

23 Green Street  
Dutch Tavern  
M.M. Comstock  
1874

The Dutch, or Dutchie's, got its name in 1933 when Mauritz M. "Dutch" Nauta (10 Nov. 1887 - 26 July 1956) decided to renovate and reopen an old saloon at today's 23 Green Street in the heart of downtown New London. Prohibition was over, and the W.S. Alling Rubber Company, which had owned the building since 1925 and reportedly used it for storage, was willing to let Nauta work his magic on the old place. Over the years the tavern was mainly owned by absentee landlords, and this pattern continued until 1981.<sup>1</sup>

Mauritz "Dutch" Nauta had been working part-time as a steward or bartender at the local German club (Order of Hermann Sons, Herwegh Lodge No. 12), and was ready for a new venue. According to a feature story in *The Day* by Dan Pearson (20 June 1999), Nauta installed a 25-foot-long bar and advertised that he had "spared no expense in outfitting the establishment to meet the demands of a high class trade."<sup>2</sup> The tavern has supposedly remained much the same ever since.

Nauta was born in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, and immigrated to America in 1910 to Baltimore, where he joined the U.S. Coast Guard and then came to New London. He was not the first or last to land in New London in this way.

In 1911 Nauta married Julia Doyle Kelly of New London, a cousin of Eugene O'Neill's, according to Dan Pearson's feature story. The 1920 US Census lists Morris Nauta as a pipe fitter living on Shaw Street. His naturalization papers from 1926 list his name as Minne Maurits Nauta, and his World War I draft registration shows he was a pipe fitter at Ship & Engine (later Electric Boat), listing his exemption as a munitions factory worker. The 1930 US Census shows the Nauta family with five sons and one daughter plus mother-in-law, Julia Kelly, living at 79 Ledyard Street. There would be one more daughter in 1930 so that the quote attributed to Nauta in Dan Pearson's story

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<sup>1</sup> Wilbur S. Alling of Norwich founded a Connecticut sporting goods chain popular in the 1920s which eventually boasted 16 stores in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. The Alling Building, 234-238 State Street, is today owned by Peter Kreckovic. The Alling stores offered everything from footballs to flashlights, gym suits to tennis shoes, raincoats to rubbers and tires. The company was incorporated in 1917 and dissolved in 1981 by which time it was a real estate concern. Ward Tiffany Alling II (1923-2006) managed the New London store. In 1933 he married Connecticut College graduate Barbara "Bobbie" Jones and went into banking. The Alling company continued to own 23 Green until it was sold by a trustee in 1981. There are Alling descendants.

<sup>2</sup> <https://dutch-tavern.com/stories/the-dutch-taps-into-history/>

is accurate: "With the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up, smoking a cigar, Dutch would say that the tavern enabled him to 'raise seven kids on nickle beer.'"<sup>3</sup> Prices today at the Dutch remain remarkably reasonable.

Nauta's first name is spelled variously in the records, but he signed his 1942 draft registration card: "Mauritz Minne Nauta." His native tongue was German, or more accurately, a dialect of Frisian known as Low German. His surname is common in his native region and means "sailor."

In the 1940s Nauta's full-time employment became "Proprietor of The Dutch Tavern." By then the family was living at 79 Cedar Grove Avenue, and in the 1950 census, son Harold was listed as "bar tender at tavern" and son Robert, as "a sports writer for newspapers."

Though women were not welcome at taverns like The Dutch, there have been a number of female absentee landlords and at least one woman who, in the old days of the Dutch, worked on site. According to oral history collected by Dan Pearson, Julia (Kelly) Nauta, Dutch's wife, served as cook, developing a popular pot roast and potato salad plate at the tavern. A tiny kitchen in the corner of the bar remains to this day.

The business (not the building) was sold in 1951 for \$1,100 to Edward Rothen and Louis "Wicky" Grabner, according to Dan Pearson's story. The bar continued to be run in much the same way as always until being taken over by Peter T. Burgess in 1978, when women were finally welcomed as patrons. Burgess became the owner of the building in 1981. The current owners, Peter Detmold and Martha Conn, became the next owners of the business and soon afterwards the building itself in 1998.

Before The Dutch, there was a saloon in the building known as The Oak. According to oral history, John H. Murphy, a steward at the Thames Club, opened The Oak in 1906, and Eugene O'Neill, "the future Nobel Prize-winning playwright, drank there, probably in 1912 and 1913 during his days as a hard-drinking reporter when he lived in his parents' summer home on Pequot Avenue," according to Dan Pearson. Indeed, the New London City Directory for 1884, among the 24 "Liquor Saloons" listed in New London, there is one run by John H. Murphy on Green Street. Before this, Mr. Murphy is listed on Green Street in city directories with a "Sample Room." This was undoubtedly the same place, the sample room being a kind of annex for the grocery store next door at the corner of State and Green.

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Joseph Nauta (1913-1986), George Nauta (1915-1989), Harold Michael Nauta (1918-?), Russell William Nauta (1919-1951) Elizabeth "Betty" Nauta (1923-?) m. George Rander, Robert Edward Nauta (1927-2018), Margaret Nauta (1930-2001) m. Clyde F. Murphy.

Saloons in general originate from two sources: firstly, as a variety of inn or tavern (a combination bar, restaurant, and hotel), and, secondly, as sample room (an annex for grocery stores and provisioners, which also sold liquor). The latter was the origin of The Oak. At first, sample rooms were merely sectioned off parts of grocery stores where customers could taste-test the stock, but eventually the sample room became a separate establishment, synonymous with saloon. The word itself, "saloon," is an Americanism that became popular in the 1840s and fell out of use with the advent of the Anti-Saloon League of the 1890s. Today, many people associate it exclusively with the Wild West.

In Connecticut, after Prohibition ended, a legal distinction was established between a "bar" and a "tavern," the latter being a place where only beer, wine, and cider were served, with or without food. This kind of tavern is entirely different than the colonial-style pubs most people think of today as a "tavern," which is essentially an eatery with a bar, often upscale. Today's licensed taverns in Connecticut are very few in number, down from the hundreds that existed in the 1940s. They were once the sole domain of working class *men* on lunch breaks (often availing themselves of "free lunch") and after work, places to unwind and socialize, to smoke, gab and have a pint or two.<sup>4</sup>

Not much can be gleaned about John H. Murphy. He was born in 1840, probably in Ireland. He married Mary (last name unknown) in 1884, and they had a son, Walter Murphy (187-1958). By 1900 John H. Murphy was a "liquor dealer" living at 32 Golden Street. Walter Thomas Murphy (1887-1958) lived at the Mohican Hotel with his wife Rene. He was the manager of the Capitol Theater.

It was another John H. – John Hudson Miller – (who also worked as a steward at the Thames Club), who became the next manager of The Oak in 1905, when he purchased "liquor and tobacco from The Oak Saloon," according to the building's title history. The 1900 US Census shows that Miller was born in Kansas in 1875 or 1876, his parents from Connecticut. At the time he started to operate The Oak, he was living with his wife, Ida, at his mother-in-law's house on Starr Street. His job was "bartender." He is listed with a disability: "Can't see without glasses." Later records show him moving to Perry Street. His association with The Oak survived until 1920, when the saloon closed. No such business is listed on Green Street in the city directory for that year, and Miller's occupation in the census is "none." By 1929 his job was "auto washing," and in 1930, he was the proprietor of a car dealership. By 1940 Ida Miller, widow, was working as a hostess in a nursing home. Ida passed away in 1960 aged 84.

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<sup>4</sup> See, "A Bar is a Bar, but a Tavern, That's History," by Georgina Gustin, *The New York Times*, 15 Dec 2002. The Dutch is mentioned.

Other names on the title chain during this period include Guy, Wetherell, and Green. All appear to have been absentee landlords who were not involved in running the tavern. However, going back to 1874, one Cynthia Miller, inferred wife of John Rice Miller and probably the mother of John Hudson Miller, was a dressmaker at 5 Green Street. She had two daughters at that time. The family disappears from the record after that. Did they go to Kansas where John H. Miller was born? I was not able to document the connection between John Hudson Miller and Cynthia and John Rice Miller, but it might be possible to do so with further research.

It was Mattarosa Maro Comstock who was owner when the building was constructed about 1874. What was here before that time? According to Frances M. Caulkins in her history of New London, Green Street was laid out in 1787, principally through the land belonging to Timothy Green, of New London's famous printing family. Given its location in central New London, the site undoubtedly had some building or other. According to Caulkins, the western section of what is now State Street was not destroyed in the burning of New London in 1781. She writes, "The ancient dilapidated building still extant (in 1852) near the corner of Green Street (and State) was then, as it since has been, a well-known tavern stand," owned by an unnamed woman whose husband was a patriot and whose brother was a Loyalist member of Arnold's attacking forces. Also in this vicinity in the 19th century was a female academy, apparently run by Victoire (Cavaillie) Francisco (1815-1905), teacher, as indicated in census records.

Also from the title chain, we know that fronting State Street in this block was once the mansion and garden of John and Mary (Deshon) Brandegee, parents of Augustus Brandegee, one of the sellers of the property to Mattarosa M. Comstock in 1860. Theodore and Mary Jane Wood, also in the title transfer, were John Brandegee's daughter and son-in-law.<sup>5</sup> The deed identifies the property as the "Lawton property." More research would be needed to identify the Lawton family. Suffice it to say, it is perfectly possible that an earlier structure was incorporated into the building in 1874 by M.M. Comstock.<sup>6</sup>

Mattarosa Maro Comstock (1807-1894) purchased the property in 1860, and it

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<sup>5</sup> John Brandegee (1786-1859) was the father of famous New London politician, lawyer, congressman and abolitionist: Augustus Brandegee (1828-1904).

<sup>6</sup> It has been pointed out that hand-wrought nails have been found in the building. This indicates the recycling of an older structure. However, dating buildings by nails alone is problematic. See, "Nail Chronology as an aid to dating old buildings," by Lee H. Nelson, National Park Service, July, 1962. <http://npshistory.com/publications/nail-chronology.pdf>

was a few years after that when he got around to building or rebuilding the current building. M.M. Comstock, as he was commonly known, was a merchant, ferry operator, the son of Jonathan Comstock, also a merchant, grandson of Capt. Peter Comstock Jr, and great grandson of West Indies trader, Peter Comstock, Sr. of New London. Who ran Comstock's saloon on Green Street? This must have been the John H. Murphy, mentioned above.

How M.M. Comstock acquired his unusual given name is unclear. He was a descendant of a numerous and early New London family. Perhaps a Portuguese sailing associate of his father's or grandfather's was so named. His wife was Ellen M. Culver (1817-55). The couple had nine children, including Maro Mattarosa, Jr. (1844-1916), who operated the grocery store located at the corner of Green and State Street. M. M., Jr. also sometimes lived on Green Street.<sup>7</sup>

The 1860 US Census shows Maro Comstock, Sr., a grocer with real estate valued at \$13,000 and personal estate \$4,000. He was living with a number of his daughters and a servant. In years past, his store had been located at the corner of Bank and State Street until that building was replaced by the Stafford Block in the late 1840s. Perhaps it was then that M.M. Comstock set up a grocery business at Green and State Street, to be run by his son and namesake.

By 1870, M.M. Comstock was a "retired merchant" living in Mystic River with real estate valued at \$25,000. A number of his adult children were living with him. His next door neighbor was Anton Bodenwein, shoemaker from Prussia, with a son, Theodore, age 6.

The 1880 census lists Comstock's home address as 15 Franklin Street, and he is living with two of his unmarried daughters. He was the "Proprietor of Steamboat Inn."<sup>8</sup> He was also the operator of the New London-Groton ferry for a number of years after 1849. One of his ferryboats was called *The Mohegan*.

Other sources indicate that at one time M.M. Comstock worked as the superintendent of a machine shop that made bomb-lances for the whaling industry, a detonating rifle-harpoon used in the Arctic fisheries. He held several patents. His home was located variously, but for a number of years he lived on Hempstead Street near Mercer.

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<sup>7</sup> St Maro was a 4th-century hermit, patron of the Maronite church. Matarosa is a surname found in Brazil and Italy. The Viscount of Matarose (Conde de Toreno) was a Spanish diplomat and historian who worked with the British against the French in the Peninsular Wars. See, José María Queipo de Llano, 7th Count of Toreno.

<sup>8</sup> The 1872 city directory lists the Steamboat Hotel at Gold, corner RR Ave. Harriet Palmer, Prop.

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The narrative above starts with title information researched by Thomas Couser. From there we look at various primary and secondary sources, including census records, city directories, newspaper accounts, local and family histories, cemetery and military service records. This is by no means exhaustive research but is meant to give an idea of the people involved in the early history of this local landmark.  
– Mary Beth Baker for New London Landmarks, 2 May 2023.