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A Summer Place

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As part of our commitment to depict a variety of places in ways strongly felt, we are lucky that Chris Little's professional photographs can describe Fenwick as an insider. His grandfather moved there in 1920; four generations have enjoyed it. Both words and photos reveal a special world, honored and loved, but viewed with a twinkle in his sharp eye.

Fenwick

The tiny community of Fenwick lies on a flat, wind-swept peninsula at the confluence of the Connecticut River and Long Island Sound. It is called Fenwick, a very special summer place of 70 houses, grand old summer mansions, set in stately rows four deep along the sea shore. In the guileless elitism characteristic of the place, these mansions are called "cottages."

Its Place in History

Fenwick was settled in the 1630s after a bloody battle forever reoriented the Pequot Indians. Protected by a Royal Charter, signed by Charles II four years after the death of Oliver Cromwell, the community was named for Colonel George Fenwick, the colony's second governor. Fenwick, a commoner, and his wealthy wife, Lady Fenwick, conceived of their new settlement as a refuge for Puritan lords and ladies. Little, it seems, has changed since.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the movers and shakers of Hartford, CT, 45 miles upriver from Fenwick, built the first cottages as exemplary of what Vincent Scully has called the "shingle style."

And they began the annual summer migration that continues today. Morgan Gardner Bulkeley, the roguish ex-governor of Connecticut, was farsighted enough to realize that such an unusual, ideally situated community would need some political clout to survive the inevitable encroachments. He finessed a new charter through the

Connecticut State Legislature.

The borough of Fenwick was incorporated and remains to this day the smallest governmental entity in the state. The borough has the power to tax and zone and "to prevent vice and immorality; to suppress gambling houses, houses of ill-fame; to license, regulate, or prohibit the manufacture . . . or use of fireworks, torpedoes, gunpowder, petroleum, dynamite, or other explosives . . . to prohibit the crying of newspapers upon the Sabbath . . . to regulate the removal of any inoffensive manure, swill, or nightsoil through the streets of the Borough . . . to prevent cruelty to animals and restrain inhuman sports."

Social Notes

The result of Governor Bulkeley's perspicacity has been a legislated conservatism and a unique form of automobile zoning in Fenwick. With few exceptions the architecture has endured throughout the natural processes of renovation, rebuilding, and even new construction. A tenacious group of residents—descendents of the community's founders—have conserved ample parkland, refusing to sell even at prevailing astronomical rates for land.

Marion Hepburn Grant, the resident historian, has aptly dubbed Fenwick "a Victorian commune." The social fabric of the community is as tightly woven as ever. Intermarriage is the norm; virtually all given names are prefaced by the title "cousin." Cousin June's house is diagonally

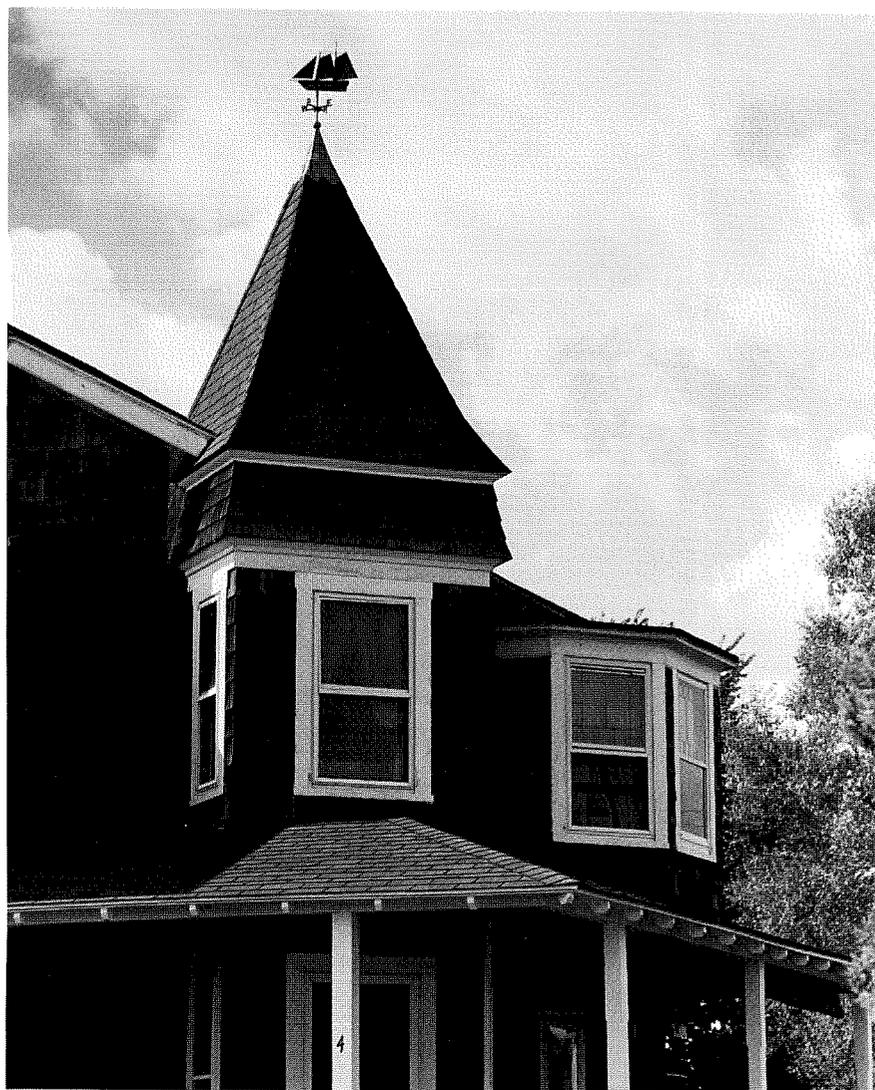
across from cousin Edie's and one door away from cousin Kelso's. If houses are sold they are sold within the family; sometimes people repurchase the very house in which they grew up. Many people move around, but almost nobody leaves.

**Towers and Shingles:
The Cottages**

On the hottest, stillest summer days of my childhood, when the yacht club's burgee drooped and the Sound was becalmed, I cannot ever remember being hot inside a Fenwick cottage. Protected by deep porches, cavernous attics, and ample crawlways, which permit a constant flow of air (as well as the high waters of occasional hurricanes), these houses enjoy natural air-conditioning.

The cottages were built on a loosely flowing, asymmetrical plan that mimics the seaside their neighbor. From the deeply sheltering porches to the chateau towers (for example: The Francis Cottage) and Colonial gables, there is an explosion of diagonals intercepted by a thrusting chimney and mitigated by the continuous texture of the shingle sheathing.

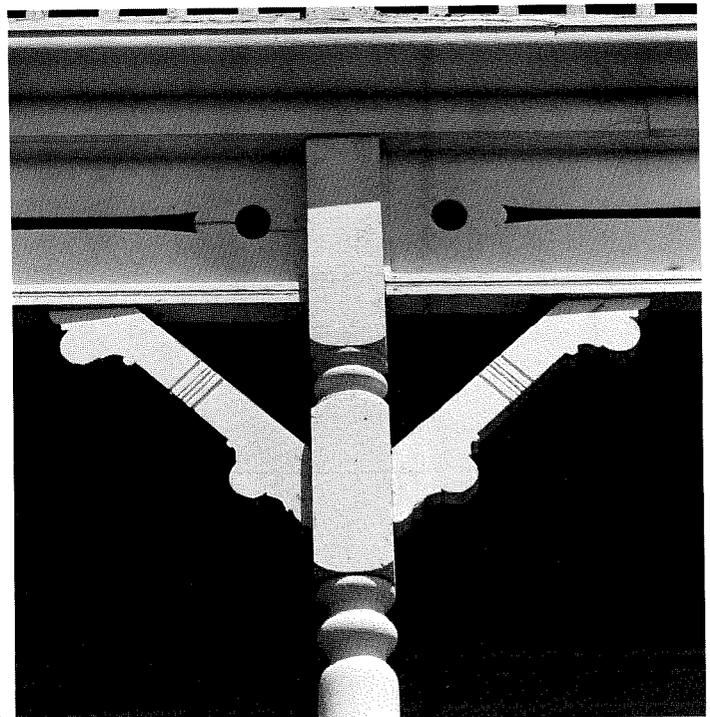
Imagine sitting on a westward porch with a drink in hand, looking at the huge orange sun touching the tops of the pine trees and being cooled by an on-shore breeze. The day-sailors on a broad reach are funnelling into the mouth of the river. And the little ones shriek delightedly as they play kick the can.



I The Francis Cottage.



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2 The Huntington Cottage.

3 The Huntington Cottage.



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**Lightning Design:
The Huntington Cottage**

This perfectly splendid house with little rhyme or reason to its plan has a wonderfully modulated asymmetry, a charming octagonal bedroom tower, and a delightful history. James B. Moore, who made his fortune brokering mortgages in the South and West after the Civil War, returned to Fenwick for his fifth consecutive summer in 1890. Accustomed to the fine accommodations that the local inn, Fenwick Hall, had offered in the past, Morgan and his family took the steamer from Hartford to discover that Fenwick Hall was fully booked for the entire summer.

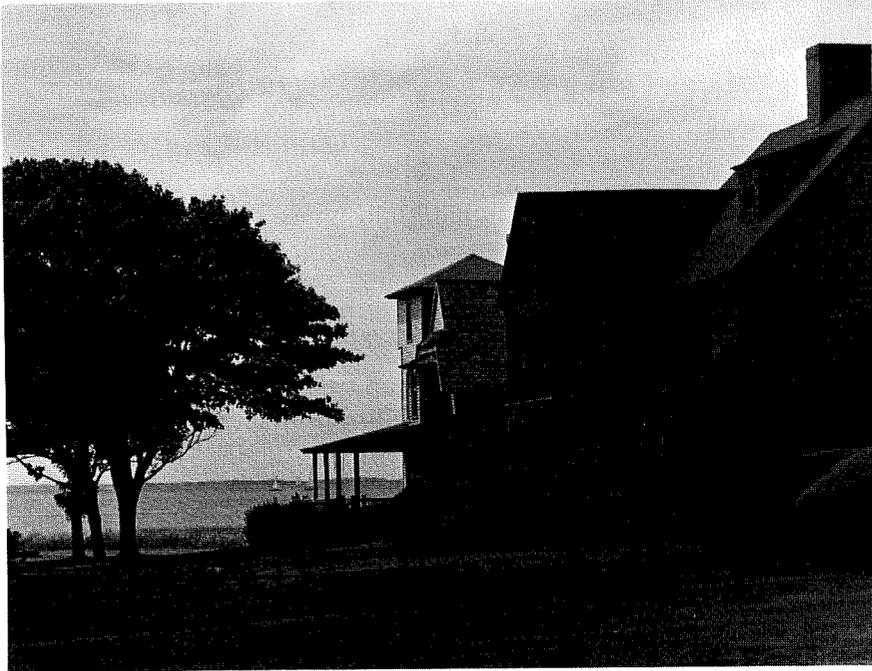
Absolutely furious with the proprietor of Fenwick Hall, Moore purchased Lots 91 and 92 directly

across the street from the Inn. With no architectural experience he quickly designed a house, hired favored local builder George Sheffield, and built this cottage in six weeks. On August 15, 1890, he and his family moved in. Although the house was a remarkable success, there were problems. Moore had built no halls on the second floor and no closets anywhere!

Modernization: The D. Wright and F. K. Davis Cottages

Viewed from the original site of Fenwick Hall, the Wright cottage stands in the foreground, the Davis house beyond, and Long Island Sound 50 yards further. The Davis cottage, its clapboard sheathing now painted light grey, started as a much smaller house and was

4 The Huntington Cottage.



originally constructed on another site. Leverett Brainard, a relative of the current owners, bought this cottage for the princely sum of \$850 on June 29, 1877. \$850 bought Brainard “the building and personal property contained therein . . . including the furniture, cooking utensils, tools, bedding, etc. . . . excepting the trees and well.”

In the last 107 years the Davis cottage has been subjected to almost continuous renovation to accommodate a growing family. Recently the house has been “winterized,” as have many in Fenwick. In a new era of tight money with the grandchildren of captains of industry only becoming corporals and sergeants, an exclusively seasonal residence has become a luxury. More and more people are turning this summer place into a Thanksgiving place, a Christmas place, and in some cases their sole residence. Unfortunately, this process has eroded the architectural qualities that have for so long made these cottages ideal for the hot season. Our house, for example, has suffered during the tightening-up required for winter use. An ideal summer house is now an inefficient year-round dwelling: Too hot in July and a little bracing (and expensive) in January.

The Wright Cottage (1887), on the other hand, is pristine. Its heavily weathered shingles, sharply angled gables, and umbrageous porches are a testament to the shingle style. The present owners are Judge and Mrs. Douglass Wright,



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a granddaughter of the builder, Mary Brace Collins.

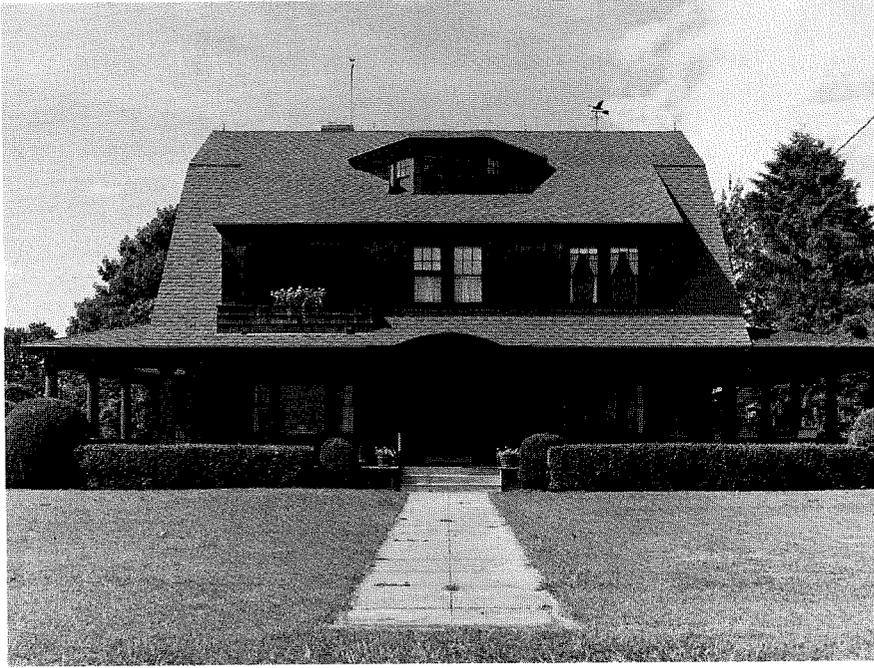
**Post-Puritanism:
St. Mary's-by-the-Sea**

The Reverend Francis Goodwin's father, James Goodwin, another well-heeled Hartford scion, was president of Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company. Goodwin, a first cousin of J. Pierpont Morgan, forsook the family secularity and went to divinity school. A deeply religious Episcopalian, he was distressed that Fenwick, to which he had moved in the summer of 1880, had no religious center. He promptly started one in his living room. When his weekly services became over subscribed, he indulged his hobby by designing St. Mary's-by-the-Sea.

Actually, design was more than a hobby; the Reverend Francis had designed an elaborate house for his father in Hartford and by dint of his close friendship with Frederick Law Olmsted was a competent landscape architect. The chapel's simple, wave-like gambrel roof, undulating from west porch to east porch, and the blunt little bell tower, which was added in 1886, create an ideal, unassuming design solution—perfect, he felt, for the congregation it served. The chapel stands in the middle of what is now a golf course (one of the oldest in the United States); golf balls frequently strike the west façade during Sunday services.

Incidentally, the first christening in the Fenwick Chapel is amusingly related in a 1946 letter from

6 St. Mary's-By-The-Sea.



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Jeanette Goodwin Howarth to F. Kelso Davis: “During the summer of 1889 a band of English gypsies camped near [Fenwick]. Tryphena, Queen of the Gypsies, desired to have her little girl christened . . . at the chapel of St. Mary’s-by-the-Sea in Fenwick. Elizabeth Knight . . . and Alice Fenwick Goodwin, daughter of the Rev. Francis Goodwin, were the godmothers. . . . The child was named Alice Fenwick after Lady Alice Fenwick, wife of Colonel George Fenwick, onetime commander of the fort at Saybrook Point. . . . There was a great deal of excitement in Fenwick and among the gypsies over this colorful and unusual ceremony. . . . What little I can give you is all that my sister remembers. I was a very small child at that time, but it made a deep impression on me. . . .”

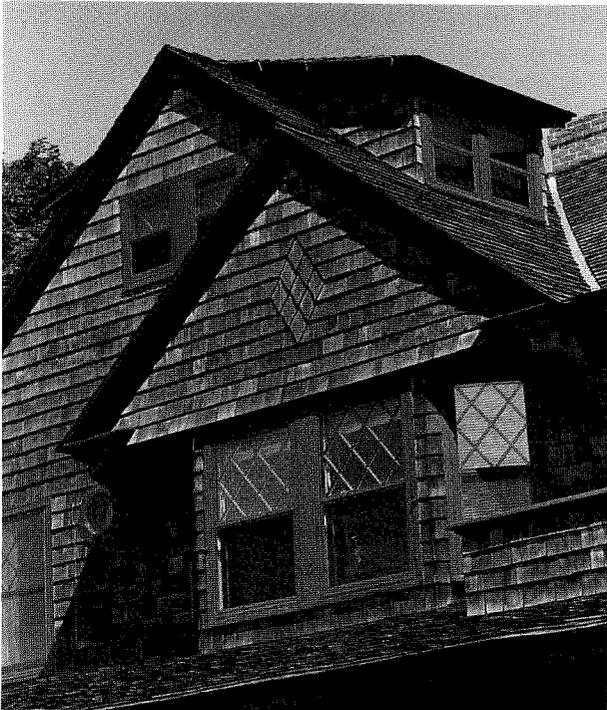
Picture Windows:

The E. C. Gengras, Jr., Cottage

A later entry on the second tier of cottages from the Sound, the Gengras house was built by George Sheffield in 1913. While considerably more symmetrical than the prototype, this snug little residence is punctuated with a delightful gabled porch on the second story, a refuge for the tenants of the master bedroom. The pair of Chicago windows on the ground floor were not part of the original plans; they were a gift to the first owner, Mrs. J. H. K. Davis, from her children in 1930: Mrs. Davis spent 95 summers in Fenwick.



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8 The Jensen Cottage.

9 The Jensen Cottage.



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Massive columns enclosing the ground floor give the house a powerfully rooted feeling (doubly so because they are painted dark green), which makes the cottage unlike most of the others and separates it in style. The triple-sided bay popping out of the attic story belies this effect, though.

A Gem: The Jensen Cottage

Entertainingly executed, this waterfront residence is, I think, particularly illustrative of shingle style architecture. It relies on the unexpected, but collects itself into a cohesive whole. Gables, bays, and details are all marvelously executed, and the house undulates and crests like the nearby Sound. The diagonal muntin upsets the massiveness of the shingle siding as does a circular bathroom window.

There is much to attack in the cottage's horizontality. Everything from a precious diamond ornament in the southmost bay to eleven thick columns with mock shingle capitals combine into a splendid paradigm.

The present owner of the cottage, Oliver Jensen, co-founded *American Heritage Magazine* in 1954, which seems somehow appropriate.

Crowbar Governor: The Staniford Cottage

Morgan Gardner Bulkeley was a formidable man. Bulkeley, who served five years on the Hartford City Council, eight years as mayor, two terms as governor of

Connecticut, one term as U. S. senator, and forty-three years as president of the Aetna Life and Casualty Company was, indeed, a man to be reckoned with.

In 1890 during his second gubernatorial campaign, when the votes were counted, no clear majority prevailed, and—with both sides claiming victory—the election was sent to the state legislature for a decision. The House was firmly Republican, while the Senate was nearly equally divided, with the Democrats holding a slight edge. Bulkeley, in the meantime, stated that he would obey all the state's election laws and in the absence of a clear majority he would simply remain in office, whatever happened. Enter another Fenwick resident: Senator Joseph Alsop. During the critical vote in the Senate, Alsop was sick in bed and in his absence the vote deadlocked. Alsop's party chiefs implored him to come down to the legislature and cast his ballot. He did, of course, and while making a rabble-rousing speech after voting dropped dead on the rostrum. His vote counted, though, and the House and Senate were now deadlocked. So Governor Bulkeley, true to his word, stayed in office.

In the meantime his political nemesis, State Treasurer Nicholas Staub, had been legally elected and contrived with his cronies to seal Bulkeley's office with a large padlock. Not to be outdone, Governor Bulkeley called for an even larger crowbar and pried off the hasp and padlock—an act which earned him the nickname, Crowbar

Governor. Staub escalated the quarrel and (being treasurer) was able to cut off all the governor's funds. Morgan Bulkeley counter-attacked by pledging his considerable personal wealth as well as the vast resources of the Aetna Life and Casualty Company to finance the running of Connecticut! And, believe it or not, he did so until the Supreme Court declared him Governor—*de facto* and *de jure* on January 5, 1892.

In 1899, Governor Bulkeley commissioned Hartford architect, W. E. Becker, to build what is still the grandest Fenwick cottage. Its shingle style is also exemplary and its details are executed to perfection. This is a magnificently well-proportioned, well-detailed house. Perfect Doric columns ring the porches; three Palladian windows front the seaward side; and the obligatory wicker swing graces the porch.

Fenwick Finis

Fenwick is a summer paradise, whose architecture—substantially and ethereally—infused our childhoods with a sense of well-being and confidence that all was right with the world when it really wasn't, and positively influenced our personal development, just as architecture should. The ultimate summer place. Fenwick.

Acknowledgments

I am especially indebted to Marion Hepburn Grant for her brilliant history, *The Fenwick Story* (The Connecticut Historical Society, 1974), from which I have cheerfully

plagiarized. I am indebted to the cottage owners, residents of Fenwick, who are my friends and whose permission for this piece was not sought but, I hope, is (tacitly) given. Also, to the great Vincent Scully, my teacher at Yale, for *The Shingle Style Today or The Historian's Revenge*, George Braziller, New York, 1974, as well as his earlier work, *The Shingle Style*, 1955.