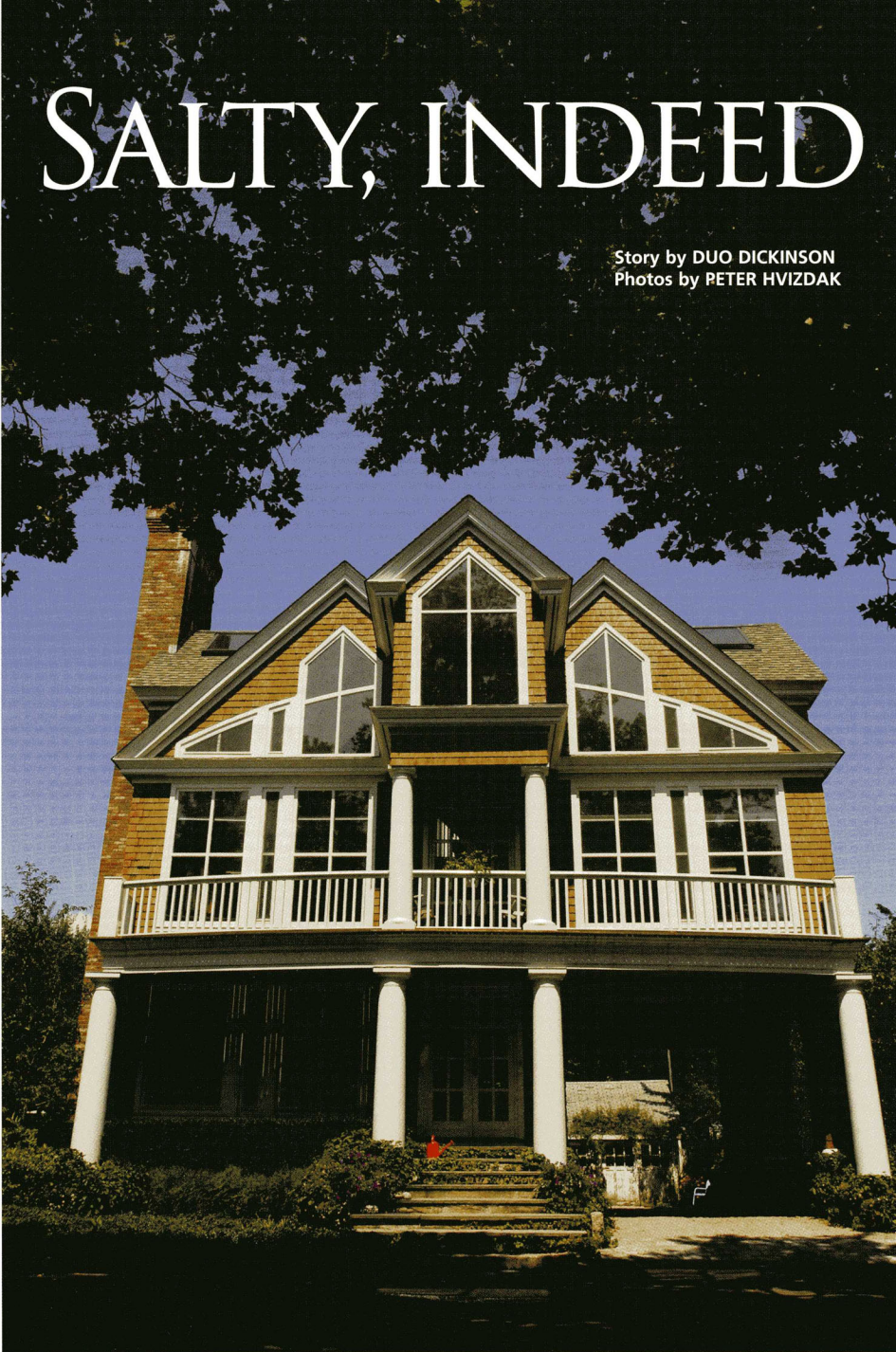


SALTY, INDEED

Story by **DUO DICKINSON**
Photos by **PETER HVIZDAK**



Above, the Pratt/Clark House.

Left, the front of the Vlock/Arbonies House.

Right, detail of ceramic tile on the granite wall in the backyard of the Ells House.



That's one way to describe this place called Stony Creek

STONY CREEK IS DIFFERENT. Its coastal perch along a picture-perfect harbor is postcard-worthy, but that is true of about 40 towns in Connecticut. Its population is eclectic, varying from artists to lobstermen, but that is true of any number of New England towns.

The place is unique because it has the moxie and sense of itself that any Greek city state would envy — even though it's merely a borough of Branford. However, native son “Unk” DaRos is the first selectman of all of Branford, proving that a “Creeker,” a lifetime resident of “The Creek,” can play well

with others.

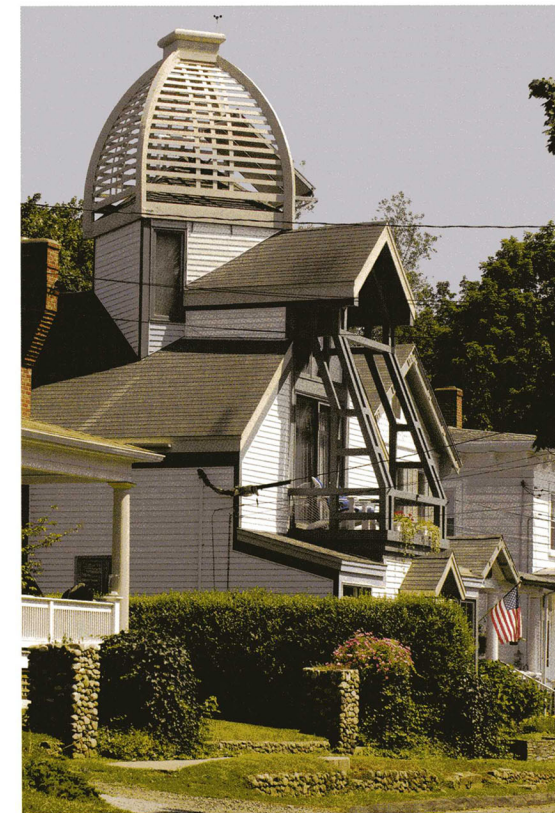
Why is this hamlet so delightfully pungent? For one thing Stony Creek is one of the few small towns in coastal Connecticut that literally has a rock-hard industrial base. Its famous century-old quarry produces a speckled pink granite that is found nowhere else on the planet. It also has a legitimate (though threatened) commercial fishing community. Trap rock is loaded to the west of the harbor off a train-accommodating pier onto huge barges any day of the week. These muscular enterprises have provided regular employment for scores of “Creeker” families for generations.

This economic base has had the usual post I-95 coastal Connecticut pressures. As transportation to and from the greater New York City area became easier, more people began to flood central Connecticut coastal towns because of their ambience and proximities to Boston and New York for weekenders and its central location for those working in-state. Of course, the investment opportunity captured by the phrase, “God only made so much coastal prop-



A fishing pole comes in handy when you live in this neighborhood. That's the Izenour House on the right.

Below, the first Simon/Bellamy house on Thimble Island Road.



erty," supercharges all shoreline property, including The Creek.

Those outsiders who fall in love with its giddy grittiness are willing to be patient (and creative) to find a path to live there. Sandra Vlock, who moved to Stony Creek 23 years ago with fellow architect Glenn Arbonies, tells a typical tale: "We were just married and our plan was to build a house. We moved here in the fall of 1986 and rented a house across from the town beach for

several years looking for any house or side yard to come up for sale. We discovered that real estate in Stony Creek was basically passed down and few properties — at that time — were put on the market. But the experience of waiting for any opportunity, revealed to us the uniqueness of village life. It was no longer the view that inspired us, but the uniqueness of the community."

Stony Creek's healthy ego not only comes from its history, but it's also

enhanced by its place in the geography of coastal Connecticut, where "fingers" of land, such as Guilford's Sachem's Head or Madison's Hammonasset Beach State Park, jut into Long Island Sound. But the ragged rock ridges that made the quarry rock so available also meant the coastal railroad had to be run tightly across Stony Creek's neck to the mainland, allowing but one small underpass passage for Thimble Island Road for anyone wishing to enter or

leave the village itself. Because of this single narrow aperture to a very special place, Stony Creek seems more like an Island with a bridge to it than a town on a peninsula, like Stonington.

As its access road's name suggests, the other extraordinary feature of Stony Creek is its halo of islands that are cast off its shores — the Thimble Islands — the name derived from the local thimbleberry, although the size and shape of a sewing thimble still makes sense when

you see them for the first time. The islands are a necklace of pink granite pearls — either 100 or over 300 of them, depending on the level of the tide at any given hour and day (and global warming's impact on sea level). Most are bare rock, but about 25 are inhabited (in fair weather) — from Exton's Reef that has a deck and little shed house on concrete piers, to Rogers Island with a 1902 Tudor Estate and outbuildings. With lush trees growing atop the pink

granite and names like Pot, Money, Potato and High, their romance perfectly complements the quirky edge of this special enclave.

Charlie Goetsch, a New Haven attorney who summered his entire life on High (aka Kidd — yes, that's Captain Kidd) Island where seven families own separate residences with common land — rhapsodizes on the magic of actually living on a summer idyll: "Of course it is a paradise for children, and what



Julie McClennan's house as seen from the water.

Author of this article, Duo Dickinson, a Madison architect, by the Ellys House.

happens is that when their parents get too old for the strenuous Island life, the children (now adults) step into the responsibility of running the cooperative. And since they have grown up together over all the summers of their lives, it is natural for them to continue the cooperative spirit that distinguishes the High Island experience."

Stony Creek has at its architectural core a sense of whimsy and playfulness that is seldom found in any town anywhere, let alone in tweedy New England. Because of this long-standing tradition of overtly proud homes (and its proximity to Yale's School of Architecture), over the years, a variety of architects have decided to live in and around Stony Creek. While contemporary architects have recently built expressive buildings to live in, there are also many remarkable antique homes that are virtually iconic in stature.

As with any New England town, the sense of "us" and "them" is pervasive between newcomers and old-tim-

ers. Typically, newcomers are deemed "new" for at least 30 or 40 years before they've had a chance to "settle in" and evolve into "Creekers."

Fourteen-year-resident Julie McClennan opines, "I love it here, not only because it is so incredibly beautiful with the picturesque Thimble Islands hugging its shoreline, but also because it is such a wonderful community, filled with interesting people — some who have been here for multiple generations and others, like myself, who are relative newcomers — but all united in their love of this place."

For outsiders (and perhaps for insiders as well), being a "Creeker" is virtually a synonym for "Swamp Yankee." Legend has it that the term "Swamp Yankee" derives from those hard-bitten, generally seafaring folk who were relegated to the lowlands on the coast — the place where storm and tide wreak havoc on day-to-day life. These ragged coastal lowlands were viewed as dangerous places, only suitable for

the hardy citizens who weren't committed to farming. Perhaps it's because Stony Creek was the first New Haven-area coastal community settled in the late 18th century that it lays a special claim to the crusty ethic of its resourceful indigenous people.

The irony is that all through New England, the rough-and-tumble shoreline habitat of the "Swamp Yankee" has in some areas been threatened by the transmogrifying impact of a growing boomer/yuppie moneyed class. Such is the case with Stony Creek, where many of its part-time residents have extraordinary wealth in comparison to those who have lived off of the harvesting of granite and lobsters for generations.

But The Creek has always had wealthy summer residents, and they built fantastic residences — mostly around the Gilded Age of the late 1800s and early 20th century.

These delightful antiques are set like small jewels amid the ragged landscape, compact village center and newer

homes, all arrayed with the Thimbles in the background. The physical ambience of Stony Creek perfectly complements its zesty social image.

New and old, natural and built, commerce and culture all seem to have reached a simmering synergy here, in full view of smiling tourists day-tripping for a boat tour of the islands.

This sense of eclectic equilibrium is best appreciated in the Willoughby Wallace Library — renovated a few years ago by a proud borough and including a privately created museum dedicated to the history, culture and landscape of Stony Creek and all things Creeker. Its like is not often found in a hamlet of 2,500 — and manifests the pride and enthusiasm of the residents.

Whether it's the heiress whose spent several tens of millions of dollars buying about a half-dozen Thimbles in the last decade, or the retired couple wanting to walk to a small New England downtown, or a lobsterman who works his traps year-round, the depth of passion for Stony Creek is rare in a world

of bedroom communities and corporate transfers. The stories of these devoted lovers of The Creek are perhaps best told by the proud homes which illustrate this article.

THE PRATT HOUSE (AKA THE CLARK HOUSE OR VILLA VISTA)

This house of many names is on the National Register of Historic Places. Designed by Henry Austin and built in 1878 by William Judson Clark who was an inventor and manufacturer of machinery that produced bolts, nuts, washers and screws, it is one of the liveliest homes you can imagine. It was a summer house while its owner held a full-time job, but Clark moved there full time once he retired, a recurring pattern in The Creek. His daughter, Rosalyn Pratt, a respected artist, came to live there full time as well, and then her daughter, Olive, kept the home in the family until after death in 1956.

The house has changed little since it was built. Its tower and porches are the height of Victorian-striving exu-

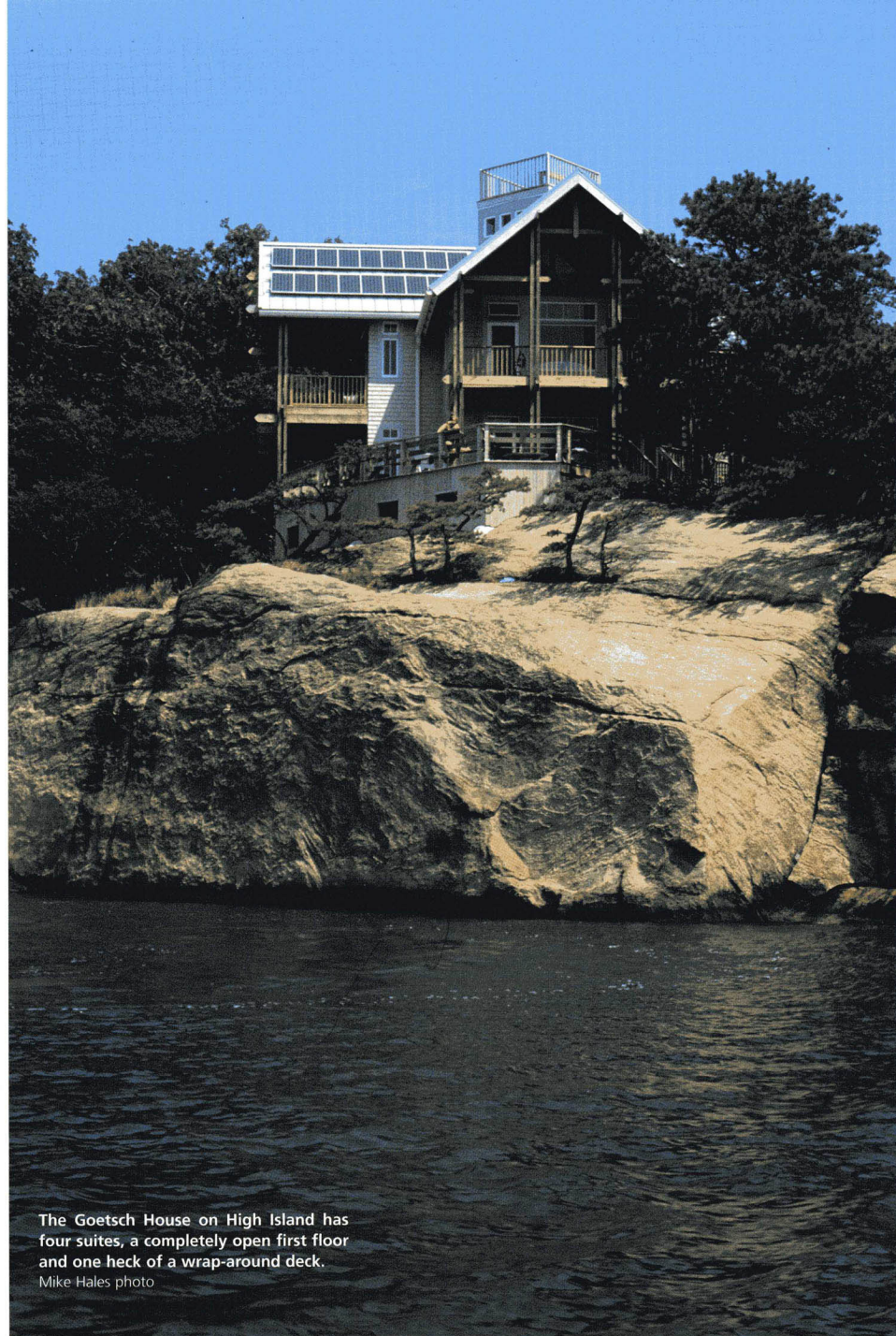
berance, and its hilltop setting, close by other less dramatic hillside homes, make it a vibrant focal point for tourists and residents alike.

THE ELLS HOUSE

Ells House was built in 1883 as Lewis Cottage. In 1912, it was moved from the lot across the street to its present location — hopping over to a full-on coastal site. A stick-style Victorian (much akin to the Pratt House) with big porches and a tower, it is set off from Thimble Island Road and has a commanding presence.

Now owned by attorney Ted Ells, it has been in the same family since it was built. Attorney Ells' grandmother willed it to his mother who willed it to him — and it has remained virtually unchanged since it was built — except, thankfully, for the modernization of the kitchen.

It was used as a summer home until five years ago when Ted Ells could no longer resist the pull of The Creek and he relocated his law practice from Manhattan and became a full-time resident.



The Goetsch House on High Island has four suites, a completely open first floor and one heck of a wrap-around deck.

Mike Hales photo

SIMON/BELLAMY HOUSE I

When architect Mark Simon and lawyer Penny Bellamy moved to Stony Creek almost 30 years ago, they bought a classic Creeker residence — small, one-story gable-roofed home — held together by a little bit of this and a little bit of that, which leaked air and water without much resistance, and had little rooms and sad windows.

But the house faced south and the Ells House — those twin inspirations made a hybrid of old/new that is a local landmark. Architect Simon added a second floor and mimicked its stick-style porches in a new central tower — capped a direct copy of the Ells House cupola in lattice, with solar panels nestled into the open lattice work — pretty edgy for 1980, and a delight to the streetscape ever since it was built.

MCLENNAN/BROOM HOUSE

Julie McCleNNan moved to Stony Creek 14 years ago. As she found it, the home she and her ex-husband Bruce bought was a 1950s remodeling of a boathouse originally owned by the Hall family, summer residents. The boathouse was built right after the 1938 hurricane wiped many sites clean of the simple homes that huddled close to the coast.

They transformed a summer house into a lovely year-round residence, but did not create a McMansion typical of the era. Instead, they created an intricate renovation that opened up water-views and provided a real kitchen and functional laundry. The phased renovation ultimately expanded the home by 200 square feet, but made its plumbing, heating and exterior skin good to go for another generation or two of New Creakers. The home now harbors a new family: Julie and her husband, Anthony Broom.

THE GOETSCH HOUSE

Built 10 years ago on High Island, a 105-year-old cooperative owned by The Buccaneers Co., this house follows the exact footprint of an original predecessor that was beyond salvage. Set on a 30-foot granite cliff this four-suite house has a common first floor and a wrap-around deck, with a cupola that

commands what is reputed to be the highest perch in all the Thimbles. The completely open first floor and deck, plus second floor covered porches, provide ample space for the extended families and friends of fourth-generation owners, brothers Charlie and Jamie Goetsch.

Like all Thimble Island residences, rainwater is gathered for use, and since only about half a dozen island homes have power from the shore, electricity comes from solar panels that juice up batteries. The island has a shared cove, dock, sandy beach (sand imported a few decades ago), and a clay tennis court (again a relic of an earlier era).

VLOCK/ARBONIES HOUSE

When two architects go looking for a house, you would assume the built result might be a bit too “distinctive” for the neighborhood. But these two principals of Vlock King Arbonies Architects (Sandra Vlock and Glenn Arbonies) had lived in the town as renters for three years before finding a building that used to serve as quarry worker housing. Sandra says, “Our corner was the starting point for the Memorial Day Parade, town celebrations, drum corps and road race.”

The complete rebuild of the existing structure created a nest for both a new family and a fledgling design firm. As kids and the client list grew, the office migrated (but only a few miles away in Branford). The home’s lively lines of trim and windowscaping and familiar shingle siding and granite appurtenances made the home fit in by being unique — just like Stony Creek on the Connecticut Coast.

IZENOUR HOUSE

Steve Izenour was a partner at the vaunted Pennsylvania firm of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown; but like many architects, he had a family who wanted some design work. His father, George Izenour, the world-famous theatrical architectural designer and historian at Yale, had a coastal site in Stony Creek and called his son 30 years ago. Both men have since passed on (Steve at a tragically young age) but their house remains.

What resulted was a rare product of federal coastal regulations, a father’s passion for sound and theater and a gifted architect’s vision. First, a Stony Creek granite plinth/base elevated the house to meet the federal regulations. Second, the water-facing living space on the second floor was an exquisite space for view, but also sound — father Izenour wanted a world-class stereo space — and got it. Third, Steve Izenour rode the whimsy of the age and the town to apply overtly nautical allusions to his creation (a two-story window array in the form of a ship’s wheel, wonderfully symbolic/graphic lattice columns) on a perfect gable house shape.

Set at the end of Thimble Island Road, it remains a happily proud icon of an equally self-aware community. ☘

Madison architect Duo Dickinson is the author of “The House You Build,” and is the contributing writer in residential design for Money magazine. For more, go to www.duodickinson.com.



Woodwork on a porch in the neighborhood of Thimble Island, Prospect and Flying Point roads.