



# OASIS OF FREE LOVE

Chapter Two

*I went as a bishop, mitre, cope, and all.  
A friend went as a very rococo angel.  
—W. H. Auden, after a Fire Island party*



**Fire Island** remained a wild and unruly place long after its surrounding geographies were subdued by European settlers. Storms periodically sliced right through it, uniting the Atlantic Ocean with the Great South Bay. Some contend that Fire Island's name comes from the blazes that were set on its shores to guide ships to inlets. Others cite a transcription error from seventeenth-century English maps that christened the battered archipelago "Five Islands," or Dutch maps that called it *Vier* (Four) Islands.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the origins of its name, Fire Island has never really been one place but rather a collection of locales in varying degrees of separation from one another. It functions as a sacrificial barrier island, five miles out to sea from the mainland, and its resulting, turbulent landscape has always been an edgier proposition for habitation than Long Island's flat and verdant plains. As such, its early residents tended toward the intrepid, the rustic, the foolhardy, and the criminal. Before 1850, it was known chiefly as a site of Native American wampum production and as a pirate's lair.

Fire Island's reinvention as a leisure destination dates to 1855, when the Surf Hotel opened at the western edge of the island. This was followed by the Perkinson Hotel, established in what is now the hamlet of Cherry Grove. Perkinson's was sufficiently renowned by 1882 to host Oscar Wilde, who recorded in his diary that Cherry Grove was "one of the most beautiful resorts he had ever visited."<sup>28</sup> Beginning in the early 1900s, other tiny communities dotted the island's thirty-one-mile length. Like Cherry Grove, these were resorts rather than towns, with small local populations that swelled with seasonal city vacationers who arrayed themselves in tiny demographic slivers across the island. After deed restrictions were lifted in 1928, Jews were free to congregate in Seaview, while Roman Catholics favored Saltaire.<sup>29</sup> *Social Register* Wasps fenced themselves into

a restricted community called Point O'Woods. There were no roads to speak of, just boardwalks.

Just east of Point O'Woods, the community of Cherry Grove subsisted without a church or local police force, lending it the charm of a rustic setting without the prying eyes of a small town. Its tiny lots were populated with modest New England-style cottages. Private generators were the sole source of electricity, possessed only by a few wealthy residents. By the 1930s, it attracted a bohemian theater crowd whose members included many homosexuals. The influx rankled some of the more established families, and the last straw was a hurricane in 1938; it devastated the community and caused many longtime residents to depart. Yet one demographic's catastrophe was another's boon. Cherry Grove's newly cheap real estate and the relative safety accorded by geographic isolation conspired to create America's first predominantly and openly homosexual community. In a hostile world, there emerged an oasis of free love.

Unsurprisingly, Cherry Grove attracted a number of creative artists. The poets W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender vacationed together there with the novelist Christopher Isherwood through the 1940s. Another trio of artists that arrived in 1937 and stayed for twenty years was Paul Cadmus, and Jared and Margaret French. Under the acronym PaJaMa (Paul-Jared-Margaret), their collaborative photographs taken in Cherry Grove set slyly erotic poses within architectural compositions. But the artistic medium that most defined Cherry Grove was the stage. Increasingly elaborate, gender-bending local productions led to the creation of the Arts Project of Cherry Grove, a professional theater operation. Its campy ways soon spilled over into every aspect of the Grove's social life. The Arts Project began sponsoring Beach Day, a Fourth of July event that pitted women in old baseball uniforms against men in

PAGES 32-33:

**Photo by Paul Cadmus. Joe Santoro, Peter Buckley, Jensen Yow, and Fred Melton, Fire Island, NY, 1954**

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:

**Sanford R. Gifford, Fire Island Beach, NY, 1878**

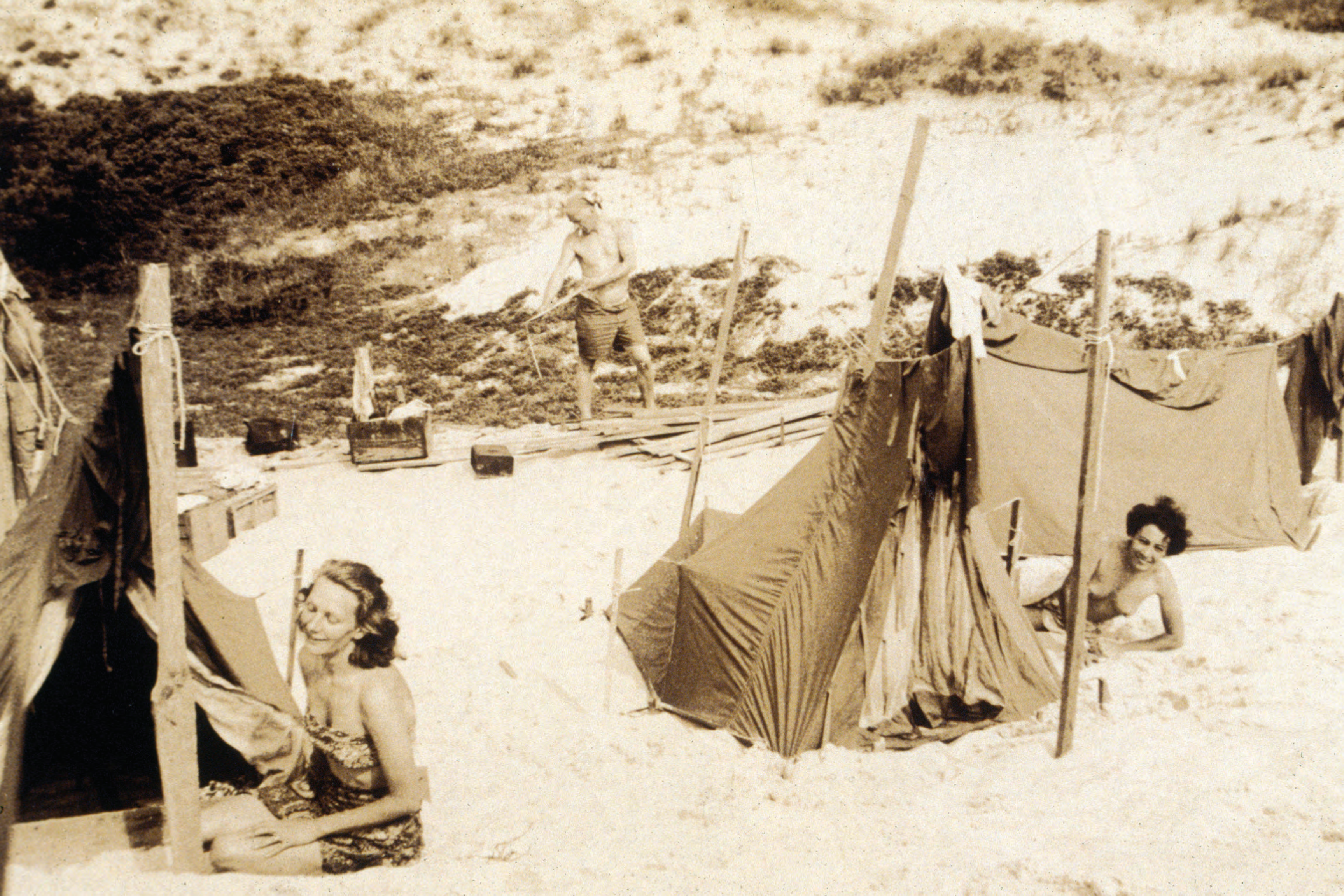
OPPOSITE, BELOW:

**Beach-shack squatters, Lone Hill, NY, 1940s**

RIGHT:

**Postcard of Cherry Grove, NY, 1930s**





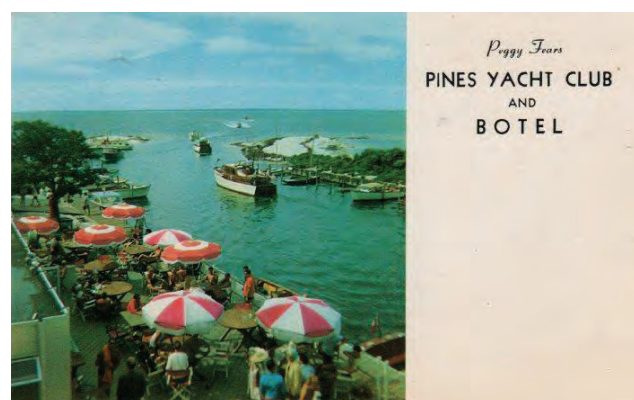
women's hats and bras. Parties took on decadent themes. Auden attended one event dressed "as a bishop, mitre, cope and all," while his companion accompanied him "as a very rococo angel."<sup>30</sup>

Within walking distance of Cherry Grove were the uninhabited, windswept vistas of Lone Hill. During the 1940s, out-of-sight but accessible beaches became a favored haunt for nudists and the occasional beach-shack squatter. A few crude structures made from hurricane wreckage provided a bit of shade but little else. By 1952, the postwar appetite for weekend getaways prompted the Home Guardian Company to sweep in and create 600 lots measuring 60 feet wide by 100 feet deep—compact but, by Cherry Grove's standards, luxurious. As its name suggested, Home Guardian strenuously touted its new development as a *family* destination ("The children will love it here!")<sup>31</sup> Lone Hill was rechristened Fire Island Pines, and lots began selling for \$800.

Commercial activity confined itself to a picturesque bayside harbor, where ferries from Long Island made their rounds. By 1956, Peggy Fears, a Cherry Grove transplant, former Ziegfeld Follies showgirl, Broadway producer, and discreet lesbian, was holding court at her rustic Yacht Club. Fears introduced a show-business undercurrent to the Pines that persists to this day. In her unmistakable style, she recounted how a prominent Cuban fashion designer, his model wife, and famous actors staffed her grand opening:

I invited a few close friends—Luis and Betty Estevez, Zachary and Ruth Scott, Joan McCracken, oh, a small group...I drove out from town with another car full: there was a boy who was being trained to play the Prince of Wales for Paramount, and Burt Martinson (you know, Martinson's Coffee), Jerry Tishman, and several others. When we got there, we found that fifty-five people had turned up! Well, Betty got a speedboat and tore across the harbor to get me a piano, (the boy who was going to be the Prince of Wales said he would play), and Zachary began taking orders for drinks...It was one of my nicest productions.<sup>32</sup>

Cherry Grove bore the stigma of being a homosexual enclave, but more cautious vacationers discovered that they could maintain an untainted address in the Pines, only a stroll away from the beach to unite them with the forbidden pleasures of Cherry Grove. They soon found that not all of the Pines's residents hailed from the permissive world of showbiz. Worldly New Yorkers might have countenanced the occasional



PAGES 36–37:  
**Nudist campsite in Lone Hill, NY, 1940s**

OPPOSITE, ABOVE:  
**Fire Island Boulevard, ca. 1958**

OPPOSITE, 2ND AND 3RD:  
**Peggy Fears Yacht Club and Motel, 1950s**

OPPOSITE, BELOW:  
**Fire Island Pines, NY, 1954**

ABOVE:  
**Peggy Fears (center) with friends Zachary and Ruth Scott, late 1950s**

RIGHT:  
**Fire Island Pines boardwalk, 1958**

PAGES 40–41:  
**Home Guardian Company promotional poster for Fire Island Pines, NY, ca. 1953**

To really enjoy Aquatic sports  
LIVE IN FIRE ISLAND PINES

During SHOOTING SEASON USE YOUR COTTAGE as a LODGE

LEAVE FROM SAYVILLE CITY WHARF  
LIVE IN THE PINES

SALT WATER FISHING AT ITS BEST!

SANDY BEACH ON-THE-BAY  
ONE OF THE finest beaches ON THE ATLANTIC COAST

TO NEW YORK CITY  
LINDENHURST

SWIMMING  
CANOEING  
BOATING  
SAILING  
FISHING  
CLAMMING  
CRABBING  
DUCK SHOOTING

Get away from it all!

INTER-COASTAL WATERWAY FOR DISTANT CRUISING

Here Summers are Unforgettable!

GREAT SOUTH BAY  
"A Sportsmans Paradise"

TO PATCHOGUE

MOOR YOUR BOAT IN FIRE ISLAND PINES Harbor

**FIRE ISLAND Pines**  
FIRE ISLAND  
BROOKHAVEN TOWN, SUFFOLK COUNTY, N.Y.

TROLLING BOATING

ATLANTIC OCEAN OCEAN BATHING and SURF CASTING  
WIDE CLEAN SANDY BEACH

One of the finest beaches on the Atlantic Coast!

HARRY A. CHANDLER  
Map  
575 7TH AVENUE  
NEW YORK, N.Y.



homosexual in their midst, but a tectonic shift in orientation was quietly rippling through the Pines. Fears sold her real estate holdings in 1962, and the Property Owners Association redoubled efforts to stave off the undesirables. Soon, an imposing sign was erected in the harbor that read:

**WELCOME TO FIRE ISLAND PINES, A FAMILY COMMUNITY**

We Believe: In a community that is clean both morally and physically.  
 We Believe: That riotous parties disturb the peace and quiet of our community.  
 We Believe: The bikini-type bathing suit apparel tends to lower the moral standards of a Community.  
 We Believe: That everyone living at the PINES wants to uphold the common standards of decency relating to personal conduct.

These beliefs are being publicized in the interest of the many CHILDREN in our community who we feel should have the opportunity of growing up in healthy surroundings.

**THIS IS THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE. AND THE COVENANT OF EVERY ADULT.**

The Fire Island Pines Property Owners Association

These developments might have spelled the end of the Pines's nascent bohemianism, except that the buyer of the Peggy Fears Yacht Club and Motel was John Burlingame Whyte, a fashion and cigarette model who parlayed his earnings into real estate. Over the next several years, Whyte steadily acquired most of the Pines's commercial venues. His entourage of photographers and fellow models added even more glamour and gaiety to the mix of vacationers. Whyte presided over his tiny empire from an austere modern house on the ocean, becoming one of many tastemakers who would define the Pines as an experiment in domestic living.

Yet the architecture of the Pines was a drab backdrop for all of this local color. Many of the homes erected during the 1950s were mean, prefabricated wooden cottages with tiny windows, delivered on barges and dragged across the fragile dunes to rest upon scrums of skinny wooden pilings. What was left of the dunes was often scraped away to "improve" views, leaving the Pines vulnerable to storms and erosion. Distinctive architecture, modern or otherwise, could only be found further afield.

The first modern home on Fire Island was built in the community of Seaview for George Marek, a classical-music critic who also contrib-

OPPOSITE, UPPER LEFT:  
**Real estate broker Arden Catlin poses in front of the infamous "Family Community" sign, Fire Island Pines, NY, early 1960s**

OPPOSITE, UPPER RIGHT:  
**Typical Fire Island Pines residence, 1954**

OPPOSITE, CENTER:  
**Left to right, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Christopher Isherwood pose for Lincoln Kirstein in Cherry Grove, NY, 1947**

OPPOSITE, LOWER RIGHT:  
**Typical Fire Island Pines beach shacks, 1950s**

OPPOSITE, LOWER LEFT:  
**John Burlingame Whyte, ca. 1962**

ABOVE:  
**Men of Fire Island, ca. 1960**



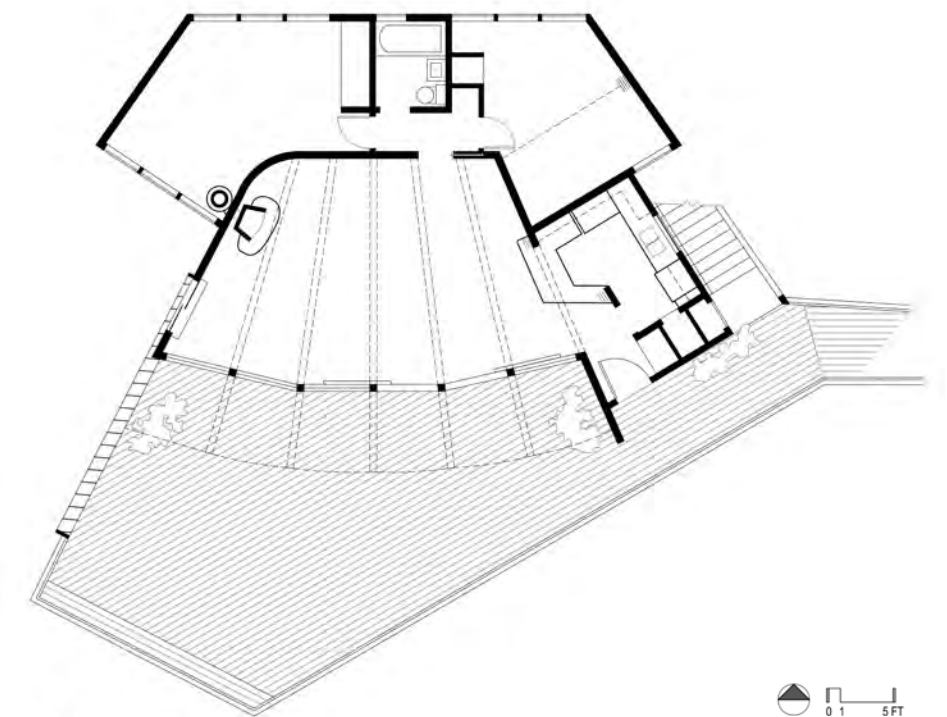
uted to *House Beautiful*. In 1951, the magazine decided to see how modern architecture might suit a man of traditional tastes and temperament. Marek proved up to the challenge once the magazine offered to build the home at cost. Veteran architect Eldridge Snyder set out to create a home that maximized ocean views while maintaining privacy on a public beach. He accomplished this with a high, twenty-four-foot-deep deck that launched over the crest of a dune. Floor-to-ceiling glass, set well back from the deck rail, was scarcely visible from the oceanfront below. Outdoor furniture was used throughout the house, blurring traditional distinctions of enclosure. The ceilings were even painted pale blue to merge with the summer sky. A clever floor plan, inspired by the radiating lines of a clamshell, allowed each room to enjoy ocean views. But the implicit tease of the home's rakish roofline and hidden spaces undermined its claims to privacy. As Marek's son Richard recalled, "The house was so unusual that people used to walk up a ramp to the deck and peer in the windows, at 7:00 in the morning. My father used to chase them away with a broom."<sup>33</sup>

In 1959, Guy J. Rothenstein added to Seaview's fledgling architectural pedigree with a diminutive "plastic house" for his family that tested technologies he acquired as a specialist in factory-produced housing for Skidmore Owings & Merrill. A German architect who trained in LeCorbusier's Paris office before fleeing war-torn Europe, Rothenstein maintained the Corbusian

view of housing as a mass-produced agent of social change. It was an idea that never really took hold in the United States, but Rothenstein extracted a surprising degree of humanity and artistry from his semisynthetic cube on the dunes. He clad a conventional wooden frame with asbestos panels, vinyl floors, and plastic laminate cabinetry. On the roof, a circular, translucent fiberglass solarium for private sunbathing relieved the modular boxiness of the structure below. Honeycombed fiberglass screens divided the living area from the deck, but pivoted up and over to become sunscreens for a combined indoor/outdoor space. Their multicolored cells bathed the space in a prismatic, twentieth-century interpretation of stained glass.

As a theater for innovation, Fire Island's small lots and relative isolation made it a place of "soft openings" for young architects who were still practicing their lines. Both Charles Gwathmey and Richard Meier designed their first houses on Fire Island. Harry Bates began his career in the Pines but decamped to East Hampton in 1964, where his successor firm, Bates + Masi, still thrives. But in the early 1960s, the only high-profile architect practicing on Fire Island was Andrew Geller.

Geller began to turn Fire Island's architecture literally on its head in 1958 with quirky and endearing beach houses that revealed "how far a little plywood and a lot of guts will take you."<sup>34</sup> Geller's immersion in industrial design conferred a gadgetlike quality to his houses that made them accessible to the sort of men who tinkered with



OPPOSITE:  
Eldridge Snyder,  
Marek House,  
Seaview, NY, 1951

RIGHT:  
Marek House, floor  
plan





OPPOSITE, ABOVE:  
**Guy Rothenstein, Rothenstein House, Seaview, NY, 1959**

OPPOSITE, MIDDLE:  
**Rothenstein House, interior**

OPPOSITE, BELOW:  
**Rothenstein House, interior**

ABOVE:  
**Charles Gwathmey, Miller House, Fair Harbor, NY, 1964**



Chevys but shied away from the “feminine” arts of high design and decor. The Irwin and Joyce Hunt House, located in the Fire Island community of Ocean Bay Park, aimed its leading edge like a missile into the wind, demonstrating Geller’s theory that an “aerodynamic” house was the best form to withstand a hurricane.

By 1960, Geller had completed seven well-publicized homes across Fire Island but none in the architectural backwater of the Pines, where plentiful lots and a seemingly ideal audience awaited his imprint. That changed in 1961, when Rudy and Trudy Frank, an ice-cream executive and a painter, built a Geller-designed home on one of the highest dunes in the Pines. It was a refined composition, inspired by the truncated pyramids that the Franks had recently explored in Mexico. Their house rose at the exact moment when Gifford began to build his own home a few hundred feet away.

While Gifford’s modest debut barely registered from the public boardwalk, the Frank House towered over its surroundings—a commanding work by a seasoned master—and it should have established Geller as the preeminent architect of the Pines. Soon, the Franks’ close friends, Edwin Wittstein and Robert Miller, decided they, too, wanted to be inspired rather than simply housed. Wittstein and Miller had found each other and career success as very young men in the 1950s, Miller as an art director and Wittstein as a set designer. Wittstein was flush with the proceeds from his work on 1960’s *The Fantasticks*, which became off-Broadway’s longest-running show. The commission for their beach house was Geller’s for the taking—that is, until the upstart Gifford brazenly seduced Wittstein, thereby landing his first Fire Island client. Wittstein recalled the affair fifty years later with lusty relish, while a mischievously approving Robert Miller looked on.<sup>35</sup> Andrew Geller never built another home in the Pines. Like a scene right out of *All About Eve*, Gifford stole Geller’s show.



OPPOSITE:  
Real estate guide to Fire Island,  
1963

ABOVE:  
Andrew Geller, Hunt House, Ocean  
Bay Park, NY, 1958

PAGES 50–51:  
Horace Gifford (right) and Robert  
Miller, photographed by Edwin  
Wittstein, 1963

