

The History of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha' Vineyard

Compiled by Sarah Shepard

Early Presidents of the Society

The first president of the Unitarian Society of Vineyard Haven, Capt. Gilbert L. Smith, served for thirty years, from its inception in 1898 to his death in 1928. After the death of Capt. Smith, Capt. John S. Reynolds was elected president and served until his death in 1936.

Whaling Wives of Martha's Vineyard, by Emma Mayhew Whiting and Henry Beetle Hough, 1952, sheds light on their remarkable careers and the remarkable experiences of their wives.

“**Capt. Gilbert L. Smith** of Vineyard Haven, master of the *Northern Light*, reached Honolulu with his wife, Mary Cannon, and there were three Vineyard wives for a round of activities.” The three Vineyard wives stayed in Honolulu while their husbands went to the Arctic for the whales, returning in the fall. “The *Northern Light* arrived first and after an interlude sailed for the line”

“Captain Gilbert L. Smith married Mary H. Cannon of Holmes Hole in August 1871. Mary was dainty and sweet. She did not seem a likely shipmate for a whaling captain, yet she went out alone to join her husband on the *Northern Light* in Panama in December 1872.”

“Captain Smith was born February 11, 1832, the son of a captain, and had won distinction as a whaleman. In the ship *Vineyard* on which he had sailed out of Edgartown in 1866, he had gone into the Arctic and, as the records told, ‘under every disadvantage and while leaking 15,000 strokes per day, pluckily remained in the Arctic until the 5th of October and secured about 600 barrels of oil while the ship was in this leaky condition.’”

“While Gilbert and Mary were in the *Northern Light* in April, 1874, the crew refused duty at Yokohama. The American consul and six marines were required to subdue the recalcitrants.”

“A terse record of that November discloses what Mary Smith went through with her husband in the *Northern Light*: ‘Nov. 5, Passed Fox Id., Nov. 7, Gale, ship laboring hard: Nov. 9, Gale, ship leaking more, large sea; Nov. 12, Hove to, parted outer bobstay, got a tackle on; Nov. 13, Gale, Hove to. Stove bulwarks and 1 boat, hurt 1 man, leaking bad; Nov. 16, large sea: Nov. 24, parted inner bobstay, got a tackle on; Dec. 1 Hove to’ At San Francisco, where she was long overdue, the ship was feared lost, but she finally limped through the Golden Gate.”

“For her honeymoon Charlotte Hillman, having become the wife of **Captain John S. Reynolds**, went on a whaling voyage of two years in the bark *Mattapoisett*, and not for ten years did she become a housewife at home.”

“Acquaintances found it quite the thing to say, ‘What a hard life you must had had going whaling with your husband?’ but her answer was ‘Not at all. We had a happy time. Once in the *James Arnold* we went through a bad hurricane off Hatteras - the guard rails were awash with the seas, but there are just as severe storms ashore, I have learned. Things were very nice for me on board. I used to have my organ and on one ship I had a bathroom.’”

“Captain Sylvanus Waldron on the *Stamboul* gammed with the *James Arnold* and this record appears in the *Stamboul's* log:

Monday, May 22 1893. At 3 PM sighted the *James Arnold*, a full rigged whaleship recently

from New Bedford via Honolulu. Captain Waldron, together with Capt. McInnis of the *Wanderer*, visited upon invitation the *Arnold* and were hospitably treated by Captain Reynolds and his very affable lady. The latter demonstrating her vocal powers by rendering some vocal music to an accompaniment on the organ.”

“This was in the cold, foggy region of the Kodiak. When Captain Reynolds took the *James Arnold* into the Arctic, Charlotte left the ship at Unalaska, took a small steamer to Seattle and a larger steamer to San Francisco, thence journeying overland to Boston and down to the Vineyard. Then she retrained to San Francisco, met her husband, and sailed around the Horn with him on his homeward voyage.”

“John S. Reynolds was born in Edgartown in 1861 and at sixteen shipped as a seaman on the bark Perry which dragged ashore at Bermuda and was lost. He sailed as a boatsteerer in the schooner *E. H. Hartfield*, was advanced to second mate, and at twenty-one became the master of the same schooner rechristened the *Aurora*. He filled the vessel in a year and a half but on the next voyage she began to leak and had to be abandoned.”

“Then came marriage, the *Mattapoissett*, the *Francis A. Barstow*, the *James Arnold*, and the *Sunbeam*, all with Charlotte, and at the last voyage with a five-year-old daughter also. After these voyages, he never sailed again in blue water, nor did Charlotte, but she said always that her whaling years were the happiest ones of her life. In the *Sunbeam* in a year and a week John Reynolds took 1980 barrels of oil, a record for the length of the cruise. But Charlotte would remember longer the mutiny on the *James Arnold*, the taking of a whale at midnight, the hurricane off Hatteras, and her stay at San Domingo when she met a black monarch and his wife, who Charlotte was told, had never before seen a white woman.”

The “five-year-old daughter”, born in 1910 and named Charlotte also, married Ralph M. Taylor in Stevens Memorial Chapel and remained married to him for 67 years. She was a professional singer with her own radio show in Worcester as well as a soloist for several churches, including ours. She mostly lived in Maine, but moved to be near a daughter in Connecticut for her last few years. She died in 2008, aged 98. She made yearly contributions to UUSMV and received our newsletter until the last few years of her life. All four Reynolds are buried at Oak Grove cemetery in Vineyard Haven.