



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

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**The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, May 20th, 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

Ice Harvesting in Dennis

When one thinks of ice harvesting, most thoughts go directly back to the 19th century. As we learned in the February Newsletter - *In the spring of 1845, the naturalist Henry David Thoreau began building a small cabin on the shores of Concord's Walden Pond to escape the noises and activity of the city. He couldn't have predicted that his tranquility would be cut short in the winter by what was then the most modern of industries: the ice trade.*

The ice trade continued well into the 20th Century. Then, the advent of mechanical refrigeration in the 1920s, the introduction of Freon in the 1930s, which made refrigerators safer, and the boom in refrigerator sales after World War II, sounded the beginning of the end of the ice trade industry...except in rural areas slow to electrify and places where summer tourism boomed in the post-war era...places like Dennis.

An Entry from Charlie Thompson's Diary

July 7, 1950

We finally arrived at our cottage just after 4 pm, having left Darien, Connecticut at 7:00 this morning! It was a long day. The weather was hot and humid, precipitating a rather violent thunderstorm as we waited at the drawbridge in Providence. My brother and little sister slept as we made our way slowly through the streets of Taunton and Middleboro on Rt. 44. Finally, after passing under the Bourne Bridge, at the crest of a hill, the Sagamore Bridge was ahead! It was on to Dennis, AND my father let me drive the final leg!

*Three summers prior, my dad had struck up a friendship with a many generation Cape Codder when he resingled our cottage. Anson Howes was not only a local carpenter, he was also the iceman! So, even though it was getting late in the day, too late for most, our family had an **in**. It was time to go get enough ice to see us through until Anson added us to his delivery schedule.*

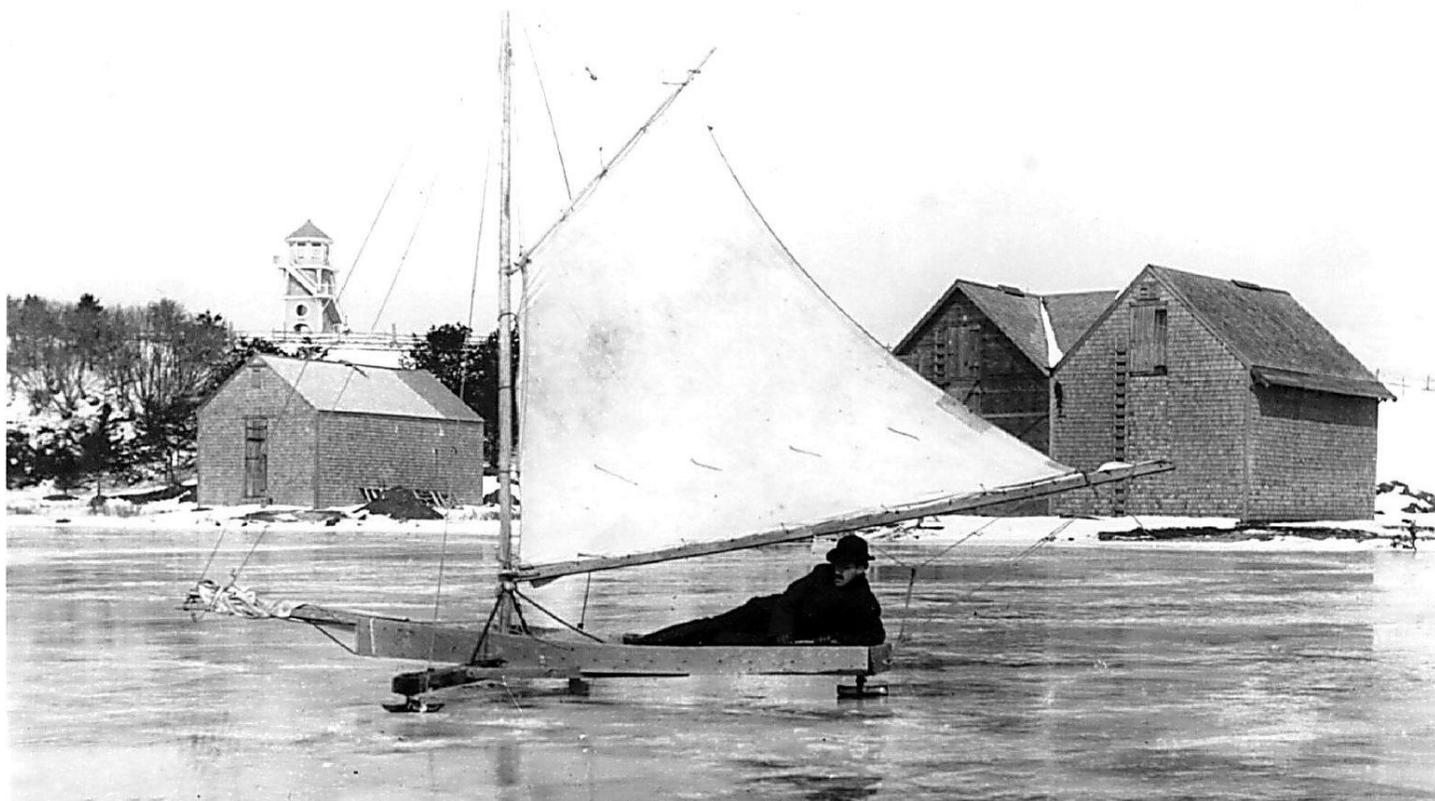
If one wanted a perfect local testimony to climate change, one need look no farther than Scargo Lake. Even with a cold snap this past winter which lasted most of three weeks, Scargo never froze to the point that ice was safe to traverse, much less thick enough to harvest. Thick enough to harvest was certainly the case in winters past. The Dennis Historical Society's Digital Archive has many pictures of Scargo Lake frozen solid...Keyword Search – Ice.

The remarkable picture on the following page is included in full width because of the incredibly interesting detail and information which it provides. The image, taken on February 23, 1903, showing Captain Tyler's one man iceboat on Scargo Lake, is from the Richard & Nancy Howes Collection. In the background of the iceboat are two icehouses. The one on the right was owned by Anson Howes, Richard (Dick) Howes' father. The one on the left was the Bleak House icehouse. The split rail fence on the rise is along what is now Rt. 6A. The tower is near the intersection of 6A and Seaside Avenue. It is on part of the Bleak House property.

From an article by Phyllis Horton in the August 1996 DHS Newsletter, we learn – *Zachariah Howes built his home in North Dennis in 1805 on a rise with Scargo Lake on the south and Cape Cod Bay on the north. One of his grandsons, Ezra T. Howes, went from Dennis to find fame and fortune. He was successful in the oil fields of Titusville, PA and returned to Dennis with his business associate Edward Cole, formerly of Orleans, to renovate the homestead into a summer residence in 1888. They changed the old family home into a very imposing residence and named it Bleak House because of its location overlooking the high moors between the house and the bay.*

The partners arrived every year with their families and relaxed to enjoy the balmy breezes and beautiful sunsets over the bay. Unlike many other summer families they hired their housekeeper, chauffeur and maids here and took them back

to Brookline in the winter. In one of the later years, they moved to Tiverton, RI for tax purposes, but continued to spend the summers here. "Aunt Esther" was the last family member to come and she stayed at Little Bleak House. Originally built as an observatory on Newcomb's Hill near the corner of Rte. 6A and Seaside Avenue on Bleak House property it had been converted to a year round house. At the onset of World War II Bleak House was leased to the U.S Coast Guard as a school for training guard dogs for patrol work. By the end of the war the family no longer was interested in retaining Bleak House and it was sold out of the family only to be subsequently purchased by Ted Howes, a nephew of the last Howes owner. He tore the house down and subdivided the property. This development is notable in that it was one of the first on Cape Cod with underground utilities, but out front along Seaside Avenue still stands the rock wall built by Mr. Joseph Murphy of Scargo Tower fame—for the majestic Bleak House. Ed. note – the observation tower (observatory) is unmistakable in this picture, rising appropriately, directly behind the Bleak House icehouse.



DHS Digital Archive

Just as climate change has altered the winters on Cape Cod, Mother Nature played the major role in making its future ice harvesting possible. At the end of what is known as the Pleistocene Epoch, approximately 12,000 years ago, a giant glacier, called the Laurentide Ice Sheet, receded from what is now the Cape. Huge chunks of ice were left in its wake. These chunks eventually melted, and when they did, the ground around them collapsed leaving holes so deep that their bottoms were below the water table. They filled with fresh water. One who has experienced flying over the Cape at about 2500' cannot believe the number of these (kettle) ponds. The ponds froze in winter and provided a source of pristine ice for many Cape towns, as well as a host of winter time recreational activities!

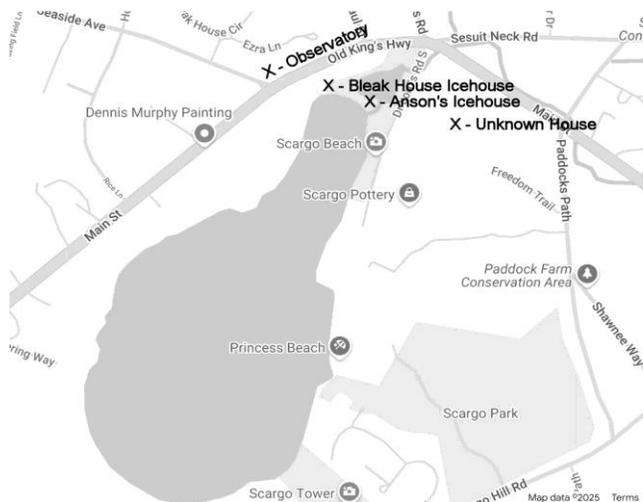
Ice harvesting was a very labor intensive business well into the 20th century. It was not until the advent of gasoline powered saws in the 1920s that the work became a bit easier. Prior to that, all the sawing was done by hand. After scoring with a long straight edge, the ice was typically sawed into blocks 18"x 48" by whatever the depth of the ice, frequently 10" to 12"....the colder, the thicker, the better!

After sawing and separating, the blocks were pushed ashore to be stored in icehouses. Many of the tools used would have been familiar to loggers and lumberjacks, such as tongs to lift the blocks and pikes to slide them across the ice.

The icehouses were constructed for storage and preservation with double walls insulated by salt hay, sea weed, sawdust or pine needles. The roofs were often painted white to reflect the heat of the sun. The floor was covered in sand and the ice was packed right up to the peak of the building and insulated with sawdust or salt hay to reduce melting. With any luck, about 3/4 of the ice would survive into the warmer months to preserve food and chill summer drinks.

The season lasted just a few weeks and coincided with the coldest part of the winter, usually beginning in mid-January. Again, Mother Nature played a hand in the process as the most frigid weather often coincided with the least amount of snow.

Below is some speculative positioning which surprisingly resulted in another *Unknown House*. Being pretty sure of the location of the observatory from Phyllis' article, I consulted Google maps and found this one – on which I marked the observatory's probable position. Continuing my search through the Digital Archive, I found this picture of Anson Howes' icehouse. Using the references in the picture of Captain Tyler's iceboat, I positioned both of the icehouses



Courtesy of Google Maps



DHS Digital Archive

and was left with a mystery – does the house in this 1903 image still exist? If anyone can provide the answer, please email the information to info@dennishistoricalsociety.org.

Ed. note – There was hardly a time working on this issue that I didn't wish that I could sit down and chat with Anson Howes' son Richard. Dick was a long time member of both the DHS Board and the Josiah Dennis Manse Committee. He passed away in April 2021. The following is an excerpt from his obituary in the *Cape Cod Times* –

Dick was a native of Dennis. In 1949 he was a carpenter and apprentice working for Roland Taylor along with delivering ice for his father's ice business. He proudly served his country in the Army from 1951 – 1953. After returning home he was educated in Boston in electronics and worked on Martha's Vineyard where he met his wife and they married in 1956. He returned to Dennis to raise his family and build their new home. He owned and operated his Television Repair Business.

There is so much we could have learned about the ice business in Dennis during the first half of the 20th century!

Here are two additional images found while perusing the Digital Archive for this issue. I couldn't resist including them because of the nostalgic thoughts they evoke of days gone by. The pastoral nature of the one on the left is from the Richard and Nancy Howes Collection with a cow beside Anson's icehouse. The other of Louis Crowell Jr. and Bill Stone on the ice at Scargo Lake, circa 1900 from the Geta Crowell Collection. Please visit the DHS time machine and journey back!



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The Dennis Historical Society Proudly Presents



THE HISTORY OF THE SHIVERICK SHIPYARD

Mary Kuhrtz, member of the DHS Board of Directors,
will introduce this video presentation
on Sesuit Harbor's 19th century clipper-building juggernaut

Saturday, May 3, at 2 pm

Jacob Sears Library, 23 Center Street, East Dennis

A \$5 donation is suggested

Membership

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OK, but we're not there yet!
If you haven't renewed for 2025-
2026, please do so today!**

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on the DHS Website -go to
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and click on *Get Involved/Membership***

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with a check, or you can renew
using PayPal.**

Thank you!