

Adventures Of Chatham Sea Captains

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

by spencer grey

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Chatham was a center of commerce because of the extensive, worldwide trading conducted by ships manned by Chatham captains and their crews. One of the more notable among them was James H. Kent (1841-1898).

In 1881 he was captain of the bark James A. Borland, sailing from Australia to Boston. When she was rounding Cape Horn the night of April 29, the second mate who was standing the midnight to 4 a.m. watch saw “a dim shadowy something...rise up out of the blackness ahead.” At first he could not make out what it was, but then he realized that it was ice, “...a berg that towered up higher than our royal yard” (the sail that it is the second one below the top of the mast). Because of the alertness of the mate, the ship avoided colliding with the iceberg and made it safely back to Boston.

Twenty years before that experience, Kent was captain of the brig Augusta on a voyage from Boston to Brazil. On March 12, 1864, they picked up a pilot who guided them up the river to the port of San Pedro, where they unloaded 163 cases of kerosene and 2,561 feet of lumber. Further up the Rio Grande, they unloaded wooden ware, reams of paper, packages of glassware and 30 cases of furniture, another 6,546 feet of lumber, three barrels of flour, and two more cases of kerosene. For the return voyage they loaded 221 salt hides, 5,000 horns, dry hides, four bales of hair, 19 bales of wool, and three bales of hair in preparation for the trip back to New York.

In 1870 Captain Kent was master of the three-masted schooner Hera bound from Boston to Australia, and his mate was a young Scotsman named George Osborne. Seven days from Boston they encountered a severe storm, during which the captain and Osborne were washed overboard. The crew was able to save Captain Kent, but they failed to get Osborne back on board, and he was drowned. When the Captain looked up Osborne’s family to notify them of their loss, he discovered that the mate’s father, who had recently died, had been the Earle of Aberdeen, and Osborne, had he lived, would have succeeded to the title.

Another Chatham Captain was Levi D. Smith (1841-1919), who in 1892 was master of the bark Xenia when it was on a voyage from New York to Sydney, New South Wales. The captain kept a personal log in which he recorded his own thoughts, for example, on April 9 he reported, “Captain hasn’t much of anything to do but eat oranges and growl,” and on the next day, “Capt. doing about the same old thing that is not much of anything but walk the deck and wish he had the wife and children near.” By mid-September the Xenia is about 30 miles off the island of Bougainville and the captain doesn’t want to get too near any of the nearby islands as, “we don’t know how friendly the natives are about here.” The temperature was in the 90s at the time, prompting the captain to record, “If any of the natives get hold of us, they won’t have to cook us much for we shall be well boiled.”

A decade earlier Captain Smith had been master of the bark Morro Castle when it encountered severe weather while rounding Cape Horn. The second mate recorded their experience in the ship’s log: “On June 24, about nine o’clock in the evening we were scudding before a heavy southwest gale and high sea when the ship broached to, sweeping decks of both boats, water casks and side lights... The wheel and binnacle were washed away. The port bulwarks were stove and the cabin door burst open, completely filling the cabin with water. I was in my berth at the time and when I woke up found my trunk on top of me and the cabin flooded with water.

The first mate, Fred Wilson, was at the wheel with one of the foremost hands and had a rope tied to his waist, but a wave struck him and he was carried overboard and drowned. The door of the storeroom in the cabin where all the small stores were kept was washed away and the stores all lost. I have been shipwrecked three times but never had such a time before. The captain's fingers were badly frozen and nearly all the men had their feet frozen."

Still another well-traveled Chatham captain was Simeon Taylor, one of four brothers who became captains during their years going to sea. During the early years of his career, he was engaged in coastal trade, carrying coal and pig iron from Philadelphia to Boston. He wrote frequently to his wife, Mehitable, whom he called "Hitty." In one of those letters he wrote: "Times are very dull. I do not have anything to do but just set down in Mr. Cooper's counting room (in Philadelphia) and drink ice water and smoke cigars. Last evening Atkins and Lewis and myself went down street and went into a bath house. Elish (Atkins) came very near getting into the ladies' apartment. Think I shall leave off going to sea and buy a farm."

By 1855, he had a more interesting command as captain of the bark Ella, which was in the Mediterranean fruit trade. In his letters he commented on some of the countries they visited, most often with negative views of them. Of Smyrna he wrote, "I am now about ready to leave this land of Greeks," and of Palermo, "I am now ready to leave this place of sin and beggars." Manifests of the cargoes carried by the Ella indicate that they carried much more than fruit. One of them lists among the cargo wine, porcelain, brandy, mustard, sardines, capers, anchovies, leather, olive oil, and much more.

Clearly these Chatham mariners were well traveled and responsible for bringing home a wide variety of goods, some of them exotic, from Europe and Asia. Their experiences made them familiar with people and cultures very different from those of their home town.

