Resort Life in Nantucket (or How Many Slices of the Pie)
Aaron Marcavitch

America has always been a country of land speculation. While much of America's early history is venerated as a landing place for those seeking refuge from the tyranny of religious persecution, America's real motivation has been economic – and "economic" generally meant the buying and selling of land. Virginia, Pennsylvania, the Western Reserve, and the Louisiana Purchase were primarily land purchase and subdivision activities. Nantucket has been a microcosm of this economic activity– only concentrated and magnified. (Slide 2)

"Nantucket," as an concept, represents beaches, seclusion, history, whaling, and for some, extravagance. In modern society Nantucket has become well known as the summer place for the rich to get away from their homes in Los Angeles, London, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston. These visitors – generally from New York City and Boston in the last decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century – brought with them a style of urban land speculation and gridded cottage city planning that shaped the future of Nantucket. These visitors created a reality far removed from the concept. They created a reality that was based on land purchase and subdivision. Not surprisingly, a central motivating factor to the economy of land speculation has been its intimate link to the American resort – everyone wants to own a piece of the "pie." (Slide 3)

Nantucket – and its first generation of settlers were the first in string of dividers of land. Clay Lancaster, in his book *Holiday Island*, wrote about this early land speculation process on Nantucket. Originally acquired by Thomas Mayhew – who also owned Martha's Vineyard – Nantucket had several thousand Native Americans working the cod and whale fisheries. Tristram Coffin from southern New Hampshire applied to Mayhew for purchase of a portion of the island and an agreement was made where the settlers owned the western most part of Nantucket, while the Indian population retained the remainder. In 1659, Coffin, Thomas Macy and his five children, Edward Starbuck, and Issac Coleman all came to Nantucket and spent a winter on the island outpost. The returned home the next summer

and brought back ten more families – forming a proprietary of twenty families. However, these settlers realized that they lacked many of the skills needed to set up a town – such as house builders - and invited fourteen "mechanics" to join for a half share. This brought the total amount of shares to twenty-seven. These twenty-seven shares would be the basic unit of division for the island for the next one hundred years. (Slide 4) "In 1661, they gave out home sites according to one's standing, and the balance of the land was reserved as sheep commons. When more of the island was acquired from the natives, and when the town was to be laid out on the Great Harbor, each section was divided into twenty seven parcels and each man took a whole or half lot according to his status. Thus everyone received a town site, a harbor site, a moor site, a pond site etc." (Lancaster, viii) (Slide 5)

Thus, the early landscape of Nantucket became a land of land purchase and subdivision. During the early eighteenth century, the island developed into its well known place in the whaling industry – but the importance of this industry did not reach its fever pitch until the beginning of the nineteenth century. (Slide 6) During this period, land division operated in shares of 27, or 270, or 2700. These tiny slivers of land still existed on the island until the 1970s and made title clearing a sport only for lawyers and the legal amateur. (Slide 7)

When the summer visitors discovered Nantucket – after the fall of the whaling industry in the 1840s and the rise of the East Coast seaside resort in the 1870s – the visitor never made it an upper middle class enclave or tawdry pleasure palace for the lower classes. The location thirty miles out to sea kept it as a quiet repose from the hustle and bustle of the rest of America. Lancaster writes, "Nantucket...catered to that vast population of summer-leisured pleasure seekers in the middle bracket, affording them a varied choice of unspecialized recreational facilities. These ranged from sailing, fishing, swimming, and beach bumming to exploring the historic and topographic wonders of this ocean domain; and it included unrestricted participation in balls and concerts, parades and pageants, illuminations and fireworks, cycling and rollerskating, banqueting, "squantums" and picnicking, and fairs, fetes, races, and competitions. By the turn of the century there were available imported

specialized games - baseball, tennis, and golf - and metropolitan theatricals, later joined by Fort Lee and Hollywood movies." (Lancaster, ix) (Slide 7)

Nantucket's tourism industry was better prepared than newly developed resorts around the seashore in other parts of New England. Lancaster writes that "Nantucketers are ingenerate hoteliers. Living on an island and depending largely on trade for their sustenance, appurtenances, and belonging, they are accustomed to dealing with people from afar and engaging in their accommodation....innkeeping is their third industry." He goes on to note that after the failure of the whaling industry, those that remained on the island "found itself with the facilities, the experience, and the inclination to play host to seasonal visitors." They built upon the historical charm of the town and seized upon the newly expanding interest in the perceived health benefits of the seaside. "Spending a busy summer providing recreation and repasts for those escaping from the trials and complexities of life on the neighboring land called America permits the islanders themselves a period of relative quietude throughout the remaining three-fourths of the year. This seems to suit their temperament. They have thrived on it for generations." (Lancaster, 1)

However, the escapism of Nantucket soon caught pace with the expanding economy of the rest of America. For as much as the islanders of Nantucket choose to believe they exist outside of "America," they are intimately connected with the economies of the rest of the mainland. During the period after the demise of whaling, the island began to rediscover itself as a place of "land speculation" and "cottage-city" schemes - "an offshoot of a movement that was rampant along the Atlantic coast of the United States over much of the triple 'New' section - New England, New York, and New Jersey..."(Lancaster, 61) A slim book by Henry Barnard Worth from the turn of the century notes that "Of the entire shore very few sections have not been the locus of some land speculation." (Worth, 213) Land speculation reached such a fever pitch that it often seemed that the island was more successful in subdivision than in tourism. Even today the island splits its industries between real estate/construction and tourism. (Slide 8)

The first major movement for land speculation was in 1872 when the area north of the downtown, or the Cliff area, was platted. Charles Mooers started to buy up parcels in between 1865 and 1871 and in 1872 he began to offer up lots. Clay Lancaster recounts some of these advertisements in *Holiday Island*. He writes “"sea Shore Lots at "THE CLIFF," having a "delightful situation...and ...near the beach, and to well conducted BATHING ROOMS." Lots of "convenient size" were priced from $150 to $200.” (Lancaster, 62). Shortly following Mooers land offerings, Charles and Henry Coffin along with investors Charles Robinson and Mathew Barney purchased over thirty acres around what is now “Brant Point.” These lots were located on the higher point of the cliff and were advertised as such. Lancaster again details the early advertisements “CLIFF LOTS" at "the Highest Part of the Cliff.” Lots were “50 by 75 feet,” and there were “nearly two hundred in all.” They featured “a beach and SEA SHORE PRIVILEGE OF ABOUT 2000 FEET,” and a thirty mile view over the Sound.” (Lancaster, 62-63) These early developments were the first major steps toward a new industry in real estate on Nantucket. Worth writes that “this method of creating a demand and supply for lots, seemed to consist in procuring a section of land on the shores extensive enough for the purpose and then having it surveyed and a plan made showing division into house lots and embellished in many ways known only to the city real estate broker.” (Worth, 214) (Slide 9)

Robinson became one of the major dealers in land. In partnership with Dr. Franklin Ellis, they purchased land in Siasconset, where they opened the Ocean View House in 1873 and “offered the balance of the land as building lots.” They were made accessible by “a broad avenue, called Ocean Avenue laid out along the edge of the bank, three quarters of a mile in length.” As on the Cliff, lots were 50 by 75 feet in size.” That summer, “a number of finely executed plans, in elevation of cottages , drawn by C.H. Robinson & Son” were displayed in the window of Macy's Express office on Main Street. It was recommended that “any one wishing a cottage at 'Sconset Heights will do well to examine these plans.” (Lancaster, 63) (Slide 10)Following on the success of the 'Sconset development, a developer by the name of Tourtellotte of Worcester, “purchased a large tract at Maddaket [sic], had it

surveyed and platted into 2000 lots and placed on the market. Unusually large and beautiful maps were circulated showing drives, parks, and other attractions known to the natives as swamps." (Worth, 214) The plan was a dismal failure. Few of the lots were even sold and no houses were ever built. Even today, this section of the island is more sparsely populated and much of the plan is now underwater. (Slide 11)

An area south of the town, called Surfside, attempted to catch some of the land fever. In 1873, a large meeting was held to find investors for $1000 per share – a tidy sum of money in that era. The area was to be three miles long between the Miacomet and Madequecham Ponds. "Surveys were made and many plans drawn by civil engineers of note and the land was bonded for $200,000." (Worth, 215) Only for the arrival of a hotel (moved from Rhode Island by barge) and the construction of a railroad, did the land speculation take off in the area. (Slide 12) The success of the 'Sconset and Surfside developments created dozens of imitators. As the 1880s dawned "Hither Creek, Great Neck, Smooth Hummocks, Hummock Pond, Trotts Hills, Brant Point, Wauwinet, Shimmo, and Coatue, were all being sliced into smaller and smaller parcels," writes Lancaster (Lancaster, 65). However, as the years passed and the railroad was realigned, the Surfside development foretold the fate of other developments. "Money has been expended by the thousands. A few houses were once to be seen, and today the seagull flying across the entire expanse can discover no other trace of man than the ruins of a few buildings. The Surfside land scheme is as dead as Madaket." (Worth, 215) (Slide 13)

On the flip side of this coin, the summer breezes of the 'Sconset development lead to its increased appeal to the visitor. The 'Sconset area – the end point of the railroad – was a favorite place for the actor and artist. Lancaster, in *Holiday Island*, writes about the success of the Sconset development:

> In the spring of 1883, the newspaper announced: "The bakers dozen of cottages which Mr. Charles M. Robinson is now building for H.K. White, Esq. of Detroit, in the village of 'Sconset, are rapidly approaching completion, and furniture from them is on the way here. Every one of them is already rented for the season of 1883." A the beginning of July, a Siasconset cottage advertised for rent contained "eight rooms and a store room, just completed and fully furnished

> for housekeeping. For particulars address E.F. Underhil, Siasconset...” Edward F. Underhill was to make a thriving business of renting cottages; in 1887 we find him asking $90 to $190 per season. he added to his initial stock and in 1890 had three dozen cottages available. Toward the end of the century he was issuing charmingly illustrated notices of “FURNISHED SEASIDE COTTAGES,” and inviting request for circulars about 'SCONSET...” containing a brief history of the place, with maps, views, and ground plans of the houses.” (Lancaster, 66)

By the end of the 1880s, developers were focusing in on methods to expand existing areas. Lincoln Heights on the Cliff, Dionis City beyond the Cliff, Aurora Heights was built next to the existing 'Sconset developments. Even the Surfside development tried, unsuccessfully to develop its land. “Throughout the autumn of 1889 agent Almon T. Mowry ran weekly notices offering lots gratis on guarantee of a contract to build a cottage 'in VERY LIBERAL TERMS.'” That effort failed to start the ball rolling and in 1891 most of the Surfside property was sold to, or taken over, by William H. Gwynn of Cohes, New York. (Lancaster, 67) (Slide 14)

Important in the history of land speculation on Nantucket was the development of the Nantucket Railroad and, later, the Nantucket Central Railroad. When the railroad was first laid out, it followed a route by which it climbed up over the Cliff to the west of town, out past the western ponds, turning south to the southern shore, then crossing along the length of the island ending in Sconset. The reason for this initial route was to link these developments – much in the way that the trolleys connected suburban neighborhoods. However, common sense ruled and a route was chosen to go directly from town to Surfside before turning east to Sconset. Eventually the route was changed further to become a straight shot towards Tom Never's Head and then towards Sconset. This passage through Tom Never's would eventually lead to another development in 1916. (Slide 15) Lancaster writes that “building the railroad had removed the great obstacle to the sale of the cottage lots on the south shore by providing regular transportation to and from the site, and in 1882 the Surfside land company set out to make the most of the situation. A new community layout was created at that time, eliminating the previous fan shaped intersections of the principal roads in favor of a regular grid, with all streets crossing at right angles. The road from town formed the main axis and terminated at the street nearest the water

forming a T shape and both were given the name Atlantic Avenue." (Lancaster, 75) (Slide 16)

Developments continued at a constant pace - nearly one a year, slackening off in the 1890s until the development of Miacomet Park in 1901. This development was one of the more interesting land speculation ventures in Nantucket's history. Worth describes its interesting history. "This shows the latest land scheme development. A new Bedford man, desiring to sell tea, arranged a new plan. He purchased 80 acres on east side of Miacomet Pond, had it surveyed and dived into 2300 lots and then advertised to give away a lot with every pound of tea, providing the purchaser would pay $2.00 for the deed." Worth notes that "forty deeds have been recorded at Nantucket" as of the time of Worth's publication in 1901. (Worth, 216)

Eventually – as the old adage goes – history repeated itself. The Nantucket Central Railroad (reformed from the ashes of the Nantucket Railroad), taking a due east direction from Town, traveled along the existing route of the "state road" and began to dip at an angle to reach the south shore. As early as 1910, the railroad had considered a way station at Tom Never's Head, a small hillock. (Slide 17) However, the railroad did not build until after 1916, when a 200 acre tract was sold to Franklin Smith of Boston and Edgar Linn of Brookline – who incorporated themselves as the Nantucket Land Trust. The railroad cut across the land diagonally and a depot was built on the northern side of the two sections.

The whole of the development was laid out and developed in much of the same way as the Surfside and Madaket developments, with large plats of land with grandiose maps. Lancaster again provides a detailed description of the property.

> The street layout at Tom Nevers Head was more interesting that the monotonous grid at Surfside, in large measure due to the oblique cut made by the railroad tracks. Two avenues radiated from the depot to the southeast and southwest corners, with other streets parallel or perpendicular to the shore or the two radial lanes. On the Head itself , or southeast corner, was built Tom Nevers Lodge, an irregular pile in the Chicago or "Prairie" style of architecture...Building lots in the Tom Nevers Head tract were disposed of through auction heard each afternoon at 2;30 from 19 through 22 July to which free transportation was provided on the 1;15 train with return at 5:10 in the evening. In August special prices were set, ranging from $50 to $100 for cottage lots 50 by 100 feet in size. As at Surfside, no private summer

houses appeared to keep company with the depot and lodge erected by the entrepreneurs themselves. (Lancaster,156) (Slide 18)

The truly fascinating element of each of these developments is not that that they were conceived – but rather that they were all generally spectacular failures in their execution They generated little or no attention and few houses were built. The bulk of their impact upon Nantucket was that they successfully cut up the sections of the pie into smaller and smaller portions. These small portions created much of the economic landscape of the Twentieth century.

While the summer resort industry rolled on in town and along the beaches, outside of town there were acres of unspoiled land. This land was never developed – but it was all platted and recorded at Town Hall. Owners of the land often vanished when the mortgage and taxes became too much of a burden. Land set aside for the proprietors, now divided up into smaller and smaller portions of twenty seven, were left behind for the lawyers to sort out. This was the life in the 1950s and 1960s, when legal professionals began to purchase small slivers of land for the cost of the back taxes. They would amass small chunks, combining them and recombining them into complete lots. In the 1970s, island based environmental groups – such as the Nantucket Land Council - began to follow the trend and successfully cleared hundreds of lots and turned them to the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, and later the Nantucket Land Bank, for permanent conservation. The Town of Nantucket also followed this pattern, laying claim to hundreds of acres of "proprietors land." This land has now been designated for use as affordable housing – although the claims upon it are still murky in some cases. In one recent situation, a land owner near the Nantucket Memorial Airport has built a house upon a parcel which he bought through standard land title methods. The airport claims that it owns this land through a taking in the 1950s. A settlement negotiated through Town Meeting had to be resolved. These land battles are still waged today. (Slide 19)

After a relative lull in the activity on the waterfront during the 1950s and 1960s, the heir to the Green Stamp fortune, Walter Benieke Jr., arrived on the island and began the process of creating an

exclusive place for the wealthy. He disliked the t-shirt shops and tacky places frequented by the middle class and sought a haven for those with better taste. He purchased many of the aging buildings along the wharf and converted them into art galleries, restaurants, and small upscale shops. His efforts were staggeringly successful. His work, which both destroyed and saved historic buildings, increased the visitors to the island – and renewed interest in the place as an exclusive beach resort. The hotels of the1840s, 1870s, and turn of the century were all pressed back into service. Houses in the downtown core were dusted off and renovated into homes for the visitor. Slowly, as the cache of "Nantucket" increased, development began to pick back up. The lucky lawyers who had cleared the titles for the various parcels around the island saw an opportunity to sell off the land to the new visitor. The Nantucket Historic District Commission was put into place in 1955 to help keep the architectural harmony of the downtown core while the Planning Board was established in 1956 to create an orderly method to subdivision. Both of these developments signaled a priority among the locals to preserve their local landscape – but to also organize and manage those seeking entry to the long history of economic development on Nantucket. Zoning codes were passed in 1972 (with a code based on Newport, RI), contemporary to the expansion of the Historic District Commission to cover the entire island. Both of these changes in 1972 signaled a major shift from development downtown to development in the outlying areas. Condominiums were developed in Madaket. New subdivisions of land were proposed. The pace of progress was speeding up. (Slide 20)

Along the central "state road," or Milestone Road, new developments were being proposed and carved out. Old South Road, the former alignment of the railroad, saw expansion of areas for new subdivisions. Naushop – a development from the late 1980s – took a large swath of land and carved it into a little slice of downtown. (Slide 22)Using the same density formulas as downtown, the whole of the development seems at times out of character for the surrounding open space. Yet, the pace of development since the 1980 has not slowed. Land subdivision continues at a rapid pace. Enshrined in the Zoning code of 1972, the town allows by right the development of two separate structures on each

lot. The pace of division and re-division shows no major sign of ceasing – even as the town grapples with wastewater and buildout numbers. (Slide 22)

Nantucket, while existing as a typical example of a seaside resort in many ways, also demonstrates the insatiable American need for a quick buck and easy land. Speculators, most of which were not native to the island, came to the island and carved out acre after acre from the scrub oaks and grasses. Soon the native islanders caught the fever and found way to make another penny from the visitor. Certainly there were those happy to part a dollar from the visitor through the traditional means of restaurants, shops, and amusements. But to many the question was simply "why not own a slice of Nantucket?" The end result of this constant land purchase and subdivision is yet to be seen, but indications point to a diluted history, culture, and experience – an unfortunate result for a place that has such strong cache of meaning. (Slide 23)

A final note from a colleague in Chicopee with a penchant for limericks.

There once was a guy from Nantucket,
Who kept all of his land in a bucket,
When the market got hot
He scooped up a lot,
And as for the buyer, he tuck it.
(Kate Brown)

Works Cited

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