

Dwelling in the Dunes:
Traditional Use of the
Dune Shacks of the Peaked Hill Bars
Historic District, Cape Cod

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Cover Picture: Theo Cozzi Poulin, Kathie Joseph Meads, Maureen Joseph Hurst, and Susan Leonard at the Tasha Shack in the Peaked Hill Bars Historic District, Cape Cod National Seashore, August, 2004. Picture by Robert J. Wolfe.

Abstract: Dwelling in the Dunes

This ethnographic report provides a picture of the traditions and cultural patterns of the dune dwellers living in shacks in the Peaked Hill Bars Historic District, Cape Cod National Seashore, Massachusetts. The report describes the seasonal settlement of dune dwellers, and documents their traditional cultural practices, beliefs, customs, and histories that are linked to the shacks and the historic district. Information for the report primarily derives from direct observations on the lower cape and formal interviews with 47 shack residents during August and September, 2004. The research was supported by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior (“Traditional Cultural Significance of the Dune Shacks Historic District, Cape Cod National Seashore,” No. P4506040200).

The report describes a “dune shack society” comprised of shack users, with a core of about 250 shack residents with connections to perhaps another 1,100 to 1,700 shack users. The group traces its history about one hundred years. Several shacks have housed four-generations of family members. In 2004, there were nineteen occupied shacks, most located on barrier dunes of what is locally called “the Backshore” of Provincetown. Shacks are small, weathered, and rustic looking, built on skids or pilings allowing for occasional repositioning on unstable dunes. Minimal infrastructure typified the “fragile house type,” purposively designed to accommodate a fluid and relatively unspoiled natural environment. Shacks survive harsh conditions through unending maintenance and small adjustments by shack residents, including low-tech methods of sand management using simple sand fences and dune plants.

Long-term members of dune shack society relate a shared identity and history that includes “surfmens” and fishers with Portuguese and Yankee roots on the lower cape, as well as writers and artists from Provincetown’s fine arts colony dating since the late 19th century. Socially, the group’s core is organized as a set of extended families linked to particular shacks with networks of close friends who stay as invited guests and provide sources of labor alongside family members. Families and individuals on occasion have organized into associations and nonprofit groups for collective action to preserve the dunes, the shacks, and their traditions. Cultural ideals value privacy, autonomy, and solitude, resulting in a small, personal, but loose-knit seasonal settlement.

At least three identifiable traditions find expression in the cultural patterns of contemporary dune dwellers. First, some dune uses are identified with “Old Provincetown,” Backshore traditions including salvaging, foraging, training children, and retreating from small-town pressures. Accordingly, the dune shacks come to represent for the town iconic symbols of certain traditions perceived as threatened by outside forces. Second, the expressive traditions of the fine arts colony extend into the dunes, with shacks offering centers for writing, art, and other creative expression. Third, concepts of environmentalism associated with Thoreau and Beston find expression in the settlement as demonstrations of special relationships with Nature.

The report provides detailed descriptions of dune shack customs and beliefs, illustrated with extensive quotes from dune dwellers. The report describes cultural patterns such as land use, shack naming conventions, seasonal residencies, privacy and solitude, mutual assistance, shack transference, ceremonies, among others. Dynamic aspects are described, including maturation cycles of families related to shack use, the repositioning of shacks in response to storms and sand, and the transmission of culture through extended family lines and new entrants to the society.

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