How Freeport’s Waterfront Grew (1977)

By Clinton Metz, Village Historian

Until the 1940s, practically all of South Freeport’s was considered “waterfront.” Freeport’s Coe’s Neck (a name that designated southwest Freeport for a very long time) was one of the village’s “late blooming” areas.

Nearly three centuries ago, Hick’s Neck (now called Baldwin Harbor) – on the west side of Milburn Creek – had attracted settlers and was developing into a gristmill and shopping area to the north in Milburn. But Coe’s Neck remained “off the beaten path.” Except for South for Bayview Avenue, which was on a slightly elevated ridge that led to the bay a surprisingly large part of the Coe’s Neck territory below Atlantic Avenue was a low meadowland.

Ted Combs, a former Freeport village Superintendent or Parks, who grew up in that section, tells a story that underlines this lateness of development. He walked to school from, from 1906 to 1910, from his home near Bayview and Atlantic Avenues, following a well-worn footpath, straight to Grove Street, at about Smith Street. No building stood in his way. Long spoiled by the direct route to midtown, he and his friends complained bitterly when someone built a house on Rose Street, because they had to walk a few extra steps around it.

When Raynor South was settled in 1659, more than a mile further east, some pioneers there bought land in Coe’s Neck (named for Hempstead Town founder Robert Coe, or his son Benjamin) presumably for speculation, as there was little homesteading yet. As white settlers gradually took over upland sites, close to Merrick Road, displaced Indians retreated south to the waterfront.

Long after oyster houses sprang up on Milburn Creek’s west side, one planter finally built an oyster house on the Freeport side. He was Wesley B. Smith, who switched his headquarters to the earliest used portion of what ultimately became Ed Buckley’s boatyard building on Anchor Street.

Domination of Coe’s Neck by the Tredwells had its roots in the 1660, when Edward and Sarah Tredwell received a Dutch royal grant, as the British had not yet taken over western Long Island. A generation later their son John owned at least 350 acres, running from a line north of the present day railroad tracks southward on both sides of the creek almost to the bay. Their descendants retained much of Coe’s Neck, and Milburn, until well into the 19th century.
Raynor South and “the Neck” existed separately for many years, with streams and undeveloped woodlands tending to keep the two communities apart. It wasn’t until 1892 that these two comparatively isolated hamlets united in a new incorporated village of Freeport. Much earlier, Raynor’s Neck and Hicks’ Neck (west and east of central Freeport) had become outdated names. But the Coe’s Neck designation survived.

John J. Randall, who built and sold homes in many sections of the village (where his activities were a major factor in its growth) had already started some of his projects before the incorporation. Known as “the father of Freeport,” he mastered the low lands problem. Randall’s idea was to pump fill and imported topsoil into meadowlands, simultaneously creating new waterfront canals. His introduction of the plan at this particular time became a real blessing.

Brooks that had gushed into Raynor Smith from the mid-island Great Plains were losing a lot of their gush – as a result of home building and the fact that the City of Brooklyn was taking away south shore water for its citizens. The use of land-fill by developers gave homeseekers more opportunity to find building sites in southwestern Freeport.

To detail the past of Coe’s Neck, this historian will use a technique a novelist would employ by telling the story of one man and his family.

My interest in the Combs genealogy was aroused while researching a house at 451 South Bayview Avenue, now owned by David and Edith Baron. Everything indicates that Daniel Combs (1790-1838) a sixth generation American of English descent, came from Jericho, Long Island to work the first section of his newly purchased farm site, aided by Mrs.Combs; the former Mary Monsee of Jamaica.

With records hard to find, this writer delved into genealogy, property transfers in the County Clerk’s office, census figures, information he had accumulated about adjacent properties and last – but not least – interviews with people who could recall what they saw, or knew, having themselves lived in southwest Freeport.

The genealogy of the Combs family background had been compiled by Fred Benjamin Combs, Roy Combs of Westchester County and George, Jr. of Amityville. This information made it easier to trace former owners of property in the area. What the village Historian already knew about local history was the final key that helped him “unlock the doors” to needed information.

The first property transfer to Daniel Combs was in 1822. It was the first of a series of transfers enabling him to acquire his large farm, including No. 451 South Bayview Avenue. The deed granting him seven acres did not indicate that this land was then in use for any purpose, making it a fair assumption that he built his home there
before, or immediately after, moving from Jericho. This calculation would put the age of
the house’s original section at about 155 years.

From 1822 through the next decade-and-a-half, Daniel bought approximately 15
more acres, some from out-of-town investors in underdeveloped land. Deeds show that
about 10 of these acres were on the east side of Bayview Avenue and the remainder
across the road. Sellers included the James Loines, John Simonson, Benjamin
Tredwell, Stephen Bedell and Richard Baldwin families, respectively in that order.

In 1839 Daniel’s son, Benjamin Burly Combs, inherited from him 33 acres, east
of the highway and adjacent to his earlier acquisitions, which were further south. A
referee named to rule on the will upheld, Benjamin’s claims, enlarging his holdings by
150 percent. Another deed indicates that only two years previously Daniel had
purchased the same 33 acres from Richard Baldwin of North Hempstead, a parcel
which extended all the way east to a brook (now covered) between South Bay and
Roosevelt Avenues.

This total of slightly over 55 acres was then inherited by Benjamin’s son, Daniel.
The eighth generation American possessed 43 acres east of Bayview Avenue and 12
west.

Daniel (1839-1921) spent part of his early life as an officer on a transport sailing
vessel which went to China ports. Although his basic occupation seems to have been
farming, he also ran a whole-retail coal business, bringing in supplies via a dock on
Milburn Creek and a right-of-way from there to Bayview Avenue. There was a coal pile
as well as barns on his farm. He sold feed and kerosene, too.

A picture, reportedly one of the Saturday Evening post covers, in grandson Ted
Combs’ house shows “Cappy Dan” and another old-timer in front of a painting of a
square-rigger. The impression is given that both veterans of sailing vessel days
welcome the opportunity to chat about their experiences at sea.

The picture shows that just outside the kitchen door of Daniel’s farmhouse there
was a big well, accompanied by an old oaken bucket under the caves. He was supplied
for the house largely by round stoves in the parlor and in the kitchen, which ran across
the back. A marine-style stairway near the front door leads to an upstairs balcony.
Among the rooms in the present Baron residence are the original ones which were
probably the cooking, dining and living rooms.

Additions appear to have been made to the north and south sides of the house
before Daniel moved out, and into an Atlantic Avenue house which is the second one
west of Bayview Avenue. He died at age 82.
Meanwhile Pitman ("P.D.") Combs, eldest of seven children born to Daniel and Ada Walls Combs; lived next door at 469 South Bayview Avenue, a home that now belongs to Joseph Presti. Pitman operated a grocery feed and kerosene store attached to his home, he made a fairly good livelihood, but got into the habit of cheerfully furnishing a lot of services without charge.

A door from the dining room of the house led into the store, built to replace part of the south side porch. Pitman had definite ideas against government-run welfare. The first time a public assistance tab was offered to him he rejected it because a woman sought merchandise in exchange. But he gladly extended credit to tide people over their jobless winter months; and when a breadwinner died, Pitman invariably tore up all bills owed by the deceased and his family.

Free public services of many kinds were also provided at the store. They cashed checks, handled mail, delivered messages that arrived over its telephone (the only one in southwest Freeport then), met people at the railroad station upon request and acted as sort of bank. The firm’s three or four horses and wagon often went out of their way to help solve customers’ problems.

One housewife, in a summer cottage at the foot of Bayview Avenue, wrote in the Nassau Daily Review-Star about her experiences shortly after the turn of the century.

“Only a store run by P.D. Combs…supplied us with groceries, ice, kerosene and other necessities. He also delivered our mail, providing all of our needs except fish – and those we caught.” Since accountants were scarce, Pitman had a sideline: accountancy for businesses like Adolph Levy & Son, haberdashery at 100 South Main Street.

George Christienses, the Combs’ neighbor to the south, raised cantaloupes in his garden and displayed a rifle to scare away kids who might try to steal them. That was in the really old days. New days came with arrival of the LIGHTS Club, whose members put up a clubhouse near the bay front at Fairview and St. Marks Avenue. An influx of theatrical people to the Combs neighborhood included songwriter Harry Von Tilzer and Gertrude Hoffman, a famous dancer, who purchased homes nearby.

The dancer bought Christensen’s place, so Pitman found that instead of kids stealing cantaloupes next door he now saw scantily clad chorus girls rehearsing dance steps. Ted Combs, at a very early age, had strict orders from his parents to stay away from Miss Hoffman’s property and not look out of the window while Von Tilzer, or anyone else in show business, was putting the girls through their day time dance rehearsals.
Pitman closed his store at his home about 1912 and opened a new market at Atlantic Avenue's northwest corner. This east-west link to Bayview Avenue was hardly more than 20 years old but it had already opened-up southwest Freeport's isolation. A hotel at Bayview Avenue's northeast corner, and enterprising new merchants, sparked a growing business area near the intersection, although the southwest corner still contained a large orchard maintained by a man named Johnson, who sold peaches and cherries. The Combs store added real estate brokerage to its services. On the west side of Bayview Avenue, below Atlantic, there were still numerous vacant lots, while on the east side of the avenue Combses continued to outnumber other homeowners.

For example, Pitman had neighbors south of him, shown on a map, in this order: Stephen Lewis; D.E. Combs; W.A. Combs; E. and S. Combs. The road called Johnson Place was like a right-of-way to the west where Jacob Johnson had a big farm.

That branch of the Combs family headed by Pitman went into “landlubber” occupations, for the most part, while his brother Daniel, Jr. chose a bay-related career, like some of the other branches. For awhile Pitman's father, “Cappy Dan,” and Daniel the boat builder shared a dock on Milburn Creek, connected to Bayview Avenue by a lane on “Cappy Dan’s property some 50 feet south of Casino Street. Later, the marine minded Daniel opened his own plane on Sportsman’s Avenue. His busy boatyard extended all the way across that peninsula between two canals, where he built a reputation for building speedy racing boats.

Meister Beach, even as late as 1940, was little more than a plan on paper for future development. Children rode their bicycles to an open bathing beach. Waterfront property further east had remained outside the limits of the incorporated village until 1930.

“Bayview,” a section developed by a corporation knows as Onslow-Moore, had been growing since the early 1900s; it eventually was extended to include territory west of Bayview Avenue to Park Avenue, between Archer Street and Southside Avenue. This put old Coe’s Neck more in touch with the rest of Nassau County. Furthermore, the nearness of potential customers encouraged further Atlantic Avenue business expansion. It was this situation that prompted the Combs store to add real estate brokerage to its services.

In 1909 construction started on a canal – Randall Bay – north through the meadow almost to Casino Street, where a sloping shore covered with sand provided good bathing. The first building along Randall Bay was the South Shore Yacht Club, now Salty Bay Yacht Club.

Since Ted Combs told us so much about the people and places that mad up his surroundings from birth, it seems only fair to tell something about him. After working in
his father’s store, Ted went into carpentry. While at work one day he met Jake Kedenberg, a park commissioner, who suggested that since Freeport had planned a municipal stadium, a steady job might be available for him. After Ted proved his capability, the Village placed him in charge of parks and stadium maintenance. As Ted approached his 61 years in the Freeport Fire Department he became the department’s oldest active volunteers, and in 1975 was named “Fireman of the Year.”