LETTERS HOME FROM SEA

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The Life and Letters of

Solon J. Hanson

Down East Sailor

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HOBBLEBUSH

ISBN 13: 978-0-9760896-5-0
ISBN 10: 0-9760896-5-3
Library of Congress Control Number: 2006924598

Designed and composed in Adobe Garamond Pro
at Hobblebush Books,
Brookline, New Hampshire

Printed in the United States of America

Line drawings by Lucy Jane Webster

Published by:
Hobblebush Books

17-A Old Milford Road
Brookline, New Hampshire 03033

www.hobblebush.com

This book is dedicated to those who love
the adventure of going to sea.

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Preface

Our ancestors of the Castine-Penobscot Maine region were long associated with the sea. They fished and farmed; developed and defended; and wrote letters and diaries that still speak to us today. This book relates the experiences of Solon J. Hanson through his letters home and his personal diary.* The letters were written in the beautiful script of the mid-19th century, the aged ink beginning to fade. Solon's words expressed a young man's desire to accompany his father to sea and then the excitement of his adventures at sea. He accepted the challenges vigorously and optimistically. The letters tell of the seaman's life and report locations of ships and people of the mid 1800s.

We have chosen to publish the letters verbatim to preserve Solon's style, which includes: a lack of capitalization and punctuation, errant spellings, and idiomatic expressions peculiar to his time. We elected not to embellish material we could not document. Gaps in continuity remain open to the imagination.

Working with the letters to publish the book has been an education for us. Little did I realize, in 1976, the extent of the project I had accepted when my mother handed me photocopies of the letters and asked that they be organized and published. I am a visual artist and Meg Noah, my daughter, is an accomplished computer programmer, thus able to put all the material into a format for publishing. We started with the letters first, thinking we would publish them directly. Then, as we reread them, we discovered unfamiliar and obsolete terms and that triggered a larger

* Hanson's niece, Helen Peterson Conner, daughter of his sister Lucy Jane, had kept these. After Helen's death, her sister-in-law Vivian Kenniston Conner retained the material. The letters came to our attention in the 1970s when Vivian K. Conner's daughters, my mother, Marian Helen Conner Myers, and her sister, Virginia Conner Moseley, were examining papers left in her Castine house.

book to help readers better understand the content and context of the writings.

Also recorded is Solon's diary, a treasure that surfaced when I was going through the papers again in the summer of 1996. I was looking for the daguerreotype.* Solon had referred to and came across a farm-ledger book his father was keeping. As I scanned the book, I was surprised to discover neatly written pages, day by day, of Solon's voyage. I cannot begin to express how I felt at that moment. To think of the journey this little book had made and here it was in my hands. I was overwhelmed. It had been over 25 years since my mother had handed me the copies. At that time she knew I could not start immediately on her request. Now we wish she had known the diary was there, hidden within the papers.

It is now 2006. Meg has been a great help encouraging and working with this book. We have learned to write and rewrite, and then to delete extraneous material. We have relished reading other author's accounts of the great age of sail in the 1800s. Studying Solon's letters today moves me, as it did when we first discovered the fragile collection years ago.

—Lucy Jane Myers Webster

*A daguerreotype is a photograph made by exposing an image on a light-sensitive silver-coated metallic plate.

CHEERFULNESS.

Prologue

The commercial center of Castine, Maine is where Main Street and Water Street meet. Here two favorite breakfast spots, Bah's Bake House and The Variety, fill with townspeople, summer folk, and tourists to exchange news, solve problems, and nurture friendships. We return annually as summer folk, yet we return to our heritage. For generations, this meeting ground has continued for finding out what was and is happening in the lives of the townspeople and friends, whether at home or at sea. We know our ancestors convened on this same spot. Herman Echenagucia had a bakery on the land in front of Bah's. Helen Peterson Conner ran a boarding house for a few years in the building of the present day Water Witch.

Here in 1629, Plymouth Colony set up a coastal trading outpost to acquire the furs needed to fulfill their contract with the Merchant Adventurers who had underwritten their move from Europe to America. They enjoyed trade with the native population until driven out by the French in 1632. The French gained control and built Fort Pentagoet to preserve their claim to the area. It is thought the fort was likely built on the Pilgrims' trading-post land. The British drove out the French in 1654. For the next 40 years, the French and British fought for control of Fort Pentagoet. Around 1665, the Baron de Castin arrived on the scene and married Chief Madockawando's daughter Mathilde. The town is named after him. The Dutch briefly captured Castine in 1674.

The peninsula, at the confluence of the Bagaduce River and the Penobscot Bay, was considered a prime location for defense of the inland and as a trading center. Therefore, the struggle for control continued, but after a while Fort Pentagoet was abandoned. In 1760, colonists of English descent resettled the site at the fort. The first permanent settlement, Penobscot, was established in 1761. Meanwhile, the British were driving out the French settlers in Acadia. The Acadians in exile, the 'cajuns, set-

tled in parishes along the Mississippi River around New Orleans. In 1765, Acadian refugees were transferred from detention camps at Halifax, now under British control, to what became St. Martin County and Parish.

Throughout the American Revolution, the boundaries between American, British, French, and Dutch colonies remained in dispute. During the Revolution, the British built Fort George and dozens of smaller fortifications to establish their control of the region. In 1779, hundreds of British troops arrived from Halifax intending to create a haven for British loyalists in Castine. In July and August, the Revolutionary War battle called "The Penobscot Expedition" was the greatest United States naval failure until the attack on Pearl Harbor. When rebels retreated, they ran their ships aground, and set them on fire. America lost about 500 men and 43 ships due to their inability to engage in a complex, amphibious assault targeting Fort George. The losses have been attributed to mistrust and a lack of communication between ground and naval commanders and a lack of sufficient training for combatants. Castine was the last British post to be surrendered at the end of the American Revolution.

The news that the 1783 Treaty of Paris gave Castine to the United States was an unwelcome surprise to the Tory settlers who, in mass, dismantled their homes and shipped them north to found the town of St. Andrews on Passamoquoddy Bay. Castine, which was a part of Penobscot, was designated a custom house to collect revenue for the government on July 31, 1789. Castine remained part of Penobscot until 1796, when Penobscot and Castine were designated as two separate towns. After occupation of the town by the British during the War of 1812, Castine was made a port of entry to the United States. By 1825, the small rural town had 13 college graduates plus sea captains, whose education came from observation and travel. A graded school system was adopted in 1840 and a high school in 1850.

Castine today is the home of the Maine Maritime Academy, and the town is quite active, especially during the tourist and vacation season. The Castine Historical Society, Castine Scientific Society (Wilson Museum) and the Penobscot Historical Society are dedicated to preserving the history of the area. Along the streets are a number of signs explaining historical events and through this narrative walking tour, one can enjoy the lovely gardens and exquisite architecture, from Colonial days to the present. On a foggy day, the crunch of gravel underfoot, the dripping of

the fog through the trees and the soft sounds of the harbor bell buoy contrast with the bellowing of the foghorns. The air has a clean, salty smell. There are soaring eagles and ospreys, seabirds, local and migrating birds, and seals foraging the river.

This story is about Solon J. Hanson, a sailor and fisherman, who lived here about 150 years ago when Castine was the epicenter of all merchant marine activities north of Boston. Solon's autobiography is told through his letters home from sea. Though technology has changed the fishing and shipping industries, the challenges and risks faced by seamen and their love of the sea remain defined by the persistent force of nature. Solon's adventures are action packed and his own words explain them best. Contextual annotation is woven around these letters to convey the perseverance, the love, the bravery and the hardships faced by the seamen and their families who defined American commerce in the pre-Civil War years.

CAULKERS.

Chapter 1

SOLON'S FATHER, CAPTAIN JOHN HANSON

Our story begins in Colonial America, when Maine was still part of the Massachusetts colony. In 1789, Castine launched its first recorded vessel, the 115-ton schooner *Ranger*, from the yard of Joseph and John Perkins at the foot of Dyer Lane. The ships *Orno* and the *John and Phoebe* were built in 1796, the same year Castine separated from the governance of Penobscot and incorporated as Castine. Support industries for the sailing industry sprung around the active shipyard. The increase in work attracted many people to the area.

Robert Hanson, born in 1784 in New Hampshire, the 13th child of John Hanson and Deliverence Clark, moved to Waldoboro, Massachusetts (now Maine) and then to Hancock County to work in the shipyards as a ship caulker. Robert was Solon J. Hanson's grandfather. Although family records do not show where and when he worked in the Castine shipyards, Robert likely worked on the 94-foot *Ruthy* in 1803 and the *Thucydides* in 1808.

The tools of a ship caulker were simple: oakum, mallets, and tar. The caulker was usually an independent worker, but bore the responsibility of ensuring that the ship would not leak during its voyage. Oakum, a loose fiber obtained by untwisting and picking hemp ropes, was used to fill crevices between boards. Caulkers used irons and longheaded mallets to force oakum into the seams, and then poured melted pitch or tar over the seam as a sealant. They and the other skilled craftsmen were employed as needed by the shipyards, usually for the duration of a contract to build a vessel. Sailors who specialized in caulking and other ship repair were employed for voyages since continual caulking was required en route on large sailing vessels.