
From the Archivists

The Cuttyhunk Historical Society

Janet Bosworth

The little island of Cuttyhunk is the outermost of the chain of Elizabeth Islands that stretch to the southwest from Woods Hole and lie north and west of Martha's Vineyard. The township of Gosnold, the smallest in Massachusetts, was formed in 1864 and is made up of the sixteen principal Elizabeth Islands and several smaller ones. The town seat is on Cuttyhunk, the only island not privately owned, except for Penikese, which belongs to the Commonwealth, but is leased to the Penikese School for Delinquent Boys.

The recorded history of Cuttyhunk goes back before the landing of the Pilgrims, for it was here that Bartholomew Gosnold, the English explorer, established in 1602 the first, if short-lived, English colony in North America. Although well known to sportsmen, Cuttyhunk made no attempt to achieve renown because of its history of seafarers, pilots and dramatic rescues at sea, until its Historical Society was founded only twelve years ago.

It was sportsmen who first brought fame to the island. The Cuttyhunk Fishing Club, made up primarily of New York millionaires, became known not only because of its huge catches of enormous bass, but because many of its equally enormous members were famous and important financiers and statesmen. Later, long after the club had closed and its holding had been sold to William M. Wood, the first International Swordfish Tournament was held on the island in 1959. The term international was a misnomer, because only a few Latin-American anglers had signed up, but many noted native fishermen did. Thus, through the years, Cuttyhunk's fame spread because of fishermen. Mr.

Wood had been brought originally to the island to fish at the Cuttyhunk Club, and it was his son, Cornelius, who formed the nucleus of the present group of summer people, who return year after year.

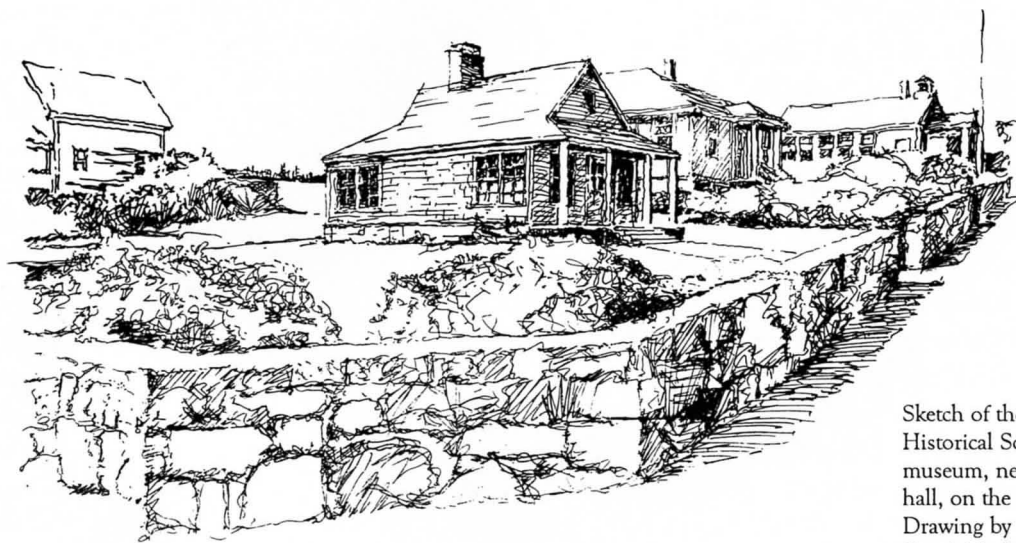
Among the later fishermen were at least three members of the famous Delaware family of DuPonts. They had been attracted to Cuttyhunk by their friendship with Dr. William Munds, an Episcopal minister, and his wife, Catherine. Dr. Munds owned a summer home on the island and held Episcopal services in the little church whenever he was there. Jessie Ball DuPont caught her first fish with Dr. Munds, and becoming interested in the island and its church, arranged for \$1,000 with the promise of more to come, to be given to the church from the Jessie Ball Dupont Fund, a charitable trust.

This church had been founded and built by Baptists in 1882. Now the Cuttyhunk Union Methodist Church, following its reorganization in the early part of the century, it was and is an unusual institution. It is open for services for only two months of the year, because of its outlying location and because the island's population shrinks to just a few dozen in the winter. Dr. H. Boone Porter, another summer home owner, now holds Episcopal services early Sunday mornings whenever he is on the island. These are followed by the Catholic Mass celebrated by Father Philip Kelly, who is often accompanied on the organ by Carmen Ward, the wife of the Methodist pastor, using the Methodist hymnal. Dr. John Ward, the pastor since 1967, conducts Methodist services in the evening.

At first, Mrs. DuPont's unexpected gift of \$1,000 in 1978 gave the church trustees an unfamiliar problem: how to spend this windfall. During the discussion, Lou Ketcham, one of the trustees, said: "How about an educational historical center for Cuttyhunkers who are proud of their ancestry?" This struck a chord, and Alexander C. Brown, then president of the trustees, later to be first president and treasurer of the Historical Center, asked me to be the curator—really director—since I was the only officer who remained on the island year round. I accepted, bought a book: "How to Run a Small History Museum" and we were in operation.

closets and attic, the only available storage room, is beginning to give out after twelve years, and the need for office and exhibit space has become urgent.

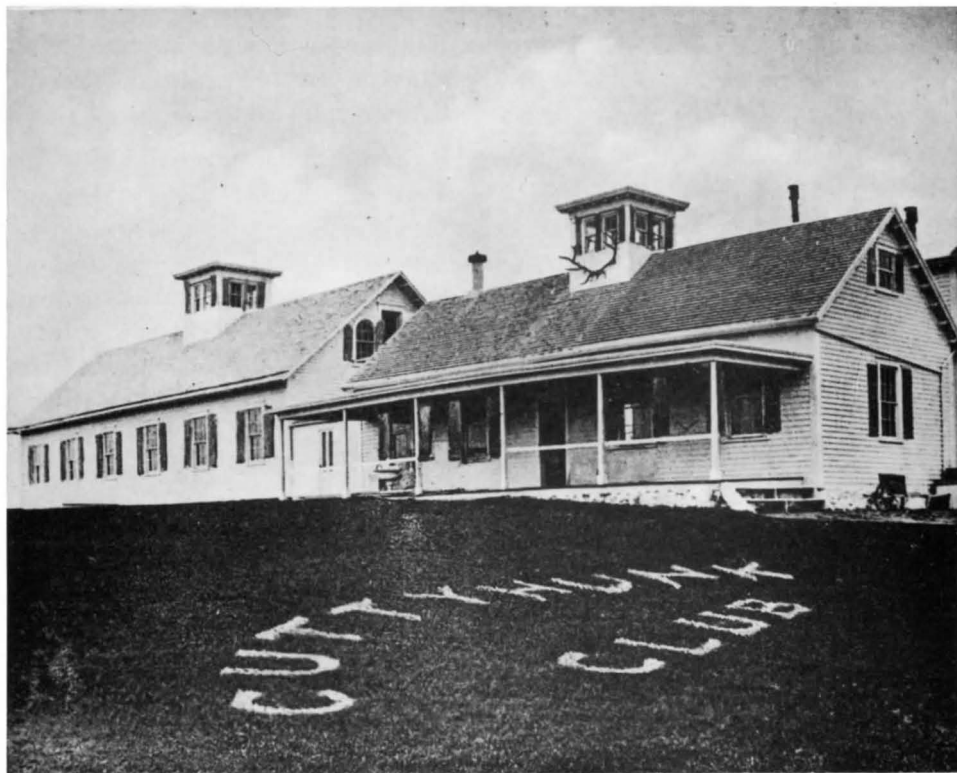
The center began to hold summer exhibits in its first year, originally in the little library historical room and then in the one-room schoolhouse. Its members rallied to assemble these and to man them. A comprehensive genealogy of island families was compiled, biannual historical papers were distributed to members and four booklets have been published, which sell well. Events have been sponsored, speakers brought to Cuttyhunk and information supplied to students and consultants.



Sketch of the Cuttyhunk Historical Society's future museum, next to the town hall, on the road up the hill. Drawing by Frederick P. Goodrich, Jr. Courtesy Cuttyhunk Historical Society.

The islanders accepted the new organization with enthusiasm and were more than helpful. Almost immediately they began searching their attics for pictures, letters and artifacts. Although many of these had been lost through the years because of hurricane destruction and the ravages of time, the space in my

Marjorie Reeves, a descendant of most of the old island families, to name only one of our many donors, stands out as a source of invaluable information; she has created many lovely needlework pieces for our collection and to sell. Steven Baldwin has made beautiful signs, Alpheus Tilton and Lloyd Bosworth



Cuttyhunk Fishing Club, ca. 1895.
Courtesy Cuttyhunk Historical Society.

made ship and boat models, the original town scales and even a bass boat have been given to us—but it is impossible to name everyone and everything. We were off, running and a success.

In 1982, because of our rapid growth, it was decided to form a separate organization from the church and to give ourselves a new name: The Cuttyhunk Historical Society. Now, all we lacked was a home of our own where we could work and hold our meetings and exhibits and could store our acquisitions safely. Cuttyhunk being Cuttyhunk, there was no land or building to buy, even had we been able to afford it. However, in 1987, the solution to all our difficulties came in the form of a gift from Muriel Wood Ponzecchi, always known as Oriel, the granddaughter of William Wood, who had owned the island. This gift

was the last remaining open piece of land in the center of the village at the corner of “Main Street”—Broadway—and the road running up the hill to the old lookout. She had guaranteed our future.

An executive committee was formed at once to make plans. Cuttyhunk has no real town center, but the town buildings are all clustered on the road leading up the hill to the lookout, and all of these are built in a somewhat uniform style: the church, the school, the library and the town hall. It was decided to place the museum close to the town hall in order to leave open space on Broadway and room for the existing volleyball court, at present the only place for organized teenage activity except for the yacht club. The building, as can be seen in the drawing, will also be simple and will closely resemble the other public buildings.

Gradually, plans have been developed for the size of the museum, its height and materials, and for its interior. Exhibit space, safety and preservation measures, storage, office and conference rooms have been carefully thought out. A small apartment will be placed at the rear to house a paid summer worker, or a docent or archivist. (There is no place anywhere on the island for such a person to live and this lack has been a great disadvantage.) The second floor will contain two bedrooms and a bath above the apartment, and storage room will be above the offices and exhibit rooms.

A finance drive was inaugurated in the spring of 1990 and a brochure distributed describing the project. By the time this article is published, the foundation should be well along. We hope that everyone who makes the climb up the steep hill from the marina and the dinghy float will stop to look and to see how we are coming along. The summer exhibit will be just beyond in the

schoolhouse; we plan to have detailed drawings there and perhaps a model as well. We will be looking forward to your comments.

Coming this far and achieving what we have on a small, remote island, starting from scratch, has been a heady experience. It has certainly been rewarding, because Cuttyhunk has a proud heritage, which the new museum will preserve. The Historical Society will provide learning as well as entertainment, a look into the past for information on how to build for the future and a record of what the people who preceded us hoped for and attained. All of us at Cuttyhunk, even non-islanders, as most of us are these days, owe a debt of gratitude to the indomitable settlers, the farmers, fishermen, pilots and summer visitors, who made and kept the island the lovely place it still is. Storing their records and histories and making them available is the best way we can repay them.