

**Smith-Taylor Cabin:
Shelter Island, NY**

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview: historical & architectural context

The subject of this report, an authentic log and cabin-sided building situated on Taylor's Island (Shelter Island), New York, is listed on the National Register and is significant for two primary reasons: for its association with individuals who contributed to the history of both Long Island and the nation; and for its distinctive architectural features and methods of construction. The building preserves a high degree of architectural integrity and is preserved on its original site. Dating originally from c. 1900, it was built in the Rustic or "Adirondack" style as a small recreational structure, but was later enlarged for use as a habitable dwelling c. 1937.¹ The later additions remain clearly discernable and were evidently constructed to be stylistically compatible with the original log technology which remains visually distinct within the overall massing and composition. Each of the two primary architectural phases embodied by the building is associated with an individual who contributed not only to the history of the locality, but to that of New York State and the nation.

The property, formerly known as Cedar Island, is a small island located in Coecles Harbor measuring 1.188 acres in size. It is situated in the southeasterly section of the Town of Shelter Island, and is owned by the town and maintained as an integral part of the Coecles Harbor Marine Water Trail. It is accessible at low tide from the mainland, where a row of private homes (Mashomack-Coecles Harbor Association) is situated along the harbor's edge. The island faces the large and environmentally significant 2100-acre Mashomack Preserve (The Nature Conservancy). The island rises approximately eight feet above sea level and is surrounded by cast concrete sea walls and bulkheads. It preserves not only the "Adirondack" style log and cabin-sided building, but also a contemporary, rustic rubble-stone well head. Other historic improvements on the island, now lost but preserved in archival photographs, included an original log-built well head and two cabin-sided guest cottages, one of which contained a generator.

The one-story building that remains is irregular in massing and measures approximately 52 feet by 46 feet overall. It is distinguished by a central tower measuring approximately seven feet square in section that rises three stories to a narrow, two-sided balcony overlooking Coecles Harbor. The ground floor of the building incorporates three distinct living areas, the largest of which is a prominent, multi-purpose living space constructed of logs and dating to c. 1900. The adjoining areas, which preserve cabin siding that simulates the appearance of the original authentic log building and later, non-

¹ Although S. Gregory Taylor did not take possession of the island until 1940, it appears that he had begun to make improvements on the building several years before this date, perhaps under a lease agreement with the island's owner(s).

historic vertical planking on some exterior walls, incorporate an entryway, two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a kitchen. These spaces are contemporary in construction and date from when the original building was enlarged, winterized and transformed into both a seasonal and year-round dwelling.

The architectural integrity of the entire building is high, both inside and out, despite the renewal of roofing material, conversion of two banks of windows, and the replacement of cabin siding on the south and west facades with vertical wood siding. Ample physical and photographic evidence is preserved that documents the historic appearances of these facades, and investigation of the interior of the rooms confirms that their architectural detailing is virtually unaltered.

1.2 Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee

Two and a half years ago, on December 6, 2005, the Shelter Island Town Board held a Work Session to discuss funding a plan, outlined in a 30-page document, to demolish the cabin on Taylor's Island and build a *faux* structure. The meeting room was packed with people upset that for a second time there were plans to destroy this historic landmark. (Five years earlier, in response to a less formal proposal to raze the building, the community rallied to save the structure by attending Town Board meetings, writing letters to the Editor of the *Shelter Island Reporter* and circulating petitions.) This time Councilwoman Christine Lewis suggested forming a committee, to be called the Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee, to champion the concern and vision the citizens had for the building. Her suggestion was followed by Supervisor-Elect Alfred J. Kilb, Jr. recommending Richie Surozenski and P.A.T. Hunt as Co-Chairs.

By January 17, 2006 the Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee was complete with members Barbara "Buzz" Clark, Keith Clark, Roni King, Michael Laspia and Town Board liaison Alfred Kilb, Jr. joining Co-Chairs Richie Surozenski and P.A.T. Hunt. The Committee met twice a month through August 2006, and since then meets monthly at the Shelter Island Town Hall with a Town employee, Clerk to the Committees, recording the minutes.

On June 23, 2006 the Town Board designated the Committee as the lead agency to regulate the use, management and reconstruction of Taylor's Island, succeeding The Nature Conservancy with whom the Town had a five-year Memorandum of Understanding (2001-2006). On August 28, 2007 the Town received a grant to complete an historic structure report funded by "Preserve New York," a grant program of the Preservation League of New York State and the New York State Council on the Arts. By the end of September, 2007, the Committee's work with Virginia Bartos of the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Presentation was complete with the Smith-Taylor Cabin being listed with the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places. With that designation, the Town established eligibility for an Environmental Protection Fund grant administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Such an application was submitted on June 30, 2008.

While concentrating on the restoration of the historic Smith-Taylor Cabin, the Town, assisted by the Committee, has also applied for a permit with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to stabilize the perimeter of Taylor's Island, as well as create a kayak landing area.

Some members of the Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee established the Taylor's Island Foundation in 2006 to assist the Town of Shelter Island in restoring, maintaining, and providing public access to Taylor's Island. This tax-exempt corporation has held yearly fundraisers on Taylor's Island, as well as other benefits, and has entered into a long-term lease with the Town of Shelter Island. The Taylor's Island Foundation was incorporated on May 30th, 2006 as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation. Its mission "... is to assist the Town of Shelter Island in fostering,

supporting, and carrying out the restoration, maintenance, and safeguarding of Taylor's Island, its buildings and improvements, the investigation and publication of the history of Taylor's Island, its residents, caretakers and their families, and of its flora, fauna, and ecosystems and the development and provision of educational and recreational programs and services for the public."

The citizens of Shelter Island with the Town Board, the Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee and the Taylor's Island Foundation are working together to fulfill the wishes of S. Gregory Taylor that Taylor's Island be "for the use and enjoyment of the general public."

1.3 Smith-Taylor Cabin: interpretive plan

The Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee began gathering suggested uses for the Smith-Taylor Cabin and Taylor's Island in December 2005, mostly from personal conversations. At the yearly August fundraisers on Taylor's Island a clipboard is passed around with a sheet of paper asking guests to "Please contribute your suggestions, comments, and vision for Taylor's Island." An additional source of input this year, 2008, is from kayakers and others in shallow draft boats who come ashore and are welcomed into the cabin for docent tours, one day each weekend, May through October. One person who summers on Shelter Island sent a letter from his winter home in Washington, DC telling the Committee about the Potomac/Appalachian Trail Club as a possible model.

The Committee reviewed a list of past and present uses gathered from archival photos, newspapers, reminiscences and local knowledge. With a sense of the past and present, the Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee reviewed a two page list of suggested uses at their June 10th meeting. Some suggestions appear frequently on the list. One of those is to offer the cabin for an overnight stay, in a manner similar to the Rose Island Lighthouse in Newport, Rhode Island.

In going through the list line by line, Committee members were easily in agreement. The necessity to limit the number of people and the number of yearly events was apparent. Also it was evident that certain activities required monitoring while others needed the development of a suitable plan. The Committee also considered complementary daytime and nighttime use, accommodating a wide range of visitors, and producing income for the maintenance of the cabin and its environment.

Current uses of Taylor's Island and the Smith-Taylor Cabin include: a landing place on the Coecles Harbor Marine Water Trail, field trip destination for East End schools and a local summer camp, yearly fundraising event, landing place for yacht clubs and cruising clubs anchored nearby, weekly docent tours, May-November.

The future suggested uses the Taylor's Island Preservation and Management Committee and the Taylor's Island Foundation are considering include: overnight stays, meeting and workshop place, retreat place, campsite, wedding ceremony and/or reception. People who would benefit from these uses would include residents of Shelter Island and the East End of Long Island, tourists, community groups, environmentalists, historians, outdoor enthusiasts and to quote from Mr. Taylor's will: "the general public."