

The Legendary Ship

A Tale of the Early Days of New Haven Colony

By Edward Page Mitchell

An unexpected and very profitable growth of our business made the immediate purchase of a piece of land necessary. My partners requested me to negotiate for a few acres in the vicinity of New Haven, and I at once began to do so. An annoying delay occurred owing to the illegibility of an ancient record which made it impossible to obtain a perfect title. I was about to abandon the attempt to buy the property, when I was reminded that a gentleman well known to me might be able to give the information that could not be deciphered from the record. This person was a professor in the college, a man of wide repute as a scholar, and an ardent student of the Colonial epoch of the town.

I found him in his library, and he, without any hesitation, gave me the information which I sought, and told me where I would find such legal proofs of clear title as I desired. I was impressed with the accuracy of his learning and the readiness with which it responded to his demands, and I ventured to say to him that the acquisition of such a mass of names and dates must have cost him great labor. To my surprise he replied that I was mistaken, the truth being that he mastered such incidents with ease. His great mental efforts, he said, were required by the processes of analysis and comparison which were necessary to separate truth from the rubbish and chaff of tradition and record, and by the reasoning necessary accurately to trace causes to those results which, when grouped, constituted trustworthy history.

“For instance,” said he, “I have here a document which will cost me the most severe application before I am through with it.”

I had observed that there lay upon the table a roll of manuscript. The table was littered with pamphlets, documents, aged and worm-eaten books, and I do not know why my attention was specially fixed upon this particular roll of paper. It was plainly an aged manuscript. The paper was ribbed and unruled, like that in use a century or more ago; and if it once was white, the years had faded it to a dull buff leathery hue, while the care with which he afterward handled it indicated that it had little tenacity of fiber. I knew that he referred to this old roll of manuscript, and, as I expected, he took it up.

“I have here,” he continued, “a remarkable historical narrative which I found among some refuse in a garret, where it had lain for more than a hundred years. It is an account of a strange, unnatural occurrence, of which I have heard by tradition, and which is even casually mentioned in Mather’s *Marginalia*. I have, however, always regarded it as unworthy of serious consideration, believing that there was either no foundation for the tradition or else that it could be traced to the hallucinations of a disordered brain. I now, however, have an account of it which I cannot ignore. It was written by a clergyman of the most godly character, a man who could not, even in jest, speak falsehoods, and he asserts that he was almost an eyewitness of what he describes. How, then, can I refuse to accept this record? It gives all that a historian requires to satisfy him of the authenticity of any alleged occurrence. It is the genuine manuscript of a man whom I know to have lived, and it is not a hearsay account. If we are to put faith in any of the records of the past, we must accept this one. I do not know of an established fact of history that has any better basis than this document gives to substantiate the wonderful phenomenon which it records.

“I confess,” continued the professor with some animation of speech, “that such a problem as is presented by this manuscript has never before been given to me to solve. As a historian, I am compelled to accept as true what I here read, while as a physicist I must regard the record as the wildest and most improbable of romances. Were it based on the testimony of one person it could easily be rejected as a vision or alienation of mind, to which the austerity of the Puritans seems to have rendered some of them peculiarly liable. I am confronted, however, with the assertion of this writer, as well as with the inherent proof of the assertion, that he was one of many witnesses. It is, indeed, an interesting problem, and the difficulty of reconciling an account that must be accepted as truthful history with the fact that it must be denied as physical possibility makes the task fascinating.”

Doubtless Professor M— observed that he had awakened a pleasing interest in me. Indeed, I took no pains to conceal it, and told him that I would gladly hear the story that had so puzzled him. He at once unrolled the manuscript.

“This appears,” said he, “to have been written by the Reverend Dr. Prentice, and in the year 1680. I judge it was a letter to a friend, although the ravages of time have made the first few sentences illegible. I have other manuscripts of the clergyman, a few sermons, and having thus been enabled to make comparison, I find the handwriting of all to be identical. I will not read it in full, and will paraphrase some of the text, for it is written in the stiff, formal manner of that day, many of the words found in it now being obsolete.

“ ‘There had come,’ began the professor, ‘upon the tradesmen and those engaged in commerce a season of adversity in the year 1646, such as they had not known even in the earliest days of the settlement of the New Haven Colony. The vessels lay idle in the harbor, trade with the other colonies languished, and as the New Haven colonists were familiar with commerce rather than agriculture, they were embarrassed even for the necessaries of life. But for the energy and determination of some of the men of character, the colony must have found its existence imperiled, for many had determined to depart, some even making arrangements to emigrate to Ireland. A less courageous and tenacious race must have succumbed. It was determined as a last resort to build a ship large enough to cross the ocean, freight her, and send her to England in the hope that the disheartening losses would be retrieved by the development of commerce with the mother country. Overcoming great obstacles they built a ship in Rhode Island Colony.

“ ‘The frost had closed the smaller streams, and the ground was whitened with snow when the ship entered New Haven harbor. There was great rejoicing at the sight of her, and her size, being fully 150 tons measurement, was a cause for wonder, for such a monster had never been seen before in that harbor. With her sails all set and her colors abroad, she came up to her anchoring place with such grace and speed as greatly delighted the people who had assembled at the water’s edge to greet her. Courage was revived by the sight of her, and the people said, “Now we shall again have plenty and add to our possessions, if God be willing.” ’

‘The master of the ship, Mr. Lamberton, was found to be somewhat gloomy, and Dr. Prentice records that Lamberton told him in confidence that though the ship was of the model and a fast sailer, yet she was so wilty—meaning thereby of such disposition to roll in rough water—that he feared she would prove the grave of all who sailed in her. However, he breathed his suspicions to no one else. The ship was laden and ready for departure early in January 1647.

“ ‘The cold that prevailed for five days and nights before the time fixed for clearing for London was such as the people had never before known. It must have remained many degrees below zero, for the salt water was frozen far down the harbor, and the ship was riveted by the ice as firmly as though by many anchors. There were no lazy bones among the people, and with

prodigious industry the men cut a canal through the ice forty feet wide and five miles long to the never-freezing waters of the sound. The vessel was frozen in with her bow pointing toward the shore, and it was necessary to propel her to clear water stern foremost.

“This was an unlucky omen. Captain Lamberton avowed that the sea and the conflicting powers that struggled for its mastery were controlled by whims and freaks, which would be sure to be excited by such an insult as that of a ship entering the water stern first. An old sailor, too, informed them all that a ship that sailed stern first always returned stern first, meaning by that that she never came back to the harbor from which she thus departed.’

“You will observe,” said the professor, putting down the manuscript for a moment, ‘that in these gloomy forebodings are to be detected traces of the mythological conception of the mystery of the sea, with which all sailors, even to the present time, are more or less tinctured. I am especially impressed with the manner in which these colonists acted. Believing in predestination in spiritual matters, their lives in worldly affairs conformed more or less thereto. So, in spite of these omens, there was no thought of delay. They had fixed the time for sailing, and they meant to sail. So godly a man as the Reverend Mr. Davenport expressed this feeling in his prayer as reported by this writer. Mr. Davenport, as the ship began slowly to move, used these words: ‘Lord, if it be Thy pleasure to bury these our friends in the bottom of the sea, they are Thine. Save them.’

“Men less completely under the domination of their religious belief would never have gone to sea without exorcising in some way the evil influences which these omens seemed to indicate would prevail. There had gathered on the ice all the people of the colony except the sick and feeble, perhaps eight hundred or a thousand souls. On the departing vessel were some of their friends and kin. The farewells were said with the expression neither of grief nor of joy. Restraint, the subjugation, even the quenching of all emotions, was the rule of life with these people, and I gather from one or two expressions in this account that never was there more formal, less demonstrative leave-taking. When the vessel reached deep water, and just as one of the great sails was beginning to belly with the wind, the people with one accord fell on their knees on the ice and prayed. The ship was five miles away. The air was clarified by the cold, and the vessel could be distinctly seen, and as the people prayed with open eyes that were fixed upon the distant and receding ship, she suddenly disappeared, vanished as quickly as though her bottom had fallen out and she had sunk on the instant. ‘Yes,’ says this writer, ‘more suddenly for whereas at one moment the eyes of all of us were fixed upon her, at the next, as in the wink of the eye, she was not. We rose, gazed fixedly into the vacant space where we last saw her, and then with wonder turned to each other. Yet in another moment she was disclosed to us as she was before, and we watched her until she disappeared behind the neck of land that bounds the harbor to the east. So we dispersed, wondering at this strange manifestation whose meaning was hidden from us. Some there were who were convinced that it betokened that even as she had disappeared only to be seen again, so we should again behold her after her voyage. But there were many who were impressed that though we should again see her, the sight would be but a partial one. With reverent submission to the will of God, the people repaired to their homes.’

“You see,” said the professor, again putting down the manuscript, “in all this that inexplicable commingling of hope and fatalism which was, I imagine, one of the inevitable conditions of mind of this austere and intensely religious people. The mere fact of the sudden disappearance and renewed sight of the ship may perhaps be explained by natural and simple causes, but not so the phenomena afterward described.

“In the natural order of events the colonists would have had some tidings of their ship after three months had passed. None came, however. Ships that sailed from England in March, April, May, and even June, brought no word of her arrival. Their suspense could be relieved only in one way. I should have asserted, even had I no evidence of it, that the colonists sought the relief they always thought they found in prayer. I should also have unhesitatingly said that they did not, in their prayers, ask that the inevitable be averted, but simply prayed that they might be prepared to receive with submission whatever was in store for them to know. I should have been justified in so asserting, as I find by reference to their manuscript. The account has it”—here the professor again read from the manuscript— “ ‘The failure to learn what was the fate of their ship did put the godly people in much prayer, both public and private, and they prayed that the Lord would, if it was His pleasure, let them hear what He had done with their dear friends, and prepare them for a suitable submission to His holy will.’

“In all the accounts that we have of prayer,” said the professor, “I know of nothing equal to that. It contains volumes of history. With that simple text the ethnologist and historian might construct the history of a people. Observe the human nature of it, that is, the intolerable burden of suspense, and see the religious faith of it, both of submission and the trust that the prayer would be answered.

‘These people seem to have rested with the conviction that this remarkable supplication would be effective. Dr. Prentice continues his narrative, after quoting the prayer, with an account of what happened, as though it were the expected answer. He writes, too, with the vividness and accuracy of detail to be expected of the eyewitness, as inherent proof of the truth of his narration. I infer that within a day or two after the prayer the manifestation was received. There arose a great thunderstorm from the northwest, such a tempest of fury as sometimes follows elemental disturbances from that quarter. It seems to have been accepted as the presage of the manifestation that followed. After it passed away it left the atmosphere unusually clear. An hour before sunset the reward of their faith came. Far off, where the shores of Long Island are just dimly visible, a ship was discovered by a man who made haste to tell all the colonists. They gathered on the shore and saw a vessel, full rigged, every sail puffed out by the wind and the hull listed to one side by reason of the strain upon the masts and the speed with which the breeze carried her.

“ ‘It is our vessel,’ they cried. ‘God be praised, for He has heard and answered our prayer.’

“Yet while they saw her straining with the wind, and seemingly speeding with such rapidity as should bring her to them in an hour, they also observed that she made no progress. Thus she continued to appear to them for half an hour. While they were still astounded by the mystery, they saw that she had of a sudden approached, and was coming with what seemed most reckless and foolhardy speed, for she was in the channel, which is narrow and of sufficient depth only to permit the passage of a vessel of her size with skillful handling. The children cried, ‘There’s a brave ship,’ but the older people were filled with apprehension lest she should go upon the shoals or be dashed upon the shore. They thereupon made warning gestures, although they could see no one upon the deck.

‘At last they observed something of which in their excitement they had taken no heed. The harbor lies in a southerly direction, and the channel itself runs due north and south. The vessel was making toward them with great speed, every sail curved stiff with the steady force of the wind that seemed to come in a gale from the south, and yet the wind was actually north. Thus holding her course due north, they saw her sailing directly against the wind. Then they knew that they were witnessing a mysterious manifestation. As she approached so near that some imagined they could easily hurl a stone aboard her, they could see the smaller details, the rivets, the anchor

and its chains, the capping of the smaller ropes, and the rhythmic quivering of the ribbonlike pennant that was flying in the face of the wind. Yet they saw no man aboard her.

“The people awaited with sober resignation such further manifestations as were to be given them. Suddenly, and when she seemed right upon them, her maintop was blown over, noiselessly as the parting of a cloud, and was left hanging in the shrouds. Then the mizzen went over, making great destruction, and next, as though struck by the fiercest hurricane, all the masts went by the board, being twisted as by the wrenching of a wind that blew in resistless circles. The sails were torn in narrow ribbons, whirling round and round in the air, while the ropes snapped and were unraveled into shreds, and beat with noiseless force upon the decks. Soon her hull began to careen, and at last, being lifted by a mighty wave, it dived into the water. Then a smoky cloud fell in that particular place, as though a curtain had dropped from heaven, and when, in a moment, it vanished, the sea was smooth, and nothing was to be seen there. The people believed that thus the Almighty had told them of the tragic end of their ship, and they renewed their thanks to Him that He had answered their prayer. The Reverend Mr. Davenport, in public, declared ‘that God had condescended for the quieting of their afflicted spirits this extraordinary account of His sovereign disposal of those for whom so many fervent prayers were continually made.’

“You will see,” said the professor, as he carefully laid the manuscript away, ‘what an extraordinary problem is here presented to me. If I accept any recorded evidence, I must accept this; yet science teaches me that the laws of nature are inexorable, as much so now as ever. What is the truth?’