

# Cotuit Inn: Looking at the next 150 years

by Janice Zeppenfeld

The history of Cape Cod is rich and composed of many lifestyles. The architecture of the Cape reflects these diversities. From the Hoxie House in Sandwich to the Provincetown Monument, these buildings tell the story of the settlers and early inhabitants of Cape Cod. Interest in historic preservation has increased in the past few years. Along with greater realization of one's environment and heritage comes a growing interest in the renovation of older buildings to suit modern purposes. The Cotuit Inn, located in the heart of that village, is an establishment trying to bridge the gap between past and future.

Records on the inn go back to 1841, when Ezra Crocker and Josiah Sampson sold two acres of land on Main Street in Cotuit to William Ellis, a mariner. Five years previously, Ellis had married Martha Rogers, daughter of David Rogers, one of the three original settlers on the Highground in 1811. William Ellis built a small cottage on this property, consisting of two front rooms and an ell. He lived there until 1851, when he became incapacitated due to illness. Three guardians were appointed for Ellis: Alex Childs, John Coleman and Seth Nickerson Jr. and they eventually bought the building for \$700. In addition to caring for Mr. Ellis, these gentlemen were very active in the organization of the newly constructed church, and Mr. Ellis' home was occasionally used as a parsonage until 1860.

In 1862, the public use of the inn began in earnest when it was purchased by Captain Asa Bearse for \$755. Captain Bearse, having retired at an early age from seafaring enterprise, began a general store on the property. He enlarged the building and later added a second story and an attic. Captain Bearse's store prospered, selling groceries, hardware and dry goods. Bearse also supplied rum to the village, which was much appreciated by the villagers. Captain Bearse also developed a side business as an undertaker. Storing caskets in his attic, Bearse employed village boat builders to help make them. One story recalls how one of Asa's assistants, answering an emergency call for a casket (and rumored to have partaken of too much rum), built a centerboard in the pine box.

In 1874, Bearse expanded his business even further by purchasing, along with his father, the barn opposite the Santuit House on Main Street. The barn served as a livery stable in that location for a short time, then was moved to the back of Asa's store, where he rented horses and rigs. Bearse could now offer a complete line of services, as the sign on his storefront advertised:

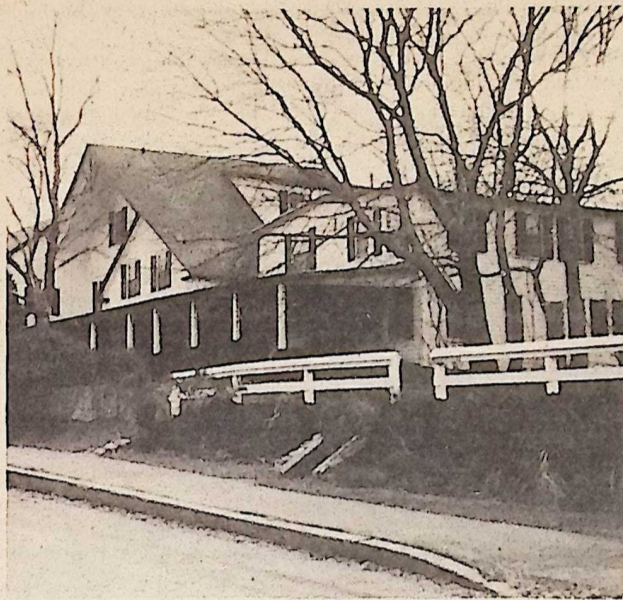
**GROCERIES—MEATS—COFFINS—ROBES—FLOWERS**

Captain Bearse did not stop there. Having had the first telephone in Cotuit installed in the store in 1882, he was on his way to establishing a landmark. In that same year, Algernon Coolidge bought the Santuit House, and the "Alfred Bearse Nine Pin Bowling Alley" located there was moved to the back section of Asa's land. With this combination, the former sea captain prospered for many years. His delivery wagons (of all sorts) were a common sight around the village, occasionally transporting people to and from the train station in West Barnstable.

In addition to being a successful entrepreneur, Captain Asa Bearse had many other interests. He sailed on "coasters" out of Cotuit Bay for a few years after opening his shop, and was part owner of many other sailing vessels. In 1875 he served as the assistant examiner of school teachers in the school department. Bearse was also founder of the Cotuit Lyceum, a social group that met once a week during the winter at Freedom Hall for the purpose of debate, discussion and entertainment. A literary person, Captain Bearse maintained a small library at his store for use by the villagers.

At the turn of the century Bearse's business slowed. Never without resource, he created an apartment on the second floor and rented it out to several couples over the years.

In this Renaissance manner, Captain Asa Bearse set the course for the Cotuit Inn, both in its physical appearance and its many uses. After Bearse's death in 1910, the building was



owned by a variety of people, including Alvin Burlingame, Congressman Charles Gifford and Walter Scudder. At various times, the inn was owned by off-Cape people and managed by Cotuit residents.

It was the Giffords who remodeled the entire home into an inn, calling it the Central House. As years passed, more rooms were added on and further remodeling took place.

In the 1940s, the inn reached its height of popularity. During World War II, when the Army training camps Can-Do-It and Have-Done-It were located in Cotuit and Osterville, relatives of the troops and other visitors kept the inn at capacity.

In the late 1950s, the building was opened as an inn for the summer months and operated as the Cape Cod Preparatory School for Young Men for the other nine months of the year. The rooms on the lower floor were converted to classrooms, with what is now the summer bar serving as the cafeteria and study hall. The school later moved to the Whitcomb Estate.

Presently, the Cotuit Inn is an entertaining conglomeration that Captain Bearse surely would have enjoyed. It still consists of several guest rooms on the second and third floors, with a large kitchen, a lobby, a spacious summer bar and a smaller winter bar on the ground floor. The buildings that at one time might have been the bowling alley and livery stable are now housekeeping cottages.

Talking with Hack Daniels, owner of the inn, one senses his deep feeling for the building and its history. He speaks of it with affection, as if it were an old friend. After purchasing the inn in 1968, he enjoyed a successful operation until the energy crisis in the early '70s. At that time the cost of heating the rooms at the inn skyrocketed. The old and small guest rooms, without insulation, could not be kept at a comfortable level of heat during the winter. As a result, he only opened the rooms during the summer, although the bar remained open year-round. Rooms were rented in the winter only if there were enough people at one time to warrant it.

Having encountered this problem, Daniels set about finding the solution. He loves the building; from his second floor apartment he can see the sun rise on the ocean. He enjoys his independence as owner of the inn, and he would like to see it operate at capacity once again. Most importantly, he wants to upgrade the building and preserve it.

After a great deal of deliberation and discussion with architects and other planners, Daniels decided on a course of action. Noting that his rooms were not always rented out, but his housekeeping cottages were, the natural solution was to redesign the smaller rooms inside the inn—make them larger,

with kitchens, to mini-apartments, and to upgrade the housekeeping cottages accordingly.

The keystone to this plan is to keep the exterior of the building exactly as it was 140 years ago.

Daniels is particular, however. His decision on an architect was based on the designer's ability to "see my vision" of the proposed inn renovations—a vision of luxury apartments with only the highest quality appointments.

It is an ambitious undertaking, and the building will have to be virtually gutted in order to insulate, fireproof and enlarge the rooms. These details will attract little notice during and after the renovation but will make all the difference in the long run, according to Daniels. The only change in the exterior will be extensive landscaping, including the creation of a park-like area in the courtyard behind the inn. The outbuildings will be renovated to the same high degree as the rest of the property.

Daniels has been developing these ideas for a long time, and is hoping to see the results of his years of planning and dreaming. The main point of Daniels' dream is to create something of lasting beauty in the village of Cotuit, in his words, "something new and sparkling, in tone with the quiet quality of homes in Cotuit, for another 150 years."