

# Sleeping Among the Dunes

## *Sandy Hook's First Vacation Rental*

by Christine Menapace • photographs by Jeff Smith



*Sandy Hook's first vacation rental is an historic home along Officer's Row at Fort Hancock.*



*The front door opens to a view of Sandy Hook Bay.*

**A**t just six miles long and one mile across at its widest, the barrier spit of Sandy Hook is one of the most popular summer destinations at the Jersey Shore. Owned and managed by the National Park Service, people flock to the peninsula for its rich military history, abundance of gorgeous public beaches (including a “clothing optional” one at Gunnison Beach), miles of trails, and seasonal beachside free concert series. Pick any gorgeous day in the summer, and the bustle of activity from beach goers, wind surfers, and history buffs is endless until the gates shut at 10:00 PM.

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*The living room features built-in bookcases and hardwood floors.*

But not today. It's a cold, rainy day in the off-season. Gone are the crowds, the tourists, the fitness enthusiasts, and even most of the fishermen. One would expect a stark loneliness to settle over the Hook, but instead a blue-gray mist and subtle blanket of fog soften the shapes and forms of the diverse ecosystem that thrives here. Devoid of people, the maritime holly forest, freshwater ponds, and salt water marshes peacefully dominate. The cheerful pink of salt spray roses in Spring, the deep purple beach plums of August and the bright green marsh cord grass, so often contrasted by the vivid blues of sea and sky are instead replaced by a quiet, comforting, more monochromatic landscape. It is beautiful and moodily evocative.

Indeed, there is something very special about experiencing a common place in an uncommon way. Tom Jones, one of the first tenants of



*The view from the porch.*

Sandy Hook's very first vacation rental in an historic home along Officer's Row in Fort Hancock, knows this feeling well. A resident of California who grew up in Rumson, he moved in last summer while writing and directing a documentary about Asbury Park's former Upstage Club. He ended up staying through the winter. "I was like Omega Man. It was just me and herds of deer. It was really unique." But even the summer season afforded unique opportunities once the gate closed at night. "It was like having a private six mile stretch of beach with an extraordinary view of the New York skyline. I would take my dog up the battery and look at the lights twinkling."

Jones's experience was made possible by the foresight, determination, and unwavering commitment of Brian Samuelson of Atlantic Highlands, who leased and renovated the 5,715-square-foot dilapidated duplex at 21 Officer's Row and transformed it into a modern, attractive vacation rental. Built in 1939, the home is one of eighteen buildings, originally all lieutenants' or captains' quarters of the former Fort Hancock, that stand majestically along Officer's Row and afford stunning, unobstructed views of sunsets over Sandy Hook Bay.

The building's renovation was not easy and could easily be called a labor of love. A former Air Force officer, whose father was an Air Force master sergeant, Samuelson was attracted to the project primarily for the Hook's military history. "A friend saw an article in the *New York Times* that Fort Hancock buildings would be available to the public. I went to Sandy Hook as a child. And as a Boy Scout, I had camped here. I'd always had an interest in real estate so I came out with my dog and thought, 'what an awesome thing this could be.'"

Despite its unimposing geography, Sandy Hook, named "*Sant Hoek*" by the Dutch for "*spit of land*," has always played a key strategic role in the safety and defense of our country due to its location at the mouth of New York Harbor. Sandy Hook



**The kitchen.**

Lighthouse, built in 1764, is the nation's oldest surviving lighthouse. (Originally it stood five hundred feet from the shore but is now one and half miles from the Hook's tip due to beach "growth" from littoral drift. One can see it from the back windows of Samuelson's rental.) In fact, in 1776, the lighthouse withstood cannon fire from Benjamin Tupper of the Continental Army, who was attempting to destroy the light's ability to aid British ships to shore. The Hook was occupied by the British for the remainder of the Revolutionary War and it is said Sandy Hook remained in the hands of the British for longer than any other location. "I took my son across to the lighthouse and I told him, 'That's the last thing the British gave up when they left,'" comments Jones.

In 1806, landowner Richard Hartshorne transferred most of northern Sandy Hook to the Federal Government for military use, and over the next two centuries, the evolution of its installments reflected the current state of warfare. From a wooden fort during the War of 1812; to a Proving Ground, concrete gun batteries, and the establishment of Fort Hancock during World Wars I and II; and finally, as a home to

Nike surface to air nuclear missiles from 1954 until decommissioning in 1974. Today, an active station of the U.S. Coast Guard remains as well as the Marine Academy of Science and Technology (MAST) magnet high school.

The majority of Fort Hancock's yellow brick buildings, designed in the Colonial Revival Style, were built between 1898 and 1910. With a peak population of seven thousand soldiers during World War II, the "Army Town" at one point included a bakery, hospital, water pumping station, stables, jail, laundry and tailor shop, gymnasium (complete with a four-lane bowling alley), two fire houses, and four mess halls. The Works Progress Administration oversaw the construction of a three hundred-seat movie theater in 1933, a gas station in 1936, and five new officer's quarters in 1939.

Samuelson's rental is obviously one of the WPA projects and was built alongside the other homes on Officer's Row. An outstanding architectural landmark, the Row is unique in that unlike traditional Army posts, the fronts of the officers' houses do not face the Parade Ground, they instead face the Bay—a wonderful

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insight of the Fort's designers.

Unfortunately, since the Fort's aforementioned decommissioning in the 1970s, most of the Fort's buildings, while still standing, have fallen into great disrepair. To further degrade the situation, Sandy Hook and its buildings took a real hit during Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Previous efforts to redevelop Fort Hancock have been fraught with public controversy and economic obstacles. Yet despite the many challenges, the National Park Service recognizes that with the proper resources and intentions, these historical structures in a gorgeous location still have immense potential. As a result, the Fort Hancock 21st Century Federal Advisory Committee is currently accepting requests for proposals from parties interested in the long term leasing of any of the approximately thirty different structures, fourteen of which lie along Officer's Row like Samuelson's.



**A cannon in front of historic Officer's Row.**

Beginning the process nearly three years ago, Samuelson has by default become a lone pioneer and expert on leasing and renovation at the Fort. Deeply passionate about the future possibilities, he is also one of its greatest champions and desperately wants to attract other investors to Sandy Hook. "I'm trying to lead by example," he comments, "be the pathfinder. My goal is to save the Row."

As a result, he is very protective of the impression he gives of the process, though he does let certain frustrations escape. "When they restored the Presidio in San Francisco, it took an act of Congress and millions of dollars and I'm just one schmuck,"



**One of the four bedrooms featuring hardwood floors and a beachy, coastal theme.**

he jokes. "This is the most restricted piece of real estate on the Jersey Shore. But 99.9% of the officials have been great." In other words, Samuelson had to deal with a multitude of agencies and paperwork, renovate to historical standards, and essentially be willing to find answers to the unanswerable. Clearly, it required a unique personality, someone patient and organized enough to negotiate all the bureaucracy and red tape yet entrepreneurial enough to go ever-so-slightly rogue and simply forge ahead when necessary.

"Brian is my hero. He is out in front leading the charge," comments Jones. "I can't emphasize enough how important it is that he got this up and running while everyone's still figuring out their dance steps. He gave the program viability."

Physical restorations to the duplex included moving utilities up from the basement, gutting one kitchen, repairing the sewer system, replacing copper roofs, restoring brickwork, glazing windows, and a ton of sealing, tiling, scraping, spackling, and painting. While conservative estimates once put the price tag of restoration around \$880,000. per home, Samuelson won't divulge what he has invested. With a transferable lease that runs sixty-plus years, does he expect to make a profit on this venture? "It was cash intensive and risky,

but I expect not to get hurt," he says.

Meanwhile, the rental is now ready to face its first full year of availability and its first full summer season. Tastefully decorated in a beachy, coastal theme, colors of buttery cream with touches of vivid blue predominate. Gorgeous hardwood floors, built in bookcases, sunny side porches, and wartime posters on the walls all lend to the historic appeal. With four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a spacious dining room, and double couches, each side of the house sleeps ten, making it just right for gatherings of family and friends.

"My relatives came out here, and they loved it. Watching sunsets and drinking wine...," says Samuelson. "I may live out here myself one day. It took a lot of patience and perseverance but for someone to give you a free mansion on the Jersey Shore? That's a pretty good deal. That's priceless; that's worth everything." ♦

*For more information on the vacation rental, visit: [www.sandyhookrentals.com](http://www.sandyhookrentals.com).*

*For information on the leasing process for buildings at Fort Hancock, visit: [www.forthancock21.org](http://www.forthancock21.org).*

*To find out more about the photography of Jeff Smith, visit: [www.JeffSmithPhoto.net](http://www.JeffSmithPhoto.net).*

*For more information on the military history of Sandy Hook, visit: [www.nps.gov/gate/learn/historyculture/hancock.htm](http://www.nps.gov/gate/learn/historyculture/hancock.htm).*