

I Introduction: Goals for Building on Nantucket

Nantucket, this remote island 30 miles far out at sea, was scraped up by the last of the glaciers and left to endure the assault of sea and storm. It is a world apart from all others (fig. 1). In the more than 300 years since this outpost was settled by the self-reliant English, it has seen the rise and collapse of a vast whaling empire and, more recently, the year-to-year undulations of an ever-growing seasonal resort trade.

The essence and charm of Nantucket are embodied in its well preserved architecture representing many past generations, in the underlying harmony and subtle diversity of the buildings both in the old town and throughout the island, in the contrast of the town and other island settlements with the spacious sweep of the moors, plains, shoreline and sky, and in the unending confrontation of the land and the sea. Not only are these attributes loved by all who know Nantucket but they also serve as the mainstay of the local economy, which is based on tourism and second-home development.

The heart of the island is the old whaling town itself, overlooking the Great Harbor. The town of Nantucket has been miraculously preserved by the caprice of economic collapse and, in this century, the love and efforts of its inhabitants. It is one of the best intact collections of late 17th- to mid-19th century buildings in the United States. More than 150 years of maritime community are represented here by the almost 800 buildings built before the Civil War that are still lived in and used today. These are interwoven into a fabric of land and buildings enriched by the history and tradition along each street and lane. In recognition of this remarkable heritage the Nantucket Historic District was created by the townspeople and the Massachusetts legislature in 1955. The National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, designated the town a National Historic Landmark in 1966 and subsequently listed it in the National Register of Historic Places.

Yet the precious character and visual quality of this unspoiled setting, town and landscape,

are threatened by the prospect of an enormous amount of new construction in the years ahead. The current year-round population growth of six percent is projected to continue.

Ironically, a 5-year building cap instituted by the town in 1980 had the net effect of catapulting the island into a building boom that was supported by the robust national economy, especially in the mid- to late-1980s. New buildable lots, for instance, increased 50 percent from 1984 to 1985 alone, when 370 lots were approved by the Planning Board. The very next year, 1986, that number almost doubled again, with nearly 600 new sites approved. Building permits followed a similar pattern. A steady rise in new dwelling permits reflected both the flush economic climate and new 'spec and flip' activity, with numerous houses being built for investment or speculative reasons as Nantucket enjoyed highly inflated real estate values. In 1986 there were 139 new dwelling permits; in 1987, 264; and in 1988, 229, before the boom, along with the economy, began to wane in 1989 (only 80 new dwelling permits were issued that year). Nevertheless, from 1985 to 1990, nearly 1200 new houses went up on the island. These figures do not reflect permits for duplexes or commercial buildings. 1988 weighed in as the biggest single year since 1972 for overall building (including new commercial spaces, residential additions and other building activity), with 740 permits issued on Nantucket. 1972 marks the peak of the previous contemporary building boom, generated in those days, in large measure, by the restoration of the waterfront and Nantucket's entry into the resort market. At the time of the 1980 building cap, projections estimated 1200 new houses over the next decade. Instead, the anticipated growth rate of 25 percent became an actual growth rate of or exceeding 50 percent. The cumulative effect of the boom has compromised the aesthetic continuity of Nantucket architecture as well as the inherent integrity of the island, threatening

to obliterate both the physical presence of its historic past and its natural beauty—if care is not taken to coordinate all new buildings, renovations and additions. Zoning regulations, first adopted in 1972 to control land use, are not adequate for this purpose.

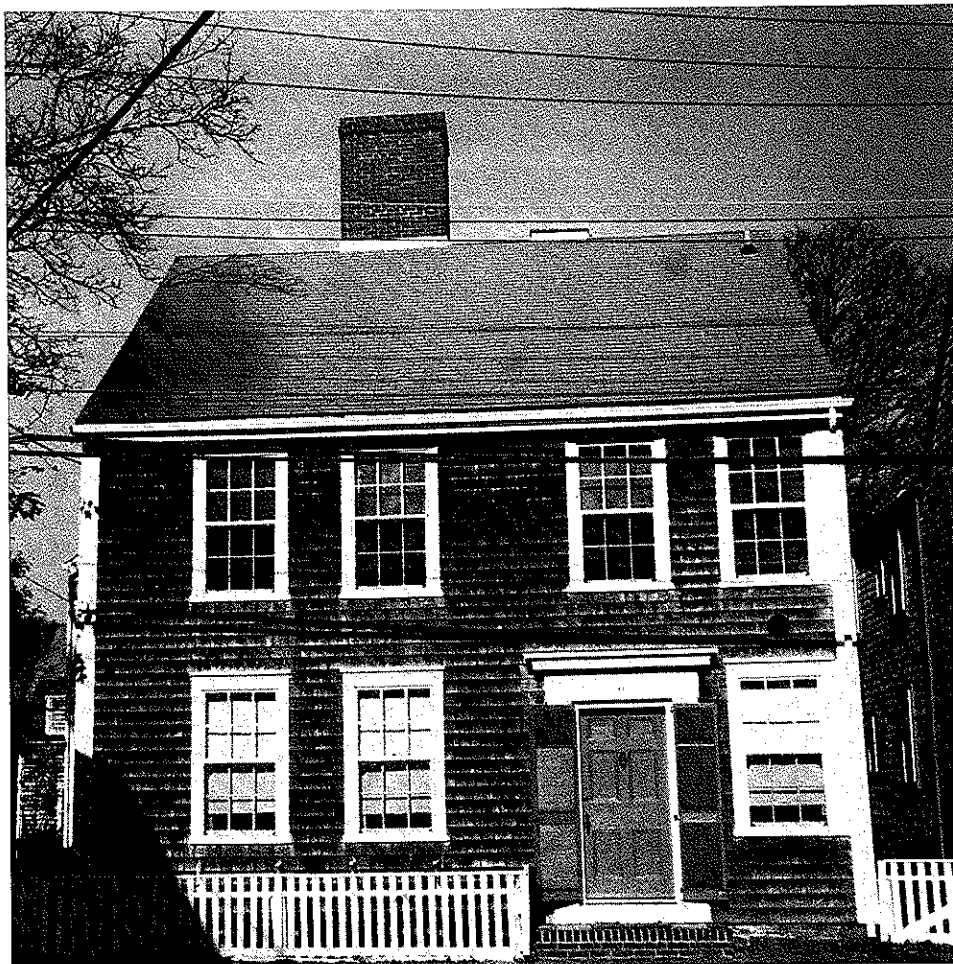
The Nantucket Historic District Commission, created by public mandate to review and approve all construction on the island, has published *Building With Nantucket in Mind* to provide a common point of reference, available to everyone, on how best to relate new construction and renovations to the island's architectural heritage and to its shared landscape. Therefore, in this manual guidelines for the design of buildings are given in order to insure harmony among buildings and with their settings, whether it be in an old Nantucket settlement or in a now open landscape. In addition to being informative and enlightening, the manual should be a natural starting point for the plan-

ning, designing and coordination of all new construction, residential and commercial, on the island. The Commission urges readers to consult the ideas and guidelines in this manual before completing renovation or construction plans. Plans should be submitted to the Commission for review. (Further details on the review process itself may be obtained from the Commission office.) As also authorized under Section 7, Chapter 395, Laws of Massachusetts, the Commission must approve in advance of erection or display any sign exceeding two feet in length and six inches in width. (Guidelines for signs on the island are presented in "The Sign Book," available in the Commission office.)

The impact of a new building or addition on Nantucket is largely a question of its *design*: whether it possesses the common identity and spirit shared by Nantucket buildings and whether it harmonizes with the special character of its particular site. When property owners build

only with concern for their own aspirations and advantage, the result often is a structure that does not belong with the historic environment and image of the island and hence diminishes Nantucket's attractiveness and unity. This manual, therefore, emphasizes the larger environmental context of a building.

The design guidelines set forth are based on the character and traditions of historic Nantucket architecture. They are also formulated to discourage those design features and stylistic forms of more recent construction that are inappropriate to the island's 'sense of place' or that are visually disruptive. The guidelines are an explicit statement of the design character and principles that should be followed to ensure that new construction is con-



23 Liberty Street — a typical Nantucket four-bay house.

sonant with the island's distinctive, largely indigenous, architectural legacy.

As originally authorized at a town meeting in February 1956, the Historic District Commission's jurisdiction was limited to the two main island settlements of Nantucket and Siasconset. However, in the late 1960s when a large sustained surge in development occurred and buildings that were unsightly and incompatible with existing island architecture were constructed, it became clear that the remainder of the island's limited 49-square-mile area required protection. As a result, the town voters petitioned the state to extend the Commission's jurisdiction to include the entire island of Nantucket as well as Tuckernuck and Muskeget Islands. This extension was enacted in 1970 by the state and accepted by the town in March 1971 (see Appendix A). The legislative purpose of the act is "to promote the general welfare of the inhabitants of the town of Nantucket (1) through the preservation and protection of historic buildings, places and districts of historic interest, (2) through the development of an appropriate setting for these buildings, places and districts, and (3) through the benefits resulting to the economy of Nantucket through the promotion of these historic associations." To carry out these purposes, the act created the Historic District Commission, comprising five unpaid resident taxpayers elected for staggered three-year terms. Alternate Commission members were approved in December, 1990.

In the 35 years since the Commission began its important function, its responsibilities have grown tremendously. In 1989, a year of development recession, it reviewed nearly 2000 requests for Certificates of Appropriateness, more than half again as many as in 1975 and a 10 percent jump over 1986, a boom year. Of the 1989 requests, 10 percent were for new dwellings and eight percent for additions. Only a few of the new dwelling applications were for sites within the original two districts; most were on outlying lots of 20,000 square feet or more. The remaining 82 percent were for a multitude of building projects from garages and garage

apartments to a new church and from six new commercial buildings to various renovations and alterations of existing structures. A number of sign approvals, demolitions and numerous miscellaneous proposals came before the Commission. Of the total 1954 requests for certificates, 40 were not approved.

Due to the magnitude of development demands and their potential impact on Nantucket, it is important that all new designs and construction on Nantucket be guided by the following goals set out by the Commission:

Goals for Construction in the Old Town of Nantucket

1. To preserve as unchanged as possible the old structures built before the middle of the 19th century in their original settings and conditions; also to maintain the fundamental harmony of the historic community by approving new structures and changes in old ones only when they will blend harmoniously with the traditions of the era before 1846.

2. To preserve the historic character of the old town of Nantucket as a whole, including its pedestrian scale as well as its close and complementary pattern.

3. To preserve the integrity of the historic buildings that physically express the history of the island; to encourage faithful maintenance and accurate restorations of historic structures; to ensure that all additions to or alterations of historic buildings are compatible with the original building.

4. To make certain all new buildings are compatible with the buildings adjacent to them and contribute to the overall harmony of the street; to encourage new buildings that, while reflecting the traditions and character of historic buildings, are in themselves high quality designs for this area.

5. To encourage new development adjacent to the town to continue the traditions and fabric of the town, particularly with regard to its

historic pattern, scale, streetside building alignment and pedestrian details.

Goals for Construction Outside the Town of Nantucket

1. To protect the character of existing small settlements on the island, especially Siasconset, but also Wauwinet, Quidnet, Surfside and Madaket; and to ensure that all new construction in or adjacent to them is harmonious with their intrinsic unity.

2. To foster a relatedness of character and 'sense of place' among all new buildings, based on traditional forms, so that they share a common identity and express their common heritage.

3. To preserve and protect the spacious character of the natural landscape outside of high-density settlements through the sensitive design of buildings, including their siting; to encourage clustering of houses; to minimize the visual impact on the landscape of scattered

new houses; and to make sure new buildings are designed as partners with the land, not its conquerors.

4. To encourage new constructions that are of the highest design quality and that represent careful responses to the specific site features, year-round climate and the needs and desires of the occupants.

The Commission recognizes that establishing design guidelines is a delicate task. Each building should be unique—a sensitive response to its particular use, site and set of conditions. While the design of any structure has its technical and objective aspects, many of the necessary choices are subjective. All aesthetic decisions involve individual judgments that vary with the perceptions, experiences and tastes of each person. Accordingly, a good architectural design, which must satisfy many requirements, cannot be arrived at solely through the application of a set of rules.

Throughout its history, Nantucket architecture has had strong community guidance, although not legally instituted as it is now with the Historic District Commission. Early gen-



Ram Pasture — the low, open landscape.



Figure 2. Overview of Nantucket.

erations exemplified this trait. A story is told of a house frame shipped over from the mainland in the 1700s that, when erected, was found to be two stories front and back instead of the accepted lean-to form. A citizens' meeting, convened to express concern over this radical change from custom, requested that the owner cut down the back posts, which he did. More recently, in 1937, almost all of Nantucket's construction tradesmen, civic organizations, realtors, building suppliers and architects voluntarily adopted a common set of specifications for exterior additions and alterations to old Nantucket houses. However, today the greatly increased range and availability of modern building materials and technologies are not guided by the historic influences on Nantucket buildings. Without advance coordination, new construction will display a wide diversity without the necessary underlying sense of order. The Commission's policies set forth in this manual constitute a common understanding and agreement on forms of construction and design features.

The overriding principle for building on Nantucket is that no new construction be considered as an isolated object, either in time or

space. It must express the historical continuity to which it necessarily becomes a part and, similarly, the pattern and position of its setting within the limited area of the island. A building carefully related to its site, its neighbors and its heritage will have an aesthetic appeal and meaning larger than it could possibly have alone. The foremost evidence of this is the town itself, where the relation of the houses to one another in form and space is more notable and important to one's experience of it than the particular qualities of any one building. Likewise, in the open landscape, the relationship between buildings and the landscape that unites them is most critical.

These guidelines, however, are also concerned with the individual merits of each building. Designs should exhibit the repose and unpretentiousness that belong to this weathered island. At the same time, they should possess personality and concern for detail. The design review process is necessary to prevent mediocre or heartless construction that would dilute the quality of Nantucket's architecture. As the guidelines indicate, simple buildings do not have to be bland or crude.

While the essential goal of the manual's guidelines is harmony among all Nantucket buildings, past and future, it is not the Commission's intention that they be applied with such rigidity that all new buildings look like historical reproductions. New buildings may be allowed the freedom to interpret historic forms and traditions so they can serve the requirements and desires of contemporary seaside living. As in the past, evolution of styles can occur. Nantucket should not be considered a museum, but a growing, active community.

Building With Nantucket in Mind is a positive statement of long-range aspirations and objectives for the future of Nantucket's historic environment. It is a reference source illustrating how new construction can (1) maintain continuity with its heritage, while enlarging upon it, (2) display respect for its setting, and (3) accommodate the generations yet to enjoy the sublime beauty of Nantucket's villages, moors and beaches. If the manual's background information and recommendations are utilized by all, the time-shaped qualities of Nantucket can be preserved (fig. 2).



Orange Street—traditional detail and craftsmanship.