

Romantic Revivals: Architecture for a Summer Resort Community

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*I*N the mid-nineteenth century, when the whaling industry had all but disappeared, the town of Nantucket looked desolate and deserted. The once thriving community of ten thousand had dwindled to merely four thousand people.¹ After visiting the island in 1866, one writer described it as “A little town, whose life stands still . . . whose ships have sailed away to other ports, whose inhabitants have followed . . . and whose houses seem to be going after the inhabitants.”²

In the early 1870s, Nantucket emerged from decades of economic slump and made considerable strides in setting the stage for its future as a fashionable summer resort. As one guidebook from the period suggested, “Having furnished light for the world, [Nantucket] is now commencing to furnish health for the weary summer sojourner who lingers on her shore.”³ Although some small industries, such as farming, fishing, and the manufacturing of boots, shoes, and straw hats were undertaken, it provided islanders with a meager income. It became increasingly clear that the key to economic survival for a significant part of the population lay in promoting the island as a resort.

By 1874, express trains brought travelers from New York and Boston to Cape Cod, where two steamboats a day brought hundreds of passengers from the mainland to the island’s shores. Visitors were attracted to Nantucket’s cool ocean breezes, saltwater bathing, sailing, and other leisure activities. Travelers were also enchanted by the quaintness and romance of Nantucket’s history as the former center of the global whaling industry. Historical landmarks, such as the Old Mill, Sankaty Lighthouse, and the Coffin School, were as popular with visitors as the sun and surf.

Contributing to the growth of the island’s resort industry were illustrated articles touting Nantucket’s attributes, published in popular periodicals such as *Harper’s* and *Scribner’s Monthly*, and the rise in wealth and leisure time, a result of the booming industrialization of nineteenth-century America. For the well-off, weekends and the summer months became times to escape the stresses of everyday life, as well as the heat and unhealthy air of the cities. They sought a simpler and healthier

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FIGURE 1: Eliza Starbuck Barney House, 73 Main Street, Built in 1872. A host of eclectic styles were built during the Victorian era on Nantucket, including this example of the Second Empire style. The French-style roof, recessed entrance-way, heavy cornice brackets, and other details give the facade a three-dimensional sculptural quality.

lifestyle at the seashore. In fact, the island advertised itself as a health resort. The *Inquirer and Mirror* claimed that after just a few “healthful” weeks on the island visitors returned to their homes with “a new lease of life, cheerful and happy.”⁴

During the mid- to late-Victorian era⁵ the island’s culture was broadened and increasingly influenced by the summer residents, who introduced Nantucket to the latest in building fashions. The romance associated with the Victorian era and advances in building technology sparked a craze for architectural embellishment, leading to Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, Stick, and other romantic and eclectic forms, all of which were built on the East Coast and subsequently on Nantucket. The styles spread quickly, in part due to the publication of designs in both house pattern books and periodicals. On Nantucket, new homes built during this period were often the result of a builder’s creativity and skill, leading to inventive interpretations of mainland designs.

The emergence of the romantic revival styles was part of the Picturesque movement in America, which brought a radical change to the shapes and plans of middle-class American homes.⁶ Beginning with Gothic Revival, Americans broke free from the restraints of regularity, simplicity, and symmetry of forms dictated by earlier fashions and ideals. On Nantucket, as on the mainland, builders were encouraged to experiment, and the result was a new burst of creativity that led to irregular, asymmetrical exterior and interior shapes and arrangements. The asymmetry and variety of this Picturesque movement seemed to connote organic growth processes and freedom and originality—values prized in America at this time.⁷ The change was also due in part to “balloon frame” construction, which became the preferred method of framing by the end of the century and made it possible to incorporate more complex architectural features, such as overhangs, bay windows, and towers.⁸ In addition, new tools like the steam-powered scroll saw enabled carpenters to create the intricate and elaborate motifs of Victorian-period buildings.

One of the earliest examples of the new exuberant Victorian manner is the Eliza Starbuck Barney house at 73 Main Street (FIGURE 1). Remarkably, it was one of three large and elegant mansions built on Main Street in the early 1870s, when the island’s economy was still at a low ebb and notices of homes for sale or to rent were posted on many “fine mansions and unpretentious houses all over the island.”⁹ These houses were the first substantial residences to be built in Nantucket Town in a quarter century.¹⁰

In the spring of 1872, three years after her husband died, Eliza Starbuck Barney (1802–1889) purchased land and a home on Main Street for five hundred dollars from Alice Swain. Barney (FIGURE 2) hired carpenters to dismantle the house, and had it replaced, as the *Inquirer and Mirror* reported, “by a new house, greatly to the improvement of the appearance of the street.”¹¹ Built in the Second Empire style, the Barney home is distinguished by its mansard roof, heavy cornice with



FIGURE 2: Eliza Starbuck Barney, ca. 1875. Described as “a central figure in Nantucket society—a leader in all literary and intellectual coteries,” Eliza Barney needed a stylish home in which to entertain her guests and family, and to hold temperance and women’s suffrage meetings. In her 73 Main Street house she also undertook the painstaking and important task of recording the island’s genealogical history. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



FIGURE 3: Detail of the Door at 73 Main Street. With its exquisitely carved wood and etched-glass panel, this door reflects the Victorians’ belief that the first and most important impression made upon a visitor to a house was through its entranceway.

colors on facades in Victorian Nantucket. For example, in June of 1878 it was noted that James M. Coffin and Son were painting the exterior of their store on Fair Street a “deep blue color,” and several years later when additions were made to the Wauwinet House hotel they were painted in “fashionable dark colors.”¹⁶

Restored in 1965, the elaborate facade of the Barney house was originally embellished even more, with finials topping the gables, arches, and cupola. The opulence of 73 Main Street is surprising considering that Eliza Barney, a temperance leader and abolitionist, had expressed distaste for “showy environments and useless luxuries” and was known for her “Quaker-like simplicity of living.”¹⁷ Barney’s choice of house design may have been influenced by the grand villas built along the Hudson River, which she would have seen in the 1860s when she was living in the area,¹⁸ or possibly by the house designs in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, an influential magazine that promoted the French Second Empire style of architecture.¹⁹ Eliza could certainly afford to build the elaborate mansion; she was the daughter of whaling industry tycoon Joseph Starbuck (1774–1861) and the wife of Nathaniel Barney (1792–1869), who along with his partner, William Hadwen, owned one of the island’s most successful whale oil and candle businesses.²⁰

Shortly after the Barney home was erected, the island’s new-found tourism industry gave rise to rampant land speculation and building activity. The small seaside village of Sconset, at the eastern end of the island, became increasingly popular as the preferred summer resort area.²¹ Builders and developers Charles H. Robinson (1829–1915) and Franklin A. Ellis (1833–1884) established the Sunset

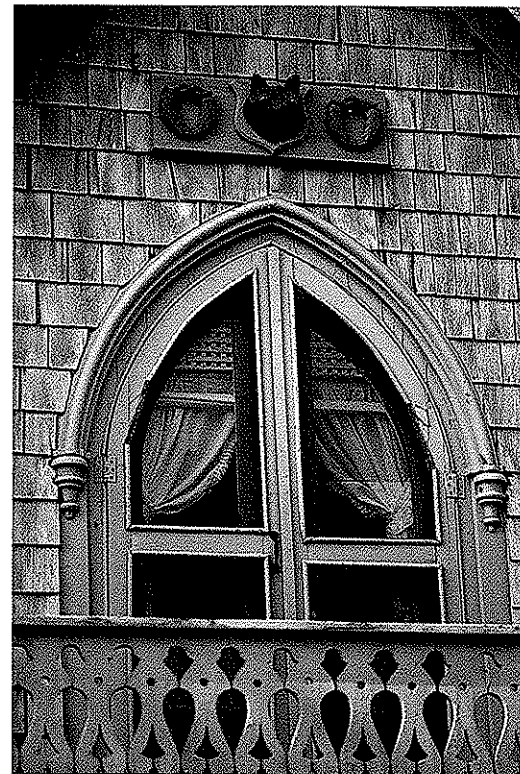
brackets, wood cresting along the upper roofline, and elaborate cupola. The three bays, paired arched windows above the doorway, and the elaborately carved, paired entry doors (FIGURE 3) are also characteristic of the style.¹² Many villas and cottages were built in the Second Empire style in America between 1860 and 1880, and house designs similar to the Barney home can be found in pattern books of the era.¹³

Painted a vivid blue with bright white trim and gray accents,¹⁴ the Barney home reflects the Victorians’ “ever increasing demand for and love of color.”¹⁵ Numerous notices in the *Inquirer and Mirror* concerning new buildings or repainting indicate that it was not uncommon to find vivid



Heights development in 'Sconset, below the junction of Main Street and Grand Avenue, in 1873. The favored style for the first seaside summer cottages and Ocean View House hotel of Sunset Heights was picturesque Gothic Revival. Fashionable in northeastern America from the 1840s to the mid-1870s, the style was inspired by medieval Europe and originated in England as a revolt against the rigid lines and symmetry of classic forms.

Tucked away on a quiet lane in 'Sconset, just a few short blocks from the ocean, Wolf's Head (FIGURE 4) is one of the few remaining Gothic Revival cottages of Sunset Heights. Built about 1873, it was more than likely designed by Charles Robinson and may have originally been part of the Ocean View House complex.²² By the 1880s the cottage was known as



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FIGURE 4: Wolf's Head, Built ca. 1873, 8 Cottage Avenue, 'Sconset. This is one of the first cottages built by Charles Robinson at Sunset Heights in 'Sconset, in the Gothic Revival style.

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FIGURE 5: Detail of Parapet, 8 Cottage Avenue. Decorative wood details and pointed arch hoods over windows and doors are among the hallmarks of the Victorian Gothic Revival style.



FIGURE 6: Charles H. Robinson, ca. 1910. Responsible for building most of the Victorian-style homes on the island, Charles H. Robinson remained an active builder and astute businessman well into his eighties. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

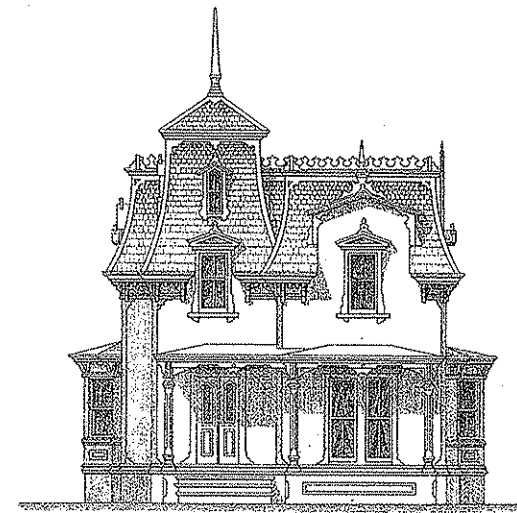
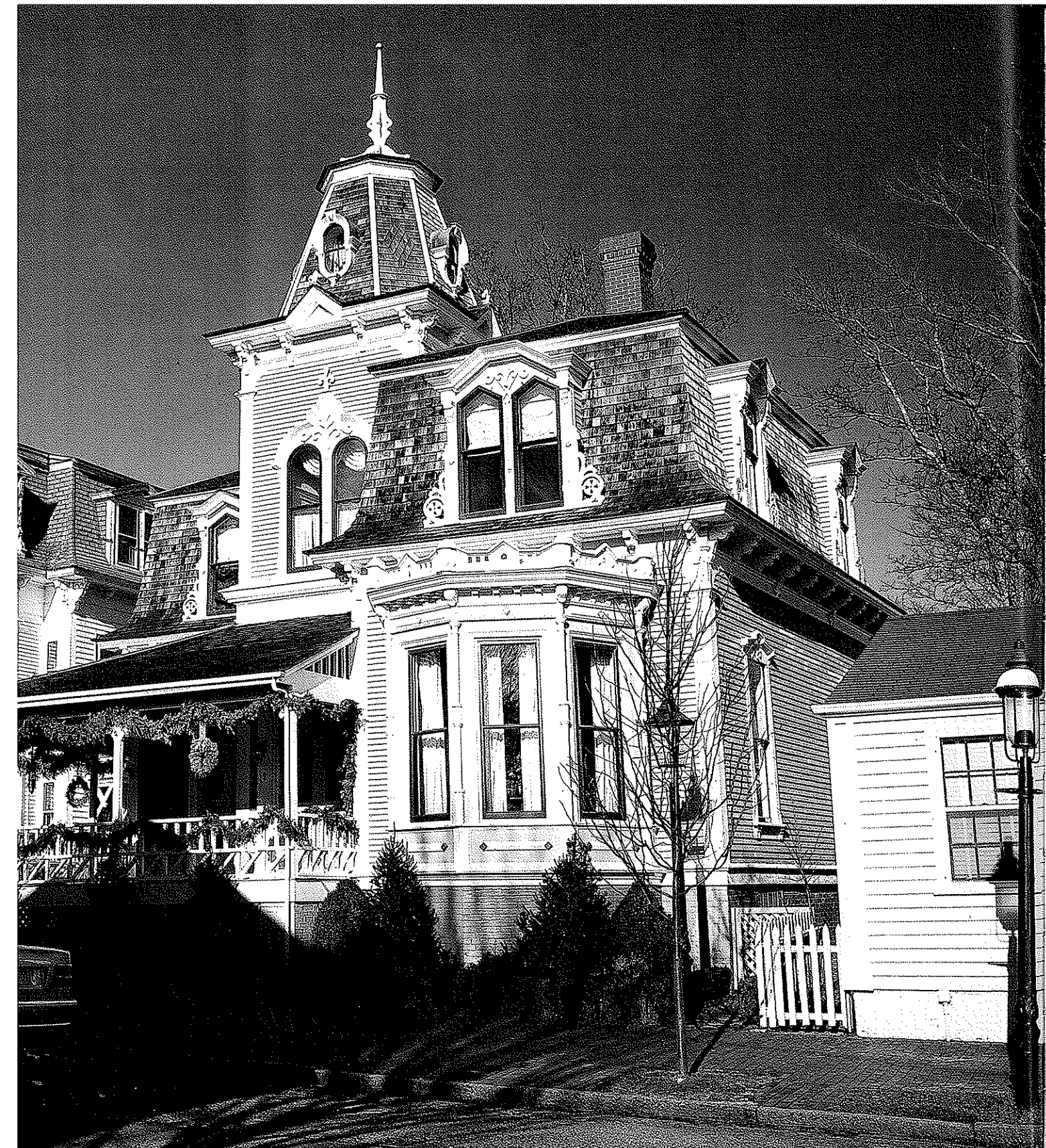
"Wolf's Head Inn"²³ and since 1921 has been owned by the Penrose family.²⁴ Characteristic of the Gothic Revival style, Wolf's Head has a steeply pitched roof with cross gables and pointed arches and drip-mold crowns over the slender windows and double front door. The fanciful carved wood railings, or "gingerbread," on the porch and second-floor parapet (FIGURE 5) are also common elements of the style. Early 1870s photographs of Sunset Heights' cottages indicate that the facade of Wolf's Head would have been further adorned with articulated vergeboards, pinnacles, and horizontal boarding.²⁵

Wolf's Head is remarkably similar in style to the tiny, colorful two-story cottages that were built in the Methodist campground on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁶ It also recalls the earlier rural Gothic cottage designs of Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852), an influential American architect of the Gothic Revival style and a major trendsetter of his day. The front covered veranda, which became one of the hallmarks of mid- to late-nineteenth-century homes on Nantucket, was an important feature to Downing, who believed that no dwelling was complete without a porch or veranda, which served as a harmonious link between the house and the "picturesque" landscape in which it was situated. The subdued green color of the trim on Wolf's Head is also in keeping with Downing's taste, who was disdainful of white on house exteriors and recommended a "mellow hue harmonizing with the verdure of the country."²⁷

According to family tradition, Wolf's Head was moved several times.²⁸ During much of the nineteenth century, as previously discussed, it was common to dismantle houses and reconstruct them elsewhere on the island, and even move them to the mainland.

The Gothic Revival style can be seen in Nantucket Town in the applied details of buildings, such as the sharply pointed arched windows at 6 Winter Street and 4 North Water Street. The Gothic Revival manner is fully realized in the magnificent facade of the 1834 First Congregational Church on Centre Street.

The exuberant nature of Victorian architecture can be seen in several buildings still existing in Nantucket Town. Most were erected by Charles H. Robinson (FIGURE 6), the island's most prolific architect/builder and contractor/realtor in late-nineteenth-century Nantucket. The son of builder Benjamin Robinson, Charles played a significant role in the growth of the island's resort industry. According to Clay Lancaster, when inclement weather kept Robinson indoors he spent long hours in his shop fabricating the lavish architectural embellishments that are characteristic of his style.²⁹ Two of his notable buildings extant today are at 21 and 19 Broad Street (FIGURE 7). The latter was built for island coal merchant Andrew Hunt³⁰ and displays the flaring mansard roof, bracketed eaves, bay window, and paired windows with scrolls typical of the French-inspired Second Empire style.³¹ Robinson, like so many of his fellow island builders, consulted pattern books of the era in designing



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FIGURE 7: 19 Broad Street, Built in 1878. *The Victorian fondness for elaborately detailed roofs, porches, bay windows and a variety of color is evident in this home, built by Charles Robinson for island coal merchant Andrew Hunt.*

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FIGURE 8: Design No. 23, from E. C. Hussey's 1874 Pattern Book, *National Cottage Architecture* (New York: The American News Company, 1874; Dover Publications reprint, 1994). *Victorian-era builders often referred to pattern books for house designs; this one is similar to 19 Broad Street.*

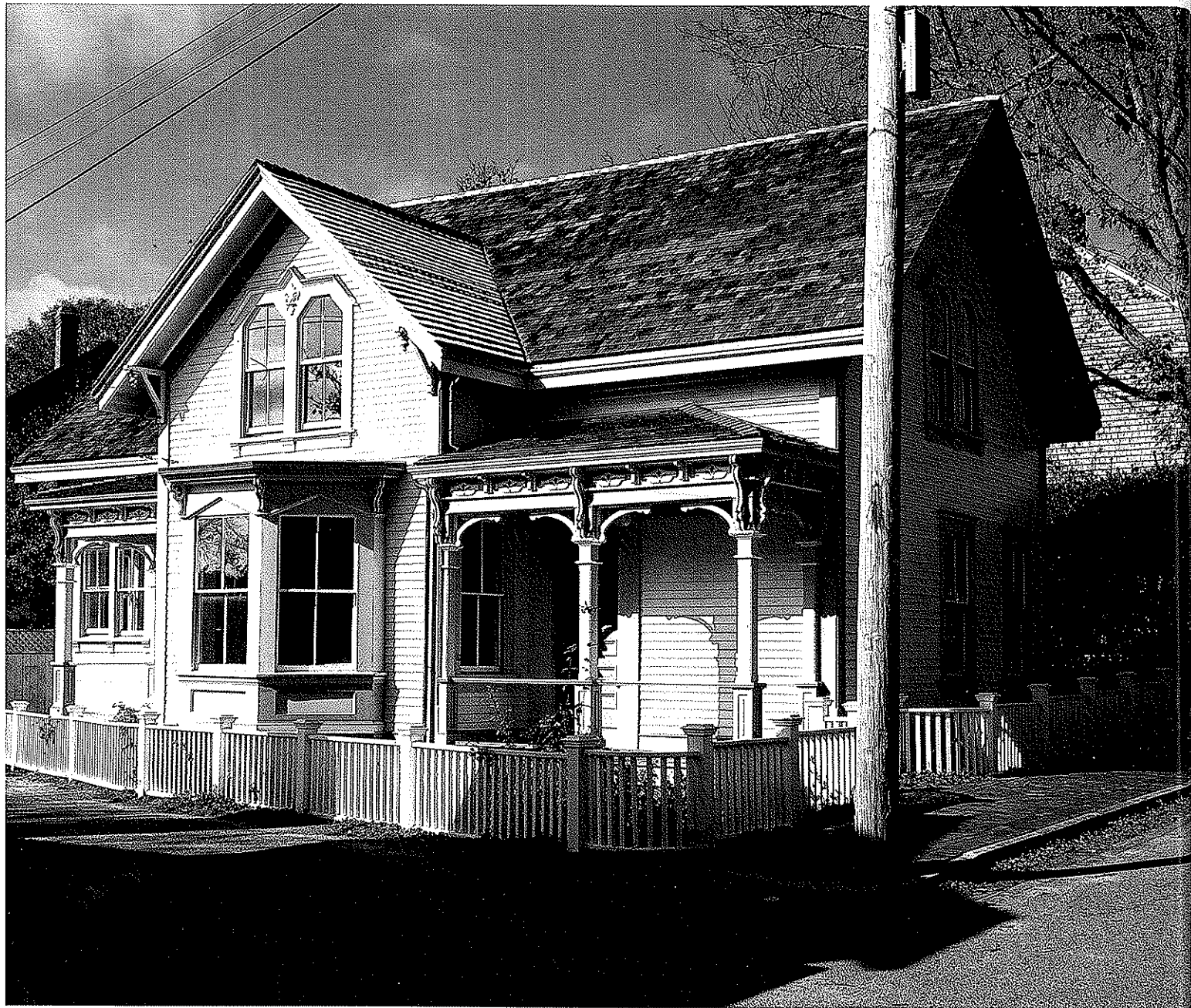
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FIGURE 9: 45 India Street, ca. 1890. *As we can see in this typical Nantucket house built ca. 1804, during the later nineteenth century many Nantucketers updated their homes by adding Victorian details such as porches, shingle patterns, dormer windows, hoods over doorways, and decorative trusses in the gables.* Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

his buildings, and 19 Broad Street resembles the published designs of American architect E. C. Hussey (FIGURE 8).³²

In addition to erecting new structures, Robinson and other island carpenters and builders "modernized" many island homes in the mid- to late-nineteenth century with decorative features of the popular Victorian style. Elaborate wood details, such as gable vergeboards and pinnacles, ornamental hood moldings over doorways, pointed arched windows, or lacy second-floor parapets, as well as wide piazzas and bay windows, were superimposed over the plain, shingled facades of typical Nantucket-style homes, creating uniquely personal dwellings (FIGURE 9). In the early to mid-twentieth century, when this type of decoration was no longer popular, these houses were restored to their original designs and stripped of their fanciful details. Around the same time, several of the island's grand late-nineteenth-century hotels and residences were demolished. And thus, much of Victorian Nantucket disappeared.

There is a movement today among several historic preservationists to restore some of the island's former Victorian-era glory. Among them are Valerie and Richard Norton, of Norton Preservation Trust, whose



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FIGURE 10: 51 Fair Street. *Architectural pattern books contained only a handful of drawings of brackets and other decorative features, so local carpenters like Charles Robinson, who built this Victorian-style home in 1877–78, created their own fanciful designs.*

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FIGURE 11: Porch Support Detail, 51 Fair Street.

strong sense of tradition is evident in their painstaking restoration of the house at 51 Fair Street (FIGURE 10). Architect/builder Charles Robinson purchased the land for this house, originally a spec project, in October of 1877. He began building in December, sold the property to Nantucketer George E. Harris (1852–1918) in January of 1878, and completed the house for him in late February.³³

Typical of Robinson's smaller homes, 51 Fair Street is a modest, simple house form with the decorative details confined to the porch, cornice line, and windows. Some of the embellishments, such as the pointed arch moldings over the prominent gable windows and bay window, are typical of the Gothic Revival style.³⁴ The porch has carefully re-created ornamental woodwork (FIGURE 11) that would have been constructed with a scroll saw by the builder.³⁵

When restoring the exterior of 51 Fair Street, the Nortons scraped the paint layers to find the original hues; they chose the second layer: mustard for the clapboard and different shades of khaki for the trim. In keeping with Victorian tradition, the trim is darker than the main body of the house, and is complementary in tone. Among the original or first layer of trim colors at 51 Fair was a dark green and vivid turquoise. While this may seem surprising today, it was not unusual for Nantucket in the late 1870s and early 1880s. In fact some residents and summer homeowners took the Victorian love for color to an extreme, and red became the "artistic thing for seaside cottages."³⁶ These vivid colors shocked some Nantucketers, including schoolteacher Elma Folger, who complained in a letter to a friend: "The Johnsons have painted their house a deep red, and the window-sills and doors etc. yellow. The Nantucket people shake their heads and wonder what it all means, and what everything is going to."³⁷

As the century progressed, the island's tourism grew into its heyday of large hotels, charming summer cottages, restaurants, and other centers catering to a rich and varied social life. The island's late Victorian era signaled a return of prosperity not seen on the island since the golden age of whaling. The year-round population remained only approximately three thousand, but by 1881 "ten thousand pilgrims" were drawn to visit the island each summer "to enjoy the elixir of health, the solemn



beauty of the ocean, the antiquity of the town, [to] converse with agreeable fellow beings, or... [for] complete retirement."³⁸

The gloomy foreboding as to the future finally dissipated, and the town and smaller hamlets were brightening up in every way. Housepainters and builders experienced a thriving trade, roads were improved, and many new amenities were established for the tourist trade. For example, a single narrow-gauge railroad was begun in 1880, with extensions running to outposts at Surfside beach by 1881 and to Siasconset in 1884.

New construction shifted from Nantucket Town to more spacious sites along the seashore. The first area to be developed just outside of town was the "Cliff," a sandy bluff overlooking Nantucket Sound that was divided into lots in 1872. Among those to build a summer home there was the artist Eastman Johnson, in 1871, and New York lawyer Charles O'Connor, in 1881.³⁹ The next major area to be developed near town was Brant Point, beachfront property along the harbor that was originally called "Cliff shore" and later "Beachside."⁴⁰ In 1880 Edwin James Hulbert (1829–ca. 1910), a mining engineer from Middletown, Connecticut,⁴¹ purchased a two-hundred-square-foot lot for two hundred dollars and the following year built the first Beachside home: a magnificent two-story Queen Anne–style edifice called "Sandanwede" (FIGURE 12).⁴²

FIGURE 12: Sandanwede, Built in 1881, Hulbert Avenue. *The Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror* reported in June of 1881 that Sandanwede, with its main facade facing the water, "is pleasantly located, commanding an unobstructed view of the sound and inner bay." The location was perfect for a Queen Anne–style home, as house pattern books of that era dictated that English-style cottages were intended for picturesque, rural locales, just like the unruly waterfront of Nantucket. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



FIGURE 13: Detail of Sandanwede, Hulbert Avenue. Sandanwede is notable for its distinct sunburst-motif porch supports. The supports and trim were originally painted a warm, neutral color that complemented the facade and harmonized with nature. In the Victorian era white was considered too cold and glaring and was rarely used on exteriors.

Fashionable in America in the 1880s and 1890s, especially along the northeast coast, the Queen Anne style was named and popularized by a group of nineteenth-century English architects, led by Norman Shaw, who drew upon late medieval models of architecture.⁴³ When Sandanwede was being constructed, the *Inquirer and Mirror* noted that the style of architecture was "the ancient English cottage pattern."⁴⁴ In fact, the design of Sandanwede reflects both the English influence and the house patterns of American proponents of the Queen Anne style, such as Eugene C. Gardner and Henry H. Holly.⁴⁵ The English Queen Anne influence can be seen in the variegated rooflines and gables, steeply pitched roof, and asymmetrical facade, while the distinctive American features are apparent in the shingle siding, spacious veranda, and compact design.

Other distinctly Queen Anne–style features of the house are the window sashes with many small square panes running along the edges, and the crisp, machine-turned spindles and

sunburst brackets of the veranda (FIGURE 13). The latter exhibits the inspiration of Charles L. Eastlake (1836–1906), an English architect and interior designer whose furniture designs were transposed into a domestic building style distinguished by ornate carved and turned wooden decoration.⁴⁶ From the Eastlake-style veranda, the Hulberts enjoyed magnificent views of the ever-changing colors of the seawater, the gently sifting sands of Coatue, the steady stream of yachts and steamships entering the harbor, and at night the bright beams of light emanating from Brant Point lighthouse.

Nantucket-born James H. Gibbs (1822–1908), who became a successful builder and contractor on the island after his hopes for a fortune in the California Gold Rush were dashed, built Sandanwede.⁴⁷ Begun in the spring of 1881, the construction of the house caused quite a stir on the

island. In May of 1881 a reporter for the *Inquirer and Mirror* noted that Gibbs had the “frames and trimmings” shipped from the mainland for the Hulbert home.⁴⁸ And one month later the newspaper reported that a “large force of workmen” was engaged in building the cottage, which “will be one of the handsomest residences in these parts.”⁴⁹

After building their summer cottage, Edwin Hulbert (FIGURE 14) and his wife, Frances, became prominent members of the summer island community, their comings and goings noted in the personal column of the *Inquirer and Mirror*.⁵⁰ The style of their home, suited to the lifestyle of summer resort areas, became popular on the island. For example, two years after the completion of Sandanwede a house was built on Brant Point for H. L. Breed in the Queen Anne style.⁵¹

The erecting of many Victorian summer “cottages” soon followed in Beachside and elsewhere on the island. The building of so many new structures in rural areas for holiday revelers disturbed some island residents. For example, in 1882 Elma Folger complained in a letter to a friend that a house was being built for the daughter of the editor of the *New York Sun*: “Someone is putting up a house over on Shimmo Hills. . . . [I]t’s awful to see the houses going up so—I suppose it’s the natural consequence—though.”⁵²

Another area that experienced an enormous building boom in the period was ‘Sconset. A stroll along the path bordering the village’s north bluff, with breathtaking vistas of the ocean, is perhaps the best vantage point from which to study the predominant architectural styles of the 1880s and 1890s. Second Empire, Queen Anne, Stick, Shingle, and Colonial Revival are all represented. When they were first built these homes were not well received by some islanders. In 1886 one ‘Sconset resident observed, “Some of the new structures are modern and ornate in style, in strange contrast with the generally modest architecture of the island, and markedly so when compared with the ‘Sconset cottages.”⁵³ However, by this date it was common to find colorful and eclectic homes on the island; an advertisement for five homes for sale on Ocean Avenue in ‘Sconset noted that “These house are all different in structure and painted in different colors to avoid a monotonous appearance.”⁵⁴

In the late nineteenth century a cliff-front house on the north bluff (also known as “The Bank”) in ‘Sconset was a highly sought-after commodity. The beautiful vistas of the ocean and moors, “healthful” breezes, the romantic lighthouse nearby, and “peace and restfulness” of the place made it attractive. One of the first homes built on the north bluff was “Idlemoor” (FIGURE 15) at 11 Baxter Road, built in 1884 as a summer retreat for Abraham W. Rice, a financial manager of the Detroit Safe Company in Detroit, Michigan.⁵⁵ His home was built on land originally subdivided by William J. Flagg,⁵⁶ and as with most of the houses on Baxter Road, it sits graciously on a spacious lawn with its facade facing the ocean.⁵⁷ At that time, grass lawns reflected the rise of genteel outdoor sports such as croquet, lawn tennis, and badminton.



FIGURE 14: Edwin J. Hulbert, ca. 1895. A successful mining engineer from Middletown, Connecticut, Edwin J. Hulbert built the first summer home in Beachside, in the fashionable Queen Anne style. Today’s Hulbert Avenue was named after him.

Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



FIGURE 15: Idlemoor, Built in 1884, 11 Baxter Road, ‘Sconset. Victorian architecture by nature is inventive and diverse in color and style, as can be seen in the rich blue color, fanciful trim, and decorative shingle work of Idlemoor. On a bright, sunny day, the vergerboards enliven the facade by creating a lively pattern of shadows across the surface. Photograph by Gregory Spaid.

Little is known about the builders of Idlemoor, carpenters E. A. and M. B. Leighton, except that they were from Cottage City (now known as Oak Bluffs) on Martha's Vineyard. They were particularly active on Nantucket in the mid-1880s, and their projects were frequently reported in the local paper.⁵⁸ When Idlemoor was under construction the *Inquirer and Mirror* noted its progress: "The Messrs. Leighton have commenced work upon a house for Mr. A. W. Rice on his land north of the village."⁵⁹ When it was completed in April of 1885, the paper exclaimed that the "cottage house" was "pronounced a beauty by all who have seen it."⁶⁰ Rice was so pleased with the house that he contemplated spending the whole year there, rather than just the summer months.⁶¹

Named after the view of the moors from the third floor and the relaxing or "idle" nature of the Rice family's visits to the house, Idlemoor has been owned by the same family for eight generations.⁶² Like many Victorian houses the structure is asymmetrical, with a steeply pitched gable roof, cross gables embracing a square gabled tower, and elongated windows that emphasize the verticality of the facade. It is also distinguished by overhanging eaves, multi-textured wall surfaces, and a pretty porch that wraps around three sides of the house. The overall style of the home is reminiscent of mail-order house plans published in the late 1870s and early 1880s, in particular those reproduced in *Palliser's American Cottage Homes of 1878*.⁶³

Idlemoor is one of the finest examples on island of the Stick style. Another adaptation of medieval English building traditions, the style stresses the exterior wall surface as the decorative element.⁶⁴ The facade of Idlemoor is enlivened by many imaginative decorative details (FIGURE 16), including five different shapes of wood shingles,⁶⁵ articulated gable vergeboards, eave brackets, curved sunburst-pattern porch supports, and varied patterns created by the raised wood siding and diagonal, flat stickwork.

Much further along the bluff is a house known as "Mayflower" (FIGURE 17). Built circa 1893–94 as strictly a summer cottage with no heat, it is one of the purest examples of the Shingle style on Nantucket. The exterior consists of a continuous sweep of wood shingles. Laid out in horizontal courses, the shingles cover the undulating surface of the roof, run down

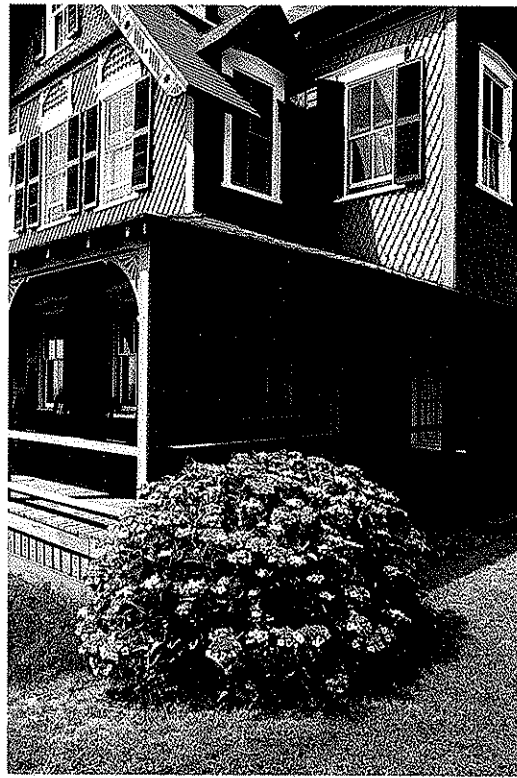
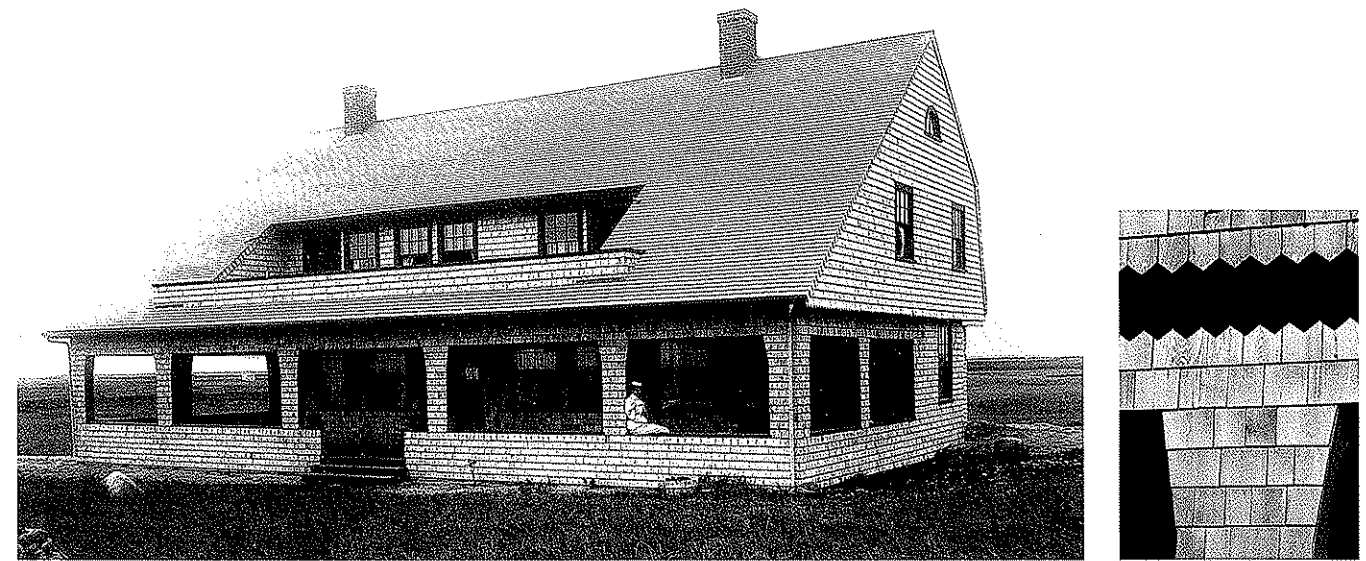


FIGURE 16: Detail of Idlemoor. The ample porch with sunburst pattern supports extends the interior volume of the house and reflects a love of nature. Photograph by Gregory Spaid.



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FIGURE 17: Mayflower, Built ca. 1893–94, Baxter Road, 'Sconset. Typical of the Shingle style, the Mayflower's gable overhangs an expansive porch that provides welcome shade from the hot summer sun, a much needed commodity on the windswept, treeless bluff in 'Sconset. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

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FIGURE 18: Diamond-edged Shingles, Detail of Mayflower. The shingle patterns of the Mayflower create a subtle play on the facade between light and shade, solid and void.

the walls, and encircle the porch columns. The primary ornamentation on this stark exterior is found in the irregular textures of the weathered shingles and the crisp, diamond-shaped edging along the overhanging roofline (FIGURE 18). Also typical of the Shingle style is the broad, low-slung triangular gable, which is broken up on the street facade by a gambrel roof and on the bluff side by the balcony. The Mayflower does have a few playful details, such as the classical half-round windows on the end gables.

While some aspects of the Mayflower, like the shallow overhangs at the gable ends and the profusion of shingles, hearken back to seventeenth-century New England architecture, the overall style is distinctly modern. In sharp contrast to the ornate, highly ornamented Victorian homes on the island, the Shingle-style Mayflower is a building reduced to elemental form and stripped of extraneous detail. The beginning of modernism in

American architecture, the Shingle style appeared frequently in seaside architecture in coastal New England in the late 1800s.

The Mayflower is named after Mary "May" Wilson (1854–1899), who purchased the land in 1892. According to family tradition, her sister Clara (1857–1930) designed the six-bedroom house that was built on the site.⁶⁶ May was a teacher in Boston, and Clara was an artist and lecturer; both summered in 'Sconset beginning in the 1880s, along with the rest of their family from Washington, D.C.⁶⁷ Owned today by the grandnieces of May and Clara Wilson, the Mayflower has been beautifully preserved.

The interiors of Victorian cottages on the island were built with more open and free forms, with hallways, parlors, and wide doorways, as compared to the more rigid and box-like arrangement of rooms in most eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Nantucket homes. Much of the new flexibility was due to balloon frame building, as discussed earlier, and improvements in central heating; warmth was produced in the basement in a steam boiler or hot air furnace and distributed throughout the building.⁶⁸ Rooms no longer had to be compact and enclosed to retain the heat from the generous-sized hearth.

One of the few unblemished Victorian interiors on the island can be seen at 76 Main Street Inn, in Nantucket Town. It was originally constructed in 1887 for Captain William T. Swain (1835–1905), a native of New London, Connecticut, who hunted sea elephants and whales for a Nantucket company beginning in the 1850s.⁶⁹ Although the exterior of the house has been altered enormously in the last century, a rich variety of original architectural features can be found in the first-floor rooms and entryway (FIGURE 19). When Swain retired from the sea in 1876, he purchased a lumberyard on Nantucket and had access to the finest woods and woodworkers on the island.⁷⁰ The entrance contains the main stairway consisting of highly glossed handrails and turned balusters, and a prominent square newel post with applied wood carvings of a deer and foliate designs. The hall is further embellished by wood scroll brackets with incised and carved geometric and floral decoration (FIGURE 20), applied ornamental plasterwork molding on the ceiling, patterned hardwood floors; and wood wainscoting with carved wood tiles of floral designs (FIGURE 21).⁷¹ The overall design of the hall is

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FIGURE 19: Entrance Hall at 76 Main Street, Built in 1887. *When this home was built for Captain William T. Swain, the owner was a leading builder on Nantucket and had access to the finest wood and woodworkers on the island, as is evident in the elaborate and finely crafted wood details of the entrance hallway.*



“Eastlake style,” inspired by the influential English designer Charles L. Eastlake, who advocated three-foot-high wainscoting, ornate wood floor patterns, and simple, incised wood decoration.⁷²

Victorians typically lavished much care in the design and decoration of the entrance, as it was the first “room” visitors encountered when entering the house. This space was treated as a symbol of the status and lifestyle of the residents. When he built his home, Swain was known on island as an “energetic and ambitious” businessman and builder, and was a prominent member of the Masonic lodge.

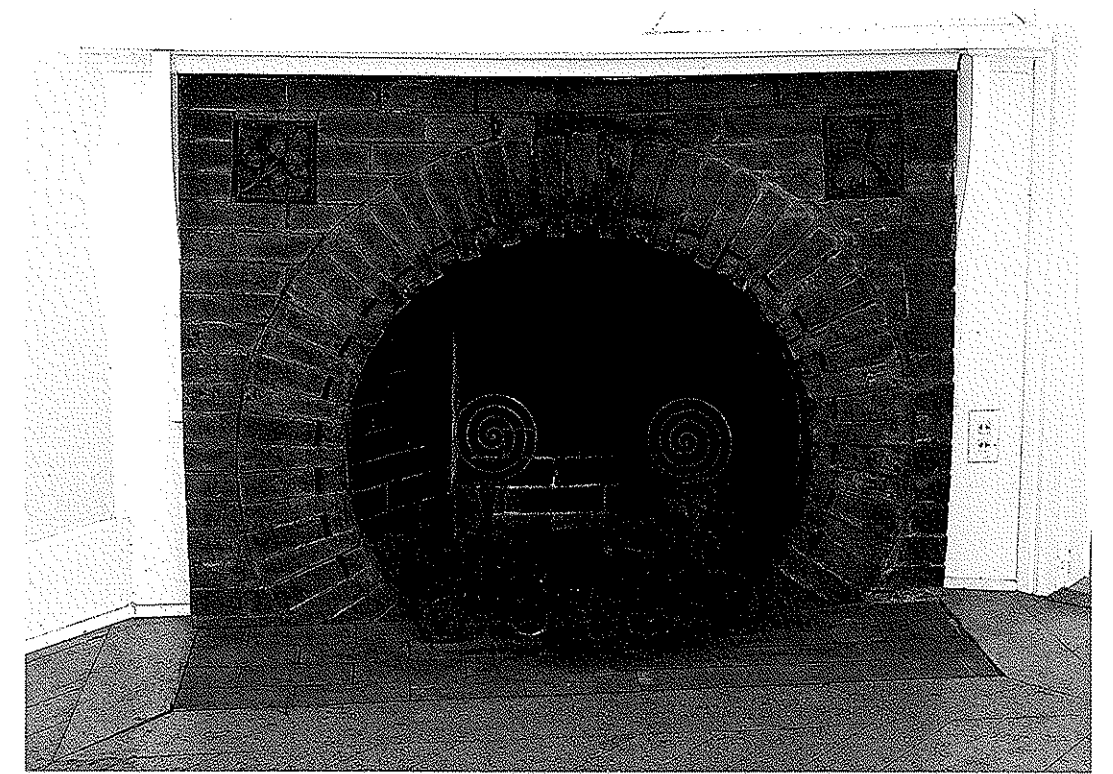
No longer the primary heating source, the fireplace in Victorian homes became much smaller and shallower, but retained its importance as a focal point of most rooms. A particularly appealing fireplace was built in the 1890s in what is now the Merrill home at 27 Hulbert Avenue (FIGURE 22). It features a curved brick opening, two terra-cotta inserts with foliate decoration (FIGURE 23), and wood bracket mantle supports with a lightly carved floral design.⁷³ The distinctly Romanesque Revival style of the fireplace was clearly inspired by the curved arched openings in the brick buildings designed by the influential Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–1886), who spent at least one summer on the island and is known as the father of the Shingle style.⁷⁴ The Romanesque Revival style also made its appearance on the island in the heavy textured stonework and rounded arch entrance of St. Paul’s Church on Fair Street, built in 1901, and in the rounded arch doorways of St. Mary’s Church on Federal Street.

Whatever form they took, Victorian houses on Nantucket incorporated a wealth of varied styles and architectural influences. They were models of domestic comfort and in large part adapted for a summer tourist community that continued to grow. As the *Inquirer and Mirror* noted in 1899, “The demand for cottages is daily increasing, and the real estate men are busy as bees.”⁷⁵



{ TOP }
FIGURE 20: Wood Scroll Detail, Entrance Hall,
76 Main Street.

{ BOTTOM }
FIGURE 21: Applied Wood Floral Motif, Entrance
Hall, 76 Main Street.



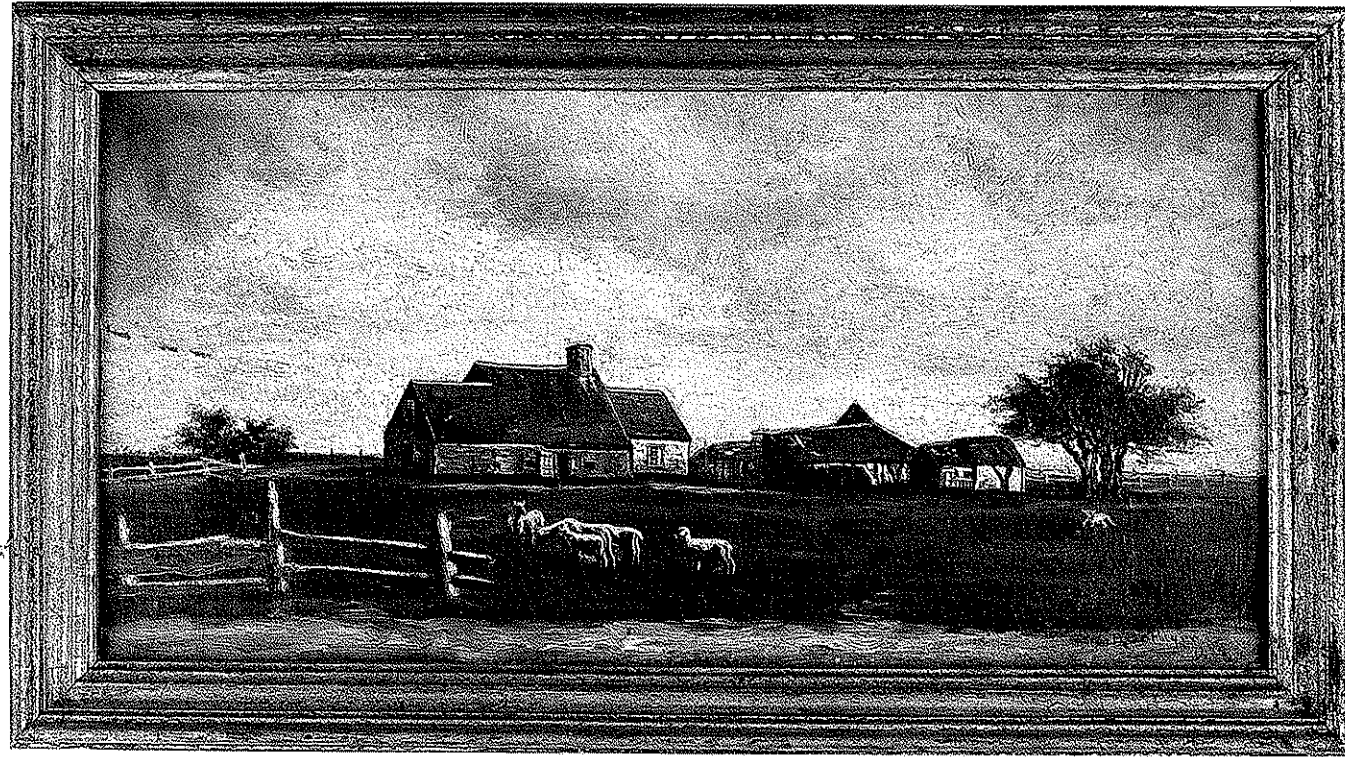
{ TOP }
FIGURE 22: Romanesque Revival–style Brick Fireplace,
Merrill House, Built in the 1890s, Hulbert Avenue. *More
than just a source for heat, the fireplace was the cornerstone of
domestic life in Victorian homes, as well as the visual focus of
the living room. This lovely curving fireplace has an added
decorative feature: terra-cotta foliate inserts.*

{ BOTTOM }
FIGURE 23: Terra-cotta Tile, Merrill House Fireplace.



“The Embodiment of Quaintness”:
Nantucket Architecture Lures Artists to the Island

MARGARET MOORE BOOKER



James Walter Folger, *Old Swain House, Polpis*, 1872, 1889. Oil on canvas. Egan Institute of Maritime Studies, Nantucket, Mass.

AS EARLY AS 1858 a correspondent for the art and literary magazine the *Crayon* exclaimed that on Nantucket Island “more subjects for pictures exist than artists to paint them!”¹ As the century progressed, artists with their portable easels, paint boxes, and white umbrellas became a common sight on the island in the summertime. By the early 1880s, the island was known as “an artists’ retreat” where painters could find “many a nook and corner queer enough for their delicate brushes,”² and several notable American artists could be found summering in homes along Cliff Road.

To meet the increasing demand of a growing tourist market for souvenirs many artists chose to portray the island’s architectural landmarks. Tourists were as enchanted by the quaintness and romance of Nantucket history and artifacts as they were by its cool ocean breezes, saltwater bathing, and other amenities.

In some instances, buildings were painted so frequently by artists that they became icons of the island’s early history. Among them was the Swain farmhouse, built in the early eighteenth century (and destroyed by fire in 1902). A writer for the *Inquirer and Mirror* predicted the interest in the house: “If it proves that the George Swain house in Polpis is the oldest structure upon the island, what a perfect stampede of photographic and oil and water color artists there will be to Polpis in the summer of 1887.”³

Indeed, the dilapidated, shingled Swain house with its “catslide” roof proved to be enormously appealing as a prized remnant of Nantucket’s rural past. Among the artists who portrayed the farmhouse were island craftsman James W. Folger (1851–1918), Chicago watercolorist Jane B. Reid (1862–1966), Boston artist and teacher William N. Bartholomew (1822–1898), and noted island photographer Henry S. Wyer (1847–1920).

One of the more popular sketching destinations on Nantucket was the small village of Siasconset (called ‘Sconset), located at the eastern end of the island. By 1880 the village’s diminutive, often rambling and sometimes eccentric shingled houses—many of which were originally built in the 1700s by codfishermen—had been renovated into summer cottages. These tiny houses gained the distinc-

tion in the late nineteenth century as being the “embodiment of quaintness.”⁴ Artists Jane Reid and Lillian Gertrude Smith Rockwood (1863–1945) became known for their faithful, meticulous watercolor representations of the diminutive, rose-covered cottages of ‘Sconset. Rockwood painted several versions of the picturesque Auld Lang Syne, on Broadway, possibly the oldest structure on the island, which served as her summer home and studio for decades.

While some artists painted accurate portraits of Nantucket’s oldest buildings, others created more romantic, atmospheric visions. For example, around 1870, famed American genre painter Eastman Johnson (1824–1906) painted *The Quaint Old Village*, in which the surrounding landscape plays as important a role in the composition as the old buildings. In the 1880s Wendell Macy (1845–1913), a versatile artist and a descendant of one of Nantucket’s earliest settlers, painted several idyllic sunset scenes of the “Old Sam Winslow House” on Quince Street. Annie Barker Folger (1852–1936) captured rural, turn-of-the-century Nantucket in her pastel streetscapes of run-down, shingled homes on sandy, winding roads.

By exhibiting their representations of Nantucket in art capitals across the country, artists helped the island gain distinction as a “famous watering-place.” As Arthur E. Jenks noted in 1897, “[W]e cannot afford to be blind to what artists, local and foreign, are doing to bring Nantucket into prominence as a charming summer resort.”⁵ Today, works by these artists are treasured resources for anyone with an interest in studying the architectural history of Nantucket, and in some instances provide the only known images of some of the island’s earliest architectural gems.

1. P., “Country Correspondence,” *Crayon* 5, part 9 (September 1858), 270.

2. I&M, 5 August 1882.

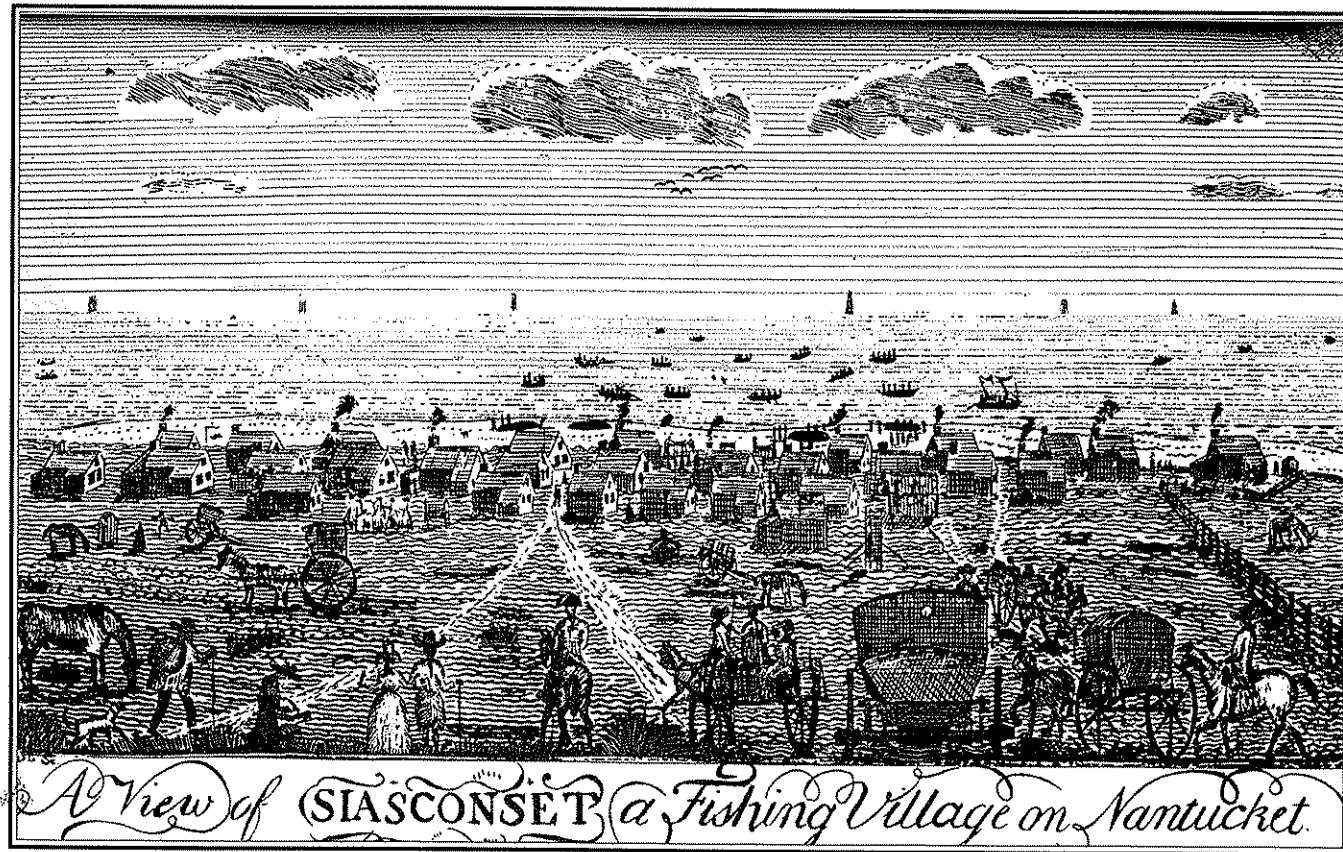
3. I&M, 9 October 1886.

4. Edward F. Underhill, *Sconset by the Sea* (Nantucket, Mass: Edward F. Underhill, 1893).

5. Arthur Elwell Jenks, “An Hour on ‘Sconset Moors,” I&M, 25 September 1897.

Fishermen's Shanties to Vacation Cottages: The Architectural Evolution of Siasconset Village

Rose Gonnella



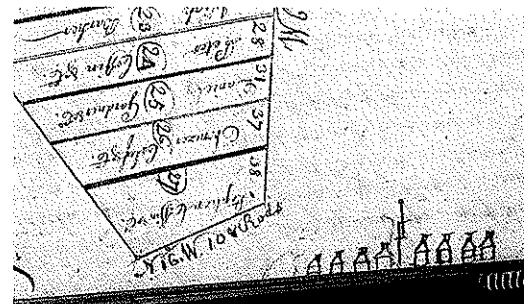
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FIGURE 1: A View of Siasconset, a Fishing Village on Nantucket (Engraving frontispiece to D. A. Leonard, *The Laws of Siasconset; A Ballad*, New Bedford, Mass., 1797). 'Sconset fishermen busy at their task and the village with its characteristic whale houses can be seen in this early engraving. At right, one house is under construction and the posts and beams, rafters, diagonal braces and window frames are depicted. When describing the village of 'Sconset, Edward Underhill noted: "Nearest land East, Portugal. Ditto South, the West Indies. Neither in sight. 200 houses big and little perched on a grassy bluff. Such is 'Sconset.'" Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

NEXT stop, Portugal. Siasconset village, on the easternmost shore of Nantucket, is perched on a sandy bluff overlooking the vast Atlantic Ocean. Its inhabitants have benefited from and enjoyed access to an unobstructed and panoramic view of the wide rolling sea for well over three hundred years (FIGURE 1).

The English colonists of Nantucket, who originally came to the island with the intent of making their livelihood in the sheep and wool trade, quickly understood the more lucrative potential of the sea. With guidance from the native Wampanoag Indians, the settlers learned of the best fishing locations along the island's southern and eastern beaches.¹ They traveled from their northerly settlement at Sherburne to the farther reaches of the island to reap the fruits of the seemingly limitless ocean.² Its bounty was surely great. With cod, sea bass, smelt, perch, and pike to catch, it is said the people regarded the southeastern ocean as a great "stew pond."³ In addition to fishing, the English inhabitants were also in pursuit of whales. The Wampanoags had been harvesting whales that had drifted close to shore and the English followed suit.

Recognizing the value of fishing and whaling as a means of both personal sustenance and as a livelihood, the English established in the 1660s and 1670s four seasonally occupied fishing stations along the southern and eastern shores of Nantucket, each equipped with rudimentary shelters for sleeping. Henry Forman, who has written a history of Siasconset and its fishing/whale houses, notes that by 1676, the Sesachacha station on the eastern shore had thirty cottages, making it the first English settlement of some size outside of Sherburne.⁴ None of the fishermen's shanties of the southern stations or Sesachacha remain (FIGURE 2). As with the English dwellings of old Sherburne, many of the primitive dwellings were relocated to a more advantageous position along the shore. Over the course of many decades, shelters from Sesachacha were moved two and a half miles south along the thirty-foot-high Siasconset bluff, a strategic vantage point relative to the migration of whales.⁵ Some cottages were also built on site.



{ LEFT }

FIGURE 2: Fishing Shacks of Quidnet Village Near Seschacha Pond, ca. late 1800s. *These fishing shanties give a clue as to the style and random arrangement of shelters erected in earlier centuries elsewhere on the island.* Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

{ RIGHT }

FIGURE 3: Plot-Plan of Siasconset, 1775. *This schematic drawing delineates ownership of the house lots in Siasconset and depicts a row of cottages. Adjacent to the single room structures shown on the plan is a tall pole that was erected for a bird's-eye view of whales.* Photograph by James McIntosh. Registry of Deeds, Town of Nantucket, Massachusetts. Courtesy of the Egan Institute of Maritime Studies, Nantucket, Mass.

The strictly utilitarian fishing/whaling cottages were, at first, crude structures with only one room of post-and-beam construction and a symmetrical gable roof (FIGURE 3). They are related in design—although smaller in area and lower in height—to the English dwellings built by the seventeenth-century settlers at Capaum Harbor.⁶ In addition, interior features (principally, a sleeping loft) were an adaptation from cottages known in fifteenth-century Wales.⁷

The small-scale whale cottages had a minimum of construction materials, heating, and maintenance needs. Fisherman obviously required the barest of shelters for their needs. Heating was not necessary because their use was during warmer months, and cooking was done outdoors or under a open shed, known on Nantucket as a porch.⁸ Resident historian and grandson of a noted Nantucket carpenter, Obed Macy (1762–1844) wrote of the minimally constructed whaling huts in a journal entry of 1839: “Siasconset was formerly confined to the fishing business. The houses were built [sic] accordingly with wooden chimneys. The uprights not shingled,—and every calculation to make all the savings they could by fishing.”⁹

By the mid-1700s, when the great harbor of Sherburne became the epicenter of a deep-sea whale fishery, near-shore whaling in 'Sconset waned. Codfishing, however, continued in earnest. Eventually, wives and



FIGURE 4: The Captain and Betsey Baxter's House, Built ca. 1682, 10 Broadway. *The nineteenth-century inhabitants of 'Sconset creatively named their homes to evoke the peaceful atmosphere and history of the village. The Baxters named their home "Saint's Rest" and also kept a quarterboard from the 1852 wreck of the ship Shanunga that hung on the property. The present owners of the home have named their small guest cottage Saint's Rest and kept the name Shanunga for the main house.*

children who lived in town began to join the men for long stays in the spring and fall during their fishing seasons. As a result, the primitive shelters were improved. Dirt or clay floors were covered with wood, interior walls were finished with plaster, exteriors were given a layer of shingles over simple sheathing, and brick chimneys were installed.¹⁰ Edward F. Underhill (1830–1898), a New York State court stenographer by profession and a businessman by inclination, was a history buff and an ardent admirer of 'Sconset's whale houses. He wrote of the exterior and interior improvements made after 1800: “old clinker-built [tightly spaced clapboards] roofs were taken off, and replaced side by side and covered with shingles, to discourage the rain from trying to become too familiar with the interiors.”¹¹ Underhill also reported: “A startling in[n]ovation was made by a well-to-do fisherman that aroused the jealous criticism of all his neighbors. He actually caused the interior of his dwelling to be plastered! For years he was the subject of animadversion, and it did not cease until the last family was able to indulge in the same extravagance.”¹²

Said to have been one of those moved from Sesachacha to 'Sconset, the “Shanunga” at 10 Broadway, built circa 1682, is one of the oldest examples of a whale house¹³ (FIGURE 4). Like many

of the 'Sconset cottages, it also has an interesting social history. A nineteenth-century owner, Betsey Cary (1778–1860), used the cottage as a tavern, having a tap room of eight by ten feet. The home was inherited by Cary's daughter, Betsey (1806–1883), who married the former whaleman Captain William Baxter (1805–?). A well-known character around the village, Baxter converted the cottage/tavern into a cottage/post office and appointed himself the postmaster of 'Sconset. According to local tradition, when Captain Baxter "came over the hill on Main Street [into the village], he tooted his fish horn, and the event of the day was the gathering of the people at the [post office] window, and for each letter or paper received, one whole cent went into the coffers of the rasping old mariner! And yet there are those who boldly assert that he did not get rich!"¹⁴ The present owner of the Shanunga suggests that a thin, worn slot cut in the door on the southeast side of the house was once the official outgoing postal box.¹⁵

Spanning several centuries, the evolution of construction of the Shanunga remains discernable from its east-facing facade. The first phase of the seventeenth-century structure is the south portion, originally a single room of twelve by fifteen feet. The room was open to the peak and had a spare interior. Sleeping quarters were arranged by a partition several feet from the south gable wall, which was further divided at the top into a sleeping garret—known from its fifteenth-century Welsh origin as a "hanging-loft."¹⁶ Particular to the Shanunga, the central living space had also been partitioned into a sleeping loft above the entire room. The simple rectangular great room (for cooking, dining, and living) and the hanging-loft was the first of several phases in the evolution of the plan of the Shanunga and most whale houses (FIGURE 5).

After 1700, additional space was integrated into the whale house through the addition of low sheds projecting from the sleeping quarters on both the east and west side of the first floor. These two small lean-to expansions or "warts" push outward from the structure's core room, creating a T-shape plan. The distinct combination of the first-phase and second-phase extensions defines the unmistakable "double lean-to form" of the 'Sconset whale house.

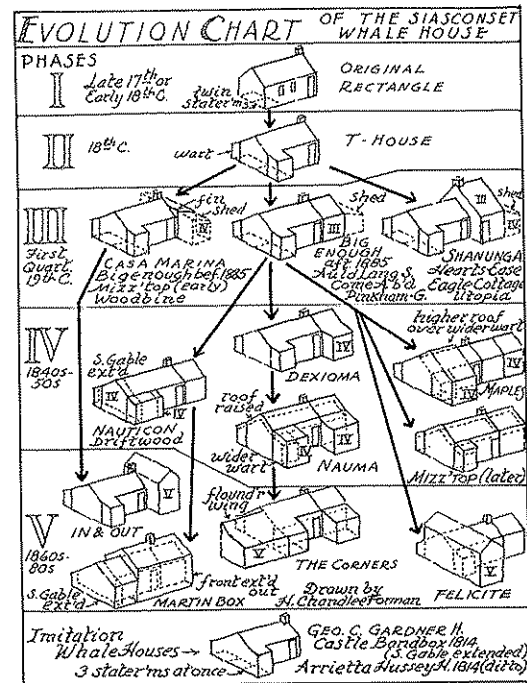
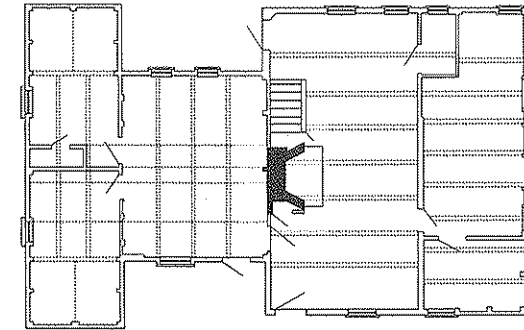


FIGURE 5: Henry C. Forman, Evolution Chart of the Siasconset Whale Houses, ca. 1966. Pen and ink drawing. Published in H. C. Forman, *Early Nantucket and Its Whale Houses* (Nantucket, Mass.: Mill Hill Press, reprint 1991), 130.



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FIGURE 6: Plan of Shanunga. Illustration by Richard Valdes, 2003. This drawing shows the evolution of the plan of the house, as it was built between 1682 and 1800.

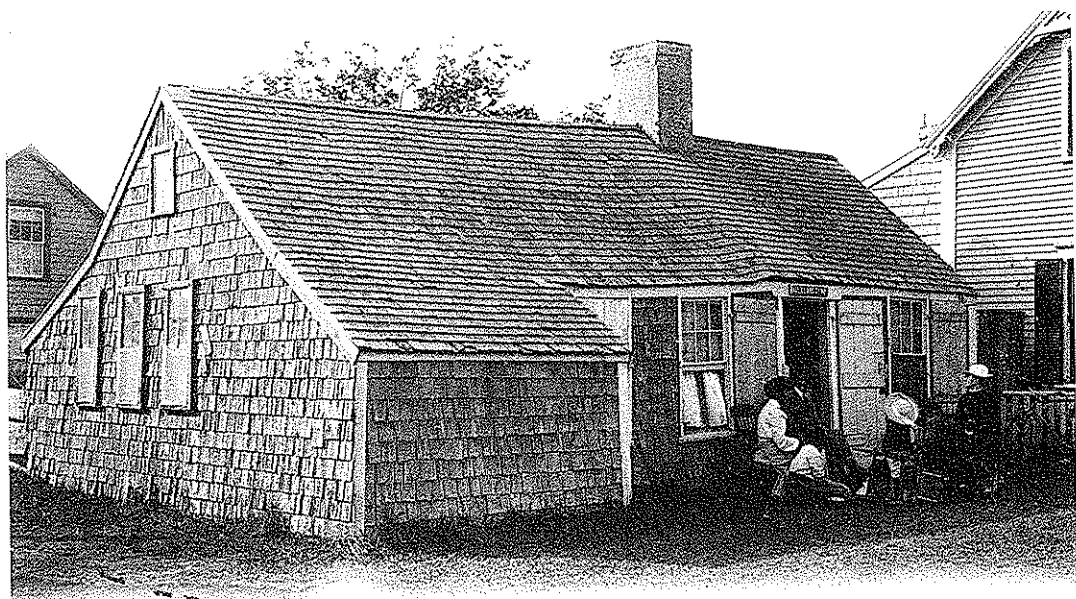
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FIGURE 7: Shanunga Interior. Wood-paneled walls in the cottage Shanunga date to the mid-nineteenth century.



None of the early T-shape houses are intact, however, as all were further extended and reconfigured in several directions both outward and, in some cases, upward. The Shanunga for instance has a large one-and-a-half-story section on its north side, opposite the early T-shape group of rooms. Built circa 1760–80, the addition accommodated a kitchen without obliterating the earliest portions of the dwelling (FIGURE 6). With this new kitchen came a chimney with a hearth located on the north side of the room. Yet another extension to the kitchen on its north side was added circa 1800, at which time the hearth was moved to the south wall and walls were improved. Modernization was desirable into the twentieth century, but the early nineteenth-century fireplace and its antique character remain (FIGURE 7).

Practical and utilitarian improvements, plus the installation of dormers, porches, and extensions (warts and all), having more to do with personal taste and whimsy, occurred throughout the centuries on the cottages and continue in guided moderation today.¹⁷ After speaking with the octogenarians living in the whale houses, Edward Underhill reported that: "the visitor who knew Siasconset previous to 1880, would be surprised to note changes in the appearance of many of the old cottages. . . . [They] have been increased in their proportions by putting a story on the 'warts,' or by projections covered with shingles laid on in shapes fantastic enough to satisfy the longings of the most ardent admirer of incongruous [sic] house building."¹⁸



Copyright 1915 by the Nantucket Co.
7000 "Auld Lang Syne" (oldest house) Siasconset, Mass

Despite these expansions necessary for modern life, the overall intimate scale of the whale houses has survived. Once strictly practical, these former fishermen's cottages grew to be valued for both their simplicity of design and petite charms (FIGURE 8). As R. B. Hussey stated in his travel guide of 1889: "[L]ife at Sconset is emphatically a cottage life. The old village is made up of fisherman's ancient huts transmogrified into pleasing villas of modern pretensions, rendering the combination of architecture both quaint and unique, and the cottages both doll-like and commodious."¹⁹

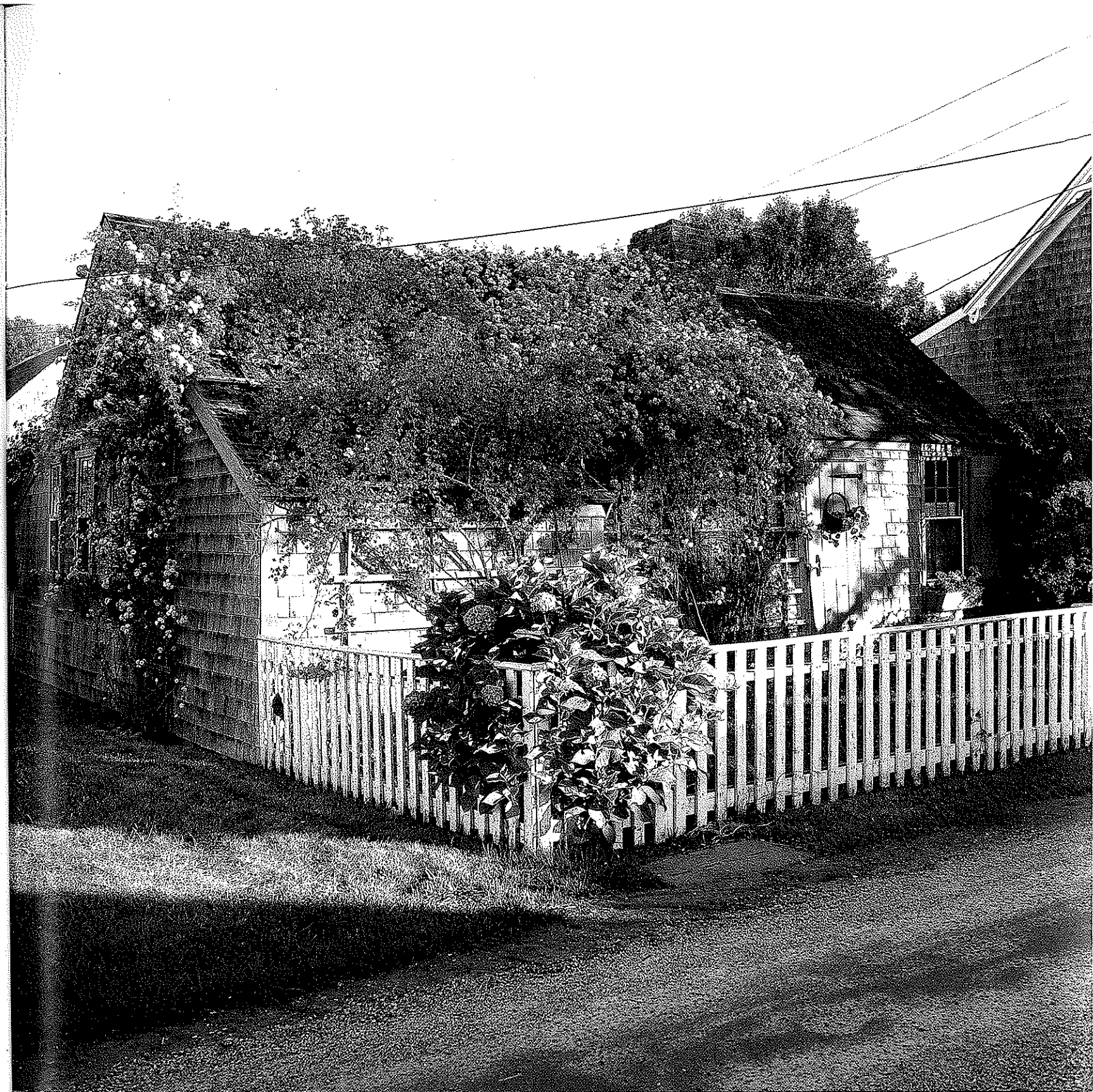
A perennial favorite, recorded in countless postcards, paintings, and photographs, "Auld Lang Syne," built circa 1675, at 6 Broadway, is thought to be the oldest house on the island (FIGURE 9).²⁰ Its plan has the essential character of a whale house and includes a hanging loft that is accessed with a ladder. The ladder remains despite several alterations that were installed gradually over its three-hundred-year history. Following the typical early construction evolution, Auld Lang Syne grew from one room to a T-shape plan. After 1790 a kitchen was added,²¹ and a small wart sprouted on the west side sometime after 1890. Within the last several years, the house was again refurbished: walls were improved and insulated, new windows installed, the house resingled, the northwest shed roof was lowered, and some interior walls reconfigured. Even though the exterior fabric of the

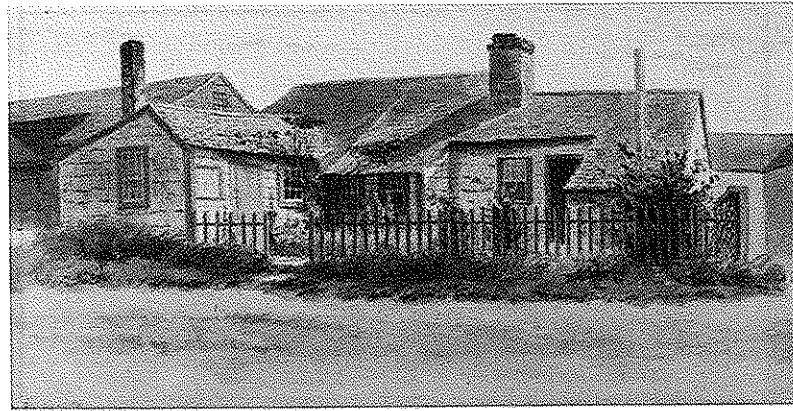
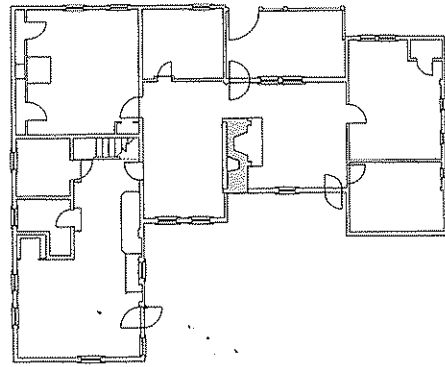
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FIGURE 8: Auld Lang Syne, Built in 1675, at 6 Broadway. *As this photograph indicates, the climate and soil of Siasconset are particularly suited to growing roses, hydrangeas, and hollyhocks in great abundance.*

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 9: Auld Lang Syne, 1905. *This turn-of-the-century view helps envision the small scale of this old whale cottage, built for Captain Henry Coleman.* Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.





cottage was not significantly disturbed, some neighbors raised objections and questioned the extent of the renovation.²²

Built circa 1806–09 or prior,²³ “Hearts Ease,” at 14 Center Street also evolved in the typical eighteenth-century fashion. Over time, it was greatly expanded to the north (FIGURE 10). Depicted in a twentieth-century artist’s rendering, the whale house plan is still recognizable (FIGURE 11). Apart from the easy to distinguish former whale houses, many others have been altered and layered over the years to the point where the basic T-shape design is no longer apparent. Cottages such as Casa Marina or Sans Souci have interesting warts, porches, raised roofs, and various punctures. The whale houses also have delightful nautical or quixotic historic elements such as portholes, unmatched windows, miniature doors, and construction materials salvaged from shipwrecks that give the neighborhood a “patchwork” appearance. For the most part, it is obvious that present-day homeowners do not wish to alter the small scale of the cottages. As Forman wrote of Hearts Ease, “This is the honeymooner’s dream of a snugger. . . .”²⁴ Tightly fitted along ’Sconset’s historic lanes of Front Street, Broadway, Center, and Shell streets,²⁵ the delightful group of whale cottages form the heart of one of the most unique and picturesque villages in New England (FIGURE 12).

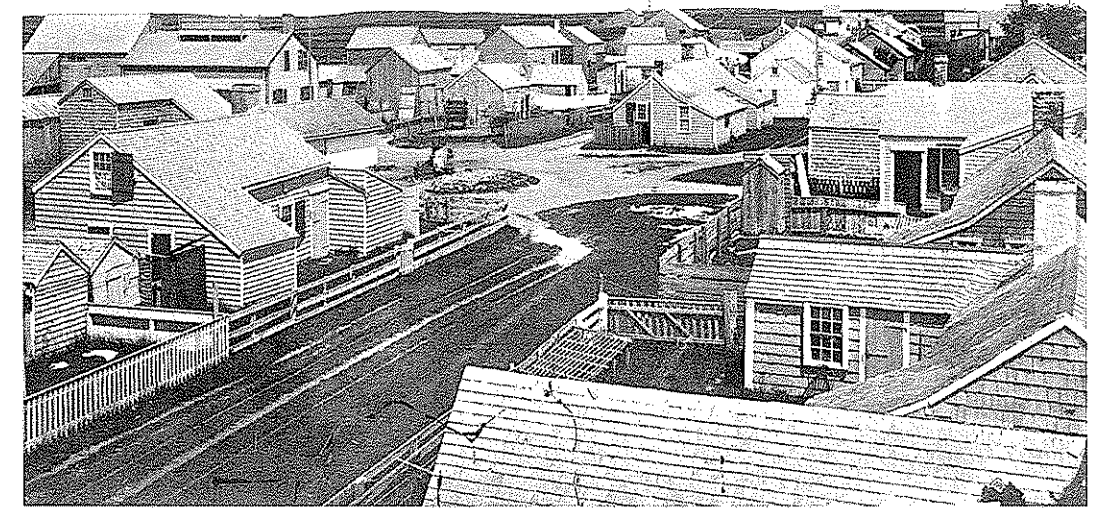
A visitor to Nantucket in 1772, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote the following description of ’Sconset: “I have never seen a spot better calculated to cherish contemplative ideas; perfectly unconnected with the great world, and far removed from its perturbations.”²⁶ Long acknowledged for its quietude and simplicity of lifestyle, ’Sconset’s appeal as a rural vacation spot was recognized in the 1830s by residents from the town of Nantucket. Many of the fishing shanties and former whale

{ LEFT }

FIGURE 10: Plan of Hearts Ease. Illustration by Richard Valdes, 2003. In this drawing, sections of this house, dating from circa 1809 to the late twentieth century, are shown from right to left respectively.

{ RIGHT }

FIGURE 11: Jane Brewster Reid (1862–1966), Heart’s Ease, ca. 1935. Watercolor on paper. Picturesque cottages of ’Sconset have been popular subject matter for generations of artists. This cottage was built at 14 Center Street around 1806. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Max Berry, 86.46.4.



houses were rented during the summer months to Nantucketers seeking a peaceful retreat from the bustle of urban life. In addition to the renters, Nantucket’s wealthy whaling merchants and seafaring families built their own vacation cottages. In a journal entry dated 1842, Obed Macy wrote: “The fishing business still continues to be kept up with many that make it their dependance [sic], in the Fall and Spring. But the greater part of the people that go to Siasconset, go out for their health, and others for the sake of the ride, and in parties of pleasure. . . . How different is this, than it was 50 or 60 years ago,—when very few visited Siasconset except it was for business or profit.”²⁷

Matthew Crosby (1791–1878)—son-in-law of one of Nantucket’s wealthiest whaling merchants, Zenas Coffin (1764–1828), and a successful businessman himself—contracted with Charles Pendleton “to build him a House at Siasconsitt [sic] to be completed on or before the first day of May 1837.” According to Pendleton’s contract with Crosby, the house was to be thirty-three feet wide by twenty feet deep and “set up on pillars 2 ½ ft high in front[.] Terrace five ft wide with Balestrade all round.”²⁸ Crosby was, perhaps, requesting a porch for his vacation house. Captain Seth Pinkham (1786–1844) and his family who lived in a typical Nantucket house on Fair Street in town, found ’Sconset to be an enjoyable retreat as well. A descendant of Pinkham, Florence Anderson wrote in her memoir of the family: “[Pinkham] was among the elite in owning a house at Siasconset. This he had purchased of Father Brown, a very old building, of queer angles of roof and yet queerer irregularities in window arrangement.”²⁹ Although the particular cottage to which Anderson is referring is

FIGURE 12: View of Broadway, ’Sconset, at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century. Not just one or two examples of the whale houses survive, but rather an entire community of early vernacular architecture. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



{ ABOVE LEFT }
 FIGURE 13: Unknown Artist, Eunice Starbuck Hadwen, ca. 1820. Oil on panel. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association. Gift of Eunice Barney Swain, 1915. 15.23.1

{ ABOVE RIGHT }
 FIGURE 14: 20 Main Street, 'Sconset, Built in 1837. This neatly appointed single-story cottage was one of the first cottages built by a resident of Nantucket Town as a summer home in 'Sconset. As most of its buildings date to the mid-nineteenth century, 'Sconset is considered one of the earliest resorts in New England

{ BELOW }
 FIGURE 16: Bird's Eye View of 'Sconset, Detail from "Bird's Eye View of the Town of Nantucket," 1881. Lithograph, published by J. J. Stoner, printed by Beck & Pauli, Madison, Wisconsin. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

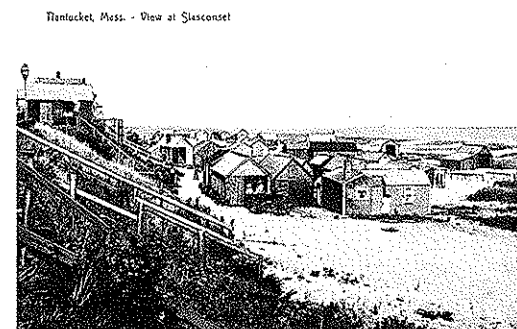
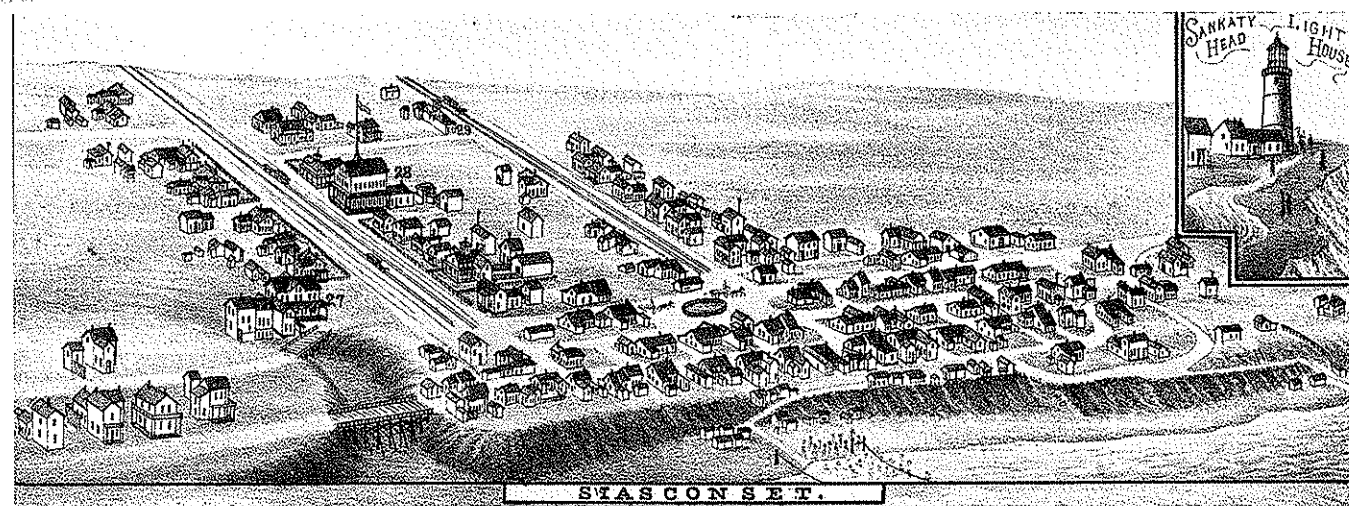


FIGURE 15: Greetings From 'Sconset. Pictured in this old postcard are a group of fishing shanties turned vacation cottages. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

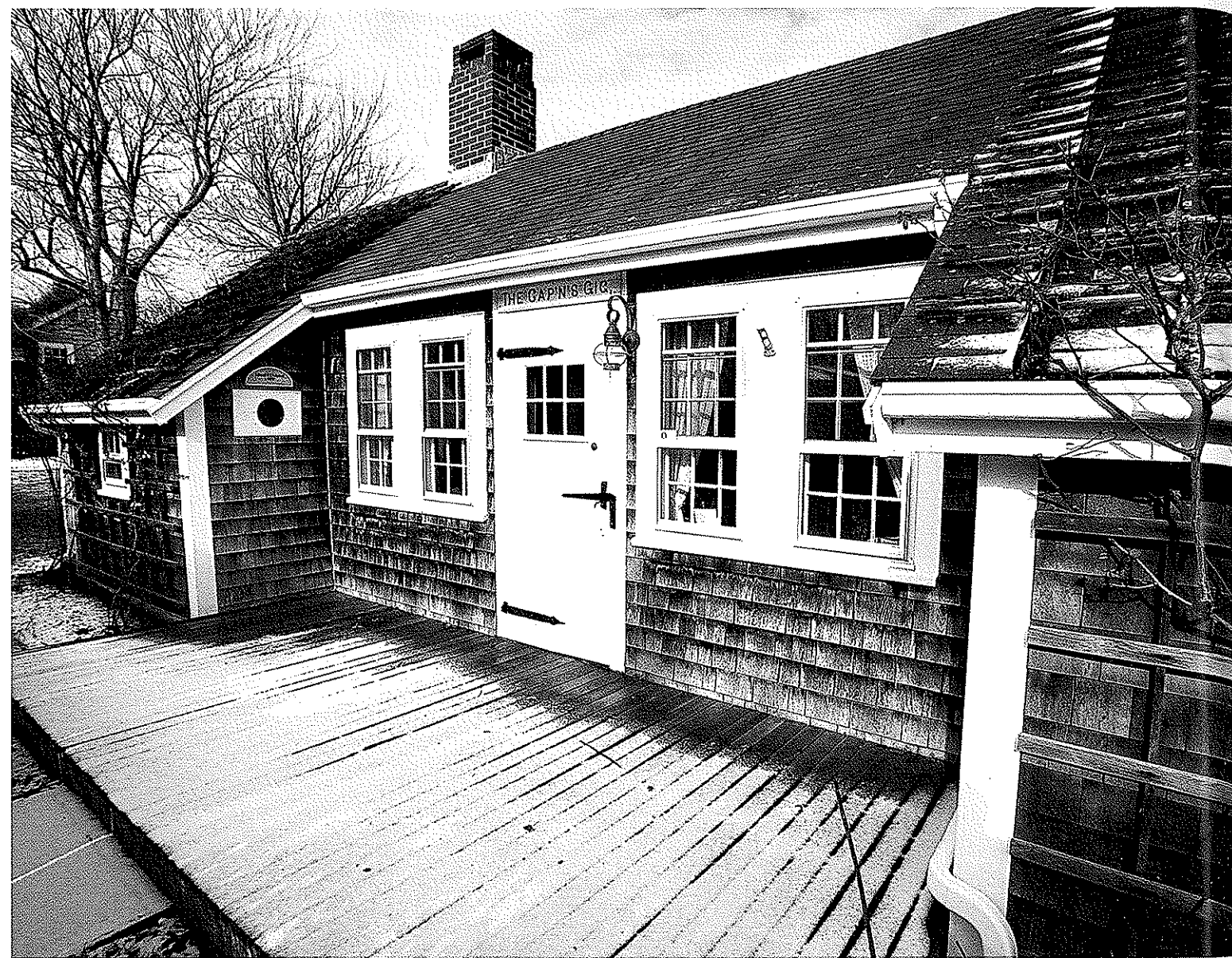
not known, it may be that the "queer" building was a converted fisherman's house. Certainly numbered among the elite, Eunice Hadwen (1799–1864, FIGURE 13), the wife of one of Nantucket's most prosperous whaling merchants, William Hadwen (1791–1862), also had a vacation home in 'Sconset, located at 20 Main Street. The home was first built circa 1837 for Frederick W. Mitchell and sold to Eunice Hadwen in 1855.³⁰ The one-story house with its simple colonnade porch also had twin gable chimneys (FIGURE 14). It was initially, as would be expected for rural 'Sconset, a less elaborate and smaller version of the refined Federal-style homes that graced Nantucket Town.

When the whale fishery that provided great wealth to so many ceased to be, the whole of Nantucket was plunged into severe economic depression, and Nantucket Town and 'Sconset village lost a significant portion of their populations. Over a period of twenty-five years, houses fell into disrepair or were dismantled and removed to the mainland. However, a second wave of settlement came to the island in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. These inhabitants, like the Wampanoag and initial colonists, were interested in the offerings of the sea—as a base for pleasure rather than toil. The sweet air and mild climate of 'Sconset lured people from the mainland who sought a peaceful seaside vacation (FIGURE 15). By 1877, an article in the *Inquirer and Mirror* described the island's summer visitors as a "throng" with "hotels in 'waiting orders' for the many others who will be compelled to seek refuge on the seaboard from the heat and vapid atmosphere of cities."³¹ The newspaper also noted: "The aspect of the ancient and unique village of Siasconset, distant a pleasant drive from town, is modernized and rendered quite attractive by the tiny cottages ornae which have lately been erected. From the piazzas of these there is a fine inland view of the surrounding landscape, and also an outlook upon the illimitable ocean, unsurpassed, if not unequalled, from any point along the Atlantic coast, with nothing to interrupt the view save snow-white sails swelling with every breeze—ships and vessels" (FIGURE 16).³²



FIGURE 17: Edward Fitch Underhill, Engraving ca. Mid-to Late 19th Century. Courtesy of the Print Collection, The New York Public Library.

In the late nineteenth century, Edward Underhill (FIGURE 17) wrote specifically on the history and charms of the whale houses to promote the village as a vacation destination. Booklets by Underhill and his wife,



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FIGURE 18: Cap'n's Gig, At 1 Lily Street, Built ca. 1889. The "Underhill cottages" located on Evelyn, Lily, and Pochick streets were especially popular with the actors' colony. Actress Margaret Fawcett Barnes recalled that these cottages seem to have had "a hundred years of sporadic living in them . . . you rambled through rooms, some with such low ceilings you might be on a ship; you mounted stairs so steep they must have been patterned from a ship's companionway." Famed actor and comedian Robert Benchley once summered at the cottage pictured here.

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 19: Bo'sn's Bunt, Built ca. 1889, 2 Lily Street. This cottage is among the smallest in the Underhill neighborhood. "If an extra room was needed, Mr. Underhill had that figured out too. He built a separate room on wheels which hauled by a large mule, could be attached for the summer to whichever house required it." Quoted from Margaret Fawcett Barnes, *'Sconset Heyday* (Nantucket, Mass.: The Island Press, 1969).

Evelyn, include *'Sconset by the Sea*,³³ *The Old Houses on 'Sconset Bank*,³⁴ *'Sconset in a Nutshell*,³⁵ *A Pictyure Booke of ye Pachworke Vyllage Sconsett by ye Sea Ye Pictyures was drawn from others made by Master Wyere and Master Platte by ye Helpe of ye Sunn*,³⁶ and *The Credible Chronicles of the Patchwork Village*.³⁷ Recognizing the quiet, simple beauty of the old dwellings, Underhill emulated their design in a development of equally small-size cottages located southwest of the neighborhood of the whale houses. Built by local Nantucket carpenters, the Underhill cottages form their own enclave on Lily Street, Evelyn Street (named for his daughter and wife), and Everett, Magnolia, and Pochick streets. The Cap'n's Gig at 1 Lily Street and the Bo'sn's Bunt at 2 Lily Street (both built circa 1889) are examples of only two of the several variations (FIGURES 18, 19). In constructing the houses, Underhill incorporated a variety of low, shed-roof warts in order to model his cottages on the seemingly random two-hundred-year evolution of the older houses.

As seen at the Observatory cottage (FIGURE 20), built circa 1888–89 at 6 Lily Street, Underhill employed a one-story, double-lean-to plan recognizable from the third phase of the whale houses. Opposite the double-lean-to is a one-and-a-half-story gabled room with a one-story wedge-shaped form projecting in front of it.

Apparent in the interior at the Observatory is the effort to arrange the rooms in the traditional way, with bedrooms partitioned off the central living area. The open rafters and walls, as well as the overall small size, contribute to the informal nature of the structure (FIGURE 21). The casual order and diminutive qualities of the cottage were certainly meant to captivate visitors. From the *Nantucket Journal* of August 4, 1887, "Old Seaweeds" wrote: "The capacity of a 'Sconset cottage is phenomenal. There are so many who partake of their daily bread in one on Evelyn Street, that in order to eat all at once it is said they have to sit spoon fashion around the table. At another on Lily Street, sofas and cots are brought into nightly requisition for the adults, the children are hung on pegs around the rooms. Captain William Baxter is the authority for this last statement. He says he knows it is true because he has seen one of the pegs."³⁸



FIGURE 20: The Observatory, Built ca. 1888–89, 6 Lily Street. The one-story shed roof front projection, which can be seen in this cottage, is said to be called a “flounder.” The wedged-shaped form was adapted by Edward Underhill from additions found on the whale houses, specifically in the cottage known as “The Corners,” located near the former Sconset water pump.



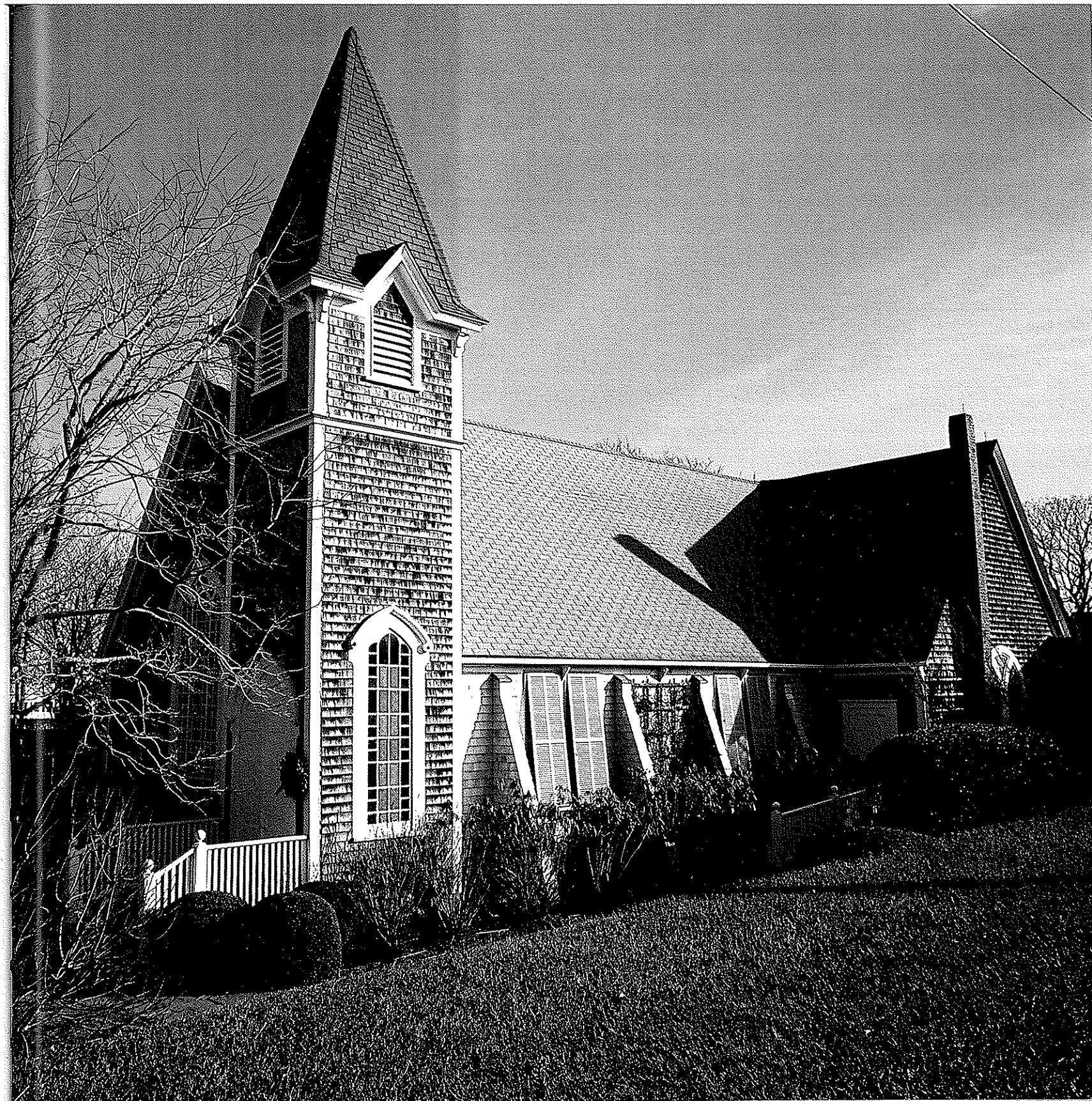
FIGURE 21: Interior of the Observatory. A thought on cottage accommodations from one of many Edward Underhill’s newspaper ads: “Rents \$90 and \$175 for the season. N.B.: I provide cribs and cradles. There my responsibility ends. Tenants must furnish babies for themselves.”

Due to his aggressive and often humorous marketing strategies, including the booklets, newspaper ads, romanticized histories, storytelling narratives, and health testimonials by doctors, the rental of Underhill's miniature vacation houses was wildly popular. The *Nantucket Journal* reported, "Mr. E. F. Underhill has rented all of his cottages, and is daily turning cottage seekers away. He could rent a dozen more if he had them."³⁹ An advertisement of June 1898 in the *Inquirer and Mirror* listed: "At Siasconset, 85 cottages completely furnished. Rent from \$75 to \$175 for the season." A few weeks after the ad was placed, Edward Underhill died suddenly in New York. His obituary states that Underhill was "highly esteemed" and that "largely through his unique efforts the little hamlet has attained a widespread notoriety, and no opportunity was ever lost by the deceased to urge its attractions as a place of summer resort."⁴⁰

Underhill was not the first to see the potential of advertising 'Sconset's mild seaside weather and history to off-islanders. In addition to Underhill, two of 'Sconset's earliest off-island builder/developers were Charles H. Robinson and Franklin Ellis, who established the Sunset Heights neighborhood in 1873, across a gully south of the ancient whale houses.⁴¹ Robinson's fondness for Victorian styles of architecture led the way for both individuals and developers to follow. Houses erected in the Gothic Revival, high Victorian, Stick, and Shingle styles, forming an arc around the nucleus of ancient whale cottages, expanded the borders of the village. The exalted level of massing and ornamentation of these romantic styles reflected the taste of the period. There were numerous sizeable Victorian houses built along the oceanfront bluff, as well as smaller homes and cottages built throughout the village. Mixed in with the grand vacation houses (FIGURES 26, 27), less formal architecture was also a choice for the casual lifestyle of the resort area and the small scale of 'Sconset. A high Victorian Gothic design such as 'Sconset's Union Chapel, built in 1882 for the multi-denominational vacationers, was a moderate interpretation of the style when originally built.⁴² Twentieth-century decorative subtractions and reconfigurations have further muted the chapel's architectural flourishes (FIGURE 22). Although many houses and buildings were modified in the twentieth century, Victorian architectural features and massing are still

{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 22: Union Chapel, Built in 1882. *Servicing visitors of varied religious persuasions, the chapel was originally constructed in a high Victorian style that was later simplified. Characteristic features of the Victorian era are still visible in the pointed arch windows and Gothic-style "flying buttresses," appropriately clad in shingles.*





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FIGURE 23: The Flagship, Built in 1890, 12 Baxter Road. The glass enclosure on the porch is a late twentieth-century addition. It is a most necessary feature on the windy bluff where the cottage is located.

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 24: Detail of the Flagship's Mansard Roof.

plainly visible on houses in all sections of the village. The North Bluff, an area that has its start at the edge of the old fishing cottages and continues north to Sankaty Head Lighthouse, was purchased and developed over the course of several years by William J. Flagg (1818–1898), an Ohio- and New York–based businessman and writer. Flagg inspired a new era of home building in his Sankaty Heights development when he had a summer home constructed just south of the lighthouse.⁴³ A story is told of one Asa Jones, a fisherman and former Nantucket carpenter, who was forced to stow his hammer and saws for twenty-five years as the islanders suffered through an economic depression. When Flagg asked Jones to build a house for him, the carpenter, in great disbelief, asked Flagg to repeat the offer. He did and Jones constructed a house circa 1875, igniting the construction of new vacation homes.⁴⁴

Further north along Baxter Road is the second house Flagg had built as a summer home. The nine-hundred-square-foot cottage, called the Flagship, was built in 1890⁴⁵ in the Second Empire style (FIGURE 23). It appears that Flagg, a wealthy man who could well afford a large, ornate house, chose to be fashionable yet modest, by considerably toning down this most ebullient, French-inspired Victorian fashion. The Flagship has the definite hallmarks of the style: a mansard roof and roof dormers, tall windows, and a projecting second story over an eastward-facing porch. In place of the bold articulation, curving forms and three-dimensionality found on most Second Empire designs, this house has a flat-sided and slightly pitched mansard roof, unbracketed shallow eaves, pedimented but simple roof dormers, a single square mass, and an exterior sheathed in shingles (painted clapboards were the usual choice). An interesting detail, the shingles on several rows of the roof and the dormer pediments are cut in a scallop pattern, echoing the slate roofing tiles that were favored for this style (FIGURE 24).

Over the decades, as practical needs and tastes changed, the Flagship did have a single-room expansion and alterations. However, during a restoration of the house in 1998 by 'Sconset residents and preservation architects Elizabeth Churchill and David Bentley, this husband-and-wife team were given the opportunity to remove twentieth-century

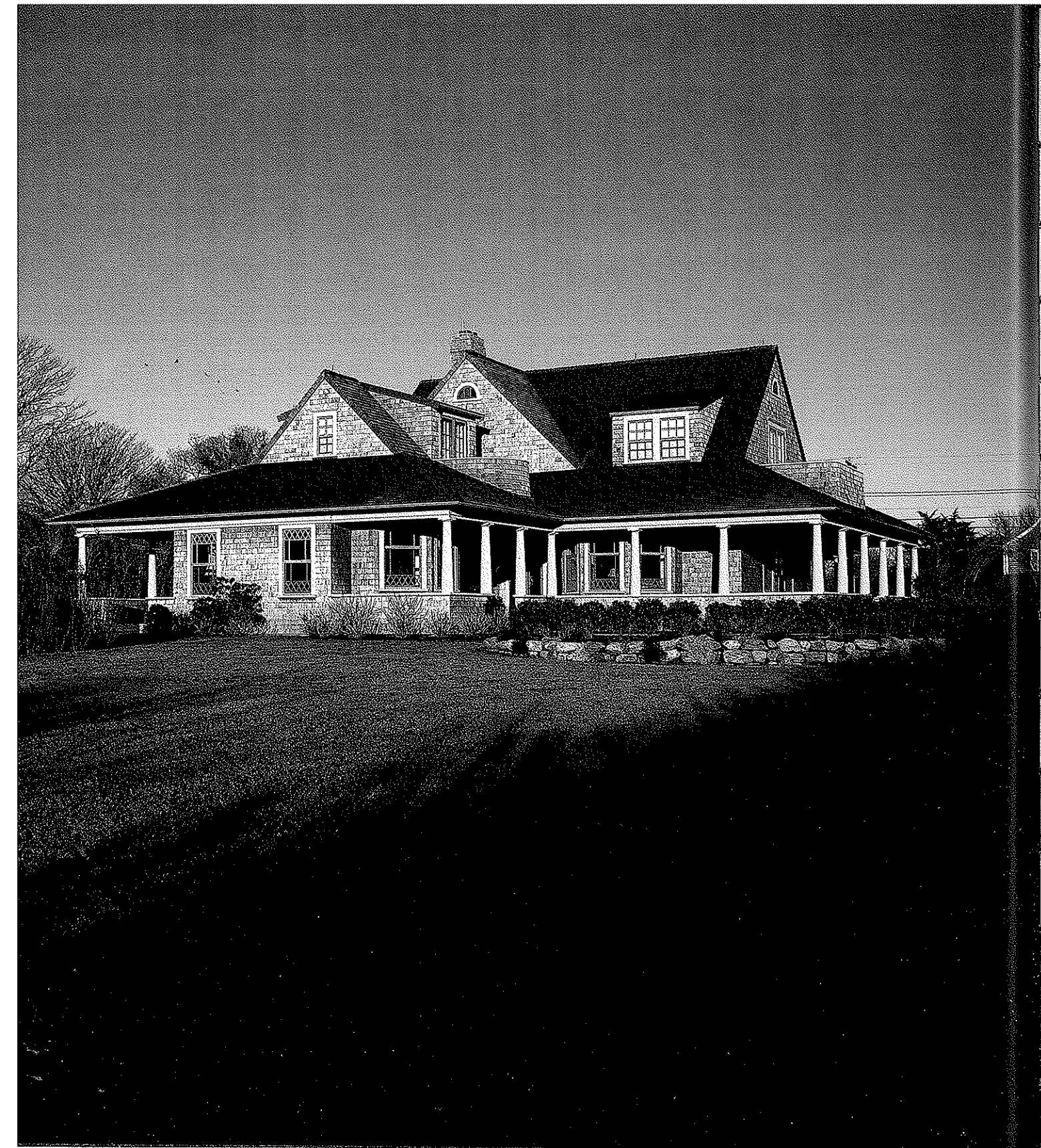


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FIGURE 25: 12 Baxter Road, Built ca. 1885–94. A second-story porch wraps around the north section of this house and is accessed from the living room. Wide porches are a typical feature of late-nineteenth-century cottages in Sconset.

additions and return the building to its essential original configuration.⁴⁶ Keeping a house small in today's real estate market, especially on prestigious Baxter Road, is not usual. Churchill and Bentley are most concerned about the tremendous temptation many architects, builders, and homeowners have to tear down and rebuild larger to fill the broad lots along the bluff. The conundrum of preservation versus modernization of the island's historic architecture has been under way at least since the 1880s, when Underhill lamented the changes he saw occurring in the ancient whale houses. Henry Forman, who spent years examining the whale houses inside and out, was also alarmed by what he termed, the "successive uglifications" of the cottages. In his book, Forman called for "a historic zoning law rigidly enforced down to the smallest details."⁴⁷ Presently, Nantucket's Historic District Commission strives to protect the houses and regulate renovation, but the elected committee cannot monitor every detail. Some homeowners choose to gut interiors completely, while others believe that the historic homes are not worth saving at all.⁴⁸

An example of both thoughtful restoration and modernization is 12 Baxter Road. Built sometime between 1885 and 1894,⁴⁹ this home underwent several additions and changes over a period of many decades (FIGURE 25).⁵⁰ First erected during the last phase of the Victorian era, the two-and-a-half-story, organically massed house is a blend of styles—a common occurrence in the vernacular architecture of the village. Archival photographs of the late nineteenth century show the house with a steep-pitch gable end to the south, a gabled roof dormer over an elongated window, and a small porch below, the features of early Victorian designs. The pointed dormer remains, but the small porch was removed and the south gable almost completely obscured by a stocky, conical-roof two-story bay extension, added circa 1904–09. This two-story projecting bay with ribbon windows (multipaned casements) are characteristic of the popular, late-nineteenth-century Shingle style (SEE ALSO FIGURES 26 AND 27).⁵¹ Additional Shingle-style characteristics of 12 Baxter Road include low-sloping shed dormers, an organic plan, and a complete exterior covering of shingles. These early-twentieth-century alterations may have reflected changing taste and a move away from earlier Victorian styles. The current



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FIGURE 26: 23 Morey Lane, Built ca. 1904. *This eastward-facing house with leaded diamond-paned windows, continuous shingle cladding, and widely encompassing roof line is an outstanding example of the Shingle style. With its roots in colonial architecture (plentiful on Nantucket), the design recalled the simplicity of sturdy, timber-frame houses. Unpainted, shingle-clad, organically designed homes like 23 Morey Lane were especially popular in 'Sconset at the turn of the nineteenth century. The shingled balconies are a recent addition, but perfectly integrated into the character of the house.*



{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 27: Interior of 23 Morey Lane. *A dramatic brick fireplace recalls the massiveness of colonial-era fireplaces. Once the vacation home of silent film actor and 'Sconset regular Robert Hilliard, the giant hearth would have been an appropriate backdrop for an actor who is said to have had a valet with him to hold his brocaded dressing gown while he went for a swim.*

homeowner also had a need for a few alterations. A modern kitchen was added, and, at a later date, the homeowner returned to Nantucket's Historic District Commission for the approval of a small shed dormer on the third-floor roof. The committee requested that the application for the dormer be withdrawn as it did not fit with the historic structure.⁵² After being presented with evidence of its previous existence, noted in late-nineteenth-century photographs of the house, the Historic District Commission did eventually approve the request.

Extensions to an original structure, occurring over the course of many decades, are not an uncommon sight in cottages and houses of 'Sconset and Nantucket Town. Rear additions may not always be seen from the front of the house (Introduction, FIGURE 8, Mill Street), and lateral expansions can also be unobtrusive. Added rooms allow for modernization and are often accomplished without disrupting the historic fabric of the original building. Such is the case at 12 Baxter Road and 20 Main Street in 'Sconset (FIGURE 14). In the latter, the original section of the house was built well before the Victorian era.⁵³ Presently known as Green Chimneys (named recently for the many stacks that dot the roof), the 20 Main Street house has a contiguous arrangement of an abundance of rooms. The original north-facing home was preserved but greatly extended on the southeast section. Prior to the 1920s, a detached, arched-entrance horse stall was located at the rear of the dwelling. After 1923, the arch-way design of the stall became inspiration for a porch. Numerous additions and small structures continued to be incorporated over the years up to the present, resulting in its meandering, railroad-car-like connection of rooms (FIGURE 28).⁵⁴ The long group of rooms wraps around and back nearly to the front of the house, leaving a center yard that is almost completely hidden from view (FIGURE 29).

Green Chimneys has been renovated for comfort and carefully preserved to maintain respect for its historic value, as have a similar group of structures located south across a gully just off Ocean Avenue. The little houses at 4 Cottage Avenue (FIGURE 30) have been reconfigured since their original construction sometime between 1873 and 1898.⁵⁵ During their 130-year history the cottages were sited adjacent to (and may have



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FIGURE 28: Interior of 20 Main Street, 'Sconset, ca. early 1900s. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

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FIGURE 29: Green Chimneys. *Many additions to this one-story cottage look as though they have grown naturally around a center yard. Painted shingles and trim effectively unify the many sections of the whole.*





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FIGURE 30: 4 Cottage Avenue, Built Between 1873 and 1898. Once part of the *Moby Dick Inn*, this set of cottages is now privately owned. To join the separate rooms openings were created in adjoining walls and two baths were combined to make a kitchen.

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FIGURE 31: Interior of 4 Cottage Avenue. The exposed-rafter construction, low-gable roof, and general small scale of this cottage is reminiscent of seventeenth-century whale houses in 'Sconset.

originally been part of) an inn called the 'Sconset Cottage Club, circa 1910–12.⁵⁶ The central building of the Cottage Club was later known under several names, including the Old 'Sconset Inn, the *Moby Dick*, and at present, the Summer House.

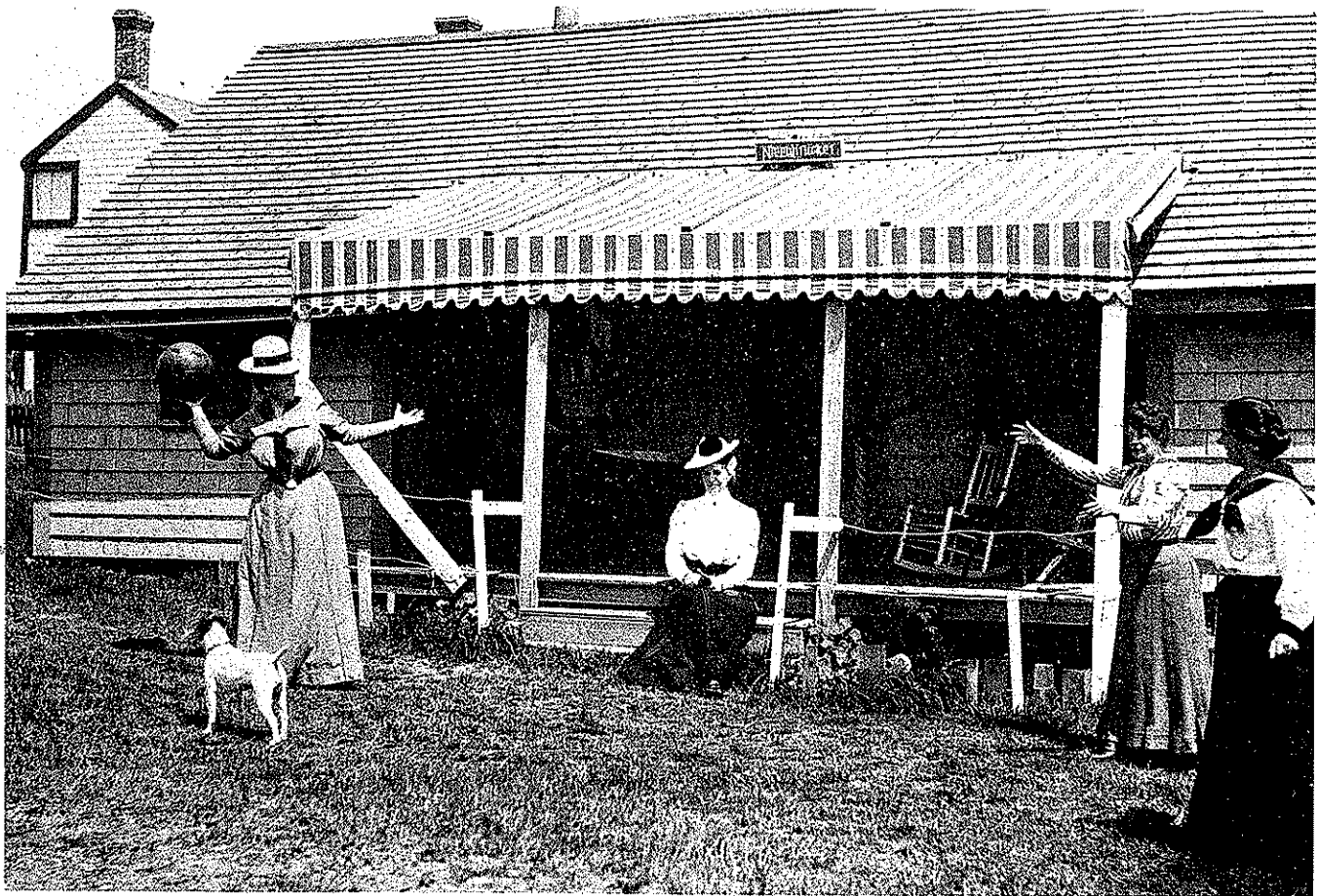
Built in stages, with additions and reconfigurations occurring sporadically from the 1920s through the 1940s,⁵⁷ 4 Cottage Avenue is another one-story rambling arrangement of connected rooms wrapped around a center yard. The single structure, composed of six separate private rental cottages, each with a tiny bath (FIGURE 31), was purchased by the present homeowner, actor John Shea, in 1979, when the

cottages were a part of the *Moby Dick*. Shortly after being purchased, the private rooms were transformed into one house and a detached master bedroom cottage was built to create a buffer between the home and the *Moby Dick*.⁵⁸ Both the interior and exterior of the new cottage look as though they were part of the original set of rooms.

Preservation of the cottage tradition was a purposeful decision made by Shea for several reasons. In the early 1970s while he was in drama school, before his own acting career was established, he waited tables and provided room service to several theater and film personalities summering at the *Moby Dick*, including J. Gibbs "Gibby" Penrose and James Cagney. In purchasing the former rental cottages and while restoring them, Shea and his wife, artist Melissa MacLeod,⁵⁹ were consciously making an effort to preserve the historic integrity of the structures, as well as carry on the vacation tradition of the actors' colony and artistic retreat. Echoing both the ancient whale houses and the Underhill cottages in design and spirit, the little conglomeration at 4 Cottage Avenue perfectly illustrates the thoughtful renovation, respect for the historic record, and the charm and pleasure found in 'Sconset's vernacular architecture.

'Sconset Actors' Colony

AIMEE E. NEWELL



New York Actresses Mary Shaw and Nanette Comstock in Siasconset with Friends, ca. 1905. *Shaw, who managed theatrical productions at the 'Sconset Casino, and Comstock enjoy a game of medicine ball in front of Nippintucket, an Underhill cottage on Pochick Street.* Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, New York City's famed Great White Way stretched all the way to the village of Siasconset on the eastern shores of Nantucket Island. "Delightful 'Sconset," as it was affectionately known, even had its own Broadway, one block from the bank. New York's Broadway actors first discovered 'Sconset's Broadway in the 1890s, and soon put the village on the map as an actors' colony.

In the decades before central air-conditioning, New York City heat proved oppressive for actors and audiences alike, forcing Broadway theaters to be dark during the summer months. To seek relief and relaxation New York actors journeyed to 'Sconset, attracted by the village's cool ocean breezes, saltwater bathing, picturesque architecture, and quiet life. In 1893, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* published a letter from the actress May Robson singing the praises of the village. "Do you know anything about the quaint little Nantucket village of Siasconset?" she wrote. "If not, steal a week from sizzling New York and come here, to sea breezes and moonlight nights. Somehow, actors and actresses always find out these heavenly spots to make delightful idiots of themselves in, don't they?"

Among the first actors to discover 'Sconset, in the mid- to late 1890s, were famed stage stars George Fawcett and his wife, Percy Haswell. They eventually bought a house on 'Sconset's Main Street and named it "Rosemary," after a play that Haswell was performing at the time. Another actor, Harry Woodruff, had an "upside-down" house built on Morey Lane, with four bedrooms on the lower floor and one spacious room on the second floor, maximizing the spectacular views.

The Underhill cottages, located on Evelyn, Lily, and Pochick streets, were especially popular with the actors' colony. Margaret Fawcett Barnes recalled that these cottages seem to have had "a hundred years of sporadic living in them . . . you rambled through rooms, some with such low ceilings you might be on a ship; you mounted stairs so steep they must have been patterned from a ship's companionway."

By 1910 there were almost five hundred actors and theatrical people summering in 'Sconset, including such well-known personalities as Mary Shaw, Robert Hilliard, Joseph Jefferson, Lillian Russell, and gossip columnist Hedda Hopper. Although as Barnes explained, 'Sconset offered "relief to play-folk who had spent most of their winter months in and out of costumes and in the public gaze," these same actors could not resist the opportunity to perform for the community. Completed in 1900, the Siasconset Casino held its first production in August of that year, for a full house of 820 people. The evening included a wide variety of acts—plays, songs, dances, and recitals—performed by 'Sconset's famed summer residents.

As the actors knew all too well, all shows must come to a close, and 'Sconset's run as an actors' colony came to an end in the 1920s. Moving pictures offered Broadway actors year-round employment in California, and New York theaters installed air-conditioning, allowing them to stay open in the summer. But, as Margaret Fawcett Barnes pointed out, "the gaiety and the glamour of the Stage rubbed off on the ['Sconset] life and left it a little more gleaming."