

## Living On The Edge: Outermost Houses

Why would anyone want to live in isolation from their town on the edge of the ocean? The reasons are various.

Henry Beston, after living in solitude for a year on Nauset Inlet in Eastham, published *The Outermost House* in 1928. Beston was a naturalist and writer active within the Audubon Society, which inherited Beston's house and rented it until it passed into the sea in the Great Blizzard of 1978. The house was officially proclaimed a national literary landmark in 1964 by "a grateful citizenry". Endicott Peabody, Governor of Massachusetts and Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior officiated at the ceremony sponsored by the Massachusetts Audubon Society. The plaque they placed states that Beston "sought the great truth and found it in the nature of the man."

Henry Beston's reasons for living in isolation on the edge of the ocean were those of a philosopher, a naturalist and a writer. He travelled on foot and lived in solitude checking in with the Coast Guard at Nauset Station when in need of company.

What are commonly called "The Dune Shacks", are a scattered collection (to use an apt and contradictory phrase) of what the Outermost House, in its solitude, came to embody. Since the turn of the century, about 40 of these shacks—these "outermost houses"—were used by locals and visitors to Provincetown to escape the all too human bustle of the town. The shacks spread from Race Point to the Truro Line. Some of the shacks were abandoned Coast Guard shelters; most were built on the spot with driftwood and boat planking washed up from the sea. Some of them, such as Charlie Schmidt's, were more elaborate and used as year-round dwellings. Charlie's was three storied and surrounded by three swallow houses as he made an extensive study of this species and even delivered a paper in Switzerland where he met the famed Claude Lorenz.

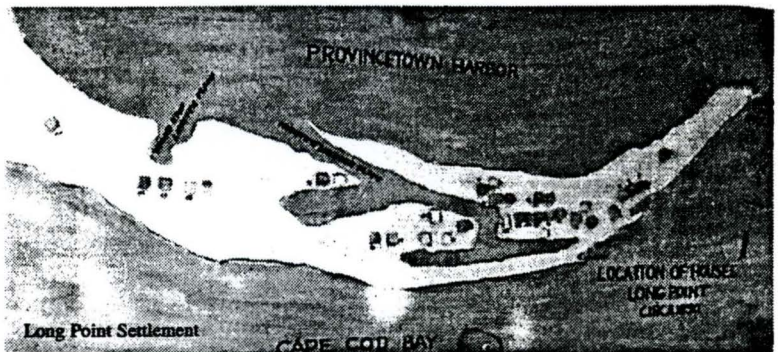
Most of the shacks are owned privately. Four belong to Peaked Hill Trust and one to the Provincetown Community Compact. The Compact's is C-Scape, a shack previously owned by the Cottens—hence, C-Scape. The four belonging to Peaked Hill Trust are Thalassa (which means from or pertaining to the sea), Euphoria, Zara (the name of Ray Well's sister) and the Gelb-Margo (or Boris' Shack). This cottage was owned by Jan Gelb and Boris Margo, wife and husband team of sculptor and painter who lived there for years. Hazel Hawthorne bought Thalassa from a local family for \$75 and she owned Euphoria too. She donated both to the Peaked Hills Trust. Zara and Boris donated their shacks also to protect their existence and to save them from being razed by the National Seashore. Boris would always give a gala bonfire party on the night of the August full moon. We have repeated that custom and hope we do again.

These shacks have a long history of artists and writers, musicians and thinkers as inhabitants, gleaning inspiration from the solitude and majesty of such a beautiful and isolated place. Eugene O'Neill is perhaps the most famous and was an influential bit of input when arguments to "save the shacks" were proposed

to the government. So many of us have spent wonderful days and nights in these tiny buildings, feeling freer in the absence of electricity and plumbing. Kerosene lamps and hand pumps seem to put the mind and spirit more at peace. Most of us walk to the shacks, down Snail Road and over the dunes. You can go by 4 wheel drive also—either by Art's Beach Taxi or your own, if you know the route. Years ago, Model A Fords were adapted to make the trip. Or, if you wish, you can go out on horseback. Nelson's Riding Stables has daily trail rides.

In the time before model As, horses and wagons were used to make the trek out to the shacks. Dot Alexander Paulman was telling me how her father, Warren, used to go over the dunes with a team of horses and wagon to fetch Eugene O'Neill when needed. Dot cared for the horses which were stabled in the West End in the area of Cape Colony Inn, 280 Bradford Street. Dot wanted "knickerbockers" in the worst way, thinking it was fitting for a horsewoman of 10 years old. Girls didn't wear pants in those days, but Aunt Mary Campbell donated a lavender suit to the cause. "Almost new!" Dot says, "and out of it came lavender knickers! Dot says she thought she was a "hot sh\_\_" sporting lavender britches while caring for the horses. She remembers thinking to herself, "Who is this O'Neill, anyway?"

The reasons for choosing to live in such isolation is varied. Pleasure, artistic endeavor, meditation, fishing, observations of



nature since birds, mammals, insects, snakes, stars, clouds, winds and the ocean itself are of endless interest. Inspiration is key in all these activities.

The third group of "outermost houses" was the settlement at Long Point. In the early 1800s there was a complete village, a subculture or mini-culture of Provincetown itself on the very tip of the Cape-Long Point. Fish were abundant within the reaches of the Point so fishing families who wanted to save time and travel built their homes on the Point and had a thriving village for over 40 years.

The first house, John Atwood's, was built in 1818. That house is now on Winthrop Street next to the parking lot. John Atwood also built a wharf on the north side of the point to service the fishing community. Long after the community disbanded, Cape Cod Oil Works continued to use the wharf.

Prince Freeman, Jr. built the second house and Eldridge Smith

the third and so on until there was a total of 38 dwellings. Long Point Light, originally called Stationary Light, was built in 1826, lit in 1827 and became the schoolhouse for three "scholars" in 1830. By 1846, they were up to 60 students and so built a



"Floated House" plaque

church which doubled as a school. (Think how that plan would save us on taxes today...)

Cod, white shad, mackerel and striped bass were abundant in these waters. Sweepseines, knitted by the women and fitted with floats on top and weights below were used to haul the large and splayed catches. One quote has 75 barrels of shad being hauled in a single catch. The fishermen got \$16 a barrel—a very good price for the time. Twenty boats at the time worked the area off Long Point. The fishing business was a very good business.

The people who lived in the Long Point community were also engaged in the salt industry. There were six windmills which pumped sea water into troughs for evaporation. The saltworks were also a good source of revenue until 1850 when large deposits of salt were found in Syracuse, New York and along the Great Lakes. Though sea salt is a superior product and healthier for you, land salt is cheaper to mine and abundant until completely dug.

Cyclical as nature is, the fish migrations began to vary and change at the same time that salt was discovered inland. Long Point was becoming a less advantageous location. So instead of transporting fresh water to the Point when the plank cisterns and cement cisterns were dry, the time had come to move the houses back to town. Deacon John Dyer who had married schoolmistress Hannah Sanborn, was a "mover of houses" as well as a preacher. Thus the migration of fishermen after the migration of fish began with Deacon Dyer overseeing the placement of houses on scows and floating them to their present addresses mostly in the area of the West End parking lot. This area is known as Gull Hill and has been made well-known by Ross Moffet's paintings of the area. The Art Association has an impressive collection of Moffets. Josephine Del Deo has written a definitive volume on Moffet's life and works. You can either buy it at the local bookstores or museums or use the library copy.

By 1861 the beginning of the civil war, only two dwellings were left. John Rosenthal was sent to the point with a company of soldiers under his command. Rosenthal and the other officers occupied the last remaining house and barracks were built for

the soldiers. Two forts were "constructed." Actually, they were and are the two mounds still visible today. At the time, they were called "Fort Useless" and "Fort Harmless". I have also heard "Fort Ridiculous" and "Fort Hopeless" through the years. There were used only once to display fireworks on July 4, 1865, by Rosenthal to celebrate the end of the civil war and to give the town folk a show.

So, a walk in the West End, noting a square enamel blue and white plaque, picturing a floating house complete with lighthouse, waves and gulls will let you know where those houses rest and function today. Check Winthrop Street and Winslow Street, too. And keep your eye sharp all over town. Claude Jensen of Anthony Street designed the plaque. There is a history of "the float" and a display set up at the Heritage Museum, complete with a map pointing out the floated houses and where they exist today.

The general method of transportation used to reach Long Point was and still is a boat. But you can also walk, either around the long way by Herring Cove Beach or walk across the breakwater. When you get there you will be at the very tip of Massachusetts and America, where Thoreau said "a man can stand here and put all America behind him." Women do it, too, Henry. You will see the two forts, an automated light house and a plaque to John Thomas Dunham, the first lightkeeper at Long Point who served from 1870-1882. He died of consumption while in office. The last lighthouse was built in 1875. His son, John A. Dunham was a whaling captain and ran the Dunham Guest House at 3 Dyer Street. He was captain of the Ellen A. Swift. Being ill on the eve of one voyage, John A.'s brother George took the Ellen A. Swift out. His wife and child accompanied him. A February storm hit and the ship was lost off Cape Hatteras. There was no report until April, circa 1914. The Dunham Guest House is now run by the great, great grandson of the original lightkeeper. The ship's clock, which had been taken off the Ellen A. Swift for repairs just prior to her final voyage, and a winecask from the ship still reside at the guesthouse.

Long Point Settlement's reasons for living in isolation on the edge of the ocean were practical and economic. Today the reasons for locationing one's self on Long Point are that it is a favorite spot for picnicing, boating, swimming and fishing for pleasure. We continue to seek those outermost places here on the tip of Cape Cod.

Claude Jensen

