

**Postcard view of the Jethro Coffin house in the 1920s**

H. MARSHALL GARDINER PC-OLDESTHOUSE-19

# Oldest House

In 1695, when twenty-five-year-old Mary Gardner Coffin looked out the window of her house on Sunset Hill at the eastern edge of the English territory called Sherburne, her vista was wide open.

From her hilltop, she cast her glance toward the Great Harbor where her father operated his cod-fishing business. No wharves were yet built and no town existed; she saw marshland, swamp, and a few buildings, but no churches, no banks, no cobbled streets. Most of the English families still lived in the settlement farther west, where the original Proprietors had selected their house lots. Houses were scattered from the North Shore at Capaum to the head of Hummock Pond and along its western arm, forming a rural community of independent families united by intermarriage and common interests.

The ranks of the English settlers had grown to several hundred men, women, and children in the thirty-five years of their island venture, but the

## ADDRESS

**16 Sunset Hill**

## CONSTRUCTED

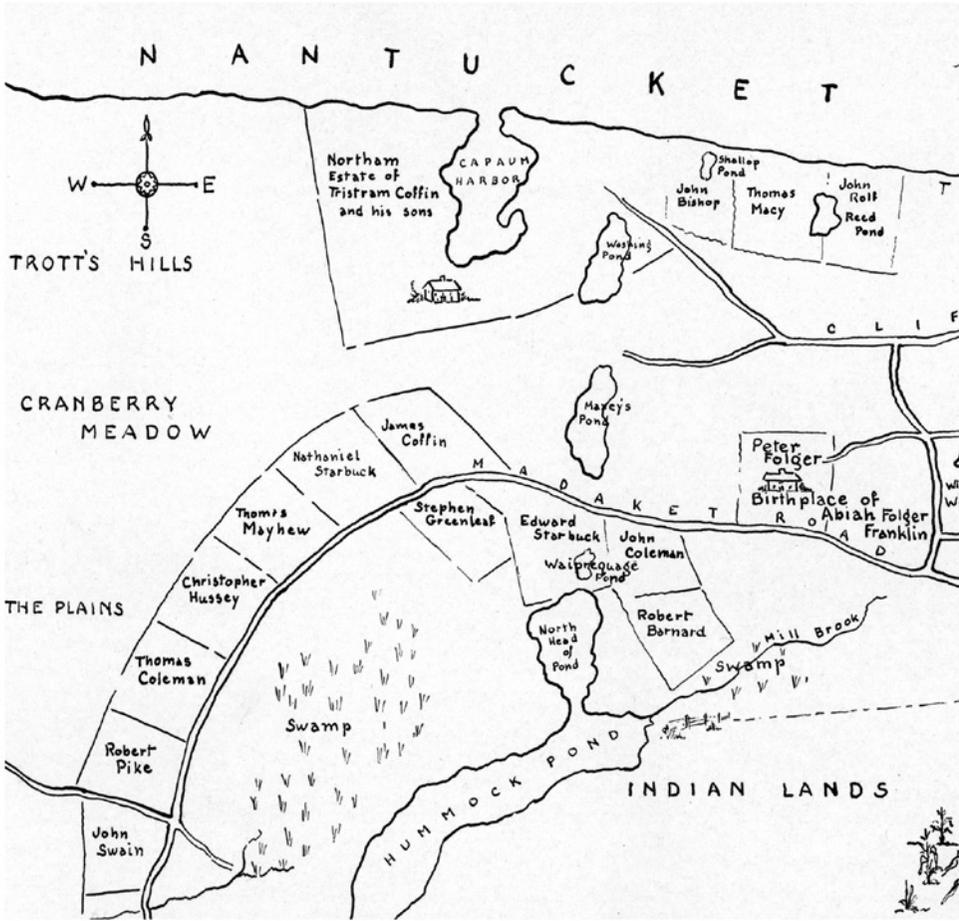
**circa 1686**

## DISTANCE FROM

**WHALING MUSEUM**

**.5 miles**

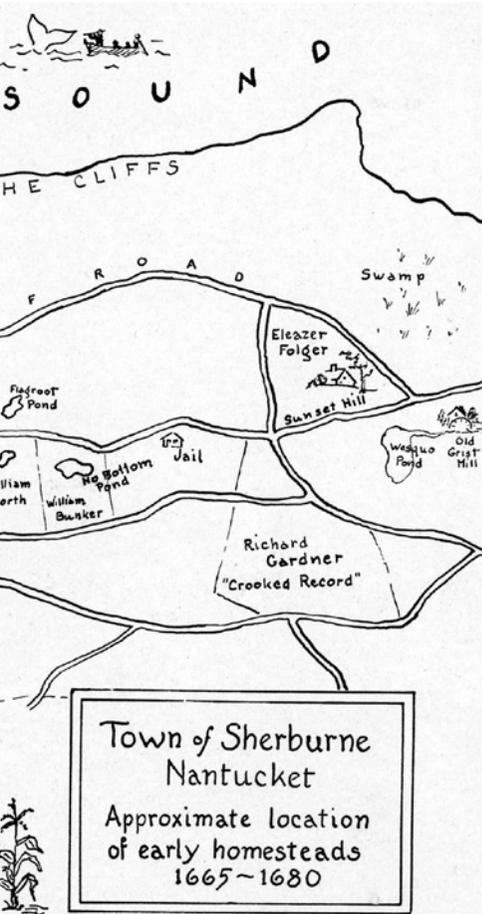




A recreation of the layout of the early settlement, based on deeds and other documents. Note the remote location of Sunset Hill, on the far right.

ARDIS MAYHEW, N.D. MS1000-1-1-10

primary inhabitants of Nantucket were Indians, and they outnumbered the English population by three or four to one. Relations between the two groups were relatively peaceful, but cultural misunderstandings occurred. Mary had had her own encounter with an Indian intruder just a few years earlier, and although the story passed down through the centuries has several versions, the essence of it is that an Indian who had been enjoying a bottle of rum made himself comfortable in an upstairs room of her house when she was out. He made a



**Mary Gardner Coffin, attributed to the Pollard Limner, circa 1720**

GIFT OF EUNICE COFFIN (GARDNER) BROOKS  
1924.3.1

threatening appearance sometime after she returned, and she fled with her baby to her closest neighbor.

Mary lived on Sunset Hill for about twenty years. Although the date of construction of the house is not known exactly,

tradition says that it was built as a wedding present for the couple in 1686, when sixteen-year-old Mary married twenty-three-year-old Jethro Coffin. Ten years earlier, Mary’s father, John Gardner, had been a leader of the Half-Share Revolt of island tradesmen against the full-share proprietors, led by Jethro’s grandfather, Tristram Coffin. The two men had very different ideas about the governance of the island and the proportional allotment of common lands. In the end, Gardner’s faction won. The relationship between Gardner and Coffin was never amicable, but the marriage of Mary and Jethro united the families, and the house — built on Gardner land with Coffin lumber — is a lasting reminder of family harmony and pioneer fortitude in the seventeenth century.



**Architectural historian Clay Lancaster's sketch of the early form of the Jethro Coffin house** *THE ARCHITECTURE OF HISTORIC NANTUCKET, 1972, P. 21*

Like the view from the house, the dwelling itself had a different appearance in the seventeenth century, although we can't be certain exactly what it was. It was an impressive house for its time, two stories in height on the south-facing front facade, with a long, sloping north roof sometimes called a "catslide," which may be an original feature. Massive fireplaces were the dominant features of the rooms on each floor: the parlor on the west side, the hall, or great room, on the east, and the lean-to kitchen in the rear, under the low-hanging roof. Two chambers, or bedrooms, were on the second floor, with an attic above. Physical evidence indicates that the center-chimney dwelling originally featured twin front gables that allowed light into the second-floor rooms, and from that height on the hill the Coffins and their children could see for miles.

Jethro, like most of the early landowners on the island, had his hand in a variety of business ventures, including sheep-raising, black-smithing, shore whaling, and his father Peter's sawmill and lumber

enterprises in the Merrimack Valley. Mary had the care of a growing family – they would eventually have six children who lived to adulthood – and the never-ending domestic chores of cooking and preserving food; spinning and weaving; knitting, sewing, mending; nursing the sick; tending her kitchen garden; and the grueling day-long process of washing clothes and linens. As a woman of fairly comfortable means, she may have had domestic help, but it was still a labor-filled life. Mary and Jethro sold their Nantucket dwelling to Nathaniel Paddack in 1708 and moved to Mendon, Massachusetts, when Jethro inherited property there, but Mary would later move back to the island and live with her son Josiah in his house on Cliff Road when Jethro died in 1726.

#### Four Generations of Paddacks

Although the Oldest House is closely associated with Mary and Jethro Coffin, four generations of the Paddack family lived there. Many of them were mariners, reflecting Nantucket's change from an agricultural to a maritime community in the eighteenth century, but the first of the Paddack owners, Nathaniel, was a weaver by trade and an occasional shore-whaler by circumstance. He came to the island from Cape Cod with his brother, Ichabod, who had been hired by the town in 1690 to teach the practical skills of whaling. Nathaniel married Ann Bunker, and they produced a family of seven daughters and three sons on Sunset Hill. Two sons were lost at sea. Only surviving son Paul, a whaling captain, inherited the Jethro Coffin house when Nathaniel died in 1756. Paul and his wife, Anna Coffin, had six children who could walk from their perch on the hill down to the shops and houses and wharves of the small town that was rapidly growing. Perhaps the most remarkable difference between Mary Coffin's window on the world in 1695 and Anna Paddack's view fifty years later was that the proportions of the island's white and Indian populations had now reversed numbers: by the mid-eighteenth century there were three thousand white inhabitants and fewer than four hundred Indians. The Oldest House was no longer an outpost of the English settlement; it was conveniently located near the center of activity. The Paddacks had a stellar view of the movement in the harbor and surrounding



**The house on Sunset Hill in the 1860s, with some of the Turner family posing for the camera** CHARLES H. SHUTE & SON P6422

waters during the Revolutionary War and, like the rest of the islanders, they suffered the hardships imposed by that conflict. Paul and Anna lived until the end of the century (Paul died in 1799, Anna in 1802) when their youngest son, Nathaniel, a mariner, assumed responsibility for the household. He had married Deborah Pinkham in 1782, just after the war, and by the end of the century they had five children. Another generation of Paddacks grew up on Sunset Hill – Lucretia, Hepsabeth, Jonathan, Peggy, and George. In 1839, when youngest son, George, was forty-two, with a wife and three children, his father sold the old house to him for \$250. He immediately sold it out of the family to a cooper named George Turner for \$300, ending a hundred and thirty-one years of Paddack ownership.

Turner had skills with a hammer and went to work; his daughter, Harriet, recalled in 1928 that her mother had told her the house was “very much out of repair.” Although the 1830s and ‘40s were an era of the refinement of Main Street, when cobbles and sidewalk flagging were laid and the grand Greek Revival-style houses were built and



**Great hall or "keeping room" on the east side of the first floor of the Jethro Coffin house, 1920s** H. MARSHALL GARDINER P18130

older houses remodeled by those reaping the profits of the whaling industry, not everyone enjoyed the new prosperity. The Turners on Sunset Hill were fortunate to have a solidly built house in a choice location, even if it was showing its age, and they were well situated away from the raging fire of July 13, 1846, that consumed the downtown, but life for a cooper with eight children during the era of Nantucket's decline was difficult. By 1865, the island had lost more than four thousand residents, and by 1867 the Oldest House was empty. George and Mary Turner found another place to live, and the ancient nuptial dwelling of Jethro and Mary Coffin was used as a hay barn and an object of historical curiosity for summer visitors on a "rantum scoot."

The Coffins were the most prolific of the first families of Nantucket, and in 1881 they had their first reunion on the island where so many had been born. Harriet B. Turner Worrton, who grew up in the house on Sunset Hill, wrote a saga of the Coffin family published the same year — *"Trustum" and His Grandchildren* — and the interest in the Coffin legacy on Nantucket reached something of a fever pitch. Five hundred reunion attendees gathered and reminisced and set about to memorialize their ancestry. They erected a monument to the first male settlers at the Founders Burial Ground overlooking Maxcy's Pond; they

spawned an interest in genealogy that led to Louis Coffin's extensive clan history, *The Coffin Family*, and two off-island Coffins purchased the Jethro Coffin house from the Turner family for \$300. Repairs were made and the house was opened up in 1886 for its 200th anniversary, then settled down for a long sleep until 1897, when it was opened in the summers as a house museum. Still owned by Tristram Coffin of Poughkeepsie (who had purchased his cousin's half share), the house attracted a constant stream of curious visitors eager to peer into a relic of the early history of the island.

The Nantucket Historical Association purchased Jethro and Mary's dwelling from Tristram Coffin in 1923. Winthrop Coffin of Boston — another off-island descendant of the original Tristram — stepped up to fund restoration of the house on the condition that it proceed under the supervision of William Sumner Appleton, then secretary of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA, now Historic New England). Appleton, and his architect of choice, Alfred F. Shurrocks, began the work in 1927. Although Shurrocks determined that the house had originally had twin front gables, a decision was made to restore the structure to its more familiar appearance and to replace eighteenth-century double-hung sash windows with diamond-paned casements, which they felt more suited a seventeenth-century dwelling.

The Jethro Coffin house was designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior in 1968. To coincide with the celebration of the tercentenary of the dwelling, historian Helen Winslow Chase researched and wrote the *Jethro Coffin House Chronology, 1686–1986*, the basis for much of this overview. Just a year later, however, on October 1, 1987, lightning struck the house, toppling the chimney, destroying half of the roof, and melting the electrical wiring, causing damage that required two years (and about a million dollars) to painstakingly mend. The stalwart old structure was so solidly built that since restoration it has continued to hold firm on Sunset Hill where it tells the story of the early English settlement of Nantucket in the seventeenth century.



### South facade and kitchen garden of the Oldest House

KATHRINA MARQUES, 2007