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Tending the Vineyard: Maritime Religion on Martha's Vineyard from 1824-1978

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**“Tending the Vineyard: Maritime Religion on Martha’s
Vineyard from 1824-1978”**

Following the War of 1812, ministers who had worked among the urban poor in the seaport cities of the East Coast began to direct their attention toward a new, distinct population, merchant American seafarers. By the 1820s, most of the major seaports from Maine to New Orleans had either a Mariners’ Church, a Marine Bible Society, or a Seamen’s Friend Society. Boston, which was the only port to direct religious energies toward seafarers before the war, was quick to renew its commitment after the war. The Boston Seaman’s Friend Society was one of the first to join the national American Seamen’s Friend Society in 1828, and it retained its branch status until 1888.

In 1828, “a company of members of the Methodist-Episcopal Church” founded the Port Society of the City of Boston and its Vicinity for the moral and religious instruction of seamen. They

hired the famous Rev. Edward Taylor to serve as a minister in the society. Taylor was well-loved by mariners (as he was a former sailor) and the literary elite. Melville based the character of Father Mapple in *Moby Dick* on the real-life Taylor. By 1830 they opened the Boston Mariners' Church, and Taylor preached to departing whaleships at Martha's Vineyard. Later, a mission and chapel were opened at Vineyard Haven to service the vessels seeking shelter in the North Channel. A steam launch was purchased so that the harbor chaplain could "make the rounds" among the vessels lying at anchor. Although much of the work was performed by professional clergy, they frequently relied on the efforts of laywomen to help raise funds and perform works of charity.

The first part of this paper will give a brief introduction to maritime missiology, the second section will trace the beginnings of the Boston Seaman's Friend Society in the nineteenth century and the third will focus on the Vineyard Haven branch of that

work well into the twentieth century. Using source material from the American Seamen's Friend Society - there is a 5,000 document collections of the ASFS papers in the G.W. Blunt White Library at Mystic Seaport, the Boston Seaman's Friend Society - whose papers are mostly in the Congregational House on Beacon Hill in Boston, and other secondary works from the nineteenth and twentieth century. I am especially indebted to George Wiseman's book, *The Kept the Lower Lights Burning*, Wiseman was the pastor of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church in Oak Bluff during WWII and the son-in-law of Austin Tower. This presentation will look at the many facets that made up religious work among seafarers.

Let me take the next 5 minutes to give you a very brief

Introduction to Maritime Philanthropy

Beginning in the 1820s, social reformers from the "Benevolent Empire" founded asylums, homes for decrepit sailors, temperance boarding houses, savings banks, reading rooms, and

other institutions to try to bring America's seafarers into middle-class Christian society. By 1828, the American Seamen's Friend Society had consolidated and co-opted most local chapters in ports from Maine to New Orleans in which clergy and laity, women and men, worked to Christianize this unusual "race" of people.

Through magazines, ship's libraries, tracts, shipboard visitation, and boarding houses, mostly interdenominational efforts were made to evangelize the merchant mariner. These "*good* havens" provided by religious groups were intended to domesticate the seaman, providing him with alternatives to the life-cycle of crimping, drunkenness, indebtedness, and shipping out again.

By the 1830s and 40s, going to sea no longer held the appeal that it once had for the young men of New England. Poor working conditions, brutal "hell ships," and low wages forced recruiters to fill the forecastles with men of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. These poor conditions were met with a variety of reform efforts intended to change to seafarer, the management of the ship, or both. Some reformers advocated temperance as a

“cure-all” to the increasing discipline problems and safety concerns on board ship causing owners and shipmasters to implement various forms of social control. Insurance companies, for instance, gave a 5% reduction in premiums to “dry” ships.¹ Reform pressure came not only from “above,” but from the seafarers themselves. Many joined Washingtonian temperance groups to pledge their own sobriety and to influence others during this ante-bellum period. Some attempts were made to get the seafarers to fund these reforms themselves. The Port of New York charged a “toll” to seafarers to help build asylums for injured and decrepit seafarers - with Sailors’ Snug Harbor as the most famous example. Even literature was rarely given out for free as missionaries learned that their tracts, if given out unsolicited, frequently found their way into the cook’s fire or over the side.² Evangelical Christian publications frequently made appeals to merchants to give more money to “the cause” of maritime

¹ Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *American Temperance Movements: Cycles of Reform* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 21.

² Harry R. Skallerup. *Books Afloat & Ashore: A History of Books, Libraries, and Reading Among Seamen during the Age of Sail* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1974), 39.

philanthropy, arguing that they had the most to gain from healthy and contented workers. These publications also made broader appeals to all Americans who indirectly benefited from the country's maritime trade and industries.

“Mariners’ Churches” (floating and land-based) were founded in all of the major ports of the Eastern seaboard. These churches were intended to cater to a specific demographic (often national) group rather than espousing a particular doctrine or confession. Mariners were not welcome in many of the churches of the six major denominations of the day, so port societies were formed to run interdenominational worship services and prayer meetings.³ The “Bethel Flag” flew from the rigging of ships by day and a lantern by night to signify that a prayer meeting was taking place on board a particular ship at anchor. But without the kind of institutional support that a denominational structure could provide, these volunteer, parachurch organizations were constantly short of funds.

Vincent A. Yzermans, in his book *The American Catholic Seafarers' Church*, argued that established Protestant churches and the Catholic Church arrived late on the maritime ministry scene. The traditional Parish System put churches near waterfronts, but they usually did not make a concerted effort on behalf of seafarers. Dissenters and evangelicals were the first to minister to the seafarer in the post-Reformation world. Yzermans explained that this was a function of their doctrine but also that “the success of the evangelicals among seafarers might also be attributed to the fact that they were looked down upon by the established churches, just as the seafarers themselves were generally rejected by every other institution of the establishment on land.”⁴ While some scholars have argued that American evangelicals were empowered by disestablishment and the Second Great Awakening, similar missions were blooming concurrently among dissenters in the

³*Sailor's Magazine*. New York: American Seamen's Friend Society, June 1843. Vol. XV, No. 10 P. 214.

⁴Vincent A. Yzermans, *American Catholic Seafarers' Church* (The National Catholic Conference, US, 1992), 76.

United Kingdom.⁵ This seems to indicate that there were social and cultural changes taking place in churches and in society that bridged the Anglo-American trans-Atlantic world, fueling an enormous amount of “benevolent energy” toward the deep-water seafarer.

Now, with that introduction out of the way, let us narrow the focus a little and look at the beginnings of the Boston Seaman’s Friend Society

The Reverend Ashley Day Leavitt, Pastor of the Harvard Church spoke at the Centennial celebration of the society in December of 1927 about the predecessors to the society,

“But this Society was the successor of another organization which was called ‘The Society for the Moral and Religious Improvement of the Poor.’ That is the kind of thing they were doing one hundred years ago. This Society for the Moral and Religious Improvement of the Poor was the successor of another Society for the Moral and Religious Instruction of the Seaman. Fancy trying

⁵Roald Kverndal, *Seamen’s Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey

to do business in such an organization today! But that is what they had in a great deal of their religion a hundred years ago - a kind of condescension. The people that were capable the people that were fortunate, went out in pity to do work for the unfortunate, and they expected a certain subserviency and obeisance on the part of those who were the recipients of the benefaction. A finer democracy has come now. . . No Christian today thinks of going out to elevate his fellow man.”⁶

In this quote we see the way the consciousness of the 1920s found disdain for what they perceived as the motives of their predecessors in the 1820s. But those founders in the early national period did not have the sociology of the 1920s with which to look at the problems besetting the seafarer. While they did take a “noblesse oblige” view of charity work, they knew of no other way to help seafarers than to “elevate them.”

Library, 1986), 424.

⁶ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder #

Because of the active work already taking place in Boston, at its founding in 1828, the Boston chapter was considered a “branch” of the American Seamen’s Friend Society headquartered in New York, never was it considered an “auxiliary.” The Reverend Jonathan Greenleaf became the preacher and agent for the BSFS. On 20 January 1830 - “a Church was organized, based on the most liberal principles, and open to Evangelical Christians of all denominations, intended to take the distinctive character of no one, but adopting those great points on which all agree, to be known only as The Mariner’s Church.”⁷ While there was noble intent to keep the sectarian squabbles to a minimum, Tension existed between the BSFS and the ASFS over raising funds in Massachusetts. The Boston chapter considered Massachusetts to be “its” area but the national society kept raising funds there. They had a split arrangement for awhile but the Boston society

Deems, Mervin M . *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman’s Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975.* “.” Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 136.

⁷ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder #
Deems, Mervin M . *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman’s Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975.* “.” Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 16.

terminated it. Some criticized both societies - claiming that all of the funds went to administrative costs and not to the seafarers themselves.⁸ While attempting to emphasize the non-sectarian, with some churches having ministers from different denominations rotate through the pulpit each week, the mariner's churches were still unapologetically Protestant in the middle of the nineteenth century. Some could not help noticing the commercial success of Protestant nations (as Weber did later in the century) and tied it to racial assumptions as well: here is a quote from the 1853 Annual Report of the BSFS:

“Commerce has always been the bone and sinew of national success. Two-thirds of the commerce of the world is in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race; and the Protestants of the world, and its commanding influence, is being felt upon every ocean, river and sea. Hence the necessity that Christian principles should go in

⁸ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder # Deems, Mervin M . *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975*. “.” Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 40.

every ship, that the Protestant religion may stand side by side with Protestant thrift and enterprise.”⁹

It would not be until after WWI that Catholic seafarers were encouraged to visit the Sailor’s Rest. The workers at Vineyard Haven also prided themselves on their non-sectarian position, as one man put it to the Chaplain, “I have been to this Bethel off and on for more’n ten year, an’ I can’t for the life of me tell what kind of a Christian you are. What church d’you b’long to, anyway?”¹⁰

But before we get into the work at Vineyard Haven, let me finish this brief narrative account of the Boston mission.

The Woman’s Seaman’s Friend Society was organized by 75 women on 14 January 1895 as an auxiliary to the BSFS. Women had been helping the seamen’s cause right from its founding, but always in roles appropriate to the women’s sphere. They made “ditty bags” for the seafarers and held fund-raisers for the cause.

⁹ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder # Deems, Mervin M. *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman’s Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975*. “.” Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 41.

¹⁰ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder # Deems, Mervin M. *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman’s Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975*. “.” Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 97.

The ditty bags included items that a sailor would need at sea plus the address of the woman who made the bag so that he would have someone to write to while at sea. In order to keep a “family” atmosphere, perhaps to keep some social distance, the women who worked with the BSFS were often referred to as “mom” or “mother.” As late as 1935, we find this quote, “What do they find at 287 Hanover Street? A friendly greeting, books, music, good cheer, clothing, food, a clean bed, a home and a mother.”¹¹

Even when the men tried to acknowledge the work the women were doing, it was praise given for performing the tasks of the women’s sphere. Mr. Shumway, of the executive committee said in 1927, “We boys of the Seaman’s Friend Society, like all other men, think we are ‘some punkins’ whether we think the ladies are or not. But I say to you men, after forty years as a director, I doubt if this society would be alive today, or at any rate doing the work

¹¹ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder # Deems, Mervin M. *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman’s Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975.* “.” Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 219.

that we are if it had not been for the Woman's Seaman's Friend Society, a group of women we are indebted to for all kinds of help. They are the ones, you know, who make the wristers and the mufflers, and all those knitted things, to say nothing of giving us ice cream and other things to eat. . .”¹²

In 1904 the Boston Congregational Ministers formally approved the work of the Society. Even so, by 1914, only 155 of a possible 1500 churches supported the work at all and the Seaman's Church had virtually disappeared.¹³ After WWI, when cigarettes became “respectable” for men and women, the BSFS distributed them to sailors. This continued until after WWII and sailors were given cigarettes to smoke in their hospital beds! Unemployment of sailors was high with the sudden end of the war, and even though imports and exports were up, changes in the economy and

¹² Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder #
Deems, Mervin M . *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975*. “.”
Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 139.

¹³ Book / Congregational Library, Collection #3.1, Box #18, Folder #
Deems, Mervin M . *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975*. “.”
Bangor, ME: Printed by Furbush-Roberts Printing Co., Inc., 1975, 1978. Vol. , No. Page 98.

steamship technologies left many seafarers in need of the Society's charity. As mentioned earlier, before WWI, the priests of Boston discouraged Catholic sailors from visiting the Sailor's Rest - after the War the Catholic choir sang there!

On 7 August 1922, the BSFS re-incorporated and 287 Hanover Street and the Bethel property at Vineyard Haven (worth approx. \$200,000) were turned over to the newly incorporated society.

The Women's Seaman's Friend Society ceased to be an auxiliary of the BSFS in 1919.

The work on the Cape and Islands

The Bethel at Vineyard Haven had only two chaplains from 1893 to 1961, Madison Edwards and his son-in-law Austin Tower.

Madison Edwards was born in Woods Hole on 13 August 1852, the son of Captain and Mrs. Benjamin Edwards. His father was the captain of the buoy setter *Active*. He attended a service at the

Congregational Church in Falmouth where he sensed a divine calling to minister to seafarers (he was only 16 at the time). (show slide) A few weeks after this calling he went aboard the barque *Portland* to hold a religious service. Edwards now included himself among the conservatives of the Community Church in Woods Hole who believed that the current leadership had fallen under worldly teachings. They left to form the First Congregational Church of Woods Hole.¹⁴

(show slide)

On 26 April 1882 Madison Edwards married Ella Blandin, a graduate of Wheaton Seminary in Norton, Massachusetts.

Edwards was running a shoe store to try to support his new family.

One year later they had a daughter named Helen and later another named Mary, but known to everyone as May. For the next ten years Edwards did his mission work on a part-time basis, having neither the funds nor the resources to do otherwise. The wealthy

¹⁴ Wiseman, George W. . *They Kept the Lower Lights Burning: The Story of the Seaman's Bethel and It's Ch.* “.” Orlando, FL: Printed by Daniels Publishers, some time after 1978. Vol. , No. Page 22.

yachtsman Malcolm Forbes gave Edwards the use of a room in his farmhouse on Naushon Island and he began his own reading room at Woods Hole when he was 37. By October 1888 the BSFS started to take notice of Edwards, the numbers of sailors that came to see him and how he used his own steam launch to visit vessels.

The Boston Seamen's Friend Society was looking for someone who could minister to seafarers on the Southeast coast of Massachusetts. They interviewed Edwards and this post in 1889 made it possible for him to sell the shoe store and do what he had wanted to do since age 16, minister to seafarers full-time. The \$350 was not even enough to keep up his launch and his salary was increased the following year. Now his field included Woods Hole, Falmouth, Tarpaulin Cove on Naushon Island, and Martha's Vineyard. In March 1889 Woods Hole became an official branch of the Boston Seaman's Friend Society and Edwards its superintendant.

Edwards appealed to the founder of the Christian Endeavor Society, Rev. Francis E. Clark, for permission to found a “Floating Christian Endeavor Society.” (show slide) The necessary changes were made in the constitution and chapters were started in 1890. One of the first chapters was on the Revenue Cutter, *Fish Hawk*. The movement spread quickly to include more than 200 chapters on American and foreign ships. (show Floating Christian Endeavor banner)

Edwards found a loft over a store, a sort of chandlery, that could seat more than 150 people in Vineyard Haven - also there was a Government Marine Hospital there where he began to visit the sick. The BSFS Board of Managers estimated that Woods Hole and Falmouth would see 10,000 vessels (approx 60,000) sailors a year (1890). While the backing of the BSFS gave Edwards credibility, his work still needed some financial backing a recognition.

In May 1890 the Edwards had their last baby - Madison Howard. Edwards had worked as a stevedore to supplement the shoe store - he continued that work to supplement his meager salary in ministry. The steam launch *Helen May* (named after the daughters) became unfit for service and he could not afford to replace her. He had started his ministry with a sailboat and in 1892 wrote to Boston to tell them that he was back in an uncomfortable sailboat. They made a plea in the newsletter "Sea Breeze" and the funds were eventually raised for a new launch. (show photo of *Helen May*, 1892)

In the 12 September 1892 minutes of the BSFS, while most of the Society's attention was directed toward the imminent purchase of \$72,000 worth of property on Hanover Street, we find this entry: "Mr. Darling reported that a committee visited Woods Hole, Tarpaulin Cove, and Vineyard Haven to look over Mr. Edwards work. Voted that Mr. Snow be requested to prepare envelopes and circulars for use in soliciting funds at Vineyard Sound and a box

prepared for same purpose for use on the steam launch - the envelopes to have upon them the address of Mr. Snow, the corresponding Secretary."¹⁵ Clearly, the work on the Cape and Islands was short on funds. But only four months later the first wealthy benefactor of this work approached the Society.

"For the Executive Committee Mr. Darling reported that Miss Fiske had expressed a desire to establish a permanent room at Vineyard Haven for the use of sailors and that Mr. Snow had been delegated to interview Miss Fiske and Capt Edwards relative to this matter. Mr. Snow reported that he had visited Vineyard Haven and saw Mr. Edwards - Miss Fiske had returned to Boston - Miss Fiske has a summer residence at Falmouth - has felt special interest in work for sailors + given a library for the room at Wood's Hole + paid \$40 for use of room for Vineyard Haven. She had send for Mr. Edwards + expressed a desire to him to erect a permanent building at Vineyard Haven + had requested him to

¹⁵ Manuscript / Congregational Library, Collection #Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Box #18, Folder #folder 2 box 1
, . *Minutes, 1851-1895*. “. ” : , . Vol. , No. Page 12 September 1892.

look up the cost of a building such as would be suitable. She has come to Boston + he had written her respecting the cost of the building."¹⁶

In 1893 Edwards was still only making \$550/year while the chaplain in Boston was earning \$2,000 and the custodian \$450! He did not yet have a “religious” title. He is often referred to as the “superintendent” of the work on the Cape. In September of 1893 the Society moved that he be given the title (at least temporarily) of missionary. They encouraged him to raise as much local support as possible and to consider adding another worker - one of them would concentrate on the shore and the other on the men on the vessels. The next month Edwards moved his family to Vineyard Haven but asked the board if he could continue to discharge coal at Woods Hole. It appeared that Edwards still could not entirely quit his “day job.”

¹⁶ Manuscript / Congregational Library, Collection #Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Box #18, Folder #folder 2 box 1
, . *Minutes, 1851-1895*. “.” : , . Vol. , No. Page 5 December 1892.

Miss Fiske gave much of the seed money to lease the land at the head of Union warf and to build the Bethel. On 26 June 1893 the construction of the Bethel at Vinyard Haven started - finished in early October with a dedication on the 23rd (show photo of Bethel after its completion). It was a 20 X 30 ' building with a 12 foot platform across the front. One room on the ground floor with plenty of shelving for the sailors' library. The upstairs was left unfinished but could house cots for shipwrecked sailors

When the Bethel was dedicated Miss Fiske (now married as Mrs. Gardiner Greene Hammond, Jr.) was in Paris and did not even attend the ceremony transferring the property to the BSFS. Her brother read a letter at the ceremony that reflected more of a *nobless oblige* attitude, of doing something for the poor sailor, than one of true concern for their souls.

Even after some various attempts to raise more funds in Vineyard Sound, receipts were still lacking. On 23 May 1894 the board

approved a Mr. E.H. Roper to work in the chapel for the three summer months and act as a collecting agent for the Bethel - this action was misunderstood by Edwards and his friend who thought that the board was attempting to replace him. He treated Roper poorly and quite a bit of gossip went on that summer re: what the BSFS was up to. While the initial goal of the board was to provide a helper to Edwards - after his unChristian behavior of that summer - they considered searching for a replacement. Edwards had very little formal education although he had 20 years of experience working with sailors. They (C.F. Stratton, F.P. Shumway, Jr., and H.J. Darling) stated that ". . .the investigation has clearly shown that the society needs as its representative at Vineyard Haven a man of keener moral perception and of greater intellectual and spiritual development. Your committee recommends that a committee of three be appointed to ascertain if a suitable man can be obtained at a salary of not exceeding five

hundred dollars. . ." - one was not found and Edwards was renewed.¹⁷

In 1896 the BSFS decided to enlarge the Bethel in Vineyard Haven to 55 feet long by 20 ft. wide. It was not uncommon during the 1890s for more than 150 vessels to lie at anchor at Vineyard Haven during a storm. Both the Helen May and the Bethel were frequently filled over capacity. Six bedrooms for the Edwards family were added upstairs and a piazza that overlooked the water (show photo of Bethel) plus a sunny smoking room. It was dedicated on 15 October 1897. (show photo of Edwards in 1897)

Wiseman's book, *They Kept the Lower Lights Burning*, gives many anecdotes of rescues, shipwrecks, and ways in which the Bethel took in cold, wet sailors and passengers over the years. (especially 1898 storm which put more than 100 men in the Bethel, 60 of whom had to be lodged and fed there for four days). (show photo

¹⁷ Manuscript / Congregational Library, Collection #Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Box #18, Folder #folder 2 box 1
, . *Minutes, 1851-1895*. “. ” : , . Vol. , No. Page .

of shipwrecked men at Bethel and wreckage after 1898 storm) The Women's Seaman's Friend Society raised the funds for a new organ and other furnishings for the 1897 rededication.

There had been a Marine Hospital on the Vinyard since 1879 and they had a burying ground that was not kept up but allowed to become overgrown and Edwards had been burying the occasional sailor in the woods or tried to take them to the mainland. After all of the deaths from the storm of 1898, Edwards decided sailors needed a more proper burial place that would be the property of the BSFS. The Women's Seaman's Friend Society of Boston raised the \$150.00 needed to buy a suitable plot and to surround it with a stone wall to serve as the Seaman's Bethel burial ground - they called it "God's Acre." (show photo) Those who had been buried in the woods were exhumed and moved to the new plot. Tugboat captains raised the money for the stone monument that was five years in the building (show photo). Austin Tower did most of the construction and manual labor for the monument and

the *Helen May* carried most of the stones from Naushon and Mashawena. (show photo) The 21 foot memorial was completed in 1913 and the plaque reads: Boston Seaman's Friend Society. Erected in loving memory of Shipmates at Rest. This was not a war memorial, it was for sailors serving during peace. As a footnote Wiseman recorded that in 1975 the BSFS cleared the brush from the Marine Hospital cemetery and provided for its future upkeep.(show photo)

Edwards had many helpers through the 1890s and few lasted for very long or were very capable - all that changed in 1900. Austin Tower was young, had a good knowledge of the sea, came from a religious family, and neither smoked nor drank. Tower was born in Sackville, New Brunswick 16 April 1880. At 16, he shipped out, like so many others from his family and community. Tower was visiting the Bethel on 13 August 1899 and converted to Christianity. Edwards asked him if he would come work for him and he agreed, finished the term he had agreed to taking a vessel to

New Brunswick full of coal, and then returned to the Bethel to assist Edwards. (show photo of when Tower came to work at the Bethel) Within the year he was Edward's assistant as he had great ability to work with his hands as well as ability as an evangelist. For seven years he served as engineer for the *Helen May*, (show photo of Helen May bringing men ashore, Bethel decked out, Tower decked out, and first fo'castle, and first fo'castle at left unsatisfactory) custodian of the Bethel, gardener, carpenter, painter, mechanic and jack-of-all trades. He attended Mt. Hermon School at Northfield, MA for four months to work on his skills as an evangelist of the gospel. He married Edward's eldest daughter Helen B. Edwards on 3 June 1908 (show photo) and he moved out of the fo'castle and they moved into a new home on Mt. Aldworth. We he returned from his honeymoon in New Brunswick, Tower learned that he had been promoted to assistant chaplain (made possible by those summer courses in 1907 at Mt. Hermon).

Edwards and Tower noticed that The Floating Christian Endeavor depended upon a chapter that could be founded among a large crew. This model worked well on big government ships. But in the first decade of the century, it became apparent that many of the small vessels of the coastal trade were made up of crews of 5 or 6 people - or one or two families. 1 January 1907 they introduced the Hold Fast Brotherhood based on Revelation 3:11 "Hold fast to that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." (show photo of Hold Fast pin) 200 hundred sailors became members in the first two months alone. Each member had to meet privately with the chaplains and pray with them. Although not stated in the written pledge, it was understood that this was a dry brotherhood. In April 1911 Edwards reported that he could not get badges made up fast enough for all of the sailors who wanted to join the brotherhood. By 1915 1600 mariners had joined and in the years that followed that number doubled. The brotherhood stopped receiving new members when Tower retired but the Boston chapter started the Anchor Alliance to perform a similar ministry function.

The trolly between Vinyard Haven and Oak Bluffs stopped right near the Bethel. The chaplain would pick up men with the launch, promise the captain that he would return them to the ship sober and on time, but some seafarers would slip off to the tavern and dance hall in Oak Bluffs. After Madison had to chase down some of these mariners, he learned to take a more careful attendance.

When a liquor vendor opened in Vinyard Haven near the Bethel - Edwards went to the town selectmen and they shut it down in 1908.

Joy Line gave the Bethel their life boat number 4, the *Aranasas*, after the Bethel provided for 50 passengers and crew who were shipwrecked and taken in at midnight and cared for. (show photo of *Aranasas*) Although she couldn't go out in the rough weather that the *Helen May* could, she was cheaper to run for small jobs around the harbor. Perhaps because she could be easily handled by one

person, she was stolen in 1910 by a 17 year old boy who took her to Harwichport.

In 1916 Madison Edwards was temporarily assigned to Monument Beach to determine if there was a need to establish a mission there. There circulated a false rumor that the BSFS was moving the Bethel to Monument Beach, at the west end of the newly opened Cape Cod Canal. It was a miserable winter and, although the canal corporation gave the BSFS freedom of the canal for their launch, the *Helen May* spent most of the time frozen in the canal (show photo of Helen May frozen in canal) Two large steamers had sunk across the channel making passage impossible.

Through the 1920s, Edwards remained active but turned more and more of the day-to-day activities of the Bethel over to Tower.

Captain Madison Edwards died at the age of 74 and was buried at 2:00 on 18 August 1926 after serving seafarers on the Cape and Islands for 58 years. Appreciation was shown in the *Sea Breeze*

and his widow was welcome to stay in the Bethel apartment as long as she pleased.

The deck hands and firemen of the *SS Islander* with flag at half mast, for the funeral of Madison Edwards, carried the casket aboard at Vinyard Haven and took it ashore at Woods Hole where he was buried in a family lot.

The *Helen May* was given to the Society in Edward's will and, as she had been in service for nearly 40 years, they began discussing replacing the launch almost immediately. She was retired from service in 1930 and a new launch was named after him - the *Madison Edwards* - was dedicated to God's work. (show photo)

The *Edwards* could accommodate 50 men in her cabin. The boat caught fire four years later right after re-fueling and had to be completely re-built.

Austin Tower was given more responsibility and a higher salary following the death of Edwards, (show photo of Tower in office)

but the BSFS letterhead still listed him as “superintendent” as late as 1929. While 1929 marked the beginning of the worst economic depression in US history, seafarers had received earlier omens.

The early effects of the Depression were felt in the shipping industry before the Crash. The BSFS claimed that it was the only sailor welfare agency in Boston providing free meals and beds for destitute sailors. Additional cots still only brought their numbers up to 90 beds. Special programs and meals had been delivered at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year.¹⁸ Shipping interests felt the coming of the depression sooner than other industries.

1927 and 1928 were both bad years for sailors looking for work. Seafarers’ charities ran huge deficits and believed that it would be morally objectionable to do otherwise in such hard times. In January 1934 the Superintendent of the NRA admitted that the program had not yet “appreciably affected the lot of seamen.”

Many agencies had to loosen some of their rules about an

¹⁸ Manuscript / Congregational Library, Collection #Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Box #18, Folder #box 3 folder 7
, . *minutes, 1926-40*. “.” : , . Vol. , No. Page 3 February 1930.

individual's work history as seafarers went for longer periods of time without work. They tried to discourage drifting from port to port and, although prohibition had ended, they refused to help men who spent money on liquor. The BSFS maintained a reading room at Tarpaulin Cove, Sandwich, and the Bethel at Vineyard Haven; but in 1935, during one of the darkest years of the depression there was talk in Boston of closing the Bethel to save on expenses. The islanders were in an uproar and letters poured in from around the world.

WWII made many large ocean-going vessels available at a good price to many shipping firms in the United States and abroad. Roll on and Roll off had made it so that ships and sailors spent less time in port - and by the late 50s containerized cargo perfected what Ro-Ro had only hinted at. Large, technologically sophisticated container ports developed away from the downtown areas where seafarers' bethels and boarding houses had been built.

The Vineyard was not immune to these large, global changes.

By the late 1950s traffic though Vineyard Haven had dropped considerably. In 1952 *The Madison Edwards* was sold and moved to the Amazon to transport workers along that river. 1952 was the same year the Marine Hospital closed at Vineyard Haven.(show photo of Marine Hospital)

The BSFS considered transferring the Bethel to the old US Public Health Service Hospital on the bluff. The Bethel was offered for sale but Vineyarders rallied and the building was re-furbished and a chapel added.

By the 1950s and 60s the Vineyard had changed considerably over Tower's lifetime. Deepwater and coastal vessels gone from the North Channel, now the Vineyard was portrayed by mainlanders more as a summer resort than as working-class port. The sailors gone, the launches gone, and the chaplains and their wives departed, the BSFS again considered what to do with the property in Vineyard Haven. Tower had retired to Chaplain Emeritus in 1957 and the BSFS gave a dinner and reception to honor his more than 50 years of service - and in 1961 he passed into glory at the

age of 81. Mrs. Harriet Norris Eaton Goldberg, who had lived across the street from the Bethel in the 1785 house for a number of years, provided in her will funds to maintain the Bethel. The Bethel was enlarged and a stained-glass window added that was dedicated to the memory of Madison Edwards (window visible behind pulpit) and the reading room was turned into a museum in memory of Austin Tower.(show photo of “present” museum and chapel) It became a tourist attraction and hundreds visited the chapel and museum each summer. On 15 June 1965 there was a third dedication of the Bethel, a new chapel was named after Madison Edwards in addition to the museum, chaplain’s office, and modern rest rooms. Tower’s daughter-in-law “Tessie” Osborne’s wife (show photo) became the hostess of the renovated building. Lastly, the Bethel and the adjoining property had to make room for progress and was sold to the Steamship authority for an expanded ferry terminal.