

Chapter 1

Fire Island—Historical Background

Brief Overview of Fire Island History

Fire Island has been the location for a wide variety of historical events integral to the development of the Long Island region and the nation. Much of Fire Island's history remains shrouded in mystery and fable, including the precise date at which the barrier beach island was formed and the origin of the name "Fire Island." What documentation does exist, however, tells an interesting tale of Fire Island's progression from "Shells to Hotels," a phrase coined by one author to describe the island's evolution from an Indian hotbed of wampum production to a major summer resort in the twentieth century.¹ Throughout its history Fire Island has contributed to some of the nation's most important historical episodes, including the development of the whaling industry, piracy, the slave trade, and rumrunning. More recently Fire Island, home to the Fire Island National Seashore, exemplifies the late twentieth-century's interest in preserving natural resources and making them available for public use.

The Name. It is generally believed that Fire Island received its name from the inlet that cuts through the barrier and connects the Great South Bay to the ocean. The name Fire Island Inlet is seen on maps dating from the nineteenth century before it was attributed to the barrier island. On September 15, 1789, Henry Smith of Boston sold a piece of property to several Brookhaven residents through a deed that stated the property ran from "the Head of Long Cove to Hunting East Gut or Fire Island Inlet." The alternate name given in the deed reflects the influence of the Dutch in the Long Island region prior to the eighteenth century, who at various times used the terms Inlet New Gut, Nicholls Gut, Nine-Mile Gut, Hunting East Gut, and Huntington East Gut, the word "Gut" stemming from the Dutch term *gat*, meaning "gate." Another strange Dutch name for the Fire Island Inlet was "Sictem Hackey," apparently an allusion to local Indians, called Secatogues after a segment of land in Islip.²

The historian Richard M. Bayles argues that the use of the word “fire” in the term Fire Island Inlet stems from a misreading of the word “five,” which would have been the number of barrier beach islands that existed off the Long Island coast in 1688. Other scholars believe the name derives from a misspelling of the Dutch word *vier*, meaning four, as “fier” which was then further transmogrified into “fire.” Some speculate that “*fier*” could have been a bastardization of the word “fire.” Still another theory conjectures that the name arose from actual fires on the island itself. There is a legend that swamp fires smoldered on the island for many years. The beaches were also used by Indians who lit fires to signal the mainland, as well as by early whalers who often boiled down whale blubber into whale oil. It is likely that fisherman and whaling crews stoked fires along the inlets to guide boats into the bay at night before the days of lighted buoys. It is also possible that “wreckers” lit fires on the beach to lure ships ashore, where oral tradition tells us crews were murdered and robbed and the ships plundered for their cargo.³

The Indians called the beach itself “Seal Island” because of the large numbers of seals that once wintered there. In the 1840s, the appellation “Raccoon Beach” enjoyed a certain vogue among hunters who found the beach rife with the furry canoids. Names given the island by early cartographers include “Beach,” “South Beach,” “South Beach of sand and stones,” “East Beach,” and, in 1839, “Great South Beach,” a name many consider the island’s official name, at least for that portion of it that lies within the jurisdiction of the Town of Brookhaven. In 1935, the Town of Brookhaven informed the U.S. Bureau of Geographic Names that the portion of the island within Brookhaven’s jurisdiction should be called “Great South Beach.” But that didn’t stop master builder Robert Moses from calling for “restoration and protection of Fire Island” in his 1938 “Moses Plan” and influencing modern usage in favor of that appellation. The National Geographic Society, in August 1962, made a formal application to the Board of Geographic Names, United States Department of the Interior, to investigate which name—Great South Beach or Fire Island—was proper. The Board made a study and found, in decision list no. 6301 made on February 12, 1963, that while the barrier beach was known to more people as Fire Island both names were correct. For all practical purposes, however, the naming of the Fire Island National Seashore in 1964 rendered the debate over use of the name “Great South Beach” moot.⁴

Social Evolution of Fire Island. While Fire Island remained mostly uninhabited prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, its resources were exploited by a wide variety of people for a wide variety of purposes. Indians made use of the island for manufacturing wampum and hunting whales for at least several hundred years before European set-

tlers arrived in the 1700s. In fact, the Indian names for Long Island were “Seawanauke,” which means “Isle of Shells,” and “Paumanauke,” which means “Isle of Tribute.” Both names refer to the purple portions of hard clam shells that Long Island Indians carved out, strung on thongs, and used as both currency and tribute to the more powerful Naragansett Indians of Connecticut. Indians killed whales from the beaches on Fire Island, a skill they taught to European settlers. The settlers arrived in the middle of the seventeenth century and exploited the island primarily for four different resources: whales, oysters, fertilizer, and fowl. Fertilizer, produced largely from menhaden or slow-moving horseshoe crabs, became a major regional industry in the nineteenth century. Fishing and fish processing also made an appearance. Fleets of oceangoing vessels cast their nets off shore and returned to Fire Island laden with fish. A processing plant was established on a site just northeast of the lighthouse. The Great South Bay’s south side became renowned for its commercial oyster beds in the late 1700s. By the early 1800s, the beds had been harvested so intensely that oysters were planted and cultivated before the Civil War to prevent the loss of a valuable industry. On the eastern end of Fire Island commercial hunters made a handsome living on waterfowl that were plentiful on the island. This activity was later prohibited by law. After March 23, 1688, when Chief Tobaccus sold the rights to all whales that came on to the barrier beach to the Town of Brookhaven, the white settlers improved on the whaling techniques the Indians taught them. Fire Island played a significant role in the advent of the shore whaling industry that had its epicenter in East Hampton, Southampton, and Bridgehampton.⁵

Fire Island and the Fire Island Inlet played important roles in more infamous activities as well. Before the decline of slavery on Long Island after the American Revolution, slave runners sailed through the inlet to Great River or Islip where some estates had facilities for keeping slaves. Fire Island may also have been home to stockades used to hold slaves temporarily. By 1800, there were approximately one hundred slaves in the Town of Brookhaven. After slavery was legally abolished in New York State in 1827, “blackbirders” kidnaped free blacks and took them south to be sold back into slavery.⁶

Pirates also favored the island for the temporary storage of loot. Hunters, fisherman, and other potential witnesses on the island could be spotted from afar through the treeless, flat terrain, making the island ideal for illicit activity. Ship “wreckers”—people who lured ships to land only to kill their occupants and plunder their loot—were common on Fire Island. Jeremiah Smith, perhaps the first inhabitant of Fire Island, built a house near what is now Cherry Grove that he used for wrecking activities. Women apparently also took part in wrecking. Island

legend has it that “two brutal women” waylaid a ship in 1816 and killed ten of the crew.⁷

The more than four hundred ships that were reported in distress off Fire Island between 1640 and 1825 gave rise to calls for the construction of a lighthouse. In 1825, the first Fire Island lighthouse was built on land the federal government bought from the state on the edge of the Fire Island Inlet. The lighthouse cost ten thousand dollars and consisted of eighteen lamps making a complete revolution every ninety seconds. This “high tech” contraption succeeded in reducing the amount of serious wrecks, but in the summer of 1850 the bark “Elizabeth” ran aground and stirred calls for a better lighthouse. The Elizabeth wreck was a highly publicized event because among its victims was Margaret Fuller, the literary editor of the *New York Tribune* and early advocate of women’s rights. In 1858, a replacement lighthouse, which still stands today, was erected, slightly to the north and east of the original. This lighthouse was larger and more effective than the original, rising 166 feet above average sea level and beaming a light flash every minute.⁸



Photo 1.1. Fire Island Lighthouse (Courtesy of Fire Island National Seashore)

Another response to the frequent mishaps at sea were the creation of unmanned rescue huts put up by volunteer groups as early as 1805. Companies that insured ships knew they could recover most of the cargo if help got to a wreck quickly. So the industry pressured Congress to set up lifesaving stations on Long Island and New Jersey, which they did beginning in 1848. The volunteer efforts were effective, resulting in roughly one hundred thousand lives saved over the decades. By the 1870s the federal government started allocating money to hire crews. Beginning in 1887, the newly created U.S. Life-Saving Service created twenty-three manned stations in Suffolk County. Fire Island hosted eleven of these rescue stations, many of which participated in heroic rescues.⁹

The steam vessel era eliminated many of the dangers faced by oceangoing craft. By the 1920s, the baymen of Fire Island turned their attention to rumrunning. The Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed in 1919 and after a grace period of one year, enforcement of prohibition began. Fire Island was ideal for bootlegging for the same reasons it was attractive to pirates: bootleggers could land liquor directly on uninhabited stretches of beach for transshipment to shore or for pickup later. Rum Row, a fleet of liquor-laden vessels floating three miles out in international waters, was easily accessible from the island. Ship captains unloaded liquor in burlap sacks over the sides of their boats and floated the bounty on life preservers to helpers waiting on the beach.

The Sunken Forest, a three-hundred-year-old holly forest protected by two sets of sand dunes at Sailors Haven, was a prime destination for rumrunners looking to stash the precious liquid their associates had floated to shore. South Shore icehouses used by local fisherman were easily converted to liquor transport stations. To grease the wheels, bottles were handed out to local residents, fishermen, and enforcement officials alike. Sometimes deliveries were made directly to Fire Island communities. Prohibition was credited with reviving the small community of Water Island, which had almost disappeared during World War I. Other Prohibition Era features of Fire Island included the Bailey Stage, opposite Center Moriches, and the Saltaire Casino, which served liquor openly.¹⁰

Prohibition was a blip in the trajectory of Fire Island's development much as it was for the rest of the nation. Fire Island had previously begun to discard its dubious reputation in favor of one as a world-class summer resort. The primary catalyst for this transformation was David Sturgis Sprague Sammis, the man who built the Surf Hotel. Sammis was not the first hotelier on Fire Island. That distinction belongs to Felix Dominy and his wife. Dominy was the keeper of the Fire Island Lighthouse, a craftsman, and a small innkeeper. But it wasn't until 1855, when Sammis purchased 120 acres of grazing land east of

the Fire Island Lighthouse for erecting his impressive hotel, that Fire Island became the toast of society. Over a span of forty years Sammis added to his original 100 foot long structure and boardwalks until the walks actually extended for several miles and the hotel buildings had a frontage of more than six hundred feet. The hotel at its peak could accommodate fifteen hundred guests and stood out from other resorts of the time for having gas lamps throughout. By the 1870s, historian Richard M. Bayles could remark that the Surf Hotel was “holding rank among the celebrated watering places of the Atlantic seaboard.”¹¹ The hotel became famous for its masquerade balls and Sammis sported a fleet of “sail and catboats” for the enjoyment of his guests. Sammis facilitated the transport of his guests to the hotel by building a trolley line from Babylon to the dock where his steam yacht carried them to Fire Island. This allowed many of New York’s most prominent men to leave their families at the hotel, to work in the city during the day and return to the hotel in the evening, perhaps a two-hour trip in all.¹²

Fire Island Land Uses. There are today two principal types of land use on Fire Island that are, in the main, oriented toward summer recreation: residential developments, and federal, state, county, and municipal parks. Each of these land uses provides for the common needs of different user-groups and for the different needs of individual user-groups.



Photo 1.2. The Club House, circa 1870 (Courtesy of Long Island State Park Commission)

The Development of Communities. The demise of the Surf Hotel during the cholera epidemic of 1892 set the stage for the development of private communities. Until that time, land on Fire Island had been owned by a small number of people. In 1693, a loophole in the Town of Brookhaven's first patent allowed William Tangier Smith to claim forty square miles of Long Island, including all of Fire Island, on which he established his estate named the "Manor of St. George." In gratitude to those who made his claim possible, he relinquished 175 acres on the west side of the Mastic River to the Poosepatuck Indians, who still occupy a somewhat smaller piece of land there. After a series of actions by the state legislature, jurisdiction over a westerly portion of Fire Island was given to the Town of Islip. In December 1834, a commission of representatives from the towns of Brookhaven and Islip drew jurisdictional boundaries that correspond roughly to what exists today. While some of Smith's heirs held onto the property left to them (mostly on the eastern half of Fire Island), one heir, Henry Smith, decided in 1779 to sell his property to "twenty yeomen of Brookhaven" for two hundred pounds. Until David Sammis began buying proprietary shares of Fire Island in 1845, no one bothered with the details of land ownership there. Conflict ensued when Sammis acted on his belief that he had enough shares to establish a hotel on 120 acres east of the lighthouse. A lawsuit—*Green vs. Sammis*—was finally initiated in 1871 challenging Sammis' title. In 1878, after years of intensive searches for shareowners, court appointed arbitrators divided the beach into seventy-eight parcels, the first of which Sammis was allowed to keep for his hotel, and the second which Sammis shared with Benjamin Sire. Sammis' Surf Hotel was eventually bought by New York State in 1892 to serve as a quarantine and screening center for ships emanating from Europe during the cholera epidemic there. Today, the state still owns the land as part of Robert Moses State Park, the first of New York's State parks.¹³

The development of private communities was made possible by the Great Partition of 1878, and the development of these communities have their origins in a wide variety of circumstances. A few communities emerged out of the housing needs of laborers. Others grew out of real estate promotion. Some expanded gradually around hotels, and one grew out of worker housing required by a fish factory. Fire Island's community developments consist mostly of summer residences, commercial establishments, and related utilities. They are situated primarily at the western end of the island, within the boundaries of the Fire Island National Seashore. Collectively, these communities provide the bulk of the island's recreational facilities (mostly private), virtually all of its overnight accommodations, and most of its commercial establishments. Fire Island is very much a study in extremes. The bright, contemporary



Photo 1.3. Davis Park T-Dock, 1945 (Courtesy of Titus Kana, www.FireIslandVision.com)

designs so publicly displayed in the mostly gay enclave of Fire Island Pines lies only a short distance from the more sedate shingled, Victorian-style cottages of Point O'Woods, the island's most restrictive community. In between the extremes there is great variety: the sturdy modern designs of Saltaire, the low-keyed mix of traditional and modern architecture of Water Island, and the understated community of Fair Harbor and its close neighbor Lonelyville. In general, the architecture of Fire Island communities is not highly distinguished, mostly due to the difficulties associated with small and irregular lot sizes, restrictive zoning and building codes, and transportation to the island of building materials. The residential areas are political subdivisions of Long Island's towns of Islip and Brookhaven and the villages of Ocean Beach and Saltaire, which provide limited municipal services.¹⁴

Point O'Woods, the oldest community on Fire Island, sprung from an educational and religious assembly. Lot 21 of the divided land, today home to the communities of Ocean Beach, Seaview, Ocean Bay Park, Point O'Woods, and Oakleyville, was originally bought by the Point O'Woods Association from the Chautauqua Association in 1898. The Chautauqua Association was part of an educational and cultural self-improvement movement that began in upstate New York in the 1870s and thrived for several decades. The Fire Island Chautauqua Association, started by a group of businessmen, was established on 150 acres at "Point of the Woods" to furnish people with the attractions of a summer resort and to give them a program of variety and excellence in musical, literary, artistic, scientific, and religious subjects." After four years of operation, the association decided to sell its lots.¹⁵



Photo 1.4. Davis Park Trustee's Walk, 1945 (Courtesy of Titus Kana, www.FireIslandVision.com)

Point O'Woods, founded in 1894 as a religious enclave, has thrived since that time, despite having lost ten homes in a storm in 1962, and enjoys a mix of modern and Victorian architecture. Today the community maintains a level of exclusivity by fencing its border to Ocean Bay Park (the "Fence") and maintains a family-oriented flair. A private ferry services this community which sports grand, shingled, beach houses. Point O'Woods over the years has managed to maintain the old world charm of a private and cozy beach community. It is a predominantly Protestant Club that is determinedly family-oriented, and it prohibits the sale of alcohol, a legacy of its origins in Chautauqua.¹⁶



Photo 1.5. Fire Island Lightship, 1932 (Courtesy of Titus Kana, www.FireIslandVision.com)

Oakleyville, lying on the bay side just east of Point O'Woods is second to Point O'Woods in age and developed out of the desire of John Oakley to do carpentry work for Point O'Woods residents. Oakley built the first house there in 1897. The Oakley's lost possession of the land but left their name to the tiny community of ten houses, no stores, no ferry, no water supply except individual wells, and no services.¹⁷

Lonelyville is a small community sandwiched between Robbins Rest and Dunewood that began in 1905 when the South Shore Realty Company began selling lots there. George S. King, a south shore physician and renowned chronicler of shipwrecks on the island was the first buyer. In the 1880s, Captain Selah Clock built a four-hundred foot pier out into the ocean and there established his Fire Island Fishing Company. The pier was demolished in the hurricane of 1938. Before the 1950s there were only twenty-three houses in Lonelyville, but developers built bay-to-ocean walks, and east-west crossing, and a community water system after World War II, which permitted more development on the eastern part. By 1979, Lonelyville had five hundred feet of beachfront and forty-two homes.¹⁸

The next location to be developed was Ocean Beach, the largest community with the most year-round residents. In 1921, the Stay-a-While Beach Estates started by the heirs of Wilmot M. Smith merged with several lots originally purchased by John A. Wilbur to form the incorporated village of Ocean Beach. In New York State incorporated villages are classified as general purpose municipalities with an elected mayor and board of trustees. Villages can also establish police, fire, water, sewage, and maintenance departments. Ocean Beach was home to Fire Island's first elementary school, which opened with ten pupils in 1918. A second elementary school constructed to educate students on the western end of the island, opened in Kismet in 1933. High school students living on Fire Island today cross the bay to Bay Shore High School. Ocean Beach is the community that was loved by old-time stars like Fanny Brice, Billy Rose, George Gershwin, John Garfield, I. F. Stone, Carl Reiner, and Mel Brooks; where Marilyn Monroe visited Lee Strasberg and said, "What a lovely place this is—it's got water all around it"; where Walcott Gibbs, the *New Yorker's* drama critic, edited the newspaper and wrote a collection of short stories, *A Season in the Sun*, later adapted for Broadway.¹⁹

Wintering on Fire Island is difficult. About two hundred fifty Ocean Beach residents choose to do so, along with around one hundred seventy-five people on Kismet, fifty in Fair Harbor and another seventy-five scattered among the other communities. Ocean Beach can furnish most of its inhabitants needs, but the Robert Moses Causeway on the western end and the bridge at Smith Point in the east provide much needed points of contact for Islanders who would otherwise suffer isolation or undue risk

in crossing the icy bay to the mainland. Today Ocean Beach is one of two incorporated villages on Fire Island and is very much the hub of the barrier island. It is, in fact, the de facto capital of Fire Island, if only because most vacationers to the island eventually end up there. All other Fire Island communities depend on Ocean Beach's wide variety of shops, restaurants, bars, hotels, and services, though some spurn the community's restrictions on eating or dressing at the beach, drinking in the streets, leaving glass in garbage cans, and skateboarding. According to the community's web site, "OB" tries to run a "tight ship" because it has so many visitors and summer residents. There are six hundred homes in Ocean Beach, an elected mayor, two churches, a police force, a public green, and a court that is in session every Saturday. Because Ocean Beach was mostly spared by the 1938 hurricane, many of the old and picturesque houses remain. Not far from the commercial district by the bay you will find quiet and quaint walks in this seaside resort.²⁰

Ocean Beach has spawned four tiny "satellite" communities: Atlantique, Robbins Rest, Fire Island Summer Club, and Corneille Estates. Corneille Estates, the location of the island-wide elementary school, is the largest of these communities with fifty-three houses, though it is only two blocks wide. Atlantique is the smallest satellite with only sixteen houses, but it is host to a hostel of the Appalachian Mountain Club. All of these communities use Ocean Beach for shopping, services, and ferry. Like Point O'Woods, the Fire Island Summer Club owns its land and rents it to householders on ninety-nine year leases. Robbins Rest derived its name from the Robbins family of Bay Shore, who started the forty-one home retreat in 1925.²¹

The other incorporated village on Fire Island, Saltaire, takes its name from an English town on the River Aire named for Lord Salt and was started by the purchase of land by the Fire Island Beach Development Corporation in the fall of 1910. Aggressive marketing resulted in the fast growth of Saltaire, the home of Clam Island, Fire Island's only natural protected harbor. By 1911, over a hundred homes were built and by 1912 enough boat owners were members that they launched a boat owners association and a yacht club. Saltaire officially incorporated in 1917, making it the first incorporated village on Fire Island. Originally, the Fire Island Beach Development Corporation demolished Saltaire's sand dunes in an attempt to sell property based on ocean views. That resulted in the devastation wreaked on the community in the 1938 hurricane, which destroyed half the community and killed four people. Saltaire received funding from the Works Progress Administration and the New York State Teacher's Retirement Fund for repair. The village recovered in the postwar decades to such a degree that the zoning code was changed in 1965 to limit development to 470 houses.

Because of the destruction to the community visited by storms, this middle-class family community is characterized by housing distinguished by the dichotomy of “post-1938” and “pre-1938” construction patterns. Saltaire was a major player in the development of the Fire Island Association in the 1960s and two of its residents, George Biderman and Norma Ervin, have been presidents. Houses are generally larger here than elsewhere on Fire Island and there are some wonderful examples of older cedar shingled beach houses on the bay side. Saltaire has two churches. There are no restaurants or bars.²²

The establishment of a restaurant on Fire Island in 1868 by Archer and Elizabeth Perkinson would eventually lead to the development of Cherry Grove, the “first, and for years the only gay-controlled geography in the United States.” The Perkinsons purchased a piece of property after the partition of 1878 upon which they built a hotel. The property sported a small group of cherry trees, from which the community derived its name. Like the developers of Saltaire, the Perkinsons leveled the sand dunes so that guests could see and walk to the ocean more easily. As early as the 1920s, gays and heterosexuals shared the resort. But the hurricane of 1938 devastated the community. The devastation of the storm reduced the appeal of the hotel to heterosexuals but continued to attract homosexuals because it afforded them the social protection of the island’s remote physical location. After 1938, the hotel was turned over to Ed Duffy, who renamed it Duffy’s Hotel. After World War II, Duffy’s attracted large numbers of visitors. By the 1950s, Cherry Grove represented “‘the fulfillment of the American dream for gay people,’ a place to escape the city’s heat and noise and socialize without the fear of violence or need of subterfuge.” As the summer capital of homosexual America, Cherry Grove continues to shape the public image of what it means to be gay: white, affluent, socially exclusive, young, promiscuous, artistic. The Duffy Hotel was destroyed by fire in 1956, but the sand dunes were restored and the community has not lost a home for more than twenty years.²³

The forty house community of Water Island also had its origins in a late nineteenth-century hotel. Edward Ryder is widely credited with having built the “White House” hotel in 1890 and rumor has it that Theodore Roosevelt spent weekends there with his family. By 1906, the Caldwell Realty Company started to develop the area, but growth slowed during World War I. Prohibition again made the White House a hot spot for visitors. The hotel was rehabilitated by William Hauck, who served liquor openly and permitted limited amounts of gambling. Predictably, the repeal of prohibition and the Great Depression resulted in the foreclosure of Hauck’s property. Today, residents of Water Island fiercely resist the accoutrements of modern life. The community has no stores, no restaurants, no public water supply or services of any kind. Only grudg-

ingly did residents accept electricity in the 1970s, and up until recently the community was reachable only by private boat or beach taxis from Davis Park. The latter form of transportation has been outlawed by the Fire Island National Seashore and ferry service is now available.²⁴

The community of Seaview grew out of Gil Smith's fish factory. The community originally housed workers for Smith's factory beginning in 1895, but after Smith closed the factory he began to sell lots to vacationers who made it clear there would be no more fish processing plants in the area. Seaview property deeds were restrictive. Along with prohibitions against the construction of a fish factory, many deeds in Seaview banned the sale of property to Jews, a restriction lifted in 1928. In the 1960s, the community experienced a construction boom resulting in large houses of modern design. Seaview is now a family resort community with 342 houses, a general store, a liquor store, and the first synagogue established on Fire Island. It has no facilities for day-trippers.²⁵

Fair Harbor was born of property bought in the 1920s on partition lot six by Captain Selah Clock and George Weeks. It was originally meant to be a community for working people, and it attracted mostly people from Bay Shore who built modest housing for themselves. The community was devastated in the 1938 hurricane but made a comeback in the 1950s and 1960s and today there are more than three hundred houses, two grocery stores, a liquor store, a post office, and Le Dock, an elegant restaurant. The community discourages day-trippers, but there are renters. Most of the community, however, is made up of families, many of whom provide the support for a yacht club dock and a Swimming Association.²⁶



Photo 1.6. First Airmail to Fire Island, 1929 (Courtesy of Titus Kana, www.FireIslandVision.com)

In the 1920s, the three thousand feet separating Seaview and Point O'Woods was turned into Ocean Bay Park, with a forty-house development erected by developers for working-class summer vacationers. The community had to be rebuilt completely after the Great Depression and the Hurricane of 1938, a job that was left to the Flynn family. This family of a father and five sons established a casino on the bay and a hotel built out of an old Point O' Woods coast guard station and an army barracks floated over from the mainland on a barge. Development accelerated, attracting day-trippers who used Ocean Bay Park's snack bars, restaurants, hotels, motels, and other commercial activities. Today, Ocean Bay Park is a very diverse community with many different groups of interest. There is a large contingent of group houses, the Fire Island Hotel and Resort, and nightlife is strong at Flynn's and other places right on the bay. Ocean Bay Park is filled with college and recently graduated young people. "Party hardy" is the general theme. There are also many longtime residents that care deeply about their community. Ocean Bay Park is most widely known for its Happy Hour, which starts at about 4:00 P.M. on Saturdays and goes on into the early morning hours, something about which families in the community have expressed reservations. The community boasts perhaps the best fire department on Fire Island, a result of closely spaced, easily flammable wooden houses. The community has a grocery store, three bar/restaurants, two pizza places, and a bagel shop.²⁷

Kismet is the most westerly private community on Fire Island, beginning only four hundred feet east of Robert Moses State Park. The community began in 1925 when the Kismet Park Corporation purchased almost all of partition lot three from the Sammis estate. As early as 1933, Kismet had enough year-round residents to open a school for children serving the western part of Fire Island. While the hurricane of 1938 swept away most of the permanent dwellings, there are today 250 homeowners, mostly residents of Islip or Bay Shore who rent them out. The three developments within Kismet attract mostly singles who rent houses as a group. The families that do occupy homes seem to live in harmony with the single "groupers." Being so close to the Robert Moses Causeway makes wintering in Kismet easier than in other communities of Fire Island, but only for those who obtained licenses to drive vehicles on the island prior to 1976. Since that year, the Town of Islip has issued no new licenses.²⁸

Two postwar communities grew up in tandem beginning in 1945, when four developers floated a large building over from the mainland and set up a restaurant/bar called "Leja Beach Casino" next to Davis Park, a Brookhaven town park and marina. Home development began shortly after and continued in the 1960s, when the eastern part of the



Photo 1.7. Leja Beach Ferry, 1945 (Courtesy of Titus Kana, www.FireIslandVision.com)

community broke off from the western part, calling itself Ocean Ridge. Today, the area has 250 houses. The marina itself now has two hundred boats, and has given rise to a third segment of the population called “live aboards.” Live aboards stay on their boats for two weeks, enjoying the community’s amenities, patronizing the casino, and shopping at the sole grocery store. Davis Park has long been popular with singles and home to the “sixish,” a popular innovation in which a single residence would be randomly chosen as the site of a “bring-your-own-bottle” party. The sixish went out of style soon after parties moved outdoors “leaving a trail of collapsed decks as testimony to its success.” The presence of the Catholic Church, which holds an annual ball and a Labor Day art show, a medical facility called “Bedside Manor,” and the Davis Park Association would seem to lend enough stability to the community to make it a mature family summer colony. But the public facilities and park supplied by the Town of Brookhaven make it attractive to day-trippers and probably ensures the continuation of Davis Park and Ocean Ridge as a youth favorite.²⁹

The community of Dunewood is distinct for being the only Fire Island community planned and built by a single contractor, Maurice Barbash and Irwin Chess. Barbash and Chess launched this community of one hundred small homes in 1958 on twenty acres of land. Barbash was an environmentalist who devoted a good portion of his life to the preservation of Fire Island. Because the homes were mostly uniform in design and featured common postwar architecture, Dunewood was derided as “Levittown-by-the-ocean.” Today, Dunewood is a family-oriented community consisting of about one hundred houses. There are no shops or bars and food shopping is done in neighboring Fair Harbor.



Photo 1.8. Davis Park Marina, 1952 (Courtesy of Titus Kana, www.FireIslandVision.com)

The community considers itself family-oriented and rentals are prohibited. There is a yacht club and all activities are limited to residents.³⁰

Fire Island Pines is the most flamboyant and extravagant of the Fire Island communities. Home to many thirty- and forty-year old high-paid professionals, the community boasts six hundred houses, making it the close rival of Ocean Beach in size and population. The Pines was bought in 1925 by the Home Guardian Company from Antoinette Sammis, but was not developed until 1947. While the Pines is unique for being the only Fire Island community to have a one-hundred-unit cooperative apartment complex and a large share of Fire Island's limited number of swimming pools, its distinguishing characteristic is its culture, which derives from the high proportion of designers, models, photographers, and others in the world of high fashion that summer or live there. Gay male couples make up the majority of summer residents. Fire Island Pines parties tend to be lavish affairs that begin after 12:00 A.M. and run into the late morning hours. The Pines is also home to a community center housing a medical facility, an auditorium, a library, and a post office. The community center was converted from one of the two original Fire Island Coast Guard Stations that stand in its original location, the other one being Flynn's Hotel. The Fire Island Pines Property Owners Association (FIPPOA) was formed in 1953, and was perhaps the main force behind the community's development. In 1993, the FIPPOA celebrated its fortieth anniversary with a party featuring a fifteen piece orchestra and an appearance by New York City Mayor David Dinkins. With 570 members out of a summer population of five thousand, the FIPPOA produces highly professional music, art shows and other community activities. The Pines Conservation Society has as its mission to build up the dunes and beautify the Pines community. The Pines is also home to a nineteenth-century building that was once part of the Coast Guard station known as Lone Hill.³¹

The Eastern Half. The communities of Fire Island developed on the west end of the barrier island and occupy only 20 percent of the twenty thousand acre barrier beach. In the eastern portion the heirs of



Photo 1.9. Summer homes on Fire Island, 2003 (Courtesy of Suffolk County Planning Department)

William Tangier Smith retained title to large sections until ownership passed to the Fire Island National Seashore in 1964. No established communities ever materialized on the eastern end of the island and when the U.S. government acted to nationalize the beach it was already mainly in public hands. Suffolk County and the Town of Brookhaven came into a sizable portion of the land through a series of land transfers beginning in the early 1700s made by the William Smith family for reasons that remain murky. Other portions of the eastern end of Fire Island were inhabited by squatters, as ownership became harder to prove as time wore on. The beach on the east end was mostly marshland and not attractive to builders. Shoals at the eastern end of the Great South Bay and those in Moriches Bay made access to the island difficult. Commercial bird hunters used the land in the fall until forbidden by law. The island's hay was particularly valued.

Charles Howell leased land at Smith Point to operate a private beach between 1901 and 1910. By that time most of the older Smith property—all of the land east of Whalehouse Point to the Southampton border, with the exception of Bailey Stage—had passed into the hands of Charles F. Lynch, of Paterson, New Jersey and into Brookhaven Town custody. In 1954, Miss Eugenie Annie Tangier Smith bequeathed the remaining Manor of St. George to the Town of Brookhaven for use as a museum, along with a twenty-seven acre public park.³² Figure 1.1 depicts the location of Fire Island communities.

Lynch had big plans for the development of what he called the “Tangier Club,” but the plans were aborted when the construction of a large bridge was necessary to carry them out. Only a small wooden draw bridge linked the island to the mainland, and that remained usable only by pedestrians. The bridge was destroyed by a storm in 1917 and went through many reconfigurations. In 1931, Suffolk County approved a Robert Moses plan to spend \$31 million on various projects, including a substantial bridge at Smith Point. Work did not begin immediately and plans were shelved until after World War II. Finally, in July 1959, the bridge and a public bathing beach on land acquired by the county

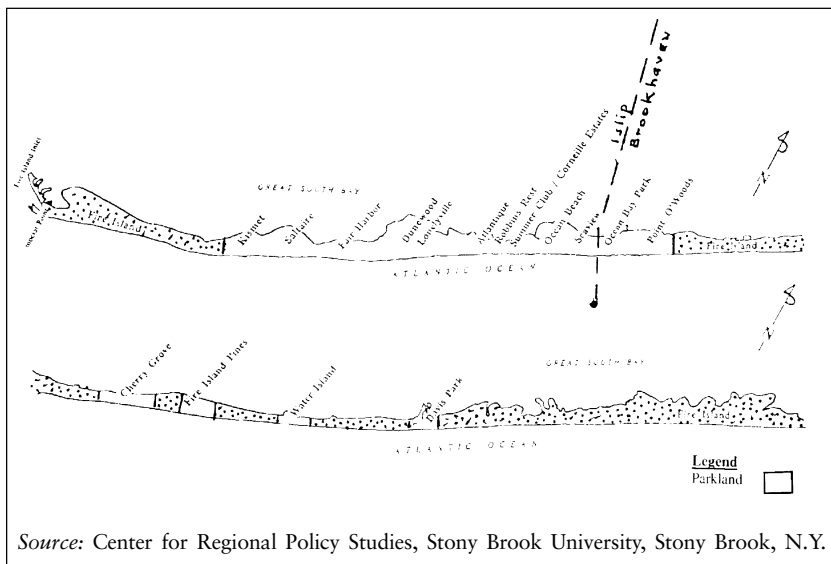


Figure 1.1. Fire Island Communities and Parklands

were opened. The county soon after bought land from Walter Shirley and extended its popular beach and attendant parking lots.

Today, the County of Suffolk owns all the land east to the Moriches Inlet except for Great Gun Beach, a small public facility operated by the Town of Brookhaven, and a 16.4 acre lot at Whalehouse Point called “Ho Hum Beach” which the village of Bellport purchased in 1963. When the U.S. Government created the Fire Island National Seashore in 1964, it bought the property owned by Nancy Ljunqvist and her sister. With this act, the last pieces of the twenty-four miles of beach property once owned by William Smith passed into public ownership.³³

For a summary of the housing units on Fire Island see Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Fire Island Housing Units—2000

Community	Total (1962) Housing Units	Total Housing Units	Occupied Housing Units	Seasonal Housing Units	Other Vacation Units
Saltaire	128	401	14	342	45
Ocean Beach	605	595	61	523	11
Fire Island (Outside Village)	1,727	3,157	138	2,976	43
Fire Island Total	2,460	4,153	213	3,841	99

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000, *Fire Island National Seashore: A Proposal* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Interior, 1964).