

What Alice Stallnecht Wight Saw

by Spencer Grey

As Mrs. Wight looked out of the window in her house at the end of Stage Harbor Road (then called Atwood Street), she usually saw some of the town characters, and she described them in the notebook where she recorded her observations and remembrances.

One of those whom she called her “little old man with the long pointed brown beard who destroyed our woodpile” was Darius Hammond. Shortly after they had moved in she saw him pawing through their woodpile because he was looking for a currycomb that he knew was there. He needed it to scale fish that he had caught. He often said, “I’ve been rolling on these fish all day,” by which he meant he had been carrying fish in a wheelbarrow.

He peddled the fish around town, weighing the buyer’s selection with a pair of scales that he carried with him.

Later when the wheelbarrow became too heavy for him to push, he carried the fish in a box mounted on a baby carriage. After this the Wights did not see Mr. Hammond for some time. When they next came upon him, he was “jig-jogging” along the road, but he was bent over backwards with his beard pointing straight up in the air because he had had a stroke. They were about to go to his aid when a young man named Martin, a wild Irish red-headed man, came along in his blue wagon and tried to get Mr. Hammond on board, but he was not able to do so. Instead he ended up dragging him alongside the wagon, until Carol Wight ran out and grabbed the horse’s head to stop him until they could get Mr. Hammond safely into the wagon. Martin then took Mr. Hammond safely to his home.

When the Wight’s son, Frederick, began painting portraits of the many retired sea captains living in Chatham at that time, his mother sat with him asking the men to relate the story of their lives. She discovered that nearly all of them first went to sea when they were nine or 10 years old, usually as cooks, often on an older brother’s ship. By the time they were mature, they had become accomplished mariners and soon commanded ships of their own. If they were not fortunate enough to be able to sign up on a brother’s ship, they went to New York where they went to the docks to find a ship that needed crew members.

Mrs. Wight tells of a retired mariner who lived near them who would stand

in the field next to their house for hours with his hand shading his eyes gazing out over the water, not moving but bent forward as if trying to see something. They were told that his ship was wrecked and went down, but all of the crew were rescued. When he came home he discovered that his wife had died, and the loss of both his ship and his wife had unbalanced him. No one knew why he stood there so many hours staring out to sea, but some said he was looking for his lost ship, while others believed he was looking for his wife.



AT THE
ATWOOD HOUSE

The fish that were landed at the wharf across the street from their house were loaded in barrels and shipped to Boston. She explains that often the barrels of fish were taken to the railroad station by “the strongest man in town,” who was deaf and dumb,

but very high spirited. When the horses were pulling the wagon up the mill hill, he would get off and run up the hill passing the horses and their wagons as he went. Some times when he was driving a wagon loaded with barrels on the way to the wharf, one of them would fall off, but he would not hear it and continued on his way. If this happened as he was passing the Wight’s house, they would run over to the dock to alert him to his loss and even though he could not hear them, he could read their lips. The man’s name was Louis Tuttle, and Mrs. Wight pictured him in her murals with his wife telling him what was being said by those around them.

Shortly after the Wights moved into their house, they were loading hay from a wagon into the loft of the barn when a neighbor, Captain George Harding, came along and asked if he could help. When they told him that they did not need any more help, he settled down under their quince tree and asked for a glass of water. When Mrs. Wight returned with the water, she found that Captain Harding was holding the head of the horse that was attached to the hay wagon, as the others pitched the hay into the loft. When she handed Captain Harding the water expecting him to drink it to quench his thirst, he instead flung it on to the horse’s head to cool him and then roared with delight.

To be able to record her observations in such detail, as well as paint the portraits of her neighbors so clearly, as we see them in her murals at The Atwood House, is evidence that Mrs. Wight was an unusually perceptive and articulate woman.