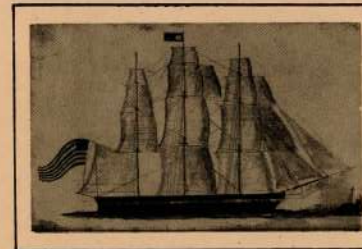




THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL. 46, NO. 4

MAY 2005



Ill-fated whaler Ceres, a drawing in the log by her first mate.

*Shipwrecked on a Reef
in the Coral Sea,*

**They Sail 400 Miles
in Small Boats
To Booby Island
and Rescue, Then. . .**

by ROBERT H. FARWELL

Cottage City: A Nation's Watering Hole

**Customs & Costumes of Bathers
On the Vineyard in the 1890s**

by ARTHUR R. RAILTON

**Sharper Michael, Born a Slave,
First Islander Killed in the Revolution**

by R. ANDREW PIERCE

**In Memoriam:
Elmer W. Athearn
1915 - 2005**

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Corrections & Additions

Our thanks to members who pointed out the error on page 83 of the previous *Intelligencer*: Dr. Charles F. Lane did not build Lane Block on Circuit Avenue in Oak Bluffs, but on Main Street, Vineyard Haven.

George A. Hough III, nephew of Henry Beetle Hough, insists that Bill Roberts (p. 77) was much more to the Houghs than just "their printer"; he was their production foreman. Also, p. 76, the first George A. Hough was managing editor of the *New Bedford Evening Standard*, not the *New Bedford Standard*. But most important, as he points out, is the fact that we failed to mention the *Sankaty*, the first propeller-driven ferry. She ran from 1911, setting speed records, before she burned in 1924 at the New Bedford wharf.

Mrs. Ruth (Cronig) Stiller also informed us of several errors involving the Cronig family in that issue. On page 53, her brother's name should have been Carlyle, not Carlton, as published. Four, not three, Cronig brothers started the market in 1917. We failed to include Theodore, often called "Tebby." At the top of page 54, we also erred in stating that the Cronigs and the Brickmans are related. They are not and she also corrected our mistake in stating that David Levine was Mrs. Lizzy Brickman's brother. He was not.

We regret the errors and thank those who corrected us.

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Articles in *The Intelligencer* do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Society or its officers. Every effort is made to confirm dates, names and events in published articles, but we cannot guarantee total accuracy.

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SHIPWRECKED ON A REEF IN CORAL SEA,

They Sail 400 Miles in Small Boats To Booby Island and Rescue, Then. . .

by ROBERT H. FARWELL

BOTH ARE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GLOBE, mere specks on a map. One is a dangerous reef 100 miles offshore in the Coral Sea; the other is the smallest of the many islands that make Torres Strait treacherous. The first is a navigational hazard, barely above water; the second is an enormous rock about 60 feet high. Although hundreds of miles apart, both played major roles in the story of the disastrous final voyage of whaleship *Ceres* in 1849, under the command of Capt. Mayhew Adams of Chilmark.

Both have birds' names: Osprey Reef in the Coral Sea and Booby Island in Torres Strait. Osprey Reef was not named for a bird, but for the schooner *Osprey*, which in 1843 first charted it. Booby Island was named by Capt. James Cook in 1770 because it was home to many thousands of Booby birds, called that by mariners because they show no fear of humans: only a boob would be so stupid, the story goes.

On that fateful voyage, *Ceres* left New Bedford July 28, 1845, to go whaling in the Indian Ocean. It was the third voyage of Captain Adams as a whaling master and his first in the Indian Ocean. First mate and log keeper was William Adams Look; second mate was Miles Adams Johnson. The three officers were related through the Adams family, as their names suggest: the two mates were both children of first cousins of Captain Adams, making them second cousins to each other and first cousin, once removed, to the captain.

The two mates, William Look and Miles Johnson, had

ROBERT H. FARWELL found this "unknown" tale of Vineyard whalers while reading logs in the Society's collection. He thanks Norma Hagen for help with research in New Zealand and Australia National Libraries; Joan Druett in New Zealand; and Steve Merson and Ted Brown in Australia. Catherine Mayhew, Society genealogist, traced the Adams family lineage. He also thanks the editor for his help.

just returned from four years on the maiden voyage of the now-famous *Charles W. Morgan*.¹ William was her Third Officer and Miles was a boatsteerer. They knew each other very well from being together at sea, in addition to being second cousins. The identity of the third mate of the *Ceres* is unclear.

The voyage had been moderately successful. After months of whaling in the Indian Ocean, the *Ceres* sailed in September 1848 into the Coral Sea east of Australia, hoping to find sperm whales. Most of the 2000 barrels she had in her hold were filled with oil from the right whale. When the *Ceres* left New Bedford, Captain Adams had hoped to fill her hold with sperm oil, which was more than twice as valuable, but so far they had seen few sperm.²

Adding to the captain's unhappiness were several rebellions among the crew, some coming close to mutiny. In October 1848, First Mate Look had a fight with the rebellious cook, who had locked himself in the galley. Calm was restored after a short struggle, but the crew's dissension continued. More serious was the uprising by ten men in December 1848. First Mate Look's log entry described it:

Thursday 14, 1848 . . . at 12 ½ o'clock Welch and Gelmore, Harwood, West, Slocam, Peal, Dodd, David Williams, John Fransis, Com Aft and said that [they] wood not work with this Bread that we hav gut out now. talked vary mutinous. At 2¼ O'clock the Capt. and myself went tow [to] the forcastal [fore-castle] and caled on evry one. of them separtly and tha [they] all said that tha [they] wood [do] duty with the bread that we hav now out. . . at 9 O'clock David Williams Com aft and war-entied [wanted] too go on duty. The Capt. told him that he met [meet] at 10 o'clock. John Fransis Com After and said that he warentied [wanted] too go on duty. The Capt. told him he met at 2 O'clock.

Friday 15. . . at 6 ½ O'clock put James West in Irons and Welch an Slocam and Look and Harwood & put four in the

hull room, one in the run.³ Dodd and Peel Com in and Maid Acknowledgement. Let tham go too their duty . . .

Saturday 16. . . James West broak his irons and Trou [threw] them away. We maid a pair out of iron hoop and put him in the after hash [hatch]. . .

After the five men who continued to refuse duty had been kept in irons for a week:

December 24 . . . let the prisners go too their duties. They have pramast [promised] two behave ther self & cas [cause] no more trubbel in the ship. . .⁴

Captain Adams was never reluctant to put rebellious men in irons and confine them to an uncomfortable place. He even did it preemptively on occasion to prevent any men he suspected might desert from doing so.

Six months of hunting whales off Australia added only 120 barrels of sperm oil, bringing the total sperm to 420 barrels. No doubt disappointed, Captain Adams decided to go home. He headed the *Ceres* to Sydney to provision for the long journey back to New Bedford. His problems continued. Three men deserted, including the cook. On March 25, 1849, the cook returned, involuntarily, it is clear:

March 25. The Canackers [natives]⁵ brought the cook back. Put him in irons . . .

April 2. Took Cook out of irons.

A new mainsail was needed. By June 8th, one month later, the new sail had been rigged and Captain Adams scheduled the *Ceres* to sail as soon as more crew could be signed on. On June 9th, the log reports, "we now have 7 new hands." Then more desertions:

³ The "run" is a small space under the deck without headroom, light or ventilation used regularly to imprison the worst offenders; hull room, we can't find definition.

⁴ The *Ceres* log was given to the Society by Everett Whiting in 1965. It is in very poor condition, as would be expected of a book that went through a shipwreck and a week aboard a whaleboat. The handwriting is extremely difficult to read, with poor spelling and confusing and incomplete sentences. Quotations are printed as written, with the addition only of occasional punctuation and, in brackets, the editor's attempt to decipher words.

⁵ Most of Australia in 1849 was still inhabited by Aborigines. It wasn't until the Gold Rush of the 1850s that large numbers of Europeans arrived.

¹ The *Charles W. Morgan* is afloat and well preserved at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, the oldest wooden whaler in the nation, a historical treasure.

² When the *Ceres* left New Bedford in July 1845, sperm oil was selling for 90 cents a gallon and whale oil, or black oil as it was called because it came from the black whale, was worth only 35 cents a gallon.

June 10. . . We wair [were] eating supper, Jackson and Conway took a boat that was Along side and cleared out. . . [we] chased them. . . could not find them in the dark. . . Joseph Walton went a shoar in the water boat and cleared out. We have got 9 new hands and [only] three old hands aboard that have come out from hom.

Despite his nearly all-new crew, smaller than normal, Captain Adams scheduled departure for the next day, but the crew demanded more men be on board, refusing to sail with the short-handed crew. They knew there was more whaling ahead and more men were needed to man the boats:

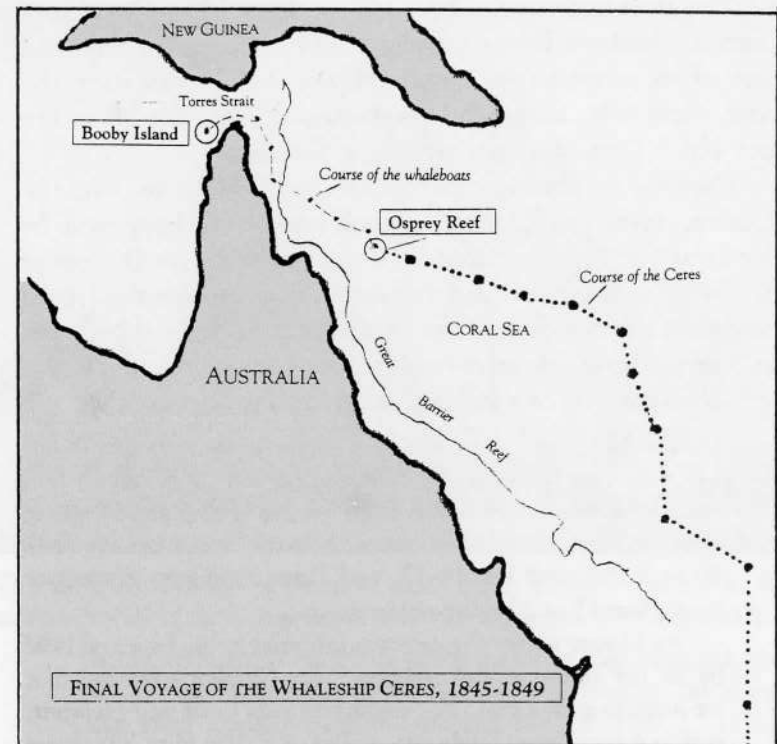
June 11. Capt. Adams and the piolot [pilot] come aboard too sail with 21 all told. Tha wair [they were] not willing to go with this number of men for tha all say that the ship has four boats [whale boats] [word illegible] so we hav [have to] stop to ship some more. . . Capt. Adams is on shoar to ship mor men.

June 12. . . Four man come on board. . . the Pilot come on board. . . get under way – with 28 all told on board.

This is an example of the imprecise entries of the log keeper. He wrote on June 11 that there were 21 men on board “all told”; the next day, the captain went ashore and recruited four more men and he wrote that the *Ceres* sailed with “28 all told on board.” He must have included the three mates in the second “all told” number, but not in the first. In any case, the *Ceres* left Sydney for New Bedford on June 12, 1849.

Captain Adams, like most whaling masters, was no stranger to problems with his crew. On his previous voyage in the South Atlantic, while master of the whaler *Seine*, more than half of his original crew had jumped ship. He sailed the bark back to New Bedford with 18 new men he picked up in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Hoping to kill a few more sperm whales, the captain would take the *Ceres* through the Indian Ocean whaling grounds on her way home to New Bedford. She sailed north in the Coral Sea, well outside Australia's Great Barrier Reef, heading for Torres Strait, the channel at the northern tip of Queensland. From there, he would head west into the Indian Ocean before going south to round the African continent.



Sailing north from Sydney, the *Ceres* hit Osprey Reef, the men took to the whale boats and headed for Booby Island, arriving there seven days later.

On Thursday, June 28, 1849, more than two weeks out of Sydney, everything was normal. Wind was steady; the log entry routine:

June, Thursday the 28. Com [come] with light breees from SE. All sails set. . . Watch Employed painting the starboard boat. .

Latterpart com with light breeze from SE and pleasant weather. All sail set. Cours W. Lat 14 : 18, Long 147 : 32

In the middle of the next night, the ship's routine was suddenly shattered:

Friday, June 29. Came with light breees from SE and plesant weather. All sail set. Cours NW by W. Middel and later part cam with light breeze from SE in plesant weather. At 1 o'clock [a.m.] run on Ospray Reef. We got so near befor it was sean that thair was not rume A nufe to clear it.

The ship had struck Osprey Reef about 125 miles east of Princess Charlotte Bay, Australia. Osprey is a lagoon reef with most of its outer edges awash. Heavy surf breaks over the shore, especially along the southeastern side, the direction from which *Ceres* was approaching in the dark.

Captain Adams must have spent many hours reliving the accident, trying to explain to himself how it had happened. In a letter to *The Vineyard Gazette* (it was published on December 28, 1849), he described the shipwreck, making sure the Island knew that it was not his fault. He wrote the letter long after the event, during a stopover in Manila on his way home. It was the fault, he wrote, of a faulty chart and "a bad lookout":

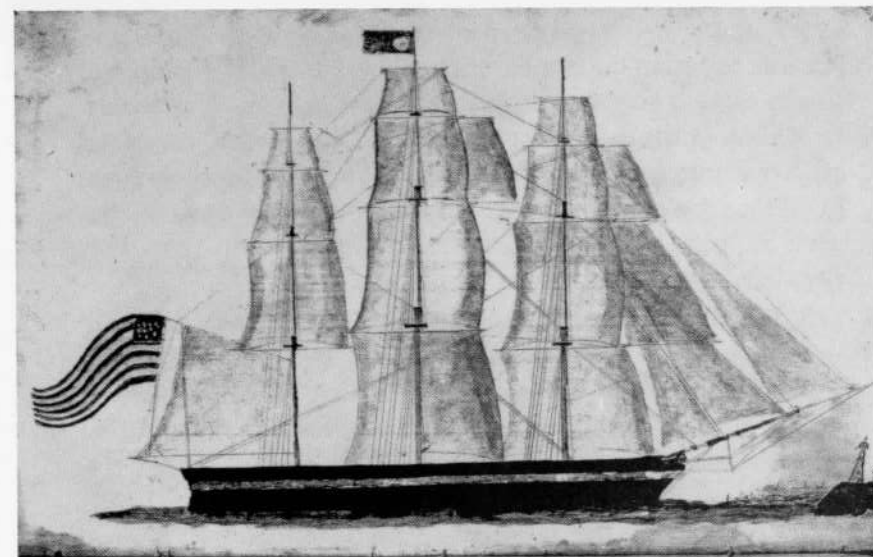
On the 23d June,⁶ at 1 o'clock at night, we struck a reef in lat. 14 04 S, long. 147 10 E, not laid down on the chart. It had been seen before, and reported to be in lon. 146 20, which must be 30 or 40 miles too far to the west, as my lon. was 147 30 at 5 PM, and lat. 14 13, and I am confident it was not more than 15 or 20 miles out at most.⁷

As I knew where the reef was reported to be, I steered NW by W per compass, and ordered a good lookout, stating that we were to pass a reef. The night was very clear and pleasant, with a 4 knot breeze right aft, giving us a chance to luff either way, and the accident can only be attributed to a bad lookout.

The reef was heard before it was seen, and before the ship could be brought to the wind we were upon it.

She hit the reef solidly. Immediately, she began to break up as the waves smashed her against the coral. An effort was made to haul her off using anchors, but it failed, forcing them to abandon ship. The log records the decision:

Got the "cag" [kedge anchor] out with too cuting falls and a larg boat ancer [anchor] with dubbel towline to haul her off. We could not start her. At 5 O'clock she knocked her reader [rudder] of and too plank off the stern and parted the cuting fall. At 7 o'clock she had seven foot of water in the hoal. She lays head on to the wind breesing up an we got the boats



Two unsigned drawings of the same vessel are in the log. This is one. We assume they are of the *Ceres* and were done by log keeper, First Mate Look.

ready, took three bariels of water and four bags of bread. At 8½ O'clock left the ship. It was not safe for a boat too lay along sid. Hald [hailed] past the reef and cast off. NW. L. 13°51 South.

Captain Adams described those chaotic hours before they abandoned ship in his letter to the *Gazette*:

We then furled the sails and got out a boat to try the groundings – found it very steep, deepening to 39 fathoms at about 2 ships length, and then no soundings. We then got out 2 kedges to hold her while we got out the bow anchor. In the meantime the ship swung hard on the reef the stern thumping heavily, knocking off the rudder, which stove in some stern plank above water.

At this time our fast parted from the larger kedge, and we drove further on the reef. We got 3 boats clear of the ship as the masts and spars threatened to fall – sounded the pumps and found 7 feet of water in the hold. The attempt to get the bow anchor out was abandoned, owing to the heavy breaking of the sea, and the probability that the ship could not be kept afloat if got off.

The reef was the peak of an underwater mountain and the

⁶ Captain Adams was wrong on the date. She hit the reef on the night of June 29-30, not June 23.

⁷ Osprey Reef is at 146° 42'E and 14°01' S. The captain was almost a full degree off, a distance of nearly 60 nautical miles.

water around it became deep so precipitously that it was impossible to set an anchor far enough away to pull the ship off. In any case, as Captain Adams wrote, the ship would probably have sunk in the deeper water if they had succeeded in getting off, her planks were so badly damaged. They had no choice but to take to the four whaleboats. Again, Captain Adams recites what happened in his *Gazette* letter. He mentions that they were heading for Booby Island:

We now prepared some things to take in the boats, and on sounding the pumps again in about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour, found the water had gained 7 inches. As we lay on the weather side of this reef there seemed but one chance for us, and that was our boats. We had but 4, and 28 men to carry. We took in what bread and water we could, with a few other things, and about 8 AM left the ship for Booby Island, 600 miles distant, where we landed, after being in the boats 13 days.

The log book presents a minor puzzle during the period surrounding the disaster. Starting February 10, 1849, four months before the *Ceres* ran onto the reef, fresh pages had been added to the book. These added pages clearly were not part of the original book although they were bound into the log as though they were. The pages are slightly smaller and the paper has a grayer tone. No explanation for the insert is given by the log keeper.

It is possible that the original pages had been so damaged by exposure to rain and ocean water during the seven days in the open boats that after their rescue the First Mate copied what he had written onto the fresh sheets and sewed them into the volume. This seems unlikely as the ink and pen strokes vary so much on the "fresh" pages that the writing does not appear to have been done at one time, as it would if it was being copied. There can be no doubt, however, that the final 38 pages were not part of the original volume when it was purchased in the shop of William C. Tabor & Son in New Bedford before the *Ceres* sailed.

Ten of those new pages were cut out after being bound into the original volume. They may have been excised simply to be used for some other purpose (paper was much more ex-

pensive in those days), as there is no visible writing on the stubs that remain.

In his explanatory letter to the *Gazette*, Captain Adams exaggerated both the length of time they were in the whale boats and the distance they covered. It was actually seven days, not 13, as he wrote; and the distance was about 400 miles, not 600.

During those seven days in the open boats, the First Mate's daily entries read as though all was normal. He doesn't provide any details about the cramped space, the rationing of food and water or the misery of being in an open boat during a rainstorm. He writes as though it was a common event, nothing to get excited about. It is hard to believe, reading the pages, that they were being written in an open boat, tossed by the waves, sometimes during a heavy rain.

The only difference in the log is in the heading at the top of each page. Throughout the long whaling voyage each page is headed: "Remarks on board the ship *Ceres* of New Bedford." After the wreck, the heading changes to "Remarks on board the boats." Such understatement is impressive.

First Mate Look, the log keeper, does not state that their destination was Booby Island. Perhaps Captain Adams had not informed him of his plan. They no doubt were in different boats. It was routine during whaling for each officer to have a boat that was "his." No doubt, the same drill was followed when they abandoned ship.

From the outset, it seems clear that Captain Adams had decided to head for Booby. It would make no sense to sail to the closer land on the Australian continent, about 100 nautical miles to the west. That would put them on the north peninsula of Australia, an area inhabited only by aborigines. If they were not killed by the natives, they would still be hundreds of miles from any shipping lane where they might be picked up by a passing ship.

The nearest shipping lane went through Torres Strait at the northern tip of the peninsula. The strait had been discovered in the early 1600s. For centuries it was little used by Europeans, as there was not much interest in that remote part

of the world before the opening of the China trade. Capt. James Cook sailed through it in 1770 on one of his voyages of discovery. Spotting the prominent rock at the western end of the strait, he went ashore and gave it the name, Booby Island. He explained why:

Being now near the Island, and having but little wind, Mr. Banks and I landed upon it, and found it to be mostly a barren rock frequented by Birds, such as Boobies, a few of which we shot, and occasioned my giving it the name of Booby Island.

Through the years that followed, Booby Island, a mile-long rock, became a landmark for ships sailing from Sydney to China. On the island's southern end, there is a small sandy beach that leads to a cave in which shipwrecked mariners found shelter. In 1814, the first recorded rescue from Booby Island was made by the ship *Hibernia* when she picked up survivors of the wrecked *Morning Star*.

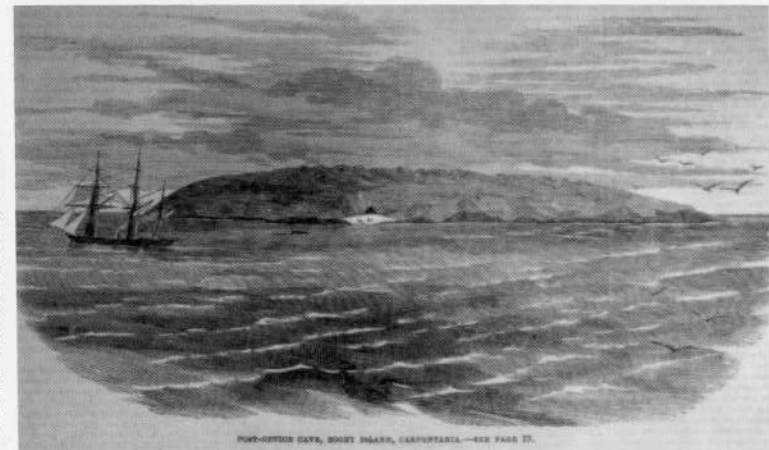
By the 1830s, the island had become so well known as a place of refuge that ships regularly sailed close enough to check for signs of sailors in distress. Torres Strait being a treacherous waterway, it was not unusual to find men on the island awaiting rescue. Ships began stocking the cave with water and other provisions. So frequent were the ships' visits that it came to be used as a message center where mail and notices were dropped off by the passing vessels, a practice that caused it to be called Australia's first "postoffice."

Being uninhabited and remote, the island was safe from plundering by the aborigines. Soon, a flagpole was erected on top of the rock so the shipwrecked men could to fly a distress signal. In 1846, the new Australian government took it over, stocking the cave with bread, fresh water, meat and spirits every three months and posting warnings of recently discovered navigational hazards in the nearby waters

By 1849, the year the *Ceres* ran onto Osprey Reef, Captain Adams knew exactly where to go with his fleet of four whaleboats loaded with the 28 survivors.⁸

⁸ Today there is an unmanned solar lighthouse on the island. For many years, the light was manned by three families living there. Plans are now underway to make the island a historical memorial.

From the National Library of Australia



Drawing of Booby Island made about the time of the Ceres wreck. White patch (center) is the small sandy beach that leads to the "postoffice" cave.

After they took to the whaleboats on June 29, the first day of sailing was pleasant and the winds favorable for the voyage north to Booby. The next two days, there were rain squalls and rough water:

July 1: . . . squalls of rain. Cours NW . . . we found it vary hard to ceap [keep] to gather [together] it was so rought that we had to tak the spreats out [remove the sprit booms and furl the sails]. . . one boat cam to ancer [anchor] with ours⁹. . . the rest maid fast tu her. At daylight maid sail. Cours NW.

The next day, there were more squalls and strong winds. By the end of the day, the four boats had sailed inside the Great Barrier Reef, passing through Black Rock entrance:

July 2. . . At 5 O'clock rais the suf [surf] off Black Rock entrance. At 6 O'clock went inside the reef. At 7 O'clock cam to ancer under the lee of the reef.

Sailing inside the Barrier Reef, they made more distance, 70 miles, on the fourth day:

July the 3. . . pleasant weather. Cours W. At Sundown ancerd under the lee of a Island. This day we have cum about 70

⁹ It seems impossible that they could have anchored. Where they were, the Coral Sea has a depth of 3000 meters, far too deep for an anchor. They must have used a sea anchor, a parachute-like drag that keeps the boat heading into the wind.

miles . . . at daylight made sail. Cours NW by W. Lat 11:27.
July the 4. . . at 5 ½ O'clock cam two ancer under the lee of a
 Island. Som went a shoar [ashore] and Cot a tirtel [turtle] . . .
 pleasant weather at daylight. . . Lat. 10:43 South.

The log doesn't say how they ate the turtle on the Fourth of July. It was unlikely that they could have cooked it. They no doubt divided the meat among the four boats, the men eating it raw. They were now nearing the northern tip of Australia and would head west to Booby Island, through Endeavor Strait. At sunset, they arrived at Booby and found the cave:

July the 5. . . pleasant weather. . . at sundown Cam two ancer under Booby Island. One boat went A shoar. We find som provision. . . landed all the *things* [word is unclear] save the cronometer and a spyglass.

For a week, they had been crammed in the four whale-boats, seven men in each. They must have been weary of each other's company. But there had been no rebellious moments recorded and all were now safely ashore on Booby Island, the most likely place for them to be rescued by a passing vessel.

There is no mention of it in the log, but surely they posted lookouts atop the rock to spot any ship that might be approaching. The log does mention that they went hunting for food.

July the 7. . . cot one tircle [turtle].

They were now regularly enjoying fresh meat, cooked or raw we are not told. The next day they caught three more; on the following day, another.

For four pages of the log during this period (covering a little more than two weeks, starting July 16), the writing has faded and is extremely faint. Perhaps Keeper Look was running out of ink and was diluting it with water. Unfortunately, these two weeks include the day they were picked up by the *Cadet* and the entries are so faded that many words are illegible. Not long after they went aboard the *Cadet*, the ink becomes more legible again.

The fresh turtle meat didn't ease their concerns. Not a sail was spotted by the lookouts. There was no traffic through the strait. Then, on their eleventh day at Booby Island, a ship:

Photograph from John Ibbotson (lighthouses@mird.net).



Booby Island today. Postoffice cave is at the left. Buildings, once homes for the keepers' families, are empty as the solar-powered light is now automated.

July the 17. . . weather pleasant. At 6 O'clock [last night] saw a sail to windard. Sent one boat off to meet her but she luf up for the island. At 7½ O'clock she got up with island. At ate [8] O'clock the Capt. cam on shoar. We put our things in the four bots [and went] on board of the *Barque Cadet* of London. . . at 10 O'clock [this morning]. . . set stud sails.

The two captains left notes in the cave. Many months later, their messages were retrieved by a passing ship and forwarded to *The Shipping Gazette & the Sydney General Trade List*. Here they are, as published on June 22, 1850:

[*Captain Adams:*] First, I thank God that he thus far delivered me & my companions & last, gratitude to those men that left provisions & water here, without which we must have suffered much, if not perished. We were wrecked on Osprey Reef, June 29th; it was 147.10° east by my Long. Lat. from 14.08° to 13.48°.

[*Capt. J. R. Pratt, Master, Barque Cadet:*] Arrived last night at 6 p.m., July 16th & sailed this morning at 10 a.m. Entered the Barrier Reef at Raine's Islet, Saturday 14th, at 4 p.m. from Sydney, bound to Manila & Amoy. Took the crew of the American whaler *Ceres*, Captain Adams & 28 of her crew, on

board, they having been 11 days on the island. They were wrecked on Osprey Reef on June 29th & were seven days in their boats & arrived at this place July 6th, all well. The *Ceres* had on board when wrecked 2300 barrels of oil.

The *Cadet* had left Plymouth, England, on November 1, 1848, carrying 150 female convicts and 30 children to a prison colony on the island of Tasmania, south of Australia.¹⁰ She arrived there after a voyage of nearly six months on April 12, 1849, and dropped off the prisoners (now only 143 women, seven having died during the voyage). Leaving Hobart, Tasmania, May 6th, she sailed to Sydney, where the prison equipment that had been used to incarcerate the women and children was auctioned off, emptying her holds. She then took on cargo for Manila. Coincidentally, the *Ceres* had been in Sydney at the same time, picking up provisions and crew for her planned voyage home to New Bedford. The *Cadet* left Sydney two weeks after the *Ceres* had sailed on her fateful voyage.

Luckily for the *Ceres* crew, Captain Pratt set a course along the west side of Australia through Torres Strait on his way to the Philippines. As the *Cadet* was passing Booby Island, her lookout spotted some men on the rock and the bark went to their rescue.

The *Cadet's* voyage to Manila with the shipwrecked men took five weeks. Those were especially unpleasant weeks for Second Mate Miles A. Johnson of West Tisbury. Captain Adams had assigned Miles, his cousin, and the entire starboard watch, 14 men, to 'tween decks, steerage, as it was called.

'Tween decks was a small, irregular space, nearly amidships, that on whalers usually had six or eight bunks used by the cook, the cooper, the carpenter, the boatsteerers and others with specialized skills to give them a feeling of superiority over the ordinary seamen jammed into the forecabin.

On a merchant vessel like the *Cadet*, steerage was quarters for the steward (and sometimes the cook), the carpenter and

sailmaker, if one was aboard. It was a cramped space, clearly not adequate for the 14 rescued men of the starboard watch, but it would seem they should have been grateful for any space – they could still be in the cave on Booby Island!

But nothing in the journal explains why such a high-ranking officer as Second Mate Johnson would be assigned to such a crowded space. It was one thing to put the seamen in there, but a Second Mate? The other officers from the *Ceres* apparently shared small cabins aft with the *Cadet's* officers.

It is speculation, but it seems likely that it might have been Captain Adams's way of punishing his Second Mate and the seamen of the starboard watch who had been on duty the night the *Ceres* ran onto Osprey Reef. No doubt, Captain Adams blamed them for the disaster. But the men of starboard watch did not feel that the fault had been theirs alone. The captain had set the course that put them on the reef. At least, one can interpret that as why they "mutinied," when ordered to clean the steerage. The log entry on August 13, 1849, a week before the *Cadet* arrived at Manila, tells the story:

Monday the 13. . . . pleasant weather, all sail set. This morning Capt. Adams went Down between Decks where our men live and ordered it washed out and Mr. Johnson and 14 others, namely Miles A. Johnson, 2 Mate, & Bave Tillton, Boat St., John Valens [?] Carpn [carpenter], Boat Steerer Fredric Polard, William Lovelady, Thomas Willson, Edwin Bowlin, Josef Hymes, Fredric Chamberlin, Edwd [?] Prendergest, Peter Condlay, Isace Wattall, Thomas Ashurst, Henry Bailly refused to obey him and yous [use] vary abusive and threatening language.¹¹

Such action would have been classified as mutinous if the ship had been under the command of Captain Adams, but he and the men were passengers. Nothing seems to have been done about it; no further mention of their defiance is in the log. The *Cadet* anchored at Manila at 6 p.m., August 22, 1849.

In his letter to the *Gazette*, Captain Adams makes it apparent that he did not feel kindly towards Second Mate Miles

¹⁰ The island of Tasmania was, along with Australia, used by England as prison colonies. The practice of sending prisoners to these places was nearing an end at the time of the *Ceres* wreck. In total, more than 100,000 convicts were sent from England to those two prison colonies during the 1800s.

¹¹ Some of the names are very difficult to read so these spellings are not certain.

A. Johnson. He ends the letter by stating that the First and Third mates would accompany him on board the *Siam* from Manila to Boston, but he makes no mention of his cousin, Second Mate Johnson:

I shall come home in the *Siam* of Salem, for Boston, Sept. 25th, Capt. Williams having generously offered me a passage. The 1st and 3d mates of the *Ceres* will also come home in the *Siam*.

Captain Adams probably arrived in West Tisbury late in March 1850, six months after leaving Manila. We know from *The Vineyard Gazette* of March 22, 1850, that he landed in Boston that month:

Passenger on the *Siam* at Boston from Manila, Capt. Mayhew Adams of Tisbury, late ship *Ceres*, of New Bedford, before reported lost.

Second Mate Johnson had to find his own way home.

Who had been at fault in the wreck of *Ceres* on Osprey Reef? We can find no record of any investigation. Surely, when a ship, heading home with more than 2000 barrels of oil is lost, her owners would want to learn how it happened, if negligence was suspected.

In our archives there is an empty envelope addressed simply to Miles A. Johnson, Ship *Sylph*, [Capt.] Gardner, Fyal [sic]. It bears no date, but it had been mailed and, we believe, received by him at Fayal in the Azores.

Whaling records show that the *Sylph* left Fairhaven in September 1850 to go whaling in the Pacific, no doubt stopping at the Azores to provision and fill out her crew, as was the custom. Miles A. Johnson was her second mate. He didn't have any better luck on the *Sylph* than on the *Ceres*. After four years in the Pacific, the *Sylph*, on her way home, was lost off the Isle of Sol in the Caribbean on January 9, 1854, full of oil. Miles had been shipwrecked on two successive voyages.

Captain Adams had much better luck with his whaling than his cousin Miles. After the *Ceres*, he made two successful voyages, both in the South Atlantic. He never returned to the Indian Ocean. Once had been enough.

When he retired from whaling, Captain Adams became a farmer in Chilmark. His wife had been given land on South Road, Chilmark, by her father as a wedding present. Sometime about 1850, perhaps soon after the captain returned from the *Ceres* disaster, a house was built on the land. It was there that they lived after he retired in 1860.

Farmer Adams was not successful. He was always in financial difficulty. After he and his wife, Mary, died, the house was sold to pay off their debts. In the late 1900s, it was owned and lived in by Henry and Peggy Scott.

Miles A. Johnson continued whaling, despite his two shipwrecks. He and his brother, James, went Arctic whaling out of California in the 1860s. Between voyages, in 1869, Miles came back to the Vineyard for a short visit to the family farm in West Tisbury, where his sister was living. After Miles returned to San Diego, James wrote to another sister, Emily:

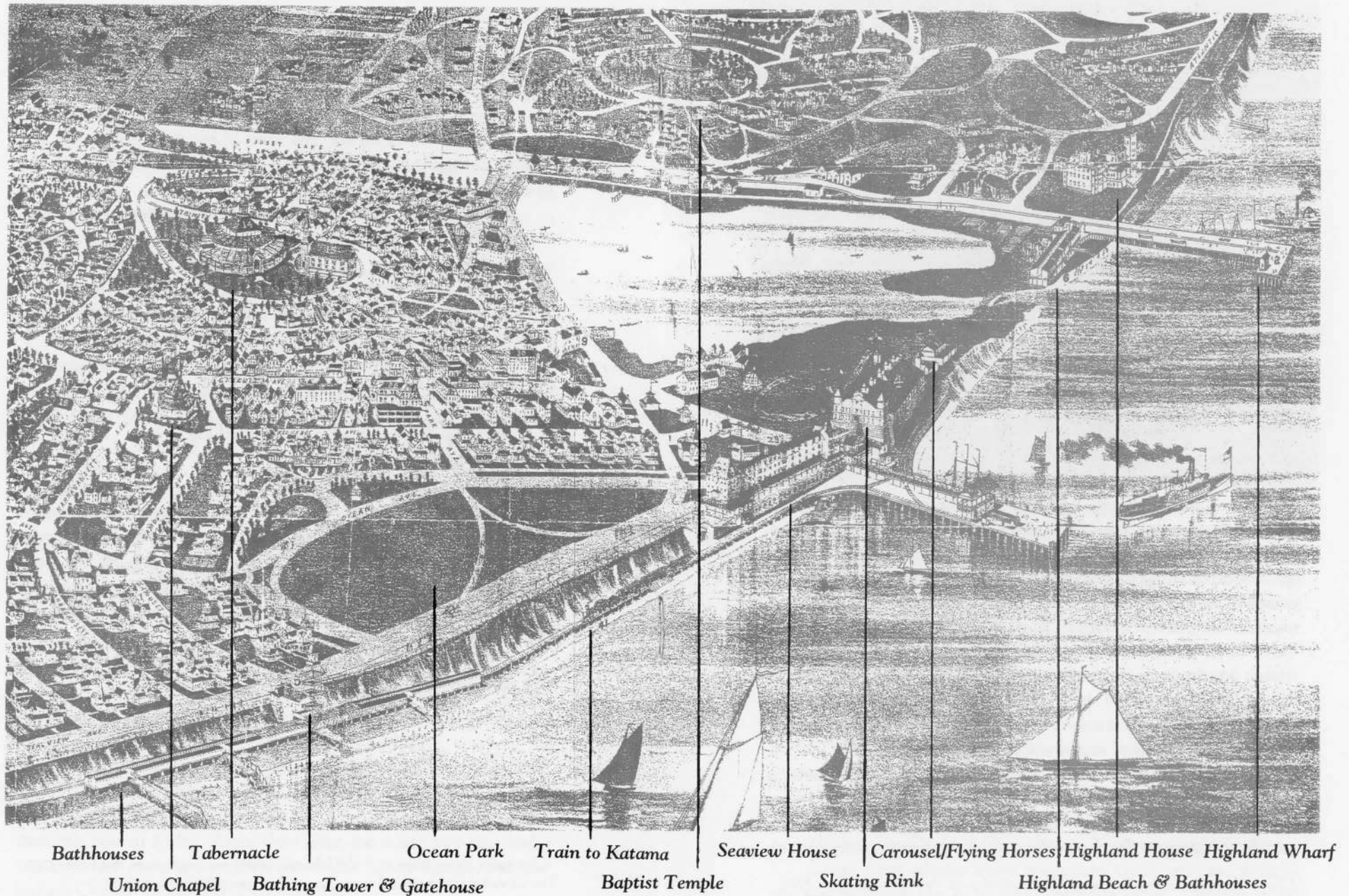
I may come home next spring if we should be fortunate this winter in Whaling. . . Miles. . . seems pleased with his visit home and says he is going again. We have a very nice comfortable vessel and aplenty of everything to eat. . . Miles sends his respects to the Family. . .

Miles never married. In 1873, he quit whaling and moved into the family house in West Tisbury. His sister had married Henry Whiting, the famed marine cartographer and gentleman farmer. Miles may have worked on the Whiting farm, but only two years after retiring from whaling, he developed a mental illness and was soon taken to the Worcester Insane Asylum. He died there in 1890.¹²

The bad luck that had started at Osprey Reef seemed to stay with him for the rest of his life.

¹² For more about Miles and the Johnson family see *Intelligencer*, February 2002. The *Ceres* log was presented to the Society by Everett Whiting in 1965.

COTTAGE CITY IN 1890, ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S BEST-KNOWN WATERING HOLES.



Customs & Costumes of Bathers On the Vineyard in the 1890s

by ARTHUR R. RAILTON

OCEAN BATHING began on the Vineyard in the late 1870s. Prior to then, only adventurous boys would jump off piers into the ocean for the fun of it. Adults rarely went into the salt water, except to shell-fish.

By 1870, the Vineyard had been a well-known summer resort for nearly a generation, but ocean bathing was just beginning. This was true at other watering holes. Bathing at New York's Coney Island became popular at about the same time.¹ Before then, it was known mostly as an amusement park.

An infrastructure was needed to support ocean bathing. A person didn't just find a sandy beach (of which the Vineyard had many) and go bathing. The beach had to be close to town, within easy walking distance (Chappaquiddick Beach in Edgartown was an exception, but a steam launch took bathers directly to the bathing beach from downtown). Bath houses were needed so bathers could change into their costumes. It was considered a gross breach of etiquette for adults to be seen on the street in a bathing costume. Not that bathing costumes were revealing, but they were worn at the beach, nowhere else.

Bathers were mostly women and children. At least, so the photographs suggest; men are visible among the bathers, but in small numbers. Probably they preferred fishing. To go bathing, women walked to the beach in their fancy clothes. They could have been going to a tea party, they were so dressed up. Arriving at the beach, they disappeared into the private bath house they had rented. In that cramped enclosure, with its slit of a "window" high on the back wall providing the only light and air, they changed into their bathing costumes.

Bathing costumes were complete ensembles, almost as stylish as the fancy clothes the women had arrived in. They covered the female body totally, including long black stockings and bathing shoes. In the early years, long sleeves were also re-



Early photo of the bathing beach. No automobiles; only horses and buggies. Later, two more rows of bath houses covered the entire sandy beach.

quired. Once they were dressed in their costumes, the women came out of their stalls, hurried along a raised wooden walkway to some steps that went right into the ocean. They didn't have to walk across the hot beach sand.

Bathing was not an athletic exercise. It consisted mostly of standing in water about chest deep, talking with the other lady bathers, while keeping an eye on the children cavorting in the shallow water near shore. It was a social event, taking place in the invigorating salt water.

As with any social event, there was a "proper" time for it: from 10 a.m. until noon, except on Sunday. On God's day, few went bathing in Cottage City. Only a heathen would do that.

There were always more spectators than bathers. Watching was as much fun as bathing, perhaps more. Throngs stood

¹ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, 1978.

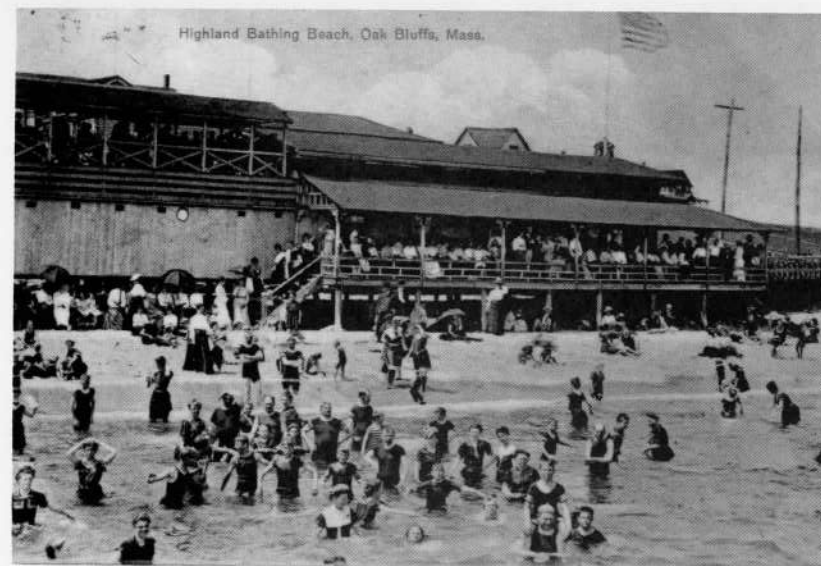


1890 Cottage City bathers. Photo must have been taken from a boat. On the bluff is the Bathing Tower. Sea View House (center) burned down in 1892.

on the porches and walkways above the beach, enjoying (often laughing at) the clumsy antics of men and boys learning to swim. Shaded walkways and porches were added to the bath houses for spectators, so important were they.

There seemed to be religious objections to ocean bathing. The Campground had been founded by seekers of religion and ocean bathing was frowned upon (although total-immersion baptisms did take place in the ocean). In the juvenile novel, *Four Girls at Cottage City*,² the objections are made clear. The story, with its strong religious message, tells of four young

² Interest in this book, written by Emma D. Kelley-Hawkins, has been revived lately as a result of research by Holly Jackson, who discovered that the author was not a black writer, although her works were included in *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, Oxford University Press, 1988. The young women in the novel are not black either. It is strange that the author was assumed to have been a black. Apparently, Ms Jackson was the first to question it.



Less known in history is Highland Bathing Beach (see p. 133). This postcard, 1900, shows bathhouses, pavilion and (upper left) a band playing on a porch.

women vacationing in a cottage across the street from the Methodist Tabernacle in an August of the 1890s. One day, a young man, eager for their company, asks one of them:

"Wouldn't you like to go down to the beach and watch the bathers? The band gives a concert every day at 11, you know."

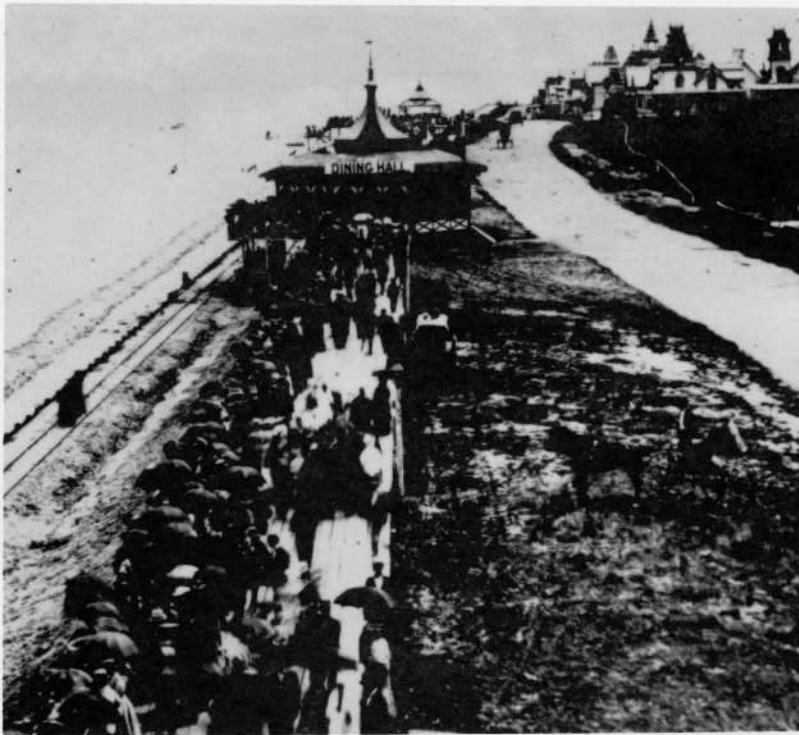
Vera's red lips curled. "No, thank you," she answered, somewhat curtly, "We do not care for that pastime."

"You object to the bathing?"

"No, I object to the bathers," answered Vera quickly and then her fair face flushed scarlet. . .

Garnet [another of the girls] came to the rescue, "Vera is greatly opposed to the manner of bathing here, and I must confess there are some things about it that we all find to object to."

Any religious objections that there might have been to bathing didn't seem to matter. By 1890, vacationers were going to Cottage City for recreation not for religion. So many came that it was hard to keep up with the demand for bath houses. At one time, there were as many as 700 of them



Pavilion on boardwalk in the 1890s was a restaurant. Ocean Park is at right. Crowd is watching rowboat racing. Umbrellas protect from the sun not rain.

standing on stilts over the sandy beaches: 500 in Cottage City; 200 more on Highland Beach. It was a big business, bringing in more than \$1000 each summer in rentals at Cottage City, plus at least half that much at the Highlands Beach.

At noon, the bathers, worn out from their watery conversations and ready for lunch, returned to their bath houses to change back into street clothes. Before leaving, they rinsed the bathing costumes in a tub of fresh water, squeezing out much of the water by cranking them through the hand wringer mounted on the tub. The heavy costumes were hung up in the changing rooms to dry in time for tomorrow's bathing hours.

Those ponderous bathing costumes did not encourage swimming and must have been most uncomfortable when wet. Made of wool serge, they absorbed a lot of water and were slow to dry. It is no wonder that bathers never sat on the beach af-



Bathing tower was torn down in 1895. It took muscle and courage to get to the top. Gatehouse went from boardwalk over the train tracks to beach.

ter a dip. Wet wool was something to get out of fast.

Sun bathing? Never. Only farmers and fishermen had tans.

•

The Society has photographs and postcards showing bathing activities during these years. Some are printed on these pages. The following items about bathing customs and costumes were excerpted from the newspapers of the period:

1878. "Armless bathing suits are now fashionable with the ladies, providing of course that arms are plump and pretty." *Island Review*, Aug. 7, 1878.

1878. Report of the Oak Bluffs Company shows about 300 bath-houses producing annual rentals of \$1000 to \$1200.

1881. "... the smooth water and mild air tempted everyone to the bathing beach. . . Hundreds donned their suits and took a dip. The band, stationed in the tall tower which surmounts the bathing



This huge entertainment hall, built over the water, blocked the water view of property owners. A court ordered it removed in 1902. It was, partially.

houses, added much to the liveliness by their well-rendered selections. The water seemed alive with people, disporting about in all sorts of costumes, red predominating. The beach and balconies were thronged with spectators. . . the picture was one worth coming a long way to see." *Cottage City Star*, Aug. 24, 1881.

1882. "The bathing-houses at Oak Bluffs and the adjacent beaches [including Highland Beach] are a scene of liveliness and frolic every day, especially between the hours of 10 and 12 A.M. Hundreds of people, old and young, fat and lean, avail themselves of this delightful pleasure daily, and it is hard to tell who enjoys it most, the bathers, in their varied and unique costumes, or the throngs of spectators who assemble each day on the balconies of the main building of the bathing-houses and on the beach below, which by-the-way, seems to be the favorite resort of the young and gay, who occasionally get a ducking from the wringing of bathing-clothes above. Notwithstanding continual additions to the bathing-houses, we have heard of several cases where not a single room was available." *Cottage City Star*, Aug. 24, 1881.

1883. "The Highland Company are adding twenty new bathhouses to the village of these structures on the beach near their wharf." *Cottage City Star*, May 2, 1883.



With its top floor removed after the court order, the hall, called the "ice house," was still no thing of beauty. It isn't clear when it was torn down.

"There have never been as many bathhouses to let as now at the Bluffs for the season. Mr. Brownell, owner of them [and the Sea View House], has been obliged to build more." *Cottage City Star*, July 25, 1883.

"From the springboard at the head of Highland wharf, whole families enjoy wholesome plunges." *Cottage City Star*, July 28, 1883.

Letter to Editor: "... A good many ladies are fond of diving, but find it inconvenient, to put it mildly, to take this exercise from a raft generally loaded down with gentlemen. Another raft could easily be fastened to the same stake, and would be a great benefit and pleasure for many." *Cottage City Star*, Aug. 4, 1883.

Letter to Editor: "... some action must be taken to make it possible for ladies to bathe without being daily shocked at what they are compelled to witness. Half-grown boys and young men wearing simply trunks. Others with gauze underclothes that when wet are scarcely any more protection than mosquito netting. Even grown men with garments so tight-fitting as not to accomplish the service for which they were intended. . . for this nominally christian place, such should not be tolerated. *This evil demands constant watching!* Will not the public insist on being protected?" *Cottage City Star*, Aug. 25, 1883.



An early photo, c.1880. Lover's Rock was a lonely rock along a beach of sand. A geological freak? The man in a tall silk hat is enjoying his day at the beach.

1884. "Diving platforms, 16 and 23 feet high, have been erected on the Highland wharf." *Cottage City Star*, July 23, 1884.

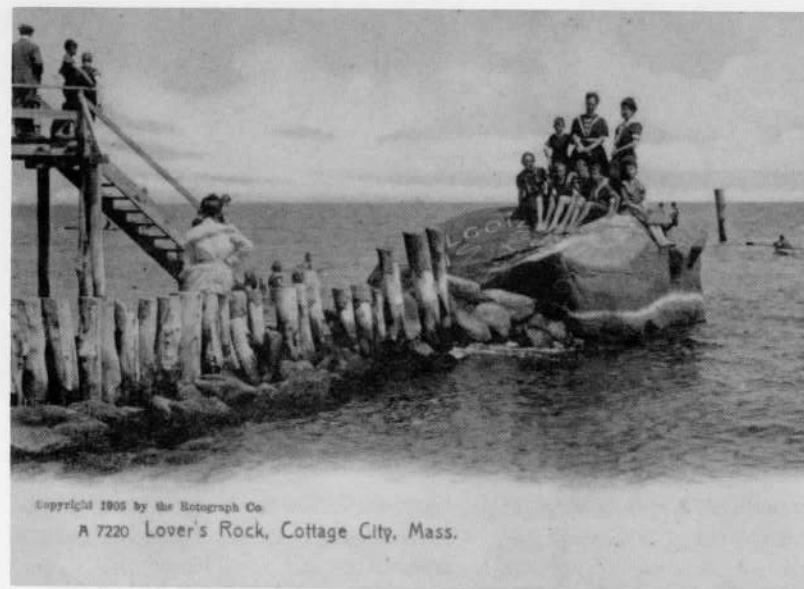
1886. "The amount of physical beauty necessary to render a man sitting on the sand, clad in his bathing suit and nothing else, is possessed, possibly, by one in a thousand. Such an Adonis may be tolerated, with patience, but the nine hundred and ninety-nine unlovely dudes and nondescripts, should hide their varied ugliness beneath the waves." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*; July 17, 1886.

"One thickness of white flannel used in a bathing suit does not shield the human form in a manner quite up to the requirements of a civilized society and our police should make an occasional visit to the beach and escort some of the men and boys out of sight of the ladies." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, July 21, 1886.

1886. "A new raft has been anchored off the Cottage City bathing beach. The ladies love it."

"A human porpoise of the male persuasion, clad in an abbreviated blue suit and wearing an umbrella, is one of the stars of the bathing hour. He would try out³ about five barrels." *Martha's Vine-*

³ A reference to how much oil his "blubber" would provide if boiled in a try pot.



Copyright 1905 by the Photograph Co.
A 7220 Lover's Rock, Cottage City, Mass.

1905 postcard of Lover's Rock shows how "progress" has taken over. Farther from shore, a walkway and a battered bulkhead lead right up to it. *yard Herald*, July 28, 1886.

1892, "The Vineyard Highland Co., have shown a lot of energy. . . this winter. . . Their pier has been put in complete repair, with substantial spring corner piles, the fender piles have been raised. . . to accommodate the new steamer, *Gay Head*. . . A pretty pavilion 25 x 50 feet with a piazza. . . adorns the head of the bathing-houses. . . with refreshment booth where patrons of the bathing beach may enjoy the delights of the every day bathing scenes. One hundred new bath houses have been added and over a central court is built a canopy. City water is supplied. . . with wringers and tubs for the use of bathers at the head of each court. Each house is provided with a glass and pails." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, June 11, 1892.

1892. "Capt. [Frederick] Hart, manager of the Sea View House, has given Cottage City the luxury of a band this season⁴. . . it will play at the bathing pavilion in the forenoon, at the Sea View in the afternoon, and on Ocean Park in the evening." *Vineyard Gazette*, July 14, 1892.

1892. *The Sea View Hotel was destroyed by fire in September,*

⁴ It sounds as though there had been no band concerts the year before. It isn't clear who had been financing the band.



Anne Platt, a Nantucket photographer in the 1890s, took this "candid" photograph, a rarity, at Cottage City. Was she filming the latest bathing costumes?

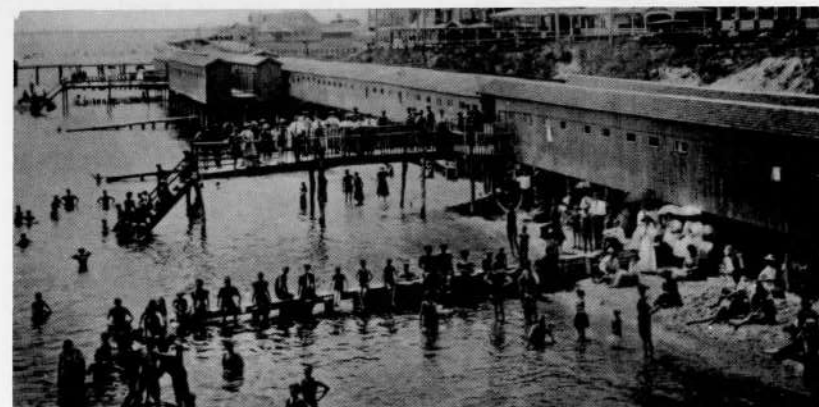
not long after it had closed for the season. Captain Hart had owned it for only one year. The skating rink was badly damaged and had to be torn down. The steamboat wharf was damaged and was only partly repaired. The train to Katama could no longer run out on the wharf to the steamers, but had to end its run at the Bathing Tower.

1894. "The Vineyard Grove Co., through Hamilton J. Greene, Treasurer, have bought of the Sea View Company, their 365 bathing houses, together with the sea front." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, May 31, 1894.

1895. "The Bathing Tower will be torn down this winter. . . Ar-



Chappy beach needed the new bathhouses Chadwick said he would build.



By 1910, Oak Bluffs had plenty of bath houses, but sandy beach was scarce.

rangements will be made to have hot water baths next summer." *Vineyard Gazette*, Sept. 1895.

"Vineyard Grove Co was denied its petition to the state to be permitted to build a hotel structure over tidal water." *Vineyard Gazette*, Dec. 5, 1895.

1896. Several reports of near drownings at the beaches of Cottage City brought calls for lifeguards to be put on duty. The *Herald* editorials charge that owners of the bath houses take money from customers, but do nothing to assure their safety.

The Vineyard Grove Company sold tickets to two men to use the bath houses and the beach. Instead of going bathing, they proceeded to photograph the bathers. The company sued them. *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, August 22, 1896.

1897. "Work has begun on 14 new bath houses on Chappaquiddick Point for Edward Chadwick. . . this will increase the total to 126." *Vineyard Gazette*, August 12, 1897.

1899. "Edward Chadwick is planning to build a wharf at his bathing beach on Chappaquiddick. It will be 80 feet long and 5 feet wide." *Vineyard Gazette*, March 23, 1899.

1900. James W. Tufts, a summer resident, offered the pier he had built near his house at the end of Tuckernuck Avenue to the town of Cottage City if it will promise to maintain it. *Vineyard Gazette*, August 23, 1900.

1902. "The Supreme Judicial Court in Boston took up the question of whether a [Cottage City] bath house and entertainment hall,

partly on the top of the bluffs, partly over the shore and partly beyond low-water mark, should be removed or allowed to stand. The master found that so much as extended above the edge of the bluff should be removed." *Vineyard Gazette*, March 20, 1902.

"The Vineyard Grove Co. has been ordered to remove the portion of the bath house on Oak Bluffs beach that blocks the view of the Sound. It is an ugly building, known as 'the ice house.' It never should have been built." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, May 29, 1902.

Letter to the Editor: "Mr. H. J. Greene, representing the Vineyard Grove Co., . . . claims that the bath houses south of the pavilion are nearly all below the level of the bluff, and do not, in the least obstruct the view. . . Every resident or passerby on Sea View Avenue is deprived of all sight of the beach from Samoset to Penacook Avenues. . . by the ugly and unattractive structures. . . from one to four feet above the grade of Sea View Avenue. . . Mr. Greene even says 'our stairways are the only way to reach the shore at present, our beach is the best on the island.' It would seem that the Vineyard Grove Co., has no legal right to charge a fee for passing through its gates to the beach. . . The bath houses, both north and south of the pavilion, being over tide-water, have no legal right of existence, since no license was ever issued. . . it is out of all reason that all the beach privileges of a watering place should be in the control of private parties. . . The town should own the beach and every avenue terminating at Sea View Avenue [should be] extended to the water's edge. CITIZEN." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, July 14, 1902.

Letter to the Editor: "Cannot something be done to prevent bathers from going to and from cottages in bathing suits? It has got to be such a nuisance in Atlantic City, the aldermen have passed an ordinance forbidding the practice. Educate public opinion through your paper. ANON." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, August 2, 1902.

1903. "Vineyard Grove Co., has built a wider platform and shelter roof to the large building. adding much to the comfort of spectators." *Martha's Vineyard Herald*, August 8, 1903.

Bath houses continued to be used in Oak Bluffs until 1944 when they were destroyed by a hurricane. Their use declined after the automobile arrived. It provided transportation to more distant beaches where there was no fee and more space on the sand. And bathers arrived wearing bathing suits.

The era of the bath house was over.

Sharper Michael, Born a Slave, First Islander Killed in the Revolution

by R. ANDREW PIERCE

IT WAS A HISTORIC MOMENT when the first Vineyarder was killed at Gay Head by the British in the Revolutionary War. We have known of that violent encounter¹ for years and now we believe we know the name of that man, the first Islander to die in the Revolution. He was Sharper Michael, a black man from Squibnocket.

A document in the Massachusetts State Archives, among the papers of the Bristol, Rhode Island, County Supreme Judicial Court, has provided the information. Sharper Michael was born a slave in Chilmark in 1742, he married an Indian from Gay Head (now Aquinnah) in 1775 and, the document indicates, was killed by a musket ball on the beach during a fire fight with a British naval vessel in 1777.

The court file contains details about Sharper and his descendants that provide a fresh insight into the intermingling of Indians and blacks and the presence of slaves on the Vineyard during those early years.

At that Bristol courthouse in October 1816, the "Inhabitants of Westport" were appealing a judgment by the Bristol County Court of Common Pleas denying them reimbursement by "The Inhabitants of Chilmark" for expenses they incurred to support and maintain since 1813, one Harriet Michael, "a poor person found in. . . Westport [R.I.] standing in need of relief. . . [and] having her legal settlement in. . . Chilmark."

The question at issue was her "settlement": in which town

R. ANDREW PIERCE of Boston, a professional genealogist, is the co-author with Dr. Jerome D. Segel of West Tisbury, of *The Wompanoag Genealogical History of Martha's Vineyard*, Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc.). Volume I, published in 2003, is available from the authors, the publishers and the Bunch of Grapes Bookstore in Vineyard Haven. Volumes II and III will be available in 2006. Mr. Pierce is also co-authoring with Franklin A. Dorman, *Native American Families of Nantucket and Cape Cod, 1650-1950*, which will also be published in 2006. His address is P. O. Box 6101, Boston, 02114; email: apgen@earthlink.net.

¹ "The Story of Martha's Vineyard," *Intelligencer*, November 2002, Chapter 3, p. 98.

was she a legal resident, a finding that would obligate the town to support her as a pauper. But the file reveals much more:

The plts [plaintiffs] proved that the pauper was the grand child of one Sharper Michael who. . . was the Negro slave of. . . Zacheus Mayhew Esqr., [and] was born at his dwelling house in. . . Chilmark about the year 1742 & was the child of one Rose, another of. . . Mayhew's slaves. Sharper lived with. . . Mayhew. . . until a short time before he removed to a place called Gay's [sic] head when. . . Mayhew agreed to emancipate him, but no Bond was given. . . as required by the statue regulating the emancipation of slaves.

That sd Sharper, a few months after removing to Gay's head in the year 1775, was married to one Lucy Peters a native Indian & a free person by whom he had a child named Marcy, the Mother of the pauper. It was agreed that neither the pauper [Harriet Michael] who was an illegitimate child nor her mother ever gained any settlement in their own rights, but the plts contended that the pauper has a derivative settlement from her grandfather. . . Sharper Michael, who had a derivative settlement from his. . . Master [Zacheus Mayhew].

A verdict was taken for the plts by consent of parties, and if from the above facts the Court should be of opinion that the pauper has a derivative settlement from the said Sharper Michael in said Town of Chilmark then Judgment is to be entered agreeable to the verdict, otherwise the plts are to become non-suit.

Ten depositions were entered into evidence, given by a number of elderly people (most of them from Gay Head) who had known Sharper and his family for years. Here are excerpts:

I, Peter Tallman. . . knew Sharper Michael who was a reputed slave to Zacheus Mayhew. . . in the year 1775, said Sharper came to Gayhead & in the same year was married to Lucy Peters by Josiah Tilton Esquire – I was present and saw. . . [them] joined in marriage. . . Sharper died in Sept. 1777 & Lucy died 5 or 6 years after him. . . I always understood that Sharper Michael was born at the dwelling house of said Zacheus Mayhew Esquire of a woman named Rose, who was an African and a Reputed Slave and I have heard Rose say that Sharper was her son – Rose lived with sd Mayhew until her death.

Ezra Allen, Joel Rogers, Moses Howwoswee, Simon May-

hew and Jonathan Cuff gave similar testimony. Joel Rogers stated that Zacheus Mayhew, who died about 1775, had "promised to free. . . Sharper Michael when his oldest son become of age but he did not stay that time"; and that Sharper "took on Cattle with an intent to keep partly [his wife] Lucy's right [at Gay Head] and [the cattle] ran there until his death."

Rogers said that Sharper was "about thirty years of age" when he came to Gay Head and married Lucy, the widow of Simeon Peters. Mayhew and Rogers both stated that Sharper died in September 1777; Allen, Rogers, Howwoswee and Cuff agreed that Sharper died from "a wound which he received in his head by a musket ball." A violent death, it was.

Many years later, the *Vineyard Gazette*² told of the violence (it was also mentioned in the *Gazette*, May 8, 1936):

The Skirmish off Squibnocket

The following incident occurred here, probably during the Revolution. An American coaster fleeing from an English bird-of-prey, commonly known as a privateer, finding escape impossible was run on the beach and fired. The Englishmen sent in barges loaded with plunderers who put out the fire, but before they had done much looting, Abner Mayhew, who lived on Squibnocket, descended to the beach with his shot gun loaded with buck-shot and opened fire on the gang of red-coats. He managed to conceal himself so well that their return fire did him no harm, while he wounded many, it is not known that he actually killed anyone.

In the meantime, a negro procured a howitzer with which he began to bombard the invaders from the cliff above and they were finally compelled to draw off without having effected their purpose, but with so many wounded that they must tow one of the barges out.

The Englishman. . . stood off and on all day, shelling the coast, but the only damage he did was to a negro whose curiosity led him to the cliff to see what might be doing and who got in the way of an English ball.

It has been no uncommon thing in the past to dig up the small cast iron balls of about three inches diameter, which

² *Vineyard Gazette*, February 4, 1909, "Stories, Legends. . . Picked Up by C. G. Hine in Recent Trips About the Island." Hardly a solid source of history, but as we shall see, it is bolstered elsewhere.

came ashore at that time.

This *Gazette* account was almost certainly describing the same incident that was recorded by British Capt. John Symons of *H. M. S. Cerberus* in his journal entry on Monday, September 1, 1777:³

at 6 AM saw a sl[oop] off Montock [Montaug] weighed and Gave Chace. . . at 2 PM at Gay head. . . at 4 Run the Chace on shore who prov'd to be a Schooner, Loaded Wt Rum, Sugar & Warlike Stores, Anch'd within Gun shott of her & kept a constant fire upon a Body of Arm'd Men lurking about the Beach while our Boats went & Burnt the Vessell, had 1 Man kill'd & 1 Wounded, ½ past 6 weighed & came to Sail.

Another confirmation of the armed skirmish is that on September 11, 1777, Keziah Coffin Fanning of Nantucket noted in her diary: "News come to [Nantucket] that there was a large number of men of war at the Vineyard burning & destroying there."

It seems probable, when we compare the dates and the testimony given in the 1816 court as well as from Hine's anecdotal account, that the unfortunate man killed by the shots fired from the *Cerberus* by the English was Sharper Michael of Squibnocket.

No other documentary evidence of his fate, or even of his existence, has been found in Vital or Probate Records, or in church records on the Vineyard. Was it not for the two towns' squabbling forty years later over who was to pay for the support of his granddaughter, Harriet, Sharper's story would have not have been saved.

The depositions establish that the daughter of Sharper and Lucy, Mercy Michael, born in 1776, was "put out to be a servant to David Davis of Edgartown," then went to Rhode Island, where she died about 1809. Her daughter, Harriet Michael, born in 1801 (the subject of the court case) was raised in Westport by relatives of Paul Cuffe, the famous sea captain and abolitionist. In 1835, she married Cuffe's nephew, Samuel Cuffe.

³ William James Morgan, editor, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1980, Volume 9, p. 863.

On July 11, 1903, the *New Bedford Evening Standard* interviewed Sharper's granddaughter, Harriet, who was then 102 years old. An illustration of her was printed along with the interview. She died less than a year later and the *Standard* published her obituary on March 11, 1904. She and Samuel have descendants living today.

Vineyard history buffs may recall the name, Nancy Michael, whose story was told by Jacqueline Holland in "The African-American Presence on Martha's Vineyard" (*Intelligencer* August 1991) and by Elaine Cawley Weintraub and Carrie B. Tankard in *The African-American Heritage of Martha's Vineyard*. Nancy was born a slave of Cornelius Bassett of Chilmark about 1772 and died at Edgartown in 1856.

In 1852, the town of Edgartown sued the town of Tisbury over who was to support Nancy, then an aged pauper (Supreme Judicial Court file #6563, Barnstable County). Depositions established that Nancy's mother, Rebecca, had come from Guinea, Africa, and was also one of the slaves owned by Cornelius Bassett. Nancy's father's name is not given in these papers, nor does it appear on her death record. Nancy had a brother, James Michael, a mariner. He owned a house in Edgartown that he bought in 1795 and which Nancy inherited when he died. In 1819, Nancy sold it, as his "sister and only surviving heir" (Dukes County Deeds, Vol. 21, pp. 71-72).

In 1804 and 1808, Nancy sued two different men for support of her two children who she stated had been conceived at her brother James's house in Edgartown. Her 1804 testimony called him "James Sharper," while her 1808 testimony called him, "James Michael." It is certainly reasonable to suppose that Sharper Michael was the father of both Nancy and James, who were born a few years before Sharper moved from Chilmark to Gay Head where he married Lucy Peters.

Sharper Michael's story, buried for almost two hundred years, reminds us that in the early 1800s Massachusetts was not free from the scourge of slavery. Sharper, who had been born a slave, achieved freedom and built a home among the Wampanoags at Gay Head, only to be cut down in his prime, the first Vineyard casualty in the colony's struggle for independ-

ence. It is an interesting coincidence in history: a black man, Crispus Atticus, killed in the 1770 Boston Massacre, is believed to have been the first colonist to die for independence; and another black man, Sharper Michael, was first to be killed by the British on the Vineyard in the Revolution in 1777.

Afterword

The story of the Michael/Martin family is remarkable and Nancy Michael was a prime factor. It began in the mid-1700s when two female slaves from Africa, Rose and Rebecca, came to Chilmark. In 1772, Rebecca gave birth to Nancy and it is believed that Rose's son, Sharper Michael, was her father, as she is listed as Nancy Michael in the estate of Cornelius Bassett in 1779, daughter of Rebecca, seven years old, a slave valued at £180. Sharper was killed, as we have seen, in 1777.

Nancy had a brother (perhaps a half-brother), James Michael, who became a mariner and bought a small house in Edgartown which was inherited by sister Nancy when he died.

Nancy Michael never married, but had two daughters: Rebecca Ann in 1804 and Lucy Ann in 1808. She "fell into distress" as a pauper in 1812 and her problems worsened.

Daughter Rebecca Ann was frequently jailed for drunkenness and related misdemeanors. Nancy herself spent five days in jail for debt in 1821. When Rebecca Ann had a son, William A. Martin, in 1827, father unidentified, her behavior didn't improve. She served nine jail sentences after his birth. She died in 1854.

Nancy was William's surrogate mother during all this disorder. He went to sea early in life and by the mid-1800s was first mate of the Edgartown whaler *Europa* in the Pacific. He was promoted to master of the *Golden City* of New Bedford in 1878, making him the Island's first (perhaps only) black whaling master. Sadly, Nancy died in 1856, before grandson William became Captain William.

In four generations, the family had gone from slaves to whaling master. When Nancy died, the *Vineyard Gazette*, in a rare tribute to a black woman, wrote: "She was a most singular character, and it will doubtless be a long time before we shall look upon her like again." (See back cover.)

In Memoriam: Elmer W. Athearn 1915 – 2005

Elmer W. Athearn, who died January 21, was never called by his baptismal name: he was always "Mike." It was a name that matched his personality and style. A genuine guy, solid. No airs, no inflated ego, a genuine person.

He belonged to one of the oldest Island families, the Athearns. It was an Athearn who challenged Gov. Thomas Mayhew back in the 1600s. Mike was of a more flexible cast, not the kind of person to start a revolt, as his ancestor, Simon Athearn, had tried to do. He could see the other person's viewpoint.

Mike Athearn first became active in the Society when he took an interest in the clockwork mechanism of the 1856 Fresnel lens on our property. It was obvious to craftsman Mike that it needed more care than it was getting. He began arriving once or twice a week with cloths, metal cleaner and oil to work on the mechanism, removing the dirt and patina that come with inattention. By the time he had finished, the clockwork looked as it had when it was rotating the giant lens every night to inform mariners of their whereabouts as they made their first landfall at Gay Head after sailing from Europe in the mid-1800s.

His work on the Fresnel introduced him to the importance of the Society and he agreed to serve on the Board. At meetings, which he rarely missed, Mike said little, but listened attentively. When some "newcomer" to the Island, sitting at the table, would make a statement contrary to historical fact, Mike politely, but firmly, set him straight. He became the Council's authority on the humanity of history; on the Island people who had made it.

He served several terms on the Council, bringing to every meeting a dedication to truth and a love of history.

And it all began when he noticed that the clockwork of the Fresnel lens needed more loving care.

Thank you, Mike. We will try to keep that clockwork just the way you would want it to be.

Vineyard Gazette Pays a "Tribute" of Sorts to an Island Black Woman

AN OLD LANDMARK GONE.—Mrs. Nancy Michael, known to most of our readers by the familiar cognomen of "*Black Nance*" is no more. She departed this life on Saturday last, at a very advanced age. Probably she was not far from 100 years old. She had changed but little in her appearance for 40 years past; and those who knew her 50 years ago looked upon her as an old woman. She was a very remarkable character in her day. Naturally possessed of kind feelings, she was very fond of children, and usually attentive to their wants; and there are but few among us who have not at some time been indebted to her.

Possessed of a strong natural mind, she acquired great influence over some of our people, by many of whom she was looked upon as a witch. She professed to have the power of giving good or bad luck to those bound on long voyages; and it was no unusual thing for those about to leave on whaling voyages to resort to her, to propitiate her favor by presents, etc., before leaving home. Special woes were denounced by her upon those who were too independent to acknowledge her influence. In case of bad news from any vessel commanded by one who had defied her power, she was in ecstasies, and her fiendish spirit would at once take full control of her.

At such times she might be seen in our streets, shaking her long, bony fingers at all unbelievers in her magical power; and pouring forth the most bitter invectives upon those whom she looked upon as her enemies. Her strange power and influence over many continued till the day of her death, though for two or three years past she was mostly confined to her room.

Taking her all in all, she was a most singular character, and it will doubtless be a long time before we shall look upon her like again. She was a professor of religion, and we believe at one time adorned the profession. "May her good deeds long live in our remembrance, and her evil be interred with her bones."

Vineyard Gazette, January 2, 1857.

It was rare for the Gazette to print a "kind" article about any black and especially about a black woman. It had difficulty being totally kind to Nancy.