

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

AQUINNAH

Report Date: 1984

Associated Regional Report: Cape Cod and the Islands

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: Gay Head

I. TOPOGRAPHY

The town of Gay Head is located on the Island of Martha's Vineyard lying between 70° 50' and 70° 25' longitude and 41° 95' and 41° 30' latitude. The island covers approximately 249 square kilometers and is covered by a hilly upland with a maximum elevation of 92 meters, averaging 59 meters; and coastal plain with elevations sloping gently southward from about 29 meters to sea level. Gay Head is located in the extreme southeastern portion of the island, bounded by Chilmark to the northeast, Vineyard Sound in the north and the Atlantic Ocean in other directions. Major physical features in the town include Menemsha Pond, Squibnocket Pond, and cliffs at Gay Head and Squibnocket Pond.

The uplands in the town are within the bounds of the Nantucket Moraine, a hilly and rocky area covering most of the township. The moraine is composed largely of coarse or medium sand and boulders of varying size (Latimer 1925:10). In general, soils are sandy and not stratified. The remaining areas of town are in coastal lowland locations. Soils in these areas are sandy. Drainage is generally subsurface, although some ponds and streams are present. Elevations peak at 185 feet in the area of the moraine and approach sea level along the coast. An oak/maple vegetation zone is present in hilly moraine areas. An oak/pine zone is present in lower coastal areas.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Gay Head Neck was first established as a native reservation in 1642. It was subsequently included as part of the manorial demense of Tisbury Manor (1671), incorporated as the town of Chilmark in 1714. The eastern boundary with Chilmark was surveyed in 1856, and the district of Gay Head was established in 1862. In 1870, Gay Head was incorporated as a town.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Gay Head is a small summer resort community at the western tip of Martha's Vineyard, west of Menemsha Bight and Squibnocket Pond. Gay Head neck was the site of a native reservation established in 1642, with first meetinghouse built before 1698. Native population became subject to jurisdiction of Tisbury Manor in 1671, controlled by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England after 1711. Local focus at Gay Head Cliffs was established with location of landmark lighthouse in 1799, with employment of Native Americans as lifesaving crews. Small mid-19th century industrial development also occurred here with Gay Head Clay Company, but by the late 19th century the cliffs

attained a greater significance as a tourist attraction, with boat excursions from Oak Bluffs. Local autonomy was finally attained with establishment of district status in 1862. Local residential population has remained small, with modern summer estate district along the southwest shore, and more recent suburban development on the north coast between Gay Head Cliffs and Lobsterville. Few 19th century structures survive, including Baptist Church, and school at South Road civic focus. Developmental pressures will most certainly intensify, threatening dispersed archaeological resources.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Little direct evidence is present regarding Contact period Native American trails and paths. However, coastal trails are probable as well as trails around Menemsha and Squibnocket ponds. Interior trails off main coastal routes also probably existed.

B. Population

Little direct information is present on which systematic estimates of Native American populations during the Contact period can be made. Furthermore, when estimates are given they are often contradictory with considerable variation. For example, Ritchie (1969:3) estimates the Wampanoag population on Martha's Vineyard in 1600 A.D. at 1,500 individuals. Yet, in 1642 another author estimates the native population at 3,000 individuals (Collections of the Mass. Historical Society Vol. III, p.92). Estimates of native population are further complicated by the fact that the plague of 1616-17 undoubtedly drastically altered existing populations and areas of settlement. Thus, it appears likely that native populations for the entire island were probably more in the range of 1,500 individuals than 3,000, at least during the late Contact period.

Little information is present regarding native populations on Gay Head before the 19th century as the Europeans had no interest in enumerating these figures. However, indirect approximations of population can be made. The Aquinnah, or Gay Head, area was under the authority of one of the four main sagamores or sachems of Martha's Vineyard at the time. Thus, substantial native populations can be assumed due to the importance of this area politically in respect to the remainder of the island. The presence of Menemsha and Lagoon ponds in the Gay Head area also indicates reasonable Indian populations, as they are two of the island's main bodies of water and favored areas of native occupation (Ritchie 1969:2). By the Colonial period, over 260 natives were living in the Gay Head area (more than any other area in the town), further attesting to the importance of this area to native populations. No Europeans lived in Gay Head during the Contact period.

C. Settlement Pattern

European settlements did not exist in Gay Head or on Martha's Vineyard during this period. However, some contact between natives and Europeans in the Martha's Vineyard area undoubtedly took place as European explorers, traders, and fishermen frequented the area from early in the 16th century, long before settlement. Most notable were Gosnold's voyages through the islands off Cape Cod and his settlement at Cuttyhunk in 1602.

Natives had settled the Gay Head area for some time prior to European contact. Late Woodland period sites and known artifact listings with general Gay Head provenience exhibit a site locational preference for coastal areas, particularly on necks, coves, or coastal ponds. Some of these locations included the Menemsha and Squibnocket Pond areas. Additional sites should be present in interior areas also.

No evidence exists at present to identify specific Contact period sites. However, it seems probable they existed since the Gay Head area was original called by its Algonquian name Aquiniuh and led by one of the four most powerful sachems on Martha's Vineyard. Furthermore, a native presence in the Gay Head area is also attested to by the presence of native place names in the area. Some of the names include Menemsha Pond, Occooch Pond, and Squibnocket Pond, all derived from Algonquian roots.

Gay Head's importance to native populations is also indicated by the fact that since the initial settlement of the Vineyard in 1641-42, Gay Head has remained a native reservation and town, having little to do with white populations on the island.

Contact period native settlement for the Gay Head area should follow regional and island trends for settlement preferences in coastal areas along ponds, estuaries, and rivers or streams. Inland sites should also be present, although not to the extent of coastal sites.

D. Subsistence Pattern

European settlements were not present on Martha's Vineyard during the Contact period. Thus, any transient Europeans in the Gay Head area probably followed subsistence patterns similar to native inhabitants in the area. While some food was undoubtedly carried with early explorers, traders, and fishermen, the bulk of their subsistence was probably secured through hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild plants and shellfish, and the trade, stealing, or purchase of agricultural products (corn, beans, etc.) from the local natives.

Native American subsistence in the Gay Head and Martha's Vineyard area was probably similar to that practiced in other areas on mainland Cape Cod. The combined use of wild and domesticated food resources formed the basis of the subsistence system. It is unknown at present exactly when agriculture, or more specifically,

horticulture, was introduced into the Cape and islands area. However, on Martha's Vineyard, carbonized corn kernels were found at two sites: the Peterson site in the town of Chilmark, and the Hornblower II site in Gay Head (Ritchie 1969). At the Hornblower II site, carbonized corn kernels were C14 dated to A.D. 1160 \pm 80 years (Ritchie 1969:52), placing corn agriculture well within the Late Woodland period. Thus, some form of agriculture may have been practiced on Martha's Vineyard for some time prior to the Contact period. Furthermore, by the Contact period, sufficient quantities of corn, beans, etc. were being produced for storage and at times for sale or trade to English settlers. Shellfishing, fishing, and hunting were also important subsistence pursuits. On Martha's Vineyard, virtually all of the existing Algonquian place names and suspected village areas are located along the coast, particularly in estuarine locations near extensive shellfish beds and anadromous fish runs.

Shellfish populations in the Gay Head area are present mainly in the Menemsha Pond area. Major shellfish populations in this locale include concentrated beds of quahog and bay scallop. Mussels, soft shell clam and oysters may also have been available in significant quantities. Alewives are also present in Menemsha and Squibnocket ponds.

In addition, other species of marine life were also available in the Gay Head area. Saltwater fish such as striped bass, bluefish, swordfish, porgie, tautog, eels, mackerel, flounder, codfish, haddock, and others were present in coastal and estuarine areas. Lobster, crabs, snails, and possibly various species of terrapins were present. Sea mammals such as whales and seals would also have been available in coastal areas. In freshwater ponds, trout, perch, bass, and pickerel were present.

The wetlands and forested areas of Martha's Vineyard and Gay Head provided numerous species of mammals and birds for hunting. The heath-hen, or pinnated grouse, was available in upland areas with numerous species of ducks and geese available in coastal locations. Several mammals were also available which today are not necessarily present. They included: deer, bear, lynx, fox, otters, beaver, rabbit, raccoon, and others.

Numerous types of flora were also present and available for subsistence. These included beechnuts, walnuts, acorns, sassafras, grapes, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, huckleberries, and others.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Little, if any, change was present regarding transportation routes from the Contact to Plantation period. Any European travel probably made use of existing native trail systems. No roads existed.

B. Population

No new evidence is present during the Plantation period on which accurate estimations of native population can be made. However, it is likely that native populations continued a regional trend of decline from pre-plague Contact period highs. Only natives resided in the Gay Head area during this period.

C. Settlement Pattern

Native settlement of the Gay Head area during the Plantation period probably followed similar trends of coastal settlement noted for the Contact period. However, settlement density was probably in decline, particularly after the 1616-17 plague. No known native sites of this period are reported, although the area was involved in an important land transfer. On May 5, 1661-2, the Gay Head area was sold by Alexander, chief sachem of the Wampanoags (brother of King Philip, son of Massasoit) to William Brenton, a Newport merchant. Actually, the sale never materialized, possibly because Nohtoaksaet, sachem of Gay Head, refused to recognize the transfer or sale. In any case, seven natives are given as witness to the sale, all reported to be inhabitants of the westernmost end of Nope (Martha's Vineyard) or the Gay Head area. The fact that the sale never materialized may also be an indicator of the importance of power of the Gay Head (Aquiniuh) sachem, one of the reportedly four most powerful sachems on Martha's Vineyard during this period.

D. Subsistence Pattern

Indian subsistence in the Gay Head area during this period probably continued that noted for the Contact period. However, the extent to which agriculture was integrated into the hunting, fishing, and gathering of wild foods is unknown at this time. Many authors have noted that the fisheries have always been the principal occupation of the Gay Head Indians. However, little direct evidence is present to support this hypothesis or its development. After the Colonial period, evidence exists indicating that Gay Head natives extensively fished traps and pounds locally and were involved in the larger whale fishing. It is probable that this maritime interest developed at a much earlier date. How much earlier, however, remains unknown.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Banks (1911:28) notes that it was not until 1870-75 when the town was incorporated that a county roadway was laid out. Prior to this time, only horse paths and trails existed, probably many of the same trails and paths that were present during the Contact and Plantation periods.

B. Population

Census figures do not exist for the Gay Head area prior to 1870. Before this date, fragmentary sources must be used to develop population estimates. In 1698 a "Report of the Committee for the Society for Propagating the Gospel" lists 260 persons as attending services at Gay Head; other persons also probably existed. In 1712 the Sewall diary lists 58 houses on Gay Head neck (Banks 1911:5), probably placing the population in the range of 250 persons or so. Evidence at hand points to a fluctuating population in the range of 200 to 250 persons throughout the Colonial period into the 19th century.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little additional information is present regarding settlement during the Colonial period over the two preceding periods. Only one English style house is reported for the area in 1727, with the natives still living in wigwams through the Colonial period. In 1711, the Society for Propagating the Gospel acquired title for the Gay Head area with the idea of benefiting the natives by establishing a reservation. In 1714 a ditch was dug across Gay Head neck and planted with thorns and barberries with a corporation gate to exclude the public from the reservation. In effect, the corporation was acting as landlord with the natives as tenants. After the Revolutionary War, Massachusetts assumed control over the Gay Head area. In this manner, the natives became involuntary wards of the state with no control over their lands or homes. In general, the Gay Head natives were in a poor state of affairs at the end of the Colonial period.

The Gay Head natives had been subjected to Christian preaching throughout the Colonial period, often with native preachers. Banks reports (1911:21) the Baptists usually controlled the religious sentiment of the Indians. In 1702 an Anabaptist sect was reported at Gay Head.

D. Economic Base

Little reliable information is present describing the economic or subsistence lives of the Gay Head natives over that noted for the Contact and Plantation periods. Fishing was probably an important activity, particularly when natives were involved in the whale fishery. Local trap and pound fishing was important, as was probably the cod fishery. Wood was reportedly rare by the Revolution, possibly effecting the availability of large game animals and hunting. Farming was probably pursued, but on a small scale. Economically, the natives were reportedly in poor shape by the time of the Revolution.

E. Architecture

Residential: Through the first half of the period, the population continued to use traditional forms of dwellings, known to the colonials as "Indian built." In 1727 there was only one English

house, though more were built later in the century. It is presently not known if any of these structures survive.

Institutional: A meetinghouse for the Christian population existed by 1698; its appearance is unknown.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The established local roads and paths continued in use. After the construction of Gay Head lighthouse in 1799, the east-west road to Chilmark (South Road) was probably the most heavily used route, although use of an alternate road to the south, branching east of Black Brook as Old South Road was likely.

B. Population

No separate figures are available for Gay Head until 1870. Native population, however, reported in Chilmark's 1765 census (72 males, 116 females) probably largely in Gay Head reservation. Native proprietors in 1790 reported as 203; 240 in 1807. In 1817, proprietors numbered 250, of which only 150 were actually resident in Gay Head. As in Chilmark, population probably remains fairly constant throughout the period without sharp losses or gains.

With the Revolution, the town came under Commonwealth control as individuals were made wards, deprived of rights of voting, alienation of land, and entering into contracts.

C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed, sparse settlement continued. Gay Head lighthouse was built in 1799 at Gay Head Cliffs in the west. A hilltop Baptist Meetinghouse was constructed a mile to the east in 1818.

D. Economic Base

Principal occupation has always been the fisheries. Gay Head natives went to sea with New Bedford and Nantucket whalers, though other offshore fishing probably also undertaken. Of the 240 proprietors in 1807, only 142 were actually resident: some were children put to service in English families; the others were at sea on whaling voyages. Remaining inhabitants devoted to small-scale dispersed agriculture. "The land," wrote Baylies in 1786, "produced Indian corn, rye, potatoes, peas, flax, and beans; but in small quantities since the British General Gray ["Gray's Raid," 1778] deprived them of their sheep, which animal greatly enriched the soil." At that time they were dependent on whites at the east end of the island for supply of bread corn. Natives also sold white clay from the cliffs for off-island firing.

Gay Head Light (1799) the first on Martha's Vineyard.

E. Architecture

Residential: Although most of the population now lived in "English" houses, little is known of their survival or appearance. One source contends the group was "more industrious and neater in their person and houses than their people elsewhere" (1806). Later sources (1839) contend they were primarily single-story dwellings.

Institutional: The meetinghouse was rebuilt in 1784, while the Baptist group had its own meetinghouse by 1818, and used its basement for a school. The first lighthouse on the Cliffs was built in 1798, of wood, 40 feet in height, 24 feet in diameter; the keeper's residence was 17 x 26 feet with three rooms, plus a barn and oil vault.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

In 1860, the County Road through Chilmark was extended west to Gay Head lighthouse, and in 1870 this road was further improved.

B. Population

Natives numbered 174 in 1848; 237 in 1860. At the latter date, there were also 16 "foreigners." First official population figure in 1870, "160," at variance with 227 reported by Commissioner sent from legislature. Subsequent widely vascillating figures suggest errors in enumeration methods.

The Baptists were briefly attached to the Holmes Hole (Vineyard Haven) group, but became an independent society in 1832. Their interaction with Mashpee residents is reflected in the presence of Blind Joe Amos as their preacher during this period. As a district from 1862, the area became self-governing, and with town status in 1870, a number of statutory rights were granted, chief among them the franchise. Whaling ship owners visited the town to recruit crews among the males.

C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed settlement continued.

D. Economic Base

No change identified in economic activity. Fishing and small-scale agriculture remains principal occupation of inhabitants. The construction of the new Gay Head Light in 1850s is a major event in maritime circles. The first-order light was called "the finest on our coasts, and perhaps unsurpassed in the world" (quoted in "Report" [1871], p. 6).

E. Architecture

Residential: The town's small population kept the number of houses down, only 35 estimated in 1839. They continue to consist primarily of one-story structures along the primary road to the Cliffs. A small number of larger homes were built in the familiar forms of the period: gable front, three-bay, double-pile plans of 1 1/2 and two stories.

Institutional: The lighthouse was rebuilt in 1858-59, of brick, 60 feet in height, with a large compound lens. The schoolhouse, now public library, in the center dates from this period. Its entry is into a small porch on the gable end, 1 1/2 stories in height, and shingled. The Congregational Church was taken down and reused as a dwelling. The remaining meetinghouse is gable front with a projecting tower entry and ornamental pilasters and one story in height.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The 19th century roads continued in use. Summer excursion boats from Oak Bluffs and Edgartown made regular trips to Gay Head Cliffs through the period.

B. Population

Population throughout period averages around 160-170, though the erratic vascillation of figures suggests errors in enumeration methods. Negligible foreign-born population.

C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed settlement continued, with 48 houses in the town in 1910. A school was built north of the Baptist Church on South Road.

D. Economic Base

With the development of Cottage City and the summer resort business, Gay Head becomes an important tourist attraction. Cliffs leased 1893 to Gay Head Clay Company, which shipped the clay to brick kilns off island. Fishing remains important occupation. The 1915 Lobster catch, valued at \$10,050, is the highest reported catch of any town in the study unit. Thirty farms, 34 houses reported 1890.

E. Architecture

The drop in population totals during the period argues against extensive rebuilding. Few examples of use of the decorative elements of the period though multiple gables ornament some two-story buildings. In 1906 the Lobsterville fishing shacks were moved to Menemsha.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

By the early 1930s, the County Road to Gay Head lighthouse was paved and improved.

B. Population

Declining population, from 175 in 1915, to 127 in 1940.

C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed settlement continued. By period's end, a small hamlet emerged around the school and town hall northeast of the Baptist church. A small coastal hamlet (now gone) developed at Lobsterville on Menemsha Bight in the north.

D. Economic Base

No identified change in economic activity. Data very scarce.

E. Architecture

Residential: Small houses were built during this period on the road to the cliffs and at Lobsterville; one story in height, mostly quite simple in form.

Institutional: The town constructed its hall during the 1920s; its wide gable end to the street has a wide pedimented porch, and houses a large hall. The side ell is divided for offices.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

There is no inventory for the town of Gay Head. The community had a small population and few dwelling houses to accommodate them throughout most of its history, until some later summer residences. The interaction of native and European building forms should be examined. The low survival rate, due to population decline and the shifting roadways, makes archaeological examination of particular importance.

XII. SOURCES

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