

# THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT SERIES

## Robert Foley, Preservation Director, Newport Restoration Foundation: OPERATION CLAPBOARD by Nancy Abbinanti

As part of the 60th anniversary celebration of the Point Association, a collection of oral histories is being recorded with longtime Point residents to learn about their experiences in the neighborhood. On August 18th, 2015, John Ward spoke with Robert Foley at the library located in Harbor House at 111 Washington Street to hear about the early days of Newport restoration and Operation Clapboard.

Mr. Foley has a long and distinguished career in the area of historic restoration in Newport. Operation Clapboard was founded in the 1960s by a group of concerned citizens who feared that in the wake of urban development many of the 18th century houses would be lost. Mr. Foley began his interest in historic preservation at a small college in Marlboro, Vermont where he studied early New England architecture. He studied 18th century New England architecture by visiting, drawing and photographing various historic buildings. He accepted a teaching position in Dover, Vermont.

One of his classmates in college was Tom Benson who was very familiar with Newport's rich collection of 18th century buildings and Mr. Foley would accompany him on his trips to Newport. The Newport houses were unique in that they weren't restored and were used for actual housing. Many of the 18th century houses they visited outside of Newport were fully restored and maintained as a museum. Mr. Benson was well known in Newport, which provided easy access to many of the homes on the Point. As they walked the various streets on the Point, neighbors heard them discussing architectural highlights and warmly greeted them when they discovered it was Tom Benson. On one visit they stopped at 25 Bridge Street and despite flaking paint in paneled rooms and hallway, Mr. Foley became interested in buying the house and did so when the house and lot became available.



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The neighborhood homes in the early 1960s were a combination of houses lived in by several generations, vacant houses and apartment buildings. There was also an auto body shop, a billboard lot and various other local businesses. The early individuals involved in Operation Clapboard, such as Tom Benson, Nadine Pepys and Pat Kirby, who provided real estate support saw that the Point Neighborhood was in transition. The Navy was changing and decreasing their presence in Newport. This had a negative impact on the area's ability

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### OPERATION CLAPBOARD

Here are a few additional sources of information about Operation Clapboard houses.

Houses with a plaque that has an acorn and an OC on them were restored by Operation Clapboard.



“Restoration On The Point: An Ongoing Story,” *The Green Light*, 1957-2007, *A History of the Point Association Bulletin* The Point Association, Newport, Rhode Island, Date of Publication- 2008. Publisher: The Point Association. pages 141- 148. Jane MacLeod Walsh, a life-long resident of the Point, having grown up on Washington St., writes about her work with both Operation Clapboard and Old Port. The book is available for purchase at all Point Association Events.

The Point Association Archives has articles and photos about Operation Clapboard. Email [HistoryandArchives@thepointassociation.com](mailto:HistoryandArchives@thepointassociation.com) to schedule an appointment.

Past *Green Light* issues contain many articles written during the 1960s by people leading the effort. To read these articles go to the Point Association's website, then go to the *Green Light* page. Put “Operation Clapboard” in the search box and hit enter. Links to the articles will show on your computer screen.

Newport Historical Society has an excellent collection of photos of Operation Clapboard houses. Contact them directly to arrange to see the collection. To schedule an appointment, contact Bridget Sullivan, Registrar, nonmembers. [bsullivan@newporthistory.org](mailto:bsullivan@newporthistory.org). \$5 fee for NHS members \$10 fee for nonmembers.

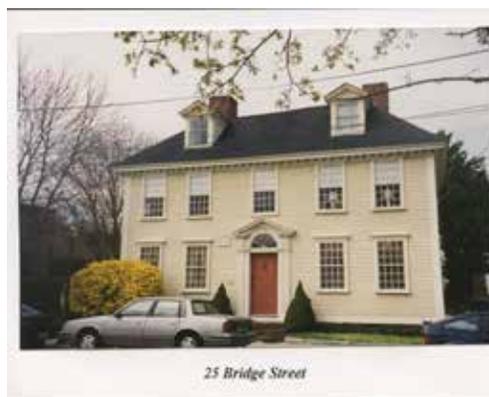
Interview with Mr. Foley. For the complete interview visit with Robert Foley visit The Point Association's website at [www.thepointassociation.org](http://www.thepointassociation.org).

to keep the houses going. From World War I to the 1960s homeowners could rent their houses no matter how poorly the house was maintained. If Navy renters complained about the condition of the house and presence of fleas and rats, they would be told to look elsewhere as other renters were right behind them. Various houses were actually condemned during that time including the Kings Arm Tavern on Cross Street.

Operation Clapboard provided a process to identify houses for sale and encourage acquaintances and friends to purchase them. Not all of the early buyers were interested in 18th century houses but were attracted by the low prices and ability to own a second house or a simple home that met their needs. When a house was identified as being for sale and had historic value, Operation Clapboard would facilitate purchase by obtaining a 60 to 90 day option to buy with little down payment. Many of the homes were sold for as low as four to five thousand dollars. Individuals from Boston and New York City, including several artists, were the primary buyers eager to secure a low cost second home. Local tradesmen were recommended to new owners by members of Operation Clapboard to complete the renovations. Mr. Foley was hired by many to provide drawings and oversee the project. Owners also received guidance on options and use of local banks.

Operation Clapboard was established as an Incorporated Business with the option for stock purchase. The funds were used to secure other properties using the 60 to 90 day option to buy while potential buyers were located. Tom Benson and Nadine Pepys were the co-directors of Operation Clapboard and there was a Board of Directors including Mr. Foley as an early participant in the organization. A split in the organization occurred when Tom Benson wanted to transition Operation Clapboard to have a non-profit arm that could accept donations to finance activities. This eventually prompted the formation of Old Port, a non-profit that also focused on building restoration.

Operation Clapboard activities decreased as time went on and housing prices began to escalate. In addition to Old Port, the Newport Restoration Foundation was established with John Perkins Brown, as its first director. Both Katherine Warren and Doris Duke provided support to the NRF which continued buying and restoring



18th century houses throughout Newport. Doris Duke was so interested in the restorations made possible by the NRF that

she wrote a check for ten million dollars and urged John Perkins Brown to go to work.

The Point Section and Newport as a whole would not be the vital historic neighborhood it is today without the vision and hard work of individuals who supported its restoration. The Newport Point Association History and Archives Committee are thankful to Robert Foley for participating in this oral history interview and sharing his recollections of early successful restoration efforts. Readers are encouraged to listen to the complete interview which is available on the Point Association Website. Mr. Foley has agreed to participate in a second oral history interview that will focus on the Newport Restoration Foundation.

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