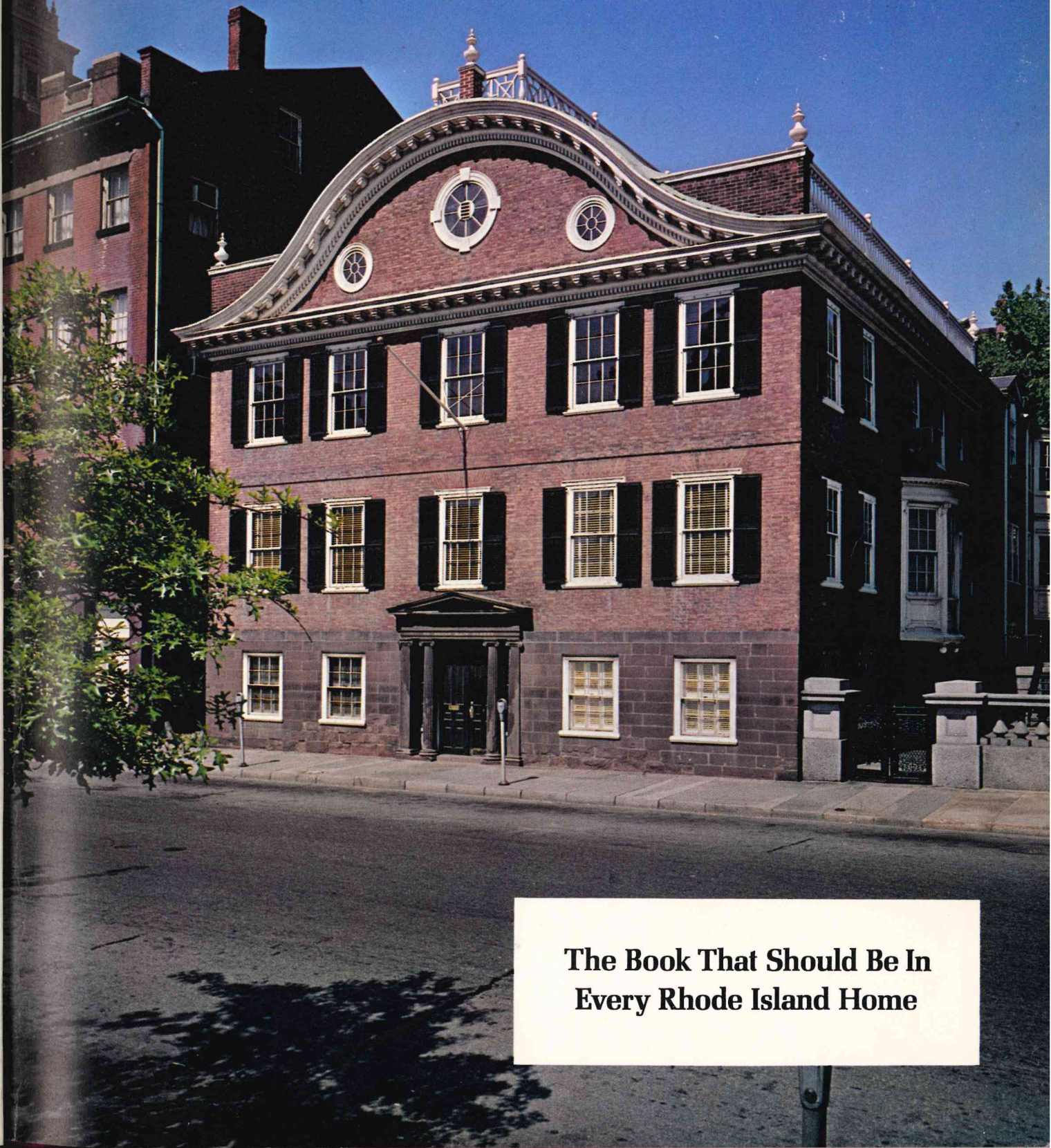


# RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



**The Book That Should Be In  
Every Rhode Island Home**



# The New Vikings

## A S'cunnet Story

BY DAVID PATTEN

ON AN EARLY September morning in 1896, the little steamboat *Queen City* slid up river from S'cunnet over water dancing with a gentle nor'westerly breeze. She forged her way past Quaket Neck, through the Stone Bridge draw, and made her usual stop at Humphrey's wharf. A hundred times she had risked hard sou'easters outside; why now did she dread the calm water ahead?

It was a fright in the air. It came from the poggy works across the river at Common Fence. It was the smell of overripe menhaden seined at sea and fetched here by the hundreds of tons to be crushed for the fish oil that was in them and the residue of dry fish guano. Even strong men called it the most terrible stench in Rhode Island.

Up in his wheelhouse, Cap. Walter Scott Gray guided *Queen* through the draw of the railroad bridge. He slammed up the weatherside window, hooked a pudgy finger through the ring at the end of the bell cord and yanked three times for full speed ahead. *Queen's* stack belched Stygian smoke, her bow surged almost out of water. Close to port she raced by those scaly gray buildings where a million pogys bred their incredible perfume. Cabin doors slammed as horrorstruck passengers fought to get inside.

*Queen's* salty smoke spewed the narrowest part of S'cunnet's river and floated off over the Stone Bridge area of Tiverton. She rounded the bell buoy off Common Fence Point and now the nor'wester was a blessing. It swept the bouquet across Mount Hope Bay and visited it upon the nearer parts of Fall River.

When coming by land, the stagecoach horses shied where the road curved inland around The Gut. A stream boiled down from the rattlesnake hills and met the tides flowing in and out of this gulch. Hedged narrowly by road and stream, a cottage clung to the bank so close to the stream that inbound tides almost swept its stone foundation. Legend said that, long since, the cottage had been a tavern and that a foul murder committed there had given the name of "Sin and Flesh" to the brook.

In 1870 a fisherman lived in the cottage. His name was Joseph Church. He married Jemima Boomer of Fall River and she presented him with seven sons and one daughter. It was this Joseph Church and his seven sons who first went in to the poggy fisheries in a big

way. People wishing to see the little house where they lived must leave the main road and circle The Gut. There is no other way. They will see only the foundation stones, for the cottage itself was wrecked so badly by the 1938 hurricane and flood that it had to be demolished. But from the stones that are left they may judge the size of the house and wonder how Joseph and Jemima and their eight children managed to squeeze into it.

Before the days of the Seven Brothers there were many small poggy works around Narragansett Bay. The pogies were boiled in iron vats set upon brick bases and the oil skimmed off. In Tiverton there were several such "works" from Howland's Ferry (Stone Bridge) to Fogland half way down river.

Jemima bore her sons between 1836 and 1853. These sons became so famous that their names were often sung in sort of a chant: "Daniel, Isaac, Joseph, James, Nathaniel, George and Fisher." They built their first "works" in Bristol, Maine, and fished with sailing craft off that shore. Those waters were soon fished out and in 1878 the company moved its facilities to Common Fence. The first steam pogeypman, forerunner to many to come, was built and named *Seven Brothers*.

Joseph the father died in 1887. We know a great deal about the state of the poggy industry in that year because Daniel, oldest of the sons and their manager, invited a friend to take a voyage to the Delaware Capes and "write it up." The friend was Sydney R. Burleigh, Paris-schooled artist who was one of the early members of the Providence Art Club and its tenth president. S'cunnet born and bred, he was of the tribe of the Long-Haired Burleighs who had come out of the hills of eastern Connecticut. He went around to see the editor of the *Providence Journal* and that functionary agreed to send the paper's artist, one C. P. Davis, along with him on the novel adventure.

Burleigh's arrival at Common Fence produced no prostrations. The odor must have stunned him at first but soon brought the anaesthesia common to those who worked at the plant. On the wharf he fell in with an old friend. Nat Church came crawling up from one of the steamers clad in "a flannel shirt, baggy pantaloons and a shocking bad hat." Sydney, in no better raiment, must have greeted him with a shout, for they were both old salts known to each other during Nat's fishing days at



S'cunnet. No doubt there was some hearty back-slapping and tall-tale-telling at which Sydney would have been able to hold his own.

Burleigh's stories, with Davis's pen and ink drawings, appeared in the *Sunday Journal* of September 11 and 18, 1887. They reported that Church Brothers had become the world's largest producers of fish oil and dry fish guano; that they owned seven steamers (the number grew to about 40 before the end); had 250 employees, of whom 150 crewed the vessels; a season's catch was 175,000 to 250,000 pounds of pogies from which were pressed 10,000 barrels of oil and 4,000 to 4,500 tons of guano.

Is there anyone who knocked about Narragansett Bay in the 90's who doesn't remember the coveys of perhaps half a dozen pogy boats clustering for their hunt? Fifty feet up at the masthead, a lookout gave the signal. Swiftly the boats packed tightly together, men put off in dories and spread the great seine, drew it tighter and tighter until the water frothed with the thrashings of a whole school of menhaden. And other Church steamers were on the prowl all along the Atlantic coast from Eastport to the Chesapeake.

Like his brothers, NATHANIEL BOOMER CHURCH was getting rich. He was the real leader of the clan. As a boy of 13, his father had sent him to sea as cook on a fishing vessel. Mark that, for it has something to do with young Nat's future. As his fortunes grew in the pogy business, he (again like his brothers) built a steamer of his own to engage in the common

enterprise. The *George W. Humphrey* was the largest and fastest of all pogy steamers. Nat had her built in Philadelphia and named her after his first wife's father. With 50-odd crewmen, it cost \$130 a day to run her. Her seine of 7,500,000 meshes was handled by a new-type steam windlass invented by Joseph Martin of Providence. When fish were really running, *Humphrey* might fetch 1,500 barrels of menhaden to Common Fence or to the boat the brothers built to process catches at sea.

Well, they were a shaggy tribe, those seven brothers, everlastingly driving. Before the pogy season opened about June 1, they engaged in the food fisheries at S'cunnet. They set their traps offshore and fitted out one of their steamers to hurry the day's catch to New York in time to catch next morning's early market. About a million and a half pounds of food fish they sold in a season.

Winters would have lagged without politics. Anyone who has a speaking acquaintance with Tiverton politics knows they are played for keeps. All seven brothers were Democrats. With their minions they ruled town meetings. Nat's granddaughter, Mrs. Robert L. Reed, tells of a voter from over Stafford Road way who in one meeting kept chanting, "Amen. Amen." Asked to explain, he said, "Waal, it be a Church meetin', ain't it?"

In the Seventies, Nat served four terms in the General Assembly, two in the House, two in the Senate. Brothers Dan and George also were active in party affairs. Patrick Henry Quinn, then State Democratic leader, said Dan was the only man he could find who would sacri-

*Dories stored at Menhaden Factory, Tiverton, R.I.*

*Courtesy, Mrs. Luscomb*





fice his own fortunes by running for governor against the unbeatable Republican, Elisha Dyer.

George, a son of one of the Seven Brothers, went to live in retirement in Miami. His wife, Helen Ring Church, wrote me that after three operations on his throat he couldn't speak, but "otherwise was hale and hearty. The doctor said, 'Good old New England stock'."

They were all that — good old New England stock. Once, while wrestling with the wheel in foul weather at sea, Nat got a foot caught between the spokes and it took the famous bone-setting Sweets to save the foot.

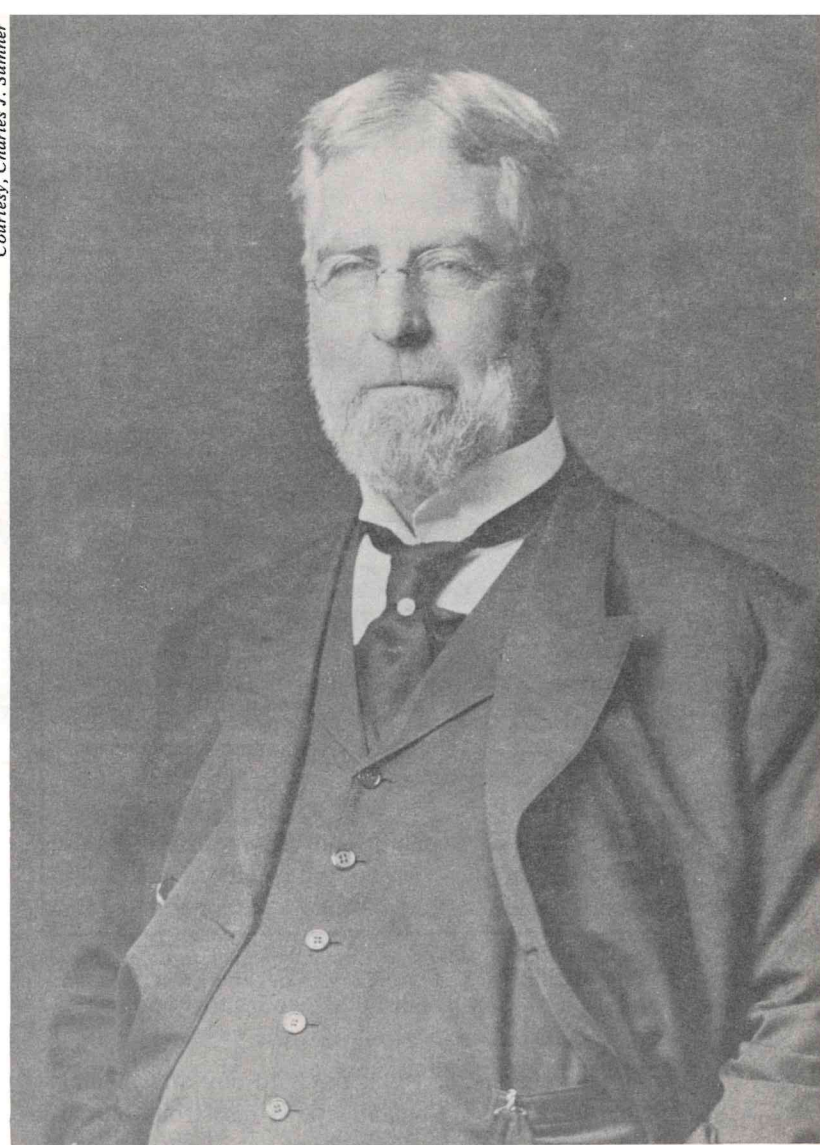
Dan's son-in-law, George R. Lawton, was head bookkeeper at "the works". He was a Republican and finally grabbed the town away from the Democrats. He bossed Tiverton for the G.O.P. until a bookkeeper who had worked under him, George Lewis, helped to turn the town over again, this time to an "independent" coalition.

Crewmen of the pogy steamers were well fed at sea, but when they got back to Common Fence they fairly mobbed the cookhouse and two dining rooms of *AUNT CALISTA*. She was the only sister of the seven brothers. She married Abraham Frank Cottrell, superintendent of "the works", but everyone in the Stone Bridge territory called her simply Aunt Calista. Her cookery spread her fame. With her helpers she sometimes fed three hearty meals in a day to 300 savages.

Neighbors from both sides of the river called at her cookhouse on Saturday evenings to take home her Boston baked beans and brownbread. One of her stoutest admirers was Charlie Weser, port captain and man-of-all-work. At one feeding he would stow away a dozen hard boiled eggs and two plates of beans. When he went to bed he always hung a pailful of milk outside the window of his shack, just to have it handy should he feel an urge for refreshment during the night. A mouse, apparently with the same forethought, climbed into the pail one night and drowned. But was Charlie Weser one to waste a pailful of perfectly good milk?

In their age of affluence, several of the Church brothers built "mansions". Nat built his in '72 at the tip of Quaket Neck. He named it "Nanaquaket". It was a secluded spot and whenever business permitted Nat liked to spend Sundays there.

With the wind from north'ard, Quaket was verdant with nose-gays from "the works". Most Neckers got used to it, but one lady didn't. One morning she made a bouquet of sweet peas and sent it by messenger to "Nanaquaket". The innuendo wasn't lost upon Mrs. Church. Back to his starting point the messenger and his gift were sent packing.



Captain Nathaniel Boomer Church

In the later Nineties, several of the brothers took to making voyages around the world and that sort of thing. Nat himself was ready to retire. A place called "Promised Land" on Long Island was home port for the chief competitor, American Fisheries. One of American's directors was the famous New York Senator, Chauncey M. Depew, a man rich with spicy anecdotes. He and Nat proved compatible and in 1896 the Seven Brothers sold out and American took over at Common Fence.

It didn't run "the works" long. Within two years the pogy supply in Narragansett Bay had shrunk so much that Tiverton was used only for repairing boats and laying them up over winters. Men thrown out of work were offered jobs provided they went over to Long Island. Aunt Calista had a daughter who had married Charles J. Sumner. Mr. Sumner loaded 65 men on the pogyman *Ranger* and set out for Promised Land. All hands got roaring drunk on the way across and never did a pogy steamer have so merry a passage.



Menu

TIVERTON BAY OYSTERS

CELERY

OLIVES

ALMONDS

BEEJAY CHICKEN CONSOMME

MARYLAND TERRAPIN A LA WILOGAN

MALLARD DUCK—NANNAQUAKET

RHODE ISLAND WILD RICE

INDIAN CORN CROQUETTES

GRILLED SWEET POTATOES

PORT SALUT

ROQUEFORT CHEESE

CAFE NOIR

RUINART BRUT

BARLOW MADEIRA

WAWERNER HERRENBERG

CLOS DE VOUGEOT

WHITE ROCK

CAMP CIGARETTES

CORONA CORONA CIGARS

*Menu for Dinner Honoring Capt. Nathaniel Boomer Church,  
The Elastic Table, Lotus Club, New York, Dec. 8, 1915*

On November 26, 1898, the Saturday after Thanksgiving, began New England's most disastrous blizzard. Three pogy steamers were sunk at Tiverton, seven blown ashore, and not one of the boats between the bridges or at "the works" escaped a serious mauling.

This blow nearly ruined American Fisheries. It called Nat out of retirement, made him general manager and sole sales agent for the company's products. Since the markets for fish oil and guano were in New York, he opened an office in Manhattan and spent winters with his family in Brooklyn. He made friends who admired him as a host and amateur chef. The lessons he had learned as a boy-cook at sea and from Aunt Calista in her cookhouse were refined by association with New York's leading connoisseurs of cookery. He was admitted to the famous Lotus Club and welcomed to its "Elastic Table", the "Elastic" implying the ability to spring back or recover quickly.

#### RETURN OF THE NATIVE

The Odyssey tells how the ships of Ulysses put into North Africa and his men, going ashore, partook of the lotus fruit, which caused them so to enjoy happy indolence and forgetfulness that they had to be dragged back to their ships. No one could have dragged Nat

Church back to his pogy boats: he was having too good a time ashore.

Back at "Nanaquaket" for summers, he enlarged the mansion, beautified the grounds, and built a boat house and landing down by the inlet. Daughter Ruth was to have her wedding on the lawns in 1903. Lotus men from New York and other friends came from Brooklyn and all around, but threat of rain drove the ceremony inside. It was Tiverton's most notable social event of all time, however.

In 1907 Nathaniel retired for good. He was 62. "Nanaquaket" would be his all-year-round home now, but he traveled a good deal and often dropped in on his friends of the Lotus Club. His old "Elastic Table" gave a dinner in his honor in December, 1915 and from the menu it is easy to see that Nat must have had a lot to do with providing the provender.

Every summer he gave two clambakes at "Nanaquaket". One was for his New York friends, one for cronies closer to home. Herb Negus came early to make the fire and heat the stones. Over the stones he stowed clams, sweet corn, sausages and what-else in layers, heaped rockweed over them and hauled a tarpaulin over the top. While the bake steamed, who were these colored gentlemen arriving in tucks and black ties? They were the waiters from whatever Fall River Line boat happened to be in port. On the boathouse veranda they served Little Necks and canapés and kept the iceberg in the bowl of cherry bounce bouncing.

That CHERRY BOUNCE! Its principal ingredient was rum made from wild cherries. Never did an iceberg have a rougher passage.

A small cannon on the landing boomed — the signal for everyone to flock down to welcome Colonel Shepley arriving from Providence on his steam yacht. Not everyone flocked. And now they must flock back to the boat-house and upstairs for the clam chowder brought steaming hot to the tables with many a ringing cheer for Aunt Calista who had made it.

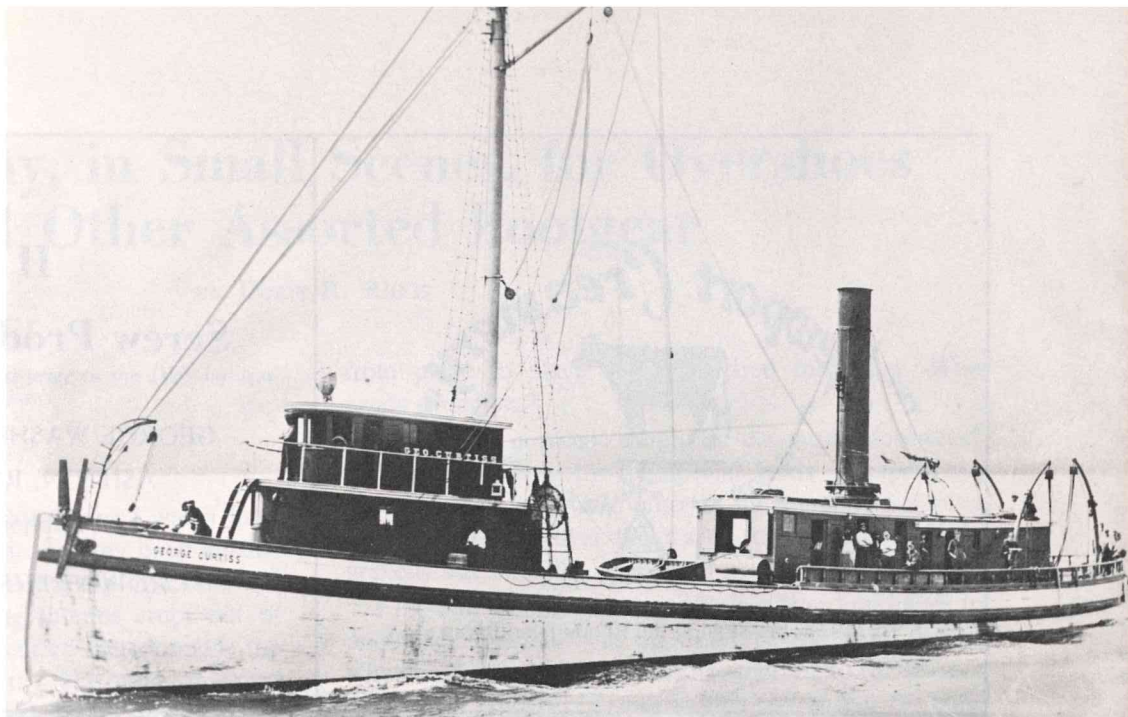
Now the tarpaulin was dragged aside, pans of clams, bowls of clamcakes, course after course bore down on the tables while champagne corks popped and beer frothed in tankards. Song and rhyme, and now George Gardiner rises and sings a rhapsody of his own composition. It has many stanzas and along about the tenth an eminent Fall River businessman slides gently down and under the table. George sings

*"How often, O, how often . . .*

Through the evening of life Nathaniel likes to sit in the window at "Nanaquaket" and gaze up river at what is left of the sheds at Common Fence. He sees the basin between the bridges filled with pogy boats; but



*The George Curtiss became a Rum Runner during prohibition. Later she sprang a leak and sank off the Hummocks. She was built about 1870.*



*Courtesy Charles J. Sumner*

only in imagination, for well he knows that long ago the *Seven Brothers* was towed outside and sunk; the *Humphrey* lost when she hit on Brenton's Reef; all the others on the bottom or the beach.

But old legends are not lost. I drive out on the Neck, stop to look in at "Nanaquaket" and think of it in the days of its glory. Nuns stroll solemnly over the grounds today, for after its master's death the place was sold to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fall River and became St. John's Convent.

I go down to the main road on the other side of the

bridge. The detour around Sin and Flesh Brook leads to the spot where the tavern once perched riskily between the narrow roadway and the tides. The stones of the old foundation are there. They are brown stones piled in irregular formation. Some of them are steps descending from roadside level to the flower garden of Jemima Boomer Church and the door into her basement kitchen. If I gaze long enough, the stones transform themselves into another Stonehenge commemorating the race of New Vikings that once peopled these parts.

*Courtesy Mrs Charles J. Sumner*



*Shrinkage of menhaden has been ascribed to spawning pauses, caused possibly by disease or over-fishing. What seemed a recovery from the latest pause occurred last season from Maine to the Carolinas, but if the deaths in the fall of thousands of young menhaden in Providence harbor had any relation to these cyclical events, that relationship has not been established.*

*Calista Church Cottrell  
and daughters  
Mary and Gertrude*