

**MVMUSEUM**

# Quarterly

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Martha's Vineyard Museum's Journal of Island History

MVMUSEUM.ORG

## The First Cottagers of Color in Oak Bluffs



The Beginnings of  
Illumination Night

Tisbury at 350 Years

  
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## DEEPER

There are simple answers to most questions, and sometimes the simple answer is enough. The challenge is recognizing when there is a more complex answer—deeper, more nuanced—and when it is worth pursuing, grasping, and explaining. Complexity for its own sake is not a virtue; complexity in the service of deeper understanding, is.

The three long articles that make up this issue of the Quarterly plumb the depths beneath (seemingly) simple truths about Vineyard History. Oak Bluffs' role as a summer haven for well-to-do African Americans from the mainland is, and has been for decades, a firmly established part of Island lore. Andrew Patch's article shows, however, that it stepped into that role half-a-century earlier than is commonly thought, and that its first "summer people" of color stepped into a community that was far from the Black utopia popular memory sometimes conjures. Skip Finley's article on the early history of Illumination Night complicates the (seemingly) simple origin story of that beloved, genteel celebration, revealing a history of ballyhoo, political speechifying, and bizarre parades of "antiques and horrors." A. Bowdoin Van Riper's article takes a (seemingly) simple chronological fact—that the Town of Tisbury was "born" in 1671 and is thus 350 years old—and complicates it by asking a (seemingly) simple question: "What do we mean when we say 'Tisbury?'"

Researchers at the Museum library sometimes refer to "going down a rabbit hole" in search of the solution to some historical mystery. The authors in this issue have done just that, and returned with a better understanding of the Island we all share. Read on, and they'll show you.

— A. Bowdoin Van Riper

*On the Cover:* African American worshippers at the preacher's stand of the Methodist Campground, sometime in the 1870s. Courtesy of Andrew Patch.

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# MARTHA'S VINEYARD MUSEUM QUARTERLY

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# The First Cottagers Of Color in Oak Bluffs

by ANDREW PATCH

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RESEARCH INTO the early history of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association and its leaseholders of color has yielded the startling discovery of an entire community of cottage owners of color that existed from the 1870s until the early 1900s, the knowledge of which has, until now, been entirely lost for more than a century. This appears to have been the first summer community of people of color on the island of Martha's Vineyard, although its existence and eventual disappearance is attributable to the segregationist practices of the MVCMA in the 19th century, before the Camp Meeting Association began to exclude leaseholders of color altogether in the early twentieth century.

## **The First Records of African Americans Living in Oak Bluffs**

African Americans leased tent and cottage lots on the grounds of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association at least as early as 1862, the first year such records were kept; before the early 1870s, however, such leaseholders appear to have been very few in number. Doctor Samuel T. Birmingham, who identified as both Black and Native American, leased a tent lot in 1862 (and likely earlier) and then owned 3 Forest Circle from the time it was built in 1865 until 1870. Birmingham's cottage still stands and is one of the first 50 cottages built in the Campground. Reverend William Jackson rented 12 Central Avenue in 1870 and purchased it in 1871. Birmingham would move to a larger cottage in East Chop by 1870, whereas Jackson owned 12 Central Avenue until his death in 1900, after which it was owned by his daughter Mary until 1921. Birmingham was a botanic physician who practiced in Boston and New Bedford and was one of the wealthier residents of New Bedford at a time when that city was the rich-

Andrew Patch is president of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association and practices patent law in his off-island life. He became an avid amateur historian of early Oak Bluffs after his family purchased its Campground cottage in 2011.

est per capita in the world. Jackson, who also lived in New Bedford, was a minister, a friend and contemporary of Frederick Douglass, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, and the first Black officer in the U.S. Army.

The ledgers containing the historical Board minutes of the MVCMA have recently been digitized and, along with the MVCMA lease records and other primary sources, reveal new glimpses of the racial makeup of the Campground in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the treatment of residents of color by the MVCMA.

The Board minutes for an MVCMA meeting held on June 13, 1872 include the following entry: "Voted that the question of locating colored people be left with the agent." This suggests that the Association, at that time, permitted people of color to lease lots on the Association grounds, but that racial segregation was understood to accompany that practice. The question referred to in the resolution quoted above seems not to have been whether to segregate leaseholders of color from their white neighbors, but how best to go about it. The entry further suggests that by 1872 the number of leaseholders of color had become sufficiently large that the Board felt the need to adopt a policy to address the situation.

The late Arthur R. Railton has detailed the forcible (and, it was later held, wrongful) removal in 1883 of Mrs. Eunice C. Rocker, a widow, and her nine children, to the Tewksbury Alms House, from a house in Cottage City that was said to be rented by her mother, Margaret Prince Matthews.<sup>1</sup> Rocker and Matthews were of mixed Black and Chappaquiddick Wampanoag descent. Matthews was a daughter of Love Madison Prince, born in 1801, from whom over 400 Chappaquiddick Wampanoag are descended.

The article describes Matthews' rented house as being on Lake Avenue, on the fringe of the Campground. Reference to the MVCMA lease records reveals, however, that Matthews' house was within the grounds of the Camp Meeting Association, albeit at the northernmost part of the grounds, and that she did not rent but rather owned the cottage at what is now 14 Central Avenue (the northern part of what is today Central Avenue was originally named Lake Park). Matthews' cottage still stands today, and is next door to 12 Central Avenue, the cottage owned by Rev. William Jackson. Matthews, according to the MVCMA lease records, owned the cottage at 14 Central Avenue from 1876 until her death in 1895.

No official role of the MVCMA in the removal of Rocker and her children is described in the Railton article, although one of the Cottage City

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1 Arthur R. Railton, "Widow Rocker, Part Indian, Struggles to Break the Chains of Poverty," *Dukes County Intelligencer*, February 2006, pp. 79-90.

Selectmen and Overseers of the Poor carrying out the forcible removal was Otis Foss, also a longtime Campground resident and merchant. Another was Joseph Dias, Town Treasurer, member of the fire department, and longtime proprietor of the Vineyard Grove House on Siloam Avenue in the Campground (now the Tabernacle House).<sup>2</sup>



Stereoview of Marcellus Costello's barber shop. Courtesy of Harvey Garneau, Jr.

The cottage on the other side of Rev. Jackson was 11 Central Avenue, which is no longer in the Campground. It was owned from about 1880 to 1895 by Harriett A. Costello, a Black woman from New Bedford whose husband Marcellus Costello was a barber in New Bedford and also operated a barber shop on Circuit Avenue during the summer months. This stereoview, likely taken in 1870, shows Marcellus Costello in front of his summer barbering establishment on Circuit Avenue, which was located approximately where Linda Jean's is today. The two young children in the view would be his daughters Nora and Floretta, who were ages 5 and 3 in the 1870 census.

Costello was born about 1833 in Richmond, Virginia, and his wife Harriett A. (Richardson) Costello was born about 1842 in Norfolk. It is not known whether they were enslaved or free, although many fugitives from slavery sought refuge in New Bedford owing to its steadfast refusal to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>3</sup>

There may have been as many as four or five cottages owned by people of color in the former Lake Park section of Central Avenue, which is located at the extreme northern tip of the Association grounds.

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<sup>2</sup> A retired whaling captain, Dias had been instrumental in the campaign for Cottage City's independence from Edgartown. See Skip Finley, "The Boy Master: Joseph Dias of Oak Bluffs," *MV Museum Quarterly*, May 2019, 22-37.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Grover, *The Fugitive's Gibraltar: Escaping Slaves and Abolitionism in New Bedford, Massachusetts* (2009).

## Aggrieved White Leaseholders

The Board minutes from the meeting of August 22, 1887 memorialize a petition from several aggrieved leaseholders:

A petition from residents on Clinton and West Clinton Avenues, remonstrating against granting leases in that part of the Association's premises, was received and a hearing was granted the petitioners.

Spowell Pease, E.H. Matthews, Geo. Fifield and A.A. Burrell appeared for petitioners. Their objection to the parties to which the petition refers is, that they are colored.

The four named leaseholders owned cottages in the southernmost sections of Clinton and West Clinton Avenues, south of Oak Park. The proximity of these leaseholders to one another in this section of the Campground suggests that the agent, pursuant to the authority granted in 1872, had sought to "locate" people of color in this region of the Campground, presumably in addition to the former Lake Park section of Central Avenue, at the northern extreme of the grounds.

In response to the foregoing petition, the Board unanimously approved the following resolution: "That we, as Directors of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association, in response to these petitioners would say, that we, judge it improper and illegal to make distinctions among our tenants on the ground of color."

An incident two years later, again involving Ezekial H. Matthews of 77 Clinton Avenue, is documented not in the records of the MVCMA but in contemporaneous newspaper accounts. The most detailed of those accounts found thus far is an article titled "The Color Line at Cottage City," which appeared in the July 13, 1889 issue of the *Martha's Vineyard Herald*:

The Mercury's account is not strictly correct as to the facts in the case of Martha James, colored, renting a cottage and being refused admission to the camp ground. Mr. Matthews, as Selectman, said and did nothing, but as a private citizen quite naturally objected to having a colored lodging house next door to him. Mr. Eldridge did the liberal thing with the rentor in furnishing her with board until he secured her another house in which she is comfortably settled and more satisfied with than the one on the camp ground. Letters were received from lawyer Barney, of New Bedford, reminding them as Republicans of their offence against the 15th amendment (presumably the 14th is meant), but the whole affair has been unnecessarily exaggerated and the Campmeeting authorities misrepresented. Agent Brown was absent and Mr. Chadwick had nothing to do with it nor made any threat about lease for next year.

Two years ago a similar case came up on a petition remonstrating against leases to colored people in certain localities, and the Board passed the following.

Resolved: That we as directors of the Campmeeting Association in response to petitioners would say that we judge it improper and

illegal to make distinction among our tenants on the ground of color.

This has been and is the position of the Association. They of course object to certain businesses in certain localities, whether by white or colored people, but their position is plainly indicated by the fact that not less than twenty-five lots are leased to colored people on their premises.

A briefer account of this incident appeared in the July 17, 1889 issue of the *Boston Herald*. It declared:

Reports that the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association has been drawing the color line are unfounded. Some of the neighbors objected to having a colored lodging house next door, and the landlady, who had rented the cottage of a real estate agent, found another one that suited her wants much more fully. There has always been quite a colony of colored people about Wesleyan grove.

The references to a "color line" in these accounts, as well as the Board's aspiration that it ought not to make "distinctions" based on color, appear to refer to outright exclusion of people of color from the MVCMA grounds, which seems to have been at least a somewhat controversial proposition at that time. Enforced segregation of people of color within the grounds of the Association, on the other hand, seems to have been accepted implicitly, as is evidenced by the first Board resolution noted above and the reference to a "colony" of people of color in the Campground.

### **Eldridge's Report—A Key to the Puzzle**

A report of the Agent and Treasurer to the Annual Meeting of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association, dated October 28, 1904, is particularly illuminating as to the MVCMA practices and attitudes at that time. After reporting for two pages on the general condition of the grounds, the report includes the following paragraph:

The number of leaseholders is 387. One cottage has been removed and one new one built. The general condition of the cottages on the grounds improves each year. The lower portion of our grounds has been given up to the occupation of colored people. It will be remembered that a number of years ago a row of these houses were removed from the rear of Clinton Avenue, and from time to time some of them have been sold and removed for non-payment of rent and unsightly appearance. There are still a number of these shanties in bad repair, and while a radical change involving an order for the removal of all those buildings would not be practical or advisable, there are certain features connected with them that I shall ask the Committee to consider before our May Meeting.

The author of the above report was Edmund G. Eldridge, who served as Agent and Treasurer of the MVCMA for over thirty years, from 1895 until his death in 1926. Eldridge was an insurance agent and lived not in the Campground but rather in the Copeland District, at the corner of Circuit Avenue and Wamsutta Avenue (that is, the Wamsutta Avenue of

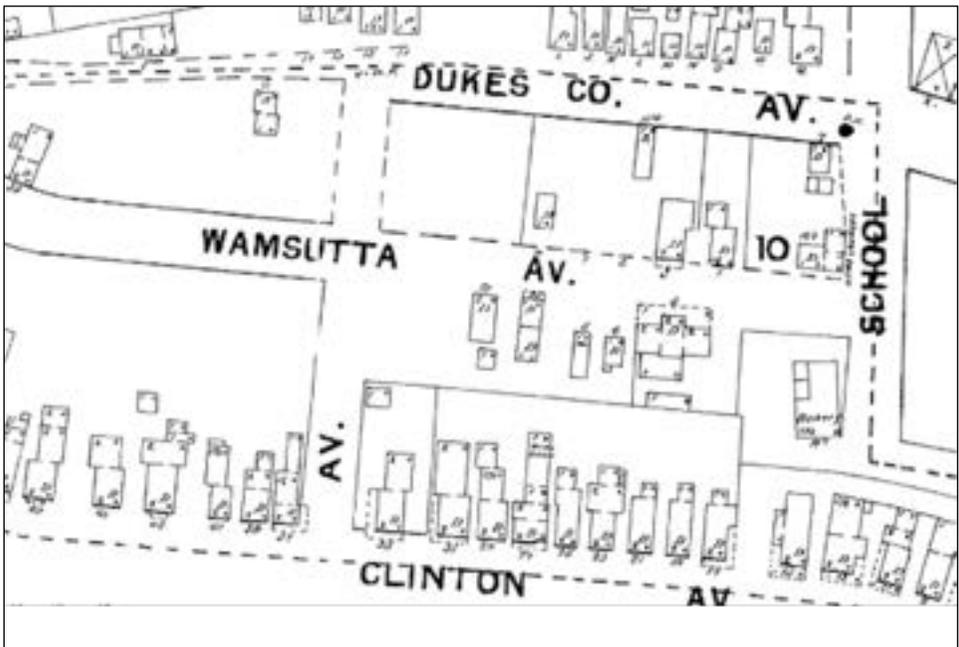
the Copeland District and not that of the Campground). The language of the report is both vivid and revealing, as the defining characteristic of “these houses,” “these shanties” and “those buildings” seems to be nothing intrinsic to the structures themselves, but rather the fact they were owned by people of color.

The reference to the “lower portion of our grounds” provides an important clue as to where the Campground’s leaseholders of color were segregated, whereas the characterization of that part of the grounds as having been “given up” to the occupation of persons of color certainly suggests a less than welcoming attitude on the part of the Association.

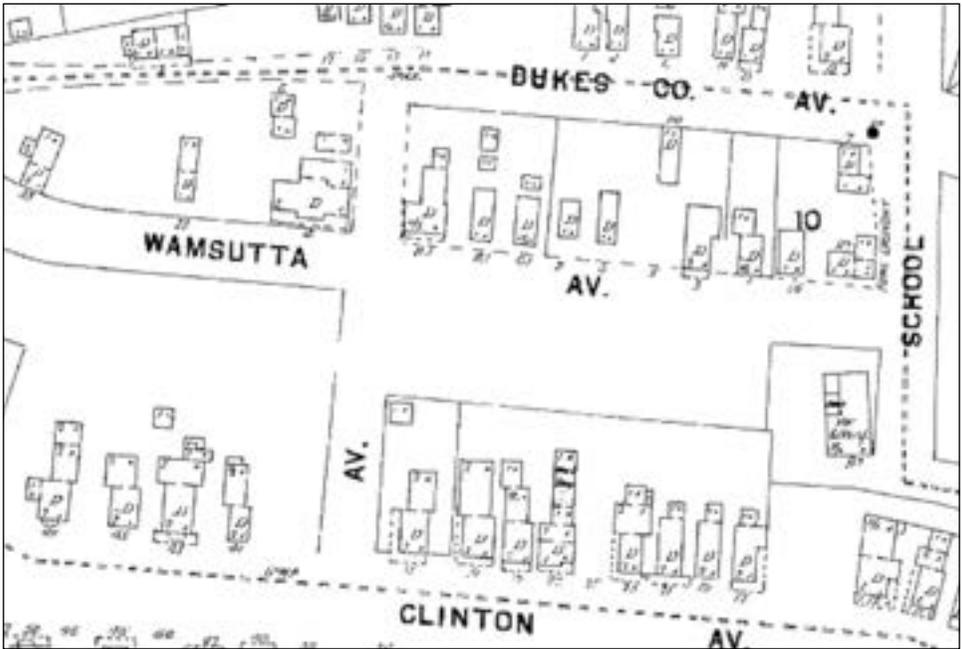
### **The Wamsutta Cottagers**

Let us first consider the row of houses that were said to have been removed from the rear of Clinton Avenue some years prior. The street that would have been considered as being to the rear of Clinton Avenue at that time was Wamsutta Avenue (of the Campground, as distinct from the street of the same name in the Copeland District). There is no longer a Wamsutta Avenue in the Campground, but the parking lot now at that location bears its name.

A comparison of the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for Wamsutta Avenue in the Campground, over the years preceding 1904, yields the following striking contrast as between the maps for 1892 and 1898.



Sanborn Insurance Company map of Wamsutta Avenue, 1892. All Sanborn map images used in this article are from the author’s collection.

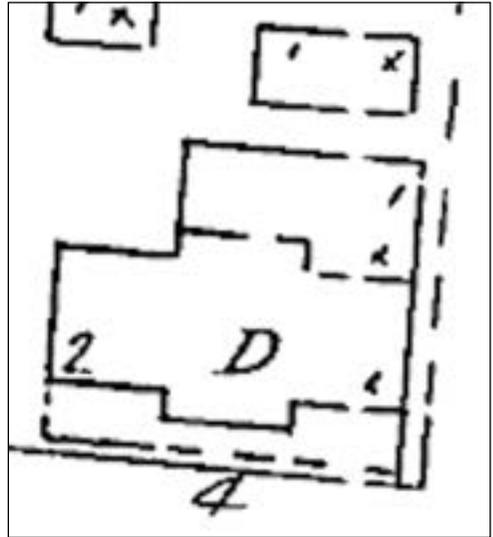
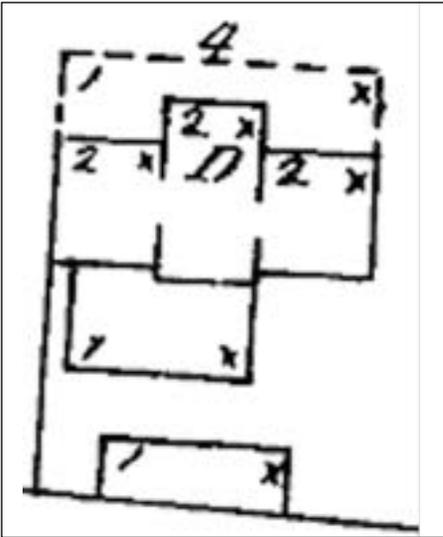


Sanborn map of Wamsutta Avenue, 1898.

The maps show that sometime between 1892 and 1898, the five cottages on the east, even-numbered side of Wamsutta Avenue (the lower side of Wamsutta Avenue in the images above) were all removed. It was common in this era for individual cottages to be removed from or relocated on the grounds, but a clean sweep of one side of a Campground block is more suggestive of an MVCMA initiative, and more consistent with the Eldridge account set forth above.

Notably, the cottages removed from the east side of Wamsutta Avenue were not removed from the Association grounds altogether, but merely relocated. In all cases, however, the cottages were moved farther away from the center of the Campground, and closer to its western fringes. For example, the cottage at 4 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1892 map has a footprint that is both distinctive and relatively large. On the 1898 map there is no longer a cottage in that location, but the same cottage has obviously been turned 180° and moved some sixty yards to the south-southwest. Indeed, it is still numbered 4 Wamsutta Avenue on the 1898 map despite now occupying lots 17 and 19 of Wamsutta Avenue, and even the outbuilding has been moved with the main cottage and positioned in the same relative orientation. Overall, there are no fewer cottages on Wamsutta Avenue in 1898 than there were in 1892.

The MVCMA lease records pinpoint the date of this clearing of the even-numbered side of Wamsutta Avenue, for in August of 1895 there are



Detail of #4 Wamsutta from the 1892 Sanborn map, at left, and at right from the 1898 map.

no longer any leases granted for the even-numbered lots. Those same lease records also suggest that the cottage shown at 6 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1892 map is the cottage that newly appears at 23 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1898 map; that the cottage shown at 8 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1892 map is the cottage that newly appears at lot 7 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1898 map (yet is still numbered 8); and that that the cottage shown at 10 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1892 map is the cottage that newly appears at lot 15 Wamsutta Avenue in the 1898 map (designated A.1).

The Board minutes for the meeting of August 17, 1895 confirm these events, in the following entry:

E. G. Eldridge then moved – That the Agent be instructed not to renew the leases of the parties now occupying cottages on the East side of Wamsutta Ave. – and that he be authorized to remove such cottages to localities that in his judgment he may think is best – and at the expense of the Association. The motion passed.

Identifying the Wamsutta leaseholders by race is more challenging, as the MVCMA lease records do not indicate race. However, by cross-referencing these lease records against the federal census records, which do indicate race, it has been possible to determine that nearly all of the Wamsutta cottagers were people of color.

### **Introducing a Few of the Wamsutta Cottagers**

For example, the largest of the Wamsutta cottages was the Ross cottage, 4 Wamsutta Ave, which stood throughout the period beginning in 1871 until 1910, although as noted above it was moved by the Association in 1895 from that location to the lot at 17 Wamsutta, across the street and farther south.

John Ross was a Black man born about 1820 in Jacksonville, Ohio, and is listed variously in the census records over the years as a mariner, farmer, and baggage expressman. He married Hannah J. (Harris) Webquish in Edgartown 1852, the second marriage for both. Hannah Ross was of mixed Black, Chappaquiddick Wampanoag and white ancestry and in the 1861 Earle Report<sup>4</sup> she is listed along with John Ross, twelve-year-old Charles F. Webquish, presumably a child of Hannah's first marriage, and her then 78-year-old mother Ferriby Harris. The genealogy of Ferriby (Porrage) Bows Harris, born about 1777, is traced back through several earlier generations in Segal and Pierce's *Wampanoag Families of Martha's Vineyard*.<sup>5</sup>

Following Hannah's death in 1881, John Ross married Ellen (Mickey) Young the same year, his third marriage and her second. In the marriage record they are both identified as "mulatto." Ellen was born in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1858. John Ross died in 1890, and his widow Ellen remarried Charles Vosburgh, a Black man born in Massachusetts in 1848. Ellen Vosburgh continued to own the Ross cottage until her death in 1900. Ellen's will identifies her as the sister of Priscilla Crippen, who owned the cottage at 10 Wamsutta prior to its removal in 1895.

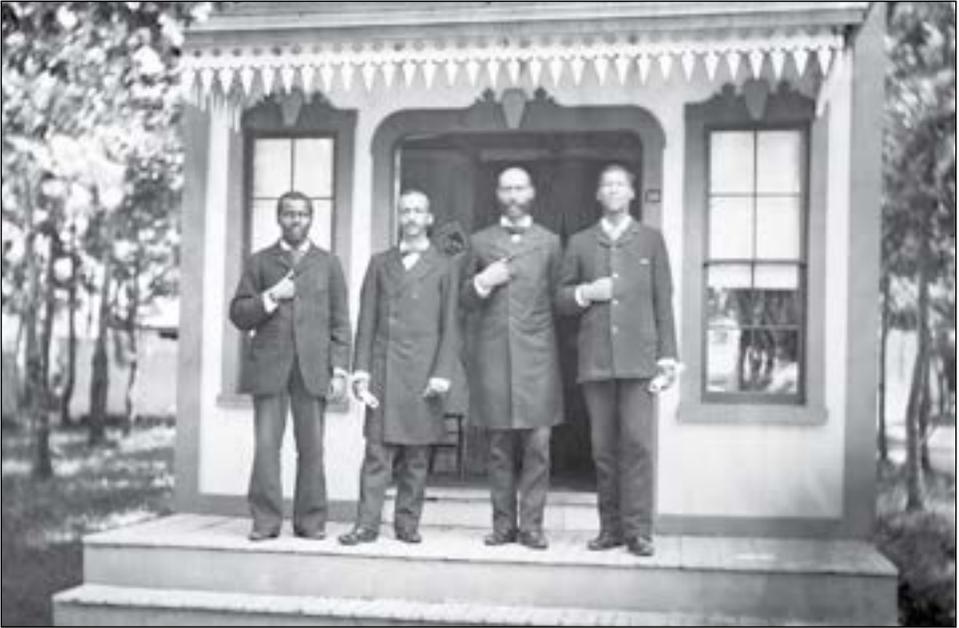
Another Wamsutta leaseholder was Caroline E. Becker of Fitchburg, born in 1827, who owned the cottage at 8 Wamsutta Ave. beginning about 1881 and continued to own it after it was relocated by the Association to 7 Wamsutta in 1895, until her death in 1904. Becker's husband Martin was a barber born in Paramaribo, Suriname. Caroline was born in Vermont, and in one census record her parents were said to have both been born in Maine, whereas in another they were said to have been born in Scotland and Connecticut.



Martin and Caroline E. Becker; Caroline is identified as "French Indian." Doris Kirkpatrick, *Around the World in Fitchburg*, Vol. I (1975).

4 Compiled by John Milton Earle in response to an 1859 act of the state legislature, the Earle Report was a census of the Native American residents of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and an assessment of their living conditions. Digitized copies are available free online, and paper copies in the Museum Library.

5 Jerome Segal and R. Andrew Pierce, *The Wampanoag Genealogical History of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts*, Volume II, Part B, p. 789.



A singing quartet from Howard University at Jeremiah Smith's cottage (#16 Wamsutta) in 1883. Author's collection.

Yet another Wamsutta cottager was Jeremiah Smith, the owner of 16 Wamsutta Avenue, which was earlier removed from the grounds in 1888 or 1889. He appears to have been the same Jeremiah Smith who was Black and is listed with his family in the federal census records for Providence, RI throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Number 16 Wamsutta Avenue is the only cottage of the Wamsutta group of which an historic photograph is known to exist, there being two glass negatives (dated August 3, 1883) showing a quartet of Black singers from Howard University posing on the porch during a visit to Martha's Vineyard. Smith's wife Eliza was born in Washington DC, and the ages of Smith, his wife and children would be consistent with one of the singers being their son.

From the above image, 16 Wamsutta Avenue appears to have been a relatively modest cottage, but it was no "shanty." Neither was it in disrepair, contrary to the allegations in the Eldridge report. The owner of 16 Wamsutta Avenue before Jeremiah Smith, from 1871 through 1875, was D. N. Mason, who was a minister of the African Methodist Society in Plymouth.

The genealogies of the Wamsutta cottage owners reveal persons of color who were born in southern states, possibly into enslavement, and reached Martha's Vineyard via New Bedford; as well as members of the Chappaquiddick Wampanoag whose family histories on Noepe (Martha's Vineyard) can be traced back hundreds of years.

## The Elimination of the Campground's Wamsutta Avenue

The next Sanborn fire insurance map after 1898 was printed in 1904, and shows relatively few changes from the 1898 map. The cottages shown at 23 and 33 Wamsutta Avenue on the 1898 map are no longer present in the 1904 map, but the group is otherwise unchanged.

In the succeeding Sanborn map of this region, made in 1914, however, none of the cottages of the Wamsutta group is present, and, indeed, Wamsutta Avenue itself is no longer present.

The lease records indicate that by 1910, no leases were granted on Wamsutta Avenue. The Wamsutta lessees, with but one exception, do not thereafter appear in the Campground records. The Board minutes once again confirm that this elimination of Wamsutta Avenue and its cottages was an initiative of the MVCMA. The minutes reflect that at a special meeting held August 23, 1910, “[a]n extended discussion followed



The only surviving cottage from Wamsutta Avenue: #10 (later #15), now at 9 Dukes County Avenue.

in regard to the advisability of removing certain cottages. Referred to the Assessment Committee, with power to act.”

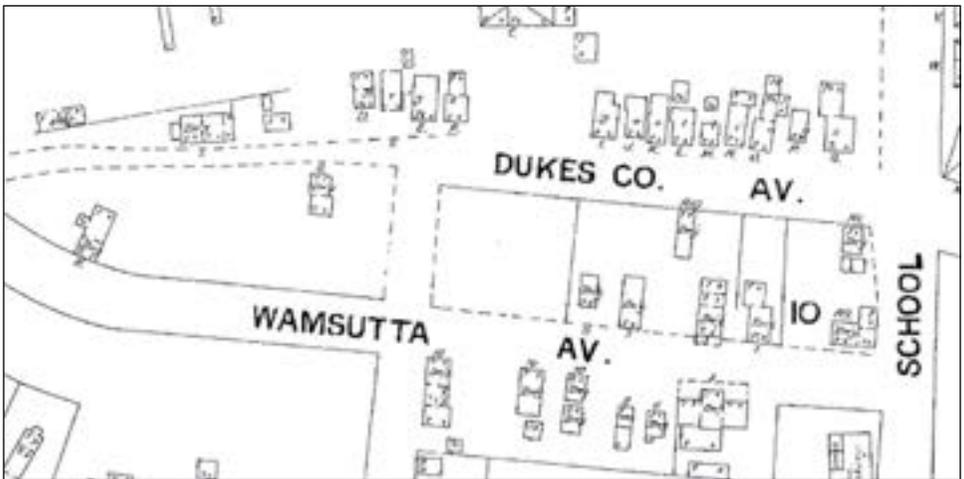
The Chairman of the Assessment Committee was none other than the Treasurer and Agent of the MVCMA, Judge Edmund G. Eldridge, who had cleared the east side of Wamsutta Avenue as one of his first official acts in 1895, and who in 1904 had written “...while a radical change involving an order for the removal of all those buildings would not be practical or advisable, there are certain features connected with them that I shall ask the Committee to consider.”

The MVCMA lease records indicate that one Wamsutta Avenue cot-

tage survived the 1910 purge, and was relocated to Dukes County Avenue near the corner with School Street, where it still stands today, now numbered 9 Dukes County Avenue. The MVCMA lease records suggest that this cottage (or an even tinier building that was a predecessor of the current cottage) was built in 1885 at 10 Wamsutta Avenue. When the even-numbered side of Wamsutta was cleared in 1895, it was moved to 15 Wamsutta and enlarged by the time of the 1898 Sanborn map. When Wamsutta Avenue was eliminated in 1910, the cottage was moved to its present location on the west side of Dukes County Avenue.

The cottage was owned by Harriet A. Peck from 1895 until 1917 when the lease was transferred to Mary F. Washington, Harriet's daughter. Mary had the cottage until 1948, when the lease was transferred to her niece, Loleita Polk. Loleita would own the cottage through 1978. All of these leaseholders were Black, as confirmed by cross-referencing the MVCMA lease records and the federal census records, with the census records also revealing the family relationships.

No other cottage owners of color have been definitively identified as having been granted a lease on the Association grounds for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Sanborn map of Wamsutta Avenue, 1887.

### **The Dukes County Cottagers**

Let us now consider the reference to the “lower portion of our grounds” that was said to have been “given up to the occupation of colored people” in the 1904 Eldridge report. The southernmost parts of the Association grounds are the sections of Clinton and West Clinton Avenues south of Oak Park, the same neighborhood where lived the four white leaseholders who had earlier objected to granting leases to people of color. However,

no leaseholders of color in the nineteenth century have been identified in this part of the Campground, and so perhaps the petition of the white leaseholders in this neighborhood achieved its goal.

The lower portion of the grounds in terms of elevation would be the sections of Siloam Avenue and Dukes County Avenue in the vicinity of School Street, which were at the foot of what was then Squash Meadow Pond, and where standing water still gathers after a heavy rain. And, as noted above, one of the Wamsutta cottagers survived the 1910 purge by moving her cottage to Dukes County Avenue.

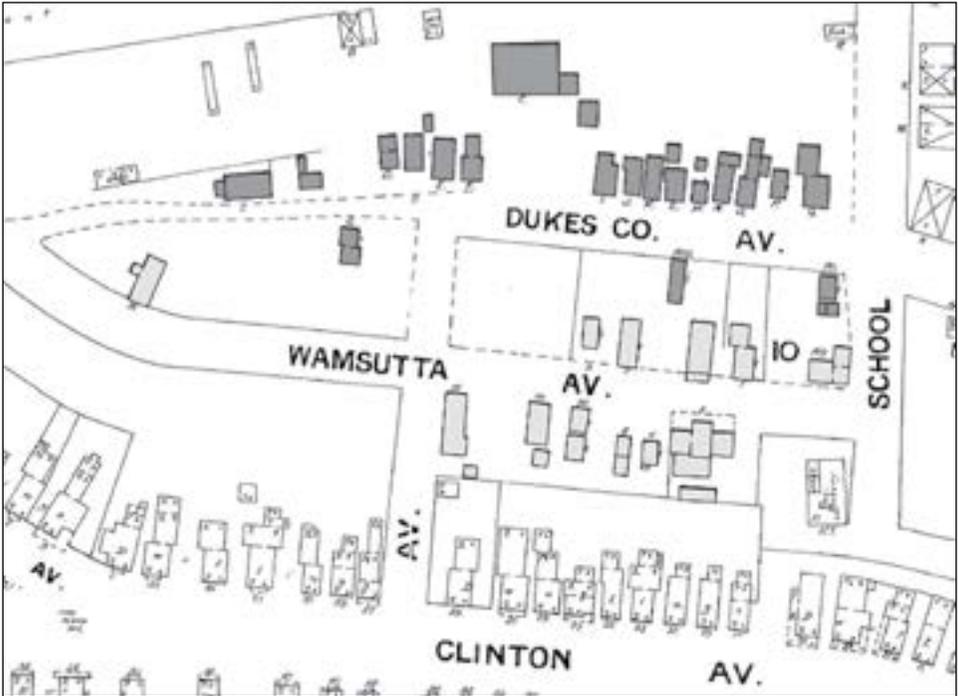
The first Sanborn map for this section of Dukes County Avenue is from 1887, and shows a group of eighteen cottages along the two blocks of Dukes County Avenue south of School Street, with fifteen of those cottages being on the west side of Dukes County Avenue and three being on the east side.

The MVCMA lease entries for 1887 list the following leaseholders on Dukes County Avenue:

MARTHAS VINEYARD			
Board of Lease of Lots in the Grounds of the Association			
DATE	LOT	LEASEHOLDERS	RENT
Aug 4	1	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 4	2	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 4	3	May & Lang	1.00
Aug 11	4	Ann & Ethel	1.00
Aug 11	5	Ann & Ethel	1.00
Aug 11	6	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	7	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	8	Ann & Ethel	1.00
Aug 11	9	Ann & Ethel	1.00
Aug 11	10	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	11	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	12	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	13	Ann & Ethel	1.00
Aug 11	14	Ann & Ethel	1.00
Aug 11	15	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	16	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	17	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	18	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	19	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	20	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	21	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	22	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	23	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	24	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	25	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	26	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	27	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	28	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	29	Edith Robinson	1.00
Aug 11	30	Edith Robinson	1.00

MVCMA record book of leaseholders on Dukes County Avenue, 1887. Author's collection.

The above entries show that most of the listed leaseholders on Dukes County Avenue were women, and many resided off-island in New Bedford. These lots on Dukes County Avenue were and remain at the westernmost edge of the MVCMA grounds, although even today many are not aware that this area is part of the Campground. Leases for the Dukes County lots were granted by the MVCMA at least as early as 1876, in some cases for cottages but in the earliest years in most cases for tents. Identifying these



Sanborn map from 1887, with the cottages of Wamsutta Avenue (lighter gray) and Dukes County Avenue (darker gray) highlighted.

leaseholders in the Massachusetts state and federal census records reveals that the Dukes County leaseholders were also all people of color, apart from the stable owned by Joseph Dias.

### **The Community Rediscovered**

In this excerpt of the 1887 Sanborn map, the Wamsutta cottages are highlighted in lighter gray, and the Dukes County cottages are highlighted in darker gray.

Here, then, was the “colony of colored people about Wesleyan Grove” referred to in the July 17, 1889 article from the *Boston Herald*, and the thirty highlighted cottages more than account for the “not less than twenty-five lots...leased to colored people” referenced in the July 13, 1889 article from the *Martha’s Vineyard Herald*.

Examination of the Sanborn maps for the succeeding years, in conjunction with the corresponding MVCMA lease records, confirms that the Dukes County cottagers were subject to the same MVCMA-directed removal policy as the Wamsutta cottagers. In the 1898 Sanborn map, the number of Dukes County cottages is reduced to 14, down from the 18 shown on the 1887 map. In the 1904 Sanborn map, the number of Dukes County cottages is down to 9, from the 14 shown on the 1887 map. In the

1914 Sanborn map, only two Dukes County cottages remain.

The removal of nine of the eighteen the Dukes County cottages through 1904 corresponds to the statement in the Eldridge report of that year confirming that some of “these shanties” had already been removed by the Association for non-payment of rent or “unsightly appearance.” Another seven would be removed by the time of the 1910 purge.

Preliminary research into the family histories of the Dukes County cottagers reveals some who were formerly enslaved and others of Wampanoag ancestry.

### **Introducing a Few of the Dukes County Cottagers**

Violet Armstead, for example, owned the cottage at 2 Dukes County Avenue from 1886 to 1896, after which it was owned by her daughter Cornelia from 1897 to 1906, the last year that the cottage was in that location. Violet Armstead appears in the census records for New Bedford in 1870 and 1880 on Kempton Street as the wife of Charles D. Armstead, a caulker, and mother of daughters Octavia and Cornelia. Their race is indicated as Black, and both are stated to have been born in Virginia, Charles about 1825 and Violet about 1829, as were their parents. Charles Armstead is identified in *The Fugitive’s Gibraltar* as having fled enslavement in 1854 from Portsmouth, Virginia, along with his brother William, from an enslaver identified as Mrs. Berkley of Portsmouth.<sup>6</sup>

David Robinson had a tent and later a cottage at 9 Dukes County Avenue from 1876 until 1885. Robinson appears in the Massachusetts state and federal census records for New Bedford as early as 1855, with his wife Mary and his children John A., Mary E. and Alexander J. Robinson. David Robinson is also identified as a caulker, who was born in Virginia (about 1820), his were his wife Mary A. Robinson (about 1825) and their parents. In 1854, David Robinson fled enslavement in Norfolk, Virginia, where his name had been Daniel Wiggins. He changed it to David Robinson upon reaching New Bedford.<sup>7</sup> Robinson’s wife Mary Ann, on the other hand, was said to have been free, as were their three children.

Joseph M. Lang owned a tent and later a cottage at 16 Dukes County Avenue from 1879 to 1895. He was born in New Bedford in 1844, and the 1859 Earle census identifies him as Dartmouth Wampanoag. In the 1855 Massachusetts census, he is 11 years of age and living among the Chappaquiddick Wampanoag. His father, James Lang, was Wampanoag, whereas his mother, Sarah Ann Barker Lang, was a Black woman born in Baltimore, MD.

Julia A. Smalley (1838-1888) owned the cottage at 19 Dukes County for the last two years of her life. Julia’s father was Leander Bassett (1810-1879)

6 Grover, *Fugitive’s Gibraltar*, pp. 242-243.

7 Grover, *Fugitive’s Gibraltar*, p. 241.

of Edgartown, and her mother was Huldah Jeffers (1807-1879), an Aquin-nah Wampanoag. She married Samuel Smalley (1829-1893), who, like his parents, had been born in New York. One of Julia's seven children was Amos Peters Smalley (1877-1961), the famous Gay Head harpooner who is credited with being the only person ever to kill a white whale. Amos would have summered at 19 Dukes County Avenue as a boy.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This research remains in its early stages, but it seems reasonably clear that the policy and practice of the MVCMA from the early 1870's until the early 1900's was to grant leases to persons of color only for lots located at the extreme north and west limits of the Association grounds. Thereafter this policy of the MVCMA to keep people of color marginalized at the fringes of the grounds transitioned into an outright exclusion of people of color from the Association grounds.

The examination of these practices, however, has revealed a larger and heretofore forgotten part of the history of Martha's Vineyard, in perhaps the earliest seasonal community of color on the island, and the first in Oak Bluffs. Much work remains to develop the stories of these cottagers, but a picture already emerges of people who in many cases overcame unimaginable hardships, and, in the span of a single lifetime, improved their lot in life sufficiently to own modest summer homes on Martha's Vineyard in their later years.

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# Illumination

by SKIP FINLEY

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THE END OF THE SUMMER season on Martha's Vineyard was once more abrupt, and the contrast between season and off-season more stark, than it is today. An anonymous writer, using the pen name "A Lingerer," captured the desolate emptiness of early September in an 1875 *Vineyard Gazette* piece titled "Oaque Bluffes Lamente."

They have gone, they have departed, they have lit out, they have got up and dusted; there is none left . . . hardly. They have folded their tents and stolen away, though by no means silently. They went with noise and tumult, with guffaws and giggings and waggings of the head, with riotous mirth and a sound like the onrushing of many waters. They girded up their loins; yea, the female portion did so gird themselves rearward that the manner of their stepping forward was wonderful to contemplate.

They were gone. From the heights of Lagoon from the Grove of Wesley, from the highlands beyond Jordan, from the home of the Pawnees and the place of the inn called Seaview, the vast army of every kindred, tongue and people, with one accord and with steadfastness of purpose, hath wended its way to the sea and taken ship for the other side.

Now, therefore, black care sitteth upon the innkeeper, and gloom resteth upon the brow of the muleteer. The polisher of the buskin no longer lifteth up his voice, the chariot and charioteer no more pass in review before the people, and the lonely tax-gatherer sitteth in sadness unspeakable.

Therefore I will arise and get out of this, and follow the multitude that is now afar off. For loneliness is not good for a man, nor a deserted city fit for his habitation.

Fond remembrances of Illumination Night by historians occasionally belie the facts of how and when it began. Indeed, our own recollections of the annual enchanted evening are far more valuable than any academic treatise. Marked by hyperbole over the years, the quaint tradition experienced by millions of young and old simply marks the bitter and sweet end of the season on Martha's Vineyard, in the Town of Oak Bluffs and its

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Methodist Campground that brought the masses to the Island, initially to pray and ultimately to play, in August when the mugginess of the mainland was made tolerable by the breeze near the sea.

As it happens, Illumination may have evolved before either of the two organizations most associated with it—the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company and the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association—although leaders of both were coincidentally, intimately involved. Moreover, the story of the origins of Illumination Night is historically ironic, given that the subject of its introduction was who made it famous, a few years later. The *Vineyard Gazette* was, from its founding in 1846, the Island’s equivalent of the Internet. It remained the only publication on Martha’s Vineyard for more than thirty years until, in 1879, Howes Norris of Eastville founded the *Cottage City Star* as a platform for his campaign to make Cottage City independent of Edgartown. The history that follows is drawn from principally from these two sources, supplemented by others.

### A Year of Moment

The July 5, 1867, issue of the *Vineyard Gazette* contained the first of many substantial, front-page advertisements for a new real estate development established by the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company. Six months later, in the depths of winter, another front-page ad courted those who might already be dreaming of summer:

*Home By The Seaside  
Oak Bluffs  
A New Summer Resort  
One Thousand Lots For Sale<sup>1</sup>*

The ads, and the company’s ambitious plans to sell land with cottages for \$300 to \$1,000 each, were the brainchild of its six founders: Ira Darrow, Shubael Lyman Norton, Grafton Norton Collins and William Bradley of Edgartown, Erastus Carpenter of Foxboro, and William S. Hills of Boston. The lots being sold by the new company were, in the spring of 1868, still part of Edgartown, and the company’s air of vibrant energy was a sharp contrast with the atmosphere in Edgartown village, six miles to the southeast. The whaling industry, which had powered Edgartown’s economy for more than fifty years, was beginning to falter, and *Gazette* editor Charles M. Vincent observed that “all the enterprise and energy of the place had gone to Oak Bluffs and Wesleyan Grove.”<sup>2</sup>

“Wesleyan Grove” was (and had been since 1835) the site of the Methodists’ annual summer camp meetings, held each August under the direction of the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association. When the Oak

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1 *Vineyard Gazette*, January 17, 1868

2 *Vineyard Gazette*, April 17, 1868



Clashing cultures: Methodists at the Campground (L) and beachgoers at the newly built summer resort development of Oak Bluffs (R). MV Museum Stereoview Collection.

Bluffs Land and Wharf company was incorporated the spring of 1868, the *Gazette* opined that its fame would spread rapidly, and also that the Camp Meeting Association had no reason to be concerned that there would be any conflict with its religious activities.<sup>3</sup>

Members of the Camp Meeting Association took a different view. They saw the Earth as a temporary home that they would depart, and secular activities as a distraction from sacred ones. The Campground, in their eyes, was an oasis where—at least temporarily—they could push the secular into the background and embrace the sacred. Signs on tents and cottages reflected this view of the world. “With light and song we greet you” was a popular sentiment. So was “We’ll camp awhile in the wilderness and then we are going home,” and “One year nearer home.” The “home” in the first sentiment might have been a residence on the mainland, but “home” in the second was clearly a hint at the afterlife, like declarations newly deceased loved one had been “called home” to spend the rest of eternity in the presence of God. Concerned that the secular influences of the new resort would intrude on their religious retreat, the members of the Camp Meeting Association voted to erect a “high board fence between Wesleyan Grove and Oak Bluffs.”<sup>4</sup> Hebron Vincent, writing in the *Gazette* a year later, chided the association for its decision:

Probably, but very few of the visitors will care to climb over THE HIGH BOARD FENCE between the grounds of the Camp Meetings and Oak Bluffs now in process of construction. We can but think that the Camp Meeting Association will never regret this proceeding

3 *Vineyard Gazette*, May 1, 1868.

4 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 25, 1868.

but once, and that regret will be for all time. It is carrying matters a little too far, and smacks somewhat strongly of Phariseism.”<sup>5</sup>

Public opinion sided, in the end, with Vincent; building the fence along Circuit Avenue was widely held to be sanctimonious. The contentious action wasn’t the mark of a good neighbor and only served to exacerbate the differences between the secular nature of the commercial enterprise of the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company with the sacred, religious proceedings of the Camp Meeting Association.<sup>6</sup>

The two organizations were united, however, by the national news of 1868, which announced Ulysses S. Grant’s election as the eighteenth president of the United States. Grant’s nationwide margin of victory was comfortable (52.7% of the vote to his opponent’s 47.3%), but on the Vineyard he received nearly 80% of the votes cast: 418 to his opponent’s 108. William Claflin was elected governor, 418 votes to 113. Exultation reigned on the Island.<sup>7</sup>

In Edgartown, a select committee of seventeen community leaders was formed to organize a celebration. It was led by Chief Marshal Samuel Osborn, Jr.—businessman, politician, and rising whaleship owner—and included Rev. Hebron Vincent and Jeremiah Pease (members of the Camp Meeting Association, who had laid out the campground in Wesleyan Grove) as well as three founders of the Oak Bluffs Land & Wharf Company (Shubael Lyman Norton, Grafton Norton Collins and William Bradley). The committee proposed a program that would begin with a torchlight procession through the streets of Edgartown, and continue with speeches at the Town Hall. All citizens, regardless of party affiliation, would be invited to join the celebration, and all would be invited to “illuminate” their houses during the procession.<sup>8</sup>

The resulting event, held on November 17, 1868, seems to have been the Island’s first Illumination. Three days later, the *Vineyard Gazette* offered a joyously hyperbolic account spread across two-and-a-half columns:

*“Edgartown Aroused!*

—  
*The Grandest Torchlight Procession  
Ever witnessed in  
Dukes County!*

—  
*The Grandest Illumination of Edgartown*

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5 *Vineyard Gazette*, May 21, 1869. “Phariseism” refers to the hypocritical observance of the letter of religious or moral law without regard for the spirit.

6 Nor, in the end, did it prove necessary. The Company demonstrated its support of religion by erecting non-denominational Union Chapel at the foot of Circuit Avenue, and the members of the Association gradually came to terms with their new, secular neighbors. In time, the fence was quietly dismantled.

7 *Vineyard Gazette*, November 6, 1868.

8 *Vineyard Gazette*, November 13, 1868,

ever beheld here, or elsewhere,  
by any Town of its size!

—  
*Perfect Thoroughness  
Pervades the Village!*”

The report itself traced the route of the torchlit parade through town, noting the owners’ names of 58 homes that it passed. The section of the story devoted to “Illuminations,” which described the homes’ decorations in detail, mentioned lit windows, 154 colored glass lamps, and the Chinese lanterns—brought back by world-traveling ships captains—that were fashionable at the time. The band was seated in a large carriage drawn by “two splendid black horses,” and the procession receiving three cheers at numerous stops along the way. The cheers honored not only President-elect Grant, but also local notables including the president of the Martha’s Vineyard National Bank, several committee members, and even Captain Ira Darrow—one of the founders of the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company—who, it was pointed out, was “a very reasonable Democrat” as evidenced by his brightly illuminated home. The Oak Bluffs Association and other institutions received accolades as the parade ended at Town Hall with music and speeches by at least six individuals.

“Thus closed the grandest celebration ever witnessed in Dukes County,” the *Gazette* wrote. “Not an accident occurred—nothing at all to mar the superlative joyousness of the occasion, the memory of which will long live in the hearts of all participants as a bright oasis in the usual quiet of our town.”<sup>9</sup> The “bright oasis” of Martha’s Vineyard’s first “Illumination” became an annual institution in salute of a summer season. Six years later, in 1874, President Grant would personally visit the Campground and the Oak Bluffs development and people would all but lose their minds.

### **Illumination Comes to Oak Bluffs**

Erastus P. Carpenter, another founding member of the Oak Bluffs Land & Wharf Company, knew a good idea when he saw it. The following summer—July 1869—he staged an illumination, and brought the Foxboro Town Band to play, in his still-unfinished resort development in the northern reaches of Edgartown. The event was, as historian Arthur Railton notes, patently a real estate promotion, intended to show off the new development. Residents who had already purchased lots and built cottages were encouraged to dress them with Japanese lanterns, and Carpenter himself arranged for the lighting of Ocean Park. In subsequent years, he added an evening fireworks display.<sup>10</sup> Illumination turned out to be a

9 *Vineyard Gazette*, November 20, 1868.

10 Arthur R. Railton, *The History of Martha’s Vineyard: How We Got to Where We Are* (2006), pp. 246-247. Railton gives the year as 1868, but this is almost cer-



Ocean Park, focus of early Illuminations, Carnivals, and fireworks displays, in the 1880s. MV Museum Photo Collection.

brilliant marketing tactic by Carpenter. An editorial in the next week's *Gazette* reported that some 3,000 people had been in Oak Bluffs for the event.<sup>11</sup> Carpenter was clearly pleased with results, since he staged another illumination the following month, on the eve of Camp Meeting week: Saturday, August 14, 1869. The *Vineyard Gazette* commented on this second illumination in its next issue, calling it the "grandest affair of its kind ever witnessed on Martha's Vineyard," and reporting that "thousands of people assembled to witness it and were delighted with the scene."<sup>12</sup>

The Methodists, who had already begun to filter into their Camp-ground cottages in mid-July and were present in force by mid-August, were less enthusiastic. Many thought the event ungodly, and discouraged one another from attending. Staying aloof from the event turned out to be impossible, however. The thousands of weekend visitors drawn by Carpenter's illuminations spilled across Circuit Avenue and through the gates in the high fence erected the previous year, striding through the Camp-ground and disrupting the peace and quiet its residents came to enjoy. The crowds became so disruptive that the Camp Meeting Association posted notices declaring: "We respectfully request all persons to refrain from vis-

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tainly an error. Henry Beetle Hough in *Martha's Vineyard: Summer Resort* (1935; p. 133), Ellen Weiss in *City in the Woods* (1987; pp. 118-121) and Sally Dagnall in *Circle of Faith* (2010, pp. 123-127) all agree – as does the *Gazette* – on 1869.

11 *Vineyard Gazette*, July 30, 1869.

12 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 20, 1869.

iting the Campground on the Sabbath.” Like the physical barrier of the board fence, however, the spiritual barrier between Oak Bluffs and the Campground was temporary.

The 1869 illumination had been centered on Ocean Park, but also involved two cottages on Clinton Avenue, a block west of Circuit Avenue, at the southern end of the Campground. The following year, 1870, saw 100 lanterns lit on Clinton Avenue, and in 1872 newspapers reported 750 lanterns in Ocean Park and parts of the Campground. In 1873 there were said to be 1500 lanterns lit on Clinton Avenue alone, and in 1874—the year of President Grant’s visit—there were 3,200, along with two locomotive headlights.<sup>13</sup> By 1880, Illumination had become an annual event centered on the Campground and observed on the third Wednesday evening in August, in conjunction with the end of the annual camp meeting. The *Gazette* reported, in 1950, that the program “had never been cancelled, and had been interrupted but twice in its history.” Even the interruptions were brief. When Ralph P. Kent, the president and drummer of the band, died of a heart attack in mid-performance, the band played on, “winging into a rollicking number.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Illumination Resurrected**

Illumination was initially held on the Saturday before Camp Meeting, but gradually expanded to include events over that took place over several days. Mondays, Fridays and Wednesdays were added to accommodate separate activities hosted by the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company and later, by the Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association.

August 1873, for example, was part of a weeks’ worth of events that began on Saturday, August 16 with horse racing at Martha’s Vineyard Park (near where the Regional High School is today) and a huge clambake for fifty folks on Chappaquiddick, dubbed “the event of the season” by an enthusiastic writer in the *Gazette*.<sup>15</sup> On Monday afternoon, the Bristol Train of Artillery, a militia unit from Rhode Island famed for fighting in the Revolutionary War, arrived in Oak Bluffs accompanied by Rhode Island governor Henry Howard. The assemblage of soldiers and dignitaries marched to the Sea View House for speeches that began with a long-winded introduction by Edgartown’s Baptist Reverend L. B. Hatch, who was originally from Bristol, RI.

Later, on Clinton Avenue in the Campground, Illumination was resurrected. The *Gazette* described

... a scene of enchantment met the eye which might well make one doubt the possession of his senses. The whole of the avenue was one blaze of light. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands of Chinese lanterns, were sus-

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13 Weiss, *City in the Woods*, p. 118.

14 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 17, 1950.

15 The *Gazette* carried no coverage at all of Illuminations in 1870-1872.

pended across and along the lines of cottages; porticoes and window-casings were covered with decorations and mottoes; every balcony had its group of fair women; while the intermittent burning of blue, red and purple lights threw a weird and fantastic coloring over all.



Cottage decorated for Illumination. MV Museum Photo Collection.

At 8:30 a band began playing in anticipation of Governor Howard's address and, when he was done, resumed playing until the crowd left. Tuesday morning the assemblage of soldiers and crowds visited Katama to hear more bands play. A dinner at two in the afternoon was followed by a trip back to Edgartown on the steamer *Monohansett*. There, they visited Dr. Daniel Fisher's house for more speeches from the visiting dignitaries, then formed into a procession that marched to shipowner Grafton Norton Collins' home for a musical interlude and on to *Gazette* publisher Edgar Marchant's house for more

music and still more speeches. Fog prevented a return to Oak Bluffs aboard the *Monohansett* that evening so carriages were employed instead. The visitors from Bristol departed the Island on Wednesday morning.<sup>16</sup>

On the following next Saturday (August 23), there was a second illumination and, after a thunder storm, the fireworks returned as well. The *Gazette's* description, printed under a headline reading "Illumination at Oak Bluffs," was enthusiastic:

Ocean Avenue was the principle [sic] scene of the Illumination, and Ocean Park the theatre of the pyrotechnic display. The spectacle was grand in the extreme. The whole avenue was hung with a profusion of Chinese lanterns, to the number of thousands, and in the blackness of the night looked like a firmament of fiery planets, while the continual shower of rockets and roman candles furnished meteors in abundance. The display of fire-works was unusually fine."

Two bands entertained that evening: the one from Foxboro that Erastus Carpenter had imported in 1869, and another from the Sea View House. Governor Howard of Rhode Island, present as a guest of Dr. Harrison

<sup>16</sup> *Vineyard Gazette*, August 22, 1873.

Tucker, was joined—and perhaps overshadowed—by an even-more-famous politician: Henry Wilson, vice-president of the United States. Born Jeremiah Jones Colbath in New Hampshire in 1812, he rose from poverty to become a lawyer and politician, representing Massachusetts in the Senate from 1855 until he took office as Grant’s vice-president at the start of his second term. A fierce abolitionist and an architect of the anti-slavery coalition that became the Republican Party, he was among the most prominent Massachusetts politicians of the era.

President Grant himself came to the Vineyard the following summer, one of ten presidents to do so, and the first to visit while in office.<sup>17</sup> His visit, from August 27 to August 30, 1874, further popularized Oak Bluffs and made for national headlines. Newspapers described every event, activity, meal, and church service the president participated in, along with the dresses and jewelry of the ladies in attendance. Grant and his wife stayed at Bishop Gilbert Haven’s cottage in the Campground—located on Clinton Avenue—but spent little quality time on the Vineyard and, indeed, showed little interest in it or its people. It was said President Grant had come to Oak Bluffs for political reasons, and he made side trips to Hyannis, Nantucket, and even Naushon to meet with potential backers about a contemplated third term in office. His choice of Oak Bluffs as a base of operations was also rooted in politics. There were, according to a remark attributed to him, three political parties in America—“Republicans, Democrats and Methodists”—and there were Methodists aplenty in Oak Bluffs in 1874.

The President and his entourage arrived in Oak Bluffs in the middle of camp meeting week. On the evening of their arrival they were paraded around its streets to experience the second Illumination of the week (the first having taken place two nights earlier). Led by a brass band the President and his party arrived at the Tucker cottage where they ascended to the third-floor tower and watched a spectacular display of fireworks along with 30,000 others.<sup>18</sup> None of the pictures taken of Grant during the trip show him smiling, and the Gazette’s Henry Beetle Hough noted the few public words he spoke to the assembled crowd after the fireworks: “I thank

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17 The ten were, in order: John Adams, Ulysses S. Grant, Chester Arthur, Grover Cleveland, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama. See: “Welcome Mister President!!!” *Martha’s Vineyard Magazine*, August 2009; Brittany Jasanoff, “The Clintons Were Here. So Were the Obamas,” *Boston Magazine*, July 31, 2016; and “John Adams’ Autobiography, part 1,” Massachusetts Historical Society, [http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=A1\\_10](http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=A1_10).

18 A physician from Foxboro who made a fortune selling patent medicines, Tucker owned one of the largest “cottages” on Ocean Avenue. See: Robert A. Danielson, “The Strange Case of Dr. Tucker: Cottage City’s Patent Medicine King,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, Summer 2016, pp. 21-36.



President Grant and members of his party at the Campground, August 1874. MV Museum Photo Collection

you for your cheering greeting. No doubt you are tired and sleepy, as I am, so I will not detain you. Good night.” Grant’s wife Julia declared herself “delighted with this island,” the President made his usual bow, and they retired for the night. Grant, however, made more of an impact on the Island than it did on him. The first line of the *Gazette’s* article about his arrival declared: “Today has been a notable day in the history of Martha’s Vineyard.”<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Grant’s stay, Oak Bluffs—which would become part of the newly independent town of Cottage City in 1880—became the town people thought of when name “Martha’s Vineyard” was mentioned.<sup>20</sup>

### Parades, Carnivals, and Fireworks

Parades were often associated with Illumination, sometimes the

same day or evening and sometimes on other days. These events ranged from something akin to modern parades to loose processions like that held when members of the general public took to the streets in celebration of Grant’s election. Some were “Antiques and Horribles” parades, an old New England tradition similar to Mardi Gras where a tin-pan drum corps was followed by ghosts with croquet mallets and frivolous characters in exaggerated costumes: satanic figures, Asians, comets, and recognizable individuals like Brigham Young and—at least once on the Vineyard—a walking caricature of “poor Nancy Luce.”<sup>21</sup>

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19 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 28, 1874.

20 Skip Finley, “Oak Bluffs Town Column,” *Vineyard Gazette*, August 9, 2013 and “Oak Bluffs Town Column,” February 14, 2014.

21 Weiss, *City in the Woods*, pp. 118-121. Described as deranged, many folks sought out the colorful character to buy her poems or deride her for entertainment. Characterized by hardship, sickness, and isolation, Nancy eked a meager existence selling eggs, small books of poems about her chickens, and photographs of herself. Her remarkable story is full of loneliness, but contains compassion, love, and even moments of fierce joy. See Walter Magnes Teller, *Consider Poor I: The Life and Works of Nancy Luce* (1984).

The Illumination version of these parades typically had prescribed routes, announced in the newspaper in advance. In the early days they typically began at Dr. Tucker’s cottage on Ocean Park and wound through the residential streets of what is now the Cottage City Historic District: Samoset to Grove to Narragansett to Pequot to Pennacook to Tuckernuck to Grove and Kennebec ending back in Ocean Park. Later, they started at Clinton Avenue in the Campground was the starting point, and followed a similar route.

The celebration held in the summer of 1875, billed by the *Gazette* as the “Regatta, Carnival and Illumination,” began on Friday, August 20, with the regatta. Saturday featured the march of King Carnival,” evidently a new name for the familiar procession that traveled the usual parade route, now amped up with a Mardi Gras flavor by participants who were masked and in costume. The *Gazette* described the Illumination with its appreciation of colorful lights and lanterns and followed by fireworks, culminating in an arched display that bore the words “Oak Bluffs Carnival, 1867-1875.”<sup>22</sup>



Oak Bluffs Carnival sign in Ocean Park, 1882. Basil Welch Photo Collection (RU 465), Album 16, Photo 24a.

The use of “Carnival” as a description of the season-ending event continued, in articles and headlines, steadily through the rest of the 1870s and intermittently into the 1880s.<sup>23</sup> Over the same period, the Island papers continued using superlative language to report on the various activities marking the end of the Baptists’ and the beginning of the Methodists’

22 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 27, 1875.

23 The use of “carnival” appears in the *Vineyard Gazette* coverage of the Illuminations of 1875 (August 27 issue), 1876 (August 25), 1877 (August 24), 1878 (August 30), 1879 (September 5), 1880 (August 22), and 1888 (August 28), as well as the *Cottage City Star* coverage of 1879 (August 27 and September 1) and 1880 (August 28). Also see Carol W. Kimball, “Wonders of the Vineyard,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, May 1968, pp. 100-101.

Camp Meeting weeks. In 1876, for example, the *Gazette* reported “crowds of thousands and measured by acres,” with ten thousand people arriving to join the ten or fifteen thousand already present. Reports from subsequent years—like those of the fireworks during Grant’s visit—describe crowds in excess of 30,000. These numbers may seem exaggerated, but given that 20–25,000 people can theoretically fit into an acre of land and Ocean Park is just over 7 acres, they are well within the range of possibility. The many diversions held alongside the religious ceremonies such as parades, regattas, clam bakes, sporting events, celebratory dinners, signage, decorations, and music added to the carnival-like atmosphere and the mainstay of fireworks displays completed the picture.

Fireworks displays traditionally served as the spectacular finale of the celebration. The Wednesday, August 27, 1879, issue of the then-new *Cottage City Star* newspaper provided a preview of the display scheduled to follow the Illumination and “procession” at 8:30 PM on Saturday. The extravagant language and minutely detailed descriptions are a spectacle in their own right: a pyrotechnic playlist designed to generate excitement even before the first rocket rose into the sky.<sup>24</sup>

1. Peruvian Cross. A brilliant zone of jessamine and Egyptian fires, revolving in rapid rotation around circles of scintillating spurs, surround gold bands and floral centers of richly colored flame...
2. Shells and Cannon Bombs
3. Cynthian Revels. A gorgeous representation of Japanese and Chinese fires, enclosing central belts of iodine flame...
4. Flights of rockets, filling the air with gold and silver rain
5. Grotto of Parses. A swiftly revolving zone of brilliant rayonnants, garnished with rosettes of chameleon and jessamine fires...
6. Mosaic Batteries, Dragon Shells, Flights of Parachute Rockets.
7. Elusis Arcana. Majestic circles of magenta flame, begirt with coruscations of dazzling spurs...
8. Flights of Pyrotechnic Pigeons and Discharges of Eighteen (18) Pound Bombs.
9. Kaleidoscope. This new device opens with a display of contra-rotating belts of Chinese and Japanese fires...
10. One Hundred Rockets. Will be fired in one flight, producing a grand effect, followed by illuminations in crimson and emerald.
11. Jewelled Fountain. This piece commences with a revolving zone of colored lance fires...
12. Dragon Shells and Mosaic Batteries, Filling the atmosphere with gold rain and amber streamers...
13. Zamia Buzaras. Amulets of coral chains surrounded with gyral jets of colored flame...
14. Flights of Floral Shells. Displaying elegant clusters of fire balls.

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24 My hat’s off to the writer of this rather breathless hyperbole and their creative use of words. It’s not often that I’ve had to refer to a dictionary.

15. Beams of Aurora. This much admired piece opens with a display of reflective flame, twinkling and sparkling with innumerable rays...

16. Myriads of Rockets, Which dissolve in showers of golden rain or display fireballs of different colors.

17. Star of America. Mystic bands of sapphire flame, moved in swift rotation, mutating to surrounding zones, encircling crimson, emerald and lambent fires flashing in sheeny splendor; change to the Star of America, composed of star points, shining in a still expanse of unbroken rays of incandescent flame, terminating with a copious shower of reflective rayonnants heavily charged with marooned gerbs.

18. Discharges of Parachute Rockets, carrying their ever changing lights.

19. Saturn and his satellites.

20. Floral and Dragon Shells, Cannon Bombs and Illuminations.

21. Finale. A gorgeous illumination filling the surrounding atmosphere with innumerable tints, unveils the finale of the evening's entertainment: a superb Temple appears, formed of flaming lance-work, covered with elegant capitals, upon which rests an arc in diamond lance, supporting pediments of brilliant fires; the whole is surmounted by a globe of silver light, over which hovers an American eagle wrought in appropriate colors. In the center of the spacious niche is a Union shield emblazoned in gorgeous colors, and surrounded by the motto, "Oak Bluff Carnival," in letters of crimson and gold. Along the base of the structure are the dates 1868 - 1879 in golden fire. The whole is instantaneously covered with a dazzling halo, and concludes with the tinted coruscations springing from mosaic batteries, displays of flower vases, dragon and streamer shells, aerial and marooned bombs pouring forth a grand salute.<sup>25</sup>

### **Illumination in Cottage City**

Illumination had begun as an enterprise of the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company, designed to promote the Oak Bluffs resort development in what was then still part of Edgartown. The Methodists' anxiety over Oak Bluffs' secular influences, which led them to erect the fence along Circuit Avenue in 1868, led them to take an even bolder step in 1869. That spring, Camp Meeting members formed the Vineyard Grove Company and purchased fifty-five acres of land on the far side of the lake. The intent was for Vineyard Highlands, as the new development was known, to provide a new home for the Camp Meeting, in case the old one's proximity to the Oak Bluffs development became intolerable. The Vineyard Grove company built its own hotel (the Highland House), its own steamer wharf,

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<sup>25</sup> "Oak Bluffs Carnival," *Cottage City Star*, August 27, 1879. A similar listing appeared in the *Star* the following year (*Cottage City Star*, August 28, 1880), and the *Gazette* followed suit the year after (*Vineyard Gazette*, September 2, 1881).



View of Vineyard Highlands, showing the steamer wharf and Highland House hotel (R). MV Museum Photo Collection.

and a causeway across the lake to connect them to the Campground.<sup>26</sup> Grant disembarked at the new wharf in 1874, and it became the preferred entry point for Camp Meeting attendees who wished to avoid the secular temptations of Oak Bluffs. Riding across the causeway from the wharf to the Campground became known as “crossing over Jordan,” a reference to the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land.

In time, relations between the Campground and Oak Bluffs warmed, and the need for a place for the Camp Meeting to “escape” to faded. Vineyard Highlands became a resort development in its own right, as well as the home of an annual Baptist camp meeting (held in a wooded circle inspired by the one in the Campground) and the Martha’s Vineyard Summer Institute.<sup>27</sup> In 1880 it was incorporated—along with Oak Bluffs, the Campground, other resort developments, and the old villages of Eastville and Farm Neck—into the new town of Cottage City, today’s town of Oak Bluffs.

The push to separate Cottage City from Edgartown—supported by developers and business owners who believed that Edgartown took much in taxes and delivered little in services—spilled over into the end-of-sum-

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<sup>26</sup> The causeway divided what had been known as Squash Meadow Pond into two separate bodies of water. The smaller one to the south was dubbed Sunset Lake and the larger one to the north Lake Anthony. Around 1900, a channel was cut through the barrier beach separating Lake Anthony from the sea, turning it into Oak Bluffs Harbor.

<sup>27</sup> Hough, *Summer Resort*, pp. 64, 80, 84.



View along the waterfront side of the Sea View House, looking south. The observation tower at the corner of Ocean Park is visible in the distance. MV Museum Photo Collection.

mer celebrations in the late 1870s. The 1879 carnival was filled with references to independence, and the parade included placards deriding the Edgartown Board of Health's treatment of popular local innkeeper (and independence advocate) Joseph Dias.<sup>28</sup> A "score" of masked, torch bearing revelers in the procession on August 30, with some carrying sarcastic and disparaging placards relating to Edgartown's taxation.<sup>29</sup>

The *Cottage City Star* had been established in 1879 specifically to advocate for independence, and its August 28, 1880 issue expressed newly independent Cottage City's unhappiness with parent Edgartown, even as it described—lovingly and in great detail—the annual fireworks display. There was no procession in the town's first summer of independence. Instead, a wagon of fireworks was led by a band and followed by a crowd through the streets who then viewed the displays.<sup>30</sup> Illumination took place as scheduled, and included electric lights for the first time. One was at the Sea View House, one on the new observation tower that had been erected over the bath houses at the corner of Ocean Park, and one on Ocean Avenue itself.<sup>31</sup>

Illumination and the now-traditional parades and fireworks continued

28 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 27, 1880. For the history of the independence movement, see Railton, *History*, pp. 258-267 and Hough, *Summer Resort*, pp. 155-164.

29 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 5, 1879.

30 *Cottage City Star*, August 28, 1880.

31 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 27, 1880,

into the 1880s, but popular interest in them was ebbing. Exultation has a certain shelf life and it would be difficult to derive the same pleasure from a repeating activity over the first dozen or so of Oak Bluffs' years.

That the bloom was off the Illumination/Carnival rose is evidenced by the pointed remarks of Samuel Keniston, editor and proprietor of the *Vineyard Gazette*, about the 1882 event: "We did not arrange for any extended report of the Illumination at Cottage City, for the reason it would necessitate too much Sunday work to get it before the summer public previous to the departure for home, and for our readers a description of the annual exhibition has somewhat lost its charm." Keniston was, in the words of historian Tom Dunlop, an interesting and "energetic" writer, but a lackluster journalist. His report of the August 1883 fire that destroyed downtown Vineyard Haven appeared a week after the event, and included little detail. He had taken over the *Gazette* at a rough time: just after secession (which it had opposed in its editorials) and at a time when it faced competition for the first time in the form of the *Cottage City Star*.<sup>32</sup>

All of these factors (and, perhaps, a sense that Illumination was no longer an "Edgartown" story and thus of less interest to the *Gazette's* readers) contributed to Keniston's jaded coverage of the 1882 festivities. An accompanying article about them began: "While it is not true that 'nothing like it was ever before seen here,' and therefore not desirable to so state it, it *is* true that Illumination was on the whole highly successful." In a snide aside the article noted the crowds were a large as year's past and the fireworks as good as ever, but that the Illumination of avenues was "considerably below the average" and "as for the races and other matters advertised for the public entertainment in the afternoon, the less said the better."<sup>33</sup>

Significantly, the article failed to note that the season-ending event in late August was the second Illumination of 1882. The first had been held in the Highlands on Thursday, July 20, and included decorated homes, bands and pyrotechnics launched from the lake. It was the first Illumination that anchored by the Highland House hotel and it included the Campground, but not the Oak Bluffs part of town. It was described as a "gratifying success."<sup>34</sup>

The *Gazette's* coverage of the Illumination of August 31, 1883, was equally downbeat. "The annually decreasing interest in the performances incident to the closing of the season here," the *Gazette* writer declared, "was never so glaringly apparent as last Saturday." The weather was far

32 Tom Dunlop, "It Took Many Years for the Gazette to Fully Report the Tisbury Fire," and "Founders Vision: To Root a New Newspaper Deep in Island Life," *Vineyard Gazette*, July 5, 1996. See: <https://vineyardgazette.com/tm/featured-collection/Vineyard-Gazette-HistoryS>

33 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 8, 1882.

34 *Vineyard Gazette*, July 21, 1882 and June 24, 1955.



The Martha's Vineyard Heralds, a Cottage City baseball team of the 1880s. MV Museum Photo Collection.

from ideal and it was suggested that the cottagers had tired of the event, despite the inclusion of a tennis tournament, an obstacle race featuring three “Insty sons of Afric,”<sup>35</sup> and a daredevil who billed himself as “Prof. Thomas Riley” leaping from a fifty-foot tower erected on the end of the Oak Bluffs Wharf. The bicycle race drew only two participants, and the baseball game ended in a lopsided score of 14-2. The evening of Illumination was described as “substantially a failure,” particularly on Circuit Avenue which was for the first time lit electrically.<sup>36</sup>

There was a similarly unenthusiastic report in 1884 when—despite a few cottages and hotels that primped with lanterns, lights and American flag decorations—Illumination itself was cancelled by rain for the first time in its history.<sup>37</sup> The next year was no better. Even with a successful parade by the fire department the afternoon of September 5, 1885, “The Illumination turned out about as expected. Closed cottages, fall rains and cold weather apathy proved too much for the committee and the promised spectacular grand exhibition degenerated into an ordinary display of fireworks from the waterside.”<sup>38</sup> It is likely that this growing fatigue with the Oak-Bluffs-centered “carnival,” in 1883 and the success of the July 1882 Illumination centered elsewhere in Cottage City may have begun changing the focus of Illumination to the Campground.

35 Perhaps a typo for “Inky Sons of Afric[a].”

36 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 7, 1883.

37 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 5, 1884.

38 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 11, 1885.



Children's Day in Ocean Park. Basil Welch Photo Collection (RU 465), Album I6, Photo 14b.

### Children's Day and Governor's Day

Illumination received no press coverage from 1886 through 1889, but the season-ender of 1890 drew renewed attention with a three-day celebration culminating in a new feature: Children's Day. The event was promulgated by the owners of the Pawnee House hotel on Circuit Avenue, and executed by the Martha's Vineyard Association, a civic-improvement society led by Dr. Tucker. Held on Thursday, August 28, 1890, Children's Day drew 600 little ones who, dressed all in white, paraded from the bandstand in Ocean Park to the Casino.<sup>39</sup> There they were feted with a couple of speeches, served ice cream and cake, and entertained by the Fitchburg Band with musical interludes for the afternoon. Following the event, the children marched back to the park for a fireworks display, and officials declared that

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39 In 1879, Boston roller-skate manufacturer Frederick Winslow built an immense skating rink opposite the steamer wharf, across Oak Bluffs Avenue from the Sea View House. Over the winter of 1885-1886, it was renamed The Casino (a term that then applied to any public building used for pleasurable activities) and refitted as a performance venue with a stage, scenery, and seating for 1500. Badly damaged in the September 1892 fire that destroyed the Sea View, it was replaced by a smaller, single-story building of the same name. See: Chris Baer, "This Was Then: Summer Toboggans, the Casino, and the North Bluff Flying Horses," *Martha's Vineyard Times*, July 6, 2017. <https://www.mvtimes.com/2017/07/06/summer-toboggans-casino-north-bluff-flying-horses/>

Children's Day would become an annual event. Friday, August 29, brought the Fire Department Parade, followed by a ball at which 600 revelers danced the evening away to the music of a live band. On Saturday, the traditional parade of "antiques and horrors" was revived. Led by a wagon of torches and fireworks, it departed from the Sea View House and wound its way amid the lantern-decorated and well-lit homes of Cottage City and the Campground, to Ocean Park where it disbanded and its members viewed the requisite fireworks.

Children's Day gave new life to the tradition of Illumination, but only temporarily.<sup>40</sup> The celebration of youth, and the other events associated with it, were repeated at the close of the 1891 season. Except for a fog that reduced the brilliance of the Saturday-night fireworks display, it could have been a mirror image of the year before.<sup>41</sup> The following year, 1892, Children's Day and its concluding fireworks were held for the third year running, but Illumination night and *its* accompanying fireworks were dispensed with.<sup>42</sup>

Illumination Night officially moved to the Campground on August 17, 1903. Governor John L. Bates visited, as the guest of the Camp Meeting Association and was widely feted with processions, meals, religious services and receptions. Illumination was the culmination of his visit, though barely mentioned in the press coverage.<sup>43</sup> Bates' visit harked back to the first Illumination in 1869, staged by Erastus P. Carpenter of the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company to celebrate the visit of Governor William Claflin and show off the new development.<sup>44</sup> The association between visiting governors and Illumination continued for the next 30 years.<sup>45</sup> Governors' visits were not, however, an annual event. When Governor Eben S. Draper and other dignitaries attended as guests of the Camp Meeting Association in 1909, for example, the *Vineyard Gazette* noted that it was the first such visit since that of Governor Curtis Guild Jr. in 1907.<sup>46</sup>

The Wesley House hosted Bates and most of his pre-WWII successors, a fact that the hotel continued to use in advertising long after "Governor's Day" had ceased to be an end-of-summer event.

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40 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 1, 1890.

41 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 28, 1891.

42 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 2, 1892.

43 *Vineyard Gazette*, August 27, 1903.

44 Later, in 1872, Claflin acquired his own home on the corner of Seaview and Pequot Avenues. Designed by Samuel L. Pratt, the original cottage was later modified by raising the top floor and adding another floor in between that survives today as the Oak House.

45 Dagnall, *Circle of Faith*, p. 124.

46 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 2, 1909.



Illumination Night in the mid-20th century. MV Museum Postcard Collection (RU 359).

Its claim to be the preferred destination of Massachusetts governors who visited the Island remained (along with its claim to be the first Massachusetts hotel outside of Boston to be wired for electricity) part of its promotions from the Progressive Era into the internet era, and was featured on its old website (eclipsed when the hotel was sold and renamed in the 2010s). Other businesses also sought to leverage the annual Illumination and associated events for promotional purposes. The first page of the August 29, 1907, *Gazette* had a substantial advertisement from The Star Store in New Bedford, with boldface type soliciting shoppers to make the store their headquarters “During the Old Home Week Carnival” as “A Continuation of the Great BARGAIN CARNIVAL.”<sup>47</sup>

The Star Store’s blatant commercialization of the event, startling even by the standards of contemporary newspaper in those times, may have been matched by promoters trying too hard to reignite the flame of enthusiasm that followed Grant’s election in 1868 or his visit to the Island in 1874. If so, their efforts had little effect, and interest in Illumination remained tepid. Even with a good-sized crowd in 1911 the *Gazette* noted: “The fireworks [held at Lake Anthony] were not so numerous or satisfactory as in years past.” The crowd may have numbered “thousands,” but the traditional collection was only able

<sup>47</sup> *Vineyard Gazette*, August 29, 1907.

to extract twenty dollars in contributions.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, the Children's Day and Governor's Day celebrations faded away, and the Carnival, with its Mardi Gras atmosphere, processions, and parades were discarded as gimmickry, out of keeping with an event where participants celebrated the end of a season they'd looked forward to all year long.

Illumination Night is quieter and more reflective now, a hundred and fifty years after it was first held. The ballyhoo is gone, and the costumes, parades, and political speeches with it. The end of the season has shifted slightly, too, to match the changing rhythms mainland life. Yet, thanks to the vision and energy of Erastus P. Carpenter and the political ambitions of President Ulysses S. Grant, we still pack Ocean Park on the Friday of the third week in August to watch fireworks light up the night sky, ending the summer with a bang and showers of colored sparks. And we still gather in the Campground on the Wednesday of Illumination Night when, amid music and reflection, a pre-selected candle sparks a host of lanterns encircling an enthralled crowd of thousands, to light the faces and eyes and imaginations of toddlers and grown folk alike.

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48 *Vineyard Gazette*, September 7, 1911.

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# The Town at the Center Of the Island: Tisbury at 350

by A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

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CREATING SOBRIQUETS for individual members of a larger group is part of how we make sense of the universe. It's not just Hera, the consort of Zeus, Homer is forever reminding his readers, but "white-armed Hera." It's not just Achilles and Odysseus, but "swift-footed Achilles" and "Odysseus the teller of tales." When Beatlemania was at its peak in the early 1960s, every self-respecting fan of the band knew that John was "the smart one," Paul "the cute one," George "the quiet one," and Ringo "the funny one." If you spend much time looking at tourist brochures and similar introductions to Martha's Vineyard, you'll quickly notice a similar pattern. Almost invariably, Edgartown is a "whaling port of days gone by," Oak Bluffs a "Victorian summer resort," and West Tisbury "the agricultural center of the Island." Chilmark is home to the "quaint fishing village of Menemsha," and Aquinnah is summed up in terms of its natural beauty and Wampanoag heritage.

And then there's poor Tisbury ("also called Vineyard Haven," the brochures invariably add, choosing simplicity over precision). Its tourist-brochure sobriquet is—inevitably, invariably—some version of "the Island's year-round port." If Tisbury had been a high-school senior, its classmates would have voted it "most likely to be useful." If Tisbury had been a Beatle, it would have been "the other one."

It is hardly surprising that Tisbury has an identity crisis. Tisbury has *always* had an identity crisis. Uncertainty about what makes the Town of Tisbury distinctive is, literally, as old as the town itself. It began on the day—July 8, 1671—when the colonial governor of New York brought Tisbury and Edgartown into existence with a stroke of his pen. The boundaries of the two new towns split Martha's Vineyard into tidy thirds, but created a mismatch between municipal politics and the realities of both physical and human geography. The unintended consequences of that long-ago decision have rippled through the history of the Island ever since. What follows is an exploration of what they have meant for Tisbury.



Deed from “Queen Sachem” Nataquanum to Hannah Mayhew Daggett, 1683. MV Museum Deeds Collection (RU 132).

## The Birth of a Town: July 8, 1671

The Wampanoag had settled and cultivated and built lives on the Island, which they called Noepe, for ten thousand years or more before the first English explorers (Bartholomew Gosnold and his fellow “gentleman adventurers”) arrived in 1602, or the first English colonizers (John Pease and his friends, then Thomas Mayhew and *his* friends) turned up a generation or so later. The Mayhews arrived in 1642, and what had belonged to the Wampanoag for a hundred centuries or more, time out of mind, was lost to them in far less than a single century, one signed, sealed, meticulously documented land transfer at a time. The process of colonization—of turning what had been Wampanoag land into English land—began on the western shore of what is now Edgartown harbor and moved steadily eastward. By 1671, a generation after colonization began, the English had thriving villages at Great Harbour (today’s Edgartown) and New Town (today’s West Tisbury).<sup>1</sup> There were smaller outposts—handfuls of English families, or even isolated homesteads—at Middletown (today’s North Tisbury), Holmes Hole (today’s Vineyard Haven), Quansoo (in southeastern Chilmark), and Eastville (now part of Oak Bluffs). Only the remote extremities of the Island—Chappaquiddick in the east and Gay Head in the west—remained wholly in Wampanoag hands.

1 “New Town” to distinguish it from Great Harbour, which was “Old Town.”

It was clear to Thomas Mayhew and every other Englishman of his era that Martha's Vineyard (as they knew it) was English territory, and so under the authority of the English king. Beyond that, for the first thirty years of English colonization, the lines of authority remained fuzzy. The Mayhews arrived on the Island in 1642, the same year that England dissolved into a nine-year civil war between "Royalists" loyal to King Charles I and "Roundheads" who supported the authority of Parliament. The victory of the Parliamentary forces, the fall (and subsequent execution) of Charles I, and a decade of political instability known as the Interregnum (1650-1660) left Mayhew unencumbered by royal *or* parliamentary oversight and free to govern the Island as he saw fit. The restoration of the monarchy, and the crowning of Charles Stuart (oldest living child of the executed king) as King Charles II, initially did little to change that. England had bigger problems than an obscure island on the far side of the Atlantic, and Mayhew continued to be left to his own devices.

The bloodless English seizure of New Amsterdam from the Dutch in 1664, during the Second Anglo-Dutch War, changed the playing field but not—at least initially—the game. Martha's Vineyard, along with other "outlying islands," was incorporated into the newly formed Province of New York, and placed under the nominal authority of its royal governor, who ruled from Fort James on the southern tip of Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> Another seven years would pass, however, before the Governor of New York, Francis Lovelace, invited Thomas Mayhew to Fort James to clarify the lines of authority. Mayhew was 78 years old that summer, and had been left alone to run "his" island as he pleased for thirty years. When the summons from Lovelace arrived in the late spring of 1671, Mayhew might have been forgiven for wondering whether his world was about to be summarily upended. He need not have worried.

Mayhew went to Fort James in early July 1671, accompanied by his eldest grandson and chief lieutenant Matthew, then in his mid-twenties. They returned with a proclamation from Lovelace naming the elder Mayhew "Governor for Life" and formalizing his authority over Martha's Vineyard, and with charters for two new towns: Edgartown and Tisbury.<sup>3</sup> The title of "Governor for Life" was largely ceremonial: a "lifetime achievement award" that burnished Mayhew's ego without granting him

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2 Built as Fort Amsterdam by the Dutch in 1625, it was surrendered to the English along with the rest of New Amsterdam in 1664. The English renamed both fort and colony in honor of James Stuart, Duke of York, the younger brother of Charles II who would, in time, take the throne himself as King James II.

3 The story of Mayhew's meeting with Lovelace is recounted briefly in Arthur R. Railton, *The History of Martha's Vineyard: How We Got to Where We Are* (2006), pp. 26-28, and at length in Charles E. Banks, *The History of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts* [3 vol.] (1911, 1926), vol. 1, pp. 147-153.



The conference at Fort James, as depicted by Charles Banks around 1900. MV Museum Charles E. Banks Collection (RU 127).

any powers beyond those he already possessed. It was, in any event, temporary: designed to die with its recipient. The charters were more consequential and longer-lasting. Dated July 8, 1671, they gave royal sanction to Mayhew's thirty-year-old colonial enterprise, and began the process of imposing English political geography on the Island. Each of them drew a formal boundary around what had been a loosely connected group of villages and settlements, binding them—for the purposes of administration, law, taxation, and even worship—into a coherent unit. They remain so, though each has been diminished in area, to this day.<sup>4</sup>

## Dividing the Island

The original boundaries of Tisbury and Edgartown are, almost certainly, the work of Thomas Mayhew and his associates. Lovelace had the authority, but not the intimate knowledge of the land and its resources that the job required. Located two hundred miles from Fort James, on the far eastern fringes of the Province of New York, Martha's Vineyard would have been a remote and insignificant backwater to Lovelace. Mayhew, by contrast, had been there for thirty years, immersed in the details of acquiring land from the Wampanoag, dividing it into suitable lots, and parceling it out to English settlers. Even before he came to the Island himself, when he paid both of its competing claimants for the settlement rights to ensure himself clear title, Mayhew had made the development of Martha's Vineyard by Englishmen his full-time concern. It was, and by 1671 had

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<sup>4</sup> The northern section of Edgartown, by then a thriving summer resort, was split off as the Town of Cottage City in 1880, and changed its name to Oak Bluffs in 1907. The western portion of Tisbury was split off and incorporated as the Town of West Tisbury in 1892.

been for thirty years, his *job*. Thomas Mayhew was not a cartographer, a surveyor, or even a yeoman farmer, but in the early 1670s no Englishman would have known the Island more comprehensively or intimately.

The boundaries of Tisbury and Edgartown, endorsed by Governor Lovelace at Fort James, reflected the depth and intimacy of that knowledge. They were drawn with careful attention to existing geographic and political features, and close attention to the broadly equitable division of resources between the three towns. The Tisbury-Chilmark boundary, for example, ran perpendicular to the north shore and the “Savage’s Line” that divided English from Wampanoag land, and then—after a brief jog along what is now South Road—followed the Tiasquam River until it emptied into Town Cove at the head of Tisbury Great Pond. The boundary split Town Cove lengthwise, then bent south to (as on the north shore) strike the coastline at a right angle. The boundary between Tisbury and Edgartown had similarly elegant contours. From a point just south of the headwaters of Lake Tashmoo, one branch ran north-south, ruler-straight to South Beach, splitting lengthwise the neck of land between Oyster Pond and Watcha Pond. The other branch angled south-southeast to the headwaters of Lagoon Pond, then turned sharply north-northeast, splitting lengthwise first the eastern arm of the pond and then the harbor beyond.

The “wasteland” of scrub forest and agriculturally unpromising soil at the center of the Island was thus split more or less evenly between Tisbury and Edgartown, as were the headlands and shores of the Holmes Hole Harbor, and the waters of Lagoon Pond. Each of the two new towns was allocated one of the two largest ponds along the south shore, though Chilmark was granted a small beachhead on Tisbury Great Pond to complement its own great ponds (Chilmark, Squibnocket, Nashaquitsa, and Menemsha) further to the west. The zig-zags in the Edgartown-Tisbury boundary between Lake Tashmoo and Lagoon Pond give both towns access to the headwaters of both ponds. Mayhew, who went to his grave seeing the entire Island as “his,” drew his boundaries with evident concern for what he saw as an equitable division of resources.

Splitting the Island neatly into thirds, the Chilmark-Tisbury and Tisbury-Edgartown boundaries laid the groundwork for the next two centuries of Island politics. Chilmark would not be formally incorporated until 1694, but for all practical purposes the 1671 charters gathered the Island’s scattering villages and villages-to-be into three contiguous townships whose boundaries remained stable for the next 200 years or more.

The townships had a real and significant impact on Island life. They simplified the work of municipal officials, from tax collectors and justices of the peace to fence viewers and tithingmen, by clarifying areas of responsibility and lines of authority. They facilitated the formation of lo-



Dukes County in 1858, showing the colonial-era division of the Island into three towns and the Wampanoag reservation established in 1717 at Gay Head. Detail from a map published by Henry Walling, MV Museum Maps Collection.

cal councils to advise “Governor-for-Life” Mayhew, and (when the Island became part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691) the establishment of Boards of Selectmen and election of representatives to the General Court. In another sense, however, the newly minted townships were—and remained for some time—just short of being political fictions. The difficulty of land travel over distances of more than a mile or two encouraged a degree of decentralization, and meant that even relatively small villages tended, over time, to develop into self-contained social worlds with their own general stores, mills, churches, and schoolhouses. Villages, like blocks or neighborhoods in cities, thus became places where social bonds with friends, neighbors, and potential marriage partners were most regularly and frequently reinforced. Connections between the individual and the township were, in contrast, reinforced less frequently and in less emotionally fulfilling ways: town meetings, tax payments, and militia drills.

Mayhew’s return from Fort James with a charter for the newly established Town of Tisbury did not, therefore, create a newfound sense of shared identity and common purpose among its citizens. Residents of Middletown or Lambert’s Cove did not, by virtue of their newly minted status as citizens of Tisbury, feel a newfound kinship with residents of Holmes Hole. At the same time, the fact that the tiny settlement at Quansoo was now in Chilmark while that at Deep Bottom Cove was now in

Tisbury did nothing to diminish the shared experiences and common interests that came from living on the margins of Tisbury Great Pond.

The original Town of Tisbury, born on July 8, 1671, was a political boundary wrapped around a far-flung collection of villages, near-villages, and villages-to-be spread across the center of the Island. New Town was its commercial, religious, and administrative center as well as its largest settlement, but it also took in Deep Bottom, Kephigan, Lambert's Cove, Middletown, Chickemoo, Chappaquonsett, and Holmes Hole, among them. The settlements that made up Tisbury might have constituted a single town for political and legislative purposes, but they differed profoundly in geography, livelihood, and outlook.

## West Tisbury and East Tisbury

The most palpable split within the new town was that dividing its coastal margins from its inland districts. The overall shape of the town's boundaries meant, that this split divided it roughly into two districts: a large one to the west and a much smaller one to the east. Located atop some of the Island's most fertile farmland, with ready access to streams ideally suited for turning mill wheels, the western district of Tisbury was strongly agricultural. Residents of the area—of New Town, Middletown, Chickemoo, and Deep Bottom—looked to the land itself, and to the inland streams and ponds, for their livelihood and their sense of identity. Only the settlement at Lamberts Cove, a gently curved embayment on the north shore, added a significant maritime component (mostly inshore fishing) to its economy. Residents of the eastern district of Tisbury—of Chappaquonsett, the Neck, and particularly Holmes Hole—looked instead to the sea. Specifically, they looked to Vineyard Sound, the waterway dividing Martha's Vineyard from the southern shores of the Elizabeth Islands and Cape Cod. Rich with fish and, in the seventeenth century, occasional whales, the sound was also a natural sea route for ships bound up and down the North American coast. Deep-water ships bound for ports from Boston and Barbados transited the sound, and smaller vessels—sloops and skiffs—from the islands crossed it on their way to south coast ports like Falmouth, Rochester, Fairhaven, and New Bedford.

Geography does not rigidly determine destiny, but it does shape it, and over multiple generations, the cultural differences between the two parts of Tisbury broadened and deepened. The coves and coastlines of eastern Tisbury produced fishermen and ferrymen, boatbuilders and pilots; the hills and plains of western Tisbury bred farmers, husbandmen, and millers. On the eve of the Revolution, a century after its founding, Tisbury was two worlds yoked—with a growing sense of unease and discomfort—into a single town.

Distance, and the burdens it imposed, reinforced the sense that Tisbury was two distinct worlds. Travelling to New Town—the commercial, religious, and administrative center of Tisbury—from one of the outlying villages meant spending a significant part of the day on bad roads. Holmes Hole residents, in particular, were frustrated by the fact that they paid taxes to support a minister whose sermons they rarely heard because the meetinghouse (located in New Town) was too far away for them to regularly attend services there. The frustration simmered for decades, but in 1780—perhaps emboldened by the spirit of the ongoing Revolution—residents of Holmes Hole petitioned the selectmen of Tisbury to exempt them from the tax. The process dragged on for another decade-and-a-half, eventually reaching the General Court, but in 1796 Holmes Hole and the land surrounding it was formally designated the “East Parish of Tisbury.”

The resolution acknowledged in law what had been apparent in fact for the better part of a century: that the western and eastern districts of Tisbury were fundamentally different worlds. It would take nearly another century, and the transformation of Holmes Hole into a major center of maritime commerce, for them to be declared not just separate districts, but separate towns.

## Holmes Hole and Eastville

Nowhere in greater Tisbury were those differences more apparent than in the rapidly growing village of Holmes Hole. When the town was incorporated in 1671, Holmes Hole had been a tiny settlement of a half-dozen English families; a century later, on the eve of the Revolution, it was a community of hundreds. Holmes Hole’s position at the head of the Island’s largest deep-water harbor made it a welcome stopping-place for ships riding out a storm or waiting for a fair wind. Like the smaller villages of Holmes Hole Neck to its north (centered around what is now Grove Avenue) and Eastville across the harbor (centered around the current site of the Martha’s Vineyard Hospital), it was a natural base of operations for local seafarers, and an ideal place to start a business offering goods and services useful to passing ships and their crews.<sup>5</sup> Schooners plying the coastal trade routes—shuttling goods from Havana to Halifax and the many ports in between—slipped into and out of the harbor in a steady

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5 Holmes Hole Neck, which locals referred to simply as “the Neck,” was gradually absorbed into the larger village to the south (by then renamed Vineyard Haven) in the last third of the nineteenth century, much as an expanding Boston absorbed the once-independent towns of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Brighton. Eastville, originally a distant outlying village of Edgartown, became part of the newly independent town of Cottage City (later Oak Bluffs) in 1880. Its significance as a working waterfront declined over the next 40 years as ship traffic in Vineyard Haven Harbor began to dwindle, and by the 1920s “Eastville” connoted a geographic area more than a community.



Holmes Hole Harbor c. 1780, showing settlements at Holmes Hole, the Neck, and Eastville, as well as Bass Creek. Detail from a map drawn by Lt. Joseph F. W. Des Barres, Norman Leventhal Map Center, Boston Public Library.

stream. Brigs and ships on the transatlantic run—inbound to New York and Baltimore, outbound to Liverpool and LeHavre—stopped for repairs, resupply, and refreshment. Boatbuilders and blacksmiths, grocers and innkeepers, gin shops and waterfront missions all, over the years, found a steady supply of customers on the shores of Holmes Hole Harbor.

Not all the ship traffic, however, came from distant ports. Pilots—experienced local mariners who marketed themselves as guides to captains unfamiliar with the Sound and its hazards—used Holmes Hole and Lambert’s Cove as a base of operations. Small inshore sailing vessels known “packeted” goods and passengers (anything that would pay) to and from New Bedford,

Hyannis, and other ports on the Cape and south coast. Long before steam engines became powerful and reliable enough to overcome the wind, waves, and currents of Vineyard Sound, the small sailing craft that ferried people and goods from the cape docked at a landing at the foot of Beach Street, floating in what is now the midst of the Five Corners intersection. A seven-foot-deep channel called Bass Creek flowed along what is now Water Street and Lagoon Pond Road, connecting Holmes Hole Harbor to the Lagoon. The barrier beach that divided the Lagoon from the harbor stretched southward from Eastville toward Bass Creek: a barren, unbroken strip of sand.



The Sailors' Free Reading Room on Hatch Road, part of the settlement known as "the Neck." Photo by Baldwin Coolidge, courtesy of Historic New England.

Over the first century of America's existence as an independent republic, the significance of Holmes Hole Harbor as a port of refuge for passing ships continued to grow. The network of shoreside businesses and institutions catering to the needs of those ships and their crews grew as well. By mid-century, Holmes Hole Neck boasted a wharf and a chandlery alongside its Revolutionary-era inns and tavern. A little to the south, on Hatch Road, Rev. Daniel Waldo Stevens of the Unitarian Association established a Sailors' Free Reading Room in 1867. There, where the crews of passing ships could write and mail letters, read the latest magazines and newspapers, and attend non-denominational religious services. Stevens had a pier built into the harbor from the foot of the bluff where the Reading Room stood, and arranged for water from a nearby spring to be piped to the end of it, enabling

ships to fill their empty water casks without having to remove them from the boats that carried them to the shore. Across the harbor, Eastville boasted a chandlery with a deep-water wharf big enough to accommodate ocean-going ships, along with an extensive collection of taverns, gin shops, and (it is said) brothels that led it to be nicknamed “the Barbary Coast.” A second deep-water wharf was added at the foot of Kedron (now New York) Avenue in 1870, to cater to steamers from the mainland and coastal liners that connected New York, Boston, and Portland, Maine.

At the head of the harbor, the village of Holmes Hole grew and developed even faster.

Bass Creek, which had been growing steadily shallower since 1815, was blocked at what is now Five Corners in 1835. The northern section (between Five Corners and the harbor) was filled, and Water Street laid atop it, by 1840. Beach Street, which had run from Main Street to the old ferry landing, was extended across the fill and along the barrier beach. By 1845, Thomas Bradley and Dr. Leroy Yale had opened a shipyard—capable of building and launching medium-sized schooners—where the Martha’s Vineyard Shipyard stands today. The Holmes Hole Union Wharf Company, founded in 1833 and incorporated in 1835 (the year Bass Creek was blocked), built a large timber wharf where the northern end of that inlet once entered the harbor. Coal, lumber, and grain merchants—regular recipients of heavy cargo—built along Water Street to take advantage of proximity to it. Blacksmiths, and boatbuilders specializing in small craft, also set up shop along the harbor front. The Island’s second U. S. Marine Hospital (successor to a much smaller one that operated in Eastville from 1798 to 1826), was established on a bluff overlooking the western arm of the Lagoon in 1879.<sup>6</sup>

Holmes Hole, the Neck, and Eastville had much in common: proximity to the great harbor they all bordered, deep economic ties to the sea, and a cosmopolitan atmosphere created by the presence of sailors from throughout the Atlantic world. Through the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, the three villages were—because of these factors—bound more closely to one another than they were to the distant towns of which they were nominally a part. The interests of Holmes Hole, and the rest of the “East Parish of Tisbury,” diverged steadily from those of the landward-looking West Parish centered on New Town (known, by mid-century, as West Tisbury). Eastville, part of Edgartown until 1880, remained distant from it both geographically and culturally. Both depended on the sea for their livelihood, but the fortunes of Edgartown

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6 On this history, see A. Bowdoin Van Riper, “View from the Front Lawn: Three Centuries of the Vineyard Haven Waterfront,” *MV Museum Quarterly*, February 2019, pp. 16-38.



The first U. S. Marine Hospital in Vineyard Haven, established in 1879 and replaced in 1895 by the building that now houses the Museum. Photo by Henry Pratt. MV Museum Photo Collection.

village were, in the 1870s, still yoked to the dying whaling industry, whereas Eastville's rested on acting as a stopover point for cargo vessels and passenger steamers. The political leadership of Edgartown—drawn, overwhelmingly, from the village—gave scant attention to the needs of distant Eastville, and expressed little concerns for its residents' desires. Proposals to build a bridge over the Lagoon entrance that had opened in 1815, supported by residents of both Holmes Hole and Eastville, met with indifference or active resistance from the Edgartown selectmen. Why, they reasoned, should Edgartown contribute money to a project whose principal effect would be to make it easier for Eastville residents to do businesses in Holmes Hole, and thus enrich Tisbury?<sup>7</sup>

The bridge was finally built in 1871, the same year that the village of Holmes Hole changed its name to Vineyard Haven. It was, perhaps by coincidence, the 200th anniversary year of Mayhew's meeting with Governor Lovelace at Fort James. The villages surrounding newly renamed Vineyard Haven Harbor remained, in 1871 and to this day, divided by the political boundary drawn at that meeting. Within a decade, however, the significance of that boundary would change profoundly.

<sup>7</sup> The bridge was eventually built in 1871, replaced in 1934, and replaced again (by the current structure) in 2015.

## West Tisbury and Tisbury

After two centuries of stability, a flurry of changes redrew the political geography of the island in the last third of the nineteenth century. The boundaries drawn by Mayhew and sanctioned by Lovelace in 1671 remained, but—in less than a quarter of a century—the Island’s traditional three towns became six. Pressed by the state government to give up their reservation status, trading the significant autonomy it gave them for fuller participation in the affairs of the Commonwealth (including the right to vote in state elections), the Wampanoag residents of Gay Head chose, by the narrowest of margins, to incorporate as a town in 1870.<sup>8</sup> Nine years later, newly enfranchised Gay Head residents overwhelmingly voted Stephen Flanders of Chilmark as the Island’s next representative to the state legislature, ensuring Flanders’ defeat of Beriah Norton of Edgartown. Victory for Flanders meant victory for those—like Howes Norris and Joseph Dias—who had been lobbying for Oak Bluffs, Vineyard Grove, and the other flourishing summer resort communities of northern Edgartown to become an independent town. Edgartown interests, represented by Hillman, had fiercely opposed independence; Flanders had made support for it central to his campaign. Early in its 1880 session, the legislature—deferring to Flanders as the voice of the Island—voted to incorporate the northern portions of Edgartown as the Town of Cottage City.<sup>9</sup>

The establishment of West Tisbury as the Island’s sixth town in 1892 was less politically and culturally fraught than the establishment of Gay Head in 1870 or Cottage City in 1880. It codified, in law and municipal politics, the separation between the western and eastern districts that had, by then, been apparent in practice for nearly two centuries. The new Town of West Tisbury got two-thirds of the land and the old village center (New Town, a name already eclipsed by “West Tisbury”), along with the villages of Middletown and Lambert’s Cove and the settlements along the necks and coves that fringed the northern shore of Tisbury Great Pond. The Town of Tisbury, from 1892 onward, encompassed the eastern districts only: Vineyard Haven, The Neck, the new summer resort development at West Chop, and the north-shore communities at Chappaquonsett and Makonikey. It encompassed Vineyard Haven Harbor and the sheltered waters of the Lagoon (dividing both with Oak Bluffs), along with all of Lake Tashmoo and the eastern portions of Lambert’s Cove.

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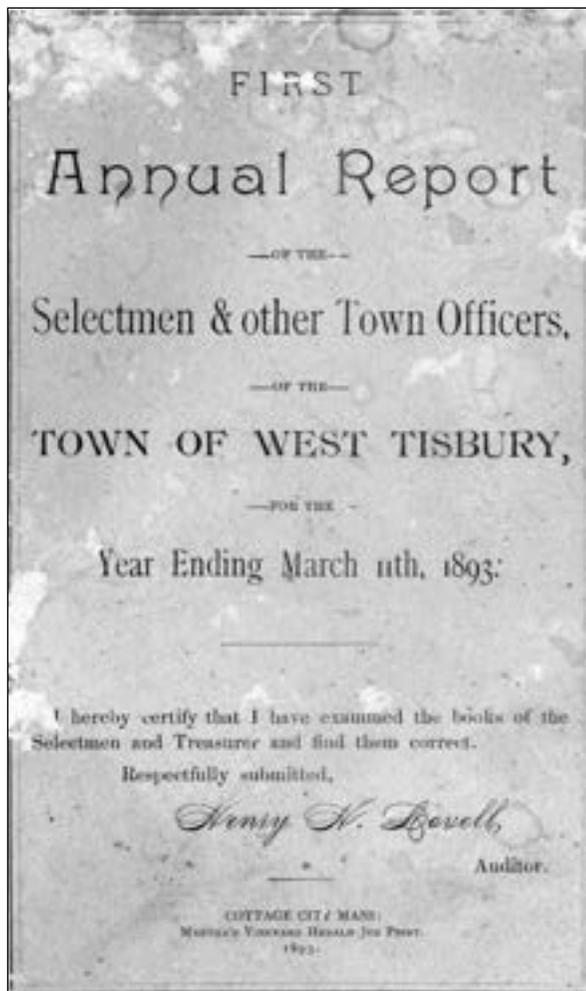
8 See Gloria Levitas, “Burden of Proof: Coercion and Autonomy and Justice in Gay Head,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, May 1978, pp. 123-147; and David J. Silverman, *Faith and Boundaries* (2005), pp. 256-273.

9 Arthur R. Railton, “When Gay Headers Got the Vote, They Changed the Island Forever,” *Dukes County Intelligencer*, May 2000, pp. 129-137; Skip Finley, “The Boy Master: Joseph Dias of Oak Bluffs,” *MV Museum Quarterly*, May 2019, pp. 22-37.

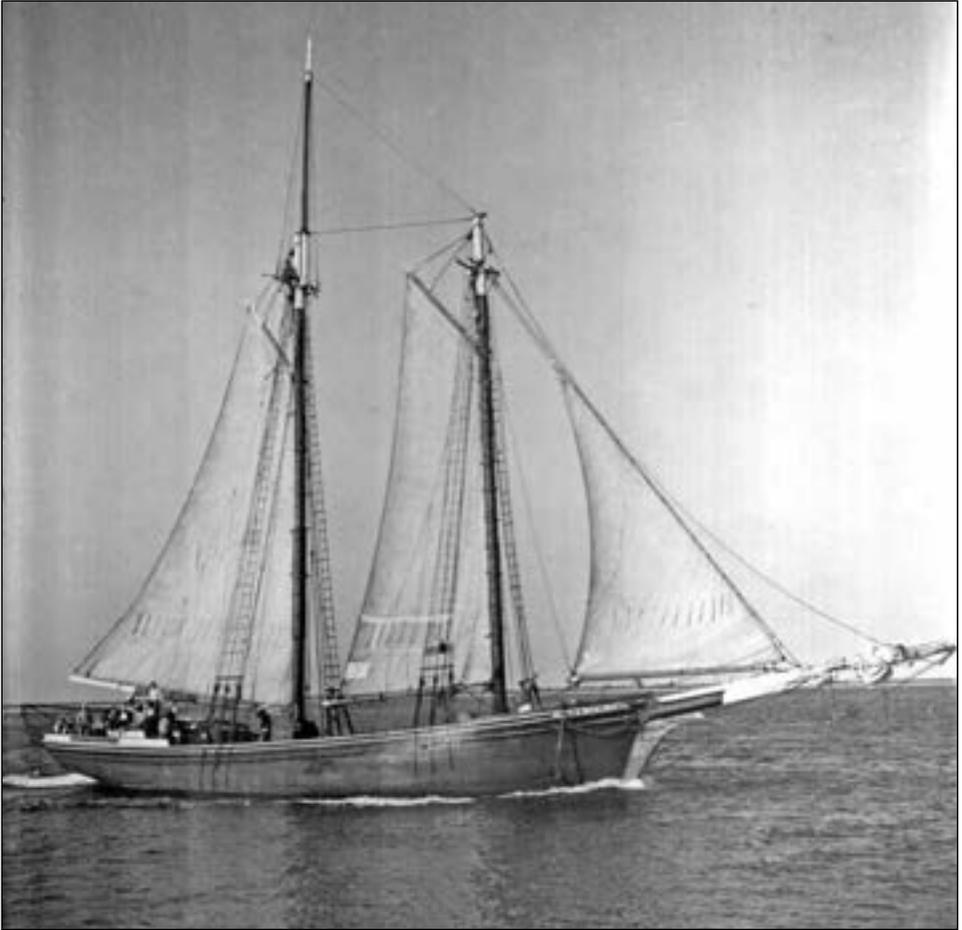
The establishment of West Tisbury gave Tisbury its second birth. What had once been an outlying district—a seaward-looking appendage of a community centered on and tied to the land—had become the town in its entirety. A part had, overnight, become the whole. The peculiar nature of the division has complicated historians’ lives ever since. The 82 pages that Charles Banks to the “Annals of Tisbury” in the second volume of his three-volume *History of Martha’s Vineyard* are substantially about what is now West Tisbury. Much of the published *Records of the Town of Tisbury, Mass., 1669-1864* (1904) and *Vital Records of Tisbury, Massachusetts to the Year 1850* (1910) are, likewise, about what is now West Tisbury. An individual described, in a pre-1892 document, as being “of Tisbury” might have lived anywhere from the shores of Tisbury Great Pond to the outermost

tip of West Chop. The Town of Tisbury that existed 1892 onward was, in many ways, *less* connected by the Town of Tisbury that existed from 1671 to 1892 than the “new” Town of West Tisbury.<sup>10</sup> Even as the division took place, however, Tisbury—the new, seaward-looking Town of Tisbury—was beginning to undergo changes that would, in time, divide it from *its own* past.

10 Leaving the larger, western portion of the town as the “Town of Tisbury” and splitting off the smaller, eastern portion in 1892 as a new “Town of East Tisbury” would have eliminated these complications, but introduced new ones. It would, for example, have created potential confusion between the town of East Tisbury, the village of Eastville, and the summer enclave of East Chop.



The first West Tisbury town report, issued in March 1893. MV Museum Town Reports Collection.



Captain Zeb Tilton's Alice S. Wentworth, the last cargo schooner to operate out of Vineyard Haven Harbor. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

Sails were still plentiful on Vineyard Sound and Nantucket Sound in the 1890s, but the schooners, brigs, and barks of earlier decades were increasingly mingled with steamships. Faster and more powerful than the sailing vessels they replaced, steamers were less subject to the vagaries of wind, weather, and currents. They had fewer reasons to pull into a conveniently located harbor while they waited for conditions to improve, and fewer parts that (if they broke in mid-voyage) could be repaired by the kinds of artisans likely to be found in a small coastal town. Improvements in the quality and quantity of government-funded charts and aids to navigation diminished the once-critical need for “local knowledge,” and so for coastal pilots. These changes gradually diminished Vineyard Haven’s significance to the coastal shipping lanes, and the contributions of maritime commerce to the town’s economy. The opening of the Cape Cod Canal,

which diverted ship traffic through Buzzards Bay rather than Vineyard Sound, effectively ended Vineyard Haven's days as a port catering to the needs of passing ships. By the late 1920s, only a handful of aging cargo schooners like the *Alice S. Wentworth* still plied the water between the Cape and Islands. By World War II, even those were gone.

Maritime-service industries had already faded from the eastern side of Vineyard Haven harbor by the 1900. Howes Norris's deep-water wharf at the foot of Eastville Avenue had been dismantled, and the wharf at the foot of Kedron (later New York) Avenue had become "Shore Station No. 7" of the New York Yacht Club. Chandleries, gin shops, and brothels had been replaced by sprawling vacation homes and hotels—like the Eastville Inn—catering to summer tourists. An electric trolley rattled along the now-paved streets of the "Barbary Coast," linking downtown Cottage City to the draw bridge over the entrance to the Lagoon.<sup>11</sup> Similar changes came, a few decades later, to Vineyard Haven. In town, chandleries, marine brokerages, and boatbuilders gave way to express offices, home-goods stores, and riding stables that catered to the needs of "summer people." Outside of town—at Makonikey, at West Chop, and on the shore of the Lagoon—ambitious real-estate developers attempted, with varying degrees of success, to reap a bonanza like their colleagues at Oak Bluffs. Summer camps sprang up along the Tisbury shore, and summer residents established the Vineyard Haven Yacht Club in 1928. The few coastal schooners that still called at Vineyard Haven in the 1930s shared the harbor with yachts, recreational sailboats, and a new style of gasoline-powered "bass boat" designed by local boatbuilder Erford Burt.

The growing economic significance of summer tourists encouraged, as it had in Cottage City decades earlier, the improvement of public infrastructure. The widening and paving of roads to accommodate automobiles, an important part of that process, gradually transformed the internal geography of Tisbury. Improved roads, and the growing number of cars in town, made it easier for residents of outlying areas of Tisbury to travel "to town"—that is, to Vineyard Haven—to shop, socialize, or attend church services. Once-distinct villages that had, in an era of more difficult transportation, provided such services locally gradually lost their reason for existing and thus cultural distinctiveness. Makonikey and Chappaquonsett followed Eastville's trajectory, fading away until they became little more than names on the map. The Neck was gradually absorbed into Vineyard Haven after Main Street was widened and graded from Hatch Road to the West Chop Light in 1889, and Vineyard Haven's residential districts expanded along it. West Chop, a resort development that became

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11 A. Bowdoin Van Riper, "Vanished Vineyard: New York Yacht Club Station No. 7," *MV Museum Quarterly*, February 2018, p. 47.



The West Chop Post Office in the mid-1950s. Basil Welch Photo Collection (RU 465), Album 25, Photo 46a.

a kind of seasonal village, retained its distinctiveness longer. Its summer-only post office, established in 1891, lasted into the ZIP code era, and was assigned the now-extinct code 02573. It remains a socially distinct summer community, but its geographic boundaries now blur insensibly with those of Vineyard Haven.

The post-1892 Town of Tisbury began its life as a town with one large village (Vineyard Haven) and a handful of smaller ones. Over the succeeding fifty years, Vineyard Haven expanded and the smaller settlements were absorbed into it or faded out of existence. Town and village have thus become essentially synonymous, their names used interchangeably by casual visitors and long-time residents alike. The practical distinction between “Tisbury” (the township) and “Vineyard Haven” (the village) enters the lives of most citizens only when they interact with the municipal government. Even if they live in Vineyard Haven, they pay their property taxes to (and thus support a school named for) Tisbury. Most Tisbury residents who are familiar with the distinction between township and village will, if given time and opportunity to think about it, acknowledge that there must be places where one can be in Tisbury but *not* in Vineyard Haven. Only geography buffs, and perhaps members of the Tisbury Zoning Board, care where those places might be.

## Port of Entry

The broad outlines of Tisbury's new identity—summer-resort community, recreational sailors' haven, and (as ever) port-of-entry for the Island—were apparent by the time America entered the Second World War. Over the postwar boom years, roughly 1945-1970, that identity took on the contours and shading that it retains to this day.

Traditionally limited to ten weeks between late June and Labor Day, the Vineyard's tourist season expanded outward, in the postwar era, to encompass the late spring and early fall. Shorter stays became more common and visitors increasingly arrived by car, bound not for large resort hotels with dining rooms and included meals, but for owned or rented vacation houses where they would handle their own housekeeping.<sup>12</sup> Vineyard Haven, with its sheltered harbor and tightly packed waterfront business district, was ideally suited to the new brand of tourism. By the late 1950s, arriving visitors could stock their refrigerators at one of two modern chain supermarkets surrounded by ample parking lots and located within a block of the Vineyard Haven wharf. Another block away, Main Street offered hardware, dry goods, and appliance stores. A lumber yard stood adjacent to the ferry wharf in Water Street, and another (as well as a second hardware store) on Beach Road. Whatever an arriving postwar renter or (seasonal) homeowner needed, Vineyard Haven could likely provide.

For those arriving without cars in postwar Vineyard Haven, the Island's largest concentration of modern, two-story motels stood along Beach Street (the road that linked Main Street to the old colonial-era ferry landing) and Beach Road. For those arriving in their own boats, there were ample moorings behind the breakwater, two new marinas south of the ferry wharf, and three boatyards that could repair or refuel their current craft or take an order for their next one. The latter group was no longer limited to the ultra-wealthy members of the New York Yacht Club who had come ashore at Eastville at the turn of the century, or even the well-to-do founders of the Vineyard Haven Yacht Club from the 1920s. The postwar mass-production of boats using low-maintenance materials like plastics, aluminum, and fiberglass had brought "yachting" to America's newly prosperous middle class. For Cape Cod and Buzzards Bay boaters with modest vessels and levels of experience, Vineyard Haven Harbor was ideal destination: close enough to be manageable, distant enough to be interesting, and well-appointed enough to be comfortable.

Vineyard Haven thus established itself, in the postwar era, as the Island's year-round port of entry *and* its premier provider—to residents and visitors

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Magnes Teller's *An Island Summer* (1951) offers a first-person glimpse inside this world.



The Steamship Authority terminal in Vineyard Haven in the mid-1960s, well into the post-World War II era of automobile-based tourism. MV Museum Postcard Collection (RU 359).

alike—of the basic needs of everyday life. Quickly, and inevitably, the reputation expanded to Tisbury as a whole. The town's shorthand identity as “the Island's year-round port” is a lingering echo of that transformation.

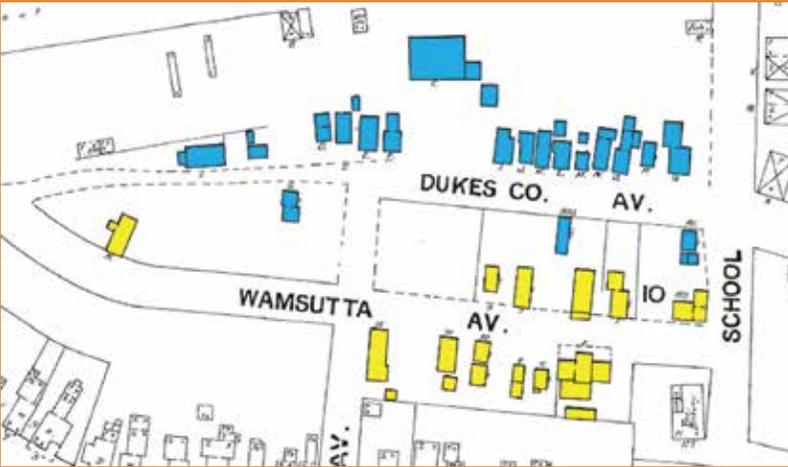
The problem with the “year-round port” sobriquet isn't that it's *wrong*, but that it's incomplete. It takes the central, defining historical truth about the present-day Town of Tisbury—the old Eastern Parish of Tisbury, centered on Holmes Hole—and reduces it to a seemingly trivial matter of logistics: “This is where you get off the boat.” In doing so, it misses two critical elements that have defined (what is now) Tisbury since the moment the (older, larger) town was founded in 1671. The first is the geographic reality of *why* you get off the boat there: Vineyard Haven stands at the head of a sheltered, deep-water harbor located at the Island's closest approach to the mainland, and adjacent to a natural shipping route. The second is the tangled skein of ways in which, over 350 years, that geographic reality had defined Vineyard Haven's place within the Town of Tisbury and Tisbury's place in the life of the Island. They were (and are) the place where Martha's Vineyard meets the wider world, and the first point of contact for those coming “from away.”



The Steamship Authority ferry Naushon, launched in 1957 as the Nantucket, sits idle at the SSA wharf in Vineyard Haven, probably in the early-to-mid 1980s. The last steamship built for the Cape-and-Islands route, the Naushon's massive size, smooth ride, and expansive interior won her a modest but fiercely devoted group of fans among frequent travellers. Maritime traditionalists, though they appreciated the Naushon's use of steam power, derided what they saw as its ungainly lines—a jarring departure from the steamers of the 1920s, with their sharp bows and slender funnels. Steamship Authority managers despaired over the vessel's insatiable appetite for fuel, and design flaws that made loading awkward and time-consuming. Sold off-Island in the spring of 1988, Naushon ended her days (like her line-mate Uncatena, just visible behind the freight shed) as a floating casino on the Gulf Coast.

This image is from a slide donated to the Museum by L. C. Meeks in 2007. It is one of thousands of color slides in the collection: images that, collectively, provide a rich visual record of the Island between the late 1940s and the early 1990s.

## The First Cottagers of Color in Oak Bluffs



*An 1887 Sanborn Insurance Company map of Cottage City shows Black-owned cottages along Wamsutta Avenue (yellow) and Dukes County Avenue (blue) in the Campground. By the end of 1910, virtually all had been relocated or demolished.*