



View of the Old Mill from South Mill Street, watercolor by unknown artist, 1910s

GIFT OF ROBERT WAGGAMAN, 70.21.2

Old Mill

Abigail Swain climbed the steep path up the Popsquatchet Hills to the new mill where white sails whipped in the southwest breeze, turning the shaft that set the interior gears in motion to activate the granite mill-wheels.

Her husband, Eliakim, and his partner, John Way, supervised the grinding of sack after sack of corn, producing the yellow meal used in every island kitchen. Operating a mill was a new venture for Eliakim, who owned shares of two sloops, a wharf, a try-house, and a fish house. Now he had a land-bound venture, one tied to the agricultural roots of the island. Swain and Way were the first owners of the Old Mill. Tradition tells us that a man named Nathan Wilbur built the mill in 1746, but there are more unanswered questions about this Nantucket Historical Association property than about any other.

We wish Abigail could have described the mill in detail for us, because we aren't certain what it looked like in the mid-eighteenth century. The mill as it stands today is a smock mill — a tapering

ADDRESS

50 Prospect Street

CONSTRUCTED

1746

DISTANCE FROM

WHALING MUSEUM

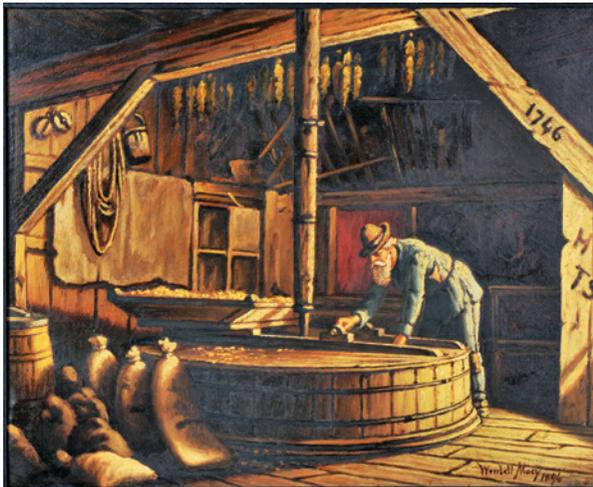
.8 miles



octagonal tower with wind vanes that project from a rotating cap. Yet two important early depictions of Nantucket's windmills — a 1772 map by James Tupper and a circa 1811 oil painting by Thomas Birch — show it as a post mill, a more ancient design where the entire structure, elevated on a stout post, could be rotated to face the wind. No written records survive that say the mill was rebuilt, and the structure of the mill itself offers no clues.

Some accounts of the Old Mill relate that it was framed with "oaken beams washed ashore from shipwrecks"; others declare that the lumber came from oak trees growing just across the street in what is now known as Dead Horse Valley. Whatever the true history of the mill may be, the 1746 date of construction is based on numbers inscribed on the stone doorstep, the one piece of evidence that appears irrefutable.

Other surviving early windmills on Cape Cod are, like the Old Mill, smock mills, built to withstand strong winds in exposed locations. Millwrights were as specialized as shipbuilders, with advanced carpentry and engineering skills, but Nathan Wilbur, called both a mariner and a hired millwright in histories of the Old Mill, may be a figment of popular imagination. One unsubstantiated tale suggests that he was



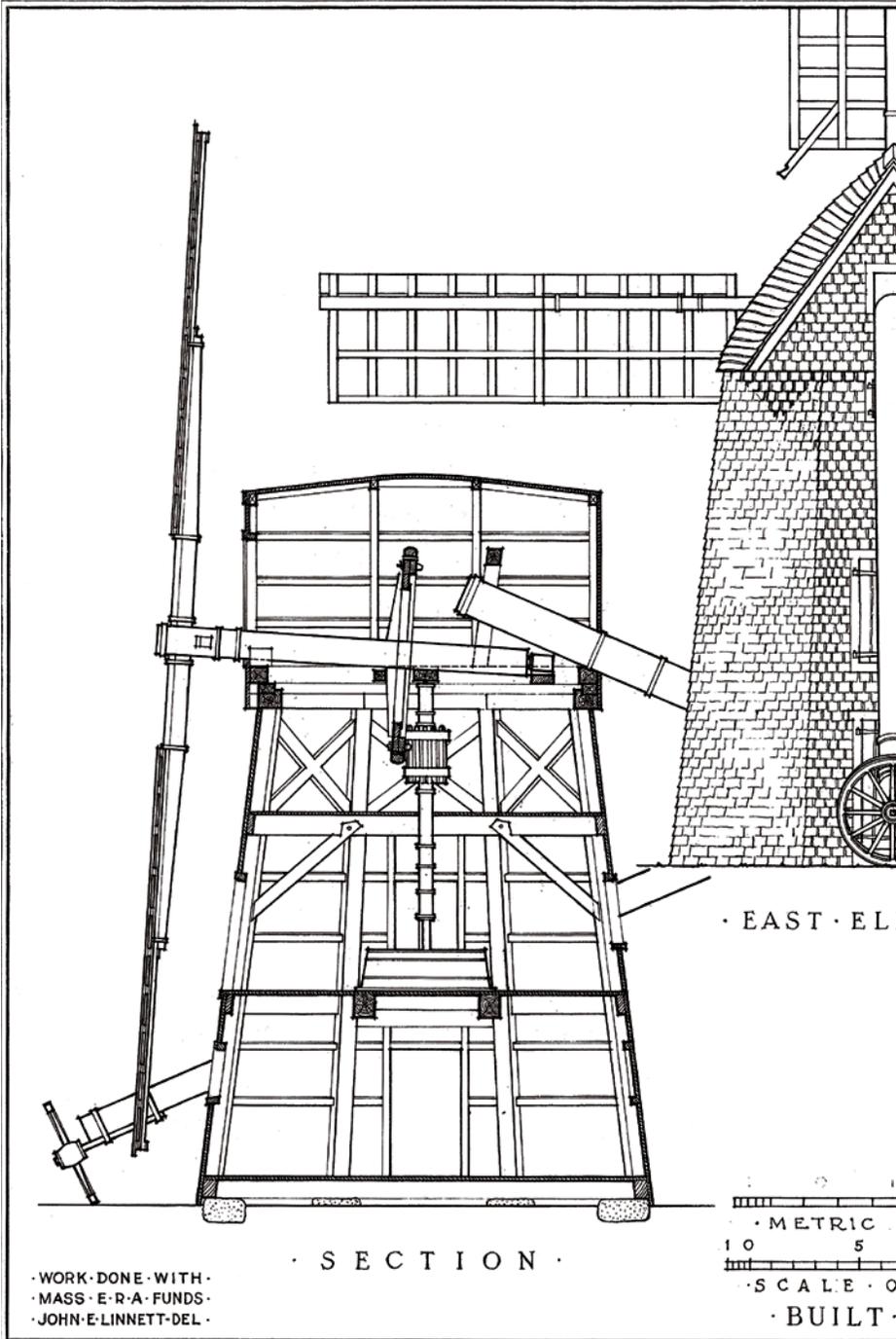
Old Mill Interior, by Wendell Macy, 1894

1909.34.1

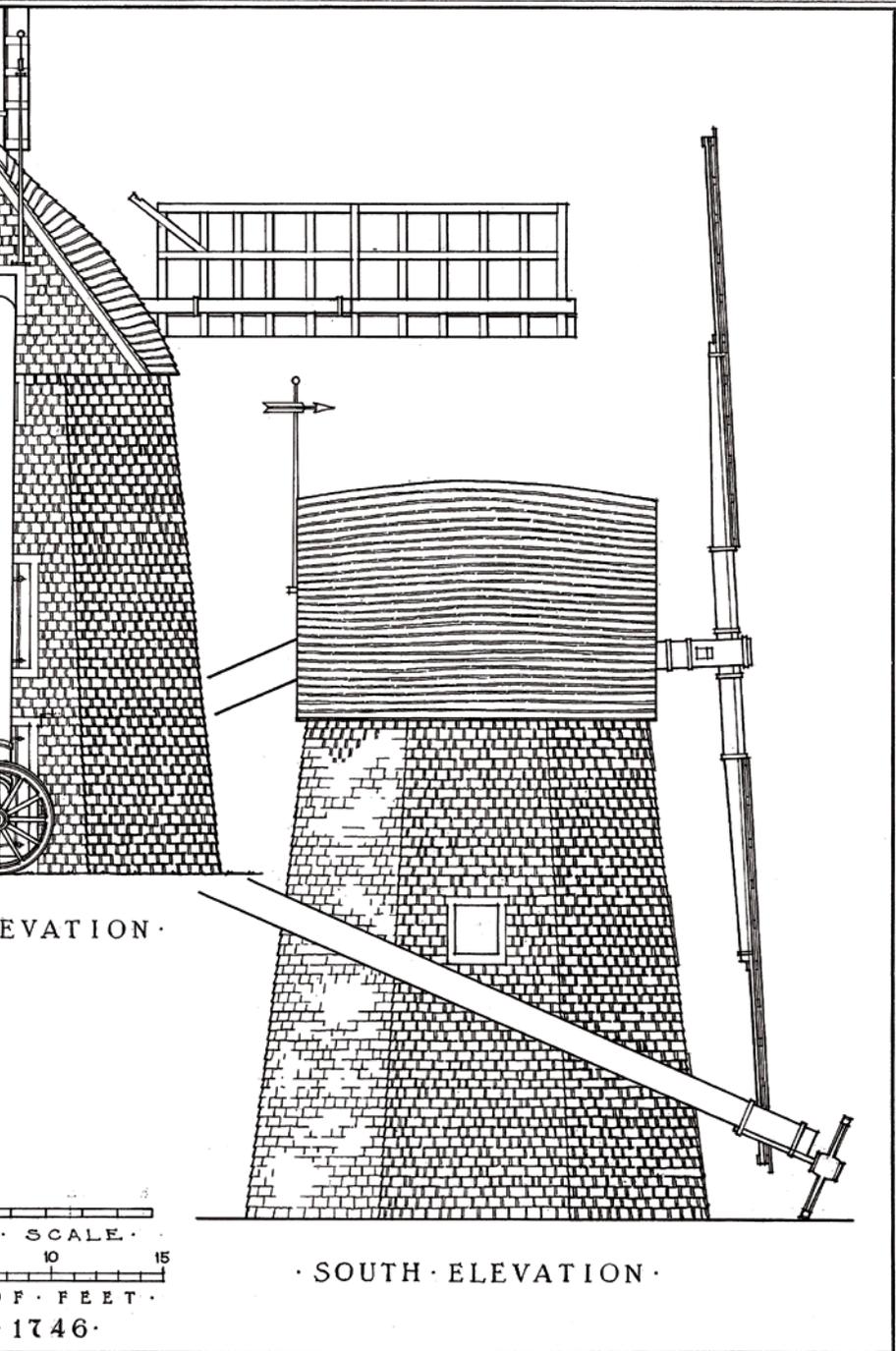
paid in advance for constructing a mill on Nantucket, but was robbed and murdered when he took the money to the mainland to purchase materials. Another storyline suggests that he was a mariner who had seen Dutch windmills and was inspired to replicate one. That story is later embellished with the addition of the "fact" that he used tools he brought to the island from England and was taunted by islanders who ridiculed him and failed to embrace his project. The character of mariner millwright Nathan Wilbur seems to have been developed in the late nineteenth century as a folktale, each telling adding a little more color to the myth of the origin of one of our favorite landmarks.

The Old Mill is a grist mill, used to grind corn. That there were five windmills on Nantucket demonstrates the size and value of the island's corn crop (which may have been supplemented by imported corn) and tells us something about the diet of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Nantucketers, who depended on Johnny Cake, Hasty Pudding, hominy, Indian Pudding, cornbread, and cornmeal mush as tasty staples to round out a meal of mutton or chowder. Near the Old Mill on the Popsquatchet Hills stood the Barnabus Bunker Mill, built by Richard Macy in 1723 and blown up with dynamite in 1836; the Spider Mill, built in 1759 and taken down around 1840; and the Red Mill, built in 1770 and taken down in 1859. (All of these construction dates are unsubstantiated.) Farther away, on New Lane just south of the New North Cemetery, stood the Round Top Mill of 1802, removed in 1873. During both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the vanes on the mills on the Popsquatchet Hills were turned in one direction or another to warn Nantucketers at sea of British privateers maneuvering nearby. A popular legend has it that during the Revolution a cannon ball shot from a man-of-war passed through the mill and landed within a foot of the miller.

The mill may have been a business investment for Swain and Way, who then hired a miller to run the operation. When Swain died, he left his share of the mill to his sons, Timothy and Charles, and other heirs; likewise, John Way left his share of the mill to his wife, Abigail, and after her death to his sons, John and Seth. In 1829, heirs of the original owners sold the mill to Jared Gardner (1775–1842) for forty dollars, Gardner's estimate of the value of the mill as firewood. Jared was a



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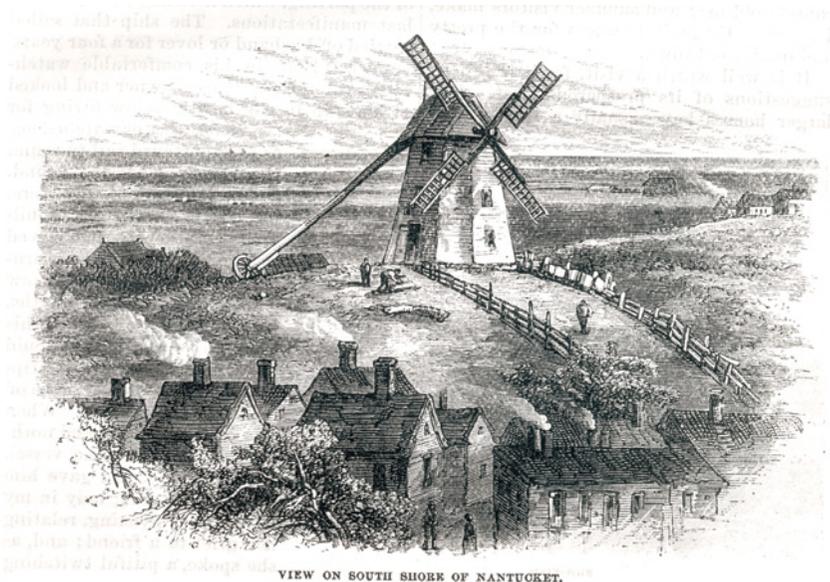




Corn husking at Rosewood Farm on Nantucket in the 1870s

JOSIAH FREEMAN P6556

carpenter and millwright, according to his son Jared M. Gardner. In an article about the mill in the *Inquirer and Mirror* in 1878, Jared's son recalled that "the condition of the mill at that time was deplorable; everything movable had been taken away, even to one vane and the lower shingles." Once Gardner examined the solid oak-frame construction of the building, he decided to repair it and put it back in working order, and Jared M., who was then eleven years old, borrowed his father's chisel and deepened the grooves in the date inscribed on the door-stone — 1746. In 1834, Gardner placed an advertisement in the Nantucket *Inquirer* offering "the Eastern Grain Mill" for sale. Apparently, he had no takers. When he died in 1842, his heirs divided his estate and daughter Elizabeth G. Macy and son George C. Gardner 2nd each received one half of the "Charles Swain Mill, so called."



VIEW ON SOUTH SHORE OF NANTUCKET.

Illustration from "Cape Cod, Nantucket, and the Vineyard," by Charles Nordhoff in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June 1875



***The Old Miller*, photographic portrait of John Francis Sylvania, 1880s**

F1758

AZOREAN MILLERS

During the remainder of its working life in the nineteenth century, the Old Mill was in the hands of mariners-turned-millers from Nantucket's thriving community of immigrants from the Azores. The New Guinea neighborhood below the mill was home to George Enos, a mariner from Flores who purchased the mill from Gardner's heirs for \$150 in 1854. In 1865, he sold "said Mill, which has been used for Milling purposes from time immemorial" to John Murray, another Azorean mariner, from the island of Graciosa, for \$850. The increase in the value of the mill during the period of Nantucket's severe economic depression at the end of the Civil War is telling — out of necessity the island had rediscovered agriculture when whaling ended, and as the last mill in operation the Old Mill may have gained value; perhaps Enos made

expensive repairs to the structure, too. Murray must have recognized the importance of the mill, selling the property a year later to Francis Sylvia, a mariner from Fayal, for \$1,200.

Sylvia was miller when Nantucket blossomed as a tourist destination, a time when visitors and locals began to tell stories about the island that mixed history and nostalgia with a heavy dose of creative invention. Tourists could wander among the fishermen's cottages in Sconset, visit the philosophical old hermit in Quidnet, eat their fill of chowder, marvel at the Atheneum's museum of curiosities from around the world, and pay homage to the scenic windmill at the edge of town. Francis Sylvia saw where the real profit of owning a mill might lie. In 1881, he advertised: "Stereoscopic Views of the Old Mill have been issued by the subscriber, and are on sale at the mill and at his residence on Back Street. A copyright for the view has been obtained according to law, and all persons are hereby cautioned against infringing upon the same, a fine of \$100 attaching to such offence." Later, he added some Azorean items to his mill gift shop and invited his summer friends to buy souvenirs: "All Aboard. I would like to see all my friends at the Old Mill. Having arrived from Fayal with a good supply of Hats, Baskets, Feathers, Flowers, etc. would be pleased to show them if you do not buy." Sylvia became the subject of paintings, and his photograph was taken wearing a straw hat that may have come from his home island. He owned the Old Mill for thirty years, from 1866 until his death in 1896.

When the Old Mill appeared on the auction block in August 1897, the members of the nascent Nantucket Historical Association, founded just three years earlier, were eager to acquire the landmark structure. With a generous donation from supporter Caroline L. French, a successful bid of \$885 secured the mill and, according to the *New York Herald* (apparently the only paper reporting the auction!), "the crowd burst into cheers." The last mill on Nantucket — the survivor of two wars, countless storms, and periods of neglect — was saved. The winning bid also secured for the NHA a one-and-a-half-acre lot on the hillside below the mill, now known as Mill Hill. Part meadow and part woodland, the space is a quiet vantage point for viewing the mill above and the town below.



Wheel and tail-pole of the Old Mill

CAROLINE SOLLMANN, 2011

After some minor repairs over the years – and major overhauls in 1930, 1936, and 1983 – the mill is capable of grinding corn just as it did two hundred and fifty years ago. Believed to be the oldest American windmill in continuous operation, the Old Mill was designated an American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark in 1992. On summer days when conditions are perfect, several strong backs are put to the task of moving the wheel attached to the long tail-pole that turns the cap of the mill, and the vanes, into the wind – new vanes, cross-arms, and tail-pole wheel were made in 2008. Sails are attached, they fill, and the vanes turn. Traffic on Prospect Street slows, cars pull over, and people congregate to take pictures and marvel at the historic mill performing its humble chore.



The Old Mill under full sail

PETER GREENHALGH, 2009