

**Finding Aid to the Martha's Vineyard Museum
Record Unit 351**

Captain Jared Jernegan Family Collection

By Julia Novakovic

Descriptive Summary

Repository: Martha's Vineyard Museum

Call No.

Title: Captain Jared Jernegan Family Collection

Creator: various, including Laura Jernegan Spear

Quantity: .5 cubic feet

Abstract: The Captain Jared Jernegan Family Collection includes materials from and pertaining to Jared Jernegan, his wife Helen M. Clark Jernegan, and his children Laura Jernegan Spear and Prescott F. Jernegan. Within this compilation are letters from Jared while on whaling voyages, the famous diary of Laura kept while on board the Ship *Roman* for three years, information on Prescott's "gold from sea-water" hoax, family memoirs, and newspaper articles about these family members.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: The documents within the Captain Jared Jernegan Family Collection were acquired by the Martha's Vineyard Museum throughout the 20th century by several donors, including Marcus W. Jernegan.

Processing Information: Julia Novakovic

Access Restrictions: none

Use Restrictions: none

Preferred citation for publication: Martha's Vineyard Museum, Captain Jared Jernegan Family Collection, Record Unit 351.

Index Terms

- Jernegan, Jared
- Jernegan, Helen M. Clark
- Spear, Laura Jernegan
- Jernegan, Prescott F.
- A Child's Diary on a Whaling Voyage*
- Whaling
- Electrolytic Marine Salts Company

Series and Subseries Arrangement

Series I: Reference

Series II: Captain Jared Jernegan

Subseries A: Letters

Subseries B: Newspaper Articles

Series III: Helen M. Clark Jernegan

Subseries A: Memoirs

Subseries B: Newspaper Articles

Series IV: Laura Jernegan Spear

Subseries A: Whaling Voyage Journal

Subseries B: Letters

Subseries C: Memoirs

Subseries D: Publications

Subseries E: Miscellaneous

Series V: Prescott F. Jernegan

Subseries A: Electrolytic Marine Salts Company

Subseries B: Newspaper and Magazine Articles

Subseries C: Publications

Biography:

Jared Jernegan II, 1825-1899:

Jared Jernegan II was born in Edgartown on August 13, 1825, to Nathan and Prudence Jernegan. Up until age 13, he worked on his father's farm but soon after joined a ship crew. [For 48 years, he worked on whale-ships and was a captain for 38 years.] At age 21, he married Rebecca Ripley of Edgartown and embarked on a voyage aboard the *Erie* just three months later. Their first daughter, Josephine, died in infancy and never saw her father. A son, Aylmer, was born in 1854. Rebecca and Jared's third child, a daughter also named Rebecca, was born in January of 1858. Sadly, his wife died of complications due to childbirth; within a year, the baby died too. Jared received word at sea of his family tragedy. His parents-in-law, the Ripleys, were now raising Aylmer. Jared wrote many letters home to his in-laws, including a note to his son that read "I am coming home and I am not going to sea again..." Jared returned to Edgartown in 1861.

Within three months of his homecoming, he married Helen McLellan Clark – a young teacher from Maine. Despite swearing off the sea, Jared left again in May of 1862 as master of the merchant ship *Erie*. It sailed from New Bedford to the Sandwich Islands, carrying supplies for whalers in the South Pacific. However, the *Erie* got trapped in a hurricane off of Cape Horn in August, and the ship was rendered useless. A ship called *Southern Rights* sailed upon the futile vessel and rescued most of the crew. Jared finally returned home in November of 1862, lucky to be alive and happily meeting his infant daughter Laura for the first time. He remained in Edgartown for six months before yet again leaving his family for another whaling voyage.

In 1863, Jared embarked on the *Oriole* en route to the whaling grounds in the Pacific Ocean. One year later, he became so lonely at sea that he wrote to Helen asking her and Laura to meet him in San Francisco the next fall; she agreed, though she left her daughter with relatives in Edgartown. The Jernegans reunited with their children on Martha's Vineyard in April 1866. Another son, Prescott, was born that winter.

The Jernegans – Jared, Helen, Laura, and Prescott – left Edgartown in 1868 aboard the *Roman*, bound for the South Pacific. While Jared and his crew went whaling, Helen and the children visited Hawaii and other smaller islands. February 1871 was an eventful month: a mutiny took place on board the *Roman*, and seventeen men left the ship. Jared sent the family home from San Francisco shortly after and continued with a new crew up to the Arctic Ocean. The *Roman* was crushed by ice in September, and Jared was luckily saved [along with 1200 other whalers whose ships were trapped]. His third son, Marcus, was born in 1872. Captain Jared Jernegan subsequently went on seven more whaling voyages, though none lasted more than two years. He retired in 1888, and lived humbly in Edgartown until his death on January 13, 1899.

Helen McLellan Clark Jernegan, 1840-1934:

Helen McLellan Clark was born in Gorham, Maine in 1840. She came to Edgartown at age 12 and was educated on Martha's Vineyard. [Two of her aunts, also from Maine, married Edgartown men and moved to the Island.] Helen became an assistant teacher at the North Primary School in 1859. Two years later, in the spring of 1861, she met Captain Jared Jernegan. By June, they married in Maine. Though he was 15 years her elder, she loved both him and the "excitement" that his occupation provided. Helen took care of her stepson, Aylmer, and she gave birth to Laura in 1862 when Jared was on his way to Honolulu. When Jared invited her to join him in San Francisco in 1865, Helen jumped at the opportunity and left three-year-old Laura with her Aunt Chloe Pierce and sent eleven-year-old Aylmer to live with his maternal grandparents.

Helen happily took Laura, now six, and Prescott, just two years old, on the brig *Roman* with her husband in 1868. Though the voyage was long, it was an experience that created many happy memories. Helen was reportedly the first white woman on the Marquesas Islands, and the only known Vineyard woman to have sailed around Cape Horn twice. She lived like royalty in Hawaii. After returning to Edgartown in 1871, Helen never went to sea again. Her youngest son, Marcus, was born in 1872. Helen was very proud of her family's accomplishments: Laura was cultured and married an officer in the U.S. Revenue Marine Service, Prescott was ordained a minister, and Marcus became a well-known professor and historian. Helen died on February 26, 1934.

Laura Jernegan Spear, 1862-1947:

Laura Jernegan was born in Edgartown on June 29, 1862, while her father was at sea. Her young life was unremarkable until age six, when she boarded the *Roman* with her father, mother, and younger brother Prescott. Laura kept a journal while on the ship,

which she used to improve her penmanship and record the monotony of life on a whale-ship. Her father made part of the deck into a "schoolhouse" so that Helen could educate Laura. In her spare time, she sang and dressed up, played with her brother, and witnessed the true life of whalers. She ended each entry in her now-famous diary with "Good-bye for today."

After returning to Edgartown in 1871, Laura continued her studies. She attended the New England Conservatory of Music, soon becoming an accomplished violinist and organist. She wed Herbert W. Spear of the U.S. Revenue Marine Service in 1894; her brother Prescott presided over the ceremony. When her husband was transferred to Baltimore for several years, Laura studied art at the Maryland Institute. In 1912, she moved back to Edgartown with her son Carleton after Herbert's death.

Laura opened a small antique shop and tea room at her home nicknamed "The Bungalow" on South Summer Street in Edgartown. There, she served as a gracious hostess at her "Tea Garden in the Pines" and sold heirlooms. She was interested in mounting and classifying sea mosses that she collected from waters surrounding the Vineyard; Laura sold greeting cards, picture frames, albums, and books of these sea mosses. Arthur Railton remarked, "In one season, she sold 16,000 cards displaying the graceful grasses." She never remarried, and lived pleasantly in Edgartown until her death on June 30, 1947.

Prescott Ford Jernegan, 1866-1942:

Prescott was born on December 17, 1866. Also on the *Roman* for three years, he caused mischief and became extremely well-traveled. Once back in Edgartown, he continued to have an impish streak and became best friends with Charles Fisher. Prescott was a good student though, and could often be seen with his nose in a book when not out creating trouble. He claimed that mandatory visits to his mother's aunts "prejudiced [him] for life against social gatherings." By his teenage years, Prescott attended some of the religious revivals on the Island, and became "born again." His mother encouraged Prescott to partake in religious work. He graduated from Brown College in 1889, a popular and busy student. He was ordained a Baptist minister and began teaching Greek and Latin at Phillips Academy in Andover. Prescott enrolled in the Newton Theological Seminary as an alternative to becoming a teacher or a businessman. He married Betsey E. Phinney of Edgartown and became a preacher in Middletown. Reverend Prescott Jernegan resigned after his first year there, and was hired by a church in Florida.

During the summer of 1896, Prescott's normal life crumbled around him. He returned to Edgartown on vacation and fell ill with typhoid fever, incapacitating him for almost two months. He was quarantined and his wife traveled to Philadelphia in the meantime; when she returned, she announced that she had met another man and wanted a divorce. Prescott was soon after asked to resign from his ministry in Florida.

He met up again with his friend Charlie Fisher, and the two devised a money-making scheme that would soon shame the Jernegan family.

Prescott “invented” a device that would extract gold from sea water. A brochure from his newfound company, the Electrolytic Marine Salts Company, claimed, “It has been well known that the waters of the ocean throughout their extent contain from one half to one grain of gold per ton and about twice that quantity of silver. At the proportion of half a grain to a ton, the gold in a cubic mile of sea water is worth \$65,000,000.” To potential investors, Jernegan showed the invention: a box made of wood, lined with zinc, and a cover with several large holes. He claimed that by putting quicksilver into the box, adding a secret formula of chemicals, and attaching wires from a battery, one could then put the box into the ocean and extract the trace amounts of gold and silver within the waters. Prescott demonstrated this experiment in February 1897, leaving the contraption in the ocean overnight. When the box was pulled up the next morning at dawn, the men filled a vial with the mercury inside. They then took the bottle to a chemist who analyzed the contents and announced later that he had found copper, silver, and gold within the quicksilver. The investors were so pleased that they promised money for the company and asked for more demonstrations. Each time, Prescott’s invention produced small amounts of gold, and each time more men were pleased to jump on the bandwagon as shareholders. A plant was soon constructed at North Lubec, Maine, with a dam and 243 of the “magic accumulators” that were purported to collect \$1.27 of gold out of the ocean every day.

How did Prescott dupe all of his investors and board members? His friend Charlie Fisher originally walked out to the “accumulators” at night while in a diving suit and sprinkled gold and metallic flakes into the boxes. Later, he just added gold flakes to the quicksilver after the contents of the boxes were removed for laboratory testing. In July 1898, zero grams of gold came out of the accumulators. In fact, Charlie Fisher had disappeared. Within a week, Prescott Jernegan also vanished... along with more than \$100,000 from the company’s bank account. He sailed for Europe with his wife and son on July 23. By 1900, they had abandoned him and Prescott became a world-traveler: England, Canada, and the Philippines were destinations. He settled in the Philippines and taught there from 1901-1910, authoring several history books on the Philippines and the culture there. In 1906, Betsey E. Phinney was granted an uncontested divorce on grounds of abandonment. He eventually married two more times, both ending in divorce as well. Prescott died on February 23, 1942 in Texas. For Marcus Jernegan biography, please see Record Unit 152.

Scope and Content Note:

The Captain Jared Jernegan Family Collection includes materials from and pertaining to Jared Jernegan, his wife Helen M. Clark Jernegan, and his children Laura Jernegan Spear and Prescott F. Jernegan. [Unfortunately, the Martha’s Vineyard Museum does

not have additional information on Aylmer Jernegan or Jared's first wife, Rebecca.] Within this artificial compilation are letters from Jared while on whaling voyages, the famous diary of Laura kept while on board the Ship *Roman* for three years, and information on Prescott's "gold from sea-water" hoax. In addition, family memoirs, letters, and other newspaper articles on the family members are also housed within this collection.

Information on Laura Jernegan makes up much of the .5 cubic feet of material. Her original well-known diary, as well as a scanned replica and a transcription, is part of this collection. The Martha's Vineyard Museum also has many of Laura's sketches of the Vineyard and her mounted "Sea Moss" items within its holdings. To access these "art" materials, one must contact the Curatorial Department. Marcus W. Jernegan was the youngest of Captain Jared Jernegan's children. For more information on Jernegan genealogy and whaling voyages, see Record Unit 152: "Marcus Jernegan Papers."

Series Descriptions

Series I: Reference

This series contains an issue of the *Dukes County Intelligencer* [November 1986], which includes an extensive article on the Jernegan family written by Arthur Railton.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 1: Jernegan Family: Reference

Series II: Captain Jared Jernegan

Subseries A: Letters

This Subseries contains transcriptions of letters written by Captain Jared Jernegan to various family members back home in Edgartown during his whaling voyage on the *Erie* from 1857-1861. The second folder of letters has an original 1865 missive to his wife Helen in Edgartown, along with a transcription. Presumably, the transcriptions in this Subseries were created by Marcus Jernegan in the early 20th century.

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Folder 2: Captain Jared Jernegan: Letters, 1858-1860, transcriptions.

Folder 3: Captain Jared Jernegan: Letter, 1865, original and transcription.

Subseries B: Newspaper Articles

This Subseries contains newspaper articles on a trip of Captain Jernegan from 1884 as well as a posthumous article listing all of his whaling voyages.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 4: Captain Jared Jernegan: Newspaper Articles, 1884-1899.

Series III: Helen M. Clark Jernegan

Subseries A: Memoirs

This Subseries contains memoirs written in 1912 by Helen Jernegan about the 1868-1871 voyage of the *Roman* that she embarked upon with her husband and two young children. Within this bound manuscript, Laura's account of her memories of this specific journey follow her mother's. The transcription of Helen's story is included in this folder; the transcription of Laura's thoughts is housed in Folder 12. The manuscript book belonged to Marcus Jernegan.

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Folder 5: Helen M. Clark Jernegan: Memoirs, 1912, original and transcription.

Subseries B: Newspaper Articles

This Subseries contains a newspaper article entitled "Interesting Vineyarders: Mrs. Helen M. Jernegan," published in the *Vineyard Gazette* on February 18, 1927.

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Folder 6: Helen M. Clark Jernegan: Newspaper Articles, 1927.

Series IV: Laura Jernegan Spear

Subseries A: Whaling Voyage Journal

This Subseries contains the famous diary of Laura Jernegan, who was six years old when she began keeping daily records on board the *Roman* from 1868-1871. Folder 7 holds the original journal; the next folder has a scanned replica of the original and should be used for research. Folder 9 houses a transcription of Laura's journal written by her mother Helen and given to Marcus Jernegan, her brother. Folder 10 houses two copies of *A Child's Diary on a Whaling Voyage*, a small book edited by Marcus and published in 1929. The forward of this publication gives an excellent summary of the period that Laura's diary covers, as well as some overviews of child psychology.

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Folder 7: Laura Jernegan Spear: Whaling Voyage Journal, Original, 1868-1871.

Folder 8: Laura Jernegan Spear: Whaling Voyage Journal, Copy.

Folder 9: Laura Jernegan Spear: Whaling Voyage Journal, Transcription.

Folder 10: Laura Jernegan Spear: *A Child's Diary on a Whaling Voyage*, ed. Marcus Jernegan, published 1929.

Subseries B: Letters

This Subseries contains a letter written by Laura Jernegan to her mother in 1875 along with its transcription. The original is on lined paper, though Laura writes upside-down around the edges of the pages too, using up all available room on the margins and making the flow of the letter somewhat choppy.

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Folder 11: Laura Jernegan Spear: Letters, 1875.

Subseries C: Memoirs

This Subseries contains the transcription of the memoirs that Laura wrote, housed in the manuscript in Folder 5. She comments on the narrative that her mother Helen recorded, regarding the voyage of the *Roman* from 1868-1871.

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Folder 12: Laura Jernegan Spear: Memoirs, 1912.

Subseries D: Publications

This Subseries contains published articles regarding Laura Jernegan, most famous for her whaling voyage journal. She is cited in periodicals such as *New England Quarterly*, *Highlights Magazine*, *Vineyard Magazine*, and the *Martha's Vineyard Times*. Pages from her diary are also reproduced in several history book series, including American Heritage and Time-Life Books.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 13: Laura Jernegan Spear: Periodical Articles, 1925-1997.

Folder 14: Laura Jernegan Spear: Book Excerpts, 1959-1976.

Subseries E: Miscellaneous

This Subseries contains Laura's copy of *Amateur's Guidebook to Sea Mosses*, written by Florence Hicks on Martha's Vineyard in 1888. After her marriage to Herbert Spear, Laura mounted and sold items decorated with sea mosses that she collected in the waters off of the Island. Many of "Sea Moss" materials are housed within the Martha's Vineyard Museum art collection.

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Folder 15: *Amateur's Guidebook to Sea Mosses*, Florence Hicks, 1888.

Series V: Prescott F. Jernegan

Subseries A: Electrolytic Marine Salts Company

This Subseries contains an 1898 brochure that would have been given to potential investors of the Electrolytic Marine Salts Company. Entitled "Gold from Sea Water at a Profit," the publication "explained" the invention, process, use of industrial plants, and estimation of profits that the company will earn after selling 10,000,000 shares at \$1 each. "Messrs. P.F. Jernegan and C.E. Fisher have during the past two year devoted their efforts to the discovery and improvement of processes for extracting gold and silver from the sea in large quantities and at a commercial profit," claimed the second page of this booklet.

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Folder 16: Prescott Jernegan: The Electrolytic Marine Salts Company, 1898.

Subseries B: Newspaper and Magazine Articles

This Subseries contains newspaper and magazine articles written after the fall-out and exposure of the scandal that Prescott Jernegan created with his "Gold from Sea Water"

hoax.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 17: Prescott Jernegan: Newspaper Articles, 1898-1962.

Folder 18: Prescott Jernegan: Magazine Articles, 1965.

Subseries C: Publications

This Subseries contains materials written by Prescott Jernegan after he fled the United States with \$100,000 of fraudulently-obtained money; eventually ending up in the Philippines teaching history and English, Prescott wrote a series of "1001 Questions" books on the Philippines. One such book, entitled *1001 Questions and Answers on Philippine History and Civil Government*, is housed in this Subseries. In addition, he co-authored a song that was the unofficial national anthem of the Philippines for several decades; the lyrics are also included here.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 19: Prescott Jernegan: Philippines Booklet and Song, 1910 and undated.