

SPRING 2019 VOLUME 27 NO. 1

# SPECIAL PLACES

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# One **BRICK** at a Time

The Brickyard reveals the Vineyard's industrial past

BY JEFF HARDER

On the craggy northwestern coast of Martha's Vineyard, a roughly 45-foot chimney rises above the shoreline like an oversized maroon candle on a rubbly birthday cake. For mariners, that chimney in the sleepy town of Chilmark has long been a marker for plotting courses across Vineyard Sound. For decades, it was the most visible aspect of 18 overgrown, seldom-visited acres.

Back in the 19th century, however, the chimney was a crucial feature of the Brickyard, one of the earliest commercial brick-making operations and a bona fide industry on Martha's Vineyard. Workers drew upon the site's native soil, timbers, and water power to manufacture the bricks that helped build, among other things, downtown Boston. And this summer, with five acres freshly cleared and a new trail cut to neighboring Menemsha Hills, The Trustees will unveil the remains of the Brickyard to the general public, affording an experience unlike any other on the island.

"When you think about Martha's Vineyard, you think about t-shirt shops or the arcade or beaches or restaurants, and this is just a complete reversal," says Chris Kennedy,



The Trustees' Stewardship Manager for Martha's Vineyard. "You'd never expect to find a place like this."



## FROM THE GROUND UP

Some 12,000 years ago, a glacier measuring many hundreds of feet high shaped the modest hills and valleys of the Vineyard's northwestern shore, endowing the landscape with rocks, soil, and ancient clay.

Enterprising islanders began working the Brickyard and neighboring properties as early as the 18th century, first with a grist mill, then extracting iron to produce American Revolution-era ammunition, and later grinding pigments extracted from the clay for paint, before the first brickmaking in the 1840s. By the late 1860s, when Boston banker Nathaniel Harris purchased the land in

The Brickyard as it appeared in the late 1800s; Nathaniel Harris (left); The Brickyard's weathered chimney (right and in the lower center of the aerial image, far right) has been a landmark on the Chilmark coast for boaters navigating Vineyard Sound for more than a century.

Chilmark, the brickworks had entered its heyday. For roughly six months a year, workers mined red and white clay by hand, fired the kilns with timber from the property's trees—that iconic chimney was an exhaust mechanism—and powered pre-electric infrastructure with the ripples of Roaring Brook.

“It was all the sheer power of water,” says Kennedy. “[Roaring Brook] compressed the bricks, moved the raw material around, and moved this massive water wheel that turned a conveyor belt to move bricks in and out of the drying sheds.” Annual production climbed as high as 800,000 bricks. Schooners docked at a pair of long-gone piers on the shoreline, shipping the finished product to construction projects in New York, Newport, and Boston.

In the summers, roughly 100 French-Canadian lumberjacks ventured from

Quebec to work at the Brickyard; the foundations of their barracks as well as the Harris family's on-site residence remain today. “People forget that year-round life on Martha's Vineyard has always been about working, whether in industry, farming, or agriculture,” says Cindy Brockway, The Trustees' Program Director for Cultural Resources. “With so much tangible evidence of its industrial history, [the Brickyard] is a reminder that Martha's Vineyard wasn't always a summer playground.”

But by the end of the 19th century, with the advent of electricity and the ubiquity of railroads (as well as fuel shortages for the already treacherous shipping process,) brick-making on the mainland became more efficient—and brick-making on Martha's Vineyard became obsolete. The acres overlapping the Brickyard as well as Menemsha Hills remained with the Harris family, who established a short-lived clay works after brick-making petered out. In the 1960s, Nathaniel and Katherine Harris donated their family lands, which included Menemsha Hills. In 2014 The Trustees formally received the Brickyard as a gift from the estate of Flora Epstein, née Harris, who passed away in 2010.

#### A NEW ERA BEGINS

Last summer, work on the Chilmark property began in earnest when neighbors Robert and Casey Elliston spent three months clearing more than five acres largely using low-power hand tools, subduing thick vegetation and cutting a 1/3-mile trail through

mesic woodlands to link the Brickyard to Menemsha Hills' trail system. “It was obvious that this was a labor of love that [they,] like many of us were just so fascinated with,” Kennedy says. Over time, forgotten artifacts came into view: 10-foot-high cut-stone walls, the brickworks' original water wheel, broken bricks, even railroad wheels from a barebones tram system used to ferry materials across the site.

Now, The Trustees is looking even deeper, commissioning the Public Archaeology Laboratory of Pawtucket, Rhode Island as well as the Andrew Fiske Memorial Center for Archaeological Research at University of Massachusetts Boston to make archaeological surveys of the area. The undertaking involves using remote sensing technology to find aberrations within the soil, a minimally invasive way to find spots that warrant more substantial exploration. “Even if we're just putting a post hole in the ground for a fence, The Trustees tries to make sure we understand what we might be impacting below ground,” says Brockway. “With the remains of these buildings and the milling operation above ground, it was clear that there could be other information we'd find below ground.”

The goal, ultimately, is to determine how to best share the story of the Brickyard with visitors while protecting the site's integrity and historic features: its loose bricks, structural debris, and other artifacts, for example, must be retained in order to preserve the site for future study. “With each piece that disappears, we lose a chapter of the story,” Brockway says.

The story of the Brickyard is frequently one of mystery. “This is the question we always ask ourselves: why a brickyard here?” Kennedy says. “Of all the places in New England, why was this one so important? But when you look around, the answer becomes instantly obvious.”

*Jeff Harder is a freelance writer and editor who lives in New England.*



[Ed. Note] Access to the Brickyard will not be available until the site is officially opened for visitors this summer. The trail from the Menemsha Hills parking lot will be a long mile-and-a-half downhill and then uphill on the return, so plan accordingly—allow at least three hours for your visit and carry hydration, especially in warmer weather. And please, do not remove any loose historical material from the site. More details will be available on [thetrustees.org](http://thetrustees.org) when the site is opened.