

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Why Are Shelter Island's Historic and Cultural Resources Important?

Before the first European settlers arrived in the 1600s, Shelter Island was home to the Manhansett tribe, who called it *Manhansack Aha Quash A Womak*, or “Island Sheltered by Islands.” In 1638, James Farrett, an agent for the Earl of Sterling, who had been granted the island by King James I, negotiated with the Manhansetts to “purchase” the island, and sold it three years later to Stephen Goodyear. In 1651, a group of Barbados sugar merchants bought the island for 1,600 pounds of Sugar. In 1651, one of their number, Nathaniel Sylvester, settled on the island and established a plantation to grow food for the sugar plantations of Barbados. Sylvester Manor remained in the same family for the next 350 years, even as the rest of the island grew and evolved into a diversified agricultural and fishing settlement. After the Civil War, Shelter Island started changing again. The Methodist's Shelter Island Grove and Camp Meeting Association, established in 1871, sparked the growth over subsequent decades of a vibrant resort community that continues to transform the island every summer. After World War II, change continued on the island in the form of residential subdivisions and individual homes lining the waterfront. Since then we have had relatively steady [increases in population](#) with the exception of the year following 9/11 and the most recent COVID pandemic, which were [both](#) periods of expedited [influx](#) and development.

Each of these eras left its mark on the island, and many historic homes and other features have been preserved and maintained by generations of Islanders. The value of these resources is most obvious in recognized historic sites like Shelter Island heights and Sylvester Manor, but may be found throughout the Island, where each neighborhood forms a unique composition of landscape, water and buildings. The result is an exceptional level of scenic beauty and a rich sense of place.



The James Haven Homestead, built in 1743, is now headquarters for the Shelter Island Historical Society (Source: SIHS)

Preserving these resources in the face of ongoing social, economic, and environmental change is one of the key challenges in perpetuating the unique character of the island for future generations.

What Historic Sites Have Been Documented on Shelter Island?

Shelter Island has ten sites that have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Eight of these are considered to have local significance, while the Sylvester Manor Windmill is of Statewide Significance and Sylvester Manor is of National Significance.

Camp Quinipet, a Methodist camp and retreat center founded in 1922, which was added to the Register in 2005. The camp includes 19 buildings constructed between 1830 and 1965, of which 13 are considered “contributing buildings.” The gazebo and “Kissing Rock” on the grounds of the Camp are both Island landmarks. The grounds themselves reflect the origin of the five massive glacial boulders that give the camp its name.

The James Haven Homestead, built in 1743 and expanded in the mid- 19th Century, is the second oldest house on the Island. Expanded in 2019, it is now home to the Shelter Island Historical Society. It was added to the Register in 1986. **Manhanset Chapel**, also known as Mechanics’ Hall, was originally built on the grounds of the Manhanset House Hotel in 1890 and moved to its current site in 1924. It was added to the Register in 1997 and was recently renovated as a community arts space.

Shelter Island Country Club, listed in 2009, is a golf course and club house established in 1909 to serve summer visitors to the Island. Now owned by the Town, the course is managed by a non-profit. The porch provides an unparalleled view across Dering Harbor to the Atlantic.

Shelter Island Heights Historic District, listed in 1993, which include 141 contributing buildings and one contributing structure. The Heights was laid out in 1872 and is considered “a beautiful example of the picturesque, naturalistic landscape and romantic rural residential areas created by the first generation of American landscape architects.” It was laid out by Robert Morris Copeland for the Shelter Island Grove and Camp Meeting Association of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Shelter Island Windmill, listed in 1978, was constructed in 1810, moved to the island in 1840, and moved to Sylvester manor in 1926. The Sylvester Manor Educational Farm is in the process of restoring the mill with the aim of once again grinding grain grown on the Island.

The Smith-Ransome Japanese Bridge, listed in 2018, designed by Ernest Ransome in 1905 for the “Borax King” Francis Marion Smith’s Estate. It represents an unusual use of reinforced concrete to implement a Japanese-inspired design. While the bridge is still used, a non-profit conservancy has been collecting donations and making plans for its restoration, which will begin with repair of concrete abutments and balustrades.

Smith-Taylor Cabin, listed in 2007, an Adirondack-style log cabin built on Taylor’s Island around 1900, also by Francis Marion Smith.



Smith-Taylor Cabin, Taylor Island (Source: Mary Ellen)

Sylvester Manor, established in 1651 as a provisioning plantation for the Barbadian sugar trade. The property has been in the same family ever since, and includes the 1735 Manor House, the 1810 windmill, and 235 acres of fields, forests, gardens, and wetlands. Over the past decade the family donated the Manor to the Sylvester Manor Educational Farm, which is dedicated to interpreting its history while bringing sustainable agricultural practices back to Shelter Island. The Manor was added to the National Register in 2015.

Union Chapel, listed in 1984, is a historic Methodist chapel within the Shelter Island Heights historic district. Built in 1875, it is considered the most important extant structure associated with the original camp Meeting Association, established in 1872. An important feature is the extraordinary windows by Walter Brigham Cole.



Union Chapel

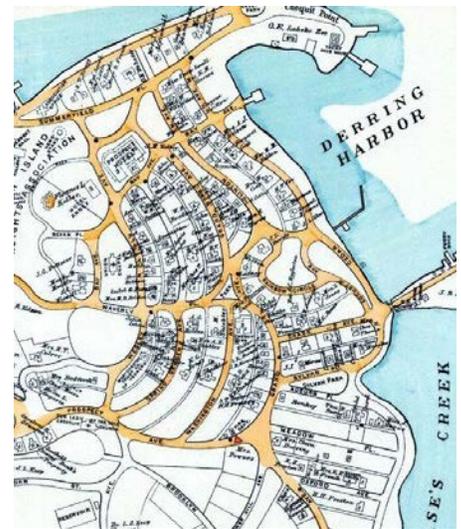
What Other Historic Resources Are Present on the Island?

Data from the NY Cultural Resource Information System show additional structures that are potentially eligible for listing on the State and Federal Registers of Historic Places but have not been fully documented and nominated. These include the Police Station and the Justice Hall. In addition, NYCRIS shows properties listed as “undetermined.” This includes more than 100 properties that have been identified as potentially important due to age of construction, architectural value or historic interest, but have not yet documented. Many other properties remain to be evaluated, ranging from the gracious homes surrounding Dering Harbor to more modest homes and summer cottages found throughout the Island - many of which are threatened by demolition to make way for larger new houses.

What Do We Know About the Island’s Archaeological Resources?

The entire island is considered an Archaeologically Sensitive Area by the State Historic Preservation Office, and Phase I Archaeological Investigations have been carried out on 11 properties according to NYCRIS. From 1999- 2005, The University of Massachusetts Boston held an archaeological field school on the Sylvester manor property exploring the three cultures on the plantation in the 1600s. Over 1 million specimens from this dig are housed at the Fiske Center at UMass Boston. After the formation of the Sylvester Manor Educational Farm, UMass has continued to be involved in digs on the site. Archaeological studies have also been carried out on the Mashomack preserve by scientists from the University of California.

“Avocational Archaeology” is an important part of preserving and sharing the story of the Island. The Shelter Island Historical Society recently mounted an exhibit by local collector and artist John Pagliaro entitled “Witness the Manhansett.” The project features a collection of more than 2,000 arrowheads, spear points and other stone tools collected on Island beaches - some thought to date back some 9,500 years.



Shelter Island Heights, as shown in a 1916 County Atlas, embodies the romantic ideals of 19th century landscape architecture and is a unique artifact of that time period..

Is Shelter Island's Landscape Considered Historic?

While homes, churches and other structures are often the focus of historic preservation efforts, the land surrounding and connecting those buildings - the cultural landscape - is often equally significant. The National Park Service defines cultural landscapes as including both historic sites and historic designed landscapes (such as parks, gardens and estates), as well as the common vernacular landscapes that emerge from human activities such as agriculture, fishing, commerce and industry. Even though these vernacular landscapes were not designed, per se, they often are among the most beautiful—think of a harbor, a farm valley, a lighthouse, or a fishing village.

On Shelter Island, several of the National Register properties incorporate a larger district that combines historic buildings with an important cultural landscape, including Shelter Island Heights and Sylvester Manor. Others, including the Shelter Island Country Club and the Smith-Ransome Japanese Bridge represent historic landscapes designed for a particular purpose. There is a wealth of other landscapes around the island that fall into the category of vernacular cultural landscapes. These include farms, historic roads and trails, hunting grounds, harbors, docks and other sites associated with the natural resource-based economy of farming, hunting, fishing, and the processing, storage and shipping of the resulting products.

As this planning process moves forward, participants will work on mapping and describing the cultural landscapes that embody the Island's history – including summer colony neighborhoods, farms, harbors, beaches, perhaps even mid-century subdivisions – and talk about how to preserve what makes them special.

How Can We Protect the Island's Visual Character and Sense of Place?

One of the reasons that cultural landscapes are important is that they represent the lion's share of what residents and visitors actually experience on the island. When people talk about sense of place it rarely is embodied in a single structure or feature. Rather it emerges from the larger experience of moving through and experiencing the landscape. Walking from one's home down a quiet, tree-shaded walkway to the edge of the harbor; exploring the winding streets of an older neighborhood; hearing the thwack of a tennis racket down the lane; smelling the water and hearing boat shrouds rattling in the harbor – each of these is a cultural landscape experience that couldn't happen the same way in another place.



A scenic view (Source: Mary Ellen McGayhey)

Of course, sense of place is also tied to the social and economic character of the community, its institutions and traditions – as described elsewhere in this report – but can those traditions continue if the historic landscape from which they emerged is lost? At what point will that happen, and what can we do about it?

What Are the Island's Cultural Institutions Doing to Preserve and Celebrate Its History?

Shelter Island has several well-known institutions that are working to preserve and share its history and culture. Each also sponsors a rich program of cultural activities and events that contribute to the fabric of the community (please also see section on *Community Institutions & Quality of Life*).

Shelter Island Historical Society

- Functions as the Town's historical repository, with an archive of more than 100,000 documents dating back to the 1600's.
- Maintains genealogies, correspondence, and over 200 maps dating from the 1700s - including land- marks, colonial and Native American grave sites; records and maps from the Suffolk County Archaeological Association; maps and records from the Town Graves Committee; and proceedings from the Inter-Tribal Task Force.
- Produces programs such as *Voices from the Vault* and *Living History* that provide narrative and/or video accounts of key periods in Shelter Island History.



Wind mill and crops at Sylvester Manor Educational Farm (Source: Chris Tehan)

Sylvester Manor Educational Farm

- Recently completed a detailed cultural landscape report to guide preservation and interpretation of the property.
- Explores the history of three cultures: Indigenous peoples, Enslaved Africans and Europeans.
- Supports UMass Archaeological field school to explore the three cultures on the plantation in the 1600s.
- Maintains and restores historic manor house, wind-mill, gardens and other features.
- Hosts field trips and summer youth programs that educate children about farming, music and history.
- Preserves and celebrates Shelter Island's agricultural roots through preservation of farmland, diverse crop cultivation, a farm stand, and a 150-member Community Supported Agriculture farm (CSA).

Mashomack Preserve

- Prepared 3-volume Natural and Cultural Resource Assessment for the entire property.
- Preserves and reuses historic buildings.
- Welcomes 40,000 visitors every year and provides
- education on the history of the site and the
- changing landscape of the Island.

Taylor Island Foundation

- Formed non-profit Foundation in 2006 to assist the Town with fundraising for restoration and preservation of the Smith-Taylor Cabin.
- Led restoration of the Smith-Taylor Cabin from 2011-2014.
- Assisted with replacement of bulkheads.
- Shares the history of Taylor's Island through do- cent-led tours of the Smith-Taylor Cabin for individuals, families and groups, including school, library, scouts, and senior citizen's association.



Taylor's Island (Source: Mary Ellen McGayhey)

Summary Findings

- Shelter Island's rich historic and cultural landscape - including ten sites and districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places - makes for a unique sense of place.
- Together with several major historical and cultural institutions, these resources attract full- and part-time residents as well as visitors from both North and South Forks.
- There are many other historic structures existing throughout the Island, but they are not well-documented.
- Historic and cultural resources are economic engines that support many island businesses, jobs and future economic opportunities.
- The Shelter Island Historical Society maintains an extensive collection of artifacts and documents at its home at the Shelter Island History

Challenges

- Historic structures can be, and frequently are, torn down and replaced with new homes, and there is nothing in the Town Code to prevent it.
- Documenting and interpreting historic structures and other cultural riches is time-consuming but critically important.
- The historic value of viewsheds, farms and the cultural landscape is recognized but not well-documented – though Sylvester Manor is showing the way.
- The importance of historic and cultural resources to sense of place and tourism is not widely understood.
- The Covid Pandemic has underlined the need to help the Island's cultural institutions become more economically self-sufficient.

Goals & Objectives:

A basic goal is the preservation of archaeological and cultural resources in order to protect linkages between the Town's history and its present life, in order to improve community self-understanding, to strengthen the sense of community, and to protect Shelter Island's special character/unique identity. A further goal is the protection of the Island's small-town community and way of life, its rural character, and the natural resources. This requires continued matching of land use with the land's natural and visual qualities, and protection of critical visual assets, including scenic views from roads and coastal view corridors.

Action Items:

- 1) Activate and staff the Historical Advisory Commission (5 member) which is outlined in Chapter 77 of S.I Town Code. Under the educational function of the existing commission, inform and educate SI residents about financial benefits available for preservation and maintenance of historical structures (tax credits) (Note: The Shelter Island Historic Society *does not* fulfill this role)

- 2) Explore the possibility of creating a Zone H for the SI Heights National Historic District and appointing an architectural preservation review committee to consult and review proposed changes, modifications, demolitions, and new constructions in the historic district

