

This Was Then: The Tashmoo

If it smells bad, just move.

By **Chris Baer** - April 24, 2019



The Tashmoo, at the corner of Main and Church streets, Vineyard Haven. Courtesy Chris Baer.

Before the great fire of 1883 burned down all of Vineyard Haven, there were two homes on the corner of Main and Church streets where the Cronig block stands today, now occupied by Mikado and Off Main.

One was owned by whaling captain Thomas Smith, a Tisbury native who died in Shanghai, China. The Smiths sold it to Capt. Ephraim Harding, who drowned, together with his teenage son and more than 30 others, in the tragic wreck of the John Milton off Montauk, N.Y.

On the very corner stood the home of Rodolphus and Mary Crocker, father and stepmother of well-known harnessmaker Rodolphus Crocker Jr. The elder Crocker represented half of Crocker Brothers, a popular local general store. Upon his death,

Mary began taking in borders, many of whom worked at her stepson's growing harness factory across the street, about where the stone bank building is today.

When flames broke out at the factory in 1883, these two homes were the first to catch fire. They burned to the ground that windy night, together with more than 60 other buildings, in a vast swath of destruction that stormed all the way up both sides of Main Street, reducing even the Mansion House to ashes.

Immediately after the fire, Mrs. Crocker bought the burned Harding property next door, and built a large new home straddling both lots, atop the ashes of the two old homes. She named it "Crocker Summer Villa." In 1888, it was purchased by Caroline and Harry Castello of Rhode Island, and advertised as an inn. A plumber, Civil War veteran, and founder and president of the Vineyard Haven Water Co., Castello led the successful enterprise to bring plumbing to Main Street by piping water from Lake Tashmoo. The

Castellos named their new hotel the Tashmoo, after the source of their new fortune. The inn's advertisements, which ran in papers as far away as Washington, D.C., offered "real solid comfort" for up to 50 guests for \$14 to \$18 per week. (The excursion fare from New York City cost an extra \$10.25.)

But across Main Street, across the little alley from the factory (and where Green Room stands today), stood Renear's livery stable. At one time the Crocker Brothers livery stable, it was now owned by Walter Renear, later sheriff of Dukes County, who ran a growing livery service and boarding stable, transporting passengers to and from Cottage City, delivering mail to West Chop and kids to Tisbury School, renting horses, and providing stabling for summer families.

And, like stables everywhere, it smelled bad. Guests of the Tashmoo began complaining about awful odors emanating from across the street. Unable to negotiate a deal with Renear, Castello physically moved the entire building a half-mile north, in 1901, to a site near the corner of Tashmoo Avenue (now the site of the Montessori School).

Renear soon abandoned horses and branched into automobile sales and real estate. Innkeeper Castello became the last surviving Civil War veteran on Martha's Vineyard. Walter Renear, grandson of the stableman, had but one memory of Castello: "Once, when I was in the third grade," recalled Renear, "Mr. Castello, too infirm to walk, was driven by his housekeeper in a school Memorial Day parade. Very near to where I was, the parade was lining up to start when the Castello driver ran over the leg of a second

grade girl. Several people shouted for the driver to stop; the driver then stopped and reversed — breaking the little girl's leg in two places. A terrible accident.”

Castello died in 1937, and the Tashmoo Inn was afterward operated by Tom Rabbitt. It burned down in June 1958. The Sandpiper restaurant was later built upon its ashes.

