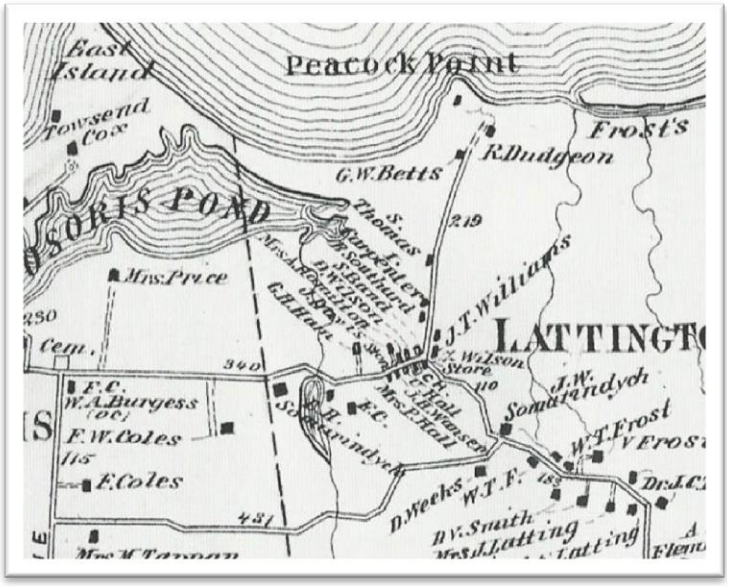
HISTORY OF LATTINGTOWN HARBOR

The land of Lattingtown Harbor, so peaceful and naturally beautiful, conceals a restless spirit with a history of change.

First the Native Americans, the Matinecock tribe, lived in the area which was mainly marsh land. Around 1660 the European settlers, primarily English, started arriving. Richard Latting bought the Lattingtown area from two Matinecock chiefs, Suscannemon and Werah around 1680. Richard then gave the land to his son Josiah (1641-1720) who made a living collecting marsh reeds for thatch roofs. Josiah built the Latting House in 1690, which still exists on Lattingtown Road across from Frost Creek Drive.

The town of Pleasant Valley, the early name for Latting Town was a community of asparagus farmers, thatch collectors and baymen. In 200 years the town grew to approximately 60 houses, two stores and a chapel.



The original town was located on the north and south side of Lattingtown Road between East Beach Drive and Peacock Lane.

The town of Lattingtown at Pudding Lane (now Lattingtown Road) in 1873.

F.W. Beers Long Island County Atlas, 1876.

.

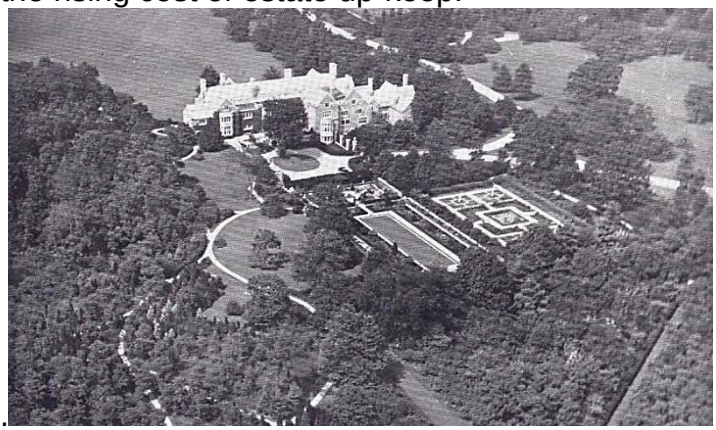
All was well in the village until 1900, when two successful wealthy friends from Manhattan decided they wanted to build their summer estates in the area. They bought the village of Lattingtown and tore it down. Where the village once stood are separate brick pier entrances to the two former estates, Meudon and Ormston. According to Amy Driscoll of the Locust Valley Historical Society, the villagers were paid well for their land and happy to leave. Many of the villagers were asparagus farmers but a blight at the end of the 19 century rendered the land unfarmable. The chapel was rebuilt in 1912 as St. John's of Lattingtown Episcopal Church on land and funds donated by one of the new estate owners, Mr. Guthrie.

Entrance at Meudon Drive and Lattingtown Road. Superintendent's house is on the left.

The Gilded Age:

The two wealthy friends were John E. Aldred, a public utilities tycoon and William D. Guthrie, a successful lawyer and educator.

John E. Aldred built Ormston, a Tudor Revival mansion on 119 acres, completed in 1917-18. Ormston had 40 rooms, numerous outbuildings and a walled garden designed by the Olmsted Brothers. He spared no expense in building his bit of heaven with oak paneled rooms, molded plaster ceilings and leaded glass windows. Aldred lost the house in 1942 due to bad financial investments and the rising cost of estate up-keep.



Aiglon Aerial of Ormston, 1915-1933

Ormston was bought at foreclosure in 1944 by the Basilian Order of Ukrainian Catholics for $75,000. The estate was renamed St. Josaphat Monastery. The house and outbuildings are still intact and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The staff of 60 are long gone, and the few monks who remain are cloistered.

Meudon and W.D. Guthrie:

Meudon gardens side. Photo: Robert Yarnall Richie Collection, SMU 1932-1934

William Dameron Guthrie completed his Renaissance Revival style residence in 1900. He named it Meudon, after the residence of Louis, le Grand Dauphin of France. The former Château de Meudon was built on a terraced steeply sloping site in an area outside of Paris. Guthrie located his Meudon on the highest bluff of land in the area. On the north side of the house, elaborate French style gardens descended in stepped terraces to the Long Island Sound. The gardens were designed by the Olmsted Brothers with Brinley and Holbrook.

The main house was 80 rooms in a two story long rectangle under a low hipped roof with a central monumental columned portico

Guthrie's architect, C.P.H. Gilbert, was a successful designer of townhouses and Long Island grand homes. C.P.H. Gilbert is not to be confused with Cass Gilbert who was also a successful architect during this time

Other local houses by Gilbert include Winfield, the Woolworth mansion in Glen Cove which is still standing, and Pembroke, on East Island which was demolished in the late 60s.

Like many of the estates, Meudon was self-sustaining with a large working farm and dairy on the property. The architect also designed most of the outbuildings including the dairy farm complex.

Meudon Aerial from Aiglon Aerial Photograph Collection, 1915-1933.

The 300 acres contained several outbuildings, including two pump houses, stables, a kennel, social buildings for the staff, several greenhouses, a beach house, and a group of farm buildings. The estate generated its own electrical power with a coal fired engine supplied by coal delivered to the property.

Meudon front (south) Entry. On photo above, note the open structure on the left (west) which still exists on the Meudon house site (see page 8).

Meudon Outbuildings:

Barn buildings with staff housing on Peacock Lane.

Photo by Aiglon Aerial Photograph Collection, 1915-1933.

The large barn complex on Peacock Lane, composed of four sides around a central stable yard, was completed in 1902. The butler, Mr. Bushell and his wife lived in one of the cottages. Male laborers bunked in one of the wings. Various animals, including cows, bulls, pigs, pheasants and chickens took up residence in the other wings and outbuildings. In 1939, Frank Armstrong, an Irish Immigrant, purchased the farm from the first developer. He established his own dairy farm delivering fresh milk to local residents. Eddie Armstrong, Frank's son, continues the agricultural heritage of the area and runs a successful egg farm across from the barn complex. The barn still stands on Peacock Lane and is housing for descendants of the Armstrong family and renters.

Staff housing at the Dairy

At the beginning of Meudon Drive (and Lattingtown Road) is the superintendent's house.

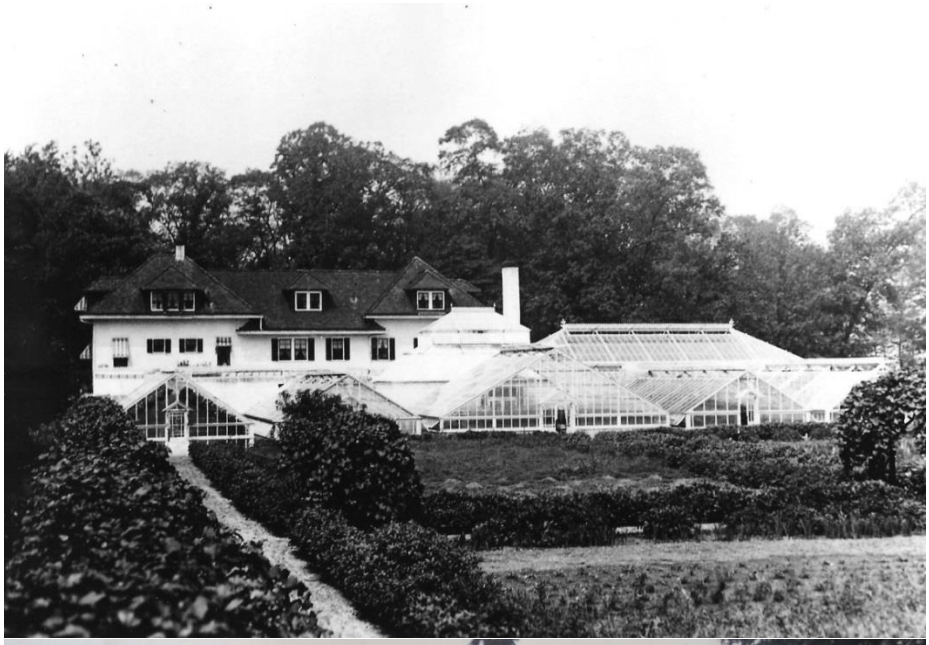
Superintendent's house.

The generator house is at 31 Frost Creek Drive. Across the street is a small building which was a kennel and/or social room for the staff. Nearby there was a subterranean space that was either a root cellar and/or a storage cave for wine and liquor. According to local lore there was a nocturnal movement of boxes along the path which bordered the Creek Club and lead down to the water and a waiting boat during the Prohibition years.

The estate had its own water system. Water was pumped from the basement of the house at 40 Frost Creek Road to the highest point of the estate, 5 Winding Way. Both houses have been demolished but the original foundations remain. Water was then fed by gravity to the various buildings.

The Beaux-Arts U-shaped carriage/stable and housing complex was located at the intersection of Frost Creek Drive and Meudon Drive. Three buildings were wrapped about an open brick courtyard which was entered through a pair of ornate tall metal gates. The two story building on the west side contained maisonettes for the chauffeur and stable manager with a central clock tower. The west wing was demolished in 1947 but the herringbone brick courtyard remained and south and north side wings were converted into housing.

Gated entry to Stable complex



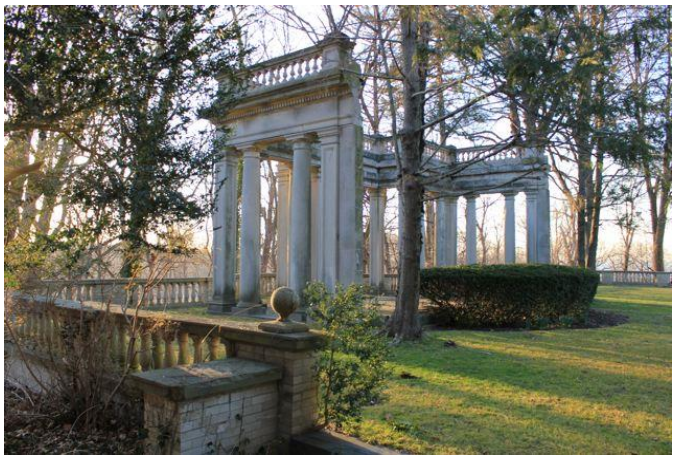
Greenhouses on south side of Servants' Quarters, Frost Creek Drive

North side of Servants' Quarters and Social Hall

Across from the stable complex at 26 Frost Creek Drive is the building that was the servants' quarters and social hall. There were as many as seven large greenhouses on the south side. One small greenhouse still remains.

The Ice house was located on a pond on Meudon Drive. Ice from the pond was cut into large chunks and stored in the stone structure to maintain dairy produce and cool drinks in the summer months. A fire destroyed the roof but the stone walls on the pond still remain.

End of an Era:

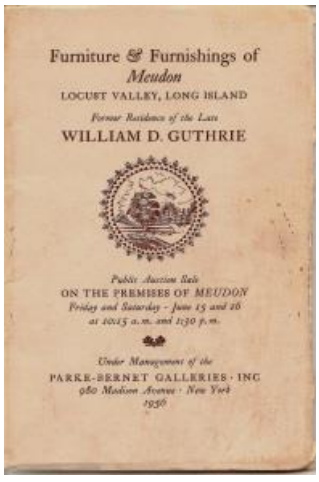


Existing Meudon remnants. Left photo: Open loggia which was attached to the ballroom of Meudon. Below: Stone base that formed the top garden level.

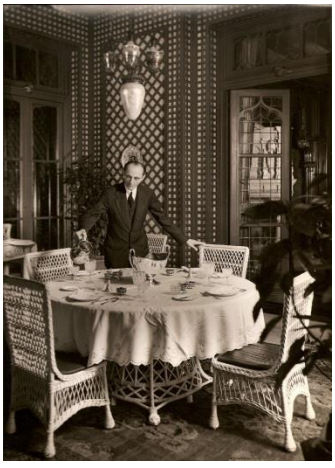
Over 500 mansions were built on a 16 mile stretch of land on the north shore of Long Island during the Gold Coast era. By the end of WWII only 200 estate houses survived. Grand houses and the fortunes of those families who built them fell victim to the Great Depression, increased upkeep costs, heating costs and the implementation of a federal income tax. Many of the estates were either torn down to make way room for housing developments or turned into event venues.

William Guthrie died in 1935 at the age of 76. His wife continued to live full time in the house until shortly before her death at the age of 100.

By 1955 the mansion was empty. In June of 1956, Park Bernet Galleries conducted a two day auction of the contents of Meudon. Around 1959, Meudon's stone facade was bulldozed into the surrounding hillside. A mansion built to last a century or two, was gone 55 years after it was built. Column capitols, fragments of marble steps and other remnants shore up the existing harbor basin bank.



Left: Auction Brochure, 1956
Below: The Guthries
Right: Mr. Bushell, the butler, at Meudon.



The Formation of the LHPOA:

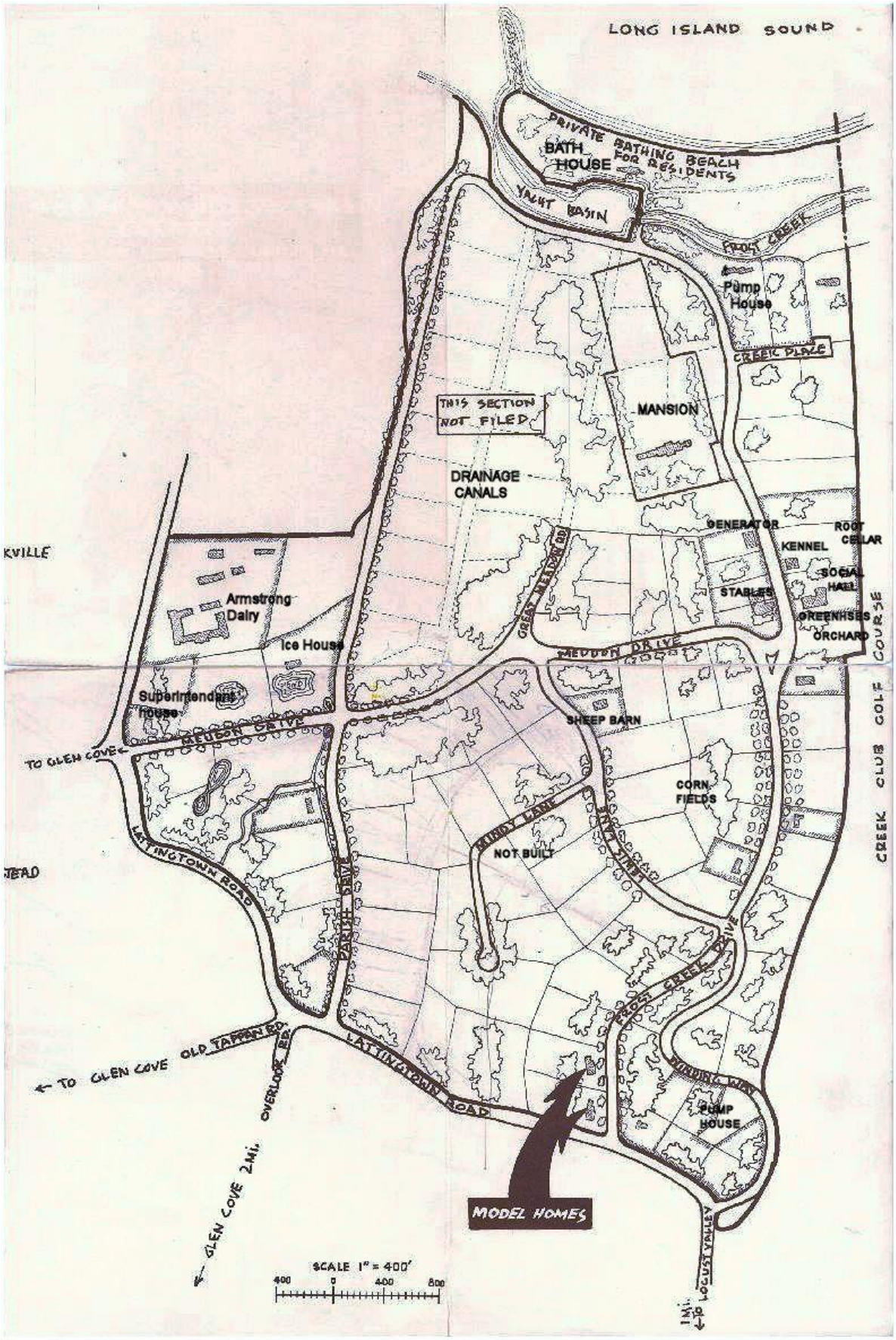
By the end of WWII the gilded age was over. In 1947 the land around the mansion was divided into 4 to 6 acre lots by the recently incorporated Meudon Land and Improvement Corporation. The grand house and surrounding 13 acres were to be retained for Mrs. Guthrie with the provision that she could stay there for the remainder of her life.

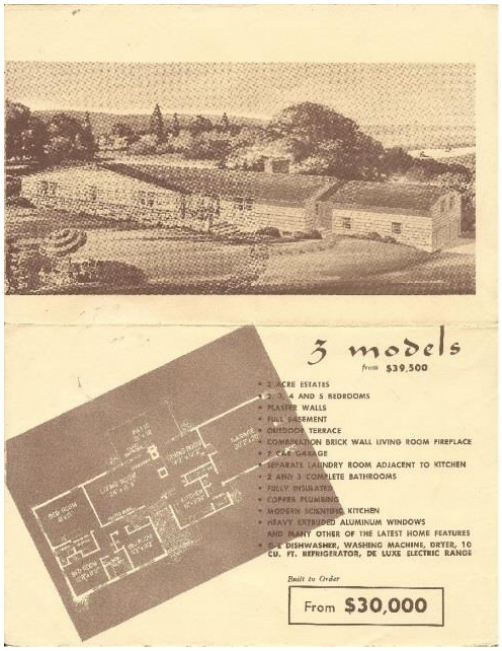
First subdivision scheme in 1947.

The first developer was not successful. According to Eddie Armstrong the reason for failure was the lack of a good septic system for the houses.

In 1950 a developer from Queens, Paul Sedrish, formed Lattingtown Harbor Development Co.,Inc and subdivided the land in to 1 to 2 acre lots. In order to attract buyers he built two model homes at the beginning of Frost Creek Drive. Prices were listed “from $39,500” with the catchy adverting slogan “everything you desire for year round living.”….private beach, private yacht basin, country living. According to the brochure, prices for a minimum parcel of two acres ranged from $7,000 to $11,000.

The following page shows the original LHPOA lot layout in 1950 as sent out in a mail brochure to potential residents. The mansion was torn down around 1959 and the area divided into six lots. Captions have been added by the author to show existing buildings and other original features. Mindy Lane was not built as shown on the map and only a few of the lots in the drainage section were sold.


LONG ISLAND SOUND
PRIVATE BATHING BEACH FOR RESIDENTS
BATH HOUSE
YACHT BASIN
FROST CREEK
Pump House
CREEK PLACE
THIS SECTION NOT FILED
MANSION
DRAINAGE CANALS
GENERATOR
ROOT CELLAR
KENNEL
SOCIAL HALL
STABLES
GREENHSES
ORCHARD
GREAT MEADOW
MEUDON DRIVE
CREEK CLUB GOLF COURSE
Armstrong Dairy
Ice House
Superintendants House
REUBEN DRIVE
TO GLEN COVE
SHEEP BARN
CORN FIELDS
MUDDY LANE
NOT BUILT
LATTINGTOWN ROAD
PARISH DRIVE
FROST CREEK DRIVE
TO GLEN COVE OLD TAPPAN RD.
OVERLOOK RD.
LATTINGTOWN ROAD
PUMP HOUSE
MODEL HOMES
GLEN COVE 2 Mi.
SCALE 1" = 400'
400 0 400 800
1 Mi. to LOCUST VALLEY



1950s Mail Brochure

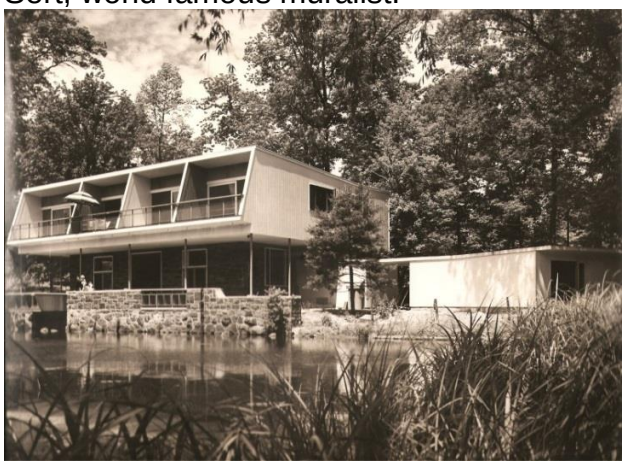
The new development retained the original tree lined roads. The north extension of Parish Drive which ran alongside the open drainage area and gave access to the dairy and beach, was closed after it crossed Meudon Drive. The road now called Great Meadow Road originally ended at the front door of the mansion after a steep uphill climb (still existing at #6 Great Meadow). Great Meadow was extended to the beach, making a diagonally cut through the terrace garden and linden tree allee. Mindy Court and Creek Place were the only new roads needed for access to the new housing lots. Frost Creek Drive was most likely named for one of the first Lattingtown settlers, George or William Frost, and the label “Great Meadow” shows up in an early map of the beach area by John Cox. Jr.

The original grey and white wood frame bath pavilion was sold in 1947 to the developer to be Included in the residential offers.

According to Eddie Armstrong, the beach house was part of the eastern coastal defense in WWII against the German U-boat operations.

Famous Houses and Artists Among Us:

One of the primary shapers of the area was Marian Willard, the granddaughter of Ella Guthrie. Marian Willard was one of the first contemporary art dealers in the city. She supported many of the artists and writers, often putting them up in the empty mansion or grand carriage/stable building. She and her husband Dan Rhodes Johnson remained on the estate after renovating the ice house which had been destroyed by a 1947 fire. She hired the architect and friend, Josep Lluis Sert, to design a second story over the existing granite walls. Sert was the dean of architecture at Harvard from 1953 to 1969 and a nephew of Jose Maria Sert, world famous muralist.



New 2nd floor on ice house stone walls

Sert and his architectural partner, Paul Lester Wiener often stayed in the large Beaux-Arts estate house on Frost Creek Drive. In 1949 they bought the complex from the Johnsons. They removed the rear two story estate building and kept the two stable wings which were arranged around a paved brick courtyard. Sert left the wing as an open living room and kitchen and added a two story bedroom addition on the foundations of the estate house. On the interior, he kept the herringbone yellow brick stable floor. Sert commissioned his friend, Alexander Calder, to designed a large tall floor mobile for the living room.

Sert House, Meudon and Frost Creek, 1952

Calder Floor Sculpture, interior stable wing.

Sert's partner, Paul Wiener and his wife Alma Morgenthau, started to adapt the northern stable wing as a home. When the marriage dissolved, Alma continued the renovation of the stable wing with an new addition of a contemporary cedar clad two story house. She converted the stable wing into a music shed with enough room for a chamber orchestra and seating for 150 patrons indoors, and 100 outside. It was her intention to have semi annual music festivals at her home but her early death in 1953 after only two seasons canceled this plan.

In 1955, at the suggestion of Marian Willard, artist Richard and his wife, the dancer, Louise Lippold bought Alma's house. Richard was becoming a famous artist with hanging metal sculptures in the lobby of Avery Fisher Hall and the Four Season's Restaurant in New York City. The stable wing became his studio, a garage for his antique cars and a home for his custom made organ.

Sadly the north part of the stable was torn down in 2008 when a new house was built at 27 Frost Creek Drive. The paved courtyard remains with half of an iron gate hanging forlornly from a brick pillar.

Remaining metal gate and pillar to stable yard

Other outbuildings include the two "pump houses" which provided fresh water to the estate. Only the foundations remain of these two buildings, the "Powell" house at the intersection of Great Meadow and Frost Creek Drive, and the "Erb" house at 5 Winding Way.

The original sheep barn and small turkey shed are located at 8 Lewis Lane. The stone walled orchard is behind the Frost Creek Drive. A large field for hay and animal feed was located between Frost Creek and Lewis Lane.

On Oct. 12, 1994 the beach house was destroyed by a fire in the middle of the night. The cause of the fire was never discovered but the caretaker's family of three were able to escape. The community met and after several heated discussions decided to rebuild the beach house as it had been. Bentel and Bentel designed the new structure which had added amenities' such as an enlarged kitchen, a sunset deck, and a handicap ramp due to new NYS regulations. The new beach house was built on the existing piers but had to be elevated and a ramp added to meet new NYS standards.

Other famous and not so famous residents were John A. Gambling who was part of the successful WOR radio show. Hank Stojowski, a noted local architect and devotee of the Frank Lloyd Wright style, designed several houses in the area including 6 Great Meadow Road, Freudenberg at 28 Frost Creek Drive (demolished, garage remains) 15 Meudon Drive and his own house, 9 Frost Creek Drive (demolished). Paul Bentel noted that most of his childhood friends' parents worked as engineers at the local technical companies which grew up around the aerospace industry anchored by Grumman Aerospace Corporation.

Fred and Maria Bentel designed and built the two barrel vaulted houses at the intersection of Frost Creek Drive and Meudon Drive. Their own house, 23 Frost Creek Drive, is a series of pavilions encircling a great Linden Tree. The other house at 24 Frost Creek Drive was built for Maria's elderly parents who required a house with the living area on the upper floor easily accessible from the street.

The Bentel and Bentel architectural practice in Locust Valley has designed such well known restaurants as Gramercy Tavern, Union Square Café, The Modern and Café 2 at MoMA; churches including Saiunt Hyacinth's, Sea Cliff Methodist; and, the renovations at Locust Valley Library . They also designed the Denning house (later Gambling) on the waterfront off Creek Place.

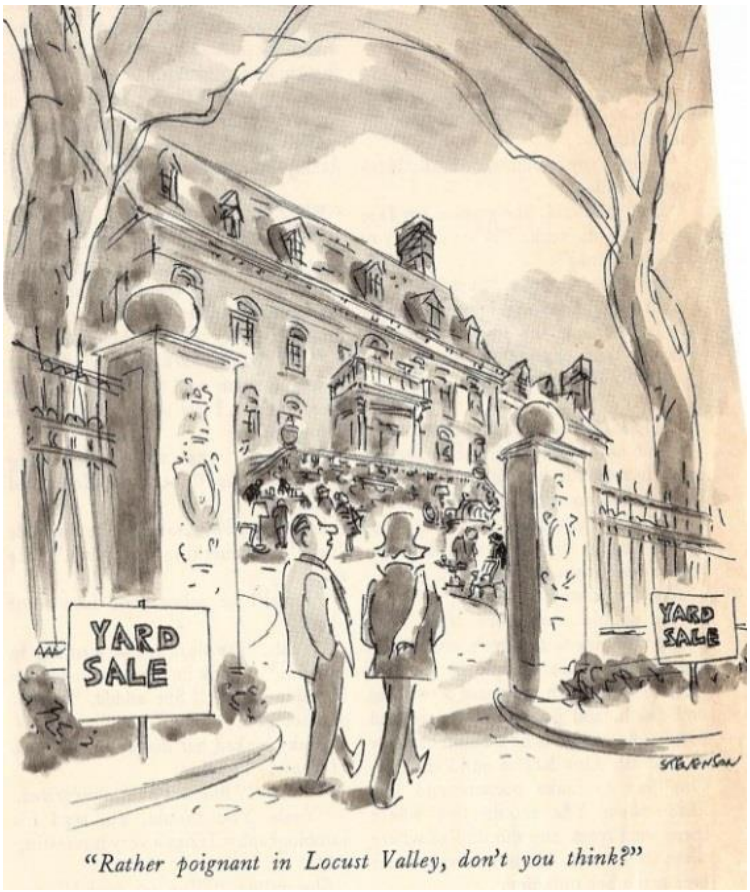
The two story structure in the field next to Fred's house was built by Paul Bentel and his grandfather during two summers. The building is a sculpture, a studio and an observatory with a roof that flips open to create a platform for a telescope.

Paul Bentel, who grew up in the area, and returned to live in his grandparent's house on Frost Creek Drive reminisced about his summers in Lattingtown Harbor: "Looking at the map of the area reminded me of my early years, tearing around on a bicycle and spending hours at the beach. Shoes came off as soon as school was over and I was not re-shod until September. I remember frequent Sunday afternoon walks with my parents on the Parish Drive extension through the marsh as well as trips with my friends, Jim Harrison, Jay Butter, Mark Fagiola, Bobby Rotach, my brother, Peter, and occasionally Eero Lippold to play on the bridges and canals of the Great Meadow. My kids grew up thinking that was where they would meet Mr. Badger and Mr. Toad."

This report has been prepared by
Susan Hillberg, Lewis Lane, Lattingtown Harbor, NY.
April 8, 2015

Dedicated to “The Commander”,
A.G. Hillberg, Architect, Surveyor, Engineer
Renovator of the sheep barn on Lewis Lane in 1947

Many thanks to Miani Johnson, Paul Bentel and Eddie Armstrong who shared their memories and historical photographs. I have borrowed photographs and information from many sources including the book “Locust Valley” by Joan Harrison and Amy Driscoll, the Blog site “Old Long Island” run by Zack L. and “Mansions of the Gilded Age” run by Gary Lawrance. Information on the Sert houses came from: Architectural Forum, July 1950: “Remodeled Dairy Building”; House and Garden, January 1952: “Recipe for Remodeling a Two-Part House”. Information on Marian Willard came from: The North Shore Journal, Vol 27,No. 4, Nov. 28 1996.



New Yorker Cartoon by James Stevenson, 1989