

Pacific Guano Company

by Jennifer Stone Gaines

On the shore of Great Harbor in Woods Hole is a patch of wild land set atop a squared-off retaining wall that juts out into the water. The land is covered with beach rose, wild cherry, bayberry, cedar, bittersweet and pines, all hallmarks of nature taking back the land. This quiet place was once the site of a bustling industry, the Pacific Guano Company, the largest factory Falmouth has ever seen. More than 200 men worked here; ships docked after their voyages from the other side of the world, and a new manufacturing process was developed. Many diverse factors combined to make this happen.

The Pacific Guano Company, started in 1859, stands as an example of entrepreneurs seizing an opportunity at a particular time and in a particular place, to make new things work and to make a good living at the same time. The company's roots lie many years earlier in East Dennis, at the Shiverick shipyard. There the Shiverick family, with the backing of the Crowells, captains and owners of the ships and by necessity financiers, built sailing vessels that were sailed all around the world. The last vessels built there from 1850-1863 were eight top-of-the-line clipper ships, built for fast voyages "around the Horn" to California and then on across the Pacific to seek out cargo in the Orient. Unfortunately by the 1850s there was a world-wide slump in this interna-

trade. The ships often spent months looking for a suitable cargo to carry back to New England.

Simultaneously, with the beginning of the industrial age, men were developing methods for more productive agriculture. The nutrients of the soil were seriously depleted from years of poor soil management. Even with the use of the time-honored methods such as spreading manure on the fields, leaving fields fallow for a year between crops, putting fish

into the ground along with the seed in coastal communities, and the additional practices of crop rotation, eventually with nitrogen-rich crops of alfalfa, beans or clover the nutrients in the soil were used up. For years farmers, had been applying lime to "sweeten" their fields, but this did little to enrich the soil.

Many of the South's long-used cotton fields were nutrient impoverished. The same was true of the fields across New England and along the eastern seaboard. Farmers could not keep up with the demands of the rapidly growing population. In this brilliant age of invention, men applied their knowledge to the creation of alternate sources for revitalizing the fields.

Inquisitive explorers observed that islands along the west coast of South America had guano, hardened and dried bird dung, several hundred feet thick. It had accumulated over thousands of years from nest-



Pacific Guano Works Plaque by Sarah Peters. Photograph by Jacki Forbes.



Etching of the Pacific Guano Company from the 1877 Report by Commissioner Spencer F. Baird of the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries. Courtesy WHHC.

ing colonies of sea-birds. Guano, high in nitrogen and phosphorus nutrients, was tried as a fertilizer, and declared successful, ten times richer than manure. Much less effort was required of the farmer to spread guano on the fields than to spread the equivalent amount of nutrient enrichment from cart-loads of manure. The beginning of the fertilizer industry had come.

The stage was set for Cape Codders to enter. In 1852 Cape Cod ships carried guano from the Pacific to Ireland, Europe and the east coast of the United States. The Peruvian government was charging what seemed exorbitant rates for guano from their Chincha islands. Also they were using what amounted to slave labor from China to mine the guano; most of the workers died at the site.

After years of experience at getting the best cargo for their ships, at finding opportunities, the Yankees were quick to see that they might do even better financially if they could

own both the guano supply and fertilizer production.

The U.S. government stepped in to support the guano industry. In 1856 Congress passed the U.S. Guano Act stating that U.S. citizens could claim any uninhabited guano island in the world that was not claimed by another country as a U.S. possession, and have exclusive rights to mine guano. The U.S. Navy was directed to back up this claim. Companies could use this protection to explore and claim other islands. This allowed Prince Sears Crowell, ship's captain, head of the Crowell family of Cape Cod and outspoken abolitionist, to avoid the Peruvian labor practices he abhorred. As an additional bonus, he and other ship owners could guarantee cargo for their clipper ships.

The Crowells and Shivericks, joining with the Boston firm of Glidden and Williams, formed the Pacific



Pacific Guano Company was founded in 1863 bringing the industrial era to Woods Hole. Courtesy WHHC.

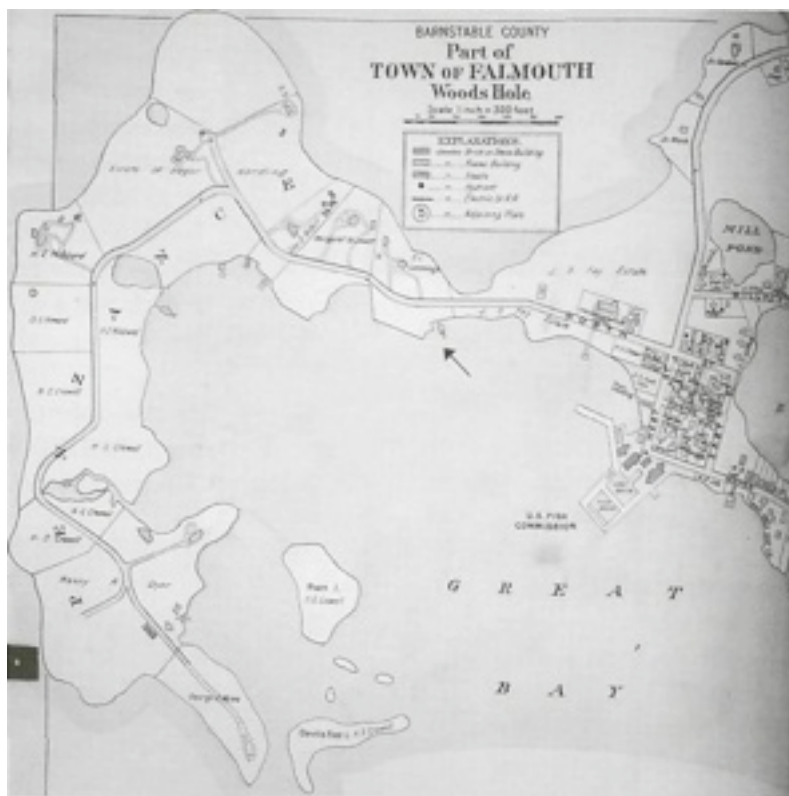
Guano Company in 1859. Under the U.S. Guano Act, the Pacific Guano Company claimed the Howland Islands at the equator in the Pacific for their own use. They searched Cape Cod for the best spot for their factory, and chose Woods Hole, the only natural deep water harbor. They bought several acres on Long Neck, the peninsula stretching out to the west off the end of Woods Hole. Until then it had been used only for sheep pasture. They built a granite retaining wall to create a deep water dock, pushed earth in behind it, and built their first factory upon it in 1863.

One of the Crowell sons came to Woods Hole as the company's chemist, charged with adding improvements to plain guano to make an even more effective fertilizer. One of the Shiverick sons came to be superintendent. Housing was constructed. Men, many of them recent Irish immigrants, were hired. The ships started to come in from the Pacific with guano. The local fish market was contracted to provide menhaden and other fish

scrap to mix with the guano to make a perfect fertilizer. Supplemented by fish from Rhode Island and Connecticut waters, 10,000 tons of fish were used in a single year. Production started on the fertilizers. In the southwest breeze, a fine stink swept across the village of Woods Hole. The industrial age had come to town.

In the first few years of operation, the Pacific Guano Company had 33 ships hauling guano off the Howland Islands. Six of these were lost on the return voyage. Two were captured by Confederate forces during the Civil War.

By 1867 the guano at the Howland Islands had been mined out. The company then claimed Swan Island in the western Caribbean off Honduras, and also bought nearby Navassa Island. In 1867, thick beds of "rock phosphate," a phosphorus-rich layer deposited by ancient seas, were discovered in South Carolina.



1908 Barnstable County Map of Penzance Point showing the peninsula subdivided after the demise of the Guano Works. The arrow, superimposed on the map, points to the location of the Pacific Guano Company. Courtesy WHHC.



When Mary Shiverick built her house on Fern Lane in Woods Hole in the early 1950s, she placed tiles around her new fireplace showing the clipper ships built by her family. The *Webfoot*, shown here, was built in 1856 and is one of the eight Shiverick ships that brought guano to the Pacific Guano Company. Photo by Jacki Forbes.

Again the Cape Codders were quick to adapt. They changed their equipment and formulas, bought Chisholm Island in South Carolina and built a rock crushing plant. Sulphuric acid was necessary to make the rock phosphate soluble in water, so a separate but adjacent building for the production of the acid was erected in Woods Hole. In 1869 the Pacific Guano Company built a second factory in Charleston, South Carolina. The company prospered, often showing profits of 20% per year.

The first fertilizer was carried by ship to other ports. With the help of Woods Hole's influential "first summer resident" Joseph Story Fay and other entrepreneurs, the railroad, which already had come as far as Monument Beach, was extended into Falmouth and down to Woods Hole in 1872. Wagons would carry

the 200 lb. bags of fertilizer from the factory to the railroad station across the wooden bridge spanning the Eel Pond channel which had been built just a few decades before when the main street was the center of the whaling industry. The village fathers saw that the weight of the fertilizer wagons was too much for the old bridge and replaced it with a new sturdy stone bridge.

The company thrived. At the Centennial exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, the company had its own booth, a sort of Chinese gazebo, and they sang the praises of their products. It was a wonderful, optimistic time for ingenuity and progress.

As the company grew, so did the town. In 1850 Woods Hole had a population of 200; by 1880 the population had



The Pacific Guano Pavilion at the Centennial Exposition of 1876, held in Philadelphia, PA. The company's pavilion, with its oriental architecture and exotic plants was designed to showcase the quality of the company's fertilizer. Courtesy WHHC.

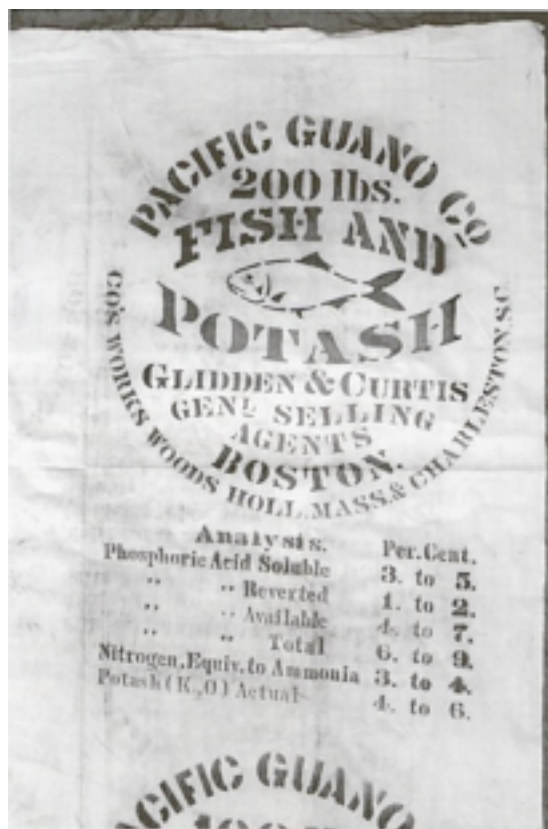
grown to 508, mostly due to the guano company. There was no looking back. The modern age had come!

The end of the Pacific Guano Company is shrouded in mystery including tales of the treasurer absconding with the money. For whatever reasons, by 1889 the finances of the company were in ruin. Bankruptcy was declared. The buildings and dock were abandoned.

A chapter in our town's history was over. But as is always the case, the groundwork had been laid for the next chapter. During the years of the Pacific Guano Company's prosperity, the train had come to

town. The ferries from New Bedford made regular stops. Summer people were appearing, and scientists had arrived. Six years after the company's demise, a developer bought all of Long Neck and subdivided it into large lots fronting on both Buzzards Bay and Great Harbor. He renamed it Penzance Point after the picturesque peninsula on the English Channel.

Woods Hole had been discovered by the world. And as a final exclamation point, gardeners in Woods Hole claim that, to this day, the lawns and gardens on and near the site of the former Pacific Guano Company grow vigorously without the addition of any more modern fertilizer.



The Woods Hole Historical Collection and Museum has this piece of material stamped and ready to be sewn into a bag for shipping fertilizer from the Pacific Guano Company. Courtesy WHHC.