

PAST-TENSE . . .

by Lucy DAVIDSON

Not content with leaving By Gones alone, we made a trip to the oldest part of Provincetown's cemetery—out behind Winthrop Street. Having found six or so very early grave stones complete with legible names and dates and epitaphs, we hurried back to hunt for some clue as to who was who and what each did. Unfortunately, neither the couple of old-timers we talked to, nor the entire shelf of old Cape records could help us much with these particular names. So we started reading on early Provincetown in general. In spite

like a town diary and even gives the names of the whaling vessels.)

Early Cemetery

It seems that the old cemetery dates back to about 1763, which is when the government built the Provincetowners its first church. It was called The Meeting House, apparently encountered quite a bit of opposition, and was placed finally on Meeting House Plain "on or near the extreme north-west end of what is now the Old Cemetery." The building stood at the same place as the present Catholic Church parsonage. It was dedi-

house. Charles Atkins tided man for which he is to have one doler. Voted to buy a pitch pipe for ye Singers."

The epitaphs and engravings on several of the stones indicate that long before the town got its meeting house, it had some strongly religious people. The reputation for Godlessness and Hell-townism apparently had its counterpoint. The opposition was strong.

States the epitaph of one Elizabeth Ridly, who died in 1792:

"By long experience have I known

Thy sovereign power to save
At thy command I venture down

Securely to the grave.

Died On Voyage

Speaking of whaling, we discovered the tomb of one Captain Isaac Cook, Jr., who died on his passage from Aux Caves to Boston in 1851. We attempted to find out

where Aux Caves might be—or have been—and so we turned page after page of the atlas index, looking for anything remotely resembling it. Stymied again! The only approximation is some place known as Cayes in French Guiana, which is certainly an unlikely destination for a Captain Cook of Provincetown. We guess it was somewhere off Canada, or Newfoundland, where many whalers headed on their way north. Although Captain Cook died at sea, he is buried right here in Provincetown, as the epitaph left by his wife reads:

"Tis hard to think that you must die

Far from home upon the sea
Without a friend to heave a sigh

Or shed one parting tear for thee

But thou art gone, my husband dear

Our children reft a father's care

But God is just we can't complain

We hope in Heaven to meet again"

Among the many generations of Cooks in Provincetown, some thirty-eight were whaling Captain Cooks between 1820 and 1866; and in 1822 and 44, every captain out of Provincetown was named Cook except one.

Many Nickersons

Just about everyone who wasn't a Cook or an Atwood in the old days, seems to have been a Nickerson. The Mary Nickerson who died in 1796 was one of seven Mary Nickersons listed simultaneously in Provincetown. Other Nickersons were judges and selectmen, grocers, teachers, whalers and "monumental sculptors".

Another Nickerson—one Freeman Nickerson—was the first principal of Provincetown's Seminary ("as good as the best.") The Seminary was first in the vestry of the Old Methodist Church for which the school paid seventy-five cents a week rent, but Freeman Nickerson received all of four hundred dollars salary. The school was later removed to the Mason's House. It was indeed well equipped and au-courant. Their First Annual Catalogue, dating back to 1849, contains the following items:

Tuition Per Quarter

For Common English Branches, \$3.00.
For Algebra, Geometry and Navigation, each, \$1.00.
For Mental and Moral Sciences, \$.75.

For Astronomy, Chemistry and Natural Philosophy, \$1.00.
For Latin and Greek, \$1.25.
For French and Italian, \$1.50.
For Bookkeeping, single and double entry, \$1.00.
For Physiology, \$.67.
For Ornamental Branches, \$2.00.
For Music with use of piano \$3.00.
Board—The price of board varies from \$2.00 to \$2.50 per week, including fuel, lights, room and washing . . ." (from The Provincetown Book.)

Phineas Nickerson, named on the stone of his two-year old son, was discovered to be a builder and contractor around the beginning of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, he is mentioned in conjunction with one Benjamin Gifford, who ran the first hotel—the Pilgrim House. According to the Jennings Book: "About 1810 Mr. Benjamin Gifford bought the place from the builder, Mr. Phineas Nickerson, much against the wishes of Mrs. Nickerson, who expressed a wish that an earthquake would destroy it. Singularly enough, the book goes on, "one did happen, which shook and rattled the dishes, and did a slight amount of damage to the building . . ."

And that's the nineteenth century gossip. We hope no real genealogist takes offense at this somewhat haphazard researching. Next week we shall leave the cemetery and its stories and head out toward Long Point for some record of Provincetown's life out there.



Photo by Paul Koch

A visitor to the old Provincetown Cemetery or the Centenary Cemetery on Winthrop Street, as it is also called by some, will be impressed not only by the deep and abiding faith manifest in the epitaphs on many of the old gravestones, but also by the beauty of the classic lettering in which the verses are carved. Although the town and the townspeople have paid but little attention to this historic spot, it could be a point of wide interest among visitors.

of all these excuses, we do think the items we've come up with give the reader some picture of early life and times—although undoubtedly not as complete, nor authoritative, nor, perhaps long-winded as one as the text-book version.

Incidentally, we've culled our facts from Barnstable County's records; from Provincetown, by Jennings (which is a little black book containing lists of watchmakers, fish-dryers, salaries, ice-plants, public-disputes and disturbances, Town meetings, high-school graduates and other what not up to 1880); and from The Provincetown Book, by Nancy Paine Smith (which also reads

cated in 1774, and from then on it seems to have faced quite a problem since Town records note again and again the refusal of the people to pay for its support. And in 1789 a Town Meeting record reads:

"January 12th, 1789: Voted. John Conant keeper of the meeting house, and to sweep it every four weeks and shet and open the winder shettters all the year round for which serves he is to Receive two dolers, one doler to be given out of the Treasury to whomsoever shall bring out the parson or parsons that Rites on the plasteren in the meeting

When I lie bury'd deep in dust
My flesh shall be thy care
These with'r'ing limbs with thee I trust

To raise them strong and fair."

A similar engraving as appears on the Ridly stone with its angel of death, appears also on the Nabby Young gravestone, dated 1794. We guess that the same stone carver was employed. The only Youngs we can trace are a number of heroic whaling captains, and one Mary Young "opposite the Town Hall, who served oysters in every style."

- October 15, 1964 -

WHILE CEMETERY SUPERINTENDENT Frank Flores and his crew were cleaning up Winthrop Street Cemetery this week he came upon a grave with a date of 1701. It had been thought that the oldest grave was dated 1723. Brush is being cleared away and trees thinned out. So far the men have carted to the dump over 40 loads of debris. Meanwhile they are mending and painting fences and a permanent sign will be erected at the gate. Mr. Flores estimates it will be about another month before the work is completed.

WARNING

ANY PERSON TAKING FLOWERS FROM THE TOWN CEMETERIES, OTHER THAN FROM THEIR OWN LOTS, WILL BE TAKEN INTO COURT.

Frank Flores
Cemetery Superintendent

June 10, 1965