Patchogue Maritime Survey Report

December 2004

Prepared by Long Island Traditions
382 Main Street
Port Washington, NY 11050
(516) 767-8803
www.longislandtraditions.org
# Table of Contents

I. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3
II. Colonial settlements .................................................................................................... 4
III. Early Hotels, Transportation and Commerce ............................................................. 5
IV. 19th-century resorts .................................................................................................. 6
V. Summer Homes 1870-1930 ....................................................................................... 7
VI. Baymen ..................................................................................................................... 9
VII. Hunting, Fishing and Yacht Clubs .......................................................................... 11
VIII. Maritime businesses ............................................................................................... 12
IX. Restaurants ................................................................................................................ 12
X. Recommendations ...................................................................................................... 13
I. Introduction

Waterfront communities on Long Island face numerous issues about their future, as competing demands are made on this prized resource. Often communities bow to pressure to replace historic sites with new and potentially lucrative residential and commercial sites that have little relationship to their environment. In an effort to stem this tide of vanishing water access, and to preserve historic maritime sites, Long Island Traditions, with assistance from the Village of Patchogue, the South Shore Estuary Reserve Council, the Preservation League of New York and Suffolk County Legislator Brian Foley, undertook a survey of Patchogue’s historic maritime sites, ranging from historic summer homes and baymen’s homes, to boat yards and fishing docks. Approximately 92 sites were surveyed by interns Jayme Breschard, Jacqueline Peu Duvallon and Cris Muia, along with Long Island Traditions’ director Nancy Solomon during 2003-04. For each structure surveyed a survey form and photograph were completed. In addition various interviews were conducted by Muia and Solomon with local residents and historians.

The sites documented reflect Patchogue’s history as a maritime center and harbor, where for generations of baymen and visitors have enjoyed the abundant resources of this community. Unlike its neighboring communities, Patchogue has a wide variety of sites that reflect both occupational use as well as recreational uses. These sites have a high degree of architectural and historical integrity from a preservation point of view. In addition there are many individuals in the community who have a high degree of knowledge about the waterfront’s history. As a result of these factors the survey has the potential to be a major resource for the Village’s waterfront revitalization efforts, as well as the South Shore Estuary’s tourism and educational efforts. This report we hope will provide insight into this unique community, and encourage you to help preserve its waterfront character for future generations.

-- Nancy Solomon
December 2004
II. Colonial settlements

Patchogue and other coastal communities were first settled by Native Americans who harvested the abundant shellfish in Great South Bay. Like other Native Americans they harvested oyster, clams, scallops along with hunting whales and catching fish for their families and communities. Unlike commercial fishermen they harvested these species for nutritional needs. In the mid-1600s a group of English colonists from Connecticut came to Patchogue but did not settle there. Not until the mid-1700s would colonist Humphrey Avery buy land, in between the area that is now Patchogue and Swan Neck rivers.¹ His first task was to create a series of saw, grist, cotton and paper mills which are no longer standing. However these mills established Patchogue as a major economic center on the south shore of Long Island. The community was first nicknamed “Milltown” in recognition of these mills.

While there were some farmers in the area, most residents earned their living by harvesting shellfish, particularly oysters and clams. Early residents included the Newins, Weeks, Smith and Roe families who owned modest farms and other properties near the bay. Others worked and operated the mills, which attracted farmers, trade merchants and other tradespeople such as blacksmiths and tanners. A typical farm house of the early 1800s still remains in the Village at 401 S. Ocean Avenue, which according to an 1872 map may have been owned by the Weeks family. The first shellfish license to a Brookhaven resident was issued in 1820 to harvest oysters. Farmers often paid fishermen to harvest “salt hay” which grew on the nearby marshlands that they fed to their livestock. By 1850 approximately 300 people made their living off the water.²

401 S. Ocean Avenue in 2004
III. Early Hotels, Transportation and Commerce

In order to house the various trade merchants and businessmen who came to Patchogue, Austin Roe built the first hotel in Patchogue in 1808 on E. Main Street. The Roe’s went on to build other hotels in the busy seaport, including the Eagle Hotel. Other mid-19th century Main Street hotels included the South Side Hotel. These hotels were built prior to the extension of the Long Island Rail Road, originally the South Side Rail Road, which did not arrive until 1869. Although none of these sites remain standing, they gave Patchogue a reputation for an accessible harbor, beautiful sandy beaches, excellent duck hunting and restaurants and hotels for travelers. Schooners came and went with increasing frequency, leading to rapid settlement in the mid-19th century.

Until the railroad connection in 1869 most residents and merchants traveled by boat, whether it was a modest skiff or an elaborate schooner. By the 1870s several boat yards were erected around town, including the Weeks boat yard which remains standing at River Road and Riverview court. However the railroad extension to Patchogue launched a dramatic growth spurt that led to Patchogue’s hey day.

To ferry passengers from the train to the hotel a sophisticated system of horse and buggies developed manned by local residents. In the early 1900s an electric trolley system was also created, linking Patchogue to its waterfront hotels and other neighboring communities. With the advent of the automobile in the early 1900s many communities were faced with the question of how to pave their roads. Local officials used discarded oyster and clam shells from the various oyster and clam processing plants to pave their streets, a tradition that continued until the late 1930s when Portland cement replaced this historic material. According to West Sayville resident Mike Van Essendelft, cars crushed the clamshells into small pieces. Rain then hardened them into a “nice strong road.” In addition to street transportation many local residents operated water taxis from Patchogue to Fire Island. The Rohrbach family transported people by barge via his “White Pines” service. Ralph Castner, “an old time beacher and waterman” also ran a taxi service in the 1950s. The most common boats used were cat boats, schooners and barges.
IV. 19th-century resorts

When the Civil War ended more New York City residents, especially industrialists, had increasing leisure time for such traditional activities as boating, duck hunting, bathing and various sports including polo and croquet. While such notables as William K. Vanderbilt built large estates, other families and people of wealth began building summer homes in Patchogue and other south shore communities, providing an escape from New York City. In order to travel easily they invested in the South Side Rail Road. Shortly after its extension small hotels were built. In c.1880 Captain Samuel Smith opened the Smithport Hotel at 532 S. Ocean Avenue, which remains standing today and was at one time managed by bayman Bob Kaler’s mother.

532 S. Ocean Avenue 2004

Other hotels built during this period include the Winona Hotel at 380 Bay Avenue. It served as a hotel and rum running speakeasy during Prohibition until the 1980s when it was converted into Halcyon Manor Nursing Home. Horse and buggies transported travelers from the train station to their hotel or inn. The cost was a mere 5¢ in the late 1880s. In later years trolleys were constructed within the town.

After the completion of the railroad other much larger hotels were built in the waterfront area. These included the Clifton Hotel at the end of Bay Avenue, the Ocean Avenue Hotel at the avenue’s terminus, the Newins Hotel and Pavilion on Bay Avenue and the New York Hotel, all of which are no longer standing. The Newins Hotel catered to local residents, opening its beach to the public and to hotel guests that did not have their own beaches. They charged rates of $7 to $14 per week in 1907. The Central Hotel on W. Main Street catered to duck hunting groups. Typical of the amenities offered were formal dining facilities, walkways to the bay, private beaches and evening music concerts. Their clientele included New York City socialites and avid sportsmen and hunters.

To accommodate these travelers a local group of baymen and duck hunters began working as hunting and fishing guides. They took them hunting in “battery boxes” which was a flat recessed boat that lay flat in the bay, enabling the “gunner” to shoot straight up without detection by passing wildfowl. Other hunting accommodations included duck blinds, small cabin-like structures that allowed hunters to keep warm during the winter hunting season. Guides also took customers fishing around the bay and near Fire Island, a short boat ride away.
V. Summer Homes 1870-1930

With the arrival of the Railroad numerous families began building summer homes, due to the increasing ease that the families could travel to Patchogue from New York City. The first group of homes was very large and substantial. They first appeared in the 1870s and reflected the architectural styles popular at that times, ranging from Italianate to Victorian styles homes with decorative towers and porches, elaborate wood shingling and stained glass windows. Examples of early style summer homes include 29 & 42 Maiden Lane, 371 S. Ocean Avenue, 3 Rider Avenue and 310 Cedar Avenue.

29 Maiden Lane (Victorian style)  371 S. Ocean Avenue (Italianate style)

3 Rider Avenue (Victorian style)  310 Cedar Avenue (Spanish Colonial Revival)

Like other summer homes of the period, these examples share certain common architectural elements including large front and wraparound porches, decorative wood shingling in the gables, modest towers on the corners with 3-sided bay windows, and ceramic roof shingles as seen in 310 Cedar Avenue. These styles were also used in year-round residences in more developed communities such as nearby Babylon and Bayshore. Other showpiece elements included brick and stone fireplaces, slate roofs and decorative dormer windows.

In the period after World War I, in the 1920s primarily, more modest summer homes were built by various developers. These included the houses along Gilbert and Cedar Street that were part of the “Brall Villa” development of 1918, as well as the homes at 15 & 17 Maiden Lane.
These homes were typical of the bungalow movement that swept the country. The homes architectural styles are modest in size, with open porches, dormer windows, and brick fireplaces, fronted by decorative picket fences. These particular examples are well preserved with few changes, as are others throughout the community. Although they were built as summer homes, they were converted to year round use in the 1950s. Other well-preserved bungalows include 23 Maiden Lane, 195 Cedar Avenue, 2 Gilbert Street, 2 Rider Avenue and 15 Pitt Street.9

There are hundreds of historic summer homes throughout Patchogue. The most prominent locations for these homes lie along Ocean Avenue, Cedar Avenue and Maiden Lane. While many have been modified to year-round use, there is a high degree of historic architectural integrity. Many summer homes were converted to year-round use during the 1930s depression, when some owners moved into their summer homes permanently in order to save money. This conversion process continued throughout the 1930-1950 period as parkways and train service increased, enabling residents to work in the city and live on Long Island. However these homes have maintained their facades, access to local creeks and canals, and exterior appearances.

Boat Builders

The favored boat during the 19th century was a cat boat, a traditional low-slung wooden sloop sailing vessel. The most prolific boat builder in Patchogue was Gil Smith, who had his shop in the late 1800s until the mid-1930s on the east side of Patchogue River near West Avenue and Amity Street. Smith built recreational cat boats used for sailing races. Smith’s boats were known for their sleek design and flat bottom, which was necessary for navigating the shallow waters in the shoreline areas of the bay. He also worked in various local boat yards as a machinist.10 Like other boat builders his business greatly expanded when the train arrived in Patchogue. Smith was also a well known bayman, hunting guide and decoy carver. Working with his wife Nancy the Smiths also sewed traditional cotton sails. He lived on Amity Street.

Other boat builders included the Weeks family, one of the first settlers in Patchogue. Frank M. Weeks was born into a family which made River Avenue in Patchogue, NY its home since the early 1700s. As a young boy Weeks was fascinated by boats and boating. After finishing school
he worked full time for Martinas Smith who owned and operated a shipyard on some of the land that is today Week’s Yacht Yard. After his apprenticeship with Smith he became a master carpenter and shipwright. In 1898 he built and sold his first boat- a small cat sail boat named Onion. It is said that he paid for the building supplies for the boat by selling onions he grew behind his house.

Weeks purchased land for the boat yard that currently stands on Riverview Court off River Road in small increments. By 1928 he had purchased all of the present property, approximately 5 acres. Weeks built and designed many types of boats in his lifetime. In his youth, perhaps the most famous boat he worked on was the Grace E. Bailey, a schooner built before the turn of the century which is based in Camden, Maine. He also built boats designed by John Alden and other renowned designers. As he gained experience Weeks built different lines of sailboats and powerboats. He was also known for building local designs such as the South Bay Scooters. Many of Weeks’ original tools and machinery are still used in the yard today. The Weeks property also includes a c. 1926 wood shingle house where Frank Weeks lived. The Weeks boat yard is one of the oldest family run boatyards in the country.

There were also other boatyards in Patchogue, numbering 12 by 1892. They included those of Ellis Smith, Gilmore Baker and Martinas Smith. They employed over 60 individuals including carpenters, joiners and other wood workers. However there are no sites remaining besides Weeks Boatyard.

VI. Baymen

For years baymen plied the waters of Patchogue. Today, their numbers are scarce, but their history is plentiful. They harvested shellfish and finfish including bluefish and weakfish, blue claw crabs, clams and oysters using haul seine nets, clam rakes, oyster dredges and pound traps. The Duffys, Flints, Weeks and other families bought property near the creeks in order to dock their boats. They built shacks that were used as shucking houses, one of which remains on Avery Avenue. Their homes still remain as reminders of this rich tradition, primarily in East Patchogue along Swan River Creek near Conklin Avenue. Thomas Duffy, a local bayman, owned 310 Conklin Avenue, which was passed on to his daughter Florence Sharkey, a local bay person who continues to clam and fish as part of her living. Today many baymen live in Patchogue and East Patchogue. Their neighbors were also baymen, who also smuggled liquor into Swan River Creek during Prohibition. Other baymen’s homes, along with summer houses can be seen at #181 and 195 Cedar, 22 Gilbert and 242 Rider Avenue. According to local bayman Bill Hamilton, “just about any street had one or two baymen.”
While many worked independently, others worked for local companies such as the Nassau oyster company located at the foot of Rider Avenue. According to a Harper’s weekly article on October 2, 1886 over 1000 tons of clams were harvested. In 1895 over 70,000 bushels of oysters were reported harvested with 40,000 of those destined for Europe. So prominent was this industry that in 1870 the Army Corps of Engineers dredged Patchogue River, making it the only deep water port on the south shore at that time. In the late 1800s and 1900s a common sight along Patchogue River was net reels used for drying nets, along with clam boats.

Swan River was also a well known rum running port, as well as a farming area. A clam processing plant was in operation at the head of Swan River on Chapel & Swezey Street, in addition to a bait processing plant that was located on Campbell Street on the east side of Patchogue River.

Prior to World War II there were hundreds of baymen in Patchogue. The height of the oyster industry reached its peak in 1895, according to one account. As a result hundreds of boats were built of varying sizes, ranging from 2 – 20 tons. At the same time commercial traffic continued, with lumber being the most common item shipped. In 1898 lumber accounted for 150,000 tons received and 53,000 shipped, while 5200 tons of fish and shellfish were exported. A Customs Office was established on S. Ocean Avenue, which later closed in 1922. With the advent of small-scale motor boats, baymen’s numbers greatly increased. However in 1938 the hurricane decimated the oyster beds, covering them in sand. As a result most baymen switched to clamming as well as fishing. In 1946 the New York Times reported that 5000 bushels of clams were harvested in Patchogue, one of the largest yields in approximately 15 years according to village official Charles Rogers. The article also mentions that the cost of a clamming license would increase from $1 to $15 annually.
Like other traditional occupations, most baymen and fishermen today learned how to fish from their families and neighbors. Flo Sharkey recalled that her father, Thomas Duffy “was a commercial fisherman, that’s what he did, he lived and died for fishing.” According to Flo he set his pound trap in the bay in April, hoping to catch fluke and flounder and other popular species. Net reels were a common sight, especially around Conklin Avenue where many baymen lived. Other fishing families in Patchogue included the Gordons and Flints. Later they would be joined by Bill Hamilton, a fisherman from West Sayville who moved to Patchogue in the 1980s. Most fishermen sold their catch to local buyers who shipped the fish to Fulton Fish Market. However some did sell their fish by going door to door. They dominated the community; “On Saturdays the baymen used to come up to the 4 corners and gather and talk and so forth.”

The clamming industry was in full swing during the post-war period until the late 1970s. The most popular places included Swan River, Brown River and Green’s River, along with Great South Bay, Davis Park and Ocean Beach on Fire Island. Bill Hamilton recalls that “you could walk across the boats in the 60’s.” Typically there would be 200 baymen at Green’s Creek, and another 50 or 60 baymen at Brown’s Creek. But by the late 1970s pollution caught up with the bay, severely limiting the amount of shellfish that could be harvested. Bill Hamilton recalls that “when the 80’s came, most [baymen] got land jobs.” Today the few baymen who still work on the water dock their boats on Swan River in a small dock owned by the Duffy family.

![The Duffy Dock](image)

VII. Hunting, Fishing and Yacht Clubs

While many visitors to Patchogue hired local hunting and fishing guides, others formed organizations that sponsored contests and recreational activities. At the end of Cedar Avenue lay the South Bay Yacht Club which sponsored sailing races as well outings to the nearby Fire Island community of Point O’Woods. The New York Times reported on the South Bay Yacht Club that “Yachting is the principle pastime of this resort. This is perfectly natural, for no resort in the vicinity of New York offers better facilities for the enjoyment of the sport. Here the Great South Bay is to be found at its best.” Other local clubs included the Mascot House, located next to the Ocean Avenue Hotel, which sponsored fishing derbies and other contests for local residents, and ice boat races sponsored by the various yacht clubs in town. Ice boating declined in Patchogue as Bellport’s ice boat races increased in popularity. In addition there has been a long tradition of recreational fishing, primarily around the shorelines and near the inlets connecting the bay to the ocean. Patchogue has had a long-standing anglers club that continues to be an important mechanism for local residents to learn about fishing techniques. Local organizations include the Lady Reelers Fishing Club and the Patchogue Fishing Club which have
been in existence since the 1950s. Most traditional recreational fishermen devised homemade traps to catch bait from local beaches and docks, hoping to catch killies (a small bait fish) and green crabs that were then used to catch fluke and flounder, striped bass and weakfish.

VIII. Maritime businesses

There were several commercial establishments in Patchogue that were directly related to its proximity to the bay. These included row boat rental businesses, such as Hoppe's row boat on River Avenue, along with boat canvas shops and fishing supply companies. Various boat storage facilities have also historically occupied the Patchogue River on both the east and western banks. Some of these sheds were used during the rum running era, including one located across from 296 Conklin Street that is no longer standing. According to local historian Hans Henke and other longtime residents, Dutch Shultz, a fairly well known rum runner, had an office in Patchogue, from which he ran trucks up and down Montauk Highway to various restaurants and speakeasies. Marinas built in the 1950s and more recently now stand in their place.

IX. Restaurants

The oldest standing restaurant in Patchogue is the Pine Grove Inn, located at Chapel Avenue & First Street on the banks of the Swan River. It was founded in 1910 as a restaurant and inn for visitors and businessmen. According to local legend the inn was used for rum running during Prohibition, along with other waterfront hotels in Patchogue.

Originally a log cabin structure, the site has been renovated over the years but retains its simple design. Unlike other restaurants in this waterfront community, the inn serves primarily German and continental cuisine, a tradition that dates to the 1940s when German immigrants purchased the inn. Prior to that time it served local seafood harvested in local waters. Other historic restaurants include Louis XIV at the foot of Cedar Avenue, which was originally a clam bar. In addition to these establishments many ethnic groups had festivals and fairs at which they sold local specialties according to their nationality. Lowell Ockers, a retired fisherman, recalled that his “grandmother made 40 gallons of clam chowder” for fire department functions and other affairs. Most villages also sponsored fundraisers, serving clam chowder, fried clams, steamer clams and oysters.
X. Recommendations

Patchogue is fortunate in its depth and breadth of maritime cultural resources. In order to educate others on this there are a variety of programs that could be developed. These suggestions are consistent with the South Shore estuary Management Plan.

a) Walking Tours

There are some obvious places where historic maritime sites are concentrated that would lend themselves easily to guided walking tours. These include Maiden Lane, South Ocean Avenue, Cedar Avenue and Riverview Court off of River Road. The sites most representative of summer homes include homes on Maiden Lane, the area around 401 S. Ocean Avenue reflects Patchogue’s agrarian origins, the Riverview Court area represents boat building traditions and the Fire Island seashore property reflects transportation history.

In addition the area around Conklin Avenue and Swan River reflects Patchogue’s shellfishing history, where many baymen still live today.

Another suggestion is the creation of a self-guided tour map that would allow residents to explore the Village’s maritime heritage. This guide could identify 20 sites that reflect the themes mentioned above, with historic and contemporary photographs and personal narratives from taped interviews for illustration. Funding sources include NYS Empire State Development Corporation, and the agencies aforementioned.

b) River tours

Patchogue has a number of historic sites that are best seen from the water. These include Weeks boat yard and the former site of Gil Smith’s boatyard on Patchogue River, the baymen’s homes and dock areas along Swan River Creek, and the summer homes along Patchogue River. It would be most appropriate to develop a guided boat tour along these creeks led by local residents and baymen.

c) Festivals

Patchogue’s maritime heritage is one that continues to the present day. There are many local baymen who are experts on the community’s history and maritime culture. They also have experience in presenting their culture to people of all ages. It would be most appropriate to develop an annual river festival with demonstrations by these baymen on how they work the waters, using traps and nets and various tools to harvest finfish and shellfish. Other participants could include local boat builders, duck hunters and decoy carvers, recreational fishermen and seafood cooking experts. Grants are available from the agencies mentioned above for this type of program.

Tours and festivals can be funded in part with grants from Suffolk County office of Cultural Affairs, the NY State Council on the Arts and the NY Council for the Humanities.
d) Historic preservation

There is a tremendous need for residents to be aware of the historic significance of the properties surveyed. A necessary first step is to nominate some of these sites to the state and national register of historic places. Of particular importance are the buildings associated with the Weeks Boat Yard, 401 S. Ocean Avenue which is the oldest standing home in Patchogue, the home of Gil Smith on Amity Street (the exact house number has still to be determined), and surveyed homes along Gilbert Street, Beach Avenue, Brightwood Street, Rider and River Avenues. The Village might consider the creation of an historic district that encompasses all the streets surveyed, using the historical background provided here as the narrative of its significance.

Another mechanism to protect these properties is to create a Village Landmark ordinance, giving the Village the power to designate historic properties. This would require the creation of a Historic Preservation Commission composed of local residents and business owners who have knowledge of the Village’s history and architectural styles, along with a commitment to preserve these sites. Should the Village be interested there are state funds available to Villages for programs and commission training, through the Certified Local Government (CLG) Program operated by the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. For more information on the CLG program call (518) 237-8643 x 3256.
Endnotes

1 Hans Henke, Images of America: Patchogue (Dover, NH: Arcadia Publishing) 1997
2 Ibid.
4 Beers Atlas Map 1872.
6 Ibid.
7 Henke, op cit.
8 Sanborn Insurance Map 1926.
10 Newsday, op cit.
11 Interview with Brian & Kevin Weeks by Cris Muia, August 4, 2004.
12 Ibid.
13 New York Times July 25, 1898; August 21, 1898; November 26, 1900.
16 Interview with Bob Kaler, Flo Sharkey and Bill Hamilton, January 23, 2004 by Nancy Solomon.
19 Interview with Bob Kaler, Flo Sharkey and Bill Hamilton, January 23, 2004 by Nancy Solomon.
23 Interview with Fred Golofaro by Steven Lang, August 2004.
26 Interview with Lowell Ockers, February 3, 2004 by Nancy Solomon.