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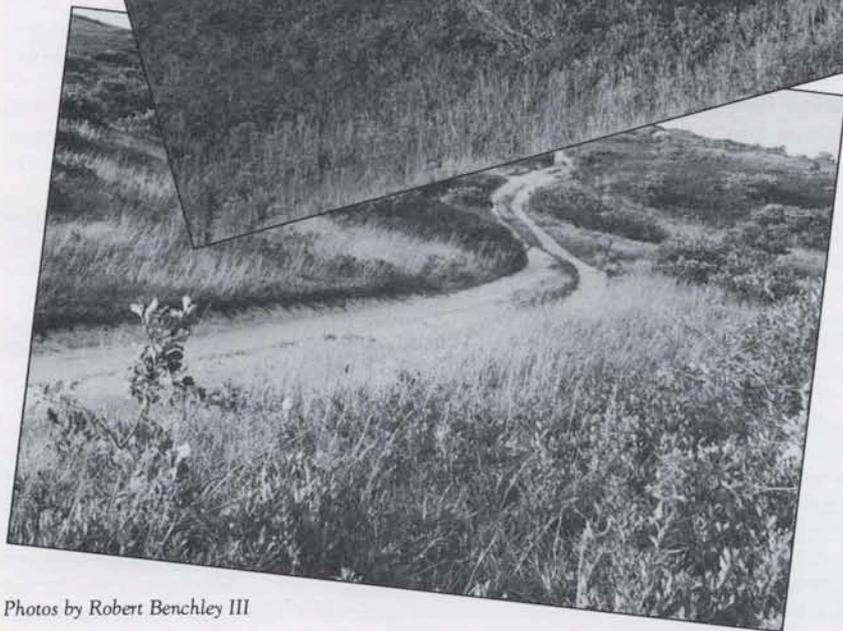


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It's February in 'Sconset, the small village at the eastern end of Nantucket. Most of the "summer natives," who six months before packed this community, are long gone. Now, the sounds of summer are replaced by those of the other season: the distant rumble of surf, the whistling no'theast wind beating the shingled cottages. If you want solitude, this is the time and the place. But listen. In the near distance another sound splits the quiet --the steady rhythm of hammer hitting nail.

The pristine qualities that make this island a distinct place, and somewhere "far away," both geographically and philosophically, also make it a refuge, an attractive haven and resort with less traffic (there isn't a single traffic light on the island), pollution and people than the mainland thirty miles away. Nantucket's popularity is beginning to catch up with her. The same things people come here to escape are quickly being introduced as more and more "off-islanders" discover the island. No longer just a summer place, Nantucket is now an active year-round community, with a tourist season that stretches from late April until well past Columbus Day. The most visible manifestation of Nantucket's increased popularity is a building boom that is fast chewing up the island's open spaces



and threatening its rural character.

A decade ago, only 100 houses a year were being built. Today, the annual figure approaches 300 and, despite zoning controls, appears to be gaining momentum. "The pace has certainly become more rampant in the '80s," agrees William Klein, executive director of Nantucket's Planning and Economic Development Commission. "We're subdividing 500 lots a year consistently. Commercial development has also increased. There are 200,000 square feet of shopping centers on the drawing boards right now."

Klein came to the island in 1974, shortly after town meeting voters established the Planning Commission, a response to the island's first condominium development in the west-end village of Madaket. "People felt they wanted something with more control than a Planning Board," Klein says. "Nantucket was always known to have avoided suburban sprawl, but the island's eighteenth and nineteenth century settlement pattern was becoming compromised by a haphazard development pattern. It was causing us to become like everywhere else, and if there's one thing Nantucketers hate more than anything else, it's to be like everywhere else."

Since its inception, the Planning Commission's work has included the drawing up of more stringent zoning regulations (most of which pass at town meetings) and a growth plan for the entire island. (One aspect of the growth plan is a push for subdivisions to be arranged in clusters, with lots of green space.) These measures are ways in which the town has worked within established systems to have a say in what can be built and where it can be built; but Nantucket has also been in the vanguard in growth control.

The most notable invention is the Land Bank, an agency established by island voters in 1984. As its name implies, the Land Bank, the first such measure of its kind in the country, was set up to buy desirable properties for conservation and recreational uses. Its funding, generated by Nantucket's healthy real estate market, comes from a two percent tax on most property transactions. This money is deposited

into a Land Bank account and is handled by five elected commissioners. To date, the Land Bank has purchased 511 acres, land that will be protected for future generations.

"The Land Bank concept is spreading," notes Klein, the Land Bank's prime architect. "Land Banks have been established on Martha's Vineyard, in Little Compton, Rhode Island and on Block Island."

By entering its own real estate market, Nantucket can afford to buy unspoiled acreage, rather than rely on either a conservation organization or a benefactor to keep lands forever wild. As Klein points out, however, the Land Bank is not enough to save the island from development.

"The Land Bank is averaging \$80,000 a week," he noted, "and when you mention that to people they can't believe the figure. But when you consider that house lots on the water are selling for a few million dollars, that figure becomes less impressive."

The single greatest land conservator on Nantucket is the Conservation Foundation, a private organization established in 1963 that is dedicated to preserving the island's most beautiful and unique landscapes. The Conservation Foundation now oversees 6,000 acres, or 20 percent of the island. These lands include a great chunk of Nantucket's moors, former sheep pastures and undeveloped valleys on the picturesque south shore. Because the Foundation owns these properties, it also imposes controls over them, limiting vehicle use in an effort to protect the fragile environment.

Nantucket's aggressive conservation movement, coupled with an even more aggressive housing market, has put land at a premium, however. A half acre plot can run anywhere from \$80,000 to nearly \$400,000, depending upon the view. This economic reality is squeezing out many natives who had the misfortune to grow up after land prices skyrocketed.

"The only way I can ever live here is to move into my parents' place," says Ron Duce, a 1981 Nantucket High School graduate. "Just to buy a two-bedroom house here would probably cost me close to \$300,000."

Despite Duce's lament, the effects on land prices from this tug of war between conservation and development are hard to gauge. "It's difficult to say the degree to which conservation effects land prices," said Klein. "If there were no conservation effort, we'd still have an incredible demand for land. We're still an island, that's our real problem."

The problem is compounded by the number of people who have no difficulty buying a piece of the rock. There's a common saying on Nantucket that if you have to ask how much something costs, you can't afford it. Klein speaks of a scenario where one summer home is built on the island. The house guests invited in just one season all fall in love with the place and, being upwardly mobile, build second homes of their own. Although this outline may seem far-fetched, it in fact describes the reality of the island's real estate market.

The transportation factor must also be considered. The Steamship Authority's three boats a day in the summer are no longer the only way to travel across Nantucket Sound; many prefer the quick, 15 minute trip by plane. The island's airport is the third busiest in New England, year-round. "In the '60s, it was kind of a pain in the neck to get here," Klein notes. "Now, we're 40 minutes from New York. It's sometimes easier to get here from Manhattan than to the Hamptons."

All this begs the question: Will Nantucket be developed until no house lots remain? The answer from Klein is a resounding, "Yes."

"We're right in the sights of being a major vacation development," he predicts. "There are approximately 7,000 houses on the island now, and there's room for 7,000 more. The dwelling units are going to double. It's hard for somebody born and brought up in a rural community like Nantucket to imagine that it's going to happen."

Island historian Edouard Stackpole has lived on Nantucket a good part of his 81 years. He has seen the fields he once played in disappear, and has watched development grow far beyond the fringes of the downtown's cobbled streets. Like the depression spawned

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by the demise of Nantucket's whaling industry over 100 years ago, Stackpole sees increased development as the new threat to the character of the island. Stackpole, who feels the lessons of the past should guide present decisions, is distraught by what he terms "the nibbling process" that he sees.

In an editorial written last year for the Nantucket Historical Association, Stackpole decried the changing face of the island.

"During the summer season of 1985," he wrote, "Nantucket has become an overcrowded, bustling, uncomfortable town ... Too many people; too many automobiles and mopeds; too many motor vehicles invading the beaches and destroying many sanctuaries ... Does this represent a true prosperity?"

Stackpole believes the island is now at a crossroads, and that efforts must be made to keep Nantucket's historical integrity intact. "If we do become just a tourist town," he says, "even the tourists won't come here." At the root of the problem, he says, are the developers who are "only looking for the quick buck."

"When you get people who own the land, and who care so damn little about the land, and rip it up with their bulldozers, tearing away vegetation that took centuries to grow, it shows they haven't got much interest in Nantucket," he said. "The greed is so evident it's terrible, because they're turning their backs on something that exists only once."

Still, even with the rapid building rate, Nantucket remains a desirable place to live. For 7,600 year-round residents, adapting is a way of life: to both the harsh winters and to the even harsher demands of surviving in a spiraling economic market. The best way to overcome a limited island budget, some have found, is to do it yourself.

Rob Benchley, a summer resident all his life and a year-round resident for the past four years, figures he's saving \$70,000 by building his own home. Benchley is luckier than most: he inherited a piece of land. "The thing that saved my life was that I had a piece of land my grandfather bought in the

1940s," he said. "I'm also lucky because I have some of the skills that are needed to build a house."

When he first decided to build his home, Benchley had no intention of leaving his full-time job, and looked into the construction costs of having a builder do the job. He quickly discovered why Nantucket is called "a rich man's paradise."

"I saw the deals builders were giving island people and it was no deal at all," he said, pointing out "the realities of \$100 per square foot, minimum -- and that doesn't include appliances."

To justify taking a sabbatical, Benchley figures he's "paying himself to do the job. But the hard economics of it are I'm taking the pay cut of leaving the job."

The hard economics of island life are also what moved Benchley to build a permanent residence. Unlike most of southeastern Massachusetts, where a landlord will scratch his head if a prospective tenant asks if the apartment is 'year-round,' there are few such luxuries as 12-month leases on Nantucket. Many residents, especially those who comprise the young working force, have to move twice a year: once in the spring, when their winter rental soars from \$300 a month to \$300 a week, and again in the fall, when the unheated cottage they rented with 12 other people is closed for the winter. "The moving thing, that's what really cast it in iron," Benchley said, "the annoyance of moving twice a year. Sometimes I had to move four times a year."

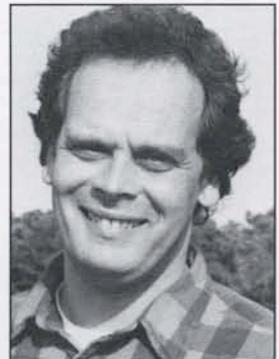
So why do people live here, and call this outpost home where electricity rates are among the highest in the country, where a cheeseburger approaches \$5, where a simple delight like Chinese food has to be flown in from Hyannis?

"Because it's like what America used to be, at least it is in January," says Klein. "Because there's enough consciousness to protect the harbor and the land so you can still go scalloping and clamming and fishing and have a reasonable belief that the food won't be polluted," notes Benchley. "Because of conservation, you can still find an uninhabited beach in the off-season."

The delicate balance between nature and man is, happily, working for the time being on Nantucket. The busy summer season is offset by the solitude of winter. There is a time to recharge, to dream up ways of protecting this place.

"This is a good planning lab," Klein says. "The eco-systems are pretty well designed, and because we're a town and a county the political set-up is conducive to planning growth. From the outside, people say we're doing a great job. But when you're here seeing some things disappear before your eyes, it can get pretty depressing."

Benchley takes a slightly more optimistic view: "It's just that there has to be some common ground between the people who are rushing down here and why I insist on staying."



Steve Sheppard was graduated from Bridgewater with a BA in English in 1980. He is sports editor and assistant editor of The Inquirer and Mirror on Nantucket. He also worked as a reporter for The Patriot Ledger in Quincy. He and his wife Karin (Ganga), BSC Class of 1979, are the recent parents of a son.