

# A Window Into the Past

BY AMANDA WASTROM

One thing I have always loved about living on Cape Cod is that the past is so close you can literally touch it and hold it in your hands.

Whether that's the weathered clapboards of an old saltbox or the main line of a catboat sailing in Nantucket Sound.

Time passes. Things change. But in many places on Cape Cod, you can take a photograph and frame a view that has more in common with an earlier century than it does with our own.

Presented here are five vignettes of life on Cape Cod and the Islands.

I look for the small moments. The way one family in one tiny corner of a town lived.

The workings of a village store. Falmouth's brief horse racing history. The glimpses are small, but not insignificant.

It's in the details—that's where you always find the good stuff.

## Benjamin Nye Homestead East Sandwich

As you travel from town to town, certain names resurface over and over. As some of the earliest English colonists to arrive on Cape Cod, the Nye family is one of those names. The Benjamin Nye Homestead, on Old County Road in East Sandwich, is open as a historic house museum in the summer season. Built in 1678, it reveals the way life evolved for many Cape Cod families over the last three centuries. From farming and cottage industries to hospitality and fisheries management, this house has seen it all.

In the 1600s and 1700s, the Nye's were a hardwork-



Above: The Benjamin Nye Homestead (right) and the former blacksmith shop of James Holway, circa 1880. Below: The Benjamin Nye Homestead today, photographed from approximately the same spot.

ing farming family. They farmed a typical Cape Cod mix of livestock (cattle, sheep), Indian corn, rye and flax. Always resourceful and industrious, the family built a grist mill (with the first one built in 1669). The prosperous homestead became a hub of activity. By the early 1800s, it attracted other businesses such as a blacksmith shop, a small tannery, a shoemaker and a store. There is

evidence that the house may have had a brief sojourn as a tavern (1805-1829) and a stagecoach stop for travelers coming from Boston.

In the 1900s, the property was reborn again, leased to the state of Massachusetts as a trout hatchery. The hatchery superintendent and family lived in the house right up through the late 1940s. By the late 1950s, the property was no longer actively used and the house had deteriorated. Local Nye family members heard that the state was considering demolition. They organized and, with help from state senators, successfully convinced the state legislature to deed a small part of the property back to the Nye family in 1960.

Since that time, the Nye Family of America Association, has steadily grown in numbers and worked to restore the house and piece the property back together again. They acquired the East Sandwich Grange Hall (built in 1889) in 1992 and added 1.39 acres of the old fish hatchery land in 2009. They are currently working to restore the Old Mill (1858) which sits on the original 17th-century mill site. Preservation work is this house's latest chapter, through the active gathering of family documents, artifacts, photographs and oral histories. This work connects the family's own past, but it also provides a detailed picture of Cape Cod life over the past 300 years.

*As told to Amanda Wastrom by John Cullity, executive director, Benjamin Nye Homestead & Museum*



Top: Weir fishing circa 1900s. Above: Weir fishing on Cape Cod today.

## Weir Fishing

There was a time, in the late 19th century, when fishing weirs dominated the shores of Cape Cod. The weir, an ancient fishing method involving wooden posts and nets, has been used on Cape Cod for centuries. Native people were the first to tend these underwater fences that guide fish into a heart-shaped pen.

Alewife. Menhaden. Herring. These bait fish were the key to the Cape's maritime commerce in the 1800s. By the end of the century, they had all but disap-

peared. Fishing weirs, which indiscriminately harvested anything that swam by, were blamed and came under intense criticism from hook fishermen. As maritime industries dried up and fish stocks plummeted, Cape Cod's economy sank into depression. In search of jobs, residents left in droves, with some towns losing half of their population. The challenge was real. How to rescue Cape Cod was debated in the Massachusetts legislature. Meanwhile, the hook fishermen petitioned for the state government to intervene and regulate weir fish-

ing. They lost.

There are only a handful of Cape Cod fishermen who use fishing weirs today. Compared to the industrial-scale, trawler-style fishing operations, the weir is a slower, more time-intensive process. It avoids current problems such as bycatch disposal (fish can be released alive) and lost fishing gear (no hooks or lines to worry about). Ironically, the technique that was targeted as irresponsible and damaging to fish populations in the 19th century is now viewed as a more sustainable option.

HISTORIC PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BENJAMIN NYE HOMESTEAD & MUSEUM; CURRENT PHOTO BY JOHN NYE CULLITY, COURTESY OF BENJAMIN NYE HOMESTEAD & MUSEUM

HISTORIC PHOTO COURTESY OF BREWSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY. CURRENT PHOTO COURTESY OF CAPE COD COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN'S ALLIANCE

In the 19th century, also known as the "Horse and Buggy Era," horses were indispensable in everyday life, particularly in rural areas such as Cape Cod. Horse racing was one of the leading forms of entertainment. Beginning in the early 1800s, racetracks sprang up across New England. There were 62 registered tracks in Massachusetts, with Cape Cod tracks located in Falmouth, West Dennis, Harwich Port, Nantucket and Barnstable.

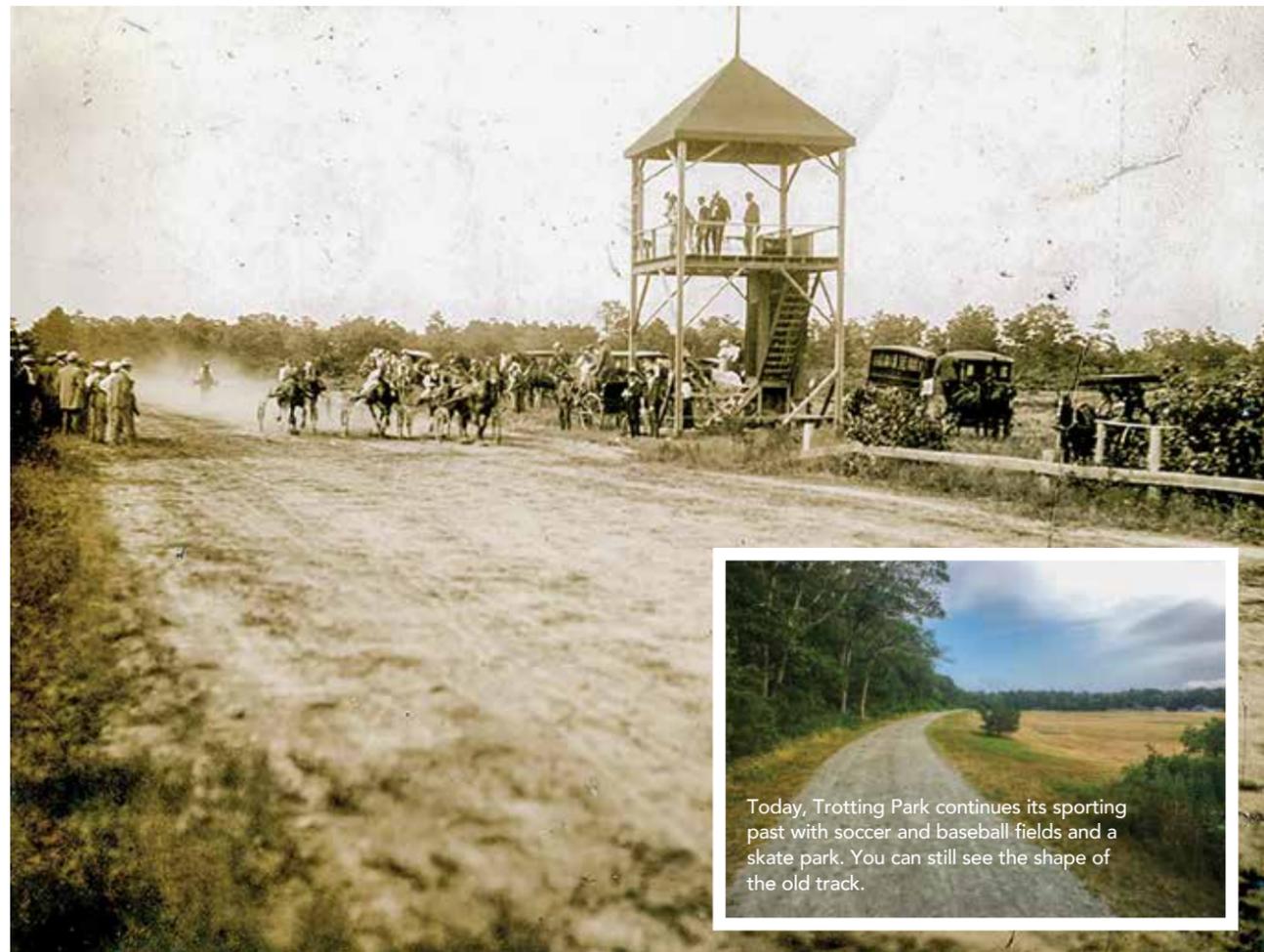
Featuring one horse attached to a two-wheeled carriage, or "sulky," harness racing, or "trotting," was one of the most popular forms of horse racing. The 1890s were a Golden Age for this kind of

## Harness Racing on Cape Cod Falmouth

racing, and thousands of people would attend. In 1896, a group of Falmouth men formed the Falmouth Gentlemen's Driving Club. They developed a 20-acre trotting park with a judge's stand, horse sheds and an embankment that formed a

natural grandstand on one side of the 200-yard track. Local clay was used for the track's foundation.

The track opened for its inaugural races in the spring of 1896, with a grand opening ceremony on July 4. The "Glorious Fourth" featured trotting and bicycle races, wheelbarrow and potato sack races and a baseball game. Admission was 50 cents for men, 25 cents for women and children over 12. The Falmouth Trotting Park continued for about six more years but then closed. The area is currently open to the public and owned by the town of Falmouth. You can still see the shape of the track and the embankment that served as the grandstand.



## Ockry's Trading Post Mashpee

On the corner of Great Neck Road and Route 130 in Mashpee sits a lone storefront: The Country Store. Unassuming, with signs for lottery tickets, ice and Coke pinned to the clapboards, it is more than just a convenience store. For just about a century, this store has served as an important gathering spot for the Mashpee Wampanoag, who have inhabited this area for about 12,000 years. They are one of only three surviving tribes of the original 69 in the Wampanoag Nation.

Historical photo: Ockry's Trading Post as it was in the middle of the 20th century.  
Current photo: The Country Store as it looks today.

The building was originally built around 1915 by Irving and Christine Oakley, as a general store and bait shop. Irving's grandson, Elwood Mills, and his wife, Josephine, owned and ran the shop for many years in the middle of the 20th century. In 1949, they ran a contest to name the shop. "Ockry Trading Post" was the winner.

For those who can remember Ockry's, the memories are strong. Smells of freshly oiled pine floors. The tall, glass penny candy cases. Elwood would know exactly what candy each of his young customers preferred. For a nickel, you could fill up your small brown bag with sweet treats.

Eventually, the Mills family sold the business and its name changed again. Although the store has been altered significantly over the years, it is still in its original footprint. To Mashpee Wampanoag people, it



will always be known as "the cor-nah." Surrounded by the school, the Baptist church and 'Collins lot' (what is now Mashpee Community Park) where Powwow was held, it is right in the middle of Mashpee Wampanoag daily life. For locals—the ones whose families go back too many generations to count—it's still the familiar place you stop by on your way home, even if it's just to grab some milk and a loaf of bread.

*As told to Amanda Wastrom by Paula Peters, Mashpee Wampanoag tribal member*



HISTORIC PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FALMOUTH HISTORICAL SOCIETY. CURRENT PHOTO BY AMANDA WASTROM

CURRENT PHOTO BY AMANDA WASTROM

# An Ever-Changing Waterfront Nantucket

Old North, Straight, Commercial, South, Steamboat—the wharves of Nantucket Harbor are the keepers of the island's past. While the buildings, people and activities have changed, Nantucket's waterfront has always been the epicenter of the island's maritime economy.

In the 19th century, it was whaling and fishing. A visitor to the waterfront in the mid-1800s would have been immersed in the daily buzz (and smells) of a thriving seaside harbor town. There was the unctuous smell of whale oil being refined and processed. Scallop shanties lined the south side of Straight Wharf. Whaling schooners would be tied up at others. Dayboat fishermen would have been coming and going. A burst of shouting, men, lines and barrels any time a ship arrived to unload its harvest.

Through the years, the waterfront heaved and hoed with changes, whether due to storms, fires (Nantucket's Great Fire of 1846 burnt the entire waterfront to the ground), changing markets and newly discovered products. The discovery of quahog beds just north of Nantucket in the early 1900s inundated the harbor with boats from all over New England looking to cash in on the newest catch.

Perhaps the biggest shift occurred in the 1870s, as Nantucket reinvented itself as a summer tourism destination. It was a much-needed boost, as a century of aggressive harvesting had depleted the ocean's once bountiful resources and left the island's fishermen and captains stranded and struggling.



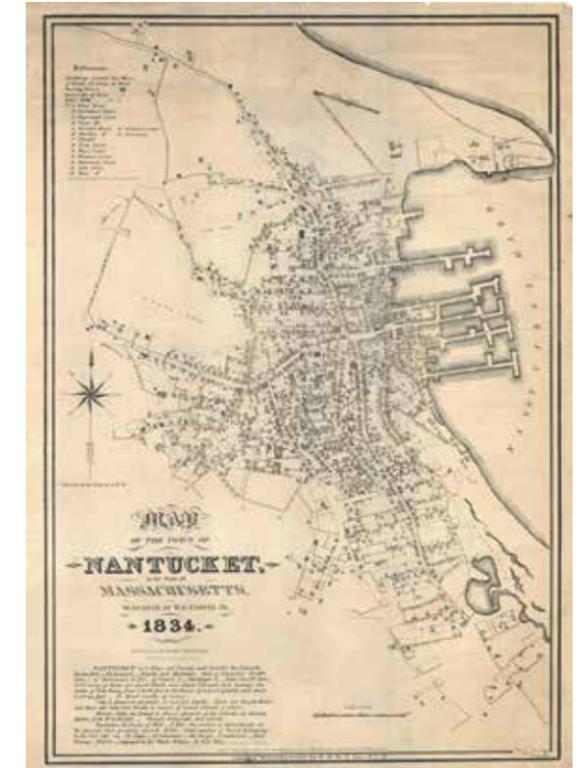
Along the Wharves, by H. Marshall Gardiner, circa 1900. Straight Wharf (left) with dories and catboats docked at Old South Wharf (right).



Horse-drawn taxis on Steamboat Wharf, waiting for passengers near the train station, circa 1900-1910.

Shown in these photos are two of the early signs of the change. The horse-drawn taxis, lined up on Steamboat Wharf, await the daily surge of tourists to arrive. In the second photo, catboats tied up and moored along South Wharf (on the right) await tourists for bluefishing parties. A catboat sail from the harbor to Great Point Rip was a favorite activity in the early 1900s. Former whaleship captains and fishermen reinvented themselves once again to skipper these boats. Today, the ocean still provides the island's livelihood, albeit in a very different form from past centuries. 🍷

Below: Antique map of Town of Nantucket, 1834. Current photo: Nantucket's waterfront as it looks today.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NANTUCKET HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION