

Introduction:

Strangers, Coofs, and Washashores

When Sarah Pinkham Bunker died at home on a Saturday in 1902, the *Inquirer and Mirror* reported that “the funeral took place Wednesday, relatives from abroad coming on to attend.”

Sarah P. Bunker’s relatives from “abroad” hadn’t made a warp-speed transatlantic voyage to Nantucket for her funeral; they came by steamboat across Nantucket Sound. At the beginning of the twentieth century Nantucketers still divided the whole globe into on-island and off-island. Off-island was “abroad,” and off-islanders were spoken of as “strangers” or less politely as “coofs.”

There was no doubt in the minds of the readers of the *I&M* that Sarah P. was a “descended Nantucketer.” Just short of ninety-four at the time of her death, she was recognized as the island’s oldest resident. Moreover, she shared a pedigree with people who for centuries had formed the influential majority on the island. Through her father, Hezekiah Pinkham, she was descended from one of Nantucket’s founding-settler couples, Tristram Coffin and Dionis Stevens Coffin, in no less than seven different lines. Jethro Coffin and Mary Gardner Coffin, for whom Nantucket’s “Oldest House” had been built in the 1680s, were Hezekiah’s great-great grandparents. Progeny of Tristram and Dionis had intermarried with Starbucks, Gardners, Bunkers, and Pinkhams through six generations to bring forth Sarah P.’s father.

Her mother, Eunice Barrett Pinkham, was descended from the same people, as was her husband, Elisha Bunker. Sarah P. was the product of one of those proverbial old local families whose genealogical trees do not branch.

Not only was Sarah P. old in years and of old settler stock, she also shared what was recognized as true Nantucket life experience. Through the China trade her father grew sufficiently wealthy to move his family from the house on North Liberty Street where Sarah P. had been born to a grander house on the Cliff with a view of the harbor. But in marriage her good fortune foundered, as it had for many other women. Her husband, Elisha, seeking to gain yet more riches from a long whaling voyage, was lost at sea in 1841, leaving behind his widow and a two-year-old whom he had never seen. In the self-reliant tradition of Nantucket women, Sarah P. maintained the Pinkham homestead property and supported herself, her widowed father, her daughter, and eventually a grandson by taking in roomers and going out to nurse Nantucket’s sick and dying. As she passed through the town’s dark streets at night carrying a lantern to find her way, her tall figure was known jocularly as “the walking Sankaty Light.”

The *I&M* reported most of this in her obituary, and the rest has been passed down as part of family history, the stories told and retold to her great-grandchildren as part of their Nantucket heritage.

What the *I&M* didn't report, and what would not have been thought to be Nantucket heritage, is that Sarah P. had a familiar stranger truly "from abroad" living right under her roof. Sarah P.'s grandson, Maurice Gibbs, had married Hilda Österberg of Finland, and Hilda had assumed the running of the household.

A fall at age 80 had left Sarah P. unable to get about easily, and she rarely left the upstairs north bedroom where she received visitors and followed the construction of a grand summer mansion across the street as it rose to close off her sea view.

Every afternoon Hilda climbed the stairs with a tray to serve tea to Sarah P. on Hezikiah's Limoges china. Hilda lived in fear of breaking a teacup and incurring the wrath of Sarah P. and all the ghosts of Nantucketers past who seemed to palpably inhabit the north rooms. Intimidated by her husband's family, she felt that in this house she would forever be regarded as a foreign maid, a stranger, a coof, a person outside Nantucket history.

In the 1930s, three decades after Sarah P.'s death, Guy Loman Jr., an interviewer for the New England Dialect Atlas project, came to collect samples of Nantucket speech. According to the survey protocol, fieldworkers had been directed to interview elderly descendants of old local families and middle-aged people with a high school education but no extensive travel or college education away from home. They were reminded that it was "of supreme importance" that the people interviewed should be from "various generations and diverse social and racial" groups, but the editors of the final report had to admit that several fieldworkers, especially Loman, "showed a preference for the interesting old-fashioned local type."

This was sanctioned by another of the guidelines that stated that "the pronunciation of 'old-timers' is of the greatest interest. Your informants will often tell you how their parents used to speak and what new expressions their children use. All such information must be put down. It is very valuable." Focus on the "old-timers" was justified "in order that the earlier regional pattern might be accurately delineated and the oldest living forms of speech preserved as fully as possible for the historian of New England speech." The editors were confident that with this data they would be able "to establish the regionalism of the pre-industrial era of New England."

Although Loman was supposed to interview a representative sample of islanders, he chose just two men and one woman, all around eighty years old and all connected with the village of Siasconset. He could not interview any Nantucket Indians, since the last two speakers of the local variety of Eastern Algonquian had died within two months of each other in the winter of 1854–55. But in the 1930s, at least in the summers, there may still have been on-island a descendant or two of African Nantucketers whose families had come to the island in the 1700s. There were, for sure, Nantucket-born children and grandchildren of families who had moved to Nantucket from the Azores and Cape Verde Islands and from Ireland, but Loman ignored them.

These Nantucketers were not interviewed partly because of limited time and resources. Each interview could take as long as three days to complete, and Loman, who was operating on a Depression-era budget, had to move on to other communities on Martha's Vineyard and Cape Cod. Another reason for the narrowness of the survey was Loman's acknowledged love of talking to oldtimers. He would have been delighted to have taken tea with Sarah P. Bunker upstairs in her home on the Cliff, but he had come thirty years too late.

The bias also had to do with the contradictory purposes of the survey: to use a cross-class, multiethnic survey to compile information about the speech of one particular segment of New England residents, those of English descent. The operating definition of "Old New England" had taken shape in the latter part of the nineteenth century in reaction to economic and demographic changes in the region. Industrialization, in particular the growth of New England textile mills and shoe factories, had created a labor market far outstripping the supply of rural New England millgirls who had originally left their families' farms to work and save money for their futures. The mills had drawn to New England a labor force from beyond the borders of the United States. Among the first had been the Irish fleeing the potato famine of the 1840s. Beginning in the 1880s intense immigration brought workers from Canada, Northern and Southern Europe, and the Middle East. By 1912, when strikes shut down the textile mills of Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts, the workers demanding better wages and working conditions were French Canadians, Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, Lithuanians, Poles, Belgians, Armenians, Turks, and Syrians, as well as Irish and English. In the Fitchburg mills the workers were mainly Finns. Just a few descendants of New England farmers were still working there.

Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard had no industry to speak of, but with the turn of the century Finns and Cape Verdeans were working cranberry bogs. Fishing boats heading out to the Georges Banks were crewed and captained by Azoreans, Cape Verdeans, and Scandinavians, whose relatives on-shore worked for weekly wages as laborers and domestics and aspired to operate their own small businesses.

In 1910 fifteen per cent of the population of the United States was foreign-born, and about a third of those immigrants did not yet speak English. For a long time New Englanders had felt flooded by this new wave and nostalgic for a time past when the dominant population had been of English heritage, to say nothing of English language. Anti-immigrant feeling ran high and was freely expressed in newspapers, public lectures, and legislation, ultimately leading to the restrictive immigration quotas established in the wake of World War I.

In the early 1930s a search was under way for how people talked in old New England. Even in Nantucket, which had a long multiethnic and cosmopolitan history, there was nostalgia for old-time ways of speaking. This nostalgia had found its expression in *The Nantucket Scrap Basket*, a 1916 book containing anecdotes, turns of phrase, and an alphabetic glossary of quaint Nantucketisms. The compilers,

William Macy and Roland Hussey, dedicated the book to “all the sons and daughters of Nantucket.” Those sons and daughters probably did not include, in Macy’s and Hussey’s view, the Nantucket-born who lived in Nantucket’s New Guinea neighborhood, those who spoke Portuguese at home, or those who attended Mass in Nantucket’s new Church of St. Mary, Our Lady of the Isle. It has taken the Nantucket community a long time to grow beyond this.

Another thirty years into the century, when Sarah P. Bunker’s Finnish granddaughter-in-law Hilda herself passed the age of 90, more changes had taken place. Early in the century, her husband’s old Nantucket line—through generations of infant mortality, “galloping consumption,” and accidents at sea—had dwindled to one person short of extinction. In the second half of the twentieth century, apparently benefiting from hybrid vigor, it was swelling like yeast dough in a warm kitchen. A daughter of Maurice and Hilda became a member of the Nantucket board of selectmen, a son a career Coast Guardsman, another son a Nantucket policeman, a grandson director of a Nantucket museum. Today the roster of descendants, on-island and off-island, is still expanding exuberantly. Through repeated marriages with off-islanders, few of them have old Nantucket surnames.

The house on Cliff Road, ghosts and all, has been sold out of the family. Meanwhile the Nevins mansion across the street has become venerable in its own right, surviving a century of change as a guest house, then back into private hands as Innishail (Gaelic for ‘Haven of Rest’), and lately renovated by yet another newcomer to the island.

But most of all, at the dawn of a new millennium, who is a Nantucketer and what constitutes Nantucket heritage have been transformed. This has been accomplished not only by the integration of many arrivals who have been called at various moments in Nantucket history “strangers,” “coofs,” and “washashores” (the current pejorative), but also by the belated recognition of people who have lived on Nantucket throughout its centuries without being given place in its public history.

These are the Other Islanders, and here is some of their history.