

Gay Head, from the lighthouse

Plate 21A (ca. 1887)

This impressive view was taken by Richard C. Woodward, a photographer who had a studio in the Methodist Campgrounds in Oak Bluffs from 1870–1888. It captures the essence of nineteenth century Gay Head — wide open. Looking east from the entrance gate to the lighthouse, the eye traces this way and that across a network of stone walls, hesitating here and there at a farmhouse, perhaps, but no tree or bush interrupts the expanse. The view seems little changed from the 1844 description of Gay Head as “a level, desolate moor, treeless, shrubless, and

barren of all vegetation, save coarse grass and weeds, and a profusion of stunted dog-roses.”

Most likely the exposed nature of the bluffs left the vegetation particularly prone to harsh winds and salt spray. Stone walls offered little protection, being built primarily to delineate property bounds and to enclose pastures. Despite the cow wandering down the road in this view, livestock were not abundant: an 1878 inventory recorded four sheep, 48 cows, 42 oxen, 71 cattle and 29 horses in Gay Head. There was little farming activity, as most of the inhabitants were engaged in fishing.

