

Finding Aid to the Martha's Vineyard Museum
Record Unit 246
Vineyard Haven Seaman's Bethel Collection, 1860-1993
By Karin Stanley

Descriptive Summary

Repository: Martha's Vineyard Museum

Call Number:

Title: Vineyard Haven Seaman's Bethel

Creator: various

Quantity: 0.5 cubic feet

Abstract: This collection of Seaman's Bethel material contains original documents (1860-1900), newspaper clippings, publications, correspondence, and additional notes on the history of the Seaman's Bethel on Martha's Vineyard.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: The Seaman's Bethel papers were acquired by the Martha's Vineyard Museum in _____ by _____.

Processing Information: Karin Stanley

Access Restrictions: none

Use Restrictions: none

Preferred citation for publication: Martha's Vineyard Museum Seaman's Bethel Papers, Record Unit 246.

Index Terms

- Seaman's Bethel
- Boston Seaman's Friend Society
- Madison Edwards
- Reading Room
- Austin Tower
- Harriet Norris Goldberg
- The Sea Breeze
- Vineyard Haven
- Marine Hospital
- Sailor's aid societies
- Rev. Waldo Stevens
- Mrs. Oscar Denniston
- Dr. Gene D. Landry
- Bethel marine cemetery

Series and Subseries Arrangement:

Series I: Publications

Series II: Correspondence

Series III: Goldberg Correspondence

Series IV: Business Records 1896-1900

Series V: Newspaper Clippings 1926-1990

Series VI: Reference

Series VII: Aid Societies 1860-1875

Historical Note:

During the late 1800's harbors on Vineyard Sound were busy with commercial sailing activity. The sailors and fishermen on these vessels naturally came ashore in search of diversions from ship life. In order to provide healthy and moral alternatives for these men aid societies were established. Beginning with the Boston Seaman's Friend Society in 1827, these religious based societies goals were to provide for the "physical, social and moral well-being of seamen of all nations." The Unitarian Church also set up organizations, one being a Reading Room, Library, and Chapel in Vineyard Haven, under the direction of Rev. Waldo Stevens. According to an 1875 notice "Free Seats" and "Free Gospel" along with many other services were available to sailors.

In the late 1800's Madison Edwards of Woods Hole began assisting with a reading room on Naushon Island at Tarpaulin Cove. The Boston Seaman's Friend Society took notice of Edward's work and in 1888 hired him to direct a mission in Woods Hole. The Society then expanded to Vineyard Haven, dedicating a "Reading Room" on October 23, 1893. The establishment quickly became known as the Seaman's Bethel. A prominent Vineyard Haven resident noted, "The bethel is the greatest blessing that ever came to Vineyard Haven. There is less drunkenness among the fishing fleet; the men are sober, and it is the influence of the bethel's work." In addition to religious services the Bethel offered temporary refuge to destitute and ship-wrecked seaman. They also provided a library and game room. Over the years curiosities collected by sailors from all over the world found a home at the Bethel.

Madison Edwards and later his son-in-law Austin Towers carried out the work of the Bethel through the late 1950's. With the decline of commercial shipping and the fishing fleet the Bethel's services were no longer necessary. The Bethel became a museum and was moved from its wharf-side site to make way for the Steamship Authorities' new terminal. The chapel went to the Martha's Vineyard Hospital in 1992 and the "reading room" to the Vineyard Haven VFW in 1995. Material objects from the Bethel have been donated to the MVM.

Scope and Content Note:

The .5 cubic feet of documents are arranged chronologically within their series. They include Boston Seaman's Friend Society publications, newspaper clippings chronicling the history of the Bethel, correspondence, business records, and miscellaneous reference material. The original documents consist of correspondence between the Town of Tisbury and the State Board of Lunacy and Charity regarding transportation of sick and ship-wrecked seamen. A notice from a Reading Room, Library and Chapel, on Union Bluff in Vineyard Haven describes the free services for sailors, including "free gospel." It also announces that arrangements were made for a museum to include curiosities brought from sailors from all parts of the world. The Boston Seaman's Friend Society publications, along with newspaper clippings and a 1991 pamphlet by Dr. Gene Landry provide an overview of the history of the Bethel.

In addition the MVM has material objects from the Bethel within its holdings. The MVM oral history curator may also be contacted regarding transcripts containing references to the Bethel.

Series Descriptions

Series I: Publications

This series contains Boston Seaman's Friend Society publications. The collection includes the quarterly *The Sea Breeze*, with issues from 1935-1972 (not a complete set). The series also contains "A Short History of the Building Its Inception and Its Work".

Box: 1 of 1

Folder 1: *The Sea Breeze* 1935-1957

Folder 2: *The Sea Breeze* 1964-1972

Folder 3: The Vineyard Haven Bethel History

Series II: Correspondence

This series contains two letters. From 1868 is a letter from the Boston Unitarian Association outlining their charitable programs, including funding for a Reading Room for sailors in Holmes Hole. A 1917 letter from Alice Vesper Smith to Madison Edwards tells of the death of Mrs. Oscar Denniston.

Box: 1 of 1

Folder 4: Correspondence 1868-1917

Series III: Goldberg Correspondence 1992-1993

This series includes two letters written by Captain Fred A. Bennett regarding the Boston Seaman's Friend Society's handling of the Harriet Norris Goldberg fund.

This fund was set up in the 1930's with the Boston Society for maintenance of its Vineyard Haven branch.

Box: 1 of 1

Folder 5: Correspondence, Goldberg affair, 1992-1993

Series IV: Business Records 1896-1900

This series includes original documents from the State Board of Lunacy and Charity and the Marine Hospital Service. These are mostly correspondences to the Town or Tisbury regarding reimbursements for transportation provided to sick and destitute seamen. Of interest is a card documenting the death of a crew member who was buried in the Bethel Marine Cemetery. This cemetery is also mentioned in the Boston Seaman's Friend Society's historic publication.

Box: 1 of 1

Folder 6: Business Records 1896-1900

Series V: Newspaper Clippings 1926-1990

This series includes photocopies of articles written over the years about the Bethel. Subjects include the work of the Bethel, some history, tributes to Madison Edwards and Austin Towers, and reactions to changes in the management of the Bethel by the Boston Seaman's Friend Society. Editorials and an obituary for Madison Edwards are also included.

Box: 1 of 1

Folder 7: Newspaper Clippings 1926-1990

Series VI: Reference

This series includes a history of the Bethel's origins written from the memories of Ruth Eldridge White. "Who Will Keep the Lower Lights Burning?" is a pamphlet written by the Reverend Dr. Gene D. Landry for a 1991 address to the Martha's Vineyard Neighborhood Convention. This includes some history, but speaks to the role of the Bethel and its philosophy in the late 20th century. Two photocopied references refer to earlier sailor aid ministries on the Island, one being the Unitarian Reading Room which is included in Series VII.

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Folder 8: Reference

Series VII: Aid Societies 1860-1875

This series includes two items. One is an 1860 certificate of deposit for the American Seaman Friends Society. Of interest is a notice welcoming seamen to a Reading Room, Library and Chapel on Union Bluff, Vineyard Haven. This notice advertises the services available to seamen, including gospel, reading materials, tide tables and survey charts, and a museum for curiosities from all parts of the world.

Box: 1 of 1

Folder 9: Aid Societies: 1860 Certificate of Deposit, American Seaman Friend's Society 1875 Vineyard Haven Reading Room