



## Brief History of the Nantucket Lightship Basket

*In 1659 when the first white settlers came to Nantucket a need arose for storage and transportation of household wares. Basket making was one of the many skills that the friendly natives taught the new settlers. These early baskets were made with materials that were readily available at the time, namely ash, oak, or hickory. These woods were made into splints by pounding and separating along the annual rings. This style of weaving baskets is the origin of many styles of baskets still produced today. Of all these styles perhaps shaker baskets most readily reflect their connection to the original methods and materials used by the early settlers.*

*In the 1830's, as the whaling industry started to flourish, ships sailed further and further from their home ports as local whale numbers dwindled. When ships sailed into the Pacific rim they brought back a material used for basket construction by natives in that part of the world, namely, rattan. Rattan is a long vine-like plant that looks much like bamboo except that it has a solid core. From this long vine local natives would cut the outer bark off in*

*long strips and use this strong yet pliable material for many things including basketry.*

*Today this material is better known as cane, and the pithy interior portion of the plant is referred to as reed. The introduction of rattan to the weaving process is one of the key elements that helped create the distinctive look of Nantucket baskets. The other elements, solid wooden bottoms, and the use of wooden molds, were used by both the Native population as well as the Shakers. It was the combination of these three elements, as well as a keen sense of craftsmanship that gave Nantucket baskets their unique character*

*In 1854, after too many years of shipwrecks off the coast of Nantucket, the United States Government ordered a ship with lanterns attached to its mast to be positioned twenty-five miles off the south shoals of Nantucket. The Nantucket South Shoal Lightship was anchored year-round to protect and warn vessels rounding these dangerous shoals. The courageous Nantucket sailors stationed on the lightships endured the harshest of winters and the balmiest of summers working many months at a time on the ship. They fought the isolation and loneliness of life aboard the South Shoal Lightship by weaving wooden-bottomed, wooden-handled baskets from cane. They made the baskets for their families as well as to sell on*

*In 1856 when the first Lightship was commissioned to warn ships of the dangerous shoals off the southern shores of Nantucket, many of the sailors took basket making materials with them to relieve themselves from the long hours of boredom. It is from this era that the baskets received their name, and reached a state of refinement that caused them to be widely sought after.*

*In 1945 Jose Reyes came to Nantucket to vacation and soon decided to stay. From his home in the Philippines he brought a working knowledge of rattan, and a sense of imagination that led him to create the "friendship basket" or handbag, possibly the most recognized and popular forms of this art. It is from this tradition of craftsmanship, creativity, and ingenuity that today's weavers draw upon to create their own personal expression of the Nantucket Lightship Basket. .*