



NOANK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Presents:

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



JOIN US: 7:30 PM—WEDNESDAY, November 15, 2023

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

One of the most incredible resources at the Sylvan Street 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 November 15 to hear selections from this collection including stories about prohibition, the waterfront, Carson’s store, Noank’s early seafaring days and various Noank characters from Captain Adrian Lane, Clifford Phelps, Jessie Carson Plumstead, Florence Oliver, Captain Ben Rathbun, Mary Virginia Goodman and more.

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

Selections from the NHS Photograph Collection:
 A Busy Afternoon on the River
 By John Wilbur, NHS Historian



Moses W. Rathbun visited the Town Dock on a calm and warm afternoon, and recorded this scene approximately one hundred years ago. Aside from the man staring down at the barge from his eyrie atop the coal scuttle, every man and boy in frame is wearing a hat and most are in shirtsleeves. At first glance one might conclude it simply shows a group of vessels at the dock, but that barely scratches the surface. This photo can be considered a study in evolution — of propulsion, trade, and the Noank waterfront, to say nothing of men’s fashion.

The sloop *Estella* is bow-on to camera. She was built as a yacht by D.O. Richmond in Mystic in 1876, and lived a long and active life mostly in the oystering business, primarily out of Bridgeport. She was fitted with an engine circa 1917, and a few years later was engaged in coastwise trade. A large pile of line appears to be on her cabin-top, and a boy is yarning with *Estella*’s crew. *Estella* was listed as “reduced or lost” in the Register of Merchant Vessels circa 1927.

Astern of *Estella* the barge *Ray* of New London is unloading coal. *Ray* was about 141 feet long, built in New London in 1889, and was crewed by three men. Manned barges like *Ray* were steered even though they were towed from one port to another. Coal was the primary source of heat in Noank homes, and much of it came to Noank by water, originally in schooners and later in barges like *Ray*. The Town Dock was destroyed in 1938, and all coal deliveries thereafter were by rail to the Coal Company (now the Mudhead’s headquarters) on Front Street. High overhead above the activity on the dock, a man pushes a wheelbarrow of coal toward the large coal bunker ashore. Not surprisingly, the high coal trestle attracted the attention of many youthful Noankers, and made for an admirable, if illegal, high platform for diving into the river.

A member of *Ray*’s crew appears to be talking to, or else watching the men at work on the power fishing vessel *Pal*, moored on *Ray*’s starboard side. *Pal* was built by Frank Bracci in 1920 for Harold Ashby. She

was built for the drag net fishery, but Ashby sold her almost immediately to interests in Greenport, Long Island — her hailing port in this photograph. By June of 1924, *Pal* had been caught for the third time carrying alcohol illegally, something reflected by the frequent changes in her homeport within the Register. She was owned in Greenport for another four or five years, was registered in New London in 1930, and finally sold to interests in Providence, RI.

The Town Dock itself is not without interest. At the time this photograph was taken, the Town Dock was just downriver from where the beach is today. The coal bunker occupied most, if not all of the area between the Red Shed and the river. Occupying much of the foreground in the photograph are lobster/fish cars. What appears to be a scale is at the bottom of the ramp from the dock down to the cars. A long-handled net lies nearby, as does a large basket. Lobster cars are essentially wooden holding pens for lobsters or fish that could be kept alive until sufficient numbers or better prices made sale favorable. For years Noank lobstermen shifted to blackfishing after the lobster season ended, stowing their catches in cars until Hanukkah. Around that time a well-smack might make as many as three trips to take the fish to market in New York. It was important that the blackfish (tautog) arrive at Fulton Fish Market alive. The smack *Conquest* was a frequent delivery vehicle, and on at least one occasion got tossed about in foul weather to the detriment of her cargo. Most of the 10,000 pounds of fish did not survive transit.

The writing on the long white shed on the dock advertises the Chesebro Brothers Seafood Company, a Fulton Market-based subsidiary of the Atlantic Fisheries Company of New York, NY. The Chesebro brothers opened their stand on the river around the

middle of 1921, and by fall of that year handled 1400 bushels on a busy day. Lobsters might fetch \$0.23 per pound. This was not the first of the Chesebro Brothers' business dealings with Noank. Since at least the early years of the Twentieth century they had been buying and selling fishing vessels to and from Noank fishermen. So far, research has not linked the Chesebro brothers of New York with the Chesebros of Noank. In addition to the business at the Town Dock, the Chesebro brothers had a dam and ice house built at Beebe Pond. The seafood business was capricious, and by June 1932 the Samuel J. Chesebro Fishing & Trading Co. was in receivership.

One might speculate what prompted Moses Rathbun to take this photograph. Did he do it to record the transition from sail to internal combustion? The rise of the barge for coastwise traffic? Or did he have any idea that someday, the entire scene would vanish completely? Or, was it something more mundane, he just thought it made a nice picture? The important thing is that he did record this scene, little thinking his photograph would be discussed a hundred years later.

Today, nothing in this photograph exists. The barge *Ray* was abandoned in 1927, *Estella* disappeared from the Register in 1927 as well, and *Pal* in 1938 (possibly a victim of the hurricane). Everything else in this photograph ceased to exist September 21, 1938 — the date of the 1938 hurricane.

After the hurricane, the Town Dock was rebuilt immediately north of its previous location (where the beach is now). Within a decade or so, (possibly after Hurricane Carol in 1954) the Town Dock was again rebuilt in its present location.

In Memoriam

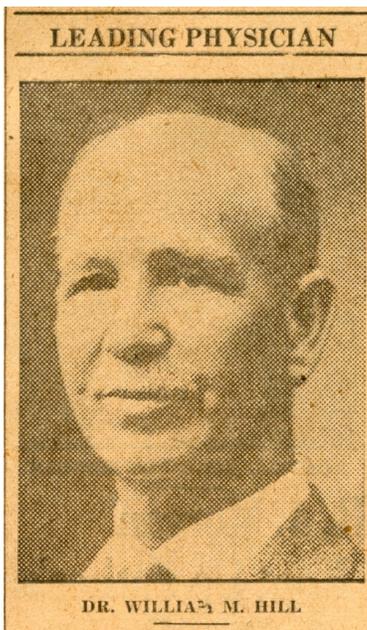
Robert "Bob" Helbig—1938-2023
William "Bill" Spicer III—1940-2023



Excerpts from the Oral History Collection

Some of the Noank Historical Society's earliest public programs involved of a panel of longtime Noankers sharing their memories of the old days. Fortunately, many of their stories were both recorded and transcribed. Over the years, NHS curator, Mary Anderson, ensured that these tapes were converted to CDs and digital audio files so that they can still be easily accessed today. The following excerpts are from programs hosted in 1967 and 1969.

Norbert Hill recalls the life of a doctor in the old days:



“My father, Dr. William M. Hill, a young doctor just out of Medical School with his wife and first born son, arrived in Noank in 1897, where he made his home for the remaining 41 years of his life. The family lived at first in the Latham house on the corner of Main and Church streets. In 1902 he built what turned out to be a drugstore, an office, and residential quarters above, in

Auntie Latham's backyard on Church Street. He also moved the old Miner drugstore up from under the hill to its present location [10 Main Street] and helped build the new Methodist Church. That year, 1902, saw three new Church edifices in Noank—the Roman Catholic, the Episcopal where we have our museum, and the Methodist. Father used to make his calls on a bicycle. When he had to make a long trip he would go down to Fred Rathbun's livery stable and hire a horse and buggy.”

Ivan Crossman talks about the old 6th district school on the hill:

“When I first went to school up there, all the land on top of Prospect Hill was bare, all mowing fields, cornfield, pasture, and huckleberry bushes. We used to go across the lot where the school is now [1967], up over by Uncle Billy Brown's. There was a gap in the wall where we used to cut through to the old dirt road to the school, where Mr. and Mrs. Hagerty live now. There were two entrances, east and west. You left your coats and dinner boxes in the entryway and went into the big room. The first thing that greeted you was the old stove. It was a beauty. All the seats were in orderly rows. On the west side of the wall, across the top in letters about 8” high, it said, “All is not gold that glitters.” On the east side it said, “Success rides on every hour. Grapple it and you will win.” That was our writing lesson. The teacher taught all grades. I went there for three years and after that they did away with the school and we call came to the 11th school district down here.”



The old sixth district schoolhouse on Prospect Hill, Noank. 1983.008, gift of Eleanor Fox.

Florence Oliver gives an amusing description of a visit from Dr. James Weaver:

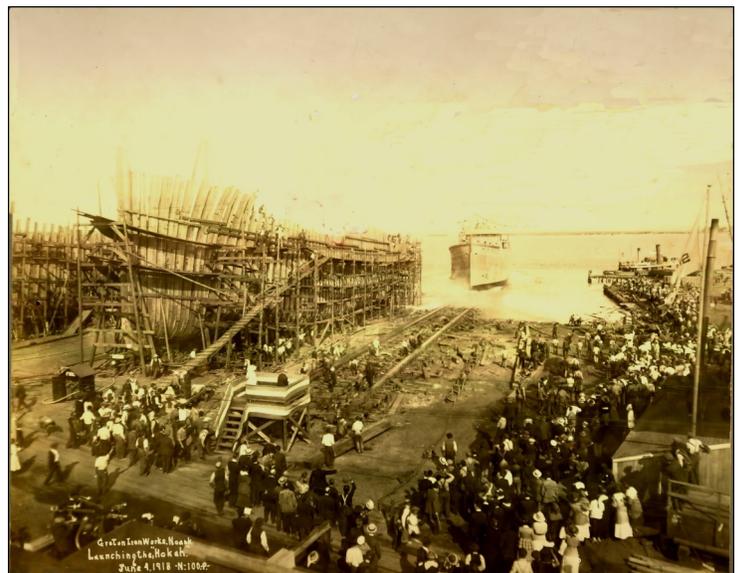
“He was a very nice neat little man with the most intriguing goatee. Doctors in those days dispensed their own medicine. Their call cost a dollar, including medicine. Every physician had his own way of dispensing his medicine, and Dr. Weaver had his own. On the little finger of his right hand he allowed the nail to grow quite long. Now I want you to understand that he kept it meticulously clean. He had a little package of white papers, and he put out four squares. He took the cap off a bottle. Then he would dip into the bottle and come up with a nailful of powder and put it on one of the papers. Then he would look at it. Perhaps your condition called for two nailfuls. This went on until he filled the four papers. Then he carefully folded them over and wrote down when and how to take the powders. Now, you may think that this was a very unsanitary way of doing things but we never had a fatality and here I am!”

George Laffargue gives his impression of Noank we he came here in 1918:

“Starting at the depot end, if you can visualize it coming along the shore, the first thing of any importance was the Bayside Inn, no longer there. There was a long dock that went way out into the channel and from there just shore. The yacht club wasn’t there. Where Skipper’s Dock is there was a long dock, about 500 feet long. On either side were old fishermen’s shacks, where they kept their gear, lobster pots and nets. At the dock were the schooners—Ben Latham’s, Henry Langworthy’s, Steve Bagnall’s and several others. The great thing in the spring was when these schooners fitted out to go fishing. The young men in the village would sign on as crew. When the ships were coming in from their trips, the people from the village would go down to the docks to greet them as they would a liner. Coming down further from the North Dock was Rastus Wilbur’s dock where fishermen unloaded their fish. A man named McGaw had a little Ford truck and used to go from dock to dock, pick up the barrels of fish, and cart them to the depot. When the train came along at 7:00 it would pick up the fish and take them to Fulton Market.

Right next to Rastus Wilbur’s was the Town Dock where the coal yard was. A little later there was another fish dock there run by S. B. Chesebro & Co. A little further down toward the shipyard there was a two story building with a narrow third story with a little roof on it—the Rossie Silk Mill. Right next door was Roger’s boatyard where I spent most of my boyhood. A little further down was a little red shanty, red because it was tin and had rusted, where the town mechanic, Nelson Rathbun, held forth. I remember the boats coming in at night and Nel Rathbun lugging gasoline in 5 gallon cans, and pouring it through chamois into their gasoline tanks. A little further down came this dock right in front of Mrs. Anna Rathbun’s home, and it was like the house that Topsy built. Someone had built a little shack on it, then they needed another room so they built another one and another one. Pretty soon the whole dock was full of these little connected shacks that they used for a cottage. Next to that was the State Lobster Hatchery—it washed away in the 1938 Hurricane.

Further down was the Groton Iron Works. They were building the Ferris type boats [for WWI]. We came here in the spring of 1918 and in November the war was over. The yard laid idle for many years. It burned down and in the course of events became a yacht yard and then practically nothing. Mr. Abbot started his business and now Mr. Singer has his beautiful marina there.”



Ships under construction at the Groton Iron Works (now Noank Shipyard), June 1918. 1970.009.0001, gift of Ada Stamm.

Halstead Brown talks about the shipyard fire of 1924:

“That was some years after World War I and those boats had stood there since the war. The frames were made of yellow pine shipped up here from the south. If you ever tried to burn wood you know that, with all that sap, yellow pine makes a very hot fire. They called in companies from all around, even New London and Westerly. One of the boats was all planked and you couldn’t get the water inside where the fire was. It just had to burn for hours. Another problem was that it was very dry and the ground was several feet deep with just pine chips. Anywhere you walked you saw these little fires starting all around under your feet. They had long lines of hose, with all the different companies hooked in, all the way up and down the coast. It was all pumped water—no hydrants. Any place they could get close enough for their hoses, they were pumping from the river. They couldn’t get down to the Lighthouse. It was too hot. The Noank truck went through that between the two buildings. I don’t know how they ever made it. Leo Shandeor was the driver and there were others with him. They got down there and all of a sudden, throwing the pump in, they stripped the gears. The poor old pump wouldn’t give any water. They had to stay down there in the hottest place there was. So it all had to be fought from this side. It was a tough fight to get those fires out.”



Spectators watching the shipyard fire in May 1924.
From the collections of the Mystic Seaport Museum.

Albert Patterson remembers Noank in the early 1900s:

“There was a big change in Noank during the period from about 1900 to 1910, when I was a boy here. Three churches were built: the Catholic Church, the

Episcopalian Church, and the Methodist Church. I remember this well because my father built the Methodist Church. This ten year period was interesting because during that time people were getting electric lights in their homes, they were getting telephones, they were getting automobiles, and people were even putting bathrooms in their homes. The trolleys came in during this period, so I saw them come in, and I saw them go out.

Also during that time, the ship *Titanic* sank [April 1912], and this touched even the small village of Noank because Mr. and Mrs. Kenyon, who lived in the house now occupied by Chip Anderson, were on the *Titanic*. Mr. Kenyon was lost, but his wife was saved and later on she married Owen Williams, who was well known in the village.



Marion Kenyon, photographed by G. Wallace Wright of New London, December 1897.

My memory of being a boy in Noank was good and it was busy too. We used to trade quahogs which we sold in the village for 20 cents a dozen. We went fishing and crabbing, all right around the Noank shore because we had no pollution then. The boys used to congregate at the railroad station about 4:30 in the afternoon waiting for the train to come in with *The New London Day*. Then there was a train that came through at 6:00pm to pick up many times a carload of fish and lobsters consigned to Fulton Market, NY. Imagine if you could get a carload from around here now!

As for the social life of the village at that time, there was plenty of it. We had the firehouse, the Daughters of America, the Junior Order of the American Mechanics, the Order of Women, and the Golden Cross. There were box lunch socials, whist parties, squares dances—we weren’t lacking for things to do. Many people would spend an evening at the firehouse playing pool or cards. There were dances up over the firehouse and the music was from a player piano. Then there was the trolley.

I remember when the trolley line was completed and the trolley waiting room. People used to come there, on the corner of the Noank park, and they'd come early just so they could sit and socialize. If they were busy talking when the trolley came, they'd wait for the next one, for at that time they ran every hour each way, and every half hour in the afternoon.

Somewhere about this time I'm talking about, the activity was moving from under the hill to the top of the hill. The Post Office, Palmer's Store, the store owned by Roswell Fitch and Perkins' Dry Goods Store were the businesses at the top of the hill. The Post Office was moved from under the hill and Ed Searles was postmaster there for some time. Later on he built a store in front of his mother's house on Elm Street where he sold everything from bicycles to rubber boots to fruit, cigarettes, clothing. Given time, he could find anything you asked for either in the store, the house or the garage.



Ed Searles' store on Elm Street.
1975.122.004, gift of Mr. & Mrs. Jack Sutherland.

Many pranks were hatched in his store while sitting about the stove. One prank which sticks in my memory was the evening the boys were having a crap game. This, however was later than 1910. The time was a cold winter's evening and the smoke pipe came out through the side of the building. Someone suggested that they tie a line onto the stove pipe behind the car and tie the other end to Leland Andrews' car. This was done and Leland started down Elm Street dragging the stove pipe behind the car, and the gentlemen shooting crap were smoked out.

No tale about the old days in Noank would be complete without telling about the 4th of July celebrations, rather,

the night before was when much of the action took place. Ed Searles had a complete line of fireworks, including blank cartridge pistols, high powered firecrackers, skyrockets and Roman candles. When the young and not so young left there with a good supply, things happened. Gates were removed from fences and some of these ended up on a big bonfire. Somebody always moved an outhouse from where it belonged and placed it in front of the trolley waiting room. Dan Chester's coal wagons could be found most any place in the village where the pranksters put them. Sharpies and dories were deposited on the Church lawn and in many other places in the village. One of the stories is that Billy Newman, working as a special constable, was put in a barrel and rolled down Store Hill. I don't remember that he was physical injured by this unasked-for-trip but I don't imagine he was very comfortable. One of the customs of that time was the ringing of the church bells at midnight before the 4th. One year the Methodist Church people hired a watchman to make sure this didn't happen, but the youngsters outsmarted him. They got him by rapping on a side window and then when he got outside to check on it, they slipped in, locked the door, and rang the bell. No one my age will ever forget the celebrations for the 4th of July!



Noank in the News, 100 Years Ago:

"Capt. Henry Langworth of Noank, one of the best known fishing ship masters of this section, is listed among the crew of schooner *Columbia* of Gloucester, which as the result of Sunday's test was chosen to contest on behalf of the United States for the international fisherman's trophy of Halifax, against the Nova Scotia schooner *Bluenose*.

This is not the first time Capt. Langworthy has been with the *Columbia*, but he is more generally known hereabouts as master of the *Tartar*, a fishing vessel of such fine lines and appearance that she was often mistaken for a private yacht. Capt. Langworthy has a wide acquaintance in local Masonic as well as maritime circles."

-The Day, October 22, 1923

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