

# Milton Historical Society

## *Common Ground*

February 2010

### **HEN FRIGATES**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century maritime world is considered a male-dominated sphere—think of Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Patrick O’Brian’s *Master & Commander* novels. But did you know that women, and even entire families, were not *always* left behind on shore? Sea-going vessels, known as “hen frigates” were commercial ships on which sea captain’s wives, and sometimes children, were present. The records in the Milton Historical Society reveal instances of Milton-born women aboard 19<sup>th</sup> century ships.

#### ***Mollie Russell***

Milton’s heyday as a shipbuilding village peaked in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when Milton was a town buzzing with activity. Shipwrights and carpenters lived side by side sea captains and sailors. A Milton-born sea captain named William Russell of Union Street is a case in point. Russell (1827-1872) is an example of a Milton man who sailed around the globe. As a ship captain, he stopped in the ports of Leghorn (Livorno), Italy; Montevideo, Uruguay; St. Georges, Bermuda; Havana, Cuba; and London.

In 1867, Capt. Russell became the sole owner of the 140’ long three-masted, square-rigged vessel SCHULTZ built in Warren, Rhode Island. That same year he married Mary Jane “Mollie” Conwell following the death of his first wife, Elizabeth (who was the elder sister of Mollie!). On July 18, 1867, Mollie Russell’s name appeared on the official “List of Persons” aboard the SCHULTZ bound for London. The manifest reveals that Mollie had a female companion in Mrs. M. Edwards, along with her three children, the wife and family of first mate John Edwards.



The ship sailed in July, arrived in London in August and then traveled on to Gothenberg, Sweden by September. In Sweden, they quickly loaded goods for Boston, probably in trepidation of the North Atlantic’s seasonal westerly gales and heavy seas one might expect in October. After a bone-chilling crossing in October and into November the SCHULTZ arrived in Boston on November 22. Along the way, one crew member killed and one crew member was gravely injured reefing the main topsail.



**Captain James C. Conwell, his wife Clara Robinson Conwell, and their daughter Ethel Conwell, taken c. 1890 in Charleston, South Carolina, likely while in port.**

*Collection of the Milton Historical Society*

#### ***Captain Clara***

In the instance of Clara Robinson Conwell, the documentation is in her own hand. The Milton Historical Society is lucky to hold in its collection a ship’s log and account book kept by Clara Conwell, the wife of Captain James C. Conwell, covering the period 1882-1896. Captain James Conwell was master at various times of schooners *A.P. Nowell*, *Laura Anderson* and *Thomas Winsmore*, all Milton-built vessels. Clara Conwell sailed with her husband and was known around Milton as “Captain Clara.” It is likely, too, that her daughter Ethel joined her parents on board—perhaps Ethel was even born at sea.

**Left: detail of gravel marker of Capt. William Russell, Goshen Cemetery, Chestnut St., Milton. Russell died at sea on a stormy voyage from Pensacola to Philadelphia. The Russells lived at 322 Union Street, today the home of Hull Cottage B & B. Photo by Gary Cooke**

In each log entry Clara recorded details about the cargo shipped—railroad iron, stone, coal, lumber and shingles—and the port of call—including Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Charleston, Savannah, and Jacksonville, Florida. She kept track of the expenses for feeding the crew—oysters, chickens, beef, pork, butter beans, radishes, cranberries, lettuce, sweet potatoes, butter, onions and more (totaling \$20.93- purchased in Charleston, November 1888). And, she recorded purchases “for housekeeping” in Milton—square cake pans, a carving knife, stair carpet, and window shades (1890).

She also documented the unpredictable nature and hazards on the sea. “Capt L of schooner Samuel W. Hall was killed Apr 6<sup>th</sup> 1889, struck by a block while standing at wheel...burial at sea in a barrel before he was cold and stiff is what I heard”. A trip from Baltimore to Galveston around Christmas of 1894 was especially trying. For days on end the weather was miserable, culminating in an evening with “high seas from all directions, blowing a living gail....rain in torrents, waterspouts all around”. The next day, January 1<sup>st</sup> 1895 she wrote as a pledge to herself, “Be this trip remembered by me the remainder of my life and never make another trip south nor east. Always think of my vough [vow], never no more at sea if I live to get back go home and stay”.

What must life onboard been like for these women? They were witness to harsh weather conditions, unspeakable accidents, and days of monotony and churning seas. The advantage was they could see new places, shop for the most fashionable goods, and perhaps most importantly, enjoy the felicity of family.

Want to learn more? Have a look at the wonderful book *Hen Frigates: Passion and Peril, Nineteenth Century Women at Sea* by Joan Druett.

Melinda Huff  
Director, Milton Historical Society

#### COULD THIS BE YOUR LAST NEWSLETTER?

The **2010 MEMBERSHIP DRIVE** is underway. If you haven't already renewed your membership consider doing so now or this will be your final newsletter☺

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Membership category:

- Individual (\$25)     Family (\$35)     Supporting (\$250)  
 Sustaining (\$500)     Partnering (\$1,000)

Make checks payable to MHS & return to PO Box 112, Milton, DE 19968    *If you've already renewed, thank you!*



## Delmarva Roots Film Series Held at the Milton Theatre

*A documentary film series exploring our local landscape and culture in partnership with the Rehoboth Beach Film Society*

### Friday, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 7pm **BEER WARS**

Director Anat Baron takes you on a no holds barred exploration of the U.S. beer industry that ultimately reveals the truth behind the label of your favorite beer.

Told from an insider's perspective, the film goes behind the scenes of the daily battles and all out wars that dominate one of America's favorite industries.

FEATURING MILTON'S DOGFISH HEAD BREWERY!

### Friday, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 7pm **Estamos Aquí**

*Estamos Aquí* reveals the humanity behind the headlines of one of the most important issues facing the United States in its history. The story of one community in a changing nation, this poignant documentary film explores the evolving social, political and economic landscape of Georgetown, Delaware. This small, traditionally white community is home to the largest poultry-producing county in the nation, and is in need of a growing labor force. A panel discussion follows the film.

### Friday, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 7 pm, **Hands of Harvest**

*Hands of Harvest* is a documentary film that chronicles the journey of migrant Mexican women who travel to fishing villages on Maryland's Eastern Shore to pick crabs in seafood plants scattered along its rural shores, offering a glimpse into a renowned American Industry being kept afloat by foreign labor.



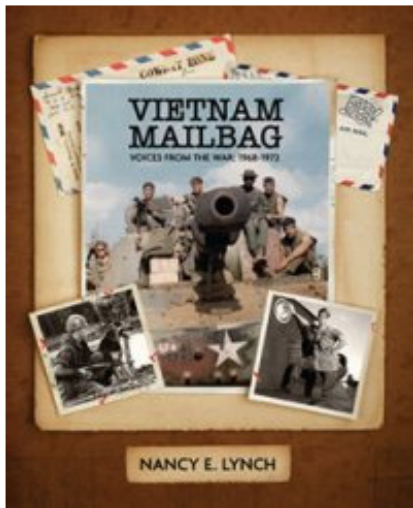
## CURRENT EXHIBIT



### ***Revolutionary Delaware Through April 3, 2010***

*Revolutionary Delaware* tells the story of the drafting of Delaware's Declaration of Rights, the outstanding reputation of the Delaware Continentals, and Delaware's role in the Battle of Cowpens. Created by the Delaware Public Archives.

## UPCOMING EXHIBIT



### ***Vietnam Mailbag April 9- June 2010***

#### ***Opening Reception and Lecture with Nancy Lynch, Friday, April 9, 7pm***

War letters and weapons, patches, pins and pictures are front and center among the military memorabilia showcased in *Vietnam Mailbag: The Exhibit*.

The compelling exhibit debuted at the Delaware Public Archives in Dover on Veterans Day, 2008 with the release of the award-winning book, *Vietnam Mailbag, Voices From the War: 1968-1972*, by Nancy E. Lynch. The 456-page social history is based on Lynch's popular News Journal column, Nancy's Vietnam Mailbag, which received nearly 1,000 letters and hundreds of pictures from Delaware servicemen on the front lines.

## BECOME A VOLUNTEER!

### TRAINING KICKS OFF MARCH 13<sup>TH</sup>

The first in a series of volunteer information and training sessions will be held on Saturday, **March 13th** at 10 am. A total of four training sessions will be held. The other sessions will be held on Saturdays **March 27th, April 10th** and **April 24th**. All sessions will begin at 10am and conclude by noon.

The museum's greatest need is for "docents". A docent is a host of the museum, welcoming visitors and acting as a guide and interpreter of the exhibits. Docents are essential to the museum's operation: without docents our museum couldn't be open on a regular basis. Becoming a docent is a great way to learn more about Milton and to share what you know with visitors to the museum. If you are a friendly person who loves learning and sharing, this important volunteer position is for you.

#### Requirements:

- eight hours of initial training
- two continuing education events per year
- minimum two and one-half hours per month commitment June–August
- minimum two and one-half hours per quarter commitment fall, winter and spring

Other volunteer needs include: assistance at special events, collections and archival cataloguing (must be proficient with computers), gift shop sales, refreshment committee, and building and landscape maintenance. ***Please 302-684-1010 to sign up for training.***



### ***Sunday, February 7<sup>th</sup> 12-5pm Annual Salon Milton Fundraiser for the Museum featuring a Community Valentines Day Bake Sale and Salon Services***

Come and enjoy refreshments, receive a salon service and meet your neighbors.

\$25.00 for any of the below services:

Aveda Conditioning Services, Haircuts (by John Potocki & Roi Barnard), Manicures (by Mia), Chair Massage

All of the proceeds collected for the above services will be donated to the Milton Historical Society.

Call Salon Milton at 302-684-1880 to reserve your preferred appointment time.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Sunday, February 7th, 12-5pm**

Salon Milton Fundraiser for the Museum featuring a Community Valentines Day Bake Sale. All of the proceeds collected for the above services will be donated to the Milton Historical Society.

**Friday, February 19th, 7pm**

**Delaware Roots Film Series** *Estamos Aquí*

Held at the Historic Milton Theatre in partnership with the Rehoboth Beach Film Society

**Friday, March 5th, 7pm**

**Speaker Series with Ed Okonowicz** *Storytelling from Brandywine to the Bay*

In addition to enjoying an entertaining experience, attendees learn about the art of storytelling, how it developed and why it is still important in today's high-tech society.

**Friday, March 19th, 7pm**

**Delaware Roots Film Series** *Hands of Harvest*

Held at the Historic Milton Theatre in partnership with the Rehoboth Beach Film Society.



**Milton Historical Society**

**P.O. Box 112**

**210 Union Street**

**Milton, DE 19968**

**302.684.1010**

**[info@historicmilton.org](mailto:info@historicmilton.org)**

## ESTATE PLANNING ADVICE

You can provide for the Milton Historical Society in the future with a gift through your will. Please contact us or your professional advisor to learn more.

We can help you convert non-cash assets like closely-held stock, life insurance, and real estate into a contribution. Ask us how!

