

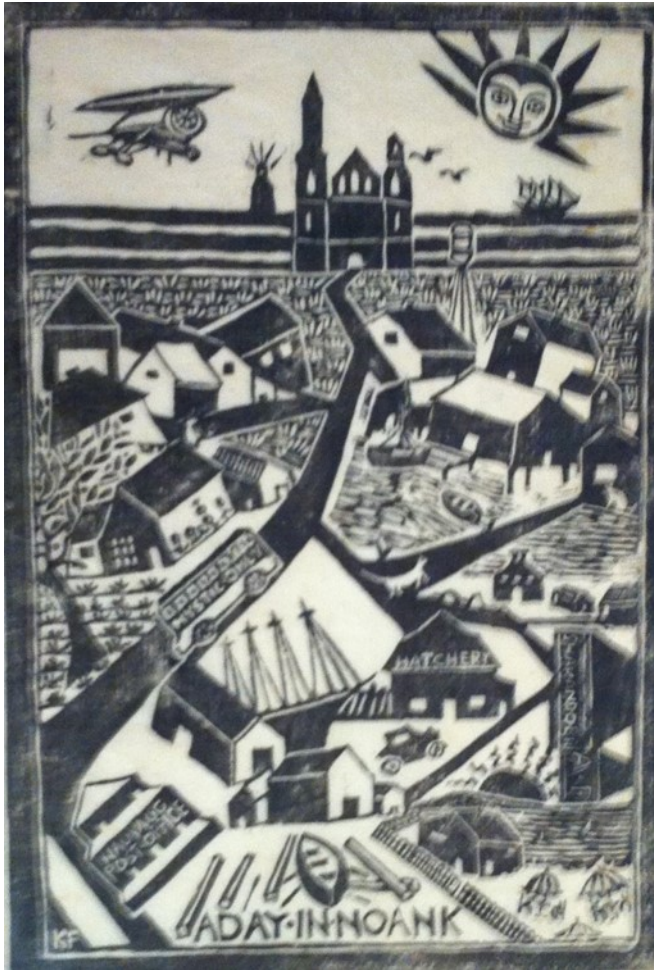


NHS2020.008, gift of Eugenia Villagra

This colonial copper coin, a 1723 Irish half-penny, was found by Eugenia Villagra while digging in her garden on River-view Avenue. The coin is roughly the size of a U.S. quarter and features the profile of King George I with the text "Georgius Dei Gratia Rex" on the face, and a woman with a harp beneath the text "Hibernia 1723" on the back.

This particular style of coin, also known as a Wood's half-penny, was only minted in Ireland between 1722-1724. They made their way across the Atlantic in the pockets of immigrants and sailors, and were a widely accepted form of coinage in the American colonies throughout the 1790s. In 1792 the U.S. Congress passed the Coinage Act which created the U.S. Mint and established the U.S. dollar as the standard American currency. Subsequently, foreign coins were phased out of the U.S. economy.

From the day this coin was minted to the day it began falling out of fashion in New England, Noank remained largely unsettled. Earlier, in the 17th century the land was used for planting and as summer hunting and fishing grounds by members of the Pequot tribe, but by the early 18th century the land had been divided into lots and awarded by lottery to citizens of the Town of Groton. In 1705 a committee of Captain James Avery, Captain John Prentice, Deacon Manasseh Miner, Captain William Champlin and Sergeant John Gallup was appointed to survey the land and draw up lots. The above map, "The Noank Lots," lays out these plots of land as they were divided in 1712 and 1713.



“A Day in Noank”

This print by Katherine Forest (a fixture in Noank during its art colony days) was donated to the Noank Historical Society by Betty Tylaska in 2017. At the time Betty wrote:

“The minute I saw this woodcut of Noank done in 1933 by Katherine Forest, I knew it belonged back in Noank. It gives us a chance to recall sights from the past. The four masted lumber schooner, the ALICE PENDLETON, is languishing at the shipyard. The old A&P is once again at the corner of Main and Pearl Street where the Corner Closet existed for many years. The water tower on Cedar Street, Pete Shanedoer's store, and the lobster hatchery are also in the picture. There's the bus which went through the village on a regular basis. You didn't need a car to travel to Mystic or New London.”

There is another feature worth your notice—the airplane flying low over the village. Last month marked the 90th anniversary of Amelia Earhart's wedding to George Putnam, Jr. in Noank. The wedding took place February 7, 1931—2 years before the woodcut was completed—in a home on Church Street that was owned by Amelia's mother-in-law, Frances

Putnam. Frances had purchased the just a few months earlier, and had been introduced to Noank by a close friend from New York City who liked to summer there—our artist, Katherine Forest. The following story, transcribed from our oral history collection, describes Frances Putnam's move to Noank and the wedding that took place in her parlor as remembered by Robert P. Anderson, Sr., who was in attendance that day.

Reminiscences of Robert P. Anderson, Sr. on Amelia Earhart From the Oral History Collection (#2018.019.005) recorded May 9, 1977

“I was born on this very street, Church Street, here in Noank in 1906. And it is my earliest recollection that this house, later occupied by Mrs. Putnam, was known generally, and had been for some years, as the John MacDonald House. John MacDonald was the Superintendent of my great grandfather's shipyard, that is the Robert Palmer & Sons Shipbuilding Company in Noank, and Mr. MacDonald was well known and highly regarded by everybody that met him. I believe that he moved to the house as early as the 1870s. And his family grew up there, but after he died, and the family went to live elsewhere, the house was sold and became the property of the Bentley family, and they

lived there until the late 20s. And then in 1929 or '30 Mrs. George P. Putnam purchased it and came here to Noank to live. She was the widow of George P. Putnam, Sr., the President of the G.P. Putnam & Sons Publishers in New York.

“Mrs. Putnam had asked me to take care of some legal matters that she had and in that way I became acquainted with her, and saw her fairly frequently. On one occasion shortly after I first met her, I also met her son, George P. Putnam, Jr., who had succeeded his father as President of G.P. Putnam & Sons Publishers. George Putnam had been married some years before

and had a couple of children and was later divorced. And at the time I first saw him he was, and had been for some time, single. He came up fairly frequently to visit his mother and on one occasion I was asked to go down there. I discovered after I arrived that George Putnam had brought with him Amelia Earhart, the famous aviatrix. And as I recollected I met them again several times when they both came up to stay with Mrs. Putnam, Sr. After I had had a chance to see them and talk to them on a number of these occasions, it became quite clear to me that George and Amelia were very fond of each other, and in fact George confessed as much to me and said that he hoped he'd be able to persuade Amelia to marry him.

“At this time she had become a very famous person. In fact, I suppose that against all odds she was the most famous woman flyer in the world. And her whole life was dedicated to the promotion of aviation. In fact she felt that whatever fame and publicity she had gained from various adventures she had had were really not so much for herself as they were for the promotion of aviation. And so as she thought about getting married, as much as she wanted to marry George, she felt that she was taking a very drastic step as far as her career was concerned. She felt that somehow she would be dividing her life between the married part of the life and the career part. And she felt that, in addition, being a married person would somewhat diminish her stature as a free and independent aviatrix. However, George apparently was fairly persuasive because late in January 1931 Mrs. Putnam asked me to come down on a particular Saturday afternoon to meet with George and Amelia, and to talk to them about the possibility of having a civil ceremony wedding there at Mrs. Putnam's house. And I told her my father was Judge of Probate and could marry people and I was sure would be quite willing to do it. In any event, by the time that afternoon came I went down there and as I went in the house and saw George and Amelia I immediately was struck to the fact that things apparently had not gone too well. And in fact by that time that atmosphere was certainly not conducive to having a marriage ceremony.

“Apparently as Amelia got up to the very crux of the decision, and taking the fatal step, she simply couldn't bring herself to do it. And so she wept a great deal and kept shaking her head and clinged to George at the same time. And he was very considerate of her and tried very hard to comfort her, and finally he got her to sit down and talk awhile and they talked to Mrs. Putnam and me. And we finally, or they really, made the decision of course that what they'd like to do is postpone it for another two weeks. And so that was what was decided upon, and that's what was done. Through some means, reporters from various papers had heard that a marriage ceremony would take place and a number of them had gathered in the front yard. So as I recollected, George and I stepped out the front door and talked to them and said that there was to be a postponement. That circumstances had arisen so as not to go ahead with it as planned, but would in the reasonably near future.

“Well, two weeks later they returned and I went down there and met them and things had been quite well straightened out and Amelia was amenable to the idea of getting married. And so I called my father and he said that he would come down and take care of the ceremony. So meanwhile we were gathered around the Franklin stove in the little back sitting room at the very west end of the house, and Mrs. Putnam had a fire built in it, and it was bright and warm and cheery, although outside, as I remember, the day was very dark and overcast and very cold, kind of a raw chilly day. When my father arrived George met him at the door and took him into the dining room, which was the middle room of the house on the first floor, and they had quite a long conversation. And meanwhile I sat on a sofa which was opposite the Franklin stove and at the other end sat Amelia, and Mrs. Putnam was sitting in a chair, a rocking chair, by the side of the stove. And Amelia was talking about the great prospects of the usefulness of the autogiro. She was very enthusiastic about it, and she was telling me that she had talked with the people at the US Army and tried to persuade them of the potential military uses that might be made of such a craft. And she said she could get absolutely nowhere; that

they had no interest whatever in it. And she paused a minute and then said “but,” she said “I went to the navy in Washington and talked to them and you know,” she said, “they’re much more progressive in such matters.”

“At that point George came to the door and said that the Judge was ready and if she would step in they would go through the ceremony. Well I learned afterward that the long conversation between George and my father had to do with the kind of ceremony. And finally it boiled down to the fact that they wanted the very briefest kind of a contract and no extra features involved other than the bare legality of the agreement. So she joined George and stepped just into the dining room and Mrs. Putnam and I came along in back of them and stood there with them. And my father said “Mr. Putnam, do you take this woman to be your wife?” he said “I do” and then he turned to her and said “Miss Earhart do you take this man to be your husband?” and she said “I do” and he said “I pronounce you man and wife.” It was all over. So then Amelia turned back and went through back into the sitting room and Mrs. Putnam followed and I followed her. And Amelia sat down on the sofa which she had just left, and she looked up at me and said “As I was saying the navy is much more progressive in these matters.” At about that time my father had come in too, and so he went over to her and said “Mrs. Putnam I hope you and Mr. Putnam have a long and happy life together.” And she immediately said “Miss Earhart please, Miss Earhart.” And my father said, “Mrs. Putnam that was a very brief ceremony, but it was effective.” And he turned around and left, and as far as I know, he never saw them again. After the ceremony, such as it was, was over, we sat and talked about various things and I knew that they had planned to return to New York so in a few minutes I excused myself and also left. In the succeeding months I saw them in Mrs. Putnam’s house two or three times.

“Now Amelia was always working on a new aviation project of some kind. And one of those about which she was most enthusiastic was making a solo flight

from the Atlantic to the Pacific in an autogiro. If she succeeded she would be the first woman flyer to do so. And in due course she did take the flight. Now George was very very nervous about it. He was afraid that the autogiro was not sufficiently well known and perhaps not powerful enough to take so long a flight. And, in any event, he took a trip by commercial air flight out to California to be there to greet her when she arrived. And I think that from time to time, as she crossed the continent, reports were both on the air and in the newspapers that she had been sighted at such and such a place, and so forth, so her progress was very well known. And she had – by the time George got out there she was on the verge of climbing over the Rockies. And he went to the little airport and she had been assigned sort of a landing pad in an area which was abounded by a wire fence which was four-and-a-half to five feet high and had the large open rectangular spaces in the wire fence. So in very short time Amelia’s autogiro appeared, coming over the mountains, and it flew down and presently settled down on the landing pad. And meanwhile George was very anxious to get out to the pad and to see her and see whether she had weathered it in good shape and was in all respects alright. In so doing it however, he somehow caught his foot on the fence and fell and broke his leg. So as Amelia stepped out of the autogiro fresh as a daisy she had to rush over to help take care of George instead of George taking care of her.

“Well, now in 1935 Mrs. Putnam Sr. had to leave Noank to take an apartment in New York so that, as I recollected, she could be near certain medical facilities that she then needed. Twice, I think it was, when I had other business in New York, I did go up to the apartment to see her and on one of those occasions I met George there. We had a discussion about his career and Amelia’s and how everything was going and that was the last time that I saw any of them.

“At the time of the wedding between George and Amelia, I think I should add, in view of some of the comments and inferences that could be drawn from some of the descriptions of the parties, that they were

really a very fine appearing couple and they were very nice people. I enjoyed their company and I'm very happy to have had the opportunity to get acquainted with them, brief as it was. George was an exceptionally fine looking man and Amelia was an extremely attractive young woman. Now prior to seeing her for the first time, I will admit that from newspaper pictures and movie pictures of Amelia she looked to me athletic and rather rough and ready, with very little femininity about her, particularly when she was rigged out in a leather helmet, in a leather jacket and leather trousers and leggings. And somehow with that it almost appeared as if she had rather course features, but seeing her face to face, in the same room and dressed to receive callers at home, her appearance was something quite to the contrary. She was in fact quite delicate looking – beautiful color and complexion, blue eyes, a [inaudible] light brown hair. All in all a very attractive personality. Of course in 1937 she started out on a round-the-world flight and in the course of it she and her plane disappeared somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. No one has ever learned where, or approximately where, and no one has ever been able to figure out what happened to cause the disaster, as it must have been."

Editor's Note:

The Winter 2020 edition of the Noank Ledger included two misspellings in the 2020-2021 membership list. The correct names are Bob Rodgers and Chris Lane.

...Continued from page 1

These land grants were claimed by dozens of Groton settlers in a lottery that, according to Claude Chester, was signaled by "the warning sound of the sunrise gun." However, in Noank village (charmingly labeled "Noank Little Neck" on the map of Noank lots) only a handful of these sites are known to have been developed with homes built during the 18th century. These included the Joshua Morgan house in the vicinity of the Noank shipyard on Pearl Street (1720), the Samuel Burrows house on Main Street (1721), the Peletiah Fitch house on Riverview Avenue (1759) and the Samuel Rathbone house on Bay-side Avenue (1797). Assuming this coin wasn't lost after it had already become an antique, we can only imagine that it originally belonged to one of these early colonial residents.



Oil painting of the Peletiah Fitch house, now 48 Riverview Ave., done by A.H. Seaver in the 1920s. NHS1985.020, gift of Mrs. Anna Rathbun.

In Memoriam

Bob Benson—1947-020
 Sidney "Sid" Buttermore—1949-2020
 Edward "Ed" Eckelmeyer—1935-2021
 Elizabeth Ann "Betty" Guhl—1925-2021
 Nyca Hall—1932-2020
 Irene Johnson—1927-2020



Noank's Practical Jokers

By John Wilbur

When Captain Latham Rathbun inadvertently fell asleep at the wheel of his schooner *Gracie Phillips*, homeward bound from New London on 1 September, 1900, he had to know what sort of ribbing was in store for him. The day had been a fine one, and the rays of the sun induced somnolence which claimed captain and crew of the drifting vessel, and all were startled to discover upon waking that *Gracie P.* had beached herself on Bushy Point, and a rather complete job she appears to have done of it too. One crewman stated that she "took a course no human being could steer." Groundings then were commonplace, and only dignity suffered, but in Noank around the turn of the Nineteenth Century, it could suffer mightily. So much so that on 5 September *The Day* opined that "Noank was always a great place for 'getting rigs' on people, 'knocking we call it now.' There are some 'star knockers' in Noank. A regular 'Arm and Hammer Club', or an 'Anvil Chorus' as the saying goes." *The Day* did not elaborate on just how the genial Captain Rathbun suffered at the hands of his peers, but the fact that he did was of interest and noteworthy. Sharing ink with the Rathbun saga was the theft of R. B. Palmer's rubber mat from the steamer *Stonington* and the launching of the tug *D. B. Dearborn* at the shipyard. A slow news day?

Not necessarily content with waiting for misfortune to befall a victim, some Noankers precipitated it. In January 1899, Joseph Sistare opened the door to his shack on Potter's Dock (Old North Dock - formerly the site of Skipper's Dock, many Noank fishermen maintained a small shack or shanty on the dock to stow their gear) to find it filled to capacity with old clothes, to the point it looked like a second-hand clothing merchant's shop. Captain Joe turned the tables neatly by selling the clothes for a dollar or two.

Another humorous instance occurred the next year when P. A. Wilcox sent invitations to the launching of a boat he had been building out to a group of friends. One came back stating that Prince Henry of Prussia

sent regrets he would not be attending "due to previous but less important engagements." Funny lot, fishermen.

1903 was a banner year for jokes and hijinks among the jokers in the crowd. The joke season commenced on April Fool's Day, of all days when our friend Latham Rathbun discovered that a gaff for *Gracie Phillips* had disappeared. He had spent the three days previous shaping the spar, and his genial nature was sorely tested. When the spar was discovered days later, he contemplated reversing the joke by having the perpetrator arrested.

The next incident occurred when a worker at the Holmes Shipyard in West Mystic attempted to return home to Noank in his skiff. (It is interesting that at least some commuted to work by oars). The gentleman had not been in the boat for very long before he realized that something was amiss, and soon discovered he was the victim of that old chestnut of tying the boat to a submerged rock. This seems to have been a very popular sort of practical joke to play on the unwary mariner, and was carried out with great aplomb against the Noank Sea Scouts decades later by the renown prankster Web Eldridge. Of interest in the 1903 variant was that the skiff was secured to the rock with an astonishing amount of hitches and knots that took a. quite a while to tie, and b. quite a while to untangle.

The 1903 trifecta was completed on 2 July when Oliver W. Beebe discovered that some of his friends had substituted an oblong stone they had labeled "hard boiled egg" for the real thing in his lunch basket. This is a little harsh, but as *The Day* implied years earlier they play hardball in Noank. Just how this story made it to the attention of the reporter covering Noank at the time isn't clear, but just maybe it is a good barometer of what a good sport Captain Beebe was.

It's a good thing too, because on another occasion, some prankster had nailed a crate to the bottom of O. W.'s sharpie while he was attending to business ashore, rendering the boat much harder to row.

Another dignity-scarring incident took place in October of 1904 when Sidney Wilcox, the rather portly captain of the lobster smack *Florence* fell overboard while furling the jib. A good yuk like this did much to provide amusement for the entire waterfront community. This was not a slow news day in town: the recently launched schooner *Charles E. Wilbur* sailed from the West Mystic, a large crane arrived to conduct repairs to Potter's Dock, and a well-nourished captain fell off a bowsprit. Headliners, every one.

Things settled down a bit after that, the beat reporter for Noank changed, or else there was a change in policy regarding printable news. Whatever the reason, our man O. W. Beebe fell victim to practical jokers ten years later, and this time some folks from Mystic put him in their sights. One day Captain Beebe hauled one of his lobster pots to find nary a lobster in it, but eight pairs of shoes. And that seemed to satisfy the news-starved readers of *The Day*.

There is no doubt, however, that the local penchant for practical jokes continued regardless of media attention, and boatbuilder Web Eldridge elevated it to an art form by all accounts. Web apparently had a fondness for nailing things down if someone left them unattended for too long. He even nailed a bunch of Ivan Crossman's eels to the bottom of a small keg while Ivan went home for lunch. Ivan had put them in the keg along with some ashes from the stove (made skinning them easier), and it took him quite some time to figure out why none of the eels came out of the upended keg.

These sort of activities are simply vignettes of a life style gone by, and put color, life, and texture into the faces that stare back at us as we look at old photographs of Noankers. We might be surprised to learn just how creative some were at creating entertainment long before iphones and television were even in dream stage.

“Mischievous at the Noank Shipyard”

Excerpt from the Oral History Collection: Rosalie Thorsen Jenssen recalls her childhood in Noank c. 1908

“When I came over with my mother from Norway, when I was four years old, my father had an apartment for us down at the very end of the shipyard. The shipyard then was going full blast, having then about 400 men or more, working very long hours. Mother couldn't speak a word of English, Dad went fishing, so I was left more or less to myself except for the MacInnis (sp?) children who lived in the middle of the shipyard here. And of course I went around bothering all the workmen.



I particularly went there when it was lunchtime, they all had such interesting food, you know, that they would share with me. So mother never knew half the time where I was, so one day when I was wandering around I'd get in where the saw mill was and fall down into the sawdust and scare the men to death because they couldn't find me. One day at around three o'clock the whistle blew, and the men oh so happily laid down their tools wondering what catastrophe or what had happened that they could go home so early... because I in my wanderings had found the whistle. That happened so many times that finally Deacon Palmer sent a note to my father asking him to come to the office. And he said you'll have to do something...they called me the Thorsen imp at the time, and dad said well I can't tie the child so there's nothing to do, but we moved away. And we moved first to down to Spicer Avenue, but my happiest days were at Potter Court. And I know many of you here realize what wonderful times we had there. I think every kid in the spring came there. We had one two there kick the can, and red light, and lord knows what else.”

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