



# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter January 2022

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**As is our January custom, there will be no Board Meeting this month.**

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: [info@dennishistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@dennishistoricalsociety.org)



## *Happy New Year! May 2022 Be A Wonderful One!*



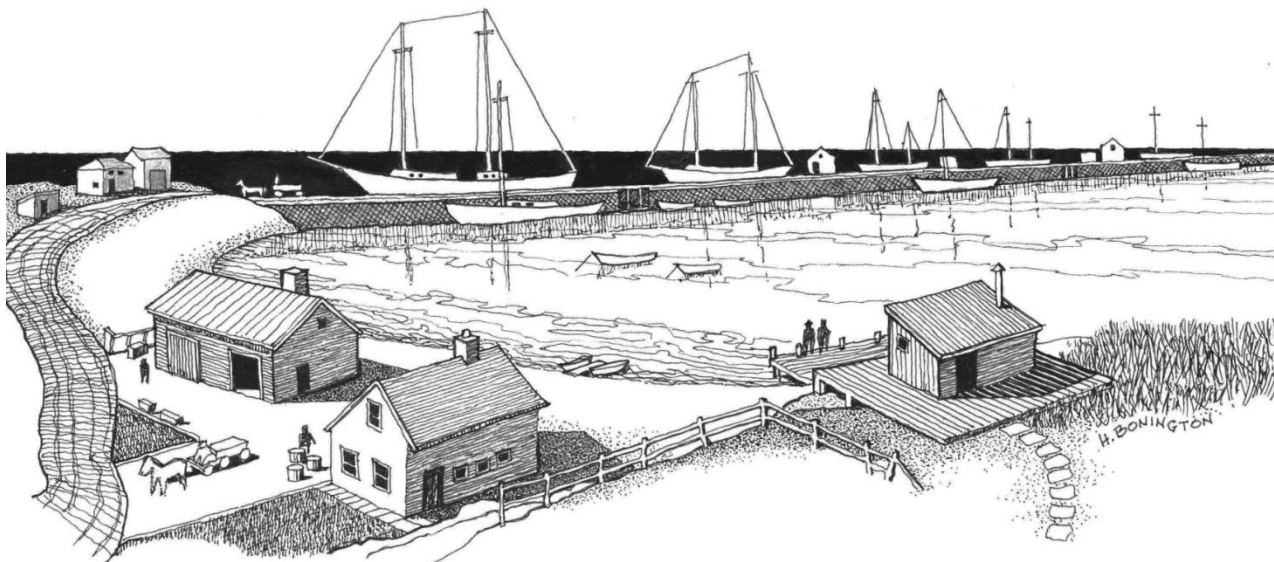
What better way to start the new year than with a look back! In his continuing series *Imagining the Past*, Howard Bonington combines his amazing artistic skill and imagination to recreate what was, but no longer is. Inspired by a visit last summer, this time it's the harbor which once was at –

### *Corporation Beach*

*I just got over a spell of wandering about the Cape and reached the Bayside. It was a clear, sunny day. There's a great beach over there called Corporation Beach, and I was lounging comfortably watching the bathers, young and old, enjoy the waters. My thoughts wandered. "Corporation" is such a commercial sounding name. It didn't seem to describe the natural ambience of the site that I was experiencing. Out of curiosity I reread about it in Nancy Thacher Reid's book, Dennis, Cape Cod. Then I researched it on various internet sources. This is what I learned!*

*In the 1800s, it was indeed commercial. A group of local investors had joined together to build a stone and timber pier to serve packet boats and the fishing industry on the Cape. The pier originated on Nobscusset Point and extended some 600 feet eastward into Cape Cod Bay. Appropriately the pier owners named themselves The Nobscusset Point Pier Corporation – Aha – THE CORPORATION! And so, the site became known as Corporation Beach. When its use declined over the years, due to changes in commercial factors, the pier was either demolished or allowed to succumb to weather and tides. The beach has evolved into a superior area to sun and bathe, but it never lost its name.*

*In idly surveying the present, relaxed scene, I began to consider how it must have differed in the 1800s. I had found no remaining graphic images, just brief verbal descriptions. It must have been a busy place - the pier with packet boats unloading passengers and cargo, fishing boats arriving and departing, buildings for service and storage. I started to imagine the old scene. Ed. Note – for more information – you'll find it in Nobscusset Harbor at Corporation Beach by Patricia A. Walker, available on our website and at the Dennis Memorial Library.*



*Nobscusset Harbor at Corporation Beach by Howard Bonington*

**Thank you again Howard for sharing your time machine!**

Our next article is from a newly found gem of a writer, Katharine Thacher Peace, who we all remember from her feature contribution to the November Newsletter, *Fate of a Dennis Schooner*. I asked Katharine to say a bit about writing and the source of inspiration for her articles. This was her reply –

*As an avid amateur genealogist, I'm always on the lookout for interesting tidbits of information and stories about the many branches of my family who have resided for generations on Cape Cod, primarily in Yarmouth and Dennis. So, I was delighted when the Sturgis Library made historical Cape Cod newspapers available online several years ago. If you've not done so already, it is well worth a browse on a rainy afternoon, such as we've had lately! The following sad tale is one of the stories I came across during my searches.*

## ***Tragedy in West Dennis: A Community's Compassion***

*Every small town has its share of tragedies, and Dennis has been no exception. Often it is how a town's citizens handle a devastating event that defines its character. Such was the case with the Baxter tragedy of 1858.*

*Elijah Howes Baxter Jr. (brother of my great-great-grandmother, Paulina Baxter) was born in 1825 in Dennis to Captain Elijah H. Baxter Sr., captain of the schooner "Molly" which had been built in 1822 at Yarmouth by his father, Obed Baxter. Elijah himself was destined to follow in their footsteps, and eventually captained the "Mercy", a fishing schooner that ran out of Bass River in South Dennis. In 1847, Captain Baxter married Olive Baker Crowell, daughter of Allen Bangs Crowell and Olive Baker of Yarmouth.*

*The couple made their home in West Dennis and had two daughters, Mary in 1848 and little Olivia in 1853. Sadly, when the baby daughter was but five months old, Captain Baxter was lost at sea in a storm in December of 1853. It can only be imagined how Mrs. Baxter suffered this shock and subsequently struggled to raise her daughters alone.*

*Apparently, she remained in the Baxter household, because in the following census she is listed as "head of household" with the two girls. It is presumed that family and friends contributed to the upkeep of the little family, no doubt a comfort to Olive Baxter, widowed at the age of only twenty-five. However, community support was not enough to prevent something from going terribly, terribly wrong.*

*Four years and two months after the death of Captain Baxter, a quiet morning in February 1858 was disrupted by the frantic knocks of Mrs. Baxter's neighbor on the pastor's front door. He was begged to come quickly to the Baxter home, something dreadful had happened. Dreadful indeed, for when Rev. Wilkie arrived, he found four-and-a-half year old Olivia dead on the kitchen floor. Incredibly, Olive Baxter had strangled her little daughter to death with a scarf.*

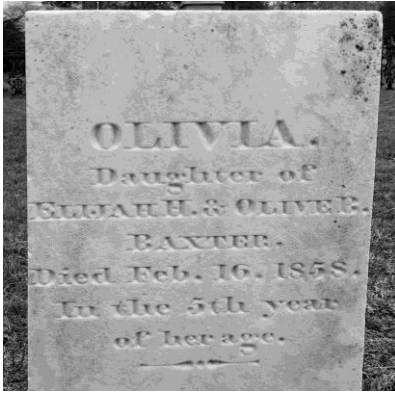
*It is possible that Olive Baxter had suffered a serious depression at the loss of her husband four years earlier from which she never fully recovered. Perhaps her depression worsened to the point where she had some sort of psychotic break that prompted her to commit such a heinous deed. In those days, of course, there was little understanding of mental illness, and even if friends and neighbors had noticed her despondency, they would have had little idea what to do to help her.*

*The community, who had rallied to her aid after her husband's loss, did seem to understand that this awful event must have been caused by something beyond Mrs. Baxter's control, for the newspaper account states, "No question but that the act was the result of insanity. No mother loved her children better than Mrs. Baxter." (Barnstable Patriot, 23 February 1858)*

*No charges were brought against the poor woman, from what I can find. Most likely she was deemed unfit to stand trial and/or was declared not guilty due to insanity. In the next town census, Mrs. Baxter is listed as "servant" living with the Kelley family, and by 1900 she is found living with her elder brother Willard Crowell in Dennis, so the community obviously provided for her with compassion after the tragedy.*

*Olive Baxter eventually moved to New Bedford into the home of her elder daughter, Mary, who had been just short of ten years old when her little sister was murdered. Mary had married Eugene Perry, originally from Sandwich. They had two children, Elijah, named after Mary's father, and Olivia, named for the lost little sister.*

*Mrs. Baxter lived until 1908, when she was 80 years of age. This means that she had to live with the knowledge of what she had done for fifty long years, assuming she recovered, at least to some degree, from her fit of psychosis in 1858. Perhaps the little granddaughter soothed her troubled heart in her old age. We will never know. But we do know that the citizens of Dennis met this horrific tragedy with sadness and with empathy for the troubled mother who acted in response to some internal force that they did not understand.*



*Olive Baxter was buried in New Bedford near her daughter's home, and her husband, Captain Elijah Baxter, "lost at sea", was added to her stone in memoriam. Little Olivia's pitiful grave can be seen in the South Dennis cemetery behind the South Dennis Congregational Church. Perhaps she and her mother are reunited now in love and forgiveness.*

**Thank you Katharine for another fascinating story!**

## ***We Have a Long Reach***

Emails come into the DHS Website from all over the world. Sometimes they are requesting permission to use images and information that have been found in our Digital Archive. I thought the information which was included in the following request was more than worthy of passing along.

*Dennis Historical Society*

*Dear Sirs,*

*Allow me to introduce myself. I am Dmitry Shparo, Doctor of Mathematics, also I am a polar explorer, the first who had reached the North Pole from the Continent on skis in 1979.*



*In 1998, my son Matvey and I crossed on skis the Bering Strait, separating Chukotka (Russia) and Alaska. I am well known in the USA, President Bush, the Elder and President Bill Clinton congratulated me on my polar achievements.*

*I've written the book called "The Unknown Peary" (about the American polar explorer Robert Peary); it relies heavily on the archival materials from the American sources and American books.*

*The last chapter, 32<sup>nd</sup> is dedicated to those people of the USA who did not agree with R. Peary's victorious statements. One of them was Captain Thomas Hall, from my point of view, an absolutely outstanding man.*

*Hall published the book "Has the North Pole Been Discovered", 1917, which I have and which I quoted. I would like to give a photo of Thomas Hall to my book and found it on your website: I am sending you the scanned photo.*

*I'd sincerely appreciate if you give me the permission to use this photo in my book. I would also be very grateful if you tell me in what form I should give a link to your society in order to express our gratitude to you?*

*The book is published in Russia in Russian by the Publishing House "Paulsen". Of course, this book is not a commercial one. After reviewing your collection, I'd like to express my admiration and respect to you.*

*Thank you for your time and attention.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Dr. Dmitry Shparo*

*My response to the good doctor on November 26<sup>th</sup> was -*

*Hello Doctor Shparo,*

*What an amazing letter!*

*You have permission to use the image. If you caption it with **Dennis Historical Society Digital Archive** that is sufficient.*

*Best of luck with your publication,*

*Dave*



**Thomas Hall**  
**DHS Digital Archive**

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**2021  
DHS Annual Appeal**

You should all have received your Society's 2021 Annual Appeal letter asking for support for *wish list* items for each of our three museums.

*Please* give generously! Your contribution will greatly assist our museum volunteers in fulfilling our Mission Statement:

**To Preserve, Protect & Promote the  
the History of Dennis, Massachusetts**

*If you have already given  
Thank you!*



***We have a winner!***

The first reader to correctly respond to last month's mystery house was ***Ellyn Hurd***-***Congratulations!*** The house in the picture is 60 Old Main Street in West Dennis.



The image was provided by  
*Premier Commercial Real Estate*  
of Centerville, MA.