

Living & Arts

New and improved: Barbara White revises "Line in the Sand"

Historian unveils expanded look at Nantucket school integration Wednesday

By Joshua Balling I&M Assistant Editor

Barbara White first wrote "A Line in the Sand," which chronicles the integration of Nantucket's public schools in the first half of the 1800s, while a graduate student at Boston University in the late-1970s.

It started out as a class paper, but the more she researched, the more she realized the importance of her findings.

"It became increasingly evident that I had something significant, that it wasn't just a paper about the interaction of blacks and whites in a community, which was normal," she said of the discovery of petitions to the state legislature seeking the integration of Nantucket's schools.

"These petitions resulted in a law being passed (ordering integration), which meant Nantucket had a major place in integration history. I finished the paper, got a Rockefeller grant, and wrote the book."

But it had holes. Which was more than understandable.

"I did that book when I was a grad student. I had a full schedule of classes, two small children, and I was commuting from Nantucket to B.U.," said White, who taught in the Nantucket public schools for 33 years, served as an interim principal, and ran an Egyptian school while on sabbatical. "I really didn't know any Nantucket history when I did it. There was so much knowledge that I needed. I didn't have a base, so consequently, ever since the book came out, I've seen its flaws, and it drives me crazy."

So after retiring, she began to fill in the gaps.

The result, a new and improved "A Line in the Sand: The Battle to Integrate Nantucket Public Schools, 1825-1847," was released this week by nonprofit Spinner Publications of New Bedford. White will speak about the process of putting the book together Wednesday at the Nantucket Whaling Museum.

"I've learned so much in the ensuing years," she said. "I had the time being retired to go back. I have now read every newspaper printed on Nantucket from 1819 to 1901, just looking for needles in a haystack."

Additions to the book include the role in integration of Cyrus Peirce, for whom the island's middle school is named; a further examination of the African Meeting House's role as a black school, and closer looks at some of the teachers who taught there. It also corrects a factual error.

"The error in my first book was that I wrote Eunice Ross (who petitioned the legislature to attend the white public school) actually attended the high school. She didn't. She paved the way for others. She was on Nantucket after that, and something of a recluse. We're not really sure what she did," White said.

"The problem with history, when you write it in a book, is that other researchers take it as fact. There was an error in my book. My fact could throw the record off. I needed to fix it."

And she did, while adding a wealth of other information on integration and the abolition movement on Nantucket in the 1800s. One of the "needles in the haystack" she found while researching was new information about "The Brotherhood of Thieves" riot at an abolitionist conference on Nantucket in 1842.

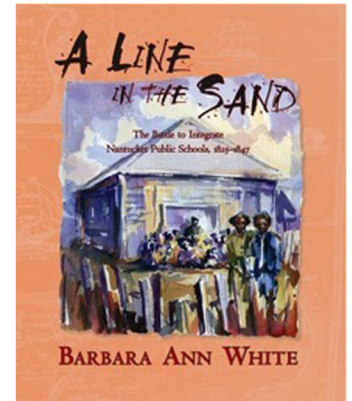
"It has been the accepted view that a speech by Stephen Foster triggered the riot on Nantucket. I found a reference in the 1880s to eyewitness accounts in *The Inquirer and Mirror* that showed it was a false view. It wasn't that Stephen Foster necessarily triggered anything, but that the riot was well-planned before the abolitionists even arrived to disrupt their conference," White said.

White has long had a passion for civil justice and equality that essentially triggered anything, but that the riot was well-planned before the abolitionists even arrived to disrupt their conference," White said.

White has long had a passion for civil justice and equality that bloomed into a calling while in college. On Nantucket, she was actively involved in restoring the African Meeting House and drawing attention to the neglect of the Colored Cemetery. The work of her eighth-grade stu-

dents to document the cemetery played a large part in its recognition and restoration.

"I was a history major at a very important time in U.S. history. My advisor in college was very involved in civil rights, although I was there a little after the civil-rights movement. It was such recent history," said White, who holds master's degrees from Boston University and the University of Lancaster in England. "I remember when I was young, watching a news clip on TV of a white person putting



Barbara White's "A Line in the Sand"



Courtesy Nantucket Historical Association

Anna Gardner, a Nantucketer born in the early 1800s who went on to become one of the island's most dedicated anti-slavery and women's rights activists.

a cigarette out in the hair of a black person. I was horrified. My dad always told me, 'pick your battles. You can't win them all, but fight hard.' I guess I chose this one. I've been so lucky."

Getting the revised book published, however, was not exactly easy. She first brought the idea to the Boston University press, and worked with them for over a year before being told there was no money for the project.

"At that point I decided it wasn't meant to be, that I'd print it, bind it and give it to the Nantucket Historical Association," White said.

But with help and encouragement from island historian Frances Karttunen, she began raising money to have the book published by Spinner.

"Our goal was to raise \$13,000-\$15,000, but most of the donations were around \$25. I have to give credit to the fundraising committee," White

said. "As a teacher, I'd done enough fundraising. Now I'm so thrilled I can hardly stand it."

Next up for White are two projects: a closer look at Cyrus Peirce, and teacher Anna Gardner, a Nantucketer born in the early 1800s who went on to become one of the island's most dedicated anti-slavery and women's rights activists. Gardner remained on the island for most of her life until the early 1860s when she traveled alone to the South to help set up public schools for the children of newly-freed slaves. White spent five weeks in 2005 tracing Gardner's path through South.

"Nantucket's abolitionist history needs so much more research. I just found out recently that Anna Gardner was good friends with Frederick Douglass' second wife. Nantucket needs to take more of the stage in this part of history," she said.

Barbara White, "A Line in the Sand," 7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 5, Nantucket Whaling Museum, 13 Broad St. Free for NHA members, \$15 general public.



Barbara White