

Conservative Nantucket: A brief History | Panorama vs. Progress

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The island of Nantucket was initially inhabited from the Indian tribe of the Wampanoags. In the beginning of the seventeenth century that particular tribe numbered thousands in the area of Massachusetts. As we will see later on this essay, the Wampanoags will play a crucial role in today's Nantucket's conflicts. What is worth mentioning for now is the fact that the majority of the Wampanoag tribe population was eliminated as it had suffered a number of diseases that probably were caused as they came into touch with the first European colonists.

In 1641 the island of Nantucket was given from the English to Thomas Mayhew and his son, that were merchants from Martha's Vineyard. But it was Tristram Coffin with a number of fellows, that purchased the island from Thomas Mayhew for "thirty pounds and two beaver hats"¹, back in 1659, who initiated the settlement of English population in the island. The so-called "Nine original Purchasers" are considered as significant figures of the history of the island.

Today's monuments, relics or sites under preservation reveal the recognition of these portraits among the inhabitants of Nantucket and, at the same time, imply an attempt to construct and reinforce a particular historic character of this place. An interesting aspect about the first English-speaking inhabitants of Nantucket would be the particular way in which the first families had divided and parcelled the land as if they were real-estate operators.

But even if this sort of constructed emphasis on the place's history starts with the first New England's settlers, the true story of the island as we saw goes way back, since by the time the island was bought, it was already inhabited by more than two thousand Wampanoag Indians. Even if the Wampanoags disappeared because of diseases, the new settlers had the chance to obtain their knowledge on a

¹ <http://parkmangenealogy.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/page/3/>

field that would potentially become their main occupation, and this would be the art of whale-hunting.

In that context, whale-hunting was the dominant source of income for the families of Nantucket and the island was, for many years, regarded as a place that a large capital was preserved and which was coming from the ocean. And probably this reveals the reason why many buildings located in the center of downtown Nantucket were hosting banks, office spaces and large houses for wealthy residents. In addition to that, a great number of schools and institutions uncover the specific cultural identity of the Quakers. Besides a central orientation towards profit-making, the first inhabitants were also oriented towards principles such as education, religion and culture.

In that sense, an interesting point about the town of Nantucket is the function of the ever first buildings that were created. Even if the expansion of the town started from the harbor and the wharf, buildings related to capital, such offices, community halls, and banks. This feature would not actually be that surprising if one takes a closer look to the history of Nantucket and to its population. As Colin Woodard² states, New England and Massachusetts were first inhabited by the Yankees, a nation that conceived the New World as a “new Zion, a religious utopia in the New England wilderness”. The Yankees pursued the “greater good of the community” and put “great emphasis on education”. However, it seems like these ideals are not quite obvious as far as Nantucket is concerned. The existence of those buildings as the primary ones of the town’s expansion reveals a more complex identity about that place. Edward Byers³ conceives Nantucket as the place of the “antithesis” of the typical New England town. For him, Nantucket shows “a degree of market orientation, individualistic behaviour, wealth stratification and economic exploitation”. From that point of view, and even though a majority of buildings are related to culture and religion, a fact that would prove the settlement by the Yankees, the particular locations of the banks and the offices underlines the capital-oriented character of the town of Nantucket, and the aims of its inhabitants that would perceive the town as a place of making profit.

² Woodard, Colin, 1968-. American nations : a history of the eleven rival regional cultures of North America 2011

³ Byers, Edward. The "Nation of Nantucket" : society and politics in an early American commercial center, 1660-1820 1987

At 1838⁴ the petroleum industry started to undermine the primary occupation of the people in Nantucket. Premature industrialization had come to question old tradition and the relation between culture and technology. The possibilities that petroleum products offered were shaking the foundations of Nantucket economy. In 1869, the last whaling ship left Nantucket and never came back. Until that point, the best recourse of lamp oil for the entire nation was based on whales, but from this point forward petroleum started to become the dominant energy resource.

The whaling industry had come to an end and the island was faced a decline in population. The island of Nantucket, as also other parts of the state, faced the first consequences of industrialization where for the first time the relationship between the site of producing goods became different from the place where the products were consumed. Even if fordism would need another century to come, it could be claimed that petroleum had already laid the foundations for it. In addition to that, the town of Nantucket faced catastrophe from the Great Nantucket fire in 1846 that left hundreds of people homeless and destroyed a big amount of the Nantucket's fabric. The inhabitants of Nantucket had to come up with new commercial activities that would make it possible for them to preserve their capital.

Nantucket made the significant shift to tourism during the 1870s⁵, and this was a source of income that would lead the island's economic development until today. One of the most important factors that laid the foundations for that was the role of the Nantucket Steamboat Company. In 1870 the Company added a new steamboat to the Hyannis route and this created the slogan "two steamboats to Nantucket per day"⁶.

However, the shift towards tourism was also lead from a number of local newspapers and magazines that were promoting the island to the entire nation. But this could only come after generating an image of that place's history that would attract visitors from different parts of the country. On its own turn this would lead to a preservation of Nantucket's historic fabric and the idea of preserving a cultural

⁴ <http://www.nantucket.net/links/facts.php>

⁵ <http://www.nantucket.net/links/facts.ph>

⁶ Nantucket historical association webpage

heritage. This was the point when the first hotels and big resorts started to flourish and the economy of the island, once again, managed to maintain its capital.

Following the path of history, an important episode that took place in Nantucket from the 1910s to the 1940s would be the removal of the railroad that used to lead to Siasconset. In 1917 the railroad was dissolved and its mechanical parts were moved to France as equipment for the First World War. According to a newspaper during that time, the visitors and residents of the island that would want to travel to Siasconset would do that by automobile. However this shift from the railroad to the extent use of the automobile reveals the fundamental changes that were taking place in the United States during that era. This was the era of Taylorism, a period that was marked by the celebration of the car industry. The primary infrastructure of the United States would shift from the railroads to the motorways. And this was a fundamental change to the image of the cities.

Nantucket had to follow the same track, but the surprising aspect about Nantucket would probably be its capability of adapting to the changes pretty quickly. And this kind of adaptability, once again, reveals its particular characteristics regarding its capital-oriented identity. To be more particular, it should not be surprising that the inhabitants of Nantucket were in the position to afford to buy a car at exactly the point when car industries were established, since the island of Nantucket was always a place that gathered wealth and individual capitals. On the other hand, even if the residents of Nantucket were exposed to the use of the automobile, besides the removal of the railroad, there were not any other fundamental changes to the physiognomy of the Nantucket town that would be the result of the car. Nantucket tried to maintain its architectural character without any large-scale infrastructural interventions. In other words, it seems like modernity did not affect Nantucket in a broader sense. Nantucket was there only to absorb the benefits of modernity in financial terms, with the attraction of capitals. However, this reflects the most important change that the island faced precisely because of modernization, and that would be the transition from a fishing-based economy to a tourist oriented growth. Nantucket had already been transformed from a local village to a big attraction for the entire nation.

An interesting remark would probably be that the image of Nantucket from the 1910s to the 1940s seems to be close enough to

what Jane Jacobs⁷ tries to describe in her polemic view against planning. Nantucket would probably fit into Jane Jacobs' perspective about an ideal place where all social relations are undisturbed and everything happens within walkable distances. Nantucket would be that sort of a village where all inhabitants are known to each other and can interact in a free environment. However, this image would definitely be a constructed atmosphere that derives from wealthy classes that would hold their doors closed to any other class. And probably this would be the target of the Nantucket population, to attract particular classes that would fit the social particularities of the island. In that context social relations are actually disturbed, since the primary concern of the inhabitants would be to remove the working class populations to other locations.

The figure that actually contributed a lot to the establishment of Nantucket as an attraction during the 1950s was Walter Beinecke, who invested a big portion of his fortune to the island. Beinecke was honest enough to admit that he perceived preservation only as a way to attract capital and investments to the island. A remarkable fact was that after buying a big number of properties on the island at relatively low costs, he managed to sell the exact same properties after the preservation been adopted as a policy for millions.

Nantucket today consists of a conservative society that resists any kind of progress. The economy of the island is primarily based on tourism and seasonal residence. The island attracts a wide range of celebrities that occasionally move there for leisure. Population increases from ten thousand inhabitants during the winter to more than sixty thousand during summertime. In addition to luxury resort complexes and large housing constructions, a great number of supplementary facilities that are related to tourism, such as restaurants and boutique shops, expand simultaneously with the hotels. What is important to mention at this point is the fact that this growth and investment of capital has lead to a particular lifestyle that is based on wealth. And in fact this lifestyle is promoted through media and a series of local magazines in order to attract even more wealth. Statistics portrait the profile of the inhabitants, most of them are high-income, enjoying luxury consumerism, expensive cars and vacations to exotic places.

⁷ Hudak, Joseph. Re Jane Jacobs, review of The death and life of great American cities

Most of them have a graduate school education level and remarkably the average age of the population is particularly low to 31 years of age. Once Nantucket's main population was mainly migrant fishermen that were trying to make ends meet by working for the wealthy ship owners, but with the rise of tourism economy they were pushed to the outskirts until the point that they left the island. And this is a reality that the construction of heritage cannot overlook.

In this particular context it is not surprising at all for one to come across a New York times article entitled "Old Nantucket Warily Meets the New" that was written in 2005 and was describing a cultural conflict between the old settlers from the decades of eighties and nineties and their contradiction with the new wave of residents that has moved since the new millenium. The writer argues that the old settlers are completely discontent with the habits of the new ones regarding their consumption choices in terms of both style and the way in which they attempt to demonstrate their wealth.

The idea would be that once Nantucket inhabitants had a consistent cultural identity and even if they were rich enough, they definitely knew how to spend their money as an aristocracy class. On the other hand the habits of the new settlers only reveal their need to exhibit their social status through their fortunes.

However, the most important cultural conflict in Nantucket today is outlined to a completely another context that manages to shift the discourse of preservation issues from the urban fabric to the environment and natural resources. The battle dates back to the 1999 when there was a first plan for installing one hundred thirty offshore wind-turbines in Nantucket Sound. Their total height would be around five hundred feet and the power that was expected to be gained as a result of their installation would be around four hundred megawatts of renewable energy. This amount of energy would be capable to cover seventy five percent of the needs of the both Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket islands. However the locals were completely opposed to that for a series of reasons.

Firstly, it should be noted that the potential decline in tourism would drop down from one hundred million dollars to sixty. However, it seems that the locals have found a better excuse. The remaining population of the Wampanoag tribes claim that the installation of the turbines offend their spiritual values. According to them, the wind-turbines disturb their view to the sunrise that they claim is the time

when they need to pray. It seems that the Wampanoags are once more playing a very important role to Nantucket's history. Once they taught the natives the art of whale-hunting, an activity that would bring wealth to the island for more than one century, and once again today, through them, Nantucket struggles to maintain its position as an elite tourist attraction which is perceived as the only way for its inhabitants to reserve their capital. It is an irony of history however that the Wampanoag population once declined by diseases, alcohol consumption and servitude, that were all caused from the colonists.

Anytime Nantucket tries to configure its own identity, the locals follow the path of construction of history, a heritage that they try to promote as a value. This monocultural approach always turns back to findings that could be used for the construction of an ideal identity. It is Nantucket's identity to construct a part of history anytime that progress attempts to dialect with heritage. In that way, the Wampanoags' spiritual values were the perfect alibi for the monoculture of Nantucket to reject the windmills.

What is remarkable here is the shift of the notion of preservation from the fabric and the built environment of Nantucket to even more constructed and abstract principles of preserving nature as a value that is threatened by progress. According to Duncan⁸, this shift reflects a battle between different social classes. The ones that are wealthy nominate themselves as possessors of the aesthetic principles of an ideal lifestyle, and as an extension to that they perceive nature and landscape as their belongings. By doing so, their only intention is to maintain their power and wealth. In a world of progress the ones that cannot follow the changes shift back to the construction of notions, such as heritage, that offer them safety. Duncan⁹ quotes Harvey: "the revival of basic institutions[...] and the search for historical roots are all signs of a search for more secure moorings and longer lasting values in a shifting world".

Nantucket was always perceived as a land of profit. Since the island's first New England settlers to today's real estate developers. Nantucket would be a great example of a place where meaning and

⁸ Duncan, James S. and Nancy G. Duncan. "The Aestheticization of the Politics of Landscape Preservation." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 91, No. 2 (Jun., 2001): 387-409.

⁹ *ibid*

history are constructed in a way that promote the interests of their inhabitants. And unfortunately this is a monoculture that rejects any kind of progress. Progress and Nantucket are two words that cannot be related for now in any sense. Nantucket consists of a constructed identity and unfortunately this is this is the only way that it can be perceived.

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