When Sailors Ruled the Seas

The discovery of a treasure trove of old family letters uncovers an incredible true story from the Age of Sail.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA ELDER

Throw away your radar, GPS and cell phone. Disconnect the autopilot and toss your marine radio into the waves. Shut down everything powered by electricity. Hundreds of miles offshore, you'll begin to imagine what it was like aboard a great wooden merchant ship in the 1800s.

Picture this: You are 24 years old and captain of a 177-foot three-masted bark, a workhorse of the ocean, with a crew of 22 men including cook, carpenter, sailors and officers. Pigs and chickens breed and get butchered in your hold. Your cargo of bird guano, a prized fertilizer from the Chincha Islands, has left a layer of noxious white dust across every surface.

As you approach Cape Horn at the tip of South America, you notice water gushing through the timbers near the bowsprit. The seas are mountainous, the skies black and raging. The ship's carpenter struggles to repair the damage, but the men at the pumps are losing ground. There's not a sail in sight.

You are alone.

Just another day at work for James Hamblin Jenkins, who went to see in the 1840s at the age of 13. By his 24th birthday, he was captain of his own ship, crisscrossing the globe between New York, San Francisco, China, India, Australia and Europe. James was part of a generation of sailors who connected cultures and continents, establishing a global system of trade during the final chapter of the Age of Sail.

While their counterparts on land spent their lives working on farms or in trades that kept them close to home, merchant sailors during the Age of Sail experienced the food, religions, languages, music and customs of foreign lands as they moved goods around the world. A fleet of sailors earned their livelihood transporting coal, lumber, tea, porcelain, silk, cotton, spices and a host of other products from continent to continent.

In New England, Frederick Tudor, known as the "Ice King," made a brisk if short-lived business transporting huge blocks of ice carved out of northern lakes. He packed the blocks in sawdust, a free byproduct of the lumber industry, and shipped them in boats needing ballast on their way to southern ports. Electricity would spell the end of the ice business, just as steamships would ring the death knell for the Age of Sail.

In these floating cities of men, sailors endured a brand of loneliness rarely experienced on shore, separated for years at a time from home and family. Some sought solace among strangers at foreign ports. Others wrote letters spanning oceans and time, connecting them to the people they loved.

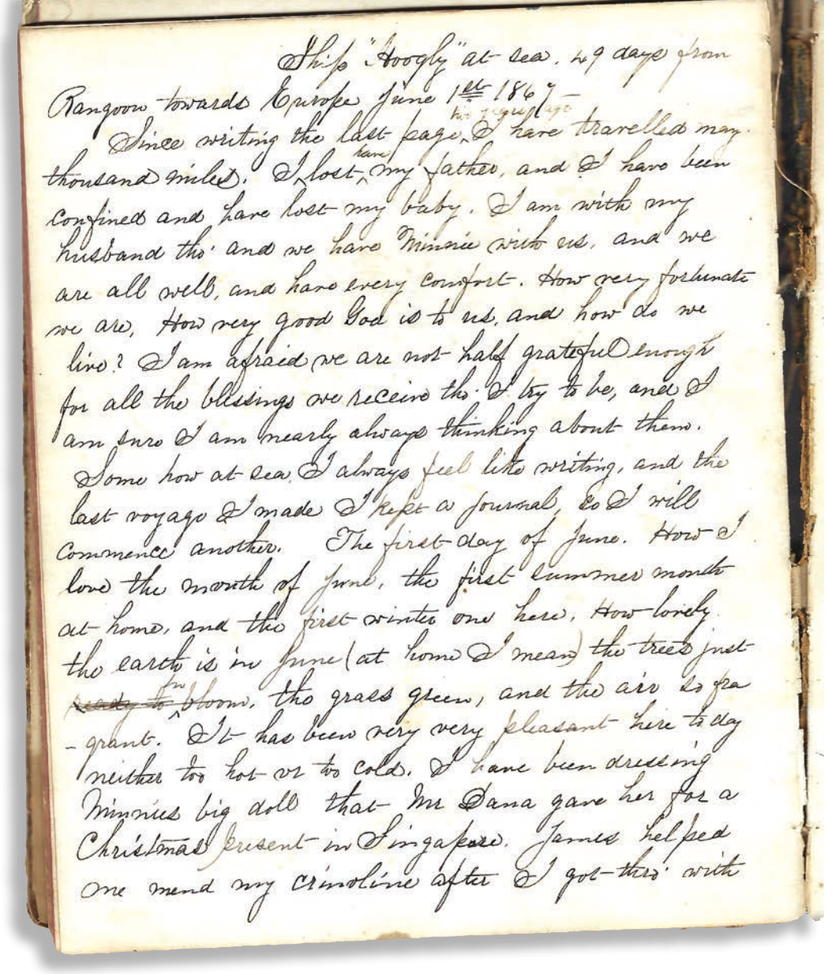
I first heard of James Hamblin Jenkins 30 years ago, shortly after I married Bob Elder, a lifelong sailor. His father gave me a transcription of a letter from Captain Jenkins, Bob's great-great-grandfather. I was intrigued. The captain shared many qualities with the sailor I had just married. Across the centuries, I could hear James Jenkins speaking. He made me laugh and pulled me in with his vivid descriptions of a life at sea.

Writing in 1859 to Ruth Fish, a sea captain's daughter, James described a "rough weather day" aboard the ship *Chilo*, the first ship under his command:

The mate comes into my room, gives me a shake, and says, "It is breezing up, Sir, and the weather looks bad," and then returns to the deck. I can feel it in my room. The ship is lurching and pitching so that I can scarcely stand. My boots, hat and coat, which upon retiring I had placed by the side of my berth, have tumbled over to leeward. I can hear the whistling of the wind among the ropes and the groaning of the masts and spars. I slip on my big coat, sea boots, and sou-wester hat, and go out on deck where at first I can see nothing at all, but gradually as my eyes become accustomed to the darkness, I can dimly discern the white sails aloft strained to their utmost tension and ready to burst with the force of the wind.

"Call all hands to shorten sail," is my first order. One of the crew goes to the forecastle and bawls out, "All hands ahoy. Muster up here, bullies. Shorten sail." The officer of the watch below is called. The carpenter, the cook, the steward, and the boys are routed out, and

The author, her husband, and John Esborne visit the Jenkins' grave. Right, portraits of James and Ruth Jenkins.


Ship "Hoogly" at sea, 49 days from
Rangoon towards Europe June 1st 186[illegible]
Since writing the last page, I have travelled many
thousand miles. I lost my father, and I have been
confined and have lost my baby. I am with my
husband tho' and we have Minnie with us, and we
are all well, and have every comfort. How very fortunate
we are, How very good God is to us, and how do we
live? I am afraid we are not half grateful enough
for all the blessings we receive tho' I try to be, and I
am sure I am nearly always thinking about them.
Some how at sea, I always feel like writing, and the
last voyage I made I kept a journal, so I will
commence another. The first day of June. How I
love the month of June, the first summer month
at home, and the first winter one here, How lovely
the earth is in June (at home I mean) the trees just
ready to bloom, the grass green, and the air is fra-
grant. It has been very very pleasant here to day
neither too hot or too cold. I have been dressing
Minnies big doll that Mr Dana gave her for a
Christmas present in Singapore. James helped
me mend my crinoline after I got this writ

pretty soon everybody on board the ship is awake and on deck.

Then taking my station by the man at the wheel, I yell myself hoarse in giving such orders as these. "Lower away the main topsail halyards. Haul in the weather brace. Haul out the lee reef tackle. Belay that, steady tight the lee brace. Luff, luff, you lubber you, what are you about? Belay, all. Lay aloft there and put in two reefs." And a thousand other of like character, all of which are, of course, Greek to you.

We named our first child Emily Jenkins Elder in honor of this seafaring captain. Sailing was in her blood, after all.

As the writer in the family, I often wondered if there might be other letters. What a story that would make. Every so often, I would return to the original letter and marvel at the way he captured the experience of sailing a mighty wooden ship.

Down comes the rain, blinding and smothering, in the midst of which the crew, headed by the second mate, scramble aloft to the sail close on the yard, where they can no longer be seen from the deck by reason of the thick darkness. Perhaps if it blows hard, they will be aloft half an hour before they will succeed in getting it tied up, for the canvas is very hard and stiff and the wind causes the sail to slap and jerk so that it is almost impossible to get hold of it.

As soon as one sail is made fast, another is taken in or reduced by reefing until the masts are no longer in danger, when the watch is permitted to go below. I remain on deck to attend to the steering of the ship. She is madly tearing through the water and requires all the strength and care of the man at the helm to keep her on her course.

I tried to imagine myself at the age of 24, shouldering responsibility for ship and crew in the middle of the ocean, long before tracking devices, search planes and satellite phones. Many a ship was lost with all hands aboard in the service of commerce during the Age of Sail. And yet, Captain Jenkins kept his calm and sense of humor when writing to Ruth.

The top of a big sea comes on board and about half a dozen barrels of water fall directly upon my head. If I have seen or heard it coming and braced myself to receive it, my hat and coat shed the greater part of it, and only a few quarts find their way in about my neck and run inside my clothes until it all settles in my boots which I take off and empty, put them on again and stand by for another sea. But if I should not have noticed it as it was coming, very likely it will wash me away into the lee scuppers, where I have a nice little swim for it and get back to my place half drowned and caring very little whether my boots are full or only half full of water.

A Family Affair

Years later, I discovered this letter was not the only old sailing document in our family's possession. Hundreds of pages of letters, ship's logs and journals emerged from the back porch of Bob's family home as we prepared the house for sale after his parents' death. James Jenkins, Ruth Fish, and her younger brother, Josiah all poured their hearts out on paper inked more than 150 years ago.

I lost myself in the transcription of these documents, piecing together the experiences of a whole family whose lives were tied inexorably to the ocean. Theirs were not the great names of history, handed down in history books. These were the voices of working sailors, soldiers, and women who risked their lives for love and livelihood by taking to the sea.

Growing up on a small farm in West Barnstable, Ruth dreamed of sailing at a time when the idea was all but unheard of for women. Months into her first voyage aboard a merchant sailing ship, she learned to calculate latitude and longitude, read navigational charts, and understand the rigging of the ship. In a letter to her mother, Ruth reflected on her early days aboard the ship *Hoogly*, captained by James Jenkins in the 1860s.

James & the mate and stewards are laughing at me every day and call me "old sailor." I was a little sick for a few hours, but I don't think I was so bad off as James was. I did not begin to feel sick till I had been up about half an hour. I could not eat any breakfast, and James gave me some lavender and sugar, but that did not do me much good... The steward brought me some strong ginger tea and I vomited it up.

About 12 o'clock James came down and says, come Ruth, if you want to get the last look of Cape Cod.. I ran to the window as well as I could, for I had not got my sea legs on then. And all I could see of Cape Cod was a little bit of land, a few rocks and a lighthouse. But your face, and Minnie's, Georgie's, Father, Eliza's, and Aunt Zelia's, all flashed across my vision. For the first time since I made up my mind to try the sea, I felt like having a good cry.

James was expecting it (and he almost blubbered too), but he tried to turn it off. And he says, Come Ruth, have some brandy and water, and I guess that will cure you. And I guess it did, for I have been as smart as a cricket ever since and have the greatest appetite you ever heard of.

The author is an avid sailor in her own right. Left and below, a wealth of documents survived in good condition and became the basis for her book.

Sailors To Soldiers

Many young sailors, like Ruth's little brother, Josiah, left home as a merchant ship sailor but ended up a soldier as the Civil War raged on. Josiah enlisted when the ship he'd been working on was waylaid in Peru en route to Baltimore due to a Union blockade of ships. During the delay, Union Army recruiters visited the city to drum up recruits. Struck by a sense of duty, Josiah signed on.

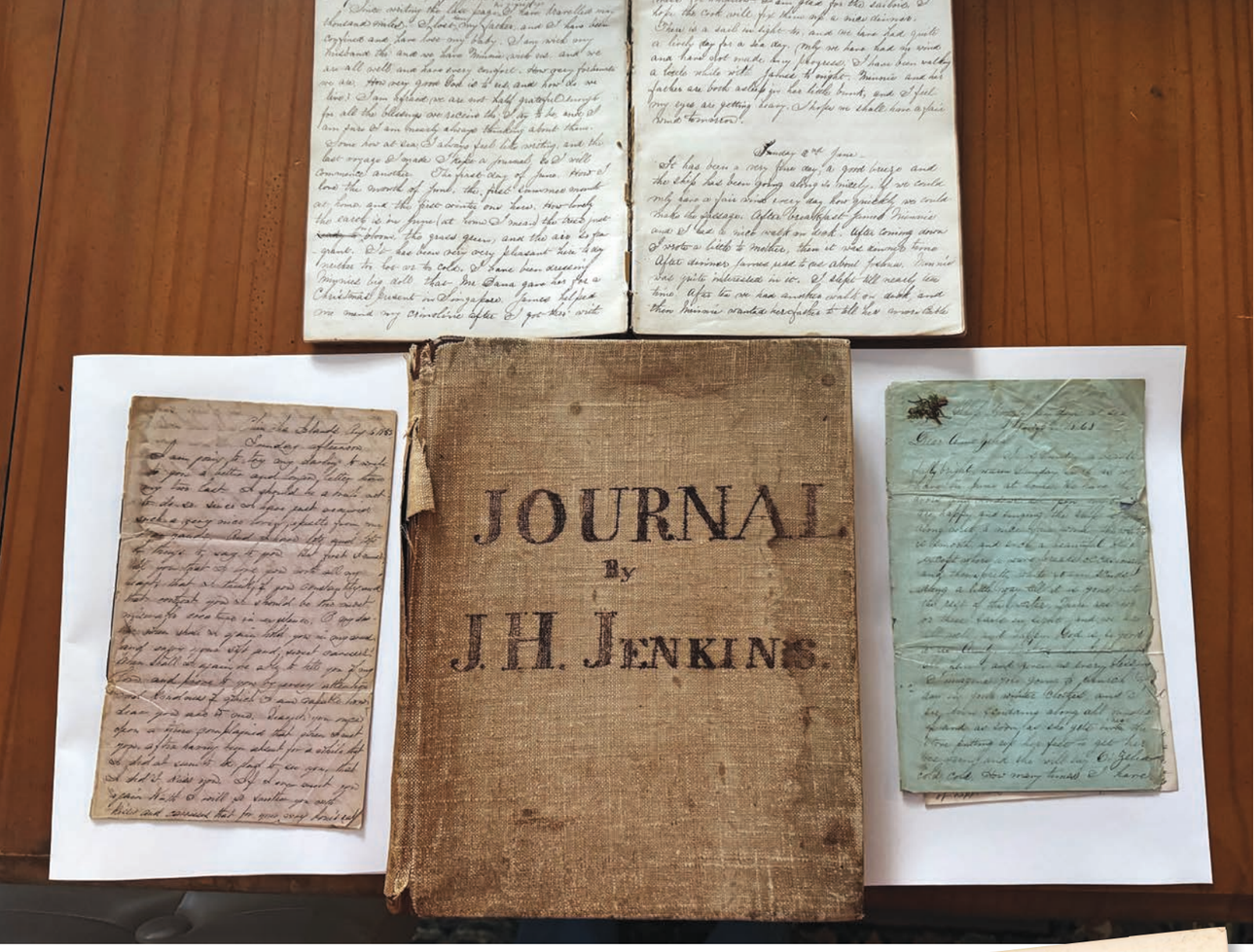
Through the long years of fighting, he wrote home, sharing the hell of battle and sending his wages home to help his mother. Writing from an encampment near Hagarstown, Maryland in July 1863, Josiah describes the scene for his brother.

At 10 A.M. came to Camp, put on our traps and prepared to leave when the Rebels commenced to shell us. We were moved into the woods, out of range, where we all succeeded in getting unhurt, except one poor fellow who was wounded in the head the night before. Had his leg taken off below the knee by a solid shot just as he had got in the edge of the woods… They said that 125 was killed in front of us the night before…

We left the White Oak swamp, traveled all night…Division went on picket that night and at 3 o'clock on Wednesday the 2nd, it commenced to rain… After dragging through mud to our knees 5 or 6 hours, arrived at Harrison's landing and made ourselves as comfortable as possible.

The suffering you cannot imagine, what the sick and wounded suffered through that long weary night. Wet to the skin and nowhere to rest but the deep mud and in drenching rain… This retreat has used up many of our best men. The Regiment came out here one year ago 1,000 strong and now we can't muster 300 men for duty.

During his long tour in the army, Josiah longed for the feel of a



sea breeze. He urged his brother and friends to stay on their merchant ships or join the Navy, but he remained true to his promise to serve his country and never regretted his choice.

For centuries, sailors have abided by the custom that they must assist other vessels in distress if it can be done without harm to the rescuer's crew and boat. During a time of war, when privateers and warships were as likely to appear from the mist as merchant vessels, the decision to assist wasn't easily made, but James also was true to his obligations in these dangerous times.

He faced just such a choice hundreds of miles off the coast of Liverpool. Just as the sun was setting on a December afternoon, the mate poked his head in the captain's cabin to report a sail on the lee bow.

"Can you see her colors?" James asked.

"The fog's too thick, Sir."

James had no reason to fear privateers in these waters, but something pushed him to get up and have a look at her. The vessel was a long way off. He peered at her through the spyglass and thought he could make out her colors, but he couldn't be certain if she were friend or foe. He fancied he saw her coming about to get nearer to them, but he wasn't sure. The fog shut in and hid her from sight altogether.

James had a niggling sense that something might be wrong with her, but as they were just at that moment having the first fair wind they'd had for weeks, he didn't relish the idea of running *The Hoogly* off her course on the bare supposition that the other vessel might be in distress.

He stood a moment, contemplating the horizon. Then he directed the man at the helm to steer *The Hoogly* nearer to the ship and get a better look at her. The vessel floated in sight through the darkness and began burning blue lights and making signals to attract their attention. Whatever divine mercy had pushed him to intercede soon showed James that the ship was indeed in serious trouble.

"We're sinking, Sir! Can you take us aboard?" the captain roared as *The Hoogly* approached.

"Are your boats ready?" James yelled back over the rails.

"Aye, they're ready, and we haven't much time!"

"Gather your men, bring what bread you have—we've been out more than a hundred days and our provisions are low—but don't bring any rum."

Captain Braithwaite, his mate, and the crew of the English bark *James Lamb* of Liverpool—thirteen souls in all—scrambled into the boats and were soon safely aboard *The Hoogly*. The *James Lamb* was left to her fate.

She had sprung a leak three days earlier. The crew had been pumping night and day ever since, the water constantly gaining on them. They were just about to abandon ship and take their chances in the small boats when they saw *The Hoogly* through the fog.

The night after they were rescued, it blew hard and the next day they bore up against a heavy gale. All hands of the *James Lamb* would have been lost if they had been tossed about in those small boats on such seas.

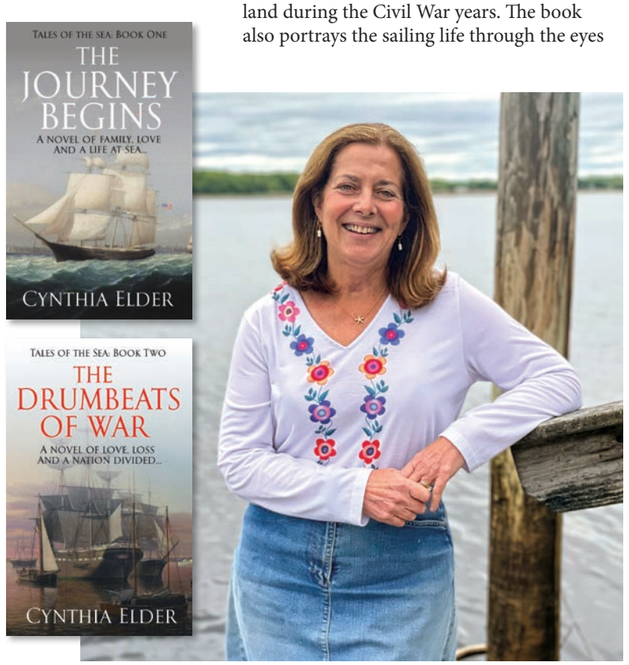
The End of the Age of Sail

The Age of Sail, when great wooden ships ruled the ocean, gave way to steam at the end of the Civil War. Many sailors were displaced from the only work they knew. James Jenkins felt the first turn of the tide in 1862, when he'd learned the outcome of the battle at Hampton Roads, Virginia. The Confederate ironclad steamship *CSS Virginia* had mowed down two wooden-hulled sailing warships like so much fodder. The next day, the *Virginia* met its match, battling for hours against the ironclad steamship *USS Monitor*. The duel ended in a draw, and both ships survived to limp home and fight another day, but the battle unalterably changed the future of sailing. Great Britain and France abandoned any further construction of wooden-hulled sailing ships, and the other countries fell like dominoes, trading sail for steam. *The Hoogly* would be one of the last great wooden-hulled sailing ships to ply the world's oceans.

As I read the words of James, Ruth and Josiah, I knew I had to transform them into a novel that captured the true story of this family during the final chapter of the Age of Sail. They lived in an era of technological change and deep political division, as our country marched toward the bloodiest war in its history.

Four years of research, transcription, and writing resulted in the two-volume historical fiction novel, *Tales of the Sea* (Holand Press, 2025). In book one, *The Journey Begins*, James, Ruth and Josiah come of age in the small seafaring town of West Barnstable, Massachusetts. Each feels the pull of the ocean, a desire to see the world beyond the horizon. Meanwhile, the rumbles of conflict over the issue of slavery reverberate across our new country.

The Drumbeats of War, the second volume in the series, tells the true story of sailors and soldiers on sea and land during the Civil War years. The book also portrays the sailing life through the eyes of women who lived aboard a merchant ship long before they had the right to vote, and the story of a man who escaped from slavery at the age of 15, finding freedom on the seas as a ship's cook. Their stories are grounded in original sources and often told in their own words, recovered from a dusty box on a back porch, where they had lain quietly for decades, waiting to be discovered.



The author wrote two historical novels based on the documents belonging to her in-laws. Left, James Jenkins' logbook and a photo of Sandy Neck Light are among the historical records of the Jenkins family.

Cynthia Elder is the author of the historical fiction series Tales of the Sea. The two volumes, *The Journey Begins* and *The Drumbeats of War*, are available in print, ebook and audiobook on Amazon and select independent bookstores and libraries. For more information, visit www.cynthiaelder.com. Cynthia and her husband have sailed the waters of New England and beyond for thirty years.