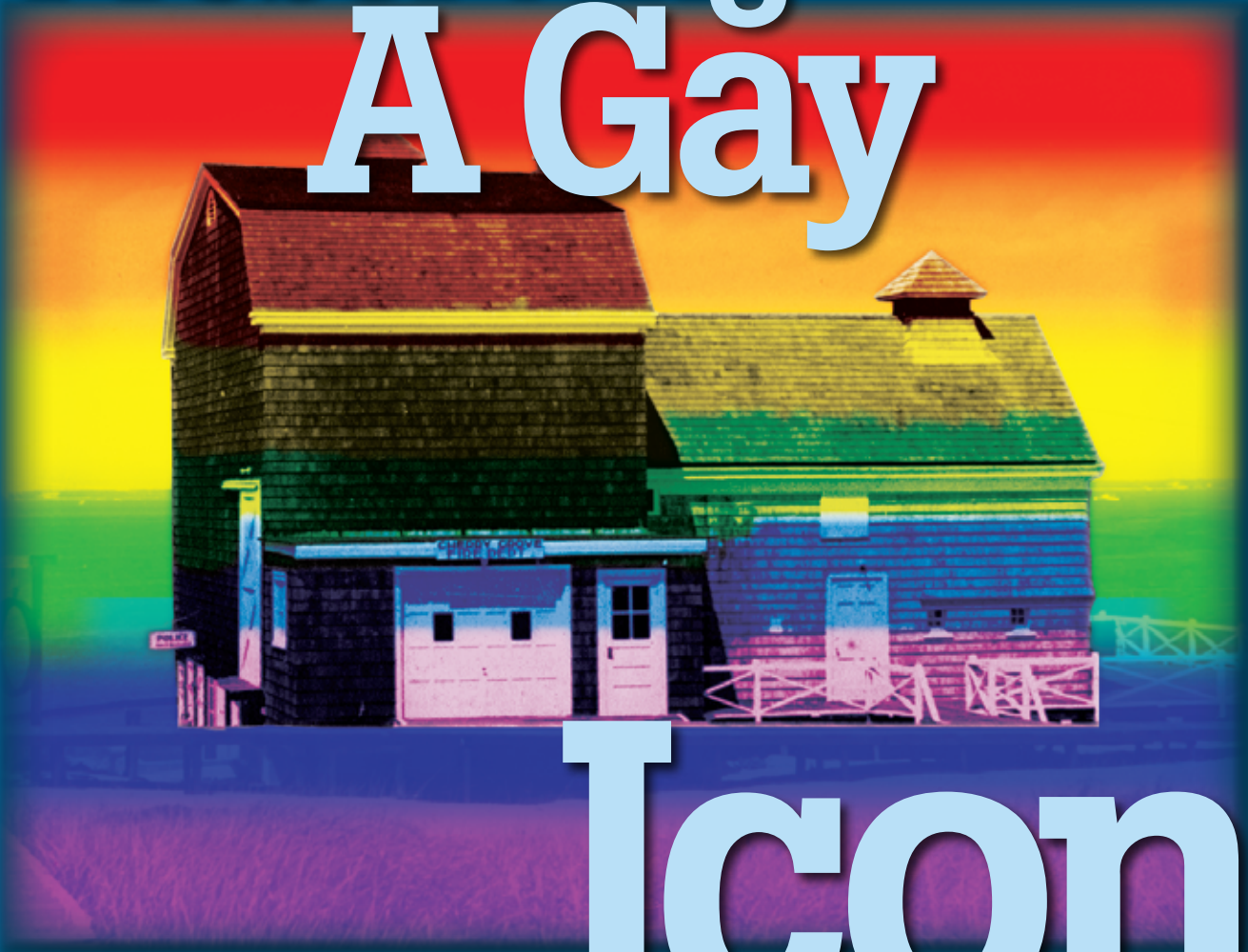


# Preserving A Gay



# Icon

The Cherry Grove Community House



# A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Theater...



**A**s we began the process of restoring and preserving our beloved Community House, we began uncovering the layers of our own history as lesbians and gay men. It was a surprisingly emotional thing to do.

We knew it housed what is probably the oldest continuously operating gay theater in the U.S. (and probably the world), but we hadn't really counted on the richness of the treasure trove we found here.

The Archives, so meticulously kept by the late Harold I. Seeley (himself an icon), yielded up literally hundreds of old photos, playbills, handwritten notes, news clippings yellowed and cracking with age, names of celebrities, visitors and residents long gone. What they showed was more than the footprints of a creative and unique gay place;

it showed us that for so many decades in an unwelcoming outside world, how profoundly Cherry Grove had been sheltering arms for gay people – a place to be safe, to be free, to not be alone, to take care of one another, a place where hope could stay alive and happiness can flourish.



In the summer of '46, just a few years after a monster hurricane bore down on Fire Island – a group of ambitious Cherry Grovites arranged to have an old barn floated across the Great South Bay and hauled to a spot just west of the dock.



At first the barn was a firehouse and a meeting room. Then in 1948 and '49, with their creativity bursting for release, they turned it into a theater. In 1950, the memorable production of “Berthe of a Nation” portrayed how a group of actresses led by Berthe Barlow got lost in the fog on the bay and were swept ashore on Fire Island, thereby giving “birth” to the nation called Cherry Grove.

But the group was to give birth to much more than a little town by the sea. Much more, in fact – more feather boas, of course, and more mile-high wigs, more six-inch stilettos, more sequins, more fishnet stockings, more laughs and sheer fun per square foot than any other place on earth.

But even more than that, Cherry Grove became a beacon of hope and freedom for gay men and women everywhere. And at its heart was its beloved Community House. A Gay Icon.

## An Icon for an Iconoclastic Town



SAVE OUR COMMUNITY HOUSE

# What Becomes an Icon Most?

*In 2013, the Community House was named a "historic site" by the National Register of Historic Places and the NYS Department of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation. The Community House is the second LGBT structure in the State and the third in the nation to be awarded such a designation.*



Today, there are only a few iconic ideas that are synonymous with "gay" in our culture: "rainbow flag," "equality symbol," "pink triangle," and "Cherry Grove."

For decades, this community has stood as a beacon to gay people everywhere – a symbol of sexual freedom, safety, hope, happiness, and an conviction that things can get better, even great, if you're gay. For nearly 70 years, Cherry Grove has had iconic status in the gay world and attracted some of the most iconic personalities in the creative world – in theater, literature, journalism, painting, film, and gay cultural life.

So, when it became clear in 2010 that the venerable old barn was about to fall down, the decision was to renovate, not tear down. How could we even think of erasing so many memories? How could we tear the symbolic heart out of an iconic community? The ghosts of our great local thespians Dickie Addison, Maggie McCorkle, and Teri Warren, at least – would never have left us in peace.

After all, the Community House was the home of the oldest gay theater in the United States, and probably in the world.

What becomes an icon most? Another icon, of course.



*Some well-known visitors, residents and performers in Cherry Grove: Hermione Gingold, Tennessee Williams, Tallulah Bankhead, Nancy Walker, Janet Flanner, Earl Blackwell, Natalia Danesi Murray, W.H. Auden, Paul Cadmus, Kaye Ballard, Christopher Isherwood, Julie Wilson, Liza Minnelli, Liz Smith, Marlon Brando*



SAVE OUR COMMUNITY HOUSE

The outpouring of community support for the old building is testament to its iconic stature in our community – here and around the world. In less than two years, Grove residents gave nearly \$450,000 – more than 140 donors so far – toward the \$1 million needed to complete the work.

Recently more donations have come in from people around the world, people who came here in younger days and remember their summers of freedom and foolishness, former residents who moved onto other towns and lands but never forgot, and even those for whom Cherry Grove is just a mystical fantasy island in their imagination somewhere in the Atlantic.

We are well on our way to success and have completed the basic interior structural work to ensure that the House will not fall down. A 3,000-lb I-Beam now shores up the east-west wall near the stage, and collar ties pull the roof in place. Foundations have been secured and vertical posts are in place.

Now we need over \$500,000 to finish the job – to move the septic system, lay a new floor, enclose the auditorium, install a kitchen and new toilets, order new theater seating, refurbish the interior, upgrade the sound and lights booth, and bring this place back to the crazy splendor it was intended for.



# An Outpouring of Support From Gay Men and Women Everywhere



SAVE OUR COMMUNITY HOUSE

# So, What Really Goes on in this House?

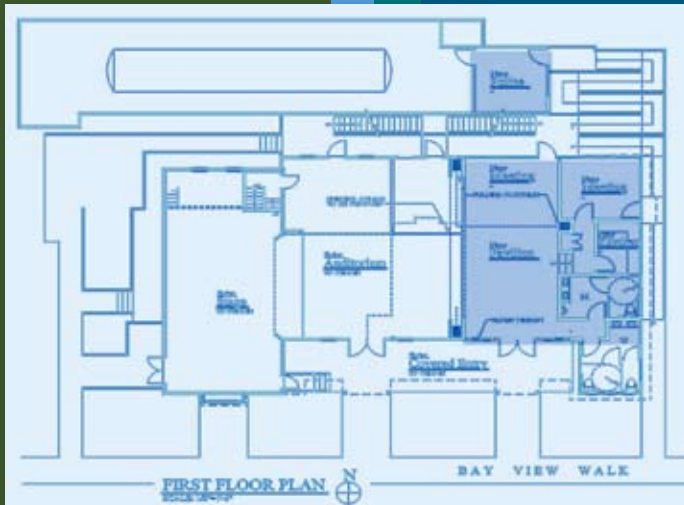
There is so much going on in the Community House on any given weekend, it's almost impossible to schedule something new. Saturdays will find Yoga classes, show rehearsals, community meetings, lectures, discussions, and paint distribution for boardwalk painting. Entire weekends are devoted to the Flea Market, Art Show, Casino Night, Archives exhibitions and the annual Memorial Day services. Sundays you can find more rehearsals, Al-Anon meetings, church services, Bingo, and the Arcade Theater performances for kids. There is also FIAR – Fire Island Artists Residences, and The 90-Minute Day Camp (for kids of all ages). Weekdays are filled with opera discussion groups, and film festivals.

The core of activities is, of course, the Arts Project's packed performance schedule. Year after year, APCG has opened each season with the election of our annual Homecoming Queen and Membership Reception, and then stretched the fun out in a full-season performance schedule of plays, cabaret shows, musical reviews, standup comedy, classical music, the annual benefit for the Doctors House, as well as receptions and fundraisers for APCG and other local organizations.

With a new Community House and "Center" with a kitchen and breathing room for activities, we can expand the schedule dramatically. The Fire Department dinner could be held here, as well as the APCG Ball. A modern theater with upgraded audio and lighting will enhance performances and improve attendance as well as the audience experience; we'll be able to generate more revenues by renting the space for weddings and parties;

the upstairs roof deck will be a place to come have a drink, meet friends, watch the sunset and enjoy the Great South Bay. And so on and so on...

It's not called the Community House for nothing – just imagine how much more it can be for all of us.



We  
Could  
Really Use  
Your Help  
Now



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*Above left: Dixie,  
Dickie Addison and  
Dominic De Santis in an  
immortal arabesque*

*Left: Maggie McCorkle  
gets ready to take stage*

*Photos this page:  
"Swan Lake" by Sue Kravitz  
"Maggie" by Diana DiPrima  
All other photos courtesy of  
the Cherry Grove Community  
House Archives*



SAVE OUR COMMUNITY HOUSE



Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc.  
For more information, visit us at: [www.cgcai.org](http://www.cgcai.org)



*The Save Our Community House campaign is for the benefit of the Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc., a 501(c)(3) public charity. Contributions are tax-deductible as allowed by law. We thank you for your support.*