Preface

On July 7, 1890, the Biological Laboratory at Cold Spring Harbor welcomed its first students for an eight-week course in biology. Now, in 2015, we celebrate notable events of the past 125 years—the establishment of the Biological Laboratory and of the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s Station for Experimental Evolution (1904), and the growth of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (1963). The Laboratory has become one of the world’s leading research and educational institutions, and my hope is that the stories of the men, women, and science told in this book give some insight into how this remarkable and in many ways unlikely transformation took place.

This book owes much to two unpublished manuscripts. In the late 1980s Bentley Glass, a scientist who had been chairman of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Board of Trustees from 1967 to 1973 and then an honorary trustee, began to prepare an account of the Laboratory to mark its Centennial in 1990. About a decade later, Nathaniel Comfort, then the Laboratory’s science writer and currently Professor in the Institute of the History of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University, undertook a major revision of the Glass manuscript and added new and more recent material. I have made liberal use of the valuable information in the Glass/Comfort manuscript in preparing this book and I am indebted to both authors.

I have also benefited in countless ways from working over the past 25 years with the two most recent Presidents of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. Jim Watson made his first visit to Cold Spring Harbor as a graduate student in 1948 and immediately became aware of the special
nature and historic importance of the site. His desire to help secure and build up its scientific heritage brought him to the Laboratory as Director in 1968 and his wish to honor the past while planning for the future informed many of the decisions he made as a scientific leader, visionary of campus development, and instigator of numerous educational programs. Jim was succeeded as Director in 1994 by Bruce Stillman, whose sense of the history of the Laboratory is equally acute and whose recall of the details of the recent past, after 35 years of service at the institution, is remarkable. I have learned an extraordinary amount from both of these individuals who have dedicated so much of their lives to making the Laboratory an exceptional place.

A special thanks is also due to John Cairns, first Director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. John’s insights and lucid prose, whether in letters to the trustees or in his annual reports and other writings, capture so well the nature of Cold Spring Harbor.

The story of how a small harbor on Long Island’s Gold Coast became home to one of the world’s great biomedical research institutes is 125 years long and complex, and this small book cannot be a comprehensive account of the origins and development of the Laboratory. Several minutely footnoted volumes would be required to do justice to all that has gone on here over the years—useful for historians of 20th century science perhaps, but they are not the primary audience for this book.

It is instead intended as a celebration of the fact that despite numerous crises over the years, there is now a world-renowned Laboratory to celebrate. The book is for anyone who knows Cold Spring Harbor by having worked or visited here, or who has driven along Route 25A and wondered about the buildings on the west shore of the harbor. I have tried to provide sufficient information to cover the broad story without getting bogged down in detail or, in describing research, getting lost in technical jargon. I may be thought obsessive by those who do not know Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory and superficial by those who do,
especially since in a short history there are inevitably omissions. These
are more numerous closer to the present, as the range and complexity of
the Laboratory’s science increased and the number of researchers rose.
There is simply not room to mention all the possible research topics and
people involved.

The events described are in chronological order, except on occasions
when it seemed more sensible to complete a story from its origin to the
present time. The account of an institution is that of its people and its
environment and I hope the photographs of people and buildings provide
context for the history. I have also included images of some of the key
documents in the history of CSHL.

At the end of almost every chapter will be found one to three short
essays focusing on a scientist and an experiment or result. Many of these
discoveries have been superseded by subsequent research but they were
important at the time, both for the work of the institutes at Cold Spring
Harbor and the development of biological science more generally. As
this is not intended to be an academic history, I have not provided foot-
notes or references. Instead, I have listed books and papers that I hope
will provide a starting point for further readings on Cold Spring Harbor
Laboratory.

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The striking painting gracing the cover is by William B. Jones, based on many photographs taken by Art Brings, Chief Facilities Officer at CSHL. It was commissioned by Dill Ayres, Chief Operating Officer of CSHL, and I am very grateful to Dill for letting us use it.

Many people helped find illustrations: Jim Childress (Centerbrook Architects), Jim Duffy (Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory), Richard Gelinas (Institute for Systems Biology), Karen Martin and Robert Hughes (Huntington Historical Society), Scott Schultz (Cold Spring Harbor Library), and Ann Skalka. Thank you all.

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Jan A. Witkowski
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