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# Stratford Historical Society >> UPDATE

A Hand on the PAST >> An Eye to the FUTURE

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Volume VII Issue 3

JAN 2003

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Capt. David Judson House c 1750  
Catharine B. Mitchell Museum

## NEXT GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Friday January 31, 2003 - 7:30pm

Christ Episcopal Church  
2000 Main Street, Stratford

**Lewis G. Knapp**  
*Stratford And The Sea*

When Town Historian Lew Knapp retired in 1985 as Chief of Product Engineering at Sikorsky Aircraft, he had contributed to the design of over 20 helicopters. He has, since that time, devoted himself to documenting Stratford history.

Research can be a long and tedious process, but when facts begin to develop into a historical narrative that process becomes exciting to the Researcher. Lew has been researching Stratford for many years and states that Stratford's relationship with the sea, although not as prominent as aeronautics, is just as remarkable.

Over a decade ago when Lew was assembling material for "In Pursuit of Paradise" he found he couldn't include all of the fascinating things he found. "There was so much stuff we weren't able to use." That stuff became the foundation for *Stratford And The Sea*, a story of a Connecticut seacoast town that for more than 360 years harvested the bounty of its waters, engaged in seaborne commerce, sent its sons to sea to defend the land or to bring home the riches of the world, and then relaxed in the enjoyment of its shores and water.

Lew will present a very interesting program, including slides, of how he was able to bring all of the various information together and also tell of many facts and pictures he still could not contain within the pages of his book.

Copies of *Stratford And The Sea* will be available for sale and Lew will be happy to personally autograph books after the meeting.

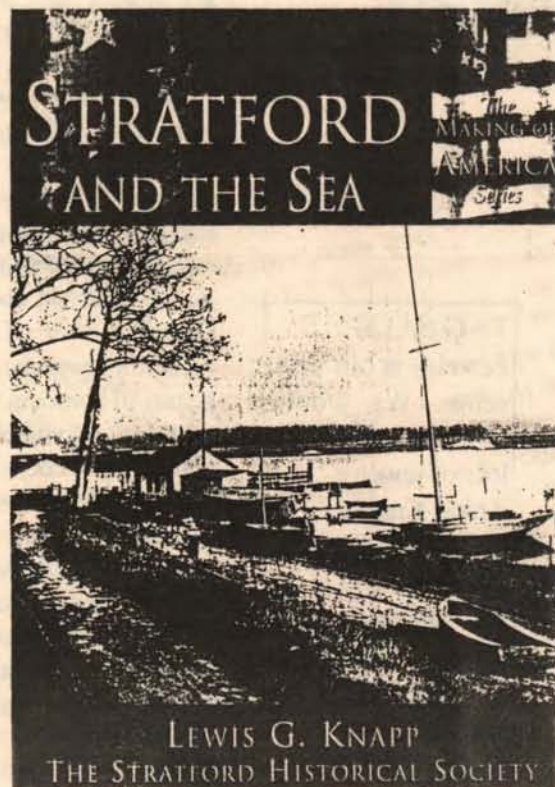
**The Meeting is open to the public and refreshments will be served.**

**Meeting starts promptly at 7:30**

**In case of inclement weather - listen to WICC 5pm**

*At sea, the motion  
never stops.  
Slowly your body  
develops a rhythm  
with the boat. Your  
cluttered world  
narrows to the  
simplicity of sky,  
wind and sea.  
Slowly you become  
still.*

*David Treadway  
Dead Reckoning*



## Happy New Year President Dave Guion



Don't just sit there  
come on in and HELP!!

In the last Newsletter, I wrote about my desire to have more Society members become involved in the various activities which we conduct each year—Stratford Day in early June, the Tag Sale, Summer Camp and the Early American Festival in September.

We hope to make this year special in the Society. As you probably know, Lewis Knapp, our Town Historian, has written a new book called "Stratford And The Sea" which chronicles local and world-wide trade, oystering, etc., as they relate to Stratford. We would like to tie in this facet of Stratford's history with our other annual activities this year.

In Addition, we are considering a self-conducted walking tour along the shoreline where you will see various sites of historical interest. A combination coloring book (for kids) and tour map would be available for sale as a guide to this tour. Also, we would like to offer (in cooperation with the Coast Guard) a tour of the lighthouse, another possibility would be an open house tour of historical homes in the waterfront area. Some of these activities require a great deal of planning and cooperation.

At this time some of our most active members have conflicting personal requirements, leaving us gaping holes in planning and executing these activities. This leaves us two options: cancel some activities, or get help from our local Society members. Won't you seriously consider helping your Society make this year a very special one? Please contact me at 377-8509 or email me at [daveg1925@juno.com](mailto:daveg1925@juno.com) if you feel you can help in any small (or large) way. THANKS

### TAG SALE

We can now accept items for the Spring Tag Sale which is being planned for Friday & Saturday, May 16th & 17th. Help is needed!! Please bring items to the office Tuesday or Thursday from 9 to 2, or call 378-0630 if you need to have an item picked up.

## 1st Vice President Todd Lovell

**GOOD NEWS**—The Society has been able to purchase six additional glass display cases matching the first six acquired last year. For a contribution of \$300 a memorial plaque will be affixed on a case of the donor's choice. This \$300 is tax-deductible and will be so designated by a letter signed by Todd Lovell, 1st Vice President. This amount equals the amount paid by the Society for each case.

At the January 6th meeting of the Board of Directors it was voted to designate one case in honor of Past President Lewis G. Knapp and Vivienne Knapp for their many contributions to the Society.

The display cases are being assembled and if you would like to remember someone in this way and also help the Society please call the office to make arrangements.

**ROOF FUND**—Operation Roof Fund has already received contributions, some from as far away as California. While we greatly appreciate the donations received to date, much more assistance from the membership will be needed before the roof replacement can begin on Judson House. The existing roof was installed in 1981 and must be replaced in the not-too-distant future.

No contribution is too small and we would like to emphasize that all amounts are tax-deductible.

**SPECIAL OFFER**—Our "Images of America-Stratford" publication is now out of print. Our supply is dwindling and we are selling the book, without the former discount, at the \$18.99 cover price.

Members may still purchase signed copy of the book with the \$2.00 discount previously offered through February 15, 2003. For mail orders send \$17.00 plus \$3.50 for postage.

**VOLUNTEERS**— The Society desperately needs more volunteers to carry out the projects we would like to present. Please call the office and say you can help - 378-0630

### TAG SALE

Jewelry is our best seller. We would like to have lots and lots of jewelry.  
Knick-Knacks  
Kitchenware  
Baskets  
Dinnerware  
Table Linens  
Brass & Copper  
Books  
Chairs  
Small Tables  
Gardening Tools  
Pots & Pans  
Puzzles & Toys  
Lamps  
etc. etc. etc.

## The United States Navy At Sea During the War of 1812

This war is probably one of the least known of our country's wars. It actually started after the Revolution with the British impressing sailors off the ships bearing our country's flag. Though no one ever labeled it a war at that time, this action was one of the underlying causes of the war.

James Lawrence, captain of the *Chesapeake*, of "Don't Give Up The Ship" fame, ran up the yardarm a flag with the motto "Free Trade and Sailor's Rights" when he was given a message to come out and fight by the British blockading Boston. The very first volley from the British left him wounded and dying on the deck of his ship. His men did eventually surrender the ship to the British, where it ended up in Halifax, Canada. Captain Lawrence was buried with honors in Halifax.

Fighting at sea was not the gentlemanly engagement that we tend to think of 'way back then'. Because sailors were mostly barefoot, cannons loaded with glass, nails, and wood splinters, wounds were not uncommon. This left the decks of the ship covered with blood, gore, and other items. Many a ship had to have a 'time out' to clean the decks before they could continue firing the cannons.



Another tactic was to set the ships afire, especially with those wooden decks, yards upon yards of canvas sail, and the ropes of most ships heavily tarred. These became a target for sea warfare engagements. The cannon balls would be heated and fired at opposing ships, causing a great fire hazard for the engaged ships.

In harbor waters the art of "Kedging" was practiced when maneuverability was a problem and very light breeze prevailed. Many ropes were tied together then an anchor was tied to it and rowed out as far as possible. The men in the ship then pulled the ship forward to the anchor and repeated the process. Thus a trapped ship was sometimes able to escape a trap by stealthily moving the ship to deeper waters.

The stink pot was another 'ungentlemanly' tactic. The jars were filled with anything available - mostly rotten fish and brimstone. Sailors would climb the rigging and when the ships got close enough, would toss the jars on the decks and hopefully down into the hatches of the closing enemy ship. The crew, sick with the smell in tight quarters, would be shot by the riflemen awaiting the crew to come on deck for fresh air.

Most ships carried many gallons of water and rum on board. These became expendable when running from a faster ship. It was said that Captain Hull of the *Constitution* was forced into this situation. In his wisdom he ditched the water, but kept the rum. (Good man he was!)

Sailing under a false flag was the usual fare at sea and most ships had a good store of false flags. Before the battle it was supposedly the honorable thing to show your true colors. But, this was often done after a few rounds of cannon had been fired, and if in the heat of battle someone 'remembered' to raise the colors.

The more adventurous sailors climbed the rigging with a pail full of grenades and a small lit torch and as before tried to get the lit grenade down a hatch. This was actually accomplished by John Paul Jones' ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, when it was tied to the British ship *Serapis*. A sailor named William Hamilton was able to actually get one of his grenades down a hatch that held the ammunition, causing a series of explosions. Many of the British sailors were killed outright, many more jumped into the sea with their clothing afire.

The most vital legislation to help the weak Navy of the United States was granted by Congress to become a 'privateer' with a license to raid enemy shipping. This power was called a 'letter of marque' and was given to a captain who requested it and, in most cases whose ship was already armed and ready. He was also allowed to keep half of what he had captured as a reward and stipend. (excerpts from 'Oh Say Can You See')

*A ship is always referred to as "she" because it costs so much to keep it in paint and powder.*

## Elvira Benjamin Nicoll

Elvira Benjamin was born on February 8, 1794, the fourth child of Col. Aaron Benjamin and Dorothy Brooks Benjamin. Through her father and mother, Elvira came from a long line of colonial ancestry. Her father was a Revolutionary soldier, took part in nearly one hundred engagements but was never wounded. In the War of 1812 he was again called into the service and was in command of the military post at New London. Elvira married Capt. Samuel Nicoll on February 23, 1820 at Christ Episcopal Church, she was 12 years younger than her husband. Privateer Nicoll came home from the War of 1812 with the third largest amount of booty in the entire war and around 1818 built a house in Lordship on 4th Avenue. Capt. and Mrs. Nicoll also lived in the house on Elm Street that became the Shakespeare Theater's Office. Capt. Nicoll died May 1, 1850 and one year later Elvira died at age 57.

We are fortunate to have copies of letters written by Elvira to her sister Delia that came into the possession of Mr. Arthur Bedell Benjamin, son of Elvira's brother Aaron, the youngest child in the family and 14 years younger than Elvira.

### **Could this be a July celebration!!**

**Stratford July 3, 1814** - *When Lucretia first came in town all the girls called on her immediately and the next day we were invited to a party at Gen. Walker's - the next at Mrs. Booth's - the next at Gen. Nicoll's and drank tea out every day that week. Indeed Delia in the four weeks she has been in town we have not been dull four afternoons. The second week I gave a large and I'll assure thee stylish party - we had 35 ladies and gentlemen. The next morning a large party of ladies and gents went to visit the gun-boats two of which lay a few rods from the lower wharf - the Officers sent their barge ashore for us and received us with true officer-like politeness. After showing us all the different parts of the boats, arms, ammunition etc. they requested a song and after some urging I sung the "Light House" a beautiful new song and very apropos - I then called on the Captain who sung most sweetly. The boats lay side by side so we stepped from one to the other - they escorted us ashore delighted with our morning excursion - they left Stratford that day.*

**Festivities surrounding President Monroe's Inauguration (1817-1821, 1821-1825)** Elvira was visiting her Aunt and Uncle - John Forsyth was her cousin and Secretary of State under Jackson and Van Buren.

**Washington January 26, 1817** - *I know you must think me the most negligent girl for being here so long without writing you, but if you could only see what a round of company we live in you would not wonder. In the morning immediately after breakfast (which is not very early) we dress - we are obliged to dress as we would in the land of steady habits to go to a party, after we are dressed company begins to call, and from 11 o'clock till near four, which is the dinner hour, we have a continual run of company - carriages standing at the door the whole morning, for everybody keeps a coach and nobody walks. Several mornings must be devoted to returning these visits - therefore the carriage is ordered and we pay 10 or 12 visits earnestly wishing the people may not be at home, for then we are not obliged to get out of the carriage - a servant knocks at the door and if they are not at home we leave our cards and then they are indebted to us - so you see how much sincerity is used here. At 4 o'clock we dine and immediately after dress for a party - for scarcely an evening passes without some party or ball—I was presented at my first drawing room appearance by Hon. David Daggett. Mrs. Madison did me the honor to call the next week and request me come to her drawing rooms that are held every Wednesday evening. Sometimes we go to Congress Hall to hear the debates - most of the debates you see in the papers I have heard in the house, it is very interesting - our cousin Mr. John Forsyth is one of the finest speakers in the house.*

**After the Ball is over - A farewell to Ex-President and Mrs. Madison**

**Washington March 23, 1817** - *The gaiety is all over now and we are as quiet as the country almost. I shall return to Stratford with Pa the first of April - I suppose the Stratforders will be almost surprised to see me return unmarried (Elvira had numerous offers) I could tell them if I chose, that if I had been like some of the girls in Stratford, or indeed in many other places, I might have been married two or three times. You have read a description of the Inauguration in the papers, it was not as interesting as I expected because of the great crowd you could not hear a word - the ex-president and lady still remain in town and the citizens are giving them parties and balls as testimonies of their respect and affection. A grand ball is to be given by the citizens to Mrs. Madison which will close the scene for this season as they leave the City in a few days. Mrs. Madison has invited me to visit them at their seat if ever I should travel to the Southward - she is one of the most lovely excellent women I ever knew.*

## WWII Book Available

### "LETTERS AND MEMOIRS OF A WORLD WAR II GLIDERTROOPER

Published in 2002 by the widow of the late Stratford resident George Charlesworth, Sr. are letters from April 1943 when he was drafted to his discharge at Camp Dix January 16, 1946. The letters and pictures were published as a tribute to Charlesworth and the men of the 17th and 82nd Airborne Divisions who fought and died in the "Battle of the Bulge" the Rhine Crossing and other battles of World War II. The letters were written on whatever was available, many of them from German foxholes on the warfront. Some were written in a tent by candlelight or in the field using a helmet as a writing desk. Also in the book are photo copies of paintings by soldier-artist Robert N. Blair, done by him in the dark and on trucks during the "Battle of the Bulge."

NOTE: Two years after receiving a Doctorate from George Washington University Dr. Charlesworth was on the Superintendent's staff representing the Pupil Personnel Department in schools in Maryland when he decided it was time for a change. He decided to accept a position in Stratford, Connecticut. He was given a warm welcome; Reverend Bulmer of the Methodist Church visited and said he knew his father and went to Drew Seminary with him, Paul Hoffman had been a close friend and roommate during overseas service with the 17th and 82nd Airborne Divisions and was now a neighbor. He had been counselor in Maryland to Tom Donahue, a principal at one of Stratford's then three Junior High Schools.

Dr. Charlesworth was a teacher, director of guidance, research statistician, administrator and served as a director in the schools at Stratford from 1960-1981. Dr. Charlesworth died on August 28, 1999.

The book is available by calling  
1-888-2800-7718

## Junior Society News

### THE JUNIOR SOCIETY IS GOING ON A ROAD TRIP

Thanks to several generous donations to the Junior Society from the Clancy, Mojcik, Hardy and Farmer/Matthews families we are able to rent a bus and travel back in time to Old Sturbridge Village. The students will be accompanied by one adult each and will take self guided tours through the village. The entire group will then gather for a "hands on cooking workshop." This event will take place in March. Students who have attended our camp program, worked as part of the Junior Society, and maintained their family membership to the Society, will be invited to attend this exciting outing.

You may look forward to hearing from Junior Society Members about their adventures in future Newsletters.

Thank you again to those families whose support is making this possible for our Juniors.



## Early American Festival

Plans are underway for our Annual "Early American Festival" to be held at a September date not as yet determined. There is a good possibility we will be adding "Civil War" re-enactors this year along with Revolutionary Units, The Mountain Men, Crafters and men or units connected with the sea. If you know of any individual who portrays an 18th or 19th Century person please let Chairman Sandy Rutkowsky know and she will be very happy to contact them. If you have any such information, leave your name and telephone number on the Society's answering machine (203) 378-0630).

*I would rather lose in a cause that will  
someday win, than win in a cause that will  
someday lose! ..... Woodrow Wilson.*

## DISASTER AT SEA IN 1838 - (this article first appeared in an 1800 publication)

Vessels lost  
Reported by month

January - 39  
 February - 31  
 March - 17  
 April - 36  
 May - 14  
 June - 25  
 July - 7  
 August - 4  
 September - 108  
 October - 32  
 November - 17  
 December - 29

The following we find in the "Sailor's Magazine" and it gives a record which has been carefully kept during the year 1838, of various disasters, which have been published in various newspapers in the country of which publication has been made in the Sailor's Magazine from month to month. Those only have been selected which resulted in a total loss of the vessel. The greater part of the vessels were American, and a large proportion of the disasters took place near the American Coast.

The number of vessels wrecked in the year:

Ships & Barks - 104	Steamboats - 17
Brigs - 147	Classes of vessels
Schooners - 169	unknown - 13
Sloops - 11	

Of these vessels that were lost toward the close of the last year, but reported in this - 45

Precise time unknown.

In addition to these known losses, there have been reported 27 vessels missing, concerning which there is very little doubt but they are lost, with all aboard. In the above named vessels there were reported the loss of 753 lives. This does not probably include all the lives lost by these disasters, but only those mentioned with certainty. Many of the wrecks were fallen in with at sea, and the fate of the crews were wholly unknown - undoubtedly the losses of life were great, and many a crew wholly swallowed up and no one spared to tell the melancholy tale. Surely "there is sorrow on the sea," sorrow that never will be truly disclosed until the sea shall give up its dead, and the myriad's who repose in the caverns of the great deep shall rise to judgment.

## Stratford Historical Society

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### COMPUTER CORNER

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Fax: 378-2562

Stratford Historical Society Board of Directors Meeting

February 24, 2003 - 7:00 pm

Catharine B. Mitchell Museum

All members of the Society are Welcome to Attend

Please call 378-0630 for information