



Timelines of
Point
Pleasant
History

Eugene O'Neill in Point Pleasant

A Winter of Discontent

The dramatist's unhappy stay in Point Pleasant inspired him to write a play. The community's reputation is better off because it was destroyed.



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Before he became America's preeminent playwright, Eugene O'Neill spent one winter, from November 1918 to May 1919 writing and brooding in Point Pleasant.

Seeking peace and solitude for his work, as well as a rent-free place to live, O'Neill and his second wife Agnes Boulton moved into what they always called the Old House, her family home on Herbertsville Road. It was a rambling two-story structure on the northwest corner of Hall Avenue and Herbertsville Road. The house was directly across Herbertsville from the rear of where the Playdrome bowling alley now stands. Built in 1863, it had just been wired for electricity the previous spring. A creaky windmill supplied water. Heat came from a series of individual coal stoves that required daily stoking and cleaning. Twenty-seven windows and northeast winds coming off the nearby Manasquan River insured lots of cold, drafty winter days.

The area was known as West Point Pleasant and at that time was still quiet enough so the approach of a motor car was noticed. There was an attractive grove of small pine trees next to the Old House between it and the river. Also near the river and a couple of blocks away Dr. Frank Denison had just founded Point Pleasant Hospital by putting aside four upstairs beds in his home for patients. The Point Pleasant Canal was under construction. The long-established West Point Pleasant Hotel (now Jilly's Gin Mill) was nearby.

O'Neill loved the sea and the coastline. In his early youth he had been a seaman on sail and steam ships. More recently he had lived and worked in Provincetown, Massachusetts. This year he chose to live in Point Pleasant. He had a play in rehearsal in New York and when his presence was required he could get to the city by train in two hours. However, the dramatist quickly discovered the Point Pleasant area oceanfront did not enchant him as Cape Cod had.

"There was nothing in that flat New Jersey landscape that he could identify with any part of his own personality," Agnes wrote in her memoirs *Part of a Long Story*. "Even the ocean appeared uninteresting to him, with its waves breaking monotonously on the sand close to the old wooden boardwalk, the decrepit summer hotels and the flimsy summer cottages, and before long he stopped walking down there." While O'Neill could be a notable drinker, he never went into a local bar. He seldom entered a store.

Although the O'Neills came here to Point Pleasant largely to get away from people, he nearly wound up living with a large group of in-laws. Unbeknownst to Agnes, her parents had decided to move back into the Old House for the winter, along with three sisters, a grandmother, three cats and a dog. Obviously this would not be an ideal living situation for creative writing. When Agnes realized the mix-up, she convinced her family to rent a small oceanfront cottage in Point Pleasant Beach and did not tell O'Neill about their presence just a few miles away. Agnes' father took a job at the local Hardware store to pay the rent. When the 30-year-old playwright finally found out his in-laws were living nearby and some of them whom he had not yet met came to call, he hid in the closet.

A typical day in Point Pleasant for the man who was destined to win four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize consisted of morning work on new plays including *Chris Christopherson* and *The Straw*, checking the mails to monitor the progress of rehearsals for *The Moon of the Caribees* in New York, long walks along the sand roads with and without Agnes, and reading at night. O'Neill picked the dining room of the Old House to write in. He set up his manuscripts and notes on a large table in front of the fireplace. He complained that the maintenance needed on the many coal stoves, the noise of the windmill and the family cat distracted him. Work did not go smoothly and he spent New Years Eve, 1918 reading magazines and drinking heavily.

No rapport developed between Eugene O'Neill and the good citizens of Point Pleasant. He came into a situation in which his wife's family, although having owned the Old House for 26 years, had made few local friends. The Boultons never attempted a social life with what they called "the natives" and the locals in turn considered the Boultons city people and "eccentric artists," according to O'Neill biographer Crosswell Bowen in *The Curse of the Misbegotten*. The playwright's long solitary walks and his habit of getting exercise by bouncing a tennis ball against the side of an old barn for many hours at a time made him seem strange.

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Agnes later wrote of one neighbor telling her, "Those walks — those long walks! It ain't natural, a man walking like that. I thought you had to go along to take care of him. I've passed him looking so quiet, you could tell he wasn't drinking, so I calculated he must of been taking drugs." He was not.

One morning O'Neill discovered their dog with its throat slashed from ear to ear on the their front lawn. The mystery of the dog's killing was never solved.

On a warm day in December the O'Neills walked down a sand road he had not seen before and came across a run down house. The fence was down. The yard was strewn with trash, including old stoves, broken chairs and pots and pans. Dirty but health-looking babies were in the yard. A red-faced man was stretched on a hammock. A woman was hanging quilts on a line. And there were three young girls, all blond, beautiful and pregnant, sitting or walking in the yard.

The playwright was fascinated. He asked Agnes who they were and where they came from. She explained they just showed up one day and took over an abandoned house. The mother took in washing occasionally. The man did nothing but sit and drink cheap whiskey. There had been seven daughters, "all fresh-faced, innocent-looking,

healthy and blond — but each girl in turn became pregnant, usually having to leave school for this reason. No one knew how this happened, for they talked to no one, this family," Agnes explained. After the babies joined the group, the girls just seemed to vanish.

After supper that night the dramatist was even more silent than usual. Later in the evening he told Agnes "I've thought of a one-act play — a peach! I'm going to outline it now and go ahead with it tomorrow." He finished within a few days and called it Honor Among the Bradleys. The Point Pleasant area lost its chance for literary immortality (no doubt of an undesirable type) when O'Neill, after consulting drama critic George Jean Nathan, a friend, tore up the play. Nathan was amused by the characters, but he and O'Neill concluded that, in O'Neill's words, it was a "very false and feeble piece of work." Honor Among the Bradleys remains listed as one of the dramatist's lost plays.

Eugene O'Neill never again lived in Point Pleasant following the that winter of 1918-19. He and Agnes Boulton were divorced in 1929. Agnes lived for several many more years in the Old House, raising their two children, Shane, who was conceived during the couple's winter here, and Oona, who would go on to international notoriety. Agnes married a Hollywood producer and continued her own writing career. She returned to the Old House for some of her final

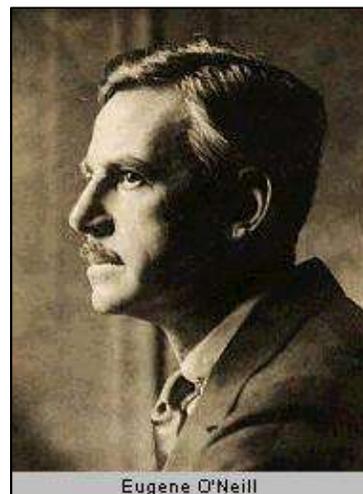
years in the 1950s and, according to an account by one relative, kept ninety pet cats and a swimming pool full of cat food at the Herbertsville Road home.

Shane attended St. Peter's School in Point Pleasant Beach before going to boarding school. During parts of his troubled adult life, he lived in the Old House. Estranged from his father, Shane worked at menial jobs, including on local fishing boats, and was often poverty stricken. With a 1948 conviction for heroin addiction on his record and the local reputation of the Boulton and O'Neill families, he was warily watched by the local population as he, like his father, took solitary walks.

Daughter Oona, beautiful and intelligent, had a relationship with J.D. Salinger, when she was a teenager before the author was well known. On at least one occasion Salinger traveled to Point Pleasant to visit. In 1943, at age 18, Oona, the daughter of America's greatest playwright married Charlie Chaplin, the cinema's most celebrated comedian - director. Although she was one-third his age when she wed, they remained happily married until his death 34 years later. O'Neill disapproved of the marriage, cutting off contact with Oona.

O'Neill died in 1953. His will specifically excluded Shane, Oona and their children, present and future. The Old House was demolished early this decade and two modern homes have replaced it.

— By Jeff Heim



Eugene O'Neill

For Additional Reading:

Agnes Boulton's account of the first years of her marriage to Eugene O'Neill, *Part of a Long Story*, contains detailed and highly readable accounts of O'Neill's days in Point Pleasant. Crosswell Bowen's *The Curse of the Misbegotten* was written with the help of son Shane and brings his local perspective the forefront. The recently published biography of Oona O'Neill Chaplin, *Oona, Living in the Shadows*, (Warner Books) contains a wealth of information on the Boultons in Point Pleasant.

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