



# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 28, number 10

October 2005

## Calendar of Events

**DHS Board Meetings** are open to all interested members. Our next board meeting (the last before the annual meeting and election of directors) will be on Wednesday, Oct. 12, at 3 P.M. at the West Dennis Graded School.



**Saturday, October 15**  
7:00 P.M.  
**Dennis Historical Society Annual Meeting**

A brief annual business meeting will be followed by *Blue Water Wives and Mothers*, a slide show narrated by Phyllis Horton which tells how Dennis women carried on their daily lives and raised children while accompanying their husbands on the seven seas  
Refreshments!

**West Dennis Graded School, School Street,  
West Dennis**

## *Cape Cod Merchant Marine*

*A school essay by Helen Wigginton (1915-1964)*

As Cape Cod has so long been associated with the sea, people often think of Cape Cod as always carrying on commerce and even think that the Pilgrim Fathers themselves were seagoing men; but the facts are very different. It was not until many years later, after the villages were well started, that Cape Cod men turned seamen. At this time two difficult arts claimed their attention—the art of building ships and the art of sailing them. The first ships attempted, with the exception of fishing vessels and whalers, were packets to run between Cape towns and Boston and New York. There were many incentives for the building of packet boats. Perhaps the most important was the need for a more comfortable means of travel. A person who had once made the trip to Boston in a packet boat would, if necessary, wait a month for the packet for the next trip rather than face the discomforts of the overland coach. Another incentive for building packet boats was the enormous amount of salt that was being produced in many Cape Cod towns. A great quantity of this salt was used at home for fish but there was still some left for exportation. Also now and then there would be a load of flax or onions. Thus we see that packet boat lines were needed for both passengers and freight, and these lines were a good investment in a business way.

There were two or three packet boats from each town and during these years when all commercial interests were in boats, there was a keen competition between the towns. Each strove to make a bigger, faster and more comfortable craft. An example of this sort of rivalry existed between Yarmouth and Barnstable. Yarmouth, about 1840, possessed a sloop named the *Commodore Hull* and it was then in truth the fastest and best on the Bay. Many a captain was dismayed to have the *Commodore Hull* appear behind him, pass him, and arrive in Boston Harbor several hours in the lead. Finally, after Barnstable had stood this one-sided competition as long as she could, two of her leading townsmen, Captains Thomas Percival and Matthias Hinckley, made a trip up the Hudson River to arrange for the building of a new packet which would surpass the Yarmouth ship.

In due time this boat called the *Mail* arrived. On the first trip to Boston both ships crossed Barnstable Bar abreast while crowds on the shore watched with excitement. The *Mail*, however, arrived at Central Wharf in Boston scarcely three lengths ahead of the *Commodore Hull*. In spite of this, the Yarmouth people said that the *Commodore* was still the

faster and the *Mail* won because both Barnstable captains sailed on it. The *Commodore Hull* had still another rival in its own town, the *Eagle's Flight* commanded by Captain Ansel Hallett. There are no records to show which of these two was the faster.

A trip to Boston by packet was a very enjoyable voyage and if, by chance, there happened to be a race it was still more exciting. In the first place, one never knew whether he would arrive in Boston in six hours or two days. Rich and poor fared alike as the boats were usually too crowded to allow exclusiveness. Often there would be a deepwater captain on board on the way to take command of a ship perhaps bound for China. If so, he would entertain the passengers with sea stories.

When a returning packet boat was seen approaching Barnstable, Dennis, or Wellfleet, a flag was raised on a pole on the highest hill to notify the "South-siders". In Dennis, Scargo Hill was used for signaling. As the boats often brought home a captain or sea master who had been away for a year or more, there were pleasant reunions and much excitement following the arrival of the packet.

The packet boats were, of course, important because they kept a lively trade going along shore and were convenient for the traveler and the salt maker. More important still is the fact that they furnished a school for seafaring and many, having begun early in life as a helper on a packet, finished on the deck of a clipper ship sometimes sailing on to the other side of the world. Captain Dean Sears and Captain Joseph H. Sears, both of East Dennis, left the small packet *Combine* to command full rigged ships which visited foreign ports.

So the little packet boats lived and thrived, then after justifying their existence by opening and beginning routes of trade, they were gradually discontinued. There were two causes for their death. The Cape salt-making industry ceased as the newly found salt mines replaced the old method of evaporation. Then the railroad finally was extended to Provincetown. This carried the passengers and the freight that the packet had transported before.

These once packet boats fared differently. Some became fishing boats; one, the *Northern Light*, of Provincetown, was sold to buyers for the Pacific Coast; another was sold as a pilot boat in New Orleans.

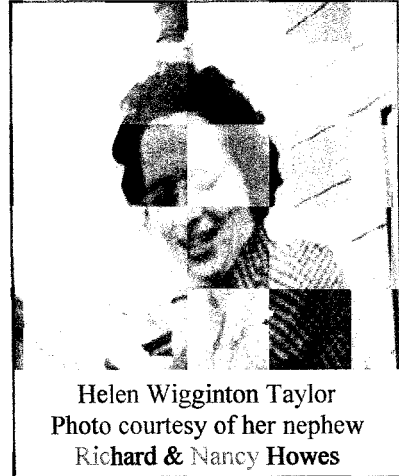
About the same time as the little packets were running up and down the coast came the ever-increasing need for ships which were suitable for long distance shipping. The ship owners all along the coast were eager to get Cape men to command their ships as these men had secured valuable experience from the packet boats. These Liverpool packets, as they were called, were started in 1810, and were more stoutly built. There was much room for storage and also many staterooms such as had never been seen before. The Captains of the Liverpool packets had to be more than good seamen, they also had to be good entertainers. It was necessary to keep the passengers happy and the line popular enough to be well used.

One of these so-called deep water captains was Captain Isaiah Crowell of Dennis. Captain Crowell early in 1812 when Madison's Embargo was expected, left Boston with only a half a cargo with papers for Eastport. He arrived here just before news of the Embargo came. He finished loading, then started for Lisbon. While he was on this voyage, war was declared and on his return trip, his vessel was captured by a British cruiser and taken to St. Johns.

Among the Liverpool packet boat commanders were Allen Knowles and John, Oliver and Asa Eldridge of Yarmouth. Allen Knowles who lived across the street from the three Eldridge brothers commanded the packet *Chariot of Fame*. Once when crossing the Atlantic in the middle of the winter, he lost his jib boom; his main yard was broken; and his main sail was blown off. Finally Captain Knowles managed to put up a new yard and make a new sail. In spite of this ingenious work, however, he did not advance one mile in two weeks time. A long time behind schedule the *Chariot of Fame* arrived in Provincetown in a driving snowstorm. Of the Eldridge brothers, John and Asa were at the same time captains of boats, while Oliver served John as a mate. Later Oliver took command of a Clipper. As important as these men were as commanders of packets, they were yet to become better known as captains of clippers.

to be continued.....

Helen Wigginton was the youngest child of Warren Tufts and Edith Belle (Blood) Wigginton. They and her older sister Esther moved to Dennis from Stoneham in 1913. Her father built their first home—now the Center Stage Café in the Cape Playhouse grounds—and they lived there until 1930 when he built a larger home next to the Dennis Public Market. Both sisters attended Hyannis Normal School, later Hyannis State Teachers College, and became teachers at the Dennis Consolidated School, now the Ezra H. Baker School. Helen replaced Irene Dumican as a fourth grade teacher in 1936. In 1940 she married Roland Taylor from South Yarmouth, a builder and later building inspector for the town of Dennis. It's not surprising that Nancy Thacher Reid should write in her history (p.580) that *Every Dennis school child in Miss Helen W. Wigginton's or Miss Helen B. Lane's fourth grade could name and give the locations of all of the lightships in the Sound....!* Next time we can learn about the Clippers.



Helen Wigginton Taylor  
Photo courtesy of her nephew  
Richard & Nancy Howes

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## Queries to our website:

To: dennis@cape.com, July 17, 2005

From Diane Schenk

*Hello.*

*My husband and I recently purchased a home at 56 Pleasant Street in Dennis Port. It is the old Capt. Joshua Wixon house. We are very interested in the history of the home. .... I have a question about the basement.....I was speaking with a friend who told me that round basements were designed in such a way so that the devil could not hide in them. Sounds silly, I know, but apparently, according to the folklore that my friend recalled, "devils can only hide in corners." Therefore, round basements were installed to keep devils from hiding in them? I would like to know if this tale has any validity ....*

*Thank you for any information you can forward to me.....*

Diane's interesting query was sent to Burt Derick who replied:

*Hi Diane.*

*It's a good tale about the "devil" in reference to the round cellars under Cape Cod houses. However, the reason they were round is not nearly that exciting.*

*Cape dirt is sand, and it flows easily. A round brick structure prevented cave-ins, same as with a well. You never saw a square well, did you? The answer is the same with the cellars. Those old-timers were just being practical.*

Thanks for asking, Diane. We all learned something new about those round Cape Cod cellars!

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*No thanks to Hurricane Ophelia, our bus tour was postponed until Saturday, October 29.*

## Thank you:

We are most appreciative to the Robert L. Crowell Charitable Fund for a donation to Jericho.

We are also grateful for a donation to the Manse from Christopher and Susan Foley which was given in memory of former member Marjorie Milano.

Thanks, too, to Joshua and Bette Anne Crowell for a donation to DHS as a gift to celebrate Lura and Seth Crowell's 50th wedding anniversary.

**Dennis Historical Society**  
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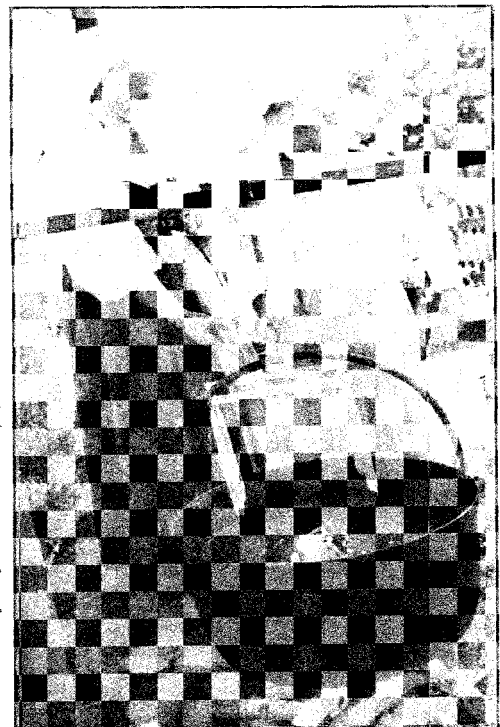
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## The Way We Were

Were you at the Manse for Dennis Festival Days? Then you might have asked Terri Fox if you could dip candles, too. After slaving over that pot of hot wax on that hot day, we wonder how she could possibly stand over the fire to make Johnny cakes, too. Susan Kelley had a turn over the dye pot turning out her home-spun yarn in a brand new color. Our ladies at the outside refreshment table were kept busy dishing out ice cream and pouring lemonade. If you went home hungry, it was nobody's fault but your own. Well over 300 visitors toured the Manse and the old school house on the grounds.

The following day hostesses at Jericho greeted friends old and new at an open house and barn tour. The best part of this location was the front and center view for the antique car parade. There were people sitting in chairs by the roadside up and down the street, but Jericho offered the added incentive of refreshments served outside under the trees and all were grateful for the shade and hospitality.



Mistress Fox and apprentice Hallie Stidham  
August 20, 2005 *Photo by Richard Howes*