

The Wigwam

Summer camp meetings began in Kentucky around 1800. They were soon spreading throughout the early American landscape. Popular for their accessibility of religious experiences to folks in a sparsely settled area, they offered social and educational companionship as well. People came from far and wide, bringing tents and prepared food with them, so that they could spend several days at the meetings. In the Massachusetts camp meetings, cottage communities sprang up as people enjoyed the cooler summer days for more than a week at their retreat.

The earliest Spiritualist camp meeting in Massachusetts was in Nickerson's Grove in Harwich in the late 1860s. Ocean Grove in Harwich followed, as well as Highland Lake Grove in Norfolk, Ma. in 1870. In 1874, a camp was founded in Montague, Ma. with a mixture of tents and cottages.

Several members from Boston were seeking refreshment from the hot city air. They sought a waterfront community. In 1876, they developed a Constitution and appointed a temporary Board of Directors to purchase land. Granted a charter by the Massachusetts Legislature in April, 1877, the Onset Bay Grove Association adopted bylaws and elected officers. The Association proceeded to purchase 130 acres of land in Onset. The land was mostly forested, with several small farms that had been cleared. Formally dedicated in June, 1877, the Association had already surveyed the land, plotted building lots and reserve parks and groves. Streets, avenues, and boulevards were laid out.

By January 1878, a dancing pavilion, a restaurant, a speakers stand and outside auditorium were built. A bridge over the East river that connected to the Old Colony's new railroad station at Gibbs Crossing was built, and a wharf to accommodate coastal steamers was erected. The passengers were first transported to Onset Center by a horse-drawn barge. Subsequently, a steam engine that did not allow the sound or sight of escaping steam was developed : the "dummy engine." A new bridge was constructed to accommodate the rails into Onset Center. Thus it got its name- the Dummy Bridge. The Association built their office building across from the wharf on Onset Avenue. With a fantastic outlook for attracting Spiritualists from a wide area, the Association offered a large bathing area, cool summer breezes, and accessibility to transportation.

At the beginning, the community sheltered in tents. With the growth of the community, and the increase in amount of time spent here, cottages sprang up. Then restaurants, hotels, boarding houses, and amusements such as vaudeville and movie houses appeared.

The Temple Theater was built in 1885. In 1891, the first festival of the Harvest Moon was held there. It had a variety of uses: lectures, entertainment, and other social events, it was never classified as a religious house of worship, so was subsequently put on the tax rolls. The building fell into disrepair after 1950, and was eventually torn down. Now parking lots sit in the site of a majestic building.

The formation of a splinter group of Spiritualists who became dissatisfied with the original settlers of Onset, came about because of their apparent neglect of the importance of Native American spirit guides. The new group felt that Native Americans should not be neglected as important parts of their worship. Another anecdote probably made their decision more firm. In 1892, the publication of a book

called "The Vampires of Onset" exposed fraud by many prominent mediums, several of whom had practiced in Onset during the summers. It made using Native Americans more important to them, as they felt those spirit guides would never be impure.

At any rate, at 4 PM on September 21, 1891, a parade of men and women began along Highland Avenue and Union Avenue, converging at Waban Grove. Seemingly spontaneous, no notices of the gathering had been published or distributed. The group agreed to organize a society and build a wigwam devoted to the use of Indian guides and healers. It was moved and accepted to organize a society and elect officers. A committee of three was appointed to find and purchase suitable land on which to erect a wigwam. Waban Grove was initially suggested, but was not available to them. At the first meeting of the new society on the following day, they officially adopted the name of the On-I-set Wigwam Co-workers.

In a meeting on September 3, 1893, a building lot was approved and the society agreed to purchase lot 358 on 13th Street, facing Crescent Park. A donation of \$125.00 from Mrs. Mary Weston was received on September 25, 1893. This enabled the society to proceed with building the wigwam.

On October 25, 1893, the Co-workers held their first meeting as an incorporated society. Officers and directors were elected from a list of 19 charter members. There were 6 officers and three directors elected. At an October 6 meeting, 3 members were named to act with the directors as a building committee. At a later meeting, an abutting lot was purchased.

Construction began early in the summer of 1894. The Wigwam was completed in midsummer, and a dedication was held on Monday, July 31, 1894.

Heavily decorated with flowers and bright colors, the Wigwam was dedicated to "The memory of the red man." In attendance was a representation of MicMacs, who were encouraged to visit Onset by Vice President Mary Weston. She had them travel from Maine and Nova Scotia to join in Wigwam activities as guides and healers. The MicMacs lived in tents in the groves, and sold crafts such as baskets and twig furniture. They served as spirit guides during services, and spent their leisure selling their wares.

So much public attention to the building attracted crowds of sightseers that the building was kept open to the public for tours for a week. Then on Monday, August 6, the first regular meeting was held.

96 feet in circumference, 26 feet high, the building rose above the neighboring cottages, with a flagpole carrying Old Glory at its peak. Added to the stars and stripes were the words, "Indian Wigwam", Painted Indian red on the siding, the roof was painted foliage green. (The roof was later restored) The building has survived 5 hurricanes with little damage. Although no longer the tallest structure in the area, it stands proudly. Inside, the walls of white pine were adorned with art work and a multitude of Indian artifacts, including blankets, headdresses, weapons, and fancy work. Many of the paintings were either donated by Mary Weston, or painted by her. The most striking feature of the interior is the center pole, or healing pole. Used for those seeking healing to sit around, it is still decorated with mementos of the past.

The Wigwam was restored on 1994. The fancy-cut shingles that were original to the building were not replaced, and many of the valuable artifacts disappeared during the restoration. Over the years, the Wigwam has suffered losses to its charm, but has withstood the elements. It stands proudly today at Crescent Park, still in use on Sundays in the summer months.