

Sermon preached by Renny Stackpole

at the Episcopal Church of St. John Baptist in Thomaston, Maine

August 13, 2017

The brave souls who launched St. John Baptist Episcopal Church in Thomaston in 1867 were survivors of a brutal American Civil War, and an uncertain national economy--as a change from sail to steam commerce threatened our shipbuilding industry. Nevertheless, in the next 30 years Thomaston merchants and artisans doggedly launched 113 sailing ships and schooners from the “ways” on both sides of the Georges River. Certainly, a new place of worship was an expected result of our growing local prosperity. And we should never forget the role of artisans who came from as far away as the Virginia tidewater to fashion thousands of ship timbers for the Thomaston ships. These workers included scores of sailmakers, blacksmiths, and riggers employed by firms like Dunn and Elliot or Burgess and O’Brien. Furthermore, it was during these years that many of the most beautiful dwellings in town were built. And it was during that era that the fame of Thomaston ship masters came to the attention of maritime historians. One in particular was Captain Charles Ranlett, master of the A.P. Low Company

ship SURPRISE, who set speed records under sail from New York to San Francisco and later to the coast of China--or Captain Raymond Gillchrest who founded his own ship brokerage firm in Liverpool.

Page 2.

Peter has often expressed the wish to one-day display the model of a sailing vessel- like the SAMUEL WATTS- proudly launched at the base of Green Street in 1870. Like ships christened by our local pastors during an anticipated Spring Tide, St. John's was laid out in a North-South configuration. And as the stem (as seen behind me)-- or foremost structural member of a wooden vessel-- is illustrated in our stained glass window, we should also notice the image of our Lord, portrayed, with the words from our scripture lesson, "Do Not Be Afraid." What a meaningful expression this was for a local mariner about to undertake a voyage in the world's often tempestuous seas.

In 1955, I was an 18 year-old crew member venturing to sea in the 70 foot former fishing schooner SNOW MAIDEN from Cohasset. On November 20, During an unexpected Atlantic Gale, this former fishing vessel, foundered on Brown's Bank off Plymouth, Massachusetts. Thanks to the use of dories, two of our crew survived the wild ride toward the safety of Plymouth Harbor. Over the next eight hours the vessel- battered by the gale-

finally broke up and was lost.. Like so many young sailors, I recall how cold and the wet we were, and how thankful we were for the initial rescue by the

Page 3.

40 footer from a nearby Coast Guard lifeboat station. For Fred White –(the owner and skipper - and his mate)- once they realized that the vessel was doomed and sinking carefully launched a dory –the schooner’s only life saving boat -- from the cabin top. Soon, they were huddled in the 16 foot craft and using the oars as sails, guided the little craft toward the one major pier in Plymouth, where local truck headlights illuminated the pier during that snowy black night. Fortunately, they were hauled ashore by ship yard owner George Davis and his friend Ted Lacy..

During that wild night - now safely ashore, I came to appreciate what St. Peter and the companions learned through their own fear and distress— “Be Not Afraid.” became the watchword for our survival and eventual rescue during that wild and tempestuous night.

On the following morning, my great grandfather’s sea chest was one of the few articles of wreckage found along the shore. One day soon, this chest will be passed on to one of my grandsons.

May the message inscribed in our dramatic church window, teach us to sail forward bravely as a congregation, bolstered through our faith in the Lord. Amen

Renny A. Stackpole