

MARTHA'S VINEYARD, MA

Island History

The earth here, tells a story erased elsewhere in New England. The famous Aquinnah cliffs lay bare to geologists the history of the past hundred million years. Traveling the South Road to Aquinnah, one goes through low hills and valleys cut by streams that ran off melting glaciers at the end of the Ice Age.

The first humans probably came here before the Vineyard was an island. It is thought that they arrived after the ice was gone, but before the melting glaciers in the north raised the sea level enough to separate Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket from the mainland. Indian camps that carbon-date to about 2270 B.C. have been discovered here.

The first inhabitants of the Martha's Vineyard were a Native American tribe called the Wampanoag. The Wampanoag established themselves on the island in the early 1600s, and a number of descendants still live here. The name Wampanoag means Easterners, and the Wampanoag name for the island is Noepe, which means "island in the streams."

Legend surrounds the later arrival of the first white men. Some believe Norsemen were here about 1000 A.D. In 1524, Verrazano sailed past and named the island Louisa. Other explorers gave it different names, but the one name that stuck, was given in 1602 by Bartholomew Gosnold, who named it for the wild grapes and his baby daughter, Martha.

Within 40 years of Gosnold's visit, all of New England was being claimed and divided up by Europeans. Thomas Mayhew, a Bay Colony businessman, bought Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and the Elizabeth Islands for forty pounds. He made his only son and namesake co-patentee. In 1642, the first white settlement on the Vineyard was established at Great Harbour, now Edgartown, under the leadership of Thomas Mayhew, Jr.

The ordained pastor of his flock, this young man instituted a policy of respect and fair dealing with the natives that was unequalled anywhere. One of the first Mayhew rulings was that no land be taken from the native island people, the Wampanoags, without consent and fair payment.

From this time forward, the colonial settlers and Indians lived without the bloodshed that marked American history elsewhere. Within a few years, a congregation of Praying Indians was established at what is still known as Christiantown. This period was marked by plenty and peace. The sea provided fish for both export and island use, and the Indians taught the settlers to capture whales and tow them ashore to boil out the oil. Farms were productive as well; in 1720, butter and cheese were being exported by the shipload.



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Martha's Vineyard Island History, continued.

The American Revolution brought hardships to the Vineyard. Despite the island's vulnerable position, the people rallied to the patriot cause and formed companies to defend their homeland. With their long heritage of following the sea, Vineyarders served effectively in various maritime operations. Vineyarders, of course, knew that they could do little to resist a British invasion of the island, and their worst fears were confirmed on September 10, 1778, when a British fleet of 40 ships sailed into Vineyard Haven harbor.

Within a few days, the British raiders had burned many island vessels and removed more than 10,000 sheep and 300 head of cattle. The raid was an economic blow that affected island life for more than a generation. Before the Revolution, islanders had been building large vessels and were sailing the North Atlantic from the Grand Banks to the Western Islands in search of whales. The suspension of these activities with the onslaught of war proved a significant blow to the whaling industry, one from which a real recovery did not occur until the early 1820s, when many of the mariners built their beautiful homes in Edgartown.

The Civil War brought the end to the golden age of whaling. Ships on the high seas were captured by the Confederate navy or held-up in harbors. Either occurrence meant financial ruin for the ship owners and Martha's Vineyard.

A new industry was God sent, in a very literal way. In 1835, the Edgartown Methodists had held a camp meeting in an oak grove high on the bluffs at the northern end of town. This was just one of the hundreds of revivals being held in outdoor settings at the time. The worshippers and their preachers lived in nine improvised tents, and the speakers' platform was made of driftwood. The camp meeting became a popular yearly affair.

Many found the sea bathing and the lovely surroundings as uplifting as the call to repent, and the island entered into its new life as a summer resort. Many who came for a week or two rented houses and later became property owners — a pattern that still occurs today. Summer visitors become seasonal or, as in the case of many writers and artists, year-round residents. These people, along with the many who retire to the Vineyard after interesting careers in academic, government, and other professional fields, bring the world to the island, much as the far-traveled captains did in the great days of whaling.



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