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Report on
THE HISTORY of
Cape Cod , Massachusetts

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CAPE COD

IN

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Region Five

CAPE COD IN HISTORY

Cape Cod was the first landing place of the Pilgrims, those "stout-hearted idealists" whom Samuel Eliot Morison justifiably calls the "spiritual ancestors"¹ of all Americans. Though Plymouth will ever be cherished as their permanent home, this "first fact" in their memorable saga must not be forgotten. Here the Pilgrims lingered for a few weeks after the first landing (at present-day Provincetown, November 11 - Old Style), making their first tentative contacts with a strange new world. Here they found their first seed corn (Corn Hill, Truro), drank their "first New England water with as much delight as we ever drank in all our lives"² (Pilgrim Spring, Truro), and had their first encounter with the red man (First Encounter Beach, Eastham). From here they sailed to find the harbor (Plymouth) that became home. The Pilgrim landing is the basic "national historical significance" of the Great Beach area, along whose entire coastline, indeed, the Mayflower sailed, after "landfall" at the Highlands (of Truro).

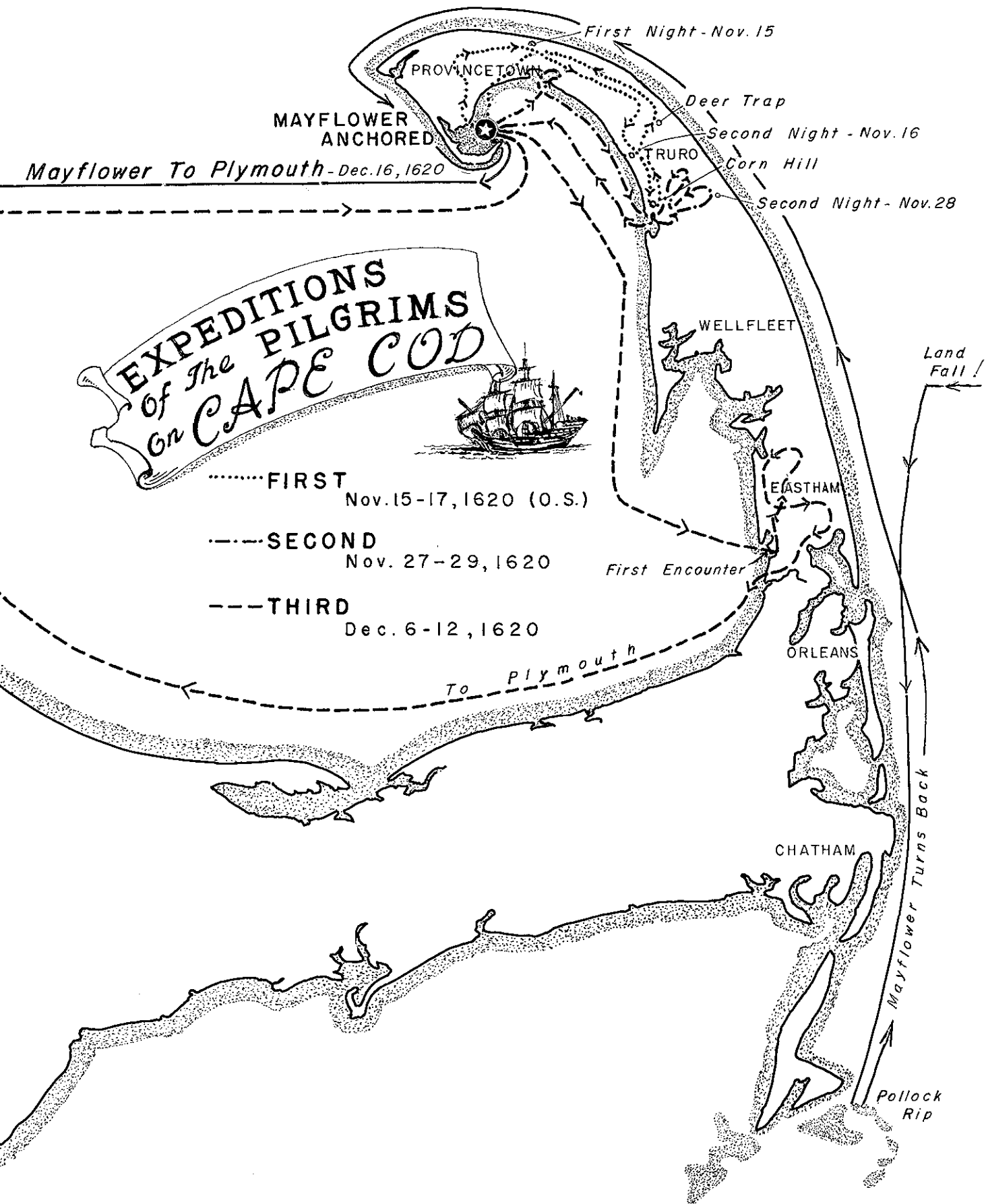
But if Cape Cod's "first" historical significance is the Pilgrim landing, it is almost equally important, literally, as a landmark in the Age of Discovery. Though only the Champlain landing point of 1606 in Chatham exists as an identified site³ of this period, the entire Cape can be considered a hallowed reminder (and no better area for this purpose is known) of those pioneer seafarers, heralds of a great New World, who were almost forced to round this promontory on their voyages of discovery in northern waters. Henry Hudson and John Smith followed Champlain; Smith's accurate map and writings may well have lured the Pilgrims. Before Champlain (the great pioneer geographer of the northern region) there was Bartholomew Gosnold, who gave the Cape its name; and long before him, Verrazano perhaps, and even John Cabot, the "discoverer" of North America.

- 1 - S. F. Morrison, "The Pilgrim Fathers; Their Significance in History," in BY LAND AND BY SEA (New York, 1953) p.234. The noted constitutional historian, Carl Brent Swisher, in AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY (Boston and New York, 1943) p.9, states that the Mayflower Compact - drafted in Provincetown Harbor - was "probably the first basic law or Constitution worked out by the people to be governed."
- 2 - Henry M. Dexter, ed. MOURT'S RELATION, or JOURNAL OF THE PLANTATIONS AT PLYMOUTH (Boston, 1865) p.17 - additionally to the sites mentioned here (nearly all owned by Dept. of Natural Resources, Commonwealth of Massachusetts) one might mention the Pond Village campsite in Truro where the Pilgrim exploring party camped on its second night ashore (the first night site is apparently washed away), as well as more incidental sites. Earliest known attempt to identify these sites in terms of modern terrain was in 1802 when an edited abridgement of MOURT'S RELATION appeared in the COLLECTIONS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Vol. VIII
- 3 - Champlain had been on the Cape in the previous year, visiting the Indian encampment along the shore of Nauset (Eastham) harbor; on the expedition of 1606 he had first landed somewhere on the bayside of the Cape (Barnstable or Wellfleet). See Morris Bishop, CHAMPLAIN IN THE LIFE OF FORTITUDE (New York, 1948) pp.81, 98-9. The Chatham landing point has been "monumented" by the Chatham Historical Society, above Stage Harbor waterfront.

Before Cabot and Verrazano (as well as in the years following) there were countless unnamed fishermen, and - who is to say not - the Vikings, whose "Wonder Strands" the Great Beach may well have been.⁴ Curiously, the name "Cape Cod" symbolizes the cause of it all, for it was fish that brought the Europeans to these shores, and the availability of fish "drying" beaches that paved the way for permanent settlement.⁵ No doubt the unrecorded word-of-mouth tales of North European fishermen were the substance of the dreams that compelled the recognized explorers of the history books west, not east, in the 15th and 16th centuries.

And if fish (and seafaring) were the cause of it all, they were the "end" of it all, too. Every tidal harbor and tiny creek came to have its fishing fleet. The great American whaling saga very probably started on the Cape with the "drift whaling" and "shore whaling" of the seventeenth century. Certainly Nantucket - before New Bedford's rise, the leader in the industry - acknowledged her debt to Cape Cod.⁶ A whaler from Truro may have been the pre-Revolution pioneer⁷ in the deep-sea whaling that would, in the "golden age" of 1830-50, bring paramount importance to New Bedford. And Provincetown whalers soon followed.⁸ Provincetown, indeed, was a whaling port of major consequence even in New Bedford's heyday,⁹ and continued to send out whalers even down into the 20th century. But in addition to whales, there were cod and shad, mackerel and oysters. Provincetown was a "natural" fishing port after the Revolution when economic conditions forced the shorter voyages that, in turn, required home "drying beaches"; for

- 4 - Henry C. Kittredge, CAPE COD, ITS PEOPLE AND THEIR HISTORY (Boston and New York, 1930) Chapter II; also George F. Willison, SAINTS AND STRANGERS, (New York, 1945), Chapter X, and standard encyclopedia accounts. With regard to early and unnamed arrivals on Cape Cod, it is interesting to note that the Pilgrims uncovered a skeleton with yellow hair in the course of their first few days ashore. In Provincetown, the "Norse Wall" house preserves the Viking tradition, notably. Archeology is offered a challenging assignment here.
- 5 - Fur, of course, is part of this story, for fish led to furs. Cp. John Bartlet Brebner, NORTH ATLANTIC TRIANGLE (New Haven, 1945) Chap. II, and by the same author THE EXPLORERS OF NORTH AMERICA (London, 1933) Chapter IX passim.
- 6 - Alexander Starbuck, HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WHALE FISHERY, (Waltham, 1878), pp.17,19; annual reports of Commissioners of Fish and Fisheries in ibid., pp.180 ff; Elroy S. Thompson, HISTORY OF PLYMOUTH, NORFOLK, AND BARNSTABLE COUNTIES (3 vols., New York, 1928) II, 744 Kittredge, Chapter IX, passim. "Shore-whaling" (in small boats from the shore), succeeded "drift whaling" (cutting up whales drifted ashore) and preceded the finally important deep-sea whaling.
- 7 - Kittredge, p.171. Starbuck does not confirm this.
- 8 - Kittredge, p.172.
- 9 - Though in 1847 (as a typical example), it ranked behind New Bedford, Nantucket, New London, Sag Harbor, in that order (Elmo Paul Hohman, THE AMERICAN WHALEMAN, New York, 1928, p.41). An archeologist might well uncover "remains" of the whale-oil factory that stood on Long Point, above Provincetown, a century ago.



Provincetown was "all beach", and it was nearest the newly-exploited Georges Banks.^{9a} In 1851, Wellfleet, no longer the whaling center it was before the Revolution,¹⁰ stood second to Gloucester in fishing. And in the period 1830-70, it may have had virtually a monopoly of the New England oyster trade.¹¹ Along with fish, went a great salt industry with picturesque windmills, "salt works", and fish drying racks.¹² Lighthouses, meanwhile - the earliest (1797) and the most important at the Truro Highlands - stood witness to the hazard of it all. For this is a stretch of coast that perhaps has equal claim with Hatteras to the label "Graveyard of the Atlantic".¹³

For many years a granary for the Plymouth settlement and soon a trade-route (across the neck, in the vicinity of the modern Canal) to the settlements in Connecticut and New Amsterdam, Cape Cod did not see permanent settlement until 1637, when Sandwich was founded.¹⁴ The first settlement in the "lower arm" was not till seven years later, when Assistant Governor Prence led a sizable number of the Plymouth inhabitants to Nauset, present Eastham.¹⁵ At Governor Bradford's death in 1657, Eastham became virtually the capital of Plymouth colony, for Prence chose

- 9a - Kittredge, pp.184-188
- 10 - Jefferson's report on whale and cod fisheries to the House of Representatives in 1791, shows Wellfleet a poor third to Nantucket and New Bedford in the period 1771-75. (Cited in Hohman, p.32).
- 11 - Thompson, II, 879; Scott Corbett, CAPE COD'S WAY (New York, 1955). The cod-fishing "peak" was in the first half of the 19th century.
- 12 - In 1850 (reports Thompson, II, 864) there were several hundred "salt works" (many of which employed windmills) on the Cape, with an annual output of one-third of a million bushels. There are no relict remains of any of this today, of course, though foundations might be uncovered by archeological means.
- 13 - Edward Rowe Snow, FAMOUS LIGHTHOUSES OF AMERICA (New York, 1955), p.120. Perhaps the most famous shipwreck of Cape history was the Somerset (see below), 1778, uncovered a hundred years after, pieces on exhibit in the historical museum in Plymouth. Adding flavor to the Cape story, is the pirate ship Whidah, wrecked in 1717, whose "bones" were seen as late as 100 years ago off the beach at Wellfleet. And one must not forget the "mooncussers" who cursed the moon for disrupting ship-scavenging operations.
- 14 - Kittredge, pp.52-3. On one of the earliest trading voyages to Nauset Harbor (later Eastham) in 1623, the Pilgrims' great Indian friend Squanto took sick and died (Willison, p.212); he is buried somewhere in the vicinity of Chatham (Stage Harbor) and a memorial plaque at the Atwood House, Chatham, commemorates this.
- 15 - The original township included Wellfleet and Orleans, and was fifteen miles in length (Frederick Freeman, THE HISTORY OF CAPE COD (2 vols., Boston, 1862) II, 350-1. Original settlement is believed to be in vicinity of present-day Eastham center (town hall, windmill, on Route 6).

to remain there rather than remove to the Governor's mansion at Plymouth; only on a few occasions did he occupy the latter until he was lured away in 1665.¹⁶ If the original thinking had prevailed, indeed, Eastham might well have superseded Plymouth at the time of the 1644 exodus, for there was much dissatisfaction with Plymouth's state, and Prence's "new pilgrimage" left that town almost deserted.¹⁷

Long a "no man's land" for transient (even lawless) fishermen, the tip of the Cape had no clear-cut community status until 1714, when it was officially designated the Provincetown "district" of Truro township. Incorporated as an independent township in 1727, Provincetown grew so haltingly that as late as 1755 it had but 10 or 15 houses and was ignored by the provincial census-takers in 1764.¹⁸ It would not come of age till after the Revolution. Already here and elsewhere¹⁹ on the Cape, prototypes of the "Cape Cod cottage" were in existence.

During the Revolution, Provincetown harbor sheltered a British naval squadron; though only Falmouth (on the upper Cape) was raided (1779), the entire Cape lived under the threat of attack from the sea. Cape whalemens, their normal activities shattered, entered into a notable privateering activity, using those home ships that could be salvaged or sailing in the privateersmen of other ports.²⁰ The burdensome British blockade was relieved at home by the scavenging of the British frigate Somerset, shipwrecked not far from the Highlands at North Truro in 1778, the Friendship, wrecked in the same locality in 1776, and others.²¹

Curiously, World Wars I and II brought stern reminders of this early "enemy" activity. (Though even the Civil War had brought fortifications on Long Point, above Provincetown.) On the beach at East Orleans fell, purportedly, the only hostile shots to land on American soil in World War I - fired by a German U-Boat. Residents today remember survivors of torpedoed American transports in World War II being brought ashore at Provincetown.

Meanwhile, not to be forgotten in Cape history is the siting of Marconi's first transatlantic wireless station in the United States (1903), remains of which are today still visible on the beach at South Wellfleet.

16 - Willison, p.340

17 - *ibid.*, pp.332-3

18 - Kittredge, pp.182-6; Freeman, II, 617-8. Provincetown land was all originally owned by the Province (that is, Massachusetts, after the demise of Plymouth).

19 - Perhaps the best preserved example of this indigenous form of architecture (the ancestor of the modern suburban story-and-a-half?) is the Atwood House in Chatham, dating to 1752. For a very apt early description of the typical Cape Cod house, see the Timothy Dwight excerpt quoted in Thompson, II, 839.

20 - Kittredge, pp.217-9, especially for the inference from British records that a goodly proportion of American privateersmen were whalers from Cape Cod (and Nantucket).

21 - Kittredge, pp.219-31

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