

## **VALUING COMMUNITY IDENTITY WITHIN FEDERAL PRESERVATION POLICY**

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#### **Introduction**

Located in Southeastern Massachusetts, Cape Cod is a narrow peninsula stretching into the Atlantic Ocean, approximately 70 miles in length. Created in 1961, The National Seashore federalized land that had been under local control for centuries. At the very tip of the Cape, where the land curls into the Cape Cod bay, Provincetown has evolved from a fishing village to a worldwide destination summer resort.

Although the year-round population is less than three thousand, a typical summer day will welcome over fifty thousand tourists and seasonal workers. While Provincetown's history and changes reflect national socio-economic trends, its identity has been nurtured and defined by the relationship between its residents and the rich natural and cultural resources within its boundaries.

The main street of Provincetown, only three miles long, faces the harbor. Dense with art galleries, unique shops, and restaurants, it bustles with tourists and seasonal residents who in a twelve-week period provide some 75% of the yearly revenue for those businesses. Just a mere quarter mile from this unrelenting activity, is the entrance to the National Seashore where the rolling dunes and vast expanse of sky and sea quiet the cacophony of the human throng. In these dunes nature is both tranquil and violent, subdued or explosive as a storm may approach, rage and exit to a clearing horizon in the same hour. Here the noise of commerce disappears. Here, embraced by the humility of natural solitude, the human spirit is given chance to commune, to envision, to create.

The human experience of this inimitable landscape permeates the community consciousness of Provincetown. That consciousness, defined by shared memory, story and experience helps to bond a community. Through the telling of stories repeatedly, a community organizes its myths into oral and iconic memory. Distinct from written history, this process stamps the soul of a community with an indelible and miraculous sense of self for which traditional preservation has no tools of recognition or measurement. Hence, what is intangible is felt, shared and retained in the dailiness of oral fabric, giving the iconic memory of physical form as valued a place in the community as the built environment. The human story of Provincetown, the dunes and their habitation is one of determination and spirit. Despite the federal boundary line that exists today, the dunes and the dune shacks within them are imprinted on the soul of the community reflecting the spirit of independence and self-reliance that have defined the outer Cape for over three hundred years.

While the town is built along the coast of the Cape Cod bay, the ocean and its adjacent landscape remain a vital part of the community. The dune shacks were built by locals who volunteered to watch the coastline for ships in distress when Provincetown was a major fishing and whaling port. In 1802, the Massachusetts Humane Society provided a list of these dune shack locations to sailors in case they got into distress. The organization added buildings through the mid-Nineteenth century including Eighteen lifeboat stations.

Seventeen dune shacks remain at this eastern end of the cape within the National Seashore property. These a-stylistic, wood, often ramshackle shelters dot a harsh and mutable landscape of high sand dunes created from deforestation in the last century. Their habitation traces the history of the town from pilgrims to pirates to whalers to artists to tourists, and provides insight into the collective memory that infuses everyday life in Provincetown.

The dune shacks are individual, built of salvaged materials and generally without plumbing or electricity. The material most often used is wood. Over the years, people have found original ways to maintain these dune shacks. One of these ways is the use of Styrofoam to insulate corners and provide draft proofing. In spite of the ramshackle nature, they are solid structures built with a clear understanding of simple construction. There is a safety in their sheer practicality. Most are one story, some with additions to accommodate sleeping areas or porches. Some are built high on pilings driven by hand. Many have decks surrounding them; many are just one room with a bed, writing area, and bookshelves. Any cooking facilities are basic. Several have wood stoves allowing for year round use; however, the landscape is desolate and difficult to navigate in winter, so most are shut at the end of fall and reopened in late spring by their owners.

The fragility of the dune shacks, their vulnerability to the elements, reminds us of our own impermanence. It is easy to contemplate how quickly, if ignored, the sands would overtake these structures. At the same time, there is an invincibility about the dune shacks, a refusal to submit to nature entirely, as they re-emerge with assistance from their owners each year. This invincibility is reflective of the community from its earliest days. The bond and battle between man and nature remains a vital aspect of Provincetown's community identity.

The dune shacks provide a perspective on our place in the world seldom available in daily life. The human need for solitude in nature is met by the dune shacks but with a condition. Their impermanence necessitates man's intervention, undoing the forces of nature on an annual basis. Rebuilding, recreating shelter, lends an evolutionary nature to the dune shacks. The same evolution is evident in Provincetown where adaptation and reuse of resources has been continuous throughout its long history. These alterations and adaptations represent the ingenuity the locals have in maintaining their identity.

My first contact with the dune shacks came in 1989 when I was asked by the Cape Cod National Seashore to photograph them for the National Archives in Washington DC. Although I had lived in Provincetown since 1975, I had never been out to the dunes.

The photographs had to be 4x5 format, black and white, and of specific views of each structure. The gear alone weighed almost forty pounds and I could only occasionally get a park service ranger to drive me to the dune shacks I had selected to work on that day. No matter, though, for what I gained from the first moment that I stepped foot in this landscape was a peace I never knew existed. Solitude is the overwhelming experience in the dunes. Footprints are quickly blown away giving the feeling that the land has never been trod on. This peace, its experiential impact, has filtered through the community for over three hundred years.

### HISTORY

This landscape has been created over the last five thousand years as the accretion of sand from the south has been deposited and the wind has blown it into formations known as parabolic dunes. These dunes are unique in the eastern United States. If this pattern of accretion continues, Provincetown will one day be an island as the deposited sand extends the end of the Cape and narrows the two neighboring beaches at Truro and Wellfleet. The planting of dune grass helps the sand to stabilize, but the landscape is constantly changing.

While there has always been a native American population, the pilgrims landed in Provincetown, the second furthest point east in the United States, in 1620. Vulnerability to the weather and changing conditions forced them to seek shelter and retarded the settlement until 1717. At that time, a group of renegades and mooncussers began a small settlement known as Helltown on the point, the very tip of land curling into the bay. As a community, Helltown reflected the wild nature of the setting around it. While on bayside of this comma of land at the outer cape, one group of men was luring ships onto the dangerous shoals with false light, on the Atlantic side men were committed to rescuing the ships stranded or wrecked. Helltown was a haven for pirates and plunderers. Life out on "the point" as it is still known today, became increasingly dangerous due to beach erosion and the population decided to float their houses and other buildings into the lee of the bay.

The feat of moving these structures is commemorated on the "old floaters" many of which still exist today. The risks taken to establish Helltown and float it across one and a half miles of bay to the opposite shoreline paid off as Provincetown attracted fishermen who saw that it was possible to live here. Eventually Provincetown developed into one of the largest whaling ports in the country.

Originally forest, the dunes are partially the result of clear cutting and grazing which occurred in the Eighteenth century. Sands traveled from the sea to the bay before laws were enacted to prohibit the felling of trees and the grazing of cattle. Until 1873, there was an inner harbor in the dunes where boats took shelter during storms. The migrating sands forced the enclosure of the harbor creating what is now Pilgrim Lake.

Today the landscape combines tall dunes with forest, bogs and other wetlands. Many types of wild life make their home here, including foxes, coyotes, weasels, mice, deer, snakes and possums. Bird life is abundant.

The fierceness of the tides along the outer cape, the nor'easter storms, the shallow sand bars and the danger of the shoals and shallows made all of Cape Cod treacherous for ships navigating between Boston and New York. Wrecks were common in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century as evidenced in the popular idiom "you have to go, but you don't have to come back." The Massachusetts Humane Society, a volunteer organization, responded to the danger and built the first dune shacks for shipwrecked sailors all along the coast.

The federal government provided funding assistance to the society from 1845 until 1871 when the United States Life Saving service was formed. In 1869, the federal government passed a bill to employ paid crews, although the number of people employed was far lower than what was needed.

In 1872, the federal government constructed nine life saving stations on Cape Cod. These identical wooden structures were shaped like large barns with a lookout tower atop. They housed boats and equipment necessary to save merchant and naval vessels. Local residents were hired to staff these facilities. Each shift had a five men crew and a keeper in all but the summer months when only the keeper would be on duty. Shore patrol went on through the night and during storms with patrolmen meeting half way between life saving stations to verify their duty. Over the next fifty years, Provincetown became one of the largest fishing and whaling ports in the country. The patrolmen were responsible for the safety of thousands of sailors and their goods both from the town itself and on the route between New York and Boston.

The work was tiring and dangerous; the residents had a long and difficult journey over sand from Provincetown center just to reach their stations. The unpredictable weather further complicated coming and going from town. As a result, the patrolmen built or adapted the dune shacks originally built by the Massachusetts Humane Society for themselves and their families.

All of the dune shacks were located on private property; the land-use pattern ran from the ocean to the bay until the middle of the century. Improvements in navigation technology and the decline of the whaling industry rendered the life-savers redundant by the early Twentieth century and the dune shacks were largely abandoned of this use at that time.

While some shack residents were happy to retreat to the conveniences of the town, others continued using their dune shacks drawn by their isolation, the natural beauty of the landscape and the sense of community engendered by these structures. This adaptation and reuse was consistent with the town's development and is a tradition that continues today. Artists and writers made their way out to the dune shacks as the town population began to assimilate the artist colony, which rapidly grew at the beginning of the Twentieth century.

At that time, Provincetown began to attract artists and writers drawn by the renegade and independent spirit of the town, its natural beauty and Mediterranean light. To this group, Provincetown and the dune shacks provided a remote but safe oasis to explore radical politics and new artistic concepts. The adventure of leaving the urban confines of New York City to find expansiveness, freedom and acceptance made Provincetown into America's first artist colony. Provincetown became the center for a new cultural movement in 1915 when challenges to the status quo in art and writing emerged through the forces of change in American society. Artists and writers adapted the built environment to suit their needs both for housing and commercial activity including the building of a theater from an old fish processing plant at the end of a pier. Industrial building stock, formerly devoted to salt works and whaling, was converted into summer residence and many purpose built summer cottages were constructed to accommodate Provincetown's first tourists.

### **The Federal Government**

What was happening in Provincetown was reflective of a national shift following the end of the Second World War. The competition for resources was fierce as urban areas witnessed tremendous growth and suburbs were eating up vast tracks of open land. The urgency of the situation demanded a re-examination of land-use policies within the Department of the Interior and specifically within the National Park Service.

Toward that end, The Outdoor Recreation Resources Commission began its work with the passage of public law 85-470 in June of 1958. The Commission was made up of eight congressional members and seven appointees made by the President. Laurence Rockefeller chaired the commission. Their mission was:

1. To determine the outdoor recreation wants and needs of the American people now and what they will be in the years 1976 and 2000.
2. To determine the recreation resources of the Nation available to satisfy those needs now and in the years 1976 and 2000.
3. To determine what policies and programs should be recommended to ensure that the needs of the present and future are adequately and efficiently met.

The 1962 Outdoor Recreation for America Report provided a management and implementation strategy for improving and augmenting recreational resources throughout the US. The proposed policy addressed many significant factors. Two of most compelling aspects of the policy were its statement of purpose and its classification of resources. In the former, the language explicitly defined the benefits of outdoor recreation as physical, cultural and spiritual. In the latter, the management plan called for a classification of recreation areas in order to best match resources to needs. The system specifically created six classes of area, the sixth it defined as "Sites of major historical significance, either local, regional or national." Unfortunately, no criteria for classification was provided. Following the Rockefeller report, the Recreation Advisory Committee was formed. The committee detailed the policy on national recreation areas and separated them from natural or historic preservation.

The increasing complexity of resource management in the 1960s with the passage of the Wilderness act in 1964, (which the park service opposed), The land and water conservation fund act in 1965, and the National Preservation Act in 1966 made for contradictory policies and guidelines within the Department of the Interior.

### **The Conflict**

Against this backdrop of changing federal policies and guidelines, the Cape Cod National Seashore was created. The Seashore included the land on which the dune shacks are located. Within the enabling legislation passed by congress in 1961, statutes were written appropriating funds for land acquisition and providing a mechanism for local zoning jurisdiction over improved properties such as the dune shacks. These statutes later called the "Cape Cod Formula" were designed to avert serious conflicts between the government and local communities, to stabilize the landscape without forced resettlement of numerous families, and to create a park advisory commission made up of State officials and those locally affected. Still to a community with a long tradition of independence and self determination, the thought of a federal agency on the doorstep was daunting to many. For years after the passage of the National Seashore legislation, Provincetown and the other communities whose land became part of the Seashore, looked for ways to protect themselves.

Provincetown and Wellfleet were the only two towns who were still not complying with federal statutes in 1964. Despite the Cape Cod formula, Provincetown residents remained resistant. Their distrust of authority was deeply embedded in the community psyche given its remoteness, isolation, and renegade history.

Provincetown is governed by annual town meeting to this day. At the town meeting of 1964, the article to create a specific zoning district as directed in the federal legislation came up for a vote.

This article stated that “the lands hereinafter described be designated on said Zoning Map as "CLASS S-SEASHORE DISTRICT," in order to preserve the seashore character of the area and to help in protecting its scenic, scientific and cultural values there shall be established in the Town a "Seashore District" which shall include all lands within the geographical boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore as they exist within the Town of Provincetown.” The article sought to prohibit new industrial or commercial uses within the district and as well as to protect the interests of single family home owners within the district and to provide setback requirements from streets and abutters. A variance procedure was established allowing the Secretary of the Interior to acquire by condemnation, "improved property that is made the subject of the variance or exception and which in his opinion fails to conform or is in any manner opposed to or inconsistent with the preservation and development of the Seashore as contemplated in the said Act.”

One of the dune shack owners, Nicholas Wells introduced amendments to the article based on what other affected towns had done. According to the transcript of the article, Mr. Wells’ changes “prepared to protect [the twenty-two owners of property within the district] from possibility of having their lands condemned by Department of Interior and Town by Eminent Domain. With Mr. Wells’ revisions, the motion carried unanimously.

Deep distrust of authority and a fierce sense of independence are typical community characteristics even today and Provincetown was the last town to adopt the zoning district as required in the Federal legislation. Only one property owner in the dunes had the foresight to force federal boundaries to go around his property. To the rest of the shack owners and the community, Federal ownership was now a reality. With local input, the town hoped to retain the local sensibility and significance of the shacks. The twenty-two owners of the dune shacks were given life tenancy or twenty-five years whichever came first.

From that time, the debate over the dune shacks is ongoing. Until very recently, the primary mission of the National Park Service was stewardship of the natural environment rather than its cultural resources. The return of this landscape to its natural, uninhabited state was the goal of several superintendents in the 1970s through the 1980s, mainly due to prioritizing the value of resources. Legislation written specifically for the Cape Cod National Seashore had assured the twenty-two property owners that their dune shacks would not be condemned. Despite this assurance, lack of maintenance and care led to condemnation by neglect of some twenty-five dune shacks under federal jurisdiction. Naturally, the community felt that the promises were being broken. The dune shacks were not protected by an historic district and the concept of cultural resource management was in its infancy. Clearly a difference of opinion about significance existed which continues today as much on the federal level as on the local.

The dune shacks represented a unique aspect of the collective memory that transcended the shifts in population over time; in fact, in their uses they reflected those shifts. The dune shacks are an experiential gateway to the spirit of Provincetown. The timelessness and isolation of each dune shack erases the routine of daily life, providing an emotional and spiritual connection with nature. This connection opens channels to creativity for within these shelters, impressions enter, artists paint, writers write. The dune shacks had imprinted their essence on the community as physical reminders of our shared identity.

As dune shacks began to disappear, one by one, the community became outraged. Concern took the form of protest by one dune shack user who mobilized the effort to create a National Register district for the dune shacks. Josephine Del Deo, an artist and long time Provincetown resident and Hazel Hawthorne, also a long time resident and dune shack owner, produced the documentation for eligibility. Creating the district presented both environmental and cultural concerns. The district would be one of only a few in the country whose boundaries shift with the underlying land. Further, the criteria for listing did not reflect the nature and significance of the dune shacks to locals. In order to make them eligible for listing, they had to fit into one of the three criteria that the Park Service uses to determine significance.

1. Important architectural style
2. Association with important historical event
3. Association with important historical person

The eligibility for the dune shack National Register District was established by the dune shacks’ association with Eugene O’Neill, a famous American playwright, who wrote in the dunes. While this action achieved the goal of preserving the dune shacks, the criteria applied was largely irrelevant to the significance of the dune shacks themselves.

### **C-Scape & BBA**

Requests for Proposals were released in 1995 by the Seashore with specific criteria related to public benefit and access. I proceeded to craft a program that would address the needs of the National Park Service to use these cultural resources for interpretive purpose. At the same time, it was clear that the National Park Service wanted to divest itself of the on-going maintenance of the structures through the leasing program. Having held the position of architectural conservator for the north Atlantic region of the National Park Service, I knew what the maintenance requirements were and dealt with them in the proposal.

The concept was to bridge the gap between the federal land and the local community. After all, the boundary created by the National Seashore in 1961 was not, hopefully, intended to cut the community off from the land and resources that formed such a large part of its cultural identity.

I wrote a program that would perpetuate community use consistent with the use of the dune shacks over the past eighty years. Not only would the program allow the dune shack to be maintained at no cost to the Park Service, the program would allow for the dune shack to be interpreted for the public in order to enhance awareness and appreciation of this unique cultural landscape. Further, the dune shack would remain a community resource not frozen by its past.

The federal requirements were that the dune shack be accessible not just to local residents but to anyone. While this requirement was inconsistent with the history of the dune shacks, the mission of the Park Service is a national one. The competition was open only to applicants with not-for-profit status. My first challenge was to find a local not for profit with whom I could work. I chose the Provincetown Community Compact because it is committed to community-based arts and education, public art, and preservation.

The Park Service asked that during the months of July and August an artist in residence be available to talk to the public who would come out on tours two days a week. Interpreting the experience for visitors of what it is like to be an artist in the dunes was the closest the park could come to the idea of experiential value. To me however, the opportunity was to provide the local community of artists with access to the dune shack as a resource.

Following my submission of the proposal and the conservation plan, the Park Service awarded The Provincetown Community Compact the dune shack with a five-year lease. I remain on the project as a consultant. Local residents asked us about our plan and requested time in the dune shack. We were obligated to open the program up to people from all over the country, so we created a competition for the artist in residency period. These would be three three-week stays during the summer months. A jury comprised of local artists, Park Service people, and other volunteers evaluate the entries using objective criteria and then vote. Winners are required to donate one piece of the work they produce at the dune shack to the Park.

The remaining weeks of the year (except winter) are provided to artists and non-artists in the community at a nominal rate. Because of high demand, the selection is done by lottery following an application process. The proceeds from the user fees defray the maintenance costs. Volunteers go out several times a year to perform necessary maintenance and conservation on the dune shack.

The C-Scape Mapping project uses GIS technology in combination with other media to map the landscape. The project is carried out exclusively by local residents during the winter months. The result is a brilliant compilation of quantitative and qualitative response to the cultural resource. As the work is done by locals, it speaks to the need to find place and to define place in many terms. Since its inception, the mapping project has gathered national attention and a book was recently published including the work done to date.

One of our fellowship recipients won a Guggenheim grant for her work in the shack.

One of the most exciting and telling aspects of the program to date is the journal that is left for users to write their impressions. I have included some pages here so you begin to get a sense of the descriptive language of the intangible values that the dune shacks highlight.

The dune shack is serving a function of continuity in the community. Despite changes in economics and demographics, the dune shack program is a connection to an intangible aspect of the community.

## CONCLUSION

The dune shacks are an experiential cultural resource; here the individual is inspired by place. The immensity of nature viewed from inside a tiny ramshackle dune shack is both provocative and empowering. That empowerment may take any form, but common to all is the ability of the landscape to provide creative and solitary nurturing. The dune shacks provide an internal definition of place for both residents and visitors for the contrast between the untamed landscape of the dunes and the urban density of the town itself defines the quality of life in the community.

Originally the dune shacks were inhabited by locals protecting the community, watching for our fleet of ships and providing shelter for those who foundered. These ships were the economic and social life blood of the community. Today the fleets are tourists, yet the dune shacks continue their role to protect and shelter the economic life blood of the community, the artists. The shacks represent the same sense of survival that they did three hundred years ago. From mooncussers and renegades to fishermen and whalers to artists and tourists, the population has shifted; the adaptive reuse of buildings in town, including in the dune shacks, reflects this shift in socio-economics but does not compromise the sense of community identity of Provincetown.

The fact remains that the dune shacks are protected by one of the three allowed criteria of the National Park Service, association with a famous person. While we can be grateful that some protection is afforded, the truth is that the dune shacks represent an experiential meaning underserved by the existing criteria. The criteria needed to protect these structures is one that values as significant intangible qualities. Most often, these qualities are expressed on the local level forming both sense of place and community identity.

In order to begin the conversation about intangible significance, we should look to the local level of preservation, for it is there that the oral history, the sense of place and the collective memory are most available. We can begin with a definition of sense of place that, if embraced, would balance tangible and intangible significance. Sense of place is the human response to history, geography, built and natural environment, and population. Sense of place is recognized, not measured, and it is first recognizable on the community level.

The dune shacks provide an opportunity to explore community preservation as the distinction and balance between heritage and history, between cellular and collective memory, between tangible and intangible, for the enduring significance of the dune shacks is their place in the community consciousness. Community preservation is both the retention of physical fabric, form or style, and the retention of the imprint on the soul. Balancing the two provides a true definition of community and promotes sustainability.

### **ABSTRACT**

Through telling stories repeatedly, a community organizes its myths into oral and iconic memory, distinct from written history. This process stamps the soul of a community with an indelible and miraculous sense of self, for which traditional preservation has no tools of recognition or measurement. Hence, what is intangible is felt, shared and retained in the dailiness of oral fabric, giving the iconic memory of physical form as valued a place in the community as the built environment.

Located within the Cape Cod National Seashore along a stretch of outer beach at the easternmost tip of the United States, 17 of the original 40 dune shacks still give shelter in a harsh and mutable landscape. Built of salvaged materials by local residents for use when patrolling the outer shores for ships in distress, the dune shacks later attracted artists and writers drawn by the seclusion and Mediterranean-like light.

In 1959, under new federal ownership, shack owners received life tenancy or 25-year leases which expired in 1984. As the Park Service prioritizes protection of natural over cultural resources, the shacks found strong advocates in the residents of Provincetown who proposed a National Register District to protect the remaining structures. Association with important historical person, one of three eligibility criteria allowed by the NPS, enabled protection but by criteria largely irrelevant to the significance of the shacks themselves. While valid for measuring historic significance, these criteria are insufficient for measuring intangible value.

No language or methodology for valuing the intangible exists, yet sense and soul of place have resonant definition in our community experience. This paper discusses how intangible value may be acknowledged and measured to develop public policy for the protection of iconic resources.

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Rita Speicher is also a founding partner of Binder Boland & Associates, Inc. Her focus is on creating the language that values intangible assets.