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Saluting Gus Foote

by John Ronan

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Gus, at his park's
rededication, in 2012.

Photo courtesy of Joelle Foote

Saluting Gus Foote

BY JOHN RONAN

"...all the while shall my heart be
with the bulge and nuzzle of the sea." - e. e. cummings

There is a slender park off Rogers Street nestled between the Gloucester House and Fisherman's Wharf, beautifully kept by the Generous Gardeners. The bright riot of flowers includes peonies, catmint, irises, daffodils, baptisia . . . there is also a shiny red metal buoy, a hardy perennial donated by the Coast Guard. And the park is the home of two stops on the Gloucester Harbor Walk: Stop #7 is a tribute to Howard Blackburn, the heroic fisherman who rowed the Atlantic for five days and nights in January, survived, and returned to Gloucester a hero; Stop #8 highlights granite and our 450-million-year-old outcrop of that legendary, durable stone. No tributes along the Harbor Walk could be more appropriate to the subject of this gem of waterfront property. It is dedicated to John Augustus Foote.

I met Gus in the late 1970s soon after he started his career on the City Council. We were introduced in City Hall, just outside the mayor's office. He shared a story about boxing as a kid in the sometime gym just over our heads. His recollections of what is now Kyrouz Auditorium included art shows, plays, movies, basketball games, and at least one circus. And, of course, with meetings of the Council. That was my first introduction to the rich lore of City Hall. Gus also shared his pride in serving as Councilor for Ward 2 and his affection for the City of Gloucester – a lifelong affection for Gus, a growing one for me.

As I quickly learned that morning, Gus was a Republican; I am a Democrat. Gus was a native; I had only been here a few years. He was in his 40s; I was in my early 30s. Despite differences, we had much in common, as I was to learn over the years. His mother was a Foley; my father's mother was a Foley. We were cousins on the great family tree! Like Gus, my father was a Marine veteran - a veteran of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The day I mentioned my father and Pearl Harbor to Gus, it seemed my stock climbed up a notch. But Gus didn't judge on credentials or birthright. He took people as they were, as they presented themselves; if you were a straight talker, he would talk straight with you. I was around for the second half of Councilor Foote's life and regretted that I had missed the first.

John Augustus was born in Gloucester and lived almost all his life on Mt. Vernon St., Ward 2. His love for the sea and the waterfront began early, in the fifth grade, when he left the St. Ann School to fish for his father, Captain Frank Foote. As a young man, Gus left Gloucester to serve his country in the Korean War and was wounded on Hill 111. His son Mark provided me with the date: July 25, 1953. It was just two days before the armistice was signed.

Decades later, Gus supported designating the Cape Ann portion of Route 128 from Grant Circle to East Main St. as a Purple Heart Highway. In November 2012, he sat on the Kyrouz Auditorium stage with Congressman John Tierney and others for the naming ceremony. His son Jack (John Jr.) and Jack's wife, Joelle, emphasized the pride Gus took on that occasion and provided a proud picture.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOELLE FOOTE

Gus at the naming ceremony for the Purple Heart portion of Route 128 in 2012.

A Marine all his life, Gus wore his Purple Heart medal to ceremonies on Memorial Day and Veteran's Day every year, including the year he died in 2017. Gus supported veterans as both a private citizen and public official whenever he was asked.

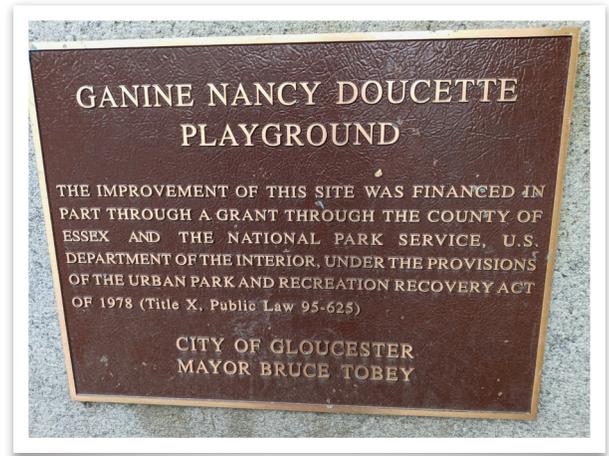
A touching example of Councilor Foote's love of Ward 2, as well as the military, is the playground on Green St. - just blocks from his own house. In 1986 Gus was instrumental in renaming the old Green St. Playground to the "Ganine Nancy Doucette Playground." Ms. Doucette

grew up not far from the Foote family on Mt. Vernon St. and was their newspaper girl for a time. Army Private First Class Doucette was on active duty when she died of leukemia in 1984 at nineteen years old.

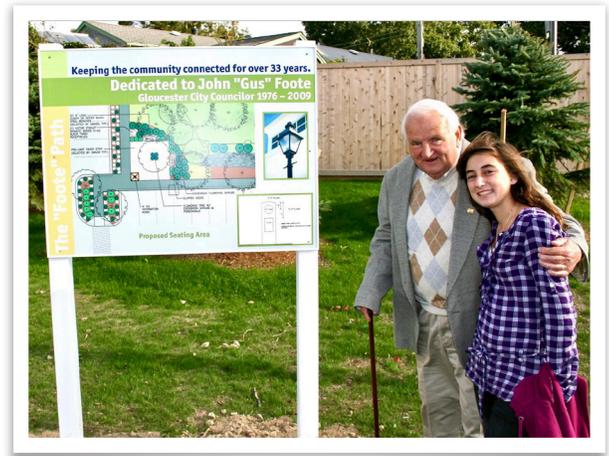
Another nearby example of Gus's care of Ward 2 is a short footpath that connects the top of Perkins St., just before it turns and becomes Perkins Peak, with Gloucester Crossing. The path passes alongside Marshalls Department Store and is marked by a wooden entrance frame. The path is dedicated to Councilor Foote, who supported the project and was helpful in moving it forward, even after leaving office. Gus knew it would be an economic lift to the City and especially Ward 2, where it is wholly located. Signage at the site explained the name and the special planting of trees along its length, but the signs are gone, at least they were in the spring of 2022. Gus was proud of this tribute and visited at least once with his granddaughter Marissa.

Former Mayor John Bell knew Gus well, politically and personally, as a City Councilor and later as Mayor. They worked together during the 1970s on the new city charter, and for years they walked Eastern Point together at 6:00 a.m., regardless of the weather. If Bell met Gus on Mt. Vernon St., he'd stop at Dunkin Donuts and bring a coffee, one of the seven or more cups a day that kept his Ward 2 host going. Mayor Bell recently reminded me of a more general example of Gus's love for Gloucester and the waterfront, but on a broader, national scale.

In 1981, the 60 Minutes interviewer Morley Safer came to Gloucester to report on the Unification Church and its aggressive move into the local fishing industry. Safer interviewed Mayor Leo Alper and Gus - Leo in the old Uncle Moe's coffee shop, and Gus in City Hall. Both, to put it mildly, were opposed to the so-called Moonies, named after their leader, Sun Myung Moon. Gus called the operation and Moon "lunatic." He was already deeply involved in the fight and



Doucette Memorial Stone



In 2009 Gus and his granddaughter Marissa visited the "Foote" Path that connects Perkins Street with Gloucester Crossing.

had no plans to slow down: “I am going continue to be right on his ass.” It is a rousing couple of minutes, and the whole segment, a wonderful quarter-hour. I am grateful to Mayor Bell for pointing me to the program, which I must have watched in 1981 (who could miss it?), but after 40+ years, I had deleted my mental file. (I recommend this search: “Leo Alper on 60 Minutes YouTube.” Follow the link.)

Councilor Foote represented Ward 2 from 1976 until 2009 with a break of one term when he ran for mayor. I respect those many years of service, especially the later ones since I’m getting up toward his age bracket when energy has to be rationed. But City Council service doesn’t sum up his contributions. Gus sat on the Gloucester Housing Authority, appointed by both Democrat and Republican governors. He also served on the Fisheries Commission and staunchly defended the harbor and waterfront. Gus served on the board of Action, Inc. and actively promoted and later often visited the Rose Baker Senior Center. And as a civic-minded dad, Gus inspired public service as a family tradition. Carolyn Foote, his wife of 63 years and mother of the couple’s six children, was the City’s parking meter enforcement officer for over three decades, retiring in 2009. Four sons became police officers.

I watched Gus Foote’s political career from the outside. John Bell and others watched from the inside, just as impressed as I was by his energy and care. Another city father, Bruce Tobey, had long experience with Gus as Councilor, Mayor, and friend. In clear, eloquent prose, Mayor Tobey highlighted four of Councilor Foote’s civic concerns in a warm *Gloucester Daily Times* piece in 2017:

- There was no stronger voice than Gus Foote’s during the successful drive to bring marine industrial activity back to the State Fish Pier.
- There was no more vigorous advocate in seeking regulatory relief and meaningful assistance for our beleaguered fishing fleet.
- There was no better partner in raising the money needed to get the long-delayed senior center built and to keep it up and running.
- There was no more effective supporter than Gus in forging the alliance between the City and the Housing Authority that built the first permanently affordable units of housing for first-time income-eligible homeowners.

The political role I knew Councilor Foote best for involved the arts. He pushed the idea of Gloucester naming a Poet Laureate, specifically appointing Vincent Ferrini to the post. On September 1, 1998, voting on a motion by Councilor Foote, seconded by Councilor Giacalone, the Gloucester City Council unanimously named Vincent Ferrini as Gloucester’s first Poet Laureate. That was also the de facto creation of the post, though it wasn’t formally codified until 2009.

Some people are surprised that Gus Foote was a protector of the arts. These folks are often in awe of Gloucester’s grit and genuine heritage but are put off when they meet the genuine article. Gus could be gruff. He certainly didn’t shy away from telling you what he thought. And he didn’t wear a beret or quote Longfellow, at least not in my hearing. What he did was love Gloucester, all of it, and he knew how important the arts were to the City and how important Vincent Ferrini had become. The arts and artists were part of Gus’s city-wide embrace. His real-world savvy moved poetry from laptops and typewriters to hard legislation. And he was joyous with the outcome, linking it to other civic goals. In a ceremony honoring Vincent, he said, “If we had six Vincent Ferrini’s on the City Council, the harbor would be safe.”

Councilor Foote was justly recognized for his long service. One form of praise and gratitude was the Rogers St. park mentioned above. It was first dedicated on June 17, 1989. The original granite marker reads:

Councilor
John Gus Foote Park
Dedicated to Gloucester’s
Working Waterfront
1989
Sponsor
Rotary Club of Gloucester

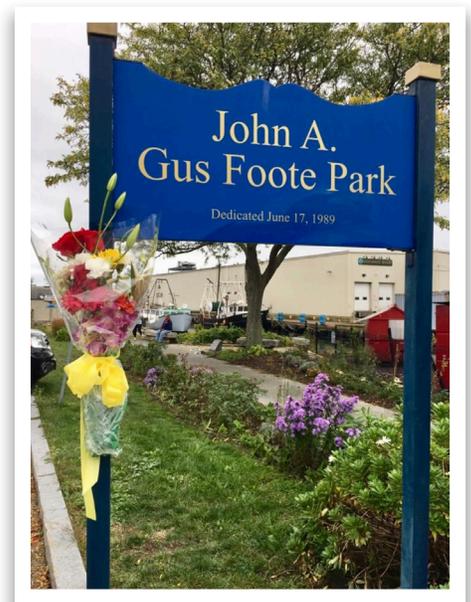


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FOOTE FAMILY

The sign at Gus Foote Park along Gloucester’s Harbor.

Of course, Councilor Foote continued his work long after the park was dedicated. An additional honor came when he was retiring from the City Council. December 11, 2009, was designated “Gus Foote Day” in Gloucester. A city proclamation cited his “integrity, honesty and devotion to the city.” It went

on: "Whereas: with deepest respect and affection, we thank Councilor Gus Foote for his service to the City of Gloucester and wish him and his family continued happiness." There was no mention of his humor. In thanking the Council and the City for the recognition, he pointed out the difference between himself and other politicians: "I let you know when I'm lying, and other politicians don't."



Gus and his wife Carolyn at the dedication ceremony of Gus Foote Park on June 17, 1989.

Honors continued. Gus Foote Park was re-paved, re-planted, and re-dedicated on Sunday, August 12, 2012. It was the concluding event in a four-day launch of Gloucester's new Harbor Walk, a \$1.2 million-dollar, award-winning project created over three years. It is a worthwhile stroll for visitors, and even longtime residents. Gus and Carolyn, of course, were on hand for the original dedication and the Harbor Walk ceremony. Gus approved of the park and later changes. The location where he began his working life as a boy was perfect: "It's small, but it's still a park," the Gloucester Times reported him saying. "There are five of them on the waterfront, and I'm one of them."

The last time I spoke with Gus was during a summer Block Party. We were at the eastern end of a closed-off area on Main St. near Pleasant St. – Ward 2, as you know. We had run into each other while doing the very important work of wandering around. Our cover story was that we were looking for our wives. We weren't in a hurry, knowing our wives

were doing the same thing, with a similar cover story: looking for their husbands. We talked for a few minutes about the weather, the Red Sox, the turnout on that clear warm evening, and the local celebrities we had met. It was a too-brief final visit.

On the morning of October 6, 2017, I got an email from my brother Mike: "Gus Foote died this morning!" Mike was also a fan of Councilor Foote, and those five words captured the surprise and shock that Gus Foote had been taken from us, that his death could even be possible. Gus was a local celebrity who would always be there, solid as granite, an institution.

Gus Foote received many honors and accolades for his work. They are deserved. Gus lived up to the Charles Winter New Deal murals that grace City Hall, not least, "City Virtues" in the lobby and "Poetry" in the City Clerk's office. He also lived up to the portraits in Kyrouz Auditorium, which he first saw as new, bright portraits as a boy, and looked upon for many years as a City Councilor.

And that is where his true legacy, deeper than a tribute, lives on. It is in the local law, the scores of Council resolutions that he created or supported. They touch all of us still, through housing, the fisheries, waterfront protection, the senior center, a playground . . . and poetry. When Gus died, I wrote an elegy that summed up my respect and affection, using his full, majestic name. I still feel the same way, so I will close with that poem.

Elegy for John Augustus Foote

My purpose today is to praise a good man
And lament his loss in a way he'd like - a poem,
An elegy to Gus Foote and his granite span
Of public service in a life-long home.
A fisherman, he fought for the industry and the harbor.
A veteran, he fought for care and recognition.
A senior, he spoke out for fellow seniors.
A councilor, he pushed for poet laureate legislation,
Pro-art and harbor, bricks for building Gloucester
In thirty-three years at City Hall.
And building not for today alone, but with a far-
Sighted, honest eye worthy of the murals.
For his witness of Gloucester, Ward Two and truth,
I offer praise for Councilor Foote, and my salute.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Mark and Jack Foote, and Jack's wife Joelle, for their help and for providing pictures. And Mayors Tobey and Bell for their insight, guidance, and memories. I have also relied on the *Gloucester Daily Times* and *Good Morning Gloucester*. And I am indebted to the Gloucester Archives for research help. Among others, these wonderful people helped: Louise Grindrod, Lois Hamilton, Michele Harrison, Elliot Jacobson, Michael Ronan, and Nancy Warny.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John J. Ronan is a former Poet Laureate of Gloucester, a Professor Emeritus at North Shore Community College, and host of The Writer's Block at 1623 Studios. He moved to Gloucester in 1973, so in 2023 he will have been here an eighth of the city's span.