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Provincetown Bicentennial Commission
Provincetown, Massachusetts 02657
August 1, 1975

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Rear Admiral J. P. Stewart
Commander, First Coast Guard District
150 Causeway Street
Boston, Mass.

IMPORTANT
REGARDING
TRAP FISHING AND
FISHING INDUSTRY
HISTORY +

Dear Admiral Stewart:

This commission would like to go on record as strongly endorsing the development of a trap fishing museum on part of the property at 125 - 129 Commercial St., Provincetown, known as the Atlantic Coast Fisheries and also the Cape Cod Cold Storage. The local Historic District Study Commission's proposal to you for such a museum is a well known fact and is continuing to receive publicity from the local to national level. We understand that you have promised a portion of the site to that commission for such use should a sale be concluded between the present owners, the Benkovitz family, and you. TRAP SHED
PROPOSAL
etc.

It was the unanimous vote of our commission at its meeting of February 19, 1975 to request that you retain the trap shed and its wharf for municipal purposes if the Coast Guard considered them surplus. Furthermore the project was voted an official project of the Bicentennial Commission.

We hereby request that this letter be included in the Environmental Impact Study. Now that the old trap shed is tragically gone we are doubly convinced that our town's fishing heritage should be memorialized before it is really too late - before every last vestige of our founding industry is expediently removed.

We are sure that you realize that in general the Coast Guard

is regarded fondly by Provincetowners. We depend upon your services, and indeed there is hardly a family here that has not had at least one relative who has served with you. We have not been the captains or admirals, but we have provided the men and women who have made your service function. There is a darker side, however, of which you may not be aware, which is largely concerned with the sickening waste made by the Guard. Take, for instance, the destruction of the magnificent Fresnel patent lenses during the 1940's at Highland Light. The old lenses ended up as shards of glass at the base of the cliff after they had been replaced by a newer set. Townspeople have pieces which they salvaged that day, after the word went out that the government had done the unbelievable. Everyone remembers the firing of the Wood End Barracks, a more recent occurrence. The Coast Guard burned the large, well constructed, and salvageable building to the ground. At the present time we have a disaster in the making at Race Point. The former lighthouse keeper's cottage has been vacant for about two years. Efforts were made by one Town agency to buy it and move it into the center, but in the long exchange of letters no one could determine which was its exact owner, the Coast Guard or the National Seashore. The sturdy Peaked Hill Bar Lifesaving Station was burned by arsonists in 1957, having achieved a similar sort of limbo status

We should touch on several details surrounding the destruction of the old trap shed on the Atlantic Coast Fisheries property, not necessarily to assign blame, but to do our best to prevent similar waste in the future. We were particularly disturbed by the fact that the shed, compromising some 3,500 square feet of floor area (about the size of two average contemporary houses) had not been mentioned in your crucial notice of January 22, 1975.

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although two smaller and lesser buildings had been included for impact study. The Public Hearing that you held here on March 17, 1975 did little to clarify matters. It was marked by unusual behavior by one member of the Coast Guard team, lack of loudspeakers, and was conducted under rules that made it impossible for participants with carefully prepared material to speak. The absence of audio amplification alone in that very large hall influenced the results in a very direct way. The meeting was "wild and wooly", consisting largely of pot shot remarks, in large measure the show of a handful of individuals who received the favor of recognition of Capt. Kraine, the team leader. One individual spoke six times. If the Coast Guard had learned anything from its recent previous attempts to establish a Search and Rescue Base within the town itself, it should have been far more prepared for this hearing than it was. As far as we know, this is the first time in the history of the town that that Coast Guard is proposing a facility in the established part of the town. This very fact should have received special attention. Bernard Benkovitz attended the March 17th Hearing. Considering all events in months prior to the hearing and in days afterward, none topped the convergence of self interest, ignorance, and power that occurred that night.

We have read the Draft Environmental Impact Statement on this proposed facility. On the title page it states that it was prepared by you, the Commander of the First Coast Guard District, as well as the outfit that did the legwork, Jason M. Cotrell and Associates, Inc. of Wellesley, Mass. We are deeply dismayed that in spite of the apparent technical expertise that was brought to the subject, your understanding of the history of

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the town in terms of its economics, sociology, and general environment is practically non-existent. You carried your biological and geological investigations to a great degree of fineness, but failed completely to do the same with the historical, economic, and sociological considerations. We recall Robert Campbell's column in the Boston Globe of January 26, 1975 entitled "The Impact Study as a Red Herring". He said, "Most environmental impact studies are ninety percent junk and ten percent advocacy." While we find a considerable amount of advocacy in your one-inch-thick volume we find that material in which we are interested is missing. We shall endeavor to furnish it in this long letter. Our qualifications are long memories, a combined total of many years of volunteer work for the Town, and a friendly disposition towards the U. S. Coast Guard.

The museum proposal for the old trap shed that had been advanced by our Historic District Study Commission was a reasonable one. Small specialized museums are the current trend. There is, as a matter of fact, a wharf museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, that bears a resemblance to the old trap shed. It is now known as the Shaefer Wharf Museum. A feature of this museum is a display of local river and coastal boats. The building itself was once a warehouse from which John Paul Jones outfitted the "Ranger." The trap shed preservation was keyed to another contemporary trend: the strong interest that has developed in industrial archeology in the past ten years or so. For the past 100 to 150 years, building preservation has been concerned largely with public and domestic architecture. We now realize that it is impossible to perceive an accurate image of the past without including evidence

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of where men worked. On a grand scale we have Mystic Seaport and Sturbridge Village as examples of reconstructions where industry is presented as being as important as man's domestic life.

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We are sending you this letter because we have seen others work long and hard to bring the trap shed issue to a fair conclusion. To help prevent further misconceptions, and to add material that does not appear in your draft study, we are writing to also explain some of the town's past, which would be the essence of the proposed museum. Without a doubt, Provincetown is one of the least understood towns in the Commonwealth. It is variously perceived as a place to have a good time, a honky-tonk of bars and refreshments stands, a snarl of traffic on an overcast summer day, the national end of Rt. 6, and many other things. But seldom is it seen by a quickly moving tourist as a place where many people like to live both winter and summer. As evidence of this you will find that the Provincetown unit property values are the highest of any on the Cape.

The trap shed and its wharf were on the oldest structures on the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company property. There were once other buildings on the same wharf of a similar vintage that tumbled over just prior to the Second World War. The trap shed itself was moved, by local accounts, from the Paine family property, about 250 feet to the west, and has served as a trap shed since it was built. A search was made of the Atlantic Coast Fisheries corporate records, now in the hands of a Provincetown resident, and it was found that the building was always known as the "trap shed". Its rough dimensions of 50 feet by 20 feet by two and one half stories high made it a recognizable type of regional industrial building.

Old photographs of the waterfront side of Commercial Street show that it was repeatedly punctuated by buildings that looked like the trap shed. This building type was generally known as a loft, and was as standardized in form and detail as what is nationally known as the "Cape Cod House". The now destroyed trap shed was the last one of its kind that had not been converted into other than original use. The building was complete down to details such as an inside privy. In every way it was evocative of an era that had passed. With this in mind an application was made to include it on the National Register on December 14, 1974. An examination of the structure and records pertaining to the trap shed indicated that the building was in excess of 100 years old. It was also in remarkably sound condition considering the neglect and vandalism that it had experienced lately. The Massachusetts Historical Commission acted as the agent for the National Register and accepted a brochure on the building prepared by the local Historic District Study Commission. Between December 14th and the day of the building's destruction the state commission logged in several calls from the First Coast Guard District. These calls were to the effect that the Coast Guard had experience with landmark structures since many of its buildings were old fixtures on the landscape, that it felt it could work with the trap shed museum proposal, and that in general there was little to worry about. At a later date, putting all of the information together, along with the material from the January 22, 1975 "Notice" from you, the President's ^{Advisory} Council on Historic Preservation concluded that the Coast Guard was more than casually interested in the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Co. property and should have included the trap shed for impact study.

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The proposal that has been made and the one that our commission has taken as an official project is to establish a museum of the trap fishery by moving a building onto the site or constructing one there and to utilize the existing miniature railway to take tourists to and from the end of the wharf. It is reasonable to assume that a trap museum and a railway would be a success. Most major tourist attractions on Cape Cod have attendance figures in excess of 200,000 visitors per year. The museum will include artifacts, dioramas, actual equipment, a large model of a trap that can be placed in the middle of the floor, a cut-away model of a cold storage and processing plant, photographs, magnetic tapes of conversations with trap fishermen and cold storage workers, municipal documents (of which there are many) relating to the location of trap rights through the years, and a large library of books on the fisheries, the corporate records of Atlantic Coast Fisheries Co., and the complete set of working drawings of their famous fish filleting machines that were saved.

The redevelopment of the wharf and the building of a museum can be expected to have the following effects:

1) If operated by, and for, the benefit of the Town the net revenues accruing to the Town should offset the real estate taxes lost by the Federal Government's ownership of the property. In your own literature you have stated that lost municipal tax revenues are one of the impact problems of your purchase if the site. You may be interested to learn that in 1916, several years after the cold storage was built, it was paying two percent of the entire real estate taxes collected in the town. The bulk of Provincetown's property was developed during the boom period of 1970 to 1990 and the tax base difference between 1916 and 1975 is not outstandingly different. If the cold storage property that you are planning to buy were to furnish two percent of the taxes today, the town would be richer by nearly \$50,000.00 per year. Remember also that the cold storage and the trap complex employed between 50 and 100 people during peak periods.

2) Will provide seasonal employment for eight individuals and year around employment for one or two. The jobs would be: curator and assistant curator, guides and railway attendants, maintenance man and watchman. Estimated payroll would be \$25,000. to curator and assistant yearly, and approximately

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\$2,400.00 each to the seasonal employees for four months of employment. This would bring the total wages to about \$50,000.00 per year. Of fundamental importance is that this presents a unique opportunity to staff a new institution with 100 % local talent. It should not be necessary to go any farther than the town line to staff this project.

3) It will help to decentralize tourism in Provincetown in conjunction with a walking tour of the town now being prepared. The museum will serve as the western pole of the walking tour.

4) Will serve to attract more family groups and others into the town proper. Many currently by-pass the town itself and use only the facilities of the Cape Cod National Seashore, such as the visitors center, beaches, bicycle trails, and nature walks.

5) Very importantly, the museum and minature railway will serve as a focus on the industry that built Provincetown through the centuries. Through its exhibits and library on fisheries it will serve as an inspiration to the youth and a source of pride to townspeople of all ages.

6) The existence of tne fishery in Provincetown induces tourism. If the fishery were to disappear there would be adverse effects on tourism. The museum and the railway at their waterfront site will complement the existing fishery, similarly the Coast Guard base and its activities will be an attractive adjunct.

7) To the best of this commission(s knowledge this museum and railway will be unique in the United States, and will not duplicate facilities located elsewhere. A check of the Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies in the United States and Canada, and the directory of American museums confirm this.

8) The museum and railway will not preempt any proposed USCG facilities shown on the plan entitled "Proposed Provincetown Station" that was enclosed in your notice of January 22, 1975. Your plan shows no USCG buildings within 150 feet of the old trap shed. Your new wharf is shown to be several feet to the west of any point of the existing wharf. In brief there is no overlapping whatsoever of the plans of the USGC and the Provincetown Historic District Study Commission's proposed trap fishing museum and railway.

As background to this proposal we would like to acquaint you with accounts of some of Provincetown's past: first, on the chance that it may not be generally known; and second, that it should be included for discussion in the Environmental Impact Statement. Time does not permit the inclusion of all material relating Provincetown's importance as a fishing port. If you feel that something has

been forgotten or needs amplification, please contact us immediately. The material below has been compiled by this commission. For simplicity's sake it has been appended to this letter. Reference notations are made within the text.

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HISTORY DIRECTLY RELATED TO THE PROPOSED MUSEUM AND RAILWAY
The Trap Fishery, Cold Storage and the Bait Fishery.

Fifty years ago the owner of 125 - 129 Commercial St. was one of the most important fish companies in North America. Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company was, in a manner of speaking, the "General Motors" of the fisheries. It was fully integrated functionally from the ocean to the consumer. Atlantic Coast dealt in fresh water and salt water fish, introduced the first fleet of steam trawlers to America, and was the most innovative company in the North Atlantic in the introduction of and development of labor-saving and complicated fish filleting machinery. The "Fishing Gazette", 50th Anniversary Issue for the year 1929, stated: "The steam trawler may be said to have commenced in 1917 with the advent of the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Co." The same publication lists its subsidiary companies in the USA as Atlantic Coast Fisheries Corporation of New York, Chesebro Bros. and Robbins Inc., Frazier's Inc., Fulton Market Refrigerating Co., and the Portland Trawling Co. In Canada the company owned the Maritime Fish Corporation Limited and the National Fish Company Limited. Its trademark was the "Nordic" brand which it applied to its fillets of haddock, cod, whiting, etc. At the present time the "Nordic" brand is the only visible surviving element of this once heavily capitalized and important company.

The property at 125 - 129 Commercial St. was not developed initially by Atlantic Coast. It began its existence as the Cape Cod Fisheries Company and was built by Joshua Paine. Later his brother Edwin became the head of it and in the early 1920's it was acquired by the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Co. The plant furnished all of the town's electricity for several years around the time of the First World War.

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Provincetown became the location for seven cold storages through the years beginning in the early 1890's with the establishment of D. F. Small's Provincetown Cold Storage Company, at Johnson and Commercial Streets. The complex of buildings was built with the designated capacity of 3,000 barrels (from U.S. Fish Commission, Volume XVIII, year 1898, article: "The Preservation of Fishery Products for Food", by Charles H. Stevenson.)

The cold storages and their related fish traps were responsible for keeping Provincetown an important national fishery center through to the middle of the present century. Edward A. Ackerman in New England's Fishing Industry, University of Chicago Press, 1941, p. 167, shows that in 1935 Provincetown landed 30,000,000. pounds of fish, of which about 20,000,000. pounds came from the fish traps. During the same year Gloucester landed 50,000,000 pounds with almost none caught in traps of any kind. Back in 1887 Ackerman shows that Provincetown also landed 30,000,000. pounds of fish. At that time a far greater amount was a product of the vessel fishery. Trap fishing could never have developed to the extent that it did without the cold storages.

THE THREE REASONS FOR THE MASSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRAP FISHERY

Provincetown's conversion from the vessel fishery to a dependence on the traps for large fares of fish is largely the consequence of

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the natural features of its coast and two different developments, on political and the technological, that were taking place in the 1880's.

1) Soft Bottoms. Provincetown, unlike Gloucester and the other major fishing ports, has a soft bottom under its waters. This allows trap spiles to be driven almost anywhere near the shore. The area has been the rendezvous of many marketable varieties of fish (school fish) over the centuries.

2) Anhydrous Ammonia Absorption Freezing Systems. Technologically the traps benefitted from the development of the direct anhydrous ammonia absorption freezing method developed by M. J. Paulson of Gloucester. There is no record here of there having been an "ice and salt" type of cold storage in Provincetown of the type that generally antedated the ammonia ones. Needless to say, the freezing systems permitted the preservation of vast quantities of fish that the traps were capable of catching in very short periods of time, and permitted the product to be held until the price was adequate.

3) "The Fishery Question". The traps and freezers were principally built for the production of bait for the bank codfishery. Tremendous quantities of bait were used by the hand liners and trawlers fishing on the continental shelf from Georges to Grand Bank. Each fishing master or fleet owner had his favorite bait. Vogue and changes took place through the years much as they do today among sports fishermen. Favored baits, both fresh and pickled, included clams, squid and herring, although oddities such as periwinkles were used by the men in pursuit of codfish. In the latter part of the 19th Century mackerel were caught in seines and no bait was required. Seines required depths of from 15 to 25 fathoms for operation.

The Grand Bank fishermen of Provincetown had generally used salted clam bait. George Steele, of Gloucester, President of the American Fishery Union wrote to the Boston Journal in June 1887: "In fact, Provincetown, which stands next to Gloucester in the (Grand) bank fishery has never used any other bait (except clams)." Provincetown's clams came largely from Maine where they were shucked, put in barrels and pickled. Gloucester bank fishermen and the fishermen of other major ports tended to begin their trips with salted fin fish bait. Fishermen from all ports utilized their own resources and caught bait on the banks or on their way to the banks. On September 24, 1886 the Boston Globe ran an article entitled "Death to Cape Cod - Provincetown Fishermen Say the New Treaty Will Kill Them." In the article Francis Joseph, owner of several bank vessels said: "I had only one vessel in the Bay (Chaleur) this year, and she caught her bait on the fishing grounds. We don't want anything that they (Canadian bait dealers) have."

By 1880 Gloucester had developed a dependence upon Canada in a number of ways. Gloucestermen were in the habit of running to Cape Breton Island of Nova Scotia and to Newfoundland for their bait, and other necessities. The Canadians and Newfoundlanders worked hard to entice the Yankees. The Maritimes,

always desperately poor and overpopulated with large families, depended upon the American purchases. A Provincetown Advocate issue of April 12, 1876 contains the following advertisement:

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Highly important to American fishermen:

Grand Placentia 100 miles nearer Grand and Green Banks than Fortune Bay. The undersigned beg to inform all interested in the American Fisheries that they have for sale 1000 tons of Ice at the above named place, being convenient to the Banks, with prevailing winds favorable; a good roadstead and harbor, easy of access, safe and commodious; best point on the entire Newfoundland coast to obtain bait during Spring and Summer months.

Fowler and Sinnott
Great Placentia Bay
Newfoundland"

Capt. John Gorman of the Schr. William D. Deasley told the Boston Herald on February 23, 1888: "I leave \$500. to \$750. each year in Canada for bait." On Sept. 24, 1886 Philip A. Whorf of Provincetown told the Boston Globe: "I am part owner and owner of eight vessels, all in the Grand Banks business. Every time my vessels have gone into Canadian ports for bait they have made a loss. They do better taking salt bait from home."

The "Fishery Question" developed in 1884 when Canada rigidly enforced the Treaty of 1818, signed when the USA was at the mercy of the British, following the War of 1812, in order to coerce the Yankees into an expensive reciprocity treaty favorable only to them. The treaty had been signed in 1871 and had expired in 1884. It must be remembered that at that time Canada was not the independent country that it is today, and that the English saw to it that the Dominion served the Queen's interest first. The Treaty of 1818 did not mention bait as one of the items that the Yankees could purchase in Canada. It mattered little to the Crown that the Scots and Irish of the Maritimes would starve if they could not sell their supplies. Firms such as Fowler and Sinnott above served as agents for employers of hundreds of individual bait fishermen. For centuries the lower class Irish and Scots had been dirt under the English feet. The English were also trying to force the Americans away from what they considered their private fishing grounds. Many captains like John Gorman risked the confiscation and sale of their vessels to take on Canadian bait, and incidentally, to allow their crews (mostly very young men) to visit their families. A large number of the Grand Bank crews and skippers in the period 1870 to 1900 were Cape Breton Scots. Col. L. M. Montgomery of the Treasury Dept. speaking to a US Congressional committee was quoted in the Boston Post of August 28, 1888 as follows:

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"I should say that 75% of the fishing crews were aliens. They came principally from the British Provinces (of Canada), some are Portuguese, some Scandinavians, and some are other Europeans, the latter in lesser numbers, they come principally from Nova Scotia; and chiefly from that part known as Cape Breton; they have a reputation of being excellent fishermen; they are enabled to obtain employment because they engage themselves for a less rate of wages, they work more continuously and are generally less expensive than the Native fishermen."

Montgomery could have added that as soon as they could they became American citizens. The colonel also said:

"Mr. S. S. Swift, one of the largest owners of fishing craft in Provincetown, Mass. is now reported to me to have contracted for four crews in 1887 in Nova Scotia, and so eager was he for their safe arrival to himself at his port by the railroad that he watched for them at the depot lest some other contractor of the same locality might bribe them into another and better paying contract."

Canada held to the terms of the Treaty of 1818 tenaciously which basically permitted American fishing vessels into their waters for shelter, (fresh) water, (repair and fire) wood, and repairs (to the vessels). The Provincetown bait fishery received a strong impetus from the British-Canadian abuse. Steele's American Fishery Union which was strongly represented in Provincetown by William Matheson and James Gifford, successfully resisted attempts by the Federal Government to re-write an 1871 type of treaty. The Union convincingly argues that all we needed from British Canada was common courtesey of the same variety that we allowed any of their vessels into our ports during emergencies of kinds not mentioned in the Treaty of 1818.

During the four "siege" years of the Fishery Question War, Canada seized and sold or otherwise disposed of vessels from all New England ports based largely on petty infractions of the 1818 treaty. A seized Wellfleet schooner, the Highland Light, became the armed Canadian cruiser, Vigilant. The New York Herald reported in 1887 that the British-Canadian government sent out ten cruisers to prevent the Yankees from purchasing the proscribed bait which the ^{improverished} Maritimers were only too eager to sell. Beside the Vigilant, they were the Acadia, Lansdowne, La Canadienne, General Middleton, L. Howlette, F. E. Conrad, Terror, Lizzie Lundlay, and the Critic. The British-Canadians managed to ruin many fishermen with their perservance. The boarded 700 vessels in 1886 and 1,362 in 1887, according to Harold Innis, The Cape Cod Fisheries, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1940. Through Secretary of State Bayard, President Grover Cleveland in Washington showed less than supportive interest in the plight of the American fishermen throughout the Fishery Question. Traditionally Democrats, like Cleveland, have not supported fishermen because they