



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MONOGRAPH

THE CHURCH FAMILY OF CUTTYHUNK

Although I have stayed in the original Church house every summer since 1953, I knew little more than the names of some of the people in the sepia photos left behind. The curiosity of my wiry 10-year-old niece, Caroline Garfield, who was sure the attic held clues if not treasures, prompted her thorough search under the eaves in August 2007. Additional research in CHS files and at the New Bedford library allowed us to compose this portrait.



*Benjamin Church
(1639–1718).
Wikipedia photo*

From Plymouth Rock to Church's Beach, the Church family participated in New England traditions on coastal waters and farms, and in small town government.

The last Church to reside on Cuttyhunk, Charles Benjamin, was nine generations removed from the *Mayflower* passenger Richard Warren, whose daughter Elizabeth married Richard Church in 1635. Richard was Plymouth's second wealthiest man, according to 1632 records. A landowner and carpenter who helped build the first church in Plymouth, he was father of 14 children, including Benjamin and Nathaniel.

To clarify any confusion among readers of Nathaniel Philbrick's recent bestseller, *Mayflower*, the Cuttyhunk Churches were descended from Richard's son Nathaniel Church (1642–1688), who owned a farm on the North River in Scituate. His charismatic older brother Benjamin (1639–1718) was a soldier in King

Philip's War in 1675–6. Started by the sachem King Philip (born Metacom), son of Massasoit, the war decimated the native population in southeastern New England. Featured in Philbrick's book, Benjamin "forged an identity that was part Pilgrim, part mariner, part Indian, and altogether his own."

The Church line was strong, with large families the norm and coastal Massachusetts the common locale. As we follow Nathaniel's branch, we meet two Josephs, three Charles's and another Benjamin. Nathaniel's son Capt. Charles Church (c.1683–c.1727) was part owner of a 22-acre Plymouth oyster bed. He drowned along with his cousin Constant in 1727 near Fall River.

Charles's grandson Capt. Joseph Church (1742–1816), a mariner and Revolutionary War soldier, also drowned when his wood-carrying sloop went down between Fall River and Providence. The empty vessel was found with the light in the cabin. Joseph's widow Sarah, "became insane and did not recover her reason until a short time before her death," according to notes in a detailed Church genealogy.

One of Joseph's grandsons, Lemuel Church (1826–1850), broke the family tradition of staying rooted in Massachusetts. He headed west during the California Gold Rush, while his older brother Benjamin took up island life.



Born in Fall River in 1814, Benjamin Barber Church married Amelia Lovel Chase of Martha's Vineyard in 1835. In the 1850s, his was the first of what would be three generations of the Church family on Cuttyhunk. By 1858, he had completed a house overlooking Buzzards Bay, shored up by beams from ship timber driftwood, and was the head of one of seven families on Cuttyhunk.

His diverse occupations were typical both of the time and of the Church family. As a pilot for whaling vessels traversing Buzzards Bay, bound to and from New Bedford, Benjamin, from under a dark straw hat, scanned the horizon from Lookout Hill. Like other islanders, he also rescued at least one



Pilot Benjamin Barber Church, scanning the waters for ships from atop Lookout Hill, Cuttyhunk, circa 1870s.



*Charles Cook Church's
lock box.*

cargo, the log wood off the *Anna Mitchell*, bound from Santo Domingo to Boston, and wrecked on the east side of Cuttyhunk in December 1875.

Benjamin Church was a central player in the formation of Gosnold Township in 1863–64. Fifteen Elizabeth Islanders, including Benjamin and the forceful John Forbes of Naushon, successfully petitioned for a split from Chilmark. One notice of the first town meeting was posted at Church's house on Cuttyhunk. A founding selectman, assessor and school board member, Benjamin set up a home office, installed one of the first island telephones, and served the new community from 1864–72.

From 1865–73, records show Benjamin's holdings of land, outbuildings, and livestock (a few cows, oxen and pigs, and up to 100 sheep). Besides the Cuttyhunk farm and homestead, he owned real estate on the mainland and held substantial interest in ships, including the schooner *B.B. Church* and the bark *C.W. Morgan*. He died in 1883 of heart disease and was the first to be interred in the Church family plot in the Rural Cemetery in New Bedford.

Charles Cook Church (1838–1909) was the oldest of Benjamin and Amelia's four children. After the death of his first wife Cordelia, mother of little Cordelia, in 1867, Charles C. married Aroline Mills and fathered Charles Benjamin (1871–1932) and Abbie Matia (1874–1903). Elected selectman in 1873, Charles filled his father's seat. His brother Albert Franklin Church, a master mariner, was the third Church listed on Gosnold's 1875 voting list.

Charles C. received a Reward of Merit from the Humane Society of Massachusetts in March 1873 for "humane exertions" in rescuing the captain and crew of the cement-carrying schooner *G.W. Kimball*, the wreck of which he subsequently bought at auction for \$440.



*Headstone of Benjamin B. Church (1814–1883) in
the Church family plot, Rural Cemetery, New Bedford.*

Charles spent a good part of his working life on Cuttyhunk. The 1880 Census listed his occupation as fisherman; in 1900, as lobsterman. He also expanded the family farm, starting the Church poultry business.

As a child in the first decade of the 1900s, Cuttyhunker Marion

Smith recalled that she was frightened of "Grandpa" Charles Church, who was heavily whiskered. From the detailed accounting of his estate after his death in 1909, this islander clearly had made substantial investments in mainland mills, banks and utilities.



Combining the names and inheriting the talents of his forbears, Charles Benjamin Church was born on Cuttyhunk on August 8, 1871. Married first in 1891 to Henrietta "Etta" Greene of New Bedford, he had three offspring, Ethel (1892–1974), Howard (1899–1979) and Norman (1895– c.1958).

Evidence is not particularly generous for Charles's support of his family, though he left behind a few receipts for pants and shoes for his sons. In a 1911 letter, Etta described their impoverished living situation in New Bedford and implored Charles to send more money. Etta was granted a divorce in 1911, for desertion in 1905. Their children apparently spent little time on the island.

Ethel wrote a plaintive letter in 1913 nearly begging her father to pay a debt incurred by her brother Norman who had typhoid fever. Correspondence from Charles's lawyer, Pardon Thompson, concerning payments (shared with half-sister Cordelia Church Booth) from their father's estate, mentioned an occasional small allowance to one of his children.

Formerly a New Bedford policeman, Charles kept his dues paid up but became a tax inspector for American Woolen Mills, possibly after meeting William Wood, the company's president who built Avalon on Cuttyhunk in 1909. The job took Charles around New England and often to Boston where he stayed in Young's Hotel, Parker House and other establishments from which he "borrowed" embossed silverware still in the Church house kitchen today.

Charles proved to be a successful businessman, investing in American Woolen and carefully managing his inheritance. In 1914, he received mail at Box 91 at the Cuttyhunk Post Office, and paid \$17.35 real estate taxes on property valued at about \$2,700.

1913 was a year of milestones for Charlie Church. He had taken up with divorcee Louise Wilhelmina Kelley, said by some to be a Boston vaudeville showgirl, and by others an actress or circus performer. Their June 1913 wedding made the front page of the *New Bedford Evening Standard* which also detailed an extended honeymoon to Niagara Falls and the White Mountains. The new Mrs. Church's arrival on Cuttyhunk was met with great

expectation. Islander Louise Garfield quoted her claim that the islanders “expected me to have spangles or be dressed in a circus Turkish costume.” Mrs. Church is remembered as a natural storyteller, and was not fazed by island life. In a letter to a friend, she reported that she had shot a rat.

The house was presumably a livelier and homier place once Louise moved in. Saved receipts from New Bedford shops indicate the immediate purchase of new featherbeds and major refurbishing of the Church house over the next few years, including a 4-burner stove costing \$11.50, and a Victrola and records. Islanders — those who did not disapprove of Louise — came over to listen to Caruso and other vocalists, and Louise played the piano.

From bits of paper stored in the attic, we learned of requests to New Bedford merchants for rum, brandy and martini mixings; Lorraine Coffee; several aluminum teakettles; union suits; and plenty of steaks and bratwurst. Ample seeds were ordered for what must have been magnificent vegetable gardens.

The Churches raised Irish and red terriers named Fluffy, Teddy and Duke and Duchess; and Rover, a Newfoundland. In 1927 there was an Irish Water Spaniel purchased from a New Brunswick breeder.

Louise’s brother Carl F. Kraut, a traveling salesman from New York, visited and fished with Charlie. Louisa C. Kraut, Louise’s widowed mother, rounded out the household until her death in 1915. The discovery of her urn in the attic by my father, Wye Garfield, in 1952 was a mild shock and fodder for many a tale.

Charlie Church caught the world’s record striped bass, weighing 73 pounds, on August 17, 1913. He went with his longtime caretaker and fishing companion, Louis Abrams, in a 13-foot smack, out through Canapitsit and caught the fish around mid-day near Nashawena. Charlie’s son Howard, age 14, who waited with the crowd at the dock, quoted his father, “My God, Louie, I’ve got a record.” This long-standing rod and reel record, registered with *Field and Stream*, was tied off Cuttyhunk’s Sow & Pigs Reef in 1967, and broken in 1982 with a 78½ pound catch in New Jersey.

Church’s 16" high copper trophy was on display for years at the former Allen House and is now a lamp in a private home. Incredibly, Charlie again pulled in a first-prize bass, weighing 53 pounds, the following summer. In his own enthusiastic account he wrote: “Well boys, all I can say is: Come down any

time...I’ll be here and will give you all the points I know free, for I have fished here 29 years.” To further his fishing options, Charlie, at his own expense, in 1914 put out a fishing stand on Cuffe Rock between his house and the West End.

By the 1920s the Church Farm was still the only residence down the hill from Island Lodge and toward Homer’s Neck. Flocks of geese, turkeys, and chickens had the run of the property. Islanders complained of turkeys that left the confines of the fences, wandered to rooftops in the village, and sometimes left droppings that spoiled cistern water.

The farm included several small buildings, and a dwelling on the rocky shore. Known as the Lower Bungalow, it was washed away in the Hurricane of 1938. The current Twichell house, up the hill from the main house, is said to have been built from lumber, salvaged from former turkey shelters, which still has staples used for old chicken wire.

Like his father and grandfather, Charles B. served for many years (1911–1928) on the Gosnold select



Charles B. Church (left) displays his prize bass with boatman Louis Abrams, August 17, 1913.



The Church Farm, circa 1920. Note the fence, small outbuildings and the Lower Bungalow on the shore, which was washed into the bay in the 1938 hurricane.



Gosnold Town “Mothers,” Louise W. Church (left) and Lizzie Allen (right), enjoying a game of *Chinese Checkers*, 1943.

board and in other public offices — alongside Fred Allen, David Bosworth, Granville Jenkins, Harold Deane and others. The years following World War I were a time of expansion of Gosnold municipal services such as roads, a water system, wharfs, and a town hall.

As he aged, Charlie showed a stronger curmudgeonly streak. He used his lawyer Frank

Vera to collect \$1,000 from Diamond Taxi of New Bedford in 1926 for a knee injury, lost wages and lost glasses, after an accident one rainy night on the way back from the police station.

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In 1927, as Registrar of Voters, Church challenged some islanders’ residency status for voting purposes. Dated transcripts of interviews with fishermen, employees of the Wood family, and other transient island workers indicate that this was a prolonged undertaking. It caused a divide among islanders and probably brought Church’s tenure on the select board to an end. Coincidentally, Gosnold’s 1923 voting list now included Louise W. Church, housewife, after Women’s Suffrage began in 1920.

Following Charlie’s death in 1932, Louise continued to live in the Church house until her own death in the late 1940s. She left behind a sturdy wooden recipe box, heavy on cakes — gingerbread, chocolate, and sponge — pies, and relishes. Alan Wilder remembers her daily walks to the post office and visits, games and meals with Sarah Tilton and Lizzie Allen at the Allen House. Louise participated in the community, serving on the town library board and school committee.

Alan also recalls Clarence Allen delivering 55-gallon barrels of oil to the Churchs’ oil furnace, one of the first on the island. Up the hill, Mabel Black, Louise’s relative, and later “the two professors” from the Midwest came to stay.

Louise kept Louis Abrams as caretaker, and he, too, may have lived in the current Twichell house. Some remember that Louise and Louis made wine from the prolific Concord grapes, and of course there were rumors of other shared activities. Island neighbor Margaret Thurston recalled that Louise

“had a little boat about the size of a bass boat and Louis Abrams did all her errands, coming in and out of [the Cove], which was open all the time then, with his dog up in the bow.” Margaret also said Bert Kelsey, Louise Church’s nephew, visited and started the entertaining Cuttyhunk summer variety shows.



In 1952, the property left the Church family after nearly 100 years and was divided. Wyatt Garfield, who had summered on the island since 1929, bought the main house (and the generator house and boathouse), from the Pulaskis who had inherited it from Mrs. Pulaski’s Aunt Louise. Up the hill, the David Twichell family claimed the barn and summer cottage. All of these buildings are still standing, and several new ones have been built for expanding families.

Wye described the dark, fabric-draped interior of the deserted main house, “decorated in attractive but over-furnished late-Victorian style.” The Garfields cleared the attic of mysterious trunks of human hair and the bulk of seemingly useless boxes of papers. They kept many shelves of records and the aging upright black piano to entertain their six children. The marble-topped kitchen table still is used daily, while several chests and glass lampshades upstairs carry memories of the Church family.

Today the name of Charles B. Church lives on in legends of bass fishing, while fishermen cast from the rocky shore by the former Lower Bungalow, and sojourners enjoy the usually sandy beach, once called Church’s Bend and now Church’s Beach, on Cuttyhunk.

LOUISE GARFIELD BACHLER



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