

While There Is Still Time

Provincetown Advocate - November 17, 1966

A letter sent to The Advocate this week appears in our In Our Mail column from an irate citizen of Provincetown expressing indignation over the tearing down of the oldest shop at 220 Commercial Street and of the Seascope House in the East End which was formerly the historic old Vernon Inn. Unfortunately righteous indignation and an interest in the landmarks of Provincetown's fine historic background after they have been destroyed is not enough.

For many years Plymouth capitalized on its Plymouth Rock as the first landing place of the Pilgrims in the new world and for more years than we like to remember, Provincetown kept a deep, dark secret the fact that the Mayflower came first to Provincetown and its hardy passengers spent weeks here before sailing on to Plymouth. It wasn't until the late Harry Kemp and a group of determined townspeople brought the secret to light that Provincetown took its rightful place in history.

As we pointed out once before, we would like to see the group of young people which sponsored the In Memoriam for the Oldest Shop form the nucleus of an organization dedicated to the preservation of the old Provincetown landmarks. We are sure they could add many interested residents to their ranks. And it is amazing what such a group of people working together with vision and determination can accomplish. The residents of Beacon Hill in Boston successfully fought for the preservation of their old brick sidewalks when they were to be torn up to make way for modern sidewalks. The Town of Yarmouth here on the Cape fought against the widening of Route 6 through the town, and this when it was the main highway on the Cape, because it would have meant the destruction of the famous old Yarmouth elms which lined both sides of the highway. Those old elms are still standing.

We are certain that the majority of our visitors come here because they are interested in Provincetown's charm and its historical background. And while many of the old landmarks have disappeared, many still remain. And these should be preserved. There are still a few of the old buildings which were part of the old settlement at Long Point, which were floated across the harbor on barges with the smoke from the kitchen stoves curling from the chimneys and the woman of the house still casually going about her household chores. These certainly should and could be marked in some way which would draw attention to their history. There is an old burying ground back in the woods which unfortunately few Provincetown people still remember and which certainly should be restored and preserved. There is interest now in restoring and preserving the late Mary Heaton Vorse's old Kibbe Cook house in the East End. And there are many more.

It takes hard work and determination to form such an organization and to make it function but it can be done and the rewards are many. And it should be done—while there is still time.

Wants Town's Historic Charm Preserved

Editor, The Advocate:—

Poor Provincetown — unless it is afforded some protection from those who are butchering and destroying the precious things that have made the town unique, it is in for a grim future. About a year ago there was a brutal incident in its precarious life — the smashing to pieces of the distinguished Vernon Inn at the East End of Town where, ironically, Thoreau wrote much of his classic "Cape Cod."

Just recently many of us who love and know the importance of our cherished landmarks were shocked to see the razing of the 1799 shop in the center of town. Despite the rumor that its structural infirmities were many, it was observed to put up a magnificent fight against the awesome, destructive power of the bulldozer. There were statements to the effect the cost of shoring up the building would have been prohibitive. I, for one, and I am sure there are many more who feel the way I do about preserving the town's historic charm, would have been glad to have donated a sum of money to have helped restore the building which must have been possible, for to my knowledge it had not been condemned by the town. The cost of preserving would have been justified by the future income which accrue from tourist interest in a building of such fine museum calibre.

The French have a saying which I feel is apropos at this time "To part is to die a little."

John W. Gregory
Provincetown

Provincetown Advocate - November 3, 1966

Let's Preserve -- Not Memorialize

There has been a rising tide of protest among a small group of Provincetown citizens during the past few years over the tearing down of old historical landmarks in the town to make room for more modern structures and businesses. This reached its peak recently over the demolition of the old building at 220 Commercial Street. The group's In Memoriam appears in this issue of The Advocate. While hoping to preserve the old landmark, the new owner found the cost of restoring the building to be prohibitive.

Erected in 1799, while John Adams was the second president of the United States, the building had housed a variety of businesses . . . it had at one time been a fruit shop and later a confectioner's shop. In 1931 it became the shoe repair shop of James Matenos and prior to that had housed another cobbler's shop. There was a secluded small back room where the gentry of many years before were wont to gather and settle the affairs of the town, the state and the nation over pipe and bottle. In olden times, too, messages for the Town Crier were written on a small slate which hung beside the door, were picked up there and 'cried' the length of the town, up-along and down-along.

In June of 1941 The Provincetown Advocate leased the building and moved its offices there. The sign, which The Advocate placed beside the door at that time read: "The Oldest Shop. This is the Oldest Shop Building in Provincetown, erected in 1799 while John Adams was second president of our country — below this sign once hung the slate from which the old Town Criers took their public notices to cry up-along and down-along. Now the office of The Provincetown Advocate." The building and the sign were photographed probably as often as the Town Crier himself.

The group of protesting citizens could well form the nucleus of an historical society or of any organization dedicated to the preservation of old historic Provincetown landmarks. And there are still more than a few to be saved though they are fast disappearing.

Let's preserve — not memorialize!