

801 Montauk Avenue
John Perry Silve
1905

The house at 801 Montauk, like its next-door neighbor at 803 Montauk, is a substantial American Four Square. Constructed in 1905 and 1906, the properties were subdivided and sold by the Gardner family, and the houses were probably constructed for their new owners by Horace Gardner (1829-1914), former fisherman turned stone mason and real estate developer, whose house was at 761 Montauk.¹

The descendants of early New London families who lived on what was called “the General Neck” included the names of Harris, Fowler, Keeney, Chapman, Lester, Mason, Chappell, Rogers, Jerome, and Gardner. This peninsula was defined on the west by Jordan Cove (now Waterford); on the south by Long Island Sound; and on the southeast and east by the Thames River. Not bisected by the railroad until 1849, the area was almost entirely farmland until after the Civil War, with a few summer homes in the area of Ocean Beach and the new Pequot Colony with its hotel at the harbor’s mouth. The Gardners, who owned what became 801 and 803 Montauk Avenue, were one of these old families with much land from Ocean Avenue through to the Thames River, both north and south.

An 1868 map entitled “Plan of the Southern Part of the City of New London” shows two main public roads traversing the peninsula: Town Hill Road (now Ocean Avenue) leading from the Bank Street/Lyme Turnpike south to the area of today’s Ocean Beach; and Harbor Road (now Pequot Avenue), which leads from downtown to the Lighthouse. Joining these two roads was Lewis Lane (Thames Street), and later on there was Oak Avenue (Gardner) and Glenwood. There was also a web of private farm roads crisscrossing the area.

At the end of the 1800s, a road parallel to Ocean Avenue with an extra-wide meridian was built with the idea of creating a scenic landscaped street leading from the city to the seaside Pequot Colony. The road was called “Boulevard,” soon renamed Montauk Avenue. Before long, a trolley line was laid down its middle where originally trees and shrubs had been planned.

In the mid-19th-century, as property values went up and the profitability of local farming went down, the old families sold off parcels for the summer estates of the wealthy from New York, Washington, as well as Hartford and Norwich. Later, after

¹ The first owner of 803 was Arthur Edward Norris, an Englishman who worked as the superintendent of the Pequot Casino until sometime around 1923, when he became a steward at a New York City club. He and his wife Louisa and their children occupied 803 Montauk on and off in the interim, sometimes living elsewhere and renting 803, perhaps to summertime tenants. See NLL plaque report.

1929, these estates were broken up, making way for year-round housing for the middle classes. Intermixed were the modest homes of 19th-century fishermen, seamen, servants, gardeners, builders, and others.

Benjamin Gardner, Jr. (1802-1851) was a butcher and grocer in New London who grew wealthy because he was able to supply high quality items from his own family farms on Ocean Avenue and East Lyme and fresh seafood from his fishing interests. His adult children participated and benefitted from this success, among them: George Harris Gardner (1828-1912), a fisherman; William Benjamin Gardner (1836-1917), a whaler and later a house painting contractor, grocer, with a successful freight and moving business; Stephen Gardner (1840-1911), farmer; and Minerva Gardner (1843-1929) a dressmaker who married William Burdick, boat captain and yacht builder. (They moved to a new house next door to 801 Montauk at 771 in the 1920s.)

These Gardner siblings sold the property at 801 Montauk to John Perry Silve in 1905. Another sibling, Horace Gardner (1829-1914), the real estate developer mentioned above, also figures into this story. He lived at 761 Montauk in a housed dating from about 1873.

John Perry Silve (1870-1942), the first owner of 801 Montauk, was born in New London, the son of Antoine Silva, a seaman from the Azores, and Julia (Hughes) Silva, from Ireland, who worked as a “washerwoman.” By the time of the 1900 U.S. Census, John Silve was living on Clover Court, working as a florist. In 1893 he’d married an Irish girl, Ellen Feeney, and in 1905, they moved to a new home at 801 Montauk. Sometime prior to that, John served in the military.

Before purchasing the house at 801 Montauk, the Silves can be found living at other addresses on Montauk and Ocean Avenues. John was probably working as a gardener on various estates, probably with living accommodations on site. In 1906 the city directory lists him at 761 Montauk, “gardener.” This was at the home of the Horace Gardner noted above. These Gardners had no children, and their house at the corner of Montauk and Gardner Avenue was large enough to accommodate more than one family, and it usually did, judging from census and city directories. The house was bordered by gardens, outbuildings, and a tennis court on the west and north sides.²

The Connecticut aerial photographs of 1934 available online through the State Library show the Silve house backed by a cultivated landscape at what today is the new development on Easy Street. In the 1920s this property was purchased by Hendrik

² In the living memory of Sarah Ryan, New London’s 91-year old city historian who grew up at what was then the house next door to 761, at 747 Montauk (the home of her Boylan grandparents), the gardens between her house and #761 (then belonging to the Booth family) were extensive and included mainly vegetables. Sally remembered the name Silve as people her grandparents knew but she did not recall John or his wives.

Verkade of Leiden, Holland, and developed into extensive nurseries. Hendrik Verkade and his wife, Flora Brouwer Verkade, built the house at 92/98 Gardner Avenue around 1930. Before that 1920s, this area was probably pasturage for the Pequot Colony's stables and carriage house, which facilities were located off what today is Lower Boulevard, around where the New London Fire Station No. 3 is today.

The 1920 U.S. Census shows John Silve living at 801 Montauk, widowed, working as a "landscape gardener." Living with him is his mother-in-law, Marya Feeney, 83, and boarders John Fife, a gardener, and Nora Fife, presumably his wife. John Silve's sister-in-law, Mary A. Feeney, a nurse, also boarded at the house for years prior to 1920.

The next year, in 1921, John Silve, in two separate transactions, sold or gave ½ interest and then the rest of his interest in 801 Montauk to Leonora O. Silve, who on the very same day gave or sold the entire property back to John Silve in one transaction. A husband's transferring ownership of a primary residence to his spouse at this time is very common – as a kind of insurance policy for her continued ownership of the home after the husband's death or divorce. But what might be the purpose here, except to document a transfer of cash?³

Uncovering Leonora's past has proven a challenge. Judging from the 1930 U.S. Census, she was born about 1885 in Massachusetts. Thus, there appears to have been an age difference between Leonora and John Silve of perhaps 18 years. She had been married before, at age 38 (to John Fife?). I was not able to find evidence that either John or Leonora had children or that they ever actually married each other, but presumably they did. They are listed as spouses in New London City Directories at 801 Montauk Avenue between 1923 and 1933.⁴

In the 1930 Census, the couple shows up living in Miami Beach, servants in the household of the widowed heiress, Margaret J. Gold, whose house is valued at \$500,000. In this record, John Silve's occupation is listed as "civil engineer," but also "servant." Margaret Gold was at that time the 49-year old widow of Egbert H. Gold.⁵ Egbert Gold, who was born in Cornwall, Connecticut, was the son of the inventor and manufacturer of the steam radiator. Inheriting a fortune, Egbert had his own very successful business based in Chicago, and his summer home, "Marigold," still sits overlooking Lake

³ What was the purpose of this transaction? Might it have been a way of foregoing dower rights in the house in case Leonora became John Silve's widow? If so, why would Leonora agree to that? Did she receive cash in lieu of her rights in the property? This, of course, is mere speculation.

⁴ An absence of evidence allows us to be suspicious but does not in itself prove anything.

⁵ Margaret Gold later married opera singer Mischa Thorgevsky

Macatawa, Ottawa County, Michigan.

Egbert Gold was an avid horticulturist and yachtsman, and it seems likely that the Golds visited friends or even rented in the Pequot Colony shortly before Egbert's death in 1928. Perhaps Leonora came as a servant with the Golds to New London or perhaps she was the person called "Nora Fife" who boarded at 801 Montauk Avenue in 1920. In any event, in 1930, while John Silve and Leonora were in Florida working for Margaret Gold, 801 Montauk was listed as "vacant" in the city directory.

What happened to Leonora is unclear, but in 1931 John Silve is back in New London, and by 1935, he is married to Rose R.M. Wortmann (according to their marriage record), who was 23 years John's junior. The 1940 Census gives a snapshot: John Silve, 72, retired, has a house valued at \$6,000, and his wife, 45, is named Rose.⁶

After John Silve's passing in 1942, Rose continued in the house. In 1945 she married the recently widowed Benjamin Leroy Lamphere (1886-1956) of Waterford. After his death Rose continued to live at the house until selling it in 1982. She passed away in New London on 16 October 1991.

The narrative above starts with title information researched by Thomas Couser. From there we looked at various primary and secondary sources, including census records, city directories, newspaper accounts, local and family histories, cemetery and military service records. This is by no means exhaustive research but is meant to give an idea of the people involved in the early history of this home.

– Mary Beth Baker for New London Landmarks, .

⁶ It is not unusual for ages to be off in census records, especially in regards to females. Rose was born 7 April 1893 in New Jersey according to her birth records.