

Journal of History of Martha's Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands



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SUMMER 2015

Beginnings: Rise of an African-American Summer Community



Oldest Enterprise: Edgartown's Kelley House

Adams Sisters: The Large Lives of Two Small Women



Moving Lighthouses: Sentinels at the Edges

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CHANGE OF COMMAND

With this issue, I become the seventh editor of the *Dukes County Intelligencer*. On a naval vessel, a brief ceremony on the quarterdeck would mark the change of command: words spoken and salutes exchanged, simultaneously acknowledging change and affirming continuity. Captains come and go, but the ship abides. There are no such ceremonies in publishing, but I take the helm of the *Intelligencer* acutely aware of that tension.

Gale Huntington, whose *Guide to Martha's Vineyard* was my first introduction to the history of the Island, held this post before me. Art Railton, early in his 27-year tenure as editor, gave me my first scholarly publication in the August 1986 issue. Susan Wilson, from whose capable hands I receive the journal, is a nationally known, award-winning writer. The challenge of following in their footsteps, extending their literary and scholarly legacy, is daunting.

This moment, however, offers an extraordinary opportunity. A multi-year, grant-funded project to process, catalog, and make available the "hidden treasures" of the Museum archives is now coming to a close. Thanks to archivists Nathaniel Janick and Lara Ullman, dozens of newly formed collections containing tens of thousands of documents and images now await researchers. There has never been a better moment in which to tell hitherto untold Vineyard stories, and to revisit familiar ones from unfamiliar perspectives. Four such stories appear in this issue, and many more will follow. I hope you'll join us in discovering them.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper

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A Shared Vineyard Vision

Harry Burleigh, Luella Coleman, and the Rise
Of an African-American Summer Colony

by RICHARD L. TAYLOR

THE TRANSLATION OF PROPERTY OWNERSHIP into the beginning of a national social and cultural cocoon for the African-American community on the Vineyard began formally in 1915 when Charles and Henrietta Shearer converted their large house and laundry facility into Shearer Cottage. Henrietta and Charles met at Hampton Institute (University) in Hampton, Va. Charles had come to Boston to work in the hospitality industry at the Young Hotel and the Parker House Hotel. Henrietta was a Blackfoot Indian and had been invited to the Island to visit some of her Wampanoag friends. Charles was a devout Baptist and was attracted to the religious revivalist community that was already well-established in Oak Bluffs. They purchased their first home on Martha's Vineyard in 1903, later acquiring property in the Highlands. Shearer Cottage was positioned on a hill beside the newly created Oak Bluffs harbor, just a stone's throw away from the old Baptist Tabernacle. It was a picturesque setting for entertaining guests. The large size of the property, along with its reputation for great food, lively conversation, music and cultural activity made it a vibrant social, political and cultural crossroads.¹

Activities at Shearer Cottage became the heartbeat of the emerging black summer community that staked their initial claim on this Island in Oak Bluffs. Dorothy West, a member of that community, remembered:

There were blacks who tried the island once and came no more. They were done in by the fog and the creepy feeling and the fog horn making moanful sounds all night. And the beaches come, the whole place surrounded by beaches. When you've seen one, the others don't look any different. And the woods. When you've seen one tree, you've seen the rest of the forest. A dirt road goes nowhere. What do you do

1 Shearer Cottage is stop #1 on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard (<http://mvafricanamericanheritagetrail.org>)

Richard L. Taylor is a longtime East Chop summer resident. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, *Hemmed In No More: Martha's Vineyard African American Profiles*.

for entertainment? Dullsville. But the others found more than they had ever hoped that they would find. A place where they could stand to full size. The town was ripe for them, and the time of their coming was ripe for the town.²

Harry Burleigh—a composer, singer, and arranger who stayed at Shearer Cottage every summer from 1917 until 1941—was the official conductor of this symphony of activity.

Harry Burleigh, Troubadour

Harry Thacker Burleigh was born in Erie, Pa., in 1866 and played a significant role in the development of Negro spirituals into the American art song, having composed over 200 works in this genre. He was the first African-American composer acclaimed for his concert songs, as well as his adaptations spirituals. His climb up the musical staircase of success began at age 26, when he received a scholarship to the National Conservatory of Music in New York. At the conservatory he studied voice, solfeggio, music history, stage deportment, and fencing. Shortly after his studies were complete in 1894, Harry's professional life received a transformative lift when, out of 60 auditioning applicants, he was selected as baritone soloist in the choir of the venerable and wealthy St. George's Episcopal Church. Given the prestige of the church and the pervasive racial discrimination of the era, his selection was the subject of some controversy when it was announced by then rector, Dr. William S. Rainsford. This decision and the hornet's nest that it stirred up brought him into contact with J. Pierpont Morgan Sr., a member of the congregation who served as Senior Warden. Morgan, a wealthy industrialist and financier, had such high regard for Burleigh's voice and his personal integrity that he not only settled the appointment in Burleigh's favor but introduced Harry to his network of high-society friends. Before too long Harry was singing in many of the homes of the wealthy in private parties, holiday celebrations and special performances. This included a performance for Teddy Roosevelt, then governor of New York. Harry's singing at St. George's and his visibility among the social elite of New York enabled him to secure a second solo position, in the choir of the wealthy Temple Emanu-El, in 1900. These two breakthrough posts, one Saturday the other on Sunday, established Harry Burleigh as one of the most significant singers of his time.

When not performing, Harry continued writing, composing and arranging music, and collaborating with other black musicians in the New York area. Two hotels run by black proprietors, the Marshall and the Ma-ceo, opened in 1897, featuring small bands and four-piece orchestras. They attracted a sophisticated crowd that gathered to dance, drink, smoke and enjoy the "after set" activities with Burleigh and his friends: author and

2 West, *The Richer, The Poorer*, 241.



Harry T. Burleigh with young friends on an outing to Gay Head in the 1920s. From left, standing: Unknown, Harry T. Burleigh, Eugenia Jordan, Dorothy West, Helene Johnson. Seated from left: John Mosely, Tom Mosely. *From the Martha's Vineyard Museum Photo Collection.*

songwriter James Weldon Johnson, poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Ted Drury of the Drury Opera Company. His singing and musical activities were reported in the *New York Age*, a weekly newspaper read widely all over black America.³ Tom Fortune, the publisher of the *Age*, assigned a staff of first-rate writers to cover music and drama as early as 1907. Under the editorship of Lester A. Walton, the paper carried full accounts of local, regional and national concerts; stage musicals; dramatic events, and other programs. The publicity it provided helped Harry to build a national audience and following.

The music publishing company G. Schirmer, Inc. published the first collection of Burleigh's arrangements in 1901, under the title *Plantation Melodies Old and New*, and issued a collection of his vocal works the following year. Maxwell published 14 of his songs in 1904, and his work appeared in the highbrow *Negro Music Journal* during its brief 15-issue run in 1902 and 1903. "Every Time I Feel The Spirit," "I Want To Be Ready," and "My Lord What A Mornin'" are all part of a broad range of solo, glee club, choral and instrumental performances spreading the music written by Burleigh. Burleigh would also give the world "Swing Low Swing Chariot," "Dig My Grave Long and Narrow," "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired,"

3 Founded in 1887, the *New York Age* was published until 1953.

“Deep River,” and “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord.” Unlike many of his contemporaries before and after him, Harry understood copyright and publishing rights, and appreciated the royalties that could flow even from slave songs. He was a charter member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers when it was formed in 1914. All of this ensured that the cohort of Negro spirituals that he wrote and arranged have been preserved for posterity.

Burleigh also reached out to other performers, both aspiring and established. He taught voice at Will Marion Cook’s School of Music in New York City and was a vocal coach for classically trained black singers such as Roland Hayes, Marion Anderson and Paul Robeson—often writing or arranging songs with them specifically in mind. Superstar operatic tenor Enrico Caruso was another of Harry’s clients, and he himself sang as the baritone soloist in a 1904 presentation of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s musical *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*. He also served as music conductor for the Drury Opera Company’s production of Bizet’s *Carmen*, as well as their productions of Verdi’s *Aida* and Antonio Carlos Gomes’ *Il Guarany*. Burleigh performed across the United States and in Europe, appearing in many command performances for the British Royal family and national political figures.

Over his lifetime in music, Burleigh is credited with as many as 190 choral arrangements and with having composed over 260 works for solo voice. His cumulative work as a composer, singer, and arranger earned him the NAACP’s coveted Spingarn Medal, recognizing outstanding achievement by an African American, in 1917. He subsequently accepted honorary degrees from Atlanta University (1918) and Howard University (1920). His portrait in oils, painted by Laura Wheeler Waring, hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, in Washington DC. When he died in 1949, the rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church, which Burleigh had served for more than 50 years, noted that all who came in contact with him felt his unusual power, not only as a musician and composer, but as a Christian gentleman and a devoted friend. “Harry Thacker Burleigh,” he wrote, “seemed aware of deeper tones of brotherhood and throbbing harmonies of humanity which others did not hear.”⁴

Harry Burleigh in the Highlands

Burleigh’s performance and writing career was punctuated, for many years, by summers spent at Shearer Cottage. He joined the summer migration of prosperous black families from Boston and New York in 1915, and continued to come for 30 summers thereafter. Over time, Harry became not just an active summer visitor, but an outright troubadour for

4 Jones, “H. T. Burleigh, 1886-1949,” which also reproduces the Waring portrait.

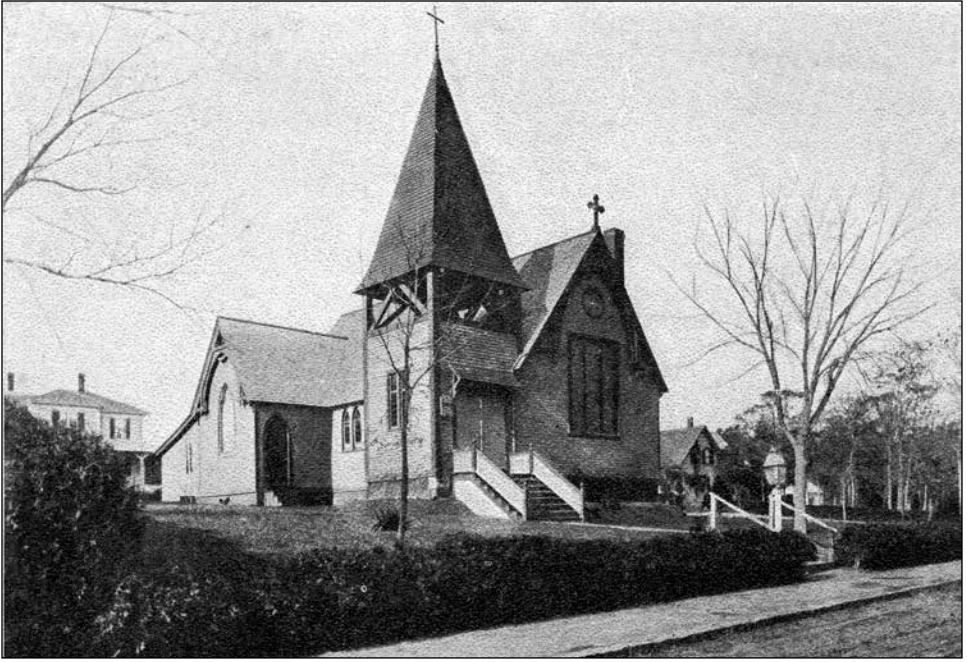
the Island, recruiting black musicians, politicians and actors to become part of the summer community. Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, William H. Lewis, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Ethel Waters all came under his spell—some performing and writing with him, others joining him at the magical dinner table of Shearer Cottage to share their views of the world and the events of their times.

Adam Clayton Powell Sr. was born in rural Franklin County, Va., just weeks after the end of the Civil War. His early life was shadowed by heavy drinking, bar fights, gambling and general mischief, but on eve of one binge weekend Adam went to a weeklong revival in Readville, Ohio, and converted to Christianity. Ordained at Wayland Seminary, a historically black college in Washington, D.C., he preached for a short time in Philadelphia before being called, in 1892, to be pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, Conn. Upon his arrival, Reverend Powell observed that the black churches in the city lacked evangelical fervor. It appeared to him, historian John Kinney wrote, “that all the preachers felt the shadow of Yale when they prepared and preached their sermons. The church services and social functions of the Negro community were Yale reproductions without Yale wealth, Yale intelligence and the true Yale Spirit.”⁵

Powell set out to kindle the evangelical spirit he found lacking, beginning with a radical change in the timing of services. Because social gatherings were usually held on Saturday night, church services were normally held at three o’clock in the afternoon or seven-thirty in the evening. Powell shocked the entire community by announcing that Immanuel would hold its services at eleven o’clock in the morning. Despite prophecies of failure, he preached to overflowing congregations, and soon thereafter New Haven’s other black churches followed his lead and changed the time of their services. Powell eventually established Immanuel as the most successful church in New Haven. He served as pastor for 15 years, simultaneously studying at Yale Divinity School and earning his D.D. from Wayland Seminary, his *alma mater*, in 1908.

That same year, the leaders of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in lower Manhattan invited Powell to meet with them. Founded in 1808 by Ethiopian-born merchant seamen affronted by the discrimination they faced at the predominantly white First Baptist Church, the church was, by 1908, falling apart at the seams and looking for new leadership. On the strength of his successes in New Haven, his academic training at Yale and his aggressive leadership style, the elder Powell was called to the pulpit of Abyssinian Baptist and assumed leadership of the church on its 100th anniversary. Dorothy West, a summer playmate of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., recalled the elder Powell’s charismatic presence:

5 Kinney, *Adam Clayton Powell*, 22.1



Grace Episcopal Church, Vineyard Haven, where Harry Burleigh worked on his compositions and arrangements during summers on the Island. *Postcard Collection, Martha's Vineyard Museum.*

Adam came to my house to play every day and every day Adam's father came to ask my mother if his son was somewhere around. I can see that great tall man, who looked so like Adam was grown up to look, striding up the road to ask my mother in his mellifluous voice if she had seen his boy. He would hold her in conversation, and she would turn as pink as a rose.⁶

The elder Powell transformed Abyssinian Baptist, by 1930, into a thriving congregation of 13,000: the largest black congregation in the United States and the largest Baptist church in the world. Its building on West 138th Street, completed in 1923, became a center of spiritual and musical activity during the Harlem Renaissance.

Powell had much to add to the give-and-take at the dinner table provided by Henrietta and Charles Shearer. A firm believer in travel and new frontiers, he had crossed the Atlantic in 1900 to attend the World Christian Endeavor Convention in London and visit the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. Five years before, early in his career at Immanuel Baptist, he had been present in Atlanta during the Cotton States International Exposition of 1895, when Booker T. Washington gave his famous speech promoting industry and entrepreneurship as the key to black self-improvement. As an admirer of Washington, Powell no doubt found a confidant in another

6 West, *The Richer, The Poorer*, 176.

Shearer guest, the formidable William H. Lewis, himself a friend of Washington and benefactor of the political largesse of the “Tuskegee Machine” made up of Washington’s followers and supporters.

A fellow Virginian, W.H. Lewis was born in Berkeley, Va., in 1868 and enrolled at age 15 in the state’s all-black college, Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (now Virginia State University). Lewis transferred to Amherst College in western Massachusetts, working as a waiter cover his college expenses and distinguishing himself as a brilliant student, a prize-winning debater, and class orator. He was also an athlete, becoming the first African American to play college football, and making Amherst’s team—which he played on for four years and captained in 1891—the first integrated squad in the history of American sports. Lewis was so well regarded that W.E.B. DuBois attended his Amherst commencement ceremony. He went on to Harvard Law School, settled in Cambridge, and won election—first to the city council and then to the state legislature—to represent his predominantly white district. Defeated for reelection to the legislature in 1902, he went to Washington and, with the assistance of Booker T. Washington, secured an interview with President Theodore Roosevelt and an appointment as an Assistant District Attorney in Boston. In 1911 he was named an Assistant Attorney General in the administration of President William Howard Taft, the highest federal post held by an African American at the time.

William Lewis and Adam Clayton Powell were among the members of the Island’s black summer community whose lives on the mainland revolved around politics and social justice. Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson represented the artistic, musical side of the summer community, but they were—in that sphere—no less accomplished.

Roland Hayes, as a college student matriculating at Fisk University, had come to Boston while touring with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. An unusually gifted singer whose talent and stage presence drew broad applause, Hayes made his official debut in 1916 Symphony Hall in Boston. He would never return to Fisk as a student, but went on to perform at Carnegie Hall, the Washington Conservatory, and Aeolian Hall in London, as well as in major cities across Europe. Like many African-American performers before and after him, he had to perform abroad to receive professional recognition in the United States. Hayes returned to the United States, famous and celebrated, in 1923 and—following in the footsteps of Harry Burleigh—received the NAACP’s Spingarn Medal the same year. His celebrity enabled him to turn over management of his career to the Boston Symphony Orchestra Concert Company, and to be handsomely compensated for his performances.

Paul Leroy Robeson was a bass-baritone concert singer, recording art-

ist, and stage performer. He was the first major concert star to popularize the performance of Negro spirituals, and the first African-American actor of the 20th century to portray Shakespeare's Othello on Broadway. Robeson was committed to racial integration and racial justice as much as he was to his multifaceted career in the entertainment industry. He spoke out against racism, denounced imperialism and nudged the United States government to provide equal rights to all of its citizens. He used his fame, his enormous talent, and his visibility to attract attention to injustice. He won the Spingarn Medal for his musical achievements, as Burleigh and Hayes before him, in 1945.

At the center of this swirl of social, artistic, and intellectual activity stood Harry Burleigh. Over the course of his 30 summers in the Highlands, he was a fixture at the Shearer Cottage dinner table, discussing the events of the day with Lewis and Powell, and collaborating in music with Hayes and Robeson. His summer residencies on the Island did nothing, however, to alter his reputation as a tireless worker. A staunch Episcopalian, he arranged and composed music every weekday on a piano in the parish house of Grace Episcopal Church in Vineyard Haven. Here he prepared much of the music to be used for Christian services in New York City, testing his newly developed repertoire with the Grace Episcopal choir and congregation. Dorothy West would later remark that "spirituals sung around the world were given arrangements within God's hearing in an island church."⁷

West had a unique window on Burleigh and the vibrant community that formed around him. When the West Cottage, near Oak Bluffs harbor, was destroyed by fire in 1911, Isaac West moved his family to a more modest cottage in the Highlands, just down the road from Shearer. Dorothy West thus spent her youthful summers in close proximity, with a front row seat to the comings and goings of its accomplished range of guests. Reminiscing, she remembered him, and his particular fondness for children: "There were seven or eight of us who were special favorites. He gave us money every time he saw us. With abundant indulgence, he would give us some more to spend in another. He rented cars, and took us on tours of the island. He told us about his trips abroad. To be with him, was a learning experience."⁸

Phillip Allston and Mattie Jones: A Place of Our Own

As Harry Burleigh and his friends were bringing notoriety to Shearer Cottage, a community of black families began to grow, organically, around this whirlwind of activity.

Phillip J. Allston, a Boston chemist who began coming to the Island in 1902, was one of them. Born in 1860, just before the outbreak of the

7 West, *The Richer, The Poorer*, 175.

8 Ibid.

Civil War, began his career as a bottle washer at the firm of Weeks and Potter, Wholesale Druggists. Patent medicines were a booming industry in the late nineteenth century, and firms like Weeks and Potter offered ample opportunity for advancement. George Robert White, hired when he was just a boy, rose through its ranks to become president and, eventually, owner. White amassed a fortune in the business, and his will left five million dollars to the City of Boston as a permanent charitable fund to support gardens, parks and other public gathering places. A statue in the Public Garden, designed by sculptor Daniel Chester French, was erected in his honor. Allston, like many black employees in turn-of-the-century manufacturing firms, was afforded no such opportunities and spent much of his career in entry level jobs that did not reflect his true abilities. Allston family history records, however, that he made critical improvements to the company's signature product—Cuticura antibacterial medicated soap—that enhanced its effectiveness, increased its sales, and so contributed to George White's fortune.

The far more modest benefits that Phillip Allston reaped from the company's success made it possible for him to come to the Island in the summer of 1902. Today, the keepers of the Allston history are Phillip's grandson Carroll Allston and his wife Myrna, third-generation summer residents. The second generation, Carroll's father and mother, purchased a house on Winemack Avenue, just off New York Avenue, in 1962 from the captain who built the house in 1940. Carroll's brother Phillip, the family historian, was an Island fixture until his premature passing. Myrna is well-known from her long association with The Cottagers—a philanthropic and social organization founded by black women on the Island—having served as their president from 1994 to 1999. Their daughters Melika and Carolyn have summer jobs on Circuit Avenue, an established tradition for a family in which they represent the fourth generation to summer on the Vineyard.

Not so far from the Allstons' house on Winemack, and not so far from Shearer Cottage, is the cottage in the Highlands that Mattie Jones bought in the early 1950s. She had come to the Vineyard around 1948 to visit Lucille Lippman—a family friend, who was renting what was then the Pollard House—and, like many before her, she came back to find a place of her own.⁹ Demonstrating the resourcefulness of the early black families that bought what they could and improved when they could, Mattie Jones added onto the six very small rooms of the original house by having the back porch of her Boston house dismantled and shipped to the Vineyard, where it became an addition to the house in the Highlands. The windows of the additional room are the originals from the Boston home. The ex-

9 Lucille Lippman also went on to a place of her own: a cottage on the other side of Oak Bluffs, near the town tennis courts.

pansion of the home, the additions, and the warmth and closeness from crowded family gatherings gave the cottage a name: “Possi,” which is short for “possibilities.”

The extended family that gathered at Possi during Vineyard summers included Mattie’s daughter, dancer and dance teacher Doris Jones, who started a dance school in Boston and later—along with her former student Clare Haywood—established the Capitol Ballet Company and the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet in Washington, D.C. Both Doris and Clare spent many summers on the Vineyard, frequently sponsoring dance classes and performances.

Mattie’s grandson—Richard Bayne, whose mother was Doris Jones’ sister Celestine Bayne—married Sandra Carmichael and they had two sons, Bijan and Javan.¹⁰ The family, and the Island, lost a beloved son when Javan drowned in the rough undertow at South Beach. His love of food, cuisine, and hospitality was evident during his career in the Omni Hotel system. The family established a scholarship to assist Martha’s Vineyard high school seniors interested in studying culinary arts or attending a historically black college. During the early years of the scholarship, the Island embraced this graceful Island family by supporting “Javan Day:” a celebration of his life that was held at Waban Park, just across from the Inkwell, where a large picnic and silent auction helped to raise scholarship funds. The Bayne family added another cottage to the family when Richard’s cousin Donald Williams and his wife Georgette, of Harlem, purchased a “legacy leap” property from George and Mary Lopez on Tuckernuck Avenue across from Waban Park.

Luella and Ralf Coleman: A Vision for the Future

A few streets from the Baynes’ cottage, the Coleman family staked their own claim to a piece of the Island and its summer lifestyle. Their introduction to the Island began, like that of so many other families, when a friend invited another friend to visit the Island, and lightning struck. Luella Barnett Coleman began exploring the Island as a guest of a Wampanoag classmate. Many years later she would return with her husband Ralf and two young children, who stayed with friends while Luella worked in the Highlands. In the 1930s she began to rent a small cottage at the corner of Laurel and Moss Avenue. In 1944 Luella and Ralf purchased the cottage and lot at 8 Myrtle Avenue from Manuel Gonsalves for \$800.¹¹ By 1946 there were five grandchildren: Marcia, Gretchen, Stephanie, Jocelyn and their brother, Jay. Luella was determined to bring them to the Island for the whole summer—away from the hot, humid and sometimes troubled

10 Bijan Bayne is the author of *Martha’s Vineyard Basketball: How a Resort League Defied Notions of Race and Class* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015)

11 “Coleman’s Corner” is now stop #25 on the African American Heritage Trail of Martha’s Vineyard (<http://mvafricanamericanheritagetrail.org>)



Luella Coleman and her granddaughter Jocelyn on the beach in Oak Bluffs, late 1940s. The beach on which they are playing, now lost to erosion, was just north of the Steamboat Wharf, visible in the background. *Courtesy of the Coleman family.*

streets of Boston's predominantly black Roxbury neighborhood. Luella had only a high school education, but she was good with numbers and willing to work multiple jobs, in a variety of settings, to ensure that her summers—and her grandchildren's—were spent on the Island. She used her earnings to accumulate two more lots near the original family cottage in 1948 and 1956, ensuring that her progeny would be certain to enjoy the carefree summer life of the Vineyard for generations.

Luella's husband, Ralf Coleman, was a visionary in his own right. Born in Newark, N.J., in 1898, he was adopted—along with his brother Warren—by Reverend O. Paul Thompson and his wife Julia, of West Newton. His early interest in theater was confirmed when one of his high school teachers had him memorize several scenes from Shakespeare, and he went on to take night classes at Emerson College and at Harvard, and to perform with the Provincetown Wharf Theater and the Boston Experimental Theater. His first public performance was as the narrator of an all-black pageant staged at Symphony Hall in Boston in 1920. Ralf worked in the garment business for 25 years while he and Luella raised their children, Leona and J. Riche, but he also became one of the pioneers of the emerging black theater movement in New England.

As the Harlem Renaissance began to spread its wings outside of New York Ralf joined the Allied Arts Center, first black community theater in Boston, in 1926. He directed the Allied Arts Players in 1927 and the Boston Players from 1930-1933, and made his Broadway debut as the romantic lead in *Roll Sweet Chariot* during the 1933-1934 season. The Negro



Ralf and Luella Coleman. *Courtesy of the Coleman family.*

Theater Project (NTP), part of the larger Federal Theatre Project funded by the Works Progress Administration from 1935-1939 as part of the New Deal economic recovery program, broadened his professional opportunities even further. The NTP established black theatrical companies (called “Negro units”) in 23 cities, creating an unprecedented opportunity to overcome racial prejudice and, for the first time, providing steady theatrical employment to black actors, writers, directors and technicians.

Coleman left his steady job as a clothes presser to become the head of the Boston Negro unit, making it the

only NTP unit to be led by a black man. He also served as one of the Boston unit’s principal actors and writers, and was joined there by his brother Warren (an operatic baritone who created the role of Crown in *Porgy and Bess*), lead playwright H. Jack Bates, and actor Frank Silvera (who went on to a long career on Broadway, in film and on television). Their range of productions included *Cinda*, a black version of the Cinderella written by Bates, along with *Black Acres*, *The Legend of Joe Emma*, *The Lost Disciple*, and Coleman’s own *Swing Song*. When the Negro Theater Project closed down in 1939, he continued his career in the theater including the founding of the Negro Repertory Theater which performed throughout New England.

Luella and Ralf Coleman were part of two independent but historic movements that improved the lives of future generations. Ralf, through his pioneering work in the black theater movement, expanded the opportunities that would be available to them in the performing arts. Luella, through her tireless work and visionary acquisition of property on the Island, fought hard to ensure that her grandchildren would be able to enjoy the Vineyard summer experience.

The life that Luella’s efforts created for the Coleman grandchildren was

shaped by the wonderful sense of community that developed among the families of their neighborhood on Myrtle Avenue. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., sisters Doris Jones and Celestine Bayne, Dorothy West, and Irene Ford all became part of their orbit. So, too, did the famous Maxwell Cottage on West Street, a highly regarded bed-and-breakfast with outstanding food. Across from it was the home of Thelma Garland Smith, the inspirational leader of “The Cottagers.”

The Coleman grandchildren and other “summer kids” like Skip Finley, Kevin Parham and their contemporaries found that—whether they lived in the Highlands, the School Street district or the “Gold Coast” near the Inkwell and town beaches—the Vineyard offered endless activities, both structured and spontaneous. Finley, who lived the Gold Coast area, recalls many hours spent searching for and eating berries, with blueberries giving way to huckleberries as July rushed into August. He reminisces about the Old Variety Store, just behind the Flying Horses, which had the best penny candy in town and where 50 cents would bring 50 pieces of Mary Janes and Tootsie Rolls, Bit-O-Honeys and Jaw Breakers. Parham, whose grandmother Carrie White (known as “Nana”) came to the School Street district in 1935, remembers digging for clams with his siblings and his friends in Sengekontacket Pond, just beyond Big Bridge, and chasing crabs down the street opposite Bend-in-the-Road Beach in Edgartown. “Our crabbing strategy went something like this,” he wrote in a memoir of his Vineyard summers. “Two of us grabbed a fishing pole, baited the hook with a small piece of squid, and lowered it into the water near the rocks to lure crabs out of hiding. The rest of us carefully waded into the water with our nets in hand and waited for the crabs to go after the bait. Once they went for the bait, we scooped them up with a net and dropped them into a bucket. For every few crabs we attempted to catch, we were lucky to trap any of them because they moved fast and often got away.”¹²

The members of the Coleman family share decades of continuity not only with one another, but with the families that Luella Coleman helped to introduce to the Island. She invited friends and colleagues to the Island to spend the weekend—as she herself had been invited, long ago—and for many the lightning would strike again. Coleman family friends Tom and Margie Borders, Jim and Maggie Alston, Richard and Cleora Francis, and Ed Daley were among those weekend visitors who, hooked on the Vineyard, returned to buy property. Former neighbor Irene Ford continues to be represented by her nephew Richard, his wife Carol Washington, and their daughter Kim. Their family moved from the Highlands, first to School Street and then to Pacific Avenue in Oak Bluffs, and finally to West Tisbury. Irene’s sister Mildred was succeeded by her son, the late

12 Parham, *The Vineyard We Knew*, 136.

Paul Johnson, and his wife Louise, whose property is across from the Oak Bluffs tennis courts in Niantic Park.

Harry Burleigh and Luella Coleman were miles apart in their social and economic positions in life. But they shared common values and a piercing insight into the significance of a Vineyard experience, and—over decades of summers—they shaped communities of family and friends that, over multiple generations, have spread across the Highlands of Oak Bluffs and beyond. To Harry summer life on the Vineyard provided the tonic of clean air and free thinking to write his music and exchange ideas with his circle of friends. To Luella it offered psychological freedom for herself and physical freedom for her children and grandchildren. Their shared insight into the Vineyard experience is tangible and intangible evidence that the Island can be enjoyed by all, regardless of their station.

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3

De blin' man stood on de road an' cried

St. Mark X, 46, 82

Negro Spiritual
Arr. by
H.T. BURLEIGH

Lento

O de blin' man

stood on de road an' cried O de blin' man stood on de road an' cried

Cry-in' O my Lord, save me, De blin' man stood on de road an'...

* Pronounced 'dūt,' not 'dee' except before words beginning with a vowel sound.
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A small piece of Harry T. Burleigh's musical legacy.
Bradley Memorial Church and Denniston Family Papers Collection,
Martha's Vineyard Museum.

The Oldest Enterprise

The Kelley House, Established in 1742, a Place of Sanctuary and Welcome Across the Centuries

by NIS KILDEGAARD

THE KELLEY HOUSE is one of the oldest of Island commercial structures, having been established as an inn in 1742 when it was called *The Tavern*. It is not known whether or not this was the first ‘public house’ on the Vineyard, but it is recorded that no inns were established on the Vineyard until after all nearby mainland towns had established inns and taverns in accordance with law, and it may be that this ancient landmark is the first house to be so designated in the county, a survival of that period in Vineyard history when traditional New England hospitality was so extensive that inns were unnecessary.”

So wrote the *Vineyard Gazette* in April of 1936, reporting that Richard L. Colter had become sole owner and proprietor of the Kelley House on North Water and Kelley Streets in Edgartown. Is it possible that the Kelley House is the oldest commercial enterprise in continuous (or near-continuous) use still standing on Martha’s Vineyard? A strong argument can be made that the answer is yes.

Charles Banks’ *History of Martha’s Vineyard*, published in 1911, has an account of the inn’s origins that differs only slightly from the *Gazette*’s: “The Kelley House of today is on the site of a hostelry that is over a century old. It is on the northerly half of the original Bayes home lot, which descended to the Newcombs and was bought of their heirs in 1743, by John Harper. He began keeping a tavern there in 1748, and was succeeded by his son-in-law, Lemuel Kelley, in 1772 [sic], and by Kelley’s widow (Bathsheba Harper), in 1798. Her son, William Kelley, followed in 1801.”

Documents in the Dukes County Registry of Deeds bear out the accounts of both Banks and the *Gazette* in a general way, though not precisely. It’s interesting to note that in tracing the history of the Kelley House, one inevitably ends up reading records dating back to the time when docu-

Nis Kildegaard was news editor of the *Vineyard Gazette* from 1981 to 2004, and since 2006 has been reference librarian at the Edgartown Public Library. He is the author of the 2014 history, *Harbor View: The Hotel That Saved a Town*.



This early image of the Kelley House probably dates to the 1890s, when it was called the Sea View. Kelley Street is unpaved and without sidewalks. In the background there's no sign of the Colonial Inn, which opened in 1911. All images in this story are from the collection of Richard I. Colter Jr.

ments don't always speak of Edgartown, but rather of "Old Town."

Jacob Norton, in 1731, purchased 10 acres of land, including the property where the Kelley House now stands, from Joseph Newcomb for the then-huge sum of 490 British pounds. This land is described as "formerly the Estate or Inheritance of Capt. Thomas Bays." Norton very likely got a good portion of his wealth through his marriage. His wife, Bethiah Mayhew, was the daughter of a prominent Chilmark citizen, Paine Mayhew. Paine was one of the agents for Indian affairs on the Island, a Justice in the Court of Common Pleas for nearly half a century, a selectman and a Representative to the General Court. John Harper (1700-1791), a master mariner who had recently relocated from Nantucket, purchased the Kelley House and five acres of land from Jacob Norton in August of 1743 for the sum of 325 British pounds. Around this time he began operating what was called simply The Tavern. Registry documents show Harper continuing to buy up fractional interests in his property from heirs in the Newcomb family—it had been divided into ninths—in 1754 and 1756.

John and Hannah Harper

John Harper was married to the former Hannah Sprowell. Not a great deal is known of them, but what the historical record does contain—recounted by Frances Ruley Karttunen in *Law and Disorder in Old Nantuck-*

et and *The Other Islanders*—is intriguing. John Harper was brought before the Nantucket court in 1718 together with William Percy and Joe Bone, a Wampanoag, on charges of breaking, entering and theft—specifically, stealing bread and tobacco from a fishing boat and having taken a boat to the mainland. He was sentenced to whipping in the town square and indentured servitude to a fisherman in return for having his fines paid.¹ But Harper apparently distinguished himself as a mariner, rising to the position of master of whaling vessels. He is recorded as going out whaling as master of the sloop *Humbird* from Martha's Vineyard in 1742, the year before his purchase of the tavern in Edgartown.

Hannah Sprowell, two years younger than John, married him in 1728. She appears in Nantucket records twice as an attorney, a role which was then remarkable for a woman. In 1734, she acted as attorney for a defendant named James, described in records as “a free Negro,” accused of owing money to carpenter Richard Folger. Her argument that Folger had overcharged James did not persuade the court. In 1750 she appeared in court again, this time representing a Wampanoag, Simon Joel. Again the dispute was over a debt, and again, Hannah Harper's arguments did not prevail. But the fact that Hannah twice served as advocate for people of color under the burden of debt is notable, and she is the only woman on record as having acted as an attorney in early Nantucket.

Hannah and John had nine children—all daughters—and their fifth daughter, Bathsheba (1739-1813), married Lemuel Kelley (1736-1797), also a master mariner. John Harper sold the inn property to Lemuel in 1762, thus beginning an association between the Kelley family and the Kelley House enterprise that would last nearly two centuries.

A New Century, and New Owners

After Lemuel's death in 1797, Bathsheba Kelley operated the inn until William Kelley, one of their sons, took over the business in 1801. After William Kelley, the inn was owned by Joseph V. Kelley, who in mid-century brought in a notable investor to be half-owner of the property: Captain Thomas Milton.

Captain Milton was born in 1787 and came to Martha's Vineyard in the early 1800s, marrying an Edgartown girl named Jane Hammett Pratt. He was an immensely successful man, first as a globe-trotting sea captain and later as an investor in fleets of commercial ships, including whalers. He built the Captain Milton House, now part of the Harborside Inn, and on that South Water Street property, in 1833, he planted a seedling of *Sophora japonica*, brought back from one of his sailing trips to the East Indies, that is now the locally famous Giant Pagoda Tree. Captain Milton retired from the sea in 1837 and became a prosperous businessman in Edgartown,

1 Karttunen, *Law and Disorder*, 89-93.

Vineyard House, Edgartown, Joseph Kelley, Proprietor.

DATE.	NAME.	RESIDENCE.	TIME.
July 5	1873		
	Mr & Mrs M. Smith	Steam Yacht "America" of N.Y.	
	Capt. E. J. Tyler	do	
	Mr & Mrs Mary Davis	do	"
	Mr. Walter	do	"
	Mr & Mrs E. A. Drake	do	"
	Miss Islyn	do	"
	Miss Grace A. Islyn	do	"
	Mr & Mrs C. Islyn	do	"
July 7	J. B. Chickering	Cincinnati, O.	
	C. Howard	Cincinnati, Mass.	
	F. R. Roots	Cornersville, Ind.	
	Chas. Morgan Jr.	do	
July 7	Chas. Fisher	New Bedford	
" 8	Alvin M. Mearns	Boston	

This page from the 1873 ledger of Joseph Kelley's Vineyard House records the visit of the steam yacht America from New York over the Independence Day weekend.

investing in properties that included a dry goods store on Main Street. In 1853 he purchased a half-share of ownership in the Kelley House property from Joseph Kelley.

During this period the Milton and Kelley families were owners of the inn business, but not operators. They hired managers to run the place, one of whom was an L. Marcy who operated it as the Marcy Tavern and as the Marcy House. Joseph Kelley, a son of Joseph V. Kelley, brought the operation of the inn back into the family early in the second half of the century. At his death in 1878—his father, surviving him, served as executor of the estate—the inn was then named the Vineyard House. In addition to being an innkeeper, Joseph Kelley was a maker of block-and-tackle gear for marine and agricultural use. An inventory of his workshop, carried out at

SEA VIEW HOUSE, → EDGARTOWN ← **Martha's Vineyard, Mass.**

(For many years known to the public as the VINEYARD HOUSE.)

THOROUGHLY : RENOVATED : AND : REFITTED.

Located on North Water street, overlooking the waters of Harbor and Sound, and in close proximity to Boating, Bathing and Fishing. Stores, Post-office, Churches, Telegraph office, etc., close at hand. The Rooms unusually large and airy, furnished with improved beds, and *cuisine* all that can be desired.

WILLIAM KELLEY, MANAGER.

With this card, doubtless printed in the job shop at the Vineyard Gazette office, William Kelley announced the opening of the hotel under its new name in the early 1890s.

the time of his death, includes saws, knives, sheaves, and other tools and materials valued at \$101.75.

A Vineyard House guest ledger, handed down across the generations, paints a picture of busy summer traffic at the inn even as the Edgartown economy struggled during the years after the Civil War. Coastal cruising was emerging then as a summer pastime of the wealthy, and the guest book for the summer of 1873 lists among the visitors the parties traveling on large motor yachts from up and down the Eastern seaboard—among them the *Lizzie*, the *Sea Side*, the *Washington*, the *Addie*, and the *America*.

To see how much the Kelley House story is a family story, it's illuminating to consider the names of Joseph Kelley's heirs as listed in his will: sons John Harper Kelley and William Kelley, daughter Rebecca A. Kelley, and "Milton Kelley and Joseph Kelley, the last two being minors." Here they all are—Harper, Kelley, Milton—the names of everyone involved in this story, contained in a single family.

William and Elizabeth Kelley, Innkeepers

If there is any break in the story of the Kelley House as the oldest continuous business on Martha's Vineyard, it comes here—in the late 1870s and early 1880s. It's not clear that the inn continued to accept guests in the years immediately after Joseph Kelley's death. This was, after all, the very lowest point in the depression that struck Edgartown after the collapse of the whaling industry.

We know that the Kelley House (then called the Sea View House²) was back in operation in 1891 under William Kelley, a son of Joseph Kelley and a direct descendant of the Kelleys who ran the inn nearly a century-and-a-half before. In the kitchen was Elizabeth Johnston, who was born in Tabusintac, New Brunswick, Canada, in 1858 and came to Edgartown at the age of 18. She would have been 33 years old when she started work at the Sea View House in 1891—and 34 in 1892, when she and William Kelley were married. This began a span of more than four decades when the Kelley House, as they would rename it, established itself as one of Edgartown's leading hostels.

William and Elizabeth Kelley became sole owners of the business before the turn of the new century. After Captain Milton's death in 1862, his ownership in the property passed to his heirs and was bought up by Eliza Sweet, his daughter, in 1878. Eliza's son, Richard Sweet, sold their interest in the business back to William Kelley in a transaction recorded in 1895.

Milton and Sweet

This period in the history of the Kelley House clears up a mystery left by a 1946 clipping from the *Vineyard Gazette*, which reported that: "A hotel, popularly called the Tavern, was kept on the site of the Kelley House in the first half of the eighteenth century. The present structure, in its first form, was erected by Milton and Sweet in 1742. Little is known of them, but they produced a building of outstanding architectural merit, and the rooflines of the Kelley House of today have been widely admired and copied." The reason so little is known of the mysterious builders, Milton and Sweet, is almost certainly that they never existed. It's simply too great a coincidence that the story of the Kelley House should also have a second, well-documented Milton and Sweet—the sea-captain and his daughter, part owners in the enterprise for almost half of the nineteenth century.

Though they would never bear children, William and Elizabeth Kelley's marriage was clearly a strong partnership. In September of 1907, facing what he must have realized would be his final illness, William purchased, for four dollars, a burial plot in the Edgartown Cemetery on Pease's Point Way. Reporting his passing, the *Gazette* wrote: "His life was active and busy, yet in a singularly quiet way. In 1892 he married Elizabeth A. Johnston, and thereafter found in her a tower of strength to help. He will always be remembered for the genial good cheer by which he became so successful in his business. Of every company in which he was present, he was the life and soul. People came to Edgartown merely to be guests of William Kelley, at his hotel."

2 Not to be confused with the Seaview, the immense hotel that loomed over the steamer wharf in Cottage City (as Oak Bluffs was then known). Opened in 1888, the Seaview lasted only four seasons before it was destroyed by a mysterious fire.

Kelley House Memories: No Lock



From the early 1940s, a view of the Edgartown village waterfront and across to Chappaquiddick, taken from the peak of the Kelley House roof. *Courtesy Richard I. Colter Jr.*

RICHARD I. COLTER JR. of Edgartown, grandson of Lee Colter and son of Richard Iliffe Colter, grew up working at the Great Harbour Inn, which was very much a family enterprise. He recalls the span of years from the 1950s through the 1970s as a time of tumultuous change in the hotel business in Edgartown. Rich Colter says that as a boy, he did about every job there was to do at the inn. “I started off washing dishes when I was so small, I had to stand on a stool to reach the dishwasher. I helped to open it up every year with my father, and to close it and drain the water pipes every fall. I worked the front desk and helped cook breakfast. And I worked in my grandfather’s garage.”

He recalls a sea change in patterns of tourism that began in the 1950s:

“Even into the early 1960s, people were coming for the whole summer, coming for half a summer, coming for a full month. The shortest stays were maybe two weeks —and they were the same people every year. They

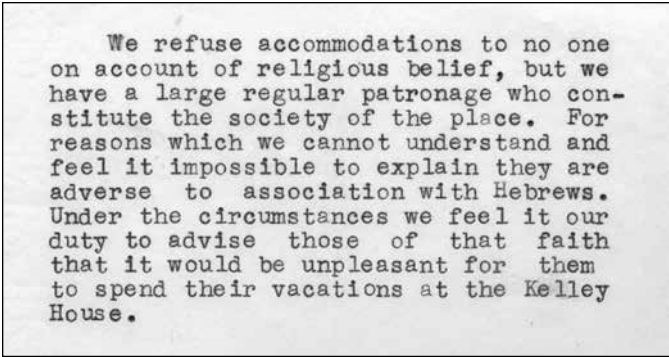
ks, But Everyone Wasn't Welcome

all came back and asked for the same room, the same dining table.

"Until about 1963, there were no locks on any of the room doors. You had an eye and a hook on the inside. And every door had a curtain that hung across it so when it was hot in the summer, you could leave your door open all night and the breeze could go through the room.

"Those people [who had stayed for months or the whole season] started to not come just because they were so old. And the new people who started coming would stay for shorter times. They were coming from the cities, and they refused to stay in rooms without locks on them. Everything just changed, rapidly. And Kennedy's accident in 1969 was a huge turning-point. People were coming here just to go over to Chappaquiddick, staying for a couple nights. There was no consistency anymore."

He also recalls the Edgartown of those mid-century decades as a conservative, Republican-leaning summer enclave for WASPS. In his grandfather's folder of Kelley House papers from the early 1940s is this remarkable notice, neatly typewritten on a sheet barely larger than a business card:



We refuse accommodations to no one on account of religious belief, but we have a large regular patronage who constitute the society of the place. For reasons which we cannot understand and feel it impossible to explain they are adverse to association with Hebrews. Under the circumstances we feel it our duty to advise those of that faith that it would be unpleasant for them to spend their vacations at the Kelley House.

Rich Colter shares one more story from this time:

"One night in the 1960s or early 70s, I don't remember exactly when, my sister was working the front desk and a black couple came in looking for a room. We did take black people, but that night we were sold out.

"When anyone came in looking for a room and we didn't have one, we'd call other hotels in town to find a room. She found a room for them at an inn nearby and directed them there. They came back and said, oh, the room was no longer available."

His sister apologized profusely, got back on the phone, and found the couple a room at the Marchant House on Main Street.

William left the Kelley House—then valued at \$4,500—to Elizabeth, who operated it for the next 28 years, until her own death in 1935. Her *Gazette* obituary declared that she had “helped develop a new and wider reputation for the house as a place where only the favored might expect to be accommodated. For such has been the standing of the place and its owner that the same guests have returned year after year, their children and grandchildren with them.” The service afforded those guests remained equally stable, thanks to Elizabeth’s habit of “keeping a watchful eye over each department and building up a staff of assistants trained in her own ways and methods.” She often said, her *Gazette* obituary reported, “that she never discharged any help, but kept them as long as they lived. She even went further than that, sometimes providing burial places for them on her own family lot.” Her passing, the anonymous writer concluded, “creates a vacancy in the ranks of Edgartown’s most respected citizens.”

A 1972 article in the *Gazette* recalled that for years “the Kelley House opened invariably for the spring term of Superior Court in April and remained open at least through the fall term, often through Thanksgiving. Bill Kelley’s fame as a host was illustrated by his repute with the many judges who, with the court officers and lawyers, were guests at the house.” Elizabeth, too, had friends in the legal world. Her 1935 obituary declared that: “Her wide acquaintance included many judges and attorneys who have patronized her inn, and who held friendship in the highest esteem.” New Bedford reporter Cooper Gaw wrote, the same year, that “I have always had pleasant memories of this hotel since the time when as a not too experienced reporter I drew an assignment to cover the spring term of court. All the off-Island people concerned, including the judge, stayed at the Kelley House; and while Mrs. Kelley fed and housed them well—I can still recall the delectableness of cod steak fried in deep fat—Bill Kelley was the old fashioned host to his distinguished guests.”

Kelley, with his wide circle of friends and love of talk, was a reporter’s dream. “There was something homey, something very comfortable about the Kelley House in those days,” Gaw recalled. “The Edgartown court assignment was prized chiefly because of the pleasant evenings in the hotel sitting room with Bill Kelley holding the floor and telling stories of Judges I Have Met.” One anecdote, in particular, captured those bygone days for Cooper Gaw. “Bill Kelley liked to talk and direct the conversation but he met his match in Judge Akin who was of the inquisitorial type. Kelley told him, among other things, he had some cows over on Chappaquiddick and was going over the next afternoon to move them. At noon the next day lawyers were surprised when the judge said there would be no afternoon sitting. Later, it turned out he had gone with Kelley over to Chappaquiddick to help drive the cows.”

The Lee Colter Years

William and Elizabeth Kelley ran the hotel for 43 years, and, in the strictest sense, the story of the Kelley House as a multi-generational family saga ends with Elizabeth's death in 1935. She had no biological children, but Richard Leopold Colter, the son of her sister Margaret, had come to Edgartown from New Brunswick as a young boy to live with her, and she had raised him as her son. Lee Colter, as everyone knew him, went on to become one of the Island's leading businessmen and, after Elizabeth's death, the owner and operator of the Kelley House.

Lee Colter helped out from a young age at the Kelley House, and showed his entrepreneurial streak early in life. He opened an automotive garage on Kelley Street, across from the hotel, and established the Island's Studebaker dealership there. In 1920, he jumped into an enterprise which caused head-shaking among some of the town's older citizens, building the Elm Theatre on Main Street in Edgartown and screening silent movies that were accompanied by his wife, Jessie Iliffe Colter, on the piano.

In 1930, Lee Colter acquired the Mansion House: Vineyard Haven's most prestigious hotel and another of the Island's oldest established businesses (though it had been mostly destroyed and rebuilt after the great fire of 1883). It was at the Mansion House that he would care for his aunt, Elizabeth Kelley, during her final illness.

Named an executor of Elizabeth's will, Colter petitioned the court for permission to continue operating the Kelley House in order to preserve the value of her estate for her heirs. In the year it took to settle the estate, he reported operating expenses of \$9,074.95 and income of \$10,497.24—about two-thirds of it from food service in the hotel's restaurant, the rest from room fees. He ultimately purchased the Kelley House property himself, paying precisely its listed value—\$8,000 for the building and \$4,400 for the land beneath it—in order to remove any suspicion of a conflict of interest.

The late 1930s, the depths of the Depression, were a hard time for the tourism industry that had long since become a foundation of Edgartown's (and the entire Island's) economy. Even long-time patrons cut back on



Lee Colter (center) and guests in the hotel doorway.

summer travel, and records from the period show that Lee Colter was having trouble paying his bills.

In a quitclaim deed dated May 19, 1936, Stephen Carey Luce, Jr. of Tisbury, president of Martha's Vineyard National Bank, assumed trusteeship of the Kelley House—a common practice used by the bank during those difficult years as an alternative to bankruptcy. Five years later, in the fall of 1940, the trusteeship was dissolved, and the bank's involvement in the operation of the Kelley House ended. The bank began foreclosure proceedings against the Kelley House, and early in the new year—on January 6, 1941—the bank assumed full ownership of the property. Three days later, on January 9, Lee's wife Jessie bought the Kelley House back from the bank, using money she had inherited from her family.

With the ownership of the Kelley House settled, Lee Colter began renovating and expanding the venerable building. The *Gazette* took notice in July 1945: "The Kelley House garden in Edgartown resumes a portion of its former beauty as it is cleared of the wreckage of the hurricane, and the setting has changed through the addition of two annex buildings increasing the capacity of the ancient hotel." The hurricane was the nameless storm that had pummeled the Island in September 1944; the annex buildings were repurposed houses hauled to the site from elsewhere in Edgartown. The one closer to the harbor was named the Lookout and the other was christened Elizabeth Ann, in honor of Lee Colter's aunt. They were planted along the sloping lawns of the Kelley House: an area now occupied by a large addition built by a subsequent owner, but then dotted with chairs, sun umbrellas and a fish pond.

In February 1946, Lee Colter announced his decision to rename the Kelley House the Great Harbour Inn, after the original name of Edgartown. On handsome cards printed for distribution to his guests and business associates, he declared: "For a long time, everyone associated with the Kelley House has felt that this oldest of all Vineyard inns should have a name reflecting the entire two hundred years of its history, rather than a single period. Accordingly, after having been called in turn the Tavern, Marcy House, Vineyard House, Sea View and Kelley House, it is now renamed GREAT HARBOUR INN, to perpetuate the name first given to Edgartown itself, and a tradition closely interwoven with Vineyard history for more than two centuries."

Along with the change of name came changes to the structure of the building. The *Gazette* noted in 1947 that guests would "have some surprises in store for them, but it is doubtful that they will miss the coal bin. For probably none of them knew that what is now a most attractive small parlor to the left of the front door, was once the hotel coal bin, which has been relegated to the rear, close to the furnace. Now equipped with win-



In October 1953, looking up from the harbor, the lawns of the Great Harbour Inn and the two cottages moved there by Lee Colter in 1944: at right, the Lookout, and next to it the Elizabeth Ann.

dows to match the others along the front of the house, with an attractive fireplace, and furnished with antiques, it makes a welcome addition to the hotel.” Other improvements enumerated by the *Gazette* writer included the redecoration of the main dining room and the transformation of the old kitchen into a second dining room, separated from the first by double glass doors. The two-room configuration gave Colter the flexibility to accommodate private parties, or (by opening the double doors) more of the diners that flocked to the hotel in summer. A second new doorway connected the main dining room to the terrace, the garden, and the cottages beyond—a convenience for the guests who stayed there.

More changes were afoot, as the inn prepared to open for the 1954 season. Two bathrooms were added to the third story—what Lee Colter referred to, according to a *Gazette* article, as “the second sleeping floor”—and a fire escape was added to the rear of the building. The addition of the outside fire escape enabled the removal of an old, unused stairway dating back 200 years—nearly to the initial construction of the building—that stood dangerously close to the doorway of one of the bedrooms. No longer needed as an emergency exit route, the stairway passed quietly into history.

Other pieces of the original building had already been removed. A May 1959 article in the *Gazette* eulogized one of the most prominent: “the five great oak tree trunks, rough-hewn, which were one of the distinctive features of the entrance to the Great Harbour Inn.” The corner post at the



Kitchen staff, summer of 1953.

far left of the façade, toward North Water Street, was original, the *Gazette* reported, but the others had been replaced over time: two years before, when the main staircase was added, and others as a result of the gradual raising of the profile of Kelley Street. Fortunately, the article concluded, “Lee Colter had the foresight to have the replacement posts made of ‘good Massachusetts pine,’ and to see that they, too, have the hand-hewn look of the originals, so all is well. They have been firmly set upon a brick base and should be good for years.”

The May 1959 *Gazette* article linked this attention to detail to Colter’s interest in the history of his inn. “According to Mr. Colter, he traced the history of the inn, which was the Sea View House before it was the Kelley House, the name it bore for many years before it became the Great Harbour Inn. With the aid of the late Marshall Shepard, then the president of the Dukes County Historical Society,³ he came to the conclusion that the date 1742 was actually the year in which this oldest of Vineyard inns was constructed, and that the posts were part of the original edifice. The hand-hewn rafters and floor timbers, put together with wooden pegs, remain as further evidence.”

Lee Colter saw himself not simply as an owner of an inn, but as the steward of an Island institution whose history (even in his own day) extended back across three centuries. He took the role seriously, as a Boston newspaper found out during World War II when it made casual reference to “the Kelley House bar.” A retraction, wrote a *Gazette* reported recounting the story in 1972, “was quickly demanded and made.”

Colter’s original response to the Boston paper, printed in the *Christian Science Monitor*, began sternly: “When you permit a correspondent to say that The Kelley House of Edgartown, on Martha’s Vineyard, has a bar or serves beer, you do us a great injustice.” Then, warming to his subject, he continued:

³ Founded in 1923, the DCHS was the forerunner of the Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

Our guests come to us for the best blueberry pie of summer, for clam chowder which has been famous through many decades, and for lobsters served as only Vineyard cooks know how, but never for beer or any other liquor. The Kelley House is celebrating its two hundredth anniversary this year, and we cannot find that it has ever had in its long history a license to sell or to serve liquor.

A hotel as old as this becomes an institution, and although we are proud of being modern in many ways, for the sounder sleep and better comfort of our guests who come year after year, we never depart from the tradition established so long ago. Many distinguished jurists have stayed at The Kelley House, while court was sitting in the shire town; white-haired summer residents came first to our inn while they were in baby-clothes; statesmen and generals and bishops have stayed here, and The Kelley House is always kept so that they can come again and feel at home.

Lee Colter, keeper of such traditions, died in 1964. The *Vineyard Gazette* hailed him as “one of the Island’s prominent business men for half a century.” His obituary declared that, for all his reverence for tradition, “his own warmth of friendship and personality were of the present day and there were few guests of the many the inn entertained who did not call him Lee.”

Ownership of the Kelley House passed, upon Lee Colter’s death, to his son, Richard I. Colter. He, in turn, sold it in 1972 to Robert J. Carroll and former state senator Allan F. Jones, partners in ownership of the Harbor View Hotel. The hotel on Kelley Street was still, officially, the Great Harbour Inn, but as the *Gazette* noted in a historical appendix to its story about the change of ownership: “All old time Edgartonians and those versed in annals of the town have continued to refer to the Great Harbour Inn by its ancient name, Kelley House. Capt. Valentine Pease, Melville’s captain, who was born in 1764, recalled, ‘When I can first remember and for years afterward there was a swamp near the shore’ with ‘but two ways through it to the shore; one, now the termination of Main street; the other leading from the old Tavern kept by Kelley and others to the wharf.’”

New owners, and time, brought further changes. A large addition rose between the original building and the water, and the old “Kelley House” name was restored. A bar with exposed brick walls, heavy ceiling beams, and dark wood furniture—designed, perhaps, to evoke the Tavern that Capt. Valentine Pease knew—opened on the first floor.

“One does not look for beer at The Kelley House,” Lee Colter wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor* in the 1940s. In time, that would no longer be the case. The rest of Colter’s vision of the Kelley House remains as true now, however, as it was then: “Our guests like swimming and yachting, fishing and bicycling, or reading on the lawn. They like the sea air and sound sleep. This is a place of sanctuary, of warm welcome, and . . . of pleasant memories.”

Little Island Ladies

The Adams Sisters of Chilmark

by LORRAINE ST. PIERRE

I THINK WE WILL SEE the Adams sisters today,” a mother would caution her daughter before they would leave for the Tisbury Fair back at the start of the last century. “They are very little people, but real grown-ups. Now, don’t you stare.”

Across the Vineyard it was a common reminder, for the Adams sisters—Sarah and Lucy, two years apart in age—were perfectly proportioned midgets whose parents (Capt. Moses Adams and Susan Palmer Adams), three sisters, and a brother were all of normal size. The Adams family homestead on State Road in Chilmark was a comfortable home that boasted a grape arbor and acres of land. The kitchen, with its wide-beamed ceiling and large oven, was a gathering spot for the clan and it was here that Susan Adams marked the kitchen door to measure her children’s growth. Later, when Sarah and Lucy were full-grown at 44 inches and 49 inches respectively, the family used to laugh at how far below the others their marks had been etched.¹

At birth, the girls were of normal size, and it was a shock to their parents when each of their daughters stopped growing. But father and mother were undaunted, making provisions and adaptations wherever they were needed. They hand-made shoes for tiny feet that otherwise might not be fitted, and they provided special furniture to accommodate their daughters. Even today the Martha’s Vineyard Museum in Edgartown has many of their belongings in its collections. All of the sisters’ possessions are proportioned in perfect miniature, right down to the tiny pocketbooks and small-scaled photo albums.

1 Details of the Adams sisters’ careers are recounted in the *Vineyard Gazette* and contemporary press accounts. (Martha’s Vineyard Museum, Sarah and Lucy Adams Collection, RU 411 [hereafter “Adams Collection”], Box 1, Folders 13, 14, and 17).

Edgartown resident Lorraine St. Pierre is an innkeeper, singer, and freelance writer. Her feature articles on little-known corners of Island history, such as the Elm Theater movie house and artificial pearls made from herring scales, appear regularly in *Martha’s Vineyard Magazine*.

The Adams name has been prominent throughout American history, and tracing the sisters' family tree reveals Revolutionary-era orator Samuel Adams as a direct ancestor, and two presidents—John Adams and John Quincy Adams—as relatives.² The first Adams to come to the Island was Eliashib in 1728, and when he married Reliance Mayhew in 1750 roots were established on the Island which remain strong to this day. The family of Captain Moses Adams was close-knit, and shared a firm Methodist faith that brought them to services regularly. It was at these religious functions that the girls' talent for performing was first noticed, and when they later became established entertainers their strong religious convictions continued to play a major role in their lives.

Although throughout the years Sarah and Lucy's height was always a curiosity, from many reports it never became a hindrance. As the usual centers of attraction, they proved most often that the reverse was true. As youngsters, they enjoyed enormous popularity with their Island playmates, who often bribed them to be babies in their games of pretend. Their weight at the time was only 25 pounds each.

Both girls attended the Chilmark School and then the Dukes County Academy—a private school housed in what is now the West Tisbury Town Hall. They happily performed at school and church functions, as well as at the newly opened Marine Hospital overlooking Vineyard Haven Harbor. They were in great demand at the Seaman's Bethel in Vineyard Haven, a tidy white building on Hatch Road where sailors who had spent long months at sea could find release from tensions in reading, music, and religious services. The little sisters were among their favorite entertainers, and many nights well-known gospel hymns could be heard in the echoing wind, as sailors joined Sarah and Lucy in song.

By the time they were in their teens, the girls had gained quite a reputation as performers on the Vineyard, and one Island minister's son, visiting from Plymouth, was very impressed when he heard them perform. At the time, he was producing an operetta off-Island, and he dearly wanted the girls to appear in his production. He persisted, and the family finally agreed to let the girls take their talents elsewhere. It was intended to be a one-time event, but it would prove, instead, to be the stepping stone that would lead the sisters to a career as professional entertainers.

Lucy won the title role in the operetta, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and the sisters' performances proved an overwhelming success and brought the girls to the attention of Lavinia Warren Stratton, who lived in Middleborough, not far from Plymouth. Lavinia's husband, Charles Stratton, had been discovered as a child by P.T. Barnum, who made him an international star under the stage name General Tom Thumb. Standing 2' 8" and 3' 4" respectively,

2 Adams genealogy chart, Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 16.

the couple were, by the time the Adams sisters were born in the 1860s, the two most famous midgets in the world. Their wedding, in 1863, was covered by the national press and celebrated by 10,000 guests at the Metropolitan Hotel in New York. President Lincoln later celebrated the occasion with a second lavish reception in their honor, held at the White House.

Lavinia invited the girls from the Vineyard to visit her Middleborough home, and was greatly impressed with their wit, their manners, and their talent. Though small in stature, she was a forceful businesswoman and—having been on stage much of her life—she had an eye for talent. Recognizing, almost at once, the potential for success in the girls, she was determined to have the Adams sisters perform as part of the traveling troupe of midgets known as the General Tom Thumb Company.

Until this point—the late 1870s—the sisters had lived an insulated, comfortable life on the Vineyard. Their mother, by now a widow, was not enthusiastic about having her tiny girls swept away to different parts of the country, and was vocal in her opposition. The girls themselves were also a little apprehensive at first. Though they had enjoyed their time in Plymouth, the stay off-Island had only made them more appreciative of all that the Vineyard had to offer.

Lavinia Stratton pressed her case, however, and finally she was able to convince Lucy and Sarah. Backed by the persuasive Mrs. Stratton, the sisters asked for their mother's blessing. After many months of talks, their mother and their brother James, now head of the family, agreed to let them join the group, with the strong stipulation that the girls always keep the Sabbath. The sisters were to observe this rule throughout their life, even declining to accompany the Tom Thumb troupe on European tour because the schedule would have required them to perform on Sundays.

Life for Sarah and Lucy Adams was to quickly and dramatically change, as the little ladies from the Vineyard made their show business debut on the New York stage in 1880. Although they were young—Sarah was 17, Lucy 19—they were an immediate success. Not wanting to be known as sideshow freaks, they dedicated themselves to perfecting their many talents. They studied at the P. T. Barnum's Museum in New York, at a time when it was the nation's most popular entertainment attraction, and worked with teachers on both the East and West coasts to study singing, dancing and acting. One such teacher, Elizabeth Flower Willis of Boston, told the sisters in a letter: "You excel in versatility in songs, readings and acting. Your program is a novel and truly artistic one of a pure and high character. Amusing, instructive, elevating and ennobling."³

Knowing that their size was their biggest drawing card, the sisters billed themselves as "Lilliputian Ladies" and "the Smallest Entertainers on the

3 "An Evening of Pleasure" brochure, Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 8.

American Platform Today.” Their promotional materials, aimed at theater owners and Chautauqua program committees, feature full-length portraits, and prominently quote their 49- and 46-inch heights. They took great care however, to present themselves as serious and accomplished performers, not curiosities. Quoted reviews praise their “sweet and well trained” voices, their “grace and ease,” and the quality of their dramatic readings—said to be “works of art.” Another quote, framed and used as a page header, declared: “They are not simply remarkable for their petiteness, but they are artists who would win recognition anywhere upon their merits.”⁴

The sisters’ standard performance consisted of vocal and instrumental music, readings, and tableaux: a now-extinct type of performance in which costumed actors posed, like statues, in scenes evoking famous works of art or events from history. The program from a July 1891 performance is typical. It begins with a vocal duet, then moves on to an instrumental solo by Sarah, and Lucy’s recitation of a then-famous poem: “How Jane Conquest Rang the Bell.” A “fairy song” by Sarah, “Come, Silver Moon,” and a series of “Scenes from the Life of Joan of Arc” by Lucy rounds out the first act. During the intermission, the program promises, “the little women will appear among the audience, giving each an opportunity to speak with them.”⁵

The tableaux, particularly “suspension” tableaux in which they dressed as fairies and hung from overhead wires, were the most popular parts of their performances, and contemporary observers said that the audience could feel the magic in the air.



Sarah Adams (center) and Lucy Adams (right), pictured here in the late 1880s with an unknown man of average stature. Martha's Vineyard Museum Photo Collection.

4 “An Evening of Pleasure” brochure

5 Agricultural Hall Program, Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 8.

A banner across the top of their bill-head read “Better To Be Small and Shine, Than Be Great and Cast a Shadow.” And shine they did. The sisters soon became the toast of New York, and although their voices were high and childlike in tenor, they reportedly had the carrying power to reach the very last seat in a theater. A schooner in New York Harbor was christened after them, named the *Lucy and Sarah Adams*, and popular songwriters of the time approached the sisters first in hopes they would perform their new songs. During their career, the Adams sisters performed with the Barnum and Bailey Circus and the Lilliputian Opera Company, they toured with the Chautauqua Circuit, appeared at the Tom Thumb Museum, and took their act to small towns where larger companies could not go. Charles Stratton—Tom Thumb himself—died in 1883, but the Tom Thumb Company continued to tour. Adams sisters remained with them for twenty years, growing close to Lavinia. When she married Count Primo Magri, another member of the troupe, in 1885, Lucy was her bridesmaid.

Eventually, at the turn of the century, the Adams sisters chose not to renew their contracts, deciding instead to do their own bookings. They moved to the West Coast, using Los Angeles as their headquarters and performing in California, Oregon, and Washington. They also ventured inland, following the railroad lines. Late 1905, for example, found them at the Methodist Church in Caldwell, Idaho, bringing their “amusing, elevating, and refining” program to an audience of farmers, tradesmen, and railroad workers.⁶ They had tremendous stamina, and their strong positive outlook always kept them cheerful and in the best form.

Venues that booked the Adams sisters during their years in the Far West could choose from two different programs. One was secular: A mixture of music, dramatic readings, and tableaux similar to the one that had charmed New York audiences decades earlier. The other was sacred. Describing it, their promotional materials promised “Religious Readings, Sacred Songs, Pantomimes and Dramatic Studies from the Bible.” Testimonial letters from clergymen are featured prominently in the sisters’ advertising, promising that they delivered “an entertainment that shall be free from all moral taint.”⁷ The sisters were careful, as always, to distinguish their “refined” art from the vulgar, morally suspect performances of the vaudeville stage.

The sisters returned from the West Coast in 19XX. Wanting more leisure time, they limited their touring to the fall and winter seasons, and to southern New England. They also focused, with increasing zeal, on their religious performances. A promotional leaflet from the 1910s bills them as “Gospel Singers and Christian Workers,” who “have had large experience

6 J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), 49.

7 “An Evening of Pleasure” brochure, Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 8

Of them it was well said:
"Better be small and shine, than be great and cast a shadow"

An Evening of Pleasure with the **Adams Sisters** **LILLIPUTIAN LADIES**



THESE little ladies, Sara, 46 inches, Lucy, 49 inches, are descendants of the Massachusetts family of which John Adams and John Quincy Adams were members, and they were reared and educated in the East having studied both vocal and dramatic art in some of the best schools of expression.



"Their posing of Grecian statuary was a revelation"



"The beautiful suspension tableaux were gone wild over"

REDPATH-VARTER CHAUTAUQUA—The Adams Sisters proved themselves the cleverest of entertainers; intellectually they are quite superior. Their programs of music, readings and tableaux, and their charming refined manner and pleasant smiles won their audiences completely.—*The Independent, Oelwein, Iowa.*

These little ladies are geniuses in expression, winsome in manner, artists in action, and give a program that is clean and wholesome.—*Albany Democrat, Oregon.*

in assisting pastors in special and revival meetings in the far West.” At the top of its pages, Bible verses took the place of testimonials. Inside, nearly every endorsement came from a clergyman. Their secular program was covered in a single line, declaring that “terms and particulars” for it were available by request.⁸

Sarah and Lucy’s hearts were, by the mid-1910s, clearly in their religious work. A letter from a Methodist pastor in Rhode Island described them as “thoroughly consecrated Christian women, more eager to honor the Master than to get any personal gain.”⁹ Another praised their “earnest Christian spirit.”¹⁰ The sisters’ careful preservation of the letters, and others like them, suggests how much such praise meant to them.

In the spring and summer, the pair remained at the family homestead in Chilmark, which they opened to the public as the Colonial Tea House and Garden, “at the sign of the spinning wheel.” An advertising brochure for the tea house describes its location in terms of other attractions popular with summer visitors: “near West Tisbury, just before the turn of the road to South Beach” and “on the way to Gay Head.”¹¹ In the house or under the grape arbors, the sisters would serve tea, sandwiches, ice cream, and homemade candy. Food and drink were not the only attraction. The antique-filled house itself was open to view (admission: twenty-five cents), and a verse on the brochure promised visitors that: “The hostesses there are pleased to tell / Of days our Grandmas loved so well.” The sisters gave a demonstration of “ye olde tyme spinning” each afternoon, Monday through Saturday, at 3:00.¹² For entertainment, both women would sing.

During their season at home, Sarah and Lucy Adams took an avid interest in their own community. Long-time Islander Mae Wannamaker remembered seeing them for the first time, when she was six years old, attending the Tisbury Fair with her family. Her grandmother had just issued the familiar warning—“They are little ladies, not children. Now don’t you stare!”—when suddenly, there they were. “I tried not to stare,” she recalled, “but I was so fascinated and curious.” It was their tiny feet,” she recalled of her first impression. “I had never seen anything so small on real people.”¹³

The sisters loved to have children visit them at their home in Chilmark, and Ruth Eldridge White, who operated Camp Tashmoo in Vine-

8 “Gospel Singers and Christian Workers” brochure, Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 9.

9 Letter from [Rev.] Matthias S. Kaufman, January 22, 1916. Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

10 Letter from [Rev.] Amos M. Bruce, December 30, 1915. Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 1.

11 Colonial Tea House brochure, Adams Collection, Box 1, Folder 8.

12 Colonial Tea House brochure.

13 Mae Wannamaker, personal communication.

yard Haven, often brought her charges to visit the little ladies. Sarah and Lucy enjoyed showing the children how wool had to be brushed and carded to remove foreign matter, before it could be spun on the wheel. Ruth White's daughter, Sydna White, who attended the camp as a child, remembered how the children would form a ring around the ladies as they gave their demonstrations on the spinning wheel. "The children towered above the sisters," she said, "and you had to look into the inner circle to see them. It was almost as if the roles were reversed, and [Sarah and Lucy] were the children."¹⁴

In 1929, the Adams sisters inherited one of the famous gingerbread cottages in Oak Bluffs that had belonged to their cousin, Lydia Adams Pease. They were still actively touring when, the following year, Sarah injured her hip in a fall from a car. The injury left her partially disabled, and the sisters performed together only five more times before ending their stage careers. By 1933, now approaching 70, they found that running the two houses was too much for them, so they made the decision to close the tea house, sell the Chilmark property and retire to the cottage in Oak Bluffs. As time went on, the hip injury continued to plague Sarah, and she died on December 12, 1938 at the age of 75.

Lucy was devastated by her sister's passing and spent the rest of the winter off-Island with her younger sister Celia, but by the time spring had come she had adapted to her loss and was growing restless. Back she came to the Island, to remain active in the church and community with her many friends. She led hymns at services and enjoyed reporting on neighborhood news for the *Vineyard Gazette*. She also wrote strong comments in letters to the editor, often sparking controversies that could last for weeks.

Kate Paul remembers visiting her friend, Bertha Mayhew, at the Martha's Vineyard Hospital at the same time that Lucy was in another room visiting a different patient. Recognizing the familiar voice, Mayhew sent young Kate to the next room with a message asking Lucy to stop by. "I can still see her now," Kate recalled years later. "She came bustling into the room and leaned against the door with her arm outstretched in a theatrical pose, and started talking in a fast, non-stop manner. Lucy kept them entertained for the length of her stay with stories of her days on the road as an entertainer, as well as with romantic stories of men who wanted to marry her, including fellow troupe members Count Primo Magri and Colonel Speck."¹⁵

In her ninetieth year, Lucy accepted an invitation to speak off-Island. She had to endure a rough crossing on the ferry, but it did not faze her, and she arrived at her destination ready to deliver her talk. As a speaker, Lucy was an immediate success, and even at age 90 she did not need a micro-

¹⁴ Mae Wannamaker, personal communication.

¹⁵ Kate Paul, personal communication.

phone. Her voice still possessed the carrying power to reach the last seat in the house. She reminisced about her career and her friendship with Mrs. Tom Thumb, and held her audience captivated until she closed her program by reciting, from memory, “Hiawatha’s Wooing”—a 300-line section of Longfellow’s epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*.

“There were many extraordinary things about Miss Lucy Adams,” read the editorial published in the *Vineyard Gazette* after her death in 1954, “and one of them was that she was not a prisoner of her littleness. She might easily have followed the easy course and permitted her small stature to garner worldly rewards. Instead of this, she dominated the forces of her life and her small stature was only a part of a sort of personality the Vineyard knows well. It was a strong and fine personality.”

That everyone agrees it was—for both Lucy and her sister Sarah. It is true that Sarah and Lucy Adams were certainly smaller than most—if not all other—adult residents of Martha’s Vineyard, but few other born-and-bred Islanders might be said to have attained such fame.



Lucy Adams in the early 1950s, over 90 but still active in the life of the Island. Adams Collection, Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

Vineyard Lighthouses on the Move

A Brief History

by A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

LIGHTHOUSES KEEP the sea from claiming passing ships and crews, but only the vigilance and ingenuity of those on land keeps the sea from claiming *them*. They are built, out of necessity, where the land meets the sea: on wave-swept rocks, crumbling cliffs, and shifting dunes. Perched on the unstable margins of the continent, they stand on ground that is nibbled by every high tide and hacked away in great chunks by every major storm.

The lights at Cape Poge, East Chop, West Chop and Gay Head—perched on exposed headlands scoured by twice daily by the shifting tides of Vineyard and Nantucket Sounds—have each been threatened by the sea since the day they were raised. The vertical faces of the cliffs on which they stand are periodically sheered away—their bases undercut by storm waves—and slump onto the beaches below. The edges of the bluffs are thus in constant retreat, crumbling backward toward the lighthouses. The process unfolds quickly at Cape Poge, slower at Gay Head, and slower still (especially since the “armoring” of the shoreline with granite boulders) at West Chop and East Chop. As the partial closure of East Chop Drive after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 shows, however, erosion can only be slowed, not halted. No matter how strong our defensive measures are, the wind and waves are stronger. The Vineyard’s headlands have, therefore, long been watched for signs that the lighthouses erected on them would have to be moved to be saved.

As this issue of the *Intelligencer* goes to press, that moment has come for the 1856 Gay Head Light. Its 450 tons of antique brick and mortar will soon be inched across a specially designed rail bed to a newly poured concrete pad 130 feet further inland. The move will be the most ambitious repositioning of a lighthouse tower in the Vineyard’s history, but far from the first. Three of the Vineyard’s five lighthouses have been moved a total of eight times to keep them away from crumbling cliff edges, and a fourth traveled miles to its current location on the island. This is the story of those improbable journeys.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper taught college history for 21 years before becoming editor of the *Intelligencer*. He has stood in the lanterns of all five Vineyard lighthouses, including (thanks to an indulgent keeper in the early 1970s) West Chop.



Gay Head Light in 1944, 90 years old and still comfortably far from the cliffs' edge. All images from the Martha's Vineyard Museum Photo Collection.

Cape Poge – 1838.

Sited at the tip of a long, curving sand spit miles from the nearest settlement, Cape Poge Light is the Vineyard's loneliest—and its most vulnerable. When the wooden tower was erected in 1801, the federal government purchased four acres of land for the tower and keeper's house, but by 1825 only two acres remained. Erosion had taken the rest, with the

cliff edge retreating 14 feet on one particularly stormy night. The keeper's house was moved inland, and in 1836—after the boundary wall enclosing it began to fall into the sea—plans were made to move the tower as well. Action took longer (a pattern often repeated in the decades to come), but in 1838 it was shifted inland, safe for the moment.

Gay Head – 1844. The crisis point for the Gay Head Light—built in 1799 to guard the western approaches to Vineyard Sound—came later, but it came. The cliffs on which it stood were denser and more durable than those at Cape Poge (clay, not sand), and they eroded more slowly, but they still retreated with every storm. Time and weather had also taken its toll on the octagonal wooden tower and civil engineer I. W. P. Lewis reported, after an inspection tour in 1842, that it (like those at Cape Poge and Tarpaulin Cove) was on the edge of ruin and in desperate need of rebuilding. Again, two years passed between before intent turned to action. In 1846 John Mayhew of Edgartown dismantled the tower and rebuilt it 75 feet further inland, billing the government \$386.87 for the work.

West Chop – 1846. The light at the tip of West Chop—the entrance to Holmes Hole (now Vineyard Haven) Harbor and one of the narrowest points in Vineyard Sound—had also gone to near-ruin in the three decades since it was established in 1817. Lewis, who visited in 1843, described crumbling stone walls, loose and leaking roof panels, rotten woodwork, and an inadequate foundation. To make matters worse, the edge of the bluff had eroded to within 40 feet of the tower. Lewis recommended moving the light inland, and in 1846—after the usual delay—Joseph Pease (the U. S. Customs Collector for the Vineyard, and thus the federal government's man on the

scene) called for bids to dismantle, move, and rebuild the tower and keeper's house. There would be no half-measures at West Chop: the new site lay to the southeast of the old one, and a full 1,000 feet further. Pease's call for bids ran three times that July, printed in a new weekly paper named the *Vineyard Gazette*. The contract was awarded to



Edgartown Light in its original setting — the dunes of Ipswich — with its original keeper, Benjamin Ellsworth, who served from 1871-1902.

Marshall Lincoln of Hingham in August, and work (as Pease had stipulated) was completed by the third week in October.

Gay Head – 1854. Less than a decade after it was first moved, the tower at Gay Head reached another crisis point: The wooden structure was, once again, decaying and the cliff edge was, as always, creeping closer. Writing in 1852, keeper Sam Flanders reported in the *Gazette* that a new tower was to be built “5 or 6 rods back from the present one.” It was a modest move—100 feet or less—but those hundred feet bought the Gay Head Light another century-and-a-half, during which the new 51-foot brick tower and its magnificent first-order Fresnel lens became one of the Vineyard's leading tourist attractions. At this writing, on the eve of its historic move, the tower still stands on the exact spot where its dressed granite foundation blocks were laid in 1854.

Cape Poge – 1893. The sea doesn't rest, and over the last half of the nineteenth century the Cape Poge Light's position grew ever more precarious. The original four acres of land on which it stood was, by 1869, almost entirely gone. An inspector's report issued that year advised the purchase of another four acres, adjoining the inland side of the original parcel, to facilitate the inevitable need to move the tower and keeper's house. The land was duly purchased, and the keeper warned to “give prompt notice” of further erosion. He doubtless did so, but to little effect. Nine years later, in 1878, another report warned that the keeper's house would topple into the sea within two years if erosion continued at the current rate. Eventually, the parsimonious Lighthouse Bureau relented, and in 1880 the existing keeper's house was demolished and a new one built further inland. Similar warnings were given about the tower over the next decade (one, in 1889, recommended moving it within the next fiscal year), but nothing came of them until 1893. We cannot



Edgartown Light, circa 1939, in its new home: an artificial stone island now (almost) covered by the sands of Lighthouse Beach.

be sure what (finally) moved the Lighthouse Bureau to action, but the records reveal a likely candidate: the keeper's 1893 report that erosion had caused a utility shed near the tower to topple over the cliff.

The move, when it came, was a triumph of seat-of-the-pants engineering. A new wooden tower—the one that still stands at Cape Poge today—was erected atop the bluffs: 35 feet high, like its predecessor, but 40 feet further inland. A temporary scaffold was erected between the tops of the two towers, and Cape Poge Light's lens, lamps, and enclosing iron-and-glass "lantern" were dismantled from the old structure and inched across it to

the new one. The entire process was completed in a single day—June 24, 1893—and the light was lit atop the new tower that night. Only a single pane of glass in the lantern was cracked in the process. Three years later, as if to confirm the wisdom of the move, the foundation stones of the old tower began sliding down the cliff face and landing on the beach.

Cape Poge – 1922. The third move of the Cape Poge Light, a quarter-century after the second, is among the least-documented of all the lighthouse movements in Vineyard history: The record shows only that the 1893 tower was moved 95 feet inland. That simple statement, however, raises a fascinating (if unresolved, and possibly unresolvable) question: Was the tower dismantled, moved piecemeal, and reconstructed at the new site, or was it—likely for the first time in the history of Vineyard lighthouses—moved intact?

There is historical precedent for both possibilities. Moving houses over long distances is an old Vineyard tradition: One of the old keeper's houses from West Chop ended up on Music Street in West Tisbury, and the Colonial-era "Great House," which now keeps watch over West Chop Light from a rise just across the street, was moved there from downtown Vineyard Haven. Photographs in the museum's Basil Welch Collection, printed from glass-plate negatives exposed between 1880 and 1920, show intact wooden buildings being dragged across fields by teams of oxen, and floated along

the coastline on barges. Flaking—the deliberate disassembly of houses, with a view toward reassembling them on a new site—was even more common. The Great House’s move to West Chop was handled that way early in 1923, and Walter E. Flanders, who oversaw the process, was one of at least two men in Vineyard Haven with a reputation for expertise in such work. Other island towns had their own house-moving specialists, and the name of the one who presided over the 1922 move of the Cape Poge Light may yet be recovered from some crumbling newspaper or forgotten letter.

Edgartown – 1939. The lighthouse that now stands at the entrance to Edgartown Harbor was, itself, dismantled at its original location and rebuilt in a new one. It was the last Vineyard lighthouse to date to undergo such a move, and unquestionably the one transported the greatest distance between its old and new locations. The lighthouse, bolted together from curved iron plates like its sister lighthouse at East Chop Light, was erected at roughly the same time: 1871 for Edgartown, 1869 for East Chop. For the first (nearly) 70 years of its existence, however, it was known as the Essex Light, and stood in the dunes of Ipswich—north of Boston, and adjacent to Gloucester.

The lighthouse that originally guarded the entrance of Edgartown Harbor, perched on a stone pier a quarter-mile off Starbuck’s Neck, was a century old in 1939, when the Lighthouse Service was merged into the Coast Guard. Alone among the Vineyard’s five lights, it was not a tower but a two-story house with the lamp and lens housed in a lantern projecting from its peaked roof. A century of rough weather, culminating in the 1938 Hurricane, had taken its toll on the building and the Coast Guard announced plans to demolish it and erect an automated light mounted on a utilitarian steel-skeleton tower. Edgartown’s citizens were militantly opposed—and a compromise was struck: the conical, iron-walled tower of the Essex Light (also declared by the Coast Guard to have outlived its usefulness) was dismantled, loaded onto a barge, and shipped to Edgartown where it was bolted together again. There it remains. Its stone base—in an ironic reversal of the situation a few miles to the north at Cape Poge—has long since been lost to view: buried in a beach deposited by the harbor currents.

Cape Poge – 1960. The demolition of the old Edgartown Light in 1939 meant that the Cape Poge Light was the last wooden lighthouse still standing on the Vineyard. Wooden lighthouses seem like a throwback (less durable than brick or iron) but they have a significant advantage over more modern designs. Lighter and more rigid, they can be lifted off the ground and carried, in one piece, to a new destination. So it was, on August 30, 1960, with the record fourth move of the Cape Poge Light. Ernest Duarte of Makoniky, having settled the light onto a stable platform and shifted it 150 feet inland using wooden rollers and a roadbed of planks laid across the sandy soil.

The 1960 move was the longest in the history of the Cape Poge Light (four times the distance of the 1893 move), and it should, in theory, have bought as much as a half-century of security. After only twenty years, however, the cliff edge was once again worrisomely close to the lighthouse. The wooden tower is braced against the onshore winds by cables anchored in concrete blocks, and by 1984 the anchor for the cable on the north side was only 22 feet from the cliff edge. A square concrete basin half imbedded in the sand at the base of the cliff provided further evidence of erosion. It was a once-buried water cistern that had served the keeper's house built in 1880 and torn down after the light was automated in 1943. The site of the house had, in a little more than 100 years, been transformed from stable ground far from the cliff's edge to empty space above a wave-washed beach.

Cape Poge – 1987. The brief time that elapsed between the Cape Poge Light's fourth (1960) and fifth (1987) move may have encouraged the Coast Guard to take extreme measures. Once a wooden lighthouse tower is lifted free of the soil—once daylight is visible between the lowermost timbers and the surface of the ground—it can, in theory, be taken anywhere. The Coast Guard put this idea to the ultimate test in 1987, when the Cape Poge Light was moved 500 feet inland in a single record-setting jump. The method employed also set a record: It was the first time that a Vineyard lighthouse was moved by helicopter. The (literal) heavy lifting was done by a Sikorsky Skycrane, capable of handling a maximum payload of 20,000 pounds. Intact, the Cape Poge Light tipped the scales at 19,000 pounds, so for the safety of the historic tower, it was moved in two pieces.

The lantern, weighing 5,000 pounds, was lifted to the ground, and (while disconnected from the lighthouse) prepared for shipment to the mainland, where it would be refurbished. The topless tower, now a svelte 14,000 pounds, was then ready for its journey inland, dangling below the Skycrane from steel cables. When the time came to set the refurbished lantern back in place atop the tower, the Coast Guard called in a second, smaller helicopter for the job. Photographs from the *Gazette* show the lantern slung beneath a gleaming white Bell 204—the civilian version of the UH-1 “Huey” familiar from countless Vietnam War films.



Brick lighthouses, like the current 1856-vintage tower at Gay Head, are simultaneously far too heavy and far too fragile to be simply picked up and moved by helicopter. The mortar that holds their bricks together is strong when squeezed together (compression) but weak when pulled apart (tension) or twisted (shear). When a brick structure is tugged or twisted, every mortared joint in it becomes a potential weak spot, ready to crack and separate—the reason why seemingly imposing (but unreinforced) brick buildings crumble in earthquakes that shake the underlying ground,

while wood-framed houses nearby ride out the tremors with ease. The trick to moving a tall brick structure, then, is consummate gentleness: shifting it slowly enough that the sideways stresses on the mortar joints are kept to a minimum.

The upcoming move of the Gay Head Light will, therefore, be an extraordinary marriage of brute force and meticulous precision. Onlookers from the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries—if we could magically transport them to the job site by time machine—would be astonished by the spectacle, but they would recognize the techniques being employed as those used, in their own time, to lift and shift heavy loads. Custom-made steel rollers may have taken the place of logs, and hydraulic rams may do the work that was once done by human or animal muscles, but the engineering principles are the same as those used to shift the lantern of the Cape Poge Light in 1893, or the tower itself in 1922 and 1960.

Our imaginary observers from the past would also grasp, even more quickly, the reasons *behind* the move, for those have not changed in 150 years. Now, as then, we move our lighthouses to cheat the forces of nature, to keep the towers standing, and to keep the lights burning a little while longer. Behind those baldly practical reasons, however, lies a deeper, truer reason: We move our lighthouses because we cannot bear the thought of losing them.



Cape Poge Light, the most-moved of all Vineyard lighthouses, in 1984, three years before its helicopter-assisted move.

Photograph by Arthur R. Railton.

Further Reading

Martha's Vineyard Museum, RU 212, Lighthouses Collection.

Railton, Arthur R. "Cape Poge Light: Remote and Lonely [in 3 parts]." *Dukes County Intelligencer* vol. 25, no. 2 (Nov 1983): 54-80; no. 3 (Feb 1984): 91-123; no. 4 (May 1984): 150-182.

Waterway, William. *Gay Head Lighthouse: The First Light on Martha's Vineyard*. History Press, 2014.

Wheeler, Wayne C. "A History of West Chop Lighthouse." *Dukes County Intelligencer* vol. 54, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 3-22.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Of Editors and Guiding Lights

WITH THIS ISSUE we welcome A. Bowdoin Van Riper as editor, and thank Susan Wilson for her valued editorial stewardship over the preceding five years. Bow, as our Library Assistant, has a front-row seat to watch and encourage original research using our newly reorganized and recatalogued collections. His serious scholarship as a college history professor and prior editorial experience will support our goal of having the *Intelligencer* closely aligned with the Museum's mission: to "engage and connect" the scholars and students with what is unique and wonderful about Vineyard history.

This issue has a variety of original articles. It was my pleasure to have breakfast in Cambridge last fall with Richard Taylor, and when he told me about the book he had been working on for so many years I suggested that he consider using the *Intelligencer* to see how one of his most-finished chapters played. I am pleased that he has done so, and encourage readers to pass along critical comments to Richard via our editor. Personally, I hope we see the book very soon.

Our editor's article on moving lighthouses is timely indeed! Over a three-day period at the end of May, the Gay Head Light was literally in motion, as observers from all over the world watched via webcam. Many Vineyarders, including several school groups, witnessed the movement of the landmark stone and brick tower in honest amazement. We now know the answer to two important questions. How fast can a 400-ton lighthouse travel? More than 50 feet per day! How many people does it take to move such a lighthouse? It takes an entire community. Well done!

On behalf of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, thank you to all our members who gave both moral and financial support to the project, and to the Save the Gay Head Lighthouse Committee who spearheaded the move. Remember that as Museum members, you can take advantage of free admission to the Gay Head Light and visit it in its new location when it reopens in July.

Enjoy the summer, when it arrives, and come see some incredible exhibitions here in Edgartown.



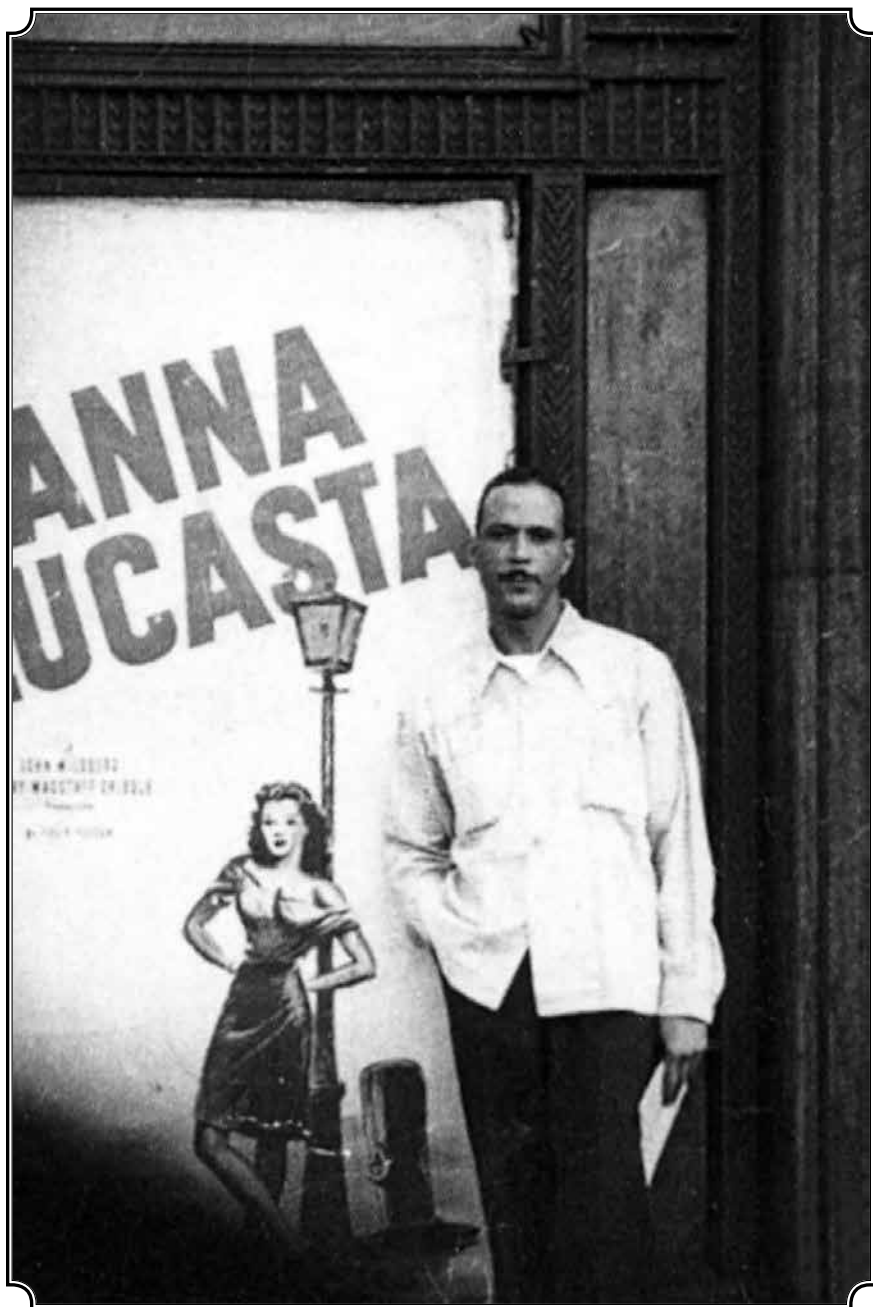
David Nathans
Executive Director

The Saloon is A Bank, for LOSING

You deposit your money—and lose it, your time
—and lose it, your character—and lose it, your
manly independence—and lose it, your home
comfort—and lose it, your self-control—and lose
it, your children's happiness—and lose it, your
own soul—and lose it.

Lee Colter of the Kelley House was not alone in expressing a dim view of alcohol. Rev. Oscar Denniston, pastor of the Bradley Memorial Church in Oak Bluffs, used this placard in one of the church's pre-Prohibition temperance campaigns.

*Bradley Memorial Church and Denniston Family Papers
Collection, Martha's Vineyard Museum.*



Writer, performer and producer Ralf Coleman was a pioneering figure in the American theater scene, and his family played an important role in the growth of the African-American summer community on Martha's Vineyard. Story begins on page three inside.