

By Irving S. Rogers

1945

Sixty years ago: John (Jack) Welsh was only a young whipper-snapper then, but, he was old enough to be snapping a whip over a team of horses. Looking at the unique front page streamer head of the Advocate some people are given cause to ask "How many wharves were there in Provincetown?" I caught Jack and Tom Welsh (no relationship) in a reminiscent mood and they both agree that there were thirty-four wharves dotting our waterfront sixty years back.

In those boom times this town was a busy seaport fishing village and all along the shorefront the shipyards, sparyards, rigger lofts, blacksmith shops, laths rooms, and fishing sheds were scenes of active industry. Lathe workers, caulkers, painters, riggers and skilled shipwrights were ever on the move to keep the whaling and grandbanker fleets at sea. Whaling was still good, but codfishing was better. Codfish flakes were spread out most everywhere on wharves, in backyards, some in front yards and a few in vacant lots near at hand. It was no uncommon sight to see thousands of quintals of split fish drying in the October sun and wind.

Beginning at the west end of town the first wharf called off by the two "oldtimers" was the "Steve Tom Nickerson pier" jutting out into the harbor from the present western parking space. The pier was 500 feet in length and was mostly a fishing wharf for trapmen and grandbankers with the washing, drying and flaking of codfish the main industry. In those days trap fishing was still in its infancy and Mr. Nickerson was one of the first men to see the possibilities of this branch of fishing.

The next wharf in this memory record was the "Jackson Williams pier"—now Capt'n Jacks Studio Apartments. The pier was approximately 300 feet long and was part of a shipyard with buildings on the dock used mostly for storage space.

Continuing eastward the oldtimers next mention the "Myrick Atwood" wharf at the foot of Nickerson street and where the former Wharf Theatre once stood. The activities on this pier were quite similar to the shipyard and storage scene at Capt'n Jacks and the Atwood wharf was also 300 feet long.

At "Union Wharf"—where Manuel Furtardo now builds and repairs boats—the old 1000-foot pier was one of the most important with a blacksmith shop, blockmaker's shed, sail-loft, rigging yard and a marine railway for hauling out vessels. One



Water Front & East End.

Arrow: Freeman's General Store. Left: Kibbe Cook's store and Sailloft. About 1890.

of the numerous buildings was used solely for the packing of mackerel.

The "J. L. N. Paine wharf"—just east of Union Wharf—was 700 feet long and provided docking space for the grandbankers to unload their catches.

Close by the 400-foot "N. C. Brooks wharf"—at the foot of Kelly's corner—was an entirely different picture with lumber schooners unloading heavy timber from the Maine woods and the more northern ports of Nova Scotia.

A 200-foot pier known as the "James Burch wharf" housed storage space for nets and miscellaneous fishing gear. Over-shadowed by the N. C. Brooks wharf, and the 600-foot "Frank Freeman's pier"—now

the Cape Cod Cold Storage wharf—the 200-foot wharf of James Burch assumed a minor role in the busy scene.

The "Frank Freeman pier" seems to have maintained tradition and is now operating as a fish wharf for packing, buying and selling to out-of-town markets. This pier was rebuilt twice and the last vestiges of the old Frank Freeman wharf have long since disappeared.

Where the old Puritan Cold Storage plant once stood, a 300-foot pier known as the "Nathan Freeman"—brother to Frank Freeman—wharf was used for unloading fish. The Freeman brothers connected their respective piers with a bridge and thus facilitated the handling of fish between the wharves.

In the rear of the present Frank Aresta property at 111 Commercial Street, Dave Smith maintained a 300-foot pier for unloading, packing and shipping fish.

The "Artemus Paine's wharf" situated at the foot of Conant street was also a fish wharf but was longer than the Dave Smith pier by two-hundred feet. On these fish wharves the scene was generally the same with unloading, packing and shipping, the main industry.

One of the longest wharves then dotting the waterfront was "Central Wharf" at the foot of Central street between the present Grozier Estate and the Adams property. The pier was 1000 feet long and housed a large sail-loft, spar-yard, blacksmith shop, rigging equipment, a fish packing shed and a long marine railway capable of hauling out the largest vessels. This wharf had four large "ballast rooms" well loaded with rocks, and a glance at the beach will reveal what happened to the rocks when the pier was razed.

The "B. H. Dyer wharf"—in rear

of the present B. H. Dyer Hardware store—was 300 feet in length and was used mostly as a fish packing pier.

The "Joseph Manta wharf"—formerly run by Crocker & Atwood—was 600 feet in length and was also a fish wharf similar to the B. H. Dyer wharf. From this pier the famous Manta Fleet rigged out and sailed on their record breaking trips.

Provincetown's Wharves, Part 2:—

Before going on with a word picture of the wharves of sixty years ago it might be best first to describe the winter storage of the many codfishing vessels and coasting ships. During the long, severe winters of that 1880 period the vessels were beached and then stripped of all running gear except the heavy mooring lines which were run off to sturdy sand-anchors. When it came time for the vesesls to go into winter quarters the crews first had to dig a deep hole high up on the slanting beach. On the flood tide, and with a strong breeze blowing over the vessel's stern, all sails were set and the craft was sailed across the harbor on a course which put her right smack on the beach and into the hole. Most of the vessels ended up with their bow almost touching Commercial Street, but in some cases, the bowsprits, hung over the street and lined up with the wooden sidewalk. The tides and winds caused the shifting sand to pile up around the vessels almost to their bulwarks, and with lines run off to either side the craft were held upright until they were firmly embedded in the sand. The nearby wharves helped to protect the vessels from the heavy seas and they stayed in these winter quarters from late Fall until the last of March, or early April. Oft' times the vessels were quartered so close to each other that the youngsters could leap from rail to rail.

At the first opportunity, and with the smell of good weather in the

offing, the crews were faced with the tougher problem of refloating their vessels and getting ready for sea. The heaped-up sand was shoveled away from the vessel's sides and a channel dug out to deep water. The anchor line was run over to the windlass forward, the guylines to keep the vessel from heeling too far on either side were hauled taut, and on the flood tide the vessel was worked out of the hole. Sometimes it was necessary to get added lift by lashing airtight barrels along the keel to act as pontoons. In a few cases the mainsail was hoisted to a strong northwest breeze and the keel was forcibly worked free of the sand while a steady haul on the anchor line gradually pulled the vessel out.

Picking up where we left off last week we take the J. E. & G. Bowley Wharf next to and just east of the Joseph Manta Wharf. Until recently—when the pier went down in a winter's gale—the wharf was known as the Fisherman's Cold Storage Wharf. But during those more active fishing days the Bowley Wharf was a busy place with its various activities. Whalers were outfitted and rigged for the long voyages. In one large loft on the pier the ever-tolling sailmakers were fully occupied plying needle and palm to serviceable canvas. The ship's carpenters had a large room which smelled pleasantly of new cordage, freshly sawed lumber and oakum, while out on the pier the ship's riggers swarmed over the vessel's lofty yardarms. The single screw S. S. George Shattuck docked at this wharf carrying passengers, and freight from the port of Boston. In the winter months the steamer made three trips a week and there was always berthing space at this twelve-hundred foot wharf.

In the rear of the present Manuel Cadose property at 205 Commercial Street the six-hundred foot Joseph Atwood Wharf was doing a big business in lumber. George Allen, Sr., father of George and David Allen, formerly carried on an import lumber business on this pier and I am told that many of the present homes were built from the stock of the Allen Lumber enterprises. There were a few fish sheds at the head of this pier but they were small and of no consequence in comparison to the other larger fishing centers.

The Post Office building now occupies the former approach to what was then the Seth Nickerson Wharf. This wharf was four-hundred feet in length and used primarily as a fishing pier with sheds, storage space for nets and hoists for unloading vessels.

Getting close to the center of the town, and where the Cape Cod Garage now stands, there stood the



Irving S. Rogers, Selectman who wrote this article and many others in this book.

Taken September 1945.