

[SPA GETAWAY: treat yourself to all-natural beauty]

# OCEAN HOUSE

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THE MAGAZINE CELEBRATING THE BEST OF WATCH HILL, RHODE ISLAND

## THE INSIDE GUIDE

to shopping,  
eating +  
family fun



# Seaside Style

A RELAXING RETREAT FOR ALL SEASONS

by DINAH SAGLIO



# Sailing Back in Time

**THE HISTORIC  
WEEKAPAUG INN  
WILL REOPEN NEXT  
YEAR AFTER A  
TOP-TO-BOTTOM  
RENOVATION,  
EMERGING AS A  
CLASSIC EAST  
COAST RETREAT  
THAT FEELS A  
WORLD AWAY**

Rhode Island's coast has been regarded as one of the most beautiful places to spend the summer since visitors began vacationing there following the end of the Civil War. From Newport to Watch Hill, visitors stayed in the famous seaside hotels and enjoyed evenings of dancing and busy social schedules. However, many visitors and local families also wanted an escape from formal occasions and the bustle of the city, and they flocked to communities like Weekapaug, Rhode Island. With quiet beaches and a lack of crowds, Weekapaug was a popular destination for picnics, and in 1877, the first nine summer cottages were built by families including Phebe and Frederick C. Buffum, who resided in Briars Cottage.

In 1899 the Buffums recognized that Weekapaug needed to be shared and that an inn would offer vacationers something different from what they could find in surrounding towns; it could also function as a center of the community. While





**ABOVE** The original Weekapaug Inn

many hotels were being built quickly and not very solidly at this time, the Weekapaug Inn stood out as a place of quality. The original inn was a Cape Cod-style building that accommodated 30 guests. The Buffums embodied traditional innkeepers; they welcomed each guest as if he or she were an old friend and said good-bye at the end of the stay.

Over the years, many additions were made to the Weekapaug Inn, and by 1905 it could accommodate more than 100 guests, albeit with communal bathrooms and minimalist décor. The pace was pleasantly slow there, with long summer days filled with bingo games, clambakes, tennis matches on the inn's clay courts, picnics, and, especially, sailing on the pond.

In September of 1938 tragedy struck in the form of a powerful hurricane that caused an immense loss of life along the Eastern Seaboard. The storm also decimated most of the cottages in Weekapaug and destroyed the entire west wing of the inn. As a result, the Buffums decided to relocate the inn along the west end of Quonochontaug Pond. Architect Ralph Doane of Boston designed it, and the inn reopened with rooms for 100 guests, plus "The Bridge," where many teenagers slept dormitory-style. Louvered doors allowed air to flow through the building but offered little privacy for guests. However, the private bathrooms and sprinkler systems were cutting-edge at the time!

Guests staying at the inn were on the "American Plan"



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
 Guests sit in the sun at the original inn; the historic bathhouse; bocce ball on the lawn; fine dining; a few of the many cottages destroyed in the hurricane of 1938; female staff in the 1950s wore pink uniforms with white caps and aprons.

which included three meals a day. This required the chefs to create more than 40 entrées each week and serve a lunch buffet to give the staff an occasional break.

In the 1970s, several guest cottages were added, along with a deck above the expanded dining room and a large bottle club room where, during cocktail hour, guests could make their own drinks from bottles kept in an adjacent space. The bottle club room was revolutionary, as the hotel had never served alcohol due to the fact that the Buffums were Quakers when they built the hotel. Previously, guests brought their own bottles, and rooms were stocked with glasses and ice. The bellboys spent much of the predinner time period filling ice requests, but there had never been a public space where

drinking was permitted.

The inn continued to be a family favorite and a cornerstone of the Weekapaug community. Bocce became the game of choice in the 1980s, and sailing remained the way many guests passed their summer days. However, time took a toll on the building, and although the newest generation of the Buffum family planned to make renovations, they were eventually forced to close the inn in 2007.

In 2010, Weekapaug resident Lang Wheeler and Watch Hill resident Chuck Royce stepped in with a new plan to renovate the inn and make it an asset for the community, as well as a reflection of the traditional values that had grounded it for over a century. Wheeler's family had spent summers in



**TOP** The current building will look much the same as the original, with only the outbuildings changing significantly. **INSET** The inn as it looked when it was built in 1939

round hotel that also serves the community.

Now under construction, the inn's original 67 rooms will become 27 guest rooms plus four two-bedroom residential units, for a total of 35 bedrooms. Other additions include a three-lane, 75-foot lap pool connecting to a fitness center in the area where the tennis courts were previously located. To entice guests to enjoy the romance of winter in New England, rooms will have bathrooms with heated floors, and real wood fireplaces will burn in the public spaces.

Wheeler is also planning to update the restaurant to offer sophisticated but familiar foods, with a focus on local ingredients. While all of the details are not yet set in stone, Wheeler is certain that the price of each room will at least include breakfast, and the full American Plan may also be offered as an option. "It was the glue that created the sense of community the inn previously enjoyed" said Wheeler. "However, as many of today's travelers like variety, we know that there will have to be adjustments."

Wheeler hopes that the local community will embrace the inn as the "community parlor." The public space includes a

restaurant, the first bar in the inn's history, and several parlor spaces. Wheeler would like Weekapaug and area locals to see the inn as a place to come for dinner or a drink and also as a meeting spot. Wheeler imagines guests "looking east down Quonochontaug Pond and watching the moon rise."

Another key asset of the original inn, and the community, was the bath houses. They have been torn down, but the plan is to rebuild something evocative of the old bath houses in the footprint. The new structure will consist of about 30 large lockers, accessible by key 24 hours a day, in which locals can store beach equipment. The interior will house four changing rooms, each with a toilet and shower. There will also be a small serving counter to provide drinks and snacks for guests.

The new inn will honor the long tradition of sailing on Quonochontaug Pond. The owners are currently restoring one of the old Beetlecats, and they plan to have kayaks and canoes available. Bocce will also return, along with weekly clambakes.

Wheeler is excited about opening the inn for the old guests, and also looking forward to bringing in a new energy. "We want to re-create that personal touch as well as the low-maintenance feel without sacrificing the comforts that our guests expect on vacation or the values of the community. We hope that the Weekapaug Inn reflects the best of what our seaside community has to offer."