



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

dennishs@cape.com

www.dennishistsoc.org

Volume 32 Number 6 Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to pmrhorton@aol.com July 2009

This Old House 401 Main Street, West Dennis

One of the grandest houses in Dennis was built by a man of very humble beginnings. Obed Look Baker was born in 1817 in Little Compton, RI, a natural child of Mary Look Baker. It would be interesting to learn how Mary and Obed arrived here. Mary married Heman Baxter of South Dennis in 1822.

Obed grew up in South Dennis and attended the one-room schoolhouse near his home. As with about two thirds of the boys in Dennis of that era Obed went to sea at the young age of nine as a “cookie boy”. This meant he did dishes, cleaned up after everyone and ran to the cook’s every whim. He soon advanced to cook’s helper, then a deck hand and became captain at age 20. He was surely a bright and ambitious young man to have advanced that far in eleven years on the meager education he had received up to the sixth grade.

Obed was in command of several sailing ships for 20 years, most notably the 3-masted Schooner Luther Child which he sailed into the Harbor at Malta on December 10, 1849--the first American ship to do so. His reputation was such that the prestigious Boston and Philadelphia Steamship Co. invited him to join them in sailing the new steamships just coming into use. He became so proficient in steam that he was made captain of every new steamship that came off the ways for B & P. He became the Senior Commander of the entire fleet and before he retired he became a stockholder in the company. He became a director after retirement. Obed was admitted as a Life Member of the Boston Marine Society in 1866. His expertise and willingness to share his knowledge brought him great respect among other captains and mariners along the East coast.



Obed married Susan Kelley Crowell, daughter of prominent businessman, Edward Crowell and Sarah Baker of West Dennis in 1838. She died in 1856 and he then married

Rebecca Howes Nickerson of West Dennis in 1857. He had children by both wives.

Obed bought land from his father-in-law, Edward Crowell, and Luther Child in 1842 on Main Street perhaps thinking to build a house there in time. However, he and Susan lived at her father’s home on Church Street until her death. In 1861 he purchased more land abutting his property on Main Street from Luther Child, across from Luther’s homestead, and built his own house in 1862 with a restrained Greek one-story portico. He named it “Elmgate”.

Within a few years Obed remodeled his house into an imposing Greek Revival mansion with horse stables, a carriage house, pastures, vegetable and lovely flower gardens on the surrounding twenty acres. The Ionic columns arrived at the South Dennis Depot in two freight cars and the house was renamed “The Columns”.

Next month I will conclude with more details of this lovely home and a picture that shows “The Columns” in all of its glory.

Phyllis Horton

Is it the End of the Summer Sun on Chase's Ocean Grove?

Of course, I don't remember it, but I first came to Cape Cod at the age of 10 months in the summer of 1932 and got such a severe sunburn on a foggy day at the beach by Chase's Ocean Grove in Dennisport, that my mother had to call a doctor. She had no idea that fog and haze do nothing to shield from the summer sun.

In 1932, my parents, my brother and I were summer residents of Cape Cod. We first came to Chase's Ocean Grove, and my parents considered buying one of the small beach cottages leased on Chase's Ocean Grove beach property. Instead, they decided to buy two small lots of land on the Dennisport side of Swan River, near the Lower County Road bridge. For a few summers we put up a tent on our land for our annual vacation. Then about 1937, my parents hired a contractor to build a small cottage, where we moved year-round in 1944.

Though my memories are hazy of our very early vacations at Chase's Ocean Grove, the grove, along with nearby Grindell's Trailer Park, took on a lot of importance by the time I was 12 years old and we finally moved to the Cape permanently.

Chase's little convenience store was a magnet for area young kids, and while I was never allowed to go there after dark, when the teenagers congregated there, it was still a fascinating place for me even in the middle of the day. I made a lot of "summer friends" during those summers when we lived nearby. Most of them disappeared from my life when we moved to South Dennis. But, they have not been forgotten.

That's why I was struck with a wave of nostalgia by the recent newspaper articles about the uncertainty of the future of the 40-acre cottage colony. The recent unexpected death of the grove owner, Jeffery Chase at age 47, has some 300-cottage owners wondering what will happen to the nearly 80-year-old family business and, of course, they are concerned about their status as tenants on leased land. The question is whether it will be continued by a trust to which it reverted on Jeffery Chase's death or will be put up for sale.

The area in Dennisport where Chase's Grove is located overlooking Nantucket Sound more or less came into being in the early part of the 20th Century. There are hundreds of small summer cottages still in existence there, though some have been converted into year-round homes and enlarged. But, substantially, the original summer cottage colony is still evident.

That cluster of summer homes – to my mind – is a remarkable example of early 20th Century beach vacation architecture that would be worth preserving. We surely will not see its like again. The price of waterfront property has soared out of the range of middle class families. And these days no one would pay hundreds of thousands of dollars, or a million or more, for a piece of land and leave a tiny, two-bedroom beach cottage on it. Down it would come and up with the new house.

Am I advocating a Dennisport Historical District? No, I'm too much a realist for that. It just will not happen, I know.

But, in a perfect world, it could happen, and wouldn't it be nice.

Peggy Eastman

The Stephen Homer House

The five-bay federal home was built circa 1800 by sea captain and later justice of the peace Stephen Homer--the son of Yarmouth sea captain Stephens Homer and Elizabeth Chapman--who married Thankful Chapman in a ceremony officiated by Reverend Nathan Stone in 1792. The couple had eight children, all of whom lived to adulthood, and two of whom--first son Joshua (after 1857) and second son Stephen Jr (who bought half the house from his parents in 1832)--later lived as adults in the home.

The main house is a four-over-four structure with seven fireplaces and with two ells: an addition off the back constructed contemporaneously with the main house (though built with recycled materials from a much earlier dwelling) and an ell off the east side built about 1860. The property also had an 1830s barn that

blew over during Hurricane Bob in 1991 and once also included a barn across 6A that is depicted in a 1906 postcard on page 122 of the Dennis volume of the Postcard History Series. The house itself is illustrated as Plate 32 in Alfred Easton Poor's 1932 landmark work, *Colonial Architecture of Cape Cod, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard*. Architecturally, the Homer House is strikingly similar to two sea captains' houses in Brewster, both built in 1799: the Elijah Cobb House on Lower Road and the Isaac Clark House on Stony Brook Road.

The Homer House was purchased in November 2007 by Kevin and Linda Keegan of Silver Spring, Maryland, as their future home. Linda grew up in Milford and has been a summer resident of Dennis since the late 1960s while Kevin has visited here every summer and more since 1978. The Keegans are passionate about historic preservation and have hired old-house specialist David Ottinger--who dismantled the Prince Sears house on South Street in Quivet Neck earlier this decade--as general contractor. The Keegans have also consulted with Historic New England and historic preservationist Robert Adam in developing strategies for bringing the Homer House back to its once grand appearance. In addition to replacing the foundations on the two ells, the Keegans hired historic mason Mike Irons from Saco, Maine, for the restoration brickwork on the two main chimney stacks, the ell chimney stack, the eight hearths, and the two beehive ovens. Work on the house in upcoming months will include the installation of all new systems, a kitchen, and 2.5 baths; repair of original plaster and pine flooring; and refurbishment of the exterior with new clapboards, shingles, and roofing. The Keegans also plan to meet with the Old Kings Highway Historic Commission about rebuilding a barn/carriage house where the old barn once stood.

The Keegans continue to research the Homers--Stephen and the artist Winslow Homer are both descended from sea captain John Homer, who came to Boston in the early 1690s, and Margery Stephens--and are interested in any early photographs, letters, or documents relating to Stephen and Thankful Homer or their descendents. Kevin can be reached at Kevin_N_Keegan@mcpsmd.org or by phone at 301.455.2116.

In Memoriam

F. James Carr Jr., Lifetime Member, avid historian, genealogist, photographer and researcher, on June 10. Copies of his photographs and postcards may be found in several publications.

Margie C. Howes, wife of Robert A. Howes Lt. Col Army (Retired), author of *Howes Genealogy, 1637-2004*, published by the Dennis Historical Society.

Pamela Van Iderstine, wife of Patron Harry Van Iderstine.

We Are Pleased to Announce:

Our sincere thanks to Pricilla Sprunt for her generous gift in support of the DHS Library.

Also, the Town of Dennis is the recipient of a \$50,000 Preservation Project Fund Grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission for the repair & preservation of the 1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum.

Dennis is still on the map! The Governor held is only Cape Cod "Town Meeting" in Dennis!!!

"A Person with a determined heart frightens problems away"

Chinese Proverb

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607



**Non-profit
Organization
US POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 2
South Dennis, MA
02660**

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Mark Your Calendars – Upcoming DHS Programs

Monday, July 6, 6:00 p.m.
Old Fashioned Pie Sale on the Green

Come buy a piece or a whole homemade pie from the Manse Bakers 11th annual pie sale. These pies may be better than what Mom baked! No early bird sales! (Proceeds go to the Dennis Manse Repair Fund)
Corner Rte. 6A and Old Bass River Road
Dennis Village



Thursday, July 16, 10:00 a.m.
Walk Through the 1860's Swan Lake Cemetery

A guided walk in the old Swan Lake Cemetery, the resting place of Dennis's only Medal of Honor winner and many local sea captains and early residents. Please join Terri Fox & her helpful 'spirits' for this interesting tour. A \$3.00 donation is suggested for the cemetery upkeep.

Meet at the Swan Lake Cemetery
Depot St., Dennis Port
Rain Date - Sun. July 19, 2:00 p.m.



Saturday, July 18, 10:00 a.m.
Children's Lawn Party

A lawn party will be held for children of all ages and will feature the stories of Jim Coogan, local author of books such as his new "Priscilla The Amazing Pinkywink". Face painting by Terri Fox. Lemonade and cookies too! A smash hit the last time! Held inside in case of rain.
South Dennis Library
389 South Main Street, South Dennis

