

Cruising ToCutchogue Harbor and Robins Island



by Capt. Gary P. Joyce

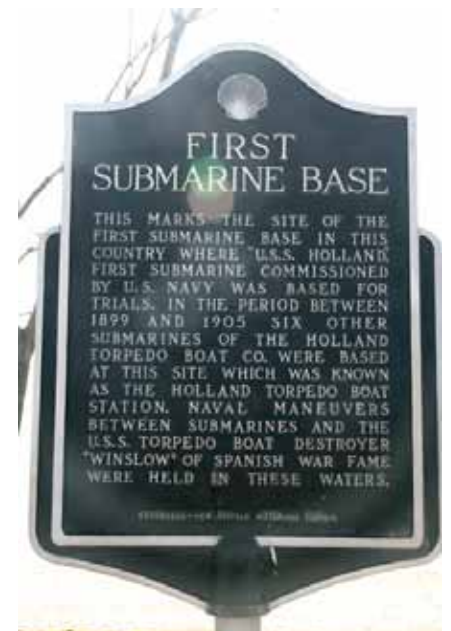
Probably one of the more overlooked areas bordering Peconic Bay — something we're sure the locals are quite happy about — is the Cutchogue Harbor area in Little Peconic Bay. Cutchogue itself has a unique distinction for towns in the area in that know one knows for sure what the name means, or how it is spelled. It also remains the only site on the North Fork that contained a fort; in this case, Fort Corchaug, a palisaded 17th century enclosure belonging to the local tribe by the same name of which next to nothing is known about. The fort these day is properly called Fort Corchaug at Downs Preserve (631-734-6413. The Downs Farm Preserve is designated a New York State Significant Coastal Fish and Wildlife Habitat and included in the Suffolk County Peconic Bay Estuary Critical Environmental Zone, as part of the Peconic Pinelands Maritime Reserve).

Anyway, on various documents Cutchogue has been known as Catsjeyick (1645), Catsjaock (1647), Carchake, Corchake and Corchaug(1648), Curchaug (1660), Cauchhague (1673), Corchogge (1684) and about a dozen more variations. Eventually Cutchogue came into use and the Algonquian etymology suggested it meant "the greatest or principle place," according to Tooker's *The Indian Place Names on Long Island*. Being there was a fort here — one of four, the others being on Shelter Island, Shinnecock and Montauk — the "greatest" or "principle" superlative seems logical.

Regardless, Cutchogue has been in business with the new folks in town well over 300 years and was the seat of Southold Town prior to the American Revolution; one grave in the Old Burying Ground (on Main Road/25) is marked 1717. Cutchogue is also the site of the first vineyard established on Long Island (1973; Hargrave's), opening the Wine Country era that comprises much of the North Fork's agribusiness (and agri-tainment business) today.

The town of Cutchogue is small and a good hoof from any of the waterfront, though it's a nice ride by bicycle. There are several shops, the famous Cutchogue Diner (you must have breakfast there at least once), and a nice historical district (Cutchogue-New Suffolk Historical Council; 631-734-7122; www.cutchoguenewsuffolkhistory.org) provides tours and events that will give the visitor a better sense of the area's history.

The "town" of New Suffolk is located on the west side of the harbor and holds the distinction of being home to the first submarine base in the U.S. The Navy's first sub, *USS Holland*, was commissioned and performed its trials in the harbor waters. Between 1899 and 1905 six other subs were built by the Holland Torpedo Boat Company on the site. Today, what was a yard filled with boats, now sits empty, save for a massive travelift two ospreys have decided to call home.



This sign is all that marks where the first submarine used by the U.S. Navy was built.

Albert Einstein used to summer and sail in the Cutchogue Harbor and the Little Peconic area, and there's a good case to be made that Cutchogue was where the Manhattan Project went from nascence to full-blown (no pun intended) idea. The area is rife with families that can trace their family trees to the early days of English settlement, and whose names also still define the geography of the area.

Cutchogue Harbor is open to the south, but there five inlets, coves, creeks, etc., branching off the harbor proper, plus West Creek, behind New Suffolk, as well as high tide openings in Little Hog Neck that forms the east boundary of the harbor, opposite Robins Island. The same situation prevails south of Cutchogue Harbor on the north side of South Fork from Sebonac Neck to Fresh Pond. This entire area is a gunkholer's delight.

Robins Island, which forms the west side of the area, is a fishing, drop-the-hook-and-hangout, kiteboarding, wakeboarding mecca as well. The north end of the island is an almost half-nautical-mile sand spit, much of which is covered at high tide, but provides a great anchorage, especially with the predominant southwest summer wind. I never get tired of watching the current funnel up and push through the



Capt. Marty's Fishing Station is the place for bait and ice. They also rent 18-foot motor skiffs.

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North Race, off the very northern tip of Robins.

The island also serves as the hub (in navigational location only; Robins is privately owned) for a variety of sailboat races, including the Wednesday night "Beer Can" racing that is a mainstay of the area's sailing community. These races feature casual and not-so-casual, but always fun, round-Robins Island races on, as the name implies summer Wednesday evenings. It's called beer can racing because — unlike more formal sailboat racing — it occurs in a less structured environment that traditional sail racing. Call it practice, call it fun, call it what you will, there is some good sailing and crewing going on every Wednesday night. The majority end up back at Legends in New Suffolk (631-734-5123; www.legends-restaurant.com) afterwards, and chances are you'll be downing a few beers there to finish the evening.

The Peconic Bay Sailing Association



Legends Sports Bar and Restaurant is a boaters' hangout offering some 20 TVs, good food (great burgers), plentiful libations and a place to catch up on the latest seafaring derring-do.

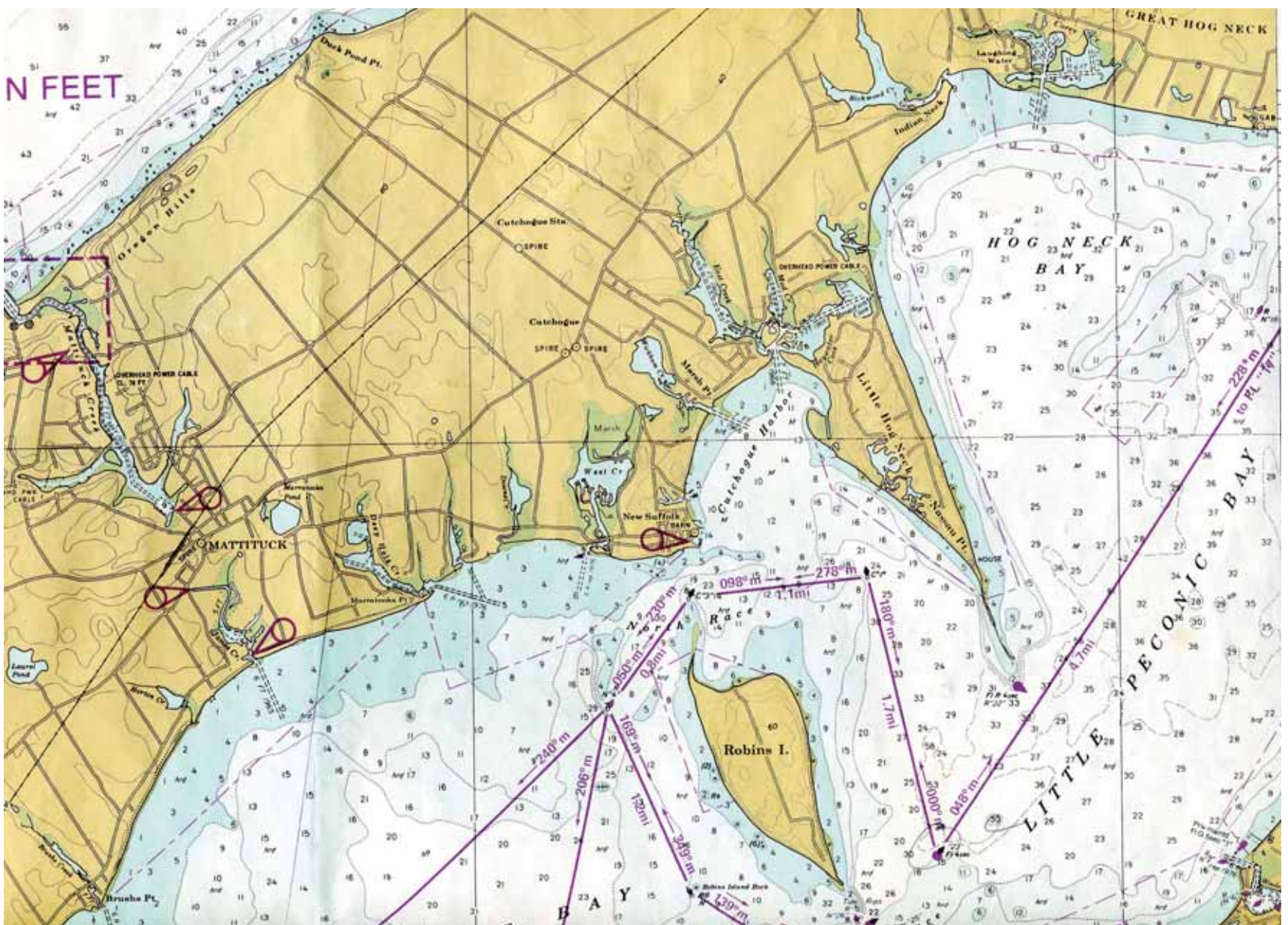
(www.pbsa.net) is based out of Cutchogue, as well, and offers sailors some more structured events, including the five-race New Suffolk Series as well as the sixteenth running of the Whitbread (October 10 this year). This counter-clockwise, around-Shelter Island race takes its name — with tongue firmly in cheek — from the famed Whitbread Race. The latter,

conjured in 1971 by some ocean racers who were undoubtedly awash in their favorite brew (Whitbread ale, named for its 1720 brewery founder, Samuel Whitbread), is now known as the Volvo Ocean Race and remains "the" credential for serious ocean sailors of that esoteric fraternity (and sorority). It took but the addition of the letter "e" by a sailing wag in Cutchogue to christen the Whitbread, which grows more popular every season.

Drift fishing off Robins Island's south side (the South Race) is also a lot of fun, but you do need to be aware of your surroundings. You'll often encounter over-loaded small boats in the area, and some tide-against-current situations can develop good-size seas (for the Peconics). The entire area from the South Race and north between

Robins and Little Hog Neck is porgie (scup) central. Weakfish, stripers and, naturally, blues can all be found in the area. The entire area is well marked and you will encounter lots of commercial crab traps in the area, so pay attention.

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Since Robins runs generally north-south, it provides a substantial lee on its eastern side from the prevailing southwesterlies that blow virtually every summer afternoon. The "cove" provided by the spit extending off the north of Robins Island is a favorite place for raft-ups or just idly watching the marine world go by.

There are dozens of marinas along the south coast of the North Fork, but in the Cutchogue area there are two, both owned by the same people, Cutchogue Harbor Marina, 631-734-6993; www.newsuffolkshipyard.com and the New Suffolk Shipyard on Schoolhouse Creek, 631-734-6311; www.newsuffolkshipyard.com. The New Suffolk operation offers some moorings as well as docks, but transient dockage in both is tight; a call ahead will pay off. Nonetheless, both yards are "real" North Fork sites, quiet, and surrounded by treed homes and estates, fields and vineyards. New Suffolk is an easy walk to the aforementioned Legends restaurant, and land transportation to Cutchogue, its vineyards or more "cosmopolitan" towns like Mattituck and Greenport can be arranged.

If you happen to be in the area and the bite is on and you've been caught without bait (tsk, tsk!), you can load up at Capt. Marty's Fishing Station (631-734-6852) in New Suffolk.

Navigation

NOAA Chart 12358

Like reaching anywhere in Great and Little Peconic Bays, this is an easy shot for South Shore boaters, and a no brainer for Sound boaters.

From the south, take the Shinnecock Canal into Great Peconic Bay. Robins Island is nor'noreast from the mouth of the canal. You can either run around the South race (Red 26 buoy) and up the west side of Robins pretty much due north. The marinas, Legends and other services are on the west shore just past the North race.

From the Sound, take the Mattituck Canal ... just kidding. But I do love firing up that ol' rumor every now and again. Nope, no canal at Mattituck, so it's around Orient Point. Take the north channel between Shelter Island and Greenport, head south-ish once by the Green 11 at Jennings Point on Shelter Island, down past the Red 12 off Paradise Point and



This travel lift is all that remains of a shipyard and restaurant, now for sale, that once occupied the harborfront in New Suffolk. Two ospreys had started a nest on the lift in late April.

head for the Green 17 at 41° 01.5/ 72° 22.9 between Jessup Neck and Great Hog Neck and hang a right (head west). There's really good fishing at the tide rips, and they're fun to watch regardless. If you have a tide-on-wind you'll want to be careful. From there, it's roughly west-south-west to the Red 22 off Little Hog Neck — if you don't know the area, take it outside and around. Head north down the west side of Robins and you're in Cutchogue Harbor.



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