

*The View from*

# The Crow's Nest



*Newsletter of the Mattapoisett Historical Society*

November 2016 / Issue XXIX

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

## *The Journal Keepers*

*A Mattapoisett life as recorded in the journals kept by Sarah and Nathaniel Ransom in 1870.*

by David Anderson  
Contributing Member

“Sarah and I went to Sippican and were married by Rev. Mr. Cobb. From there we went home again. My dear wife & I spent a part of the evening to Father’s.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to his journal entry on June 27, 1869, Nathaniel Cushing Ransom, age 23, tied the knot with Sarah Dexter, age 21, the girl next door on Pine Island Road. Eighteen weeks later, on November 9, he sailed from New Bedford, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mate on the Bark *John Wells*, to go whale hunting in the Arctic. His new wife recalled their wedding day in her journal for March 2, 1870: “It is just nine months today since Nattie and I called one ... I am lonely ... How I wish Nattie could be home with me.” Later, in a poignant entry from May 9, Sarah looks ahead: “[I]t is just six months today since I saw you, my dear husband, and I expect there are several more six months before I shall see your dear face, but I will try to be patient and hope for the best. Good night, darling Nattie.”

She was right. Her Nattie was one of several hundred whalers whose ships were trapped and destroyed by early onset arctic ice in the winter of 1870-71. In fact, his journal of that voyage is an important part of the record of the destruction of the fleet. It also gives us a chance

to view what each of the newlyweds was doing on a day-to-day basis. Nathaniel was rescued, as were most of the other trapped mariners, but he would not return to Mattapoisett until November of 1871, three more six-month periods.

An accomplished seamstress, Sarah kept busy while Nattie was away. She earned money at home for her piecework on men’s coats, as well as her crocheting and dressmaking. And when she wasn’t sewing, she found plenty to occupy herself: “Aunt Hannah came up for me to do her hair” (May 24); “have been out dropping<sup>2</sup> corn for father all day” (May 13); “went



**Fig. 1 Sarah Dexter and Nathaniel Ransom, June 27, 1869.** (Frink, Helen H. (2015). *Oil, Ice, and Bone: Arctic Whaler Nathaniel Ransom*. Portsmouth: Peter E. Randall Publisher, p. 83)

<sup>1</sup> NCR’s matter of fact description makes it sound like a spur of the moment action. Probably not. The couple’s wedding certificate reflects careful planning. It includes formal photographic portraits of Nathaniel and Sarah. See Fig. 1.

(continued on next page)



## **The Journal Keepers** (continued from cover)



**Fig. 2** Mattapoisett village, c. 1879. (Walker & Co., pub. (1879). *Atlas of Plymouth County, Massachusetts*. Boston: Geo H. Walker & Co., pg. 91)

a-fishing ... caught one small tautog<sup>3</sup>" (May 21). Sarah had attended public school, probably in the village and maybe even with Nattie, and there's hardly a misspelled word in the 176 entries that comprise her 1870 journal. Her entries invariably begin with the weather: "Very pleasant today" shows up often; "Cloudy most of the day" (Apr. 22); "Stormy" (Apr. 17); "A rain storm" (Mar. 27). And just as regularly, she concludes her entries with a few words about her evening activities: "Theo<sup>4</sup> and his father have been in for a while" (Jan. 4); "have been at home, no one in" (Jan. 8); "went to David Hiller's to a party this evening, stopped with Bettie all night" (Jan. 13).

There will be an archaic usage in Sarah's journals now and then, but remarkably few.

Her entries extend from page edge to page edge with no margins at all. Often only three lines, though sometimes more, there are usually three or four entries per page. The day of the week, month, and year appear at the head of each page. Nathaniel's journaling style was similar to Sarah's, and the pages and entries are headed the same way. He begins with the weather and often follows with the ship's location. Then he may add a few words about the ship's catch or other activities. The only days Sarah missed until the final entry on June 28, 1870, were June 4, 5, and 6. On June 7 she explained: "... went to New Bedford Saturday, stayed until last night. Susie went with me. We went to the circus yesterday, had a nice time." It's likely that her 1870 journal was preceded and followed by ones that have been lost.

### **3 The hard-fighting, excellent-tasting Blackfish**

## 4 Her brother-in-law



The journal we do have provides a look at life in east Mattapoisett (aka “Dextertown”) and to a lesser degree, the village itself: “father has been to town meeting” (Apr. 4); “mother went to an auction to the village this afternoon and bought a bureau, rocking chair and mattress” (Mar. 26); “went down [to the village] this morning & took my [organ] lesson” (Mar. 8). She practiced at home quite regularly for these weekly lessons until she “went and took my last lesson this morning” (Jun. 9). A map of the village from 1879 shows that it had much the same character and a great many of the same buildings as it does today (see Fig. 2). If the young married Ransom couple could return today for a visit, they would have no trouble finding their way around.

Sarah put her considerable skills as a seamstress to good use, earning the money to furnish and decorate their new home. Much of it came from her piecework on men’s ready-to-wear coats. Up until the Civil War most men’s dress clothes were tailor-made; everyday clothes were handmade. The war’s demand for uniforms in all sizes led to the development of standard sizes and associated patterns. After the war, these patterns were used to mass produce men’s clothing. For a deposit of as little as \$50.00, jobbers could obtain pre-cut cotton cloth and patterns from the nearby textile mills – Wamsutta Mills in New Bedford or one of the thirteen mills in Fall River – then coordinate the tasks with individual workers. Each worker like Sarah performed a step in the process until the garments, coats in this case, were finished and ready for the retail market.

Sarah’s journal does not describe her particular part of the process. It does include, in over 40 entries, her work on 250 or more coats from January to June 1870. She could complete her step on as many as ten coats a day, but six was the norm, and she probably earned 15 cents or so for each one. At least one of her friends also took coats: her entry for May 26 records sewing on eight coats for her friend Lois who had been called out of town. She was also in demand to create clothes for friends and family: “brought Lizzie’s dress home to make” (Jan. 11); “cut out a dress skirt for Bettie” (Feb. 3); “finished father’s vest” (Mar. 30); “got my pay of Mrs. Norris for crocheting today” (Jun. 23).

Her Mattapoisett days more or less reflected the old nursery rhyme rhythm: ‘Wash on Monday, Iron on Tuesday, Mend on Wednesday, Churn on Thursday, Clean on Friday, Bake on Saturday, Rest on Sunday.’ “We washed this morning” (Monday, Jan. 3); got our ironing done” (Tuesday, Jan. 18); “have been working some on Lizzie’s dress” (Wednesday, Jan. 12); “have been helping mother clean buttery” (Thursday, Apr. 21); “we have cleaned the parlor and my room today” (Friday, Apr. 29); “made pies this afternoon” (Saturday, Apr. 23); “reading most of the time” (Sunday, May 8). There were many exceptions, but one gets the sense that the family saw to its domestic needs not just as they arose, but in an orderly fashion.

Despite marrying into a Quaker<sup>5</sup> family, Sarah nevertheless eschewed an ‘all work and no play’ approach to life. Sarah and her friends found time to play: “popping corn & making corn balls this forenoon” (January 12); “went to school this afternoon to hear the scholars speak pieces” (January 28); “played dominoes with mother & two games of checkers with father” (January 29); “Uncle Roll & I had a few games of backgammon tonight as we did not know what else to do” (April 3); “Becca and Deborah were here & played croquet” (April 30); “Becca, Delia & myself have been out rowing tonight – had a splendid time” (May 16).

(continued on next page)

<sup>5</sup> The Dexters were probably Congregationalists, and the Ransoms, Quakers. The Rev. Cobb was a Congregational Minister, which suggests that the couple was married in her church, not his.



## The Journal Keepers (continued from previous page)

Sarah was always on the lookout for mail from Nattie. Here, again, she would need patience. She wrote him a letter most weeks, often on Sunday: “have commenced a letter to Nattie” (May 22); “wrote a letter to Nattie this morning” (Jun. 19). But the hit-or-miss nature of mail service from the Arctic precluded timely responses. Letters to him would be carried by a ship bound out of Honolulu headed to the whaling grounds, passed over to the *John Wells* if and when the ships hooked up. His letters would eventually reach her in the same manner: passed first to a Honolulu-bound ship when the opportunity arose, and from there to be forwarded to San Francisco or Oakland for the rail trip to the east coast. In that manner, Sarah “found three [letters] from my darling husband & how glad I was to have them” (May 13). No others reached her during the period covered by her journal although his contemporaneous journal reflects the many times he wrote to her.

In the decade following Nathaniel’s return in the fall of 1871, the couple had four children: two daughters, Laura and Eunice, followed by two sons, Clarence and Everett (the author’s grandfather). The family first moved to a small house at the corner of Foster Street and Shipyard Lane, and then in 1881, to the farm on Marion Road which now houses the “On the Go” sandwich shop. Nathaniel lived there until his death in 1907 and his widow, Sarah, until she passed in the late 1930s.



Fig. 3 Sarah Ransom, 1938.

## Annual Meeting 2016 by Jennifer N. McIntire

The pews were full on Sunday, September 25 for the society’s Annual Meeting. As usual reports were made and votes were taken. We welcomed three new members to our Board of Directors – Kyle DeCicco-Carey, John Oldham, and Alison Van Keuren. Kyle is an archivist and reference librarian at Harvard University’s Property Information Resource Center. He has already served for the past six months due to a mid-year board seat opening. Kyle is a skilled researcher, enjoys writing about history, and learning about museum practices. John is a high school history teacher at Old Colony and a realtor. His tremendous enthusiasm for Mattapoisett and history is readily apparent. Alison is an occupational therapist with the Southcoast Visiting Nurses Association and the public schools. She is a tri-town native and an avid sailor. Maureen McCarthy and Lisa Hill are stepping down from the board and will be sorely missed. Thank you for your service and dedication to the historical society.

Following official business, we engaged the group in a strategic exercise. The historical society’s Board of Directors is working to ensure the society lasts in perpetuity. We want to continue to engage our community by providing programs, exhibits, and events





that educate, entertain, and encourage participation. We feel a tremendous responsibility to preserve our collection and serve the community. To that end we must be mindful and intentional regarding our legacy. We must evolve to remain relevant and vital. Last year we completed a self-assessment through the American Alliance of Museum's Museum Assessment Program. We continue our work to develop a more intentional plan for the historical society, to increase our knowledge about resources available to help the museum, and to advance the museum's ability to provide financial sustainability. As a board we have set aside time during our meetings to think strategically about our future. We are in the process of drafting a 4-year strategic plan. We are crafting a vision that will carry us into the future as well as strategic objectives and tactics to accomplish that vision. At the Annual Meeting we reached out to the membership asking two questions:

*How can we engage more of our community through programs, exhibits, and events?*

*How can we address/overcome the historical society's obstacles? (examples of obstacles: financial sustainability, membership, etc.)*

We divided into four break-out groups to efficiently gather input from the large group of members present. The group was comprised of teachers, realtors, small business owners, marketing executives, attorneys, former as well as current board directors, etc. This dedicated group gave us incredible feedback that will impact our vision and strategic plan, as well as our priorities going forward.

Once the strategic work was done, Seth Mendell entertained and educated the crowd with two stories of famous fires in Mattapoisett. The first was about the whaleship *Joseph Meigs* that returned to its homeport too loaded with whale oil to enter the harbor and caught fire while at anchor off Ned's Point while waiting to be unloaded. The second story involved a building that stood on what is today Shipyard Park and how its tragic burning threatened the whole of Mattapoisett village. Many members socialized after Seth's talk over refreshments in the Mendell Room.



## ***MHS Yard Sale***

**by Kathleen Damaskos**

Early on Saturday, June 4, 2016, Mattapoisett Historical Society's Carriage House became the scene of a yard sale that spilled out onto the Baptist Street lawn. Enthusiastic history-lovers and second-hand merchandise aficionados began queuing up before 7:00 am for the first crack at the goods. Promptly at 8:00 am, the Carriage House hummed with the contented sounds of successful treasure-hunters and buyers. Sale items included furniture, china, housewares, hundreds of issues of the Presto Press, and donated treasures from MHS supporters. A few items from the museum's collection were also for sale - these were carefully selected objects that were unrelated to Mattapoisett or duplicates of which we have many copies.

The yard sale yielded a total of \$1,766, including \$759 in proceeds from items from the museum collection, which is now restricted to future museum acquisitions. The remainder, just over \$1,000, is available to fund MHS general operations.



## *The Great Community Picnic*

by Kathleen Damaskos

On August 4, 2016, a picture-perfect evening attracted 200+ community members, friends, and neighbors to The Great Community Picnic, co-hosted by the Mattapoisett Historical Society and Mattapoisett Land Trust. Munro Preserve on the harbor provided a magical setting, with rows of pristine, white linen-covered tables, a gentle breeze, and live music. As dusk descended, festive twinkle lights and hurricane candles lent additional ambiance.

Participants brought their own picnic dinners and, for many, gorgeous centerpieces and place settings. Wine, beer, and oysters were available for purchase. Complimentary hors d'oeuvres were passed.



It was a marvelous combination of friend-raiser and fund-raiser. MHS and MLT each netted \$1,820 after expenses. Feedback has been extraordinarily positive with a unanimous appeal for another Great Community Picnic next year.

Our sincerest thanks are due to Andrea and Nils at The Inn on Shipyard Park for their contribution of hors d'oeuvres, Bob Fields for his donated Coot Cove fresh oysters, David Dunn for arranging free live music by his own band, Huxter, along with Glowbox and Grace Morrison, and the picnic planners from both MHS and MLT: Jenn McIntire, Mike Huguennin, Sharon Chown, Arthur and Kathleen Damaskos, Peter and Melissa Davies, Chris Demakis, Ellen Flynn, and Sandy Hering.



### **Mattapoisett Historical Society**

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Jennifer McIntire

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Leda Kim

*Treasurer*

Kathleen Damaskos

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Chris Demakis  
John Oldham  
Alison Van Keuren

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Nate Bekemeier  
Jim Broadwater  
Lisa Hill  
Maureen McCarthy

*President Emeritus*

Seth Mendell

*Curator*

Jeffrey Miller

*Crow's Nest Editor*

Mary Beth Morse



## WWI Seminars

by Jennifer N. McIntire

Seth Mendell returned to Mattapoisett full of energy and ready to contribute. In addition to four Walking Tours of Historic Mattapoisett (one for high school students studying local history), a lecture on the history of Naushon Island (that drew a HUGE crowd) as well as his usual building and repairing, Seth gave the town a 5-lecture seminar series on the history of World War I. The lectures were a collaboration with the Mattapoisett Free Public Library and were held in the library's Meeting Room on Tuesday evenings.



Mendell started out by introducing Mattapoisett's life-long learners to the nations of Europe as they were in the last half of the 19th century, and the circumstances that led to the outbreak of war in 1914. In his second lecture, Mendell kept his students engaged as he described the failure of the initial German offensive, how the British Gallipoli Campaign was devised, and the importance of naval forces to the conflict. The lecture ended with the disastrous sinking of the *Lusitania*. His third lecture focused on some of the war's most notable battles and events played out in the context of changing warfare practices in the early 20th century. Mendell outlined the circumstances that brought the US into the war and the impact of Lenin's ascendance in Russia during his fourth lecture. And finally, he wrapped up his seminars by discussing the American side of the conflict and the eventual surrender of Germany and the Central Powers.

Each lecture drew a large crowd and many individuals were present for all five talks. Next summer Seth plans to offer a 6-lecture series focusing on the years between the two World Wars.

### SUPPORT YOUR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Mattapoisett Historical Society is a not-for profit 501(c) (3) educational institution, chartered in 1958. The Historical Society relies on private funding to support its mission. Donations through the Annual Appeal, membership and additional funding support a wide variety of programs and activities for schools, families, adults and children, engaging exhibits which explore Mattapoisett's culture and history, and the care and maintenance of the museum's collections.

The Society is supported through the generosity of individuals, families, foundations and businesses who wish to help us *Preserve the Past for the Benefit of the Future*. In addition to being a member, please consider other ways you can support our efforts:

**Memorial Gifts or Contributions in Honor:** Mark an anniversary, a passing, or honor a loved one with a donation to the Historical Society

**Bequests:** Naming the Mattapoisett Historical Society as a beneficiary in your will will leave an enduring legacy for the future.

**Corporate Matching Gift Programs:** Please check with your employer to see if they offer a matching gift program.

**Business Sponsorships:** We offer many ways for local businesses to sponsor the Historical Society and its efforts.



## Thank You Docents!

The Board of Directors and staff would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the docents who volunteered their time this summer. Your dedication and enthusiasm are what bring the museum alive for visitors. Thank you!

Carol Atkinson

Ann Briggs

Diane Brown-Couture

Karen Browning

Cecile Callahan

Ruth Cederberg

Carole Clifford

Ann Coggins

Penny Cole

Wendy Copps

Alice DeCicco-Carey

Kyle DeCicco-Carey

Margaret DeMello

Blaise Dugan

Tom Dugan

Gail Dunn

Lois Ennis

Ellen Flynn

Katherine Gaudet

Nancy Gauvin

Nancy Griswold

Pat Goss

Lisa Hill

Bobbi Ketchel

Anne Layton

Bob Marklin

Brendan McIntire

Jenn McIntire

Alice Mendell

Eileen Mullen

Carol Shute

Jackie Slade

Jean West

## Docent Profiles

### Eileen Mullen

**How long have you lived, vacationed, etc. in Mattapoisett?** *I have lived in Mattapoisett for 27 years.*

**How did you get involved with the historical society?** *I was first introduced to the Mattapoisett Historical Society when my daughter Gracie attended Center School. I chaperoned her 3rd grade class trip.*

**How long have you been a docent?** *I was asked by current president and friend Jenn McIntire if I could volunteer a few days this summer as docent.*

**What did you enjoy about it?** *I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed this experience, and would certainly do it again.*

**What is your favorite object, exhibit, etc. in the museum?** *I particularly loved the exhibit this summer on the history of the road race!*

### Lois Ennis

**How long have you lived, vacationed, etc. in Mattapoisett?** *I've lived here my whole life, except for three or four years when I was down in the Washington D.C. area right after I got married and I was working for the Navy. My two sons were born down there, and then we came back to Mattapoisett. So that's about 75 years.*

**How did you get involved with the historical society?** *Well my involvement has been a little sketchy, but early on I became a permanent member. I was also Town Clerk for 35 years here, and I'm just very proud and very endeared to the town and its past, and its present, and hopefully its future.*

**How long have you been a docent?** *Maybe ten years? It's been a while. Bette Roberts was curator when I first started.*

**What do you enjoy about it?** *Being able to steer people to some of the interesting exhibits, and to talk about the exhibits. And it's such a small, unique little museum that most people are surprised when they come in. It's always nice to be able to greet the people and direct them to the main exhibit that is going on. I don't get asked very many questions, I get asked a few, but not a whole lot of questions. But to make sure they see all the features, including back to the Carriage House and the second floor with the saltworks and everything.*

**What is your favorite object, exhibit, etc. in the museum?** *Hmm, that's hard to say. I'm certainly very impressed by the Wanderer mast. I'm so glad that ended up here when it was struck by lightning many years ago.*



## *Curator's Corner*

by Jeffrey Miller

What a great summer! We opened our seasonal exhibit in July as usual, and it was a great success. This year's exhibit, *Mattapoisett Fun: Celebrate Summer*, explored the traditional summer pastimes and events of Mattapoisett, with a particular emphasis on those people whose hard work made many of them possible. We covered The Rochester Memorial Day Boat Race, Wharf Dances, Harbor Days, the 4th of July Road Race, as well as swimming, boating, biking, baseball, golf, and more. While there was an occasional quiet day (too many other things to do in Mattapoisett!), the exhibit drew a steady stream of visitors through the summer months, including locals, passers-by, and international yachters. We also had visits from a group of home school students and a Nature Explorers group. A big thank you to all those who helped out with the exhibit by contributing their knowledge, objects, and efforts.



We also had a series of great events over the summer. Some were longtime annual events, such as our Ice Cream Social, Open House, and Harbor Days. Others were new collaborations with other town organizations. We had great experiences working with the Mattapoisett Land Trust on the Great Community Picnic and participating in The Home Scoop with the Mattapoisett Congregational Church. And of course, we had Seth Mendell's fantastic walking tours and lectures. This was my first opportunity to see one of Seth's tours, so I was sure to make arrangements so I could leave the museum in good hands and learn about the village and hear Seth's stories!

New acquisitions have been mostly related to the exhibit theme, and include pictures of boat and road races, a collection of golf schedules, an architectural print of the Reservation, copies of the history of the Mattapoisett Yacht Club, and newspaper articles about Oscar Tinkham, an early 1900s baseball player from Mattapoisett. Most recently, however, Bill Feeney donated a 19th-century scrimshaw whale's tooth, inscribed with a message from Francis Stetson to Elisha Handy, who captained several voyages out of Mattapoisett in the mid-1800s. This is a great addition to our collection – thank you Bill!



If you have an hour or two a week and are looking for an interesting and fun way to spend some time, please join our year round Volunteer Program. If you have a particular interest, we have a need! Please email [mattapoisett.museum@verizon.net](mailto:mattapoisett.museum@verizon.net) or call (508) 758-2844 with any questions. We look forward to hearing from you!



## *The Holidays are Coming!*

The Mattapoisett Historical Society's 3rd annual Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair will be held at the museum on Saturday, December 3 from 9:00 am until 12 noon. The Fair will offer delightful gifts for all ages and interests. We will have books, totes, cosmetics, art, bookmarks, sea glass, artisanal soap, handmade clothing, and photography as well as a few surprises - items that are just great for stocking stuffers or that special present under the tree.

Come by to see us and then head over to the Congregational and St. Anthony Church Fairs for other gifts and lunch. It is sure to be a great day for shopping in Mattapoisett!



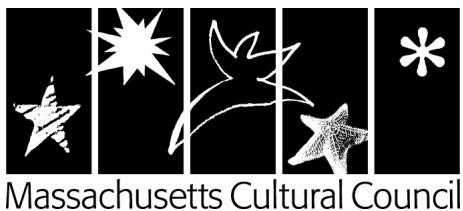
### **Odd Objects**

Do you know what this is?



The answer can be found on the last page.

*Our programs are supported in part by a grant from the Mattapoisett Cultural Council, a local agency which is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency.*



Massachusetts Cultural Council



# WORD SEARCH

*Docents*  
by Lisa Hill

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

coggins  
mitchell  
dunn  
flynn  
mendell  
coppes  
browning

gauvin  
demello  
dugan  
west  
cederberg  
callahan  
marklin

mullen  
atkinson  
layton  
clifford  
griswold  
ketchel  
goss

briggs  
cole  
slade  
shute  
ennis  
brown-couture

## Off Season Museum Hours

During the off season, the Curator is available on Wednesdays from 9:00 am - 12:00 p.m. or by appointment.

5 Church Street, Mattapoisett  
508-758-2844

## Mattapoisett Historical Society Facebook Page

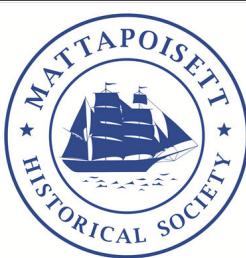
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**Odd Objects Answer:** *An early Victorian-era goffering iron. It was used to press pleats and ridges on clothing.*