



John R. Smith

Back on the Turn. Lancy's Corner. 1900

Commerical Street turns on the right; Tremont Street, Chip Hill, on the left; and Franklin Street, the first street to be laid out, straight ahead.

Few small communities have a longer continuous street than our own Commercial Street and few can show such alacrity in clearing the sidewalk of snow. It is a long trek with a shovel as those who have been clearing it during the last few days can tell you, and though narrow it is far from straight.

There are several reasons why it is not straight, one of the most important dates back to the time when the making of salt in Provincetown was an important and prosperous industry.

For instance when the surveyors came to Lancy's Corner they found a salt works right in the line of the proposed road. "Whoever saws through my salt works saws through my body," shouted Mr. Lancy.

"Where's the saw?" asked Joshua Paine, proponent of the road. But in the end it went around the Lancy property, and around other salt works.

The story of salt making is one of the interesting descriptions in Nancy Paine Smith's The Provincetown Book, now unfortunately out of print. It follows:

They prospered on the water. And on the land back of the houses were the Salt-works. A mill at the foot of the rising pumped sea water into vats, through hollow logs made tight at the joints with white lead. The vats were about twenty feet square and eighteen inches deep. They were arranged in groups of three or four, the water room, the bitter-water-room, the salt room. The sea water in the vats exposed to the sun, rapidly evaporated, leaving the salt. Three hundred and fifty gallons of water produced one bushel of salt. As the clear salt was shovelled from the last vat and spread out to dry, the partly evaporated water in the bitter-water room was allowed to run into the salt-room, and new water was pumped into the water-room. These vats had covers on rollers, which were pushed over the vats at night or at signs of a shower. These rollers were ten inches in diameter; occasionally one of them, now used as a foot stool, can be found. A man and a boy could manage the covers. As the boys of the family grew up and went off to sea, boys from Boston were adopted to help with the salt-works. They were seldom legally adopted, but they were in all respects members of the family. Some of these boys grew to be among our best citizens.

Salt-making was extremely profitable. The cost of building the salt-works was small. Uncle Jonathan took his Grand Banker, when she got home in the fall, and with his boys as crew, went to Maine and bought cedar posts, pine planks and joists, brought them home in the

vessel, and threw them overboard at high tide. Men carried the lumber on their backs up from the shore to a level place not far from the dwelling house, and there they built "a string of salt-works," sixty or eighty vats. The work of tending salt-works was done by elderly men and boys, and sometimes, when black clouds rolled up in the west, with the help of the women. The noise of many covers rolling over the vats, when a shower threatened, rivalled the thunder itself. Before the days of salt-works, when salt was manufactured in a kettle over the fire in the fireplace, its cost was eight dollars a bushel. In 1837, Provincetown had seventy-eight salt-works, producing 48,960 bushels of salt, and the price was one dollar a bushel. That would give an income of more than six hundred dollars for the old man and the boys, during the summer, while the Grand Bankers were away. The brine left in the bitter-water room, evaporating slowly through the winter, yielded a little pin-money in the form of Epsom or Glauber's salts. Reduction of the duty on salt, the repeal of the bounty, the discovery of salt in New York State, ruined the salt making here. The salt-works were dismantled, and houses and stores were built of the lumber. The two-story fish-stores, common along the shore, unpainted, but well proportioned, with double doors large enough to take in a boat, below and above, were made of salt-works boards. They are now used as studios by the artists. The beams and the inside boards, so long saturated with salt, are silvery; they will last I suppose, to the end of time. This shining background carries the draperies and the pictures of the artists. The building that looks to the chance passer-by like a bare barn, is all beautiful within.

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Gives New Data On Salt Works

Mrs. Gertrude DeWager Adds Interesting Facts On Industry

The making of salt formed a fascinating chapter in the history of Provincetown, revealing much ingenuity on the part of the townspeople and their ability to take advantage of opportunities to augment their income.

Mrs. Gertrude DeWager, in a letter to The Advocate, adds to existing data on the salt-making period with first-hand information. Her letter follows:

"In last week's Advocate under 'Cape Cod-dities' was an article on the layout of the 'Front' of Commercial Street. I have heard the story related many times so I would like to add a bit to that which has already been told.

"My mother, who was the daughter of Benjamin Lancy, said her father was an ardent supporter of the road but did not approve of it in its entirety. He was willing for it to cross the Lancy property, a large tract of land with many buildings thereon, extending from the first corner mentioned in your last week's issue, to the shore front, but he recommended and urged it cross the back of the Lancy property, triangularly starting at the first corner. If this plan had been carried out those two present day dangerous corners would have been avoided. There are many old-time stories familiar to me—stories that at one time I regarded as exceedingly tiresome, but as time goes on they assume a different aspect.

"Franklin Street was the first street laid out in Provincetown. It was named in honor of Benjamin Franklin and it was the road to Provincetown's first cemetery in which were the little slate grave-stones sent from England to mark the burial places of those Mayflower passengers who died here while the Mayflower was anchored in Cape Cod Bay. This cemetery was completely destroyed in the laying out of Bradford Street.

"In speaking of the early industry of salt making here, it was in 1800 that the manufacture of marine salt began, rapidly increasing until in 1837 there were 78 salt works.

"In 1845 there were about 80 plants yielding 26,000 bushels of salt. In 1855 there were but five plants left, and in 1865 only one remained. In addition to marine salt, salts for medicinal purposes were also manufactured here.

"The high price of lumber, reduction of duty on salt, and discovery of salt springs in the eastern United States, is said to have caused the rapid decline in the local marine salt business.

"Among some old documents I have one dated 1825 showing that an ancestor of mine received \$96 paid in full for 24 hundreds of salt put on board the schooner General Jackson."