

Some Recollections of the Constitution Island Association in Its Middle Years

I arrived at West Point in the summer of 1959 with just enough rank to rate captain's housing on Post. Marie and I, with our two youngsters, moved into North Apartments and were soon oriented by our across-the-hall neighbors, Bill and Genevieve Lewis. I renewed my acquaintance with Bill, a PE instructor in my cadet days, and we learned that Genevieve was the Constitution Island Association's primary advocate among post residents. Her specialized education and persuasive temperament suited her well to that role. She had a contagious enthusiasm for the Island, the Warner sisters, and especially the Warner House. Within weeks, she appealed to Marie's informed interest in American history and enlisted her as a volunteer worker. Being a former Marine Sergeant, Marie was not easily impressed, but on her introductory excursion to the Island she was astonished by the evident extent of "the Warner sisters' world." Her uncharacteristic excitement roused my own curiosity because my World War II cadet classmates and I had only known Constitution Island as the far anchor of the great iron chain a few links of which we had seen on Trophy Point, but our minds focused on the war in progress as we walked Night Area Guard around the barracks carrying loaded rifles. In daylight hours, however, we reverted to late teenagers who would scan past an obscure island house to catch glimpses of the Osborn Castle or Dick's Folly and pursue a brief illusion of freedom and romantic conquest. The engaging potential of that island house may have been nearer, but we had no inkling of our connection with the saga of the Warner sisters, of Anna's authorship of the Sunday school hymn we all knew, nor that one wall of that house was supposed to have been part of Benedict Arnold's headquarters. But our current war stayed before us until the Japanese surrender marked the end World War II, which shifted our primary concern to the Academy's return to a peacetime curriculum and the additional year of cadetship it would require of us. On my return to the faculty, the awareness of Warner matters Marie and I gained from the Lewises matured into a lasting involvement.

Marie's accounts of her first days on the Island led me there whenever departmental duty permitted it. Post transportation office furnished a launch to ferry work groups and visitors to and from the Island, stopping to pick up Putnam County passengers at Garrison Landing. This

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accommodation began early in the spring when the Warner House was being opened for the season. Work schedules had to be flexible because the launch often had commitments that would vary departure times from South Dock and modify pickup times from the Island. Since we had neither cell phones nor Anna Warner's rowboat, there was no means of emergency return. (Someone always seemed to have band aids.) Work trips were usually cancelled on dark, rainy days for not much could be accomplished in the unlighted house. If an unpredicted storm came down the Hudson, we huddled inside the House hoping the launch or clear weather would arrive. If the rain persisted, there was no reason to hurry to the launch for it had no top. Such conditions were accepted in good humor as part of a volunteer's role. Once I had become a "regular," I did what I was invited to do, listening and gradually learning that Anna Warner's sentiment and Mrs. Russell Sage's generosity had awarded the title to (and responsibility for) the Island to the Academy and that maintenance of the "out of sight and out of mind" property was low on the priority list for Academy funds and resources. The expanse of the river might have kept the Island outside the administration's immediate concern had not a few senior Academy officers and influential community leaders who were Constitution Island Association members lobbied for more than minimal care of the premises. From one point of view, the overall effect was a form of benign neglect that kept the structure of the Warner House sound, its contents safe, and the remnants of eighteenth century fortifications generally unaltered. Even so, one of my first impressions was the absence of any outbuildings or other domestic structures around the homestead. The privy, and surely there was one, would of course have vanished without a trace. If there was a well, I don't recall ever using it or even seeing it. An old photograph shows Anna and Buckner, her black man- of-all work, standing beside their three-wheeled cart/carriage that I later saw stored in a lean-to on one side the House. That unique vehicle was contracted to a wheelwright to be restored, but it was destroyed when his shop burned. With the carriage lost, the lean-to was removed. Was the carriage horse drawn? Did the horse have a stable? Was there housing for Bucker or did he somehow "commute" from Cold Spring, West Point, or Garrison? I saw no evidence of foundations for another dwelling, barn, or shed.

Some Recollections of the Constitution Island Association in Its Middle Years

After the winter weather there was always debris about to be attended to; while most paths to the redoubts were still easily identifiable, others, like the redoubts themselves, were overgrown with sprouts and vines, much of it poison ivy. Once inside the house, I felt sure that all the dust I was seeing had not accumulated since the last fall closing, but that some might have been left by Anna herself. Also there was the clutter of the sisters' books, papers, mementos, gift souvenirs, and curiosities, all sharing space with their furnishings and materials belonging to the Association. I was told that members had at one time affixed small brass plates (C.I.A. No. _) to major pieces of furniture, though no corresponding inventory was about. Given those circumstances, Genevieve Lewis, in concert with Association members from both sides of the river, undertook new initiatives to make the Island and the House cleaner and more orderly for both C.I.A. functions and escorted tours. In the surge of activity in the 1960's, the decisions had to be made to give direction to the effort. How should the interior of the house appear once the C.I.A. and Warner sisters' items were differentiated and the C.I.A. materials segregated? Should it reflect the quarter century when the sisters were most actively writing and publishing or in the years when Anna carried on without Susan? The consensus was the "Anna years," and Mrs. Lewis and her deputies repeatedly reminded workers of that goal. All were given to understand that their mission was to clean and restore the site and its contents without damaging or modifying either. Strict adherence to that principle was not always possible nor wise. For example, outside the house, the dock that the Post installed to replace the one damaged by ice and the tide was a welcome new construction, but when Boy Scouts arrived to clear routes to the redoubts, they were advised to follow the established trails and not to seek new, "improved" ones.

Workers came dressed for the chores of the day, not for a tour or garden party. They came ready not only to satisfy their curiosity but also to work, bringing the cleaning necessities-- brooms, buckets, soap, rags, and bags for trash, along with their lunches and water to drink and clean--the brackish Hudson was good for neither. All went about their business understanding the basic rule: "We are here to clear, clean and maintain, not to alter or modernize what we may find." Such direction was easier to give than to follow because the Warners were

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incorrigible collectors who kept and classified a conglomeration given them by acquaintances and correspondents worldwide. Cleaners enjoyed frequent "discoveries": "Look at this! Stones from Buckingham Palace." "Have you ever seen a penguin skin before?" "Why do you suppose they wanted all these kinds of mica?" Then came reminders: "If you dust a shelf, put everything back exactly where you found it." "Don't move items from one drawer to another." "Those old books may be interesting, but don't flip through their pages; dust them gently and reshelv them in their same order." "Share your finds and observations, but only briefly-- if it can't wait until lunchtime or the end of the day." And again, "Ask before you try to make repairs or 'improvements": "The leg came off this stool when I moved it. Can't I just take the stool home and refinish it and put the leg on so it will stay? ""No, put the thing back together, dust it, and bring glue next week to fix the leg." "Should we toss these old grass placemats? "No, those were pads Anna had so Sunday School cadets could sit on the grass; keep them all." "What do I do with these four old letters that were in this drawer?" "Make a note of the names and dates on the envelopes, and put them back where they were. One day when we're done cleaning, we'll open them with clean hands and consider the contents."

So the work proceeded, but occasionally, limited time and primitive facilities dictated work had to be done off the Island. Some items required more water, hot water; others might take uninterrupted hours of close attention. Two such problems we took to our quarters: a cast iron desk set with a crystal inkwell and a Rogers allegorical garden statue. A grease spill on the desk set defied cold water, and the statuette had been doused with leftover house paint. It was easy to get the grease off the desk set with warm soapy water, but it took much tender, tedious scraping to take the white lead out of the curly locks of the plaster cherub--a quick fix of paint remover would have disfigured the plaster. In time, both pieces returned to their spaces on the Island, only to be stolen the next winter by burglars who also made off with one of the high-backed Gothic dining chairs and other unidentified articles. In an effort to prevent such theft, combined efforts each fall prepared the Warner House for the winter by moving outdoor furnishings, closing shutters securely, barricading doors, and transferring vulnerable items to West Point.

Some Recollections of the Constitution Island Association in Its Middle Years

After a few seasons preparation, Mrs. Lewis was delighted that a senior Putnam County resident would be among one of the visiting parties. When she had ushered the gentleman about, he thanked her for the tour, declared he had been there in his younger days, and added, "This has been very nice, but the house doesn't look anything like it did as I remember it..." Taken aback, Genevieve immediately asked, "How so?" In effect, "How have we got it so wrong?" To her great relief, he replied, "Things were never this clean when Anna Warner lived here."

With that encouragement, we carried on. Members with a horticultural bent attempted to recreate Anna Warner's plantings guided by her *Gardening by Myself*, and perhaps succeeded better than Anna had alone. Members sometimes invited unsuspecting houseguests for a day on the Island and promptly made them assistants. Among those so enlisted were two Nicaraguan cadets, Lorenzo and Maximillian Kelly, protégées of Anastasio Samoza and sponsorees of the Lewises. (The Kelly brothers took pleasure in reminding their North American friends that not all Irish had emigrated to Boston or Ellis Island.) They were no idle observers: one afternoon, Max helped Marie decant a fully desiccated mouse from a long-necked glass jar. Such unusual chores lightened the days' work, and there was other comic relief: a passing snake alarming Hilma Robinson and Imogene Dale's squad of gardeners or the search for necessary personal privacy in early spring or late fall when the bushes had few leaves, and nothing compared to ending a day with the sight of Bill Lewis in the launch at low tide boosting ample ladies over the gunnels onto the high dock at Garrison Landing.

Fifty years ago, when one started up the path from Martelaer's Rock toward the silent Warner House, it was still possible to sense the remote privacy that gave Susan and Anna the perspective to write of a wide, wide world from the apparent isolation of the Island. Thoreau's withdrawal to his cabin on Walden Pond produced similar literary stimulation. Today one can no longer experience Thoreau's idyll: Walden is a public park, the pond a bathing beach, but Constitution Island's unique location and military ownership long protected it from a public

Some Recollections of the Constitution Island Association in Its Middle Years

utilization that would disregard the east anchorage of the Revolutionary Chain, the redoubts, and that unique walk from the dock into the genuine past of the carefully curated Warner House. When Marie and I became Life Members of the Constitution Island Association that preservation was its mission; and when we retired from West Point in the 1980's, the singular experience of returning to the Island could still be had.

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