

HELL-TOWN

A fascinating name for a town with a fascinating history. A town in name only because it was merely a settlement of fisher-folk within the township of Provincetown. The people of Hell-Town worked hard and waged an endless struggle against the sea. Hard work, long hours and constant risks, was the everyday schedule. The rewards were few and the cash returns poor. But, even with all these hardships, life at Hell-Town was free and easy. Although the name is still well known here and often repeated, the actual site of Hell-Town and the story have gone unrecorded, except for the yarns handed down by word of mouth. There are still two or three "old timers" here in Provincetown who can tell you something about Hell-Town, as they remember it. But the Hell-Town they knew was not the original settlement. There were two other settlements of "Fishermen's Huts" in the vicinity of the site where the real Hell-Towners settled, flourished and faded into oblivion. The other settlements were small in numbers and less active.

This article is about the Hell-Town of which so little has been recorded. What you will read about the settlement consists of notes and items gathered and checked during the past 12 years.

Hell-Town was located on the beach area between the present Race Run (formerly Hatches Harbor) and the New Beach of today. In 1835 the New Beach was the shore of Lancy's Harbor. A long sandbar formed the outer shore of Lancy's Harbor and a narrow channel facing Massachusetts Bay gave the harbor an excellent entrance. Hell-Town was first started by a few fishermen, who built temporary shanties in the area for storing fishing gear. The men fished in small dories with two men to each dory. They were called "handliners" because they used hand-lines, fishing two or more lines per man. They fished in Massachusetts Bay for codfish and on the nearby grounds where the fishing was good. The purpose of building the shanties at Hell-Town was to be as near the fishing grounds as possible. Fishing was good in the area and soon more fishermen moved into the new location and numerous other shanties were erected.

At first the fishermen came in to town at night and would ride on the teams bringing in the day's catches. In the early morning hours, of course, the fishermen had to manage the long walk out to the shanties over the sandy roads. But, as the weather got colder and the

early morning walk tougher the men gradually started at first to stay out in Hell-Town. They installed bunks and stoves in the shanties. Pumps were driven for fresh water and the shanties were made liveable even in cold weather. And soon thereafter the women folk moved in along with their men and Hell-Town became a town all of its own. At its peak time the settlement could boast of about 200 people, including the women.

The "Hell-Towners" were evidently a clannish group and "outsiders" were promptly discouraged from visiting at the settlement. Even the drivers of the teams from in-town were not made overly welcome. But they were tolerated as one old-timer stated. Provincetown was alive with whispering and stories of "the going-on" out in Hell-Town. Food and supplies were teamed out to the settlement and the daily catches of codfish were brought in on the same teams each night, along with bigger and better stories of the "going-on". Many of the stories cannot be told here, for obvious reasons. Some of the tall-tales were evidently enlarged and exaggerated by each repetition. But, it is most evident that the "Hell-Towners" enjoyed the privacy of their little settlement and that the social life was free and easy. There is some evidence to show that some of the fishermen "Did admit that there was some carousing out there."

The drinking, card playing and gambling, was not the worst of the offenses, according to the stories. It seems that violent arguments were easily started and only settled after a free-for-all with even the women slugging it out back-to-back with the menfolk. On a few occasions disputes were settled by the use of ever handy bait-knives, but these affairs were kept mighty quiet in order that "the law" wouldn't step in. The Hell-Towners were an independent and rugged group of individuals, and they wanted to keep things the way they were. One of the few unwed settlers of Hell-Town who did come in to town frequently, made no secret of his female "housekeeper" and was not reluctant to admit that the confines of a one room shanty wasn't too inconvenient for them.

The men fished two or three miles offshore. At daybreak each morning, weather permitting, the dories were launched and using oars and a small sail the small fleet set off to the grounds. The fleet consisted of approximately 35 dories. When they reached the good fishing bottom the dories were anchored, the hooks baited and the lines lowered

over the sides. Each dorymate fished on his own side of the dory. Although they shared all expenses equally each man caught and sold his own catch. The dories stayed out on the grounds all day, or until they were loaded, and the men ate cold lunches. In good weather the dories could be loaded deep and would come in at night with only a few inches of free-board. When they were beached on the shore the teams would be driven alongside and the fish pitchforked into barrels on the teams and as each team was loaded they would drive into town over the old Race Road.

Handliners later gave way to the more modern method of trawling and the settlement soon began to outlive its usefulness. The shanties were still used years later by Lobster fishermen and some codfishermen occupied them in the good summer season. But the storms and time soon washed away the outer bar and Lancy's Harbor soon became a name only. With the harbor gone the site was too exposed for launching dories heavily loaded with tons of trawl. Hell-Town was practically abandoned. The old group of "Fishermen's Huts" at Race Point Light (Hatches Harbor) which was the oldest fishing settlement existing before and long after the Hell-Town era. It was never as notorious nor did the womenfolk move in and the area was used up until 1890.



Hell-Town is believed to have been in this section between New Beach and Race Point Light in the distance. - A 1957 postcard.