STUDENT HISTORIES:

- A History of Fishing
- Silence of the Heath Hens
- Gosnold's Great Adventure

PLUS:

A Great-Uncle Lost and Found

Early History of the Grange Hall
TO OUR READERS

This double edition of the Dukes County Intelligencer inaugurates what I hope will become an annual tradition of featuring student work. Students of the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School freshman class under teacher David Wilson were assigned to do a research paper on the topic of their choice on the subject of Martha's Vineyard history. (In the interest of full disclosure, Mr. Wilson is the editor's spouse.) Three of those papers are published in this edition. We also welcome back Jean Cargill, writing on the building of the Agricultural Society's first hall. To round out this issue Chris Baer has uncovered a family mystery and tells us the story of an unusual love affair with a bittersweet ending.

This edition of the Dukes County Intelligencer marks the launch of a new collaboration with EBSCO, a subscription service for libraries and academic institutions. EBSCO will be making available a digital version of the Intelligencer to subscribers to their service. This not only increases accessibility but widens the audience for the DCI. A link on the EBSCO website to the MVM website will introduce new researchers to the Martha's Vineyard Museum.

Submissions to the Intelligencer are welcome. For guidelines, please contact swilson@mvmuseum.org. Letters to the editor intended for publication are also welcome.

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A Hole in the Bible

A Vineyard Haven Family's Personal Mystery
And a Town's Racial Attitudes
At the Turn of the Century

by Chris Baer

There's a hole in the middle of our family Bible that looks like it was made with a blue ball-point pen. The pen chewed through the "Family Records" page in our leather-bound 1838 tome, marring the first page of the Apocrypha on the other side. Most of a deleted birth record is still visible around the edges of the hole: "Ralph Crosby Lair, born April 18, 1900." This is the beginning of the story of my great-uncle Ralph. He was black. I am white, and so is the family I grew up in.

Ralph was my grandfather's illegitimate half-brother — the uncle we never knew. The product of an affair between my white great-grandmother, Marion, and a black Vineyard Haven barber, Uncle Ralph's existence was denied by one side of the family, and another branch of the family shunned

CHRIS BAER teaches art, design and technology at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. He maintains an online archive of Vineyard genealogy and historic images. Visit http://history@vineyard.net and http://oldtimeislands.org. All images in this article are from the author's collection.
African-Americans were welcome at the Oak Bluffs camp meetings, although occasionally black men and women were allowed to sing for white Methodist audiences.

Three years later, in 1876, William and Ellen Hammond were the high bidders in a public auction of a widow’s estate in downtown Vineyard Haven, across from the Mansion House hotel. For $285, they found themselves the owners of a narrow lot with an ancient, pre-revolutionary home in the rear.

Vineyard Haven was a sleepy, rural village in 1876. Main Street was a rutted dirt road bordered by a few narrow, dangerous planks serving as sidewalks. The whaling years long over, much of the town’s business came from Campground tourists who were lured over the brand-new Vineyard Haven-Oak Bluffs bridge to spend their vacation dollars. The town’s population was in decline, as young men left town for greener pastures.

Vineyard Haven was and is white — very white. Only one other black family lived in Vineyard Haven when the Hammonds arrived, aside from a few domestic servants (mostly young women) living in the homes of their white employers. Nonetheless, the town has black history tales to tell.
Charles Bennett Ray

The most influential African-American man in the 19th century with roots in Vineyard Haven was certainly Charles Bennett Ray, a leading abolitionist and one of the most distinguished black leaders of his day. He published what was by 1840 the most important African-American newspaper in the United States, the Colored American, and as an active "conductor" of the Underground Railroad. Ray was personally involved in helping Southern families escape slavery.

Charles was the son of Joseph Ray, who for thirty years carried the U.S. Mail from Falmouth to Holmes Hole in his small open sailboat in even the stormiest weather. (His predecessor drowned.) In the 1820s, the elder Ray placed his teenage son Charles in an apprenticeship with shoemaker Thomas Robinson of Holmes Hole, to labor in his shoemaking shop on the northeast corner of Main Street and Union Street, about where the shop Two Susans has opened in recent years.

I’d like to think that Rev. Charles Ray's years in Vineyard Haven helped him to become the national figure he became, and perhaps they did, but the few records we have are mostly just embarrassing. Although later in life Rev. Ray was remembered fondly by his white peers from the Vineyard, their memories focused mostly on the leather strap used by shoemaker Robinson to beat young Ray. In 1832 Ray left the Island to become the first black student to enroll at Wesleyan University; however, his time there lasted less than two months as white students immediately demanded his removal. 3

Minstrelsy and Denigration

By the time the Hammonds settled in town, Rev. Ray had been gone from Vineyard Haven nearly fifty years, the Island was still more than 96 percent white, and racial ignorance and prejudice were not exactly hidden. Local dry goods merchant Louis Rosskoph, whose store was about where Mosher Photo is today, regularly published ads in the newspaper featured a young, slack-jawed black boy poking his head through a large tear in what we assume is a square of "Louis Hermosdorff Standard Fast Black Ho-

3 His daughter Charlotte eventually became the first African American woman to pass the bar and become a practicing lawyer, an event celebrated even in the Island newspapers.

Fred West’s troupe, “The Great Ethiopian Combination,” numbered nearly 100 white, black-faced performers.

siery” to mouth lines like “Golly, Boss, we all knows they ain’t but two fast blacks. I’s one an’ Hermosdorff’s de udder.”

Other than the occasional visit by Wampanoag families from Christian town, or visits by the very first “Bravos”— a local slang term for the dark-skinned Cape Verdeans who had begun to settle in nearby Cottage City — the only other black faces regularly seen in town were the members of a local all-white minstrel troupe whose faces were darkened with burnt cork — F.M. West’s Great Ethiopian Combination, a homegrown black-face minstrel show.

Fred Mortimer West, the son of a Vineyard Haven whaling captain, was a natural-born showman. He played the banjo, sang, performed feats of ventriloquism, and made "stump speeches" (the racially-charged forerunners of modern stand-up comedy acts). Barely in his twenties, he spent a few years juggling a string of failed Vineyard Haven business ventures in the late 1870s, including a ice cream and oyster saloon and a shooting gallery, before recruiting his friends and other local talent to found the “Impromptu Minstrels,” performing songs in blackface such as “Happy Are We, Darkies So Gay” to enthusiastic audiences around the Island. By the early 1880s his troupe, renamed the “Great Ethiopian Combination,” had grown to nearly one-hundred white, black-faced performers, among the largest minstrel shows in New England. It toured widely off-Island,
performing comic sketches, short dramas, songs and dance, with black-faced Fred M. West both the star and the stage manager of the show.

In early 1880 Hammond began construction of a barber shop on his property opposite the Mansion House hotel. It was already a crowded commercial district — immediately to his north stood the tailor shop of Abraham Anthony, who also served as superintendent of the seven Tisbury schools. To his south was Thomas Hillman’s saloon, although Hillman himself was freshly home from prison and his saloon was occupied by a dry goods shop, the Vineyard Haven Cheap Store.

Barbering was relatively new to Vineyard Haven — until the 1870s, barbering had been a more casual, part-time occupation. In November 1874, two young African American barbers from New Bedford had just opened a shop, presumably leased from a white landlord, in Vineyard Haven when they capsized a boat in the Lagoon while oystering. One died of a heart attack; the other promptly left the Island. In the summer of 1879 another barber shop operated by African Americans opened in Vineyard Haven, which the newspaper derided as offering “pineapple cuts,” adding, “We look and wonder if the dusky tonsorial has inherited any of the atrocious spirit of the aborigines and scalped the youth.”

By the summer of 1880, William “Barber” Hammond, now assisted by his brother Moses, had settled into their brand new quarters on Main Street, featuring two “luxuriously” Rochester chairs and a striped barber pole out front. The Gazette wrote “Give them a call, and sharp as you consider yourself; be cautious, or you may get shaved.”

Hammond became a well-known and well-respected figure on Main Street. The Gazette described him as “the jolly village barber.” Author Gratia Harrington remembered going to visit his shop: “When I was a little girl, Mr. Hammond, a plump and suave Negro gentleman, presided over the shop,” she wrote. “Every spring I went with my sisters to have my hair cut short so it would be cool in summer and no trouble to mother.” Hammond was also active in the newly formed town band, the Vineyard Haven Brass Band, for which he served as drum-major.

New Beginnings

In August 1883 disaster struck. Fire broke out at Crocker’s Harness Fac-

tory on the other end of Main Street, where Sovereign Bank stands today. Within a matter of a few hours, high winds spread the flames all the way down both sides of the street, and the Hammonds’ home and barber shop were quickly engulfed. Other than one small shop near the wharf, every store in town was destroyed. The Hammond’s dreams were reduced to a blackened lot. Their losses totaled some $1150 and they held no insurance. The New Bedford newspapers printed his name among a short list of “those who are left nearly destitute.”

Nonetheless, within days Hammond had reopened his barber shop in a friend’s shed, and within two weeks they had found the money from somewhere to purchase an additional lot to his north, next to the ashes of the old tailor shop. He hired a local contractor, and by that December he had completed the building which now stands across the street from Zephyr, and had reopened his doors to business. He lacked one necessary item, however — a barber pole — so he painted the red and white stripes on the street lantern out front.

A decade of relative prosperity passed. His brother Moses left the Island, but Hammond hired new barbers, white barbers. In 1888 he had the shop and his home piped with Tashmoo Spring water, among the first in town to do so. A new boot shining stand opened on the sidewalk out in
our local blackface minstrel leader Fred M. West. Her husband, Capt. Leroy Crosby Lair, was a gregarious harnessmaker and a restless entrepreneur, a tall, mustachioed ladies’ man who wore a captain’s hat and smoked a pipe. Abandoned by his father as a child, Lair had moved to the Vineyard as a teenager in the 1880s in order to labor in Crocker’s infamous harness factory, and then opened a harness business of his own on Main Street when Crocker’s empire finally collapsed. It was in the back of Lair’s harness shop, just a block or so north of the barber shop, where Hammond and Marion were said to have had romantic trysts when Cap’n Lair was at sea, skippering for a variety of employers when the harness business was slow.

We can only imagine how Cap’n Leroy Lair reacted to his wife’s delivery in April 1900 of baby Ralph in the William Street home they shared with his mother, stepfather, and grandmother, together with their two children, Fanny and Carlton (my grandfather Stan hadn’t been born yet). Ralph remained unnamed for his first several months of life. In the end, Cap’n Lair accepted him and chose to raise him as his son, and gave him not only his last name but also his middle name, Crosby, honoring members of his mother’s family. Ralph’s birth was dutifully recorded in black ink under his siblings in the ancient family Bible which Lair’s grandmother had brought over from Mattapoisett.

Two months after Ralph’s arrival, Cap’n Lair chose to expand his harness shop into a social clubroom and billiard hall, holding suppers for tug captains and pool games for young men. He ran the harness shop/boys’ club for more than two years before giving up on harnesses altogether, for there was another unwelcome arrival that year: the automobile. In November 1902, shortly after the birth of his last son Stan, a biological son, Cap’n Lair sold his shop and began a new business crisscrossing the harbor in a small steamer “bumboat” selling goods to anchored vessels, like a floating convenience store. He named his little steamer Marion H., a tribute to his housebound wife, Marion Hodge West Lair. His lifelong dedication to Marion is well-remembered in our family, especially as she began a long slow descent into dementia in her final decades of life.

**An Island Childhood; An Outsider’s Life**

“Barber” Hammond lived until 1914. It’s not known whether he had any relationship with his son Ralph. Hammond played for the Vineyard Haven

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4 The Monohansett was famous for its role as General Ulysses Grant’s dispatch ship during the Civil War. General Grant was reportedly very fond of this boat, and President Abraham Lincoln and his wife are said to have also spent time aboard.
Baseball Team in the early 1900s, and remarried in 1906. After his death, his shop and haircutting business passed to Joe Penney of Oak Bluffs, then to the eccentric and mysterious Italian immigrant Charlie Bell, and then to another Italian barber, Humberto "Bert" Colaneri. The business was moved to Beach Road only about twenty years ago, and still bears Bert's name.

Ralph Lair was raised as Cap'n Lair's son, but his African-American complexion clearly set him apart from his three white siblings. Society was not forgiving, nor had race relations changed much in a generation. Ralph's younger brother Stan, my grandfather, a gentle giant who never had a bad word to say about anybody, spoke with discomfort of the popular game booth which would appear each summer at the West Tisbury Agricultural Fair offering paying customers three baseballs and a live human target. The Barker would shout, "Hurry, hurry, hurry! Hit the nigger on the head and win a cigar!"

We have only been able to piece together a few sparse facts about Ralph, known as "Laughy" or "Lefty" Lair to most of his peers. He was a legendary basketball player — widely considered the best basketball player in the history of Tisbury High School. At six-foot-two and ruggedly built, his athletic ability was not limited to basketball — he excelled at football, baseball, boxing, and golf as well.

He also had a reputation for alcohol and for trouble. In April 1922 he was arrested for participating in Sunday boxing matches in Edgartown, together with seven other local young men. The American Legion denied all rumors that they were connected with the bouts. The young men were fined $5 each, and the incident wound up in the sports section of the Boston Globe.

In 1923 Ralph left for New York and became a professional athlete. Records are scarce. We have heard that he played semi-professional football and boxed professionally during the 1920s. John Coutinho told Linsey Lee in a 1997 interview, "[Stan Lair] had a brother called Lefty Lair. And he was a great, great, great athlete. Baseball player, and a basketball player, and everything. He was just wonderful. Colored fellow. Why he was colored, I don't know. God forgive me, but — I don't know how he was colored unless Stanley was — well, mixed up somewhere... A hell of a nice guy. In fact he tried to teach me to play the clarinet when I was caddying up at the [Tashmoo] golf links... He run [the golf shop] for awhile, yes.... He tried to get in the big leagues, but they wouldn't take colored people in the big leagues. You know that. They had a hell of a time to get in. They wouldn't think of it. But he was a fun ball player."5

George "Snookie" Baptiste shared similar memories with Ms. Lee in 1999: "Lefty Lair. Some people called him Laughy, Laughy Lair, and some
called him Lefty Lair. He was an excellent basketball player but he wasn't tall like the basketball players today... There was a little — you know — a little, yeah, mixing there somehow... I asked my father about it one time. He was related to the Lairs, you know, Stan Lair, but there was a mix-up there somehow. My father didn't really want to go into detail with me about it... He was [on the Island] for a while, but then he went off-Island. I never saw him again. I don't know whatever happened to him. He was quite the athlete, though."6

The 1930 census record tells us that Ralph left New York and professional athletics and had moved into a tenement on the corner of L Street and 19th in what is now part of the heart of downtown Washington D.C., but what was then an all-black neighborhood of rooming houses inhabited by servants and cooks. He lived with his girlfriend or wife Beatrice (the records are contradictory as to whether or not they were married). Ralph worked as a hotel busboy.

Sometime during the Great Depression, Ralph returned to the Vineyard and turned heavily to the bottle. In May 1942, as the Island was practicing wartime blackouts, and tire and gasoline rationing boards divided scant resources, Ralph was discovered at 1:30 a.m. in the boiler room of the steamer Nausheon and charged with drunkenness, distur-

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5 Interview with John Coutinho, Oral History Collection, MVM

6 Interview with George Baptiste, Oral History Collection, MVM
bance of the peace, trespass and resisting arrest. He was found guilty on all charges and sentenced to the State Farm in Bridgewater. Formerly the state almshouse, the Bridgewater State Farm was an asylum for the "criminally insane" and a common last stop for alcoholics in trouble with the law. The Gazette printed a tongue-and-cheek news item of the incident which must have been humiliating for Ralph and his family: "He [Lair] had been arrested at 1:30 that morning, in the boiler room of the Naushon, to which he had repaired for some reason not clear even to himself, after a night of jollification."

During the following year, 1943, Ralph's mother Marion died. My mom remembers Cap'n Lair coming to their home that morning, sitting on the kitchen chair, and sobbing.

**Letters to Leroy from His Son**

In 1944, Ralph got into further trouble. We don't know what it was, but it must have been very, very bad. It caused a permanent rift in the family. We have a letter Ralph wrote to Cap'n Lair in October 1945 which gives us some hints:

Dear Pa:

I don't know whether you want to hear from me or not but I thought I would write you and let you know that I am still alive.

Thanks a lot for the ten ($10.00) that you sent me last winter.

I have been just about breaking even here so I haven't been able to help you any. I am making good money but I have been spending it too. It costs a lot to live.

I want to tell you that I got married up here and am going to make Worcester my home.

How are you making out? Fine I hope.

What do you hear from Rich? I haven't heard any Island news since I have been here. I doubt if I will see the Island again before next summer - if then. The only reason I am going to pick up what few things I may have left there.

I messed up everything for me down there.

If you could I would like you to come up and visit me here. I have a nice four room apartment and you would be very welcome at any time. Can't you come up for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I have a nice little wife you would love her.

If you want to you can make your permanent home with us. We would like it very much.

I'm sorry I took so long to write but you know how I am.

I know that you would like it here with us.

I had a few set-backs last winter but I am just about getting on my feet now.

Please write and let me know how you are.

My wife is a swell kid and I know that you would love her. We are very happy to-gether.

Please try to come up Thanksgiving or Christmas or come up here to stay with me forever.

Your Son,

Ralph

Cap'n Lair never went to live with Ralph, but he did save the letter, which my mother discovered in the old family home on Center Street many years after his death. Ralph never returned to the Island, and his name was never mentioned by the family. We have no idea what happened to him after that — we don't know what he did, or even whether he had children. Some branches of the family denied he existed. Somebody — probably one of my sweet old great aunts — quietly took a ball-point pen to his birth record. Two decades passed. Then in the early 1960s my grandfather and Ralph began to write letters to each other. My grandfather never spoke about what was in the letters, but he carefully saved each letter in his desk drawer.

In 1965 a woman telephoned my mother and introduced herself as Alma Lair, Ralph's wife, from Worcester. She explained that Ralph was dying. A couple days later she called again to inform our family that Ralph had
The Tisbury Bears baseball team. Ralph Lair stands second from the right in the back row in the last photo we have of him. Back row, from left: Elijah Crowell, Everett Tilton, Stanley Smith, Wallace Pinkham, Em. Elliot, Ralph Lair, George Carey. Front row, from left: Manuel Campbell, Reginald Pinto, Jesse Oliver, Joe Campbell, Antone Silvia.

died. My mother cried for a full day, mourning the uncle she never knew.

When my grandfather passed away, Mom went looking through his desk drawers to find Ralph's letters. She didn't find them. Just the week before he died, my grandfather had thrown them all out.

There's a hole in our family Bible.

Histories from the High School: A Special Section

The Martha's Vineyard Museum welcomes first-time contributors Ian Tripp, Jack Shannon and Will Stewart to these pages. As an assignment for their freshman English class at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, these youngsters have written research papers about Martha's Vineyard using the resources of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, including oral histories, images, documents, and this publication, as well as resources available to them via the internet. For those who lament the state of public education in America, read these submissions with joy. Well researched and well-written, these articles belie the youth of their authors and offer a fresh perspective on three very different topics of Island history.

— Ed.

A History of Fishing on Martha's Vineyard

by WILLIAM STEWART

The people who lived around here thought we had the only job in town," said Robert Jackson Jr., the son of a legendary swordfisherman of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Fishing was not only a keystone of the Vineyard economy, but vital to the Island culture as well. Although fishing has evolved from early Wampanoag methods to the modern practices of today, it has always been at the center of the Vineyard way of life. Not only have many generations of Island families made their living from the sea, but offshore commercial fishing, shellfishing, and recreational fishing have also been major factors of the Island's identity and economy.


WILLIAM STEWART is a native of Oak Bluffs and has just entered his sophomore year at Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. He enjoys high school sports including golf, basketball, and baseball. Will has fished the Derby for ten years—and three times has been winner of the Junior Shore Bass category.
The Wampanoags fished Vineyard waters as a food source and for trading, but it wasn’t until the mid 1800s that commercial fisheries began to take hold as a viable industry. Commercial fishing replaced whaling as one of the main industries based mainly on the arrival of petroleum products such as kerosene. Because kerosene was cheaper, easier to light, and more readily available, it took the place of whale blubber as a lamp oil. By 1890 whaling had tapered off to nearly nothing. As the whaling trade faded off, swordfishing took its place. Many whaling methods were applied to the swordfishing industry yet they were improved and streamlined over time.

As swordfishing emerged as a commercial industry, harpooning methods were still utilized, but the fishing boats were adapted to the needs of swordfishermen. Large whaling vessels were replaced by sloops, catboats and small schooners. Typically these boats were about 25 feet long and traveled around 12 miles out of Edgartown to the fishing grounds. A bowsprit extended off the front of the boat on which the harpooner would stand, taking aim at the center of a swordfish’s backbone. Swordfish taken by these boats ranged from 12 to 14 feet in length (including the sword which measured about 4 feet) and weighed between 100 and 500 pounds. If a boat took four or five fish in a day, it was considered to be a good haul.

In the early 1850s local swordfish began to be exported from the Island. This led to the development of 14- to 19-foot craft known as Nomansland boats. “Dressed,” or filleted, swordfish were brought back to the Island where they were salted (both Edgartown and Tisbury had their own saltworks) and loaded aboard. These boats, which were also used for cod fishing, were the main method of transport for fish being taken from the Vineyard to ports, including New Bedford, Providence, and New York. Although the Nomansland boats were small, they were extremely durable double-enders that were well suited to local conditions. Each vessel had two sails, a foresail and a mainsail, but relied equally on oars for movement. The design of these boats was such that they were light enough to be hauled up on shore when not in use, yet they were stable enough that they could safely hold a large capacity of fish when in transit to large East Coast ports.

In the early 1900s new techniques were implemented to keep up with increasing demand for swordfish. The area of Georges Bank was discovered as a fruitful fishing ground, but in order to maximize fishing hours relative to travel time, fishermen began to spend several weeks a time at sea as opposed to the previously customary day trips. Horace Hillman and Bob Jackson, who were considered to be two of the best fishermen of their time, were among the first locals to venture to Georges Bank.

Being at sea for longer periods of time required the use of large schooners as fishing vessels. A schooner of sixty or more feet would typically have an eight-man crew. Of the eight men, five would be positioned in the rigging to spot fish. The three men left on the deck included the striker (usually the captain), who threw the harpoon, the engineer, who kept the engine running, and the cook. When the striker harpooned a fish the cook would toss a keg overboard. The keg, a large floating barrel that acted as a positioning device for harpooned fish, was attached to 100 fathoms (600 feet) of line. As the keg was tossed overboard, the crewman closest to the bottom of the rigging would jump down and into a dory (small rowboat) to pursue the harpooned fish. When the crewman in the dory reached the keg he would haul the rope until the fish was brought to the surface. If the fish was small, the crewman would raise it into the dory himself. In the
long lining boats on the Vineyard were the Chilmark Sword and the Chilmark Voyager, both built and owned by the Larsen family. Long lines were stored on large reels aboard the boat and were originally four miles long. They eventually became as long as 30 miles with a total of 3000 hooks baited with mackerel.

Long lines were so successful that the swordfish population thinned drastically in the New England area. Usually about 50% of the swordfish taken on long lines had been bitten in half by sharks by the time the lines were hauled in. Still, long lining was far more successful than the harpoon method (even with the aid of airplane spotters), where only one fish could be taken at a time. As swordfish were depleted in the north, captains began traveling as far south as the Gulf of Mexico in search of more fish. Their catches in the south were flown back to preserve freshness. Unfortunately, the days of abundant swordfish in the Northeast were coming to an end.

**Lobstering**

Long before the arrival of Europeans, Wampanoags had been shellfishing. Shellfishing included lobstering, quahoging, scalloping and oystering. Much of the early lobstering on Martha’s Vineyard took place out of Nomansland (part of Chilmark) during the summer months. At one point, around 70 fishermen were camping on Nomans. Herrings were trapped and used as lobster bait. Nomansland was home to a unique fishing culture where everyone, although they were competing from a business standpoint, worked together for the most efficient production and catch. Lobsterville was established as a fishing village after Nomans because of the abundance of lobsters on the north shore of the Vineyard, especially Lucas Shoal and Middle Ground. Lobsterville was used as a port for lobstermen, trap fishermen, and hand liners from April to September. Lobster pots were hand built out of Island wood by the lobstermen. Bricks or rocks were used to weigh down the finished pots which consisted of a door, through which the lobsters could enter but not exit, as well as bait spindles. Pots were set, then hauled in at low tide (so the buoys could be seen) two to three days later. Many of the lobstermen used the locally popular Nomansland boat. Legal lobster size was 10 1/2 inches in Massachusetts but only 9 inches in Rhode Island. Some Vineyard lobstermen would keep their 9-inch lobsters illegally and then sell them in Rhode Island.

In 1904, Menemsha Creek, now known as Menemsha Harbor, was dredged to create a shelter for lobster boats. This allowed lobstermen to live in their year round homes as opposed to camping seasonally at the ports of Lobsterville or Nomansland.

**Shellfishing**

Colonists are thought to have learned early quahoging techniques from the Indians—including the treading method. Fishermen would use their
feet to feel for quahogs and then dig them out by hand. The first record of commercial shellfishing was in 1807 when quahogs were taken with iron rakes in various Vineyard ponds. In the same year it was recorded that $2000 worth of quahogs were sold at $9 per barrel in Edgartown. By 1900 the quahog market had increased dramatically.

Another popular shellfish was the Vineyard oyster:

The oyster is found in Newton Pond, and two other ponds on the south shore, one of which is in Edgartown and the other in Tisbury. The fresh water 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 pond. As the southerly winds fill the canal, the digging must be renewed four or five times in a year.

This quote suggests that freshwater ponds on the Vineyard's south shore were being opened to the ocean as early as 1807. It is also said that the saltwater improved the taste of the oysters, which were found in abundance on the south shore, specifically the two Great Ponds and Katama Bay.

Prior to the 1870s, scalloping was only a small portion of the shellfishing industry on the Vineyard. Scallop didn't become popular until the late 1870s because Islanders had not yet developed a taste for them and they were thought to be poisonous. Eventually, the common misconception was laid to rest and people began to appreciate the delicacy. Consequently, as demand increased, more advanced catching methods were developed. Around 1875, drag fishing for scallops became popular. Dragging allowed scallop-hunters to fish in deeper water which increased the area that they could cover.

The scallop drag was constructed of two straight arms made of iron, connected by an iron blade about 1 1/2 feet wide. A net, which could hold up to a bushel of scallops at a time, was positioned between the arms. The drag was designed to be pulled behind rowboats and catboats. Rowboats could tow one drag while larger catboats (18-23 feet) could tow two. Onboard the catboat was a culling board that ran the entire length of the boat. On the culling board, scallops were separated from the "junk" picked up by the drags. Junk included crabs, clams, and other shellfish. A single catboat completely rigged for scalloping could be operated by one or two men.

By 1907, small 8-horsepower engines were being used by catboats. While boats used about five gallons of gas per day, which ran at fifty cents per gallon, scallop hauls increased by 33% to 50%. The motors also allowed for six separate drags to be towed at a time. Clearly, these factors greatly increased the profitability of scalloping.

**The Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass & Bluefish Derby**

In 1946, a year after the end of World War II, a group of fishermen gathered to create an annual recreational fishing tournament on the Vineyard. The development of this event was headed by Nat Sperber, who was working as a public relations agent for the Massachusetts Steamship Lines, which ran a ferry between Martha's Vineyard and the mainland. In an attempt to establish the Island as a major tourist destination and promote the ferry system, the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby was founded. Over the years the derby became a world renowned event. According to Ed Jerome, a well known Island fisherman, and current Derby president, "This is a tournament run for and by fishermen."

Long before the establishment of the Derby, the Squibnocket Club was a popular spot for many anglers. Members ranged from well known celebrities to politicians. The club was formed in 1869 and included a clubhouse with numerous bedrooms and a large porch where members could observe the fishing conditions. The building was located atop the Squibnocket cliffs and as a convenience to the fishermen, eight different bass stands up to 100 feet branched off the porch. These bass stands were "narrow wooden walkways constructed of spruce, which was less slippery when wet than pine, and supported by iron rods driven into the boulders that extended out over the water." Chummers were employed to create optimal fishing conditions for club members. Their duties included anything from attracting fish to the area with lobster bodies, to baiting hooks, to actually landing the fish for the members. Although "chummers" are no longer in existence, modern charter captains play the same role for "hands-off" fishermen.

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3 Clark, A. Howard. "Historical Reference to the Fisheries of New England."


Wampanoags fished the Island for uncounted generations, but historical accounts of fishing only date back to the arrival of early English settlers. After the decline of the whaling industry, commercial fishing efforts shifted to swordfishing, shellfishing, and recreational fishing. Throughout Vineyard history, many, many people have been connected to the fishing industry as either a means of income or a recreational passion. Although the methods of catching have evolved over the years, fishing has continued to be a perpetual staple in the Vineyard economy as well as a major part of Island culture.

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Gosnold: The First English Expedition to New England
by JOHN R. SHANNON

ONE SUNNY DAY in 1602 (as it was recorded) off the coast of what is today Maine, a small ship appeared on the horizon. On board were a foreign, pale-skinned people. This ship was the Concord, and these people were English explorers, searching for unknown lands. These men were led by Captain Bartholomew Gosnold of England. He wasn’t the first to come to New England (as the region eventually came to be known), but was the first Englishman to fully explore the region.

The first Europeans to visit North America were the Vikings, led by Leif Erikson, who established temporary colonies in Newfoundland, circa 1001 AD. Centuries later, the Italian Giovanni da Verrazzano briefly sailed along this coast. Later, the Englishman John Cabot explored New Foundland and southern Canada. However, Gosnold was the first British explorer to thoroughly investigate the lands to the south: the Cape and Islands of modern-day Massachusetts.

Sailing away on a technicality...

“The Gosnold family originally came to England from Normandy, with William the Conqueror.” They settled in the region of Ash and became a fairly prominent and wealthy family. Bartholomew Gosnold was born in the year 1571 to Anthony and Dorothy Bacon Gosnold and was one of nine children. When he got older he studied law at the Middle Temple. However, his true desire was to become a sea captain and, with the help of his wife’s family, he became a successful privateer. Gosnold is believed to have sailed with the Earl, Robert Devereux, and even with Sir Walter Raleigh himself.

Gosnold’s friend and teacher, Richard Hakluyt, along with several other nobles and investors, planned a small expedition to North America. Hakluyt recruited Gosnold to lead this voyage. The legality of this voyage, however, was questionable — they hadn’t informed Sir Walter Raleigh of their plans. Raleigh, who was in charge of English explora-

1 Wilson, H.C. Gosnold’s Hope: The Story of Bartholomew Gosnold. p. 18.

JOHN R. SHANNON completed his freshman year at the Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School in June. Outside of school, Jack, now a sophomore, enjoys baseball, biking and playing the trumpet. He lives in Vineyard Haven.
in-command on the voyage. With his ship ready, Captain Gosnold prepared to leave Britain in 1602, and sail toward the New World.

There were several goals in mind for this voyage. First, Gosnold wanted to find a good location to establish a small trading post which was to be manned by him and several others while the Concord returned to England for supplies. Second, he wanted to start good relations with the local tribes. Third, Gosnold was also told to search for the fabled "Kingdom of Norumbega," described by Giovanni da Verrazzano as being a paradise-like land located somewhere in the northern sections of America. Lastly, Gosnold hoped to find the legendary Northwest Passage — though he thought it unlikely that he would.

**Naming the New World**

On March 26, 1602, the Concord sailed from Falmouth, England. From Britain they first sailed to the Azores islands. From there, they went west, toward the coordinates mentioned by da Verrazzano as the location of Norumbega. The merely seven-week-long voyage was uneventful until they reached what is now the Casco Bay in southern Maine. Here a Spanish skiff manned by natives came out to meet the Concord. This was a peaceful encounter, the natives more curious than hostile. Although difficult at first, the two groups managed to communicate, and the Europeans got directions to the lands to the south.

The Concord continued to sail southward, eventually reaching a great cape. Here Gosnold led a small landing party to what is today known as Provincetown. They met a local Indian boy who helped them gather fire-wood and water. When they returned to the Concord, Captain Gosnold found his crew catching enormous amounts of cod and other fish. John Brereton, one of the recorders, wrote of this discovery:

> I am persuaded that in the months of March, April, and May, there is ... better fishing and in as great plenty as in New Foundland: for the schools of merkerel, herrings, cod, and other fish that we saw daily ... were wonderful; and besides the places where we took these cows ... were but in seven fathoms water.

So impressed was he by the large fishing grounds he decided to name the place Cape Cod.²

The explorers left, continuing to sail south along Cape Cod. The Concord encountered near-disaster along the southwestern coast of it. In this area they located trecherous shoals and rocks. Had they not veered east for deeper waters, the entire voyage might have ended right there.

On May 21, 1602, the Concord reached a large island south of Cape Cod.

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2 Wilson, H.C. p. 46.
3 Ralston, A. *The History of Martha's Vineyard: How We Got to Where We Are*. p. 60.
Captain Gosnold landed on the island with a small scouting party. Here he was awed by the diverse wildlife, especially the abundance of grape-vines. The captain experimented with growing seeds here and several days later found the soil to be excellent for growing English crops. He decided to name it “Martha’s Vineyard,” after his late daughter Martha. Before leaving, he and his crew met and ate with the local native tribe. Gosnold wrote of the locals:

The inhabitants there, as I wrote before, being of tall stature, comely proportion, strong, active, and of good years, and as it should seem very healthful, are sufficient proof of the healthfulness of this place. First for ourselves... we had not a man sick two days together in all our voyage.  

The Concord next sailed west, crossing Buzzards Bay which was named “Gosnold’s Hope” by his crew. It arrived at modern-day Cuttyhunk, and again a small party went ashore. Gosnold found it to be just as good as Martha’s Vineyard, and named it Elizabeth’s Island. It is said he named it for his sister, but it’s also likely he named it for the Queen of England. So ideal was this island that Gosnold decided to build his trading post here next to a small lake.

Over the next few days they explored the rest of the island and the mainland to the north. To the north he met yet another native tribe, and quickly befriended them. He invited them back to his fort and the two groups had a Thanksgiving-style feast over the next few days. John Brereton, one of the voyage’s recorders, wrote of the natives, “They are exceedingly courteous, gentle of disposition, and well conditioned, excelling all others... I think they excel all the people of America.”

Things were going very well for Gosnold. He hadn’t found Norumbega, but he had found a beautiful land perfect for future colonization. Gosnold hadn’t found the Northwest Passage either, but doubted its very existence to begin with. He even established both a small trading post and good relations with the locals. Unfortunately, this success wasn’t enough for his crew. Despite earlier promises, few people wanted to stay for the winter while the Concord returned to England for supplies.

Exactly why the crew had a change of heart isn’t clear; some say it was because they were worried about supplies lasting through the winter. Another reason may be that they didn’t trust Captain Gilbert to come back to them with supplies. The last (and most unlikely) reason was the natives. Although the Englishmen enjoyed friendly relations with them, a few of them had been attacked on one occasion (this was probably retaliation for stealing an “abandoned” canoe). Whatever the reason, Gosnold was forced to abandon the newly-built trading post and return home.

**Home again hero...**

Gosnold may have been forced to leave the New World, but he returned a hero. He proved that a relatively short voyage across the Atlantic could be achieved (a mere seven weeks to America, and five weeks back to Europe!). He also proved that it was possible to establish a colony here, and even live in peace with the locals. Gosnold brought back treasures such as animal furs and skins, cedar wood and even a large quantity of sassafras. “The sassafras alone turned out to be worth 336 English pounds per ton!”

Soon after the voyage, John Brereton wrote a small book on the expedition. The book was such a huge success that just several months after Gosnold’s return another voyage was planned to the Cape and Islands; this time led by Captain Martin Pring, specifically looking for more sassafras. This wasn’t the last. Over the next few decades, dozens of expeditions were sent to northeastern America.

Several years later Gosnold gained yet another charter, this time to establish a colony in southern Virginia. This colony came to be known as the Jamestown Settlement. Accompanying him were Captain John Smith, his own brother Anthony, and his old friend Gabriel Archer.

Unfortunately, several weeks after landing in Virginia, Gosnold was stricken with a fever. About two weeks later, on August 22, 1607, Bar-

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4 Wilson, H.C. p. 52
5 Ibid. p. 58
6 Raitton, p 62
7 Raitton, p. 69
8 Raitton, p. 64
tholomew Gosnold, "Discoverer of Massachusetts ... Founder of Jamestown ... First Man to Plant wheat in America" died of scurvy and dysentery. He was buried in an unmarked grave at Jamestown. Gosnold was only 36 when he died.

Bartholomew Gosnold may be one of the most important European explorers in America's history. He was the first Englishman to establish a permanent colony here. Gosnold was also the first British man to explore the New England area. Were it not for Gosnold, English colonization may have turned out extremely differently; since Gosnold founded Jamestown (the first permanent English settlement) he was more or less the "Father" of Colonial America.

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The Heath Hen: A Losing Battle Against Extinction
by IAN TRIPP

Often mentioned among the great extinctions caused by man are the Auk, Stellers Sea Cow — and the Heath Hen. But, as the Heath Hen had no axe-like beak, no leviathan gray body, how did it achieve such fame? Perhaps because it was the first endangered animal to have legislative protection, the first to have laws regarding how often it may be served at the table, and was a bird that survived on an island a hundred years after having Gone extinct on the mainland. And so it was on the island of Martha's Vineyard that this bird fought its final battle against extinction.

The Heath Hen (Tympanuchus cupido cupido) was a species of prairie chicken that once inhabited most of the East Coast. Declared extinct in the early 1930s, the Heath Hen was famous for its traditional mating display, called booming, as well as having marked the Island as a major destination for bird watchers. After it disappeared from the mainland in the mid 1800s, the Heath Hen's sole habitat was in the Great Plain region of the Vineyard, on a reservation smaller than today's Martha's Vineyard airport.

Heath Hens were recorded to be approximately eighteen inches long and fifteen inches in height, with eggs similar to, though less oblong than, regular chicken eggs. The Heath Hen's vocal range was closer to that of a turkey than that of a chicken, and included both chucking and a sort of gobbling sound. Both sexes were striped and had brown backs and sides with rusty white underbellies, breasts, and leg feathers, with groups of elongated feathers, called pinnae or pinnate feathers, on either side of the neck. Despite these similarities, there were several key differences. First, the cocks had a reddish brown back with brown or dark brown stripes, as well as darker, stripe-less tail feathers, whereas the hens had a lighter brown back with light brown or tan stripes that continued onto the tail. Secondly, cocks of the species also had longer pinnae for use in courtship, as well as a small orange comb over each eye and a low ridge on the top of the head, both of which the females lacked.

During courtship, cocks stuck out their feathers, which nearly doubled their size, and fanned their tail feathers out much like those of a turkey.

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though the spread was much smaller. It was at this point that the pinnææ came into play. The cock would erect these feathers to form horns. The bird would then stick out its primaries on a downward and backward diagonal, the tips usually being held just above the ground. Starting by stomping its feet in rapid succession, the cock would initiate a bizarre set of moves that are exclusive to Prairie Chickens. The first of several actions would be a bobbing of the head while staggering backwards and forwards, letting out quick little hoots. The cocks tended to complete this action shortly before sparring, in which they batted each other with their wings; not much is known as to how these conflicts were won, if they could be won at all, as both birds tended to retreat simultaneously. Secondly, the birds would jump straight up into the air and cackle loudly while spinning in the air to face the opposite direction; shortly after landing, they would tend to sprint in a small semicircle so as to return to their original position. If it wasn't doing either of these, the bird would be stomping furiously and making the noise for which it was famous — and for which the last member of its species was named.

Called booming, this noise was created by the inflation of two bright orange air sacs located just below the pinnææ on either side of the neck. It could be said that the noise sounded vaguely like the hooting of an owl, but that would not be doing it justice. A sort of a hum, it has been described both as "The subdued and distant echo of many medium pitched steam whistles" and as "A sound similar to that made by blowing small blasts of air across the mouth of a bottle." It should also be noted that, while the cackling of the Heath Hen was much louder than the booming at short range, the booming had much greater carrying power, and could be heard just under a mile away.

The Heath Hen Prior to European Settlement

Before the advent of European settlers on North America, the Heath Hen's continental range probably would have been much smaller than it was during the Colonial era. As its name suggests, the Heath Hen was a resident of treeless areas with low, coarse shrubs and grasses. In the time before European exploration, the East Coast was much more heavily forested than it is today, and thus would have provided less habitat for it. Though the Heath Hen could be found in lightly forested areas, it would never have lived in an area that was exclusively woodland; among other reasons, these areas would have offered the Heath Hen less protection from predators and rendered them unable to protect themselves, let alone their eggs.

Keeping in mind their inability to live in the forest, their life-long at-

tachment to their booming grounds, as well as not being adapted to warmer climates, the Heath Hen's range probably wouldn't have extended much farther north than southern New Hampshire, or south further than the upper half of North Carolina, without help. Fortunately, this was something they had.

The relationship between the Heath Hen and Native Americans was decidedly a beneficial one. The Heath Hen provided Native Americans with food, and when, in turn, supplied the Heath Hen with food and habitat in the form of farming. The Heath Hen was an excellent food source, as no weapons needed to be wasted on hunting it. During the Heath Hen's courtship, "Cunning Natives were accustomed to strew ashes and rush upon them with sticks when blinded by the dust which they had raised." Despite the clear ease with which the Heath Hen could be hunted, they were never killed in excess, and actually gained more than they were harmed. A good number of Heath Hen could live off one crop field without noticeably lowering the field's output, so they both lived in and ate from native corn and grain fields. On Martha's Vineyard, the Wampanoag tribe helped the Heath Hen in a totally unexpected way — by setting fires.

Before European settlement, the Great Plain region of the Vineyard covered most of the Island, and relied on regular sweeping fires to maintain its ecosystem. These fires helped to control populations, as well as simultaneously trimming and seeding those plants that relied on fire to open their cones. Without these occasional fires, the Great Plain would have continued to grow from heath to forest and destroy the habitat of many local animals, especially the Heath Hen. Though these fires would eventually become a cause of the Heath Hen's decline, they remained beneficial up until European settlement.

The Heath Hen from the Colonial Era
To the First Half of the 19th Century

From early in the Colonial era to the time of the newly formed United States, the Heath Hen flourished in crop fields and cities. Fitting into a pigeon-like niche, the Heath Hen thrived on most town commons, which were often occupied by several flocks, with more scattered throughout fields all over eastern America. There were even several flocks of Heath Hens that lived on the Boston Common — which were often shot and sold.

Though it was primarily eaten by the poor, the Heath Hen was just as often purchased by the rich. Due to its numbers, the Heath Hen could be sold relatively cheaply; and since employers fed their servants, the Heath Hen was a great way to save money. This became so common a practice that servants, rather than bargain for better pay, would request that Heath Hen was not served a few nights out of the week. In colonial Massachussetts, they went so far as to enact a law that prevented employers from serving an excess of Heath Hen. Interestingly enough, this is one of the early workers rights laws.

With the white man came guns, and with guns came sport hunting. This, however, was something the Heath Hen was safe from as they offered no challenge. Their habit of congregating in large, closely packed flocks made them easy targets on the ground, and once in flight the Heath Hen flew straight, with no attempts to evade. Furthermore, the meat of the Heath Hen was described as rather dry and gamey, and thus not fit for an elegant dinner. So, for all that they denied hunters, the Heath Hen supplied those who were hungry or stood to gain a profit from the hungry. Many earned a living hunting and selling Heath Hens the way a baker may make profit by selling bread.

Extinction of the Heath Hen on the Mainland

On the mainland, the Heath Hen’s downward spiral began due to people’s over-reliance on it as a food source. Unaware of the effect over-hunting was having on it, many continued to kill and eat the Heath Hen at a near frantic pace. As the bird’s numbers decreased, those who had made a living out of the Heath Hen were now short of product, and so had to raise their prices; the public responded poorly. Rather than lessen their dependence on the Heath Hen, most resorted to poaching as a primary means of Heath Hen acquisition.

Though most people were unaware or indifferent to the plight of the Heath Hen, local governments were not. One of the first laws designed to specifically protect the Heath Hen was passed in the state of New York. It stated that between the dates of April 1 and Oct. 5 a $2.50 fine was enforced for every bird killed. Mistakenly read as “an act for the preservation of the heathen,” this bill was only passed after the mistake was revealed and a second vote was cast. From Edward Howe Forbush, the State Ornithologist of Massachusetts, comes this record of a later law passed in Massachusetts: “In 1831 the Heath Hen had become so rare in the state that a special act was passed protecting them during the breeding season, or from March 1 to Sept. 1, under penalty of a two-dollar fine. This partial remedy proved entirely ineffective.”

Despite such restrictions, the Heath Hen population began to decline until 1870, when it is believed to have gone extinct on the mainland. And so began the Heath Hen’s last stand — on the Island of Martha’s Vineyard.

The Heath Hen on Martha’s Vineyard
After the Mainland Extinction

While not extinct, the Island’s Heath Hens were not faring so well themselves. The Island population, though it was receiving greater protection, had to contend with even greater challenges than its mainland counterpart. In a lesser group, not only did all of the old issues pose a greater threat, but things that could easily be absorbed by a larger population, such as disease and car hits, began to take their toll. Soon the population was so small that even the most natural of events took the matter out of human hands. Though it had not been a popular game bird in the past, the Heath Hen and its new-found rarity soon became a prime target for poachers. Looking to acquire their own piece of feathered history, many museums and private collectors hired hunters to travel to the Island and kill a Heath Hen or two for their collections. With total disregard for the well-being of the species, poachers continued to whittle down the Heath Hen population to the very end.

In 1908, the Heath Hen was in such dire straits that the government took action, and a reservation was established. Originally the reservation consisted of 600 acres nestled in the corner of the West Tisbury-Edgartown Road and Airport Road. A warden was hired to feed and protect the birds, and Forbush became heavily involved. The Commonwealth also hired Alfred O. Gross, an ornithologist and photographer from Bowdoin College, to help with conservation and recording of the Heath Hen and its history. Over time, more land was either bought or leased until the Heath Hen reservation covered what is now the State Forest and most of the Airport.

Several of the threats faced by the Heath Hen at the time were feral cats and disease. Summer residents would adopt a kitten for companionship and pest control and, when their vacation ended, they would drive it out to the Great Plain and release it. These cats found the Heath Hen to be easy pickings. Poultry diseases were contracted. Two other underlying reasons for
the Heath Hen’s extinction were both fire and a lack thereof. Fires were set in the spring, the middle of the breeding season, to promote the growth of blueberries. Unwilling to leave their nests, female birds were burned along with their nest and eggs. An attempt was made to put an end to the spring fires by cutting seventy-foot fire breaks in the reservation, but to no avail. In 1916, a fire started during a gale, which easily carried the flames across the fire breaks, scorching most of the reservation, and almost halving the population, which for a short time had jumped to around 2,000 individuals. After much deliberation, Island legislation put an end to the fires; soon, however, the fires were replaced with another threat. To provide a source of local income, oak trees were planted in the Heath Hen reservation. These unwelcome additions to the environment stopped sunlight from reaching the lower plants which the Heath Hen lived in and fed on, almost entirely destroying their habitat. These oaks later came down with blight and died, and soon dried to a forest of matchsticks, making the prevention of fires a permanent necessity. Were a fire to start now, it would be disastrous.

The brush fire wasn’t the only trouble in 1916. During the summer months, a particularly large migration of Goshawks, which fed on the Heath Hen, appeared, and approximately 25 birds were transported to Long Island in a unanimously lethal attempt at repopulation. Also, due to the mass death of nest-protecting females, there were many more males than females, and unpaired males molested nesting females, often killing the current brood. In an attempt to correct the imbalance, Gross removed five males from the breeding grounds, all of which caught poultry diseases and died, further shrinking the population.

After performing a necropsy of the five specimens that had died in captivity, Gross found that the greatest calamity of all had befallen the disappearing species: the last Heath Hens in existence had become infertile. Restricted as they were in both population and range, inbreeding had led to the slow degeneration of the male’s sex organs; the Heath Hen could no longer reproduce. Now, no matter how carefully they were guarded, no matter how many legal restrictions were applied, the Heath Hen was doomed.

In 1925, second and third wardens were hired to help protect the thirty or so Heath Hens on the Island. James Green, who owned the Heath Hen’s booming ground, was give the same duties as the original warden, while the third warden was give the specific job of killing the Heath Hen’s predators. Slowly but surely, as the birds succumbed to various diseases, predators, and poachers, the population of Heath Hens dropped until 1927, when there were approximately thirty birds; in 1928, the species had dropped down to three, all of them males. By 1929, one was left; the Island legend, Booming Ben.

Booming Ben was not a typical bird, but for the last member of a spe-

cies this is acceptable. He was in excellent condition, which in and of itself was remarkable for the last Heath Hens; infertility had led to a certain listlessness which, in turn, had led to unhealthy birds. He also tended toward slightly more unusual behaviors: he once performed a full courtship routine in the upper boughs of a tree.

In 1931, Gross caught the bird to band it and see if it was, indeed, the same one, or if there were several. Gross held the bird, the last Heath Hen in existence, and gave it a full examination; finding it to be in perfect health, he affixed a copper tag on its right leg and an aluminum tag to its left leg. Then he released it. It was seen once a few days later, and a final time in 1932. Booming Ben, the final Heath Hen, was never seen again. The species was declared extinct in 1933, despite the efforts taken to preserve it. It was on the Island that this bird fought its final battle against extinction; and it was on the Island that it lost.

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Beneath Our Own Roof: Origins Of the Grange Hall

by JEAN CARGILL

As you travel State Road in West Tisbury, it catches your eye. The building marked "1859" and "Grange" has a public presence that everyone can relate to, especially on weekends in summer when it hosts Farmers' Markets and Artisans Festivals.

As we celebrate the great barn's 150 years of service to the Island it seems fitting to see what the archives at the Martha's Vineyard Museum can tell us about its origin. Although the West Tisbury Grange as an organization came to the hall a century ago, the story of how the hall got built is told in the earliest records of the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society.1

Gently sifting through the contents of archival Record Unit 233, I began to get a sense of the people and events that shaped the farmers' hall. It was a letter from Charles L. Flint, Secretary of Agriculture for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that first piqued my interest. A little searching online revealed that Flint played a leading role in founding Massachusetts Agricultural College (today's University of Massachusetts), and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), both schools awarded Morrill Land Grants. I had forgotten (if I ever knew it) that MIT was one of the rare private schools to qualify for a grant.

But before that, on March 22, 1858, Flint spelled out how to best go about establishing an agricultural society on Martha's Vineyard.

My Dear Sir,

Your favor was duly rec'd & in reply I would state that the first important move is to obtain a fund by the subscription of members &c. This can be done as you propose by calling a meeting & organizing & adopting a constitution as a voluntary organization. After you are once fairly under way you could apply to the legislature for a charter with a better chance of success. I do not think there is the slightest chance of your getting anything from the legislature at this late day of the session.

I should say your better way is to go ahead this year & do the best you can. Get up a society & get all the fund you can hold an exhibition &c. & make your effort for an Act of Incorporation another year.

Yours Very Truly,
C. L. Flint, Sec.

The letter was addressed to Henry L. Whiting, Esq., proprietor of "The Parsonage" farm in West Tisbury. Whiting also played a role in founding the Massachusetts Agricultural College by serving on the original Board of Trustees. Although he is best known for his work on the United States Coast Survey and, by that association, a fledgling MIT engaged Whiting as professor in the department of Civil Engineering. A colleague would later recall, "He had the dignity of manners which is usually associated with 'a gentleman of the old school,' along with a simplicity of character and openness of heart that made him beloved by all who came in contact with him."2

What impressed me most about Flint's letter to Whiting was how well it foretold the events leading up to construction of the Agricultural Hall.

Get up a society...

Whiting wasted no time in carrying out the directive. On March 28th (between an editorial condemning the Fall of Canton as "unjustified," and

Postcard from the MVM collection: the farm of Henry L. Whiting.

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1 A local chapter of the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, a fraternal organization of farmers modeled after the Freemasons, including secret meetings, oaths and special passwords, was established after the Civil War.

JEAN CARGILL is an Edgartown resident and a Martha's Vineyard Museum library volunteer. Her most recent contribution to the DCI was in February 2009 on the Honorable Leavitt Thaxter.

2 Science February 19, 1897.
a news item that a fin-back whale washed ashore near Scrubby Neck and ten barrels of oil were salvaged) a notice of an organizational meeting for a new farmers' society appeared in the Vineyard Gazette, only six days after Flint had penned his letter.

The response was substantial, and once organized, members of the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society voted in a slate of officers (including Leavitt Thaxter as President, and Henry L. Whiting as Secretary), adopted a constitution, and set to planning a fair. Notices soon appeared encouraging farmers to nurture their best livestock and produce for the first agricultural gathering and display ever attempted on the Island.

On Wednesday, Oct. 27, 1858, with the weather uncommonly fine for the season, the first Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society Exhibition and Fair was held at the Dukes County Academy in West Tisbury. The event was heralded as "a great day for the Vineyard"); "The whole affair a splendid success"; "Everyone astonished and delighted."

An estimated 1,800 people thronged through the Academy, prompting one reporter to write, "...the building, however, we regret to say, proved altogether too small for the occasion, and the necessity of a new and large hall, in which to have future exhibitions, is already apparent."

...& get all the fund you can

Massachusetts law required that an agricultural society amass $1,000 in capital to qualify for a charter and bounty of $200. So building on the success of the fair, the Finance Committee began issuing promissory notes in the amount of $16.66. Leavitt Thaxter, known for his "interesting exercises in arithmetic" reasoned that was the lowest amount the Society should accept on a note and at 6% the annual interest was, conveniently, one dollar.

You ask if the notes you have are acceptable as an investment? They are such as we had & we now have about $1,500 of them & we take them yearly. It is an undesirable mode of investment. We lose several each year by failures, death without property, & removals.
— George Marston of the Barnstable Agricultural Society in a letter to Whiting.

Nevertheless on Christmas Eve, Treasurer John D. Rotch reported that the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society had raised $1,550 in capital. His announcement "met with great interest & enthusiasm by the meeting." The Society was now in a good position to apply for a charter from the state and this task fell to Charles B. Allen, Esq. of Tisbury. A former Representative, Allen knew his way around the State House and in February 1859 the Legislature voted favorably on an Act of Incorporation.

Handsome, new, and commodious

The members of the newly incorporated Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society next set out to build a hall better suited for their needs. Leavitt Thaxter, John D. Rotch (whose textile factory in West Tisbury manufactured the celebrated "Vineyard Flannel"), and Captain Benjamin Manter were appointed to locate and purchase a site for a show ground and to erect a building.

They decided on the lot adjacent to the Dukes County Academy and arranged to buy the two and one half acre parcel from Mrs. Hannah Look for $250.7

Meanwhile, Mr. R. W. Crocker, C. Crane and Captain Allen Tilton, were appointed to study existing agricultural halls in the region, writing to other societies for their opinions on design and expense. In the end, the committee selected Joseph T. James, an experienced architect and recent arrival to Holmes Hole, to prepare a detailed plan and drawings.

The lower story was designed to extend beyond the main building eight feet on all sides, in the style of an enclosed veranda. This gave a large room on the ground floor, without the expense or heavy appearance of a large building. The exterior finish was "simple, but quite sufficient, and in good taste." The main exhibition room on the ground floor was to be left entirely rough; the committee rooms, ticket office and stair-way would be plastered.

The contract would require the building to be finished by Oct. 1. "We have therefore the prospect of a handsome, new and commodious building

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7 Coffee lovers will be interested to learn that after the first Ag Fair, which featured a grand dinner in a tent, Mrs. Look drew a rave review for hers: "we must say one word in reference to the coffee. It was a capital article and in great demand. Mammoth pots were emptied in a trice; but there was no lack in the supply. Mrs. Hannah Look was the coffee caterer on this occasion and she is never at fault in such matters. 'Barrels of coffee!' was the cry, and barrels came rolling in over the hills up to the very entrance of the tent!" Vineyard Gazette November 5, 1858.

Vineyard Gazette, November 5, 1858.
Vineyard Gazette, October 29, 1858.
Vineyard Gazette, November 5, 1858.
Dukes County Intelligencer, February 2009.
honor on the race course was Nelly Bly—she made a mile inside of three minutes. Henry L. Whiting, Esq. took the prize for best Milch Cow (yield of milk last 10 days of June 480 lbs). Charles B. Allen, Esq. had hoped to enter a Fat Cow considered "well worthy of praise," but brought it in too late for regular inspection.

When it was over, Whiting reflected on all that had been accomplished by his fellow Islanders since that first exchange of letters with Secretary Flint:

Our Vineyard men have been ploughing the sea long enough; they had better try a few furrows on land... potatoes and corn are about as sure crops as whales, now-a-days... About eighteen months ago a few farmers met together to discuss the subject of an Agricultural Society. At length a motion, almost a single motion, was made to have a Fair — and low we had it. Witness the success of our beautiful Fair last year. This was good, but we saw we could do better. We went out into the highways and by-ways (for we have no large cities with their rich merchants to go to as in other counties) — and came back with enough to get our charter, to buy our land, and to build our hall. And here we have met to see, for the first time, upon our own grounds and beneath our own roof, a display of beauty and goodness which can hardly be surpassed.9

POSTSCRIPT: After 134 years, the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society sold the Hall and moved to a 21-acre parcel on Panhandle Road, the centerpiece of which is a century-old barn moved from New Hampshire and restored into use by the Society. The Old Agricultural Hall is now owned and managed by the Martha's Vineyard Preservation Trust, which revitalized the hall in 1997, bringing it up to standard building code and restoring its original form.

The author is grateful to the Vineyard Haven Public Library for the microfilm workstation that made it possible to peruse old issues of the Vineyard Gazette. Special appreciation goes to the Martha's Vineyard Museum for access to the manuscript archives, especially Record Unit 233, Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society.

8 Vineyard Gazette May 27, 1859.

9 Vineyard Gazette October 21, 1859.
Remembering “Booming Ben”  
And His Island Kin

In 2004 Robert H. Hughes, a longtime amateur historian, sent the following letter to the Vineyard Gazette:

Perhaps some of your readers would be interested in the following:
The last Heath Hen in the world died on Martha's Vineyard in 1932.
The Martha's Vineyard Historical Society will be erecting a boulder and
a remembrance plaque in West Tisbury so that the Heath Hen's history
will live forever.
The Heath Hens more than the wild turkeys kept the Pilgrims alive during the grim winter of 1620 at Plymouth. Also our State Forest owes its existence to the Heath Hen since it was established as a sanctuary in an attempt to save them.... The boulder and remembrance plaque will be on the right about 1 ½ miles from the airport entrance going toward West Tisbury.... The bike path turns there and goes around Jimmy Green's field where the last Heath Hen was seen in 1932. The last Heath Hen was named “Booming Ben.” He called, in vain, each spring for his girlfriend.

On Saturday, May 22, 2004, the Martha's Vineyard Museum did indeed unveil a plaque in honor of this legendary bird. Crafted by Island artisan and stone-carver Alan Gowell, the boulder with its brass plate reminds passersby of the extinction of the once prevalent Heath Hen.

Signature and sketch from Mr. Hughes' letter.

Support for the Dukes County Intelligencer is always welcome. Please make your tax deductible contribution to the Martha's Vineyard Museum, designating your gift for the Intelligencer. If you enjoy receiving the Intelligencer, consider making a gift of membership to a family member or friend so that they too can enjoy the journal of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, as well as all the other benefits of membership. See our website, www.mvmuseum.org for more information about how you can support our work.

Erratum

In the May 2009 Intelligencer, Sally Dagnall, who contributed to the article “The Krikorian Plates: Historic Images of Oak Bluffs,” was incorrectly identified as Sally Bagnall. The editor regrets the mistake. Mrs. Dagnall is working on her second book on the history of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association.