

THE MONUMENT

**THE
PROVINCETOWN
BOOK**

by
NANCY W. PAINE SMITH



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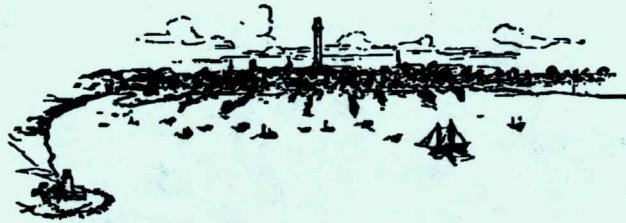
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How the Town Was Laid Out

HERE is the harbor broad and deep. At full tide, boats go to high-water-mark; at low water, the gently sloping shore is safe and easy. Here is the level sandy beach, circling the blue harbor, like the gold setting of a sapphire.

Up-along-the-shore and Down-along-the-shore the fathers made their homes. Few built on the hills. Who would live "Up-back?" They were squatters, with no title from the Indians and none from the Commonwealth. Their lots ran along the shore, and extended from the harbor to the ocean. When sons married, fathers gave them a place close by for building the new house; so that we became a series of neighborhoods. Way-up-along, on Gull Hill, were two brothers, Joshua Paine and Nathaniel Paine from Truro. There the soil was good, and "Nancy had the prettiest flower bed in town." At the foot of the hill were the houses of John and Arnold Small, also from Truro; their wives were sisters, and cousins to the Paines.

Next toward the east was Stephen Nickerson and his sons, and after Abraham Small and the Sopers, connected by marriage, came another Nickerson neighborhood, Seth Nickerson and his sons, Jonathan Nickerson and his sons, Thomas Nickerson and his sons. Stephen, Jonathan, Seth and Thomas were cousins.

Then the Lancy neighborhood, and the Freemans; Nathan, Phineas, Charles, Prince and Hatsuld. Then came a neighborhood where three Paine brothers married three Nickerson sisters; and two Paines, brothers to the first group, married two Nickerson sisters, who were cousins to the other girls. And yet there are persons in town who correctly trace their genealogy. Then Conants, Ryders, Atkinsons, Atwoods, Hills, Doanes, Hatches, Smalls, Collinse, Higginses, Cooks, oh, many Cooks, Riches, Bangses, Williamses, Bushes, Mayos, and others. Some names once numerous, are now gone.

Many of these old families had coats-of-arms. About 1830, a man named Cole traversed the Cape and furnished the aristocracy with these beautiful designs, at a good price. He knew something of heraldry, and what he did not know his artistic fancy supplied. Many of the coats-of-arms are decorated with corn-stalks, some of them display an American flag, most of them are valueless, except as they have been a treasured keepsake in a family for near a hundred years. Who would believe that scarcely fifty years after the Revolution, these old patriots would be buying coats-of-arms? They were the people who during that war, from a village of twenty-three families, gave twenty-eight

men to the American cause. But they bought the coats-of-arms, and we prize 'em. Not many people in town are eligible for the Revolutionary Societies. Since five hundred British ships were captured by American privateers, we can guess the reason why our names do not appear on the records.

The Street

At first there was no street. They carried their burdens in boats; they carried their dead on a bier. In 1829, the Provincetown minister, Mr. Stone, wrote to a friend, "Would you believe that there is a town in the United States, with eighteen hundred inhabitants, and only one horse, with one eye? Well, that town is Provincetown, and I am the only man in it that owns a horse, and he is an old white one with only one eye." A Provincetown boy, seeing a carriage driven along, wondered how she could steer so straight without any rudder. Shebnah Rich, in his *History of Truro*, says: "There was no road through the town. With no carts, carriages, wagons, horses or oxen, why a road? Every man had a path from his house to his boat or vessel, and once launched, he was on the broad highway of nations without tax or toll. There were paths to the neighbors, paths to school, paths to church; tortuous paths perhaps, but they were good pilots by night or day, by land or water. Besides, at low water there was a road such as none else could boast, washed completely twice a day from year to year, wide enough, and free enough, and long enough if followed, for the armies of the Netherland." This street led downward

to the sea and landward to the West.

Nevertheless, early deeds speak of the "Town Rode," and it seems that the present Front Street, laid out by the County Commissioners in 1835, must have followed a well-beaten track, the "Town Rode." Of course there was great opposition to such an innovation as a street. "We don't need it," "We can walk along shore as well as ever we did." "It will cost too much." It did cost \$1273.04 for land damages. "We don't want any street along our back door." The houses faced the water then; since then some of the houses have been turned around; some of them still have the front door on the shore side. One man, a doctor, who had not lived long in town, proposed that the street be made sixty-four feet wide, but they soon voted down such foolishness as that from foreigners. He tried to compromise on thirty-two feet, but twenty-two feet seemed wide enough for all possible purposes, and twenty-two feet wide it is. The greatest difficulty arose when the County Commissioners, "supervised by a committee of three representing the town," took land. When they reached Lancy's Corner, Mr. Lancy came out and said: "Whoever saws through my salt-works, saws through my body." And Joshua Paine replied, "Where's a saw?" Nevertheless, the road went round the Lancy property and makes the two bad turns now so dangerous.

The Sidewalk

No sooner was the street laid out than extravagant souls began to talk of a sidewalk. The time was auspicious because the town had some easy money to

spend. This was during Jackson's administration when the Government had its debt paid and had in the national treasury \$40,000,000 surplus revenue. This surplus was divided among the States, and by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was sub-divided among her towns. With this money the town paid its debt, and appropriated something for schools. The remainder, the conservatives wanted to put out at interest, and the progressives wanted to use to build a plank sidewalk. Debate in town meeting lasted a week. When it was apparent how close the vote would be, some one challenged Mr. Abraham Chapman (a sidewalk man) as not an American citizen. Full of indignation, Mr. Chapman demanded to know what was meant by such a word as that, and it was explained to him that his folks were Tories during the Revolutionary War; that they had gone from town to Nova Scotia, where he was born; that he was six months old when he came to the United States, that therefore he was not an American citizen and not entitled to vote. But Mr. Chapman's vote was admitted and when at last the votes were counted there were one hundred and forty-nine ayes and one hundred and forty-eight nays, and the sidewalk was built in 1838. Neither the town records nor the records of the Commonwealth tell what Provincetown's share of this surplus was, but tradition affirms that we received \$6000. So incensed were some of the fathers at the use of the surplus revenue, that they refused ever to walk on the sidewalk and they continued all their lives to plough through the sand. Those who were young then

remembered to their dying days how springing and delightful was the new plank sidewalk. They do say that Cape Cod girls know the trick of walking in the sand without filling their shoes. Try this, ye off-islanders. Lift your feet high, toe in a bit, and put your feet down flat.

The King's Highway

The present main street through the town is "the Terminal of the King's Highway," laid out in 1717-20 "to connect to and through the Province Lands." From Eastham it passed around the ponds in the Wellfleet woods, came down through Truro woods near the ocean to the vicinity of the head of Pamet River by the present Coast Guard Station, continuing northward still through the woods along by the Lodge at the Highlands, on by Ocean Farm, passing about two hundred yards west of the Highland Coast Guard Station, along to the head of Eastern Harbor meadows, across the sand dunes to the harbor, (probably over Snail Road,) "to and through the Province Lands," whose eastern boundary is the Eastern schoolhouse. The present highway over Beach Point was laid out at a later date, about 1850.

The bridge across East Harbor was built in 1854. It was destroyed by the ice a couple of years later, and rebuilt. Before the building of the bridge, all travel up the Cape went across those drifting sand hills to the north and east of the dyke; hills which whaling captains say look exactly like the Desert of Sahara. They remind others of the snow-clad hills of Labrador. Bradford street was laid out in 1873.

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The Town Landings

The streets running off Commercial Street are continuations of the town landings. These public landings are all along the shore, open for any one to moor his boat or unload his fish. One is at the foot of West Vine Street; one at the foot of Franklin Street; one at the end of Good Templar Street, which is the continuation of an alley running into Pleasant Street. One is across the front street from Atlantic Avenue. One is at the west side of the Excelsior engine house; one west of the Post Office; one at Hilliard's wharf opposite Freeman Street; one at the foot of Pearl Street. The streets opposite the landings are the old paths that led to the fish-flakes, to the salt-works, to the Backside. All these streets converge into four well-marked old roads. They are sandy roads and hard to travel (except the State Highway), but they skirt the beautiful ponds, cross the dunes and lead to the ocean. One is the Race Road, at the west end; one is the Atkins Mayo Road, laid out in 1803, not far from the Eastern schoolhouse; one is Snail Road, west of Mayflower Heights; one is the Nigger Head Road, now the State Highway, running out just east of Johnson Street, smooth and easy for walking or for automobiles.

It was hard to protect those old roads from the sinking sand beneath them and the shifting sand beside them. They were hardened with turf cut from the hills, and covered with clay, with brush, with shells, with chips, with old nets, with coal ashes and cinders,

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but nothing was sufficient to make a permanent and hard road till the modern macadam was used. One would suppose that even this would be cut by the heavy auto-trucks, but on the contrary, the roads down the Cape are considered among the best in the State.

Indefinite Bounds

When the town was set off as a Precinct, the bounds between Truro and the Province Lands were determined by representatives from the General Court. These bounds were fixed by marked trees, "running from the jaw-bone of a whale set in the ground near a red oak stump and running to a red cedar post set in a sand hill, to the North Sea." The directions are fixed by compass, but no distances are given. Many old deeds describe land as running from somebody's flake-yard to the salt-works of somebody else. Here is an instance of a careless bound. George Adams kept a shop which stood and still stands on the shore. Trade was good as long as travel was along shore, but when the street was laid out and people walked on the sidewalk, his trade suffered. He asked the town to lay out a road from the street to his shop. This the town refused to do. Then he applied to the county to lay out a county road for his use and that of his customers. The county did this, and the work of the county commissioners is recorded in the Barnstable Records, Book 2, page 129, as follows: "Commencing at a point on the county road running through Provincetown, five and a half feet westward of the dwelling house

occupied by Nathan Freeman, at a Notch cut in a board fence, and thence running south forty-eight degrees and thirty minutes east by compass about one hundred and thirty-three and a half feet to the west corner of an outbuilding or necessary belonging to the said George M. Adams, and sitting on the northwest corner of his land. The foregoing described line constitutes the north-easterly side of the way now laid out, and the south-westerly side is to be nine feet from this line in all places."

The Wharves

About the time the street and sidewalk were built, wharves began to appear along the shore. The first wharf was built opposite Masonic Hall by Mr. Thomas Lothrop. His neighbors predicted that the tide would cut away the sand from the piles, and the wharf would fall. They might have recalled how hopeless is a vessel caught on a bar. The sea rots the piles, sometimes the ice breaks them, but the sand holds them. The Union Wharf was built in 1831, by Jonathan, Stephen and Thomas Nickerson and Samuel Soper. Then followed thirty wharves in twenty years. The schoolhouses were built soon after, and the churches.

Prosperous Times

Business of all kinds flourished, till Provincetown was reckoned the richest town per capita in Massachusetts. Judge Henry D. Scudder in his oration at the first anniversary of the Cape Cod Association in

1851, said: "Provincetown, the Sahara of Cape Cod, where all the freehold property which nature ever gave her, if bid off at public sale, would hardly satisfy the auctioneer. Provincetown, in proportion to her population, is not only the wealthiest town upon the Cape, but in personal estate is, I think, the richest town in all the Commonwealth."

Most of the houses were story-and-a-half-houses, an architecture characteristic of Cape Cod and harmonious with the setting. They were set twenty feet back from the sidewalk, with a little lawn in front. They have been razed for more pretentious dwellings; they have been modernized; they have been extended to the sidewalk, but these changes have rarely been improvements.



Interesting Things about

were stores of all kinds. A lighthouse was built in 1849. But these good times did not last. The harbor began to fill up and vessels increased in size, while attempts to get money for the protection of the anchorage failed. The shipping had to move away and with it went the shore industries that had been built up to serve it. The lighthouse was abandoned in 1855. Pamet Harbor, a hundred years ago the scene of such wholesome activity, is now deserted.

In those good days many vessels, although no large ones, were built in Truro, largely from timber cut on the hills of the town. Most or all of these were locally owned, and one record shows that during the twenty-five years between 1840 and 1865, one hundred and eleven vessels were owned in Truro, were skippered by Truro men and manned with Truro crews. They included whalers, Grand Bankers, coasters, packets, and fishermen in general. Fish are still brought ashore to the "freezer" in North Truro, although this is but a poor travesty of the industry of the flush days.

TOWN LINES. During these years Provincetown had grown in area at the expense of Truro. The original line ran, as has been said, near to the site of the Eastern schoolhouse in the former town and people living east of this were, legally, in Truro. To put these folk into the town to which they really belonged, the line was thrice moved to the eastward, first in 1813, again in 1829, and lastly in 1836, to the point where it now is. All these additions to the territory of Provincetown were and are east of the Province Lands, so the town within this area extends from "sea to sea"; in fact the town lots originally sold east of the schoolhouse ran completely across the Cape, from the harbor to the ocean.

THE FRONT STREET. Up to the 1830's Provincetown was unique in having no main longitudinal street. The houses were grouped along the harbor shore facing the water, and on numerous cross streets running from the hilly back-country to the landings. The beach was the highway and had been since the town began. One or two old houses still stand looking off across the harbor, just as they stood when in 1835 the people decided, after heated debate, to build a street through the village as a continuation of the county road from up-cape. This is now Commercial or, as the older folk called it, Front Street. The house at No. 157, where this is being written, is about the best remaining example of the old beach-facing dwellings.



two Interesting Places



The streets were merely roads through loose sand. Some sketches of the time show people as cut off at the ankles, the idea being that their feet were buried out of sight as they walked. The building of the town street



Provincetown—1840—from an old print

caused much controversy among the inhabitants and, in 1838, this was renewed and accentuated when it was proposed to lay a plank sidewalk as well. After much argument this was done, but it is said that some of those who protested against it never set foot on the planks. They preferred to plow through loose sand rather than acknowledge the sidewalk was of any use!

THE SALT WORKS. The War of 1812, when British warships again dominated Provincetown Harbor and Truro shores, gave the towns a serious setback, as had the Revolution. They both survived, however, and at the Peace went on to renewed and greater prosperity. About this time too they added another industry to their fishing and whaling and farming — salt making. Captain John Sears of Dennis seems to have

of which the county contributed two thousand, was constructed. The bridge, however, was destroyed by ice in 1856 and was rebuilt in 1867. Twenty years afterward the bridge was discontinued and a solid road-bed was constructed across the channel.

In the meantime the railroad displaced the stage, for in 1873 the extension of the Cape Cod railroad from Wollfleet afforded Provincetown the long coveted rapid transit by land. The town contributed largely to the attainment of the railway by subscribing \$98,300 toward the stock issued for the extension, and received in return 727 shares of the capital stock of the Old Colony Railroad Company, which were sold from time to time for \$72,696.25. The railroad was opened for traffic July 22, 1873, and has proved, as had been anticipated, an important factor in contributing to the prosperity of the town. Very soon after the opening of the railroad President Grant, August 28, 1874, visited Provincetown, receiving an enthusiastic welcome from the people. With the exception of a brief visit from ex-President Cleveland in 1889, Provincetown has not been honored by the presence within her borders of other presidents of the United States.

In 1873 Bradford street was completed and opened to public travel, a great public improvement, rendered necessary by the continued growth of the town, its execution hastened by the opening of the railroad. The town had taken steps toward the survey early in 1869, and expended, before 1873, for land damages and for the construction of the road bed nearly twenty-nine thousand dollars.

TOWN OFFICERS.—The representatives from Provincetown prior to 1857, with date of first election and number of years' service (when more than one), were: 1810, Joseph Atkins, 2 years; 1811, Samuel Cook; 1812, Simeon Conant; 1813, Daniel Pease, 2; 1826, Thomas Ryder; 1827, David Ryder; 1828, Isaac Small, 6; 1833, Elisha Young; 1834, John Atkins, 7, and Enos Nickerson, 3; 1835, William Gallica; 1836, Godfrey Ryder and Joshua Cook; 1837, David Ryder, jr., 2; 1839, David Cook, 2d; 1841, Stephen A. Paine, 2; 1843, Thomas Lothrop; 1844, John Dunlap; 1845, James Gifford, 2; 1846, Stephen Hilliard, 2; 1850, Joseph P. Johnson, 5; 1852, Henry Paine; 1863, Elisha Tilson; 1866, Nathaniel E. Atwood.

The selectmen have been: 1747, John Conant, 6 years, and Thomas Newcomb; 1748, Elisha Mayo, 2, and Caleb Conant, 6; 1749, Jonathan Nickerson, 2; 1751, Solomon Cook, 2; 1753, Thomas Kilburn, 12; 1756, Ebenezer Nickerson, 3; 1757, Samuel Smith, 7; 1758, Joshua Atwood, 2; 1760, Gershom Ryder; 1762, Benjamin Ellis; 1763, Seth Nickerson, 3, and Samuel Cook, 11; 1767, Solomon Cook, 16; 1768, Thomas Ryder, 4, and Samuel Atwood, 5; 1769, Phineas Nickerson, 2; 1770, Nehemiah Nickerson, 7; 1772, Stephen Atwood, 8; 1775, Seth Nickerson, jr., 7; 1782, Stephen Nickerson, 3, and Edward Cook, 2; 1784, Reuben Orcutt,

Cook, Ebenezer Cook and others were incorporated as the Eastern Marine Railway, to construct a railway from the wharf of E. and E. K. Cook. The Eastern Marine Railway was discontinued in the winter of 1874-75.

As the population increased and the business interests of the town developed, a need arose for more rapid means of communication than were afforded by the old time packet and the lumbering stage coach. In 1842 and 1848 the steamer *Express* ran between Boston and Provincetown by way of Plymouth. In 1849, 1850 and 1851 the *Naushon*, commanded in turn by Captain Upham Grozier, Henry Paine and Nathan Nicholson of Wellfleet, made trips to Provincetown, Wellfleet, and in summer to Dennis. From 1857 to 1861 the *Acorn*, Captain Gibbs of Hyannis, and afterward Captain Richard Stevens of Provincetown, made regular trips between Boston and Provincetown. The *Acorn* was followed by the *George Shattuck*, built in 1862, commanded by Captain Gamaliel B. Smith, S. T. Kilbourne, mate, and N. Porter Holmes, clerk. The *Shattuck* ran on the route until 1874, when the *United States* ran for one season, and was succeeded by the *Acushnet* in 1875 for two seasons. In 1883, the *Longfellow*, Captain John Smith, was built expressly for the route, and still remains in service, affording a fast, safe and convenient means of communication between Provincetown and Boston. In 1849, Bowly's wharf, erected in 1849, was extended to the deep waters of the harbor for the accommodation of the *Shattuck* and became the steamboat wharf of the town.

At a meeting of the proprietors of Truro April 26, 1715, a vote was passed to apply to the court of quarter sessions for the County of Barnstable for a highway to be laid out from Eastham to Truro and through Truro down to and through the province lands upon Cape Cod. It is not probable, however, that at this early date any attempt was made to lay out a definite highway across the sand banks to the north of Eastern Harbor meadows from Truro to Provincetown, along which for many years travelers between the two towns were forced to pass, in winter, a bleak, dreary way; in summer hot and dusty. As late as 1798 the town voted "to petition to have a post to come down to the Cape," an indication, perhaps, that the roads were at that time but little used for public travel. In 1836 a county road from George Lewis' residence to Laney's corner was laid out twenty-two feet in width, at a cost of \$1,273.04 for land damages. Before the establishing of the county road the shore had been for many years a frequently used way, and in many places the only means of communication. April 12, 1854, an act of the legislature authorized the commissioners of Barnstable county to construct a bridge over East harbor at Beach point, and a bridge costing nine thousand dollars,