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Cotuit — rich in history

by C. I. Mahoney

Cotuit today is one of the quieter, more well-preserved villages of the Town of Barnstable. The present Cotuit Village has only a handful of businesses, and some of the most beautiful old homes on the south side of the Cape.

Many changes have occurred over the course of Cotuit's rich history. As was typical of many early east-coast settlements, the village was at first an agricultural community, then a seaport, and with the advent of the railroad, saw a decline in that industry. The railroad, which replaced shipping as a major means of transporting goods, also made travel quicker and easier, thus bringing to Cotuit, and other Cape towns, a new industry: tourism.

According to "Cotuit-The Third Purchase" by historian Donald Trayser, the first Cotuit village center was what we now know as Santuit. This cluster of homes was once a center with a post office and tavern where stage coach travelers stopped to rest overnight. The heart of the present village was then known as Cotuit Port, and further out, Highground.

The maritime trade was at its peak from 1820 to 1890, and Cotuit Port grew during this period. Trayser says, "The maritime years were at hand and soon the shore was humming with the sound of the ship carpenter's hammers as Job Handy and John Coleman built their vessels, the whirring of windmills as Daniel Childs and Samuel Dottridge made salt, and the activities of countless others engaged in fishing, shellfishing and coasting."

"Coasting" was the term used to describe the shipping industry that made Cotuit Port proper. Since the waters of Cotuit were too shallow for large vessels, smaller two- or three-masted schooners made up the Cotuit fleet. According to Trayser's research, in 1866 there were 25 vessels registered in Cotuit, and in 1882, 32. After that period, the number declined, with only 10 remaining in Cotuit in 1890. The last, he writes, was probably the George E. Klinck, owned by Captain Edson E. Fisher, which was registered in Cotuit in 1928.

During the middle 1800s, however, the seafaring life flourished. Nearly every family was involved in the "coasting" industry. Florrie C. Churbuck writes in Cotuit Historical Society records: "Nearly all able-bodied men were seamen... Most sailed two- or three-masted schooners from Maine and points on the North Shore to points as south as Norfolk." (Thus, the term "coasting.")

Churbuck writes that cargoes of these small vessels included ice, stone, and lumber from Maine. They returned north with cargoes of coal from Pennsylvania.



Hooper's Landing, Cotuit, in its heyday. It is now known as Ropes Beach. Piles of cordwood can be seen

at middle right of photo, waiting to be loaded onto coastal schooner.

Cotuit vessels also made trips to Nantucket, which was the "trading and shopping center for a very large area," according to research by Calvin Crawford. Since Nantucket harbor could accommodate the larger ocean-going vessels, goods from all over the world came to port in Nantucket, and were brought to the mainland by the schooners from both Cotuit and Hyannis. Cotuit schooners carried fire wood to the island, and returned with imported goods. Crawford said the "Nantucket packet was an important part of life."

Florrie Churbuck, in her memories of Cotuit, recalls, "Believe it or not, in those days Osterville people came to Cotuit to shop."

She also remembered that the small vessels did not go out in the winter. From November until March and April, when the vessels would be made ready for the summer season, the men were home, and Cotuit's social life was at its peak. There were "teas," and family parties that would last all day. There were "home dramas" presented by a cast of local amateur talents, the "Lyceum," a series of debates on subjects of local and national interest, and occasionally auctions. All these were held at Freedom Hall.

Churbuck recalls childhood winters: "I remember once some of us skated across to Oyster Harbors. Then it was called The Island, inhabited only by wood-ticks, and possibly other wildlife..."

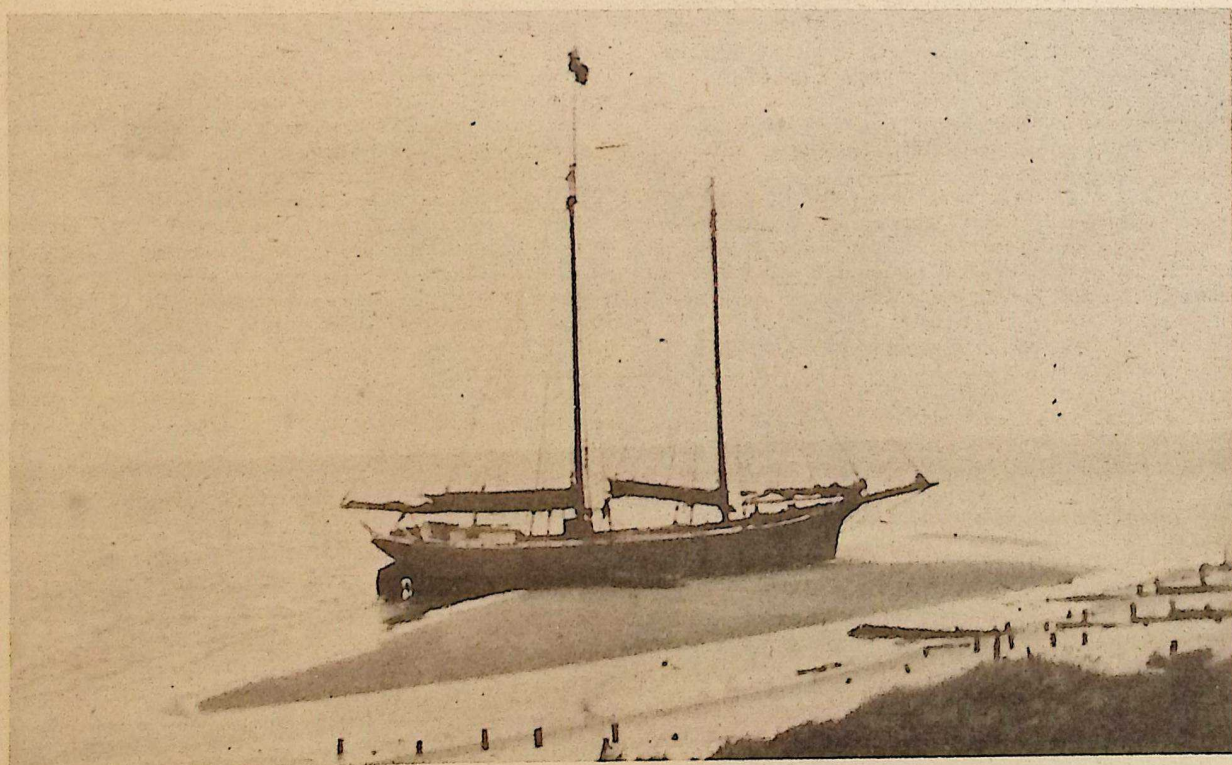
The beginning of the end of the coasting trade came in the 1850s. Catherine Taussig Opie writes in Cotuit Historical Society records, "As long as water was the only practical way to transport large loads of commodities, seashore towns with a harbor flourished. Railroads changed all this." The railroad to Cape Cod from Boston was completed in 1854. In July of that year three trains per day came to West Barnstable and Hyannis from Boston.

Along with coal, lumber and other goods, the trains brought "summer visitors" from Boston and New York. This began the Cape's tourist trade. Cotuit visitors from Boston came by train to West Barnstable, and on to Cotuit by stage. From New York, travelers went by boat to Fall River, took a train to Middleboro, where they changed to a train destined for West Barnstable.

Cotuit's first summer resident was Samuel Hooper. According to Harriet Ropes Cabot, whose family now owns the Hooper house, Hooper was "reputed to be one of Boston's wealthiest men." He served in the Massachusetts Legislature and United States Congress, and was also a banker and merchant.

Hooper came to Cotuit looking for captains for his ships to go to the Gold Coast. He particularly wanted to hire Captain Scudder, who was then the first postmaster of the Cotuit Port post office. Scudder agreed to go if he could sell his house and move his wife and children to a smaller house that his wife could maintain more easily during his absence. Hooper saw the house and fell in love with it, according to Mrs. Cabot. He bought the house, thus becoming Cotuit's first summer resident.

Hooper attracted some of the country's most influential



Schooner hard aground at Loop Beach.

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Cotuit's Hotel Pines, in the Highground section, was one of Cotuit's two fine hotels for visitors to the village in the late 1800s.

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intellectuals to Cotuit. His guests included historian Henry A. Adams, novelist Henry James, poet George Santayana, and Senator Charles Sumner. Another of Hooper's Cotuit visitors was Secretary of War Edward M. Stanton. Donald Trayser reports that Stanton was in Cotuit when President Andrew Johnson demanded his resignation.

Boston's intellectual elite became members of the Cotuit summer colony, as Hooper began to sell some of his land. The prestigious Lowell family of Boston became summer residents and, in turn, the Lowells attracted other Beacon Hill notables to the small village.

Harriet Ropes Cabot, whose great-uncle George Gardner Lowell first accompanied Daniel Webster to Cape Cod and later bought part of the Hooper property, still lives on the property that was the original summer colony. Her house overlooks the bay; next door, her brother lives in the original Hooper house. Her grandfather and step-grandmother bought the house from Hooper's granddaughter. The house was inherited by Mrs. Cabot's mother, Alice Lowell Ropes.

Mrs. Ropes remembers her childhood summers as extremely pleasant. "We were very close and fond of each other," she recalled. Many of her cousins also summered there. "We reached a point of being known as a clan-- you lived as a family enclave," she said. Although her family has owned property as summer residents since 1856, to those descendants of Cotuit's sea captains and fishermen, "We're going to always be newcomers," she remarked with a smile.

The "newcomers," who spent a long summer season from April to November in the pleasant seaside village, created a demand for more lodging. According to Catherine Opie, the first inn on Cape Cod that was not a tavern was built by Braddock Coleman in 1860 on Main Street overlooking Hooper's Landing Beach (also known as Ropes Beach) in Cotuit. The Inn was called the "Santuit House," and according to Opie's research for the Cotuit Historical Society, "The Santuit House advertised a ballroom, roads for riding, driving and later motoring, tennis courts, and swimming."

The Highground section of Cotuit boasted the second of Cotuit's hotels, called The Pines. Of this establishment Opie writes, "The Pines offered the same, but in addition a sandy beach belonging to the hotel to which children could run by themselves."

By the late 1800s, the economic tides had completely changed in Cotuit. With the advent of the railroad, the fleet of coasting schooners dwindled, and the summer tourist trade grew. In 1898, E.G. Perry wrote of a trip he made to Cape Cod, "Cotuit is a colony of retired sea captains...with some handsome and fashionable places...two large hotels, many private boarding houses, and several fine stores...a delightful place to spend the summer."

Photos
Courtesy
of
Cotuit
Library

Committee hopes to preserve Santuit

by C. I. Mahoney

What is now called Santuit, the cluster of antique buildings along Route 28, was originally Cotuit Center. In the early days, stage coaches enroute to and from Boston would stop at the small village for a night's rest.

Now a study committee has been formed and one of their goals is to preserve the historic flavor of this area. According to Harriet Ropes Cabot, the buildings there are the oldest on this side of the Cape. Mrs. Cabot said the group hopes to have Santuit homes included in the National Register. She said the state is aware of the area, and it's "just a matter of getting the details together."

The committee, chaired by Paul Grover, has been meeting to discuss the possible effects state plans for widening Route 130 would have on the cluster of homes. Mr. Grover said the Cotuit-Santuit Study Committee hopes to form a village association. Their first priority will be to prevent the section of Route 28 from the Marstons Mills to the Mashpee line from becoming another "strip" area.