

THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

Published by
DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.
EDGARTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS



VINEYARD MEETING HOUSES

by
DR. SIDNEY N. RIGGS

August 1960 — Vol. II, No. 1

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VINEYARD MEETING HOUSES

by

DR. SIDNEY N. RIGGS

The meeting houses of Martha's Vineyard represent an interesting segment of the Island's colorful history. A volume could be written about the changes which have occurred in the church bodies of the County of Dukes County. Few have emerged with little or no alteration in spiritual structure. But this story is beyond the scope of the "Intelligencer."

The church structures, themselves, have undergone many replacements and renovations. Committees are not quite so frank in these days as to charge that they "shall agree with a Carpenter — to build the said meeting-house as Cheap as they Can." Few modern congregations would put up with an unpainted wooden structure with a red roof and no steeple. Nor would we consider sawing a church down the middle to spread it into a wider building.

The prints of our present day churches will serve to call attention to the charm and variety of our places of worship. Some of the meeting houses reach back into the middle distance of our history. Others are quite modern. The brief stories which accompany these prints are a meagre sampling of the material that can be found in your Society's library.

EDGARTOWN

The Federated Church in Edgartown is the fifth meeting house of a congregation first mentioned in 1643 as the "English Meeting," referring to the small group of early colonists who gathered for religious services in Old Town with the missionary, Thomas Mayhew, Jr. Later it was termed the First Church of Christ, Congregational. Its architectural ancestor was begun March 1, 1653, on which date the town fathers ordered the town "to come together at the Pastors house to Begin to build a meeting house."



Federated Church, Edgartown

The present day structure was designed by Frederick Baylies, Jr., and is in the traditional simple but dignified style of New England meeting house. It was dedicated December 24, 1828. This historic building is now the home of two religious groups brought together by mutual need and understanding: the Congregational and Baptist.

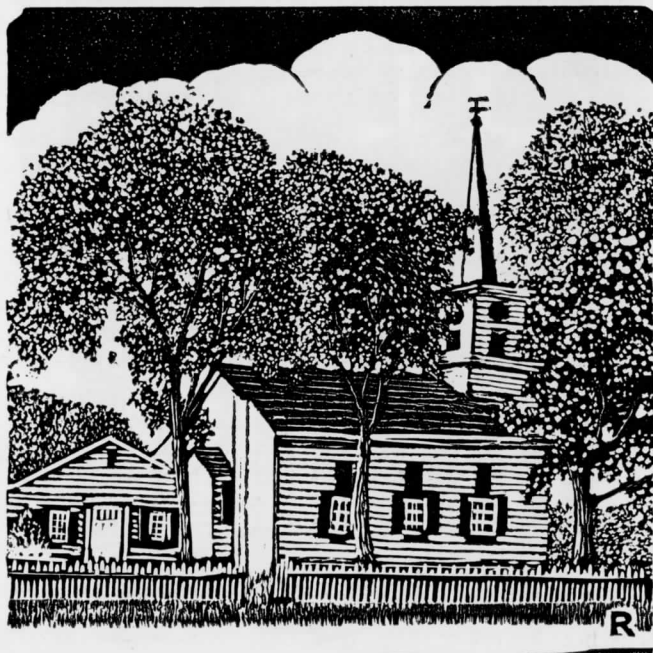
The Baptist church in Edgartown was originally part of the parent association formed in Holmes Hole in 1780. It was organized as a separate parish on April 16, 1823. Meetings were held in a barnlike structure on Winter Street which at first was shared with the fledging Methodist group but later became the sole property of the Baptists. Then, in 1837, sufficient funds having been collected, a lot was procured on School Street and a fine new house constructed from a Baylies design and using the solid white pine and oak timbers from the old — Fourth — Congregational Church standing idle in the West Side Cemetery. The building, dedicated September 6, 1839, was sold to the Oriental Lodge A. F. & A. M. — the present occupants — following the Baptist federation with the Congregationalists in 1925.



Methodist Church, Edgartown

The Methodist Church on the Island dates from the arrival of John Saunders, a negro slave from Virginia, who arrived at Eastville — then a part of Edgartown — in 1787. As Methodism in America had only been established in 1784, he was conspicuously up-to-date in his religious convictions. He held intermittent classes until his death, and his followers were served by occasional itinerant missionaries up to 1810 when Rev. Erastus Otis of Falmouth was assigned to the Vineyard circuit and headed the ever lengthening list of Methodist preachers in Edgartown.

After relinquishing their share of the "Union" meeting house to the Baptists in 1822, the Methodists built a church of their own nearby on Winter Street. This they occupied but five years, then sold it to the recently formed Methodist Society of Chilmark and moved into a new home on Main Street. Services were conducted here for the next sixteen years when the prosperity of whaling days prompted the erection of a more pretentious house which would compare favorably with those of the Congregationalists and Baptists. This handsome structure, designed by Baylies in the classic revival style, was dedicated October, 1843, and is still in use. The Main Street building is now the Edgartown Town Hall.



West Tisbury Congregational Church

WEST TISBURY

In the Tisbury Town Records of May 20, 1671 — two years after the first English purchase from the Sachem of Takemmy — provision was made for a minister. The Reverend John Mayhew, youngest son of the missionary Thomas, answered the call in 1673, and served the parish until his death in 1688-9.

The first meeting place of this congregation Banks places in a schoolhouse near the Chilmark-West Tisbury line. There was, however, some sort of meeting house by 1699 as the town records note that it was in need of "Convenient Repair." A new house was voted in 1701 towards which the General Court voted assistance out of the "Publick Treasury" of fifteen Pounds. This was situated in the acre of land donated by James Allen for a "Buring place," which was also the site of its two successors, although the later one, built in 1833, was removed in 1865 to its present location on South Road at Music Street. The belfry and steeple were added shortly after this move.

Eleazer Steele organized the first Methodist class in the Lambert's Cove section of West Tisbury in 1820. Meetings were held in the homes of members. In 1838 a Sunday school was formed under the imposing title of The North Shore Union Sabbath School Society.

The present church structure was built and dedicated in 1846. The Reverend Daniel Wise journeyed from Nantucket to preach the dedication sermon. The church organ was purchased by the local Mite Society with money raised during the years 1874-6. The building was enlarged and a belfry added not long after this.

In name the church group has changed many times, due probably to secretarial individuality, but it has always been Methodist. It is now known as the Lambert's Cove Methodist Episcopal Church.

Although the influence of the Baptist Society in Holmes Hole was being felt in the "West End" of town at the birth of the new century, it was not until 1820-1 that the West Enders built their own house of worship. This was situated on the South Road at the Panhandle and continued in use 27 years when a new Baptist church was built at Middletown (North Tisbury). West Tisbury became a separate parish in 1832.

In 1852, there was a split in this group, caused, it is said, by a dispute over the ownership of a pair of flatirons, although the distance of the new building from the old center of town may have been somewhat responsible. The seceders put up a meeting house of their own on the Edgartown Road within walking distance of most of their own homes.

Both of these churches are since discontinued: the one having been torn down and the lumber taken to Vineyard Haven to be used for a boat-building shop; the other, converted into a private dwelling.



Lambert's Cove Methodist Church

The Chapel at Christiantown was built by the state in 1829 primarily for an Indian school, though it was probably also used by the Congregational Meeting until around 1850. In 1870, it was dedicated as a Baptist Church and occasional services were conducted for the next 20 years, usually by the North Tisbury minister.

The site is the original meeting house lot on which the first church of the Praying Indians was erected before 1680, and a second in 1695, possibly at the behest of young Experience Mayhew who at sixteen had inherited his father's missionary chores and charges.



Christiantown Chapel

In 1941 the chapel and burying ground were taken by the County as a memorial to the Praying Indians, many of whom lie beneath the lichened fieldstones on the hill. It is a place of pilgrimage for those who seek a truly religious atmosphere.

VINEYARD HAVEN alias HOLMES HOLE

Holmes Hole — as Vineyard Haven was originally known — was far away from the “church of the standing order” in the west end of town. Seven miles each way over a rutted, sandy road to Congregational meeting lent added lustre to the new and virile Baptist creed promulgated along the waterfront, whose followers organized December 21, 1781. Because the early laws exacted taxes for the support of the orthodox ministry and meeting house in each village, the Holmes Hole Baptists, who also must contribute to their own church, were doubly tithed. Relief from the ministerial tax was requested in 1782, but not until 1796, when a law was passed creating the East Parish of Tisbury, was the dual burden lifted.



Vineyard Haven Baptist Church

Because of existing laws, any meeting house built in Holmes Hole before the East Parish was set off had to be financed by private funds. This prompted the idea of a community church to which members of all beliefs would contribute and thereby become shareholders. Thus the “Proprietors’ Meeting House” came into being about 1788 at the corner of Main and Spring Streets. It was used in rotation by both Baptists and Congregationalists, and in 1795, Reverend Jesse Lee, founder of New England Methodism, preached his first Vineyard sermon from its pulpit.

By 1832, the other sects had withdrawn and the Baptists found themselves in sole possession. However, five years later it was considered beyond repair, razed, and the first strictly Baptist meeting house erected on the site. This was consumed in the great fire of August 11, 1883. The new, and present, structure at the corner of William and Spring Streets, was voted in 1884 and completed the following year.



Vineyard Haven Methodist Church

The Methodists, having relinquished their interest in the Proprietors' Meeting House, moved into their own building on Church Street, July 11, 1833. Meanwhile, they had anticipated the first Oak Bluffs camp meeting by eight years by holding a camp meeting at West Chop in August, 1827, under the exhortation of Reformation John Adams during his second pastorate on the Vineyard.

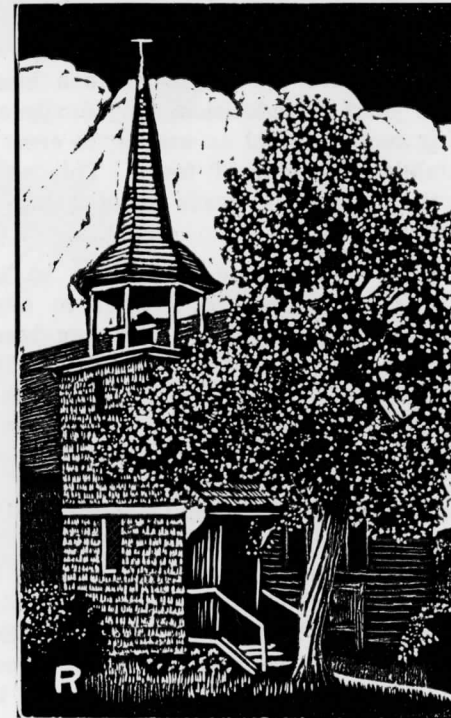
Growth of the sect in the years following its move to Church Street necessitated a new and larger structure which was forthwith built diagonally across from the old one at the William Street corner, and dedicated November 13, 1845. It burned in 1923 and was replaced by a fieldstone church in a style suggestive of rural English ecclesiastical architecture. Martha's Vineyard Lodge, A. F. & A. M. acquired the first church building in 1895.

The Congregationalists, whose pulpit had been supplied by the parent church in West Tisbury until abolition of the ministerial tax, suddenly found themselves without funds and frequently without a parson. Consequently this society suffered an eclipse for about thirty years when it was revived and held services for some time in a little school house on the corner of Main Street and Colonial Lane, now the headquarters of the Sea Coast Defense Chapter, D. A. R.

In 1844 a "suitable house of worship" was erected on Spring Street. The congregation, never overly sizeable, dwindled over the years until 1859 when it was finally disbanded. The building was subsequently used for a short period by the Universalists, then the Unitarians, and finally, it was turned over for secular use as a lecture hall. Known as Association Hall, today it serves Tisbury as a town hall.

The Unitarian church on the Island is inalienably associated with the name of Reverend Daniel Waldo Stevens who came to Vineyard Haven in 1867 as a missionary for the American Unitarian Association. He established the Sailor's Free Reading Room, Library and Chapel on a bluff overlooking the harbor and devoted his efforts on behalf of the thousands of mariners who frequented this busy seaport during the Age of Sail, and up to the opening of the Cape Cod Canal. He continued his activities until his death in 1891 and the mission was discontinued. However, his influence among residents of the town prompted them to take steps to keep his organization alive.

At length, in 1896, a Unitarian group called the Channing Conference built a chapel on the West Chop Road, and the Vineyard Haven Unitarian Society was formed to keep the pulpit supplied. The little meeting house, known today as the Stevens Memorial Chapel, was moved closer to town on Main Street in 1901 where it is open for services during the summer months.



Stevens Memorial Chapel

CHILMARK

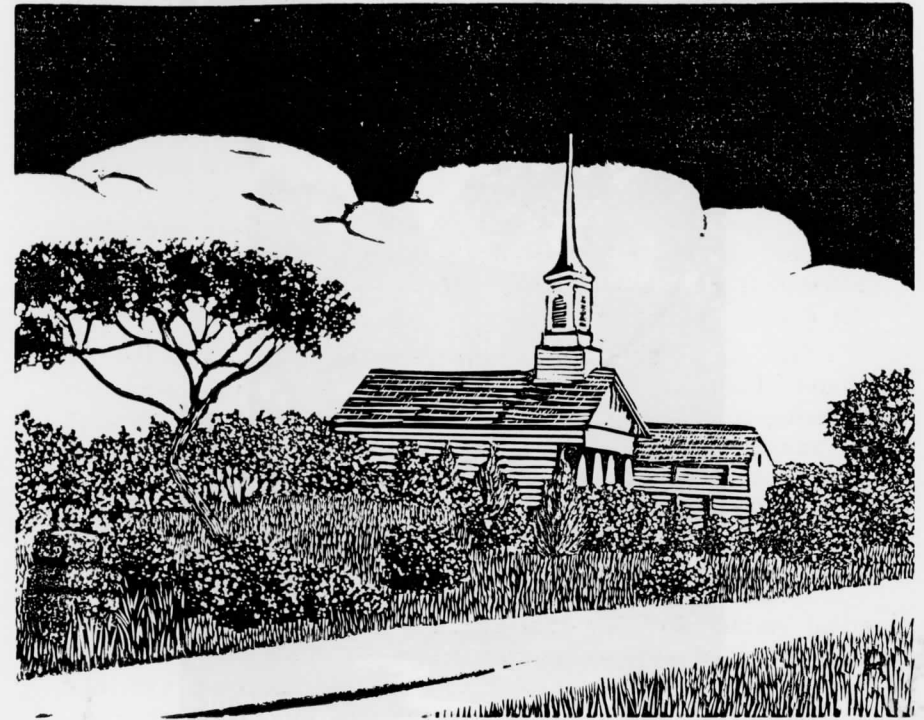
The original church group in Chilmark was Congregational and shared the services of young John Mayhew with Tisbury. According to Banks, the first meeting house was built on Abel's Hill sometime prior to 1701. A second structure was voted September 1723 to be "set on the hill neare the old or present meeting house in s'd town by the County Roade." The site for this building was given July 10, 1724 by Nathan Bassett.

By 1782 the population of the town had shifted westward and the voters decided to move the old house to a more convenient site. After several years of indecision, they finally agreed to tear it down and, using such material as was fit, to erect a new building near the established center of town. This was on a ridge between the South and Middle Roads about half a mile east of the Fulling Mill Brook.

The 4th meeting house came into being in 1842, the old church, built largely of secondhand lumber to begin with and suffering from lack of care and interest, having been condemned as unworthy, perhaps even unsafe. However, the evangelical delights of Methodism had made such inroads on the congregation that, by 1875, it was virtually nonexistent, and the last meeting house of the standing order in town was demolished.

Methodism was first introduced to Chilmark in 1797-8 by Reverend Joshua Hall, itinerant preacher stationed at Holmes Hole, who organized what was known as a "small class." In 1807 there were only four known Methodists in town. The class was re-instituted in 1810, probably by Erastus Otis, and subsequent missionaries found a fertile field for converts in what Reformation John Adams called the "hill country." It was due in large part to Adams' efforts that the group was able to purchase the vacant Methodist house from the Edgartown society and move it up-island to the corner of Meeting House Way and Middle Road.

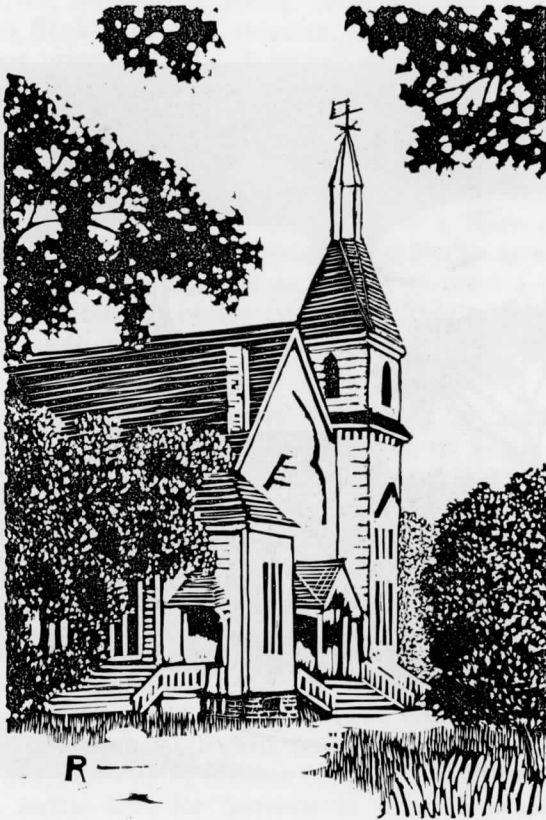
The congregation, which until 1833 was a branch of the Holmes Hole church, continued to flourish thereafter independently, and by 1842 had outgrown the old building. The present meeting house with simple pediment and Doric columns — but sans steeple — was dedicated in January 1843. Its original site was on the north side of Middle Road a little west of Tea Lane. It was moved to the Menemsha Cross Road in 1915; the steeple and belfry were added in 1931 to accommodate the bell from the Oak Bluffs Baptist Church, a gift.



Chilmark Methodist Church

OAK BLUFFS formerly COTTAGE CITY

Although Methodism was closely associated with Oak Bluffs from early Camp Meeting days, curiously enough, no local Methodist society was formed until 1877. Trinity Methodist Church was completed in 1883 facing the Tabernacle on Trinity Circle, and adjacent Grace Chapel somewhat later.



Trinity Methodist Church

In the wake of the real estate boom and promotion of Cottage City as a summer watering place at the close of the Civil War, the need for a place of worship outside the 7-foot picket fence which enclosed the Camp Ground was increasingly felt. Consequently a non-sectarian chapel was built and dedicated with eight clergymen participating August 20, 1871.

The Oak Bluffs Christian Union Association was formed a number of years later which continues to maintain the original intent and high standards of the builders. Prominent clergymen of various denominations conduct services during the summer months and there are musical programs of comparable excellence.



Union Chapel

The Baptist Association who began holding camp meetings on the Highlands in 1875 built a wooden temple there which was dedicated August 18, 1878, but is no longer standing. The formation of a local Baptist society was practically contemporaneous. They organized in 1877 and completed their church, around the corner from Union Chapel on Pequot Avenue, in 1878. The group became inactive in the Twenties and the building was taken over by the I. O. O. F. Three years ago it reverted back to a Baptist group which had established a small colored mission under the leadership of Mrs. Susan Bradley at the turn of the century, and for many years benefited by the services of a dedicated clergyman, Reverend Oscar E. Denniston. The church is called the Bradley Memorial.



Bradley Memorial

GAY HEAD

"The Gay Head Baptist Church, constituted in 1694, is the oldest Indian Baptist Church in North America, and notable for its indigenous origin and natural devotion to the basic Baptist principles, after the manner of Roger Williams' teaching in Rhode Island." —Rev. H. C. Whitcomb, *Historical Sketch*.

Christianity came to Gay Head in the guise of Congregationalism, but the west end of the Island was in many ways closer to Rhode Island than to Edgartown. And a scant thirty years after the Sachem Metaark braved the threats of the powwows by accepting the Missionary Mayhews' God, "Anabaptisticall Notions" had begun to spread among the Indians on Gay Head.



Gay Head Baptist Church

The present meeting house, dating from 1850, was preceeded by two church buildings, both located on the Old South Road. The earlier of these, which was "already framed" in 1686, was undoubtedly of the "Standing Order," but presumably changed creeds along with the congregation. The second, built a century later, was definitely Baptist. Burgess quotes a description of it in 1835 as "full of oak timbers from the island, of the old ship-stuff."

The church structures, shown in these prints, are merely the shells for the spiritual church within. They are interesting from historical and architectural viewpoints. They lend color and variety to a beautiful New England community.

Acknowledgments:

Banks, Charles E., M.D., *The History of Martha's Vineyard*, 3 vols., Boston 1911, 1925.

Mayhew, Eleanor Ransom. *The Christiantown Story*, Dukes County Intelligencer, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1959.

Mrs. Franklin Benson, Lambert's Cove; Mrs. Mabel Hughes, Oak Bluffs; Mrs. Everett A. Poole, Chilmark; Rev. S. Read Chatterton, Edgartown; and others.

* * * * *

An article, illustrated with more of Dr. Riggs' linoleum block prints, and dealing with the Episcopal churches on the Island, will appear as the lead article in the next issue of the Intelligencer. It is hoped that articles on other Vineyard places of worship will appear in future issues.

The editor wishes to thank the secretary, Mrs. Mayhew, for her assistance in preparing this article for publication.

E. G. H.