

# Mantoloking Recovers From Sandy

By: Victoria Ford



Photo credit: Victoria Ford.  
John Wesson.

Superstorm Sandy gave Mantoloking a beating unlike any the borough can recall. Sure, the Great New England Hurricane in September 1938 made its mark, and the Great March Storm of '62 dealt a blow, but prior

to Sandy, no such devastation had befallen the tiny coastal community, which was established in 1911 and where the earliest residents' progeny still inhabit the homes and preserve the borough's character, three and four generations on.

Earlier this year the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission presented the Mantoloking Historical Society with an award in recognition of its "extraordinary dedication to historic preservation during the ongoing recovery from Superstorm Sandy" and for the "dignity and grace" with which the preservation efforts have been handled.

Historically, Mantoloking has been "ridiculously lucky" in terms of storm damage, according to historical society member Jenny Buck. "Up until now, ... it did not seem like this was *that unsafe* an area."

But two years after the superstorm that blighted fully 200 of its 528 residential properties, Mantoloking finds itself in flux. Those charged with keeping records organized and safe are faced with the question of how to preserve the very essence of the borough's identity, and its residents' sense of place, after more than a third of its structures have been wiped out – either washed out in the storm or torn down afterward.

And what is the borough's identity, exactly?

Some might compare it to the British dramedy "Doc Martin," set in Portwenn, a fictitious coastal town populated by eccentrics. Mantoloking is a place where free, independent thought and action are fiercely valued. Many families are related through marriage because children of neighbors have married. Its yacht club produces Olympic champion sailors. Mantoloking is not a destination for shopping or tourism.

Buck noted an interesting dichotomy exists between those who have roots going back 100 years and those newly drawn to the area and strongly inclined to stay – though now it seems the two are beginning to blend together as everyone continues to deal with the same storm-related issues. "(The storm) has brought people a lot closer together than we necessarily would have expected it to," she remarked.

The historical society had never formally organized as such, the group explained;

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before now, it never had a good enough reason to. Five to eight core members have made contributions and helped conduct research for books, e.g., *Mantoloking Through the Lens* by local historian Anne Benedict, first published in 2001 and reissued in 2011 for the town's centennial.



John Wesson, Jenny Buck & Peter Wright.  
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

“In many ways, Anne (Benedict) did this singlehandedly for decades, and people just backed her up when she needed it,” Buck said.

Upon Benedict's recent stepping-down as historical society president, she named town historian John Wesson as her replacement. Wesson comes from a long line of year 'rounders in Mantoloking and is fortunate to be the son of meticulous documentarians, who kept very carefully arranged and clearly labeled photo albums, which thankfully were spared in the flooding. Wesson said he hopes someday to create a designated space for his photographs and other historical collections to be made available for public view and research. Asked whether the group has plans to expand, Buck said she suspects Wesson will soon find he needs more help, so “I wouldn't be surprised if it starts growing within the next year or two.”

Meanwhile, the recovery process is playing out differently throughout the borough based on everyone's unique circumstances, Wesson said. Some, for example, had flood insurance and others did not. Some seemed to have the know-how to move quickly. Some houses that were destroyed have already been replaced by bigger and better, while quite a few residents are still hung up in the slow, tedious permitting process. Some had been waiting for the outcome of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's 3.5-mile sea wall project (which officially began in July). Some are deciding to sell. Some are contemplating the merits of elevating on pilings, while at the same time questioning the practicality of investing in infrastructure on the sand.

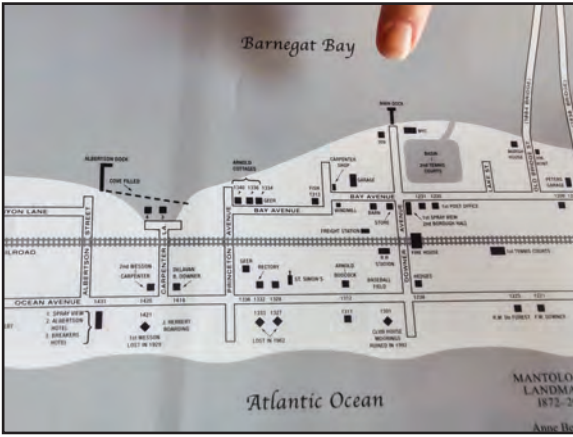
“People are drawn to the water,” Wesson said. “They'll pay any price to be at the water.”

A lot of things are still unclear, Buck said, as residents struggle over whether to rebuild, and if so, when, and whether enough is known at this point to make the best decision.

Peter Wright is a Brielle resident who was made an honorary historical society member last year in order to take on the tasks to which no one else could commit the time. His contributions have proven productive on several fronts, though he is more humble:

In February 2013, four months out from the storm, Wright walked the entire beach in Bay Head and Mantoloking with a camera hung from a kite, to collect aerial photographs of the destruction. His images show the true extent of the ocean's appetite – some houses had giant bites taken out while others were broken in half,

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Map of Historic Mantoloking.  
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

knocked down or smashed to bits.

Wright’s primary focus was a program of the Federal Emergency Management Agency called Private Property Debris Removal, which offered mitigation funding to save structures with historic value. Alas, he said, “we were fighting

for that prize, whatever it might be, and it turned out to be nothing.”

“The FEMA guys just had no ears,” Wright said. “They didn’t listen at all.”

Nonetheless, the time and work invested in the FEMA project have yielded ancillary benefits in the form of knowledge.

“This is where Peter (Wright) and John (Wesson) have done so much for this town, in starting to pull some sort of understanding,” Buck said. “We didn’t even have a grasp of it when we walked in.”

Buck said Wright’s work has helped to lay the groundwork for “trying to comprehend what we did lose” – an important next step, in her opinion. Since the storm, every house in the borough has been photographed. The challenge now is to assemble a complete set of “before” photos to serve as a definitive record of houses that were lost.

“At best, it may be a building block,” Wright said.

These days, Buck said, even the definition of the word “historic” may be subject to revision. Considering how many houses were lost, she said, anything that survived feels like it has historic value. However, she clarified: “The mission of this group has never been to force people to keep an old house.” More important than keeping old structures standing is fostering a love and respect of local history.

Outsiders can look critically upon coastal dwellers and say, “you never should have built there,” Buck acknowledged. But it has taken a disaster of Sandy’s scale to cause residents to re-evaluate their relationship with the beach on a fundamental level.

“We’re all changing our belief on why we want to be here and what it means to us,” Buck said. “That might have to be an article in another five or 10 years.”

