



Rich history of Trout Pond revealed

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The Eldridge house foundation.

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The newest exhibit at the Sag Harbor Historical Society's Annie Cooper Boyd House, "Trout Pond—Its Surprising History Revealed," is more than just a picture of the small body of water in the hamlet of Noyac. It tells the tale of a bygone era and the people who inhabited it.

Beginning with four paintings by Ms. Boyd, Historical Society members and curators of the exhibit Jean Held and Dorothy Zaykowski slowly unfurled the mysteries of Trout Pond's colorful past. The two women followed leads and collected input from friends, eventually telling the pond's story with an unforgettable cast of supporting characters.

Among the denizens of the pond and the bucolic world beyond its shores were nationally recognized figures, artists, an eccentric hermit, and others who provide a fascinating glimpse into a way of life slowly becoming alien on the East End.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, Ms. Held walked the rooms of the Boyd House, explaining the photographs, maps and text displayed on several clearly arranged boards, as well as a number of artifacts gathered during her and Ms. Zaykowski's research.

Ms. Zaykowski is well-known locally for her book "Sag Harbor: An American Beauty," an essential tome for anyone interested in the history of the former whaling port.

The Sag Harbor Historical Society shows Ms. Boyd's paintings every year, according to Ms. Held, but only recently did the subject of the watercolors in the Trout Pond exhibit become clear. "We weren't even sure what we were looking at," Ms. Held said, noting that the mill and nearby structures pictured no longer exist on Trout Pond, but they matched old photos of the area and what remains of a stone bridge on Noyac Road's "dead man's curve," by the pond.

With that realization, the "detective work" began for the curators and with each new find, more questions arose. Ms. Held and Ms. Zaykowski were taken down several roads of research, but all of them met at Trout Pond.

Trout Pond was formed by early mill owners who shaped the landscape to capture the water of a creek known then as Noyac River, which they dammed and then used to power grist and fulling mills for grain and cloth. The first mills were built at the end of the 17th century and were owned by several families, but the exhibit focuses closely on the last of them before the pond began its next incarnation.

There are still descendents of the final owners, the Eldridge family, in Sag Harbor and Ms. Held said one of them visited the exhibition this month.

In the late 1870s, Thomas Eldridge married Susan Chadwick, the daughter of Henry Chadwick, who is credited with popularizing baseball in America. Ms. Held said, "The two families were cemented at that time." The marriage was not long after Mr. Chadwick came to Noyac during the peak of his fame and moved next door to the Eldridges. He bought the mill on Trout Pond and put his son in-law in charge of it.

The Chadwick and Eldridge family owned a massive house near the mill, though it burned down in a 1944 forest fire, which took a number of buildings around the pond.

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After learning the story, Ms. Held and Ms. Zaykowski went to Trout Pond, which is now preserved, and found remnants of the house, including partially uncovered cisterns. The women followed the cistern pipes and discovered that a brick corner of the home survived the fire and still stands, hidden in the brush.

"The most amazing thing is when you go there today. It's very hard to imagine all the activity around the pond," Ms. Held said of the public park that is now a place of quiet greenery. She and Ms. Zaykowski brought the Eldridge descendent, Thomas Eldridge's grandson "Chaddy" Worden, to the pond recently. He remembered and keenly described his grandfather's home and looking at an old photograph, Mr. Worden was able to point out the window of the room in which he slept.

Input from people like Mr. Worden has been an invaluable resource for the Historical Society and Ms. Held said several have illuminated the pond's past, answered questions and even added physical elements to the exhibit. Two bowls at the Boyd House contain plant samples from Trout Pond, and visitors were able to help identify them, including one rare species of liverwort, which grows nowhere else on Long Island. "I don't know how it got there," Ms. Held said.

A passionate naturalist wary of jumping to conclusions, she did not want to speculate as to why the plant grows there, but Ms. Held said the rare flora was found growing in pools that another important Trout Pond resident dug for farming trout.

George W. Thompson was a local man who had returned from the West after the gold rush and moved in across the pond from the Eldridge family. His fish operation eventually inspired the pond's name, and because Trout Pond is man-made, the Town Trustees had no control over its use. Mr. Thompson charged people to see his trout farm and, perhaps because of this, an unknown person poisoned and killed his entire stock.

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