



Provincetown
Massachusetts in 2006.
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Provincetown

by Kathleen M. McGuire

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From the time the Pilgrims landed there in 1620, Provincetown, Massachusetts has been a destination for outsiders seeking freedom. With its inhospitable terrain and distance from the mother colony in Plymouth, Provincetown became known early on for its feisty independence and decidedly un-Puritanical ways.

Situated at the very tip of Cape Cod, Provincetown has 100-foot beaches, 12-foot tides, and a 22-foot wide main street that is periodically covered in sand. There are about 3,500 year-round inhabitants, with a 10-fold increase during the summer months. The population, like the land, is in a continual state of flux.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Provincetown's economy was based on fishing. The Portuguese arrived in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, joining the Yankee outcasts from commonwealth mainstream society. By the end of the nineteenth century, the fishing industry was in decline, and Provincetown's economy was in trouble. Its recovery would be initiated by another group of outsiders: the artists.

In 1899, Charles W. Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art to sponsor impressionist painting *en plein air*. The following year, E. Ambrose Webster opened the Summer School of Painting, creating the local dynamic between modernists and traditional artists. The Provincetown Art Association was formed in 1914, and by the summer of 1916 there were at least five summer art schools in Provincetown.

In 1915, George Gram Cook and Susan Glaspell created the Provincetown Players. The following summer, then unknown playwright Eugene O'Neill premiered *Bound East for Cardiff* in a fish shed on Lewis wharf. The Summer of 1916, as it later became known, saw an influx of artists and writers for whom Paris was no longer a destination during World War I. Provincetown was transforming itself from Portuguese fishing village to an arts and tourism center.

After World War II, Friday night art gallery openings became major summer events. A popular stop on the circuit was Reggie Cabral's Atlantic House, Provincetown's first gay-friendly bar. The A-House and Ciro and Sal's, opened in 1951 by two aspiring painters, became gathering places for artists and writers, including Tennessee Williams, Norman Mailer, and Jack Kerouac.

In 1960, at a time when "subversives" were a target of law enforcement nationwide, Police Chief Francis H. "Cheney" Marshall, supported by Father Duarte of the local Catholic Church, required background checks on restaurant employees in an attempt to weed out any with an arrest for sodomy. Local establishments, led by Ciro and Sal's, ignored the edict, a common response to "regulations" in Provincetown.

The 1960s and 1970s saw an influx of "hippies" and other counter-culture types. Provincetown's tolerance for non-conformists also attracted gay men and lesbians, who created shops, restaurants, nightclubs, guesthouses, the Women Innkeepers of Provincetown, and the Provincetown Business Guild (PBG).

Until the formation of the PBG in 1978, the glbtq community, although a significant percentage of the

population, had remained largely apolitical. An early mission of the PBG was to organize the gay vote, increase the number of gay-owned businesses, and gain control of the town's tax base.

The AIDS epidemic, which took the lives of over 1,000 persons in Provincetown, galvanized the community. The Gay Pride Parade of 1989 catalyzed a major political upheaval, teaming up with Provincetown PWA and ACT UP to hold a "die-in" at the Outer Cape Health Services, demanding access to experimental medicines and streamlined FDA approval.

Also in 1989, in a town noted for its annual celebrations, the first Gay and Lesbian Family Week was held, signaling another major flux. Whereas lesbians had always been a presence, they now "discovered" Provincetown, and many of them stayed.

Provincetown's heritage of the arts and on-the-edge lifestyles is no better represented than in the 4th of July Parade, an eclectic community event that celebrates the independence of Provincetown and the freedom to be gay, in all senses of the word. Annual events specifically geared to the glbtq community include Carnival Week (mid-August), Women's Week (early October), Fantasia Fair (late October), and Holly Folly (late December).

Provincetown may well be the only small town in America where the unconventional lifestyle is the majority lifestyle. The 2000 census records only one birth that year and only 6.2% of the population as being under age 15 (in contrast with the national average of 21.4%).

Many second- and third-generation Portuguese have moved further up the cape after selling to affluent gay men and lesbians who occupy their homes only a few weeks a year. Real estate, rents, and other costs have more than doubled in the past decade. Political activism today tends to center around retaining Provincetown's viability as a diverse year-round community where even non-millionaires can afford to live.

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About the Author

Kathleen M. McGuire earned her M.A. at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she also taught for several years. She subsequently spent two decades in international business, from which she has recently--and joyfully--taken early retirement.