

Antoinette Palmer Jones: The Goodness and Power of One Christian

*from Chapters on the History of the First Congregational Church
of Falmouth, Massachusetts of the United Church of Christ*

by Rev. Dr. Douglas K. Showalter© 2010

"What must I do to be saved?" came a cry from the boat builders at Quisset Harbor on May 12, 1812. Susanna Crowell Fish had just had a conversion experience in the house overlooking their boatyard. When they heard the tidings, they "became simultaneously awakened and alarmed" according to the official church records. Reverend Douglas K. Showalter quoted this story in "First Congregational Church and the 1812 Quisset Revival" published in the Winter 2009 issue of Spritsail.

Reverend Showalter had been doing research for his recently completed history of the First Congregational Church in Falmouth when he came across the records of the 1812 Quisset Revival. He also discovered the story of Antoinette Palmer Jones and wrote a sermon about her. Now he offers her story to Spritsail readers. We have edited it slightly.

These two stories testify to the importance of religion in the history of our town. Both Susanna Fish and Antoinette Jones were transformed by personal religious experiences which filled their lives with meaning, value, and joy. Their membership in the Congregational Church amplified their religious energy and helped them to implement their religious commitment.

Antoinette Palmer Jones was a layperson in our church. In some ways Antoinette was a remarkable person. In other ways, she seems to have been very



Antoinette Palmer Jones.

ordinary, like most of us. Antoinette doesn't appear to have been a woman of wealth or high social standing. In her adult years Antoinette was a seamstress who worked out of her home on Falmouth's Palmer Avenue. But Antoinette was a woman of strong faith, intelligence, and energy. And those personal qualities counted for a lot, as they often do in our world.

Antoinette was born on November 20, 1856, in Falmouth. She was the youngest daughter of John Gilmore Jones and Harriet Pettee Jones. The Jones

family lived on the Fay Farm, a dairy farm in the area now known as the Moors, down towards Woods Hole, off Elm road.

Antoinette and Katharine Lee Bates were contemporaries. They may have attended school together, though Antoinette was almost three years older than Katharine. Antoinette's father was a professor of chemistry. His eyes were severely damaged due to a lab explosion. Antoinette grew up being the "eyes" for her father. She read him his mail, newspapers, and books that interested him. And she brought word to him of some spring bird, flower, or anything else that was of interest, so they could talk about it. Antoinette and her father had many discussions. She later said that those talks molded her young mind, giving her a broader perspective on life. Given Antoinette's experience with her father, it is interesting to note that years later, in 1904, she patented the design for

a special writing tablet, which she had designed for people with limited or no vision.

Antoinette's mother was a "quiet, refined, intelligent woman," who had been "a pupil of Mary Lyons in the early days of Mt. Holyoke Seminary." Antoinette had three older sisters and two older brothers. One of her older sisters came up with the idea of having a reading circle for young women. That circle was said by some to have been the beginning of Falmouth's Public Library.

Antoinette was an unusual child. She was intense and alert with a strong will. She also seemed to have a special need to be liked by her peers. Falmouth birth records suggest that Antoinette may have been much younger than her siblings. It wouldn't be uncommon in a situation like that for a child to grow into adulthood feeling rather lonely.

One day Antoinette was walking with schoolmates down Locust Street over to Palmer Avenue, to go downtown. As Antoinette said to her companions, "If I do decide to be a Christian, I'll be one!" According to our church records, Antoinette joined our church on March 10, 1878. She was 21 years old then.

At the death of her father a year later, in 1879, Antoinette and her mother were forced to live in the homes of Antoinette's married siblings. It seems that over time Antoinette and her mother were passed from home to home. That was very difficult for Antoinette, for it made her feel as though she had been forced to give up her own life and plans.

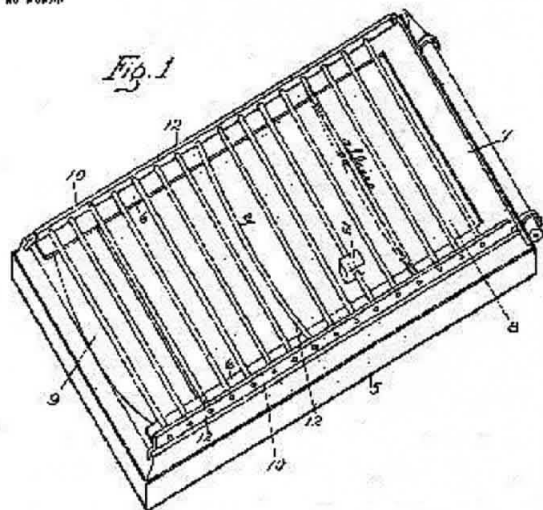
One day in a heart-to-heart family discussion, Antoinette made an announcement. She said: "I want to find out how to win the love of people; how to have real friends." With her strong will and some

Ed. 763,211.

PATENTED MAY 17, 1904.

A. F. JONES.
WRITING-TABLET.
APPROPRIATE DESIGN MAR. 10, 1904.

NO. 100751.



Antoinette's writing tablet, U.S. Patent 760,211.

help from family members, Antoinette took up the dressmaking business. She struggled to provide an income and a home for herself and her mother in Falmouth. It was a hard life. Antoinette didn't love sewing, but it helped her to pay her bills and it brought her in touch with other people, which she very much wanted. A friend described Antoinette this way:

Ever ready to do a kindness, faithful to her church as best she knew how to be, her word was ever "forward."

As time passed, a great longing began to grow in Antoinette. She wanted to find a special work she could do in the world to be of use. That "calling" as I would term it, was compelling; but it did not yet give Antoinette a clear sense of exactly what she could do.

Antoinette tried different things, such as giving chalk talks at meetings of the local Woman's Christian Temperance Union. But that was not successful. It soon became evident that Antoinette had a gift for writing, but her skill at public speaking was lacking. During that time, Antoinette was a member of the Society of Christian Endeavor of our church, a fellowship organization for young adults.

Christian Endeavor was started in 1881 by Dr. Francis Clark, a Congregational minister in Portland, Maine. Apparently that was an idea whose time had come, for under Clark's leadership that fellowship organization soon sprung up in churches of numerous denominations all around our world.

For example, when Christian Endeavor held its 14th Annual Meeting in Boston, in 1895, more than 56,000 young adults showed up. And by that year there were already Christian Endeavor societies in such far away places as Hawaii, Africa, and Australia, to mention just a few of them.

Sometime between 1881 and 1887, our church archives have the first Christian Endeavor society in Falmouth. Then on August 17, 1887, a second Endeavor society was formed in our church. Our church archives has the original record book of that second Endeavor society. Antoinette Palmer Jones was one

of the secretaries of that group. In that tattered ledger, one can still see Antoinette's flowing, easy-to-read handwriting.

Christian Endeavor societies of that time all had a pledge which

each member had to keep. The archives of our church has a framed version of that pledge. That pledge probably hung for years in the room directly below our church sanctuary. Imagine that year 1887. Imagine young adults from our church gathering downstairs at night and reciting that pledge together in the soft glow of oil lamps. There was no electricity in town then. Here's what that Christian Endeavor pledge said:

Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for strength, I promise Him that I will strive to do whatever He would like to have me do: I will make it the rule of my life to pray and read the Bible, to support the work and worship of my church, and to take my part in the meetings and other activities of this Society.



On Apr and May ^{12th} members of the
 Society went to Woods Hole to meet
 the crew of the Cutter "Sexton" and
 assist in the formation of a "floating"
 Society of Christian Endeavor. Such
 a society was perfected May 12th
 Antoinette P. Jones, Sec.

Record of the May 12, 1890 founding of Floating Christian Endeavor in Antoinette Palmer Jones' handwriting.

I will seek to bring others to Christ, to give as I can for the spread of the Kingdom, to advance my country's welfare and promote the Christian Brotherhood of man. These things I will do unless hindered by conscientious reasons; and in them all I will seek the Saviour's guidance.

Antoinette always tried to live up to that Endeavor pledge. The part that gave her the most trouble was standing up and speaking at Endeavor meetings. But she felt she needed to do that in order to be a full participant in that group. Tearful emotions sometimes came into Antoinette's voice as she spoke. Then she would drop back into her seat feeling like a complete failure.

One day Antoinette came rushing down a Falmouth street and thrust a card into the hand of a friend, which she asked her friend to keep. Signed by Antoinette, that card contained this pledge: "I hereby solemnly promise I will abstain from weeping." Antoinette was a person of her word. When she made a pledge she strove to fulfill it.

In the late 19th century, Falmouth was quite a nautical center. At that time, a man named Madison

Edwards, who was four years older than Antoinette, was conducting a ministry to sailors whose ships were docked at Woods Hole. There was a reading room on shore for those sailors, and Edwards was sometimes invited on board their ships to conduct worship services. One day Edwards asked the Christian Endeavor Society in our First Congregational Church to help him in his work. Antoinette lived closest to the town's telegraph station in Woods Hole, so she became the contact person who transmitted Edwards' telegraphed calls for assistance to the other members of her society.

One night a ship came in. Edwards called for help, and Antoinette was the only Christian Endeavor member able to go. So Antoinette bravely went all by herself. It was so dark that night that she had to trust her horse to find its own way to Woods Hole. Antoinette was very willing to give of herself to help others. At this time she was beginning to realize how much she really loved this type of ministry to sailors.

Another night, after services in Woods Hole, Madison Edwards told Antoinette and others about his interest in having the Christian Endeavor pledge

Madison Edwards

Madison Edwards was a missionary who worked in Falmouth for twenty years before moving to Martha's Vineyard in 1888. Reverend Henry Herbert Smythe of Falmouth's First Congregational Church wrote a memorial for him and the Woods Hole Seamen Friend's Society when Edwards died in 1924:

"... Madison Edwards who, at the ripe age of seventy-four, after fifty-eight years of daily work for his sailor boys entered on Aug. 13 into well deserved rest from his unceasing labors, which had continued even in the last evening that he spent on this earth.

An officer of the Seaman's Friend Society writes of him: "Mr. Edwards was discovered at Woods Hole in 1888 where for about twenty years he had, in a little room back of his shoe shop, been interesting sailors in better living, and caring as far as possible for their personal needs, because, as he said, 'No one seemed to particularly care for the sailor.'

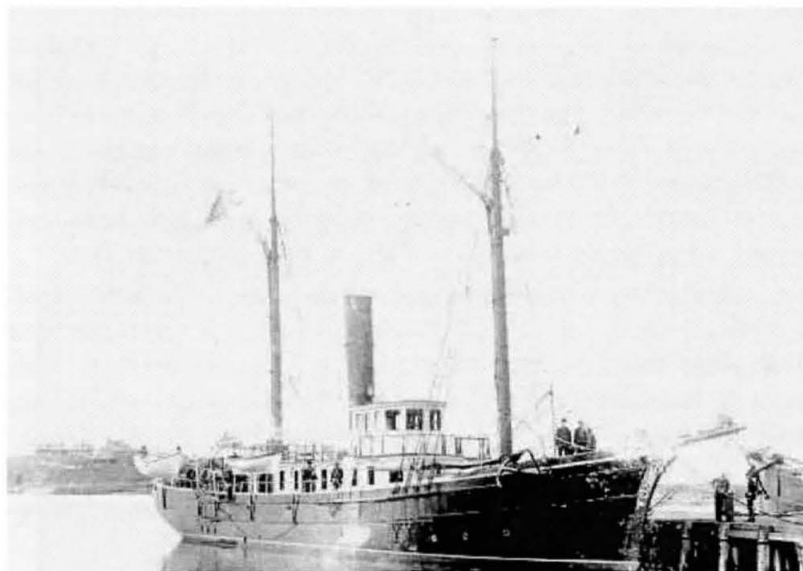
"The society immediately arranged with Mr. Edwards to furnish him with needed financial help and, thirty-eight years ago 'Captain' Edwards, as everyone called him, became chaplain of the Vineyard Haven Mission of the Boston Seaman's Friend Society and was placed in charge of the work in and about Vineyard sound.

"He commenced work in Woods Hole in his own room, until the society decided that he ought to be located at Vineyard Haven. After doing everything that he could for sailors in an old sail-loft, the society hired for him at Vineyard Haven a good woman who had watched his work and built for him a small chapel at the head of Vineyard Haven wharf. The work had hardly begun there before Mr. Edwards' skilful use of this little chapel crowded it to such an extent that the society was obliged to greatly enlarge it and also to provide quarters for himself and family.

"To this building for more than thirty years thousands of merchant sailors and navy men were brought by 'Captain' Edwards, usually in the launch Helen-May; and largely through his personal influence very many hundreds of them were induced to hold clean, temperate and godly lives. Over 2000 men addicted to liquor became members of the Hold Fast Hand and today are wearing its pin in every port in the world."

adapted to the men on board ships. That idea captured Antoinette's imagination. The very next morning she had a letter in the mail to the headquarters of Christian Endeavor, which was located in Boston. Antoinette's letter carried both the plan for a new type of Christian Endeavor Society specifically tailored for men on ships and a revised Christian Endeavor pledge for it. The headquarters in Boston gave Antoinette the go-ahead. Thus it was that she and other members of our church's Endeavor Society went down to Woods Hole on May 12, 1890.

There on the United States Revenue Cutter *Dexter*, Antoinette and others organized the very first shipboard Endeavor Society. As noted, "twelve of the [*Dexter's*] sailors signed the pledge, organized a society, and held their first consecration meeting." That was the beginning of an entirely new branch of Christian Endeavor.



United States Revenue Cutter *Dexter*.

Within a month of the first Floating Christian Endeavor Society being formed on the Revenue Cutter *Dexter*, the Boston headquarters of Christian Endeavor named Antoinette the Superintendent of all such "floating" societies which could be developed. Antoinette was 33 years old at the time.

As it happened, Antoinette's "Floating Christian Endeavor" movement grew quickly. By 1895, just five years after the *Dexter* event, there were already sixty Floating Societies with a total of two to three thousand members. Those societies were on both ships at sea and in ports. Within that five year period there were already societies in New York City; Cleveland, Ohio; Boston; Galveston, Texas; San Francisco; New Zealand; Australia; and England. As Antoinette wrote:

The Floating Society of Christian Endeavor is...not limited to one ocean, or one class of men of the sea, it offers equal inspiration to its members in consecration to Christ, training for His service, fellowship with His disciples, and personal endeavor 'afloat' and ashore; whether they are on man-of-war, ocean steamship, merchantman, coaster, or fisherman.

By 1906 there were more than two hundred of those "floating" societies around our world. The crew members in those societies held worship services on board their ships. They also joined together in saying the version of the Christian Endeavor pledge which was specifically for sailors. In that version, individuals promised to abstain from all alcohol.

Floating Christian Endeavor groups which were based on shore made visits to ships. They held worship services for sailors. They helped provide maritime personnel with medical services, reading rooms, boarding houses, and comfort items such as hand-knit sleeveless sweaters. However, as Antoinette said, the highest aim of Floating Christian Endeavor was "soul winning" for Christ.

In the United States Navy, members of Floating Christian Endeavor were allowed to wear their Endeavor badges on their uniforms. There was a Floating Christian Endeavor Society on the famous American battleship, the *U.S.S. Maine*, which blew up in Havana harbor in 1898: "Remember the *Maine*!"

There was a Floating society on Admiral Dewey's flagship, the *U.S.S. Olympia*, when it entered Manila Bay in that same year. There were even Floating Endeavor folks in the Japanese navy when it was at war with Russia in the early 1900s. A Floating Christian Endeavor home for sailors was founded in Nagasaki, Japan, by a Christian Endeavor sailor who later died in the sinking of the *U.S.S. Maine*. In 1921, a Floating Christian Endeavor reading room in San Diego hosted more than seventy-two thousand maritime personnel. They used that facility to write more than thirty-nine thousand letters to loved ones and friends.

As indicated by the adjacent picture, our local branch of Floating Christian Endeavor was active in Vine-



Christian Endeavor mission launch, Vineyard Sound, Massachusetts.

yard Sound. That mission launch flew the Christian Endeavor flag and went around the Sound throwing reading materials onboard passing ships. It also transported sailors to shore for worship services.

Antoinette Palmer Jones, the young woman who had been so anxious about public speaking in the downstairs vestry of our church, suddenly found herself traveling all over to tell people about Floating Christian Endeavor and its ministry with sailors for Jesus Christ. She was often a guest speaker at Christian Endeavor events and events with nautical personnel. She was once described as speaking on her favorite subject, Floating Christian Endeavor, in "her usual happy and energetic manner." As Antoinette used to say, "My work is like Ivory Soap. It floats and it is 99.99 percent pure."

In 1911, our church asked our Barnstable Association of Churches to license Antoinette as a Congregational lay preacher. She served as a supply preacher in

Congregational churches and seamen's chapels from time to time and felt that sanction by our denomination would be helpful. The Association licensed her as a lay preacher for four successive years. Antoinette was likely the first woman ever to be granted that authorization from our Barnstable Association.

As a delegate from our Barnstable Association, Antoinette attended the 1913 meeting of the National Council of Congregationalists which met in Kansas City, Missouri. That meeting adopted Congregationalism's famous "Kansas City Statement of Faith" which in a slightly altered form is the Statement of Faith which appears in our Falmouth church's bylaws today.

Antoinette was a voluminous letter writer. The young woman who was so eager to have friends, eventually found that she was corresponding with people all over our world. As *The Falmouth Enterprise* once said of Antoinette:

In close touch with sailors from all parts of the globe, she had a knowledge of the life and surroundings of the sailor in port and at sea. She was a friend to the sailor lad and many a young man in the uniform was brought to Christ because of the helping hand she held out to him.

In Antoinette's correspondence, she often received interesting items from around the world which she then shared with our community. For example, as our local newspaper reported in 1898, she received an account of the battle of Manila Bay in the Philippines from men on Commodore Dewey's flagship, the U.S.S. *Olympia*, which led the U.S.

fleet to victory over the Spanish fleet there. In 1909 she received from the battleship *Fortress Monroe*, "a fancy box holding a packet of the famous Lipton tea from Colombo, Ceylon." As noted, those items were placed on display at the Falmouth Jewelry Store for anyone to see. Antoinette served the cause of "Floating Christian Endeavor" for almost 30 years.

During World War I Antoinette was there to be sure that all of Falmouth's young men heading off to war had New Testaments, calendars, and sleeveless sweaters to keep them warm. During that war, Antoinette served as a liaison person between Massachusetts officials and the families of those Falmouth men who were fighting overseas. Antoinette also served in the Red Cross effort to provide for the war-time needs of those same Falmouth families.

Antoinette died in the great influenza epidemic that swept across our country in the year 1918. She died on December 15, 1918, at the age of 62. It was just about a month after the end of World War I. Her funeral was held in a local home, not in our church as planned, because there was then a ban on public gatherings due to the influenza. At the time of Antoinette's death, *The Falmouth Enterprise* published these words:

In the death...of Miss Antoinette Palmer Jones there passed from our community a sincere Christian woman — one of whom it may truly be said, "She was full of good works." Her sudden passing away has thrown over the entire community a cloud of gloom...



In 1942, during World War II, our local newspaper again celebrated Antoinette's life, in part because of the example of her good works during World War I. Christian Endeavor still exists in America today and is particularly active on our west coast. There is a Harbor Mission for sailors in Southern California, which owes its origin to one of those societies in Antoinette's "Floating Christian Endeavor."

Is it possible for just one person, to make a real difference in our world? My answer to that question is yes, it is entirely possible! It is possible, particularly if you are a person like Antoinette Palmer Jones, who responded to God's calling with all her heart, mind, soul, and strength!

Rev. Dr. Douglas Showalter was the Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church of Falmouth, Massachusetts, of the United Church of Christ until his retirement this year. He had served in the church since 1987. He is a graduate of Bowdoin College, Yale Divinity School, and Chicago Theological Seminary. He has lectured and written on numerous aspects of American Congregational history. Full scholarly endnotes to this article are in his book on the history of the first Congregational Church which was published in 2010. He welcomes contacts at dougshow@cape.com



Antoinette P. Jones, Falmouth, Mass.