

The House That Was

by Maria C. Ward

Once upon a time there was a grand shingled French chateau with three turrets on the shore of Quisset Harbor. Many people have visited and much has been written about the adjoining Webster gardens. (See *Spritsail* Summer '05). This is the story of the house itself.

On December 26, 1905, the Barnstable County Registry of Deeds records that Ella Shearer sold to Jane Webster a property on Quisset Avenue in Falmouth. Thus Edwin S. and Jane Hovey Webster took possession of the house previously owned by William and Ella Shearer. Mr. Webster was cofounder of the electrical engineering consulting

firm, Stone and Webster. Mr. Shearer owned The Paine Furniture Co. in Boston, then the largest New England furniture company. The Shearer house came with a building across the street that had been a stable, became a garage, and had living quarters for servants. That building is now a private home, but it still has a shingled turret with the curved windows that characterized the original mansion. The famous Webster Rose Garden would not be constructed for another 25 years. Since street numbers were not in existence, the address is simply listed as Quisset Avenue, which at that time may have extended down to Quisset Harbor. (There was no Sippewissett Road.)



Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Among reports in *The Enterprise* during the next twenty-five years are: Edwin Webster “will install an electric light plant to light several private residences in that vicinity.” January 12, 1907.

“E. S. Webster has arrived at his summer house in Quissett with horses, autos, a large steam yacht, and a \$7500 hydroplane that almost flies.” 1914.

But nothing compares to the changes made in 1930, when the *Falmouth Enterprise* reported on the alterations in progress at the Quissett estate, a “stately turreted home ... remindful of a French chateau” with pink stucco and blue trim colors carried out into the garden of blue flowers on the paths leading to the expansive rose gardens. B. G. Norton was the



The Webster house after 1930.

Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

contractor for refinishing the exterior in stucco. H. V. Lawrence installed the carefully planned gardens while P. F. Powers Co. was commissioned for the plumbing and irrigation piping for the rose garden.

The gardens were promised to be open, free to the public, in the summer of 1930, as they were for almost 40 years. It is said Mrs. Webster delighted in roaming the gardens, incognito, to assure herself of the pleasure they afforded her “guests.” Very seldom was there a charge. Once, in 1932, Mrs. Webster joined with three other local gardeners to open their gardens to the public for a fee - \$1.00 to benefit the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Mrs. Webster was determined to protect her Quissett enclave. A 1949 *Enterprise* reported that “Mr. and Mrs. Webster have bought 45 acres of undeveloped land from Mr. and Mrs. Arthur M. Morse of Quissett. Sale was by Mrs. Ermine Lovell. The tract lies between Woods Hole Road, Oyster Pond, and Surf Drive.” In 1952, she bought the old Ames Estate, owned by James Marshall, near her property on Quissett Harbor, to prevent it from becoming a hotel or resort. Four years later, she sold the estate to Howard Houston as his private home. She was also a party to a lawsuit to prevent developers who had plans for an eight-acre subdivision of 24 building lots, each 10,000-14,000 square feet just ahead of a town meeting rule requiring 40,000 square foot lots.

The Webster house was witness to many gatherings. The Websters’ interests were wide. Obviously, the Falmouth Garden Club often held meetings at the estate. (It celebrated its 30th Anniversary there in 1961.) In 1932, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, headed by Mr. Webster, entertained 500 garden lovers from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Maine. At a 1934



The Webster house overlooking Quisset Harbor and the Marshall tennis court. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Collection.

meeting of the New England Historic Genealogical Society the guest speaker was Stephen Vincent Benét.

A Republican meeting in 1938 featured the assistant chair of the Republican National Party and Sinclair Weeks, then chair of the Republican Finance Committee. The ladies' committee for the event was a who's who of locals including Mrs. Hobart Ames, Mrs. Arthur Bell, Mrs. Murray Crane, Mrs. Henry Fay, Mrs. Irvin Garfield, Mrs. Walter Janney, Mrs. Harry Lawrence, and Mrs. Walter Luscombe. The

Websters' many smaller gatherings benefited charities like the Red Cross.

Of course, family occasions were often celebrated in the house. At the time of her death, Mrs. Webster was reported to have had four children, 17 grandchildren, 46 great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren. The *Falmouth Enterprise* noted her 90th and then her 95th birthday celebrated at the Quisset house. In 1938, it wrote of the arrival of her daughter, Mrs. Thomas Hiam, by plane from



The Webster "garage" across the street from the main house.
Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Collection.

Vancouver, British Columbia, with her five children, Thomas (12), Ned (10), Elizabeth (7), Peter (5), and Frances (1 1/2). (All slept aboard the twenty-four hour transcontinental flight which landed at the East Boston airport.) Grandson Ned Hiam becomes very important to this narrative.

After Mrs. Webster died in 1969 at age 99 (Mr. Webster died in 1950, age 82), Edwin (Ned) Hiam bought the Quissett property from her estate. Because of the prohibitive cost of the gardens, the roses were given away to neighbors. He noted, "An extensive formal garden is difficult to maintain; just not feasible in this generation. In my grandmother's day, things were different." The house also demanded great outlays of money just for taxes and upkeep. And so the house was demolished that fall. (The property that had included the house and garden between Quissett Avenue and Quissett Harbor was held by a family trust until 2009.)

The loss of the house and garden was lamented in a 1972 poem by A. E. Carlson of Waquoit, courtesy of *The Enterprise*.

Sic Transit Gloria

A black and barren hillside
sweeps downward to the sea
No vestige of the grand old house
or towers, which used to be.
Gone is the magic garden
where rose of every hue
Perfumed the morning sunshine -
velvet petals jeweled by dew.
When all things temporal have passed
when we all know peace at last
May Quissett live on, in that lull
disturbed by only mewing gull.

About the Author

Maria C. Ward has been a *Spritsail* editor since 2005.