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Disasters etc.

The Maritime World of Marblehead, 1815-1865

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****Q&A with author John R.H. Kimball****

Q: What inspired you to write *Disasters, etc.*?

A: I inherited some documents from my Marblehead ancestors. I've always been interested in maritime history, so I began trying to make sense of the documents. But the more I read, the more I found that historic Marbleheaders' maritime life remained virtually unknown and very misunderstood. Outsiders called Marbleheaders immoral, unindustrious and timid, but they were actually quite the opposite. This negative reputation may have been due to the insularity of Marblehead. Locals kept to themselves, partly because Marblehead was an un-Puritan town surrounded by Puritan towns. It was a unique community in many ways.

Q: What drew you to the era of 1815 - 1865 in Marblehead? What was it like?

A: Once I started doing some research, it was an obvious choice. The documents were available, the history of this period had been ignored and it was a transitional period for Marblehead. There were many changes: After the War of 1812, Marbleheaders continued to fish, but farther away in Newfoundland. Shipmasters set records for speed, as the Clipper Ship era exploded. When codfishing gave out, the fishermen made an unlikely transition to shoemaking. And finally, the town became famous for building clipper ships. All of this happened in a fairly short period of time, making it a really interesting era.

Q: How and why did you choose the title *Disasters, etc.*?

A: This was the name of the column in daily newspapers of the time that reported on the misfortunes that occurred to ships throughout the world. Marblehead vessels that are discussed in my book appeared in this column. The existence of the column shows how great the interest in maritime affairs was at the time and how dangerous maritime careers were. The sea has not changed and Lloyd's of London still publishes a similar casualty list, but not in the daily paper.

Q: Did you learn any unexpected facts about Marblehead during your research?

A: I was surprised to find that Marbleheaders were substantially better fishermen than those in other towns, as well as better sea captains. I believe that this can be attributed to Marblehead's exclusive maritime focus for two hundred years and its strong communal spirit.

Q: Did the book take a long time to research? Where did you find the documents and pictures?

A. You have to like to dig. There is a wealth of material at the Marblehead Museum and Historical Society, the Peabody Essex Museum, and elsewhere. There is information accessible in various ways, even on the web. You never know when you are going to find the missing link and that's the fun of it for me!

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