



NOANK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Presents:

“Voices from the Past: Memories of Noank in Days Gone By”



Lobster pots on the shoreline along Riverview Ave. NHS1971.004.083, gift of Florence Fitzpatrick.

JOIN US: 7:30 PM—WEDNESDAY,
March 19, 2025

*The Latham/Chester Store,
108 Main Street, Noank*

One of the most incredible resources at the Noank Museum is the Noank Historical Society’s oral history collection. The collection includes dozens of interviews and recordings from a generation of Noankers who are no longer with us, sharing their memories of Noank from days gone by. Join us on March 19 to hear selections from this collection including stories about the village’s lawless 4th of July celebrations, the 1938 Hurricane, childhood on the waterfront, Noank’s shipyards and various Noank characters from Captain Ben Rathbun, Walter Davis, Bernie Davis, Albert Patterson, Walter Palmer and more.

The public is cordially invited. Refreshments will be served.
<http://www.noankhistoricalsociety.org>

Noank Historical Society Seeks Stories about Famed Arctic Explorer



Peter Freuchen pictured with his wife Dagmar. The couple maintained a second home in Noank from 1947 to 1959.

For such a small and out-of-the-way village, Noank has attracted its fair share of celebrities through the years. Actress Jennifer Jones and business mogul John D. Rockefeller both came to Noank to have their portraits painted by Robert Brackman. Amelia Earhart was married in her mother-in-law's home on Church Street and Albert Einstein was said to frequent Skipper's Dock (formerly located on Front Street at the present location of the Ram Island Yacht Club). Most of these famous visitors simply passed through town, but a handful decided to put down roots. One of Noank's most famous settlers was the Danish explorer and anthropologist Peter Freuchen, who moved to Noank in 1947. Freuchen was internationally recognized for his numerous Polar explorations (from 1906-1933) and for his extensive knowledge of the Inuit tribes of Greenland. In the early 1930s he began a career as a film con-

sultant and screenwriter for MGM studios. He co-wrote the 1933 film "Eskimo," and appeared in a supporting role as a villainous ship captain. Following the German invasion of Denmark in 1940, he joined the Danish Resistance and took every opportunity to undermine the Nazi party. He was eventually captured and sentenced to death by the Germans, but managed to break out of prison and escape to Sweden.

In 1945, Freuchen moved to New York City where he met his third wife, Dagmar Cohn. Cohn was interesting in her own right—she was an accomplished artist, editor and fashion illustrator whose work made it to the covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. Cohn also taught fashion illustration at the Art Students League in New York. The couple lived in Manhattan, but purchased a second home on Pearl Street in the spring of 1947. They were frequent visitors to Noank from that point until Peter's death in 1957. Dagmar remained in the village a few years longer before selling the house in 1959.

Standing at 6'7" with wild hair and a wooden peg leg, Freuchen made quite the impression around town (especially on the village children). His fame in the village reached new levels in 1956 when he appeared on "The \$64,000 Question" and praised a Noank business. While information on his polar expeditions, Hollywood career and wartime resistance work are relatively easy to come by, the NHS has very little information on Freuchen's life in Noank available in our archive. The Society is putting a call out to our members, and to anyone who lived in Noank during that time, to share any memories they have or stories they have heard about Peter and Dagmar Freuchen. If you have anything you'd like to share, please reach out to us at (860) 536-3021 or noankhist@gmail.com.

In Memoriam

Janet Crossman—1932–2024

Nancy d'Estang—1934-2024



Selections from the NHS Photograph Collection: The State Lobster Hatchery

By John Wilbur, NHS Historian



The State Lobster Hatchery photographed by Moses “Mode” Rathbun. *NHS1986.061, gift of Debbie Bates.*

A warm, late summer’s day on the Mystic River, and a brisk southerly breeze extends the flag at the State Lobster Hatchery at the easternmost point off what is now Riverview Avenue. Three men lounge on the porch watching the river traffic. The gentleman in white shirt, vest, and straw hat is almost certainly Captain Latham Rathbun, Superintendent of the hatchery. Noank had long been the biggest lobstering port in Connecticut — *The Day* estimated Noank’s investment in the industry to be worth a quarter of a million dollars in 1905 — so it was not surprising that the state considered establishing a hatchery in the town.

The Day first published mention of a hatchery in April 1905, and officials scouted potential building sites that August. Of two sites under consideration, the one further south — belonging to M. A. McDonald, was purchased for the princely sum of \$600, and construction began a few months later by a firm from Middletown. The Connecticut Legislature appropriated \$10,000 for

the purchase, construction, and equipping of the new facility. April of 1906 saw the structure completed as well as a wooden pier that reached the channel. The hatching season was relatively short, yet required two shifts of workers. To that end there were accommodations on the second floor for the off-duty shift.

Over the course of the season, many millions of lobster eggs were hatched and the fry released into the local waters. Only a very small percentage of those were expected to reach maturity. The task of releasing, or “liberating” the fry was primarily done from a fast launch built in Essex, Connecticut especially for the hatchery. The vessel was named *C.F.C.* — short for *Connecticut Fisheries Commission*. Hatchery business kept the *C.F.C.* quite busy, but she still managed to have an eventful career outside of her intended duties. She took state commissioners on fishing trips, parties to New London to view the visiting battleship *USS Connecticut* (before her time as flagship of the Great

White Fleet) and undertook a rescue mission in July 1907. In 1915, Frank Bracci built a new *C.F.C.* in his shop on Morgan Point, and this is most likely the one pictured.

The lobster hatching season concluded each year in July, and the hatchery closed. The lobster cars — large wooden semi-submerged holding cages used for holding female lobsters — would be hauled out, cleaned, and stored away for the winter. Two cars are visible just to the right of the hatchery.

Electric power came to Noank around the turn of the century, but numerous houses were still awaiting connection to “the grid” as late as 1906, the hatchery among them. This photograph was taken by Moses W. Rathbun (son of Superintendent Latham Rathbun) no earlier than summer 1912 (the hatchery flag has 48 stars), probably circa World War I, and suggests that from the beginning electric power wires at the bottom of Riverview Avenue (or Water Street as it was sometimes known) ran underground or maybe through backyards. Other photos from the time show wires running along Riverview Avenue, and a power pole is visible in front of the tree at the top of Snake Hill, but none show wires at this locale.

Looming over the background, the large, dormered structure is the old Morgan Block. At the time this photo was taken the structure was refurbished to accommodate laborers from the shipyard, and dubbed “Ye Old Noank Tavern.” Later named Corona Hall, the structure served as a public meeting place, and home to the local Sea Scouts. Corona Hall was constructed of pitch pine and destroyed by fire on 21 September 1937.

The jumble of buildings at far right, projecting out over the water, is what was referred to as “The Bungalow.” Across the street from the Bungalow stands the house formerly belonging to Captain Ben Rathbun. Although painted a light color, clapboarded and sporting a porch, the house is easily recognizable today. Just to the left of Ben’s is the not so recognizable white-painted house that used to be Schofield’s Store. Today, the structure has been enlarged a bit, but still stands on location. To the left of the hatchery

is a disused wheelhouse from a tugboat or steamer, a white shed, and three houses on Snake Hill and Palmer Court. (Close inspection reveals others, but three are plainly discerned). Exactly one year after the Corona Hall fire, the 1938 hurricane swept away or mortally damaged the Bungalow, the hatchery and dock, the house on the river side of the road descending Snake Hill, as well as all the docks and boats at extreme left of picture — the wheelhouse had disappeared long before then. The large house at the top of Snake Hill, (far left at top of the hill) also survived and stood until early this century when it was deliberately burned as a training exercise for the Noank Fire Department.



Noank in the News, 100 Years Ago: Total Eclipse of 1925

A total eclipse of the sun was visible “in all its brilliant glory” from Noank at approximately 9:12 a.m., January 24, 1925. Local hotels (from Westerly to New London) were filled to capacity as spectators poured into the area. Special trains were arranged for students and scientists to observe the event. Local town councils made pledges to shut down street lights, shop keepers were urged to turn off the lights in their shop windows, and the trolley line prepared to stop service completely during the totality. Local factories, shipyards and boat owners were enlisted to sound their whistles at 9:00 a.m. to warn citizens of the eclipse’s approach and business was suspended to allow everyone a chance to admire the spectacle. Thomas Edison was expected to travel to Westerly to view the show, although he ultimately decided against taking the trip (his son attended in his stead). Despite predictions of cloudy weather, the skies miraculously cleared just before the eclipse began.

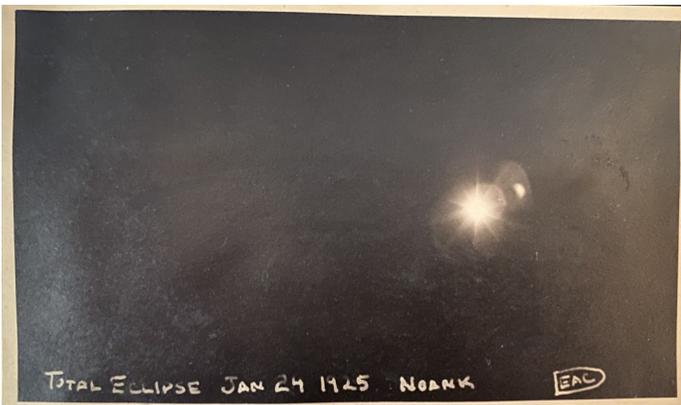
The event was front page news. The evening issue of *The New London Day* opened with the headlines: “Two Ring Sky Circus Proves Magnificent Spectacle; Thousands View Phenomenon from Lofty Points Here. Astronomers, Scientists and Students Gather for Unique Heavenly Treat. Clouds Disperse as Moon Starts to Blot Out Sun. Weather Conditions Here Ide-

al for Photographing Spectacle; Totality Remains 110 Seconds.” The following excerpt from *The Day* gives a further glimpse into the excitement surrounding the eclipse.

"In the midst of this shadow...the corona was visible, the effect that sets barnyards askew, terrifies their inhabitants, sends the chickens to roost, makes the dogs howl, and turns man's complexion to a livid hue, casting a chilly atmosphere over the population.

Varying streams of light emanated from the corona, during the comparatively few seconds it was visible. Three in particular dominated, reaching out from the rim, from the upper left and right corners and from the bottom,. Their length was at least the diameter of the sun, as observed here, meaning that they stretched out a distance of 900,000 miles or more. But one of the most peculiar effects was not at the corona but at the horizon. It was a series of undulating light waves, shooting up from the horizon. They were of many hues and do not always attend solar eclipses. In the opinion of Observer Campbell [of the Harvard University observatory] these effects were either atmospheric or analogous to the aurora borealis, which is sometimes visible winters."

—*The Day*, January 24, 1925



Photograph of the total eclipse found in a Spicer family photograph album. NHS2024.003.001, gift of C. William Stamm.

Noank in the News, 150 Years Ago: The Arctic Winter of 1875

The winter of 1874-1875 was one of the harshest winters on record in Noank (and across the north-

east). Temperatures regularly dropped below zero and the ground was frozen to a depth of five and a half feet. Miles of waterways along the coast were frozen over, with numerous vessels locked in place until spring. The Stonington Steamship Co. was forced to navigate new routes on the south side of Long Island, while children were able to skate safely on Fisher's Island Sound. The Noank Ice Co. had completely filled their ice houses at both Beebe Cove and Mason's Island by mid January, "having more than ever before put up one time." The unusually bitter and prolonged cold dominated local news accounts of the time as seen in the excerpts below.

"During a snow storm the brig *Agnes Raymond*, Capt. Randall, ran ashore at White Island, thirty miles from Halifax, and became a total wreck. When some fishermen discovered the wreck no person was on board, and there is no doubt that all hands were lost. The crew doubtless took to the boats, which were swamped, as two boats were washed ashore in the neighborhood. There were probably eight persons on board."

—*The Mystic River Press*, January 22, 1875

"The mouth of the river and channel are frozen over between Noank and Mystic Island [Ram Island] for the first time in years...Although the river is often frozen over in the winter in the vicinity of the draw-bridge, it is seldom as troublesome as this season. At Mallory's and Holmes's wharfs the ice freezing to the piles and to the *Hattie Collins* lying alongside, has raised piles and wharf out of place, and the ice acting in the same way, has raised the west end of Mr. Mallory's block some three or four inches."

—*The Mystic River Press*, February 12, 1875

"The ice and tide raised all the piles of the west wharf on Mystic Island on Sunday or Monday, carrying the wharf away bodily. Mr. Brewer's boat, attached to it by a new rope, for greater security, went off with it, but some of the Noank fishermen secured the boat and took it back to Noank...Mr. Robert Palmer with his workmen are kept very busy putting in buckets in the wheels of the Stonington

steamers as they are broken out by ice "

—*The Mystic River Press*, February 26, 1875

"Tuesday morning Watrous' smack was discovered going to sea with a large cake of ice that had broken her post, but fortunately, there not being much wind, she was broken out of the ice and brought back to this place in safety."

—*The Mystic River Press*, March 5, 1875

Back In The Day

By John Wilbur



NHS1971.004.071, gift of Florence Fitzpatrick

"Winter isn't like it was back in my day. You don't know what it's like to be cold." Every generation hears this, or something like it from the generations before. Certainly, the winter of 1917-1918 would support those claims for all who lived through it. *The Day* expressed a similar sentiment on 26 October, 1917 when it reported "Fishing hereabouts is not what it used to be when dad was young. Blackfishing is about played out if it is safe to believe what the men tell about it. As soon as the first snow storm arrives there will be none at all and no hours are being wasted in the meantime by those engaged in the industry." A few days later a storm with high easterly winds struck the area, and although it did no damage to the shore or fishing fleet, *The Day* doubled down on its gloomy tone, "It is about time for the fishermen to abandon the hope of getting rich this fall, as the time for blackfish is almost over." But this pessimistic outlook was merely the orchestra warming up before the curtain.

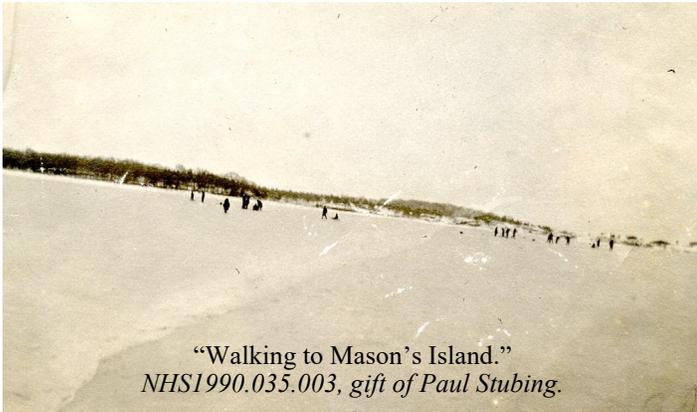
Fishing had "fallen off considerably" by the end of the third week in November, and many fishermen had secured winter employment at the old Palmer Shipyard or else Pendleton Brothers' yard in Mystic. America had entered the war on 6 April of that year, but ship building and repair had been booming for well over a year beforehand, and employment was plentiful.

As December wore on, winter gathered the area into its iron grip. *The Day* reported that 10 December was the coldest night so far, although whether that statement included the low of three below from the previous January is unclear. It mattered little, for the new year dawned very cold indeed at six below zero, paralyzing the shipyard when "no work [was done] besides what is absolutely necessary." Five days later Pearl Street was noted to be slippery in places where standing was possible, the implication being it was impossible everywhere else. The next day it was possible to walk from Morgan Point to Mouse Island. Ice continued to pose problems ashore, but the incessant truck traffic on Pearl Street shunting lumber from the railroad freight yard to the shipyard broke up the ice and allowed a modicum of traction for walking. By mid January there was a thaw, and the river was clear of ice, the first movement was over, and then ensued a brief intermission.

Around the beginning of the third week in January a snow storm hit the area, and by the end of January the river had frozen over as far south as the Morgan property (Chesebro Avenue). The channel was clear around the shipyard, but maritime traffic in the river was impossible. A similar freeze had occurred in 1904 and again in '05. On those occasions the smacks unloaded their catches onto the ice at the mouth of the river for transportation to shore.

It was probably around this time in late January that Florence Fitzpatrick, in the company of others decided that there were recreational possibilities in all this ice and frigid weather. Lucky for us, they were accompanied by someone with a camera who documented this rare occurrence. *The Day* reported that people were skating on the river, walking across the

river to Mason's Island, and one person (Gilbert Wilcox) took advantage of the freeze recently to walk to Mystic Island.



February saw the Second Movement reach crescendo. On February 4 *The Day* reported the Sound had frozen over, the next day it reported a low of sixteen below zero, with the ominous comment that with the stiff breeze blowing "it was almost too cold in Noank to keep fires." The sea froze such that it was barely possible to get within a mile of Fishers Island. The Army supply vessel *General Thomas Pickering* was compelled to disembark passengers at the edge of the ice for them to continue their journey to the island over the ice on foot. At this time Fishers Island Sound was reported to be a solid mass of ice several inches thick and closed to marine traffic. To add confusion into the mix, on 7 February, *The Day* reported that "It looks today as if the coldest weather in Noank of the past 65 years was only a thing of memory. Ice made solidly enough to walk on as far as Gates Island, and the children skated Wednesday [6 February] to Mason's Island. Today everything is slush, and while there are a few good sized ice cakes the performances of yesterday could not be repeated."

And then came the interesting theories. Noank fishermen became concerned that all the ice melting might lead to localized flooding in unusual high tides. Oliver W Beebe posited that winter's backbone was "broken all to pieces," and that he predicted an early spring. This postulate was based on his sighting a groundhog "last Saturday" (2 February). So strong was his belief that he was preparing his vessel *Brainstorm* for an early season. Rodental theories notwithstanding, on 13 February Noank was surrounded by a

"solid field of ice, and looking from the Store Hill in one direction, and the west shore in another, the sight is such as never seen here before, unless in the days of the Indians (sic)." The ice was such a problem that the Lighthouse Board removed the Ram Island Reef, Bartlett's Reef, and Cornfield Point Lightvessels from their stations and moored them in New London for safe keeping.

The Day did not record when the Sound was clear of ice, but the occasional snow storm would bring progress in the area shipyards to a halt more than once following the Big Freeze, neither did *The Day* report exactly when O. W. Beebe commenced fishing. They did, however, report the observation of Thaddeus Pecor, keeper of Morgan Point lighthouse, that the winter of 1917-18, along with the winter of 1871-72, was the coldest season he ever experienced in his long existence.

It was by no means though the last time that Noankers took to the river on skates. In mid-January of 1968, a group of seven teenagers from Noank, Mystic, North Stonington, and Ledyard, after noticing that the river ice was about six inches thick, skated from Mystic, downriver, around Sixpenny Island and into Beebe Cove ending their adventure at Spicer Park. It was a notable achievement, but I'm sure anyone who remembered the winter of 50 years before would be inclined to give a dismissive harrumpf, and say "Yeah, but back in my day...." And chances are they would be justified.

Noank artist, Lars Thorsen, featured in Exhibit at the Mystic Museum of Art

Our members may be interested to know that the life and work of Lars Thorsen will be featured in an exhibit at the MMofA this spring. The exhibit, "Lars Thorsen: from Norway to Noank," will be open to the public from May 3—June 1, 2025.



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If you have any questions, concerns, and/or articles to share in the Noank Ledger, please contact us at Noankhist@gmail.com. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the mailing of the ledger, or address changes, please contact Elizabeth Boucher at P.O. Box 9454, Noank, CT 06340