

ALDRICH THOMAS BAILEY

AN OLD TOWN BY THE
SEA

Thomas Aldrich

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Thomas Bailey Aldrich

An Old Town By the Sea

PISCATAQUA RIVER

Thou singest by the gleaming isles,
By woods, and fields of corn,
Thou singest, and the sunlight smiles
Upon my birthday morn.

But I within a city, I,
So full of vague unrest,
Would almost give my life to lie
An hour upon upon thy breast.

To let the wherry listless go,
And, wrapt in dreamy joy,
Dip, and surge idly to and fro,
Like the red harbor-buoy;

To sit in happy indolence,
To rest upon the oars,
And catch the heavy earthy scents
That blow from summer shores;

To see the rounded sun go down,
And with its parting fires
Light up the windows of the town
And burn the tapering spires;

And then to hear the muffled tolls
From steeples slim and white,
And watch, among the Isles of Shoals,
The Beacon's orange light.

O River! flowing to the main
Through woods, and fields of corn,
Hear thou my longing and my pain
This sunny birthday morn;

And take this song which fancy shapes
To music like thine own,
And sing it to the cliffs and capes
And crags where I am known!

I. CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH

I CALL it an old town, but it is only relatively old. When one reflects on the countless centuries that have gone to the formation of this crust of earth on which we temporarily move, the most ancient cities on its surface seem merely things of the week before last. It was only the other day, then—that is to say, in the month of June, 1603—that one Martin Pring, in the ship *Speedwell*, an enormous ship of nearly fifty tons burden, from Bristol, England, sailed up the Piscataqua River. The *Speedwell*, numbering thirty men, officers and crew, had for consort the *Discoverer*, of twenty-six tons and thirteen men. After following the windings of “the brave river” for twelve miles or more, the two vessels turned back and put to sea again, having failed in the chief object of the expedition, which was to obtain a cargo of the medicinal sassafras-tree, from the bark of which, as well known to our ancestors, could be distilled the Elixir of Life.

It was at some point on the left bank of the Piscataqua, three or four miles from the mouth of the river, that worthy Master Pring probably effected one of his several landings. The beautiful stream widens suddenly at this place, and the green banks, then covered with a network of strawberry vines, and sloping invitingly to the lip of the crystal water, must have won the tired mariners.

The explorers found themselves on the edge of a vast forest of oak, hemlock, maple, and pine; but they saw no sassafras-trees to speak of, nor did they encounter—what would have been infinitely less to their taste—and red-men. Here and there were discoverable the scattered ashes of fires where the Indians had encamped earlier in the spring; they were absent now, at the silvery falls, higher up the stream, where fish abounded at that season. The soft June breeze, laden with the delicate breath of wild-flowers and the pungent odors of spruce and pine, ruffled the duplicate sky in the water; the new leaves lisped pleasantly in the tree tops, and the birds were singing as if they had gone mad. No ruder sound or movement of life disturbed the primeval solitude. Master Pring would scarcely recognize the spot were he to land there to-day.

Eleven years afterwards a much cleverer man than the commander of the *Speedwell* dropped anchor in the Piscataqua—Captain John Smith of famous memory. After slaying Turks in hand-to-hand combats, and doing all sorts of doughty deeds wherever he chanced to decorate the globe with his presence, he had come with two vessels to the fisheries on the rocky selva of Maine, when curiosity, or perhaps a deeper motive, led him to examine the neighboring shore lines. With eight of his men in a small boat, a ship’s yawl, he skirted the coast from Penobscot Bay to Cape Cod, keeping his eye open. This keeping his eye open was a peculiarity of the little captain; possibly a family trait. It was Smith who really discovered the Isles of Shoals, exploring in person those masses of bleached rock—those “isles assez hautes,” of which the French navigator Pierre de Guast, Sieur de Monts, had caught a bird’s-eye glimpse through the twilight in 1605. Captain Smith christened the group Smith’s Isles, a title which posterity, with singular persistence of ingratitude, has ignored. It was a tardy sense of justice that expressed itself a few years ago in erecting on Star Island a simple marble shaft to the memory of JOHN SMITH—the multitudinous! Perhaps this long delay is explained by a natural hesitation to label a monument so ambiguously.

The modern Jason, meanwhile, was not without honor in his own country, whatever may have happened to him in his own house, for the poet George Wither addressed a copy of pompous verses “To his Friend Captain Smith, upon his Description of New England.” “Sir,” he says—

“Sir: your Relations I haue read: which shew
Ther’s reason I should honor them and you:
And if their meaning I haue vnderstood,
I dare to censure thus: Your Project’s good;
And may (if follow’d) doubtlesse quit the paine

With honour, pleasure and a trebble gaine;
Beside the benefit that shall arise
To make more happy our Posterities.”

The earliest map of this portion of our seaboard was prepared by Smith and laid before Prince Charles, who asked to give the country a name. He christened it New England. In that remarkable map the site of Portsmouth is call Hull, and Kittery and York are known as Boston.

It was doubtless owing to Captain John Smith’s representation on his return to England that the Laconia Company selected the banks of the Piscataqua for their plantation. Smith was on an intimate footing with Sir Ferinand Gorges, who, five years subsequently, made a tour of inspection along the New England coast, in company with John Mason, then Governor of Newfoundland. One of the results of this summer cruise is the town of Portsmouth, among whose leafy ways, and into some of whose old-fashioned houses, I purpose to take the reader, if he have an idle hour on his hands. Should we meet the flitting ghost of some old-time worthy, on the staircase or at a lonely street corner, the reader must be prepared for it.

II. ALONG THE WATER SIDE

IT is not supposable that the early settlers selected the site of their plantation on account of its picturesqueness. They were influenced entirely by the lay of the land, its nearness and easy access to the sea, and the secure harbor it offered to their fishing-vessels; yet they could not have chosen a more beautiful spot had beauty been the sole consideration. The first settlement was made at Odiorne's Point—the Pilgrims' Rock of New Hampshire; there the Manor, or Mason's Hall, was built by the Laconia Company in 1623. It was not until 1631 that the Great House was erected by Humphrey Chadborn on Strawberry Bank. Mr. Chadborn, consciously or unconsciously, sowed a seed from which a city has sprung.

The town of Portsmouth stretches along the south bank of the Piscataqua, about two miles from the sea as the crow flies—three miles following the serpentine course of the river. The stream broadens suddenly at this point, and at flood tide, lying without a ripple in a basin formed by the interlocked islands and the mainland, it looks more like an island lake than a river. To the unaccustomed eye there is no visible outlet. Standing on one of the wharves at the foot of State Street or Court Street, a stranger would at first scarcely suspect the contiguity of the ocean. A little observation, however, would show him that he was in a seaport. The rich red rust on the gables and roofs of ancient buildings looking seaward would tell him that. There is a fitful saline flavor in the air, and if while he gazed a dense white fog should come rolling in, like a line of phantom breakers, he would no longer have any doubts.

It is of course the oldest part of the town that skirts the river, though few of the notable houses that remain are to be found there. Like all New England settlements, Portsmouth was built of wood, and has been subjected to extensive conflagrations. You rarely come across a brick building that is not shockingly modern. The first house of the kind was erected by Richard Wibird towards the close of the seventeenth century.

Though many of the old landmarks have been swept away by the fateful hand of time and fire, the town impresses you as a very old town, especially as you saunter along the streets down by the river. The worm-eaten wharves, some of them covered by a sparse, unhealthy beard of grass, and the weather-stained, unoccupied warehouses are sufficient to satisfy a moderate appetite for antiquity. These deserted piers and these long rows of empty barracks, with their sarcastic cranes projecting from the eaves, rather puzzle the stranger. Why this great preparation for a commercial activity that does not exist, and evidently had not for years existed? There are no ships lying at the pier-heads; there are no gangs of stevedores staggering under the heavy cases of merchandise; here and there is a barge laden down to the bulwarks with coal, and here and there a square-rigged schooner from Maine smothered with fragrant planks and clapboards; an imported citizen is fishing at the end of the wharf, a ruminative freckled son of Drogheda, in perfect sympathy with the indolent sunshine that seems to be sole proprietor of these crumbling piles and ridiculous warehouses, from which even the ghost of prosperity has flown.

Once upon a time, however, Portsmouth carried on an extensive trade with the West Indies, threatening as a maritime port to eclipse both Boston and New York. At the windows of these musty counting-rooms which overlook the river near Spring Market used to stand portly merchants, in knee breeches and silver shoe-buckles and plum-colored coats with ruffles at the wrist, waiting for their ships to come up the Narrows; the cries of stevedores and the chants of sailors at the windlass used to echo along the shore where all is silence now. For reasons not worth setting forth, the trade with the Indies abruptly closed, having ruined as well as enriched many a Portsmouth adventurer. This explains the empty warehouses and the unused wharves. Portsmouth remains the interesting widow of a once very lively commerce. I fancy that few fortunes are either made or lost in Portsmouth nowadays. Formerly it turned out the best ships, as it did the ablest ship captains, in the world. There

were families in which the love for blue water was in immemorial trait. The boys were always sailors; “a grey-headed shipmaster, in each generation, retiring from the quarter-deck to the homestead, while a boy of fourteen took the hereditary place before the mast, confronting the salt spray and the gale, which had blasted against his sire and grandsire.” (1. Hawthorne in his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*.) With thousands of miles of sea-line and a score or two of the finest harbors on the globe, we have adroitly turned over our carrying trade to foreign nations.

In other days, as I have said, a high maritime spirit was characteristic of Portsmouth. The town did a profitable business in the war of 1812, sending out a large fleet of the sauciest small craft on record. A pleasant story is told of one of these little privateers—the Harlequin, owned and commanded by Captain Elihu Brown. The Harlequin one day gave chase to a large ship, which did not seem to have much fight aboard, and had got it into close quarters, when suddenly the shy stranger threw open her ports, and proved to be His Majesty’s Ship-of-War *Bulwark*, seventy-four guns. Poor Captain Brown!

Portsmouth has several large cotton factories and one or two corpulent breweries; it is a wealthy old town, with a liking for first mortgage bonds; but its warmest lover will not claim for it the distinction of being a great mercantile centre. The majority of her young men are forced to seek other fields to reap, and almost every city in the Union, and many a city across the sea, can point to some eminent merchant, lawyer, or what not, as “a Portsmouth boy.” Portsmouth even furnished the late king of the Sandwich Islands, Kekuanaoa, with a prime minister, and his nankeen Majesty never had a better. The affection which all these exiles cherish for their birthplace is worthy of remark. On two occasions—in 1852 and 1873, the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the settlement of Strawberry Bank—the transplanted sons of Portsmouth were seized with an impulse to return home. Simultaneously and almost without concerted action, the lines of pilgrims took up their march from every quarter of the globe, and swept down with music and banners on the motherly old town.

To come back to the wharves. I do not know of any spot with such a fascinating air of dreams and idleness about it as the old wharf at the end of Court Street. The very fact that it was once a noisy, busy place, crowded with sailors and soldiers—in the war of 1812—gives an emphasis to the quiet that broods over it to-day. The lounge who sits of a summer afternoon on a rusty anchor fluke in the shadow of one of the silent warehouses, and look on the lonely river as it goes murmuring past the town, cannot be too grateful to the India trade for having taken itself off elsewhere.

What a slumberous, delightful, lazy place it is! The sunshine seems to lie a foot deep on the planks of the dusty wharf, which yields up to the warmth a vague perfume of the cargoes of rum, molasses, and spice that used to be piled upon it. The river is as blue as the inside of a harebell. The opposite shore, in the strangely shifting magic lights of sky and water, stretches along like the silvery coast of fairyland. Directly opposite you is the navy yard, and its neat officers’ quarters and workshops and arsenals, and its vast shiphouses, in which the keel of many a famous frigate has been laid. Those monster buildings on the water’s edge, with their roofs pierced with innumerable little windows, which blink like eyes in the sunlight, and the shiphouses. On your right lies a cluster of small islands,—there are a dozen or more in the harbor—on the most extensive of which you see the fading-away remains of some earthworks thrown up in 1812. Between this—Trefethren’s Island—and Peirce’s Island lie the Narrows. Perhaps a bark or a sloop-of-war is making up to town; the hulk is hidden among the islands, and the topmasts have the effect of sweeping across the dry land. On your left is a long bridge, more than a quarter of a mile in length, set upon piles where the water is twenty or thirty feet deep, leading to the navy yard and Kittery—the Kittery so often the theme of Whittier’s verse.

This is a mere outline of the landscape that spreads before you. Its changeful beauty of form and color, with the summer clouds floating over it, is not to be painted in words. I know of many a place where the scenery is more varied and striking; but there is a mandragora quality in the atmosphere here that holds you to the spot, and makes the half-hours seem like minutes. I could fancy a man

sitting on the end of that old wharf very contentedly for two or three years, provided it could be always in June.

Perhaps, too, one would desire it to be always high water. The tide falls from eight to twelve feet, and when the water makes out between the wharves some of the picturesqueness makes out also. A corroded section of stovepipe mailed in barnacles, or the skeleton of a hoopskirt protruding from the tide mud like the remains of some old-time wreck, is apt to break the enchantment.

I fear I have given the reader an exaggerated idea of the solitude that reigns along the river-side. Sometimes there is society here of an unconventional kind, if you care to seek it. Aside from the foreign gentleman before mentioned, you are likely to encounter, farther down the shore toward the Point of Graves (a burial-place of the colonial period), a battered and aged native fisherman boiling lobsters on a little gravelly bench, where the river whispers and lisps among the pebbles as the tide creeps in. It is a weather-beaten ex-skipper or ex-pilot, with strands of coarse hair, like seaweed, falling about a face that has the expression of a half-open clam. He is always ready to talk with you, this amphibious person; and if he is not the most entertaining of gossips—more weather-wise than Old Probabilities, and as full of moving incident as Othello himself—then he is not the wintery-haired shipman I used to see a few years ago on the strip of beach just beyond Liberty Bridge, building his drift-wood fire under a great tin boiler, and making it lively for a lot of reluctant lobsters.

I imagine that very little change has taken place in this immediate locality, known prosaically as Puddle Dock, during the past fifty or sixty years. The view you get looking across Liberty Bridge, Water Street, is probably the same in every respect that presented itself to the eyes of the town folk a century ago. The flagstaff, on the right, is the representative of the old “standard of liberty” which the Sons planted on this spot in January, 1766, signaling their opposition to the enforcement of the Stamp Act. On the same occasion the patriots called at the house of Mr. George Meserve, the agent for distributing the stamps in New Hampshire, and relieved him of his stamp-master’s commission, which document they carried on the point of a sword through the town to Liberty Bridge (the Swing Bridge), where they erected the staff, with the motto, “Liberty, Property, and no Stamp!”

The Stamp Act was to go into operation on the first day of November. On the previous morning the “New Hampshire Gazette” appeared with a deep black border and all the typographical emblems of affliction, for was not Liberty dead? At all events, the “Gazette” itself was as good as dead, since the printer could no longer publish it if he were to be handicapped by a heavy tax. “The day was ushered in by the tolling of all the bells in town, the vessels in the harbor had their colors hoisted half-mast high; about three o’clock a funeral procession was formed, having a coffin with this inscription, LIBERTY, AGED 145, STAMPT. It moved from the state house, with two unbraced drums, through the principal streets. As it passed the Parade, minute-guns were fired; at the place of interment a speech was delivered on the occasion, stating the many advantages we had received and the melancholy prospect before us, at the seeming departure of our invaluable liberties. But some sign of life appearing, Liberty was not deposited in the grave; it was rescued by a number of her sons, the motto changed to Liberty revived, and carried off in triumph. The detestable Act was buried in its stead, and the clods of the valley were laid upon it; the bells changed their melancholy sound to a more joyful tone.” (1. Annals of Portsmouth, by Nathaniel Adams, 1825.)

With this side glance at one of the curious humors of the time, we resume our peregrinations.

Turning down a lane on your left, a few rods beyond Liberty Bridge, you reach a spot known as the Point of Graves, chiefly interesting as showing what a graveyard may come to if it last long enough. In 1671 one Captain John Pickering, of whom we shall have more to say, ceded to the town a piece of ground on this neck for burial purposes. It is an odd-shaped lot, comprising about half an acre, inclosed by a crumbling red brick wall two or three feet high, with wood capping. The place is overgrown with thistles, rank grass, and fungi; the black slate headstones have mostly fallen over; those that still make a pretense of standing slant to every point of the compass, and look as if they were being blown this way and that by a mysterious gale which leaves everything else untouched;

the mounds have sunk to the common level, and the old underground tombs have collapsed. Here and there the moss and weeds you can pick out some name that shines in the history of the early settlement; hundreds of the flower of the colony lie here, but the known and the unknown, gentle and simple, mingle their dust on a perfect equality now. The marble that once bore a haughty coat of arms is as smooth as the humblest slate stone guiltless of heraldry. The lion and the unicorn, wherever they appear on some cracked slab, are very much tamed by time. The once fat-faced cherubs, with wing at either cheek, are the merest skeletons now. Pride, pomp, grief, and remembrance are all at end. No reverent feet come here, no tears fall here; the old graveyard itself is dead! A more dismal, uncanny spot than this at twilight would be hard to find. It is noticed that when the boys pass it after nightfall, they always go by whistling with a gayety that is perfectly hollow.

Let us get into some cheerfuler neighborhood!

III. A STROLL ABOUT TOWN

AS you leave the river front behind you, and pass “up town,” the streets grow wider, and the architecture becomes more ambitious—streets fringed with beautiful old trees and lined with commodious private dwellings, mostly square white houses, with spacious halls running through the centre. Previous to the Revolution, white paint was seldom used on houses, and the diamond-shaped window pane was almost universal. Many of the residences stand back from the brick or flagstone sidewalk, and have pretty gardens at the side or in the rear, made bright with dahlias and sweet with cinnamon roses. If you chance to live in a town where the authorities cannot rest until they have destroyed every precious tree within their blighting reach, you will be especially charmed by the beauty of the streets of Portsmouth. In some parts of the town, when the chestnuts are in blossom, you would fancy yourself in a garden in fairyland. In spring, summer, and autumn the foliage is the glory of the fair town—her luxuriant green and golden trees! Nothing could seem more like the work of enchantment than the spectacle which certain streets in Portsmouth present in the midwinter after a heavy snowstorm. You may walk for miles under wonderful silvery arches formed by the overhanging and interlaced boughs of the trees, festooned with a drapery even more graceful and dazzling than springtime gives them. The numerous elms and maples which shade the principal thoroughfares are not the result of chance, but the ample reward of the loving care that is taken to preserve the trees. There is a society in Portsmouth devoted to arboriculture. It is not unusual there for persons to leave legacies to be expended in setting out shade and ornamental trees along some favorite walk. Richards Avenue, a long, unbuilt thoroughfare leading from Middle Street to the South Burying-Ground, perpetuates the name of a citizen who gave the labor of his own hands to the beautifying of that windswept and barren road the cemetery. This fondness and care for trees seems to be a matter of heredity. So far back as 1660 the selectmen instituted a fine of five shillings for the cutting of timber or any other wood from off the town common, excepting under special conditions.

In the business section of the town trees are few. The chief business streets are Congress and Market. Market Street is the stronghold of the dry-goods shops. There are seasons, I suppose, when these shops are crowded, but I have never happened to be in Portsmouth at the time. I seldom pass through the narrow cobble-paved street without wondering where the customers are that must keep all these flourishing little establishments going. Congress Street—a more elegant thoroughfare than Market—is the Nevski Prospekt of Portsmouth. Among the prominent buildings is the Athenaeum, containing a reading-room and library. From the high roof of this building the stroller will do well to take a glance at the surrounding country. He will naturally turn seaward for the more picturesque aspects. If the day is clear, he will see the famous Isle of Shoals, lying nine miles away—Appledore, Smutty-Nose, Star Island, White Island, etc.; there are nine of them in all. On Appledore is Lighton’s Hotel, and near it the summer cottage of Celia Thaxter, the poet of the Isles. On the northern end of Star Island is the quaint town of Gosport, with a tiny stone church perched like a sea-gull on its highest rock. A mile southwest from Star Island lies White Island, on which is a lighthouse. Mrs. Thaxter calls this the most picturesque of the group. Perilous neighbors, O mariner! in any but the serenest weather, these wrinkled, scarred, are storm-smitten rocks, flanked by wicked sunken ledges that grow white at the lip with rage when the great winds blow!

How peaceful it all looks off there, on the smooth emerald sea! and how softly the waves seem to break on yonder point where the unfinished fort is! That is the ancient town of Newcastle, to reach which from Portsmouth you have to cross three bridges with the most enchanting scenery in New Hampshire lying on either hand. At Newcastle the poet Stedman has built for his summerings an enviable little stone chateau—a seashell into which I fancy the sirens creep to warm themselves during the winter months. So it is never without its singer.

Opposite Newcastle is Kittery Point, a romantic spot, where Sir William Pepperell, the first American baronet, once lived, and where his tomb now is, in his orchard across the road, a few hundred yards from the “goodly mansion” he built. The knight’s tomb and the old Pepperell House, which has been somewhat curtailed of its fair proportions, are the objects of frequent pilgrimages to Kittery Point.

From the elevation (the roof of the Athenaeum) the navy yard, the river with its bridges and islands, the clustered gables of Kittery and Newcastle, the illimitable ocean beyond make a picture worth climbing four or five flights of stairs to gaze upon. Glancing down on the town nestled in the foliage, it seems like a town dropped by chance in the midst of a forest. Among the prominent objects which lift themselves above the tree tops are the belfries of the various churches, the white façade of the custom house, and the mansard and chimneys of the Rockingham, the principal hotel. The pilgrim will be surprised to find in Portsmouth one of the most completely appointed hotels in the United States. The antiquarian may lament the demolition of the old Bell Tavern, and think regretfully of the good cheer once furnished the wayfarer by Master Stavers at the sign of the Earl of Halifax, and by Master Stoodley at his inn on Daniel Street; but the ordinary traveler will thank his stars, and confess that his lines have fallen in pleasant places, when he finds himself among the frescoes of the Rockingham.

Obliquely opposite the doorstep of the Athenaeum—we are supposed to be on terra firma again—stands the Old North Church, a substantial wooden building, handsomely set on what is called The Parade, a large open space formed by the junction of Congress, Market, Daniel, and Pleasant streets. Here in days innocent of water-works stood the town pump, which on more than one occasion served as whipping-post.

The churches of Portsmouth are more remarkable for their number than their architecture. With the exception of the Stone Church they are constructed of wood or plain brick in the simplest style. St. John’s Church is the only one likely to attract the eye of a stranger. It is finely situated on the crest of Church Hill, overlooking the ever-beautiful river. The present edifice was built in 1808 on the site of what was known as Queen’s Chapel, erected in 1732, and destroyed by fire December 24, 1806. The chapel was named in honor of Queen Caroline, who furnished the books for the altar and pulpit, the plate, and two solid mahogany chairs, which are still in use in St. John’s. Within the chancel rail is a curious font of porphyry, taken by Colonel John Tufton Mason at the capture of Senegal from the French in 1758, and presented to the Episcopal Society on 1761. The peculiarly sweet-toned bell which calls the parishioners of St. John’s together every Sabbath is, I believe, the same that formerly hung in the belfry of the old Queen’s Chapel. If so, the bell has a history of its own. It was brought from Louisburg at the time of the reduction of that place in 1745, and given to the church by the officers of the New Hampshire troops.

The Old South Meeting-House is not to be passed without mention. It is among the most aged survivals of pre-revolutionary days. Neither its architecture nor its age, however, is its chief warrant for our notice. The absurd number of windows in this battered old structure is what strikes the passer-by. The church was erected by subscription, and these closely set large windows are due to Henry Sherburne, one of the wealthiest citizens of the period, who agreed to pay for whatever glass was used. If the building could have been composed entirely of glass it would have been done by the thrifty parishioners.

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