



A WALK DOWN BROADWAY

A Self-Guided Walking Tour through 'Sconset's Historic Core

A visit to Nantucket is not complete without a walk around 'Sconset's historic core. We hope this brief review of some of 'Sconset's earliest cottages will whet your appetite for exploring this extraordinary village.

Although much of 'Sconset's development occurred in the late nineteenth century, when the summer resort industry boomed along the Atlantic coast, the village's history goes back much further. 'Sconset's beachfront was used as a "fishing stage" by Native Americans and later by early English settlers, and the village is one of the earliest seasonal communities in the country. 'Sconset is short for Siasconset, a Native American term meaning "place of great bones." Accounts suggest that many early settlers traveled from the town of Nantucket to the remote eastern end within a few years of the island's settlement, and that by the 1670s 'Sconset was one of four fishing "stands," or stations, with constructions to provide temporary shelter.

As you wander the lanes of the village, you will notice that it grew "organically"—that is, without much planning, but on an as-needed basis. Note the intimate scale that marks the width of the lanes, the low cornice heights (some shorter than an adult human), and the very modest massing of the houses. Reusing building materials was prevalent in 'Sconset due to its remoteness and the difficulty of hauling materials to the area. Accounts suggest that the first structures were grouped around what is now Pump Square and were very crude, one-room, post-and-beam buildings with dirt floors and gable roofs.

As the years passed, subsequent owners added to the shelters with simple lean-to additions called "warts." Obed Macy, the first Nantucket historian, wrote in the 1830s that the buildings were constructed with wooden chimneys and that the exterior walls consisted of vertical boards without shingles. The small yards were filled with secondary buildings such as small barns, peat houses, boat houses, outhouses, and fish-drying racks called "flakes."

Although 'Sconset was a seasonal fishing village for most of its early history, by the mid-nineteenth century visitors from the mainland began seeking summer refuge at 'Sconset. These early seasonal residents included an influx of Broadway actors, many of whom rented new cottages just south of Main



Photo by Michael May

Nauma, 27 Broadway, 'Sconset

Street. Their influence in the village may account for the naming of Broadway—one of the oldest lanes in 'Sconset. Today, Broadway retains some of the best examples of these early structures.

Nauticon Lodge, at 4 Broadway, probably dates from the early eighteenth century, and like most whaling houses was built in phases. The first section, known as the “Great Room” with chimney (at center), was later expanded into a T-shaped plan. This early form is still clearly evident. The wings have shed roofs and appear as warts to the main block. Nauticon Lodge also retains an early outbuilding—a stable located at its south end.

The George C. Gardner House across the street, at 5 Broadway, was built at the end of the eighteenth century, and its design reflects that of earlier whale houses. Its T-shaped plan was part of the original mass rather than part of later additions. The building served as the village’s library for summer residents for much of the early twentieth century.

Auld Lang Syne, at 6 Broadway, is perhaps the oldest structure on island (if you live in town you probably argue that “The Oldest House” is). Edward Underhill, who gathered histories of many of ‘Sconset’s cottages in the late nineteenth century, notes that Auld Lang Syne was first owned by Michael Coffin, who employed Native Americans to fish for him while he remained ashore to do the cooking. The house grew from a rectangular structure with a great room and two small chambers to the south. In the eighteenth century it evolved into a T-plan structure with low shed-roof extensions. It was expanded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with warts on the south side, a kitchen at the north side, and a shed.

Dexioma (which means “welcome” in Greek), at 7 Broadway, has been called the “most perfect gem” by Henry Chandlee Forman, an architectural historian, and the author of *Early Nantucket and Its Whale Houses*. The south end is the oldest section. A north kitchen was added in the early nineteenth century, with warts to either end added by 1840–50. Dexioma also incorporates an early boathouse, which is now attached and found along the structure’s Front Street side.



Dexioma, 7 Broadway, 'Sconset

As you follow Broadway, you will note that many cottages have changed appearance with the addition of second floors, including Liberty Hall, House of Lords, and Mizzentop. All, however, began as simple cottages with a T-plan.

One of the best preserved cottages is Shanunga, or the Betsey Cary cottage, 10 Broadway. It is believed to date from the 1680s. The tall wing toward the north was added about 1780, adjacent to the oldest core and its early warts.

By 1835, Shanunga was held by Betsey Cary, who ran a tavern there. By 1873, the cottage was an early post office operated by Captain Baxter, Cary's son-in-law. Local histories suggest that the name Shanunga comes from a quarterboard that once hung here, taken from a shipwreck in 1852.

Across Mitchell's Lane is another fine early cottage known as The Maples. It was built by the early eighteenth century and occupied by Eliza Mitchell, for whom the small lane separating the houses may have been named. The south end is the oldest section. Later wings are evident to the north. The house's small scale and its crooked windows and wings are an essential part of its character and authenticity.

Farther along on the right is Willow Harp. It, too, was built in the late eighteenth century and was later owned by Benjamin Bunker, whose mother kept a teahouse. It has been added to in an unusual fashion, but the early structure is easily discernible.

Elisha Clark's Stable, a gray-trimmed building with a storefront-like window, found on the right near the shell path to Front Street, was later converted into Crosby's store at the turn of the nineteenth century, and a second floor was added.

The three cottages at the head of Broadway are believed to have been built elsewhere and moved to 'Sconset in the early nineteenth century. San Souci (meaning "without a care"), which fronts on Centre Street, may have been erected on Traders Lane in town and used as part of a twine factory. Local histories suggest it was moved to 'Sconset in 1814 and was the first cottage in the village to be raised to two stories. The kitchen to the north was a boathouse, and bricks for its chimney are said to be from the British ship *Queen* when she wrecked.

Early records indicate that the first known owner of Nauma was Rachel Paddock, the widow of Reuben. Local histories suggest the cottage was moved from nearby Sesachacha Pond. The barn now attached at the north end is believed to have been brought from Shimmo in 1868.

Whale Spray, at the top of Broadway, dates to 1796 and was moved from the Five Corners section of Nantucket Town, once known as New Guinea.

After walking along Broadway, we suggest wandering back along Front Street, Centre, or Shell—or better yet, double back and explore all three lanes to view similar cottages or to catch glimpses of the ocean.

For those who want to delve into more architectural history, we suggest picking up a copy of Henry Chandlee Forman's book, *Early Nantucket and Its Whale Houses*, which describes the evolution of 'Sconset's early houses, street by street. Also, the Nantucket Historical Association's exhibition on 'Sconset is currently on view at the Whaling Museum on Broad Street in town.

Guided architectural walking tours of 'Sconset, cosponsored by the 'Sconset Trust and Nantucket Preservation Trust, are held at 9:00 A.M. on the second Tuesday of each month, in season. Contact the NPT office for information and reservations at 508-228-1387.

The NPT also conducts tours of Main Street in town every Wednesday and Thursday from mid-June through September. The Main Street tour begins at 9:30 A.M. from our office at 2 Union Street, at \$10 per person. A discount to visit the Maria Mitchell Birthplace (4 Vestal Street) is provided as part of the tour.

Grab a copy of NPT's *A Walk Down Main Street: The Houses and Their Histories*, if you prefer a self-guided tour. The beautifully written and illustrated book makes a perfect gift or memento of your visit. It is available for \$25 at the NPT office or local bookstores.

