

# The Atlantic House at 200 Years

by Jan Kelley



The **Atlantic House** is celebrating a birthday, its 200th birthday. A bar to many, this "A" House, this building and this location, have a long and varied history. The tale begins in 1798 with Daniel Pease of Edgartown choosing to erect Pease's Tavern. A Customs House sprang up next door during the same year and Abner Dunham was appointed its first Customs Officer. Actually, there was not a great demand for either one during these years because of an embargo in effect forbidding trade with France and

England. The 18th century limped into the 19th century with the War of 1812 and before long Provincetown was all but deserted due to the proximity of danger.

Daniel Pease also became Provincetown's first Postmaster, appointed January 1st, 1801. Seven years later and ten years into the tavern business he petitioned President Thomas Jefferson to end the embargo. Besides the scarcity of business, the British frigates at anchor in Provincetown Harbor were menacing. Regular artillery drills were carried out from the harbor, using land targets, not welcoming, intimidating, bad for business and noisy. Pease continued running the tavern until 1834 when he and his family died of cholera, not in Provincetown but traveling on ship from New York.

The building was purchased by Benjamin Allstrum and renamed Allstrum House. Benjamin Allstrum was a wealthy ship chandler, ready to spread and vary his investments. He went from supplying to owning schooners to real estate. During his ownership of the building, the Atlantic House was used as a court house. The circuit court judge traveled over the dunes by stagecoach once a month to hear cases and the last stop of the coach was the Atlantic House.

It was Lysander Paine and Samuel Knowles who operated the stagecoach line until 1873, the advent of railroad travel. The stagecoach operated from Orleans to

Provincetown, coming into town on the dunes, north or shore side of Pilgrim Lake. East Harbor is the other name for Pilgrim Lake, since it was just that, part of the harbor. To keep the harbor from filling in with sand from the parabolic dunes, a dike, then a bridge, then a road and finally in 1949, a macadam road cut off that part of the harbor and it is now brackish water with a tidal sluiceway.

Thoreau traveled by stagecoach over the dunes to Provincetown and tells us of the very wide iron wheels that displaced the sand and ferried the coach to its final stop at



the Atlantic House. Since the judge and courthouse were in action there, it also served as a jail from time to time. Benjamin Allstrum also experienced an untimely death and Frank Potter Smith became its next owner.

Frank Smith came from Pico in the Azores. He arrived in America at age 18 and worked for 20 years on Provincetown vessels as crewman and steward. With his steward experience, hotel ownership came naturally and logically to Smith. It is he who gave the property the name *Atlantic House* and enjoyed a successful 45 year stewardship as a well-liked citizen who ran an above-average business. Contemporaries remarked and wrote that Frank Smith ran "a clean and welcoming hotel with an excellent menu." Travelers and locals enjoyed the comfort of a well-trained steward who utilized his skills on land. Comfort even ranged to the humorously coined sign "Guests heated."

The Iris Brothers bought the Atlantic House from Smith in 1916 and Frank Smith retired to Pearl Street. I can remember many a fiery story of spice and passion from the lives of the old Bohemians like Manny Zora and Daphne Wells Vorse, as told to me by Joe Seaman. What is that old line? "If walls could talk?" Add the era from 1950 when Reggie Cabral and Frank and Kathy Hurst bought the building and you would never have to talk again, just listen.

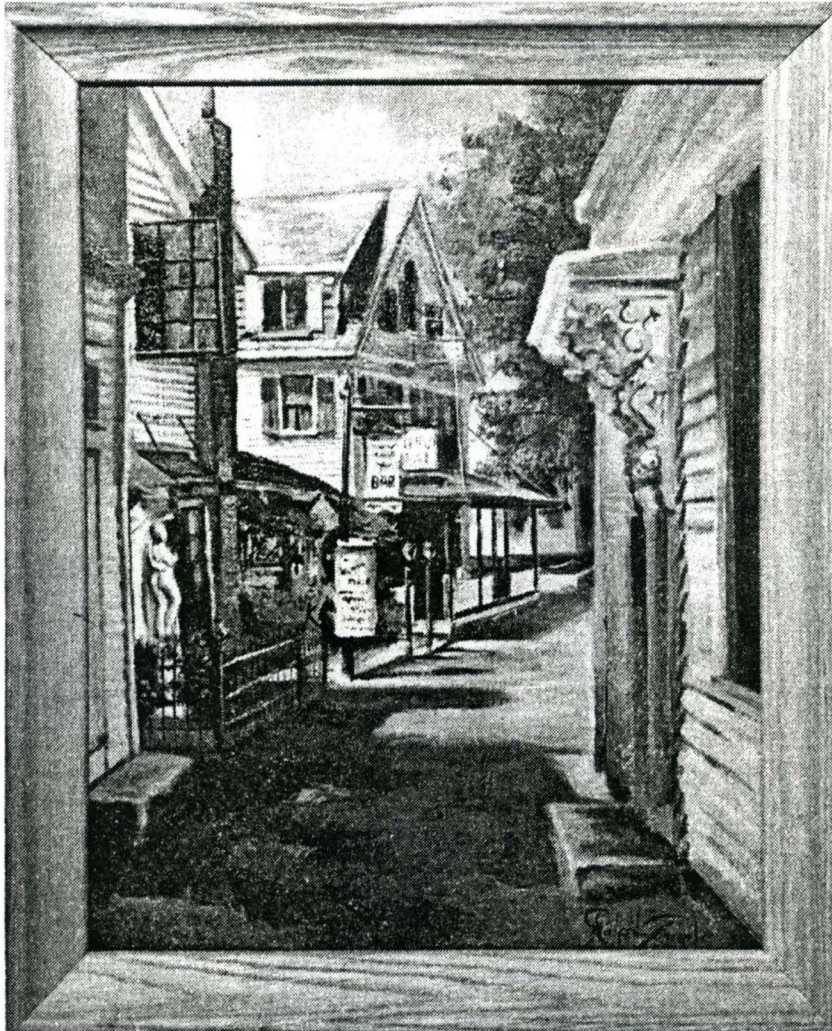
Reggie and Frank ran the business from 1950-1958, when Reggie bought out Frank Hurst and his sister Halcyone "Kathy" Hurst and ran it solo. The "A" House, as it came to be known, stepped into yet another plateau of its history. Eugene O'Neill is said to have written his play "Ile" in the Little Bar and in his room in the hotel. Old timers shared the tale of the frozen voyage of Captain Cook in search of whale oil, which rendered his wife Viola, insane,

playing the organ, singing hymns and driven mad by an unmoving, unchanging frozen tundra. When O'Neill heard the story he seized the moment and paper and pen and wrote *Ile* on the spot.

Tennessee Williams swept the floor for draught beers. *Pats of A Streetcar Named Desire* were also written here. As his career grew, he visited P'town often and stayed at

Cap'n Jack's Wharf and in the dunes. There are photographs recording this period of history on display in the Little Bar.

Reggie invited and succeeded in presenting so many of the greats of the music world in the 50's and 60's: Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Eartha Kitt, Gerry Mulligan, Gene Krupa; as well as Barbra Streisand, Jackie Kennedy and Liz Taylor, celebrities of later years. Victor Alexander, "Little Joe" Gevino and Anne Kane, Jr., tended bar through these famous days. DeKooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Larry Rivers drank and danced in the "Big Room," a place of great life and great



living. The "A" House distinguished itself again. Lil Holway, a great worker, kept everything clean, painted and in working order. I met Lil, Anne, Victor and Joe when I was a student. For two weeks, I thought Lil and Victor were the same person. They still look so much alike.

We lost Reggie, patron of the arts, two years ago. He made his mark in town and he is missed. I often think of him when I'm smoking a cigar. He loved them so much and once in a while would slip me a Havana. Daughter April Cabral Pitzner runs the Atlantic House now. This young woman has a demanding job, running a business with a long, illustrious history, following in daddy's footsteps and raising her two daughters.

Happy Birthday, Atlantic House!