

# Cruising to Port Jefferson

by Capt. Gary P. Joyce

Port Jefferson Harbor, located just about midway along Long Island's Sound coast, is a great destination for visiting, gunkholing and anchoring up in a blow. It provides a base for some good angling and is the gateway to several other picturesque North Shore towns rolled up in one.

The history of Port Jeff (or PJ as many refer to it) starts back in the mid-1600s when the first locals, the Setaukets, began selling the land known in the Algonquian tongue as Souwassett (at the place of small pines) to the European settlers - who promptly renamed the place Drown [sic] Meadow. The area of present-day Port Jefferson town was a salt marsh back in 1682 when Irish shoemaker John Roe built the first house in the area (now 118 Broadway and housing the Chamber of Commerce; 631-473-1414; [www.portjeffchamber.com](http://www.portjeffchamber.com)). It wasn't until around the mid-1800s that Port Jeff in its present configuration started to show; a William Jones built a 500-foot dock in the marsh area and downtown Port Jefferson started to form around this. A customs house was built in 1852 (now located on High Street). From this quiet beginning the town took off, and its harbor was so large and protected that it rapidly became a major seaport. It was around this time that the new locals decided they'd better change the name of the town and opted to honor the third U.S. President and renamed Drown Meadow (which had morphed to Drowned Meadow - with a "d" by then) to Port Jefferson.

Although shipbuilding started in PJ in the late 1700s, it reached its peak during the whaling era and faded by WW I, but the town's reputation for shipbuilding made it an industrial hub as well. All manner of manufacturing thrived in the area: mills, brick, carriage and even an auto factory all rose up in Port Jeff at one time or another. Famed showman P.T. Barnum owned land and had hoped to house his circus there, an idea that, apparently, didn't sit well with the local gentry, and Barnum sub-



*Marina at Danford's - Port Jefferson.*

divided his land and became a stockholder in the Port Jefferson Steamboat Company (established in 1872 and expanded in 1883; now the Bridgeport & Port Jefferson Steamboat Company).

The *Park City* was the first of this ferry service's "modern" ships. Built in Bridgeport (which held the sobriquet of Park City, and thus the name of the ferry), it was launched in 1898. The 150-foot steamer had a long career on the Sound. Caught out in the famed Hurricane of 1938 en route from Bridgeport, her captain "smelled" the weather and headed back to Bridgeport. She ended up anchored east of the Stafford Shoal Light and - somehow weathered the storm. The *Park City* wasn't retired until 1949, and the saga didn't stop there. She was purchased in 1951 to work in the southern shrimping industry, but foundered, not far from home, on the tow south and quickly sank. Two hands died, and it was always said that she died of a broken heart. God, but I love those sea stories.

The *Park City* wasn't the only ship of note to come out of the Port Jefferson shipways. A Captain John Wilsie is said to have been the first person to build a ship in Port Jeff not long after the close of the Revolutionary War, and all manner of work,

commercial, military and recreational boats have been built there, including the largest sailing vessel built on Long Island, the *Martha E. Wallace*, a 200-footer built in 1902. Although known for her boats populated by "iron men and days of sail," Port Jeff suffered a temporary boost to the vanishing boat building business due to World War I, and a number of steel boats were built there between 1917 and 1919.

Naturally, immediately following WW I, the 18th Amendment, popularly called The Volstead Act, came into being, and like all the other seaside communities, Port Jefferson had a steady rum-running business going - along with all the related businesses associated with the rum-running culture - wink, wink.

Things went pretty much downhill industry-wise after World War II, and it wasn't until the early 1960s that Port Jefferson as we know it today emerged. The town incorporated and started getting revenue from the Long Island Lighting Company plant on the southwest side of the harbor, and lo-and-behold, PJ became a tourist destination. The LIRR North Shore line terminates in PJ, the two hospitals (Mather and St. Charles) expanded, the harbor was deep enough to take U.S. Navy gunboats ... and, well, if you haven't been to Port Jeff, let's just say that, come summer it doesn't lack for a party atmosphere. It isn't Key West, but it'll pass for it on a summer Long Island weekend!

## Getting There

Yeah, this is a real rough one, navigation-wise. If you're west of Port Jefferson, head east until you encounter the red-and-white whistle and light buoy at 40° 59.3 and 73° 06.4 This is due south of Stratford Shoal (also known as Middle Grounds), which is about mid-Sound between Long Island and Connecticut (the southern buoy marking the area is at 41° 03.1/73° 06.2). Then head south. If you're east ... same thing but turn to port instead of starboard. If you're coming from New England (east of

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