



dennishs@cape.com

# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

www.dennishistsoc.org

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## *Treasures From The Manse*

During the clean-out of the Manse, in preparation for the renovations, there were a huge number of treasures discovered that we never knew we had. These had been donated over the years, by various people, and had never been documented nor gone through a formal archival process. (Now that we have a bona-fide archivist, Phyllis Horton, that won't be happening again!)

One of the greatest treasures was found in a box of old books – a composition book, titled merely “A Journal from Boston to Mauritius,” dated 1850-1, fully handwritten in a woman's hand, with not a name to identify the people involved. By some detective-work based on anniversaries and birthdays noted in the entries, and the name of the vessel, the *Orissa*, I soon came to realize this was a diary kept by Minerva (Handren) Sears, wife of Capt. Joshua Sears of East Dennis. (Capt. Sears was later to become master of the Shiverick-built *Wild Hunter*.) How it came to the Manse, and when, is not known, but it may have been given to us some time ago by Geta Crowell, a descendant, whose heirs have made available additional family heirlooms and documents for our collections.



Capt. Joshua Sears

The journal is a wonderful piece for our library. Minerva is a hopeless romantic, terribly in love with her husband. She is an old sailing hand, stating that she has crossed “the line” four times before this voyage, meaning that this is the third voyage she has sailed with her husband. On 14 May 1850, in the South Atlantic she writes: “I employed my time in sewing & reading untill after tea & then I went on Deck to take my Evening exercise in jumping rope & walking the Deck with the Capt. singing walking & standing. in the Evening played a few Dominos drank a glass of Beer & retired to rest”.

Other times she talks of knitting, playing her accordion, and singing “tunes” with the other passengers. She gives details of the bill of fare on the vessel, and how the sailors find flying fish on the deck in the morning and fry them up for her breakfast. On 7 June, she has read “Vanity Fair” and states, “after I read it through I have made up my mind not to read any more novels this passage for I think it is time thrown away & at the Same time we cannot gain any useful Knowledge from them... [they] fill our minds with trash and nonsense...”

10 June, “To Day is the Birth day of our Capt My Dear beloved Husband...”, and a day later, “To day is the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my wedding day & with what pleasing recollections do I look back on that happy day that I was united in the Holy bonds of matrimony to one that I Esteemed above all others & one that has proved himself highly wourthy of that



Minerva (Handren) Sears

esteem & I can truly say that I never have looked back upon that day's transaction with any thing like regret."

She notes how pleased she is to be able to beat her husband at Dominos. She keeps track of their position by "shooting the sun" with the sextant, and looking up the logarithms in the tables for her husband to calculate the ship's longitude and latitude. She notes the sea birds they see, the whales and the sharks and the porpoises. She also reports on seeing giant snakes swimming in the Sea of Bengal. She scolds her husband for driving the vessel too hard, and having the sails ripped "serves him right," but then gloats that they pass every vessel they see ahead going in the same direction they are going.

On the Bay of Bengal she writes "now as I sit on the Deck writing this I cast my Eye in the Far Far West towards the land that gave me birth & behold the beautiful & gorgeous sun set that this Bay of Bengal is noted for Large piles of Clouds towering one above the other & the setting sun gilding there Edges with its golden rays oh it is Magnificent. If my friends at home could see one such sunset as it is often seen here they would almost imagine themselves in Paradise. the sun is gone below the Horizon & left her beautiful tints shading through the Heavens & glittering Every Cloud, which gives them the appearance of having a large fire at the back of them. I turn my head to the East & behold there is the Cold full moon rising & pouring full her silver light over this vast ocean to light & cheer the Dreary Mariner on his way where all is trackless."

On her return trip, the vessel springs the main topsail yard, the fourth one they have destroyed on the trip, and they have to stop at St. Helena for a replacement. She tells in detail about visiting Napoleon's tomb and homestead. While we have anecdotal information that some of the Captains from Cape Cod had brought weeping willow cuttings and roses from Napoleon's tomb, Minerva writes specifically about it, thus confirming in writing, what we had never known for sure.

The journal ends with a number of pages of poetry she has written. One of the most poignant, and one of the shortest, is the following:

#### Lights and Shades

The gloomiest day has gleams of lights  
The darkest wave has bright foam near it;  
And twinkles through the cloudiest night  
Some solitary Star to cheer it.

The gloomiest Soul is not all gloom'  
The Saddest heart is not all sadness;  
And sweetly o'er the darkest gloom  
There shines some lingering ray of gladness.

Despair is never quite despair  
Nor life nor death the picture closes  
And round the shadowy brow of care  
Still hope and fancy twine their roses

### *Empty House Party at Manse*

As the old song says, "What a swell party this was". That would certainly apply to our "empty house party" at the 1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum on November 21 and 22. On both afternoons people were coming through the door well before the opening times and most stayed the whole time and inspected every nook and cranny of the old house. June Howes had made up 3 wonderful collage posters showing some of the structural problems to be addressed, pictures of the Manse before 1890 to the present and some of the activities that take place there during the summer months and at our annual Christmas open house.



Joel Chaison, and his wife Sally are shown here with Nancy Howes

Money from the sale of Manse note cards, post cards and pictures sold by Virginia Devine and designed by her sister Lynn Weber as well as many generous donations were deposited to the Manse Repair Fund.

A big 'thank you' to all who attended and donated and especially to June Howes for coming up with the idea of the empty house party and for all of her hard work organizing it. It was great!

Historical Society of Yarmouth President

Nancy Howes

### *The Famous (or infamous) WHATISIT*

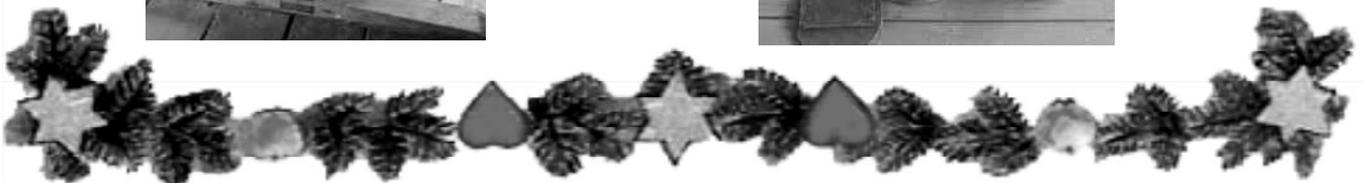
In the October Newsletter we ran an article by Dick Howes entitled *The Mystery of the Whatisit*. Dick has been pursuing this topic for some time now, and furnished this great answer to the mystery.



The WHATISIT has turned out to be a very old CHEESE PRESS. It looks just like the one owned by a person in Fredericksburg, Texas which he said is worth around \$400.00 dollars. It could be a "Shaker" cheese press from the 18th or 19th century and is very rare. We have one of three known cheese presses of this type, one in Texas, one that was sold in Vermont and ours. Both cheese presses are built the same way with very little variation between them.

Here are the pictures of the Texas cheese press for you to compare with the one that we currently have shown above to the left:

Richard Howes



Dennis Historical Society  
P.O. Box 607  
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607



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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

*“Here we come a-wassailing.....”*

Wassailing as a Christmas custom started as far back as the 1400s as a way of passing good wishes among family and friends. The name *Wassail* comes from the Old English term “*waes hael*” meaning “be well”. The contents of the Wassail Bowl are served hot and begins with an apple base often with other fruit juices, spices and when appropriate, laced with ‘spirits’ to warm the cockles of your heart.

Our DHS Christmas Open House at Jericho on Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> had a wassail Bowl, homemade goodies and beautiful melodies played by “Cellobrations”. What a lovely respite from the hustle and bustle of the season and concerns of the impending storm.



The following words taken from a popular Wassailing Carol express our wishes for each of you:

“Love and joy come to you,  
And to you your wassail too,  
And God bless you and send you,  
A Happy New Year,  
And God send you,  
**A Happy New Year**”

June Howes