

### ***Who was Captain Burnham?***

The name Burnham is everywhere around Bridgewater and is attributed to William Dixon Burnham, born April 22, 1847 son of William Gillette Burnham and Eliza Hannah Boland, and the youngest of eleven children. This Litchfield County native with an entrepreneurial spirit was drawn to the sea at a young age where he would acquire his wealth to help benefit his beloved adopted hometown with two prominent town buildings.

His humble childhood abode, the Captain's House, now sits between Burnham Library, his namesake, and the Peck House, home to the Bridgewater Historical Society. The house originally stood just south of the Center Cemetery until being moved twice; first to the Keller Homestead on Keller Road and then to its present location in the center of town. William Dixon Burnham probably only lived in this house a short time in 1850-51 while his father had the larger home built across the street on Main Street. This home is often referred to as the Gillette House and is where the Burnham family lived while William attended Center School, now the Grange building. The family moved to New York City around 1859 where young William finished his education before deciding to go to sea. It was not a decision he made lightly and did not please his parents, but his determination won the day. At the tender age of fourteen, he went to sea as a cabin boy on a "long voyage" sailing vessel to Liverpool, England. Here he would meet and then marry Matilda Elizabeth Bunting in West Derby, Lancashire in 1868.

He took the mate's exam in New York City in 1874. He became first mate and then Captain of the *Pactulos*, a 191 foot long full rigged ship built in Thomaston, Maine in 1865 by Chapman & Flint Company which did regular trade routes between San Francisco, New York and Liverpool. He is mentioned in the book *Landlubber's Voyage Around the Horn* written by Morton MacMichael in 1883 describing the voyage of the "*Pactolus*". MacMichael describes Burnham as:

"...a native of Connecticut...He is stouter than the captain, has a short reddish beard, blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and when rigged out in a pea-jacket, high-top boots, and a big flat topped Scotch cap, is the picture of a jolly sailor. He has been in many parts of the world in the course of his life at sea, and has plenty of yarns to spin of his adventures and experiences."

He went on to say that Mr. Burnham is well read and even had tattoos that made him a "walking art gallery."

At this time, Burnham held the record for the fastest trip from San Francisco to Liverpool by a sailing vessel. In those days, the Captain of the ship shared heavily in the profits of the cargo he carried which greatly benefited Burnham. Captains were not only responsible for operating the ship, but also negotiating cargo contracts on land. While Master of this ship he discovered Burnham's Bank near Cape Horn in 1885. No matter how exotic or remote the port, Burnham always spoke of his years in Bridgewater and asked for news from his adopted home town.

In 1899, Captain Burnham entered into a new venture as manager of American Hawaiian Steamship Company after serving as port captain for Flint & Company for six years. The idea of converting inter-coastal fleets from sail to steam was the brain child of George S. Dearborn of the New York shipping agency Dearborn and Company, which finally came to fruition in 1899 with the acquisition of Hawaii and its formal organization as a territory the next year. These actions gave Dearborn the opportunity he needed to obtain funding to link the agencies and partnerships that dominated the square rig sailing traffic around Cape Horn.

The American-Hawaiian Steamship Company was incorporated in 1899 with William D. Burnham serving as one of seven directors and company manager. He was known for his ability to maintain low costs of operation, to keep a strict schedule and to preserve the value of equipment. In fact, many of his ships were in operation for over 20 years when the industry average was 10-14 years. Burnham went to Hawaii in 1900 to negotiate with Sugar Factors, who controlled the marketing of the Hawaiian crop, and was so impressed with the possibilities of the Hawaiian trade, that the new company decided to expand their fleet, even before their first ship sailed.

The company continued to be innovative by shortening the trip around Cape Horn using the Straits of Magellan hereby cutting the journey from 125 days to an average of 50 days in 1903, all with Captain Burnham in charge of operations.

Another break through was the conversion of the steam engines from coal to oil burners. The Lasso-Lovekin oil burner revolutionized the industry and made possible the 50 day journeys which caught the attention of the U.S. Navy, convincing them to convert their fleet to oil burners. All this innovation profited the officers and shareholders of American-Hawaiian, including William Burnham.

Burnham's work with American-Hawaiian brought him ashore after 23 years at sea, prompting the Captain and Mrs. Burnham to settle in Port Chester, New York, while maintaining a summer residence in Sharon, CT.

Their son, Frederick William, started suffering from epilepsy as a young adult, a devastating diagnosis for the family, and received treatment at the Hudson River State Hospital in Poughkeepsie, New York. Unfortunately, not much was known about the disease or its treatment in those days, so those afflicted often suffered alone and away from public view. The Burnhams lived in Port Chester for the remainder of their lives.

With all the American-Hawaiian Steamship success, the company still had its setbacks, especially during the building of the Panama Canal, the railroad across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec Mexico and the American involvement in World War I. Even though the company anticipated and prepared for the canal and railroad, the many delays in the building of the canal and labor problems with railroad increased sailing time and affected profits.

Captain Burnham retired in 1914 with the first opening of the Panama Canal. He confided in one of his associates, Roger D. Lapham the head of the Los Angeles office of American-Hawaiian, that he planned to retire once the Panama Canal opened. Lapham saw him a short time afterwards and noted that he had lost weight and looked "a shell of his old self." This prompted Lapham to resolve that "no man should retire and expect to

exist on just memories.” Roger Lapham acknowledged that Captain Burnham was a dynamic character he had learned much from over the years and could tell many stories of their adventures.

During the War, all American-Hawaiian ships were under government control, but still operated by the company. The American-Hawaiian fleet carried a total of a million tons of cargo to the allies over the war years and brought home 122,361 American soldiers at the war's end.<sup>1</sup> After the war, the company never did return to the Hawaiian run, so beneficial to the company in its early years, and found that public policy was more crucial to their success than the effectiveness of their organization.

Over the years, William D. Burnham never forgot Bridgewater and made contributions, including many books to the one room library originally housed at Town Hall. While visiting Bridgewater and the Litchfield Hills during his retirement years, he felt that Bridgewater had much to offer, but was disturbed by its declining population and wanted to put “Bridgewater on the map.” This may have laid the groundwork for the bequests he would soon make. When he wrote his will on April 16, 1917, he made bequests to his wife who died in 1920, his son, extended family members, the town of Sharon and Sharon Cemetery Association, the Methodist and Congregational Churches and the town of Bridgewater, hoping that Bridgewater would once again become a thriving town.

When he died on March 27, 1919, a tribute to his active life was best summarized by this statement read into the minutes of the July 14, 1919 meeting of the Marine Society of the City of New York which reads in part:<sup>2</sup>

“Whereas by the hand of death our esteemed friend and associate has been taken from our midst and from the scene of his early activities. Now we, his associates and personal friends deem it proper that there should be placed on record our sense of the value of his life and labor in the following minutes...that in Capt. Burnham’s passing there has departed one of the most remarkable men in our maritime affairs...of great executive ability, a true judge of human character, he built up under the American flag the largest freight line of the US...He was a strict disciplinarian, honorable in all his dealings; he despised all crooked ways, he was simple and democratic in his tastes, with no care for outside show; he was a true friend, a strong, honest, determined and sturdy man, whose place it will be hard to fill among us; And be it further resolved, that this

---

<sup>1</sup> “The American-Hawaiian Steamship Company”, 1899-1919 by Thomas C. Cochran and Ray Ginger, *Business History Review*, vol.28, pg 343-365

<sup>2</sup> The Marine Society of New York is a charitable and educational organization composed of seafarers who have been officers or captains of merchant vessels under the US flag.

resolution be spread upon the minutes of this society and that a copy be engrossed and presented to his family as a mark of our sympathy and esteem.”<sup>3</sup>

The will was contested in regard to money left for the care of Captain Burnham’s son Frederick William Burnham who passed away on January 4, 1946. After some legal wrangling, the stipend for his son was increased to \$35,000 and Bridgewater started their plans to first build a library and then a school with their bequest. Both were built as modern marvels of their time to grace the main road through Bridgewater. We can only hope that Captain Burnham would be pleased and that residents appreciate his generous contribution to this wonderful town.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Waterbury Republican*, Sunday edition, May 11, 1930 pg 4

*Other sources: Bridgewater Historical Society records on Capt. William Burnham, articles mentioned above, Burnham genealogy, genealogy research*