



## CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# A Fertility Symbol from Cuttyhunk

BY JANET ADAIR WILDER

A scattering of Wampanoag Indian artifacts occupied a glass case in the Cuttyhunk Historical Society's museum exhibit marking last year's 400th anniversary of the English landing on Cuttyhunk Island.

The artifacts were all surface finds from Cuttyhunk and Penikese, two of the seven major, and many minor, islands making up the glacial chain that begins off Woods Hole, MA, and separates Buzzards Bay from Vineyard Sound.

They included a stone chisel or gouge, a weight (sinker) for holding down a fishing net, a projectile (arrow) point of white quartz and four stone pestles, all from the Penikese Island collection of Cape Codder Thomas Buckley, and from Cuttyhunk, a grinding bowl on loan from the Jacques family, a fragment of a steatite (soapstone) pot, three projectile points and what is described as "a fertility symbol made of sandstone."

The fertility symbol, or phallus, is 13 inches tall and weighs 12 pounds. It appears to be a sculptural work of primitive art of a ceremonial nature and probably predates by hundreds of years the landing at Cuttyhunk in 1602 by Bartholomew Gosnold and company in the English ship, Concord.

Its discovery on a south side beach in 1954 and how 48 years later, in 2002, it made its appearance in the historical society's exhibit, is an interesting saga.

The chain of events began in September of 1954 when my Cuttyhunk friend, islander Doris Tilton Bosworth, stumbled over the stone phallus while beach-combing the south side after Hurricane Carol.

Carol had come and gone on August 31, leaving devastation in its wake. It hit with little warning, the last

storm to do so before the weather service woke up and initiated present day forecasting.



*The stone fertility symbol found by Doris Tilton Bosworth in 1954 after Hurricane Carol.*

“The island is a mess, reported Doris in a phone call to me at my home in Braintree, MA. I learned that both of the small cottages, one or the other of which my husband and I had been vacation-renting since the mid-40’s, had been blown off the Point and were lying on their sides across the inner harbor in eight feet of water off Copicut Neck. Boats of all kinds, both sail and motor, torn from their harbor moorings, lined the Neck Beach, sails in tatters, their planking stove in. Dinghies, skiffs and private docks were kindling on the shores.

“I went beachcombing after the storm,” said Doris, “and I have a surprise for you. It’s of an archaeological nature,” she teased, well aware of my amateur activity and membership in the Massachusetts Archaeological Society.

“Come down to the island,” she invited, “and see for yourself.” Next day, I did.

SURPRISED! I’ll say.

When I rolled out the 13-inch stone phallus from its hiding place under her sofa in the living room of her small house off Broadway, I was surprised, astounded and speechless with awe.

When I recovered, the first thing I pointed out was that the annual fall meeting of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society at what was then the Bronson Museum in Attleboro (now the Robbins Museum in Middleborough) was soon to occur and that the phallus was likely to create a sensation if it could be exhibited.

First, it was necessary to document its existence. In the excitement of my spur-of-the-moment trip to Cuttyhunk, I had left behind my camera and Doris had no film in hers.

“Wilfred!” Wilfred Tilton, Doris’s cousin, was the answer. He owned a Polaroid, it turned out, and he joined us in Doris’s back yard.

We draped a bed sheet over Doris’s clothesline to serve as background. Doris rummaged around in her kitchen closet and came up with an old fashioned wooden yardstick which we propped up beside the phallus to measure its height in inches. Wilfred used up the small amount of film he had on hand and we were in business – archaeological business.

I carried the phallus off the island in a resurrected Boston bag and waved goodbye to Wil and Doris as the Alert chugged from Cuttyhunk’s main dock to Pier 3 in New Bedford where I got in my car and drove home to Braintree.

Immediately, I wrote a letter to Bill Fowler, one of the executives of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society, enclosing a Polaroid snapshot and information about where the phallus had been found at the base of a south side cliff on Cuttyhunk after Hurricane Carol.

Doris, a fisherwoman of note and an experienced surf caster, had beachcombed and cast the south side for many of her 29 years, and was pretty sure that the phallus was new to the beach. She surmised it surfaced as the result of the cliff’s battering by 20-foot waves.

Both of us examined the cliff thoroughly and hopefully during my visit and found no other artifacts of any kind in the vicinity.

When I got a letter back from Bill Fowler, all he could tell me was that the phallus was a fertility symbol possibly used in a planting or harvest ceremony by Indians on Cuttyhunk. Looking at the photo I'd sent, I nearly "died" of embarrassment. Not one of us, Doris, Wilfred or I, had noticed that the yardstick advertised in black, capital letters, HOME FURNISHINGS - WING'S NECK DOMESTICS.



*Doris Tilton Bosworth, the daughter of the late islanders Charles and Sarah Tilton. She was the sister of Charles, Jr., and Sarah Tilton Winterbottom.*

If Bill, himself, was aware of it, which I doubt, he would never have mentioned it, he being a gentleman of the old school. It must have been bad enough, corresponding about a verboten subject with a female he hardly knew.

This was the same reaction I got when I brought the artifact to the fall meeting of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society. I gave it to Ken Ayres, a fellow member of the then South Shore Chapter, MAS, to carry in. It was set up in a small room off to the side of the main floor of the Bronson Museum where it was treated like forbidden erotica by the mostly austere and serious male archaeologists who left their wives to "sneak a peek" - emerging pink-faced, bright-eyed and flustered.

The Puritan ethic seems to carry over in New England to this day, despite television.

The phallus went back to Doris's house where it languished for years. When she died, very prematurely, in 1960, her husband, Lloyd, who enjoyed a successful career as a fishing guide, eventually married again. His new wife was Janet Bosworth who became the founder and curator of the Cuttyhunk Historical Society, and in whose attic the phallus reposed until the Historical Society was established in 1978. Again, it was kept in obscurity due to its embarrassment potential; its possible propensity to offend the righteous.

With the 400th anniversary of the 1602 landing on Cuttyhunk by the English ship, Concord, the Museum Committee, now of a liberal constituency, took courage last year and exhibited it - with almost

predictable results. According to Society statistics, more than 4000 visitors saw it, noted it privately, and in only a few instances, acknowledged it. The mystery of its origin is still a matter of conjecture, and its true age undetermined.

A picture of the phallus graces the back page of the Fall 2001 Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society. The caption states: "Previous research by the Society suggests it was made of 'European stone,' and perhaps dated from about 950 AD, but in view of a paper by Russell Gardner, the late Wampanoag Tribal Historian, it seems more likely it is of Native Origin."

In a 1998 Bulletin article entitled "Anthropomorphic and Fertility Stone-works of Southeastern New England: a native interpretation," Gardner wrote: "Here in New England there is a special class of stoneworks represented that has, to date, received little notice or interpretation by the archaeological and anthropological disciplines."

His paper deals with these anthropomorphic and fertility forms located on mainland sites in the southeast region. The Cuttyhunk phallus is unique, having come from an island site.

"These stoneworks," Gardner continued, "are found in the form of manitou or god-stones of various sizes, effigy pestles, phallic forms, and Archaic period plummet types. Historically, archaeologists have recognized only utilitarian importance in many of these forms.

"I suggest," wrote Gardner, "that it is more likely that they have spiritual implications that relate directly to native archaic concepts of the interrelation of things animate and inanimate, and the perpetuation and regeneration of life through sexuality, concepts surviving through our oral tradition today."

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*Janet Wilder has been a professional journalist and photographer for many years. She is the author of another Historical Society monograph, "Broadbill - Boom to Bust?"*

