



NEWSLETTER

OF THE TREMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY & COUNTRY STORE MUSEUM

TremontMaineHistory.us

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A GENUINE MAINE HERO FROM BASS HARBOR



John Fairfield Bickford

1843 - 1927

Awarded Medal of Honor

In this issue we will share the story of this valiant young man from Bass Harbor, relying mainly on an article published by the Mount Desert Islander newspaper, written by Nan Lincoln, a staff writer who is also a Tremont Historical Society board member. A further article is written by board member Kathie Pratt, who will be working with students and teachers at Tremont Elementary School to chronicle this local hero.



USS Kearsarge

Bass Harbor Native Was Civil War Hero

By Nan Lincoln

Reprinted by permission from Mt. Desert Islander

A pivotal naval battle in the Civil War was fought off the coast of Cherbourg France, June 19, 1864, between the Union's 200 foot, three-masted steam and sail powered "screw sloop" warship *Kearsarge*, and the elusive Confederate raider the *CSS Alabama*. On board the *Kearsarge* that day was a 21-year-old sailor named John Fairfield Bickford, a native of Bass Harbor, Maine, who was serving as the ship's number one pivot gunner. Bickford, along with his captain John A. Winslow, and the 17-man gunner crew, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his outstanding service and valor in that famous battle.

For two years before this famous naval encounter, the *Alabama*, captained by Raphael Semmes, had been sinking or disabling dozens of union vessels — merchant ships, whalers, even a fully armed warship— with the brutal precision of Barbary pirates, totaling up a loss of men, treasure and strategic advantage that could well have affected the outcome of the war. The *Kearsarge* had been dispatched to put an end to this rampage.

According to an article written for the *US Naval Institute Magazine* by Norman Delaney, and cited here with permission from its Naval History archives, *Kearsarge* caught up with the enemy ship in the French port of Cherbourg where it had put in for repairs. When Semmes, perhaps a bit cocky from his many successful conquests, learned that the *Kearsarge* was prowling a few miles outside the harbor like a hungry shark waiting to engage in battle as soon as the *Alabama* left port, in an act of what in hindsight seems supreme hubris, Semmes sent Capt. Winslow a challenge:

"My intention is to fight the Kearsarge as soon as I can make the necessary arrangements. I hope they will not detain me more than until tomorrow evening or after the morrow morning at furthest. I beg she will not depart before I am ready to go out."

It appears that much of that time was eaten up by removing the captured gold and other valuable items from the *Alabama*'s holds, and the repairs were only partially complete when Semmes steamed out of port to confront the Union rival on his own terms. It was a bad decision.

Although the two ships were fairly evenly matched in size and fire power from their cannons and shell guns, the *Alabama* had been at sea for so long her bottom was water logged, making her sluggish; the ammunition was damp, and her crew exhausted after a grueling two year campaign. Also unbeknownst to Capt. Semmes, the *Kearsarge*'s hull in the steam engine area had been draped with chains painted to resemble the color of the hull, making her effectively an iron clad.

When the two battleships went broadside to broadside that sunny, still morning of June 19, seven miles off the coast of France the *Kearsarge*'s superior gun crews — one of them led by John Bickford— ripped into the *Alabama* with a barrage of fire power from its cannons and the two large pivot guns mounted on the ship bow and stern. In his article Delaney quotes the written recollection of the *Alabama*'s executive officer, John McIntosh Kell:

“The 11-inch shells of the Kearsarge did fearful work, and her guns were served beautifully, being aimed with precision, and deliberate in fire. She came into action magnificently.”

The *Alabama*'s gunners were not so well prepared. While they fired even more shot than they received, their cannons were apparently aimed too high, and much of it flew over the *Kearsarge*'s deck. Also, most of shells from *Alabama*'s own pivot guns that managed to hit the *Kearsarge*'s hull did not explode, largely due to damp wicks and powder. By one account a shell flew so close to Bickford's head it sucked the air out of his mouth. When asked by a superior officer, why he didn't duck, the gunner apparently responded, “Haven't got time, sir. Too busy.” Busy indeed. By his own account, cited in Delaney's piece, Bickford personally fired more than 35 shells at the enemy ship, and the second gun more than 20, receiving far fewer in return, most of them duds or doing little damage due, perhaps, to the *Kearsarge*'s chain armor.

“The firing now became very hot,” Captain Semmes wrote in his own report, *“and the enemy's shot, and shell soon began to tell upon our hull, knocking down, killing, and disabling a number of men, at the same time, in different parts of the ship. Perceiving that our shells, though apparently exploding against the enemy's sides, were doing him but little damage, I returned to solid-shot firing, and from this time onward alternated with shot and shell.”*

A couple of mates manning the *Kearsarge*'s second pivot gun were not so lucky as Bickford. One lost his arm and the other died from wounds he received when one of the few *Alabama* shells to hit its mark exploded nearby. The uneven exchange of fire power went on for a solid hour before the *Alabama* foundered, and Semmes's lowered the confederate colors in surrender.

Bickford was, according to Delaney's account, among the *Kearsarge* crew who manned life boats to search for enemy survivors to rescue from the water. Captain Semmes was not among them, however. Having literally jumped ship after lowering the colors, he and 40 other survivors were picked up by a neutral British yacht and taken back to England, where they lived to fight another day.

That autumn, after being honored, along with his crew, for their “personal valor” at a banquet at Faneuil Hall in Boston, Bickford, who had reenlisted with a promotion to Acting Master's Mate, was allowed to go home to Bass Harbor for a brief visit with family before returning to sea aboard the *Lanapee* for a reconnaissance mission along the Cape Fear River in North Carolina. Although the tall young Mainer was remembered by the *Lanapee* crew as being “exceedingly robust and strong” he, along with several other

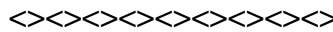
crew mates, contracted malaria. In June 1865 after three months of illness, and still “a very sick man” Bickford was discharged and came home to Maine to recuperate.

Two years later, with the war won, Bickford left his native Bass Harbor to take a job as a foreman in a Gloucester Massachusetts fish factory. Two years after that he married the boss’s daughter, with whom he had five children, three of whom survived to adulthood. By 1911, he had retired from the factory, but even into his eighties operated an excursion boat out of Gloucester Harbor, during which he would regale passengers with his personal accounts of the renowned sea battle. He was also a regular attendee at reunions with the crew who had fought with him aboard the *Kearsarge*.

John F. Bickford died April 27, 1927, at age 84 and was buried at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Gloucester. A headstone and a veteran’s marker mark his grave. His Medal of Honor, which he received by mail, is now in the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester Mass. Whether Bickford ever visited Bass Harbor again in his later years is not known, and while he has a probable relative, Mary Mackay, still living on MDI, his story has apparently gone out of her family’s oral history.

For a more detailed account of the *Kearsarge*’s naval battle with the *Alabama* and John Bickford’s other exploits, including his purported brief stint as a naval spy go to:

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2010/december/i-didnt-feel-excited-mite>



A few years ago, the Tremont Historical Society received a notice from the Maine Secretary of State about a project to recognize and honor Congressional Medal of Honor winners from Maine. John Bickford was on that list.

Kathie Pratt, a Tremont Historical board member, has now picked up the challenge of engaging local schools in a project to memorialize this home town hero. “This is the highest military decoration given by the U.S. Government,” Pratt says. “That we don’t know about this native son, and what he did for his country, is just crazy. Except for a few diligent Civil War historians and writers, when Maine’s contribution to the Civil War is mentioned, Brewer born Joshua Chamberlain is the hero who comes to mind. But Maine sent many young men to fight and, in some cases, die, for the cause of preserving the Union and ending slavery. John F. Bickford was one of these brave and presumably principled young men, who while honored in his own time, should also be remembered in ours.”



LOVED ONES REMEMBERED IN GIFTS OF SUPPORT FOR OUR WORK

Steve Ahlgren	Humphrey H. Hosmer	Alfred & Evelyn Gott Reed
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Betty Bradford	Louise Lawson	Mike Smith
Larry Closson	Deann Lebeau	Juanita Stanley
Samuel A. Cousins	Malcolm & Margaret MacDuffie	Esther Trask
Ruth Emma Rich Black Fournier	Bowen Marshall	Marilyn Trask
Robert Gott	Ian Marshall	Orville & Esther Moore Trask
Lester & Alice Gott	Eleanor Mayo	Mr. & Mrs. Francis Wood
Warren "Pard" Higgins	Ruth Moore	Mildred & Manuel Young
Chester D. Hill	Joan Pratt	

PERSONS HONORED WITH GIFTS OF SUPPORT FOR OUR WORK

Nancy Babb Mary Jones John MacDuffie Emily Russell

Editor's Note: These memorial and honoring gift names have been accumulating for quite a number of years. We apologize for not having shared them sooner. We certainly have always been touched and grateful to receive these gifts.

We want YOUR memoirs of this pandemic

These are historic times we are living through. As with the Civil War, two world wars, the Spanish Flu pandemic and the Great Depression, 50 or maybe 100 years from now, our descendants living in or visiting Tremont may want to know how we fared physically, emotionally, and spiritually during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The Tremont Historical Society has been archiving documents, photos and objects related to Tremont's history for more than 60 years and is encouraging residents of all ages to keep journals or other records of their experiences, which they would be willing to share with us where they will be archived for future use.

While philosophical or relevant political ruminations are certainly of interest, it is the personal details of daily life that bring history to life. How you lived; the dynamics of sheltering in place with family or alone; the challenges you faced getting food, getting exercise, communicating with friends and family far away; how the community at large supported you. If you are letter writers, think about saving copies of correspondences in which you discuss what life is like during these difficult times. Photographs that illustrate activities unique to this era are encouraged.

Tremont people's everyday lives and experiences are a critical part of our town's history. While you are sheltering at home and looking for things to do, this may also be a good time to collect your personal memories and family stories of other hard times in Tremont.

When this pandemic has run its course or when we have found a cure or vaccine, it would be interesting to know what, if any, lessons we have learned.

Copies of memoirs or photos may be mailed to P.O. Box 215, Bass Harbor, ME 04653 or emailed to tremonthistory@gmail.com



THS board member Nan Lincoln shares experiences, story sources and ideas with the 4th grade class, Tremont Consolidated School 2020. Fellow Board member Chuck Liebow was also present, out of sight to the left behind the desk. He shared with the class some important understandings of online resources and the THS website.

Natalia Pajor-Meddaugh photo

TODAY'S STUDENTS LEARN AND WILL REMEMBER

By Kathie Pratt

In 2016, the Tremont Historical Society received a letter from Maine’s Secretary of State regarding Maine’s Medal of Honor Project. Its mission is to memorialize MOH recipients in their hometowns. It encourages civic and cultural organizations to partner with schools, learn about their hometown heroes, and raise funds for their public memorial. The Medal of Honor is our country's highest military decoration, awarded by the President in the name of Congress. Turns out, Tremont’s own John F. Bickford was awarded the medal for his valor and composure under fire in a naval battle during the American Civil War.

It took four years of intermittent proposals to educators to get an acceptance. Although there was interest, teachers are extremely busy just teaching the required standards, which leaves little time for a project of such proportions. Enter Natalia Pajor-Meddaugh, Tremont School’s 4th grade teacher. She matched the project with the grade 4 core standards of writing informational text, and social studies units on Maine and heroes.

This year's class is particularly precocious, and therefore up to the task. They are determined not only to learn about Bickford, but to add a plaque in his honor at the veterans' memorial site beside the school. At the minimum, a bronze plaque fitting that space costs \$3000.

In November, they presented their intentions at the Veterans' Day event. In December, they had a bake sale at the winter concert, raising over \$250 in donations, with an additional \$100 coming in later. Their teacher applied for a Tremont School Fund grant. The class, THS, and the school's parent-teacher organization partnered to host a spring egg hunt and pancake breakfast. Because of the Covid19 pandemic, it had to be canceled, and the grant outcome is on hold. The memorial efforts may be temporarily dormant, but never abandoned!

On the academic side, the class has researched and written about John F. Bickford's life and role in the Civil War. They will condense their findings into a brochure to educate the public about this hero. THS guests Nan Lincoln and Chuck Liebow visited the class in February. Ms. Lincoln had written an article about Bickford for the *Mount Desert Islander* the previous spring. A journalist and author of books, she shared her experience and tricks of the trade. Mr. Liebow, a retired Coast Guard captain and former technology specialist at Sumner HS, helped the class with online sources. He also showed them some features of the THS web site. Here is a bit of what they found:

John F. Bickford was born (1843) and bred in Bass Harbor, growing up on the sea. His name appears in the 1850 census along with his seven siblings, his mother Abigail [*sic*], and his father John, whose occupation was listed as Mariner. The Bickford home site is on the 1860 H. F. Walling map of Hancock County, and the 1881 Colby & Stuart map of MDI.

At age 19, John enlisted in the Union Navy, and served aboard the *USS Kearsarge*. He established an exemplary service record which culminated on June 19, 1864, off the coast of Cherbourg, France, when the *USS Kearsarge* sank the Confederate raider *CSS Alabama*. Bickford was manning the first pivot gun, cool as a cucumber all the while. Fascinating details of the battle and quotes from John himself can be seen in Norman Delaney's 2010 Naval History article, on the U.S. Naval Institute website. The battle was famous; there are plenty of sources of information available in both word and image, including a Manet painting which hangs in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

After the *Kearsarge* was decommissioned in November of 1864, Bickford served on the *USS Lenapee*. Unfortunately, he and many of his fellow crewmen contracted malaria and typhoid. Illness forced him to resign in 1865, and he returned home. Two years later he moved to Gloucester, Massachusetts, worked for Stockbridge Fish Company, married the boss's daughter, Elsie, and raised a family. He spent the remainder of his life Gloucester, and died in 1927. He is buried in Mt. Pleasant Cemetery there, with his stone inscribed "Medal of Honor, Master's Mate, US Navy."

<https://www.mdlander.com/maine-news/bass-harbor-native-was-civil-war-naval-hero>

http://mdihistory.org/Cultural_History_Project/htdocs/MDIcensuses/Tremont1850census.htm

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3732m.ct003150/> (Map)

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3733h.la000268/> (Map)

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2010/december/i-didnt-feel-excited-mite>

<https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/101707.html>

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/19621/john-f-bickford>

Ed. Note: As Kathie mentioned in this article, due to the pandemic it is impossible for the current fourth graders to complete the project described. There is hope that another way will be found.

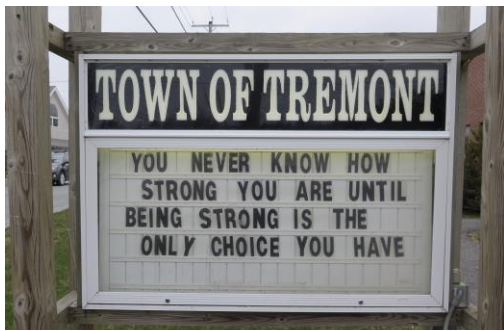


OUR NEW CALENDAR IS SOON TO BE HAD!

The 2020 Calendar was such a success that of course we set out to create a new one for 2021. This time we determined to add captions or "legends" about each picture, in the limited space available. So the new calendar should be even more interesting as well as useful. It will be on sale at the Museum, assuming we will be open during the summer as usual, for \$12. It can be ordered, as can all our books on the list in this Newsletter. Mail delivery is \$14 (includes tax and postage). Payment can be made by credit card or check. See information in the Response section.

Our Calendars will also be on sale in several local stores which carry varied merchandise.

A few of the 2020 calendars are left, now to be had for \$6.00 only (\$8.00 if shipped)!



Elizabeth Roberts photos

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Around our town lately (March, April and into May at least!) the signs shown here are not surprising, even if initially disheartening, to see. We are coping with an incredibly contagious disease for which we have no vaccine to prevent, nor even effective medications to mitigate. The technique of "social distancing" which we hear was recommended and practiced with good effect in the 1918 "Spanish Flu" pandemic, is our best line of defense in these times as well.

Still, while the top two signs, one at the borders of the town and entrance drive to the Town Office, the other on the roof of the Swans Island Ferry terminal, seem necessary though somehow unfriendly, the bottom two tell a very different story. In front of our closed elementary school and community center, some good soul has posted encouraging and uplifting words for passersby to ponder. And all over this Island community, some inspired neighbors have been posting these Trojan Strong signs to remind us that our high school athletes set an example, now as always, that we older folks need to hold before us every day.

It is not frequent that our Newsletter carries information about present-day events. But as we are often reminded, what we are experiencing today will be looked back upon in the future by our descendants who will find the same level of interest and satisfaction with which we view past events. So let us keep the right kind of records and artifacts to make sure those future folks will be well informed!

Books Available - 2020

We continue to stock books by local and regional Maine authors, especially those whose fictional works are based on nearby landscapes and communities which are part of our history. Non-fiction works tend to cover local wildlife, industry, community life, crafts, and special features such as homes and cemeteries. We encourage readers to peruse the following list of offerings which are often not found elsewhere. There are no better gifts for the holidays, birthdays, etc. than books!

Author	Title	Price	5.5% tax	Total
Peter Blanchard III	We Were an Island	\$27.95	1.59	\$29.54
Sven Davisson, Editor	Foley Craddock-Moore short stories	14.95	0.82	15.77
Christina Marsden Gillis	Writing on Stone	24.95	1.38	26.33
Christina Marsden Gillis	Where Edges Don't Hold	8.95	0.49	9.44
Ruth Gortner Grierson (text) & Richard Johnson (photos)	A is for Acadia	15.95	0.88	16.83
Ruth Gortner Grierson	Nature Diary of MDI	15.17	0.83	16.00
Ruth Gortner Grierson	Wildlife Watcher's Guide	15.17	0.83	16.00
Ruth Gortner Grierson	Wonderful Wildflowers	15.17	0.83	16.00
Ruth Grierson & Tom Vining	Living on the Edge	26.00	1.43	27.43
Sharon Joyce	Culinary History of Downeast ME	21.99	1.21	23.2
Nan Lincoln	The Summer of Cecily	18.95	1.05	20.00
Nan Lincoln	Cecily's Summer	19.95	1.10	21.05
Eleanor Mayo	Turn Home	16.95	0.93	17.88
Eleanor Mayo	October Fire	16.95	0.93	17.88
Eleanor Mayo	Loom of the Land	18.95	1.05	20.00
Eleanor Mayo	Swan's Harbor	16.95	0.93	17.88
Ruth Moore	The Weir	14.95	0.82	15.77
Ruth Moore	Spoonhandle	13.95	0.77	14.72
Ruth Moore	Fire Balloon	15.00	0.83	15.83
Ruth Moore	Candlemas Bay	10.95	0.61	11.56
Ruth Moore	Speak to the Winds	15.00	0.83	15.83
Ruth Moore	Walk Down Main Street	8.95	0.49	9.44
Ruth Moore	Times Web	13.95	0.77	14.72
Sandy Phippen	High Clouds Soaring, Clouds...	16.95	0.93	17.88
	<i>Letters of Ruth Moore</i>			
Laurie Schreiber	Boat Building on MDI	21.99	1.21	23.20
Wendell Seavey	Working the Sea	16.95	0.93	17.88
Weslea Sidon	The Fool Sings (<i>poetry</i>)	15.17	0.83	16.00
Irving Silverman	Aging Wisely	29.98	1.65	31.63
Sheldon "Smitty" Smith	Memories of a Lifetime (<i>poetry</i>)	10.00	0.55	10.55
Craig Milner & Ralph Stanley	Ralph Stanley: Tales of a Maine Boat Builder	24.95	1.38	26.33
Tremont School	Cookbook	9.48	0.52	10.00
Tremont Women's Club	Two Tall Tales	9.95	0.55	10.50
Thomas Vining	Cemeteries of Cranberry Isles and The Towns of Mount Desert Is.	33.18	1.82	35.00
Capt. Ray Williamson	Maine Windjammer Cruises Keeping the Tradition Alive	48.00	2.64	50.64
Luann Yetter	Bar Harbor in the Roaring Twenties	21.99	1.21	23.20
DVD	Chummy Rich Maine Boat Builder	14.95	0.82	15.77



Our members help keep us afloat. Here's how you can join the crew:

- \$10 Individual
- \$25 Family
- \$50 Contributor
- \$100 Friend
- \$250 Patron
- \$500 Benefactor
- other: \$ _____

All contributors automatically become Society members and will receive our periodic newsletters.

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City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____ Phone _____

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In honor or memory of _____

- I would like my gift to be anonymous
- My check is enclosed (payable to Tremont Historical Society)
- I would like to pay by credit card:

Card number _____ Expiration date _____

If you wish a written receipt, please let us know.
Otherwise, your receipt will be your check or credit card statement.

The Tremont Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization

Please clip and mail to Tremont Historical Society, P.O. Box 215, Bass Harbor ME 04653

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Books or Calendars may be ordered as follows:

Contact the Editor at redhousemaine@gmail.com or P.O. Box 176, Bernard ME 04612

See price list on page 10. Please add \$1.50 per book for postage.

Calendars are \$14 including Maine sales tax and postage.

We can accept check or credit card payment. Please make checks payable to Tremont Historical Society or include your credit card number and expiration date with your order. If you wish a written receipt, please let us know.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Tremont Historical Society is dedicated to preservation of the history of the town of Tremont. We achieve this mission by gathering, cataloging, preserving and making available to the public historical materials, such as genealogies and information showing the growth and development of the town, as well as artifacts. We operate and maintain the Bass Harbor Country Store Museum to protect and preserve the artifacts and documents in the Society's collection and to display the collection to the public; we promote a spirit of goodwill and encourage others to cooperate in historic preservation to the benefit of this and future generations; and we do any and all things necessary and proper to promote and encourage the highest level of conduct of an historical society.

Visit our new website: www.tremontmainehistory.us

or

email us at: tremonthistory@gmail.com



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