



Quisset Harbor House, September 1897. From left to right: the Cottage, old saltworks called "the alley," the Jenkins house, the connector (with dining room behind), the Hammond house.
Photo by Baldwin Coolidge. Courtesy WHHC.

Some of the History and Flavor of the Quissett Harbor House Hotel

Virginia Francis

The land on which the Quissett Harbor House stood was originally Indian territory. Quissett, Quamquissett, Quiquamquissett are all Indian names, and when Carey Lane was built through the Carey property north of the hotel, an Indian midden full of shards of pottery and arrowheads was uncovered just at the beginning of the road.

White settlers came to this particular site between 1678-1690. Among the earliest houses were those of Moses Rowley, Isaiah Hammond, and a little later, in



Cornelia Carey (1891-1973), granddaughter of Stephen W. Carey. At her death, Miss Carey generously left the Quissett Knob property to Salt Pond Areas Bird Sanctuaries as a nature preserve. The Carey family's generosity made possible the purchase of the central portion of the hotel property by the Quissett Harbor House Land Trust, organized by Lewis W. Francis, thus saving it from development. Courtesy Lewis W. Francis, Jr.



Stephen W. Carey (1831-1920) bought the Quissett Harbor House and property from Jane W. Lewis for \$9,675 in 1881. Photo by Frank Pearsall, 1894. Courtesy Lewis W. Francis, Jr.

1802, Prince Jenkins's house to which Willett Hall is now attached. The Jenkins House is the only one of the three remaining on its original site. The string of rooms which stretches between what we call "the Cottage" and Jenkins House was originally a salt works.

In 1871, Jane Lewis, a lady from Arkansas, bought 47 acres from Susan Eldred Jenkins (who occupied the house at that time) for \$2,100. She would be astounded to learn what that property sells for now. Jane Lewis's husband James planned to divide the property into 40 house lots. Fortunately for Quissett he never sold any.

The Lewises built for themselves a Victorian cottage on the hill close by where Hammond House stood. They



The Cottage, at the end of the alley, where the DeWitt family lived for many summers. 1914. Courtesy Cynthia Coffin.

moved the Hammond House down the hill and attached it to the Jenkins House by means of a connector, which finally served as the main part of the hotel, containing the dining room, living room, and many bedrooms. This was in 1874.

The way the connector joined Hammond House was not very well designed. It did not quite fit where it was supposed to, so that in order to get from one to the other without going outside, you had to go up two steps, crouch through a narrow opening, and down two steps on the other side.

At that time the hotel had an unsavory reputation. New Bedford fishermen were wont to bring their lady friends there.

Stephen Carey and his sister Sarah, who was my husband's great grandmother, were born on Martha's Vineyard. Stephen came to Quissett in 1881 and bought the hotel and all the property which included the Knob and everything over to Racing Beach, as well as the strip around the harbor on the waterside of the road, including the dock and about 100 yards south of the dock along the beach. For all this he paid Jane Lewis \$9,645. (One acre of this property—just the property, no house—sold for \$250,000 in 1988.) Stephen Carey

moved the Victorian cottage down to the south side of the salt works and turned that into a string of six single rooms. No bathroom was included in this renovation.

George Washington Fish had been running the hotel for the Lewis's, and Stephen, who never wanted anything changed, kept George on. He remained as proprietor until 1916.

Katie, the pastry cook, and Mrs. Spillane, the housekeeper, also worked at the Harbor House for many summers.

There was also Russell, the hotel's general factotum who "would do anything for anybody." He was very black and very fond of children. He was always willing to clean the fish they caught from the Harbor House dock.

George was a relative of A. Metcalf Morse, Jr. Metty still lives in the family home, one of the oldest houses in Quissett, called Hurricane Hall, just across the harbor from the Harbor House. Metty's mother was Maria Fish.



Quissett Harbor House bath houses and bathing beach on Buzzards Bay, ca 1915. Courtesy Cynthia Coffin.

Stephen spruced up the hotel a bit, and it became a very popular summer vacation spot—so popular that you had to reserve a room one year in advance to get in.

Many well-known people stayed here including Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Joseph Holland the actor, Dr. Spock of child-care fame, and the Morrows (Anne Morrow Lindbergh's family), to name just a few. And there were loads of children.

When George Fish finally left the hotel in 1916, Stephen Jr., who had inherited the property from his father, decided to give up the hotel, but there was such an outcry from the guests that Lew's father, Lewis W. Francis, and a friend, decided to open it and oversee it. After three years they finally persuaded Stephen Jr. to take over. He ran it until his death. Then Cornelia Carey, his daughter, ran it until her death in 1973.

This account, written by one of the guests of the Quissett Harbor House in its heyday, is taken from *The Book of Falmouth*.

"Modern convenience is anathema to the interior of the Harbor House, and no violence has been done its antiquity since the coming of electricity in the early



Playing informal golf over Quissett hills, where Carey Lane is today. Maria Fish Morse (Metty Morse's mother) on left, Sarah Dimon Chapman (Lew Francis' mother) on right, Ned Ryuson in center. September 1897. Courtesy Lewis W. Francis, Jr.

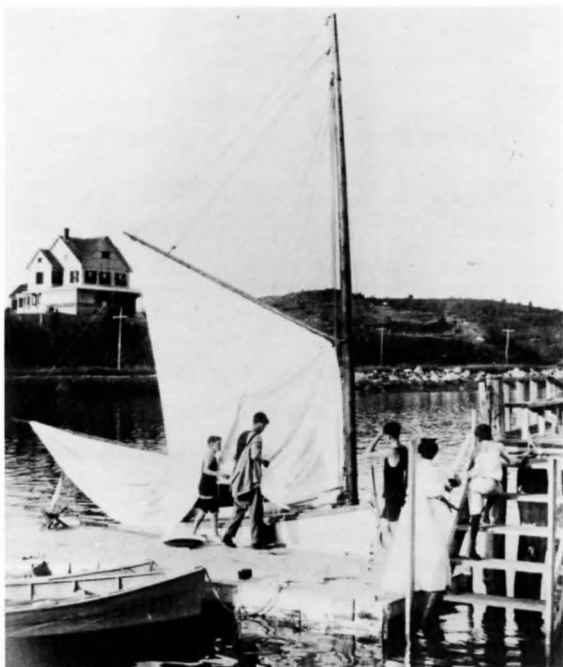


A sailing party aboard Stephen Carey's yacht *Petrel* out from the Harbor House, August 1890. Courtesy Lewis W. Francis, Jr.

twenties. If the hotel were modernized, it would lose more than half of its present clientele to whom the status quo is cherished and inviolable. A few years ago when the Harbor House passed to Stephen W. Carey's grandchildren, the heirs were petitioned by dozens of guests to keep it in operation as before. This June it will open its many doors for the seventy-fifth consecutive year.

"There are no obsequious bellkeeps at the Harbor House. If you want your keys or your mail, you may go behind the gnarled counter in the front entrance and fish them out of the pigeonhole corresponding to your room. There is no running water in your room. Only a stone pitcher and a basin. Every morning there will be left outside your door a second pitcher of hot water and another of ice water. There is no unnecessary clutter of useless furniture in your room either. An iron bed, a chest, and hooks in the wall for your clothes.

"On the wall next to the window you will find a coil of rope hanging over a sign reading, 'In case of fire throw this rope out of the window and use as a fire escape.'"¹



Activities on the Harbor House dock. From left, Howard Day, Harvey Osgood, Ward Parker. Climbing the stairs, "Lilly," Roger Prosser. Courtesy Dr. Charles E. McGowan.

Troup Daignault told me that Dr. Spock once said, "the Harbor House is so uncomfortable that only the nicest people would come here."

What brought people back year after year? What was it that made the Harbor House so popular? Lew's family came here for 35 summers. He called it a glorified boarding house full of congenial people who liked simple summer fun. In the early days there were no cars, no TV, no movies. But there was softball on the lawn, swimming, water sports, sailing, charades in the evening, moonlit sails, and dances to the Victrola. Sometimes the ladies hired a woman from town to play the piano.

There was no bar at the Harbor House but guests could bring their own bottle to the side porch.

At first there were only oil lamps, later one electric bulb hanging by a wire in the bedrooms. Mattresses sagged

badly and there were no bathtubs or showers—who needed them with Buzzards Bay so close and bath houses along the beach on that side?

There were only four toilets in the whole place. One lady, whose room year after year was opposite one of the toilets, used to keep time on her elderly gentleman neighbor. "Ten minutes," she would shout, "5 minutes," then "time's up!"

One lady complained that the rain dripped on her in her bed. "Why don't you do what Mrs. DeWitt does," the management said, "take an umbrella to bed with you."

Mrs. DeWitt was the grandmother of Cynthia Coffin and Ned DeWitt, and she occupied the cottage for many years. Following her, Clarence and Dippy Bartow lived there for a number of summers.

Mrs. Gilbert, one of the long-time guests, gave parts of the Harbor House special names. The big living room was known as "the Morgue," "the Foxes Den" was another room, the Hammond House was "the Ritz," the string of single rooms where the salt works used to be was "the Bowling Alley," and the cottage was "The



Standing on the Harbor House lawn with their catch, Dr. Leroy Milton Yale, Jr. (brother-in-law of Stephen Carey) on left, and John W. Chapman (grandfather of Lewis W. Francis, Jr.) on right. Courtesy Lewis W. Francis, Jr.

Cottage." We who have a lot to do with the Harbor House still use these names.

Willett Hall, named for Herb Willett because he did so much work himself in restoring it, was the dining room. The status of the guests could be determined by where their table was—newcomers at the back and you gradually progressed towards the windows and the view. After 35 years Lew's family had a table by the window.

In 1975, after 101 years, Quissett Harbor House closed. People wanted something fancier and more comfortable.

Cornelia Carey, who had run it after her brother Stephen died, saw the hotel gradually lose guests, but it did not actually close until after her death.

Cornelia had left the Knob, property she had bought from her brother, to the Audubon Society, but they did not want it. Her second choice had been the Salt Pond Areas Bird Sanctuaries. They accepted it and now own it.

Helen Carey, Stephen's third wife, and her step-children inherited all the rest of the property extending north to Gray Lane and including the strip between Quissett Harbor Road and the water from Helen Carey's house to about 100 yards south of the Harbor House dock.

Because of Lew's relationship to the family, Helen turned to him to help her decide what to do with the property. Like the other Careys, she wanted as little as possible changed. She could have sold it all for many millions to Howard Johnson for a big hotel or to some developer, but instead she sold part of it including the Harbor House plus seven acres, the bathing beach, the dock, and the strip along the harbor to about 100 yards south of the dock up to the point where the Salt Pond Bird Sanctuary property begins, to a group organized by Lew called the Quissett Harbor House Land Trust for a price they could afford. This allows the group to

control the waterfront so no clam shacks or fancy marinas can be built there.

The executive board of the Trust decided to take down "the connector" and to sell Hammond House, but to keep Jenkins House and "the Cottage" and fix them up to rent.

Chet Wright, whose mother was an Eldred, took the connector down for what he could salvage from it. Part of it is in the "Quarterdeck," the restaurant he once ran on Main Street in Falmouth.

We offered Hammond House which was built in 1790 and still had the original paneling, wide floor boards and doors, to friends and neighbors to buy, but no one wanted to buy it, so I wrote a description of it and sent it to *Yankee Magazine*. We had 52 responses, and we sold it to the highest bidder. It was taken apart, each piece numbered, and shipped by train and truck to Washington State where it was restored to its original state. The owner has sent us pictures of it and it is charming.

Lew gave the job of getting the Jenkins House and the Cottage in shape for summer rental to Molly Willett and me. We ransacked "the connector" before it was taken down for any furniture we could use. We climbed the ladder to the attic where we found a huge old water tank, 50 chamber pots (known to the guests as thunder mugs), and some decrepit costumes which must have been used in charades.

We were allowed only \$2,000 for new rugs and a sofa, so we combed the second-hand shops for additional furniture. We turned the old pastry kitchen into a living room, put a big picture window in the back wall for a view of the Bay, turned the servants' dining room into a modern kitchen, put in bathrooms and showers, and finally painted or papered all the rooms.

When we tore down the ceiling in the servants' dining room exposing the old beams, we found stuck in one of the beams an 1831 newspaper telling a story about



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When we tore down the ceiling in the servants' dining room exposing the old beams, we found stuck in one of the beams an 1831 newspaper telling a story about

a Negro woman who bashed in her husband's head with an axe.

Down in the cellar of Jenkins House we found two huge closets with walls and doors one foot thick stuffed with seaweed. These were used to store meat. The cellar floor is partially paved with bricks from England which served as ballast in ships.

Today the Trust allows the Yacht Club Sailing Class to use part of the basement for meetings, and they let the Yacht Club use the dock and the floats for dinghies and the parking lot south of the Cottage.

The Quissett Yacht Club was organized in the Harbor House in 1911. Jo Holland was the prime mover. Some familiar names were on the original committees—among them Stephen Carey Jr., George Fish, Lewis W. Francis, Edward DeWitt, Charles Eldred.

Willett Hall is used for certain meetings and sometimes for weddings or parties of Trust members. It is used a lot.

We owe a great deal to the Carey family and to the Quissett Harbor House Land Trust for keeping the harbor part of Quissett much the way it has always been.

Virginia Francis grew up in Brooklyn, New York, where one of her neighbors was Lew Francis. After the death of her first husband, Virginia visited Lew with friends in Quissett, and twenty years ago she and Lew were married. Over the years she has learned much of the history and lore of the Quissett Harbor House from her husband and friends and from her own work with the Quissett Harbor House Land Trust. A highly respected artist, she paints under the name of Virginia Mortenson Francis.

Note

1. Mary Lou Smith, editor, *The Book of Falmouth*, Falmouth Historical Commission, Falmouth, Mass. 1986, p. 348.



End of an era. Remains of the connector on ground, Jenkins house behind truck, Willett Hall (old dining room) on right, 1977. Courtesy Lewis W. Francis, Jr.