

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



THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL.31, NO.3

FEBRUARY 1990



Customs Collectors at Edgartown 1842 - 1855

by FLORENCE KERN

"The Package of Old Letters"

by JOHN A. HOWLAND

The Slandering of Jeremiah Pease Bit & Pieces

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Society among your bequests.

Correction

In the November 1989 *Intelligencer*, page 63, it states:
"There was no electricity in that part of Chilmark at the
time (it came in 1958) . . ." The date in parenthesis is
incorrect. Electricity came to the Boston Hill section of
Chilmark, as far west as Mrs. Ella Brug's house, in 1939.
It was Benton's house that didn't get electricity until the
1950s.

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Vol.31, No.3

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The Dukes County Intelligencer is published quarterly by the Dukes
County Historical Society, Inc., Cooke and School Streets, Edgartown,
Massachusetts. Subscription is through membership in the Society. Back
issues are available at the Society offices.

Memberships are solicited. Applications should be sent to the Society
at Box 827, Edgartown, MA, 02539. Manuscripts and authors' queries
should also be addressed to that address.

Articles published in *The Intelligencer* do not necessarily represent the
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ISSN 0418 1379

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The Dukes County Historical Society was founded in 1922 to preserve the history of Dukes County for the public benefit. It is a nonprofit institution, supported by membership dues, contributions and bequests, which are tax deductible. Its annual meeting is held in August in Edgartown.

It maintains two historic houses, both providing guided tours to the public during the summer, one in Edgartown and the other in Vineyard Haven. A nominal fee is charged to non-members.

In Edgartown, the Thomas Thomas Cooke House, circa 1765, is on the corner of School and Cooke Streets. Acquired by the Society in 1935, it is maintained as a museum of Island history.

Also on the Society grounds in Edgartown are the Francis Foster Museum and Gale Huntington Library. Both are open to the public year round. The Museum has an exhibition of the Vineyard's maritime heritage. The Library contains logs, journals, genealogies and other Island documents, plus many photographs and volumes of history.

The Edgartown property also includes the Gay Head Lighthouse exhibit with its 1854 Fresnel lens and the Carriage Shed containing various old boats and wagons, including an 1854 hand pumper fire engine. These, too, are open to the public all year.

In Vineyard Haven, the Society maintains the Jirah Luce House, circa 1804, formerly operated by the Tisbury Museum, now part of the Dukes County Historical Society. The exhibits are of early Vineyard explorers and settlers, and other aspects of local history.

The public is invited to visit the Society and also to take out a membership, which includes a subscription to this quarterly journal and free admission to our buildings.



Customs Collectors at Edgartown 1842 - 1855

by FLORENCE KERN

Leavitt Thaxter 1842-1845
Joseph Thaxter Pease 1845-1849
Leavitt Thaxter 1849-1853
Joseph Thaxter Pease 1853-1855

OF ALL the political plums in 19th Century Dukes County, the choicest was that of United States Collector of Customs, District of Edgartown.

Although Federal compensation was minimal, the position was prestigious. It was hotly sought after by Whigs and Democrats throughout the District, which included the Vineyard, the Elizabeth Islands, Noman's Land and Skiff's Island, then apparently considered a possible landing spot for cargo.

Leavitt Thaxter of Edgartown, one of the Whigs, was appointed Collector, beating out Richard L. Pease, Abraham Osborn and John Presbury Norton, all of Edgartown. The last named, out-going Collector Norton, had even gone to Washington trying to retain the post, but he was told he had no chance. On February 2, 1842, the day he was leaving to return to the Vineyard, he delivered a "private" letter to Stephen Pleasanton, head of the lighthouse establishment, proposing a radical change in the post:¹

...the President will in a few days appoint a new Collector

¹ His proposal was ignored. For details of the appointment see "Richard L. Pease Goes Job Hunting," *Intelligencer*, Feb. 1989.

FLORENCE KERN of Bethesda, Md., is a Society member and summer resident of Chappaquiddick. She has been studying the history of the Edgartown Customs office for years. This article is the fifth she has written on the subject. Her work provides a definitive history of the maritime industry along Nantucket and Vineyard Sounds. Her research continues, at the Society, the National Archives, the Coast Guard Library and the Library of Congress, and other places. We are grateful.

...[I] recommend your placing all lighthouses and buoys that is now under my charge to the Collector at New Bedford or Boston . . . Should Mr. [Leavitt] Thaxter be appointed you will have trouble with him for he knows nothing about lighthouses. . .

The new Collector, Leavitt Thaxter, born March 13, 1789, was the second son of Rev. Joseph Thaxter, minister of the Edgartown Congregational Church from 1780 to his death in 1827. Although he may have known "nothing about lighthouses," as Norton claimed, he was well qualified to handle all other aspects of the business of Customs during the boom days of whaling and coastal shipping.

Educated by his father and the public schools, he began teaching at the age of 18. A bill in the Society archives shows that he charged Timothy Coffin \$1.36 a week in 1807 for instructing his son, plus an additional 48 cents a week for wood to keep teacher and pupil warm during the lessons.

That year, while teaching, he struggled with the decision of what to do with his life. At first, he felt that teaching was not for him. He was eager for adventure and would go to sea. But under pressure from his father, he gave up that romantic notion and agreed to take the examination for Harvard. The Reverend wrote James Freeman about the change in attitude in August 1807:

. . . the thought of going to sea was only a forlorn Hope, because he could not think with any Degree of Comfort on the Difficulties it must put me to, in bearing the Expense [of college]. I have convinced him that the Expense will not be so grievous a Burden as the Distress I must suffer to have him exposed not only to dangers, but to every Vice. As to his concern about what he shall do after he gets out of College, I have convinced him that it will be time enough then to think of it. . . He now sets off for Hingham to spend the vacation under the direction of Mr. Coleman to prepare for his examination . . .²

Harvard Yard wasn't exciting enough to erase his desire for adventure. Finding the Boston waterfront more interesting than Cambridge, he left college without a degree

² Letter, Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS).

to take a job in a trading company. He was sent overseas to various places by the company, most often to the East Indies. In Calcutta, during the War of 1812, he was seized by the British and put in jail, although he was not a combatant. He soon managed to escape.

He may have decided while in that Calcutta jail there were better ways to earn a living and to spend one's life than in foreign trade. Returning to Massachusetts in 1814, he took a position as school teacher in the western part of the state. While teaching there, in Williamsburg, he met and in 1816 married Martha White Mayhew. Patty, as she was called, had Vineyard connections. Her grandfather, Paine Mayhew, had left Chilmark to settle on the mainland in 1786.

The young couple later moved to Sparta, Georgia, where Leavitt was offered a position as headmaster of the local academy. He began to study law and was admitted to the Georgia bar in 1823. His father, the Parson, was highly pleased with how his son had turned out, as he wrote once again to friend and historian James Freeman in Boston:

My wild Boy has become a steady, charming man. He is at Sparta in Georgia and in high standing as Head of their Academy. But will come to this Place in the course of the Summer — we shall attempt to set up an academy here & I believe it will afford him a comfortable living. . .³

With the Parson's help, the once "wild Boy" built the spacious structure which stands at the corner of School Street and Davis Lane in Edgartown. In 1825 it was dedicated as Thaxter's Academy with great pride by the townfolk. An outstanding school during its brief life, it educated many of Edgartown's future leaders. His students were so fond of their schoolmaster that some years later they commissioned a portrait of him by his cousin, Cyrus Worth Pease, a painting that now hangs in the Dukes County Court House.

For some reason, he closed the Academy in 1839. The

³ Letter, dated Feb. 25, 1823, MHS.

Panic of 1837 and the ensuing depression may have had something to do with his decision, but by then he had other ambitions. He had passed his Massachusetts bar examination, had served a term in the Massachusetts General Court and was State Senator from 1836 to 1847.⁴

Thaxter sold the Academy building in 1839 to Capt. Alfred K. Fisher for \$3400 and built a smaller but elegant home a few hundred yards away on Davis Lane near Pease's Point Way. Presumably this housed the Custom Office after he was appointed Collector in 1842. Collectors were obliged to provide two offices for the service, one for themselves and another for their Deputy or Naval Officer.⁵

The former teacher devoted himself to farming, real estate and politics. Between 1829 and 1857, his name and that of his wife appear frequently on Edgartown land deeds. They bought and sold many pieces of property. He was named Federal Judge of the Court of Insolvency, was the first President of the Dukes County Educational Society, the first President of the Agricultural Association (which runs the annual fair in West Tisbury), and State Guardian of the Indians on Chappaquiddick and at Christiantown. Through his close association with the Indians, he collected and studied fossils and other archaeological specimens from the Gay Head cliffs.

He certainly had outgrown the "wild Boy" character that his father, Parson Thaxter, had worried about.

Takes Oath of Office

It was cold and cloudy on April 8th, 1842, when Thaxter took the oath of office as Collector of Customs for the District of Edgartown. Two whalers, *Phebe* and *Joseph Starbuck*, had just arrived in port and were being inspected that day by Deputy Collector Jeremiah Pease, who was no doubt wondering if he would be continued in office. After

⁴ David Davis had started a competing academy in Edgartown about 1835 so that may have been a factor in Thaxter's decision.

⁵ Only the larger ports had Naval Officers who verified the Collector's reports. In Edgartown, the second room was used by the Inspector of Customs, called Deputy Collector.

all, he had just lost his lighthouse Keeper's job for political reasons, or so he believed. The Whigs had won the Presidency and he was a Democrat. He did not have long to wonder. In his diary that night he wrote,

At 1/2 past 11 o'clock [Thaxter] appoints me a Deputy Collector and Inspector of the Customs for the District of Edgartown.

Pease was immediately put to work moving the "books, papers and public property" from the former Custom House on North Water Street⁶ to Thaxter's home on Davis Lane. It was a trip of about 10 blocks.

Deputy Collector Pease, as those who have followed his diary know, was a man of many jobs, paid and unpaid. In the Customs service position, after many years on a salary, he was in 1837 put on a per-diem basis at \$3 per day "when actually employed, not to exceed [*sic*] in the aggregate Five hundred dollars a Year." He had also for many years been the Keeper of the Edgartown Light, but had been fired in March 1841 and replaced by Capt. Sylvanus Crocker. When he was reappointed two years later, in October 1843, after he had personally petitioned the Secretary of Treasury, he wrote in his diary:

I sent no dirty Petition, or scandalous reports to Government but merely stated that if the crime for which I was displaced had ceased to be a Crime I should like to have the same station again, meaning the crime of supporting the Election of Gen. Jackson & Mr. Van Buren as Presidents of the United States.

Politics were important to job holding, but that may not have been the reason for Jeremiah's dismissal in 1841. Collector Thaxter in a letter to the Secretary of Treasury in 1843 suggests a different reason for Pease's earlier dismissal:

... and [I] have also admonished him of the necessity of residing and being himself steadily in the house provided for the keeper.

But that wasn't until 1843. Now, in 1842, with no lighthouse to worry about, Jeremiah would have time to

⁶ Capt. John Presbury Norton house, 90 No. Water St.

make the many trips necessary to move the Custom Office to its new location. There were boxes and boxes of forms that recorded arrivals, clearances, manifests, registers, enrollments, licenses, bills of health and bounties for fishermen. Plus, of course, records about lighthouses, buoys, wrecks, medical care and quarantines aboard vessels, smugglers, storm damages, forfeits, fees, drawbacks, payrolls and office expenses, not to mention the voluminous directives from the Custom House in Boston and the Department of Treasury in Washington.

That moving day, April 8, was also Jeremiah Pease's birthday. He had no time for celebration, but he did acknowledge it with the usual terse entry in his diary: "Another year of my short life is past."

It was a busy week for Collector Thaxter and Deputy Pease. On April 14, Richard Luce arrived from Tarpaulin Cove to be given his new commission as Deputy there, and a new commission was delivered to Holmes Hole for Deputy Henry Worth Pease, who had held the job, politics or no politics, since 1817.

The Fabulous Forties

Edgartown, along with the rest of the Island, was near the peak of its 19th Century prosperity at this time. In the decade from 1840 to 1850, the town's population rose from 1509 to 1736. It continued to increase to a peak of 2118 in 1860, when it began falling slowly. By 1900, it had dropped to 1200 where it had been in 1800, a century before.

When Leavitt Thaxter took office, Edgartown was booming. There were almost a dozen wharves at which whalers and coasters tied up. There were two grist mills, about 33 shops and 18 stores, two saltworks,⁷ a candle factory that employed 14 men, a ropewalk, a hardtack bakery and three fishing companies. Good jobs were plentiful for mariners, farmers, carpenters and cordwainers. No large vessels were built on the Island, but there were

⁷ Salt manufacturing was starting its decline as cheaper salt, at 50 cents a bushel, began to come in from the Bahamas.

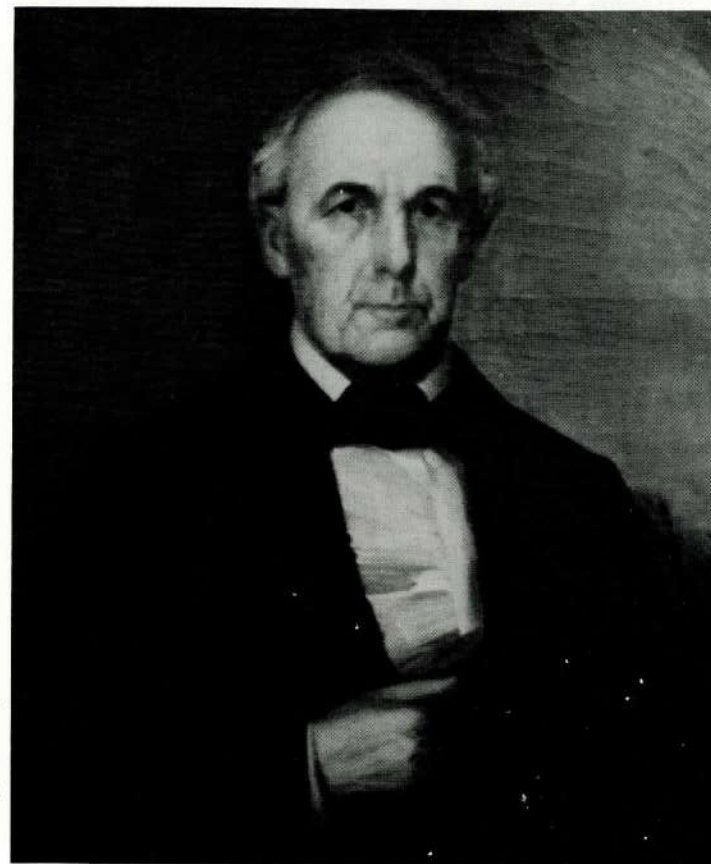


Photo by Mitch Edgan

Portrait of Leavitt Thaxter by Cyrus Pease hangs in County Court House.

good facilities, including marine railways, for repairing and refurbishing anything that floated.⁸

The results of those prosperous years are visible today. Many of the old houses in the Edgartown Historic District were built during these years. Among the largest are the Dr. Daniel Fisher house on Main Street, the Dr. Clement Shiverick house on Pease's Point Way, the Capt. John O. Morse house on North Water Street, plus, of course, the

⁸ Janet Van Tassel, "The Vineyard's First Business Boom, 1815-1860," *Intelligencer*, Nov. 1975.

Methodist Church (now called the Whaling Church) on Main Street.

Much of the money for these fine buildings was derived directly or indirectly from whaling. Fortunes were being made by those who invested in whalers owned or mastered (sometimes both) by Vineyarders. However, only a trickle of whaling money came through the Edgartown Custom House. Duties on cargoes of oil in the tens of thousands of dollars were paid at mainland ports where the ships were usually unloaded. Hence, Edgartown never came close to being a commercial port in the order of New Bedford or Boston.

Between 1833 and 1852, permanent registers for foreign trading and whaling were issued for 30 ships, barks, brigs and schooners by the Edgartown Collectors Cooke, Norton, Thaxter and Pease. A few of the 30 were registered from Tisbury, one from Chilmark and the others from Edgartown. Many were over 100 tons, but even these large Vineyard-owned vessels rarely brought their cargoes to Edgartown. In 1849, only one whaler unloaded her oil in the town. In that same year, 80 vessels unloaded at New Bedford.

Collector Thaxter's salary was \$600 a year, plus a small percentage of harbor fees and marine-hospital insurance each mariner was obliged to pay. Even in the busiest of years, the Custom House seemed to operate at a loss, resulting in drastic expense-cutting measures being taken by authorities in Washington. Fifth Auditor Stephen Pleasanton of the Treasury Department was a penny-pincher *extraordinaire*. He could see no reason why revenue boats and boatmen were needed in the Edgartown district. Why couldn't vessels be inspected when tied up at wharves? He ordered Thaxter to dismiss the boatman at Holmes Hole and lay up the Revenue boat. Thaxter complied reluctantly, but wrote to Pleasanton that he thought it an unwise move. There were, he argued, only two wharves in Holmes Hole and most vessels anchored far out in the harbor, often

waiting only long enough to catch the tide up or down Vineyard Sound. He argued:

If Foreign vessels are permitted to lie at this port without having their papers examined and their manifests certified by the Boarding officer, it will be very easy for them to dispose of parts of their cargo, and then to make out such manifests to be exhibited at their final port of destination as would best suit them, and therefore defraud the Revenue.

Pleasanton soon restored both the boat and boatman and thereafter showed considerable respect for Thaxter.

Among the new revenue acts passed in 1842 was one prohibiting the importation of pornographic material. Another act placed a tariff on opium, which previously had come in duty free.

"Rotten from Base to Roof"

In addition to being Collector of Customs, Thaxter, like all Collectors, was also responsible for the lighthouses and lightships in his district, those on Nantucket and Vineyard Sounds, as well as other aids to navigation, such as buoys. He made an annual tour of inspection from Chatham on Cape Cod to Cuttyhunk, then known as Cutter Hunk. The tour was usually made aboard one of the United States Revenue Cutters, forerunners of today's Coast Guard. These cutters regularly stopped in at Edgartown, Holmes Hole and Tarpaulin Cove.

Many lighthouses were old, outmoded and in sad repair. In 1838, Congress, goaded by Edmund and George W. Blunt, publishers of *Blunt's Coastal Pilot*, ordered an inspection of lighthouses and it was reported that 40 percent of the 256 lighthouses and the 30 lightships were defective.

Congress commissioned a follow-up study, this one by an independent engineer, of the lighthouses of Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Concerning the Edgartown district, this second report stated:

The establishments at . . . Cape Poge, Tarpaulin and Gay Head were found in a state of partial or complete ruin, and all require rebuilding.

The report by independent engineer I.W.P. Lewis quoted

various keepers, all critical of the service and the equipment they were required to use.⁹ After reading the report, Collector Thaxter was, he wrote, "somewhat alarmed." He went to the lighthouses, talked to the Keepers who had been quoted and reported his findings to Pleasanton in Washington:

The Report of Mr. Lewis respecting the lights under my superintendence is incorrect and exaggerated in most instances; and the statements signed by the Keepers were drawn up by him and urged upon them contrary to their convictions of the truth.

Again, some months later, in June 1843, Thaxter reported to Pleasanton, after being asked to investigate:

I am assured that the pilots and masters of vessels in this region will speak well of the Light Houses in these waters.

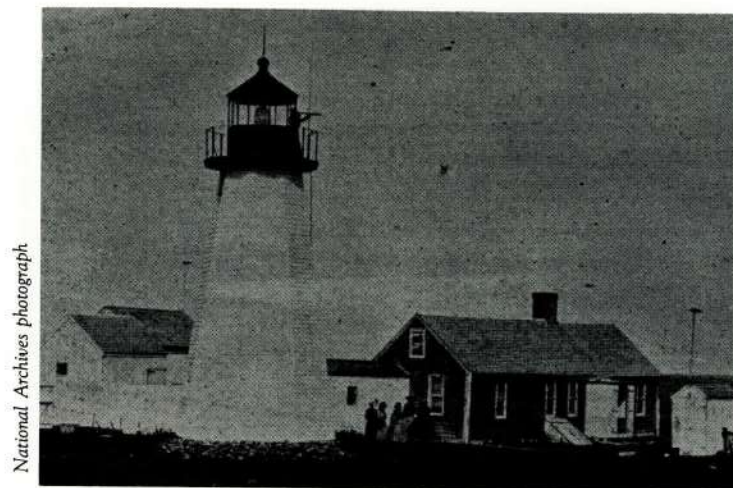
Nonetheless, he did agree that the Cape Poge Light was in need of replacing. It had been built in 1801 and had just recently been moved back from the eroding cliff. But its structural condition was bad and the tower should be replaced:

[It is] an octagonal building, rotten from base to roof, and requires to be rebuilt at once . . . The keeper states that four years since, a breakwater (so-called) consisting of pilings, planks, and ballast, was constructed to protect the point from further decay, but the whole was demolished the following winter, and its remains (the ballast) are now visible under water about 75 feet outside the present beach.¹⁰

The breakwater, built in 1838 at a cost of \$120, had been copied from similar breakwaters at Provincetown and Billingsgate. The Keeper at Cape Poge did complain about the dwelling, which consisted of "three small rooms with no closets." Further, the boat he had "is old and rotten," Thaxter wrote. Pleasanton in Washington was pleased with Thaxter's report and responded:

⁹ I.W.P. Lewis was a nephew of Capt. Winslow Lewis, who had built most of the New England lighthouses and was the principal advisor to Stephen Pleasanton, head of the lighthouse establishment in Washington. Ironically, Winslow Lewis had recommended his nephew for the independent engineering study, which so discredited him.

¹⁰ The breakwater or "fence," as some call it, is still visible at low tide at this writing (1989).



National Archives photograph

Cape Poge Light with enlarged Keeper's dwelling and covered walkway.

I am very glad to perceive that [your report] puts an extinguisher upon the many false statements made by I.W.P. Lewis concerning these lights.

Perhaps as a way of showing his appreciation, Pleasanton approved an additional room for the Keeper's dwelling and the purchase of a new boat.¹¹

At the request of Pleasanton, Thaxter went to Boston where he met with Capt. Winslow Lewis, long-time builder of lighthouses. Together they drew up plans for a new tower at Cape Poge. A contract with Lewis in July 1844, set the cost of the tower at \$550, to be equipped with a new lantern and lamps for \$1150. Lewis, as would be expected, specified installation of his own lamps and reflectors although by this time the French Fresnel lenses had been shown to be far superior.¹²

The new tower was to be built within 18 feet of the Keeper's dwelling. Thaxter on his own initiative agreed to pay Lewis \$45 to build a covered way between the house

¹¹ For more details see *Intelligencer*, Feb. 1984.

¹² If both jobs, the new tower and the new light, went to him, Lewis offered to reduce the bid by \$100 to \$1600. As usual, he got both jobs. In 1857, Lewis's inefficient lamps were removed and a Fresnel system of prisms and lenses installed.

and the tower and he also authorized Lewis to furnish the lamps with his Patent Caps at an extra cost of \$19.50. Thaxter seemed confident that Pleasanton would not object. And apparently he did not.

On July 27, 1844, only 17 days after the contract was signed, Thaxter wrote Pleasanton that "the Cape Poge Light House will be completed in all next week." Lewis had arrived in Edgartown on July 24th to supervise its completion.

The Society archives contain detailed specifications for the octagonal tower and lantern. The tower, built of pine planks and shingles, was painted with two coats of Boston white lead outside, the lantern with two coats of black. The lantern was fitted with 11 lamps, each with a 14-inch reflector that projected a fixed white light visible over 28 points of the compass. The tower continued in service until 1893, when a new one was built 40 feet back from the old one, as the sea continued to nibble at the cliff.

The Gay Head light was also being threatened by the erosion of the cliffs and in August 1844 Collector Thaxter paid John Mayhew of Edgartown \$320 to move the lighthouse 75 feet "to a spot indicated by a post in the ground," and to repair it in the process. Thaxter certified that the work had been done that same month.

During Thaxter's first term as Collector, which was from 1842 to 1845, there were several damaging storms and two winters of extreme cold. In the winter of 1843-44, Edgartown's inner and outer harbors froze solid and all boat traffic was halted for a lengthy period. It was possible to walk across the ice from the Edgartown harbor light to Cape Poge light. One man even drove his horse and "slay" out to Cape Poge over the ice, Jeremiah Pease wrote in his diary.

A severe storm on November 23, 1846, broke an opening in the barrier beach linking Edgartown and Chappaquiddick. The opening permitted fishermen and pilots to reach Muskeget Channel from Edgartown without going around Cape Poge, saving them about five nautical



National Maritime Museum

Steamboat Naushon, built in 1845 for Holmes W. Smith, Edgartown.

miles.¹³

By the time Thaxter left office in 1845, steamboats were an ordinary sight in Edgartown harbor, making regular stops at what came to be called the Steamboat Wharf (today's Memorial Wharf). The first that did so on a schedule were the *Telegraph* and the *Massachusetts*, both Nantucket-owned. With the advent of the steamers, tourist traffic began bringing such distinguished guests as Governor and Mrs. Briggs of Massachusetts. On one visit in August 1844, Collector Thaxter and his wife, Patty, entertained the Governor and his wife at dinner in their home on Davis Lane.

The first steamboat to be listed in the Edgartown Customs records was the 240-ton *Naushon*. She was given a permanent enrollment for coastwise voyages by Collector Thaxter in 1845. Built in New York, she was owned by Holmes W. Smith of Edgartown and Jared Gabor, who formed the New Bedford and Martha's Vineyard Steamboat Company.

The *Naushon* didn't begin regular service from Edgartown to Holmes Hole, Woods Hole and New Bedford until Monday, March 23, 1846, after Thaxter had left the Customs Office. She departed from Edgartown each Monday,

¹³ In the past 300 years, the beach has been breached almost every 30 years, making Chappaquiddick, at best, a some-time island. This breaching was to occupy the attention of the Collectors for the rest of the 1800s.

Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and left New Bedford on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. On Saturdays passengers could make the round trip from New Bedford to Edgartown for one fare. She never made a profit and was taken out of service in 1848.

There weren't any public opinion polls in those days, but somehow Collector Thaxter seems to have known how the 1844 election would come out months in advance. He even knew who would take his place because on September 24, 1844, in a letter to Washington, he wrote:

I was assured early this qtr. that I should be removed and I was unwilling to do anything to the prejudice of my successor, who, by the bye, is a very worthy and capable young man.

The young man he praised was Joseph Thaxter Pease, eldest son of Thaxter's deputy, Jeremiah Pease.

Joseph T. Pease 1845-1849

Things looked good for the Democrats in the 1844 presidential election. Tyler, an independent Whig, had alienated many of the old-line Whigs, splitting the party. Despite this, the party nominated him for a second term and he accepted, but he withdrew before the election, causing considerable confusion in the party.

James Polk, Democrat, won the election. Edgartown Democrats had for months been campaigning for Joseph Thaxter Pease to be named Collector. He and Jeremiah were steadfast Democrats. Joseph, a carpenter who felt he was destined for bigger responsibilities, had two years before been recommended by the local politicians for a position in the Boston Custom House. They described him as "a fine young Demo of about 25 years of age, married, & has two children, a first-rate man, writes with great speed . . . can give satisfaction in the Coastwise Dept., deputy surveyor, copyist, boarding officer. Understands boarding vessels & managing boats, etc. He has served a regular apprenticeship with his father." His father, as we know, was Deputy Collector under Leavitt Thaxter.

Joseph, despite the flattering recommendation, did not get the Boston position. After all, a Whig, albeit an independent one, was still in the White House in 1842. Now, in 1844, things would be different.

Late in February 1845, a month after the Democrats took over, Joseph went to Washington to make sure Collector Thaxter's advance information was correct. He was assured it was, but it would take time. In August he finally heard that he would get the Collector's job and the following month his commission arrived.

Joseph Thaxter Pease, named for Rev. Joseph Thaxter, long the pastor of the Congregational Church, was born August 3, 1814, the oldest of Jeremiah's 10 children. No diary for that year survives (perhaps none was kept), but six years later on Joseph's birthday Jeremiah's diary entry does recall the joy his first child's birth had brought:

The day six years agow [*sic*] gave birth to our first born son, Jos. T. Pease. My feelings on that day can be imagined only by parents. This day our 2 little Sons, Wm. & Cyrus, are brought to the Shop, being the first time.¹⁴

Young Joseph had grown up on the Edgartown waterfront. He was apprenticed as a carpenter and in 1835 he married Sophronia Norton. The couple had five children, one of whom, Horatio, grew up to become Keeper of Gay Head Light. It isn't known where the family was living while he was Collector, nor do we know where the Custom Office was located. Later, in 1849, he built the handsome house (still standing) at 67 North Water Street, but that was a year after he left the Custom House.

Joseph's appointment as Collector created a peculiar situation. He was now his father's boss. The older man, Jeremiah, was 53 and had been in Customs for 24 years. There are indications that Jeremiah felt he should have been given the Collector's job himself. Indeed, it would seem that he deserved the appointment.

¹⁴ Jeremiah's "little Sons" were twins, both of whom became Captains in the United States Revenue Service. The family depended heavily on the Federal payroll.

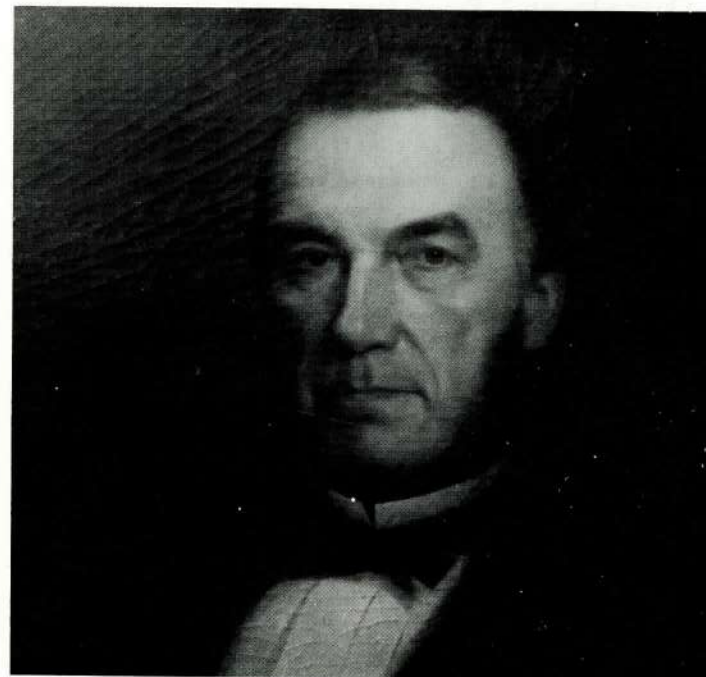
One of the first duties the new Collector had was to fill the position of Keeper at Cuttyhunk Lighthouse. Capt. Nickerson Chase, Keeper, had died in November 1844 and his wife, Fanny, had been keeping the light burning. Apparently it was not acceptable to have a female as permanent Keeper so it fell upon Collector Pease to find a replacement. In 1847, W. Whittemore Gass was named Keeper of Cutter Hunk (as it was then spelled) lighthouse and Fanny went back to housekeeping.

A storm was brewing in Washington over the poor quality of lighting equipment in American lighthouses and of the lack of competitiveness in awarding contracts. Captain Lewis, friend of Pleasanton, the man responsible for the nation's lighthouses, seemed to be getting all the contracts although his lamps were called inferior by experts. Congress first reacted to the criticism by putting a few construction contracts under the Army Corps of Engineers. In another move, some members of Congress proposed to eliminate the 2 1/2 percent commission Collectors got on all contracts awarded in their districts. Pleasanton, famed as a penny-pincher, urged that the commission be continued. If outlawed, he wrote, it would destroy the system and "the system as heretofore existing is the cheapest, the safest and the most efficient that can be devised."

Collector Pease tasted the fruits of the commission system early in his term. The West Chop lighthouse and its Keeper's dwelling had to be moved because of erosion of the point. Funds were appropriated by Congress in 1846 to move the buildings about 1200 feet and to raise the tower by 10 feet so the beam would clear the nearby trees.

As was apparently the custom, the Collector, in April, asked the advice of Captain Lewis. The Boston contractor gave him the specifications and even advised him about the wording of the advertisement he would run to solicit bids.

In May, before bids were solicited, the Collector hired Jeremiah Pease, his Deputy Collector and father, to "survey



Portrait of Collector Joseph Thaxter Pease by his brother Cyrus.

the premises of the United States and make a report in relation to removing or rebuilding the Light House [at West Chop]."

The advertisement for bids was published in the *Vineyard Gazette*, the *Barnstable Patriot* and the *Boston Post* in mid-July. Captain Lewis, who had known about this job since April, bid \$2400 plus the cost of new lamps, but Marshall Lincoln of Boston won the contract with a bid of \$2339. It was a rare occurrence when Lewis did not get the job, but it wasn't a total loss for him as he was given the job of installing all new lamps at a cost of \$657.50.¹⁵

¹⁵ Winslow Lewis, although not up-to-date in optics, was an honest man. He returned \$1.50 to Collector Pease, saying it was an overpayment. He couldn't resist mentioning that had he won the tower contract he would have been able to save the government the cost of building a temporary light. Marshall Lincoln, who had won the contract, may have been a relative of Collector Levi Lincoln of Boston, whose responsibilities included the Edgartown district.

During Joseph T. Pease's four years as Collector from 1845 to 1849, the Vineyard basked in the prosperity of its whaling industry, its sheep farms, its candleworks and its fisheries. There was also an active home industry: scores of industrious women spun yarn and knitted thousands of warm garments for mariners and landlubbers alike. It was said, in jest, that the clicking of their needles was so loud it could be heard on vessels miles offshore. Their woolen wigs for mariners heading north were especially popular.

Many new houses were built during those years along streets white with crushed scallop shells. Families rode over them in beautiful carriages, many made by Vineyard carriage makers like Rudolphus Pease, brother of the Collector.¹⁶

There were even a few Island families still holding slaves and such ownership seemed not to arouse moral indignation. The former Collector of Customs, John Presbury Norton, in 1849 petitioned the Massachusetts General Court asking permission to import slaves for his farm, saying:

The undersigned, a resident of the town of Tisbury, in Dukes County, would most respectfully request your honorable body to pass a law permitting him to import from the slave-holding States, one or more slaves, and hold them in perpetual servitude, for the purpose of cultivating his farm.

The General Court in Boston was quick to react. After heated debate, several members "contended that [the petition] was an insult to the House and that the petitioner should have leave to withdraw." When things cooled down, it was referred to the Committee on the Judiciary where it was turned down.

Collector's Duties Expanded

During Pease's term, the duties of the Collector were greatly enlarged. Passports were now being issued by the Collectors and Americans were warned that without them they were liable to have "serious inconvenience" while visiting foreign countries. This was especially true for

¹⁶ A carriage and equipment cost as much as \$215. A horse from \$13 to \$111. A considerable sum; for example, a lighthouse Keeper's salary was \$350 a year.

mariners, the most frequent overseas travellers. Collector Pease was obliged to write on each passport proof of national origin, age, stature, description of nose, forehead, mouth, eyes, chin, complexion and face. There was no mention of sex, it perhaps being assumed that females didn't travel much.

Some passports were issued in four languages: German, English, French and Spanish. Others only in English, plus the language of the country to which the voyager was going.

Immigrant-carrying vessels had to be closely inspected for over-crowding and unsanitary conditions. Fourteen square feet of space were required for each passenger on the lower decks, 30 for those on upper decks, a vivid indication of class structure.¹⁷ There was a \$50 fine for each passenger over the limit. If more than 20 passengers above the limit were on board, the vessel could be forfeited. One cooking vessel and stove had to be provided for every 50 passengers and one water closet (toilet) for every 100. Ocean voyages were not luxurious in those days.

Called "The Passenger Act of 1847," the law was later amended to classify the number of passengers by vessel tonnage rather than as above. Colonization agencies transporting so-called colored emigrants back to Africa were exempt from the law. Another shocking bit of history.

The Edgartown Customs Office did not have many immigrant vessels to inspect. Most docked in the large cities on the mainland. Only a few foreigners came ashore on the Vineyard. In the first quarter of 1848, five persons under 35 years, one over 40 and two females, no age given, arrived from Great Britain to become Vineyard residents. Others arriving that year included two from Mexico, a female from Mexico, one from Scotland, one from Denmark, one from France and one "emigrant" from the United States. All but the one female must be assumed to be have been male. No such classification was required.

Several of the Vineyard's most famous whaling vessels

¹⁷ Fourteen square feet is 7 feet by 2 feet, barely enough for an adult to lie down within.

were given permanent registers by Collector Pease. On April 1, 1847, he registered the *York*, a 433-ton square-sterned ship built in New York in 1824, owner John O. Morse, and on April 27, 1846, the 392-ton ship *Splendid*, owner Abraham Osborne, built in 1835 in Rochester, Massachusetts. On August 1, 1847, he registered the 458-ton *Ocmulgee*, also owned by Osborne. She was a billet-headed ship built in New York in 1835. All three were to make history on the high seas, especially the *Ocmulgee*, which was captured and burned by the Confederate raider *Alabama* in the Civil War.

Summer visitors, though still a novelty elsewhere on the Island, were beginning to arrive for the August camp meetings at East Chop. Fireworks were shot off in Edgartown harbor on the Fourth of July, but few visitors came from the mainland to join the celebration. The island of Naushon, used as a hunting and fishing preserve by its owner, James Forbes, and his friends, seemed to be a bigger attraction. Keeper John Hayden pointed this out to Collector Pease when asking for funds to repair and paint his lighthouse at Tarpaulin Cove:

So many comes to the Light House to see it I want to have it in as good order as possible. They come from all quarters, som Last Summer that were neighbors of James K. Polk.¹⁸

Keeper Hayden was a squeaky wheel and he kept Collector Pease busy with his many complaints. He had a well that went dry. He wanted his barn moved. He needed a new stove and a new stove pipe. Pease, after Pleasanton's approval, usually fulfilled his requests.

The Lighthouse Service had expanded very rapidly. In 1800, there were only 16 lighthouses in the United States (two of them in Dukes County); by 1842 there were 256 plus 30 lightships, 35 beacons and 1000 buoys. Collector Pease was responsible for 12 lighthouses and their Keepers and all the buoys between Chatham and Cuttyhunk. A Keeper's salary averaged \$350 a year, which was less than \$1 a day since they worked 365 days a year. Housing, such

¹⁸ Talk about name-dropping! Polk was the President of the United States.

as it was, was provided, so it was a job much sought after. Except for those remote and exposed lights, it was a comfortable, well-paying job. Pease's recorded expenses for the 16 lighthouses were about \$16,000 a year.

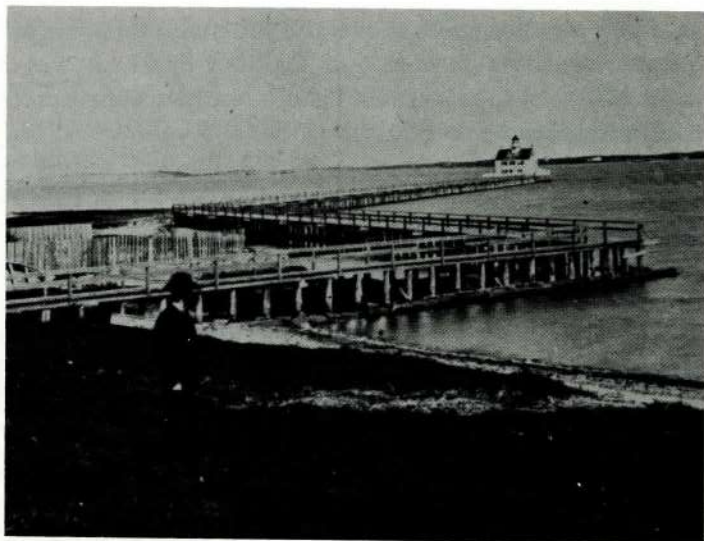
Sick and injured mariners in the District waters, if reported, were brought ashore and cared for in private homes with \$2.50 to \$5 allowed for doctor's visits and \$2.50 for medicine. These costs were paid by a hospital insurance tax levied on every mariner. Collecting those taxes and paying the bills were the Collector's responsibilities. He was also required to file reports on all the wrecks that occurred in the District, 108 occurring from 1845 to 1849. Many of them were the result of one severe storm, November 23, 1846, which wrecked 38 vessels, of which 6 were driven ashore at Holmes Hole. Included were brigs, barks and schooners from Maine and Nova Scotia loaded with pork, flour, bread and corn. In some cases, entire cargoes were lost.

Jeremiah Pease's diary entry for the storm tells of tragedy:

NW to NNW, heavy Gale with rain. Brig *Lincoln* of _____ loaded with Lumber was dismasted off Gayhead on Monday last, 2 men were then washed overboard about 10 pm. She came a shore on the South beach about daylight. [Two days later] the crew landed except one man who was lost, one died on the beach. The Capt. and one man reached Mr. B. Stewart's much exhausted. [One] man who was drowned was found near Washqua.

Storms, especially northeast gales, regularly damaged the wooden bridge to the Edgartown lighthouse and in 1848 Collector Pease was told to protect it with a rock breakwater. That, with its blockage of the tidal flow, began a long process of turning the man-made island on which the light was built into the peninsula we know today.

During Collector Pease's last year in office, the lightship *President*, Captain Luce, was ordered to mark the Sow and Pigs Reef off Cuttyhunk. It was a post that figured in another critique of the lighthouse establishment a few years later. Capt. J.D. Delano of the ship *Albert Gallatin* wrote to the



Edgartown Harbor Light with the original bridge that connected it to shore. Photograph is probably around 1880, 40 years after Jeremiah.

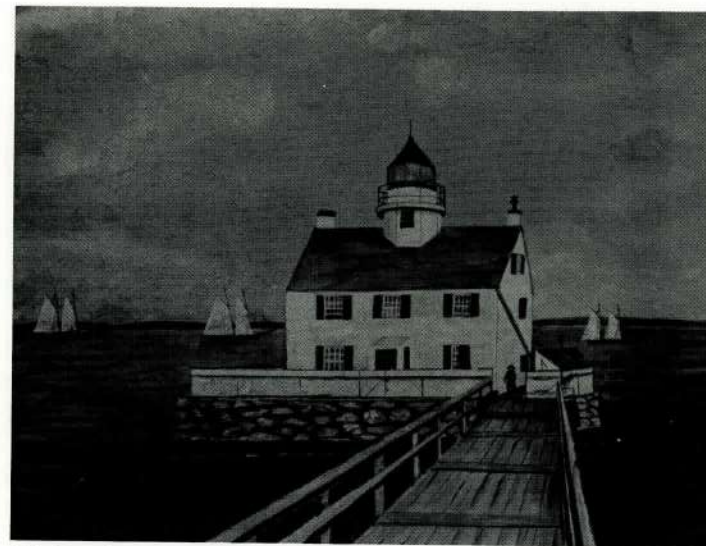
Light House Board in November 1851:

It is quite ridiculous what a mess the officers of the customs make in placing lights, or misplacing them. Witness . . . Cutterhunk, where the lighthouse might have been so placed on the southwest point, instead of northwest, that it would have rendered unnecessary entirely the "Sow and Pigs" floating light vessel.

Editor Edgar Marchant of the newly born *Vineyard Gazette* was also critical, but for a different reason:

It [the lightship *President*] will be entirely unfit for public service on that boisterous and dangerous station.

Perhaps none of the other 12 men who served as Customs Collectors of the Edgartown district from its beginning in 1789 to its demise in 1913 served through four years more important to Martha's Vineyard than Joseph T. Pease during his term from 1845 to 1849. Whaling was at its peak and earth oil had only begun to surface in the hills of Pennsylvania. To the nation's good fortune, only a year or so after California was taken over by the United States,



Painting of original Harbor Light, before roof was raised. This is how it looked when Jeremiah was Keeper.

nuggets of gold showed up in the sluiceway at Sutter's Mill and the Gold Rush began. Collector Pease soon was busy clearing vessels for San Francisco and its adjacent gold fields, vessels filled with Island friends and among them three of his brothers.

He enjoyed the post for its political prestige, its money and its importance. He was eager to continue, but the establishment being the political animal it was, such was not to be the case.

In March 1849, Zachary Taylor, a Whig, was sworn in as President and changes in Edgartown were inevitable. Jeremiah's double-dipping was first to go. In April, Collector Joseph had to inform the Deputy Collector, his father, of a notice he had received from Washington: "Jeremiah Pease, removed as Keeper of the Edgartown light." The father recorded the event in his diary on April 25:

This day I am again removed from Keeper of Edgartown Light House under Genl. Taylor's Administration,

notwithstanding his many pledges, declarations, etc., etc. Silvanus Crocker is again appointed in my stead.

Jeremiah was referring to the fact that Zachary Taylor had campaigned against the Democratic-created Spoils System, promising to separate politics from government appointments.

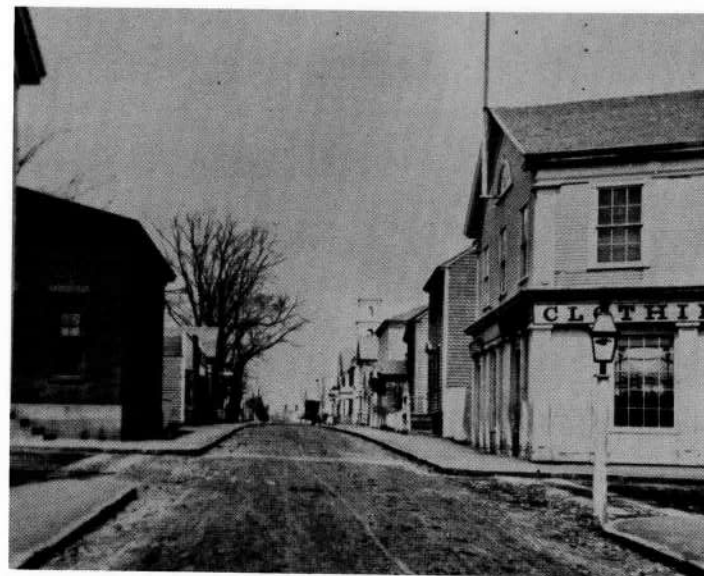
In Jeremiah's case, to be sure, it could have been more than politics that was involved. After all, he did not live in the lighthouse as required by regulations and he did hold another government position in the Customs Office, albeit on a per-diem basis. He was not fired from that post as Inspector and Deputy Collector of Customs, so he still collected Federal money. His son, the Collector, was not so lucky. On September 1, 1849, he was relieved of his post. Former Collector Leavitt Thaxter, Whig, was once again sworn in as Collector for the Edgartown district.

Thaxter's Second Term

While many Customs ports along the Atlantic coast boasted fine Custom Houses, Edgartown, perhaps because of its small revenues, never had a separate building for that purpose. Rooms, known as "the Custom House," were provided in the Collectors' homes until 1849, the year Leavitt Thaxter took the position for the second time. Perhaps his wife, Patty, balked at having sea boots tramping into her tidy house, or maybe the mariners disliked trudging the half mile from the waterfront to Davis Lane.

Whatever the reason, it was during this term that quarters for the Customs Service were rented on the second floor of the imposing building, which still stands, on the northeast corner of Main and Water Streets in downtown Edgartown. The Island's major historian, Dr. Charles E. Banks, wrote in 1911 that,

According to the best information now obtainable the building on the northeast corner of Water and Main streets was rented during the tenure of Leavitt Thaxter as collector (1849-1853) and it has been occupied ever since that time by this service.



Customs House was on second floor of building at right. National Bank is at left. Photograph may be the earliest of Edgartown's Main Street.

The building is believed to have been built by Timothy Coffin Jr., who, the story goes, died in 1838 after catching a cold while shingling the roof.¹⁹ It may have been built even earlier. Edward W. Vincent, a former owner, thinks so. The beams measure 12 inches by 12 inches. A shingle dated 1829 was once found in the building, he recalls.

The upstairs rooms made an ideal Custom House. There was a private entrance on North Water Street. On the Main Street side, a tall flagpole extended high above neighboring buildings so mariners could quickly spot the United States office. The halyard for the flag was cleated outside the Collector's office window on the second floor so it could be raised when he was on duty. Just a short block to the harbor, this two-room Custom House saw service for 64 years. The floor below was occupied at various times by a barber shop, the postoffice, a shoe store, a clothing store,

¹⁹ Paula Delbonis, *Vineyard Gazette*, Oct. 6, 1989.

a restaurant and, from 1928 to 1989, a drug store. It now is occupied by a modern-day drug store that does not dispense prescriptions.

Presumably, Thaxter moved into the new Custom House soon after he was commissioned for his second term, September 1, 1849, although Deputy Inspector Pease makes no reference to any move in his diary. His entry for September 1 is, as usual, brief:

Hon. L. Thaxter being appointed Collector, commences this day and verbally appoints me as Inspector and Dy. Collector.

Two days later, a much more emotional event occurred and Jeremiah records it by his entry:

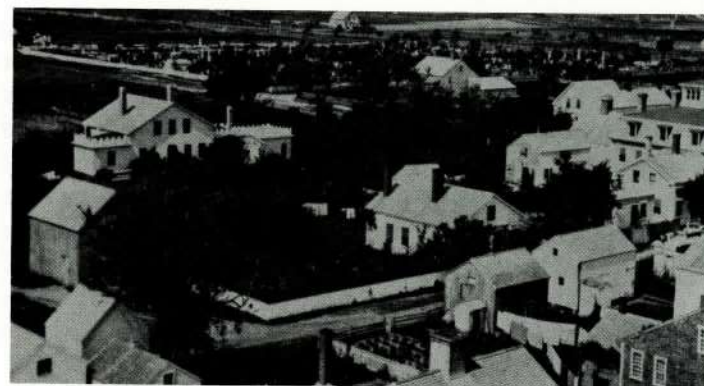
Bk Ship *Sarah*, J.O. Morse Master, sails for California. Our Son Frederick goes in her. May the Good Lord bless and return them all again, how changable are the scenes of this life.²⁰

Two weeks later, another whaler, *Splendid*, G.A. Baylies master, left the harbor carrying about 100 Vineyarders heading for the California gold fields, all with pickaxes and shovels instead of harpoons.

A few days before Thaxter was commissioned, he had officiated at a celebration honoring the leading Whig, Daniel Webster, who was visiting the Vineyard with his wife and niece. A picnic in a grove near John Cleveland's house outside Edgartown was cancelled "owing to the threatening aspect of the weather" and held in the Edgartown Town Hall instead. There, the Hon. Leavitt Thaxter introduced Mr. Webster with "a few neat and appropriate remarks." Addressing "the young and the old, the rich and the poor," Thaxter said:

I know your impatience to catch a word from a statesman who is now with us to breathe our pure air, and to visit and admire the bays, prairies and headlands of our beautiful Island, [a man] whose name is treasured up in our hearts

²⁰ Two other sons of Jeremiah were also en route to California: John and Cyrus. John's wife died on Sept. 30, 1849, while he was aboard ship bound for the gold fields. Jeremiah was with her when she died.



Rear view of Leavitt Thaxter's new house, left center, on Davis Lane. as the defender of the Constitution. Ladies and Gentlemen, permit me to introduce to you, the Honorable Daniel Webster.

Thaxter's introduction, brief as it was, was preserved by his wife and is now in the Society archives. Webster's remarks had no Patty to preserve them, but we do know from the newspaper account that he praised the Vineyarders for being "a hardy, industrious, manly, vigorous race" and he urged Europeans to follow America's example. He was suddenly interrupted by a noisy disturbance at the door, forcing him to end his talk abruptly.²¹

In November 1849 another light vessel was added to the Edgartown district, this one at Pollock Rip. Three years later, she was replaced by a new vessel, which after only four months on station had to be brought into port because of serious leaks. The *Vineyard Gazette* editorialized:

... [this] is but one of many specimens of fraud practised on Uncle Sam. . . notwithstanding a very vigilant superintendent.

The commander of the Pollock Rip lightship was Capt. George R. Marchant, brother of the editor of the *Gazette*, who, a week later, resigned from his command, after only a few months on the vessel.

The lighthouse establishment was still being torn apart

²¹ For more details see *Intelligencer*, Nov. 1988, "Daniel Webster, Fisherman."

by the criticism that had been going on for years. After long hearings in Congress in 1852, a new organization was announced. Stephen Pleasanton, who had been responsible for lighthouses, was relieved and W.B. Shubrick was named Chairman of a newly created Light House Board. The two Massachusetts Senators opposed the change, arguing that the old system was the "most economical in the world." In the House, Representative Evans of Maryland argued: "I want an end put to that set of contractors in the northern cities who plunder the Treasury out of hundreds of thousands of dollars." He was referring, no doubt, to Capt. Winslow Lewis of Boston, among others. The reformers won and the old lighthouse establishment was turned out.

In April 1853, the Boston official responsible for lighthouses in the Second District, which included Edgartown, was relieved of his duties. Again the *Gazette* had a strong comment:

It is about time. . . he displayed an utter ignorance of the duties of his office. . . the Light House Board must have wide-awake, go-a-head young Americans, capable of flying, almost, from one post of duty to another. . .

No personnel changes were made in the Edgartown district. Collector Thaxter and Deputy Collector Jeremiah Pease continued in office.

With large vessels now making money in the Gold Rush trade, Edgartown investors bought ships. The town's registrations increased to 7970 tons; Nantucket's to 27,731 tons. The sandbar outside Nantucket harbor continued to give Edgartown an advantage for outfitting the larger, deep-draft vessels. In 1853, 18 American vessels sailed from Edgartown for foreign ports, while only three cleared from Nantucket. But both islands were unimportant in boat building: Edgartown built no vessels in 1852; Nantucket just one, a vessel of 63 1/2 tons.

Both harbors were being eclipsed in importance by Holmes Hole, as Collector Thaxter informed the Secretary of the Treasury, February 6, 1850:

I know of no harbour on the Atlantic Coast where so many Vessels stop, in transit, as at Holmes' Hole. The harbour is capacious, being about three miles deep and one mile and a half wide, immediately on the Sound, easy of access, and having good anchorage. . . . The Vineyard Sound, on which are harbours of Tarpaulin Cove, Holmes' Hole and Edgartown, is the great thoroughfare for Vessels from the West and East Indies. . . Africa and Europe, bound over Nantucket Shoals for Boston and other Eastern ports.

Some observers reported that 12,000 vessels transitted Vineyard Sound every year; others gave a more moderate count of 3000. The *Vineyard Gazette* in 1860 quoted the Keeper of Cape Poge Light as having counted 4817 vessels passing the light in daytime during the last three months of 1859, indicating a total of about 12,000 a year. By this time, Edgartown owned six vessels involved in Grand Banks fishing, Nantucket owned 3. Gloucester was the first ranked port in the state with 241 fishing vessels.

Pease's Second Term 1853-1855

In November 1852, Gen. Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire was elected President, having been nominated by the strongly divided Democrats on the 49th ballot. Millard Fillmore, who had moved up to the Presidency when Zachary Taylor died, was not renominated by the Whigs. Instead they chose to run another General, Winfield Scott. Both candidates had become famous in the Mexican War. Pierce won easily. The change in parties in the White House meant the inevitable change in the Custom House in Edgartown.

Joseph T. Pease, Democrat, was again appointed Collector in May 1853, "under peculiar circumstances," his father wrote tantalizingly in his diary. We have no hint of what Jeremiah meant.

The Collector had a new home on North Water Street that would have made an ideal Custom House, but the same upstairs rooms continued to serve. There are, however, local legends that both the Pease house and its neighbor, the Daggett House, were used as Custom Houses at some period

in history. We have found nothing that confirms the legends.

The *Gazette*, always ready to comment on Customs business, had this to say:

Joseph T. Pease Esq., our new and popular Collector, has not yet made any removals or appointments, though rumor, as usual in such cases, has made quite a number for him.

The new Collector had gone to Washington immediately after his appointment. When he came back many changes were announced in the ranks of the lighthouse keepers, replacing Whigs with Democrats. Such was anticipated, but totally unexpected was the firing of his father, Deputy Collector Jeremiah Pease, after 32 years of service. Joseph appointed Constant Norton of Edgartown to take Jeremiah's post of Inspector and Deputy Collector.

This was too much for the citizens of the Vineyard, Whig and Democrat alike. They immediately rose up in protest to such an extent that the Constant Norton nomination was rejected by Edgartown's Democratic Committee seven days later and Jeremiah was restored to the office. In his diary that night, long-time Deputy Pease offered thanks to the Lord and to the citizens of the Island:

The nomination of Constant Norton for the office which I now hold is rejected. The Lord reigns. Let the earth rejoice. I have great reason for gratitude to my Heavenly Father for his many mercies and especially at this time for the good feelings manifested by almost all the Citizens of this, and the other Towns, towards me in relation to my removal from office.

Why had son Joseph fired his father? Was he trying to make life easier for him, or was there animosity and rivalry between father and son? The younger man, and some other members of the family, believed that Jeremiah was spending too much time in his major avocation, the Methodist Church at Eastville.²² But perhaps it had been totally a

²² Jeremiah Jr., seems to have been the only one of Jeremiah's family who was as enthusiastic about Methodism as the father. He was an important figure at the campground and named his son John Wesley Pease.

Washington decision. If so, on what grounds? Jeremiah was a Democrat and an outstanding Deputy Inspector.

It is a question for which we have no answer at present.

The 1850s were to bring many changes to Edgartown and to the nation. The days of the sailing vessel were almost over, even though New York and New England were now building the fastest, largest sailing vessels of all, the giant clipper ships. None of these giants ever came into Edgartown, but on November 26, 1853, Vineyarders saw a breathtaking sight: the 334-foot *Great Republic*, built by Donald McKay in Boston, was being towed down Vineyard Sound towards New York for rigging and she spent the night in Holmes Hole. Islanders swarmed out to the Chops to see the huge vessel. What happened in New York was sad. Virtually on the eve of her maiden voyage, she took fire and was badly damaged, requiring drastic changes to be made in her hull and spars before she ever sailed.

Pease held the office of Collector from May 1853 to May 1855, when he resigned to take the more lucrative and enduring position as cashier of the Vineyard's first bank, the Martha's Vineyard National, which opened its doors on September 4, 1855, directly across the street from the Custom House.²³ Leavitt Thaxter, former Collector, was chairman of the board of directors.

Pease's new position was announced in the *Gazette* August 3, with the following tribute:

At a meeting of the Directors of the Martha's Vineyard Bank on Monday last, Joseph T. Pease Esq., recently Collector of this port was chosen Cashier. The choice of Mr. Pease for this important post reflects great credit upon the directors. He is a thorough business man, a perfect gentleman and is possessed of an untarnished reputation.

Leavitt Thaxter, former Collector, served as a director of the bank until his death in July 1872, at the age of 83. Pease became president of the bank in 1877, an office he held until his death in 1897, also at 83.

²³ The building still stands, but it is now the Edgartown National Bank. The Martha's Vineyard National moved to Holmes Hole in 1905.



Collector Joseph T. Pease's house, c.1880, now 67 North Water Street.

Edgartown's heroes, in legend at least, in the 19th century were her whaling masters who brought fame and prosperity to the sleepy village. But perhaps of greater importance were civic leaders like Leavitt Thaxter, Whig, and Joseph T. Pease, Democrat, who built the foundations on which the town's educational, business and political systems stand. They are heroes of a different sort, but heroes nonetheless.



The Slandering of Jeremiah Pease

WHEN Jeremiah Pease, a man of many occupations and interests, was fired from his position as Keeper of Edgartown Lighthouse in 1849, (*see preceding article*), he claimed it was for his political beliefs, for twice supporting Democratic candidates for President.

A letter from his superior, Edgartown Collector Leavitt Thaxter, to the Secretary of Treasury suggests that it was because he was not, as lighthouse regulations required, living in the Keeper's dwelling, atop which stood the light. Whatever the reason, he was fired and when the Democrats came back into power he was reappointed.

But that 1849 censure wasn't the first time Jeremiah had been under attack for his handling of the Keeper's job. On May 15, 1832, only four years after he had taken the position, Jeremiah's diary entry hints of another:

Received a newspaper called the *Nantucket Enquirer* where I find an anonymous publication about the Light House, etc.

The following day's entry again mentions the *Nantucket* matter. Jeremiah, who had spent the preceding two days whitewashing and painting the lighthouse, wrote:

Sent a letter to the editor of the *Nantucket Enquirer* by Capt. Francis Coffin. Requested him to deliver it himself.

On May 22nd, Jeremiah reported that he had "received a letter and communications from the Editor of the *Nantucket Enquirer* relating to an anonymous publication."

The article in the *Nantucket* paper was a Letter to the Editor very critical of the unnamed Keeper for failing to maintain the lighthouse. The letter was unsigned, but it is almost certain that it came from Francis Addlington of Edgartown, who, on January 13, 1831, more than a year earlier, had written on the same subject to Stephen Pleasanton, the U.S. Treasury Department official in Washington responsible for the nation's lighthouses.

Pleasanton had forwarded the letter to David Henshaw, Collector of Customs in Boston, with these instructions:

I hereby enclose a letter of complaint from Francis Addlington of Edgartown, Mass., on the conduct of Jeremiah Pease, Keeper of light House in that neighborhood and have to request that you will make enquiry into the allegations contained in this letter and report the result to this office with as little delay as circumstances will permit. The letter you will also be pleased to return.

We don't know the contents of the letter, but we are reasonably sure that Francis Addlington, who was born Zadoc Norton but had changed his name, was writing on behalf of Thomas Cooke Jr. Cooke had lost the position of Collector of Customs for the Edgartown District when the Democrats took over in 1830 and, for some reason, blamed Jeremiah Pease for that loss. John Presbury Norton, Democrat, was appointed to take his place.¹

In June 1831, David Henshaw, Collector at Boston, responding to Pleasanton's request, went to Edgartown to inspect the lighthouse himself. Apparently he found nothing serious enough to cause the dismissal of Jeremiah and the case was closed. However, Thomas Cooke Jr., was not about to let it drop, or at least that's what we suspect. The following May, it was Cooke, we believe, who got his alter ego, Addlington, to write the above-mentioned anonymous letter with its derogatory charges to the Nantucket newspaper. The letter was published May 12, 1832, with the disclaimer by the editor that he "knew nothing in regard to the truth of the statements but believes that it is of public interest and invites replies."²

That letter, as published in the *Enquirer*, reads as follows:³

Communication for the Enquirer

I have this day visited the lighthouse situated in the town

¹ See *Intelligencer*, Feb. 1989.

² There was no newspaper published on Martha's Vineyard at the time. The *Gazette* began in 1847.

³ The *Enquirer* is available only on microfilm, which is slightly marred, making some words illegible. Words in brackets are those which were somewhat distorted and may not be correct as transcribed.

of Edgartown which is a house of long standing.⁴ I found the doors [unhinged], also in a state of ruin which does no [credit] to the United States. This I would not assert had I not been an eyewitness . . . This house is out of order, as [I] believe, in consequence of the inattention of [its] keeper; it is well finished and in every [way] fit for a family to dwell in; and where [the keeper] has from three hundred to five hundred and fifty dollars per annum he should have consideration enough to his benefactors to be [worthy] of his charge. The house appears to [be a] rendezvous for all kinds of dissipation, and [is] at the moment on the verge of decay. . . If some judicious person had the [management] of the House, money could be saved for the U. States.

It isn't clear what the writer meant by calling the house a "rendezvous for all kinds of dissipation," but we do have some evidence that it was being lived in by a young man, an off-Islander, no doubt with Jeremiah's approval.

The young man was Charles Thomas from New York State. Some years later, a friend wrote of Thomas: "In the spring of 1830 went to school at Edgartown where he found a place in the lighthouse. Here, he said, 'I lived almost entirely on bread and water at the rate of 40 or 50 cents per week and attended as intensely as possible to my studies for about three years. Here I fitted for college.'"

That college was Harvard, which he got to by boat in 1833 after a passage of three sleepless nights around Cape Cod. One of his Harvard classmates was James Russell Lowell, the Massachusetts poet, who often referred to him, after he had become a successful Boston lawyer, as "Lighthouse Thomas."⁵

If the above story is correct (and we see no reason to doubt it), Thomas would have been living in the Keeper's dwelling

⁴ It isn't clear what is meant by this. The building was only four years old. The lamps were lit for the first time Oct. 15, 1828, by Keeper Jeremiah Pease.

⁵ Charles Thomas was graduated from Harvard in 1838. This unusual story has not been verified. It is told in a pencilled document, unsigned and undated, in the Society archives. The document states that Thomas had come to the Island to visit the grave of his sister and returned to live in the lighthouse the next year. *Edgartown Vital Records* show that a Pamela Thomas, aged 16, died in 1827, and a Susannah Thomas, age 21, died in 1826. Both were daughters of Shubael and Sarah Thomas. We can't find any reference to Charles Thomas. Jeremiah never mentions him in his diary.

at the time the complaining letter was written. It's certainly possible that the young man's housekeeping was not exemplary, hence the charge of "all kinds of dissipation."

But, to get back to Jeremiah: the next issue of the *Nantucket Enquirer*, May 19, 1832, published a letter in support of Jeremiah. It was written by his good friend, Frederick Baylies, teacher of the Indians:

Mr. Editor. I observed in your paper of last week a communication from Edgartown describing the lighthouse situated there "to be a rendezvous for all kinds of dissipation." This is new to me, and I believe it to be a mistake. I live within half a mile of the lighthouse and in sight of it and am acquainted with the keeper. Mr. Pease is a man of respectability and piety and I believe faithful to the trust. If the keeper neglected the light or the house, Mr. Norton, the Collector, whose duty it is, would give information to the proper authority.

The Editor of the newspaper added his comments:

We are very happy that the statement made in the communication published by us last week is so fully refuted. The veracity of Mr. Baylies is unquestionable.

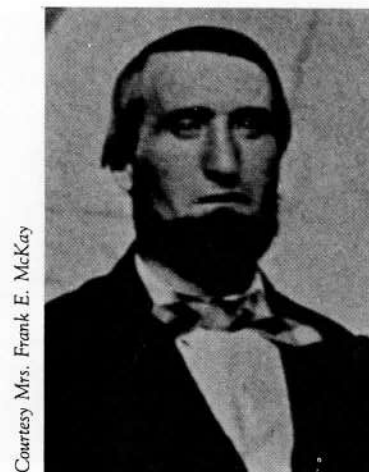
It was apparently this issue of the newspaper that had been sent to Jeremiah by the editor and which he described in his diary entry for May 22, mentioned above.

The Nantucket editor continued to provide his readers with information about the Edgartown dispute. On June 2, in an article headed "The Light at Edgartown," he wrote:

We published two or three weeks since a communication complaining of the negligence of the keeper of the Edgartown Light. As the public are interested in such matters, and as we maintain the propriety of an occasional examination of the mode in which public servants perform their duty, we inserted the article and invited a reply.

The result has been to establish entirely the character of Mr. Pease, the keeper, for capacity and fidelity, and to show the writer of the communication was instigated by private ill will and not by regard to the public good.

Besides the notice from the Rev. Mr. Baylies, published a fortnight ago, we have a communication from Captain Cahoon of the Revenue Cutter *Vigilant*, and from his first



Courtesy Mrs. Frank E. McKay

Believed to be the only photograph of Deputy Collector Jeremiah Pease.

and second officers in which they say that the light and lighthouse have been within their observation during the last winter and spring while cruising the Vineyard Sound, and that they have at all times in the night season found it one of the best lights on their cruising ground. We think, after all, that Mr. Pease owes some thanks to his enemy for furnishing the offensive piece since it affords him an opportunity to show how faithfully he performs his duty.

Two weeks later, on June 18, 1832, Boston Collector of Customs David Henshaw made his second visit to Edgartown, arriving in the Cutter *Hamilton* to inspect Jeremiah's lighthouse. Jeremiah noted the visit in his diary and, by his entry, suggests that Henshaw had complete confidence in his custodianship:

[He] informs me that I may paint the lantern or whitewash the Light House, etc., when I think it necessary. May put piles under the middle of the house, make steps at the edge of the hill, etc.

Surely, that must have made Jeremiah feel that his superior approved of his caretaking. Perhaps he should have, as the Nantucket editor suggested, thanked "his enemy . . . for the opportunity to show how faithfully he performs his duty."



View from lighthouse bridge of Jeremiah's white hip-roofed house, from which he monitored the lamp. Son Jeremiah lived in white house at right.

That "enemy," if our surmise is correct, was Thomas Cooke Jr., previous Collector of Customs in Edgartown. There is no evidence in the Pease diary that Jeremiah thanked him, but there is evidence that Cooke, or at least his family, tried to lessen the tension. On June 19, the day after the Henshaw inspection, Jeremiah noted in the diary:

William Cooke calls at the house of Esq. Norton when I am absent. See my minutes made in the office this day on file.

William Cooke was Thomas Cooke's eldest son. Esquire Norton was Collector and the Customs office was in his house. Collector Norton may have asked young Cooke to tell his father that the lighthouse had passed inspection. Or, we prefer to think, William came as an emissary of peace on his father's behalf. Jeremiah worked regularly for Squire Cooke at his saltworks and other places, so there would have been need for a reconciliation if both were to be comfortable.⁶

⁶ On June 8, 1842, Jeremiah's diary entry: "Having received an invitation from Thos. Cooke Esq., to visit him & his family, I gladly complied although I had not been there since the 31st Dec. 1829. I had a very pleasant & interesting visit." Cooke had been fired as Collector in February 1830. Obviously, he and Jeremiah had not socialized since then.

Jeremiah, God-fearing Methodist as he was, may have taken the advice of the editor and thanked "his enemy." We don't know. However, we do know that there was a bit of paranoia in his makeup.

In 1857, only a few months before his sudden death, apparently of a heart attack, he wrote to "Brother Smith" in Holmes Hole:

As relates to the persecution with which I have been assailed, I am induced to say in the language of St. Paul, "It is a small thing to be judged of Man's judgment." . . . I think I have been called to contend with the rulers of the darkness of this world . . . I feel indignant at the course pursued by some from whom I had reason to expect better things . . . It affords me many pleasant reflections to know that I have loving friends in Holmes Hole who take a sympathetic part in my affliction and would render any assistance in their power.⁷

Certainly, we all must agree, Jeremiah Pease was a complex person, who deserves a full-scale biography.⁸

FLORENCE KERN AND ARTHUR R. RAILTON

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to the staff of the Nantucket Atheneum for research assistance.

⁷ Draft of Letter, Mar. 13, 1857, Jeremiah Pease to Brother Smith, in Vol. 5, *Pease Diary*, DCHS.

⁸ As for the allegation that Jeremiah did not live in the Keeper's dwelling as he was supposed to, it seems clear that he did not. But perhaps no Keeper did at that time. It was hardly a pleasant place to spend the winter. Jeremiah was replaced as Keeper by Sylvanus Crocker in March 1841. On Nov. 16, 1841, Jeremiah wrote in his diary that Thos. M. Mayhew was "taken to the lighthouse with smallpox." He died there five days later. Surely, if Keeper Crocker and family had been living in the lighthouse, as was required by regulation, the town would not have moved a man dying of smallpox in with them.



"The Package of Old Letters"

by JOHN A. HOWLAND

CAPT. Owen H. Tilton (1836-1901) was an eighth-generation Vineyarder, born in Chilmark, who in Island tradition went to sea as a young man. He married Eliza Cottle in 1856. They lived in Lambert's Cove, near James Pond, where they raised three sons, Francis, Herbert and Ernest.

Owen rose through the ranks to become a whaling master and as such he chased the sperm whale from 1876-1877 in the Atlantic on the Bark *Tropic Bird* out of New Bedford.¹

During that voyage he wrote often to his eldest son, Francis, then 12 years of age. Fortunately, many of the letters, along with other old documents, have been preserved by the family. (The author is indebted to Robert F. Tilton of Vineyard Haven, great-grandson of Captain Tilton for allowing him to read this pack of old treasures.)

On top of the pack is a long sentimental Victorian poem, copied apparently by the Captain's widow in her late years. (She died in 1913.) It is entitled "The Package of Old Letters" and has this opening verse:

*In a little Rosewood casket
That is resting on the stand
There's a package of old letters
Written by a cherished hand.*

¹ Captain Tilton retired from the sea in the 1880s, shortly after this voyage. He moved the family's Lambert's Cove house to Main Street, Vineyard Haven, where it stands today, and went into the lumber business at the head of the Steamboat Wharf, the site of the Steamship Authority vehicle-loading area today. The company is still in business under the Tilton name on Beach Road.

JOHN A. HOWLAND, Vice President of the Society, lives on Lambert's Cove Road, overlooking Duarte's Pond, a spot that inspires him to seek out and write about overlooked bits of history like this.

The letters in the Tilton package, written by the "cherished hand" of Captain Owen, are all addressed to Master Francis O.(for Owen) Tilton and have the usual admonitions from a father to the 12-year-old: "Obey your Mother and be a good brother to Bertie and little Ernest. You do not know how much I want to see baby and all the rest of you."

In a later letter he writes of infant Ernest, then only a year old, "... if he is just a little bit of a rogue, you must not scold him."

Obviously a loving father, the captain shows a concern for his children's schooling: "How do you and Bertie like going to school to Quonsett school?" He seemed not to hold the Chappaquonsett school in high regard as in another letter he writes, "You must learn all you can at school . . . wish you could go to a better one, but if you try hard you can learn a great deal where you are."

All his letters reflect a deep love of family and a longing to be home. Most were not written at one sitting, some even over a period of weeks, with intermittent entries. They were mailed at the first port or upon meeting a homeward-bound vessel. Some are fragmentary and undated.

This Atlantic voyage was at a time, the late 1870s, when whales were scarce. Even in the best of times, whaling was a gamble, but during this period catches were few, often separated by weeks. It is understandable then that a note of frustration creeps into many letters.

The following quotations are verbatim, just as Captain Tilton wrote them, with the exception of a few added punctuation marks.

February 17, 1877: "We are all well on board but not getting whales very fast. The last time we saw them (which was over two weeks ago) we only took a small one. Chased them about all day. Got almost to them a good many times. Once the Third Mate darted his irons but he darted too soon and did not reach them. . ."

February 19: "This morning at sunrise saw two large whales going quick to windward. Chased them almost out of sight of the ship and could not get any. Too bad, ain't it, Frank. You know it would bring me so much nearer home. . . Yesterday saw Bark *George & Susan* who reported two or three ships as having done well a short time previous and it makes me feel poor. The *George & Susan* has got a good voyage and is coming home². . . Had I known she was coming home before I got on board I should have sent a letter. But never mind, I can send this by mail from St. Helena and you will get it sooner."

Undated: "I was in hopes to have been able to say I had got some more oil by this time but cannot. We have all tried hard, I think, but could not see it. The ships, some of them, have done well around us but we could not see a whale. I feel very sorry but cannot help it . . . A short time ago, saw Mr. Manter. He was well and a good deal fleshier than when I saw him last."³

May 13, 1877: "From the Twelve Forty Grounds. We now have 520 barrels of sperm. How is that for high? One week ago we saw whales and took four. Got the last one to the ship just after dark. The next morning commenced to cut them in. . . About nine o'clock someone said there is a sail to windward. I looked and sure enough there was a large merchant ship. Pretty soon he caught sight of us and changed his course. . . and came directly towards us as though he wanted to speak us, as it afterward turned out he did. He said, Who's there? I told him *Tropic Bird* of New Bedford, then asked him where he was from. He said *Marcella* bound to Boston. Then I said, Please report the *Tropic Bird* cutting four whales, and he said he would.

(Later he writes of an earlier meeting): "It was the Ship *Midnight* of Boston. . . Now if you get the May [New

² Starbuck lists her as having reported taking 1250 barrels of sperm, 1250 barrels of whale oil, a superb catch.

³ This could have been any one of several Vineyard Captain Manters of the period: Benjamin, Frederick W., or Henry.

Bedford] *Standards* and see what time the *Midnight* and *Marcella* arrived in Boston you will know who reported us [first] and how long she was in getting home. She spoke me on the 6th day of May . . . I tell you I almost wished I could hop on board of him."

Some of his letters refer to the family's cranberry bog which was apparently the Captain's ace-in-the-hole if whaling collapsed.

September 24, 1876: "I got some papers from the Bark *Minnesota* dated the first of July in which it said the weather was dreadful dry so am afraid you had poor encouragement with your garden. . . In a few days from now you will begin to pick cranberrys. Hope you will have a good lot on our bog. I am quite anxious about them. . . How many you had and what you got for them."

September 21, 1877: ". . . we are all well but are having pretty hard luck this season. Think you and Mother will have to spend the cranberry money this year."

An undated letter tells of a near collision during a severe tempest: "It seemed to me that I never in my life saw it lighten so sharp and rained and blew ahead fully. Well, right in the height of it, which was midnight, the man on the look-out sang out for a vessel's light right ahead, so the Third Mate having the watch on deck kept the ship off right before the winds. . . It was some time before I could make out how he was going. Finally, he got pretty near, then it lightened very sharp and I got sight of him going right across us . . . so I kept off and brought him right astern. Knew it was our only chance for just before he struck us I should put my wheel down and shoot away from him enough to let him go clear, but just before it was time for that I thought I would sing out to him. So I sung out "Hard down!" Whether he heard me or not I cannot tell but he did hard down his wheel and in an instant was all clear. It was a large three-masted schooner. Had I as much sail out as he had I think he would have had hard work to catch me for the *Tropic Bird* can sail for to tell the truth!"

The Captain tells his son of the lighter side of being at sea (*undated*):

"Just now the steward came down below with the cooper's clothes bag all tied up. He said the cooper wanted he should bring it down. He said it was very light and could not think what there could be in it. Pretty soon, down came the cooper, took hold of his clothes bag and commenced to heft it in his hand and look at it funny.

"I asked him what he had in it and he said his clothes he supposed. I said I guess you have not got many clothes there by the way you heft it. So he untied it and found it full of shavings. Come to find out, the old Dutch carpenter had put them in. So you can see when we want to have a little sport we have to make it ourselves. . . Now, I must . . . close for the present. The islands of Flores and Corvo are in sight."

In another letter, the Captain tells of selling one of his whaleboats:

November 2, 1877: "Now I am going to tell you of something I saw while we were at Teneriffe. . . The day before we left, I sold a boat to a large French ship. She was built a great while ago for Napoleon Bonaparte [*sic*] the First, for a Man of War of 100 guns. . . called *Narverine*. Now she is getting too old for the service and they have changed her into a Transport which means to carry troops of Soldiers or emigrants or convicts across the Ocean to another part of the world. . . She is very large . . . They asked if we had a boat to sell and the mate told him I had a boat that I would sell but would want a good price, for it was new. . . Shortly after, they came and said the Commander would like me to come aboard. . . So I went on board.

"When we got there the Commander was engaged with some people from a Spanish Man of War . . . so I was invited to look around. Went down below on the third deck. There, they had 450 convicts shut up in two large pens, one on each side built out of iron bars. They was just the

same as in prison. Some was what they call Communists or disloyal to the French government. Others were murderers, robbers or had committed some crimes. They were to be carried to New Caladonia for life. . . will be put in prison when they get there. . . then if they behave will perhaps be let out on what is called a ticket of leave. But never to leave the island as long as they live⁴. . . So you see what comes of bad, wicked men. . . When I get home will tell you all about it. . . and tell you how much I got for the boat!"

Apparently close to the end of the voyage, he wrote this *undated* note:

"I hear the *Azor* arrived all right with our oil but the other one which sailed about the same time brought up at Bermuda. Some of the folks at Fayal was very anxious to have me send my oil by that one but I couldn't see it. Now I am glad enough I did not . . . Tell Bertie we are looking sharp for whales for we all want to come home.

"I suppose about this time you are all carried away with catching herrings. Dare say you can scoop them out pretty slick. . . Give my respects to Mr. Athearn. Ask him how he got along eeling last winter. I expect by next winter there will be plenty in James Pond."

As always in his letters, he ended with:

"Do not forget your father and may God Bless and Keep you, my dear boy, from all harm. Your affectionate father, O.H. Tilton."

⁴ These unfortunate exiles were communards arrested after the 1871 uprising in Paris brought on by the defeat by the Prussians in 1870. They were among the few communards who survived the bloody suppression of the communes of Paris and other cities by French royalists after the Franco-Prussian War. At least 17,000 of them were executed. New Caledonia was one of several notorious French penal colonies around the world, most famous being Devil's Island, because of the Dreyfus case.

Bits & Pieces

IT WAS as much fun as putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces fell into place and soon, there it was, the whole picture.

That was how the article, "The Slandering of Jeremiah Pease," came to be.

It all started with an entry in Jeremiah's diary that had stuck in my memory. It mentioned an article in the Nantucket newspaper that he didn't like. I kept wondering why. But there never seemed to be an opportunity to dig deeper. One day last summer I mentioned it to Florence Kern, then writing the Customs Office article for this issue.

Typical of adventurous Florence, old salt that she is, one day while in Boston, she decided to take the high-speed catamaran, *Ocean Spray*, to Nantucket, where she went through the *Nantucket Enquirer* microfilms in the Atheneum.

Earlier in Washington, she had uncovered a connection between Francis Addlington (born Zadoc Norton) and Thomas Cooke Jr., through a letter Addlington had written to the government about the Edgartown lighthouse. When she found the article in the old Nantucket newspaper, it was very similar. Though unsigned, it surely was from the same man, Addlington of Edgartown.

But something remained unexplained: how could Addlington charge that the lighthouse was a "rendezvous for all kinds of dissipating." Surely, such would not be

permitted by straight-laced, God-fearing Jeremiah Pease!

We both agreed we needed to know more. Then, walking home one day, I recalled having read some years before a document in our archives about a Charles Thomas who prepared for Harvard while living in the Edgartown lighthouse.

The next day I looked up the document. There it was: "In the spring of 1830, I went to Edgartown." He was living there at the time!

The several pieces, all at first glance unrelated, fell into place and, behold, there was the picture of the slandering of our diarist, Jeremiah Pease.

Sometimes historical research takes an opposite route: researchers break a large body of facts down into its elements to explain smaller bits of history. Such is the case in Frederick W. Graham's Master's dissertation at Brigham Young University.

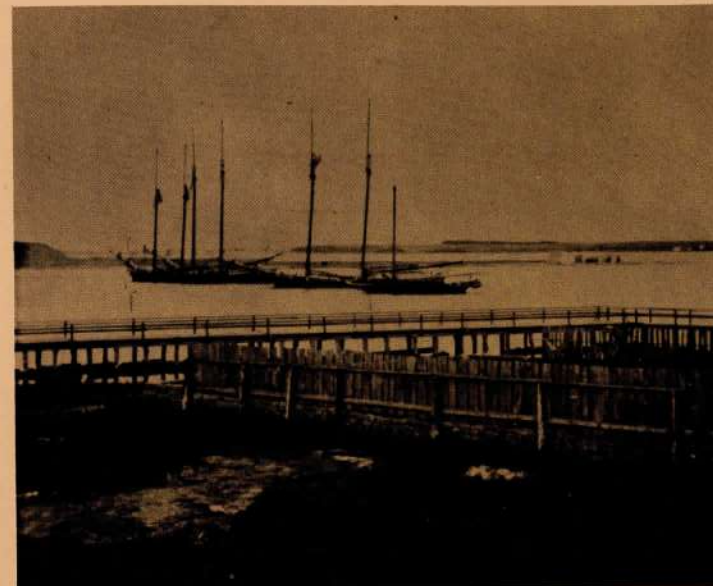
He used the 1850 Federal Census, the first to list family members, age, birthplace, personal wealth and other facts such as blindness, deafmutism, pauperism and insanity. It was widely attacked as a shocking invasion of privacy. The Island census enumerator was Richard L. Pease (those Peases were into everything!).

Graham used those data and that from later censuses to analyze population changes on the Island in those decades that were among the most important economically and socially in history.

And so the monumental work of the Hon. Richard L. Pease, Census Enumerator in 1850, lives on. He would be pleased.

A.R.R.

Edgartown in the 1870s



Bridge to lighthouse, beyond fence; Chappy Point is faintly visible.



Main Street; large building is Town Hall, once the Methodist Church.

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*Ad in 1897 Vineyard Directory for the original Tilton Lumber Yard (top).
Oliver's Chandlery in lower ad sold just about everything.*