

# ***HISTORY OF THE PROVINCETOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM***

What is the history of the Provincetown Heritage Museum and how old is the building? We knew you would ask these questions, and here, in brief detail, are the answers: *This museum was originally built, in 1860, as the Center Methodist Episcopal Church.* It was the fourth Methodist Church in Provincetown and its congregation was directly descended from the first group of Methodists known as the Methodist Episcopal Society which erected their first meeting house in 1795.

The advent of Methodism (in the early 1800's) was accompanied by a furious storm of opposition against the new and aggressive sect which divided the Congregational Church, the Church of the State since the time of the Pilgrims. Large numbers of Congregationalists departed to the new fold, and so great was the defection that the Methodists in 1810 carried a vote in town meeting placing a Methodist minister "in control of the Congregational pulpit" unless the regular minister was able to officiate. "The members of this society bought a schooner-load of lumber in Maine and shipped it to Provincetown for the building of their church. Unloaded on the beach, it was seized by certain of the Orthodox (Congregational) brethren, taken to High Pole Hill, now the site of the Pilgrim Memorial Monument, and there burned on a great bonfire along with the tarred and feathered effigy of the presiding elder, Jesse Lee. In spite of this rather broad hit, the Methodists obtained another load of lumber and, with armed men standing guard, built their meeting-house, locating it just north of the site of the present Universalist Church.

"Their difficulties with their more conservative neighbors did not end, however, with the construction of this place of worship. A competent authority says: 'Persecution continued for thirty years, so that it was far from being safe, not to say respectable, to be a Methodist. Men piled up fish heads on the shore for boys to throw at Methodists as they went to church. Many a woman crawled on her hands and knees under the fish flakes<sup>1</sup> in order to avoid the insults sure to be heaped upon her. So great were these abuses that, at one time, thirty or forty members of the early church removed in a company to the state of Maine."<sup>2</sup>

When the Center M.E. Church was built, *it was reputed to be the largest church of Methodist denomination in America with a spire 162 feet high.* The present finial at the tip of the belfry is approximately 100 feet from the ground, and so we may assume that the additional 62 feet represented the portion of the spire that was removed in 1898 after the Portland Gale so weakened its members that it was taken down rather than risk its falling on unsuspecting passersby. The task of dismantling the spire was accomplished single-handedly by Jot Small, Provincetown's legendary carpenter and cabinet maker!

*The church was built in the English Baroque style often referred to as the style of Sir Christopher Wren, but it is not as typical a Wren interpretation as the older Universalist Church built here in 1847.* Its ground level frontal facade is constructed of wood panels made to look like smooth-faced rusticated stone, and the modillioned cornice is supported by Ionic columns which give it a regal face.<sup>3</sup> *A huge bronze bell hangs in the belfry which was cast by George Holbrook in East Medway, Massachusetts in 1837, just two years after the Liberty Bell cracked.* In 1979, the flywheel was rebuilt by Cape Cod Regional Technical High School and the bell restored to ringability.

Interiorly, the handsome spiral stairwells contain the original stairways which led to the sanctuary on the second floor where the congregation of approximately 800 could be accommodated in the auditorium and in the mezzanine balconies. The choir loft and tracker organ occupied the raised platform over which the bowsprit of the "Rose Dorothea" now extends, and the congregation faced the pulpit on the north or opposite wall. In the cold of winter, services were held downstairs, and activities such as quilting parties and church dinners at 35¢ were looked-forward-to events.<sup>4</sup> The stenciled ceiling can still be seen, and as much of it as possible will be restored once the schooner model is completed. In the center of the ceiling a large chandelier, which could be raised and lowered for purposes of lighting the candles, hung from a circular grillwork of cast iron.

In 1958, the upkeep of this very large structure presented a problem to the congregation. A controversy arose over the disposition of the church property, and the congregation became bitterly divided over a proposal to build a new church on Shank Painter Road. Under the persuasion of the then minister, Rev. Gilman Lane, the congregation finally voted to sell the church for the sum of \$40,000 to the wealthy son of the founder of the Chrysler Corporation, Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. for conversion to an art museum. The sale was not consummated, however,

# A MUSEUM ESTABLISHED BY THE TOWN OF PROVINCETOWN IN 1976

without a protracted and emotional tug of war by many prominent citizens of the town and members of the congregation. Such highly respected persons as Dr. Daniel Hiebert, a member of the congregation for 35 years, Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan, the famous Arctic explorer and native son, and Ross Moffett, well-known Provincetown painter, pleaded the case for preserving the church as the home of the Methodists. Letters flooded the local paper and a petition of 130 signatures was sent to the presiding Bishop, John Wesley Lord, in an attempt to stop the sale, but to no avail.

When the church was finally converted to an art museum by Chrysler, the results were impressive, but, unfortunately, the priceless tracker organ and all of the stained glass windows were destroyed in the process. (The last stained glass window stands in the present lobby of the museum.) The museum had a modest success but was costly to run, and, after a few years, the Chrysler collection was moved to Norfolk, Virginia and the old church was again hard pressed for a suitable tenant. No commercial use was appropriate or viable for the building, and an attempt to make an art center, theater and restaurant complex of this magnificent landmark failed utterly. The church was, and still is, *the first building visible to fishermen returning from sea* and a statement of community pride; therefore, in 1974, National Landmark status was sought by the Provincetown Historical Association and the Historic District Study Committee, and, on *October 31, 1975, the building was designated as a National Registered Landmark*. This important step in its preservation did not, however, solve all the problems. It had to be used for some purpose; it could not just sit there uncared for. Foreclosure on the property was imminent and various proposals for its use were unsuccessful until a small group of citizens headed by Josephine and Salvatore Del Deo and including Adelaide Kenney, Joseph Lema, Jr. and Cyril Patrick, Jr. proposed to the town of Provincetown that the building be purchased as a municipal museum and run by the community. This committee powered the effort to secure *the vote to acquire the building at a special town meeting on November 13, 1975 and arranged the purchase of the property from the First National Bank of Provincetown on March 15, 1976*.

Since that time, the Heritage Museum has been maintained as a community resource for the collection and preservation of Provincetown's remarkable legacy. Its financial support comes from the people of the community, publicly through appropriations of the town meeting and privately through the Provincetown Historical Association which has funded many of the building's activities, most notably the construction of the beautiful "Rose Dorothea," the half-scale model of the Grand Banks fishing schooner which won the Lipton Cup during the Old Home Week Celebration in the Boston-Gloucester Fishermen's Race of 1907. Daily operation of the museum's schedule is made possible by more than twenty volunteers who keep the building open ten hours a day, seven days a week from June 14th to October 12th. In every way, the words of Rear Admiral MacMillan still ring through the halls of this structure as visitors from many countries and every state in the union come to enjoy what the past held sacred and what we hold in trust for the future:

"Can we forget the calling of the bells on Sunday morning? The stately procession of well-dressed men, women and children along our four-planked sidewalk to the place of worship? The quiet entrance, the hush throughout the auditorium? The volume of music from the organ, the singing of canary birds in their cages hanging from the balcony on Easter morning: The old church stands tingling and vibrating with memories of days gone by. And do I understand that all is to be forgotten and that all is to be classed as sentiment? It is far more than that, for sentiment is one of the most powerful factors in the development of the human race, as our churches have been for more than 300 years in the betterment of the people of Provincetown."<sup>5</sup>

Josephine Del Deo, Curator  
July 4, 1986

1. Fish flakes: wooden trays used for drying fish outdoors after the catch was brought ashore and washed. The entire length of the waterfront was intermittently covered with these flakes which came within a few feet of the front doors of many beach front houses.
2. M.C.M. Hatch, *The Log of Provincetown and Truro on Cape Cod, Massachusetts*, Provincetown, 1939, p. 30.
3. Nomination form for National Landmark designation, Massachusetts Historical Commission, Oct., 1975.
4. Adelaide Kenney, member of the congregation of the Center M.E. Church, 1918 — 1958; Board of Trustees, Heritage Museum, 1975 — 1986: Recollections.
5. Donald B. MacMillan, "Hold It Sacred Urges Famous Son," *Provincetown Advocate*, Thursday, March 20, 1958, p. 2.

# THE ARTISTS' VIEW

## A Commemorative Exhibition

### JULY 4 — SEPTEMBER 1, 1986

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#### 10th ANNIVERSARY OF THE PROVINCETOWN HERITAGE MUSEUM 1976—1986

The Provincetown Heritage Museum, which, for nearly 100 years was the Center Methodist Episcopal Church, dominates the shoreline of this beautiful harbor like a mother hen hovering over her chicks. The buildings on every hand seem to flock to the "grand dame's" protection, and the many angles and views of her architectural grandeur juxtaposed to a hustle of houses have always fascinated painters. The present exhibition, honoring the museum's 10th year as a municipal museum, is representative, although limited in size, of the variety of ways in which the artist has responded to a splendid work of art and architecture.

(Height precedes width)

- Samir Barber, "Commercial Street," 1983, Oil on board, 40" x 48"  
(Museum Collection: Gift of the Artist)
- W.H.W. Bicknell, "Church Tower from the Shore," 1921, Etching, 5" x 7"  
(Museum Collection)
- W.H.W. Bicknell, "Methodist Church," Etching, 7½" x 5½"  
(Loaned by the Provincetown Art Association & Museum\*)
- Harry Brown, (Untitled) Watercolor, 1929, 15½" x 11"  
(Loaned by the P.A.A.M.)
- George Crosby, "Susanah and the Elders," 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 28" x 36"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- Salvatore Del Deo, "Provincetown, Winter Blanket," Oil on canvas, 16" x 24"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- Tina Dickey, "Heritage," 1980, Color Woodblock, 10¾" x 11⅞"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- Ellen Donahue, "Provincetown Scene," Woodblock 8⅜" x 7"  
(Loaned by the P.A.A.M.)
- William H. Evaul, "Rooftops," White Line Woodcut, 11¼" x 7½"  
(Loaned by the P.A.A.M.)
- William H. Evaul, "Rooftops," Master Woodblock, 11¼" x 7½"  
(Loaned by the P.A.A.M.)
- Harry Livingston Frank, (Untitled) Center M.E. Church at Center & Commercial, 1919, Pencil drawing, 8½" x 5¾"  
(Loaned by Lancey & Joe Watts)
- Lena Gurr, "Roofs, Provincetown," 1977, Serigraph, 7½" x 15½"  
(Loaned by the P.A.A.M.)
- Mary Hackett, (Untitled), Center M.E. Church et al., 1948, Oil on board, 20" x 24"  
(Loaned by Tobias Everett & Margot Jackson)
- Marston Hodgkin, "The Three Towers," Watercolor, 24" x 16"  
(Museum Collection: Gift of the Artist)
- Frank James, "Tide's Down," Watercolor, 24" x 16"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- Stella Johnson, (Untitled) Center M.E. Church, Oil on canvas, 36" x 30"  
(Loaned by Helen Edel Buker)
- Julius Katzieff, "Center Methodist Church," Oil on canvas, 24" x 20"  
(Town Collection: Loaned by the Prov. Public Library)
- Lois Boutemain Marston, (Untitled) Center M.E. Church View Along Center St., 1933, Oil on board, 16" x 12"  
(Museum Collection: Gift of the Artist)
- Bruce McKain, "A Winter Scene," Oil on canvas, 20" x 16"  
(Loaned by the P.A.A.M.)
- Frank Milby, "Skyline and Gulls," Oil on canvas, 22" x 36"  
(Loaned by Anton Van Dereck)
- Mary Spencer Nay, "Homage to the Heritage Museum and Chaim Gross," Oil on canvas, 42" x 28"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- Johnathan Talbot, "Provincetown Waterfront," Etching, 4½" x 12¾"  
(Museum Collection: Gift of the Artist)
- Carol Westcott, "Fourth of July," 1986, Oil on canvas, 16" x 20"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- George Yater, "Firehouse on Johnson Street," Oil on canvas, 28" x 38"  
(Loaned by the Artist)
- George Yater, "Provincetown Cold Storage," 1946, Watercolor, 23" x 30"  
(Loaned by Anton Van Dereck)

\* (Hereafter referred to as the P.A.A.M.)

Underphoto: Charles Demuth, "After Sir Christopher Wren," 1920, Tempera, 23⅞" x 20"  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)