

# **The Remarkable Brick Barns of Martha's Vineyard**



**BY  
PETER COLT JOSEPHS**

*F. C. Joseph*

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OF  
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by  
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by  
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by  
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and  
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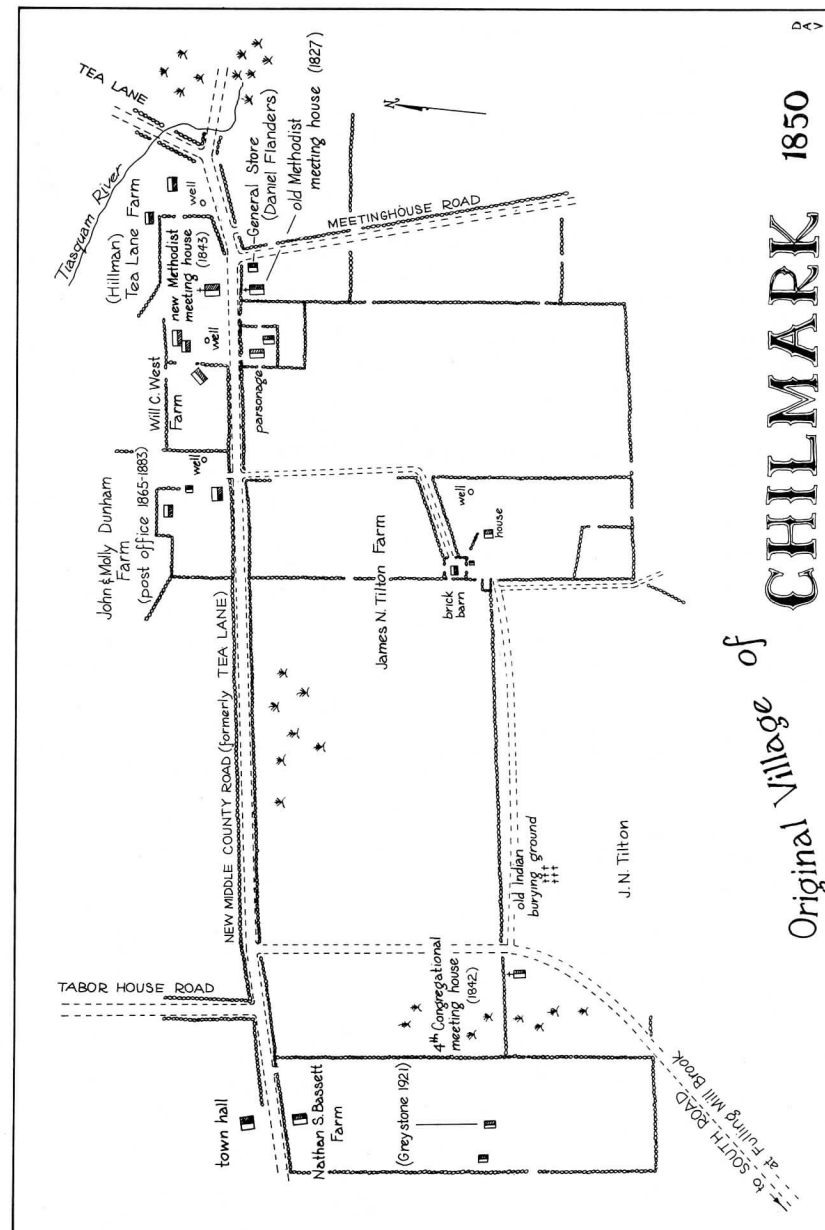
The writer would like to take this opportunity to express his gratitude to all the people who made this paper possible by cheerfully responding to his requests for information. In particular there are a few who went out of their way to provide help or who merit special thanks:

Hollis Smith, surveyor and authority on the Registry of Deeds records; Joseph Chase Allen, writer and Island historian; Cyril D. Norton, teacher and Island historian; Mrs. David Epstein, environmentalist; Sydney P. Harris, farmer; Walter G. Jenkinson, Sr.,\* farmer, coasting captain, and jack-of-all-trades and Mrs. Jenkinson; Roswell C. Josephs,\* teacher, and summer architect, and Mrs. Josephs; Alpheus P. Tilton, builder, Robert Tilton, lobsterman; Ernest Correllus, Jr., farmer; Mrs. Anne W. Luedeman, title searcher; George M. Horn, linguist; and E. Gale Huntington, teacher, Island historian, and Acting Editor, The Dukes County Intelligencer, in the May 1974 issue of which most of this material first appeared, and whose editorial assistance was invaluable.

\*Deceased

Brick Barn  
Chilmark  
July 1974

Original Village  
of  
**CHILMARK**  
1850



To the memory of my father

## INTRODUCTION

Surrounded by mystery and conjecture for years these stunning structures are at last yielding up their secrets to the determined efforts of this writer.

It was the year 1852 and the brickyard near the mouth of the Roaring Brook on the north shore of the Vineyard was operating full tilt. The brick works was the largest business enterprise in the town of Chilmark, and one of the largest on the entire Island. Twelve men, and at times more than twice that number, worked in the yard that was dominated by the tall square chimney - firing the kiln, pressing the brick, stacking the brick in the drying sheds, tending the sluiceway and the other machinery, and digging the clay from the nearby pits. For some reason the great overshot waterwheel was never hooked up.



Photograph courtesy of Flora Harris Epstein.  
The brickyard at the Roaring Brook, Chilmark, about 1860 looking northeast across Vineyard Sound. Originally the wharf was longer.

Schooners from New Bedford, Providence, Boston and ports all up and down the coast stood in to the brickyard to tie up at its long wharf and take on cargoes of building brick and fire brick.



Dr. Charles E. Banks in his three volume *The History Of Martha's Vineyard*, says that the first brick factory was established at the Roaring Brook by Messrs Smith and Barrows. It had an annual output of 600,000 bricks with a value of some \$2,400.00. <sup>(1)</sup>

The Smith and Barrows Company operated the brickyard from 1836 to 1864. The Boston Fire Brick and Clay Retort Manufacturing Co. took over the works in July of 1866 and then sold to Nathaniel Harris in January 1867. <sup>(2)</sup>

Nathaniel Harris arrived on the Island at the end of the Civil War. He continued to operate the brickyard until some time in the 1870's when the supply of cordwood to fuel the kiln began to give out, and the yards had to be abandoned, although the supply of fine quality clay was as great as ever. The Boston Fire Brick Company shifted its operations to Gay Head and dug and exported clay from there until into the early years of this century. It is possible that small quantities of brick had been produced near the Roaring Brook site since the late 1700's.

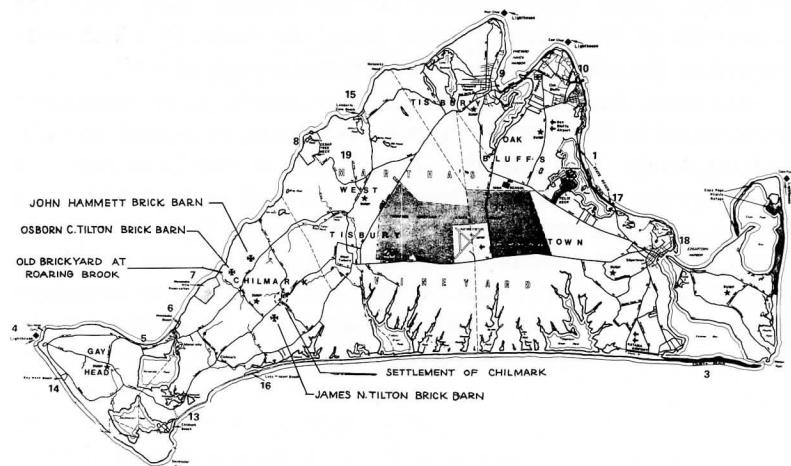
The Harris family still owns the site of the brickyard and the farm where one of the brick barns once stood. There is a tradition in the Harris family that about 1852 the brickyard produced a huge batch of bad brick which were given gratis to any who would come and cart them away. And that is how the three brick barns of Martha's Vineyard, all of them in Chilmark, came to be built.

The aged and distinguished author and writer for the *Vineyard Gazette* Joseph Chase Allen thinks that that tradition is probably untrue. Rather, he says, the mechanics of brickmaking of that day made it inevitable that only a third or so of each batch of brick would be perfect and hence saleable at top dollar. The perfect hard, red-fired bricks were produced at the center of each batch. The outer third of the hatch would be underbaked and soft with an orange-pinkish hue. These were called salmon bricks. The inner third, closest to the fire, would often be overbaked and would bulge and warp and often be almost black. These were known as swelled bricks.

The salmon brick would be sold at a fraction of the price of the

perfect brick and was used for inside walls and chimneys where there was no exposure to the weather. There was no market for the swelled brick. Thus each year saw several hundred thousand reject bricks produced which would accumulate in huge heaps about the brick works.

Apparently between the years 1852 and 1859 three quick-witted up-Island farmer-fishermen got for nothing, or for very little, enough reject bricks to build the three remarkable brick barns. The three Chilmark men were Osborn Charles Tilton who built his barn on a high hill back from and above the brickyard; John Hammett who erected his about a half mile away on a line to the east of Osborn Tilton's; and James Norton Tilton who constructed his brick barn about a mile to the southeast on a high hill south of the Middle Road. This section of the Middle Road was once an extension of Tea Lane.



This third barn was on a site that overlooked the sea and south side of the Island in one direction and what was then the village of Chilmark in the opposite direction. In those days when the trinity of human population, sheep by the thousands, and the brickyards

(1) Banks, *History*. . . Vol. II, Annals of Chilmark, p. 69.

(2) Smith & Barrows. To Wm. F. Durgin, April, 1864; To James Edmund, July, 1864; To Boston Fire Brick and Clay Retort Manufacturing Co., July, 1866; To Nathaniel Harris, January, 1867.

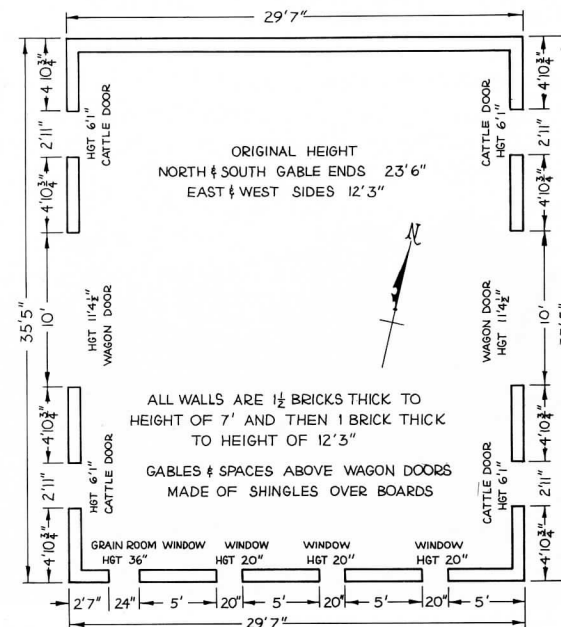
had denuded the Island of its primeval pygmy forests all three brick barns were in sight of one another.

The three barns had many similarities. All were apparently of the same height. That is, they were 23' 6" on the gable ends from fieldstone foundation to peak, and 12' 3" high on the sides. They were almost square. The arched cattle doorways were all about 6' 1" high and 2' 11" wide. The walls were a brick and a half thick to a height of 6' on the gable ends and 7' on the sides. The exception was the south wall of the James N. Tilton barn which was only one brick thick.

All the walls were one brick thick above those heights. Every seventh row of bricks on the outside walls was butted flat, lengthwise. Above the arched doorways the bricks were butted on their sides lengthwise. Above the windows on the interior the bricks were butted flat lengthwise. Lime mortar was used, made in part from crushed seashells. Iron straps were used at random as cross-ties. All the barn doors slid open and shut on iron tracks mounted above the archways on the interior walls with the exception of the John Hammett barn, the doors of which were hinged to the exterior walls. The roofs had a pitch of 6.5".

Animals and land represented a man's most important possessions in those days - his very livelihood, so a great pride of craftsmanship went into the construction of the barns just as it had into the farmhouses. Oxen and cart and perhaps horse and wagon, too, had worked for weeks and months to haul the bricks from the Roaring Brook to the barn sites. And in every case it was a hard up-hill climb much of the way. There must have been cooperation by the three farmer-fishermen in the building of the barns. And perhaps it took years to build each one.

The Osborn C. Tilton barn was built to the north of the just completed North Road and measured 29' 7" on the north and south gable ends by 35' 5" on the east and west sides. According to Mrs. David Epstein (Flora Harris) of Watertown and Chilmark this barn was brick only up to the eaves. The peaks like the roofs



ALL WINDOW OPENING HEIGHTS ARE 40" ABOVE FOUNDATION  
ALL DIMENSIONS EXCEPT OVERALL LENGTHS ARE ESTIMATES

OSBORN C. TILTON  
brick barn  
1852 (?)

D  
A  
V

were wood which were beamed with ship timbers probably picked up alongshore. At any rate the building was top-heavy because the timbers were so huge.



Photograph courtesy of Flora Harris Epstein.  
The Sydney P. Harris farm and 17th century farmhouse in 1932 when the old Osborn C. Tilton brick barn was still standing. The view shows the south gable end and east side of the barn.

There were large barn doors on the east and west sides reaching to the eaves. The small cattle door was on the west side to the left of the large door. There had been other doors which had been either bricked up or sealed. There was a sheep shed attached to the east side of the barn. This barn collapsed and was totally demolished in the 1944 hurricane which did terrific damage on the Island. Only the mansard roofed half-excavated foundation site remains today. It serves as a shelter for Sydney (Preston) Harris's cattle.

Mrs. Sydney Harris, a widow, and the mother of Flora and Preston apparently was alone on the place that night when the hurricane hit. When she got up the next morning there was nothing but a pile of bricks where the barn had been. The roof had been pushed down into the barn knocking out the walls. Two half-inch steel rods running the length of the building at eave level,

put there after the 1938 hurricane in an attempt to better tie the barn together, had snapped.

Many of the bricks from this hurricane-demolished barn were salvaged and cleaned and are now the brick floor of the R. C. Josephs brick barnhouse which was formerly the J. N. Tilton brick barn.

Osborn C. Tilton (1814-1888) bought what had been the Daniel Jones farm and what was to become the Nathaniel Harris farm in the spring of 1852 when he was thirty-eight years old.<sup>(3)</sup> He must have built his brick barn soon after that. He sold the place in 1864 along with seventy-five acres. Among the animals listed in 1861 were twenty sheep.

The John Hammett brick barn was also on the north side of the new North Road. John Hammett was Joe Allen's maternal great grandfather. John Hammett's nephew Humphrey Hammett, (1828 or 1835 - 1912) Joe Allen's grandfather, was twenty-four years old when the barn was built. That was either in 1852 according to his marriage record, or in 1859 by his death record.

This barn measured 32' 7" on the north and south gable ends and 35' 4" on the east and west sides. This barn



Ruin of the old John Hammett brick barn, 1974. The view shows the new south side and the new east gable end.

(3) Daniel Jones to Osborn C. Tilton, March 1852; to James Edmund, July 1864; to the Boston Fire Brick and Clay Retort Manufacturing Co., July, 1866; to Nathaniel Harris, January, 1867.

had the same flat arch construction as the other barns with no keystone, which is the weakest form of arch. There are four small windows and four cattle doorways as well as three large to huge wagon doorways on the east and west sides. All the wagon doorways are arched which is the most unusual feature of this barn. The largest wagon doorway measures 11' 2" high by 10' 8" wide. As with the Osborn C. Tilton barn there is a half-excavated foundation which was open to animals on the south.

Attached to the barn on the east, a 100' by 40' barnyard once boasted a carriage house, corn crib and sheds for the oxen. To the east and connected with the barnyard an elaborately walled square once contained a brick hen house, two privies, a well, and some giant boxwoods, and the surviving four chimneyed 18th century house with a long kitchen ell. The house is actually quite similar to the 17th century Osborn C. Tilton house which had been moved some time in the past from Nomans Land and, according to tradition, to its present location on the Harris estate. The Tilton house sat to the west of the barn. The Hammett farmhouse has long been abandoned, but a good roof has kept it from complete destruction.

An interesting architectural feature of the Hammett brick barn is the brick-and-a-half columns that rise from loft level to roof on either side of the large central wagon archways on the east and west sides.

Like the other two brick barns, this one also developed large cracks as the fieldstone foundation settled. Also all the bad brick did not help.

George Manter and his wife Daisy inherited the farm in exchange for moving in and caring for Humphrey W. Hammett and his wife Mary O. for the last years of their lives. George Manter was Joe Allen's uncle. In an attempt to do something about the cracks that had developed in the walls, George and Humphrey tried drilling holes through the walls at the corners in order to tie the barn together across the corners with mammoth six-foot-long nuts and bolts. But this proved counter-productive. They then cut down two huge white oaks and tried to shore up the south gable end by placing the butt ends of the oaks against the bulging wall. They thought they had the problem solved, but then the great gale of September 1904 struck the Island with fury. The storm

had an eye and surely must have been a hurricane. At any rate, the gables and the top six feet of both sidewalls fell. And the roof, rafters and all, was lifted off intact. One section of roof came crashing down in the barnyard. The other half of the roof was never found! Perhaps it was blown out to sea.



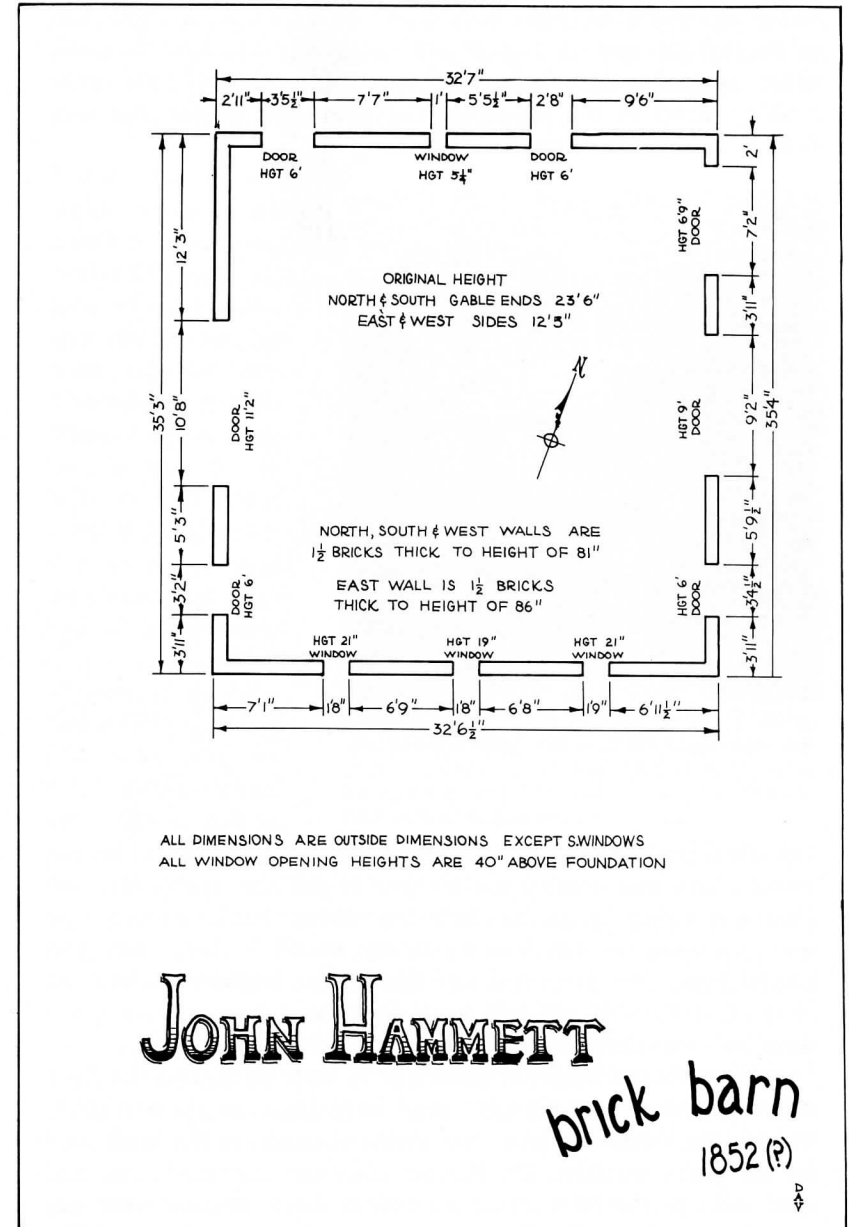
This view shows the new west gable end and new south side of the old John Hammett brick barn, 1974.

George and Humphrey then proceeded to brick up new shallow gables on the east and west sides and reroofed the barn with the ridgepole going at right angles to the way it had gone before the storm. That is what gives the barn the squat, eerie appearance it has today.

John Hammett (1800 - 1891) had bought the old Daniel Tilton farm in May of 1835 and

lived on it until 1891 when he died at the age of ninety. During his lifetime and then during the lifetime of his son Humphrey, and after that during George Manter's stewardship the place was one of the very finest of the Island's farms. In 1861 there were one hundred and sixty-four sheep on the place. At that time, because of the Civil War the price of wool was sky high. But as the years went by Vineyard farming underwent a steady decline.

In the spring of 1913 Dr. Charles R. L. Putnam bought the great farm with its most remarkable brick barn from George and Daisy Manter. Dr. Putnam kept a large stable of ponies in the brick barn for his many children. Dr. Putnam also had the south, east and west walls of the barn concreted over to hold together what was left of them. When Dr. Putnam's widow died she willed the huge estate to the Harvard University Medical School a few years ago.





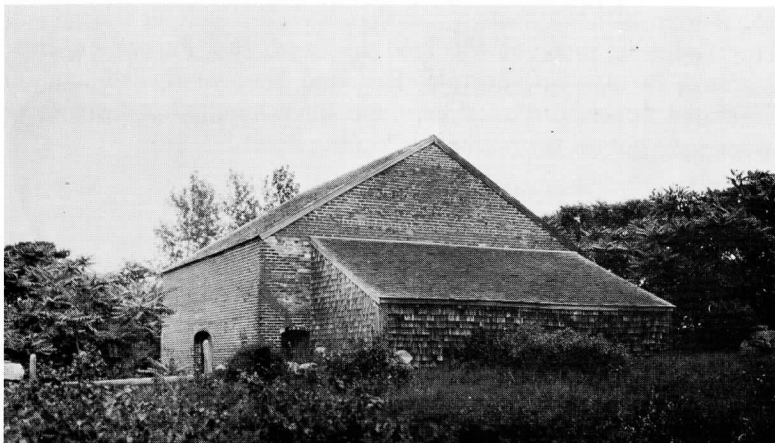
Harvard sold most of the land to Land/Vest Properties, Inc., Limited Partnership, Boston. The land was subdivided, and in 1973 the house, the brick barn and three hundred, twenty three acres were put on the market as "Spring Point."

The James N. Tilton brick barn sits on its hilltop southwest of the intersection of the Middle and Meeting House Roads. At the time that James N. Tilton built his brick barn one could look out from that hilltop over treeless pastures and meadows at the then village of Chilmark with its two churches, town hall, post office,

general store and a few tall vase-shaped American elms. Like the mystical village of "Brigadoon" that ancient village of Chilmark has vanished almost as though it never existed and the present Chilmark center is found two and a half miles to the west. Only the long abandoned cellar holes and house and barn foundations and the open wells remain to show that the village ever existed. And the whole is choked in ailanthus, locust, grapevine and brush jungle. On the scale map of this ancient village which was located at the western end of Mark's Valley the distance between the Tea Lane/Middle County Road intersection and the town house or hall is exactly one mile. Almost all roadways and laneways were laid out to either side of this line at one tenth mile intervals. The crest of Bassett's Hill is one tenth mile to the west of the town hall.



View of the west gable end of the John Hammett 18th century farmhouse, 1974.



The old James N. Tilton barn in 1931 showing the north side, west gable end and the sheep shed.



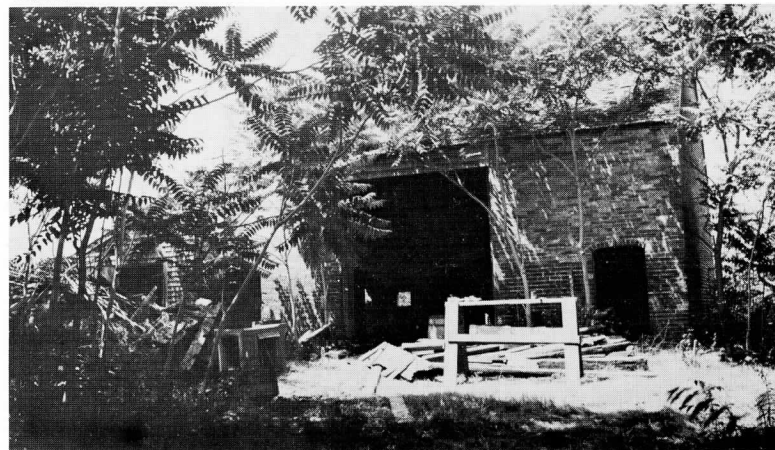
The old James N. Tilton brick barn in 1932. View is of the east gable end and the north side. Note the ailanthus jungle.

The then steepleless Methodist Episcopal church and the parsonage were moved to their present location on the Menemsha Cross Road in 1915 and a second story was added to the parsonage. The fourth and last Chilmark Congregational Meetinghouse<sup>(3)</sup> of the Orthodox Congregational Society was located only a short distance to the west of the James N. Tilton

(3) Banks, *History*. . . Vol. II, Annals of Chilmark, pp. 54 - 57

brick barn, at about what was then the demographical center of the town. About 1876 both meetinghouse and congregation vanished leaving hardly a trace except for a small Indian cemetery with its fieldstone markers. And even that is now almost lost in scrub oak thickets.

Chilmark's old town hall atop Bassett's Hill was abandoned and the present town hall built at Beetlebung Corner. That was in the year 1897. The old town hall was moved to the current Chilmark Center and was raised at the post to become the present Kurth barn.



The south side of the old James N. Tilton barn in 1932. And again note the ailanthus jungle.

One feature of the ancient village of Chilmark that must be noted here is the tangle of ailanthus growths that are found all through the area. Whalemen and merchant seamen brought these trees to the Island in flowerpots. The ailanthus is native to China and the East Indies where it is called the 'Tree-of-Heaven.' The little trees were a curiosity and one or more of them were planted about many of the old farmhouses. But the trees grew and spread by means of their long root systems. And now wherever a tangle of these weed trees is found there also will be found the foundations of an abandoned house or barn. The ailanthus altissima or 'Tree-of-the-Gods' is similar to the sumac and gives off a pungent odor. Ailanthus seedlings as food for Silkworms were imported in great quantity in the late 18th and early 19th century to the U. S. mainland in an abortive effort to create a domestic silk industry.

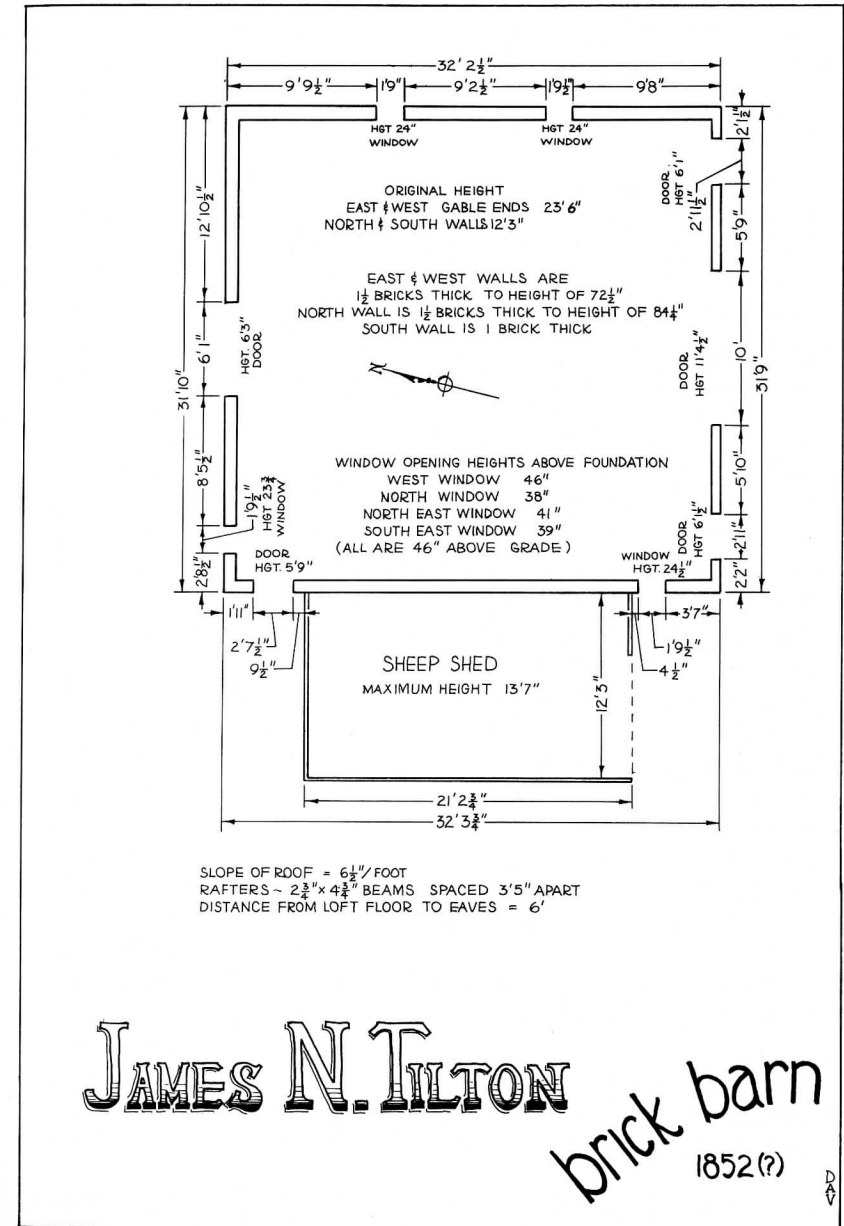
The farm to which James's brick barn belonged was apparently a very prosperous one. (4) There were miles of stone walls dividing the one hundred fifty acres or more into fields and pastures. Also there are the fancy foundation stones of what was once a two and a half story dwelling. The late Mary Guerin bought out the heirs and tore down the house in 1921 and used the lumber to build "Greystone" to the west. An apple and pear orchard separated the brick barn from the giant sycamore maple, well, and farmhouse to the east.

The James N. Tilton brick barn measures 32' 3" on the east and west gable ends and 31' 10" on the north and south sides. It has four ground floor window openings 2' high by 1' 9" wide. There are three arched cattle doorways 6' 1" high by 2' 11" wide. The north wall wagon archway is 6' 3" high by 6' 1" wide. As long as anyone now living can remember there has been a gigantic crack above it running from arch to eave. But the crack actually adds to the picturesqueness of the structure. The wagon doorway on the south by which the loaded hay wagons would enter the barn is 11' 5" high by 10' wide.

The south wall is unusual in being only one brick thick in its entirety. Perhaps that was because it was the warm and sunny side of the building. But the sun, as every farmer knows, is the most destructive force in nature, far more so than wind or rain or low temperature. Could that be why farmer James N. Tilton built the upper half of his south wall of firebrick? At any rate, the cream colored firebrick half of the wall is in perfect shape today, while the lower half built of salmon brick is badly pitted and both corners have crumbled away. The barn was built with both regular and jumbo sized odd brick.

The structure is well proportioned and has beautiful lines. Huge oak beams tie the north and south walls together keeping them from buckling out because of the enormous weight of the roof. The beams also support the hay lofts. Attached to the barn on the west is a large sheep shed that was open on the south. An oddly dimensioned barnyard, call it a hundred feet square, surrounds the barn. Part of the west wall of the barnyard is one of the finest

(4) *Vineyard Gazette*, August 1, 1941, Polly Woolcott, "One Old Barn Is Insured Against The Fate Of Ever Housing A Summer Stock Theatre."





examples of flat-faced retaining wall to be found in New England. That section measures 6' 3" high and is 47' 6" long.



The R. C. Josephs brick barnhouse - the old James N. Tilton barn - in 1960 and as it looks today.

Perhaps a yoke of oxen was used to scoop off the brow of the hill for the barn square is nice and flat while the terrain about it rises to the west. An unusual lane runs northeast from the barn square down the hill and through the present woods to the outskirts of the former village. It is a little over a twelfth of a mile long, (441') and sixty-three feet wide at its mouth and thirty-one and a half feet wide at the barn square. Aside from being the original entrance to the farm it seems also to have been used to funnel the sheep home from the outlying pastures.

Existing Chilmark tax assessors' records beginning with the year 1861 indicate that in the year 1866 there were the following animals on the farm; two cows, one yearling, one swine, two horses, and fifty sheep. In 1872 two oxen are listed as well. In 1896 eighty sheep are listed among other animals. But by 1900 only twenty sheep and no other animals were listed. That was the year in which Martha Tilton, James's widow (she was his second

wife and the mother of three of his four sons) abandoned the farm. She was in ill health and died in New Bedford three years later at the age of sixty-eight a very able woman to the last. Her father Isaiah Hillman's farm was at the intersection of the Tabor House and the North Roads, now the James Cagney Place. One of her sons of the two to go a'whaling was the late James A. Tilton, retired whaling captain of San Francisco who was master of the schooner *Gaspee* in the 1929 movie version of, 'Down To the Sea in Ships', which was filmed out of New Bedford.



The date on the west wall of the James N. Tilton brick barn, 1974.

James N. Tilton, the years of his life are 1816 - 1881, apparently built, or completed his brick barn at the age of thirty-six in 1852. On the exterior west wall at the southwest corner and in the lee of the sheepshed at a height of six feet from the ground is a date painted with crude brush strokes. It seems to read 1852.

James began to buy up the old Norton Bassett place which dates from about 1800, which included a house, house lot, and barn in 1839. He completed his acquisition of land in 1847. He may have used some of the timbers from the old Bassett barn in the construction of his new brick barn. Two of James's grandsons,

Robert Tilton, a lobsterman, and Alpheus (A. P.) Tilton a carpenter and selectman of the town of Gosnold both of the island of Cuttyhunk say that their grandfather built the brick barn circa 1852.

After it was abandoned the James N. Tilton farm was soon lost in a locust and ailanthus jungle. Yet the bright red brick of the barn reflecting sunlight and moonlight had captivated much of the up-Island community. According to Rita Benton (Mrs. Thomas Hart Benton) of Kansas City, Missouri, and Chilmark and Gay Head, the brick barn became a favorite rendezvous for sweethearts and for the guests of local weddings after the ceremonies. They came on horseback and in horse drawn carriage and wagon. Rita remembers one such joyous gathering after a wedding. This remarkable brick ruin was also a popular place for picnics.

In 1931 Roswell C. Josephs, the author's father, who died in 1963, bought from Mary Guerin the heart of the farm which included the brick barn, sheep shed and a corn crib. During his subsequent teaching-free summers he hacked back the jungle and began the process of rebuilding the barn. He knocked out new windows and eventually made it into a remarkable summer house twenty years ahead of its time architectually, and, one of the first barnhouses, in fact.

Chilmark was without electricity then as it was to be for nearly ten years longer. But by 1932 the brick barnhouse had one of the very first indoor bathrooms in the town. And the old brick barn is still without electricity. Such a rebuilding job, however, is never finished and the heirs continue the task. This brick barn is undoubtedly the Island's most unusual ancient structure and perhaps its most unusual and imaginative summer house as well.

The James N. Tilton brick barn is really a marvelous Brughel-like work of art and as such might be considered a national art treasure. Indeed, applications are currently pending on a listing with the Historic American Buildings Survey and with the National Register of Historic Places for the old James N. Tilton brick barn.

*Peter Colt Josephs was born at Evanston, Illinois on September 14, 1939. He is the son of the late Roswell C. Josephs originally of Baltimore, Maryland and Newport, Rhode Island and Frances Sheffield Josephs originally of Newport, Rhode Island who were among the early group to pioneer Chilmark as a summer resort and the handful of people to summer there prior to World War II. As a second generation summer resident, now year-round, of Chilmark the author long ago developed a fascination with the Island's geography, history, fauna and flora.*

*He attended Rogers High School at Newport, Rhode Island and was graduated from Christchurch School, Virginia in 1957. Trained in the exacting German research tradition of The Johns Hopkins University at Baltimore, Maryland he holds a B. A. degree in political science and is a member of the class of 1961. His B. A. thesis; 'Civilian Absentee Voting in United States General Elections,' is on file at the Milton S. Eisenhower Library there. He is currently an M. A. candidate in political science at The University of Rhode Island at Kingston, Rhode Island. A stint as an assistant professor of political science and American studies at Vernon Court Junior College at Newport, Rhode Island as well as the teaching of English and American studies at the secondary level in Massachusetts and Rhode Island account for his professional career. Previously prose and poetry of his have appeared in the "Vineyard Gazette" or in "Yankee."*

*The author, a social activist and an ardent defender of civil liberties, lives at the brick barnhouse with his blue ribbon winning Yellow Labrador Retriever named Meadow.*

