

The New Petticoat Row • Grace Grossman • Quaker Wives • Embroidery

# NANTUCKET

M A G A Z I N E

Early Summer 2001

In this issue:  
**Women of  
the Grey Lady**

Their influence,  
Their history,  
Their lives today

\$3.95

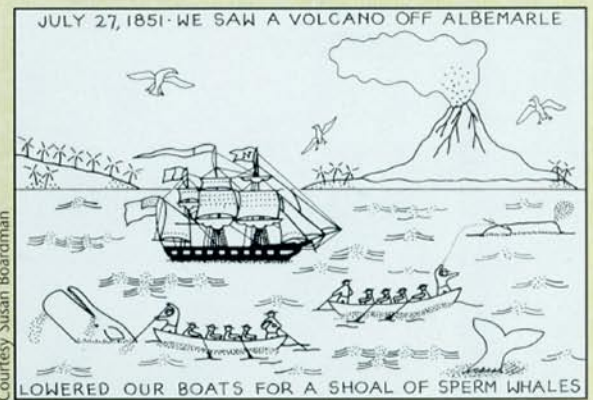






# Threads of Time:

Susan Boardman  
Embroiders  
Nantucket History



Courtesy Susan Boardman

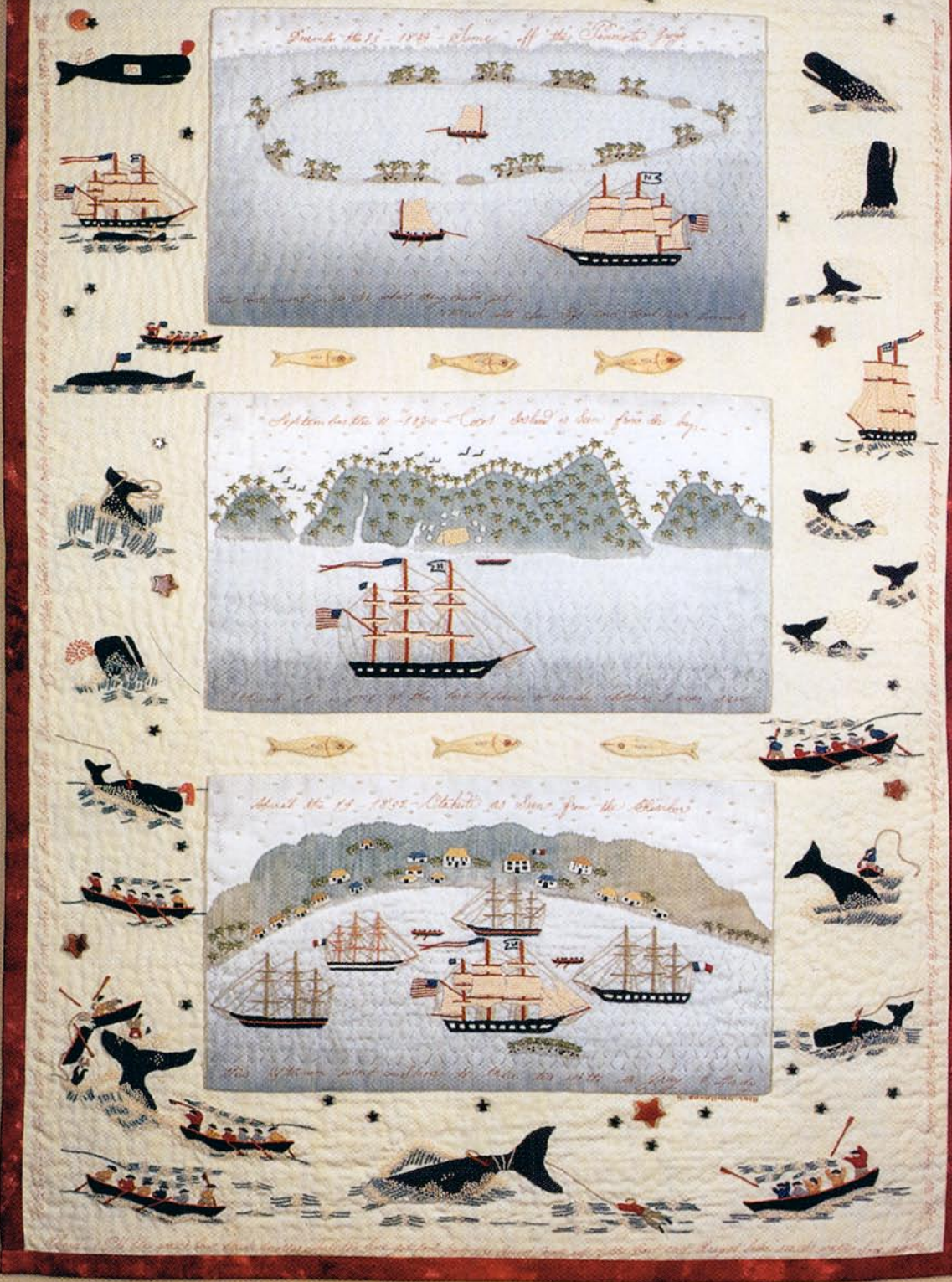
By Aimee E. Newell ◀

Photography by Terry Pommett ◀

Once a week, island resident Susan Boardman can be found sitting at a large table in the Nantucket Historical Association's Research Library, white gloves on her hands, poring over the journals left behind by Nantucket's independent breed of women. This week she is struggling with the writing

Working at home. An eye for detail is required in Susan Boardman's meticulous embroideries. Inset: A drawing inspired by the journal of a whaling captain's wife is the basis for a recent work.

# AS SEEN FROM SHIP NAUTICON



Boardman's first "embroidered narrative" (above), detailing the travels of the ship *Nauticon*, was based on "the words of the woman who was there." Opposite page: A lightship basket with miniatures, all woven by Boardman, hold her needlework implements.

## Threads of Time

of Martha Fish, a farmer's wife who kept copious diaries throughout the late nineteenth century. "I like the way she gave dignity and purpose to everyday life by writing it down," Boardman says. "She makes it important."

Boardman has been volunteering at both the Maria Mitchell Association and the Historical Association for over ten years; she credits this experience with igniting her interest in the hardy women who walked Nantucket's streets during the 1700s and 1800s. "I love the independence of Nantucket's women," she exclaims. "They always had a passion for what they did, and they were hard workers—these are qualities that I share."

Boardman first became acquainted with the women of Nantucket in



Terry Pommert

the 1980s when, as a vacationer, she attended the annual Maria Mitchell birthday celebration. "I had never heard of [Maria Mitchell] before and I was fascinated that she had come from this little island and done so much," she recalled. Boardman also felt a bond to Mitchell as a fellow teacher: Mitchell was a professor at Vassar, while Boardman taught for over twenty years in Massachusetts and in Washington, D.C., before moving to Nantucket year-round in 1993.

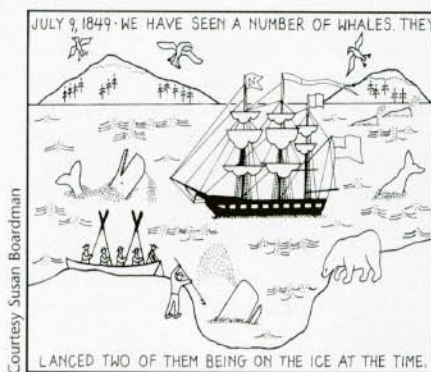
Her experience at the Maria Mitchell Association and her thirst to learn more about Nantucket women led Boardman to volunteer at the Nantucket Historical Association. "I started reading about these women whom I totally understood and loved. . . . I wanted to work them into my own artistic output," she says. Reading the journals of other women appealed to her in part because she kept, and still keeps, a journal herself. "You can always see the purpose since the journals record events, not emotions." As she

Boardman first became acquainted with the women of Nantucket in the 1980s when, as a vacationer, she attended the annual Maria Mitchell birthday celebration.

read the journal kept by a woman named Susan Veeder (in the collection of the Nantucket Historical Association) an epiphany occurred. "The lightbulb went on and I knew the kind of work I wanted to do."

Veeder's journal documents her experiences from 1848 to 1853 as she accompanied her husband, Captain Charles Veeder, on a five-year whaling voyage aboard the ship *Nauticon*. Although Veeder's entries are brief, focusing primarily on each day's weather and chores accomplished, her personality also comes through. "I like the way she described the places she visited, and I loved the fact that she liked the whale hunts, except for the smell," Boardman explains. And, while Veeder's words are descriptive, they are enhanced by sixteen watercolor drawings spread throughout the journal's pages, depicting ports and islands visited as the ship searched for whales.

While Boardman read the Susan



Courtesy Susan Boardman

Veeder journal, she was taking an art class at the Massachusetts College of Art. The professor, Ben Peters, served as a catalyst, telling her one day, "You know what you're doing, just go home and do it!" The result was Boardman's first "embroidered narrative," a piece of textile art titled, "As Seen from Ship *Nauticon*." Three central panels reproduce watercolor illustrations from Veeder's journal, including the ports of Cocos Island and Tahiti. Boardman dyed the fabric to resemble the colors of

Her professor told her one day, "You know what you're doing, just go home and do it!" The result was Boardman's first "embroidered narrative."

the journal illustrations and then embroidered the details of the scenes: ships, palm trees, flags, and laundry blowing in the breeze on Cocos Island.

The outer border consists of vignettes that are exquisitely embroidered and provide a fascinating illustration of the whale hunt—from breach to the tallying of the barrels of oil. Boardman designed the border illustrations based on the words in Veeder's journal. "Since I never saw it myself, I relied on the words of the woman who was there," she explains.

Boardman has been an embroiderer for as long as she can remember. "I think my mother taught me when I was five, probably for a project that someone had given me. Being a good New Englander, if you got it, you finished it," she laughs. Skill with the needle runs in her family—her great-grandfather came to the United States from Switzerland to pursue his trade as an embroiderer. But it wasn't until she

graduated from college that she got serious about needlework. "It became something more," she says. In 1968, she took the extension course offered by the Nantucket School of Needlework, founded by Marianne Beinecke, foreshadowing her future work. She went on to earn a master's degree in home economics education from Simmons College and an Advanced Professional Studies Certificate from the American Institute of Textile Arts at Pine Manor College, later teaching textile-related classes at both colleges.

In between her teaching jobs, Boardman and her husband Bill, and later their two sons, visited Nantucket on vacation. "We fell in love with Nantucket when we made our first visit during the early 1970s," she remembers. During the 1980s, the family rented a house for their annual visits, but they bought their Ash Street home in 1989 with the intention of its becoming their permanent residence. Originally

Boardman has been an embroiderer for as long as she can remember. But it wasn't until she graduated from college that she got serious about needlework.

built in 1765 for Benjamin Barney, a Nantucket cooper, the Boardmans lovingly restored the house, reinstalling as much old fabric as possible, and decorating the interior with marine antiques, lightship baskets Susan had made, and her beautiful quilts and needlework.

Boardman's strong sense of place and appreciation for the island's historic architecture inspires her embroidery. Her daily walks take her by the homes of many of the women she studies. "It gets me in the rhythm," she explains. "I'll be thinking about how to approach the piece and walking by the woman's house really helps." Recently, her path has taken her by the African Meeting House at the corner of York and Pleasant Streets as she thinks about her planned narrative on the early abolitionist Anna Gardner. "I've walked out to Martha Fish's farm, and by the Mitchell House too," she says.

The enjoyment of making the Susan Veeder piece encouraged Boardman to create others. "They're

## Threads of Time

fun to do," she says of her embroideries. She continues reading about island women and is designing a series of "embroidered narratives" to remind herself and others about these fascinating people. "Women are a part of history," Boardman says, "but they're often forgotten, and as a woman I wanted to see people like myself in history."

She often uses dye-painted backgrounds, embroiders details, and adds needle lace, gold leaf, and other materials as her research suggests.

Boardman has tried to develop "a feel for the evolution of Nantucket history" through her needlework. "I read a lot and then pick and choose," she explains. She has completed four of her embroidered narratives so far, but envisions a series of twelve, including well-known women like Maria Mitchell, Lucretia Coffin Mott, and Keziah Coffin Fanning as well as "people no

one knows about," such as Martha Fish, Mary Coffin Starbuck, who introduced Quakerism to Nantucket, and Susan Veeder. She is also working on narratives about contemporary Nantucket women: scrimshander Nancy Chase; ornithologist Edith Andrews; and former director of the Nantucket Island Chamber of Commerce, expert copy editor and island history guru Libby Oldham. Boardman's respect and admiration for all of these women is evident as she describes her project. "What attracted me to these people is that they have a passion for what they do. They're all different, but they all have a passion; I share and understand that. This is a quality that I love about women."

Susan Boardman's "embroidered narratives" defy categorization; they are best described as works of art. She often uses dye-painted backgrounds, embroiders details, and adds needle lace, gold leaf, and other materials as her research suggests. Nancy Chase recently taught her to carve ivory, and Boardman has

"It's fun to research things I've never seen firsthand; I try to get into [the journal-keeper's] method," Boardman says.

put her new skill to work, using ivory carvings to adorn her narratives.

She is also keeping busy with a series of smaller pieces inspired by journals kept by women who went whaling with their husbands during the late nineteenth century. "It's fun to research things I've never seen firsthand; I try to get into [the journal-keeper's] method," Boardman says. As she reads the journals, she looks for words and phrases with action in them. She then looks at old paintings and lithographs to get an idea of what the whaling action looked like. Boardman is currently working on two small works inspired by Susan Veeder's journal, which has become a favorite read. "I read the journal all in one day recently, for inspiration." One piece is based on an entry describing a whale hunt while a volcano on a nearby island erupted. The other piece represents a series of entries Veeder made while her husband's ship was stuck in Arctic ice for thirteen days. This presented a peculiar challenge. "I've been

Susan Boardman's embroidered homage to Maria Mitchell.



trying to figure out how to represent ice," Boardman noted. She eventually hit upon a unique solution: "Pieces of an old white leather glove underneath hog intestine, which makes an interesting icy look."

Boardman's work has been exhibited at the Cahoon Museum in Cotuit, at the Nantucket Historical Association, and in numerous private collections. This summer, she is offering several pieces for sale at Nantucket Looms. Despite her commercial success, the true appeal for Boardman is the sense of connection that she gets from needle and thread. "I feel such a sense of tradition," she says, "a bond between myself and the women that I'm studying. Living in the present but with the past all around. . . . It's comforting and it puts everything in perspective."

Aimee E. Newell is former curator of collections at the Nantucket Historical Association. She was recently named curator of textiles and fine arts at Old Sturbridge Village.