

# Chuck Royce: For the love of an old hotel

**FAIRFIELD COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL**

**By Alexander Soule**

Oct-19-09



In a warehouse in Stonington, Conn., Chuck Royce has a Gilded Age museum of sorts totaling some 5,000 artifacts.

Next June, their replicas will be back on display where they belong, where the ocean surf thunders in toward the bluffs of Watch Hill, R.I.

Through his Bluff Avenue L.L.C., Royce has been working to rebuild Ocean House, a grand old seaside hotel located in the village Watch Hill of Westerly, R.I., on a peninsula that juts out into Block Island Sound, with the edifice dating back to the Victorian Era.

Nearby landmarks include the Watch Hill Lighthouse and the Flying Horse Carousel, the oldest continuously-operated carousel in the United States and a National Historic Landmark.

Ocean House owned its own piece of history – it reportedly was the first resort hotel in the country to offer indoor plumbing and later, telephone service.

More notably, it was the last hotel left standing from the Gilded Age, with Watch Hill attracting famous vacationers from throughout the generations, such as Henry Ford, Clark Gable and Frank Sinatra.

A longtime vacationer himself at Watch Hill, the Greenwich investor Royce formed Bluff Avenue L.L.C. with Nicholas Moore, Donna Simmons and Grant Simmons to purchase the property after learning it was slated to be replaced with a row of McMansions.

Royce said he considered saving the original edifice, but deemed it impractical from both a financial and operational viewpoint.

“Absolutely falling down,” Royce said, recalling the condition of the facility when he took his first tour. “You felt for your life in there.”

Instead, Royce hired Essex-based Centerbrook to lead the architectural re-imagining of Ocean House. To preserve key elements of the ocean façade and other elements, Centerbrook stashed original moldings in Stonington, and used them as models to cast identical replacement trims and architectural elements.

When complete, the hotel will have nearly 50 rooms, and a wing of about two-dozen condominiums that represents the biggest departure from the old hotel.

The facility also has 6,000 square feet of space to accommodate business meetings, and has already sold out the summer wedding season.

Few New England hotels command both sweeping sea vistas and a listing on a registry of historic hotels maintained by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The handful includes the Newport Beach Hotel & Suites in Rhode Island; Emerson Inn by the Sea in Rockport, Mass.; the Colony Hotel in Kennebunkport, Maine; and Newagen Seaside Inn near Acadia National Park in Maine.

The Newport Beach Hotel & Suites was built after the Long Island Express hurricane of 1938 wiped out numerous establishments there, and 65 years later remains the only beachfront hotel in Newport. That storm and others similarly ravaged Watch Hill’s coastal bluffs and beaches, which featured seven sumptuous hotels at the dawn of the 20th century.

Even as Royce has led the renovation of Ocean House, a New York developer has done the same at Watch Hill Inn, which dates back to 1845 and which likewise survived the Long Island Express. Catalano elected to convert the property into a mix of condominiums and apartments.

Royce hopes to replicate both the historic look of Ocean House, and the modern-day renown of the Mayflower Inn & Spa; the Litchfield County icon is one of three hotels in Connecticut listed on the Relais and Chateaux web site for luxury hotels, along with the Homestead Inn-Thomas Henkelmann in Greenwich and Winvian in Morris, where room rates start at \$1,450 a night.

Royce's toughest critics may not be the guests that will return to Ocean House beginning next June, but the locals haunted by the demolition of the old building and eagerly anticipating the rebirth of the new. Even a coat of fresh paint brought evoked commentary. A video of the old hotel can still be viewed online at [theoceanhouse.org](http://theoceanhouse.org), with one chronicler there saying that when the hotel was whitewashed to contain any lead paint during the January 2006 demolition, it was as if it had been transformed into a ghost.

Now Royce hopes to recapture the venue's 19th century spirit for 21st century vacationers.

"I remember my first time calling to make reservations," wrote Waterbury resident Dave Moriarty on the web site. "I asked the gentleman what the room was like – he said there's no TV, no air conditioning, no fans, no fancy paintings on the walls, no wake-up calls, no clock radios; but the food is good and it has a great beach. Being the beach lovers that my wife and I are, we said let's give it a shot. I guess it was a good choice because we went back every year until it closed."