



Timelines of  
Point  
Pleasant  
History

# Oona O'Neill Chaplin



## Living In The Shadows of Her Father and Husband

A Point Pleasant hometown girl became world famous as Eugene O'Neill's daughter and Charlie Chaplin's wife. After Hollywood and Europe, she still loved Point Pleasant.

The daughter of one genius and the wife of another, Oona O'Neill Chaplin was Point Pleasant's most famous citizen. Many notables have vacationed in the Point Pleasant area or lived here for short periods of time. But Oona called the place home. Even after she moved to the splendor of Hollywood, and later into exile in Switzerland, she continued to return to her childhood residence on Herbertsville Road. In her mature years she spoke warmly of her time here. When she described leaving she made it sound like expulsion from Paradise, according to one friend.

Oona O'Neill (1925-1991) was the only daughter of Eugene O'Neill, America's preeminent playwright, and Agnes Boulton, a writer whose family was sometime residents of Point Pleasant. At the age of 18 Oona married Charlie Chaplin, who is still considered to be the cinema's most celebrated comedian-director. The marriage resulted in her permanent estrangement from her father, but she and Charlie remained devoted to each other until his 1977 death. They had nine children.

The material for this article, whose focus is deliberately parochial, comes mainly from the new biography Oona, Living in the Shadows by Jane Scovell, published by Warner Books. It depicts the life of this remarkable woman who was overshadowed by her father and husband.

The focus of Oona's local life was the Boulton home at northwest corner of Herbertsville Road and Hall Avenue, directly behind the current Playdrome bowling alley. Her maternal grandparents had purchased the rambling two story house in 1892 when it was already 30 years old. There is evidence that it had been moved to the corner location from a previous spot. The family always called it the Old House. The grandfather, Teddy Boulton, was an artist and had a studio in an adjacent building, near a grove of pines that sloped gently toward the Manasquan River.

In the winter of 1918-19 Eugene and Agnes lived in the Old House because of the free rent and the fact that O'Neill could take the train to New York City where one of his plays was in rehearsal. The soon-to-be-regarded great playwright hated this area. A lover of the sea and beaches in general, and especially of Cape Cod, he found Point Pleasant Beach's shoreline dull and uninspiring and the closed old hotels and boardwalk depressing. While here O'Neill worked on the play Chris Christopherson. Despite a propensity for going on drinking binges, he remained sober the entire time, never going into a local bar. Also during his stay O'Neill fathered son Shane who would lead a troubled adult life and become a local character in the 1950s.

There was often tension between the full time residents and those in the Old House. Many citizens regarded these artistic types with distrust. Agnes' dog was killed and dumped on her lawn. O'Neill wrote a one act play, Honor Among the Bradleys, inspired by a poor lower class family that experienced many pregnancies, which he observed living in squalor in West Point Pleasant. It is believed to have been highly uncomplimentary of the locals, but no copy survives. In May the O'Neills left Point Pleasant and Eugene would never return.



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Shane O'Neill was born in 1919, Oona six years later. When the children were eight and two Eugene and Agnes were divorced with the mother and children settling in Point Pleasant. Oona and Shane received minimal paternal attention from then on, as Eugene subordinated his duties as father to the demands of his writing.

Oona attended the Ocean Road School before going to boarding school. Although her father was already famous, one classmate recently recalled that she was not considered a celebrity. The classmate remembers being more impressed that another student's father was the engineer in charge of building the Upper Manasquan River bridge.

Oona grew up to be beautiful, charming and intelligent. She attended boarding school in New York City, becoming a socialite with many boyfriends. By her senior year she was one of the city's most sought after debutantes and a regular on the café society circuit. Her name appeared in the society pages. Her father, a Nobel Laureate by now, disapproved, believing she was trading on his fame. "...All the publicity you have had is the wrong kind, unless your ambition is to be a second-rate movie actress of the floozie variety..." he wrote her. Although Oona always wanted a close relationship with her father, she rarely saw him while growing up. Her last in-person contact with him was during a visit to his west coast home in 1941, while she was still a high school student. For the rest of Eugene's life she tried unsuccessfully to reestablish contact. O'Neill's will specifically disinherited her, Shane and all their children.

Soon after returning to Point Pleasant from that last trip to her father, she was introduced the aspiring writer J. D. Salinger. Salinger was "crazy about" Oona, according to the woman who introduced them. Salinger visited her at least once in Point Pleasant. But it was a rocky relationship with Salinger telling a friend, "Little Oona's hopelessly in love with little Oona." But apparently the author was fixated upon her. When she married Chaplin two years later, Salinger sent her a scathing, scatological letter describing in detail his version of the Chaplins' wedding night.

Turning down an opportunity to attend Vassar, Oona traveled to Hollywood, intent upon becoming an actress. She immediately began receiving invitations from studios, modeling agencies and agents. Then they suddenly stopped. It appears Eugene used his influence to thwart his daughter's career. Oona never did become a successful actress. However, she did manage to meet numerous Hollywood luminaries, including the reigning genius of the cinema, Charlie Chaplin. It was on May 14, 1943, Oona's eighteenth birthday and when Chaplin was 54, the couple announced their engagement. She told her mother, "This is going to be the love of my life," and she was right.

The marriage was the talk of the nation. Life Magazine published a full page photograph. Back in Point Pleasant, The Leader article misspelled the bride's first and last names and contained a typo in the headline which made it look like Chaplin had wed several Point Pleasant females:

Former Local Girls [sic] Weds Charlie Chaplin

Radio and newspapers reported the news on the marriage of Miss Ona O'Neil [sic], 18-year-old daughter of Playwright Eugene and Agnes Boulton O'Neil, to Charlie Chaplin, Wednesday morning. The marriage, according to reports, was performed Tuesday. Mrs. Chaplin, who is the fourth wife of the screen comedian, formerly resided in Point Pleasant Borough and attended local schools. She was recently voted the Glamor Girl of 1943.

Across America there was speculation that Oona had married for money or that she was looking for a father figure. Chaplin's well known attraction to very young women was noted. Around this time he was acquitted of violating the Mann Act, but lost a related paternity suit in 1944, even though blood test evidence was in his favor. Despite the publicity that always accompanied the couple, they got along splendidly for the next 34 years. Friends said that even decades later the two would chatter away like adolescents with crushes on each other. Oona settled into Charlie's Hollywood mansion and helped him host parties where the intellectual and movie elite gathered. Unfortunately, did not become Chaplin's muse, as the great filmmaker's days of major creativity were already behind him.

As the cold war intensified, Chaplin's reputation changed. A public that already knew about his prodigal private life before his final marriage began to hear about his alleged leftist political leanings. During a trip to Europe in the early 1950s Chaplin, a British citizen, was accused of Communist sympathies and denied reentry into the United States. The family took up residence in Switzerland, which would become their permanent home. Oona played a key roll in saving the Chaplin fortune, but it was not until 1967 that she spoke about it. In a conversation with Point Pleasant resident George Beecroft, Jr. she described how, with her husband barred, she returned to the United States, gathered up the Chaplin assets, turned them all into thousand dollar bills, had them sewed into a mink coat and left for Switzerland. The veracity of this adventure while she as not yet 30 can not be verified, but it is certain that she played a key roll in saving the Chaplin fortune.

While Oona was living in luxurious exile in Switzerland, her mother Agnes and brother Shane were having problems. Although obviously highly intelligent and sensitive, Shane could not keep even a menial job like working on the local fishing boats. He became disheveled, abused drugs, was arrested several times and hospitalized for drug addiction. He divided his time between Point Pleasant and New York City. Living in the Old House on Herbertsville Road, Agnes became somewhat reclusive with people but played host for about one hundred cats. She frequented the Idle Hour bar and Stanwall Inn. Once she invited the Idle Hour's Chinese kitchen employees over. The indigent, non-English speaking workers overran the house for several weeks, until Agnes had to summon police Chief George Beecroft, Sr. to evict them.

Oona tried to help by sending money and making long distance phone calls. But when Chief Beecroft notified her that the situation with her mother had become critical, Oona returned to the United States in 1967 for the first time in 15 years, going directly to Point Pleasant. Agnes was hospitalized and the Old House was fumigated, twice. A year later, Agnes died. Oona did not return for the funeral. The Beecrofts had become friends with Agnes and Oona and were put in charge disposing of many of Agnes' possessions. Defying his father's directions, George Jr. saved for posterity many handfuls of records from a backyard bonfire. Chief Beecroft acquired the Old House, which was demolished in the early 1990s.

Charlie Chaplin returned to the United States in triumph in 1972 to receive a special achievement Oscar award. He died in 1977, with Oona caring for him in his years of failing health. In the 14 remaining years of her life, Oona battled drunkenness, as her father and brother had done before her. This woman who married a man 36 years her senior was often seen in the company of much younger men, including rock star David Bowie.

The last known time Oona visited Point Pleasant was on a spring Sunday morning, probably in the early 1980s. The doorbell rang at the Old House, now the Beecroft home. The caller told George Jr. said "Hi, remember me? I'm Oona Chaplin, my family used to live here. I hope I'm not disturbing you but I'd like to take a look around. I was hoping to make a video." She taped the outside of the home, but declined an invitation to go inside -- "Too many memories." The brief visit ended and her car drove off.

— **By Jeff Heim**

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## For Additional Information

**Jane Scovelle's *Oona, Living in the Shadows*, published in 1998 by Warner Books gives a comprehensive and sympathetic account of the life of Oona O'Neill Chaplin. 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. Also see the Point Pleasant Historical Society's article on Eugene O'Neill.**