

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SMYK PARK

By Nathan Merrill, Heritage Commission Chair

July 2022

Today's 11-acre Smyk Park was bequeathed to the Town of Stratham by Walter and Mary Smyk in their will. The Smyks lived here from 1993 until their deaths. The Town officially took ownership of the property on November 5, 2018.

Walter Smyk, a former fighter pilot and farmer, was the developer of The Meridian, the tallest building in San Diego at the time it was built. Mary was a native of Minnesota who also farmed alongside her husband during their time living in South Dakota. The Smyks moved here from San Diego after falling in love with New England during a cruise. The couple became an integral part of Stratham, with Walt serving on the Planning Board and Mary serving in leadership roles for many years with the Seacoast Federation of Republican Women. They were active congregants of the Stratham Community Church, and Walt did fine carpentry work for the church.

Today's Smyk Park once included a custom-built Colonial Revival style home sited on 24 acres that was envisioned by John and Marilyn Flynn, its original owners. The house was designed by Hampton architect William Maynes, who it is believed also designed The Exeter Banking Company building at 36 Portsmouth Avenue.

The Flynn house was built in 1972 by local craftsmen, led by Al Cote of Exeter. It was unusual for its time in that all the timbers and extensive wood paneling were handcrafted by skilled carpenters. No mass-produced millwork was used in the house. Mrs. Flynn sought highest quality reproduction lighting fixtures and hardware, based on styles found in Colonial Williamsburg houses.

Upon its completion, the Flynn residence was the highest-valued residential property in Stratham with an assessed value of \$80,000 on the property tax rolls in 1973.

The Flynnns were prominent in the community for decades, and Marilyn generously hosted countless Unity Club gatherings at their home through the 1970s and 1980s. (The Unity Club was a Stratham women's community service organization that was organized in 1920 as an outgrowth of a Red Cross group that did sewing to support WWI soldiers, and was active until the late 1980s.)

The Flynn house was historically significant not just for its striking architectural design, quality of construction, and beautiful landscaping, but also because of its prominent place in the late 20th century development of Stratham. The large, modern, executive home was built at the turning point in Stratham's history when the town was beginning to transition from a rural farming community into a burgeoning middle- and upper-middle-class bedroom community.

John Flynn was a founding partner in Bell & Flynn Incorporated, a significant local contracting business located up the street on Bunker Hill Avenue. The development of this highly visible, centrally located property was important in the early 1970s. The previous home and barn on this land (once a farm) burned in 1949 from a grass fire. Observant passersby and park visitors will notice evidence of the old farmstead site along the frontage of Portsmouth Avenue.

When the Smyks purchased the property in 1993, they remodeled the Flynn house, particularly the interior, giving it a notably more West Coast feel. They converted the former timber-framed family/game room into a master bedroom suite to mimic their San Diego tower's sleek, mirrored condominiums. Much of the original Colonial Revival interior design was lost in the Smyk renovations, although the fine paneling and wide pine floors secured with authentic wooden pegs survived.

The terms of the Smyks' will significantly limit what the Town can do with the property. Immediately following their vote to accept the Smyk gift, the Select Board voted to raze the house rather than maintain and heat the structure until a suitable new use could be identified. The Heritage Commission, members of the Flynn family, and numerous citizens protested, but the house was demolished on December 17, 2018 – just six weeks after the Town had taken ownership of the property.

For those who are interested in more detailed information, there is extensive documentation (including architectural plans and period photographs) about construction of the house, as well as its demise, at the Stratham Historical Society, and on the Stratham Heritage Commission's webpages at strathamnh.gov.

The Smyks recognized that many townsfolk appreciated the scenic beauty of this landscaped site. Without any direct heirs of their own, they generously chose to bequeath the property to our community. It is hoped that this green space will remain a restful spot in the heart of our town for generations to come.