

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



THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

VOL. 52, No. 2

SPRING 2011

RESTORING THE MONUMENT

A Community Effort

by S. DAVID WILSON



THE MILFIN HOUSE

History of a Summer Home

by SKIP FINLEY

GEORGE WASHINGTON GOETHALS

& His Vineyard Friends

by THOMAS GOETHALS



TO OUR READERS

When I took on the position of editor of this journal I noted that I was filling some mighty big shoes. On May 19, 2011, Arthur Railton, emeritus editor of the *Dukes County Intelligencer* passed away, leaving me certain that I can never accomplish what he did. He spent 28 years at the helm, and in that time established the *Intelligencer* as the premier source for anyone curious about the history of this Island. Not a day goes by that I am not amazed at the richness of the resource he created and the debt we who follow owe him.

In this issue we welcome two new contributors to the Dukes County *Intelligencer*. Skip Finley, a broadcast executive now living in Oak Bluffs year round, has written a wonderful account of his family's Oak Bluffs cottage. We often speak of the African American upper middle class and the rise in popularity of Oak Bluffs as a place where mid-century blacks could enjoy themselves. Skip Finley is the product of this rarified environment and talks about the joys of growing up as a summer kid in Oak Bluffs with his extended family of honorary aunts and uncles.

S. David Wilson was instrumental in the restoration of the Civil War monument in Ocean Park ten years ago. He writes of the outpouring of support, both in terms of time and money, for the restoration project — a project that took on a life of its own. “Charlie” got a trip off-island, and the town of Oak Bluffs got a history lesson.

Tom Goethals last contributed to the *Intelligencer* in 2008 with his recollections of Craig Kingsbury. In this issue he writes of his world-famous grandfather, George Goethals, best known for his supervision of the building of the Panama Canal. But Goethals had a deep connection to and love of the Vineyard. Through careful parsing of his letters, Tom, in this excerpt from his upcoming biography of George Goethals, reveals a man of integrity and loyalty to his Vineyard friends.

— S.W.



Submissions to the *Intelligencer* are welcome. For guidelines, please contact swilson@mvmuseum.org. Letters to the editor intended for publication are also welcome and may be emailed or mailed to:

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VOL. 52, No. 2

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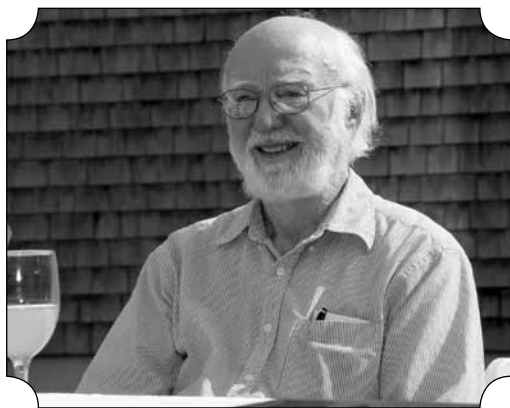
Founding Editor: Gale Huntington (1959-1977) George W. Adams, Editor (1978-1979) Arthur R. Railton, Editor (1979-2006) John W. Walter, Editor (2006-2008)
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Back copies of the *Intelligencer* are available for sale in the Museum library.

Authors' queries and manuscripts for this journal should be emailed to swilson@mvmuseum.org or addressed to the Editor, *Dukes County Intelligencer*, P.O. Box 1310, Edgartown, MA 02539.

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IN MEMORIAM
ARTHUR R. RAILTON

AS EDITOR of this publication for over twenty-five years, Arthur R. Railton transformed it from a compendium of personal recollections to a highly regarded — and consistently referenced — journal of Vineyard history. His final gift to the Museum, and to the Island, is his 2006 book, *The History of Martha's Vineyard: How We Got To Where We Are*, a chronicle of Island history from the glaciers to the beginning of World War II. Art was a humble man, uncomfortable in the limelight and reluctant to have any fuss made of his accomplishment. Nonetheless, it now stands as a perfect memorial for a man who loved this Island and its history.



A note from the Executive Director:

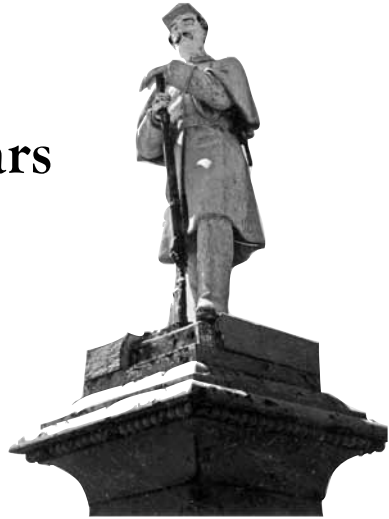
After agreeing to become the Museum's executive director, my summer 2009 reading was Art Railton's history. It provided an educated, entertaining and eccentric account of both the major and minor themes of Vineyard history. I was pleased that I did get to meet Art on a couple of occasions and happy to see him honored last summer with a well-deserved Martha's Vineyard Medal. Art's leadership of the Intelligencer for so long is a legacy that continues to introduce countless amateur and serious scholars to our rich archival collections. Most recently I was reminded by Geraldine Brooks' Caleb's Crossing just how rich our sources here are for researchers.

Art Railton's contributions to both our past reputation and our future success are immeasurable. On behalf of the staff, Board and membership of the Martha's Vineyard Museum, we wish his family peace.

David Nathans
May 2011

By the People:

How a Motley Band Of Vineyard Irregulars Defied the Odds & Saved a Statue



by S. DAVID WILSON

TEN YEARS AGO this summer, Oak Bluffs unveiled its newly restored Civil War memorial, and for those who attended the ceremony — complete with skirl of bagpipes and volleys by Civil War re-enactors — civic pride was as palpable that day as the breezes off Nantucket Sound. Just two years before the statue had been in such disrepair that a noted local sculptor pronounced it “so full of booby-traps” that “it would be safer and less costly to produce a replica in reinforced plastic.”¹ A number of Islanders thought otherwise, and in a triumph of community spirit, restored it to near-original condition. It is a remarkable story, one fraught with equal doses of joy and despair, and here is the story of how an ill-qualified but enthusiastic band of local volunteers ultimately saved the Island’s best-loved (and least understood) public monument from near-oblivion.²

1 Michalczyk, Casimer. “Restoration of a Civil War Monument.” *Vineyard Gazette*, November 20, 1998.

2 Readers curious about how the statue came to be should read Judith Chively’s “The Civil War Monument and the Story Behind It,” published in the February, 1996 edition of the *Intelligencer*.

DAVID WILSON teaches English at the Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School. He lives in Oak Bluffs and is chairman of the Cottage City Historic District Commission. In the interest of full disclosure, he is married to the editor of this journal.

The Soldiers Memorial Fountain was conceived by Charles Strahan, a Maryland native and former Confederate soldier who relocated to Martha's Vineyard after the Civil War. Due to lingering bitterness toward the Southern cause, local veterans were initially hostile to his participation at their gatherings. In a surprising gesture of reconciliation, Strahan proposed a memorial in honor of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the national organization of Union veterans, and raised the necessary funds through advertisements in his newspaper, *The Martha's Vineyard Herald*. In August of 1891 the memorial was unveiled in its original location at the intersection of Lake, Circuit and Oak Bluffs Avenues. In 1930, when automobile traffic made viewing the statue hazardous, it was moved to Ocean Park.

The memorial consists of two main sections, a cast-iron base with fountain troughs for horses, dogs and humans (in recognition of the animal, as well as human suffering Strahan had seen in the war), and the crowning figure of a typical Union soldier. Strahan purchased the monument from the J. W. Fiske Company, a manufacturer of garden ornaments and decorative statuary based in New York City.

The restoration project began, as so many complicated enterprises do, with a simple request that town replace the monument's current — and historically inappropriate — paint scheme with a more traditional color. Through most of my life it had been finished in various shades of green (equally incorrect, it would turn out), but during the country's bicentennial celebrations it had been changed to Confederate gray, likely due to a misreading of its confusing inscriptions. As it already appeared in need of a repainting, and utterly ignorant of what lay in store, I thought it an opportune time to raise the subject with the Oak Bluffs Park Commission, the official keeper of the monument.

The commissioners' response was positive, and the matter may well have ended there but for an aside by park foreman Donald Madeiras who, as the meeting broke up, said to me: "You know, David, that statue needs a lot more than just paint."

A subsequent visit to the site revealed that Donald's assessment was, if anything, an understatement: the statue was a wreck. In addition to the peeling paint and streaks of rust, there were other obvious problems. The lion's head spout that had once poured water into the main fountain bowl was missing. A smaller one was cracked in half. The figure's rifle, a wooden replacement for one lost long ago, was rotted to pieces. Fist-sized chunks of concrete were falling off from a small slab around the soldier's feet. The entire cast-iron base was afflicted with a pox of ferrous sores oozing ominous streaks of rust. A depressing sight, to say the least.

Soon after, I was contacted by two individuals offering help (word gets



Before restoration, the statue's entire cast-iron base was failing.

around quickly in small towns). The first was the late William “Bill” Nicholson, a Civil War buff who, unbeknownst to me, had a longstanding interest in the statue and its history. A gifted raconteur, his anecdotes about the statue and its donor inspired many to contribute to the project in some way. Another was Gail Croft, who approached me with an intriguing anecdote about the statue. When she was a young girl, the soldier figure had been blown over in a hurricane and was so damaged that town officials decided to scrap it. Mrs. Croft related that her father, a local plumber named Benjamin Amaral, convinced the powers that be to let him try and repair it.³ Gail even recalled seeing it on his workbench in the family plumbing shop on Circuit Avenue when she was a child. Gail subsequently became a tireless foot soldier in the restoration effort.

One of the people Bill Nicholson drew into the cause was James N. C. “Jim” Brown, who Bill had buttonholed during a long ferry ride to a Nantucket football game. By the time they returned to the Vineyard, Jim, a business consultant and CPA, was inspired enough by Bill’s passion for

³ On September 17, 1955, under the title “News of the Day Twenty-five Years Ago,” the *Vineyard Gazette* reprinted the following from an item that originally ran on September 12, 1930: “The soldiers’ statue, recently moved into Ocean Park, Oak Bluffs, toppled from its pedestal Wednesday morning and went over backward upon the ground. The warrior’s face was still toward the enemy, but his head was broken off, his gun smashed, and one hand amputated. His cape was also bent under. . . . Under the direction of the park commissioners, the soldier was removed to the shop of Amaral Brothers and repairs were begun.”

the statue to call me (a vaguely known neighbor) to offer his help. Soon after, Jim became the nascent group's treasurer, not only taking charge of the group's fundraising and accounting functions, but also serving as a de facto partner with me in the overall effort.

Over the next few months three other individuals became full-time members of the emerging coalition to save the statue: Della Brown Hardman, a retired professor of Art History; Richard Walton a local attorney, and Wesley Mott, a professor of American Literature at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Mr. Mott had previously been involved in the successful project to save Walden Woods). All, including myself (who served as chairman) were local residents and ultimately leaders of what became the Soldiers' Memorial Fountain Restoration Inc. (SMFR), a registered non-profit organization to which the Oak Bluffs Park Department entrusted the task of restoring the monument.

The first task was the hiring of a professional conservator to make a formal assessment of the statue's condition, a step made possible by an initial contribution by the Park Department and a significant gift from the Friends of Oak Bluffs, a group with a long history of charitable projects in Oak Bluffs. These enabled the SMFR to hire the well-known firm of Dae-dalus Inc., based in Cambridge, to conduct a professional assessment of the monument's condition in November, 1998. For several hours on bright but blustery day, conservator Clifford Craine, suitably attired in beret and pullover sweater, clambered over newly-erected scaffolding, and with a few small tools, camera and notepad, meticulously probed and scraped about the figure and base, solemnly taking notes on a large legal pad.

As part of his inspection, Craine asked that one of the statue's four dedication plaques be removed to allow internal access to the monument. At the mere touch of a screwdriver, the entire 50-pound tablet broke off in his hands. While all this was going on, a few SMFR members hung around anxiously, waiting for Mr. Craine to give his initial report.

It turned out much to be much worse than expected. In addition to the problems previously noted, Craine found far more extensive — and serious — problems with the monument, all of which were detailed in his subsequent report. Most alarming was word that his internal inspection revealed that angle fasteners holding the four massive sides of the cast iron base had oxidized to powder; only gravity was holding them in place. As the broken-off plaque suggested, the various screws and bolts holding the base's four bowls were also shot, which meant that they could break off at any time, potentially injuring anyone close enough to read the monument's plaques. Close inspection of the monument's figure (it was cast in zinc, we learned) revealed that it had lost its armature, a kind of internal skeleton meant to support the figure's weight. Over the previous

century, gravity had been pulling relentlessly on the relatively soft metal, causing it to slowly collapse into its feet (think of the melting witch in the *Wizard of Oz*). Craine estimated the overall cost of repairing the monument at between \$50,000 and \$100,000, a figure that did not include replacement of the cracked and uneven concrete footing it sat on.⁴

The Vineyard public first got word of the conservation effort through articles filed in the local press about the Craine visit. Soon after, I began getting more calls offering assistance from a number of Vineyard residents, both seasonal and year round. Two of them offered direct expertise in art conservation and would prove to be critical to the success of the project.

The first was Dodie Headington, a Greenwich, Connecticut resident with considerable expertise in the conservation of outdoor sculpture. Mrs. Headington, who with her husband Dan, owns a summer home in Oak Bluffs, had worked with many professional conservators and was familiar with every aspect of statue restoration, from the intricacies of initial requests for qualifications (RFQs) to insurance coverage and long-term conservation plans. It was Dodie who told the SMFR about an organization called Save Outdoor Sculpture (SOS), whose purpose was the preservation of threatened artworks precisely like the one in Oak Bluffs, and with this information the SMFR was able to file an application in SOS's next grant round.

The second professional overture to SMFR came from another pair of experts with Vineyard connections: Chris Packard and Susan Buck of Historic Paint and Architectural Services based in Newton Center. Summer visitors to Menemsha, they had heard about the restoration effort and offered to conduct a scientific paint analysis on the monument free of charge (they would ultimately perform three).



Swaddled in a protective blanket, the statue comes down from its pedestal.

4 Craine, Clifford. "A Conservation Assessment of the Civil War Monument at Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts." Cambridge (MA): Daedalus Inc., rev. April 14, 2000.



On the statue's torso, evidence of earlier repair work.

Fundraising for the project officially kicked off on Tivoli Day, 1998, with the firing of the effort's symbolic "first shot" from an authentic Civil War rifle by SMFR member Bill Nicholson, who dressed for the occasion in an impeccable reproduction of the uniform worn by the statue's figure. Members of the SMFR put up a display near the statue that informed visitors of the monument's condition and the unfolding project.

Over the course of the next two summers, SMFR members and volunteers staffed booths beneath the statue, and in Healey Square and at events like the Oak Bluffs Harbor Fest and the M.V. Agricultural Fair, which in addition to providing information on the statue, provided the op-

portunity to sell promotional items like T-shirts and commemorative cup plates whose proceeds went to the restoration fund. Martha's Vineyard Regional High School Art Department teacher Scott Campbell gave this effort a significant boost by making a re-usable mold of a lion-head spout, from which SMFR members made and sold limited-edition plaster casts. SMFR members, led by Bill Nicholson in his blue uniform, also marched in Fourth of July parades bearing a banner made by Jim Brown's wife, Deborah.

The SMFR was also successful in winning grants from a number of local and state organizations, including the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Peter Norton Family Foundation, The Farm Neck Foundation, The Permanent Endowment for Martha's Vineyard, and The Second Chance Foundation. The Oak Bluffs Fireman's Civic Association, sponsor of the annual August fireworks display in Ocean Park, generously offered to put the image of the statue on the T-shirts it sold as their annual fundraiser and donate the proceeds to the restoration effort.

In December of 1998 Susan Buck sent the SMFR results of an analysis

of three paint chips taken from the statue that were examined under a fluorescent microscope with an ultraviolet filter. The analysis revealed that eighteen “generations” (layers) of paint had been applied over the previous century. Photographs of various magnified cross-sections of the chip had the vibrant, undulating quality of Munch paintings— swirls of varying hues of gray, green, yellow (apparently primer) broken here and there by bright metallic seams of bronze powder paint. Unfortunately, a bottom-most layer of corrosion on the chip SMFR had provided made identification of the original layer impossible. Ms. Buck offered to take her own sample from the statue on her next trip to the Island.

By late 1999 cash or pledges in hand enabled the SMFR to apply for a \$15,000 matching grant from Save Outdoor Sculpture. By the summer of 2000 fundraising had progressed to the point that the SMFR was able to send out a request for qualifications letter to conservation firms who would be invited to bid on the project. From these, three firms, each furnished with a copy of Daedalus’ assessment, later received requests for proposals (RFP’s). Knowing that restoration of the statue would require that missing pieces like the soldier’s hand be recreated, Dodie recommended that the SMFR also reach out to a firm called Conservation and Sculpture, whose principal and conservator, Mark Rabinowitz, was also a sculptor.

In March of 2000, Save Outdoor Sculpture notified the SMFR that it had been awarded a matching grant of \$15,000, an amount that, along with what had previously been raised, was enough to begin the actual restoration process. Six months later, SMFR signed a contract with Conservation and Sculpture, Inc., of Brooklyn, New York, to perform the work. Principal and chief conservator, Mark Rabinowitz, had previously served as Chief Consulting Conservator to the City Parks Foundation in New York. Mark had performed conservation treatments on more than 20 public monuments, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ Stewart Memorial in Brooklyn, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi’s “Washington and Lafayette” in Morningside Park, New York City and Henry Moore’s “Two Forms” at the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York.

Aided by the Oak Bluffs Highway Department under Richard Combra, Mr. Rabinowitz began disassembly of the monument on October 10, 2000, by drilling out the four rusted bolts that held the zinc figure to the cast iron base, fitting a specially-fabricated steel collar around the statue’s plinth (the square pad the figure stood on was too deteriorated to support the figure itself), and with the help of a boom truck volunteered by a local business, guiding the fragile figure to the ground. The fountain base was strapped together for safety and then hoisted onto a truck.

The figure arrived in Brooklyn two days later, and once the various layers of paint were removed the minutest details of its history were now vis-

ible. They told a story of damage and repair that that was far more extensive than even the initial report had indicated and brought confirmation of the earlier “intervention” by Benjamin Amaral. Tracks of lead solder extended over much of the figure’s shoulder, back and cape where the zinc had been damaged in the fall, and thick blobs of lead covered places where patches of the original metal had been lost completely. In a compliment to the plumber, Mr. Rabinowitz noted that some of the work was “quite sensitively performed” and “had been effective at re-establishing the integrity of the statue and allowing it to be reinstalled.”⁵ It was now obvious that some areas of the statue, particularly the original plinth that had been covered in concrete, were so deteriorated that more castings would have to be made than originally planned, further driving up the cost of restoration. Seams that originally appeared sound were actually so deteriorated by the elements that virtually every seam, original or repaired, would have to be re-soldered.

After a metal sample was analyzed to determine the exact composition of the original zinc alloy by the Ney Smelting and & Refining Company in Brooklyn, New York, new microcastings were poured. To recreate the missing rifle and hand, the SMFR obtained permission from the Town of North Kingstown, Rhode Island, where I had found one of the few extant copies of the Fiske figure, to make molds of the missing parts. SMFR member Bill Nicholson provided the conservator an authentic Union bayonet and scabbard from which Mr. Rabinowitz carved a pattern for the foundry. Other features of the statue, notably its cartridge box and hat, needed to be repaired (missing buttons on the figure’s hat band were obtained from a Civil War costume-supply house).

The most critical — and delicate — work involved the installation of a new stainless steel armature that would protect against wind pressure and keep the figure from settling further. Though it had now fallen to pieces, the conservator found the remnants of a similar structure. Though a tradesman rather than an artist, Mr. Amaral understood, as clearly as the professional conservator, the reason why the statue toppled in the first place. Though not aesthetically perfect, his armature had kept the figure in place through hurricane winds for almost a half-century. Installing the new armature (this one even stronger and made from stainless steel) required the temporary removal of 10” x 10” section of the figure’s back to allow positioning the brace internally. When this had been done and the new castings made, the conservator soldered the pieces of the figure back together.

The cast-iron fountain base was sent to the Allen Architectural met-

5 Rabinowitz, Mark. “Condition Assessment and Conservation Treatment Report for the Oak Bluff (sic) Fountain.” New York: Conservation and Sculpture Company, 2001. p 3-4.

als facility in Talledega, Alabama, where it was lightly sandblasted, the cracks in the basin were repaired with silver solder, and replacements were cast for the three lion head spouts, one lost and two others so eaten by rust that durable repairs were impossible. By examining the cleaned-up base and an illustration of the memorial that had appeared in the Martha's Vineyard Herald, the conservator also determined that two horizontal bands of molding had been lost. After consultation, the SMFR agreed pay for the re-creation of the original detail. When all this work was completed, the base's sections were reassembled and bound together with new fasteners.

Discerning the original paint color of the monument proved difficult. A second sample taken by Susan Buck also turned out to be missing the original coat of paint. It was only after Mr. Rabinowitz provided a further sample he had stripped from the figure that the statue's original color was finally revealed: a glossy, deep chocolate brown that almost perfectly matched a standard Benjamin Moore tint called "Bronzetone." The long-sought appropriate color was literally sitting on the shelf at a local paint store, but for the fullest possible accuracy (indistinguishable to the human eye) a custom batch of two-part epoxy was custom-blended.

At this point in the project it was unclear if the SMFR had enough, or could raise enough, money to cover all the unexpected costs of restoration. But one afternoon in February, 2001, a handwritten letter addressed to the SMFR arrived in my post office box. Once at home, I read as far as the words, "Dear SMFR, I would like to help in the restoration of the Civil War statue..." when I was interrupted by a telephone call. It was my wife calling to report that the newly restored Corbin-Norton House in Ocean



The statue, after restoration work, in the Brooklyn workshop.

Park was ablaze and threatening other historic homes in the neighborhood. I dropped the letter on a counter and drove to the scene just in time to watch the structure's tower fall to the ground in flames. Nearby, a woman began to sob.

About an hour later, after the blaze was under control and I was back at home, I picked up reading where I had left off: "... Let me know the status of your fundraising," it continued, "*and consider your project completed.*" (author italics) It was no hoax; subsequent contact with the letter's author, a summer resident and authority on J. W. Fiske, who wished to remain anonymous, confirmed the incredibly generous offer. After two exhausting years of work, and more than a few sleepless nights, it was now certain that the restoration would be fully completed. Thus in my mind the loss of one historic work is inextricably linked to the survival of another. In preservation work, that's how it usually goes.

That summer Mark Rabinowitz came back to the Vineyard to reinstall the now-gleaming soldier to his position atop its shining base. By a generous offer from local trucker Clarence "Trip" Barnes, it had been brought home, free of charge, on a company van returning to the Island, and thanks to the Oak Bluffs Parks and Highway Department, now sat securely on a new concrete footing.

On August 17, 2001, the Soldier's Memorial Fountain was rededicated before a sizable crowd. To mark the occasion, Wesley Mott prepared a time capsule for some future generation to open. By that time the SMFR had been notified that the project had won that year's national first place treatment award from Save Outdoor Sculpture (the accompanying cash grant was put toward exterior lighting for the statue).

Special guests and benefactors were seated under a rented tent, and reenactors from the Massachusetts 54th (Colored) Division, whose exploits in America's bloodiest conflict were celebrated in the film *Glory*, provided an honor guard. Twelve-year-old Maya Hayes, a descendent of Charles Strahan himself, unveiled the monument just as her long-deceased cousin, Louise Strahan, had done that same month 110 years earlier. Also looking on were Jean and Dr. William Strahan of Silver Spring, Maryland, the latter a grandchild of Charles Strahan's younger brother, Theodore, who still recalls, as a child, meeting his great-uncle.

During their visit to the Island, the Strahans provided me with a copy of a letter that helps to explain their relative's long-ago gesture to the men who had faced him in war and spurned him in peace. It was written by Charles Strahan's English-born father, Ebenezer, on June 15, 1863, during the time his son was serving in the rebel army. Most of the two-page manuscript concerns Ebenezer's financial affairs, but in the last paragraph the father takes an abrupt and surprising turn of subject, gently but firmly reminding

his son of his personal sentiments about the war: "I am a Union man out and out," Ebenezer reiterates, and he closes with the following words:

I was always of the sentiment that all men should be free and that it would be best for all. Omnipotence is at the helm. "Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you," in my opinion, sweeps or will sweep not immediately but eventually slavery from the face of the globe.⁶

Considerably older and wiser, Charles gave thanks for the abolition of slavery at the original dedication of Soldiers' Memorial Fountain, thus proving the old adage that "the apple never falls far from the tree." Thanks to the generosity of countless Islanders, visitors and friends, this unique testament to our better angels will likely soldier on for many more years.

POSTSCRIPT: THE FOURTH TABLET

THE RESTORATION of the Soldiers' Memorial Fountain solved many of the mysteries surrounding the people and the circumstances of the monument. Its origins, materials and original color, its locations, and earlier restorations as well as many more facts were known by the time of the rededication in 2001, but one mystery lingered for eight more years.

Four tablets surround the base of the monument. Three of them honor the veterans of both sides of the conflict, but the fourth displays, in large letters, F C & L. No one quite knew what those three initials stood for.

It was a lingering mystery until 2009 when a copy of a document from the annual GAR (Grand Army of the Republic, the Union veterans' organization) meeting in Boston in the 1890s was discovered on the Internet. The document included greetings from the esteemed members of the organization and the community, each closing with the words "Yours in Fraternity, Charity and Loyalty"; some simply, "Yours in FC&L."

With more research it was discovered that Fraternity, Charity and Loyalty were part of the ritual in the early, exclusive, GAR meetings (much like the ritual of Free Masonry). Later, when the GAR became more inclusive, Fraternity, Charity and Loyalty were its guiding principles.

And so the mystery of the fourth tablet is solved.

— James H. C. Brown

⁶ Ebenezer Strahan. Letter to Charles Strahan. 15 June, 1863. Quoted by permission of Dr. and Mrs. William Strahan of Silver Spring, Maryland.

At 18 Pequot Avenue, Oak Bluffs: Home Base for Island Summers

by SKIP FINLEY

IN JUNE 1955, the automobile trip from Long Island, New York, to Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard was indeed a journey— not only was there no Route 195; there was no Route 95. So the trip was almost wholly along the serpentine, stoplight-speckled Route 1. Today's four-hour, 250-mile drive was then an arduous nine to ten hours in Dad's Pontiac station wagon, crammed with a season's worth of clothes and supplies — and a tortuous one for the parents of us three kids, all under the age of reason. I was six then — would be seven that July — and Dad, hailing from Mobile, Alabama, had no illusions about stopping on the way up with our African American family even in the Northeast because the small towns along the way were, well — small towns and this was the fifties when minds weren't so open. Stopping was for gas and bathrooms only to avoid unseemly contact with white folks whose horizons were not very broad.

The Ewell and Millie Finley family first came to Oak Bluffs with the Desi and Ann Margetson family (with two youngsters of their own), sharing a small house on Dukes County Avenue that first summer.

The patriarchs were Ewell, a civil engineer, and Desi Margetson, an architect, whose business ties had grown to friendship. Desi's wife, Anne (who is white), suggested the joint summer retreat having visited the Vineyard earlier. Both families enjoyed the sojourn so much that both bought homes in Oak Bluffs — my parents on Pequot Avenue that August 24, 1955. Named as an amalgamation of my mother's name, Mildred Finley, the Milfin House was purchased for \$4,600 — and we became the fifth family to own it but only the fourth family to actually live in it since it was built sometime in 1872. We were the fifth family because in the fifties it wasn't that easy for black people to buy homes — and Dad's white local attorney (technically the fourth owner) had to buy it and sell it back to us.

SKIP FINLEY, a well-known radio broadcasting executive, has been a seasonal resident of Oak Bluffs since 1954; he and his wife, Karen, have been year-round residents since 1999. He has served on the Oak Bluffs Historical Commission, is a trustee of the Vineyard Open Land Foundation and a member of the Martha's Vineyard Rod and Gun Club, and enjoys offshore fishing, cars and model trains.



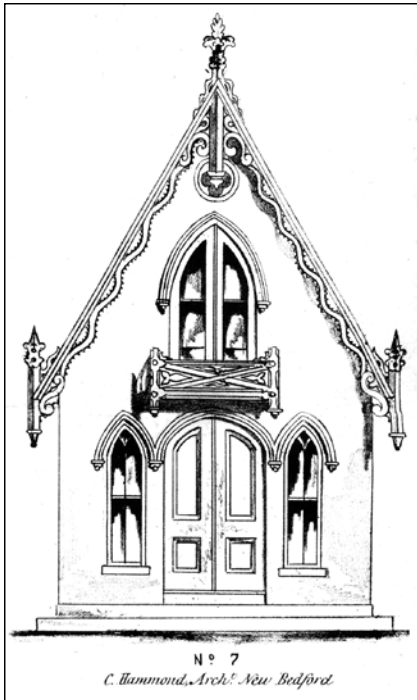
The Milfin House today.

Martha's Vineyard did not have the same cachet then as today; in fact, Oak Bluffs was decidedly *not* the 'Seaside Watering Place' envisioned by the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company, the town's developers. Oak Bluffs then was a very small village, undiscovered by today's masses and press. Not all the houses were in use then, few crowds, not many street-lights. Compared with today's vibrancy, Oak Bluffs really was run down. Of course we all fell in love with Oak Bluffs, the Milfin House, and Martha's Vineyard — to the extent that, since 1999, my wife, Karen, and I have called it home.

Early History

In 1866, Captain Shubael L. Norton, Captain Ira Darrow, Captain Grafton Norton Collins and William Bradley teamed up with William S. Hills of Boston and Erastus P. Carpenter of Foxboro to form the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company. The three former captains knew the whaling days were over — Confederate raiders had hounded them throughout the Civil War, and oil was discovered in Pennsylvania — and they had investment dollars that needed to be put to work. From 1866 to 1874, the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company accomplished the extraordinary feat of designing and constructing an entire seaside resort — docks, harbor, hotels, homes, parks and a downtown (Circuit Avenue) — Cottage City.

The developers hired Robert Morris Copeland, a Boston landscape



This 1866 architect's sketch depicts the original design of the Milfin House.

architect, to design the village. There were several versions of the layout,¹ and it is the October 25, 1866, version which has the initial design of The Milfin House — No. 7 drawn by C. Hammond, architect. Priced at \$500, it was the least expensive of the seven model homes offered.

On October 15, 1872, the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company sold 18 Pequot Avenue “with the building standing thereon” to William H. Hart of New Britain, Conn., for \$125.00. William H. Hart was the president of Stanley Tool Works and the founder of today’s Hart Haven. Also notable, another hardware magnate, Philip Corbin the lock manufacturer, built a home on Ocean Park (now the Corbin-Norton House). It is easy to imagine that Corbin locks and Stanley Tools were used in the construction of Oak Bluffs.

In a nod to the existing Wesleyan Grove community, early purchase and sale agreements had covenants prohibiting drinking,

gambling or commerce on the premises — covenants religiously defied by the Finley family.

A House Changes Hands

On April 29, 1927, the Hart family sold 18 Pequot Avenue to Bertha A. Lawrance of New York City for \$1.00 and other valuable considerations.

On June 20, 1946, Bertha A. Lawrance sold the house to Esther E. Magnusen for \$5,700. On December 18, 1954, Mrs. Magnusen conveyed the house to Florence E. and Esther M. Magnusen for the consideration of love and affection. They in turn sold 18 Pequot Avenue to Henry and Patricia Corey for \$3,800 on June 21, 1955. On August 25, 1955, Henry Corey, my father’s attorney, sold 18 Pequot Avenue to Ewell W. Finley of Jamaica, New York, for \$4,600. The deed was transferred to his wife, our mother, Mildred J. Finley, who, upon her death in 1984, left it to us, her children, who set up The Milfin House Realty Trust, and are the Milfin House’s owners today.

The Milfin House, 1955 to Present; The Finleys

In August 1955, 18 Pequot was conveyed fully furnished, not unusual for those times. The house was a summer home, i.e. with no insulation, and

¹ Waban Park had yet to be added, nor had Waban Avenue, which would ultimately run perpendicular to 18 Pequot Avenue alongside the Milfin House.

only the living room fireplace as a source of heat, as it remains so today. The house had a full bath on each of the two floors and a “water closet” (toilet) behind the kitchen. Walking into the front entrance of the house into the living room, there is a bedroom to the right (used by our parents) and a sun porch to the left — part of which was my bedroom. The stairway leading upstairs is at the right of the room with the stairs to the brick basement beneath. We believe, but cannot tell for certain, that the original house may have ended at the far wall of the dining room — even if so, it seems the rest was constructed of the same materials at almost the same time as the first part was constructed.



Ewell F. Finley at work in the Milfin House yard, 1955.

Beyond the living room is the dining room, with a leaf table for ten, a window seat, a pantry and a built-in breakfront. As the center of the house, the dining room was — and is — the focal point of countless jigsaw puzzle sessions, birthday celebrations, parties, card games (Mom was an avid penny-poker fan); weddings — and, of course, meals with family and company gathered around the table.

To the rear of the house is a hallway housing an exterior door to the side yard on the left, the downstairs bath, a pantry that became a bedroom opposite the back stairway to upstairs and the entrance to the kitchen that also has a deck alongside a small, fenced in courtyard. Going upstairs, above the living room is a bedroom with a balcony (with a view down the street to the beach). There are bedrooms on either side of the stairway and the bathroom is behind it.

Above the dining room is a bedroom we called the dormitory, and, across a small hallway at the top of the back stairs, is the back bedroom (today it's my sister Debbie and her husband Bashir's room).

Finally, above the kitchen there is a bedroom with a sink (we used to call it the hidden room, today it's my brother Glenn and his wife Yolanda's room).

All evidence suggests that the seven-bedroom home had been used as a guest house. There were multiple sets of sheets for all the beds and plenty of towels in a linen closet near the downstairs bath. The pantries held several complete sets of dishes, pots, pans and utensils — in addition to the



Lifetime friends were made at the beach.

fancy Delftware service in the breakfront. Unlike the rest of the neat, if somewhat tattered and well-worn house — white painted walls, stained wood floors, some with Persian rugs, wicker furniture, and lace curtains — the kitchen was utilitarian at best with open shelving and a linoleum-covered, painted wood floor. The family has retained many of the artifacts from those days, including dishware, pictures and furniture.

A Kid's Paradise

The Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company had specifically set out to build an afford-

able, middle class resort in 1866. Our house at 18 Pequot Avenue is a block from the beach, two blocks to Circuit Avenue, two blocks to Waban Park and three blocks to Ocean Park — or, in other words, a kid's paradise.

I was blessed to be able to spend the entire next 13 summers, from the last week in June to the day after Labor Day, at 18 Pequot Avenue — the Milfin House. We kids were much older before understanding the significance of a black family having middle class resources enough for the luxury of a summer home, not just back then but even today.

We kids spent most of our time outdoors. The Milfin House had no television until the late '90s, when we needed one for the computer. Back then we had the tennis courts and playground; Church's Pier for discovering; Farm Pond for crabbing; Circuit Avenue for treats; Hartford Park for running around; Waban Park for kites; Ocean Park for sailing boats and band concerts for our entertainment, all in walking distance. But from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., on all but the rainiest of days, we could be found down the street at the Inkwell and the Pay Beach — and, no doubt, in the water. Even today, the Inkwell is one of the best and easiest places to meet people. Lifetime friends were made at that beach — Moms had a mutual interest in their children getting to know other, rather privileged, African American families who congregated there in order to reinforce black middle class rules of the day: you ARE going to college, one WOULD excel in a chosen field of endeavor, one WOULD deport himself correctly.

It didn't take long to discover other kids to befriend and was a con-

stant source of fun. There was a pier on the Pay Beach side we could dive or jump off, rafts on both sides for swimming to, jumping, diving, or throwing smaller kids off. Jetties alongside were sea life educational facilities and places for imaginative games (albeit dangerous, and now prohibited) and activity. At the top of the menu were occasional hot dogs from the Seaview Hotel's cantina, potato chips from the Pay Beach food stand or a choice of tuna or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with fruit from Mom's picnic basket on the beach.



Mildred J. Finley, from whom the house takes its name.

On weekends, beginning late Friday night when the “Daddy Boat” arrived, we were scrubbed clean and on our best behavior for visits to the exotic beaches at Edgartown, South Beach, Gay Head and Chappaquiddick. Mom and Dad dressed up in the evenings for dinners at the Boston House on Circuit Avenue or for countless house, lawn and porch parties. Social lives expanded as Moms met Moms on the beach and were introduced to Dads on weekends.

It wasn't long before the Moms and Dads became honorary Aunts and Uncles and the microcosm of the ‘beach’ society became a village — where children's activities were monitored by all. In those days the telephone system utilized party lines; one picked up the phone and waited for an operator (we didn't have dial tones then) — and hung up if someone was already talking. You had to be very careful of the information you shared with close friends because someone else's Mom might hear you and tell *yours*.

Soon enough the Moms latched onto the idea of shared custody — where one or two would babysit at Inkwell Beach all day through dinner, while the rest took turns cocktailing and playing cards at State Beach or the porches or lawns of others.

Less than the best of beach days were creatively devoted to group activities like blueberry picking, crabbing at either Farm Pond or Sunset Lake; flying kites, kick ball, library visits or crafts in the Tabernacle grounds. Prized were the rainy day afternoon movie matinees and weekly visits to the Flying Horses. As we grew older the supervision lessened and diver-

sions extended to team sports like basketball and football, dancing at The Tivoli² — and standing around on Circuit Avenue.

We Would Become the Help

As the fifties closed in on the early 1960s, fewer families were able to spend the entire summer. Rare for black families then, both of our parents were college educated: we were a privileged middle class family accustomed to private schools, help, multiple cars and a second home. Dad decided to build his own structural engineering firm around this time, and that meant we had to economize. The folks decided WE children would become the help in order for us to stay all summer. That meant their friends would come to the Vineyard and pay to stay in one of the Milfin House's four or five available bedrooms. Our jobs were: cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and getting supplies from town for Continental breakfasts — and the rest of the time was ours. Lesson learned: work was character building.

Even then, Oak Bluffs was the type of town where youngsters were able to go to Circuit Avenue and conduct commerce: stopping at the Post Office for mail; getting the Milfin House breakfast from the Old Stone Bakery; and using the Laundromat (where Offshore Ale is now located). It was a safe way to learn to grow up and do adult things. As I got older, my activities leaned towards gainful employment — having the dual benefit of being out of the house and able to support my own movie and Clam Bar habits.

One of my favorite 'jobs' was coin diving. The steamship *Nantucket* stopped in Oak Bluffs on the way to Nantucket and if you were strong (and fast) enough you could swim near the boat and beg, "How about a coin?" of the passengers awaiting debarkation. You learned to save those pennies and nickels to buy fins and masks in order to get to the dimes and quarters ahead of your rivals. I'd leave that job for setting pins at the bowling alley across from the ferry dock (where Sovereign Bank is today) and the money from coin diving and the tips from the bowling alley bought me clams and French fries from Giordano's and usually a movie at the Strand or the Island theaters. More formal jobs were being the 'ring boy' at the Flying Horses, washing dishes and doing salads at the Oceanview Hotel before it burned down (now it's the Oceanview Restaurant) and at Giordano's. At Giordano's, washing dishes by the window that looked out on the yard, (now where Giordano's Pizza is), was how you knew what was happening among your friends that evening; kids stopped by to chat about what was going on later, with whom and where. Of course this all served to instruct a

2 The Tivoli was a multistory dance hall located where the Oak Bluffs Police Station is today.

middle class black kid the value of a dollar — and the lesson that once you catch that brass ring, you don't let go.

By the mid 1960s my Vineyard summers were gradually being replaced by college and the real world — the one where employment lasted twelve, not two, months a year, as our children have learned — and our grandchildren will be learning. After being reduced to spending the majority of our real world time off-Island for the benefit of commerce and only vacations on Martha's Vineyard, I was able to figure out a way to stay here — and vacation back in America.

A Family Tradition Lives On

Ewell Finley died in 1979, leaving the house to Mildred Finley who, in 1984, also died and left the Milfin House to us. We siblings agreed to set up a family trust, the EW Milfin Fund, which operates the Milfin House in perpetuity on behalf of the family. The Finleys and their heirs continue to spend a significant amount of time summering on the porch of 18 Pequot Avenue in Oak Bluffs — thanks to the vision of EW and Millie Finley and their friends, Anne Margetson and her late husband, Desi. EW and Millie (Bebe to her grandchildren) lived to see some of their grandchildren play on the porch of the Milfin House. Now their great-grandchildren also enjoy the beauty, peace and freedom of life in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard Island.

Today my wife Karen and I get to visit our children and grandchildren at the Milfin House during their summer vacations (holidays and winters they visit at our house). I'm a radio broadcast executive with an office in New York — and we have a pied-a-terre in Washington, D.C., where our kids live. Fortunately, my sister Debbie Finley-Jackson (now a retired school principal) stays for the whole summer, keeping the house open for her (and our) children, and my brother Glenn takes a month away from his law practice (his partner takes a winter month off to ski) to stay with his daughters in July. We all get together for the annual Illumination and Oak Bluffs Fireworks — and often spend that time with neighbors and family friends from the last 50 years.

The Milfin House has been wonderful for and to our family — Thanks Mom & Dad!

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George Washington Goethals And His Vineyard Friends

Letters Are ‘A Window Thrown Upon A Sensitive & Appealing Inner Man’

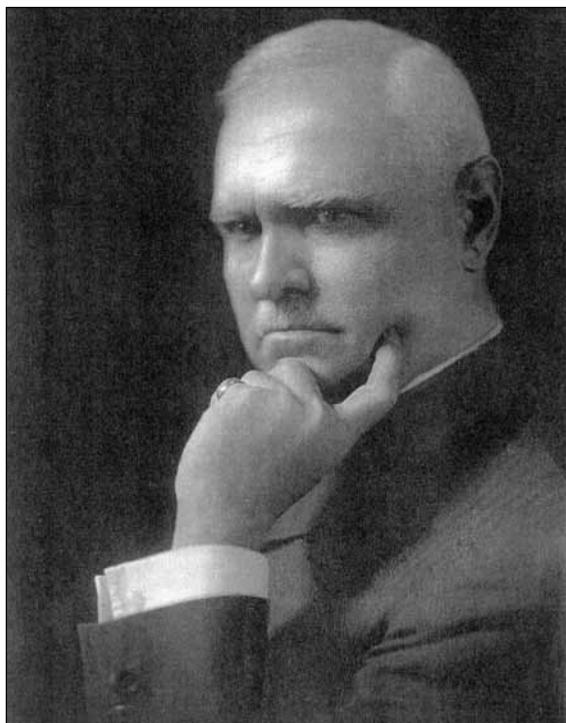
by THOMAS GOETHALS

IN THE SPRING of 1910, George W. Goethals, Corps of Engineers, U.S.A., a summer resident of Vineyard Haven, was entering his fourth year as Chairman and Chief Engineer of the Isthmian Canal Commission in Panama. That body of seven members, five of whom were military engineers, had been appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 — his third and final such body since work had begun under American control in 1904 — to continue the construction of a canal across the Isthmus of Panama. That is, in essence, to create what David McCullough, historian and author (and also a Vineyard resident), called a “path between the seas”; what Joseph Bucklin Bishop, journalist and Secretary of the Canal Commission (and also a summer resident of the neighboring town of Falmouth, just six miles across Vineyard Sound), had earlier named “Panama’s bridge of water.” Not to his mind so much a path or even a traditional sea-level canal of 50 miles through the Isthmus, as a very long bridge of water, because for 34 of those 50 miles ships were to be lifted 84 feet above sea-level by means of three gigantic man-made locks at the Atlantic end of the projected canal, then to sail across 24 miles of a man-made lake of 164 square miles, and finally to be lowered back to sea level again by another set of three locks at the Pacific end.

Whichever of the two descriptions seems the more apt or accurate, the task Goethals had been assigned by President Roosevelt was, all historians agree, a monumental one. Often known as the “Eighth Wonder of the World” even today, the Panama Canal — perhaps more accurately now, Pan-

THOMAS GOETHALS, a retired professor of English, was the founder, executive director, and president of The Nathan Mayhew Seminars of Martha’s Vineyard (1974-1992) and is now working on a biography of his grandfather, Major General George W. Goethals, builder of the Panama Canal (1907-1914) and first governor (1914-1916). This article © Thomas Goethals, 2010, printed by permission.

ama's Canal — became, upon its opening to the commercial traffic of the world in August of 1914, history's greatest engineering marvel, unmatched at the time. Unmatched, that is, until the era of atomic and hydrogen bombs in the 1940s and '50s, of the moon landing in 1969, and of all the ambitious space programs launched thereafter. Those remarkable scientific advances in engineering and technology seemed at the time to diminish the historical, engineering, and scientific significance of the Canal; but, as the author of an innovative and comprehensive study of the building of a tectonic culture during the nineteenth century concluded, "Modern building owes a great deal to [George W.] Goethals and his team, as do many other processes our world depends on, from modern oil prospecting to space programs."



George W. Goethals. — Photo courtesy Thomas Goethals

In short, the building of the Canal was — and is — an important step forward in the development of the "modern building processes."¹

Yet, however much of the credit for building the Panama Canal (and it was a great deal) belongs to George Goethals and his staff, especially for his leadership during the final seven years of construction, what I find, as his grandson (and as a Vineyard resident too), and after years of research, study, and thought, most appealing, even endearing, about the "genius of the Panama Canal," this seemingly austere, stern — yes, even seemingly cold and rigid — soldier, is his deep attachment to Martha's Vineyard and its inhabitants. It is never openly admitted, that attachment — he found it difficult to express his feelings — but it is revealed in the simple fact of the series of personal letters he wrote and kept, particularly those to Vineyarders, whose letters he unfailingly answered, in his characteristically detached manner and style, quite impersonal and businesslike, but always promptly and cordially, despite the press of his duties on the Canal. They are contained among his personal papers — another indication of his attachment — in the Library of

1 Peters, Tom F. *Building the Nineteenth Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 345.

Congress, a gift from his widow and two sons after his death in 1928.

I was first alerted, during my early research, to the possibility that my grandfather had far greater depths within him than my parents ever acknowledged to me, for I read a footnote in David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas* — a footnote, mind you, not the text itself: "Were it not for Goethals' letters to his son George included among his papers in the Library of Congress, one might mistakenly assume that he was as devoid of human warmth and emotion as his critics insisted. The letters are a window thrown upon a sensitive and appealing inner man; for the author they were a revelation and one of the high points of the research."

It was his wife, the former Effie Rodman of New Bedford, who first introduced him to the Vineyard in 1889. Born and brought up in New Bedford, a direct descendent of the whaling families of Rotches and Rodmans who had made New Bedford the whaling capital of the world by the first half of the 19th century, she had often visited Martha's Vineyard during her girlhood. And, as Bishop explains it in his biography of his longtime associate and friend:

Becoming enamored of the place, Captain Goethals bought a lot on Crocker Terrace in Vineyard Haven, in the summer of 1893, and had a very substantial summer frame house built in time for the family to occupy it in the summer of '94. Thereafter he made Vineyard Haven his legal residence and his home. He never voted anywhere else. The Goethals were no longer summer people — they were folks. He belonged to the local Barnacle Club. After he had been for seven years on the Isthmus and won world-wide fame, he came back for a short visit, and one of his fellow members, a very retired sea captain, asked, affably, 'Where be ye now, Cap!'



It was a local contractor, Horace A. Tilton by name, also of Vineyard Haven, who built that "very substantial frame house" for Captain Goethals, and it led to a friendship between the 35 year-old army officer and the 45 year-old builder that lasted, despite years apart, for the rest of their lives. We know little about the nature of that friendship except that it was renewed at intervals when they worked together thereafter. For example, and probably quite by coincidence, they may have met again in Rhode Island sometime between 1900 and 1903, for it was in 1900 that Goethals, returned from his service in Porto Rico during the Spanish-American War of 1898 and, promoted to the rank of major, was assigned to take charge of the U.S. Engineer District office in Newport, Rhode Island. He was responsible not only for all improvements on the rivers and harbors in Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts, including the Vineyard, but for the construction and maintenance of coastal defenses and fortifications like Fort Wetherill, Fort Greble, and Fort Rodman as well. In that

same year of 1900, Horace Tilton, after selling his contract business to W. G. Manter of Vineyard Haven, entered the employ of the War Department for a period of six years, to build fortifications in Rhode Island, specifically to build forms — molds into which concrete is poured to set — for gun emplacements. So it's difficult not to believe that during his work, at Fort Rodman, for example, or Newport or Jamestown, he did not meet Goethals during his inspections either in Rhode Island or on the Vineyard, but neither one of them ever mentioned it in their interviews with the Island press.

Ever since he had taken charge of the construction of the Canal in April of 1907, Goethals had often offered classmates, friends, and dignitaries free transportation to and from the Canal Zone on the Panama Railroad Company's steamship line (of which he was president). Of the two letters exchanged between Goethals and Tilton, the first in late November of 1911 proposed a visit to the Canal Zone, the second contained Goethals' response:

Vineyard Haven, Mass.
Nov. 24, 1911
Colonel Geo. W. Goethals,
Culebra, Canal Zone, Panama

Dear Colonel:

I am thinking quite strongly of visiting the Canal Zone this winter, if your offer of two years ago still holds good. If I go I think Mr. Urbin S. Lantz will go with me. I thought that the last of December or the first of January would be a good time to start. We may decide to stay there a while if you have anything for us to do. Will you kindly advise me by return mail.

Very sincerely Horace A. Tilton.



Culebra, C.Z., December 12, 1911

Mr. Horace A. Tilton
Vineyard Haven, Mass.

My dear Mr. Tilton:

I am in receipt of your letter of November 24th relative to your proposed visit to the Isthmus and take pleasure in enclosing you transportation for the purpose. I also enclose a letter to the Vice-President of the Panama Railroad, which will secure a thirty dollar rate each way for your friend Mr. Lantz who will accompany you.

With kindest regards,
Yours sincerely,

Enclosures

~

Culebra, C.Z., Dec. 12, 1911.

Mr. H. A. Drake,
Vice-President, Panama Railroad Company,
24 State Street, New York City.

Dear Sir:

Upon application, please grant a rate of thirty dollars to the Isthmus, each way, to Mr. Urbin S. Lantz, of Vineyard Haven, Mass. Mr. Lantz will accompany Mr. Horace A. Tilton, who has been furnished courtesy transportation.

Very truly yours,
President P. R. R.

Not surprisingly, Tilton's visit — he and Lantz presumably had done some sightseeing first — turned into jobs for both of them, thanks undoubtedly to Col. Goethals' interest and friendship. Carpenters were, at the time, in short supply, so Tilton was assigned to take charge of a planing mill by the Miraflores locks, at the Pacific end of the Canal — assisted by his son-in-law, Urbin Lantz — and his job was to build the huge wooden forms into which concrete was poured for the lock walls 80 feet high, 1000 feet in length, and 110 feet wide. Although he was then 65 years of age, he apparently enjoyed his work — and undoubtedly visited Col. Goethals in his office at Culebra. Years later, in 1926, he told the *Vineyard Gazette*, "I wouldn't have missed the experiences for a great deal. The climate too was very agreeable and at that time the Zone had been well cleaned up and was a perfectly healthy place to live in." Tilton was employed as a general carpenter for nearly three years on the Canal, from 1911 to 1913, so it is quite possible that in 1913, as construction was nearing completion and workers were being laid off, Tilton and Lantz were among them.

Two more events testify to the length and strength of the friendship between George Goethals and Horace Tilton. The first occurred in 1923, by which time Goethals had not only completed the Canal, been promoted to the rank of major general, served in World War I, but had also been awarded many decorations,² medals, and honorary degrees for his exemplary services for the nearly eleven years he spent on the construction of the Panama Canal and as Chief of the Division of Purchase, Storage, and Traffic during World War I.

In 1923, though retired and world famous, he turned again to his friend,

2 The Distinguished Service Medal, U.S.A.; Commander of the Legion of Honor, France; Honorary Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order, of St. Michael and St. George, King George of England; the Grand Cordon of the Order of Wen Hu (Striped Tiger) 2d Class, the Chinese Government.



Gathering gravel with orange peel crane from Changres River, January 1912. — *MVM collections*

then 75 years old, to ask if he could move his house on Crocker Avenue — the very one Tilton had built thirty years earlier — two miles up Main Street to the outskirts of West Chop, where he could have a better view of Vineyard Sound and Cape Cod six or seven miles in the distance. It was undoubtedly another good friend, Charles P. Greenough, a summer visitor from Boston and a friend since 1915 when the Greenoughs first visited the Canal Zone, who lured Goethals to buy the lot with a view; his own house stood on a bluff at the tip of the Chop, on the other side of the West Chop lighthouse, about a half-mile from Goethals' site.

To move the original house Tilton, who readily accepted the challenge, had to cut the two-story building into three sections, move them on rollers for the two miles, and then reassemble them on the new foundation; and he did the job so skillfully that, when completed, as Goethals' biographers say, "not a crack could be seen in the plaster and every door in the house swung true." As Tilton said in his interview three years later, "It was quite an undertaking for a man of my age, but take a look at the house. I know that you never could tell that it had been cut in three pieces, and we think it is one of our finest residences."

After the death of George Goethals on January 21, 1928, in New York,

the funeral took place three days later, from the Mortuary Chapel at West Point, where Goethals had asked to be buried.³ “No place was nearer and dearer to him than the Academy [even Martha’s Vineyard] where he had grown to manhood.” On the Vineyard, following the suggestion of the membership of the Tisbury Post of the American Legion (who would at the time change the name of the Post to the Gen. George W. Goethals Post No. 257), every flag but one in the Village was flown at half-mast from the time of Goethals’ death until the hour of the funeral service at West Point. Then

Horace Tilton and a few other close friends and neighbors went into Goethals’ house, brought out the flag that he had raised over San Juan de Porto Rico, ran it up, and lowered it to half-mast on the flagpole before his home. Placing a wreath at the foot of the flagstaff, they stood there with bowed heads; then departed as they had come, in silence. That was the perfect tribute.

His friend, Horace Tilton, was to die a year later, August 31, 1929. Friends to the last.

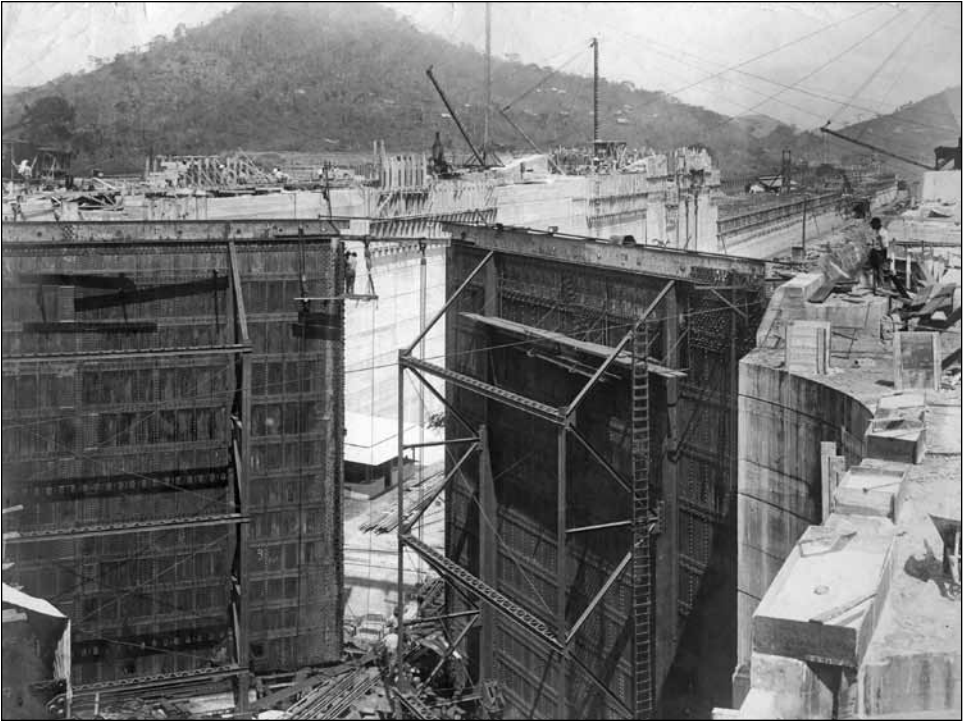


Not so surprisingly, the Vineyarder who had the longest correspondence with George Goethals during the years he presided over the construction of the Panama Canal was “one of the town’s leading citizens,” Stephen Carey Luce, Postmaster of Vineyard Haven. His family genealogy, like Horace Tilton’s, stretched back to the 17th century. Although he never visited the Canal Zone, as Tilton had, he did write a tribute to General Goethals, published in the *Gazette* six days after his death. It appeared on page eight just after former President Theodore Roosevelt’s encomium, in the edition headlined “Gen. Goethals Was Citizen of Tisbury” on page one and sub-headed, “Island’s Most Distinguished Resident Dies — Loved Vineyard — His Brilliant Career.”

In the passing of General George W. Goethals, Martha’s Vineyard loses a very influential friend and citizen. The loss is felt most intimately in Vineyard Haven where he resided when not in active service in his governmental and private business. Being a legal resident of the town of Tisbury, he was always interested in the welfare of the town, ever ready to assist in the larger activities of its people and to serve their interests.

The town loses a friend who was always ready to give his support in every way possible. To all who knew General Goethals, he was kind, sympathetic, helpful in giving advice, appreciative of kindly acts and attention, and notwithstanding his large affairs was most unassuming in his manner, never for a moment suggesting that his

3 Headquarters United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, Jan. 23, 1928, General Orders, No. 2.



Pedro Miguel Locks, upper guard gates, east chamber, March 1912. — *MVM collections*

position in his profession or his social standing called for privileges more than should be accorded the most modest citizen. A great man has passed on. He has left a lasting memory that will go down to future generations not only in the nation but particularly to the people who may survive him in the village in which he chose to claim his residence. The expressions of sympathy for the bereaved family of General Goethals are numerous. May his character and wondrous ability descend upon his sons and enable them to strive for the highest the world may have in store for them.

Luce's tribute was appreciative and generous; it was well-written, and it was closer in its estimate of the General's character than so many of the numerous other tributes published in newspaper articles and editorials nationwide. Undoubtedly because it was based on Luce's own experience with George Goethals, to be attested to by the following series of letters they exchanged with one another during Goethals' years of construction on the Isthmus. And all the letterheads on Luce's handwritten stationery bore his official address:

United States Post Office
Vineyard Haven, Mass.
Stephen C. Luce, Postmaster

The first of Luce's letters was dated April 4, 1910, probably written before Horace Tilton had begun his journey to Panama:

April 4, 1910

Col. George R. [sic] Geothals [sic],
Panama

My Dear Col. Goethals,

Please pardon me for presuming to ask for a moment of your very valuable time, but I have a young friend who is to graduate from the Mass. Institute of Technology about the middle of June in Civil Engineering, and will be ready for work, and it occurred to me that you might need such a man. You may remember that I talked with you in reference to him and the effort that was made to get him summer work as rodman on governmental track.

His name is Augustus B. Merry of Vineyard Haven — a fine young man as to character. Ambitious and starts well at Tech. A poor young man having borrowed money in past to pay his Tech. expenses. Is there any opening for such a young man with you? I shall feel very grateful to you if you will consider this application. He feels that he would like to go to Panama if there is an opening that he can fill realizing that the experience and prestige he would gain there would be valuable to a young man. Anything you may be able to do for him will be appreciated.

I hope you and Mrs. Geothals [sic] are very well. Vineyard Haven and its people are as usual. We have been having very fine mild weather. With kindest remembrances for Mrs. Geothals [sic] and yourself, I am

Sincerely Yours
s/ Stephen C. Luce



April 14, 1910.

Dear Mr. Luce,

Yours of the 4th instant received, and as our work is organized Mr. Merritt [sic] will be obliged to start in as a rodman at \$1,000 a year. If this will be satisfactory to him, I think I can locate him during the summer and whatever advancement he receives thereafter will be dependent upon his own exertions. I hope to be in Vineyard Haven early in June and will see you in regard to the matter at that time.

Very truly yours,
s/ Geo. W. Goethals.

Mr. Stephen C. Luce,
Vineyard Haven, Mass.

4/28, 1910

Col. Geo. W. Goethals [sic]
Culebra Canal Zone

My Dear Col. Goethals,

Yours of the 14th at hand and fully noted. I wish to thank you for the very kind consideration of my letter to you. My young friend A. B. Merry who will graduate from M.I.T. about June 8th will be very much pleased to accept such a position as you suggest. We shall be very glad to see you and confer with you when in Vineyard Haven in June.

I hope you are very well and with Mrs. Goethals [sic] enjoying the best of health. With kindest remembrances to you both and thanking you for any interest you may be able to take in my young friend I am

Sincerely Yours,
s/ Stephen C. Luce.

[M.I.T. seal]
Vineyard Haven, Mass.
June 15, 1910.

Col. Goethals,
Dear Sir: —

A sailing list of the Panama S.S. Co. has been sent me; and I have decided to sail July 12th unless you cable to me to come earlier. If the Government rate of thirty dollars holds for the steamers *Ancon* and *Cristobal* and I can arrange to come on one of them about July 9th I shall do that instead of coming July 12th. I have sent one letter to you at West Point so as to reach you before you sail if possible.

Very truly yours,
s/ A. B. Merry

Apparently Merry made a success of himself as a rodman on the Canal — the first step in the career of a civil engineer. For he was promoted within a year and a half in rank and pay to a transit man at the fortifications building on the islands off the Pacific end of the Canal. There he might have met Lt. George R. Goethals who was assigned by his father in 1912 to take charge of the construction of fortifications for the Canal — or even Col. Goethals himself on one of his daily inspection trips to survey the progress of construction. How long Merry continued his work on the Canal, we have no record, but we do know that he continued his career, either on the Canal or elsewhere as a civil engineer. And during the Great Depression of the 1930s he did return to the Vineyard to work on several Island projects. Although he left the Island again with

his wife and son to spend some years in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where his wife died, he finally returned again to live in Vineyard Haven until his death at the age of 75 in the town of his birth, survived by his son, George W. Merry, and three grandchildren.



Two other civil engineers and summer visitors, with their families, Frank A. Browne and Frank C. Stanton, ranked quite high in the Canal's hierarchy. But because they obtained their jobs on their own, independently, without an invitation or assistance from Goethals — though they may have encountered him on one of his daily inspection trips — I am excluding them from further consideration.⁴ They worked on the Canal for five and eight years respectively, a long time.



Stephen Luce, after assisting Augustus Merry to obtain a job on the Canal, did not write Goethals again until 1915 and then on an entirely different matter. That year Goethals, by then Governor of the Canal Zone, and the Canal having been opened to maritime traffic, was heavily engaged in coping with the recurrence of slides (or landslides) — that is, the movement of earth and rock from the excavated banks into the bed of the Canal, particularly in Culebra (soon to be renamed Gaillard) Cut — which closed the Canal to traffic for several months during 1915 and 1916. Nonetheless, Goethals continued to respond to correspondents, particularly to his Vineyard friends, no matter the severe demands of his job.



In between 1910 and 1915, the years of Luce's correspondence with Goethals, another Vineyarder, Capt. Hartson H. Bodfish, a native farm boy born in West Tisbury in 1862 and known as “the last of the Arctic whalers,” wrote Goethals in 1913 a letter I think of historical importance:

Vineyard Haven 1/22/1913
Col. Goethals,

Dear Sir,

Your letter of Jan. 18th received this week. I thank you very much for it, also for the interest you have taken in getting for me a position at the Isthmus. I have carefully looked over the pamphlet you sent

4 I am also omitting from this article the three Army officers and Vineyarders, besides Goethals, all three engineers as well as officers, who served as governors of the Canal Zone immediately after Goethals (1914-1916): Chester Harding (1917-1921); Jay J. Morrow (1921-1924); and Meriwether L. Walker (1924-1928). Harding also served during the construction years; the other two had not. And all were summer residents on the Vineyard, both Harding and Walker retiring on-Island, their children and grandchildren continuing as seasonal visitors since their deaths.



The Panama Canal's Pacific Entrance, looking south from Sosa Hill, October 1912. — MVM collections

and am sorry that I fail to find anything in my line of work. As I am just fifty the age limit would conclude the matter. I have been whaling in the Arctic since I was seventeen but *steel has taken the place of whalebone* [italics mine] and I am out of business. I am well and do not feel at fifty that I cannot afford [sic] to retire or that I am incapacitated from some kind of work.

If I change my occupation, I want if possible to make it permanent. Thanking you again and with warm regards for your family,

Very Truly Yours,
(Capt.) Hartson H. Bodfish

Unfortunately, Goethals' personal files in the Library of Congress do not contain his letter of January 18 to which Bodfish refers, nor any pamphlet either, conceivably one that provided basic information about the project for job applicants. The two men, however, had recently become "relatives" by marriage, for Bodfish's wife, the former Clara Howes of Vineyard Haven, was the aunt of Priscilla Howes Goethals, the wife of Lt. George R. Goethals, then working for his father as an Army engineer in charge of constructing the fortifications for the Panama Canal. Reason enough, I should think, for Goethals, as he already had in the case of Horace Tilton,

to offer Captain Bodfish a new opportunity for employment.

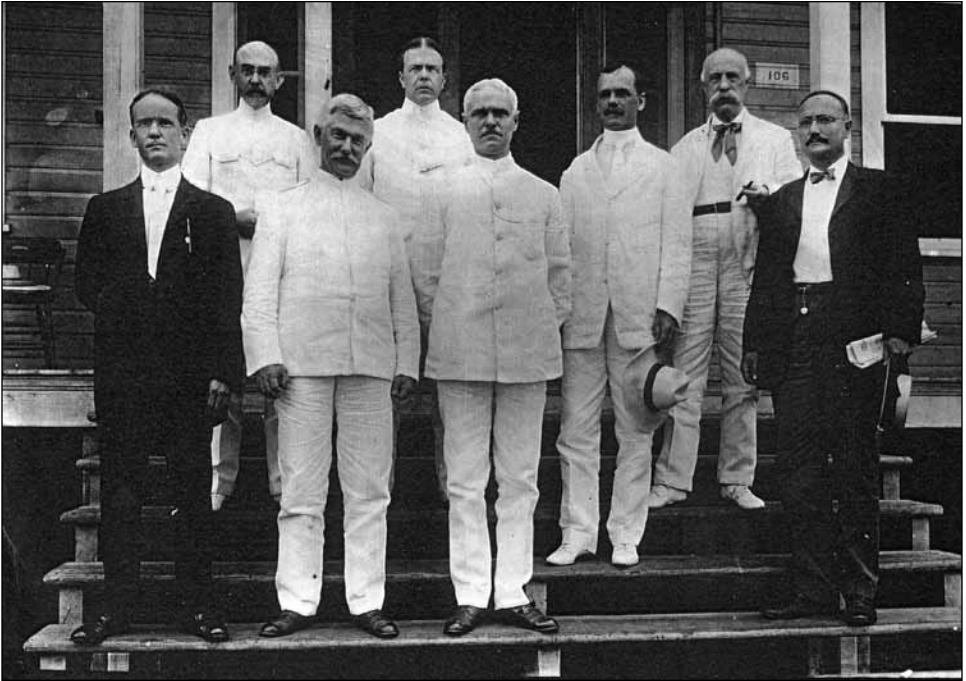
What makes me think Bodfish's letter may be of real historical interest is his statement that "steel has taken the place of whalebone" — as apposite, succinct, and accurate an observation as can be imagined, a metaphor for the vast transformation that had been taking place in American life since the Civil War. That costly war, as scholars have noted, was indeed the watershed between pre-war pastoral America and post-war industrial America, the latter often referred to as the Gilded Age, during the second half of the 19th century. And all of which is implied by, and encapsulated in, Hartson Bodfish's simple, stunning maxim.

Bodfish was, of course, referring to his own professional career of 31 years at sea and describing it from the perspective of a veteran whaler who had risen over the years from a foremast hand to the master of steam whaleships. The "Golden Age of Whaling" began right after the War of 1812, flourished during the first half of the 19th century, into the 1850s, and ended in 1859, two years before the firing on Fort Sumter, when one Edwin Drake drilled America's first oil well, in Pennsylvania. That major event, the discovery of crude oil, soon proved to be an essential ingredient in the development and growth of industrialism in America, which simultaneously led to the decline, and ultimately the death of an industry. That lingering event occurred at the beginning of the 20th century, as Bodfish's letter to Goethals makes clear, after 300 years of whaling in America since the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620; after only 60 years since whaling had become the third largest industry (after shoes and cotton) in Massachusetts, the fifth largest in the United States. The surest sign of its decline, historian Eric Dolin writes:

...came six months after the outbreak of World War I in Europe, [that is, in July of 1914] on December 29, 1914, when the *Whaleman's Shipping List* published its final issues... The *Shipping List* had reported on the rise of petroleum, the horrors of the Civil War, the dangers of the Arctic, and the industry's struggle to survive in a modernizing world. It had seen the American whaling fleet rise from 675 ships to a high of 735 in 1854, and then begin its long decline, shrinking to 321 in 1870, 175 in 1880, 97 in 1890, 48 in 1900, and just 32 whaleships on the eve of its last issue.⁵

One of those 32 ships had to have been the steam barkentine *Herman*, Captain Bodfish's last command and, in the spring of 1911, his final voyage of whaling and trading. Despite the risks — the declining market, particularly in whalebone (or baleen) for the women's fashion industry during the Gilded

5 "Whaleman's Shipping List and Merchants' Transcript" was the country's first and only newspaper devoted to whaling. See Eric Dolin, *Leviathan*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2007, p. 215.



Panama Canal Isthmian Commission. G. W. Goethals center. — Photo courtesy Thomas Goethals.

Age — Bodfish outfitted the *Herman*, took on a heavy cargo of trade goods, and sailed from San Francisco, 43 men in the crew, for the Arctic. Strong gales struck them — “the most anxious time I ever knew as master,” Bodfish later wrote — but by that time the ship had returned to Frisco in November, returned, according to Bodfish, “from the worst voyage I ever sailed on:

We had taken six whales and considerable whale bone⁶, making a total of around 30,000 pounds for the voyage, which was very good

6 The bowhead was a polar whale, a large whale — not a humpback nor a right whale, which it resembled — and it was prized especially for its baleen (or whalebone) in its mouth. Because of its size it yielded, on average, 150 barrels of oil, much more than either the sperm or the right whales did; and, from its mouth, thousands of pounds of long (12 feet or longer) and valuable baleen. That baleen had many uses: hats, caps, suspenders, shoehorns, mattresses, brushes, etc., none of which accounted for baleen’s rise in the market place. Rather it was what Dolin called the “vagaries” of the women’s fashion industry. During the last half of the nineteenth century, the so-called Gilded Age, the prevailing fashion became that of the “hourglass figure” simply because baleen supplied manufacturers, particularly for corsets, both the pliability and the rigidity required to mold women’s figures into the unnatural — and often painful — figures demanded by the dictates of contemporary definitions of beauty. But the shift in fashions at the end of the century caused the decline in the use of baleen and ultimately to the end of whaling, as Bodfish’s letter to Goethals indicates. See Dolin, pp. 231 ff., 356-357, 362-363, especially.

under normal conditions. But I didn't get a penny for my share, and I don't even know that the bone was ever sold, but it was but slight recompense for the responsibility of taking a ship and nearly half a hundred men through an Arctic season, particularly such as season as we had passed through. The end of whaling had arrived, that was all, and I saw it plainly. I don't know of but one other whaling voyage that was ever made in the Arctic after that, but for my part I went ashore from the *Herman* with my mind definitely made up to quit whaling, and this I did, but I didn't quit the sea at once."

No, not at once by any means, for, after refusing Goethals' offer of a job on the Canal, he retired for a brief period, but then emerged from retirement, during World War I, to enlist in the Navy. As a commissioned officer, he served aboard transport and cargo ships and in the fleet of the U.S. Shipping Board. Then, the war ended, he returned to the Vineyard and there became associated in the hardware business with B.D. Cromwell for a number of years.

In 1936, Bodfish published *Chasing the Bowhead as told by him and recorded by Joseph Chase Allen*, author and longtime reporter on maritime affairs for the *Gazette*. It is of great historical and biographical interest and value; the story of a man who was "at once the last of the old whalemens and the first of the new," as the *Gazette* noted in an editorial after his death; "a pioneer in the frozen north," and "the most successful of the Arctic whaling masters."⁷ George Goethals admired him too, no question. In 1945, the year of the Allied victories in Europe and Asia, and eight years after his wife Clara, Bodfish died, aged 81. He was survived by three sons, one of whom, Waldo, Bodfish had never seen. His mother was Lucy Kongona, an Inupiaq Eskimo from Point Hope, Alaska.



Born in 1854, Stephen Luce was four years older than Goethals, and even before he wrote to Goethals in 1910, he had already established himself, as mentioned earlier, as one of Tisbury's "leading citizens." His first job after graduating from Tisbury High School was in New York City working for a ship brokerage firm; but, after a short stint there he returned to the Vineyard, still in his early twenties, to establish and become the proprietor of what soon became the Island's leading grocery store. He took an interest as well in the potential of the new telephone industry, proved successful in his efforts to bring the first telephone cable from the mainland to the Vineyard and, as the Island manager, even established the first telephone office, which contained a small switchboard office only three

7 Bodfish also became known as the "surgeon of the North." As a boy he had dreams of becoming a surgeon, had read extensively about the subject during whaling voyages, and performed some 72 major operations during his years at sea — including amputation of one of his own toes.



Miraflres lower locks looking north, March 1912. — *MVM collections*

feet square, in the backroom of his grocery store. That was in 1884, when Luce was but 30 years of age.

If he was already becoming a leader in the business life of Vineyard Haven, he was doing so as well in the civic life of the town, for his efforts were diverse and many, and always in support of progress and improvement in the life of his community. For example, in 1886, he and Henry H. Smith bought the burying ground — later the Oak Grove Cemetery — and thereafter acquired additional lots laid out by John H. Crowell. Four years later, in 1900, the two conveyed the property to the Town of Tisbury — a property, as of 1911, then containing 24 acres.

Another example of his desire for civic improvements soon became clear: the interest he took in plans for a free public library. In 1878, Hannah T. Bradley, with the assistance of several other young ladies, had organized the Ladies Library League, which by the following year had accumulated 73 volumes for public use. By 1883, only four years later, the League had acquired 483 volumes — all of which, including furniture and equipment, were consumed in Vineyard Haven's "Great Fire, the greatest disaster in the history of the town," that destroyed 63 dwellings,

26 stores, 13 barns, and two stables. Stephen Luce immediately took action to head a group of volunteers to rehabilitate the town. Dr. William Butler provided space over his office and drug store to accommodate the League's needs. In early 1895, when the League, now 2500 volumes strong, became incorporated, Luce was made president and within a few months was instrumental in dissolving the League to make it the Public Library of Tisbury, which was formally opened July 31, 1895. And through Luce's efforts, in 1910, Mrs. John MacArthur generously gave a parcel of land on Main Street to the Library, and there it stood until a new building replaced it in 1967.

Only a year after the fire another disaster occurred: the sinking, on January 18, 1884, of the steamer *City of Columbus*, on Devil's Bridge, a reef of rocks extending out from Gay Head into Vineyard Sound, "the most disastrous shipwreck of the century." And Stephen Luce was among many other Vineyarders to assist in the crisis by rescuing bodies from the wrecked ship, by helping relatives to find their dead, and by making sure that those who had risked their lives to rescue the living from the broken steamer received due recognition. Following this disaster, Luce was instrumental in establishing a life-saving station to serve the Island and also led the fight to keep the Marine Hospital on the Island.

Luce repeated his rescue efforts of 14 years earlier during the terrific blizzard of 1898, known as the Portland Storm, in which 40 coastal schooners in Vineyard Haven's "harbor of refuge," as it was known then, were dismantled, sunk, or wrecked on shore amidst a million feet of lumber and other cargo.



In 1902, Luce was, as it were, "promoted" by President Theodore Roosevelt to the office of Postmaster in Vineyard Haven. He gave up his grocery business and telephone interests to devote the next 40 years to serving his community in his higher post. It must have meant a great deal to Stephen Cary Luce to assume an important position as an employee of the United States Government, and perhaps the position of Postmaster of Vineyard Haven emboldened him, eight years later, to write Col. Goethals about young Merry, whose credentials as a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology had impressed him. Perhaps Luce had gained confidence in his achievements as Postmaster — among them the establishment of a rural free delivery service on the Vineyard — and perhaps too he had met informally with Goethals several times during his brief leaves as an Army officer from Newport, Washington, and Panama, found him friendly, approachable, and affable — hence he did not hesitate to write him again five years later on a personal matter:

Oct. 25, 1915
Maj. Gen. Geo. W. Goethals [*sic*],
Culebra
Canal Zone

My Dear Gen. Goethals [*sic*],

My position as postmaster expires in December of this year and I am to ask for reappointment. It is quite necessary that I make as urgent and strong an appeal as possible, although there is no one mentioned for the position and really no Democrat available for the place. I have not been active in politics although at the last election of Congressmen I favored the defeated Democrat as I thought him to be a good man for the district. We have a Republican congressman in the district and as it is the policy of the administration in all cases when the congressman is of the Republican party to submit all nominations for postmasters to the National Committee man, I shall be passed upon by the Hon. John W. Coughlin of Fall River, Mass.

I am asking my friends of influence to use their influence on my behalf by writing to Mr. Coughlin asking him to endorse my reappointment.

You may be able to be of great service to me in some other direction, and I can assure you I shall appreciate any assistance you may be able to render me.

We have been very sorry not to see any of your family here this summer. We are having a delightful fall, it being particularly mild. Our people are very much interested in your work at Panama and you would be quite surprised to hear the expressions of our people at any time whenever a compliment to you can be made.

I am sorry you are troubled with the present landslides but have no doubt you will conquer them — with kindest regards for your good wife and yourself I am

Very truly yours
s/ Stephen C. Luce.



Balboa Heights
November 11, 1915.
Mr. Stephen C. Luce,
Vineyard Haven, Mass.
My dear Mr. Luce:

I received your letter of the 25th ultimo in the last mail, and if you will let me know how long you have been Postmaster at Vineyard Haven, and give me any other facts that may have a bearing on the situation, I will take pleasure in writing a personal letter to the Postmaster General in your behalf. However, I fear that, as is usual in such cases, politics will have a great deal to do with the appointment.

Yours sincerely,
s/ Geo. W. Goethals.
GWG/MBS.

Nov. 24, 1915
Gen. George W. Geothals [*sic*]
Balboa Heights
Canal Zone

My Dear Gen. Geothals [*sic*],

Your very kind letter at hand and fully noted, and I appreciate your willingness to write the Postmaster General in my behalf.

The facts are, I received my first appointment in 1903 — at this time it was not a political appointment as is usually understood — my predecessor had been found guilty of misappropriating funds, was retired at once — he made good the deficit and his case was filed. My appointment was then made by recommendation of Cong. Greene of this district. I have not been prominent in politics, and at this time there is no other applicant and I have the endorsement of the principal Democrats in the county as well as Town — as well as all my patrons, both summer and permanent residents. Our present congressman is a Republican and in all districts when a Republican congressman is elected, the department refers the appointment to the National Committeeman of the state in which this district lies. In this case it is Mr. J. W. Coughlin of Fall River, Mass.

My fences are pretty well built in that direction, and I feel that a personal letter to the Postmaster General from you would be a very great assistance in placing me in position before him.

I count [it] a very great help to be recommended by you.

With kindest regards I am

Very truly yours
s/ Stephen C. Luce

Balboa Heights
December 8, 1915.

PERSONAL.

Honorable Albert S. Burleson,
Postmaster General,
Washington, D.C.

My dear Mr. Burleson,

Stephen C. Luce, Postmaster at Vineyard Haven, Mass., has notified me that his term of office expires shortly and that he is an applicant for reappointment. He was first appointed Postmaster in 1903 and has held the office ever since, giving satisfaction to the people of the community as well as to the summer contingent. I have known Mr. Luce since 1887 personally, and have considered Vineyard Haven as my domicile since the latter date. I am one among those who would be pleased to see Mr.

Luce reappointed if it can be consistently done, and I assure you it will be appreciated by

Yours sincerely,
s/ Geo. W. Goethals.

Office of the Postmaster General
Washington, D.C.
December 20, 1915.

Hon. George W. Goethals,
Balboa Heights, Panama.

My dear General Goethals:

I have received your letter of the 8th instant expressing a desire to see Mr. Stephen C. Luce reappointed postmaster at Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, and shall be glad to give very careful consideration to your statements regarding the case before another appointment is made.

The term of the present postmaster at that office expired on December 12th, but Dr. Coughlin, who is consulted by the Department regarding appointments in that district, has not yet submitted his suggestions respecting the Vineyard Haven appointment, and the Department has, therefore, taken no action in the case.

Very sincerely,
s/ A. S. Burleson
Postmaster General⁸
AP-M10

Balboa Heights
December 31, 1915.
Mr. Stephen C. Luce,
Vineyard Haven, Mass.

My dear Mr. Luce:

In reply to my letter favoring your reappointment as postmaster at Vineyard Haven, I have received the following reply, under date of the 20th instant, from the Postmaster General:

8 Albert S. Burleson, “a hard-bitten political operator who oversaw speaking for the campaign [Woodrow Wilson’s campaign for the presidency in 1912] and coordinated publicity,” was a former congressman from Texas. He was chosen in 1913 for the position of Postmaster General in Wilson’s first term as President. He was responsible — no objections from Wilson — for segregating offices, rest rooms, and eating facilities in the post office, and remained a close advisor to the new president. He was also, by the way, one of Wilson’s cabinet who urged the President to nominate Goethals for the post of Governor of the Panama Canal. See John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, pp. 71, 183, 191, 214-215.

He transcribed Burleson's letter, followed by this closing paragraph:

From this it appears that politics will govern the appointment; however, I hope that my misgivings in this direction are unfounded, and that some turn of affairs may land you in the office again.

With best wishes for a Happy New Year, I remain

Yours very sincerely,
s/ Geo. W. Goethals
MBS.



Jan. 15, 1916

Gen. George W. Goethals [*sic*]
Balboa Heights
Canal Zone

My Dear Gen. Goethals [*sic*],

Your valued favor of this 31st ult. at hand and fully noted.

My name was presented to the Senate Jan. 13th for confirmation as postmaster at Vineyard Haven. I want to thank you for your very great assistance in this matter which I consider has been of the utmost benefit to me. I had matters pulling very well here, but as you suggested, the political end must be looked after. In addition to this recommendation of the member of the Democratic National Committee, it did smooth the way very much to be endorsed by yourself, and I am sure that your letter to the Postmaster General had as much weight under the circumstances as the political side.

We are just having our first cold weather. Ther. [*sic*] this a.m. 6 above zero. I hope you are well and that your work at the canal is progressing satisfactorily. Mrs. Gen. Carey⁹ is still here and I understand will remain this winter on account of her health, although she is better. With kindest regards and the wish that some day I may be able to be of service to you, I am

Very truly yours,
s/ Stephen C. Luce

Thereafter, for the next 40 years until his death at 87, Stephen Luce served as Postmaster of Vineyard Haven — under both Democratic and Republican administrations, surely a testament to his ability and commitment. Indeed, he had become known as the oldest postmaster in the

9 Asa B. Carey, one of the first graduates of West Point to summer on the Vineyard, had served as an infantry officer on the Western frontier before the Civil War, then during the Civil War at the Battle of Apache Canyon near Santa Fe, New Mexico, and finally rose to the post of Paymaster General of the U.S. Army. He retired in July of 1900 and died in 1912; but he and his wife had by then spent their summers on the Vineyard. And George Goethals had been one of his good friends.

United States because he had served 17 years beyond the prescribed limit for second-class postmasters. In addition, though he never held town office (except that of library trustee), he became a director of the Martha's Vineyard National Bank, a member of the Duodecimal Club, which he had helped found, among other contributions to civil improvements. His wife of many years had died 15 years before so he was survived only by his son, Stephen Cary Luce, Jr., who by then had become president of the Martha's Vineyard National Bank himself.



What can we conclude about George Goethals' relationships with Vineyarders? It is, I think, that both affection and respect were shown him (and reciprocated by him), not simply as an internationally honored figure, promoted to the rank of major general, for completing the construction of the Panama Canal, but also as a local Vineyarder himself, as "just folks." And both the affection and respect were symbolized by two simple acts immediately after his death in 1928: Horace Tilton's raising and lowering to half-mast Goethals' own flag at his West Chop home at the very moment his military funeral began at West Point, and by Stephen Carey Luce's eulogy in the *Vineyard Gazette*.

Finally, let me, as one of his historians and his eldest grandson, point to Henry Beetle Hough's editorial on Goethals upon the 25th anniversary of the opening of the Panama Canal as confirmation of my own sense of him:

Surely it is a strange and pleasant thing that so many of the great names — including the greatest of all — linked with the building of the Canal are also linked with the Island. It would seem to have been almost obligatory for a governor of the Canal Zone to have a summer home on the Vineyard. Here so many have come: Goethals, Harding, Morrow, Walker.

In the honor to the memory of General George Washington Goethals the Vineyard should join with particular pride the feeling at this anniversary. He was a resident of the Vineyard for many years, and although the Panama Canal is one of the vastest memorials a man could have, he has also the smaller and intangible monument of the respect and liking which the Island held for him.

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- Unless noted otherwise, the Canal images are in the MVM collection, a gift of James B. Richardson III.

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