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For Table of Contents see page two of cover

A Glimpse of Old Nantucket

IT was my privilege the other day to stand on the moors near the western end of Nantucket Island,¹ and look over the site of the earliest English settlement.

The high wind swept so strongly from the direction of "the Continent," that even the huckleberry bushes and the short blades of yellow grass all about us leaned away from the northerly gale—"a dry nor' easter," that almost blew us off our feet.

As we looked west from our hill, Tuckernuck and Muskeget Islands were on the horizon, or nearer. North of us, on the cliff, named from a famous Indian chief, rose the pipe of the waterworks of Wonnacomett, and south stretched the "Hummocks" to the ocean. Behind us, in the distance, lay the old town of Nantucket, whence we had come. All about us was hilly ground, with swampy hollows, filled with the wonderful flora for which the Island is famous. Beds of hibiscus, and groups of the exquisite sabbatia, with many others as rare, may be found by the diligent seeker, and there are those who know the haunt of the real Scotch heather, quite at home on the moorland so like its native hills. Some of the many ups and downs, through or around which we passed, are the old cellar-holes of the first English comers on the Island.

Space does not here permit to relate the story of the early settlement by the English. Indian and Norse legend goes far back in date, but fact begins in 1641, when James Forrett, as agent for Lord Sterling, to whom all

the lands between Cape Cod and the Hudson River had been granted by the Crown, sold this Island and the two smaller ones adjoining, to Thomas Mayhew of Watertown, merchant, and his son of the same name. Eighteen years later, July 2, 1659, Mayhew, Senior, sold to the nine original proprietors, for thirty pounds and "two Beaver Hatts, one for myself and one for my wife"! The Indian titles were secured, but since the Sachems were given to deeding land owned by a neighbouring Sachem instead of their own, certain titles to property had to be unravelled with much heart-burning later on!

My chief impulse to visit this spot, now deserted by the inhabitants in favor of a more sheltered site for their town, came from an afternoon spent poring over a gift recently made, by a descendant, to the Nantucket Historical Society. This is a priceless old account book once belonging to Mary Starbuck, a woman who deserves to stand in our Quaker annals beside the Margaret Fells, Elizabeth Hootons and Mary Dyers of history.

The old vellum folio measures nine by eleven inches, and the loops for the leather thongs that tied it together are still in place. It is the third in point of age of any document so far discovered bearing on the history of early Nantucket. A memorandum inside the cover declares it to begin in 1662. But the first pages are missing, and the regular entries begin "Sept^r '83," when the Indian "Cannontimuck" was paid for bringing barley, "turnaps," and Indian corn (maize). Much of the pioneer life can be built up from this fascinating old book. Trade with the Indians was lively, and feathers are the means of exchange for powder and shot, and occasionally a bit of old iron. Primitive necessities and worldly luxuries are curiously mingled, as, for instance, "To a paire of purple Collered Shoos, five shillings," and "To a yerling's scin" (yearling's skin) two shillings and four pence! Fish comes from Coatue, Sasacacha and Squam, and Abigail Natane is paid eight shillings "for plowing an acre p^r Josiah," probably a squaw and her son. Some of the Indians, with their picturesque names, are Wannacomet, Cannontimuck, Wattashamonett, Shawoner, Wauwinet, and Winnapo described as "an

Indian from ye uineard" (Martha's Vineyard).² Other Indians have received English names, like "Little Daniel," and "Mycall," and one, who is evidently a well-mannered man, is known as "ye Gentleman."

Doubtless Mary Starbuck, being a capable and versatile woman, helped to fit out her neighbors in clothing, as well as herself, for there are many charges for "making cloakes and trim" "petecotes;" a "duzen" buttons; "scains of thrid" (skeins of thread), and more than one "samar," which was a gown or scarf with its French name askew, *i.e.*, *simarre!* These more sophisticated articles are usually paid for "in Mony."

In 1699, (May 23rd) prices interest us:

A Callimink Jacob [Callimanco Jacket]	..	..	..	2	£
As mony in pay	..	..	..	3	0 0
A stuff peticot, 8½ lb. wool, 12 sh. pr. yard	..	..	..	1	0 0
2 lbs. wool and a bonnet	..	..	..	4	6

Duffels, ozenbriggs, callimanco, are some materials in use. In November, 1686, a "Caster [beaver] Hatt and two yards of ——" [*illegible*] cost £1 3s. 6d. Mary "nets a paire of stokins" for herself, and charges them at two shillings and sixpence. A canno (canoe) is bought of an Indian, and in 1687, "To wool, to pay for the Fraite [freight] of a Horse," fifteen shillings. Another charge is "To a goate, as Mony." The great industry of sheep-raising is foreshadowed by the use of wool as another means of exchange and a spinning-wheel and cards (for wool) appear.

Some of the handwriting of the old folio is more masculine, and is probably that of Nathaniel Starbuck,³ Mary's husband. Their account runs to 1715, when their son, Nathaniel, Junior, carries it on. The whaling industry, to which volumes might be devoted, and which made of Nantucket in the eighteenth century a great and important port, is here shown in its beginnings. Indians help the natives "lay out" the oil from whales cast up on the shore, and the first entry of the Indian into the trade may be perceived in this book. In 1730, Nathaniel Starbuck, Junior, writes:

by ½ bbl. oyl. formerly gott by lying on shoar	..	..	1	5	0
By oyl and bone gott with Tristram [Coffin] along shoar in ye					
winter 1730	..	..	2	17	0

There is a mine of information in the old book—but we can only hope that it will soon serve as a text for a historian.

Who was Mary Starbuck ?

Born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, February 2, 1645, she was the seventh child of Tristram and Dionis Coffin.⁴ The superstitious have pointed to this fact, in following her later career ! Tristram Coffin was one of the original purchasers of Nantucket, and his daughter Mary, at the age of seventeen, married Nathaniel, son of Edward and Catharine Starbuck, also of the proprietors. Mary Starbuck was a woman of rare intellect and ability, of strong character, and a domestic economist of a high order. In the absence of the men of her family she administered justice, and was loved and respected by her fellow townsmen, exerting an influence over them almost unparalleled in colonial history. She was known as “the Great Woman,” and her prototype is Deborah, among the Hebrews.

Such was the position of this remarkable woman when the first Quaker preachers appeared on the Island. Earliest came Thomas Chalkley, in 1698. Then followed John Richardson, who paid a tribute to Nantucket housekeeping when he had his meeting in her “bright-rubbed room,” and then came Thomas Story, in 1706. Under the powerful influence of a man whom Mary Starbuck must at once have recognised as a scholar and lawyer, as well as preacher, she embraced Quakerism with ardor and enthusiasm. Tradition asserts that Peter Folger⁵ had once baptized her as a Baptist ; but she cast aside all forms and became an eloquent preacher, making many converts to the new faith. For several years meetings were held in the great “fore-room” of her home, known as “Parliament House,” and she brought up her ten children to follow in her steps. Her eldest child, Mary, is said to have been the first white child born on Nantucket. Her husband recognized her very superior endowments, and aided her in every way in his power.

Mary Starbuck died September 13, 1717—her husband outliving her by two years. Quakerism on Nantucket was destined to an enormous growth, and a decline

complete. Its records are kept in Lynn, Massachusetts. Not a member of the Society now resides on the Island, where thousands once dwelt.

On the moors on which we stood that September day was the site of Mary Starbuck's home. Somewhere here, in the unmarked Quaker graveyard, in what for a time was Sherburne, lie her remains. Even the town has disappeared totally from the hill, and only the grave of John Gardiner, one of the earliest settlers, and a monument to his companions, mark the burial place of so many.

As we came away on the boat next day, with the silhouette of old Nantucket town clear cut against the sky, we could only hope that someone in the near future would give us a just tribute to the memory of Mary Starbuck.

NOTES

¹ NANTUCKET: called *Nanticon*, according to early tradition, by Leif Erikson, an explorer from Norway, A.D. 1000-1. Sir Ferdinand Gorgas (*circa* 1630) calls it *Nantican*. Dr. R. A. Douglas-Lithgow, in his recent book, *Nantucket: a History* (p. 25), says, "In all likelihood the name *Nanticon* was merely a Norse approximation to the original Indian name of the Island, viz., *Natocket*, meaning "The far away land." Many Indian names in Southern New England end in *et*, signifying usually some approach to water.

Nantucket Island is situated twenty-eight miles south of the Peninsula of Cape Cod, having a sandy soil, and is fifteen miles long and from three to four miles wide. In shape it is triangular. From earliest days it was inhabited by Indians, who were more friendly with the first white settlers than many historians have given them credit for.

[See Lydia S. Hinchman, *Early Settlers of Nantucket*, 1901 (in D.).—EDS.]

² MARTHA'S VINEYARD.—The name has been ascribed to Bartholomew Gosnold, who probably landed there in 1602. Captain John Smith, however, whose *General Historie of Virginia* was published in 1624 (see *Works*: Arber Ed., p. 333), says "And by the blossomes we might perceiue there would be plenty of strawberries, resperies . . . etc., which made us call it *Martha's Vineyard*."

The *Encyclopædia Britannica* says that *Martin's Vineyard* "appears on some maps as late as 1670." This name has never been in common use, and appears to be a later form, and, probably, incorrectly used.

This island lies west of Nantucket, and nearer the mainland, nineteen miles long, and some five miles in width, less sandy than its neighbor, and in certain parts very productive. The last Indians on "The Vineyard" have only disappeared in comparatively recent years.

[A novel by Agnes Harrison picturing life on this Island, entitled *Martin's Vineyard*, appeared in 1872 (see THE JOURNAL, ix. 124).—EDS.]

³ The names of EDWARD and NATHANIEL STARBUCK in connection with Nantucket first occur February 2nd, 1659, at Salisbury, Massachusetts, as Associates of the original Nantucket owners. The first house on the Island was built by Edward Starbuck, who died in 1691. Nathaniel Starbuck married Mary, daughter of Tristram Coffin, and their ten children have perpetuated the name to the present day. Mary Starbuck died 1717, Nathaniel, her husband, in 1719. The Starbuck account book after 1715 contains no entry in the earlier hand. After 1734 it was kept by Nathaniel Starbuck, Jun., who died 1753. The Starbucks from the first settlement were chief traders with the Indians, and the place of exchange was at one or other of their houses.

Edward Starbuck is supposed to have accompanied Thomas Macy, his wife and five children, to Nantucket, in the autumn of 1659, and they are usually regarded as the first settlers. There is documentary proof that Macy had been fined by the General Court of Massachusetts for "harboring Quakers," but the actual circumstances of Whittier's charming poem, "The Exiles," must not be seriously taken as history.

⁴ TRISTRAM COFFIN, a resident of Salisbury, Massachusetts, where dwelt most of the associate owners of the Island. He was the pioneer among the purchasers of 1659, and his favorable report, after a preliminary visit, is supposed to have led the first group of proprietors to undertake the settlement of Nantucket. He had five sons—Tristram, James, Peter, John, and Stephen. One daughter married Stephen Greenleaf, and another Nathaniel Starbuck. Tristram Coffin was one of the most prominent men on the Island until his death in October, 1681. His descendant, Lucretia (1793-1880), daughter of Thomas Coffin, of the town of Nantucket, married James Mott, of New York, and became a well-known leader in the Abolition Movement and the early political Suffrage cause.

Mary Coffin, Tristram's seventh child, shared in a belief common to many primitive people, that a fortunate star presided over the birth of a seventh son or daughter, and still more, the seventh of a seventh.

⁵ PETER FOLGER.—Born in England, 1617. Came to America with his father about 1635, and was living on the Island of Martha's Vineyard in 1658. He appears to have gone to Nantucket as interpreter of the Indian language for the first group of settlers. He took a half share as proprietary and removed there in 1659. Peter Folger was probably the best educated man among the settlers, and at once became very influential. He was the town miller, and a weaver and blacksmith, besides filling the offices of surveyor and keeper of the records. After 1673, he was made Clerk of the Courts, and wrote *A Looking Glass for the Times, or the Former Spirit of New England Revived in this Generation*. He died at Nantucket in 1690.

Peter Folger was the maternal grandfather of Benjamin Franklin, whose mother was his daughter, Abiah. She married Josiah Franklin, tallow-chandler, who was of a Northamptonshire family. Benjamin Franklin, born in Boston, January 6th [O.S.], 1706, was the fifteenth of their seventeen children.

Haverford, Pa.

AMELIA MOTT GUMMERE.

Where the holy sense is lost, possession of the highest truths cannot preserve against the enemy's assaults.

WILLIAM PENN, *Tender Counsel and Advice*, 1695, p. 6.