



WE CELEBRATE FEBRUARY

We had a pleasant day for our Mid-Winter Festivity and the meal was excellent and enjoyed by all. We were disappointed that our scheduled speaker, Mr. Joshua A. Nickerson, could not be with us due to illness. The Board scurried around and came up with a tape made by the late Walter McDowell, a gentleman some of those present remember well. His reminiscence was interesting to all and brought back pleasant memories to some. Door prizes were donated by Purity Supreme, Harney's, Gingersnaps Bakery, Fleming's Donut Shop, Christine's, Chase House of Flowers, Vasilli's (formerly The Brass Kettle), and by Dee Moore. And the lucky winners: Irene Dumican, Ellie Lloyd, Margaret Mahar, Dee Moore, Sarah Kruger, Susan Kelley, and Phyllis Horton. Burton Barrows won the head table floral arrangement, provided by Positively Depot. Congratulations all you lucky people and many thanks to our friendly businesses for their donations.

THE SEA CAPTAINS OF DENNIS

Nathan Foster Baker

One of the fascinating things about studying the lives of the hundreds of sea captains who were native sons of Dennis is discovering the wide variety of their careers. Aside from the almost universal early beginning of life at sea, each man has a unique and interesting story. In the earliest maritime careers we have documented, we learn of adventurers who sailing without instruments, encountered pirates and privateers, and cheerfully engaged in smuggling. After the wars with England, we find a respectable merchant marine developing and our captians in the mid-nineteenth century are winging their way around the trade routes of the world, bringing capital to invest at home. But after the Civil War, as railroad and steam take much of the domestic trade and other nations catch up in the maritime field, we encounter the master mariner who knows no other life than that of the sea. He is faced with learning to navigate with steam, coming ashore, or continuing to sail, while cargoes and freight rates diminish. Many Cape captains chose the latter--"You can't put new kinks in old rigging." Men who had manned sailing vessels since the age of eleven had few other skills which could bring their family a living. So dozens of our citizens continued coasting--well into the twentieth century--carrying whatever cargo they could bargain for, in order to provide for those waiting so anxiously at home. Such a man was Nathan Foster Baker. He was one of seven children of Capt. Nathan and Susan (Kelley) Baker, born in 1831 in South Village, a part of West Dennis near the mouth of Swan Pond River. His maritime career began when he shipped at age 11 as cook aboard a fishing vessel, and continued through good and bad years for an incredible 56 years. He was a master well-liked by his crews, ship owners, and fellow mariners. He was not a driver, but nevertheless was known as a captian who had the best interest of his owners at heart. Among the dozens of men who continued to persue a career at sea long after the Golden Age of Sail had past, his story is not exceptional. However, we are fortunate to know him more personally, for many of his logs have survived and are part of the archives of D.H.S. From the daily entries we can learn a great deal about this Capt. Baker. In addition to weather conditions, type of cargo loaded, and distances covered, he makes personal comments which give us a glimpse into his thoughts. And the most interesting part about it is that many of his entries are accompanied by verse--not terribly good poetry, but an unexpected manner of expression from a hardened seaman. Instead of the traditional closing line found in many logs, "So ends this day.", Capt. Baker writes:

"I now will end this day's work
By the closing of the book,
I will then have a little smoke
And then for my berth will look."

His concern for his owners interest is expressed this way:

"We have all had a long trip,
And the owners do not like that kind,
But it is a hard road
A-coasting in the winter-time."

Capt. Nathan's happiest days were when he dropped anchor at Bass River. He is often homesick, and in this verse expresses some of that feeling.

"Wherever you go or wherever you may roam,
Think of your parents and dear old home,
As you will never find a better place
Upon this big earth
Than the dear old homestead where
You was given birth."

Those at that dear old homestead shared the Captain's feelings, and urged him to give up the sea. At long last, Capt. Baker uttered to his beloved wife the words she had long hoped to hear. It was Christmas Eve in 1898, when he said to Mary Ann, "I shall go to sea no more. This time I am home to stay." A few minutes later, without another word, Capt. Baker passed to his eternal reward. I sincerely hope that Mrs. Baker took the time to read the log books her husband had so carefully kept. For in among the verses is this one, perhaps intende for her.

"Think of me long,
Think of me ever.
Think of the fun
We had together."

So ends the story of Capt. Nathan Foster Baker

CALENDAR

April 6 10:00 A.M. Sandwich Glass Museum Cape & Islands Historical Association
Cape Cod Samplers by Lynne Horton
April 9 3:00 P.M. Jacob Sears Memorial Library
April 11 7:30 P.M. Board meets with Sarah

AN AFTERNOON OF HISTORY AT AN HISTORIC PLACE

Our April meeting will be held at the Jacob Sears Memorial Library in East Dennis on Sunday, April 9th at 3:00 P.M. The program will be about the ever-present sea around us, and you will be able to view a very important acquisition, which D.H.S. has recently purchased, with the assistance of Robert Eldred. No hints, you'll just have to be there! I know you will enjoy the afternoon. Guests are welcome.

NEW MEMBERS WANTED

Efforts to attract new members have begun in earnest. Last month Sarah Kruger and Gertrude Lailey attended a meeting of the Newcomers Club to invite new residents to join our society. The Board has asked the committees of the two town-owned Historic houses for permission to hold an open house at each, to try to encourage more people to be involved in preserving the town's history. The most effective way to increase membership, however, is for each of you to make it your personal duty to invite a friend or neighbor to join us. Dues are modest, most of our activities are free, and you know what nice people they will meet. So please, do a friend a favor, and invite them to join us as members of D.H.S.

MORE ABOUT OUR FOUNDERS

William Chase 1600-1659

Descendants of William Chase have brought great honor to several of the mid-Cape towns, notably Harwich and Dennis. Like Gabriel Whelden, he seems to have been in Old Yarmouth even before the committee was organized. At first he lived away over on the west boundary of the present town of Yarmouth, but his later homestead was closer to, and perhaps within the bounds of the present Dennis. His garden plot adjoined Simpkins Neck and his name is perpetuated in the creek or river which formed one of his bounds, still called Chase's, or Chase Garden Creek. He was a carpenter by trade and the specifications of a house he was to build for Dr. Starr give us a good description of the type of dwelling our founders had. Chase was not a "Saint" by Gov. William Bradford's definition--that is, he was not an original member of the Pilgrim band which began its trip to the New World with a short sojourn in Holland. Plymouth Colony Records indicate that he may not have been a saint by any definition, but then, who among us could have kept our reputation unspotted under the close scrutiny of those tattle-taling Puritan neighbors? In fairness to Goodman Chase, it appears that his principle fault was that he didn't like the minister and wasn't afraid to say so. Although I think that it is very important that history records the human frailties as well as the strengths of former generations, this particular story of Wm. Chase is about one of his talents. He, (or just possibly his son, William Jr.) is the first musician I have found among our first settlers. Actually he played the drum, which you may not regard as particularly musical. But I want you to visualize the way things were in 1639. Let me ask you a question. What time is it? I'd be willing to bet that 90% of you reading this newsletter looked at your own wrist for the answer. Our ancestors had no such convenience. There were no wrist watches--not even a clock--among the belongings of the founders of this town. And yet there were times when the people needed to meet together. As the villagers walked toward the meeting house on the Lord's Day, they were greeted not by the gentle pealing of the bell, but the tap of the drum let them know that the time for worship had arrived. As the Constable warned the male inhabitants of an upcoming Town Meeting, he was accompanied by the drummer, to be certain that none missed the announcement. And on Militia training day, the drum summoned the men able to bear arms into formation for the drill master. When Chase answered the call to go to Rehoboth to suppress an uprising among the Narragansett Indians, he was paid an addition of 5 shillings for acting as drummer. It may have been this talent which provided him with a reprieve of sentence when he was ordered to find another place to live because of his trouble with the minister. If so, we should be grateful, for his progeny continue to bless this area down to the present day.

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