



SEA-CAPTAINS' HOUSES
AND ROSE-COVERED COTTAGES

The Architectural Heritage of Nantucket Island

MARGARET MOORE BOOKER,
ROSE CONNELLA,
and PATRICIA EGAN BUTLER



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Principal Photography by Jordi Cabré

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All photographs are by Jordi Cabré unless otherwise indicated.

FRONT COVER: *105 Main Street, Built ca. 1690-1757 for Christopher Starbuck.*

BACK COVER: *Rose-Covered Cottage with Porthole Window, 'Sconset.*

PAGE ii: *Rose-Covered Cottage, 'Sconset.*

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Monument Grocery, Built 1875, 106 Main Street, ca. 1880.

Building demolished, facade dismantled August 2001.

Photograph Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

To the memory of 106 Main Street
and
to all those dedicated to preserving Nantucket's architectural heritage

Introduction

Margaret Moore Booker

ONE late-nineteenth-century writer suggested that Nantucket was a “quaint old place” with “odd-looking specimens of architecture” that are “shingled, shangled, shongled, and shungled.”¹ Indeed, today, upon first stepping onto the sandy shores of this island, which lies twenty-four miles off the south coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts (FIGURE 1), one might gain the impression that all of the buildings are, and always have been, covered in weathered gray shingles, and are of simple construction. In fact Nantucket’s architecture was once sheathed in a variety of rich colors (FIGURE 2). As the aforementioned writer noted, “in years gone by [these shingled houses] were painted red, green, or yellow.” There is also abundant evidence that the island was, and continues to be, home to a wide range of architectural styles, from the stark lean-to and typical Nantucket house, to the balanced classical Federal and Greek Revival, to the eclectic Victorian, to the streamlined modern.

Nantucket Island, a fifteen-mile-long and three-mile-wide “elbow of sand,” as Herman Melville called it in *Moby Dick*, is one of America’s national treasures. Consisting of acres of rolling heathland, small ponds, and wide expanses of unspoiled beaches, the island is home to several small villages containing one of the largest and most important collections of historic buildings in the United States. An astounding 2,400 historic structures, including eight hundred pre-Civil War buildings, are still extant on the island today and represent the character and charm of Nantucket’s people and their glorious past.²

While there are preservation-minded individuals and organizations on the island, including the Historic District Commission, Nantucket Preservation Alliance, and Nantucket Preservation Trust, as well as preservation regulations, there is still a widespread need for educating the public on the merits of Nantucket’s important historic architecture, and the necessity of preserving it for future generations. Our primary goal in writing this book is an attempt to meet both these needs, as well as to celebrate the architectural gems on the island and to preserve in print buildings that some day may be altered or demolished.

{ OPPOSITE }

View of Nantucket
Town and Unitarian
Church Tower from
Summer Street.

Photograph by Gregory Spaid.

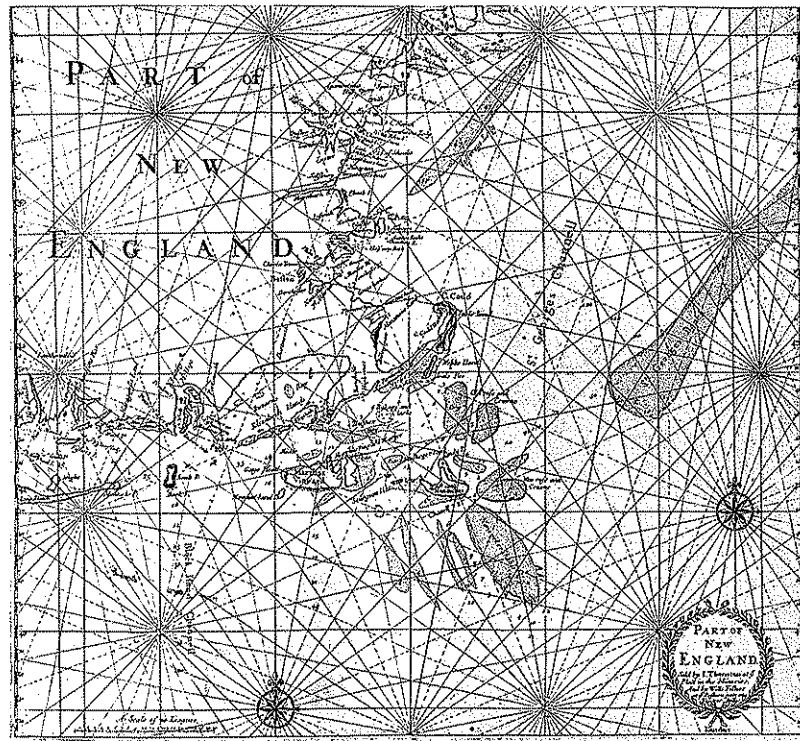
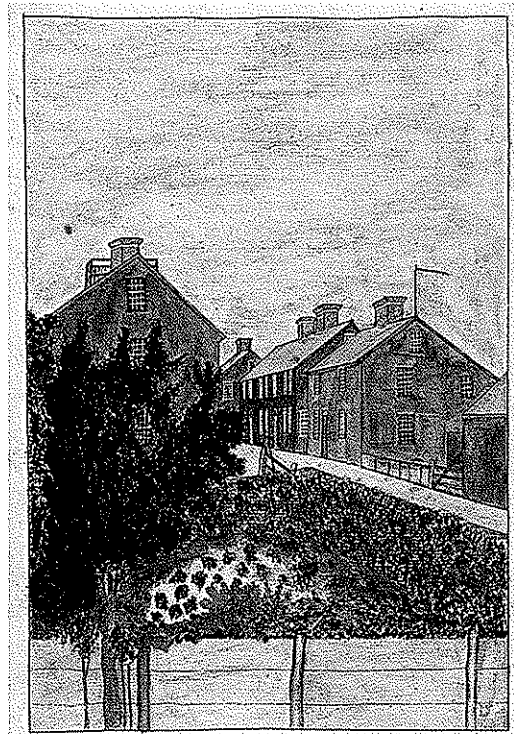
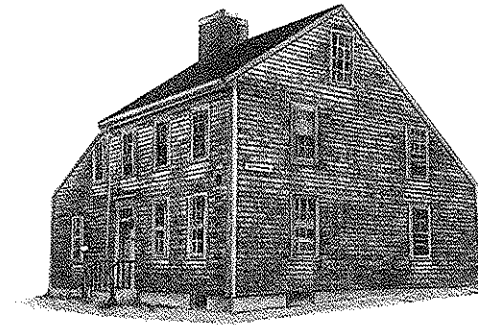


FIGURE 1: Map of Part of New England, 1698. Engraving published by John Thornton and William Fisher for The English Pilot, The Fourth Book (London, second edition, 1698). Photograph Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum.

FIGURE 2: Phebe Folger, A Perspective View of Part of the Town of Nantucket, Taken from an East Window in the House of Walter Folger, 1797. Watercolor on paper. This scene was drawn by Quaker schoolmistress Phebe Folger (1771–1857) from the window of her brother’s house at 8 Pleasant Street. The red houses she portrayed are proof of the fact that the “Gray Lady”—as Nantucket, with its predominantly gray-shingled houses has so often been called over the centuries—was not always as gray as was once believed. This and another drawing by Folger (Chapter 2, figure 22) are the two earliest views of Nantucket Town that exist today. FMS Typ 245, Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.



A Perspective View of part of the town of Nantucket, taken from an east window in the House of Walter Folger



{ LEFT }
FIGURE 3: 19 Hussey, Built for Timothy Barnard, 1758. Illustration by Rose Gonnella, 1995. This is a classic early lean-to house, one of three on Hussey Street, in Nantucket Town.



{ RIGHT }
FIGURE 4: 8 Mill Street, 1922. Built in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, this “typical Nantucket house” has a proliferation of “warts” and ells jutting off the side and rear of the building, which were added in later years. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

Several centuries of social, cultural, religious, and economic narratives are embodied in Nantucket’s architectural landscape. The story begins with the island’s first inhabitants—Native Americans—who lived off the abundant resources of the land and sea and fashioned their rustic homes out of bent saplings covered with grass mats. In 1659 English settlers arrived and built simple homes with steep gabled roofs that reflected the traditions of their homeland. They settled at Capaum Harbor on the north shore. As the island’s first families grew and needed more living space, a lean-to was typically added to the rear of the house (FIGURE 3).

When the Religious Society of Friends, the Quakers, gained a stronghold on the island in the early 1700s, the group adhered to a Zen-like quality of restraint, fashioning homes distinguished by their simplicity, superb carpentry, and beautiful proportions. Many of the builders of these early homes were also shipwrights, and their houses reflect the influence of shipbuilding in the streamlined tightness of the plan, excellent craftsmanship, and architectural details such as porthole windows, rope handrails, and roof walks. These features are particularly noticeable in the “typical Nantucket house” (FIGURE 4) and in the small fishermen’s cottages in Siasconset, on the eastern shore of the island.

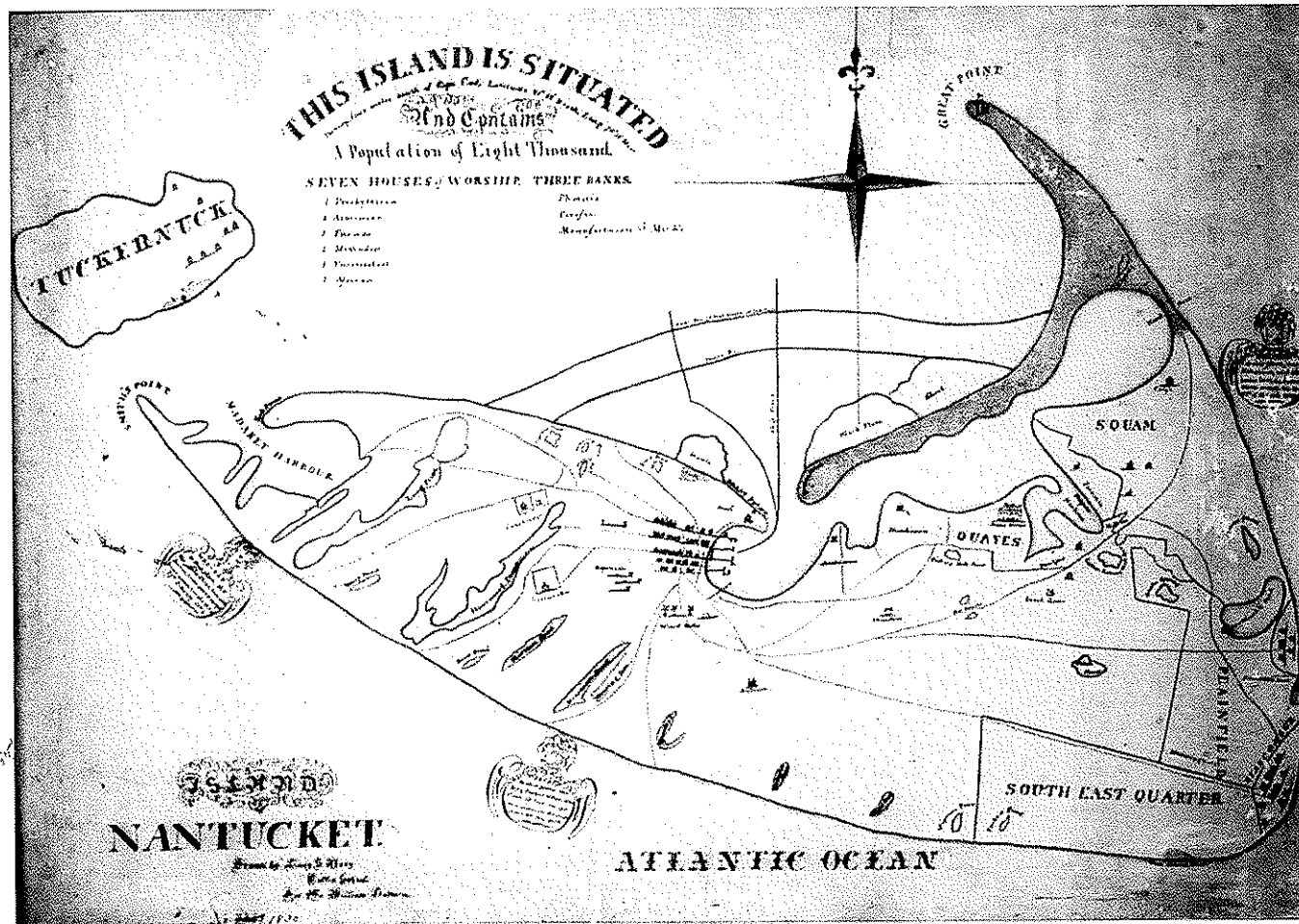


FIGURE 5: Lucy S. Macy, Map of Nantucket, ca. 1829. Watercolor and ink on paper. Made at the Coffin School by student Lucy Macy (1812–1875), this map gives a fairly accurate indication of the overall shape of the island and the populated areas. In a simple, naive manner Macy drew tiny images of important structures—including the windmills, ropewalks (where rope was manufactured), lighthouses, and some homes in the settlements of Nantucket Town, Siasconset, and elsewhere around the island. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



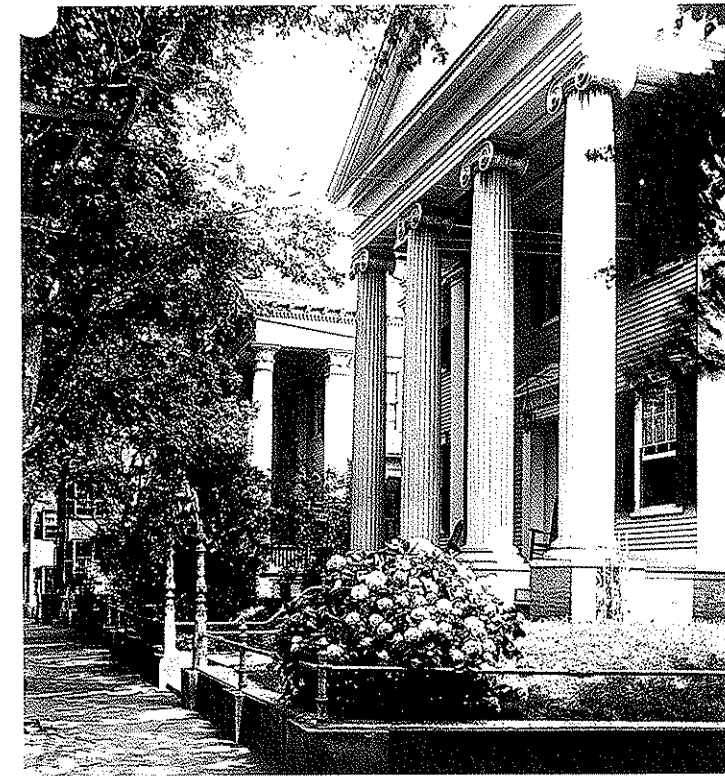
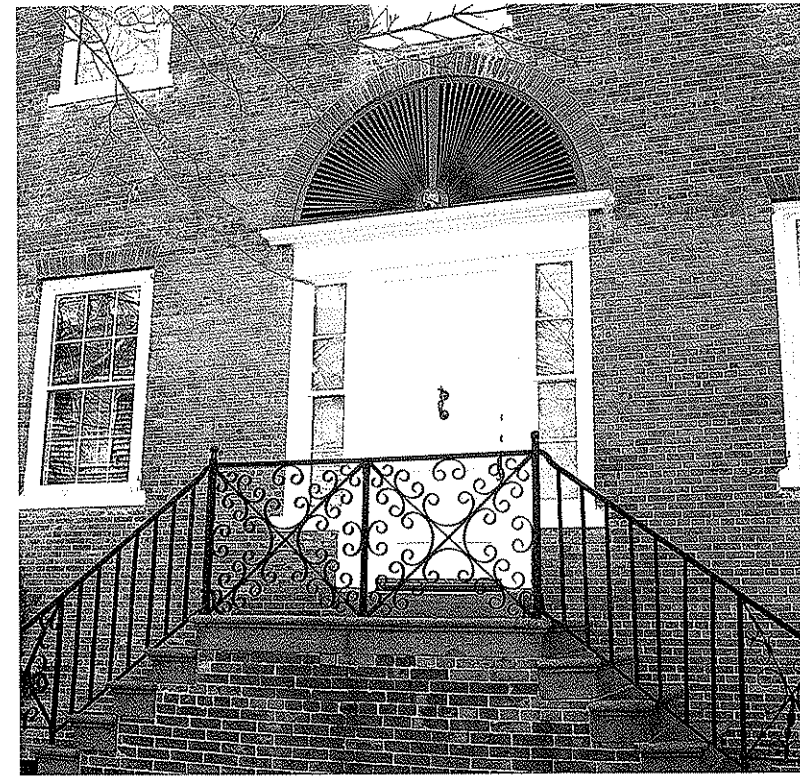
In 1690 the English began the practice of “alongshore whaling,” killing right whales from small open boats, and in 1712 they began specializing in hunting sperm whales, which took whalers as far north as the arctic circle and as far south as the Falkland Islands. Soon after the Revolutionary War, huge reserves of sperm whales were discovered in the Pacific and by 1792, Nantucketers commanded thirty-three of the thirty-nine whaleships there.

As writer Joseph Sansom noted, by 1811 the town (by then moved from Capaum Harbor to its present location) had a thriving population, with new streets laid out in straight lines and a number of new houses built with extravagantly high ceilings. However, despite the activity of a flourishing seaport, Sansom commented, “Everything here reminds one of a religious community... the tranquility of a convent pervades the streets.”³

After the War of 1812, when America gained economic freedom from the British and national pride was soaring, Nantucket’s whaling industry reached a zenith of prosperity and the Quakers no longer had a stronghold on the community. In the 1820s and 1830s, with a population of almost ten thousand inhabitants, and property valued at six million dollars, the island was a thriving commercial center and the third largest port in New England (FIGURE 5). Ships crowded the harbor and the town was bustling with whaling-related industries, including seventeen factories, nineteen candle manufacturers, ten ropewalks, and twenty-two cooperages (barrel-making shops), which employed hundreds of people and created an air of prosperity (FIGURE 6).

Nantucketers built up immense fortunes and used them to transform the downtown into a small but elegant and modern port town, complete with elm-lined streets, brick commercial buildings, and stately homes (FIGURE 7). Most of the mansions were built on cobblestoned Main Street, which flows through the heart of town to the harbor. Architectural historian Vincent Scully aptly described these blocks of homes as “fine, flat-fronted or columned mansions of the Starbucks and other shipowners and whaling captains [that stand] close to each other and to the cobbled pavement. Dappled in sunlight,

FIGURE 6: Henry C. Platt, View of Nantucket from the Harbor in 1833, ca. 1883. Pen and ink on paper. This rendering gives a good representation of the bustling, crowded Nantucket Town and harbor during the height of the whaling era. Henry “Harry” Platt (1850–1895), was an artist, photographer, and art teacher who began visiting the island in the 1880s, and eventually established a studio in Nantucket Town. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



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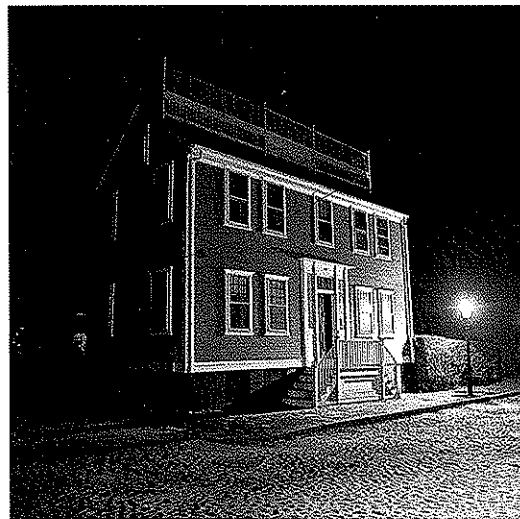
FIGURE 7: Main Street Mansion, Built (or remodeled) ca. 1830s. Still paved with cobblestones and lined with mansions built with whale oil money, Main Street retains much of its original character today. This house has both classical and Gothic Revival elements; an example of the latter is visible in the pointed arch window in the pediment.

{ ABOVE LEFT }

FIGURE 8: Moors' End, 19 Pleasant Street, Built in 1829–34 for Jared Coffin (1784–1860). A good example of the early Federal style, Moors' End was the first all-brick house built on the island and is notable for its beautiful semicircular "blind fan" rising over the doorway. Like many others who made their fortune in the whaling industry, Jared Coffin built a large edifice that is a bold statement of his wealth, power, and ambition.

{ ABOVE RIGHT }

FIGURE 9: William Hadwen Mansion, Built in 1844, at 96 Main Street. The height of the Greek Revival style is realized in this house, which is distinguished by its Greek temple facade with the large pediment and Ionic columns. Built by prolific island builder Frederick Brown Coleman, it was the home of magnate William Hadwen (1791–1862), one of the island's wealthiest men and largest manufacturer of whale oil and spermaceti candles. It is now owned by the Nantucket Historical Association. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



{ LEFT }

FIGURE 10: 82 Main Street, at Corner of Ray's Court, Built in Early 19th Century. This five-bay Federal-style home has two architectural features that are often associated with Nantucket houses: a roof "walk" (a platform enclosed by a hand railing and originally intended to provide easy access to the roof in event of a chimney fire) and double-sided stairs.

Photograph by Gregory Spaid.

{ BELOW }

FIGURE 11: Main Street Before the Great Fire, ca. Early 1840s. The Pacific Bank and Methodist Church at the top of Main Street are the only buildings in this earliest known view of Nantucket Town that survived the Great Fire of 1846, and remain extant today. The wooden homes and businesses on the right side of the photograph were, not surprisingly, replaced with brick buildings after the fire.

Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

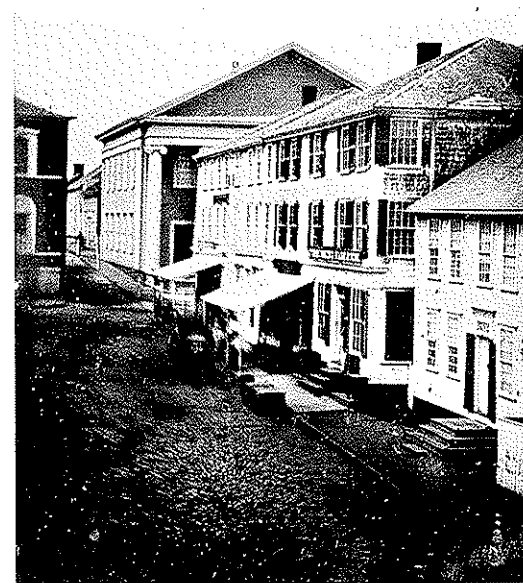


FIGURE 12: Old North Wharf, Nantucket Island. After the decline of the whaling industry, the island suffered a series of economic blows, and the waterfront and town took on a seedy, desolate appearance. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

these blocks seem hardly to belong to the United States but to an island jewel, like the Calypso's in the heart of the ocean. Here the captains slept uneasily, heads starting up with grate of iron on cobbles, accustomed as they were, as Melville tells us, to pillow on the lucid rush of porpoises and whales."⁴

When building their mansions, the newly rich and style-conscious island merchants embraced the current vogue for classic forms, including the Federal style (FIGURE 8), distinguished by doorways with slender columns and fanlight windows, and the Greek Revival style (FIGURE 9), recognizable by the pediment and columns that echo the classical Greek temple. After visiting the island one journalist observed that these new buildings were "neat, clean, and orderly, 'blazing away' in white paint, [with] all the majesty of Greek design and ornament . . . exhibiting on the part of owners and occupants a *desire* to have everything about them in the best possible taste."⁵

In the mid-1840s, Nantucket's whaling industry began its precipitous decline. Many factors contributed to this, including the Great Fire of July 13, 1846, which began in a hat factory on the south side of Main Street and eventually consumed one third of the town (FIGURE 11). Although it was quickly rebuilt, Nantucket could no longer compete with the rival whaling port of New Bedford. In addition to having a deep-water harbor unencumbered with shoals, New Bedford enjoyed the benefit of direct access to the nation's burgeoning railroad system. With the discovery of gold in California, Nantucket lost a quarter of its voting population to the goldfields in nine months.

After the demise of the whaling industry in the mid-1840s, the island experienced a series of economic blows, and for some thirty years, few buildings were erected or altered. One visitor commented that in 1847 the town was "composed mainly of old weather-beaten frame houses covered with pine shingles, and entirely destitute of all architectural graces or the embellishment of paint; the streets are crooked and straggling, and so sandy that you have to wade through them, rather than walk."⁶

As the island experienced a period of economic decline from the mid-1850s throughout much of the 1860s, the population greatly decreased and many island homes were abandoned, waiting for new fortunes to bring them back to life (FIGURE 12). This financial depression led to the forced "preservation" of many early structures, and is why Nantucket has one of the largest caches of pre-Civil War homes in the United States.

During the mid-nineteenth-century depression years, some early houses were taken down and removed to other places, both on and off the island. The moving of houses (FIGURE 13), which began with the transfer of homes from the settlement at Capaum Harbor to Sherburne (now Nantucket Town) in the late 1700s, is a tradition that is carried on to this day. By the time the English settlers arrived, the island was largely devoid of trees, and transporting timber and other supplies across the sea was costly. Therefore it was prudent to reuse valuable building materials. Structures

were transported by land or by sea; in the 1880s, in fact, a special “apparatus for moving buildings” was brought from New Bedford to the island on a schooner.”⁷

Although valiant attempts were made to keep whaling alive and to establish businesses, including the manufacturing of shoes, there was a sense of foreboding in the town that the island would become a poor fishing village. The Civil War further interrupted life when Nantucket men answered the call to arms in the summer of 1861. One Nantucketer, writing in 1874, looked back to this dismal time period in the island’s history and gave the following description: “[T]he good old town was going sadly to decay, putting on the air of seediness...houses were devoid of paint...a new house was a wonder that the entire population turned out to see and carefully watched every step of its progress; while many dwellings appeared to be on their last legs, and very poor specimens of legs they were;...the price of real estate was so low that a house and land would scarcely bring the cost of newly shingling the roof of the dwelling; many houses could not be rented at all...”⁸

Salvation came in the form of tourism. Remarkably, even as early as 1847 Nantucket was becoming known as a summer resort. The *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror* reported that year: “It is very evident that people abroad are rapidly making the discovery that Nantucket is about the most pleasant and comfortable place of resort during the summer months that can be found within the limits ‘of these United States.’ For years the number of pleasure travellers [sic] visiting our island has been steadily increasing, and this year the tide has set in more strongly than ever before. People are coming from every part of the country, to breathe our pure and invigorating air, to enjoy our unequalled scenery, to bathe, walk, ride, have *squantums*—in a word to enjoy themselves, as they can most thoroughly.”⁹

In the mid-1860s the editors of the *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror* newspaper ran editorials encouraging islanders to invest in the summer trade; later articles appeared in national periodicals that spread the word concerning the island’s attributes as a summer resort (FIGURE 14). By the early 1870s the new era of tourism began in earnest: new dwellings began to be erected, older homes were updated to appeal to boarders, streets were improved, and ferry service—linked to railroad lines to Boston and New York—increased to two boats a day in the summer, to accommodate the growth in the number of visitors (FIGURE 15). As historian William F. Macy noted, carpenters from off island had to be brought over to keep up with the building boom, and soon “something like prosperity dawned once more.”¹⁰

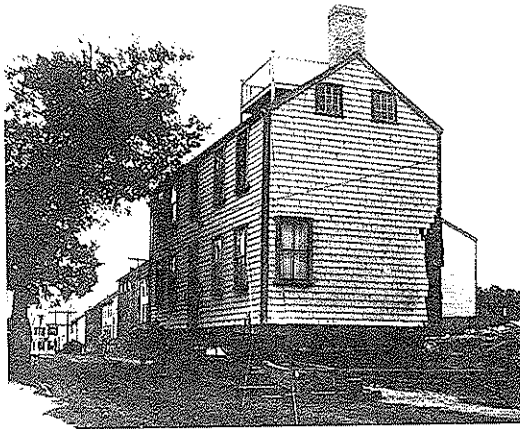
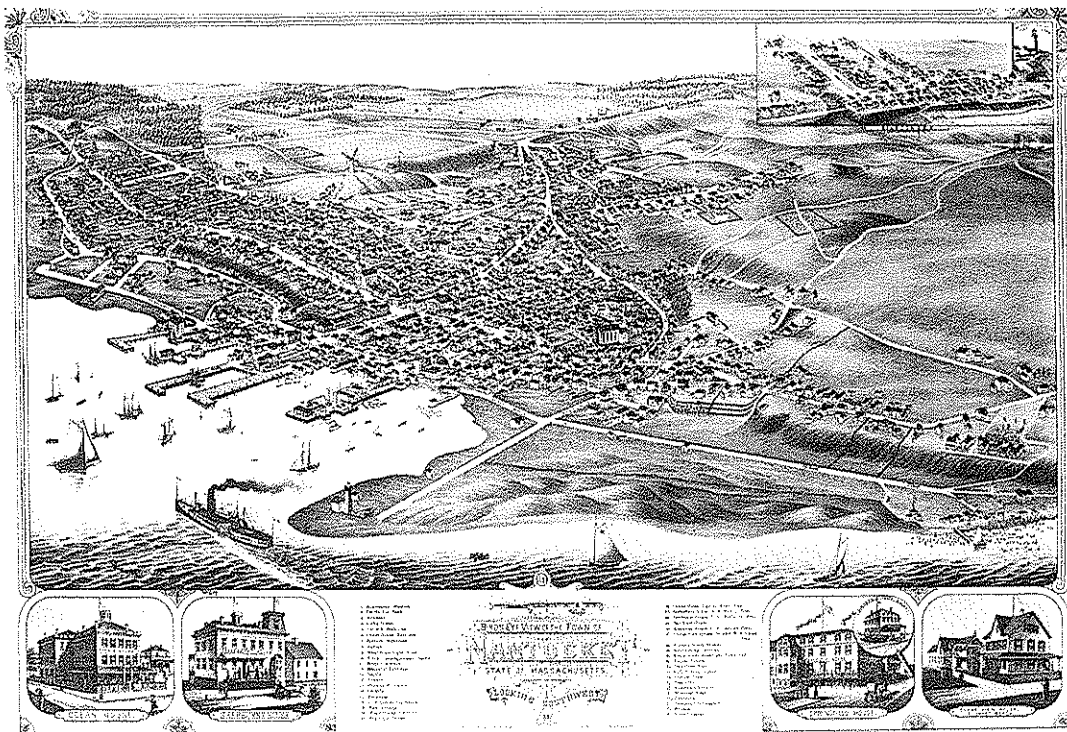


FIGURE 13: 21 Cliff Road Being Moved, ca. 1900. House moves on the island became a common occurrence beginning in the early nineteenth century, a result of Yankee thrift and the prohibitive cost of shipping building supplies from the mainland. As developer Edward Underhill noted in 1888, every house on the island seems never to be satisfied unless it has occupied at least two places during its existence. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

FIGURE 14: Nantucket Harbor, from the Church Tower, 1873. Originally printed in “Nantucket,” *Scribner’s Monthly*, vol. VI, no. 4 (August 1873), 389. Illustrated articles touting Nantucket’s attributes, published in popular periodicals, contributed to the growth of the island’s summer resort industry. In 1873, a writer for Scribner’s claimed that Nantucket was the most quaint and interesting seaboard town in America “on account of the reminiscences of the past which one constantly meets in every ramble.” Courtesy of Spinner Publications, Inc.



FIGURE 15: Steamboat Wharf, Nantucket, in the Late Nineteenth Century. By the mid-1870s, two steamboats a day made trips to Nantucket in the summer, bringing hundreds of visitors. The daily arrival of these ships at Steamboat Wharf was an exciting and much anticipated event for both visitors and Nantucket residents. As one 1882 guidebook noted, visitors were met at the wharf by “hackmen, teamsters, and expressmen,—the jolliest, kindest, and wittiest set of human beings upon the face of the globe,—ready to take you and your luggage to any hotel or boarding-house which you may have selected.” Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.



{ LEFT }
 FIGURE 16: Bird's Eye View of the Town of Nantucket, State of Massachusetts, Looking Southwest, 1881. *Lithograph, published by J. J. Stoner, printed by Beck & Pauli, Madison, Wisconsin. By 1880 Nantucket was "on the map" as a summer resort, inspiring the production of this bird's-eye vista, sold to tourists for two dollars. The waterfront is bustling with pleasure sailing craft and a steamship bringing tourists from the mainland; railroad tracks can be seen in the far distance; new homes built for summer tourists can be seen on the "Cliff" and large hotels figure prominently along the lower edge of the map. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.*

By the 1880s, the new tourism industry gave rise to rampant land speculation and building activity across the island; "off islanders" snapped up oceanfront property on which to build their spacious summer cottages in the latest mode (FIGURE 16). Following national trends, eclectic Victorian homes, ranging from Gothic Revival to the creative Shingle style, were erected by island builders.

The small fishing village of Siasconset (generally referred to as 'Sconset), established in the late seventeenth century at the eastern end of the island (FIGURE 17), became increasingly popular as the preferred summer resort spot (FIGURE 18), or as one writer suggested, "the brightest gem city of rest and enjoyment on the New England coast."¹¹ Until the summer of 1884, 'Sconset was reached from town by way of carriage, a bumpy forty-five-minute ride across eight miles of commons and moors. When the island's railroad was extended to the village of 'Sconset in July of 1884, and became the favored mode of transport, the trains first ran across the fragrant moors to Surfside and then followed a beautiful path along the seashore. The newspaper reported that the railroad and building boom

{ OPPOSITE }
 FIGURE 17: "Dexioma," The Captain George Wilber House, 'Sconset. *Built in the first half of the eighteenth century, this rose-covered cottage is a lovely example of a fishing shack that was later turned into a vacation home.*





FIGURE 18: Ocean View House Hotel, Sconset Village, ca. 1890. *The exuberant nature of Victorian architecture seemed to match the mood of pleasure seekers in Sconset during the late nineteenth century.* Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

were welcome sights: “A new era appears to have dawned upon the once quiet, slumbering village and its people, and they welcome the sound of the locomotive, and the arrival of new faces, as evidences of continued prosperity.”¹² The predominant styles of architecture of the Victorian period, which reflected this new prosperity, can still be seen along the village’s byways and lanes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Nantucket’s image, as well as its appeal to visitors, was closely linked to its historic structures, which had become symbols of the island’s romantic past.¹³ This was due in part to the fascination of some Americans for “all that was not modern, urban, and industrialized,” including historic buildings and preindustrial village life.¹⁴ As Nantucket transformed itself into a “famous watering-place” and provided new amenities for tourists, including the railroad, enormous hotels, and a plethora of seaside cottages, it endangered the island’s historic legacy. Some islanders lamented the growth and subsequent loss of the “queer old houses of ancient date” and the charm of the island, which they saw “gradually passing away before the triumphal march of modern improvement and innovation.”¹⁵ Efforts were soon made to protect the island’s historical artifacts and buildings. In 1894 a group of concerned citizens founded the Nantucket Historical Association, in order to “secure all possible material relating to old Nantucket . . . before it is too late and those valuable mementos are carried away from the island.”¹⁶

The early twentieth century brought some progress to the island, including expanded electricity and cable, regular airplane service, and, after years of struggle against it, the automobile. Colonial Revival-style architecture, and the modern convenience of practical “mail-order” bungalows appealed to Nantucketers at that time and became popular house types. However, some innovations of the twentieth century, from traffic lights to gaudy neon signs, never took hold on Nantucket.

As the twentieth century progressed, steps were taken toward establishing design restrictions and regulations for all new island structures. In the late 1930s, more than thirty island architects, builders, artisans, realtors, building suppliers, and homeowners joined together to sign an agreement to offer plans and architectural advice to builders of new homes in

order to preserve the “Colonial character” of Nantucket.¹⁷ Their efforts began in 1937 with a conference and an analysis of 320 historic homes on the island, which resulted in Everett Crosby’s book *95% Perfect*, the object of which was to “keep unmarred the old Nantucket dwellings.”¹⁸

In 1955, the Historic District and Historic District Commission (HDC) were established on the island. Eleven years later the National Park Service, part of the United States Department of the Interior, designated the town a National Historic Landmark, and subsequently Nantucket was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The HDC’s landmark *Building With Nantucket in Mind* was published in 1978, providing architects, builders, and homeowners specific guidelines for building new structures on the island.

Despite all the restrictions established by the HDC, several renowned architects from the mainland were able to build significant examples of innovative postmodern structures in remote locations around the island. Robert Venturi, John Rauch, and Graham Gund are among the award-winning architects who have successfully designed homes on Nantucket that are a hybrid of innovation, historical influences, and stylistic features required by the town’s design guidelines.

When walking through town or on a ramble along the winding lanes of Sconset, make note of the interesting architectural elements of each building, for each feature, each house has a story to tell. And remember that the preservation of Nantucket’s historic architecture is in all of our hands. As one architectural historian so aptly wrote, “The vitality of history is everywhere in Nantucket. It draws distinction to life today, and provides a reminder of times past. Such survival is a fortunate accident of time and history; and its continuance lays grave responsibilities on us and succeeding generations.”¹⁹

{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 19:
The Mayflower, Built
ca. 1894, Baxter Road,
Sconset. *At the end of the
nineteenth century, the free-
form, uniquely American
Shingle style appeared on
the island, ushering in the
modern era of architecture
on Nantucket.*



Hearth and Home: The Lean-to House

Rose Gonnella

WINTER, Nantucket Island. A strong wind whistles off the Atlantic from the northwest. The air is damp with salt spray; the sun dips out of sight by four o'clock. Dry warmth is an imperative. Enter the kitchen of an early-eighteenth-century dwelling on Nantucket. A fire is burning in the enormous hearth, an aromatic soup simmers in an iron pot hanging from the trammel over the fire.

The fundamental heating and cooking hearth built for the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century "dwelling houses" on Nantucket, ranged from seven to nine feet in width, with a height of over four feet. This immense fireplace, large enough to stand in, was the structural anchor of the house (FIGURE 1). Seen from virtually any street in the town of Nantucket, a centrally placed, colossal, square chimneystack at the ridge line of the roof is one unmistakable characteristic of an older home on Nantucket. Fortunately, the island today has approximately forty residences that are gracious survivors of

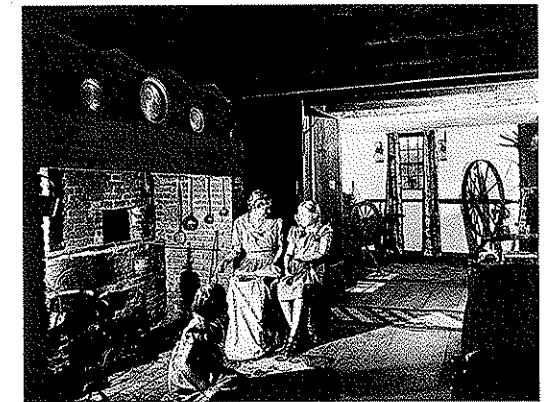


FIGURE 1: Fireside, 1944, at the Elihu Coleman House, Built in 1722. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the hearth functioned as a cooking and heating appliance. Immense as it may be, the fireplace was not an efficient source of heat. The romantic idea of the great hearth being the heart of the home was a nineteenth-century notion, created long after heating systems improved. Still capable of functioning many generations after construction, the hearths found in old houses continue to be preserved and enjoyed for their historic value. Photograph by B. Anthony Stewart. Courtesy of the National Geographic Magazine Image Collection.

{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 2: The Elihu Coleman House, Built in 1722, Hawthorne Lane, ca. 1900. Withstanding the sea winds for more than two hundred years and still surrounded by precious open space, this outstanding example of a lean-to style house allows the imagination to conjure visions of old Nantucket. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

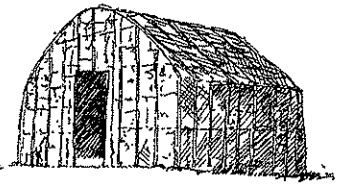


FIGURE 3: "Wetu." Illustration by Rose Gonnella, 2003. *Wampanoag Indians of Nantucket were likely to have erected dwellings such as the one pictured. Called "wigwams" by the English, this house type was in use by the indigenous population of New England.*

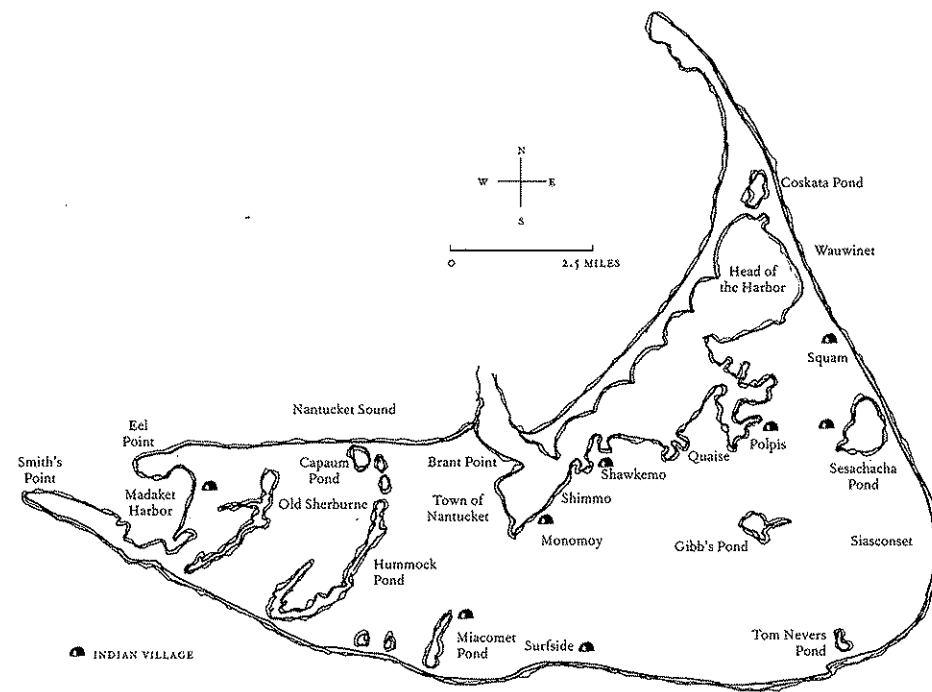


FIGURE 4: Nantucket Island. Illustration by Rose Gonnella and Dilek Katgi, 2003. *This map shows the early English settlement at Sherburne and the locations of the Wampanoag Indian settlements.*

the early-eighteenth-century settlement of the island (FIGURE 2).¹ Derived from postmedieval old-world designs, adapted to the climate and resources of the New World, influenced by particular cultural forces, and preserved by both tradition and chance, the historic architecture of Nantucket is the legacy of a group of staunchly individualistic and spirited people who lived on a notable island twenty-four miles from the mainland shore and three thousand miles from their original home across the Atlantic Ocean.

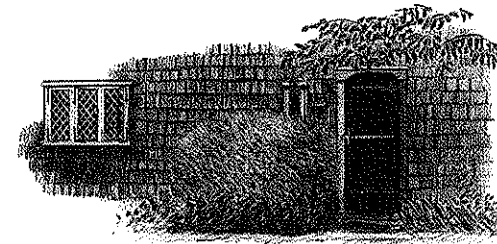
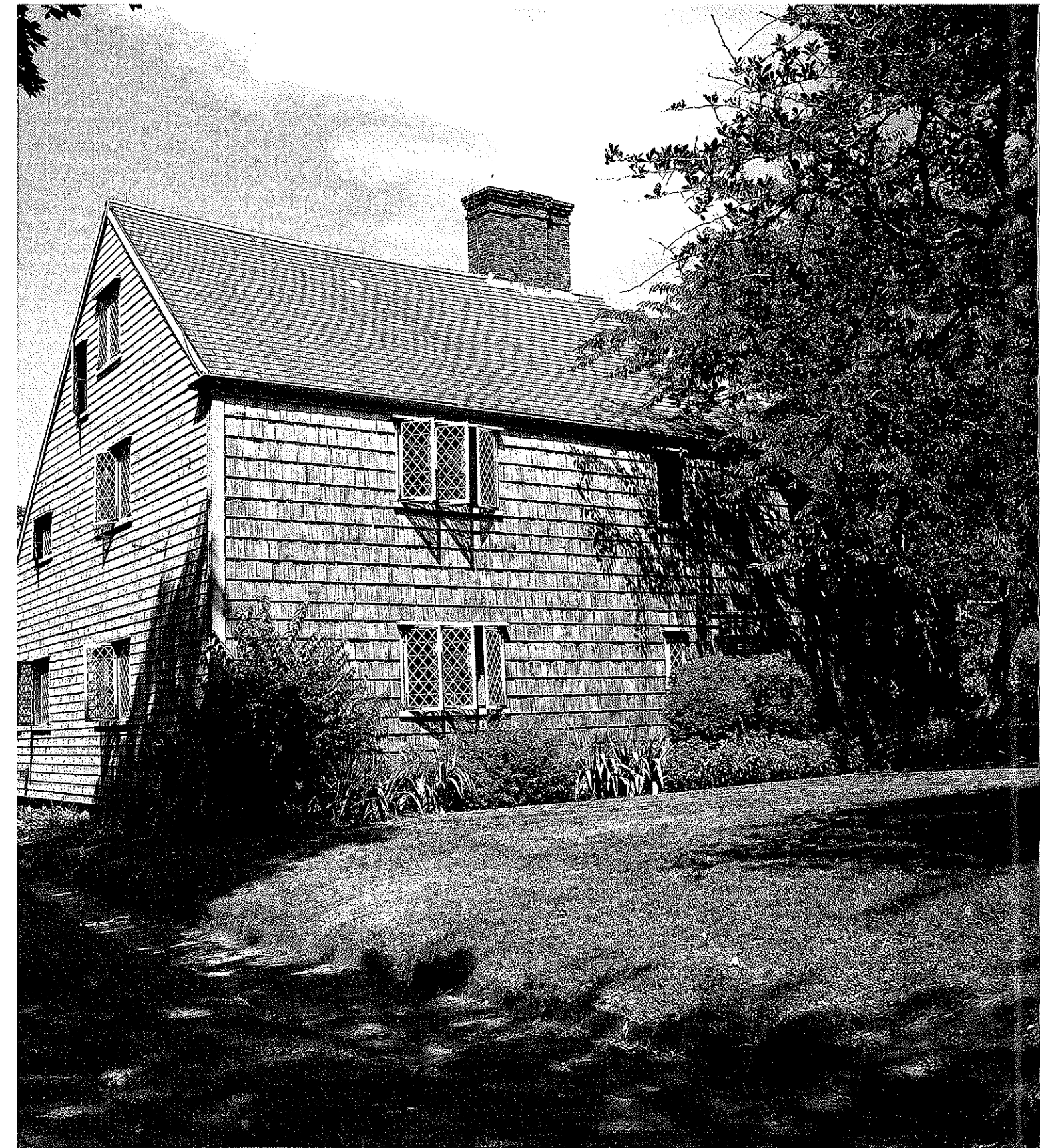
The first Europeans to colonize Nantucket were entrepreneurial Englishmen from the south and eastern regions of England, who first settled north of Boston. Thomas Macy, Edward Starbuck, and Tristram Coffin were among the leaders of a small group seeking viable farmland and a local governing system of their own design, different from the intrusive Puritan order from which they hailed. Nantucket proved a sound choice. When the colonization of Nantucket began in 1659,² the first settlers found that the island was no "howling desert [where] the onely encouragements were the laborious breaking up of bushy ground, with the continued toyl of erecting houses," as New England was described in 1628 by Edward Johnson in his long essay, *Wonder-working Providence*. Nantucket was known to the English inhabitants on Martha's Vineyard who brought livestock to graze there. Among the Vineyarders was the governor and missionary Thomas Mayhew, who owned both islands as part of a royal grant. Mayhew eventually sold Nantucket to the Macy-Coffin

group. Importantly, Nantucket was also home to several established groups of Wampanoag Indians. The approximately three thousand native Nantucketers had villages strategically established across the island and were living in arbor-like dwellings made of bent wood and grass mats (what the English called "wigwams") (FIGURE 3). The Wampanoags gathered abundant shellfish, foraged native fruits, and grew corn. They were also proficient fishermen and captured whales that drifted along the beach, skills that were to become especially profitable to the English inhabitants.³ The settlers chose Nantucket in part because the grass-covered island was particularly suited to the raising of sheep, a livelihood with which they were familiar. But with guidance from the native islanders, the sea eventually provided a most lucrative enterprise for the English.⁴

None of the houses built by the first purchasers, Coffin, Macy, Starbuck, and others, during the earliest decades of Nantucket's colonization exist on site as originally built. Many of Nantucket's seventeenth-century structures are recorded to have been moved⁵ from their original location near Capaum Harbor, when storm-driven sands finally closed access to Nantucket Sound in 1717 (FIGURE 4). Houses in this north-westerly region (Sherburne was renamed Nantucket in 1795) were relocated a mile east to a larger harbor around which the present town of Nantucket developed. In an environment where large trees were severely limited and most timber, lumber, and supplies were brought from off island, it was highly prudent to reuse valuable building materials.⁶ In a 1714 entry in his carpenter's account book, Richard Macy (1689–1779) noted, "bargined with old Joseph [R]usel for carting my frame and the timber." Macy may be referring to the frame of a house off-loaded from a ship or perhaps from an intra-island move.⁷

During the early years of colonization, carpenter John Bishop, a partner of the island's original purchasers who had been recruited from the mainland specifically for his building skills, erected heavy timber-frame, single- and double-room, postmedieval English-style⁸ dwellings for the families of Massachusetts emigrants at Sherburne. These late-seventeenth-century dwellings, with a central chimney and baffle-entry plan, were a continuum of the vernacular architecture that was previously known from the colonists' homeland.⁹ Noted English historian R. W. Brunskill explains the visual clues of the style: "The baffle-entry house plan may easily be recognized from the outside. If one draws an imaginary line down from the principle chimney stack and it falls within the width of the front doorway then the plan has been used. . . . Some houses of this plan have two living units on each floor. . . there is a kitchen/living room to one side of the entrance lobby and fireplace stack and a heated parlor to the other side. The arrangement is rarely completely symmetrical because the kitchen living room and its chamber [above] are normally wider than the parlour and parlour chamber."¹⁰

One example illustrating several features of the early English dwelling type remains in the town of Nantucket today at 139 Main Street (FIGURE 5). Built sometime before 1690,¹¹ the house was



{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 5: Richard Gardner II House, Built Before 1690, 139 Main Street. *Clad from top to bottom in shingles, this house illustrates several key characteristics of the English style of the seventeenth century: small, diamond-pane casement windows and massive chimney. The house was in the Gardner family for more than two hundred years.*

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 6: Building Details. Illustration by Rose Gonnella, pencil on paper, 1995. *A flat board door with long, strap hinges and a wooden string-latch are characteristic features of seventeenth-century homes on Nantucket.*

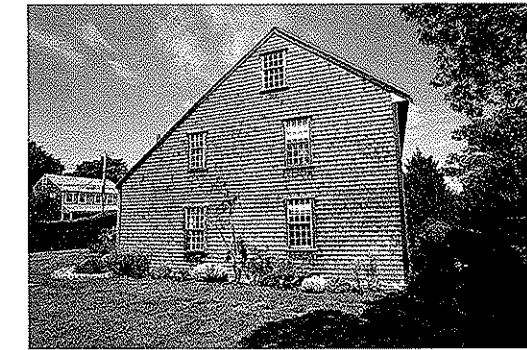
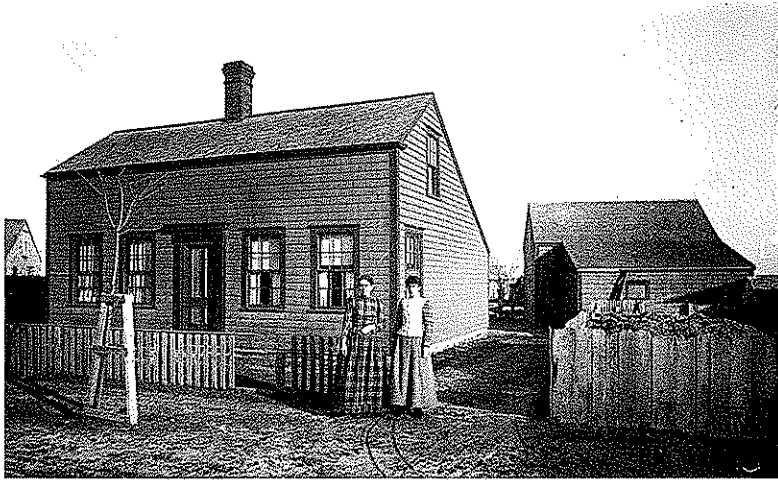


FIGURE 7: Captain Richard Gardner III House, Built ca. 1722–24, 34 West Chester Street. *An asymmetrical gable is the unmistakable architectural feature of the lean-to house. Captain Gardner built this house as an integral lean-to.*

moved five hundred feet from its construction site and restored in the 1920s.¹² Initial ownership of the home is attributed to either Richard Gardner II (1653–1728) or his son, Joseph (1677–1747), descendants of Richard Gardner I (1626–?), a seaman and partner of the initial purchasers of the island. Originally one room deep with two and a half stories, this house was later extended to the side and rear. Exterior details express its English colonial character.¹³ The typically small, hinged casement windows are set with leaded, diamond-pane glass. Doors are of plain boards with long, metal strap hinges and a wooden latch (FIGURE 6). Aligned with the front entrance and crowning the steeply pitched roof is a massive, articulated chimneystack.

As building design progressed to accommodate growing families, the single- or double-room English house was extended at the rear to its northern side, and at times laterally as well, as exhibited at the Richard Gardner II house. The rear extension, with its characteristic single sloping roof, is known as a “lean-to.”¹⁴ On Nantucket, the lean-to is the distinct building feature that defines both the shed-like extension and the entire style of the house. As it did on the mainland, the practical and often essential lean-to became integral to the plan and construction of the home (FIGURE 7). Gradually, the one-room-deep, original English house evolved into two-room-deep variations (FIGURE 8). The insular Nantucketers held fast to the structurally simple and sensible lean-to house. The design reached a height of popularity between 1700 and 1760



{ LEFT }

FIGURE 8: Floor Plan of the Christopher Starbuck House, Constructed and Extended ca. 1690–1757. Illustration by Richard Waldes, 2003. When the house was moved to its present location in 1757, the western room (in the lower left of the plan) and rear lean-to section were added. Note that there are recessed brick ovens in the hearths of both the kitchen and front chamber, an indication that suggests the rear kitchen was added at a later date.

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 9: One-and-a-Half-Story Lean-to of the Late-Nineteenth Century on Atlantic Avenue. Adopted from the mainland standard and used on Nantucket long after it lost popularity in New England, the lean-to model persisted on the island for over a half a century. Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 10: Captain Richard Gardner III House, Built ca. 1722–24 at 34 West Chester Street. This house is a testimony to the durability of timber-frame construction, as it was built for the Gardner family 280 years ago. Historian Henry Worth aptly notes the appeal of the direct and honest design of these lean-to houses: “[They have] to a high degree that subtle quality, called ‘atmosphere,’ that attracts and satisfies the eye of all.”





{ OPPOSITE }

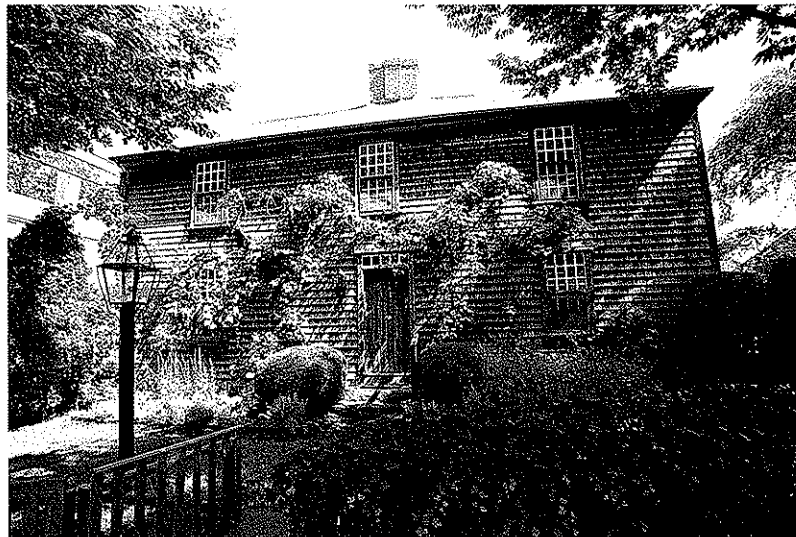
FIGURE 11: Major Josiah Coffin House, Built ca. 1724, 90 North Liberty. *Maritime Nantucketers were so adamant about the accuracy of southern orientation that they would set the foundation posts by compass. For instance, in the nineteenth century Professor Henry Mitchell investigated the age of the Josiah Coffin house by means of a compass. He computed a building date of 1723 as the date when the east and west sides of that house coincided with the magnetic north. Mitchell conferred with the woman who owned the property and found he had a successful estimate.*

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 12: Charles Gardner House, Built ca. 1740, Quarter Mile Hill. *Tucked away on a quiet lane off Main Street and facing south, this mid-eighteenth-century-style home is a transitional type of lean-to. The chimney and front door alignment indicates the lean-to plan, but the rear wall has a two full stories. Within a few decades after the Gardner home was built, the lean-to lost favor and this full, two-and-a-half-story house was popularly adopted. The section on the east end is a nineteenth-century addition.* Courtesy of the Nantucket Historical Association.

Each of these solid houses is situated away from the street at seemingly random angles and surrounded by generous open space. Instead of facing the road in an orderly manner, the earliest houses were oriented to the south and therefore many of the facades cannot be easily seen by the passerby (FIGURE 10). Choosing a southern orientation was far from random. Collecting solar warmth, the south-facing facade absorbed strong rays of the sun into the primary rooms of the house, and the long sloping roof on the north side, known as a “catslide,” buffeted the wind. Henry C. Forman, a respected historian of early Nantucket architecture, has noted: “[t]he catslide was generally placed on the north side because the prevailing southwest wind tended to tear off fewer shingles than would be the case if the structure faced the other way. What Islander, besides, would wish to see his valuable shingles flying away like birds in the sky?”¹⁸

Nantucket Town’s remarkable cache of eighteenth-century lean-to houses—several of which have passed down through eight or nine generations of the same family—represents a significant archive of American vernacular architecture. As noted in deeds and probate records kept at Nantucket’s town hall, the Christopher Starbuck house (FIGURES 8, 13, 14), built circa 1690–1757, at 105 Main Street, was kept in the family for 175 years. The Starbucks were among the most influential families in early Nantucket.¹⁹ Christopher Starbuck (1731–1815) was the great-grandson of Mary Starbuck (1645–1717), the charismatic woman who was instrumental in establishing the Society of Friends on Nantucket.²⁰ The house, moved from the first seventeenth-century Sherburne site and enlarged, faces south and was originally the early English type with each floor one room deep. It was expanded to the west and north sometime before 1757,²¹ resulting in a larger, three-bay (building division) facade with two front windows, one on either side of the entrance (FIGURE 13).



{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 13: Christopher Starbuck House, Built ca. 1690–1757, 105 Main Street. *Built facing south before orientation to the street was necessary, this house sits firmly on the ground counterpoint to the road. The gable dormers on the lean-to roof are a twentieth-century addition.*

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 14: Facade of the Christopher Starbuck House. *Once given a Victorian hooded door detail and other late-nineteenth-century ornaments, the entrance to the Starbuck house was restored in the early twentieth century to the aesthetically appropriate simple board door of the period in which the house was built.*





{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 15: Richard Swain House, Built ca. 1755, 3 Weymouth Lane. *Unlike a full lean-to with two front rooms, there is only one front room in this half-house. Nonetheless, the living area is comfortable in size and receives generous sunlight through the two south-facing windows.*

The humble and dignified Starbuck house, restored and preserved with respect to its history, is a perfect mirror of Nantucket's sturdy lean-to architecture. A sill flush with the ground, a heavy post-and-beam frame built around a giant chimney, exposed timbers on the interior; and a baffle-entry plan are the chief characteristics inherited from the English dwelling phase. The lean-to is a full two rooms deep. Two stories high in front with a catslide roof sloping down to one story in the rear, the Starbuck house displays the asymmetrical gable end that is the hallmark of the lean-to.

Two types of the lean-to can be found on Nantucket. The first is a full-house, built with two rooms in front (parlor and chamber)—one on either side of the central chimney—and three rooms in the rear, including a narrow pantry, kitchen, and secondary chamber. Examples of this style include the Josiah Coffin house (a five-bay version) and the Captain Richard Gardner III house (a three-bay version). The second lean-to type is the smaller, half-size house, containing a single front room (a parlor with two windows) and two rear chambers (kitchen and pantry) (FIGURE 15). The chimney of the half-house is aligned with the front door and abuts a side wall. This smaller variation was meant to eventually be expanded laterally into a full-house such as the Christopher Starbuck house. In the case of the Richard Swain house, however, built circa 1755, at 3 Weymouth Lane,²² only a small shed was added to the west side because the lot could not accommodate a full-size room.

On the mainland, the lean-to was generally nicknamed a "saltbox" in reference to the shape of containers that held that mineral. The outside form and interior plan of the lean-to closely followed that of New England models. Despite similarities, several architectural features widely found in the two-story English houses and the lean-to houses built in the seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Massachusetts colonies were absent from their Nantucket counterparts. For instance, large facade gables, projecting first-floor porches, and second-floor overhangs (or jetties), with their decorative drop pendants, and deep eaves did not appear on Nantucket's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses.²³ From the beginning, the defining character of the island's vernacular architecture had been an overriding sense of restraint. The stark minimalism of the Nantucket form stems, in part, from circumstances of isolation. On an island where most building materials needed to be imported, restraint was an economic reality. Though not poor, the entrepreneurial colonists were practical by necessity. As one might anticipate, weather also had its influence. Absent are the roof overhangs that were commonly incorporated into mainland homes.²⁴ Perhaps there was the fear of a strong Nantucket wind catching hold under the overhang and pulling apart the roof.

Practical restraint used in homebuilding may have gained momentum with the fledgling maritime economy by way of house carpenters who also worked constructing and repairing boats.²⁵ The efficient use of materials and space employed in boat building found its way into the construction of houses.²⁶ Furthermore, the functionally spare style fit the virtue of simplicity espoused by the growing popula-

tion of the Society of Friends, who were beginning to exert influence over taste and propriety. The Friends' principles guided the faithful to live and dress humbly and to extend this outlook to the design of their homes. The conservative exterior and the low rear wall of the lean-to style tempered the massiveness and perceived ostentation of the form, thus soothing the Quaker mind-set.²⁷ The islanders, consciously or not, achieved an overall aesthetic harmony through collective acceptance of the notion that less was economically and appropriately more. The Quakers shunned worldly opulence, but they were progressive in terms of technology, such as heating, and probably lighting, within the home.²⁸

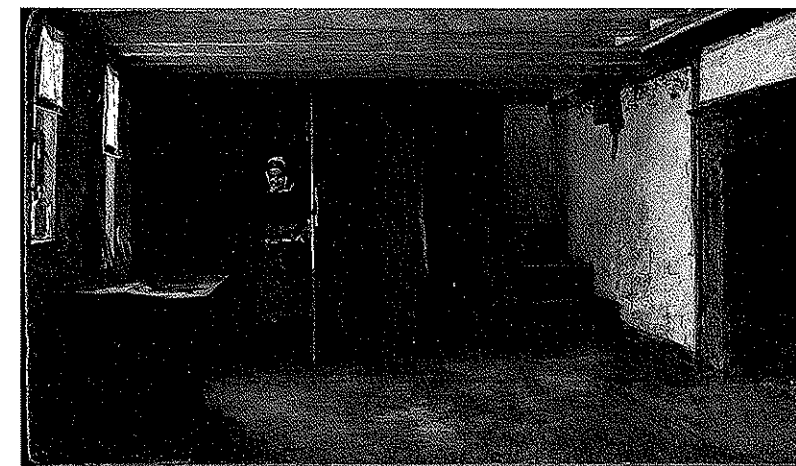
The virtue of simplicity and ship-tight efficiency did not prevent the natural pursuit of comfort for Nantucketers. The lean-to plan expanded living space by providing new utility rooms on the first floor at the rear, chambers for storage and small living spaces on the second, and even a third-floor garret.²⁹ The easily recognizable asymmetrical gable of the lean-to, the massive ridge chimney, and the window arrangement on the facade reflect the house plan within. As with its English house predecessor, access to the baffle-entry lean-to is immediate and without formality. The board door opens directly into a narrow vestibule, then called a porch (FIGURE 16). Directly opposite the door, steeply winding stairs wrap around the huge internal chimney. A new feature of the front entrance—a five-pane transom across the top of the door—illuminates the tiny interior porch.³⁰ Transom lights might also be found above each of the doors leading to the interior rooms as an aid in the detection of harmful fires.³¹ Perfectly suited for windswept regions, the minimal enclosed entry blocked damp sea breezes from sweeping through the house.³²

On either side of the vestibule, the plan included a single room—a chamber for sleeping and a parlor for receiving guests, each with a fireplace. The rear utility rooms were reached through the front parlor and comprised a small chamber, a buttery or milkroom (a pantry), and the kitchen, with its giant hearth and built-in bake oven (FIGURES 17, 18). A circular cellar below the kitchen kept food cool all year round.

On the exterior, architectural details contributed to the distinguishing fabric of the whole structure. As noted previously, seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century houses were originally constructed with small, diamond-paned casement windows and flat board doors with wooden latches and long, wrought-iron, strap hinges. Latches, hinges, and board doors continued to be used into the eighteenth century and can be seen on many lean-to houses. As on the mainland, window construction styles improved as technology and finances advanced. Fixed or swinging casements with leaded panes were replaced with larger double-hung sashes entirely of wood. On the lean-to houses throughout Nantucket Town, the small twelve-over-twelve-pane sash windows are another clue in recognizing the earliest structures, as seen at the Alex and George Folger house, built before 1750, at 10 Ash Street³³ (FIGURE 19).

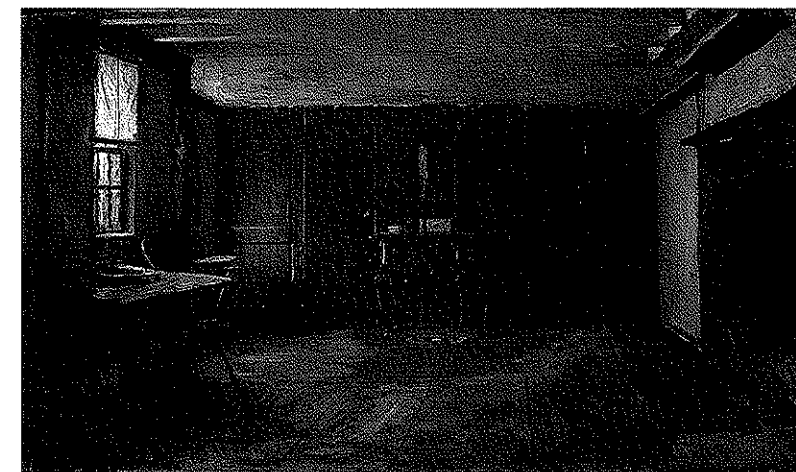


FIGURE 16: Interior "Porch," Major Josiah Coffin House, Built ca. 1724, 90 North Liberty. *The tiny vestibule of this house contains steep winding stairs behind vertical board sheathing. This baffle-entry keeps the Nantucket wind from blowing through the house. On an island that is statistically one of the windiest spots on the East Coast, blocking the wind was a priority.*



{ TOP }

FIGURE 17: Eastman Johnson, Susan Ray's Kitchen—Nantucket, 1875. Oil on board. *A nineteenth-century painter of the American scene who summered on Nantucket, Johnson depicted Susan Ray (1821–1904) emerging from the tiny milk room in the lean-to addition of her home at 9 Mill Street. The simplicity of the room was a symbol of humility, an important ethic of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Courtesy of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Gift of John K. McMurray in memory of Dr. James Graham Leyburn, 1994.69.*



{ BOTTOM }

FIGURE 18: Eastman Johnson, The Other Side of Susan Ray's Kitchen—Nantucket, ca. 1875. Oil on paper board. *The spare character of the room emerges in Johnson's skilled and precise brushwork: he portrays the plaster walls, wooden doors, paneling, heavy beams, and hearth of Susan Ray's kitchen. Courtesy of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Museum Purchase, 1996.74.*

Many of the various construction materials and techniques of eighteenth-century Nantucket houses are noted in the account books of the island carpenters. Among the many building notations recorded in the accounts of island builder Richard Macy is an entry dated 1718 for “making 3 window frames and 3 casements.”³⁴ Later in the century, carpenters’ account books frequently record the making of sashes but there are no references to casement windows. For instance, in his ledger begun in 1788, Benjamin Newland records: “10 window frames” and “210 Squares of Sashes” for Elisha Barnet, and “puttying 75 Squares of Sash” for Samuel Howland.³⁵ Recorded by John Coffin in 1790: ten days labor on Simeon Ellis’s house including, “8 window frame, 24 squars sashis, 4 squars sashes for over door.” The latter entry notes the specific use of transom lights.³⁶

Although leaded-pane casements were not employed in the lean-to houses built shortly after 1700, the pegged heavy plank-frame and pegged construction of the window was retained. This pegged-together form was easily fitted or tapped out if the building was expanded or moved.³⁷

Exterior cladding, perhaps more than any other single component, establishes the character of Nantucket’s architecture. Strikingly noticeable and widespread even today, split shingles over horizontal sheathing was preferred as the primary cladding rather than the clapboards that were favored on the mainland. Tightly spaced clapboards, once termed “clinker-built” on Nantucket,³⁸ did have a place. However, pine or cedar shingles, which do not need to be painted, offer superior durability in the maritime climate by clamping out the wind and stubbornly resisting saltwater spray.³⁹ Toiling over the wind and wear on a house is clearly recorded by carpenter John Coffin in his account book entry of 1790. His work on Laban Gardner’s house included: “laber to stop out wind from garret to celler[,] mend position [of] celler and milkroom shelves . . . take up harth in c [chamber] room & lay it again[,] lay floar in w [west] room and mend under floar and mend kitchen floar.”⁴⁰

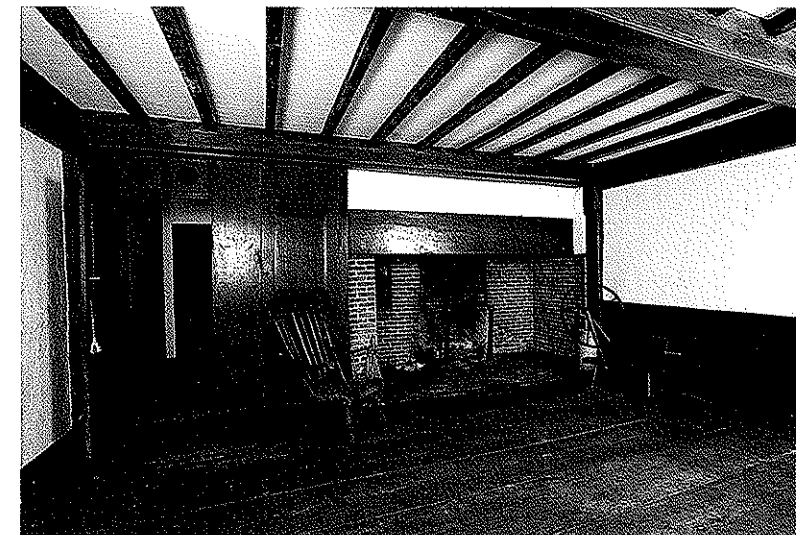
Shingles are mentioned with great frequency in carpenter account books. In 1718, Richard Macy noted the cost of four thousand “shingls.”⁴¹ In 1789, Benjamin Newland noted one and three-quarter “thousand of shingels” for Ebenezer Baley. Newland also charged Goodspeed Jones for two thousand shingles “dliward,”⁴² while carpenter John Coffin asked twelve shillings of Simeon Ellis for “laber shingle fore side house.”⁴³

A pure “saltbox” house is a rarity on the island, as most have what are called “warts”—single-slope roof additions or outshuts projecting from the side of the house and the rear beyond the lean-to. In addition, many of the eighteenth-century houses had their one-story rear walls later raised in height, obliterating the lean-to. Altered, extended, or outwardly pushed in some way, the lean-to houses all have additions built to accommodate modern kitchens and new bedrooms, sunrooms, or dens (FIGURE 20). Fortunately these warts, ells, or dormers are generally discreet and well integrated

{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 19: Alex and George Folger House, Built Before 1750, 10 Ash Street. Covered with vine roses, this striking five-bay facade does not face the street; instead it faces south to collect the warmth of the sun. The plank windows—slightly projecting from the face of the building—and board door with long strap hinges are unmistakable details of the early lean-to houses. The present owner of the house, Dr. Bryon Lingeman, suggests that during the early nineteenth century the house was converted into a duplex by two brothers, Alex and George Folger. Partitioning walls have been removed, exposing a long double fireplace.





{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 20: Thomas Macy House, Built ca. 1717, 3 Tattle Court. Originally a half-house, the Macy house is a south-facing lean-to found on a tiny lane off Fair Street. The original section is recognizable, though the east gable of the house projects a rather large extension that obscures the original salt-box shape. The tall, articulated chimney and slightly projecting, plank-frame windows are features of its early date.

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 21: Interior, Christopher Starbuck House, Built ca. 1690. Except for several houses owned by the Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket's historic architecture is in private hands and not accessible by the public. Occasionally, however, a house will be open for a public tour as part of a fund-raising event. In 1945, the Starbuck house was listed on a public tour, and a description of the interior appeared in the island's newspaper: "The exposed floor joists, the oaken summers, girts and corner posts, the huge fireplaces and mantles, the pine floors, provide a splendid, living picture of how those early Nantucket families lived their simplified existence." The house was opened to the public again in 2003.

at the back of the house (FIGURE 13). The rear jumble and pile of extensions often contribute to the charm and layered history of the houses.

Despite its austere exterior appearance, the lean-to's interior is inviting. Upon walking into the front chamber of the Swain house, the Starbuck house, or the Captain Gardner house, for instance, there is a sense of comfortable intimacy. Low ceilings, which minimize efforts to heat the space, are practical and snug, yet the rooms are spacious. The interior also reveals building techniques and taste. Decoration is minimal, wood trim around interior doors and windows is nonexistent. The timber-frame construction is visible in the exposed beams, posts,

and floor joists. Many kitchen timbers were left rough, leaving the slashes of a broad ax and various hand tools visible on the wood's surface. To offer a refined appearance, the exposed beams were planed and have a beaded edge, and corner posts were molded into curved, bracketed shapes before fitting into the framework. These details are seen both in the Starbuck and Swain houses (FIGURES 21, 22, 23). Although the lack of wood trim, the exposed joists, posts, and rough-hewn timbers may appear crude to some contemporary sensibilities, the visible marks of the hand tools reveal something of the fascinating story of the builders, as well as the taste and practical concerns of the people who occupied the homes. By mid-century, many house interiors had walls and ceilings covered with plaster.⁴⁴ Formerly exposed wood was hidden from view because homeowners did not find it fashionable at the time. When the Starbuck house was restored and opened to the public in the 1930s, the following description of the front and rear chambers appeared in the *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror*: "the huge fireplaces in the Breckinridge home astonished many visitors, many expressions of delight could be heard at the sight of the wide pine-board mantles, the exposed summers, [beams] girts, and floor beams [joists], which brought out the old time appearance of the well-preserved structure."⁴⁵



{ LEFT }

FIGURE 22:
Interior, Richard Swain
House, Built ca. 1755,
3 Weymouth Lane.
*Although small, this
half-house was thoughtfully
built with subtle decorative
touches, such as beaded
beams and curved post
brackets in the former
kitchen.*

{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 23: Interior,
Richard Swain House.
*In place of a mantel there is
molded plaster over the par-
lor fireplace, finished at the
ceiling edge with a curved
and beaded beam.*



Interior refinements, such as plaster walls, continued later in the eighteenth century, as cabinetmakers created frame-and-panel doors and raised-panel wall sheathing. In addition, lathes were used to fabricate elements of chairs, spinning wheels, and stairwell balusters. The cabinetmakers' work added further polish. The Captain Richard Gardner house, at 34 West Chester Street, has many fine examples of the work of joiners, turners, and cabinetmakers. Most attractive is the raised-panel work and cabinetry surrounding the various fireplaces (FIGURE 24). Also at the Gardner house, a set of vertically twisting stairs was replaced with steps in several, straight flights. The staircase has a molded handrail, turned newel posts, and balusters (FIGURE 25). These details may have been added at a date late in the eighteenth century; nonetheless, the thoughtfully crafted features reflect the engaging evolution of the architecture.

Practical, comfortable, and aesthetically pleasing to the eye of the Nantucketer, the lean-to, both large and small, was a long-favored design. When in the 1730s, homes in New England developed into a full two stories at both front and rear, the design was adopted on Nantucket. The idiosyncratic islanders, however, had their own plan for the next phase of home building.



{ OPPOSITE }

FIGURE 24: Interior, Captain Richard Gardner House, Built ca. 1722–24, 34 West Chester Street. *Fine craftsmanship can be found in all aspects of this house, including the entry staircase. Visible here are the extensive raised-panel walls of the living space.*

{ ABOVE }

FIGURE 25: Interior, Captain Richard Gardner House. *The several sets of straight flights of steps, the turned newel post, and balusters in the front vestibule were likely to have been added at a date later than the initial construction of the house. The paneled wood and turned posts are simple refinements; with prosperity came the inclination to make details of the home more elaborate and pleasing to the eye.*



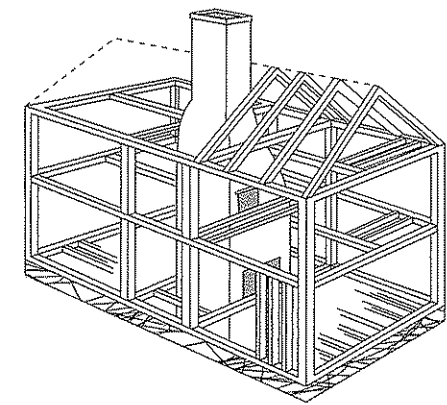
Assembling a Timber Frame

ERIC GRADOIA



FIGURE B: Timber Frame Detail at the Captain Richard Gardner House, Built ca. 1722–24, 34 West Chester Street. Exposed timbers at the peak of the house reveal the trunnel (peg) that fastens together the mortise-and-tenon joint of a pair of roof timbers. The board planking used to sheath the building interior was usually whitewashed, and interior walls were given an additional layer of plaster for insulation and finish. On the exterior, the boarding was covered with an added layer of shingles.

FIGURE A: The Timber Frame. Illustration by Rose Gonnella and Cesar Rubin, 2003. In *New England, a dwelling house was built around a central chimney. Joined together while flat on the ground, wall sections were raised into place to form the structural frame of the building.*



ALTHOUGH BOTH MASONRY WALL CONSTRUCTION of stone and brick and timber-framed, wattle- and daub-filled (lathe and plaster) wall construction were known from the colonists' British homeland, the practice of building in timber was the obvious and natural choice throughout New England, where wide-girth trees were found in great abundance. Despite a lack of significant forests on Nantucket, imported wood timber frame was still the most common building method used for dwellings and commercial structures from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.

In simplest terms, timber frame construction is a method of erecting a building with a structural system fabricated from squared timbers connected to one another with joinery. Trees such as the white oak and red pine provide the lengths of timber necessary for building construction, as well as the properties desirable in the wood itself. Wood is an excellent building material for a number of reasons. To start, it is easily worked. It is possible for a standing tree to be felled and hewn into a squared timber by one person using only simple hand tools. More important, the physical properties of wood allow it to function well under the common loads that act on a building—tension, compression, and combinations of these forces. Last, wood is durable as long as it is protected from moisture.

Hewn and squared timbers are first cut into a number of individually sized building members: sills, posts, beams, girts, and plates (FIGURE A). Connecting the members requires complex joints fabricated from the timbers themselves. The specific joinery used for a connection depends on what forces are acting on that location of the frame. Perhaps the most common joint is the mortise and tenon,

where a projecting “tongue” on one timber is fitted to an opening of like dimensions on another timber and fastened with a wooden peg called a trunnel (FIGURE B). A mortise-and-tenon joint performs well in compression but poorly in tension. In locations where a timber is performing a number of tasks or carrying great loads, such as a summer beam, the joinery becomes more intricate. A tusk-tenon joint was commonly used at the ends of a summer beam to join it to the frame. The design of this joint allowed it to both bind the frame together while supporting the weight of heavy loads. The most complicated joinery in the average timber-frame building is often found at the heads of corner posts. It is at this location that the post, plate, tie beam, and roof framing meet and fasten together. To achieve this task a complex connection called the “English tying joint” is used. This compound joint binds the timbers together and resists the mix of forces that act on this location.

After the joints have been fabricated, assembly begins with a series of bents. A bent is a group of vertical (posts) and horizontal (beams) members that form one cross section of the frame. Two bents connected together create a bay, and one or more bays connected together form a box frame, the four walls of the building. Using mortise-and-tenon joints, a roofing system is constructed atop the box frame, completing the structure of the building.