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The Story Of George Welden
FROM THE ARCHIVES

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Daguerreotypes and ambrotypes

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August 1959 - May 1972

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Edgartown, Massachusetts

The Story Of George Welden

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Editorial Note

The material for this article is from the Society's archives. It consists of newspaper clippings from the *Vineyard Gazette*, the *New Bedford Standard*, and an unidentified paper. None of the clippings includes a date line which is unfortunate. Undoubtedly research would uncover the date lines, also the name of the unidentified paper, but time was short.

The clippings actually tell three different stories, that is, stories which differ in important details. The two which are the most alike have been put together to form this article.

The third account is as told by Barkley Renear who, according to the clipping, was a brother of the Late Sheriff Walter Renear of Vineyard Haven. Barkley Renear says that he and the George of the story were shipmates that voyage, and that he was a witness to everything that happened. According to Renear the officers that voyage were John A. Luce of Tisbury, Master; William Merry, First Officer; a Mr. Smith of New Bedford, second officer, and Jethro C. Cottle, Third Officer. That checks with the other two accounts, but it is almost all that does check. For, according to Renear, the voyage took place in 1873, not 1862. The vessel was the *Pocohontas*, not the *America*, and George Welden was not George Welden but George Leonard.

In folklore it is entirely normal to find such widely varying accounts. And the story of George Welden must be considered folklore, that is it must be until a great deal more concrete and factual evidence is uncovered. One of the clippings does show what seems to be a reproduction of an actual photograph of the famous entry in the logbook, but the logbook itself has not been found. Nor has any crew list for the voyage been located.

Starbuck in the *History of The American Whale Fishery* does list a voyage of the Bark *America* from Holmes Hole in the year 1862 with Luce as master and Thomas Bradley as agent. But the whaling ground given is the Atlantic, with no mention of the Indian Ocean. There is no listing of any voyage of the *Pocohontas* for the year 1862, naturally. She was indeed a Holmes Hole vessel, but she was lost, according to Starbuck, at the Cape de Verde Islands on October 29, 1857.

There are many folk ballads and stories which deal with adventures very similar to George Welden's. Sometimes the attempt is entirely successful. But more often it is not and the hoax is discovered, sometimes there is a happy ending and just as often not. Perhaps the best known of such stories is that of William Taylor of the Isle of Mann. There are many versions of that some varying quite as much as the three accounts of the story of George Welden.

In the summer of 1862 the bark *America* was fitting out for a whaling voyage. That was in Holmes Hole, the present Vineyard Haven.

The *America* was an old vessel but she had the reputation of being a lucky one. Her master for that voyage, as he had been for her two previous ones, was Captain John A. Luce of the North

Shore of the Vineyard, and Captain Luce was a good whaler. Still, Thomas Bradley, agent of the *America*, and one of her principal owners, was having a hard time finding a crew for her.

There is an old whaling song that begins:

'Tis advertised in Boston, New York and Buffalo

Five hundred brave Americans a-whaling for to go.

Well, Mr. Bradley had advertised. He didn't need five hundred brave Americans, he needed just enough to handle the *America* until she reached the Western Islands - the Azores - where she would ship enough Portuguese whalers to make up her full complement of men. Mr. Bradley had his officers, and his petty officers, the boat-steerers or harpooners. And he had his specialists, the carpenter, cooper and sailmaker, and the cook and steward. But he didn't have a crew.

The reason for that, of course, was that the Civil War was raging at the time. Everywhere wages were high and factories and mills as well as the army and navy, were crying for men. To make matters worse Confederate commerce destroyers, the *Alabama*, the *Florida* and the rest - the whalers called them pirates - were boarding and burning every Yankee whaleship they sighted, and that was not an inducement to go whaling.

Finally, in desperation, Mr. Bradley went to Boston himself to see what he could do about it. How he did it is a mystery, but when he came back he did have a crew of sorts. The men he brought back with him were of half a dozen different nationalities. Only one or two had ever been to sea before, and none of them had ever made a whaling voyage. They were not a prepossessing lot, and perhaps some of them were criminals. Among them was George Welden.

More than any of the others, George Welden looked as though he might have in him the makings of a sailor. He stood a stocky five feet nine inches, which for that crew was a pretty good height. He had a ruddy, fair, complexion, and tightly curled fair hair. The hair was cut short so that one could see an evil looking scar that ran from his cheek almost to the top of his scalp.

When asked about that scar, George said that he had gotten it in a cavalry charge only a few months earlier. He had been in the Confederate army, and in that charge a Yankee officer had given him a saber slash that had almost killed him. After the engagement

he had been picked up by the Northern troops that had won the fight and put in a hospital in a prison camp. He had been released from the prison camp on parole only a short while before Thomas Bradley had found him in Boston. That was his story and it just could be true.

With his motley crew aboard. Captain Luce lost no time in starting the voyage, for he was afraid if he didn't, some of the men would jump ship. And so the *America* sailed from Holmes Hole on September 10, 1862. George Welden seems to have picked up a knowledge of the ropes faster than the rest of the green hands. Also, he was popular in the fore-castle. He told innumerable stories about his experiences in the Confederate army. He could dance a jig better than anyone else aboard, and he sang many of the old songs and ballads in what passed for a pretty good tenor voice.

They had been out only a few days when something happened that gained the crew's real respect for the curly-haired sailor. The cook on that voyage was a very big Negro, and at grub time the cook said something to George that George didn't like. In the fight that followed George cleaned up the deck with the big black man. On another occasion a fight with knives between George and another sailor was narrowly prevented by the men who rowed in the same boat with Welden. After that George Welden's quick temper and his very evident willingness to fight made his position in the crew secure.

Apparently there was only one man in the ship who had any doubts at all about George, and that was Jethro C. Cottle of Edgartown. Cottle was the third mate. One evening the officers were talking about the crew in the cabin, and Cottle said, "There's something about that George Welden that's wrong. If he wasn't such a mean hard cuss I'd say he was a woman."

That brought a laugh. Robert G. Smith of New Bedford, the second mate - it was in his boat that George pulled tub oar - said, "If he's a woman maybe we ought to ship a full crew of 'em. He's the best man I've got in my boat." So Jethro Cottle didn't voice his doubts about George again.

George Welden was indeed a good man in the boat. Tub oar position was usually given to the strongest man, and there was not the slightest doubt but that George was strong. Only the harpooner, perhaps, who rowed in the bow, pulled a stronger oar

than George.

The second mate was proud of his boat's crew. For some time now, indeed ever since they had really learned to work together, it was almost always the second mate's boat that led all the others when they were out after whales. It was that fact that made him so furious on the day when the event took place that made whaling history. His boat wasn't in the lead that time, but last. And worse, they were steadily falling farther and farther behind. "Pull, damn ye," he shouted. "Pull!"

The men did pull, but they weren't gaining on the other boats, and so the second mate raged and swore. That was on the ninth of January, 1863, so it was almost four months to the day since they had sailed from Holmes Hole. They were in latitude 46 South, east of the coast of South America and west of the Falkland Islands. After the man at the masthead had raised whales that noon and shouted the traditional "Blows! Blows! There she blows!" the second mate's boat had been first away from the ship. And now it was last in the chase. It was infuriating, and Mr. Smith was infuriated.

"It's you, Welden," he said finally. "It's you that's shirking."

"It's not me," George Welden shot back at him, and he didn't add any sir to his denial, either.

"I say it is, damn ye," the second mate shouted. With a swift movement he reached under the thwart and grabbed a paddle. Paddles were used only very occasionally when there was absolutely no wind and the boat wanted to sneak up on its prey in complete quiet. With the paddle in his hands Mr. Smith took a step forward and brought it down with almost a full swing on George's shoulder and arm.

One report of the event says that the second mate struck George Welden with his steering oar. Of course that wasn't true. The steering oar that Mr. Smith held was about twenty-two feet long, and even if one could have swung an oar like that in the air, a blow from it would have killed a man. No, it was not the steering oar but the paddle that Mr. Smith used, and he used it hard.

George Welden's reaction was just as fast as the second mate's had been. With a screaming curse he pulled his knife from its sheath and leaped over the thwart at the officer, the knife held ready to strike.

Again there are different versions of what happened right after that. One story is that the second mate jumped overboard to save himself. The other is that he managed to grab George Welden's wrist and to defend himself until the others in the boat had George Welden securely bound and trussed. At any rate, the second mate's boat didn't go on a whale that day, but returned to the ship before the others.

The captain had not gone in his own boat that day, which was unusual. So he was waiting when Mr. Smith's boat pulled under the davits. "Why'd ye give up?" he asked his second mate.

The second mate pointed at the bound figure between the thwarts, "Him," he said.

"What happened?" the captain demanded.

"He wasn't pulling his weight on the oar," the second mate told him, "so I gave him a crack and he jumped me with a knife."

Captain Luce thought about that. "Mutiny," he said finally. And mutiny on a whaleship was the most serious of all crimes. "Heave him aboard and I'll put him in irons. But first I'll give him something to think about."

So George Welden was put aboard, and bound to the mainmast with his arms above his head. While that was being done he hadn't uttered a word. "What have you got to say for yourself?" the captain asked him then. George Welden didn't answer and the captain said, "Maybe the taste of a rope's end will make you feel more like talking.

The ship keepers - the steward, cabin boy and cook, the carpenter, cooper and sailmaker, as well as the other men from the second mate's boat stood around in a silent circle. All looked pretty serious, all except the cook. There was a slight grin on his face. "Strip the shirt off'n him, Mr. Smith," the captain ordered.

Before the second mate had a chance to carry out that order, George Welden said, "No! Don't!"

"You should have thought of that before you went for Mr. Smith with a knife," the captain told him. "Get at it, Mr. Smith." So the second mate reached between George and the mast and began to unbutton the shirt.

"No!" George Welden said again, but this time it was a scream. "No, don't! I'm a woman!"

That was George Welden's secret. And how he had been able to

keep it for four long months on a whaleship is a mystery, as much a mystery as why he - or rather, she - had signed up for the voyage in the first place. And only third mate Jethro Cottle of all the ship's company had had an inkling that something about George Welden wasn't right.

That night at the cabin table, underneath the whale oil lamp swinging overhead in its gimbals, Captain Luce wrote the entry for that day in his logbook. His entries were always terse and to the point, having to do with the day's whaling and not much else. His entry that night was no exception. He wrote:

Friday January 9th 1863

Comes with light breezes from the W the boats in chase of whales at 3 p.m. the boats came on board this day found out George Welden to be a woman the first time I suspected such a thing at sunset took in sail latter part fine breezes from S by W steering to E.S.E three sails in sight

Lat 46.00

Long 56.20

After that day George Welden did not pull tub oar in the second mate's boat again. Instead, the cabin boy was promoted and went forward to the forecastle, and George Welden moved aft and did the cabin boy's work until she was put ashore. But because a whaleship's business was whaling, that latter didn't happen until more than five months later.

During that time the *America* had gone around the Cape of Good Hope and into the Indian Ocean. On July 13th 1863 she lay at anchor in the harbor of Mauritius recruiting, that is taking on water, fresh vegetables and fruit, and making some necessary repairs. It was then and there that George Welden was put ashore. But first the crew took up a purse so that she could buy herself some proper woman's clothing.

Captain Luce accompanied George Welden to the American consul's office where she was given her discharge from the whaleship. And in her new clothing, except for her short hair, she was a very good-looking woman. There was a clipper ship in Mauritius at the time bound for New York with cargo and passengers. The consul succeeded in getting George Welden a birth on her as stewardess.

That is all we know with certainty about the woman whaleman. There is a tradition that the *America* happened to be in another port with the same clipper ship a year later and George Welden was still her stewardess. She told some of the crew of the *America* that she had fallen in love with one of the officers of her new ship and planned to marry him.

One of the stories that George Welden had told about herself when she was on the *America* was that she came from an aristocratic, slave-owning Southern family. But we don't know whether or not that is true. We don't even know if she spoke with a Southern accent. Those stories about having been in the Confederate army, and of the saber wound could be true. They could also be untrue. For it seems as though a girl who would lie about her sex, and get away with it for four long months, might also lie about other matters.

All that we actually know as fact is from stories that Captain Luce and Jethro Cottle told long afterwards. And even their stories did not always agree in all details. But among whalers and sailors the story of George Welden became a part of the folklore of the waterfront. There are two quite conflicting stories about what finally did happen to her.

One of those stories is that some years later she arrived in New Bedford, apparently prosperous, and bought a small bar near the waterfront. She renamed it "The Sailorboy," and it became very popular with whalers. She ran it for many years and was always her own bouncer.

The other story is that some years after that voyage that began on September 10th 1862, Captain Luce received a letter from the former woman whaleman in which she thanked him for his kindness to her, and stated that she had married the officer of the clipper ship, and that they were happy. She did not give her address, nor her married name, but only signed herself George Welden in quotation marks.

Now after more than a hundred years, the whole story probably never will be known. Whaling was a brutally hard, cruel and dangerous life, and George Welden had adapted herself to it quickly and amazingly well. And if it hadn't been for that wild temper of hers she just might have gotten away with the masquerade for the whole voyage.

Portraits Of Some Unidentified Vineyard People

Daguerreotypes and ambrotypes

In the Society's library there are literally hundreds of unidentified portraits - daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and the later photographs from glass plates and still later conventional film - presumably all of Vineyard people. Here are a few.

Looking at them one finds oneself saying, "Why that looks just like....." or, "I'll bet that's a Luce, or a Norton, or a Tilton," or any other of the old Vineyard families, as the case may be, and undoubtedly most of them are. If any of these portraits can be positively identified please notify the librarian or the curator and we will so report in the next issue of the *Intelligencer*.



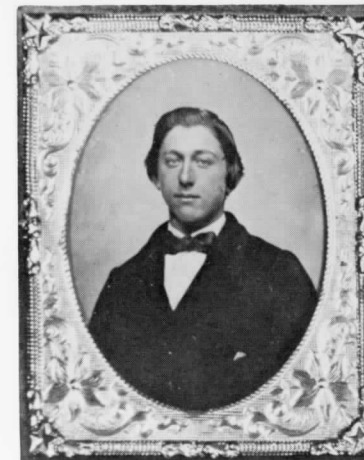
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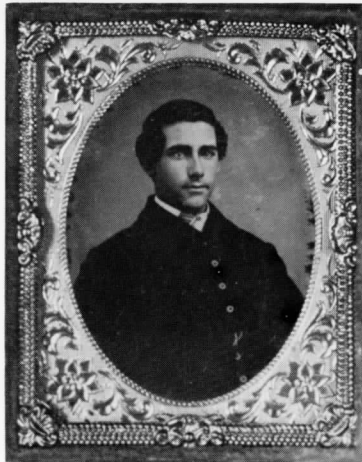
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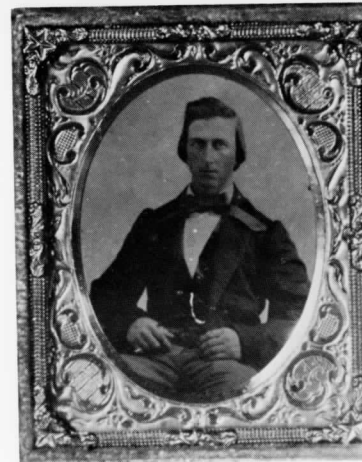
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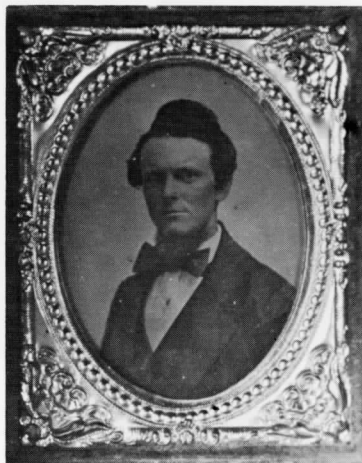
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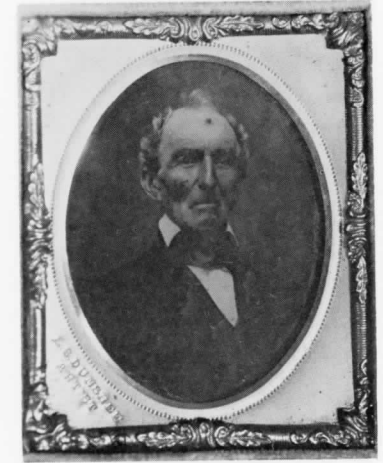
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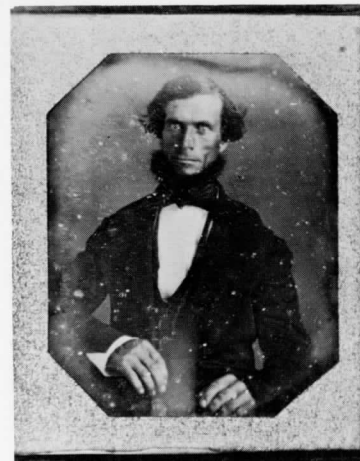
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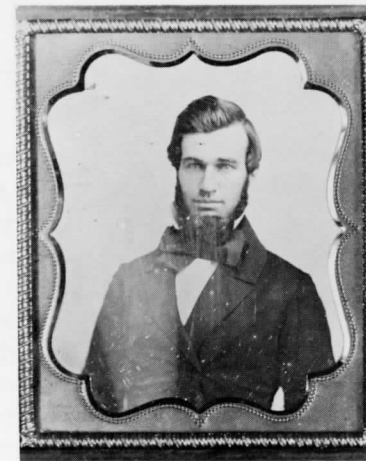
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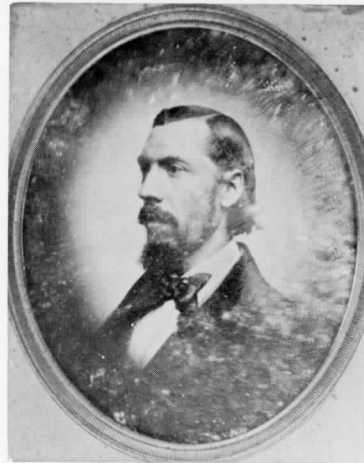
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DCHS News - Accessions

Islanders usually think of winter as a time of peace and quiet, but this certainly was not the case at the historical society in the last few months. From January through March, we had twenty-four different researchers in the library, and many other people just dropped by to look at the exhibits or to ask questions. Many of the researchers are working on extensive projects. Jan Van Tassel, for example, can usually be found hard at work on her master's thesis concerning the transition of the island's economy from the agrarian-seafaring pattern to one based on tourism. Harold Wilson, who contributed an article to the February edition of the *Intelligencer*, often makes the trip over from Falmouth on Saturdays, and through his publications he is greatly expanding our knowledge of the Elizabeth Islands.

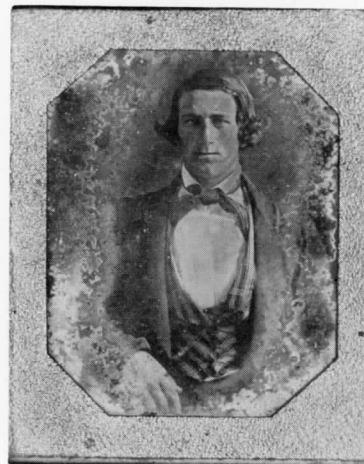
A few people have wanted to tour the Thomas Cooke House, but this has usually been impossible due to the cold weather and to our staff limitations. We did make exceptions for a family from Switzerland and for Marian Clark's archaeology class at the high school.

In thinking of the Regional High School, we should be reminded that the Dukes County Historical Society is also regional in scope. No one should think of it as being simply an institution of the town where the buildings are located. The ten members of the society's governing board live in five of the six towns on Martha's Vineyard, and there are more council members from Tisbury than from any other town. Vineyarders should also remember that some of the society members live on Cuttyhunk.

With the library becoming so important as a research center, we were most fortunate to receive a donation of \$1,000.00 from Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Stoddard for the express purpose of refurbishing the main floor of the building. Among other things, the money has enabled us to purchase a copying machine and sturdy work tables. Other changes in the library include the addition of shelves over the radiators, the shipping of the Samuel P. Lee Papers to the National Archives, and the repair of the glass case containing the model of the bark *John Coggeshall*. Beside the portrait of Dr. Daniel Fisher, Mrs. Stoddard has placed a framed



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summary of her research on his life, and she has also polished and mounted his coffin plate. Mrs. Marian Halperin was on the island for only a short stay, but she managed to complete her registrar's report and to begin an inventory of our paintings.

Another contributor during the winter was Mrs. Robert Waggaman, who donated a full page advertisement of the Dukes County Historical Society in the catalog of the Washington Antiques Show. This thoughtful and unique gift has pleased everyone who has seen the copy of the catalog on display in the library. We have also received a \$50.00 donation from Mr. David McCullough of West Tisbury.

While on the subject of contributions, it is necessary to note that the society needs money to take the proper steps toward preserving the Thomas Cooke House. We hope to establish a special fund in order to protect what has become the County's greatest historical treasure. Stop for a second and think of the several historic landmarks on Martha's Vineyard that have disappeared as the result of economic factors. At this very moment, we are witnessing what may very well be the end of the Seaman's Bethel. Fortunately, the Cooke House is in a safer position, and we have now constructed a gatehouse to collect an admission fee and to provide a measure of crowd control. Nevertheless, the increasing burden of maintenance is rapidly becoming more than our regular finances can bear. The cost for just the ordinary upkeep of our buildings and grounds is running to about \$3,000.00 per year. This figure, of course, does not include the extensive painting that is being done on the exterior of the Cooke House. Before long, we will need to have structural work done on the foundation and on the roof.

Those of you who are reading this appeal are already making a financial contribution, but if you can contribute to a special preservation fund, please do so. More importantly, however, we need your time and your thoughts for developing a fund-raising campaign that will assure the preservation of our island heritage. Please give this problem some thought and then give the curator a call at 627-4441. Better yet, drop by the library and help us to get started on something that must be done.

Thomas Norton, Curator

ACCESSIONS, October 1972 – March 1973

ARTIFACTS:

Swampscott dory, gift of Mrs. Martin S. Meigs, Sr.

Engraving: Colomne de Trajan, 19th century, for use with zograscope, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roderick S. Webster in memory of Alvin E. Bastien.

Parasol, three skirts, petticoat, three bonnets, gift of Mrs. Caroline Osborn Reynolds.

Length of *rail* similar to rail used by Martha's Vineyard Railroad, gift of Walter Blackwell.

Gravestone from Gay Head inscribed Haiki Cagnehein, gift of Seacoast Defence Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

BOOKS:

The First Seven Generations of the Cushman Family in New England by Joseph Augustine Cushman, gift of Miss Ruth Todd.

Martha's Vineyard Directory, 1907, gift of Mrs. Ralph Packer.

The Victorian Home in America by John Maass, gift of the author.

Etiquette by Emily Post, 1950; *Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard; *Ho, The Fair Wind!* by J.,A. R. Wylie; *Verse* by Gerald Chittenden; *The Foxfire Book* edited by Eliot Wigginton; *In an Herb Garden* by Annie Burnham Carter; *Celia's Lighthouse* by Anne Molloy; *Birds of America* by John James Audubon, 1950, gifts of the Reverend and Mrs. S. Read Chatterton.

Doorways, Lanterns and Fences of Martha's Vineyard by Edith Blake, gift of the author.

Three Centuries of Custom Houses by members of The Colonial Dames of America, gift of Mrs. Ralph Hornblower.

The Venerable Mayhews and the Aboriginal Indians of Martha's Vineyard by William A. Hallock, 1874; *History and its Heroes* by James Hunter, 1896, gifts of Eldon West.

An Informal History of Several Families by R. Draper Richards, gift of the author.

Mankind, III, No. 1 (2 copies) containing an article on whaling by Kenneth R. Martin, gift of the author.

PAPERS AND MANUSCRIPTS:

Drafts of Schooners *Hattie E. Smith* and *E. H. Hatfield*, gifts of Mrs. Caroline Osborn Reynolds.

Books containing logs or journals of Ship *Splendid* (1849-1850); Ship *China* (1841-1842) and Ship *Franklin* (1843-1845); Ship *Flying Eagle* (1861); Bark *Tahiti* (1861), Ship *Eliza F. Mason* (1862); Ship *Pocohontas* (1840-1843); whaling voyage journal (1844-1845); Ship *Eliza F. Mason* (1862-1863), gifts of Seacoast Defence Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Letter to Alfred Norton, 1843, gift of Mrs. Philip Mosher.

"The Human Predicaments of an Island Population" by Dr. Milton Mazer and "A Demographic Study of Martha's Vineyard" by Susan Lee Cook, gifts of the Reverend S. Read Chatterton.

Several documents including manuscripts, articles on Grace Church in Vineyard Haven, whaling, Vineyard street railways. Also a list of ships built on Beach Road, gifts of Ruby Holmes Martyn.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS:

Two photographs of Lillian Nordica, gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Viera.

Photograph of Orin Norton, blacksmith, gift of Rutledge Davis.

Marian R. Halperin
Registrar

Indices Of *Intelligencer* Articles And Authors

August 1959 - May 1972

The Society has had two sets of the *Intelligencer* bound in hard cover. They contain the issues from August, 1959 to May 1972. Following are the indices of the materials contained - one by title and subject, the other by author. These should be a real help to researchers.

Index by author.

Bailey, Frances. Three Poems. May, 1967.

Banks, Dr. Charles E. The Deputy Governor Of Martha's Vineyard, August, 1962.

Bettencourt, D. Osborn. The *Gallatin*, November, 1970.

Bishop, C. Nelson. Merrily They Rolled Along - On Skates - Five Miles At Sea, August, 1961.

Bodfish, Captain Hartson H. A Letter Home, February, 1967.

Burgess, Edward S. The Old South Road Of Gay Head, August, 1970.

Butler, William. Martha's Vineyard In 1972 (A diary), November, 1966; May, 1967.

Coon, Nelson. Plant Life And The Island Colonists, May, 1967.

Crocker, Thomas R. Loss Of The Whaleship *Columbia*, November, 1963.

Davis, Arthur W. Recollections Of Many Years, August, 1962.

Dearth Golden. Journal Of A Cruise On Board Privateer *Yankee*, February, 1963.

Eldridge, Sydna. Glimpses Of Vineyard Haven And Vineyard Haven Harbor, November, 1965.

Elvin, Joseph B. The Lamberts Cove Cemetery, November, 1963; The Passing Of An Era On Martha's Vineyard, May, 1964; The Fishes In Vineyard Waters; February, 1966.

Freeman, James. Dukes County In 1807, May, 1971.

Gardner, Russell Herbert. My Sanchekantackett, November, 1970.

Gifford, Doris Cottle. Jonathan Mayhew And The Missionary Mayhews, February, 1967.

Gifford, Flavel Mayhew. Genealogy, August, 1959; The Peddle Cart, November, 1961.

Hare, Lloyd C. M. Vineyard Whaling Captains And Fabulous Frisco, February, 1960; An Island Girlhood One Hundred Years Ago, August, 1963.

Hobbs, Addie B. A Letter From Cottage City, November 1971.

Hough, Dorris S. Some Vineyard Authors, May, 1962; Sengekontackett Pond's Other Name, November, 1971.

Hough, Henry Beetle. Approach To A Period, May, 1960; Years Of Innocence On Martha's Vineyard, February, 1961; Vineyard Jottings, May, 1966; Martha's Vineyard And The Theatre, August, 1966; Amelia Watson, February, 1968.

Howland, Alice Forbes. The Story Of Pasque And The Pasque Island Club, February, 1962.

Huntington, Elon Obed. Rounding Cape Horn, November, 1961.

Huntington, Gale. An Archaeological Study From Martha's Vineyard, November, 1959; The Singing Tiltens And Some Of Their Songs, May, 1961; The Animal Food Supply Of Vineyard Indians, November, 1962; The Steamboat *Helen Augusta*, May, 1966; Nancy Luce, May, 1969; Dragging - 1934, February, 1971.

Hugo, David T. Nova Scotia To Martha's Vineyard, Notes On Captain Joshua Slocum, August, 1969.

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