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Dr. Sidney N. Riggs - A Tribute

Noman's Land: Some Controversial Issues

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DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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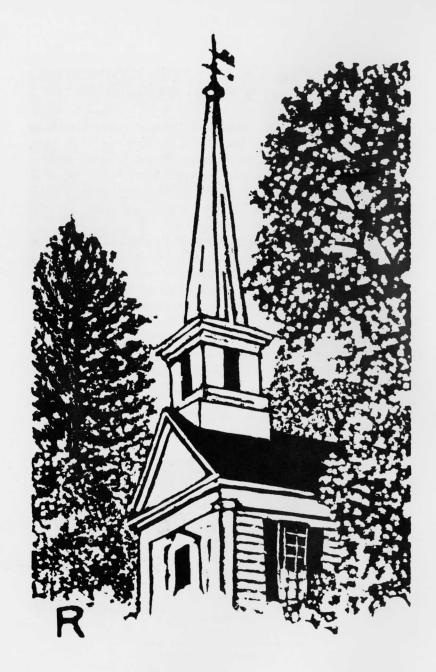
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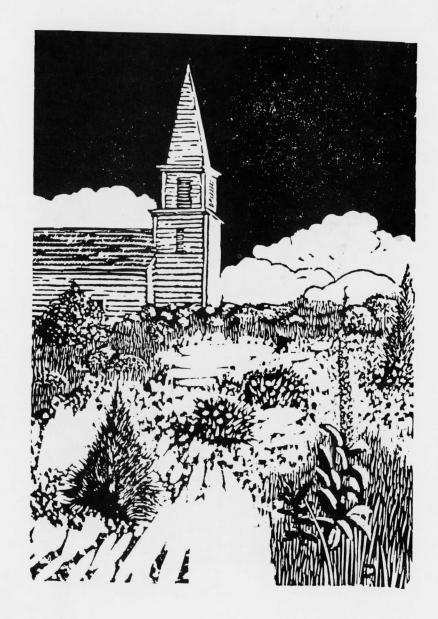
With the death of Dr. Riggs the Dukes County Historical Society has suffered a great loss, for it has lost one of its most active and valued members. He was a past president of the society, a position to which he gave great dignity. Also for many years he was a member of the council, the society's governing body. And almost from its inception he was the cover artist for the *Intelligencer*.

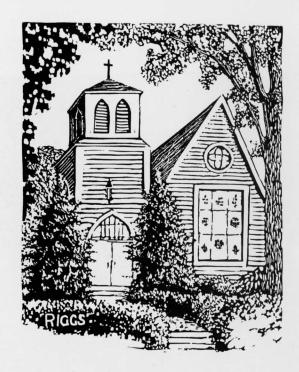
Dr. Riggs was a man of many interests. By profession he was an educator and a good one because he loved children and young people. He was a fine artist as his prints so very clearly show. He was a musician and long sang in the choir of the West Tisbury Congregational Church. And he was an historian and writer of distinction.

So here, as a small tribute to Sid, are a few of the almost sixty cover illustrations that he made for the *Intelligencer*.





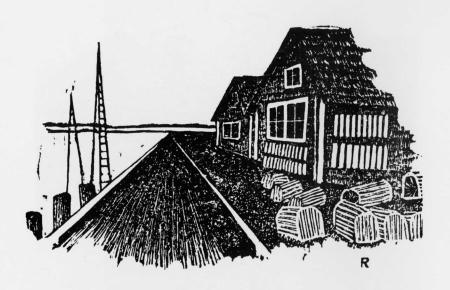




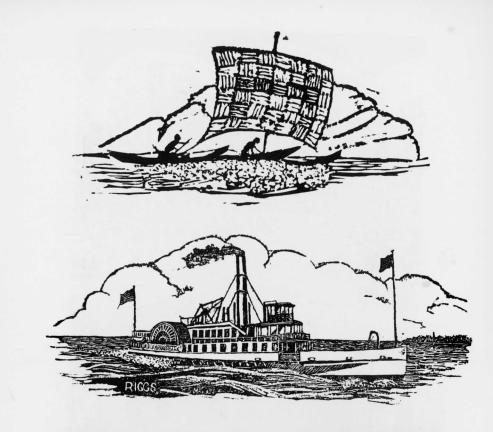


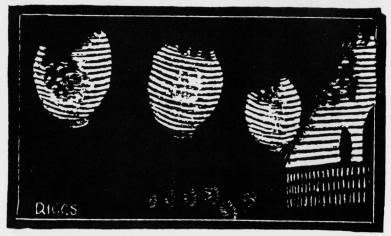


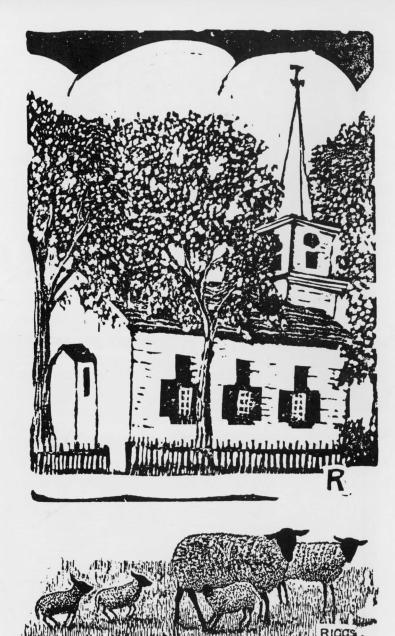


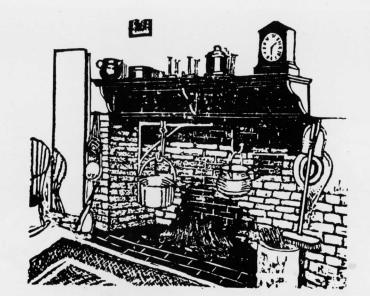










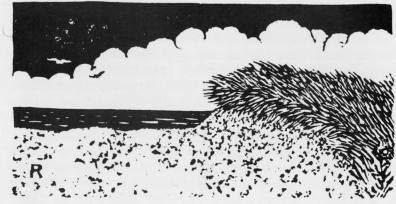












Noman's Land: Some Controversial Issues

BY JOY RYAN

Editorial Note:

Joy Ryan has been our archivist for the past year. She became interested in Noman's Land while she was cataloging old deeds to land on the Island.



Courtesy of Dr. Edwin T. Moul

East Cliffs on the northeast corner of Noman's Land.

Noman's Land, a tiny island just south of Gay Head, has been the subject of fantasy, conjecture, and daydreams by historians, artists, seamen and romantics of all kinds throughout its known (or unknown) history. There are those who believe it could have been visited by Leif Ericson about 1000 A.D. The evidence is thin, but it encourages speculation. Was the name "Noman's" truly derived from the name of the Indian Sachem Tequenoman or is the "r" simply dropped from the word "Norman?" Is it possible, even remotely possible, that the stones with runes carved on them and discovered in this century, have survived the erosion of 900 years? Noman's Land has been the subject of Indian

legends, and of a mystery novel. It has been the location of innumerable shipwrecks and smuggling operations, the dream-island of buried pirate treasure and archealogical discovery, a hunter's and fisherman's paradise, and is now a true no man's land which can only be visited by military and government personnel or carefully processed, authorized private parties. It is, indeed, no wonder that, from our vantage point at Squibnocket or thereabouts, we speculate about this lonely landing place for sea birds, harbor seals and dummy bombs.

But what sources do we have on which to base our history: some deeds to land beginning in 1685; mention in an occasional letter or document; town reports; and for more recent events personal accounts which often conflict. Newspapers have carried reams of material in recent years, much of it hearsay and personal opinion. Everyone has an interesting or amusing story to tell about the island, but few are based on proven fact. A cursory glance at a few facets of Noman's Land's history will show how confused the facts can be.

Who Was The First Visitor?

One account after another states that Bartholomew Gosnold stopped at Noman's Land on his way to Cuttyhunk in 1602. Hines, Henry Franklin Norton, Dr. Charles Banks, and Annie M. Wood all state without reservation that he sailed from Cape Cod south of Martha's Vineyard and landed on Noman's Land, stopping to explore the island for a full day, naming it Martha's Vineyard, and later transferring that name to the larger island. However, a glance at Warner F. Gookin's map of Gosnold's course, published in 1963, shows that he held a different opinion. He describes a course that went south from Cape Cod and skirted the southern shore of Nantucket, then through Muskeget Channel and Nantucket Sound into Vineyard Sound and North of Martha's Vineyard to Cuttyhunk. This would bring him nowhere near Noman's Land.

Gookin presents an excellent argument for his theory, and after reading it one would quickly discredit those historians who follow blindly the 1798 account by the Rev. Jeremy Belknap, who apparently first developed the idea of Gosnold's presence on

Noman's Land. Gookin begins by citing the early use of the name "Martha's Vineyard" to refer to the island that we now know by that name. Edward Winslow, a Mayflower pilgrim, and Richard Vines, as an agent for Sir Ferdinando Gorges, had been in New England as early as 1616 and were friendly with Indians who had been here when Gosnold arrived. Both these men referred to the island in question in documents and letters as Capawack and as Martha's Vineyard. We know that Capawack was the name that the Indians used to refer to the larger of the two islands. The name Martha's Vineyard was never attached to the smaller island by explorers or cartographers.

Gookin then offers a thorough study of each small statement in Gabriel Archer's *Relation* of Gosnold's voyage. He takes each location mentioned and shows a Martha's Vineyard location that the writer could have been describing, but that could not have existed on Noman's Land. The confusion among other historians may have first come from the fact that the *Relation* states that "Marthaes Vineyard...hath 41 degrees and one quarter of latitude." Noman's Land lies directly on this latitude, but Gookin considered that the nautical instruments of the early seventeenth century were not accurate enough to avoid the mistake.

If the Norsemen did not visit Noman's Land and Gosnold stopped at Martha's Vineyard instead, who were the first Europeans to make their appearance? It is likely that a Dutch explorer named Hendrick Christiaensen visited it in or before the year 1616, because the island was given the name "Hendrick Christiaensen's Eylant" on a 1616 map and later in 1646, "Ile de Hendrick." It was first called "Noman's Land" in 1666, but other names, such as "Isle of Man" and the Indian name "Cappoaquit," were still in use.

Little is known about Noman's Land in the late seventeenth century except that it was under the authority of the Duke of York's representative from 1666 to 1685. The Duke of York tried to encourage its settlement by giving it to William Reeves, Tristram Dodge, John Williams, and William Nightingale in exchange for the establishment of the fishing trade, the building of a harbor and the payment of a barrel of codfish each year. This arrangement was made three times, in 1666, 1670, and 1674. Each

More Vineyard Ties

Matthew Mayhew faired much better. He received Noman's Land from Gov. Thomas Dongan when Mayhew was granted his Lordship of Martha's Vineyard. He then sold the small island back to the same Governor Dongan. It would seem he turned a small profit. The subsequent ownership is easily traced and documented in the Dukes County land records: Dongan to William Nichols. Nichols to Jacob Norton, Norton in his will dividing his lands among his five children, then further division and sale by his many descendants.

Noman's Land historically has been linked with Martha's Vineyard. Chilmark apparently wanted it badly, because it became a part of the township of Chilmark twice, in 1714 at the time of Chilmark's incorporation and in 1716 by petition to the General Court. Indians fished for cod there, dressing and curing at Stony Point, a five-acre point of land covered by clean stones. Years later other Vineyarders adopted the same habit, moving back and forth during the nineteenth century to take advantage of the fishing. Farmers from Chilmark owned land there where they pastured their sheep with little fear of long-lasting snow cover to endanger their flocks. Chilmark still claims the island, but the advantage to residents has disappeared.

Shipwrecks and Smuggling

There is much romanticizing about the sea all over the world, but Noman's has more than its share of tales of sea adventure. Annie M. Wood in *Noman's Land, Isle of Romance* tells of twelve shipwrecks. It is a dark, lonely place on a moonless night. There is no light to guide the traveler, and, although the Gay Head light flashes across Stony Point and the sites of no-longer-existent dwellings, the comforting illumination is obscured on the south by the land mass itself. The pounding waves from the open sea have dashed many a ship, brig, bark, schooner, and fishing launch onto

the rocky shore, leaving destruction, death, mystery for the victims and useful salvage for the residents. One wrecked vessel left its cargo of shingles which provided many roofs. Another loaded down with white pine gave Henry B. Davis enough lumber to build a large barn. Coal from shipwrecks was often gathered from the beach to keep the fires going in winter.



Courtesy of Dr. Edwin T. Moul The rocky coastline of Noman's Land has long been hazardous for mariners.

More recent wrecks fortunately left no casualties. A *Vineyard Gazette* entry on January 5, 1951 tells of the New Bedford dragger *Fred Henry* stranded on the rocks on the south shore. The captain and three-man crew were rescued by the Gay Head Coast Guard after they had made the beach and built a fire of driftwood. The use of radio saved their lives. The vessel was later saved, but \$500 worth of fish was lost. Navy corsairs strafing the island almost caused disaster for a fishing boat tied up at the Noman's Land pier in the early 1950's. Machine-gun fire hit the cabin and barely missed a fisherman sleeping in a bunk. The boat suffered holes, but did not sink.

A coincidence of time between the abandoning of the steam yacht *Flit* on Noman's Land and the sinking of the steamer *John Dwight* in Vineyard Sound offers evidence of rum running piracy

during prohibition and the role that the island must have played in smuggling operations. The men at the Gay Head Lifeboat Station heard sounds of whistles and bells coming across the water through the fog and prepared to launch their boats for the rescue of the steamer in Vineyard Sound. Then they saw the ship roll, explode, and sink. The next day they found the bodies of the crew members in life jackets floating nearby among bottles of illegal ale. Cuts and mutilation suggested that the men had not died from exposure, but from a bloody battle reminiscent of past decades of piracy. The same night the *Flit* was left on the shore of Noman's Land with no sign of life aboard. The crew had evidently escaped in a smaller boat and was never seen again. The flight must have been connected with the demise of the *John Dwight*, but mystery surrounds these incidents like so much of this island's past.

But the smuggling incidents were not always so bloodcurdling. A 1951 *Vineyard Gazette* article written by an unnamed former caretaker tells of three smugglers who turned out to be good friends to the Noman's Land caretakers during one lonely winter. It was soon after their arrival in October, when three cold, wet men knocked at the door of the house in the middle of the night.



Courtesy of Priscilla C. Crane Farm houses and out buildings at West Bend which have since been destroyed.

Their small boat had been wrecked and the contraband cargo lost to the sea. The caretakers treated them kindly, giving them food, shelter and dry clothes. The men were so grateful that they often stopped there bringing presents from the mainland of fruit or the latest newspapers. The article does not mention whether there were business reasons for these visits.

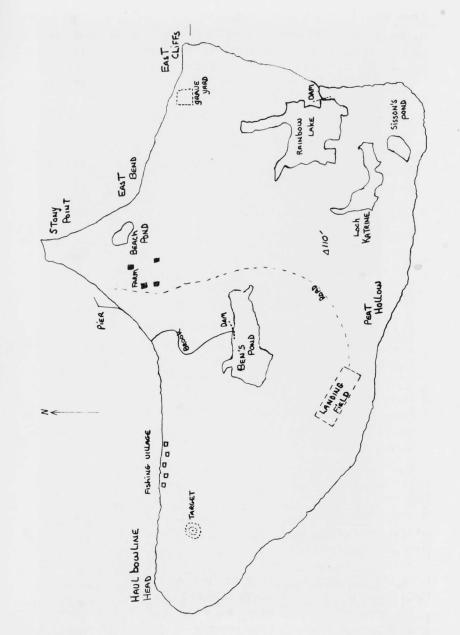
The Coast Guard tried to stop the smuggling, but met with limited success. In 1921 the Coast Guard cutter *Acushnet* chased the British schooner *J. B. Young* from near Noman's to a point fifteen miles south of Nantucket. A large cargo of whiskey was found in the hold, but the Coast Guard was helpless because the ship was beyond the three-mile limit. Four days later the *J. B. Young* was in Vineyard Haven harbor and apparently had been doing a fine business.

Smuggling was not a new phenomenon to Vineyard waters when prohibition took effect in 1920. There is no documented evidence that Vineyarders or the then-owners of Noman's Land participated in any illegal activities, but many have stories to tell. One Vineyarder assured me that he knew nothing about rum running around here, but then informed me that such activities were best carried out on dark nights without moonlight. I have also heard that there were tracks in one of the barns on Noman's Land to allow quick removal of contraband, but here we have another mystery. The buildings have all been destroyed and we can only guess about their use by smugglers.

The Federal Government Intervenes

The ambiguity surrounding this small island continues to the present, with an added element of contention. Should this unique ecological setting be protected against the bombers or are the bombers actually protecting the ecology from intrepid human intruders? If it belongs to the government, why not let the open land be enjoyed by the people? But if there are people picnicking and exploring there, what is the Navy to do for a target range?

The United States Department of the Navy first took possession of Noman's Land during World War II, leasing it from the Crane Properties Trust for \$900 a year. The agreement stated that it was to be returned to the Cranes in its original condition after the war.



Noman's Land with lakes and landmarks as remembered by Priscilla C. Crane.

Aerial photographs from the 1930's show well-kept pastures and farm buildings. By the late forties the sheep farm had obviously been completely destroyed. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Priscilla Crane, a trustee of the Crane Properties Trust:

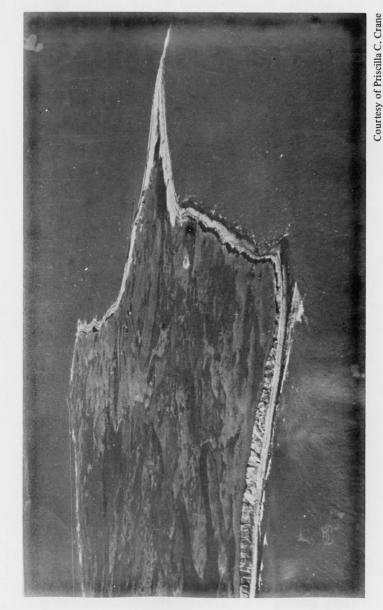
Interviewer: What was the family's reaction to use by the Navy during the war?

Priscilla Crane: During the war we didn't know anything about it. We weren't allowed to go there. We had to take the sheep off the island, which we gave to the Forbses on Naushon. ... We were not allowed to do anything. [Now] I know what happened to it, but we had no reaction [then]. Interviewer: Were you allowed to go there between 1945 and 1954?

Priscilla Crane: Oh, yes. I went down when the Navy left the island which I think was about 1947... And of course, during the war they had not only destroyed all our buildings, but the thing that bothered us most was that it was impossible to put it back to a sheep farm, because we didn't fence. We did it by water, by making the ponds and damming the ponds, and making little ditches so the sheep couldn't jump over the ditches. ... And they destroyed all of that. They just bulldozed it all down. That was our reaction after the war. ... When they pulled out they wanted me to come over and examine everything which I did and I was horrified to see the mess. ... It was a going farm and... [after the Navy left] there wasn't anything. No houses, no barns, no roads, no stone walls, no ponds, nothing.

In 1952 the Navy took the property by eminent domain despite opposition by the Crane family. The Navy's presence presents unanswerable questions. Priscilla Crane stated that the Navy had enlarged the pier during the war, but the Dukes County land records shows that the Department of Public Works granted the Navy permission to build a new pier and breakwater in 1957. Was it built then or earlier? It would seem that it would have been more useful during the war when they were doing construction there than later when it was only used as a target.

The most controversial issue - one which seems to have caused a great interest in Noman's Land recently - is the Joint Management



Stony Point, farm buildings at West Aerial photograph showing East Clii Bend, and the lakes and land contour

Agreement between the Department of the Interior and the Department of the Navy, in which "the Navy and Interior do mutually agree to the use and management of Nomans Land Island to benefit migratory birds and other wildlife to the extent consistent with military requirements..." "Visitation and inspection rights by Bureau personnel on official duty will be permitted." Inspectors must clear their visit with the Navy ten days in advance, travel there by Navy helicopter, and be accompanied by a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal expert. "Under no circumstances will members of the general public be permitted to visit or otherwise accompany Bureau personnel to Nomans Land Island."

It is easy to understand how this could engender many divergent opinions. Some feel that the Navy's presence there discourages trespassers and thus protects wildlife. Yet when the earth rumbles on Martha's Vineyard on a calm, sunny day, and residents of Oak Bluffs, as well as those closer, know that war maneuvers are being exercised so close, there is a sobering effect. And what of the fires that have occurred there? They may be caused by unauthorized visitors, and not the bombing at all. They may even have a positive effect on the island ecology.

Whatever the future holds for this now desolate stronghold with its strange combination of Government protection and Government destruction (if it actually is destruction), Noman's Land will, undoubtedly, remain one of those places on earth that evokes deep emotions from all who are interested or concerned: from the daydreamer to the political activist, from the lover of the peaceful, remote seascape to the treasure seeker or pirate, from the dove to the bomber.

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Jeremiah Pease - A Plea

In the last issue of the *Intelligencer* we noted that Julien Weston was the owner of the remaining volumes of Jeremiah Pease's diary. Mr. Weston has sent us the five volumes of the diary that were in his possession. And be sure that we will take good care of them. Eventually we hope to transcribe them all.

For a few brief periods Joseph Thaxter Pease, Jeremiah's eldest son kept the diary. But in the main Jeremiah kept it himself from when he was still a quite young man until the day of his death, June 5, 1857 when he made the last entry in his "journal."

Unfortunately one of the volumes of the diary is missing. And again, unfortunately, it is the volume that contains the continuation of the diary from where it was left off in the last issue of the *Intelligencer*. We can hope that somewhere, somehow, that missing volume will be found. Mr. Weston did give us a few leads to follow in our search but so far they have lead nowhere.

Even if the missing volume is not found we shall continue the diary, probably in the November issue of the *Intelligencer*. But it would be so much better if we could continue the entries without a break. So if any reader has any idea where the missing volume might be please let us know.

DCHS News

Unhappily, we must begin the DCHS news on a solemn note. Since the last issue of this journal, the society has suffered the loss of Sidney N. Riggs and Manuel Bettencourt. Dr. Riggs, a member of the society's council, served the community in many ways, and readers of the *Intelligencer* knew him as the artist who provided the woodcuts for the cover of almost every issue. For the last two summers, Manny Bettencourt served as our gatehouse keeper, and despite his eighty years and failing health, he was full of a genial energy that helped to make people appreciate the joy of living. Both of these individuals were true gentlemen, and they will be missed by their many friends.

As usual the summer has been a very active period for us, but this year we have been busier than usual. The premier event of the season for us was the meeting of the Bay State Historical League in Edgartown. As hosts for this meeting, we had many preparations to make, but Saturday, June 21, turned out to be a beautiful day, and the ninety people in attendance had a very enjoyable time. At the beginning of the morning session at the Harbor View Hotel, the members of the League were introduced to the Vineyard through a slide presentation given by Edith Blake, who volunteered her time, but received a reward in the form of the many compliments that she received. After a short business meeting and luncheon, we took our visitors through the historical society's buildings and grounds and then most of them went on a bus tour of the island. In the evening for those staying overnight, we turned on the lighthouse, and punch was served at the whaleship try-works by Mrs. Samuel Halperin and Mrs. John H. Montgomery, Jr.

Usually in the summer we have a considerable amount of volunteer help, and this year we have been more fortunate than usual. One of the most interesting and certainly the most time-consuming projects was undertaken by Mr. and Mrs. William Block, who moved our old loom from the workshop to the summer kitchen. After many hours of cleaning, repairing, and reassembling, the Blocks put the loom into such usuable condition that the guides are now able to demonstrate the weaving process to our visitors as they make a rug to be used in the house.

In other areas of volunteer work, B. Jean Silva identified and repaired much of our pewter; Dr. John Wallace framed two of our paintings; and Stan Murphy, having finished his inventory of items in the attic, has now sorted out our shell collection. As he did last year, Snowden Taylor worked on our lighthouse and is now restoring one of our clocks. Yvonne Chao, a student at Brown University, and Tony Kleckner have been arriving at the society at least once a week to help with a number of projects.

In addition to our volunteer help, we are very fortunate to have an excellent staff this summer. Jody Angevin welcomes guests to the society, and after receiving an introductory lecture from Hilda Gilluly in the customs office of the Thomas Cooke House, the visitors are guided through the rest of the house by Shirley Drogin, Debbie Pelow, and Alison Shaw. In the morning hours at the library, our researchers have been receiving expert help from Gale Huntington, who presides over the librarian's desk while he edits the diaries of Jeremiah Pease. Joy Ryan can be found throughout the day working in the archives, and Mrs. Bettencourt joins us in the afternoons.

Among our several accomplishments this summer, Doris Stoddard has put together a most attractive brochure for the society, which should be much more effective than the old one. It is blue in color and has been widely distributed around the island. For those of you interested in learning more about Edgartown, Joy Ryan has completed a walking tour of the town. It can be adapted to both long and short walks, and it is available from us for \$1.00. Due to the generosity of an anonymous donor, our library now has a handsome bluestone walkway leading to both doors. The grounds are in excellent shape this summer, and we were pleased to receive from Tea Lane Nursery a gift of three lilac bushes, which have been planted at the front door of the Cooke House and at the side door of the library. Last but not least in the list of accomplishments, we have received a matching grant of \$2,200 from the Bicentennial Commission for the purpose of repairing and reshingling the roof of the Thomas Cooke House.

Fortunately, we will be able to match the \$2,200 with money that is already in the Preservation Fund. Recently, we received contributions in the memory of Dr. Sidney Riggs from Col. and Mrs. Henry Hotchkiss, Dr. Elden H. Mills, and Mr. and Mrs.

Donald Poole. Other recent contributors to the Preservation Fund have been Mrs. Charles S. Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Brown, Mrs. Ralph Hornblower, Nancy Sheldon Hurlburt, Mr. and Mrs. Victor Kalina, Mrs. Helen B. Mannoni, Mrs. Dorothy G. Mill, Mr. and Mrs. John Speranza, and Mrs. Henry Tallman. In addition we have received several anonymous contributions.

The society's annual meeting will be held at 8:00 p.m., Thursday, August 14, and we are fortunate to have as speakers Henry Beetle Hough and Edith Blake. Members of the society and guests are invited, and we will be looking forward to seeing many of you there.

Accessions

The following additions have been made to the Society collections between October 1974 and July 1975.

ARTIFACTS AND PLANTS

Mercury barometer made by P.V.P. Gally and Co., London, bequest of Eugene Hoffman; two lilac bushes planted at doorway of Cooke House, gift of Tea Lane Nursery.

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Records of Littleton, Mass., 1900, gift of Mrs. William C. Pierson, Jr.; The Fur Trade in Colonial New York (1686-1776) by Thomas Elliot Norton, gift of the author; Charles Gardner Chase: His Ancestry and His Descendants by Frederick Earl Chase, 1973, gift of Helen Lorraine Hutts; Webster's Third International Dictionary, 1971, gift of the Council in memory of Kenneth Stoddard; Workaday Schooners complied by Edward W. Smith, Jr., 1975, gift of publisher; History of Martha's Vineyard, Mass., Vol. III by Charles Banks, 1925, gift of Mrs. Richard Neeld; Seventh Annual Report of the U.S. Geological Survey by J. W. Powell, 1888, gift of Mrs. Edward P. Childs; The History of the New York Yacht Club by John Parkinson, Jr., 1975, purchase; pamphlet, "Illustrated New Bedford, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket," 1880, gift of Mrs. Janet Swift; article, "The Great Stone Fleet; Calculated Catastrophe" from U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings,

1968, gift of Mrs. William Deeble; copies of *The Grapevine*, 1971-1974, gift of Donald Roberts.

PAPERS AND MANUSCRIPTS

Journals, logs and other documents from Anglo Saxon, Samuel Robertson, Jaboatao, William Wilcox, Marianne Nottebohn, America, Oscar, Pocahontas and Virginia kept by Henry Manter along with other original papers belonging to him, account book kept by Frank Adams, will of John E. Luce, letters to Mrs. Polly Manter, documents concerning Shubael Cottle, Joseph Vinson, William J. Rotch and the West Tisbury store, gifts of Daniel Manter; diaries kept by Jeremiah Pease from 1829 to 1857, gift of Julian Vose Weston; poems written or copied by Thomas Nevin Jernegan Dexter, gift of Mrs. Esther C. Conkling; copies of "Genealogy of Thaxter Family" by Annie Athearn, letter from Annie Thaxton Athearn, "Gems from My Mother's Selections" by Annie Thaxter Athearn, 1892, gift of Donald C. Athearn; copy of family tree of John Mayhew, gift of Samuel M. Wilson; engraved certificate of marriage of John W. Smith and Sarah I. Snow of Edgartown, 1855, gift of Mrs. Mitchell Wilder.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Eight stereoptican views of Cottage City subjects, gift of Mrs. Ira S. Lewis; nine stereoptican views and five photographs of Oak Bluffs subjects, gift of A. E. Watkins; photograph of old Mayhew house, gift of Mrs. Hugh Bullock; three slides of Nomans Land, gift of Edwin T. Moul; photograph of Adams sisters at home, gift of Janet Grimes.

Marian R. Halperin, Registrar

NOTE: Whaling Wives by Emma Mayhew Whiting and Henry Beetle Hough is out of print. A number of requests for copies have come from researchers. The Society would be happy to act as an exchange should any members wish to sell their copies.

Some Publications

OF THE DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ON SALE AT ISLAND BOOK STORES AND IN THE SOCIETY'S LIBRARY.

The Mammals of Martha's Vineyard by Allan R. Keith. Illustrated, paper. 50¢.

People To Remember by Dionis Coffin Riggs. Illustrated, paper. \$4.95.

The Heath Hen's Journey to Extinction by Henry Beetle Hough. Illustrations. Paper 50¢.

The Fishes of Martha's Vineyard by Joseph B. Elvin. With 36 illustrations of fishes by Will Huntington. Paper, 50¢.

The History of Martha's Vineyard by Charles Edward Banks. A new edition. Indices, illustrations, three volumes. Cloth, \$30.00.

Tales and Trails of Martha's Vineyard by Joseph C. Allen. Illustrated. Paper, \$3.95.

"Cap'n George Fred" Himself. The autobiography of Captain George Fred Tilton of Chilmark, A new edition, Cloth, \$6.50.

Wild Flowers of Martha's Vineyard by Nelson Coon. Illustrated. Paper \$3.95.

Indian Legends Of Martha's Vineyard by Dorothy R. Scoville. Paper \$2.50.

An Introduction To Martha's Vineyard by Gale Huntington. Illustrated, paper. A new edition. \$3.95.

Shipwrecks On Martha's Vineyard by Dorothy R. Scoville. Illustrated, paper. \$3.00.