

Joseph's Boats

Karen Allen

For the past two centuries on Cape Cod, Joseph's boats have been almost as ubiquitous as white churches on village greens. They are wooden dories past their useful sea duty, pulled onto land and loaded with a cargo of colorful flowers. They can be seen around the Cape plowing through troughs of grass and gravel in yards or parking lots.

The following story tells why they came to be known as Joseph's boats. Like many good stories it has a dark and stormy night, some humor and a hero.

Joseph Metcalf, the fourth son of Jonathan and Hannah (Kenric) Metcalf of Dedham, was born on April 11, 1682. He attended Harvard College with the goal of becoming a Congregational minister. His classmates at Harvard thought he was "unusually quiet and orderly."

After graduation in November, 1703, he signed a six-month contract to teach school. Off he went to Rehoboth, Massachusetts, where he remained until called to minister to the inhabitants of Malden 1705-1706. He took over the Congregational pulpit of the great Michael Wigglesworth. Because the town voted little or no money for the ministry, he was fortunate to live with the previous minister's family while preaching that year. At a meeting in March, 1706, they voted to pay him £3 10, but in May they decided to raise no money for his upkeep.

Continuing to board with the Wigglesworths, he occasionally preached as guest minister at Falmouth. This was good for two reasons: one, he liked the people of Falmouth and two, he got paid. The con-

gregation was seeking a replacement for the Reverend Samuel Shiverick, who had lost favor with his congregation in recent years. With age, Mr. Shiverick's eyesight had become impaired and he no longer had the energy to minister to the parish, which was spread over a large area. His Huguenot fervor was not popular either.

The people of Falmouth gathered in their meeting house near the Burying Ground on May 19, 1707, to consider calling Joseph Metcalf to become their minister. Without too much discussion, they voted in favor of Mr. Metcalf to fill their pulpit. More difficult, however, was the monetary arrangement. In a letter dated August 22, 1707, they offered him a salary of £40, which would eventually be raised to £70. They would provide two good cows, all his firewood, dig and stone him a well, and give him £160 to cover the cost of settling in Falmouth. They also would give him land on which to build his home. Considering he received no pay for his service in Malden and he liked the Falmouth Congregation, Mr. Metcalf agreed, provided he could have an occasional Sunday off without having to provide a substitute for the pulpit.

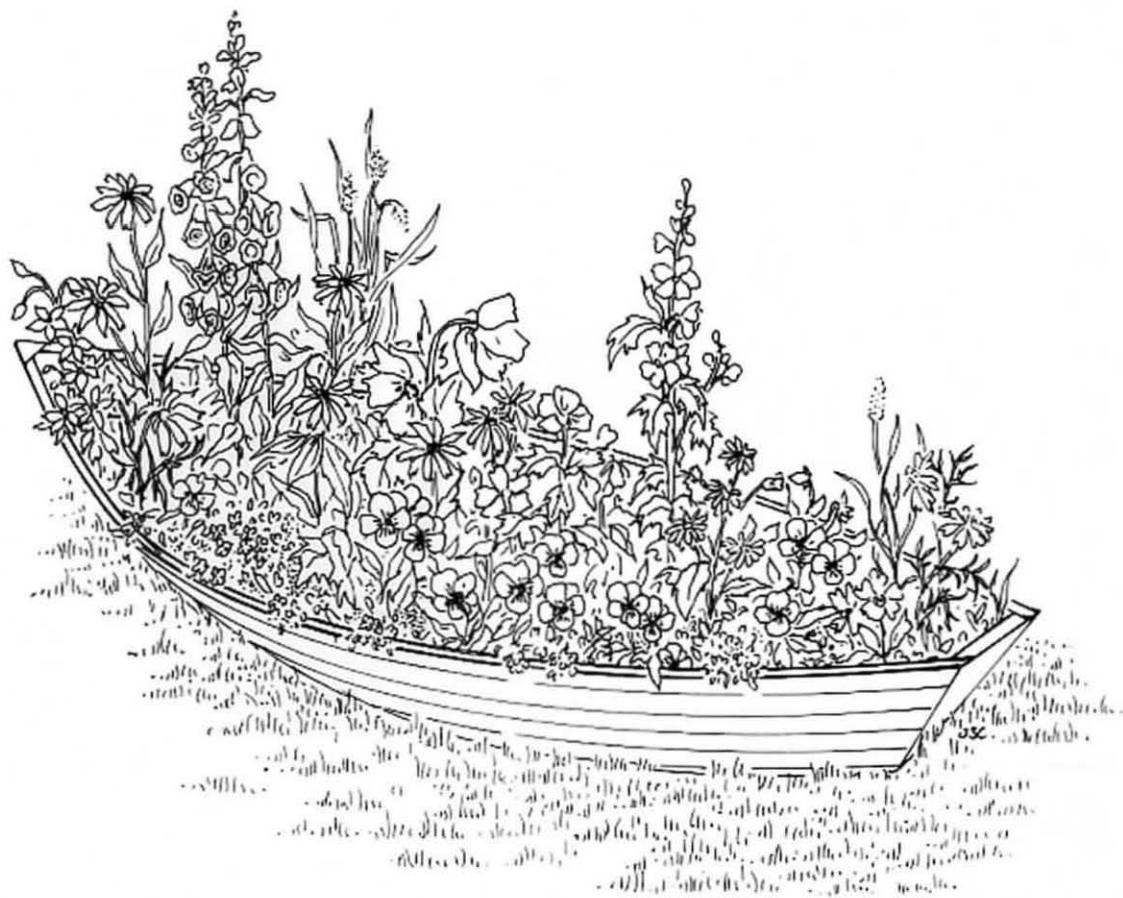
Before arriving in Falmouth, the Reverend Joseph Metcalf returned to his hometown and married Abiel, the daughter of the Reverend William Adams of Dedham. Mr. and Mrs. Metcalf moved to Falmouth where they settled in by building a home, a barn and several outbuildings on their lot bordering Fresh Pond. (Presently the site of the St. Barnabas rectory off Siders Pond.) They also started a vegetable garden, flower garden and an orchard. Their

first child, Abigail, was born June 13, 1708, but died in infancy. After a son also died in infancy, the Metcalfs were blessed with a string of daughters.

Poor Joseph. He thought when he left Malden that his financial troubles were over. Like his predecessor, the Reverend Samuel Shiverick, he was having great difficulty getting paid. There were several inhabitants with "Quakerish inclinations" who didn't feel that they should have to support the Congrega-

tional ministry and meeting house as well as their own meeting in West Falmouth.

In 1711, his salary a year in arrears, Mr. Metcalf forgave the town its debt, but three years later he was forced to appeal to the General Court for financial help. As the Falmouth congregation was unable to pay his salary due to "Worms and Drought," the Court voted £20 to help alleviate Mr. Metcalf's poverty. He thanked God and the court, and with prop-



Pen and ink drawing of a Joseph Boat by Julia S. Child.

duce from their farm and the generosity of some of the congregation, the Metcalfs fed their growing family.

Later, with the buying power of his salary depleted by inflation, Mr. Metcalf again turned to the courts stating that he was unable to feed his wife and many daughters. He was rebuffed by the lower court which found that it was through no fault of the church that the pound had been devalued. On Mr. Metcalf's appeal, the General Court ordered he be properly paid. After this experience, the reverend sat down and wrote a pamphlet arguing that the Scriptures warranted general taxation for support of the ministry.

In spite of his difficulty in collecting his salary, Joseph Metcalf was well liked by his congregation. His good sense of humor and ability to forgive were frequently called upon when ministering to his parish.

After some fifteen years of living among and caring for his Falmouth congregation, the minister and his wife had learned to stretch his meager salary to purchase the necessities they were unable to produce on their farm. It was probably in 1723 when Joseph Metcalf came into some inheritance. He decided to spend a portion of it on something he had wanted for a long time: just a small boat in which he could "take [his] ease on the deep."

Mr. Metcalf went off down the road preoccupied with thoughts of spending a few quiet hours floating at sea in his own wee boat. His mind wandering, he tripped on the rutted cartwheel tracks more than once. He hoped no one was watching. His destination was the harbor where Caleb Gifford moored his boats. Caleb's house was nearby and it was there that the minister found him.

Anyone purchasing a boat for relaxation, especially this quiet, orderly minister, was something extraordinary. Caleb Gifford could hardly believe it when the Reverend Joseph Metcalf proposed to buy one of his old dories, now barely seaworthy. It had seen far better days, but Joseph was taken with the apple-cheeked craft. He imagined the many hours he might spend in meditation peacefully riding the waves in Vineyard Sound.

Caleb thought the minister's ideas more than a little strange; after all, ministers were supposed to spend their time seeing to their congregations' needs. But he decided if Joseph was willing to spend his shillings for a boat he, Caleb, would be glad to oblige. Figuring that some of his fellow townsmen might disagree, Caleb decided to keep the transaction to himself.

With the purchase of the boat arranged, Mr. Metcalf journeyed to Dedham to collect his inheritance. Because his legacy was a generous one, he continued on to the peruke maker in Boston to purchase a new wig. Impoverished, he had been unable to have his old wig restyled; it was said to be moth-eaten, in very poor condition. Though not a vain man, Joseph felt dignified in his new, fashionable, full-bottomed, white powdered periwig.

Buoyed by his stylish new wig, Mr. Metcalf had a spring in his step when on his return to Falmouth he headed down the lane to Caleb Gifford's house. The two men walked down to the water's edge where they viewed the little dory bobbing on its mooring just off shore. The minister could hardly contain his happiness as he made the final arrangements to take possession of the boat.

Returning to the parsonage, he was met by three ladies from his congregation. After listening to sev-

eral minutes of argument, with each woman cutting the others off in mid-sentence, he determined that they were involved in a moral dilemma. Were colored flowers sinful? The ladies were afraid that the flowers' "gaudy hues" might suggest that they were godless women if they carried them in a posy or used them to decorate the meeting house. At a time when musical instruments, singing, jewelry or fancy vestments were considered worldly and banned from Congregational meeting houses, this was a serious issue for these women.

Having just purchased the boat of his dreams, the minister was feeling benevolent. He held his newly be-wigged head up and rubbing his chin voiced his opinion: flowers were a gift of God and could be gathered in posy bunches to be enjoyed by all.



Pen and ink sketch of wig by Karen Allen

The women hardly heard his answer. While waiting for Mr. Metcalf's reply, they focused on his "extravagant" new head gear. With much clucking of tongues and wagging of fingers these influential ladies wasted no time in vocalizing their opinion of the minister's new adornment. That Saturday afternoon they spoke to any and all they met, and they met all they could. Many a husband got an earful over supper that evening.

When the Reverend Metcalf climbed the stairs to the high pulpit the next morning for the beginning service, all eyes were glued to his "Boston vanitie." The minister began with his selected text about Joseph, the fisherman, but soon realized that the congregation wasn't responding to his words even though their gaze was certainly fixed on him.

At the noon break before the second service, the issue of brightly colored flowers was introduced for reconsideration. The issue, however, had been redefined and was no longer about flowers picked to carry in bunches or to decorate the church. Oh, no, some of the congregation, a certain three females among them, diverted attention to the minister's own garden plot. They thought the minister was spending too much time tending to his plants instead of caring for his parish.

This quiet, orderly, ill-paid minister, desiring to please his parish, agreed to abandon his flower garden and devote all his time to his flock, except those few hours which he desired to spend "meeting his Maker at sea." Silenced momentarily, the congregation broke into whispered exclamations about ministers and boats. Caleb Gifford continued to remain silent. Unaware of the consternation, Mr. Metcalf proudly spoke of his purchase, then went on to address the issue of colorful flowers. He appointed a Ladies Delegation to seek enlightenment within the

Bible. A meeting was set up for the following day at Deacon and Goody Jenkins's house. There the Reverend Metcalf would study the "Bible-findings" with the ladies in order to reach a final judgment.

Setting off for the Jenkins's home on Monday afternoon, Mr. Metcalf passed his flower garden. The early spring flowers gently swaying in the breeze caught his eye and brought a smile to his lips. He reached down and pulled a couple of weeds. Reaching for another he stopped in mid-action and remembering his promise in Sunday meeting, continued down the road. He would spend the time ministering to his parishioners even if it meant that weeds and drought would consume his garden. Gardening had given him much pleasure and he would sorely miss it.

Arriving at his destination Joseph, could hear the ladies' voices through the open door. Once again the discussion had strayed from seeking the Bible's enlightenment to the appropriateness of picked flowers. The delegation was now discussing the minister's "Vanitie Wig" in the most derogatory tones.

With his shabby old wig beyond repair, this reserved man had simply picked out a new one. He had been pleased with his choice because it was neat and proper but not gaudy or fancy. Now, somewhat piqued, he

spoke; his voice echoing from the doorway silenced their cutting remarks.

Asked if they preferred him to wear no wig on his balding head, they quickly replied in the negative. It would be totally inappropriate for him not to wear a

wig and "An insult to the sacred office!" Then would they rather he return to wearing his old moth-eaten peruke? No, that wouldn't do either. The delegation, huddling in consultation, came to the conclusion that if they were allowed to alter the wig till it no longer offended, they would be content.

Mr. Metcalf reluctantly handed over the wig which he had so judiciously purchased with his inheritance.

The wig's purification began with Goodwife Jenkins clipping off a couple of lush locks, passing it to Goody Hatch, who found a few more offending curls and on it went with each lady finding at least one sinful lock. By the time it reached the last member of the Ladies Delegation, it had been so snipped and pulled that it was lopsided with no uniformity. It looked more like a scared cat than a wig.

The women handed the wig back with a remark that to wear any wig at all was breaking the second commandment, "Thou shall not make yourself an idol." Joseph, patient though he was, had reached the limit of his endurance. Taking the wig in hand he para-



Imaginary scene of Joseph Metcalf and two ladies from his congregation. Pen and ink silhouette from *Fashion the Mirror of History* by Michael and Ariane Batterbery, Greenwich House, division of Arlington House, Inc., 1982. Drawing by Francis Torend, Victoria and Albert Museum.

phrased the rest of the verse saying, "[it was now so unlike] anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth," that it fell under no law of God or man. Grabbing the remains of the once stylish piece in both hands he tugged it like a helmet onto his balding pate, turned on his heel and set off for home.

His troubles were not over. Greeting him in front of the parsonage were a couple of townsmen eager to discuss the boat issue. They had watched the strange apparition coming down the lane, and when it came close enough, recognized it as their minister with the most ungodly creation on his head. After exchanging quick glances among themselves they came right to the point. Associating Sunday's sermon about "Joseph the Fisherman" with the minister's purchase of a boat, they told Joseph he didn't need to spend his time fishing. Had they realized his need they would have offered sooner. God willing, they would provide the necessary fish to feed the minister and his family.

Mr. Metcalf eagerly assured them that it was "a sea going boat in which to take his ease" that he desired, not a boat for going fishing. Exchanging glances again, they voiced their opinion that ministers should not be taking their ease, especially at sea which was a dangerous place for an amateur. They would ferry him wherever he wished to go, but he should find a better way in which to spend his legacy and his free time. Reluctantly, Joseph agreed. The happiness his bequest had purchased such a few short days before was gone. No wig and now no boat.

It was a few days latter, in the late afternoon that Mr. Metcalf forced himself to set off down the road around Fresh Pond to find Caleb Gifford. Seeing the dory bobbing on her mooring he couldn't resist. Taking off his shoes and rolling up his pant legs he

waded out to her. The little boat's bow nudged him in the ribs as she nuzzled him like a puppy. Joseph looked outward over Vineyard Sound where a sloop rode at anchor and the promise of a beautiful sunset was beginning. There was just a hint of a strengthening breeze.

Joseph rubbed the gunwale of the little boat affectionately then turned toward shore and went off to find Caleb to tell him he would be unable to purchase the dory after all. His gait slow and deliberate, the minister set off for home telling himself that giving up the dory was the proper thing to do. Oh, it would have been so nice and peaceful communing with God in that little boat, but he must not think of it anymore.

That night a terrible storm hit. Houses floated off their cellars, trees crashed down, debris washed well inland and many ships were wrecked. Joseph, his pregnant wife and their seven daughters huddled together praying through the night while the wind shook the rafters and banged the shutters. The reverend prayed for the safety of his parishioners, their homes, ships, crops and livestock.

Just before dawn, Joseph heard a heavy knock at the back door. Opening it as slowly as he could and keeping a hardy grip to prevent the door blowing inward he peered into the darkness. One of his daughters held up a lantern and they strained their eyes to see through the blackness. They heard something heavy grate on the door step. Then it bumped into his legs. Looking down he could hardly believe what he saw. The dory had broken its mooring in the harbor and traveled the length of the pond to his door.

That day Mr. Metcalf entered in his diary: "I have bin tempted to persue the sea sence I was borne. Yit may natt be. Yett have I pruf of the Lord's harboring

no wrath, for this nite in a storme cam to me my bote that fain would live on land.”

With the storm still blowing and the tide continuing to rise on this, the Lord's Day, some of the congregation must have wondered what message God was delivering. The storm wreaked havoc on the Cape, especially along the shore. Monday morning the town awoke and began to deal with the strange landscape of devastation left in the wake of the storm. The reverend knew that much of his time in the next few weeks would be spent ministering in the community among his congregation rather than in the meeting house. After breakfast Joseph rode his horse to aid and give encouragement to his parishioners.

Arriving home in the evening exhausted, he noticed that one of his daughters had anchored the boat in the front yard. With the receding tide it had been stranded near what was once his colorful flower garden. The posies had been uprooted by wind and water but some kind soul had placed them into the boat for safe keeping. Worn out as he was from his long day of caring for others, he took a moment to push a bit more dirt around the roots of the flowers and thought that the next morning he would send his daughters off to deliver these survivors to some of the goodwives who had lost their flowers to the storm.

The Reverend Joseph Metcalf had overextended himself ministering to the needs of his congregation in the aftermath of the storm. He died during the night, aged forty-one.

The next morning the deacons came to the parsonage to pay their respects to the widow, Abiel. They were greeted by blossoms of roses in the boat “that

fain would live on land.” When Caleb came by and saw the dory with her cargo, he thought about how Joseph loved both flowers and the boat and how the minister had been unable to use his legacy to buy a little bit of happiness.

After Mr. Metcalf had been laid to rest in the Burying Ground, other townspeople stopped by the parsonage to admire the dory. Some, including the Ladies Delegation, returned to beautify her by adding plants from their own gardens.

Each year the parishioners filled and seeded the “Joseph's Boat,” named in honor of their minister whom they greatly missed. They remembered fondly Joseph Metcalf, who for 16 years had preached short sermons, given good counsel, remained even-tempered and managed to take care of his wife and seven daughters on almost no money. The flowers seemed to like their home in the old dory for they bloomed more lush and radiant than those in other gardens. It was not long before people in Falmouth and around the Cape were dragging boats on shore, filling them with soil and posies. It was said, “when sailors came home from sea these skiffs were striped up good.”

Legend has it that on each anniversary of the great storm, the Reverend Joseph Metcalf returns to inspect his fleet of landlubbing dories.

Epilogue

This vignette from the Reverend Joseph Metcalf's life is based on two stories. The wig incident is re-cited in several Falmouth and Cape Cod histories; the only source for the Joseph's Boats is in Elizabeth Reynard's *The Narrow Land*. Luckily for posterity, Ms. Reynard was given a scrap copied from the Reverend Joseph Metcalf's diary. She was told a Metcalf

descendant down Cape had the diary but she was unable to locate it. She stated that most of the story was based on oral tradition.

The date of Mr. Metcalf's encounter with the boat in the storm, according to the copied diary scrap, was August 1723. This date also became associated with his death because oral tradition had compressed the events in recounting the story.

Charles Jenkins's date for Joseph Metcalf's death, December 24, 1723, has been accepted and reprinted in several local histories. However, Sibley's *Harvard Graduates* gives the date of death as May, 24, 1723, as did Davis's *Biographical Sketches of Congregational Pastors of New England*.

I began my research looking for a storm somewhere between August 1722 (in case the year on the copied diary scrap was wrong) and May 1723. I went to the Barnstable County Courthouse to verify his date of death and to the Boston Public Library where the eighteenth century *Boston Newsletter* is on microfilm.

Joseph Metcalf's obituary in the *Boston Newsletter* gives May 24, 1723, as the date of death. In the Barnstable probate records, power to administer the Metcalf estate was given to Capt. Hope Lothrop and John Metcalf on June 18, 1723. With an official record to back it up, I accepted the May rather than the December date for Mr. Metcalf's death.

Research of weather history led to the discovery of a storm on March 6, 1723, which matched the one described in *The Narrow Land*. The date was close enough to Metcalf's demise for his death and the storm to have been connected.

According to the *Boston Newsletter*, the great storm on March 6, 1723, was on a Sunday: "the Water flowed over our [Boston] Wharffs and into our Streets to a very impressive height." It states the loss and damage sustained was very great. There was no warning. In Boston the tide began rising during "Fore-noon service."

The Newsletter went on to cover the South Shore and Cape Cod. On the Vineyard side of the Cape to Rhode Island the storm had been "a violent Storm of Wind, with Hail, Rain and [unreadable]... the wind being Southeasterly during the day Saturday, to the East then Northerly during the night... and Northerly on the Lord's Day morning." The tide on the south side of the Cape was ten to twelve feet higher than ever known before. It filled up harbors and covered marshes with sand destroying the hay. The tide lifted timber frame houses off their cellars and carried trees, boats and other large objects inland. The article stated that the sun or male tide was the highest but the moon or female tide (on Saturday night) was also extremely high. The height of the Sunday tide was the highest in 19 years (since 1704) and would be unequaled until 1851.

If one merges the information from oral tradition, documentation, and the diary, Joseph Metcalf probably found the little dory knocking on his door sometime before dawn on March 6, 1723. The tide was so high that the boat floated from the area of the present day Surf Drive Bath House over the land into Fresh (Siders) Pond to the back door of the parsonage.

In the weeks after the storm Mr. Metcalf must have made his way around his parish helping where he could. In so doing he was probably constantly exposed to the cold damp winds of a Cape Cod spring. He may have contracted pneumonia. However it

happened, he died in May having passed his forty-first birthday on April 11.

The oldest source for the December date of death that I found was in Styles's *Extracts*. Mr. Jenkins also used that date as did several writers since him. Mr. Jenkins's historical research caused him to go to the Old Burying Ground to find and pay his respects at the Reverend Joseph Metcalf's grave, but to his dis-

may there was no marker. When he called the Town's attention to this, a marble slab was erected at the grave site with the inscription, "Sacred to the memory of the Rev. Joseph Metcalf, the first pastor of the Congregational church in this town, who died Dec. 24, 1723, in the 42d year of his age and 16th of his ministry."

This marker, placed at the grave site in 1843, is unfortunately in error. It would be good if an errata stone or marker stating Joseph Metcalf was the *second* minister of the Congregational Church, who died *May* 24, 1723, in his *41st* year could be placed at the site.

Karen Allen, past member of the Historical Commission and archivist of the First Congregational Church 1987-1994, has done a great deal of research into Falmouth's History, especially on the Congregational Church. She has written articles on the houses around the Green, the Church, and the history of North Falmouth. Having been involved in getting the Village Green area accepted onto the National Register of Historic Places, she is working on getting her (and her husband, Jack's) c. 1740 home on the Register.

Notes

Barnstable County Probate Record, Vol. 4, pages 118, 135, 282.
Boston Newsletter, #996, March 21, 1723.

Boston Newsletter, #1010, June 6, 1723. "Falmouth, May 27. Last Friday the 24th of this Instant, dyed here (to our great loss) the Reverend Mr. Joseph Metcalf, Pastor of the Church in this Place, Aged 41 Years in April last; and hath left his Widow with eight Female Children." [actually the eighth daughter was born later.]
Davis, Rev. Emerson, *Biographical Sketches of the Congregational Pastors of New England*, Vol. II, page 214.

Jenkins, Charles W., *Three Lectures on the Early History of Falmouth, Massachusetts*, L.F. Clarke, Steam Printer, Falmouth, 1889.
Reynard, Elizabeth, *The Narrow Land*, pages 313-317, The Chatham Historical Society, 1978.

Shipton, Clifford K., reprint of *Sibley's Harvard Graduates, 1701-1712*, Vol. V, pages 220-223, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, 1937.

Stiles, Ezra, *Extracts From the Itineraries 1755-1794*, page 262, Yale, 1916.



Modern Joseph Boat from Moonakis Cafe in Waquoit.

Photo by Paul Rifkin