

The View from
The Crow's Nest



Newsletter of the Mattapoisett Historical Society

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Fifty-two years of preserving the past for the benefit of the future.

The Alaskan Territory And Captain Charles Bryant

BY SETH MENDELL

“Next to myself, you owe it to Captain Bryant that we were successful in purchasing so valuable a territory “ Senator Charles Sumner

The United States purchased the Alaska Territory from Russia in 1867. The question as to the value of the area had been debated in the U.S. Senate numerous times for nearly thirteen years starting in 1854. No one knew much about this vast stretch of land laying beyond Canada's northwest coast until Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, working with Secretary of State Seward summoned several whaling captains to Washington to testify as to the extent and nature of the area. Captain Bryant proved to be the most knowledgeable as he had made several whaling voyages to the north Pacific and into the Arctic Ocean and possessed an intimate knowledge of the Alaskan coast and its geographical features. Following the testimony of these men, Congress passed a bill to purchase Alaska.

Born in 1820, Charles Bryant was one of seven children and grew up on his father's farm in Rochester. As many boys did, he spent the summer months carrying fruit and vegetables in a horse drawn cart from the family farm to the shipyards in Mattapoisett. Here he sold to the ship's carpenters and to the general store owned by Harlow LeBaron. Young Charles enjoyed these daily trips to the harbor as he was fascinated by the activity of the waterfront with ships going and coming. The salt

air smelled fresh and clean compared to the odors of the barnyard and he was always eager to listen to the tales of returning sailors. Tales about the lowering of the boats, the “Nantucket sleigh-ride” and the “kill” fascinated him. Then there were the stories of tropical islands with long white beaches, girls swimming in the surf and native feasts with exotic foods. Such tales sparked the imagination of the boy and whet his appetite for adventure.

At the age of twenty he shipped aboard the whaler “Montezuma” out of New Bedford returning three years later. After a year, he shipped a second time in 1844 on a four year voyage. During the voyage the ship's captain was struck on the head by the heavy boarding tackle and died instantly. This brought about a ripple of advancement up the chain of command. The first mate became the captain and



Captain Charles Bryant and companion at “Witch Rock” in Rochester



Bryant, who had proved to be an able seaman, was promoted to fill the vacated position of fourth mate at the bottom of the chain. On his third voyage aboard the “Abraham Barker” in 1848, he shipped as Third Mate and in 1850 he sailed as Second Mate aboard the “Gideon Howard.” In 1853 he sailed again on the “Gideon Howard” as Captain and four years later he captained the whaler “America” out of New Bedford. These voyages took him all over the Pacific and particularly to Alaska, the Aleutians, the Bering Sea and the Arctic.

After twenty years of life at sea, Charles Bryant retired and married Hannah Eldridge of New Bedford in 1861. He and his bride bought a farm in East Fairhaven at the head of Nasketucket Bay and for five years he settled into farming before being summoned to Washington where his testimony would lead to the purchase of the Alaskan Territory in 1867.

One hundred and twenty six years earlier, in 1741, Captain Vitus Bering, a Danish navigator/explorer sailing for Empress Ann of Russia, discovered Alaska. Fourteen years earlier he had been engaged by Peter the Great to find out what lay between Asia and North America. On this first voyage, he sailed up the coast of Siberia from the Russian peninsula of Kamchatka, passing through the Bering Straits and Bering Sea (both to later bear his name). But, due to bad weather and fog, he and his crew were forced to turn back without ever sighting Alaska only thirty miles to the east. However, on a second voyage, Capt. Bering’s course lay to the south of the Aleutian Islands and into the Gulf of Alaska where, on July 16, 1741, he sighted the 18,000 foot peak of Mount St. Elias which he so named. Unfortunately, Captain Bering died on the return voyage and never knew the full extent of his discovery.



Alaskan Territory 1867

Following the discovery of this large unexplored area, legions of Russian fur hunters and trappers descended on the coastal areas. They were after the sea otter whose pelt was highly valued for its warmth and softness. Russian towns sprang up along the Alaskan and Canadian coasts and down into Oregon and northern California. For a hundred years, Russian fur companies made huge profits exploiting the territory and inhabitants until Tsar Alexander II negotiated with the United States. Russia and England were at odds in the Middle East and Alexander did not want hostilities with the British in North America. The U.S. on the other hand viewed Alaska not only as a safe haven for the whaling fleets but as an area rich in natural resources.

The United States paid Russia \$7.2 million for Alaska and following the purchase, the Treasury Department, which had jurisdiction over the territory, asked Captain Bryant to administrate the vast tract of land. So, after only seven years on the Fairhaven farm, Charles Bryant answered the call of his government arriving in Sitka, Alaska in September of 1868. His first order of business being to rid Alaskan waters of Russian hunters and trappers, he engaged the aid of the steam



powered frigate “USS Wyanda”, whose guns soon ended the Russian presence. In the fall of 1869, he returned to Washington to seek congressional approval of a comprehensive plan to regulate the hunting and killing of the sea otter, seal and other marine animals. All commercial hunting would be licensed and the income generated used to enforce quotas and restrictions. Fortunately, in that same year, Governor Stamford of California drove a ceremonial gold spike connecting the rails of the Transcontinental Railroad in Ogden, Utah, enabling Captain Bryant to travel to the nation’s capital and back in several months, rather than a year or more sailing around South America twice.

For the next seven years, Captain Bryant devoted his efforts to improving the living of the Aleuts, the native inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands. Houses were built, communities were formed complete with schools and churches and inter-island transport was arranged connecting the islands with the mainland. Towards the end of his stay in Alaska, his wife and niece joined him. They also had a young Aleut living with them who had lost his parents. The boy always called Captain Bryant grandfather. One day the Captain said to him, “How old do you think I am?” After studying Captain Bryant carefully (the Aleuts have very little facial hair and the Captain had a full beard), the boy answered without hesitation “360 years”. When asked how he came to that conclusion, the boy replied, “A man in my village has a beard and is 60 years old. Your beard is six times as long as his!”

After ten years in Alaska, Captain Bryant resigned his position and returned with his wife to the farm in Fairhaven. However, within a year he sold the farm and purchased the Bay View Hotel (the old Meigs tavern)

in Mattapoisett which he owned and operated for twenty five years. The Captain was a familiar figure around Mattapoisett walking in the winter wearing a long black cape as he had in Alaska to keep out the cold. In the summer he worked in his vegetable garden on Barstow Street where the library is today. He was active in town affairs and served on the school committee for several years. Through the doors of the Bay View Hotel, along with the usual flow of guests, came special guests to see Captain Bryant. Whalers and Cabinet Members, Aleuts and Senators came to talk with this man who sailed the length and breadth of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and had played such an important role in the Alaskan Territory. Occasionally, a Russian woman of royalty would visit, someone he had known or the wife of someone he had known long ago in that far off corner of the world.

Charles Bryant died July 2, 1903 at the age of 83, of stomach cancer. His remains lie in the Sherman Cemetery in Rochester. Although born in Rochester, it was the Mattapoisett waterfront that took him to sea, and it was Mattapoisett he returned to for the last years of his life. It has been said he wrote his memoirs prior to this death, but if so, they vanished at the time of his passing.



Bay View Hotel on Water Street now Kinsale Inn



MURAL RESTORATION UPDATE BY GIANFRANCO POCOBENE

On Sunday, April 10, Gianfranco Pocobene gave a power point presentation to a very attentive audience at the Mattapoissett Museum. With numerous slides, he detailed the various steps in the cleaning process of the surface of the “chart” and then the removal of the canvas from its ridged backing.

At present, the back side of the mural is being cleaned of adhesive in preparation for being re-attached to a flexible backing. With that done, the 6' x 16' “chart” will be stretched over a lightweight frame.

Mr. Pocobene said he hoped to have the mural ready for delivery by the end of May, ready to be hung on the wall over the pulpit in the church building of the museum. However, it will be mid-summer before this extraordinary work by Clifford Ashley is ready for viewing.

A gala event to mark the occasion will take place Sunday afternoon on July 31 at 5:30 pm. Please note the posters that will be up in town and notice in the “Wanderer.”

CURATOR’S CORNER BY BETTE ROBERTS

SUMMER AT THE MUSEUM

While we await the arrival of the Ashley Mural, our special summer exhibit will focus on Mattapoissett’s role in the Civil War. From letters and other papers to uniforms, swords and other memorabilia, this small, but significant exhibit, will be of interest to all.

OPEN HOUSE

Our annual Open House at the Museum will be held on June 30 from 5:00 to 7:00 pm. The Museum and Carriage House will open for the summer on July 1. Museum hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 1:00 - 4:00 pm.

DOCENTS NEEDED

There is always a need for docents at the museum during the summer to welcome visitors and help them enjoy our collection. If you are interested in being a docent this summer, please call Bette at the Museum 508-758-2844.

HISTORICAL DOLL TEA PARTY



Children ages 8 and up are invited to tea on the veranda with their historic dolls on June 26 from 2:00 - 3:30 pm at the Purrington House (Main Street) in Mattapoissett. Come dressed in 1800s style, or we will have clothing ready for you. We will enjoy an old-fashioned tea and some games and crafts from the same time period. Space is limited so please pre-register with Bette Roberts at the Museum at 508-758-2844.



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If, in our listing, we have missed anyone, please accept our sincere apologies and please contact us.

2011 Upcoming Programs

June 26	2:00 pm	Historical Doll Tea
June 30	5:00 pm	Open House
July 6	6:30 pm	Ice Cream Social
July 16, 17		Harbor Days
July 31	5:30 pm	Mural Gala
August 4	2:00 pm	Seth Presents the Civil War

While some of the information is still incomplete as we go to press, we want to be sure you know what the Historical Society has planned for you! Please visit www.mattapoisethistoricalsociety.org for an updated program schedule.



WORLD WAR II VETERANS DESCRIBE THEIR WAR EXPERIENCES

BY TOM COPPS

Two local veterans of World War II, Martin Smith and Norman Cayer, gave fascinating accounts of their war experiences to a large group at the Historical Museum on March 6.

Mr. Smith was called to serve on the first day of his senior year in college, and assigned to a B-17 flight crew as an aerial gunner. He gave fascinating accounts of training in Tennessee, during which the pilots would occasionally resort to flying low and reading the town names on water towers in order to find the way back to the airstrip. While stationed in England the crew was sent on a run to Czechoslovakia when they encountered three waves of German fighter jets and were shot down. Finding themselves unharmed on the ground but behind enemy lines, Mr. Smith was captured and sent to a German Stalag (prisoner of war camp). He was held in the camp for 8 months during which the prisoners found creative and unique ways to pass the time. One day without warning the prisoners were told that the camp was about to be overrun by Russian soldiers advancing toward Berlin and were



Martin Smith

marched out of the camp toward another Stalag. The march was to last 43 grueling days through decaying German armed forces. Finally, this second camp was liberated by British soldiers.

Mr. Cayer had wanted to join the marines in 1942 to serve his country, but was not accepted because he was color blind. He was immediately assigned to the U.S. Navy (and joked that they apparently didn't care about his ability to see blue). He was assigned to a submarine based in Portsmouth, NH, onboard which he sailed south to Miami and then Nicaragua. After passing through the Panama Canal his sub traveled up to the Puget Sound. Ultimately he was to serve on two carriers, the Tarawa and Wright. He ended up on a Navy Personnel Carrier taking part in offshore protection during the Okinawa invasion – a massive invasion which he pointed out involved over 1,000 ships. His role was manning a 20mm “gun tub,” aimed at battering shore installations and providing cover for the American forces. He made the statement that “life is a big voyage, you go along to get along.”



Norman Cayer

LIONS CLUB AT THE MUSEUM

BY KATHERINE GAUDET

This past December, the Museum opened its doors for some holiday cheer, inviting the Lions Club to stop by before its meeting at the Kinsale Inn. The Museum was decked out in Christmas finery, and on display was the Clifford Ashley mural in addition to the rest of the Museum's treasures. Seth Mendell talked about the history of the mural as well as the Museum's efforts to restore it. Katherine Gaudet was on hand to answer any questions. After viewing, everyone left for the Kinsale Inn where Seth had prepared another treat for the members.

After a delicious dinner and an awards ceremony, Seth presented his Mattapoissett Quiz for all to try to complete. After several minutes, time was called, and Seth began to give answers to his questions. It was affirming to see how many of the questions Lions members were able to answer. Lions certainly knew their Mattapoissett history!



ELIZABETH ISLANDS WORD SEARCH

By LISA HILL

W D C A N E S L W T D L A D D T P S H E
 I C R S L A O E P I N K T N N N I S I C
 P W H O W A S R E I L W A C E U R S O L
 O N O W F E V O C N I L U A P R A T W I
 R H P A O F H E L S S O I O A C T P A S
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 M E W I A E K L U O K A R K T U O K H S
 T T A G N C Y O Q E L B E S M S U O H R
 P U N S E L O H S N O S N I B O R U D T
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 W H A E W K D H H N R I H K R O C A N F

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 CHANNEL
 CONCORD
 CUTTYHUNK
 FORBES
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GOSNOLD
 HADLEY HARBOR
 KETTLE COVE
 LOOKOUT HILL
 MAYHEW
 NASHAWENA
 NAUSHON

PASQUE
 PENIKESE
 PIRATES
 QUICKS HOLE
 ROBINSONS HOLE
 SHEEP
 SLOCUM

SOW AND PIGS
 TARPAULIN COVE
 TIMBER
 WANDERER
 WEEPECKET ISLAND
 WILLIAM WOOD
 WOODS HOLE

CUTTYHUNK AND THE ELIZABETH ISLANDS, CHAPTER II

By KATHERINE GAUDET

On March 6, to another packed house, Seth Mendell delivered part two of his Cuttyhunk and the Elizabeth Islands series. An inimitable storyteller, Seth brought history alive with his depictions of piracy, politics, and profiles of the rich, poor, and famous.

Attendees learned about John Murray Forbes and William Wood, and their impact on the region. Seth also talked about the New York millionaires who joined the club and came to the island to fish for striped bass. Dressed in their three piece suits, ties, and straw hats, the fishermen climbed out onto

gangplanks covering rocks that connected them to shore. They chummed the bass with lobster!

Listeners heard about the adventures of the “Wanderer,” the last whale ship built in Mattapoissett, that was launched from New Bedford on April 23, 1878. Seth told the story of how she took her last voyage out of New Bedford and in a gale, “fetched up” on Cuttyhunk Island during a nor’easter. One of the Wanderer’s mast hangs in the Museum today.

Part III of Seth’s talks will be delivered next year and will explore the islands of Nashawena, Pasque and Penikese with its leper colony.



MATTAPOISETT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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