

plaque identifies the historically significant buildings

Provincetown Past

The Long Point Settlement

by Jim Hildreth

(Provincetown) A complete village community once thrived at the very tip of Cape Cod at the area known as Long Point. Fish were extremely abundant in Provincetown Harbor and Cape Cod Bay during the early 1800s, and the proximity of Long Point to the rich fishing areas was enough incentive to cause Provincetown fishing families to pack-up their belongings and live on the sandy shoal.

The first house on Long Point was built during 1818 and was occupied by John Atwood in November of that year. Atwood was also responsible for building a wharf on the north side of "the Point" for the purpose of servicing the resident fishing community. The second and third houses were built and occupied by Prince Freeman, Jr. and Eldridge Smith, respectively. A colony of more than 200 people in 38 dwellings occupied Long Point during the following 30 to 40 years:

Cod, white shad, striped bass, and mackerel were abundant in local waters and profitable on the open market. One historian has documented the degree to which the waters were fished by the people of Long Point. "As many as seventy-five barrels of white shad have been brought ashore there at one haul," he wrote. The price for the catch was high by early-nineteenth century standards: \$16 for a barrel filled with 200 pounds of fish.

Long Point fishermen used sweep seines to haul in large catches. The settlement's women knitted the seines by hand and once in the water, the long fishnets hung vertically with floats at the top edge and weights at the bottom. More than

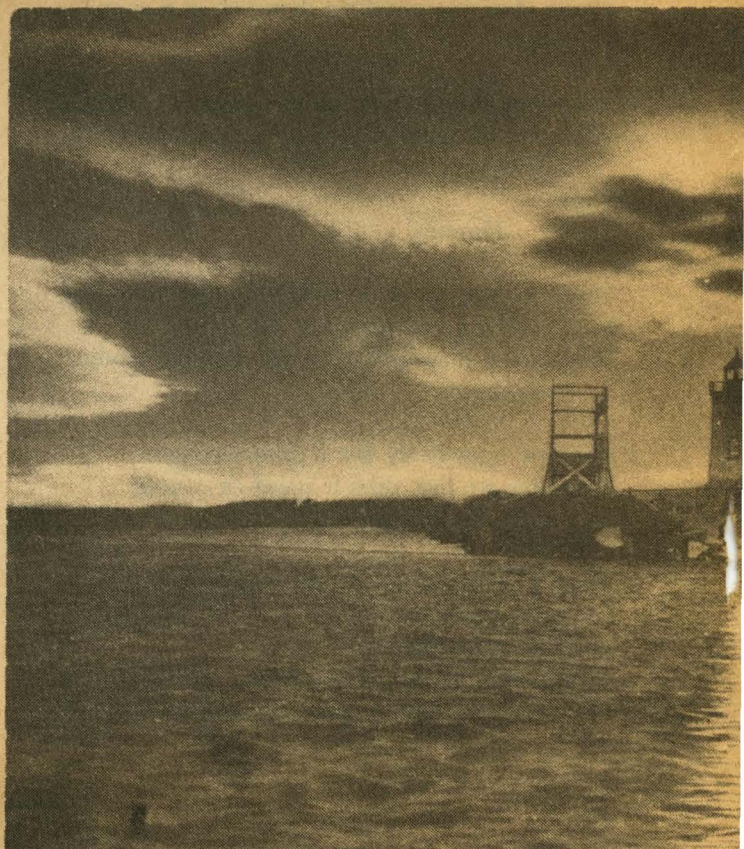
20 boats took part in cod fishing and each would haul from 40 to 60 "quintals" (a 100-weight) of fish per day during the height of the spring season.

Salt manufacturing was a second trade at the Long Point settlement. Eldridge Nickerson built the first complex of saltworks that consisted of 3000 square feet of troughs. Windmills were constructed to pump sea water into the evaporating troughs, and as many as six windmills dotted the landscape as the industry grew.

The annual output of the saltworks was approximately 600 "hogsheads" of high-quality salt. Readers not familiar with the hogshead measurement should note that a hogshead was a large cask with a normal capacity of 63 gallons, although large hogsheads held up to 140 gallons. The saltworks prospered for a time, but they proved unprofitable when less expensive salt deposits were discovered near Syracuse, New York.

The original Long Point Light, also known as Stationary Light, was built in 1826 and was illuminated for the first time in 1827. According to one author, "It was technically described as being on Long Point Shoal, inside Cape Cod, in Latitude 42 degrees, 2 minutes, 45 seconds North, and Longitude 70 degrees, 7 minutes, 45 seconds West." The lighthouse was described as standing 28 feet above sea level, and its beam could be seen 13 miles out to sea.

Fishing and the saltworks provided employment for the adult population on the Point, but the children needed education. The first schooling took place in Long Point Light during 1830. There were only three students attend-



Long Point of olde

ing school that first year, and they were taught by Hannah Sanborn who later married Deacon John Dyer. School enrollment later increased to 60 students, and a schoolhouse, which also served as a church, was erected in 1846.

Though the settlement at the Point prospered, life was by no means easy. Virtually all provisions had to be carted by wagon or floated by boat or barge to the settlement from Provincetown. Fresh water was collected in barrels and large, plank cisterns during storms. A few families poured cement cisterns to collect water, but during times of drought, all fresh water had to be shipped from Provincetown.

The year 1850 marked the beginning of the end for the Long Point settlement. The Syracuse salt deposits were discovered, and the fish slowly migrated to other regions. The longer journey to rich fishing grounds made living on Long Point less advantageous than when the fish were close to shore.

Deacon John Dyer, in addition to being married to the settlement's first school teacher, was a house mover. He was responsible for putting many of the Long Point houses on scows and floating them across the harbor to Provincetown. One by one the houses were rafted to the mainland; the majority to the West End of town, and by the start of the Civil War in 1861, only two houses and Long Point Light remained at the tip of the sand spit.

Blockade runners were active off the coast of Cape Cod during the Civil War. Military strategists decided that it would be in the North's best interest to build two forts

on Long Point at the entrance to Provincetown Harbor. A company of soldiers was stationed at Long Point under the command of John Rosenthal. The officers' headquarters was established in the final house that remained on Long Point, and the enlisted men were housed in barracks nearby.

It is amusing to note the words of one author/historian. "After seeing the forts," he wrote, "the citizens of Provincetown named the two earthen mounds Fort Useless and Fort Harmless." Following the end of the Civil War, Rosenthal obliged the residents of Provincetown by firing salvos from the fort's batteries during annual July 4 celebrations.

A new lighthouse tower was built on Long Point during 1875, and that tower was eventually replaced by the present automatic lighthouse and its accompanying foghorn. Long Point today is owned by the Cape Cod National Seashore. The area is a favorite place for boaters, fishermen, and picnickers to congregate.



one of the buildings floated from Long Point

Many of the houses that were floated from Long Point to the mainland of Provincetown remain standing. A concentration of them are located west of the Coast Guard station near the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (one of the floated houses) on Commercial Street in the West End of town. Each house is identified by a blue and white plaque that is nailed to the front of the building. The plaque shows a house on a raft floating on the water, and Long Point Light is on the upper left-hand corner of each plaque.

Information for this article was gathered from: *Here's Provincetown*, (Provincetown Historical Association, Inc.); *The Lighthouses of New England*, (Dodd, Mead and Company); *Provincetown*, (Peaked Hill Press), and from Provincetown residents. □