

# The View from The Crow's Nest



Newsletter of the Mattapoisett Historical Society

Fall 2015 / Issue XXVI

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

## *The Shipyards of Mattapoisett*

by Seth F. Mendell, President Emeritus Mattapoisett Historical Society

The following article by Seth Mendell is a prologue to Peter Mello's forthcoming book *Good morning, Shipyard Park!* (December 2015)

*Peter Mello describes his book: "For the past 5 years, I have been capturing an image nearly every morning looking out over Shipyard Park and into Mattapoisett harbor. I've always been intrigued about how a place changes over time and how people use public space. As an artist/photographer, I'm also interested in daily artistic rituals. This ongoing photography project and book help me explore these ideas."*

For over one hundred years shipyards ringed the Mattapoisett harbor front stretching from the foot of Pearl Street to Cannonville and Ship Street. Not all yards were building all the time and ownership changed as the yards were bought and sold. In the early years prior to the Revolutionary War, smaller vessels were built such as sloops and schooners for fishing and coastal trade.

However, after 1800 when the New Bedford whaling fleet



View of shipyards from water, circa 1920

increased in size, full rigged ships were needed for voyages around Cape Horn to the Pacific and to carry cargos to distant points of call. So began the golden age of Mattapoisett's shipbuilding, when ships built in Mattapoisett were admired in ports worldwide for their craftsmanship and design. Six to eight vessels would be lined up at the water's edge in various



Whaler Mattapoisett built in Meigs' Shipyard 1836

stages of completion. The typical whaler measured 110 to 120 feet in length, had a beam of 24 feet, and drew 14 feet of water. Standing in the ways or stocks, they stood 30 feet high and where the waterfront narrows, their bowsprits, 50 feet in length, hung out over Water Street. The daily stagecoaches from Plymouth and New Bedford with their passengers passed beneath them. There were three shipyards in what is now Shipyard Park. First was the famous Holmes shipyard started under Josiah Holmes in 1812 and staying in the family for three generations until the launching of the "Wanderer" in 1878, the last whale ship to be built in Mattapoisett.

Next was the yard of Leonard Hammond, a very shrewd Yankee, who also owned the Plymouth County House, a tavern right on Water Street where he wined and dined customers who came to Mattapoisett to negotiate the building of a ship in his yard. Mr. Hammond also had a contract with the Federal government to build lighthouses, and in 1836 he built Ned's Point light. Eliakin Cannon owned the third yard on the east side of the Park. He built large merchant ships for Boston and New York firms. It was from his yard that the bowsprits of the ships hung out over Water Street.

(continued on next page)



## The Shipyards of Mattapoisett (continued from cover)

Three to four hundred men came to work every day in the yards, from master carpenters to handymen. Special timber was required to build ships sturdy enough to sail around Cape Horn and then return loaded with barrels of oil after four years of whaling in the Pacific. This came from the southern states in the form of live oak for the ribs and heavy timber below the waterline and long leaf yellow pine for the planking of the hull. Live oak cutting voyages took place in the winter months when the weather made working in the yards difficult. Men sailed south to the Carolinas and beyond on coastal schooners to cut this timber returning in early spring with their decks piled high.

Mattapoisett harbor was a port of call. It had its own United States Customs Office for the arrival and departure of vessels. At one time thirty-seven vessels hailed from the town. In addition to the live oak cutting voyages, vessels from Europe were coming and going with tool steel for the blacksmith shops, hemp for the rope walks and cotton for the sail lofts. Native timber also arrived by water as well as by ox drawn wagons from Rochester. On shore there were cooper shops, block shops, and whale boat shops.



**View of shipyards from wharf**

sound, however, the ringing of the caulking iron. When the caulker's hammer hit the steel of the caulking iron it made a ringing sound that not only was heard in the shipyards, but up into the village streets and out over the water. At times ten to twenty men would be swinging their hammers and people knew when the workday started and when it finished by the ringing of the caulking irons.



**Whaler *Gay Head II* built in the Holmes' Shipyard 1877**

The ships were built stern to the water's edge. The keel was laid, the ribs raised and the planks fastened in place one by one. Then it was the caulkers turn to make the hull watertight.

It took seven miles of oakum and hemp to caulk up a vessel. These men, hanging off staging high in the air, pounded the caulking with hammer and caulking iron into the many seams of the ships bottom and sides.

By today's standards the yards were surprisingly quiet. There was no roar of gasoline and diesel engines, no whine of electric saws, only the muffled sounds of hand tools being used on wood and the occasional shouts as men lowered large timbers into place with ropes and pulleys. Nor was there the stench of exhaust fumes, but rather the sweet smell of freshly cut wood. There was one dominant

The end of this era of shipbuilding came shortly after the Civil War. Simply put, petroleum was replacing whale oil and ships built of iron were replacing those of wood. The last whaleship to be built in Shipyard Park was the "Wanderer." Late on the afternoon of April 16, 1878 a large number of people gathered to witness the launching. The "Wanderer" standing in the stocks at the water's edge dwarfed the surrounding buildings. Beneath her bowsprit was a six foot gilded eagle carved by Henry "Carver" Purrington of Mattapoisett. Her topsides were painted black down to the waterline and a white strip at deck level showed off her lines. When the flood tide was at its fullest, workmen knocked away the last remaining blocks and the "Wanderer" slid slowly at first and then rapidly down the greased ways into the water of the harbor.

### Mattapoisett Historical Society Facebook Page



Please be sure to check out our page and like us!



## *President's Update*

By Jennifer McIntire



**Mattapoissett Historical Society Annual Meeting**

On Sunday, September 13 at 2:00 pm the Society held our Annual Meeting. Our stalwart members turned up and filled the pews. We efficiently moved through the vital business of the day. Lisa Hill read the minutes from last year's meeting. Kathleen Damaskos gave a thorough treasurer's report detailing our financial situation from the start of our fiscal year to date. I was elected for another two-year term as president. Lisa Hill, Jim Broadwater, and Chris Demakis were elected for three-year terms as members-at-large.

The big news is the Society was awarded a 2nd grant from the Community Preservation Commission (CPC) to archive our collection of works on paper. Lenora Robinson (our archivist) continues to impress us with her diligence. We are implementing best-practices that are essential to the conservation of our collection and will make research easier for one and all. The CPC project started with the first grant in November 2014 with the focus on maps, charts, blueprints, designs, and other large sized documents. These were flattened, processed and put into a new flat-file storage system. Newspaper and magazines were next to be processed and added to storage. The clothing, which Elizabeth, docents, and our intern (Abigail Field) cataloged and photographed were entered into PastPerfect and brought to the storage facility. With the renewal of the grant for 2015-2016, the large file cabinet of Charles Mendell's research and personal papers is being addressed. The files are being processed and moved to new, archival storage.

We have completed our self-assessment through the Museum Assessment Program of the American Alliance of Museums. We continue our work to develop a more intentional plan for the Historical Society, increase our knowledge about resources available to help the Museum, and advance the Museum's ability to improve financial sustainability. Vicky Kruckeberg, Director of the Dedham Historical Society, was our assigned expert. She visited in early spring and did a very thorough analysis of our organization. We received her report at the end of May and will use her advice to guide us in a vision and strategic planning process this fall.

Elizabeth again opened the Museum for the Holiday Season with a children's book exhibit and craft fair. She hosted several summer programs for young children. We partnered with the Mattapoissett Land Trust on two programs this summer and plan to do more with them in the future. Our "Swordfish Stories" program drew a large crowd interested in Tom Brownell and John Clark's personal experiences of sword fishing locally and together for over 30 years.

We are encouraging more business memberships. This type of membership has increased and we will continue to focus our efforts. Posted on the door at the back of the church (and on our website) are the names of the businesses that support us in this capacity.

We cannot accomplish all we do without our volunteers. We are grateful to members who docent at the Museum and staff the booth at Harbor Days. We are particularly interested in developing an exhibit committee and a grant committee. If you want to help, please get in touch.

The annual meeting business was followed by a presentation by Seth Mendell – "Mattapoissett and Rum Runners" – and a lively reception with the membership.



## Seth Mendell: Home for the Summer

Seth returned for the summer and ran himself ragged. He comes into town with unbridled energy to make the Mattapoisett Historical Society better than ever. This year he gave several lectures “New Bedford Whaling and Mattapoisett Shipyards”; “Russian Cities”; “Charles Bryant” as well as walking tours that attracted more people than ever. Seth is also feverishly working on several publications at once: “The Wanderer,” “Salt Works,” and a history of Mattapoisett. We are researching viable publishing approaches. The Historical Society also benefits from the countless little jobs Seth takes on. He often shows up at the Museum with a can of paint or bits of hardware. Seth repairs latches, hangs pictures, or freshens up some peeling steps. One of his last responsibilities this year was to give a walking tour to Old Rochester Regional High School students enrolled in Mr. Colin Everett’s local history class. Here are selected words of thanks from the students:



*Thank you so much for taking us on the tour. I loved all your stories!* –Annie T.

*I learned so many new things about Mattapoisett. Thank you for sharing its history and stories!* – Isabell B.

*Thank you for the wonderful tour! I had a lot of fun and learned so much that I never knew about my community. I can’t wait to learn more!* – Lauren G.

*I have been passing your knowledge to other locals. Very interesting!* – Will H.

*Thank you so much for the tour! I learned so much about the streets I see every day. Mattapoisett will never look the same with the history I now know!* – Jacob S.



## Harbor Days

by Maureen McCarthy

The opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* states “it was the best of times-it was the worst of times.” Saturday at Harbor Days this year was great! The weather was hot but comfortable, and people were out and in great moods. We had a successful day with much interest in our maps and books. The bulk of our sales for the weekend’s event was virtually all realized on Saturday. But...the people we met! Visitors stopped by and talked about their family’s Mattapoisett history, their search for family history and the family legacy and of course, about how special Mattapoisett is. It was heartwarming to hear all the stories.

Sunday however, was a bit of a different story. The sun returned with a vengeance and it was a roasty, toasty, humid day. Not as many folks turned out and those who did were not in a buying mood. Still, our booth was near the entertainment and we were able to enjoy listening to the “Showstoppers” entertain the crowd. And once again, folks stop by the booth to talk.

We look forward to another successful time next year.

## SUPPORT YOUR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Mattapoisett Historical 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.



## Summer Exhibit and New Acquisitions

*by Jennifer McIntire*



We just dismantled our blockbuster summer exhibit. Record numbers of visitors enjoyed the collections that came from the descendants of Sophia Means, as well as the community oriented Survival Program display.

As a result of our summer exhibit, we have many new additions now on permanent display at the Museum. The most obvious is the Hebe sculpture. This neoclassical wooden sculpture came to us from Polly Duff Phipps (a descendant of Sophia Means) and was once bracketed to the harbor side exterior of her home on Water Street. We are grateful for a monetary donation from Catherine Barrett in memory of her sister, Hebe Wise Bixby, to help with restoration expenses. Jim Broadwater and Stephen Mendell made necessary repairs to the sculpture as well as painstakingly stripped away layers of paint revealing details of exceptional carving.

John Mello (another descendant of Sophia Means) donated the low relief diorama hanging in the central bay of the west wall. It was a collaborative work by Clifford Ashley and Manuel Perry commemorating a sword fishing expedition undertaken by F. Gilbert Hinsdale in 1918. They were chased by German U-boats. Hinsdale wrote an article about this terrifying outing called "Crossing Blades with Swordfish." John Clark recently donated Hinsdale's original



manuscript for that article along with a collection of swordfish darts invented and collected by Hinsdale and preserved by David "Bi" Todd (yet another descendent of Sophia Means). These are on display at the back of the church in a new case designed and built by Nate Bekemeier and donated to the Museum by Rogers Gallery.

Following Seth's well-attended talk about Captain Charles Bryant (b.1820, Special Agent of the U.S. Treasury Department in Alaska) we received a large archival donation from his descendants. Donna Jones and Marilyn Lange gave us a collection of photographs, a diary, a hand drawn map, newspapers,

a rare book, and prints that were treasured for generations. It is an impressive and meaningful collection for our Museum. Captain Charles Bryant is an important historical figure of whom Mattapoissett is justly proud.



### *Flowers Make a Difference*

One could not walk through the Museum doors this summer without noticing the beautiful pots of flowers on our exterior steps and gorgeous arrangements as one entered. Our Museum looked beautiful on the outside thanks to the dedication of the Mattapoissett Woman's Club Garden Group. They planted a creative collection of plants by our door and steadfastly cared for them all summer long. The arrangements indoors were dropped off by the Museum's neighbor and avid gardener Mary Lalli. Visitors were particularly wowed by her exotic dahlias. Prior to our annual meeting, hardworking and industrious Lisa Hill cleaned up the gardens and the yard. She freed us of encroaching weeds and gave our Museum a tidy appearance. We are grateful for this generous attention to detail that makes our Museum a more welcoming place.



## Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair

*by Maureen McCarthy*



Once again, we will have a Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair. It will be held on Saturday, December 5 from 9:00 am to noon. The Fair is a great time to see some unusual items and pick up some stocking stuffers. Last year we featured small works of art, lamps, photographs, sea glass, cosmetics, jewelry, and much more. Information about this year's Fair has been sent to all past participants, however, we hope to hear from some additional interested artists and crafters who did not participate last year.

In lieu of paying a percentage of sales, participants pay a \$25.00 non-refundable fee for a 3 ft. by 3 ft. space. The deadline to sign up is November 6. Due to limited space, registration will be on a first come first served basis. Additional information for artists and crafters is available at the Museum. Just call and leave your name and number and you will be contacted. Please note that the St. Anthony Christmas Fair takes place on this day so we expect to see folks in a shopping mood. Admission to the Fair is free so please come stop by and shop with us!



## Curator's Corner

by *Maureen McCarthy*

It is with heavy hearts that we announce that Elizabeth Hutchison, our curator for the past 3 ½ years, has left to take a teaching position. During her time here with us a number of programs were initiated or further enriched. Elizabeth started the summer children's program series. Because parents also participated, we have picked up a number of new members. Additional monthly programs were offered that featured a diverse group of speakers such as our always amazing Seth Mendell with talks about Russian history and our Alaska connections. We also had the Plymouth County Sheriff's Office give a presentation about the county jail and some amazing prisoners.

Elizabeth was involved with the New Bedford Whaling Museum during the preparation for the Morgan visit last summer, established personal connections with the Plymouth County Tourism office, and established the Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair. The hours of the museum were expanded and our collection of clothes was photographed, cataloged and stored in the correct manner. Also, our Christmas Open House dates as well as our Christmas display were expanded.

There are many other contributions that Elizabeth made but suffice it to say that we were very glad to have her and her professional museum experience with us for as long as we did. We wish her well in her new position!

### *Practical Items*

From time to time we need functional, practical items to perform the administrative work of the society. Here is our current wish list:

- Desk chair
- Shredder
- Vacuum
- Digital SLR camera
- Office storage cabinet

Serviceable (not antique!) items would be happily and gratefully accepted.

## Welcome, Jeffrey Miller!



The Board of Directors of the Mattapoisett Historical Society is delighted to announce the appointment of our new Curator, Dr. Jeffrey Miller. Jeff started on Tuesday, October 20.

Jeff is a heritage professional with over 10 years of experience in archaeology, history, and heritage management. He received his doctorate from Queens University Belfast, and specializes in exploring the links between communities, history, and places. His past research has included investigating the history of Prudence Island and the surrounding Narragansett Bay

region. Prior to returning to his native Massachusetts he spent several years living abroad in Ireland and the UK, where he worked to connect coastal communities with their heritage.

Jeff is excited to be joining the Mattapoisett Historical Society as our new curator, and looks forward to getting to know the area, its history, and its people.



**Sign up for our e-mail newsletter!**

We are pleased to announce that *The Crow's Nest* will be going digital for the February issue. If you would like to receive our e-newsletter in February please send your e-mail address to [mattapoisett.museum@verizon.net](mailto:mattapoisett.museum@verizon.net). Our spring issue will be printed and mailed.



**WORD SEARCH** *by Lisa Hill*  
*Birds of Buzzards Bay*

N	R	E	T	S	E	T	A	E	S	O	R	CARDINAL
T	E	O	O	L	Y	K	S	A	K	M	C	CHICKADEE
E	I	G	N	L	C	E	S	C	N	U	O	COMMON TERN
E	H	E	E	U	E	E	K	O	L	R	M	CORMORANT
E	V	O	D	G	N	I	N	R	U	O	M	GEESE
D	R	I	B	G	N	I	M	M	U	H	O	HERON
A	B	I	E	N	E	N	U	O	R	T	N	HERRING GULL
K	K	R	I	I	O	S	P	R	E	Y	T	HUMMINGBIRD
C	I	C	A	R	D	I	N	A	L	L	E	MOURNING DOVE
I	R	E	E	R	T	D	E	N	D	K	R	OSPREY
H	E	H	G	E	E	H	R	T	S	L	N	ROSEATES TERN
C	D	M	R	H	K	R	W	R	M	I	R	TURKEY
												WREN

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*Curator*

Jeffrey Miller

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Mary Beth Morse



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.

Are you interested in:

- ◆ Programs (public and school groups)
- ◆ Exhibits
- ◆ Acquisitions Registration
- ◆ Office Administration
- ◆ Public Relations
- ◆ Research
- ◆ Museum Shop
- ◆ Museum and Artifact Maintenance

If you have a particular interest, we have a need! We look forward to hearing from you!

Please call (508) 758-2844 or email [mattapoissett.museum@verizon.net](mailto:mattapoissett.museum@verizon.net) with any questions.



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Join us on Saturday, December 5 from 9:00 am to noon for our 2nd Annual Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair.  
 Free admission for all. Come by the Museum for a bit of last minute shopping.



***Become a member today!***

- Annual - Family \$50       Life - Family \$1,000
- Annual - Individual \$35       Life - Individual \$500
- Annual - Student/  
Senior (60+)/Military \$20       Business \$250
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