

QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Oral History

JOHN VAN BUREN

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Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

This is an unedited transcript of an oral history that is available in the QHS Archive Center. The policy for the use of this copywritten material can be obtained by contacting the Quonochontaug Historical Society (archivist@quonniehistory.org).

Q: I was born on 9 April 1923 in Ridgewood, New Jersey. We'd had a summer home in Vermont, which my father had made from a corn crib, which he had skidded from a farm that was being demolished. In the '40s, it was apparent that we would have to—the land was being sold, so we were looking for another place for a summer camp. My father knew Beatrice Forstraw, who was a professor in the University of Georgia at the Department of Music, and a first-class violinist. She had known Quonnie. He came down to visit. Over the three years that he was simply visiting in the summer, he had rented Hearthstone, Hobby House and Topsy. I was in service at the time, and came up each of the summers. At the time the Avenger airplanes were being flown from the naval air stations in Charlestown, coming out over the beach and making a triangle from Block Island down to Montauk, and then back again to Charlestown. I can remember running over to the beach with a great roar. They were special anti-submarine aircrafts launching torpedoes, bombs and death charges.

After buying the land from Grant Slater, in the fall of 1949, he had Emery Schweeney, who was the caretaker of the girl's camp in Vermont, come down with a load of knotty pine in a truck with his wife, Lena, and they started construction of our cottage, which my mother named the Beach Plum. We stayed the winter and had the fireplace and chimney built with an opening for their stove's flew halfway up the chimney on the inside. That's now covered by a picture.

My experience in Quonochontaug was always rather limited. I had limited leave, and would be here for a few weeks, which I spent largely doing carpentry in the upper part of it to accommodate my wife and family. I also brought material to write papers, which I did as part of my research at the National Institutes of Health. Usually I went swimming in the late afternoon. And then I'd be gone for the rest of the summer. My wife, Shirley, and the children remained here and knew the place much better than I did. We were here for the hurricane of 1954. I was down here by myself with my daughter, and apparently water did come up around the foundation, from what I was told. But we were quite high, and there was no damage from it. Although I believe there was some along the ocean edge.