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A New History of the Old Wesley House



Joseph Dias:
Mariner, Hotelier, Activist

The Oak Bluffs Civil War Statue
in Context

From the Archives:
Letter to a Whaler's Wife


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SERENDIPITY

The February 2019 “Marine Hospital” issue of the *MVM Quarterly* was—like the May 2018 “Edgartown” issue before it—a deliberately designed theme issue, planned for a year or more before it appeared. The current issue, though three of its four stories are centered on Oak Bluffs, and all four unfold in the half-century bracketing 1900, is not. When Andrew Patch approached me last fall, offering to write the first complete history of Oak Bluffs’ last surviving grand hotel, I knew that I wanted to give it the lead position and the cover. May 2019 was, at the time, the first issue where that slot was open. Skip Finley’s portrait of Joseph Dias III—whaling turned businessman, hotelier, and political activist—came later, and the many layers of resonance between the two stories became clear only in the editing process. The Oak Bluffs Select Board’s public hearing on the Soldiers’ Memorial (for which the third article was written) had not even been planned when I first sketched out the contents of the issue. The outcome of that hearing—the Board’s unanimous vote to remove the 1925 “Chasm is Closed” plaque for display at the Museum—made the case for the article’s inclusion here, now.

The fourth and final piece in the issue concerns a 1903 letter that—in a different kind of serendipity—crossed my desk as I was editing the issue. The letter, a seemingly mundane piece of routine business correspondence, is an astonishing window on a world in transition . . . the same tumultuous, turn-of-the-century world inhabited by Augustus Wesley, Joe Dias, and Charles Strahan.

— A. Bowdoin Van Riper

MARTHA'S VINEYARD MUSEUM QUARTERLY

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A New History Of the Old Wesley House

by ANDREW PATCH



Fig. 1—The Wesley House (now Summercamp) as seen from Oak Bluffs Harbor. Unless otherwise specified, all images are from the author’s collection.

THE FORMER WESLEY HOUSE HOTEL, relaunched in 2016 as “Summercamp” under the ownership of the Lark Hotels Group, is the sole survivor of the large hotels that sprung up in Oak Bluffs in the 1800s. This article revisits the long and colorful history of the Wesley House in light of newly uncovered primary source materials that, among other things, establish its existence several years earlier than has previously been reported.

Anchoring the northern end of the grounds of the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association (“the Campground”), the former Wesley House is situated on Lake Avenue and overlooks Oak Bluffs Harbor. It is now the only surviving hotel of its size in all of Oak Bluffs, but in earlier years there were numerous other hotels and boarding houses just in the Campground, to say nothing of Circuit Avenue and the rest of Oak Bluffs. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, there were

Andrew Patch is vice-president of the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association. An earlier version of this article was published in the *Wesleyan Grove Journal*, a publication of the MVCMA. All images used in this article are from the author’s collection except as otherwise noted. The author wishes to thank Harvey Garneau for his invaluable research assistance.

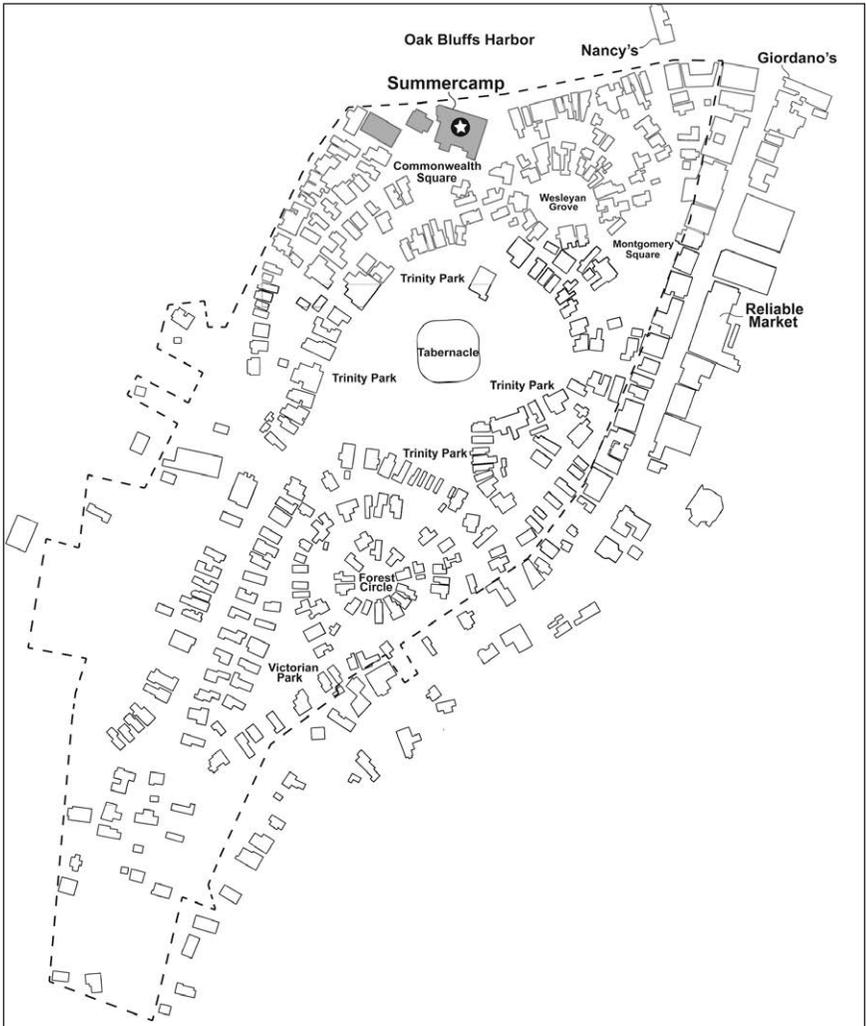


Fig. 2—Map of the Campground; Commonwealth Square is at the top.

three distinct commercial districts in the Campground: Commonwealth Square, Montgomery Square, and the southern end of Siloam (now Dukes County) Avenue. Together, they were home to various boarding houses, a US post office, two grocery stores, two bakeries, a hardware store and a drug store. The businesses gradually disappeared as Circuit Avenue became the commercial center of Oak Bluffs. The Frasier House, a boardinghouse that once stood in the Campground on Fourth Street Avenue, was one of the last, demolished by 1959. Finally, the Providence House in Montgomery Square was torn down in 1963, leaving the Wesley House as the sole surviving hotel in the Campground. Today, it is the dominant feature of Commonwealth Square.



Fig. 3—Commonwealth Square in 1867. The future site of the Wesley House is occupied by (R to L): Brock and Gifford's grocery store, Piper's ice cream, Matthews' boarding tent (with ladder), Tucker's bakery, and Adams' photo studio. Courtesy of Harvey Garneau.

The part of Oak Bluffs that now lies between Circuit Avenue and Nantucket Sound, surrounding Ocean Park, did not exist in 1866. The Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company would erect its first cottages in what would become known as the Copeland District—named for the landscape architect who designed it—the following year.¹ There were, however, already over 100 cottages on the Campground, in addition to several hundred tents, all occupied during camp meetings and (increasingly) many for longer periods. It was natural, therefore, that commercial enterprises would arise in the Campground, to meet the physical needs of those staying there. In the 1860s most people attending camp meeting came from the mainland by steamship, disembarking at Eastville, on the east side of Vineyard Haven Harbor, and then proceeding to the Campground via what is now New York Avenue. Commonwealth Square was then the main entrance to the Campground, and a logical place for businesses to set up shop.

Commonwealth Square, in 1867, included several buildings which occupied the land that would later be occupied by the Wesley House (Figure 3). The Brock & Gifford grocery store was built that year, and the ice cream tent of Robert H. Piper stood next door.² The next tent to the left, accord-

1 See Skip Finley, "The Captains of Cottage City: The Men Behind the Boom of the Bluffs," *MV Museum Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 3 (August 2018), 3-21.

2 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 2, 1867. Piper's ice cream tent in this view still bears No. 430, its lease number under the numbering system utilized in the Campground until 1866. A new lot numbering system was implemented in 1867, which allocated the lot number 748 to Piper's ice cream tent. Fig. 3 is the only known photograph showing a pre-1867 Campground lease number.



Fig. 4—L.D. Tucker's new bakery, 1868.

ing Campground lease records for 1867, was the boarding tent of William Matthews. To its left was the bakery tent of L. D. Tucker, which in this view displays the sign of a New Bedford bakery with which it was presumably affiliated, and finally the storefront of stereoview photographer Stephen F. Adams. Tucker erected a new, wooden bakery on the site of his tent in 1868 (Figure 4), prominently displaying a sign with his own name, rather than (as in 1867) that of the New Bedford bakery with which he was associated. The sign also—in much smaller letters—announced the address as “Domestic Square,” the original name of Commonwealth Square.

Greater changes, however, were soon underway in Commonwealth Square (Figure 5). By 1872, the bakery was flanked by the Howard House—a four-story mansard-roof building built in 1871—and the Mayhew & Luce hardware store, which stood on the site where the former Matthews boarding tent had been. Piper’s ice cream tent had, by 1872, been replaced by the R. H. Piper eating house—the building with the square façade. The Brock & Gifford store that had occupied lot 747 in 1867 had given way to the Otis Foss dry goods and grocery store. The Campground lease records for 1872 continue to list R. H. Piper as the lessee of lot 748, and proprietor of Piper’s Eating House, but those records also include a pencil notation indicating a transfer of the lease to one A.G. Wesley.



Fig. 5—Commonwealth Square in 1872, showing a near-complete turnover of businesses in five years. From right to left: Otis Foss's dry goods store, R.H. Piper's eating house, Mayhew & Luce hardware, Tucker's bakery, and the Howard House hotel.

Wesley's Rise

Augustus G. Wesley was born Augustin Goupille in 1843 in Saint-Gervais, a village near Quebec City on the south side of the St. Lawrence River. Goupille emigrated to the U.S. in 1859, and in 1869 changed his name to Augustus G. Wesley. Whether his name change was motivated by sympathy with the teachings of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, or to endear himself to the Methodists who would soon patronize his cafe, is not known. Perhaps it was both. In any case, his newly-adopted surname would likely have been received favorably within the Campground, which was then still referred to as Wesleyan Grove.

A.G. Wesley was first and always a cook. The 1870 federal census lists his residence as the Harvard College Commons, and his occupation as cook. It also reflects his marriage, earlier in 1870, to Mary J. Stevens of Acton, MA. Three years later, in 1873, he is listed in a directory of Cambridge, Massachusetts as working as a cook at the Thayer Club, No. 4 Holmes Place, where he also boarded.

In the same year, Wesley established a foothold in Cottage City. A photograph taken that summer (Figure 6) shows that the Piper eating house and the Otis Foss store have been replaced by what appears to be a three-story mansard roof building occupying lots 747 and 748 in Commonwealth Square. The sign to the right of the lamp post (Figure 7) reads: "Wesley's Cafe. Ice Cream Saloon. Fruit, Cigars & Confectionery. Rooms by the Day or Week." The printing on the canvas awning reads "A.G. Wesley's Cafe. Rooms to Let. Otis Foss & Co. Dry Goods & Groceries. Boots



Figs. 6 & 7—Wesley's beginnings: A café and “rooms to rent.”

& Shoes. Hats.” The stenciling on the glass of the lamp post reads “Otis Foss & Co.” It therefore appears that the building in the foreground of this view was initially shared by the newly-opened Wesley Café and the Otis Foss store. The Wesley House has traditionally been dated to 1879, but this photograph—when viewed in light of the Edgartown tax assessment records—suggests that Wesley’s first dining and rooming establishment was operating at the location of the current Wesley House in 1873.

Construction of this building might have commenced as early as 1872.³ Interestingly, photographs of the back of this structure taken from across Lake Anthony (now Oak Bluffs Harbor) indicate that the Wesley and Foss establishments were in fact separate structures, and that the three-story façade shown in Figure 6 was a false front shared by the two adjacent buildings.

Further evidence that the building of the preceding view dates from 1873 is an item from the July 11, 1873 issue of the *Seaside Gazette*, a newspaper that was published in Oak Bluffs from 1872-1875 during camp meeting season. In an article entitled “Changes since last Season,” it is reported that “[t]he Wesley Café is a very tasty structure, finely arranged and well kept.” This statement most likely refers to the three-story mansard roof building shown in Figure 6. The squared façade building of the 1872 view, the R. H. Piper eating house, was more functional than “tasty,” and, in 1873, was not new.

3 The 1873 Edgartown tax assessor’s field book for the Campground lists (for the first time) A.G. Wesley as the lessee of lot 748, and values his store on that lot at \$1,400. The Otis Foss store on lot 747 is valued at \$1,800. The sum of those values, \$3,200, would seem to be about right for the large three-story mansard roof building in Figure 6, in relation to the smaller (but taller) Howard House, which was valued at \$2,500 in 1873.

Although Wesley's first enterprise in the Campground was nominally a cafe, the signage in the preceding view makes it clear that Wesley was also an innkeeper from the outset. This is also confirmed by the following ad that appears in that same July 11, 1873 issue of the *Seaside Gazette* (Figure 8). The reference to "pleasant plastered rooms" suggests a substantial structure,

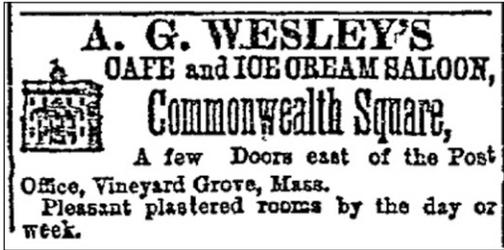


Fig. 8—Wesley's establishment was advertised in 1873 as a "café with rooms."

along the lines of the three-story mansard roof building in Figure 6. Plastered rooms in the Campground would, even today, be a comparative luxury, although boarders were regularly welcomed into more humble rooming houses and cottages. It was common in this era for correspondents from the mainland papers to report with amusement the abundance of signs advertising "Rooms to Let" displayed in the windows of cottages that seemed too small for their owners—let alone boarders—to inhabit.

The tax assessments for 1874-76 show no significant change in valuation, and continue to show Wesley and Foss as the lessees of lots 747 and 748, suggesting that the building remained relatively unchanged during the middle of the decade.

By 1875, however, Wesley's establishment had been renamed the Wesley House, as shown in an advertisement from a directory of Oak Bluffs and the Campground. In 1875 the Wesley House would have competed with a number of other Campground hotels—the neighboring Howard House, the Central House in Montgomery Square (later known and still remembered by some as the Beatrice House), and the Vineyard Grove House and the Providence House on Siloam Avenue—as well as the larger hotels on Circuit Avenue and elsewhere in Oak Bluffs. The largest of them, the Sea View House, had opened in 1872 at the head of the steamer wharf, where the automobile staging area for the Steamship Authority is today.

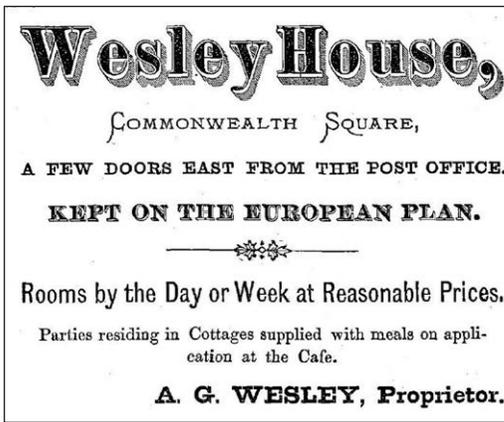


Fig. 9—The first appearance of the name "Wesley House," in 1875.

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Fig. 10—The expanded Wesley House in the summer of 1877.

A first major change to the Wesley House occurred in 1876-77. According to the MVCMA lease records, Wesley acquired the lease for the adjacent lot from Otis Foss on September 14, 1876. The Edgartown tax assessments for 1877 indicate that a building occupying both lots was under construction in May of 1877, but its value had already increased from \$3,200 in 1876 to \$4,500 in 1877 (it would be assessed for as much as \$5,800 in 1880). Wesley, in other words, displaced Foss from their shared building following the 1876 camp meeting, and proceeded to significantly improve it.⁴

The resulting improved structure, shown in Figure 10 (likely taken in 1877), included ornate new piazzas on the main and second levels, a three-toned roof, a reconfigured main floor and two tiers of balconies on the opposite side facing Lake Anthony. Wesley's increased focus on lodging did not mean, however, that his dining facilities were diminished. A prominent sign in Commonwealth Square to the left of the hotel advised passersby that "Persons Wishing A Good Meal At A Reasonable Price Will Do Well To Visit The WESLEY HOUSE."

It is noteworthy that, within a few years of taking over the lot previously occupied by the Piper ice cream saloon, Wesley had the wherewithal to replace that building with the new, much larger and much costlier structure shown in Figure 10. However, in addition to his own success, Wesley had

4 In 1875, the Campground adopted a street numbering system that remains largely unchanged to this day, and by 1876 the lot numbering system that had been in use since 1867 was discontinued. The side of Commonwealth Square now occupied by the Wesley House is 26-32 Commonwealth Square, but in 1877 the building that had been shared by the original (1873) Wesley House and the Otis Foss store occupied only 27 (old lot 747) and 28 (old lot 748) Commonwealth Square.

a stalwart backer, Joseph Fullonton Hilton, whose family figures prominently in the history of the Wesley House. The Hilton family land in Acton, Massachusetts was rich in timber, and Hilton and Wesley had become acquainted when Wesley was employed as a cook for Hilton’s logging crew.

In a 1979 interview, George Chase, grandson of Joseph Hilton and proprietor of the Wesley House during much of the twentieth century, recalled that his grandfather had supplied the framing timbers and funding toward the construction of the original Wesley House. The 12 x 12 timbers of seasoned white oak, each 42 feet in length, were taken by oxen to Portsmouth, then by sailing ship to the New York Wharf in Vineyard Haven Harbor, and finally by oxen down New York Avenue to the hotel site.⁵ Mr. Chase recalled that the framing construction was mortise and tenon, without the use of nails. The ceiling of the former dining room was suspended from the roof timbers by linked iron chains that were then still in place, to avoid the need for interior columns—a very different type of drop ceiling than what we think of today.

The building to the right of the Wesley House in Figure 10, No. 26



Fig. 11—The Wesley House in 1880-1881: Four stories, with a bathroom on each floor.

Commonwealth Square, was another early Campground boardinghouse. It was known during 1873-76 as the Fall River House, but beginning in 1877 it had been renamed the Lake House and was owned by a William Morse of Taunton. The MVCMA lease records indicate, however, that Wesley bought the building from Morse on October 1, 1877. The purchase was part of an ongoing expansion of Wesley’s hotel business

in the Campground. The *Vineyard Gazette* reported in September 1880 that he had commenced further improvements, including tearing down

5 The northernmost of two major wharfs on the Eastville shore, the New York Wharf served the coastal steamers of the New York Steamship Line, which provided regular service between New York, Boston, and Portland, Maine. The New York Yacht Club maintained a shore station there from 1892-1917 (see the *MV Museum Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 1 (February 2018): 47. The road leading into Oak Bluffs, originally Kedron Avenue, acquired the “New York” name by association, and retains it to this day.

the Lake House in favor of a “handsome lawn,” and adding another story of rooms to his hotel. Among the more noteworthy improvements, a later story announced, was the provision of a bathroom on every floor.



Fig. 12—In a detail from photo on page 11, Augustus Wesley stands in front of his newly expanded hotel, probably in the summer of 1881.

Construction was still ongoing the following spring, in May of 1881.⁶ With four stories throughout and towers on the north and south sides, the enlarged Wesley House of 1880-81 (shown in Figure 11) was then—and remains today—by far the largest enclosed building in the Campground.

The main entrance of the 1881 Wesley House was located on the Commonwealth Square side. The Mayhew & Luce hardware store and the Tucker & Richmond bakery are still visible to the left of the enlarged Wesley House in Figure 10, at Nos. 29 and 30 Commonwealth Square, respectively. Wesley himself is also present, standing to the left of the woman in the light-colored dress. The Lake Avenue façade of the building (Figure 13)—what is, today, the front of the structure—was the rear in 1881, though it, too, boasted a tower and a prominent sign. It is evident from these 1881 images that the third and fourth

stories of the newly-enlarged Wesley House, as well as the front and back towers, were built atop the existing first and second floors of the original (1873) structure, which therefore survives to this day.

The Wesley House continued to expand. The June 30, 1883 *Boston Herald* reported that real estate broker Frank C. Smith had sold the Howard House, Commonwealth Square, to Wesley on behalf of the owner: J. S. Howard of New Bedford. The Howard House, located at 32 Commonwealth Square and built in 1871, had been one of the Campground hotels that predated Wesley’s own establishment. In a sense it is there still, as it became the west wing of the Wesley House, its distinctive roofline remains recognizable today.

In newspaper accounts throughout the 1880’s and into the 1890’s, A.G. “Gus” Wesley was feted as one of Cottage City’s most well-respected businessmen and most accommodating hosts. He had also, by the early 1890s, expanded his hotel empire still further by acquiring the Central House in nearby Montgomery Square.

6 *Vineyard Gazette*: September 10, 1880; December 17, 1880; and May 6, 1881.



Fig. 13—The Lake Avenue façade of the hotel: Now the front, but originally—and when this picture was taken—the back of the building.

Wesley's Fall and Redemption

In the early 1890s a series of devastating fires—all of suspicious origin—forever altered the skyline of Cottage City and the trajectory of its development. The most consequential was that which destroyed the Sea View House on the night of September 24-25, 1892. The Sea View was the largest and grandest hotel on the Island: the crown jewel of the Copeland District. The Casino, a large building across Oak Bluffs Avenue that had been built as a roller-skating rink and repurposed as an auditorium and exhibition hall, was also lost to the fire, as were the Western Union telegraph office, along with part of the steamer wharf and its offices.⁷ The Highland House, located not far from where the East Chop Beach Club stands today, burned down in 1893. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported, on October 27 of that year, that it was valued at \$20,000; however, its owners had only \$6,000 of insurance on the property. A common theme among the properties lost to fire during that time was that the owners typically had insufficient insurance to cover their loss, or no insurance at all. The fires continued unabated into 1894, with the Cottage City School destroyed by fire on October 20 and a group of five closely adjacent Campground cottages on Clinton Avenue and Victorian Park on November 6. Both fires were believed to have

⁷ The fire destroyed the Y-track that the train operated by the Martha's Vineyard Railroad had used to reverse direction at the Oak Bluffs end of its nine-mile route. The track was not rebuilt, and for the last four years of its financially precarious existence, the MVRR train was forced to run from Edgartown to Oak Bluffs in reverse.



Figs. 14 & 15—At left, the Howard House as a separate building. At right, the Howard House in its post-1883 role as the west wing of the Wesley House.

been “of incendiary origin.” The idea that a “fire bug” was on the loose created palpable anxiety in Cottage City. The Campground was a tinderbox, with its hundreds of wooden cottages packed together cheek to jowl.

Then, on November 13, 1894, the Wesley House was severely damaged by fire. Two men walking in County Park that evening smelled smoke, discovered the source of the fire, and sounded the alarm. The *Vineyard Gazette* of November 15, 1894 reported that the fire was extinguished before breaking through the outer walls of the building, but the interior of the Wesley House was destroyed by the flames and the water used to extinguish them. The Cottage City fire bug, still at large, was assumed to be the culprit. Three days later, however, A.G. Wesley would confess to having set the fire himself. According to the November 17, 1894 *Boston Daily Globe*, Wesley was immediately suspected of having set the fire by Walter S. Howland, who was not only chief of the Cottage City fire department but also an agent for a fire insurance company.⁸ Howland, Sheriff Jason L. Dexter of Martha’s Vineyard and state fire marshal Charles F. Whitcomb reportedly had numerous “interviews” with Wesley, who ultimately signed a confession in which he admitted having set fire to the building and its contents in order to collect the insurance on them. The nature of those “interviews,” and whether Wesley’s confession might have been made under duress, remain unknown.

Wesley stated in his confession that, after leaving a prayer meeting at the Methodist Church in Cottage City, he entered the Wesley House at about half past eight, found some burlap in the closet under the stairs on the sec-

⁸ Apparently, that was not considered a conflict of interest at the time.

ond floor and—after saturating it with kerosene—wrapped it around a cigar box in which he placed a lighted candle. It was also revealed that Wesley had taken out \$18,000 in insurance on the property, whereas its assessed value was only \$7,000. The *Globe* asserted that Wesley was overextended, and intended to use the insurance proceeds to pay for a \$10,000 residence that he was then building on New York Avenue. On May 25, 1896, Wesley was convicted of arson and attempting to defraud his insurance company, and on September 25 he began serving a sentence of three years at hard labor in the New Bedford House of Corrections.

On July 19 of the following year, the *Boston Journal* reported that Wesley had recently applied for a pardon, supported by a “numerously signed” petition, which was filed with Governor Roger Wolcott. One of the petitioners advocating a pardon for Wesley was Alfred L. Barbour, Secretary of the Cambridge Mutual Fire Insurance Company—the same firm that Wesley had been found guilty of attempting to defraud. Barbour stated that in his opinion Wesley had been sufficiently punished for his offence. Wesley’s wife and friends and neighbors wrote in the petition of their respect and esteem for Wesley, and their belief that he was “irresponsible” when he set the fire, “his mind having become unsettled for fear of the safety of his property because of the large number of incendiary fires which had recently taken place in Cottage City.” It seems illogical that one would attempt to burn down one’s own hotel for fear that someone else might do so first, but then they did say that his mind was unsettled. Wesley’s petition for a pardon was granted by the Governor’s Council on July 29, by a vote of 5 to 3, and he was released after serving ten months of his three year sentence.

Ownership of the Wesley House passed to Wesley’s friend Joseph Fullonton Hilton in 1899, and then to his son-in-law Herbert M. Chase, who managed the hotel through World War II and was succeeded by his son George Chase and grandson Paul Chase. It is a sign of the esteem in which Wesley was held in Cottage City, and of the longstanding friendship between Wesley and Hilton, that after ownership of the hotel changed hands, Wesley was hired to work there again as a cook. The grand house that Wesley built on New York Avenue still stands at the corner of Munroe Avenue. It was, for a number of years, a hotel in its own right—the Admiral Benbow Inn—and was purchased in 2016 by the Martha’s Vineyard Hospital. In this early 20th century photo, an older Wesley is clearly recognizable standing in front of the house, wearing a white cap.

Wesley passed away in 1929, outliving his first wife, Mary J. Wesley, by sixteen years, and his second wife, Eliza O. Wesley, by nine years. A human-interest piece in the June 3, 1923 *Boston Sunday Herald* gives some



Fig. 16—Augustus Wesley is pictured at left, wearing a white cap, at his house on New York Avenue, debt from which may have spurred him to attempt arson and insurance fraud. Martha's Vineyard Museum Photo Collection.

sense of how far Wesley had redeemed himself in his later years. He purchased a dilapidated Goodwill Lodge for indigent women in South Athol, refurbished it, and renamed it the Mary J. Wesley Memorial House. He then founded the Morgan Memorial Fresh Air Camp at South Athol, as a retreat that would allow disadvantaged children to get away from the city during the summer months and spend time in the country, tending their own gardens alongside Wesley himself, then 81 years of age.⁹ The article refers to Wesley as having run the Wesley House for many years, but makes no mention of his having set fire to it.

⁹ This latter venture might have been inspired by the apparently similar “Little Wanderer’s Home” established in 1880 on Martha’s Vineyard on what is now New York Avenue, as a summer outpost of the main facility in Boston.



LAKE ANTHONY FROM WESLEY HOUSE, OAK BLUFFS, MASS.

Fig. 17—Postcard view from the front porch in the 1920s. Courtesy of Gail Thompson.

The Wesley House in the Twentieth Century

The twentieth century began on an auspicious note for Cottage City in general and the Wesley House in particular. In 1900, Lake Anthony was connected to the ocean by dredging a 100-foot-wide channel through the barrier beach that had separated them, thereby creating what is now Oak Bluffs Harbor. Prior to that, the Wesley House had overlooked the tidal Lake Anthony, which had increasingly presented sanitation issues. The dredging of the new channel simultaneously solved that problem, created a useful harbor into which smaller and shallow draft vessels could dock, and provided much improved vistas from the north side of the Wesley House.

The *Boston Herald* of July 1, 1900 described the newly-created harbor as “perhaps the most important improvement made in Cottage City for many years.” Things were looking up for the town, although with the Sea View House and the Highland House gone, the *Herald* was perhaps overly optimistic in predicting “a return to the palmy days of the ‘80s and early ‘90s.” The *Herald* also noted that a debate was already afoot as to whether the new harbor should continue to be called Lake Anthony or should instead be rechristened Oak Bluffs Harbor, and urged that the question be settled before the July rush.¹⁰

The Wesley House took full advantage of the new harbor by moving its

10 The Massachusetts state legislature took up the question, and with due deliberation and its accustomed dispatch approved an Act decreeing that “Lake Anthony in the town of Oak Bluffs shall hereafter be known and designated as Oak Bluffs Harbor and such designation shall appear on maps and similar publications pertaining to that area.” The act was approved on March 27, 1956.



Fig. 18—The distinctive rooftop “W” was toppled by Hurricane Carol in 1954.

main entrance from the Commonwealth Square side of the building to the Lake Avenue side and constructing the large wraparound porch that has been populated, ever since, by wooden rocking chairs from which guests watch the summer life of Oak Bluffs pass by against the backdrop of the harbor waters reflecting the setting sun. The postcard in Figure 17 captures such a scene in the 1920s.

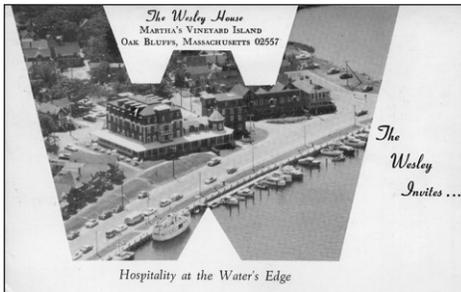
Such are the charms of the Wesley House, that it has been for over 140 years a center of hospitality in Oak Bluffs.

The change of the entrance from the Commonwealth Square side to the Lake Avenue side was also the time when the three businesses standing between the original Wesley House and the former Howard House, namely, the Tucker & Richmond bakery, the Mayhew hardware store and the photography studio of Joseph W. Warren were at last incorporated into the expanded Wesley House. In his 1979 interview, George Chase recalled that negotiations for the purchase of the last of the intervening building had broken down at one point, which led to the owner of that building “beating madly on a stovepipe at five in the morning for a week.” The stovepipe cacophony was evidently an effective negotiating tactic, as at the conclusion of that week an agreement was reached for the purchase of that last intervening structure. The resulting continuous structure (shown in Figure 18) had as many as 75 rooms, including those on the fifth floor whose presence is signalled by the dormer windows atop the Mansard roof. The large “W” atop the main building was toppled by Hurricane Carol in 1954 and was not thereafter replaced.



Figs 19 & 20—The building at 3 & 4 Commonwealth Square—a block of shops, and then a hotel—became the Wesley House Annex, adding rooms while eliminating competition. Photo at right courtesy of Peter Jones.

The Wesley House would undergo one more major expansion: the purchase of the building located at Nos. 3 and 4 Commonwealth Square, most recently known as the Wesley Arms. Built in 1873, the building first housed a series of stores and then (by the early twentieth century) the Brunswick House, a hotel operated by T. W. Allen. The Wesley House acquired the building in 1922. It was initially referred to as the Wesley House Annex,

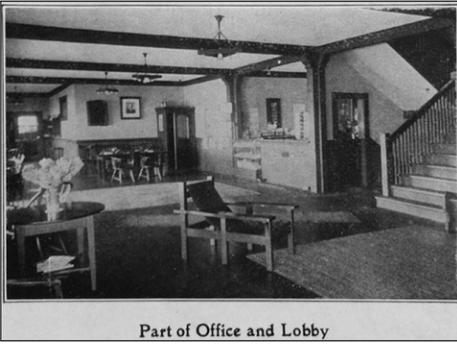


The Wesley House in its final configuration, shown in a postcard from the early 1960s. Courtesy of Gail Thompson.

and later as the Wesley Arms. The Wesley Arms added about 25 rooms to the main Wesley House structure, and completed the footprint that the Wesley House still occupies today. The Wesley House can thus trace its origins to several dates. The oldest part of the building is the west wing that is connected to the main building, the former Howard House, built in 1871.

The lower stories of the main building, as well as the annex building, were built in 1873 and significantly improved in 1877. The upper stories of the main building were built in 1880-81. The structure interconnecting the main building and its west wing dates to the early twentieth century.

The interior decor of the Wesley House, for much of its history, made no attempt at opulence, as shown in a 1924 advertising pamphlet. It did, however, offer not only a full-service restaurant but also—on the Commonwealth Square side of the hotel—a bakery that was an alternative to Walmsley's (now home to Back Door Donuts) and LaBelle's on Circuit Avenue. It is said to have been the first hotel on Martha's Vineyard to have electricity,



Figs. 21 & 22—Postcard photos of the interior, comfortable but not opulent, in 1924.

but unlike the Sea View House and other large resort hotels of the era it never installed an elevator in the main building. The Wesley House *was* also one of the first hotels to install telephones in every guest room, but Paul Chase recalled in a 1985 interview that the telephones were removed several years after they were first installed, because the guests largely considered them a nuisance. They were, after all, on vacation.

The lack of plush accommodations did little, however, to deter well-to-do guests. The *Boston Sunday Herald* of June 12, 1927 reported



Fig. 23—President Bill Clinton thanks Tom Warburton of the Wesley House for his hospitality in 1993. Courtesy of Tom Warburton.

that, since 1903, every Governor of Massachusetts had been entertained at the Wesley House by Mr. Chase, and that President Coolidge had stayed there on three occasions. The first charter flight to the Island is said to have landed in the Oak Bluffs Harbor in 1919 and docked at the Wesley House pier. More recently, The Wesley House also provided accommodations for all of the 40+ Secret Service agents who would be on-Island during the visits to Martha's Vineyard of President Clinton and President Obama, as



The lobby after the 2015 renovation. Courtesy of Gail Thompson.

well as for the members of the FBI assigned to protect the attorney general during his visits here.

The Wesley House was owned and managed by three successive generations of the Chase family—Herbert, George, and Paul—for most of the twentieth century, but in 1985 it was sold for only the second time in its history. The hotel was then in need of substantial renovation, and the new owners—Peter Martell, George Fisher and Richard Kelley—sought to restore the hotel to its nineteenth-century glory. A view of the lobby taken in 2015 (Figure 24) provides evidence of their success. Lark Hotels, which acquired the Wesley House from Peter Martell and his partners in 2015, is therefore just the fourth owner of the property. Lark has already put its stamp on the Wesley House, not only by changing its name to Summercamp but also through an extensive redecoration to update and enliven the interior spaces. It is to be hoped that Summercamp will enjoy a long and successful future, as we pause to look back on the 140+ year history of the Wesley House.

The Boy Master: Joseph Dias of Oak Bluffs

by SKIP FINLEY

LIFE CAN turn out fairly well when you're your parents' Christmas present. So it did for Joe Dias, who was born on December 25, 1822.

Family Background

The original Joseph Dias—grandfather of the boy who was born on Christmas Day—came to Martha's Vineyard from the Azores when the Thirteen Colonies were still (just barely) under British control. On January 4, 1780, he married Sarah Chase Manter (1762-1822), who not only lived in Holmes Hole (today's Vineyard Haven) but was descended from two of its oldest families. Enlisting as a sailor in the Revolutionary War, he was captured by the British and jailed in England for a period of time. When released, he returned home only briefly—adding his name to the membership roster of the Baptist Church in 1781—before shipping out again in the service of his adopted country. Once again, Dias was again captured, and this time he was less fortunate. Rather than a land-based prison, he was sent to the *Jersey*: a former hospital ship turned notorious “prison hulk.”

Hulks were worn-out, rotting ships no longer fit for service at sea, stripped of their masts and rigging and anchored in sheltered waters to be used as floating storehouses. In the case of the *Jersey*, the “stores” were chained, tightly packed prisoners of war. Dark, poorly ventilated, and overcrowded, prison hulks were breeding grounds for disease and disability. Like many others condemned to serve their sentences there, Joseph Dias died in captivity. The will of the Dias family prevailed, however, and Joseph Dias (Jr.) was born in Holmes Hole in May 1781, never knowing his father.¹

1 Joe Dias did not use “Junior,” his father having died before he was born; it is used here to differentiate between the three generations of Joseph Dias. See Donald Warrin, *So Ends This Day: The Portuguese in American Whaling 1765 – 1927* (North Dartmouth, MA: Tagus Press, 2010), 74.

Writer, broadcaster, columnist, and longtime Oak Bluffs resident Skip Finley is Director of Sales and Marketing for the *Vineyard Gazette*. His book on African American whaling captains is scheduled for publication next year.

The younger Dias (1781-1859) followed his father's footsteps, going to sea and eventually to war, becoming skilled enough that he was appointed one of seven prize masters on the brig *Yankee*, a privateer in the War of 1812. Privately owned vessels whose captains were licensed by the government to attack enemy merchant ships in time of, privateers sought to capture, rather than sink, their targets. Once captured, the enemy ship became a "prize of war," that could be sailed to a friendly port and sold (along with its cargo) at auction—the proceeds divided between the privateer crew and the government. A prize master's job was to take temporary command of the captured vessel and, aided by a skeleton crew, ensure that it got to a friendly port—avoiding dangerous weather and enemy warships along the way. It required first-class seamanship and good judgement, and was often a stepping stone to a permanent command.

The War of 1812 was declared on June 19, 1812 and *Yankee* was commissioned within a month, on July 13. It went to sea on its initial voyage of the war on October 15, 1812—a valorous trip that concluded 146 days later, in March, 1813. On the voyage the ship battled four British warships and captured or destroyed a total of eight other vessels, taking prizes valued \$212,000. It was the beginning of a brilliant career in which, over the course of the war, *Yankee* captured forty British ships valued at over \$5 million.² Fifty percent of the take from the first voyage was divided which was split with the crew,³ and Joe Dias' share—\$4,249 for the trip—would have been the equivalent of almost \$67,000 today.⁴

Dias left the *Yankee* and joined another privateer that, like his father's, was captured by the British. He was taken to England's notorious Dartmoor Prison in April 1813, and held there with over 5,000 other Americans.⁵ Luckier than his father, he lived to see the end of the war, and was released to return home to Martha's Vineyard. He married Eliza (Betsey) Norton Holmes (1789-1864) of Holmes Hole on August 31, 1815, and John H. Dias, the first of their seven children, was born the following year.⁶

2 Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 75.

3 Wilfred Harold Munro, "The Most Successful American Privateer – An Episode of the War of 1812," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, April 1913, 12-52; <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44817272.pdf>

4 *U. S. Dollar Inflation Calculator*, <http://www.in2013dollars.com>

5 Pat Amaral, *They Ploughed the Seas: Profiles of Azorean Master Mariners* (New York: Valkyrie Press, 1978), 28.

6 Marianne Holmes Thomas, *Our Portuguese Heritage: An Informal Genealogy of 3,000 Portuguese Families on Martha's Vineyard*, 2 vol. (Edgartown, MA: Community History Project, 1996), D216. The other children were: Christina B. (1818), Sarah M. (1821), Joseph (1822), Charles H. (1826), Abby H. (1828), and Mary E. (1830).



The grave of the second Joseph Dias (1781-1859): War of 1812 privateersman turned Holmes Hole harbor pilot. Author's collection.

The 1850 Tisbury census listed Joseph, age 68, as a mariner, and sons John (33) and Joseph, Jr. (27) as a laborer and a mariner, respectively. In the 1855 census, Joseph is listed as a harbor pilot—a job he held for most of the last years of his life—and John as a fisherman.⁷ The house that Joseph and Betsey shared with their two adult sons stood on the water side of Main Street, at the north edge of the village. It was among the oldest in Holmes Hole, built by the Daggett family sometime before 1740 and then deeded to Abraham Chase, whose father Isaac had been one of the first European settlers in the area. The lot on which it stood had once stretched completely across West Chop, bordered by the harbor in the east and Lake Tashmoo in the west.⁸

Joseph and Betsey Holmes Dias are both buried in the West Chop Cemetery.⁹

Joe Dias III: A Life in Whaleships

The 1855 census lists Joseph and Bestey Dias's son as "Joseph Dias, Jr." to distinguish him from his identically named father. Technically, he was "Joseph Dias III," and some whaling journals list him with that appellation attached to his name, but there is no evidence that he ever used it in real life.

Joe Dias III began a whaling career his whaling career in 1836, when he shipped as a cabin boy aboard the *Clifford Wayne* from Fairhaven. He was fourteen.¹⁰ The trip, which lasted from October 3, 1836, to September 10 of the following year, had to have been frightening but educational for young Dias. The ship returned after less than a year due to a mutiny—one of only 71 in the annals of whaling, which encompass more than 15,000 voyages from American ports.¹¹

Dias again signed onto the *Clifford Wayne* in 1841, at the age of 18, this

7 Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 75; census data courtesy of Andrew Patch.

8 Amaral, *They Ploughed the Seas*, 29.

9 Thomas, *Our Portuguese Heritage*, D216.

10 Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 75.

11 Philip F. Purrington, *Anatomy of a Mutiny: Ship Sharon, 1842* (New Bedford: Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1968); Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 131. Dates of voyages in this essay are taken from Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery: From its Earliest Inception to the Year 1876* (1878. New York: Argosy-Antiquarian, 1964).

time with more responsibility and better pay. The jump in status makes it virtually certain that Dias made an intervening voyage, gaining experience, sometime between 1837 and 1841. As cabin boy he would have remained with the ship (along with the carpenter, cooper, sailmaker, and cook) when the crew lowered the boats to chase whales. As a seaman—the role he would have played on his next voyage—he would have pulled an oar in one of the boats, participating in the chase and the kill. When he signed onto the *Clifford Wayne* in 1841, he did so as a harpooner. He also kept the log, another position requiring skill and responsibility, for at least part of the trip. The *Clifford Wayne*'s voyage ran from March 25, 1841, to July 23, 1845, but Dias must have returned earlier because he shipped on the *Ocmulgee* late in 1844. Whaling crews, when they signed on for a voyage, did so in exchange for a “lay:” a share of the voyage’s profits that varied with their skill and responsibility aboard the ship. As a harpooner Joe Dias probably received a lay of 1/80. That is, he would be entitled to 1/80 of the value of the oil that the *Clifford Wayne* brought back to Fairhaven: approximately \$17,500 in today’s money.

Dias was experienced enough to ship as third mate of the *Ocmulgee* when it departed Holmes Hole on November 21, 1844, just before his 22nd birthday. The elder Joe Dias, who as a harbor pilot may have guided whale-ships like the *Ocmulgee* from their moorings into deep water, may have put in a good word with Captain Frederick William Manter, who he would certainly have known. A good word alone, however, would not have been enough. Third mate is an officer’s position, fourth in the chain of command, and carrying responsibility for one of the whaleboats and its crew.

The three-year voyage of the *Ocmulgee* took it to the Pacific whaling grounds off the northwest coast of North America and Hawaii. The log (again kept by young Dias) recorded that fewer than 1,000 whales were spotted, at a time when the whaling industry was at its height. It also records that the cook was accused of stealing and put in irons and another crewman was flogged for a similar infraction. Two men died, one due to illness and the other was lost.¹² All things considered the trip was successful, harvesting about 36 whales and returning on May 25, 1847, with cargo valued at \$1.6 million in current dollars. Estimating a lay of 1/47 for Joe Dias—typical for a third mate—his share would have amounted to about \$32,800 for the two-and-a-half-year enterprise.¹³

12 Log of the ship *Ocmulgee*, 1844-1847, New Bedford Whaling Museum, KWM 646.

13 These calculations—based on the number of barrels of oil and pounds of whale bone taken by the ship (as recorded in Starbuck’s *History*), their market value at the time (recorded in newspapers), and the rate of inflation between the year of the ship’s return and the present—are estimates, at best, with significant potential for errors.

Dias' performance must have been creditable enough to Captain Frederick Manter, who promoted him to first mate—second-in-command—when the *Ocmulgee* left on her next voyage on September 2, a little more than three months after her return from the Pacific. This voyage, too, was successful, coming back with oil and “whalebone” (baleen) worth the equivalent of \$1.6 million today. An average lay for a first mate at the time, 1/21, would have earned Dias about \$74,100 when he returned home on April 21, 1850.

Dias was 24 when he shipped as first mate, and 27 when he returned.¹⁴ He was, however, already developing a reputation as a strict taskmaster, and a stickler for upright behavior. Reports from the time portray him as a religious man who didn't drink, and the crew of the *Ocmulgee* reported to first mate Dias in early 1848—five months into the voyage—that 15 men had made a pledge of temperance and 7 others pledged not to swear. The temperance pledge may have been a sop to the young officer, and an attempt to gain his favor. A month later, on February 20, 1848, Dias he recorded that he had “...boxed a thing's ears for not minding his business while tacking Ship in a Strong breese,” suggesting that he was already well-accustomed to command, and to being obeyed.¹⁵

The *Ocmulgee* would make three more voyages—one from Holmes Hole and two from Edgartown—before she was captured and burned to the waterline by the Confederate raider *Alabama* during the Civil War.¹⁶ Joe Dias, however, was not aboard her. He had moved on, at the age of 27, to command of his own ship: the *Pocahontas*, a veteran of ten previous whaling voyages, which left Holmes Hole, bound for the Pacific, on July 10, 1850.

“A Recontre With A Whale”¹⁷

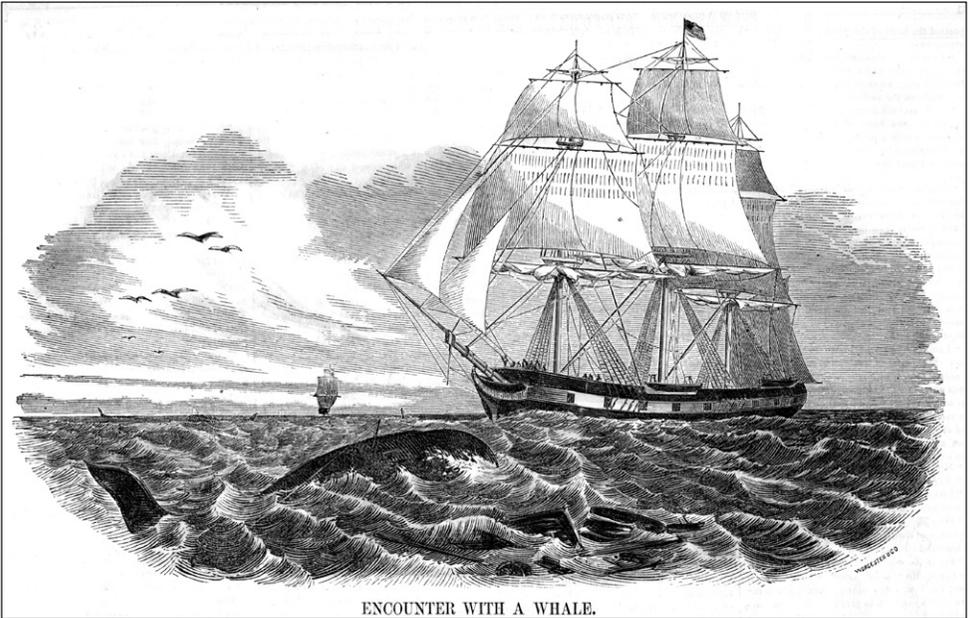
On December 12, while Dias's crew was in the process of harpooning a sperm whale, it had turned and attacked one of the *Pocahontas*'s boats, crushing it in its jaws. This was not necessarily an out of the ordinary occurrence and fortunately the crewmen, some of who were injured, were safely rescued. What *was* decidedly out of the ordinary was that the whale remained in the area rather than escaping amid the chaos, and when the young captain turned the *Pocahontas* to make a second attempt to take the

14 Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 138.

15 Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 139.

16 For the outlines of the voyages see Starbuck, *History*, and Judith N. Lund, *Whaling Masters and Whaling Voyages from American Ports: A Compilation of Sources* (Gloucester, MA: Ten Pound Book Company, 2001). For the encounter between the *Alabama* and the *Ocmulgee*, see John M. Taylor, *Confederate Raider: Rafael Semmes of the Alabama* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 1994), 109-110.

17 The phrase comes from a report of the attack in the *New York Express*, for February 14, 1851, and reprinted in the *Vineyard Gazette* for May 2, 1851.



ENCOUNTER WITH A WHALE.

A nineteenth-century newspaper artist's imagining of the whale attack on the *Pocahontas*.
Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

whale, it attacked again. Using its head as a battering ram against the hull, it did damage substantial enough that the ship began to leak—750 miles away from Rio de Janeiro. The *Pocahontas* thus became one of only seven whaleships—out of more than 15,000 whaling voyages made from American ports—known to have been directly attacked by a whale.¹⁸

The most famous, and most horrific, of these attacks had been that carried out on the *Essex*, of Nantucket, thirty years before. Rammed by a massive and enraged sperm whale in the waters west of South America it sank, over 1,200 miles from shore. The fatally damaged ship filled with water so quickly that the 20-member crew only had time to load limited provisions and equipment into the three whaleboats that became their only hope of reaching land. Running low on food, and unable to obtain more from the small, sparse islands they passed, the survivors slipped, one-by-one, into starvation. The living ate the bodies of the dead to survive and, in the boat commanded by Captain George Pollard, drew lots to see who would be killed in order to feed the others. Only 8 of those who sailed aboard the *Essex* survived the voyage, and some took over a year to get back home to Nantucket.¹⁹

Captain Dias's luck was better than Captain Pollard's. The ship wasn't

18 Lund, et. al., *Whaling Masters and Whaling Voyages*, 4.

19 Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (New York: Viking, 2000).

sunk, and he was able to make it to Rio for repairs—a voyage that lasted two long weeks, thanks to poor weather. Joe Dias was reflective on his whaling voyages, at times keeping a diary as well as the log. Questioning his luck, aboard the *Pocahontas* following the encounter with the whale he wrote:

Well this is getting along indeed. I don't know what to do with myself. Talk about trouble I never knew what trouble was before and I should like to know what I have done to deserve this heep (sic) it takes away my appatite (sic) and in fact kills me right out and I believe if it holds calm much longer I shall loose what little reason I have got. Now is the time I suppose people want Christian fortitude to bear up under such afflictions. But I suppose I must bear it without the help of such things.²⁰

One would think the minuscule odds of being attacked by a whale would alone make for a great story. Not for Joe Dias though. The *Pocahontas* was one of several vessels that had made port at Rio de Janeiro—including a merchant ship, the *Banshee*, that Dias encountered on the way in. During that brief encounter at sea the *Banshee's* master had asked Dias the longitude of the two ships, but at the time didn't believe the answer Dias gave him, despite how seemingly precise it was. Later, on land at a dinner an important New York agent was giving for a number of captains, the same master explained the group that he had followed Dias' advice when a fog came up, and would have wrecked his ship on the rocks had he not taken Dias at his word. Joe was the youngest captain there, not yet 29, so this news was well received and the other captains gave him the sobriquet “the boy master.”

The agent then offered the group a drink, but Dias declined. The other members, shocked, suggested to Dias that his refusal might well be taken as a slight. After dinner, however, the agent took the young captain aside and complimented him on his decision, saying he was the first captain he had met who refused a drink, and that he was proud of him. Dias' reward was that the agent made sure the *Pocahontas* was repaired quickly, enabling it to leave the harbor first.²¹

Once repaired, the *Pocahontas* returned to sea, but although the crew saw whales they were unable to catch any for the first 13 months—a depressing beginning to the trip. Once his luck changed, however, it changed drastically for the better, and after the extended drought allowing Dias to return to Martha's Vineyard on May 7, 1853—almost three years since they had left—with a cargo worth over \$1.9 million Joe Dias' lay, as master, would have been about 1/13 which meant that he would have earned about \$144,200.

20 Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 158.

21 “Began Whaling Career at Age of 14” [story from an unidentified New Bedford newspaper, dated April 24, 1910], ODHS Scrapbook #2, New Bedford Whaling Museum Library.

Joe Dias III would make one more whaling voyage: as master of the *St. George*, which sailed from New Bedford on September 10, 1853, bound for the North Pacific. Whaleship masters were virtually omnipotent and Joe Dias had learned how to be firm when circumstance called for it. His youthfulness—he was still only 30 when the *St. George* put to sea—made it all the more important for him to establish, and maintain, a reputation for toughness. Awakened at 4 AM one night by the sound of two crewmen fighting, he ordered them to stop. When one of the pair talked back, declaring that he'd do what he wanted, Dias ordered him tied to the ship's rigging and then "gave him two dozen"—that is, twenty-four lashes on his bare back with a short, multi-stranded whip called a "cat o' nine tails." The log neglects to mention that whipping with the "cat" had been outlawed aboard all American ships by an 1850 act of Congress.²²

The voyage of the *St. George* lasted nearly four years. The ship returned to New Bedford on May 6, 1857, with 2,236 barrels of oil (of which 78 were high-grade, and increasingly scarce, sperm oil) and 19,350 pounds of bone—a cargo, valued at \$2.4 million in 2018 dollars, that would have earned Dias about \$180,000. Joe Dias took his earnings and, at age 34, turned his back on whaling and on the sea. His earnings had been substantial—nearly half-a-million dollars, adjusted for inflation—and he was anxious for a new start on land. For a few years after his 1857 "retirement," Dias lived at his parents' house on Main Street in Vineyard Haven while he planned for the next chapter of his life.

The Vineyard Grove House

Dias's first years ashore were not easy. His father, the elder Joseph Dias, died on February 22, 1859. The younger Dias married Clarissa Adams on October 3 of that year, and their son John H. Dias (named for Joe's elder brother) was born on April 13, 1861, but Clarissa died—perhaps, like many women of the era, from complications resulting from the birth—on August 19, and baby John on September 1. Dias was married for a second time, to Mary M. Athearn (1839-1909) of Tisbury, on October 12, 1864. Two months later, on December 9, his mother Betsey died. Joseph and Mary's first child—a son, Charles H. Dias—was born the following summer. The Massachusetts state census for 1865, conducted on July 10, shows Joseph and Mary Dias living with an unnamed infant. Two more children followed: Herbert C. in 1867 and Bessie H. in 1868. The two younger children would live to adulthood, but Charles—like their half-brother John—would not. He died in 1881, at the age of 16.

During this period Dias became partners with his brother-in-law, Cap-

²² Warrin, *So Ends This Day*, 131; Briton Cooper Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me: The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 26, 30.

JOSEPH DIAS,
IS STILL ON
"THE OLD CAMP GAOUND,"
At the Old Stand,
NO. 32 SILOAM AVENUE,
and invites his old friends and all new comers
to the
"Cottage City of America"
to call and see him, and look at his stock of goods,
whether they wish to buy or not. We are always
ready to show our goods, and give the prices, and
guarantee as good as represented every article
sent out, or the pay will be refunded. He has the
largest stock of goods for the supply of this
market to be found in the Cottage City, consisting
of **MEATS, GROCERIES, FLOUR and**
GRAIN,
Wooden, Glass and Tin Ware,
Ladies', Gents' and Children's fine and common
BOOTS, SHOES, and RUBBERS.

An advertisement for Dias's store from the August 30, 1878 *Island Review* promotes the wide variety of merchandise it carries: not only meat, flour, and groceries, but also kitchenware, boots, and shoes.

tain Willis Howes, in a large farm in West Tisbury where they raised sheep. Howes, married to Dias' sister Mary, had been a whaler himself, sailing as master in a pair of New Bedford ships: the *China* from 1852-1856 and the *Nimrod* from 1857-1861. The pair likely used part of their whaling earnings to buy the farm. Dias also joined with another partner, John Look, to open a grocery store and restaurant at 32 Siloam Avenue in Cottage City.²³ Adjacent to the grocery store, at 31 Siloam Avenue, he established a hotel: the Vineyard Grove House.

Methodist camp meetings had been held in Wesleyan Grove for thirty summers by the time the Civil War ended. In August 1865, they drew 12,000 visitors to what would

become Oak Bluffs, and by 1868 six hundred lots for tents and (increasingly) cottages were leased each summer.²⁴ Impressive as they were, however, those numbers would soon be dwarfed. Recognizing area's potential as a seaside resort, a group of six investors—four from the Island, and one each from Foxborough and Boston—formed the Oak Bluffs Land & Wharf Company and began to lay out streets, parks, and house lots in the space between the Campground and the sea. They built a steamer wharf to bring visitors to the doorstep of their new development, and erected the Oak Bluffs' first hotel at the head of it. The new company struggled financially, collapsing in 1882, but the resort it helped to build was a spectacular success. Lots sold, and houses went up, quickly. The apparent success of the Oak Bluffs development inspired others, including Vineyard Grove, in the Highlands northwest of Lake Anthony (now Oak Bluffs Harbor). Fifteen new hotels opened between 1871 and 1879.

²³ "Began Whaling Career at Age of 14."

²⁴ Chris Stoddard, *A Centennial History of Cottage City* (Oak Bluffs, MA: Oak Bluffs Historical Commission, 1980), 62.

The Vineyard Grove House, run by Joe and Mary Dias, was one of them.

The Camp Meeting Association viewed the new Oak Bluffs development warily. They worried that the summer residents and visitors that flocked to it, and the attractions built to cater to them, would be unwholesome influences. The Association erected a high board fence along Circuit Avenue, and residents of the Campground were warned to be on the proper side of it before the gates were locked for the night. Highland Wharf, built in 1870 by the company promoting the Vineyard Grove development, became the preferred destination of visitors from the mainland who wished to enter the Campground without exposing themselves to the secular temptations of Oak Bluffs. A horse-drawn trolley line, begun in 1870 but not completed until 1873, ran from the wharf to the Campground by way of Kedron (now New York) and Siloam (now Dukes County) Avenues. Campground residents referred to its passage across the isthmus of land dividing Lake Anthony from Sunset Lake as “crossing over Jordan.”

The Vineyard Grove House stood on the eastern edge of the Campground, overlooking Sunset Lake. It was minutes away from Highland Wharf in one direction, easily accessible via the trolley, and minutes away from the Tabernacle in the other. It would have been one of the first hotels that greeted visitors “crossing over Jordan” and entering the Campground through its historically west-facing main entrance. Visitors who arrived at the Oak Bluffs wharf could reach it with only a little more effort, traveling down Oak Bluffs Avenue and Lake Avenue before turning onto Siloam and into the Campground.

A tourist guide to the summer resorts of Massachusetts, published around 1890, described the Vineyard Grove House in glowing terms. The anonymous writer described Joe Dias himself as one of its most attractive features:

People visiting Cottage City should not fail to visit the Vineyard Grove House, on Siloam Avenue, kept by Captain Joseph Dias which is one of the distinctive features of the place, uniting as it does the ancient and modern history of the Vineyard. The proprietor, Captain Dias, is one of the oldest residents, and has witnessed the growth of the place into a summer resort from its former condition as a resort of whalers and fishermen, and he can relate many stories of former days.

After describing the hotel’s convenient location, handy to virtually every place of interest, the writer went on to praise its food and—like the business agent in Rio decades before—Dias’ firm stand on alcohol:

The table is supplied with the best in the market, the vegetables being raised on the premises and picked fresh every day. The Tabernacle is only a few steps from the doors, and the house is conducted on strictly temperance principles. People wishing to escape the noise and turmoil of the cities will find the Vineyard Grove House the quietest place in the city, and with its excellent accommodations and



Dias's hotel (foreground) and grocery store (background) on Siloam Avenue. Joe Dias is believed to be the hatless, extravagantly mustachioed man next to the right-hand post. Courtesy of Andrew Patch.

moderate prices, all that could be desired as a summer residence, although the house is kept open all the year. Connected with the house is a first-class grocery and provision store where may always be found a full line of good things for the table.²⁵

All this, for \$9.00 a week.²⁶

Of the 15 major hotels built from 1871 to 1879 the Vineyard Grove was the only one open year-round. As a result, it was often used for religious gatherings and public meetings. The group of worshipers that became the Trinity Methodist Congregation, for example, gathered for worship

25 *Illustrated Guide to Martha's Vineyard - Nantucket - Taunton - New Bedford - Fall River* (1890), 105. <https://archive.org/details/illustratedmarth00grie>

26 Henry Beetle Hough, *Martha's Vineyard: Summer Resort* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1936), 125.

during the off-season months in Dias's hotel.²⁷ In December 1871, for example, 100 people met and raised \$40.00 for the library of a new Sabbath School. The same week, coincidentally, saw the arrival of the first child born in the campground: Wesley Grove Vincent, son of Frank and Minnie Vincent, on December 6.²⁸ The persistence of Methodist services into the off-season, and especially the birth of a child during the winter, were markers of larger changes. A new town being born as well, and the first meeting about just that was held at the Vineyard Grove House in 1872.²⁹

The Birth of Cottage City

The rise of Oak Bluffs, and the similar developments that followed it, paralleled the decline of offshore whaling. Whalers continued to put to sea from Edgartown, Fairhaven, and New Bedford, but they did so in smaller numbers and returned with less oil, which (because of competition from the petroleum industry) brought lower prices. Edgartown's economy, dependent on whaling-industry profits for more than fifty years, began to shrink and the land-based businesses that it once supported began to falter. Oak Bluffs, Vineyard Grove, and the Campground—still part of Edgartown in the 1870s—represented a lucrative source tax money for the town's treasury, but the thousands who flocked there each summer did little to directly enrich the businesses of Edgartown village. The thirty thousand people who gathered for a fireworks display when President Ulysses S. Grant came to the Island in August 1874 filled hotel rooms and restaurants, but the money from their pockets went into the tills of Oak Bluffs businessmen like Joe Dias, not those of their counterparts in Edgartown.

Rankled by the success of the upstart resorts to the north that threatened to eclipse the traditional village center, the Town of Edgartown went to extraordinary lengths to restore what they saw as the natural order of things. Town leaders funded a railroad designed to funnel tourists out of Oak Bluffs to Edgartown, and a newly established resort development on the shores of Katama Bay. They built a road that led out of town to Edgartown, with similar purposes in mind, but denied funding to a bridge that would have bridged the Lagoon Pond opening and connected Oak Bluffs, Vineyard Grove, and Eastville to Vineyard Haven. Above all, they taxed. Soon the 500 year-round residents and 15,000 summer homeowners of Oak Bluffs and surrounding areas were accounting for over 60% of Edgartown's total tax revenue.³⁰

27 Dagnall, *Circle of Faith: The Story of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting* (Edgartown, MA: Vineyard Stories, 2010), 96.

28 *Vineyard Gazette*, December 15, 1871.

29 Hough, *Summer Resort*, 125.

30 Skip Finley, "Captains of Cottage City: The Men Behind the Boom of the Bluffs," *Martha's Vineyard Museum Quarterly* vol. 59, no. 3 (August 2018): 3-20, on 16.

The combination of high taxes and limited services fueled calls for the northern part of Edgartown to secede and incorporate as a new town. The movement was backed by twenty-five prominent Oak Bluffs taxpayers and led by three year-round residents. Ichabod Norton Luce was a wealthy retired whaling captain who had been a prominent abolitionist before the Civil War. Howes Norris, the son of another whaling captain, was a businessman and wharf-owner who bought the offices and press of the failing *Island Review* newspaper and launched the *Cottage City Star*: a paper that argued for the interests of the new resorts, as the *Vineyard Gazette* did for the “old town.” The third was Joe Dias, who lent the Vineyard Grove House as a venue for secessionist meetings until they grew so large that Union Chapel was required instead. It was a meeting at Union Chapel, in the summer of 1877, that approved the decision to formally push for separation, and formalized the committee of 25 that would see to the movement’s success.

Edgartown pressed its luck in 1878, when it appropriated \$500 of Oak Bluffs’ tax dollars to fight against division.³¹ The last straw, however, came in 1879 when the Edgartown Board of Health, declared that the water used by the Vineyard Grove House was unfit to drink. Seeking to ensure that the announcement had the desired effect—driving Dias’s customers away—anononymously printed notices of the findings were distributed to passengers arriving on ferries in hopes that they would choose other hotels instead. Presently, witnesses came forward to declare that they had seen the sample of water from the hotel’s well placed in an unsealed jar and then taken to Edgartown where it sat unsealed overnight before being sent—now, at last, sealed—to Boston for testing. The implication was clear, the *Star* thundered: The sample had been deliberately contaminated by someone in Edgartown—an attack on Dias for his separatist activities. Dias responded by having two new samples taken, immediately sealed, and delivered to Boston for testing. They were judged safe, ending the immediate crisis but not the ill feelings that it generated.³²

The controversy over Dias’s water supply spurred the separatists to action. The Island’s seat in the state legislature was, by mutual agreement, held in rotation by representatives of its (then) three towns. In the election of 1879 it was Chilmark’s turn, and the separatists backed Stephen Flanders against “establishment” candidate Beriah T. Hillman, who supported the interests of Edgartown. Backed by the near-unanimous sup-

31 Hough, *Summer Resort*, 156-161.

32 Arthur R. Railton, *The History of Martha’s Vineyard: How We Got to Where We Are* (Beverly, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2006), 261-263; “Why Was Professor Sprague so Upset about Cottage City’s Water?” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 45, no. 3 (February 2004): 47-49.

port of newly enfranchised Wampanoag voters from Gay Head, Flanders defeated Hillman, giving the separationists a voice in the State House. Just as important for their success was the fact only 14 of the 92 state legislators who had voted down an earlier separation bill were returned to office. The incorporation of the Island's fifth town, Cottage City, was approved by the new legislature early in 1880. The victory celebration, held at Joe Dias' Vineyard Grove House, stretched long into the night.³³

On the day it became a town—February 17, 1880—Cottage City consisted of 769 cottages, 1,058 taxable buildings and 672 persons. Five of those persons were Joe Dias

and his family, enumerated in the June 4, 1880 Cottage City census:

Joseph	57	Hotel, Grocer
Mary	40	Keeping House
Charles H.	15	
Herbert L.	13	
Bessie	11	

The Vineyard Grove House would continue to be both home and business for them well into the new century.

Joe Dias's involvement with the town he helped to create continued long after it won independence. He signed Cottage City's first annual report of March 1, 1881 as Treasurer and Collector of Taxes, a post he held until his retirement.³⁴ The same month, residents formed the Rural Improvement Society of Cottage City, a group that—though its mission statement of ninety-nine words neglected to even casually mention it—was responsible for establishing the Cottage City Library. The Society, during its first summer of existence, thanked Joe Dias for offering to pay for and plant 1,000

A less wordy ad, perhaps placed by a more established and confident Joe Dias, in the *Vineyard Gazette*.

³³ Railton, *History*, 262-267.

³⁴ Amaral, *They Ploughed the Seas*, 33; Charles E. Banks, *History of Martha's Vineyard*, Vol. II, Annals of Oak Bluffs. 62.



An eastern larch tree similar to those that Joe Dias underwrote the planting of in newly independent Cottage City. Image by Bisnicks via Wikimedia Commons; Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike Unported License 3.0.

larch trees—large, deciduous trees with cones and short needles, capable of growing between 50 and 80 feet tall.³⁵ Two years later, a newspaper story headlined “Notes of Busy Preparation for a Season of Gayety” acknowledged a second gift of trees, 500 this time, to the Rural Improvement Society.³⁶ He would have been sixty by then—aware, perhaps, that like the man in the proverb he was planting trees in whose shade he would never sit.

A Life Well-Lived

Joe Dias retired in 1886, moving his wife Mary to her family homestead (the Prince Athearn property) in what would soon become West Tisbury. He may have used this

time to compile an early catalog of whaling voyages—titled *Catalogue of New Bedford Whaling Ships, 1783-1906*—that became an important source for historians of whaling. Attributed to “Joseph Dias . . . a retired New Bedford whaling Captain,” it lists 4,127 voyages from New Bedford—over a quarter (25.9%) of all American whaling trips.^{37 38}

Mary Dias died of apoplexy on October 26, 1909. Where Joe went then is not entirely clear. One source has him moving in with relatives in Vineyard Haven.³⁹ The West Tisbury census of May 14, 1910, on the other hand, lists him as an 87-year-old widower living as a boarder in a household composed of Bartlett Smith, age 70, and his sister, nephew, niece and cousin. A full-page retrospective of his whaling career, published in a New Bedford newspaper in early 1910, describes him as “living in retirement in

35 Edith Morris, “How Oak Bluffs Got Its Library,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 24, no. 2 (February 1982): 122-128, on 122.

36 *Boston Sunday Herald*, May 20, 1883

37 Lund, et. al., *Whaling Masters and Whaling Voyages*, pg. 4

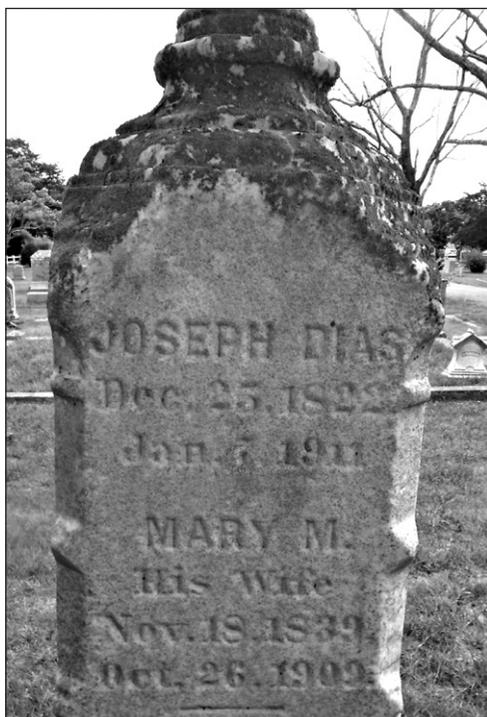
38 Lance E. Davis, Robert Gallman, and Karen Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816 - 1906* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 57.

39 Amaral, *They Ploughed the Seas*, 33.

South Boston.”⁴⁰ The Oak Bluffs column of the *Vineyard Gazette*, reporting his death on January 12, 1911, noted that it “occurred Saturday night at the Vineyard Haven Sanitarium, where he has been located this winter.”

“Captain Dias,” the *Gazette* continued, “was very widely known all over the island and bore the highest esteem of everyone.”⁴¹ The New Bedford paper that had reviewed his career the year before went further, calling him “a well-known Vineyarder, rated in his day as one of the best navigators who ever trod a deck.”

Joseph Dias lived an interesting and productive life: “boy master” of whaling ships, farmer, grocer, hotelier, secessionist, philanthropist and—very likely—pioneer whaling industry historian. He is buried, fittingly, in Oak Bluffs: beside his wife Mary in the Oak Grove Cemetery. The Vineyard Grove House—repurposed as a laundry in the early twentieth century and substantially altered since—still stands on Siloam Avenue. It is known today as the Tabernacle House, its name looking back to a time when Joe Dias was young, and the town of Oak Bluffs still a faraway dream.⁴²



The grave of Joseph Dias III in Oak Grove Cemetery, Oak Bluffs. Author's collection.

40 “*Began Whaling Career at Age of 14.*”

41 *Vineyard Gazette*, January 12, 1911.

42 Andrew Patch, personal communication, January 25, 2019.

The Oak Bluffs Civil War Monument: Background and Context

by A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

The Soldiers Memorial, a cast metal statue of a Union soldier atop a four-sided pedestal, was dedicated, in 1891, with plaques on three sides of the pedestal and the fourth side left blank. In 1925 a fourth plaque was added, “in honor of the Confederate soldiers,” as a gesture toward the statue’s donor, Confederate Army veteran and Oak Bluffs resident Charles Strahan.

In March 2019, as part of an ongoing national conversation about Confederate monuments in the public square, the Martha’s Vineyard chapter of the NAACP petitioned the Town of Oak Bluffs to remove the fourth plaque. Extensive public discussion—in print, on social media, and at two meetings of the Oak Bluffs Board of Selectmen—followed, leading to a public hearing held at the Oak Bluffs School on May 21, 2019. At the conclusion of the hearing, the Board voted unanimously to remove the fourth plaque (along with a smaller one, outlining the history of the statue, added to the plaza at its base in 2001) and offer it to the Martha’s Vineyard Museum, which indicated its willingness to accept, display, and interpret the plaques.

As a professional historian and a frequent contributor to the public discussion, I was asked by the Board to open the hearing with a fifteen-minute overview of the monument and its history. An abridged version of that talk appeared in the May 24 issue of the Vineyard Gazette. The full version—edited only to remove typos and delivery cues—is reprinted here for the record.



I’M A HISTORIAN—PhD, University of Wisconsin, 1990; twenty-plus years in university classrooms, and five at the Museum; working on my second million published words—and this is a talk about a statue. It’s also, necessarily, about that statue’s historical context . . . because, in history, context *always* matters.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper is Research Librarian at the Martha’s Vineyard Museum, and editor of the *Quarterly*.



The fiercest, bloodiest wars are those fought not over territory or a throne, but over a way of life: The Thirty Years' War, the Second World War, the Cold War. The Civil War was one such war. The “way of life” at stake was slavery—lifetime, heritable, chattel slavery—and the ideology on which it rested: that men, women, and children of African blood could be property (like a cow or a horse), because (like a cow or a horse) *they were not human.*

The battle over slavery—what southern planters called “our peculiar institution” and northern abolitionists called an affront to the laws of God and man—was decades old when the first cannonballs flew at Fort Sumter. “It is not light we need, but fire,” Frederick Douglass wrote in 1852, “it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.” The question was put to the citizens of the Kansas Territory in 1854: Enter the Union as a free state or a slave state? The first death occurred in December 1855, and by the summer of 1856 armed guerrilla warfare had broken out. Later that summer, in a Senate debate over the Kansas situation, Charles Sumner of Massachusetts accused Preston Brooks of South Carolina of embracing “a mistress . . . who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight. I mean the harlot, Slavery.” Brooks, enraged, attacked Sumner at his Senate desk, beating him senseless with his walking stick. He was re-elected in a landslide, and supporters from all over the South sent him new walking sticks inscribed with these words: “Hit him again.”

Portrait of a chasm. Portrait of a nation, slowly tearing itself apart.

The election of 1860 came, Lincoln won, and the Southern states bolted, convinced that upon inauguration in March he would unleash the abolitionists. They declared—one after the other—the principle for which they stood: the right to maintain, *and expand*, the practice of chattel slavery. We know their reasons because the states, and the Confederacy into which they formed themselves, declared them in writing: boldly, clearly, and without equivocation. Soldiers *on both sides* who committed their thoughts to paper were equally clear about the causes of the war: slavery, its future in America, and the future *of* America.

Let me take a moment, here, to underscore two points.

It is frequently said that those who fought for the Confederacy committed treason, but they did not. President Lincoln took the position that—because the Constitution did not allow states to secede—the Southern states had *not*, in reality, seceded. Having not seceded, they had *not* positioned themselves as a now-foreign enemy, and those who gave them “aid and comfort” had *not* committed treason against the United States. Make what you will of his legal argument, the fact remains that *if* the government against which you take up arms declines to indict you for treason . . . you didn’t commit it.

It is also frequently said that not all those who fought for the Confederacy enslaved people, benefitted from the enslavement of others, or even supported the *idea* of enslavement. True as this is, at a superficial level—“not all” is a low bar to clear—it is also beside the point. Regardless of why they went, regardless of what they thought, regardless of what was “in their hearts,” those who wore the uniform of the Confederacy and took

up arms on its behalf knowingly fought for a regime *openly and expressly committed* to the perpetuation and expansion of chattel slavery. The honor of the individual soldier may be separable from the honor of the cause they serve—I'm neither an ethicist nor a moral philosopher—but whatever position you choose take on the subject needs to be squared with that reality.

The war ended and the Confederacy dissolved, but ideas do not fade away so quickly. The 13th and 14th amendments outlawed slavery as an institution and explicitly extended the protections of the Constitution and Bill of Rights to *all* Americans, but saying it is one thing and enforcing it is another. The federal government *did* enforce it (after a fashion) for a decade after the War, but with the election of 1876 and the infamous “corrupt bargain” that resolved it, African Americans in the South were—like the Kurds in northern Iraq after the Gulf War—thrown to the wolves.



Fast-forward fifteen years.

Cottage City, 1891. Charles Strahan—once a soldier in the 21st Virginia Infantry, now publisher of the *Martha's Vineyard Herald*—is a stranger in a strange land: a southerner in a northern town, wash-ashore at a time when the Vineyard was far more insular. Snubbed by the local chapter of the GAR—the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans' organization—when he expresses his intention to attend their Memorial Day picnic, he launches a campaign to erect a statue in their honor.

Their honor. Not “the Union soldiers” . . . not even “the GAR” . . . but “the Henry Clay Wade Post of the GAR.” The statue, and the original three plaques, were a gesture by an *individual* toward a group of other, identifiable *individuals*. The statue went up, with a blank plaque of the fourth side of the pedestal, and speeches were made. Someday, Strahan said, perhaps the men of the GAR would see fit to return the gesture of honor, respect, and—the thing that Strahan clearly, achingly craved—acceptance.

There are African Americans in Cottage City in 1891: bellmen and cooks, laundresses and landladies. Others come, each summer, to worship at the Methodist Tabernacle in the Campground, and the Baptist Tabernacle in the Highlands. They rent rooms in boarding houses, or cottages from owners to whom the color of their money matters more than the color of their skin. The big resort hotels will not serve them.

Meanwhile, in the South . . . Jim Crow (legalized discrimination, in defiance of the 14th Amendment) has solidified; five years later, the Supreme Court will declare it legal in *Plessy v. Ferguson* . . . poll taxes, “literacy” tests, and open intimidation make the voting “rights” of African Americans a cruel joke . . . enslavement has been reestablished (in everything but name) in prisons, poorhouses, and sharecropped farms . . . lynching, on imaginary “charges” or just for the hell of it, is epidemic.

Citizens of the “new South,” nursing wounded postwar pride and desperate for northern investment, craft a new narrative of the war, known today as the “Lost Cause” myth: The antebellum South, a genteel society of gallant men and demure women (think: *Gone with the Wind*), was crushed by the North in a senseless war and a brutally harsh decade of Reconstruction . . . a “quarrel between brothers” over the proper balance of State and Federal power. Can’t we all be friends again? Can’t we go back to being one nation?



Fast-forward (almost) a quarter-century.

Gettysburg, 1913. Fifty years after the great battle, old men in blue and gray uniforms smelling of cedar and mothballs meet each other for what is billed as “The Last Encampment.” They sit around campfires, tell stories, and—gripping one another’s hands—declare the wounds of the war to be healed. Cameras flash, speeches are made . . . and the quarreling brothers of 1861-1865 are declared reconciled. “We are,” they declared, “all Americans again.”

African Americans might well have asked: “What do you mean ‘we?’ And what do you mean ‘again?’”

Two years later, D. W. Griffith brought the “Lost Cause” mythology to the screen in *Birth of a Nation*: an artistically brilliant, but grotesquely racist caricature of the Civil War and Reconstruction (this is the one where the members of the Ku Klux Klan are the heroes). Six years later, in 1919, President Woodrow Wilson purged the federal civil service of African American employees. Two years after that, in 1921, a white mob attacked the Greenwood district of Tulsa—a prosperous neighborhood of African American owned homes and businesses—with small arms and improvised bombs dropped from airplanes, burning it to the ground. The following year, 1922, the Ku Klux Klan was re-formed at Stone Mountain, Georgia. Another year, 1923, and the predominantly black town of Rosewood, Florida was torched by another white mob. Two years after Rosewood, twelve after the reunion at Gettysburg, a plaque was added to the Soldiers Memorial in Oak Bluffs.



Oak Bluffs, 1925. Charles Strahan is an old man now, slowly dying. The members of the GAR—those still alive—are old, too. Prodded by Sydna Eldridge of Vineyard Haven, a member of the GAR women’s auxiliary, they decide to give Strahan what he has wanted for so long. Acknowledgement. Acceptance. A fourth plaque to replace the empty one he put on the pedestal half-a-lifetime ago.

There are more African Americans—“colored people,” in the language of the day, though depending on the speaker that can mean *anyone* (Wampa-

noag, Portuguese, Azorean, mixed-race) who has dark skin—in Oak Bluffs now. Shearer Cottage, in its second decade, is a mecca for black intellectuals, performers, and artists. The first generation of African American “summer people,” like the Shearers and the Wests from Boston, return each summer to homes they have purchased (mostly in the Highlands) from those willing to sell to them. New Yorkers, like Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, are beginning to hear about the place. A second generation, including a young Dorothy West, is learning what it means to grow up on the Vineyard.

Part of what it means is that the big resort hotels *still* have an unspoken color barrier. Part of what it means is that acting “flashy” or attracting attention to yourself is *still*—if you’re black—problematic. Part of what it means is knowing that there are white people who won’t eat at the homes of their friends who employ black cooks, because they don’t want to eat food that black hands have touched. Not everywhere, not always. Oak Bluffs, MA is not Rosewood, FL. But the invisible boundaries, and the unmarked minefields, are very much there.

And, sometimes, they *are* visible. Blackface entertainment is still considered good fun on the Vineyard in the 1920s. In 1922, the children of the West Tisbury school stage a minstrel show as a fundraiser. If you went to the Ag Fair, or the Vineyard Haven Library children’s carnival, there’d be a booth where you could put down a few coins and get a stack of balls to play “Hit the Negro” . . . except that “negro” would not be the word that was used.



So: the plaques. One—on the front of the pedestal, replacing an existing plaque—named Strahan as the donor of the statue, and acknowledged his service in the 21st Virginia. The other—on the rear, replacing a blank plaque—began: “The Chasm is Closed.”

Here is where wording matters. The statue and the first three plaques, back in 1891, had been a gesture by one individual toward other individuals. Had Sydna Eldridge and those who made common cause with her responded in the same register we would, I suspect, not be here tonight. We can even imagine what such a response would have looked like: “This plaque is erected in honor of Charles Strahan by his brother veterans and fellow citizens of the Town of Oak Bluffs.” But, for reasons lost to history, they didn’t do that.

The fourth plaque, donated “by Union veterans and patriotic citizens of Oak Bluffs” *in honor of* “the Confederate soldiers” universalized the sentiment. Caught up, perhaps, in the fading echoes of the “Last Encampment” a dozen years before, they reached for a sweeping statement of healing and reconciliation at a time when—for African Americans, in Oak Bluffs and elsewhere—the chasm was far from closed, and the wounds inflicted, over centuries, by the unholy alliance of power and prejudice were far from healed.



Fast forward, just briefly, thirty more years. It is 1955. *Brown v. Board of Education* is a year old. In Atlanta, Birmingham, and elsewhere, men and women whose names are not yet household words are gathering in the meeting rooms of black churches: making plans, getting ready. “The storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake” that Douglass called for a century earlier is coming, again . . . this time by other means.

Nationwide, the last of the Civil War veterans are dying. Congress passes a bill enabling Confederate veterans to receive pensions and government-funded medical care. It is a symbolic gesture to, perhaps, a dozen impossibly old men, that will become moot within a year or two. It does *not*—Facebook memes to the contrary—confer some abstract and all-encompassing “US Veteran” status on them. The last members of the GAR die, and the organization formally disbands, in 1956. Its last member designates the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War—an ancestry society, like the DAR and the Mayflower Society, founded in 1881—to be its successor. Like the DAR, membership is contingent on the ancestor’s, not the member’s, military service.



Fast-forward 64 years, and here we are. Is the centuries-old chasm at last closed? Are the wounds inflicted over those centuries at last healed? You doubtless have your thoughts, as I have mine. I invite you to consider that, if your thoughts (or mine) are different from someone else’s, it may be because—having lived different lives, and experienced different things—we see the world through different, perhaps radically different, eyes.

Thank you for your time, debate responsibly, and if you remember nothing else, remember this: History is complicated . . . anyone who tells you different is selling something.



Photo courtesy of Heather Seger.

From the Museum Archives

A Letter for Mrs. Fisher

by A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

ON A MID-AUTUMN day in 1903—possibly Saturday, October 31, but more likely Monday, November 2—Parnell Pease Fisher of Edgartown walked the short block from her home at 23 North Water Street to the Post Office, then located at the corner of Water and Main. Among the mail that Edgartown postmistress Mary Adlington handed her that day was a small envelope from the firm of J. & W.R. Wing, posted in New Bedford on October 31. She brought it home (gratification is easier to delay when you live only minutes from the Post Office), then opened it in haste, lopping off the end of the envelope with a pair of long-bladed scissors and shaking out the single sheet it contained.¹

Brothers, born twenty years apart and raised on a farm near South Dartmouth, Joseph and William Ricketson Wing had opened a dry goods firm in New Bedford in 1849, when Joseph was 39 and William was 19. Their first toehold in the booming whaling industry was fitting out whalers for their upcoming voyages: offering clothing and equipment supplied on account, to be paid back (with substantial interest) from the sailor's earnings on the voyage. These small risks soon gave way to larger ones. The Wing Brothers began investing in whaleships in 1852, and by 1870 they owned the largest fleet in the country; they also acted as agents for ships owned by others—arranging for supplies and fitting-out at the beginning of a voyage, and bringing the whale oil and whalebone (baleen) to market at the end—again, taking a healthy percentage for themselves.² The services of agents like the Wing Brothers would have been particularly attractive to whaling captains who owned their own ships, getting them better deals than they would have been able to arrange for themselves, and freeing up their limited time ashore. Among the owner-operators who employed the Wings in 1903

1 The scissors (and the haste) are suppositions, but three-sixteenths of an inch—sliced off smoothly, but not *quite* straight or square—are missing from the right edge of the page, truncating two lines of text in mid-word.

2 “Historical Note,” Inventory of the J. & W. R. Wing & Co. Records, New Bedford Whaling Museum. <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/explore/library/finding-aids/mss35>

CABLE ADDRESS
"WING."

Office of

"A. B. C."
CODE USED.

J. & W. R. Wing,

No. 133 Union Street,

New Bedford, Mass. Oct. 31 1903. 190

Mrs. C.W.Fisher,
Edgartown Mass.

Dear Madam:-

Mr. Wm. R. Wing, telegraphs arrival of Bark Gay Head, Capt. Fisher, at San Francisco, yesterday, with 300 bbls. each of sperm and whale oil and 3000 lbs. whalebone, At the present price of whalebone, a very good season. No doubt Capt. Fisher has telegraphed to you, but if by chance he has not we take the liberty of doing so.

Yours truly,

J. & W.R.Wing,

By Moutton

was Capt. Charles W. Fisher of Edgartown: master of the bark *Gay Head*, and Parnell Fisher's husband of eighteen years.

The letter that slid out of the envelope and into her hands that morning was brisk and to the point: two sentences, spread over seven lines, typed on a half-sheet of J. & W.R. Wing letterhead.³ "Mr. Wm. R. Wing," it begins, "telegraphs arrival of Bark *Gay Head*, Capt. Fisher, at San Francisco, yesterday, with 300 bbls. each of sperm and whale oil, and 3000 lbs, whalebone. At

the present price of whalebone, a very good season."

Following that torrent of information, the second sentence is brief—almost apologetic—by comparison. "No doubt Capt. Fisher has telegraphed you, but if by chance he has not we take the liberty of doing so."

Parnell Fisher, of course, would have read another, more thrilling message between those bland lines: The whaling season was over . . . the *Gay Head* was safe . . . Charles was coming home.

The fact the *Gay Head* had come home to San Francisco rather than New Bedford, and would remain there until the next whaling "season" began, reflected the realities of the whaling business in 1903.

The once-rich hunting grounds of the central and southern Pacific were all but fished out; making a profit meant chasing the dwindling whale population into the chilly waters north of Japan:

to the Bering Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk. The northern whaling season was measured in months, and to arrive too early or

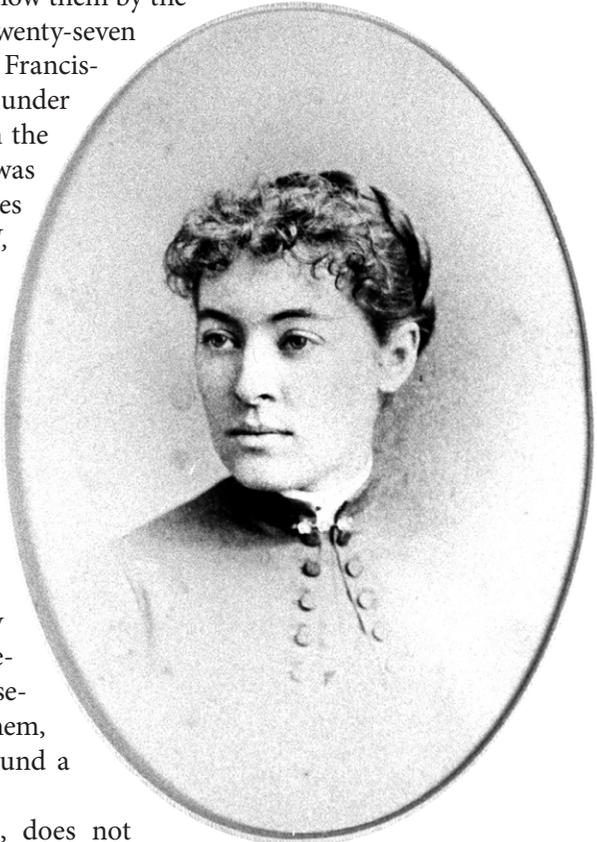
linger too late was to risk disaster. Some captains timed their annual trips northward so that they arrived just after the breakup of the pack ice in the spring, and left again before it began to reform in the fall. Others, fitting out their ships with reinforced hulls and their crews with clothes made of seal skin and caribou hide, went north in late fall and "wintered



3 Martha's Vineyard Museum, RU 518, Captain Charles W. Fisher Collection, Box 1, Folder 9.

over” in the Arctic in order to begin whaling at the first possible moment the following spring.⁴

The whaling “season” referred to in the letter thus took on a predictable shape, with ships making voyages of 8-12 months on a more-or-less annual schedule. San Francisco, a booming port city conveniently close to the whaling grounds, became a natural base of operations for such voyages. Over 100 whaleships had departed through the Golden Gate by the end of the Civil War; 1000 more would follow them by the beginning of World War I. Twenty-seven whaling vessels sailed from San Francisco in 1903 alone, many of them under the command of captains from the Vineyard. George Fred Tilton was there with the *Belvedere*, James A. Tilton with the *Bowhead II*, and Benjamin F. Tilton with the *Morning Star*; Stephen F. Cottle and Hartson Bodfish of Tisbury had the *William Baylies* and the *Beluga*, respectively, and James A. M. Earle of Edgartown the *Charles W. Morgan*. San Francisco was—for them as for Charles W. Fisher and other whaling captains of the era—functionally a second home.⁵ A turn-of-the-century photograph in the Museum archives shows group of them, formally dressed, gathered around a dinner table.



The photograph, of course, does not capture what words passed across the table in the moments before the photographer cleared his throat and said: “Gentlemen, look this way if you please.” The talk may have been of their other shared home 3,000 miles to the east, but it could also have involved the details of their shared business: plans for the next season, or the current market price for whalebone. With the petroleum industry booming and

4 Dorothy Cottle Poole, “Vineyard Whalemens in the Arctic,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 13, no. 1 (August 1971): 1-25.

5 Lloyd C. M. Hare, “Vineyard Whaling Captains and Fabulous Frisco,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, vol. 1, no. 3 (February 1960): 3-19;

the market for whale oil permanently depressed as a result, the amount of whalebone harvested on a voyage, and the price that could be obtained for it could—as the Wing Brothers’ letter to Parnell Fisher implied—make the difference between a healthy profit and a meager one.

The voyage that Fisher completed on All Hallows’ Eve, 1903 had begun the previous November. It was the third of three virtually back-to-back voyages he had made from San Francisco since becoming owner-master of the *Gay Head*: January to November 1901, December 1901 to October 1902, and November 1902 to October 1903. This time, however, Fisher allowed himself a break of weeks rather than months. The *Gay Head* would next head north in March of 1904.⁶ In the meantime, Captain Fisher could go home.

His trip home would—like William Wing’s trip from New Bedford to San Francisco—have taken place overland. Transcontinental rail service had, by 1903, long since rendered the long, passage trip around Cape Horn unnecessary for passengers and cargo alike. Boarding a train at the old San Francisco depot at 4th and Brannan Streets, Captain Fisher would have rolled eastward over the rails laid a generation earlier by the Central Pacific and Union Pacific: San Francisco to Ogden, Utah, then on to St. Louis and ultimately New York, where he could board a New York, New Haven & Hartford line train, or a Fall River Line steamer, to New Bedford. Parnell would be waiting for him there, as was their custom, and their first night together after a year or more apart would have been spent in a hotel room there. “Nellie” (as he called her in his letters home) had been through enough such reunions to estimate the day of his arrival. It would, in any event, be soon. San Francisco and New York, still three months distant from one another by sea, were less than a week apart by rail.



Our mental images of the “The Whaling Era” are firmly tied to its Golden Age: fifty years or so between the late 1810s and the early 1870s. The whaleships of our imagination are driven by wind and canvas alone, even though those that tied up on the San Francisco waterfront often carried coal-burning steam engines for auxiliary power. We imagine Captain Fisher’s crews stalking their prey like latter-day Tashtegos—wielding hand-held spears and relying on keen eyes and muscle power alone—even though they were likely equipped with shoulder-fired harpoon guns and the latest bomb lances. We adore (implausible as it may be) the image of the whaling captain’s wife on her widow’s walk, sweeping the horizon

6 Voyage details are taken from the “American Offshore Whaling Voyages Database,” *National Maritime Digital Library*, <https://nmdl.org/projects/aowv/>

with her spyglass and hoping for a glimpse of the masthead pennant that will signal her husband's long-awaited return. Told that the news actually came by letter, we imagine fountain pens and flowing copperplate script. The reality—a transcontinental telegram, translated into a routine business memo typed by a nameless clerk on a Remington upright—seems as jarring as a digital watch in a Pre-Raphaelite painting.

Yet, as the letter from J. & W.R. Wing shows, that's how it was in the long-ago autumn of 1903. The offshore whaling industry was in decline by 1870, but its downward spiral was slow and its end long in coming. It lasted long enough for kerosene lamps yield to electric lights, the telephone to supplement the telegraph, and the paddle steamers that served the Vineyard to give way to a new generation of screw steamers designed to carry automobiles. The Whaling Era and what we think of as the Modern Era overlapped by decades. Should we forget, documents like Nellie Fisher's letter are there to remind us.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Community Conversations

“The more you know of your history, the more liberated you are.”

—Maya Angelou

How true those words are, and how real they became on May 21 when the Town of Oak Bluffs held a public hearing to discuss the fate of the plaque affixed, in 1925, to the Soldiers’ Memorial opposite the Steamship Authority. What happened was a “liberating” experience for all, as the breadth of history unfolded through the words and the knowledge of Bow Van Riper, the MVM’s Research Librarian and your *Quarterly* Editor. Perspectives and actions of 1891, 1925 and then 2019 shed light upon the subject for all who attended. The result was a community conversation, a humble and gracious consideration of all perspectives, and a rational decision to give the 1925 plaque to the Martha’s Vineyard Museum where it can be interpreted more fully, informing everyone present of the what, how, and why of the statue, the plaques, and their place in the Island’s history.

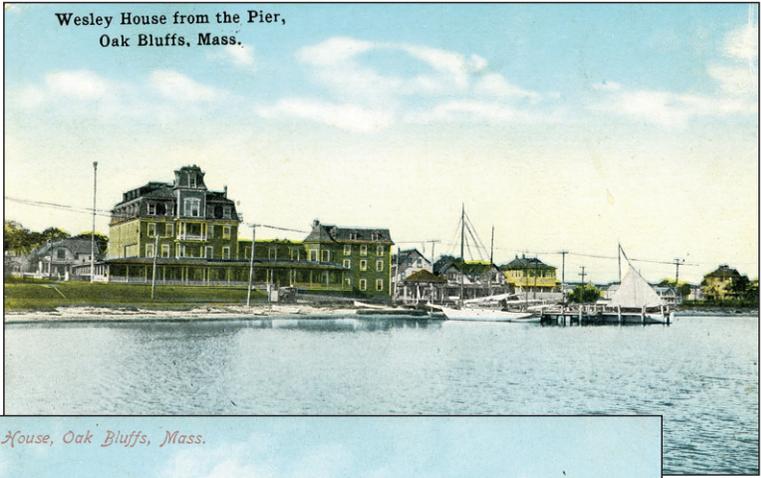
Everyone who attended the hearing left knowing more; everyone was liberated.

Such community conversations are at the heart of the new Martha’s Vineyard Museum. We seek to tell the untold stories, the stories that matter to everyone and may not be known by many. Our new Sheldon and Lucy Hackney Library offers books, memorabilia and files galore for the curious to better understand who they are, where they came from, and indeed help chart where they may be going. The Rose Styron Garden, now under construction, will host community conversations, poetry readings, and human rights dialogues in an intimate setting, perhaps in conjunction with drama or with music. Our goal is to stimulate conversations, to provide spaces in which knowledge can be shared, and to create places for people to explore and discover. In so doing, we all will become liberated. Come visit!



Phil Wallis
Executive Director

The Wesley House Between the World Wars



The Wesley House's private pier and rooftop "W," shown here in postcards from the Museum's collection, were familiar sights to Oak Bluffs visitors in the 1920s and 1930s. The "W" was toppled by a hurricane, and the pier dismantled, in the 1950s.

151 Lagoon Pond Road
Vineyard Haven, MA 02568



The Evolution of the Wesley House, 1873-1930s

