

The Church That Came In On The Tide

by Sumner A. Towne, Jr.

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Someone had torn the top off the dawn and daylight was spilling all across Cape Cod Bay. It was the first of June. The spring fishermen were already out beyond the canal breakwater in their small boats, looking for whatever fish might be foolish enough to get up so early.

Conversation is sparse among Cape Cod fishermen, especially in the early morning. One weather-beaten face peered across the slowly lifting mists shrouding the sea's surface to where another small skiff was lying. The second fisherman had just finished setting out his line.

"Say, Pete," bellowed the first face, causing two gulls to start, then thrash in the water in an almost abortive attempt to fly away. "Pete, what in the devil's name was that thing on the barge back at the dock?"

The second fisherman took his pipe from his mouth, blew a soft stream of blue smoke into the light wind, and chuckled. "You got the wrong name there, George," he replied. "You should of said, 'what in Heaven's name.' That there was the Reverend Sam's new church."

It was true. Back there, tied up at the dock at the East end of the Cape Cod Canal was, of all things, a church. Well, the Canal had seen some pretty unusual traffic go through during the war, but a church? It all happened this way:

The Rev. John Samuel Stephenson had received a call from the parishioners of St. Peter's Church-on-the-Canal in 1944. They wanted him to come down from Philadelphia to be Priest-in-Charge of the tiny Episcopal Mission on the banks of the Cape Cod Canal. Father Stephenson accepted the call and, in so doing, entered into one of the major turning points of his life. This new church, this small mission by the sea, was to become the main purpose of his life and work.

The church, at that time, had no formal edifice in which to meet. In fact, services were held in what was then Redmen's Hall. The atmosphere was anything but churchlike. It had been the meeting place for the fraternal organization for some years, and before that it was a barn. When Father Steve, as he has become

known throughout the community, took over, the altar rail was made of unpainted plywood, there was a piano but no organ. It was clean, it served; but it was still only Redmen's Hall.

Almost as soon as he took over his duties at St. Peter's, Father Steve began looking for ways to have a real church, not just a rented building. He even tried to get the War Surplus Administration to declare one of the small white chapels at nearby Camp Edwards as surplus so the parish could get it for a church. Nothing happened.

Out of a clear blue Cape Cod sky came a call from the then nationally popular radio program, "Vox Pop." Vox Pop had done a program years before from Buzzards Bay about Father Steve's "Teen Town" – an organization of young people that Father Steve had founded because of his belief that "Kids are People." Vox Pop wanted to do another program from Buzzards Bay, but this time they wanted it to be about Father Steve and his church.

The program was broadcast on November 26, 1946 and, as a direct result, over \$8000 was donated or pledged to the Building Fund of the little church by the Cape Cod Canal.

Now Father Steve went to work in earnest. He had heard of an unused Episcopal Church in the Hull-Allerton area of Massachusetts. He drove the 45 miles up the South Shore to see it. The church had been boarded up for five or six years. It was old, it was dirty, it needed repairs badly – but it would serve. The only trouble was, it would cost more than the \$8000 just to move it down the highways to Buzzards Bay.

Momentary dejection set in. . . then, as though St. Peter himself had put the idea into his head . . . "what if. . .no. . .well. . .what if we moved it by water?" Father Steve had taken a contractor friend with him to look things over. The friend raced out of the building, down the street a few blocks to the waterfront, and then raced back.

"I can do it! I can do it!" he shouted, "and probably for only the \$8000." Father Steve's heart jumped.

"You can?"

"Yup," gasped the Contractor, and Father Steve could see his dream starting to come true.

Everything went forward at great speed, and by the end of May, 1947, the church was loaded aboard a barge in Hull and was waiting only for reports of good weather before it started the 60-mile journey across Cape Cod Bay and up the Canal to Buzzards Bay. The reports finally came – fair weather ahead – and the barge, towed by the tug *Bounty*, moved slowly out into the reaches of Cape Cod Bay.

New England weather often makes a liar out of the weatherman. The skies started to blacken and a spring storm began to chop the water. The little sea-bound church began to bob precariously on the ocean. The *Bounty* turned about and headed toward shore to wait out the storm in the protection of the harbor. Next day the weather cleared and out to sea again went the church that was to be named for the world's best-known fisherman.

All day Saturday the tug towed the barge with the church on board across the open bay – and on into the night, and all the next day. At 12:30 A.M. in the black of the early morning, the barge, with church intact, tied up at the Sandwich end of the Canal to wait for daybreak and a fair tide.

Monday dawned bright and clear. The fishermen who had gone out in the dark to catch the early tide were still shaking their heads over the sight of a church tied up to the dock. At 8:45 A.M., the tide came fair and the *Bounty*, with church in tow, headed up the canal on the last five miles of its journey.

Father Steve was there. He leap-frogged up the canal in his car to watch the progress of his church as it drew nearer and nearer to home. First he stopped at the Sagamore Bridge. “She’s really here,” he was thinking. Next, across the canal and down to the Herring Run. “Just about three more miles. . .” his mind ticked off the distance. Finally he moved to the bank of the canal where the barge would tie up to unload its unusual cargo onto dry land.

Word went through the town like wild-fire. “The church is riding the high tide” . . . “She’s just passed under the Bourne Bridge. . . “They’ll be docking her at two o’clock” . . . Businesses in Buzzards Bay, Bourne, and Sandwich closed their doors. From Wareham to the west and from down Cape, cars came by the thousands to watch the church floating down the canal. Thousands of people lined both sides of the canal. Men doffed their hats, women smiled, and everyone cheered. Father Steve just breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t told anybody, but the trip had cost so much of the \$8000 that he hadn’t had enough left to buy insurance to cover the dangerous sea voyage.

Securely docked and with only two hours of high tide to put the church on solid ground, the winches were put immediately to work – and the people helped. They harnessed themselves to the lines – and not just Father Steve’s parishioners. Protestants of many denominations, Roman Catholics, Jews – they all took hold of the lines to help Father Steve bring his church home.

And then it was accomplished, this almost too perfect undertaking: the bringing of a church to be named for St. Peter, the fisherman Apostle, to its new home across the sea and down the Cape Cod Canal, for which it is also named.

Father Steve’s dream of a little white country church had come true. It stands in quiet dignity on Main Street in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts. It was moved through the efforts of numberless people who heard of the dream and worked to help make it come true, and was brought there just 19 years ago by the help of thousands of folk from all across America. Father Steve calls it “The Church the American People Helped to Build.” He’s still there today, and St. Peter’s-on-the-Canal is all that he hoped it would be.

If you should come to Cape Cod on a Sunday morning, or any morning for that matter, stop in and visit the church that came in on the tide.