

NANTUCKET'S MOST WANTED

BY LUCRETIA VOIGT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Hiding behind the split rail fences of the quaint shingled houses and underneath the ancient cobblestones and gaslights of Main Street lays a Nantucket history that most people would like to forget, somewhat like the uncle you never speak of at Thanksgiving or the ancient relative your grandmother refuses to acknowledge. Frances Ruley Karttunen has opened the closet and is airing out the skeletons.

"While I was compiling stories for "The Other Islanders" [Karttunen's earlier book on Nantucket], I was sitting in Pat Church's office looking for mentions of Indians because Indians got taken to court for bad debt. I kept finding all these crimes. I said 'Gosh, this sounds like the Wild West — the Wild East.' I couldn't contain myself," said Fran Karttunen when recently asked about her new book, "Law and Disorder in Old Nantucket." Karttunen will be discussing her book at the Nantucket Atheneum Great Hall tonight from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

From the pain of capital punishment in the form of hanging to the pleasure of bawdy brothels a stone's throw from Children's Beach, Karttunen's book investigates the darker side of old Nantucket. Beginning in the early 1700s and covering the period until prohibition in the 1920s, "Law & Disorder in Old Nantucket" describes the underbelly of early Nantucket that does not make it into the public relations pieces. For a population that reportedly came to Nantucket to evade the judgment of the Puritans, the English settlers were not as neighborly as one would imagine. The original inhabitants of Nantucket, the Wampanoags, bore the brunt of the changing demographics of the island.

"One of the things I put into the book was Obed Macy's description of how English alcohol destroyed the Indians," Karttunen explained. "He wrote that the Indians were kind and hospitable and 'their only misfortune was their connection with Christians, and their only crime, the imitation of their manners.' They drank the Christians' poison, which was demon rum, and died."

Rum fueled many of the crimes. Theft and fighting were common. Karttunen tells of Tom Jesper, who in 1759 accused Jonathan Gershom of Martha's Vineyard of "attacking him with a knife and leaving him half scalped." Jesper took Gershom to Court, demanding that Gershom pay to have his scalp reattached. Could this be the incident that led to the feud between the islands?

One would think with the axe murders and alcohol poisoning deaths Karttunen found in the archives that it would take a truly horrendous crime to astonish her. Not so. "Television crime detective shows kind of inure us to any criminal thought we can imagine, so I think what shocked me most was not the murder and mayhem but the Quaker Book of Objections," Karttunen points out when asked about the entry that perplexed her most. "It's amazing what they got in trouble for, and they got in really bad trouble for getting vaccinated for smallpox. Quakers are throwing people out left and right for dancing, playing music and instruments, doing their hair, and wham, they're getting disowned for getting a smallpox vaccination." When questioned about the reasoning behind the rule, Karttunen would only conjecture that the Quakers probably felt smallpox was part of God's plan, and by getting a vaccination you were circumventing God's will.

Some of Nantucket's most famous residents ran afoul of the Quaker laws. "The Nantucket Historical Association's Research Library houses the Book of Objections which became one of my very favorite holdings in that manuscript collection," she explained. "You find very famous people in the Book of Objections. Maria

Mitchell and Anna Gardner invited their own disownment from Nantucket's Society of Friends. Anna Gardner didn't go to meeting enough so she got booted out for lack of attendance. Maria Mitchell got booted out on principle. Her brother was going to be disowned for marrying out of meeting, and Maria made a statement that her mind was not settled on religious matters, and basically invited disownment in solidarity of her brother, according to Margaret Moore Booker. I find that document at the NHA endlessly fascinating."

When questioned about her next project, Karttunen laughed at the prospect of digging up more dirt on Nantucket. Instead she is turning from the underbelly to the gastronomical belly. "I'm working on a book titled 'Good Things From Nantucket's North Shore,'" Karttunen said. "It's a neighborhood history with recipes, the core of which is my aunt Esther Gibbs who founded the North Shore Restaurant. She collected 19th century recipes with Ellen Ramsdell who owned the Garden Gate Gift Shop. They concocted lots of recipes together for Ellen's gift shop and mail order business, like jams, jellies and chutneys. When Esther passed she left me a box of annotated and tested recipes — and since they never bothered to keep the ones they didn't like, I have an entire box of Esther and Ellen approved recipes."

Karttunen's Aunt Esther is the perfect example of a Nantucket woman entrepreneur, a force that can be found throughout the island's history. "Esther and Ellen were definitely gutsy gals," explained Karttunen. "When Esther wanted to start her restaurant, a location opened up where Cathcart's Grocery Store was. The Cathcarts had a son about my aunt's age who died, and they wanted to close down the business. They told Esther they would sell the building to her. She had always wanted to start a restaurant and had previously started working at The Roberts House in the kitchen and the dining room, then worked in Florida, saving money and learning the trade. When the Cathcarts approached her, she went to the bank and asked for a loan. They turned her down. She walked out of the bank with a look of thunder along her brow. Walking along Centre Street, she met Cora Stevens, one of the famous Petticoat Row women. Cora said, 'Why Esther, what's the matter?' Esther promptly told her, 'They said they wouldn't give me a loan because I'm a woman and I'm not married.' Cora looked at her and said, 'Esther, how much do you need, and when you're ready, you can pay me back.'"

From early philandering to later genteel philanthropy, Karttunen spends her time uncovering the full life of the many layered island known as Nantucket. When asked if she worried that the relatives of the scoundrels mentioned in "Law and Disorder in Old Nantucket" would be offended, she speaks like a true historian who is enamored with the stories that have made us what we are today. "Everything in my book is crime so old we don't have to feel ashamed of our relatives. The most recent is prohibition. Since none of us are personally involved

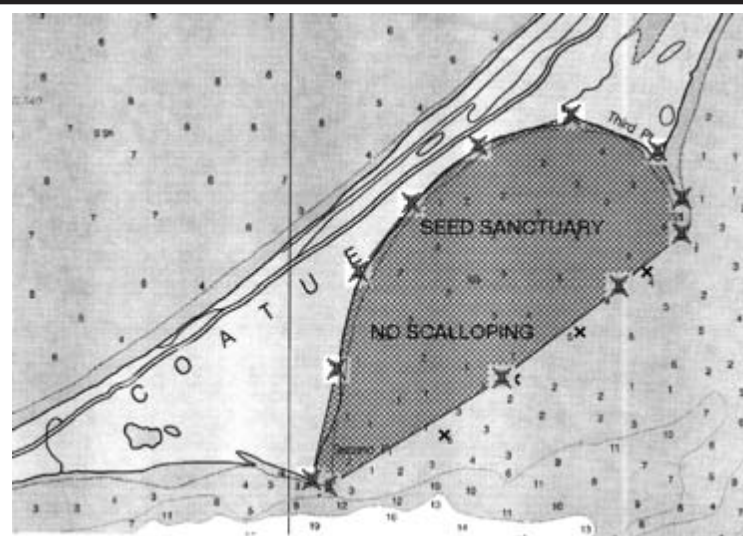


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and none of our direct ancestors are, we can be entertained by it." Entertainment with a touch of history — a recipe we all can enjoy. ■

— Frances Ruley Karttunen will discuss her latest book "Law & Disorder in Old Nantucket" tonight at the Nantucket Atheneum Great Hall from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public.



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