

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

### National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



373

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

#### 1. Name of Property

historic name Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

other names/site number The Cherry Grove Playhouse / The Cherry Grove Theater

#### 2. Location

street & number 180 Bayview Walk [ ] not for publication

city or town Cherry Grove [ ] vicinity

state New York code NY county Suffolk code 103 zip code 11782

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] nomination [ ] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [X] nationally [ ] statewide [ ] locally. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ruth Purpoint DSHPO

4/19/13

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [ ] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([ ] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register  
[ ] see continuation sheet
- [ ] determined eligible for the National Register  
[ ] see continuation sheet
- [ ] determined not eligible for the National Register
- [ ] removed from the National Register
- [ ] other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

fore

Signature of the Keeper

Alexis Abernathy

date of action

6/4/13



**Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre**

Name of Property

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Suffolk County, New York**

County and State

**Areas of Significance:**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Social History

Performing Arts

Community Planning & Development

**Period of Significance:**

1947- 1969

**Significant Dates:**

1947 -1950, 1953, 1968

**Significant Person:**

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation:**

N/A

**Architect/Builder:**

Carriage House - Unknown

Theater Addition – Frederick Stover

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other repository: \_\_\_\_\_





United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 7 Page 1

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre - Description

The Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre is located on the bayside of Fire Island in the hamlet of Cherry Grove. Fire Island is one of a number of long, narrow barrier islands located just off the south shore of Long Island on the Atlantic coast. Fire Island is immediately east of the series of barrier islands that were combined in the 1920s to make Jones Beach State Park. The west end of Fire Island is the location of Robert Moses State Park. Cherry Grove is located on the central portion of the island, across the bay from the hamlet of Sayville.

The building is composed of two historic adjoining sections: a one and half-story c.1900 peak roofed carriage house that was floated across the bay in 1946, and a two and one-half story gambrel roofed theater addition constructed in 1949.<sup>1</sup> These are set between the bay and Bayview Walk, with the carriage house portion to the east and the theater addition to the west. The building is unified by a shingled exterior, white painted trim and fascia, and an asphalt shingle roof. Two shallow cupolas punctuate the roofs of both historic buildings. The overall form and massing of the building is irregular, with a one-story gable roofed wing at the south of the theater and a one-story flat roofed wing at the north, both completed shortly after the two buildings were united. A one-story, non-historic flat roofed enclosed porch is off of the east elevation. This irregularity is further evident in first and second story decking on portions of the exterior, dormers on the carriage house section that have been adapted to provide balcony access, and a police booth that has been added to the southeast corner of the building. While there have been alterations that postdate the Community House and Theatre's 1947 to 1968 period of significance, these changes do not compromise its character-defining features or overall historic feeling. The building is approximately 4,500 sq. ft. with a 151 seat theater.

The building is located in the Cherry Grove commercial district, west of the main dock, positioned on its lot within 75-feet of the Great South Bay. The lot is 9,110 square feet, approximately 100-feet along Bayview Walk and 91-feet deep. On the building's east side is a boardwalk ramp leading to lower level storage areas and to a pump house toward the bulkhead, which do not contribute to the site. The easternmost adjacent parcel is a private lot. The lot on its west side is bound by a Town of Brookhaven boardwalk (Holly Walk) leading to a one-story Suffolk County Water Authority's pump house building, which occupies a rectangular lot on the bulkhead in front of the Community House. Due to the grade on the bayside, the county building obscures the sublevel of the Community House when approaching by water. The immediately adjacent west lot is the property of the Cherry Grove Volunteer Fire Department and is occupied by its fire house. The Ice Palace, an entertainment complex with a bar, nightclub, swimming pool and two-story hotel, is opposite the Community House on Bay Walk.

Southern (Main) Elevation-[Photo 1]

Public entry to the Community House and Theatre is from the Bay View Walk boardwalk. Here, from left to right, is the 1949 theater addition, the 1946 carriage house, and an enclosed porch/police booth. The two and half story theater is visible behind a one-story peaked roofed wing that serves as an entry to the space

<sup>1</sup> The original building was floated across the Great South Bay from Sayville, NY to its present location by Clive Davis of Davis Brothers (Blue Point, NY) in 1945. The building was purchased from Sayville real estate entrepreneur, August Kappel, for \$400.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 7 Page 2

known today as the boardroom. This small wing dates to c.1950 and originally served as a garage for the volunteer fire department. At the time of its construction, it had a flat roof. In 1990 it was altered to serve its current function and the current gable roof was introduced. A door to the boardroom is offset to the right and the pediment of the new roof faces the south. [Photo 2] A free standing signboard is located in front of the boardroom. Above the boardroom, the windowless wall of the theater stage rises to the slope of its gambrel roof, cupola centered at its peak. The cupola is capped with a pyramidal roof and its square base contains wood louvers. [Photo 3]

To the right of the boardroom, three large beds of plantings bracket twin boardwalks that lead to the building's main public entrances. The left boardwalk is centered on an entrance to the theater auditorium which is formed from the original, one and half story carriage house section of the building, and a twin boardwalk on the right is centered on the pavilion entrance that was formed from enclosing the original east deck of the carriage house, and now serves as the community house pavilion and main entrance (lobby) to the theater auditorium. Since the building's main entrance from Bay Walk is recessed, this entire elevation forms a 'U' or courtyard around this entrance. The Arts Project of Cherry Grove's theater billboard, illuminated at night, is a focal point in the property's center garden on Bay Walk.<sup>2</sup> Memorial gardens, replenished seasonally by the Grove Garden Club, and shade trees, complete the premises' landscaping.

Irregularly placed wood double hung windows and non-historic front doors sit below an open porch with square post supports. These doors provide access to the building's interior. A mobile ticket booth occupies the extreme east corner of the front porch. This ticket booth is redesigned seasonally to compliment to the Arts Project's programming theme, for example, the Arts Project's "Summer Camp" theme saw its ticket booth redesigned to resemble a 'Boys/Girls Scouts Cabin' for its 2011 season. Above the porch, a balcony has been created with square balustrade. The half story pitch of the roof is visible and its gable is flush to the larger theater addition to the left. Centrally placed on the carriage house's roof, a hipped dormer entrance had been introduced to provide access to the balcony. The cupola on the carriage house is offset to the east. It is capped with a pyramidal roof and its square base is decorated with fish scale shingles.

Northern (Bayside) Elevation-

The bay side's sublevel is partially obscured by the county building. [Photo 4] From left to right, this elevation contains the enclosed porch, the carriage house, and the theater. The one-story non-historic enclosed porch contains a bank of four wood double hung windows, partially obscured by a staircase that leads to a balcony off of the carriage house. On this elevation, the centrally located carriage house contains a one-story 1949 'bump out' addition. This small addition expanded the central auditorium and added a small theater office (today's unisex lavatory). Fenestration on this one-story elevation includes three double hung windows and two emergency exits provide access to decking. As noted on the principal façade, the bayside elevation follows a similar composition with the half-story of the roof's pitch visible and its gable flush to the larger theater

<sup>2</sup> Originally called the "Cherry Grove Association "Art Project Committee" (1944), shortened to the "Art Project Committee" (1945-47); the "Artistic Activity Group" aka "The Cherry Grove Property Owners Association—ART PROJECT" (1948-e1950s), shortened to "Art Project" (m1950s-e1960s); and formally incorporated as the "Arts Project of Cherry Grove, Inc." (1964) aka the "Arts Project." All references to this entity are period specific throughout this narrative.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 7 Page 3

addition. A hipped dormer original to the building has been adapted into an entrance to provide access to a small balcony. As noted above, this balcony connects to the ground level by a staircase that runs against the enclosed porch toward the east and connects to decking along the eastern elevation. The balcony includes a very simple wood rail. The theater portion has an organized two bay wide fenestration pattern of three sets of double hung wood windows.

The West & East Elevation-

The west elevation is a two and half-story, windowless wall of weathered shake siding. Centered directly at its peak is a half-circle louvered window. [Photo 5] At its sublevel are decking and a ramp and that leads to the theater loading doors and provides access to the bayside elevations sublevel.

The east elevation contains the visible enclosed pediment of the c.1900 carriage house. The pediment is clad in fish scale shingle and a 'horseshoe' shaped window is centered toward the peak. [Photo 6] A bank of five windows is located on the enclosed porch below.

On the eastern elevation lie the non-historic one-story enclosed pavilion and a police booth. The enclosed pavilion, which consumes the first story of the eastern elevation, was constructed in 1983 as an open air porch. At that time a 1953 detached structure that had been built directly atop the southeast corner deck of the original carriage house, and used as a costume shop (later doubling as a "police holding pen" at the community house), was adjoined to the open air porch. Today that 1953 structure comprises the Arts Project's office/supply room in the pavilion's interior; and is fenestrated by original awning windows visible on the eastern elevation. The subsequent full enclosure of the east porch in 1987 provided the opportunity to absorb into the building's envelope the current police booth that had been commissioned in 1978.

Interior

The Theater-

The theater is generally accessed by its main entrance through the pavilion (lobby) via double crash-doors left of center on the pavilion's interior west wall. A second single door entrance is located on the far right side of this wall. The pavilion's west wall comprised the exterior façade of the historic carriage house, and so retains its period-specific cedar shake siding in its distinctive sea wave pattern. Inside the theater auditorium, above its pavilion entrance, is a balcony that was the hay loft of the original carriage house section. The balcony's low ceiling projects approximately 8 feet into left-center of the theater auditorium. The balcony is fore fronted by an interior space, open from its center floor twenty five feet vertically, that reveals the vaulted peak of the original carriage house section. Seven ceiling fan/4-light luminaires provide general overhead lighting, the theater lighting booth is located in the balcony, spotlights in the balcony's corners, and lighting bars attached to the balcony and side walls support Fresnels and parabolics—the theater lights.

A raised stage with proscenium arch, fronted by a short apron, is offset left of center on the auditorium's west wall, but would have appeared centrally aligned to the historic carriage house footprint prior to the 'bump out' of the theater auditorium space. [Photo 7] An orchestra pit once fronted the stage, but was removed and the space beneath converted to a props storage room accessible from the basement beneath the stage floor.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Blue prints (unrecovered) for the theater extension are attributed to Frederick Stover, assist to scenic and lighting designer Donald Oenslager.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 7 Page 4

non-historic proscenium is over thirty years old, its façade an *objet d'art*, created by the Arts Project's long time scenic designer and archivist, Harold Seeley.<sup>4</sup> It is a three-dimensional collage comprised of theater artifacts, actors' props, and production ephemera. Overall the arch is unified by a seaside motif accented by interweaving ferry boat ropes and oversized sea shells set in a beach sand and pebble bas relief. The whole is embedded in plaster of Paris and gilded in gold leaf. A framed, color diagram identifying the locations of artifacts embedded in this proscenium hangs on the west wall adjacent to the stage.

The historic theater section is comprised of a "hemp house" (the centuries-old tradition of manual, rope-rigged stage mechanics) with extended wings for the line system and set pieces, and a two-story loft above the stage providing fly space for battens for stage curtains, lighting and scenery pieces. A second floor storage room—stage left—is accessible from the stage by a narrow wooden staircase on the back west wall of the stage's northwest corner. On the southwest corner wall large double doors for loading scenery offer egress to an exterior loading dock (West Elevation). The stage right (Bay Walk) wall supports the stage line (rigging) system (e.g. hemp ropes, blocks aka pullies, tie bars and, sand bag counterweights).

To the left of the stage/proscenium arch is a wall covered in straight course cedar shakes with a centered door, original to the 1949 construction. [Photo 8] The door leads to a wooden, switch back stairway that goes up to the stage floor/back stage, and down to the basement/dressing rooms/storage areas. [Photo 9] A traditional "stage door" entrance is also located on the exterior of the community house in the left corner of the front porch adjacent to the boardroom.

The left hand section (north side) of the theater auditorium comprises the 'bump out' expansion of the historic carriage house. The space is confined by a low, flat ceiling conjoined to the balcony's ceiling. The entire auditorium floor space is approximately 35 feet (L) x 32 feet (W). The north (bay side) wall is comprised of two non-historic fire exit doors accessing exterior decks, and irregularly-spaced, double hung wood/vinyl-clad windows. Stackable audience chairs are stored along this wall or on the stage. The northeast corner of the "bump out" space contains a unisex lavatory (originally conceived as a small, theater office, c1949).

The south (Bay Walk) wall of the theater auditorium is comprised of a separate exit/entrance, a double door twin of the pavilion's exterior double door entrance, accessing the exterior south porch. Two double hung wood/vinyl-clad windows are equidistant on each side of this entrance. [Photo 10]

Originally the carriage house had no electricity. Two 4-lamp, propane gas-fueled chandeliers illuminated the interior, augmented by natural light from the open 'barn doors' and small, deep set clerestory windows during the years 1947 – June, 1949. Steam heat was generated from a basement boiler in the early years of the building's use, but later abandoned. Theater seating was never affixed to the auditorium's floor. In this respect, once the accoutrements are stored away at the end of each summer, the grove community house and theater came to resemble nothing more or less than a typical, mid-20th century American high school gymnasium with a polished, hard wood floor, and in 1949 even an outdoor basketball hoop. The building was

<sup>4</sup> For More on Seeley, see: Guide to the Harold I. Seeley, Jr. Collection on Cherry Grove, MS 1908, Yale University Library Manuscripts and Archives (New Haven, CT), 2011

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre**

**Name of Property**

**Suffolk County, New York**

**County and State**

**Section 7 Page 5**

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electrified in 1949 for the inauguration of its new theater addition when a permanent cable was run from Duffy's Hotel.

**The Pavilion-**

The pavilion was created over the original open air, side deck attached along the entire length of the east façade of the historic carriage house, and extended out toward the bay front. This deck was first roofed over to become a sheltered porch as well as providing a second entrance to the community house and theater. Canvas wind breaks (shades) were used to protect the interior from the elements for many years. In 1987 this roofed east porch was enclosed. A double door entrance, with equidistant double hung wooden windows on either side, provided access to pavilion. [Photo 11]

Upon entering the pavilion, on its left hand (east) side is the theater office/supply room. This room was originally built in 1953 as a detached structure atop the extreme southeast corner deck of the historic community house. It was to be used as a costume/props shop, but that concept was supplanted by use as a police substation for many years. The 1953 building was fully integrated into the renovation and enclosure of the east porch as the theater office and supply room.

The pavilion can be used independently from the main auditorium, but usually functions as the theater's lobby during performances. A total of eleven windows afford bright, natural illumination to this fully-enclosed space—further enhanced by an all-white painted interior with a contrasting, cerulean blue painted, wood deck floor. Modern drum light fixtures suspended from the ceiling illuminate the lobby at night. Club chairs and couches, and a mobile bar and glass front, commercial refrigerator compliment the interior of the pavilion in 2013. [Photo 12]

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 1

The Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre: Significance

The Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre on Fire Island is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the areas of Social History, Performing Arts, and Community Planning and Development. The Community House and Theatre is exceptionally significant in social history for the enormous role it played in shaping what gradually evolved into “America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town.”<sup>5</sup> Located in the hamlet of Cherry Grove on Fire Island, the building was floated across Long Island’s Great South Bay to serve as the community house for the Cherry Grove Property Owners Association, Inc., which organized in 1944 to serve this small, beach colony’s civic needs.<sup>6</sup> In 1948, a theater addition was constructed, completing the building seen today. As an organization, the association influenced the community’s development, facilitating gradual social acceptance, self-affirmation, and integration of its gay and lesbian residents into Cherry Grove’s governing affairs and civic life. This integration of homosexual residents into daily life and events at its community house afforded Cherry Grove a singular status; it became the one of the first and, for many years, the only gay and lesbian influenced geography in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Its metamorphosis played out against turbulent social and political upheavals—our nation’s response to the pre- and early days of the homosexual liberation movement. The 1969 uprising at the Stonewall Inn, which is largely credited as the turning point in the gay civil rights movement, has been documented by numerous scholars. For the purposes of the National Register program, a thorough discussion of the events leading to the riots and its impact can be found in the 1999 *Stonewall* National Register nomination and its subsequent National Historic Landmark designation report. The nomination of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre is especially significant because it offers the rare opportunity to document an entire GLBT community in the pre-Stonewall era.

The Community House’s theater has been in continual operation since its inaugural production in 1948. The Cherry Grove Association’s Art Project Committee facilitated what can be described as the first “gay theater,” continually produced by gay people, for gay and straight audiences in the United States. The theater is also exceptionally significant for its association with homosexuals’ heightened visibility in the performing arts. Examples of moments associated with GLBT history in the performing arts have been widely documented by scholars.<sup>8</sup> However, the very term gay theater remains a difficult term to place in a context. In an attempt to define what is meant by the term, William M. Hoffman, editor of *Gay Plays: The First Collection* states, “the manner in which a play is acted and directed will determine if a production is ‘gay theater.’” Hoffman defines gay theater as a production that implicitly or explicitly acknowledges that there are homosexuals on both sides of the footlights. Gay theater winks, flirts, and looks at its audience in a certain way, as two homosexual strangers might at a party or bar....Gay theater will certainly ‘camp’ that is, emphasize style to such a degree that the style will become the subject matter.”<sup>9</sup> The 1933 Broadway premiere of *Design For Living*, authored by the known-to-be-homosexual Noël Coward, can be revisited today as an early example of gay theater on the legitimate stage in light of Hoffman’s definition. Coward also starred in *Design For Living* along with the era’s

<sup>5</sup> Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove Fire Island: Sixty Year’s in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), Cover.

<sup>6</sup> Referred to in this narratives as the Property Owners Association.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, *Fire Island* (December 2006). [http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/fire\\_island.html](http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/fire_island.html)

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan on Theatre* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 286-88.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas W. Gordy, “Joseph Cino and the First Off-Off Broadway Theater,” on ‘gay theater’ (313); William M. Hoffman, ed., *Gay Plays: The First Collection* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), (322, n24) in Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra, eds., *Passing Performances, Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998);

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 2

pre-eminent, Broadway husband and wife team of Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne. The three originated their roles with a homosexual aesthetic coded in the comedy's notorious *ménage à trois*.<sup>10</sup> While other moments in gay theater history have been recorded, the Cherry Grove Community House's Theater represents a first in its continued production of gay themed and gay identified productions starting in 1948.

At the time of the Community House and Theater's establishment, no civil rights organization dedicated to the advocacy of GLBT rights existed in the United States. The word "gay" was not yet the term specifying homosexuality in America's lexicon. With few exceptions, homosexual men and lesbians were forced to remain "invisible" in public spaces, in the work place, to friends and in their families. The integration and self-affirming presentation of homosexual men and lesbians in Cherry Grove's social life, and especially their presentation in its performing arts, is of exceptional historic significance. The Cherry Grove culture of homosexual inclusiveness emerged and flourished against a background of seemingly implacable, universal abhorrence of virtually all expressions of gender and sexual unorthodoxy. The Cherry Grove culture succeeded in an era characterized by demonstrations of extreme, and often violent, prejudice visited equally upon men and women identified as homosexual in many towns and cities of the United States. As such, the community house represents a rare and exceptionally significant chapter in the struggle for gay and lesbian civil rights.

Cherry Grove, Fire Island, New York

*There was a magic about the sea. People were drawn to it. People wanted to love by it, swim in it, play in it, look at it. It was a living thing that was as unpredictable as a great stage actor: it could be calm and welcoming, opening its arms to embrace its audience one moment, but then could explode with its stormy tempers, flinging people around, wanting them out, attacking coastlines, breaking down islands.*

Cecelia Ahern, *The Gift*, 2009

The seaside resort and beach holiday, in their various guises, played a central role in the development of tourism as a great international industry, agent of economic and social transformation...across the globe. The railways helped to boost growth from the 1840s onwards, giving easier, cheaper, faster access to the coast for middle-class families and working-class [vacationers].<sup>11</sup> The intermodal transportation system in New York City developed during this period. It had an identical impact on society's mobility. Rail lines linked New York City to its five boroughs and eventually to its six contiguous states.

The railroad expansion encouraged the success of the Surf Hotel on Fire Island, a barrier island on Long Island's south shore. Travelers first came from a train station located in Deer Park. In 1867, the Babylon line was built, providing even closer access. David Sammis provided coaches and eventually a trolley to shuttle between the rail stations to where his boats were docked in Babylon—the first regular ferry service to Fire

<sup>10</sup> Sam Abel, "Staging Heterosexuality: Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne's Design for Living," in *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History*, eds. Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 175-196. Herein the author deconstructs, by evidencing their ambiguous sexual orientations, one of American theater's most celebrated 'married' couples. A *ménage à trois* is defined as a married pair and the lover of one of the pair living in the same household

<sup>11</sup> John K. Walton, "The Seaside Resort: a British Cultural Export," in *History in Focus: The Sea*, Issue 9 (United Kingdom: University of Central Lancashire) <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Sea/articles/walton.html>



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 3

Island. About seven miles east, Elizabeth and Archer Perkinson purchased land in 1868 where sour cherry trees grew in abundance...where they opened a chowder house that would later be expanded into a hotel.<sup>12</sup> These two hotels, and others at that time, ushered in the era of seaside resort vacations on Fire Island. The Perkinsons' hotel resort is the infant Cherry Grove of today. According to local lore, the world-famous author and playwright Oscar Wilde visited Cherry Grove and stayed at the Perkinsons' hotel in 1882. He reputedly described it as "one of the most beautiful resorts" he had ever visited.<sup>13</sup> Some artifice had been employed to achieve that beauty, e.g. the leveling of sand dunes by the Perkinsons so that guests could see and walk to the ocean more easily.<sup>14</sup> This landscaping decision would lead to catastrophic consequences for the Grove.

The beach at Cherry Grove beckoned equally both middle-class and working-class individuals and families from small towns, like Bay Shore, Islip and Oakdale, dotting Long Island's South Shore. Increased access to Fire Island, its relative isolation and few restrictions, afforded these early local tourists a kind of exclusivity by proximity. Transportation to and from Fire Island's early colonies was entirely waterborne via steam-powered ferry or private sail boats.

At these idyllic seashore resorts visitors enjoyed American pastimes: luncheons and baseball games on the beach, fishing or wading in the ocean, or sail boating on the bay. A most popular local pleasure was digging for hard shell clams and bay scallops in Long Island's Great South Bay followed by a clambake on Fire Island Beach, the name designating early Cherry Grove on regional maps. The earliest colonists were governed mostly by the 'golden rule' and the rules of hard work followed by rest and relaxation.

**Gay and Lesbian Communities: Pre-1940**

*It is extraordinary to consider that with the possible exception of pre-Hitler Berlin, no city in the world had a gay communal life before the late sixties equivalent to that now found in Phoenix or any other one of perhaps a hundred Western cities.*

Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America, The Americanization of the Homosexual*<sup>15</sup>

Mapping conclusive demographics of the existence (or absence) of one or more homosexual 'residential' enclaves in the United States analogous to Cherry Grove, an identifiable homosexual resort town, presents a challenge. There was no cultural curiosity on the part of demographers, social scientists or others to prompt research about homosexual America's social life during the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century or in any preceding time. The construct of homosexual communal life simply did not exist. No United States Census has ever provided a check-box for its homosexual male and lesbian citizens to identify themselves. Another

<sup>12</sup> Shoshanna McCollum, *Images of America: Fire Island Beach Resort and National Seashore* (South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Escoffier, *Fire Island*.

<sup>14</sup> Lee E. Koppelman and Seth Forman, *Fire Island-Historical Background; The Fire Island National Seashore* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America, The Americanization of the Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 8. Altman is an Australian academic and author of seven books, several documenting the suppression and rise of gay civil rights in America.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 4

significant obstacle to an accurate count of America's homosexuals during this time was the unreliability of individuals self-reporting their sexual orientation in response to direct inquiry. Early to mid-20th century America was a time when even self-identifying homosexual men and lesbians could not safely seek out, identify and query one another.

*Gay New York*, by George Chauncey Jr., is an authoritative, meticulously researched study of New York City's gay male urban culture from 1890 to 1940. Chauncey notes the absence of research about homosexual communal lifeways during the book's subject era as being the reason his research was sourced from materials such as police records of homosexual arrests or their routine reportage in New York City tabloids. He also sourced homosexual patient studies published by psychiatric institutions, homosexual prison inmate records, and the discharge records of American Armed Forces' homosexual personnel, primarily dating from the onset of World War II. Details from these records and news items, accessible in file rooms of most U.S. cities where a homosexual minority did exist, also influenced the public acceptance of the most scurrilous characterizations attributed to homosexuals during the 20th century.

The *Kinsey Reports of 1948 and 1953* were firsts of their kind to quantify the prevalence and frequency of male homosexual and lesbian activity in the general population of the United States. Public shock over, and denial of, these studies' conclusions exposed an era of national naiveté concerning homosexuals' ubiquitous existence generally and their numbers and behaviors specifically. This naiveté also benefitted homosexuals. It permitted their existence right under the noses of their heterosexual counterparts, as long as they assiduously avoided the era's identifying stereotypes (effeminate affectations by males, masculinized or 'butch' presentations by women) and eschewed obvious gender transgressions in work roles, recreational and entertainment pursuits.

In the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, the cities of Paris, Berlin and, somewhat later, Amsterdam, and in the United States, New York and San Francisco "began to develop reputations as places where emerging gay subculture(s)" could be found.<sup>16</sup> For example, Nollendorfplatz, Berlin was a city known to tourists for having an identifiable 'gay village' dating from the turn of the 20th Century.<sup>17</sup> Paris in pre-World War II was the locus of a commercial 'gay sub-culture' surpassing New York's in scale.<sup>18</sup> Although gay visibility and gay social gathering spaces were often heavily policed and publicly criticized in European capitals, liberalized social attitudes there allowed homosexual enclaves to flourish and become firmly established by the end of World War II.

New York City's Greenwich Village neighborhood was known internationally in the 19th and 20th centuries as an artist enclave that included a recognizable male homosexual and lesbian minority. New York City's homosexual spaces in the working-class, immigrant neighborhood Downtown—the famous Bowery district, and Uptown—in black Harlem, also existed during this era. San Francisco maintained a gay

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Waitt and Kevin Markland, *Gay Tourism: Culture and Context* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 54.

<sup>17</sup> Susanne Twardawa, *Der Nollendorfplatz in Berlin* (Germany: Motzbuch, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York; Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 144.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 5

community at the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Waitt & Markland note a “simulacrum of the modern gay community had taken a distinct shape...comprising gay enclaves, clusters of commercial establishments and residential neighborhoods [in San Francisco].<sup>19</sup> Coincident with New York City’s “pre-World’s Fair (1939) crack down” in the form of police raids mobilized to close most gay bars and to further clear the streets and venues of visible homosexual men and lesbians, “the public nature of these early gay communities declined and went underground by the end of the 1930s” in response to local public condemnation, and the era’s censorious forces.<sup>20</sup>

Generally, the development of homosexual-identified resort towns in the early 20th century is attributed to their proximity to America’s metropolitan centers. Waitt & Markland note especially Fire Island and the Cherry Grove colony as developing due to proximity to New York City. Provincetown (near Boston), Russian River (San Francisco), Key West (Miami) and Palm Springs (Los Angeles) were the only other places in the nation known to homosexuals vacationers where they could find others like themselves in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1940s Cherry Grove was known regionally and by homosexuals in cities around the world as an established residential community with a significant homosexual population. It gained in reputation as a holiday destination for homosexual men in particular. By the mid-1950s a nearly 50/50 mix of heterosexual and homosexual residents in Cherry Gove was the result of the family exodus of the late forties and early fifties. In Provincetown gay and lesbian homeownership was only just beginning to take form by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup>

The anthropologist and author Esther Newton, in her studies of Cherry Grove in this era, “plac[es] the island as a ‘gay utopia’ hidden from view of the heterosexual world that increasingly sought to limit and restrict homosexual culture and community at least from the public sphere.”<sup>22</sup> Newton credits the associative characteristics of America’s affinity groups with the development of identifiable gay minority group compatibility and self-identification. She says that, “[g]ay theater people’s migration to Cherry Grove is one of the clearest proofs we have that sexual preference was becoming [by the late 1930s] the basis for a complete social identity.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Waitt & Markland, *Gay Tourism: Culture and Context*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 182; Waitt & Markland, *Gay Tourism: Culture and Context*.

<sup>21</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 82

<sup>22</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 62

<sup>23</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 21

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 6

Cherry Grove: Establishment of "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town"

*The gays, mostly men, were already here [in the 1920s]. It had a hotel, but was more a 'picnic' beach [than an established resort town] with barrels with rope lines out into the ocean that people would hold onto to go into the waves.*

Jim Fallon, interview (16 September 2012),  
recalling his first visiting Cherry Grove in 1923 as a 7-year-old<sup>24</sup>

**The 1920s-** With the extension of the Long Island Rail Road to Sayville and Patchogue, and the increasing affordability of motor cars driving to beaches linked by marvelous new highways created by the Long Island State Park Commission, tourists from New York City and its boroughs became frequent visitors to Fire Island. Homosexual men and lesbians discovered Cherry Grove as early as the 1920s. As word spread among the homosexual demi monde of New York City, the numbers and visibility of homosexuals in Cherry Grove accelerated. Esther Newton associates Cherry Grove's gay vacationers phenomena with America's 1930s search for vacation spots and, just like other Americans, homosexuals wanted to be with compatible people.<sup>25</sup> "Cherry Grove had become a bohemian hangout. Painters, actors, and writers made the Grove their summer home. Despite the ban on alcoholic beverages during Prohibition, Fire Island offered some protection from the local police on Long Island, if not altogether against the Coast Guard. Liquor flowed a little more easily on Fire Island."<sup>26</sup>

**The 1930s-**

- "People [in Cherry Grove] witnessed a thrilling spectacle Saturday morning when the German airship *Hindenburg*—the droning of her motors barely audible, was sighted gliding majestically over the [Great South] bay, on her way to Lakehurst, NJ."<sup>27</sup>

- "The manner in which Cherry Grove bungalows have been rented to date points to a successful season at the Fire Island Beach resort...a large percentage [being] rented...at prices higher than those that prevailed in the recent seasons."<sup>28</sup>

- "Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the President, was a visitor at Cherry Grove, when she went surf bathing there after making a trip across the bay in a private cruiser, in the company of Mrs. R.B. Deans. She gave a number of autographs at Cherry Grove."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Fallon, a local judge and his wife, Marie (deceased), first rented in the grove for years before purchasing their small cottage in the 1960s. They raised their family in the grove during the summers. Jim Fallon played a significant role as an attorney defending the grove's gay male arrestees following police raids in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>25</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Koppelman & Forman, *Fire Island-Historical Background*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Patchogue Advance*, 14 August 1936, 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Mid-Island Mail*, 18 May 1938, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Patchogue Advance*, 18 August 1939, 4.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 7

With the opening of Duffy's Hotel in 1930, Cherry Grove began to attract gay and lesbian vacationers with more frequency. The hotel drew many visitors and soon became the center of social life, where guests danced and caroused to music played on the nickelodeon.<sup>30</sup> Unlike anywhere else on the island, Duffy's provided electricity and access to a telephone. The grove's isolation from the mainland, proximity to a major city, and lack of a permanent police presence created a relatively *safe harbor* that proved enticing to the theater crowd, "artistic types," poets, and "naturists"—1930s and 1940s code words for gay men and lesbians, who identified them easily.

Despite a general level of tolerance, not everyone was comfortable with the grove's subaltern attractions. District Attorney Alexander G. Blue promised his office's support in curbing alleged "indecent conditions" at Cherry Grove, including "acts committed by parties coming to the resort for picnics and the indecencies of 'Moonlight Sailing' excursions." Among the complainers was Harry T. Weeks, vice president of an early coalition of homeowners called the Cherry Grove Association, who asked authorities for help after cottagers became "indignant at the conditions...created by outsiders...casting a stigma on the regular residents of Cherry Grove."<sup>31</sup>

For the most part, however, acceptance of professional gay and lesbian adults in Cherry Grove was no doubt facilitated by their ability to afford the above average \$100 rental fees for seasonal cottages. A few successful business and theater professionals were able to purchase or have homes built for them in the grove. But a national "homophile" movement had yet to be born at the start of the grove's evolution from a community of private property owners renting cottages, albeit many of them closeted homosexuals, to a community largely identified as an American gay geography in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1932, an estimated 500 people and 60 cottages made up the summer colony at the grove.<sup>32</sup> In 1933, the Cherry Grove Association, acknowledging the colony's growth, formed the Cherry Grove Dock District under the taxing authority of the Town of Brookhaven "to erect a public dock at the summer resort on Fire Island Beach [its formal name]," and established that its cost would be levied "against the taxpayers of the district." Harry T. Weeks, the Cherry Grove Association vice president and postmaster of Patchogue, became one of the first commissioners of the dock district.<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Stein eventually obtained an exclusive franchise to operate a ferry service between Sayville and the Cherry Grove dock after years of satisfactory service to the colony, assisted by a resolution in his favor voted by the Cherry Grove Association.<sup>34</sup>

William "Bill" Murray described 1936 Cherry Grove as a place where closeted homosexuals could be accepted on their own terms "without fear of the law, without endangering their livelihoods or risking social

<sup>30</sup> Koppelman & Forman, *Fire Island-Historical Background*, 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Patchogue Advance*, 4 August 1931, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 9 September 1932, 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 26 June, 1933, 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Suffolk County News*, "Stein Asks Exclusive Franchise," 7 September 1945: 1. The Stein Family was one of the founding families of Cherry Grove, owning property and establishing commercial businesses (Sayville Ferry Service, Inc., owners of the Island Breeze Restaurant), and to this day demonstrate community support by many in-kind contributions to the grove's charitable organization and especially to its volunteer fire department.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 8

ostracism.”<sup>35</sup> Murray’s mother, Natalia Danesi Murray, and her male friends who worked in the arts and entertainment business frequented the grove at least in part for these reasons. Arthur Brill, one of Danesi Murray’s best gay male friends, would contribute his talents at the founding the Art Project in Cherry Grove.

After discovering the grove’s beaches on a trip to New York City from Hollywood, stage and screen actor Glen Boles (1913-2009) and his friend—and lover for a brief period—Earl C. Blackwell Jr. (d.1995) counted themselves beneficiaries of the grove’s seclusion.<sup>36</sup> Blackwell went on to form the Art Project in Cherry Grove with Helen Ely in the late 1940s.<sup>37</sup> Boles’s acquaintances who visited the grove during the 1930s included Noel Coward, Christopher Isherwood, possibly Thornton Wilder, and W.H. Auden.<sup>38</sup> The poem “Pleasure Island” (1948) is a celebration of Wystan (W.H.) Auden’s summers spent in Cherry Grove. Auden, a well-known modern poet, was on Fire Island (actually in Cherry Grove) in 1946-47 at his tar shack house [“Bective Poplars” on Main Walk] bought with married friends Tania and James Stern.<sup>39</sup> Auden’s relationship with his young lover, Chester Kallman, and their eventual break up (pre-1948), also led to “the writing of three long poems, “For the Time Being,” “The Sea and the Mirror,” and “The Age of Anxiety,” which evolved out of [his resulting] emotional turmoil.”<sup>40</sup>

The thorough social disapproval of homosexuality, even within the artistic communities on both east and west coasts, required many of these famous guests to hide their sexual orientations from family, friends and co-workers—and for some married grovers, especially from their spouses. But when visiting Cherry Grove, gay men and lesbians found relative acceptance among tolerant (or even like-minded) home owners and cottage landlords. In describing the era’s “rental agreements” in New York City, George Chauncey says that “[s]ome landladies doubtless tolerated known homosexual lodgers for the same reason they tolerated heterosexual lodgers who engaged in heterosexual affairs, and others simply did not care about their homosexual tenants’ affairs. Most expected their tenants to maintain a decorous fiction about their social lives.”<sup>41</sup> These vacationers enjoyed relative freedom from conventional norms on the grove beaches and at its private parties. “Sandy Tales,” a typewritten memoir by Robert ‘Bert’ Cable, a Sayville business man who owned a grove cottage until about 1933, provided a vivid description of grove freedoms: swimming, duck hunting, fishing, and outdoor pleasures of the early Grove.”<sup>42</sup> Certainly any grove resident, even its “artistic types,” could easily identify with such excitements and pursuits of “regular” middle and upper class Americans.

<sup>35</sup> William Murray, *Janet, my mother and me: a memoir of growing up with Janet Flanner and Natalia Danesi Murray* (New York: Simon & Schuster, February 2000), 26, 276. Natalie Danesi Murray was a WWII voice of Italy newscaster for NBC, later a publisher, and (in 1965) became the first director of *Rizzoli’s*, at its NYC flagship bookstore. She and Janet Flanner were lovers for over thirty years.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Michely and Tim Steffan, *The Mind and Life of Glen Boles* (New York: ©Roland Michely, 2010), 19.

<sup>37</sup> Jack Nichols, *Welcome to Fire Island* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 107. Earl C. Blackwell Jr. is not Mr. (Richard) Blackwell, the acerbic ‘worst-dressed list’ fashion critic. The grove’s Blackwell was known as a ‘society impresario,’ a kind of public relations man, promoter, connector, who [with his lover, Ted Strong] in 1939 started the *Celebrity Service*, that kept track of the comings and goings of a wide array of celebrities. Blackwell who hailed from Atlanta and started out as an actor in Hollywood came to New York with a show he wrote called “Aries Is Rising”. Source: David Patrick Columbia, *New York Social Diary*. <http://www.newyorksocialdiary.com>

<sup>38</sup> It’s reputed that playwright Thornton Wilder previewed and revised scenes from *Our Town* at the beach colony prior to the play’s premiere in 1939, but there is no ‘hard’ evidence in support of the rumor.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Davenport Smith, “Auden’s Life and Character,” in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21. <http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/companions/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9780511999420>

<sup>40</sup> W. H. Auden, “In Solitude, for Company,” in *W. H. Auden after 1940: Unpublished Prose and Recent Criticism, Auden Studies*, eds. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (USA: Oxford University Press, February 1996), 51.

<sup>41</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 153.

<sup>42</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 307 [6n: 13-20),

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetCherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 9

On September 18, 1938, ships in South Atlantic waters flashed warnings to the United States Weather Bureau. Instruments charted a storm center—the “eye” of a hurricane—zigzagging northwest at 17 miles per hour, headed for Florida and the Keys. Dawn in Cherry Grove found homeowners and visitors expecting stormy weather to pass far out in the Atlantic. All along the shore, summer visitors postponed their return to the city on promises from ‘seasoned’ sailing enthusiasts of better weather just ahead. Storm warnings were hoisted along the shoreline all the way up to Eastport, Maine, as barometers fell alarmingly. With shipping lanes evacuated from the storm’s path, no news of the on-rushing juggernaut reached New York until the Jersey coast was struck near Atlantic City. A few unfortunates, trapped in cottages on exposed beaches (like Beatrice Farrar and her guests in Pride House in Cherry Grove)...double-barred doors and windows. Driven by the hurricane’s high winds, a tidal wave engulfed Fire Island’s entire oceanfront. Kismet, Fair Harbor, Saltaire and Cherry Grove were all but wiped out.<sup>43</sup> The 1938 hurricane was a Category 3 storm with sustained winds of 120–125 mph gusting to 186 mph. A 17-foot storm surge (compounded by an autumnal equinox and full moon high tide of 14 to 18 ft across the region) swept across Cherry Grove.<sup>44</sup> Grove dunes, having been leveled for the Perkinsons’ hotel’s vista, were non-existent, and left the grove exposed to the full force of the Atlantic Ocean. In the end Duffy’s Hotel survived, functioning as an ocean front bulkhead against massive waves, but only 14 houses (including Pride House and today’s grocery store) remained.[Fig. 1] “The sun rose the next morning on a bay and ocean as calm as ‘a sheet of glass’. Cherry Grove was in ruins. The land was flattened; where wind and water had swept through not a tree or bush stood...cottages were totally destroyed or washed out in the Great South Bay.”<sup>45</sup> [Fig. 2] The 1938 hurricane destroyed much of settled Cherry Grove, but the resort would “continue to appeal to homosexuals because it afforded them the social protection of the island’s remote physical location.”<sup>46</sup>

**1940s-** In the 1940s, Cherry Grove attracted an increasing number of prominent gay men and lesbians: Carson McCullers, Janet Flanner, Benjamin Britten and his lover, Peter Pears, Christopher Isherwood, Lincoln Kirstein, Patricia Highsmith, Jane Bowles, Tennessee Williams, and Truman Capote, among many others.<sup>47</sup> In nearby Ocean Beach, homosexuals who were increasingly ostracized and made to feel unwelcome, traveled via beach taxis down the shore to investigate Cherry Grove in the 1940s. Taxis played a vital part in safe passage

<sup>43</sup> Federal Writers Project, *New England Hurricane—A Factual Pictorial Record*, Work Project Administration, Harry L. Hopkins (Adm.) (Boston: Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1938)

<sup>44</sup>:various Internet archived news sites.

<sup>45</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 25, 26 & 138.

<sup>46</sup> Koppelman & Forman, *Fire Island-Historical Background*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Janet Flanner was “[c]elebrated as the author of a new style of personal journalism for her “Letters from Paris,” published in *The New Yorker* magazine. Quoting Murray, *Janet, My Mother...*, Book Jacket. Flanner was Natalia Danesi Murray’s lover for more than 30 years. Patricia Highsmith (the author) was a deeply conflicted, closeted lesbian (with an occasional male sex partner) and grove renter/visitor in the 1940s and 50s. The famous lesbian Broadway producer Elisabeth (“Bessie”) Marbury backed a play for one of Highsmith’s lovers. Highsmith was a close friend of the Arts Project’s Maggie McCorkle. When in the grove, Highsmith frequented the company of the Arts Project’s Margot Johnson (her first literary agent, and one-time lover of Kay Guinness), Jane Bowles (playwright, *In the Summer House* 1953), innamorata Ann Smith, and wooed the artist, Mary Ronin, aka “Cherry Grover” (Arts Project’s *1949 Follies*). Source: Joan Schenkar, *The Talented Miss Highsmith* (New York: St. Martin’s Press-Picador, 2009). Audrey Hartmann, in a telephone interview (2 September 2012), spoke of “T” (Danesi Murray’s private nickname for Tennessee Williams) attending a housewarming party at Hartmann’s and Maggie McCorkle’s new home in Cherry Grove (1974). Williams was invited at the suggestion of Natalia Denisi Murray, as he was a guest staying in her cottage during her absence from the grove that summer. Hartmann and McCorkle were asked by Danesi Murray to make “T” feel welcome. “He was the first to arrive and the last to leave. Maggie, being from the South, got along with him like a house on fire,” recalled Hartmann.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 10

(and respite from disapproving and sometimes assaultive townspeople) for homosexual travelers who arrived at Sayville's LIRR station and required transport to Kenneth Stein's ferry service to Cherry Grove.

This decade, during which the Community House and its theater came into existence, proved to be a period of advances and setbacks in the nation's awareness of homosexuality:

- Charles Jackson, author of the best seller *The Lost Weekend*, a breakthrough novel about alcoholism, published *The Fall of Valor* (1946)—a book about a middle-aged man's discovery of his homosexuality. *The Lost Weekend* was made into an award-winning film in 1945, but the studio changed the source of the protagonist's problem drinking from the accusation that he had an affair with a male friend in college (as in the book) to frustration over of a case of writer's block.
- The armed services "Blue Discharge" (neither honorable nor dishonorable) given to homosexuals up until 1947 was changed to a mandatory Dishonorable Discharge.
- And within a few days of the *Kinsey Report*, heralded new young writer Gore Vidal published *The City and the Pillar* (Jan. 1948). Written in blunt, pulp prose and set in the contemporaneous homosexual subculture, it features an undisguised gay male protagonist. The *New York Times* refused to review his next five books.
- Dr. Alfred Kinsey's book, *Sexuality in the Human Male* (1948), shocked mainstream Americans, who found its report of a high incidence of homosexual behavior and orientation especially repugnant. Its research and comments on homosexuality continued to be some of the most misquoted and misused material on the subject by both gay people and their adversaries for the next half century.<sup>48</sup>

***Provincetown, Massachusetts***

Provincetown shares marked similarities to Cherry Grove in the heyday of beach resort development. According to Karen Krahulik's *Provincetown: Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort*, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century several well-known artists came to Provincetown, followed by an assortment of gender and sexual nonconformists around 1914. In the 1920s and 1930s, Provincetown's semi-isolated location at the tip of Cape Cod, its famed artist colony, and homeowners' rental cottages available to a growing tourist trade, afforded homosexuals a protected destination, and a level of anonymity. By the mid-20th century, Krahulik asserts that vacations to Provincetown came to symbolize 'coming out' for those homosexual men and lesbians who could afford such travel.<sup>49</sup> Gay Cherry Grovers' 1950s pride of place identification with the 'tip of Cape Cod'—“Land's End,” the location of Provincetown's seaport, is attested to by the clever name given the house, *Finistère* or “land's end,” located at the extreme west end of Cherry Grove on the Great South Bay.

<sup>48</sup> *When My World Was Young: 1945 - 1956*, <http://www.nycnotkansas.com/WhenMyWorldWas.htm> (26 September 2012). This is the source for all four preceding bullet points.

<sup>49</sup> Karen Christel Krahulik, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort (American History and Culture)* (New York: New York University Press (June, 2005): 9-15, 82.

<sup>49</sup> *When My World Was Young: 1945 - 1956*, <http://www.nycnotkansas.com/WhenMyWorldWas.htm> (26 September 2012). [Four preceding bullet points.]

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 11

Provincetown even shares with Cherry Grove a period, the mid-1950s, according to Krahulik, when locals tried to run homosexuals out of town. In those respects, Provincetown's development as a gay resort enclave followed a formula similar to Cherry Grove. On the other hand, neither Provincetown, [nor Key West, Florida], would "gain widespread reputations as gay holiday destinations until the 1960s."<sup>50</sup>

Provincetown and Cherry Grove diverged dramatically, however, in respect to their civic governance. The Town of Provincetown was a continuously developing, incorporated entity of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Its citizens periodically voted for boards of governors, as in Cherry Grove, to manage civic affairs. As year-round residents, however, Provincetowners could elect representatives to the Massachusetts State House and Senate to represent them directly.

Cherry Grove, by contrast, was and remains an unincorporated hamlet of the Town of Brookhaven. Its growth peaked at approximately 260 homes in 1964, when its further expansion was legislatively enjoined by creation of the Fire Island National Seashore Park. Cherry Grove's civic governance has always been vested in the hands of its homeowners. As early as 1944 the Property Owners Association's board of directors, as well as all its community service committees, were comprised of heterosexuals *and* homosexuals—albeit often closeted. Cherry Grove's summer season (part-time) residency precluded its residents voting for direct representation at local or state levels of government for many decades. Cherry Grove had to negotiate its civic infrastructure improvements and public services *only* at the Town of Brookhaven level. In turn, the town funded *only* basic improvements, and *only from a percentage* of Cherry Grove's total property tax revenue. From 1921 on, however, Cherry Grove's property taxpayers funded a significant percentage of mainland (local, county and state) services taxes assessed upon its residents. Cherry Grove's development as a seaside town, the ideation as a gay resort, was entirely a product of its unique location, demography and the hard work of its mix of summer residents.

**1944 – 1947: Cherry Grove Property Owners Association & the Community House**

*The building looked like a Charles Addams cartoon creation, and not at all like the imposing and useful community house of today.*

Robert Kenmore, "Cherry Grove Column," *Suffolk County News*, 23 September 1949

In September 1944, the Cherry Grove Association met at Duffy's Hotel, where its members proposed to formally organize themselves into the "Cherry Grove Property Owners Association."<sup>51</sup> Committees of the Property Owners Association would include: Fire Prevention, Dock & Boardwalks, Buoy & Channel, Beach, Dune, Finance and Art Project. Ferry, Building and Carnival committees completed the association's list of civic services. At its first meeting the following Sunday, the association (unincorporated) elected its officers and directors, including Earl Blackwell.<sup>52</sup> By the following season (1945), the grove had acquired its own

<sup>50</sup> Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (1<sup>st</sup> Ed.) Vol. 1. (New York: Garland, January, 1990) "In the United States, the east coast boasts two resorts of particular renown: Provincetown, Massachusetts, and Key West, Florida...with a consider able though not originally dominant gay admixture – 'tipping' probably only in the 1960s." In Waitt and Markwell, *Gay Tourism*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Property Owners Association, "Minutes," (10 September 1944)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 12

permanent post office. At its annual membership meeting, the Property Owners Association members recognized that the grove had become “a permanent summer resort area” (with approximately 90 owner or renter-occupied dwellings.)<sup>53</sup> At the September 29, 1945 meeting the association members formalized plans for purchasing lots and a building for sale by August Kappel, real estate entrepreneur in Sayville, NY.<sup>54</sup> Earl Blackwell, president, promoted purchase of the building and raised \$1,000 (the purchasing power of \$12,728 in 2012) for a new community house “through the first annual ‘Cherry Grove county fair’ (and costume ball) held at Duffey’s Hotel; its front porch decorated with hundreds of colored lights, and garlands of hydrangeas...Hundreds of people arrived by private boat and special ferry.”<sup>55</sup>

Concurrent to this period of organization, Cherry Grove’s celebrity—its homeowners and guests—became fodder for the 1940s versions of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* through the reporting by newspaper gossip columnists:<sup>56</sup>

- In his *World Telegram* column “Society Today,” Charles Ventura reported that “Vivienne Woolley-Hart... [t]he attractive heiress to English coal mine millions, recently bought a house in Cherry Grove on Fire Island....She has one of the most dazzling collections of jewels extant....Despite her having to cook on an oil stove in her shack at Fire Island, Vivienne hung on to her sparklers.”<sup>57</sup>

The Community House began its life as a small carriage house and was floated across the Great South Bay in the fall of 1945. [Fig. 3] It was common practice to barge buildings across the bay to Fire Island locations following World War II. The need to recycle buildings was owing to a lack of building materials, shingles, wood and nails, which had been strictly rationed in support of the nation’s war effort. The carriage house was winterized quickly, and its subsequent renovations were carried out principally by an area carpenter, Andrew Novotny, with the help of Cherry Grove resident handymen.

Shortly after acquiring the carriage house, on January 25, 1946, the “Cherry Grove Property Owners Association, Inc.” was incorporated. The *Suffolk County News* noted this development in its headline “Cherry Grove Property Owners Organize Corporation,” reporting the planned “erection of a community house and yacht club” and naming newly elected officers and directors, including Earl Blackwell, president, and Mrs. Benedict Erstein, secretary.<sup>58</sup> Erstein later became an Art Project board member and grove stage performer.

During its first few years, the Community House maintained the distinctive features of a small carriage house. Period photos and postcards illustrate a simple vernacular 2-story, rectangular (approximately 40 x 30 feet) structure with a gable roof covered by asphalt shingles, topped with a vented cupola. The carriage house was positioned atop wooden ‘pier’ pilings. Historically, pilings were and are a means of support for all Fire

<sup>53</sup> Property Owners Association, “Minutes,” (2 September 1945)

<sup>54</sup> Homer Dickens, “Notes” (1978). [An unpublished book on Fire Island history.] Collection of Patricia Goff, Cherry Grove, NY.

<sup>55</sup> *Patchogue Advance*, 27 September, 1945, 4.

<sup>56</sup> A popular TV show beginning in 1984 and hosted by Robin Leach that tracked the homes, extravagant parties and purchases of celebrities. <http://www.imbd.com>

<sup>57</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 21 September 1945, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 1 March 1946, 5.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 13

Island buildings erected on sand lots. New wooden decks were built on the building's east and south sides. A large barn door, centered on the south façade (with two separated, small-framed barn windows to the door's right), provided a main entrance to the building. A small square door with a hinged shutter (probably positioned to vent air) was offset above center entrance just beneath the roof line. A second door (likely a 1946 renovation feature) provided an additional entry on the building's east façade. The building was painted white with a contrasting color at its peaks. Eventual cost, including lots purchased, building sale price, and moving fees, amounted to \$2,867 (\$29,454.76 in 2012)

Membership meetings of the Property Owners Association began on site immediately upon the building's arrival. The *Suffolk County News* routinely reported in its "Cherry Grove" column that these meetings were held either on the board walks and decks surrounding the carriage house—weather permitting; inside in rainy or colder weather—renovations permitting. The association's minutes record these same *al fresco* meeting locations and also describe the carriage house as a community house during this period. The community house became the a venue for town hall meetings, a space for the exercise of democracy and community problem-solving. One period photo of a community meeting may have been taken in the carriage house. It shows residents seated on low benches in space dimly illuminated by ambient light, perhaps from open carriage house doors and windows. The building had no electric lighting between 1946 and 1948.

Once a year the entire grove home owning population convened at the community house to elect a governing body—a board of directors—tasked with growing the community's infrastructure and services. All aspects of community development were undertaken by grove elected officials, once a majority of homeowners voted its approval of such projects at community meetings. This democratic principle and community work ethic emulated historic models established by early community founders of other beach colonies on Fire Island such as Point O' Woods, Lonelyville, Ocean Beach and Seaview.<sup>59</sup>

Concurrent with its civic governance use, the community house was turned over to residents for wholesome, social activities, including Sunday school for children of summer residents, community hymn sings, pot luck suppers, and baked goods and crafts sales. Its recreational use is evidenced in a photo showing a traditional basketball hoop with wooden backstop affixed to the second story east façade of the barn.[Fig. 4] In this regard, grove residents' recreational and entertainment pursuits were typical of those of their mainland contemporaries held in church halls, high school auditoriums and VFW posts across the nation. Residents proudly donated benches, tables and chairs, gas lamps, and decorations for use in their building. Square dances, movie nights, an annual county fair and a regatta—hosted from the community house's bay front property—raised money needed for the building's continued improvements and additions. [Fig. 5]

Cherry Grove's development by its property owners and business people was exemplified by extending boardwalks into undeveloped tracts, acquiring real estate lots for future cottages and businesses, funding construction of its public dock, lifesaving equipment, medical services and a fire department. Grove property

<sup>59</sup> Shoshanna McCollum, in her Fire Island photo essay, points to a debate as to whether Point O' Woods or Cherry Grove was the first established settlement on Fire Island, but she dates Cherry Grove's beginnings as "an actual community" to 1921. She also notes that the Great Depression and the Hurricane of 1938 nearly wiped out Cherry Grove. The resulting income-depressed, supply reduced cottage rental industry was forced to recover its financial footings from a 'new crowd.' The crowd—readily available and enthusiastic—was the increasing numbers of New York City homosexual corporate and theater professionals choosing summer vacations in Cherry Grove. in McCollum, *Fire Island*, 40.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 14

owners and cottage renters were the first among all Fire Island communities to replenish and nourish their dune system each summer. Its dunes protected the grove and its homes from ocean storm surges caused by frequent Nor'easters and the occasional hurricane. Grove officials grew local businesses: a post office, a grocery store for essentials, a restaurant, bottled gas and kerosene stations at the bay front. Wells were dug for water. Eventually electric and telephone transmission lines were contracted from mainland utilities. The Property Owners Association's board members established working relationships with local and state agencies to further meet the needs of its seasonal residents. One could say that they grew a town on a sandspit.

**1948 – 1950: The Art Project of Cherry Grove**

*Just imagine this world without queens in it. It would be absolutely barbaric!*

Tennessee Williams, *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens* (1957), his overtly homosexual short play<sup>60</sup>

***The Cherry Grove Follies of 1948-***

At its board meeting in September 1948, the Property Owners Association created “*an Artistic Activity Group for the benefit and entertainment of the entire community...to use and encourage the talents and interest[s] of all property owners, their tenants and their guests.*” [emphasis added] The newly formed Art Project presented its first fundraising production at the community house, with less than two weeks preparation, following its inauguration. The show, which had three performances on the evening of September 25, 1948, was titled, *The Cherry Grove Follies of 1948*, a traditional vaudeville-style revue. [Fig. 6] Its presentation in the tiny community house was made possible when a section of the space was partitioned-off with a clothesline-hanging curtain, creating a stage. Dressing rooms were make-shift—out of doors on the community house deck—performers shielded behind sheets and canvas sail cloth. Benches were built for the eagerly anticipated audience. Lighting arrived courtesy of a cable that was run from Duffy's Hotel, which was the only building with electricity in the grove at that time. A piano and a portable record player were moved from the hotel to the building for music accompaniment. Live theater was practically non-existent on Fire Island and absent from many mainland towns in 1948. People came from neighboring Fire Island communities or traveled by special ferry across the bay to the grove “playhouse.” Three shows on a Saturday night, including a midnight performance, ran back to back to meet local and mainland audience demand.<sup>61</sup>

The speed of production for the nascent theater company's first effort was due entirely to a prestigious cohort of consultants and participants from America's legitimate theater, full-fledged homeowners or renters in the grove community. Among such personages involved in the *Cherry Grove Follies of 1948* were Frank Carrington (a founder of The Cherry Lane Theater, NYC and The Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey), Cheryl Crawford (a co-founder with Elia Kazan and Bobby Lewis of the Actors Studio), Carson McCullers (author of *The Member of the Wedding*), Marcella Swanson (Broadway actress and wife of Lee Schubert, the producer and owner of the Schubert Theater, NYC), and George Freedley (founder of the Theater Library at The New York

<sup>60</sup> Steve Winn, Review of “100 Years of Queer Theater,” *The San Francisco Chronicle* (November 2008)  
<http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/100-Years-of-Queer-Theater-3262626.php#ixzz2L30iJbIE>

<sup>61</sup> *Follies of 1948* overview: Newtown, *Fire Island-Cherry Grove*, 68-93; reportage from the *Suffolk County News*, 1948.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 15

Public Library) who became the director of additional Art Project shows. Broadway celebrities included Bertha Bellmore (backed by a chorus line of grove “boys” in tuxes) and Peggy Fears in the “Ziegfeld Girl” sketch (which she had been in her professional life). Hollywood stars included Betty Garde, featured in the sketch “Primrose Path” (opposite James Goss), and Nancy Walker. Mabel Guerin was featured in the “Cherry Grove, 1910” sketch’s rendition of “Oh, You Beautiful Doll.” Norman Ruvell (an NBC radio show host) serenaded Kay Guinness on his arm with “The Girl in the Song.”[[Fig. 7] Talented residents were given soloist spots or provided a chorus (or chorus lines) for clever musical sketches. Many more grove residents volunteered their time and talents for this inaugural show.<sup>62</sup>

The following day at the Property Owners Association’s meeting, Earl Blackwell announced ticket sales totaling \$666 (\$6,331 in 2012)—or 244 tickets sold. The Art Project Committee (née, the ‘Artistic Activity Group’-1944) presented blueprints for a proposed addition to the Community House: a hemp house (rope rigged) theater with an orchestra pit (since removed), extended wings for rigging and set pieces, and a two-story loft overhead as fly space for hanging light bars and scenery. After a lengthy discussion, the association approved the plans and their execution by the Art Project to the extent of its funds. Another board resolution created a separate bank account: “Cherry Grove Property Owners Association, Inc.—ART PROJECT.” Blackwell was elected chairman of the Art Project Committee. Helen Ely, interviewed by Jack Nichols (1970s), recounted how she and Blackwell “with a cigar box in hand, buttonholed everyone on boardwalk, beach, boat, and bar... [who] contributed \$3,000.45 (or \$28,523.45 in 2012)...[This resulted] in a list of original contributors that numbered 60 property owners and 130 renters, friends, and guests who got the Art Project underway.<sup>63</sup> By year’s end, bulkheading was erected on the bay side of the Community House (construction by Ivar G. Olsen, Inc.), and the Art Project Committee reported a bank balance of \$4,272.63 (or \$40,618 in 2012).<sup>64</sup>

No community theater could be built, however, solely from cigar box donations, or three shows in front of a clothes line curtain, even in 1948. So during the off-season of 1948, the Property Owners Association, its Art Project Committee members and their guests raised additional theater building funds by hosting two parties at *Spivy’s Roof* in New York City.<sup>65</sup> [Fig 8] The second of the two fundraising events was the “Roaring ‘20s Party.” [Fig 9] This event’s journal included a recounting of the Art Project’s first event, a Halloween Costume

<sup>62</sup> Crawford was “[o]ne of the most influential female producers [of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century] on Broadway. She brought *Brigadoon*, *Porgy and Bess*, *One Touch of Venus*, *Paint Your Wagon* and others to Broadway. In 1947 she started one of the most important acting schools (with an associated theatre)—the Actors Studio—in the nation. Like the majority of gay vacationers living in Manhattan during the summer months, Crawford and her partner, Ruth Norman, spent weekends in Cherry Grove....The women met in the late 40s, most likely introduced by Janet Flanner (Crawford’s close friend). Crawford and Janet Flanner were considered “Grovers,” since they had spent their wartime summers as tenants on the Grove. Kathleen Endres, “Cheryl Crawford, 1902 – 1986,” *Akron Women’s History*. [http://www3.uakron.edu/schlcomm/womenshistory/crawford\\_c.htm](http://www3.uakron.edu/schlcomm/womenshistory/crawford_c.htm); Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas (Series Q)* (North Carolina: Duke University Press Books, November 2000, 58; Internet Broadway Database. <http://www.ibdb.com>.

<sup>63</sup> Jack Nichols, *Welcome to Fire Island* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 106.

<sup>64</sup> Property Owners Association, *Minutes*, 26 September 1948.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Spivy,’ is described by George Chauncey (349) as “an enormous lesbian, famous in the elite gay nightclubbing world...[a] singer with a gay following who, in 1940, opened Spivy’s Roof in the penthouse of a building on Fifty-Seventh Street at Lexington Avenue. The club quickly became one of several elite night clubs heavily—but covertly—patronized by gay men and lesbians.” Entertainers at Spivy’s Roof on November 21, 1948 included Mary McCarty, Adelaide Hall (considered with Louie Armstrong to be the world’s first scat jazz singer), Libby (“Moanin’ Low”) Holman, and Helen (“I Wanna be Loved by You”) Kane. Source: <http://www.ibdb.com>. The Roarin’ 20’s Party made history by scoring the first national brand sponsorship of a ‘gay’ fundraising event, which noted “Compliments of Martinson’s Coffee..



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 16

Party on October 31, also held at Spivy's: "The Halloween Costume Party drew capacity attendance.... Dick Avedon was on hand to photograph everyone in costume. You've never seen such magnificent pictures and Dick is turning over to the [Art P]roject all of the revenue from the sale of the photographs [for construction of the theater addition]." Richard Avedon and his first wife, Doe, rented a cottage in Cherry Grove with another couple for several summers in the late 1940s. The couple, Avedon's close friends and colleagues, were the fashion and documentary photographers (and husband and wife team) Lillian Bassman and Paul Himmel (*Vogue and Harpers Bazaar*). An image from the event is of *George Freedley* (Art Project Director, 1948) costumed as "Artaud," a character from Hamilton Forrest's opera *Camille* (1929). [Fig. 10] The image can be viewed in "The George Freedley Papers Collection" in New York Public Library's The Billy Rose Theater Division.<sup>66</sup>

***The Cherry Grove Follies of 1949-***

For the Art Project's inaugural season of its new theater addition, Earl Blackwell announced that the theater's programming would include the movie *A Star is Born* (1937, starring Janet Gaynor and Frederick March), a variety show dubbed the *Cherry Moon Ball*, and the *Cherry Grove Follies of 1949*. During these early years, a cross-section of international, national and New York City-based heterosexual and homosexual actors, musicians, playwrights, artists, photographers and poets discovered the joys and personal freedoms that could be experienced only in Cherry Grove. "Many of the property owners and newcomers to Cherry Grove were in show business, and summer theatricals quickly evolved under the banner of the [Art Project]. As an escape from the seriousness of the professional theater and as a means of publicly expressing themselves without fear of reprisal, they indulged in theatrical fun and games and set a precedent on Fire Island for gay vacationers engaging in camp presentation."<sup>67</sup> These professionals lent their talents to the theater's development with the hope it would come to rival The Provincetown Playhouse, located in Greenwich Village (not Provincetown, MA) of that era.<sup>68</sup> Grove theater shows were routinely reviewed in local papers of the time, such as the *Suffolk County News* and the *Patchogue Advance*, and in New York City theatrical news columns, including those of the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *NY Morning Telegraph's* "Off Stage—and On" column (not coincidentally under the byline of George Freedley). The theater was popularly referred to in news reportage from the era as "The Cherry Grove Playhouse" or "The Cherry Grove Theater."

By the 1949 summer season, both the Community House and Theatre were fully utilized. No permanent partitions were installed (other than the proscenium, orchestra pit and balcony) to define the space for preferential use by one event over another. Theater seating was never affixed to the auditorium's floor. In this

<sup>66</sup> "A Sunday in September." *The Roaring 20's Party Sponsors' Journal* (Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archives, 1948), 7. Long believed to be just a local anecdote, the only surviving Avedon image from this event (Freedley's "Artaud") was confirmed by archivists of the New York Public Library and authenticated by The Richard Avedon Foundation in 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Barranger, *A Gambler's Instinct*, 105.

<sup>68</sup> The Provincetown Playhouse, located on MacDougal Street at New York University, is renowned for its founding company, the Provincetown Players. The troupe summered, and first organized themselves, in Provincetown, MA at Land's End in 1916. The players were an experimental theater group presenting new American plays and playwrights (e.g. Eugene O'Neill) and actors (e.g. Edna St. Vincent Millay). <https://files.nyu.edu/jtk2043/public/provincetown.html>. The playhouse at MacDougal Street impelled America's 'Little Theater' movement, then sweeping the country, which contrasted and competed with hallowed, conventional Broadway practices for many decades. In 1961, The Provincetown Theater Playhouse organized itself at Land's End, hoping to capture the glory of its Greenwich Village namesake. <http://www.provincetownplayhouse.com>



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 17

respect, once its accoutrements were stored away at the end of each summer, the community house and theater came to resemble nothing more or less than a typical, mid-20th century American high school gymnasium with a polished hard wood floor and even an outdoor basketball hoop. An extension to the building on its south side created a fire department garage, housing hand-drawn fire wagons and pump extinguishers.<sup>69</sup> [Fig. 11] Three fire alarms (large metal rings struck with a steel bar—gifts from Fire Island’s Point O’ Woods) were positioned outside the Community House and at the extreme east and west ends of the grove. Bingo at the Community House was introduced as a new attraction, and Sunday school continued apace with square dances, covered-dish suppers and hymn sings. Photography exhibits, aka the “Art Show,” were added to the Art Project’s season. Dressing rooms and a balcony were constructed for the theater in 1948-49. The new stage proscenium was enhanced by Arthur Brill’s (Danesi Murray’s gay male pal) donation of a beautiful red, bi-parting front stage curtain (as well as an ‘oleo’ curtain of painted scenes from grove life), both used for the very first time. Herbert Andrews (the NYC Roxy Theater manager) donated the black and white show curtain.<sup>70</sup>

In September, the production of the *Cherry Grove Follies of 1949* (Sketches and Lyrics by Ed Burke, Dances by Vincent Morino, Book Directed by George Freedley, and “entire production under supervision of Earl Blackwell,” was a smash hit, providing a Broadway staffed, Broadway styled show with original musical sketches such as “Arthur Murray’s” (a comic take on the famous, national dance instructing school) and “Saturday Night At Duffy’s” (with a chorus line of jitterbugging couples).<sup>71</sup> [Figs. 12 & 13]

But *Follies of 1949* is most important for its historic contribution to American theater development, because it was a first-of-its-kind to introduce the homosexual aesthetic of “camp” to its audiences. “The word ‘camp’ itself is of unknown origins.” First printed in 1909 in a dictionary of Victorian slang and then in the 20s popularized to describe the writings of, among others, Oscar Wilde and found...“in the first public discussion of camp” in Christopher Isherwood’s 1954 *The World in the Evening*.<sup>72</sup> In Susan Sontag’s celebrated (yet surprisingly gay-unfriendly) 1964 essay, *Notes on Camp* (containing 58 numbered definitions and one footnote) several definitions stand out: “Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken (#16). Behind the straight public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing (#17) [A] visual reward - the glamour, the theatricality...marks off certain extravagances as Camp (#28). Camp is the glorification of character (#32). Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature (#56).”<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Cherry Grove Fire Department, incorporated on 2/10/47, was composed of an all male, gay/straight volunteer force.

<sup>70</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 86; Aronson, *Suffolk County News*, 26 August 1949, 1 ; Arthur Brill was a furniture designer and decorator at this time. His work was included in William Hennessey’s *Modern Furnishings For The Hom*, (New York: Reinhold, Vol. 1 (1952) and Vol. 2 (1956). <http://www.modernism101.com>

<sup>71</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 30 September 1949, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Fabio Cleto, “Camp,” *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures (Vo. II), ed. George E. Haggerty (New York: Garland, 2000).

<sup>73</sup> *Notes on Camp*. <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/sontag-notesoncamp-1964.html> Sontag’s definitions set off a storm of literary criticism, not the least among gay men of letters (e.g. W.H. Auden) in disagreement over her jejune insights, and especially her unstudied assessment of the homosexual subculture’s historic influence on the development of “camp” aesthetics in general. She famously quipped, “[i]f homosexuals hadn’t more or less invented *Camp*, someone else would have,” thus betraying one [temporary] heterosexual’s cultural ignorance of her era. Sontag’s observation is the equivalent of claiming, “If Jews hadn’t invented American Musical Theater, or if African Americans hadn’t invented Blues and Jazz, then someone else (who Mormons and Chinese?) would have.”

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetCherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 18

Included in the *Follies of 1949* sketches are camp (and ironic) satires of classic song titles. “The Most Beautiful Girl in the World,” had Kay Guinness serenaded by handsome Jack Hofflander—in top hat and tails—but was a nod to camp irony indeed. [Fig. 14] Kay Guinness was truly one of The Most Beautiful ‘Girls,’ most certainly in the context of Cherry Grove.<sup>74</sup> Kay remains one of the most enthusiastically regarded and celebrated grove founders remembered today. Under her “Cherry Grove Specials” category, *Suffolk County News* columnist Suzy Aronson gave Kay a “special nod” for her “beautiful coloring which brings to mind the luscious, fragrant peaches of the south of France.”<sup>75</sup> A member of The Ladies Baseball Association of Fire Island with locals Betty Froos, Alice and Lynne Bellamy, Kay cut a wide swath through the grove’s lesbian crowd. In 1949, she was the lover of Margot Johnson (who starred in 1950’s *Berthe of a Nation*), friends with Janet Flanner and her lover, the lesbian divorcée Natalia Danesi Murray. Kay was married, but “[i]t was more a friendship...and he knew the score.” Husband and wife entertained family and friends jointly in their New York City penthouse during winters away from the grove. Kay came to the grove in the summer while her husband went to his golf club.<sup>76</sup> Kay would give her significant lovers a bracelet from Tiffany’s and luncheons at the 21 Club in New York City.<sup>77</sup> An Ocean Beach audience member might have been delighted with Kay’s traditional vaudeville presentation and, assuredly, completely unaware of Kay’s local biography. Any grover who also knew the score must have been bowled over by Kay’s cheeky straight impersonation. Kay was also listed as a member of the Art Project’s executive committee in the *1949 Follies* program. She remained active in both the Property Owners Association and Art Project affairs until she retired from grove life in the 1980s.

*The Cherry Grove Follies of 1949* was an original musical/book show with a story. It involved a heterosexual couple, “Cherry” and “Jerry Grover” (Mary Ronin and James McCormack), who win a trip to Cherry Grove. The couple’s naïveté about their destination (a homosexual resort) is gradually revealed to them in witty sketches beginning with “Bon Voyage.” [Fig. 15] The ensemble cast in this number were costumed to be representative of weekend resort types waiting at the ferry terminal to embark on their trip across the bay to Cherry Grove. The costume choices for this sketch ranged from what would be termed today as “heteronormative” the “Mother” (Polly Dick) and the “Grovers,” to “fey,” the “Little Boy” (adult Ed Burke) and “First and Second Campers” (Terry Wilson and “Pixie,” a pseudonym), all in clearly camp/drag presentations.<sup>78</sup>

“Forty-Five Minutes *From Sayville*” (not George M. Cohen’s *Broadway*) (emphasis added), with Mabel Guerin in the lead, sketches the ensuing ferry ride (45 minutes was the actual time it took to cross the Great South Bay by ferry in 1949).<sup>79</sup> [Fig. 16] The song title must be read also in its homosexual “camp” context: a reference to just how far Cherry Grove itself and its Art Project’s theater and themes were from Cohen’s original concept: “*Only forty-five minutes from Broadway/Think of the changes it brings/For the short time it takes/What a difference it makes/In the ways of the people and things.*” As to that “*fine bunch of rubens,*” whose

<sup>74</sup> “Girls” (and “Boys”) was the coded nomenclature used by nearly all grove residents at this time when referring to lesbians and gay men.

<sup>75</sup> Aronson, “Cherry Grove,” *Suffolk County News*, 26 August 1949, 17.

<sup>76</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove Fire Island*, 38. [Interview with K.G.]

<sup>77</sup> Gay Nathan is the current owner of Kay Guinness’s and Martha Morgan’s Cherry Grove cottage. Interviewed by Carl Luss, 1 September 2012.

<sup>78</sup> “[D]rag derives from the drag of the dress, as distinct from the non-dragginess of the trouser.” The term’s association with homosexuality dates to 1870 (UK) and probably derives from “the petticoats or skirt used by [male] actors when playing female parts in the English theater.” Eric Partridge ed., *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. (New York: Routledge, May 1984).

<sup>79</sup> George Gibson recalled that “the trip across the bay took at least forty-five minutes,” in Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 19.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 19

parochial tastes and cultural foibles are ridiculed throughout Cohen's original song, the grove's version could easily be read as camp put down of grove residents who laughed and applauded the Art Project's gay theatricals in 1948 but then clamored to expel the "undesirables" among these same performers following the Duffy Hotel scandal.

***The Varieties of 1950, the Berthe of a Nation, and the 1950s Cherry Grove***

By 1950 Cherry Grove had become a well-known destination for the "artistic" set and the success of its community house and theater drew more people to its shores. Maggie McCorkle—herself an entertainer in NYC's *Supper Club*, a dancer and successful model—described it as "a gay country club." There were a lot of show business people, writers and people in the fashion world. Miles White and Oliver Smith, well-known on Broadway (for costumes and scenic design, respectively), had rented a house named "Shadows" near the Bridge of Sighs.<sup>80</sup> Kay Guinness had been in Cherry Grove since the 1930s and looked askance at the young crew coming from Manhattan who started naming their houses "Cats on a Hot Tin Roof" and "Four of a Kind." There were well known people [from the 1930s and 1940s] like Natalia Denisi Murray, Allen Prescott, Janet Flanner (the *New Yorker's* "Genet"), and, occasionally, people like Anna Magnani, Tennessee Williams, Diana Barrymore and a "drunken" Veronica Lake. The theater was also a big attraction as well as the theater people in the grove. George Freedley, a Cherry Grover, was the treasurer of American National Theater and Academy ("ANTA," founded in 1935 with general directors: Cheryl Crawford and Robert Breen), and Freedley was also a Broadway critic.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the seasonal freedom enjoyed in Cherry Grove, most gay men and lesbians still led double lives, closeted lives at home. They put their professional and personal lives at risk by coming to the grove to be among like-minded men and women. Even straight supportive friends might not escape harm from a casual revelation of being associated with Cherry Grove. Glen Boles recalled the need for secrecy and leading a double life: "You had to go to the right places and get the right pictures of you taken. They all had to play the straight game in New York. They wouldn't hire you in a part, because if you were gay you wouldn't be seen as masculine enough. But producers got gay guys and girls anyway whether they knew it or not. The going thing in the Grove was: no names, no pretense of being a star or anything like that. The Grove was a place of relief..."<sup>82</sup>

The Art Project remained unbiased compared to its New York theater counterparts, and its 1950 season pushed its boundaries further. Programming still maintained a balance between more traditional community theater offerings: the popular vaudeville-style sketches and blackouts, and the flamboyant, camp and drag formats favored by the gay Arts Project performers. *Suffolk County News's* Kenmore reported:

The single event (in July) being looked forward to with the greatest anticipation by Cherry Grover's [sic] is *The Varieties of 1950*. The Art Project will present this intimate vaudeville...

<sup>80</sup> Oliver Smith and Miles White, Scenic and Costume Designer team, *High Button Shoes* (1947), *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* (1951), *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1962), among many other Broadway productions. <http://www.ibdb.com>

<sup>81</sup> "ANTA." <http://www.ibdb.com> (29 October 2012); Lois Fisher, "Meet Maggie McCorkle," (Interview for Arts Project of Cherry Grove, June 2005) [http://www.fireislandsun.com/maggie\\_mccorkle\\_memorial.html](http://www.fireislandsun.com/maggie_mccorkle_memorial.html)

<sup>82</sup> Michely and Steffan, *The Mind and Life of Glen Boles*, 419-420.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetCherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 20

[d]irected by Frank Davidson, consisting of sketches, production numbers, and several guest artist appearances. Barbra Ashley, who scored a personal hit in last year's (1949) *Cherry Grove Follies*, and who has recently appeared [on Broadway] in *The Liar*, will perform. Bertha Belmore, well known resident of Cherry Grove, and a character actress in Broadway shows, is scheduled to take part.<sup>83</sup> Also appearing [all from recent seasons' of Broadway productions] are Allen Knowles, late of *Miss Liberty*; Haim Weiner of *Ken Murray's Blackouts* and *Studio One* [via the new media of Television]; Jeanne Parsons of *Merry Widow* and Ed Balin *Arms and the Girl*.<sup>84</sup> The ballet is under the direction of Tony Matthews Becchino, himself a well-known dancer and choreographer. Tickets were \$2.50 (or \$24.00; in 2012) and sold at Thornhill's Drug Store in downtown Sayville, NY.<sup>85</sup>

Kenmore's follow-up review praised *Varieties* and Ms. Bertha Belmore's performance.<sup>86</sup> Belmore had been "coming to the grove for four summers and owned two homes, 'By Jupiter' on Duryea Walk, and 'That'll-do-me' in back of it."<sup>87</sup> The Art Project's busy theater season continued with its fourth *Little Show (Encores)*. Alan Prescott was master of ceremonies and it featured reprises of previous sketches, including Jack Hofflander and Jerry O'Brien as two "original Cherry Grove Indians wandering the dunes."<sup>88</sup> [Fig. 17] Kenmore's big scoop, however, was a "new musical, book by Ed Burke, to be presented on September 23, 1950, which based upon a preview copy, should be good for a two year run even on Broadway."<sup>89</sup>

To conclude its 1950 season, the Art Project presented the *Berthe of a Nation*. The title was a camp parody of *Birth of a Nation*, D.W. Griffith's 1915 silent movie. It's an especially sweet irony that this silent movie, infamous today for its many scurrilous depictions of a minority group, blacks played by whites (in blackface, but no less offensive), is thematically turned completely on its head by Art Project's creative theater company. The grove's version humorously depicts women played by men and men by women (no blackface required) and the campy antics of the grove's minority group, also scurrilously discriminated against in American society. *Berthe of a Nation* satirizes Cherry Grove (by this date an infamous male homosexual beach resort) as *being discovered and founded by a group of women emerging from a fog* [emphasis added] on the Great South Bay.<sup>90</sup> Maggie McCorkle recalled in an interview, "My first show was *Berthe of a Nation* titled after Bertha Belmore. Straight men like Lloyd Pugh would dress in tutus. They did drag numbers from ballet and opera. Lip synching was rare and the humor was very sophisticated."<sup>91</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Barbara Ashley as Cleionice Anselmi in *The Liar* (1950), Musical, Comedy. <http://www.ibdb.com> (30 August 2012)

<sup>84</sup> *Miss Liberty* (7/15/49 – 4/8/50), Musical, Comedy, Original; Performer Allen Knowles [A Shark, Reception Delegate, Dancer] and *If the Shoe Fits* (1946) and *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960); Jeanne Parsons, *Oklahoma!* (1951 Revival). <http://www.ibdb.com>

<sup>85</sup> Kenmore, *Suffolk County News*, 23 June 1950, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Belmore was heterosexual and president of the Art Project in 1950. At age 62, her professional theater biography was extensive and international. She acted on stage with Maurice Evans, Ray Bolger (on Broadway in *By Jupiter*), and in England with Catherine Cornell (lesbian actress and George Freedley's good friend), and with Sir Cedric Hardwick and Lilli Palmer. The Property Owners Association accepted a proposal by the Art(s) Project and named the theater "The Belmore Theater" with a "plaque over the proscenium." Sources: <http://www.ibdb.com> and Property Owners Association, "Minutes," (1955).

<sup>87</sup> Kenmore, *Suffolk County News*, 7 July 1950, 7.

<sup>88</sup> A frequent master of ceremonies for the Arts Project, Prescott was a professional narrator and crooner for a 1940s radio show, *Time Out*, which broadcasted his serenades, household hints and "cracker-barrel gab." <http://www.otrcat.com>

<sup>89</sup> Kenmore, *Suffolk County News*, 8 August 1950, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Newton, *Fire Island-Cherry Grove*, 87.

<sup>91</sup> Fisher, [McCorkle interview for Arts Project] [http://www.fireislandsun.com/maggie\\_mccorkle\\_memorial.html](http://www.fireislandsun.com/maggie_mccorkle_memorial.html)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 21

Written by Ed Burke and directed by his lover, George Freedley, *Berthe of a Nation* was described by Esther Newton as “a turning point in gay and theatrical history. [It] had nothing to do with a realistic or authentic presentation of gay topics, characters, or themes. Instead, it built on...camp, revue, and drag...to *signify* rather than *realistically represent* a sophisticated Manhattan version of *gayness*, , and in some numbers people even wore the clothing of their own gender”<sup>92</sup> [emphasis added: one of Newton’s 1980s definitions]

“*Berthe of a Nation*” made American Theater history with a sketch under the heading, “Command Performance,” called “Dismembering the Wedding.” It was a parody of Carson McCullers’s novel and Broadway play, *The Member of the Wedding*, which premiered in January, 1950. Originating Broadway roles were Ethel Waters (Berenice Sadie Brown), Julie Harris (Frankie Addams), and Brandon de Wilde (John Henry West). In September 1950 the all-gay satiric send-up (no script survived), “Dismembering the Wedding,” premiered at the Cherry Grove Theater. Originating grove roles were Margot Johnson (Berenice), Mary J. Ronin (Frankie) and Vernon Crane (John Henry). A photograph illustrating the camp inventions of this sketch shows a butch looking, eye-patched woman (Johnson) in a gingham apron, Ronin costumed as a tomboy—but in lamé, and a hairy-legged, fairy-costumed—with wings—Crane interpreting the original play’s principal characters. [Fig. 18] Cheryl Crawford’s biographer, Milly Barranger, tells us that this original, one-of-a-kind grove production “was a send up of McCullers’s *Member of the Wedding*, in revue format, devised for the Grove Follies and sanctioned by the novelist.” McCullers would have learned of Cherry Grove and its new theater at her 1940s artists’ enclave, a townhouse at 7 Middagh Street, Brooklyn. McCullers worked there with Grovers: Wystan (“W.H.”) Auden, Oliver Smith, Benjamin Britten and his lover, Peter Pears, and frequent visitor, the Broadway producer Cheryl Crawford.<sup>93</sup> “Dismembering’s” connection with the New York legitimate theater’s gay subcultural network brought the Cherry Grove Theater just ‘Three hours and Forty-five Minutes from Broadway’.

Also in *Berthe of a Nation* was the skit titled, “Bill Ronin’s All-Girl Orchestra” under the baton of Ed Burke, which mimed “Take Me Back to My Boots and Saddle” and featured Mary Ronin in the orchestra’s climax with cymbals clashing between her legs. [Fig. 19] But in “Floradora,” the men dressed in gowns and heels and the woman led them in couple dancing wearing morning trousers and cutaway coats.”<sup>94</sup> [Fig. 20] Chauncey, in his historical review of New York’s gay male culture, points out that, “[b]y playing on the artificiality of social roles and mocking the conventions of gender, ‘camp’ helped many men mediate the contradictions they had to confront between their status as males socialized to be men, and the status ascribed to them by the dominant culture as non-men or pseudo-women; and resulting from their acute awareness of the artificiality of the roles they regularly played in many social settings in which they needed to pass as straight.”<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Newton, *Margaret Mead*, 60. George Freedley (1904-1967) was the author of *Three Plays About Crime and Criminals*, *A History of the Theatre*, *Mr. Cat*, *More Mr. Cat And a Bit of Amber Too*, and *The Lunts: An Illustrated Study*,” [www.librarything.com](http://www.librarything.com) (10 August 2012). Freedley & Burke lived in a grove house named, “St. George and the Dragon.”

<sup>93</sup> Milly S. Barranger, *A Gambler's Instinct: The Story of Broadway Producer Cheryl Crawford* (n.p. Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University, 2010), 105.

<sup>94</sup> Newton, *Margaret Mead*, 60.

<sup>95</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 290.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetCherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 22

From this point on, nearly every skit performed at the theater had a gay slant conveyed primarily through double entendre, camp humor, and drag.<sup>96</sup> Programs from the early 1950s show most numbers were written by men but acted by both genders. The Arts Project mined Broadway for ideas for its summer seasons. It adopted the *Little Show* concept (originated in 1929 and 1930, with music by Arthur Schwartz and lyrics by Howard Deitz, at New York's Music Box Theater) in order to fully utilize the grove theater early in the season. The small revue format was ideal. It allowed for quick arrangements, a short rehearsal schedule which could be executed using well-known songs and themes cleverly adjusted, of course, for the Art Project's drag performers and camp humor. In 1951, a review of the grove's *First Little Show* stated that "Miss [Maggie] McCorkle as *Jimmy Durante*, and Charles Claussen as *Helen Traubel* mounted on a horse, wowed the audience."<sup>97</sup> [Fig. 21]

*George Claussen* was a popular comic female impressionist in the Art Project during this period; thus, it's no surprise how close to reality was his impersonation of *Helen Traubel* as "Brünnhilde." Helen Traubel, a famous New York Metropolitan Opera singer of the period, was best known for her Wagnerian roles, especially those of Brünnhilde and Isolde.<sup>98</sup> Traubel's contract at the Metropolitan Opera was not renewed in 1953 when its general manager, Rudolf Bing, expressed disapproval of her desire to expand her lucrative career to include major supper and night clubs and radio and TV appearances alongside the likes of Jimmy Durante (Maggie McCorkle's 'drag king' impersonation).<sup>99</sup> It's clear from this story, that the Arts Project company was coining representations of 'sophisticated camp' for straight and gay audiences by 1951.<sup>100</sup>

Natalia Danesi Murray was prevailed upon to take a star turn in the *Cherry Grove Follies of 1951* singing *Tarantella* (unidentified version) surrounded by waltzing couples. Bill Murray recalled that his mother [Natalie] "could also play the guitar and sing in a dark, untrained alto voice that carried well even in a large theater (in Rome)." Danesi Murray also sang on Broadway in a musical scored by Vincent Youmans, *Revenge with Music*.<sup>101</sup> This is the only record of Danesi Murray having appeared in an Art Project show.

Perhaps Danesi Murray was further encouraged to join in the *1951 Follies* by the presence of Hermione Gingold (TV's *All Star Revue*, 1951, and later Lerner & Loewe's musical film, *Gigi*, 1953, and *The Music Man*, 1962). The year 1951 was Gingold's first in the United States from London.<sup>102</sup> She appeared in two comedic sketches, "Compartment 44," and sang in a sketch titled, "Souvenirs." The latter was "an attic-rummaging number...the high point being Miss Gingold holding up an old photograph of Dorothy Kilgallen and framing it with a toilet seat."<sup>103</sup> This skit most assuredly was dedicated as a 'camp' put down to Kilgallen, TV celebrity (*What's My Line*) and gossip columnist (*New York Journal American's*, "Voice of Broadway"), for her reputed gossip column exposés about the homosexual beach colony of Cherry Grove.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Aronson, *Suffolk County News*, 30 September 1949: "Michael Santoro did a wonderful imitation of Carmen Miranda, beautifully costumed."

<sup>97</sup> George Freedley, "Off Stage - And On," *The NY Morning Telegraph*, 16 July 1951.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas S Hischak, "Traubel, Helen," *The Rodgers and Hammerstein Encyclopedia* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, June 2007), 297.

<sup>99</sup> See: *Gettysburg Times*, 29 September 1953, 6 and *Montreal Gazette*, 31 July 1972, 14.

<sup>100</sup> Esther Newton, "The Fun Gay Ladies," in *Creating a Place For Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (London: Psychology Press, April 1997), 154.

<sup>101</sup> Murray, *Janet, My Mother...*, 63-64, 80

<sup>102</sup> <http://www.imdb.com> (3 June 2013); Wolfgang Saxon, "Hermione Gingold, English Actress, Dies at 89," *New York Times*, 25 May 1987

<sup>103</sup> Lee Israel, *Kilgallen*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), 298.

<sup>104</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 103.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 23

Finally, *The Cherry Grove Follies of 1952* included a musical skit, “Ladies Prefer Brunettes” featuring Bea Greer (of the Kay Guinness ‘Girls’ clan). The skit was an exceedingly rare example of lesbian-focused ‘camp’ in its parody of “Gentlemen Prefer Blonds” (Jules Styne, 1949). “ ‘Camp’ has been claimed since the 1970s...to constitute the major aspect of pre-Stonewall gay culture, coinciding with the rise of [gay identity].”<sup>105</sup>

The community house and theater continued to be populated by members of widely differing lifestyles, sensibilities and sexual orientations. They coalesced around the grove’s version of a town hall in a town square. The theater continued to present Art Project theatricals to grove audiences. Musicals, movies, high and low drama—high and low camp—were the fare of each summer season. The auditorium was periodically transformed when needed into a sophisticated art gallery, a cabaret with open bar, a voters’ polling place, a family-style pot-luck dining hall, or a glitteringly decorated ballroom. Community Theatre “occupies a peculiarly important position in the American theater picture....It engages more people in theatrical activity, albeit part-time, than all the rest of the American theater put together, including schools and colleges.”<sup>106</sup>

‘Gay Theater’ and The Arts Project of Cherry Grove, Inc.

*The Grove’s ancestry is in the theater. The resort’s outrageous theatricality gave it much of its charm and staying power.*

Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*<sup>107</sup>

*Live theater has always been a particularly potent means of capturing the gay experience, even when that experience is thwarted or submerged.*

Steve Winn, *100 Years of Queer Theater* (2008)<sup>108</sup>

*The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy* (GLTL) states, “Documenting gay theater history entails wrestling with complex problems of terminology and evidence.”<sup>109</sup> A comprehensive overview of “the most powerful and influential people in [theater] business,” GLTL recounts the American theater’s ‘gay’ ancestors. Included is the biggest (lesbian) star of early 20th century Broadway, Maude Adams, the era’s most successful playwright, Clyde Fitch, and the pioneering theatrical agent, Elisabeth Marbury, who together constituted an organized performing arts network “sustained through shared queer lifestyles and aesthetics, along with shared financial interests.”<sup>110</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Cleto, “Camp,” 255.

<sup>106</sup> Robert Gard, Martin Blach and Pauline Temkin, *Theatre in America: Appraisal and Challenge* 1st Ed., (Wisconsin: Dembar Educational Research Services, 1968), 40.

<sup>107</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 297.

<sup>108</sup> Winn, “100 Years of Queer Theater.”

<sup>109</sup> Billy J. Harbin, Kimberley Bell Marra and Robert A. Schanke, *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era* Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance (University of Michigan Press, March 2007), vi.

<sup>110</sup> Fitch “[a] dandy by his early teens [and bachelor for life], knew that in school he was seen as a sissy, but he said, “I would rather be misunderstood than lose my independence.” In fact, he seems to have been understood all too well; correspondence of the time points to a likely relationship, however brief, with *Oscar Wilde*.” Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, W. Clyde Fitch Collection (1867-1986). Marbury was the longtime companion of Elsie de Wolfe, a famous period interior decorator. Marbury invented the profession of the theatrical agent (representing, among others, J.M. Barre in America). Marbury saved Oscar Wilde’s royalties while he was in prison and produced Cole Porter’s first



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 24

After World War I, a theater troupe called the Washington Square Players (1915) formed “one of the most influential theater companies in American history, The Theatre Guild (1918), where many founders of the gay grove first met each other. Grove impresario George Freedley, Arts Project [advisor] Cheryl Crawford, Natalia Danesi Murray, Tom Farrar, the designer and owner [with his wife Beatrice] of Pride House, and Hallye (“Hallie”) Cannon, an eccentric heterosexual and wardrobe mistress—all these grove pioneers of the 1930's were employed and nurtured by The Theater Guild.”<sup>111</sup> Similar common bonds were a factor in the formation in 1946 (and ultimate dissolution) of the American Repertory Theatre (ART) by Eva LaGallienne, Margaret Webster, and Cheryl Crawford, as well as in the [birth] of the Off-Off-Broadway movement at Caffe Cino.”<sup>112</sup>

Performative bonds further link three of these gay ancestors of American theater to one of the world’s most beloved plays, J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. Premiering on Broadway in 1905, Maude Adams’s interpretation—a woman cross-dressed as the orphaned boy (Peter), who becomes enchanted with the Darling family’s young daughter (Wendy)—made Adams’s fame for the next fifty years.<sup>113</sup> LaGallienne produced, directed and starred as “Peter” in her pre-Depression Civic Repertory Theater production. *Peter Pan* productions culminated on Broadway in 1954 with a successful musical adaptation, and its subsequent NBC telecast, starring Mary Martin as “Peter”.<sup>114</sup>

These *Peter Pan* actresses were all connected with the “complex network of social and professional relationships among lesbians, gays, and bisexual men and women in the American theater with which they all were familiar.”<sup>115</sup> <sup>116</sup> Martin, a close friend of Cheryl Crawford and frequent correspondent with and dinner guest of George Freedley, remains a key subject of many gay historiographers’ efforts to reclaim their LGBT ancestors. The mythos of *Peter Pan*—the boy who wouldn’t grow up because he was afraid the world would turn him into a man, coupled with his cross-dressed interpretation by known lesbian (and heterosexual) actresses—has been dubbed the “Peter Pan Syndrome” in dubious explanation of some aspects of homosexuality.<sup>117</sup>

Cheryl Crawford was a consultant, with Frank Carrington (a founder in 1934 of the Paper Mill Playhouse, NJ), to George Freedley’s production of the *Cherry Grove Follies of 1948*, the show inaugurating the Art Project in Cherry Grove. Crawford, during her ART years, frequently collaborated with George Freedley, assessing the work of new playwrights and performers to showcase at her theater.

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musical. [Source: Harbin, Marra and Schanke, *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*, 146n].; Harbin, Marra & Schanke, *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*, vii.

<sup>111</sup> Ethan Mordden, *The American Theatre* 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., (USA: Oxford University Press, October 1981), 61.

<sup>112</sup> Harbin, Marra & Schanke, *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*

<sup>113</sup> *American Theater Guide*: Maude Adams.

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.ibdb.com>

<sup>115</sup> Harbin, Marra & Schanke, *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy*, 240 & 289

<sup>116</sup> Ronald L. Davis, *Mary Martin: Broadway Legend*, (University of Oklahoma Press, April 2008), 66.

<sup>117</sup> Roy Y, MSW, “Alcoholism And Addiction In Homosexuals: Etiology, Prevalence & Treatment,” 12 December 1995.

<http://www.royy.com/pap.html>; Mike Ruiz, “Does the LGBT Community Have a ‘Peter Pan’ Syndrome?,” *Huffington Post: Gay Voices*, 10 December 2011

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 25

George Freedley was a celebrated expert of theater history, a guest lecturer at university theater arts colloquia, and advisor to commercial theater development committees in the United States and Europe. He was theater columnist for the *NY Morning Telegraph*, hence a denizen of Schubert Alley. Freedley reviewed scores of plays and musicals that premiered there from Broadway's most famous creative talents. He frequently exchanged letters with, and hosted an annual holiday party for, star talent of the times, including Flora Robeson, Lillian Gish, Mary Martin and Oscar Hammerstein.<sup>118</sup> Freedley's life-long, sophisticated emergence in all things theater, wedded to his homosexual aesthetics, produced the witty gay themes and camp sketches that characterized the grove's *Follies* era.

In the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century American theater, as early as 1907 there have been stage performances that have dealt with gay themes and depictions of gay life in various forms. Typically these have come in the form of supporting characters playing up early 20<sup>th</sup> century gay stereotypes of swishy men or villainous lesbians. Laced with camp humor for a summer colony that was primarily looking to be entertained and amused, the earliest performances at the Cherry Grove Theatre were not exactly explicit in their presentations of gay subject matter. However, these performances were created by a cross-section of heterosexual and homosexual actors, musicians, playwrights from the legitimate theater, established artists, photographers and renowned poets. In that regard, the Cherry Grove Theater is arguably, the first and oldest continually operating gay theater in America. Steven Winn tells us:

[f]rom the days of men playing all the female parts in Shakespeare's plays to Cole Porter's double-entendre songs to today's free-wheeling political works and gender benders, the blunt physicality of theater paired with its fundamental qualities of make-believe and disguise create a blooming garden of suggestive possibilities...

For most of theater history, the gay blossom have remained chastely pruned or carefully camouflaged. "Unable to be honest about their sexuality," writes Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, gay playwrights "used coded language, substituted straight for queer characters, and formed their plots in heterosexual contexts in order to gain acceptance and production of their plays. The work of Tennessee Williams is a prime example.

Theatre Rhinoceros's Artistic Director, John Fisher, links gays to Jews in American show business in their approach to humor. "It's the spring of comedy," he says, "the desire to undermine, the ability to talk out of turn and be underhanded about it."<sup>119</sup>

Shtik and Camp share the same characteristics of irony, self-mockery, sarcasm and vulgarity. A further association can be made between the Jewish Catskills and gay Cherry Grove. Both formed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as resort enclaves and both needed to develop social and political negotiation skills to combat prejudice from neighbors; homophobic in the case of Cherry Grove, and anti-Semite bigotry of 'restricted' communities in the case of the Catskills. Winn continues:

<sup>118</sup> The George Freedley Papers, \*T-Mss 2003-052. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>119</sup> Winn, *100-Years-of-Queer-Theater*.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 26

Setting for herself the '[100 Years]-of-[Queer]-Theater' challenge, Eastenders Repertory Artistic Director, Susan Evans, says she had a hard time finding pre-1940s short plays that were overtly "out." One of her early-years finds is *The Dangerous Precaution*, a 1907 mini-musical by the Russian writer Mikhail Kuzmin.

Staged with a fittingly light, fractured fairy-tale touch by Fisher, this historical oddity turns on the amorous maneuverings in a 17th Century court. The king's son is passing himself off as a woman disguised as a man - or something like that. One song lyric celebrates a "lissome waist and trim rump"; another winkingly puns on "top or bottom." It all ends with a jolly male-to-male kiss. Fisher speculates that the Russian czar, who was reeling from a bad war effort, let his censorship guard down in order to demonstrate his confidently expansive nature. "It's like [George W.] Bush being so nervous about losing power," says Fisher, "that he'd start letting boys get married."<sup>120</sup>

The scarcity of primary source material confirming the specifics of homosexual presentation and content in performing arts, as experienced by ERC's Evans, is sadly the same experienced at the Cherry Grove Arts Project's theater. Its archivists have found no extant books or lyrics from the 1940s and 1950s. Newton queried this paucity of "hard" evidence in a footnote of an interview with Maggie McCorkle. McCorkle recalled that the material written for these early shows was so "slight" it was easily memorized and scripts discarded.<sup>121</sup>

George Chauncey provides a comprehensive narration of homosexual presentation in the performing arts in *Gay New York* during 1890-1940, the period surveyed by his book. Highlights of his research include:

- **(1926) The Ritz Review**, a New York City burlesque house (along with many others), presented "Queer Doings" sketches characterized by same sex male 'kissing and goosing' to a hooting and catcalling anti-homosexual audience.
- **(1927) The Drag**, a play written by the inimitable Mae West, was a first to employ the professional actor, Bert Savoy, famous for his female impersonations and "about 40 chorus boys" recruited by West from a Greenwich Village speakeasy. Chauncey states, 'the play put gay men on stage to play gay men.'
- **(1929) Play Mart**, a cellar theater on Christopher Street (in NYC's Greenwich Village) for amateur theatricals, presented *Modernity* a play based on period authoress Eve Addams's collected short stories, *Lesbian Love*. The performers, the Scientific Players, were forced to abruptly close-down production in face of an imminent police raid.
- **(1930) The Pansy Club** was a nightclub that ushered in the "Pansy Craze" era (1930-1931) in New York, and was imitated by city nightclubs nationwide. The club featured sophisticated female impersonators posing as patrons on the club floor, mingling with regular (mostly heterosexual) club goers. Jean Malin was a famous *pansy entertainer* during the craze, whose act "revolved around his being gay, not as a 'normal' man [scornfully essaying] mincing gay mannerisms or homosexual buffoonery."<sup>122</sup>

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*

<sup>121</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, n36 to 85-91

<sup>122</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 316-318.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 27

Chauncey also notes in 1930, the voluntary adoption by the movie industry of the Hays Code (the informal name for *The Motion Picture Production Code*) as an influencing factor that kept gay presentations off of the New York stages, as well as off the silver screens of the nation. The code banned (among a laundry list of taboo subjects) “any inference of sex perversion” (read, homosexuality).<sup>123</sup> He concluded his overview of ‘gay’ theater (its period-specific visibility and influence on America’s culture and entertainment) with a plausible explanation that supports a conclusion that it is highly unlikely a theater emerged elsewhere in the United State prior to 1948 that was comparable to Cherry Grove’s gay theater. As just one example of the growing national trend to suppress all public expressions of a homosexual aesthetic, Chauncey discusses anti-homosexual laws enacted in New York State. New York State amended its public obscenity code in 1931 to criminalize the presentation of overt homosexual characters and themes on all New York stages, legitimate and burlesque, and in its cabarets. Part of the code was originally called the Wales Padlock Law. It was enacted in New York in 1909 and formally rescinded by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1975.<sup>124</sup> It prohibited any depiction of “sex degeneracy or perversion” upon the stage, padlocking all offending venues.<sup>125</sup>

Female impressionists found limited venues for performing (mostly bars and costume balls) as early as the 1940s in Provincetown. “[P]ostwar state regulations criminalized dancing between same-sex couples—no professional “female impressionists” or drag performers, who were also “illegal,” found a welcoming theater.<sup>126</sup> There is no mention made in available historic commentaries of the renowned Provincetown Theater Playhouse (est. 1961) permitting drag performances, or revues containing overt ‘camp’ content on its stage comparable to such fare available seasonally at the Cherry Grove Playhouse beginning in 1948.

If Broadway audiences had missed the facts of homosexual life on New York’s stages for over two decades, they were re-introduced to “them kind,” and to “Cherry Grove” by name as a “gay place,” in the hit comedy, *Season in the Sun*, in 1950. Authored by Wolcott Gibbs (a writer for the *New Yorker*) the play featured “comically affected gay male characters renting in Ocean Beach.”<sup>127</sup>

In 1958 a storefront theater/coffee house opened at 31 Cornelia in Greenwich Village. It offered audiences experimental productions, some with candid gay subject matter, more so than would have been possible in Cherry Grove in 1948. The Caffe Cino was the invention of Joe Cino, an Italian-American theater producer, who is credited with starting the “Off-Off-Broadway” theater movement—distinct from Broadway (large Equity theatres) and Off-Broadway (smaller Equity theatres). The first performances at Caffe Cino were done on the café floor, echoing the improvisational savvy required of Art Project members when presenting its inaugural show in its tiny carriage house in 1948. ‘The Cino’ was a friendly social center for gays at a time when the most openly gay life was restricted to bars and bathhouses.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>123</sup> *The Motion Picture Code*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion\\_Picture\\_Production\\_Code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_Picture_Production_Code)

<sup>124</sup> A state-by-state history of obscenity laws enacted and repealed, especially from the late Victorian period to the mid-1950s, is readily available on multiple Internet websites.

<sup>125</sup> Kaier Curton, “We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians,” *The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 100ff.

<sup>126</sup> Krahulik, *Provincetown*, 141.

<sup>127</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 102.

<sup>128</sup> Douglas W. Gordy, “Joseph Cino and the First Off-Off Broadway Theater,” Shanke & Marra, *Passing Performances*, 303-23; Elizabeth L. Wolman, *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2012), vi.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 28

Off-Off Broadway was the cradle of modern gay theater long before the Stonewall riots erupted in June 1969, [and] it became thereafter a convenient home for a number of gay rights-themed musicals. Doric Wilson's "And He Made Her" was first presented in May, 1961 at 'The Cino'. It was an examination of the drag scene at that time, seven years before Matt Crowley's, *Boys in the Band* (1968). *Boys* is often referred to as the 'first modern gay play,'"<sup>129</sup> In 1964 the Caffe Cino hosted the "first gay play[s]", *The Madness of Lady Bright*, by Lanford Wilson, and *The Haunted Host*, by Robert Patrick.<sup>130</sup> Although Wilson's, *The Madness of Lady Bright* is often referred to as the first conspicuous American drama to feature an explicitly homosexual character, a number of earlier Cino productions had also dealt with gay identity, including Doric Wilson's biting satire *Now She Dances!* (1961). "The play started out as a response to the hilarious histrionics and fruity language of Lord Douglas's translation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. The resulting play became an angry, ironic, nightmarish metaphor for the trial of Oscar Wilde -- the quintessential closet queen."<sup>131</sup> Alan Lysander James presented several gay-slanted programs of Oscar Wilde material at The Cino from 1962 through 1965.<sup>132</sup>

After Joe Cino's death from a self-inflicted wound in 1967, The Cino continued in reduced operation until March, 1968. Approximately one month after the groundbreaking Caffe Cino closed its doors, the first commercially successful play to deal with gay sexuality and gay life premiered Off-Broadway. Matt Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* debuted on April 4, 1968. The critically acclaimed play ran for more than 1,000 performances. Its forthright depiction of a group of homosexuals celebrating a friend's birthday party shocked audiences and has been cited as a contributing factor in igniting the Stonewall Riots.<sup>133</sup> Also of note from 1968, *Hair, the American Tribal Love Rock Musical*, opened in New York on April 29, 1968. The musical included an inter-racial cast, on-stage nudity, the lyrical crafting of formerly taboo topics (e.g. masturbation), and the slang and camp of homosexual characters at the height of the hippie era of free-love, drug use, and psychedelic rock music.<sup>134</sup>

The Waterfront Playhouse, located in the historic area of Mallory Square in Old Town Key West, is Florida's "oldest continually running professional theatre." Its company, the Key West Players (the producing organization of the Waterfront), first performed wherever they could find a venue in town, even on Navy ships. The Key West Players troupe first organized itself in 1948, the same year as Cherry Grove's theater debut.<sup>135</sup> However, while The Waterfront Playhouse is situated in one of Florida's most historic and heavily GLBT-populated districts, its "overall target audience is not [nor was it ever] predominantly GLBT."<sup>136</sup>

The Art Project and its theater grew tremendously in the 1960s, to the point where new blood introduced innovative programming never envisioned by the *Follies* creators. Incorporated in 1964, the "Arts Project of

<sup>129</sup> Gordy, "Joseph Cino," 314.

<sup>130</sup> The American Gay Rights Movement: A Timeline. <http://www.infoplease.com>

<sup>131</sup> Doric Wilson, "Featured Lodestar Writer - Drama," *Lodestar Quarterly* 8 (Winter 2003), 17 June, 2000.

<sup>132</sup> Joe Cino. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe\\_Cino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Cino).

<sup>133</sup> Peter Filichia, "Bring on the Men!," *Theater Mania* 18 (October 2002), 25 May 2012. [In this play, archetypal gay characters struggle with internalized homophobia in frank dialogue, deconstructing brutal stereotypes about homosexuality. *Boys* delivered a first of its kind, central message of gay solidarity despite differences in appearances and behaviours. The GLBT Stonewall generation heard that message loud and clear.]

<sup>134</sup> <http://www.ibdb.com>

<sup>135</sup> The Waterfront Playhouse's policy of all-inclusiveness results in gay and straight performers and staffers who are salaried employees. "The Playhouse targets its programming to a general audience who's [sic] demographic is no more than 20-25% GLBT," the remaining majority being 'tourists,' based on ticket subscription data. Gary Symons, The Waterfront Playhouse, Key West, Florida (Telephone interview, 9 January, 2013).

<sup>136</sup> Danny Weathers, Artistic Director, The Waterhouse Playhouse. [Email Correspondence, 11 January, 2013.]

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 29

Cherry Grove, Inc.” eventually evolved into a 501(c)(3) membership organization. In the years leading to the Stonewall riots, Arts Project productions became far less cloaked compared to their earlier material, a reflection of the changing mores of nation in the 1960s. In 1967, John Noble was authorized to direct *The Women* as the second show of the season, with each character identified by “her” color-coordinated costuming.<sup>137</sup> The agent of the playwright, Claire Booth Luce, allegedly complained to the Arts Project about this production—not for lack of royalty payments, but for its use of an all-male cast. Abel Pokras was appointed director of *The First Little Show—Sexpo 68* held on July 13, 1968.

**Cherry Grove: An GLBT Community Profile in the pre-Stonewall Era**

*Civics Declare War on ‘Undesirables’ in Cherry Grove*

*Patchogue Advance*, 7 July 1949

The Community House’s accomplishments and successes from this period played out against a backdrop of intense, national homophobic attitudes. Public scrutiny was accelerated in the 1950s by Senator Joseph McCarthy's attack on homosexuals in the State Department, which ushered in what many have characterized as the most homophobic decade in the nation's history.<sup>138</sup> From the onset of its formation, to the uprising at Stonewall that pushed the gay civil rights movement into the streets, the Property Owners Association and the Art Project played a significant role in fostering the small enclave’s harmonious environment and the protection from the scrutiny of its gay and lesbian population by people outside (and at times within) their community.

***Unwanted Attention: A Cherry Grove Scandal - Murder at Duffy’s Hotel, 1949***

At its July 7 meeting of the Property Owners Association at the Community House, “The President, August Reich, announced that the main purpose of the meeting was to discuss and act immediately concerning the situation at Cherry Grove which has been slowly building up and was finally brought to a head with the tragedy of the previous weekend.”<sup>139</sup> The association asked Ed Duffy (owner of Duffy’s Hotel) “to do all he could in and about the Hotel towards enforcing all rules and restrictions.” Duffy agreed to employ a house detective. The association’s secretary, Mrs. Jeanette “Jean” Skinner, dutifully carried out her assigned task: writing a letter “on the subject” to the “three important papers in the vicinity,” thanking them for their fine (albeit homophobic) editorials (e.g. “Lets Clean Up Cherry Grove,” addressing the “disgusting behavior that takes place every summer.”)<sup>140</sup> Skinner was also tasked with writing a second letter (a veiled threat) to the “unlicensed and uninsured” taxi service operating between Ocean Beach and Cherry Grove, blaming it for

<sup>137</sup> Arts Project of Cherry Grove, “Minutes,” 22 June 1966.

<sup>138</sup> Lisa E. Davis, “The Spy Who Came In from the Closet,” *The Gay & Lesbian Review* 19.5 (Sept-Oct 2012), 18: “[m]any prominent anti-Communist figures (circa 1949)...were closeted homosexuals whose homophobic fanaticism undoubtedly sprang from their own fear of being outed. Another *GLR* article highlights the more than casual relationship of McCarthy (and Roy Cohn, prosecuting attorney during the Army-McCarthy Hearings) to the young and handsome David Schine, for whom they tried to get preferential treatment during his U.S. Army service. Cheryl A Bates, “The Gay McCarthyites,” *The Gay & Lesbian Review* 17.9 (March-April 2010).

<sup>139</sup> Property Owners Association, “Minutes,” 1949.

<sup>140</sup> R.T. Gerrodette, Editorial, *Suffolk County News*, 1 July 1949, 22. [ Gerrodette, the father of Jeannette Skinner, is one of the grove's early entrepreneurial families, buying up lots, becoming cottage landlords and members of the Property Owners Association. Reticent to describe the nature of ‘uncleanliness in Cherry Grove,’ he believes ‘excessive drinking, drunken fights and brawls’ to be a *lesser problem* (than the presence of homosexuals) at the beach.]

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 30

transporting homosexuals who were “being run out of our neighboring community to the west.”<sup>141</sup> Duffy protested that the homeowners’ clamor for him to conduct his business with greater responsibility was partly their responsibility too, since many rented their cottages to “*these undesirable people.*” (emphasis added)<sup>142</sup>

The “tragedy of the previous weekend” was the strangulation murder of Robert Duff by John Robbins in a shared room at Duffy’s Hotel—the result a violent lover’s quarrel, according to vivid newspaper accounts of the day—which caused a huge sensation in 1949.<sup>143</sup> Some of the more conservative grove property owners seized upon this dreadful event in a move to finally rid the grove of “the queer assortment of characters from the metropolitan area.”<sup>144</sup> A *Patchogue Advance* headline trumpeted, “Civics Declare War on ‘Undesirables’ in Cherry Grove.”<sup>145</sup> While closer to home, and to Sayville’s conservative grove families’ landlords, *Suffolk County News* demurely reported “Cherry Grove Asks More Police; Seeks Rent Restrictions.”<sup>146</sup>

An especially vivid example of the virulent homophobic atmosphere, arguably characterizing the national attitude on the subject at this time, is found under a *Patchogue Advance* column, “Letter from the People,” from Alexander Grenier entitled “Disgusted with Cherry Grove.”<sup>147</sup> Grenier described himself as “a conscientious citizen,” who in the past has been “willing to raise a family in the previously healthful conditions of Cherry Grove...most favorable until about 1942.” But the colony had become unrecognizable to him “due to a class of people quite foreign to our previous family community.” Grenier asserted that many “regular property owners” commented on the deteriorating conditions and had “looked forward to the obvious outcome” such deterioration predicted. He claimed to speak for “regular property owners,” stating, “Our only satisfaction in this particularly referred to case was that it did not happen to “a young boy or young girl of normal family life.”

Following what can be characterized as Grenier’s dismissive assessment of a young man’s death in the grove community, he reserved a first class, moral indignation for railing against “nudeness” on the grove beach. His indignation may have stemmed from the dissemination of an article in *The New York Herald Tribune* he had seen that reported the arrest of two gay men for swimming in the nude and “prancing in front of children”. Grenier sold his house, forever abandoning the grove. Cherry blossoms bloomed and beach plums continued to ripen despite the Grenier family’s absence.

The effort by a minority of homeowners to rid the grove of homosexuals was genuine and caused a deep resentment in the community of mixed groups that once coexisted in mutually beneficial relationships: working-class families as homeowners and/or cottage landlords versus middle/upper-class, gay and straight corporate and theater professionals owning or renting cottages who also dined in the straight-owned Pat’s Restaurant and

<sup>141</sup> Property Owners Association, “Minutes,” 1949.

<sup>142</sup> Skinner memorializes this ‘coded’ description (the collective opinion of many grove property owners) in a letter from the Property Owners Association board to the editor of the *Suffolk County News*, (4 July 1949). [Attachment: Property Owners Assn. “Minutes,” (1949).]

<sup>143</sup> “The homicide touched off demands for a cleanup of the Fire Island summer resort, said to be a hotbed of homosexuality....The death stirred reaction to the behavior of effeminate visitors to the summer colony and demands were made that cottages and hotel rooms be denied objectionable visitors.” *Suffolk County News* (10 March 1950): 1.

<sup>144</sup> *Patchogue Advance*, 30 June 1949.

<sup>145</sup> *Patchogue Advance*, 7 July 1949, 1.

<sup>146</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 7 August 1949, 4.

<sup>147</sup> Grenier, *Patchogue Advance*, 21 July 1949, 26.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 31

danced in the straight-owned Duffy's Hotel. [Figs. 22 & 23] Property Owners Association members, resident landlords, and renters (many of whom were Art Project Committee members) tacitly understood each other's shared economic and social interests—a balm that often soothes the sometimes acute pain and stress accompanying rapid social change. However, the scandal tipped the balance for some and many of the “seasonally offended” (or perhaps psychologically exhausted) homeowners sold their cottages.

John Aaron Robbins was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced (June 1950) to 7-1/2 to 15 years in Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, NY. His fate was reported in a news clipping (unidentified newspaper) that describes Robbins as a member of Cherry Grove's “lavender set during the summer months.” This clipping was enclosed by Mrs. C.S. Bates in a letter to a grove landlord or real estate agent in Sayville named E.A. Dickenson as an explanation why her family would not be returning to its confirmed grove summer rental. Dickenson replied, claiming her use of the murder as an excuse for canceling the rental was “far-fetched” and that “murders have been happening since the world began.” He accused Bates of changing her mind to avoid paying the rent. But Dickenson promised to let her know of other rentals “if we find a place where there has never been a murder.”<sup>148</sup>

The Robbins-Duff trial was also enjoyed by an appreciative audience of titillated mayhem enthusiasts—leaving standing-room only for courtroom spectators—who formed daily crowds outside the Riverhead courthouse.<sup>149</sup> Reviewing three decades of his reporting career, Lloyd G. Record draws a comparison between the 1949 public's intense fascination with trials involving sex, violence and murder, and such interests a decade later, “Today [1960] you can have the most sensational trial imaginable, such as that of a Cherry Grover charged with murdering his boyfriend in a jealous rage, and you could put the whole audience into a telephone booth.”<sup>150</sup>

As grove historian Esther Newton observed, “ironically the very murder which gave family people their chance to oust the gays only encouraged gay growth by providing the most vital element needed to build gay community—information. Five New York City newspapers covered the Robbins-Duff murder, and references like “Cherry Grove, Fire Island's outpost of Greenwich Village,” leave little doubt that, as Grover Ann Leone said, “this was where gay people could go and have a ball.”<sup>151</sup>

<sup>148</sup> Correspondence from the collection of Arts Project Memorabilia. Shirley Munnell (Cherry Grove, September 2012)

<sup>149</sup> Various headlines from the period.

<sup>150</sup> Lloyd G. Record, “The Era of Wonderful Nonsense,” *Suffolk County News Anniversary Edition* [Editorial], 26 May 1960, 26.

<sup>151</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 67.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 32

*Cherry Grove Booster: "Suzy Aronson"*

*Gossip provides official unrecorded history. Oral history is the history of those denied control of the printed record, gossip is the history of those who cannot even speak in their own first-person voice.*

Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich<sup>152</sup>

Concurrently, and perhaps not coincidentally, on July 17, 1949 the *Suffolk County News* announced that "Suzy Aronson" from Long Beach would act as its correspondent for the "Cherry Grove" column (replacing Robert Kenmore). Aronson was the 14-year-old daughter of Cal and Peggy Aronson of Cherry Grove, though some speculated that her reportage was pseudonymously written by one or more grove adults. Suzy launched a "happy talk" column of fun facts and cheery gossip about Cherry Grove's denizens and events, particularly focusing on its residents' all-American pastimes, including their beach picnics and travels around the country. Dozens of inches of column space were given over to reviews of the brilliant theatrical offerings of the Art Project.

According to Esther Newton, several grove interviewees "speculated that the column was written substantially by Suzy's mother, Peggy Aronson."<sup>153</sup> Naome Kenmore, mother of furloughed (he returned in 1951) columnist Robert Kenmore, may have also ghosted some of the "Cherry Grove" column, along with a cohort of grove women. It is remarkable that absolutely no reference to the murder appears under Suzy's byline throughout her tenure. Whether or not Aronson wrote the column, it may have been intended to counter the continuing hostile, anti-homosexual publicity that resulted from the Robbins-Duff murder scandal and subsequent trial or it may have just been a coincidence. Certainly the author's youthful and upbeat tone seemed calculated to give Cherry Grove's image a little burnishing after so much attention was focused on a scandal. A few excerpts from her columns:

- "[O]ur annual Cherry Grove Carnival started with a bang. [There were] water sports for children; swimming, diving, floating and underwater swimming exhibitions, a baby parade, and an auction. The Community House was decorated with balloons and confetti and crepe paper [and flowers], and there were booths all around the new outside terrace: refreshment and soft drinks, jewelry and cards; flowers for sale; a fortune teller; a children's bazaar (containing fur monkeys, batons and huge lollypops with bubble gum centers; a small fish pond with 250 small prizes); valuable prizes were awarded: a 'Nicro coffee maker; 12 bottles of rye. The ladies of the peep show were so attractive that many people went to see them several times. [Fig. 24]
- "One of the many distinguished guests at Cherry Grove last week end was Prince Alesandro Torlonia of Italy. His wife is the daughter of the late King of Spain and his mother is Elsie Moore, an American. Prince

<sup>152</sup> Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage and B. Ruby Rich, "Lesbians and Film," *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (eds.) (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), 31.

<sup>153</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 58.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 33

Torlonia has visited Cherry Grove before, but has not revealed his identity. He considers Cherry Grove one of the most interesting and charming communities in America.”<sup>154</sup>

Aronson’s publicity continued to “spin” in high gear; her headlines reported guest sightings at grove parties:

- “Mrs. Farrar [1938 Hurricane survivor who rode out the Storm of the Century in her Pride House residence]—Guest of Honor at Beach Party” thrown by Burt Martinson [the Martinson Coffee magnate].<sup>155</sup>
- The Farrar party guests include Arthur Brill, Dr. Elmer Lindsay and Kay Guinness and celebrity sightings: “Miss Fifi Dorsay, the actress, who flew in by seaplane from New York (guest of Norman Sanson, a New York decorator at the cottage, ‘Silver Slipper’). George Reich, Jr., the well-known dancer missed at Cherry Grove this summer, is rehearsing for a new [Broadway] musical show.”<sup>156</sup>
- Nancy Walker was listed among guests at a large party in Cherry Grove (and in the *1948 Follies* program).<sup>157</sup>
- “Mr. and Mrs. Paul Himmel (née Lillian Bassman, staff photographer at *Harper's Bazaar*) rent ‘Pride House,’ and “love the freedom and the informal atmosphere of Cherry Grove, and many of their friends who first came here as their guests are now Cherry Grove residents also.”<sup>158</sup>
- Roxy Theater manager, and donor of the Art(s) Project’s *'49 Follies* ‘black and white’ show curtain, Herbert Andrews’s cottage is toured, and his summer guest, Mr. Jules Racine the actor, is introduced.”<sup>159</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Aronson, *Suffolk County News*, 9 September 1949, 15.

<sup>155</sup> Beatrice Farrar married and later divorced a gay man, Thomas Farrar (who worked for Norman bel Geddes, according to his friend Miles White). Farrar was a set designer (1931-34) and theatrical effects man for John Ringling North Circus. Mr. & Mrs. Farrar lived in Pride House (still in existence) on Beach Walk in 1937. Source: Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 24.

<sup>156</sup> Ronson, *Suffolk County News*, 26 August 1949. Fifi D’Orsay, Actress (movie: *Going Hollywood*, 1933) aka ‘Fifi Dorsay.’ <http://www.imbd.com> (30 August 2012). George Reich, (b. Dec 15, 1926, Patchogue, NY, USA ). A Performer and choreographer. Shows: *Inside U.S.A.*, Original, Musical, Revue (1948-1949); Dancer, Ensemble; *Touch and Go*, Original, Musical, Revue (1949-1950). <http://www.ibdb.com> (29 August 2012). His father, August Reich, initiated the homosexual purge of Cherry Grove. According to Munnell, “Augie” changed his attitudes and “toned it down” after his son, also named George [Jr.] revealed he was gay and appeared in one of the Art Project’s *Follies* shows. [Munnell: Interview. New York: Cherry Grove (October, 2012).

<sup>157</sup> Aronson, “Cherry Grove,” *Suffolk County News*, 2 September 1949, 17. In 1949 Walker appeared on Broadway in an original musical revue, *Along Fifth Avenue*, and was famous for her role as ‘Hildy Esterhazy’ in the 1944 original production of *On the Town*. <http://www.ibdb.com> (30 August 2012).

<sup>158</sup> They are lionized today as two of the most important 20thC fashion photographers, who were the contemporaries, and artistic equals to Richard Avedon.

<sup>159</sup> Aronson, “Cherry Grove,” *Suffolk County News*,” 19 August 1949, 14. Broadway Stage Manager/Understudy for *Regina, Love Life* and *Brigadoon* (1948-49); <http://www.Playbillvault.com>

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 34

***“A Moral Danger” & the Outcry for Public Decency: Police Raids in Cherry Grove***

*...large numbers of men of effeminate characteristics, certain among whom apparently do not hesitate to practice acts of sexual perversion, have ‘adopted’ the beach colony as their summer haven.... ‘Via the Grapevine.’ Few property owners squawking loudly at B’haven police raid at Cherry Grove...The point is, they don’t want to get rid of the lace pants set, because, generally speaking, they are a free spending crowd and will pay outrageous rents for the privilege of living in the sand colony...the dollar sign still rules many viewpoints, it seems.*

*Suffolk County News, 14 August 1953*

The deluge of upbeat reporting from Suzy Aronson could not succeed completely in sanitizing the grove set from the barbs of the mainland. By the 1950s there was a renewed national push to legally regulate sexual conduct thanks to a shocked America’s response to the *Kinsey Report* and particularly exacerbated by Joseph McCarthy’s government-sanctioned communist and homosexual purge of the nation’s civil service ranks and Hollywood’s film industry.<sup>160</sup> Harry Hays, founder of the Mattachine Society, recalled that McCarthy’s “scurrilous House Un-American Activities (HUAC) witch hunt had...demoralized the nation’s entire cultural environment.”<sup>161</sup> The Art Project’s productions and grove costume parties were made vulnerable by a national sex crimes panic, since lewdness laws could be applied to individuals wearing clothing of the opposite sex in public: “[T]hese laws vest discretion in the police and other enforcement officers.”<sup>162</sup> A typical ordinance was that found in the Municipal Code of Columbus, Ohio (§2343.04), providing: “No person shall appear upon a public street . . . in a dress not belonging to his or her sex, or in an indecent or lewd dress....The state had power to prohibit cross-dressing when it...bears a real and substantial outrage to public ...morals, or general welfare.”<sup>163</sup>

Police have been arresting gay men and lesbians for public lewdness for decades, according to William N. Eskridge, a professor at Yale Law School and the author of *Gaylaw*, a book that chronicles the legal regulation of homosexuality. “The 1940s and 1950s represent[ed] a huge increase in the number of people arrested,” Eskridge says. “We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of gay men and lesbians each year. Those people were faced with a range of possible charges, such as cross-dressing, that went beyond public sex. The gay and lesbian subcultures that existed in most American cities became a lot more visible....World War II saw a lot of loosening up of gender and sex roles... America re-normalized with a vengeance. With this re-normalization...it was very important to make an example of these subcultures.”<sup>164</sup>

The raid tradition in Cherry Grove began primarily in 1953. This was fueled in part by the national attention focused on sexual morality and in part by the dawning era sexual freedom, which substantially

<sup>160</sup> Wisconsin’s Republican U.S. Senator (1947 - 1957)

<sup>161</sup> *Birth of a Consciousness*. 19.6. Issue #100 (1995)

<sup>162</sup> “The Function of Law in the Regulation of Sexual Conduct,” *Indiana Law Journal* 29.4, Art 2, (1954): 533  
<http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ilj/vol29/iss4/2>

<sup>163</sup> Penal Law, A Web Court Opinions, *The PEOPLE of the State of New York v. Gene SIMMONS, Defendant Criminal Court of the City New York, Kings County*. Part AP 5 79 Misc. 2d 249. (1974) (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/law/bclc/web/nysimmons.htm>) (9 October 2012)

<sup>164</sup> Duncan Osborne, *In 2002, Lewdness, Cruising Arrests Persist*. <http://204.2.109.187/GCN2/ArrestsNews.html> (4 October 2012)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 35

increased the sheer numbers of gay men and lesbians coming annually to the grove. This made it more difficult for Cherry Grove's gay and straight populations to maintain their unacknowledged coexistence. Alex Grenier in his letter recounts being "somewhat awed" at first by "the carryings on of this new circle [of homosexuals]" in the grove; acknowledging that [the] "condition of nudeness" on Cherry Grove's beach had been going on "for many, many years" (presumably among the "regular" straight property owners of his nostalgic pre-1942 residency)<sup>165</sup> A site that has been at the center of Cherry Grove's lewdness raids is the wooded area, now part of the Fire Island National Seashore territory, east of the grove famously (or infamously) known as the "Meat Rack." [Fig. 25] This largely gay male space has been with the grove since its beginning and is a major source of community tension among many residents, renters and visitors to the grove—straight folks, gay men and lesbians—to the present day.<sup>166</sup> Police activity in the grove progressively escalated in the 1950s and 1960s leading to lurid newspaper coverage:

- "Ten Seized in Cherry Grove Raid." "A long-awaited crackdown on immorality stemming from large numbers of admitted homosexuals at Cherry Grove came in the form of a carefully planned police raid (10 plain-clothes policemen; 4 policewomen) on the Fire Island resort Saturday night. A total of 10 men were arrested and tried in a court (presided over by Justice of the Peace, Donald W. Shaw) set up in the precinct station in the [Cherry Grove] Community Building (sic)."<sup>167</sup> A trial of sex related violations is emotion packed even for the most impartial of judges and juries. Prejudice against the defendant can enter at any step of these proceedings...morality in a legal form is a shifting concept that changes from time to time and place to place.<sup>168</sup>

Property Owners Association members in 1953 alluded to these raids and the national anti-gay backlash with a reference to "recent newspaper and police pressure" threatening the Art Project's programming. In turn, the Art Project agreed to review its entire program for the balance of the season with the goal of "elimination or continuation of certain of their activities."<sup>169</sup> Mary Hecht wanted it made clear at this meeting that the Property Owners Association did not encourage the police raids in Cherry Grove and that [they] should try to stop the rumors to the effect that it did. This is the only mention of police raids in Cherry Grove in the association's minutes. In the late '1940s and early 50s, headlines and articles in mainland (Sayville and Patchogue) newspapers routinely reported arrests and fines for nude swimming and sunbathing. Aside from Kay Guinness and a female guest—the only lesbian couple arrested in the grove—the malefactors were almost equally divided between heterosexual and male couples.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Confirmed by Shirley Munnell a resident then and now. [Interview. New York: Cherry Grove]. (20 October 2012)

<sup>166</sup> "The fact that these [men] met in unsupervised public places and even had sex there was more shocking still to middle-class reformers, in part because it challenged the careful delineation between public and private space that was so central to bourgeois conceptions of public order." Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 203.

<sup>167</sup> *Suffolk County News*, 7 August 1953, 1.

<sup>168</sup> *Indiana Law Journal*. The *Suffolk County News* took a more temperate tone in its reporting compared to its competitor, the *Patchogue Advance*, probably due to the fact that its publisher in 1932 was Francis Hoag, one of the more successful grove cottage landlords. The Hoag family owned several cottages, but many local Sayville readers also owned homes in Cherry Grove

<sup>169</sup> Property Owners Association, "Minutes," (1953)

<sup>170</sup> "Nudes Have 'Fine' Time at the Beach," *Patchogue Advance*, 8 July 1948, 1. Homer Dickens, "Notes." [Unpublished book from Collection of Patricia Goff]

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre  
Name of Property  
Suffolk County New York  
County and State

Section 8 Page 36

Frank A. McKenna, one of the ten men arrested in the grove police raid (August, 1953) demanded a jury trial. Three attempts by the district attorney for a conviction for “soliciting” (a plain-clothed policeman on the beach) resulted in hung juries. The successful defense attorney was a young grove resident, Jim Fallon. In an article, “Cross-bay Citizen -- Jim Fallon Sr.,” Fallon stated, “I’ve represented people on the beach for 50 years. I used to defend the [grove] boys when the police would drag them off to Riverhead. I had a pretty good record--*no convictions*. I still go to the beach and I still fish. I enjoy life.”<sup>171</sup>

The Art Project board, concerned and protective of the grove’s image generally and of members of its theater company specifically, circulated dress code and behavior advisories as inserts to its show programs, for example in *New Faces of 1938* (1957). The Art Project even delivered warning notices to grove households that alluded to New York’s lewdness law prohibiting, “costumes which might tend to offend...unorthodox dress and overly brief swimsuits.” Shirley Munnell provided one such cautionary notice from her Art Project memorabilia, suggesting that the text was likely drafted by board member Helen Ely, because “it sounds just like her.” Helen Ely was assigned as a Property Owner Association representative to compose a letter (along with secretary Charles Austin), to all association and Art Project members explaining the two organizations’ history and relationship.<sup>172</sup> In her defense, Ely in her role as “Honorary Art Project Board member for Life” acted both as promoter of the grove’s 1940s “country club” sensibilities and as defender of grove conservative values, yet maintained an often progressive, gay-friendly attitude toward the cultural changes sweeping through the grove during the remaining years of her residency. She evolved with the times.

The backlash from this period impacted Art Project productions straight into the 1970s. Last names and then surnames of contributing writers, directors, actors, set and lighting designers gradually disappeared from Art Project programs. Joke attributions included, “Sets by Coincidence,” and programs’ centerfolds enumerated only a show’s scenes. Pseudonyms such as “Annabella Andrews” and “Gretchen Gassley” (Arts Project’s 1977 *Zodiac—A Review in 12 Houses*) became necessary for some participants, especially school teachers, performing in the grove’s summer shows during the Anita Bryant era of the gay civil rights movement.<sup>173</sup>

***Political Influence: Cherry Grove Property Owners Association***

While the Property Owners Association closely monitored the harassment of its gay and lesbian residents during the 1950s and 1960s, it continued the daily business of being a force in shaping the political decisions that would impact its community and driving new ideas that would improve the small hamlet’s quality of life. During its meetings at the Community House, the association began to exercise its nascent political

<sup>171</sup> John Lee, *Suffolk County News*, 15 August 1996, 8.

<sup>172</sup> Property Owners Assn, “Minutes,” (1953) The relationship between Property Owners Association (entirely property owners) and the Art Project (largely renters) became strained at the point of their shared history over alleged promises of donations from the Art Project to the owners association to support the Community House building. Art Project’s privileges in the Community House were at stake. A motion was made (sharing of earned money being the principal subject), seconded and following a discussion unanimously approved. It required that the Art Project dissolve itself and reorganize effective October 1, 1953.

<sup>173</sup> Anderson, Annie and Gassen, Ricki. [Interview. New York: Cherry Grove, 15 September 2012]. Anderson and Gassen acted in Arts Project productions and Gassen was an elementary school phys-ed teacher on Long Island. Dade County, Florida’s threatened passage of a gay anti-discrimination law inspired Anita Bryant to capitalize on her pop culture fame. She became one of the nation’s most outspoken critics of homosexuality in the late ‘70s. Bryant failed in her attempt to influence successful passage of California’s *Brigg’s Initiative* (CA Proposition 6) in 1978. Anita Bryant and California’s *Brigg’s Initiative* (CA Proposition 6). [http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/bryant\\_anita,3.html](http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/bryant_anita,3.html). The CA Initiative would have banned gays and lesbians and more broadly, their supporters, from any teaching position in California schools.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 37

clout, yet also as a known gay and lesbian enclave. It became a member of the Fire Island Erosion Control Committee, an island inter-community group. The Fire Island Erosion Control Committee (and the Property Owners Association autonomously) lobbied county, state and federal representatives on various legislative initiatives designed to mitigate erosion on the south shore of Long Island.<sup>174</sup> This ultimately led to the creation of the Dunes Fund.

Dune preservation has been of prime importance to the Property Owners Association from its earliest days to the present. [Fig. 26] This concern stems partly from oral histories of vivid recollections of the devastation wrought upon the colony by the Hurricane of 1938. January 24, 1964 marked the incorporation the grove's "Permanent Dunes Fund, Inc." which later became "The Dunes Fund," both direct descendants of the 1944 Property Owners Association's "Dune" committee. Each year funds are solicited from grove homeowners for annual dune replenishment (i.e., positioning of snow fence to trap and hold sand, planting new grasses and dune fertilization). Donors are reminded that grove dunes are sacrificial in that they exist as impermanent protection; but their loss during a severe hurricane will spare grove homes. On October 29, 2012 the dunes served their purpose when Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast. Over half the width of the dunes was scoured away along the entire length of the grove, but homes were largely spared and no businesses were lost.

The Art Project and Property Owners Association joined forces in answer to the need of regular medical service in the grove in the 1950s. The Property Owners Association's doctors committee was formed to investigate, with the Art Project, the possibility of constructing a combination residence and office for visiting physicians in the summer of 1954. Mary Hecht donated land in a raffle to raise money for the cause.<sup>175</sup> "The Elmer A. Lindsay Memorial Clinic Fund" was formed and a lot was purchased from Ms. Gerrodette (Jean Skinner's mother). Construction proceeded on the premises, named "Belly Acres," popularly called the "Doctors House," and was completed by mid-May of 1956 at a cost of \$7,426.70 (or \$62,563 in 2012).<sup>176</sup> Newton believes, "the Grove became one of the first Fire Island communities to fund a cottage dedicated to housing a resident doctor."<sup>177</sup> Located naturally enough on Doctors Walk, the Doctors House of today looks exactly as it did upon its completion: a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modern, split-level house with a walk-up, office entrance at its lower level, and set behind a seaside garden. Sixty years later, the Cherry Grove community continues its historic tradition of funding this important institution. Donald Labohn and Evan Kane (impersonating the "Shapiro Sisters") and Meryl Facterman and Lois McIntosh, in cooperation with the Arts Project, annually produce the popular *Doctors Fund Benefit Performance* at the Community House theater.

The grove's well-known designation as "the summer capital of the gay world" by the 1960s did not impair the Property Owners Association's ability to make history by joining with other Fire Island communities

<sup>174</sup> Property Owners Assn, "Minutes," (1954)

<sup>175</sup> Property Owners Association, "Minutes," (1954). Mary Hecht (heiress to the Hecht Department Stores chain) started her grove life in a heterosexual marriage. She amicably divorced, and ended her life in Woodlawn Park Cemetery (Miami, Florida) in a pink marble tomb—fashioned after Egypt's *Sphinx*—next to 'her friend' Jane Gertrude English. "A Hecht of a Way to be Laid to Rest," *Miami Herald*, 8 April 1983.

<sup>176</sup> The doctors residence was named after Dr. Lindsay, long-time grove resident, and a principal board member of the early Art Project Committee. Lindsay died during the winter (1955). He was the father-in-law of Dr. Jonas Salk, discoverer of the Salk polio vaccine. "Talk of the Town," *Suffolk County News*, 8 June 1956, 5.

<sup>177</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, 81.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 38

to successfully prevent Robert Moses from realizing his dream for a highway down the length of Fire Island.<sup>178</sup> The “Moses road” was a plan 32 years in the making.<sup>179</sup>

The Great Atlantic Storm of 1962, or the “Ash Wednesday Storm,” as it became known, was not a hurricane but a fierce Nor’easter. The weather report for Monday, March 5, 1962, predicted nothing out of the ordinary for a late winter day: “Monday: chance of rain, cloudy. Tuesday: cool and cloudy.” There were no advance warnings, no radio bulletins. There was a new moon, a time of traditionally high tides when the sun and moon are in alignment, called perigee tides—higher than normal tides. The Nor’easter hit the coast with between Force 10 and 11 winds, a mixture of snow, sleet and hail, and twenty-five to thirty-five foot waves.<sup>180</sup> Forty-one homes were destroyed and hundreds more badly damaged on Fire Island and in Cherry Grove. Grove dunes were cut to a fraction of their bulk, eroded away by the pounding surf.<sup>181</sup> On March 19, 1962, the *New York Times* headlined: “Fire Island Puts Shoulder To Dune; 40 Cherry Grove Residents Pitch In On Sandbag Wall For Mile-Long Beach: \$10,000 WILL BE SPENT. Property Owners Fund Will Pay Hired Workmen To Finish Job This Week. Spirit Is Commended—17,500 Bags Purchased.”<sup>182</sup>

Robert Moses, president of the Long Island State Park Commission, who had treasured a plan to build a highway down the spine of Fire Island for 32 years, renewed efforts to see how his highway might fit into a Fire Island erosion-control plan. “With (eventually) two bridges at the east and west ends of the Island, all that remained to carry out the Moses plan was to fill the gap between these bridges with a concrete road running up the spine (the dunes) of the island—and, said Moses triumphantly, this road will stabilize the dunes. 1,500 Fire Island property owners loudly disagreed at a public comments meeting” (among them residents of Cherry Grove).<sup>183</sup>

The Property Owners Association, at its August 10, 1962 meeting, wrote a letter and forwarded a signed petition to its elected state and federal representatives. The Property Owners Association demanded completion of a Fire Island Erosion Project and thoroughly objected to the proposed 4-lane parkway through Fire Island. Congressman John V. Lindsay replied to the association secretary’s letter, thanking them for their support of Lindsay’s H.R. 12965 bill “To Provide for the Establishment of a National Seashore on Fire Island.” H.R. 12965 was entered on the floor of the House of Representatives on August 20, 1962.

The Fire Island National Seashore was created by unrelenting lobbying of the U.S. Congress, including frequent correspondence between the Property Owners Association’s presidents and New York State’s governor and congressional leaders. Today, the Fire Island National Seashore stretches from Robert Moses State Park to Smith Point County Park. Its authorizing legislation was signed by Lyndon B. Johnson on September 3, 1964,

<sup>178</sup> Charles P. Dickerson, “A History of the Sayville Community including Bayport, Bohemia, West Sayville, Oakdale, and Fire Island,” *Suffolk County News*, (1975).

<sup>179</sup> John V. Lindsay, (R-NY 1962) *News Release*, (Washington, D.C., 20 August 1962).

<sup>180</sup> *The Great Atlantic Storm*. <http://www.njtvonline.org/njtoday/2012/03/06/the-great-atlantic-storm-of-1962/> (16 February 2013)

<sup>181</sup> Cherry Grove Permanent Dunes Fund, C.G.P.O.A., “Help Needed Now...and fast!” [Community donations brochure.] (March, 1962)

<sup>182</sup> Byron Porterfield, “Special Section,” *The New York Times*, 19 March 1962, 31.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* *The Great American Storm*. <http://www.njtvonline.org/njtoday/2012/03/06/the-great-atlantic-storm-of-1962/> (16 February 2013)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 39

thus “preserving the only developed barrier island in the U.S. without roads.”<sup>184</sup> Abundant references to the sophisticated negotiating and lobbying activities of the Property Owners Association are extant in the archival documents and minutes of the Cherry Grove Community Association Inc.

The grove community—straight and gay, homeowners and renters—had become a force for civic pride and social comity by the 1960s according to Gabriel Levenson, a married, heterosexual with two children—a grove renter for 10 years beginning in 1952. Levenson reported on his grove life and his thoroughly enjoyable experiences among its homosexual residents for a travel magazine, *Islands in the Sun*: “Over the years, the *New York Daily News*, for example, has been alert to the exciting possibilities of naming the names of Cherry Grovers; in some instances, even ‘straight’ friends of mine have been fired when they ‘made’ the columns of the *News*....No more than any other Cherry Grover, could I, would I have given the [investigative] *Post* reporter a direct answer to the direct question: ‘Was so-and-so ‘gay’ or ‘straight’?’ Too much is at stake: social position, family pride, and livelihood. [A homosexual in the grove]—possibly for the first time in his life—knows he is enjoying the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>185</sup> The “undesirables” had, at long last, become very desirable community leaders and residents of Cherry Grove.

**1968: The Community House Stages a Revolution**

*Perhaps the most telling proof of animus and discrimination against homosexuals in this country is that, for many years and in many states, homosexual conduct was criminal. These laws had the imprimatur of the Supreme Court.*

United States Court of Appeals (Edith Windsor vs. United States)<sup>186</sup>

Grove historian Esther Newton chose "The Nation Takes Shape" as a name for a section of her book, *Cherry Grove-Fire Island*, dealing with the 1960s. This title serves as a metaphor that incorporates notions of “solidarity, visibility, public recognition, and pride that are commonly seen as post-Stonewall characteristics.”<sup>187</sup> It was in the year prior to the Stonewall riots, that the Property Owners Association took its most proactive measure to stand up for the civil rights of its gay and lesbian residents of Cherry Grove.

In 1968, The Mattachine Society accused Long Island mainland justices of the peace of corruption in authorizing repeated grove “dragnet assaults, usually on the Fourth of July.” They entrapped gay men on the beaches and at night in the “Rack” by use of plain-clothed constables. (Grenier boasted of having been one such constable.) One judge actually owned property in the grove and rented to gay victims of these raids. An interesting gay/straight paradigm, exceptionally progressive for this era, was argued in defense of gay men’s

<sup>184</sup> “Negotiated Rulemaking for Fire Island National Seashore, NY.” “Negotiated Rulemaking for Fire Island National Seashore, NY.”

<http://www.cbuiding.org/publication/case/fire-island-national-seashore-offroad-driving-negotiated-rulemaking> (17 February 2013)

<sup>185</sup> Gabriel Levenson, “Cherry Grove,” in *Islands in the Sun Club: Fire Island*, Rpt. 22 “Fire Island” (New York: American Theatre Press), 4.6.

<sup>186</sup> Edith Windsor is the executrix of the estate of her wife, Thea Syper. Windsor is before the Supreme Court in a challenge to the Defense of Marriage Act’s (DOMA) denial of spousal benefits to the surviving partner of a lawful homosexual marriage.

<sup>187</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.) (Illinois: Chicago University Press, October 1998), Afterward 259.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 40

nocturnal parties in the Rack. That space came to be characterized a “sort of lover’s lane. And cops don’t usually raid (straight) lover’s lanes.”<sup>188</sup>

The Property Owners Association, in cooperation with Mattachine, employed “the rough and tumble local American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyer, Benedict P. Ventura.” Ventura stated his defense bluntly: “[C]ivil liberties is civil liberties. The gays are not bothering anybody until the cops find them in the scrub and then it’s the cops who are disturbing the peace. [New York State’s] ‘deviate conduct’ laws (including sodomy and anal sex) between two people not married makes that a crime. You can be married and doing the same things on the Boardwalk in Jones Beach, and that’s OK. That’s damn discriminatory for homosexuals.”<sup>189</sup>

Cherry Grove police raids and the era of gay sex crimes prosecution were effectively halted by the Property Owners Association and its Arts Project members through seemingly endless, and at times tumultuous, meetings held at the Community House during the 1960s. Raids ended completely one year before the summer of 1969 and the Stonewall Riots. Stonewall’s ripple effect would gradually achieve similar results nationwide. As gay rights activist Martin Duberman reminded us in 1993, “[t]hough Stonewall inspired a generation of young New Yorkers (and others), its effect on the rest of us was more symbolic than real. After all, Stonewall was not the beginning of queer liberation. The riots came after almost two decades of Mattachine Society and ONE and Daughters of Bilitis (and other gay rights groups); of demonstrations in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.; and of riots in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and elsewhere.”<sup>190</sup>

Tectonic shifts that would ultimately reshape America’s cultural landscape began in the first years of Gay Liberation, and resonated in Cherry Grove. At meetings of the Property Owners Association held at the Community House, members developed expert negotiation skills with the Suffolk County Police and later with the Fire Island National Seashore’s Park Rangers in a series of pleas for protection (a 1940s weekend presence), for liberality (post-Stonewall), an increased presence during the Disco-era of the 1970s (prompted by an invasion of straight “peeping toms,” mainland thugs, and even a pyromaniac, coming to the grove during the anything-goes era of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll). The Property Owners Association and Arts Project’s tactics culminated in a cooperative détente of enforcement, but non-harassment, for a 21<sup>st</sup> century Cherry Grove

<sup>188</sup> Karl Grossman, “The Fight for the Right to be Gay,” *The Fire Island Tide*, 2.8 (8 September 1978), 16.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Jesse Montegudo, “Stonewall at 40,” in *Jesse’s Journal*. (2009) <http://GayToday.com>

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 41

Post-Stonewall Cherry Grove

*That's what happened Stonewall night to a lot of people. We went, "Oh my God. I am not alone, there are other people that feel exactly the same way."*

Doric Wilson<sup>191</sup>

Growing workplace parity for women brought a new generation of lesbians to the grove as home and business owners. Compared to previous years, lesbians have held officer positions in both the Property Owners Association and Arts Project and broke the all-male barrier of the grove's volunteer fire department. During the worst years of the AIDS crisis, these women united with their stricken grove brothers, bringing succor and nursing care. Private homeowners hosted "People With AIDS" outings at the Community House, notwithstanding the uneasiness of some residents. And the first days' national panic over AIDS transmission put a stop to curious and disruptive sightseers invading the grove on weekends. The Arts Project hosted the first performance in 1980 of the newly formed, now nationally famous, New York City Gay Men's Chorus, on stage at the Community House in a fundraising concert for that group.

In 2001, the *New York Times* began to take note of the social evolution of Cherry Grove that mirrored national themes of changing attitudes and increased acceptance of GLBT peoples in, "Children? At Cherry Grove? Yes!" by Vivian S. Toy, wherein Toy interviews gay and lesbian adoptive parents.<sup>192</sup> In 2005 the *New York Times* described the grove as "community-oriented," deriving that quality from its all-volunteer fire department, nonprofit activist groups and Cherry Grove Community Association "brimming" with participants. "Last summer, when the local population of piping plovers [protected by the National Parks Service's Fire Island National Seashore] reached a critical point in its endangered status, volunteers sat in round-the-clock shifts to guard plover nests on the beach."<sup>193</sup>

Also in 2001, the Property Owners Association, at 55 years of age, embraced its own maturity, changing times and demographics of the community. The all-volunteer projects initiated by the early association committees—dunes protection, doctors fund and art project—had evolved as independent, not-for-profit organizations. At the Community House, these organizations reported their activities at three public meetings regularly held each summer. The historic activities of the Property Owners Association were deemed a "community service"—especially its administration of its Community House/Theater, and Doctors House for charitable use. Thus the Internal Revenue Service granted the Property Owners Association a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt charitable status. A new organization was formed for this charity, The Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc. (Sep. 2001) in order to fully open the Community House to all "residents, visitors, guests." The Property Owners Association, reorganized as a 501(c)(4) not-for-profit entity, continued as an important liaison to the Town of Brookhaven's municipal departments, state and federal agencies.

<sup>191</sup> "Stonewall Uprising," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/transcript/stonewall-transcript>

<sup>192</sup> *New York Times*, 26 August 2001.

<sup>193</sup> Beth Greenfield, "Journeys; Weekender | Cherry Grove, N.Y.," *New York Times*, 15 July 2005.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County New York

County and State

Section 8 Page 42

Each summer, the Arts Project opens its doors for a new season. It periodically presents its “Arts Project Archives.” People lucky enough to attend this event discover one very special memorial, similar to those found in American towns and cities honoring war veterans, in the Community House basement’s theater dressing rooms. There visitors can view the signatures of nearly every performer (homeowner or renter, gay or straight) who appeared in grove shows since 1948. The walls are homage and witness to veteran participants from all grove organizations and all Arts Project productions. Some autographs are the only proof of an appearance by Arts Project performers, signed as they were during the years when use of real names in show programs—and even publicly in the grove—might have resulted in loss of friends, family and jobs. These names will remain on the dressing room walls for as long as the Community House and Theater stands, as statements of gay pride, as reminders for each new gay and lesbian generation of their distinct but shared histories, and as a gay peoples’ elegy: “We were here yesterday, so you can be here tomorrow.” [Fig. 27]

The Cherry Grove Community House and Theater’s greatest national historic significance is in providing a socially secure and creative home for the grove’s talented homosexual residents and their guests. It became their space, with a pride of possession literally forbidden to them in the nation’s public town halls, theaters and nightclubs of the era. Through their full participation in grove community governance and theatrical entertainments, gay men and lesbians could be themselves: “to find one another, and to affirm [their] existence and participation in society to the rest of the world.”<sup>194</sup> The Arts Project, its Broadway talents and camp humor, created a permanent venue on the grove stage for gay creativity and self-affirmation. Together, the Cherry Grove Property Owners Association and its Arts Project developed a revolutionary model for a community’s gradual acceptance of its homosexual residents, with all their individual modes of self-expression, during the pre-Stonewall era. This early coalescing of two groups, heterosexual and homosexual, with widely divergent lifestyles, around a Fire Island community house and theater ultimately produced the nation’s oldest, continually operating, gay summer theater in America’s first gay town: Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY.

<sup>194</sup> Amy Hoffman, “Do Tell: Recovering our GLBT History,” in *The Gay and Lesbian Review, Worldwide*, Vol.XX.19, (Jan-Feb 2013), 25.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 9 Page 1

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

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National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 9 Page 4

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National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

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Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 9 Page 5

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 9 Page 6

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Continuation Sheet

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Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 9 Page 7

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

County, New York

County and State

Section 10 Page 1

Verbal Boundary Description

The Cherry Grove Community House and Theater is located on the bayside of Long Island's Fire Island in the Town of Brookhaven's Hamlet of Cherry Grove. The building is located in Cherry Grove's commercial district, west of the main dock, positioned on its lot within 75-feet of the Great South Bay. The lot is 9,110 square feet, approximately 100-feet along Bayview Walk and 91-feet deep. On the building's east side is a boardwalk ramp leading to lower level storage areas and to a pump house toward the bulkhead. The eastern most adjacent parcel is a private lot. The lot on its west side is bound by a Town of Brookhaven boardwalk (Holly Walk) leading to a one-story Suffolk County Water Authority's pump house building, which consumes a rectangular lot on the bulkhead in front of the Community House. Due to the grade on the bayside, the county building obscures the sublevel of the Community House when approaching by water. The immediately adjacent west lot is the property of the Cherry Grove Volunteer Fire Department and is occupied by its fire house. The Ice Palace, an entertainment complex with a bar, nightclub, swimming pool and two-story hotel, is opposite the Community House on Bay Walk. The boundary is indicated on the attached map with scale.

Boundary Justification

The boundary for the Community House and Theatre coincides with the boundary during the site's 1947 to 1969 period of significance.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre

Name of Property

Suffolk County, New York

County and State

Section 11 Page 1

Additional Information

<b>Identification/Description</b>	
<b>EXTERIOR</b>	
<b>Photo #</b>	
1	Community House: Exterior SE Corner (South elevation on Bay Walk); porch and main entrance, second level deck and balcony entrance, theater addition (background). Partial view of memorial gardens and events marquee. Separate Suffolk County Police Booth substation (right foreground). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
2	Community House: Detail (South elevation on Bay Walk); Boardroom addition (converted from original 1947 fire house garage). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
3	Community House: Exterior South Elevation (on Bay Walk facing North onto the bay); 1949 3-story theater addition; Boardroom (foreground); Bay Walk porch/main entrances (right). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
4	Community House: NE Corner (North elevation facing bay). Pump house and bulk heading (right foreground). Adjacent lot and restaurant (left foreground) property of Stein Family. Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
5	Community House: Exterior NW Corner (North elevation facing bay); basement dressing rooms (bottom center foreground), 3-story exterior North elevation, and auditorium 1949 'bump out (background NE facing bay). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
6	Community House: Detail original 'floated barn' roof line; original cupola; NE peak with original horse shoe-shaped, wood framed 4-light window, original extended eye-lid roof /entrance to loft (now lighting booth and balcony entrance); original cedar shakes; Victorian "seaside-style" (fish scale). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
<b>INTERIOR</b>	
7	Auditorium and stage (W). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
8	(NE): Auditorium (foreground), and stage (left background); (NE corner): original 1949 cedar shakes and door (entrance to stage and basement dressing rooms). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
9	Basement dressing room (1 of 3) includes autographed walls. Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
10	Auditorium (S) Bay Walk entrance and balcony converted from original barn loft (Upper left hand of frame). Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
11	Lobby a/k/a the Pavilion (N) facing bay, and access to exterior stairway to balcony and lighting booth. Photo: Courtesy Lorraine Michels
12	Lobby a/k/a the Pavilion (S) Bay Walk entrance, office/supply room left.





Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983  
Units: Meter

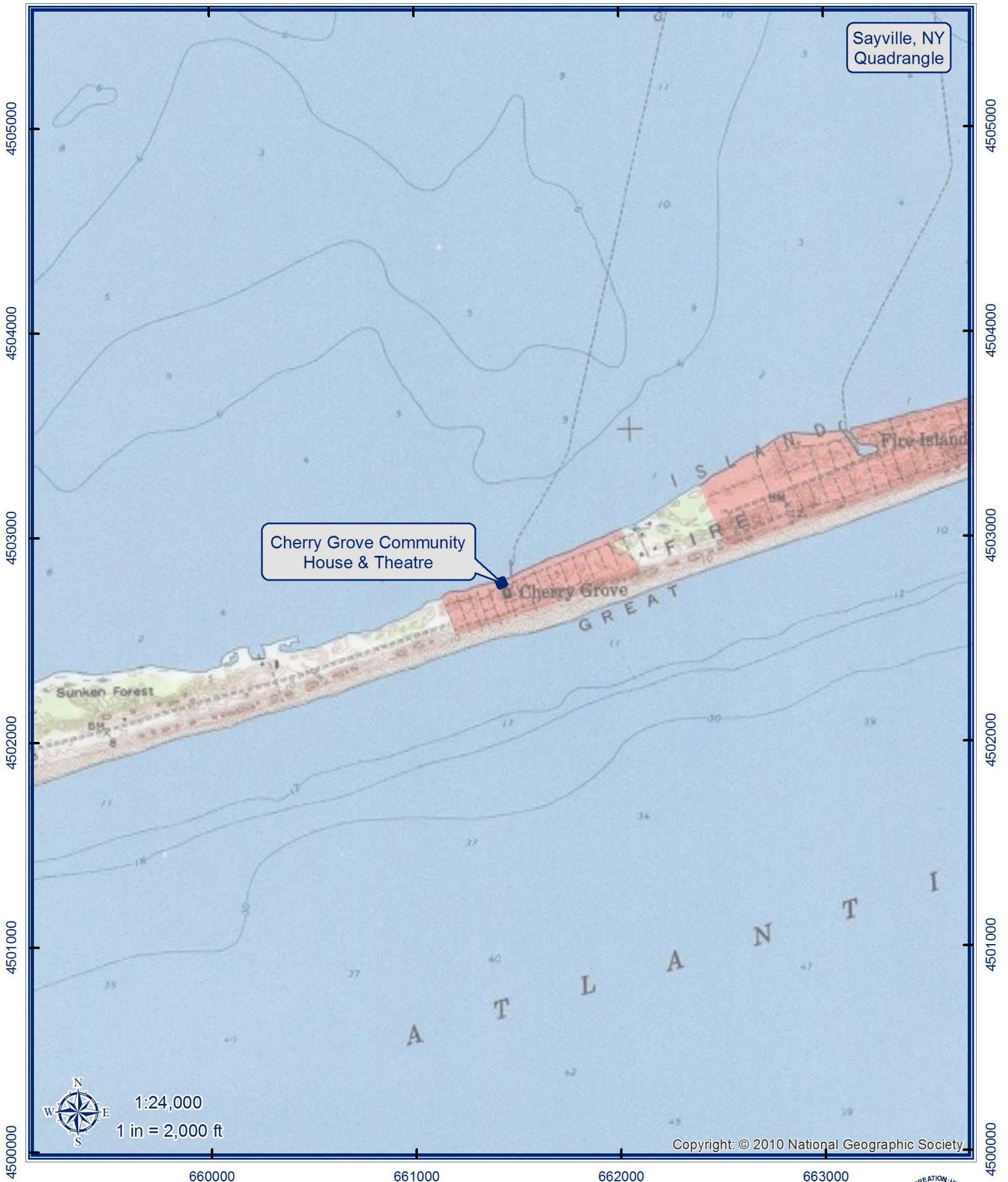


 Community House

Tax Parcel Data:  
Suffolk Co. RPS  
<http://gis.co.suffolk.ny.us>







Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N  
Projection: Transverse Mercator  
Datum: North American 1983  
Units: Meter

0 600 1,200 2,400 Feet

 Community House

Tax Parcel Data:  
Suffolk Co. RPS  
<http://gis.co.suffolk.ny.us>



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National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number     Add info     Page     1    



1.) 1938 Hurricane Aftermath: Duffy's Ocean Front/ George & Elsa Gibson Collection

See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number          Add info Page   2  

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2.) 1938 Hurricane Aftermath: Houses in Great South Bay/George & Elsa Gibson Collection



3.) 1945 Floating Carriage House on Brown's River/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archive

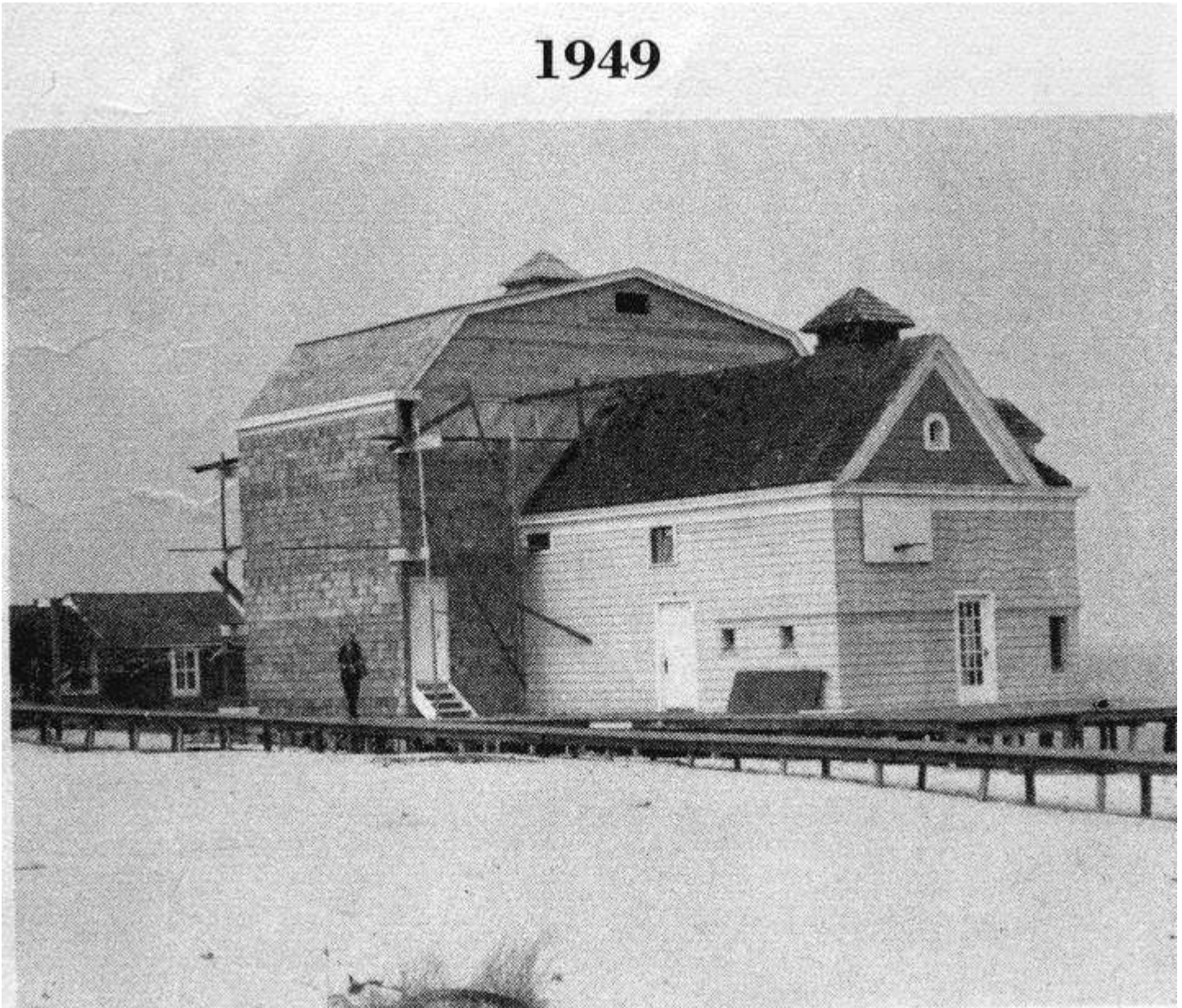
See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number      Add info Page   3  

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4.) 1948-49 Community House & Theater In Construction/APCG 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Journal

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number      Add info      Page   4  



5.) 1949 Community House: Regatta on the Bay/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archives

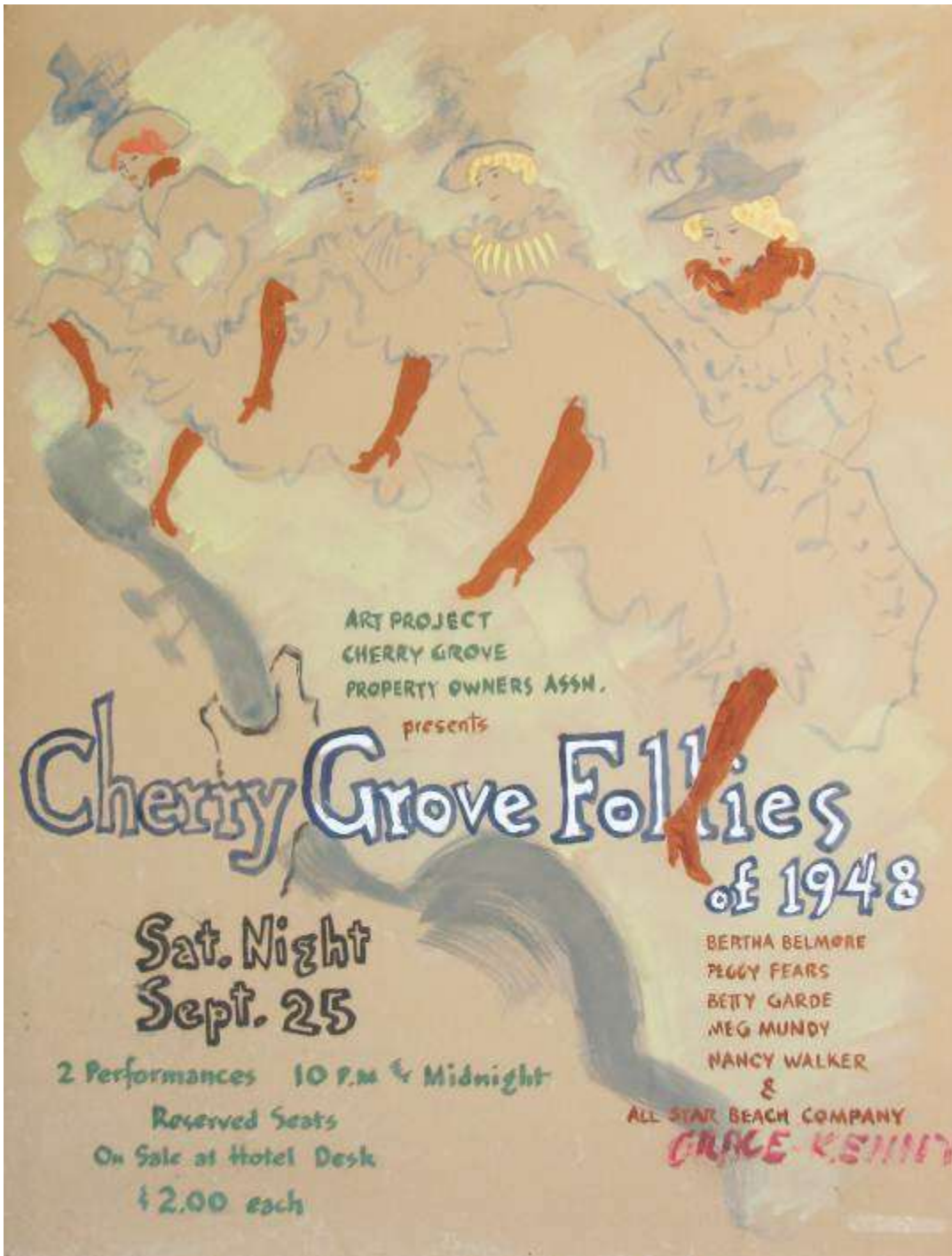
See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number      Add info      Page   5  



6.) 1948 The Cherry Grove Follies of 1948 Original Poster/APCG Archives

See continuation sheet



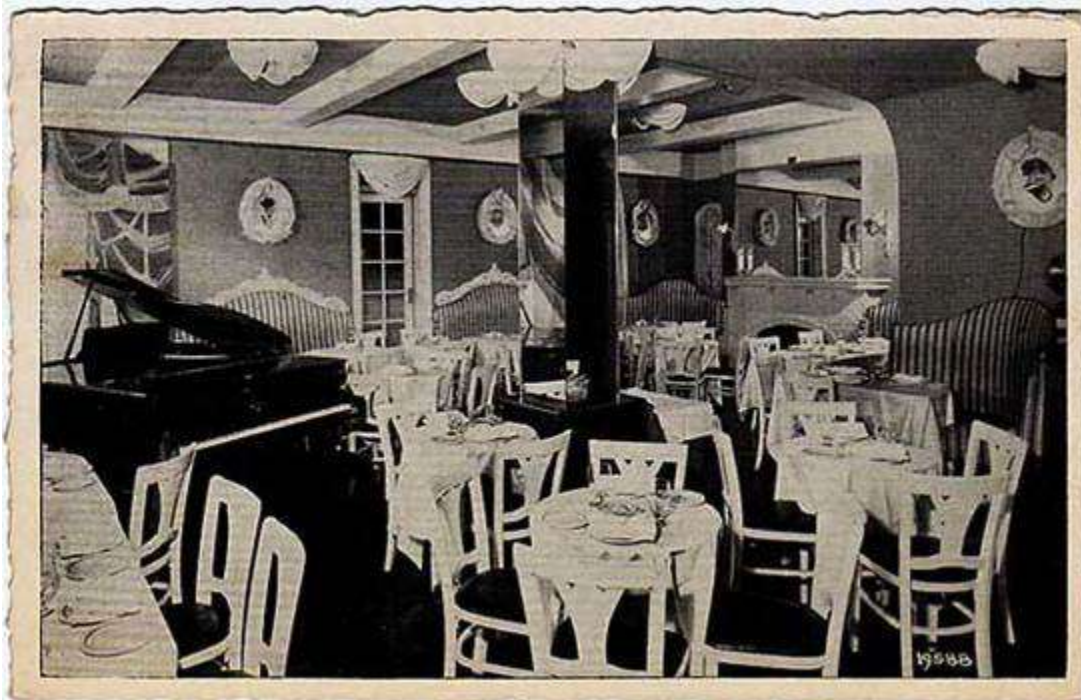
United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number          Add info          Page   6  

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7.) 1948 Follies: "The Girl in the Song"-K. Guinness & N. Ruvell/Gay Nathan & Julie Paradise Collection



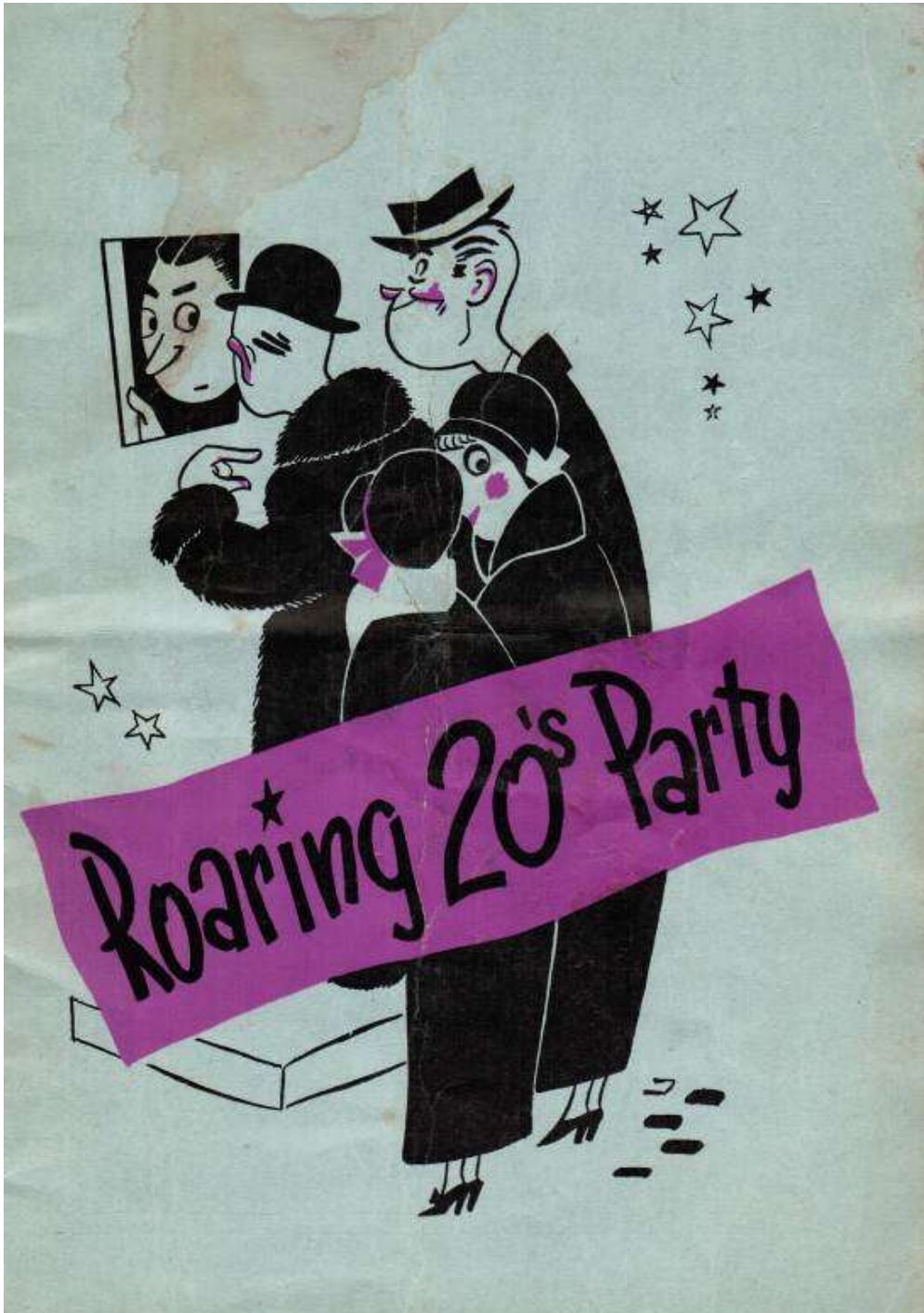
8.) 1948 Spivy's Roof Interior/[www.queermusicheritage.us/oct2000ms.html](http://www.queermusicheritage.us/oct2000ms.html)

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number     Add info     Page     7    



9.) 1948 The Roaring 20's Party Sponsors' Journal/APCG Archive

See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number          Add info Page     8    

---



- 10.) 1948 Halloween Party: George Freedley as Artaud (Camille)/Courtesy The George Freedley Papers, \*T-Mss 2003-052. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts [permissions@nypl.org] & The Richard Avedon Foundation [rights@avedonfoundation.org]

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number      Add info      Page   9  

---



11.) 1949 Community House with Fire Dept Garage/APCG Archive

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number     Add info     Page     10    

---



12.) 1949 The Cherry Grove Follies of 1949/ L to R - E. Burke (Lyrics) & George Freedley (Director)/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archives



13.) 1949 The Cherry Grove Follies of 1949/ Courtesy Lillian Bassman and Paul Himmel, [(c) 2013 Bassman Himmel]

See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number          Add info Page   11  

---



14.) 1949 Follies: "The Most Beautiful Girl"-K. Guinness & Jack Hofflander/APCG Archives



15.) 1949 Follies: "Bon Voyage"-Ensemble/Courtesy Lillian Bassman and Paul Himmel [(c) 2013 Bassman Himmel Studio]

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number     Add info     Page     12    

---



16.) 1949 Follies: "Forty-Five Minutes from Sayville" John Di Iorio & Harriet Erstein/APCG Archives

See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number     Add info     Page     13    

---



17.) 1950 4<sup>th</sup> Little Show (Encores): "Original C.G. Dune Indian"-J. Hofflander/APCG Archives

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number      Add info Page   14  



18.) 1950 Berthe of a Nation: "Dismembering the Wedding"/APCG Archives

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number     Add info     Page     15    

---



19.) 1950 Berthe of a Nation: "Bill Ronin's All-Girl Orchestra"/Patricia Goff Collection

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number      Add info Page   16  



20.) 1950 Berthe of a Nation: "Floradora"/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archives

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number     Add info     Page     17    

---



21.) 1951 First Little Show: "A Real Piano Player-G." Claussen (Helen Traubel) & M. McCorkle (Jimmy Durante)/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archive

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number          Add info          Page   18  

---



22.) Pat's Restaurant with Grove-"Girls" and "Boys" (Exterior)/Gay Nathan & Julie Paradise Collection



23.) Duffy's Hotel Bar Room-K. Guinness and Friends (Interior)/Gay Nathan & Julie Paradise Collection

See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number          Add info          Page   19  



24.) 1949 Carnival at Community House/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archive

See continuation sheet



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number          Add info Page   20  

---



25.) 1953 "This Is A Raided Premise (sic)"/Arts Project of Cherry Grove Archive

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number     Add info     Page     21    

---



26.) 1940 Dune Grass Replenishment/George & Elsa Gibson Collection

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Section number          Add info          Page   22  



27.) 2013 Dressing Room Wall Autographs-“Earl Blackwell” c.1949







CGPOA









**CGPOA**



**NOTICE**  
THIS PROPERTY  
PATROLLED BY  
WATER WATCH SERVICE  
CALL 800-976-0776  
PART #77-1048 (CELL)

















National Register of Historic Places

Archivist note to the record

# Correspondence

The Correspondence consists of communications from (and possibly to) the nominating authority, notes from the staff of the National Register of Historic Places, and/or other material the National Register of Historic Places received associated with the property.

Correspondence may also include information from other sources, drafts of the nomination, letters of support or objection, memorandums, and ephemera which document the efforts to recognize the property.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: NEW YORK, Suffolk

DATE RECEIVED: 4/26/13      DATE OF PENDING LIST: 5/20/13  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 6/04/13      DATE OF 45TH DAY: 6/12/13  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 13000373

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N    DATA PROBLEM: N    LANDSCAPE: N    LESS THAN 50 YEARS: Y  
OTHER: N    PDIL: N    PERIOD: N    PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: Y    SAMPLE: N    SLR DRAFT: N    NATIONAL: Y

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT     RETURN     REJECT    6/4/13 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

*See Attached comments*

RECOM./CRITERIA A

REVIEWER Abernathy      DISCIPLINE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_      DATE \_\_\_\_\_

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.





ARTS PROJECT OF CHERRY GROVE  
P.O. Box 4137, Cherry Grove, N.Y. 11782



**APCG  
Board of  
Directors**

March 31, 2013

**Thom  
(Panzl)  
Hansen  
President**

Mr. J. Paul Loether  
Chief  
National Register of Historic Places  
and National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

**Troy  
Files  
Vice President**

**Eric  
Coyne  
Treasurer**

Dear Mr. Loether:

My name is Thom Hansen, President of the Arts Project of Cherry Grove, Inc., a 501(c)3 charitable organization (the Arts Project), located in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community of Cherry Grove, Fire Island, NY.

**James  
Hughes  
Recording  
Secretary**

The historic Cherry Grove Community House and Theater has recently been approved by New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation for listing in the *NYS Register of Historic Places*. I am requesting the National Register review board's careful consideration, approval, and if deemed eligible, subsequent listing of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater on the *National Register of Historic Places*. The site is only the third LGBT-specific site to be nominated to the *National Register*.

**Ken  
Elliott  
Corresponding  
Secretary**

**Mary  
DiFede  
Director**

As you will discover during your review, the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater's application is a first of its kind to document an entire community's development in the pre-Stonewall era. Also, the post-World War II creation of the 'Art Project' in Cherry Grove, and the theater's 1948-49 addition to the community house, was the direct result of dedicated work by gay and lesbian members of a sub-cultural network from the America Theater of that era. We believe these reasons, among others which you will discover in your review, make the site's application to the *National Register of Historic Places* one of greatest significance to LGBT history, as well as a the timely addition of an new chapter to our Nation's story.

**Anita  
Auricchio  
Director**

**James  
Lyons  
Director**

**Dennis  
McConkey  
Director**

Today the Community House and Theater is a multi-use facility. It is home to the Arts Project's theater and its membership, as well as home to the joint memberships of the Cherry Grove Community Association and the Cherry Grove Property Owners Association. Regular public meetings held in this building address civic issues, such as Dune preservation and Fire Island National Seashore cooperative efforts in preserving the Grove's natural environment. The Arts Project is the proud producer of plays, concerts, art shows and other entertainments for hundreds residents and visitors to Cherry Grove from all across Fire Island, from Long Island and New York City.

**Michael  
Turci  
Director**

**Mathew  
Baney  
Director**

**Kathleen  
Morrone  
Member At  
Large**

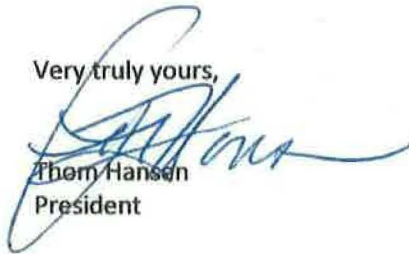


All Cherry Grove community service organizations report their activities at three regular meetings held at the Community House and Theater during the summer season. The building is over 65 years of age and, in addition to taking a battering from sea and salt air, and structural stressing during Hurricane Sandy, the House exhibits wear and tear from much use and love over the decades.

For many of us, the historic Community House and Theater is an iconic symbol of Cherry Grove community life. It's listing on the New York State and National Historic Registers holds the promise of a renewed life and a full restoration of this recognized historic venue. The Arts Project hopes to apply for performing arts and historic preservation grants based upon these listings.

The Arts Project would be very grateful for an affirmative response to the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater's application for listing on the *National Register of Historic Places* if deemed worthy of such recognition by the board of the National Parks Service.

Very truly yours,



Thom Hansen  
President



UNITY IN THE  
COMMUNITY  
SINCE 1948

arts project of cherry grove



**Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities**

161 Main Street, P.O. Box 148, Cold Spring Harbor, NY 11724  
Email: info@splia.org Tel: 631-692-4664 Fax: 631-692-5265

2 April 2013

Ms. Ruth Pierpont, Director  
Division for Historic Preservation  
Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation  
Peebles Island, PO Box 189  
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

Dear Ms. Pierpont

As the regional advocate for historic preservation on Long Island, the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA) enthusiastically supports the listing of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre on the State and National Register of Historic Places.

Located on Fire Island in Brookhaven's beach colony hamlet of Cherry Grove, the Community House and Theater is a critical locus in the history of the gay liberation movement in America. Established in 1944 as the headquarters of the Cherry Grove Property Owners Association, it represents the first civic entity to integrate gay and lesbian interests into governance and social life. It also played a major role in the development of gay performing arts, serving as the first American venue (initiated in 1948 and still in operation) to feature productions by gay people for gay and straight audiences. In both cases, the site provides the first setting for a collective gay identity to appear openly in our nation's history.

In pre-dating the Stonewall Uprising of 1969, the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater captures an earlier chapter in the history of homosexuality in America – one that introduced the possibility of integration, self-affirmation, and social acceptance at a time when members of the gay community were largely forced to stay invisible to the outside world. In this respect, the Cherry Grove site contributes to a greater understanding of civil rights movements as an evolutionary process towards change. As a supporter of expanded historical narratives, SPLIA is pleased to know that "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town" is located on Long Island.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Parsons Wolfe  
Director of Preservation Services

# Columbia University

IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE PLANNING AND PRESERVATION

400 AVERY HALL

Ms. Ruth Pierpont, Director  
Division for Historic Preservation  
Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation  
Peebles Island, PO Box 189  
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

April 3, 2013

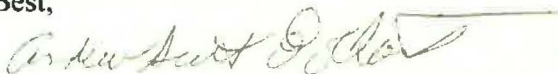
Dear Ms. Pierpont

As the Director of the Historic Preservation Program at the Columbia University School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, as the author of dozens of National Register nomination, and, most particularly, as one of the co-authors of the Stonewall National Register report (the first on a gay and lesbian theme), I want to enthusiastically support the listing of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre on the State and National Registers.

I have read the superb draft nomination for the Cherry Grove site. It is an amazing work of research and analysis that fully supports the historical and cultural significance of the theater and community house to the history of gay and lesbian life in New York State, theater in America, and the development of the unique cultural character of Fire Island.

This is an excellent proposal for National Register listing and I look forward to hearing of its approval by the State Board and its eventual listing on the National Register.

Best,



Andrew Scott Dolkart  
Director, Historic Preservation Program  
James Marston Fitch Associate Professor of  
Historic Preservation  
Columbia University School of Architecture, Planning  
and Preservation





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President

April 15, 2013

Mr. J. Paul Loether  
Chief  
National Register of Historic Places  
and National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

Dear Mr. Loether,

On behalf of the Preservation League of New York State, I write in support of the National Register nomination of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater on Fire Island, New York.

The Cherry Grove Community House and Theater would be the third LGBT site listed on the *National Register of Historic Places* and we believe that its history, and the reflection of that history in the site's architecture, give it national significance. As stated in the National Register nomination, this site is important to our country's social history for its role in shaping the evolution of Cherry Grove, "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town." The theater has continually operated since its first production in 1948, created by gay and lesbian theater artists, as the first "gay theater," which the National Register nomination places in cultural and historical context.

As the statewide historic preservation organization, we have seen the destruction of several sites significant to LGBT history, most recently in Greenwich Village. We applaud the efforts of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater in seeking National Register designation. We strongly support this nomination and ask you to please consider the national significance of this site. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

  
Jay A. DiLorenzo  
President





## New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

Division for Historic Preservation  
P.O. Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189  
518-237-8643



Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor

Rose Harvey  
Commissioner

19 April 2013

Alexis Abernathy  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places  
1201 Eye St. NW, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20005

Re: National Register Nominations

Dear Ms. Abernathy:

I am pleased to enclose four National Register nominations to be considered for listing by the Keeper of the National Register. Three of these are submitted on disc. They are:

Tonawanda Municipal Building, Erie County  
Knights of the Maccabees Hall, Ontario County  
Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre, Suffolk County

The other one is submitted on paper. It is:

The First Baptist Society of Bath, Steuben County

Please feel free to call me at 518.237.8643 x 3261 if you have any questions.

Sincerely:

Kathleen LaFrank  
National Register Coordinator  
New York State Historic Preservation Office

# COUNTY OF SUFFOLK



## OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

**Steven Bellone**  
SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE

**Joanne Minieri**  
Deputy County Executive and Commissioner

**Department of**  
**Economic Development and Planning**

April 22, 2013

National Register of Historic Places  
and National Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001  
Attn: Mr. J. Paul Loether, Chief

Dear Mr. Loether:

I am pleased to write this letter of support on behalf of the Community House and Theater, Cherry Grove, Fire Island, New York. The historic Community House and Theater is a much beloved symbol of the LGBT community and now is recognized for its great contribution to America's pre-Stonewall civil rights evolution, as well as for its historic connect to American theater and performance arts.

The Community House's theater has been in continual operation since its inaugural production in 1948. The Association's Art Project Committee facilitated what can be described as the first "gay theater," continually produced by gay people, for gay and straight audiences in the United States. The theater is significant for its association with homosexuals' heightened visibility in the performing arts. Examples of moments associated with GLBT history in the performing arts have been widely documented by scholars.

I ask you to look favorably upon the application and nomination submitted by the Cherry Grove Community Association. Historic community buildings, neighborhoods, and landscapes alike embody the intentions, assumptions, and lives of those who built or lived or worked in them. They have stories to tell about what the community was and how it became what it is, and that helps us understand who we are. Preserving those stories is an important part of building and maintaining community.

I ask you to find this institution's application and nomination worthy of listing on the National Registry.

Sincerely,

Joanne Minieri  
Deputy County Executive and Commissioner

cc: Diane Romano, President  
Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc.





# Town of Brookhaven Long Island



**Edward P. Romaine**, Supervisor

22 April 2013

Mr. J. Paul Loether, Chief  
National Register of Historic Places  
and National Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

Dear Mr. Loether:

It is with great honor that I write to support the nomination of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater, Fire Island, NY to the National Register of Historic Places. The compiled research on the structure shows its significance to the community of Cherry Grove, the Town of Brookhaven, and the social importance it played in the development of "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town". I hope that you will consider the application with the utmost importance that it deserves.

If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

  
Barbara M. Russell

**Office of the Town Historian**

One Independence Hill • Farmingville • NY 11738 • Phone (631) 451-8038 • Fax (631) 451-8039

[www.brookhaven.org](http://www.brookhaven.org)

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Town of Brookhaven  
Long Island

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ZIP 11738  
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Mr. J. Paul Loether, Chief  
National Register of Historic Places  
and National Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

20240\$0001





# Town of Brookhaven Long Island



**Edward P. Romaine**, Supervisor

April 17, 2013

Mr. J. Paul Loether, Chief  
National Register of Historic Places and  
National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

Dear Mr. Loether:

It has recently been brought to my attention that the historic Cherry Grove Community House and Theater has been approved by New York State Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation for listing in the NYS Register of Historic Places.

As the Supervisor of the Town of Brookhaven, I support the approval and listing of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater on the National Register of Historic Places.

The historic Community House and Theater is an iconic symbol of the Cherry Grove community life. It's listing on the New York State and National Registers holds the promise of a renewed life and full restoration of this recognized historic venue.

Thank you for your consideration in this sensitive matter.

Sincerely,

Edward P. Romaine  
Town Supervisor

EPR: md  
cc: Cherry Grove Community Association

**Office of the Supervisor**

One Independence Hill • Farmingville • NY 11738 • Phone (631) 451-9100 • Fax (631) 451-6677  
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Town of Brookhaven  
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Mr. J. Paul Loether, Chief  
National Register of Historic Places and  
National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

*Em. 3/28*

20240\$0001



KIRSTEN E. GILLIBRAND

NEW YORK  
SENATOR

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WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205  
202-224-4451

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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

May 9, 2013

Mr. J. Paul Loether  
Chief  
National Register of Historic Places and  
National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001



Dear Chief Loether,

I write in support of the candidacy of Cherry Grove Community House and Theatre on Fire Island, New York for placement on the National Register of Historic Places. This historic site provided one of the first settings for a collective gay identity to openly appear in our nation's history.

Located on Fire Island in Brookhaven's beach colony hamlet of Cherry Grove, the Community House and Theater played a critical role in the history of the gay liberation movement in America. Established in 1948 as the headquarters of the Cherry Grove Property Owners Association, it represents the first civic entity to integrate gay and lesbian interests into governance and social life. It also played a major role in the development of gay performing arts, serving as the first American venue, initiated in 1948 and still in operation, to feature productions by gay people for gay and straight audiences.

At the time of the Community House and Theater's establishment, no civil rights organization dedicated to the advocacy of LGBT rights existed in the United States. The Cherry Grove site contributes to a greater understanding of civil rights movements as an evolutionary process towards change and represents a rare and exceptionally significant chapter in the struggle for gay and lesbian civil rights in the United States.

I ask that you please give this your full consideration. If you have any questions, or desire further information, please do not hesitate to contact my staff member Andrew Usyk at (202) 224-4451.

Sincerely,

Kirsten E. Gillibrand  
United States Senator

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

*Kristen E. Gillibrand*  
U.S.S.

PRSR T STD

Mr. J. Paul Loether  
Chief  
National Register of Historic Places and  
National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, NW 2280  
Washington, DC 20240-0001



DFS-TPI-20240



1 May, 2013

Dear Mr. Loether,



I write to you to extend, in the strongest possible terms, my support for the approval and listing of the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater on the National Register of Historic Places.

As a nationally-known biographer, I have, in *THE TALENTED MISS HIGHSMITH*, written about the highly creative mid-century women and men responsible for the Cherry Grove projects. As an internationally-produced playwright, I've been sustained by the New Dramatists organization in New York: an organization for playwrights founded in the middle of the twentieth century by some of the people responsible for creating the Cherry Grove venue which we now seek to commemorate.

In short, I have had both scholarly and theatrical opportunities to explore the long-lasting importance of what the women and men in Cherry Grove -- marginalized, it goes without saying, because of their sexual orientations -- and their historic venue have contributed to the histories of both American theatre and American culture.

With a listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Cherry Grove venue can be better protected and fully restored; its crucial legacy of performance -- so important to the history of arts in America -- will be

sustained and developed. It will have a wonderful future as well as a glorious past.

Thank you in advance, Mr. Loether, for giving your serious attention to this matter.

Sincerely yours,

*Joan Schenkar*

Joan Schenkar  
29 Cornelia St. #6  
New York, NY 10014

36 rue St-Sulpice  
75006 Paris, FRANCE

[JMSchenkar@aol.com](mailto:JMSchenkar@aol.com)

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Mr. J. Paul LOETHER, Chief  
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