

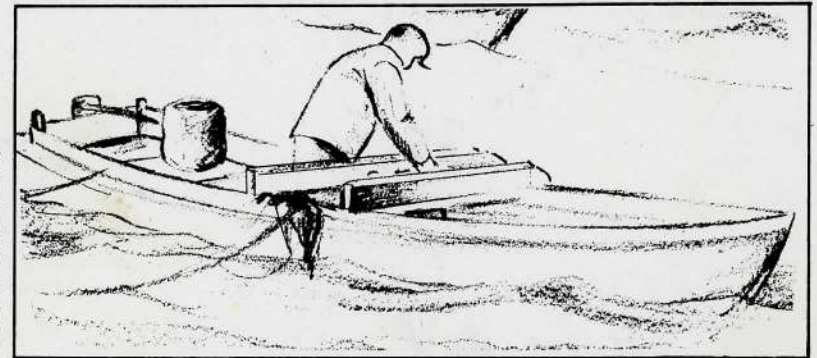


THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL. 34, NO. 1

AUGUST 1992

Sketch by Priscilla Gilley



Ernest "Red" Ward scalloping on Katama Bay in the 1950s.

Shellfisheries On Martha's Vineyard

by CLYDE L. MacKENZIE Jr.

Power Dragging for Quahaugs

by OSCAR PEASE

Some Recollections on Shellfishing

by S. BAILEY NORTON

The Tribulations Of Reverend Thaxter

by ARTHUR R. RAILTON

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JEREMIAH PEASE DIARY

The Jeremiah Pease Diary has been omitted from this issue because of space limitations. It will be published in the November issue. Incidentally, that will be the final installment we will publish, concluding a series that began in 1974. With that issue, we will have published all volumes in our possession. Readers interested in a particular date can learn the issue it which that entry appeared by requesting such from the Society Librarian.

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Editor Emeritus: Gale Huntington

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.

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ISSN 0418 1379

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

The Society operates The Vineyard Museum on its grounds at School and Cooke Street, Edgartown. The Museum includes the Thomas Cooke House, circa 1765, a house museum of Island history, open from mid-June to mid-September. Also on the grounds are the Francis Foster Gallery, the Capt. Francis Pease House and the Gale Huntington Library of History, open all year, as are the Gay Head Light exhibit with its 1854 Fresnel lens and the Carriage Shed containing boats, wagons, an 1854 Button hand-pumper fire engine and many other examples of Vineyard memorabilia, including the gravestones of Nancy Luce's favorite hens, circa 1860.

All buildings are open free to members. Non-members are charged a nominal entrance fee. Research assistance is provided in the Huntington Library.

You are invited to join the Society. You will receive this journal four times a year with your membership.



Shellfisheries On Martha's Vineyard

by CLYDE L. MACKENZIE Jr.

EVERY salt-water or brackish pond and harbor on Martha's Vineyard has a history of producing commercial quantities of shellfish. Bay scallops have been the most abundant, followed by quahaugs, soft-shelled clams and oysters. While the six towns have done relatively little through the years to enhance shellfish abundance, those who controlled Tisbury Great Pond, Oyster Pond and Edgartown Great Pond have dug trenches in the natural barrier beaches along their south shores about once a year to allow Atlantic Ocean water to flow in to make them brackish and thus produce clams and oysters; the pond water otherwise would remain fresh. Water depth over the shellfish beds rarely exceeds 15 feet and many beds are overgrown with eelgrass.

The shellfish resources have contributed much to the Island's economy. Often, 100 or more fishermen earned most of their livelihood gathering shellfish. At least two to three hundred others found part-time employment in the work. The number of part-timers varied, depending on the availability of onshore work on the Island and the abundance of shellfish, especially scallops. Non-commercially, year-round as well as summer residents also gathered small quantities of quahaugs and clams for their own consumption.

About two-thirds of the Island's shellfishing waters are

CLYDE L. MacKENZIE, who was born and raised on Martha's Vineyard, now lives in Fair Haven, New Jersey, and is employed by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, Biological Laboratory, Highlands, New Jersey. He financed his college education by shellfishing in Edgartown. The author of nearly 50 articles about shellfish biology and management, his latest work is a historical book about fishing in Raritan Bay, south of New York City.

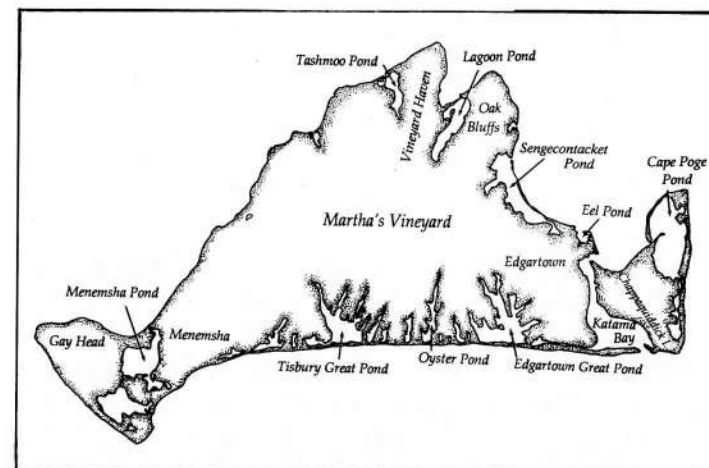
within Edgartown. Its residents have had exclusive rights to the shellfish in its harbor, Cape Poge Pond, Katama Bay, Eel Pond, Oyster Pond and Edgartown Great Pond plus about half of Anthier's Pond.¹

Oak Bluffs residents have shellfishing rights on the northern half of Anthier's, which they call Sengecontacket, and the eastern half of Lagoon Pond. Vineyard Haven residents have rights to the western half of Lagoon Pond and Tashmoo Pond. Menemsha residents have the eastern portion of Menemsha Pond, while Gay Head residents have its western portion. West Tisbury residents have rights to the eastern two-thirds of Tisbury Great Pond; Chilmark residents have its western third. Town lines across the ponds were often marked by buoys or stakes to prevent arguments.

The largest commercial fishery was for scallops, carried on only during the colder months, after the shellfish had grown to full size. Annual replenishment of juveniles varies yearly. Because scallops live only 18 to 24 months, there are wide swings in year-to-year abundance. Every fall, a principal discussion topic in Island towns was the size of that year's scallop crop. When scallops were abundant, towns were more prosperous and the spirits of adults and school children rose.

Fishermen have been able to predict whether scallops will be abundant next year by observing the relative number of seed scallops in their drags. The location of scallop beds varied from year to year because the seed would set in different places. Prices that fishermen receive for scallops vary, dependent upon the supply. When other localities in Massachusetts and Rhode Island had large crops, the price could drop by half. Because quahaugs and clams live for at least ten years, their abundance and prices were much

¹ Sengecontacket is the historic name for the pond, but Edgartown fishermen usually call it Anthier's, pronounced "an-TY-ers." The name came, tradition has it, from widow Bethiah, who lived on a small pond that flowed into Sengecontacket. She was known as "Aunt Bethiah by the pond." When, through shore erosion, the small pond became part of Sengecontacket that end, closer to Edgartown, continued to be called "Aunt Bethiah's Pond," later shortened to Anthier's. You can believe the story or not.



Ponds and harbors where shellfishing has been done through the years. more stable and dependable.

Shellfishing in the 1700s and 1800s

In the 1700s and much of the 1800s, most people looked upon the highly colored scallop, with its beautiful shell, as poisonous and unfit for eating, just as our forefathers considered the "love apple," (tomato) as only an ornament for the garden. Popular taste and opinion have changed, and the scallop became an important seafood (*Belding 1910*).

Before the 1870s, a small scallop fishery existed on the Vineyard, consisting of gathering the shellfish in shallow water with dip nets and rakes. There was little public demand and the catch was marketed with difficulty. No records have been found to show that the Indians taught the colonists to eat scallops or that colonists were familiar with their edibility from their experience in England. In all probability their edible qualities became known only gradually in the late 1800s (*Belding 1910*).

In 1874, the scallop drag was introduced in Massachusetts, revolutionizing the fishery by allowing their capture in deep water, thus opening new territory. The Vineyard's drag fishery began in Edgartown in 1875. The drag had two straight arms made of iron connected by an iron blade,

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2 1/2 feet wide, fastened to the arms in hook-and-eye fashion. Its net, which held about a bushel and filled the space between the arms, had a wooden bar at the back to aid in dumping. The number of men scalloping, along with the capital invested and the market returns, increased steadily afterward, as did improvements in the method of capture (Belding 1910).

Those early drags were designed to be hauled astern of rowboats and catboats. Fishermen in rowboats towed a single drag, weighing only about eight pounds empty. Its net bag was made entirely of twine and did not have metal rings on its bottom as did the heavier drag that was towed by catboats. The fishermen rowed slowly, retrieving the drag for emptying about every five minutes. The rowing method was used on Island ponds as late as the 1930s.

Catboat scallopers would tie several reefs in their sails to hold down their speed. The boats were from 18 to 23 feet long and usually towed two drags across the beds. A single run over a bed was called a "drift." The drags were then hauled aboard and emptied onto a culling board which extended across the width of the boat, projecting slightly on each side. The board was three feet wide with rails 3 inches high along its two sides (Belding 1910). While the drags were being towed along on the next drift, fishermen culled the usable scallops from the previous haul of empty scallop, quahaug and conch shells, crabs, eelgrass and other algae, plus seed (juvenile) scallops. This "trash" and seed was pushed overboard off the ends of the culling board. Seagulls followed the catboats, often swooping down noisily to pluck a crab to eat before it sank too far below the surface. The scallops were tossed into a bucket and later transferred to bushel coal baskets or dumped into the cockpit. A sailing catboat rigged for scalloping could be operated by either one or two men.

In the 1880s, Massachusetts passed several acts to regulate its fisheries. Among them were these:

1. By the Act of 1880, towns and cities were given their

SHELLFISH 7

Courtesy of the State Library of Massachusetts (Benton 1910).



Dragging for scallops under sail on Nantucket about 1900. The last Vineyarder to scallop this way was Josiah Pease, who did it in the 1920s.

present jurisdiction over shellfisheries with power to control and regulate the taking of eels, scallops, quahaugs and clams. Towns were allowed to prohibit the taking of shellfish by non-residents.

2. In 1885, an act placed a limit of 25 bushels per boat per day, this being the first state regulation of the scallop fishery.

It also closed the season between April 15 and September 1. Previously, there had been no closed season. In 1887, the closed season was increased to April 1 to October 1.

3. An early law to prohibit the taking of seed scallops was initially ineffective due to failure to define clearly what was seed and what was adult. In 1909, an adult was defined as having a distinct growth line on its shell. With this law, authorities were confident that the future of the scallop fishery was secure — it meant that seed, next year's catch, would be returned to the beds. It worked and heavy fishing did not reduce the catch the following year (Belding 1910).

Scallop abundance lasted the entire season only in years when they were extraordinarily numerous. In most years, a month or so after the season opened, the scallops would become scarce and the number of fishermen would dwindle. One or two fishermen would keep going out after the others

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quit, however, continuing as long as they could gather at least a bushel a day.

Fishermen usually opened their own scallops. When they did pay someone to help, the rate in the 1870s was 12 1/2 cents per gallon of eyes or meats (*Belding 1910*). It takes about an hour for a skilled shucker to open enough scallops to produce a gallon of meats.

Quahaugs and Clams

Long before the English colonists arrived, quahaugs and soft clams were important foods in the native-American diet. No doubt, the colonists learned where and how to get them from the Indians, who gathered quahaugs by treading — feeling for them with their feet and picking them up by hand. Clams probably were dug by the natives with sticks or large quahaug shells. The northwest shore of Sengecontacket Pond was the site of an Indian village. There, farmers have found quahaug and clam shells in middens two feet deep throughout a four-acre field, with many arrowheads in adjacent fields.

The colonists probably dug quahaugs and clams for home consumption during the 1700s, but little effort was made to sell them until the late 1700s and early 1800s. The first written record of commercial shellfishing was published in 1807:

The poquau (called the quahaug in the county of Barnstable) is found in Old Town [Edgartown] harbor, at Cape Poge, and in Menemsha Pond; great quantities are exported. It is taken with iron rakes in deep water; and in shallow water it is picked up by the hand. The siki, or common clam, is found on the borders of the lagunes and in several other parts of the Island. . . Two thousand dollars worth of clams, at \$9 a barrel, have been sold in Edgartown in the present year [1807]. They also begin to be taken at Menemsha Pond, and we believe in other places, and sold for bait. . . Cape Poge Pond, a lagune of salt water. . . affords an inexhaustible supply of poquaus and eels: vessels, which are chiefly from Connecticut, frequently enter it and procure poquaus from the natives.²

² James Freeman, "A Description of Dukes County in 1807," *Mass. Hist. Soc.*, 1807.

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From 1860 to 1890, harvesting of quahaugs remained about constant, but by 1900 the development of the fishery increased sharply (*Belding 1910*). Quahaugs sold for about 60 cents a bushel in this period (*Ingersoll 1887*).

Clams (siki) were abundant along many Island shores: Edgartown Harbor, Katama Bay, Kitter's Cove in Anthier's Pond, and Eel, Lagoon, Tashmoo, Menemsha and Tisbury Great Ponds. As Freeman reported, in 1807 more than 200 barrels were sold in Edgartown.

Oysters have also been gathered on the Island for many years. Early in the 1800s, they were much more plentiful than today. The writer quoted above, James Freeman, wrote in 1807:

The oyster is found in Newtown [Tisbury] Pond, and in two other ponds on the south shore, one of which is in Edgartown, and the other in Tisbury. It is fresh to the taste; but it is improved in its relish and rendered fatter, by digging a canal through the beach, and letting the salt water flow into the fresh water ponds. As the southerly wind soon fills up the canal, the digging must be renewed four to five times in a year.³

Shellfishing from 1900 to 1945

The season of 1907 witnessed the first use in Massachusetts of motor power in catboats for scalloping and it may have begun in Edgartown. The first engines were 8-horsepower Lathrops. In later years, more powerful, second-hand automobile engines were also used. Despite the additional expense of five gallons of gasoline per day (probably costing a total of 50 cents), fishermen adopted the motor-powered boats because they produced daily catches a third to a half larger than the old method of dragging by sail. Not only could they gather scallops when the wind was too light or too heavy for successful scalloping by sail, but six separate drags could be towed and more frequent drifts made (*Belding 1910*).

Another advantage was that the motor boat could tow skiffs in addition to drags and some of the captains of the

³ *Mass. Hist. Soc. Collections*, 2nd series, p.58. Reprinted *Intelligencer*, May 1971.



Ernest and Carlton Mayhew scalloping on Menemsha Pond c. 1920, before boats were rigged with pulleys to lift the heavy drags into the boat.

Menemsha and Gay Head boats earned extra money by towing one or two skiffs with fishermen aboard, each towing two drags as the captain was towing his own. Scalloping with motor power had two slight disadvantages. One was that it was better to have two men in the boat as steering the power boat demanded much more attention than the sail boat, which was practically held to a fixed course by the drags (Belding 1910). The other was very minor: the noise of the engine.

In 1907-1908, Edgartown had 39 scallop fishermen, with 26 catboats being used for scalloping. They produced 17,000 gallons of scallop meats which sold for \$22,270. Costs of their outfits averaged \$550 for a catboat, \$20 for a dory, \$25 for six drags, \$25 for rope and gear, \$2 for culling board, \$3 for incidentals, and \$50 for a shanty (Belding 1910).

The blacksmith who made most of the drags, anchors and quahaug rakes for the Island fishermen was Orin Norton. From about 1905 to 1950, he had a smithy on Dock Street in Edgartown where he also shod horses, made fence locks plus a great variety of ironwork. The best steel rods for the teeth of the rakes came from the spindles of cotton mills, because they were flexible, yet durable.

In 1910 Massachusetts lowered the daily limit from 25 to 10 bushels of scallops per man (Belding 1910). Each town could



Blacksmith Orin Norton, about 1930, at the door of his smithy on Dock Street, Edgartown, with Sibley's Garage in the background.

set its own limit below that of the state to lengthen the period of employment provided by scalloping while still allowing a decent weekly wage. The limits set by towns varied and were, in bushels: Edgartown, 4; Oak Bluffs, 3; Vineyard Haven, 2; Menemsha, 3 to 4; and Gay Head, 3 to 8, depending on the quantity of scallops available. Catboat scallopers had a rule of thumb that they had to obtain two pecks of scallops per drift or they would not get their daily limit. Each town had one regular shellfish warden and sometimes a deputy or two to enforce the limits, as well as minimum size and catch regulations for quahaugs and clams. While nearly all fishermen willingly abided by the regulations, a few often landed an extra half bushel or bushel of scallops and quahaugs.

Occasionally, a few fishermen from one town went beyond their town line and dragged illegally in beds of neighboring towns. An Oak Bluffs fisherman once got six bushels of scallops on the Vineyard Haven side of Lagoon Pond. When he landed them on the Oak Bluffs shore, the Oak Bluffs warden stopped him. The scalloper said, "You can't give



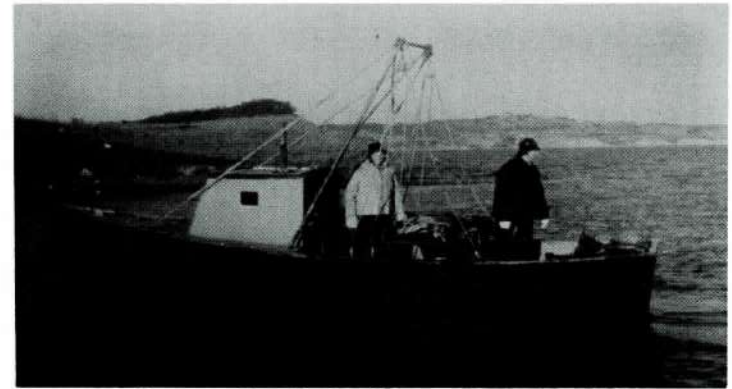
Herb Landers of Oak Bluffs, dip-netting for scallops from a rowboat in the 1950s with the help of a glass-bottomed bucket.

me a ticket. I got all these in Vineyard Haven." The warden let him go.

By the 1920s there were 60 to 70 scallop boats in Edgartown, most of them catboats. When the season ended, wealthy summer people hired about 30 of these fishermen and their boats fulltime for trolling and handlining for fish, and family sailing, often for picnics in Katama Bay. Thus the fishermen made use of their boats all year — scalloping in the winter, quahauging in spring and fall, and party boating in the summer.

The last Island fisherman to drag for scallops by sail was Josiah Pease of Edgartown, who finally abandoned it in the 1920s. He had sailed aboard one of Edgartown's whaling ships in the late 1800s. On one trip, he had a dispute with the captain and had jumped ship when they stopped at a Pacific island to take on supplies. The crew went looking for him, but natives on the island hid him until the ship left. When the next whaling ship arrived, he boarded it and returned to finish his mariner's life scalloping in Edgartown.

In the mid-1920s, Sam Norton of Edgartown, famed skipper of the *Manxman*, the largest yawl in the world at the time, introduced the glass-bottomed viewing box to the Island for scalloping. On a trip to Florida, he had seen



By 1960, scallopers used overhead pulleys to make hauling the drags easier. John and Louis Larsen, Chilmark, head into Quitsa Pond.

fishermen drifting over a shallow bay to gather sponges using similar boxes. The box, which he named the "Buck Rogers" after the then-popular futuristic hero of a popular cartoon strip, was later called the "peep sight" by Island fishermen. It allows a person looking through it to see the bottom clearly. By leaning over the side of his rowboat and looking through his peep sight held by one hand and a pole with a small scoop net at the end by the other, the fishermen could pick up scallops one at a time in water from three to ten feet deep as his boat drifted across a bed. The work was much easier than rowing a drag and a limit of four bushels could be gathered in about three hours when scallops were abundant. Called "dip netting" or "picking up," the method was used extensively in Eel, Sengecontacket and Lagoon Ponds.⁴

Before the pickup truck was common, Edgartown scallopers did not carry the shellfish home from the docks for opening as they did later. They opened them in about 20 two-man shanties that rimmed the waterfront from Osborn's Wharf to the Steamboat Wharf.⁵ Inside each shanty, a bench ran along one wall about waist high. The scallops were dumped on the benches under which were

⁴ See p. 31 for more details on the "Buck Rogers."

⁵ The shore between the Edgartown Yacht Club and Memorial Wharf.



Shanties on Dock Street, Edgartown, in the 1950s, with scalloping boats.

barrels for the discarded shells and guts. Fishermen flipped the edible meat, which were called "eyes," from the scallops into dishpans which held about two gallons, hand basins which held about one gallon, or tin cans which once held salted hams. The shanties were also used for storing gear, such as quahaug rakes, anchors and ropes.

From at least the early 1900s through the 1920s, the fishermen saved the scallop guts as a bait for fin-fishermen. The salt-preserved guts were sold for a dollar a bucket. Commercial finfishermen used this along with salted clam meats to bait trotlines, which they laid in about six fathoms of water off the south side of the Island to catch codfish in March and April. They were also used by fishermen in the summer for bottom fishing for scup, sea bass and fluke. Since the 1920s, the scallop guts have been discarded along with the shells.⁶

For years, scallop shells, after the guts were eaten by seagulls or rotted away, were spread on driveways and public streets, providing a clean, white topping to the gravel. The sun bleached them and wagon wheels, later car wheels,

⁶ S. Bailey Norton Jr., of Edgartown tells of eating the entire scallop, including the guts, in Japan, where such is customary. It is roasted and eaten on the half shell.



Eldridge's Fish Market in the 1940s. Fish shanties are visible at right.

pulverized them. They provided a good, inexpensive and ecologically sound solution, although nobody thought of the latter at the time. Today, they are discarded in town dumps or along the shores of ponds.

In the early 1900s, fishermen shipped the scallops to mainland markets in seven-gallon kegs or smaller butter tubs by boat. Most went to New York City, where prices were usually highest. The principal wholesalers to whom the fishermen sold their scallops in the 1920s were the New Bedford Fish Company, which had a building at the Edgartown Steamboat Wharf, and Ben Collins on Dock Street, Edgartown (now the Quarterhouse snackbar).

In the 1920s and 1930s, some fishermen did not have automobiles to get to their ponds or to haul their catches to Eldridge's Fish Market, where many were opened. They simply walked from home to and from the ponds. So John Correia, who worked at Eldridge's for 50 years, many of them as manager, would drive a truck to the shores of various ponds to pick up the scallops. St. Clair Brown, who later opened an Edgartown restaurant called the Captain's Table, also bought Island scallops similarly for Sam Cahoon, fish dealer in Woods Hole.

The pay for shucking scallops during these years was 50

cents a gallon of eyes which were shipped to the mainland in five-gallon tin-plated steel cans.

Later, as cars became common in the 1940s and 1950s, most fishermen took the scallops home and opened them in their kitchens, back-entries or garages with the help of wives and children. They would stack burlap bags filled with scallops on the front bumpers when they drove home. In those years, John Correia and St. Clair Brown would drive around to each house in Menemsha and Gay Head to weigh out and pay cash on the spot for the scallop meats.

In the 1930s, a new method of scalloping was developed. The method involved pulling a drag with a rowboat while working along an anchor rode (a rope line). The rode was about 200 feet long. While most fishermen used straight-sided rowboats for anchor-roding, those who fished on offshore draggers used their double-ended dories. This rode-lining minimized rowing and could be used in waters too deep for dip netting. The fisherman anchored each end of the rope over a scallop bed, pulled his boat to one end of the rope, tossed out his drag, and then pulled the boat along the rode to the other end. He then secured the rode, pulled in his drag, and emptied out the scallops onto a culling board on the boat's stern. He then either rowed back to the other end and repeated the drift or simply tossed out the drag and pulled himself back to the other end. He kept traversing the rode until catches declined and then moved his rode location over more scallops. Fishermen used the anchor-rode method near the lighthouse in Edgartown harbor and in Sengecontacket, where about 15 men used it, and in Lagoon Pond, with about 75 men. During these years, the 1930s, scallops were bringing about \$2 a gallon.

In the late 1930s, the new power source was the outboard motor, which was used on rowboats 12 to 14 feet long. The first outboard motors provided only three or four horsepower and were unreliable. Despite this, more scallops could be gathered with them than with anchor rodes because two drags could be towed, doubling the catch, with much

reduced labor. The outboard enabled skiff fishermen to gather scallops as fast as those using catboats. The only gear required was a skiff with a culling board, the outboard and a couple of drags. The equipment was used year after year and was less expensive to purchase and maintain than a catboat. The new motor made it easier and more productive for some of the Island's many carpenters, painters, electricians and other craftsmen to go scalloping part-time.⁷

Perhaps 200 of the occasional fishermen took breaks from other work to go scalloping for two to four weeks, especially at the beginning of those seasons when scallops were abundant. They could earn substantially more per week than on their regular jobs. Though the regular scallopers felt that the part-timers took the cream, leaving them with poor pickings, the extra earnings of the group were a substantial boost to the Island's winter economy. The bay-scallop fleet also included fishermen who worked much of the year on offshore finfish and sea-scallop boats.

The outboard motor also made it easier for a fisherman without a catboat to take his wife scalloping. With her along, they were allowed a double limit, thus improving the family income. He would haul the drags, load the culling board and she would cull the scallops. But this was not common, perhaps only one in 20 men scalloped with his wife.

The scallop season also provided employment for men and women opening scallops for others. Scallops, unlike quahaugs and clams, are not sold in the shell, as gathered. Only the eye, the muscle that opens and closes the shell, is marketable. Removing the edible muscle quickly and without waste is tedious and requires skill to do it fast enough to make the work profitable. Fishermen and the part-time shuckers worked in such establishments as Eldridge's Market and Gordon Shurtleff's opening house in Edgartown as well as the fish shanties, sometimes called shucking parlors, at Menemsha Basin, one of which was owned by Cyrus Norton. Shuckers included some of the

⁷ See p. 31 for details on the first use of outboards for scalloping in Edgartown.

towns' older men, boys after school, and a few non-fishermen who took days off from regular jobs when the demand for their work was high.

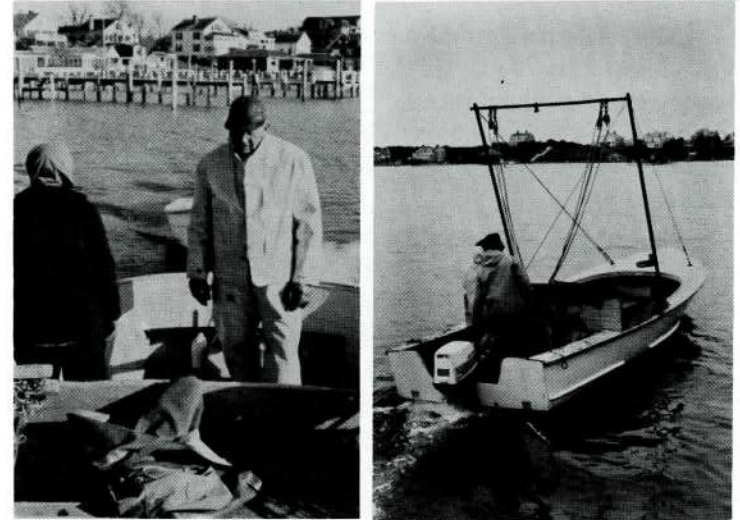
When one town had few scallops and others had a large supply, perhaps 15 of the unemployed scallopers would go to the other towns for the day to earn money shucking. When Menemsha Pond had a large crop in the 1940s, one wholesaler purchased many unshucked scallops from the fishermen of Gay Head, hauled them to Edgartown where he hired people to open them. In the 1920s and early 1930s, shuckers were paid 50 cents per gallon of shucked meat. By the 1940s, the rate had gone up to \$1 per gallon.

There were many years when fishermen could get their limits by mid-morning during the early months of the season. One year, scallops were so abundant in Edgartown harbor, between the lighthouse and Chappaquiddick Point, that for about three weeks fishermen could obtain their limits by making only two five-minute drifts. One fisherman, Huck Look, who had two teenage sons in school would have them run down to the steamboat wharf at noontime, go out with him for an hour while he made about four drifts to get the two extra limits allowed them. While this was going on, the boys ate their lunch. He would drop the boys off at the dock and they would run back to school in time for the afternoon session. After school, the boys went directly home to help their father open the day's catch.

Quahauging

Quahauging was also an important source of income in Edgartown in the early 1900s. In 1903, the town passed a regulation forbidding the taking of quahaugs under 1 1/2 inches across their widest part, thus assuring that the seed were returned to the beds (Belding 1912). In these years, Katama Bay in Edgartown had the finest littleneck fishery in Massachusetts.

By the 1930s, about 70 full-time and part-time fishermen were raking quahaugs there. About 28 dug with short rakes



Photograph by the author.

Left, Oscar Pease and wife, Nellie, going scalloping on his catboat, *Vanity*. Right, a modern, outboard-powered scalloper in Edgartown. at low tide, mostly in the bay's channels where depths ranged from their knees to their waists. Even though they were in the water, they wore normal work clothes and old shoes, getting to the beds by rowing skiffs or sailing sharpies, which ranged from 14 to 16 feet long.

In the early 1900s, those who rowed would toss the quahaugs into the skiff which they towed by tying its painter around their waists. Some years later, they began using a basket that floated inside an automobile inner tube to hold their catches. The investment required of these short-rake fisherman was small: boat, \$20; rake \$3; basket \$2; for a total of \$25 (Belding 1912).

At this time, Edgartown also had about 40 long-rake fishermen who dug quahaugs in 5 to 15 feet of water from catboats and other boats. The first rake they used was the basket rake, which had a pole of yellow pine 20 to 24 feet long. Fishermen would anchor their boats, toss the rake out the full length of the pole, pull it back along the bottom and then lift the rake over the gunwale to take out the quahaugs.

Later, fishermen used a bull rake, which had a pole 18 to 22 feet long. They let their boats drift with the current and wind as they raked. The rake's pole had wooden extensions which could be added to lengthen it as the water depth increased, thus maintaining the correct angle for the rake's teeth to the bottom, a critical angle. If the pole was too short, the rake would not gather quahaugs, and if too long it would anchor itself in the bottom. The perpendicular cross-head at the end of the bull-rake handle which the fishermen pulled on was often made from an old oar. Fishermen made their own poles from pieces of clear pine, two inches square planed round. The investment required for deepwater quahauging was: boat, \$300; two rakes, \$20; three poles, \$6; for a total of \$326.

In 1907, production of quahaugs in Edgartown was 20,000 bushels, which brought the fishermen about \$32,000, averaging \$5 to \$8 a day per fisherman. (*Belding 1912*)

In 1929 or 1930, Massachusetts increased the minimum size limit for quahaugs to two inches across. Despite this restriction, it was followed, in the mid-1930s, by a boom period for the Edgartown fishermen. There had been a dense, widespread set of quahaugs in Katama Bay in 1930 or 1931 and it produced a crop of littlenecks (2 to 2 1/2 inches long) so abundant that fishermen at times found it difficult to get their rakes into the bottom. They would get as many as 50 quahaugs in the rake after pulling it only about two feet.

This bonanza attracted about 30 part-timers who would go out very early and get their limit of two bushels of littlenecks by 8 a.m. They then went to their regular jobs, usually chartering their boats to summer people.

Littlenecks sold wholesale for \$1.25 a bushel and chowder quahaugs (larger than 3 inches long) for 50 cents a bushel.⁸ Catches continued good until the 1938 hurricane washed

⁸ Littlenecks, the smallest and sweetest of the quahaugs (2 inches in diameter), are eaten raw on the halfshell, and command a premium price. Cherrystones (2 1/3 to 3 inches) and chowders (over 3 inches) bring in less per bushel.

sand from the three-mile-long barrier beach between Katama and Chappaquiddick on the south side of Katama Bay, smothering many of the beds.

Quahauging was not so important to the economy of the other Island towns. The principal quahauging areas in Oak Bluffs were Sengecontacket (Anthier's) Pond and Oak Bluffs harbor. The harbor often became polluted in the summer due to the large number of visiting boats, but cleared up enough in the fall to allow the taking of quahaugs. Lagoon Pond never had many quahaugs. During the 1930s and 1940s, Oak Bluffs had about 15 quahaug fishermen, who used both short rakes and bull rakes. The daily limit set by the town was two bushels of littlenecks and one bushel of cherrystones or chowders.

In Vineyard Haven, quahauging was an even smaller fishery, but in the 1930s eight power boats towed dredges which held about five bushels of quahaugs in its outer harbor. In Menemsha and Gay Head, 15 to 20 men raked quahaugs using bull rakes and short rakes and a few power boats dredged for them in Menemsha Pond during the summer; a few fishermen continued to go quahauging in the winter whenever scallops were scarce.⁹

An attractive feature of the quahaug fishery was its ease of entry. If someone found himself without a job or had just immigrated to the Island, he could earn a reasonable weekly wage by purchasing a skiff and a rake. He would follow the regular fishermen to the productive beds and start raking. Many Portuguese immigrants arrived in Edgartown between 1900 and 1935 and went short-raking. After they had saved enough money for a catboat, often built by Manuel Swartz, the renowned Edgartown boat and furniture builder, they diversified into scalloping and party boating at which they were excellent.

The principal market for quahaugs was Eldridge's in Edgartown, which shipped them to New York City where

⁹ Power dredging is now prohibited in town waters (see article on page 23 for more details).

prices were usually the highest. Boston was also an important market.¹⁰ The quahaugs were packed in wooden barrels and apple and potato sacks and trucked along Dock Street to the steamboat wharf by John Donnelly and Son to be loaded on the early-morning steamer to the mainland.¹¹ In the summer, holes were bored in the sides of the barrels and burlap was nailed over the head to allow circulation of air. Burlap bags later replaced the barrels entirely because they were inexpensive and more available.

The soft-shell clam fishery was never as important as the hard-shell quahaug on the Island. Fishermen harvested the clams with diggers, seahorses or garden forks in the early 1900s. On intertidal flats, they used the digger, which had four or five teeth six inches long. The handle was short, only a foot long and angled perpendicularly to the teeth. The fisherman went out on the clam flat at low tide, dug a hole slightly deeper than the depth of the clams with his digger and hands, reached about six inches past the end of the hole with the digger and then pushed its teeth all the way into the sand. He then flipped the sand over into the hole. If he was lucky, five to ten clams, upside down, were then exposed. He picked them up, put them into a net bag or basket, stepped forward and repeated the procedure. Clammers usually could gather two or three bushels apiece before the tide rose over the flat.

The seahorse was a rake about 15 inches wide with about 15 spike-like teeth each about a foot long. Its handle (about 40 inches long) was set at a perpendicular angle to the teeth and had an attached strap which went around the waist of the digger. Fishermen used it in water about knee deep. They worked in pairs; one of the fishermen pushed the teeth straight down and then lifted the end of the handle, bringing the clams to the surface on the teeth. His partner picked

¹⁰ Eldridge's Market in Edgartown was on the site of today's Yacht Club and was a popular place to buy and eat littlenecks. The building is now the snackbar for Junior members.

¹¹ In those years, the steamer to the mainland spent the night in Edgartown, leaving early for New Bedford and returning on its final trip.

Power Dragging for Quahaugs

by Oscar Pease

Power dragging for quahaugs had a short life on the bays and ponds of Martha's Vineyard. Despite that brevity, it damaged the crop drastically for years afterwards. Fortunately, it is now prohibited by all the towns.

The dredge that was used was made of round iron bar in the same general shape as the scallop dredge. The first crossbar was raised about eight inches by steel rods, welded to the iron plate that formed the bottom of the dredge opening. On the underside of the plate were the teeth that dug up the bottom, forcing the quahaugs into the mouth. The teeth were set at an angle so that when the bag at the rear of the dredge was filled with quahaugs its weight would lift them out of the bottom. In doing so, the lessening of the drag would cause the boat to speed up, telling the fisherman that it was time to haul. The dredge, made of metal rings, was very heavy when full and had to be hoisted aboard the boat by a boom arrangement. The boats were about 35 feet long.

Power dredging broke many shells, especially of the smaller quahaugs, killing many of them and had it continued would have destroyed the crop forever.

them off and put them in a basket. One team of diggers, Charlie Earle and Clarence "T" Collins, using a seahorse, once got 20 bushels of clams along Collins Beach in Edgartown harbor on a low tide.

Fishermen used the four-tine garden fork in a foot or two of water. They drove the tines straight into the sand and then swung the handle down into the water, lifting the rake horizontally and picking the clams off the teeth. Each could usually get two or three bushels on a low tide this way.

There were three different markets for clams. One was the bait market, which supplied the fin-fishermen who set lines of baited hooks from tub trawls. For that market, fishermen dug the clams during the winter, shucked and

salted them, then sold them in the spring for 25 cents a bucket.

From 1900 through the 1930s, a market developed in sales to the clam bakes which were popular each summer. In the 1920s and 1930s, Tony King put on a clam bake every day at a large building on the shore of Katama Bay. It was very popular with the summer people. Some would sail there from Edgartown while others arrived by car. There were also commercial clambakes on the shore of Lagoon Pond and occasionally there were private clambakes in yards and on beaches around the Island. The menu at the bakes included corn, several kinds of fish, lobsters, clams, sausages, potatoes and watermelon, plus littlenecks on the half-shell. Everything but the littlenecks and watermelon was cooked in rockweed in a shallow pit in the beach sand.

The third market was the house-to-house sale of clams. Several clam diggers, including Levi Jackson and his son Sam, in Edgartown shucked their clams and peddled the meats in pint and quart jars around the Island. In the 1930s, Amos Smalley of Gay Head, who was famous for harpooning an albino whale, operated a travelling fish market. He trucked littlenecks, quahaug meats for chowders, whole and shucked clams and fish to customers who ordered them in advance. He dug the quahaugs and clams himself and purchased the fish from Vineyard trap (pound-net) fishermen.

During the depression in the 1930s, many unemployed Islanders dug soft clams for their own tables. Initially, clams were abundant in intertidal flats at wading depths and were easy to gather with the simple tools available. Unfortunately, the diggers took all the seed and adult clams they found. Their efforts were so intense that clams disappeared from most localities and in many areas they have never again been abundant.

Shellfishing from 1946 to the Present

In the years right after World War II, over 400 scallop fishermen were active during the first few weeks of good

seasons, distributed as follows: Edgartown, 175; Oak Bluffs, 150; Vineyard Haven, 35; Menemsha, 30; and Gay Head, 30. The numbers represent an estimated one-fifth to one-quarter of the male labor force on the Island. Licenses were usually purchased by about twice that number each year and also were given free to men over 60, so many more could have gone scalloping if they wished.

It was in these years that towns passed a regulation that no scalloping was allowed when the air temperature fell below 28 degrees Fahrenheit. The purpose was to prevent the seed from being killed by freezing.

The 1960s brought an innovation which relieved fishermen of hand-lifting the heavy scallop drags. It involved hauling them with a winch positioned below and alongside the culling board. The new system included a horizontal metal bar mounted about five feet above the culling board on vertical posts. Two single or double-spool pulleys were mounted along the bar and the line to each drag was run through one of the spools and cleated on the boat's rail. To retrieve a drag and lift it above the culling board for emptying, the fisherman unwound the line from the cleat and wrapped it around the revolving winch drum. The powered winch hauled the heavy drag easily, eliminating the back-breaking manual work of earlier systems. Today, at least two-thirds of the scallop boats have this gear.

Nearly all the boats used in scalloping today are of fiberglass, about 20 feet long and powered by outboard motors of 50 to 60 horsepower. A few wooden boats are in use, many with inboard engines, but usually not the modified catboats formerly so common. The scallops are loaded into one-bushel plastic boxes to simplify the catch-limit observance.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the quantities of scallops in three major areas dropped below what they had been. One was Katama Bay, probably because the opening in the barrier beach on its south side was closed to the ocean most of the time and the bay had become too stagnant. In Lagoon

Pond and Menemsha Pond, an introduced alga, called japgrass (*Codium fragile*), was growing in great abundance and its presence may have choked the space in the scallop's habitat. The Eel Pond, a smaller area, also did not produce as many scallops, probably because its opening to Nantucket Sound had become much wider.

In 1991, Edgartown had 80 active scallopers, Oak Bluffs and Vineyard Haven combined had about 10, Menemsha had about 10, and Gay Head none. There were more who were licensed to scallop, but only about 40 percent go out on a given day. Younger shellfishermen, in their twenties, are not as persistent as older counterparts of past decades and they usually quit scalloping whenever it becomes difficult to obtain the limit. From 1962 to 1990 scallop production in Edgartown averaged about 10,000 gallons a year, ranging widely, from 2600 to 23,000 gallons, during those years. In the 1990s, fishermen were paying shuckers at a rate of \$1.25 a pound, about \$11.25 a gallon, to have their scallops opened.

Since World War II, quahauging has been less important to the Island economy. For one reason, Katama Bay had fewer quahaugs than in the 1930s. The closure of the barrier-beach inlet to the ocean may have been a main reason for that. While there were fewer quahaugs, the work was made easier in the 1960s with the development of a more efficient rake with an adjustable aluminum handle.

Wholesalers were able to sell a portion of the local littlenecks and cherrystones to the Island's restaurants and seafood snack bars for the half-shell trade. In the 1950s, littlenecks, with a slice of lemon, sold for 3 for a dime or 12 for 35 cents. Most of the local production of quahaugs, however, was shipped off-Island.

In the 1990s, from 30 to 35 men still dig quahaugs in March and April and in the summer about 15 men, mostly teenagers or retirees, dig them in Katama Bay. The only regular fishermen who dig quahaugs do so in the spring before setting their pots for conchs, a new fishery which



Photograph by the author.

Cyrus Norton uses a water-jet to uncover softshell clams in Edgartown Great Pond. Partner Jim Geddis, right, waits to rake them up.

began in the 1970s. Today, quahaugs are not sold by the bushel, but by the count. The daily catch by a fisherman averages about 1000 quahaugs (equal to about two bushels), nearly all of which are littlenecks.

Soon after World War II, a group of shellfishermen began gathering clams in Tisbury Great Pond with water jets and rakes. Their equipment included a skiff, which had a water pump driven by a 1.5 to 3 horsepower gasoline engine and connected to a 30-foot hose. The fishermen directed the water jet against the bottom and washed away the sand that covered the clams so they could be raked up and put into floating baskets.

In the early 1950s, some fishermen in Edgartown persuaded the town to open Edgartown Great Pond to the ocean every year to encourage the growth of soft clams. They intended to harvest the clams using the same jetting method as West Tisbury fishermen. For years the Great Pond had been freshwater and was the habitat of eels as well as the spawning ground for herring which came up Mattakeset Creek to deposit their eggs. (Herring and eels require fresh water for portions of their life history.) At the head of the creek, fishermen would seine herring and sell most of them to 20 or 30 schooners from Gloucester, usually 100 barrels

to each, at a dollar a barrel. These herring were used to bait tub trawls set for halibut and cod on the Grand Banks. Herring seiners also caught eels in fyke nets every October and November.¹²

Within two years, the pond had a large crop of seed clams and when they attained a legal size of two inches about three years later, nearly 20 Edgartown men and women in pairs gathered clams every summer for about 15 years. The limit was two bushels per person a day and nearly all clams were shipped off-Island, bringing \$8 to \$10 a bushel.

A negative consequence of opening Edgartown Great Pond was that with the brackish water flowing in the creek, herring did not return and that fishery ended. At least, this was the fishermen's hypothesis for the demise of the herring run. The eels also became scarcer. Currently, clams are abundant in the pond, but because the pond does not remain open to the ocean for more than a few days and does not become salty enough, their growth is impaired and clams remain too small for commerce.

During the past 30 years or so, some Vineyard Haven fishermen dug clams in Tashmoo Pond using plumber's helpers. By working the plunger up and down just above the bottom, the fishermen would wash the clams out of the bottom so they could rake them. The daily limit was one bushel.

Since World War II, clambakes have been held less frequently, mostly because they have become too expensive. The cost of seafood ingredients rose sharply as demand rose and supplies fell, and currently the old-fashioned clambake is rarely affordable to the average family. They continue to be popular for special celebrations, such as weddings, family reunions and organizational outings.

By the late 1940s, most Vineyard oysters were found in Tisbury Great Pond, where as many as a dozen fishermen had leases on areas where oysters set and grew. They harvested them with drags and shipped them off-Island for

¹² A fyke net is a long, cylindrical bag held open by a series of hoops.



Photograph by the author.

A few women went scalloping in the 1950s. This unidentified fisherwoman, her day's limit aboard the rowboat, was from Oak Bluffs.

sale. The other area where they grew abundantly was Oyster Pond. For two years in the 1950s, about 20 Edgartown men gathered oysters with drags and by hand. They went early in the morning or late in the afternoon before or after their regular jobs, getting a daily limit of two bushels each to supplement their incomes. Edgartown Great Pond has also produced oysters for a number of years.

In the 1970s, a new shellfishery, the catching of conch¹³ in pots in waters mostly outside the Island's ponds and harbors, was begun by Island fishermen. The pots vary a little in shape, but most are about 20 inches square and 10 inches deep. Fishermen bait each pot with half a horseshoe crab. The main conch grounds are in Muskeget Channel, along the north shore of Nantucket, in Nantucket Sound and along the south shore of Cape Cod. There are also grounds off the state beach between Edgartown and Oak Bluffs and off Menemsha.

Each boat sets from 100 to 150 pots, the state limit being 200 pots per boat. Fishermen place pots on shoals to avoid the nets of fishing trawlers. The season begins when the water temperature rises to 40 degrees Fahrenheit, about the first of May, and ends about Thanksgiving. The daily catch

¹³ Pronounced "konk."

of conchs per boat ranges widely, from 200 to 1500 pounds.

By the late 1980s, Edgartown had 18 conch boats, Oak Bluffs had four and Menemsha had three. Most had the design of lobster boats, about 35 feet long. Two, sometimes three, men crewed each boat. In 1990, the landing of whole conchs in Edgartown came to 990,090 pounds, which sold for \$495,000¹⁴ Conch meats are used in stews, salads and spaghetti dishes.

Shellfishing will undoubtedly continue to be a colorful part of the industry and culture of Martha's Vineyard as long as shellfish habitats remain undisturbed. In an attempt to reverse the declines in the quantities of available scallops and quahaugs, the Island towns now support a hatchery which raises scallop and quahaug seed for planting in its beds. Perhaps, through greater support, the habitats which have been degraded can be restored and the fisheries returned to their past grandeur.

¹⁴ Town Report, Edgartown, 1990.

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Photograph by the author.

Jimmy Geddis admires the four bushels of soft clams, their daily limit, he and Cyrus Norton got on Edgartown Great Pond, using a water-jet.

Some Recollections on Shellfishing

By S. Bailey Norton Jr.

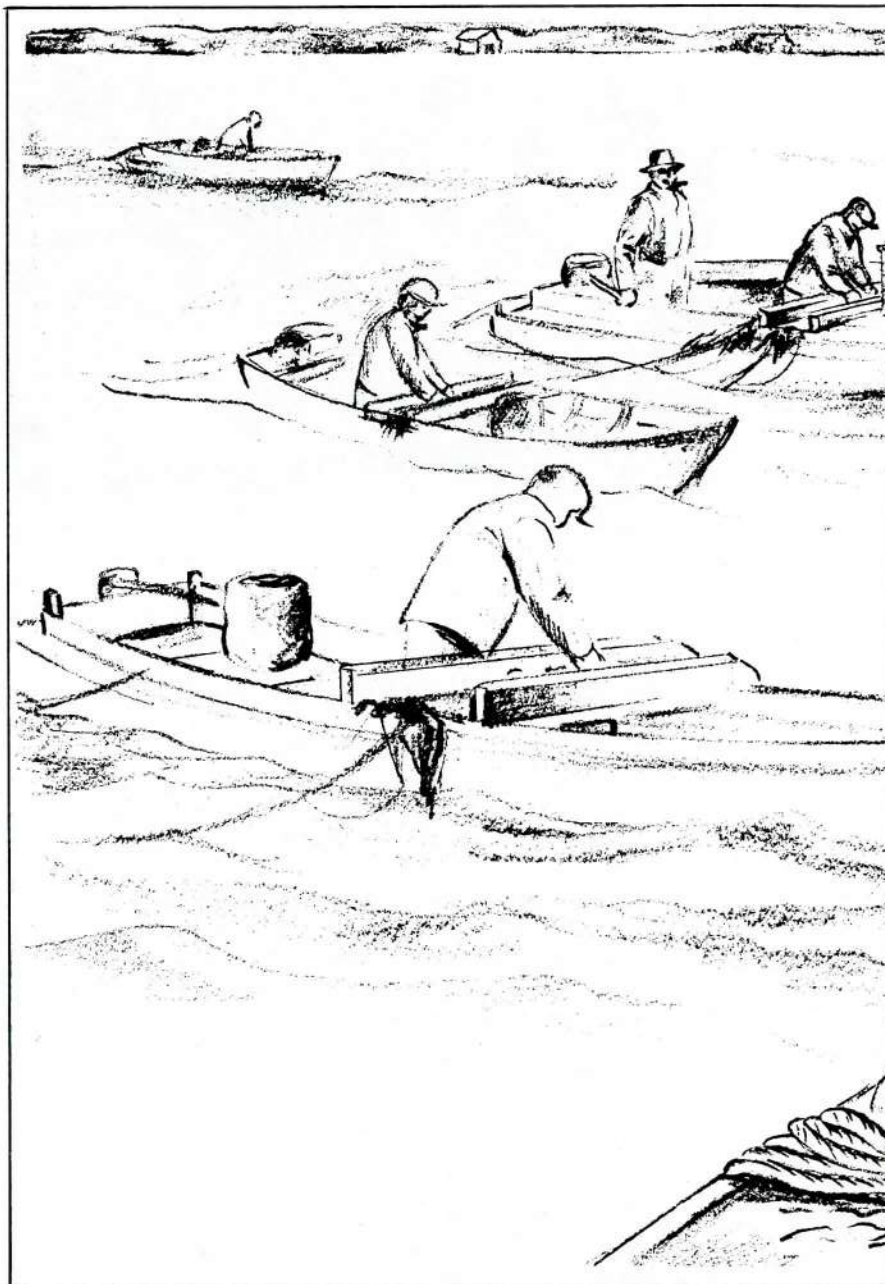
As Clyde MacKenzie has written, Sam Norton, my father, did bring the first glass-bottomed viewing device to the Island. It was actually a glass-bottomed pine bucket or firkin, about a foot in diameter at the bottom and about 18 inches deep. In the spring of 1932, he brought the bucket home from Florida filled with sponges.

I and John R. O'Neill were the first to use the bucket for scalloping in Edgartown. After school one day in the fall of 1932, we were picking up scallops from a skiff off Chappy Point with dip nets, as we often did. The breeze came up, rippling the water so we couldn't see the bottom clearly enough to spot the scallops. I remembered that my Dad had told me how the Florida sponge fishermen used the bucket to see underwater better.

John and I rowed across the harbor and picked up the bucket in our garage. We took it back to the point and used it with much success. Word got around and soon others

(Continued on page 34)

Scallopers on Katama Bay,



Drawing shows a variety of scalloping boats on Katama Bay, Edgartown, in the 1950s. Front to rear: Jim Ripley, Ernest "Red" Ward, Cyrus Norton, Leon

Edgartown, in the 1950s



Estabrook, Phil Norton. Sketch was made by Priscilla Gilley of Milford, Conn., from photographs taken by the author.

made similar glass-bottomed boxes and buckets and their use became widespread.

I believe, we were also the first to use an outboard motor for scalloping in Edgartown. It was in 1932 or 1933 and happened this way:

Among the surplus marine gear stored in my Dad's boathouse I found an old, worn-out outboard that had been used on a yacht tender in Long Island Sound. It was an early Elto (Evinrude Light Twin Outboard) of about 5 or 7 horsepower with cast-iron cylinders, hot-shot battery and spark coil. We got Victor Danberg and Fred Waller at Coulter's Garage on Dock Street to help us overhaul it and, with much difficulty, get it running. (The knuckle on my right thumb still shows the damage done by much cranking of that motor.)

That summer we spent most of our time running around the harbor in a rowboat powered by the Elto. I believe there were only two other outboards on the harbor at the time: one was owned by Clara F. Dinsmore, the other was a big Johnson used by Eldon and Orin West on a fast hydroplane.

In late September, when we began our usual dip-net scalloping, we decided to borrow a couple of drags from Phil Norton and try towing them with our outboard in the shoal water off Chappy Point. We made a culling board and Manuel Swartz made a lever and pulley rig for us so we could use the aluminum rudder on the Elto for steering. To my recollection, before this all scalloping was being done in catboats, either by sail or power, or in rowboats, as Clyde has described.



350th Anniversary of the Congregational Church

The Tribulations Of Reverend Thaxter

by ARTHUR R. RAILTON

AMONG the scores of ministers who have filled the pulpit of the Congregational church in Edgartown, none was as memorable as the Rev. Joseph Thaxter Jr., who served from 1780 until his death in 1827.

For nearly 50 years, he was the religious leader of the community. Tragically, his final years were filled with disappointment, his life's work evaporating under the flame of revivalism, a flame focussed by Baptist and Methodist evangelists.

In those final years, within his congregation a bitter split developed between Unitarians, of which he was one, and Trinitarians. He died proud, but saddened.

He was, one Vineyard historian wrote, "a man of quick sensibility, ready sympathy, and of a strong emotional nature. Kindness melted his heart and won his love; and injustice at once aroused his indignation."¹

One who knew him well wrote:

Rev. Joseph Thaxter was social and unreserved and consequently revealed himself to those who listened . . . his whole appearance was suited to arrest attention and to impress itself on the memory. . . his step was quick and nervous, but irregular from a wound received when he served as Chaplain or Surgeon — for he held both offices — in the army of the Revolution; and his apparel was fashioned after the style adopted by the clergymen of a preceding generation.²

Harvard educated, he graduated in 1768, having paid for his education, the story goes, with money won in a lottery.³

¹ Richard L. Pease, ms., DCHS, Box 141.1, #27.

² *Ibid.*, Rev. Calvin Lincoln, Hingham. Quoted by RLP.

³ Thaxter, while in Hingham, sold lottery tickets for the financing of the Revolution. In 1778, he returned some tickets saying, "I hope it will not be too late, am sorry I could not dispose of them all." DCHS.

He planned to become a doctor, but soon decided that, while he enjoyed the study, the practice did not appeal to him. He then switched to the ministry, in which, it was said, he was not enough of a Calvinist to be well accepted.

In 1771, he began preaching in various Massachusetts villages before settling at the parish in Westford. There, he joined the militia, serving as its Chaplain. When the Revolution began, he was commissioned Chaplain in Colonel Prescott's regiment, having been at the Battle of Concord Bridge, of which he wrote a first-hand account:

The British had placed about ninety men as a guard at the North Bridge . . . It was proposed [we] advance to the bridge . . . Strict orders were given not to fire unless the British fired first. When they advanced about halfway on the Causeway, the British fired one gun, a second, a third and then the whole body; they killed Colonel Davis of Acton and a Mr. Hosmer. Our people then fired . . . They killed two and wounded eleven. . . On this, the British fled and assembled on the hill, the north side of Concord and dressed their wounded and then began their retreat.⁴

Later, he served under General Washington, taking part in the battles of White Plains and Princeton. That winter was spent at the army's quarters near Morristown, New Jersey. His term of enlistment up, he returned to his home in Hingham early in 1777, at 33 years of age. He then opened a school, being unable to find a pastorate. He was chosen by the town to participate in the convention in Boston to draw up the Massachusetts constitution.

In April 1780, Edgartown, which had been without a minister since the death of Reverend Kingsbury in 1779, voted "to procure a gospel minister to preach to the town for the space of three months." The man they chose was Joseph Thaxter, still in Hingham. In May, he arrived in Edgartown and moved into the home of Thomas Jernegan, at Main and Water Streets. For three months, he preached, gaining wide approval, and in August the church and then the town (as was required by law) voted unanimously to

ask him to become their settled minister.

He did not accept hastily. Returning to Hingham, he talked it over with the esteemed Rev. Ebenezer Gay, his old pastor. The isolation of the Island caused him to hesitate. Reverend Gay, thought by some to be the father of Unitarianism, convinced him it was God's calling. After five weeks of thought, he agreed. He was 36 years old, unmarried, mature, experienced in war, government, medicine and religion. He even had a trade, he had apprenticed as a cooper.

With all these talents, he settled down and lived the rest of his life as Edgartown's religious leader. When he died, he was 83 years old, 47 of those years spent on the Vineyard.

Being single, he was reluctant to be burdened with household chores. When the town offered him a salary of £100 in silver money, he had a different proposal:

Sensible of the care and trouble in which I must necessarily be involved in having all the necessities of life to purchase wherever I can find them, I most sincerely wish to avoid such cares as much as possible; and therefore would propose that your agreement with me may be to give me ten cords of good oak wood, three tons of good English hay, forty-five bushels of Indian corn, fifteen bushels of rye, eighty weight of good fleece wool, two hundred weight of large pork, two hundred weight of good beef, including the proportion of tallow; and two hundred Spanish milled dollars.⁵

On November 8, 1780, his ordination service was led by Rev. Zachariah Mayhew of Chilmark, missionary to the Indians, opening "the Solemnity with Prayer." Two weeks later, Reverend Thaxter called a church meeting. It was voted to hold communion every sixth Sunday, from April until September, and that on Thursday before each communion he would deliver a lecture at 3 p.m., to prepare the members.

The Anabaptists, "in the northern part of town"

⁵ Obviously, Spanish dollars were worth less than Sterling. The produce arrangement did not begin until January 1, 1781. He was paid £34 until then. In March 1783, he decided to take his entire salary in money. He had married in the interim.

⁴ DCHS, Box 141.1, #19.

(Eastville), had started to gain converts and a town committee early in 1781 met with them to ask if they would agree to continue paying minister's tax now that Reverend Thaxter had taken over. Apparently, they agreed, because it was many years before the question came up again.

In the first year of his ministry, 146 children and adults were baptized and 55 new members were admitted. He was so quickly accepted that in January 1781, only three months after his ordination, Thomas Cooke named his new-born son, Joseph Thaxter Cooke.⁶

On October 11, 1781, Reverend Thaxter married Mary Allen of Chilmark who, like him, was living with the Jernegans.⁷ Reverend and Mary Thaxter had seven children in 15 years, the first being Mary, born August 11, 1782. Two years later, daughter Hannah was born. With their expanding family, the Thaxters needed a house and in 1784 Thomas Vincent, "for love, good will and affection [gave] to Joseph Thaxter a quarter of an acre of land" next to the meetinghouse. There he built a large house, one-fifth of which, it is said, was by his own hands.⁸

Thomas Vincent may have been generous with the new minister, but the town, like most, soon was in arrears in paying his salary, which was supposed to be paid out of tax money at the end of each year. It was already a year behind, as he wrote to his brother Caleb in Hingham on February 14, 1788:

I last week settled with the Town Treasr. for the Year '86.

There remains £30 on that year & £90 on '87. I hope for something better by & by. . .⁹

The church's growth soon slackened. In the following six years, only 22 new members were admitted, all but two of

⁶ The baby died at three months. Thomas Cooke, whose house the Society maintains as a museum, had 14 children, while living there. The first 11 were boys. Joseph Thaxter was the 10th.

⁷ The Jernegan-Thaxter relationship was close. The first Thaxter child, Mary, married Thomas, the son of landlord Jernegan.

⁸ Another quarter acre was sold to Thaxter by Daniel Vinson of Nova Scotia, Thomas' brother and co-heir. The house was torn down in 1897, its location, at the corner of Cooke Street and Pease's Point Way, is marked by a plaque.

⁹ *Joseph Thaxter Papers*, Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

them women. Reverend Thaxter was unhappy with a growing dissension among his flock. On March 1788, he held a meeting in his new house to take "into Consideration the unhappy State of the Chh, arising from the Members not taking the Methods which the Gospel points out for healing Differences . . ."

The members present passed six resolutions, defining steps of forgiveness and reconciliation with those who have offended, "either from Inattention or Misapprehension of the Rules given by our Lord." There is no mention of the basis for the "Differences." Could this be the start of the great schism that divided his flock later, the Unitarian-Trinitarian conflict?

On July 20, 1791, the town assessed its inhabitants £100 "for the Support of the Rev'd. Mr. Joseph Thaxter . . . it being his Yearly Sallery and Delivered to Mr. David Davis, Constable of Edgartown, to Collect." There were 261 names in the assessment book, the total number of households at the time.¹⁰

He was pastor for all Edgartown, including Eastville. In 1792, William Butler of Eastville wrote in his journal: "The People of the Neighborhood were disappointed today, it being lecture day and Mr. Thaxter's not coming."

He preached to the Indians on Chappaquiddick. Throughout his life, he had a deep concern for the Indians and the encroachment upon their land by the English. He mediated disputes among Indians as well. In 1826, a year before he died, seven Chappaquiddick residents asked him to help settle quarrels over land rights among the "natives and people of colour on the Island." They put their request in writing because he was "unfortunately hard of hearing." These quarrels had pitted "neighbours against neighbours and childrend against parents or parents against childrend."¹¹

Richard L. Pease, who as a young man heard Thaxter

¹⁰ DCHS Box 141.3, #4.

¹¹ DCHS Box 141.1, #22.

preach often, wrote that "His sermons were composed with care; his style was sententious, and his delivery marked with great earnestness."¹²

The Society has a few of his handwritten sermons, each numbered, the dates of delivery carefully annotated. The highest number it has is No. 1787, first given November 30, 1814, and repeated, according to his notation, in November 1820. He must have written well over 2500.

In April 1794, the Boston Society for Propagating the Gospel asked him to be its Indian missionary in the Maine district for three months. Although, as he wrote, of "frail constitution," he accepted. To fill his Edgartown pulpit he procured a young man named Charles Brown.

The mission experience was uplifting, but, he wrote, "I returned to my people with joy." He had come back to a prospering village, as he wrote to brother Caleb on December 23, 1795:

Our Seamen are well satisfied & prosper, they reap the happy Fruits of Peace & Plenty. Our Harbour for some Weeks past has been alive with Nantuckett whaling Ships, some returned full & others fitting away. It makes employ for some of our People . . . but it has given a dreadful price to everything . . . Wo is me if these Times last long. I find but very few that are willing to make me any consideration; one Bushel of Rye as a Present is all that has been done by my People. . . I am feeling round & if I find it will do, I propose to push . . . [for] some Relief. It will not bear at present. It will not do for me at this advanced Stage of Life to stir up a Hornett's Nest...¹³

In the letter, he asked about his daughter Mary, who was living with Caleb and going to school in Hingham: "I hope She will diligently improve in her Manners & in her Learning. . ."

In 1796,

the town taking into consideration the great rise of almost all of the necessities of life, and the peculiar disadvantages that persons who are confined to certain salaries must labor

¹² DCHS Box 141.1, -27.

¹³ *Joseph Thaxter Papers*, Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

under . . . [grant] by way of gratuity, to him, the said Mr. Thaxter, the sum of seventy dollars.

Whether it was a taste he developed in Maine or not, we can't say, but 1796 and 1797 were the only years he is shown to have bought liquor in Joseph Mayhew's store. In 1796, he bought two gallons of rum and in 1797, nearly three gallons.¹⁴

It was also at this time that Reverend Thaxter toyed with the idea of going into politics, a field that was always of great interest to him. On April 26, 1798, he wrote brother Caleb:

We are exceedingly provoked with Freeman, the Representative from this District in Congress. We are searching for a Good man to fill his Place . . . it has been proposed by the Principle men in this County & Nantuckett to hold myself as a Candidate. I have not consented as yet.
..¹⁵

Three months later, on July 16, he again wrote to Caleb, scolding him for not answering his letters. He felt, he wrote, isolated on the Island from the news and urged his brother to keep him informed:

I am shut up from all Information, except once a Week, I get the Papers, which only seem to raise my Indignation against the French. The People are ripe for an open War as preferable to the present state of things. . .¹⁶

Mrs. Hannah Newman Metcalf, widow of Rev. John Newman, an earlier pastor, died at about this time and left the church \$333.33 to set up a fund for its poor widows. Reverend Thaxter went to Boston to pick up the money along with six silver cups, one pewter flaggon and two pewter platters, that were also in her bequest. The first distribution of money to the widows was in 1798 when the fund's income of \$20 was divided among eight widows.

The good pastor, who enjoyed his pipe, decided to give up the habit in 1800. He boasted to Caleb of his success:

I had commenced a War with Tobacco. I can now assure

¹⁴ DCHS, Joseph Mayhew's Account Book. This doesn't include purchases for communion wine, of course.

¹⁵ *Joseph Thaxter Papers*, Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

you that I am Victorious . . . I have gained Flesh & expect if I meet with no PulBacks, to be in a little Time as Plump as a Hen in the Forehead [?].¹⁷

Another responsibility had come to him. The town's school teacher had left:

I am unhappy with Respect to our School, our Master has left us to pursue the Study of Physick at Plimouth. We have not been able to obtain another & I am under the Necessity of attending Part of every Day to those that are studying Grammar. . .¹⁸

In 1802, when the youngest of their seven children was only five, his wife died. Reverend Thaxter recorded her death:

Molly, the wife of the Rev'd. Joseph Thaxter, died in the 44th year of her age. Her Temper was all Mildness. She possessed that meek & quiet Spirit, which is in the Sight of God of great Price. Remarkable for her Industry . . . her Family was clothed in the manufactures of her own House & by the Labour of her own Hands. Her Skill in economy enabled her always to administer to the Necessities of the Needy . . . her Life [was] an Example of the religious, Domasticks & social Virtues. She died of an object in her Side. She lay 33 days in which she underwent a Scene of Distress too shocking to describe. She bore it without a Groan, or a Tear, being full of Good Works . . . Her Life was a Life of active Goodness. . .

In 1803, he remarried. The second Mrs. Thaxter was Ann Smith, daughter of George and Anne Smith of Edgartown. She was 41 and he was 59. Their bliss was cut short in 1805, when his son Robert died at age 11. He had been a sickly boy, requiring much care. At 6, he became blind "of nervous Pains in his Head, at 9 years he had a severe shock of the Palsy & [at 11] died of the Lock Jaw."

Thaxter had great empathy. He felt deeply for his fellows, even the poorest, as his words on the death of John Vincent in 1807, at 76 years, indicate:

He was a Bachelor & lived alone for near twenty years. Extreme poor, a weak mind, an honest heart, he suffered

because he would not beg & could not be prevailed upon to go into any Family, preferring his Solitary den where he had neither Bed nor bedding to protect him from the cold, often nothing but a nest of Straw. In this Way he lived contented and died in Peace.¹⁹

Warm-hearted as Thaxter may have been, some saw him and his church as aloof, too impressed with itself and the important people in town. It represented the establishment and acted that way, some thought. Leading the dissension were the Baptists, who as early as 1803 had petitioned the town to allow them to form a separate religious society. The petition was sent to the General Court in Boston.

Whether this caused disturbances in church meetings we don't know, but in 1804 the members voted to appoint Noah and Elijah Pease to "keep order in the Meeting House on the Sabbath."

By 1805, the General Court had ruled the dissenters could form Societies of their own. The largest on the Island was in Tisbury, with 55 families joining, out of a total of 219 families in town (one family was Quaker, another Roman Catholic). Among Edgartown's 195 families, 18 were Baptists and one Quaker. In Chilmark, with 102 families, 6 were Baptists and four Methodists, the only Methodists on the Island at the time.²⁰

Reverend Thaxter, an establishment Federalist, looked unfavorably on these new religions and on the growing movement towards greater democracy. He wrote to a young man in 1808:

My Young Friend, The Situation of our Country is truly distressing. What will be the Consequence, God only knows. Infidel Philosophy & mad brained Democracy are the Destroyers of civil Liberty. They pretend to struggle for the "Rights of Man." Alass, I fear it will end in a military Despotism.

With the Baptists now having their own Societies, they asked to be excused from being taxed to support the established church. For nearly 200 years, tax money had

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Feb. 23, 1800.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ DCHS, Death Records, Box 141.1, #4.

²⁰ *Mass.Hist.Soc. Collections*, v.3, p.62, "Description of Dukes County 1807."

paid the Congregational ministers and shared in the cost of meeting houses (which were also used by the town). It was not a tradition that was quickly changed.

Slow it was in Edgartown and the Baptists got tired of waiting. At midnight, December 31, 1808, New Year's Eve, after a powerful prayer meeting at Hannah Norton's house, a group of Edgartown Baptists walked to the home of the Town Clerk, awakened him, and demanded he remove their names from the minister's tax list for the coming year.

For Reverend Thaxter, now 65, it marked the beginning not only of a new year, but of a changed and unhappy era.

During that new year, 1809, eighty members dropped their membership in his church to become Baptists. Reverend Thaxter was devastated. Earlier, he had been upset by an evangelical Congregationalist who had caused dissension in his church. Now, Baptists were moving in. He was so upset that he wrote a "Report on the Revival of Religion on Martha's Vineyard in 1809, 1810" and sent it to the Massachusetts Historical Society, at the time headed by a Congregational minister, whom he knew. He graphically described "the attempts of James Davis, a pretended Congregationalist, in union with certain disorderly Baptists and Methodists to overturn the regular churches on the Island."

Thaxter had, at first, tried to work with Davis, even allowing him to use the meetinghouse:

I was convinced that if I could keep him from private houses & Night Meetings, he would do no mischief, but this was out of my power. That night he carried on . . . at a Baptist house (this family had come into town about a year before). The next day, all Day & late at Night at the house of a leading Democrat. . . This had great Effect upon the ignorant and filled their heads with vain imaginations . . . They were attended with great outcries, groaning, screaming, falling down, etc. These were called the powerful operations of the spirit of God and expressed in such blasphemous language as is not fit to be repeated.²¹

²¹ Mass.Hist.Soc., 41.2.45.

Davis was so encouraged by his first visit that he returned later in August, this time to harass Thaxter at midnight:

[His meetings] continued for six days and nights . . . their practice was to keep the windows shut & when with fright & stifled air many fainted and were thrown into fits, they would not allow any to afford relief . . . Once at twelve at night a number passed the streets, singing and clapping their hands & awakened people out of their sleep. They threw stones against my House.

The dissenters once attended Thaxter's weekly afternoon lecture, standing in the rear. He asked them to be seated and to be quiet. They complied, but,

No sooner had I closed than they burst out in singing most vociferously . . . I took no notice of them, but left . . . They continued till after Sunset when they were put out of the House by the High Sheriff. They went to Dr. Wheldon's & a dreadful scene ensued; some praying, some Exhorting, some crying out that our Church was built upon the Sand; it must fall. . . I was unconverted & leading my People blindfolded to Hell. . .

Thaxter and his congregation petitioned the selectmen to remove Davis and his companion from town. The petition was signed by 25 leading citizens, all members of his congregation.

Some years later, in 1813, Reverend Thaxter wrote a critical letter to Rev. Henry Lincoln, who had sent the young Davis to the Vineyard. But Thaxter never mailed the letter, "because I judged him too far gone to listen to Reason." Lincoln had been offended by Thaxter, who publicly accused him of destroying his congregation by sending Davis to the Island. Thaxter accused him of deceit, of using his pulpit to drive a wedge between him and his flock. Lincoln said the dispute should not have been made public. Thaxter replied, in the letter that he never mailed:

Should I keep such Things secret? No. I believed it to be my Duty to show your Letters to my Brethren to let them know what they have to expect from those who encourage Itinerants in opposition to the Proceedings of the Convention & to what by all sober Clergymen is deemed

the order of the Chh. established by Xt [Christ] & the Apostles . . . I pity you. I forgive you the Injury you have done me. It has robbed me of Part of my living, which was small before . . . as to my Salary I care little about it. My Time is short. I have enough to carry me thro. Let me beg you, Sir, not to be quite so officious in recommending Itinerants — you had better keep your young Friend at Home than send him upon the Island.

But that young friend and itinerant, Davis, was only the first. A few weeks later, a Lemuel Lebaron came and Thaxter invited him to stay at his house so he could influence his actions. He even went to a revival meeting at the Court House with Lebaron. About 60 persons were present. Thaxter was humiliated by Lebaron, who “undertook to examine me,” he wrote, “both to my creed and experience.”

On December 30, 1809, another Congregational itinerant, Rev. Prince Jenne, arrived. He, too, met with Thaxter before beginning his campaign. The meeting broke up unpleasantly. From January 1 through February, 49 days and nights, the evangelist and his exhorters held virtually continuous meetings. All this was reported by Thaxter in his letter to the Historical Society. Despite his displeasure, he ended it with spirit:

My situation is not very comfortable. My Labours are wiped out. My friends are firm, some of them too warm. I fear violence will take place, but I retain my spirits . . . Tho' far advanced in Life, my Health is better than I ever enjoyed before . . . It ill behooves an old Soldier engaged in a good cause to turn his back in the hour of danger. I have written nothing without good evidence.

These early itinerants were all Congregationalists, all in the same church as Thaxter. He couldn't understand why they wanted to divide his flock by heating up the argument between Trinitarians and Unitarians. Their preaching style was a factor also. The emotional evangelicals were more entertaining than the reasoned Thaxter. Their fervor was encouraging his congregation to question his Unitarianism. It was an easy step then for them to join the Baptists.

Thaxter was fighting a losing battle. More evangelists

came, holding meetings day and night, decimating his flock and those of the other Congregational ministers on the Island (and the mainland).

Even in the midst of this religious struggle, Thaxter had the energy for other battles. A man of strong opinions, he loved arguing with those who disagreed with him. In 1809, in the middle of the invasion by itinerants, he wrote to Isaiah L. Green, Member of Congress in Washington, accusing him, most unpleasantly, of treason for deciding not to run again, assuring the election of a Democrat. Green responded:

From your education I had presumed you a Gentleman and from your profession a lover of truth . . . You say 'You have fallen.' Yes and . . . I fell by my own consent, fell to prevent the chance of a Federalist's being elected and I rejoice that a good democrat is chosen in my stead . . . In your postscript you say you fear I correspond only with those on one side of the question. I answer. I do not voluntarily correspond with any men undeserving the character of Gentlemen. I hope you will take the hint and write no more to,

Yours, Isaiah L. Green.²²

The argumentative preacher didn't take the hint. After a long response filled with Biblical citations, Thaxter concluded:

I bid you farewell. Jo. Thaxter. P.S. You say 'I well know that you fell by your own consent.' You did. As a man may be said to be hanged by his own consent because he chooses to walk to the gallows rather than to ride in a cart. Should you write to me again I will not defile my Fingers so much as to take it out of the Postoffice.

As is understandable, he was often in trouble with his correspondents. He wrote bluntly and, at times, discourteously. He had a heated exchange of letters with Lemuel Lebaron, the Congregational evangelist who had come to the Island some years before. Lebaron's final response to Thaxter was on October 4, 1814:

. . . you have worked up in your mind such a contemptible

²² In 1823, Thaxter's fears materialized. The Federalists went down in defeat in Massachusetts and the victorious Republicans passed a law permitting any ten persons to form a religious society and be excused from tax support of the Congregationalist church.

idea of the man to whom you write that one would think you would spare yourself the pain of writing to him. . . You challenge me to point out your errors. By your own account of yourself you are almost perfect. I shall not trouble myself to look up errors among so much perfection. . .

The War of 1812 was going on and one or two sallies by the British had disturbed the peace of the Island. Several boats were burned in Edgartown harbor by British raiders. Occasional bombardments were heard off the south coast as warships exchanged gunfire. But Island life was largely undisturbed.

In February 1815, another personal tragedy befell Reverend Thaxter. His son and namesake, Joseph Jr., was drowned off Nantucket. The young man had married Sally Worth, daughter of Jonathan Worth, long-time deacon of the Congregational church. In entering the death in his records, Thaxter wrote:

Feb. 3, 1815. Joseph Thaxter Jr. He was drowned on the South Side of Nantuckett. By the care of the Rev'd. Mr. Swift he was kept till the 19th and then brought home and buried the 20th. Blessed God I bow — thy will is done.²³

For all the misery that the evangelicals were causing him, Thaxter was surprisingly generous. His objection was less that they were diminishing his flock than that they were creating dissension among Protestants. But, he insisted, there was room for all. He wrote to an old friend, Gen. Joseph Dimick, in 1816:

The unhappy Dissentions among Christians must be a cause of Grief & Sorrow to every one who has imbibed the Spirit of the Gospel. . . [But I oppose any] power to exercise Dominion, not only over each other's Faith but over their Church's. This will at once put a stop to free inquiry . . . It was by such means that Popery arose . . . The Pretence is to keep the Church pure from Herecy. Alass, who are Hereticks? . . . Calvinists, Arminians, Methodists, Baptists — each of these may claim the Title of orthodox & call the others Heritick. . . Tho' the way to Heaven is called strait & narrow, I believe it is wide enough for all Sects, if they

²³ The young man's body was kept for two weeks, no doubt on ice. Reverend Swift, a Unitarian, officiated at Reverend Thaxter's own funeral in 1827.

have imbibed the Spirit of Christ.²⁴

At 63 years of age, he fathered the only child of his second marriage. She was Ann: "my dear child, the daughter of my old age," he called her. In 1817, when she was 10, he sent her to Hingham to live with his brother Caleb and to attend school. He wrote her a bit of fatherly advice: "Do not contend with any of your schoolmates — Yield to them in everything that is not wicked."

Thaxter, by his own account, was never very healthy, suffering incapacitating headaches. ". . . I have been thro' life confined to my bed with extreme Pain in my Head for at least one day in Fourteen." He wrote his brother Caleb, describing another health problem, adding some financial advice:

I have had a severe turn of Pain in my breast bone, it was of short continuance, but left me rather feeble. . . Your Post Master over rates your letters. The Postage is but Ten cents. We must in these times save cents. . . it is harder with the poor People here than it has been, for they have Nothing to buy with & the Potatoes are all spent — They will not starve. Fish will keep them alive.

Smallpox was spreading on the Island and in July and August of 1816, he expanded his role of doctor, inoculating the population. It was a new weapon against the frightening disease. People were frightened of the technique, but he convinced many to accept it. In December 1817 he submitted his bill to the town of Edgartown. He had treated 91 families and a total of 224 persons. His bill was \$56, 25 cents each. One family with eight members had paid him with a quarter of mutton. The Town Treasurer authorized payment of only \$50.

These were times of economic stress, as Thaxter had written to his brother. With the end of the War of 1812, the country had fallen into a serious depression. The town was even later than usual in paying his salary. It was due each January 1, for the year just ended. He wrote Edgartown Treasurer Timothy Coffin in November 1817 about his 1816

²⁴ DCHS, Box 141.1, #15.

salary, now nearly a year overdue:

Sir, I have examined the settlement made with you by the Town Committee and find that you had full credit for all you paid . . . for 1815. . . If you want any security [receipt] from me I shall be at home in the morning till Nine o'clock. The order I must & will have. Third time of asking. Joseph Thaxter. Nov. 24, 1817, 1/2 past 6 o'clock PM.

His salary was \$333.33 a year, the same as when he arrived in 1780. But now, he had to deduct an amount for each member who had left to join the Baptist or Methodist Societies. Earlier, in 1814, he had written Coffin:

I freely remit . . . Sixty dollars in consideration of those who have drawn off from attending on my ministry, some for conscience, some for politicks & some because they like not to pay for the support of publick worship. The above Sixty dollars by my consent not being assessed.

The defection of his flock meant more to him than dollars. Because the revival movement often split families, he sometimes was not permitted to perform services for members of his flock. Such was the case at the funeral of Mrs Jethro Norton, one of his congregation:

She was not a Baptist but her Parents, Zach Pease, would not be satisfied for me to attend. She was carried to the Baptist meeting house and her brother Jesse performed it.²⁵

The religious dissension kept him from helping people in other ways. For example, he was not called to give medical help to a dying man, Dennis Davis, who ". . . died distracted in chains and handcuffs. He was a Baptist. They sent for James Crosby, a very ignorant man, to attend him."

A note in the Society archives, written by Thaxter in 1816, provides an interesting glimpse into the etiquette of the day. Unrelated to religion, it is addressed to Ichabod Norton, the Island's richest man:

Col. Vinson & Mr. Thaxter's Compliments to Esq. Norton. They intend to call on him the New Year's Day & take Dinner with the Esqr. if agreeable to him, wind & weather permitting.²⁶

²⁵ Jesse Pease, distantly related to the Congregationalist Peases, was the Baptist minister in Edgartown.

²⁶ DCHS, Box 141.1, #26.

Apparently in 1816 Edgartown, you invited yourself to New Year's Day dinner!

After the drowning of his eldest son, Reverend Thaxter looked to his second son, Leavitt, to fulfill his dreams. It is no wonder he was disappointed when Leavitt dropped out of Harvard to go to sea, seeking adventure. He found it when his ship was captured by the British and he spent a brief time in a Calcutta prison. After he was released (some accounts say he escaped), he decided to try teaching, pleasing his father greatly. He taught in several schools in Massachusetts and at one of them he met and married Martha Mayhew, whose grandfather, Paine Mayhew, had emigrated from Martha's Vineyard. Then in 1819, he accepted the position of headmaster of a school in Georgia, where he stayed for several years. His father, fearing he may never see him again, wrote him a long letter. His distress over the evangelists is evident:

My dear son, avoid all parties in religion. . . Never enter into warm disputes on those points about which sectaries contend with such bitterness that they lose the true spirit of Christianity. . . Be on your guard; never suffer yourself to engage in theological wrangling. . . Need I caution you against having any thing to do with slaves; rather become your own boot & shoe black than deal in human flesh.²⁷

The reverend's congregation was deserting him. Now the Methodists, in addition to the Baptists, were sending evangelists. The first was Reverend Eleazer Steele. But it was not only the Edgartown Congregational church that was being decimated. At Tisbury, only five male members remained.

Then, as though he hadn't been tested enough, on the final night of 1819, a gale blew the roof off his church. Thaxter recorded the event:

Dec. 31, 1819. about 4 o'clock in the morning there came the most violent gusts, Wind SSW, we ever knew. It broke several squares of glass and shattered the roof of the meeting

²⁷ *Ibid.*, #16. Typescript of original. The letter, written in January 1819 when Leavitt was expecting to go to Carolina (he did not), was not sent until September, after he moved to Georgia.

Schedule (4)

First Class Pew No. 1	8 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$60	Second Class Pew No. 2	10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$26
Third Class Pew No. 3	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$55	Fourth Class Pew No. 4	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$21
Fifth Class Pew No. 5	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$48	Sixth Class Pew No. 6	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$18
Sixth Class Pew No. 6	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$42	Seventh Class Pew No. 7	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$15
Eighth Class Pew No. 8	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	\$41	Ninth Class Pew No. 9	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100	

A True Record of the foregoing Report, Plan, Schedule, and Classification of the Pews in the Congregational meeting house in Edgartown in the County of Dukes County, taken by the Baptist Benevolent Society, Clerk.

In 1820, pews in Thaxter's church (built in 1768) were assessed for tax purposes. (The dollar numerals for the nine categories are not on the original.) Plan, opposite, shows pew locations.

(3)

N. 122	N. 123	N. 124	N. 125	N. 126	N. 127	N. 128
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 129	N. 130	N. 131	N. 132	N. 133	N. 134	N. 135
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 136	N. 137	N. 138	N. 139	N. 140	N. 141	N. 142
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 143	N. 144	N. 145	N. 146	N. 147	N. 148	N. 149
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 150	N. 151	N. 152	N. 153	N. 154	N. 155	N. 156
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 157	N. 158	N. 159	N. 160	N. 161	N. 162	N. 163
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 164	N. 165	N. 166	N. 167	N. 168	N. 169	N. 170
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 171	N. 172	N. 173	N. 174	N. 175	N. 176	N. 177
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 178	N. 179	N. 180	N. 181	N. 182	N. 183	N. 184
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 185	N. 186	N. 187	N. 188	N. 189	N. 190	N. 191
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 192	N. 193	N. 194	N. 195	N. 196	N. 197	N. 198
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 199	N. 200	N. 201	N. 202	N. 203	N. 204	N. 205
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 206	N. 207	N. 208	N. 209	N. 210	N. 211	N. 212
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 213	N. 214	N. 215	N. 216	N. 217	N. 218	N. 219
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 220	N. 221	N. 222	N. 223	N. 224	N. 225	N. 226
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 227	N. 228	N. 229	N. 230	N. 231	N. 232	N. 233
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 234	N. 235	N. 236	N. 237	N. 238	N. 239	N. 240
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 241	N. 242	N. 243	N. 244	N. 245	N. 246	N. 247
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 248	N. 249	N. 250	N. 251	N. 252	N. 253	N. 254
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 255	N. 256	N. 257	N. 258	N. 259	N. 260	N. 261
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 262	N. 263	N. 264	N. 265	N. 266	N. 267	N. 268
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 269	N. 270	N. 271	N. 272	N. 273	N. 274	N. 275
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 276	N. 277	N. 278	N. 279	N. 280	N. 281	N. 282
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 283	N. 284	N. 285	N. 286	N. 287	N. 288	N. 289
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 290	N. 291	N. 292	N. 293	N. 294	N. 295	N. 296
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 297	N. 298	N. 299	N. 300	N. 301	N. 302	N. 303
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 304	N. 305	N. 306	N. 307	N. 308	N. 309	N. 310
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 311	N. 312	N. 313	N. 314	N. 315	N. 316	N. 317
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 318	N. 319	N. 320	N. 321	N. 322	N. 323	N. 324
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 325	N. 326	N. 327	N. 328	N. 329	N. 330	N. 331
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 332	N. 333	N. 334	N. 335	N. 336	N. 337	N. 338
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 339	N. 340	N. 341	N. 342	N. 343	N. 344	N. 345
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 346	N. 347	N. 348	N. 349	N. 350	N. 351	N. 352
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 353	N. 354	N. 355	N. 356	N. 357	N. 358	N. 359
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 360	N. 361	N. 362	N. 363	N. 364	N. 365	N. 366
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 367	N. 368	N. 369	N. 370	N. 371	N. 372	N. 373
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 374	N. 375	N. 376	N. 377	N. 378	N. 379	N. 380
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 381	N. 382	N. 383	N. 384	N. 385	N. 386	N. 387
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 388	N. 389	N. 390	N. 391	N. 392	N. 393	N. 394
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 395	N. 396	N. 397	N. 398	N. 399	N. 400	N. 401
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 402	N. 403	N. 404	N. 405	N. 406	N. 407	N. 408
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 409	N. 410	N. 411	N. 412	N. 413	N. 414	N. 415
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 416	N. 417	N. 418	N. 419	N. 420	N. 421	N. 422
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 423	N. 424	N. 425	N. 426	N. 427	N. 428	N. 429
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 430	N. 431	N. 432	N. 433	N. 434	N. 435	N. 436
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 437	N. 438	N. 439	N. 440	N. 441	N. 442	N. 443
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 444	N. 445	N. 446	N. 447	N. 448	N. 449	N. 450
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 451	N. 452	N. 453	N. 454	N. 455	N. 456	N. 457
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 458	N. 459	N. 460	N. 461	N. 462	N. 463	N. 464
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 465	N. 466	N. 467	N. 468	N. 469	N. 470	N. 471
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 472	N. 473	N. 474	N. 475	N. 476	N. 477	N. 478
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 479	N. 480	N. 481	N. 482	N. 483	N. 484	N. 485
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 486	N. 487	N. 488	N. 489	N. 490	N. 491	N. 492
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 493	N. 494	N. 495	N. 496	N. 497	N. 498	N. 499
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 500	N. 501	N. 502	N. 503	N. 504	N. 505	N. 506
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 507	N. 508	N. 509	N. 510	N. 511	N. 512	N. 513
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 514	N. 515	N. 516	N. 517	N. 518	N. 519	N. 520
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 521	N. 522	N. 523	N. 524	N. 525	N. 526	N. 527
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 528	N. 529	N. 530	N. 531	N. 532	N. 533	N. 534
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 535	N. 536	N. 537	N. 538	N. 539	N. 540	N. 541
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 542	N. 543	N. 544	N. 545	N. 546	N. 547	N. 548
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 549	N. 550	N. 551	N. 552	N. 553	N. 554	N. 555
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 556	N. 557	N. 558	N. 559	N. 560	N. 561	N. 562
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 563	N. 564	N. 565	N. 566	N. 567	N. 568	N. 569
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 570	N. 571	N. 572	N. 573	N. 574	N. 575	N. 576
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 577	N. 578	N. 579	N. 580	N. 581	N. 582	N. 583
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 584	N. 585	N. 586	N. 587	N. 588	N. 589	N. 590
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 591	N. 592	N. 593	N. 594	N. 595	N. 596	N. 597
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 598	N. 599	N. 600	N. 601	N. 602	N. 603	N. 604
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 605	N. 606	N. 607	N. 608	N. 609	N. 610	N. 611
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 612	N. 613	N. 614	N. 615	N. 616	N. 617	N. 618
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 619	N. 620	N. 621	N. 622	N. 623	N. 624	N. 625
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 626	N. 627	N. 628	N. 629	N. 630	N. 631	N. 632
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 633	N. 634	N. 635	N. 636	N. 637	N. 638	N. 639
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 640	N. 641	N. 642	N. 643	N. 644	N. 645	N. 646
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 647	N. 648	N. 649	N. 650	N. 651	N. 652	N. 653
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 654	N. 655	N. 656	N. 657	N. 658	N. 659	N. 660
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 661	N. 662	N. 663	N. 664	N. 665	N. 666	N. 667
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 668	N. 669	N. 670	N. 671	N. 672	N. 673	N. 674
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 675	N. 676	N. 677	N. 678	N. 679	N. 680	N. 681
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 682	N. 683	N. 684	N. 685	N. 686	N. 687	N. 688
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 689	N. 690	N. 691	N. 692	N. 693	N. 694	N. 695
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 696	N. 697	N. 698	N. 699	N. 700	N. 701	N. 702
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 703	N. 704	N. 705	N. 706	N. 707	N. 708	N. 709
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 710	N. 711	N. 712	N. 713	N. 714	N. 715	N. 716
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 717	N. 718	N. 719	N. 720	N. 721	N. 722	N. 723
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 724	N. 725	N. 726	N. 727	N. 728	N. 729	N. 730
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 731	N. 732	N. 733	N. 734	N. 735	N. 736	N. 737
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 738	N. 739	N. 740	N. 741	N. 742	N. 743	N. 744
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 745	N. 746	N. 747	N. 748	N. 749	N. 750	N. 751
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 752	N. 753	N. 754	N. 755	N. 756	N. 757	N. 758
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 759	N. 760	N. 761	N. 762	N. 763	N. 764	N. 765
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 766	N. 767	N. 768	N. 769	N. 770	N. 771	N. 772
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 773	N. 774	N. 775	N. 776	N. 777	N. 778	N. 779
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 780	N. 781	N. 782	N. 783	N. 784	N. 785	N. 786
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 787	N. 788	N. 789	N. 790	N. 791	N. 792	N. 793
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 794	N. 795	N. 796	N. 797	N. 798	N. 799	N. 800
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 801	N. 802	N. 803	N. 804	N. 805	N. 806	N. 807
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 808	N. 809	N. 810	N. 811	N. 812	N. 813	N. 814
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 815	N. 816	N. 817	N. 818	N. 819	N. 820	N. 821
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 822	N. 823	N. 824	N. 825	N. 826	N. 827	N. 828
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 829	N. 830	N. 831	N. 832	N. 833	N. 834	N. 835
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 836	N. 837	N. 838	N. 839	N. 840	N. 841	N. 842
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N. 843	N. 844					

house so much that we were obliged to have our meeting in the Court House.

At first, the town seemed indifferent to the damaged meeting house. Most inhabitants were attending Baptist or Methodist services elsewhere. It was not until March that a town meeting was called to discuss the matter. A committee was chosen to decide "the best and cheapest way of putting [it] into repair." It reported back that \$475 would be needed. A petition was sent to the General Court asking that a law be passed authorizing the town to collect three-quarters of the cost from the pew owners, the other quarter to be paid in taxes by members of the Congregational Society. This was required because of a new law that prohibited the town from supporting any church.

Two months later, with no response from the General Court, a town meeting was called to decide what to do. Nobody came, either "by reason of the bad weather . . . or of their indifference about such matters" and the next day the Town Clerk posted a notice:

As there is no Certain or Particular Provision as yet, made for Repairing the old meeting house, or for building a new one, or for Procuring the materials for Either; it is to be hoped and Expected that those who wish to keep up the form and appearance of Religion and morality will give their attendance and use their Exertions to have the business carried into full effect: Les we share the fate of the Laodiseans . . . because thou art Lukewarm and neither Bold nor hot: I will spue you out of my Mouth!²⁸

In July, several meetings were held by the Congregational Society to end the delay. The Society was reorganized, new officers chosen, and pews in the meetinghouse were given an assessed value against which taxes could be levied. This, it seems, was the legal means of raising the needed funds through the town's taxing authority. The money was collected as a tax, but only from Congregationalists. With this accomplished, the repairs on the building began.

As is usually the case, costs ran above the estimates and

another \$250 had to be raised. To reduce the expense, several church members helped with the repair, one being Jeremiah Pease, a devoted follower of Thaxter. He had recently started to assist Thaxter in setting broken bones around the Island. It was a skill Jeremiah practiced throughout the rest of his life.²⁹

Eventually, on the last Sunday in October 1820, for the first time since the storm ten months before, the Congregationalists were able to hold services in their meeting house.

Despite these tribulations, there were moments of glory in Reverend Thaxter's life. One was in 1820 when he was invited to participate in the 200th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth. He received a letter later from one who was present, praising him, inaccurately, as among "those venerable men, descendants [of the Pilgrims] who, like you, resemble them in principles and practice."³⁰

But such joyous moments were only occasional interruptions in an increasingly sad life. In April 1821, his second wife died after a long and painful illness. Friend and protege Jeremiah Pease was watching with her when she died. Reverend Thaxter wrote in the church record:

April 9, 1821. died Mrs. Ann Thaxter, the Wife of the Rev'd Joseph Thaxter, aged 59 years & thirty three Days. She, a remarkable strong mind, was an Example [of] early Piety, inflexible Virtue, enlarged Benevolence & liberal Sentiments. Her Constitution was very slender. She died of a Dropsy. For Four Weeks She suffered extreme Distress but enjoyed a calm & serene Mind that inabled her not only bear her Distress with Patience but to rejoice, calling for the 103rd Psalm to be read to her & but a few moments before she died desired the 21st Hymn to be read to her. She expired rejoicing in the Steps of Glory. Was ever man blessed with Two such Wives or called to part with them by such long & awful Scenes of Distresse? Good God, thy Judgment a great Deep but ordered by infinite, unceasing Wisdom. I doubt not the Design of God was to convince

²⁹ It is said that both Thaxter and Pease provided this service without charge.

³⁰ Thaxter was not a descendant of the Pilgrims.

others of the Power of Religion & put them upon the Practice of it amidst all the Confusion of mad Phanatism that has prevailed here. No one has been known to speak reproachfully of her. — Tho' she put no Confidence in their boasted Experience & openly & honestly let them know it.³¹

The world he had worked so hard to build seemed to be blowing away as had the roof of his church. But his tribulations were only beginning. That same year, 1821, his most energetic "opponent" arrived: Rev. John Adams, the charismatic, indefatigable Methodist evangelist. Reverend Thaxter began moving toward paranoia. Writing to historian Rev. James Freeman in February 1823, he went into detail:

In June 1821 a John Adams from Newington in New Hampshire came. He is an illiterate & weak man, his wife attends him & grasps a high degree of self confidence not to say impudence as well as himself. He has a thundering voice & many curious agitations of body. He boldly affirms that he was sent by God to preach the Gospel in this place. Neither he nor his Wife hesitate to address persons of whom they have no knowledge & [going] about their own business thus: I have a message from God to you, don't you want to get Religion?

In this way they go from Town to Town & from House to House. They hold their Meetings Night & day. . . there is often some praying, some singing & some exhorting. When one musters courage enough to speak, they call it 'coming out,' meaning they are born again.

On these occasions, Adams is so loud as to be heard a quarter of a mile. The Baptists have been more moderate till of late. They have had outcries & numbers speaking at the same time. . . the whole Island has been thrown into a Flame . . . much to the Injury of Family Peace & Harmony. Children are set against their parents & Wives against the Husbands.

Extreme cases require extreme Remedies. The Proselytes. . . immediately become self-confident & swell with spiritual Pride like a puff-Fish when the Boys scratch his belly. . . Adams and [Baptist] Hubbard, with their Wives, ride about

in their carriages . . . have frequent Contributions & get as much Money in one Week as I have received for the last fourteen months.

Thaxter was so upset by Reverend Adams that he wrote to the evangelist's home town, asking the Selectmen about his background:

I must beg it as a favor of you, gentlemen, to inform me as to his character, what his standing is where he is known; the interest of religion and the peace of society require that the character of every itinerant preacher should be known . . . I do not wish to injure his good name. He appears to me to be in some degree insane.

He added a postscript, which got more to the point:

I have been a pastor of the church in this place more than forty years. It is grievous to see the flock scattered in my old age.

The New Hampshire selectmen replied that Adams was "as faithful a servant as ever was called . . . and may you and we strive with him to serve the Blessed Lord, that we may meet in heaven!"³²

On the Fourth of July 1822, Reverend Thaxter wrote a thoughtful letter to a grandchild of John Cottle of Tisbury. The letter tells us a lot about the elderly minister. He was a great patriot and it was the nation's birthday:

While many of my Countrymen I hope are spending this Day in grateful [sic] acknowledgement to the alwise Disposer of all human Events, I fear many are spending it in Riot & Debauchery. I am spending it in Solitude.

There is but little to be enjoyed by me in these Times except in Retirement reading & meditation. Religious Phanatism has thrown all into Confusion. I am watched & my words perverted & a Spirit of lying is more prevalent than a Spirit of Love, but I still hold up my Head & my best People do not forsake me. . .

Eldridge [Baptist evangelist] has left us, whether to return again I know not. Within about three weeks there have been four Baptist preachers & three Methodist. Scarce a Night without meetings. The Young Women are full of the Spirit & in what it will end God only knows. It will bring down

³¹ Federated Church (FEDC) Record Book 001, p.20. DCHS.

³² E. G. Adams, editor, *Life and Labors of Reformation John Adams*, Geo. C. Rand publisher, Boston, 1853, p.135-136.

my grey Hairs to the Grave. . .

The Division made by Davis [Congregational evangelist] is at an end. Some have forsaken the Sectaries. The prospect is promising & very pleasing to me. . .

Times are very difficult, money scarce. Provisions high & People not very good natured. I am yet, thro' the Goodness of God, able to get thro my Parochial Duty with a good Degree of Ease. . .

The Tarsianism is gaining Ground, but not Socinianism. The orthodox flounce & spout like a wounded Whale.³³

But he was soon to be shaken from his "good Degree of Ease." One of those he called his "best People" forsook him. On October 1, 1822, faithful disciple Jeremiah Pease was "born again," something he had previously scoffed at in others. Jeremiah told the evangelist, the day after his conversion (as Adams told it), that, a few months earlier,

. . . if I had come to his house to talk on religion, he would have ordered me out. He would not suffer a Methodist hymn to be sung in his house. . . Bless God! he now talks the language of Canaan. He found peace the night before, and now preaches a free salvation.³⁴

Jeremiah, whose father-in-law was a Congregational deacon, had become a born-again Methodist. In his diary that night, he wrote: "This day, I hope, will never be forgotten by me."

Nor, it is certain, would it ever be forgotten by Reverend Joseph Thaxter.

Two days later, Reverend Thaxter called on Rev. John Adams, who described the meeting:

That day, the Rev. Mr. [Thaxter] told me I was a deluded man and called all this religion a delusion and said the people were worse than ever. O Lord, thou knowest that I love him and never have felt hard towards him! The people in this place cannot say that I have manifested a hard spirit against him. O God, convince the dear old Christian Pharisee of the Truth of experimental religion before he dies!³⁵

³³ DCHS, Box 141.1, #26. The last two sentences (a postscript) are puzzling. Arminianism was a forerunner of Methodism; Socinianism, of Unitarianism. But Tarsianism?

³⁴ Adams, p.142.

³⁵ Adams, p.142-143.

Reverend Thaxter was never convinced. In the Society archives is a fragmented journal that he kept during those traumatic days. He maintained a daily, almost hourly, watch (perhaps through a loyal friend) over the proselytizing of both Baptists and Methodists. The tattered pages cover seven months in 1822. Here are a few excerpts:

March 20. Adams [Methodist] came. He held meeting at Matt. Cleavlands.

21. At Timothy Pease's House. There was terrible Screaming & great Confusion.

25. There was a dreadful confused scene at Tristram Norton's. All speaking at once. Adams beset a Daughter of Jonathan Atherns & said he would bring down her haughty spirit but he failed. He makes sad work. Norton Family saw a Ball of Fire come into the House & heard an audible Voice saying Repent. I believe there is need of it.

29. [Hubbard, Baptist] came to my Door but turned and went off. He is a sly Boot. He stood & listened a few minutes. I was conversing on Experimental Religion.

31. The Screams of this Week at Night Meetings have been dreadful.

April 12. [Hubbard] called on me, made an apology for listening at my door. He has a mild countenance & a smooth Tongue. Jesse Pease [Baptist minister] is also going to Tisbury, H.Hole & all round preaching. Eldridge makes no noise but is skulking round. . . [Hubbard] went to Chappaquid. Adams at [White] Chapel, Eldridge at Baptist House.³⁶

19. Adams required a daughter of Harlow [Crosby] to kneel before him. She refused. He then prostrated himself at her feet, laid his arms across on the floor & his head in his arms & prayed vociferously in language which I will not write. She joined the class. She is by no means a good character. 20. Adams at Thos. Mayhew's Jr. There was a terrible time. A Daugt. of Matt. Cleavland's was thrown into Fits, they were called Convictions. Adams said it was because she was obstinate & would not submit to the Spirit but that she would be then humble.

21 At the Hall all Day & Night. Adams acted more like a mad man than a sober Christian. He did Nothing but bawl out with all his Might, broken Sentences, slap his Hands

³⁶ The White Chapel was shared by the Methodists and Baptists.

& Stamp. There was an awful Scene of Confusion till near 12 o'clock. When Adams & Thos. Stewart failed of making Nancy Bailies kneel before him, Adams said, pointing to a young Daught. of Timothy Pease, She kneeled down even [with] her Father present but you will go to Hell first. May 12. I preached on the death of [Peter] Pease 3d. The fulest meeting I have seen in many years. Eldridge preached in his meeting house . . . had but five hearers. The part he has acted is very ridiculous. His Pretensions in New York were to set up a Marine Society. He represented the People in This Place as a very poor set of fishermen. It is supposed that he collected several thousand dollars. Tho' the Baptist Church had cast him off & disavowed his beging for them, yet I am well informed that Deacon Ezra Allen came down & insisted upon having part of the money to build a Baptist House in Tisbury. Such Dishonesty does not become a Christian.³⁷

June 2. The Baptists are falling out among themselves. John Cleavland got the Key of the Meeting House, shut out Eldridge & Jesse Pease took the Pulpit. Eldridge's Wife is jealous of him & a bitter contention has ensued. It is thought he has been too free with S.C. [Sophia Cleavland] at T.M.'s [Thomas Mayhew's].

19. Hardy, a Baptist, came. He preached in Eve at Baptist Meeting house. Eldridge is gone — there was a squabble with him at Thom Mayhew's. His Wife was jealous of him about Sophie Cleavland. . .

23. Whittesey, a Methodist . . . at Night [meeting] shouting crying Amen. He called on them to kneel down before him for him to pray over them. Sally Arey & others obey him. . .

29. Hazeltine came. This man was here some years ago. . . & was carried from the Island totally deranged. He went off July 2 . .

July 3. Eb. Smith [Baptist?] came down on Monday. His conduct is that of a deranged man. He was down two or three days last week in the same Plight. He had been at New Bedford for three weeks before & I hear in the same situation — I fear he is a ruined man.

16. Hubbard is here skulking about from House to House trying to make Proselytes. . . He has lately been to Boston

³⁷ Thaxter was so upset about this that he pasted in the church records a clipping from a New York newspaper which described the fundraising effort.

& is now by the Baptist Missionary Society paid for coming here.³⁸

27. Adams, Hyde [Methodist] and George Weeks attended . . . funeral of Thos. Jernegan's wife.³⁹ They appeared very uneasy, sometimes bowing their head down out of sight, then up. Adams twisting himself into all shapes in Prayer time as well as Sermon time. They carried on till late in Night at their Meeting house, halloo-ing, screaming, so as to be heard plain at my House.⁴⁰

28. Adams called me to see about preaching in my Meeting House. I offered to consent on condition that he would preach on a Text I would give him & stick close to it without running into Declamation. He did not accept & whether he will is uncertain. I presume his Hearers will not consent. They know that he will only expose his own weakness & Ignorance.

August 7. Dr. Allston [Congregationalist] from NewPort came. He preached at Mr. Fellows till about 10 o'clock at Night. The Chambers crowded. . .

8. I was absent, he preached in the Meeting House & talked of the Papists, Arminians, Unitarians & Universalists. He said that all Unitarians denied the Divinity of Christ. On the 11th. after the publick service I proclaimed this to be a gross & slanderous falsehood.

Sept. 1. Jesse Pease at Court House 3 times, Adams Three, & quite late at Night. He halloed very loud but no confusion. A Number of vessels in the Harbour. They generally attend the Methodist meetings. There has been a Capt. Dellans [?] here some Time. He is exceeding warm & full of Intrigue. Allen Coffin, Col. Vinson, Wm. Jernegan Jr., Matthew Vincent, stick close to them Day & Night. And a number of Girls.⁴¹

10. Adams flies about so that I cannot keep [up with him]. There are now Five Baptists [preaching]. . . every Day & Night.

16. At Esq. Jernegans, Sons & two Daughters stick close

³⁸ This was a sore point with Thaxter. He couldn't see why off-Island money was being used to decimate his flock.

³⁹ It was with Mrs. Jernegan that Thaxter lived when he first came to Edgartown. His daughter, Mary, had married a Jernegan son. He conducted Mrs. Jernegan's funeral service. It isn't clear why the Methodist ministers attended. There must have been someone in the family who had been converted.

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to the Methodists.⁴²

Thaxter's tattered journal is filled with such entries. It ends on the last day of October 1822. He was approaching 80 years of age, still preaching and tending his greatly diminished flock. He has not yet given up.

In 1824 he began a heated exchange of letters with Rev. William Hubbard, the Baptist evangelist, who was often mentioned in his 1822 journal, as we have seen. The dispute was over a pamphlet that Hubbard had written in 1819 and it seems to have centered on Thaxter's opposition to adult immersion, the Baptist doctrine. As usual, Reverend Thaxter hits hard:

I make no Secret of my Sentiment & am not one of those who "creep into Houses." I have been under solemn Vows to God for more than Forty Three Years as a Shepherd to watch over the Flocks of God in the Place & shall not cease to warn them of the Danger of falling into Errors either of Faith or Practice.

Hubbard had written that he had spoken of Thaxter "with as much Tenderness as any of my professed Friends" and had come to his defense often. Thaxter agreed, but that Hubbard had said, "he is an old man & does not understand these Things." Those were fighting words to the old man:

There are many things done in these Times that I do not understand to be consistent with the Spirit of the Gospel, but after spending Fifty Years of my Life in studying the Scriptures, I shall not go to Dr. Chopin, Mr. Moore nor even to the Rev'd. Mr. Hubbard to be instructed in the Doctrines, Precepts or Ordinances of the Gospel. . . I would not willingly offend a weak Brother, but Truth must not be sacrificed.

After receiving Hubbard's response, Thaxter wrote:

I have no Disposition to enter into an Epistatary Controversy with you. For this Reason, I return your last without breaking the Seal.

He challenged Hubbard to a public debate on the subject "Are Infants proper Subjects of Christian Baptism." Hubbard never read his challenge, also returning the letter

⁴² This explains why the Methodist ministers attended Mrs. Jernegan's funeral.

unopened with a note:

Having expressed my opinion fully . . . there is strict propriety in my returning yours, directed and forwarded to me today, without breaking the seal.

With each returning the other's letters unopened, the correspondence ended.⁴³

The Reverend Thaxter loved controversy and not only religious controversy. He wrote letters to his congressman condemning a vote he had made on tariffs for woolen goods:

Cotton is a Staple of our Country. The flourishing Condition of our Cotton Factories is such that they need no aid from Government. . . The new Tariff it is pretended is to encourage & promote our Woolen Manufacturers. Will it have this Effect? . . . will it have the least Tendency to increase the Number of Sheep? It evidently will not. Every Farmer has a right to & will improve his Farm in that way which he thinks & finds by Experience most in his private benefit. It is a Fact that a Dairy will yield at least Thirty percent more Profit than to keep Sheep & will so long as our Wealthy Citizens love good Butter & Cheese. . .

The Woolen Factories have almost put a stop to Domestick manufactures. A spinning wheel or Loom is rare to be found in Families. The poor are deprived of a means of gaining a living. young Females grow up in Idleness . . . This is a great Evil. . . in the Northern & Eastern [states] . . . our climate & calling on the Sea requires warm Clothing, especially of the Woolen Kind. The Duties on these are paid by the poor Sailors & Fishermen & Labourers while the Southern Nabobs clothe their Selves principally in Cotton. . .

He also wrote to the Congressman about a plan to build a canal linking Massachusetts Bay with Buzzard's Bay. Like most Islanders, he opposed it as it would eliminate much of the coastal shipping that regularly stopped at Holmes Hole or Edgartown to await fair wind and tide. Furthermore, many Vineyarders earned their living as pilots, boarding vessels off Gay Head and sailing them through Vineyard and Nantucket Sounds. The Island had economic reasons to oppose the canal.

⁴³ These letters and those quoted below are all in DCHS Box 141.1.

It might seem unusual, he wrote, for "an old man of Eighty to trouble you with his observations" on the use of Federal money to dig a canal between Buzzard's Bay and Barnstable. He gave several "scientific" reasons why it wouldn't work. Then, he added,

It may be said that I am prejudiced because the Vineyard men are pilots . . . I acknowledge it is a Source of ready money to a considerable Number, but it is also a Source of horrid Corruption of Power & Misery. Had the People of the Vineyard never engaged in the Piloting Business but gone into the whaling, it would have proved a Source of Wealth and morals to many active & enterprizing who are now poor & wretched.

During his last years, he also became involved in a lengthy and very friendly correspondence with Rev. Dr. James Freeman, who was writing a history of Massachusetts. He provided much of Freeman's information about Martha's Vineyard. The historian had asked Frederick Baylies, teacher and missionary at Gay Head, about the Indians. Baylies turned the letter over to Thaxter to respond, which he did, describing the problems of the Vineyard Indians.

It is sad, he wrote, but

. . . a few Designing white men have acquired Property & the Natives [are] left to perish or live by begging. . . I fear those who have been benefitted by buying their Lands have but little feeling for them. . . I do fear that there are those who think it no Sin to cheat an Indian. . .

What a pregnant line: ". . . who think it no Sin to Cheat an Indian. . ." ⁴⁴

As he grew older, he spent more time on non-sectarian matters. He wrote a description of the Battle of Concord Bridge that was published in *The United States Literary Gazette* in 1824. It was a first-hand account of that historic battle, which he had witnessed. No doubt, that article led to what was to be the high point of his final years. He was invited to give the opening prayer at the cornerstone laying of the Bunker Hill monument in Charlestown, June 17,

1825. The guest of honor was the Revolutionary War hero, the Marquis de Lafayette.

On the morning of June 14, a coastal sloop sailed out of Edgartown harbor, heading for Boston. Aboard were the Reverend Thaxter, his son John, Edward Dalton Marchant, Lloyd Daggett, Joseph Ripley, Charles Butler, Sylvanus L. Pease and Jeremiah Pease, Thaxter's former friend and protege. Jeremiah wrote in his diary:

This day a great number of our Citizens (myself, one of the number) sail for Boston in sloop *Thomas*, C. Pease master, to view the scene which is to take place on the 17th Inst. Arrived in Boston on the 15th at night. Went on shore on the 16th in the morning. I had the honour of seeing Gen. Lafaet (sic) several Times. It was a splendid procession on the 17th, which the newspapers of the present and History in future will give a complete account of.

21st. SW. Sailed from Boston for Edgartown with our passengers and arrived on the 22nd.⁴⁵

Reverend Thaxter did not return on the *Thomas*, going instead to Hingham where he preached at the Third Congregational Church. It was a sermon "that should have an edition in every orthodox pulpit in New England," Rev. Charles Brooks, pastor, told him later. Brooks was, like Thaxter, a Unitarian and his admiration for the elderly minister is evident in a letter he wrote to him on July 13, 1825:

Your kind & luminous letter arrived yesterday & most cordially do I thank you for the able recapitulation of your views on this momentous subject [the divinity of Christ]. . . I shall promise to dwell with new interest on this view of the subject illustrated by the power of your long-cherished opinions. . . Controversy is the rage of our day & the practical influences of Christ's truth seem overlooked . . . It will not be inquired at the bar of God in what church we have worshipped, whether we have kneeled at the communion or . . . stood or sat, it will not be enquired

⁴⁵ There must have been some uneasiness at the start of the voyage. On May 19, three weeks earlier, Jeremiah had written in his diary: "Rec'd an Insult from the Rev'd. Mr. Thaxter which . . ." He did not complete the sentence. Now they were sharing the cabin of a small sloop. Seven years later, the *Thomas* was lost at sea en route to Charleston, S.C. All on board were drowned, including Jeremiah's brother Abner, the master.

⁴⁴ Mass. Hist. Soc. Miscellaneous Bound, March 1, 1823.

whether we have been immersed or sprinkled, but whether we have done the will of God . . . I am an Unitarian, tho' once the opposite . . . I congratulate you on the many & pleasing notices of yourself in all the papers, far & wide of the 17th of June. It was surely a red letter day. . . Your friends here are all well & rejoice in your recent visit. Your labours with us were more acceptable than ever. . . with great respect, C. Brooks.⁴⁶

It had, indeed, been a red-letter week for the old man. His heartbreak, for a few days at least, was forgotten.

The newspaper reports of Reverend Thaxter praised this traditional, now vanishing, village parson, dressed as always in breeches and silver-buckled shoes. His prayer, thanking God for his country and its heroes, was quoted widely. It was a moment of glory.

But the glory was not for long. The next year, the Methodist evangelist, Rev. John Adams, returned, rekindling the "Flame", as Thaxter called it. This time, though, his paranoia seemed diminished. The old man had become reconciled. His life was nearly over. Why battle the incoming tide? He saved his energy for the debate in his own church, the debate between Unitarians and the orthodox Trinitarians.

That, too, was a losing cause. After a Sunday when Thaxter was too ill to officiate, the church decided to hire an assistant minister. On May 25, 1827, the members assembled to vote on the question: Should the church hire a Trinitarian or a Unitarian?

The vote was close, but the Trinitarians won. That was the final blow for the old man.

While a committee searched for a Trinitarian, Thaxter went through the motions of ministry, keeping the Death Records he had faithfully maintained for 47 years, holding services routinely. But his "flame" was out. He had given all he could to his flock and it was no longer enough.

The church records, as reorganized by Reverend S. B. Goodenow in 1847, show that there were now, in 1827, only

⁴⁶ Box 141.1, #20, DCHS. Letter from Rev. Charles Brooks.

22 members in the church, of which 17 were women, 11 of them widows. The five men held all the offices, such as deacons, secretary, treasurer and moderator.

The flock had scattered. But the old preacher did not seem bitter. His love of his people was still deep. In his last entry in the Death Records, six weeks before he died, we find evidence of his empathy. On June 7, when Love Courtney, aged 56, died of consumption, he wrote:

She was the daughter of Benj. Vincent, a poor laborer, and she married an Irishman who turned out as a poor intemperate man. She met with great Trials, but by my benevolence, she supported her children: Four sons and a daughter. Three are living Here in this Town, one in Connecticut. Leonard, I brought from 4 years of age. My Daughter [Hannah] Thayer brought Eliza. Eliza and Leonard now live with us. Smart, active, industrious & prudent.

Reverend Thaxter and his two wives had eight children of their own and, in addition, adopted five others, including Leonard Courtney, mentioned above. Their four other adopted children were orphans. He clearly was a man who loved humanity.

On the fourth Sunday in June 1827, Reverend Thaxter officiated for the last time, administering communion. At the afternoon meeting, he fainted during his first prayer, falling to the floor. Members of the congregation rushed to help and soon he was able to walk, with assistance, down the aisle.

Turning to the handful of faithful parishioners, he bowed and said: "Farewell, my dear friends, I hope I shall meet you all in Heaven."⁴⁷

That was his last message. Three weeks later, the search for a Trinitarian ended with the arrival of Rev. Job H. Martyn, who preached for the first time on July 13, 1827. Five days later, Reverend Joseph Thaxter, minister for 47 years, was dead.

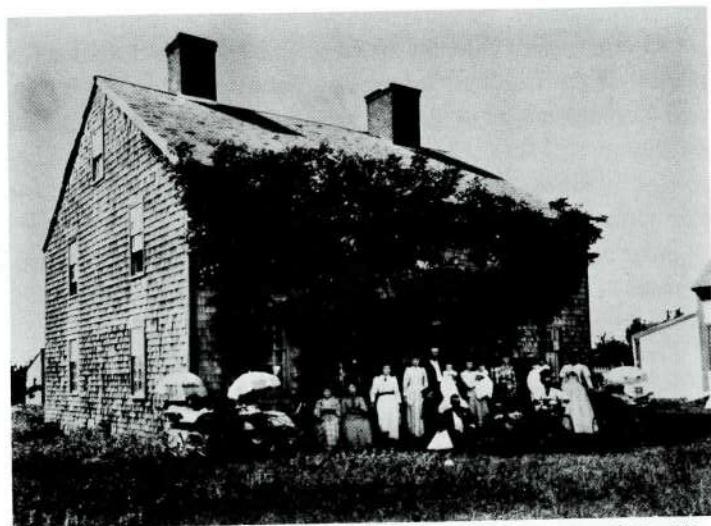
⁴⁷ DCHS, Box 141.1, #26. Letter, dated June 13, 1883, from Mrs. A. A. [Ann Athearn, Thaxter's last surviving child] published in *The Pacific*, a newspaper in San Francisco, where she lived.

In his letter to Thaxter two years before, Reverend Brooks of Hingham had remarked that the public outpouring of adulation "in this evening of life . . . must make your passage to the tomb green and pleasant."

Let us hope that it was.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Patricia Rodgers for bringing to his attention the letters written by Joseph Thaxter to his brother Caleb of Hingham that are now in the Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts. He also thanks Ann Allen, Society Librarian, and Jane E. Ward, Curator of Manuscripts at the Essex Institute, for their expeditious effort to get copies of the letters to him in time for use in this article.



Reverend Thaxter's house, at the corner of Cooke St., and Pease's Pt. Way, Edgartown, was torn down in 1897. Photo was taken about 1890.

in July & August 1816.

Dec. 16. 1816

Persons inoculated by Rev Joseph Thaxter.

Jason Luce	5	at $\frac{1}{6}$	= \$1.25
Harlow Crosby	1		25
John Robinson	2		50
Wid Love Lewis	4		1.00
Thomas Smith	4		1.00
Wid Sally Marchant	2		50
Ephraim Marchant	5		1.25
Joseph Holley	4		1.00
Abraham Fisher	3		.75
Robert Wimpenny	4		1.00
Freeman Tripley	1		25
Uriah Morse	2		50
William Mayhew	3		.75
Thomas Mayhew	4		1.00
Wid. Clara Allen	3		.75
George W. Arey	6		1.50
Obed Pease	4		1.00
Peter Coffin	2		50
Thomas Milton	1		25
Wid. Matty Cleveland	4		1.00
Lemuel Clark	1		25
James Cleveland	1		25
Daniel Fellows	3		.75
Samuel Pent	3		.75
Benjamin Smith jr	4		1.00
John Beecher	2		50
Marcy Craig	1		25
Carried over			\$19.75

During the 1816 smallpox epidemic, Reverend Thaxter, who had studied medicine at Harvard, inoculated 224 residents. At the time, inoculation was considered risky. This is the first page of his four-page bill which lists the families treated at 25 cents per person. The total bill came to \$56; the town paid him \$50.

3.

