

A Fond Farewell For Tom Ross



Written by Dagmar Fors Karppi, oysterbay@antonnews.com Thursday, 11 July 2013 00:00

The news that Thomas Ross, superintendent of Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, is moving on is getting the same response from Oyster Bayites. Everyone is happy for him, sad at his loss to Oyster Bay, and hopeful that his replacement will have the same interest in working with the community as seamlessly as Tom did.

Besides working on projects with local non-profits, Tom and his wife Kerry were regular guests at local fund raising events, becoming a part of the Oyster Bay social network.

“It’s a big promotion for Tom and I’m happy to see him move up in the park service,” said Edward Mohlenhoff, chairman of Youngs Cemetery, where Theodore Roosevelt’s gravesite is located. “But it’s a big loss for Oyster Bay. I hope the NPS will replace him with someone who wants to be involved with the community as he was.”

Tom Ross is going from overseeing Sagamore Hill, a site with TR’s mansion, the Old Orchard Museum, a nature trail that leads down to a shoreline area on Oyster Bay Harbor. He will become, as of Sept. 9, the superintendent of two



At the Friends of Sagamore Hill lecture series, from the left are: Jay Perrell, FOSH treasurer; Superintendent Thomas Ross; Virginia Perrell, FOSH director; Philip Blocklyn; seated is Roger L. Di Silvestro, author of Theodore Roosevelt in the Badlands. (Photo by DFK)

NPS sites: dedicated to inventor Thomas Edison, and to George Washington at Morristown.

As described by the NPS: Thomas Edison's home and laboratory are a step back in time, when machines were run by belts and pulleys and music was played on phonographs. Where to the passerby, the buildings betray little evidence of the industries they once started. Discover where America's greatest inventor changed our world forever. And: Morristown National Historical Park commemorates the sites of General Washington and the Continental army's winter encampment of December 1779 to June 1780, where they survived through what would be the coldest winter on record.

Mohlenhoff said the Morristown site has a mansion, that is similar to style to Sagamore Hill, it is a Queen Ann house, but very large.

"Tom was good at working with us. He reached out to us, he didn't wait for us to go to him. He has done as much as he can in relation to Youngs Cemetery," added Mohlenhoff.

"He was always willing to come to us and try to offer help, but we are very limited in what we can do. We are a small country cemetery. His last program for us was installing interpretive signage. I hope they do get installed at Youngs Cemetery."

Tom Ross said later that the interpretive signage work will continue, whether he is there or not, since he was working with the Main Street Association of Oyster Bay, and the Oyster Bay-East Norwich Chamber of Commerce on the project.

Mohlenhoff added, "I just hope the NPS sends someone open minded who wants to improve Sagamore Hill and make it people friendly. A good one like Tom." He appended the comment saying, I don't blame him for trying to improve his situation. They are a great couple."

Feather In His Cap

TR interpreter, James Foote said, “It’s a feather in his cap. I wish him well. I will miss him. But he’s going to the site of one of my heroes, Edison, and as for the Ford Estate, it includes Jockey Hollow where the Washington’s troops set up camp. I used to live in Morristown. The people there are very supportive of history.”

The Morristown national park consists of four non-contiguous units: Washington’s Headquarters with the Ford Mansion and Headquarters Museum, the Fort Nonsense Unit, the Jockey Hollow Unit, and the New Jersey Brigade Area. The Jockey Hollow Unit includes the Wick house (headquarters of General Arthur St. Clair), five reconstructed soldier huts, and approximately 27 miles of walking trails.

“Tom Ross’ leaving is a great loss to Oyster Bay, and the hamlet and to the Oyster Bay Historical Society,” commented Philip Blocklyn, OBHS executive director and a member of the Friends of Sagamore Hill, the group that raises funds for Sagamore Hill. “Tom has worked with the OBHS on projects. This is a great step for him in the two sites, close together in New Jersey. It’s a good thing for Tom, the kids and Kerry, they were a real part of Oyster Bay for the past five years. It seems they have just been here overnight.” They came here in 2007.

Kerry was a Sunday School teacher at Christ Church. Their boys, Cameron and Nate attended the local schools. Kerry, who said she enjoys her role as a supportive wife, also has a career. An artist and writer, she is writing a book on art education. She recently took part in an artist-in-residence opportunity at a national park to work on ways the NPS can interface with artists.

Creative Ideas

One of Tom Ross' ideas brought photographer Xiomáro to record Sagamore Hill as it was being closed and emptied for restoration. Twenty [out of 144] of those photographs were exhibited at the OBHS and the project included a series of gallery talks about the work by Xiomáro. [He is currently photographing the other NPS site on Long Island, the fully furnished William Floyd House in Mastic Beach, part of Fire Island NPS site.] Before that Tom and the Theodore Roosevelt Association partnered with the OBHS to bring the exhibit "TR in '12" to the Koenig Center. Interest in that exhibit brought a great number of visitors to Oyster Bay to view the material on TR's last race for the presidency.

OB An Adopted Home

Ross himself said he has enjoyed working with the Oyster Bay community. "I really enjoyed the Oyster Bay community and working with everyone as well as all the local business leaders and elected officials. Everyone just opened their arms to us."

He said when he arrived at Sagamore Hill, he had the 2008 General Management Plan to work with. It had been created after a series of forums with the community, facilitated by the MainStreet Association of Oyster Bay, to ascertain what the residents wanted to see at Sagamore Hill and to promote a greater connection between the site and the residents.

Ross said, "Now with the sequestration we are not able to add more structures and buildings but are taking care of what we have."

He said, "I am certainly going to miss my adopted home."

He commented on how the hamlet itself has been improving and how much he liked the new lampposts that have gone up in the hamlet; and new signage that is unique. It alerts people that they have arrived at a special place he said.

Ross credited the Oyster Bay Main Street Association for help in trying to “set the table for us to bring residents and visitors to come by land or by boat to see the different attractions here. The hamlet has been improving with the addition of lampposts, trash baskets, brick side walks and the hanging baskets.”

In a statement to the public, Ross said, “Sagamore Hill and the Oyster Bay community will be greatly missed by me. I am so proud of the collaborative work we accomplished over the past five and a half years. We made great progress in implementing the park’s community developed 2008 General Management Plan, continued work on rehabilitation projects, expanded interpretive offerings, and most importantly forged strong relationships between the park and the hamlet of Oyster Bay.”

National Park Service Northeast Regional Director Dennis R. Reidenbach added that Ross was successful in facilitating the first General Agreement between the park, the Theodore Roosevelt Association, the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace NHS, and the National Park Foundation. The “TR in ‘12” exhibit was supported by them, and was first viewed by the public at the TR Birthplace in NYC.

Ross is looking forward to his new assignment with sites dedicated to Thomas Edison and George Washington. “Those two are great American figures. George Washington was the father of our country; and Edison was the father of invention and ingenuity. They are two amazing individuals that I have the privilege to show to those visitors to the sites.

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He said he was especially proud of being at Sagamore Hill, “It was my first superintendency and I am proud of the work I did,” he said.

Currently, Ross was tapped to help ready the Statue of Liberty NHS for its reopening on July 4 and the operation of that site through the peak summer visitation period. Tom is on temporary duty on Liberty Island, serving as Deputy Superintendent/Chief of Operations.

“July Fourth was so wonderful. It was just a great day and I was honored to welcome the first visitors off the boat with NPS Northeast Regional Director Reidenbach. It was a very proud day to be an American at the opening of the statue, especially after the devastating effects of Superstorm Sandy,” said Ross.

Sandy cut off their electricity, water, phones and sewage system. The dock, all 42,999 board feet, where tourists enter Liberty Island was severely damaged as were the walkways said NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis, in a speech at the ribbon cutting. “It was a wonderful ceremony and a great day,” said Tom. He was seen on BBC America television shaking the hands of the first visitors as they came off the ferry.

Presently, the park management team members Eric Witzke, SHNHS chief of maintenance and Curator Amy Verone are sharing acting superintendent assignments through the summer, until a new superintendent is selected.

Ross began his career with the National Park Service in 2000 as the community planner for New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park in New Bedford, Massachusetts and has held multiple positions in the NPS since then. Ross graduated from the rigorous USDA Executive Leadership Program in 2005.