The Ups and Downs of

Great Captain's Island

REFERENCE ONLY

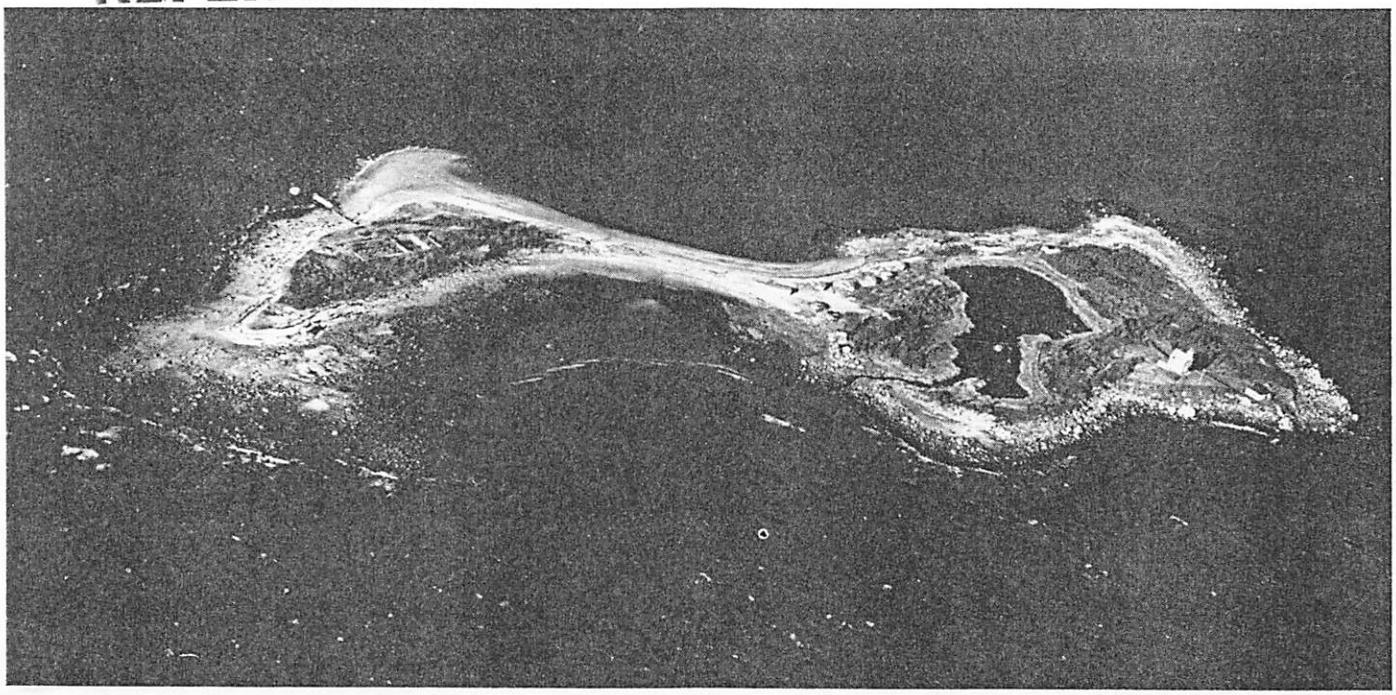


PHOTO COURTESY OF AEROTEC CORPORATION

Great Captain's Island recently purchased from the Aerotec Corporation by the Town of Greenwich. The company's vacation cottages are seen in the right center of the picture, near the lagoon; the lighthouse is at the right, and at the left, the remains of an elaborate clubhouse-casino.

An island is undoubtedly one of the most mysterious and alluring of all properties. Great Captain's Island, soon to be acquired by the Town of Greenwich, is no exception.

Lying westward of the town-owned Island Beach, the 18 acre island is the largest of the trio of islands which make up the Captain's Island group—Great Captain's, Middle Captain's or Island Beach, and the smallest officially named Little Captain's but also known as "The Clump." Great Captain's has often been called the most picturesque island on the Sound. Certainly it is one of the most curiously shaped; and with its neat lighthouse, romantic lagoon and long strips of sandy beach, it is a very attractive piece of real estate for the citizens of Greenwich to own. The lighthouse, of course, is government owned, as are the two or three acres surrounding it.

The town's recent plan to buy the island was backed by the Conservation Commission, and met with amazingly little opposition. This may have astonished those who remember the uproar and the cries of anguish with which many residents greeted the proposals to purchase Tod's Point (now Greenwich Point) some years ago.

Perhaps we have learned something in the interim, or perhaps the acquisition of Great Captain's satisfied in each one of us a secret yen to own an island. Now, for about a dollar and a half apiece, each of us will be the owner of a one-sixty-thousandth share of a real honest-to-goodness island. That's pretty nice. We only hope that rumors of Captain Kid's buried treasure don't reach every share holder at once.

Captain Kidd, for whom some say the islands were named, is reputed to have stashed away much gold and silver on Great Captain's Island. He buried his treasure on islands all over the Sound for that matter, but for years Great Captain's was pointed out as the pirate's favorite hiding place. Despite these rumors, there's no record of any actual finds.

Origins Mysterious

Although the islands may have been named for Captain Kidd, it's just as likely that they were named for Captain Daniel Patrick, military commandant during the Revolutionary days. Nobody quite knows. The island's history and ownership remained obscure and for more than a 100 years the states of Connecticut and New York squabbled over the jurisdiction of the islands. In 1886

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Great Captain's Island

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Connecticut finally won its claim over New York and has had jurisdiction over the Captain's Islands ever since.

The granite lighthouse at the Eastern end of Great Captain's was built in 1868, its fixed, white light being tended by a head keeper and his assistant. They lived with their families in a house under the tower, kept chickens, cows and a garden. A reporter who visited the lighthouse in 1890 noted that despite very heavy traffic on the Sound "with sometimes as many as 200 sailboats and many steamers sighted at one time," there had been no wrecks since the installation of the light (and later, the fog horn) the last recorded wreck having been a large brig, which smashed up on the rocks back in 1850.

Great Captain's ownership continued to be rather mysterious until 1895 when a Greenwich lawyer and local historian, Fred Hubbard, searched for many months through musty books and records, both in Greenwich and in Port Chester, and came up with all the answers.

Rumors Spark Interest

Mr. Hubbard's interest in the island may well have been sparked by a series of rumors which began back in 1892, when a small notice in the Port Chester Journal stated that "Benjamin Lyon, whose people own about nine acres of Captain's Island . . . will make a summer resort on the island and for that purpose has already ordered a 30′ naptha launch." Three years later it was rumored that the Myers Transportation Company, which operated excursion steamers, was interested in the property "and if they can get control of the islands, will make another Glen Island on-the-Sound."

Real Eastate Bargain

In the course of his search, Mr. Hubbard found that the Lyons family were six brothers from Port Chester, who, in 1856, has bought all three islands from the Anderson family, whose ancestor, John Anderson, had been granted letters of patent from George III in 1763. There is no record of the price paid by the Lyons at that time, but 30 years later, in 1886, one of the brothers sold his one-fifth share in the island for $70.00. This was five or six years before the first interest in the islands as a summer resort was shown and 43 years before Great Captain's actually was sold for that purpose—at a record $750,000!

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. . . . None of the original members of the Lyon family lived to see the sale and development of Great Captain's Island, for despite the rumors, none of the ambitious plans took shape. The island remained just as it had been for hundreds of years, a nice place to camp, fish, swim and hunt.

Boom Days

Not until 1926 did Great Captain's come into the news again. Real estate of all types was in the news then. Commercial properties such as West Putnam Avenue, where frontage had sold for $100 a foot in 1923 was quoted at $600 a foot but three years later. The subdivision of the Benedict shorefront estate was being developed as Indian Harbor, and Marshall Allaben, then president of the Greenwich Real Estate Board, cited the price of one dollar a square foot as "very cheap indeed for waterfront property." A dollar a square foot does sound a good deal cheaper than $43,560 an acre.

A Real Coup

15 acres on an undeveloped island property would have been far less desirable than the Benedict acreage, but when Great Captain's Island with its mile of beach front and almost two miles of shoreline was purchased by a group of investors for $90,000, or $6,000 an acre, it was doubtless considered quite a *coup*—which as it turned out, it was.

At the time of that sale, in May, 1926, the purchasers announced that they intended to transform the island into a "bungalow community," with trees, shrubbery, a large dock, electricity and telephone service among its attractions.

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News and Graph

CONNECTICUT, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1929

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CAPTAIN'S ISLAND SOLD FOR $750,000

Will be Developed for Pleasure Purposes by Exclusive Club

Land prices were booming in the Twenties, as the 1929 headline will attest.

For some reason, this scheme fell through. Perhaps the term "bungalow community" was ill chosen. A later group chose "cozy cabanas" and had far better results. For three years nothing at all happened. With prices of everything going sky high (including the stock market) they undoubtedly figured that they'd make more simply by selling the property to another purchaser.

Before the Fall

Sell it they did, and on a date that, ironically enough, was the 60th anniversary of this country's first "Black Friday" financial panic, September 24. More important, it was but five weeks before the October 29 market crash of 1929. A headline in the Greenwich Graphic announced the sale of the island for $750,000. This is hard to believe, we know, that's why we have attempted to reproduce the heading from a microfilm found in the Greenwich Library. The lead paragraph reads: *An exclusive seaside playground restricted to the use of members of the Great Captain's Island Beach and Yacht Club, now in the process of formation, is foreseen, following announcement today of the sale to a group of New York developers for three quarters of a million dollars, of Great Captain's Island, lying in the Sound, off Greenwich.*" The 750 thousand figure is obviously not a typo.

True Figure?

Headline or not, it did seem an incredibly high sum to us, so we attempted to track it down. A visit to the town records and a talk with the Assessor, Harold Von Brock, merely verified the date of the sale and the parties involved, but there were no tax stamps as a clue to the sales price, no mention of price whatsoever. Mr. Von Brock agreed that the $750,000.00 seemed out of all proportion, particularly since later records indicated that the property had been lost through foreclosure of a mortgage for a mere $38,000.00. Puzzled, we returned to the library microfilms for further details, discovered that among the club's Board of Governors, most of them from New York, Rye and other points in Westchester, was one Greenwich man, a realtor, the late A. W. W. Marshall.

In a phone call to his widow we read off the headline, asked her if that was indeed the right figure. Mrs. Marshall recalled that the venture had "cost a great deal of money, I shouldn't be surprised if that figure was correct." She, too, started to hunt for records, but to date has not come up with anything definite. She did remember that there had been a lot of liens on the property, but, other than that, the financial details remained obscure.

Elaborate Plans

A membership of 750 members was hoped for, the 1929 article said. If each member was charged an initiation fee of a thousand dollars that would have brought the receipts up to the $750,000 quoted as the sales price. The new owners, The Great Captain's Island Corporation, described their plans for a clubhouse at the Western or narrower end of the island which would include an elaborate ballroom, trophy room, dining room and card rooms. Outdoor facilities would include tennis, handball and volleyball courts; cro-

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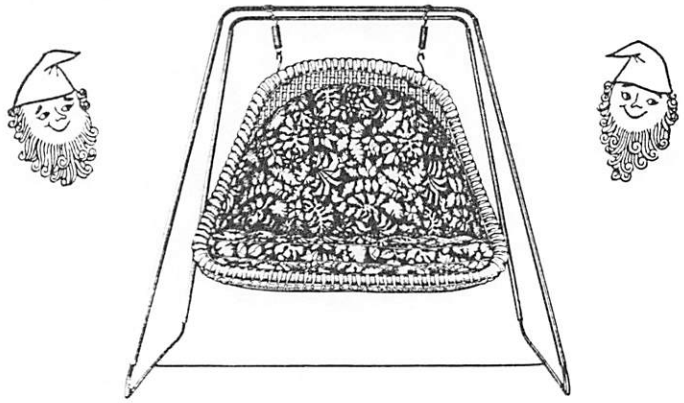
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quet, lawn bowling and brevette (sic). (Have no idea what "brevett" is, sounds somewhat like the game of pulling rank.)

The Show Goes On

Despite the Wall Street panic which shortly followed that optimistic and ambitious announcement, the developers followed through with their plans: the clubhouse was built, the grounds were cleared of driftwood and debris by a crew of 45 men, a sea sled and a cruiser were bought to provide transportation, cabanas were constructed, jetties built, and by February 1930 the organizers of the club were happily sending out news releases describing rosy days to come at Great Captain's Island, with sessions of fishing and duck shooting and "clambakes and corn roasts under moonlight skies."

On Decoration Day the new club opened as scheduled, and an elaborate affair it was. Mrs. Marshall recalls a famous orchestra imported from New York which played every evening throughout the summer. The orchestra pit, according to a brochure, was built like the stern of a yacht and the dining salon had a multi-colored lighting system which diffused the light over the dancers into ever-changing color effects. In between dances one could enjoy the views from the 16-foot wide awninged porches — 260 feet of them. Lamp posts, spotted here and there, provided light for those who wished to stroll down the dock or along the wide boardwalks.

Depression Days

Unfortunately, the bubble soon burst. No amount of soft music or diffused light could hide the stark reality of those days, the Depression. By 1932 the club had fallen victim to foreclosure proceedings, the property going to the Twin C. Holding Corporation.

The continuing Depression and the start of World War II ended any hopes of success as a resort, and by 1944 the property was again foreclosed, this time by the Town of

Greenwich, which took it over for non-payment of taxes — $19,061 worth. Soon after this, the Port-Green Corporation bought the island for $20,561 but announced that they had no plans for its use until after the war.

A Freak Accident

At war's end the corporation operated the former clubhouse as a casino, but this, too, was a short-lived venture, for in 1947 the casino was destroyed by a freak accident. A Coast Guard plane, while on a night search for a missing plane, dropped a flare and — you guessed it — the whole club burned down. The Port-Green Corporation later sued the Government for $150,000. We were unable to check the outcome.

The next purchasers of the island, the Aerotec Corporation, who paid $17,500 in July 1955, had barely taken possession when another devastating fire hit. The company got the word about the fire on the day after its plant on the Byram River had been all but washed away in the famous floods of October, 1955. Edward Pegg of Aerotec, president of the company's Great Captain's Island Club, recalled, "When we heard about that fire on the island we were all trying to mop up the Byram River and all we could think about was, 'Why couldn't some of those flames come over here and help us get dried out!' "

The fire had been discovered by Coast Guard members, who were stationed across the lagoon from the bathhouses. It was totally out of control by the time Fire Chief Potter and Fireman John Crowle reached the island by police boat. The boardwalk, cabanas and an old powerhouse were a mass of flames.

Cottage Colony

Despite fire and flood, Aerotec went ahead with its plans to develop the island into a vacation colony for its employees. In the hopes of building 25 cabana type cottages, they sought zoning variations the following May, applying to the Planning and Zoning Commission for drastic variances in zoning, asking the Com-

(Continued on page 61)

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In other years, it has been necessary to saw off a few feet before any of the young huskies succeeded in sending the caber spinning.

The massing of the bands at the close of the day-long competition, which has camera fans hard at work snapping pictures, brings the Games to a spectacular climax.

Last year's competition drew a record 400 contestants from as far north as Toronto and Montreal, Canada, and as far south as Wilmington, Delaware, vying for top honors in 45 different events. Naturally, prizes and awards are presented to the winners.

July 4 has particular significance for the Games. It was on that date, Mr. Francis points out, back in 1320, that the first record gathering of the clans took place in Arbroath Abbey where the owners of the estates in Scotland, with the roar of the North Sea in their ears and the smell of burnt homes in their nostrils, met to reaffirm their freedom.

"The Games, with its picnic-like atmosphere, is fun for youngsters as well as grown-ups," Mr. Francis said. "It's an event of gaiety and frolic for all."

Captain's Island

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mission to rezone the island from half acre lots to those of 7,500 square feet.

For more than a year the question of zoning, sanitation problems and what-not was shuttled about from one committee to another, then in June 1957 Aerotec received permission to build seven cabanas and a bathhouse, with 10 cabanas to be added in the future. Membership in the corporation's club to be limited to 400.

The cabana-cottages were built and for the past eight summers they've been happily occupied by Aerotec's club member employees. Needless to say, they're regretful about the recent sale of their vacation island, but some, like Mr. Pegg of Port Chester, may not give up the pleasures of Great Captain's Island. His solution is a simple one: just move to Greenwich!

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