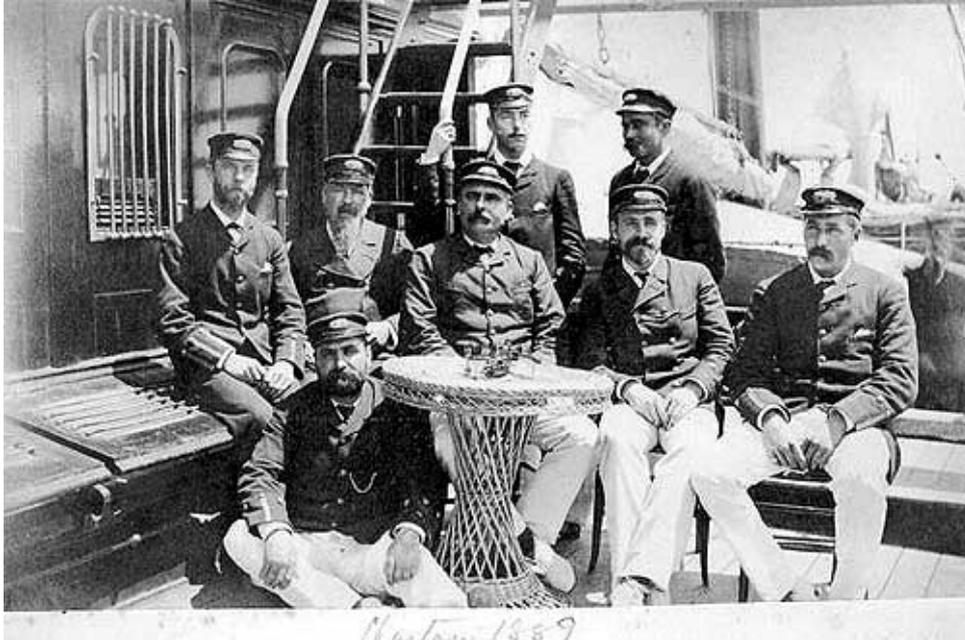


History and heritage: The old men, the sea and Montclair



Captain Wait, seated in the center, behind the table, surrounded by his officers. COURTESY CHARLES COOK

By **MIKE FARRELLY**

For Montclair Local



MIKE FARRELLY

“History & Heritage” is a series on Montclair history, written by representatives of the Montclair History Center and the Montclair Public Library. Mike Farrelly is a trustee of the

Montclair History Center, and has been official township historian, a volunteer position, since 2004.

Montclair is about 12 miles away from New York Harbor and about 34 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, yet there is a surprising connection between Montclair and life at sea.

Before we break out the bosun's pipe, the white uniforms and the black neckerchiefs it should be understood that most of the people who spent their lives on sailing ships retired to Montclair, or came here when they were assigned to duty on the docks of New York City. An example is Samuel Brewster, who lived at 88 Elm Street. He spent his entire career at sea, eventually becoming the superintendent of the Inman Lines at Pier 44 in New York; then the superintendent of the American Steamship Lines at Pier 43. The American Lines named a steamship after him.

Captains

John K. Gibson had been a tugboat captain in Hoboken for years. He was involved in the rescue of 15 sailors aboard the Main when the German ship, Saale, caught fire and set the Hoboken docks ablaze in 1900. The passengers and crew aboard the Saale, 99 people in all, lost their lives. John and his wife, Elizabeth, moved to Montclair when he was promoted to shipping agent.

Captain William Chambliss, who commanded a freighter that sailed between New York and Brazil for years, lived in Montclair. Unfortunately, his story became public news when he was suspected of involvement in a repair scam, and was stripped of his rank by the Shipping Board. Represented by U.S. congressman Fred Lehibach, he brought his case to the House Claims Committee, where he sued to be reinstated and given his back pay.

Captain John Clark Jamison sailed for the American Line for 22 years. He commanded several ships during his career and ended

up in charge of the St. Paul, one of the largest steamships built in the United States in the 19th century. The St. Paul was 11,000 tons, 554 feet long, had five decks and two sets of engines that developed 10,000 horsepower each. A steam pipe exploded while it was docked in New York Harbor. Nine people were killed, which set off a clamor for better safety regulations.

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Sometimes the connection to the sea was not so romantic. Abram Lincoln Burbank, who lived at 299 Upper Mountain Ave., was the founder of the A.L. Burbank Company, which owned and operated steamships. John R. Livermore, who lived at 66 South Fullerton, at the corner of South Fullerton and Union Street, was a shipping broker. The exterior of his house has been preserved, but it was sub-divided into condos. Russell T. Mount, who lived at 24 Erwin Park Road, was an admiralty lawyer and the president of the board of trustees at Central Presbyterian Church for many years. William Shaw, born in England, was a marine engineer and won the Queen Victoria Prize for most original ship design. He came to the United States and was the superintendent of the Harlan and Hollingsworth shipbuilding works in Delaware. He moved to Montclair when he became head of Standard Oil's shipyards in Long Island City.

In the Navy

Naval officers have also lived in Montclair. Admiral Ralph Mervine Warfield moved here when he was assigned to head the public works division of the 3rd Naval District in New York. He had been involved in marine engineering for most of his career, but he served in combat situations during World War I. He taught at the Naval War College and served, for a short while, as provisional governor of the Dominican Republic during the military actions there (1916-1922). Although little

remembered, things got intense in the Caribbean after WWI. The Dominican Republic had endured more than 70 years of internal conflict after finally freeing itself from Spanish Rule in 1865. It was also involved in border conflicts with Haiti, which shares the same island. At the request of the Republic, the United States operated the customs house in Santa Domingo. Since it was the largest source of revenue in the country, it was the target of one rebel army after another. The Republic requested U.S. military assistance and the marines were sent in and there was heavy fighting. Martial law was declared in 1919.

Captain Wait's two sinkings

Perhaps the most interesting old salt to come to Montclair was Captain Alfred McLean Wait, who plied the route between Southampton and Capetown, South Africa. On one trip, Wait was in command of the RMS American, the Union Lines's biggest and fastest steamship. It hit a rock off Cape Palmas, Liberia. One of the propeller shafts bent, not all that uncommon an occurrence. The American was outfitted with sails. Normally they would have hoisted the sails and continued the voyage, but this time the hull was cracked and the ship began to sink slowly. Captain Wait had breakfast made for the passengers and extra food prepared for the lifeboats, while eight boats were put over the side. They watched the American go down.

Six lifeboats were picked up by the liner Congo, and the American ship Emma F. Herriman. The people in the boats, including Captain Wait, were brought to Liberia. After some celebratory dinners the rescued passengers were placed aboard the Senegal and sent back to England. Overloaded with people, the Senegal hit a rock off the coast of the Canary Islands. She began to sink quickly. Her captain tried to make it back to land and panic ensued. Captain Wait, now a simple passenger, managed to organize everybody and get them on the lifeboats. One person fell overboard and was killed, but Captain Wait was given credit for saving everyone else's

lives.

The two outstanding lifeboats from the American remained lost at sea. One was picked up a week later, while the last was picked up two months later. The whole incident loomed large in the papers for months, at least in the South African papers.

After several more years the Union Line and its competitor, the Castle Line, merged. Captain Wait was rewarded for his years of meritorious service and sent to manage their New York facilities. He lived at 18 Erwin Park.