THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

Published by
DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.
Edgartown, Massachusetts

Benjamin D. Smith, Decoy Carver
BY STANLEY MURPHY

Anna P. Vinson's Diary -
January to March 1850
TRANSCRIBED BY
DORIS C. STODDARD

The Alice S. Wentworth
BY DOROTHY HOWARD

D C H S News

February 1976
Vol. 17, No. 3
Benjamin D. Smith, Decoy Carver
1866 - 1946

BY STANLEY MURPHY

Author's note:

The following material is excerpted from a book manuscript entitled “The Decoy Carvers of Martha’s Vineyard”. In February, 1975, The Intelligencer published a short biography of Keyes Chadwick (1865-1958) taken from the same manuscript. Of the hundreds of Vineyard-made decoys in collections spread across the nation only the work of Chadwick is well-known and recognizable to the average collector. Chadwick had some peers on Martha’s Vineyard though, and there was one man who surpassed him; the man to whom he was apprenticed as a carpenter early in his career and from whom he learned the art of fine carving - Ben Smith of Oak Bluffs.

The photographs are by George Moffett, Jr., of Edgartown, whose home overlooks the great salt pond, Sengekontacket, where Ben Smith did much of his wildfowling.

The Vineyard Gazette of August 13, 1946, carried the following obituary:

“Benjamin D. Smith, retired carpenter, of Oak Bluffs, died at his home on Friday following a prolonged period of failing health. He was eighty years of age and had made his home in Oak Bluffs for many years. He was born in Provincetown, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Obadiah Smith. Little is known of Mr. Smith, who was retiring in his habits and lived alone. He was employed as a carpenter during his active years and was famed as a hunter, but talked little about himself or his past. He is not known to have any living relatives.

Interment was in Oak Grove Cemetery, Oak Bluffs.”
It is not noted that he happened to carve some of the loveliest
decoy ducks (now widely heralded as "Folk Art") of his era.

Most of the great names of American decoy carving were
professionals each of whose lifetime production amounted to
hundreds and even thousands of examples. Their work was
appreciated in their own time and they had many incentives to
improve technique and refine style over a long period. Smith, on
the other hand, was a loner who made his decoys for the ducks
only, not for men, yet whose carvings are a distillation of great
natural talent and the keenest powers of observation.

Each of his birds, glowing with life, has been caught in a logical
and transient posture of the duck it represents. Where the typical
Chadwick decoy is a quiet thing, solid, unperturbable, serene, the
Smith counterpart has a lively alertness; not a quality of alarm
(always to be avoided in a bird lure) but a contained wakefulness.
The Sheldrake is so rakishly Sheeldrakelike; the Black Duck so
thoroughly a recluse, the wary Black Duck and no other: the
extraordinary likeness of the Canvasback is ready to stretch that
strong neck and take wing at any sudden movement of the hidden
wildfowler.

In season, Ben Smith was a market gunner and appears to have
been his own boss, working as a carpenter when he needed money
but refusing to be tied down to steady employment. He was noted
for keeping a fine orchard of which he was very proud. An Oak
Bluffs man today, a man in his fifties, recalls an incident of his
childhood: With several other boys, he went one night to steal
some of Smith’s apples, not realizing that there had been a lot of
recent poaching on those trees. Ben was waiting for them in the
crotch of one tree with a shotgun and fired rock salt at the boys as
they disappeared over his fence. My informant ran in the opposite
direction and was almost decapitated by a rope strung across the
path for that purpose. He says that was the last of the apple
thievery.

Everyone I have been able to find who has any memory of
Smith agrees on one essential point about him: He was not a man
to trifle with. He was known to make spot judgements of people
on brief acquaintance and, as one man reports, "If he decided for
some reason, any reason, to dislike you, that was it. He would
have nothing further to do with you."

He was tall, lean and strong and quick in movement, a small
eyed man with a pointy nose and heavy moustache, a man who
habitually wore a felt hat. Briefly, obscurely, and late in life, he
married. It quickly, and probably mercifully, ended in divorce.
Sooner or later he quarreled with everyone in his orbit and one
source of information reports that he ended up with a grudge
against even Keyes Chadwick though the reason, if one did exist, is
lost in antiquity.

There could be no better evidence of Smith’s capacity for
vindictiveness than his last will and testament. It is a onepage
document in three parts; part three, with punctuation, capitals,
and underlining as it appears in the original, reads as follows; with
only the name of the brother and his address omitted.

"I give and bequeath to my brother and who I publicly declare
without fear of successful contradiction to be the most
contemptible thief it has been my misfortune to meet, the sum of
$2500. The above mentioned sum being the amount he cheated
me of to feather his own nest in his capacity as Executor of the
estate of my sister Mrs. Mamie E. Talbot who at the time of her
death was a resident of Provincetown, Mass.

"The above mentioned still having in his possession the above
mentioned $2500, I take this method to release him, if possible, of
the stigma of being a contemptible Thief."

There, brethren, is one way of settling accounts. The executor
of this will recalls that he had to promise that, upon Ben’s death,
he would see to it that the will was published in the Tacoma
newspaper. When the time came, the executor failed to keep his
promise. “His brother had become a man of some parts by then,
and had his own family,” he explains, “and I didn’t have the heart
to do what Ben asked. What good could have come from such a
thing?” What good indeed.

Another inclusion of that will and testament reveals a facet of
Ben Smith that now defies all further amplification. No one recalls
that he was a particularly musical man, but the will, part 2, states:
"I give and bequeath to my cousin Mrs. Geo. Burke (nee Edith
C. Watt) all right and title to the copyright song entitled “A Song
of Sonja Henie, the Golden Girl,” same being recorded in the
Library of Congress at Washington, D.C.”
Smith's decoy bodies are of white cedar, the heads of sugar pine. The Black Duck is flat-bottomed but most of his other species that I have seen vary from rounded bottom to flat. Some of the bodies are solid, others are hollow. There are examples with metal-stud eyes, painted eyes, and glass eyes, perfectly set. His lead weight is unique in shape and, when present, is an instant identifying feature (illustrated). He doesn't appear to have used it on his flat-bottomed decoys however.

The pair of Canvasbacks in the collection of the Dukes County Historical Society in Edgartown is proof that Smith was an excellent painter, too, subtle and accurate (illustrated). They are the last decoys he possessed and were purchased from him in his final year by an Edgartown collector who found him, that day, up in one of his apple trees doing a little pruning.

When he went gunning, generally on the great tidal pond known as Sengekontacket (and by some as Anthier's), between Oak Bluffs and Edgartown, he is remembered as wrapping each decoy separately in straw for the wagon trip. This indicates a rather small rig, and concern for his fine blocks. The average hunter bundled his decoys loosely into grain bags where one banged against the other with broken necks, tails, and anchor scars the inevitable result.

The decoys in the accompanying photographs include, with three exceptions, all of the examples of Ben Smith's work that I have seen. A market gunner, and Smith was one, needed a fair number of decoys. Where are the Smith Redheads and Bluebills, the most common ducks of his time? Did he carve any Brant? Or Goldeneyes, Widgeon, or Canada Geese? Perhaps, like the wildfowl they imitated, these wooden birds migrated too. In the 1930's and 40's second-hand dealers made frequent visits to the Island and filled their pick-up trucks with old decoys purchased at 25c apiece.

Time and the gradual appearance and identification of more of his work will establish the reputation of this very gifted man. Let all who would pursue the enjoyment of the decoy as Art consider these words about Ben Smith spoken by his contemporary and one-time apprentice, Keyes Chadwick: "He taught me my craft, and there was literally nothing Ben couldn't do very well. He was the best."
II Benjamin D. Smith. The eyes are metal studs. The head was carefully painted but the body was merely stained a deep burnt-cork brown. There is no sign that the block ever was weighted. Bruised, cracked, and gouged over the years, it remains an extraordinary work of art.

III Benjamin D. Smith. Male Red-Breasted Merganser (Shelldrake). Solid body, flat bottom, original paint. This body style was the prototype for much of the work of Keyes Chadwick.
IV. Benjamin D. Smith, Pair of hollow Canvasbacks (hen above, drake below). Collection of the Dukes County Historical Society.

V. Benjamin D. Smith, The hen Canvasback of plate No. IV. The body was separated for hollowing on a diagonal line which descends from just behind the neck to just below the tail. The join is difficult to find even with the decoy in hand.
VI  Benjamin D. Smith. View of the bottom of the hen Canvasback of plate No. IV showing Smith's unique weight.

VII  Benjamin D. Smith. Male Red-Breasted Merganser. This hard-used beauty, still bearing vestiges of original paint, was at some time owned by Smith's friend Frank Richardson who cut his typical, tiny tooth serrations into a replacement bill and hollowed the decoy from the bottom.
VIII  Benjamin D. Smith. Female Red-Breasted Merganser. The head bears the original paint but the badly worn body paint has been removed.

IX  Benjamin D. Smith. Male Red-Breasted Merganser. Rounded bottom, solid body, original paint.
Anna P. Vinson's Diary -
January to March 1850
TRANScribed BY DORIS C. STODDARD

Forword
The *Intelligencer* for February 1968 contained excerpts from a
diary of a sixteen year old girl, Anna Pease Vinson, written in
1849.

Research concerning ownership of the Thomas Cooke House
showed that Anna's father, John (Jonathan) Vinson, acquired
some of the Cooke land in 1833, and in 1854 he purchased the
homestead, land and outbuildings from the estate of Thomas
Cooke (Jr.).

Realization that Anna had lived in the house renewed interest in
the part of her diary that had not been published. Entries from
January through March 1850 (when the diary abruptly ends) give
an insight into Edgartown activities of that period. Her life
centered around school, her friends, church and evening "female
prayer meetings" but, especially around the boys who walked her
home! A few words are in parenthesis - code words that had
meaning to Anna and her friends!

---

1850

Tuesday
Jan. 1
Did not go to school. In the afternoon Rebecca and myself
went up to Nancy Coffin's a little while. In the evening went
to meeting.

Wednesday
Jan. 2nd
Have been to school today. In the evening at 7 o'clock went
sleigh riding with James Smith, George Bailey and Elizabeth.

Thursday
Jan. 3rd
Received a letter from Susan Swift. Expected a letter from
Ann-Frances but was *much disappointed*. Was to Mrs.
Fisher's and spent the evening. 4 months since Bark *Sarah*
sailed.

Friday
Jan. 4th
In the afternoon was down to Lydia's. To meeting in the
evening.

Saturday
Jan. 5th
Was down to Caroline's and spent the afternoon. Went into
Lydia's a little while in the evening (letters etc.) 1 month
since Ann-Frances left.

Sunday
Jan. 6th
Have been to meeting all day and in the evening. Lydia came
up a few minutes.

Monday
Jan. 7th
To school. Went to Mrs. Almira Worth's to a female prayer
meeting in the evening. Velina Pease slept with me. 8 months
since Ship *Walter Scott* sailed.

Tuesday
Jan. 8th
Have been to school all day. In the evening went to meeting.
Received a note from Sarah, and a letter from Ann-Frances.

Wednesday
Jan. 9th
Was down to Lydia's a little while in the afternoon. Rebecca
and Sarah were there, (treat)- Velina and Eunice were up
to our house and spent the evening.
Thursday
Jan. 10th
Margaret came to school with me in the afternoon. To meeting in the afternoon.
Note: Anna was evidently studying French. The next three days she wrote the date in French, and there is a page of exercises in the back of the diary.

Vendredi
Janvier 11th
Had the pleasure of having Velina Pease come to school with me this afternoon. Paulina Coffin was to our house and spent the day; stayed all night.

Samedi
Janvier 12th
Velina Pease and myself were into Rebecca’s and spent the afternoon. To Mrs. Velina Swift’s to a female prayer meeting in the evening.

Dimanche
Janvier 13
To meeting all day and in the evening. At noon, went down to the water to a baptism. Eliza Courtney, Hannah Davis, Harriet Norton and Puella Cleveland were baptised. To Lydia’s a little while.
Note: The novelty of French evidently wore off, and Anna again uses English when dating her entries —

Monday
Jan. 14th
To school all day. Received a note from Velina Pease. Rebecca was into our house and spent the evening.

Tuesday
Jan. 15th
Rebecca has not been to school today. Went to Caroline’s to dinner. In the evening went to meeting. Received letters from Martin and Benjamin.

Wednesday
Jan. 16th
Did not attend school in the afternoon. Anna H. Coffin and Caroline F. Osborne were to our house and spent the afternoon. Allen Weeks, David Davis, Charles Sprague, Francis Vincent, Lydia, Charlotte, Sarah, Harriet B. and myself were invited to Holmes Hole, to Susan Maria Luce’s to a party and event. Started from home about six o’clock, arrived there about half past seven. Had a very good time indeed. Arrived home about two o’clock. No one like Barney, Lydia thinks.

Thursday
Jan. 17th
Feel rather stupid today. Caroline was to our house in the afternoon. To meeting in the evening. G. H. Bailey went home with Eunice Coffin and myself. Wrote a letter to Ann-Frances.

Friday
Jan. 18th
To school. Went down to Lydia’s at recess and Sarah, Ellen and Charlotte went to school with me. To Susan P. Coffin’s and spent the evening. D. Davis, C. Sprague, T. Pease, G. H. Bailey, T. [?] Smith, S. F. Upham, Charlotte, Ellen. Velina, Elizabeth, Mary Mayhew, Sarah and myself were there. Timothy Pease came home with me. Wrote a note to Susan Maria.

Saturday
Jan. 19, 1850
To Lydia’s and spent the afternoon. Received a letter from John. Went to Mrs. Chloe Coffin’s to a female prayer meeting in the evening.

Sunday
Jan. 20th
To meeting all day. Went to the Baptist in the evening to Seaman’s Concert. 4 months since Ship Splendid sailed.

Monday
Jan. 21
Rebecca came to school today after being absent a week. Sarah and Charlotte came and called me out of school in the afternoon. They came up here a little while, and then we
went down to Charlotte’s and had a time. To Mrs. Abby Smith’s to a female prayer meeting in the evening. To Lydia’s a few minutes after the meeting. (Going in for it principally).

Tuesday
Jan. 22nd
Rebecca did not come to school this afternoon. Went down to Lydia’s at recess and had a spree. Charlotte came into school with me at recess in the afternoon. To meeting in the evening.

Wednesday
Jan. 23rd
Down to Lydia’s in the forenoon. The boys hired rooms to Mrs. Pollard’s and had a party. There were eleven there from Holmes Hole. Barnard Luce, John Luce, Charles M. Luce, Paine Cottle, Henry C. Wade, Everett Prouty, Octavia Norris, Henry Heald, Minerva Chase, and Susan Maria. From here there were A. L. Weeks, James Smith, George Bailey, David Davis, Charles Sprague, Timothy Pease, Francis Vincent, William B. Marchant, Charlotte, Harriet, Sarah Mills, Velina, Eunice, Elizabeth, Mary Mayhew, Sarah, Lydia and myself. Had a grand time. Went to walk on the bridge. A. L. Weeks went home with me. Got home about quarter of one. (Barney and Lydia).

Thursday
Jan. 24th
To school all day. Into Lydia’s a little while. Went to meeting in the evening.

Friday
Jan. 25th
Charlotte went into school with me at recess in the afternoon. Received a note from Susan Maria. Went to sewing circle in the evening to Mrs. Betsey Marchant’s. A. L. Weeks went home with me.

Saturday
Jan. 26
Went to drawing school in the afternoon to Frances Mayhews. To meeting in the evening. A. L. Weeks went home with me. Lydia slept with me. Sarah and Harriet B. went up to Holmes Hole today.

Sunday
Jan. 27th
Have been to meeting all day and in the evening.

Monday
Jan. 28th
Was serenaded in the morning about 4 o’clock. To school in the forenoon. Took a walk up to the new school house in the afternoon with A. L. Weeks, J. Smith, Lydia, Charlotte & Elizabeth. To home in the evening.

Tuesday
Jan. 29th
Received a note from Ann-Frances this afternoon. Mrs. Fisher had a little boy today. Harriet B. and Sarah came down from Holmes Hole this afternoon. Henry Wade came too. Went to a meeting in the evening. A. L. Weeks came home with me. Wrote a note to Susan Maria after meeting.

Wednesday
Jan. 30th
Henry Wade went up this morning. Went over the Plain to meeting in the evening. Had a very pleasant ride. Mary Fuller, Harriet, Phebe Ann Smith & Eunice Coffin rode up with us.

Thursday
Jan. 31st
Did not go to school in the afternoon. Went out a little while. Received a letter from Susan Maria. Lydia, A. L. Weeks and David Davis to our house in the evening. (drawing)

Friday
February 1
To school all day. Female prayer meeting was here this evening.

Saturday
Feb. 2nd
Went to drawing school a little while. Charlotte and me were to Mrs. Catherine Baylie’s and spent the afternoon. To
Charlotte's a little while in the evening. A. L. Weeks and David Davis were there. A. L. Weeks went home with me. (Poor Lydia got sadly disappointed today - cruel).

Saturday
Feb. 9th
Went to drawing class in the afternoon to Frances Mayhew's.

To female prayer meeting in the evening.

Sunday
Feb. 10th
Received a note from Susan Maria. Did not attend meeting in the morning. Went in the afternoon and evening. Everett Prouty and Henry Wade came down in the afternoon.

Monday
Feb. 11th
Sarah Linton came to school with me in the afternoon. Went to a female prayer meeting with Lydia in the evening. Received letters from Benjamin and Martin.

Tuesday
Feb. 12th
To school all day. Went to meeting in the evening. Received a note from Harriet Fisher.

Wednesday
Feb. 13th
Prayer meeting to our house this evening. John Luce, Barnard Luce and James Cottle came down tonight.

Thursday
Feb. 14th St. Valentines Day -
Received a Valentine from Lawrence and one from Ann-Frances. Down to Lydia's part of the afternoon. To meeting in the evening. James Smith went home with me.

Friday
Feb. 15th
Did not go to school in the afternoon. Went to female prayer meeting in the evening, to Mrs. Mary Marchant's.

Saturday
Feb. 16th
To drawing class a little while in the afternoon down to Velina's. Emeline Marchant was here and spent the afternoon. To Mrs. (Good—) in the evening. Received a valentine.
Sunday
Feb. 17th
To meeting all day. In the evening kept house for Caroline.

Monday
Feb. 18th
To school all day. Received a letter from Mrs. Gerald. Went
to the Baptist meeting with Charlotte in the evening. A. L.
Weeks went home with me.

Tuesday
Feb. 19th
Received a Valentine this morning. Went to Caroline’s to
dinner. To meeting in the evening.

Wednesday
Feb. 20th
Susan Maria came down. To meeting in the evening. Timothy
Pease went home with Lydia and me. Phebe Ann Smith was
to our house and spent the afternoon. 5 months since Ship
Splendid sailed. Lydia’s birthday.

Thursday
Feb. 21
Went to Lydia’s a little while in the afternoon. To meeting in
the evening. S. T. Upham went home with Susan Maria and
me.

Friday
Feb. 22nd
Susan Maria came to school with me till recess. Went to
sewing society a little while in the evening, then went to
walk. A. L. Weeks went home with me. Susan Maria slept
with me. (apples)

Saturday
Feb. 23rd
Drawing school met to our house in the afternoon. To female
prayer meeting in the evening. A. L. Weeks went home with
Lydia and me.

Sunday
Feb. 24th
To meeting all day. In the evening kept house for Caroline.
A. L. Weeks went home with Lydia and me.

Monday
Feb. 25th
Oh. dear! A. L. Weeks and David Davis have gone away
today. James Smith took tea here in the afternoon. Went to
meeting in the evening.

Tuesday
Feb. 26th
Left school today. Received a letter from Ann-Frances this
afternoon. To meeting in the evening.

Wednesday
Feb. 27th
Susan Maria went home today. Lydia went up with her. So
Lydia, Frances spent the afternoon and evening. Harriet B.
was there in the evening. Had a very pleasant visit.

Thursday
Feb. 28th
To Sarah’s a little while in the forenoon. Velina Coffin was
here and spent the afternoon. Received a Valentine. To
meeting in the evening.

Friday
March 1
Nothing particular happened. Went to female prayer meeting
in the evening down to Caroline’s. Lonesome enough here.

Saturday
March 2nd.
Lydia came down this afternoon. Received a letter from
Susan Maria. Went to drawing class up to Elizabeth’s. To Mrs.
Fishers a little while in the evening.

Sunday
March 3rd.
Stormy. Did not attend meeting in the morning. Went in the
afternoon and evening. To Caroline’s to supper. 6 months
since Bark Sarah sailed.
Monday
March 4th
Down to F. F. Pease's in the afternoon. To meeting in the evening.

Tuesday
March 5th
To Sarah's and spent the afternoon. Charlotte, Harriet, Sophronia, Lydia, Ellen, Lydia Frances and Octavia Norris were there. Went to meeting in the evening.

Wednesday
March 6th
Down to Eunice Pease's and spent the afternoon. To Lydia's in the evening. Eunice slept with me.

Thursday
March 7th
Eunice Coffin was here and spent the afternoon. Went to meeting in the evening (rocking chair). 10 months since the Walter Scott sailed.

Friday
March 8th
Received a paper from A. L. Weeks. Went to concert in the evening. George Bailey invited me. It was very good. John's birthday.

Saturday
March 9th
Went to drawing class in the afternoon to Mary Mayhew's. To female prayer meeting in the evening to Mrs. Sophia Smith's.

Sunday
March 10th
Did not attend meeting in the morning. Went in the afternoon and evening. Charles Mayhew arrived from California.

Monday
March 11th
Received a letter from Benjamin in the afternoon. Meeting here in the evening. Wrote a note to Susan Maria.

Tuesday
March 12th
Went to meeting in the evening. To walk after the meeting. Timothy Pease went home with Lydia and me. Lydia slept with me.

Wednesday
March 13th
To Phebe Ann Smith's to tea and spent the evening. Received a note from Susan Maria.

Thursday
March 14th
At home all day. Went to meeting in the evening. Nothing particular happened.

Friday
March 15th
Harriet Fisher was here to tea. Female prayer meeting was here in the evening. Sent a letter to Ann-Frances.

Saturday
March 16th
Went to drawing class in the afternoon to Caroline Osborne's. Velina Coffin was here and spent the evening. Received a letter from Susan Swift and a paper from A. L. Weeks.

Sunday
March 17th
Attended meeting all day. Had a "Colored gentleman" to preach for us in the morning. James Smith was baptised in the afternoon. Went to seaman's concert in the evening in the Baptist house. Timothy Pease went home with me.

Monday
March 18th
Sent a note to Susan Maria. To Phebe Ann Smith's and spent the afternoon. George and Elizabeth Bailey were there. To meeting in the evening. (Stormy).

Tuesday
March 19th
Went to Holmes Hole to spend a few days with Susan Maria, arrived there about one o'clock. To Minerva Chase's and
spent the evening. (Eggs)

Wednesday
March 20th
Went to school with Susan and staid until recess and then we went home. In the afternoon went out and made a few calls. Went to Mercy Heald's and spent the evening. John Luce, Barnard, Susan Maria and Minerva Chase was there. Had a real good time. Barnard went home with me. Got home at ten o'clock, went to bed about 11.

Thursday
March 21st
Susan Maria and me went to Octavia Norris's and spent the afternoon. In the evening Octavia, Mercy, Minerva, John Luce and James Cottle were up to Susan Maria's and boiled candy. Had a real good time. ("Snake Root")

Friday
March 22nd
Went to school with Susan in the forenoon. Was invited to Mr. Henry Worth's in the afternoon but could not go, because I came home.

Saturday
March 23rd
It is a real bad storm, and Ann-Frances has not got home as she expected. Was into Mrs. Fisher's in the evening.

Sunday
March 24th
Ann-Frances got home today. Have been to meeting all day and in the evening.
Note: The diary ends abruptly at this point, with the exception of an entry on April 26, 1850 – as follows:

April 26
1850
Two years today since sister Caroline died (note - her half-sister, Caroline Arey). On the anniversary of such day, sorrowful thoughts force themselves into the mind. The recollection of past days, in which it seemed as if death could not seize her as his victim; the pleasant hours spent in her society, together with her last suffering moments, call for sad thoughts.

Postscript

Anna's diary for the year 1849 frequently mentions the names "T.G. Coffin" and "James H. Bunting."
On Tuesday September 12 of that year she mentions that she walked home with T. G. Coffin - and the cryptic entry (engaged!) On September 17 she gave each of the young men "a loaf of cake." Their names do not appear again; evidently they sailed on the ship Splendid" on September 20th.
This ship does not appear on the whaling records. Instead she sailed for the California gold fields, with a cargo of lumber and bricks.
Anna and T. G. Coffin were married (int. May 6, 1854). Their life together was brief, as Anna died of consumption on June 29, 1859.
Five years later Thomas, age 35, married Anna's niece Carrie (Caroline) Arey, age 18 - and he was again left a widower five years later.
The Alice S. Wentworth

by Dorothy Howard

Editorial Note.

Dorothy Howard is a student at the Middleboro High School. This article on the Alice S. Wentworth, and her master, Captain Zebulon Tilton, was done as a term paper for her English teacher. We hope that she got a good mark for it.

Dorothy is also Captain Zeb's great, great niece. She got much of her information for the paper from her grandfather, Captain Thomas Tilton and from her great uncle Captain Alton Butler Tilton, both of whom are nephews of Captain Zeb. She got some other information from other members of her family on the Vineyard.

The Alice S. Wentworth was the last of the small schooners that carried freight by sail along the Atlantic coast.

The vessel's fame was won with her last captain, Zebulon Northrop Tilton. It was with Capt. Zeb that the great legend of the two started, schooner and master. In this paper, I hope to capture the courage and relationship of this unforgettable pair.

Schooners date back to the seventeenth century. The first one was built in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1713. Schooners were also used in Holland during the seventeenth century.

The Alice S. Wentworth was a two masted schooner seventy-three feet long overall. She was broad beamed and shallow draft. The shallow draft was so that she could go into small harbors and up the coastal rivers. She had a centerboard so she could go to windward almost as well as a yacht, where the water was deep enough.

The Wentworth had seven sails when all were used, but that seldom, only when she was making a long passage in a light wind. The sails were mainsail, foresail, forestaysail, jib, flying jib, main topsail and foretopsail. The flying jib and foretopsail were used the least.

Schooner Alice S. Wentworth towing the dory and with the yawl boat on the davits. Everything set but the foretopsail and flying jib. Note the patches in the mainsail.

The Wentworth could carry a hundred tons of cargo, and sometimes before she had a yawl boat with an engine in it Zeb, and his mate Tom Tilton, would lower the dory and with a pair of
oars tow the vessel into harbor. That was a terrific feat of strength.
Zeb usually rowed the dory and Tom has the vessel’s wheel.

Near the end of the era of sail the Wentworth had a yawl boat
with an engine in it that would bring her into harbor or push her
along when there was no wind at all. The Wentworth also had a
small donkey engine that would bring up the anchor and raise the
sails. The donkey engine went “Bang, sput, sput, sput, bang, sput,
sput sput sput. Before the donkey engine, anchor and sails were
raised by hand, and for two men that was a very hard job.

The Alice S. Wentworth was originally named the Lizzie A.
Tolles. She was built in Norwalk, Connecticut in 1863 to be used
for freighting between Hudson River ports and New York City and
Long Island. Her home port was in Bridgeport, Connecticut. In
1891 she was bought by Capt. Charles Stevens and his brother
Arthur, of York, Maine.

Capt. Charles Stevens and his brother sailed her for thirteen
years in Maine waters carrying coal, lumber and salt to different
ports. In 1904, when she was forty years old, they rebuilt her and
named her the Alice S. Wentworth after Capt. Stevens’ favorite
niece.

Zeb was captain of the Wentworth for a short period of time
while the Stevens still owned her, and he fell in love with her.
Eventually he sold his own vessel the John B. Norris and became
the owner of the Wentworth. That was in 1921.

Captain Zebulon Northrop Tilton was born in 1867 on Martha’s
Vineyard. During his lifetime, he had three wives and seven
children; three daughters and four sons.

Capt. Zeb was well known for his skill at sea and for his
generosity and wit. He was a very big, strong, powerful man, and
cross-eyed. He had the reputation of being the strongest man on
the Atlantic coast and also the homeliest, but there were two
things he loved, the Wentworth and women. And despite his looks,
women were overcome by his charm.

When Zeb had the Wentworth she was known as the smartest,
fastest and slipperiest thing afloat. She lived through two
hurricanes, those of 1938 and 1944, and both times she was at the
coal wharf in New Bedford, and both times saving her was a close
ting.

Zeb and the Wentworth were in the movie “Down to the Sea in
Ships” starring Clara Bow. Once in that picture Zeb had to bring
the vessel into the dock under full sail. That was a feat that not
many men could do but Captain Zeb and his mate Tom Tilton
could do it, and did it many times when the Wentworth was
fully loaded.

Once Zeb was on the radio for an interview with Burgess
Meredith. And once James Cagney sailed with Zeb on a trip to
Nantucket.

Usually there were only two men on the Wentworth. But
sometimes when extra hands were needed some of Zeb’s sons
would go with him. Also, Captain Alton Tilton sometimes went
mate with Zeb. But usually it was just Zeb and Tom. Tom went
mate with Zeb in the winter and went trap fishing in the summer.
Zeb’s great nephew Leslie Tilton also made some trips with Zeb
but was drowned at the age of twenty-four while fishing his own
boat in the summer.

After sixty years in the coasting trade, first as mate with
Captain Josiah Cleveland on the little Liza Jane and then as master
of his own vessels, first the Wilfred W. Fuller, then the John B.
Norris and finally the Alice S. Wentworth, Zeb had to have an
operation on his eyes. Though the operation was successful he
never sailed the Wentworth again.

Better roads were being built and trucks were rapidly taking
freight away from the coasters so the Wentworth got in debt and
was sold to Capt. Ralph Packer, who kept Zeb as the Captain of
her. After Capt. Zeb had to leave because of his operation,
the schooner continued for another two years. Then she was sold to
Ann White who had her remodeled and took out sailing parties.
But no one could manage her as Capt. Zeb had, and the venture
was a failure.

The Wentworth was at the dock in Woods Hole - tied up - when
she sank in 1964 after a storm had opened her seams. She was
raised and appraised for three hundred dollars. But Anthony
Athanas of Boston bought her for thirteen thousand five hundred
dollars as a floating attraction at his Pier 4 restaurant. In March
1967 she sank again. She was raised once more and this time filled
with styrofoam so that she floated again. In December of that year
she was used in a re-enactment of the Boston Tea Party.

On February 2, 1973, the Wentworth was declared eligible for
nomination to the National Register of Historical Places for
restoration.

Anthony Athanas gave her to the National Maritime Historical
Society to be restored and it was planned that she would go to
Rockland, Maine for the work and to be done and then returned
to Boston Harbor in time for the 1976 bicentennial. However it
was soon decided that she could not be restored, too old and far
gone, and the Alice S. Wentworth is still in the Boston Harbor
floating on her styrofoam.

At one time almost all the freight from the Maritime Provinces
and New England went to all the Atlantic and Gulf ports by
coasting schooners. But the range of the very small schooners was
usually more limited.

The Wentworth made trips as far as the Kennebec River in
Maine and to Philadelphia on the Delaware. She went up the
Hudson River as far as Albany and to Hartford on the
Connecticut. But mostly she sailed in local waters and on Long
Island Sound. She carried coal from Perth Amboy, New Jersey, to
the Vineyard and Nantucket and bricks from Greenport, Long
Island. She carried oyster shells from New Haven to be used as
culch for oyster spat and she carried seed oysters from Greenport
to Chatham and Centerville on the cape where they were grown to
market size.

The Wentworth deep in the water with cargo and with the yawl boat pushing her along.

The Wentworth could carry three thousand bushels of oysters.
The freight was twenty cents a bushel. The oysters were mostly
carried on deck so they could have air and they were covered with
tarpaulins so the sun wouldn't hurt them.

The Wentworth carried road oil in drums, lumber, and once
even cars, when the boatline was on strike. She would carry just
about anything that could be gotten on deck, from airplanes to
pre-fab houses.

Of course the Alice S. Wentworth had a lot of stories to go
along with her.
One time when Capt. Zeb, his great nephew, Leslie Tilton and a
great nephew by marriage, Gale Huntington, were making a trip,
they had a hundred and three tons of rice coal on the *Wentworth*,
that was too much, because it put the deck right down to the
water. They anchored in New York harbor for the night, and there
was a big wash from passing ferries, tugs and steamers. Some of
the wash went through the scuppers and onto deck, which leaked.

Zeb didn’t find out about the water in the hold until morning,
and it was a good thing he found out when he did or the *Wentworth* would have been on the bottom. It took hours to
pump her out and pumping is hard work. It took so long that the
*Wentworth* almost missed the fair tide through the East River.

Once, in the winter, when Capt. Zeb, along with his nephews,
Tom and Alton Tilton, had a load of home appliances on board
for Nantucket, bad weather came on them off Point Judith. They
had to drop anchor but the wind increased and the anchor was
dragging onto a rocky ledge. To save the vessel from being
wrecked, Capt. Zeb ordered the jib hoisted. Then the anchor was
slipped and Zeb sailed her onto the beach where there were no
rocks.

The Coast Guard shot the breeches buoy to the vessel to bring
the men ashore but Zeb refused to go ashore in any breeches
buoy. Instead they rowed ashore in the dory. They stayed at the
Coast Guard Station for three days until the storm was over. Then
the vessel was towed by a Coast Guard Cutter to New London
where repairs were made. Only the rudder and rudder post were
damaged.

Capt. Zeb would sometimes sing songs to pass the time. He was
a great singer and always sang unaccompanied. To see and hear
this big man singing sentimental songs was a real treat.

Zeb was very generous. If anyone needed a dollar Zeb was
always ready to give it to him. But there was one time when he
refused to part with even half a dollar. The *Wentworth* was at the
dock in Vineyard Haven unloading coal when an itinerant preacher
came on board and asked Zeb if he could spare fifty cents for the
Lord. Zeb looked him over and asked how old he was. And when
the preacher replied, thirty. Zeb said, “Then you give me the fifty
cents. I'll see the Lord before you will.”

During prohibition, Capt. Zeb liked to fool the Federal men.
One time they were in Newport unloading brick. The Coast Guard
came around looking for rum and asked Capt. Zeb what he was
carrying and also asked him what he had in the cellar. Zeb
immediately asked him what part of the country he came from
when they called a hold a cellar.

Party on the *Alice S. Wentworth* about 1930. Identified: extreme right, Zeb and Mil,
Tom Tilton's daughter.

Another time, during prohibition, Capt. Zeb and his nephew
Tom saw some cases of rum floating around in the sea. Tom went
out in the dory and picked up thirteen cases and put them down
in the hold. At night, after they were tied up at Union Wharf in
Vineyard Haven, they made three trips carrying the rum from the
vessel to the house where Tom was living then. They put the cases
in the fireplace to hide them. But Tom’s wife started to get
nervous about that rum so Tom sold it all for fifty dollars a case.
About a month later he was asked if he had any more. Come to
find out his landlady wanted some.

Capt. Zeb played another trick on the Federal men. Before he
left New Bedford one time he dropped a hint that he was carrying
“wet goods.” When he got to Vineyard Haven, the Federal men
were waiting for him and asked what he was carrying. Capt. Zeb
opened the hatch and said “Well, gentlemen. you be standing on
'em" and the men peered down at a load of ice, and Zeb said
"Them's wet goods, ain't they?"
Capt. Zeb usually did the cooking himself. One of his favorite
dishes was "Tilton's Glory" which was a delicious mess of salt
port, potatoes, water with sometimes onions if there were any,
and sometimes hard-tack. The mess is also sometimes called
"Potato Bargain." Zeb would make up a big kettle full of it, and
the first day it was delicious and the second day it was good but
by the end of the week it tended to become a little tiresome.
Zeb also made beautiful "saleratus biscuits" or "cream of tartar
biscuits" which were a lot like baking powder biscuits only better.
One thing about Zeb's biscuits though, they tended to be the same
color as the cargo. If the Wentworth was carrying coal, the biscuits
would have a grayish tinge or if the Wentworth was carrying bricks
the biscuits would have a reddish tinge. But that didn't hurt the
taste a bit.
The drinking water was carried in a big water cask on the deck,
aft. Sometimes by the end of the trip the water would taste so bad
everyone would be drinking tea.
The Alice S. Wentworth is a part of history that will never be
forgotten. She represents days of courage and strength some of
which seems to have been lost over the years.

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D C H S News

Since the last issue of the Intelligencer, a number of interesting
things have taken place at the historical society. Probably the most
important development is that the roof of the Thomas Cooke
House has been completed. In addition to extensive repairs, the
roof has been covered with cedar shingles. This has greatly added
to the appearance of the house, and we can feel confident that we
will at least have a roof over our heads for many years to come.
The work was efficiently completed by the firm of Burnham &
Magnuson, and half of the total $4,400 was paid by a grant from
the Bicentennial Commission.

Another event of this season was the participation by Gale
Huntington in the National Whale Symposium held at the
University of Indiana, where he presented a program of folksinging
with an emphasis on material from his book Songs the Whalmen
Sang. His performance was broadcast over a nationwide radio
hookup. Not wanting to let Mr. Huntington do all the traveling
this fall, I went to New York to accept the 1975 Citation of
Honor award from the Society of Colonial Wars for my book The
Fur Trade in Colonial New York. The ceremonies at the Union
Club were very impressive, and I gave a short talk on the colonial
fur trade.

Before long, we will have the good fortune of receiving the two
paintings left to us by Thomas Hart Benton. These portraits of
Josie West and Zeb Tilton should be in our possession by the time
you receive this issue of the Intelligencer.

Among our other recent accessions, Nelson Coon gave to the
society all his copies of Wildflowers of Martha's Vineyard. This
should add to our book sales next year, and if you would like a
copy, they are available from us for $3.95. Several people have
recently given us books for the library, and their names will appear
in the next list of accessions.

For personal reasons two members of the Council, Herbert
Stewart and William Sorensen, have resigned. We regret to see
them go, and we consider ourselves lucky to find such able replacements—Henry Beetle Hough and Rachael Williams. As most of you know, Mr. Hough did a great deal over the years to develop the society, and it is good to have him back on the Council. In addition to being a vigorous participant in the community activities of Oak Bluffs, Rachael Williams has frequently volunteered her services to the society, and we are delighted that she will now be with us in an official capacity.

Let me close by reminding you that with the bills this year, Mrs. Stoddard enclosed a letter appealing for donations to the Preservation Fund. In order to keep the house and artifacts in good condition, we are dependent on our members, and of course your regular dues just barely cover the cost of the Intelligencer. Therefore, if you have not already done so, please enclose a little something extra with your dues.

Thomas E. Norton
Curator
Some Publications

OF THE DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ON SALE
AT ISLAND BOOK STORES AND IN THE SOCIETY'S LIBRARY.

The Mammals of Martha's Vineyard by Allan R. Keith. Illustrated, paper. 50¢.

People To Remember by Dionis Coffin Riggs. Illustrated, paper. $4.95.


Tales and Trails of Martha's Vineyard by Joseph C. Allen. Illustrated. Paper, $3.95.


Indian Legends Of Martha's Vineyard by Dorothy R. Scoville. Paper $2.50.

An Introduction To Martha's Vineyard by Gale Huntington. Illustrated, paper. A new edition. $3.95.

Shipwrecks On Martha's Vineyard by Dorothy R. Scoville. Illustrated, paper. $3.00.