

Fishing Is Provincetown's History

Provincetown had a tradition of fishing long before it ever had a history. Prior to 1600, European fishermen from England, Brittany, and the Bay of Biscay anchored here, drawn to the deep, protected harbor and its teeming schools of cod and bass. Their trail is difficult to trace, as any journey over water, but their legacy survived into the early 1700's as their descendants continued to drop anchor here — fishermen, who traded rum to the Indians for corn and venison, as well as various smugglers, Portuguese whalers, and French privateers — a disorderly lot indeed whose behavior must have scandalized the staid British settlers.

Fishing rights were leased out by the colony, and in 1670, the profits of these went toward the support of a free school in Plymouth. In 1714, in an apparent effort to tame the notorious community, the area which is now Provincetown was placed under the jurisdiction of neighboring Dangerfield (now Truro) and all visiting seamen of whatever nationality were assessed 4 shillings a week during their stay on shore.

The early settlers themselves proved poor fishermen at first, and showed more interest in farming. But gradually, as more land was cleared and the soil deteriorated along the Cape, the colonists took an interest in fishing. The growing Cape fleet, concentrated at Harwich, Chatham, and Eastham, soon developed a profitable trade route between the Grand Banks, where cod was caught and dried along shore, and the West Indies, where the salt fish was traded for rum and molasses. At this time, almost all of the market for Cape fish was abroad, with 60% of the catch going to the West Indies, and the remaining 40% to Europe.

There were also the so-called "boat fishermen" working close to shore, who supplied fresh fish to the home markets. These were often farmer-fishermen who operated on a near subsistence level, combining opportunity and enterprise.

Revolution and Recovery

The Revolution disrupted things completely. With large numbers of Cape men away to fight, an embargo lowered against foreign trade, and the British fleet anchored off Provincetown Harbor, fishing boats sat idle. After the war, the new government was eager to help rebuild the fishing industry. In 1789, Congress voted a

bounty of 5 cents per hundred weight (dried) on all cod exports. A year later this was doubled. These bounties were intended to help the fishermen offset the cost of a government-imposed duty on salt, huge amounts of which were essential for preserving their catch.

Recovery was quick. With less capital available after war losses, the rebuilt fleet had to rely on smaller boats, which in turn made shorter voyages necessary. Fishing off the coast of Labrador and Newfoundland, it was often easier to bring the catch straight home for curing than to dry it there. This fashion for home-cured fish helped push Provincetown to the forefront: we had plenty of beaches for drying and a harbor which could shelter even the smallest boats through any weather. By 1790, Provincetown could boast 20 vessels which sailed from here to the Grand Banks and Labrador. By 1802, there were 33 such vessels.

These went out after cod, of which they caught and dried over 1650 tons each year. From October to December, when the cod fishing was off, they shipped over 5,000 barrels of herring, at about \$4 a barrel. In the spring, when the fleet set out for the banks, boat fishermen caught local mackerel; about 300 barrels of pickled mackerel left the port in season. Boat fishermen also seined for bass and herring, while five vessels steadily hauled lobsters from Long Point to New York throughout the year.

Expanding Shore Industries

Shore industries grew along with the fishing, providing the beginnings of a stable local economy. During this period, the early 19th Century, 225 men and boys from Provincetown, along with 75 from nearby towns, were employed on shore in industries related to fishing. There were 10 saltworks in town, which together distilled over 8,000 hogsheads of salt each year, all of it used locally to preserve cod and mackerel. There were five buildings for smoking herring and 90 buildings altogether for storing fish. Most provisions came from

Boston, which also provided the largest market for Provincetown fish. The population increased from 812 in 1800, to 946 by 1802. By 1840, the settlement would grow to become the largest fishing port on the Cape.

During the War of 1812, Provincetown was again occupied by the British, and commerce to Boston was this time crippled. Another blow to the industry came as a result of the Convention of 1818 which severely limited American access to Canadian waters. Several boats which did attempt to fish there, disregarding the ban, were captured and confiscated by the British.

Changing Conditions

As Canadian fishing became more difficult, interest grew in Georges Bank. Known to be rich with cod and halibut, the Georges was also feared, almost superstitiously, for its dangerous tide rips and unpredictable currents. To anchor there was believed impossible and nobody had ever tried it before 1820, when a Gloucester skipper finally took the dare and succeeded. He returned home with a record catch, and a new era was begun. This new source of wealth was closest to Provincetown, only a day's sail away, which meant quick voyages and quick profits for the local fleet.

In the 1830's and '40's, Provincetown boomed with Grand Bankers, Georges Bankers, mackerel fishermen, and boat fishermen. The cod fleet alone comprised 100 vessels, schooners of 90 tons and more. At this time mackerel fishing also began to gain importance. While Provincetown had only a small mackerel fleet of its own, it served from August through November as the meeting place for the entire East Coast mackerel fishery. This fleet followed the fish from the Virginia coast to Nova Scotia every year, marketing its catch at ports along the route.

Once more, shore industries associated with fishing flourished. Upwards of 50 wharves, and numerous packing houses, salt works, fish flakes, riggers' yards, and ship chandlers crowded the beach. There were at least three canneries in operation over the years, mostly canning alewives. In 1835 there were 78 solar salt works in operation. (These were dismantled after 1842, when the salt duty was reduced.)

Among shore establishments, the most

This article was compiled from Provincetown Selectman George Bryant's slide presentation at the first workshop, and from written reports of the period. Edited by Cynthia Huntington.

M. FOREST, FISH COORD.



The salt codfish operation of Philip A. Whorf around the turn of the century (photo courtesy of John Bell collection).

important were probably the outfitters, who furnished supplies and provisions, often extending credit to families when the fleet was out on a long trip. Many outfitters owned shares in the vessels, and sometimes they served as unofficial bankers, lending and taking deposits for interest. Nearly every taxpayer had a heavy interest in some aspect of fishing. Many owned shares in vessels, or had small boats of their own, while many vessel owners owned saltworks or packing houses.

By 1845, Provincetown was bringing in over one third of the total cod caught off the Cape, or some 1000 tons a year. Ten years later, Provincetown would account for almost twice the total of all other Cape towns, with an annual catch of almost 4000 tons.

During this period, the population of Provincetown was undergoing a steady increase. The descendents of original colonists and later settlers, mainly of British descent, were joined by an influx of Portuguese, many from the Western Islands, or Azores, and by a large number

of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia Scots. The Portuguese had been whalers and fishermen for centuries, and Portuguese sailors were picked up from their island homes by Cape vessels during long voyages to replenish the crews. Cod fleets filled out their crews in the same way, thus contributing to the influx from Nova Scotia. Both these groups had a long tradition of fishing and quickly became an integral part of the fishing industry here. By 1876, of the existing Grand Banks captains, six were native-born, nine Portuguese, and 33 were from Nova Scotia.

The Squeeze on Capital

The Civil War devastated the fishing industry and many ports never recovered. After the war, capital was harder to come by, profits smaller, and so fishing settled more and more into the hands of big business. This meant larger vessels and bigger fleets; these in their turn demanded excellent harbor facilities. Locally, fishing became centered at Gloucester, Boston, and Provincetown.

One thing that helped Provincetown hold out for as long as it did was a special boat developed here for the tricky waters of Georges Bank. This was a fast, long-spurred schooner which could not only negotiate the treacherous currents of the Georges, but was also able to skim quickly across the bay to Boston, where fresh fish were bringing the highest prices. We also still had an active mackerel fishery and Grand Banks fleet well into the 1890's.

But economics were dictating the end of deep-sea fishing on a small scale and it was no longer possible for a person to make money with only one or two vessels. In 30 years, the population of the Cape shrunk from 36,000 to 27,000, resulting in a decline of capital available to finance operations, even in a port such as Provincetown.

Also, the methods of fishing had changed. The cod-fishery had turned to setting trawls rather than fishing off the sides of the schooners. This was a more dangerous and physically more difficult

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Fishing History

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task, but it brought in more fish quickly. The mackerel fleets had almost abandoned hook-and-line fishing for the big purse-seines, which were also more efficient, and heavier. Where once boys had gone to sea with their fathers and uncles, and learned their art by working alongside them, these new methods demanded a man's strength. The work was too heavy for boys, and so the youths of the Cape towns began to look elsewhere for their employment.

Trap-fishing, which began in the mid-1800's here, helped the town to hold its own as the offshore fleet collapsed. In 1887, for example, Gloucester landed 50,000 tons of fish, while Provincetown landed only 15,000. But in 1935, Provincetown still held at 15,000, while Gloucester's catch was halved to 25,000.

The first cold storage plants were built here after 1892. At first they were only intended for storing herring as bait, but within 5 years they were being used for food fish as well. The presence of the storage facilities, as well as the upsurge in trap-fishing, helped a great deal to stabilize the diminishing fishing industry into this century.

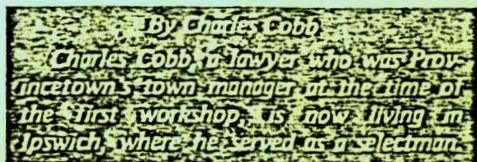
It would be difficult to find another town so totally dependent throughout its history on fishing as Provincetown has been. No farming or manufacturing of importance has ever taken place here, and tourism is still a relatively new phenomena. The state valuation of 1831 showed this dependence clearly: while the other 12 Cape towns together had 6,745 acres in crops, 2,079 in hay, 39,010 in pasture, and 70,745 in commercial woodlands, Provincetown had less than a fraction of an acre in any of these.

Exports Key

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done to influence the growth of transfer income, since it's all from outside, but that's not true. The age group most affected by transfer payments from retirement and social security is growing. For this community to make itself attractive to that age group could mean substantial growth. One problem is the overall quality of life here in winter, which may make this community less attractive than it has been. This group may also be influenced by multi-unit availability: the choice of having

Town Share Of Profits Small



Growth in a local economy depends upon "exports" — something the community has to offer which brings in money from outside. Provincetown has a true export in fish. By stretching the point, retail goods sold to people from out of town, plus meals eaten by visitors, room rates, etc., could be called export.

In an export economy, where goods are produced, there should be a multiplier effect as revenues are reinvested in the local economy, paid out in salaries, or used to purchase goods and services locally. Unfortunately, in Provincetown a relatively high proportion of what is generated through export goes out of town to purchase the goods which are sold. (Fishing is the obvious exception to that.) The town has to import almost everything consumed here, and most of what is sold to tourists. This limits growth within the economy as surely as any geographical limitation, the presence of the Seashore, or any regulations set on development.

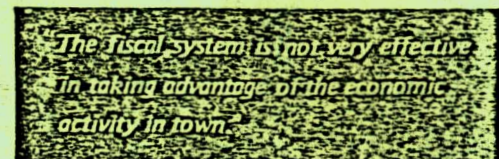
Nevertheless, between 1972 and 1977, the number of retail shops in Provincetown increased by 18%. Retail sales themselves were up 23%, even allowing for inflation.

How can this growth be used to expand the economy as a whole? There are investment opportunities of course, such as in construction; I'm not sure how much opportunity there is for expansion in that area. Industry makes up less than 1% of our local economy. The town government is probably the largest employer, and has the largest complex of facilities and equipment. One might hope that some of the growth in sales would be reflected in increased investment in the public sector.

But during the time in which overall a home you don't necessarily maintain yourself.

These are the three biggest components shaping the growth of our tourist economy. In each case, there are things the town could do to influence further growth. A man named Russell Athoff said: "We spend too much time predicting the future and not enough time making it." And that's what I want to emphasize, the importance of making the future.

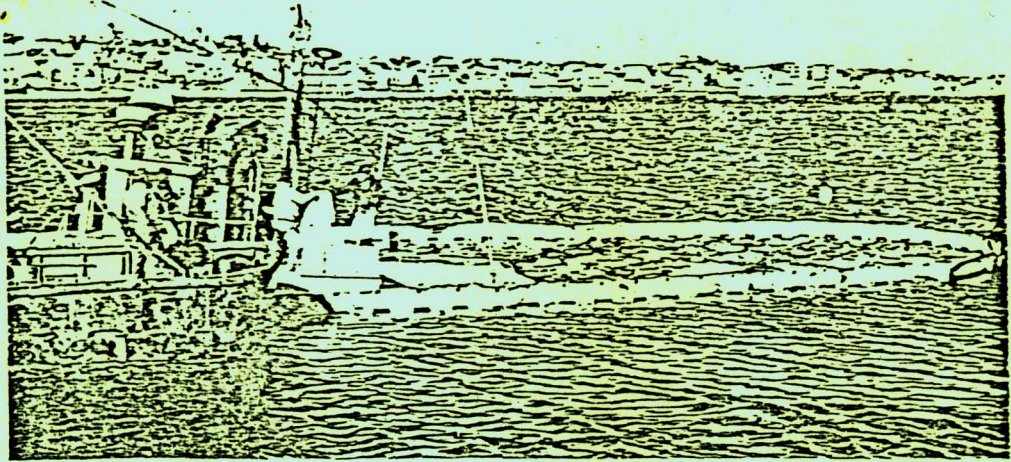
sales were increasing 23 percent, the tax rate increased only 2½ percent, this also adjusted for inflation. This would seem to suggest that the fiscal system is not very effective in taking advantage of all the economic activity in town. The property tax, which is the principal source of local revenue, is not effective in translating increases in economic activity into taxable value. Despite allegations of a spiralling tax rate, the rate only increased 2½ percent in constant dollars between 1972-77, and has risen less than .2 percent since. In fact, the total valuation of the town has not increased, officially at least, in several years. (If the total valuation of town property did reflect these increases in economic activity, the tax rate would have remained constant, or even declined.)



We levied a little over \$3 million in property taxes last year, spread out over about \$60 million in assessed value of taxable property, which probably reflects not more than half of its real value. So we should consider the total value of the town's tax base at about \$120 million or more. The largest component of that is single family residential property, at about 35%. The next largest is commercial property at 18%. Here we see why commercial activity has such a small effect on tax resources. Much of that commercial property is earning revenue only on a seasonal basis, of course, but that doesn't mean it's not earning a lot at those times. This is another indication of the weakness of our tax base.

A proposal was made this year before the state legislature which would allow cities and towns to retain a sales tax of 1% on transactions within the community. This is one way of trapping some of the money which right now comes into town and goes right out again.

As long as we are limited to the property tax as our sole source of revenue, we will be limited by its defects. It is a conspicuous and therefore painful tax. It is perhaps time to think about something less conspicuous, more equitable in terms of our economy, and which could serve us better as an aid, not a substitute, for the property tax.



The raising of the Blue Surf, a New Bedford-based fishing vessel which sank in Provincetown Harbor February 8, included the use of an oil-spill containment boom and absorbent pads. Minor spills such as occurred in this incident are common to the Cape, and are a primary focus of the county's Cape Cod Coastal Oil Spill Response Plan. These spills are potentially hazardous to coastal shellfish and marshland resources (photo by Susan Seligson, Provincetown Advocate).

Harbor Not Up for Grabs

With the persistence of Hamlet's ghost, harbor abutters and developers have claimed that Provincetown bylaws and regulations do not apply to Provincetown Harbor. The claim is based on the undisputed fact that the land beneath the harbor is owned by the State. It seemed peculiar, though, that state property would be exempt from local bylaws and regulations. One-fourth of the landward portion of the town, after all, is also owned by the state: Route 6. Was

that also exempt? And in every other community!

The answer is no. According to the State Division of Waterways, and notwithstanding anything contained in the state statutes, Provincetown not only can regulate state land - including the harbor - it is required to. It is responsible.

John Zajac of the Division of Waterways says the state cannot issue licenses for harbor activity without an order of conditions from the Conservation Commission. And, by law, the Conservation Commission cannot issue that order until a local building permit has been applied for.

The only thing that distinguishes Provincetown Harbor from the rest of the Massachusetts coastline from Rhode Island to New Hampshire is that, from Howland Street west, State ownership begins at mean high tide rather than extreme low. Otherwise, the town has the same responsibilities and jurisdictions as any other coastal community - each of which must regulate state-owned land.

Coastal Courses

The Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies is offering a five-week, 40-hour course in Coastal Marine Ecology from June 30 to August 1, 1981. Using classroom meetings and field trips, the course is an interdisciplinary study of coastal ecosystems and processes.

The Center has also planned a series of nine coastal environment field trips for August. For information, write: Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies, Box 826, or call 487-3622.

Pesticides:

Officials from the towns of Wellfleet and Provincetown and from the National Seashore are predicting only minor, localized outbreaks of gypsy moth, tent caterpillar and brown tail moth this year and are planning, at the most, spot treatment where outbreaks may occur.

Such treatments include removal of egg masses, clipping of nests and spot spraying of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (BT), a bacterial disease of caterpillars which is environmentally safe. Use of ecologically harmful toxic materials such as Sevin, malathion and methoxychlor can thus be avoided.

While many areas of the Northeast are expecting devastating effects from the gypsy moth epidemic that has been building for the past several years, the outer Cape may be spared the worst.

The exception, according to Truro's Pest Control Superintendent Arthur Joseph, is Truro. Joseph predicts "a buggy year, with good infestations of gypsy moth, tent caterpillar and brown tail moth, and it'll be worse next year." Joseph again plans a vigorous spraying program. Although he says he has not yet decided which pesticides he will use this year, Joseph does say he has used such toxic chemicals as Sevin, malathion and methoxychlor in the past.

Truro has the largest budget of the three outer Cape towns for pest control. Last

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