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THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

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WINTER 2015

The Liberty Pole:

Shedding New Light
On a Vineyard Legend



Whalers, Women & Song:

Women Seen Through
Male Eyes in Sea Shanties
Of the 19th Century



Plus – Patriotic Narrative Poetry from the Want To Know Club, 1895

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FAMILIAR STORIES, NEW PERSPECTIVES

“I desire you would remember the ladies,” Abigail Adams famously wrote to her husband John in March 1776, “and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.” Her critique was aimed at lawmakers, but it would have applied equally (then, and long afterward) to historians. Weaving the lives of women into the tapestry of written history has already been the work of several generations, and it will likely take several more before. This issue of the *Intelligencer* is a modest contribution to that process.

It is also an opportunity to look anew at familiar stories. The first two articles explore the Revolutionary War exploits of Mary “Polly” Daggett, Maria Allen, and Parnel Manter, who blew up the Liberty Pole in Holmes Hole to prevent its appropriation by the British. Most Vineyarders know the outlines of the story, recorded on a plaque on the flagpole outside the Museum’s Morgan Learning Center in Vineyard Haven. The pages that follow reveal the details, and the changes in the story over nearly two centuries of telling and retelling. The third article considers the women that the whalemens and other sailors who set forth from the Vineyard sang of in their shanties and their fo’c’sle ballads: the ones they left behind, the ones they met in foreign ports, and the ones who lived only in their imagination. The late Gale Huntington, in his landmark *Songs the Whalemens Sang* (1964), revealed the breadth of the titular songs; in the article, summer 2015 intern Lilie Pudnos explores their depths.

The issue closes, felicitously, with a letter from Western Australia, received from a writer who—through the magic of the Internet—met, and was charmed by, the Vineyard’s own “Girl on a Whaleship,” Laura Jernegan. Like the articles that precede it, it reminds us that even the most familiar of the stories from the Island’s past can reveal new depths when we revisit them.

A. Bowdoin Van Riper

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The Liberty Pole

New Light on a Vineyard Legend

by ELIZABETH TROTTER



The Liberty Pole memorial in front of the (then) DAR building, soon after the plaque was installed in 1898. The building currently houses the Morgan Learning Center of the Martha's Vineyard Museum. *Martha's Vineyard Museum Postcard Collection.*

WHEN I WAS young, my love of reading was encouraged by a need to escape from three younger brothers and my search for the distraction that curling up with a good book provided. The books that my fingers itched to pull down from library shelves were the biographies. Filled with unfamiliar places, events and characters, they would take me away to places of times gone by. I would sink my small frame into comfortable cushions, and my young brain into the wells of knowledge these tales offered, filled with watershed moments from history. The ones that touched my heart most often and profoundly were the books—always far too few—that narrated the lives of great women who had made a difference in our world. Brave women like Clara Barton, Marie Curie and Florence Nightingale struggled to forge new paths and open

A graduate of McDaniel College with a BA in social work, Liz Trotter did extensive work with the elderly, followed by 15 years as a human resources executive. After moving to the Island, she began to research the history of her 17th century house and its ties to Vineyard lore, which led her to the steps of the Museum.

minds, and stood out for their deeds of courage and strength. Women like them, encountered in the pages of books, helped to shape my sense of self, and of my place in this world.

So perhaps you can appreciate how, when I first moved to the Island in 2001, I was drawn to the darkened plaque decorating a tall white pole in front of what was then the Sail MV building on Main Street, Vineyard Haven—a marker that recorded an act of defiance from the Revolutionary War. These words were cast into its surface:

TO COMMEMORATE THE PATRIOTISM
OF THREE GIRLS OF THIS VILLAGE
POLLY DAGGETT
PARNEL MANTER
MARIA ALLEN
WHO DESTROYED WITH POWDER A
LIBERTY POLE ERECTED NEAR THIS SPOT
TO PREVENT ITS CAPTURE BY THE
BRITISH IN 1776
THIS POLE REPLACING THE OTHER
IS ERECTED BY THE
SEA COAST DEFENCE CHAPTER, DAR
1898

More recently, I began an in-depth investigation of the previous owners of my Island home, the history of which stretches back to Isaac Chase—one of the earliest settlers of what is now Vineyard Haven. Researching the lives of the previous owners, and the events they had been a part of, I ran across the three names from the Liberty Pole again. Both Maria Allen and Parnel Manter had direct ties to the Chase family, and even Polly Daggett was related to them by marriage. This information set me on a new quest: To find out all I could about the story that has forever tied their names to one another, and to the pole that stands on Main Street.

Two things became clear as I explored the history of the Liberty Pole and its destruction. One is that there were nearly as many variations of the story as there were tellers of it, with different narrators disagreeing on details as seemingly basic as the year when it happened. The other is that many historians doubted whether the girls' destruction of the Liberty Pole had happened at all. Digging deeper, however, I discovered a pair of long-forgotten documents: the sworn testimony of Polly Daggett about her role in the destruction of the Liberty Pole, and that of her nephew Samuel, who had been present at its raising. These eyewitness accounts, submitted to Congress in the late 1830s when Polly sought a pension for her service during the Revolution, clarify crucial details about the Liberty Pole story. More important, they establish beyond a reasonable doubt that the story of the Liberty Pole is not legend, but documentable fact.

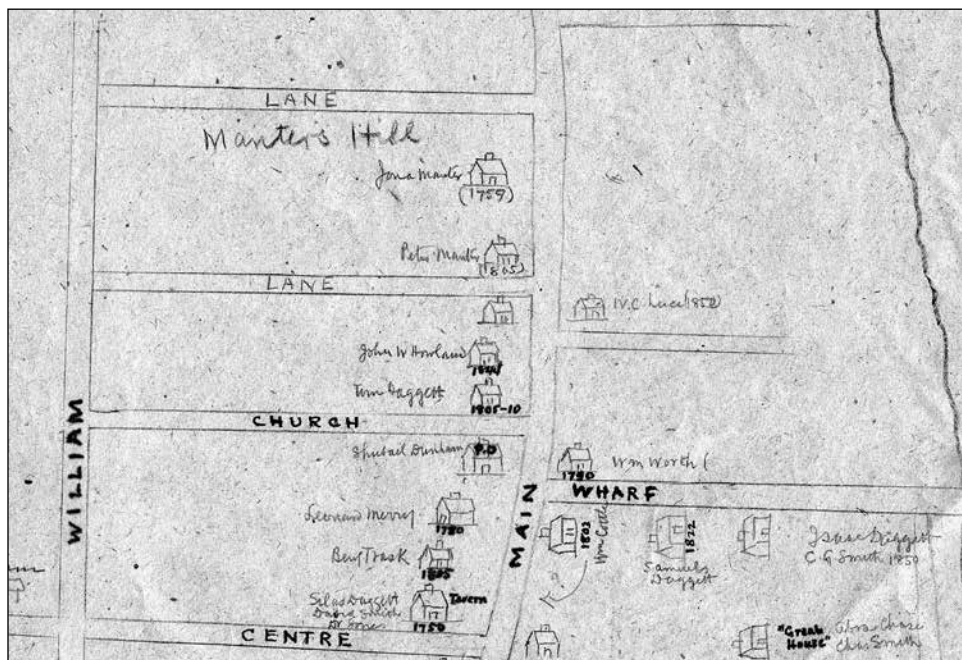
The land where the story of the Liberty Pole was played out—bounded by Main Street to the east, and William Street to the west, and Colonial and Drummer Lanes to the north and south—is known, today, for its historic houses. It no longer has a particular name. At the time of the Revolution, however, it was a wilder and more open space: a grassy rise known as Manter's Hill because the home of Jonathan Manter stood on its lower slopes, looking eastward across Main Street to the harbor. Charles Hine, in *The Story of Martha's Vineyard*, claims that the last encampment of British troops on Massachusetts soil took place there: the Redcoats resting easily with the forest behind them, the harbor (and the Royal Navy) in front of them, and the boulder-strewn gully that is now Church Street to their right.¹ Before it became a British encampment, however, Manter's Hill was a site for civic protest, and that is where the story of the Liberty Pole begins.

The year 1775 was pivotal for the Islanders.² The Vineyard's proximity to the busiest shipping routes in New England had helped to bring them a degree of prosperity, but as relations with Britain deteriorated it also rendered the Island vulnerable. As the citizens of Boston were learning in 1773 and 1774, Britain was stronger at sea than on land, and could impose its will most easily in ports and along the coast. The prospect of Vineyard Sound, or Edgartown and Holmes Hole harbors, filled with British warships and British troops led Vineyarders to deem it necessary to remain neutral while things heated up on the mainland. When the Boston Tea Party occurred, and the Port of Boston was ordered closed in retaliation, the Island was not ready to join in. After the formation of the Continental Congress, however, the citizens of Dukes County met in council and, on November 9, 1774, adopted the resolutions of the Continental Congress. By 1775 the Islanders were in full support of the Revolution.

Let me pause, here, to outline the basic story of the Liberty Pole—the key details that most accounts agree on. One day in 1775 the citizens of Holmes Hole gathered together on Manter's Hill to express their solidarity with the rebellious patriots of Boston. Tea was gathered from pantry shelves and, as a symbolic gesture of defiance, poured into a hole that would hold the base of a newly erected pole—a symbol of liberty and of opposition to the Crown's infringements of it. Some time later, after war had broken out, the British warship *Unicorn* sailed into the harbor, and her captain demanded the pole as a replacement for a damaged mast on his ship. The captain declared that

1 Charles Hine, *The Story of Martha's Vineyard* (New York: Hine Brothers, 1908), 101.

2 For the history of the Vineyard in the Revolution, see Charles E. Banks, *The History of Martha's Vineyard* (Edgartown, MA: Dukes County Historical Society, 1966), 321-415, and Arthur R. Railton, *The Story of Martha's Vineyard* (Beverly, MA: Commonwealth Editions, 2006), 67-118.



This map, depicting Holmes Hole in 1850, shows a thriving village. In 1778, however, the center of town lay east of Main Street and south of Wharf (now Union) Street, and Manter's Hill stood on its sparsely settled outskirts. Map by Charles Banks, c.1900; Martha's Vineyard Museum Maps Collection, 2012.034.007.

his crew would return the next day to claim the pole, but three local young women were unwilling to see the town's sacred symbol of liberty taken. Under cover of darkness they gathered at the base of the pole, bored holes in it with an auger, and filled them with gunpowder. Backing off to a safe distance, they ignited the powder, rendering the split and splintered pole worthless for use as a ship's mast. The British captain sailed away the next day, leaving the Islanders with the knowledge that they had taken a stand for liberty in the face of the British Empire.

Thanks to the DAR's commemorative plaque and many retellings in print, the story is well known on the Island, but an air of implausibility has long hung over it. Island historian Charles E. Banks writes, in his three-volume *History of Martha's Vineyard*, that the story has "much in it that is improbable and fanciful."³ Arthur Railton, his spiritual successor, dismissed the story outright and left it completely out of his own comprehensive history of the Island. "You can't disprove something that didn't happen," Railton told fellow historian Tom Dresser in an interview for a 2005 *Martha's Vineyard Magazine* article, but "it's unlikely [the three

3 Banks, *History*, I: 412. Banks' full account of the story covers pages 412-414 of volume I.

girls] would think this up.” Railton continues: “It’s a preposterous notion that a flagpole would be of any use to a sailing ship—its mast would be two feet in diameter. There were no trees on the Island that big. It was a DAR project; they invented it. Myths last longer than facts—they’re more interesting.”⁴ Contacted by Dresser for his article, the national office of the DAR was noncommittal. Explaining that “in 1898, DAR historical markers did not undergo such scrutiny (as today) respecting accuracy,” they admitted that they could not vouch for its accuracy.

Historians know that stories handed down from generation to generation are often embellished and stretched over the years, but they also know that stories we take to be legends often contain threads of truth. Why, then, is the story of the Liberty Pole so suspicious to so many historians? Is it that the story—three young women defying the might of the British Empire, and winning—is so good that we doubt its truthfulness? When I was researching the story at the Martha’s Vineyard Museum, I encountered the same air of dubiousness in discussions with the staff. “It’s a great story,” I heard more than once. “But a *true* story? Well . . .”⁵

Determined to sift out the facts beneath the legend, I started my own research reading all I could find on the subject at the museum. The first written account of the Liberty Pole story to be widely circulated was penned by Oliver Bell Bunce in *The Romance of the Revolution* (1853). Subtitled “A History of the Personal Adventures, Romantic Incidents and Exploits Incidental to the War of Independence,” the book was Bunce’s effort to document eyewitness accounts of the Revolution in an effort not to lose them to advancing years. The story of the Liberty Pole, which he recounts in two pages of a chapter titled “Miscellaneous Anecdotes,” was one of them. According to Bunce, the incident happened “some time in the year ’76,” when “the British sloop-of-war *Unicorn* put into Holmes Hole.” He describes a “liberty tree,” not a “pole,” and refers to “a detachment of marines” coming ashore to press some local men into service as pilots. The *Unicorn*, Bunce explains, was in need of a “spar,” and the captain—having determined that the liberty tree was “the only stick of timber on the Island” that would do—offered to buy it from the town. The citizens, fearing retribution if they refused, consented to sell the tree and agreed to deliver it the next day. Among those in disagreement, however, were three young girls—Bunce gives their names as Parnel Manter, Horiah Allen and Mary Milman, and their age as not yet 16—took matters into their own hands.

4 Tom Dresser, “The Legend of the Liberty Pole,” *Martha’s Vineyard Magazine*, September 1, 2005. <http://mvmagazine.com/news/2005/09/01/legend-liberty-pole>

5 The skeptics—though the author is too polite to say so—included the current editor of this journal. After viewing the evidence presented here, however, his mind has been decisively changed. – Ed.

After boring into the pole with augers and filling the holes with gunpowder, they “cautiously applied the match” and blew the pole up, shattering it into many pieces. Mary Milman he concludes, was the lone survivor into old age and was “obliged to apply to congress for relief.”⁶

A short note about names is necessary here. Eighteenth-century attitudes toward spelling were often casual by modern standards, and local quirks of pronunciation (as well as simple misunderstanding) produced further variations. Maria Allen also appears in written records as “Mariah,” and Bunce’s “Horiah Allen” is probably a corruption of the latter. Parnel Manter’s given name is spelled, more or less interchangeably, with one “l” or two. Polly Daggett was baptized “Mary” in 1760 but used “Polly,” a common diminutive, until her marriage to Peleg Hillman in 1779. Bunce’s references to “Mary Milman” clearly refer to Mary (“Polly”) Daggett *Hillman*, though the last name is anachronistic for the year of the Liberty Pole incident, and misspelled in any year.

The members of the Sea Coast Defence Chapter of the DAR, who placed the commemorative plaque on the flagpole outside their Vineyard Haven headquarters in 1898, relied on a version of the story told by Polly Daggett’s great-nephew Leander in a letter to the *Cottage City Star* in 1882.⁷ He begins the letter by noting that an “imperfect and abridged account” had appeared in the *Vineyard Gazette*, and that he wishes to present the story as told to him by his great aunt. We can imagine a young lad sitting at her knee, hanging onto the words that spell out an exciting adventure. “It was voted to erect a Liberty Pole and accordingly a spar was procured suitable for the purpose and conveyed to the highest hill in the village,” he writes, and goes on to corroborate the pouring of tea into the hole. “A few weeks after” the British ship came into the harbor and “demanded a spar” to repair their ship and “none but the Liberty Pole could be found to answer.” The British, he claims, offered payment for the spar and the townsmen agreed so that they would not take it by force. He then describes the girls hatching the plan, blowing up the pole, and watching out the window of a nearby home the next day as the British came on shore with their tools.

Daggett, reporting his great-aunt’s words as he remembers them, describes astonishment on the faces of the British sailors, and the officers’ response to the Tisbury selectmen: “Sirs, you have used us very unjustly; we did not take the spar from you, but bought it, and would have paid you well for it although we could have taken it, and now it is unfit for use.” The

6 Oliver Bell Bunce, ed. *The Romance of the Revolution* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1853), 365-366. <https://archive.org/details/bunceromance00bellrich>

7 The contents of the letter are reprinted in *The American Monthly Magazine* 11, no. 5 (November 1897), 492-494. <https://books.google.com/books?id=qtoQAQAAMAAJ>

selectmen, he continues, pretended to feel bad and could only “lay it to the boys” of the town, and it was thought to be “the boys” who had done it for another eight years, until the girls told of it themselves. Leander’s account is the most detailed ever published, and some of the details—the words of the British officers, and particularly the mention of the eight years that the town had thought it was “the boys”—are specific enough that they could only have come from an eyewitness, lending his version credibility.

Banks, recounting the tale in his *History*, takes issue with the idea that the citizens of Tisbury would agree to sell their Liberty Pole, noting the patriotic spirit that they had exhibited at the time. He thinks that the idea of the townsmen “capitulating to the British” was gratuitously placed in the story to “glorify the girls.” He does not, however, go so far as to dispute the tale as a whole, and in fact reports that—according to the ship’s log, signed by Captain John Ford and examined at Banks’ request by the Admiralty Office in London—*HMS Unicorn* sailed up Vineyard Sound and “moored in Holmes Hole” on April 19, 1778. Her business was conveying some transports and making some repairs to her fore topmast. The log continues: “Struck and unrigged the Foretopmast to fit new Crosstrees (that was sprung) rigged it again and swayed it up and set up the lower fore topmast Rigging fore and aft.” Banks posits that the lack of mention of the particular Liberty Pole incident in the log could be because the commander may not have wanted to mention being defeated in his effort to obtain a spar.⁸ One can only imagine what the commander would have thought had he realized that he had been bested not by “the boys” of the town, but by three young women!

Banks’ reference to the log is important for several reasons. First, of course, it corroborates the *Unicorn*’s presence in Vineyard waters, and its need of repairs to the rigging when it sailed into our harbor. Second, it establishes the date of the ship’s visit, including its odd coincidence with the third anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord. Finally, the date in the log helps to explain why the townspeople may have capitulated to the British captain’s demand for the pole. In 1778, the size of the Island’s militia was at an all-time low, most of the men having been called up to fight in the war. The state militia was only stationed on the Island for a short time in 1776 before the state general court declared, on November 16, that “the men stationed at Martha’s Vineyard excepting twenty five men” were discharged from service.⁹ Efforts to lobby the council for more men to protect the Vineyard failed repeatedly, and in 1778 there remained only 25 men guarding the entire Island. If we suppose (based on the log of the *Unicorn*) that the incident took place in 1778, the townspeople’s deci-

8 Banks, *History*, I:413-414.

9 Banks, *History*, I:355-366.



The destruction of the liberty pole as depicted by Banks in his 12-panel visual history of the island. The paintings are currently on display in the boat shed at the Martha's Vineyard Museum Campus in Edgartown. Martha's Vineyard Museum, Charles E. Banks Collection, RU 127, Box 3, Folder 16.

sion to sell the pole becomes more plausible. Had the British arrived in 1776, the militia might have been able to inhibit them as they came on shore. Two years later, with so few armed men left to guard the Island, there was little hope of effective resistance.

It is interesting to note that the written versions of the story that appeared prior to Banks, including the DAR's commemorative plaque, have the story occurring in the year 1776, but nearly every version that appeared after Banks gives the date of the incident as 1778. Among them are the accounts included in Charles G. Hine's *The Story of Martha's Vineyard* (1908), Henry Franklin Norton's *Martha's Vineyard: History, Legends and Stories* (1923), Allison Convery's *A Child's Guide to Martha's Vineyard* (1970), and Holly Nadler's *Vineyard Confidential* (2006). Each of these retellings of the story embellish the story in various ways, adding details not found in Bunce, Daggett, or Banks, and imagining how the three "girls" plotted and planned behind the townsmen's backs, and then gathered the tools for their nighttime exploit and lit the infamous spark.

Arthur Railton as noted above, dismisses the entire story and omits it

from his *History of Martha's Vineyard*. He does, however, indirectly confirm that the *Unicorn* was in Vineyard waters in 1778. Quoting the journal of Frederick Mackenzie, a British officer stationed in Newport, Rhode Island, notes that on May 9, 1778 the *Unicorn* protected two transports carrying lambs and sheep taken by the British from "Nashawn" Island.¹⁰ Railton, in his interview with Dresser, also offers an important correction to many depictions of the story, noting that Allen, Manter, and Daggett "were not little girls—they were teenagers."¹¹

Having exhausted the published accounts of the Liberty Pole story, I contacted the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England, which provided much information about the *Unicorn*, and verified—through the *London Chronicle* of March 21, 1776, that "The Unicorn, a new ship, is put into commission, and the command given to Capt. (John) Ford." A later issue of the *Chronicle*, dated May 14, 1776, noted that *Unicorn* along with another ship, the *Hornet*, was "fitting out at Woolwich, for the North America Station." These dates mean that ship could have been in New England waters as early as the summer of 1776, but the Greenwich museum also confirmed the evidence from the *Unicorn's* log cited by Banks in 1911: the ship had definitely been in Holmes Hole on April 19, 1778. I also wrote to the DAR, which responded to me as it did to Tom Dresser, noting that in 1898 the protocol for authenticity was not what it is today and that they could neither confirm or deny the story.

Revisiting the lives of the three Liberty Pole heroines revealed that—despite numerous depictions of them as young girls—even Railton's statement that they were teenagers understated the case. Maria Allen was 20 and Parnel was 21 in April of 1778; Polly, the youngest, was a few months short of her 18th birthday. Today we would call them "college age;" in their own day they were of prime marriageable age. Either way, they were not girls but adult women, very much aware of the events circling their days and what they meant. Maria had an uncle, Thomas Chase, who was a member of the Sons of Liberty in Boston, and who participated in the Boston Tea Party.¹² Parnel, who lived in her father Jonathan's house on Manter's Hill, would have seen the Liberty Pole erected in 1775, and looked out on it every day since from her windows. They would have fully understood the importance of their act and the statement it would make.

Parnel Manter died young, living only three months beyond April 1778. According to a story related by Hine, she "formed an attachment to a young

10 Railton, *Story of Martha's Vineyard*, 93.

11 Dresser, "Legend of the Liberty Pole."

12 John Carroll Chase and George Chamberlain, *Seven Generations of the Descendants of Aquila and Thomas Chase* (Somersworth, NH: New England History Press, 1986), 491.

man named Hillman, on whom her father frowned, even going so far as to threaten the youth with rawhide.” Undeterred, she continued to meet her suitor secretly, in the process contracting a cold that led to her death on July 19, 1778. On her deathbed, told that her father had relented and would allow her would-be suitor to visit her at their home, she declined and instead sent young Hillman a note. “I am going to heaven,” she wrote to him, “prepare to meet me there.”¹³ Maria Allen, who married David Smith on November 13, 1778, died on the first day of March, 1820, at the age of 62. Polly lived the longest of the three—well into old age. The year of her death was not recorded, but we know that she lived to apply to Congress for a pension in 1837 and again in 1839, when she was in her late seventies.

Sometimes the evidence we seek is hidden in plain sight; so it was with the paper trail of Polly Daggett’s application for a pension. Reading the Bunce account, I noted the line about Mary Hillman (as she was known in adulthood) being obliged to apply for relief from Congress, which echoed Banks’ statement that Polly “is said to have received a pension.” Following the thread, I located an item in an 1837 issue of the *Army-Navy Chronicle* reporting that on January 30th of that year Mary Hillman of Tisbury had petitioned the U. S. House of Representatives for “a gratuity or reward” for her part in the destruction of the Liberty Pole, and in the process had set down the story in her own words.¹⁴ Further research in the published records of petitions to Congress revealed that her 1837 application had apparently been unsuccessful, since she submitted a second one in 1839.

The *Army-Navy Chronicle* article is the earliest published account of the Liberty Pole story, appearing in print sixteen years before the first edition of Bunce’s *Romance of the Revolution*. It is also the only version of the story set down by one of the three women directly involved. I immediately contacted the archives of the House of Representatives and within a week I was the proud owner of facsimiles of both handwritten petitions that Mary Hillman submitted to Congress in her quest for recompense.¹⁵

The first petition—the one reported on, and partially reprinted, in the *Army-Navy Chronicle* in February 1837—consists of two pages. The first is Mary Hillman’s account of the Liberty Pole incident in her own words: minimally punctuated and slightly rambling, but as sharp and clear about details as one would expect of an eyewitness recounting, in old age, the greatest adventure of their youth. She confirms every key point in the tra-

13 Hine, *Story of Martha’s Vineyard*, 107. Polly Daggett’s husband, whom she married on May 13, 1779, was named Peleg Hillman, and it is tantalizing to wonder if he was the same Hillman who had been in love with her friend.

14 *Army-Navy Chronicle* 4, no. 7 (February 16, 1837): 101. <https://books.google.com/books?id=-LCgAAAAMAAJ>

15 Facsimile copies of both petitions are now in the “Liberty Pole” vertical file (VREF 1050) in the archives of the Martha’s Vineyard Museum.



"Three girls of this village" reenact the liberty pole incident in July 1971, during the Town of Tisbury's tercentenary celebration. The reenactors (L to R: Linda Welch, Beth Lyons, Laurie Lyons) are the same age that Daggett, Allen, and Manter would have been in 1778. *Martha's Vineyard Museum, Basil Welch Collection, RU465, Album 27.*

ditional narrative—the erection of the pole as a “symbol of liberty,” with tea poured into the hole at its base as a protest; the arrival of the *Unicorn* and the captain’s determination to take the pole for a mast; and the night-time destruction of it by boring holes in the pole and filling them with powder—and she identifies herself as the one who “set fire to the same which was totally split to pieces on the spot.”¹⁶ It was, she boldly declares, an act “equal to taking a standard or colours from an invading Enemy,” and so (now that she is “poor in old age”) worthy of a pension or other reward from “the Hon. Legislature of this Great Nation.”

The second page of the petition consists of a one-sentence endorsement of her testimony, simple and to the point: “We the undersigned citizens of Tisbury, County of Dukes County do hereby certify that we are well acquainted with the foregoing petitioner Mary Hillman and believe the facts which she has stated in the foregoing petition are true.” The nine signatures that follow include those of attorney Thomas Dunham, a frequent town office-holder who at the time was Justice of the Peace, and Leroy M. Yale, the (ironically) Harvard-educated town physician.¹⁷ The other seven names on the list included Mary Hillman’s nephew Samuel Daggett, a

¹⁶ Mary’s sometimes-shaky grammar clouds the waters here, but her clear implication is that she set fire to the *powder*, and its combustion split the pole. —Ed.

¹⁷ Yale came to the Island to visit friends shortly after his 1829 graduation from Harvard, and stayed until his death (treating victims of a “shipboard fever”) in 1849. His story is told in the May 2001 issue of the *Intelligencer*.

youth at the time of the Revolution, who went on to a career as a mariner and pilot; along with Joseph B. Brown, John Holmes, Warren Cleveland, Abner West, Charles West, and Oliver Grinnell. The *Army-Navy Chronicle* described them, accurately, as “nine leading citizens” of Tisbury.

Despite their endorsements and Mary Hillman’s undimmed Revolutionary fervor, however, the 1837 petition in Congress failed to bring her the financial relief she had hoped for. The problem may have been timing: elections had been held in November 1836, and the 24th Congress had only weeks left in its term when it received the petition on January 30, 1837.¹⁸ The problem may also have been that Mary’s testimony, the simple endorsement, and nine signatures were not sufficient. Whatever the reason, Mary Hillman submitted a second petition to the 25th Congress two years later; drafted in late December 1838, it was received by Congress (via Representative John Reed of Massachusetts) on January 7, 1839. The second petition is longer than the first version—three pages, as opposed to two—and better organized. The language is clearer, and the arguments are more forcefully worded.

On the first page of the 1839 petition Mary Hillman again narrates, in her own words, the story of the Liberty Pole and her involvement in it. Longer and more clearly worded than the 1837 version, the 1839 narrative gives us a definitive eyewitness account of what happened on Manter’s Hill one April night in 1778. Reprinted here in its entirety, it reads as follows:¹⁹

The memorial and Petition of Mary Hillman of Tisbury in the County of Dukes County Commonwealth of Massachusetts (widow) begs leave to state: That in the early part of the War of the Revolution the people of Martha’s Vineyard erected at the harbor of Holmes Hole a Liberty Pole (so called in that day) and the Whigs of that day brought their Tea that had paid the odious and unjust Tax levied by the minions of George the Third and put the same at the foot of the Liberty Pole and there pledged themselves to support their country and afterwards under the then government of the state of Massachusetts two companies of state Troops were organized and stationed under the command of Nathan Smith and Benjamin Smith to defend the Island and the adjacent sea coast from British aggression after which several British ships of war anchored in Holmes Hole harbor one of which ships was in want of a spar (for some purpose) the few state Troops being absent from said harbor they (the British) came on shore and some one or more of the people of Holmes Hole agreed to sell this standard of Liberty (the Liberty Pole) to the Enemy and was to be removed on board of the British ships the next day. Your petitioner with two other young women to wit Mariah Allen and Parnel

18 Until the ratification of the twentieth amendment in 1933 the installation of the newly elected Congress took place on March 4, rather than January 3.

19 The spelling, punctuation, and capitalization reproduced here are those used in the original document.

Manter unaided by others the following night blew up and destroyed the Liberty Pole by boring holes in the same and putting in Powder and it fell to the lot of your petitioner to set fire to the train at the hazard of her life which was done to save the honour of the citizens of the Island from the disgrace of selling their standard of liberty. As Mariah Allen and Parnel Manter are both dead your petitioner cannot prove the above fact of destroying the Liberty Pole by any other Testimony than her own. Accompanying this Petition is the deposition of persons in corroboration of the fact. Your petitioner being old, infirm and poor any gratuity or reward that the Representatives of a grateful country would think proper to bestow would be thankfully received and your petitioner as in duty bound will ever pray.

[signed] Mary Hillman

A few details from the 1837 petition are absent from the 1839 version: the “pressing” of pilots from Holmes Hole into service aboard British ships, and a “hasty” meeting of the townspeople during which the decision to sell the Liberty Pole was made. That “one or more” citizens agreed to sell the pole, suggests a far less democratic decision-making process.

The second page of the 1839 is a shorter, more concise version of the same story, presented as a formal legal deposition rather than a personal narrative. It begins: “I, Mary Hillman of Tisbury in the County of Dukes County Commonwealth of Massachusetts, widow, do make the following declaration and, on oath, do testify and say . . .” and is followed, on the same sheet of paper, by a formal endorsement:

Dukes County, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, December 27th 1838. Then and there personally appeared the above named Mary Hillman and signed and made oath to the truth of the above deposition before me. I also further certify that the above named Mary Hillman is a person of truth and full faith and credit ought to be given to her Testimony.

[signed] Thomas Dunham, Justice of the Peace.

Dunham had also endorsed the 1837 petition (the first of the nine “leading citizens” to sign), but in that instance he had acted as a private citizen. For the 1839 petition, he invoked the authority of his office, effectively giving Mary Hillman’s account of events the same legal standing as statements made, under oath, in a court of law. The use of formal legal language—“on oath do testify and say,” along with “full faith and credit” and a reference to Mary as “the deponent”—suggests Dunham, a lawyer himself, advised Mary on how best to make her case to the lawyers who served in Congress.

The third and final page of the second petition, like the final page of the first, contains further endorsements of Mary’s testimony. Like the concise version of the testimony itself, they are followed by Thomas Dunham’s statement that they were sworn before him, under oath, as Justice of the Peace.

The first, signed by Sophronia Dunham and Richard Luce, declares that:

We the undersigned citizens of Tisbury in the County of Dukes County, Commonwealth of Massachusetts on oath do say that the report that the said Mary Hillman whose name is in the deposition herewith annexed destroyed the Liberty Pole mentioned in said deposition was a common report many years past and we believe the annexed deposition to be true.

Lower on the same page, Mary's nephew Samuel Daggett declares, in a separate deposition:

That in the year of our Lord 1775 I was one of a number of the citizens of Martha's Vineyard that erected a spar made of a vessel's mast for a liberty pole...and citizens of both sexes came and poured out their tea at the foot of said liberty Pole. I was not on the Island of Martha's Vineyard when the Liberty Pole was destroyed but I have frequently (above fifty years now past) heard Mrs. Mary Hillman relate that she with Mariah Allen and Parnel Manter blew up said Liberty Pole as she relates in her deposition annexed to this paper.

Taken together, the two petitions show us the story of the Liberty Pole through the eyes of eyewitnesses—not as casual reminiscences, but as formal testimony sworn under oath before an officer of the court. Mary Hillman's petition was referred to the Committee on Revolutionary Claims. Clearly they believed her story—as, in light of this new evidence, should we all. Some of the details may remain unclear but we now know beyond a reasonable doubt that the story of the Liberty Pole, as it has been told over the years, is true.

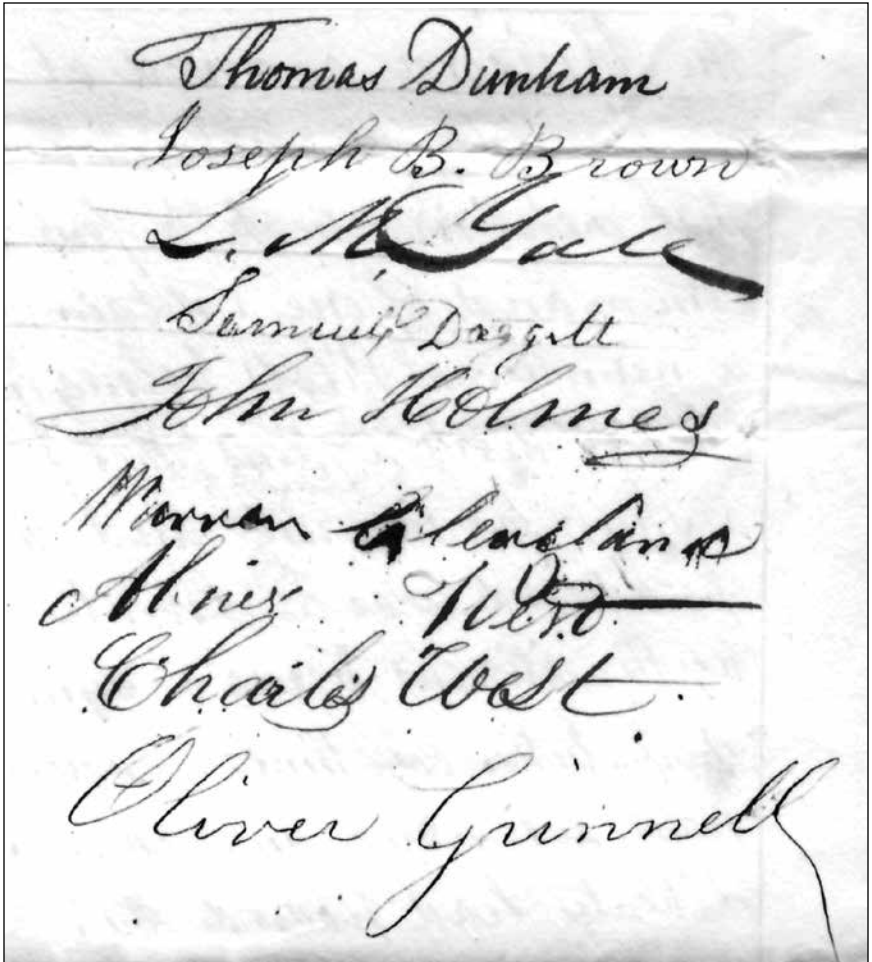
The sworn testimony of Samuel Daggett and Mary Hillman casts many aspects of the familiar Liberty Pole story in a new and clearer light. Samuel's account of the pole's raising, for example, decisively confirms the pouring of tea into the hole in 1775, and adds the unexpected detail that it was a community event, with citizens of both sexes participating. He also states explicitly that the Liberty Pole was not a tree or a simple flagpole, but a ship's spar. We can assume that a village as tied to the sea as Holmes Hole would have had such a piece lying around and available at that time, and that Samuel (a master mariner) would have known one when he saw it. This detail, which also appears in Mary's testimony and in Leander Daggett's retelling of the story as she had often told it to him, answers Railton's skepticism and explains the *Unicorn's* interest in the Liberty Pole. A British captain in need of a topmast might not have given a second glance to a mere flagpole, but would have recognized an actual (ship's) spar on Manter's Hill and said, "Aha! That will do perfectly for our needs."

Mary's testimony, meanwhile, confirms the British captain's offer of money in exchange for the pole—putting to rest the idea that the British came and simply demanded the pole, and threatened violence without even

attempting to negotiate with the townsmen. Clearly the crew of the *Unicorn* were just looking for an easy way to repair their ship, and offered some money in the hope it would be a simple exchange. Banks' skepticism that the townsmen would capitulate so easily, and his suspicion that this detail was added to "glorify the girls," are also answered in Mary's testimony. The "hasty" meeting of "some citizens" that she mentions in the first petition, and her claim in the second that "some person or persons sold the standard" suggest that the decision was not made by a large group of townspeople, let alone a town meeting, and that it may only have been one or two representatives who negotiated, and struck a deal with, the British. Holmes Hole may well have been full of sympathy for the Revolution, as Banks suggests, but that would not have stopped a handful of citizens from selling the Liberty Pole, fearful that it would be taken by force if they refused.

The testimony in Mary's petitions makes such fear seem plausible. She notes that "the few state troops the Island had for protection were absent," twice mentioning Captain Nathan Smith, who was in charge of the Island's militia. We know from other sources that in 1778 the Island was less-defended than any other time during the war, which makes the act of defiance committed by the three women even more endearing. If their symbol of liberty was to be seized or sold, then they would allow neither. It was too valuable for a price, and if it could not serve the patriotic villagers it would serve no one, especially the enemy. Even after the passage of decades, Mary's pride in her involvement is evident in her wonderful, brief description of just how the women committed the act: boring many holes in the pole, inserting the gunpowder, and then risking her own life to touch it off with carefully applied fire.

The Vineyard, too, should be proud of the courageous part these three women—defying the British—played in the war that defined us as a nation. Thanks to Mary's determination to apply to Congress for recompense, and her diligence in writing down, under oath, her version of events, we can appreciate, at last, that the story of the Liberty Pole is not legend, but fact. The marker on the pole we see today in Vineyard Haven tells a story of hope, courage, and defiance that embodies the patriotic spirit that fired the Islanders of the Revolutionary era. It reminds us that heroism is the province of all ages and both sexes, and that heroic deeds are often more powerfully symbolic than the material symbols we create. May we all continue seeking to understand the legends of our past, which so often hold a key in preparing us for our future.



Thomas Dunham
Joseph B. Brown
L. M. Yale
Samuel Daggett
John Holmes
Warren Gleason
Henry West
Charles West
Oliver Grinnell

The signatures of “nine leading citizens” endorsing Mary Daggett Hillman’s 1837 petition to Congress. Attorney (later Justice of the Peace) Thomas Dunham, who also played a key role in her second, 1839 petition, signed first. “L. M. Yale,” third on the list, is Dr. Leroy Yale. *Martha’s Vineyard Museum, “Liberty Pole” vertical file, VREF1050.*

Writing the Liberty Pole Incident

175 Years of Stories

by A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER

THERE ARE ROUGHLY a quarter-of-a-million distinct words in the English language,¹ but we use one of them—"history"—to mean two separate-but-distinct things: past events, and the stories we tell about them. History in the first sense is immutable. What happened, happened; the events themselves exist independently of what you, I, or anyone else thinks about them. History in the second sense is, in contrast, continually changing. The changes are driven partly by changes in our understanding of the past—new information discovered or rediscovered, new connections between seemingly unconnected events proposed—but our interest in history is never *just* academic. We tell stories about the past in order to explain ourselves: to articulate who we are, where we came from, and what we believe in. As those things change, the stories we tell about the past change with them, reflecting—with surprising fidelity—the times and places in which they are told. If we look closely at those stories, we can see ourselves, looking back.

So it is with the Liberty Pole that briefly stood on a hilltop in Vineyard Haven during the Revolution. Stories about its rise and (literal) fall have been told and retold—if Mary Daggett Hillman's recollections are accurate—for close to 250 years, but although they are all rooted in the same set of historical events, they are far from being the same story. Their changing form reflects the process by which history—streamlined and embroidered through generations of retellings—is polished into legend. Elizabeth Trotter's article in this issue concerns itself with history in the first sense; it brings us as close to the historical realities of the Liberty Pole as we are ever likely to get. What follows is about history in the second sense: the stories we have woven from those realities.

1 "How Many Words are There in the English Language?" *Oxford Dictionaries (US)*. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/words/how-many-words-are-there-in-the-english-language>

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Printing the Legend: An Overview

In the beginning, and for decades afterward, the story of the Liberty Pole existed purely as oral tradition: a tale told by Mary (“Polly”) Daggett Hillman, and perhaps Mariah Allen, to their friends and family. In their endorsement of Mary Hillman’s 1839 petition, Sophronia Dunham and Richard Luce declare that the story “was a common report many years past.” Mary’s nephew Samuel Daggett concurs, in his own endorsement, that “I have frequently (above fifty years now past) heard Mrs. Mary Hillman relate that she with Mariah Allen and Parnel Manter blew up said Liberty Pole as she relates in her deposition.”² All three endorsements affirm not just belief in Hillman’s participation, but in her specific narrative of events. We can, as a result, be reasonably sure that the story of the Liberty Pole, as it was told in Holmes Hole between the early 1780s and the late 1830s, would have sounded very much like Mary Hillman’s deposition.

The first printed version of the story—the 1837 account in the *Army-Navy Chronicle*, noted in Elizabeth Trotter’s article—was explicitly derived from the first (1837) petition. Indeed, it simply reprinted the text of Mary Hillman’s statement.³ The second printed version, in Oliver Bell Bunce’s *The Romance of the Revolution* (1853), may also have been based on a handwritten copy of the same 1837 document.⁴ Assuming so allows us to explain why he refers to Polly Daggett by her married surname and the “adult” form of her given name, neither of which she used at the time the Liberty Pole was destroyed but both of which she used in the petitions. His references to a liberty tree, however, suggest that if he did see the 1837 petition he wrote from imperfect notes or a fading memory.

Leander Daggett’s account of the story, published in the *Cottage City Star* in 1882, thus became, by default, the key source for most of the accounts that followed. It was the last to be derived directly from the oral tradition, and Daggett presents it as “the story as it was related to me by my great-aunt, Polly Daggett Hillman, one of the three young ladies engaged in the affair.”⁵ It is longer and more detailed than any of them, and more novelistic—a *story*, rather than a formal recitation of facts for the public record—and it is easy to imagine that what Leander Daggett wrote

2 Mary Hillman to the U. S. House of Representatives, January 7, 1839, p. 2. “Liberty Pole” vertical file, VREF 1050, Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

3 *Army-Navy Chronicle* 4, no. 7 (February 16, 1837): 101. <https://books.google.com/books?id=-LCgAAAAMAAJ>

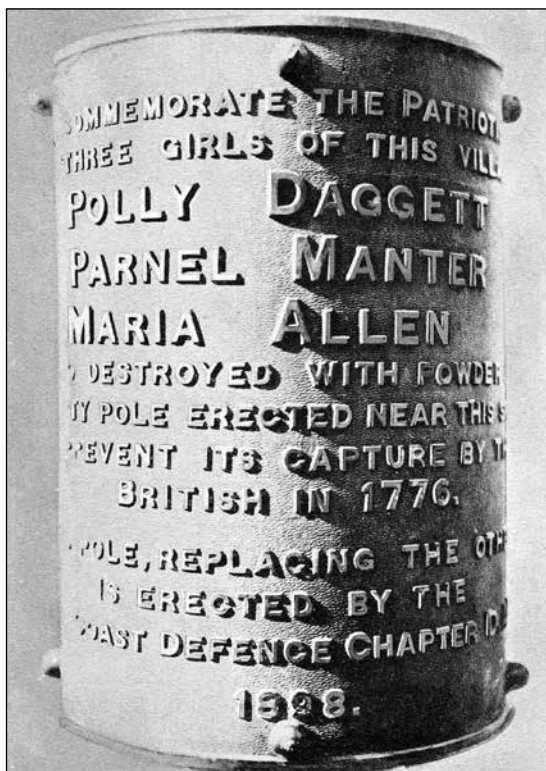
4 Oliver Bell Bunce, ed. *The Romance of the Revolution* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1853), 365-366. <https://archive.org/details/bunceromance00bellrich>

5 Leander Daggett, “The Liberty Pole,” reprinted in Martha Norris, “Sea Coast Defence Chapter,” *American Monthly Magazine* 11 (1897): 492-494. <https://books.google.com/books?id=qtoQAQAAMAAJ>

down in 1882 was something close to what Mary had told her friends and family over the years. It includes details about the timing of the escapade (midnight), the women's pretext for being absent from their homes (visiting a sick neighbor), and the fact that the Tisbury selectman, at a loss to explain the pole's destruction, "laid it to the boys of the town." Finally, it elaborates on the women's motives, and recreates the dialogue that passed between the Tisbury selectmen and the *Unicorn's* officers as they contemplated the splintered wreckage.

The Leander Daggett narrative was the source of a flurry of retellings of the Liberty Pole story that appeared around the turn of the century. When the Vineyard Haven chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) drew on it when they set out in 1896 to erect a memorial to the trio, and Martha Daggett Luce Norris' 1897 account of the campaign in the DAR's national *American Monthly Magazine* reprinted Leander's statement in its entirety. Her description of it as "perhaps the most authentic account" of the event, implies that the 1837 and 1839 petitions had—with the deaths of everyone involved in creating them—faded from Vineyarders' collective memory, and that the reprinting of the first in the 1837 *Army-Navy Chronicle* article (if it was ever well-known) had likewise been forgotten.⁶

The dramatic qualities of Leander Daggett's narrative, along with the visibility it received in *American Monthly Magazine*, encouraged the reprinting and retelling of the story in other publications. A version of it appeared in the *Kansas City Journal* in July 1898, as part of a piece on the dedication of the plaque in Vineyard Haven.⁷ *The Patriotic Review*, a short-lived monthly published in Boston, offered readers its own rewritten



The DAR plaque, placed on the Liberty Pole in 1898.

⁶ Norris was the great-granddaughter of William Daggett, elder brother of Polly Daggett, and thus related to both Polly and Leander. She would, presumably, have cited Polly's account in addition to Leander's had she known of it.

⁷ "Patriotic Vineyard Girls," *Kansas City Journal*, 14 July 1898, p. 6.

version—condensed down to a few paragraphs—in 1901. This version was picked up and reprinted, in turn, by the *Fulton County News* in Pennsylvania, the *Fort Mill Times* in South Carolina, and the *Rockland County Times* in New York.⁸ The *Kansas City Journal* vaguely explained that its version of the story was one that Polly Daggett had told to “her people” when alive, nodding at the Leander Daggett account without specifically naming him. The *Patriotic Review* piece, however, dispensed with even that tenuous connection to eyewitness accounts. It simply told its abbreviated version of the story, treating it as an established part of history.

The early-twentieth-century accounts of Charles Hine (1908), Charles Banks (1911), and Henry Franklin Norton (1923) did the same.⁹ Collectively, their accounts represent the third generation of Liberty Pole stories: They have no visible connection to any of the first-hand accounts, and (in the case of Hine and Norton) confidently embroider the story with details found in none of them, assigning specific roles to each of the three girls and significantly elaborating on the narrative of how they destroyed the pole. *Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People* (1937) created under the auspices of the Federal Writer’s Project falls, chronologically, in the same category.¹⁰ It prefigures the fourth-generation stories of the post-WWII era, however, by remixing details from previously published accounts while adding none of its own.

Fourth-generation stories are typically very short: the Dukes County Historical Society’s multi-authored *Martha’s Vineyard: A Short History and Guide* (1956), and Gale Huntington’s *Introduction to Martha’s Vineyard* (1969) mention the Liberty Pole only briefly and in passing.¹¹ Allison Convery’s *A Child’s Guide to Martha’s Vineyard* (1970) covers the story in a single page consisting of a few short paragraphs and a fanciful pen-and-ink illustration, while *The Country*, a middle-school social studies textbook first published in 1979, recaps it in a single paragraph

8 The reprints are accessible through the Library of Congress’ historic newspaper archive, *Chronicling America* (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>). Copies are available in the “Liberty Pole” vertical file, VREF 1050, Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

9 Charles Hine, *The Story of Martha’s Vineyard* (New York: Hine Brothers, 1908): 105-106. Charles Banks, *History of Martha’s Vineyard*, 3 vols. (Boston: George H. Dean, 1911), I: 412-414. Henry Franklin Norton, *Martha’s Vineyard: Historical, Legendary, Scenic* (Hartford, CT: Privately Published, 1923), 58-59.

10 Federal Writer’s Project, *Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1937), 559. <https://archive.org/details/massachusettsgui00federich>

11 Eleanor R. Mayhew, ed., *Martha’s Vineyard: A Short History and Guide* (Edgartown, MA: Dukes County Historical Society, 1956), 94. Gale Huntington, *An Introduction to Martha’s Vineyard* (Edgartown, MA: Dukes County Historical Society, 1969), 16.

as an example of women's roles in the Revolution.¹² Holly Nadler's *Vineyard Confidential* (2006) and Tom Dresser's *Martha's Vineyard: A History* (2015) offer fuller accounts, but do little more than recap Banks along with, respectively, Norton and Bunce.¹³ *The Liberty Pole* (2003) a fictionalized retelling of the event for 9- to 12-year-olds by young-adult author Jackie French Koller, weaves elements of all three accounts (Bunce, Banks, and Norton) into a narrative that also includes inventions such as Polly's crush on Maria's older brother Caleb and unlikely friendship with Abel Butler, a young Redcoat quartered in town.¹⁴

Over these 175 years' worth of printed accounts, the Liberty Pole story slowly, steadily drifts away from documentable fact (represented in the petitions) and toward legend. As it does, three patterns become apparent: the girls' become better-defined characters, accounts of their destruction of the pole become more detailed, and their motivations for doing to become less complicated and politicized.

“Three Girls of this Village”

The historical record tells us virtually nothing about the three principal characters in the story and their interactions with one another. Tisbury's published vital records provide dates of birth for all three, the dates of Polly's marriage to Peleg Hillman and Maria's to David Smith, and the dates of Parnel's death in 1778 and Maria's in 1820.¹⁵ Beyond that . . . there is nothing. The story that Polly told her grand-nephew Leander when he was a boy and she was middle-aged “Aunt Hillman” reveals little of who she was as a girl of eighteen.¹⁶ The testimony that she sent to Congress as elderly, pension-seeking “Mary Hillman, widow” reveals even less. Polly's accounts reveal equally little of Maria and Parnel: only glimmers of an adventurous spirit already evident from their decision to become involved in the plot in the first place.

This vagueness invites embellishment, in the interest of a better story, and

12 Alison M. Convery, *A Child's Guide to Martha's Vineyard* (Martha's Vineyard, MA: Privately Published, 1970), np. Gertrude Stephens Brown, with Ernest W. Tiegs and Fay Adams, *The Country* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1979), 71.

13 Holly Nadler, *Vineyard Confidential: 350 Years of Scandals, Eccentrics, and Strange Occurrences* (Camden, ME: Down East Books, 2006), 135-137.

14 “The Liberty Pole” was serialized in 8 parts by the *Boston Globe* and 16 parts by other newspapers; pieces of it online, but it was never reprinted as a stand-alone work. A copy is available in the “Liberty Pole” vertical file, VREF 1050, Martha's Vineyard Museum.

15 The date of Mary Daggett Hillman's death remains a mystery, listed in no known genealogical source.

16 Hine (*Story of Martha's Vineyard*, 106) states that she was known by this name to “a younger generation.”

From the Want To Know Club:

The Want to Know Club was founded in 1893 in Vineyard Haven as a literary organization to meet the intellectual and recreational needs of Vineyard women. The monthly meetings were structured around a different theme each year, with each member in turn choosing a subject related to the theme and presenting a report to the group. Begun with only nine members, the club voted in 1894 to expand to twenty. The following year it issued a booklet titled 20 Voices, containing original contributions from each of the members. It was intended to be an annual publication, but the second volume did not appear until 1995.

The poem reproduced here, originally published in 20 Voices in 1895, is notable because it predates, by a year, the DAR campaign to erect a Liberty Pole memorial, and the renewed visibility it brought to the story. Stansbury's poem reflects the influence of Bunce's Romance of the Revolution, but also the tradition of patriotic narrative poetry established, at mid-century, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ("Paul Revere's Ride") and John Greenleaf Whittier ("Barbara Frietchie").

The text below is taken from a copy of 20 Voices in the "Want To Know Club of Vineyard Haven" collection in the archives of the Martha's Vineyard Museum (RU 387, Box 1, Folder 9). — Ed.

The Sacrifice of the Liberty Tree

MARY A. STANSBURY

'Twas seventeen hundred seventy six, the year our fathers sealed
The charter of their liberties with blood, on many a field
A time of darkness, doubt and dread, with hope so long delayed
That thought of child and wife almost the bravest cowards made.

Upon that island, fair and green, girt by the throbbing sea,
The men of Martha's Vineyard set a tree of liberty;
Flung from its peak their virgin flag, that wind and wave might hear
Their pledge to freedom's cause of life and honor yet more dear.

Up through the harbor-mouth one day, by favoring breezes borne,
Flaunting the ensign of King George came the ship *Unicorn*
Her tattered sails and splintered spar told but a sorry tale
Of battle with the billows' rage, and fury of the gale.

The Liberty Pole Story, in Verse

“Now, by my faith,” the captain cried, “but there’s a goodly mast.
’Twere worth ten other nights of storm, each blacker than the last
To bring these canting rebels’ pride to such a grievous fall
And mend His Majesty’s good ship with yonder flagstaff tall.

Then short and stern the summons passed through willing messengers
“Sell me for gold, if so ye will, yon prince of rock-grown firs;
But hark ye, if ye bring it not by dawn of morrow’s morn,
Perforce I take it, and beware how ye my mandate scorn.”

The patriots heard the haughty word and, struck with sore dismay,
Looked down the black mouths of the guns grim watching from the bay.
Through clinched teeth and quivering lips the angry whisper hissed,
“The red-coat has us by the throat—’Twere madness to resist.”

Night fell along the quiet shore, with not a light to guide,
Save where the warship’s lantern dim swung slowly with the tide—
Then softly from their sleeping homes there stole the maidens three,
Maria, Parnell, and Mary fair, beneath the liberty tree.

They closed it round in silent ring—what means that click of steel?
Could musket cold and bayonet those gentle hands conceal?
Nay from a simple workman’s bench were drawn their weapons true
Three twisted augers strong and sharp to cut the tough wood through.

With firm, unflinching wounds of love they pierced the fragrant grain,
Then forced the crackling powder home, and set the fuse in train,
Through the still darkness of the night a sudden flash and roar,
And the tall emblem of the free fell shivered to the core.

The glad west wind of heaven that once had rocked it where grew,
Flung out its shattered fragments small upon the water blue
The mocking ripples tossed them light against the vessel’s lee,
Whose baffled captain anchor weighed and, cursing, put to sea

While screamed the sea-bird on his track, “Chew your proud words again
Will they whom white-faced girls outwit, dare try the fight with men?
So runs the tale of maidens three, to children’s children told,
Maria, Parnell, and Mary fair, in the brave days of old.

the process began shortly before 1900. The 1898 *Kansas City Journal* article, for example, proclaims that “the old-timers in Vineyard Haven recollect that Polly Daggett was a demure, fair-cheeked and beautiful girl.”¹⁷ Charles Hine makes a similar claim for Parnel Manter, describing her, too, as “a beautiful girl” and turning her death in the summer of 1778 into a tragedy worthy of a folk ballad or Gothic novel, complete with an earnest suitor, a disapproving father, and the heroine dying for love.¹⁸ Even Banks, who rarely strays far from the documentary evidence, allowed himself to give Maria Allen a personality conjured from nothing more than his imagination. “We may easily suppose,” he writes, “that this dashing young girl was the moving spirit in the life of the tavern kept by her father.”¹⁹

Koller, taking advantage of the freedom offered by historical fiction, elaborates on all three and makes them inseparable friends: “three peas in a pod.” Her description of Parnell Manter—“tall and slender, with chestnut hair and great brown eyes,” already turning the heads of boys and men at 14—echoes Hine’s tragic romantic heroine, and her Maria Allen is unmistakably modeled on the one of Banks’ imagination: “short and prettily plump, with golden hair and apple cheeks,” as well as “a quick smile and a spirited laugh that made her the darling of the patrons of her father’s tavern.” Koller’s version of Polly Daggett, on the other hand, is a world apart from the “demure” and “fair-cheeked” maid imagined by the *Kansas City Journal*’s anonymous correspondent in 1898. Younger by two years than Parnell and Maria, and the youngest child of a large family, she is “small and wiry, with freckled skin, green eyes, and a breathless exuberance,” so energetic that she finds it “nearly impossible to walk more than two steps without breaking into a trot.”²⁰

The fictionalized versions of the three heroines in *The Liberty Pole* are conspicuously younger at the time of the plot than their real-world counterparts. Koller fudges their birth dates by two years, and has the *Unicorn* arriving in Holmes Hole in 1776 rather than 1778, allowing her to make Polly fourteen and her co-conspirators sixteen, rather than the 18 and 20 years they were in real life. Presumably done to make the characters more relatable to the 9-12 target audience, these changes are part of a general tendency to de-age the trio, turning adult women into girls. Bunce, placing the incident in 1776 and assuming that all three girls were Polly’s age, and declares (in a sentence with more poetry than precision) that the trio’s “young eyes had not yet beheld the frosts of sixteen winters.”²¹ Convery, in

17 “Patriotic Vineyard Girls,” 6.

18 Hine, *Story of Martha’s Vineyard*, 107.

19 Banks, *History of Martha’s Vineyard*, II: Annals of Tisbury, 55.

20 Jackie French Koller, *The Liberty Pole*, ch. 1.

21 Bunce, *Romance of the Revolution*, 366. This is further evidence that Bunce worked from the 1837 Mary Hillman petition, since she recalls (in that docu-

her *Child's Guide*, pictures them as 13 or 14, and even Charles Banks—in one of a set of twelve wood-burned panels he made depicting scenes from Island history—pictures them in their mid-teens.²²

Koller also follows a well-established tradition by making Polly Daggett the instigator and mastermind of the plot to destroy the pole. The idea first surfaces in the 1898 account in the *Kansas City Journal*, which specifically declares that Polly “boiled with indignation” that the pole was to be taken, and so “conceived a plan and detailed it to her chums.”²³ Three years later, the *Patriotic Review* story followed suit, explaining that Polly, “very indignant” and “determined to frustrate” the British plan, “took two girl friends into her confidence.” Norton goes further, claiming that Polly’s father was a Tisbury selectman and that she, having heard of the threat to the pole around the family dinner table, slipped away and roused Parnel and Maria to action. The WPA *Massachusetts* guide follows suit, offering less detail but echoing Norton’s claim that Polly’s father was a selectman.

All of these details add to the drama, but none of them have any basis in the historical record. Seth Daggett, as Banks notes, was *not* a Tisbury selectman in 1778.²⁴ Polly, whether telling her story orally to her grand-nephew Leander or in writing to Congress, never presented herself as instigator or leader of the plot (even though doing so would have strengthened her case for a pension). They are, if not outright fabrication, then embellishments mistaken for fact.

“Who Destroyed with Powder a Liberty Pole”

Elaborately detailed descriptions of *how* the three girls destroyed the Liberty Pole, common in modern versions of the story, are also conspicuously absent from earlier eyewitness accounts. The 1837 petition simply states that the trio bored holes in the pole, filled them with powder, and set it alight; the 1839 version adds only one significant detail. “It fell to the lot of your petitioner,” Mary Daggett Hillman writes, “to set fire to the train at the hazard of her life.” Leander’s version of her story follows the same lines: “One had procured an auger, another some powder, and the third was to be on guard for fear of interruption. At midnight when all was still they sallied forth, bored a deep hole in the pole and filled it with powder, but not knowing how to plug it and apply a slow match, they tied a brand of fire to a pole and touched it off.”

ment but not the later 1839 version) that the incident took place in 1776, when she was 15.

22 An image of Banks’ Liberty Pole panel accompanies Elizabeth Trotter’s essay in this issue, and the panels themselves are on display at the Martha’s Vineyard Museum.

23 “Patriotic Vineyard Girls,” 6.

24 Banks, *History of Martha’s Vineyard*, I:413.

Across all three versions of the story, Polly rarely claims any special role for herself and never assigns one to either of her two friends. There is no division of labor; the three (almost) invariably function as one. The only exception is the 1839 petition, where acknowledging her specific (and uniquely dangerous) role in the proceedings had the potential to strengthen her case for financial reward. Significantly, the “friends-and family” version of the story—told when no pension was at stake, and recounted by Leander—omits that distinction. “Not knowing how to plug [the powder-filled hole], and apply a slow match,” Leander writes, “*they* tied a brand of fire to a pole and touched it off.”²⁵

Plugging the hole would have been necessary for the gunpowder to work with maximum effectiveness; without it, much of the force of the explosion would have dissipated in a jet of fire and hot gasses emerging from the open hole. Blasters working in a quarry or construction site packed sand into the hole behind the powder to serve as a temporary plug, then pierced it to allow the insertion of a fuse. The *Kansas City Journal* account gently underscores this point, noting that none of the girls “knew how to confine the explosion to ensure its most terrific result. The art of tamping and insertion [of] a time fuse was beyond their knowledge, and perhaps they could not have procured the fuse in season for the work at hand.”²⁶ Faced with that limitation, the article implies, they did the best they could, using a “brand fastened to the end of a pole and applied to the powder.”

In all this, the anonymous writer in the *Journal* echoes Leander Daggett’s account. He (or she) does not stop there, however, recounting in meticulous (but almost certainly fictional) detail the girls’ division of labor. Maria, the account in the *Journal* explains, who held the point of the auger against the wood, Polly who steadied the shaft, and Parnel who turned the handle; likewise it was Polly who procured the powder, and Maria who raked a brand from the fire. Henry Franklin Norton’s account, written a quarter-century later, covers the same details while completely rearranging the names. Maria brings the auger, Parnel the powder horn, and Polly—when the time comes to ignite the powder—runs home for a bed-warming pan of hot coals. Norton also has Polly sacrificing the hem of her “woolen petticoat,” first for wadding and then to wrap around the end of a beanpole for a makeshift slow match, which the three girls jointly

25 Leander Daggett, “The Liberty Pole,” 493 [italics added]. A “slow match” was a cloth cord impregnated with a gunpowder solution, allowing it to smolder for long periods of time without going out or bursting into flames. Applying the burning end of a slow match to the powder charge was a standard method of firing a cannon until the development of friction igniters in the early 1800s.

26 “Patriotic Vineyard Girls,” 6. A time fuse (the stiff black string shown extending from bundles of dynamite in cartoons) is a quick-burning, gunpowder-impregnated cord, designed to burn at a constant rate.

thrust into the wadding, setting it afire and touching off the powder.²⁷ Holly Nadler, in turn, follows Norton's account, except that the sacrificed petticoat belongs to Parnel rather than Polly.²⁸

All of these details—vivid and engaging as they are—cannot simultaneously be true. The powder horn was brought by Polly, or by Parnel; they took turns with the auger, or worked it jointly; they improvised wadding from a petticoat hem, or they didn't. The complete absence of *any* of these details from the only eyewitness accounts we have suggests, however, that none of them are true—that, like Polly Daggett's selectman-father, they were simply invented.

“To Prevent Its Capture by the British”

The characters and actions of the three Liberty Pole heroines—so sketchily defined in the historical record—have, over the years, been embellished with vivid, novelistic detail. The trio's motivations have followed the opposite trajectory. Clearly and amply documented in Polly Daggett's accounts of the event, the forces that drove them to risk their lives on Manter's Hill have gradually disappeared from the Liberty Pole story over time. Their central motivation—keeping the pole out of British hands—remains, but the passion behind it has been leached away, and the political complexities with which it was bound up have been whitewashed over.

Both passion and complexity are evident in her 1837 and 1839 petitions. Writing as a woman of nearly eighty, recalling events that took place six decades before, her revolutionary fervor appears undiminished. She writes of the pole as “a symbol of liberty” and declares that the tea poured into the hole at its base by “the Whigs of the day” had been subject to “the odious and unjust tax levied by the minions of George the Third.” The citizens of the town had “pledged themselves to support their country” and even raised two companies of militia for the purpose, but upon the arrival of the *Unicorn* “some one or more of the people of Holmes Hole agreed to sell this standard of liberty (the Liberty Pole) to the enemy.” The destruction of the pole, she writes, was undertaken “to save the honour of the citizens of the Island from the disgrace of selling their standard of liberty.”

Across both petitions, and in the account recalled by her grand-nephew Leander, Polly Daggett paints a picture of a town divided between Whigs, who opposed the efforts of Lord North's government to rein in the colonies, and Tories, who supported (or at least tolerated) them. Polly implicitly places the unnamed “one or more” who agreed to sell the pole on the Tory side of the political spectrum. Her contempt for their willingness to accommodate “the Enemy” is palpable. Had the British taken the pole by force,

27 Norton, *Martha's Vineyard*, 59.

28 Nadler, *Vineyard Confidential*, 136.

Leander recalls her saying, that would have been different, but “to sell it to an enemy’s ship was disgraceful, and they were determined not to submit to the disgrace if they could prevent it. Dishonor, for Polly and her friends, lay not in the loss of the pole, but in the townspeople’s failure to *defend* it.

Early printed versions of the Liberty Pole story—the *Army-Navy Chronicle* and Bunce—also claim that the British offered money for the pole and the townspeople accepted. By 1898, however, the *Kansas City Journal* had subtly altered the narrative. In it, the British captain declares that he is prepared to “take [the pole] away by force and therefore a price might as well be fixed,” turning those who agreed to the sale from cowards into thoughtful pragmatists.²⁹ The 1901 *Patriotic Review* article and its various reprints echoed that position. Less than a decade later, Hine took it a step further, with the townspeople rejecting the British captain’s offer of money, and capitulating only after he threatens to bombard the town. Norton has the captain offer the carrot and the stick simultaneously, declaring that “if they refused to sell [the pole] he would consider it a rebellious act and set fire to the town.”³⁰ The offer of money all but disappears from the story by the 1970s: The British simply demand the pole, and the three heroines blow it up to prevent them from taking it. The heroines’ defiance—originally aimed equally at Britain *and* its colonial supporters—becomes defiance of Britain alone.



WE EXPECT MUCH of the stories we tell about the past. We want them to be accurate, reflecting the best available information historians have gathered. We want them to be legible, with clear plotlines and vividly drawn characters. And we want them to be meaningful, connecting with the worldview and the concerns of the present in ways that make sense to us. There is no guarantee, however, that all those needs can be met simultaneously, and when they clash it is often accuracy that loses.

The story of the Liberty Pole is a small-but-vivid example. Over 175 years of telling it in print, we have edited in, for the sake of vividness and narrative flow, a wealth of details for which there is no evidence. At the same time, we have edited out some of its most salient features: the political divisions within Holmes Hole, the fraught decision to sell the pole, and the fact that the destruction of the pole represented a protest, by three young radicals against their elders’ “disgraceful” accommodation of the Enemy. We owe it to ourselves to reclaim, and embrace, a more accurate story of the Liberty Pole incident—a reminder that principled activism, then as now, was not the sole province of men.

29 “Patriotic Vineyard Girls,” 6.

30 Norton, *Martha’s Vineyard*, 58.

Whalers, Women and Song

Women Seen Through Male Eyes In 19th-Century Sea Shanties

by LILIE PUDNOS

SEA SONGS HAVE a prominent place in the popular image of nineteenth-century seafaring, and fictionalized depictions of clipper ships and whalers at the climax of the Age of Sail often include sailors humming a pleasant tune as they work alongside their crewmates on deck. They sing along to the steady, rhythmic beat of shanties while raising the anchor or hoisting the mainsail, making the hard work easier and filling the ship with merriment and boisterous song. Later, off-watch and relaxing in the forecabin, they sing ballads about the joys of life at sea and how the ocean grants a man true freedom, and the pleasure of having no ties or tedious responsibilities to anyone.

The reality was far more complicated. Seafaring *did* offer the prospect of travel, adventure, and—as the captains’ and ship owners’ houses of the Vineyard attested—at least the possibility of wealth. A successful career at sea also opened the door to a quiet retirement on land as a farmer or shopkeeper, prospects otherwise beyond the reach of younger sons in large families with little prospect of inheriting land or a family business. On the other hand, the life of a nineteenth-century sailor involved heavy manual labor, monotonous food, limited sleep, harsh discipline, and the constant threat of death or serious injury. The crews of whaling ships faced additional dangers, since they made their living hunting animals that could kill them with the flick of the tail or a toss of the head, and worked with fire, boiling oil, and razor-sharp tools on slippery, pitching decks.

The social isolation that came with seafaring was also complicated. Merchant voyages could easily last for several months, and whaling voyages for several years—time spent confined aboard the same ship with the same crew of men, away from family and friends, wives and sweethearts ashore. A handful of captains brought their wives and children aboard, but all oth-

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Sea songs offered two images of sailors—the steadfast lover and the swaggering rogue. All illustrations in this story are courtesy of the New York Public Library.

ers who went to sea were obliged to leave their loved ones behind. Time at sea also, however, brought sailors unprecedented freedom of action. In a world where most individuals lived out their lives in or near the same community where they were born, and the judgment of friends, neighbors, and local authority figures (or fear of such judgment) strictly enforced social norms, sailors had the luxury of traveling the world as strangers. A sailor at sea was far from his home community, and so free of its strictures. In every port he entered, he was an outsider without a past, who could be judged only on his actions in the few days he spent there. The ship was his home, shipmates his only community, and the captain—patriarch, clergyman, and officer of the law in one—his only judge. Cooper Busch argues that “whalemen—officers and forecandle hands alike—were freed at distant landfalls from the home constraints of public Victorian morality and able to display the traditional ‘macho’ values, including overt sexuality, expected of the sailors’ subculture.”¹

Sea songs—both those sung as shanties to accompany shipboard work and those sung for recreation in the forecandle—captured these complexities. Collectively, they painted two very different pictures of sailors. Depending on the singer of the verses, sailors were honest, adventuring men who went to sea to make a good living, or they were rapscallions who did not fit into society on land and took to the sea, where normal rules do not apply. “Bonny Highland Laddie,” a call-and-

1 Briton Cooper Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me: The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 140.

response shanty based on an old Scottish folk melody, falls into the first category, its verses emphasizing the sailor's life of hard work interwoven lightened by time ashore in exotic ports:

Was you ever in Quebec?
(Bonnie laddie, highland laddie)
Stowin' timber on the deck . . .
(Bonnie highland laddie)

Was you ever in Baltimore?
Dancing on that sanded floor . . .

Was you ever in Bombay?
Stackin' cotton all the day . . .

Was you ever in Merimachee?
There you tie fast to a tree . . .

"Bell Bottom Trousers," on the other hand, imagines sailors as boisterous, vulgar intruders who rampage through port towns in a frenzy of drunkenness and brief sexual encounters before setting off to sea once more, heedless of the consequences of their actions. The song concerns a virginal young woman—"the waitress at the Prince George Hotel"—who resists the advances of entire regiments of soldiers, but quickly succumbs to the charms of a sailor who asks her "if she'd come to bed, just so's to keep him warm." Two of the song's *less* bawdy verses depict the sailor before and after their one night together:

Then there came a sailor, an ordinary bloke,
A-bulgin' at the trousers, with a heart of solid oak.
At sea without a woman for seven years or more,
You didn't need to ask just what he was lookin' for.

Early the next morning, the sailor he awoke,
Sayin' "Here's a two-pound note for the damage I have wrote.
Now if you have a daughter, bounce her on your knee,
And if you have a son, send the bastard off to sea!"

Both images—the hardworking adventurer longing for home, and the brawling, boozing, womanizer looking for a good time—doubtless held elements of truth.

Nineteenth-century sea songs—designed to make difficult work more pleasurable, and to keep keeping shipboard morale high during times of hardship—frequently, if not constantly, featured women in one form or another. Like their images of sailors, the songs' images of women varied widely, but three in particular stand out. First there is the Virgin, representing the pure young girls that the sailors imagined they had left behind



The climax of many sea songs: The sailor wins the heart of the steadfast virgin.

in their home towns, or at the ports they visited. Second, there is the Wife, representing the nagging older women who plead for money and confront the sailor with the mundane concerns of life on land. Finally, there is the Siren, representing all the picturesque, worldly, unattainable beauties who were the subjects of legend and sailors' unachievable fantasies.

The Virgin

These sweet maidens are the symbol of virginity standing on the shore of the sea, looking out to the horizon where their sailor love departed, faithfully waiting for the day he would return home. She is the picture of girlish innocence; a last trace of the idealized life lived in a time before the singer (or listener) went out to sea. She represents what the sailor left on shore—or, at least, what he wishes he left—and what he hopes to find when he returns. She turned him into a man (as he turned her into a woman), and she represents the promise of marriage, a future commitment, and an end-point to the long voyage. The sailor promises the virgin that, as soon as he returns from sea, the two will get married; she, in turn, promises to wait for him and remain faithful. Typically,

the virgins in sea songs have at least one other suitor who competes for her in the sailor's absence. Depending on the song, she either resists the rival suitor, is killed by him, or discovers that he is her own sailor in a disguise.²

The latter type of song frequently begin with an unidentified man—his background left unexplained—who sees a sad-looking maiden and tries to convince her to come away with him. She resists him, either mournfully or aggressively, and explains that she is waiting for her sailor-lover

2 For an example of the rejected suitor killing the faithful virgin, see "The Silvery Tide," in Gale Huntington, *Songs the Whalemen Sang* (Barre, MA: Barre Publishing, 1964), 125.

who has gone away to sea. After testing and reaffirming her faithfulness, the miscellaneous man removes his disguise to reveal himself as her sailor, often by wearing the same blue-themed outfit he wore upon leaving, or by displaying his half of a token that they had divided between them before his departure, as a symbol of their eternal love and eventual reunion. Now certain that her love has returned, the Virgin lays aside any previous scorn and wistfully returns to his arms, usually marrying him the next day.

“The Dark-Eyed Sailor,” a variation on the pattern, tells the entire story through the eyes of the (nameless, unidentified) singer who witnesses the Sailor’s test and the Virgin’s fidelity:

There was a comely young lady fair
As she walked out to take the air
She met a sailor on the way
So I paid attention to what they did say
He says pretty maiden why roam alone
The day is far spent and the night coming on
She answered him while the tears did fall
'Tis a dark-eyed sailor that is proving my downfall
'Tis three long years since he left this land
When he took a gold ring from off his hand
He broke the token here is half with me
And the other is rolling 'pon the raging sea
Cries William drive him from your mind
There is plenty of sailors left behind
Love turned aside it colder grows
Like a winter's morning when the hills are clad with snow
These words did Mary's fond heart inflame
On me she cried you shall play no game
She drew a dagger and then she cried
For my dark-eyed sailor I'll live and die
'Twas his coal black eye and his curly hair
And his flattering tongue did my heart ensnare
He was so manly no rake like you
To advise a maiden to deceive a jacket blue
But a tarry sailor I will not disdain
I will always treat them as the same
And to drink his health here's a piece of coin
But my dark-eyed sailor claims this heart of mine

Then William did the ring unfold
She seemed distracted mid joy and woe
She cried I've houses I've silver and gold
For my dark-eyes sailor so manly true and bold

In a cottage neat by the river side
It's William and Mary they do reside
So girls prove true while your lovers are away
For a cloudy morning oft brings a pleasant day.³

A girl of unwavering faith, love, and even wealth, Mary the Virgin represents the reception the sailor hopes to return to upon coming home after his voyage. Her name, though common among girls in the nineteenth, is undoubtedly also reference to the Virgin Mary as a symbol of femininity and maternal comfort, as well as virginal innocence.

The virgins of sea songs are objects subject of fantasy, and of no small amount of self-congratulation and flattery. Men themselves wrote the songs, and their portraits of sailors depicted them as they hoped they to be seen by others. With the line "he was so manly, no rake like you," the sailor imagines himself as *both* the steadfast, faithful lover and the passionate, slightly dangerous rake, placing both descriptions in the mouth of a beautiful and desirable woman. He distances himself from the common man, declaring the sailor, being cut from a superior bolt of cloth, is passionate, romantic, and the only true love of girls on land. "The Tarry Trousers," also presents sailors as better for women than men of other, more stable occupations, regardless of what disapproving parents might think:

Mother would you have me wed with a farmer
And rob me of my heart's delight
Oh give me the lad with the tarry trousers
They shine to me like diamonds bright.⁴

The sailor thus congratulates himself by planting praising words in the girl's mouth, while also painting a picture of an idealized girl—an image to keep in his head during the long months and years at sea.

The girl in "The Tarry Trousers" has a one-track mind, focused on her love of her sailor and her determination to retain her own maidenhood, which she predictably reserves for the sailor upon his return. She is not a faithful virgin, looking out to sea and waiting for the singer (her lover) to return, but also openly and loudly expressive of his claim on her. Every sea song similar to "The Dark Eyed Sailor" starts with a man

3 Huntington, *Songs the Whalemen Sang*, 122.

4 Huntington, *Songs the Whalemen Sang*, 97.

(or, less commonly, the girl's mother) challenging her dedication to her love. This sailor may be suggestive, thoughtful, or even aggressive and hostile. He encourages her to tell him her story of her sailor or to forget him completely in order to come along with him and marry him instead. The suitor is often very persistent, putting the girl's love to the test. Frequently, the suitor is the sailor himself and rewards her faithfulness by revealing himself to be her long-awaited sailor—if she passes his test. But what is his true intention upon approaching her? Is he truly testing her, to see if she still desires him? Or is he simply in pursuit of the beautiful maiden he sees wandering the shore, who conveniently enough turns out to be the girl he left before setting sail?

The Siren

Maritime mythology has always framed the water and the ocean as forces of femininity. Great ships, storms, and the ocean itself are referred to as women. Ancient Mediterranean goddesses were often related to the sea, as well as fertility. For example in ancient Greek tradition, while Poseidon was the god of the sea, most of the occupying deities of the sea were women. Goddess Aphrodite sprung from the ocean out of a clam shell; Amphrite, wife of Poseidon, is referred to as the sea itself; and the creatures of the sea were Nereids, sea nymphs. Greek and Roman philosophers and physicians assumed women were more filled with water, which prompted menstruation, and made them ideally suited to giving birth. Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder attributed marvelous power to women in relation to the sea:

For, in the first place, hailstorms, they say, whirlwinds, and lightning even, will be scared away by a woman uncovering her body while her monthly courses are upon her. The same, too, with all kinds of tempestuous weather; and out at sea, a storm may be lulled by a woman uncovering her body merely, even though not menstruating at the time.⁵

This obvious display of feminine power over the sea manifested itself in age-old sailor's lore, perhaps with the combined male sailor's desire to see a woman after months at sea with only his other male crewmates.⁶ From this aura of mythological femininity was born the mermaid and the siren.

The image of the siren is as old as the occupation of sailing. The earliest notable literary memory comes from the Homeric epic *The Odyssey*:

5 *The Natural History of Pliny V*, translated with notes by J. Bostock and H.T. Riley (London, 1855), 304.

6 This is not to disregard female sailors or female sailors disguised as men. See Dianne Dugaw, "Female Sailors Bold," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, ed. Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling. 34-54 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

First you will rise the island of the Sirens,
Those creatures who spellbind any man alive,
Whoever comes their way. Whoever draws too close,
Off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices in the air—
No sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him,
No happy children beaming up at their father's face.
The high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him,
Lolling there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses
Rotting away, rags of skin shriveling on their bones...⁷

According to the Homeric tradition, the siren is an outstandingly beautiful female aquatic creature who sings enchanting melodies to passing ships to lure the sailors close and result in their doom by shipwreck. They erase any thoughts of home and family from the sailor's mind toward and sing them into a state of obsessive lust where the outside world does not exist. Despite the cautionary warnings attached to them, legend assigns the siren the mystique of a woman so exquisite that she has the ability to control the mind of any man she meets. This image is ages-old in sailing lore, and a perennial subject of fascination. Sirens, highly sexualized women too beautiful for reality, use their supernatural wiles to lead respectable men to their downfall. They appear in sea songs in two guises, both types of women prominent in the lives of nineteenth-century sailors: the prostitute and the gold-digger.

Prostitutes are mentioned explicitly only in bawdier sea songs, typically through references to "whores" or "whoring"—that is, searching the docks for whores or enjoying their company in houses of ill repute or taverns. The whore is rarely an individual, but rather simply a replaceable, interchangeable woman of little value—dehumanized and objectified. Rather than accepting the prostitute as a person of business, the sex worker, the sailor's goal in the song is to make the prostitute accessible to him, the desiring suitor. The "gold digger," on the other hand, is typically given an individual identity and a name within the song—individualizing her and distancing her from prostitutes, who cannot become his wife and are thus less valuable. The gold digger may be a beautiful woman, but she is still a sex worker at heart: She seeks out the money of passing sailors, lavishing attention on them when they are rich and refusing to give her love to them when they become poor.

The siren, whether prostitute or gold digger, is, after the virgin, the second most common type of woman featured in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sea songs. The gold digger, though greedier than the virgin, may be equal to her in attractiveness and occupies the same level of eligibility:

7 Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 12:46-52.



Latter-day sirens at work, using their allure to separate a sailor from his money.

The one was lovely Nancy
 Most beautiful and fair
 The other was a virgin
 That still the laurel wear
 Altho' that she did slight me
 Because I was so poor
 I will marry pretty Nancy
 I'll go to sea no more.⁸

The sailor has two choices: the beautiful and fair Nancy, or the virgin in laurel wear. Despite Nancy's obvious rejection of him because of his lack of money funds, the sailor still considers himself an eligible suitor for her and sees her as the only girl for him, since she is the only one who receives a name.

Once rejected by the gold digger, the sailor becomes an object of pity after being rejected by his beloved. "The Lily of the West," written by Thom-

⁸ "Covent Garden" in Huntington, *Songs the Whalemen Sang*, 91-92.

as Perkins in 1844, portrays the extreme lengths the siren puts the sailor through at the expense of his broken heart:

When first I came to England
Some pleasure for to find
I spied a pretty fair maid
Most pleasing to my mind
Her rosy cheeks and rolling eyes
Like arrows pierced my breast
And they called her lovely Flora
the lily of the west

Her golden hair in ringlets hung
Her dress was spangled o'er
She had rings on every finger
Brought from some foreign shore
She would entice both kings and princes
So costly was she dressed
She's the fair exile of Kennis
The lily of the west

I courted her a while
I thought her love to gain
But soon she turned her back on me
Which caused me much pain
She robbed me of my liberty
She has robbed me of my rest
And I roam alone for Flora
The lily of the west

One day as I was walking
All in a shady grove
I spied a lord of high degree
Conversing with my love
She sang a song melodiously
While I was sore oppressed
He said adieu to Flora
The lily of the west

I stepped up to my rival
With a dagger in my hand
I snatched him from my false love
And boldly bade him stand
Being mad with desperation
I swore I'd pierce his breast

For I was betrayed by Flora
The lily of the west

It's now I stand my trial
Most lonely for to plea
There was a flaw in the indictment found
Which quickly set me free
For a beauty high I did adore
I'd kill who would molest
And I'll roam alone for Flora
The lily of the west

It's now I've got my liberty
A-roaming I will go
I'll travel through old England
I'll roam old Scotland through
For a beauty high I did adore
And she still disturbs my rest
And I'll roam alone for Flora
The lily of the west

The siren is a woman of exotic fortune, covered in jewels and with irresistible beauty. She draws the sailor into her midst, who arrived on unknown business before the siren captures his attention. With “her rosy cheeks and rolling eyes like arrows pierced my breast,” the sailor is powerless before her charms.

The Wife

The virgin and the siren are obvious fantasy figures, who enjoy the status of legend in maritime lore. They are romanticized figures—beautiful, yet obtainable—who always, invariably, desire the sailor. Sea songs about sirens always revolve (at least implicitly) about the sailor's wish to transform the siren into the virgin so that he can wed her, but his goal is always unachievable, and the siren inevitably leaves him by the end of the song. The virgin *is* obtainable—the idealized end-goal of the sailor's journey at sea—and songs featuring her inevitably end with the sailor attaining his goal and making her his wife. Like fairy tales, however, sea songs always end with an implied “happily ever after.” Once the couple is wedded, the song ends, telling the listener nothing of the woman's desires, the virgin-as-wife, or how the marriage turned out. The wife appears as a character in her own right only as the mother of the virgin, who—as in *Tarry Trousters*—typically opposes her daughter's love for the sailor.

Not every sailor, of course, was a sex-starved rabble-rouser with wandering eyes who hunted for willing women whenever he came into port. Despite stereotypes about sailors' inability to remain in a faithful rela-

tionship, many took to the sea in an effort to make good money away from land, and so support their wives and their families. By the late 1850s and early 1860s, it was relatively common practice for whaling captains to bring their wives and children aboard ship, with one in six captains choosing to do so.⁹ Those who left their wives on shore often brought keepsakes—precious items such as letters, gifts, or clothing—that reminded sailors of home. Why, then, were wives never featured in sea songs, which represented the pleasurable thoughts of men trapped at sea?

Several possibilities present themselves. First, despite mythological conceptions of the sea as the domain of women, seafaring as an occupation was the domain of men. It was considered bad luck to bring a woman aboard ship, and if family members were brought aboard, they were not expected to participate in the routines of daily life on the ship.¹⁰ Even the kitchen, the typical domain of the woman, was off limits and exclusive to the ship's cook. Aboard the ship, men were required to be overtly masculine and to prove their masculinity in the hardening years at sea: "In whaling ships, as in most merchant ships, the seamen lived in cramped conditions and were expected to be tough and self-reliant. It was a male, macho culture in which feminine values played no part and sensitive feelings were masked or suppressed."¹¹ Feelings toward wives left behind might, in such an environment, have been too sensitive and intimate a subject to discuss openly. It might also have given the impression of homesickness, provoking ridicule from fellow sailors.

Married sailors' feelings about their wives were too personal, and too intimate, to be shared in the masculine world of the forecabin. What happened between a man and his wife was his private business, saved—if he was literate—for the letters he exchanged with her. Captain Henry Marchant's letters home to his wife in Edgartown reveal how tender those words could be, as in this example, written from San Francisco in March 1850:

My dear Mary how I long it seems since we parted all most like an age I do long to see you your pleasant smiles and consoling face once more than I think I shall be a happy man, O how much I have thought of the pleasant hours we have been promised to enjoy in each others company;...¹²

9 David Cordingly, *Seafaring Women: Adventures of Pirate Queens, Female Stowaways, and Sailors' Wives* (New York: Random House Trade, 2001), 123.

10 On women aboard ship, see: Joan Druett, *Hen Frigates: Passion and Peril, Nineteenth Century Women at Sea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999) and *Petticoat Whalers: Whaling Wives at Sea, 1820-1920* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001).

11 Cordingly, *Seafaring Women*, 136.

12 Capt. Henry Hubbard Marchant to Mary W Jackson, 30 March 1850. Martha's Vineyard Museum, Whaling and the Vineyard, 1793-1925, RU 207, Box 1, Folder 9.

Singing songs about one's wife may have been too personal, intimate, and individualistic. The average sea song was shared, public property, with the words changed in various times to accommodate for the particular ship singing them or perhaps to adjust the sounds of words to roll off the tongue easier with certain accents. Therefore, when a song is meant to be vague and change for different audiences, a song about one man's wife may have been considered too specific to serve as a sufficient subject for songs passed down over the decades. The virgin or the siren may be any maiden or prostitute on any shore; the wife is always one specific woman, in a specific time and place.



A sailor's wife engaged in one of the defining activities of her life: waiting.

The wife may also have even been less idealized than her other female characters in sea songs (even the gold digger, who—in spite of her greedy nature—is still desirable). Because the wife is a living individual, she represents the reality, rather than the fantasy for which shanties were born. Though a captain's wife on board might be a welcome reminder of family life, most whaling wives were kept below decks and, according to Briton Cooper Busch of *Whaling Will Never Do for Me*, “overall... their presence was often intrusive and resented as such.”¹³ A wife may have also been an unpleasant reality of a difficult life waiting for the sailor back home. The years necessarily spent apart in a whaling career put excessive strain on

13 Busch, *Whaling Will Never Do For Me*, 136.

marriages, whether new or long-lasting. The wife of a whaler was subjected to constant loneliness, unremitting familial responsibilities, and potentially dire financial straits. Mrs. Peter L. Sylvia doubtless spoke for many sailors' wives when she wrote to him from—deep in financial distress—in November 1897:

Dear sir

I now take the pleasure to write to you to know *why you do not write to your son or to come home as you said in your last letter to me*. Peter, [our son] is feeling very bad for you have not answered? aid his last letter that was 2 weeks ago today that he wrote to you and, Peter, *I want to know what you are going to do for your son* or how you think that he is going to get along as feeble as he is. Peter, the Priest was down to see me last Sunday and *he asked me what you intend to do* and he told me to write and tell you to send me and your boy some money and that you must do it or he [?] look in to think [?] and see what he could do for me and [?]. Now Peter you [?] that I cannot get along you know that it will take more than 400 a week to [?] [?] and then he [?needs] everything so [?] the [?De] says that he must have the best of [?Beefatch] and I tell you it costs money and you must pay for it for I cannot do it myself is very [?pricy?] in health but **I suppose you do not care for that** as being as you and [?] is. Well now Peter *you can write to your boy if nothing more and tell him what you intend to do*.

I will close by hoping that you will do right and Peter I think that you have done very [?wrong] by believing the talk of people but God is good and time will tell [?which] is my the right or is in the wrong.¹⁴

These types of familial pressures, real and widespread as they doubtless were, scarcely make the wife an undesirable feature in a song created to bring pleasure and comfort to men at sea.

Nineteenth-century sea songs reflect the mental preoccupations of whalers at sea, as well as their cultural values as occupants of the era's cultural borderlands. The representation of women in such songs reflects that. The virgin, typically the most popular, reflected an idealized desire for commitment and family life on the land, although the women presented in songs as virgins were little more than beautiful objects with no personality traits except their passionate desire for their men and faithfulness to them, and were created as a form of self-congratulations for the men who sang about them. The siren was the reflection of age-old sailors' lore about supernatural women whose fundamental purpose was to ensnare men with their beauty and seductiveness. Though likely to actually be prostitutes who plied their trade in foreign ports, the siren was idealized in song as the gold digger, who seduces men and then leaves them when their money is gone. The wife is the feminine ideal to which the women in the other two categories aspired—at least in the male fantasies represented

14 Mrs. Peter L. Sylvia to Peter L. Sylvia, 27 November 1897. Martha's Vineyard Museum, Whaling and the Vineyard, 1793-1925, RU 207, Box 1, Folder 7.

by the songs—and to which the men in the songs aspired to elevate them. Despite the man's ultimate goal of making the virgin or the siren his wife, however, the wife disappears from sea songs as soon as she is married. The songs the whalemens sang did express their desires about the women they had, only the women they created in their minds.



Thoughts of women—left behind at home or waiting in ports over the horizon—manifested themselves in whalemens' artwork, as well as in their songs. These scrimshawed sperm whale teeth appeared as illustrations in *Songs the Whalemens Sang* (1964), the pioneering study of sea shanties by folklorist, historian, and founding *Intelligencer* editor Gale Huntington.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Thanks for Enriching My Life

AS 2015 COMES to a close, the Museum has lots to celebrate. The fact that we hit the 1,000 mark in numbers of members for the first time since 2007 is very high on the list. Your participation in our special events, especially the summer Evening of Discovery benefit, and your willingness to volunteer as greeters in the Cooke House, docents in the school programs, and facilitators in the expanded pre-school and Museum Conversations senior programs, allows us to expand our service to this community. You make our outreach possible.

As much as the Museum has changed—becoming a more energetic and enlivened institution with expanded exhibition and educational programs—some things have changed very little. This publication, now in its 57th year, remains true to its core mission: telling the important stories that make Martha's Vineyard a special place, and using the primary resources from the archives, oral histories, and objects that are contained in the Museum collections. Two articles on the "Liberty Pole" story help us to sort out some of the facts from the fiction that has for nearly two centuries surrounded this legend. The story speaks to the leadership and strength of girls and women, including a Vineyard chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) who, in 1898, commemorated the 1778 event with a plaque now on a newer pole in front of the Mayhew Schoolhouse on Main Street in Vineyard Haven. Another article is devoted to women as they were portrayed in sailor sea shanties, and it is the result of original research from intern Lilie Pudnos this past summer. The issue is completed with an endearing note from an Australian internet admirer of our own Laura Jernegan.

This is another one of those bittersweet moments for me as I write my last message for the *Intelligencer*. Many have congratulated me on my September marriage to Kate Hastings, my partner of more than a decade and a devoted

advocate for the Martha's Vineyard Museum. And many have thanked me for the dramatic changes in the higher profile and service of the Museum. Making changes takes a team, and I have been fortunate to be part of a team that also sees the value of the change and will continue to improve on it. I am very pleased that members, some with us for a long time and some just coming more recently to our family, continue to be supportive of the Museum's larger role in Island life.

These past six years on the Vineyard, and so many relationships, have deeply enriched my life. Many thanks, and be sure to welcome your new director in 2016 as warmly as you welcomed me.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Nathans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" written in a more stylized, connected manner than the last name "Nathans".

David Nathans
Executive Director



David Nathans and Kate Hastings at the Museum's summer 2015 Evening of Discovery event. *Photo by MDC Photography*

WE GET MAIL:

Laura Jernegan Touched My Heart Half a World Away

I am a Western Australian writer living in the southwest of the state on a coast frequented by American whaleships in the early whaling days. Local interest in the subject is very keen. Recent research brought me to the beautifully presented Martha's Vineyard Museum website and the fascinating story of Laura Jernegan: *Girl On A Whaleship*.

I was enchanted. Laura was an amazing little girl who lived aboard her father's whaleship with her mother and baby brother for almost three years.

I could not stop thinking about Laura, her endearing photograph, the delightful way she signed off each day from the diary she kept, and the eventful life she led as her captain father sailed the world's oceans chasing whales.

Laura's diary begins in 1868 when she was six years old and shows how intelligent this small girl must have been as she grew and observed the world around her. The diary gives an idea of how she filled her days, the details of the food consumed, the ports called into, her observance of the whalers at work, the tallies kept of barrels of oil and so on.

But how did she like living at sea? How did she feel during a terrifying time of mutiny? Was she frightened for her father's life? Was she worried the mutineers would take over the ship?

I thought about how I might have felt concerning these things at such a young age and began jotting down notes. A story took shape and I wrote "Katie's Voyage," a children's interest short story inspired by Laura and penned as an imagining of what it might have been like for such a little girl living aboard a whaleship all those years ago.

I loved writing "Katie's Voyage." I hope it may encourage others to read the real life story of Laura Jernegan at www.girlonawhaleship.org.

Jill Feutrill



Electric cars enjoyed a significant share of the automobile market from the late 1890s to the early 1910s. Unlike the gasoline-powered cars of the day, they started reliably (without the need for hand-cranking), rarely needed adjustment, and ran cleanly and quietly with few breakdowns. These qualities made them particularly popular with women, like these unnamed Vineyard motorists who went for a spin in their two-seater National Runabout sometime around 1902 or 1903. The driver sits on the right-hand side of the car, steering with a tiller held in her left hand and controlling the acceleration with a hand throttle held in her right. The dirt track shown here might have been hard going, but the Island's network of hard-surfaced roads was already substantial and rapidly expanding. *Martha's Vineyard Museum, Basil Welch Collection, RU465, Album 28.*



Gladys Widdiss (1914 - 2012) worked in the tradition of Wampanoag potters who, beginning in the late 1800s, used clay from the Gay Head cliffs to make decorative vessels and souvenirs to sell to tourists who visited Aquinnah. The bowl in the center is her work; together, the three pieces pictured here show some of the variation of style and form that different potters could achieve using the same material. Work by a wide range of Vineyard potters is on display in the exhibit “Made of Clay: Pottery for Use and Beauty,” open through March 2016 at the Martha’s Vineyard Museum. *Photograph by Wayne Smith.*