

Greater Gloucester

Home at Last!

by Michael Johnson

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ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Pavilion Beach in Gloucester, 2024. Credit: Terry Weber Mangos

FOREWORD

Enjoy this story of how the ocean and the people of Greater Gloucester helped change the direction of a young boy's life for the better. Michael has lived in Rockport, Manchester-by-the-Sea, and Gloucester. The author prefers the phrase "Greater Gloucester" over "Cape Ann" as he says that not only is Gloucester great, but it's also a state of mind that connects our area together.



PHOTO CREDIT: MIKE JOHNSON

The Fishermen's Memorial in Gloucester.

Greater Gloucester

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BY MICHAEL JOHNSON

The ocean—majestic, calming, almost mystical. The ocean on a foggy day when the land blends with the water and the horizon disappears into the sky. On a bright, sunny day, when the ripples reflect the joy of life. At its fearsome worst when the power of storm-driven waves reveals the majesty of God.

Once you've experienced it, you're addicted; the water and the ocean both become a necessity to the psyche. Gloucester epitomizes the wonder of the ocean in all its magnificent variants.

Epiphany

It was 1950. I was 14, a freshman in high school, and my father had been transferred to Gloucester. The Great Depression and World War II had not been kind to my parents, but they had finally achieved some level of stability. My mother, particularly, was not thrilled to be moving.

Leaving Waltham, a small run-down city near Boston, wasn't a problem for me. My life was school, a part-time job, and playing pinball machines. A juvenile delinquent in the making. Transferring from parochial to public school hadn't gone well, and I was not looking forward to another transfer.

We moved in December. I vividly remember coming over the hill in Magnolia and seeing Gloucester Harbor spread out before me. An intense electric tingle went through me. I was in awe! I would recognize later that this was a deliverance, an epiphany.

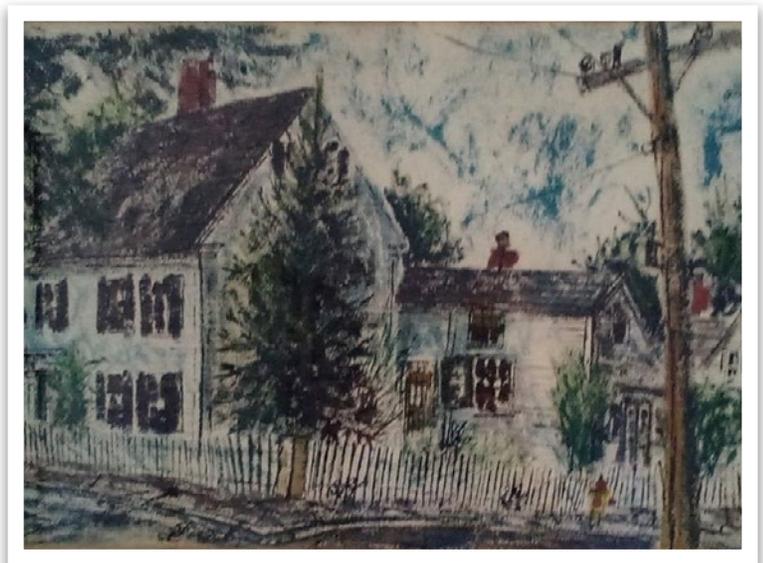
The Depression and the war had also not been kind to Waltham or Gloucester. Both cities needed renovation and tender loving care. The atmosphere in Waltham was dejected, almost despondent. The atmosphere in Gloucester, on the other hand, was vibrant, driven by a robust

and dominant fishing industry. The vocation was powered by the biblical “They that go down to the sea in ships” (Psalms 107:23-27). These were the fishermen who invested in their own family businesses and boats. They were rugged, independent men, willing to risk life and fortune in a test of their skills against the “wonders in the deep.”

School Days

My mother and father rented an apartment, and subsequently a house, in Rockport. We moved during the Christmas break, and it was off to the new school when the break was over. I was anxious, a stranger in a strange and wonderful land.

Back-to-school-day came quickly. The backyard of our apartment abutted the back of Rockport High School, a very short walk. There were other kids, of course, and several of them stopped me and said, “You’re new, aren’t you? Welcome. My name is ..., what’s yours?” The teacher in my homeroom introduced me, and my new classmates officially welcomed me. Not at all as expected, a new world indeed.



The author’s house in Rockport as depicted by artist Roger Martin, 1965.

To my surprise, during lunch break, Donnie, a junior, invited me to basketball practice. You see, I was 5'7" and chubby, not your basketball prototype. I went to the practice, my new friends taught me the game, and it became an important part of my life for the next several years. Rumor had it that the coach was a converted hockey coach and had been surprised to discover there was no goalie in basketball.

I made the Junior Varsity team. Everybody who went out for the team made it, but we didn’t all get to play. I was a benchwarmer with a couple of cameo appearances in settled games.

That summer, I grew about six inches. I was walking down the street when a car pulled up, and the coach said, "Hey, you're a tall one. I want you on my team." I answered, "Hi, it's me, Mike Johnson, and I'm already on the team."

In 1954, I became varsity center by default, being the tallest kid on the team. Fred Peterson (see Gloucester400+ Story "Meant-to-be Moments") had graduated, and I took his place but couldn't come close to replacing him. Our rival and nemesis was Saint Ann's of Gloucester. Tony Verga (Mayor Greg Verga's father) was their captain, and Ron Singleton was their 6'6" center. Ron was dominating the rebounds, and the coach told me to get him to foul out. I had the ball under the basket, made a head fake, and shot underhanded. Ronnie took the fake, I scored, and the coach benched me for not following orders. Saint Ann's won the league championship that year.



PHOTO CREDIT: PHIL PEDA

Author Mike Johnson on right with high school friend Fred Peterson in 1951.

Our teachers were often young and empathetic, and classes were more personal than simply a talking head behind a desk. Our chemistry teacher was dating the girls' basketball coach and finagled a chaperone assignment for an out-of-town game. He told the class, "Be on your best behavior while I'm gone, and whatever you do, do not take the stuff in that flask and heat it over that Bunsen burner." Of course, that's exactly what we did, and it exploded. I ended up with a handful of flaming liquid, but no burns. We put out the flames, but the awful stench lingered.

My senior year English teacher made me stay after school for a makeup test. It was a planned hunting day, so I snuck out the last period, went home, changed, and brought my new-bought \$12 single-shot .22 rifle to school. I set the rifle on the desk and announced, "I'm not flunking this test." I think I flunked. True story, different times, much different times.

College

My summer job after graduation from high school was in the fish freezing plant on the State Fish Pier. It was heavy work but great pay: \$1.44 per hour. Twenty-four tons in an eight-hour day, thirty-three tons on days with overtime, and all the while, Tennessee Ernie Ford¹ was bragging about doing a mere 16 tons of coal in a day. During mug-up and lunch, we played Rummy Out, a fast card game for a quarter a hand. My winnings covered day-to-day expenses, and my entire salary went to my mother.

My mother wanted me to go to MIT, but we couldn't afford it, and my high school math wasn't up to MIT standards. Northeastern University (NU), in the middle of Boston, featured low tuition, remedial freshman classes, ROTC, and a respected school of engineering. It also mandated a work-study program that gave students on-the-job training and a decent paycheck to boot.

The daily commute was about 50 miles from Rockport to Northeastern by train and subway. We played co-ed Kitty Whist² on the train, both coming and going. I was on the NU Rifle Team along with two Gloucester High graduates, Nick Mineo and Bill Davis.

Mary

On an idyllic day in June 1957, three friends and I drove up to Steel Derrick Quarry in Pigeon Cove, a stunning location. We met a group of girls celebrating their Saint Ann's High School graduation. We made a date that evening. I met Mary and we spent a lovely evening together.

We dated, and I knew it was serious when Mary asked me to come over one Saturday and bring Simonize and window cleaner. The two of us would clean up my well-used '49 Ford with its splotchy oxidized-purple finish and dirty windows. Mary did the windows and interior while I did the paint job. It was hard work, but I only remember a good time working towards a common goal, a goal created by Mary. The interior was immaculate, the windows transparent, and the paint job a showroom-brilliant royal blue. Mary nicknamed our car "Myrtle the Turtle," appropriate if you're old enough to remember the '49 Ford. Mary and I were a team, a couple.

¹ Tennessee Ernie Ford was an American singer and TV host who wrote a hit song in 1955 titled "Sixteen Tons" about the challenge of coal miners and their work conditions.

² "Kitty Whist" is a card game similar to, but simpler than Bridge.

The 1959 NU graduation was a whole week of parties and events. There was a clambake on a Cape Cod beach, a banquet at the Wentworth-by-the-Sea in New Hampshire, a night at Symphony Hall, and then the culmination! Mary, the love of my life, was eye-popping gorgeous in her Commencement Ball gown.

We married in the fall of 1959. The High Catholic Mass and wedding was at Saint Ann's Church in Gloucester. The reception was at the Carmelite Seminary in Hamilton, where Mary's brother John, a Carmelite Brother, was stationed. It was a blast.

We rented near my new job in Nashua, a relatively short drive from Gloucester physically and a chasm emotionally, but we were young and had each other.



PHOTO CREDIT: MILTON-BURR STUDIO

Mike and Mary at the Northeastern University Commencement Ball, 1959.



Mike Johnson in combat gear, 1959.

My two-year commitment to active duty with the Army began in May 1960. It was a tumultuous period in US foreign affairs, not a pleasant time for active Army personnel, and a significant strain on Mary. Robin was born at this time.

The wife of a junior officer is problematic. There's the loneliness inherent in a strange place, particularly when the husband is away on maneuvers, and then there's the snobbishness and condescension of the senior officers' wives. The commitment was up in May 1962, we returned to Nashua, the job went well, and Beth and Kathy were born.

We built a nice colonial saltbox with a working fireplace, wainscoting, and a hand-made chandelier by Shorty Lesch of Bearskin Neck. We furnished it with relatively inexpensive colonial reproductions from local craftsmen. It was our ideal house, but it wasn't Gloucester. The pull of the ocean remained; the homesickness persisted.

Returning to Greater Gloucester

I took a job at RCA in Burlington, MA, and Mary, our three kids, and I moved back to Greater Gloucester in the summer of 1965. This was the second of my three moves to the area.

We took a short-term rental in Rockport and went house hunting. We found one in Lanesville but vetoed it because of the long commute. We then tried Manchester and, surprisingly, found an authentic 1812 federal-era house that was in our price range. Eleven rooms with a unique 80x30x2 foot granite wall on the north side. Structurally sound, up-to-date electricity, heating, and plumbing; otherwise, drab and worn; painting, papering, and considerable renovation required.

I look back at the time from 1965 to 1970 with awe and chagrin. We had three preschoolers to care for; I was committed to the greatest technological leap in human history, the Apollo Program; and Mary and I were restoring our new home, doing tasks we'd never done before.

For example, wallpapering! Should we or shouldn't we? We both wanted the walls to be papered rather than just painted and about that time, our daughter Robin had a "Show and Tell" on the jobs of fathers. She told the class that her daddy "was building the rocket to the moon." Her friend Liz then told them that her daddy "wallpapered." When we heard this, we called Liz's father to see what he charged. It turned out he didn't exactly wallpaper; he owned a wallpaper manufacturing business specializing in colonial patterns. Just our style, he gave us enough paper for three rooms, and we did the papering ourselves. Mary did the gluing, and I hung the sheets. Perfect!

I was indeed "building the moon rocket," Kennedy's promised 1969 manned mission drew closer, and the schedule pressure increased significantly.

On 27 January 1967, the Apollo 1 capsule caught fire, and three astronauts died. One of the victims had been my boss's roommate in college. Wham! From the abstract to the reality.

The very next day, we shipped our Radar #11 to NASA. I made a notation under the quality assurance sign-off that the unit was not qualified for manned flight. A political firestorm ensued. The program manager, having lined up me, my boss, his boss, and his boss's boss, said, "Well?" Starting at the top, each manager turned to their underling and said, "Well?" I was last in line and had no one to turn to. I said, "RCA can do better, sir." The program manager nodded, told me that he would have to override my signature, and then assured me that Radar #11 would never be used for manned flight.

Our dream house in Manchester proceeded apace. We installed a reasonably up-to-date kitchen, replaced the old bathtub with a modern one with a shower, and added a washer/dryer, including plumbing and electricity updates. Beautiful! Six working fireplaces, Indian shutters with milk-glass knobs, wainscoting, black walnut sills, wide pine floorboards, and furnished with our colonial pieces.



PHOTO CREDIT: HEATHER BURGESS

The Johnson's house in Manchester-by-the-Sea, as photographed in 2023.

I shiver upon thinking of how naive and arrogant I was. Yet, it all came to pass: man landed on the moon, the house was stunning, and three children were all in school, the youngest in kindergarten.

Almost Tranquility

RCA completed its Apollo deliveries by early 1969, relieving the schedule pressure. The house renovations were sufficient for civilized living; all that remained was reclaiming the landscape. Mary had a lovely flower garden in the front yard, the kids had a swing set in the side yard, and the jungle behind the house was mine to clear.

Mary and I took full advantage of the new normal and relished a well-earned vacation to Bermuda. Motorbikes, caves, elegant dining, and sandy beaches - all glorious. The first manned Apollo landing was on June 20, 1969. I watched it on Bermuda television. I take personal pride in the success of the Apollo.



Fisherman with Net, by Mike Johnson, 1971.

We took an art course at Gordon College, a learn-by-doing class; the instructor was a friend of Mary's. "Be bold" was the instructor's main message. It was fun, we both enjoyed it, and I was hooked. Mary didn't follow up, but I continued to draw and paint.

Gloucester's celebration of its 350th anniversary in 1973 included an art exhibit with public voting outside the Fitz Hugh Lane House. I entered a portrait titled *The Old Fisherman* done in stark black and white so all the lines and droops of his haggard face stand out. My daughters Beth and Kathy and two of their friends were with me, and they all voted for my picture, perhaps several times. It won first place and was awarded a silver 350th Anniversary Medal.

Mary and I went on a two-week bed-and-breakfast tour of southern England in 1981. Fabulous. History, castles, pubs, scenery, pleasant people, a different dining experience every evening. English cuisine was much better than we had been led to believe. One day in London, Mary went shopping while I waited in a pub. The pub keeper asked, "You're a Yank?" I said, "Yes." "Would you be liking a lager then?" "Please." "I've an import." "Thanks, fine." And he brought me Pabst's Blue Ribbon.



Gloucester 350th Anniversary Medal

Distress

My marriage to Mary failed in 1982, the year Kathy graduated from high school. I left my house, my home, and I was gone a long time.

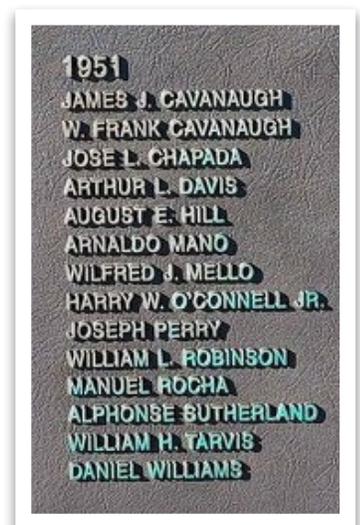
Meeting Joan

I needed to find housing and answered an ad for a professional man to share a Salem, MA condo with a professional woman: separate bedrooms and baths, a common living area, and a kitchen. Joan Pinkham required an interview, which was over quickly when her Doberman curled up at my feet. Long story short. The two of us had common interests, common conservative politics, became involved, and eventually married.

I left RCA and started my own defense-oriented consulting business, which flourished until the Soviet Union collapsed and defense spending was reduced. After a short but agonizing downtime, Assurance Technology Corporation (ATC) hired me. Joan and I had spent ten years centrally located in Lexington with my consulting business. We wanted to return to the ocean, the call of the sea. Gloucester was an unreasonable commute to ATC, so we rented in Amesbury and then bought a lovely house in Kensington, NH.

Heather Lynne II

A few days after Labor Day in 1996, Joan called my daughter Beth, why, I don't remember. Beth's answer I very much remember, "It's not Richard! It's not Richard!" She was distraught, and it took a few minutes to understand that the fishing vessel *Heather Lynne II* had capsized with the crew trapped within the hull. Beth's husband, Richard Burgess, owned a boat similarly named *Heidi Lynn*. Richard and his *Scotia Boat Too* were first to arrive at the capsized vessel, but after calling the Coast Guard, there was little they could do. Richard tells the harrowing story of the trapped men tapping on the inside of the hull with no way to escape. It seemed like forever for the Coast Guard to arrive. Kate Yeoman's book, *Dead Men Tapping*, grippingly captures the event and the subsequent legal activities. Fishing is a dangerous profession.



Mary's father as listed on the Fishermen's Memorial, lost at sea in 1951.

PHOTO CREDIT: HEATHER BURGESS

Mary's father, Alphonse Sutherland, is listed on the wall of Gloucester City Hall and at the *Fishermen's Memorial* on Gloucester's Boulevard, lost at sea in 1951. Her mother's father and her grandmother's father were also lost at sea.

Articles on Fishing

While researching this essay, I found an article by Terry Weber, coincidentally the Director of the Stories Project for Gloucester400+. It was the best of several articles on Congressmen questioning fishing enforcement at a Gloucester hearing. Beth's husband, my son-in-law, Richard Burgess, was one of the witnesses at the hearing. Our conversations about the hearing sparked my interest in the conduct of our government in its mission to restock the depleted fisheries. As a result, I wrote several articles published by the *American Thinker* website from 2010 to 2012. I plan to resume writing about the who, how, what, where, and why of the industry today.

Not for Sissies 1

"Old age is not for sissies." My mother's favorite actress, Bette Davis, is credited with this truism. Ms. Davis was my mother's age and a summertime resident of Annisquam.

My father passed on in 1984, and my mother was all alone. She would take the bus from Rockport to Gloucester and go to Schooner's (now Topside) for lunch. She was such a regular customer that the owner put a plaque with her name on it on her personal bar stool.

Not for Sissies 2

Joan and I were getting older and had the infirmities to prove it. Joan's diabetes was particularly debilitating. She was hit by a car while in the crosswalk at the local supermarket and broke her wrist, ankle, and shoulder bone. I was diagnosed with a mild cancer that led to my retirement. The cancer is currently under control.

In 2015, Joan's oldest child, Chris, died at age 64. Joan's grief was deep and took some of her spark away.

Joan's health continued to fail. She passed at home in her sleep on 12 June 2021, one month shy of her 90th birthday. Her instructions were precise: she wanted to be cremated, no service, and her ashes were to be sprinkled in Marblehead Harbor as Marblehead was where she grew up. My children and grandchildren joined me for the ceremony. A dozen roses were also sprinkled in memory.

Rest in peace, my love.

Serendipity

Logic told me to move closer to my children. Emotions told me to move to Gloucester. Serendipity, these two coincide. Further, Gloucester, with CATA, the Rose Baker Senior Center, Cape Ann Museum, Maritime Gloucester, and the Sawyer Library, is ideal for seniors. God bless.

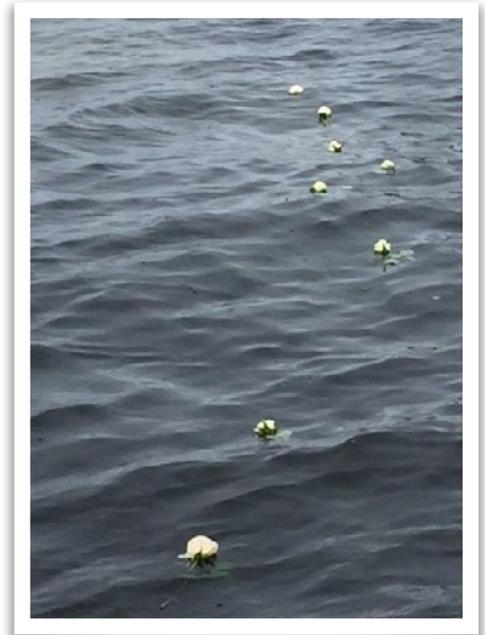


PHOTO CREDIT: KATHY JOHNSON

Roses scattered at Joan Pinkham's memorial, 2021.



PHOTO CREDIT: KATHY JOHNSON

The author with his great-granddaughter, Lily Quinn, 2021.

All three of my children live on Cape Ann. Robin, after years in various hotspots around the world, now has a home on the Cove in Lanesville, but the wanderlust persists. Beth and Richard Burgess, the fisherman she married, live in Manchester. They have two lovely daughters, Heidi and Heather, and a granddaughter, my great-granddaughter, Lily, such a happy child. Kathy and her husband, Tom Moriarty, are settled in Annisquam with their daughter, my delightful granddaughter, Zoe.

My three daughters were and are the best of friends. It warms my heart.

Blessings and Regrets

I have been blessed with wonderful women in my life. Mary was my first love. We shared the love and the raging hormones of youth. We also shared a dream, a vision of our life together, and the hard work to make it happen.

Joan and I had a different kind of love: a deep affection for each other and a recognition that life is not meant to be spent alone. We shared good times and exciting times. We also shared the tougher life events and were each, in turn, caretakers for the other.

I regret that the geography of commuting to my work took time from my home life and kept me from the beauty of Gloucester and its environs. I am now back to stay.

Last Words

The ocean, sometimes calm and gentle, other times angry and terrifying. Either way, it gets in your blood, in your psyche. Once exposed, always addicted. It will call you back. It has called me back. I have returned here for the third time. It is my sanctuary, my community, my family, my home.

The American Dream was drummed into me by my mother and father: get an education, work hard, and do better than your parents. It wasn't working in Waltham; it worked in Gloucester. Gloucester, the ocean and its almost religious addiction, the deep-felt respect for Gloucester's hero family fishermen, and the kindness and joy of its people.

I'm back; I'm home to stay. I thank God, I thank my family, and I thank the people of Gloucester.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Gloucester400+ workshop instructor, Kristin Czarnecki for her assistance in helping me develop this story, and the Gloucester400+ Stories Project for accepting my submission and bringing it to publication.