

NANTUCKET STREETS and LANES

By Merle E. Turner

1929

On one of my airplane trips over the town recently, I met an old lady who informed me that she used to live on the island and had not been down here for over forty years. She was enjoying her flight immensely and shouted to me every few minutes about something she saw down below.

"You know," she said, "I saw a whole lot of flowers on Rose Lane the other day. Do you know where that is?" Rose Lane. Where did she mean?

It puzzled me for a while until I thought of the lane that runs up to Voorneveld's greenhouse, just north of the Methodist Church. My answer satisfied her and I waited, wondering what she would say next.

Suddenly the lady exclaimed: "And there is Break Neck Alley, where I used to slide down hill when I was a child." Again I was all at sea, but she pointed it out to me, and what should it be but what I know as Sunset Pass which leads from the school grounds to Lily street.

I asked her to tell me more of the old streets and she did her best to make me hear her above the noise of the motors. Before we landed I learned that she, as a girl, had lived on Stone Alley, which was then called "Gunter's Alley".

This charming old lady interested me so much that I visited her the following day, when she told me many en-

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joyable tales about the old lanes, the names of which I had never heard. Who ever would think now that the street opposite the Post Office (now the bus stand) was formerly named "Coal Lane", or that Hiller's Lane off Fair street used to be known as "Nabby Bailey's Lane"?

During the afternoon she asked me if the old asylum were still on Jail Lane. There I was perplexed. I knew nothing of an asylum and had never heard of Jail Lane. After asking her questions about its locality, I discovered that she meant Vestal street and that the "Asylum" was our old jail.

I spent the next day with her, riding around town, and I learned more about Nantucket as it used to be than I had ever known before. I discovered that Gay street used to be Coffin's Court; that Mooers' Lane was always known as "Judith Chase's Lane" or Moose Lane; and that Quince street was formerly Crown Court. No one seems to know why it was changed to Quince, for about all the fruit trees seen there have always borne pears. Saratoga street, that borders the Friends' burial ground, used to bear the cheerful name of Grave street. But where did the "Saratoga" come from?

We rode up Coffin's Court to inspect the new school building and then down Clay Lane. Westminster street had been called Clay Lane for years and my friend told me that on a rainy day Clay Lane had always held its own.

Coming down Federal street we stopped at "Black Horse Alley" to look at the old shop south of it where the old Quaker, William Hosier, bought old rope and nails from the Nantucket boys. "Black Horse Alley" is the small court between the Killen house and the Hosier property, both of which estates now belong to the town.

Further down the street the old lady asked me if I

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had ever heard of Independence Lane. Upon my saying "no" she told me that it used to extend from Centre to Federal streets, north of the Main street stores, and that the town closed up the Centre street end many years ago when it built the engine-house there.

Madison street still exists, but few people know it. It is the narrow way just wide enough for a cart or auto, that extends from Federal street to Coal Lane, between the news store and the Catholic Church.

Further down Main street, below Coal Lane, was Type Alley. This ran between what is now Lester Ayers' shop and the Wannacomet Water Company's office. It is said that it acquired its name from the fact that many years ago the former newspaper office was in the building on the west side of the alley and that type was often thrown out of the window by the apprentices.

My friend told me lots of other interesting things about the old town. I learned that "Hay Scale Lane" was the lower part of Pine street; that Macy's Court is now called Howard street; and that Angola street is now the western end of South Mill street.

Macy's Court! Why I have been told that it was there that Zaccheus Macy lived, the man who was the noted bone-setter of Nantucket. Why was it changed to Howard street? No one seems to know, and if ever a man deserved to have a street named after him, it was Zaccheus Macy.

My interest in the old streets of Nantucket has grown keen as the days have passed. I learn that Main street was formerly called State street, and that Pearl street was originally India street, said to have been given that name because so many of the sea captains lived there and made voyages to India.

Tattle Court still remains the little narrow way on the west side of Fair street. Tradition says that it was given

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its name because so much neighborhood gossip transpired there. Whether this be true or not, no one has attempted to change the name and Tattle Court still exists.

And there was once Brown's Lane, which extended from Centre to Federal street, and was closed up when the Friends built their meeting house there (now the Roberts House dining-room).

Even in my day I have heard folks refer to North Liberty street as "Egypt". I wondered why it was so called and was told that it was always a place of total darkness; that up to forty years ago there were only four houses there and people did not travel that way much at night—hence the local application of the expression "as dark as Egypt".

Who ever heard of Easy street in Nantucket up to a few years ago—the place which is this year to be the center of the water-front carnival for the benefit of the Hospital? That was always known as "the dump", yet it suddenly blossomed out into Easy street and Easy street it will always remain, for the county commissioners have accepted the name and placed it on record. Is there another town in the world with an Easy street? Lots of people endeavor all their lives to live there, but do they?

Step Lane, between Centre and North Water streets, was always Step Lane until the steps were removed when Farmer Chapman and his wife started to run a boarding house there fifty years or so ago, and then for some reason or other it was transformed into "Chapman Avenue". It remained an avenue until later residents petitioned that the old name be restored and Step Lane it is today—without any steps.

New Dollar Lane, extending from Milk to Mill streets, is said to have been given that name because it was there the famous whaling merchant, Joseph Starbuck, lived—the man who built the three brick houses on Main street for

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his sons. The Nantucketers were always skeptical whether Starbuck ever "saw a new dollar for an old one" in consequence of his ventures. But why New Dollar Lane was changed to Risdale street I cannot state, but it was—and for a number of years people were compelled to live on Risdale street who preferred to live on New Dollar Lane. But a few years ago the town voted to change the name back again and Risdale street blew away, never to return.

In passing, let us take a stroll through what is now Ray's Court, starting at Fair street by the Historical Building and extending through to Main street amid the shade of aged trees. John Ray, who was my grandfather several generations back, was a Scotchman named Macrae, but the Nantucketers found it easier to call him Ray, and Ray he and his descendants have remained ever since. He built the house now owned by Dr. W. P. Graves and settled his children around him, some on one side of the court and some the other. In 1830 Ray's Court was joined to Turner's Alley, which was the name of the little end of the court which empties out onto Main street. The name of Turner's Alley is no more—it is all Ray's Court.

Who authorized the change of Rose Jenkins's Lane, between Orange and Union streets, to the meaningless name of Flora street? No one knows who Flora was but there are many people living today who know all about Rose Jenkins and can well recall why it was called Rose Jenkins' Lane.

Just for a moment, let us take a peek at Prospect street. Where did that name come from? Possibly because it had such a fine view of three cemeteries. Originally it was called Cooper street and came rightly by that name because a number of coopers lived there during the days when Nantucket's whaling industry was in its prime. Oc-

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asionally deeds refer to this street as Copper street instead of Cooper street, but Cooper was its right name until it was transformed over night into Prospect street.

And, last but not least, I have found Cat Alley—a narrow passage extending north from Stone Alley, which is important enough, however, to have a sign-board announcing its presence. Let us hope that it will always remain Cat Alley and that future generations will not try to improve it. It should retain its name just as much as “Kite Hill”, which remains “Kite Hill” today in spite of the fact that the boys have not flown kites there for a quarter of a century or more.

The streets of Nantucket were given names which had a meaning, although perhaps not always melodious in sound. There is no doubt but that Grave street meant much more to our ancestors than does Saratoga street, and the by-ways which were “lanes” years ago are entitled to retain the names which the good people of Nantucket gave them when they built this old gray town that we all love and in which we all take pride.

