

E.O. 11593

DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY NOTIFICATION

National Register of Historic Places

National Park Service

Name of property: Dune Shacks of Peaked Hill Bars
Historic District

Location: Cape Cod National Seashore
Barnstable County

State: MA

Request submitted by: Herbert S. Cables, Jr./NPS

Date received: 2/3/89

Additional information received: 3/2/89; 3/7/89;

Opinion of the State Historic Preservation Officer:

4/17/89; 4/18/89
5/1/89

☒ Eligible ☐ Not Eligible ☐ No Response

Comments:

The Secretary of the Interior has determined that this property is:

☒ Eligible Applicable criteria: A, B, C ☐ Not Eligible

Comments:

See attached comments.

☐ Documentation insufficient

(Please see accompanying sheet explaining additional materials required)



Keeper of the National Register

Date: 5-12-89

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
INTERAGENCY RESOURCES DIVISION
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REVIEW COMMENTS

Dune Shacks, Cape Cod National Seashore, MA

SIGNIFICANCE:

The dune shacks and the dune landscape surrounding them are eligible for the National Register as a historic district under criteria A and C because of their exceptionally significant associations with the historic development of American art, literature and theater; and for their representation of a rare, fragile property type. Additionally, the Tasha Cottage and the district are significant for historic associations with the productive life of poet Harry Kemp under criterion B. The dune shacks and the dunes themselves represent a historic cultural landscape comprised of a distinctive, significant concentration of natural and cultural resources united by their shared historic use as a summer retreat for the Provincetown colony of artists, writers, poets, actors and others. The importance of the dune shacks is embodied in their collective association with the historical development of the arts; their spartan, utilitarian form; and their unique relationship with the harsh dune environment.

The dune landscape, as the source of natural beauty and artistic inspiration, is the linchpin of the district's cultural importance: it provides the key to the district's existence and to its fragile historic character. The shacks are the surviving material artifacts that convey the significant, continued historic use of the dunes' seaside setting over time. Because of the continuous shifting conditions of the dunes and the problem of erosion, some of the dune shacks have been moved short distances to ensure their preservation. Because the shacks are part of a district and because of the expected impact of the harsh dune environment, their movement within the same general environment is acceptable and does not detract from the district's eligibility.

The dune shacks provided shelter while minimally intruding into the contemplative solitude of the environment that provided the impetus to an abundance of artistic and literary work. The shacks' unpretentious, predominantly one-room structure, their simple materials and craftsmanship, their mobility, and their lack of amenities such as electricity and running water enabled their inhabitants to experience a survivalist relationship with nature. Celebration of the Cape's natural environmental qualities is eloquently embodied in Thoreau's Cape Cod (1865) and Henry Beston's The Outermost House (1928). This same attitude was perpetuated by the inhabitants of the dune shacks as attested to in the oral history contained in Josephine Del Deo's account of "The Dune Cottages at Peaked Hill Bars" and in the multitude of letters from a variety of literary figures such as Edmund Wilson, Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, Hazel Hawthorne Werner, artists, historians, numerous long-time residents, members of Congress, the Provincetown Board of Selectmen, and other interested parties advocating the preservation of the dune shacks.

Although the proposed Provincetown Historic District and other individual buildings in the town are historically related to Provincetown's development as a late 19th and 20th-century art and literary colony and to particular significant individuals, the dunes and the dune shacks represent the isolated seaside hinterland which also served as an important retreat for inspiration and the creation of artistic and literary work by members of that same community. Art schools such as the Cape Cod School of Art, established in 1899 by Charles Hawthorne, and the Summer School of Painting, established in 1900 by Ambrose Webster, as well as other organizations such as the Provincetown Players (1916), the Beachcombers Club (1916), and the Sixes and Sevens Coffeehouse (1920), were drawn to the Cape's natural beauty and the promotion of the arts in Provincetown. Major luminaries such as playwright Eugene O'Neill, socialite Mabel Dodge, and radical journalist John Reed attracted an everchanging constellation of literati, socialites, bohemians, actors, writers, and artists to the dunes at Provincetown for artistic inspiration and creative interaction.

Eugene O' Neill is one of the well-known writers clearly associated with the dunes. In his work diaries archived in manuscript collections at Yale University, O'Neill lists dates and places where plays were written including works penned at the dunes at Peaked Hill: Anna Christie (1920), The Emperor Jones (1920), Diff'rent (1920), The Fountain (1921), The Hairy Ape (1921), Marco Millions (1923), and All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923). Despite the destruction of the old lifesaving station associated with Eugene O'Neill in the 1931 hurricane, the cultural tradition of dune habitation has been continued by subsequent generations of creative persons. Following the destruction of the O'Neill property several shacks were constructed in the 1930s, 40s and 50s to meet the demand for dune living accommodations.

Although it may not be possible to document direct association of well-known figures with each individual shack, sources do document the long association of the artistic community with the district and with the dune shacks from O'Neill's occupation to the present. Critic Edmund Wilson's The Thirties chronicles his visits to the dunes and to the abode of Eugene O' Neill, the abandoned lifesaving station previously converted to a residence by socialite Mabel Dodge. The book, transcribed from Wilson's journals, provides anecdotes about the impact of the seaside environment and mentions several individuals who shared the experience of life in a stark dune shack by the sea. It is clear from this account and others that the dunes and the dune shacks, as the sole remaining material cultural artifacts representative of this pattern of historical use and cultural symbolism, were frequented not by isolated individuals, but rather by a collection of varied artists united by the dynamic process of artistic creation. Some persons mentioned specifically in Wilson's accounts are: John Dos Passos and his wife, Katy; George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, founders of the Provincetown Players; bohemian poet Harry Kemp; artist Niles Spencer; watercolorists William and Lucy L'Engle; writer Mary Heaton Vorse; local bookseller Frank Shay, publisher of early O'Neill, Edna Millay, and Susan Glaspell works; and Hazel Hawthorne Ufford (later to become Werner), relative of artist Charles Hawthorne and one of the grand dames of the dunes.

Hazel Hawthorne Werner's novel The Salt House was written and published while she was in residence on the dunes in the 1930s. The circle of literary and artist friends who frequented her two dune shacks, Thalassa and Euphoria, included Wilson, Glaspell, Dos Passos, e.e. cummings, Clare Leighton, Edwin Dickinson, Franz Kline, and Jack Kerouac, among others.

William Brevda's biography of poet Harry Kemp entitled Harry Kemp: The Last Bohemian (1986) documents the poet's intensely personal relationship with the dune environment throughout his life. Kemp, known as the "Poet of the Dunes," wove references to the dunes throughout his poetry and other writings created primarily while he was in residence at the dunes. Numerous references can be found in the texts of such works as Love Among the Cape Enders, Tramping on Life, More Miles, "Great Night," "Poet's Song," "Aurian Dunes," "Dune-Revenant," Poet of the Dunes: Songs of the Dunes and the Outer Shore, With Others in Varying Modes and Moods, and his unpublished autobiographical novel, "Time of the Moon: A Tale of the Dunes," to name but a few of his works. Kemp felt such an affinity for the dunes and his experiences there that he specifically requested that upon his death that half of his ashes be scattered over the dunes and the other half be scattered over Greenwich Village. Writer, artist, poet Jan Gelb, spent most of her summers in a dune shack built by her husband, artist Boris Margo, conceiving and executing works from 1935 until her death in 1977. She too had her ashes scattered among the dunes.

The period of significance for the Dune Shacks extends to the less than fifty year period, but the district meets criteria exception G for exceptional significance. Documentation supports their exceptional importance as a unique resource type associated with long-standing traditional use by American and expatriate European artists, poets, journalists, celebrated bohemians, socialites and the like. A logical termination date for the district's period of significance is 1960. The rationale is twofold: in 1960 the Cape Cod National Seashore was created, and the year also marks the date of Harry Kemp's death in the dunes. It may be true that not enough time has passed to allow for a historical perspective on the significant achievements of some individual artists associated with the district in the less than fifty year period. However, there does exist sufficient documentation on the importance of the district to Provincetown's history as a haven for the artistic community and the role of this group of artists and their work, both in Provincetown and the dunes, to demonstrate the shacks' exceptional cultural significance for associations with the continued use of the district by recognized artists under criterion A.

The essay on the history of the Provincetown art colony by Dorothy Gees Seckler provided in Provincetown Painters: 1890s-1970s (1977), edited by Ronald A. Kuchta, documents this broad pattern of historical development within the context of a handful of comparable art colonies in Europe and the United States. The appendix of this book lists numerous artists who have painted in the Provincetown vicinity, as documented by a variety of sources including books, periodicals, museum records and oral history. Of the 283 artists listed, the vast majority worked in the Provincetown area in the 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s. They run the gamut from relative unknowns to well-known artists and include such names as: Blanche Lazell, Bruce McKain, John Grillo, Philip Malicoat, Ross Moffett, Frederick J. Waugh, Ben Shahn, Jan

Muller, Marcia Marcus, and Marguerite and William Zorach, to name but a few. Specific dune shacks are linked with several of these individual artists; however, the district is significant for the shacks' collective use by the artistic community. Representative paintings illustrating the direct influence of the dunes and the shacks include: "The Shack" by Loren MacIver (1934), "Dunes at Sunset" by Morris Kantor (1939), and "Cabin Behind Herman Tasha's" by Wolf Kahn (1953).

BOUNDARY:

The boundary for the Dune Shacks at Peaked Hill Bars Historic District encompasses approximately 1500 acres and is described as: the shoreline to the north, the crest of the second dune line away from the shore south of the second jeep trail delineated on the accompanying USGS map, the viewshed line of the cluster of shacks F, A, I and D on the west, and the crest of the first dune ridge to the east of shack B. These boundaries are demarcated on the attached map of the area.

This boundary encompasses all of the dune shacks and the area incorporating the entirety of the historically significant cultural landscape and associated important viewsheds as seen from the dune shacks. This boundary is supported by the written documentation and by the attached Geographic Information Systems viewshed analysis. We recognize the shifting characteristics of the dune landscape; for this reason, this boundary is a close approximation. In light of dune movement the boundary may move in some locations some degree, but the basic principles underlying its justification shall remain constant. Allowing for this movement, the boundary shall continue to include the dune shacks and the extent of the landscape to the crest of the second dune ridge, wherever that may occur.

Prepared by: Beth L. Savage
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