



Walking Through Time: The Boardwalks That Shaped Oak Beach

By: Jim Schappert

As the 19th century faded, Oak Beach began to emerge as a residential summer community. By 1916, there were 250 homes and a handful of resorts that lured both local visitors and salty folks from Brooklyn and Manhattan.

It was literally a place apart. Ocean Parkway would not divide the Bayfront from the oceanfront until 1933; a bridge would not span the Great South Bay until 1955. Summer residents and visitors would have ferried over from Babylon Village, crossed the wind-swept bay and landed finally at Government Dock on the bay side, directly across from the cottages of Oak Island. This dock was the beginning of a boardwalk system that extended south towards what was then called “Oak Island Beach,” an ocean-front shoreline of pristine white sand that absorbed the breakers.

A new community of hardy leaseholders nestled summer shacks into the grassy dunes. And from the Yacht Club to the Lifesaving Station, from the Chapel to the General Store, from VanNostrand’s Pavilion to the Oak Beach Hotel, and from neighbor’s house to neighbor’s house, one would have traveled by boardwalk.

This set-up isn’t very hard to imagine. Today, many of Fire Island’s communities resemble it. It would be hard to imagine Fire Island without its distinctive boardwalks. Perhaps the same can be said of Oak Beach. Boardwalks have always been the connective links that physically and figuratively join the community together, and our boardwalks are undoubtedly an essential part of Oak Beach’s heritage.

Throughout the early years, several entrepreneurs would rely on the boardwalk to offer services to the summer residents. The “Ice Man” (John Arnold), The “Fish Man” (John Tooker), the “Oil Man” (John DeGarmo) all relied on carts and the walkways to ply their trade.

There was the story of Willie Seamen, as remembered by Ed Meade, a former and prominent native of Oak Beach, who wrote a manuscript remembering “the early days.” Meade writes:

Eras I and II were marked by the existence of invaluable life support systems which should not go unmentioned here. For example, outdoor plumbing was serviced by Willie Seamen as he made his midnight rounds with his “covered wagon” – a long two-wheeled cart that contained several cans which were carefully emptied at some mysterious “Indian Burying Ground” up West. No one ever made much effort to discover just where Willie buried his treasure, but as Willie described it, this was the section where bushes and grasses grew in profusion for years to come. Once in a while Willie’s wagon would go off the boardwalk with rather disastrous results for those living near the scene.

Today, many Oak Beach residents still access their homes via boardwalk, and many still enjoy a leisurely stroll down the wooden paths. The boardwalk system offers safe passage for kids, parents pushing strollers, dog walkers, and others glad to be away from the narrow and dangerous Oak Beach Road. The walks still provide emergency personnel the only access to many homes, as well as access for modern day service providers, like oil and gas deliveries, package deliveries, grocery deliveries and the like.

Over the years, some sections of the boardwalk have been removed, breaking the continuous path from the easternmost houses on Oak Beach Road to the Community Center, where the boardwalk ends. In some areas, there are obstructions or missing boards that make travel dangerous. Some have put up gates directly onto the path allowing passage, albeit with an uneasy sense of intrusion. Others have removed the walk entirely to build driveways that dissect the path.

New neighbors move in and see sections missing and may assume that it is optional to have a boardwalk. In fact, it is not. The lease with the Town of Babylon requires that the walks be maintained and free from obstruction. In fact, the boardwalks have been town-owned property since 1909. Oak Beach without its boardwalks would look and feel like something else, something it has never been. What Oak Beach was, and what we still are, is best characterized as a connected beach community, a small and rare part of Long Island that has always relied on one another for survival and fun - a claim clearly revealed in our history as detailed in Tom Morris's book, *Islands of Content*, a history of Oak Beach and Oak Island.

It's long been said that living at the beach is not for everyone. One man's paradise is another man's "*You couldn't pay me.*" There are some people who take stock of all the inconveniences of beach-living and simply conclude it's not worth it. Beach homes do not have modern sewage systems; well-water can look and smell "off"; food shopping seems a world away; phone and internet service are unreliable; bridge traffic can make it impossible to leave on a summer weekend...not to mention the mosquitos. And for some, parking can be inconvenient, especially if your home and your driveway are separated by a boardwalk.

So, what is the allure of living here? The answers are personal and will vary, but one might venture to guess commonalities. The first attraction is simply the water. People don't move to a thin barrier island unless they have an intimate relationship with it. Fisherman, oysterman, clambers, surfers, boaters, swimmers, shore-line admirers...these types tend to do well and to stay here.

An additional lure is romantic in nature. It has to do with the fact that there are few places on Long Island that have retained the spirit and aesthetic from the past the way that the barrier beaches have. This includes the neighborly sense of unity and communion, aided in part by various civic and homeowner associations whose social gatherings bring residents together a few times each year, and where annual meetings ask residents to raise their hands, contribute their opinion and vote to resolve issues. In Oak Beach and Oak Island (another community steeped in boardwalk history), these meetings and events typically happen in the Community Center, the former 19th century U.S. Life Saving Station. From almost anywhere in Oak Beach, it is still possible to walk to this historic building to congregate with your neighbors via the boardwalk, just like the pioneers and those who followed them have done for the past 120 years. If more of the boardwalks disappear or are blocked, this may soon change.

Undoubtedly, nostalgia is selective memory, and the only thing constant is change. Surely many things have changed in Oak Beach over the years. Moses's roads and the automobile itself brought the biggest change, and it seems the reason some have removed sections of the walk is to accommodate convenient parking. This desire is understandable. But how much residents want Oak Beach to modernize - or 'suburbanize' - is an important discussion. What is worth preserving? The more the continuous boardwalk is broken to accommodate automobiles and convenience, the more Oak Beach's past disappears - a past that was filled with hearty "salts" who purposefully avoided unnecessary luxuries in exchange for the uniqueness and community of beach living; and, like Fire Island and Oak Island today, the automobile and convenience were never really welcome guests anyway.

Life on the barrier islands may have been simpler in the past, but not necessarily easier. Today, most realize that Oak Beach's boardwalk system is a charming, if at times, inconvenient relic of our history. A few creative leaseholders have installed hinges on two sections of the walk so that it opens like a drawbridge across their driveway allowing a vehicle or trailer to pass through, albeit with some effort. This seems like a thoughtful compromise that honors the past while

moving forward. For most, especially the ole' timers with a strong appreciation for what came before, the boardwalk represents a major aspect of what makes living in Oak Beach unique and feel that it is worthy of insistent and careful preservation.