

The Role of Fire Through Time on Martha's Vineyard

The following is the latest version of an ongoing attempt to compile a comprehensive record of historical fires in the landscape of Martha's Vineyard. This effort was initiated by Peter Dunwidde and Mark Adams and expanded by Glenn Motzkin and David Foster with contributions by many people especially Tom Chase, Brian Hall and John Varkonda. In this version DRF has gone back to the VG to check on and further document the information previously represented in table such as those in D&A and F&M. Source drawn on beyond the Vineyard Gazette include MA DCR.

xx – Remove as domestic, not wildland fire or not clearly escaped

xx - Remove from MV table as off Island

xx – Need to check Vineyard Gazette for original account

Banks 1911: “The great plain land is a dense jungle of the ‘scrub oak’ which thrives despite repeated devastating fires covering large areas.”

October 8, 1846 (VG) Fire in Plymouth Woods near Halfway Pond

March 16-17, 1847 Wednesday (VG) Destructive fire in the West Tisbury Woods
>5000 acres. 1.25 by 7 miles.

The usual quiet of our village was broken on Tuesday last, about noon, by the bells pealing forth the alarm of fire. It was soon discovered that the woods in Newtown were in a blaze, and many of our citizens hurried to that section of the Island, to assist in subduing the flames, which spread with frightful rapidity, and were not checked until Wednesday, 3 P. M.

Great Effects from Small Causes.—A Mr. Nickerson, in West Tisbury, on the 16th inst, set fire to a small plot of blackberry briars in his orchard, not designing to injure any person's property. The fire, when caught, soon became uncontrollable, and with astonishing rapidity, (although exertions were made to check its progress) soon reached the wood land in the neighborhood. The fire then raged with great fury through the afternoon and night, although many men were on the spot to check it. On the morning of the 17th, our bells again rung for renewed exertions, which was promptly responded to. By great exertions, the fire was brought under control about 2 o'clock, P.M., after having burnt over about 5000 acres of wood land and about \$2800 worth of wood....

Length of distance burnt, about 7 miles.

Width of same, about 1 1-4 miles.

From Jeremiah Pease Diary (Martha's Vineyard Museum RU280) – see 1850 Chapter notes:

March 16, 1847 - NW cold fresh wind a Fire commenced in West Tisbury this morning and came in contact with the woods burned over a very large tract, the wind blowing strong the fire came down near the place where Mr. Beetles house stood (near Wintucket) it continued to burn until late the afternoon of the 17th the damage done was great.

April 4, 1855 (April 6 VG) FIRE IN THE WOODS –

On Wednesday last (April 4), a fire was raging in the woods to the westward of “Willay's Plain,” in Tisbury. Mr. David Davis, Jr., of this place, rode out to the fire, and from him we learn

that it was occasioned by the carelessness of a man in smoking a pipe. The fire was first discovered about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and burned fiercely all day. At about four o'clock, when Mr. Davis left the scene of desolation, quite a large tract of the woods had been burned; but, it was thought the woods would not be injured to any great extent. At nine o'clock P. M., the fire continued to burn, and was visible from this place; but it was supposed to have been extinguished shortly afterwards.

September 21, 1855 (VG) Fire Among the Pines at Nantucket

Over a thousand acres of the pine lands on Nantucket were burned over on Saturday morning last. A portion of the land was covered with a thrifty growth of pines three years old, and valued at from 10 to 15 dollars an acre. The cause of the fire is unknown...

April 18, 1856 (VG) Fire in the Woods.

Mr. Editor: – The most destructive fire that ever, probably, occurred in our town, broke out yesterday, and raged with its wonted fury. Everything with which it came in contact being very dry, and consequently, in a good state to burn, greatly facilitated the onward march of this devouring element. In spite of all efforts, it spread over a large tract of land, damaging a great quantity of valuable wood, and almost everything within its reach. Fortunately, no buildings or persons were injured by the fire, though some were expecting their dwellings to be destroyed, and removed some of the “valuables” therefrom.

The amount of loss, may be estimated, at from \$5000 to \$10,000; and would have been much greater, were it not for the timely aid of our citizens. Their untiring activity to stay the progress of the flame, is worthy of note.... Men and oxen labored till they were entirely exhausted. Nor would we forget to offer a tribute of praise to the ladies, who were present to render assistance. After burning nearly all day the fire was conquered.

The fire originated in some bushes, which were being burned off, as is usual at this season of the year. Soon after it was kindled, it became unmanageable, and started on its course of devastation.

Such disasters are too frequent among us. Persons cannot be too careful, how, when, and where they use fire; for though it is “a good servant,” it is a very “hard master.”

M. Chilmark, April 12, 1856.

March 4, 1859 (VG) FIRE IN THE WOODS AT WEST TISBURY –

On Wednesday a fire accidentally caught in the woods north west of Mr. Job Gorham's store, but it was subdued before it had done much damage.

April 15, 1859 (VG) Fire in Falmouth woods >1000ac

April 19, 1861 (VG) BE ON HAND

On Thursday evening of last week the people of this village were somewhat startled by the cry of fire. During the day some one had been burning blackberry vines—on the plain—in order to get rid of them, and left them thinking they would do no harm; but some “scrub oaks” or brush near by caught fire, and, for a while, burned briskly. We hear also that some of Hon. LEAVITT THAXTER'S pines were destroyed and a number of fences injured, making the damage about forty dollars. The fire was finally stopped from spreading, by plowing and by throwing on sand.

So seldom do we have a fire, it is not strange that all, at first notice of one, are ready to do what they can to extinguish it. And, notwithstanding we may have had some false alarms, and our fires may not have been very large heretofore, it is wise to be ever on hand.

April 19, 1867 ca 4000 acres

(VG) Just before going to press a dense mass of smoke was discovered rolling up from the westward, and from the church tower the woods was discovered on fire. It appeared to have commenced in the vicinity of the village of Holmes' Hole and extended along toward West Tisbury, travelling rapidly, Men on foot, and on horseback, with shovels, were going out of town, it is still raging, and must burn over a large area of land, destroying much valuable woodland, before it will be suppressed.

April 26, 1867 (VG) The Fire – the actual damage sustained from the fire, on Thursday last, it is impossible to arrive at. No doubt many persons will tell of valuable wood-lots being destroyed that have been urgently depreciated in value when about to be recorded on the ancestor's books...

May 20, 1870

Attention is called to the Reward offered by John Mayhew, Esq., and others, for information to detect the persons who have several times, lately, sought to amuse themselves by the dangerous business of setting brush and woods on fire. Last Saturday a great fire raged on the Great Plain, and but for the persistent efforts of several men, a portion of our town would be in ashes. Now, a word of warning to those incendiary spirits: –Cease this sort of work, immediately, unless you desire to be placed where you can be found every day and night, without trouble...
...there are several bad boys in this town, who will do well to heed these remarks, before they terminate there [sic] criminal career in a stone house.

July 9, 1875 Friday (F&M) Quompacha Bottom (SV) – outwash. 7-10,000 acres

Fire In The Woods – A fire broke out in the woods on this island on Thursday forenoon of last week. It commenced at Quompacha Bottom, and spread in various directions until late Saturday night, when through the active exertions of parties from Vineyard Haven, the Camp-ground and Oak Bluffs, assisted by a few from Edgartown village, it was extinguished after burning over a tract of ground variously estimated at from 7 to 10,000 acres. The most of the territory burned over was a scrub-oak country, comparatively worthless. Some good wood was burned, and the total damage is probably about \$25,000. Before the fire was extinguished it reached the premises of Mr. Jeremiah Weeks and the road known as Dr. Fisher's.

August 11, 1883 (F&M) Vineyard Haven town fire – moraine. Not wildland

August 17, 1883

VINEYARD HAVEN.

The entire business portion of the town, as already stated, was totally destroyed on Saturday night, Aug. 11th. Twenty-six stores, thirty-two dwellings, two stables, and twelve barns and smaller buildings were burned. Desolation is abroad in the streets. Some of the sufferers have lost all; others have an inconsiderable insurance. The majority had not their property insure for more than half the nominal value. The heaviest losses perhaps fall upon the Quincy Mutual Fire Insurance Co...

April 3, 1885 (F&M) Gay Head-Chilmark boundary – moraine. Small

...On Tuesday afternoon last week a fire was started on the premises of A. Diamond of Gay Head, for the purpose of burning brush. It was through to be extinguished when it was found

spreading in the grass, and came through the boundary line wall into town. Neary [sic] all of the premises of Mr. B. F. Mayhew at Quitsa was burned over and the fire nearly reached the barn of Mr. David Mayhew...

May 2 (??), 1886 (F&M) near Vineyard Haven, West Tisbury. 1000s acres

May 7, 1886

About noon Sunday a fire, probably incendiary, started in the woods near the Vineyard Haven almshouse, about a mile and a half southwest of the village, and under the influence of a brisk northeast wind spreading rapidly in a general southwesterly direction, although it spread in other directions. The fire was to the south of the main road extending from Vineyard Haven to West Tisbury, and although the people turned out [sic] promptly and worked hard, its progress was not checked till after 5 o'clock in the afternoon, until a space estimated covering five square miles was burned, and involving some of the heaviest and best timber on the island, principally oak wood. The nearest point that the fire reached the main road was at the residence of William Norton, which was endangered, as well as the house belonging to Vinal Hammett and one occupied by a Portuguese family...

May 7, 1886 Fire in the Woods.

On Sunday a fire in the woods called out a company of men from the village, who armed themselves with shovels, picks and hoes, and went forth to conquer the flames. The usual quiet of the Sabbath was thus somewhat broken in upon. On Monday and Tuesday more fires were discovered burning in the woods, and more fighting had to be done. On Tuesday night the selectmen detailed as a precautionary measure men to "watch fires," as the wind was blowing quite strongly, and fears were entertained that the smouldering [sic] embers might be blown into flames again during the night, and further damage to be done.

A large amount of woodland has been burned over, and many of our village people have had their entire woodlots burned...

...Several thousand acres have been doubtless destroyed. Much of this was growing wood. In some places wood which had already been cut and piled up ready for carting was consumed. *The fire is said by some to have burned over one of the largest tracts of land ever known to have suffered in this manner on the Island.* As will be seen by the report of Tisbury town meeting the selectmen are authorized to offer a reward for the arrest and conviction of the person or persons who set the fire; as it is thought by many persons that the fire originated in this manner.

March 24, 1889 (F&M) Quampeche Bottom – outwash. 4000 acres

FIRES ON BOTH SIDES

A fire starting Wednesday, late in the forenoon, on Chappaquiddic, in the dead grass near Clark's landing on the southern end of the Island, burned all the afternoon and a part of the night, burning fences, oak and pine groves, &c., and large tracts of clear land not so valuable. At one time in the course of the fire the new residence being erected for Mr. Weston, of New York, and which is now well along towards completion, was in imminent risk of destruction, but by vigorous efforts on the part of those engaged in fighting the flames, a series of furrows were ploughed around it and the house saved. Later the fire spread out, nearly enveloping the Washqua farm house, and Mr. Walter Blankenship, who was in charge there, had his hands full in saving the buildings.

The principal losers by the Chappaquiddic blaze, so far as can be learned, are Mrs. Parnell Pease, loss principally on pine grove, estimated at several hundreds of dollars, and R. E. Norton & Co., loss by burning of standing oak wood.

The fire is said to have started from the unnoticed dropping of a match on the ground, after the lighting of a cigar, the dry grass easily igniting.

At about the same time Wednesday that the Chappaquiddic fire started, 11 a.m., another woods fire started somewhere to the west of the Little Pond country, near Middletown, which under the strong south-west wind blowing soon assumed vast proportions. This fire has burned with more or less fierceness up to this writing (1 p.m. Thursday), and has covered an area estimated at several thousand acres, extending from the Farm Neck district west towards Middletown...Edgartown is full of smoke today, brought into town by the southwest breeze...

April 8, 1892 (F&M) near Middletown (VG), Lagoon Heights (SV). 5-8000 acres

June 1894 (F&M) Location unknown (DEM 1994b; Gross 1928). Large

April 26, 1900 (F&M) Scrubby Neck towards Edgartown – outwash (DEM 1994b) 5000+ acres

May 3, 1900

EXTENSIVE FOREST FIRE

The forest fire which raced across the large section of the island known as “The Plains” lasted two days and burned through to West Tisbury. More than 200 men had a hard fight before the flames were subdued.

Two and a half hours from the start of the fire reached Pine farm, owned by Ariel B. Scott, where the flames claimed a barn, destroyed a corn crib, hen houses and a building in which two incubators, wagon and tools and a flock of hens.

A barn on the estate of Thomas Waldron was burned, as well as the barn on the farm of William H. Vincent, with the hay tools and a mowing machine.

Much valuable standing wood was burned, variously estimated at from 100 to 150 acres, and some 5,000 acres of brush land. The fire came within about 500 feet of the fine residence of Allen Look, and that of his son, F. Allen Look, also very near the summer home of Herman Streater of Boston.

The fire had its origin on the farm of Capt. Benjamin C. Cromwell, where, on Thursday [April 26] he and his men were burning brush. As the last pile was fired the wind came with hurricane force and changed from west to northeast, lifting the burning mass high into the air, where it seemed to burst, throwing the embers in all directions...

May 10, 1900 FOREST FIREWARD’S CARD.

For the heroic efforts of Mr. B. F. Norton, of Vineyard Haven, and Mr. Dumbard Norton, of Cottage City, in saving from being burned more than one thousand cords of wood in Edgartown, by the late fire, I for the people of Edgartown, desire to thank them...Edgartown’s forest fire ward, saved these woods from being burned...

May 17, 1906 (F&M) Innisfail Hotel (Oklahoma) burns in forest fire.

July 22, 1909 (F&M) on Plains (DEM 1994b) 10,000 acres

10,000 ACRES BURNED. Said to be the Area Covered by the Woods Fires This Week.

The woods fire which raged across the Vineyard Plains two days this week burned over it is estimated an area of from nine to ten thousand acres, or a tract three by five miles in extent. Some sixty men from Edgartown under the direction of Forest Warden George N. Cleveland, a large force from West Tisbury, and others from the country round about, fought [sic] the flames for hours before they were got under control. The spectacle presented by the fire on Monday night as viewed from Edgartown village, some two miles from the flames, was magnificent, and the reflection of the fire could be plainly seen in New Bedford thirty miles distant.

At no time, despite published reports to the contrary, was the village of Edgartown seriously menaced—in fact no extensive growth of woods is near the town, and with the

protection afforded by the water hydrants which fringe the village, no grass or running fire is ever likely to endanger the town...

...The fire was confined almost wholly within the limits of the town of Edgartown, though a small portion of the township of Oak Bluffs was touched by the flames. Valuable wooded tracts were destroyed within the town of Edgartown.

There has been a good deal of mystery as to the origin of the fire, but in the absence of anything authentic it is believed that it was started as a result of a burning match carelessly thrown into the dry bushes that cover the Vineyard plain...

...Only a small portion of the tract that is owned by the State as a reservation for the preservation of the heath hen was destroyed, but it is believed that the fire destroyed a good many of the young heath hens that were unable to get out of the path of the destroying flames. Hundreds of rabbits and other small animals and birds were seen, some dead and others endeavoring to escape the flames...

December 24, 1914 Thursday (F&M) western Great Plains to Katama – outwash. 1200 acres Grass Fire on Great Plain.

A fire which apparently started about midnight Tuesday in the western part of the Great Plain, swept the greater part of the Plain and the Katama lands, and burned over it is estimated about 1200 acres. Its origin is undetermined at the present time. In its course one or more pieces of woodland was threatened, but apparently the rains of Monday had so soaked the leaves and matted them that the flames only lapped the edge of the woods.

Quite a force of men from town went out from 2 a.m. on, and worked hard to subdue the fire, which was finally controlled about 9 a.m. Wednesday.

No loss, fortunately, is reckoned from the burning, but rather it is *thought the pasturage* over the area may be improved another season. But this does not excuse the gross carelessness of someone, it would seem, who is presumed by a heedless throw of a half-burned match or the knocking out of a pipe started a conflagration which might have destroyed much valuable property...

...The gunning camp of Mr. Archie Mellen, in the vicinity of Katama Point was threatened with destruction...

May 18, 1916 – Thursday (F&M) West Tisbury to Farm Neck, Ocean Heights, and Edgartown – outwash. 12,000 acres

FRIDAY'S FIERCE FIRE

Burned Over Some 12,000 Acres of Territory, with a Loss Variously Estimated at from \$10,000 to \$15,000.

High Wind Sent Flames Speeding Over Tisbury Plains Causing Hard Work for Army of Fire Fighters. No Farm Houses Burned.

Friday, May 12th, was a day of excitement over the eastern half of Martha's Vineyard when men from the towns of Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, Tisbury and West Tisbury, and the country roundabout, in in [sic] all to the number of several hundred persons, labored from 7 a. m. until nightfall, handicapped by a heavy wind, at times approaching a gale, in their efforts to control one of the most extensive woods and brush fires which has occurred on the island in years, if ever before. The property loss runs into the thousands.

The area burned over has been conservatively estimated at some eighteen to twenty square miles, or from 11000 to 13,000 acres, which included grass land, brush and woodland,

burning in its course many cords of cut wood, at least two barns, one gunning lodge, various outbuildings, and at times approached threateningly near the several villages on eastern end of the island. The buildings on the State heath hen reservation were saved by the desperate work of the fire-fighters. Some of the heath hen were burned, perhaps a tenth of the number of the old birds, and all the eggs for this year's crop of young were destroyed, and all the rabbits on the reservation are practically all gone.

The fire, the cause of which yet remains a mystery, apparently started about 7 a. m. in the township of West Tisbury on the old road, between that place and Vineyard Haven, at a point about a mile from West Tisbury Postoffice [sic].

The blaze soon reached tremendous proportions. The woods and the scrub oaks and pines on the Vineyard plains were dry, and the flames were fanned by a brisk northwest wind that occasionally attained the severity of a gale. Before this wind, the blaze was driven with rapidity and even when it burned through a section of wood it continued to race across the dry fields and would eat its way into the next adjoining clump of trees. Early in the forenoon the fire which then had burned over several square miles seemed suddenly to mushroom out and to threaten the whole east end of the island...

...The extent of the fire and the rapidity with which it travelled may perhaps be more fully realized by noting that, starting near the village of West Tisbury about seven o'clock in the morning, soon after 11 o'clock it was threatening the house and premises of Shubael H. Adlington, just outside of Edgartown, having come some eight miles...

...The big fire approached very near to the villages on the eastern end of the island... The flames did much damage to growing wood in the Amoz Smith, Dr. Kidder and Farm Neck sections, while on the old Vineyard Haven road the fire was raging in the locality of the former Dr. Leach hospital and the county thereabouts.

No very serious damage we heard reported from Ocean Heights...

...If the Gazette is correctly informed Geo. D. Flynn of Fall River, owner of Pohogonot Farm and much country and woodland thereabouts and at Swan Neck, is to be congratulated that he escaped damage by fire this time, although property owned by him was several times threatened alarmingly during that day...

August 5, 1920 (F&M) large Vineyard Haven fire.

May 13, 1926 (F&M) West Tisbury toward Ocean Heights – outwash. 6400 acres

May 14, 1926

FIRE SWEEPS EDGARTOWN WOODLANDS IN GREATEST CONFLAGRATION OF YEARS

For the entire afternoon yesterday the fire departments of Edgartown, Oak Bluffs and Vineyard Haven, together with every available man of the first named town battled with a forest fire which at one time threatened the western sections of Edgartown and the outlying summer colony at Ocean Heights.

The fire, which was the largest the Island has seen in many years started at Mashacket. Various reports have been circulated as to the origin, but the choice seems to be between a bonfire and a mattress set on fire near the Gazelle place...

JUMPS WEST TISBURY ROAD

Burning a path which ranged from several hundred yards to over a mile in width, one edge of the blaze swept through to Clement Norton's swamp, and due to the fact that there was considerable vacant land near Mr. Norton's farm the fire languished at this point...

...Up to the time of crossing the road the fire had burned through territory never before burned down, as far back as can be remembered. After jumping the West Tisbury road it ravaged what had been ignited several times before, in years gone by...

Striking almost northeast the fire now directed itself towards Pennywise Hill and Ocean Heights...During its progress from its starting point the fire had destroyed practically all of the heavy timber in the town...

...It is estimated that ten square miles of territory were burned over before the fire burned itself out at about sunset. Swamps and the dropping of the wind at sunset caused the flames to die down to such a degree that they could be handled.

April 29, 1927 (F&M) from Dr. Fisher Road to Edgartown – outwash. 6400 acres

April 29, 1927

FOREST FIRE SWEEPS EDGARTOWN PLAINS OVER BIG AREA

Blaze Started from Brush Fire on State Forest Reservation – Travels At Record Speed

Edgartown Men Narrowly Escape Serious Injury When Car is Enveloped in Flames

An area estimated at ten square miles of the great plain and timber land in the southwestern end of Edgartown township, was burned over by a raging forest fire on Thursday afternoon...

...Many of the newly planted trees on the state forest preserve were destroyed, but it is not thought that any of the heath hens were caught in the flames, though it is known that many rabbits were killed.

The fire started a quarter of a mile this side of Willis Plain on the state forest reservation on the Doctor Fisher road, where a gang of men under Supt. Hollis A. Smith had been burning brush...

...The fire jumped the West Tisbury highway in the vicinity of last year's blaze, and burned over land almost directly adjacent to the area burned a year ago, working down as far as Wintucket...

May 23, 1927 (F&M) from Dr. Fisher Road towards Edgartown – outwash. 6400 acres

April 27, 1928 (F&M) Indian Hill Road --- moraine. Small

May 4, 1928

PROMPT WORK STOPS LIVELY FOREST FIRE

Cause of Blaze Undetermined—Believed Some Trees Fire-Killed

Prompt and efficient work by fire-fighters from Oak Bluffs, Vineyard Haven and West Tisbury prevented a disastrous forest fire on Friday when a blaze started in the open field near the old Rogers house, so called, in North Tisbury and burned northerly before the strong breeze to the junction of the Indian Hill and State roads crossing the western fork of Indian Hill Road and also crossing the State Road, but without spreading in the latter instance...

...so efficient was the work that the fire was confined to an area of less than a square mile, although it was a very hot and smoky blaze...

April 5, 1929 (F&M) Watcha to Tiah's Cove, Waldron's Bottom, to Oyster Pond – outwash.

2500 acres

April 5, 1929

Destructive Blaze Sweeps Plain, Burns over 2500 Acres

Barns at Watcha Destroyed – Many West Tisbury Residences are Threatened

Spectacular and Menacing in Appearance, Flames Roar Like Storm Swept Sea

... a furious fire on the great plain of Edgartown and West Tisbury that burned over an area estimated at around 2,500 acres destroyed two barns at Watcha, was beaten off the houses of Tyer's Cove summer colony only after a terrific battle, and seriously menaced the fringe of West Tisbury village...

... The fire burned from about 10:30 in the morning until 4 o'clock Thursday morning when a shower helped finally to quench it.

Starting on the property of T. H. Tawell, in Waldron's Bottom, so-called, when a brush fire got out of control, the fire swept away toward the Oyster Pond, carrying a flaming front of nearly a mile in width...

... but before the fire reached the cleared land near the pond the wind suddenly shifted, driving it back in a direction that caused the burned area to become V-shaped...

... The firefighters turned their attention then to Deep Bottom, attempting to backfire and prevent the fire from rounding the head of Deep Bottom cove, but the backfire proved to be unmanageable in the fast rising wind and the flames leaped the road, almost trapping a number of cars parked at the edge of the woods...

... The lower tongue of the fire burned over virtually all of Middle, Long and Thumb Points, and where the main fire did not reach, backfires burned the ground over as the property owners fought to save their camps. In some places ditches were dug and on Long Point a strip was plowed to prevent the fire from reaching the buildings...

... At almost the same time a battle was raging around Tyer's Cove, where the half dozen houses of summer residents lay directly in the path of the fire, which was coming down the wind at the speed of a running horse, the flames leaping and roaring through small trees and heavy brush that has never before been burned and shooting yards high whenever a clump of pines was encountered...

... The Tyer's Cove road was then backfired for some distance and the fire thus prevented from extending to the Strater estate, but the wind shifted still more to the south, and instead of burning down to the road, the fire began to parallel it, burning back toward the Edgartown-West Tisbury highway, with what might be termed its left flank working ever nearer to the outlying houses of West Tisbury village...

... Although the fire from the start was the most spectacular and menacing in appearance of any in recent years the spectacle was terrific as it entered the grove of tall pitch pine trees, the flames leaping to the skies and the trees cracking beneath the heat even before the fire reached them.

May 3, 1929 (F&M) Waldron's Bottom – outwash. 2560 acres

May 12, 1929

Forest Fires Should Be Prevented

April has brought what seems to be the inevitable spring fire on the Vineyard's great plains...The ravages of the fire might easily have been much worse. Yet, as it was, we have a broad section of plain wasted by fire, a great deal of wild life killed, and renewed evidence that no effective remedy has yet been applied to avoid these recurring conflagrations.

In early days of its settlement, the plains of Martha's Vineyard were heavily wooded. Tall and valuable spruce, pine and cedar stood in abundance where for generations there has been an expanse of worthless scrub oak. For this change of circumstance we have fires to blame. The scrub oak has survived because of its peculiar resistance to fire; it is burned, but up it comes again. Most trees will not stand such treatment.

The plains are capable of becoming a beautiful and economically important land of big trees, but they can never be advanced from their present state unless these yearly fires are prevented. The state forest is little more than started, and whether the growth which is now being fostered there can actually be brought to maturity without the blight of spring burnings can not yet be known. We hope that it can...

July 2, 1929 (F&M) Tashmoo/Herring Creek – moraine. Small

April 18, 1930

Incendiary Fires Ravage Woodland

Four Blazes Set at Once—Two Towns Aid Oak Bluffs as 5000 Acres Are Burned Over

Five thousand acres of land burned over, with an estimated loss of two thousand dollars worth of marketable wood, is the extent of the damage done by the series of fires set Tuesday in Oak Bluffs and Edgartown. That the fires were the work of malicious persons has been established beyond doubt, and the town authorities are hopeful of discovering the identity of the culprits.

There was little doubt in the minds of the fire fighters when four fires broke out at once about one o'clock in the afternoon, and when the fifth fire was found in Edgartown some time later, they believed their suspicions of incendiarism verified. Later in the afternoon a fire was discovered between C. E. Dutton's farm and Menada Creek, and a rolled-up newspaper, evidently used as a torch, was found at the point of its starting...

...Sometime after midnight when the fires in the woods had burned very low and were considered to be under complete control, three more fires, set at intervals of more than a mile, were discovered in the unburned section between the burned area and the village of Oak Bluffs...

...As all the fire fighters were concentrating their efforts along the two mile front of fire, broken by the intervals between the different masses of flame, someone, perhaps the same one who set those, started another in Edgartown, about a mile and a half away, and on the south side of the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven road...

...Police...learned that the blazes had been kindled by someone who sped through the dirt wood road in a car, stopping to drop matches into the dry underbrush.

May 9, 1930 (F&M) West Chop – moraine. 200 acres

May 16, 1930 (F&M) between Edgartown and Oak Bluffs – outwash. 5000 acres

June 6, 1930 (F&M) North to Northeast through State Forest – outwash. 1000 acres

June 6, 1930 – Friday

FIRES NEAR NORTH ROAD WORK ALARM NEARBY RESIDENTS

Blazes Blamed on Embers Of Brush Fires Set by The Workmen

...The fire, which was started from the embers of brush fires, set by road constructors during the day, burned over about three acres of woodland on the south side of the road. Much of this property, possibly all of it, is owned by Mrs. Edith M. Harris...

...At first believed to have originated from a carelessly tossed cigarette or match, some evidence of incendiary origin of the blaze was discovered last night, when a tightly twisted roll of newspaper, charred black, was discovered close to where the fire started...

...None of the small pines planted on the state forest reservation were harmed although the fire came dangerously close to the superintendent's house, which is protected by a fire stop...
...for the most part the flames found little to impede their progress, the scrub oak, dead from a similar fire two years ago, yielding readily to the spread of the fire, the flames rising high into the sky as the wind freshened and dropping low as it lulled...

June 6, 1930 – Friday

1000 Acres Burned On the Great Plain

Incendiary Origin Suspected—Fighter from All Down-Island Towns Battle Flames

One thousand acres of woodland were burned over yesterday in the most spectacular blaze seen here for a number of years. Much of the land had been burned over two years ago and was covered with a stand of dead scrub oak. Most of the devastated acres were on the forest reservation, but a less extensive area on the game reservation was burned by the flames, which were discovered almost across the road from the Mayhew Memorial boulder at 1.45 yesterday afternoon...

July 1, 1930

An article on this page gives in brief form the history of some of the great fires which have raged on the plains of Martha's Vineyard during the last half century. The record, incomplete as it is, is one to cause amazement in the mind of any observer not familiar with the reign of fire on the Vineyard's wasteland,—and immense and picturesque wasteland, but a wasteland nonetheless. For as far back as anyone can remember, the plains have produced only one considerable crop and that has been fire. The scrub oaks flourish because they are tolerant of heat which blasts the roots of larger and finer trees.

Although recent years have seen the establishment of the state forest reservation, the erection of the state fire tower, and the development of protective measures which should be available for use on the plains, the fires have become more instead of less frequent. Since 1926 there has been a fire of greater or less intensity and seriousness on some part of the great plain at least once every spring. The young trees set out by the state have been threatened and at times a number of them have been destroyed. In the light of experience, there is nothing to look forward to but more fires, year after year, and a perpetually blasted plain,—unless something is done to improve upon the methods of the past.

It is to be hoped that prevention can be substituted for the annual expense of firefighting which takes men from their work and forces them to struggle desperately and often dangerously to fight back the plain fires from settlements and even from the large towns themselves. Difficult as the task of prevention is, one thing aids it enormously, and that is the fact that the great fires

invariably come at the same time every year. It is impossible to know where a fire will break out, but it is possible to know when it will break out. April and May are the crucial months. Some form of adequate patrol should be possible to watch the plains closely, night and day, for these two months, and to give a definite, intensive vigil which has never been put in force before. The outlay for this measure of protection would be small when compared with the cost of suffering from fires and of fighting them after they have become well started.

The record of fires, continuing up to the present time, is serious enough to warrant a study of the situation by the county and the adoption of an adequate preventive program. There is no doubt that taxpayers on the Vineyard will be glad to foot the bill to stop forest fires; it is a bill which will prove smaller than the cost of the fires themselves.

July 1, 1930

From Vineyard Gazette Files: The Recurring Tragedy of Fire

The forest fires of Martha's Vineyard have long been a contradiction in terms, for forests have ceased to exist on the broad stretch of mid-Island plain ravaged time and time again by destructive conflagrations. Long ago reduced through repeated burnings to a covering of scrub oak, the roots of which have great resistance to fire, enabling these stunted, scraggly trees alone to survive when other trees perish, the great plain has continued up to the present day to be the scene of hard-fought battles with sweeping and spreading ranks of flame. These are still called, ironically, forest fires.

Again and again in the last half century fire has appeared somewhere on the plains in the month of April or May and more often than not has marched victoriously over tremendous areas. The reduction of the plains to a place of scrub oak, the imminent extinction of the heath hen, property damage aggregating a vast amount over a period of years, costly expenditures of labor in fighting the fires, and severe injuries to firefighters – these are some of the tolls taken by the relentless spring onslaughts.

Sometimes the origin of the fires is known but more often it is never discovered and is put to carelessness. In the extensive blazes of this spring, incendiarism became a factor almost for the first time, although the guilty persons have not been found.

Is the repeated burning of the great plain an inevitable accompaniment of Island life? Will the state of Massachusetts succeed in rearing once more the stately forests of pines which once covered the central part of the Vineyard? Or will the ever recurring "carelessly thrown match" continue to cause destruction and waste? These are questions brought to the front by the serious fires of 1930 and a retrospect of the past which reveals a succession of conflagrations occurring almost at the same time of the year and in the same fated areas of the Vineyard's surface.

Following are brief descriptions of some of the more serious fires on the Island:

1930 Sees Plains Aflame

And in 1930, in the weeks which have just closed; the unbroken sequence of spring fires was maintained, great tracts being blackened and reduced to charred sticks and ashes. Again the flames, home of the forest fire but not of any forest, suffered a searing ordeal by fire.

In 1931 – what?

1932 (F&M) Two fires in State Forest (DEM 1994a)

March 29, 1935 (F&M) Edgartown Great Pond to Katama – outwash. 4000 acres

1936 (F&M) 8 Fires, none in State Forest (DEM 1994a)

1937 (F&M) Chappaquidick (DEM 1994a)

March 31, 1939 (F&M) Quampacha Bottom on Dr. Fisher Road to Vineyard Haven Road (TC) – outwash. 4000 acres

May 17, 1940 (F&M) State Forest near Edgartown – Vineyard Haven Road – outwash. 1000 acres

May 26, 1942 (F&M) Job’s Neck Pond to Jayne’s Cove, G. Flynn – outwash. 350 acres

1942 (F&M) near Edgartown Great Pond (DEM 1994b). 1200 acres

1944 (F&M) in MFCSF (DEM 1994b). 240 acres

April 19, 1946 (F&M) Head of Tisbury Great Pond towards Edgartown/Oak Bluffs – outwash. 5120 acres

September 3, 1948 (F&M) South & West towards Cleavelandtown/Edgartown Airport – outwash. 300 acres

April 8, 1949

Our Pattern of Fires

In the past sixty years the aggregate area on Martha’s Vineyard burned over by forest fires – or so-called forest fires, since the ravaged plain cannot be said to be real forest – has considerably exceeded a hundred square miles. This means, of course, that fires have burned an area great than the Island itself; and it is possible because of the fact that the plains have been burned over and over again, spring after spring.

The really great fires have occurred in March, April or May. The greatest of all was probably that of May 12, 1916, which started near West Tisbury and in about two hours was beating at the outskirts of Edgartown. That year about twenty square miles were burned over this single fire, and among other things the extinction of the heath hen was made all but inevitable... ..the pattern shows the extreme peril of the spring. During the period when late frosts are still preventing the plains from turning green they become tinder, ready to be ignited by a cigarette or a spark from any outdoor fire.

In the second place, the pattern shows how the fires repeatedly start on or adjacent to the enormous level tract of plain and tend to cover large areas before they can be controlled.

Applied to the question of a fire tower, the lesson of the past seems clearly to be that of a location in Christiantown can have no special merit, and probably no merit at all. The original site was near the center of the plain, a very logical one. Now that the age of aviation probably makes that impossible, there are many advantageous places strategically placed on the periphery of our conflagration area where a tower may be placed far more economically and with every advantage in observation.

1951 (F&M) 10 fires on the Island (DEM 1994b)

April 9, 1954 (F&M) between Barnes Road, Wing Road and Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road —outwash. 1000 acres

April 9, 1954 – editorial

Our Latest Fire

The recent fire that burned over many acres and threatened a number of houses on the outskirts of Oak Bluffs is so clear an object lesson that comment seems almost superfluous. Once again it has been demonstrated how quickly carelessness turns into disaster, how dangerous a

season the spring of the year is for outdoor fires on the Vineyard, how much more easily a fire may be started than put out and how mostly in time, labor, and destruction of resources such fires always are...

...The Vineyard has many acres of scrub oak and rather insignificant growth which is lightly regarded. The repeated burning over of such areas is not considered important. But the scrub oak grows in place of tall trees that flourished when white settlers came, and it grows because scrub oak is peculiarly resistant to fire. Were it not for the repeated burnings, generation after generation, land now valueless would have great value; its howl character would be different, and the climate of the central part of the Island would be affected. The sharp changes of temperature in the region of the plains, the early and late frosts, the rapid draining away or evaporation of rainfall, are all factors related to the growth of woods.

Where trees grow, leafmold accumulates. The soil acts as a sponge and retains moisture. The forest leaves evaporate moisture and modify the humidity of the surface air. They supply shade and act as natural regulators. Useful timber is grown. Cycles of production are established.

But because of the succession of fires, usually in the spring, something approaching a desert condition was long ago established near the center of one of the most verdant and congenial of islands. The recent fire is simply the latest instance, one more variant reaching off in a different sector, of the old, old process of waste and loss...

May 29, 1954 (F&M) Tiah's Cove, West Tisbury to Edgartown — outwash. 2500 acres

July 16, 1954 (F&M) Chappaquiddick near four corners — eastern moraine. 100 acres

April 19, 1957 (F&M) near State Highway at Deep Bottom — outwash. 35 acres

May 3, 1957 (F&M) North of Chilmark cemetery, toward Chilmark Pond — western moraine. 100 acres

June 13, 1958 (F&M) east and north from State Forest — outwash.

April 24, 1959 (F&M) between Old Courthouse Road and State Highway — outwash. 25 acres

May 8, 1959 (F&M) West Tisbury Road near Deep Bottom — outwash. 500 acres

April 22, 1960 (F&M) Katama — outwash. 25 acres

May 6, 1960

[Recent years fire-fighting equipment increased from 5 to 17 pieces. 3 additional trucks at the airport, State Forest, Coast Guard. Island people were haunted by the fear of fire from the first. Exactly when the full realization of danger from fire swept the Island is not clear. At least 70 years ago.

Burned woodlands to promote blueberries. Arson is a big problem. Some fires burn for days.

“There has been no case of a building being destroyed or even damaged by a woodland fire...since the present system enabled”]

October 25, 1963 (F&M) Quampache Bottom to West Tisbury Road — outwash. 300 acres

December 12, 1965 (F&M) Great Plains to Katama (TC) — outwash. 1200 acres

May 14, 1971 (F&M) Oklahoma, Tisbury. 20 acres

April 25, 1975 (F&M) Northeast from Edgartown dump. 50 acres

December 31, 1976 (F&M) Edgartown: Herring Creek Road Katama Airfield — outwash. 85 acres

July 31, 1987 (F&M) Oak Bluffs behind Crosslands Nursery (TC) — outwash. 20 acres

1987 (F&M) State Forest. ~8 acres

February 21, 1992

[Downed wood poses Island fire hazard

40 years without a fire

Ed Davis Keene, NH cleaning up after Hurricane Bob

400,000 bd ft timber & 800,000 cubic yards of wood chips

“Members of the MV Sandplain Restoration Groups argue that the forests growing on the outwash plain are unnatural. The landscape is meant to be sandplain—a specialized grassland found only in this part of the world. Historically, spring fires kept the sandplain from succeeding to forest”]

September 14, 1993

September 14, 1993

[Serious forest fire risk

John Varkonda & Earl Littlefield working at State Forest

“At times, the fire has stopped only when it met the sea”]

April 6, 2007

[1st burn season for MV Fire Partnership formed fall 2006]

March 19, 2010

[Bob Bale

MV Prescribed Fire Partnership – TWC, MAS, TTOR, PHA, SMF

Protect public and preserve unique fire dependent ecology. Some areas haven’t seen fire in 40-50 years. Cites 1916 fire as what they want to prevent.

“Fire has played a major role in erecting the Vineyard’s unique sandplain grassland ecosystem. For centuries, the Wampanoags worked with fire to clear underbrush and improve the east of the travel and visibility on the Island. Fire also improved agriculture”

Fend off early germinates, cool-season grasses = European grasses for little bluestem – summer warm season grasses

“On an Island where the life depends on its own immolation to survive, burn teams are guardians not only of public safety but of natural heritage”]

April 1, 2011

[24 years of prescribed fire in MV first done at Wasque]

September 14, 1993

September 14, 1993

[Serious forest fire risk

John Varkonda & Earl Littlefield working at State Forest

“At times, the fire has stopped only when it met the sea”]

April 6, 2007

[1st burn season for MV Fire Partnership formed fall 2006]

March 19, 2010

[Bob Bale

MV Prescribed Fire Partnership – TWC, MAS, TTOR, PHA, SMF

Protect public and preserve unique fire dependent ecology. Some areas haven't seen fire in 40-50 years. Cites 1916 fire as what they want to prevent.

“Fire has played a major role in erecting the Vineyard's unique sandplain grassland ecosystem. For centuries, the Wampanoags worked with fire to clear underbrush and improve the ease of travel and visibility on the Island. Fire also improved agriculture”

Fend off early germinates, cool-season grasses = European grasses for little bluestem – summer warm season grasses

“On an Island where the life depends on its own immolation to survive, burn teams are guardians not only of public safety but of natural heritage”]

April 1, 2011

[24 years of prescribed fire in MV first done at Wasque]