



Top left: Second House in 2019. Above: Second House in 2021 as the restoration continues into its next phase.

# SECOND HOUSE'S SECOND PHASE

MIA CERTIC

*Driving into Montauk just isn't the same anymore. . .*

Second House has stood at the western edge of our hamlet since 1797, welcoming visitors to Montauk. Over the years, it endured multiple additions, renovations and embellishments until, in around 1912, it was transformed into the sprawling summer cottage that most of us associated with our first glimpse of town as we drove in from the West.

Now, thanks to a meticulous historic restoration underwritten by East Hampton Town, it has returned to its original, simpler lines. Gone are the familiar dormer windows, the dark brown shingles, and the roof that sloped all the way down into a lattice-

framed porch. Second House now appears as it did in 1886 when the last livestock keeper departed.

In 1661, East Hampton livestock owners acquired grazing rights to Montauk pastures from the Montauketts, and in 1687 they managed to procure title to the 8000 acres of grasslands. No other town in the entire Northeast could boast so much pasture land, and it spelled affluence for the East Hampton proprietors, who shared the land as tenants in common.

The proprietors built three houses on Montauk for management of the cattle, sheep and horses that grazed there. Hither House (later known as First House) stood opposite what is now the parking lot of the Hither Hills State Park. Here the Keeper logged the livestock as it was driven onto Montauk, using the notches that had been cut into the animals' ears to identify their owners.



Originally known as the House at Fort Pond, Second House was built to replace a 1746 house that had most likely been destroyed during the Revolutionary War by the British, who also wrecked the other structures and decimated the livestock on Montauk to feed their troops.

It is believed that the funds to rebuild the three keepers' houses - Second House in 1797, First House in 1798, and Third House in 1806 - came from the Federal Government's purchase of land at Turtle Hill to build the Montauk Point Lighthouse.



Above: An early photograph c.1870 of George Osborne (holding a child) and company at Second House.

The Keeper at Second House was responsible for separating the sheep from the cattle, and mending fences to keep the flock separate from the herd. He and his family were permitted to farm the land, and to keep their own livestock in a pasture in the appropriately named area of Shepherds Neck. (To the East, at Third House - originally "Further House" - the Keeper watched over the cattle in the Fattening and Outer Fields.)

Although sparsely inhabited until the latter part of the 1800s, Montauk attracted some hearty tourists who came to hunt, fish, pick berries, and enjoy the brisk fresh air. The only accommodation to be had in those days was at the three Keepers' houses and the Lighthouse. Second House became legendary for its hospitality, especially during the tenure of George A. Osborne, the last Keeper.

An 1871 article in *Harper's Magazine* describes one group's arrival:

"After dinner we continued our walk, following the coast until sundown; then on over the downs, through the deepening twilight into the gloaming, the music of the everlasting and monotonous roar of the sea sounding in our ears, until we reached Mr. Osborne's, near the beach, after dark. Soon we were comfortably seated in his cozy parlor, chatting with the family like old friends."

Just eight years later, in 1879, Arthur Benson bought all of Montauk at auction. As a result, the Montauketts were largely exiled from their ancestral lands, uprooted and moved to the north of East Hampton, where Benson had purchased parcels for their resettlement.

Other changes came gradually, but irrevocably, as more tourists discovered the area.

After Benson's death in 1889, his heirs disregarded his will and sold most of Montauk to the Long Island Railroad and Standard Oil. East Hampton proprietors lost their grazing rights. First House was destroyed by fire. Second House passed into private ownership in 1909, where it remained until the Town of East Hampton and the New York Historical Trust purchased it in the late 1960s, entrusting the newly established Montauk Historical Society to run it as a museum.

But by that time, the house, apart from having fallen into disrepair, looked more like a 20th century summer cottage than a traditional farmhouse, providing "only a hint of its nineteenth-century exterior appearance," according to Robert Hefner, a historic preservation consultant and East Hampton Village's Director of Historic Service.

That has all changed now. Based on Hefner's Historic Structure Report (read it on our website!) East Hampton Town engaged Ronald Webb Builders to restore Second House to the way it looked in 1886, demolishing everything that was built after that year and replacing it with era-appropriate materials. Phase Two of the project, which involved a total exterior restoration, was completed late last year.

"It came as a great surprise that Second House, which is one of the oldest houses in East Hampton, was never designated as an historic structure," said Councilman David Lys, the Town Board's liaison for the restoration, as he proposed the designation in a

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At left: Second House as it appeared in 1887. Guests travelled "from away" to spend their vacations in the rural setting.

Below: The Second House restoration in progress since 2020.



*"The basic integrity test applied for National Register consideration is whether the keepers who lived there would recognize the Second House as it exists today"— Robert Hefner*

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work session last November. "Doing so will protect it for future use and potentially bring in greater chances for institutional grant funding."

"David Lys has been a terrific partner in this project," said Jessica James, chair of MHS's Second House Committee. "It has been thrilling to watch the house take shape according to Robert Hefner's beautiful plan. We are so grateful to East Hampton for its commitment to this monumental undertaking."

As the Town gears up to begin Phase Three, which will involve electrical, plumbing, and septic work, James and her committee are turning their attention to what the new museum will offer. Aidan Corish and Ken Vigiletti of Tangram International Exhibitions, Inc., have begun working with the committee to explore innovative ways to create a history museum that engages visitors of all ages, encourages repeat visits, and really serves the community.

"We want the museum to tell part of Montauk's history by reflecting the rural and challenging lives of the Keepers, who had to be self-sufficient farmers as well as gracious hosts," said James. "East Hampton Village has generously given us a 19th century cast-iron stove to help us begin to build our museum collection."

The stove had been in the Isaac Osborn house in East Hampton – a meaningful provenance, as Isaac was the uncle of George A. Osborne, the last Keeper of Second House. "It will be the centerpiece of our kitchen," said James,



who intends to offer classes in traditional cooking, baking and preserving. "And we look forward to acquiring other period-appropriate fixtures

and furnishings to inform the museum experience." But Second House will be more than the recreation of a historic house. There will also be a focus on bringing technology into the museum to evoke historic landscapes that long ago disappeared with the development of Montauk. Plans for the grounds include a vegetable and herb garden, a berry patch, an orchard with heirloom apple trees, and maybe even some farm animals.

"Second House has a warm spot in my heart because members of my family grazed livestock in Montauk in the 1700s," said East Hampton Town Supervisor Peter van Scoyoc.

"I'm grateful that there's such a great organization in Montauk who could partner with us and take over the management of this incredible structure."