

## THE NEW SAYBROOK COMPANY AND FENWICK HALL HOTEL © (Part I)

(By Lamar LeMonte OSHS July 2021)

### Wealthy Hartford and the New Saybrook Company

There was great wealth in Hartford after the Civil War ended in 1865. It was said that Hartford was the most affluent city in America at the time. The war had greatly benefited Connecticut military manufacturers who supported the Union army and navy. Many were located in and around Hartford. Colt's Manufacturing Company, founded and owned by Hartford-born industrialist Samuel Colt, was one of the most significant arms and munitions suppliers. The New Haven Arms Company provided the army with the Henry Rifle. The Hartford-based Pratt & Whitney Company provided machinery and support equipment to Army contractors to produce weapons. Most of the brass buttons used on Federal uniforms, belt buckles and other fittings were made in Waterbury, the "Brass City", notably by the Chase Brass and Copper Company.

Additionally, Hartford was dominated by insurance companies; it was the *capital* of the United States' insurance industry. Also prominent were wealthy bankers and national publishing houses. Hartford published more books than any other city. Hartford held more patents than anywhere else. The city was also home to some of the most famous families and Yankee blue-bloods in America, including cultural elites such as Samuel Clemens.

In 1868, resident *Mark Twain* wrote of Hartford:  
*Of all the beautiful towns it has been my fortune to see, this is the chief. You do not know what beauty is if you have not been here.*

In his novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, he coined the term for this period of incredible industrial wealth.



Hartford, 1870

In the summer of 1870 a group of Hartford investors decided that the quaint village down the river named Old Saybrook, would be an excellent location for developing a summer resort for wealthy Hartford residents, of whom there were many. They named their company the New Saybrook Company; a descriptive name for a perfect locale for the wealthy families of Hartford to spend their summers on the water. They purchased over 200 acres of land, now known as the Borough of Fenwick. These investors were also working closely with the owners of the Connecticut Valley Railroad. The resort investors knew the railroad would play a critical role in the development of their proposed summer resort. One Hartford insurance company, the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company, was the primary financial backer of both the New Saybrook Company and the railroad.

The vision of a river valley railroad, from Hartford to Long Island Sound, had started in the 1840s when the president of the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company, James Clark Walkley, traced the 44-mile route from Hartford to Old Saybrook by stagecoach. A state charter in 1868 formed the railroad and during the next two years, survey crews worked to map out the line from Hartford to Old Saybrook. Tracks were completed to Saybrook Point by 1870. That same year, right on time, the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company had completed construction of Fenwick Hall, the centerpiece of their proposed summer retreat.

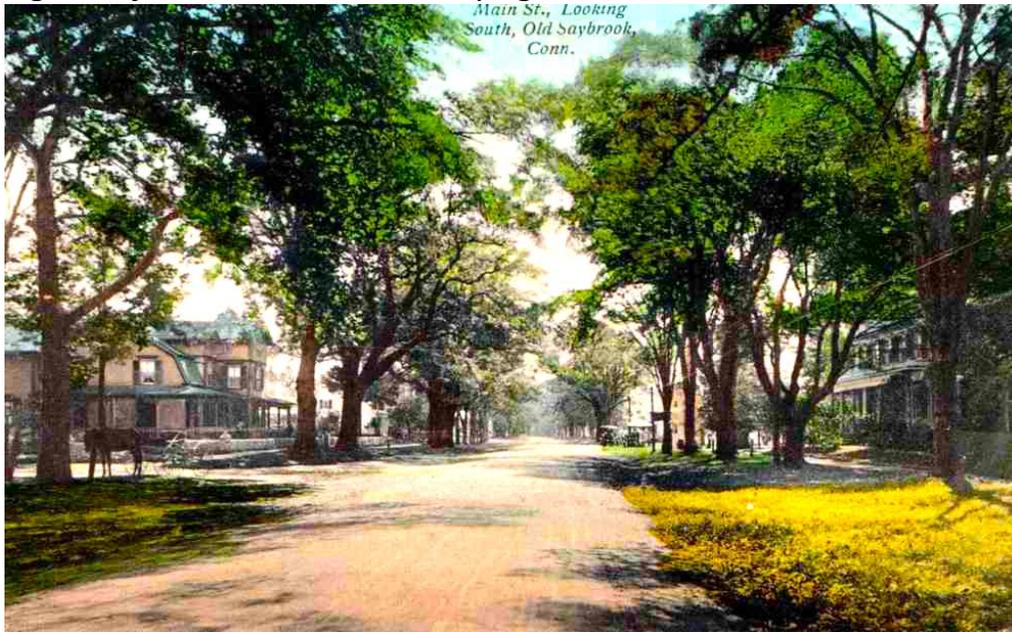


*1870 construction of Fenwick Hall is completed*

### **Promoting New Saybrook**

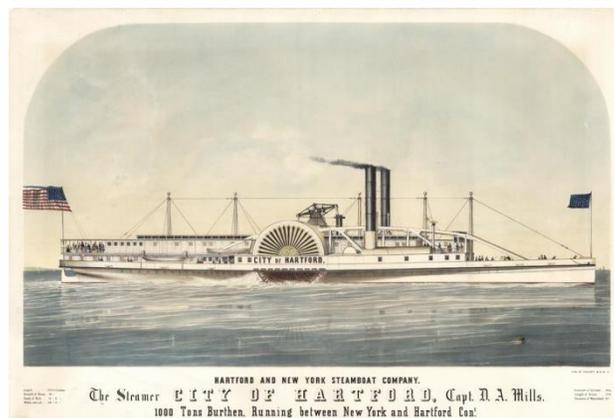
In Newport, Rhode Island, Gilded-Age money was already financing the building of palatial summer cottages for many of the nouveau riche Robber Barons. The New Saybrook Company also envisioned cottages, but on a scale somewhat less grandiose, and for those not quite of Robber Baron stature. The focal point of the proposed development would be the luxurious resort hotel around which summer cottages would be built.

In their 1870 prospectus for building lots, their selling proposition started with a description of Old Saybrook: *Saybrook is an "old-fashioned" New England town, laid out with a broad avenue two hundred feet wide, and bordered on either side with beautiful old trees. Its pleasant streets and location have attracted to it many gentlemen of wealth, culture and high social position, some of whom have expended much money and displayed great taste in the erection of fine residences and laying out of extensive and well-kept grounds.*



*Colorized postcard, "Main St., Looking South, Old Saybrook, Conn."*

They reminded prospective buyers of building lots that the Connecticut Valley Railroad would have a depot on the grounds of the New Saybrook resort. They also mentioned that passage to the new resort could also be obtained on the fine steamers of the Hartford and New York Steamboat Company, *Which would doubtless during the summer months secure more travel than train cars.*



South Cove was described as, *Containing a bed of fine native oysters, and it is intended to increase its usefulness in that way by planting more extensive beds of the best quality. South Cove is a great addition to this admirable location. It affords a place for safe sailing to children and timid persons, the water being shallow, and at all times giving a safe harbor for all sailboats in case of a storm. A bridge fully half mile in length and twenty-two feet wide, will cross the Cove and connect the Company's point of land with the settled portion of the pleasant town of Old Saybrook. The bridge will be a pleasant promenade and (carriage) drive, and give to the children a desirable place for their safe indulgence in the universal juvenile propensity "to fish."*



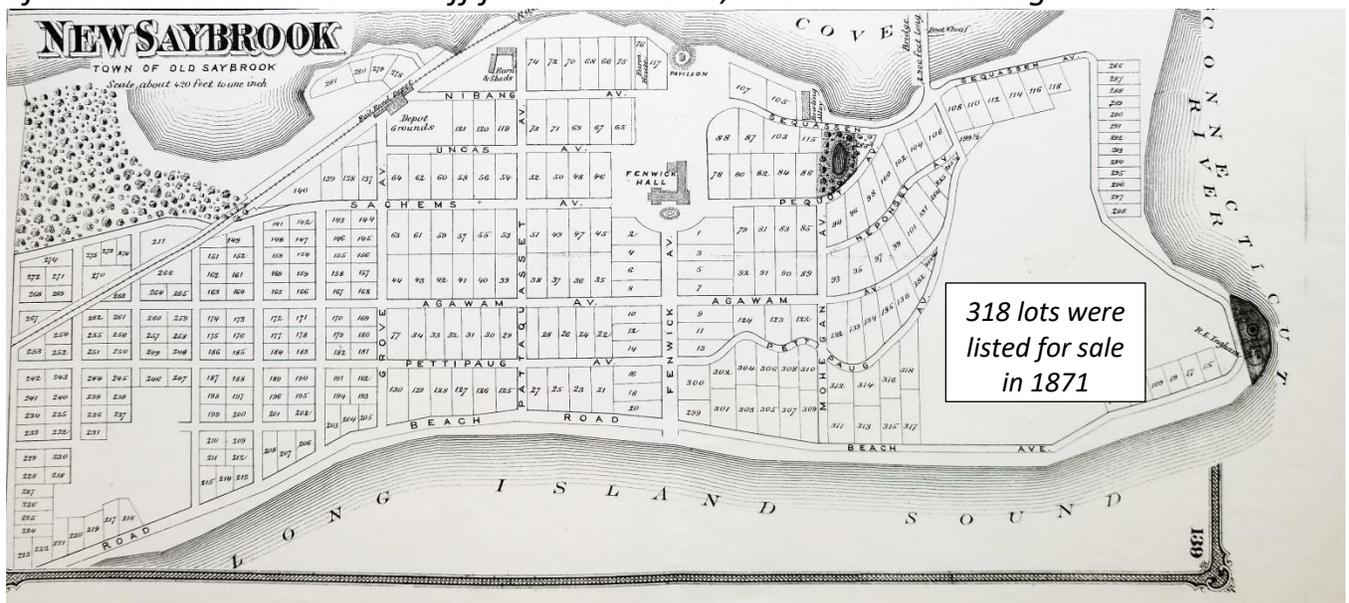
*The wooden carriage bridge to Fenwick Hall, looking toward Saybrook Point*

The prospectus described the hotel as follows: *Fenwick Hall is to be fitted up with far more regard to comfort than is usual at sea-side. The architect, Mr. S.W.Lincoln, of Hartford, has designed on the first floor two private dining rooms. In the arrangement of private rooms, great attention has been paid to the requirements of families, there being twenty-four suites, consisting of parlors and chambers. In all there are two hundred rooms for the accommodation of guests. The rooms will be lighted with gas, and water will be conveniently introduced on several floors. Water closets and the conveniences of bathing in salt or fresh water will be provided.*



Colorized postcard showing the front of Fenwick Hall. It faced Long Island Sound. The tower on the right was planned to be a central tower; the plan was to add an extension to the hotel eastward (to the right) with a matching wing. It was never built.

The New Saybrook Company made another point clear: *But it is not to the hotel alone that the guests and visitors at Saybrook Point will go. Most if not all of the one hundred stockholders will in a few years erect pleasant cottages on the lots apportioned to them. In addition to these, many who are not stockholders of the Company, will purchase lots from the large portion of land not required for the use of the Hotel and the lots set off for stockholders, and will erect cottages.*



The first train to arrive at Saybrook Point for the grand opening of Fenwick Hall was in 1871. The *Hartford Courant* reported that the opening of the Hotel was so successful and the crowds so great that a (stage) coach line was started from Saybrook Point to Fenwick across the carriage bridge. *Fenwick Hall was taxed to the limit, with every room occupied and on many nights cots had to be placed in the parlors, as there were no cottages nearby.*

Saybrook Point in 1871 was not the scenic riverside locale it is today. It was a dirty, gritty, crowded, commercial terminal area with not only the steamboat dock facilities but also the Connecticut Valley Railroad facilities, which were considerable. In addition to the train station there was a rail yard with roundhouse and turntable, brick engine barns large enough for six engines, a complex network of tracks, a signal tower, storehouse, ice house, coal bins, and a switching tower all built on the Point. The first passengers for Fenwick were quick to mount the waiting horse-drawn carriages with their luggage and cross the half mile bridge to the quaint and quiet confines of Fenwick.



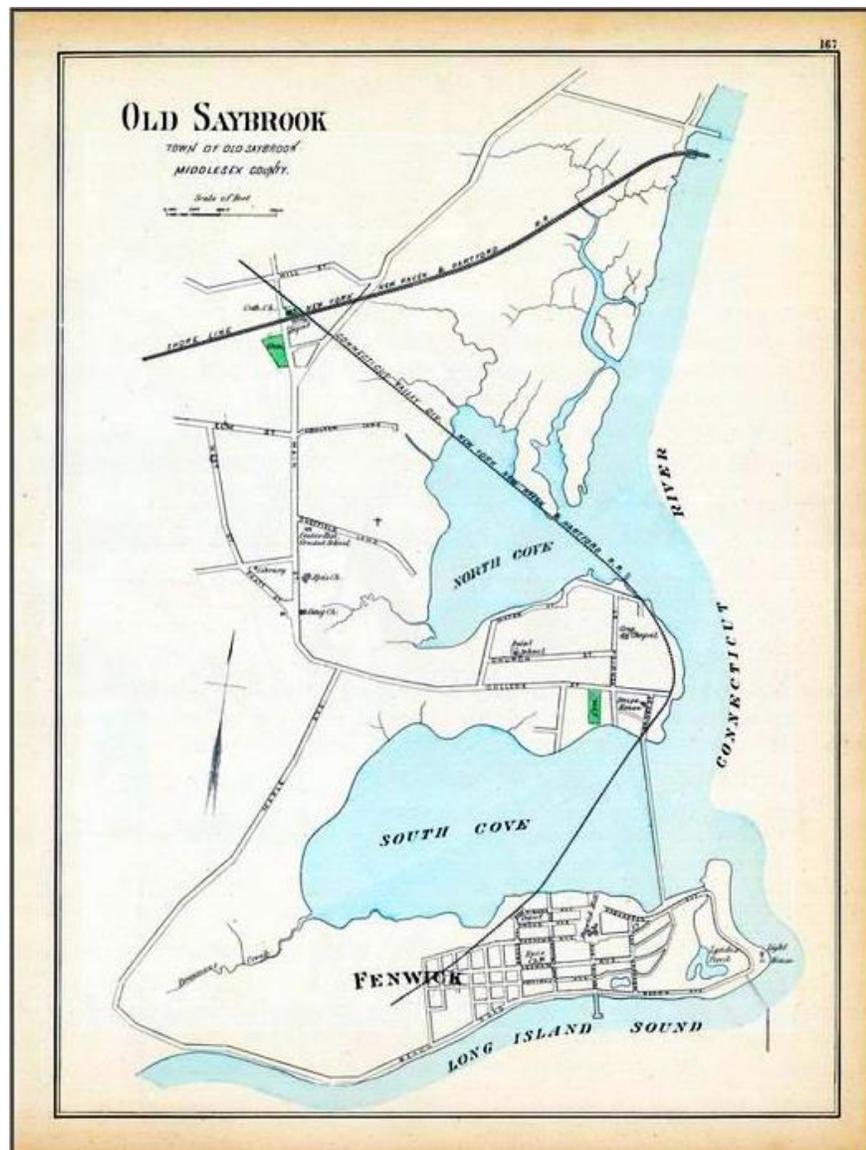
*Postcard showing Saybrook Point, looking from South Cove, circa early 1870's*

The next year, visitors could ride the train directly to Fenwick Hall. The railroad had completed the tracks across South Cove to a depot located at the end of Nibang Avenue, just a short walk up the gentle hill to Fenwick Hall. The tracks extended well beyond this depot, almost to the Sound, to make room for the freight cars that delivered coal and kerosene supplies, plus hay and grain feed for the numerous horse stables.

With the rail link completed, resort customers could avoid both Saybrook Point and the carriage bridge. The railroad extension to Fenwick was a wooden trestle with a single track. Narrow wooden planks were placed between the tracks. The trestle was strictly for train use but occasionally adventurous young boys on bicycles were said to use the planks to ride across the Cove.

The railroad causeway to Fenwick also facilitated bringing the Hartford horses and carriages to Fenwick, but the majority of horses still arrived by steamboat. A few families still had their horses driven overland on an adventurous journey down from Hartford, ultimately across the dirt roads of undeveloped Cornfield Point, and around to Fenwick.

*Map shows both the train track and the carriage bridge in the 1870's crossing South Cove to Fenwick*



When the development started, the lots were sold by auction. The highest premiums were for lots near the Hotel because it was expected that those living in the cottages would take their meals at the hotel. But it didn't work out that way and many of those lots went unsold. Luckily these empty lots became part of the golf course layout in 1897.

The early cottages did not have running water. Water was pumped by the maids, of course, and carried to the various rooms. The only light at night was from kerosene lamps and candles. Toilets were outside, as usual, and in some cases near the cottages' adjacent stables. The large main stables were near the train depot.



*Some summer-cottage ladies of Fenwick. Many families brought their nannies, cooks and maids with them from Hartford for the summer.*

In the early 1870's the future looked good for the New Saybrook Company and Fenwick Hall. In fact, the future looked good for almost everyone in America and especially good for the Robber Barons of the era. Everywhere, it seemed, real estate and railroad speculation was rampant. Values of corporations multiplied to unheard of heights, especially for railroads. New financial instruments were being created, including new types of railroad bonds. As one historian who lived through the period observed, *Prosperity was written all over the face of things. Manufacturers were busy, workmen in demand, streets and shops were crowded and everywhere new buildings going up. Prices of commodities were high and demand was good. Everybody seemed to be making money.* But then came the Panic of 1873.

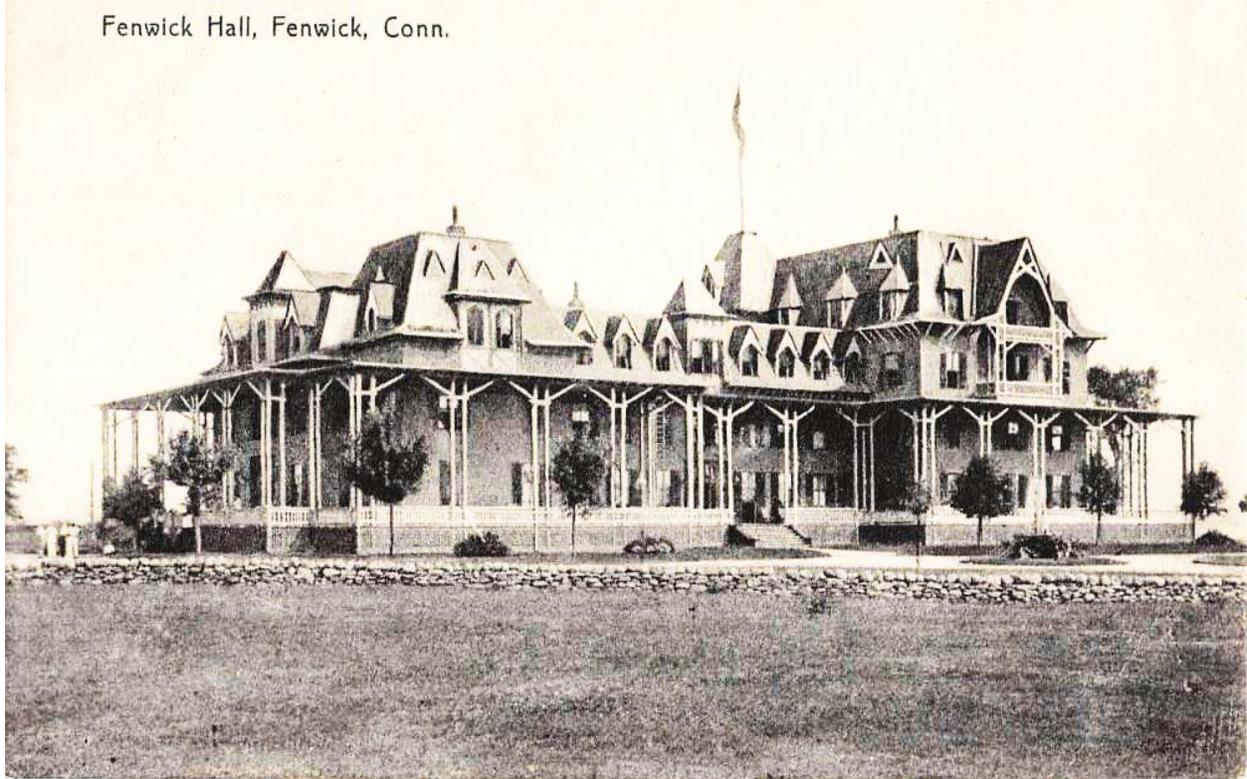
The Panic of 1873 was a financial crisis that triggered an economic depression in Europe and North America that lasted from 1873 till 1877. In the United States, the Panic was known as the Great Depression (until the events of 1929 and the early 1930's set a new standard). Jay Cooke & Company, the prominent investment house that had essentially financed the Civil War, had a cash crunch because of the bankruptcy of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Cooke's firm was the financial agent in this venture, and poured money into it. The firm realized it had overextended itself and declared bankruptcy. Mirroring the firm's collapse, many other banking firms and industries did the same. This collapse was disastrous for the nation's economy. A startling 89 of the country's 364 railroads crashed into bankruptcy. A total of 18,000 businesses failed in a mere two years. By 1876, the country's unemployment had risen to a frightening 14 percent.

Not surprisingly, during this same time period, the New Saybrook Company enjoyed only moderate success in selling lots and building cottages. Only 18 cottages had been built on the 318 lots. Investor profits were almost non-existent. Likewise, the Connecticut Valley Railroad, like many at that time, was not turning a profit and no dividends were being paid to stock or bondholders. But the railroad had a more systemic problem than the Panic of 1873.

The Connecticut Valley Railroad was popular for transporting vacationers to beaches while also carrying coal, lumber, grain, and feed. But it was one of the few railroads in Connecticut which did not connect two cities; it connected Hartford only with a string of summer oriented villages which automatically limited its commercial and year-round passenger business.

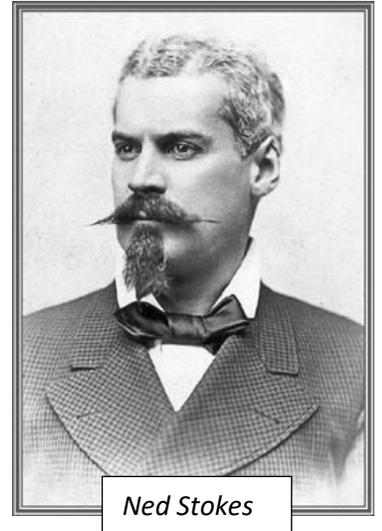
The Connecticut Valley line had trouble making ends meet and went bankrupt in 1876. Reorganized in 1879, it emerged as the Hartford and Connecticut Valley Railroad. The financial reorganization helped stop the railroad's financial bleeding for a while, but it did little to boost profits at Fenwick Hall. As the country worked its way out of the Great Depression, the New Saybrook Company and Fenwick Hall remained profitless.

Fenwick Hall, Fenwick, Conn.



Dependence on the finances of the railroad would ultimately cause both the New Saybrook Company and Fenwick Hall to fail. The failure had a lot to do with the involvement of James Clark Walkley. As president of the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company, he was also the primary financial backer of the New Saybrook Company. Additionally his backing was also instrumental in the formation of the Connecticut Valley Railroad, and he was its president when the first train arrived at Saybrook Point in 1871. Although no records clearly show the financial interconnection between his life insurance company and the railroad, they both ultimately failed, and forced Fenwick Hall and the owners of building lots to reorganize. In 1887 the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company declared bankruptcy and the New Saybrook Company was essentially bankrupt as well. They put Fenwick Hall up for auction.

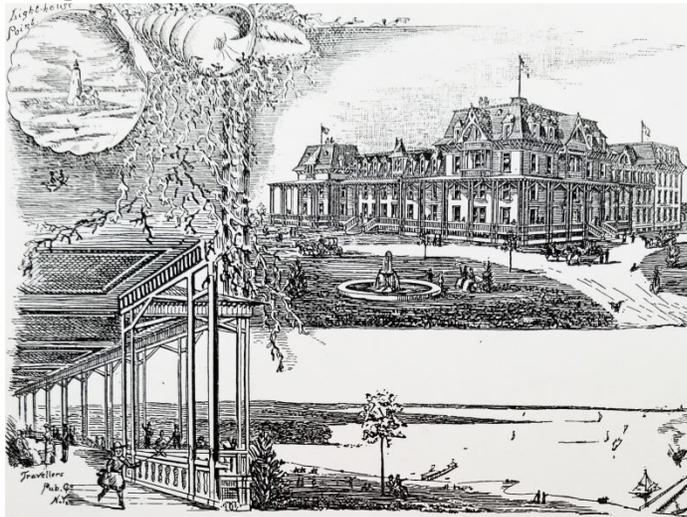
The new owner of Fenwick Hall was a New Yorker named Edward “Ned” Styles Stokes. The most often told story about him was about his bidding rival for the bankrupt hotel, Lawrence S. McMahon, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hartford. The bishop wanted Fenwick Hall for an orphanage. On the day of the auction, the story was that Stokes invited the bishop's agents to take a ride on Stokes’ yacht, which conveniently breaks down offshore. Stokes may have been on the yacht while his agent was sent to the auction to make the purchase. Regardless, the bishop’s agents missed the auction and Stokes became the new owner of Fenwick Hall. He decided to upgrade the hotel.



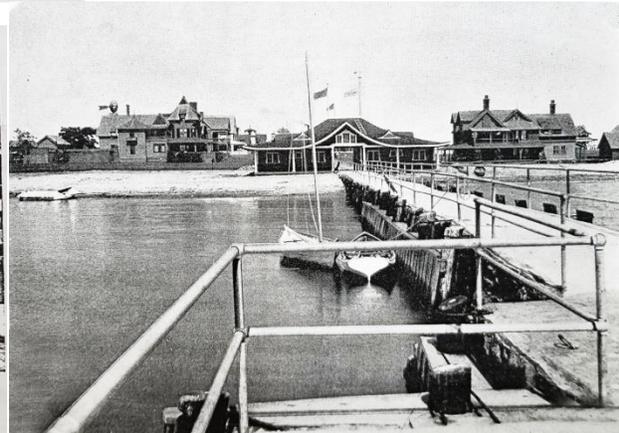
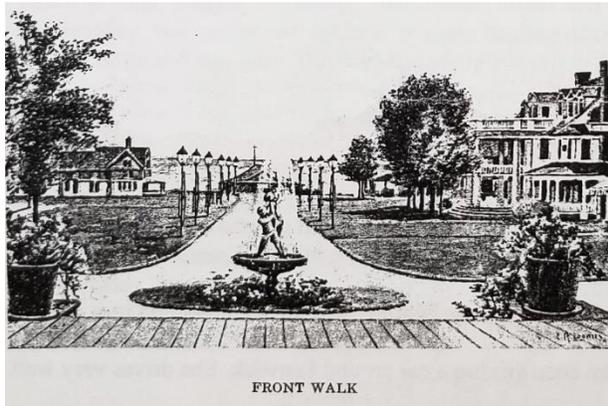
*This photo was taken from the top of Fenwick Hall, looking east toward Old Lyme. The wooden carriage bridge from Saybrook Point had several docks beside it, and beyond them was the Government Dock. It was probably built prior to the 1838 rebuilding of the “Inner” Lighthouse. Steam workboats and barges supplied blocks of brownstone, quarried up-river in Portland, to build a 65-foot octagonal tower, replacing the original wooden lighthouse, built in 1803.*

Stokes traveled to Fenwick regularly from New York City on his steam yacht named *Fra Diavolo* (Brother Devil). He docked at Fenwick at the Government Dock, beside the carriage bridge and near the Hartford Yacht Club clubhouse.

He turned Fenwick Hall into one of the liveliest and most popular resorts. He also put a considerable amount of money into upgrades. He installed an elevator, cultivated a five acre vegetable farm for fresh produce, added hot and cold salt water baths, invited a well-known head of a New York City riding academy and his horses to Fenwick for the pleasure of the Hotel Guests, built a bathing pier into Long Island Sound, and he electrified the hotel with its own power plant.

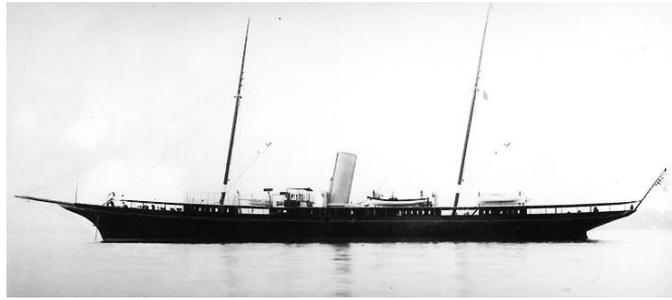


**Left** is a brochure cover showing the view of Long Island Sound from the Hotel's front veranda. **Lower left** was the view from the Hotel's front steps looking toward the bath house on the Long Island Sound beach. **Lower right** was the "bathing pier" built out into Long Island Sound. The top of Fenwick Hall just visible above the roof, just left of the flagpole.



Newton Brainard, the son of Leverett Brainard, an early cottage owner, had youthful memories of Fenwick Hall after Stokes bought it: *Theatrical luminaries and political leaders made it their headquarters. The hotel was once again crowded throughout the season. Cots were put up on weekends in the billiard rooms and even in the halls, to accommodate the crowds. Life moved at a fast pace and tandem carts and liveried grooms were not uncommon. There was an orchestra available as a rule and evening dancing was popular of course. Once a week there was an entertainment by traveling talent, which toured the resorts.*

Brainard recalls: *When the hotel was at its height in the Stokes days, Fenwick was a rendezvous for many of the New York Yacht Club yachts and such boats as the first Corsair of J.P. Morgan, the Intrepid of Lloyd Phoenix and others were frequent visitors. Mr. Stokes came up every week in his steam yacht the Fra Diavolo on which the now famous chef, Oscar of the Waldorf, was a steward.*



*Above left is "Intrepid" owned by Lloyd Phoenix. Above right is "Corsair" owned by J. P. Morgan. Morgan would own four yachts named "Corsair" the last one, built in 1930, was 343 feet.*

No one knows exactly why Ned Stokes bought Fenwick Hall in the first place, but there was no mystery as to why he sold it. Ned Stokes and the town of Old Saybrook did not get along. More specifically, Stokes disagreed with the town about the responsibility, upkeep and taxes for the wooden carriage bridge from Saybrook Point to Fenwick. Stokes claimed it had been accepted as a town road, and that the town should be appreciative of the fact that the hotel had been maintaining it for years. The town claimed it was a private road built just for the Hotel, despite the fact that the general public used it regularly. Lawsuits ensued and Stokes, fearing liability suits, tore up various sections of the bridge so that no carriages, only pedestrians, and could cross. The courts ultimately ruled that the Town must pay to maintain the carriage bridge, but arguments about unpaid hotel taxes still persisted.

Although Stokes owned Fenwick Hall for six years, he only kept it operational for about four years. Many claim that he closed it to get even with the town for challenging him about the carriage bridge. It sat empty for several years and became the favorite playground for young kids. Newton Brainard recalls, *We found its broad porches a fine place for bicycle riding on rainy days. Most of us, too, knew ways of getting inside and roamed its empty and spooky halls.* In 1894 Morgan Garden Bulkeley bought the abandoned Fenwick Hall for \$500 and some back taxes.

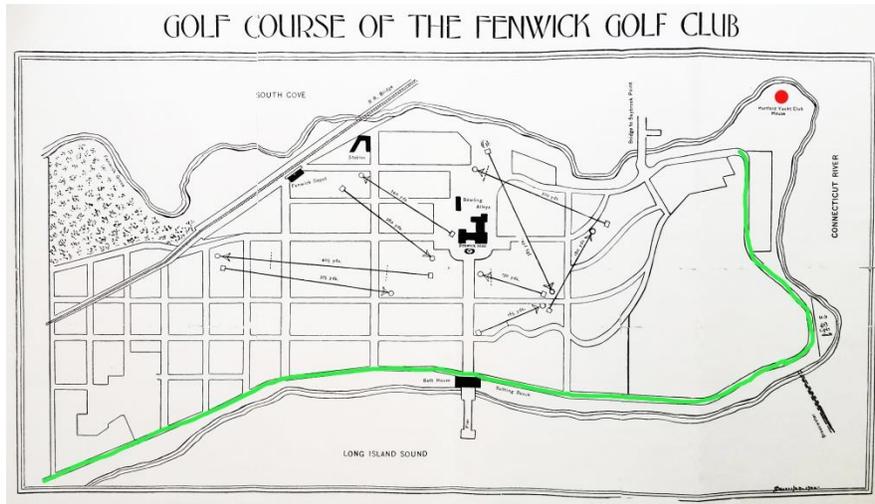
Two important Hartford notables, both on board the very first train to Saybrook Point to celebrate the opening of Fenwick Hall, were James Clark Walkley, and Eliphalet Bulkeley. Walkley was president of the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company, the financial backer of the New Saybrook Company and the head of the Connecticut Valley Railroad. Eliphalet Bulkeley was the head of the Aetna Life Insurance Company.

Twenty three years later, Eliphalet's son, Morgan Gardner Bulkeley, bought the New Saybrook Company's grandest asset, Fenwick Hall. Morgan was also the president of Aetna, having succeeded his father. Morgan undoubtedly was well aware of James Walkeley, all the travails of the New Saybrook Company, the Charter Oak Life Insurance Company, the Connecticut Valley Railroad, and Fenwick Hall. Plus, his sister, Mary Bulkeley Brainard, along with her husband, Leverett, were already summer cottage residents of Fenwick. It is fair to say that no one had more first-hand knowledge of Fenwick and Fenwick Hall than Morgan Bulkeley, then president of Aetna, former 4-term mayor of Hartford, and soon to be Governor of Connecticut and a United States Senator.



Morgan Gardner Bulkeley

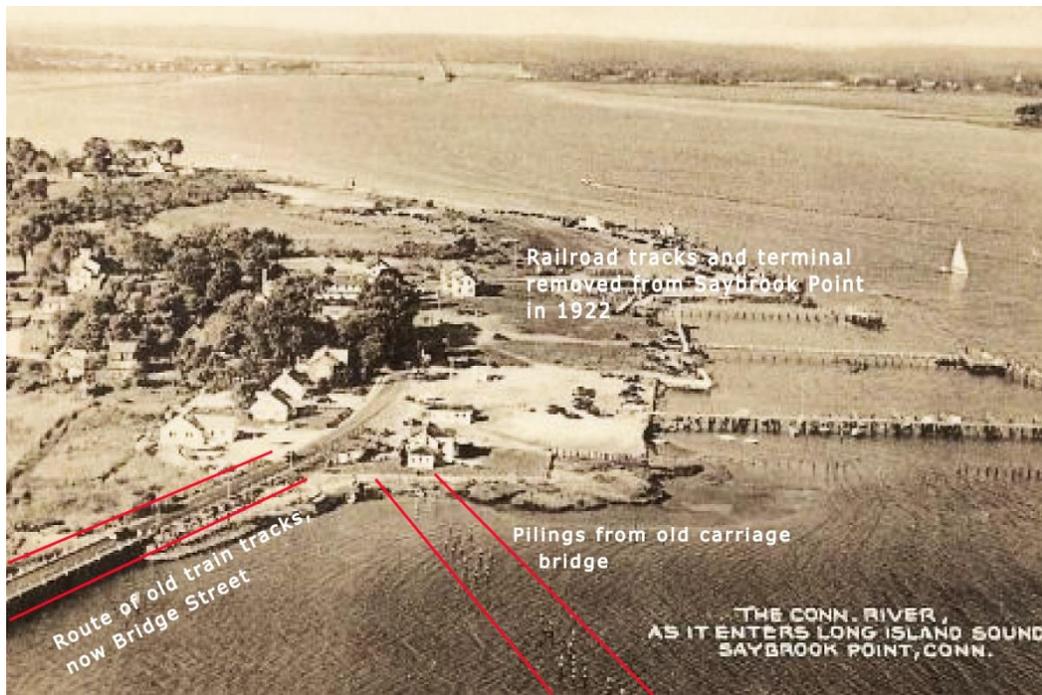
Morgan apparently was not interested in going into the hotel business. He was more interested in getting the Fenwick summer community organized the way he and his associates wanted it organized. He formed the Fenwick Hall Corporation which assumed ownership of the Hotel and a considerable amount of the surrounding land, the original unsold lots near the hotel. This land plus additional lots donated by his sister Mary and brother-in-law, Leverett Brainard, became the 9-hole golf course organized in 1897. Morgan was a golfer, he wanted a golf course, and he got one. He also decided where he wanted to build his cottage and he persuaded two cottage owners to move their cottages to make room for his. He decided the Beach Road, which ran around the shore in front of all the seaside cottages, including his, had to go. It did.



Above was the proposed layout of the golf course on the land that was unsold as building lots. The red dot upper right was the location of the Hartford Yacht Club clubhouse. Their main club was on the River near Hartford. The road marked in green was Beach Road, removed by Morgan Bulkeley.

As governor he had considerable political clout and was savvy in the ways of local town politics. He assisted with the establishment of a borough government to regulate the use of property and taxes and by 1899 the Borough of Fenwick was chartered. His new cottage, facing the water and without a beach road, was completed the same year.

The railroad to Fenwick had continued to lose money, and by the turn of the century was competing with automobiles, buses and shoreline trolleys. In 1916 they ended their service to Fenwick, and Bulkeley got the Connecticut Highway Department to build a road across South Cove, using the abandoned railroad right-of-way. The road extended all the way around to Cornfield Point. The old carriage bridge to Fenwick Hall was abandoned and slowly rotted away.



The road extended all the way around to Cornfield Point. The old carriage bridge to Fenwick Hall was abandoned and slowly rotted away.

Fenwick Hall was used only occasionally as a hotel during this time. It hosted several summer company gatherings of Aetna employees. Otherwise, most of the hotel guests were visiting Fenwick cottage owners. In 1911 Bulkeley had ended his term as United States Senator and returned to spend more time in his Fenwick cottage. By 1916 the hotel was in disrepair. Bulkeley and his Borough associates decided to have the hotel torn down.



The next year they were saved the trouble. Fenwick Hall burned to the ground. Curiously, the Hartford Yacht Club building, a half mile away, burned down at the same time. There was public speculation about whether the Fenwick cottage owners really cared for the hard drinking yachtsmen who docked their yachts and partied at the Yacht Club. There was also public speculation about who held the insurance policy on the hotel.

Fenwick Hall was never rebuilt, nor was the Yacht Club. The Borough of Fenwick continued to build more cottages. The First World War ended and Fenwick residents entered the decade of the Roaring Twenties quietly playing summer golf and tennis. One mile down the beach, however, *The Cornfield Point Association* started selling building lots for summer cottages, with a grand hotel called The Castle Inn as the focal point of the development. Yes, there was the inconvenience of Prohibition. But it was 1923, and the building lots were a great real estate investment, and the Castle Inn was full of wealthy vacationers and weekly entertainment. Times were prosperous, and every month the stock market continued to set record highs. What could possibly stop the good times?

**Interested in Fenwick Hall and more history of Fenwick?**

**Read Part II, *Tammany Hall and Fenwick Hall*.**

It's a story about Ned Stokes' notorious crime and his hotels, one of which was in Fenwick, the other in New York City. His life and his notorious Fenwick neighbor were emblematic of the life of the robber barons. This was the Gilded Age mixed with dubious Victorian sensibilities and Tammany Hall power-politics and corruption.



**Cary Grant, Edward Arnold and Frances Farmer  
in "The Toast of New York."**

Cary Grant was cast as Ned Stokes in the 1937 movie, "The Toast of New York." Ned Stokes' crime made New York tabloid history. Read more about this nefarious New Yorker **in Part II, Tammany Hall and Fenwick Hall.**

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