



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# MONOGRAPH

## GEORGE AND FREDERICK HOMER

### NEW BEDFORD BUSINESSMEN AND ELIZABETH ISLAND SOJOURNERS

**C**urious about the Homer brothers, Cuttybunker Wyatt Garfield ordered a genealogy. This narrative builds on that summer 2002 report, by Janice G. Brockman, of North Easton, Massachusetts. Janice has her own Cuttyhunk connection. Her great grandmother, Mary Edith Smith, was born on Cuttyhunk in May 1878, when her mainland-based great-great grandfather, George Howland Smith, was working as a carpenter on the island. The CHS is grateful both to Janice, for uncovering so much of interest, and to Wye, for sharing the report.

**F**or a time in the 20th century, Cuttyhunk islanders referred to “Homer’s Neck,” the claw-shaped land mass stretching between Church’s Beach and the jetty. Across Buzzards Bay, New Bedford residents continue to speak of Homer’s Wharf. Attempting to round up bits of history of the Homer brothers, George and Frederick, we found an array of business ventures in the booming whaling port and, later, summer houses on the Elizabeth Islands of Cuttyhunk and Penikese.

The story begins in January 1838, on High Street in New Bedford, where George S. Homer was born to George (c. 1811–1888) and Mary Seabury (Cory) Homer. Frederick A. Homer was born in 1840. Their father George, who hailed from Boston, was a ship’s carpenter and builder of whaling vessels in New Bedford, then the whaling capital of the world. He married Mary, from nearby South Dartmouth, in 1835.

George and Frederick were educated in New Bedford. Presumably they had an entitled childhood as the 1870 census shows father George’s combined worth, including ample real estate, at \$60,000 – a sizeable amount for that era. In adulthood the duo often worked together, with George appearing to take the leading role. Successful mainland businessmen and real estate investors, they eventually owned farms on the Elizabeth Islands in Buzzards Bay.

From the census record we also learn that the brothers still lived at home in 1870, along with

their mother’s brother, Seabury Cory, a shipwright. At that time Fred and George shared the occupation of whale oil merchant. George worked as a clerk for Sylvanus Thomas, a sperm whale oil refiner and manufacturer. After Thomas’s death the Homers took over the prosperous business. The refinery “reached its zenith of success” – supplying whale oil for lamps and candlemaking – during the time George ran it under his name. With the discovery of petroleum in 1859, demand for whale oil began its decline in the last quarter of the century. George diversified, in both the ascendant textile industry and banking. He served as president of the Booth Textile Mill as well as a director of the Merchants National Bank for several years.

Both George and Fred tried their hand at the toy business when they took over Weeden Manufacturing Company in the 1880s. William N. Weeden of New Bedford founded the business in 1883, and the Homers may have been venture capitalists. A stock company was formed in July 1887, with a capital stock of \$50,000. At that time, it employed seventy-five workmen. Documents list George S. Homer as an officer.

An antique toy journal claims that Weeden “is



*Weeden toy steam engine. (On-line photo by H. Matthews)*



*George S. Homer (1838–1912)*



*Advertising card for whale oil, showing George Homer’s plant (lower left). (Photo: New Bedford Whaling Museum’s on-line archives)*



*View across Cuttybunk Pond, showing Homer Farm, (right) and Bosworth Farm (left), 1914.*



*Detail from a watercolor of Homer Farm, by Gertrude Talcott, 1936.*

responsible for perhaps one of the finest and most desirable toys ever produced, the Weeden's Live Steam Fire Engine." Weeden also produced miniature autos and steamboats as well as the now highly collectible tin mechanical banks, including "Ding Dong Bell," "Japanese Ball Tosser," and the Plantation Bank.

In the 1880 New Bedford Atlas, to which George was a contributor, and the later 1911 atlas, Weeden's address is listed as 1 Central Wharf, next to the Merchants Bank, which would have been adjacent to the end of Centre Street (on the north side of the current State Pier). The

maps also show several of the Homers' real estate holdings, which they managed together, and sometimes with their mother. According to his obituary, George also bought and developed the Seabury farm (perhaps owned by his mother's family or other relative) at the corner of Hawthorn and Page Streets.

More than 200 real estate transactions are listed in the Bristol County deeds office during George and Fred's lifetimes. One can only imagine how the brothers swaggered around the bustling port of New Bedford, which was for a time in the mid-1800s the wealthiest city in the world. There was even a bark, the *George S. Homer*, built in 1882, that berthed in New Bedford before eventually changing its homeport to Portland, Oregon.



The Elizabeth Islands clearly pulled the brothers from their mainland endeavors during their later years, which coincided with Buzzards Bay's era of sport among the rich. In 1883 George and Fred bought Penikese Island from the heirs of the Andersons who had sponsored Louis Agassiz and his founding of the Anderson School of Natural History in 1873. Closed at the end of the summer of 1874 after Agassiz's untimely death, the school and island had lain vacant until the Homers arrived.

The Homers then sold a one-half interest in the island to William McGrorty. These three men started a turkey farm. They used several small buildings on the east (smaller) side of Penikese. They left a caretaker, longtime Penikese resident, ship pilot and farmer, John Flanders, in charge of the island and their sheep and turkeys. George and Fred made the daily commute to New Bedford on their personal steam yacht. Friends were invited to Penikese to fish and occasionally to hunt the turkeys, geese and ducks. Edward Forbes, future owner of Nashawena, wrote of taking part in a turkey hunt in 1897.

There are only a few recorded events during the Homers' tenure on Penikese. A new caretaker was hired after Flanders drowned, at the age of 91, in 1891. In 1892, McCroarty sold his share back to the Homers. In the same year, the large building that had been the Anderson School laboratory and dormitory burned down.

The need for a leprosarium brought an end to the Homers' leisure and sporting use of Penikese. Having failed to negotiate the purchase first of land in Brewster, Massachusetts, then of Nashawena Island, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts took neighboring Penikese by eminent domain in July of 1905. The Commonwealth paid George and Fred \$25,000, and opened the leper colony in November 1905, much to the dismay of many locals.



Bachelor businessmen for most of their lives, the brothers married late and did not have children. Guarding his shared real estate holdings, George, in his early 60s, made careful prenuptial financial arrangements with his brother. He placed all of his Massachusetts real estate into trust with Fred in 1902 before he wed Nellie Cronin, daughter of Cornelius Cronin. He did, however, include Nellie in his will written shortly before his demise in January 1912.

Soon after their departure from Penikese, the Homer brothers purchased land and built a farm for use as a summer home on Cuttyhunk's Copicutt Neck. Copicutt (or Capiquatt) is said to be Wampanoag for "densely wooded/deep, dark woods"—hardly a fitting name for the farmed landscape of the early 1900s. The current Zimbone (formerly Oowler, Pettit) house is built on the site of the more easterly of the two original Homer farm buildings.

The general island memories passed down are of a working farm and productive garden. According to

Wye Garfield's boyhood memories, the shingles of the two-story farmhouse were painted alternately red and green. The house, set amid grazed fields divided by several stonewalls for sheep and horses, faced Cuttyhunk Pond. The farm could be seen from most anywhere on the other side of the pond, as could the neighboring George Bosworth farm.

Current Neck residents Bets and Gerrit Sanford claim their workshop is built on the old stone foundation thought to have been the Homers' sheep shed. Remains of a second shed-sized foundation lie nearby, with a third on a neighbor's land. A variety of apple trees, a quince tree, and a Concord grape arbor are likely left from the days of the Homers' active farm. Final evidence of the lost farm are the remains of a pump house and stone-lined dug wells surrounding two natural springs, probably the source of water for both the farmhouse and the farm animals, and perhaps for the neighboring Bosworth farm. A small Delco DC generator, one of several on the island, provided the Homers with lighting, remembers Alan Wilder.



The year 1912 saw major shifts for the inseparable Homer brothers. George died at the age of 74, in January. His obituary in the *New Bedford Evening Standard* attributed death to the strain from a "heavy cold... superinduced by heart failure." At the time of his death he lived at the corner of Grove and Borden Streets, New Bedford. He was remembered for "his charities toward the poorer people of" the city.

Later that year, 72-year-old, Fred married 64-year-old Fannie Shaw. After his brother's death and his own marriage, Fred departed with Fannie from the



familiar life along Buzzards Bay and settled in Boston. For at least the years from 1920–21 they lived at the renowned Hotel Brunswick on Boylston Street. A gathering place for the likes of Mark Twain, the Brunswick had an in-house orchestra. It was also the early home of radio station WBZ. Frederick died in October 1921, and Fannie just two months later. They are buried together in the Rural Cemetery in New Bedford.

### *Homer's Neck from the Point.*

*(Photo: Clifford W. Ashley, in  
New Bedford Whaling Museum's  
on-line photo archives)*

George's widow Nellie continued to summer on Cuttyhunk, perhaps as late as the mid-1930s when she died. Alan Wilder shared island lore of a temporary dock, put in and taken out by Cliff Kilburn who came over from a New Bedford shipyard aboard his boat *Swordfish*. Alan heard tell too, that Kilburn had a romantic involvement with Margaret Brewer, the long lived "Miss Brewer" who helped out for so many summers at the Cuttyhunk Church and library. Wye Garfield adds that Nellie's unnamed caretaker showed off by running his one-man speedboat, with a huge engine, "skimming like a dish or sled around the pond."



*Coast Guard boat breaking ice during WW II. The Homer farm is in the background, on the left, blended with the Bosworth farm.*



*Shared headstone in New Bedford's Rural Cemetery.  
(Photo: Allison Thurston)*

## SOURCES

*The Homer Brothers Narrative*, researched and written by Janice G. Brockman of North Easton, MA, 2002.

*Cuttyhunk and the Elizabeth Islands, from 1602*. Janet Bosworth, ed., Cuttyhunk Historical Society, 1993, p. 33.

*Penikese, Island of Hope*, by I. Thomas Buckley, 1997, pp. 33–4, 43.

*New Bedford Evening Standard*, Jan. 9, 1912: obituary of George S. Homer.

Research and assistance: CHS staff Shelly Merriam and Sandy Earle; Mystic Seaport Library; Allie Thurston, Paula DiMare, Alan Wilder, Wyatt Garfield and Ann Conway.

Photos from CHS collection unless otherwise noted. The editor notes that age and condition of some photos makes for compromised print quality.

The property was unoccupied for a time in the late '30s and early '40s and was not farmed again. Privet and bayberry filled in the fields. Locals used to tell stories of the plunder of plumbing piping by mainland fisherman, and the appropriation of some prairie windows by A.P. Tilton for *Sea Breeze*, the former Army mess hall that he and his brother Wilfred converted into a restaurant and dance hall. Four of the Homers' original picture windows – recaulked and preserved with storm windows – remain in *Sea Breeze*, now the home of the Conways.

“Tack” Hardwick, a Harvard football star who had come to know Cuttyhunk as a fisherman, bought the Homer property during World War II. He tore down the farmhouse and, building on the old foundation, added a wing to the west and a boathouse by the pond. Tack’s lovely Spanish wife, remembers Wye, owned a burro that she rode across Church’s Beach to town. The death of Tack by drowning, after he suffered a heart attack while quahogging along the shore of the pond, was an unfortunate event in Homer’s Neck history.



Nellie Homer carried on management of the mainland real estate. From 1909 to 1929 she increased her interest in Merrill’s Wharf, New Bedford, from 50% to 100%. Built by Captain Edward Merrill in the 1840s, it was the departure point for early Cuttyhunk ferries (just south of the current ferry dock). The 1922 silent movie “Down to the Sea in Ships” was filmed on location in New Bedford, with scenes shot here. This movie offered the breakout role for the future “It Girl” Clara Bow as Dot Morgan, 16-year-old granddaughter of Charles W. Morgan.

Two years later, the *Wanderer* set sail from this same wharf and was wrecked on the west end of Cuttyhunk. Merrill’s Wharf, the largest in New Bedford until the State Pier was built, saw the last whaling vessel depart in 1927, 80 years after it saw the first.

Just prior to the stock market crash in 1929, Nellie mortgaged the wharf. Most likely because of the crash, she was unable to pay the note on the mortgage and it was declared delinquent. The City of New Bedford bought the wharf at auction in 1936. Now called Homer’s Wharf, it lives on in an active historic waterfront district, a legacy to George and Frederick Homer’s vitality. Perhaps some will choose now to revive the topomoniker “Homer’s Neck” on Cuttyhunk Island.

LOUISE GARFIELD BACHLER



*Homer’s Wharf as it looks today (top) and in the 1960s.*  
(Photos: Virtual Globetrotters; New Bedford Whaling Museum on-line archives)



*Aerial map of New Bedford waterfront, showing Homer’s Wharf.* (Internet photo: MapQuest)



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Box 181, 23 Tower Hill Road,  
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Museum Director: Alexandra Earle  
Editor: Louise Garfield Bachler