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# Oldest house built for the centuries

By Karen Berman

Provincetown's oldest house has been standing since about 1746, and its owner, artist and photographer John Gregory, predicts that it will be standing for centuries more.

He and his wife, pianist Adelaide Gregory, bought the house in 1944, along with land and another house behind it. The property, at 72 Commercial Street, cost \$4000 then. Now, Gregory said it would sell for 20 times that price.

But, Mrs. Gregory stresses, they're not the least bit interested in selling. Both enjoy taking tourists through the house four months a year, and telling the stories that go along with just about every feature of the place.

The design comes from an early 17th century house in Essex, England. The house was built by ship's carpenter Seth Nickerson from material scavenged from shipwrecks. It probably took between a year and a year-and-a-half to complete.

Architecture experts have dated the house to 1746. The major proof of that is the brick oven located in the rear of the fireplace. After 1750, ovens were built on the side of the fireplace.

The oak beams supporting the house are eight-by-eight inches thick. Oak and other hard, age-resistant woods used throughout the house account for its weight—four or five times heavier than the average Cape.

The 16-ton chimney also adds to the weight. A traditional Cape design, the chimney is in the center of the house. It was called an anchor, because it held the house down against storms. The mortar used to bind the bricks predates cement. It is made of thousands of ground clam and oyster shells, burned and mixed with sand and water.

The wide floor planks taken from ships offer another clue to the house's age. Gregory said King George III taxed colonial houses partly on the width of the floor planks. The wider-planked floors were taxed more heavily.

So, some houses built under King George III use narrower planks on the first floor than those on the second. The tax collector, Gregory said, would hopefully not want to bother climbing the stairs. "It was an early form of tax dodging," he said.

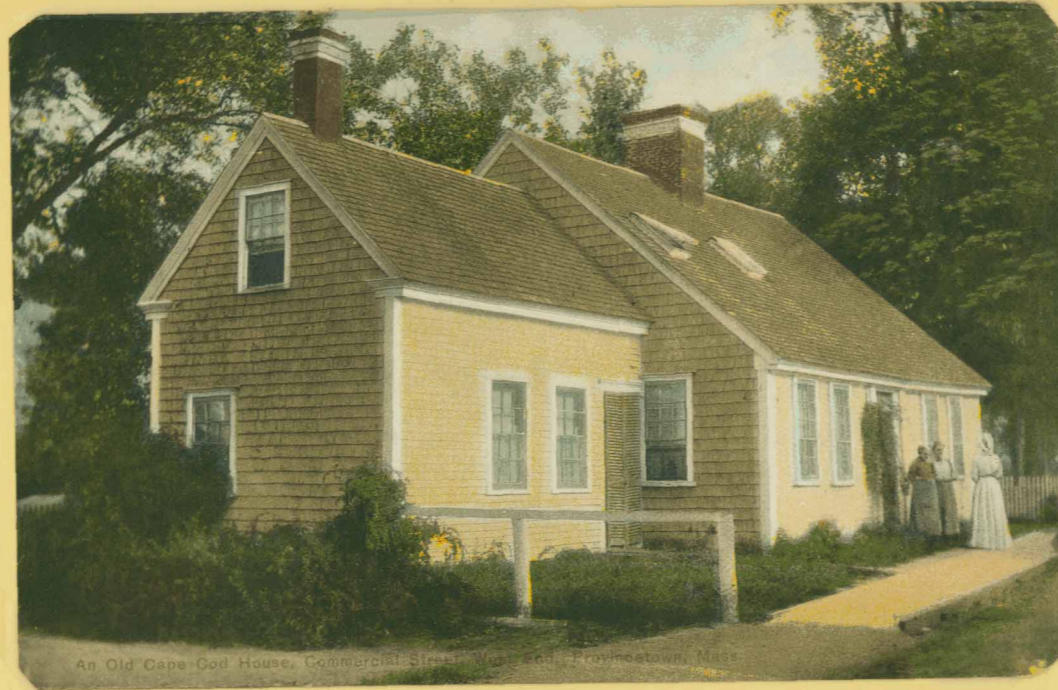
Another forerunner to modern construction is the sailcloth floor, which inspired the invention of linoleum. Sailcloth was painted brightly and tacked down to keep out winter drafts. The planks they cover are an inch-and-a-half thick.

Door and cabinet frames are tilted noticeably, having been taken from ships, where nothing was built level. They were constructed to accommodate the ship's hull.

Hinges and doors are another sign of the times. The HL hinges were called Holy Lord hinges, and the doors were Christian Cross doors. The two religious symbols in the entrance ways were thought to prevent visits from witches.

Gregory said most of the artifacts now in the house were there when he bought it. He and his sons, Kenneth and Jack, and his wife, restored the house, uncovered the treasures and learned about the lifestyles and eras the pieces represent.

Gregory remembers scouring through 25 layers of paint



An Old Cape Cod House, Commercial Street, West End, Provincetown, Mass.

- 1915 -

Oldest House in Provincetown, 72 Commercial St. Built by Seth Nickerson, a ship's carpenter, with timbers from wrecked ships. Listed as one of 5000 Treasures of America by Reader's Digest. Admission: adults \$1, children under 12, 25 cents. Lithographs and photographs by John Gregory on display, free of charge.

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to get to the bottom wood of the floor. But he calls the house and the work his family has put into it "one prolonged spiritual milestone."

Those that visit the house, off the beaten track in the West End, are people who appreciate the Provincetown that Gregory loves. "We get a good class of people here," he said. "Not the kind that go on the rubber chicken circuit." About 1200 people visit each summer, he said.

Born in Brooklyn, Gregory came here when he was 21, to visit his artist sister. He was attracted by the "quality of a little fishing village with a faded historic charm." He settled here and married his wife, who had started her piano career at age 14, playing at the old silent movie theater in Provincetown, where Whaler's Wharf now stands.

They bought the house after it had been vacant for five years, and was in considerable need of repair. "We saw such great potential here," Gregory said. So he and his family got to work, and brought the house to a state where it has been recognized by the Magazine Architectural Forum as a fine example of ship's carpenter craftsmanship.

Not the least of the attractions in the house are

Gregory's own photography. He turned to photography for more financial security, as an addition to his career as a lithographer and artist. He said when he first took up a camera, he was photographing weddings, high school pictures and other commercial items.

Now his display reaches into many facets of Provincetown, capturing the vision of someone who appreciates the beauty and character of the town, harbor and beaches.

Gregory's son Jack is now an established artist in Somerville, and his son Kenneth is a professional lobster fisherman in Provincetown.

The house is visited by antique dealers, historians and other experts, from whom Gregory gleans bits of information to offer his other visitors. Between his house, the Fairbanks House on Bradford Street, and the Heritage and Pilgrim Monument Museums, the exchange of visitors is constant.

Gregory owns and supports the house completely, so that he can keep it in the family. He obviously expects it to be standing far into the future. "It wasn't built for the decades," he said. "It was built for the centuries."



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Oldest House, left of Automobile - - 1940