

Finding Aid to the Martha's Vineyard Museum
Record Unit 374
Zebulon N. Tilton and *The Schooner Alice S. Wentworth*
Collection

By Linda M. Wilson

Descriptive Summary

Repository: Martha's Vineyard Museum

Call No.

Title: Zebulon N. Tilton and *The Alice S. Wentworth* Collection

Creator: Linda M. Wilson

Quantity: .25 cubic feet

Abstract: This small collection contains photographs, clippings, correspondence, and documents relating to the Schooner *Alice S. Wentworth* Associates. There is also a paperback copy of Polly Burrough's 1972 biography, *Zeb; A celebrated Schooner Life*. A album in scrapbook format titled *The Log of the Alice S. Wentworth* contains photographs but no text and is stored separately.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: Zebulon N. Tilton and *The Alice S. Wentworth* Collection was acquired by the Martha's Vineyard Museum in _____ by _____.

Processing Information: Linda M. Wilson

Access Restrictions: none

Use Restrictions: none

Preferred citation for publication: Martha's Vineyard Museum, Zebulon N. Tilton and *The Alice S. Wentworth* Collection, Record Unit 374.

Index Terms

Tilton, Zebulon N.

Alice S. Wentworth

Burroughs, Polly

Series and Subseries Arrangement

Series I: Business Correspondence, 1939-1943

Series II: Schooner *Alice S. Wentworth* Associates, 1939-1940

Series III: Photographs

Series IV: *Zeb; A Celebrated Schooner Life*, by Polly Burroughs

Series IV: Reference

Biography/Historical Note:

Zebulon N. Tilton was born on Martha's Vineyard in the town of Chilmark in 1866. He was one of seven brothers and a sister. The six Tilton boys loved to sing. Zeb himself sang enthusiastically and publicly until the end of his life.

Zeb found his life calling at the age of 15 when he signed on to the two-masted schooner *Eliza Jane* sailing out of Vineyard Haven Harbor in 1882. She was captained by Josiah Cleveland. Years later Zeb would credit Cleveland with teaching him all he knew about handling a schooner, navigating the seas, and developing a rigorous work ethic.

He was hardly a fastidious or frugal man, continually caked with the detritus of whatever freight he was handling and spending every penny that came his way. But he had a way with the ladies who were charmed by his wit and physical prowess and undeterred by his crossed eyes.

In 1894 he married for the first time, to Grace Cook of Vineyard Haven. Grace however had a wandering eye and did not do well living alone in Chilmark while Zeb was away at sea. Their marriage lasted only two years.

By 1900 Zeb was ready to captain his own vessel and acquired an ancient Vineyard Haven two-master called the *Wilfred J. Fuller*. Competing with rail, steam, and other schooners he held his own in the active coastwise trade.

In 1901 he was married for the second time to another local girl, Edith Mayhew, who was descended from a legendary Vineyard family. They had seven children and remained together until her death in the 1930's.

Sailing in to Portland Harbor in 1906 he encountered the great love of his life. Her name was the *Alice S. Wentworth*. Built in 1863, she recently had been rebuilt and rechristened. Zeb was so smitten he sold the *Fuller* and signed on to captain the *Wentworth*. Within two years he had argued with the owner and was back on the *Fuller*. He eventually owned another two-master called the *John B. Norris*. He literally wore out both of these schooners. In 1921 for the grand price of \$4500. he returned to the girl he never forgot and purchased the *Alice S. Wentworth*. She was 58 and he was 54. He captained her in the coastwise trade for the next 18 years.

Captain Zeb was the subject of adventure stories and legendary escapades his entire life, but the business of the coastwise trade was nearly over by the mid 1930's. In the summer of 1934 he caused a stir at the America's Cup Race trials in Newport by bearing down on the yachts and the spectators and sweeping the *Wentworth's* bowsprit over the crowd. A bright spot from that time was his third marriage at the age of 72 to Grace McDonald at the Seaman's Bethel in Vineyard Haven. After the reception Zeb and his bride put out to sea for a little wedding trip to New Bedford.

By 1936 he was losing his sight and was so deeply in debt that the *Wentworth* went on the auction block. Captain Ralph Packer and a group of Vineyard notables bought her for a paltry \$701. and pronounced Zeb captain for life of the last commercial cargo carrier under sail in southern New England. Shareholders included James Cagney, Katherine Cornell, Denys Wortman. Through the sale of shares they financed her overhaul.

Captain Zeb's final years were marked by considerable notoriety. He was interviewed by Lowell Thomas and Burgess Meredith, had his portrait painted by Thomas Hart Benton, and was honored at the All-Island Cavalcade, a hospital benefit, in 1941. He lived on to the age of 85 and died in 1952.

And as for the *Alice S. Wentworth*, she returned to private ownership after a few years with the Associates. From there she moved to the pier in Boston where Anthony Athanas, her new owner, had his Pier 4 Restaurant. Mr. Athanas wanted her to go to the National Maritime Historical Society for restoration, but she was considered too old and too far gone. To keep her afloat she was filled with styrofoam and in 1977 she was blown to pieces by a winter storm.

Scope and Content Note:

This small collection consists of correspondence and documents for the *Alice S. Wentworth Associates*, 1939-1943, and newspaper clippings about the *Wentworth* and Captain Zeb. Among the documents are several certificates for shares in the Associates. There is a paperback copy of Polly Burroughs' book *Zeb; a Celebrated Schooner Life*. The photographs are the jewels of the collection. Taken by an unknown photographer they record a meeting of the shareholders of the *Wentworth Associates* on board the schooner, and include portraits of Captain Zeb and Charlie Sayle who crewed on the *Wentworth*. Two photographs show work on the final overhaul of the schooner. An illustrated article on the *Alice S. Wentworth* and Captain Zeb can be found in the February 1976 issue of *The Dukes County Intelligencer*.

Series Descriptions

Series I: Business Correspondence, 1939-1943

Box 1 of 1

Folder 1: Correspondence, 1939-1943

Series II: Schooner *Alice S. Wentworth* Associates, 1939-1940

Box 1 of 1

Folder 2: Schooner *Alice S. Wentworth* Associates, 1939-1940

Series III: Photographs

Box 1 of 1

Folder 3: Photographs

Series IV: *Zeb; a Celebrated Schooner Life*, by Polly Burroughs

Box 1 of 1

Folder 4: *Zeb; a Celebrated Schooner Life*, by Polly Burroughs

Series V: Reference

Box 1 of 1

Folder 5: Reference and Clippings