DENNIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER Dec. 1982 VOL. 5 NO. 12 Compiled and edited by Nancy Thacher Reid

STURBRIDGE AND DENNIS - 1840

We saw a very interesting film at our November meeting, depicting the work-a-day life as recreated at Old Sturbridge Village, representing early rural America about 1840. We also had a glimpse of the beginnings of industrialization as water power began to be employed to do tasks previously laboriously performed with "person" power. Following the film, we talked about the similarities and differences between Dennis and Sturbridge during this period, when agriculture on the Cape was much less important and occupations having to do with the sea employed a large percent of the male population. Nevertheless, certain aspects of daily life were very similar, and a good discussion was had, with many contributing. Our thanks to Jim Coogan, who showed the film for us, and also arranged to have it shown at the High School to several American History classes.

CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE

The exceptionally mild weather which we have enjoyed may have lulled us into thinking that Christmas is a long way off. But the calendar says otherwise, and our Christmas Open House is only a short time away. Susan Kelley is organizing a group of volunteers to decorate the Manse appropriately. Georgia Pate will provide seasonal music, as will the Girl Scout carollers. I understand that there will be an ample supply of Dennis Historical Society's well-known version of "Negus", a tasty hot punch, as well as other delightsome refreshments. We hope you will all come and exchange Holiday greetings with friends and neighbors, at the Josiah Dennis Manse on Sunday, December 12, from 3-5 P.M.

CHRISTMAS COMES TO CAPE COD

Although we annually celebrate Christmas at one of our historic centers, there is a very good chance that Christmas was not celebrated in either house by its original family, or for several generations thereafter. If you remember from Governor William Bradford's journal, the pilgrims of Plymouth Colony deliberately banned all celebration of Christmas as they considered it a heathen holiday and not a Holy Day. Early writings on Cape Cod refer to the season as "Fool tide", a caricature of "Yule tide" as then celebrated in the Anglican church. A statute passed by the Great and General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1659 stated, in essence, that the celebration of Christmas had been deemed a sacrilege by the Congregational ministers, and therefore the exchanging of gifts and greetings, dressing in fine clothing, feasting and "similar Satanical practices" in observance of the day would be subject to a fine to the offender of 5 shillings. In fact, festivities surrounding Christmas in New England were very limited until the mid-1800's. Nevertheless, there is an historical record of a celebration of Christmas which was held on Pochet Beach in Orleans in 1626. Perhaps you remember that a vessel named SparrowHawk was shipwrecked on its voyage from England to Virginia in that year. The Indians were persuaded to go to Plymouth to seek help for the stranded passengers. As Christmas Day arrived, the Englishmen, who were not Congregationalists, but Anglicans, celebrated Christmas with a roast goose, washed down with a hogshead of wine. If the Pilgrims had known that, they probably wouldn't have come to their rescue! Nevertheless, they did, sheltering the passengers of the Sparrowhawk until a vessel arrived which could take them to their destination. Thus the first known celebration of Christmas on Cape Cod was held on an Orleans beach in 1626, despite the disapproval of the Cape's first settlers.

THE SECOND SCARGO OBSERVATORY

'There was a tall building upon Scargo Hill, But having blown down, 'tis not standing there still."

With these words, the Dennis correspondent to the Yarmouth Register laments the loss of the first observatory which stood atop Scargo Hill. The great windstorm in February 1876 which leveled the tower also uprooted the Liberty Elm on Boston Common, but unlike the elm, which was forever lost, the tower at Scargo would rise again. Almost immediately, plans were made to raise funds to replace the observatory, which had become a landmark for the Dennis villagers. Food sales and entertainments were held to benefit the building fund and by July of that same year, the new tower was complete. Joshua Crowell has a fine picture of the structure. About 30 feet high, it is a sixsided wooden building, resembling a windmill, but with an observation deck instead of a cap with arms and sails. Our Dennis reporter exclaims that this tower is surely strong enough to withstand a tempest, but in a good-natured jab at the Yarmouth Register's editor's inflammatory oratory, he adds that if Editor Swift will keep his fire confined to Yarmouth, the tower is sure to last for years. His light-hearted prophecy had an ironic twist. The tower did survive for a number of years, and withstood several tempests, and its end was not by wind, but by fire. I will tell you more next time.

CALENDAR

December 12 3-5 P.M	. Josiah Dennis Manse Christmas Open House
	Music by Georgia Pate, refreshments, carollers
December 16, 1773	The Boston Tea Party
January, 1983	"Antiques as an Investment" Marilyn Straus
End of January	Watch for the announcement of the date for the showing of
	the slide show "Dennis" to the public at Wixon School

Plan to attend the Mid-Winter Festivity in February

OUR MEDIA SHOW - "DENNIS" - IS GETTING AROUND

After several public showings, the slide show prepared by your society on the history of this town has been booked and shown to quite a few civic and social groups, to the Ezra Baker School, nursing homes, and to other historical societies. All audiences have been very enthusiastic. D.H.S. should thank Wilson Scofield, Joshua Crowell, Nancy Reid, and Don and Paula Bacon, who have been the crew who have given their time for these showings. A scheduled public showing will be announced in January, when, following a viewing by the pupils at the Nathanial H. Wixon School, it will be shown to the public in the Middle School auditorium. Watch for an announcement of this date, which will be late in January.

ANTIQUES AS AN INVESTMENT

Most of us have one or two articles around our homes that we cherish as antiques, but not many of us indulge in extensive collecting. Marilyn Straus thinks we should consider antiques as an important part of our investment plans. Whether you intend to get serious about antique collecting or are just curious as to what type of antiques constitute the best investment, you will enjoy Ms. Straus' lively talk in January. Come and bring your questions. The exact date and place will be announced in the next newsletter.

WHALE IN THE BAY

The stranding of 65 Pilot Whales at Lieutenant's Island in South Wellfleet evoked from most of us feelings of sympathy and frustration, as the finest naturalists in the area were unable to aid these gentle animals. The reason for the beaching is unexplained. Over the recorded history of the Cape, there have been many such mass strandings, enough of them in this same area to give the name "Blackfish Creek" to the narrow waterway which winds inland just north of the island. The Pilot Whale, or Blackfish, is in reality a member of the dolphin family, not particularly productive of oil-yielding blubber. However, a melon, or cushion of fine oil, valuable as a lubricant is located in its head. Our Cape ancestors would have had a much different reaction than ours, and would have looked upon these blackfish as a gift from the hand of God. Shore whaling was of early economic importance along the bay side of the Cape. The art was learned from the natives, who used whale meat for food, and the oil to supplement their diet. The English settlers knew the value of whale oil, and some interesting arguments developed over the ownership of drift whales, with King, colony, town and individuals all demanding their share. In our town, in 1690, 7 men were appointed to secure all drift whales for the town, and were paid 4 pounds for each whale. The town's whaling ground was at the end of Nobscusett Road. As drift whales became scarce, whales spotted feeding in the bay were driven ashore and slaughtered. The Indians were talented at chasing whales and often manned the whale boats. One of our more successful shore whalers in Dennis was Lt. Jonathan Howes, who owned his own try works at Sesuet. It is said that he netted enough profit from oil in one year to build himself a two-story house. Probably his sons were in charge of the Indian crews in the whale boats, for it is recorded that his young son Jonathan, was "killed by a whale" in 1718-19. When Lt. Howes died in 1748, he left his "whale house, try house, try kittel, and cooler" to his heirs. But shore whaling was already declining, and there is no record that any of them pursued the whale to the great oceans of the world. I'm sure that the Howes family of the early 1700's would not have asked the same questions about the stranded blackfish as we have been asking.

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