The sea has always given Marion its livelihood, and much of its allure. Once a hard-working port with robust industries of whaling and later shipping and minor shipbuilding, the Marion waterfront is now given over to recreational pursuits—sailing, fishing, and powerboating. Lacking the open oceanfront of the Cape and Islands, the natural beaches around Sippican Harbor present only modest amenities for sun worshippers. Indeed, the most commodious of them, at Silvershell and Piney Point, have been much improved by construction and loads of trucked-in sand.

The attractions of owning waterfront property in an idyllic setting drew a well-to-do set beginning in the late-nineteenth century. These summer residents built their cottages on Water Street facing the harbor, on Charles Neck, and on the shores of East Marion. The practical imperatives of coastal navigation were addressed early on by the building of Bird Island Light off Butler’s Point, with its typical complex of outbuildings. But after all but the tower was swept away in the Hurricane of ’38, only nesting terns called it home until a solar-powered beacon restored its usefulness many years later.
An aerial view of Sippican Harbor from the 1970s. From this perspective, Marion’s longtime attractions for mariners of all kinds can be easily appreciated. The protected harbor offers moorings for 1,700 craft—940 of them in the Inner Harbor—plus easy access to fishing and sailing on Buzzards Bay. Much of Marion’s 25 miles of coastline is rocky, but several sandy beaches have been created for sunning and swimming. Bird Island, swept on multiple occasions by hurricanes, is visible as only a speck off Butler’s Point at left. Ram Island sets astride the mouth of the harbor at center, with Little Island below and to its right. Converse Point, formerly Charles Neck, stretches off on the right side of the view.
The western shore of Sippican Harbor from aloft, circa 1950s, looking north. The commercial wharves vital to the town’s eighteenth-century economy jut into the harbor for the length of the waterfront. At the far right, at Old Landing, the Hathaway and Delano wharves are visible; at center, Sippican Village Luce’s Wharf (now Island Wharf), Bates Wharf (angled upward), and Sherman’s Wharf (now Long Wharf) are prominent (right to left). The shallow depth of Sippican Harbor limited the size of vessels that could put in and navigate there. As whaling became more an industry—with larger ships sailing further for longer periods at sea—Marion’s brief hold on that industry was surrendered to New Bedford and other larger deep-water harbors. Marion’s maritime trade was carried on by coasters and other smaller ships carrying box boards and cordwood to the Islands (the Elizabths, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket); native salt (from evaporation industries on the shores of the harbor) to southern destinations; and returning cargos of white oak lumber, cotton, and rice. A snippet of Little Island is visible at far left.

This aerial view shows Butler’s Point about 1935. The Kittansett Club is in the background, mostly hidden by trees, and the Beverly Yacht Club with its long pier is situated close by in the foreground. From this perspective, the area’s vulnerability to severe weather is evident.
The U.S. Congress authorized the construction of a lighthouse on Bird Island on March 3, 1819. The authorization provided a budget of $4,040 for a 25-foot high lighthouse, 18 feet in diameter at the base and 10 feet at the lantern, which was to be 12 feet tall. It also provided for a 20 x 34 keeper’s dwelling built of stone, with two fireplaces, porch, well or cistern, and a covered walkway to the lighthouse. At far left is the boathouse and pier. All but the lighthouse tower was swept away in the Hurricane of 1938.

In this view of Bird Island Light from 1910, the conical building at left, built in 1902, housed a 1000-pound fog bell. The lore about Bird Island keepers is extensive, but largely undocumented. The original keeper, William S. Moore, took his post on August 24, 1819. Moore was at various times thought to be a convicted pirate sent to the island as punishment. He was popularly thought to have abused his wife, who tried to escape their remote post numerous times. Some stories even go so far as to conjecture that Moore murdered the unfortunate woman and buried her on the island. More benign tales are associated with lightkeeper M.A. Babcock, who was the recipient of holiday gifts dropped by “the Flying Santa,” pilot Edward Rowe Snow during the former’s tenure, 1919–26.
In 1890, the stone keeper’s house was torn down and replaced with this wooden structure, measuring 28 x 31 feet. On June 30, 1933, the lighthouse was taken out of service, and on September 21, 1938, a fierce hurricane destroyed everything but the lighthouse tower. The island with its disused lighthouse passed through several private owners’ hands until it was purchased by the Town of Marion in 1966. On July 9, 1976, Marion’s Bicentennial Week celebrations concluded with the relighting of Bird Island light, thanks to years of fundraising and restorations. The ten-mile range beacon is powered by solar energy, and thus requires no full-time keeper.

The original lighthouse tower, built in 1819, is all that remains today on Bird Island, located about three-quarters of a mile off Butler’s Point in East Marion. A portion of Bird Island now falls under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Fisheries & Wildlife Commission as one of a handful of protected nesting grounds of the roseate tern.
This real-photo card shows the Beverly Yacht Club launch tied up at the float in front of the BYC’s rented clubhouse space at Barden’s Boatyard, during its short stay at that location. Yet another hurricane ended that chapter of the club’s history in 1954. The time here is the early 1950s, and from the small number of boats anchored in the harbor, the season appears to be early spring.

Just before the starting gun, Herreshoff H-12½s, gaff-rigged, form up for a race at the Beverly Yacht Club in the 1940s. H-18S was owned by Russ Pierce. This artistically composed photo was shot by Frederica D. Poett.
Beverly Yacht Club has moved its base of operations four times during its history in Marion. After the Hurricane of 1938 wiped out the original clubhouse at the tip of Butler’s Point, BYC relocated for a time to a building erected for the sailing club’s use at the adjacent Kittansett Club. In 1950, the club relocated again to a space leased from Barden’s Boatyard at Island Wharf in the Village Center. This view from 1950 shows the BYC dock with several members’ skiffs tied up and the BYC launch heading out, just above. In 1954, Hurricane Carol completely demolished both the BYC clubhouse and Barden’s, after which the club moved to its current location on Water Street.

A fairly early real-photo view of the town float at the end of Island Wharf, circa late 1940s. A visiting racing squadron in port from a rival yacht club may account for the large number of boats in the harbor. Long Wharf juts into the view at top right.
Little Island, seen from 49 Water Street on the west side of Sippican Harbor. In 1925, the time of this view, the island was covered with mature trees and verdant vegetation. After being swept by several major hurricanes, Little Island today is merely a rocky outcrop. The shoreline at this address on Water Street remained a rocky open field until 1966, when a home was erected there.

Looking west from Allen’s Point in East Marion, about 1908, with Little Island visible above the two-masted schooner. Both of these yachts belonged to the same owner, George C. Thomas. The gasoline-powered boat at left is the 120-foot Allegro. On the right is the 112-foot Eduardo. One year after this card was mailed, in 1909, the Philadelphia Press, in its obituary for Mr. Thomas, described him thus “. . . banker, philanthropist, and churchman, George C. Thomas has enriched far more than himself during a long, busy, and successful life.”
The vantage for this early view, circa 1911, of the Upper Harbor was the vicinity of 39 Water Street looking northeast toward Hammett’s Cove past the end of Sherman’s Wharf, with Little Island at right. This postcard has been heavily colorized and retouched, to the point that the foreground resembles a painting or illustration more than a photograph.

This 1930s Inner Harbor view taken from Island Wharf toward Allen’s Point shows how light the recreational water traffic used to be. The race in progress toward the east side of the harbor here would not be easy to stage with today’s congestion. The catboats in the foreground remain one of the most popular types of sailing craft on Buzzards Bay.
This linen card from the 1930s–50s period shows the floats of Barden’s Boatyard from Island Wharf. Though this appears to be a summertime scene, there is little sign of activity. The photo may have been taken very early in the morning when no one was about, and then heavily colorized—as was the practice with linen cards—to simulate a midday scene. Both Bates and Long wharves can be seen in the distance as well as a cluster of simple structures typical of any waterfront—sail loft, stores for provisions, and a cooperage—to the right.

This view from outer Sherman’s Wharf (now Long Wharf) about 1930 provides a panorama of the Sippican Harbor waterfront. The tall towers dominating the skyline are those of the Marconi Wireless Station, which stood until 1960.
The Sippican Hotel wharf as seen from the Casino, about 1919. The hotel maintained a variety of small watercraft for the use of its patrons. Interesting, too, is what appear to be stacks of wood on Sherman’s Wharf at left. Both Marion and Rochester were shippers of box boards and cordwood to the islands off Cape Cod.

This 1920 view shows the pier in front of the Casino on Water Street, the recreational structure built to serve guests of the Sippican Hotel, as well as subscribers from the town. In the distance, on Sherman’s Wharf (later Long Wharf), a two-masted schooner is tied up on the far side behind the shacks; a small steam-powered excursion launch is moored on the near side. The hotel provided all manner of canoes, skiffs, and small sailboats for the use of guests, but sometimes it was enjoyable enough just to sit on the end of the pier and dangle one’s feet in the water, as three boys are doing here.
Chapter 4

The Sippican Hotel & Casino

A view of the Casino from the water, with its squadron of catboats and canoes ready for the enjoyment of guests of The Sippican Hotel, visible just across Water Street at rear.
At the turn of the past century, the intersection of Water and South streets formed the social epicenter of summer life in Marion Village. There stood the elegant Sippican Hotel, and across the street, its Casino. Well-known up and down the Northeastern seaboard, the Sippican catered to an élite clientele—including politicos, literati, and visiting business magnates sizing up Marion as their permanent summer residence—serving them with an array of the most modern amenities. Gaslights and then electricity came first to the Sippican Hotel, as well as Marion's earliest telephone service. The Casino was their base for boating, canoeing, and waterside activities of all sorts—as well as tennis, ice cream, and dancing in the evenings. Guests could, of course, get a shave and haircut, as well as an excellent cigar, in the Casino barbershop. The hotel and casino exemplified Gilded Age leisure living at its zenith. On a more modest scale, today the Beverly Yacht Club keeps up the tradition of recreation and social activity at the same intersection.
This view of the Hotel Sippican, at the foot of South Street facing Water Street, dates from about 1910. It clearly shows the hotel’s original building and two distinct additions. The original section, with tower at right, dates to 1794, when Timothy Hiller built it as a farmhouse. Hiller’s grandson, Joe Snow Luce, was the first proprietor to let rooms to visitors. In 1864, an additional story was added, and the property became the Bay View House. By the mid-1880s—the height of Marion’s popularity as a summer resort town—the hotel was being operated by Charles W. Ripley. Mr. Ripley expanded the hotel by adding the three-story center section seen here, as well as a casino across the street for events and social gatherings.

Charles Ripley’s 34 years of proprietorship ended in 1916, when Harry T. Miller took over. This view from about that time shows the piazza of the central section, facing onto the harbor. Summer visitors to Marion arrived on five daily trains (plus the private, members-only “dude” train). Patrons of the hotel over the years included the writer Henry James; actors John Drew, Maude Adams, and Ethel Barrymore; Bishop Philip Brooks; President and Mrs. Cleveland; illustrator Charles Dana Gibson; Senator Jonathan Bourne; poet and magazine editor Richard Watson Gilder; novelist and poet Margaret DeLand; and journalist and playwright Richard Harding Davis.
This view from about 1906 shows the hotel during the C.W. Ripley era. The postcard is a notable example of promotional embellishment, as the five peaked dormers across the roof of the middle section never existed, and were probably retouched on the negative to make the hotel look even grander. Nonetheless, the hotel as seen here (with the last addition at left built in 1901) could accommodate 150–200 guests along with their service staffs, dogs, horses, and carriages. Some even shipped pianos to the hotel for the season. Horses and livery were boarded at Hiller’s Stable on Front Street. The rooms in the earlier wings had double beds and many boasted fireplaces, but no private baths. The four-story 1901 addition was arranged in suites consisting of parlor, bedroom, and private bath. All rooms on the upper floors throughout had a standard feature: a stout rope knotted to a bolt in the floor, to be used as a means of emergency exit in the case of fire.

A view of Water Street looking north toward the Casino, on the right side of the street. The Sippican Hotel is hidden by trees on the left. The Casino, built by C.W. Ripley, was the social hub for hotel-sponsored events and private gatherings. In 1910, about the time of this photo, a windmill is visible at center.
These two trifold advertising postcards date from two different periods of ownership of The Sippican. The 1909 version below, produced by C.W. Ripley, announces the summer opening on May 29th, the season-long calendar of activities, and touts Hiller's Sippican Garage as the place for competent auto repair. A tipped-on menu advertises the hotel's chicken dinner special—ready in under 30 minutes. Nine years later, in 1918, Harry T. Miller used the very similar advertising trifold card at left to promote his recent acquisition. The photos are different, but the verbiage is virtually identical to the earlier card.
This view of the Sippican’s dining room was clearly produced after electricity came to Marion in 1910, during the 1916–20 period when Harry T. Miller was the owner. Howard B. Hiller recalled his boyhood jobs as telegram deliveryman and bellman at the hotel. In that pre-telephone era, the hotel office in the central wing had a telegraph key, and messages received there would be delivered within the Village by bicycle or pony (25 cents) or as far as Converse Road for 50 cents. Delivery by flat-bottomed sailboat to the east side of the harbor cost 75 cents, and the tariff was one dollar for deliveries to Blankenship’s Cove. The only telephone line in the Village at that time connected the hotel with Hiller’s livery stable and garage.

By 1920, the hotel was under the management of Charles W. Kokerda, who operated it until its closing in 1929. This view of the parlor shows the tasteful wicker appointments that among many other amenities made the Sippican one of the most fashionable resort hotels on the Northeastern seaboard.
This seaward view of the Sippican Casino was taken from one of the upper floors of the hotel. Built as part of the 1885 expansion, the Casino quickly became the social center for Marion’s entire summer colony. Summer residents paid a season-long subscription fee to use the Casino; hotel guests gained free access. Day trippers could take the trolley to the stop at Spring and Main streets, walk the short distance to the hotel for dinner, then cross the street to the Casino for dancing. The Casino ballroom hosted regularly scheduled dances throughout the summer season on Wednesday evenings for teenagers and Saturday nights for adults.

A view of the Casino’s wrap-around second-story veranda from the harbor. No ocean breeze went unenjoyed from this vantage! During Harry T. Miller’s period of ownership, the Casino gained an oceanfront tennis court, sometime in the 1910 decade. To the right of the Casino, the Townsend / Davis cottage is visible.
The summertime tranquility of South Street is interrupted by only a single car in this view from 1916 looking toward Water Street and the harbor. The north corner of the Casino is visible behind the large trees, and the Sippican Hotel is just out of sight to the right. The ground floor of the Casino contained about 30 cabanas for bathers and a storeroom. The grand staircase leading up to the second-floor ballroom was flanked by a soda fountain and candy concession. The ballroom was surrounded by wide verandas on three of the seaward sides. The inland side, facing Water Street, held a barber shop and pool room.

The view from the piazza of the Sippican Hotel onto Water Street in the early 1910s. The family strolling the sidewalk is real, but notice that the printer pasted in both of the autos pictured, the one at left seemingly climbing a steep incline that doesn’t exist. Visible in the distance at left is the house of Judge Herbert Austin, father of Marion benefactress Miss Edith Austin. In the distance at center is one of six gas streetlights operated on Water Street during the summer season only, at a total cost to the town of $15.00 per month in 1905.
For several years, the Beverly Yacht Club sponsored annual water sports competitions on the harbor. In the aquatic “horse race” shown in this real-photo card, participants attempted to paddle through a marked course while staying astride their “horses” made of barrels. Even without the handwritten date on the card, the modest bathing costumes place this photo in the 1906 era.

Another scene of water sports on the harbor, this one sponsored by the Sippican Hotel in the mid-1910s. In the annual tub races, youngsters each boarded a half barrel and used their arms to propel their crafts through the designated course. The winner was awarded an inscribed loving cup trophy. The 1916 winner’s cup is in the Sippican Historical and Preservation Society Museum. Many spectators have taken to the water in the hotel’s squadron of canoes to get closer to the excitement. But notice the dearth of larger watercraft in that era compared with the heavy summertime water traffic today.
This pair of postcards showing the moorings in front of the Casino, the corner of which is just visible at right, illustrates a common practice among postcard printers in the early twentieth century. Here, the daylight view above has been retouched to create the moonlight scene below, with all elements exactly alike, down to the briskly flying flag at center. The copy checker might have lost his job in the bargain, as the captions are obviously reversed between the two cards.

Postcard publishers “enhanced” their products in various ways, some of which have been pointed out in individual cards in this book. In this pair, the skyscapes have obviously been retouched—both the daylight view clouds and the bright moon cutting through a heavily overcast night sky look artificial. The novelty for the time of adding automobiles to scenes is apparent in several instances. And careful inspection of many cards shows that summertime tree foliage has been sponged onto the images in esthetically pleasing locations.
Chapter 5

The Shoreline

Lower Water Street residences from the water side. At left, the home of Edward Hamlin, a Boston coal dealer, later owned by Amory Houghton, ambassador to France under President Eisenhower. Daniel W. Knowlton owned the cottage to the right.
As a coastal town, Marion is viewed from its harbor nearly as often as it is seen from points on land. Intrepid postcard photographers over the years loaded their equipment into skiffs and rowboats and took to the water to capture views of the shoreline.

Their subjects often duplicated those already visited in other sections of this tour, so some sites may be familiar by now. But landward views from the water present opportunities for creative compositions similar to those taken by generations of landscape artists who never tire of painting New England scenes. Thus, some of these view cards present Marion’s most picturesque face. Others simply give us a glimpse of the seaward sides of estates, grand homes, and areas of the shore that would be otherwise inaccessible from public vantages along the streets and roads.

In a few instances, we get to see features of the Marion landscape that are otherwise almost invisible to passersby on land. Notable among them is the colorful figurehead now permanently affixed to the tip of Bates Wharf, who—if she could speak—could no doubt tell a tale or two of her adventures right in Sippican Harbor!
This Shingle-Style cottage, known as Hobbs House, stood on Lewis Street near Front Street, as seen in this view from 1908. Prior to 1953, Silvershell was a small, rocky, unimproved beach with only a crumbling wharf used by fishermen and intrepid swimmers. In 1953, the Town set out to improve the Silvershell area. Stone jetties were set along the northern and southern boundaries and truckloads of sand were brought in. In 1954, Hurricane Carol pummeled Hobbs House, and in April, 1955, the Town voted the sum of $30,000 to purchase the ruined house and 7.67 acres on which it stood. With this acquisition, Silvershell Beach took on the proportions we know today. Almost miraculously, the much-improved beach was being enjoyed by swimmers and sunbathers by the summer of 1955.

This view from Nye’s Wharf about 1915 shows the west shore of Sippican Harbor, looking north. At the extreme left, 23 Water Street is partially visible. This was the summer home of Boston coal dealer Edward Hamlin, and later of Amory Houghton, who was to become U.S. Ambassador to France under President Eisenhower. Number 29 Water Street, to the right, was the residence of Daniel W. Knowlton. The float in the foreground served water traffic to and from Ram Island. Little Island, with its stand of trees, can be seen in the distance. The powered launch at far right was likely an excursion boat associated with the Sippican Hotel and Casino.
This expansive view of Lewis Street residences as seen from the water about 1910 includes Hobbs House at left, which was later demolished in 1955 with the expansion of Silvershell Beach. The brick house at center, known locally as "Silver Shells," was owned at the time of this photo by industrialist Stanley McCormick, son of the inventor of the McCormick Harvester. In 1950, this property was purchased by James Gordon Gibbs, who had previously owned and lived on Ram Island. Mr. Gibbs razed the brick house and built a new residence inside the brick wall that still surrounds the estate. To the right is Lewis Cottage, at 2 Lewis Street. The boathouse and marine railway at center are gone today, both victims of storm damage.

In this view, from about 1908, the beach house belonging to the H.R. Reed estate, out of view to the left across Water Street at Number 46, stands in the foreground. Behind it is the large J.C. Rhodes house at 57 Water Street, later owned by F.H. Bennett. In the distance are the Austin and Davis houses, with the Hotel Sippican Casino at the far right.
A circa 1920 view of the foot of Main Street as seen from Long Wharf showing the yellow building now known as Zero Main Street. In the nineteenth century, it served as a meeting place for mariners setting out to sea, and the Universalist minister Rev. Theodore K. Taylor often offered up a prayer there for the safety of the departing crews. The white building to the right was a sail loft, and as a private home it bears that name today.

A placid harbor scene from about 1903, looking from Island Wharf toward Bates Wharf and the outer harbor. The red-roofed, two-story structure at center was then a cooperage. The two windmills visible here were the primary sources of fresh water at that time. To the far left, the derricks of the stone barge shown in other views protrude above Sherman’s Wharf (later Long Wharf). The gabled house to the right was the Dreyer Inn.
A waterside view of Bates Wharf, on a postcard mailed in 1923, with Long Wharf in the background. A substantial popple-stone structure has been erected on Bates Wharf by this time, and on Long Wharf a string of rude wooden shacks has been added to provide cover for shellfish shucking. The cupola of the Casino can be seen just to the right of the roof peak of the building on Bates Wharf.

An aerial view of Island Wharf Park about 1950. The octagonal bandstand was severely damaged by Hurricane Carol in 1954. It was demolished and a new structure with a sound-reflecting bandshell design was erected in its place. The inclusive cost of $5,131 was borne almost entirely by funds from the state’s hurricane fund. The town paid only $175 of the project, and the new bandstand was completed in time for the July 4, 1955 concert.
Artist Don Jason created this loose rendition of a scene at Town Beach in the late 1940s. He also drew postcard views of Tabor Academy's Lillard Hall and the fireplace of the Old Stone Studio during the same era.

The public bathing beach at Town Beach, sometime in the 1920s. Several swimmers in modest bathing costumes of the period are enjoying the cooling waters, while others relax in the shade of the pavilion. To the right of the pavilion, the towers of the Marconi Wireless Station dominate the horizon.
In the 1940s, Marion’s public bathing amenities were relatively sparse. This view shows the main beach to the north of Island Wharf in the Village Center. At low tide, the near raft floated in water only waist deep, but the further raft was anchored deep enough for diving from the platform or taking the slide down. The only other public beaches were a tiny stretch of sand at Old Landing (now a boat ramp) and a small, rocky beach at Silvershell at the end of Front Street, where one could dive off the end of the pier at high tide—if no one was fishing there.

The shoreline at Planting Island about 1907. At this time, Planting Island was a rugged, undeveloped area, abounding with heavy vegetation. The Sippican Indians had used it as a protected site for planting and grazing. By piling brush across the narrow neck by which it was reached, the Indians could discourage predators from raiding their foodstuffs. By 1926, the area was under development by the Planting Island Association, two parallel avenues had been laid out along the length of the narrow “island,” and a clubhouse had been built.
A waterside view of the Herbert Austin estate at 75 Water Street, about the 1910–20 era. The well-groomed stone seawall and expansive lawn behind it are where Miss Edith Austin befriended Canada geese that frequented the area. Behind the Austin house in the trees are the Hotel Sippican at left and its Casino to the right, both further north on opposite sides of Water Street.

The gracefully curved seawall shown here created a level seaside garden for the Townsend / Davis Cottage near 81 Water Street. Beyond it is a walkway over the salt marsh to the Davis float. Beyond that spindly structure is the more substantial pier belonging to the Herbert Austin estate. In the distance across the mouth of the harbor are Little and Ram islands. The stone barge with derrick at right was a common fixture in the harbor about the time of this view, circa 1920. It was probably used to build and improve stone seawalls.
The figurehead from the bark Golden Sunset was brought to Marion by Edward Hamlin and mounted at the head of Bates Wharf, thus establishing a landmark visible from any number of vantages around the Inner Sippican Harbor. The Golden Sunset was built in England in 1876 and passed to French owners, back to the English, and finally to Norwegian owners, who converted her into a coal barge in 1920.

This is a later view of the Golden Sunset’s figurehead on Bates Wharf, with the former cooperage, now fitted with a tall chimney, in the background. The wooden statue was carved by the workshop of Robert Bailes of Hendon, England. During the Hurricane of 1944, the figurehead became detached from her earlier vertical mounting and floated up into the inner harbor. She was recovered relatively undamaged—requiring only some restoration of her nose. She was firmly remounted in this angled posture that more closely matched the way she would have appeared on the bow of the Golden Sunset.
This real-photo view of Hathaway Wharf at Old Landing in the Upper Harbor was taken from the adjacent Delano Wharf, about 1950. Moorings at both of these humble wharves are acquired by application; the waiting list is several years long.

This real-photo view of Sippican Harbor taken from Island Wharf was mailed in 1947. At that time, the blimp base at South Weymouth, MA was still in operation, and sightings of blimps were common along the coastline.