

# Up in the old hotel



A new chapter for the Madison Beach Hotel

By Lisa Reisman 5/11/2012  
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Why should we care about a Civil-War draft-dodging itinerant shipbuilder by the name of Emery Wildes—in particular, in relation to the newly reconstructed Madison Beach Hotel which reopened last Tuesday?

Little reason, it would seem. Except that he represents a direct link from Madison's rich history to the current hotel in the person of his great granddaughter Nancy Farnan.

According to the spirited, good-natured septuagenarian, who was engaged in research at Madison's Charlotte Evarts Archives last Friday, her great grandfather traveled from Maine along the eastern seaboard, picking up shipbuilding jobs as he went, until he landed in Connecticut - specifically, at the shipyards of Madison's East Wharf, and eventually to West Wharf, then the hub of activity in the town.



Top photo, the Madison Beach Hotel from a 1959 postcard, courtesy Charlotte. L. Evarts Memorial Archives. Above, the renovated Madison Beach Hotel is officially open. Photo by Arnold Gold.

At a time when ships were the only means of transporting produce from Madison farms to the cities and bringing back coal and supplies, it was only natural that Madison, land of forest and har-

bor, would become a shipbuilding mecca in New England. And only natural that it would draw men adept with mallet and axe like Emery Wildes who would occupy the gray four-story clapboard inn on West Wharf built in the early 1800s that would become Madison Beach Hotel.

Wildes had picked up his tools and moseyed down the road to Stony Creek to repair "stone boats," barges that carried stone, by the time the railroad and the steamship ended the age of great wooden sailboats. Shipyards closed, and the summer resort era began, with hotels welcoming train passengers attracted by the natural beauty and healthy atmosphere of Madison's beaches.

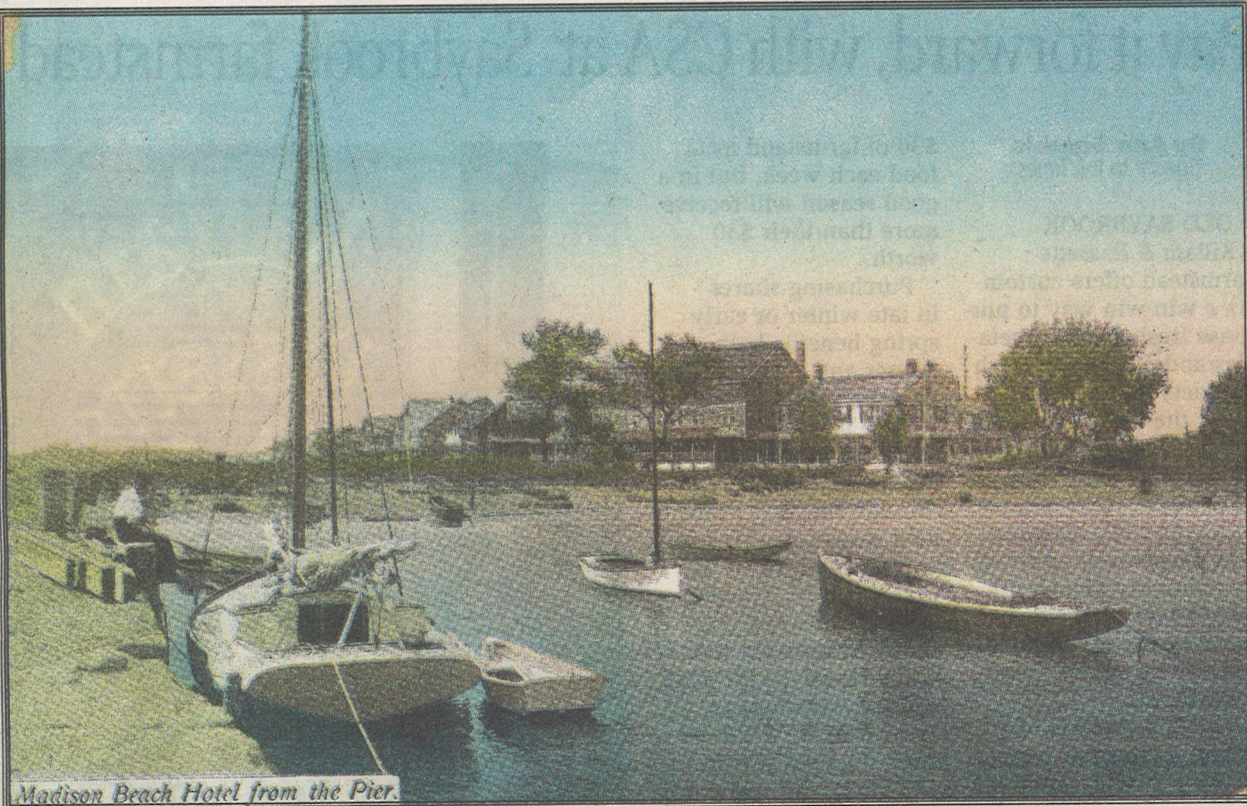
None were more popular than the former clapboard rooming house nestled along a curve of the Connecticut coastline where Long Island Sound was at its widest and dramatically fronted by a natural island and rock formation. It was the grand "old school" New England beach hotel with the wicker rocking chairs on the expansive covered porch offering its lazing guests a vista of Long Island that seemed to stretch to infinity, with the pleasantly unobtrusive furnishings in the simple, unfussy rooms and the beach doubling as the front yard.

And it became the oldest continuously run businesses on the

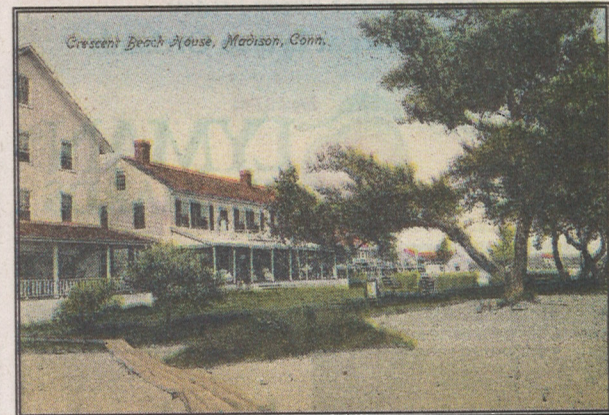


Antique photo circa early 20th century, courtesy Charlotte. L. Evarts Memorial Archives.

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Madison Beach Hotel from the Pier.



Crescent Beach House, Madison, Conn.



MADISON BEACH HOTEL, VIEW FROM COVE MADISON, CONN.

Photos courtesy of Charlotte L. Evarts Memorial Archives, Inc., Madison, CT. View from "Cove" early 20th century.

Above, an early view of the Madison Beach Hotel from the pier. Photo top right: Shipbuilders who worked at the shipyard on Madison's West Wharf, many of whom stayed at the boarding house that would become the hotel. Emery Wildes, is sixth from the left. Center right, the Crescent Beach House, a predecessor to the hotel, perhaps. All historic photos courtesy of Charlotte L. Evarts Memorial Archives, Inc., Madison, CT.

# Hotel: From storied past to new chapter

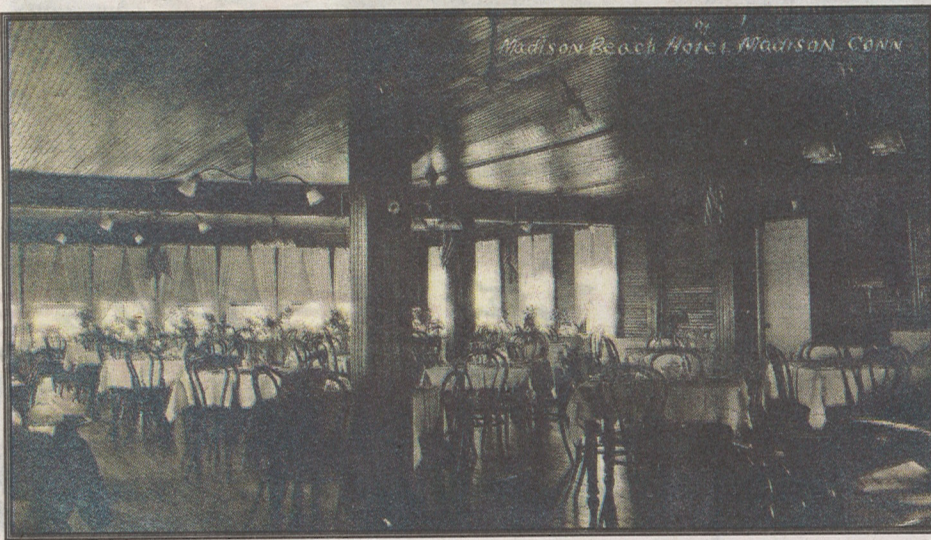
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 Connecticut shoreline where, according to a June 1975 New Haven Register article, "families returned year after year . . . college boys worked as beach boys, setting up umbrellas on the sand each morning, stowing them away each evening, clearing the beach of debris, driving guests to the railroad, and serving as bus boys."  
 Which is why, like many Madisonians, Farnan felt a deep sense of loss on the November 2008 day that the Zoning Board of Appeals approved the plan to have the shoreline landmark razed and rebuilt as an upgraded boutique hotel.

Sure, there was something outdated about the rambling four-story structure with the outside stairwells and room entrances at the back, but that was part of its delightful lack of pretense. As for the slightly sloping floors and dusky, faded patina on the multiple layers of paint—well, it bespoke two centuries in the sun and salt air. It was, in short, as one reviewer had it, "a quaint

wreck of a place." So it was with mixed feelings that Farnan, like many Madisonians, looked on as the new hotel struggled to emerge, as it navigated the shoals of a failed land swap, of concerns over the height of the building and the safety of the new generator, and anxieties over parking; as it endured winter snowstorms and spring downpours and multiple delays, and perhaps most challenging of all, the cross currents of nostalgia.

It's not that, as an amateur historian, it doesn't pain Nancy Farnan "to see the past torn down." And yet, as she begrudgingly acknowledges, "its time had come." Indeed, while Ric and Dawn Duques, longtime residents of Madison, bought the 34-room hotel in 2006 with the intention of lifting it out of disrepair, the consensus among builders was that the roughly 200-year-old building, having already undergone multiple renovations and enhance-

ments, could endure no more. The only course: to capture the charm and essence of the quintessential New England beach inn, with the new cedar shingle facade paying homage to the hotel's humble origins and the warm hues of the interior exuding an intimate and understated grace. If the guest rooms are larger; if there's now a spa and fitness center, a banquet facility, a gift shop, as well as a honeymoon suite on an upper



The old dining room had a casual, coastal charm. Old photo taken some time in the mid 20th century. Charlotte L. Evarts Memorial Archives, Inc., Madison, CT.

floor; if the two walls facing Long Island Sound have been fortified so the hotel remains warm in the winter and cool in the summer, there are still private balconies overlooking the beach and Sound. There's still the veranda where anyone can take in the breathtaking views. And there's still, of course, the magnificent location. Not to mention that even those most resistant to change can't protest the strenuous efforts of the hotel to hire locally or its goal, as stated by Lou Carrier, president of the Distinctive Hospitality Group, which manages the hotel, "to be regarded as one of the larger employers in the state." Or the added revenue that the new hotel will bring

to Madison. Eileen Banisch, executive director of the Madison Chamber of Commerce, summed it up nicely: "The old place will certainly be missed, but ultimately this will prove to be a wonderful benefit for our town." As for how Emery Wildes might have reacted to the new Madison Beach Hotel: "Dumbfounded," said his great-granddaughter without hesitation. "But what can you do? she added with a sigh. "Time marches on." *Editor's note: For more information visit on the web: madisonbeachhotel.com; Charlotte Evarts Archives, evartsarchives.org; Madison Chamber of Commerce, madisonct.com.*