

# 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*

# DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

DORIS C. STODDARD . . . . . *President*  
 STANLEY MURPHY . . . . . *Vice President*  
 JOHN WORTH OSBORN . . . . . *Treasurer*  
 MARIAN R. HALPERIN . . . . . *Secretary*

### Council

DORRIS S. HOUGH . . . . . *Term expires 1978*  
 NELSON COON . . . . . *Term expires 1978*  
 RACHAEL WILLIAMS . . . . . *Term expires 1978*  
 B. JEAN SILVA . . . . . *Term expires 1977*  
 EDITH BLISS . . . . . *Term expires 1977*  
 REV. JOHN T. GOLDING . . . . . *Term expires 1977*  
 DOROTHY COTTLE POOLE . . . . . *Term expires 1976*  
 JOHN H. MONTGOMERY . . . . . *Term expires 1976*  
 HENRY BETTLE HOUGH . . . . . *Term expires 1976*  
 ALFRED HALL . . . . . *Ex Officio*

THOMAS NORTON . . . . . *Curator*  
 DOROTHY COTTLE POOLE . . . . . *Historian*  
 DORIS C. STODDARD . . . . . *Genealogist*  
 MARIAN R. HALPERIN . . . . . *Registrar*  
 ALISON SHAW . . . . . *Archivist*  
 DEIDAMIA OSBORN BETTENCOURT . . . . . *Reference Librarian*  
 GALE HUNTINGTON . . . . . *Acting Editor, Intelligencer*  
 ALISON SHAW . . . . . *Cover Artist*

### DUES

Active membership	\$5.00 annual dues
Active husband and wife membership	\$8.00 annual dues
Sustaining membership	\$25.00 annual dues
Life membership	\$100.00

The *Intelligencer* is mailed to all members of the Society as nearly on the day of issue as is possible. Others may buy current issues as well as such back copies are still in print for \$1.00.

PLEASE - give us your change of address promptly to save postage and insure arrival of every issue of the *Intelligencer*.

This Society is supported entirely by membership dues, gifts, and bequests.

Your gift or bequest will be deeply appreciated and should be made payable to the "Dukes County Historical Society, Inc." All such contributions are deductible under Federal Income Tax Law.

Copyright 1976

by the

Dukes County Historical Society, Inc.  
 Edgartown, Massachusetts

## 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. Obediah 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, imperturbable, 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 Shelldrake is so rakishly Shelldrakelike; the Black Duck so thoroughly a reclusive, 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 just 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 quarrelled 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."





82

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.



83

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.





86

VI Benjamin D. Smith. View of the bottom of the hen Canvasback of plate No. IV showing Smith's unique weight.



87

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.



88

VIII Benjamin D. Smith. Female Red-Breasted Merganser. The head bears the original paint but the badly worn body paint has been removed.



89

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.

At eight o'clock with Allen Weeks, Timothy Pease, Charlotte, Sarah, Lydia and myself. Had a real good time.

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, (treating). 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).

Sunday

Feb. 3rd

5 months since Bark *Sarah* sailed. Went to our meeting in the forenoon and evening. To the Methodish meeting in the afternoon with Lydia. Several were baptised, among whom were Velina Pease, Rebecca, Nancy Coffin & Ellen, and two others were taken into the church. Sophronia was baptised by immersion after the meeting.

Monday

Feb. 4th

To school. Henry Wade came down today. Received a note from Susan Maria. Went to female prayer meeting in the evening down to Mary Raymond's. It was real good meeting. A. L. Weeks went home with me.

Tuesday

Feb. 5th

Charlotte came to school with me all day. Received a letter from Ann-Frances this afternoon. Went to meeting this evening. 2 months since Ann-Frances left.

Wednesday

Feb. 6th

To school in the forenoon. Down to Lydia's and spent the afternoon. (watch chain). Went to meeting in the evening.

Thursday

Feb. 7th

9 months since Ship *Walter Scott* sailed. Did not go to school in the afternoon. Went to meeting in the evening.

Friday

Feb. 8th

To school all day. Barnard Luce came down today. Went to sewing circle in the evening. Wrote a letter to Ann-Frances.

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 storn, 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.

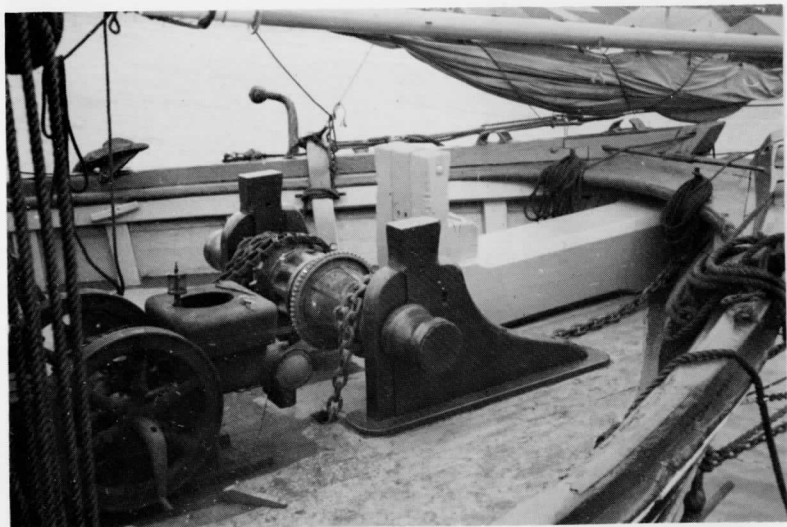


Schooner *Alice S. Wentworth* towing the dory and with the yawl boat on the davits. Everything set but the foretopsail and flying jib. Note the patches in the mainsail.

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.



Foredeck of the *Wentworth* showing the windlass catted anchor and the donkey engine or h'ister.

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 thing.

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 do 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.

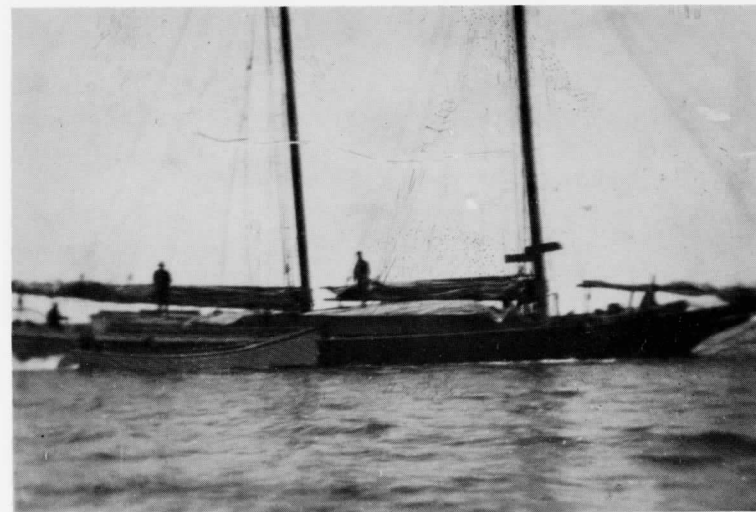
The *Wentworth* was at the dock in Woods Hole - tied up - when she sank in 1964 after a storm had opened her seams. She was raised and appraised for three hundred dollars. But Anthony Athanas of Boston bought her for thirteen thousand five hundred dollars as a floating attraction at his Pier 4 restaurant. 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 cultch 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.

#### Bibliography

Burroughs, Polly. *Zeb*, Riverside, Connecticut, Chatham Press, Inc., 1972.

Landstrom, Bjorn. *Sailing Ships*, Garden City, N. Y. Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969.

Leavitt, John F. *Wake Of The Coasters*, Middletown, Conn. Wesleyan University Press, 1970.

O'Brien, Louis Edward V. and Robert O'Brien. *Ships*, New York, N.Y., Time, Inc., 1965.

*Vineyard Gazette*, Edgartown, Mass., 1938-1973.

#### 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 Whalemens 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.

*The Heath Hen's Journey to Extinction* by Henry Beetle Hough. Illustrations. Paper 50¢.

*The Fishes of Martha's Vineyard* by Joseph B. Elvin. With 36 illustrations of fishes by Will Huntington. Paper, 50¢.

*The History of Martha's Vineyard* by Charles Edward Banks. A new edition. Indices, illustrations, three volumes. Cloth, \$30.00.

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

*"Cap'n George Fred" Himself.* The autobiography of Captain George Fred Tilton of Chilmark. A new edition. Cloth. \$6.50.

*Wild Flowers of Martha's Vineyard* by Nelson Coon. 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.