

THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT SERIES

ANNE RAMSEY CUVELIER, OWNER AND OPERATOR OF THE SANFORD COVELL VILLA MARINA BED AND BREAKFAST

by Nancy Abbinanti

The Newport Point Association History and Archives Committee continues to record a collection of Oral Histories with longtime Point residents to learn about their experiences in the neighborhood. On September 16th, 2015, John Ward and I spoke with Anne Ramsey Cuvelier at the Sanford Covell Villa Marina B&B at 72 Washington Street to hear about the history of the house and Anne's life on the Point. Anne is the great granddaughter of William King Covell II who purchased the home in 1895. The family has owned the house ever since. It was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1979.

When the Sanfords died, the house was left to their nieces, the Barter sisters, who didn't want the house, as they lived in the Isaac Bell House. The house at 72 Washington Street became available and Anne's great grandfather, William King Covell II, purchased it in 1895 via a bid at public auction for \$16,500, although the house had cost over \$100,000 to build. The country was in the midst of a major recession in the 1890s.

The house at 72 Washington was used as a summer residence, as it wasn't heated. The Covells also resided in a house near the Mumford School on Farewell



Milton Sanford built the house in 1869/70 and he and his wife used it as a summer resort home, as they also had residences in Kentucky and New York, where they were involved in horse ownership. Mr. Sanford moved the Townsend House that was originally on the site to Second Street. The Sanfords didn't have children but a niece Kate Field stayed with them and was famous as a singer and writer. She was a friend of Alexander Graham Bell at the time the telephone was invented and she made one of the first calls in which she sang happy birthday to Queen Victoria. She was also a friend of Mark Twain and would meet with him at the Newport Literary Guild.

Street. They also owned a hard goods store in town and used a horse drawn carriage to transport furniture between the two houses. Mrs. Covell's family were close friends of Lizzy Borden and supported her by attending the trial in Fall River daily and taking food to her in jail. After she was acquitted, Ms. Borden came to stay with the Covells, as she was being teased and taunted in Fall River. The trial was in 1893 and the home was purchased in 1895 so it is unknown if Ms. Borden stayed at the Villa Marina but she definitely stayed at the house on Farewell Street.

Anne's grandfather had maintained a successful business on Thames St. and was fortunate to send his

two sons to Harvard and his daughter, Anne's mother, to Vassar. Anne's mother married a naval officer stationed in Newport at the time. When Anne was a child, they lived in Alexandria, Virginia, and visited her grandmother and uncle each summer at the Villa Marina. In later years her grandmother required nursing home care at a facility that was located at the Isaac Bell House where the two sisters resided who had previously owned the Washington Street house. Between the cost of the nursing home and the great depression, Anne's uncle was not able to keep the house. It was taken over by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and her uncle had lifetime tenancy. The house was open as a museum for a few years. When Anne's uncle died, the Society took it over but there was a contract stipulation that gave the family first right of refusal with a purchase price of \$60,000.

When the house became available for purchase, Anne was living in San Francisco with her family and came to see it, as she had always loved the house, and decided to take it over in 1980. In order to cover the mortgage and taxes, she converted the home to a bed and breakfast. The house was made for entertaining and Anne has enjoyed meeting people from all over the world. Many guests aren't aware that the quiet historic area at the Point exists, as they generally travel straight down Americas Cup into town. The view and the number of 17th and 18th century houses in the area impress her guests.

Anne described wonderful summer memories of staying at the house as a child, which included going on her uncle's boat to Mackerel Cove for swimming and blueberry picking. The family also spent evenings with neighbors singing, accompanied by piano, mostly Scottish songs. They occasionally came to Newport at Christmas and would carol up and down Washington Street, returning to the house for hot cocoa. Anne remembers traveling to the Point by ferry before the bridge was built and liked the feeling of being on an island.

Over the years there have been many changes to the Point neighborhood. The Torpedo Station was close by on Goat Island and the harbor was filled with destroyers and battleships, as the Navy held a strong pres-

ence. Washington Street was well maintained but the blocks leading to Washington were considered slums. There wasn't money available to restore the houses and if money had been available, it most likely would have been used to tear them down. It is fortunate that Doris Duke recognized the importance of restoration and the historic houses were saved. Anne and other family children weren't permitted to walk down Long Wharf which was filled with bars and brothels -- so different from today. The Point neighborhood had various small stores where Anne remembers as a child getting candy and ice cream. There were no supermarkets but locals were able to get their essentials from the various stores located in the neighborhood.

The present day Villa Marina remains a gathering place for B&B guests and Anne's friends and family. Over the years Anne has improved the residence by restoring the pier that was damaged by hurricanes, adding a saltwater pool and installing solar panels on the roof. Fortunately Anne opens her home for various neighborhood functions such as the Point Association's and the Bridgefest Annual Cocktail Party. Visitors to the Villa Marina can learn about its rich history by looking at all the photos displayed in the home that capture family moments and changes to the areas surrounding the house. Guests also have access to one of the best locations in Newport to experience the sunset.

The Newport Point Association History and Archive Committee is thankful to Anne Ramsey Cuvelier for participating in this oral history interview. We appreciate having Anne share the history of her historic home and memories of time spent there over the years. We encourage readers to listen to the complete interview that is available on the Point Association website.



Anne's uncle King Covell