

Transcript of Lecture Delivered by
Harrison Hunt
on May 9, 1998
East Hampton and the Civil War

The story of East Hampton's role in the American Civil War may seem an unusual topic for this lecture series celebrating the major events of the Town's history. No battles were fought here, and no events which had their inception here had a decisive effect on the war. There are some peripheral connections with several well-known figures of the war, however, chief among them the Beecher family. The Rev. Lyman Beecher served as pastor of the church here from 1799 until 1809, when he moved to a new charge at Litchfield, Connecticut. There, he and his wife had two children who were to have significant roles in the Civil War: the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, outspoken abolitionist and wartime pastor of Brooklyn's Plymouth Church, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The book's moving depiction of slave life in the South so galvanized Northern public opinion against the institution that Abraham Lincoln, on being introduced to her in 1861, said, "So this is the little lady who started the war."

Other major wartime leaders touched upon locally relate to the Montauk Point Lighthouse. The Light was renovated shortly before the war began, and inside the tower is a plaque installed at that time listing the members of the U. S. Lighthouse Committee in 1860. In a telling reflection of how the war was to split the United States military, the plaque includes two future Union Generals, A. A. Humphreys and Joseph Totten, Confederate General Howell Cobb and Confederate Admiral Raphael Semmes, remembered as commander of the Southern raider *Alabama*.

The real significance of the war to East Hampton lies not in these connections to well-known figures, but in the effect the struggle had on the lives of the everyday people who lived here. The war was one of the watershed events in American history, and affected the men and women of East Hampton just as it did families across the nation. Virtually everyone here would have known someone serving in the Army or Navy and have been touched by the war in many ways. This paper will examine some of these local connections, bringing the events of 135 years ago a little closer to home.

East Hampton during the war was a town of 2,300 souls which had changed very little since the turn of the nineteenth century. The population was homogeneous, with only 140 residents foreign-born. With the exception of Sag Harbor, the town was quite rural. The vast majority of citizens made their livings as farmers or farm laborers, raising wheat, oats, rye, Indian corn and turnips (the potato, later to become a staple crop on Long Island, was not yet widely raised). Many other men made their livings from the sea as baymen, whalers or merchant seamen, and most women worked for themselves or others keeping house, according to the 1865 New York State census abstract.

Traditionally, the Town voted for the Democratic Party, to the extent that, in 1860, the editor of the *Sag Harbor Express* wrote that "years ago, scarcely a vote was cast except a Democratic one, and we are credibly informed that the time has been when a unanimous Democratic vote would be polled." However, by the time of the Presidential election in November of 1860 the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln had made significant inroads in the Democratic bastion of East Hampton. The reasons behind this are unclear, but judging from the rest of Eastern Suffolk they probably have less to do with a deep-seated anti-slavery feeling among the

voters of East Hampton than their belief that the South was getting more than its fair share of power under the Democratic Party and that it was time for a change.

The Republicans of the area took up the challenge with enthusiasm in 1860, organizing Lincoln and Hamlin clubs in several locations and holding rallies and processions in Sag Harbor and Amagansett in early November -- rallies which far outstripped one held by local Democrats in Sag Harbor in October, if the editor of the Express is to be believed (he was, after all, a Lincoln man). Mary Mulford Miller described one of the local electioneering sessions in her autobiographical book *An East Hampton Childhood*: I remember a meeting at the church just before Lincoln's election. ... A row of us school girls sat across the middle of the church, and if anything was said against Abe Lincoln we would hiss. We must have disturbed the speaker more than we anticipated. Suddenly he stopped speaking and looked down on us and said, 'The hissing of geese once saved Rome, but the hissing of these East Hampton geese will never elect Abraham Lincoln president.'

When the votes were counted, East Hampton had gone for Lincoln by 26 votes, and Sag for Lincoln by six. "For the first time the Town of East Hampton has given a majority against the Democratic ticket," the editor of the Express crowed on November 15th. "We have carried the Town by a majority of Twenty-six.... Who says the world don't move?" A few days after their victory, area Republicans celebrated their triumph with a "grand jollification" in Sag Harbor. Mary Mulford Miller recalled the excitement of the moment:

Of course when Lincoln was elected president we were all jubilant, girls and boys.... Zebulon Field, a gentle soul who went everywhere with us and was treated as a sort of court jester, used to sing a rhyme in those days which ran like this,

'Solomon they say was a man of great sense
But Uncle Abraham, he could build a rail fence,
And we're hoping he'll build it so high and so stout
Neither traitor nor rebel won't never get out!'

Following Lincoln's election, Southern states started to secede from the Union and events started the course which led to the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, beginning the War Between the States. Local reaction was swift and, unlike that on some other parts of Long Island, decidedly pro-Union. "When the war came there was no division of feeling," Mary Mulford Miller chronicled. "Everyone was for the North" To show its loyalty, East Hampton organized a rally on May 17 at which a liberty pole -- a large flagpole -- was raised in the middle of the street in front of Nathaniel Huntting's house. Four days later, crowds gathered there for the first raising of the flag to speeches by the Rev. Stephen Mershon, John Wallace and Lawton Parsons. Sag Harbor, too, showed its support for the Union with a liberty pole raising and rally in early May. An American flag was also placed at the top of the steeple of the Whaler's Church, which was the charge of one of Sag's most outspoken Unionists, the Rev. Edward Hopper. Hopper, now most widely remembered as the author of the sailor's hymn, "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me," quickly wrote a song in support of the Union entitled "The Old Flag" and sung to the tune "America":

Flag of the Brave and Free
Flag of Our Liberty
Of Thee we sing!

Flag of our father's pride;
With their pure heart's-blood dyed.
When fighting side by side
Our pledge we bring!
... We love each tattered rag
Of that old war-rent flag
Of Liberty!
Flag of great Washington!
Flag of brave Anderson!
Flag of each mother's son
Who dare be free!

The Anderson referred to was Maj. Robert Anderson, commander of the Union garrison at Sumter. As often happens in wartime, there was a little panic. Jeanette Rattray, in *Montauk: Three Centuries of Romance, Sport and Adventure*, quotes a reminiscence by Thomas Edwards of East Hampton that "when Fort Sumter was fired upon ... a man came here selling maps, who was suspected of being a Southerner and a spy. It was said he was down to Fort Pond Bay, Montauk, looking up a landing place for the rebels, so they might march straight through to New York. We children imagined how they would look marching through Pantigo...."

As mentioned previously, not all of Long Island was enthusiastic in its support of the war. According to Everett Rattray's book *The South Fork*, Southern sympathizers were found as close to East Hampton as Sagaponack, "just ... over the line in Southampton Town." "Some of its Democrats were said to have flown the Stars and Bars during the late Rebellion," he recorded, "although then as now Washington hardly trembled when Sagaponack grumbled." And while East Hampton residents were solidly in support of the war, some former locals were not. Most notable of these was Julia Gardiner Tyler, the Gardiner's Island native who was married to former United States President John Tyler, a Virginian. She supported the South during the war and, as a result, was unable to inherit from her mother's estate upon the lady's death during the war. Perhaps the most unusual example of a local person siding with the South was that of John H. Hobart, a former resident of Sag Harbor who had moved South. Hobart wrote the editor of the *Sag Harbor Corrector* from Vicksburg, Mississippi on May 11, 1861, to cancel his subscription, telling the publisher to "keep your infamous abolition newspaper at home. You ... can go to Hell. I belong to the Mississippi 7th Regiment and shall be most happy to meet men who [support your anti-Southern sentiments] on the Battle Field."

Many of the young men of East Hampton were more than willing to take up Mr. Hobart's challenge. Although the numbers who served in the Army and Navy are not fully documented, it appears that around 150 of approximately 400 men of service age in East Hampton did their part during the war. Following the attack on Fort Sumter, several enlisted for 90 days service in the 13th and 71st New York Militia Regiments, in the widely-held but naive belief that the war would be over and done with in that time. Following the rude awakening the nation got at the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, the Army quickly began recruiting new regiments to serve for three years or the duration. These regiments were organized under state aegis, and East Hampton boys served in several. Most significant locally was the 81st New York Infantry. Although largely raised upstate in Oswego County, its command had been assigned to Col. Edwin Rose of Bridgehampton, a former regular Army officer. A number of recruits from the South Fork decided to enlist under his command, forming Company H of his regiment. Among them were 16 men

from East Hampton and 35 from Sag Harbor. One, Lt. James Wallace Burke, sent a series of letters to the Sag Harbor Express under the byline "Wallace" detailing his experiences; his wartime diary was subsequently printed by the same newspaper ninety years later, in 1951. In it, he summed up the local recruits' view of Army service, typical of that throughout the Union at that early stage of the war: "we ... consoled ourselves with the reflections that we had left our excellent homes for a great purpose, had enlisted in service of our beloved country and in that service might expect to see hardships before unknown, and endure trials as yet unthought of." Burke and the boys of Co. H underwent a typical training at camps in New York and Virginia before going off to their baptism of fire during the Peninsular Campaign in Virginia in the spring of 1862. Following this, they had a fairly quiet time of things until June of 1864, when many, including Lieutenant Burke, were killed at the Battle of Col Harbor, Virginia. After this battle, the regiment was engaged in the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, until the end of the war.

The largest number of area residents volunteered to serve in "The Monitors" -- the 127th Regiment, New York Infantry, which was almost entirely raised on Long Island. Some 33 men from East Hampton and 30 from Sag enlisted in Companies G and K of this regiment. The unit was mustered into service in 1862 and spent most of its time on occupation duty in South Carolina -- not a bad billet. The members of the Monitors were particularly proud that, at the end of the war, they took part in the ceremonies at Fort Sumter when the American flag was once again raised over the place where the war began.

Other local men served in a variety of different units. Eleven joined the 11th New York Cavalry; nine, including Capt. Henry Garagher of Sag Harbor, enlisted in the 48th New York Infantry; and 16 young churchgoers from Amagansett followed their pastor, the Rev. Alanson Haines, when he signed up as chaplain of the 15th New Jersey Infantry.

All of the units mentioned above were white regiments, as the Army did not permit African-Americans to serve until 1863. When segregated "Colored Troops" were finally allowed that year, several local African-Americans and Native Americans enlisted, among them the Montauk Stephen Pharaoh, who served in the 29th Connecticut Regiment, and Shinnecocks Warren Cuffee (20th U.S. Colored Regiment) and Stephen Cuffee (14th Rhode Island Artillery). Significantly, due to tribal intermarriage with African-Americans, Shinnecock and Montauk men were forced to serve in Colored units, while members of upstate tribes such as the Senecas were allowed in white regiments.

Even in the Colored regiments, African-Americans were not allowed to serve as officers until the very end of the war, so the units had white officers. One Sag resident, George Sherman, transferred from the 81st Regiment to become an officer in the 7th U.S. Colored Infantry, finishing his tour of duty as a major. As befits an area with such a rich maritime history, there were a good number of local men in the Navy and Revenue Service (the forerunner of the Coast Guard). In 1861, 46 men volunteered to serve on the Revenue Cutter Crawford in the Port of Sag Harbor, and the following year more signed up for duty on the Cutter Agassiz, which was headquartered at the Long Wharf. Some 20 East Hampton tars and 21 more from Sag Harbor enlisted in the Navy during the war as well. Most notable among them was Oscar Stanton, a career Navy officer who finished his service years after the war as a Rear Admiral.

In addition to Naval service, local sailors did their part in the war effort by serving on civilian troop transports and the merchant ships which were essential to the Union's supply lines. Among these was the

steamer Massachusetts of Sag Harbor, which was chartered by the U.S. government in 1861 to carry troops and supplies between Fortress Monroe, Virginia and Annapolis, Maryland. Still other able-bodied seamen from the area took part in an historic effort to block Charleston, South Carolina, to Southern shipping. In December 1861, the U.S. government bought several old whaling vessels from Sag Harbor and New England, filled them with rocks and had them scuttled in Charleston Harbor. Two Sag Harbor ships, Timor and Emerald, comprised part of this "Stone Fleet." Although the innovative plan worked for a brief time, tides soon cut new new channels into Charleston and the Union abandoned the idea of using Stone Fleets in other Southern harbors.

In many ways, the war at sea hit closer to home than the war on land did for East Hampton area families. Confederate raiders approached as close as 90 miles off Montauk in their relentless pursuit of Northern merchant shipping. Once, the ship Mary Gardiner of Sag narrowly evaded capture by a Rebel ship by raising the British flag on her signal gaff. Whalers were especially attractive targets for the Confederates. The Sag Harbor ship Myra was pursued by the famed Southern raider Alabama off Cuba in 1862, and Jirah Perry, another Sag whaler, avoided capture by the C.S.S. Shenandoah in the Pacific in 1865. The Sag Harbor fleet can even claim a tie to the enemy side: The steamer Borosco, formerly of Sag, became a Confederate blockade runner. She never returned to Long Island, having foundered off the coast of Florida on April 10, 1863.

The effects of the Civil War were felt far beyond its fleets and armies, of course. Throughout the nation, citizens did their part for the war effort. As soon as the hostilities began, women North and South organized Aid Societies to help the soldiers serving their cause. Sag Harbor had a Women's Relief Society raising money for the wounded as early as July 1861. In East Hampton, the Ladies Aid Society succeeded in getting \$324.53 worth of clothing for soldiers in hospitals by February 1862. In the months and years which followed they ran ice cream festivals and other fundraisers to ease the sufferings of the wounded boys in blue. And at least one local woman, Adelaide Renken of Sag Harbor, went beyond mere fundraising to volunteer as a nurse with the 127th New York Volunteers. The war was also felt locally in its effect on supplies. Many consumer goods were scarce, preempted by the government's vast needs or unavailable because of blockades and embargoes. "A shortage of luxuries was felt here, as everywhere," Jeanette Rattray recorded in *Montauk: Three Centuries of Romance, Sport and Adventure*. "Cook books of the 1860s advise that 'clean-chopt meadow hay' from Napeague makes a very acceptable substitute for tea; and old people [in a leftover from Civil War times] still maintain that roasted wheat kernels make very good coffee." In response to the shortage of lightweight cotton, "probably the last flax to be raised and dressed in East Hampton was on the Filer [farm] during the Civil War," according to Mrs. Rattray's book *Up and Down Main Street*.

The most dramatic example of the war's effect on the home front occurred in Sag Harbor in October 1862. During that month, Gen. Charles James of the Rhode Island Militia was testing a new type of rifled cannon he had designed. He had three of these guns set up near Conklin's Point for target practice, and attracted quite an audience whenever he fired them. Unfortunately, on October 16, an explosive projectile got jammed in his largest cannon, and the 24-pound shell exploded while being disarmed. The accident killed General James, two of his staff and a French Army observer. Nine local residents were wounded, including former Sag Harbor artillery officer Philander Jennings, Capt. Jeremiah Hedges and Orlando Bears; Bears later died from his injuries.

As the years went on, the U.S. government had a harder and harder time attracting volunteers for the Army.

Many men who were willing to serve had families to support and feared leaving them destitute if they enlisted. In response, many towns raised funds to offer a cash bounty to enlistees. East Hampton offered up to \$400 to each man who volunteered plus \$3.00 per month to his wife and \$1.00 for each child. By the end of the war, the Town had spent \$35,000 to meet its service quotas.

Not every town was able to meet its quotas, however, and in 1863 the Federal government instituted the draft to get soldiers. The first selection of conscripts in New York, in July 1863, resulted in tremendous draft riots which threatened to spill over onto Long Island. As described in Lisa Donneson's Guide to Sag Harbor Landmarks, when Sag Harbor resident Oliver Wade heard that some anti-draft men had made threats against the African-Americans of Eastville (much of the rioters anger was directed toward Blacks, who they blamed for the war), he took it upon himself to secure rifles and distribute them among the Eastville residents for protection. When word of this leaked out, Wade himself was threatened. Not one to take chances, he had four harpoon guns loaded with iron slugs positioned in his home on Main Street so as to protect it from all angles. Fortunately, no riots occurred locally and within a week life returned to normal.

The year after the draft riots, the men of the North had a more peaceful way to express their opinions about the war: the Presidential election. The campaign of 1864 was essentially a referendum on the war, pitting Abraham Lincoln and his policies against Democratic candidate George McClellan, the former commanding general of Lincoln's army who was ironically running on a platform offering compromise with the South. McClellan was well-known in the area, having vacationed in Sag Harbor and East Hampton in August 1863. Despite his warm reception at that time and the Town's longstanding support for Democrats, when the votes were finally cast in 1864 Lincoln carried East Hampton by the narrow margin of eight votes.

With Lincoln's reelection, the war continued on to a Northern victory, and its surviving soldiers and sailors finally came home. The local men who returned were saluted by their fellow townsmen at a dinner at Sag Harbor's Washington Hall on July 4, 1865. In the years which followed, these proud veterans kept the memory of their service alive by organizing a chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, which was the largest Union veterans' group in the country. The members of the Edwin Rose Post, as it was known, organized Memorial Day parades in Sag Harbor for many years and spearheaded the erection of Sag Harbor's striking Civil War memorial statue, which was dedicated on October 24, 1896. The last of their number in East Hampton, George C. King of Springs, died on April 3, 1928 at the age of 85.