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Author ELIZABEH STUART PHELPS
On tensions between residents and visitors, 1896



Vacationers came to Gloucester in great numbers once the Eastern Railroad completed its link by 1847. Forty years later, there were plenty of cottages, boarding houses and hotels for guests. Tensions between the residents and visiting rubes were obvious to the best-selling author, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, who came to spend her first season in Gloucester in 1875 and returned every year. She speaks with some embarrassment of being perceived as an “idle” tourist who knows little of the working world before her.

In fact, Phelps was a best selling author by 1868, and she realized much of Gloucester was not impressed. Hardly idle, she was an advocate for women’s rights and wrote more than 50 works of poetry, fiction, and essays in her lifetime. After some twenty seasons in Gloucester, she describes the divide between the two groups with a voice of experience:



“Gloucester, it must be understood, is the most important fishing port in the world, and Fish, whether dead or living, is always spelled there with a capital. In fact, there is a dignity about this form of commerce, upon which, to the reduction of most other kinds of interests, Gloucester insists. Her summer guests may come and go, may pay or not, may criticise or adore, but her fish bite on forever. The result of my own observation has been that Gloucester, in her heart of hearts, regards her large summer population with a certain contempt. We are weak on the topics of main-sheets, and jib-banks, of blocks and "popple-ballast," and seines. We are not learned in the times when herring strike and mackerel are due. We cannot man a Grand Banker in a gale. We do not go "haddockin" in March. We do not pack "Cape Ann turkey" to the limits of the globe. Our incomes, if we have any, are drawn from invisible sources looked upon with instinctive suspicion. They are neither caught with a hook nor salted in a box, nor telephoned to the Board of Trade when the cargoes come in. We are more or less idle folk, who wander about the streets, (who knows why?) or sun ourselves stupidly on the red and purple rocks, or dig for clams on the beaches at high tide, or exasperate the farmers by trampling down the hay, and letting the cattle into the apple-orchards. We are artists, whose crop of white umbrellas sprouts everywhere, and bothers everybody, and whose brushes do not know a back-stay from cornsilk. We are boarders who capsize the catboats, or pay by the hour to sail in a calm and don't know any better; cottagers who create homes in extraordinary localities hitherto little respected; or even writers who put Gloucester adoringly into the magazines out of the impulses of our loyal and loving hearts, and are hated accordingly of all men for the tribute's sake.”

—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, 1896



Despite her loyalty to Gloucester, she felt misunderstood nonetheless. Phelps tried to explain that she was not as terrible as some of those seasonal tourists who followed after her--the inconsiderate fools who spoiled the peace at all hours and marred the landscape. She, on the other hand, appreciated the true Gloucester.

“Our Gloucester home itself has suffered a sea-change within the last five years. The choice spot on the chosen side of the harbor became in time a Babel, in which only those “who sleep o’ nights” could rest. The tramp and the tongue of the summer army devastated Paradise.”