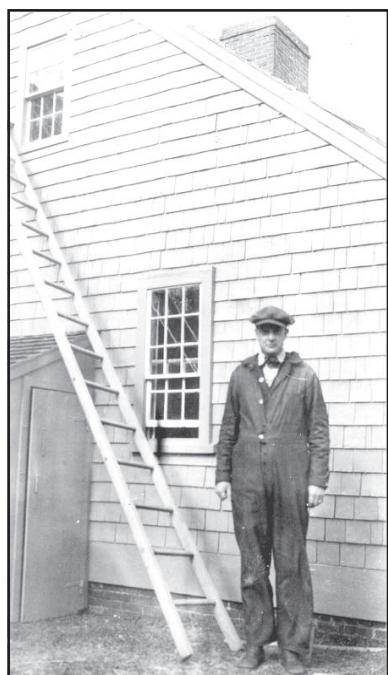




## Atwood-Higgins House The Debate over George Higgins' Whimsical Farmstead on Bound Brook Island, Wellfleet



George Higgins in his first full season on Bound Brook (1920) working on the west side of the Atwood-Higgins House.



George Higgins' work crew and cook pause for a photograph during work on the Atwood Higgins House in 1920. Higgins developed lifelong friendships with many of his hired help, most of whom lived locally.

*"If whales no longer visit their shores, rich city folks do, and with easy adaptability, Cape men and women take the goods the gods provide them. What, they argue, is the use of a proud history if it does not make them independent."*

Henry Kittredge, *Cape Cod: Its people and Their History*, 1930. On the author's ambivalence towards the new vacation economy.

*"The road onto the Island, as no one lived there, was what one might have been expected. Impossible to an automobile it was almost too much for a horse."*

George Higgins describing access to Bound Brook Island, 1919

In 1920, George Higgins, a Brookline, Massachusetts, businessman, inherited his great grandparents' home in a remote corner of Bound Brook Island in Wellfleet. The homestead included a 1730 Cape Cod-style house. Now known as the Atwood-Higgins House, it is one of the oldest in the region.

The house was likely built by Thomas Higgins, a fourth generation descendant of Richard Higgins, a pioneer settler at Plymouth and Eastham.

*"... I was paying carpenters wages of \$6.00 a day, a painter wages of \$7.00 a day and found (coming from Boston) general work at \$4.00 a day."*

George Higgins, 1920

From 1919 to 1961, Higgins made the trek from Brookline during the warmer months to restore the property. At first, poor roads made access to the island difficult, and he would come for one week at a time. By 1932, he began spending summers here. His work spanned four decades and culminated with his donation of the property to the National Park Service in 1961.

As an amateur historian and disciple of the emerging Colonial Revival movement, he restored the house, purposely excluding modern amenities from the house and filling it with period antiques.

*"The original intention was too strictly 'in period' to lend itself to modern demands. Marriage, occupancy, guests and help all sympathized but did not appreciate such sparse living. The luxuries of our youth become the necessities of our old age."*

George Higgins, lamenting his decision to install a bathroom and laundry room in the wood shed adjacent to the old house in 1938.

By the early 1950s, Higgins had completed nearly a dozen structures, from working outhouses and a 1,500 gallon brick-lined water reservoir, to a renovated antique woodshed and a garage for his Model T Ford.

For Higgins, this seasonal retreat satisfied his yearning to reconnect to ancestral lands and a simpler past. Family and friends could stay in the primitive "old house" and utilize the outhouse or the new bathroom hidden in the adjacent woodshed. Or they could stay in the guesthouse with all the modern amenities but enjoy the ambience of paint-spattered wide pine floors and wavy glass in the windows.

Since 1873, the abandoned house had crept closer to complete ruin, enduring bouts of vandalism and windstorms.

Upon inheriting it, the 32 year-old George Higgins, fresh from Army service in World War I, was determined to not only save the house but to assemble a collection of outbuildings organized around a central barnyard – his sentimental vision of a colonial-era homestead.

Employing a dedicated group of local carpenters and tradesmen, Higgins built a rustic barn (1924) to house a horse, a bunk room, and his vintage tool collection; a colonial-inspired guesthouse (1929) crafted from hand-hewn beams salvaged from an old barn on the island; a screened "summer house" (1936) situated on a knoll overlooking the Herring River to catch summer breezes; and most ambitious of all, a country store/post office (1948) modeled after one he often visited with relatives in North Pomfret, Vermont.

Higgins kept a journal to document his work, from oiling wood roofs and planting roses and fruit trees to salvaging old barn boards in New Hampshire and hunting for antiques to add to his 5,000-piece collection of Americana.

After he donated his property and collection to the national seashore, expectations were high that all of the buildings would be preserved as an historic site for public enjoyment. The seashore has continued to maintain the 1730 house and offer tours, but the 20th-century farmstead buildings have languished due to a belief they lacked historical significance. As a result of new historical research, however, there is renewed emphasis on preserving the buildings.





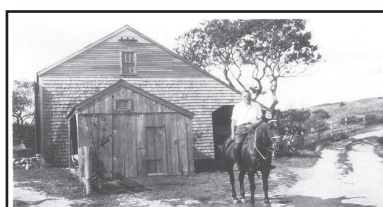
George and Katherine Higgins (at center) with friends in front of the newly constructed New England Store and Post Office about 1948. The interior had a bunk room and study, store counter, post office boxes, and a bar. By the early 1950s, the store was a popular stop on tours led by the Wellfleet Historical Society.



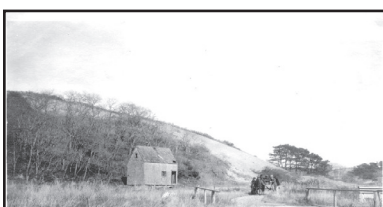
Interior of Higgins' barn circa 1959. Higgins filled it with antique tools and farm equipment. Note the large bellows on the wall and the sleigh.



George and Katherine Higgins (at left) with a friend (possibly Katherine's sister) at the beach, sometime during the 1920s.



George Higgins on his horse "Imp" alongside the barn and attached shed (circa 1930s/1940s). Higgins convinced the town in the 1940s to reroute the town road away from where it passed by his barn. Traffic was increasing as a result of 5 families now living on the island.



The road on the approach to Bound Brook Island circa 1920. Early access to the island was difficult, even for a horse and cart. The road crosses over the Herring River in the foreground and continues around the hill, which marks the beginning of the island. The Atwood Higgins property is a short distance over the hill to the left.

*"This fall on November 1st, I brought my future bride with my father and mother to see what had been accomplished and for the first time to show Miss Christian what had so completely possessed my interest."*

George Higgins, 1921.

Historians have disagreed for years on whether Higgins was prominent enough, his architecture authentic enough, or the farmstead comparable enough to living outdoor museums of the day like Colonial Williamsburg (1926), Mystic Seaport Museum (1930), Sturbridge Village (1936), or Plimoth Plantation (1947).

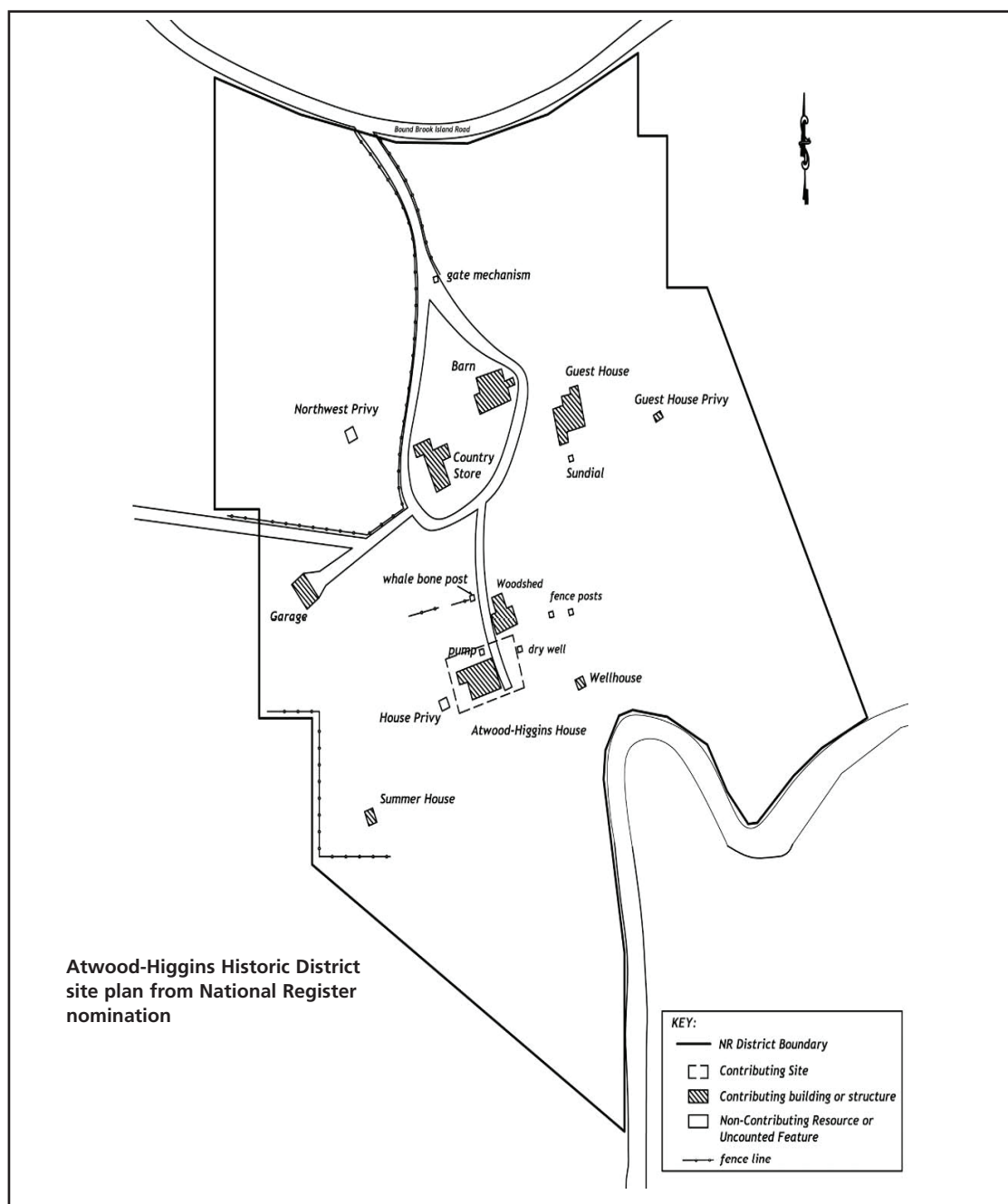
Higgins fails on all of these tests. What does make the Higgins farmstead worth saving is the simple fact that it represents an early and intact example of the Cape's transition from industrial decline and remoteness to tourist destination.

*"So, in my time, I have seen the disappearance of the waterfront, with its old ship chandler's store, its ancient sail loft where sails were made, and the old buildings for fishing gear, and numerous wharves – and now, the railroad, which lasted for only 87 years . . ."*

George Higgins, 1960

Higgins' seasonal residency foreshadowed the rebirth of the Outer Cape's way of life. Tourism and leisure were filling the void left by the declining fishing, whaling, and shipping industries. Since the 1870s, Wellfleet alone had lost over half its population, from a peak of 2,135 to only 826 in 1920. Yet in the years to come, with improved roads, heightened interest in historic preservation, and urbanites seeking an escape to the Cape's newly-marketed quaint villages and

natural beauty, "non-natives" would embark on the same pilgrimage that Higgins had made. People with means like George Higgins reclaimed family homesteads long neglected, while people from across the United States and abroad began enjoying the Cape's new vacation economy, complete with cottage colonies, roadside motels, and lazy summer afternoons spent at the seashore.



**At this time only the main house is open to the public. Tours of the Atwood-Higgins complex occur seasonally throughout the year. Check the park's website: [www.nps.gov/caco](http://www.nps.gov/caco) for a current schedule of activities, or call Salt Pond Visitor Center at 508-255-3421.**

Content by William P. Burke, Park Historian. Originally published in Park News, 2009 edition. All photos are from the Cape Cod National Seashore archives.