

Port of Call

Once the purview of retired mariners, today the nation's oldest retirement community accepts any to whom the seaside beckons.

By Bryan A. Oesterreich

On a sunny but blustery day, my wife, Christine, and I set out to visit a retirement home in Sea Level. She was less than enthusiastic. “You’ve got 20 years before you retire,” she said. I told her the place was something — something special.

Travelers driving east along U.S. Highway 70 in Carteret County, perhaps on their way to the Cedar Island Ferry, may spot the unobtrusive signage for the retirement community, 26 miles east of Beaufort — but only if they’re paying attention. And unless they take a right turn off the causeway bridge, they’ll never realize how close they came to visiting the oldest retirement home in the nation.

In 1801, Revolutionary War hero Captain Robert Richard Randall, with help from a friend, Alexander Hamilton, drafted a will that would create, maintain, and sustain a retirement home for mariners and their wives. A trust was created, the nation’s oldest secular trust, and Randall’s 21-acre property in lower Manhattan — mansion and farmland — provided the necessary funding. Randall died four days after signing his will. Over the next 20 years, escalating real-estate prices in Manhattan forced the trust to seek an alternative site for the home — they had been using Randall’s mansion. The Manhattan property was sold, and the Trust bought a 130-acre farm on Staten Island, after legal issues with the will were resolved.

Construction of the “new” Sailor’s Snug Harbor was completed in 1833. Thirty-seven retired mariners attended the ribbon cutting and took up residence in the facility designed for 200. Over the years, buildings were added. By 1900, more than 1,000 retired sailors and their wives called Snug Harbor home port.

By 1970, however, financial losses from the Great Depression, World War II, and the ever-increasing expense of maintaining the property’s buildings to more stringent building codes forced the trustees to find an alternative site for the retirement community. The search reached from Virginia to Florida. Charleston became the top-seeded location. Then, Snug Harbor board member and Sea Level native Dan Taylor suggested the committee look at some property near a hospital he had recently built in the small Down East village of Sea Level. They did, and their search ended. New York City may have been the birthplace of Sailor’s Snug Harbor, but the Tar Heel state has had the privilege of keeping the legacy alive.

The “Down East” Sailor’s Snug Harbor Retirement Home opened its doors in 1976. In June of that year, 105 seamen, their wives, and their medical teams “set sail” from Staten Island to a new port-of-call, Sea Level.

Once by sea

Snug Harbor is set within the sprawling coastal plains topography — towering pines, marsh grasses, oaks — and water. A low-rise causeway bridge prefaces the entrance and gives an overview of the natural beauty still found in Eastern North Carolina.

Snug Harbor's architecture — understated luxury — would be as at home in Wilmington's Landfall as it is in Sea Level. Three slate-roofed wings sprawl out from a central hub. Windows are abundant — as are azaleas and crepe myrtles — and allow an unobstructed view of Nelson's Bay. Exterior colors are soft and complement the natural beauty surrounding the complex.

When entering the facility, a rich sense of maritime history reaches out from every nook and cranny. Large, glass-enclosed ship models are everywhere. There are commercial freighters and tall ships, windjammers and tankers. And they're correct down to every windlass, halyard, and spar.

Displayed along the walls of the extravagantly commodious "living room" — with its four-sided, free-standing fireplace (one of 14) and Steinway grand — is one of the largest collections of original maritime art in the nation.

From the living room, where weekly Saturday evening "Happy Hours" find residents sharing tales of past, present, and future voyages, brick and wood-trimmed walls provide comforting warmth while approaching the main dining area. The dining room, with its soaring beamed ceiling and meticulously crafted ship models, is a fitting setting for the carefully chosen, but wonderfully abundant meals set forth three times daily.

Shannon Miller, marketing director, says a great deal of time and effort is given to the dietary requirements of residents. "These days, everyone has certain needs — and we do our best to meet them." She also says that while serving size has never been an issue, some residents have been spotted in the main kitchen late at night "sampling a bit of ice cream."

Miller says the term "retirement home" may not be an accurate representation of life at Snug Harbor. "Our residents get involved in so many activities, it might be more likened to a cruise than a home for retirees."

"Awfully glad"

William and Edna Singleton echo that sentiment. "Living here is like being on a cruise that never ends," says Singleton. He and his wife, Edna, moved into Snug Harbor in March 2002. And, they're "awfully glad" they did.

Singleton, who spent five years in the Army and then worked at Cherry Point Naval Air Station supervising helicopter and Harrier jet maintenance, says the feeling he gets is one of family. "We've met just about everyone here there is to meet, and we're a very active and close-knit group. The mariners and landlubbers mix very well."

His wife, a retired nurse, is also having a wonderful time with her new friends. “We checked all around for a place to retire, before our children took it upon themselves to do it for us, and this was, without question, our first choice,” she says. “People here are active and social. We have but one rule, and that’s no proselytizing at happy hour!” Activities at Snug Harbor include a varied array of entertainment — bi-weekly bingo, surfing the net, no-limit poker, films, exercise classes, library offerings, pocket billiards, and dances.

But what sets Snug Harbor apart is the entertainment available nearby. Residents frequently take advantage of continuing education courses at Carteret Community College. They can also embark on weekly shopping trips to nearby historic Beaufort and Morehead City in the comfort of two airport shuttle-style vans. “Residents enjoy our on-campus social environment, but they also like to get out and enjoy our delightful neighboring communities,” says Miller.

After a day of browsing through the art galleries and antique shops of Beaufort, residents can return to home port. When they disembark from their Beaufort shopping trips, they can walk the grounds, cross over the canal on the footbridge, and have their afternoon tea while viewing sunsets over languid Nelson’s Bay. Herons, egrets, and osprey provide accompaniment.

While social activities attract many single residents to Snug Harbor, others are also drawn by the available living arrangements for married couples — the Singletons, for example. “When we were looking for a place to live, very few offered a living space like we have here,” says Singleton. “We brought all our own furnishings — including our art. It helps us feel like we’re home.” Their one-bedroom suite looks very much like an upscale condo with all the trimmings.

Setting priorities

Setting, activities, and aesthetics all contribute to the comfort level of residents, but it’s the people of Snug Harbor that close the deal for discriminate residents. Marketing Director Miller says they are very fortunate to have assembled such a dedicated and caring staff. “Our industry has a very high turnover rate — between 50 and 80 percent. Here, we average only 10 percent. And the resident-to-staff ratio is one-to-one.” Health care is a priority for most people considering a retirement home, so staff continuity allows for an added sense of comfort.

Comfort and health care top the list of priorities at Snug Harbor. Since the population ranges in ages from 46 to 101 (Ms. Minnie Davis is the most senior resident), three levels of accommodations are available: independent living, assisted living, and skilled nursing care. Medical staff includes RNs and CNAs; Dr. Roy Genz and Dr. Mark Worthen provide additional medical services.

Since its inception, Sailor's Snug Harbor has provided a "home port" for retired mariners and their wives — exclusively. During the late 1990s, however, a decreasing need for accommodations caused a shift in policy. Today, one not need have a background in naval maneuvers to gain a boarding pass. One need only seek the comforting view of bordering Nelson's Bay, the history of nearby Beaufort, and the fellowship of active, interesting retirees to become a "crew member." Captain Robert Richard Randall would be proud.

When Christine and I pulled into our driveway at home, I shut the engine off and looked at her. She smiled and said, "How long did you say it was until we retire?"

Bryan A. Oesterreich teaches English at Beaufort County Community College and East Carolina University.