



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 28 Number 7

July 2005

Calendar of Events

Board Meetings are open to all interested members of the DHS. Next meeting
Wednesday, July 13
3:00 P.M.

Josiah Dennis Manse

**Bike Tour of Historic
Dennis Port**
Saturday, July 16
9:30 A.M.

Mary Kuhrtz will lead a narrated bike tour telling stories of early village residents and the thriving maritime business that gave the village its name. Park at the Town Parking Lot on Hall Street. Meet at the Village Green across the street. Helmets required for children and requested for adults.

Rain date July 17
1:30 P.M.

Save the dates:

Sat., Aug. 20
**Colonial Open House at
the Manse.**

Sun., Aug. 21
**Old Fashioned Skills
Day at Jericho**

Don't You Just Love a Mystery?

And isn't it fun when a mystery is solved? *Nancy Thacher Reid*

A few months ago (*see December 2004 Newsletter*) we asked if anyone had any idea about the mysterious carvings of whales which we see on Hokum Rock and on the breakwater on the east side of the mouth of Bass River. No one appeared to know how these examples of folk art had been created and by whom. But during the long, cold and snowy winter, a good friend of Dennis has come up with the answer.

A letter from Priscilla Hall has cleared up our mystery, just in time for the dedication of the historical marker at the Hokum Rock site. Priscilla remembers Stanley Woodward, also known as Woody, who with his wife June (Foster), June's brother Ken, and Priscilla loved to walk through the woodlands and along the beaches of the Cape and the South Shore in the 50's and 60's, with the children tagging along. Woody always carried his chisel with him, and would leave small carvings of whales along the trails they walked. It is Woody's carvings which adorn our glacial rock and the breakwater at Bass River. Although not related to the better known artist also named Stanley who lived and worked on the Massachusetts North Shore, Woody was a talented artist whose other works included the marine and Indian scenes which adorned the Woodward's home and summer cottage.

Priscilla writes, (*Woody*) *is no longer with us, but these small whales remind us of wonderful days together.* Thank you, Priscilla, for solving this mystery, and thank you, Woody, for these whimsical and artistic additions to the scenes of Cape Cod which we all love.

Our Great Glacial Erratic (also known as Hokum Rock)

One of the town's oldest treasures is Hokum Rock, located just off Hokum Rock Road in Dennis. Growing up in Dennis many years ago, it was a favorite place for picnics and for exploration and climbing by local youngsters. The origin of the name of the rock pile is not documented. (Traditions surrounding the *naming* of the rock were discussed in the January 2005 issue of the Newsletter. Take your pick.) Now for a scientific description.

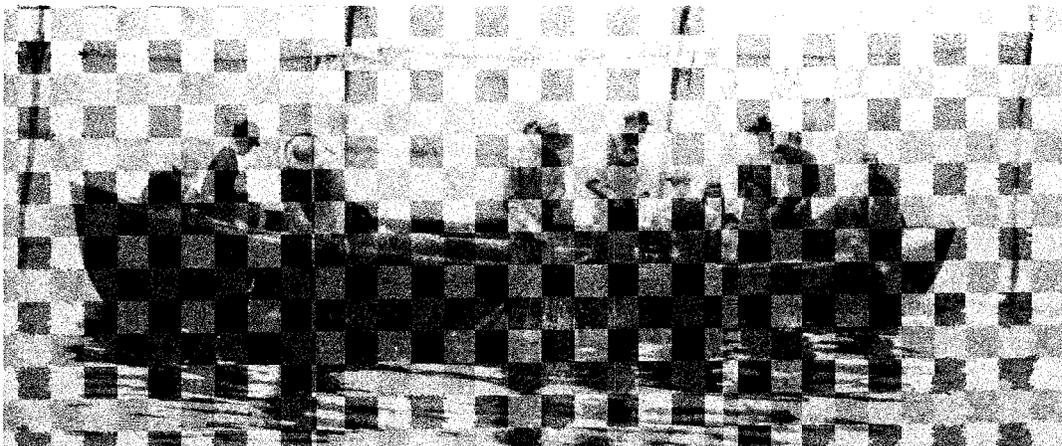
According to **Sandy Wiper**, a retired teacher of geology, the rock is classified as igneous commonly called diorite. It consists of a blend of biotite, (mica), plagioclase (feldspar), and some opaque minerals—probably magnetite and ilmenite. Its place of origin is probably north or west of Boston, as a fair amount of diorite is still found in that vicinity. Its age is between the pre-Cambrian and mid-Paleozoic ages, approximately 600,000,000 to 300,000,000 years old. The rocks were carried or pushed here by the glaciers, maybe 50,000 to 100,000 years ago. They were exposed when the ice melted over 20,000 years ago. I think we can safely say this pile of rocks is our oldest historic monument.

In 1996, **Luke Dignan** and his dad Michael measured this rock pile for a report Luke was doing while at Ezra H. Baker School. They found the circumference is 98 feet at the base and the height of the rock at the north east face is 14.5 feet.

The town of Dennis now owns a small conservation area around this geological wonder, and the Dennis Historical Commission has prepared a marker which is mounted on a stone near the large rock pile. If you have never seen Hokum Rock, you have missed one of the great natural wonders of Cape Cod. It's still a great place for a picnic—but be sure to clean up your picnic site. Let's keep our great natural wonder as nature intended.

Fishing, anyone?

A short while ago I came across some notes made by Pauline F. Derick for Mr. Roland Barker who was looking for information for a talk on mills and fishing which he gave on March 14, 1966. I must admit to great confusion over this business of weir fishing until I came across the pictures in Burt Derick's Fishing Album. I still have questions, such as why is this woman in the photo from the Jacob Sears Library collection all dressed up? Is that man wearing a derby hat? Let's see what we can find out.



This photo shows a boat which has entered the trap. First the ropes called outhaulers are undone, one side of the mouth is dropped, and the boat enters the trap. The men pick up the bottom of the net on one side, pulling it up doing the same across the bowl until they have the fish in a pocket. They then bail and sort fish into the boat. The outhaulers have to be set again so the trap will catch for the next day. On closer inspection there seem to be several onlookers. Tourists perhaps?

According to Pauline, the first type of fish weir was called a fike and was set in the rivers, used mostly to catch eels. **Edgar F. Wixon** of Dennis Port had the first off-shore weir in the town of Dennis and **Zenas Baker** of West Dennis had the second. The weir consists of a leader, which is set on the edge of a bar, which also acts as a leader, in 20 feet of water and runs 500 yards to a heart and bowl in 30 feet of water. The bowl has a radius of 50 feet, 320 feet around it, and big enough to take a 30 foot boat. The fish that are migrating north to feed and spawn hit the leader, following it in an effort to get by, then into the heart and then the trap or bowl. These are usually set in a row of 3 covering a distance of a mile.

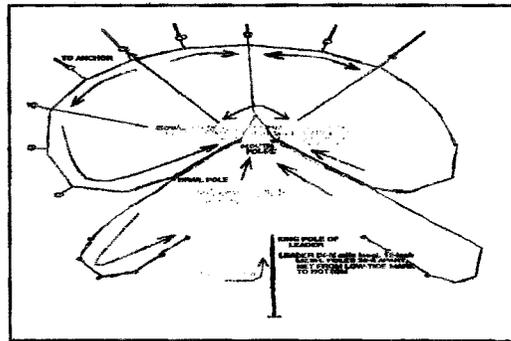
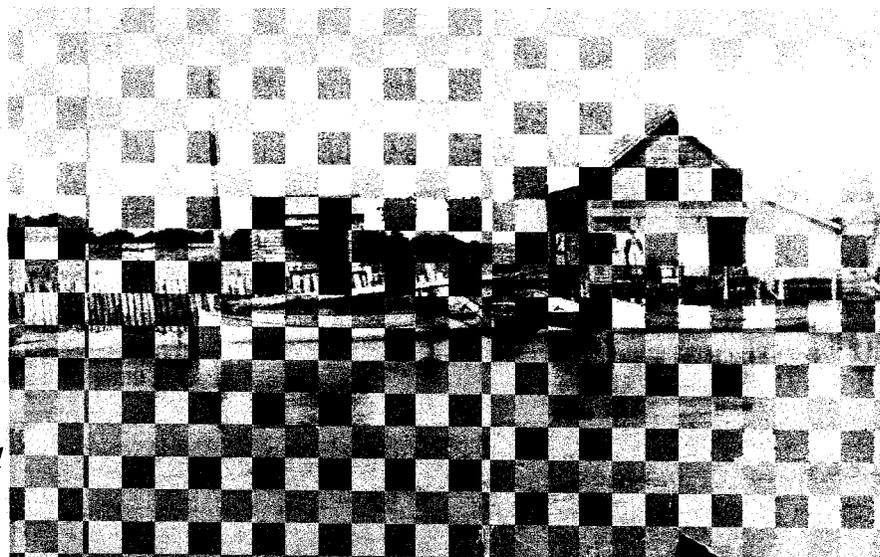


Diagram of fish weir with arrows indicating the motion of fish

This type of fishing has been one of the best-paying, but the most expensive to do, as the cost to set one weir is about \$6,000 and a fisherman has to have material enough to replace any destruction by storms. The fish caught include herring, shad, pogies, squid, mackerel, butterfish, and on the north side of the Cape, tuna. In a good season, it has been known to take \$3,000 worth of fish a day. One year Mr. Nathaniel H. Wixon caught 10 tons of tuna in one trap on one day, averaging 100 pounds each dressed, and another time, 23 tuna the smallest of which was 400 pounds.

There were at one time as many as 70 traps on the North and South sides of the Cape. Now there are none on the North side and about 15 total left. Provincetown area used to have 30 traps alone and now has only 4. (Remember this was in 1966.)

The picture shows a view of Herring River. The building on the right is the shanty of Edgar F. Wixon, with Edgar on the dock and son Nathaniel in the boat. The building was later moved downriver (toward the left). This photo was taken around 1907.



Have you tried our website at dennishistsoc.org? Let us know what you think. Any suggestions? Need to reach us? You can e-mail us at dennishs@cape.com. The Manse telephone has an updated message of DHS and Manse events at (508) 385-2232. You can also leave a message. To reach the Jericho House and Barn Museum call (508) 394-0206.

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The Way We Were

This picture is from Burt Derick's Fishing Album "Concerning the Weir Fishing Business of Nathaniel H. Wixon of Dennis Port." It shows "Than" Wixon on the left and Max Finkel in Provincetown.

The tuna was caught in a trap off Dennis. At the time, Max Finkel, a fish buyer in Provincetown, was running a contest with \$500 for the largest tuna caught in traps that year. Though the prize money was less than he would have received for selling the fish, "Than" took it to Provincetown and entered it into the contest. He won the prize, much to the chagrin of the Provincetown fishermen. That was the last year that a prize was offered!!

