

Journal of History of Martha's Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands



THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

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WRECK & RESCUE: The Mertie B. Crowley

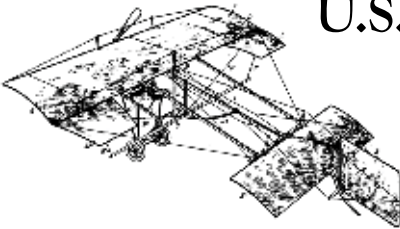
by HERBERT R. WARD



INVENTIVE ISLANDERS

U.S. Patent Records Tell A Tale of Creativity

by CHRIS BAER



PLUS:

Student Essays:

Early Vineyard Medicine

History on Main Street

The Remarkable Polly Hill

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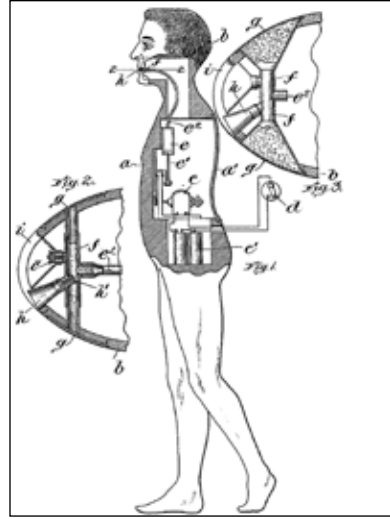
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Androids, Aeroplanes & Ears

Chronicles of Early Island Inventors

by CHRIS BAER

WHEN YOU IMAGINE nineteenth-century Martha's Vineyard, whaleships and widow's walks might come to mind; or perhaps fishermen and farmhands. Androids may not. Yet an android was patented in 1883 by an Edgartown inventor, as was an "artificial ear" in 1902, and a cigar-smoking automaton in 1904. And in 1910, an Island Broadway actor filed a patent for a one-seated "aeroplane." The Vineyard has long been home to eccentric tinkers, basement experimenters, ingenious artists, ambitious dreamers, and even corporate engineers. Here are a few stories of the Island's first patented inventors.



Elmer Bliss' 1904 cigar-smoking, humanoid "advertising device."

The Chandlers: Holmes, West, Eldridge, & Chadwick

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, the principal landing terminal and business center in Vineyard Haven was not at our familiar wharf at the bottom of Union Street, but rather an ancient pier and store at the bottom of what is now Grove Avenue (formerly "Horton's Lane") on the road to West Chop. Here is where steamers from the mainland tied up for many decades, together with whalers, mail packets, and European and Caribbean freight ships, met by ox-carts loaded with wool from up-Island and the horse-drawn stage to Edgartown. This vital wharf and ship chandlery were operated by several generations of the Holmes family, from which

CHRIS BAER teaches art, design and technology at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. He maintains an online archive of Vineyard genealogy and historic images. Visit <http://history@vineyard.net> and <http://oldtimeislands.org>. All images in this article are from the author's collection.

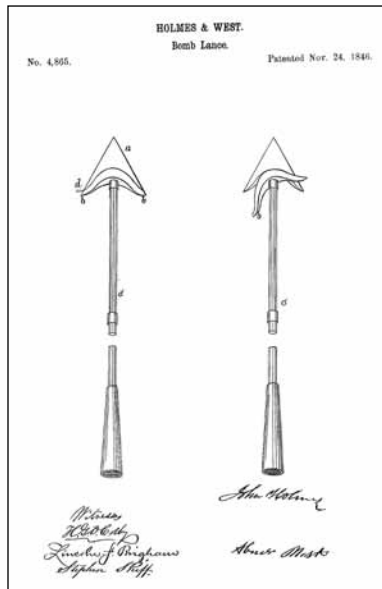
the village of Holmes Hole inherited its spelling.¹ “At this store,” according to a 1933 *Vineyard Gazette* retrospective, “a vessel captain could purchase provisions, cordage, sails, anchors and cables, and a thousand other articles necessary aboard ship. . . . People from all parts of the Island came to Holmes’ store to trade farm produce, knitted woolen goods and other items for groceries.” Or as a 1926 *Gazette* article put it, “Everything necessary for the maintenance of mankind ashore or afloat could be purchased there.” A telegraph office received dispatches upstairs, a Notary’s office processed paperwork in the back, a busy repair shop mended sails in the loft, and the store itself sold cigars to the new steamer arrivals and served as a popular hangout for local men and boys.

This shop also housed the first patented inventors of Martha’s Vineyard: John Holmes, Esq., and Capt. Abner West. In 1846, while operating under the name “Holmes and West, Shipchandlers and Merchants,” they filed the Island’s first patent, #4865: a flexible whaling harpoon, thrown by hand or launched by gunpowder. Their secret weapon had a second set of barbs which rotated upon penetration into a whale to prevent withdrawal.

The 1926 *Gazette* article recalled the team:

Holmes was a humorist and loved a joke above all things, while West was an irritable man much given to profanity. When the pranks of the boys had reached a point where he could no longer endure them he would exclaim with explosive adjectives; ‘You boys leave this store or I’ll dart you half-way to the beach!’

Thirty-five-year-old West, son of the West Chop lighthouse keeper, was an experienced whaling captain who had just returned from an ocean voyage as master of the bark *Chase*. Described as a “stalwart, fearless seafaring man,” he had been employed at sea since the age of ten. Although



The Vineyard’s first patent: Holmes & West’s 1846 Bomb Lance Harpoon.

1 In the earliest records, the village was more commonly spelled “Homes Hole” or “Homses Hole.” It is believed to be derived from a Wampanoag term meaning “old man.” Holmes Hole officially changed its name to “Vineyard Haven” in 1871.

his first voyage as the young captain of the whaler *Pocahontas* ended in mutiny, he had since had a successful whaling career. But now, Captain West was settling down in a new position ashore as John Holmes' partner at the chandlery, while he prepared to be married to his fourteen-year-old fiancée Sarah, a girl from upstate New York whose father had recently committed suicide with his own policeman's pistol.

Holmes was a middle-aged, life-long merchant who also served as notary public and local insurance agent. His chandlery business was slowly losing the competition with the Union Wharf, built at the head of the harbor in 1832. He had been working on the harpoon idea for at least two years.

Like most Island inventors, Holmes' and West's invention didn't lead to fame or fortune. Although written up in *Scientific American*² magazine and heralded in some newspapers, their harpoon design was not without its flaws, and it failed as a commercial success in an industry that was in decline anyway.

Abner West's career as a Chandler was relatively short, and he returned to whaling after a five year hiatus on dry land. Holmes continued to tinker at the store, however, and two of his inventions — a method of constructing fiddles and an emergency backup anchor — also appeared in *Scientific American*, although ultimately the patents were evidently not issued. The magazine editor wrote about Holmes' anchor design, "As the inventor is a person long and intimately acquainted with the danger of a vessel being on the lee shore and dragging her anchors, it is hoped for the sake of humanity, that it will arrest the attention of the Underwriters."

In 1863 Mayhew Adams of Chilmark corrected some of the design flaws of Holmes and West's invention, and patented his own improved two-fluked harpoon with a rotating head. He was the first patented inventor from Chilmark, as well as its second — in 1868 he also patented a



Inventor Moses Adams' famous daughters, Lucy and Sarah Adams.

² This is the same magazine found on newsstands today. *Scientific American* has been in print since 1845.

self-clearing chock, to keep a whaleboat's rope from getting tangled after harpooning a whale. His brother Moses Adams, a Chilmark farmer, became a three-patent inventor as well. Better known as the father of the two famous tiny circus performers who starred in the General Tom Thumb company, Moses patented a combination lock (1869), a seed-planting machine (1869), and a belt buckle (1870).

Eventually chartmaker George Eldridge took over the Holmes ship chandler's business, one of the longest operating businesses in Vineyard Haven history.³ Like his predecessors, he was also a patented inventor, and was issued at least four patents between 1889 and 1913, including a sound-based navigation system and a railroad rail support.

Edgartown's first patentee was William P. Chadwick, namesake of the former Chadwick Inn, whose blacksmith shop, grist mill, hardware store and cordage shop were Edgartown landmarks for more than sixty years. He patented three inventions between 1852 and 1858: one for a chimney flue, and two for shipboard blubber presses used to squeeze oil from whale scraps. Like most early Island inventions, his commercial success was limited at best; but like many, his second blubber press design earned a legal tip-of-the-hat by later inventors — in his case in a 1993 Canadian patent for a machine that crushes car oil filters to collect dirty oil.

The Carpenters' Wives

The Island's second patent was filed in 1849, #6015: a Machine for Sharpening Saws. The patentees were another odd Holmes Hole duo: Presbury Norton and Franklin D. Cottle, and they also earned mention in *Scientific American*. Curiously, both men share unusual stories involving their marriages and old age:

Cottle was a young carpenter and housewright who operated a tiny shop on a sixteen-foot-wide property on Main street, about where the tattoo parlor stands today. A year after his saw sharpening patent was filed, Cottle married Hepsa Andrews, a young widow whose first husband had died some years earlier at a tiny isle near Fiji while on a long whaling voyage. Franklin and Hepsa followed the Gold Rush to San Francisco in 1852, where he spent the rest of his life and had a very successful career as a builder and contractor. But long after Franklin's death, 97-year-old Hepsa's life took an unexpected turn when the 1906 San Francisco earthquake devastated the city and burned her house down "almost about my ears." After a brief recovery in the hospital she travelled to New York City and then by auto with her daughter and great-grandchildren to Boston. A

³ Many tales of his years in business here can be found in the book written by his four children, *The Captain's Daughters of Martha's Vineyard* (1978).

97-year-old driving nearly two hundred and fifty miles as an automobile passenger may not seem unusual today, but in a 1906 horseless carriage wobbling over turn-of-the-century country wagon trails, it was highly notable. Newspapers from the *Washington Post* (“*Women Laugh at Father Time*”) and the *New York Times* to the *Oakland Tribune* (“*One Hundred Years Old, She Races in an Auto*”) covered the event.

Cottle’s partner Norton was an elderly boatbuilder and a deacon of the Baptist church, and like his patenting partner, he too got married the following year. His third wife Eliza was forty-four years his junior, and together they had a son, Francis. But when little Francis was just four years old, Eliza died of lung disease. The 1860 census lists the 84-year-old inventor caring alone for his six-year-old son. A year later, probably on his deathbed, Norton married his 42-year-old fourth wife, Matilda, and then died of bronchitis three days later. Young Frank was raised by his new stepmother, eventually growing up to be the owner of a popular Vineyard Haven men’s clothing store.

“Cocoanut” Cakes and “Grotesque” Figures

The Island’s fourth patentee was Capt. Elisha Dexter, Holmes Hole candy maker, who was issued patent #14,857 in 1856 for a “Self-Counting Measure” which aided salesmen measuring cloth by the yard. Five years later he also patented an inexpensive, ventilated refrigerator. “It is a fact well known” he wrote, “that in order to preserve meat and various articles of food in a sweet normal state during the summer season that such articles must not be placed in an air tight box.”

According to a *Gazette* account, Capt. Dexter’s “eccentricities and sudden changes of lease, on the ocean and the land, were marked characteristics of the man, and whose exploits in whaling voyages as narrated by him in lectures were highly enjoyed by numerous audiences in the old times.” Dexter was a sea captain who was shipwrecked in the middle of the Atlantic in 1840 after a violent gale sank his brig. His book *Narrative of the Wreck and Loss of the Whaling Brig William and Joseph*, ghost-written by James Athearn Jones of West Tisbury, tells the tale of Capt. Dexter and his crew of eighteen wrecked and drifting on makeshift rafts without water or food for seven days. Fourteen survived.

The book, expanded and republished in 1848, ends:

“I am now penniless. I put every thing I had afloat, hoping to receive it all back, with large profits, for my adventure, besides something for my ‘lay.’ But I have lost it all; and with gray hairs, and a shattered constitution, I am now compelled to commence life upon the land, anew. And now, being no longer able to follow the seas, I am trying to turn even my bitter misfortunes to some account, by the sale of this ‘Narrative.’”

Dexter, at one time a Honolulu candy store owner, decided to open an ice cream “saloon” and confectionery store with his son, Ben. It was located on Spring Street and later moved to the corner of Centre Street and Main Street — where Café Moxie is being rebuilt today. “Oh! what delicious ice cream and cocoanut cakes were sold by the Dexters to us girls” wrote Mrs. Howes Norris in 1921.

Elisha Dexter’s son, Ben Dexter (or “Ben Chuck” as he is usually known), was not a patentee, but he was a unique innovator. Gratia Harrington, in her 1978 memoir *The Captain’s Daughters* recalled Ben: “He was a short, thick-set man with bowed shoulders who had once been a whaler. In his youth he had scarlet fever, and it affected his speech so that only those who knew him well could understand him.” Deaf and illiterate as well, Ben nevertheless found success as a Vineyard Haven confectioner, store-owner, and artist. His ice cream saloon and “museum,” which also doubled as a billiard hall, burned to the ground in the great August 1883 fire which destroyed all of Vineyard Haven.

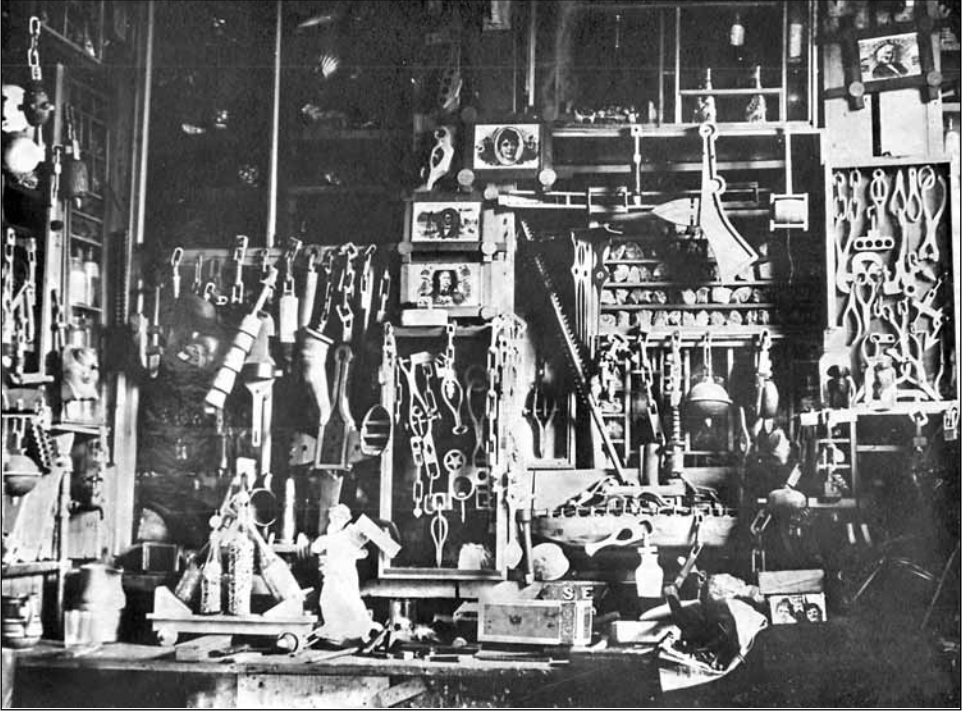
In a 1933 article the *Gazette* recalled that during the great fire,

“[Dexter] stood at the front door with his axe, keeping people away. Several boys, [George] Dean among them, ran around to the back and climbed in. They removed freezers of ice cream and some of the famous coconut cakes Ben Dexter was famous for, and served refreshments in a vacant shed to everyone who came along. ‘Anyhow,’ said Mr. Dean in narrating the incident, ‘we saved the cans, and that’s more than Ben would have done.’”

Ben was well known for his carvings of life-sized “grotesque human figures” which he placed around his shop. The *Gazette* told another story of the devastating 1883 fire: “Great was the lamentation when it was discovered that human figures were being burned in Ben Dexter’s store. They turned out to be nothing but wooden Indians made by Ben, who



Artist and confectioner “Ben Chuck” Dexter.



Ben Dexter's Vineyard Haven workshop.

was one of the most famous jack knife experts of all time.”

His shop was quickly rebuilt. My grandfather Stan Lair was a fan of Ben Chuck's artwork. He explained:

“Ben Dexter his actual name was, Benjamin Dexter. Everyone called him ‘Ben Chuck.’ He lived in the back of the building and did all of his wood carving there.... Old Ben was famous for his crazy wood carving. Some of it still is around today — I have a few pieces here. I recall mounds of earth in the rear of that building with a full-size wooden Indian on each mound. I lived on Center Street, so I went right by there as a kid. I remember that wooden Indians out there. ... He did a lot of crazy wood carving, putting stuff through holes that seemed impossible. And no joints — and the holes were much smaller than the pieces he put through there, so it was always a mystery to people how he did it.... He built a few models, too, boat models. Pretty complicated things.”

William Peakes' Rainbow Fuel

Mr. Lair, himself an aspiring-but-unfulfilled patentee of a toilet part, remembered another eccentric local innovator, William Peakes, and his home on William Street:

“Mr. William Peakes, he operated a wood yard. He had machinery in a shed or a barn in the back that would split wood and all that sort of thing, and that was his business. He also had a patent on a type of wood he called ‘Rainbow Fuel,’ which would burn in the fireplace with pretty colors. I remember seeing him cooking that stuff. He had a great big, it looked like a - I think it was - a copper kettle, almost like a tripod as they used in the whaling days, outside of the building. He’d build a fire and put this stuff in there - whatever it was - and boil the wood in it, and pack it up in little boxes, called ‘Rainbow Fuel.’”

The “whatever it was” was a mixture of sawdust, salt, blue vitriol (copper sulfate), charcoal, sulfur, and copperas (iron sulfate) which Peakes patented in 1902 as “Artificial Fuel” to simulate the colors he often saw when burning driftwood. The powder, as patented, was sprinkled over ordinary firewood just before burning. Copper Sulfate (“blue vitriol”) it should be noted, is a poisonous compound which gives off toxic fumes when burned and irritates the skin when handled. It is particularly toxic to sea life and is today considered an environmental hazard. Peakes’ powder was simultaneously patented as a disinfectant.

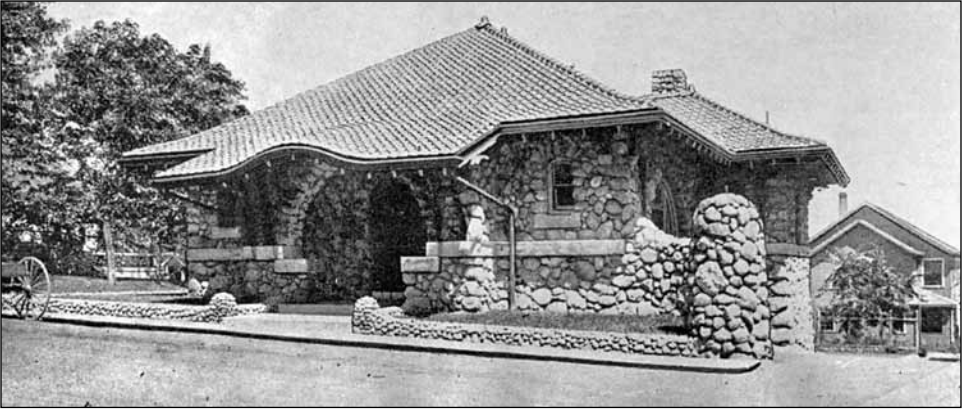
Zithers, Talking Machines and Luxemoor Leather

Of all the Island’s early inventors, John Crowell was easily the most prolific. He patented at least seventeen inventions (and possibly as many as twenty-five), including four fountain pens, a bottle opener, a socket wrench, two presses, and a fingernail cutter. A mechanical engineer and machinist, in his later life he became a civil engineer and surveyor as well, and served as Master of the Vineyard’s Masonic Lodge.

Early in his career, Crowell worked with the Blair Camera Company of Boston, manufacturer of the “Hawk-Eye Detective Camera” and a stiff competitor to Kodak in the growing amateur photography market. Crowell and Blair patented a camera in 1890 which punched notches in the roll of film with each exposure, as well as an 1891 camera shutter. The company and its patents were ultimately bought out by Eastman Kodak.

Stan Lair, Tisbury’s one-time assistant plumbing inspector, remembered his home as well:

“I recall in John Crowell’s house the stair rail going upstairs from the first to the second floor - actually the rail was part of the heating system, one of the pipes. It went right up and acted just like a regular stair rail, and it was heated of course. Keep your hands warm going upstairs or something. But John Crowell was a surveyor. Had a little Maxwell. He always wore leggings, I suppose so the bushes and stuff wouldn’t snag on his pants when he was in the woods. His helper was Lyman Vinto, a little bit of a man that was always with him and the two of them together were quite a team, going along in that old Maxwell.”



William Barry Owen's Vineyard Haven bank, at left, and the leather factory, at right.

In the 1890s Crowell began a long-time association with fellow Vineyard Haven native, lawyer William Barry Owen. Together they patented a stringed musical instrument — a zither with damper bars for producing chords — for the C. F. Zimmerman autoharp company in 1895.

Crowell continued his musical patent work — probably in connection with Owen — with his 1899 patent of an “Automatic Stop Mechanism for Sound Reproducing Machines” for Thomas S. Parvin. Parvin was the founder of the Berliner Gramophone Company, which held exclusive license in most of the United States for the patents of Emile Berliner, inventor of the phonograph. They produced gramophone records; it was the world’s first record label. In 1900 the company was merged into the Victor Talking Machine Company and Parvin soon became an officer and director.

It was Owen, not Crowell, who truly profited by this connection to the gramophone business. He moved to London and became a top European salesman for Victor. From a local artist he purchased a painting of a dog with its head cocked listening to a gramophone, which became the trademark image of Victor and later of RCA. In 1903 he retired to his native town of Vineyard Haven extremely wealthy — a millionaire, by some accounts.

Owen spread his wealth quickly and broadly across the Island. He became the first year-round Island resident to own an automobile. He bought controlling interest in the Martha’s Vineyard National Bank (a long-time Edgartown institution) and built a new fieldstone bank in the shape of a Greek cross, complete with separate men’s and ladies’ waiting rooms, as a monument to Vineyard Haven. (It angered many Edgartown residents.) He created a new park at Tashmoo’s overlook.⁴ He built a farm for breeding

⁴ Owen Park, named for William Barry Owen, has a later origin; it was donated and named by his family after his death.



Luxemoor's Powerhouse. *General Electric Review* (GE's company journal) wrote an article about this outbuilding titled "A Model Small Isolated Plant." It begins: "Dreamy, picturesque Vineyard Haven! – probably the last place one would naturally expect to find an installation of man's latest and greatest development in the steam engineering line – the Curtis steam turbine."

prize-winning "fancy" poultry he imported from England, and his inventing partner Crowell patented three new poultry-related inventions: a "mash feeder," a "water feeder," and a "scratch grain-feeder."

But Owen's boldest investment involved another set of patents he became involved with in 1905 which concerned a new technique for embossing leather. The patents were issued to Owen's new partner, Lynn shoemaker Fred W. Moore, but Owen secured the rights to manufacture and distribute these

decorative leather items nationally. He invested \$75,000 to build and equip a two-story, 100' by 30' factory plant behind his new bank — about where the drive-in bank stands today — with a separate building for the state-of-the-art Curtis steam turbine, and about two or three other small buildings stretching to the beach. By some reports he hired as many as seventy-five workers. "The factory is to employ every one at all acquainted with leather work" announced the *Gazette*, and they included Herbert Bradley, George Merry, John McDonough (later known for his filling station), A. H. Look, and many others. William Robinson served as treasurer and secretary for the company, and E. J. Nutter the bookkeeper. Fred Holdsworth, a recent Harvard graduate, became a travelling salesman for states east of the Mississippi. The Tisbury School's Supervisor of Drawing, Sarah Felter, became a designer at the factory. Patenteo Fred Moore checked into the Mansion House to supervise.

The factory began production in the spring of 1906, manufacturing leather draperies, upholsteries, pillow covers, wall panels, book covers, ladies' slippers and belts, travelling bags, screens, table covers, gift novelties, and other ornamental leather items in every color, and distributed them to "high class stores and decorators throughout the country."

The Craftsman magazine trumpeted:

"To the lovers of fine leather work 'Luxemoor' is a revelation as an entirely new decorated leather combining exclusive artistic effects with almost unlimited possibilities for practical application. The best leather which can be bought, tanned by the most approved scientific processes, is the basis of 'Luxemoor' decorations. In general, 'Luxemoor' effects may be divided into two classes, embossed and carved. The embossed effects are obtained by cutting



View from Vineyard Haven harbor. The Luxemoor factory is visible near the center, behind some outbuildings. Tilton's lumberyard and Lane's Block are visible on the left; the Nobnocket Club and wharf are seen on the right.

the surface of the leather on the reverse side, leaving the design in relief. The embossing is thereby made permanent and the figures are more sharply defined by the use of the glazing machine. At all points on the pattern there is a greater thickness of leather than at any point on the background; the glazing will therefore bear more forcefully on the raised portions which take a high polish, resulting in a handsome two color effect. This method of embossing is wear-proof, in fact the effects are only emphasized by wear. In the carved work a two color shaded effect is produced by cutting the pattern in intaglio on the leather. The brilliant greens, reds, blues, etc., of modern tannage lend themselves admirably to this class of work, the shaded effects being a result of the different depths to which the dyes penetrate the leather during the tannage process.... The many and beautiful designs are prepared by their own artists. Customers may, however, submit their own special designs and will be protected in the exclusive use of the same for their own line of goods. 'Luxemoor' leather is a genuine article of unquestioned artistic merit combined with exclusive decorative effects which cannot be obtained elsewhere."

Vineyard Haven's new industry didn't last long. The plant closed in the autumn of 1908 - barely two and a half years after opening. The factory's spacious salesroom became a community basketball court for many years. Stan Lair recalled:

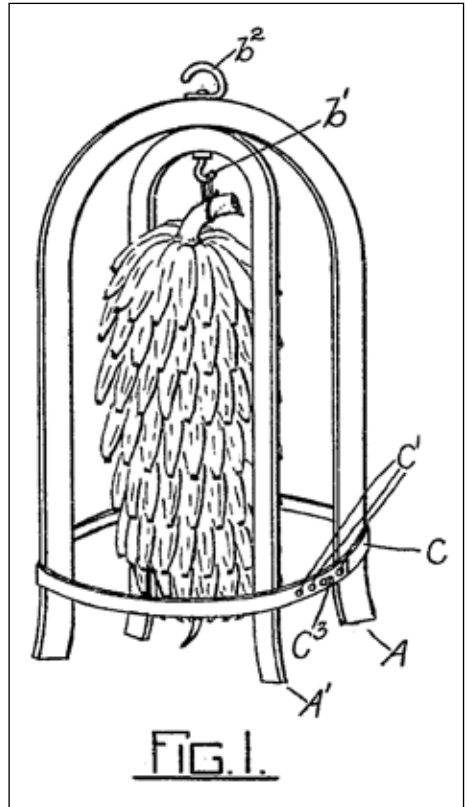
"We used to play basketball in this building, a good many years ago. It's none too good a place to play basketball, but we had to play there. The timbers ran right across the hall and we had to shoot the ball over them, and on each end there was like chicken wire, to protect the spectators from getting hurt, but it didn't help the players much 'cause plenty of them were hurt on that chicken wire - cut fingers and so forth. Also on the second floor was a Customs Office, operated by Howes Norris."

In 1923 the Luxemoor building was moved to Five Corners, where it stands today, housing the Tropical Restaurant and other businesses.⁵ One of the Luxemoor outbuildings was moved and rebuilt as John Conroy's fish market. The building containing the boiler and engine room was the only one left behind; this small fieldstone building can still be found where it was built, nearly forgotten at the bottom of the hill behind the bank.

Fred Moore took his patents and what was left of the company, moved the Luxemoor offices to Manhattan, and established a new manufacturing plant in Newark, New Jersey. Although the new plant was nearly destroyed by a fire in 1912, the Luxemoor company existed until at least 1914, and Fred Moore and his wife continued to summer on the Vineyard until their deaths.

Albert Look's Banana Carrier

Patentee Albert Look was a butcher and grocer for what later became SBS, the Vineyard Haven grocery which still operates today as a gardening and pet supply store. His family had owned and operated a very successful meat business since the Civil War. Every week his father John Look would go to Brighton to buy ten or twelve big steers, bring them to New Bedford, load them onto a steamer to Vineyard Haven, and finally drive them to their Lambert's Cove farm. As the Gazette recalled in a 1932 article, "It took several men to manage them and prevent them from dodging up the various village streets as they left Vineyard Haven." Their slaughterhouse provided meat to the entire Island, and even shipped surplus to the mainland. The Look's meat business eventually became the grocery store of Look, Washburn & Company, and then Look, Smith &



Albert Look's 1908 banana carrier.

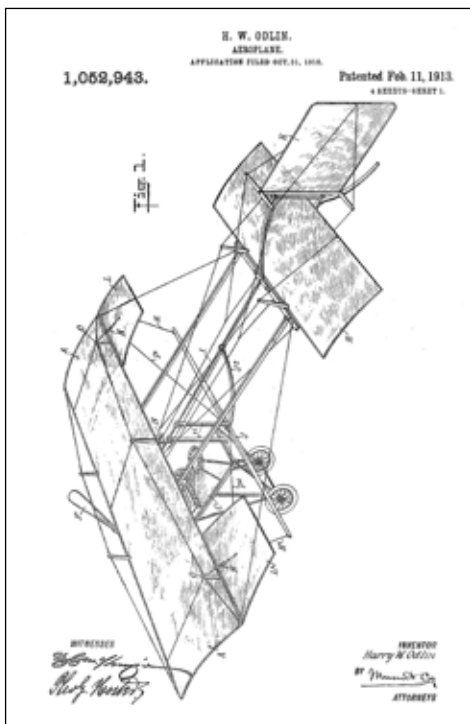
⁵ The Dukes County Garage used it for many years as a Buick and Chevrolet showroom, and the second floor was leased to the Navy during World War II to house personnel.

Company. In 1908 Look filed a patent for a “new and useful Banana-Carrier” to accommodate the insatiable American appetite for the imported tropical fruit. His device “can be conveniently handled and transported, will protect the bananas from being bruised, broken or otherwise injured, and which can be folded to small compass when not in use,” he wrote. He died less than six months after his patent was issued, and his grocery merged with Bodfish & Call’s grocery and the Swift Brothers’ grocery to become SBS — “Smith, Bodfish and Swift.”

The Ear, the Aeroplane, & the Android

John Holmes (fiddle patentee), John Crowell (gramophone patentee) and William Barry Owen (autoharp patentee) were not the Island’s only musical inventors. Another early musician-inventor was German immigrant Ulrich Kleiner, a Brookline piano teacher who filed his patent for an “Artificial Ear-Drum” while summering in Cottage City in 1902. He described a tiny cone of cotton, silk, and wax which fitted inside the ear; he claimed it successfully treated the hearing of those with injured eardrums, and that it did so without irritation. Another musician-inventor was summer resident Julian W. Vose of Edgartown, owner of Vose and Sons Piano Company of Boston, which had been founded by his father. A talented piano designer, in 1907 Vose patented a “Piano-Key Base” - a flexible, slotted frame below the piano’s keys designed to keep the piano in tune through swings in temperature and humidity.

Patentee Harry W. Odlin of Edgartown was a professional performer as well, although not a musician. A career actor, he shared the stage for nearly two decades with one of the most famous comedians of the American theater, Joseph Jefferson. Odlin and his wife, actress Jessie Sweet, toured the country as part of the Joseph Jefferson Company, with Odlin playing the role of “Seth” for more than a dozen years in the stage adaptation of Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle.” His career also included a 22-night performance of the hot-air-balloon comedy, “The Aero Club” starring Lulu Glaser, at the 1700-seat Criterion Theatre on Broadway in 1907. But his ca-



Actor Harry Odlin’s 1913 Aeroplane.

reer took a strange detour in 1910 when he filed a patent from his Edgartown home for a “new and improved aeroplane, arranged to automatically maintain its equilibrium and thus prevent capsizing in heavy winds.” He shared the rights of his patent with his partner (and probably financial backer), Frank Burke Jr., New York City soap manufacturer. Burke was the son of the millionaire founder of the Manhattan Soap Company, best known for its very popular “SweetHeart Soap.”⁶ It’s doubtful whether this soap-financed, actor-designed vessel ever left the ground. Odlin patented one later invention in 1919, a carburetor for the Stromberg Motor Devices Company of Chicago, mass-producer of carburetors for boats, tractors, automobiles, and airplanes.



C. H. Shute & Son’s photography wagon, on a visit to Nantucket.

Yet another musician-inventor was Richard G. Shute of Edgartown. A snare drummer in the Civil War, he was discharged with a pension after a belly wound ended his infantry service, and he returned to the Island to join his father in the photography studio he had opened above his dry goods store on lower Main Street. His father Charles Shute, a Nantucket native, was a musician-inventor himself; he was the leader of Edgartown’s town band as well as the Island’s seventh patentee. He was issued patent #46503 in 1865 for a “Rotary Photographic Plate Holder” which allowed six images to be separately exposed on the same glass film plate.

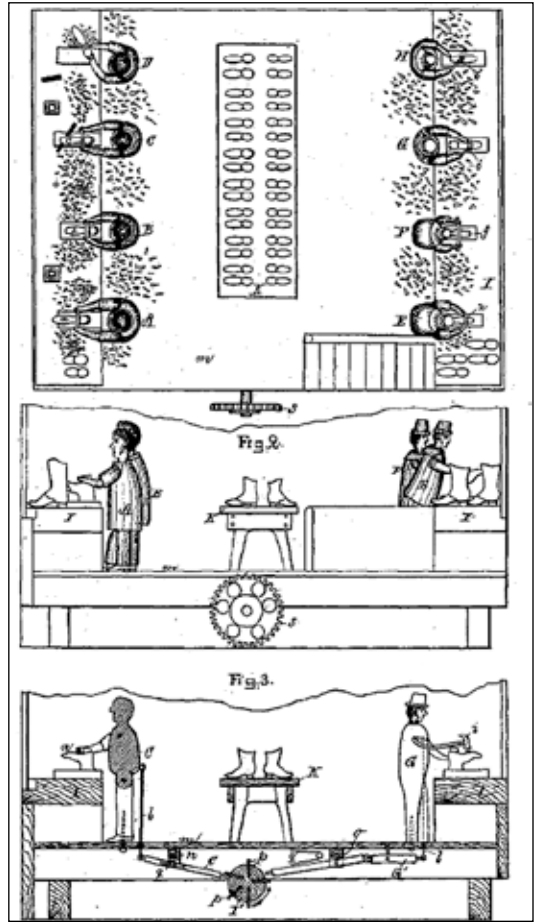
Like his father, Richard had broad interests outside of photography. In 1883 he filed patent #284338 with the U.S. Patent Office for a set of eight miniature “android” shoemakers. “Android” was a very unusual term

⁶ Manhattan Soap was eventually bought by Purex which was later acquired by Dial.

in the nineteenth century, and referred to an automated humanoid toy. Shute's "Androides or Automaton Shoe-Factory" consisted of eight tiny factory workers with moving arms and bodies who labored over shoes at their benches, buffing tiny soles and swinging miniature hammers when the spring was wound. In 1885, he also patented a bicycle bell.

Just down the street from the site of Shute's studio, the Edgartown Yacht Club was built with money made in actual women's shoes by the inventor who brought the first automobile to the Island: Elmer Bliss. Said to be a look-alike of President Harrison, Bliss founded the Regal Shoe Company, a major ladies shoe manufacturer based in Boston with four massive factories and a chain of international shoe stores. He continued to summer in his childhood home of Edgartown, and justifiably caused a stir in 1900 when he drove through town in a steam-powered "locomobile" which he had brought down from Boston. He patented seven inventions between 1904 and 1912: six related to manufacturing, selling, and advertising shoes, and one for a life-size mechanical cigar-smoking mannequin. With his shoe fortunes, Bliss purchased Osborne Wharf, revived the yacht club, funded and built the clubhouse, and served as its Commodore.⁷

Innovation certainly hasn't stopped on the Island. According to the USPTO, in the last twenty years some sixty patents have been issued to Island residents. Recent in-

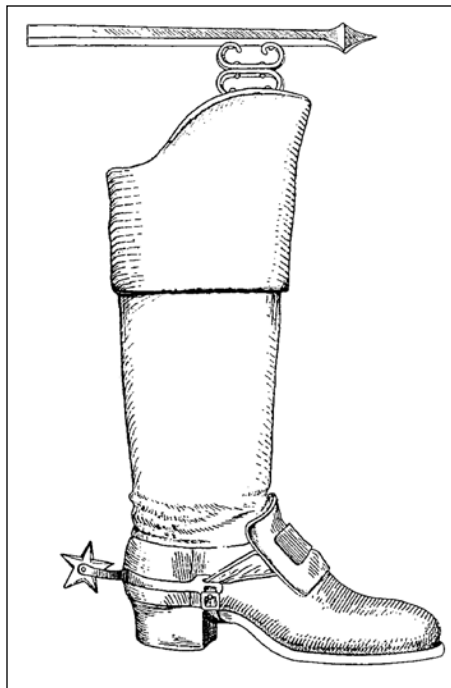


Richard G. Shute's 1883 Androids.

⁷ Harold H. Mills, the Governor of the Vineyard Haven Yacht Club at about the same time, is said to have invented GravyMaster in the 1930s and became president of GravyMaster Co. His original formula was a liquid sugar used to make rock candy on a string. Stan Lair remembered, "Looked like a lot of large white buttons spaced about a half inch apart on the string. I think it was used principally in the barrooms for some kind of drinks."

ventions include a shopping list holder, a toy smoke-ring gun, a diaphragm for clearing toilet obstructions, a roller blade braking system, pacemaker software, a piano key balancing system, a three-part modular automobile, and a spring-tipped cane.

To learn more about these inventions and many more, such as #637,889, an 1899 pencil-holder invented by the Island's first female inventor Linette Parker; or Theodore Strater's 1909 picture puzzle frame (#932,512); or Samuel King's 1882 windmill (#257,496); or William Mayhew's 1871 folding settee (#115,010): visit the complete online archive of US patents at <http://www.uspto.gov/> or <http://patents.google.com>.



Elmer Bliss' 1908 street sign.

Main Street, Vineyard Haven

by DANA JACOBS

AS ONE OF SIX towns on Martha's Vineyard, Tisbury has had a fair share of its own history, heartbreak and growth. It's made an impact on the Island and the people who live here today. It's known as a place of social bustle and the hub of a major tourist destination. Until the late 1850s, Vineyard Haven, or Holmes Hole as it was then, consisted mostly of houses, a few shops and its most important feature — the harbor. After the Civil War, the whaling industry began to decline and the small town of Vineyard Haven was forced to turn to another revenue source. It was during the years following the Civil War that Vineyard Haven's Main Street built the foundation upon which the Island thrives today — tourism.



This single place on Martha's Vineyard has been known by three different names: Tisbury, Vineyard Haven, and Holmes Hole. Even before that, the Wampanoags were the first to give the area now called Vineyard Haven a name, 'Nobnocket,' in the Algonquin tongue. Before being incorporated as Tisbury, this mainstay town was known as Holmes Hole by its first European settlers around 1646. Holmes Hole it was until 1871, although nothing about the name was official — "The name of Holmes Hole is not mentioned in the town records from 1673 to 1737, nor is there any reference to it indirectly." The town was officially named Tisbury in 1783 for "The English Parish of governor Thomas Mayhew at the New York conference..." The first time 'Tisbury' is found in the town records, [it is] referred to as "that tract of Land Called Holmes hole." Tisbury encompassed what is now known as West Tisbury and Tisbury. The current name, Vineyard Haven, actually only applies to one section of the town, but is often used in place of 'Tisbury.' The name Vineyard Haven also advertises the safe harbor that is the central focus of the town and a trusted port for the numerous visitors that arrive by sea. No matter what one may happen to call the town of Tisbury, Islanders and visitors alike all know one thing for sure, this little town has evolved through the years, while staying faithful to one thing — the harbor.

In terms of town importance, Edgartown definitely held its place at the top for many years because of the whaling industry. A significant transition occurred around the late 1850s, when the Civil War delivered a severe blow to the whaling industry. With Edgartown's decline, Vineyard Haven became

the commercial center of Martha's Vineyard. The harbor was the main attraction, and was growing with maritime traffic — by the 19th century, over 200 boats could be found in Vineyard Haven's harbor at any one time.



One of the lasting impacts on old Vineyard Haven and Main Street was the “Great Fire of 1883.” August 11, 1883, was a day to be remembered. The fire started in the Crocker Harness Shop, though every building from Main Street to Beach Street burned to a crisp under the southward winds.

“All the picturesque little stores that had grown along its margin and the great trees under whose sheltering shade they nestled went down before the onslaught.”

The fire killed no one — quite surprising considering the devastating damage that was done to the village. That night, townspeople had gathered in Oak Bluffs for Illumination Night, which is somewhat ironic as their village burned. The news spread quickly as a man announced to the crowd: “Fire!”

In total, 32 houses, 26 stores, and 14 barns were destroyed. In addition, the very first public library on the Island burned, a building owned by Dr. Rufus Spalding.

One Islander recalled the fire and its devastation: “...fifty seven buildings were destroyed, many of them dwellings with their accumulations of personal belongings that mean so much to the owner and so little to the insurance adjuster.”

Rebuilding began immediately for the small village, but the fire had thoroughly “cut out the heart of [the] beautiful village”

Spurred on by the fire and the lack of adequate fire-fighting methods, O.G. Stanley founded the Vineyard Haven Water Company in 1887. Investors in the money-making opportunity included some of Mr. Stanley's “wealthy friends in Boston.”

Some of the investors included well known names such as Peabody, Weld and Forbes. Together, the investors bought 30 acres of spring-fed ponds at Lake Tashmoo (called Chappaquonset Pond). On December 15, 1887, five years after the fire, Vineyard Haven celebrated the new water system in a unique and uplifting way. While the townspeople watched, firemen sprayed two columns of water on the roof of Rudolph Crocker's the new harness factory, where the fire started.



There were a number of important people in the 1800s who lived on Main Street, influencing the Island from the prime view of the harbor and town. Many of the houses were architecturally unique, boasting wealth and power on the outside and a comfortable ocean view from the inside.



Scorched earth: aftermath of the 1883 Tisbury Fire. Photo from the MVM collections.

The town was not without change, however. None of the houses on Main Street can be found today due to the devastating fire of 1883. The uniquely designed houses gone, never to be reconstructed with anything except words and memories.

“Memory turns back to the times long ago and the quaint old homes, the low-roofed houses and sanded kitchen floors and deep brick ovens that yield such delicious things to eat; the pantry door stands open and on the shelves are the pewter platters burnished like silver, the silver porringer which was brought out every night before retiring to warm the coffee, handsome lustre pitchers and dainty bits of china.”

Most houses in the 1800s were located on Main Street and Beach Street — the only two streets there in 1871. The location of the streets are, of course, the same now as then. Another prime spot for houses was on the harbor itself. The harbor and its surrounding area were known as a prestigious place to live and visit. Influential figure, Peter West, had a large and elegant home which he himself built quite close to the harbor. It was his “emblem of success” in 1796 when he was only 28 years old.

In 1851, John Merry was fortunate enough to own one of the three houses where Owen Park is now. Mr. Merry was a young mariner who moved from his house on Main Street to one block north. Others who lived on Owen Park were Mr. and Mrs. Robert Scott. They owned apartments right on the harbor, great for mariners and captains. The apartments also catered to the growing tourist business in the 1850s. The Scott’s building was built by John Hursell in the early 1800s.

“Through the years it [had] been so remodeled and rebuilt that no vestige of the old house [was] left. In the mid-19th century, it became the home of Mrs. Christaline Johnson, who kept there one of the earliest boarding houses for summer visitors.”

Also near Owen Park was a house owned by Mr. John Andresen; the structure was built between 1801 and 1805 by Benjamin Allen.

“He was a rank Tory, and not at all popular in the village. Rev. William C. Hicks, rector of the Episcopal church in the village from 1894-1898, was the last owner before Mr. Owen purchased it and moved it to its present location.”

In 1720 Mrs. Marian Warner Trotter owned the grandest house in town. It stood where the town parking lot is now, next to the Stop & Shop. The Great House, as it was called, was built by Abraham Chase.

“It was quite the grandest house, and its owner was quite the most important man in the village.”

In 1922, the structure was moved to West Chop.

Another notable house is the Alphonso Smith House which was located on the south side of Owen Park, the second house down after Main Street. It is quite unfortunate that the beautiful houses that once stood there did not survive, all destroyed by fire or hurricane. Had they survived, they would be historical landmarks, perhaps, instead of a parking lots or post offices.



If you were to live in downtown Tisbury in the 1900s, you would know some of the important landmarks. One would be the windmill. Originally, it stood on Spring Street.

“The lot is now owned by Mrs. McAdoo.... Since its original location in town over one hundred years ago, the windmill moved twice – first to Mr. Donald Tilton’s home property on Main Street, then to the current Mr. William Snow’s home property.”

The mill was owned by Mr. Tristram Luce until purchased by General Carey. Likely the tallest structure around at the time, the windmill served as both a landmark and source of power for grinding grain. Another important landmark and business was the Saltworks Company in 1804. It began with Peter West and his brother-in-law Captain Lot Luce, who bought the Chase Homestead Meadow from Abraham Chase. The lot is where the current Post Office and Memorial Park are located, stretching over a large part of the town. Mr. West and Mr. Luce formed a partnership with two more master mariners, William Worth and William Cottle. Together, they built five evaporation vats plus two storage barns at the western shore of Bass Creek.

“Salt making was one of the earliest industries of the town and was carried on until 1850. The salt was used in curing fish to be shipped to foreign



Postcard view of Main Street, Vineyard Haven, in the 1930s.

markets.... Their venture gave the name “Company Place” to that section of the expanding village...”

Peter West, a grandson of Major Peter West who fought in the French and Indian wars, was only 36 years old and was the fifth generation of Wests raised in Tisbury. West was certainly dedicated to the Island, remaining there his whole life while gaining remarkable success. Not only did West own one of the nicest houses on the harbor, but he also was involved with matters outside of the Island as well. He participated in transatlantic shipping, and the many struggles that came with the task. From 1807 to 1811, he was detained in France while Napoleon “attempted to counteract British interference with transatlantic shipping.” West was soon released and returned to Martha’s Vineyard.*



Among other important buildings on or near Main Street, the churches and town halls were largely used during the 1800s. The Grace Church Association was formed in 1882, and the cornerstone of Grace Church was laid in September of that year. There was also Capawock Hall on Church Street (called Methodist Street back then); it was built in 1833 by William Daggett Jr. This public meeting place was originally one story, but was raised to two in 1855 to accommodate a market. In 1895, the building was remodeled and became the Masonic Lodge. In 1922 it changed hands again to become the

* The embargo of the War of 1812 dealt West’s saltworks a death blow.



From the 1950s, a view of Owen Park and the harbor.

movie theatre, and is today the home of the Vineyard Players. This was one of the buildings that narrowly escaped the Great Fire of 1883.

Another public meeting place was the Proprietors Meeting House. The building was built on the northwest corner of Main and Spring Street. This building became a Baptist church in 1804. However, it did not escape the fire and burned to the ground. The burning of the Baptist Church was most unsettling for the citizens of Vineyard Haven.

“At the time of the fire, when many people were losing their property, one citizen returning to his home in another locality was asked by a neighbor what had burned. He replied: ‘All of Main Street has gone.’ ‘Oh! Mr. Smith,’ the woman exclaimed, ‘Did the Baptist church burn?’ ‘Yes,’ he answered. She began to cry and said: ‘Oh! my hymn book, my new hymn book; why did I leave it there last Sunday?’”

A devastating loss for much of the village: Vineyard Haven was not just a place of business — it was a place for the people to live, to pray, to shop. Many of the churches and halls were what brought them together, uniting them with the other townspeople. In 1885, the present Baptist church was built on the corner of Spring and William Street.



Upon walking down Main Street today, one can find a large variety of novelty shops, boutiques, and unique stores. Back in the 1900s, it would look very different. The road was first laid out in October of 1798. The Norton Family Livery Stable was then located where former Bowl & Board is today, “looking much the same as it did when horses were billeted on

the lower level and carriages displayed on the apron leading to the upper level from the street.”

The building housing Mosher Photo used to be owned by Judal Brickman, who began working as a cobbler in the building. The first movie theatre was the Capawock in 1919 which featured “Goldwyn Plays and Capitol Comedies.” It’s still operating today. According to Stan Lair in a oral history interview: “...what they called Jenkin’s Paint Shop...is now Brickman’s. The “Stone Bank,” now Bank of Martha’s Vineyard, a division of Sovereign Bank, is found next to the Green Room. The building was designed by J.W. Beals in 1905. William Barry Owen bought a major interest in Martha’s Vineyard National Bank becoming the director in June 1905. This bank was built on the lot where the Crocker Harness Factory fire started. It was built of stone to “assure safety and to symbolize the recovered town”

This shift from being a sleepy, secondary town to one focusing on tourism built an economic foundation that the Island still relies on today. What was so attractive to tourists — then as now — was the location: right on the harbor. Many visitors to the Island, find themselves strolling in Owen Park, enjoying the beautiful views of the harbor and its come-and-go activities. Not only does the park present a lovely open view to the harbor, it gives people access to the beach. “[It] portrays the changing character of the harbor and the community over the course of time, both by the vistas it allows and by what is no longer there.”

Though the times and trends have changed, many of the same building structures and the spirit of the town remains. The evidence of our ancestors and history is clearly written in the foundation of our town. The same salty, Island air is still being blown in from the harbor and the warm Island vibe still beats in the heart of our town, Main Street.

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