|  |
| --- |
|  |

Bottom of Form

January 4, 1998

# Building a Village, Providing for a University

By RAMIN P. JALESHGARI

ONE hundred and ten years ago, John Ward Melville was born in Brooklyn, New York, more than 60 miles away from the tiny Long Island farming community that he would one day change forever.

From his father, Frank Melville, a slipper salesman-cum-cattle rancher who opened a series of retail shoe stores that would eventually become Thom McAn Shoes and the Melville Shoe Corporation, Ward learned his legendary business sense. Today, largely through Ward Melville's leadership, the company is CVS Pharmaceuticals, the parent company of CVS. Thom McAn and Bob's Stores, Kay-Bee Toys, Marshall's Linens 'n Things, Foot Action and Wilson's.

Ward's mother, Jennie McConell Melville, an avid fund-raiser who, in the late 1800's raised enough money for what would be the first women's club in America, served to temper Ward's business savvy with social concern.

The Melvilles first came to Old Field in Stony Brook in 1900 and Frank and Jennie immediately jumped into local life. Frank served on civic boards, including the Chamber of Commerce. Jennie's love of gardening led her to organize the Three Village Garden Club in 1929, which still beautifies the area through conservation and plantings.

By the late 1930's, Ward Melville, then in his 40's, also began to turn his attentions on the sleepy community where his family had summered through the years. Surveying the little village of Stony Brook, once a bustling shipbuilding and whaling port that had become little more than a hodgepodge of post-colonial homes and freestanding shops abutting a shallow harbor, Melville made a serious plan: Stony Brook Village could be revived, and he was the man to do it.

Under his guidance, the revamping of Stony Brook would be the design project of a lifetime -- becoming the first planned business community in America, and the standard by which retail developments would be set throughout the nation.

Ward Melville's organization, the Stony Brook Community Fund, was an unusual experiment. Part development company, part charitable trust, part preservation group, the Community Fund, renamed last year the Ward Melville Heritage Organization, and run by a self-perpetuating board of trustees, spent millions of dollars to create a full-service, colonial-style village.

''Basically,'' said Gloria Rocchio, current president of the Community Fund, ''Ward Melville dreamed of creating a 'living Williamsburg' -- a hamlet with the same colonial beauty of Williamsburg, but unlike it in that it was not to be a museum, but a public center where residents could go about their daily lives.''

Ward Melville continually supported the fund's activities throughout his life, a continuing cause for his concern until his death in 1977. Yet, even through financial hardships within his living Williamsburg, Melville continued to finance worthy causes: particularly those involving the welfare of young people. It was he who persuaded the State Board of Education to allow the Setauket and Stony Brook school districts to merge, supporting a $21 million program for five new buildings. Melville also donated land for a Y.M.C.A. camp grounds and his 478-acre donation to the State University of New York system brought what is now a nationally recognized university to Stony Brook.

Ward wasn't the only Melville with charitable tendencies. Recognized as a philanthropist to rival even her husband's generosity, his wife, Dorothy Bigelow Melville, worked extensively to preserve Long Island's cultural and historic heritage. Mrs. Melville's call to charity began early, when she served as a volunteer nurse's aide in World War I and worked actively with the American Red Cross in World War II. In later years, her interest in natural history and small collection of artifacts, grew into what is now the Museums at Stony Brook.

Working well into her elder years for organizations like the Suffolk County Y.M.C.A. and the League of Women Voters, Dorothy Melville was recognized by the New York State Legislature in 1986, which adopted a resolution recognizing her contributions to the community. And, even after her husband's death, she continued his avid support of the Stony Brook Community Fund, financing the financially strapped organization to her final days.

Idyllic as plans were for the colonial-type Stony Brook, they did not proceed without problems. The major part of Ward Melville's plan required that the existing Main Street (Route 25A) be re-routed, meaning that more than 30 houses in its path be moved or destroyed.

But, reiterating what Melville said, Ms. Rocchio stated that most residents willingly allowed their homes to be relocated. Some old-timers disagree, referring to the homes (some of them historic) that were destroyed under claims of eminent domain for the new road.

At its completion in record time in 1941, the Stony Brook Village Center looked then the way it looks today. Facing the harbor, a sweeping village green culminated at a crescent of stores at its apex. The little shops lent themselves well to Melville's ''living Williamsburg'' design. A butcher, baker and barber were among the shopkeepers, and a local hardware store provided supplies to the increasing number of new homeowners.

Today the shopping area, expanded in the 1980's, includes Market Square, with high-end boutique retailers. There is no butcher any longer, and the hardware store is long gone in favor of shops like Godiva Chocolatiers, Laura Ashley and Talbot's.

Yet, just as in its founder's time, the centerpiece -- the United States Post Office -- has remained a constant. A Greek temple design, the post office facade features an eagle that flaps its wings on the hour -- an attraction that has lured tourists to the center for 50-odd years.

And it is for the tourists, many residents complain, for which Ward Melville's Stony Brook Village now exists. Some point fingers directly at Ms. Rocchio, who left a post as director of the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau to head-up the Stony Brook Community Fund. Store owners, past and present, say they have been bullied into vacating their shops to make room for trendier, more profitable merchants, by high rents or unreasonable demands by the fund that they should incur the cost of extensive improvements to their retail space.

Ms. Rocchio vehemently denies that she was specifically hired to create a tourist haven out of Stony Brook Village Center or that any of the center's business people have been bullied in any way.

Today, 20 years after Ward Melville's death and 8 years after Dorothy's, Ms. Rocchio says the group is beginning to reap a profit, albeit a small one, which is then funneled back into the preservation of the numerous historic sites the fund owns and maintains as part of the original Melville greater plan.

Among the sites the fund acquired and maintains are the 18th-century Thompson and Hawkins-Mount Houses (the latter is the former home of the Long Island artist William Sydney Mount) and the recently refurbished Brewster House dating to 1667. A particular prize is the 18th-century Stony Brook Grist Mill, the most completely equipped working grist mill on the Island. The bulk of the refurbishment costs in the early 1990's was borne by a local philanthropist, Leighton H. Coleman.

These acquisitions, too, were not without critics. Many locals say that Melville was able to obtain the properties as a result of foreclosures or at grossly undervalued prices.

'''At the time Ward Melville started acquiring these historic sites,'' said Joyce Miraglia, a spokeswoman for the Melville Heritage Organization, ''many were in a bad state of disrepair, and some were slated for destruction. The fact is, at the time, he was really the only single individual with the capital to purchase these properties; there were no higher bidders. If he hadn't bought them, they would have rotted where they stood, and an invaluable heritage would have been lost.''

In recent years preservation of a different kind has been on the agenda for the Community Fund/Heritage Organization. Expanding their pervue into environmental concerns, the group has instituted a Marine Conservation Center in West Meadow Creek adjacent to Stony Brook Harbor. The center works closely with the University at Stony Brook's Marine Sciences Research Center to bring year-round programs to the public.

Following its founder's example, the Heritage Organization puts a variety of other charitable endeavors high on its list. In August, the organization sponsored a fund-raiser for breast cancer research, and a yearly ''Walk for Beauty'' to support breast cancer survivors has become a successfulevent. The organization works regularly with children's and other charities as well.

But for many Stony Brook residents, these things are not enough. Most recently, the sale of Forsythe Meadows last summer -- at 32 acres, the largest remaining undeveloped tract in the fast-burgeoning Stony Brook area -- to the Commack developers Klein & Eversoll Inc., outraged residents.

Klein & Eversoll plan to put 42 homes on 1/2-acre tracts on Forsythe Meadows. Homeowners whose properties abut the area contend that they were assured when they purchased their houses that the meadow was the property of a nonprofit community group and would likely never be developed.

In an open letter to the Community Fund and its trustees, one Forsythe Meadows neighbor, Robert Harvey, stated that his group, Neighbors for the Preservation of Stony Brook, were repeatedly rebuffed and ignored by the fund when they attempted to talk about these issues.

''The Heritage Organization Community Fund is entrusted with a primary responsibility to preserve our historic holdings, and the way we earn the money to do that is through our commercial real-estate endeavors,'' said Ms. Rocchio. ''We have been forced to, because of our financial condition, sell certain properties. The fact is that Forsythe Meadows was always slated for development -- Ward Melville had sold it to a contractor who was going to build a nursing home there in 1971. His plans fell through and he sold the parcel back to the Community Fund.''

The organization's most recent transaction is the sale of a land parcel and a historic home -- not part of the commercial real-estate holdings -- to James H. Simons, private resident and founder/owner of Renaissance Technologies.

''It seems like everything the Community Fund does is under the cover of secrecy,'' said Peter Cella, who has been living in Stony Brook since 1958. ''I remember as a child coming down to Stony Brook Village with my parents who shopped here and made use of the facilities -- the supermarket, for example,'' he said. ''In those days everyone talked about Ward Melville as a great man. Then, all of a sudden the essence of what he tried to give the community is all gone with no one's input.''

For her own part, Ms. Rocchio doesn't understand the outrage, pointing out that her group is not a public establishment, but a private nonprofit association that doesn't have to amass public consensus for its plans.

''The fact is, we don't have to tell the public anything. We are a private group,'' she said. ''I've never understood why people get so angry at us, when we are simply administering our duties according to the charter of the organization. When it comes to running the Heritage Organization and its holdings, we don't have to ask permission of the public to move forward. I wish people would just understand that.''

For, William Bonnifield, who has lived in Stony Brook for 36 years, such comments are not surprising. In the 1980's Mr. Bonnifield started an association, the Committee for the Fund, which spent years trying to monitor the Community Fund's activities and encourage them to interact with and inform the public of activities that would impact it.

''We were horrified to see the close-knit, community-oriented atmosphere of Stony Brook Village change and we wanted to do something about it,'' said Mr. Bonnifield, ''When the boutiques started taking over, we felt we had to do something. My neighbors and I didn't think that this is what Ward Melville wanted. The small-town, Main Street U.S.A. feel that he strove for is gone.''

In 1980, the Committee for the Fund obtained from the Charitable Division of New York State the Community Fund's report of assets, which at the time totaled $54 million.

''They were also getting millions from the Melville estate, so we could never understand why the Community Fund was always bankrupt,'' said Mr. Bonnifield, ''necessitating the need for higher-end commercial renters in the Village Center and the sale of fund-owned lands. Today, it's still a question.''

Even though the Heritage Organization's nonprofit status makes its assets public record, Ms. Rocchio refused to release that figure or to reveal rental prices in Stony Brook Village Center.

''To give that information out would simply be bad business,'' she said. Mr. Bonnifield said his group folded because the Community Fund was unwilling to work with any local interest group.

One group, the Hamlet Study Task Force, has had some success in getting citizens voices heard with respect to Forsythe Meadows and other Community Fund deals. Headed up by a local citizen, Cynthia Barnes, the task force prepared a survey that appeared in local papers. The survey, created and compiled with the help of Lee Koppelman, a state planner and local resident, identified that increased development was a high concern among inhabitants.

'''With the information we gathered we have prepared a study that we want to be included in the Brookhaven Town Plan,'' said Ms. Barnes. As a result of the group's work, in July, the Brookhaven Town board passed a moratorium on all residential development in the Three Villages, a measure that directly affects the Forsythe Meadows project.

''We are very pleased with our success, but realize that our work cannot truly be comprehensive without the input of the Stony Brook Community Fund,'' said Ms. Barnes. ''Although, we have invited representatives of the Community Fund to join us on this study numerous times and they have repeatedly refused, we want them to know that there is still an open invitation. They are a life-force of this community and no study impacting local life would be complete without them.''

Yet, despite continuing conflicts with the community, the Ward Melville Heritage Organization continues to administer Stony Brook Village Center. A bustling commercial center, it draws visitors Island-wide, whose support insures that the nonprofit trust and the village it administers will long remain a part of the Long Island landscape that Melville so affected with his charitable endeavors of all kinds.

''I think this set-up works for Stony Brook,''said Jill Smith, a visitor from Queens who commented on the current flavor of the village. ''I come out here and avail myself of all there is to do, but I wouldn't drive all the way out here to go to a hardware store. With all the big mega-stores on the main highways, a little village like this couldn't compete unless it appealed to a niche market.''

Her mother, Judy Vilas, of Farmingdale finds the Melville's colonial vision most appealing.

''It's just lovely here,'' she said. ''I come here year-round, have lunch, browse in the shops. There are always special events and activities and physical beauty of the area is unique. I think Ward Melville ultimately succeeded-because there's nowhere quite like Stony Brook Village on the Island.''

Photos: John Ward Melville, circa 1936, a philanthropist who established the Stony Brook Village Center as the first planned business community in America. (Three Village Historical Society)(pg. 1); Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller breaks ground in 1960 for State University at Stony Brook with Ward and Dorothy Melville. An eagle atop the post office flaps its wings every hour in the village center. (Three Village Historical Society; Lois Raimondo for The New York Times)(pg. 4)