

The Casino

756 Pequot Avenue

1894 - 1916 (Major renovation after 1930)

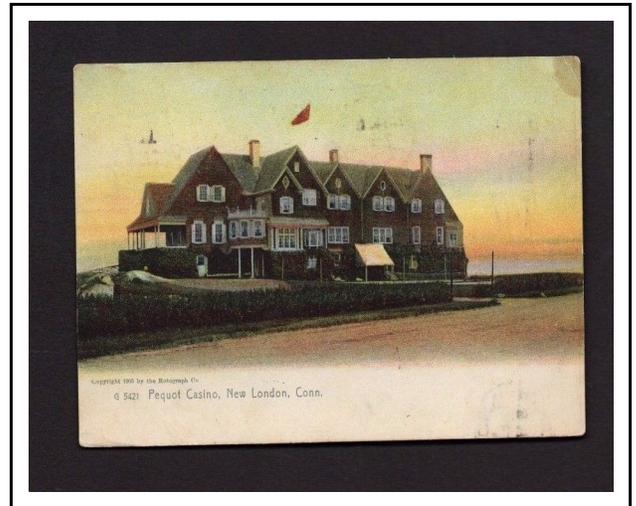
Usually, in New London Landmark plaque reports, we start with the earliest known owner or resident and work our way into the 20th century, if that is possible. In this case, however, the story of the Pequot Casino hinges on information from a mid-20th century owner, Alma Clarke Wies.

Alma Clarke Wies was an early supporter of local history and historic preservation and was keenly aware of the history of New London's Pequot Colony. Her hand-written narrative about the Colony was entrusted many years ago to Sarah Ryan, Municipal Historian, who in turn deposited it with New London Landmarks, along with maps and other documents.

Alma was the daughter of Waldo Emerson Clarke (1882-1953) and Daisy L. (Klinck) Clarke. The Clarks lived across the street from the beach adjacent to the Casino property. The Clarks purchased the Casino in 1925 in order to save it from commercial development. Eventually it became the home of the Clarks' daughter, Alma.¹

Alma was born in 1922 in Panama (her father was working in the Canal Zone), and was a Connecticut College graduate (1935). She married Dr. Carl Wies (1906-1986?) (Yale Medical School, 1932) and had five daughters. Dr. Wies was a community leader and humanitarian, and like Alma, was a local historian. Above his medical offices at 3 Whale Oil Row he opened his own history exhibit: The Tale of the Whale Museum.

Starting in the early 1940s, the Wies family resided at the former Pequot Casino up until Alma sold the property in 1991.² By that time the property had been in the



Pequot Casino, 1907

¹ Robert Moore, who owned the property briefly between the Pequot Casino Association and Waldo and Daisy Clarke, was a long-time summer resident of the Oswegatchie Colony from New Orleans. In 1909 Moore purchased the Rhinelander property opposite the Pequot Casino. He may have purchased the Casino property in 1924 to protect his investment from commercial development, and the Clarks did the same.

² This is based on city directories. In the later 1930s, Alma and Carl were living at Alma's parents' address: 675 Pequot. In city directories, the address of the Casino was #754 rather than #756. The house at 760 Pequot is dated to 1930 on Vision Appraisal.

family for some 66 years.³ Just when, during the Clarke-Wies ownership the property was subdivided is unclear, but even the former Casino building itself was made into two separate residences, with a masonry home at 760 Pequot having originally been part of the Casino building.⁴

The Colony & the Casino

The Pequot Colony, with its rambling hotel, picturesque cottages, beaches, boating, tennis, bowling, croquet, chapel, farm-fresh food – all easily accessible from New York and beyond – saw its heyday in the 1860s and 1870s. The decline of the Colony was gradual in the 19th century, but in 1908, when fire destroyed the Pequot House hotel and damaged many of the surrounding cottages, things came to the point of collapse. Revitalization of the area became paramount among New London's leaders.

For a while there was talk of a new high-end, exclusive Pequot House. There were rumors that it might be developed by Morton Plant, whose successful Griswold Hotel across the river in Groton catered to the rising middle classes. However, the start of federal income tax (16th Amendment) and of Prohibition (18th Amendment) in 1913 and 1919 respectively, put a damper on any such pipe dream. The best option seemed the redevelopment of the former Pequot Colony as a suburban neighborhood, and Alma's father spear-headed this effort.

Alma's father, Waldo Clarke, was instrumental in creating New London's south-end residential neighborhood as it exists today. A graduate in engineering from New York University (1906), he served as chief engineer for Connecticut State Pier starting in 1912. Among his various philanthropic accomplishments was helping to found Mitchell College in 1936.

Clarke's partner in the effort to reclaim the former Pequot Colony for year-round residences was Ernest Rogers, a politician and history buff. Together they sponsored the purchase and subdivision of much of the neighborhood. In 1923 Rogers built a Georgian revival brick home overlooking the Thames River at 605 Pequot Avenue, fit for a state governor. Though Rogers lost his gubernatorial bid to Wilbur Cross in 1931, he did serve in many offices, including Lt Governor of the state.

It was Clarke who put through Quinnepeag Avenue from Glenwood to the beach along Pequot Avenue, and this is where the Clarke's home was located (no longer extant). Meanwhile, numerous smaller homes were built on subdivisions carved from the former estates. In the 1920s, Clarke and Rogers oversaw the development of a

³ Alma's brother was Waldo K. Clarke (1913-1982).

⁴ This has yet to be documented but is part of oral history shared by Sally Ryan.

number of colonial revival homes in the neighborhood, including 38 Chapel Drive and several larger examples on Glenwood Avenue. Today this neighborhood is part of the Pequot Colony National Historic District, though the Pequot Casino property itself falls outside its defined boundaries.

Before the end of the Pequot House, the Casino had been developed as a private club owned by an elite group of summer cottagers of the Colony. With recreational facilities, tennis courts, boat dock, and dining facilities, it also operated as a private hotel for the members' guests. Dances, bridge parties, tea parties, luncheons, charity events, concerts, formal dinner parties, and just about any kind of social gathering – except perhaps gambling – were held there. It was popular for society wedding receptions, following ceremonies in the Pequot Chapel.

Alma wrote about the club: “A few Colony residents formed the Pequot Casino Association in 1890, and by 1893 a separate Casino building was constructed on the water. Its presiding officers were William Appleton from Boston and David Banks and Col. Eugene T. Kirkland from New York. Billings Learned and James Lynch were intimately involved as well, and were reputed to have ruled the private club with a rod of iron.” An exclusive organization, it granted membership to only forty or fifty of the Colony's residents and a few affiliated New Londoners. Saturday night dances and card parties were common, as were, unfortunately, fires.⁵

“The Casino suffered four fires in all, but they seemed so frequent that some recalled waiting for the annual fire! The end of the Casino came with Prohibition and the general dissipation of the Colony itself in the early 1920s,” Alma concluded.⁶

Originally built in 1893 as the group's clubhouse, the Casino was soon considered one of the most exclusive social organizations in the region. Steamers regularly called at the Casino dock to transport members and guests to downtown New London and beyond. But the Casino's glory days were short-lived. Plagued by fires, its popularity was soon under stress due to World War I and then the advent of Prohibition in 1919. The Norwich Bulletin predicted in October 1920 that the last season at the Casino was probably at hand. There were messy court battle in the 1920s, and rumors abounded concerning its redevelopment as a commercial venue.

⁵ There were some reports that the casino fires were due to the action of the sun's rays refracted through the Fresnel lens on the nearby lighthouse. We have not been able to research this issue or whether this is at all likely.

⁶ In using the word “dissipation,” Alma probably does not mean, “a descent into drunkenness and sexual waste” but rather a general running down of interest in a summer colony in New London. New people stopped summering in the Colony, partly on account of the exclusivity of the ‘old guard.’

Timeline for the Casino

1890 - Pequot Casino association formed

1893 – First Casino constructed

1908 - Aug. 30 – Fire at Casino partially destroys building. Rebuilt.

1910 - Aug. 1: Fire “guts” the Casino; to be rebuilt immediately. Loss covered by insurance. Meanwhile, the club functions at the Brandegee cottage. Rebuilt Casino opens in October.

1912 - June 28: Manager of Casino, Steward C. Anderson, fires head waiter, Wilhelm Meyer. Three other waiters, a kitchen boy, a pantry boy, and a tennis court boy all walk off the job in protest. A native of Sweden, Anderson has been manager for a decade.

1915 - Casino members include Hiram Bingham

1916 - Labor Day fire. New casino to cost about \$25,000. (It was insured for \$20,000) Fire started on third floor, probably by a tossed cigarette. The building is redesigned and modified to two stories by New York architects Hoppin, Koen, & Sullivant, contractor H.R. Douglas, Inc. The Casino continues to have a few bedrooms but use as a private hotel is over. A long veranda is added on Pequot Avenue side.

After the 1916 fire, and while the rebuilding took place, the club used the residence of Col E.R. Kirkland at 51 Glenwood Avenue as their clubhouse. The Kirland house had “until recently,” been occupied by Maj. George B. Pillsbury.

Also in 1916, The Casino’s tennis pro, Helying Carlson, was charged with assault against its superintendent, Harry Congdon.

23 July 1921 - “Booze by Boat” - The Norwich Bulletin reports that a steamer frequenting Fishers Island Sound rendezvous with a schooner near New London harbor. The schooner was seen to pick up the banned substances that were then transferred to small boats. Pequot Casino wharf was their destination. From here the booze would be offloaded to trucks. During the summer of 1921, two out-of-town hotel managers purchased an option to buy the vacant Casino property with idea of making it into a public establishment.

Circa 1940 – Remodeled as a family home by Alma & Carl Wies

Sources:

“History of the Pequot Colony by Alma Weiss” – Undated MS. TM by M.E. Baker.

Picturesque New London (1901) shows an early photo of the Casino with the Lighthouse in the background. The shingle-style hotel is 3 ½ stories, with three chimneys visible. A seaside veranda is also visible as is a long pier to an island [Quinnipeag Island] gazebo or pavilion. In the foreground, a long shoreline of lawn is prominent, rather than a beach.



The narrative above starts with title information supplied by Tom Couser for New London Landmarks. From there, we look at various primary and secondary sources that are readily available online, including census records, city directories, local and family histories, cemetery and military service records, and where supplied by the current owner, oral histories and later information. Generally, our research does not go beyond the last accessible census records: 1940. This summary is by no means exhaustive but, it is hoped, will give some idea of the people involved in the early history of the home as owners, builders, or residents. – Mary Beth Baker