

Hingham and Scituate Nautical History

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for Unicorn Singers Spring 2012 Concert

I.

Picture, if you will, a stroll along Hingham's harbor in the year 1750. You would see shipyards, wharves, salt works, ropewalks and warehouses. Those wharves were busy with the comings and goings of all types of vessels. Sloops, barques and packet ships, built here, ran to Boston and back, ferrying the products of a working waterfront. There were ship's masts and spars, clapboards and shingles, hatchets, axes and nails and, of course, wooden buckets. Farmers from surrounding towns brought their produce and home-made goods in wagons to Hingham's wharves where it was all loaded onto "housed" packet ships. These sturdy little vessels carried barrels of fresh and pickled food, baskets of eggs, hand-knitted woolen stockings and sundry homemade goods. On arrival at Boston's Long Wharf, the ships turned themselves into dockside markets and also offered temporary lodging. Berths in the housing of the ships were rented by the night, until all the merchandise was sold, and the packets headed home. Larger Hingham ships plied the seas in the long distance West Indies trade and for a time the harbor was home to one of the nation's largest mackerel fishing fleets. By the mid-19th century Hingham Harbor was an official port of entry into the United States, complete with its own Custom House!

The industry of those early days on the waterfront eventually gave way to more leisurely pastimes. By the 1870's steamboat lines were competing to bring visitors from Boston to the amusements of Hingham's Melville Gardens. Crow Point had been a bucolic peninsula used mostly as pasture until Samuel Downer of Dorchester bought 43 acres on the point and transformed the fields into a pleasure garden. The hotel was the Rose Standish House and the Vue de l'Eau Café graced a new wharf. Arriving guests walked up a canopied walkway to visit the flying horses, the dance hall, the clambake pavilion, or the monkey house! The gas lamps of the Gardens were described as lighting up the rocks and waters of cove and harbor "like a scene of a fairy land."

Melville Gardens eventually lost its caché to the newer attractions of Nantasket Beach, but soon private sailing boats dotted the waters off Crow point. The Hingham Yacht Club was founded in 1895 as a family oriented sailing club and continues today in its long tradition of sailboat racing and training new generations of sailors.

In the early 20th century the US Navy took notice of Hingham and its sheltered coastal terrain, surrounded by hills. Along both the Hingham and Weymouth banks of the Back River nearly 1000 acres were purchased for the creation of a munitions magazine that was to serve the Boston and Portsmouth Navy Yards. Both towns stored and provided mines and torpedoes for the North Atlantic fleet and townsfolk swimming in the marsh grass at high tide could see the sentries on guard on Weymouth's great esker.

But Hingham's finest hour at the water's edge came during the Second World War. The United States Navy and Bethlehem Steel chose the little town of Hingham, with its deep harbor, to be the site of a new shipyard. Crews worked around the clock to clear 150 acres where they erected a steel mill that stretched for more than a third of a mile. Thousands of workers and tons of equipment flooded into Hingham and the building of vessels began. Within two years Hingham was transformed into one of the largest shipbuilding centers in the nation.

In 1943, the Navy demanded that 60 destroyer escorts be built: Hingham delivered 90 of them, 50% over quota. Many of the workers on the line were women, or boys and men too young or old for military service. Twenty-five hundred local versions of "Rosie the Riveter" helped to make the shipyard one of the most productive in the nation, and the yard was awarded an "E" for excellence, a commendation usually reserved for active service sailors. These vessels slid down the ways in Hingham and escorted thousands of convoys across the ocean to the theater of war. On each journey they faced the danger of submarine attack and several Hingham vessels sank enemy U-boats.

The plan for the D-Day invasion required the building of flat-bottomed boats that could land on the beaches of Normandy. Hingham once again answered the call and began production of the Landing Ship Tank, or LST. The largest of these vessels could transport 10 tanks or 1000 men. For 3½ years the workers of the South Shore gave their all at the Hingham Shipyard, and supplied our fighting men with the vessels that helped bring them victory.

Today you can catch a commuter boat, buy fresh lobsters, stroll a picturesque walkway, or indulge in fine dining where once an industry rose to the call of war.

Our concert this afternoon sings of all these scenes: the excitement of setting out on a voyage, the longing for home after time at sea, the romance of sailors and their sweethearts, separated and re-united, the pride of being part of a fleet and a great national effort, and most of all, a love of the sea.

II.

The sea is a subject that has attracted great poets and composers for centuries. Perhaps there is something in the rhythm of the waves and the tides, or in the changeable colors of sky and water, or in the cries of sea birds and the roar of the surf that calls to the artist. Many of us understand this attraction because we are lucky enough to live by the shore. Residents of Scituate, especially, have experienced both the wonder and the terror of the ocean throughout their history. Tragic shipwrecks and terrifying storms have gone hand in hand with breathtaking sunsets and gentle sea breezes; and with all the advantages of life on the coast, there also comes a vulnerability, particularly during time of war.

The music performed in tonight's concert captures much of a seaside town's experience. It was John Masefield, a former Poet Laureate of England who wrote *Sea Fever*. Masefield spent several years at sea as a young man, and his verse has the ring of someone who's been there : All I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by/ and the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sails shaking/ and a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking...Though I am quite sure that John Masefield never visited Scituate, his verse bears a surprising resemblance to a recent entry in the blog of the current resident of the keeper's cottage at Old Scituate Light, Bob Gallagher. "It is a constant sensory extravaganza around here - sound, sight, smell. The knock around of the wind the other night had the house shaking again and every morning is another chance to notice the blue of the ocean." Those lovely maids in the set of Ralph Vaughan Williams' songs might have set you to thinking about the flock of Scituate girls who married sailors that came to town during World War II when the Navy had the boys stationed out at the Glades.

But the centerpiece of our concert is *Songs of the Fleet* by Charles Villiers Stanford. The suite is a fine example of poetry and music coming together to capture the spirit of a fleet of battleships at sea. The English poet Henry Newbolt's maritime poems provide the lyric for Stanford's composition and together they paint a beautiful portrait of the sea, both raging and calm, and of the sailors anticipating the excitement of battle, feeling a national pride, all the while knowing the danger they face.

Stanford was born in Ireland and came to Cambridge England to study the classics, but found his true calling in music. Though he finished his classics degree, he spent much of his undergraduate time deeply immersed in the musical life of Cambridge. Upon graduation he lived and studied in Germany and absorbed the influences of "new" composers such as Brahms, Offenbach and Wagner. His works became favorites of the many choral societies that multiplied in late 19th century England.

He and Newbolt were contemporaries, writing and composing at the turn of the 20th century, before the two world wars that were to come, and yet the music could have been written about the 227 ships that slid down the ways in Hingham and headed into battle in the Second World War.

The third movement of Songs of the Fleet, entitled The Middle Watch, evokes Scituate's vigilance against German U-boats, the silent, stealthy enemy that crept along our coast during the war. In 1943 the Navy leased land from the owners of the Glades and built housing facilities disguised as summer cottages. Sailors lived on the first floor, but on the upper floors there were high powered scanning instruments guarding against the lurking subs. Further back in the woods, a coastal observation tower was built. It had a direct cable to a submarine lookout base on the other side of Massachusetts Bay. The Glades tower still stands as a ghostly reminder of those days.

Tonight's music has many echoes of the South Shore's nautical past, but it also sings of the universal experience of all those who live by the sea, fish in it, sail on it...and love it.