

CAPE COD COLD STORAGE  
(U.S. Coast Guard Station Provincetown)  
125-129 Commercial Street  
Provincetown  
Barnstable County  
Massachusetts

HAER No. MA-124

HAER  
MASS  
1-PTOWN  
3-

~~PHOTOGRAPHS~~

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
Northeast Region  
U.S. Custom House  
200 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
CAPE COD COLD STORAGE  
(U.S. Coast Guard Station Provincetown)

HAER  
MASS  
1-PTOWN  
3-

HAER NO. MA-124

Location: 125-129 Commercial Street, on  
Provincetown Harbor, Provincetown,  
Barnstable County, Massachusetts

UTM:19.401360.4654200  
Quad: Provincetown, Mass., 1:25,000

Date of Construction: circa 1850

Engineer: Unknown  
Architect: Unknown

Present Owner: U.S. Coast Guard

Present Use: U.S. Coast Guard Station

Significance: The Cape Cod Cold Storage was a major trap fishing and cold storage facility which functioned as a principal local industry and employer in Provincetown during the period of significance. As such it represents contemporary technology for the off-loading and processing of fish from a typical Provincetown trap fishing and cold storage operation during the mid-late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Project Information: All but two structures related to the Cape Cod Cold Storage operation have been demolished and replaced or substantially rehabilitated for use by the United States Coast Guard in with the last fifteen years. The off-loading wharf associated with the Cape Cod Cold Storage, known as Freeman's Wharf has deteriorated beyond rehabilitation and is scheduled for demolition. To mitigate the adverse effect, the State Historic Preservation Office stipulated appropriate documentation.

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At the peak of its development, during the 1940s, the Cape Cod Cold Storage was one of five cold storage fish processing operations in Provincetown owned and operated by the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company. Contained within the approx. 49,900 square foot block now occupied by the United States Coast Guard Provincetown Station were the following structures functioning as the Cape Cod Cold Storage plant:

- o Bldg 1: Power House, wood-framed, 1.5 stories (135' x 40')
- o Bldg 2: Machine Shop, wood-framed, 1.5 stories (75' x 25')
- o Bldg 3: Pump House, wood-framed, 1 story (40' x 15')
- o Bldg 4: Freezer/Cold Storage, wood-framed, 4 stories (150' x 75')
- o Bldg 5: Cannery, brick, 1 story (100' x 30')
- o Bldg 6: Blacksmith Shop, brick/metal, 1 story (25' x 15')
- o Bldg 7: Fillet Plant/Cannery, wood-framed, 2 story (60' x 40')
- o Bldg 8: Trap Shed, wood-framed, 2 story (60' x 20')
- o Bldg 9: Wharf, wood-framed (Freeman's Wharf)

The origins of the Cape Cod Cold Storage relate to the development of fisheries and support facilities for fishermen and fishing vessels along the entire stretch of Provincetown's harbor. The area, bounded by Commercial Street and its southerly turn to Provincetown Harbor, provided the base for several small scale fishing and vessel support businesses in the mid-to-late 19th century, including Freeman's Wharf, Lancey's Wharf and nearby fish flaking yards. These operations supported primarily the off-shore salt cod and in-shore mackerel fisheries.

The need for bait fish precipitated by Canadian enforcement of the *Treaty of 1818* in the mid-1880s, which precluded American use of Canadian bait fish supplies encouraged investment in the local trap fishery and cold storage facilities. In the late 19th century, a growing taste for fresh fish also encouraged the development of a method to quickly freeze fish. The first Provincetown cold storage designed to utilize the anhydrous ammonia absorption freezing process was built in 1893 (the Provincetown Cold Storage). Within two decades (by 1915) Joshua Paine had acquired Freeman's Wharf and the adjacent property and had developed the Cape Cod Cold Storage facility. By 1927, the cold storage and wharf were purchased by the Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company, a major regional fish processing and marketing business.

A typical cold storage of the period operated as a fish processing plant, sharp freezer, and frozen fish fillet warehouse. Among Atlantic Coast Fisheries cold storage operations, the Cape Cod Storage was typical, employing trap fishing as the principal source of fresh product.

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Trap fishing consists of the entrapment of migratory coastal fish in V-shaped, box-shaped or cello-shaped weirs or traps consisting of tarred nets (called "twine") hung with block and tackle on hickory stakes driven into the sandy bottom about a mile from shore. These traps were located within the protected areas off the Provincetown waterfront and along the shelving bottom of the western shore of the Cape facing Cape Cod Bay. The nets stayed in place for the eight month fishing season (spring, summer, fall). Small motorized trap fishing boats tended the nets and brought fresh dressed and clean-washed fish from the traps to cold storage wharfs and piers where fish were off-loaded via hoppers and hoists onto motorized carts for transport into shore on the wharf. The tidal range in Provincetown dictated extended piers of 600-1000 feet in length to ensure appropriate depth at the pier end. The Cape Cod Cold Storage wharf (known as Freeman's Wharf) provided a gasoline-powered cart for the transport of fish. Transport from the wharf to cold storage building entailed the off-loading of fish from the cart into a hopper hung from an aerial tramway for lifting of the fish to the upper floors of the cold storage. The design of operations within the cold storages dictated delivery of fresh fish to the upper portions of the building for processing in a vertical operation. At the Cape Cod Cold Storage, fish were delivered via tramway to the 4th floor where they were mechanically headed, skinned, filleted and packaged, then transferred vertically to the sharp freezer (on the third floor). This area consisted of 1.5 inch piping in coils running the length of the space on which were wooden flakes or shelves. Prepared fish fillets were placed on metal trays on these shelves to be frozen. Frozen product was then transferred to freezer/cold storage rooms on the second and first levels of the plant. Frozen whiting fillets were particularly popular in the marketplace.

In 1935, the Cape Cod Cold Storage operation utilized three trap boats with a crew of five men in each and between 50-100 workers in the cold storage itself. In spite of the capacity, there apparently were days when the freezer could not hold any more fish. In 1935, Provincetown landed 30 million lbs of fish, of which 20 million lbs were from fish traps.

In the later days of operation (circa 1957), the plant had undergone additions to the cold storage building extending the space to the east and adding 50% to capacity. By 1957, the operation had a storage capacity of two (2) million lbs of frozen products as well as the freezing capacity for approximately 75,000 lbs of fish per day.

The Cape Cod Cold Storage relied upon steam power (supplemented later with electric generators) for operation. The power house was a large wood-framed, Greek Revival-styled building

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fronting on Commercial Street with an interior space of approximately 4000 square feet and 20 ft in vertical dimension. This space housed two Corliss cross-compound double expansion steam engines which generated 100 horsepower. There were no larger steam engines on Cape Cod. Chilled brine pumped by compressors through the piping system was used to freeze and cold-store the fish product. The brine was chilled by the ammonia process. Two vertical ammonia compressors connected to the Corliss steam engines by crank arms were located in the machinery end of the Power House. Steam powered virtually every piece of moving equipment in the Cape Cod Cold Storage including the aerial tramway winch. The steam engine boilers were coal burning, hand-fired, low pressure, horizontal return type in configuration and vented through a 90' stack.

The Atlantic Coast Fisheries Company (est. 1917) developed in the early 20th century as a vertical fish food business. It was well integrated to catch fish, process fish, pack fish and market fish for the inland consumer. The company produced the well-known "Nordic" label for its frozen fish products. Atlantic Coast Fisheries is credited with the utilization of the first steam trawlers employed in the fish industry in 1917, and with developing and patenting innovative fish filleting machinery. These were major innovations in the fish supply business during the early 20th century.

There were seven (7) major cold storage operations in Provincetown during the first half of the 20th century. In addition to the Cape Cod Cold Storage facility, Atlantic Coast Fisheries gained control of four of the remaining cold storages including:

- o Fisherman's Cold Storage, 183-185 Commercial Street
- o Puritan Cold Storage, 131 Commercial Street
- o Colonial Cold Storage, 229 Commercial Street
- o Consolidated Cold Storage, 497-501-503 Commercial Street

The company held eleven (11) local trap fishing licenses off Provincetown and Wellfleet during the 1940s.

With the decline of the trap fishery in the mid-20th century, Atlantic Coast Fisheries reformed as Atlantic Coast Industries in 1958. This entity consisted of non-fishery related companies including the Bridgeport Rolling Mills Company (producers of strip and roll brass in Bridgeport, Connecticut), Industrial Chemical Specialties Corporation of Hoboken, New Jersey, and the Brickseal Refractory Company, Saverite Engineering Company, Industrial Metals Company, Exit Chemical Company and the Fish Machinery Company. The corporate move away from frozen fish production

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reflects the demise of trap fishing and the cold storages in Provincetown.

*United States Coast Guard Provincetown facility*

Eventual abandonment of the facilities, conversion or demolition, essentially ended the trap fishing era in Provincetown by the 1960s. The Cape Cod Cold Storage property was purchased by the United States Coast Guard in 1975 following demolition of the trap shed building on Freeman's Wharf and the cold storage structures by the owner of the property, Bernard Benkovitz. The only surviving elements of the Cape Cod Cold Storage facility are the altered and rehabilitated brick cannery building (circa 1935) and the remnants of Freeman's Wharf.

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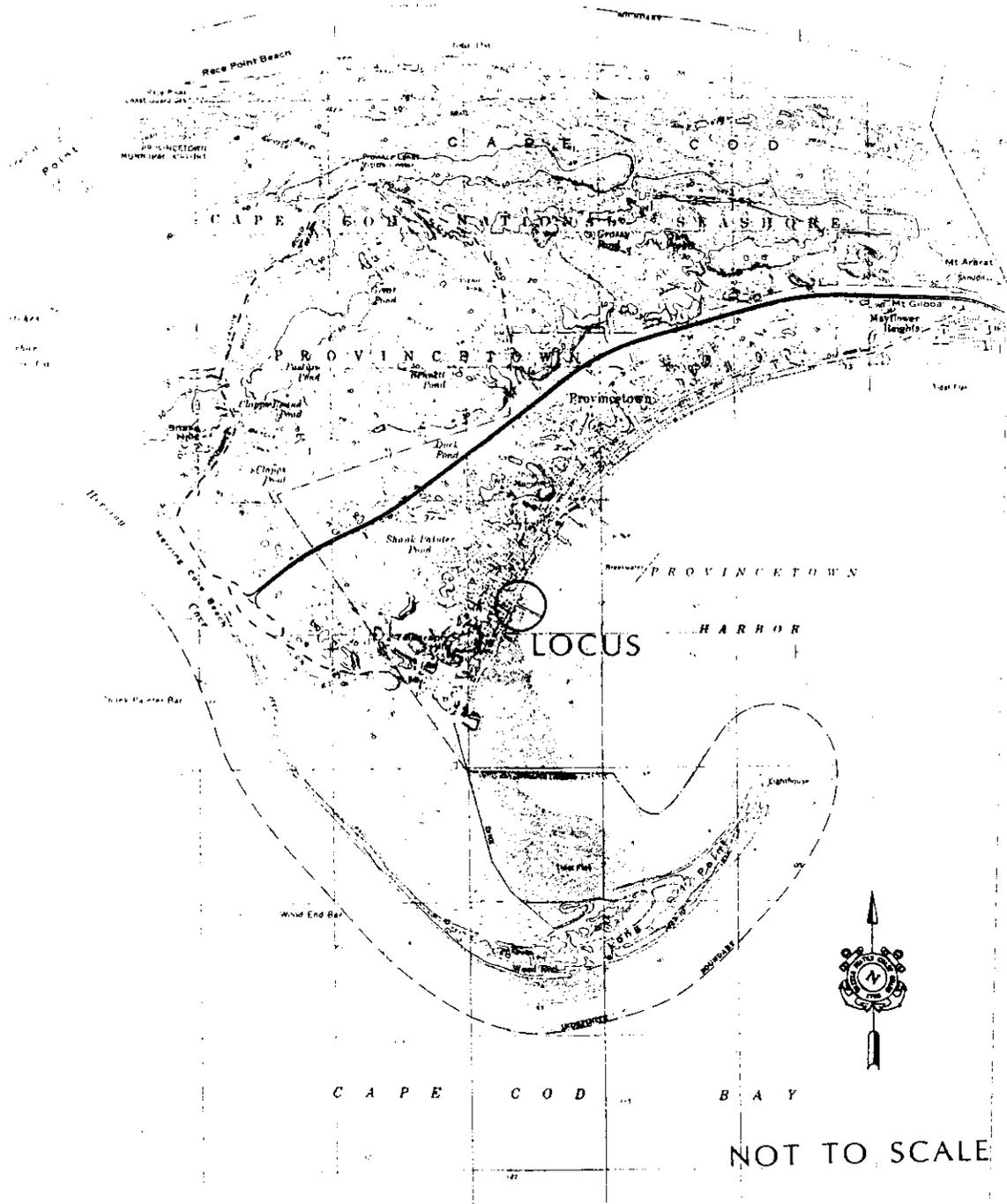
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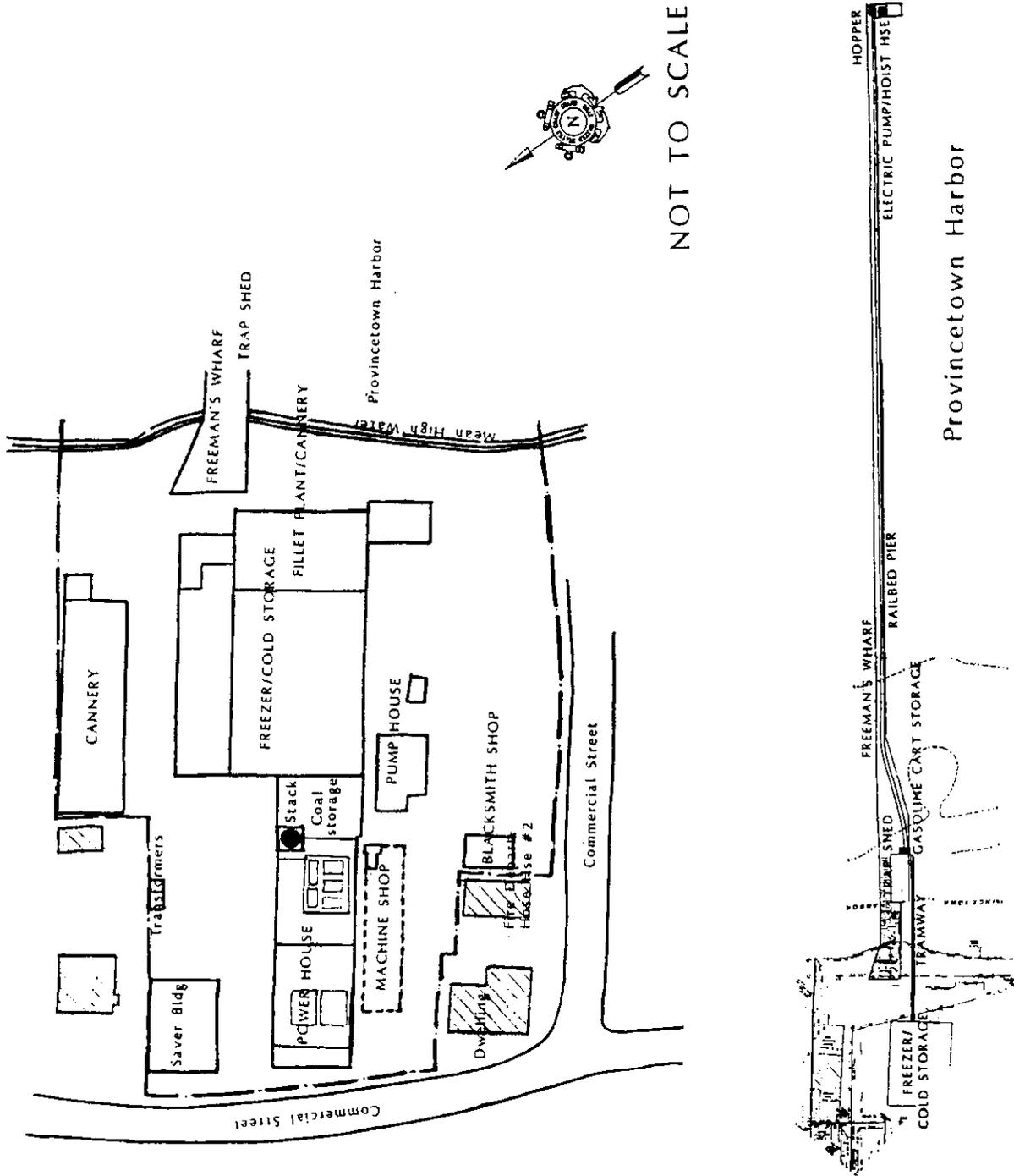
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LOCATION MAP, CAPE COD COLD STORAGE, PROVINCETOWN



Source: U.S. Department of the Interior, Geological Survey, Provincetown Quadrangle, Massachusetts-Barnstable County, 7.5 Minute Series (reduced), 1972.

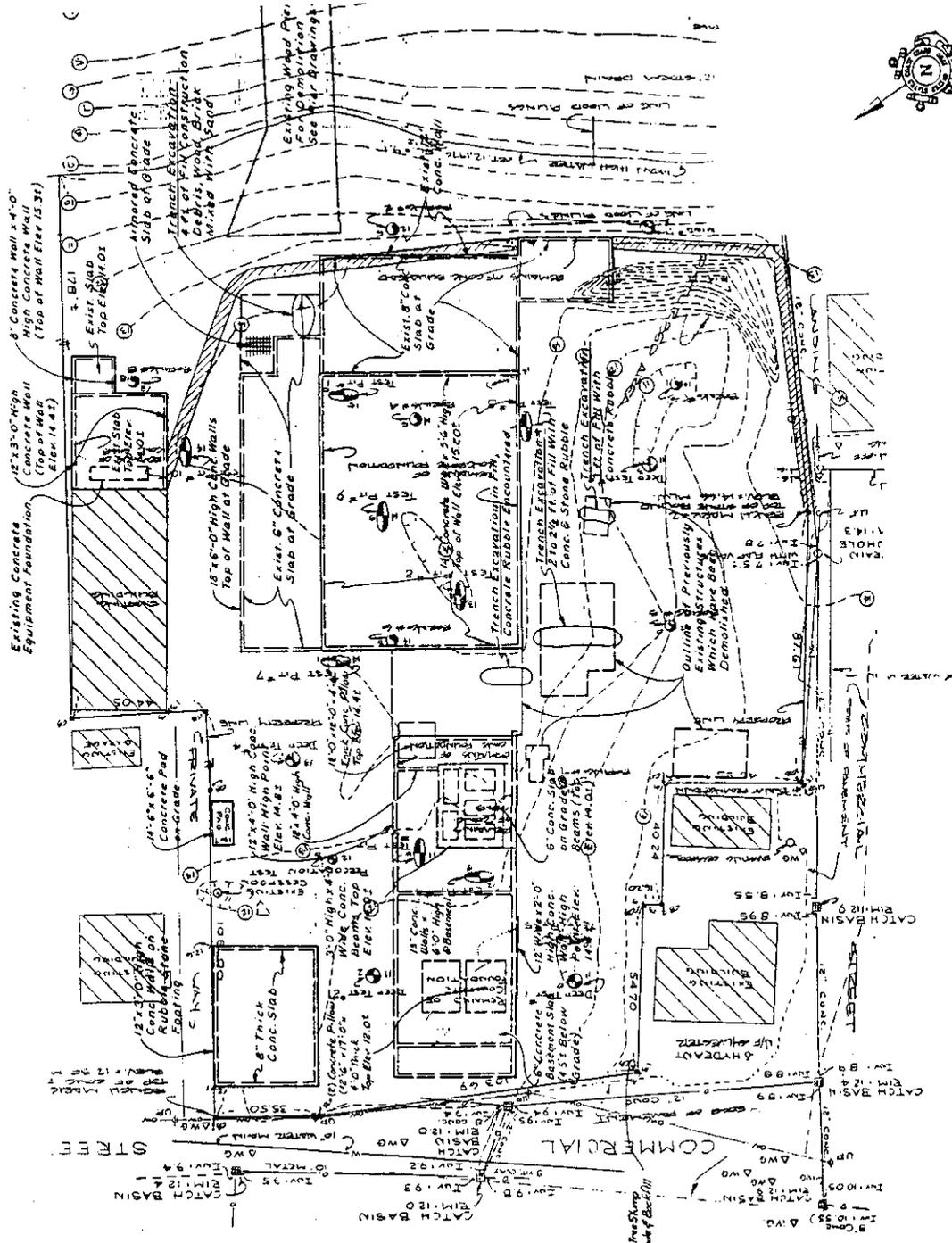
SKETCH PLAN OF CAPE COD COLD STORAGE FACILITIES, circa 1950



Source: Hastings, J.R., Jr, "Atlantic Coast Fisheries Co. Cape Cod Plant, Provincetown, Mass," plan of facilities, F.B.Hall & Co., 5-8-1947.

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DETAIL OF SITE CONDITIONS, CAPE COD COLD STORAGE, 1977



NOT TO SCALE

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