



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**BY THE SEA, BY THE SEA:
DUNES CLUB LISTED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER**

A private beach club in Narragansett has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture and recreation. Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the Dunes Club to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. The Dunes Club illustrates the history of Narragansett as a resort community and is an excellent example of early 20th-century beach club architecture.

The Dunes Club is a complex of recreational buildings occupying 32 acres on a spit of land fronting the Atlantic Ocean, with the entrance to the Pettaquamscutt River (or Narrow River) immediately to the east. The complex faces south toward the sea with the primary buildings connected by an extensive wood deck and terrace system arranged along a stretch of beach and sand dunes.

When the Dunes Club opened in 1929, recreational activities for the wealthy in Narragansett had shifted away from resort hotels and toward summer colonies comprised of private residences. Membership-only clubs provided facilities for summer residents to socialize. Dunes Club member New York architect Kenneth M. Murchison (1872-1938) designed the hipped-roof, stucco Mediterranean-style gatehouse (1928) that stands at the entrance from Boston Neck Road, as well as a clubhouse, a series of cabanas, and a saltwater swimming pool. Murchison's eclectic vision for the complex freely combined elements of Norman and Spanish architecture in keeping with fanciful beach club design of the period.

The Hurricane of 1938 destroyed nearly the entire complex. The Club quickly installed a new steel sheet bulkhead to protect the site and held a juried competition to select an architect to design a new clubhouse. Philadelphia architect Thomas Pym Cope submitted the winning design, an interpretation of the New England architectural vernacular. The new design also reflected conservative post-Depression austerity. The buildings could be erected quickly of local pine and oak felled by the recent hurricane (known as "hurricane pine"), and for comparatively little money. The new facilities were built within six months at a cost of approximately \$125,000 in 1939 dollars; in contrast, the Murchison-designed clubhouse had cost \$250,000 in 1928.

Cope's design for the Dunes Club used the same siting and program as the original. The new complex included a large clubhouse, a series of wood-frame bathhouses, four cabana circles, and a gable-roofed staff housing complex and also incorporated the swimming pool and gatehouse that had survived the hurricane. It was vastly different from Murchison's, however, in terms of style. A low, solid Colonial Revival-style building constructed of heavy timber, Cope's barn-like clubhouse was subdued and restrained with a barn-like form, a cross-gable roof with a cupola, and weathered exterior wood siding. Art Moderne-inspired details, many with a nautical theme, were used sparingly but effectively. Decorative motifs included waves, rope, and dolphins, and the cupola was topped by a seahorse weathervane. With its expansive wood decks and many windows, the clubhouse layout was designed to take advantage of views to the ocean.

The 1939 complex has been altered only minimally since its original construction. The staff housing complex was expanded in 1993, with the construction of a fourth building that enclosed the courtyard on the east. The bathhouses and cabana circles have been repaired and reconstructed after hurricane damage; most notably, the cabana circles were rebuilt in 1955, to their original form but to a slightly simpler design. New structures, such as tennis courts and a private house, were sensitively arranged in Cope's 1939 site plan.

The National Register nomination for the Dunes Club was prepared by preservation consultant Richard Youngken. RIHPHC's Executive Director Edward Sanderson commented, "Generations of Narragansett families have kept the tradition of summer by the sea at the Dunes Club. Now the Club complex has been recognized as part of Rhode Island's mid-20th-century architectural heritage."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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