

Captain Edward Penniman House



Title: Captain Edward Penniman House
Twenty-first Century

Located within the boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore
Fort Hill area of Eastham
Cape Cod, Massachusetts 02642

THE "REST" of the STORY

While re-proofing my *AUTOBIOGRAPHY of a YANKEE-NEVADAN*, the final sentence of the story of my association with Irma Broun and her Aunt Bessie Penniman piqued my curiosity. It reads, "I would never know."

So, on a whim, I did an internet search of the name Penniman and was really surprised by the results. (I am always amazed by the miracles of modern electronics.) I was not only reminded of the story of Bessie's father, but also learned the "rest of the story" of the grand old house and Irma.

The story below is from my book, followed by copies of the Penniman House story (from the internet) and old notes from "Aunt Bessie" and Irma Broun:

An excerpt from the **AUTOBIOGRAPHY of a YANKEE-NEVADAN**

By George A. Phelps

In the fall, around Halloween time, I would take my first tour to Cape Cod. Irma Broun, [Boss of the bellhops at The Northfield] whose aunt lived in Eastham, wished to see the elderly lady and had no trouble convincing me to drive her down there for a visit. Irma would pay the expenses, gas and food on the road, and we'd lodge with her aunt. By saving and borrowing gas-ration coupons, we managed to accumulate enough for the journey.

We took SR-2 east to Boston, bypassed the bustling city and travelled through a sparsely populated area to the Cape Cod Canal. (The canal, which connects Cape Cod Bay with Buzzards Bay, severs the arm of the cape at its shoulder, making a virtual island of the long peninsula.) There, just off the approach to the northernmost bridge over the ditch, we paused for a breather.

It was just sundown, and in a few minutes we were treated to the most spectacular moonrise I'd ever seen. Just to the left of the big iron bridge it rose out of the sea, full and round and of the deepest orange hue imaginable. Having never before seen the moon over an ocean I at first thought it to be a distant fireball of some kind. Irma chuckled at my naiveté. She'd witnessed the phenomenon many times. And then, reluctantly, we took up the last thirty-five miles of our journey.

Irma's Aunt Bessie Penniman lived in the house that had belonged to her father (Irma's grandfather), a turn-of-the-century Yankee sea captain who had sailed the seven seas and visited ports-of-call around the World. The house reflected his profession. It was a big, square, two story affair with a mansard roof and a tall cupola, the latter from which the Captain's wife could look to the sea in anticipation of his returning ship.

Irma pointed to a sandy driveway. I drove onto it and stopped the car before a gate in front of the house. The yellow glow from a lamp

silhouetted lacy curtains outlining a window on the first floor of the otherwise dark edifice. A shaft of moonlight reflected off the slate roof above. Mist, rising from the nearby bay, swirled around us as we walked beneath a Gothic arch, the jawbones of a whale. I shivered, not only because of the chilly night air but also because the place looked as if it were haunted. I half expected to be greeted by witches and hobgoblins.

A light appeared behind the beveled glass of the front door. With a squeak the door swung open to reveal a small, gray-haired lady holding a shawl over her sloping shoulders. Aunt Bessie fondly greeted her niece, and then held out a thin pale hand to me. Shyly I took the hand and said "Hello," then followed the two of them into the kitchen.

There, next to a cooking range, were a small oilcloth-covered table and four hardwood chairs. Bessie motioned us to be seated, then explained that, because of a problem with the furnace boiler, she'd been forced to spend most of her time in the kitchen. A new casting had been ordered, she said, but it had not yet arrived.

She served tea and cookies and plied Irma with questions. She told us about the German U-boat recently discovered offshore, not far from Eastham, and candidly admitted that she and her neighbors were pretty nervous about it. Furthermore, she went on, they were still recovering from the effects of a recent hurricane that had brushed the Cape. After hearing about her many and varied problems I was kind of glad that I didn't live on the Cape.

I got a good night's sleep, though, and felt better about the place in the daylight. I joined Bessie and Irma at a breakfast of cranberry muffins, juice and coffee, served in a nook bathed in subdued sunlight. When our appetites were satisfied Irma showed me the yard in back, which, except for a tiny patch of coarse grass, consisted of natural flowers, weeds and scrub brush, and lots of sand.

The house's pale yellow clapboards and green blinds were very much in need of new paint, but were otherwise in rood repair. A picket fence, also in need of paint, surrounded the front yard and the remnants of a vegetable garden to one side. But it was the gate, the jawbone gate, which I remember best. Bleached white from the elements it stood in stark contrast to the faded fence and house, and to the grays and browns of the autumn landscape.

Back inside, Bessie led a tour of the house. It was more a museum than a dwelling, I thought, for there were more foreign artifacts and memorabilia (one room was crammed full of exotica) than I'd ever before seen in one place. It struck me as the more remarkable considering the fact that it was all collected by one man. I was fascinated, and wished the old captain were alive to tell me about his adventures. And I wondered what might become of this vast collection in the future. (I would never know.)

[It is June of 2010, and now I do know the rest of the story.]

G.A. Phelps

["George Phelps Slept Here"]

The Penniman House: A Whaling Story



Captain Edward Penniman steps outside his house on Fort Hill in Eastham, Massachusetts in the late summer of 1881. He can feel the chill of the winds blowing off the Atlantic Ocean. He can smell and taste the salt air. By habit, he scans the white-capped horizon in search of a whale's spout. Soon he would leave on his fifth voyage across the world's oceans, to hunt these "leviathans of the deep." The voyage could last for four years. Would his wife Gustie come along this time? Would any of their children accompany them? Where would he find his crew? Would this whaling voyage be successful? It was the whaling industry, or "whale fishery," as it was known then, that satisfied Captain Penniman's adventurous spirit and offered him an opportunity to earn enough money to support a family and to construct an impressive home in Eastham.

Captain Penniman built his French Second Empire style house on Cape Cod in 1868. Today, over 100 years later, the Penniman House is a National Historic Site owned and interpreted by the National Park Service as part of Cape Cod National Seashore. The house holds the Penniman family's written records and artifact collections, which provide glimpses of the places and people that the family visited on their whaling voyages. There is a true life whaling story representative of hundreds of other whaling captains and their families that traveled the globe to pursue whale fishery.

Edward Penniman was married in 1859, to Betsey A., daughter of William F. Knowles, a descendant of that old family name. Their children were: Eugene B., born September 11, 1860; Bessie A., born September 2, 1868; and Edward D., born March 25, 1870.

**Irma Broun
1908-1997**

I spent my growing up days on Cape Cod with my grandparents. Captain Edward Penniman was a whaling captain and sailed around the world seven times without a mishap. I inherited their beautiful sea captain's home. It is now owned by Cape Cod National Seashore and open to the public.

---Irma Broun

Irma passed away on March 25, 1997 in Modesto, California. She was eighty-nine.

Eastham. Nov. 19. 44

Dear friend George: I was much pleased to receive your letter. All the folks you met thought it very nice of you to do so. Everything much the same as when you were here even to "camping in kitchen". Furnace casting alive broken. Another ordered and waiting patiently for arrival. We are wondering if the Guild beach plum jam is proving popular at the store? I had another jar given me. Wish I could share it with you and Irma. Irma's sister improving slowly. I am going to see

her to morrow. Monday. Brother is well and sends regards. We enjoyed your visit and hope to see you on Cape Cod when we are not recovering from a hurricane.

Sincerely,

Bessie Penniman.

[Message, enclosed with Sketch-note]



Sea Captain's House and Whale Jawbone Gate

Greetings for Thanksgiving day.

Ruth Husland Suttar's
Wood Prints

New England Series

Irma's Aunt Bessie.

Nov 1944