



Left to right, Robert Judd, Tricia Foley, Robert Kessler, Audrey Kessler and Peggy Judd are board members of the Yaphank Historical Society. With other volunteers, they restored the Mary Louise Booth House, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places this year.

Preserving the irreplaceable

Devoted volunteers restore Yaphank sites and work to gain them national landmark status

BY JAN TYLER
Special to Newsday

Volunteers of the Yaphank Historical Society earlier this year scored their latest victory when the circa 1829 Mary Louise Booth house on Main Street was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

It was an achievement 13 years in the making and no small feat, but it was nothing new for the volunteer organization. The Robert Hawkins house and Homan-Gerard House are two other structures that have also earned the prestigious listing as national landmarks in Yaphank.

In the late 1990s, the dilapidated Booth house was moved to its present location on county-owned land and over the years, its roof and siding have been repaired, its interior restored by volunteers.

“My husband, Bob, and I actually joined the society so that we could work on the renovations,” says Peggy Judd of Yaphank, the society’s vice president, who is a retired technology systems director. “We scraped off tons of old paint and repainted and did a lot of drudge work.”

Other members also put their backs into the restoration, repairing moldings and refitting doors. Replacement

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The Robert Hawkins House, circa 1850, was one of the first homes in Yaphank to be restored.



The landmark Swezey-Avey House is now headquarters for the Yaphank Historical Society where archives are stored.



The Homan House is in the early stages of restoration. Below, Robert Kessler amid the ongoing construction inside the home.



The south parlor of the historic Hawkins House showcases portraits of Samuel Norton and Eliza Swezey Norton, prominent early residents of Yaphank.

History in the remaking

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windows were handcrafted by a restoration carpenter, Eagle Scout candidates earned points by building a replica outhouse and local Girl Scouts planted herb gardens in the backyard.

The Yaphank Historical Society is acknowledged by experts as a well-oiled machine that's been chugging along for 40 years, persistent in its efforts to save the hamlet's legacy. On Long Island, there are about 200 volunteer historical societies, and local historians point to the Yaphank Historical Society's 180 members as being among the most active and innovative in protecting their rich heritage. One major victory in 1985 was the establishment of a historic district for the 18th and 19th century homes that line Yaphank's mile-long Main street.

"It's an outstanding group, committed to planning the

future of their past and I salute all their efforts," says Richard Martin, Suffolk County Parks Department director of historic services.

Yaphank Historical Society president Robert Kessler says Martin's appreciation of the organization's work has been beneficial. Martin "has been instrumental in guiding us through minefields of paperwork and regulations as we search out and restore all that our landscape has to offer," says Kessler.

From Millville to Yaphank

During Colonial times, the hamlet in the Town of Brookhaven was known as Millville. About 1844, when the railroad came to the area, the name Yaphank was adopted. It was derived from Yamphanke, the Indian name for a small creek in the area, according to the society's website, yaphankhistorical.org.

Kessler, 72, has long been enamored of the hamlet, enjoying "a lifetime of getaways" at his family's vacation home there. "I've always loved this place," he says, "the lakes, the people, the wonderful old houses."

He and his wife, Audrey, 74, relocated from Smithtown to a permanent home in Yaphank six years ago and joined the society. A year later, Kessler, a retired stonemason, was elected president. "It's a very busy group, but I didn't expect to be constantly on the go," he says, "but I do it gladly and come back for more, just like the rest of the members who give their time working on restoring the historic houses in the village."

The home of Mary Louise Booth was high on the list for restoration. She was the founding editor of Harper's Bazaar in 1867 and a nationally known abolitionist and suffragette. She was thanked for her work



DANIEL BRENNAN

Yaphank Historical Society board members Robert Kessler, Audrey Kessler, Peggy Judd, Tricia Foley and Robert Judd in the kitchen of the historic Mary Louise Booth house, which dates to 1829. ■ Video, more photos at newsday.com/act2

on behalf of the Union in a handwritten letter from Abraham Lincoln; a photocopy of it is displayed in the house.

Tricia Foley, the society's historian, worked on the home's interior restoration. "I was honored to touch her personal life in a place where she lived it," says Foley, an interior designer who lives "down the street" from the Booth house.

In the mid-1970s, shortly after the society was formed, the group partnered with Suffolk County to save the crumbling Robert Hawkins house, circa 1850, at the eastern edge of the historic district. "Everyone was upset to think of that beautiful old house being torn down," Kessler says.

The county restored the structure's exterior while the society — with funds raised from grants, donations and events — took on the interior

Take a tour

WHEN Sundays in July and August, 1-4 p.m. Groups by appointment.

WHERE Hawkins House 4 Yaphank Ave., Yaphank

COST Free; donations accepted

INFO 631-924-4803; yaphankhistorical.org

renovations. "The whole village responded with gifts of antiques and household items, it was such a pleasure to see it all come together," recalls Karen Mouzakes, 70, a retired teacher and the society's historian emeritus. She recently moved to New Jersey but is still active in the society.

Hawkins was a businessman and had the home built for his

family. By 1974, it was in ruins and ready for demolition, but the fledgling society fought to save it. Though the Hawkins home and land are now owned by Suffolk County, the historical society members are its caretakers. That obligation is made festive by members who enjoy spaghetti dinners after housekeeping chores at "dust and dine" sessions.

'Very long journey'

The Hawkins House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986 and members say it took 25 years to bring it to its present elegance. "It's been a very, very long journey," says Mouzakes, who was there from the start. "Everyone has worked very, very hard."

Members are working toward that same goal in restoring the Homan-Gerard House,

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A recently acquired collection of original issues of Harper's Bazar (now Harper's Bazaar) from the 1880s and '90s is in the historical society's archives. Abolitionist and suffragist Mary Louise Booth was its editor for 22 years after its 1867 founding.

MY TURN

Soldier not at ease with new name

Growing up in Brooklyn, the extent of my travel away from home was a day at the beach in Rockaway or a subway ride into the city to see a movie. Then, in the spring of 1957, at the age of 21, everything changed. I was drafted into the U.S. Army.

It began with a letter from Selective Service instructing me to appear before my local draft board with my birth certificate. I asked my mom where my birth certificate was, and after an extensive search, she handed it to me. I looked it over and realized something was wrong. "Mom, who is this person?" I asked. I had lived for 21 years as Jack Pepitone, but the name on the paper read "Giacomino Pipitono."

My mom then explained that the parish priest insisted that "Jack" was too "American," so he persuaded my parents to use the Italian equivalent of "little Jack" or Giacomino. "OK, Mom, I'll give you that one," I said, "but how the heck did my last name become Pipitono?" My mom replied, "Ask your father."

My father explained that

the family name had been incorrectly spelled as Pipitone for a number of years. Then, in a firm and unapologetic voice, he said, "And I don't have any idea how the letter 'e' at the end of your last name became an 'o.'"

I wondered how this would play out at the draft board. When I arrived, the clerk immediately asked for my birth certificate and began typing my name on a form. "Excuse me, sir," I said politely, "but there is a mistake on my birth certificate. My name is not Giacomino Pipitono, it's Jack Pepitone." Without looking up, the clerk said, "Listen, son, I have my orders, your birth certificate is an official document, so you'll be Giacomino Pipitono for the next two years."

When the clerk was finished, I was asked to sign the form and stumbled trying to write my new name. A month after passing my physical, I was on active duty at Fort Dix in New Jersey. We were issued uniforms and equipment and told we would be flown to Fort Benning, Georgia, for basic training. Bused to nearby McGuire Air Force Base, we were put on a two-

propeller military aircraft. I was nervous about my first plane ride and my heart started to race. The engine noise was deafening and it started to rain. Flashes of lightning lit up the cabin and the turbulence got so bad I was certain we would crash-land. I imagined the lead story on the evening news: "Military plane crashes, all aboard killed." Would I be buried as Giacomino Pipitono or Jack Pepitone? But we all survived and were treated to a different kind of Southern hospitality.

"Stand up straight, you miserable bunch of New Yauk zip-gun-carrying misfits," screamed Sgt. Weems, our platoon leader. "OK, listen up," he growled, "when I call your name, sound off in a loud and clear voice: 'Here, Sergeant.'"

He had difficulty pronouncing some of the names but then stumbled badly: "Giac-Giach — Giacomenio Peep-tono," he yelled. I hesitated a second before Weems screamed out: "Giakamino Pipitono." I shouted, "Here."

Weems responded: "Soldier, front and center." He told me to face the platoon and in a mocking tone said,

"Gentlemen, before you stands a dumb [expletive] who does not know his [expletive] name. Perhaps we should make him say it a few times so he can remember it." He ordered me to run double time, circle the field yelling, "My name is Giacomino Pipitono and I am a dumb [expletive]."

During the next eight weeks, Weems mastered the pronunciation of my name. "Pipitono, you are a disgrace to the uniform of the U.S. of A." "Pipitono, your mama can't help you now." "Miss Pipitono, this is not a tea social." Weems subjected us to many challenges and indignities, but I survived.

After basic, I was shipped to Germany to work as a medical records clerk and was able to travel through Europe. Returning home in the spring of 1959, I realized that I was no longer the naive kid that left two years before. I was proud to have served my country.

But now and then, I awake in a cold sweat from the same dream that I have once again been drafted. I try desperately to explain that I have already served, but the reply is, "Sorry, we have no record of Jack Pepitone serving, but we do have someone named Giacomino Pipitono."

Jack Pepitone,
West Hempstead



Jack Pepitone had no idea until he was drafted into the Army that his "real" name was Giacomino Pipitono.

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COVER STORY

Resourceful at restoring Yaphank's past

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built in the 1700s. The structure was saved from destruction by Suffolk County and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places about 20 years ago, Kessler says. Its walls have been stripped to the lath in some rooms and years of paint have been scraped from every surface.

Taking tradition to the board

Longtime Yaphank resident and society member Linda Petersen, 67, recalls how, in

1985, after years of endless meetings, she went before the Brookhaven Town Board to appeal for passage of an ordinance ensuring a broader layer of protection for historic relics. "We knew we had a unique place that was being threatened," she says, "if something wasn't done soon that would all be gone, and it could never be replaced."

For the occasion, she wore a floor-length dress with ruffled apron — a period costume to depict a Yaphank resident in the 1800s. It was her reminder to board members that Main

Street looked like a page out of history, and "most residents wanted it to stay that way." The ordinance was approved.

Whether Petersen's showmanship swayed the board is undetermined, but it might have inspired the society's imaginative approach to future projects such as a holiday house tour two years ago at the Italianate-style Hawkins House. Men in top hats and capes and ladies in ruffled aprons and bonnets led visitors through the Victorian-era rooms where they watched costumed actors perform skits

revisiting the daily life of the Hawkins family at Christmas-time.

The society is also resourceful when it comes to enhancing the buildings in its care. In a bid to evoke a sense of nostalgia, the society took advantage of Suffolk County Sheriff's Labor Assistance Program, which allowed inmates of the jail to help build picturesque picket fences around county properties in the village, using old photos as guides. "The men were enormously helpful," Kessler says. "They did a great job."

Anyone meandering along the byways in Yaphank should not mistake the tranquillity of the centuries-old homes for inactivity. "We're restoring two houses, cleared a scenic hiking trail, thinking about a landscape face-lift for the post office, and a visitor's center with maps for walking tours is a possibility," Kessler says.

And with so many plans, the society would like to strengthen its numbers. "We're hoping to attract younger members," Kessler says, "and we're reorganizing our records for when the next generation takes over."