

PHOTO COURTESY RICH MCKOWN.

Rich McKown firing porcelain enamel tile designed at his studio in Acton.

Crafting a history legacy

Porcelain markers continue effort begun by the late Claude Jensen

By Mary Ann Bragg

BANNER STAFF

A small cluster of houses at the far East End of Commercial Street in Provincetown were reportedly mail-ordered from a Sears Roebuck catalog in the early 1900s and built by one man for his extended family.

And there's an artist who, after spending many of his younger years in one of them, would like to commemorate the

buildings with porcelain enamel tiles nailed on the outside of each house.

This is not a new idea in Provincetown, of course.

There are the blue-and-white tiles created by craftsman Claude Jensen in the 1970s that mark the "floater" houses, mostly in the West End, which were brought across the harbor by boat from Long Point in the mid-1800s. And Jensen created other historical tile markers as well, like the "Circa 1850" style plaques seen on many houses in town.

And it was the elderly Jensen who taught artist Rich McKown, of Acton and Provincetown, many of the skills needed to cre-

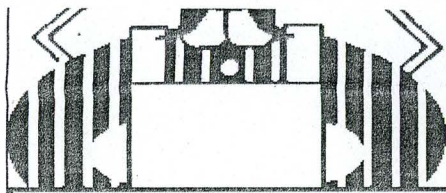
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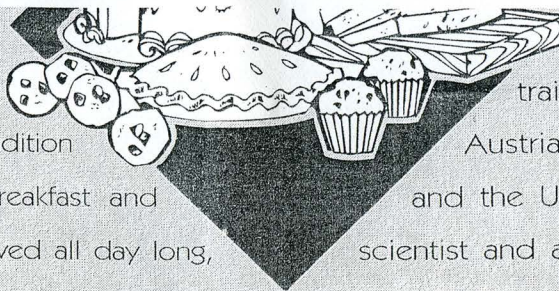




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And it was the elderly Jensen who taught artist Rich McKown, of Acton and Provincetown, many of the skills needed to create the historical markers, officially called "porcelain enamel tiles."

Together, in the late 1980s, Jensen and McKown worked on more than 50 tiles for buildings in Provincetown, including those currently at Adams Pharmacy on Commercial Street and at 564 Commercial St., the former residence of writer and playwright Susan Glaspell.

And it is McKown, 54, who has begun to breathe life into the art of creating those tiles again, after a many-year hiatus following Jensen's death in 1989 at age 94; during the years immediately following Jensen's death, McKown created only one tile, marking a stagecoach stop on Bradford Street.

Last winter, though, McKown completed four porcelain enamel tiles for the Fine Arts Work Center and also finished another tile last month, marking the former home of the late artist and cartoonist Mischa Richter.

The cost of the plaques is about \$350 each, McKown said.

"He was really talented in his own right," McKown says of Jensen, his mentor. McKown was in Provincetown recently staying in what is reportedly an original Sears Roebuck house now owned by his mother-in-law.

"[Jensen] was very unassuming, basically," McKown says

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"He was almost apologetic. He thought his wife and son were the artists, that he was more of a craftsperson. ... He was a wonderful jewelry maker."

Jensen did have his own artistic credentials, in jewelry making, silversmithing and enameling, even though he was professionally trained as an electrical engineer. He exhibited at annual shows in Pittsburgh, where he and his wife, Margaret, lived before they retired to Provincetown in 1961. His house and study in Provincetown were on Anthony Street in the East End, and he was a former trustee and early chairman of the Fine Arts Work Center Executive Committee.

As a craftsman, Jensen created a charm bracelet depicting scenes from his friend Donald B. MacMillan's trips to the Arctic Circle, with charms that included an igloo, a kayak, a seal and an Eskimo, according to McKown. Jensen and his wife are buried next to MacMillan and his wife at the town cemetery in Provincetown.

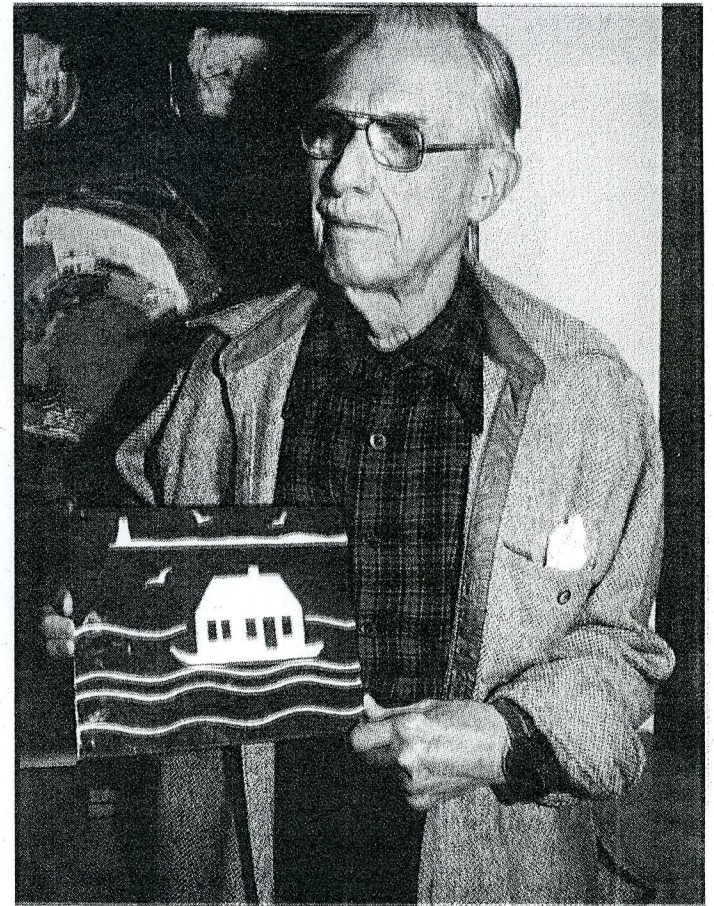
Jensen also created a pair of stained glass windows but he was best known for his enamelware. Provincetown residents Roslyn Garfield and Phyllis Temple own a small enamel bowl made by Jensen.

"He was a tall, elegant-looking man, handsome and soft-spoken," Temple says, recalling her work with Jensen to identify the Long Point "floater" houses, as part of the Provincetown Historical Association.

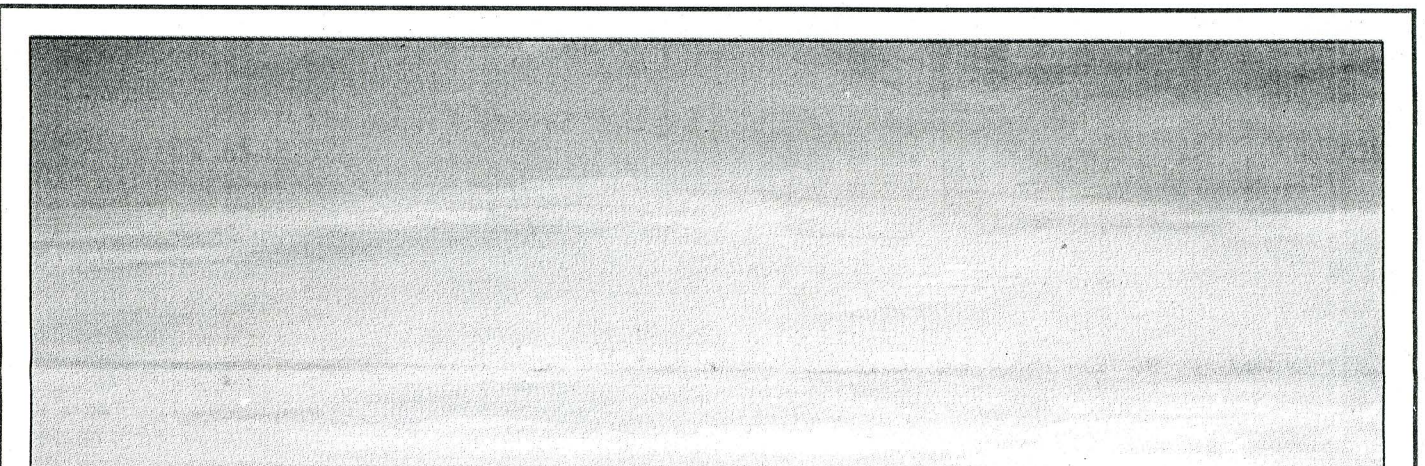
The work of Jensen's son Hank, now deceased, was



One of Claude Jensen's plaques dating this house.



Claude Jensen with his plaque for houses floated over from Long Point.



the Long Point "Hoater" houses, as part of the Provincetown Historical Association.

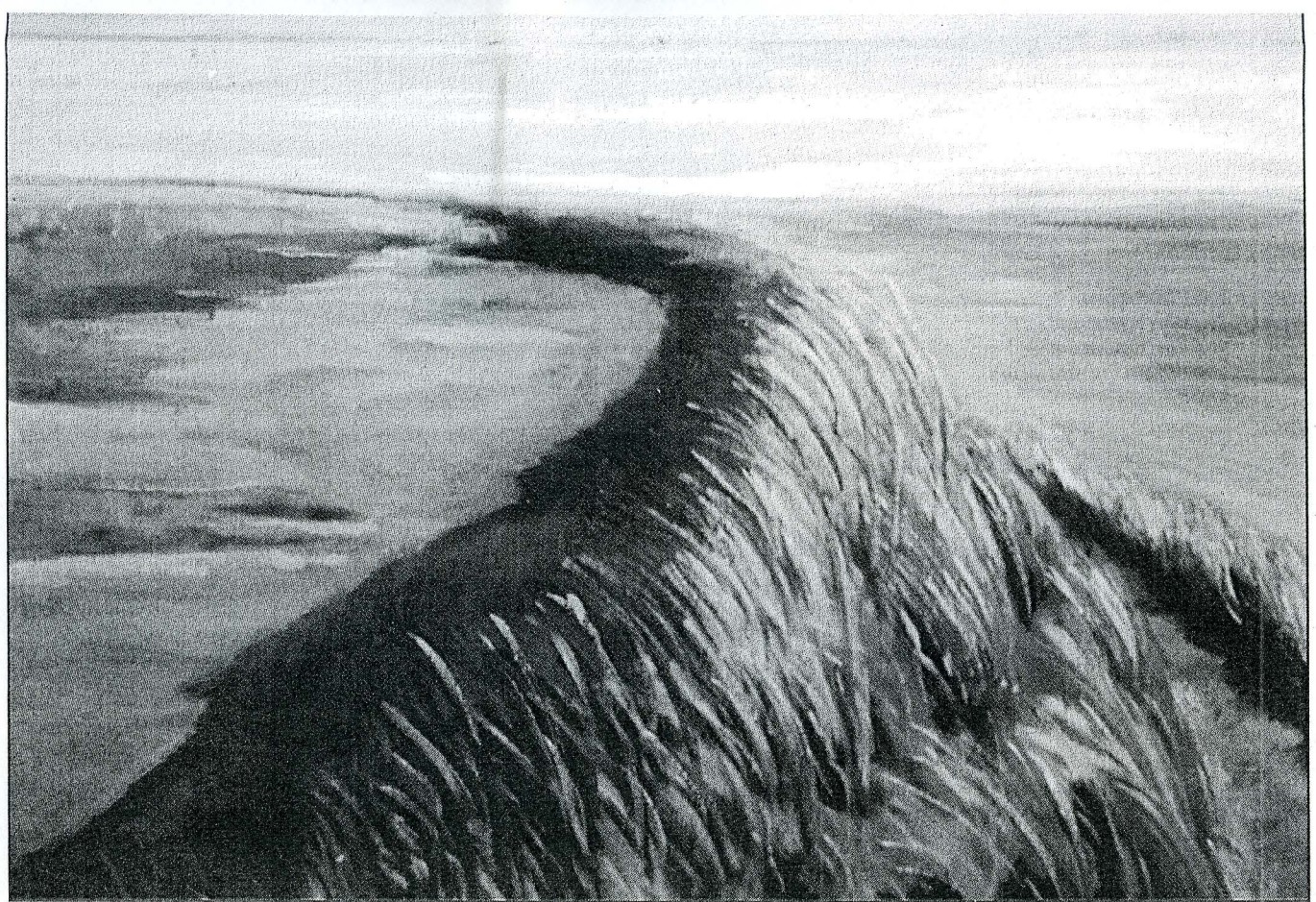
The work of Jensen's son Hank, now deceased, was shown this summer in a two-person show at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

McKown, too, has his own artistic credentials, as a painter and photographer, including several one-person shows in Provincetown. He also spent many summers as a young man in the far East End of town, often around the adult company of American artists Hudson Walker and Richard Florsheim.

"They treated us as adults. ... They really cared about young people," McKown says, joking with his wife, Debbie, and their neighborhood friend about being allowed to drink beer at age 17 and having heart-to-heart talks — in particular with Florsheim, who reportedly had the listening skills of a psychologist.

McKown, who was born in Cambridge, now teaches art at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and at Middlesex Community College in Bedford, and received an M.F.A. in creative photography in 1972 from the University of Iowa School of Art. After landing a summer job in 1979 as the acting director of the Provincetown Group Gallery, McKown became aware of Jensen, who with his wife served on the gallery's board of directors.

McKown's connection with Jensen and the porcelain enamel tile work didn't occur until



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copper and cut a stencil for the design from Plexiglas, which McKown recalls as a "very labor intensive" method. The thin lettering on the tile at 473 Commercial St., marking the former residence of MacMillan, is an example of the type of precise cuts Jensen made in the Plexiglas.

The original idea for the historical house markers was based on blue plaques Jensen had seen in England, McKown said, and the design of Jensen's "floater" tile, with the boat on a raft and the Long Point lighthouse in the distance, was created by Jensen's son Hank.

When McKown and Jensen began working together, they used steel, with copper only occasionally, and also began creating a computerized image of the porcelain enamel tile, transferring the image to silk screen, and then onto the tile.

"He was ambivalent," McKown says of his initial contact with Jensen in 1985, when McKown needed help with the mural commission for Southeast Bank. McKown recalls that Jensen seemed "depressed." But within 24 hours of McKown's phone call, Jensen called back and said, "Let's do it." "He was totally energized," McKown says.

Over the winter of 1985, the two of them created the porcelain enamel tiles for the mural commission, with McKown creating the designs and applying the colored glazes to the tiles, and Jensen firing the tiles in his kiln on Anthony Street. That

mural was finished, the tiles created in batches of 50 or so, transported to Sarasota and mounted on a wall at the bank (the bank has since been sold, and the disassembled mural is now in McKown's attic in Acton).

And that was the beginning of their collaboration.

"It gave him a second lease in life. He was really excited. He really came to life," McKown says of Jensen. "Physically, he would sit in an office chair and wheel himself around. The only time he used to stand was to fire the tiles."

After Jensen's death, in 1989, his son Grady gave McKown all of Jensen's kilns, the enameling equipment and glazes, which McKown still has in Acton.

"What I liked about Jensen is how he had these skills and talents," McKown says, "how he was really kind of unassuming, kind of modest about it ... and his dry sense of humor."

McKown said a few weeks ago that he would like to mark those houses in his old East End neighborhood, reportedly built from Sears, Roebuck kits. And he'd like to create more tiles for historic buildings in Provincetown and update the "Walking Tours" booklets, originally published by the Provincetown Historical Association.

The first porcelain enamel tiles, the ones created by Jensen alone, were used to raise money for the Heritage Museum, where he was a trustee.

"I can't be more emphatic

about the need to do that ... it's an incredibly important thing to do," Provincetown historian and artist Josephine Del Deo says of marking the town's historically significant buildings with the porcelain enamel tiles. Del Deo worked closely with Jensen, as part of the Provincetown Historical Association, to document 1,300 old buildings in the 1970s, in preparation for a bid to create a local historic district, which was ultimately defeated.

"We must draw from [the past] to empower our present life and give it meaning ... and then we form the past for the next generation," Del Deo says. "Really, man is always in the same position, somebody's future, and also somebody's past. And, if, as the past, we didn't give [the next generation] any references, then we have done them an enormous disservice. They don't know who they are."

According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C., Sears, Roebuck, & Company sold more than 100,000 mail-order buildings, with more than 450 styles, between 1908 and 1940. The houses included indoor plumbing, wiring for electricity, delivery and instructions for construction. The company's first "Modern Homes" catalog offered building plans and materials for 44 models, ranging in price from \$495 to \$4,115, according to a recent story in the *Christian Science Monitor*. □

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McKown was commissioned to create a porcelain enamel-on-steel mural for Southeast Bank in Florida in 1985. "Who had done enameling that I knew locally?" McKown asked himself, before thinking of Jensen. And once they worked together on the mural, McKown and Jensen then for the next few years produced the 50 or so porcelain enamel tiles for old buildings in Provincetown, with materials paid for with \$500 Arts Lottery grants from the town.

Porcelain enamel tiles are made of thin coats of powdered glass melted onto some type of metal, often steel or copper, while being fired in a kiln. For Jensen's first tiles, like the ones for the "floater" houses, he used

Cape & Islands

Craftsman puts his mark on historic houses

Claude Jensen's work helps to perpetuate the memory of the Long Point settlement



STAFF PHOTO BY GORDON E. CALDWELL

Claude Jensen displays one of the plaques he designed and made to identify and mark the Long Point houses.

In 1832, following a cyclical scarcity, schools of bluefish reappeared along the shores of Nantucket.

"... They did not come north of the Cape, so as to affect our fisheries until 1847, when they appeared in vast abundance and drove away from our bay nearly all other species.

"When they first appeared in our bay I was living at Long Point, Provincetown, in a little village containing some 270 people engaged in the net fishery. The bluefish affected our fishery so much that the population was obliged to leave the place. Family after family moved away, until every one left, leaving that locality, which is now a desolate, barren, and sandy waste."

Nathaniel Ellis Atwood

at a hearing of a joint U.S.-Canadian fisheries commission
Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1877

By ALLISON BLAKE
STAFF WRITER

Provincetown

THEY are gems among gems — architectural interlopers hidden in the 300-year-old neighborhoods in Provincetown.

And though their facades resemble those of their neighbors, the 28 houses, marked by distinctive blue and white plaques, share a unique past. All of them arrived in Provincetown by way of the water, floated over from the Long Point fishing settlement prior to the Civil War.

The distinctive plaques — white-on-blue copper enameling — depict what looks like a houseboat, with Long Point light in the background. Craftsman Claude Jensen created both the design and the plaques during the mid-1970s, when he spearheaded the local historical association's project to identify and mark the Long Point houses. Most of the houses are located in the town's West End.

Marking the remnants of the old fishing settlement was simply "one of those things that should be done," says Jensen.

But another Provincetown Historical Association member who worked on the project said that marking the Long Point houses was purely Jensen's idea. It has recognized "an enormously important historical resource for the town," said Josephine Del Deo.

A house that was once the Long Point post office now stands at the corner of Bradford and Allerton streets. And a building thought to have been the settlement's bakery also was in the exodus of Long Point structures. Left behind were saltworks, a wharf and a U.S. military enclave.

"Even the old schoolhouse was floated over," said Jensen.

One architectural expert says the Long Point houses are no different from other old homes on the Lower Cape.

"They are not distinguished in any way from the houses built in Provincetown, Truro, Wellfleet, Eastham or Orleans," said George Bryant.

Bryant often examines old buildings for structural soundness before they are sold, and so has scrutinized many of the Long Point houses.

"These buildings are typical of the buildings you see on the Lower Cape, built of both salvaged and new lumber," he said.

Although one historic record says that some of the Long Point houses may have been built in Truro, then floated to Long Point, Bryant says he doubts that is true. Many houses were floated from Truro to Provincetown — and

some to Wellfleet. But the Long Point houses were probably built on "the Point," as it is called. Salvaged materials were likely used, said Bryant.

"I have a feeling that in the early 19th century, after Massachusetts got on its feet after a very destructive War of 1812, that there were great numbers of buildings demolished in Boston and replaced with four- and five-story brick buildings," he said.

The salvaged lumber seems to have made its way into many Lower Cape houses, he said.

The 58-year history of the settlement at Long Point grew with the fishing industry. In November 1818, John Atwood built the first building on the Point. He soon was followed by others, almost all of them seeking proximity to abundant fishing grounds nearby.

Various accounts tell of the fishing wealth. Capt. Ed Walter Smith, born on Long Point in 1851, told a 1932 audience that 200 to 300 lobsters were caught daily by fishermen fishing from up to 75 dories at a time. The lobsters brought 2 cents each, and were sold to "men from New York."

As many as 40 houses — many clustered down the Point at Wood End — are said to have comprised the settlement. Sixty-one families — up to 300 people — lived there.

Drinking water came from rainwater cisterns built beneath the houses, said Bryant. Food and other supplies were floated over from the mainland, said Jensen.

The schoolhouse was built in 1846, 14 years after Long Point was declared a school district. Sixty students attended the new school. Before the structure was built, classes were held in the Long Point lighthouse, constructed in 1826. The lighthouse looked like a Cape Cod-style home, with a light positioned where a chimney would ordinarily be.

The Long Point settlement began to disperse in the 1850s. Erosion may have threatened some homes, and Provincetown native Charles A. Mayo Jr. speculates that the newly built road into Provincetown may have meant more convenient living for some of the Long Point residents.

Bryant supports the Nathaniel Ellis Atwood account that blames the return of the bluefish — scavenging fish who ate everything, including valuable mackerel — for the end of the Long Point settlement.

The Civil War also may have hurried the demise of the settlement. According to Bryant, the federal government took over the Point. He speculated that any houses left were quickly moved, "or lost to the federal government."

It was just before the Civil War that the sand battlements, which came to be known as

"Fort Useless" and "Fort Ridiculous," were built at Long Point, said Jensen. No battles were ever fought there.

The house where Bryant and his family live, which now is in the East End, was used as a barracks for soldiers living on Long Point during the Civil War, according to local historic records. (The same house once was owned by Rear Adm. Donald B. MacMillan, who was on the expedition with Robert Peary to the North Pole early in this century.)

While the federal government readied for the Civil War, the Long Point homeowners moved their houses onto scows and barges. Power to get the craft across the harbor may have come from rowing, or sailing craft or even a steam engine, if one were available, speculate both Bryant and Mayo.

Bryant stresses that moving houses was nothing unusual in these parts during the mid-19th century. The houses, called "land ships," were built on minimal brick foundations — "you could kick out the foundation if you wanted to," he said.

The slightly elevated foundations were built to add warmth and to keep vermin out of the house. When it came time to move, the foundation was pulled away, and the houses were rolled aboard barges with rollers — exactly the way large ships of the time were moved.

"There were a lot of people skillful about moving things. A lot of boats would come up on the back shore," said Bryant. Though the Cape's Atlantic shoreline is called the Grave-

yard of the Atlantic, "there were probably more boats refloated than wrecked," said Bryant. "If you could pick up a boat, you could pick up a house."

The last house left Long Point in 1866.

In these modern times, learning about the Long Point settlement means relying on anecdotal accounts. Interspersed with known fact are tales that sound like legend.

After being moved to Provincetown, the old schoolhouse was Matchson's Drygoods Store in the middle of town for years, recalls Mayo. It stood on Commercial Street, next to where Arnold's Bicycle Rental now operates. Fire destroyed the building 30 years ago.

"I grew up with it being there," said Mayo. "It was definitely moved over from Long Point.

Rachel White, whose family owns an apparent Long Point house at 5 Soper St., says she has found little in the home to distinguish it from other old Provincetown houses. Rather surprisingly, she said, the family has never found evidence of a fireplace. An old artisan well was discovered in the kitchen, she said.

Documenting the house's history has proven to be a tough job. Fire destroyed old local records years ago when the town hall burned.

A family tale about the house has been passed along, though, says Amy McKain, descendant of the Cowing family that once owned the White home. As the story goes, the family ate dinner in the house as it was floated across Provincetown Harbor. When the meal was through, the lady of the house shook

crumbs from the tablecloth into the harbor.

Articles published in 1954 in the defunct "New Beacon" newspaper, chronicle similar tales. Charlotte M. Wilson, proprietor of the Red Inn at that time, told of a family cottage in the West End on Commercial street that was presumably the old Long Point bake shop.

"Saturday was the only day the fishermen did not go out fishing . . . and consequently the only day that they could float the buildings over from the Point to town. Saturday was also baking day for the week, and so the bake-shop was floated across the bay with a good blaze going in the ovens and the bakeshop owner busy preparing and baking her pies and cakes and cookies, and a fine smoke coming out of the chimney during the trip," the article quotes Wilson.

Mayo, poking around Long Point a few years ago, discovered what he thought was an old salt works. Now, he believes the old pilings he found once supported a wooden bridge that was built where there a cut was blown through Long Point during the 1978 blizzard.

Such discoveries may be the true value of the Long Point settlement — more so than the houses in town, said Bryant.

"The most important part of the Long Point settlement is still there," he said. "Just the artifacts that remain there . . . what must remain in the sand . . . is a time capsule of an early 19th-century fishing village.

"A time capsule sealed by shifting sand."