Before the Stone Drops
Greenport’s Youngest Mayor

A Quick Cycle of
Boom and Bust in Bayview
ATTENTION READERS!!!
Looking for photos and reminiscences of the drive-in theater!!
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RIBBON CUTTING
(See Gail Horton’s story, page 3)

Ribbon Cutting for the newly constructed North Fork Bank & Trust building, Main Street, Greenport, New York. (Site of former Klipp Mansion) From left to right: Lynn Carlson, unknown (reader help please?), Joseph L. Townsend Sr. (Trustee), Llewellyn Price (Trustee), Frank Anderson (East End Manager), Joseph L. Townsend, Jr. (Greenport Mayor), William Albertson (Branch Manager), John Ashton, John Kanas (Vice President) and MaryBess LaFreniere (Phillips).
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As Horace Evans, the widowed publisher and editor of The East End Times, rested in the comforting arms of his confidant and sometimes lover, local madam Bessie Tibbs, he mulled over the incongruous details of the death of Oldport’s prominent realtor George ‘Hoss’ Tanner’s wife, Ada. In response to Horace’s “It doesn’t make sense.” Bess shrugged her shoulders, “There ain’t no way to find out now. The past is like a white stone that you drop in the water. It gets dimmer and dimmer and then, finally it disappears. And then everybody gets old and then everybody dies and it’s all just stories. That’s all. Some day we’ll all be stories to other people, as if we never really existed.”

When local author Robert DeMaria’s 1980 above quoted pot-boiler novel SECRET PLACES – United by Blood, Divided by Power. Their Battle Ripped the Lid Off the Town. It didn’t ‘rip the lid off the town’ - but it angered some and was the talk of its thinly veiled setting - the Village of Greenport. Loosely based on local issues, events, residents, and locales – the hyperbole sent a frenzied ripple throughout the village with many of the citizenry guessing who Secret Places characters were modeled on and - mus ing “Did such things really happen? Did they really do that?” Generally, those who made it into the novel as subjects enjoyed a dubious pride in being featured as a character – even if they were portrayed as wife-murders, adulterers, crooks or just plain drunks or scoundrels. What the heck, at least they were noticed. Most of us guessed who was who, where was where, and what was what, and enjoyed our quick read of the book as we matched up the people, places and events— both real and invented. Impromptu discussion groups gathered on street corners and in the Coronet aka ‘Crown Diner’ to share their conjectures.

Joseph Townsend Jr., who served as the Village of Greenport’s youngest mayor from 1974 through 1979, enjoyed a fairly favorable portrayal as Jeff Tanner, Oldport’s recently elected twenty-eight-year-old leader and son of the scoundrel, wife-murdering, realtor, Hoss Tanner. Before time passes, and the challenges that the young leader faced become “all just stories,” I decided to take a look at Joe’s entry into local politics.

Greenport was in the throes of change in early 1974 when James Monsell, the Village of Greenport’s Superintendent of Public Utilities, approached Joe Townsend Jr. in an attempt to draft him to run for mayor of the village. The underpinnings of the village’s economy were coming unraveled. The evolution from a small port settlement – once referred to as Winter Harbor - on Sterling Creek to the development of a readily accessible deep water port engendered rapid growth. The village which began in 1828; changed its name from Green Hill to Greenport in 1831, incorporated in 1838 grew rapidly – riding the waves of success as a maritime community, first with whaling and then men-haden fishing, oystering and coastal trade and recreation-al boating. Fisherman and baymen who also engaged in trap fishing; scalloping and clamming all played an important part of this economy as did the surrounding farms whose produce – shipped by coastal schooners - was an important part of the local economy. Ship chandleries, shipyards, marine engine shops, sailors, sailmakers, barrel makers, blacksmiths, and provisioners moved to the area and contributed to the growth of the vibrant working community; builders moved in to create new houses, and existing dwellings arrived on the shores from Shelter Island on barges and by horses from hamlets to the west and east to provide housing for the burgeoning community – an early version of adaptive reuse. The 1844 appearance of the train to Greenport ushered in a new wealth of employment and mode of shipping as well as easy access to westerly towns and villages, New York City, and New England via passenger steamships. Our forebears showed great foresight in the development of our community by providing utilities: with the incorporation of the Greenport Light and Power Company in 1887 to furnish light and power to Greenport and the surrounding community out of a plant built on South Street; 1894 they voted to sewer Main Street from Broad Street to the Bay; and in 1899 the residents of Greenport voted to purchase the Greenport Water Works established in 1887 by a group of local residents. The pumping station located west of the village on the farm of William H. Moore – the area currently fronted by Moore’s Lane. Now serving the needs of a population that had grown to 2239 people in a
mile square area, the Village of Greenport realized the value of public water to serve the closely developed community with portable drinking water and fire protection.

By 1974, the traditional waterfront uses in the village dwindled down to a trickle: fiberglass replaced wood planked boats; the military engine that drove massive boat building during World War II dried up; and the many fish and shellfish were not as plentiful. Trucks transported local farm produce replacing boats and the train; the deep sea fishing fleet was no longer welcome on Main Street Wharf and laws governing the industry became more onerous. These waning industries took the once plentiful jobs with them. Meanwhile, the combination of increased car use and shopping malls creeping closer to the North Fork caused Greenport to lose its preeminence as a shopping mecca. Stores closed, and more employment opportunities were lost. The once sturdy and storied maritime community that encouraged generations of families to live and make a living saw a break in the continuity with their offspring leaving to find work and homes elsewhere. They left behind a waterfront with many crumbling buildings, a downtown with a high vacancy rate, and many old, once splendid homes empty.

Addressing the issue of the brain-drain that then faced the North Fork, Joe states in his mayoral campaign ad of February 28, 1974: “I’m one of the few Greenporters who has the opportunity to come back home to work. The same opportunity should be available to every one of us and our children. That is why I’m running for Mayor.” Thus, he responded to Superintendent Monsell’s plea to put his youthful vigor, understanding of village issues, and problem solving mentality to use and threw down the gauntlet – he would challenge then Mayor David Walker – who was appointed to his position the previous June after the resignation of George Hubbard and now had to stand for election to serve the remaining year of Hubbard’s term.

Elsie Knapp and Frederick Landon Corwin wrote in their book Greenport, Yesterday and Today & Diary of a Country Newspaper that it was “Dedicated to the people of Greenport with whom we have shared the joy of living in this village by the sea.” These were the people who young Townsend wanted to serve and in a pre-election interview for the Suffolk Times where he was often interrupted by passer-by’s questions, Joe told reporter Ronnie Wacker, “This is the kind of thing, this friendly atmosphere that is so good in a small town. Of course you lose a certain amount of privacy,” he admitted with a smile. “Ten minutes after you have put your foot in your door, everybody in town knows about it. But on the other hand, 10 minutes after you’re in trouble those same people are ready to help. There’s a tremendous security in this.”

Joe then went on to discuss the dilem-
ma that faces all change and Wacker reports: "The biggest problem now and the one he feels he can help with is keeping those things people value about life here, the surroundings and the familiar ways while accepting of the changes that are inevitable, only those that will improve the quality of life."

And so the shot crossed the bow – feisty Mayor Walker was alerted to his opponent and that he was serious. The race was, according to the March 21, 1974 Suffolk Times "... an election noted for its sportsmanship on both sides – neither candidate said a harsh word about the other." Maybe it was his alleged volatility; his call for a full time mayor; or maybe it was time for change as everybody was surprised when, on the evening of March 19, 1974 “Joseph Townsend, Jr., 28, toppled politicians prediction this Tuesday to win the post of Mayor of Greenport 421 to 320. ... Incumbent Mayor David E. Walker who was generally assumed to be a shoo-in, answered the phone cheerily at his home after the polls closed and found people commenting, 'Are you kidding?' when he told them the final figures. ‘Nope,’ he replied with his usual cocky air ‘that’s what the people said and I’m with the people.’ ... Even young Joe, usually urbane and imperturbable, seemed surprised at the plurality of votes he received, attributing it to villager’s desire for change in direction at a time that he feels is critical in Greenport’s development. He will busy himself in the next few weeks, he said, talking to people around town to make sure he is on top of things and ‘reading up on parliamentary procedure’ for his first meeting in April.”

Joe Jr. was not experientially or hereditarily unprepared for this venture. Since returning in 1969 to his life long home port, the Village of Greenport, after graduating from Boston College and two years of teaching in public schools in Boston and Philadelphia, he worked in his father, Joseph Townsend, Sr.’s Insurance Agency. He had served as vice president of The Village Improvement Society, on the Aquasem Board, was an active member of the National Guard, and a member of the Village of Greenport Planning Board. Before him, his fraternal grandmother, Lillian Townsend was a ‘right on woman’ - both a keen business person and an activist participating in such community activities as: the Woman’s Christian Temperance Movement; organizer of 800 volunteers for the Red Cross; and the Suffragette Movement. Lillian ran for a seat on the Greenport Village Board in 1921, the year after the 19th Amendment was passed prohibiting gender-based denial to vote - and lost by only four points - no mean trick for a woman at the time. Joe’s Dad, too, served on many committees throughout the community and ran for public office.

Townsend’s five years as mayor, he was re-elected in 1975 for a full four year term, were productive. He was easily accessible to villagers at work in the Townsend Insurance Company on Main Street in the heart of the downtown and visible in the community. Does anyone remember the signs posted around downtown when merchants were demanding public bathrooms for Greenport - Public Bathrooms, Visit the Mayor’s Office?

Bathrooms were not the only issue, several problems loomed, many of them reflecting issues that faced the country as a whole. Blacks had few meaningful leadership roles in the larger community, lived in a preponderance of substandard housing, and lacked adequate employment. Their position was further destabilized when the Suffolk County Department of Social Services Unit placed tenants, many of them former employees of the Warner Duck Farms in Riverhead, in the empty housing available in Greenport. There were no jobs for these newcomers, expectations were
dashed and the growing narcotics trade fed into the despair and endangered the well-being of many of the youth.

An October 17, 1974 issue of The Suffolk Times headlined an article by Tim Stalker: Fuel Costs Threaten Shut-Down of Village Generators by 1976. In 11/27/74 the paper declared State Moves to Sell Mitchells, the waterfront restaurant, that along with Claudio’s, served as a popular local bar and restaurant and drew many visitors - by land, train, and sea to the area. A month later Mitchell’s Restaurant was reported reopened and it hobbled along until a devastating fire burnt it to the ground in 1978. Meanwhile “A Farmer’s Land Is Sold” informed us that the former Lester and Toner oyster plant at the foot of Fifth was sold to a group of investors called Oyster Factory Associates. It was converted to the Oyster Factory Restaurant and, upon closing, the land was sold and became Oyster Point Condominiums and the building was barged over to the Triangle Yacht Club Property on Sterling Street by Richard Kearns where it was re-adapted to feature medical offices and an apartment. To the west the village’s down zoning of the former Ellsworth Oyster Plant from residential to general commercial by Southold Resins - to produce space heaters made primarily from resin- was being legally contested by surrounding residents. Eventually the Pipe’s Cove Condominiums were built on the site. On Sterling Creek the aquasem supporters had their sights set on eventually locating their research and education facility on the ruins of Sweet Shipyard. The Middle Atlantic Natural Science Council despite its knowledgeable and tenacious support never realized its dream and the property became the home of the Stirling Cove Condominiums. The New York State Division of Criminal Justice, with the support of Police Commissioner Bill Quinn and Chief Robert Walden was commissioned to conduct a police efficiency study to look for ways to improve the effectiveness of the department responsible for over 1/3rd of the village budget.” Village Mayor Joseph Townsend said, “We’re the largest commercial area in town, we have the densest population and we’re growing. Our police problems are also growing and we have to improve the efficiency of our police department.” Mascony Transport and Ferry Service was pressing to bring a ferry service to New London into the heart of the village business district and Ron Ziel sought to bring a railroad museum to the village. Meanwhile, Newsday published a despicable, undeserved, editorial in the guise of an article on the village that infuriated the community.

The truth was Greenport was still a joy to live in by the sea and many business’ remained strong and served the community: Washington White’s Hardware, Greenport Yacht and Shipbuilding; Arcade Department Store; North Fork Press & Office Supplies; Hanif’s Shipyard; Claudio’s Restaurant and Liquor Store; Vail’s Camera Shop; Coronet Restaurant; Townsend and McMann Price Insurance; Van’s Hardware; Hummel’s Plumbing and Heating Supplies; Brandi’s Shoe Store; Colonial Drugs; Golden’s Furniture; Mills Sail maker; ST Preston’s Chandlery to name a few.

The Village Board, committees, and department heads, with Townsend’s leadership seized the available opportunities to fund and create needed village
projects. The Suffolk County Consortium Community Development HUD funds were secured for purchase and rehabilitation of the dilapidated housing to improve and stabilize the rental market. This was, according to Joe, the beginning of improving housing in the Third Street and Ludlum Place areas. In addition the Benjamin Junkyard in the heart of Third Street was cleared during this era making way for the Lakeside Garden project. Newcomer David Kapell, later a village trustee and mayor – whom Joe first met in the Coronet - was hired as Community Development Director. A contract with the Power Authority of the State of New York (PASNY) to secure low cost hydropower for the Village of Greenport Light Plant ended the plant’s dependence on high priced gas and oil. Federal Funds enabled the village to upgrade the village sewer system from a primary to a secondary treatment plant. An experimental retrenching system was created for waste treatment but never adopted for permanent use. Comprehensive Education and Training Act (CETA) monies were attained to establish a Cultural Resource Center in the Former Town and Village Hall on South Street and hire several artists. Many projects and events resulted from this venture. Under the direction of Louis Black and Ellen Neff Stevens the group created a building structure inventory of village historic houses. This detailed inventory (updated and available in Greenport Village Hall) was the basis of the eventual Greenport Landmark Preservation Law and also resulted in 1978 with the publication of The Greenport Heritage Walk. Joe told me that the demolition of the Klipp House was a strong motivation for this project; bringing home the reality of the need to protect the many fine elements of Greenport’s architecture that reflect our history. The staff also designed a storefront façade improvement plan; actively promulgated the arts – long an intrinsic part of our community – and provided a broad variety of entertainment (it was through this project he met his future wife – singer, songwriter Nancy Baxter). Cooperative relations were established with the Town of Southold leadership as well as Community Action of Southold Town a local anti-poverty agency, to improve the quality of life.
for all. In response to the deteriorated marine industrial sites on the waterfront, the village created zoning (that later became controversial and was abolished) to create a tax base by allowing a viable use - condominium housing.

Ironically, according to Joe, the glut in the housing market and the low market value served to boost the village economy during this period with housing sales of the intact 19th and late 18th century houses that lined the streets proving tax dollars and business for the construction trade and local retail. Some of these newcomers soon sold out and left. A number remained - raising their families and taking part in community affairs: May Watson, who with her husband Phil bought and restored the Stirling Square area (including the former Arnott Drug Store site) on upper Main Street and created several stores and a restaurant, as well as a burnt out Victorian on the corner First and Broad Street to live in; and Jane and John Williams who restored their Victorian home on Fifth Street and housed their business Williams & Company on Front and Fifth Street.

Joe always wanted to live by the water and in the late 1970’s his dream was realized when Ron Edeen offered Townsend his mother-in-law’s home in East Marion for purchase, Joe couldn’t resist. The price was right and the view incredible - Orient Harbor and Shelter Island and the distant Promised Land to the east and south, and Dam Pond framed by the Long Island Sound on the north. Here he could walk out his door and hone his skills as a champion rower.

Election laws being what they are, moving to East Marion disqualified Joe from seeking another term as mayor. He has, however, continued in public service as a Southold Town Councilperson and member of several town agencies. His presence in Greenport, thankfully, was barely diminished as he continues to work in the insurance business started by his Dad right there on Main Street. (Joe’s Dad, Joe Sr., by the way was a good family man and community person with no resemblance to the wife-murdering bully in Secret Places).

When I asked him about what he considers his biggest contributions as mayor he replied, “Keeping the massive Mascony Ferry service to New London - which several of his fellow board members supported - out of downtown Greenport.” Townsend then ventured, “I learned, during this time, the value of the arts in protecting the culture and quality of life of a community.”
Carpenter Street - Barstow Property photo & site drawing for the aqua
drum project. Now property of Stidd Systems. Drawing compliments of
the Village of Greenport Archives.

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Klipp House and Bruce Bollman removing salvage before the house is razed - June, 1976. Bruce, whose shop the Cheese Emporium opened in a store front on Adams Street a few weeks after Joseph Townsend Jr. was sworn in as Mayor of the Village of Greenport, remembers well one the village events that gave impetus to a major thrust of Mayor Townsend’s plans for preserving the village’s unique architectural prizes – the destruction of the Klipp House on Main Street where the Capitol One Bank Building now sits. The house was formerly owned by Frederick Klipp, captain of a fishing smack, who purchased it from the Ireland family in the early 1900’s. Bollman admired the soon to be razed three story home and felt that there was potential to use it as a bank: “They didn’t think it was feasible because they wanted a drive-through but the building was sound with plenty of room and I thought it was feasible to make a beautiful bank in the building.” I recently enjoyed coffee and a bagel with Blue Costello Cheese in Bruce’s Cheese Emporium and Café on Main Street, Greenport as he recalled the massive interior: “You would walk in the 10 foot tall double doors, then through another set of double door into a hallway with a 27 foot mahogany banister with a return and look down into the foyer. On the left was a living room and right was the dining room, both behind pocket doors. To the rear of the dining room was butler’s pantry and then the kitchen that was a later addition. The bedrooms were on the second floor and the third story had two big meeting rooms.” When the time came to tear down “the handsome Klipp House which has looked over Main Street since the 1830’s” according to a June 15, 1976 Suffolk Times article, Bollman spoke to the demolition crew and they let him salvage and purchase hardware and accoutrements of the house including marble funnel earphones for an early intercom system, doors, banisters, porcelain keyhole covers and faucets, brass doorknobs, an ornate doorknob. The North Fork Bank building purchased from The People’s Bank in 1954 was also torn down to provide a driveway for the new brick and clapboard bank set back from the road in a lawn of asphalt. Mayer Townsend (whose father Joseph Townsend, Sr. served on the bank’s board) only learned about the planned destruction when a contractor came by to ask if they could temporarily put the debris on village property, said he had a visceral reaction to the destruction, feeling that it was a disservice to the village. Unfortunately the strong, negative public reaction to the demolition that he thought could save the nearly 150 year old structure did not prevail.

Thanks to:
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