

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



THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

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Tom Benton by Henry Scott

A Reminiscence
**Tom and Rita Benton
on the Vineyard**

by PEGGY and HENRY SCOTT

**More Recollections
of the Bentons**

By Others Who Knew Them

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Thomas Cooke Jr. (1809-1830)

by FLORENCE KERN

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The Dukes County Historical Society was founded in 1922 to preserve the history of Dukes County for the public benefit. It is a nonprofit institution, supported by membership dues, contributions and bequests, which are tax deductible. Its annual meeting is held in August in Edgartown.

It maintains two historic houses, both providing guided tours to the public during the summer, one in Edgartown and the other in Vineyard Haven. A nominal fee is charged to non-members.

In Edgartown is the Thomas Cooke House at the corner of School and Cooke Streets. Acquired by the Society in 1935, the Cooke House, circa 1765, is a museum of Island history.

Also on the Society grounds in Edgartown are the Francis Foster Museum and Huntington Library. Both are open to the public year round. The Museum has an exhibition of the Vineyard's maritime heritage. The Library contains logs, journals, genealogies and other Island documents, plus many photographs and volumes of history.

The Edgartown property also has the Gay Head Lighthouse exhibit with its 1854 Fresnel lens and the Carriage Shed containing various old boats and wagons, including an 1854 hand pumper fire engine. These, too, are open all year.

In Vineyard Haven, the Society maintains the Jirah Luce House, circa 1804, formerly operated by the Tisbury Museum, now part of the Dukes County Historical Society. The exhibits are of early Vineyard explorers and settlers, with emphasis on the maritime history of Holmes Hole, as Vineyard Haven was once called.

The public is invited to visit the Society and also to take out a membership, which includes a subscription to this quarterly journal as well as free admission to our buildings.

A Reminiscence

Tom and Rita Benton On the Vineyard

by PEGGY AND HENRY SCOTT

IN the fall of 1936 we, Peggy and Henry Scott, met Tom and Rita Benton for the first time. We were having dinner together at Stanley and Peg King's house in Amherst, Massachusetts. Stanley was President of Amherst College.

During the evening, there was much interesting talk about life in New York City and on Martha's Vineyard. Rita Benton got out her guitar to play and sing for us. The Bentons and the Kings knew each other from summers in Chilmark. Little did we, the Scotts, suspect that the Island would later become our home.

But our friendship with the Bentons came much later than that of Ruth (Van Cleve) Emerson, who remembers Tom and Rita Benton during their early days on Martha's Vineyard as well as in New York. Now ninety years old, Ruth is still very active as a painter in Chilmark and we are grateful for her help in the preparation of this article.

In 1913, Thomas Hart Benton had left his native home and parents in Neosho, Missouri, to try his luck in the great metropolis of New York. There were such painters in the city as John Sloan, Robert Henri, William Glackens, Arthur B. Davies and Maurice Prendergast, all of whom helped to organize the famous 1913 Armory show.

Between 1913 and 1920, Tom was rooming on the lower East Side with a Vineyarder, Bill Scott (no relation to the authors). For years, Bill and his wife, Rachel, had a house

PEGGY and HENRY SCOTT of Chilmark first felt Vineyard sand between their toes in 1944, when Henry, a Navy lieutenant, was transferred to the Auxiliary Air Facility at the airport here. Like many others, they were never able to shake the sand off. As they explain in this article, they and the Bentons were long time friends here and in Kansas City, where both Tom and Henry were artists.

on the North Shore near Menemsha. In this period, Tom was teaching at the Art Students League in New York, and Ruthie Van Cleve was taking courses there. She was Womens' Vice President of the League.

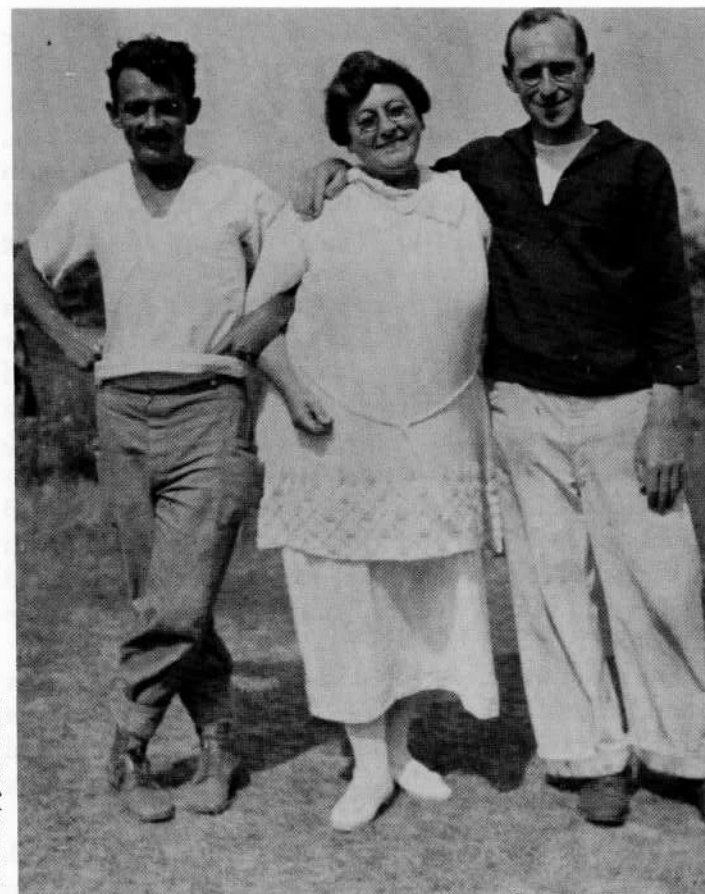
Rita Piacenza, while a young girl, had come from Italy with her father and an older brother in about 1908. The family name, Piacenza, came from the city of that name in northern Italy where the family had come from.

Rita worked for a while in the Chelsea area of New York and she met Tom while a student at one of his art classes. Possibly it was through Bill Scott that they first came to the Vineyard. Whether Tom or Rita came first is hard to say. There is, however, a story that Rita told to Peggy.

About 1920 Rita had come to Menemsha where she rented a small house on a vacation. She told Peggy about a scare she had while there. It was early one foggy morning when she heard approaching footsteps and heavy breathing. Thoroughly frightened, she grabbed a big kitchen knife to protect herself and opened the door a crack. The footsteps came nearer and her heart raced. Suddenly, out of the fog, there appeared a large, but reassuring head. It was only a cow!

We know that Tom came to the Island with his friend, Thomas Craven, possibly the following summer, but that may not have been his first visit. He and Rita were married in New York in the spring of 1922 and the following summer the couple rented a barn in Chilmark with primitive living arrangements. They liked the life here so much that in May of 1928 they bought about 18 acres on Boston Hill in Chilmark in one or more purchases.

Here was their house — a one time chicken house with a very low-roofed shed which was to serve as their kitchen for many years. Ruthie, and much later the Scotts as well, remember many pleasant times there. In 1944, the Bentons bought another piece of land with a small shack on it, just over the line in Gay Head, for their young son, Thomas



Courtesy Jane Slater

Mrs. Ella Jane Mosher Brug with tenants, Tom Benton, left, and Tom Craven, in 1919, during their first summer on the Vineyard.

Piacenza Benton, or "T.P.," as he came to be called.

So, while Tom was developing his art in New York City and elsewhere, the Vineyard became his summer family home. Soon, the Vineyard became of major importance in his work. But we must back up a bit to make that point.

In 1935, Tom was asked to teach at the Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design. Leaving New York, the Bentons bought a large stone house on Bellevue Avenue

in the Westport section of Kansas City in Tom's native Missouri. This then became their winter home.

It was the year before this, in 1934, that Guy Emerson, one-time banker and always a lover of birds, and his bride, Ruth Van Cleve, built their house on Abel's Hill off South Road, Chilmark. At about this time, Seth Wakeman (of Smith College) and his first wife, Marion, who was studying painting in New York, were also building next door.

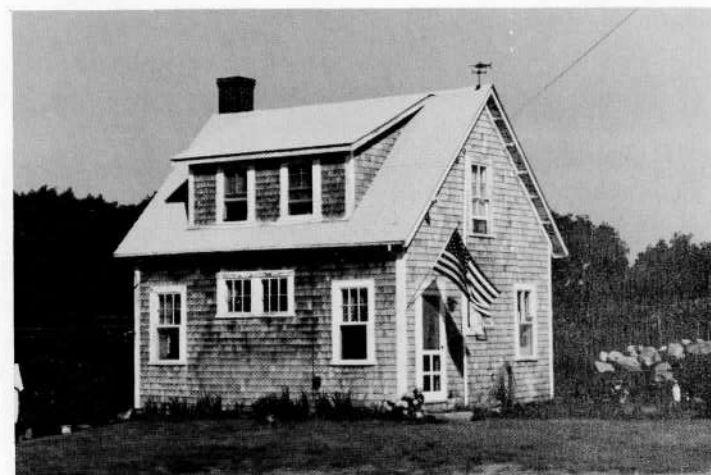
When the 1938 hurricane hit Martha's Vineyard a devastating blow, Tom hastened over to see how their property had fared. On the mainland, the storm had brought mostly soaking rain and fallen trees, but in Chilmark the ocean had raised havoc, its waters inundating Stonewall Beach and washing out the bridge at Hariph's Creek. The Thielens, who had a cottage on Stonewall, had to flee for their lives and, tragically, their maid drowned in the tumultuous waters. Later, Tom painted a picture titled "The Flight of the Thielens," dramatically portraying the tragedy.

The ocean water, sort of a tidal wave, swept across Quitsa Pond, through Chalkers Creek, rushing into Menemsha where it wiped out most of the fishermen's shacks. It changed the course of Menemsha Creek and Menemsha Basin permanently.

The following year, 1939, the Bentons' second child, Jessie, was born. Ruth Emerson recalls going to the Bentons' Chilmark house that summer and seeing young "T.P." carrying his baby sister upstairs to bed.¹

Five years later, during the last winter of World War II, the Scotts came to Martha's Vineyard with their sizable family. Henry had been here for some months, having left his teaching position at Amherst College after eight years to become a Lieutenant in the Naval Reserve. After a tour in Texas, he was transferred in the fall of 1944 to the Quonset Point Naval Air Station in Rhode Island, which

¹. The chicken coop obviously had been enlarged by then.



Barn that Benton and Craven rented, as it is today. Two small windows were installed by Benton, replacing the barn door.

supervised the Auxiliary Air Base on Martha's Vineyard (now the County Airport). He was named Recognition and Navigation Specialist at the training school there. It is not generally known that at the Martha's Vineyard airport Navy pilots were given the very final phase of their flight training, including night flying, before being sent into action in the Pacific against the Japanese.²

And so it happened that, in the spring of 1945, as the war was ending, the Scotts found and purchased a hundred-year-old house on South Road, Chilmark, which became their summer home and eventually their year-round residence. In the ensuing years, the Bentons, the Kings, the Wakemans and the Fred Jameses maintained summer homes here, making it inevitable that the Scotts would meet up with the Bentons again, this time on the Vineyard.

It happened in August 1947 when Tom and Henry met on a street in Vineyard Haven.

"Hi!" exclaimed Tom. "There's a guy from Kansas City visiting me who is looking for someone to head up the Art

² See *Intelligencer*, Feb. 1984, for more about co-author Henry's Navy service on the Vineyard.

Department at the university there where he is president. I told him that there is just the man for the job right here. Why don't you and Peggy come to our house and meet him and his wife?"

His guests were Dr. Clarence Decker and his wife, Mary. When the Scotts arrived at the Boston Hill house, Tom was there and, after putting on his shoes, he took them to T.P.'s cottage on Menemsha Pond where the Deckers were staying.

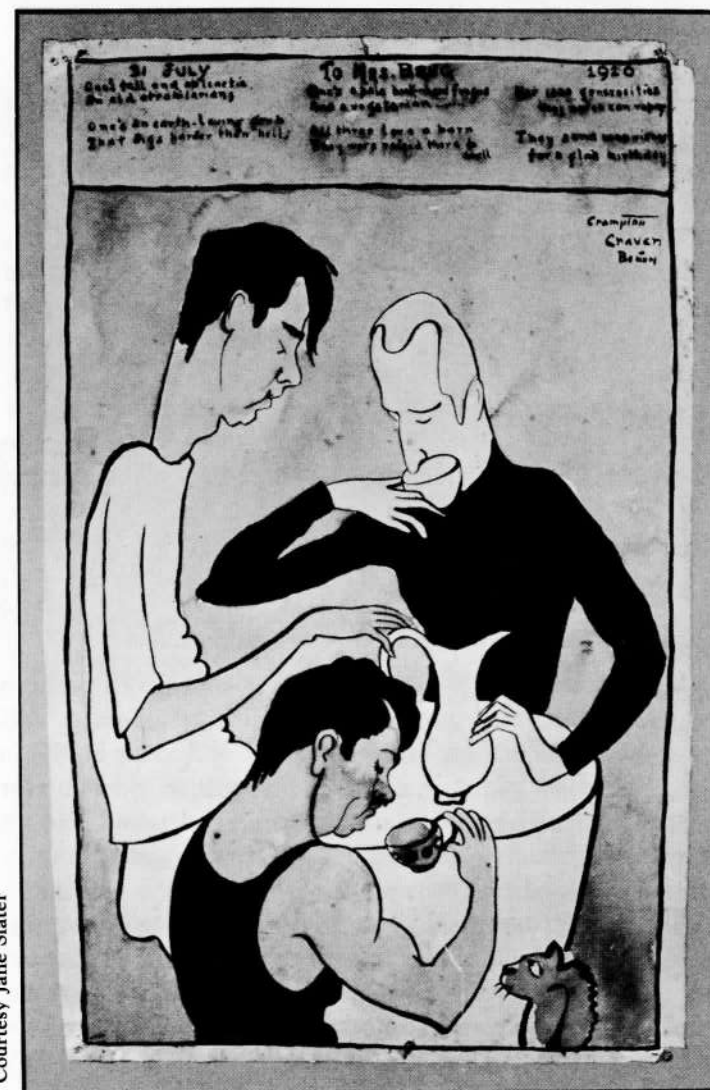
The Decker proposition startled us, to say the least, for it meant that if Henry went along with it, we, the whole Scott family, would have to be in Kansas City within a month, ready to live there. The upshot of it all was that, after a lot of consideration of pro's and con's, Henry accepted.

And so it was that in September 1947, the Scotts, with five children, a sheep dog and a pregnant cat, headed west in a 1939 station wagon and trailer. Henry became Chairman of the Art Department at the University of Kansas City, now part of the University of Missouri, and Peggy became a teacher of Dramatics and English at Sunset Hill School for girls.

In Kansas City, the Bentons and the Scotts saw each other often at their homes (the Scotts, like the Bentons, had found an ark-like stone house), at social and University functions, and, of course, at the Decker home. The Deckers had many friends, both "town and gown," within music and art circles. Among the many friends the Scotts made were Ernest Manheim (who came to the Vineyard later) of the University Sociology Department and his wife, Ann, who, like Peggy, taught at Sunset Hill School. There also was Hans Schweiger, Conductor of the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra, and his wife, Mary.

Tom Benton at this time was working on murals for the Capitol building of the state of Missouri in Jefferson City. Among his friends were Grant Wood and John Stuart Curry. These three men were considered by art critics to

Courtesy Jane Slater



In 1920, Benton, Craven and Rollie Crampton lived in the barn. Tom drew this birthday card for Mrs. Brug. A verse entitled "To Mrs. Brug" was probably written by Craven: "One's tall and splenetic, An old atrabiliarian; One's an earth-loving grub that digs harder than hell; One's a pale hook-nosed fungus and a vegetarian. All three love a barn. They were raised there to dwell. Her 1000 generousities they never can repay. They send 1000 wishes for a glad birthday." Tom was the grub, Craven the fungus, Crampton splenetic.

be Regionalists, their common subject matter dealing with the Middle West. Tom was exhibiting some paintings at the Associated American Artists' Gallery in New York and at the Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City.

In 1947, soon after the Scotts arrived in Kansas City, Tom, always very outspoken, made some highly critical remarks about art gallery personnel and, as a result, was dropped from his position as a teacher at the Kansas City Art Institute. "Deck," as Dr. Decker was often called, was quick to realize that Tom might fit in well at the University Art Department as Artist in Residence. Being Chairman of the Department, Henry became the intermediary between Tom and the students, arranging sessions with Tom either at the University or in Tom's studio, adjacent to his house. Henry also arranged exhibitions of Tom's work at the University's Little Gallery and set up forums in which Tom took an active part.

In physical stature, Tom was rather short and, perhaps to offset this, he tended to speak with positiveness and assertiveness. Further, he loved to talk and to air his views on art and the art scene, on politics and on people. Not just a painter, he was an omniverous reader and had an extraordinary background of historical and literary knowledge.

When we first knew her, Rita was young and most attractive with dark eyes and hair. She was always completely loyal to Tom and was very proud of his work. Once when someone asked her about the artists in Chilmark, she replied: "There is no artist on Martha's Vineyard but Thomas Hart Benton." Her nature was warm and affectionate and she was devoted to her children. She was fond of all children and was especially attentive to the young Scotts. Indeed, so warm-hearted was she, that she seemed to embrace the universe. In her manner and bearing, she had a special style and, as the saying goes, "flowed into her clothes."

Courtesy the authors



Henry Scott, right, and Tom hang Benton's portrait of Burl Ives for an exhibition at the University of Kansas City in 1959.

One summer at Chilmark, possibly 1950, Tom asked Peggy and Henry to pose for a picture he was planning, to be called "The Picnic." He made pencil sketches of us on our back porch, Peggy as if preparing a lunch basket and Henry carrying a pail of water. In the completed painting he had himself and his family bathing in Menemsha Pond, at T.P.'s camp, with friends, Fred and Diana James, and ourselves on shore. The painting eventually went to Kansas City where it recently sold for a prodigious price.

Many of Benton's paintings include Chilmark scenes and Chilmark residents. The Society owns two of his portraits, one of Zeb Tilton and another, the more famous one, of Josie West, both Chilmarkers. The Editor Emeritus of this journal, Gale Huntington and his daughter, Emily, are the subjects in Benton's "The Music Lesson" (1943). Tom gave considerable credit to the Island for its influence on his work.

In the 1930s, he wrote: "Martha's Vineyard had a

profound effect on me. . . . It separated me from the Bohemias of art and put a physical sanity into my life for four months of the year. Providing me with a homely subject matter and a great quiet for reflection, . . . it freed my art from the dominance of narrow urban conceptions. . . . It was in Martha's Vineyard that I first really began my intimate study of the American environment and its people."³

In the summer of 1952, Henry did a head-and-shoulders drawing of Tom in his Chilmark studio. It portrays him with quite a deep crease in his forehead, a result, perhaps, of the intensity of his nature and the rigorous way with which he applied himself to his work. He sat patiently as Henry sketched and they talked about his painting techniques, especially those using tempera and acrylics.⁴

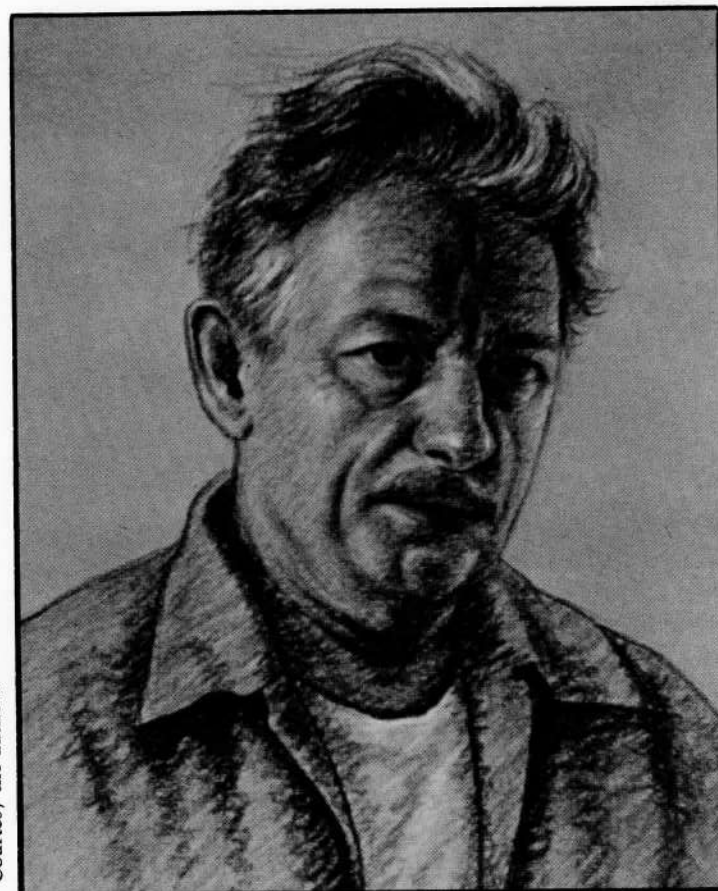
When she was a teenager, Jessie, Tom and Rita Benton's daughter, went around a lot with Helen Baldwin, daughter of Roger and Evie (Preston) Baldwin of Windy Gates, Chilmark (formerly Senator Butler's). They drove around all summer in an old "jalopy," frequently stopping at the Scott house to see our daughters, Anne and Sally, and possibly Johnny, our youngest son. They would all take off to sun and swim on the beautiful beach below Windy Gates.

One of Tom's favorite stories about children was of Peggy making a big batch of doughnuts in our kitchen. Tom barged in and beheld a group of kids standing around the stove ready to grab doughnuts as soon as they were ready. Needless to say, by the time the frying was over there were no doughnuts left. This tickled Tom no end and he often described the incident.

By the 1960s Tom had done so well selling his paintings

³ Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America*, Third Rev. Ed., U. of Missouri Press, Columbia, Ma., 1968, p.26, as quoted in Polly Burroughs, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Portrait*, Doubleday [Co., Garden City, N.Y., 1981. In addition to those mentioned in the text, among the Chilmarkers who were subjects for Benton were Frank Flanders and George and Sabrina West.

⁴ Henry's drawing was purchased by Stuart Miller, then of Kansas City, who probably took it to his home in San Miguel d'Allende, Mexico.



Courtesy the authors

Co-author Henry Scott made this drawing of Tom Benton in the summer of 1952 in Tom's studio in Chilmark.

that he had a sizeable and attractive extension added to their old living room and kitchen on the Boston Hill house. It made a splendid gathering place for friendly discussions after one of Rita's good Italian dinners. She especially enjoyed making spaghetti with marvelous original sauces.

New York's Day at the Bentons in Kansas City was always something to remember. Rita would prepare plates of sandwiches and cakes on the dining table and at a side table



T.P. Benton plays classical flute for Tom, Hollis Smith (behind Tom), Albert (seated) and Gale Huntington. Pianist is unidentified.

Tom ladled out his famous eggnog, well laced with bourbon, while talking all the time. Many friends dropped in, adults and children, and the house teemed with good cheer.

We recall one evening at the Bentons with Jim and Eleanor Worthington and two of their children, Caroline and Jules. Caroline was playing her cello with young Tommy Weaver on his violin. She is the same Caroline who is now a noted cellist and organizer of the present Chilmark Chamber Music series. Her brother Jules and wife are active in Chilmark town affairs. Their mother, Eleanor, later married, as her second husband, Rita's brother, Louis Piacenza, now deceased. Eleanor and another of Rita's brothers, Santo, now over 90 years old, live in Chilmark in the house built by Tom's mother on Boston Hill in the 1920s.

Music was always prevalent in the Benton home, whether in Kansas City or the Vineyard. Rita, as we have noted,



Country music was Tom's forte. A hoedown with fiddlers Hollis Smith and Gale Huntington, flutist T.P., and unidentified ocarinist.

played the guitar and sang. Tom was very good on the harmonica. There is a Decca record, "Saturday Night at Tom Benton's," that documents this musical interest. T.P. became a skillful flutist, playing in summer concerts at the Chilmark Tavern (later the postoffice and now a real estate office). These concerts were organized in the late 1940s and early 1950s by Leopold Mannes. Leopold was a superb pianist who at one time accompanied the famous cellist, Pablo Casals. Henry Scott took part in these Tavern concerts on his violin, along with Walter Charak on cello and Isabel Richter on viola. Tom and Rita were always there, whether T.P. was playing or not.

After the Chilmark Community Center was built, the concerts were held there and Guy Frazer Harrison and Tom Sherman, pianists, and Robert Rudie, violinist, took part. The Bentons were good friends of the Mannes and Tom did portraits of Leopold and of his father, David, of the

music school of that name in New York.⁵

The Benton daughter, Jessie, had a lovely vibrant voice, much like Rita's, and she sang in Peggy's Christmas programs at Sunset Hill School in Kansas City.

During these years, Henry put on some exhibitions of Tom's work in the University's Little Gallery in Kansas City. A most unusual one in 1960 featured Tom's murals. It was prefaced by Tom talking to the overflow audience in the University theater. For the exhibition, Tom and Henry had pulled from the Benton attic, panels from some of his early New York wall paintings that dealt with the American Historic Epic. He had been working on these from 1923 to 1926. Carefully, they moved samples of the clay models that Tom formed to create a sense of three dimensional depth in his figure compositions. Photographs were displayed to show some of the more recent murals such as those he was painting for New York State at Massena and Niagara Falls. These were historical or allegorical in character.

It must have been about 1970 that Henry took his students to Independence, just east of Kansas City, to the Truman Library, where Tom was working on his mural, "Independence and the Opening of the West." Former President Truman gave us a talk in an auditorium and then turned the group over to Tom, who proceeded to paint and demonstrate on the still-unfinished mural in the lobby. For this enormous project, he had made many preparatory drawings. For two of the figures, Peter Colt Josephs of Chilmark, using David Flander's shotgun, had posed the summer previous. Rita had posed as the pioneer mother in the central area.⁶

⁵ The two musicians, father and son, are the subjects for Benton's oil and tempera, "Evening Concert" (1948) portraying a musicale in a Chilmark living room.

⁶ This painting, along with all those mentioned here, are reproduced in Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York City, undated. Also shown is the commemorative stamp, "Missouri 1821-1971," showing the two figures posed for by Peter Josephs along with the central figure of Rita, two of very few Vineyard residents ever to appear on a U.S. postage stamp. Another book with many reproductions of Benton's Vineyard related paintings is Burroughs, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Portrait*. Burroughs also provides a wealth of details about the Bentons' life on the Vineyard.



Courtesy the authors

Tom, Rita and friends enjoying an after-dinner song. Henry Scott is standing behind Rita. Figure to her right was cut from photo.

That wasn't our only meeting with Harry Truman. On the occasion of Jessie's wedding to David Gude, who summered with his parents in Chilmark, President Truman

Courtesy Eleanor Piacenza



Tom and Rita Benton, about 1950.

attended the reception at the Benton house. He was sitting in a corner of the dining room surrounded by admirers. In a rare moment of silence, Henry Scott had an impulse to raise his glass and say, for all to hear, "Here's to the Chief!" Mr. Truman, in response, promptly answered: "That was."

Our children have their own recollections of the Bentons and their children. "Hank" (Henry III, our eldest) recalls one evening when he took Tom and "Deck" to a night club in Kansas City where black musicians were playing. Tom made sketches of some of the players which appeared in paintings soon after that. Sal and Johnny remember a weekend with Tom and Jessie at a cabin in the Ozarks where he went canoeing with a friend. Trees, foliage and flowers in his paintings reflect his keen observation of nature in this region as well as on Martha's Vineyard. Our son Jonathan posed for a figure in a painting with a dancing theme, "The Twist" (1964). Both Hank and Anne became painters and were influenced by Tom's work.

Towards the end of the summer of 1974, Peggy and Henry called on Tom and Rita in T.P.'s enlarged house on Menemsha Pond and had a delightful talk. His painting of "The Picnic," in which we both appear, was hanging over the mantel and a copy of Matthew Baigell's handsome book on Tom and his work, which had just been published, was on the table.

Tom proudly showed watercolors that T.P. had done recently and took us to his new studio house nearby to show us a number of the clay models he had recently made for some of his murals.⁷

Only a few days after that, Tom and Rita left for Kansas City. Three months later, Tom, at 79 years, had a fatal heart attack, on January 19, 1975. Within another three months, Rita was stricken the same way.

Years earlier, the Bentons and the Josephs had exchanged garden plantings one summer in Chilmark. Roswell Josephs gave the Bentons a slow-growing boxwood. The Bentons, in turn, gave Roswell yellow irises which blossomed each spring. But that spring, 1975, the iris did not blossom.

⁷ Sadly, it is believed that these clays ended up in the Chilmark dump.

More Recollections of the Bentons

by OTHERS WHO KNEW THEM

WHEN Tom Benton wrote in the 1930s that it was at the Vineyard that "I first really began my intimate study of the American environment and its people," the people he was talking about were Chilmarkers, mostly his neighbors on Boston Hill and those he met at social affairs and musicales at the Chilmark Tavern (a nonalcoholic gathering place next to the postoffice).

Most of his friends are no longer alive, but they often told their children about the Bentons and many anecdotes survive. We have talked to a number of Chilmarkers, all of whom knew the Bentons. Their recollections are summarized here, enlarging upon those of Peggy and Henry Scott, printed elsewhere in this issue.¹

One theme runs through all the memories: the Bentons were well received by the Chilmark residents. They were accepted as part of the community, although they were "summer people." Among the first "regular" summer people in that part of Chilmark, they came to Boston Hill year after year, initially as renters, later as property owners.²

There are several versions of their first visit to the Island in either 1919 or 1920. Mrs. Ella Brug, who died in 1927, remembered that Tom and his friend Tom Craven came to her door in the summer of 1919, wearing parts of their old Navy uniforms, to inquire about a place to stay. She

¹For more anecdotes about the Bentons and Chilmark see Polly Burroughs, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Portrait*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1981.

²Boston Hill is the first high point of land going west from Beetlebung Corner, Chilmark. Its name, it is said, came from the fact that a retired Chilmark ship captain lived there and would sit on his porch watching the vessels sail on Vineyard Sound, several miles away. On very clear days, he bragged to friends, he could even see Boston.



Much enlarged from what it was in 1919, Mrs. Ella Brug's house, now the Slater house, is still on Boston Hill. Barn is seen at rear.

had several camps on her property plus a converted horse barn that she rented out each summer. They chose the barn. Mrs. Brug's recollection didn't include Rita in that first year, 1919.

Mrs. Eleanor Piacenza, who became Rita's sister-in-law some years later, remembers Rita telling her that she came here before Tom. It was in 1920, she recalls, when Rita and a girl friend came and stayed at a camp in Chilmark on the recommendation of a New York artist friend. Shortly after they arrived one of those persistent, thick Chilmark fogs settled over Boston Hill, hanging there for days. The friend was too nervous to stay in the lonely camp surrounded by nothing but fog and went back to New York. Rita then wrote to Tom and told him about the place and about the Brug barn that could be rented very cheaply. Tom and Craven soon arrived.

Whichever story is correct (and they are not mutually exclusive; they both could be partially correct), they fell in love with the Chilmark hills and returned each summer for several years, the men staying in the barn and Rita along with Craven's girl friend in one of Mrs. Brug's camps. After



E. Eliot Mayhew's store and postoffice about 1920. The Chilmark Tavern was here. It burned and was replaced by today's store.

their marriage in 1922, Tom and Rita took over the barn and Craven stopped coming. In 1927, Mrs. Brug sold Tom and Rita two acres on Boston Hill on a contract basis. There they built their own summer house, enlarging, as the Scotts have written, a building that had once been a chicken house.

We have indisputable evidence that Benton, Craven and another friend, Rollin Crampton, were at the barn in July 1920. The proof is a Benton sketch, honoring Mrs. Brug on her 62nd birthday. (See p. 189.) Atop the sketch is a verse, which, after describing the men, reads:

All three love a barn;
They were raised there to dwell,
Her 1000 generositys they never can repay.
They send good wishes for a glad birthday.

The warmth of the verse would seem to indicate that this was not their first summer in Mrs. Brug's barn, suggesting that Benton and Craven had been there the preceding year, 1919.

As the verse also makes evident, Mrs. Brug treated them



Beetlebung Corner, about 1910, shortly after the state hardtopped Gay Head road (foreground). Other roads remained unpaved for years.

like personal friends. Tom always presented her one of his sketches after each summer's visit. She, like Rita, became certain he was going to "amount to something." But in those early years, the only years that Mrs. Brug knew him (she died in 1928), he was just a poor, struggling artist, working to develop the painting style that was to make him famous.

Rita Piacenza Benton was universally described by Chilmarkers as "warm, friendly, outgoing and full of life." She made friends easily. Asked if the stories of Rita being given fish by the Menemsha fishermen were true, one man who knew her said: "People would give Rita anything."

The Scotts have written that she loved children. Children, in turn, were very fond of her. She exuded a maternal nature and, some felt, in many ways she tended to "mother" Tom. It was up to her, she seemed to feel, to make him what she truly believed he could be — one of America's finest artists. Right from the beginning, she knew that was his destiny and she never let him or anybody else forget it. When it came to selling his paintings, she was his business agent, demanding the highest prices, rarely bargaining. If the



Menemsha Basin in August 1923, as Tom and Rita first knew it.

customer didn't like the price, she was not quick to reduce it. Tom's work was worth everything she was asking, even more, she would tell buyers. She has, of course, been proven right.

There were several deaf mutes living near them on Boston Hill and Rita learned to sign so she could communicate with them. This was not unusual among year round Chilmarkers, but it was among summer people. Tom, in turn, made several portraits of his deaf mute neighbors, some being among his best known works.

He was uninhibited, less disciplined, and, some feel, without Rita's tight reins would have never become what he did. He worked hard, staying at his easel most of the daylight hours. Serious about his work, struggling to find a style he was satisfied with, he rarely took time off to exchange pleasantries with children or adults. Children were always told to be quiet around his studio: "Tom is painting." But at day's end, or on the beach, after he had put down his brushes, he could be, and was, ebullient. He loved being with jolly friends and their house was often filled with such.



Head of the Basin in 1927, near today's Menemsha postoffice.

Rita knew how to put on a feast and both she and Tom knew how to entertain, although at times she would have to ask him to be careful of his language. He enjoyed being shocking, often erupting in profanity no matter who was present. He soon was Chilmark's best known celebrity.

Both Tom and Rita were talented craftsmen. Tom was a good carpenter, converting their Soho loft into a handsome home, long before such conversions were common. During one summer at Mrs. Ella Brug's, he removed the big barn door, which he had to open in all kinds of weather so there would be enough light for him to paint, and installed a pair of windows. Thereafter, they were known as "Tom's windows."

Rita was a skilled picture framer. In New York and in Missouri, she had a framing studio in their home right next to Tom's painting studio. She framed all Tom's pictures and others also. One friend recalls how astonished he was that, in their Kansas City home, the only paintings were Tom's, all framed by Rita. As Peggy Scott has written, Rita had a real sense of style. She favored peasant type dirndl skirts, probably to soften her large hipped frame.

She loved music, as he did, and she loved to dance. She

was always there for the Saturday night square dancing at the Chilmark Tavern, near Beetlebung Corner. Tom did not seem to share her fondness for dancing, some say he felt he was too short to be a good partner. There are mixed feelings about his sensitivity to his height. Some feel it was very strong, others sensed no such concern. He was shorter than average, being somewhere under five foot five. But he had an athlete's muscular body and was an outstanding swimmer.

She bubbled all the time, talking incessantly and, some said, often indulging in exaggeration, especially about Tom's work. As he became more famous, she seemed to revel in it more than he did. And with justification as she had been, most Chilmarkers agreed, the driving force. Often, she was "coldly ambitious" for Tom. But, no matter, everybody loved her. She was that kind of human being.

When they began to spend more time on the Island, they moved into their house at Herring Creek, Gay Head, the one usually called T.P.'s house. On the shore of Menemsha Pond, it had been enlarged from a shack that was on the property when they bought it in the 1940s. It was winterized, which the Boston Hill house was not at the time. Next to it, Tom had built a studio. All summer Tom and Rita could be seen there on the bank above the beach, watching the activity on the pond or, on most summer afternoons, in the water, playing with their grandchildren. It was a happy scene in a most beautiful setting. Tom loved that place.

They both loved Chilmark and Menemsha Pond. It was their favorite place in all the world. That love affair lasted right up to their deaths. Both of them died in Missouri, only months after leaving the Island for the winter.

The above recollections were provided by Gale and Mildred Huntington, Emily Huntington Rose, Eleanor Piacenza, Shirley LaPlante, Jap and Helen Gude, Jane Slater, Eileen Mayhew and others.



Customs Collectors at Edgartown

Thomas Cooke Jr. (1809-1830)

by FLORENCE KERN

ON June 21, 1809, Thomas Cooke Jr., was commissioned Collector of Customs for the District of Edgartown by President James Madison and Secretary of State Richard Smith. Born in 1768, seven years before the start of the Revolution, Collector Cooke was 41 years old. He was part of the influential Mayhew family, his wife being Elizabeth Mayhew, youngest daughter of Matthew Mayhew 5th. They had been married 19 years and had five children. A sixth, Jane, was born two years after his appointment.

He was notified of the important Federal appointment by the General Accounting Office on March 21, 1809. On the same date, Edgartown's first Federal collector, John Pease (or John Peas as his name was recorded in Washington), was informed of his dismissal from the office he had held since 1789.

Required by law to provide his own office, Collector Cooke is believed to have set up the Custom House in two upstairs rooms in his home on Meeting House Way (today's Cooke Street). This public way had been laid out early in 1768 to provide a more direct path between South Water Street and the new meeting house which had just been completed on the grounds of the cemetery on Pease's Point Way.¹

¹ Charles E. Banks, *History of Martha's Vineyard*, DCHS, 1966, v.2, "Annals of Edgartown," p.183.

FLORENCE KERN, who spends her summers on Chappaquiddick (with many hours in our library), became entangled in the history of customs collectors while researching the beginnings of the United States Revenue Service, a subject on which she is an authority. She spends the winters in Bethesda, Maryland, a short trip from the National Archives and the Library of Congress, where much of her research is done.

The two rooms were both on the north side of the building, known today as the Thomas Cooke House. It is owned by the Society and open to the public each summer. The larger of the customs rooms is in the front of the house, facing the harbor. Since there were no buildings between the house and the water in 1809, Collector Cooke had a clear view of the harbor and of the vessels entering it.

The Edgartown Customs District, for which he was responsible, included the Vineyard, the Elizabeth Islands, No Man's Land and the waters out to the three mile limit. Falmouth, originally part of the District, had been reassigned to the Barnstable District a few years before.

The new Collector was no stranger to the operation of a Customs Office; his father, the venerable Squire Cooke, had served as customs surveyor at Edgartown under the British during colonial days and as Edgartown Collector for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts from 1784 to 1786, before the Federal government took over. Some Vineyard historians, including Banks, have written that Squire Cooke was Federal Collector from 1799 until 1809, but documents in the National Archives prove otherwise.

The old Squire had fallen upon hard times after losing his position under the Commonwealth. He had just built a larger house for himself on a lot adjacent to the old homestead. He had planned to give the homestead to Thomas Junior, but had fallen heavily in debt to a Boston merchant, Hermann Brimmer, and his brother, Andrew. In 1793, the Squire was sued by the Commonwealth and threatened with imprisonment for non-payment of debts. He was forced to sell almost all his property, including the homestead and his new house, as well as his pew in the meeting house. Of his considerable fortune, only one woodlot and half a windmill remained after he paid off the Brimmers. Fortunately for the Cooke family (and subsequently for the Historical Society), they were allowed to continue living in the homestead and were able to redeem

it in 1798, so that it was again owned by the family when Thomas Junior was appointed Collector in 1809.²

Chappaquiddick Saltworks

Prior to his appointment as Collector, Thomas Junior had been a mariner. Edgartown records list him in that occupation until 1804 when he apparently quit the sea life to operate a saltworks on Chappaquiddick Point. On May 8, 1805, he bought from George Marchant 15 acres of land on the point "on a straight line northwest from the Hill Windmill."³

In August of that year he and Marchant bought more property on the point for \$1000. This was "a certain tract of land, being mostly beach in Edgartown on the Island of Chabbaquidick Point bound south by a line from the Hill Wind Mill to Paul Dunham's house near the harbor, then northeast to meet the beach on the southwest side of the Point." The second purchase included an existing saltworks. On the property sale were "all the buildings of every description, lumber and material and machinery for raising and conducting the water." In the early 19th century, this was one of three saltworks in Edgartown.

There is little information on exactly how much salt was produced on the Island during this period. Whether the Vineyard was self-sufficient in the essential commodity is not known. One document, a letter from Thomas Cooke, Jr., to the Register of the Treasury on September 6, 1828, reported that in the Customs District of Edgartown, which included more than the Vineyard, there were 5837 bushels of salt produced. This was a smaller amount than normal,

² The family was not so fortunate with the newer and larger house. It was bought by William Jernegan in the forced 1793 auction and never recovered by the Cooke family. William Jernegan left it to his son, Richard Whellan Jernegan, in 1807. The land between the two houses (there was no street separating the houses then) was also bought by William Jernegan, who described it as "as a house lot between my house and Esq. Cooke" when he willed it to his grandson, William Davis Jernegan.

³ The remains of an old windmill can be seen across the road from the Chappaquiddick Beach Club. This may have been the site of the windmill in which Thomas owned half interest.

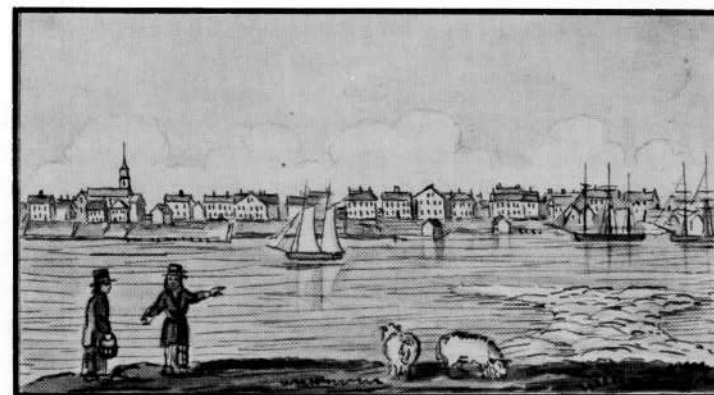
the Collector stated: "Owing to the low price of salt and in connection with the prospect of the duty on foreign salt being diminished there has not been any increase of the manufacture of that article for several years past, but a diminution, resulting I presume from those causes."

The two men petitioned the town in 1805 for permission to build a wharf at the point "opposite the wharf of William Norton across the gut." Although their petition was granted, provided the wharf was "good, substantial and suitable for the loading and unloading of vessels," there seems to be no mention of it ever being built.

In 1806 Thomas Junior became interested in politics and was elected Representative in the Massachusetts General Court. In 1807, he ran for the Massachusetts Senate against Isaac Coffin of Nantucket and William Jernagan of the Vineyard. According to Ichabod Norton of Edgartown, he entered the race at the last moment, encouraged by "a designing enemy" of the Republican party who had "puffed him up with popularity."⁴ Cooke got 75 votes in Edgartown, more than half of those cast, but when the rest of the Island and Nantucket were included, the winner was Nantucketer Isaac Coffin with 106 votes, barely edging out Jernagan by 12 votes. Coffin credited his close election to Cooke's fragmentation of the Republican vote.

Whatever the reason for Cooke's action, it didn't seem to hurt him politically, despite what Ichabod Norton wrote. In 1808, he was appointed Sheriff of Dukes County by Gov. James Sullivan, Republican, replacing Benjamin Smith who had been Sheriff for 27 years.

⁴ Ichabod Norton of Edgartown, writing to Isaac Coffin in Nantucket, April 16, 1807, was upset that Cooke had entered the race at the last minute, fragmenting the Republican vote. "... everything appeared favourable untill a few days before the Election meeting, when it was reported that Cooke was held a Candidate for Senator. It immediately struck me that it was a Fedral [sic] intrigue, it being on a suddan, and many of the People, not being apprised of the consequence, only carried the idea of having a Senator from their own Town, which scattered the Votes. I cannot but think Mr. Cooke a Republican and friend to our government and must compute it to the designing Enemy casting a mist before him, Puffed him up with Popularity rather than having a mind to hurt the Cause." Book No. 1, *Edgartown Town Records*.



Drawing, about 1837, by John Warner Barber, viewing Edgartown from a spot near Thomas Cooke's saltworks on Chappaquiddick.

The following year, 1809, as mentioned above, Thomas was appointed United States Collector of Customs. When he took over the office from John Pease, his quarterly salary was \$37.50, plus a percentage of duties, tonnage taxes, fines, forfeits, hospital fees and fees for entering and clearing the harbor. His first quarterly report shows the sum of \$187.50 as his three-percent share of the \$6,265.93 in duties he collected, plus 93 cents as his commission on hospital fees.⁵

It was a very depressed period in New England maritime history and a confusing time politically. The European powers expected the American experiment in independence to collapse momentarily and French and British vessels made free use of the American waters, plundering American vessels and shanghaiing American seamen. These actions led to President Jefferson's Embargo of 1807 which kept all American vessels in port, followed by the Non-Intercourse Act which further restricted trading. Jefferson's orders, like the subsequent War of 1812 itself, greatly displeased New England's merchant marine and especially citizens of the Vineyard, so dependent upon maritime commerce. One historian has calculated that "the embargo deprived Massachusetts of nearly \$16,000,000 a year — an amount

⁵ Each vessel paid a fee based on crew size which went into a fund used to pay medical expenses for sick mariners. The Collector took a percentage of the fee.

equal to the entire federal revenue of the time."⁶

Edgartown Takes "Pacific Position"

Early in the War of 1812, Collector Cooke was appointed to an Edgartown Committee of Five by action of a town meeting to draw up instructions for a Committee of Nine that had been authorized to negotiate "conciliatory terms with the enemy who should land at this place." Many Islanders still remembered the bitter consequences of Grey's Raid in 1778, during the Revolution, and were not willing to repeat the experience. The Collector and the four others on the committee drew up a list of instructions advising the Committee of Nine "to take a pacific position" in any encounter and "to meet any hostile party who may attempt the invasion of said town and act as they shall think best for the preserving thereof."⁷ Fortunately, there was no need to "meet any hostile party," as the British made no raids on the Island during the war.

Collector Cooke kept numerous orderly records, many of them now in the Archives of the Society and some on display in the Custom House rooms on the second floor of the Thomas Cooke House. The first bill he paid was to John Clark Jr., for mending the sail of the Custom House boat: four yards of duck \$2, twine 24 cents, labor \$1.25. Another bill from Obed Coffin for \$9.32 listed three and a half days' labor, "nales and timbers, pantes for the inside, and 2 oars." The "pantes" were "verdigreases."⁸

The District of Edgartown was too small to have a Deputy Collector or Naval Officer such as were appointed in more important Districts, but Collector Cooke was allowed to hire the occasional help he needed at \$2 a day. His brothers, William and John, frequently assisted him during his first years in office. John later became Edgartown Town Clerk. William died in 1817. Among others frequently employed

were John Clark and Obed Coffin, who took care of the Custom House boat, apparently a small sloop; William Mayhew, who measured vessels and inspected cargoes; William Athearn, who took manifests; Peter Pease, who inspected and unloaded cargoes; and William Kelley and William Worth, who sailed aboard suspicious vessels to their authorized destinations to prevent them from breaking cargo en route and smuggling goods ashore without payment of duties. In 1809, Kelley spent 15 days on the Swedish brig *Nord Starnan*; Worth sailed for two days on the British schooner *Sally* and another two on the Spanish barque *Misisipi*. Worth had the title of Inspector of Customs and was stationed at Holmes Hole.

From 1811 to 1822, the Collector kept his handwritten records in a bound volume now treasured in the Society Archives. On January 11, 1811, he wrote his Congressman complaining about his meager salary of \$150 a year. His commissions for 1810 had totalled a mere \$370, making his annual income only \$520, while Collectors in Barnstable and New Bedford were being paid between \$1000 and \$2000. This, he wrote, was unfair as there often were as many as 50 vessels in the harbors of Edgartown and Holmes Hole, a far greater number, he claimed, than in the other two ports. His smaller income was due to the fact that the vessels usually went to the mainland to unload and pay duty. His commissions came mainly from the smaller fees collected for entering and clearing vessels.

Collector Cooke's activities may not have been profitable to him, but nonetheless were many and varied; sometimes, as a consequence of the embargo, he served as a federal policeman, long before the days of the FBI. In the National Archives there is a financial accounting of a ship seizure by the Collector. On January 29, 1811, among the "fines, penalties and forfeitures remaining unadjusted in the Auditor's office" in Washington was listed the sum of \$148.42, which was the Federal share of the \$489 realized by the sale of the British sloop *Lively*, which Collector

⁶ Daniel L. Marsh, *The Story of Massachusetts*, The American Historical Society, N.Y., 1938, v.1, p.375. "The immediate effect . . . was the defeat of the Federalists."

⁷ Banks, v.1, pp.417 18.

⁸ "Pantes" are paints; "verdigreases" is green.

Cooke had seized for violation of the Embargo during the last quarter of 1810.

On another occasion, this one during the War of 1812, he held a midshipman and five seamen from one of His Majesty's brigs of war as prisoners at the Customs House. This may account for the set of manacles found in the dungeon-like cellar of the Cooke House.⁹ Other prisoners of war and miscreants, such as mutineers, were perhaps detained from time to time in the Cooke House cellar.

The history of the War of 1812 as it affected the Vineyard has not, as yet, been fully researched. Collector Cooke could have given an eyewitness account of enemy vessels in surrounding waters and of collaboration with the enemy on shore. He sent his bonds and other important Customs House papers to Boston for safekeeping. Congress had passed the first Trading with the Enemy Act in 1812 and had designated Customs to enforce it. This was no easy task on the Vineyard, remote as it was from any enforcement forces.

Even so, a number of foreign vessels were detained by Collector Cooke in Edgartown harbor during the war. When the war was winding down in New England in 1814, the masters of the vessels were impatient to get underway and Cooke wrote to Washington on January 13, asking if he could let them proceed to Newport and New Haven. The masters' impatience may have been due, in part, to the fact that January, then as now, is not the best of months to be sequestered on the Island.

Cooke took a great interest in the Indians on Chappaquiddick. He and Elijah Stewart were appointed "guardians to the people of color on said Island" and he tried to protect their rights when they were signed on as seamen on ocean-going vessels. On November 29, 1812, a native Indian of Edgartown entered the port on board the armed schooner *Roller*, a privateer belonging to a Baltimore merchant named Deshon.

⁹ Dimensions of the Cooke House cellar are almost identical with those of the Edgartown jail built in 1743: 24 by 12 by 7. It is conjecture, but the cellar may have been used as a jail.

The Indian had given Cooke power of attorney to collect his share of the prize money from the captain, James Dooley, who had signed up a number of Indians from Edgartown. The Collector warned the captain that any contracts he made with the Indians themselves would be illegal. All the men, except one old man, had given Cooke power of attorney and their wives were eager for him to collect the money before it disappeared. One of them, Hezekiah Joel, Cooke wrote, was "a man of no discretion. If he had \$10,000 he would spend it in one day."

In letters to prize agents in New York and Newport, he reminded them that any contracts drawn with the Indians were not valid because, under the laws of the Commonwealth, Indians were subject to guardianship.

This guardianship matter created problems that persisted even after the war as more shipowners and ship masters discovered how valuable were the services of the Vineyard Indians on board ship. One November 6, 1818, Cooke wrote to Nantucket's shipping agent, Paul Macy, asking for a statement of the account of George Johnson, a "man of color" from Chappaquiddick who had shipped aboard the ship *Francis* of Nantucket. On December 8, 1819, the mother of William Madison, "a minor under the age of 20 and a man of color on Chappaquiddick," came to Cooke to report that her son had been fleeced on board the ship *Governor*, Capt. Obed Fitch. On a voyage to the Pacific he had been told that the owner would buy his clothes. Instead he had been obliged to buy clothes from the ship's slop chest. Trousers, she said, for which he had to pay four dollars could have been bought in Nantucket for one dollar. During his term as Collector, Indian families increasingly turned to Cooke for protection from exploitation.

Two Deputy Inspectors

By 1817, shipping traffic into the District had increased enough so that the government authorized two deputy inspectors, full time. Appointed to one of the posts was

Henry Pease Worth to serve as Deputy at the busy port of Holmes Hole. He was the nephew of Capt. William Worth who had worked for Customs along Vineyard Sound from 1789 to 1814 on a daily basis but had never received a commission. Captain Worth and his family had left the Island in 1814. Nephew Henry was to serve as Deputy for 44 years, always reporting to the Customs Collector in Edgartown.

Also in 1817, Jeremiah Pease was named Deputy Collector. Like Henry Worth, he was well acquainted with the Customs operation, having worked for Collector Cooke for many years in various capacities. He was to remain in office until 1855, with only a few months interruption in 1827, serving under seven Collectors.¹⁰

Jeremiah Pease

Deputy Collector Jeremiah Pease was a remarkable man. Born April 8, 1792, son of Master Mariner Noah Pease, he had many skills, but never went to sea. During his lifetime he served as a salt maker, surveyor, appraiser, lighthouse keeper, shoemaker, bonesetter, evangelist, farmer and, above all, chronicler of Edgartown news. His diary, which has been published in installments in this journal, covers the period from 1819, two years after he became "occasional inspector," until his death in 1857, with only a few interruptions.¹¹

He was Collector Cooke's right-hand man from his early twenties, helping him get in his hay, working at his saltworks, repairing his buildings. When commissioned as Deputy Inspector in 1817, he surely became the busiest man on the Edgartown waterfront. Almost every day, he boarded at least one vessel to inspect it for the Collector — sometimes there were two or three to be examined.

¹⁰ There is confusion over the dates and titles of Jeremiah's service. His diaries, right from 1819, have him working for Customs, but he gives no title until May 22, 1827: "This day I received a Commission, 'Inspector of the Customs for the District of Edgartown' and surrendered my old Commission as an occasional Inspector." He never calls himself Deputy Inspector, yet Customs records show him to have been one.

¹¹ In our next issue we hope to begin publishing the previously missing Pease diary (1823 to 1829).

He traveled to Falmouth, New Bedford and Boston on Customs business frequently and to all parts of the District of Edgartown to report on the numerous wrecks.

Deputy Pease also arrested smugglers and put down mutinies on board vessels in Edgartown waters. On one occasion he had to assist the Sheriff in taking seven men ashore from the ships *Boston* and *Thomas* of Nantucket and committing them to prison. Presumably this was the Edgartown prison near the Court House as the Sheriff was involved. Less dangerous miscreants could have been detained in the Cooke House cellar for trial by Squire Cooke, who, it is said, often administered the law at his home, as Justice of the Court of Common Pleas.

In 1827, when President John Quincy Adams issued a proclamation prohibiting foreign vessels from anchoring within three miles of the coast without prior notification, Jeremiah Pease seized the British ship *Caledonia* at anchor off Edgartown. Captain Atkinson claimed she had just stopped to pick up a pilot, but the Deputy Collector brought the ship into the harbor and tied her up to a wharf. She was on her way from the island of Tobago to St. Andrews, Canada, and had been seen loitering in Tarpaulin Cove for several days.

Captain Atkinson and the crew were furious over the seizure. A fracas developed when Collector Thomas Cooke came down to the wharf and boarded the ship to remove her British colors. The chief mate threatened his life and drove him off the vessel. The Collector reported the incident to Secretary of the Treasury Richard Rush:

Pursuant to the President's proclamation of March 17, 1827, I made seizure of this vessel. . . The ship was well manned and well found in all respects. . . I view it to be my duty to inform you that on securing this ship I met with great opposition and much abusive language from the crew at the instigation of the chief mate. While in the act of making fast to the wharf, they took possession of her and threatened my life with an uplifted deadly weapon — however through

persuasion (for I had not sufficient force at that time to compel) I prevailed on them to submit to the law.

The Collector went on to deplore the lack of respect on the part of the British for the "constituted authorities" at the Vineyard, who were in an "insular position." He suggested that the armed Revenue Cutter *Vigilant* be ordered to make more frequent appearances in his District, particularly in Tarpaulin Cove. The Vineyard was in a vulnerable position; the *Vigilant* did not often patrol beyond Cuttyhunk, while the cutter from Boston never went beyond Nantucket.

Captain Atkinson was allowed to go to Boston to plead his case. Collector Cooke, ill with a cold that had settled in his lungs, sent his son William to represent him, hoping that the case would be settled in his favor "out of respect to the laws of my Country and the dignity of the Officers of the Customs." It was not to be. Captain Atkinson was exonerated and *Caledonia* was released by order of the Comptroller of the Treasury. On April 3, she sailed for St. Andrews while Collector Cooke fumed over his difficulties in "making seizure under these imbecile non-intercourse laws."

During the period *Caledonia* was being held at Edgartown, Jeremiah Pease was ordered to Chilmark to report on the case of the British schooner *Union* which had struck the beach at Chilmark and scattered 250 bushels of salt, 19 cases of gin, 14 boxes of honey, 19 boxes of cigars and a bag of coffee on the sand. Having broken the President's proclamation by invading the three-mile limit without prior notification, *Union* was seized.

Nineteen Chilmark men helped to salvage the cargo. Collector Cooke advised that what was left of it be sold, that the salvors be paid out of the proceeds and any surplus money be turned over to the Treasury Department. Deputy Pease had taken some money from the ship's captain, but Collector Cooke insisted on returning it since it was not a part of the cargo. The case was finally settled by

compromise after the vessel broke up on the beach, leaving the sea a little saltier and many Chilmark homes stocked with gin, honey, cigars and coffee.

Golden Age of Whaling

After the lull in shipping that had marked the first years of Collector Cooke's 21 years in office, he was to take part in the beginning of what has come to be called "the golden age of whaling."

In 1816, seven years after he took office, two whalers left the Vineyard as the wartime restrictions ended: the schooner *Harmony*, Captain Chase, from Holmes Hole; and the ship *Apollo*, Captain Daggett, from Edgartown. The first went whaling off the Cape de Verdes in the Atlantic; the second headed for the Pacific. The *Harmony* returned December 31, 1816, with 250 barrels of sperm oil; the *Apollo* late in 1817 with more than 1100 barrels of sperm.¹²

From that year onward, whalers were familiar sights in the two harbors of the Vineyard. Among the Vineyard owned whalers, *Apollo* was one of the most active, her voyages usually being two or three years' duration, and returning with about 1250 barrels of sperm each trip. She was soon joined by the Edgartown whaler, *Loan*, which continued whaling until 1838, when she was lost at sea at Talciano after sending home 900 barrels of sperm. From 1816 to the end of Collector Cooke's term of office, the Vineyard fleet included the three whalers mentioned, plus the *Hope*, *Planter*, *Palmer*, *Almira*, *John*, *President*, *Rising Sun*, *Gleaner*, *Meridan* and *Mary Ann*.

The ship *John* joined the Vineyard fleet in 1821 after a campaign undertaken by the Collector's son William and Jeremiah Pease to raise funds to purchase a new South Pacific whale ship. On August 29, 1820, Jeremiah wrote in his diary:

This day Mr. William Cooke and myself take a subscription

¹² These were not the first whaling voyages from the Vineyard. That distinction goes to Capt. Joseph Chase in the sloop *Diamond* in 1738 (Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery*, Waltham, Mass., 1878, p.170). Data on the 1816 voyages also from Starbuck.

paper for the purpose of purchasing a ship for the South Sea whale fishery and obtained \$7000.00 in part of the afternoon.

The subscription was sold out by October and the *John*, purchased in Connecticut, arrived in Edgartown Christmas Day 1820. She set sail for the Pacific on March 20, 1821. Jeremiah recorded the event in his diary:

Ship *John*, Capt. Clement Norton, sails for the Pacific ocean. My brother-in-law Jonathan Worth goes in her. She is a fine ship and well fitted for the voyage and may the blessing of the almighty God be with them.

In 1815, Edgartown was home port, according to customs records, of about 900 tons of registered vessels, many in whaling, compared to Nantucket's 14,700 tons. Yet Edgartown exports and imports totalled \$9000, compared to Nantucket's \$6000.¹³ While whaling products accounted for most of this total, there were other vessels from Europe listed as bringing in iron, steel, glass and bristles from Gothenburg, cheese, nutmegs, books, watches and ammunition from London, as well as passengers with their trunks and bedding. From 1816 onward, there often were as many as 50 vessels in Edgartown harbor, ranging from full-rigged ships over 300 tons and 100 feet in length to tiny sloops like the single-masted pilot boats and Deputy Pease's revenue boat.

Vineyard vessels did not often leave empty. Wool, bricks, salt, candles and fish were regular exports. Nantucket imported cobblestones from the Vineyard for her streets, and in 1813, Capt. Thomas Milton, whose home was his sloop *Five Sisters*, hauled 1700 bushels of ashes to Sag Harbor, Long Island, presumably for the manufacture of soap.

The Four Lighthouses

The nation's lighthouses were the responsibility of the Secretary of the Treasury during this period and the various Customs Collectors provided the supervision. It was a logical

¹³ This was due to the fact that Nantucket vessels unloaded their oil at places like New Bedford, rather than their home port, a day's sail from the market.

arrangement because the Customs Offices were at the nation's major ports and they did oversee the arrival and departure of shipping. The Edgartown Collector was responsible for lights at Cuttyhunk, Tarpaulin Cove, Nobska Point and Nantucket, as well as the four lighthouses on the Vineyard. Those four lights were Gay Head, established in 1799, Cape Poge Light, established in 1801, Tarpaulin Cove Light in 1818 and Edgartown Harbor Light in 1828. It was the Collector's responsibility to see that they were supplied with oil and to assist in providing repair and maintenance where necessary. He also was expected to inspect them regularly. Other aids to navigation, such as buoys and, some years later, lightships, came under his responsibility.

When the lighthouse at the entrance to Edgartown's inner harbor was built on a manmade island, Deputy Collector Jeremiah Pease was appointed its first Keeper on October 10, 1828. He was, as the law required, ordered to live in the house and maintain the light.¹⁴ It was lighted for the first time on the night of October 15. Jeremiah's diary recorded the event:

Oct. 15. W.N.W. Received the Oil, etc., for the lighthouse from Sloop *Henry* of New Bedford, Cap. [John] Akin, lighted the lamps for the first time.

On the 21st, he recorded another milestone:

Oct. 21. N.N.W. This day 5 of our most approved Pilots are engaged in taking the bairing (*sic*) of the Lights and ascertaining Sailing Directions for this Harbour. Sent a Copy to Genl. H.A.S. Dearborn, superintendant for Lighthouses, Boston.

Collector Thomas Cooke served for 21 years, through four Presidents: Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and John Quincy Adams. These 21 years were years of great growth and activity in the nation. There was the unpopular War of 1812, the start of the Western migration, where land was

¹⁴ Jeremiah's diary does not indicate that he ever lived in the lighthouse, although that was the regulation. Some years after this he built a house on North Water Street from which he could see the lighthouse. Where he was living during his first years as Keeper is unclear.

sold for \$1.25 an acre, the beginning of the United States Navy and its victory over the Barbary pirates. New England textile mills burgeoned with the 1816 tariff on imported wool and cotton. Florida was purchased from Spain in 1819, three new states joined the Union. A standing army of 10,000 men was created. Gradually, the issue of slavery began to rear its ugly head. As for the maritime business, a new-fangled boat that ignored the wind steamed up the Hudson. It was during Cooke's years in office that the first steamships were seen huffing and puffing through Vineyard and Nantucket Sounds, signalling the beginning of the end of the age of sail.

During his years of service, Collector Cooke became one of Edgartown's most prominent citizens. He represented Dukes County in 1820 at the convention at which the Massachusetts Constitution was amended. When the state ordered that a meeting house and school be built for the Indians on Chappaquiddick, it was the Collector and Deputy Pease who "went to Chappaquiddick . . . for the purpose of laying out the ground for a meeting and school house for the Indians."

As Collector he was charged with registering, enrolling or licensing vessels when they were built or changed ownership. He seems to have registered about one vessel a year for foreign trade, mainly large schooners, ships, barques or brigs. Other schooners and sloops were enrolled in coastwise trade or licensed for fishing.

It was also the responsibility of the Collector to provide medical attention to any mariner needing it. Since the Vineyard, in those years, had no marine hospital, he was obliged to provide board for sick or injured mariners in Island homes and engage the services of a physician. Small-pox victims were, however, not permitted to leave their vessels. There was great concern in 1816 when one such patient was brought ashore, fostering an investigation. Collector Cooke and two other men were named to find

out from which vessel he had come, the name of the master and the port from which they had sailed.¹⁵

Another responsibility of the Collector was passenger safety. Only two passengers were allowed for each five tons of vessel and adequate food and water had to be on board.

With the election of Democrat Andrew Jackson as President in 1828, there was a change in political parties in Washington and the Spoils System was born. When Collector Cooke, a supporter of John Quincy Adams, National Republican, for reelection, saw the handwriting on the wall, he rounded up his friends and associates of both parties to petition "Old Hickory" for his continuance in office. When he approached his deputy, Jeremiah Pease, that Jacksonian Democrat refused to endorse him. One can only conjecture why. Cooke promptly fired Pease, who, in his diary December 31, 1829, wrote:

This day I have surrendered the Commn. mentioned below agreeable to request of T. Cooke Esq., the only accusation bro't by him against me was that I did not sign his Remonstrance or Recommendation.¹⁶

Cooke's petition to the new President was to no avail and on February 20, 1830, he was relieved of his duties. The new Collector for Edgartown was John Presbury Norton from Lambert's Cove. A few days after the appointment was made, Jeremiah met with Mr. Norton "on business." On March 8, 1830, Jeremiah wrote in his journal:

Received a Commission as Inspector of the Customs, from J. P. Norton, Esqr. Engaged with Esqr. Norton. Took charge of the Revenue Boat, etc.

¹⁵There was at least one small-pox patient quarantined in the Edgartown Lighthouse, according to the Pease diary. Others were kept at Cape Poge, where a small-pox "hospital" was operated. There is confusion about the first marine hospital. It was located in Eastville near today's Martha's Vineyard Hospital, overlooking the Lagoon. The state appropriated funds for it in 1798, but it is unclear exactly when it was built. Later, a larger hospital was built at the head of Holmes Hole harbor (Banks, v.II, pp.62-3, *Annals of Tisbury*).

¹⁶We don't know what Jeremiah was referring to with "the only accusation bro't by him against me . . ." but Cooke may have asked him to sign a letter recommending that, despite his politics, the Collector should be kept in office. Jeremiah's party was in power and he may have been hoping to get the appointment himself.

Each day during his first week under Norton, from March 10 until March 16, Jeremiah recorded that he was "engaged in writing at the Custom House," the first time such a term appears in his diary. He even underlined the words "Custom House" boldly. Whether this meant that, for the first time, an office outside the Collector's home was used, we cannot tell. Collector Norton did not own a house in Edgartown at the time of his appointment so perhaps the Custom House was set up in a store or some other separate building from 1830 until 1832 when Norton rented a house on North Water Street and moved his family to Edgartown. He bought the house two years later and it then served as the customs office.

When Norton took office both he and his deputy became the target of the ex-Collector's fury. When the new Collector asked for the Custom House records, Cooke Jr., refused to turn them over without being paid for them until he was reminded by the Secretary of the Treasury that they were the property of the United States of America.

For several years he spied on the activities of Norton and Pease, even engaging an accomplice, Francis Addlington (born Zadoc Norton), to write letters of complaint to the Boston Collector and the Secretary of the Treasury. He vowed he would "pursue" Pease through life, and was said by the new Collector to have declared "a war of extermination against all the officers of the government."

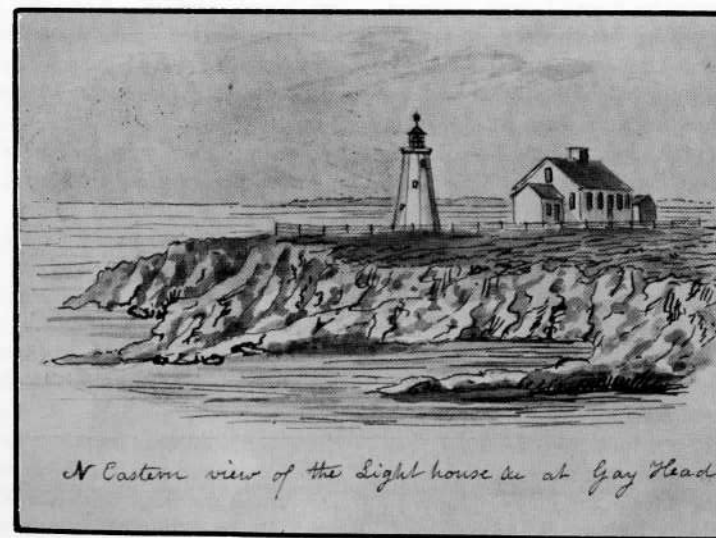
His dismissal from office, and perhaps Jeremiah Pease's "disloyalty," seem to have preyed on Cooke's mind and may have been responsible for the mental illness that clouded the last months of his life. On October 18, 1852, he was declared "an insane person" and a "distracted person incapable of taking care of himself." Justice of the Peace Joseph Thaxter Pease, eldest son of Jeremiah, was appointed his legal guardian and an appraisal of his estate was made by Deputy Collector Pease. The homestead was valued at \$1200. Two lots, one in front of the house and one southwest

of it, were appraised at \$500 and \$800. Another lot, next to the schoolhouse, was appraised at \$450 and two pews in the meeting house were valued at \$100 and \$75. The contents of the house, including an extensive library, four beds and bedding, 33 silver spoons, two stoves, a writing desk and a carpet, totalled \$232.50. The entire estate was valued at \$3125.

Two months later, when Thomas Cooke Jr., died, he left the entire estate "to his beloved wife, Elisabeth," during her natural life, after which it was to be divided among his four daughters, two sons and grandchildren. To his grandson, George Thomas Bailey,¹⁷ he left his spyglass and those books in his library he had not already bequeathed to his daughter Maria Swift.

(To be continued)

¹⁷ Although our genealogical data on later generations of the Cooke family are fragmentary, it appears that George Thomas Bailey, son of Thomas's daughter Julianna, was his only male grandchild. The Bailey family moved to Lawrence, Mass., a few years later.



Barber drawing, c.1837, of the first Gay Head Light, built 1799, clearly misrepresents height of the cliffs.

News of the Society

THE merger with the Tisbury Museum completed, our summer challenge has been to operate at two sites, a new experience. Thanks to a fine staff, it has gone very well. Open House was held on Sunday, June 12, at both the Jirah Luce House in Vineyard Haven and the Thomas Cooke House in Edgartown. Jirah Luce, by the way, was the builder of the structure occupied by the Tisbury Museum and known as the Ritter House, now owned by the Society. Both events were well attended and provided a good start for the season.

Dianne Louard, a graduate student in the Columbia University Historic Preservation Program, has been guide in charge at the Jirah Luce House. She is assisted by Karen Georgi, a recent graduate in art history from St. Lawrence University, and a loyal group of volunteers, without whom we couldn't function. They include Miss Shirley Adams, Mrs. A.A. Burke, Edmund Dandridge, Mrs. Theodore Dreier Jr., Mrs. Harry Ekberg, Mrs. John Gibbons, Mrs. Martha and Miss Barbara Kudravetz, Douglas Stewart, Mrs. Bert Winter and Mrs. Robert Williams. Trevor Good, a student at the South Kent School in Connecticut, has helped in a variety of ways and without Nancy Weaver the garden would never have been weeded in time for the opening.

Returning to the Cooke House as guides this summer are Mrs. Donald Berube, Mrs. Hilda Gilluly and Andrew Thomas. They have been joined by Dianne Ficcaro, a June

graduate in anthropology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. Volunteers in the Cooke House have been Neil Barker, Robert Farwell, Mrs. Gibbons, Mrs. Donald Hill, Mrs. Tanya Kaye and Mrs. Priscilla Summers. Gate house attendants include Mrs. Albion Hart, Mr. Dandridge, Mrs. Douglas Dorchester, Mrs. Robert Farwell and Mrs. Winston May. Without the assistance of these volunteers, we could not operate on our present summer schedule. For making it possible, they have earned our very special thanks. We are also grateful to Mrs. Nathaniel Bacon and Mrs. Ronald Silva for providing arrangements of dried flowers for the houses. Our two lighthouse keepers, Anthony and Kathryn Bettencourt, have been operating the Fresnel lens each Sunday at dusk. Its jewel-like quality is brighter than ever thanks to the lens polishing by Eleanor Olsen, our lens caretaker.

Ann Coleman Allen replaced Alvin J. Goldwyn as Librarian just as our busiest time of year began. The speed with which she has mastered our files and the wide variety of materials we have has impressed patrons and staff alike. A newly created position of Superintendent of Buildings was filled in the middle of July by Victor Haeselbarth. Already there is evidence of his expertise and hands-on work throughout the Edgartown site. Both are welcome additions to our year-round staff.

Very welcome, too, are the contributions of our library volunteers,

Mrs. Stanley Abelson, Miss Ruth Hyatt and Mrs. Arthur W. Young Jr. We also continue to enjoy the good fortune of having Catherine Mayhew and Dorothea Looney faithfully volunteering their talents as Genealogist and Registrar. Both spend countless hours organizing and updating our records as well as serving an ever growing number of researchers.

Two special events are scheduled for the summer under Catherine Chamberlain, Events Chairman. On July 18, members and guests were invited to tour two historic houses in North Tisbury as the first in a series of benefit events. Sydna White served as chairman, with Dionis Riggs honorary chairman. We are grateful to Benjamin Clark for his generosity in making the two properties available and to the many committee members who helped.

On August 10, the Society will sponsor a slide talk by Alfred Eisenstaedt, a much-anticipated annual event. This year's show will include over 80 photographs of the Vineyard through the years, many of which have never before been shown to the public.

Our Annual Meeting is scheduled

for August 22, with a rain date of August 23. As in the past few years, it will be held on the Society's Edgartown grounds under a canopy on the lawn. The speaker at the meeting will be Ann Beha. During the spring and summer, she headed a team of historic preservationists who examined the Luce and Cooke Houses for evidence of alterations, original paint schemes and present structural condition. With their findings, we anticipate beginning a restoration program in the fall. Members will not only learn about the study, but will have a chance to question Mrs. Beha about the historic information revealed by the two houses.

Special summer exhibitions have been arranged at the Luce and Cooke Houses and the library is open for historic and genealogical research. Guest tickets mailed to members may be used at either house for guided tours. Members themselves, of course, need no tickets. We hope you will visit both sites before September 10, when they will close for the season.

MARIAN R. HALPERIN
Director

Where there's a Will, there's a Way . . .

to help preserve and publish
Dukes County history.
When drafting your will, won't
you please remember to include
the Dukes County Historical
Society among your bequests.

Bits & Pieces

BOSTON Hill, Chilmark, was remote and treeless in 1919 when Tom and Rita Benton first saw it. Today, it is tree covered, the ponds and ocean are hard to see. But back then, the sea was part of the landscape. You knew you were on an island.

The houses, even those used year round, had no electricity, no running water. Privies were standard. The camps, like the one Rita rented, were primitive. For big city folk, living in one was an adventure. The two Toms, Craven and Benton, stayed in Mrs. Brug's barn. Water was fetched from a "boiling spring," a short walk across the field. When Tom bought land on Boston Hill later, each deed mentions the right to draw water from the "boiling spring."

Ella Mosher, later Mrs. Brug, was born in Chilmark, her mother was Harriet Cottle. Ella's first marriage, to a Poole (a downIsland Poole, it is emphasized), ended in divorce at a time, the early 1900s, when divorce was not socially acceptable, especially in Chilmark. She became housekeeper for a widower, Dr. George Alan Brug in Providence, R.I. Some time later, they married. After he died in 1911, she returned to Chilmark and began renting camps and rooms each summer to augment her income. A generous, outgoing person, she and Tom Benton hit it off right from the start and Tom was quickly accepted into the Boston Hill "family."

Later, Gale and Mildred Huntington also joined that Boston Hill "family." They had just been married and, after living in a rented house on the hill for

a while, they bought the Polander's house on Rumpus Ridge (another name for Boston Hill). A previous owner was a Polish fisherman and the name had stuck.

Gale was struggling to support his family by farming and fishing. Mil was working for the town of Chilmark as bookkeeper. Behind the house, Gale tended a huge garden of flowers and vegetables which he sold to inns and stores. A folk singer, guitarist and fiddler (he never admits to being a violinist), he soon teamed up with Tom Benton, who loved country music,

Tom had an idea for a painting to be called "The Music Lesson," and asked Gale and Emily, his daughter, to pose for it. So each morning, after tending the garden, Gale would take Emily up to Tom's house for a sitting.

The sittings were not long — less than an hour each. Emily was only 7 years old and her pose was uncomfortable. Tom made it easier by paying her one cent a minute. Gale posed for nothing, purely out of friendship. Anyway, Tom never offered to pay him.

Emily hated the posing, but loved the money. When the painting was finished, she had enough to buy a bicycle (it was not all model fees, some came from picking blueberries). Riding the brand new cycle down Boston Hill, she met Tom's son, T.P., and their dog, Jake. Emily had a crush on T.P. and to impress him she began riding no hands. Jake ran in front of the bike, there was a collision and Emily went over the handlebars, breaking her front teeth.

That's what Benton's "The Music Lesson" reminds her of.

A.R.R.

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