

Can You Afford to Live on Nantucket?

M A R C H 1 9 9 6

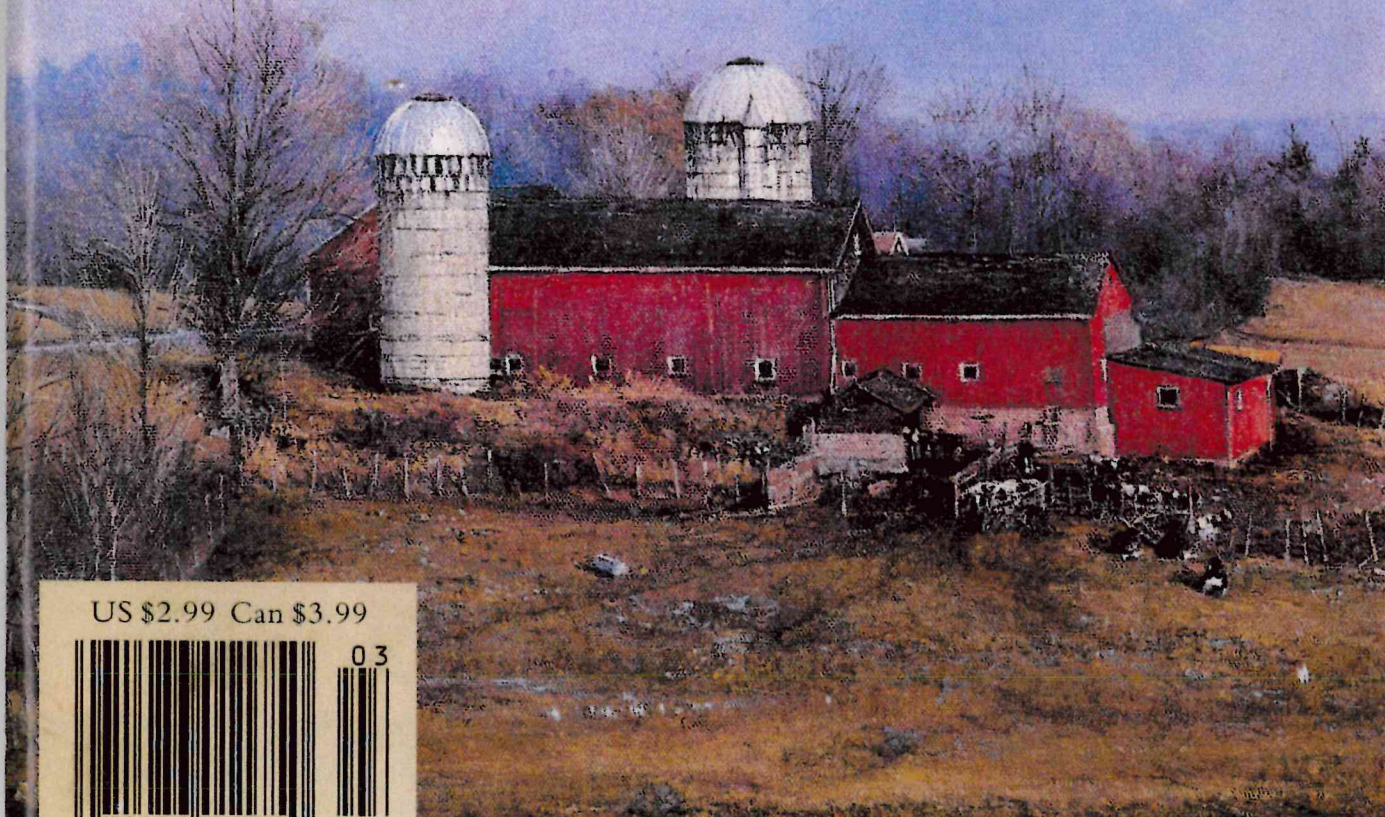
YANKEE®

Fiction:

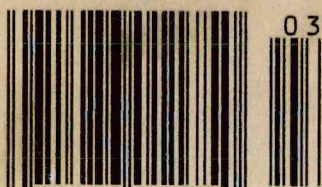
Terror in a Vermont Town

Life and Death at
Angell Memorial

My Neighbor,
Robert Frost



US \$2.99 Can \$3.99



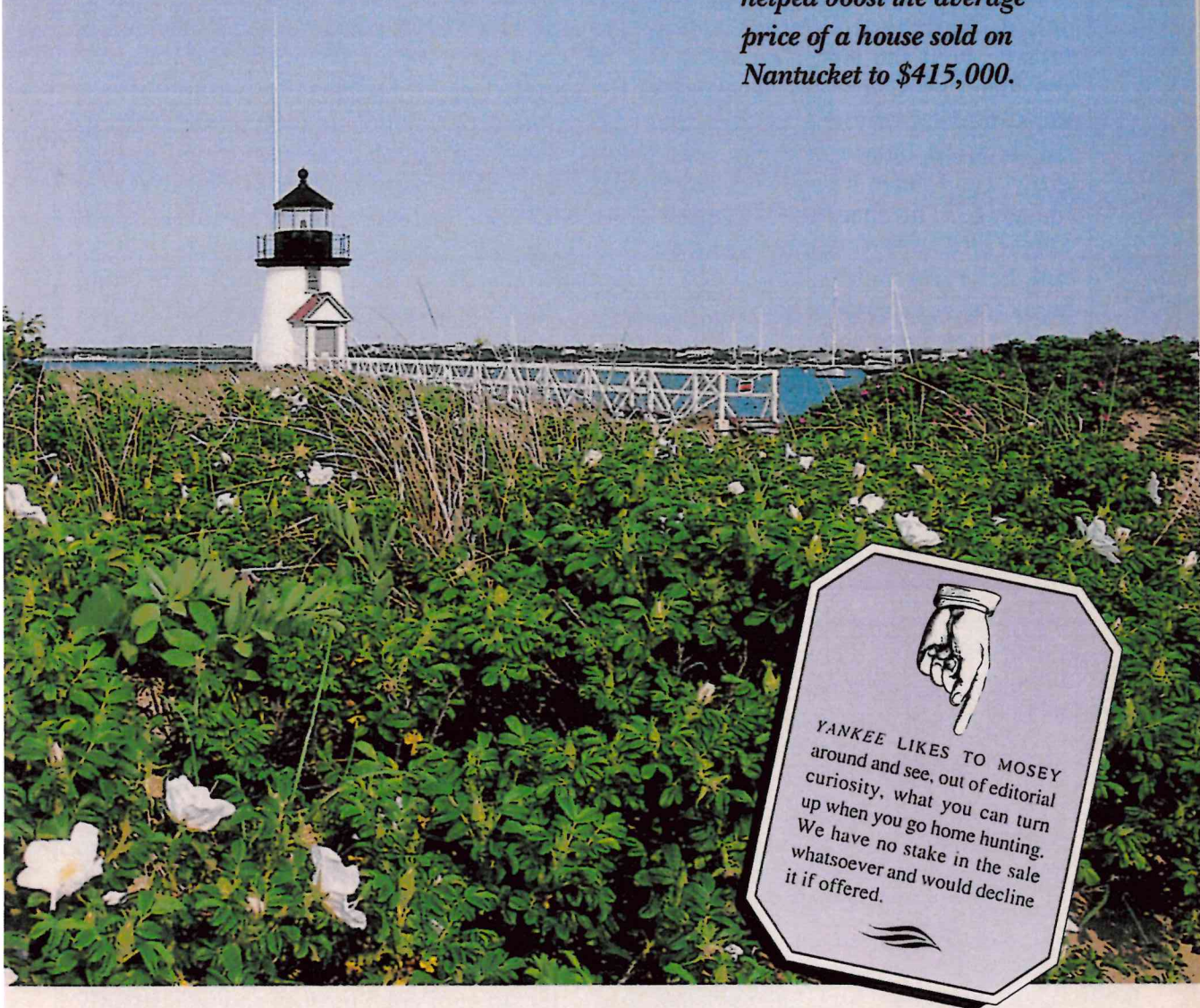
HOUSE FOR SALE



There's Always a Way to Live on Nantucket

Like much of New England, Nantucket Island is divided between those who want growth and those who want it never to change. How does this affect available real estate? That's what Guest Moseyer JIM COLLINS went out there recently to find out . . .

*Sights like the Brant
Point Lighthouse have
helped boost the average
price of a house sold on
Nantucket to \$415,000.*



THE HIGH SEASON ON NANTUCKET had long since passed, but the afternoon sun gilded the white houses of the village, turned everything golden and warm and timeless. Laughter rang out from a lively tennis game somewhere close by; tourists in shorts meandered along cobblestone streets and wondered aloud if these might be the last beach days of the year. Yet there we were inside, poring over statistics, no less, with John Pagini, the town's new director of planning.

We'd come to Nantucket because of something we'd heard that seemed extraordinary — that some 430 houses and

270 pieces of land were for sale just then on the island. What was going on down here? In fact, nothing extraordinary was going on at all, at least not in the house numbers. The 430 represented around five percent of the 8,000 housing units on the island, which is about what you might expect anywhere and was a good deal smaller than in the days following the real estate boom of the mid-1980s, when more than 600 houses were often for sale at one time. But there in John Pagini's office, we were learning that housing issues on Nantucket were extraordinary in ways we hadn't even imagined.

"Honestly, I came here expecting to do

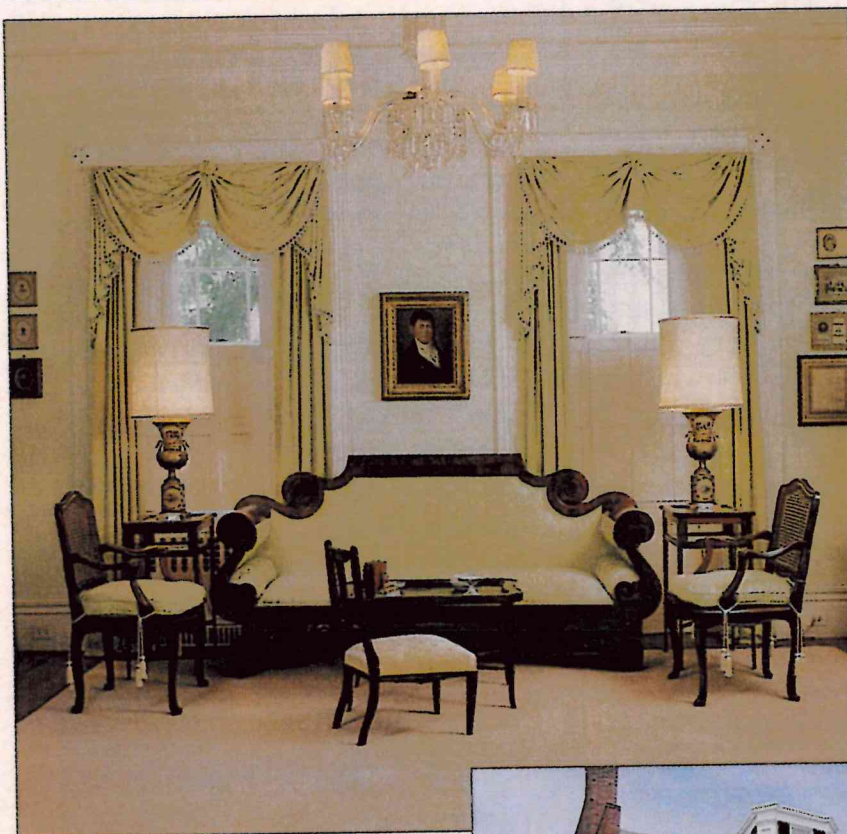
a little fishing," John told us. "I'd worked in a community of 45,000 people in Connecticut, then in an energy-impacted town in Colorado. But neither of those compares to here. This has, by far, the biggest set of challenges I've ever seen." He talked about the issues spinning out of the island's growth — the snarled traffic, the stretching of town services, the age-old tension between those who want growth and those who want places never to change. The chamber of commerce no longer promotes Nantucket's summer season, believing more tourists will detract from the very experience people come here for. A historic district commission approves every new construction and remodeling project on the island, to assure that nothing gets built that is not harmonious with the town's predominant architecture and scale — from the size of your picket fence to the colors you can choose for your exterior trim. Last year the town was involved with more than 100 lawsuits — many of them complaints over access and other housing-related issues. John said it was a delicate balance between sustained economics and preserving the island's charm and what remains of its open space. While tourism is the island's lifeblood, a significant part of the economy is built on construction, development, and real estate-related services. And quite a few residents still fish, harvest cranberries, and work in the schools and in the trades.

John described how hard it is for seasonal help and working-class residents to find affordable housing; how he himself had moved four times during his first seven months before finding a place he could afford. The summer population of 40,000 has created a serious housing shortage, and the growth shows no sign of slowing. Three hundred building permits had been issued during the previous year alone. Since fully a third of the island's 48 square miles has been set aside for preservation and another third has already been built on, developers are scrambling to carve up the remaining land. With land

(not to mention water views or frontage) so limited, it shouldn't have surprised us that real estate prices would be high. But we were shocked to learn that the *average* price of a house sold this year was \$415,000, that people were buying modest houses on the water for a half-million dollars, then razing them to put up million-dollar new homes in their places. Lots of less than a tenth of an acre were bringing \$150,000. And rents were high everywhere. "The irony is that so many houses are rented for three or four months, then sit empty for the rest of the year, while a lot of us can't find houses to live in."

We mulled over these things as we walked around town the next day, a handful of real estate listing sheets in our hands. We wondered about the new breed of Nantucketer who would tear down a perfectly usable cottage and put up a 5,000-square-foot "mini-estate" with a four-car garage in its place, wondered how those kinds of things change a community. We thought of an essay about Nantucket we'd read called "Living Where It's Always Saturday Morning," and that's exactly how the village seemed on this glorious morning. Everyone looked tanned and relaxed and unhurried, even though it was a workday. And we had to admit: Nantucket *did* seem as quaint and charming as it's advertised. We were even tempted to think of these as halcyon days on Nantucket — calm days at sea — but we knew too much of the storms brewing behind the scenes. We walked down street after street of cobblestones and wonderfully preserved historic houses, along wrought-iron fences and formal gardens. For a while, we stopped thinking of high prices and zoning appeals and transportation subcommittees and understood part of the dream of living here.

We walked without too much direction, matching the addresses on the listing sheets with the village map we carried, amazed at the universally grand and well-preserved architecture. And finally we arrived at the showplace in this town full of showplaces. We recognized the famous Starbuck East Brick mansion instantly and instantly re-



At the upper end of the Nantucket price scale is the Starbuck East Brick mansion, one of the finest historic houses on the island. With high-style Federal architecture and interiors, six bedrooms, and Main Street location, it's been reduced to \$3,450,000.

gretted having been so free with adjectives all these years. "Stately" and "lovely" and "magnificent" have been used on too many lesser houses to do justice to the scale and presence of this one.

It had been built in 1836 by prosperous whaling merchant Joseph Starbuck for one of his three sons. He had built two identical mansions next door for his other two sons (and two different identical mansions across the street for his daughters), and together the houses had become a Nantucket attraction sought out by thousands of tourists each year. The high-style Federal architecture includes two chimneys at each end of the house, eight-foot-high windows, and double front parlors. The recessed doorway is set off by Greek Revival-style columns, and the whole effect is, well, stately and lovely. The listing sheet counted 16 rooms, six of them bedrooms, and 5½ bathrooms. The color brochure made the inside of the house look every bit as im-



pressive as the outside. The price on the sheet had been reduced — to \$3,450,000.

Leaving the house, we passed a young man on the sidewalk who waited on tables at the India House (where, coincidentally, just the night before, we'd eaten the most mouthwatering swordfish we'd ever had — roasted over a cedar plank, with caramelized red onions and a glazed roasted-pecan-and-cashew topping, just exquisite). We asked him how people

manage to live here. He'd lived here, seasonally, for the past five years, renting houses with roommates. "There's *so* much money here," he said. "Gardeners, house-painters, and carpenters earn wages like they could nowhere else. It's incredible how this town takes care of itself. Banks make it a little easier for residents to get loans. I know of hired help who, once they've gained trust, have been able to borrow money from the people who employ them. People all realize they need each other to live here. Plus once you've been around for a while, you can find ways to be creative. There's always a way."

We walked back toward the ferry, thinking of dreams: of the young seasonal workers sharing cramped apartments; of the wealthy retired investment bankers wanting their own private pieces of paradise; of the real estate agents and developers concerned for their livelihoods; of tourists smitten with the thought of living here year-round; of longtime locals who want to preserve Nantucket's special scale and character while affording to live here themselves; of John Pagini and the other town fathers who envision a difficult but possible balance among all those competing interests.

The ferry pulled away, and we found a place on the open deck to stretch out in the sun. We closed our eyes, smelled the soft salt air, and thought of the little place right in town listed for \$195,000. "Great for renovating or tearing down," the advertisement said, and we hoped someone would choose to renovate, dreaming a little bit ourselves.

* * *

• **WHILE REALTORS ELSEWHERE** belong to an MLS, or multiple-listing service, here they belong to the NLS — Nantucket Listing Service. Members are free to show prospective buyers any property for sale on the island. Our most helpful contact was Penny Dey of Congdon & Coleman Real Estate, 57 Main St., Nantucket, MA 02554; 508-325-5000. She can provide information on any of the properties mentioned in this article. □ □

A Nantucket Sampler

OK, PRICES ARE ASTRONOMICAL. On the other hand, wages are also high, it's one of the most beautiful unspoiled places in New England, and if you are creative, you can find a loan.

• **93 MAIN STREET.** "*The Starbuck East Brick.*" A landmark house built during Nantucket's whaling heyday. Six bedrooms. Asking price: \$3,450,000 (see previous page for more details).

• **27 LIBERTY STREET.** One-half of a Shaker-style house built in 1747 and then divided in 1801 for



two sons. Three bedrooms. Asking price: \$438,500.

• **14 ORANGE STREET.** "*The Levi Starbuck House.*" One of Nantucket's finest Greek Revival mansions. Six bedrooms. Asking price: \$2,500,000.

• **10 EAST DOVER STREET.** The least expensive house "not in need of renovation" in the village of



Nantucket. Built around 1940, located on a busy street. Three bedrooms. Asking price: \$279,000.