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# During Provincetown's boom fishing years . . . . .

## . . wharves lined the waterfront

By Mary Bauer

Although MacMillan Wharf is now the last surviving example of the town's historic panorama of piers, a century ago more than 50 of its wooden predecessors lined the waterfront during the town's boom fishing years.

The appearance of Provincetown's waterfront has changed dramatically since those boom years. Now the waterfront reflects the town's biggest industry, tourism.

Spacious decks and restaurant patios now hang over beaches and remnants of pilings where fishermen once dried their catch, mended their nets and repaired their boats.

But in the 1860's, the original impetus to build the wharves arose from a need to expand available work space on the beaches to meet the many demands imposed by a growing fishing industry.

Comparing the town's wharf-lined shoreline decade by decade traces the ups and downs of the fishing industry since the early 1800's. As one of the major tools of the industry, the wharves ranged from an average length of 50 feet in the 1870's to the huge 1200-foot repair wharves of the late 1800's, equipped with tracks and pulleys to haul large schooners completely out of the water for repairs.

The industry got a boost from fish markets provided by two major wars, the Civil War and the Spanish American War. But it was nearly destroyed by turn-of-the-century economic reversals and the Portland Gale of 1898, which reduced many of the great wharves to kindling.

Provincetown's fishermen ran a diverse gamut of ethnic origins. There were early English settlers with names like Nickerson, Snow, Atkins, Freeman and Mayo. But the most daring winter fishermen were the Portuguese from families with names like Marks, Brier, Souza, Caton, Silva and Foster. The boom fishing period, which ran from about 1860 to 1883, brought in reinforcements from the clans of MacDonald, McFayden, McRitchie, Matheson, Kemp and McKay, natives of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

Throughout Provincetown's history, names of wharves have traced the original social and cultural heritage of the community.

Captain Jack's Wharf is an example of the changing uses of the waterfront. Although it was built as a fishing wharf it has hosted many representatives of Provincetown's various subcultures including fishermen, artists, writers and now summer visitors. It was built about 1884 and a second permit was issued for an extension in 1898, said Ruth Hiebert, who now owns the wharf.

Many of the shacks that line the wharf now were first



Turn-of-the-century photograph shows cod drying on Provincetown wharf.

Photo courtesy of George Bryant

used for fishing gear and net-mending. Hiebert suspects that the wharf was once used for rum running because several trap doors are scattered along the wharf's length.

The original owner, Capt. Jackson Williams, let artists

live and work in the shacks. When artists began itching for more northerly light to work by, Captain Jack would tell them to take a saw and cut out some windows for

themselves, Hiebert said. She said to this day many of the windows don't fit tightly. When they need to be replaced, she replaces them to maintain the catch-as-catch-can flavor of the wharf.

When Hiebert's family bought the wharf in 1934, it was still used partially for fishing, so the artists' and fishermen's occupancy overlapped for some years.

The earliest wharves were stubby extensions of the land, rarely longer than 100 feet, stages on which men dried salt fish and mended nets. The fish were landed directly on the land and hauled to higher ground in wheelbarrows.

Serious wharf-building, requiring heavy capital investment and occasional grants from the state, got underway in the 1850's. This reflected the acceleration of the fishing business, increased profits and greater government interest in the fisheries. Three of the long wharves constructed early in the boom era were outfitted solely for ship repair.

These were the Eastern Marine Railway Co., behind what is now Bryant's Market, the Central Wharf Co., behind the Boatslip Motel and the Union Wharf Co., behind Sal's Place Restaurant. Each repair wharf contained one curious structure. An octagonal building on each wharf housed an ox team. The team walked in a circle turning a winch. This powered the pulleys that hauled ships onto the end of the wharf. Boats could be hauled at any tide.

These large wharves had buildings for storage of hardware and rigging, and a blacksmith shop. Workers on these repair wharves included a smithy, calkers, painters and boatbuilders.

"This was a great town then," said Capt. Alexander Kemp, in a 1936 Cape Cod Standard-Times interview. "A sailmaker and blacksmith on every wharf, and calkers, painters and riggers to beat the band." Capt. Kemp was a Provincetown Grand Banks fisherman.

"Three or four of the wharves approached 1000 feet," said Selectman George Bryant, a local historian. "They built them longer to be able to service the large schooners that drew several feet of water at low tide."

The Civil War kicked prices and profits through the roof during the 1860's and immediately after. Bryant said a boat worth \$3000 before the war years suddenly was valued at \$6000 to \$7000 despite its greater age. This increase was partly due to wartime inflation and partly to the demand for fish.

"Salt fish was a very saleable commodity because it was capable of being shipped great distances and would keep for a year or more," Bryant said.

Two new long wharves built to accommodate the demand were Steamboat Wharf, built in the 1860's, and Railroad Wharf, built in 1873.

Steamboat Wharf, an extension of Bowley Wharf, was built by the Bowley family near today's Seaview Restaurant. Court Street was at that time the center of town, Bryant said. The wharf was 1200 feet long and had a coal bunker, a water tank and a steam engine for pumping water and hoisting. It got its name for the Boston steamboat that docked there at the end of its daily run. Railroad Wharf was just to the west of where MacMillan Wharf is now. Railroad Wharf was so close to MacMillan Wharf that it was used to carry supplies while building MacMillan Wharf in the mid 1950's.

Provincetown had 12 wharves in 1835 and 45 of them in 1867 with 18 more in the planning stage. Most of these 18 were completed.

Grand Bank cod fishing off the south and east coast of Newfoundland was responsible for the bulk of the town's profits during the town's biggest fishing boom, which peaked in 1883. Provincetown boasted some of the largest