

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

DRAFT

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name John Steinbeck Cottage

other names/site number _____

name of related multiple property listing _____

Location

street & number 2 Bluff Point Lane ☐ not for publication

city or town Sag Harbor ☐ vicinity

state New York code NY county Suffolk code 103 zip code 11963

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

X national statewide X local

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official _____ Date _____

Title _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

 entered in the National Register determined eligible for the National Register

 determined not eligible for the National Register removed from the National Register

 other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____

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Name of Property

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | private |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | public - Local |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | public - State |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | public - Federal |

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | building(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | district |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | site |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | structure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | object |

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
4	0	buildings
0	0	sites
2	0	structures
0	0	objects
6	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

DOMESTIC/secondary structure

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

DOMESTIC/writer's retreat and residency
program

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS/Bungalow

NO STYLE

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: CONCRETE/Block; BRICK

walls: WOOD/Shingle

roof: ASPHALT; WOOD/Shingle

other: STONE; BRICK

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The John Steinbeck Cottage is located at 2 Bluff Point Lane on a 1.29-acre parcel situated at the westerly tip of Bluff Point in the village of Sag Harbor, Suffolk County, New York. The property is zoned “R-20 Residence” (single family, detached dwelling on a minimum of 20,000 square feet). It is bounded by water on two sides—Morris Cove to the south and Upper Sag Harbor Cove to the west—and contains six contributing resources (four buildings and two structures). All resources from the period of Steinbeck’s ownership and occupancy (1955-1968) survive and include the main house (cottage) (ca. 1930), dock (ca. 1930), garage/workshop (1955), writer’s studio (1958), guest cottage (1962), and swimming pool (1965). The property maintains all aspects of integrity, and no buildings or structures have been added or removed from the property since Steinbeck’s death in 1968.

Narrative Description

Location and Setting

Sag Harbor Village and Bluff Point

Sag Harbor Village is located 100 miles east of New York City on the South Fork of Long Island, which is bordered on the south by the Atlantic Ocean, north by the Great and Little Peconic Bays, Gardiner’s Bay and Block Island Sound. Montauk Point is the South Fork’s eastern terminus. Sag Harbor’s location on the north side of the South Fork facing Sag Harbor Bay is protected by an irregular coastline and Gardiner’s Island to the east, which together with its natural deepwater harbor, were two geographical factors that led to its prominence in long-distance whaling and maritime commerce in its formative years. The village was incorporated in 1846 and straddles two Long Island towns – Southampton and East Hampton – with an historic wharf that stretches into Sag Harbor Bay and aligns with the subdivision between the two towns. The downtown area preserves a significant concentration of late eighteenth through early twentieth century residential, commercial, and industrial architecture that was entered in the National Register of Historic Places as the “Sag Harbor Historic District” in 1974. The historic district boundaries were further enlarged in 1993. The Old Whalers’ Church, a contributing resource in the historic district and designed by New York architect Minard Lafever in 1844 in the Egyptian Revival style, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1994. And the Old Burying Ground, opened in 1767, was the site of a British redoubt and the scene of the Battle of Sag Harbor, a skirmish between

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Lt. Col. Return Jonathan Meigs and occupying enemy forces that resulted in the capture of 90 British soldiers in May 1777. The village is a Certified Local Government and a vibrant year-round community that has a large seasonal and second-home population dating from the early to mid-1900s, as represented by the John Steinbeck House on Bluff Point.

Bluff Point is one of three necks of land that project into a series of coves which characterize the westerly edge of Sag Harbor Village, the others being Long Point to the south/west, and Redwood (formerly Brush Neck) to the north/west. Bluff Point and Long Point were both part of the 1930 subdivision known as Nunna Koma Park that laid out streets and narrow residential lots sited and promoted for building summer cottages (Figures #7 and #8). The John Steinbeck House is one of those cottages. Redwood, which is considerably larger than either Bluff Point or Long Point, was also well suited for planned residential development but its subdivision was undertaken without the infrastructure of roads to support it. As a result, the land remained unimproved, evolving only gradually in later decades with summer homes built on a lot-by-lot basis, unaided by a unified marketing plan like that of the Nunna Koma Park development or its successor, Beach Haven.

Historic maps illustrate the uninhabited necks of land that extended to the west of the village. The 1838 U.S. Coast Survey *Map No. 71* of "Peconic Bay from Noyack to Sag Harbor" provides a detailed view of the area, with houses scattered along the main roads closer to the village but none erected on the three necks themselves. The 1854 Wall & Forrest *Map of Sag Harbor* illustrates the same condition, whereas the 1878 Beers, Comstock & Cline *Atlas of Long Island* (Plate 188) shows the beginning of roadways approaching Bluff and Long Points, and one new road bisecting Brush Neck with a house labeled "J. Foster" near the end of it. But E. Belcher Hyde's 1902 *Atlas of Suffolk County, Volume 1* (Plate 6) no longer shows the roadway on Brush Neck, which may have been a private drive, and roads have yet to reach the other points of land. Hyde's 1916 *Atlas of Suffolk County, Volume 2* (Plate 8) illustrates a house belonging to "Dr. Martin" on Brush Neck and Long Point belonging to "H. Donner" but no roadways. And Dolph & Stewart's 1929 *Atlas of Suffolk County* (Page 26) records Dr. Martin's continued ownership of Brush Neck, as well as a new owner on Long Point – "CA. Jundt" – who soon after developed both Long and Bluff Points with roadways and residential lots. Charles Jundt's "Subdivision Map of Park Nunna Koma (On the Shore)" was filed in 1930 with the Suffolk County Clerk. The Steinbeck property comprises seven parallel lots in Charles Jundt's subdivision, each measuring twenty-five-feet-wide and numbered 59 through 65 on the 1930 Nunna Koma map, and one larger, adjacent lot corresponding to the southerly half of the parcel labeled "Bluff Point." These lot lines survive on the current

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survey of the property, in which the main house is centered on Lots 63, 64, and 65. The dock extends into Morris Cove from Lot 63.

Steinbeck Property

The Steinbeck property is relatively level and grassy, and slopes gently downward toward the waterfront on its north, south, and west sides from a high point of fifteen feet above sea level. A cliff that drops about ten feet to the water's edge borders the south and west sides, whereas the northwest corner where the guest cottage is located slopes more gradually to the water's edge. The site preserves widely scattered, mature trees and foundation plantings located at the main house and garage/workshop. Narrow brick paths laid in herringbone pattern connect the main house with the garage/workshop and guest cottage, and a rectangular brick patio extends at grade level from the west side of the house. The property is accessed via Bluff Point Lane, an extension of Bluff Point Road, which forms its northeast boundary. Chain link fencing borders the property to the north and connects the garage/workshop with the main house.

The surrounding neighborhood is bordered by Upper Sag Harbor Cove to the north and Morris Cove to the south and adjacent properties are bisected by Bluff Point Lane, each having a view of the water. The neighborhood is residential in character, with predominantly larger and newer single-family homes occupying heavily landscaped lots that average between one quarter to one half acre in size. The Steinbeck property, which encompasses 1.29 acres, is the largest in the neighborhood and enjoys views of Long Point to the south across Morris Cove and Brush Neck to the west across the Little Narrows and Upper Sag Harbor Cove. The property was conveyed by John P. Kennedy and his wife Alice LeCa. Kennedy to John E. Steinbeck on April 4, 1955, and described by the local newspaper as "parcel n s Bluff Point Lane and lots 59 to 65, sect. A. Bluff Point, Sag Harbor."¹

Steinbeck lost little time after 1955 in improving the Bluff Point property to suit his and his family's needs. He acquired the acreage with only the house and dock, both of which are situated near the center of the property on what had been defined as Lots 63, 64 and 65 on the original subdivision map of 1930. The large, adjoining "Bluff Point" parcel to the west was yet unimproved. Over the following decade, Steinbeck built the garage/workshop (1955), writer's studio (1958), guest cottage (1962) and swimming pool (1965) on this part of the property. Each of these improvements reflected his needs as an artist, husband and father: the garage/workshop serving multiple purposes by garaging his car, providing workspace for projects and a space

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for writing until the studio was built; the writer's studio "Joyous Garde" where he escaped to write and avoid distractions in the house; a guest cottage where his sons would stay when they came to visit; and a swimming pool that he gave to his wife Elaine for her birthday.

Main House (Cottage), constructed ca. 1930

Contributing primary building

The main house, while the largest building on the Steinbeck property, is a relatively small, compact cottage of one story measuring approximately thirty-eight-feet-wide by twenty-nine-feet-long (Photographs #1 & #2). Its rectangular footprint is extended in length by nine additional feet in the northeast corner. The house is situated near the center of the 1.29-acre property and located approximately forty feet north of the wooden dock that extends at an angle into Morris Cove.

The frame building is wood-shingled (seven inches to the weather) and supported on a block foundation, with a partial basement accessible from the exterior via a Bilco type door on the east elevation. The gable roof is covered with composition shingles and oriented east-west, the ridge aligning with the center of the building. A stone chimney rises through the roof ridge slightly to the east of center, and a secondary brick chimney is set against the east (kitchen) elevation.

The façade is oriented to the west and dominated at the center by a pair of French doors with glazed side panels surmounted by two multi-paned transom windows. A single six-over-six window and bank of four, single-pane windows flank the doorway to its left and right, respectively. The south elevation, which faces Morris Cove, retains a row of six, vertical single-pane windows matching those of the façade and a glazed door at the east end that gives access to a shallow wooden deck and steps to the ground. The north elevation, which faces Bluff Point Lane and serves as an entry to the building, retains three, six-over-six windows and a paneled door leading to a small entry foyer lit by a skylight. The east elevation retains three six-over-six sash windows on the first floor and one on the attic level that lights the sleeping loft. The east elevation also houses exterior utilities: the brick chimney that vents the cooking stove, an outdoor shower, and an oil tank in addition to the basement entry.

¹ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 3872, Page 59; East Hampton *Star*, May 12, 1955.

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The interior of the building is organized around a central living space dominated by an original stone chimney and fireplace constructed of rounded fieldstones (Photographs #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, & #8). The room and chimney rise to the roof frame, whose wooden rafters and roof sheathing is exposed. A sleeping loft accessible via a circular staircase to the right of the chimney is located behind the chimney. An eating area and kitchen occupy the floorplan that faces Morris Cove (south) and bedrooms and bathrooms are located on the opposite side, facing north. While the structure of the building including the wood frame and stone chimney remain as built during Steinbeck's ownership, architectural features such as flooring, windows and doors, and wood trim appear to have been altered and updated over time.

When compared with the massing and exterior appearance of the "typical" bungalows illustrated in the Nunna Koma Park promotional booklet, the house appears to have been enlarged along the north side. Where the profile of its roof is now symmetrical, the original bungalows were built with a gable roof that flattened to a lower pitch along only one side. The explanation for this alteration may be found in a newspaper account in 1947, in which the prior owners "Mr. and Mrs. John P. Kennedy of Douglaston were down Monday to inspect construction work recently completed on their bungalow on Bluff Point by Ray Bassenden."² The scope of work appears to have been that of enlarging the footprint of the house by twelve feet along the north elevation, which added two bedrooms and a bathroom, and accounts for why the north entry is now recessed. This work also explains why the north elevation is longer than the south and has a nine-by-twelve-foot extension at the northeast corner. Photographs taken during Steinbeck's ownership show the house in its present configuration. In his published letters, the writer provides occasional descriptions or incidents that give insight into the construction or use of the buildings or structures during his ownership. Soon after moving into the cottage, for example, Steinbeck wrote to his wife Elaine on July 5, 1955, that:

I really love it out here. Am going to winterize this little house so I can come up when it is cold. My little harbor freezes over and then you fish through the ice. The house needs double walls and an oil furnace but I'll do a lot of it myself.³

Before discovering that the house was too small to accommodate both his family members and his writing simultaneously, however, Steinbeck made arrangements to facilitate his writing in the house, as in this reference to editor Elizabeth Otis from Sag Harbor on January 3, 1957:

² *Sag Harbor Express*, March 13, 1947.

³ Steinbeck and Wallsten, *A Life in Letters*, 506.

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The bay is nearly all frozen over with just a few patches of open water and as the tide rises and falls the crushing ice makes a strange singing sound. I've moved my card table to the front window with the telescope beside it so if anything goes on I can tompeep it.⁴

Dock, constructed ca. 1930

Contributing structure

The dock extends approximately 60 feet into Morris Cove from a frame deck at the water's edge which is attached to a wooden bulkhead (Photographs #18 & #19). The dock is supported on eight pairs of wooden pilings measuring about ten inches in diameter and spaced approximately eight feet apart. The dock is five-feet-wide and floored with three-by-ten-inch planks.

Garage/Workshop, constructed 1955

Contributing secondary building

The garage/workshop, a one-story frame building sided with wood shingles, is located five feet from and parallel to the north property boundary (Photograph #17). The building measures approximately thirty-seven-feet-long by twenty-feet-wide. It preserves a wide garage door, painted white, with a concrete apron on the east elevation and a secondary garage door, also painted white, with a brick apron on the south elevation. The front, easterly section faces Bluff Point Lane beneath a wood-shingled gable roof and serves as a garage whereas the rear, westerly section is covered with a flat pitched roof and appears to have been added to the front section to serve as a workshop. A pair of six-over-six sash windows is located on the south elevation and light the larger garage area. There are no windows on the north elevation.

The building served briefly as Steinbeck's writing studio while Joyous Garde was under construction, as referenced in the following letter to Elizabeth Otis on July 9, 1958:

I am working in the garage until my new workroom is completed and it is good.⁵

Writer's Studio, constructed 1958

⁴ Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters*, 543.

⁵ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 593.

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Contributing secondary building

Steinbeck nicknamed his writer's studio "Joyous Garde" in honor of Launcelot's castle in Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The tiny building is hexagonal in shape and was conceived as a private workspace in which Steinbeck could concentrate on his writing, away from family distractions (Photographs #11 & #12). It is in the southwest corner of the property, about twelve feet above the high-water mark and two feet from the edge of the cliff that drops to the water's edge.

The one-story frame building is sided with V-jointed vertical boards set beneath pairs of six-lite, casement windows that occupy five of the six sides. The remaining side contains a pair of glazed and paneled doors. Each of the exterior walls is approximately five-feet-wide and seven-feet-high, and the roof is covered with composition shingles. The tiny building, which Steinbeck likened to a "lighthouse" perhaps because of the extant lighthouses he discovered on eastern Long Island, is set on a brick platform that extends approximately two feet beyond the walls of the building on all sides. A small concrete pad embedded in the bricks at the foot of the entry doors is inscribed with copper nail heads that spell "AROYNT" (i.e., be gone; go away!) (Photograph #13).

The interior of the studio measures approximately eight feet in diameter. The floor is of poured concrete and the walls are exposed, uninsulated wood framing and lined with shelving made of salvaged boards beneath the window openings (Photograph #14). The ceiling is open to the undersurface of the roof, which is framed with two-by-fours and sheathed with V-jointed boards.

Guest Cottage, constructed 1962

Contributing secondary building

The one-story building located in the northwest corner of the property is a small, frame and wood-shingled guest cottage that measures approximately ten-feet-wide by twelve-feet-long (Photographs #15 & #16). The building is supported on a block foundation above a crawlspace that is vented on the side and rear elevations. A brick walkway extends several feet out from the front door and continues to the back of the building along the southwest side and to the garage/workshop located approximately 100 feet to the east. The gable roof is covered with wood shingles and preserves a decorative louvered cupola centered on the ridge. The entry façade faces southeast and is angled toward the center of the property, with a four-lite glazed and paneled front door

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surmounted by a shallow, decorative wooden trellis. A bank of three, six-over six sash windows occupy the southwest elevation and a single, six-over-six window is located on the northeast elevation.

The guest cottage was constructed in 1962, according to this newspaper reference:

Author Steinbeck must be here to stay for he's just completed a new addition on his property. It's called Grossinger's East and it serves as a bunkhouse for sons Thom and John.⁶

By 1962, sons Thom (Thomas) and John IV were ages eighteen and sixteen, respectively, and building a guest cottage to accommodate them during their visits augmented the limited space in the main house.⁷

Swimming Pool, constructed 1965

Contributing structure

The pool was installed in 1965 and is an irregular oblong in shape and surrounded by a narrow brick path and coping (Photographs #9). It measures approximately thirty-feet-long by fifteen-feet-wide and is situated near the center of the property, about equidistant from the north and south property lines, and approximately twenty-five feet distant from the brick patio on the west side of the house and seventy-five feet from the southerly edge of the property. According to one of Steinbeck's letters, he gave his wife Elaine "a little swimming pool" on August 12, 1965 and "made a stepping stone and incised it with Launcelot's last words to Gwinevere—'Ladye, I take recoorde of God, in thee I have myn erthly joye.'" His inscription remains embedded in a cement pad set in the ground next to the pool (Photograph #10).⁸

Within a year of its construction, Steinbeck experienced the problem of ducks invading the swimming pool. In a letter to his editor Elizabeth Otis on June 22, 1966, he wrote that:

⁶ *Sag Harbor Express*, November 8, 1962

⁷ Steinbeck's penchant for nicknaming things—from buildings (e.g., "Joyous Garde") to people (e.g., in *The Winter of Our Discontent*) and even suits—was notorious and indicative of his irreverent sense of humor. In this instance, the reference to "Grossinger's" is to the legendary summer resort located in the Catskill Mountains in the Town of Liberty: Grossinger's Catskill Resort Hotel. Originating in the early 1900s as a kosher establishment catering to a Jewish clientele from New York City, Grossinger's grew from a small family business to encompass over 35 buildings and a dining room that accommodated 1,300 guests. With this nickname for the guest cottage, Steinbeck's ironic humor is on full display.

⁸ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 829.

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We have been plagued with wild ducks getting in the swimming pool and getting it filthy. A couple of days ago, though, I mounted a 10-gauge cannon over the pool with a trigger-string going into the house. When six ducks got in the pool I pulled the string and the great explosion went over their heads. Well, you never saw such a reaction. A kind of heart failure set in. They got up in the air and flew in flip-flops, beating the air and getting nowhere. Two or three more shots and they may take the hint. Word may be passed in the duck kingdom they are not popular in our pool.⁹

⁹ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 833-834.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☒ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LITERATURE

Period of Significance

1955-1968

Significant Dates

1955

1962

1968

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

John Steinbeck (builder)

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Summary Paragraphs

The John Steinbeck House, located at 2 Bluff Point Lane, Sag Harbor, Suffolk County, New York, is significant under National Register **Criterion B** in the area of **Literature** for its association with the last period of American writer John Steinbeck's (1902-1968) life and literary career.¹⁰ Steinbeck and his wife Elaine owned and occupied the house and property from 1955 until his death on December 10, 1968. It was during these later years in his writing career (1955-1968) that Steinbeck wrote his last three critically acclaimed books—*The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), and *America and Americans* (1966)—the first earning him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962. *The Winter of Our Discontent* reaffirmed Steinbeck's reputation as a writer of international renown and significance. His writing studio, where he worked on all three of the Sag Harbor "trilogy," is a hexagonal structure of his own design nicknamed "Joyous Garde," which remains standing among five other contributing buildings and structures on the nominated property.

In addition to the main house, which is a modest summer cottage that was previously owned by John P. and Alice LeCa. Kennedy until Steinbeck's acquisition, the property includes three buildings and two structures, all dating from his occupancy from 1955 until 1968. The three additional contributing buildings are the writer's studio referenced above, a small guest cottage, and a garage/workshop that preserves storage cabinets, tools, and ephemera associated with the writer. The two structures are a dock and a swimming pool, the latter being a birthday gift from Steinbeck to his wife Elaine in 1965. No buildings or structures have been added or removed since Steinbeck's death in 1968.

The location of the John Steinbeck House in Sag Harbor is especially significant in his writing career because the history, people, and culture of the village inspired him to create the fictional village of New Baytown as a setting for the themes and characters who appear in his award-winning novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). The story about an impoverished grocery store clerk, the descendant of a once-prominent Long Island family, and his struggle with a corrupt society and the psychological turmoil over maintaining his honesty and integrity is at the heart of the plot. Far from being a departure from his earlier novels that were set on the West

¹⁰ Steinbeck's house at 16250 Greenwood Lane in Monte Sereno, California, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1989. While residing at the Greenwood Lane property from 1936 to 1938, Steinbeck wrote two of his most significant works, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Steinbeck's birthplace and boyhood home at 132 Central Avenue in Salinas, California, was also listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. These properties represent Steinbeck's early life and

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Coast, such as the *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *East of Eden* (1952), *The Winter of Our Discontent* is regarded by contemporary Steinbeck scholar Richard E. Hart as demonstrating a “bi-coastal odyssey from birth to death... a man and artist who had come full circle, returning to the wellsprings of his creativity and personal contentment.”¹¹

Steinbeck’s decision to buy a second home in the waterfront village of Sag Harbor on eastern Long Island, after he had relocated to New York City from the West Coast in 1945, is viewed by critics and biographers as both logical and fortunate. Far from abandoning the scenes and sources that informed his earlier fiction, Steinbeck discovered a comparable location in Sag Harbor in which to live and write. The East Coast village was not only reminiscent of the familiar Salinas Valley and Monterey, California towns of his youth, but was also a place that was animated with historic themes and authentic characters that re-ignited his imagination. The significance of the John Steinbeck House in Sag Harbor is therefore due to the resource that the village served in Steinbeck’s writing, and for the fact that the place provided him with inspiration and a quiet retreat in which to pursue his late writing career.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Architectural Context

The John Steinbeck House is a small summer cottage or bungalow that exhibits the scale, massing and detailing of a seasonal dwelling type that was popular in resort areas across Long Island from the 1930s until the 1950s. One story high beneath a gable roof and sided with clapboards or wood shingles, the typical bungalow was originally unheated and often organized around a disproportionately large, central living area with two adjoining bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom. Sometimes, as in the case of the Steinbeck cottage, a sleeping loft was also tucked under the rafters. This house type was usually built with little, or no basement and some examples include a screened porch to the side.

The architectural character of the bungalow is often associated with a “rustic” interior designed to differ from that of a year-round home. Exposed and varnished structural framing and trim, and especially an exposed stone

career, and the influence of California on his writing, whereas the Sag Harbor property embodies his later literary career and the impact of Sag Harbor upon it.

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or brick chimney column rising to the rafters in the central living area, struck a visual contrast with more typical year-round home interiors of the day. The most important characteristic, however, was simplicity. That, and of course a naturalistic setting. The purpose of a summer cottage or bungalow – which later purchasers like John and Elaine Steinbeck oftentimes converted to year-round use – was to provide access to recreation and an immersive experience in the environment. On Long Island, with its miles of beaches and water frontage on the Atlantic Ocean, Long Island Sound, and countless bays and coves, the appeal of having a summer place was the opportunity to escape from urban or suburban living, and to have close access to beaches, boating, fishing, and all their related recreational activities.

The summer colony named “Nunna Koma Park” in which the John Steinbeck House is located was designed to provide these recreational amenities. The promoter’s brochure describes the community as “a restricted colony ideally located directly on the water offering every facility for summer enjoyment at moderate cost” (Figures #7 & #8). Home lots are shaded by “tall and stately oak and elm trees [that] cast their inviting shade over the Park” while “sparkling waters surround the properties [and] enfold their share of pleasures for young and old – swimming, canoeing, sailboating, rowing and fishing.” After establishing how accessible the community is from New York City, especially because of the convenient location of the railroad’s Sag Harbor-Noyack station, the brochure provides examples of summer recreation as well as images of model bungalows.

The John Steinbeck House was evidently one of those model cottages which epitomized the ideal summer house of its day. Its modest scale, when compared to the large summer “cottages” of wealthy families found in nearby oceanfront communities like Southampton and East Hampton, was designed to accommodate middle class buyers with smaller purses, but who sought the same recreational amenities and relief from city life as their richer counterparts. The scale and seclusion that the house and its setting offered were evidently well suited to Steinbeck’s temperament and need for privacy.

Historic Context

Sag Harbor has always been a port town. Early Southampton Town settlers discovered it in the late seventeenth century, and by 1707 the place became known as the “Port at Sagg.” Its natural, deep-water harbor attracted ships engaged in coastal trading, and later sent whale ships and trading vessels around the globe. The nineteenth century

¹¹ Richard E. Hart is Professor of Applied Ethics and Philosophy Humanities Division, Bloomfield College, Bloomfield, NJ, and has written and lectured extensively about Steinbeck. His article “John Steinbeck and Sag Harbor” (n.d.) argues for the significance of the

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brought more change with the end of whaling in the 1850s and the rise of tourism, which transformed the village into a summer destination within reach of New York City via steamship and railroad. As the port and its commerce flourished, the year-round population developed an economy based on building and servicing ships, importing and exporting goods, and manufacturing products that depended on access to raw materials. Hats, watches, and silverware were produced and exported from Sag Harbor and the people who made them, oftentimes immigrants from Europe, brought their language and customs to the village and enriched its culture in the process. Today, Sag Harbor reflects this vibrant history in its architecture, summer tourism, and diverse population.

It was long-distance whaling, however, that impacted Sag Harbor's history and economy more than any other industry and established the tiny village on eastern Long Island as one of America's premier centers of whaling in the early to mid-nineteenth century. What began as "off-shore whaling" in the seventeenth century, which was pursued by Southampton Town's earliest settlers with the assistance of native inhabitants, evolved over time into a *bona fide* industry that sent ships out on long distance voyages equipped with onboard try pots capable of rendering whales' blubber into oil and collecting whale bone while at sea. Industrial whaling at this scale developed in Sag Harbor, Nantucket, and New Bedford before the American Revolution; Sag Harbor's inaugural voyages took place in 1760.¹² Allowing for the disruptions of the Revolution and the War of 1812, the industry flourished, and whale ships sailed farther and farther from home port. A Sag Harbor vessel, for example, was the first to reach the southern latitudes in 1785, and by the early 1800s, the *Hope* and *Lucy*—both Sag Harbor whale ships—were sailing the coast of Brazil. The growing wealth that resulted from long-distance whaling was enjoyed not only by ship owners and captains, but also by tradespeople who serviced the ships: sail and rope makers, painters and caulkers, provisioners and insurers, and whaleboat makers. Hotels and boardinghouses sprung up to accommodate crews and travelers, and fees were collected in the form of customs duties for goods imported into the village after Sag Harbor was declared a Port of Entry in 1789.

The whaling industry and the prosperity that Sag Harbor experienced in the nineteenth century were of great interest to Steinbeck, who had witnessed the decline and aftermath of a different and later whaling industry—machine-processing whale carcasses into fertilizer, soap, and other products—as a young man in Monterey, California. His visit to the newly restored Custom House in 1953, when he and Elaine first began searching for a summer place in Sag

writer's Sag Harbor period in his late career and appears as Appendix A.

¹² Zaykowski, *Sag Harbor: The Story of an American Beauty*, 81.

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Harbor, indicates his early interest in its local history.¹³ Steinbeck scholars like Richard E. Hart (see: Appendix A) and Nathaniel Philbrick have identified the strong connection that Steinbeck felt for the community and surrounding region, whose whaling history evoked memories of his early life and writing career.¹⁴

The historic context that defined Sag Harbor leading up to and during Steinbeck's life in Sag Harbor (1955-1968), however, reflects broader regional and national themes that became manifest on a local level. These themes include the aftermath of the Great Depression and the economic recovery that followed World War II; the impact of suburbanization on Long Island; the loss of tourism that was based on traditional modes of transportation – steamboats and railroads – as car ownership and superhighways defined a new mode of travel; and the effects of a diverse ethnic and religious population. These themes illustrate a changing America and find expression in Steinbeck's later writing, especially in *The Winter of Our Discontent*, where the author writes that "other towns not too far away grew and prospered on other products and energies, but New Baytown [e.g., Sag Harbor], whose whole living force had been in square-rigged ships and whales, sank into torpor. The snake of population crawling out from New York passed New Baytown by, leaving it to its memories."

Beginning with its gradual recovery from the Great Depression (1929-1939), which impacted Sag Harbor's economy negatively through the closure of small local businesses and large employers such as Fahys' Watch Case Factory (1931) and B. Aptheke & Son's rayon factory (1937), the village experienced only modest growth in the post-war years. Despite these economic factors – and in response to the threat of suburbanization – a significant movement took hold among local residents in the post-war years that may be described as "civic pride," a re-discovery of the community's history and a collective desire to identify and preserve its unique heritage and sense of place. This phenomenon was demonstrated in numerous ways, notably in the creation of the Suffolk County Whaling Museum and the publication of historian and preservationist Nancy Boyd Willy's *Guidebook to Sag Harbor* (1945); preservation of the Customs House by the Old Sagg-Harbour Committee (1948); formation of the local American Legion Post (1949) and meeting hall (1954); creation of the annual Old Whalers' Festival (1963); and construction of a replica windmill on the Village wharf by the Chamber of Commerce to serve as a visitor's center for summer tourists (1966).

¹³ *Sag Harbor Express*, October 1, 1953.

¹⁴ Philbrick, "The Whaling Town and America," *passim*.

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While tourism played an important role in the history of Sag Harbor after the mid-nineteenth and into the early decades of the twentieth century, the significance of this national pastime was greatly diminished in the post-WWII decades due to factors beyond the village's control. Historic modes of transportation, first sailing vessels and then steam-powered pleasure boats that plied Long Island Sound, had brought large numbers of vacationers to Sag Harbor and other eastern Long Island destinations in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The Long Island Rail Road also reached the village in 1870, facilitating travel and as a result, hotels, and boardinghouses – often converted from larger, one-family dwellings – became numerous. The local economy boomed as a result. But with the invention and eventual affordability of the automobile by the 1930s, vacationing “took to the road” and rendered steamboats and railroad lines that had catered to summer travelers obsolete. Construction of intersecting parkways across Long Island enabled access to destinations in Nassau and western Suffolk counties, but not to the eastern villages at this early date. Significantly, the Sag Harbor railroad spur was abandoned in 1939. As a result, Sag Harbor remained a back-water port town with small bay beaches and a year-round population that earned its living for the most part in the factories and industries it attracted in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Another factor that shaped the history of Sag Harbor in this period was the ethnic and racial diversity of its population. While residents of African and Native American descent had always been integral to the community, immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Eastern Europe were attracted to the village in the late nineteenth century by its employment opportunities. After the decline of the “whale fishery” in the 1850s, local entrepreneurs and village leaders built manufactories and attracted large industries to Sag Harbor to rebuild its economy. Cotton and flour milling, brickmaking and a pottery works began the trend. By the end of the nineteenth century, Joseph Fahys' Watch Case Factory and the Alvin Silver Company provided not only employment for local residents but also brought skilled immigrants to augment the workforce. Large Jewish and Catholic populations developed around these and other enterprises, resulting in a mix of ethnicities unlike any other community on Long Island at the time.

These themes – the society in flux, a sense of place, economic uncertainty, immigration – all appealed to Steinbeck's deep interest in American history and contemporary culture, as well as his social conscience, insatiable curiosity, and apprehension for a changing America. In Sag Harbor and its local residents, the writer discovered an authentic American village that exhibited many of the symptoms that alarmed yet fascinated him about America, and that he explored in his writing. As historian Philbrick points out:

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As a community stuck in a cultural cul-de-sac, New Baytown [Sag Harbor] exemplifies what Steinbeck would describe... in *America and Americans* as a nationwide malaise: “We have reached the end of the road and have no path to take, no duty to carry out, and no purpose to fulfill.”¹⁵

Not surprisingly, the village of Sag Harbor—its history, culture and people—served Steinbeck as a rich resource and fertile ground for his imagination and creativity during his late writing career while living at Bluff Point.

Geographical Context: Bluff Point

Sag Harbor Village sits on the northerly shore of Long Island’s south fork, facing Sag Harbor Bay to the north and Gardiners Bay to the east. Its geographical boundaries straddle two Long Island towns, East Hampton and Southampton, with Division Street defining the separation. While a majority of the village is either concentrated around a commercial district near the water or in residential neighborhoods that stretch to the south and east from the waterfront, there are three small land masses—Redwood (formerly Brush Neck), Bluff Point and Long Point—that extend the village boundaries to the west and include several protected coves. These points of land or “necks” were uninhabited until the early twentieth century, when real estate developers discovered their potential to be developed with seasonal housing within walking distance of the “quaint” village of Sag Harbor.

Historic maps illustrate the lack of roadways and habitation on these necks during the nineteenth century (see: Historic Maps). These include the U.S. Coast Survey *Map No. 71 Peconic Bay from Noyack to Sag Harbor* (1838), Wall and Forrest’s *Map of Sag Harbor* (1854), and Beers, Comstock, and Cline’s *Atlas of Long Island* (1873), all of which show the necks as uninhabited. Even E. Belcher Hyde’s *Atlas of Suffolk County* (1902) lacks any reference to land ownership, which first appeared on Hyde’s *Atlas of Suffolk County* (1916). Not until 1929, one year before the beach colony was created where John and Elaine Steinbeck would buy their summer home in 1955, was the ownership of “CA. Jundt” first identified on Dolph & Stewart’s *Atlas of Suffolk County* (1929).

Bluff Point, where the Steinbeck House is located, was acquired in 1930 by a North Haven resident, Charles H. Jundt, who became president of the Nunna Koma Development Corporation and contracted with William Grassgreen, Inca., New York City builders, to construct summer cottages on narrow parcels that subdivided the

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neck into 25-foot wide building lots.¹⁶ Jundt's residential 1930 subdivision (see: Historic Maps), which he named "Nunna Koma Park," was only partially developed by 1938 when he sold it to John H. Livingston, Jr., who changed its name to "Beach Haven."¹⁷

Livingston was reported in the local newspaper to be in the advertising business in New York City, and under his management, financing was offered to home buyers to stimulate sales. Livingston purchased Lots One, Two and Three from the old Bluff Point subdivision in 1938 for his own summer residence¹⁸ and by 1941, he had also arranged for village water to be piped to Beach Haven. Livingston advertised that this improvement "will enable purchasers to erect year 'round residences and apply for F. H. Loans."¹⁹ John P. Kennedy and his wife, whom Steinbeck would acquire the Bluff Point property from in 1955, became residents of the Beach Haven community in 1944 by purchasing three adjoining Lots 63, 64 and 65 on which the cottage was located.²⁰ This land purchase was followed by two more acquisitions of unimproved, adjacent parcels in 1946: Lots 60, 61 and 62²¹ and Lot 59,²² which enlarged the property to the east.²³

In March 1947, Kennedy and his wife visited their bungalow, which was then under construction and evidently being enlarged by local builder Ray Bassenden.²⁴ And in 1951, the couple acquired a portion of the point itself,²⁵ which further increased the size of their property to the west. John Steinbeck purchased the entire Kennedy property in April 1955,²⁶ which included the ca. 1930 bungalow which the Kennedy's enlarged in 1947, as well as the adjacent building lots to the east and west, for \$24,000.²⁷

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¹⁵ Philbrick, *Op. cit.*, 234.

¹⁶ *Sag Harbor Express*, March 25, 1932.

¹⁷ *Sag Harbor Express*, July 21, 1938.

¹⁸ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 2009, Pages 417-418.

¹⁹ *Sag Harbor Express*, May 29, 1941.

²⁰ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 2374, Pages 207-208.

²¹ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 2567, Pages 409-410.

²² Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 2633, Pages 536-537.

²³ *Sag Harbor Express*, June 6, 1946.

²⁴ *Sag Harbor Express*, March 13, 1947.

²⁵ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 3259, Page 217.

²⁶ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 3872, Pages 59-60.

²⁷ *Sag Harbor Express*, June 6, 1955.

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Steinbeck in Sag Harbor

When John and Elaine Steinbeck began to search for a summer house, they'd been living in a four-story, brownstone rowhouse at 206 East 72nd Street in New York City since early 1951. It was there in February that Steinbeck began writing *East of Eden*, which he finished in November, and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* was published by Viking Press in September.⁴⁰ He and Elaine traveled to Italy in March 1952, and after extending their European trip to include Spain, France and the United Kingdom, returned home in August. *East of Eden* was published in September. The years 1951 and 1952 were also busy for Steinbeck politically, with his concerns about the State Department investigating his un-American activities and his involvement in Adali Stevenson's campaign for president.

In 1953, they rented the Hodenpyl house in North Haven village, which was located on the water on Ferry Road near the bridge to Sag Harbor, facing Sag Harbor Cove and Brush Neck. As Steinbeck's biographer Jackson J. Benson explains:

In September [1953] the Steinbecks rented a house on Long Island for a month. They had been looking for a place to go during the summers, and the Ernest Martins, who lived during the summer in East

³³ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 2567, Pages 409-410.

³⁴ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 2633, Pages 536-537.

³⁵ *Sag Harbor Express*, June 6, 1946.

³⁶ *Sag Harbor Express*, March 13, 1947.

³⁷ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 3259, Page 217.

³⁸ Suffolk County Clerk, Deed Liber 3872, Pages 59-60.

³⁹ *Sag Harbor Express*, June 6, 1955.

⁴⁰ Kannard, *Steinbeck: Citizen Spy*, Timeline, *passim*.

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Hampton, found them a big, old house to rent in nearby Sag Harbor, which would allow John to consult frequently with Martin about the book in progress.⁴¹

During their stay in North Haven, Steinbeck made time to investigate Sag Harbor's historic architecture, foreshadowing his interest in the whaling industry and its local significance:

John Steinbeck, famous author, visited the Custom House. He showed great interest in the building and was deeply impressed by the authentic records and furnishings.⁴²

Steinbeck's objective in renting a summer place on Long Island's East End was essentially to be near the producers of the musical version of his novel *Sweet Thursday* (1954). Broadway producers Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin, both of whom summered on Long Island, held the rights to *Cannery Row* for which *Sweet Thursday* was to be the sequel. With music by Rodgers and Hammerstein, the production premiered on Broadway as *Pipe Dream* in 1955. Although not a musical success, its unintended consequence was that it introduced the Steinbecks to Sag Harbor in 1953 and resulted in their buying the house on Bluff Point Lane in 1955.⁴³ It is not surprising that Steinbeck chose Sag Harbor as a place to buy property over other, more popular East End villages. In addition to Ernest Martin, his literary agent Shirley Fisher summered in Southampton (Loesser, Susan, *A Most Remarkable Fella, sic passim*). The authenticity of Sag Harbor's storied past and more industrious population, it seems, appealed to the writer's sensibilities and creative imagination over alternative communities.

Robert Wallsten, who co-edited Steinbeck's letters for publication with Steinbeck's wife Elaine in 1975, expressed the writer's feelings about Sag Harbor:

When the Steinbecks rented the house in Sag Harbor, Long Island, during the summer of 1953, he was immediately attracted to the village. It was for him an East Coast equivalent of the Monterey Peninsula. In the spring of 1955, he bought a small house outside the village, in an oak grove on a cove. It marked his complete acceptance of the East Coast as his permanent home.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*, 741.

⁴² *Sag Harbor Express*, October 1, 1953.

⁴³ East Hampton *Star*, February 17, 1955.

⁴⁴ Steinbeck and Wallsten, *A Life in Letters*, 505.

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Biographer Benson writes that Steinbeck “returned from Europe [in December 1954] with a sense that he was losing track of the mood of his own country, [and that] he had to get out of the city and get in touch with people again. The search now was for something more than a weekend or summer retreat—a place where they might want to settle and live much of the time.”⁴⁵ In Sag Harbor, the Steinbecks found a place that:

... was so far from the city that it didn’t even seem to be part of Long Island; its history, and the speech and attitudes of the people gave it a closer kinship to New England than New York. It was somewhat isolated, not being on either the rail line or the main highway, and it was nearly surrounded by water... The feeling of the area was roughly similar to Pacific Grove, or at least enough so to give John some sense of being at home.⁴⁶

Soon after buying the house, Steinbeck wrote to his friend Carlton A Sheffield on September 23, 1955, that:

We have a little shack on the sea out on the tip of Long Island at Sag Harbor. It’s a whaling town or was and we have a small boat and lots of oak trees and the phone never rings. We run there whenever we need a rest – no neighbors, and fish and clams and crabs and mussels right at the door step. I just got it this spring and I love it.⁴⁷

In February 1956, Steinbeck wrote to his publisher Pascal Covici that:

Out here [i.e., Sag Harbor] I get the olde sense of peace and wholeness. The phone rings seldom. It is clear and very cold but the house is warm. Elaine is ecstatically happy out here. She cooks and sews and generally enjoys herself. You can’t imagine the change in disposition and approach in both of us. And it seems to be getting into my work. I approach the table every morning with a sense of joy.⁴⁸

And after owning the house for nearly ten years, Steinbeck expressed his feelings for the place by writing in 1965 that “it’s silly for me to be staying in town. I can’t work as well in town as in the country.”⁴⁹ An added

⁴⁵ Benson, *Adventures*, 771.

⁴⁶ Benson, *Adventures*, 772-3.

⁴⁷ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 512.

⁴⁸ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 521.

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bonus was that the “locals” accepted him into their midst with little fanfare, as this brief notice in the local paper had suggested when he first arrived:

A new member of the Sag Harbor Yacht Club is John Steinbeck, the writer. Mr. Steinbeck recently bought the J. P. Kennedy property at Bluff Point. He plans to make Sag Harbor his home port all year round. P.S. – Mr. Steinbeck also subscribed to the Sag Harbor Express this week. First thing you know he will become a ‘native.’ Seems to have the makin’s of one...⁵⁰

In 1957, two years after purchasing the Bluff Point cottage, Steinbeck elaborated on that prediction by saying:

Our association with the village people of Sag Harbor is, I think, pleasant to all of us. I came originally from a small town on the West Coast, a fishing town where my people have lived for a long time... If you pay your bills, trade locally as much as possible, mind your own business and are reasonably pleasant, pretty soon they forget that you are an outlander. I feel that I belong in Sag Harbor and I truly believe that the people of the village have accepted us as citizens. I do not sense the resentment from them which is reserved for tourists and summer people.⁵¹

Steinbeck struggled at first with writing in Sag Harbor, however, because according to his agent Shirley Fisher, he couldn’t find a comfortable place to do it. The house was too small; his young sons Thom (b. 1944) and John IV (b. 1946) were a constant source of interruption whenever they visited, and his wife Elaine enjoyed entertaining, and her frequent guests were an added distraction. According to biographer Benson, Steinbeck:

... had a garage built on the property [in 1955] with the idea that he would put his workbench and tools in there and also set up a table for writing. He found, however, that during the winter and spring, even with a little heater, it was just too cold to work, so for a time he moved into the house and set up a place in the tiny second bedroom... When it got warm enough, he moved back into the garage, but the garage was full of temptations...⁵²

⁴⁹ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 822.

⁵⁰ *Sag Harbor Express*, June 23, 1955.

⁵¹ *East Hampton Star*, April 11, 1957.

⁵² Benson, *Adventures*, 789.

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Steinbeck's ultimate solution, after first improvising writing surfaces in both the car and several boats, was to build a writer's studio in 1958 which he nicknamed "Joyous Garde." It was a small, six-sided workspace designed with only enough space for storing paper beneath the windows and a desk and chair (Figure #2). In a letter to his editor Elizabeth Otis, dated April 6, 1958, Steinbeck explained the circumstances that led to its construction:

This is really heaven out here. There is only one drawback to it. If there are guests or children here I have absolutely no place to go to work or to be alone. My stuff gets stuffed into closets and drawers and it sometimes takes me several days to find it again. Right now Thom is with us. I am going to build a tiny little workroom out on the point, too small for a bed so that it can't be considered a guest room under any circumstances. It will be off limits to everyone. I can take electricity out there on a wire which can be rolled up when we are not here. It doesn't need plumbing of any kind. I designed a cute little structure, six-sided, with windows looking in all directions. Under the windows will be storage for paper on three sides and the other two will be a desk so that it will need no furniture except a chair and I will use one of our canvas deck chairs for that. It will look like a little lighthouse... I will build most of it myself and then with that and the boat I will have some semblance of privacy. One of its main features will be an imposing padlock on the door. I think I am going to call it Sanity's Stepchild.⁵³

On October 17, 1958, Steinbeck shared his thoughts about how significant the Sag Harbor place had become to him with Pascal Covici:

We will be coming in [to New York City] about the 1st of Nov. This place [Sag Harbor] though will be waiting. I can come out any time when I need a change from the city. I love the winter storms and the cold. They are much more my friends and relatives than the summer with its lawn mowers and the brown girls greasy with sun tan oil.
My life is coming back now.⁵⁴

Between writing projects, the studio served as a much-needed retreat and refuge, as expressed in these letters to Elizabeth Otis in December 1959 and March 1960, respectively:

⁵³ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 581-2.

⁵⁴ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 597.

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I'm sitting out in Joyous Garde and the deep snow is all around and I feel rested and unraveled.⁵⁵

I am sitting in this good little house on the point. Poor Harry, the giant blue heron, is wading past looking for soft clams and the wrinkled water moves in as though I were on the bridge of a ship. I could want no better place to sit and contemplate and turn over the rocks of what mind I have left.⁵⁶

It was there in his writer's studio on Bluff Point Lane that Steinbeck wrote *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), which earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, and which is judged by Steinbeck scholar Richard E. Hart as the literary equal to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Biographer Benson describes the innovative approach that Steinbeck took in writing the book, one that differed from his earlier novels:

... [by] making the novel immediate in every respect, more immediate, he [Steinbeck] felt, than any novel ever written.

Its action would take place from Easter to the Fourth of July 1960, at the time he was writing it. Day by day he used the weather as it actually was, and he used the environment of Sag Harbor very precisely, For characters, he had to change things a bit, but still managed to use himself, his wife, his children, and their friends, neighbors and acquaintances in Sag Harbor very precisely.⁵⁷

In fact, the similarity of the novel's fictional setting of "New Baytown" to the real Sag Harbor and to the history and people of Eastern Long Island was too obvious at first, and Steinbeck was encouraged by his friends and editors to alter the text to make these references less apparent.⁵⁸ For example, he changed the surname of his protagonist to Ethan Allen Hawley from "Halsey," which is a highly recognizable Long Island name with deep roots in whaling history. In the final manuscript, Steinbeck also added a prologue, which sought to redirect readers from searching for the writer's sources and realize instead that whatever had served his purposes was a metaphor for the nation as a whole:

⁵⁵ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 656.

⁵⁶ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 662.

⁵⁷ Benson, *Adventures*, 872.

⁵⁸ Benson, *Adventures*, 883.

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Readers seeking to identify the fictional people and places here described would do better to inspect their own communities and search their own hearts, for this book is about a large part of America today.⁵⁹

In a letter to his friend Frank Loesser, the song writer and musical producer, Steinbeck wrote from Sag Harbor on May 25, 1960:

My new book is known to no one except Elaine. I have told only the title, a great one, I think. The Winter of Our Discontent. It's a strange book that is taking its own pace – part Kafka and part Booth Tarkington with a soup-song of me. It's writing along and I am following mostly amazed. I hope to finish it this summer.⁶⁰

And on July 1, 1960, Steinbeck wrote from Sag Harbor to his publisher Pascal Covici:

I guess it is characteristic that I am writing a book called Winter in July. But, maybe it's all right because the line goes, you remember – Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious by this sun of York.⁶¹

The book met with mixed reviews from the critics, perhaps because it broke with the writer's traditional settings on the West Coast and seemed too "emotional" to many readers. It won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, however, which was the equivalent of a lifetime achievement for the writer's collective body of writing. Steinbeck learned of the award while watching television at Bluff Point on the morning of October 25, 1962, and is said to have been "thunderstruck." After the Nobel Prize was announced, Sag Harbor Mayor James McMahon, Jr., congratulated Steinbeck in a letter that was published in the local newspaper, and Steinbeck's reply speaks volumes about his warm regard for Sag Harbor:

1 Nov. 1962

Dear Jim (alias James McMahon, Jr., Mayor of Sag Harbor):

⁵⁹ Steinbeck, *The Winter of Our Discontent*.

⁶⁰ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 666.

⁶¹ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 676.

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When your letter of Oct. 27 came in on the paper of the Village of Sag Harbor and in your capacity as Mayor, I was more pleased than I can tell you. Surely I had received congratulations from heads of state, heads of industry and just simple Heads, but to be honored in one's own village is something else again because it violates the old saying that people are honored save in their own Towns...

We moved here only six or seven years ago – a very short time in Sag Harbor's history but very shortly we have been made to feel at home, to feel that we belong here. The villagers have made us feel at home even to the extent of protecting us from those outlanders who have wanted to make a circus of us. In our immediate district we have the best neighbors anyone could want. Perhaps this is because we are here at all seasons but it is more than possible that this is a very special village.

Let me assure you that nothing has pleased us more nor given us more pride than to be considered Sag Harborites and this was so long before any 'furrin' recognition.

Again my thanks for your letter

John Steinbeck⁶²

As further evidence of Steinbeck's affection for the village, the newspaper went on to report that "the author [has] consented to be a guest editor of the *Sag Harbor Express* 'sometime this coming summer.'" ⁶³

Soon after completing the first draft of "*Winter*" in summer 1960, Steinbeck followed his innate wanderlust and desire to connect with the American people and departed in September on a 10,000-mile journey across the country in the company of Charley, his wife's standard poodle. *Travels With Charley in Search of America*, in which Steinbeck refers to his home in the opening pages as "my little fishing place at Sag Harbor," was published in 1962. Bluff Point served as the starting point for the odyssey ("Under the big oak trees of my place at Sag Harbor"), which he described in a letter to Pascal Covici from Sag Harbor in July 1961:

Another week and into thick summer. We have the breeze of course but the air is heavy. Summer is far from my favorite time. The village fills up with hot angry people... And so I go very seldom off my point of land and spend even more hours than usual in Joyous Garde.

⁶² *Sag Harbor Express*, November 8, 1962.

⁶³ *Sag Harbor Express*, November 8, 1962.

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And the little book of ambulatory memoirs [e.g., *Travels with Charley*] staggers along, takes a spurt and lags. It's a formless, shapeless, aimless thing and it is even pointless. For this reason it may be the sharpest realism because what I see around me is aimless and pointless – ant-hill activity. Somewhere there must be design if I can only find it. I'm speaking of this completed Journey now.⁶⁴

Although the publication of *Travels with Charley* by Viking Press in mid-1962 occurred only a few months before Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize, it garnered sufficient attention to reach #1 for non-fiction on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for a week in October 1962.

Early the following year, Steinbeck became involved with planning Sag Harbor's first Old Whalers Festival, a community event that's now been celebrated continuously since 1963. One of Steinbeck's closest Sag Harbor friends, Bob Barry, owned a boat docked at Baron's Cove Marina where Steinbeck kept his Boston Whaler, and the circle of friends that developed around this common interest—dubbed the Round Table Club—became the Chamber of Commerce which initiated the festival. It grew out of conversations that Steinbeck had with friends like Robert Friedah, a member of the club and local schoolteacher. Bob Friedah was active in civic affairs and later became a trustee of the Sag Harbor Whaling Museum, and like Steinbeck came to Sag Harbor with his wife Avis in the early 1950s. According to Friedah:

In 1963, the Round Table Club, forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, started the Old Whalers Festival in June. John Steinbeck was named honorary chairman. He was very quiet. He had a great sense of humor, but he did not like a lot of people around. I guess that is why he was comfortable with this group.⁶⁵

Regarding the significance that the event played in Steinbeck's life, his biographer Jackson Benson writes that:

The festival celebrated the town's colorful whaling past, and Steinbeck, who was fond of nearly anything to do with history and of nearly any kind of celebration, was happy to join in.

... he became totally involved, coming up with one idea after another... He suggested that they inaugurate an annual debate between Sag Harbor and Nantucket as to which port had the greatest

⁶⁴ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 702.

⁶⁵ Tobier, *Voices of Sag Harbor*, 111.

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historic importance... and suggested they hold whaleboat races, an event that led to another, the International Whaleboat Competition, started in 1966, in which crews from several nations raced each other...⁶⁶

Steinbeck's "Words of Welcome," which he wrote in 1964 as an introduction to the second festival, express his whole-hearted enthusiasm for the event and demonstrate his extraordinary sense of humor and playful irreverence.⁶⁷ In his opening sentence, Steinbeck writes that "it promises to be even more reverent and memorial and confused and historic and crazy than the one last year." According to historian Nathaniel Philbrick, "Steinbeck's enthusiasm for the event was so large that he repeatedly invited the president of the United States to the festival."⁶⁸ Although the president never attended the festival, Steinbeck's idea was a "supremely American conception" in Philbrick's view, and one that the writer articulated in *America and Americans* when he wrote that we were "a new society" in which "all these fragments of the peoples of the world... [have] become one people."

In fact, Steinbeck was not content to limit his public engagement in Sag Harbor's whaling history to an annual event. In September 1965, following the second festival in June, he organized an expedition to Mystic, Connecticut to engage local historians in a debate concerning the origins of whaling:

William King of the Old Whalers Festival committee has announced that a delegation of Sag Harbor men in eight or ten boats, headed by John Steinbeck and Robert Barry, will cross Long Island Sound to Mystic, Conn., on the morning of Saturday, Sept. 11.

The occasion will be a second-round debate concerning the origin of the American whaling industry. The first round was held in Sag Harbor in June. A third round is planned to coincide with the New Bedford Festival in the summer of 1966.

Mr. King promised that this discussion will be formal and definitive, with representatives of the Massachusetts marine historic society of New Bedford to uphold the claims of New England, and New York State historians will argue for eastern Long Island. The debate will be limited to the period 1630 to 1700.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Benson, *Adventures*, 953.

⁶⁷ Steinbeck's two-page "Words of Welcome" appeared in the festival booklet and is attached as Appendix B.

⁶⁸ Philbrick, "The Whaling Town and America," 241.

⁶⁹ East Hampton *Star*, September 2, 1965.

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Two years later, in covering the Old Whalers Festival in 1967 which was then in its fifth consecutive year, the *Sag Harbor Express* wrote that:

Nobel Prize Laureate John Steinbeck, Honorary Chairman of the festival, has termed the celebration as “Sag Harbor’s answer to automation,” and adds, “Not all attention will be on blood sports. Youth and beauty of feminine persuasion will preside over the dancing and music together with many romantic inventions and conceits – all designed to create a Dionysiac spirit of quid pro quo and the quoter the better.”

The annual Old Whalers Festival, as spirited as it is, however, was established five years ago with the more serious intent of commemorating the historic significance of Sag Harbor as the first United States official Port of Entry and its importance as a center of one of the brighter moments of the history of the world’s maritime development, the whaling trade.⁷⁰

Steinbeck continued his association with the Old Whalers Festival as its honorary chairman until his death in 1968. His interest in Sag Harbor’s whaling heritage, which he saw as a high point of achievement in American history, served him while conceiving the themes and characters in *The Winter of Our Discontent* and enabled him to interact without pretense with the people he met in his adopted community of Sag Harbor.

Steinbeck’s last published book, *America and Americans*, was completed in Sag Harbor in the fall of 1965. Now seen by scholars to be the third of a Sag Harbor “trilogy,” the narrative was originally conceived by the publisher as a series of captions to accompany photographs of America, but the collection of essays that Steinbeck developed from the original idea appeared in book form instead in 1966. Writing to his friend Carlton A. Sheffield from New York on April 26, 1965, Steinbeck mentioned that “we went to Sag Harbor for a while and I finished the first draft of my book [e.g., *America and Americans*]. I hope to get the thing off by June 1.”⁷¹

Together with *The Winter of Our Discontent* and *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, “*Americans*” became what biographer Benson calls his “moral trilogy.” Benson writes:

⁷⁰ *Sag Harbor Express*, May 18, 1967.

⁷¹ Steinbeck, *Letters*, 821.

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Those who would understand not only Steinbeck's perception of the Vietnam war, but his canon from beginning to end, would do well to read *America and Americans*, particularly the essay on morality, "Americans and the Future," written during the months of July through October 1965.⁷²

Historian Philbrick identifies the unifying theme that Steinbeck explores in his Sag Harbor trilogy, which is that "the country had moved beyond [its] dynamic state of becoming and entered into a deeply troubled era... [in which] we have not yet discovered a path to the future."⁷³ Philbrick summarizes the significance that Sag Harbor played in Steinbeck's last works:

In his portrayal of a community still clinging to an outworn identity rather than forging a new one, Steinbeck's final novel effectively uses an old whaling town to describe a nation that has come to the end of one line and has not, as of yet, found another. Besides bridging the cultural gap between Steinbeck's two lives in California and New York, the whaling town also provided a deeply personal connection between his own beginnings and that of America as a bicoastal nation. Despite the pessimism and uncertainty he might have felt concerning that nation's future, Steinbeck was able to affirm at least one thing during his cross-country journey in *Travels*: He had not, as he had once feared, lost touch with his native land.⁷⁴

After the Period of Significance: Purchase and Preservation of the Steinbeck Property

In 2021, Steinbeck family heirs placed the Sag Harbor property on the market. Local preservationists saw the listing as a opportunity to turn the property into a writer's retreat. The Sag Harbor Partnership, a non-profit organization, formed and, in 2023, purchased the Steinbeck property for thirteen-and-a-half million dollars with the intention to use the cottage for a writer's residence program and to open the property to the public at select times of the year and by reservation.⁷⁵ This community support for the preservation of the property thus demonstrates the love of Sag Harbor for John Steinbeck, their adopted son.

⁷² Benson, *Adventures*, 968.

⁷³ Philbrick, "Whaling Town," 241.

⁷⁴ Philbrick, "Whaling Town," 241.

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Summary Statement

The John Steinbeck House and its related buildings and structures at 2 Bluff Point Lane, Sag Harbor, are significant for their association with the American writer John Steinbeck during his late writing career. Acquired in 1955, the property served Steinbeck as a country home and writer's retreat until his death in 1968, the period in which he wrote and published three critically acclaimed books (1961, 1962 and 1966), numerous magazine articles, and president-elect Lyndon Johnson's speech for accepting the Democratic nomination (1964). Through extensive correspondence with business associates, prominent figures of the time, and friends and family members, Steinbeck documented his frequent use of "Joyous Garde," the writer's studio he designed and built on Bluff Point in 1958, not only in the summer months but throughout the year. His Nobel prize-winning book *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) was written in Sag Harbor, and his travelogue *Travels with Charley* (1962) began there. His third and final book, a collection of essays entitled *America and Americans*, was completed in Sag Harbor in the fall of 1965 and published in 1966.

The Sag Harbor studio was not only a quiet retreat in which Steinbeck could pursue his writing, but the village itself provided the inspiration, setting and characters for his fictional New Baytown in *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). Steinbeck considered this novel to be experimental, making the writing of it "immediate" in every respect, rather than the result of extensive research which had been his former approach to writing. He wrote the book in his Sag Harbor studio in real time, between Easter and the Fourth of July in 1960, taking cues from the weather daily and using himself as the protagonist and family members, friends and Sag Harbor acquaintances as his characters. The book was so personal, in fact, that its excessive use of nicknames and words of endearment irritated critics at first but were a true reflection of his playful use of words and sense of humor. Like the "*Travels*" and "*Americans*" that followed, however, "*Winter*" was the first of a Sag Harbor "trilogy" of books which are now recognized as some of his greatest writing.

Owning a second home and writer's studio in Sag Harbor afforded Steinbeck the opportunity to reconnect with a place that was steeped in whaling history. The subject was familiar to him, having lived as a young man in Salinas and Monterey, California, where the industry struggled to survive by grinding whales into fertilizer and soap. Sag Harbor's early whaling history intrigued the writer, suggesting a time of adventure and prosperity, and served as a metaphor for his belief that American culture was in decline. Although Steinbeck maintained his

⁷⁵ Hannah Frishberg, "John Steinbeck's Hamptons home sells for \$13.5 M," New York Post, April 3, 2023; James Kent, "Saved! John Steinbeck's Retreat in Sag Harbor," *Steinbeck Now*, May 1, 2023. <https://www.steinbecknow.com/2023/05/01/saved-john-steinbeck->

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residence in New York City throughout these last years of his writing career, his correspondence reveals that much of his writing was done in Sag Harbor, where he began and completed all three of his last books.

The significance of the Bluff Point property, which Steinbeck articulated directly in his extensive correspondence and indirectly in his published books, was as a waterfront setting far removed from city life and a retreat for creative thinking and reflection, while the nearby village of Sag Harbor with its unique history, people and culture provided him with inspiration and raw material for his distinguished writing career.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 1.29

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 40.993502 | Longitude: -72.307953 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the enclosed map with scale.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary was selected to encompass the entirety of the historic 1.29-acre Steinbeck parcel in addition to the dock area, which is in a town parcel.

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1:12,000

0 500 1000 ft



John Steinbeck Cottage



New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation

Projection: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 18N

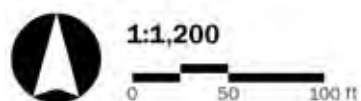
Mapped 04/16/2025 by Matthew W. Shepherd, NYSHPO

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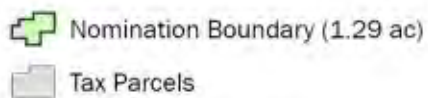
Name of Property

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Projection: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 18N



Suffolk County Parcel Year: 2024



**New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation**

Mapped 04/16/2025 by Matthew W. Shepherd, NYSHPO

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1:1,200

0 50 100 ft

Projection: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 18N



Nomination Boundary (1.29 ac)

New York State Orthoimagery Year: 2022



New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation

Mapped 04/16/2025 by Matthew W. Shepherd, NYSHPO

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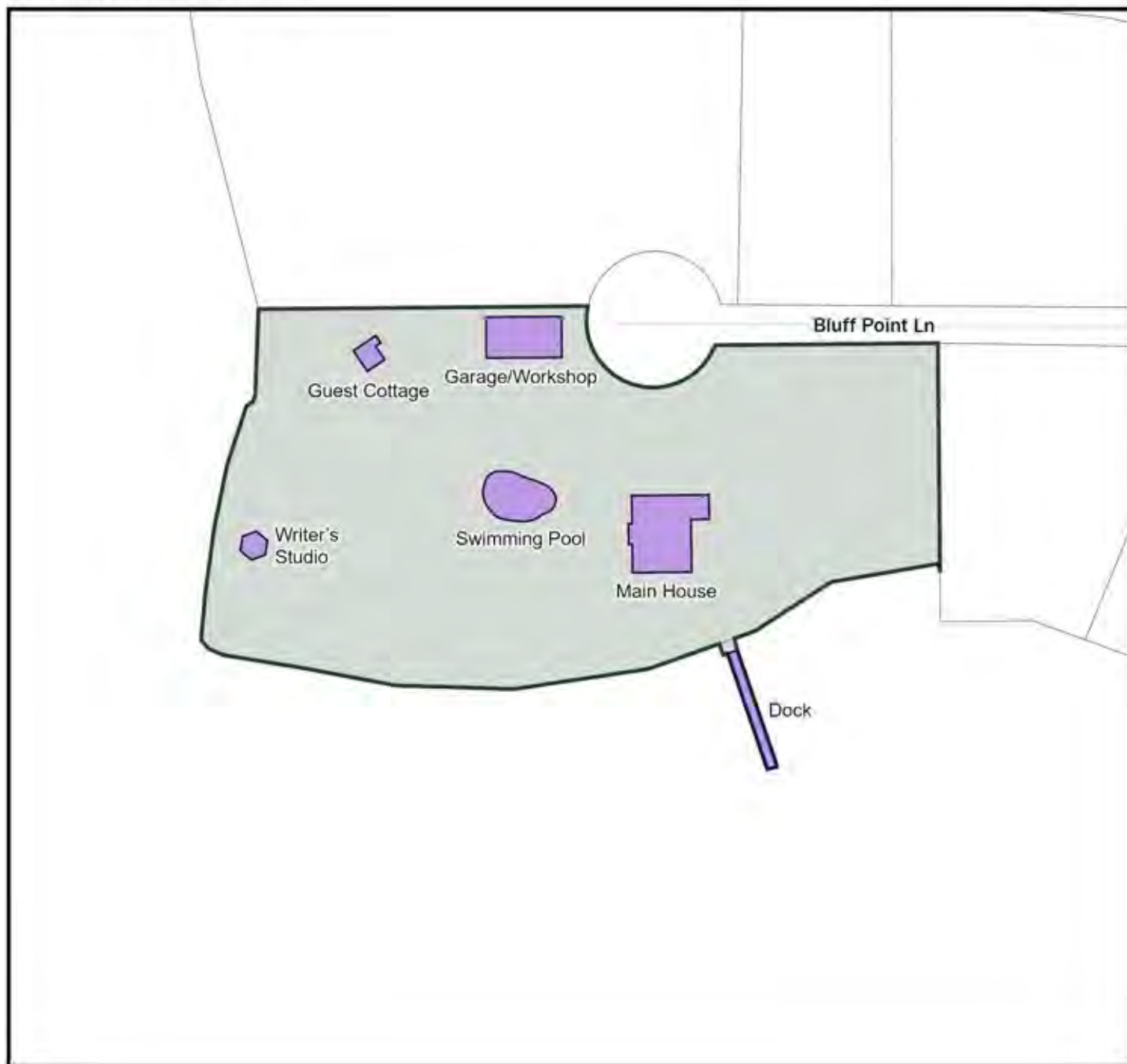
Name of Property

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Resource Map

See Resource List for details



1:900

0 25 50 75 ft



Nomination Boundary



**New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation**

Projection: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 18N

Suffolk County Parcel Year: 2024

Mapped 04/16/2025 by Matthew W. Shepherd, NYSHPO

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title Zachary N. Studenroth, Historic Preservation Consultant (edited by Jeff Iovannone, PhD, NYSHPO)

organization N/A date April 2025

street & number P.O. Box 2492 telephone 631-275-3374

city or town Sag Harbor state NY zip code 11963

e-mail studenroth@aol.com

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: John Steinbeck Cottage

City or Vicinity: Sag Harbor

County: Suffolk

State: NY

Photographer: Jeff Iovannone; Kathryn Szoka

Date Photographed: May 2023; April 16, 2025

Description of Photograph(s) and number:

Photo 0001 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage primary (west) elevation, facing east.

Photo 0002 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage primary (west) and side (south) elevations, facing northeast.

Photo 0003 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage, interior view, entrance vestibule, facing north.

Photo 0004 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage, interior view, central living space, facing southwest.

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Photo 0005 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage, interior view, fireplace, facing west.

Photo 0006 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage, interior view, built-in bookcase and entrance to bedroom, facing north.

Photo 0007 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage, interior view, bird mobile created by Steinbeck above central living space.

Photo 0008 of 0019: John Steinbeck Cottage, interior view, kitchen, facing southwest.

Photo 0009 of 0019: Swimming pool with garage/workshop and guest cottage in background, facing northwest.

Photo 0010 of 0019: Swimming pool inscription detail created by Steinbeck.

Photo 0011 of 0019: Writer's Studio ("Joyous Garde"), facing east.

Photo 0012 of 0019: Writer's Studio ("Joyous Garde"), facing northwest

Photo 0013 of 0019: Writer's Studio ("Joyous Garde"), entryway detail ("AROYNT") (photo by Kathryn Szoka, May 2023).

Photo 0014 of 0019: Writer's Studio ("Joyous Garde") interior view, featuring Steinbeck's original writing setup.

Photo 0015 of 0019: Guest cottage primary (south) and side (east) elevations, facing northwest.

Photo 0016 of 0019: Guest cottage primary (south) and side (west) elevations, facing northeast.

Photo 0017 of 0019: Garage/workshop primary (east) and side (south) elevations, facing northwest.

Photo 0018 of 0019: Dock, facing southeast.

Photo 0019 of 0019: Dock in foreground with John Steinbeck Cottage in background, facing northwest.

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Figure 1:

Historic view: John Steinbeck and poodle Charlie, house in background

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Figure 2:

Historic view: John Steinbeck standing in front of writing studio "Joyous Garde"

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Figure 3:
Historic view: John Steinbeck standing in front of house

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Figure 4:

Historic view: Steinbeck house, view from dock

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Figure 5:

Historic view: John Steinbeck standing in front of interior stone chimney

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Figure 6:

Historic view: Steinbeck moderating debate about Origins of Whaling; Whaling Museum, Sag Harbor, June 11, 1965

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Figure 7:
Nunna Koma Park brochure, front page, ca. 1930

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Figure 8:
Nunna Koma Park brochure, pages 11-12, ca. 1930

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Historic Maps



U.S. Coast Survey, Map No. 71, *Peconic Bay from Noyack to Sag Harbor*, 1838.

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Wall and Forrest, *Map of Sag Harbor*, 1854.

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Beers, Comstock, and Cline, *Atlas of Long Island*, Plate 188, 1873.

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Even E. Belcher Hyde, *Atlas of Suffolk County*, Volume 1, Plate 6, 1902.

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Hyde, *Atlas of Suffolk County*, Volume 2, Plate 8, 1916.

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Suffolk County, NY

County and State



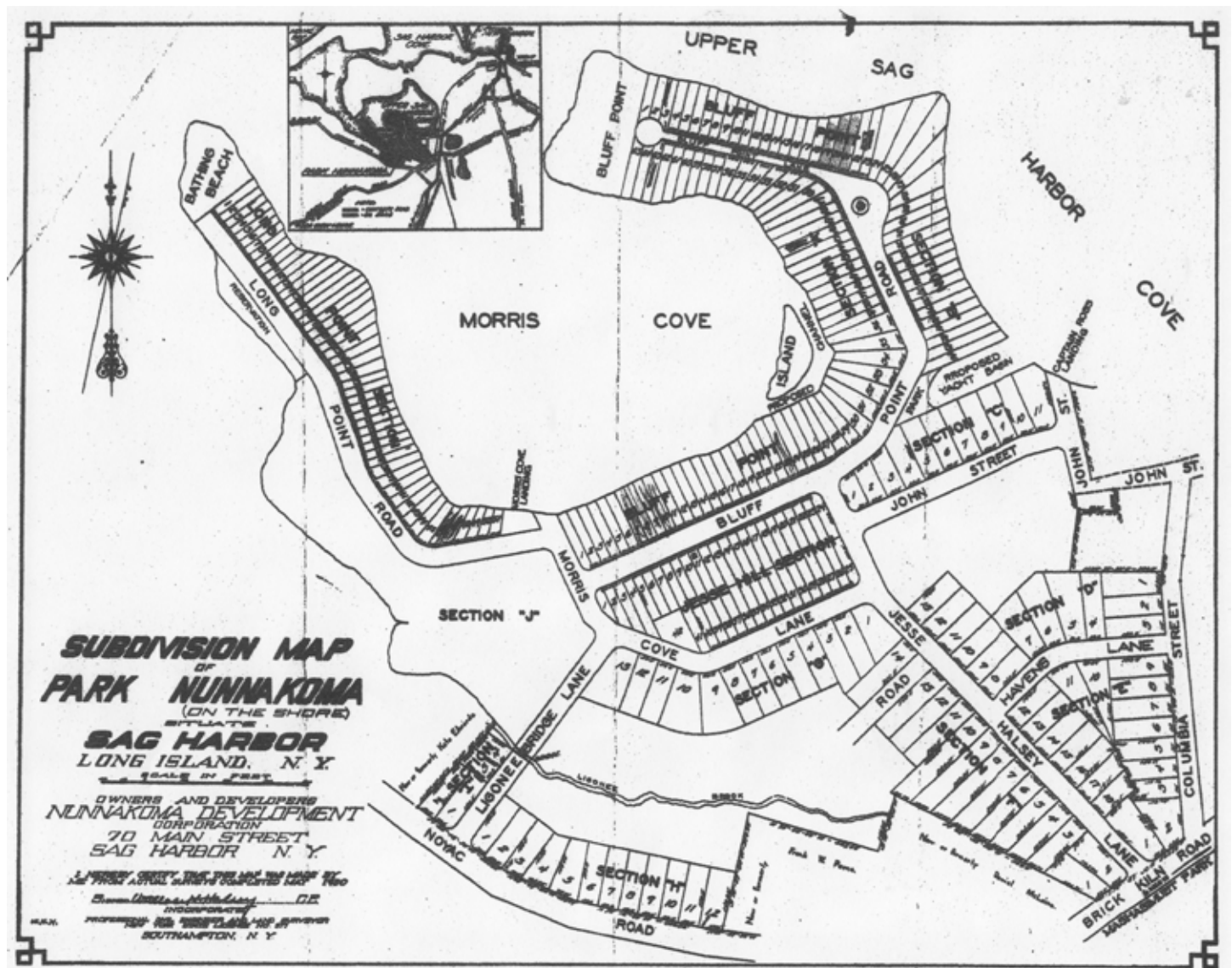
Dolph & Stewart, *Atlas of Suffolk County*, 1929.

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Subdivision Map of Nunna Koma Park, Sag Harbor, Long Island, NY, 1930.

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Appendix A

John Steinbeck and Sag Harbor⁷⁶

John Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. In his “Presentation Address” Anders Osterling, then Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, made clear that Steinbeck’s latest work, produced while residing in Sag Harbor, Long Island, had deeply influenced the Academy’s final selection of him from among some sixty candidates who were considered that year. Kjell Stromberg, writing on the 1962 prize, cited a radio broadcast by Osterling in which he stated that *The Winter of Our Discontent* was the book that finally convinced the academy to abandon any “wait and see policy and to end any hesitation” (374). Osterling, in his “Address,” contended that “If at times the critics have seemed to note certain signs of flagging powers, of repetitions that might point to a decrease in vitality, Steinbeck belied their fears most emphatically with *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961)... Here he attained the *same standard* [my emphasis] which he set in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Again he holds his position as an independent expounder of the truth with an unbiased instinct for what is genuinely American, be it good or bad” (202). Further, the novel’s central character, Ethan Allen Hawley, raises a whole body of questions which bear upon the nation’s problems. “This is done [by Steinbeck] without any theorizing, using concrete, or even trivial, everyday situations, which are nonetheless convincing when described with all of Steinbeck’s vigorous and realistic verve. Even with his insistence on the factual, there are harmonic tones of daydreaming, fumbling speculations around the eternal themes of life and death” (202-203). The point is amplified by Brom Weber, professor of English at the University of California at Davis, when he asserted, “Indeed, the novel [*Winter*] probed its protagonist’s moral problems with greater emotional depth, intellectual perspicuity, and stylistic richness than can be found in any novel Steinbeck had published since 1939” (369). Similar praise is offered for *Travels With Charley*, considered as Steinbeck’s effort to rediscover his country and its people and the manner in which it, also, becomes a forceful and thoughtful criticism of society. “It is”, says Osterling, “a most topical reflection, valid also outside America” (203).

⁷⁶ Reproduced with permission.

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The preceding offers perspective and context in addressing two matters often overlooked or underplayed in Steinbeck studies. One, as Osterling and the Nobel Prize affirm, it goes a long way in putting to rest the criticism of Steinbeck's late-career work as somehow not measuring up to his earliest "California" fiction of the 1930's, the body of work that made him into a household name in America and around the world. Over the decades since then some have claimed, often rather cruelly, that his writing went precipitously downhill after the 30's and that he probably should never have left his native land which had given him energy and a resonant voice for America and its common people. However, the Nobel Academy did not accept such claims as being properly reflective of the whole Steinbeck picture. Second, virtually all readers and scholars of Steinbeck readily acknowledge in his books the interwoven, inextricably connected linkage between the writer and the natural and social environment in which he lived and worked. In acknowledging the Nobel praise for his late works, a key question arises. What was Steinbeck's experience of Sag Harbor—the village, its history, its people—and his residence on the Cove? How did such experience permeate the late writing that served as capstone and conduit to the Nobel Prize? Put simply, what role did the town and his home in Sag Harbor play in the crowning final achievements of his long and much heralded writing career?

Steinbeck sometimes spoke of a "wall of background" that gave shape and texture to his writing. A large part of that "wall" in his later years was Sag Harbor's long history as a fishing and whaling village. Whaling was the biggest industry in Sag Harbor in mid-nineteenth century with some 130 whaling ships operating out of its harbor. Such industry brought riches—cultural, architectural, and economic—to the village, and the whaling legacy, if not actual practice, endured well into the twentieth century. Steinbeck was keenly taken by this legacy. As I have previously written, "...there is ample evidence to suggest that whaling history and culture were, in part, behind his move to Sag Harbor, Long Island late in his life. Contrary to the judgment of some critics, far from reflecting a split or contradiction in his life and work as a writer, his bi-coastal odyssey from birth to death demonstrates ...a man and artist who had come full circle, returning to the wellsprings of his creativity and personal contentment" (16). Thus, his leadership role in the long-standing

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Sag Harbor Old Whalers Festival came as no surprise to those who knew him.

This view is confirmed by others. Steinbeck biographer Jackson J. Benson writes that upon moving to Sag Harbor Steinbeck “tried to retreat into the habits of the past in order to recover something of what he was” (952). Sailing journalist and best-selling author, Nathaniel Philbrick, concurs in writing that “Steinbeck had a more immediate connection to whaling which was very much alive during his youth in California,” and that his engagement with Sag Harbor “opened a kind of cultural conduit to his past”, highlighting his identification of whaling with Romantic dreams of his youth (230-231). Philbrick further contends that Steinbeck’s attraction to and purchase of his Sag Harbor home was, in part, attributable to the “way in which the town reminded him of Monterey” (232), that is, a kind of East coast equivalent to the Monterey peninsula. Additionally, Steinbeck’s widow, Elaine, explained in an unpublished 1993 interview that John never ever lost “his interest in marine biology and bought a house in Sag Harbor because he wanted to be near fishermen and people who worked by the sea” (Railsback 44). In terms of the house itself, Steinbeck scholar Susan Shillinglaw writes of her 1997 visit with Elaine in Sag Harbor, noting that the small cottage is in its entirety “perhaps 1000 square feet, much more like Steinbeck’s Los Gatos and Pacific Grove houses than I’d ever imagined” (7). Perhaps more evidence of the full circle.

By nature shy and protective of his privacy, Steinbeck became comfortable in Sag Harbor, interacting regularly with townspeople and participating in local politics and community activities such as his honorary chairmanship (1963-1967) of the annual Old Whalers Festival, in which he took great pleasure. The property was purchased in 1955, and while also maintaining an apartment on the upper East side of Manhattan, his letters from Sag Harbor over the ensuing years spoke of his comfort in and love of the village and its people, and how the cottage and village became for him a writer’s retreat from the rigors of life in the big city; indeed, a healthy environment where he could slow down, gather his thoughts and re-energize his creativity. English professor Lawrence J. Epstein, who grew up in Sag Harbor during Steinbeck’s tenure, writes how he “...found the town’s provincialism attractive; he didn’t have to pay the price of fame. He could go into the stores and walk the streets and not a single person would offer him a manuscript or beg him to compare himself to John O’Hara.” He joyfully took part in the village’s life. “He knew Fred,

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the high schooler who worked in the pharmacy, by name. His deep, unmistakable voice would say hello to many people.” Epstein’s father, a storekeeper, came home one evening and recounted a long conversation with Steinbeck that day at his store. On a number of occasions, Steinbeck would simply enter the store, sit down on the floor and stretch his legs or lean on the counter, while discussing local politics the whole time. “It turned out that Steinbeck and my father were both serving on the local Democratic Committee.” Epstein came to think that “Steinbeck saw in the behavior of those small town residents the true American character...It was a wonderful way for a writer to work. Talk with real people, see what makes them go.” In essence, “Steinbeck saw in Sag Harbor a piece of Americana frozen in time” (6-7), and dearly loved the fishing, gardening, drinking and earnest comradeship the town provided.

With all this as “wall of background” what is to be said about Steinbeck’s most notable writings during his Sag Harbor years and the impact the village and his neighborhood had on these works? As the decade of the 1960’s dawned Steinbeck was sensing emerging changes in Sag Harbor as well as the nation. Sag Harbor, thus, became something of a microcosm, and America the macrocosm. Long Island journalist and author, Tom Clavin, writes that “...as had been the case with the Salinas Valley, Steinbeck began to view his surroundings [Sag Harbor] as a setting for writing. The area both inspired his creativity and he saw in it elements that could be intertwined with long time themes of individuality and social change. Sag Harbor became not only his physical home but the spiritual home of his muse” (4).

Early 1960 saw the beginnings of his work on what turned out to be his final novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*. It was an important election year and Steinbeck was prompted to use the novel as a way of offering his opinions on the state of America, with Sag Harbor as a jumping off point. He had grown increasingly despondent about what he saw as an eroding threat to community, creeping materialism, blind hunger for attention, money and possessions, and sacrifice of individual moral responsibility. His quaint little village was slowly becoming victim to land developers and speculators. Seasonal tourism was beginning to transform the village known on the East End of Long Island as the “un-

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Hampton.” Individual virtue and moral behavior was starting to crack for some. What he saw happening on a local level in Sag Harbor he, also, witnessed throughout the country during his journey in a camper truck with dog, Charley, that culminated in *Travels With Charley*. His reflections on the old and new Sag Harbor were captured in a 1963 *New York Tribune* (August 4) blurb that Steinbeck wrote for the Old Whalers Festival brochure. Here he reveals his feelings and aspirations for the village and its whaling heritage while, also, offering thought-provoking suggestions about the problems of America, ideas explored in both *Winter* and *Travels* as well as his collection of non-fiction essays and reviews published as *America and Americans* (1966):

Sag Harbor intends to preserve and maintain the beautiful houses the whalers built in order to keep alive the spirits of the builders.

If neon honkytonks, juvenile delinquency and the quick buck are symbols of progress, then Sag Harbor is and wants to remain old-fashioned.

The three books referenced here actually form a trilogy on America, its past and future prospects. Steinbeck had come to be regarded by his many readers as the conscience of America, a sort of moral barometer of American society and its vulnerabilities. As it turns out, from more than a half century later, his despairing criticisms were, indeed, prescient and should have been heeded then and now as warning signs for our country. But his love for Sag Harbor and his modest cottage and writing studio on the cove never waned. We see it on full display, for example, in the first chapter of *Travels*, as he struggles against a hurricane to set off on his road trip, or in a lovely and humorous 1957 *Holiday* essay, “My War With the Ospreys,” or in the numerous letters he wrote from and about Sag Harbor. His last three books received some mixed reviews, but for those critics who contended that Steinbeck had lost his powers, the Nobel Academy and the views of peers like Saul Bellow, set the issue straight. Tom Clavin cites Bellow’s assessment of *Winter*:

In this book John Steinbeck returns to the high standards of *The Grapes of Wrath* and to the social themes that made his early work so impressive, and so powerful. Critics who said of him that he had seen his best days had better tie

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on their napkins and prepare to eat crow (5).

So, is there a Steinbeck “legacy” on eastern Long Island? The answer, according to Clavin, is likely both no and yes. No in that most everyone who even casually knows Steinbeck’s work thinks of his legacy as set in northern California during his early years as a writer. Some believe that he never really left there, either physically or creatively. However, even if a book like *Winter*, for example, is not typically put in the same league as *Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*, it is, nonetheless, according to Clavin a “remarkable novel, the last flowering of a great American writer.” Furthermore, abundant evidence confirms a qualified yes answer to the “legacy” question. The extraordinary trilogy of final books, the opening of *Winter*, his heartfelt letters, and much more, “describe and emphasize the physical and spiritual beauty of his late-in-life home,” (6) both the village and his home. A great, authentically American writer, who captured the nation’s attention in his early years, remained a singular, indispensable voice to the very end. Sag Harbor and his house on the cove loom large as integral factors in nurturing and shaping his capstone successes as social critic and literary artist.

Richard E. Hart, Ph.D. Editorial Board, *Steinbeck Review*

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Appendix B

WORDS OF WELCOME

From Our Honorary Chairman

JOHN STEINBECK



This is the second annual Sag Harbor Old Whalers' Festival, and it promises to be even more reverent and memorial and confused and historical and crazy than the one last year. It is Sag Harbor's answer to automation. For one thing, much research has gone into this festival, and we now know more about the original Old Whalers than some of them would want us to.

We made some mistakes last year which helps because now we can make the same ones quicker and easier and go on to new errors.

One of these will be a real whale boat race participated in by Sag Harbor defending against the neighboring towns for the Cetacean Cup. This is no clocked affair. The flower of our youth and strength will man the sweeps, each whale boat driving down the harbor. The winning boat gets the first harpoon in a genuine artificial whale. And if that isn't an invitation to mayhem, I don't know what is.

This resurrected sport is so new that it has no ground rules as yet. We may have to get some later to save life and limb but not this year. However, this race may prove that there is as much blubber now as there was in the old days.

But this is only one of many fascinating, historical and improbable events. There will be parades and reenactments — a beard judging and a beauty contest for fish.

We aim to experiment with a beach buggy contest over a course like a lunar landscape. No one can foresee what will happen here but the prospects are dreadful and beautiful to

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contemplate. But after all, the Old Whalers whom we celebrate lived dangerously, and we cannot let them down.

Not all attention will be on blood sports. Youth and beauty of the feminine persuasion will preside over the dancing and music together with many romantical inventions and conceits — all designed to create a Dionysiac spirit of quid pro quo and the quoter the better.

(Note) North Sea will participate in the festival which is a guarantee of enthusiasm even if the insurance rates do go up.

Harborites have been working and planning and practicing for this celebration for many months. We want to make our guests welcome only promising to clobber them if they get out of hand. We hope we are not overtrained.

The fact that I have been made Honorary Chairman of the Old Whalers' Festival is a clear indication of the explosive but cautious thinking of the descendants of the Old Whalers. If all goes well, we share the happiness but if the Village blows up, I get the blame.

I don't know how I got here. I am only a sixth class citizen. It takes six generations for first class. But my neighbors are considerate and kind to me.

Anyway, we hope you will enjoy our festival. Complaints may be made in Riverhead or will be individually taken care of behind Otter Pond and perhaps in it.

John Steinbeck

Honorary Chairman and running scared.

John Steinbeck, "Words of Welcome," *Old Whalers Festival, Sag Harbor, Long Island, N.Y. June 12, 13, 14, 1964*, 1-2.

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