

# The Story of Benson House

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How the house on the  
bluff played a critical  
role in World War II



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**IN 1912, A THREE-STORY** red shingled house is built at 408 North Side Road in Wading River, New York. It sits on the edge of a bluff overlooking the Long Island Sound...

The house was built by Dr. Gabriel S. Owen as a summer home, surrounded by 72 acres of dense woodland and reached by a rutted, winding quarter-mile path. Miss Sarah Owen was the last occupant of the house and died in 1940 at well over eighty years of age. Mrs. Helen Owen Howell, who inherited the house, was approached in 1941 by a gentleman who was interested in renting the place.



Since this was 1941, at the height of the war scare and with the house being so isolated, the Howells wondered why anyone would want to live there and thought they should contact the FBI. The man returned a few days later and told the family he *was* the FBI. The family was sworn to secrecy and the government's operatives took over.

Today, the house is known as Benson House and it has a remarkable tale of intrigue, double agents—and significant contributions to the Allied victory in World War II—to share with the world.

# How the FBI used the house

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A highly-classified operation which confused and deceived the Axis powers about Allied plans and intentions throughout World War II



**FROM JANUARY 1942 TO** June 1945 FBI agents and radio technicians secretly living and working at the house broadcasted radio messages to the Germans in Hamburg who believed they were communicating with their espionage agents in the United States.



*Benson House as it looked in 1942. Note the absence of outward evidence of radio antennas, feed lines or towers.*

Working closely with military deception planners, the FBI sent hundreds of reports—some accurate and some fictitious—designed to confuse and mislead the Nazi leadership regarding Allied military plans and intentions.

An FBI ‘front man’ lived in the house openly with his family, posing as a lawyer living in seclusion because of poor health. However, there were half a dozen other agents living in the house as well, where a high-powered radio station had been installed.

Not until after the war was it finally revealed that the FBI men were participants in a game of counter-espionage. The radio station posed as a clandestine station operated by Nazi agents and was in constant contact with Germany. Deceptive messages—supposedly from a spy ring in the United States—were sent to Nazi headquarters and instructions for the ‘spies’ were received from Germany. What the Germans didn’t know was that a direct Teletype circuit linked the three-story, red shingled house, on the North Side Road in Wading River, New York, with FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C.



# The agents who lived in the house

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A selfless commitment  
to the Allied war effort



**IN FEBRUARY 1942, SPECIAL** Agent Donworth Johnson of Chicago was assigned to manage the day-to-day operations at the house. Johnson had previous service in the U.S. Navy as a radio man and also had unique quality that made him ideal for the job—his tall, angular and “tubercular appearance” was perfect for a young man who required peace and open air.

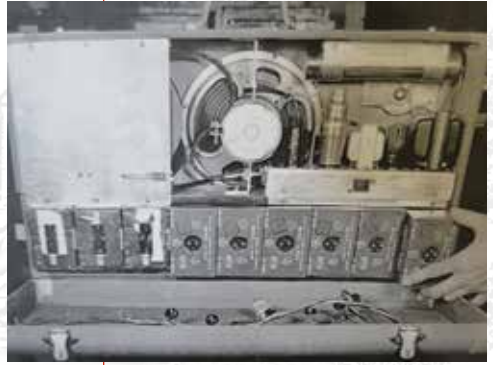


*Donworth Johnson with Clifford and Vicki Jean Johnson with her mother, Betty.*

Accompanying him in his new assignment was his wife Betty, his one-year-old daughter, Vicki Jean, and Clifford, a “huge, fierce German Shepherd.”

For three years, the Johnson family, together with two or three other radio operators, lived and worked at the house with no respite. The first floor was maintained as the family home, Johnson and his family slept on the second floor and the others occupied the third floor, which was also used for receiving and transmitting as well as office and storage space.

While most details about their stay are lost to history, an April 1943 confidential memo prepared for J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI, revealed several radio operators posing as “enemy agents” who had “perfected this impersonation almost to the ultimate point.” Accomplishing this feat meant living “in an isolated cottage under difficult conditions... for 24 hours a day, six or seven days a week.” The Johnson family and their radio colleagues remained “absolutely under cover in order that no suspicion as to the activities being carried on at this station will leak out to unauthorized persons in the vicinity.” It was a situation that made it impossible to leave the site even occasionally “to go into the next town for meals.”



# Historical significance of the work

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A radio station's  
contribution to the Allied  
victory in World War II  
and a testament to the  
FBI's remarkable history

**FOR THE FBI, THE CASE** began in the late fall of 1941, just weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, when Special Agent William Gustave Friedemann heard the story of Jorge Mosquera, an Argentinian businessman who had spent the last twenty years living in Germany. After being denied the profits from selling his business unless he agreed to become an intelligence agent for Germany, Mosquera had no choice but to agree—but also had no intentions of spying.





*At left: FBI agent Richard Millen, who set up the radio site at the house. Millen was highly qualified for his role. He was a trailblazer in the new speciality of radio engineering with degrees from the University of Indiana in physics and mathematics. Opposite page: Some of the equipment used in the house. In total, 2,829 messages were transmitted to the German High Command, 824 of which were received.*

Mosquera was given instructions for building a secret radio station—complete with broadcast times, frequencies, call letters, emergency keys and transposition codes—somewhere in the New York area to broadcast and receive information from a site in Germany, later identified as Hamburg. The FBI had their double agent, now assigned the codename ND98.

One day Mosquera recounted to Friedemann a strange conversation in which his German handler, Hans Blum, asked him to hunt for information about revolutionary new weapons systems, especially experiments performed in the U.S. regarding the “shattering of atoms.”

In a terrible breach of security, Blum shared the fact that German military planners were anxious to develop high explosives from atom sources. In what was almost a premonition, he confided to Mosquera that “the victorious nation in this war will be the one which has accomplished the task of shattering atoms and applying the results thereof.”

The FBI wasted no time in setting up Mosquera’s radio station. New York agents, together with technical agent Richard Millen, began searching for a site on eastern Long Island that met two needs: first, atmospheric conditions had to be optimal for uninterrupted trans-Atlantic high-frequency radio communications; and second, it had to be isolated and remote.

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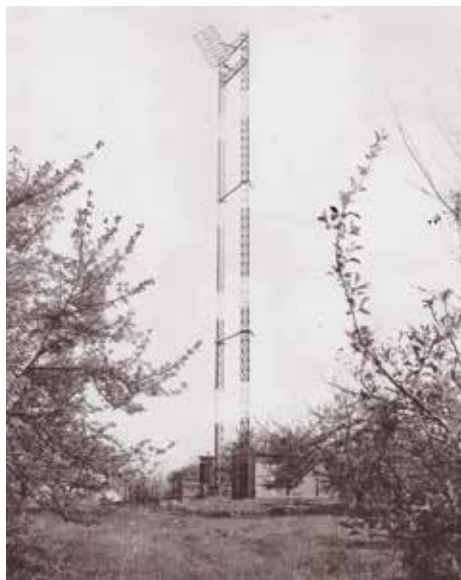
How Millen found the site remains a mystery, but what is known is that during the first two weeks of January 1942, Millen led a team of engineers installing sophisticated radio equipment in the house on the bluff overlooking Long Island Sound. Millen and his partner, Special Agent Jim Kirkland, constructed a radio tower deep in the woods, yet close enough to the wide open Sound for proper line of sight. Once the antenna, 70 feet off the ground, had been erected, a birdhouse was constructed to hide its terminating resistor.

*The driveway approaching the secret radio station at the house, showing the property's dense woods in which the antenna was located.*

To offset the enormous amount of electricity coming to the house of a seemingly quiet young couple, and therefore not cause alarm at the local power company, Millen devised a clever solution: a diesel engine in the basement could supplement power coming in from the street. To muffle the engine noise, Millen rigged a Buick car muffler to it and vented the fumes through a nearby window. And to prevent vibrations from causing the engine to 'walk' across the basement floor, Millen bolted it to a concrete block that the agents cast to the floor—the block with four mounting bolts that remains there today as the only visible evidence of the radio station's existence.

The radio station sprang to life with its first broadcast to Hamburg on January 28, 1942 and operated continuously through June 1945.





*Above: The radio antenna at Wading River.*

*Above right: Society of Former Agents of the FBI Historian Ray Batvanis (left) shares the story of the concrete block used to secure the Buick engine to the floor—the only remaining piece of evidence of the operation at the house.*



Another significant contribution was the receipt of a German message in April 1942 instructing its spies to obtain information about American atomic bomb development—an order that helped influence President Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to pursue an atomic weapon.

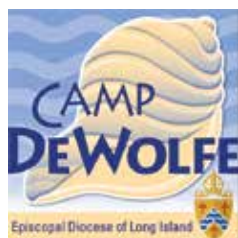
Messages transmitted from the house played an important role in Operation Bodyguard, the massive strategic initiative which fed German intelligence lies about the timing and location of the June 6, 1944 Allied invasion at Normandy. Mosquera and another FBI double agent—both using separate radio circuits from the house—regularly relayed information from their fictitious 'sources' within key government departments and industry. The radio station also participated in Operation Bluebird, which misled Japanese forces about U.S. advances in the Pacific Theater.

One hint showing the importance of this remarkable site came from Colonel Truman Smith, the U.S. Army officer who ran the American deception program with the British. In a memo to J. Edgar Hoover, he trumpeted the "important part [ND98] played in the successful operation of the Allies on the coast of Normandy." And then there is the fact that until the last days of the war as British forces closed in on Hamburg, the Germans were still radioing the house in Wading River with offers of thousands of dollars for information. In the words of one historian, "German faith in [Mosquera] never wavered."

# A new purpose and mission

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Camp DeWolfe finds its home and purpose in Wading River



*Today, Benson House is used as an administrative office and retreat house as part of Camp DeWolfe, a year-round recreation and youth camp site.*





### **THE MYSTERY OF WHAT HAPPENED**

at Benson House was buried even deeper immediately after the war when the house and surrounding property was transferred to the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island.

Upon her death in 1918, local resident Mary Benson left a trust of \$50,000 to the Diocese of Long Island. Mary had devoted much of her time to the Women's Auxiliary to the Board of Missions of the Diocese and was an active member of Grace Church in Brooklyn Heights. Her generous bequest would go largely untouched until 1945, when the diocese used it to purchase the house and accompanying 72 acres at the top of the bluff.



With the purchase, The Rt. Rev. James P. DeWolfe was able to pursue his plans for annual youth retreats to foster youth development. The three-story red shingled house located on the property would become the hub of Camp DeWolfe when it opened its first summer camp in 1947 and would bear Mary Benson's family name for decades to come.

Today, Camp DeWolfe, a year-round retreat center and summer camp, continues to provide a natural setting for people to engage in community and empowers them to live out an outward and visible expression of the love and grace of Christ.

# Unveiling a special dedication

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Honoring the sacrifices  
and contributions of  
those who lived and  
worked in Benson House  
during the war



*On the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of D-Day, the Society of  
Former Special Agents of the  
FBI dedicates Benson House  
for the role it played in the  
counter-espionage program  
during World War II. Above  
right: The plaque on the  
outside of the house.*



**ON JUNE 7, 2014 THE SOCIETY OF** Former Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation publicly revealed the seven-decade-old secret that the house on the bluff held. A ceremony sponsored by the Society, working in close partnership with the diocese and the Suffolk County New York Historial Society, was held on a beautiful morning at the Camp DeWolfe conference center, just steps away from Benson House.

Donworth Johnson, his team and the thousands of soldiers who died at the Battle of Normandy were honored—including 25 World War II veterans who were honored guests at the event. Other guests and speakers came from the Society, the Suffolk County Historical Society and the FBI, as well as many state and local political figures.

Reflections were shared about bringing this long-lost story to the world's attention, lessons learned from World War II and the proud legacy that this secret operation conveys to today's FBI agents.

To underscore the importance of Benson House in FBI history and the Allied wartime victory, the Society unveiled a plaque commemorating the house and contributions of the FBI personnel who worked there.



# National Historical Register

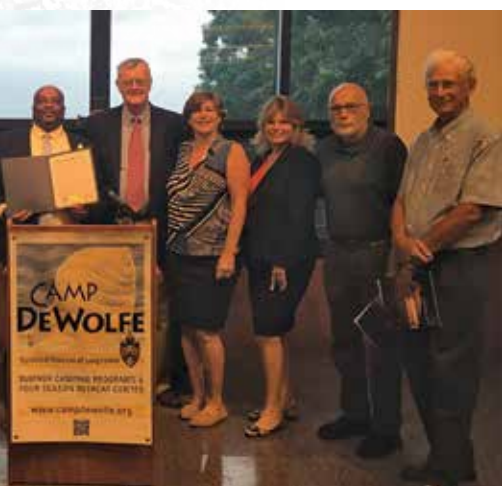
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Recognizing the importance to our country's history as well as receiving a level of protection and historic preservation



*Above: Denis Collins, Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI, John F. Good Long Island Chapter; Chapter Chair Martin Finn; Ralph Ianuzzi; Bill Barry; Deacon Jason Moskal, Camp DeWolfe Board of Managers; Michelle Wiley, Camp DeWolfe Board of Managers; David Cannon, Vice President, Camp DeWolfe Board of Managers; Society of Former Special Agents of the FBI Historian Ray Batvinis; Laura Jen-Smith, Riverhead Town Supervisor; Jodi Giglio, Riverhead Councilwoman; Sid Bail; and Richard Wines, Landmarks Preservation Commission Chairman in St. Luke's Chapel.*





**OFFICIALLY REFERRED TO AS THE** 'Wading River Radio Station,' the Benson House now joins an elite group of sites around the country that the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Park Service deems worth of special protection and historic preservation.

On March 17, 2018, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that Camp DeWolfe and Benson House would be added to the New York State Register of Historic Places, with the designation to the National Register of Historic Places made on May 4, 2018.



A key piece to the application for this designation was the revelation of the role Benson House played as a top-secret radio station during World War II. Information collected by the radio operators, posing as German agents, was critical to the counterintelligence used to deceive and mislead the Nazi government about the Allied invasion of Europe as well as to the push to develop the atom bomb.



## See you at camp!

Overlooking the Long Island Sound, Camp DeWolfe is a peaceful place in Wading River, New York, to hold your retreats and getaways during any season of the year.

Camp DeWolfe welcomes all families, schools, churches and organizations, from one guest up to 150 guests, for day or overnight retreats and meetings.

Camp DeWolfe is also a family camp, providing an opportunity for people from any background, ethnicity, faith or religion to experience God in community and develop as leaders in a beach and outdoor natural setting.

Camp DeWolfe is a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island.



## Did you know?



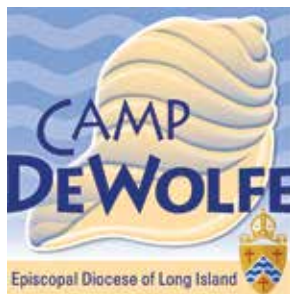
### **Benson House was even once a movie location!**

*In 1939, an American standout university student is approached by Nazi recruiters because of his German heritage. He feigns interest, then notifies the FBI and is encouraged to play along when the Germans ask him to set up a radio station on Long Island to relay secret information...*

Sound familiar? In early 1945, when the movie *The House on Ninety Second Street* was filmed to show the FBI's guarding of military and industrial secrets, sequences of the house were shot in and around Benson House!

If you would like to learn more about Camp DeWolfe, please visit our website at [www.campdewolfe.org](http://www.campdewolfe.org) or call us at (631) 929-4325.

We look forward to seeing you!



Camp DeWolfe  
408 North Side Road  
Wading River, NY 11792  
[www.campdewolfe.org](http://www.campdewolfe.org)  
(631) 929-4325

*Thank you to Ray Batvinis and Betty Lapham for their contributions to this piece.*