

# QUONOCHONTAUG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Oral History

# ELINOR STILES PRIOR

January 12, 1998

Interviewed by Anne S. Doyle

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**Anne:** Today is Monday, January 12, 1998. I am sitting with Mrs. Elie Prior in her home called "The Basket" on 6 Ninigret Avenue, Central Beach, Quonochontaug. The following conversation deals with her history here at Quonochontaug.

**Anne:** I was wondering if we could just begin by talking about how you came to Quonnie. You just said that you were living in Westerly when you were younger

**Elinor:** I was born in Westerly (? address) in 1917. As a little girl, my parents had friends here in Quonochontaug. When I was six years old, there were still hotels on the Breachway; and my father would take me to dances over there, in the Eldridge House. And I always was in love with Quonochontaug. Now I feel like I have come round robin home again.

**Anne:** That's wonderful. So why don't you just continue telling me about how you got here.

**Elinor:** My parents had friends here, and my father and mother always came over to Quonochontaug to the Worcester House or the Eldridge House; and it was at that time a red-light district, and rum runners coming in and out of the Breachway that you can't believe!

**Anne:** Were people aware of that, when that was happening—the rum runners?

**Elinor:** This was just a summer resort, you know; nobody lived here year-round. There was just a summer resort.

**Anne:** Did you stay overnight in the hotels?

**Elinor:** Yes, we did. My father was a chauffeur for people who stayed at Shelter Harbor Inn, and he brought them from the Westerly railroad station to Shelter Harbor. My two brothers were bell-hops at Shelter Harbor, and so this area has been part of my growing up.

**Anne:** All right; let's just back up a little bit when you were younger and coming to West Beach area, as you said, to the Eldridge House and the Worcester House. Now how did you get here, into that area (from your home in Westerly? Did you take the trolley at that time or not?

**Elinor:** No; the trolley came (started) from Westerly ( and went down) High Street, Westerly, down to Watch Hill, Misquamicut and Weekapaug. But my father, who was a chauffeur, for the Shelter Harbor people, always drove people to Quonochontaug; there was no (other) transportation to Q. at that point.

**Anne:** So you did use the trolley to get to Weekapaug, you said (from a previous conversation), and you took swimming lessons and that kind of thing.  
**Elinor:** Right. **Anne:** What were the trolleys like?

**Elinor:** It was an open-air trolley that only ran in the summers; and it came down High St. in Westerly, down Main St. and Beach St. to Watch Hill, and then Watch Hill all the way to Misquamicut and Weekapaug.

**Anne:** So you went there several days during the week, I mean, or just once a week to take your swimming lessons?

**Elinor:** Well, we always went there –Misquamicut was called Pleasant View at that time; it didn't become Misquamicut until the early thirties.

**Anne:** Was there entertainment there?

**Elinor:** Yes, there was the merry-go-round and the Ferris wheel and all those things. I have seen Misquamicut wiped out three times in my lifetime, with hurricanes and what they call line storms in the winter.

**Anne:** Now as far as Quonnie is concerned, did you actually spend – like this was part of a vacation from (your home) in Westerly that you would come and stay at the Eldridge House, for instance?

**Elinor:** We would come for weekends; that was mainly --the only time we stayed here except for friends that lived on East Beach. And we would come [for] the day to go swimming. And things like that, but I never spent a

great deal of time here at Quonnie. But I –loved it and Misquamicut was so crowded and all that, that I thought this was just heavenly.

**Anne:** Did you take walks down the beach (from East Beach) to where our-- our Central Beach is now? Were there any houses along there?

**Elinor:** Yes, there were houses all along: my house, Mrs. Vars' and the (Frank) Turners' house (Note: this was after 1938 Hurricane and the (now) Prior's cottage had been pushed across Fresh Pond and relocated at the corner of Sea Breeze Ave. and Ninigret Ave.). We were all – I lived here for five years before we were voted into Central Beach. (Mr. Thorp had created Quonnie Highlands in the 1940's which became an extension of Central Beach north of the original border of Central Beach). We all belonged to East Beach. (before it became part of Central Beach).

**Anne:** So this was considered an extension of the original Central Beach.

**Elinor:** Right. These three houses – there were no houses here before the '38 Hurricane –

**Anne:** Just one more thing before we talk about how you got your home here: getting back to the red-light district: Did your mother know it was part of the red-light district?

**Elinor:** My mother didn't like my father taking me there.

**Anne:** Did you know that?

**Elinor:** No, I didn't at that time and [after] I grew up, my mother explained this all to me. [ Laughter]

**Anne:** Oh, isn't that something. I like that story! Do you have memories of swimming in the breachway, or wading in the water there?

**Elinor:** Yes, I remember – you could walk across the breachway, when I was about 10 or 12, and the Shelter Harbor beach, with no houses on it, was so terrific –isolated and now.

**Anne:** So you would walk across and then go to the beach on the other side. (The first Quonochontaug Beach was located in front of the Q. Coast Guard Station which was west of the breachway entrance.)

**Elinor:** Right. And there was a Navy –like a (Anne prompting Coast Guard) Coast Guard station there; Ainsworth Crooker used to be there years ago, and he, he was part of that naval –

**Anne:** I don't know him; who is that?

**Elinor:** We used to rent our house to Ainsworth Crooker, Marian and Ainsworth Crooker. They bought a house after we didn't rent (to them) any more, they bought the house called the Old Salt Box or –

**Anne:** Oh – “Old Salt” --(located on 40 Oceanview Ave. in Central Beach)

**Elinor:** “Old Salt”—was Ainsworth Crooker's house.

**Anne:** Oh, I see; I didn't know that.

**Anne:** All right; is there any kind of an incident that you remember, you know, that stands out in your mind when you were over in the West Beach area? Anything in particular? Were there any ships that went aground or anything like that?

**Elinor:** Yes, but I can't rec—I had pictures that -- my grandfather (Frederick Stiles) was a photographer in Westerly for 50 years – and he took many shipwrecks of boats off Quonnie, Watch Hill and Misquamicut. And I don't have those pictures anymore. But there were lots of shipwrecks along this coastline.

**Anne:** So you also visited your friends over in East Beach, and can you remember their names, can you give us their names?

**Elinor:** The only one I can remember is Worthingtons. (?Warrington)

**Anne:** Then you went on to the East Beach area as well—was Blue Shutters there at the time? Or you don't –maybe it's hard to remember.

**Elinor:** No, it was, it was always a public beach. But East Beach had its own private beach but where the Blue Shutters now is was always open to the public.

**Anne:** Is that where you would go when you visited your friends?

**Elinor:** Yes.

**Anne:** Oh, OK. So it wasn't like the East Beach right across here, across the pond.

**Elinor:** No.

**Anne:** All right. –Ok, now let's just –I wanted to find out a little bit about your home, here, and how you came to own the home and where it used to be

before the hurricane – that type of thing. Who owned the house before you?

**Elinor:** Professor Wilkinson from Storrs College owned it, and it was on East Beach (actually it was on Central Beach) and in the '38 hurricane, it was washed into the swamp (Fresh Pond) in front of me. And Roland DeMoranville, I had pictures of he and some other people pulling it out of the swamp (Fresh Pond) and Professor Wilkinson bought the property and had the house set up here. And when we bought it from Mr. Thorp, it had no foundation, no fireplace, it had no – and Brad Fisher did all that for us. Tarzan Brown, the Indian, did the foundation for us and we bought this house for three thousand dollars. ...It must be about 100 years old now, this house. Well, it was fifty years ago, the hurricane, and it was on the beach for fifty years before that –

**Anne:** My goodness. Now when you—do you remember when you bought the house?

**Elinor:** 1941.

**Anne:** 1941. Now you had it -- the foundation put in and so forth. And you just spent summers here, is that correct?

**Elinor:** Right. And we rented it every August to Ainsworth Crooker, the month of August. But I spent the month of July with my children here, and the Frosts, who used to go to the Sea Breeze Inn. And that's how they came here. We would all walk down to the East Beach to the house called the "Tunxis" had ice cream, and the kids all had their ice cream cones, and we always walked down there.

**Anne:** The "Tunxis" was like a little restaurant? (The "Tunxis" originally was a boarding house on the oceanfront near the end of Highland Rd. Mr. and Mrs. Williams were the owners. It was washed back to 35 Highland Rd. by the 1938 Hurricane.)

**Elinor:** It was like a boarding house. She served meals, and she had ice cream and all those things; and the Frosts with all their five kids and my children, we would walk down there every night about 7:00 to go to the Tunxis to get ice cream.

**Anne:** That's a wonderful story; I have not heard about this at all. Now, when did you decide to come here permanently? You told me before I had the recorder on,

**Elinor:** My husband died in 1975, and I lived in a 200-year old house in Windsor, Ct. that got to be too much for me to take care of, and I thought –said to my children, why didn't you drop-kick me and send me to R.I. ? And

they said, you weren't ready yet. So I contacted Brad Fisher and asked him what can you do so I can come here to live? And he did, and I've never been happier.

**Anne:** Well, I can tell how happy you are. And that was 198(?).

**Elinor:** 1981.

**Anne:** We were just talking a little bit about the Sea Breeze Inn, and your memories of that.

**Elinor:** A great many people who fell in love with Quonochontaug started at the Sea Breeze Inn. It was a wonderful farmhouse hotel. The families could come for \$35 a week, served three meals a day, and every Thursday a pitcher of Scotch was put on the table and if you wanted to have-- get lobsters you could cook them in the kitchen; and everybody -- it was just wonderful, wonderful --and why they ever got rid of that, nobody will ever know.

**Anne:** Now--So did you go up there (Sea Breeze Inn) to eat?

**Elinor:** When I rented here, I would take my children and stay there a week myself.

**Anne:** Oh, I see.

**Elinor:** And I thought it was wonderful.

**Anne:** I didn't know that. So you were one of the people that actually stayed at the Inn, then, for a period of time.

**Elinor:** Nice, nice place; it really was. They used to have a --what do you call -- Finnish baths --

**Anne:** Saunas? Inside ?

**Elinor:** No, it was down in the woods.

**Anne:** Oh, like a hot tub kind of thing? What did they call them?

**Elinor:** Finnish bath, is what they called them. The Nurmis were Finnish people.

**Anne:** Did you ever go down --

**Elinor:** No, I never did.

**Anne:** Now I had heard something about them having dances over there (Sea Breeze Inn)

**Elinor:** In the little yellow, little house they used to have community dances there. (The Rettigs are the present owners. The Rettig family owns the property that once was Sea Breeze Inn)

**Anne:** And you also mentioned that there were dances over at the other hotels, when you were younger—is that correct?

**Elinor:** Yes, at the Eldridge House and the Worcester House, there were dances every Saturday night.

**Anne:** Did they have live music?

**Elinor:** Yes. Matter of fact, my most vivid memory is of Red Nickels and the Five Pennies. If anybody ever remembers who they are –  
The Red Nickels and the Five Pennies [together]. They were playing at the Eldridge House, and everybody from Westerly and everywhere came to listen to them.

**Anne:** And they danced to the music, too?

**Elinor:** Right, right – yeah.

**Anne:** And you were young then!

**Elinor:** I was –

**Anne:** So –I mean there were children, you know, that would dance as well as the adults –

**Elinor:** This was when parents took their children to all these things. You know, the whole family went. There wasn't just mother and father; all the kids came and, and most fathers danced with their daughters, and if not their brothers had to dance with them!

**Anne:** I remember, for a short period of time going to Sea Breeze Inn and square dancing; that's what I remember. I don't know why it stopped, either.

**Elinor:** See, all the good things in life cease to exist anymore.

**Anne:** I think that life has become much more complex. I mean there was simplicity of what people enjoyed before –

**Elinor:** And you didn't have to have a lot of money to do all these enjoyable things.

**Anne:** So the people that were here weren't necessarily wealthy people.

**Elinor:** No. No.

**Anne:** Not at all.

**Elinor:** No.

**Anne:** What about some of your – when you were--when you had your home here, and you were here in July, did you have a car at the time? I mean, how did you get your groceries and all that?

**Elinor:** When I first moved here, there was a little vegetable man who came around in a truck, with the corn and tomatoes; and we didn't have a refrigerator: we had an ice box, a big ice box. And the ice man would bring a 50-pound piece of ice that would last me a week. We bought the ice box from Henry Brightman. I'll never forget when Henry Brightman and Roland DeMoranville brought in the ice box. It was a huge thing! And the whole side where the ice –50-pound cube of ice went in and a bucket underneath where it dripped out into the yard. But we just –we never knew anything else.

**Anne:** Did you know anything more about Henry Brightman and Mr. DeMoranville – is that how you pronounce his name? I don't think we talked about those two people. Can you tell me a little bit about those two people?

**Elinor:** I know a little.

**Anne:** Mr. Brightman used to own that gas station, across Route One, right?

**Elinor:** His father, who had lost a leg, elderly man who ran the –it was not the Quonnie Forum then, it was –

**Anne:** I remember it as Brightman's .

**Elinor:** Brightman's Store.

**Anne:** Was he the big man?



**Elinor:** Yes.

**Anne:** That was his father you're talking about?

**Elinor:** His father. And he always sat, if you ever saw him. He had one leg amputated, for what reason I don't know. But he was a nice, nice man. And Henry Brightman still has sons here who he did—Henry Brightman did over xxxxxx Brown's house, and he did a lot of building around here.

**Anne:** I see. This is the son, now.

**Elinor:** Right. And maybe the grandson.

**Anne:** So this is fairly recently, then.

**Elinor:** Yes.

**Anne:** So that the family is still around here.

**Elinor:** They're still around; right.

**Anne:** Now what about Mr. DeMoranville?

**Elinor:** Well, he died when he was in—he was 62 years old.

**Anne:** And tell me who he was.

**Elinor:** He was our collector of garbage and trash, like Dennis Jalbert is today, and his wife Irene drove the truck while he picked up all the garbage. And he was quite a ladies' man, or he thought he was. [Laughter]

**Anne:** That's a good piece of information.

**Elinor:** Lots of stories – there were a few scandals around in those days, but I won't disclose them.

**Anne:** Oh, well –if there's any you can remember that you can disclose I wouldn't mind! So he was –when he died then, is that when Dennis took over?

**Elinor:** I don't know who was here before Dennis.

**Anne:** But did you know him more than just as your (trash collector?)– was he a friend, too? Or

**Elinor:** Roland?

**Anne:** Yes. Roland.

**Elinor:** Well, I guess you would call him a friend because my husband would ask him he if would like a drink and he said Yes, I would.

**Anne:** Oh – so he'd come in when he was on the job?

**Elinor:** On the job. I guess he got many more than one a night.

**Anne:** That's all right; you don't have to say it if you don't want.

**Elinor:** But he made everybody happy and I guess everybody made him happy, too.

**Anne:** OK, we were just chatting without the recorder for a few minutes about the hurricane of 1938. Now, you said you were down here and left just before that. Could you just tell us where you were?

**Elinor:** My mother-in-law rented a cottage owned by Mrs. Van Ost on the beach, called the Botonic (?name); and the reason it was called Botonic was that it was bought on a tick at the stock market. And we were there (as renters) two weeks before the '38 Hurricane. And the house was completely destroyed, but it was rebuilt (at 128 Oceanview) the house-- this side next to the present Ham Schwarz cottage.— and bought by Rex Baldwin, back --oh not too many years afterward (after the Hurricane). This cottage I don't know how long Mrs. Van Ost still owned the house. But the house was rebuilt as a Dutch colonial, next to Ham Schwarz. And we left two days before the hurricane and the water was up to the front steps, and when we came back we couldn't believe how destroyed it had become. There were so many people lost in this area – 169 between Watch Hill and Quonochontaug.

**Anne:** Your husband, you said, was a sailor.

**Elinor:** We always had boats in Quonochontaug Pond, and I was a pretty good sailor myself. Once with Mary McSweeney, who always loved her sailboats. And we would go to Block Island many times.

**Anne:** A sailboat, not a motorboat?

**Elinor:** When we went to Block Island, it was in the motorboat. But we sailed Watch Hill and Misquamicut and Quonochontaug Pond, and you could go in and out of the Breachway – it was not as dangerous as it is now.—

**Anne:** Did they have ferries to Block Island? Is that how –did you get to Block Island by ferry? Was this now –how old would you –did you go to Block Island when you were younger as well?

**Elinor:** No, no. Only when I was married: we went to Block Island many times, by boat, but also the New London Ferry and the Point Judith Ferry and when my children were small, we went there many many times. And stayed over for a weekend, in the Manisses Hotel.

**Anne:** Have you seen that recently?

**Elinor:** Yes.

**Anne:** My husband and I have stayed there.

**Elinor:** Don't you love it?

**Anne:** Oh it's wonderful!

**Elinor:** It was – when my kids were small, we went to the Manisses and my son said "Don't ever bring me here again."

**Anne:** Why?

**Elinor:** It was absolutely disreputable! And such a –

**Anne:** Oh, it hadn't been renovated or anything.

**Elinor:** Oh no—there were –you could hear people fighting in all the rooms and everything else, and my children said that was the worst place I could have taken them.

**Anne:** My mother's name was Helen, Helen Seamans Schafer. You knew her?

**Elinor:** Helen Schafer, Marian Evans –

**Anne:** Marian Evans –

**Elinor:** We lived in that house –

**Anne:** Oh, in that first house there? (? "Checkpoint" at 180 Surfside Ave.)

**Elinor:** Right, right.

**Anne:** All right; I didn't know her.

**Elinor:** Myself and --we used to sit as a group.

**Anne:** OK -- Down right there where the stairs used to be? (across from 180 Surfside Ave.)

**Elinor:** Right. Right.

**Anne:** Because I can remember my mother always sitting in that place, in that area.

**Elinor:** And also your father was a friend of Albert Schultz that was my brother's best friend.

**Anne:** Oh -- this was from Hartford?

**Elinor:** Right.

**Anne:** Yeah, I remember --

**Elinor:** And Albert used to come down to see your father; Edward worked at Travelers.

**Anne:** Yes, right. Oh I didn't know there was that connection.

**Elinor:** So --you look very much like your mother.

**Anne:** I do strongly resemble her. What kinds of things would you talk about? Was it more just chit chat, or --

**Elinor:** Well, unfortunately, when you're young and you have children the conversation always concerns children, and the people who don't have children get pretty bored about that.

**Anne:** Now you obviously rented to different people; you mentioned the Crookers -- is that the name? And now you said the Friends rented your house?

**Elinor:** Well, because we bought this house in 1941, and only spent July here, myself and my children --my husband would come down weekends-- we rented it, and before Dick and Audrey Friend or their mother built their houses, they rented my house. And I remember Dick saying "I want to build a house like Mrs. Prior's" and his mother built a house on the street West Niantic Avenue, behind him. And when -- after I moved here, Dick and Audrey came in here one day and Dick said, "I can't believe what you've done to this house" and I said, "How do you know because you're blind?" And he said -- "Oh I can tell."

**Anne:** Oh, isn't that something!

**Elinor:** He just felt everything.

**Anne:** Now they have the house on the corner, the corner of (Ninigret and Kenyon Ave.)

**Elinor:** Right.

**Anne:** Is that the only house in the family or do they have another?

**Elinor:** They sold – the mother – He sold his mother's house, which was on West Niantic Street

**Anne:** Oh, I see. And then they went –

**Elinor:** They still come here summers. You know, and they're not spring chickens anymore either.

**Anne:** I don't know them. I don't even know how old they are.

**Elinor:** I've known them since before they were married, you know.

**Anne:** Through Quonnie – not through any other –like—where you used to live or anything.

**Elinor:** No – I remember Mrs. Fisher –um Mrs. Friend—did not really think they should get married because – I don't know what her objection was except that Audrey was a Jewish girl and she was blind, and Dick was blind; but they are so musically tuned to each other it is just the most wonderful thing to see them perform together.