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Nantucket Corporation: A Timeline

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In the DOS years, behind countless shop counters, a beige computer with a green screen kept the stock, raised the invoices and remembered the customers. A great many of those programs were built with one tool: Clipper, from a small company in Culver City called Nantucket Corporation.

This video follows Nantucket in order, with every date and figure on screen. How dBase, born from a NASA laboratory program, ruled PC databases, and why every customer had to buy dBase, or a runtime copy, to run a dBase program. How Nantucket was founded in 1984, and the tale of the restaurant napkin behind its names. How Clipper Winter '84, shipped on 25 May 1985, turned dBase programs into single stand-alone files, and how the seasons releases ran to Summer '87.

Then Ashton-Tate's fall: dBase IV in October 1988, the lawsuit against Fox, Judge Hatter's ruling of 11 December 1990 and its withdrawal in April 1991, and Borland's purchase of Ashton-Tate in October

1991. Clipper 5.0 in September 1990, and the Windows problem: Windows 3.0 on 22 May 1990, and Nantucket's Windows project, code-named Aspen. Clipper in the Soviet Union, from the New York Times of 3 November 1991.

The sale to Computer Associates in May 1992, and what the price really was. CA-Clipper 5.2 to 5.3b, the last, on 20 May 1997; CA-Visual Objects in 1995. And the afterlife: Harbour (1999), xHarbour and X#, and Harbour 3.2.0, released on 7 July 2026.

One item could not be read at its source: the Wall Street Journal report of 7 May 1992, cited by Wikipedia for an estimated sale price. The video says so.

Educational documentary. Not financial or investment advice.

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1. The program behind the counter



Picture a shop counter in the late nineteen eighties. Behind it sits a beige computer with a green or amber screen. There is no mouse and there are no windows, just a menu of numbered choices and a blinking cursor.

That screen ran the business. It kept the stock list, raised the invoices and remembered every customer. It ran on Microsoft's DOS, the text-only system that most office computers used before Windows.

Programs like it ran in shops, surgeries, garages and warehouses. Most of them were not bought off a shelf. They were written for one business, or one trade, by a local programmer or a small software firm.

A great many of them were built with the same tool. It was called Clipper, and it came from a small company in the Los Angeles area called Nantucket Corporation. This video follows Nantucket from its start in nineteen eighty-four to its sale in nineteen ninety-two, and then follows Clipper to the present day.

To see why Clipper mattered, it helps to start with the program it was built around. That program was a database called dBase, and in the early nineteen eighties it was the best known of its kind on small computers.

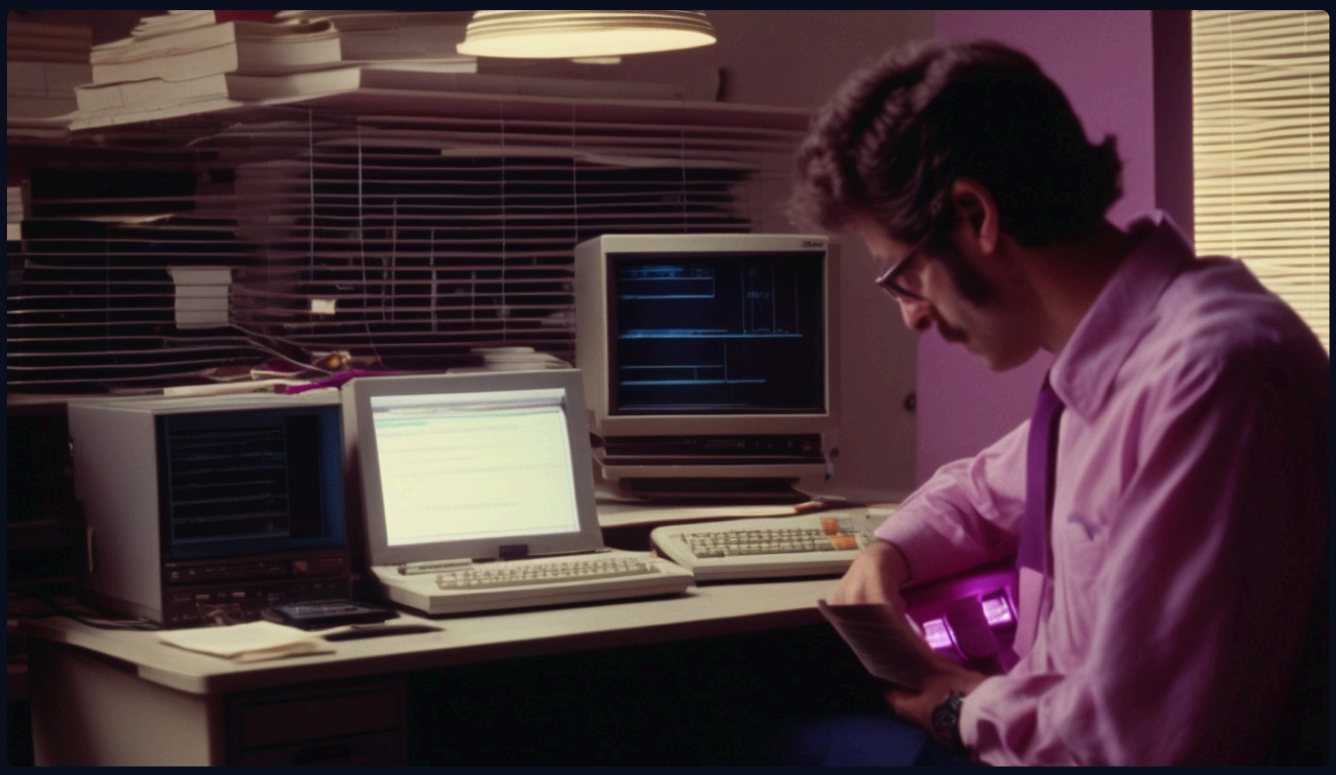
A database, in the sense used here, is a program that keeps records in tables and finds them again on request. One table might hold customers, one row for each customer. Another might hold stock.

The database program sorts them, searches them and prints reports from them.

dBase did all of that, and it did more. It had its own simple programming language, so a user could build a whole business program on top of it.

The trouble was not dBase itself. The trouble was what it cost to hand a dBase program to somebody else. Nantucket's whole business grew out of that one problem.

2. dBase and its price tag



dBase began not in business but in space science. At NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, programmers wrote a system for managing data, called JPLDIS.

A programmer called Wayne Ratliff, who worked at the laboratory as a contractor, came across it. He wrote his own version for a small computer at home, and named it Vulcan, after Mr Spock's home planet in Star Trek. In nineteen eighty, a young Los Angeles company called Ashton-Tate took it on and sold it as dBase two.

Ashton-Tate was an odd name for a company, and it had an odd story. There was a George Tate, one of its founders. There was no Mr Ashton.

According to Wikipedia's history of the company, "Ashton was Tate's after-the-fact parrot, whose cage was kept in his Culver City office." The joke stuck, and so did the name.

dBase sold very well. In May nineteen eighty-four came a rewritten version, dBase three. By nineteen ninety-one, the Los Angeles Times put the number of dBase users at more than three million.

Culver City is a separate small city inside the Los Angeles area. Ashton-Tate was based there before it moved to Torrance, near the coast, in late nineteen eighty-five. Pasadena, where JPLDIS began, is on the far side of the city. Nantucket would grow up in the same few miles.

But dBase was an interpreter. That means it read each line of a program and carried it out, one line at a time, every time the program ran. It worked out each line afresh, which was slow. And it meant a

dBase program could not run on its own. The customer's computer needed dBase too.

So a programmer who sold a stock system to a shop had to tell the shop to buy dBase as well. Ashton-Tate did offer a cheaper route.

It sold what was called a runtime. That was a cut-down copy of dBase that could run programs but not write them. By Wikipedia's account of the company, it cost three hundred and ninety-five dollars for each machine. For a small business buying one program, that was a large extra bill.

That was the gap. Somebody who could turn a dBase program into a program that stood on its own would give every dBase programmer something they could sell freely.

3. Nantucket is born, 1984



The idea came from inside Ashton-Tate. Brian Russell worked there, in technical support. Customers phoning in kept asking the same question: where was the compiler for dBase?

A compiler is the opposite of an interpreter. Instead of reading a program line by line as it runs, it translates the whole program once, in advance. What comes out is a file the computer can run directly, with no dBase needed.

Ashton-Tate did not make one. So in nineteen eighty-four, a new company set out to. The usual account names two founders: Barry ReBell, who ran the business side, and Brian Russell, who wrote the compiler.

ReBell was not a programmer. He was a consultant who ran a temporary staffing agency, and he put up the money. Russell was the programmer. By the account of a colleague, Clipper was the first program Russell had written in the language called C. He learned it as he went.

That colleague, Brett Oliver, also worked in Ashton-Tate's support team. In his own later account, he names more founders: himself, Jim Warner and Richard McConnell, as well as Russell. So the company had more than two parents, even if two names are the ones usually remembered.

The names Nantucket and Clipper come with a story, and the story calls itself a tale. Two friends were having lunch at a seafood restaurant in Malibu, grumbling that Ashton-Tate had no compiler. On the napkin was a picture of a clipper ship, "a sleek, speedy, and elegant thing." The restaurant was called the Nantucket Lighthouse.

Whether it happened quite like that, few people can say. Even the man who wrote it down said only that insiders called it not far from the truth. Oliver remembers recruiting Russell at a different lunch, in a Japanese restaurant in Culver City.

Either way, the company settled in Culver City. A trade paper noted in nineteen eighty-seven that Nantucket was based not on the island of that name in Massachusetts, but on the other side of the country. Its first development office, by Oliver's account, was a beach house in Malibu.

4. Winter '84: the first Clipper



The first Clipper went on sale on the twenty-fifth of May, nineteen eighty-five. Nantucket named it after a season, not a number. It was called Winter eighty-four.

Here is what it did. A programmer wrote a program in the dBase language, just as before. Clipper translated it, and a second program called a linker joined it to Clipper's own library of routines. The result was a single file ending in dot EXE, which DOS could run on any compatible machine.

The linker that came in the first box was a product called PLINK eighty-six. Later versions of Clipper came with others. What mattered to the programmer was the result: one file, and nothing else to install.

So the two routes to a customer looked very different. On the dBase route, every customer needed dBase, or its runtime, on every machine. On the Clipper route, the programmer bought Clipper once. Each customer got a single file.

That file could be copied onto a floppy disk and sold as often as anyone would buy it. Nantucket asked nothing for each copy. The programmer paid for the compiler, and kept the rest.

The other reason to buy it was speed. Programs built with Clipper ran faster than the same programs under dBase. Under the surface, Clipper did not turn every line into raw machine instructions. Many versions turned the program into a compact code, run by a small engine inside the file. That was still much faster than working out each line afresh.

Speed and freedom were the two things programmers wanted, and Clipper offered both. By Oliver's account, at Nantucket's first Comdex trade show in Las Vegas, Russell was still upstairs in his hotel room, writing the code.

5. The seasons releases



For the next two and a half years, Nantucket kept naming its versions after seasons. Each one added commands that dBase did not have.

After Winter eighty-four came Summer eighty-five. Winter eighty-five shipped on the twenty-ninth of January, nineteen eighty-six. Autumn eighty-six shipped on the thirty-first of October that year. Summer eighty-seven, the last of the seasons, shipped on the twenty-first of December, nineteen eighty-seven.

The names did not always match the calendar. Summer eighty-seven shipped four days before Christmas. What mattered to programmers was what each release added.

Summer eighty-seven was the last and fullest of the seasons. A trade paper reported that it sold for six hundred and ninety-five dollars. It could still turn dBase programs into stand-alone files, and it added far more of its own.

It was also the last Clipper to call itself a dBase compiler. The disks and manuals of Summer eighty-seven still said so on the label. By now, though, many programmers were writing for Clipper first, and using its extra commands freely.

That changed who Nantucket depended on. A company that began by following dBase now had followers of its own. There were Clipper user groups, and Nantucket's own developer conferences, at home and abroad.

Nantucket also opened offices overseas. By nineteen ninety-one it had a British company, Nantucket UK, which claimed ten thousand users of its own.

6. Living beside Ashton-Tate



Nantucket's whole business rested on another company's language. For as long as Ashton-Tate led the field, that was an uneasy place to be.

Then Ashton-Tate stumbled. Its next version, dBase four, shipped in October nineteen eighty-eight. By spring nineteen eighty-nine, users were finding many faults. The company's own chief executive later admitted it had been shipped too early.

It had another weakness, too. Developers wanted a compiler, and dBase four still did not have one.

A trade paper, Computergram, summed it up in August nineteen eighty-nine. It said Ashton-Tate's failure to match Clipper was good news for Nantucket. And it said that failure left Ashton-Tate looking inept.

Ashton-Tate had already gone to court. In November nineteen eighty-eight it sued Fox Software, maker of a rival called FoxPro. It claimed that the dBase language itself was its property, and that Fox had copied it.

On the eleventh of December, nineteen ninety, a federal judge in Los Angeles, Terry Hatter, ruled Ashton-Tate's dBase copyrights invalid. He found it had not told the copyright office that dBase was built on JPLDIS, from the laboratory in Pasadena. The failure, he wrote, was "done knowingly and with an intent to deceive."

That ruling did not last. In April nineteen ninety-one, the same judge reconsidered and withdrew it. But by then, Ashton-Tate itself was nearly finished.

In July nineteen ninety-one, Borland, a software company from Scotts Valley in northern California, agreed to buy Ashton-Tate, of Torrance. It paid in Borland shares, worth about four hundred and forty million dollars. The deal closed in October.

The US Justice Department set conditions. Borland could not claim copyright in the dBase commands or language, and it had to drop the case against Fox.

The Los Angeles Times described the effect as "allowing any company to produce software that mimics some or all of dBase's functions." It was the first time the department had placed conditions on a takeover because of copyright. For Nantucket, the threat over the language was gone.

Set in order, the dates tell the story. A faulty dBase four in nineteen eighty-eight. A lawsuit against Fox the same year. A ruling for Fox in nineteen ninety, withdrawn in nineteen ninety-one. And in the same year, Ashton-Tate sold to Borland.

7. Clipper 5.0, 1990



Nantucket's own big change had come a year earlier. In September nineteen ninety, it dropped the season names and launched Clipper five point oh.

It was not a small update. Clipper five added local variables. A variable is a named piece of data in a program, like a running total. A local one belongs only to the part of the program that made it. In older dBase code, any part of a program could change any variable, which made large programs hard to keep in order.

It also added code blocks and a preprocessor. Both sound technical, and both are simple ideas.

A code block is a small piece of program that can be stored and passed around like a number or a name, and run later. A preprocessor is a tool that rewrites the program before it is compiled. With it, programmers could invent commands of their own, and Clipper built much of its own language that way.

Not everyone liked it. Programmers who had learned dBase found much of Clipper five unfamiliar.

One Clipper writer, Greg Holmes, remembered the reaction: "What have they done to our language?" His own verdict came later in the same history. Clipper, he wrote, had become a real language.

It sold anyway. The first production run of forty thousand copies went in three months. A trade paper reported that by the new year, sales of Clipper five had passed the total sales of Summer eighty-

seven.

The first release had faults, as big releases often do. Nantucket followed it with Clipper five point oh one, on the fifteenth of April, nineteen ninety-one. That was the version that took hold. In the space of seven months, the seasons were gone, and Clipper was a language of its own.

8. Aspen and the Windows problem



While Clipper five was being finished, the ground was moving under DOS. On the twenty-second of May, nineteen ninety, Microsoft launched Windows three point oh.

Windows three sold fast. In its first week it became the top-selling business software. Two million copies were sold in six months. New programs were now expected to use windows, icons and a mouse.

Clipper made DOS programs. A Clipper program could draw boxes and menus out of text characters, but it could not open a window. Nantucket needed a way to follow its customers to Windows.

Its answer was a project code-named Aspen. It was meant to be a new, object-based tool for building Windows programs, for the Clipper community. It was large and ambitious, and it was still unfinished when Nantucket was sold.

Meanwhile Clipper was travelling. By late nineteen ninety-one, the New York Times described Nantucket as a thirty-five million dollar company. It was privately held, and still one product at heart.

It sold far beyond Los Angeles. There was Nantucket UK in Britain, and a Belgian subsidiary in Brussels. From there, a manager ran the company's boldest venture of all, in Moscow.

In the Soviet Union, the paper reported, illegal copies of Clipper were everywhere. Nantucket set up a joint venture with a clinic that helps disabled children use computers. It spent more than two years

persuading Soviet programmers that "buying is preferable to pirating". Two thousand legal copies had been sold there.

The New York Times piece appeared on the third of November, nineteen ninety-one. Weeks later, the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist.

The same article gave Clipper's reach worldwide. It had sold two hundred and fifty thousand copies, and it listed at seven hundred and ninety-five dollars in the United States. Each of those copies could have produced any number of business programs.

9. Sold to Computer Associates, 1992



At the beginning of May nineteen ninety-two, Nantucket was sold. The buyer was Computer Associates, a large software company based on Long Island, in New York.

The seller was one man. By then Barry ReBell owned all of the company. The managing director of Nantucket's British arm told a trade paper, "It was part of the plan that Barry ReBell would sell eventually".

The price is less certain than it is often made to sound. A figure of about a hundred and ninety million dollars is widely repeated, including on Wikipedia, but the page Wikipedia cites for it does not give that number.

The one figure found that goes back to the time is lower. Wikipedia's list of the company's purchases gives an estimate of about eighty million dollars, citing the Wall Street Journal of the seventh of May, nineteen ninety-two. This video could not read that report itself.

Computer Associates had grown by buying other software companies. Nantucket's British managing director insisted it had been bought for its technology and its people, and that most of its staff would stay.

Clipper was renamed CA-Clipper. The Aspen project passed to Computer Associates as well. A trade paper said Aspen's core design was nearly finished, and described what it would be: "It will not be compatible with Clipper but will share syntax for the classes."

So Clipper's own programmers would not simply carry their programs across. They would have to learn a new tool, from a new owner.

The company that had grown up in Culver City now answered to a head office on the other side of the country. For the programmers, the firm that spoke their language had become one product line inside a large corporation.

10. CA-Clipper and Visual Objects



Computer Associates did keep Clipper going for some years. CA-Clipper five point two came out on the fifteenth of February, nineteen ninety-three.

Five point three followed in June nineteen ninety-five, then a string of smaller fixes. The last, five point three b, was released on the twentieth of May, nineteen ninety-seven. That was the end of the line for Clipper.

Aspen, meanwhile, had become a product. It was called CA-Visual Objects, and it was built to make real Windows programs in the Clipper style.

A trade paper reported on the eleventh of January, nineteen ninety-five, that Computer Associates was shipping it. It cost from nine hundred dollars. It could also reach larger databases, the kind that run on company servers.

But Visual Objects did not carry the Clipper world with it. By Wikipedia's account, it was released before it was ready for the market.

It also arrived almost head to head with a strong new rival for Windows programmers, Delphi, from Borland. Visual Objects was not compatible with Clipper, so programmers had a new tool to learn whichever they chose. And Clipper itself still worked, on DOS.

Visual Objects kept a loyal following for many years. In the end, it passed to a smaller company, GrafX.

Its last version, two point eight, came from GrafX in twenty twelve. GrafX said there would be no more. Nantucket had shipped Clipper updates for seven years. Computer Associates kept them coming for five more, and then stopped.

11. Harbour and the afterlife



The programs did not stop when the updates did. Businesses that had run on Clipper for years still ran on it, and those programs still needed fixing and moving to newer machines.

In nineteen ninety-nine a group of programmers began an open-source Clipper, called Harbour. Open-source means the program's own code is published free, for anyone to use and improve. The project was founded by a programmer called Antonio Linares.

The name was a joke with a meaning. A clipper is a ship, and a ship needs a port.

As the project's own description puts it, "Harbour is a port of the Clipper language." A port is a place where ships dock. In programming, a port is also a version of a program moved to run on a different system.

Harbour set out to compile Clipper programs as they were, and to run them on Windows, Linux and other modern systems. A program first written for DOS could be rebuilt with Harbour and carry on working.

In late two thousand and one, one of Harbour's leading developers, Ron Pinkas, started a separate version called xHarbour. Harbour's version three came out on the seventeenth of July, twenty eleven. Then, on the seventh of July, twenty twenty-six, came version three point two. It was Harbour's first stable release in fifteen years.

The code is kept on GitHub, a public site where programmers share projects. Its most recent change was made just days before this video was written.

A third project, X sharp, started in twenty fifteen. It carries the same family of languages into Microsoft's dot NET system, used for modern Windows programs. Its founders had worked on Visual Objects, and they are spread across Europe: the Netherlands, France, Greece and Spain.

X sharp released version three in June twenty twenty-six. Its users now meet at their own conference in Germany. Clipper's descendants are still being built, forty-two years on.

12. What Nantucket left behind



Nantucket was an independent company for about eight years. In that time it sold one main product, to one particular kind of customer: the programmer who built software for the business down the road.

That was the secret of its reach. Nantucket did not have to sell to shops, surgeries and garages. It sold to the programmers who did. Each copy of Clipper could become many programs, and each program could run in many businesses.

It faded for reasons that were mostly not its own. Windows changed what a program was expected to look like, and Clipper was built for a text screen. The answer, Aspen, took years, and arrived under another company's name.

So the story runs both ways. Forwards: a small company freed a generation of dBase programs from dBase, and helped put a computer behind countless counters. Backwards: it never found its own way to Windows, and its successor never won Clipper's programmers over.

The founders did not stay in the story. Barry ReBell, who sold the company, died in two thousand and nine. The product outlived the man who owned it.

And the programs outlived the company. Nantucket was founded in nineteen eighty-four, and sold in nineteen ninety-two. More than three decades later, Clipper code is still being compiled and fixed. Somewhere, behind a counter, one of those text screens is probably still running.

Sources and credits

Primary sources

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Not regulated financial advice.