# World War II code-breaker spent his final years in Newburyport
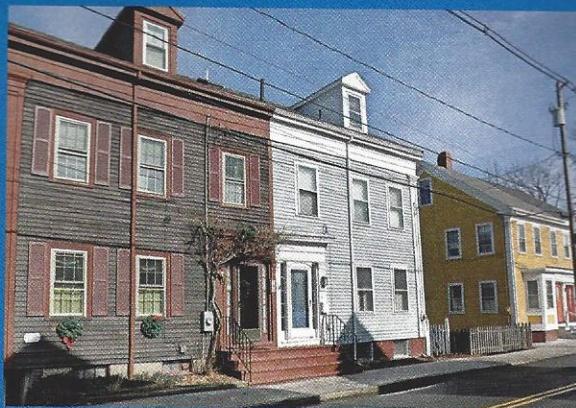
A sign designates 167 Water St. as the Gordon Welchman House. The World War II code-breaker lived the last 14 years of his life in Newburyport. At right, Welchman is seen along the Water Street seawall near his home.

HOME *to a* HERO

There is a small, all-weather sign on the exterior wall of a bed-and-breakfast on Newburyport's Water Street that states simply: Gordon Welchman House.

Few passers-by likely know who Welchman was, but both England and America benefited from his remarkable code-breaking skills in World War II.

Indeed, military professionals at the time said that the work of Welchman and other code-breakers meant that the war ended at least two years earlier than it might have.

The house that is now 167 Water Bed and Breakfast was Welchman's final dwelling after he migrated to the United States for better opportunities.

But his senior years in Newburyport were not as golden as he might have liked.

Because he chose to write about his career as a code-breaker, he spent much energy and angst ducking censors and avoiding intelligence agents who thought he was divulging too much about this esoteric but crucial technology.

When he died at Anna Jaques Hospital in 1985, he was probably the most accomplished mathematician to have resided in modern Newburyport.

How many immigrants' lives are discussed 32 years after they are dead?

Welchman, who kept a low profile here,

By DYKE HENDRICKSON • *Photos by* BRYAN EATON
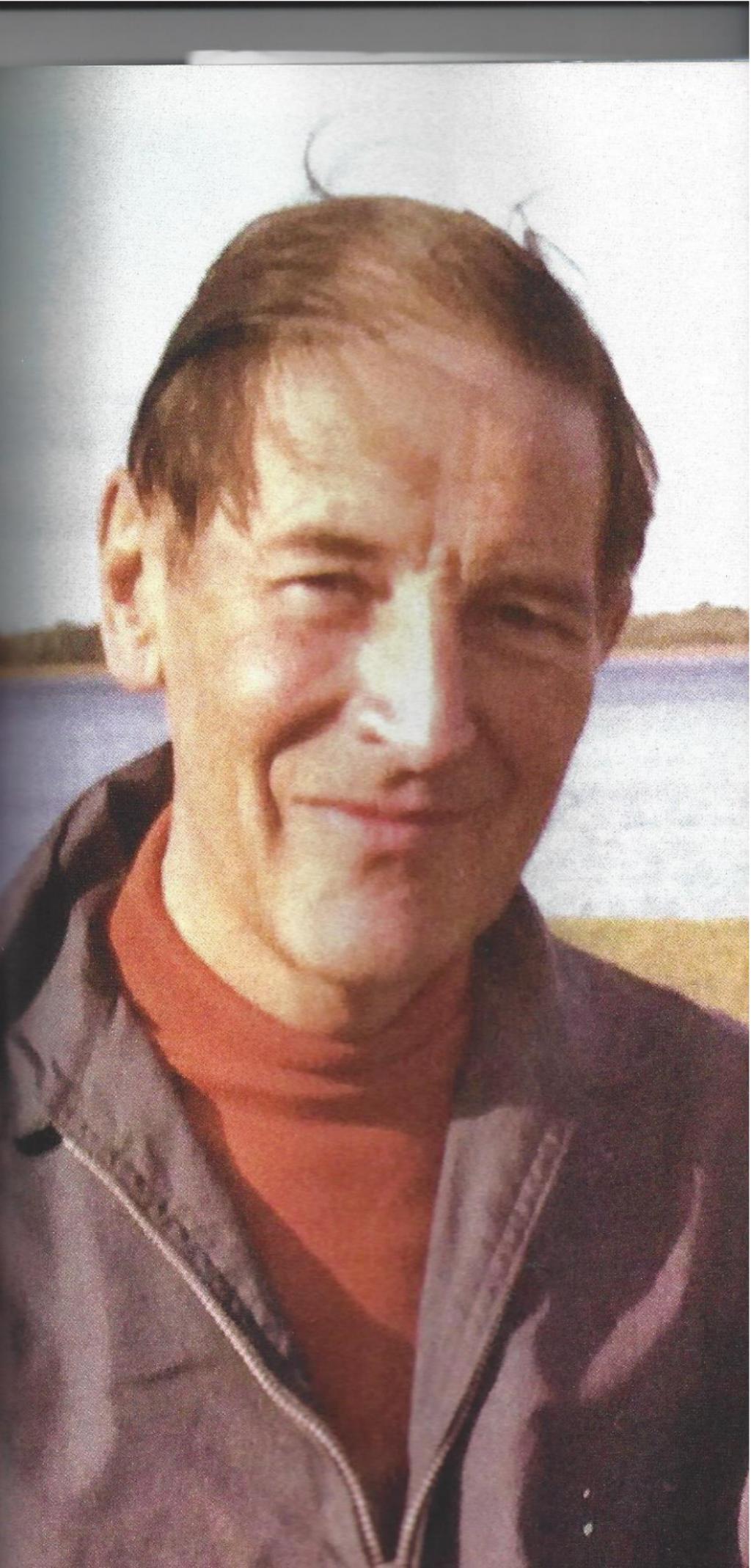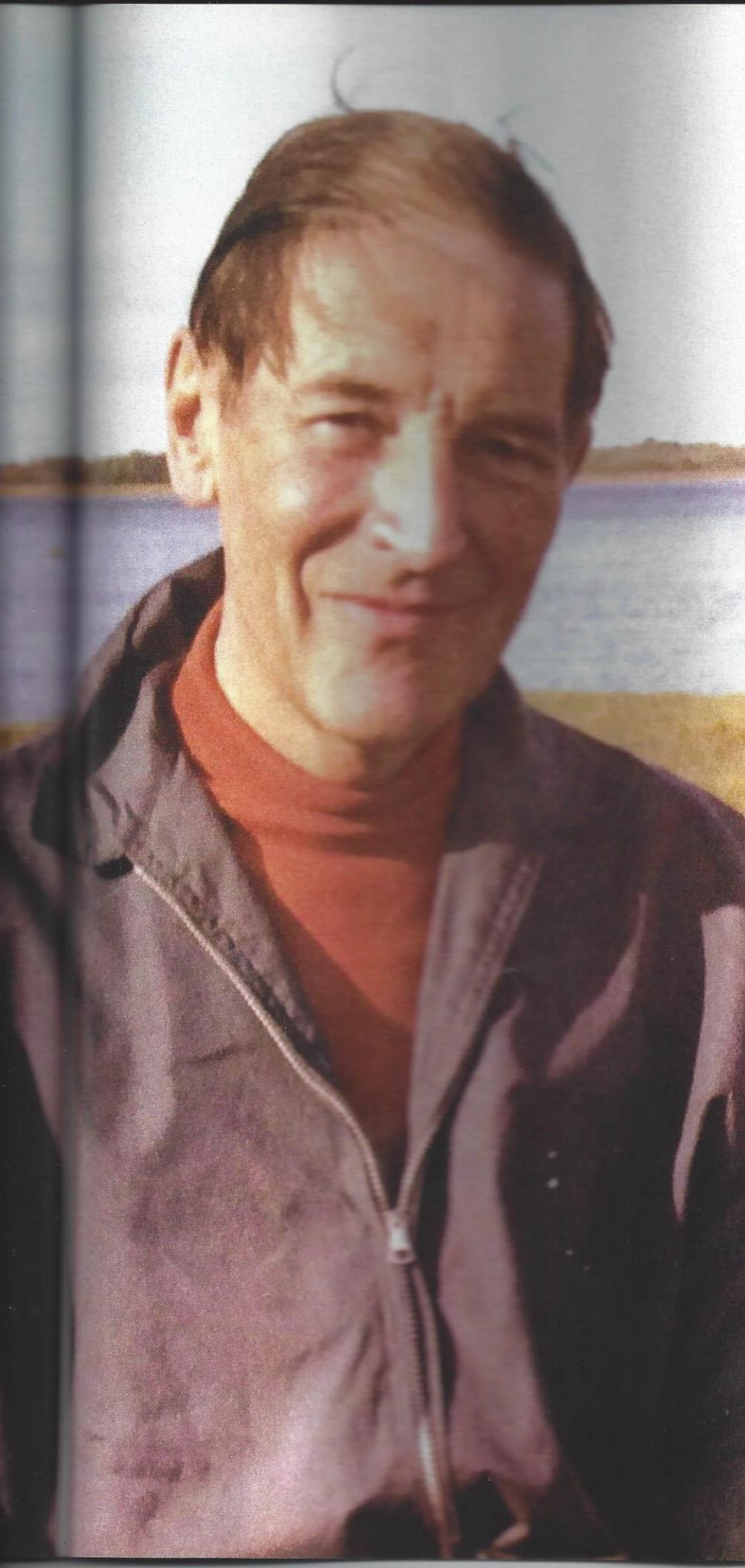
appears to be one of the very few.

The Friends of the Newburyport Public Library and the Museum of Old Newbury are presenting a program this spring that will reflect on the life of Welchman.

"I think it's important to link national and world events with local connections when possible," says Susan Edwards, director of the Museum of Old Newbury. "Gordon Welchman had a remarkable career in code-breaking that led to the shortening of the war. He chose to live in Newburyport for his final years, and it will be interesting to look into that connection."

Welchman's lifesaving work was done in England during the war when he worked at Bletchley Park, the prominent British center for code-breaking activity.

After the war, he quietly came to the U.S. to seek a career in mathematics. For a short time, he taught at MIT and worked in private industry.

But when he attempted to publish his memoirs in the early 1980s, he drew the ire of national security officials from both Britain and the U.S.

Many intelligence officials thought that the four-decade-old math calculations should be kept secret, but Welchman felt he could discuss them because other books and interviews had referenced the science involved.

Though he enjoyed his nearby family and loved his jaunts to Plum Island, his final years involved harassment by those who wanted to curtail his writing and speaking.

"Gordon was a very pleasant man," says Skye Wentworth, a Newburyport book publicist who lived near Gordon and his third wife, Elisabeth, in the early '80s. "But he didn't talk much about the important work he had done. He loved Plum Island and often took his family there. He wasn't prominent in the community, and few people knew about his career during the war."

Good with numbers

Welchman was born in 1906 near Bristol, England, and died in Newburyport in 1985. His father was a vicar and later archdeacon of Bristol; his mother was the daughter of a pastor.

Welchman was a gifted math student and won scholarships to Marlborough College and, later, the University of Cambridge in England.

He married musician Katharine Hodgson in 1937 and was the dean of Sidney Sussex College at the University of Cambridge when he was recruited to Bletchley Park, the rural center where the British government had set up a code-breaking operation.

In 1939, he began his indoctrination to military code-breaking.

The center regularly penetrated the secret communications of the Axis Powers, the alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan. Most important among these were the Enigma codes. As a result, British authorities often knew the movements of German forces.

Sir Harry Hinsley, the official historian of British Intelligence in World War II, has written that the information produced at Bletchley shortened the war by two to four years.

Those who worked at Bletchley had numerous notable successes.

Historians say that their work was essential to defeating the U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic and Hitler's armies on the ground.

In May 1941, the German battleship Bismarck was sunk by the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force working together, which was an enormous morale booster, as well as a strategic victory.

Welchman's code-breaking team, known as Hut Six, was credited with learning where the Bismarck was hiding.

And prior to the Normandy landings on D-Day in June 1944, the Allies knew the locations of all but two of Germany's 58 Western-front divisions as a result of breaking encoded enemy messages, historians say.

Welchman and others, including the now-famous Alan Turing, were given the Order of the British Empire for contributions during the war.

Drawn to the coast

In 1948, Welchman moved to the Boston area and taught the first computer course at MIT. Friends at the time said that he chose this region because of strong universities and growing number of technology companies.

It was said that Welchman felt the U.S. was less tied to class structure, and he wanted greater opportunity to pursue the new world of computing.

In 1962, he became a citizen in order to get high security clearance, and he worked for MITRE Corp. in Bedford, where he investigated optimum battlefield communication systems. He also worked for Remington Rand.

Like many Boston-area professionals, he traveled up to Newburyport on weekends and fell in love with Plum Island.

In 1971, he moved to Newburyport and inhabited the house on Water Street. It has gorgeous views of the harbor and Plum Island, and its proximity to the downtown has made it a popular tourist
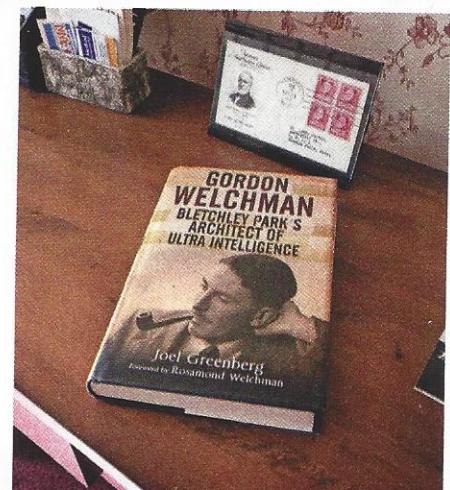
Guests at 167 Water Bed and Breakfast can peruse Joel Greenberg's book "Gordon Welchman: Bletchley Park's Architect of Ultra Intelligence."

destination in recent years.

"He loved the island, and he loved the area," says Ron Ziemba, president of the Friends of the Library. "He had family nearby and enjoyed the beach. But he didn't talk much about his work during the war and didn't really get involved in civic organizations or public affairs."

Ziemba says that Welchman did play music and was involved in a small combo that entertained in nursing homes.

If Welchman didn't talk much about

Gordon Welchman enjoyed beautiful waterfront views from the bedroom of his home at 167 Water St.

his code-breaking work, he began to write about it.

His 1982 text, "The Hut Six Story: Breaking the Enigma Codes," was published by McGraw-Hill.

Authorities say that it was the only publication to describe in detail how the British Bombe code-breaking system worked and how German messages were read.

Military authorities in this country were displeased that Welchman had revealed "secrets." Shortly after publication, he lost his security clearance and had to have an escort to do any work at MITRE, a prominent math and physics think tank.

Operatives of the National Security Administration visited him at home and forbade him to talk with the news media, news reports indicate.

He was threatened with jail and a $10,000 fine if found guilty of divulging military secrets, historians say.

Biographers say that his phone was tapped and plainclothesmen walked by his house and observed him from vehicles.

"He was losing weight and was in a state of great agitation," his widow, Elisabeth, said in a 1989 newspaper interview. "Because of his age, his work was everything."

Posthumous fame

Welchman was never fined or incarcerated, and he continued to write.

One subject that he sought to explain was Poland's enormous contributions to the English code-breaking mission.

Diana Lucy, a Brit who now lives in Newburyport, helped him find a publisher for his treatise on Poland, which appeared after his death in the journal

Intelligence and National Security.

But stress evidently played a role in his diminishing health.

In April 1985, he was diagnosed with pancreatic liver cancer. In the fall of that year, Welchman died at age 79 at Anna Jaques Hospital.

His third marriage had been a happy one, though, and he was interred in his wife's family plot — ironically, in Germany.

In recent years, the work of Bletchley Park is receiving more visibility — and appreciation.

The brilliant circle of mathematicians there was featured in the 2014 movie "The Imitation Game."

The film, which focused on Turing, grossed $233 million worldwide after being produced for a sum of $14 million.

British television has highlighted Welchman's role, and Newburyport was mentioned prominently in the 2015 BBC documentary "Bletchley Park: Codebreaking's Forgotten Genius." The film was retitled "The Codebreaker Who Hacked Hitler" when it aired in the U.S. on the Smithsonian Channel.

Scenes were filmed at the bed-and-breakfast, and since then, owners Anne Dodge and Chuck Kennedy have been welcoming visitors from across the world who are interested in seeing where Welchman lived.

It appears that some WWII luminaries like Welchman are gone but not forgotten.

"He had a remarkable career, and his team helped end World War II earlier than it might have," Ziemba says. "He chose Newburyport for his final years, and we've chosen to focus on him because of the outstanding work he did." $\mathcal{N}_M$

Gordon and Elisabeth Welchman enjoy the beach at Plum Island with their grandchildren Katy and Danny, the kids of their daughter Rosamund and her ex-husband, David.

Family, friends to remember Gordon Welchman

A free program to honor Gordon Welchman will be held Tuesday, March 28, from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at the Newburyport Senior Community Center, 331 High St.

A panel made up of those who knew him will discuss his life and achievements.

"Codebreaker: Newburyport's Gordon Welchman at Bletchley Park" is being hosted by the Museum of Old Newbury and Friends of the Newburyport Public Library.

Scheduled to be on the panel are the following:

■ **Rosamund Welchman,** daughter of Gordon Welchman

■ **Marilyn Wescott,** a personal friend

■ **Jay Stevens,** a lawyer who worked with Welchman during controversy over the code-breaker's book, "The Hut Six Story"

■ **Diana Lucy,** a fellow code-breaking alumna and Newburyport resident who knew Welchman when he lived here

■ **Bertrand Steeves,** a Newburyport minister who was friendly with Welchman during his time here

■ **Skye Wentworth,** a friend and neighbor

To reserve a seat, email info@newbury history.org or call 978-462-2681.