

From the Archivists

Woods Hole Historical Collection
Jennifer Stone Gaines

The Woods Hole Historical Collection has recently been given part of a large collection of the papers of Thomas D. Fish, who was born in Quissett in 1840. In his adult years he joined his uncle's New York shipping business, which was then renamed "Thomas Dunham and Nephew and Company." Their firm was located on South Street in Manhattan and flourished there for over 50 years.

The donor of this collection, A. Metcalf Morse, Jr., is the grandson of Thomas D. Fish, and still lives in the family home in Quissett. He was in the process of giving all the shipping papers to the South Street Seaport when he decided to allow us to have the local materials. We gratefully accepted and have been sifting through Mr. Fish's correspondence, most of which was neatly stacked in a sea chest from one of the company's ships.

The sea chest has become a veritable treasure chest for the archives. The letters are filled with information and glimpses of life from more than one hundred years ago. For instance, one of the letters which was loose on top of the stacks was from Braddock Gifford from Woods Hole in 1873. Before this, we had known him only from one photograph which we have in our archives of him at the door of his blacksmith shop, heavy iron mallet in hand, wagon before him. Suddenly, across the ages, by way of one small piece of paper, we can hear the cadence and pronunciation of his speech; we learn details of his family, and aspects of the local economy, of which we had previously known nothing.

Woods Hole Nov 3 1873

Mr Fish Sir

I shall send you 10 barrels
of cranberries by Propeller
on Tuesday 4 day I should like
for you to sell them for me
in soe doing will oblige your
friend

Braddock Gifford

these barres have ben pickt
the most of them sence the
10 of Oct. & we call them
good hard berres

my son Benjamin soald
our berres last fall at Bridgewater
but has ^{now} gorn to England to
git him a Wife & he may not
return untill Spring

Braddock Gifford

Nov 3 1873

Letter from Braddock Gifford to Thomas D. Fish asking for help in selling ten barrels of "good hard berres." Help was needed because Gifford's son, Benjamin, who "soald our berres last fall at Bridgewater but has now gorn to England to git him a Wife and he may not return untill Spring." Thomas D. Fish Collection, 1873. Courtesy WHHC.

There was also a letter on top of the stacks from a lady in New York thanking Mr. Fish for the “lovely bouquet of arbutus” which was made “all the more precious for coming from dear Quissett.” (Because I am so very fond of our native mayflowers, I find this especially touching.)

But even more exciting than these are the letters mailed back to Mr. Fish, at the home office, from captains on vessels all around the world, telling of their voyages.

One particularly harrowing voyage is related in a letter dated 1874 by Captain Warfelaen who had sailed the clipper ship *Caravan*, jewel of the company’s fleet, around Cape Horn, where she was caught in a constant gale for 32 days. After a voyage of 224 days, she landed at San Francisco, delivered her goods, resupplied, and set sail again. Along the way she encountered a “rotary hurricane”, heeled over to an angle of 25 degrees, which flooded the galley, the cabin, and the fo’cscle, and yet she did not lose a single man. Needless to say, Captain Warfelaen and his wife were greatly relieved to reach Britain! In his words: “You may rest assured, we were not sorry to find ourselves, once more, on terra firma.”

Among the stacks of letters are bills from various businesses. Notations on them let even us know which supplies were bound for Quissett where Mr. Fish’s parents lived, as did his cousin George Fish and his

Letter to Thomas Dunham Fish, Esq. from Captain G. Warfelaen from Liverpool, Feb. 8th, 1874.

“... on the fifteenth of August we experienced a fearful hurricane which lasted several hours, and lost several bright new sails. She laid during the heaviest of the hurricane on the angle of twenty-five degrees, the decks entirely submerged, forecstle, galley and cabin filled with water. It was one solid sheet of water washing over her, having no sails set and none left to set which would stand the fury of the wind. We could not get her to steer and consequently could not get her before the wind so as to be able to run her. But I think it was all for the best, as we might have done a great deal more damage, as it is we lost only a few sails. The vessel stood it like a beauty. . . . It is the first real rotary hurricane I was in and hope it will be the last, for one trial of that kind is enough for anybody. Thank God we all came out of it safe and sound.”

brother-in-law Stephen Carey. There are letters from these relatives that tell us how things are going in Quissett; we hear of George Fish’s Falmouth Hotel and his general store, and of Stephen Carey’s property purchases and boats.

Old Colony Steamboat Co. —AND— FALL RIVER LINE Pier 28, North River, New York.	Make Check for Freight payable to the order of BORDEN & LOVELL, Agents O. C. S. B. Co.		New York, 9/25 1885						
	To OLD COLONY STEAMBOAT CO., Dr.								
For Transportation per Steamer									
Cases	Bbls.	Rate	Chariages						
Bales	Bags	Roll	Ads						
Casks	Bundles	Hf.	Doz. Shov						
Boxes	Kegs	Ro							
	Ft.								
No. 47		400 Lbs.	Expenses Paid.						
Received Payment for the Company,			<table border="1" style="width: 100px; height: 100px;"> <tr><td>2</td><td>00</td></tr> <tr><td>0</td><td>08</td></tr> <tr><td>2</td><td>08</td></tr> </table>	2	00	0	08	2	08
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Receipt for \$2.08 from Thomas D. Fish to Old Colony Steamboat Company for 400 pounds of produce shipped on the steamer *Vineyard*. Thomas D. Fish Collection, 1885. Courtesy WHHC.

As you can see, this is a wonderful collection of papers, perhaps the most exciting acquisition in my time. Reading these letters has brought the past more vividly to my mind than any other papers in our archives (with the possible exception of photographs).

From one point of view it is unfortunate the collection must be split; but fortunately, the division between Falmouth papers and New York business papers can easily be made. On the bright side, this gift opens up a whole new era of cooperation between the Woods Hole Historical Collection and the South Street Seaport. Their curator, Charles L. Sachs, and I have

met and agreed on the divisions. We have also both photocopied certain documents so that we will both have the information. When we have finished cataloging, both institutions will have a complete listing of the Thomas D. Fish and Thomas Dunham and Nephew and Company holdings, so any researchers will be able to locate the documents. We will also send copies of the listings to the Mystic Seaport which received other material (including ships' logs and photographs) from the collection in the past. In this way we will strengthen the research facilities of all three institutions and we can all share in the delights and insights that this collection offers.