

Memories Of the DoReMi Houses

*By Robert W. Griffin and
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The view from the Millfield Street side of Eel Pond about 1910. The Vadala home (formerly owned by Adeline Vadala's family, the Goffins) is on the right. The Carpenter Gothic style is apparent on the DoReMi houses.
Photo by Caroline Bigelow. Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Museum Archives.

Most people familiar with the Woods Hole of the first half of the past century remember the DoReMi houses, three buildings in a musical scale arrangement at the junction of North and MBL (formerly East) streets. They were on separate adjoining lots, large parallel plateaus, like steps, facing the Eel Pond ('the Eel Pond' was Woods Hole usage). Although they were roughly similar in design and size, they were built to different plans and not purposely designed for musical interpretation.

These quaint houses, built in the Carpenter Gothic style, are now gone, unfortunate victims of their virtues – their location near the village center, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the Marine Biological Laboratory, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority.

They were built in the mid to late 19th century. The Barnstable County Atlas shows them in 1880, owned by "G. Gifford and B. Gifford." The Giffords are an old Woods Hole family, going back to 1679. Braddock Gifford (1791-1873), the village blacksmith, had extensive holdings in the village. When he died, he left them to his three sons, Barzilai (father of the artist Franklin L. Gifford), Gideon, and Benjamin.

By the 1930s, the houses and land were owned by Addie Elliot, daughter of Gideon Gifford, who was brought up on Center Street, where Gideon and his wife Julia and family lived. The street ran parallel to Water and North Streets and was eliminated in 1969 when the MBL built the Loeb building.

Addie grew up in Woods Hole, married a Merchant Marine and moved to Newtonville but returned to Woods Hole often to be with her family. It appears

that she and her son, Bernard G. Elliot, sold the houses in the mid '30s to Horatio (Ray) and Sarah (Naomi) Smith, who lived in the Do house, and to Warren and Ruth Vincent, who lived in the Re house for many years. The Smiths and Vincents were living in the houses prior to the sale, however, probably as renters.

Ray and Sarah Smith had moved to Woods Hole from South Jefferson, Maine. Sarah Atkinson Smith was the sister of Martha Atkinson Hilton, wife of Oscar Hilton.

Mr. Hilton had the building with a marine railway on Water Street that is now occupied by Liberty House. He was very active in carpentry, boat building and rentals and local real estate, developing the Cherry Valley area off the Woods Hole Road: Glendon Road, Sumner Street and Leslie Street, named for his children.

Although the Smiths acquired other real estate, the house on the edge of Eel Pond was Mr. Smith's home base. He had a dock and a boat, useful for getting to Naushon Island for the carpentry and dock work he did there as well as in Woods Hole and Quissett.



Naomi Smith watches as her husband Ray attempts to load a horse onto his boat in front of the Do house in 1943.

Courtesy the Allen Collection, WHHM Archives

Mr. Smith bought or built several small houses near the DoReMi houses, one a rental property on North Street next door to the Do house, and another right on the edge of Eel Pond, which he rented to MBL summer scientists, including Ralph Cheney of Brooklyn College, who returned for many summers.

The Smiths did not have children but Mrs. Smith's nephew, David Ross, lived nearby and spent time with them, especially with Mrs. Smith when her husband died in 1948 at the age of 59.

Warren Vincent was a commercial fisherman. He and his wife, Ruth Taber Vincent, moved to Woods Hole from Edgartown, by way of New Bedford, and into the Re house in 1929 or 1930. There they raised their children, Martha and Samuel. Martha married Robert W. Griffin (the great great grandson of Braddock Gifford) of Woods Hole in 1942. Their reception was at the Re house overlooking Eel Pond. Samuel married Lee Cordeiro in Falmouth in 1948.



Martha Taber Vincent and Robert Wendell Griffin were married on September 5, 1942, at the Church of the Messiah and their reception was at the Vincent home, the Re house. Courtesy R.W. Griffin

The Vincents' five grandchildren (including this co-author) spent weeks at a time during the summer at the Re house. Warren Vincent (known as "Gug" to his grandchildren) had created an extra bedroom out of the storage area that was adjoined to the back of the house, which he dubbed "the steerage."

Ruth, or “Mum,” made doughnuts and pies in the cast iron stove in her kitchen, cooling them in the pantry – off limits to her voracious grandchildren. We children would have to be home by six for dinner and, after playing all over town all afternoon, would run home when we heard the first Angelus bell ring at the Millfield Street belltower.

We were in awe of the whale jawbone that our grandfather had pulled up in his nets that sat near the stonewall by Eel Pond in front of the house. Captain Vincent had been a fisherman most of his life. Born in Edgartown, he began fishing as a child, hauling pots off Naushon from a dory. His first commercial fishing boat was *Halbird* that he fished out of Woods Hole and Edgartown. In 1937, he and his partner Carl Beckman of New Bedford bought the dragger *Anna*. Woods Hole was their home base, and they sold their catch at Sam Cahoon’s Fish Market, next to the ferry pier and railroad station.

The 1938 hurricane came through Woods Hole on September 21, washing away buildings and boats and endangering the townspeople. Five people died in the storm surge on Bar Neck Road. Captain Vincent invited neighbors to his house, since the Re house sat slightly higher than the Do house. He tied *Anna* to a telephone pole at the corner of North Street and then rode out the storm at home with his family and neighbors, with the dory tied off the first floor bedroom window. The water came up to the first floor of the house but no further.

In 1945, Captain Vincent and his partner, George Fisher of Oak Bluffs, commissioned Casey Boat-builders in Fairhaven to build a 75-foot dragger, *R. W. Griffin Jr.*, named for Capt. Vincent’s first grandchild. Later Captain Vincent bought his partner’s share of the boat. He added new technology: special tanks in the hold with continuous flowing water to keep the lobsters alive, solving the problem

that had kept lobstermen from staying out at sea for longer periods of time. In 1958, Captain Vincent became one of the first to install radar on his boat.

On July 11, 1958, Captain Vincent and his crew were 59 miles from the Nantucket Light vessel with 6,000 pounds of lobster, about to leave to sell their catch in Portland. Nearby was *City of Karachi*, a 484-foot, 7,360-ton steel freighter based in Glasgow, Scotland. In heavy fog, the freighter struck *Griffin*. Captain Vincent was pulled beneath the surface of the water as the vessel sank. He was never found. Two other men died that day, including Ruth Vincent’s brother, Milton Taber. Samuel Vincent, the first mate and captain’s son survived, as did three other crew members.

Another fisherman, Charles Bailey, who lived in the Do house with his wife Rowena and their four young sons, had met the same tragic fate as Captain Vincent. On July 5, 1930, Charles went out in the lobster boat *Ruth M.* that he co-owned. According to the *Falmouth Enterprise*, “Mr. Bailey left early in the morning to haul lobster pots. Later in the day his partner, Milburn C. Stuart, put out in another boat. That afternoon Mr. Stuart found the Bailey boat running in circles off Quicks Hole. Mr. Stuart overhauled the crewless boat. Mr. Bailey’s cap and sweater were hanging near the wheel and a broken rope dangled overboard.”

“Mrs. Bailey, distraught, haunted the wharf Saturday afternoon, gazing down the Sound,” the *Enterprise* reported. Mr. Bailey was never found. Neighbors in Woods Hole rallied and raised funds to help the family, who were later able to buy a home on Glendon Road.

The highest house, the Mi house, was home to several families over the years, among them the Spaldings, Russells and Paynes. Oakes Ames Spalding was the certified radio operator for WHOI’s research vessel *Atlantis*. The Robert L. McKenzie family also lived in that house, and later moved to High Street at the corner of Middle Street. Mr. McKenzie worked for the railroad mail service for

49 years. The McKenzies had five children, among them, Helen, who taught biology at Lawrence High School for many years.

After Ruth Vincent died in 1963, the family sold the Re house to the MBL. For two years, the house was used as the MBL director's home. H. Burr Steinbach was director and president of MBL from 1966 to 1970. He was chairman of the department of zoology and physiology at the University of Chicago. He later became the first dean of the graduate program at WHOI. He and his wife Eleanor (Susie) lived in the Re house for two summers, 1967 and 1968.

At the time, Woods Hole's scientific institutions were built mainly in the west section of Woods Hole Village. The MBL expansions had been mostly between Eel Pond and Albatross Street (formerly West Street) to make a compact campus.

In the 1960s, talk began of a new MBL building to provide dining facilities, meeting rooms, and dorm space. This would not only replace the old wooden mess hall at the corner of Water and Albatross streets but would provide other needed space for conferences. The corporation acquired the Breakwater Hotel, the old wooden "rocking chair" type summer hotel on Bar Neck Road, as a possible location for a new building.



The Breakwater Hotel on what is now Bar Neck Road.
The site has become an unpaved MBL parking lot.
From *Falmouth On Cape Cod*.

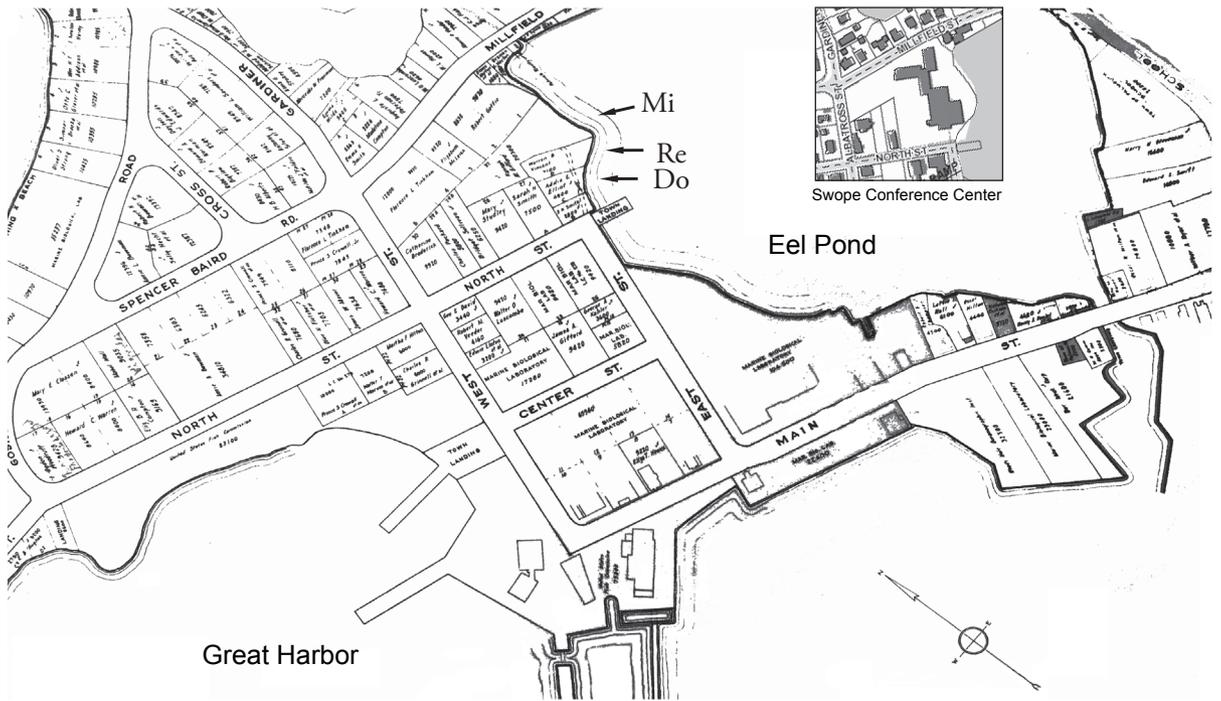
But Bar Neck Road leads to Penzance Road, and the owners of the estates there objected to the MBL's plans, afraid that the construction of the new building would cause traffic and interfere with access to their property.

In 1968, Dr. Steinbach was still indicating that the new facility would be on Bar Neck Road according to the *Enterprise* of July fifth. "In a written statement before the [MBL's] executive committee meetings," The *Enterprise* reported, "Dr. Steinbach said alternative plans were rejected as 'incompatible with the concept of maintaining Woods Hole as a place for people, rather than a collection of massive buildings, constituting a separate city.' "

But rather quickly, the MBL changed course and the facility was built on Eel Pond, tearing down the DoReMi houses that it had purchased, as well as the houses previously owned by Dominic and Adeline (Goffin) Vadala and Edith and James Reilly Sr. on Millfield Street. Sarah Smith moved from her home to a house on Bar Neck Road.

A building of typical of 1960s concrete construction, the Swope Center was built in 1969-70 and opened in 1971. Its style is a later, somewhat gentler version of what is called in architectural circles "brutalism" (from the French *béton brut*, or raw concrete). Many residents have complained over the years that it does not blend with the architecture of the neighborhood, including the MBL's other buildings. It does, however, fit quite neatly on the topography and has become an accepted part of the local landscape.

The renovation included the waterfront walk from MBL Street to Millfield Street, a nice addition to the village. Previously, residents (especially the aforementioned grandchildren) who wanted to take a shortcut to Millfield Street had to climb out on the rocks, then run through the side yard of the Vadala home on Millfield (and be scolded by Mrs. Vadala).



Several street names have changed in Woods Hole since 1947 and one street has vanished. Main changed to Water, East to MBL, West to Albatross, and North beyond West to Bar Neck Road. Center was built over by the Marine Biological Laboratory. Falmouth Assessors Map of 1927, updated through 1947. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society. Inset from Falmouth GIS, 2014.

While it is significant that in Woods Hole some of the village's old buildings ended up as part of the scientific organizations, many locals were saddened to see homes that held so many pleasant memories for the families who lived in them, and so much history, torn down as the DoReMi houses were. Fortunately, we have learned from this, and now there are individuals and committees within the community who value and protect historical buildings such as these.

About the Authors

Robert W. Griffin grew up in Woods Hole and attended the Woods Hole School and Lawrence High School and graduated from Brown University with a degree in civil engineering. He taught math for many years at Falmouth High School and later at Falmouth Academy. His parents were George A. Griffin and Ellen (Gifford) Griffin, whose Gifford ancestors were among the first settlers of Woods Hole.

Deborah Griffin Scanlon is the daughter of Robert W. Griffin and the late Martha (Vincent) Griffin, who grew up in the Re house. She is a graduate of Syracuse University's Newhouse College of Public Communications and is currently a copy editor and writer for the *Falmouth Enterprise*.