



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter June 2023

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**The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, June 13th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village
Members Welcome**

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

Imagining the Past & More

As we head into the 2023 Museum Season, there is much to be excited about! On Saturday, July 1st, the DHS Maritime Museum opens with *"Piering into the Past; the Lost Wharves of Dennis."* The wonderful play on words in the program's title, concocted by Kevin Keegan is one of the things that makes me hate *spell check*. Maybe someday when AI becomes more involved in writing programs, cleverness won't get flagged!

In previous newsletters, we have been fortunate to have had multiple contributions by longtime DHS member, local historian and artist extraordinaire Howard Bonington. In this newsletter, we are introduced to a new piece of Dennis history. It is another in Howard's ongoing series *Imagining the Past*, and it will be followed by a surprise treat for all of us later in the issue! I am quite certain what you are about to read will be known by only a few!

First, here is a little background. It started with this email from Howard – *I'm thinking about the breakwater off West Dennis Beach. In reading Bob Kelley's book about Daniel Wing, there's a Wing write-up about the breakwater and its relationship to the Old Pier (Crowell) and the discontinued construction of the breakwater. Bob also gave me similar information. The reason for its abandonment seems to be that the reduced water depth around it was due to inevitable natural silting in. To me this implies that its original intention was to be a freestanding wharf for the transfer of goods from large ships to lighters. But I don't find anything that confirms this. The transfer of blue rock from shore via scows to construct the breakwater is mentioned, also a storage shed and a beacon. Is this one of the lost wharves? If appropriate, I'd like to add a drawing about it to the set. I can create/imagine something, but I'd like it to be reasonably believable. Do you have any additional info?*

I emailed the Chair of the DHS Maritime Museum Pat Corcoran and Assistant Librarian at the DHS Library Maureen Sullivan asking for help. Howard's information was confirmed, but no new information was gleaned. Here is Howard's rendering, and a compilation of his research -

The Breakwater off West Dennis Beach, often known as the "Mysterious Rock Island off Dennis". Someone has called it "One of Cape Cod's Seven Great Mysteries"

I seem to be obsessed with making a drawing of the breakwater in relation to "lost piers" (or any other reason). I spent a couple of hours this afternoon pulling together things I've already learned, together with a few new things. This sums up my sources: Daniel Wing's writings in the book published by Bob Kelley, another write-up given to me by Bob, a Cape Cod Times article of May 5, 2019, which published work by its writer, Eric Williams in 2013 (from the Internet) - pages 306 and 307 of Nancy Thacher Reid's well known book about Dennis, 1639 – 1993, which mentions Dogfish Bar, and the Harbor of Bass River.



Construction of the West Dennis Breakwater by Howard Bonington

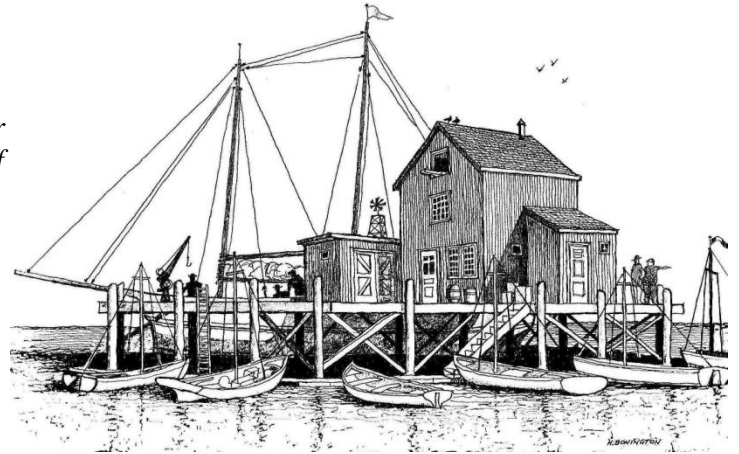
Some of the facts –

Built in the early 1830s, the breakwater is about a half mile from the Dennis shoreline. It was always intended to be an island and never attached permanently to land. The huge chunks of rock (blue rock) were gathered at a pond up Bass

River and floated downriver on scows to the shore. A four and a half inch diameter hawser was stretched from the shore to the breakwater location. To utilize the hawser, a pulley system was anchored on shore at one end with another one on piles driven at the breakwater location. Using this system, the scows loaded with rock were pulled out to the island, unloaded, and returned to land. Steam powered engines were not available. Teams of oxen were used and a tremendous amount of manual labor.

The purpose of the breakwater was to enhance the use of Bass River Harbor (as established by the Crowell Pier) by reducing shoaling at the mouth of the Bass River, and create an area for bigger boats to offload stuff onto smaller boats set to head upriver. When it was found that in spite of its partial completion, the harbor side was still silting in, the remainder of the project was abandoned as a failure. Plans to build a lighthouse there were abandoned. It has now just become a landmark – a place for the cormorants to roost.

An aside: During World War II, the island was used by the U.S. Navy for practice bombing, using dummy bombs. For a time it became known as “Bombers Island”.



The Crowell Pier by Howard Bonington

A further aside – if you type *Bomber Island, West Dennis, Cape Cod* in your browser, you will not only find Eric Williams’ article, but also a video of a quick trip around the breakwater. Yes, it is covered with cormorants and yes, it is covered with their droppings. As you will see below, from space it looks as if it has been whitewashed.

Here is a satellite image taken of the West Dennis Beach and the pile of rocks which had already been moved into place when the project was abandoned. Look at the location of the breakwater in relationship to the beach and the mouth of Bass River and you begin to appreciate the magnitude of the undertaking. AND, it was the 1830s! Marvel also at the durability of blue rock. After almost 200 years of being pounded by wind, water and turning tides, it is still very much a presence. Then, flip back to page 1 and study the way in which Howard has captured the technical aspects of the undertaking. Only one blessed with immense artistic talent combined with the mechanical knowledge

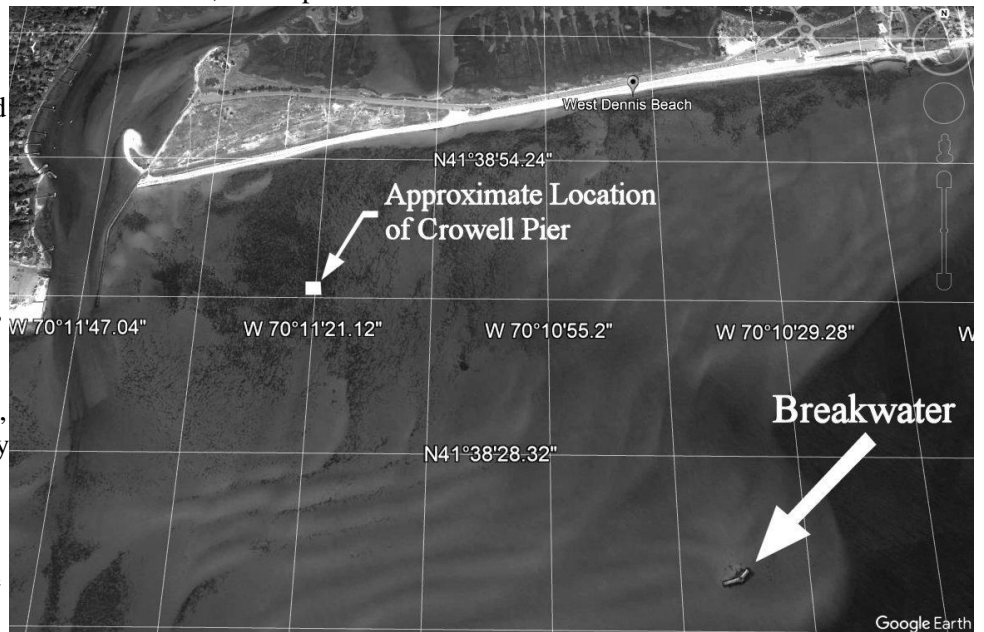


Image courtesy of Google and Google Earth

acquired by being an architect could produce such a rendering. **Thank you Howard!**

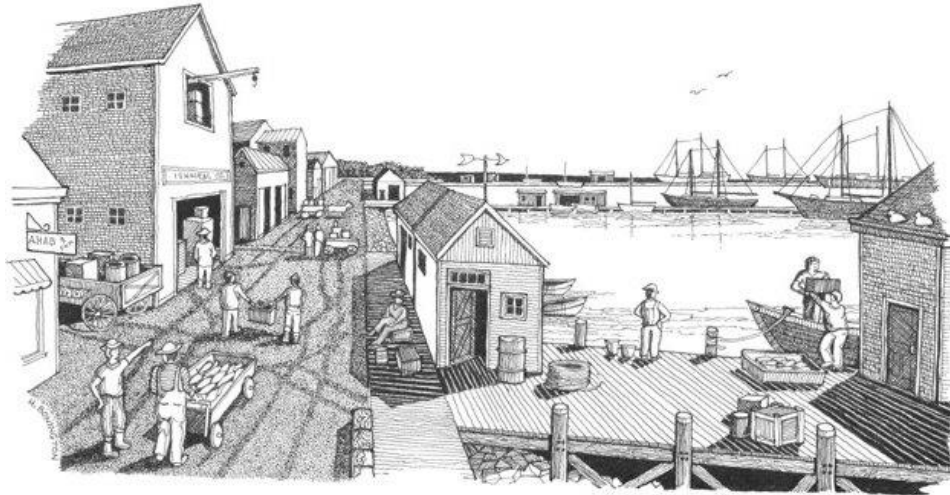
For those who missed or might have forgotten the details of its history, let’s look back at an excerpt from the March 2021 Newsletter based on information provided to Howard by Bob Kelley about the Crowell Pier –

The pier was constructed, circa 1795, by Captain Silvanus Crowell as a commercial venture. Crowell came up with the idea of building a fixed pier structure at the deep hole at Bass River Harbor. There a freighter would be able to tie up and safely transfer its cargo to/from a large group of shallow draft vessels at one time. Crowell, being a local businessman in South Yarmouth and a ship owner, must have looked on it as a profitable undertaking due to the advantages it provided. When constructed, it was probably a very busy place. Among other users, the saltworks was nearby up-river and its barges could easily reach the pier. Crowell could view the pier from his house in South Yarmouth and thus could monitor its activities.

The Wharves of Dennis Port

Howard's rendering of the Crowell Pier first appeared – Kevin might have said “apiered” – in the March 2021 Newsletter in the first of Howard's *Imagining the Past* series. This issue is also available on the DHS Website. The article begins with a quotation from an article written by our own Phyllis Horton in the April 2018 Newsletter describing a search for an image of the wharves of Dennis Port when Nancy Thatcher Reid was writing her beloved *Dennis, Cape Cod*. It was a search which eluded Nancy. From the newsletter -

Too late for Nancy's book, the depiction was found in a scrap book belonging to Michael Lincoln, who married Phyllis's niece Janet Snow. The scrap book was made by Mike's grandmother, and its existence was recalled by Mike's father Fred. Finally, there was proof of one of the three 600' wharves which stretched out into Nantucket Sound and gave Dennis Port its name.



The Wharf at Dennis Port by Howard Bonington

Wharf and later Eastern Wharf. Ed. Note – The island pier referred to was constructed in 1834 with the permission of the Massachusetts General Court. It was a floating pier and was not connected to the land.

Thank you again Howard from all of us!

For more about Howard, please check out the *March 2019* issue of the DHS Newsletter available on our website. Go to – www.dennishistoricalsociety.org and click on the Newsletter tab. For more of his *Imagining the Past*, see the following issues – *March 2021, July 2021, October 2021 and January 2022.*

This Unknown Bottle

In a bit of a switch from *This Unknown House*, we are trying to learn anything we can about an East Dennis patent medicine manufacturer named Downes. The search starts with a request which came in to DHS email with these picture and the following information. – *I have an early to mid 19th century bottle with a partial paper label. It is "Laxative Jaundice Bitters" with a lengthy description prepared by what looks like N S Downes, E. Dennis Mass. I would like to get some information about this bottle if anyone in the Dennis Historical Society is familiar with N S Downes. Here is a picture of the bottle. The New England Glass Company manufactured this type of bottle until about 1840 or so, the initials are tough to read on the name but I do believe it is N S Downes. Thank You.*



Pictures were provided by the inquirer

If anyone can help by providing any information about the product or its Manufacturer/bottler/seller, please email me at info@dennishistoricalsociety.org Thank you!

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Saturday, July 8, 1 - 4 pm

**WEAVING
 ON THE LOOM**



Join Dennis Historical Society's Susan Kelley
 for this special one-day-only event at the iconic

1736 JOSIAH DENNIS MANSE
 61 Whig Street in Dennis Village
FREE ADMISSION

**PIERING
 INTO THE PAST**

The Lost Wharves of Dennis

Auction Sale

OF BAKER'S WHARF, in DENNIS VILLAGE, at 1 o'clock P.M., on the premises. The finest Wharf Property on Cape Cod. Over 15,000 square feet of land, with all the buildings, including a large Coal Shed, a massive Lumber Shed, Shakes and Offices, all in perfect repair, with the good will of an established and lucrative cash business of forty years standing, which will yield \$2000 annually, well managed. Coal and Lumber come high, but we have to have them. Together with a large and valuable lot of Personal Property, including two large Horse Boxes, Harness, Coal Shovel, Truck and Saw, 50 tons of Egg and Broken Franklin Coal, 200 tons of Egg and Shove Lackawanna Coal, large assortment of Lumber, Sperrins, a Patankin Shovel, large set of Tools, Double Sand PloUGH, Drags, Trucks, ironing clock and Desk, 500 pounds of Shells, Spices, etc., Broken Trucks and Balls, Giant Pliers, Dogbits and Gear, Derrick and Gear, E. C. Moore's safe (Cost \$100), 2 Pattern boxes, etc. The only business of its kind within a circumference of 15 miles. The above premises and property will absolutely be sold to the highest bidder. Returns given upon application, by the owner and proprietor for 20 years past (now retired from the business). Terms easy. For full particulars and name of address - see Washington Street, Boston.



**EXHIBITION OPENING
 SATURDAY, JULY 1, 1 - 4 PM**

DENNIS MARITIME MUSEUM
 West Dennis Graded School House, 2nd Floor
FREE ADMISSION/WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE

MARITIME MUSEUM OPEN THEREAFTER
 Wednesdays & Fridays: 1 - 4 pm through September 8

Wednesdays & Fridays is correct, a DHS Calendar correction!