

An Advocate for Our Seafaring Traditions

“Nancy Solomon, A keeper of our valuable history and traditions”

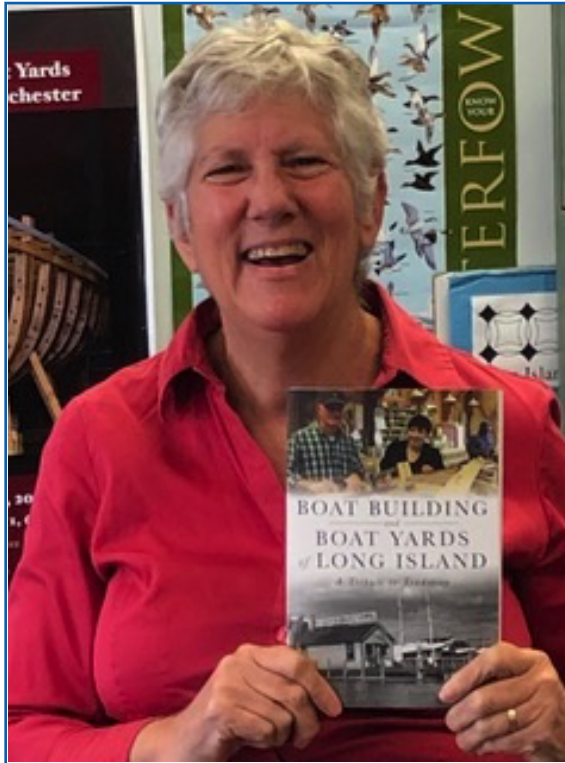
by Mark C. Nuccio

As a writer and artist documenting the history and environment of Long Island and beyond, I have been privileged to meet and interact with many advocates for keeping both our nautical heritage alive and moving forward so that its richness can be appreciated by all. When you pass Zach’s Bay on the Ocean Parkway in winter you will see professional clammers working those waters. As you cross the Meadowbrook Bridge you will see bay houses owned by generations of families standing proudly on the bog and, if you are privileged to attend a seminar, film, or read a book on the subject, most likely Nancy Solomon was at the root of its development. Whether documenting traditional wooden boat building techniques, waterfowl decoy carving, the living history of bay houses, or advocating for the livelihood of baymen men and women, Nancy Solomon is always at the forefront as the head of Long Island traditions. From the time Nancy was a youngster, growing up on the shores of Long Island Sound, where her dad kept a sailboat, she was hooked on documenting and advocating for those who live and thrive at the edge of, on top of, and under the salt waters and the roots in the historical architecture surrounding these endeavors.

Nancy states, “When I lived across the street from Nichol’s Boat Yard on Rushmore Avenue in Mamaroneck, I visited the boatyard frequently to see who was working on their boat, which is a never-ending task in the spring months, and observing the lobstermen and commercial fishermen who docked their boats there”. She observed how boats were built, the styles of each different keel, their centerboards, types of sail and motor power. She also became keenly aware of the changes beginning to take place on the waterfront as each generation moved forward. “The lessons I learned from the boat yard crews have stayed with me throughout my life,” says Nancy.

After finishing her first four college years, Nancy went on to obtain her master’s degree in American and folklore studies from George Washington University. Moving onto Long Island, Nancy first worked at the Long Island Arts Council which was then centered in Freeport. Nancy points out that “At first I focused on the working fisherman and bayman and those recreational tradition bearers, whose way of life had gone through significant changes in the last fifty years.” Nancy decided to dedicate her career to educating residents on the rich traditions still trying to survive amongst suburban sprawl and helping those who made their livings in the traditional marine trades to survive. Those trades are boat building, fishing, shellfish and crab harvesting, decoy carving, etc.

Slowly, her endeavors and advocacy spread all along Long Island’s south shore which had a rich history in boat building by masters such as the Verity’s, Gil Smith and the Weeks family and extending to decoy carvers like the Combs family, Steve Sanderson, etc. and the working baymen in hope of nurturing and preserving their livelihoods for future generations. Having built up a solid reputation and trust of many baymen and the nautical



Nancy Solomon with her latest book on traditional boat yards and boat building.

Photo c. 2022

community in general, coupled with her abilities to identify and give all her effort to preserve waterfronts, buildings and careers in Freeport and beyond, Nancy proceeded to move on to the next exciting phase of her career. In 1994, Nancy founded Long Island Traditions of which today she is executive director, and has dedicated it to promoting expansive programs to enrich the entire Long Island maritime region and beyond.

Nancy’s job is not an easy one. She became an acute master at identifying and applying for grants, developing interesting school programs where children can meet and interface with working baymen and maritime folklore artists, who take time to bring live natural creatures such as clams and fish into school auditoriums to let children have “hands-on” experiences that light up their eyes. They also learn how artistic duck decoys are carved, fishing nets repaired, and wooden boats built. Having participated in the program myself, I can verify that there is not one uninterested or misbehaved child in these pro-



Weeks Boat Yard in Patchogue, still in operation today. Photo by Jayme Breschard Thomann c. 2004

grams. The kids are “all in” with it which bodes well for our nautical future.

As a preservationist, Nancy lobbied successfully to save the few remaining Hempstead Bay houses. Many of these bay cottages were built by coastal fishermen and baymen as a place of shelter close to the fishing and shellfish grounds when sail and slow powerboats were employed. They were a “halfway-point”, so to speak, allowing for more time to work fishing and harvesting on the bay before sailing to the main dock and unloading the catch. They also provided shelter during the autumn salt hay harvesting which was crucial to keeping farmlands fertile. As a boy, there were still many of these cottages and shacks in the wetlands of Jamaica Bay where my brother and I used to fish and play. Now all of them are all gone, but through Nancy’s leadership together with the community outreach the Town of Hempstead has a few of these historical gems remaining and preserved under the stewardship of the same families that have owned them for generations. Nancy then initiated the South Shore Bay House Program which takes visitors by boat to tour the bay houses where owners greet them and explain their history and present way of life “On the bog” as they say. She has curated the book “On the Bay; Bay Houses and Maritime Culture of Long Island” on this very subject.



George Rigby decoy carver at work. Photo by Nancy Solomon c 2018

Other books authored by Nancy are “West Meadow Beach: A Portrait of a Long Island Beach Community”. Although lobbying to keep this historical Stony Brook community intact was not successful, Nancy documented its history, and one structure remains as a testament to a past style of vacation life on old Long Island. She has written “Traditional Architecture of Long Island: A Teacher Resource”, and her latest, just off the presses “Boat Building and Boat Yards of Long Island: A Tribute to Tradition”. Nancy also serves as

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a columnist for “Voices: Published by the New York Folklore Society. In addition, she has acted as an advisor on local maritime documentaries of filmmaker Glenn Gebhard – “Baymen” and “A World Apart: Bay Houses of Long Island” (Primarily Hempstead Bay). Long Island Traditions has added related film festivals to their visual history venues. Check the Traditions website at - “longislandtraditions.org”. Nancy has also curated many maritime exhibits and continues to act as the maritime culture consultant to the South Shore Estuary Reserve, Village of Rockville Centre and Great Neck Plaza.

Of late, Long Island Traditions has documented the various ethnic groups that have made lives on this island. It promotes the cultural traditions, customs and arts of our diverse and interesting communities including artistic performances of music, song, oral tradition and the visual arts. Under Nancy’s stewardship, Long Island Traditions has added self-guided audio tours of various sites on Long Island that can be accessed on your cell phone. You can also explore this exciting option

by logging on to the Long Island Traditions website.

As the director of Long Island Traditions, Nancy Solomon is a very busy professional. She has her hands on the pulse of what it takes to keep the roots of our maritime traditions alive and transferable to new generations of Long Islanders and beyond, whether they live locally or visit from other places. From the inception of her vision to found Long Island Traditions, up to the present, she has persevered and preserved our rich maritime heritage and continues to keep it alive.

Thank you Nancy - You are a



Muller bay house restored after Sandy.

Photo by Nancy Solomon c. 2015

Long Island treasure!

Be sure to visit Long Island Traditions website at “nytraditions.org”. Its offices are at 382 Main St. Port Washington, NY 11050 Ph# 516-767-8803.

You can purchase books and DVDs, view up-and-coming events and access the apps for “Long Island Self Guiding Folklorist Tours” and you can donate to help this most important non-profit.

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Muller bay house - always a place of joy.

Martha Cooper c. 1988.