

Fort Hill Trail



T is for Treat

"... God himself shall be the principal agent of thy misery. He is that consuming fire; his breath is the bellows, which blows up the flame of hell forever; he is the devouring fire, the everlasting burning..."

Rev. Samuel Treat
1648-1717

The church and state were joined as one in the Plymouth Colony, and so it was that in 1672 the Town of Eastham invited Samuel Treat to serve them as minister. In return for his services Reverend Treat received £50 a year, "sufficient wood" at this door, and the "oyle" or part of every whale cast ashore. Numerous parcels of land were also his, including the twenty acres of Fort Hill land whose northwest bound is still marked by a stone inscribed with "T." Here a house was built for the town's first resident minister and family, and this Calvinist began his legendary 45 years of service.

He did much, including missionary work among the Nauset Indians who venerated him, but his preaching was proverbial. It was long, loud, and harsh, and compared with the howling winds of Nauset.

Still, church attendance was a part of life for everyone in town, stipulated by Plymouth Colony law. Those who "slothfully doe lurke att home" were sought and reported. Those "without doers at the meeting house on the Lords daies" were set in stocks. Those who smoked tobacco within two miles of church on Sunday were fined twelve pence. And those who "denied the scriptures" received the corrective benefit of bodily punishment. The meeting house was not a place to avoid.

First Contact

"... we found the place very spacious, being perhaps three or four leagues in circuit, entirely surrounded by little houses, around each one of which there was as much land as the occupant needed for his support... There were also several fields entirely uncultivated, the land being allowed to remain fallow... their cabins are round, and covered with heavy thatch made of reeds..."

Samuel de Champlain
Map maker to Sieur de Monts
July 20, 1605

Before this was New England, it was New France. Sieur de Monts, Governor of New France, possessed a grant for fur trading, but his attempt to settle at St. Croix (New Brunswick) proved disastrous. The explorer sailed south the following year in search of a better site, and in doing so he briefly entered this bay of the Nausets.

It was a provident world. The soil supported cultivated crops, fresh water was at hand, and if one knew how, the bay yielded a rich harvest. The Nausets reaped this concentration of energy, and over the years used it to build their extensive settlement. It was not to continue.

"Old men say that it was the habit of the farmers to plow up most regularly all those fields which had been already cleared by the natives, for... at these places the most thrifty vegetables in the fields were those growing in the dark earth and scattered shell-heaps. But by this practice the most lasting monuments of the Indians have been erased, their graves leveled, their shell heaps scattered, and their weapons and implements of stone plowed under or picked up and removed."

Henry Chase
Smithsonian Institution Annual Report
1883

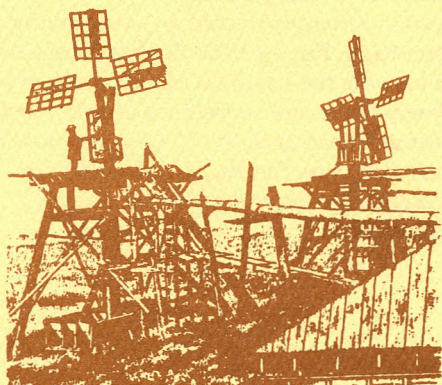
Eastham Settlement

It was the good soil that in 1644 drew the first Plymouth colonists to Nauset. But though the soil was promising, the land was mostly forested.

It was also a place of shaky security. So to protect against invasion a “brest worke with flankers” was ordered built during the Dutch-English conflict of 1653 (whether it was built or not is unknown). To protect against the “numerous wild beasts,” a reward of twenty shillings was offered in 1686 for each wolf head—ten in silver, ten in corn. And to further protect the enlarging farms, each unmarried man was ordered in 1695 to kill six blackbirds or three crows while he remained single.

Gradually, Fort Hill was converted to agricultural use. There were corn, rye, pasture and hay fields. There were orchards and vegetable gardens. There were cattle, cows and goats—and sheep famed for the quality of their wool.

Few objects in this pre-petroleum age were not used as resources. Salt hay was harvested from the marsh with floating barges; the Atlantic white cedar swamp south of Fort Hill and the red maple swamp were cleared of trees; and as local wood disappeared, an Irish-born minister taught residents how to dry and burn peat. Even the salt of the sea was gathered—first by boiling (a costly, wood-consuming practice), and then by solar evaporation. This activity grew until in 1830 salt vats dotted the water’s edge of Nauset Marsh. And for a while the clacking of their wooden pumps was as familiar as the cry of gulls.



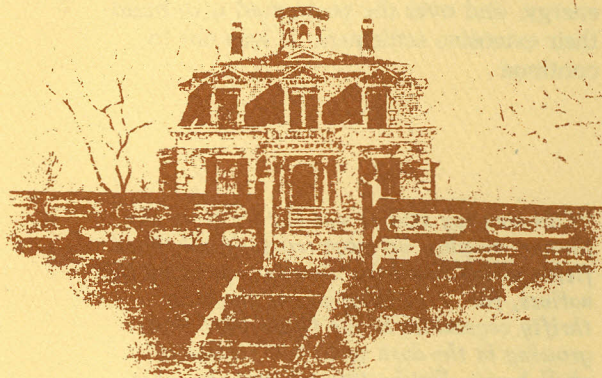
Edward Penniman-Whaler

When Edward Penniman grew up there were few ways to make a living in Eastham. The land was worn and impoverished from years of use. And so like most local boys this eleven year old left his Fort Hill homestead, and in 1842 he went to sea. He returned to build this house in 1868.

At twenty-one he had been a harpooner on the *Isabella*, a square-rigger out of New Bedford. At twenty-nine this redhead had captained his own whaler bark. Until he retired here in 1884, whale oil, baleen, spermaceti, and ivory were the harvests he sought. He sailed the Arctic Ocean, paid call at such far-flung ports as Fiji and Honolulu, Patagonia, and Panama, and circled the world seven times.

His house became a local landmark. Built in the French Second Empire style, complete with mansard roof, it featured a kerosene chandelier, a lead-lined rainwater cistern in the attic, indoor plumbing, and a cupola overlooking both bay and sea.

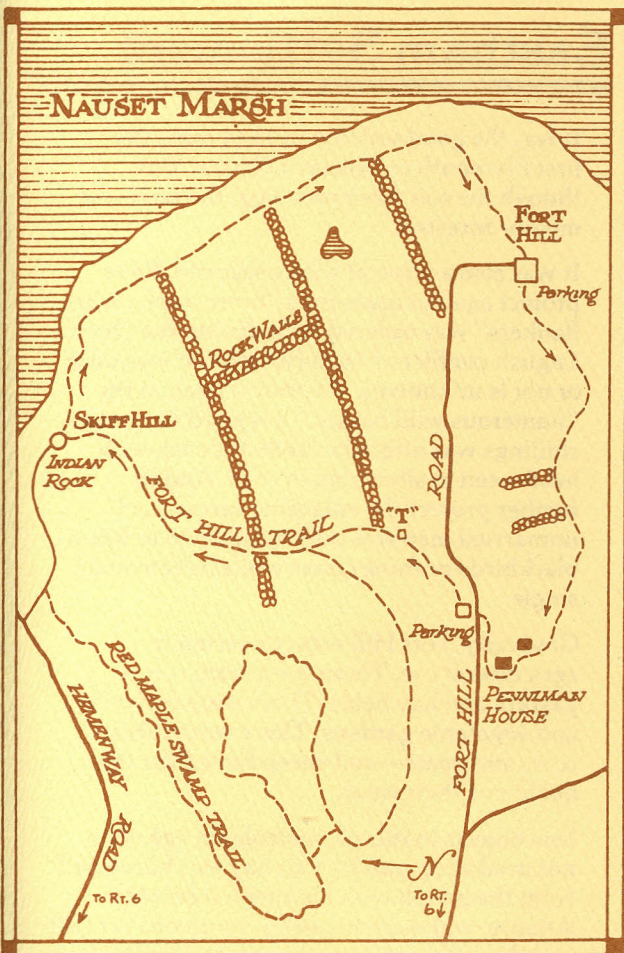
It was a symbol of sailing ship whaling, but there were not to be many more. Even as his house was built, whaling was declining, and while it did, the infant petroleum industry that would replace it was coming of age.



To conserve - we printed this on recycled paper.
Please return this folder if you no longer need it.



NAUSET MARSH



But there were changes. Within three decades of settlement the town was alarmed at the scarcity of wood. By 1680, town laws were issued in attempts to control overgrazing and overcutting. But by 1850 the Eastham forests had become the Eastham plains. Only at Fort Hill was there any semblance of soil. Farming continued here until the 1940's, and now a forest creeps in. But the fallow fields are still kept open, as a reminder of those yesterdays.

Text: Glen Kaye
Art: Richard Fish
© 1978
Reprinted 1991

