

LOOK AT IT THIS WAY

Sound waters run deep

SoundWaters President Leigh Shemitz invites me to gaze upon the horizon, but I can't help looking back.

She's guiding a tour in Stamford's Bocuzzi Park at the construction site for a \$8 million marine education and research center, which is slated to debut in July.



JOHN BREUNIG

Most people know SoundWaters from its cozy center in Cove Island Park in Stamford, or its schooner that occasionally adds a 19th century postcard silhouette to the coastline.

Shemitz's vista is as bright as a sunrise on the water. This center could be transformative for the Waterside neighborhood, as it will include bonus perks such as an extended beach area and a splashpad. As I approach the entrance, I'm reminded that this is not the

part of Connecticut's most successful city that shields itself with invisible security. Barbed wires framing nearby businesses have been there for generations.

Without bold moves like this one, Stamford would be a different city. It nearly was. I mention that 60 years ago, Connecticut Light & Power almost turned Cove Island into the home of a power plant. Many residents favored the tax dividends. A court battle ensued before Mayor Thomas Quigley offered a solution: Sell the property to the city for \$485,000 and put the plant on Keyser Island, where the Jesuits once ran a spiritual retreat named Manresa.

Stamford got its signature beach. Norwalk was rewarded with toxic ash and fumes.

"You're welcome Norwalk," Shemitz says.

The grandeur of Long Island Sound can make progress along its shoreline seem like grains of sand in its hourglass of history. Some grains are larger than others, but it's remarkable how frequently shifting tides change history by happenstance.

Let's dig deeper into the sand.

A few centuries ago, during the heyday of Connecticut farming, the Cove was known as "The Pound," a place to corral wayward animals. There was no need to fence them in, as they had no way to escape the island.

Someone finally realized waterfront property could be put to better use. The Cove area was redefined by familiar Stamford surnames: David Waterbury, Jonas Weed and John William Holly.

Holly installed a grist mill in the 1790s, followed two decades later by a familiar saltbox home for himself.

Let's shake the sand in the hourglass and fast-forward through the Industrial Age. The Cove hosted the Stamford Manufacturing Company, the world's largest producer of dyes. Among other products, the company ground licorice for medicines, candy, cocktails and tobacco. Local kids chewed on the roots as treats.

The complex was sprawling, with brick factory buildings as long as 300 feet, labs, machine shops, 126-foot chimneys, ferries on the waterfront and bridges. It was a testament to modern progress. The company expanded with mills in Greenwich, Westport, New Haven, Rye, N.Y., New Rochelle, N.Y., and Lynchburg, Va.

Then it burned down on Feb. 19, 1919.

"The great plant of the Stamford Extracts Manufacturing Company, on Cove harbor, was practically wiped out last night in the most spectacular and, by all odds, the most disastrous fire that ever visited Stamford," the Stamford Advocate reported.

Allow me to do a little editing a century later — delete "practically."

"Fireproof" buildings were destroyed. Boilers exploded, extraction pots popped. The sole hydrant failed, leaving firefighters to use saltwater. No one was killed. Even the mules and horses made it out alive.

About the only thing left standing was the Holly saltbox. It survived another fire seven years later that cleared most of what remained. City officials talked about turning the whole thing into a parking lot.



Contributed Photo

A rendering of the new Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center at Bocuzzi Park in Stamford.

Now imagine what might be there if there had never been a fire.

If condos come to mind, consider this bit of serendipity. Among opponents to developing the Cove as a recreation center in the 1950s was one Nicholas Condos, a Republican candidate for state representative who favored the state taking over the property.

Eying the Cove for a possible school (a folly that reemerged recently) isn't anything new either. In 1958, my predecessors on the editorial page were aghast at the suggestion that a large chunk of Cove land be turned over to the state for a University of Connecticut branch.

A year later, Stamford's parks superintendent advised residents to bring identification to the new beach, declaring "this recreational spot is for Stamford people." The following summer he suggested one section be designated as the exclusive turf of senior citizens.

The Holly House became a city Parks Department office for a spell, and continued to deteriorate. Thanks to people such as SoundWaters Founder Len Miller and then-Mayor Dannel Malloy, it was refurbished and became the SoundWaters HQ in 2000.

"I maintain it's one of the best-maintained buildings in the city," Shemitz says. "We love that building."

It will continue to endure, but will soon have a companion 4 miles away. On his way out of the governor's office, Malloy boosted the Waterside project as well by helping secure \$2 million in bond money.

Another \$3 million came from the Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation, thus the official name of the Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center. As I gazed from the second floor, I grinned at a thought I didn't voice. Someone standing at the tip of nearby Kosciuszko Park could look across the water at a building named for the owner of the New York Mets, then turn around and see the studios of the Yankees' YES Network.

Shemitz and I have long shared a view that too many area residents take the coastline for granted. The problem is access. Liberating the Sound has always been part of the agency's mission.

But that's not all SoundWaters does. It uses the Sound to teach, not just about ecology, but life skills. Michael Bagley, the agency's vice president of programs, shared anecdotes about interviewing former Young Mariners Academy participants for summer positions in their teen years.

"Almost to a person when we ask why they want to do this they say, 'Because Young Mariners is my second family ...'"

Just for a moment, arriving like an August zephyr, emotion washes over Bagley. What could be more fitting? There is water in his eyes.

It should always be there when we consider the horizon.

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