

# Sam Cahoon

by John Valois

*John Valois gave a "Conversation" about Sam Cahoon for the Woods Hole Library in May 2000. It was one of a series of informal lunchtime talks on a topic of local interest that was taped and later transcribed. It has been edited for publication with a few interpolations from other John Valois stories.*

My relationship with Sam Cahoon lasted only three years, sadly ending in August 1952, when he died unexpectedly at age 74. But after those three years I thought I knew him quite well. The first thing I admired about Sam was his sailing ability. He was a master and I really wanted to learn from him. Homer Smith, my boss at the MBL, was Sam's son-in-law so I asked him to introduce us. And he did. After some sailing talk, Sam said, "Bub, if you can sail a catboat, you can sail anything." Sam was right. Catboats are difficult to sail. But a lot of fun to sail.

Sam Cahoon's father, Alden, was born in Cedarville, the southeasternmost village of Plymouth, in 1842. He grew up there and went to sea at the age of 15. He shipped out for ten years on a cod-fishing vessel that went out to the Grand Banks. They left in the last part of April and didn't return for six months, when the October weather was getting too fierce. A boy of 15 in the cod-fishing industry would have learned a lot the hard way. Everybody would spend hours fishing, dory fishing, bringing the cod in, and spending all night cleaning and dressing the fish. The protein in cod breaks down very rapidly, so the fish must be dressed immediately and salted down. A spoiled

catch would cost you all the money that you had spent for the six-month voyage plus all the profit that you had hoped to make.

Back ashore, in 1869, Alden was hired as a foreman by Philip Haskell of Cedarville, a contractor who frequently worked in Falmouth. Alden worked on the stone and timber railroad pier at the land end of Butler's Point (now Juniper Point) where the ferries to Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket docked. He and his workmen built the dock revetments with rocks and sand brought from Nobska Point, the same source that had been used for the old stone dock at Surf Drive. The men had to crop large boulders into square blocks to face the pier. It took a lot of hard, careful work.

While he was working in Woods Hole, Alden met Rebecca Lewis Hinckley, the daughter of Captain Thomas Hinckley, who lived on Butler's Point. He married Becky in 1872, he finished the pier, and they each got a new job. Becky became the first Woods Hole telegraph operator and Alden became the live-in caretaker and gardener for the Foster family on Church Street.

Mr. Foster had bought an old dairy farm across the street from the Episcopal Church and turned it into a summer estate for his family, naming it "Farm House." Sam Cahoon was born in that house in 1878. Every day young Sam looked out over Little Harbor toward Vineyard Sound. At the age of five he essentially taught himself to sail in a small sailing skiff. His father tied him in, pushed

him off, and told him not to go out beyond Butler's Point. Sam went back and forth in Little Harbor learning the basics of sailing and some of the tricks of managing wind and water.

Sam went to the Woods Hole school through the sixth grade, to junior high in Falmouth, and then to Falmouth High School, from which he graduated in 1896.

Sam was a good student in high school and a good athlete. He was on the football team and on the baseball team. He loved skating on the local ponds and playing hockey. But after high school, he had to find a job. Walter O. Luscombe, a neighbor, advised him to apply as a boat boy to Alfred Craven Harrison. In 1893 Harrison had bought a large Shingle Style house on the east side of Little Harbor that had originally been designed for Mahlon Ogden Jones by Edmund March Wheelwright, a famous Boston architect. The new owner took Luscombe's advice and hired Sam Cahoon.

Boat boy for a wealthy man in those days was a very important job. In the beginning Sam had to clean and maintain the Harrisons' two yachts in Woods Hole, a 25-foot catboat and a very fast racing boat, a 21-footer that they raced against the Beverly Yacht Club in Buzzards Bay. Sam worked his way up on these boats from boat boy to crew and sailor. All this time, Luscombe was talking to A. C. Harrison about promoting Sam. In 1902, Harrison asked Sam to be his captain. It was unheard of in those days to be a yacht captain at 24. Yes, you could go to sea on a whaling vessel and be a captain at 24, but not in the yachting world. This was the golden era of yachting: extraordinarily wealthy people, towering egos, marvelous vessels. A yacht captain had to be a polished and self-confident man as well as a skillful sailor. Sam accepted the offer and became Harrison's captain.

In 1902 Sam's father and mother moved to John Gardner's estate on Tobey Island in Monument Beach; from then on Sam lived pretty much alone until he married Elsie Gardner in 1917. But I can tell you he was well taken care of. A yacht captain took meals with the chauffeurs and the carriage men. They were all well treated and they were all respected. Yacht captain to the Harrisons was a marvelous job and Sam worked hard at it. The Harrison fleet took a lot of maintenance.

In 1898 A.C. Harrison bought a 21-foot raceabout (raceabout was a racing classification) from the Herreshoff boatyard in Bristol, RI, and named her *Gadfly*. The next year Harrison's brother, William Frazier Harrison, bought another 21-footer from Herreshoff and named her *Quakeress*. In 1904, A. C. Harrison bought a new Herreshoff design, the New York 30, a gaff rigged sloop, *Quakeress II*. She was 30 feet at the waterline, 43'6" over all, had 1,300 square feet of sail, and was very, very fast. She needed a crew of six. The Herreshoff yard built 18 of these racing sailboats in just one year. All 18 were ordered by New York Yacht Club members, including Harrison, but many owners had summer houses on Buzzards Bay and sailed in its waters most summers. When *Quakeress II* was racing, Captain Cahoon was often at the helm.

The Harrisons were members of the New York Yacht Club, the Corinthian Yacht Club of Philadelphia, the Seawanhaka Yacht Club of Oyster Bay, NY, as well as the Woods Hole Yacht Club.

Sam once told me that when he was racing with the Harrison family he spent all night looking at the charts and tide tables for Newport or Chesapeake Bay or wherever he was racing to figure out the currents and where likely wind shifts would come from. Sam knew what to look for, he knew how to look for it, and, what's more, he had pretty much taught himself his superb sailing skills.

By 1913, Sam had had enough of being a yacht captain and of being in charge of boat maintenance. Now he wanted a land-based job.

Here is how he entered the fish market business: Isaiah Spindell had opened a fish market in Woods Hole right next to the stone and timber dock that Alden Cahoon had built before Sam was born. The fishing industry was good in those days. There were a lot of school fish, pogies, menhaden, and mackerel, so that Spindell's wholesale business went very well. But the collapse of the Pacific Guano

Company in Woods Hole in 1889 left him without his best wholesale customer. The guano factory mixed ground-up fish with the guano. Spindell closed the fish market and left town. In about 1905, the market was bought and reopened as the Harborside Fish Market by a newcomer to Woods Hole, Charles Bunker Coombs, who lived on Buzzards Bay Avenue with his family. Coombs ran the fish market as a retail business until 1912, when he sold it to John Nagel, a Boston fish wholesaler. In 1913, Nagel put the market up for sale with the condition that he would be the exclusive buyer of all the fish coming into it.

Walter Luscombe knew that Sam wanted a land based job and said, "Sam, why don't you go into the fish business? Why don't you see about that fish store in Woods Hole, see if you can't make



Sam Cahoon sailing with Mrs. Harrison.  
Courtesy Woods Hole Historical Collection.

a living from that? Don't worry about the money to buy it."

But when Luscombe heard that Nagel insisted on having exclusive rights to buy all the fish, he told Sam, "No, you don't want to do that. You want to be free to sell to New Bedford, to New York and to Providence; you want your fish to be for sale in all of those markets."

Nagel rejected that. Contentious discussions went on for a while. Finally Luscombe stepped in and said, "Well, Mr. Nagel, if that's how you feel about it, then let me tell you that

I own the land under your business. If I tell you to get your fish market off my land you're going to have to do it."

That settled that. In 1914, Sam became the owner of the Harborside Fish Market. Sam's final arrangement with Mr. Nagel required him to send all his yellowtail flounder to Nagel's wholesale market in Boston. He was free to ship the rest of his fish to New Bedford, New York, or anywhere other than the Boston market. And he made a success of the business pretty quickly; in 1922, he opened a branch market in Falmouth. By the early '40s, several big trawlers would often come in at once, crowding the entrance to Eel Pond as they waited to unload at Sam's wharf.

Sam loved people and was very public spirited. He was a good businessman and used his money wisely, but whenever an employee needed money,

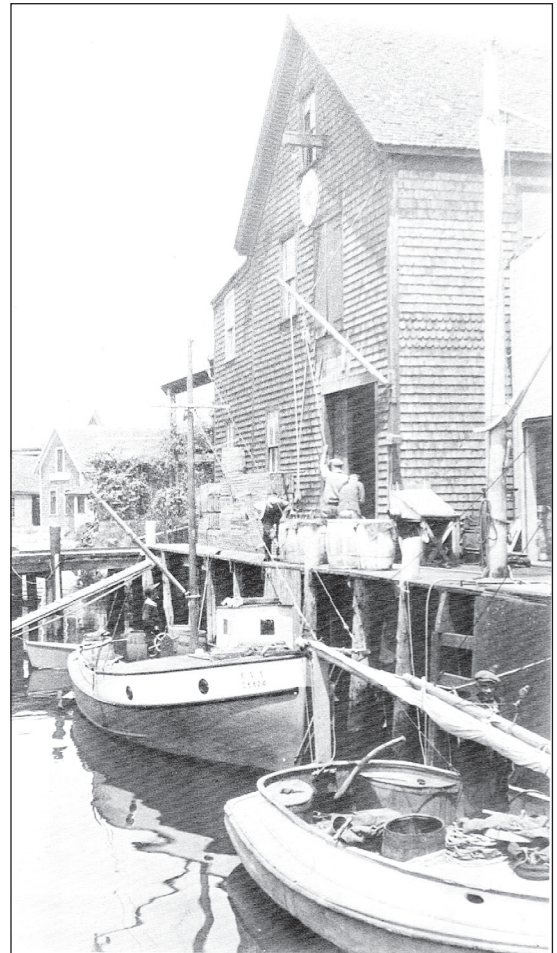
he always lent it or even gave it freely. He and his employees were known for their scrupulous honesty. Sam's good reputation grew as fast as his fish business did.

In the beginning, Sam got 70 percent of his fish from fishermen who tended the local fish weirs. He bought scup, squid, and scallops caught locally; he bought cod, haddock and pollack caught further offshore; he would even send a truck around to fishermen as far away as Osterville to buy shucked scallops. In the spring he bought any mackerel and menhaden that the New Bedford fleets wanted to sell to him on their way home. For the rest he relied on "dinner pail boats," boats with small gas engines and small dredges that would go out for just one day. But at the end of that one day they would bring back very, very, fresh fish. Yellowtail flounder caught off the back side of Martha's Vineyard was a specialty. Sam had as many as 30 day boats working for him.

Before long Sam persuaded his day boat fishermen to ice down their fish to keep them fresh. This was surprising. You would have thought that most people would be using ice by then, but no, they were still salting fish. Then he thought, well, what's the sense of unloading the fish from the ice-filled holds, moving them into the preparation room and packing them in ice all over again before sending them off to market? So he sent his day boats out with barrels of ice and they came back with barrels of iced yellowtail flounder. The catch went from the holds of the boats directly into Sam's own red and black delivery trucks or onto the trains waiting at the Woods Hole terminal. All those day boats were there every day unloading; it was a very, very fine business to be in.

Because Sam's iced yellowtail flounder came to the Boston market fresher than anyone else's, the restaurant buyers there soon bid up its wholesale price

two cents or even three cents a pound at auction. Mr. Nagel, being a good promoter, soon labeled it "Woods Hole Flounder." Other wholesalers in the region found their market share of yellowtail dwindling. Their buyers came to Woods Hole, saw what Sam was doing, and then they renamed their own fish, "Woods Hole Flounder." Sam said, "Ha, ha, that's the way they want to do it, we'll do it better!" and renamed his fish "Cahoon Yellowtail Flounder." It went on the auction board in Boston as "Cahoon Flounder, yellowtail." The restaurants



Unloading the catch at Sam Cahoon's dock.  
Courtesy Frances Cahoon Shepherd.

wanted the real thing, the word got around, and Sam could barely keep up with the Boston market for his yellowtail flounder.

In 1917 Sam was 39 years old, still unmarried, and very busy with his fish market. But then his mother died; his father needed a new place to live and some company. So Sam added a second floor to the fish market for his father. That same year he asked Elsie Frances Gardner to marry him. Elsie lived just off the Woods Hole Road and she came from another old New England family. Elsie happily agreed to become the wife of the successful Woods Hole fishmonger and the daughter-in-law of Alden Cahoon. It was an excellent marriage. It produced four wonderful children: Cynthia (Coonie) Cahoon Smith, Frances Cahoon Shepherd, Rebecca Cahoon Ames and Samuel Cahoon Jr.

When they were old enough, not very old at all, Sam began teaching his children to sail. He had a sailing skiff built for them with very high coamings so that the girls couldn't fall overboard: they had to stand up to look forward. He remembered how constricted he felt when his father had tied him into a boat. He wanted his own children to be safe, but not to be tied in. When Cynthia was a bit older, she went off to a summer camp in Brewster, where she sailed a big Knockabout. When she came home, she asked Dad if he could get a Cape Cod Knockabout. Sam bought one from Phinney's boat yard in Monument Beach that was named *Whiz* by mistake. He meant her name to be *Wiz* after one of his favorite boats in the Harrison fleet, but *Whiz* was what got painted on her stern. Sam's family really needed two boats, so he bought another one from Robinson's boat yard in Cataumet. Sam named this Cape Cod Knockabout *Mae Win*. He was to win many a race in her, including his final race.

Sam was unbeatable in a Knockabout. And he taught his skills to his daughters. I talked to Cynthia this week about what she learned from her father and I was amazed. Sam's children knew so much about the shifting behavior of wind and water and about all the technical ways to make boats go faster that are only just now being used in racing circles.

Over the years, Sam bought a stake in various fishing boats. One of those boats was *Priscilla V.*, owned by Jared Vincent. Sam also owned a big vessel, a scalloper over 70 feet long called *Three and One*. She was later renamed *Three and One and One More*. "Three" was for his three daughters and "One" was for his son. The "One More" was added when a daughter was born to John Salvador, Sam's partner from the Vineyard.

For three years I chatted with Sam in his office at the fish market after almost every race. Sam would put a pipe in his mouth, sit back and we'd just talk boats. I could see his secretaries, Clara Adams, Frannie Cahoon, and sometimes Cynthia looking over and listening. Through the window I could see huge crates of fish being hoisted onto the trucks. There was always lots of commotion: "Sam, take the phone please." "Yes, yes." Buyers would be quoting the market in New York. "I'll give you one cent more, that's all I can do, one cent more." "OK, that's a deal." Sam would put the phone down and turn back to me.

*The Falmouth Enterprise* summed up Sam's 1951 sailing season. He won the 1951 Knockabout championship regatta, which added the forty-second trophy to his collection. He recalled winning his first trophy in 1895 in a Spritsail Boat race sponsored by the Woods Hole Yacht Club, which had a fleet of 25 Spritsail Boats. Sam was too young to join the yacht club.



Henry Klimm's fishing boat tied up near Sam Cahoon's Harborside Fish Market.  
Postcard courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

On August 30, 1952, Sam T. Cahoon sailed the last race of the season at the Woods Hole Yacht Club and his last race in *Mae Win*. He finished first in a close race without the usual pipe in his mouth. He left the boat for his crew to put to bed, something he never did, and made it home. He died four hours later. He was 74. He had suffered a fatal heart attack. He was buried in the village cemetery on Church Street. His tombstone shows him at the helm of *Mae Win*. Sam's joy of sailing and his enthusiasm for small boat racing are his lasting legacy.

### **About the Author**

John Valois began his 41 years at the Marine Biological Laboratory in 1949, while in college. He was a potato peeler on the summer mess crew. The next year he joined the Supply Department (now the Marine Resources Center) summer crew and began his career as a collector of marine specimens for scientific research. In 1957, he became a year-round employee in that department and was named its manager in 1970, a position he held until retirement in 1990.

A highly competitive sailor himself, he was fascinated by marine life and equally fascinated by the people who worked and played on the ocean. He considered the times he took Rachel Carson collecting to have been among his greatest privileges. John was a highly valued member of the Woods Hole community and served on the Museum's Steering Committee for years. He remained a life-long supporter.

John Valois died in 2014.