



House History

George Edward Sanford House Peter Theodore Benson Sr. House Seawall Farm

Address: 506 Seawall Road

City: Southwest Harbor, Manset

State: Maine

Map and Lot Number: Map 19 – Lot 006

Map: CS 1887 – Peter T. Benson Jr.

MHPC: 405-1011

First Owner: Sanford - George Edward Sanford (1812-1873)

Builder: Sanford - George Edward Sanford (1812-1873)

Build Date: 1852

1917 Renovation: Stillman Dolliver (1862-1942) of Manset.

"Peter Benson's house is on the site of one built by Van Ness Smith, who changed his mind before his house was finished, took it down and carried the materials to Otter Creek where he rebuilt it. George Sanford built a house on the same site and lived in it for twenty or more years, then sold it to Peter Benson, whose son Peter now owns and occupies it with many additions and improvements." - "Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine" by Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, 1938, p. 204.

Owner Chain:

The house at 506 Seawall Road was built by George Edward Sanford about 1852 [T-204] who lived there until he died in 1873 when it passed to his son Samuel Clark Sanford and daughter Dorothea Sanford Rice.

Dorothea died in 1899, leaving as heirs-in-law her husband Herbert A. Rice and brother Samuel.

They sold the place to Peter T. and Nellie Johnson Benson 1/30/1900 [346-156];

Mortgage foreclosed by S. Ward Newman 12/26/1904 [415-271];

Sold back to Peter and Nellie Benson 10/17/1905 [425-536].

Mortgage foreclosed by Luere B. Deasy 7/25/1907 [440-373];

Sold to son Jordan B. Benson 10/5/1908 [454-445] who sold to his brother Peter T. Benson, Jr. 5/5/1914 [505-122]

Peter and his wife G. Katharine Gatcomb Benson made many renovations and raised their family of six in this home;

Sold by G. Katharine to Peter T and Dorothy Fisher Benson, III 7/20/1964 [964-16] who sold to Lawrence S. & Judith A. Hostetler Newman, Jr. 1/2/1973 [1159-338];

Sold to Charles D. Litton and Melvin L and Joyce R. Matlock 11/20/1979 [1365-635, 637, 639];

Melvin and Joyce Matlock sold their portion of the property to Charles D. Litton 1/30/1981 [1397-299, 301].

Charles D. Litton sold the property to Robert E. and Ann Sperry McGrath 10/10/1987 [1665/591]. Ownership conveyed to Ann S. McGrath Revocable Trust, Ann S and Robert E. McGrath, Trustees 4/18/1990 [2804-299]

In 1981 Captain Peter Benson Sr.'s grandson, William "Bill" Valentine Benson (1917-1997) wrote a brief history of the house and Benson family from which most of the information below is taken. William Benson says that the original house consisted only of the part that is now the dining room and living room, "though how they all managed in that little house is a mystery to me, but my grandfather was away at sea most of the time....He had been to sea all his life...had sailed around Cape Horn to the Pacific and back as a youngster and then become a fishing skipper in the North Sea out of Oslo, Norway."

At one time "he was owed a lot of money by the owners of one of the vessels he captained and could not collect [the debt] so he and the crew took the vessel, sailed it across the North Atlantic into Gloucester, Massachusetts and went fishing there....Captain Peter became the youngest foreign born skipper in the United States with a Master's papers.

Then in 1902 Captain Benson was "stabbed, robbed and thrown into the East River in New York." Captain Benson had been "carrying a large sum of money that had been the settlement for a very long fishing trip to the Grand Banks...all the proceeds of the trip were taken, probably about five thousand dollars"

The house was foreclosed the day after Christmas in 1904 (HRD 415/271) but Captain Benson's young son, Peter Theodore Benson, Jr. (1888-1963) was able to purchase it back within a year (Oct. 17, 1905, HRD 425/536) and Bill Benson says "My father lived in the house at Seawall until his death in 1963. His brother, Jordan went to sea briefly and married a Norwegian woman..." They lived in a large house across the road [Location: Map 19, Lot 33, 511 Seawall Road] which was later bought by Doris Fielding Reid and moved to Seawall Point near Flynn's Ledge [Map 19, Lot 39, 30 Seawall Point] "The price of the house, six acres of land and the moving job was \$750.

"My father [Peter T. Benson, Jr.] and his brother [Jordan] never got along and made nearly a lifetime career of not speaking to each other....My uncle, Jordan, went on to found and operate a sight-seeing boat business in Bar Harbor.

"Their sister, Annie, married Harry Seavey, and lived in Northeast Harbor. They had five children and lots of bad luck in their lives but they were decent, hard-working and caring people.

"[Their sister] Nina Pauline went to New York. [She came to visit us a couple of times, but it was clear she was not welcome in our midst. Her later life was tragic and she was eventually buried in a pauper's grave in New York."

On October 7, 1916 Peter Benson, II married Gertrude Katharine Gatcomb,(1889-1962), daughter of James Y. Gatcomb and Katherine Gertrude (Higgins) Gatcomb, a summer visitor to Southwest Harbor. Katherine Gatcomb of the Boston area was a concert pianist, a well-known tennis player, world traveler and a very attractive woman.

"Peter was a fish peddler, general handyman and sometimes worked on fishing vessels. He was ambitious and hard-working [but] their elopement caused a great social stir. They moved to Seawall and lived there [in the house] along with Peter's mother, who died a short time later. In the meantime plans were made to enlarge the house and my mother's uncle made them a wedding present of the addition in 1917. The work was done by Stillman Dolliver (1862-1942) of Manset."

"...The house was always a warm and comfortable haven for all our good and bad times. To my knowledge no one ever died there. There were two fires. One I set in the kitchen as a little boy when I got my hands on some matches. The other was in the attic. My father was out fishing in front of the house and saw the smoke wafting up from the house but he was helpless to do anything about it. The fire department came and put it out and my mother kept on working on a cake in the kitchen while they were doing it. She said there wasn't anything she could do about it and the men were doing a fine job.

"It's a great old house...It was sold out of our family in 1973 for \$38,000. I hope it is half as great a life experience for those coming after...as it was for us."