

~~Old South Wharf~~ Fish Shanties

On north and south sides of Old South Wharf
Nantucket
Nantucket County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-853

HABS
MASS
10-NANT
18-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

OLD SOUTH WHARF FISH SHANTIES

HABS
MASS
10-NANT
18-

Location: On north and south sides of Old South Wharf,
Nantucket, Massachusetts

Present Owner: Sherburne Associates Inc.

Present Occupant: Fishermen and artists.

Present Use: Some are still used as boathouses in connection
with scalloping and quahauging, or renting boats.
Others are now small shops or galleries for artists.

Brief Statement
of Significance:

These small fish and scallop shanties, many of them moved from locations on Washington Street and along the waterfront, are the only remaining wharf structures that resemble those that crowded the wharves in the first half of the nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

While the whaling industry had still to reach its climax, in the year 1760 the Old South Wharf, later the Island Service Wharf, was started and completed in 1762. The Old South Wharf was rebuilt after the decline of the whaling industry into a business wharf. When the United States entered World War I, Mr. Henry W. Lang, who had purchased the wharf in 1917 from W. T. Swain and Co., turned the use of it over to the Government for the period of the emergency. Since then it has continued as a public wharf for commercial purposes. Mr. and Mrs. Lang established the Island Service Company which supplied fuel, ice and lumber. In 1964 the wharf was sold by the Island Service Co. to Sherburne Associates Inc.

In Nantucket's Great Fire of 1846 Old South Wharf was swept by the flames. The burning oil from storage warehouses rolled and poured into the docks so that the waterfront became a veritable sea of fire, with the New North, Old North, Straight and Old South wharves gradually falling prey to the conflagration. Before the fire Old South Wharf was a hive of industry. Upon or near it were located many shops of the different mechanics then demanded by the general business of the town, especially in connection with the fitting of whaleships for sea. On the Old South was a pump and block-making business, and close neighbors

to it were five blacksmith shops; the old rope-walk under the direction of Robert Ratliff, where rope and cordage were spun; over it the sail-loft, where thousands of yards of canvas were fashioned into sails; at the head of the dock was the lumberyard and buildings of Isaiah Robinson and Peleg Macy, besides numerous smaller shops in different trades. All day long coopers, sparmakers, riggers, boat-builders and sailmakers were at work; iron-smiths were forging harpoons, lances and knives; cordage factories were turning out every kind of standing and running rigging, bolt-rope, wormline, marline, spunyarn, whale lines or any other article along those lines. Practically all of these shops were destroyed in the fire.

The rear of these shops was at the water's edge of the lower, inner harbor, overlooking that sheet of water. With the decline of whaling, these became fish houses used in connection with the scalloping and quahauging industry, and many of them were at that time (from 1850 on) moved over to the Old South Wharf for that purpose. Other shacks were built between them, accounting for the irregularity of the shapes and sizes of the fish houses. (Abstract, Nantucket Historical Association Records and History of Nantucket by Obed Macy, 1835.)

B. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views:

- a. Map of the burnt district in the Town of Nantucket resulting from the fire. (This map originally appeared in the New Bedford Mercury. It was loaned to The Inquirer by Asa Wood, Esq. and reprinted in Editor Cobb's issue of July 24, 1846.) Now owned by Nantucket Historical Association.
- b. Old photographs of fish houses in Scrapbooks owned by Miss Grace Brown Gardner (microfilm copy in Nantucket Atheneum).

2. Bibliography:

Macy, Obed. The History of Nantucket. Boston: Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1835.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin
Nantucket, Massachusetts
February, 1965