

200 Years of a Quisset Family

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In 1992 a large collection of family papers, letters, pictures, clothing and artifacts was given by the estate of A. Metcalf Morse, Jr. of Quisset to the Woods Hole Historical Collection. These items were illustrative of a good portion of the history of the Fish and Morse families. As the collection passed to the Woods Hole Historical Collection, the house built about 1790 by Deacon Thomas Fish passed out of the family to a new owner, ending an era of family history covering two hundred years.

In preparing the exhibition of this collection at the Woods Hole Historical Museum, much interesting history has come to light. Quisset has been known for over one hundred years as a beautiful and quiet summer village surrounding a protected harbor. In recent years many new homes and new families have become part of a thriving and busy summer community. But the view of Quisset as a summer place does not reveal its long history of local and interstate commerce and international trade.



Quisset Harbor, showing the Fish farm as it appeared in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The 18th century windows had been changed from small, multi-paned glazing to two-over-twos to give more light, a porch has been added and there is only one dormer. The barn is still adjacent to the house; later it was moved to the rear of the property close to Quisset Avenue. Postcard, The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.

Deacon Thomas Fish (1762–1848) was a prominent citizen of the Falmouth area. He fought in the Revolutionary War, became a teacher, a Barnstable County commissioner, a Justice of the Peace and was a member of the Massachusetts State Legislature for 21 years. His absence from his beloved Quissett Harbor home for the long periods that his presence was required in Boston caused him much regret. He was an important figure in the Congregational Church in Falmouth and became a Deacon of that church. This title preceded his name for the rest of his life.

Three large houses were built on Quissett Harbor around 1790 by men bearing the title of Deacon. Deacon Thomas Fish built The Farm or The Homestead, later Hurricane Hall, on the east side of the harbor in about 1790–1791. A similar center-hall five-bay two-story Colonial house had been built several years earlier by Deacon Eldred on the north side of the road leading to Quissett Harbor. And Deacon Jenkins built another house of this type on the west side of the Harbor. This house formed one part of the collection of buildings that became the Quissett Harbor House hotel which dominated the Harbor for over one hundred years.

In 1802 a stone dock was constructed on the eastern side of the inner harbor below the home of Barney Marchant who owned the land south of Thomas Fish. A small shipyard began at this dock with Thomas Fish as shipwright and his neighbors as partners and shareholders in the trade that resulted from the voyages of Quissett built vessels: the brig *Victory*, the brig *Enterprise*, the bark *Union* and the sloop *Susannah*. Partners Isaiah Hammond, Zephaniah Robinson and Barney Marchant engaged in coastal and West Indian trade. Thomas Fish was also the first agent for the company, as well as a captain on some of the vessels. Some of the products included cranberries from bogs north of Quissett Harbor in Racing Beach and salt from harbor edge saltworks built on the west side. Live oak timber



Thomas Dunham Fish, about 1860.
Daguerreotype. Courtesy Thomas C. Morse.

used in shipbuilding was shipped up the coast from South Carolina.

Another prominent personality of Quissett and later of Woods Hole was Braddock Gifford (1791–1873). He was the blacksmith for the shipyard at Quissett and built a large two-story hip roofed house on the Woods Hole Road nearby. This house was later owned by Thomas Fish, Jr. and his son Aaron Cornish Fish.

Trade and shipborne commerce was very important to the citizens of the area and during the War of 1812 great care was taken to hide the presence of a harbor and its vessels from the British warships. Ships were camouflaged and some boats floated near the harbor entrance covered with treetops designed to hide the very presence of a body of water.

Deacon Thomas Fish and his wife Susannah Crowell (1763–1847) had at least eight children who survived childhood. Susannah was known to have had a religious “experience” which caused great comment and

interest among her neighbors and friends. Cornelia Carey remembered annual revival meetings held to commemorate Susannah's experience for decades afterwards. David Fish, one of the younger children, wrote to his mother from Boston about his own religious excitement, but died soon afterwards at the age of 24. The second daughter, Celia, widowed young, later married Aaron Cornish, a prominent physician from New Bedford. Her brother Thomas Fish, Jr. named his youngest son after this man. Third daughter Susannah married her neighbor Deacon Prince Jenkins. The youngest son Henry Lincoln Fish, named for the minister of the Congregational Church, established a ship's store in Quissett and kept a "daybook" from 1834 to 1845 listing the local vessels he supplied, including sloops, schooners and whaling ships.

It is Joseph Crowell Fish, the sixth child of the Deacon and Susannah, who provides the link to the next generation and the transition from the earlier forms of coastal trade to interstate commerce and international shipping. Joseph married the beautiful Albinia Daggett of an old and prominent Martha's Vineyard family.

Albinia's sister Mary was married to Thomas Dunham, Jr. of Tisbury on the Vineyard. Dunham and Frederick Dimon of Southport, Connecticut, formed

the shipping agency Dunham and Dimon in New York City during the 1840s. In about 1860 Joseph Crowell Fish's son Thomas Dunham Fish (1840-1928) joined his uncle's business. Eventually, Frederick Dimon left the agency and Thomas D. Fish (according to family tradition) forced his uncle to relinquish the daily operation of the business. The agency became *Thomas Dunham's Nephew & Company* upon the death of Thomas Dunham in 1868. In the later part of the century the business had its offices at 68 South Street on the East River in New York City, in the heart of the shipping district. Coastal and international sailing vessels tied up at the docks that lined South Street for miles, their bowsprits almost touching the third story windows on the opposite side.

Dunham and Dimon and *Thomas Dunham's Nephew & Company* employed a number of full rigged ships on their international routes. A small number were built to order for the two companies: the ship *Caravan* built in 1855 in Bath, Maine; the ship *Jacob A. Stamler* built in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in 1856; the ship *Thomas Dunham* built in Bath, Maine, in 1862 and the bark *Albinia*, named for Thomas Dunham Fish's mother, built in Portland, Maine in 1863. Other ships and barks, some purchased well-used with many previous owners, made up the bulk of vessels utilized from the 1860s to the 1890s.

Thomas Dunham Fish (right) and manager John Kimble (left) in the offices of *Thomas Dunham's Nephew & Company*, 1890s. Courtesy Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT.



Thomas Dunham Fish wrote extensively during his lifetime, both as a diarist and as a correspondent. Since we are able to read his diary and letters, he seems to us to be the most interesting and human of all the long-dead members of the family. His diary of 1860 and 1861 when he was 20 to 21 years of age and working in New York City is fascinating reading. He was working as a clerk in the 61 South Street offices of the Dunham shipping agency, copying letters, paying bills, running errands, visiting the ships (the *Robina*, the *Byzantine*, the *Corra Linn*) going to the Corn Exchange and the Produce Exchange. He also worked as a clerk for Stephen W. Carey, who was Thomas Dunham's ward as a young boy, but who by this time had formed his own agency with Lambert and Yale. Stephen Carey married Sarah Smith Boardman Yale and Thomas Dunham would eventually become his brother-in-law, marrying Sarah's younger sister Albina* Daggett Yale. Presumably, Carey came to Quissett Harbor as a visitor because of this relationship before he began to purchase land and took over



South Street, New York City, 1890s, near the offices of Thomas Dunham's Nephew & Company. Courtesy South Street Seaport Museum, New York, N.Y.

the running of the Quissett Harbor House as a hotel in the early 1880s.

* There is much confusion about the name of Thomas Dunham Fish's mother Albinia and his wife's name Albina. This confusion exists even in the family bibles, records and letters. It appears to be that the first lady was indeed named Albinia and the second Albina. Some of the ship's records call the bark of 1863 *Albinia* and others *Albina*.

The Yales, the Dunhams and Daggetts were all residents of Brooklyn at this time. Thomas sometimes lived with the Dunhams in Brooklyn, sometimes boarded in New York, sometimes lived in Staten Island and with his uncle Dunham would watch for the family ships from the heights of both these areas overlooking New York Bay. Cousins and brothers came to visit and had to be picked up at the Fall River Line ferry dock. There were frequent evenings of dancing and music with his relatives. Thomas and his uncle observed soldiers drilling near the Battery during the early months of the Civil War. On July 19, 1861 Thomas wrote in his diary:

Bath in morning. Remained with my aunt during the day & in evening drove with my uncle to Camp Scott. There are about 5000 men making a brigade. Daniel Sickles acting as Brigade General. We arrived at the camp in time to see the drill. Some were draped in one uniform, some in another & some had not yet received their uniform. After seeing all the principle features, we drove along to the first road above the camp where my uncle had quite a long talk with two soldiers keeping guard. One told us he was a fireman on an engine of the N.Y. & Erie road & belonged in Orange Co. The other was a parasol maker from N.Y. City. They appeared to be very smart men. Had been in camp since April without pay or knowing if they were to have any. . . . were desirous of remaining & going further on. They said they had nearly forgotten how a piece of money looked. My uncle gave them two shillings apiece for which they were thankful & we drove home by moonlight. Stopping on a hill overlooking the water to see the Therese my uncle's ship bound to sea. Arrived at home. Spent the evening pleasantly listening to reading from Mr. Jones & music from ladies.

Thomas had spent part of 1860 at home in Quissett working on The Farm, attending church, going to Woods Hole to pick up relatives at the ferry, clearing swamps, fishing and sailing. When he returned to New York after almost a year away he resumed his

duties as a clerk but was often unwell with a chronic sore throat. He finally went to Saratoga Springs near Albany to take the waters.

The Woods Hole Historical Collection has a vast collection of letters received by Thomas D. Fish but only a small set of copies of letters written by him, mostly in the 1890s (the originals of these letters and his diary of 1860-1861 were given by Arthur Metcalf Morse, Jr. and the Woods Hole Historical Collection, along with much of the business records, to South Street Seaport Museum in New York). It is through his letters that we have discovered the role of local trade in interstate commerce. Braddock Gifford, the Quisett blacksmith, wrote to Fish asking him to sell cranberries for him and Fish also received numerous letters from Josiah P. Luce of Martha's Vineyard asking him to sell eels, fish and white beach stones.

Tisbury Jan 15 1877

Mr Thom D Fish

New York

Dear friend

Your favors come duly to hand. Should (have) replied sooner if I could have caught you a few eels. Just at the time you wrote it was hard getting eels up the island on account of the thickness of the ice. Consequently had to go to the lagoon pond. They were scarce enough there. Those Vineyard Haven gulls. Had hauled the most of them out. I went twice and made out to get what I sent you by buying a part of them.

The weight of the barrel fish was
197 \$15.76

The freight and express
I paid as far as S.S. NEW
BEDFORD by N.Y.

The late severe gales and high tides swept my boathouse away and stove my boat very hard. It will take all my earnings this fall to replace things and more. Should like to supply you another barrel (of) fish or more if you can

place them. I wish you would pay my dues to the Marine Society before remitting me the moneys.

We call the eels \$1.50

15.76

\$17.26

Ever yours respectfully,

J P Luce

These goods were sent by the Old Colony Steamboat Company, which owned the Woods Hole to Boston train and the ferries to the Islands, New Bedford, Fall River and New York. In New York, Thomas Dunham Fish, who ordinarily handled international shipments, would probably hand the agricultural products over to a commission agent in the Produce Exchange in Lower New York.

The letters give a wonderfully interesting picture of 19th century life. He received letters from his ships' captains and their sailors; a Peter Madre wrote to Fish on the 5th of December 1880 requesting a loan of twenty dollars because he had "got in a collision with a yellow young lady" in Charleston; he wished to receive the money without his captain's knowledge but Fish ignored this irregular request and sent the money

on to Captain Lawrence of the ship *Freedom* anyway. The ships' captains wrote of stormy dangerous voyages and their gratitude when they had safely reached port, telling Fish about the condition of his ships, his crew and the cargo. Captains' wives wrote asking for money and news of their husbands. And there are many flirtatious letters written by women, for Thomas Dunham Fish was a widower. His wife, Albina Daggett Yale, died a month after giving birth to a daughter, Maria, in 1874. Fish never remarried and Maria was brought up by her mother's sister Sarah, the wife of Stephen W. Carey. There are charming letters from the young child Maria to her Papa.

Maria grew up to be a lovely young woman, small and slender, who wore gold rimmed spectacles. We have many of her dresses which were carefully saved and which are in beautiful condition. One pink and white silk dress was made from Chinese "pineapple cloth" (which included pineapple fibers) and had been given by a ship's captain to Stephen W. Carey for his wife. His wife had it made over for her niece Maria in about 1890. Another lovely dress with huge leg-o-mutton sleeves and a lace jabot is made of shimmering purple

DEAR PAPA I WISH YOU
WOULD COME AND SEE
ME YOU ARE A LONG
TIME. ABOUT IT I SEND
YOU A LOVE AND A
KISS FROM YOUR
DAUGHTER MARIA
FISH

M. J. T. D. FISH
68 SOUTH ST
NEW YORK

First letter received by Thomas Dunham Fish from his six year old daughter Maria, October 13, 1880. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.



Maria Yale Fish Morse and her children: Arthur Metcalf Morse, Jr., Carey Yale Morse, Cushman Crowell Morse and Albina Yale Morse. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.



Quisset Harbor at the turn of the century, showing Quisset Harbor House, Petrel's Rest, the Yale house and Harbor Head Cottage. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.

satin; this was made in 1897, the year Maria became engaged to Arthur Metcalf Morse of Montclair, New Jersey. As Maria was the only child of Thomas Dunham Fish, upon her marriage the family history became focused on the Morses.

The main residence of Thomas Dunham Fish was in Rutherford, New Jersey; the Careys and Morses made their winter homes in nearby Montclair. By the 1890s the large interrelated clan of Fishes, Morses, Careys, Yales and Dimons spent their summers and leisure time at Quisset Harbor in houses that had existed since the early days or that had been built for summer living. The Fishes and Morses, of course, lived at the old Fish farmhouse, known as The Homestead. Stephen W. Carey lived for many summers with the Fishes at the farm but eventually built Petrel's Rest, a large shingle-style residence above the northern corner of the harbor. The Yales built a plainer smaller shingle house behind the Careys overlooking Buzzards Bay. The Careys bought and renovated many smaller existing cottages, barns and sheds which then housed various members of the family. Stephen W. Carey, Jr. lived at the old Barney Marchant house. In the year 1897, many photos of the Careys and their relatives were taken, by Baldwin Coolidge and others, showing the large extended family and their children and grandchildren on the beach, on the lawn and under an arbor. Some were informal snapshots, others were formal group portraits.

Maria and her husband Arthur Metcalf Morse (1870-1954) moved to Quisset permanently in 1937. He had founded the Wheatena Company and now in retirement served as president of the Falmouth Historical Society. In the 1950s the senior Morses moved into one of the smaller cottages on the property (there are two: The Eagle and The Corncrib) and Arthur Metcalf Morse, Jr. (1898-1991), known as "Metty" took over Hurricane Hall, formerly called The Homestead. He and his wife, Katherine White Morse



Stephen W. Carey and his granddaughter Isabella Lee Carey, who was known as "Oldy", walking uphill from the Harbor House towards Petrel's Rest, 1897. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.



Mrs. Joseph C. Fish, Jr. and Ned, 1897. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.



Aaron Cornish Fish. The "Knob" may be seen in the background. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.



Quisset family group. Photograph by Baldwin Coolidge, 1897. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.

(1901-1984), had lived in Larchmont, New York, and Metty continued to commute to New York City where he was vice president of Conover-Nast Publications, spending his weekends in Quisset. He was an active sailor and took a serious interest in the Quisset boatyard.

Before his death, Metty began to distribute the vast collection of Fish family papers that had been stored in the Corncrib and in the main house to Mystic Seaport Museum and South Street Seaport Museum. As some of the remaining material came to the Woods

Hole Historical Collection it became a tremendous addition to our knowledge of the history of Quisset, Woods Hole and Falmouth.

Susan Fletcher Witzell was born in New York City and grew up in Summit, New Jersey. After graduating with a B.A. in Art and Art History from Milwaukee-Downer College in 1962, she worked as an art and photo editor at several major publishing companies in New York. She moved to Woods Hole in 1972 and worked as an engineering draftsman at WHOI for many years. She is an alternate member of the Falmouth Historical District Commission and has made her home in Quisset since 1977.



Hurricane Hall after renovation in 1927. Small-paned windows replaced the 19th century plain glass and more dormers were added to the roof, giving the house more of an elegant Colonial Revival appearance and probably making it closer to its original style. The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.

Sources

The Fish/Morse Collection, WHHC.

FISH TALES, a Newsletter about the Fish/Morse Families. Edited by Thomas Cushman Morse, 1993.

The Diary of Thomas Dunham Fish, 1860–1861. Original in the Collection of South Street Seaport Museum, New York, N.Y.

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The Quissett Post Office and grocery store, 1908. Postcard, The Fish/Morse Collection. Courtesy WHHC.