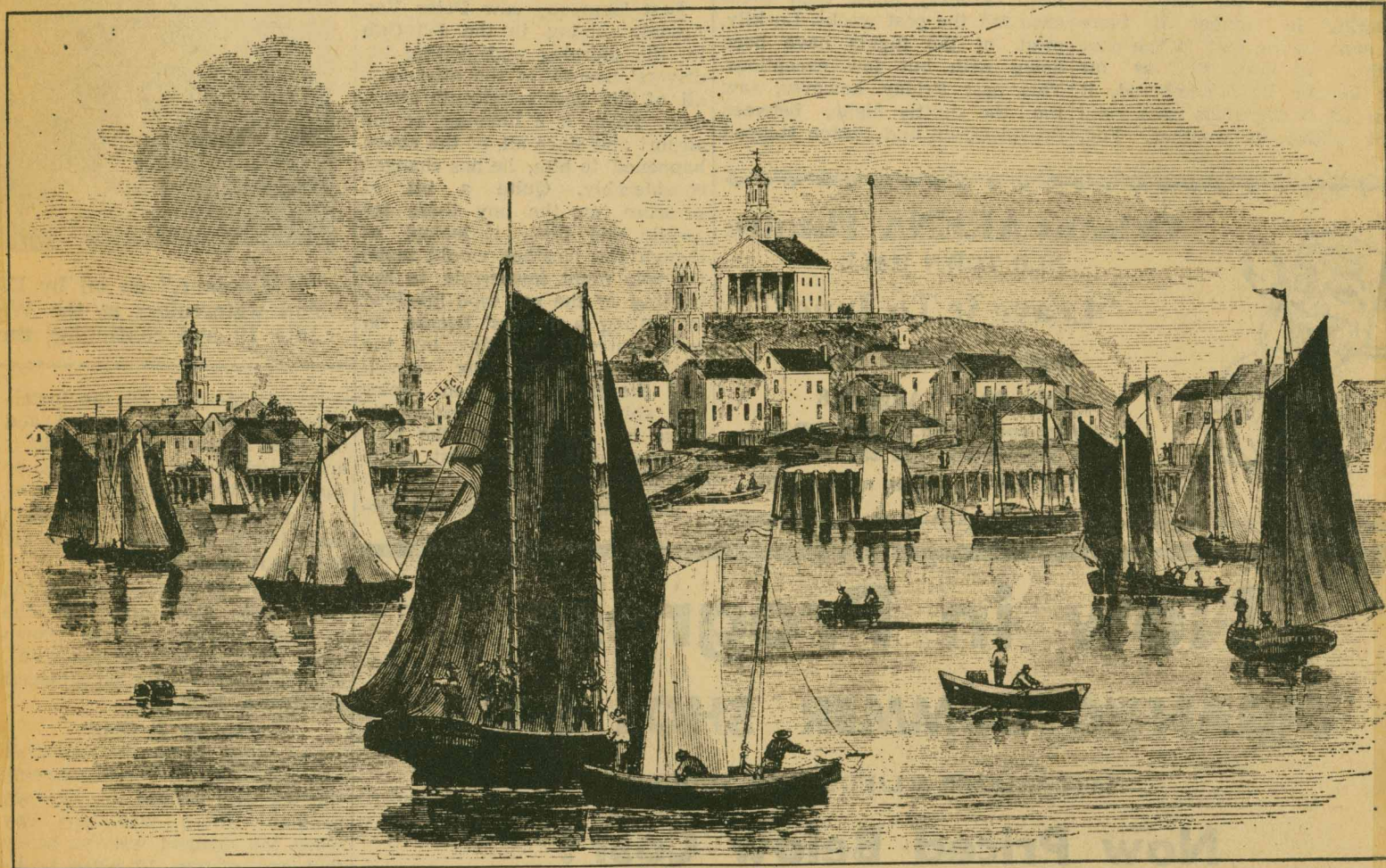


PROVINCETOWN ADVOCATE

Wherein A Musty Magazine Triggers Mitch's Annual Trauma



VIEW OF PROVINCETOWN, MASS.

By Howard Mitcham

Just look what I found while thumbing through a musty old magazine in a book shop in New Orleans! It's nothing else but a view of our favorite town in 1856, and ain't she purty? There's the old town hall sitting up on High Pole Hill and in all her classic dignity. Ah, now I wish she was still there instead of that granite imitation of the Torre del Mangia. And there's the high pole, too, with its weather ball on top.

Every Provincetowner alive at the time this print was made is now asleep in the sandy bone orchard over behind town. Among them one of my favorite

characters, if only for the sake of his unique name, Captain Groce Ghen. (John Gaspie used to say the name was pure Gaelic for "Crazy John" and he was called that because he knew how to find fish when no one else could).

Those boats in the foreground are the famous "Pinkies," the dumpy but seaworthy little schooners that put Provincetown on the map as the fishing capital of New England. The name was derived from their pink painted sterns, perhaps this was a good luck gimmick dating back to the Phoenicians. If you look closely you can read the sign on the eaves of one of the waterfront build-

ings, it says "SALT COD," and that just about sums up the economy of the town in those days. It was the heyday of the cod and mackerel fisheries and Provincetown was enjoying its first real boom, its fleet numbered several hundred sails.

At the left side of our picture you can recognize the Christopher Wren tower of the Church of the Redeemer, and there's the light and airy belfry of the "Church of the Pilgrims" which was removed only a few years ago, in the center there's a real oldy, it's the Old White Oak Church which stood where Town Hall is now located. Are any of those

other buildings still standing, can anyone recognize them? Seems like Higgins Wharf (now Macara's) should be in there somewhere, it's the oldest wharf in town at present.

This woodcut was made only six years after Henry David Thoreau's last visit to our town. He eloquently described the sights and smells of the waterfront, the fish drying flakes along the shore, the cows standing around munching the salty cod fish heads. He noted that Provincetown milk had a decidedly fishy flavor. In our picture the absence of windmills and the drying vats with their sharp angular roofs shows that

Provincetown's salt making industry had already hit the skids.

As the signature in the lower left hand corner reveals this chef d'oeuvre was executed by an artist named Kilburn, he was a leading wood engraver of his time, and he must have been pretty close to the Cape. Some of his woodcuts appear as illustrations in Shebnah Rich's masterpiece of homespun historiography, "Truro, Landmarks and Seemarks," published in 1881, a full quarter century after our print. Maybe Kilburn was a spiritual ancestor of our present art colony, and a little research could turn up a sizeable body of his Cape-tip work. But peace to his bones for giving us this one little view of the town.

As far as I am concerned you can take those Pilgrims and the "Mayflower" and shove 'em out to sea. They were with us only two weeks. But the salty little old town has perdured for over two hundred and fifty years, grimly wresting its existence from the sea (and to some extent latterly, from the tourist's pocketbook, just as grimly, but excuseably). I think the name of Commercial Street should be changed to Codfish Avenue, Bradford should be Mackerel Drive, and all the quaint little side streets should be named Haddock, Flounder, Yellow Tail, Halibut, Striped Bass, Pollock, etc., until the list is exhausted. May the town never lose its fishy flavor, sez I, or it loses me, and a good passel of other folks, too.

My malady falls on me like a ton of bricks at about the same time each year (usually about three weeks after vernal equinox). I sit at my desk with a glazed faraway look in my eye. I'm crabby with the office boy, short tempered with the secretary and I kick the elevator operator in the shins. The cloud nine reverie is known as Provincetown Fever, and I have myraids of friends who go through the same annual ordeal. One can sit for hours wondering whether the quahaugs have turned over in their Winter beds, whether the fiddler crabs are venturing forth from their burrows waving their 'fiddles' in the air, whether the mussels in their shallow beds might have frozen to death, how the soft shell steamers might be big enough to eat. And did the Winter storms blow Mount Ararat on the dunes away, have the high tides at Peaked Hill uncovered the wreck of the 'Somerset' yet?

All through the months of April and May my trauma builds up to an explosion climax which arrives on the first of June. Of course I never did, but even if I had a hundred-thousand-a-year job, come June, I'd always write my own pink slip, kiss the secretary goodbye and grab the 5:15 for Hyannis. There's no job in the world that shouldn't be quit some time or other. As Jake Spencer used to say, "I travel light, toothbrush and razor in my pocket, and I'm off with the Seagulls to Duneland."