

Transcript of Lecture Delivered by
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WILLIAM JOHNSON RYSAM AND THE RISE OF SAG HARBOR*

(Slide 1: Ariel view of Sag Harbor) Captain William Johnson Rysam, 1737 - 1809, embodied the entrepreneurial spirit America prides itself on. He spent a lifetime at sea, always captain of his own ship, active as a free booting merchant trader. He made things happen by dint of his drive, energy and determination—as his will phrased it, “What I have written shall be so.” Judging by the many friends he made for himself and his family, he must also have had an irresistible charm. A desire to educate his daughters brought him to Clinton Academy in East Hampton. At the age 62 he retired to Sag Harbor, a retirement he crowded with constructing new buildings and starting new businesses. No one recorded Rysam’s height, the color of his eyes or his hair. He was and is known by the altered landscape he left in his wake—Rysam Street can be seen today winding uphill from the protected inner harbor. (Slide 2: Rysam Street sign) He was and is known, also, for his interest in education, an interest he passed on to his descendants, and for his benevolence.

Rysam’s early years are something of a mystery. His descendents understood that he was born in Wales and left as a teen age sailor in the 1750’s to work his way up to captain and then owner of his own ship. He married a new Englander, Ursula Pierce, who gave birth to their 5 daughters between 1765 and 1778. He made Norfolk, Virginia, his base and dealt in the Norfolk trades of tar, lumber, hides and tobacco. He expanded into ship building and repairing. He developed a lumber business in the mahogany groves of Honduras. He owned slaves, but his mercantile interests do not seem to have taken him to the slave trade ports. Rysam’s business endeavors had been hampered by King George’s laws, and he became a patriot, perhaps out of commercial self interest. The Revolutionary War forced Rysam out of Norfolk in December 1775 when the patriots destroyed their city to prevent its use by the British. Rysam fled with his family to Newtown, New York. In August of 1776, patriot troops massed in Brooklyn, and the battle of Long Island was fought only miles from Rysam’s new location. His last child was born there in 1778, and his wife died not long afterwards.

(Slide 3: 1790 Map of Sag Harbor. This is a detail from the Southampton Town map in the New York State Archives. Note the ship arriving in port. We’ll consider that to be Rysam’s ship.) The Captain discovered Sag Harbor in 1785 when he sailed his ship to the east end. The deep water port, located on the boundary line between the towns of Southampton and East Hampton, had been developed before the Revolutionary War. A long wharf had been constructed on the Southampton side of the harbor. The extended British occupation had destroyed Sag Harbor’s economy, and the village was still struggling to recover. The East Hampton side of Sag Harbor was, as it had been for many years, Conkling family farmland.

(Slide 4: 1790 map of the town of East Hampton. Now we see a detail from the East Hampton Town map in the New York State Archives.) Rysam moved quickly through Sag Harbor and on to East Hampton to enroll his 5 motherless daughters, Mary now 20, Nancy 14, Fanny 12, Hannah 10 and Sophia 7, at the new Clinton Academy. (Slide 5: Clinton Academy building erected in 1784. This photograph is from Samuel Seabury's book 275 YEARS OF EAST HAMPTON, LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK.) The academy educated Long Island's elite from 1785 until 1868. It had been named to honor George Clinton the first governor of New York State and an early advocate of education. Clinton Academy was one of the first academies chartered by the state, some sources identify it as the first. It was a forward looking institution which was co-educational, a place where girls could turn up their noses at needlework and water colors and enroll in the English academic program with the boys, as Sherrill Foster tells us in her article on the Academy in The Long Island Historical Journal. Rysam was a man ahead of his time in seeking out the best education for his daughters. He believed the pious and intellectual puritans who founded Clinton Academy would provide what he was looking for. (Slide 6: East Hampton's Second Church built in 1717 and across the street from the academy. This photograph is also from Seabury's book, who tell us that the Second Church stood from 1717 until 1866.) (Slide 7: The Reverend Samuel Buell (1716-1798) was the guiding spirit behind Clinton Academy. The photograph is from Avriil Gues's book FROM SEA TO SEA.)

On the academy's opening day, in January of 1785, Fanny Rysam recited a poem by Alexander Pope with her "more than usual elegance," academy records, here in the library, report.

The captain arranged for his daughters to board with a kindly East Hampton widow named Mrs. David Mulford at this house (Slide 7a now 102 Main Street, the home of Mr. And Mrs. James McCrea. Slide 7b close up. This photograph is from Jeanette Edwards Rattray's wonderful book, UP AND DOWN MAIN STREET, and is identified as David Hunting's and then Mrs. Raymond Smith's house.) Let us go back to the time when it was Mrs. Mulford's boarding house for Clinton Academy students. For Captain Rysam it was a fortuitous arrangement. Phoebe Mulford knew everybody in town and was related to most of the people she knew. Her husband Colonel David Mulford, a leading citizen of East Hampton, had died of smallpox during the war. Her father was Deacon John Hunting, son of The Reverend Nathaniel Hunting, (Slide 7c: also from Seabury's book.) Mrs Mulford's grandfather was a Harvard graduate and an East Hampton minister for almost 50 years, from 1699 to 1746. Phebe was one of 9 sisters, now variously married into the local gentry, as were 4 of her own 6 Mulford children. After the death of Phebe's husband the Mulford place, now known as Mulford farm, went to her oldest son, Sherrill Foster tells me, but Phebe was able to establish her students' boarding house on Hunting family property down the street at what is now the corner of David Lane, in the house we have seen. The maternal and well connected Mrs. Mulford became a perfect surrogate mother to the 5 Rysam girls.

As time passed, romance bloomed under Phebe Mulford's chaperoning eye. Mary married Jeremiah Miller, kin to Phebe's sisters. Unfortunately, we have no pictures of the

bride or her sisters, but maybe we can let the charming drawings in Rattray's book serve as stand-ins. (Slide 7d: a pensive young lady. We can easily imagine she is thinking about her beloved.)

Nancy was next. She married Jabez Peck, a teacher of classics at the academy. (Slide 7e: This might be professor Peck's pipe among his books.) The professor died unexpectedly, leaving Nancy a widow with a young daughter. She soon married again. Her second husband was Archibald Gracie, and they lived here (Slide 7f: in the house Rattray identifies as the Lockwood - Gracie house.) Archibald Gracie was trustee of the academy and a man of substance with large land holdings in Kingston, Jamaica and New York City as well as in East Hampton. (He was not the Gracie Mansion Archibald Gracie however, though the 2 men were contemporaries with the same name, a confusion of identities that puzzled me for a considerable time until Rattray set me straight.) Romance continued to flourish along the East Hampton pathways and beside the pond. (Slide 7g: Here we see the pond backed by the South End Burying Ground, courtesy of Rattray.) The talented Fanny, who recited Alexander Pope's poetry with such elegance, married next. She took Edward Mulford, a prosperous member of Phebe's extended family, as her husband.

Rysam came more and more frequently to East Hampton and not just to see his daughters. Phebe Mulford became his "beloved wife" his words for her in his 1795 will, written shortly after their marriage.

More wedding days followed. (Slide 7h: this bride-to-be is carefully not neglecting her needle work.) Hannah married a fellow student at Clinton academy, Cornelius Sleight the son of a Hudson River Valley Dutch family, and Sophia married Stephen Sayre, the scion of a well to do land owning east end family. Now all 5 of the Captain's daughters were educated and as nicely married as Jane Austin's 5 Bennett daughters. (Slide 7i: Here we see our bride away from her books and back in the kitchen.)

Rysam had charmed his way into the closed Puritan society of East Hampton and into the hearts of its leading families. The East Hampton Town fathers granted Phebe's new husband the rare privilege of his own cattle ear mark, the town records show, treating him as if he were an old East Hampton Puritan, and Rysam kept cattle in the great summer pastures at Montauk just as they did.

At this appropriate time in his life, the Captain decided to retire from the sea. He acquired the valuable property in Sag Harbor, 250 acres on the waterfront that had belonged to the Conkling family. (Slide 8: Sag Harbor waterfront, ca. 1800, as it appeared at the time Rysam made his purchase. This is a watercolor by Elizabeth Sleight, a sister of Cornelius Sleight, which hangs in the Sag Harbor Whaling Museum. Elizabeth Sleight was painting in the early 1800's.) Rysam bought most of the East Hampton part of the village from Captain Joseph Stratton Conkling's estate in 1799. Phebe Rysam likely helped her husband find the inside track to this purchase, for a descendant later wrote that the "Conklings, Mulfords and Rysams were endeared to each other by marital, religious, financial and social ties."

As a new century approached, the East Hampton side of Sag Harbor was a quiet, sleepy place. Rysam swept in with 5,000 pounds in his deep pockets, according to a descendant. 5,000 pounds was a substantial sum for the time. (Slide 9: Map of Sag Harbor, ca 1800, published in Dean Failey's book LONG ISLAND IS MY NATION) Retirement Rysam style included the sounds of saws and hammers. Freight carrying sloops piled with logs and lumber began to line the waterfront. (Slide 10: Close up. Map of Rysam's commercial empire in Sag Harbor.) Soon a wharf extended out into the harbor. A ropewalk, a building 1,000 feet long with a narrow road on each side, ran from the harbor inland for a full block. Rysam roofed it over and manufactured rope. People and horse drawn wagons rushed back and forth on the shore road, and it was soon improved. A shipyard appeared on the sandy arm of Conkling's Point. Construction of the Merchant, a brigantine of 202 tons, began. (Slide 11: Rysam's Merchant would have looked much like the jaunty brig seen here in a painting by Antoine Roux that hangs in the Peabody Museum at Salem, Massachusetts.)

(Slide 12: Map of Sag Harbor ca 1808 from David Allen's collection at Stony Brook.) Around Conkling's Point down on the sandy beach, the large vats of Rysam's salt works appeared. They were filled with sea water which solar evaporation turned into salt. Workmen loaded the salt into barrels for sale. Rysam also built and operated a candle factory. When the Brazil Banks off South America proved to be a popular destination for whaling, Rysam expanded to whaling vessels.

(Slide 13: The Sag Harbor Waterfront before 1840, O. H. Beers lithograph in the Connecticut Historical Society.) The development of the Sag Harbor waterfront continued. (Slide 14: This detail of the lithograph shows the location of Rysam's boat yard. A boat yard still operates today in the same location that Rysam chose so many years ago. (Slide 15: boat yard today.)

(Slide 16: Rysam's merchant mansion: my photos courtesy the present owner, Ted Conklin, who is very distantly related to the original Conklings.) Rysam transformed the small, 60 year old house that stood on the Conkling property into a mansion in keeping with his prosperity and standing in the community. The house was placed on a high foundation, much more Virginia than East Hampton in style. The clapboard exterior stood out from among the cedar shingle houses commonly built at that time. The Captain turned the main entrance from north to east so that it is faced Division Street. The old front doorway still survives as a closet entrance in the new central hall. (Slide 16a: Old Front Doorway) (Slide 17: attic fan window) Two large attic fan windows on the side gables were designed in an elliptical shape, examples of the so-called sunrise fan window popular between 1800 and 1820.

(Slide 18: Rysam house doorway) The new house was built as a Georgian five-bay, 2 story building with a typically Georgian gabled portico supported by Ionic columns. The cornice on the facade was simple, but modillions—those little brackets-- trimmed the gable and cornice over the doorway, another typical Georgian feature. (Slide 19: close-up of doorway) The door frame contained leaded sidelights and a rectangular transom.

(Slide 20: interior shot of central hallway.) Inside a wide central hallway led to a door at the opposite end, again more Virginia than east end in style. (Slide 21: hallway wall.) (Slide 22: close-up) Rysam's original wall decoration for the hall, discovered by the present owner beneath layers of old wall paper, showed a series of panels grained to resemble rosewood, a popular motif of the time.

(Slide 23: double parlors) On the left side of the hall Rysam placed elegant double parlors with handsome wood trim and ornate marble fireplaces. (Slides 24, 25 close-ups) On the right side of the hall is a room now greatly altered. Its use in Rysam's day is unknown. The second room on the right (Slide 26: dining room) is the present owner's dining room and was likely Rysam's dining room as well. This room is believed to be the original Conkling house.

(Slide 27: kitchen) The current owner believes the kitchen wing has been replaced since Rysam's day, but he think the massive fireplace chimney may be original. (Slide 28: stairway in front hall) The unusual double banistered enclosed stairway is believed by the present owner to be a modified version of the original Conkling stairway. Note the handsome mahogany newel posts. Rysam was determined to have his house furnished with mahogany from his own groves in Honduras. He became, as usual, the irresistible force that carried all with him. He asked the renowned East Hampton cabinet maker Nathaniel Dominey (Slide: Old Dominey House and Clock Shop, as shown in Seabury's Book from a sketch by H. G. Buek.) to build a wind driven saw mill which he could ship to Honduras for cutting his trees into lumber. The mill was built on the east end, dismantled, brought to Sag Harbor, loaded aboard ship, sailed to Honduras and reassembled. Soon "great quantities of mahogany" were being received "from Capt. Rysam's Honduras grove," the East Hampton Trustees Journal reported. Rysam provided Dominey with his Honduras mahogany and in due course fine mahogany stair banisters and newel posts found their places in his house. These were forerunners of many found in Sag Harbor houses today. (Slide 30: typical Sag Harbor newel post)

(Slide 31: A Dominey Windsor Chair in the Custom House in Sag Harbor, my photo courtesy of Carolyn Oldenbusch, curator) Rysam wished to have mahogany chairs for his dining room table made, of course, from his own mahogany. Dominey went to work, and the Windsor chairs took their places around the Captain's table.

In 1804, Rysam's brigantine the Merchant was launched amid popping corks. In 1811 Sag Harbor's new look was recorded by Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University. He wrote that the village was barren of vegetation, but that the "houses, outhouses and fences are new and neat, and an appearance of thrift... is spread over the whole village." Rysam could take credit for a large portion of that thrift.

Rysam took on a junior partner, his son-in-law Cornelius Sleight, husband to his daughter Hannah. Sleight was of a far gentler disposition than his father-in-law, fortunately, since no family could have accomodated 2 Rysam egos. Sleight was a manager rather than an entrepreneur, and he became Rysam's supercargo, his commercial manager on land as well as at sea. In a characteristic exchange, he assured his wife by mail that he was

following her father's wishes, that he had arranged to "countermand the order... the moment I received Mr. Rysam's letter," Sleight's revealing letter to his wife is now tucked away in the John Jermain Memorial Library.

(Slide 32: Rysam's will) As Rysam retired from the sea, he became concerned about his legacy. He had made a will in 1795 at the time of his new marriage, and after providing for his wife, he divided his property among his 5 daughters, they to receive the income and their children to receive the principal. He expressed his kindly side, his fatherly affection when he wrote, "May the almighty in his heavenly wisdom keep my children, friends and relations in the paths of truth and honesty, charity and love." But Rysam was still Rysam, and his will stated, "What I have written shall be so, and may the almighty in his wisdom find the devil that dares to presume to alter this my will to inflict all the plagues that Job was inflicted with."

Rysam served on the board of Clinton Academy, and education would be one of his lasting legacies. He left a bequest to the town of East Hampton to benefit needy students, writing in his will that "two hundred pounds be paid out to interest, and the interest money to be applied to the schooling of [East Hampton] children [whose]parents are not able to pay for schooling... [East Hampton] to be the guardians and judges of such children... God grant them judgement and providence to watch over the poor children." Always forward looking, Rysam was concerned about the education of all children, not just boys. Under the stewardship of the East Hampton Town Trustees, the Rysam fund continues to donate money to East Hampton schools today.

When Rysam died in 1809 at the age of 72, the Suffolk Gazette wrote that he was "distinguished for those social and benevolent qualities of the heart which will render his memory long and deservedly respected."

Phebe Rysam lived 6 more years in the fine house her husband had built; she died in 1815.

(Slide 33: Rysam Street and stone wall) The ropewalk Rysam built eventually disappeared, but its location is marked by the street that carries his name today, Rysam Street.

Rysam's legacies extended beyond his will. (Slide 34: Sag Harbor waterfront in 1840, a woodcut inspired by Beers lithograph.) In the early 1820's, Rysam's 2 grandsons, William Rysam Mulford and William Rysam Sleight founded what became the great Sag Harbor whaling firm, Mulford and Sleight. Between 1821 and 1850, Mulford and Sleight sent 11 ships on 68 voyages, first to the Brazil Banks, then to the South Atlantic, and eventually to the Pacific. It was an immensely profitable partnership. The successes of his grandsons surely would have brought a smile to the face of the Captain. (Slide 35: Sag Harbor waterfront in 1860 an unsigned oil painting in the Sag Harbor Whaling Museum. The harbor is still a busy commercial endeavor.)

In 1833 William Rysam Sleight took as his bride Charlotte Dering, the daughter of Henry Packer Dering and a descendant of Nathaniel Sylvester—about whom you heard a month ago as part of this lecture series. The marriage united two of the most prominent east end merchant families.

Rysam's interest in education and learning left another legacy. (Slide 36: The Corrector) His great grandson, Brinley Dering Sleight became editor of Sag Harbor's weekly newspaper, The Corrector, in 1860, shortly after his graduation from Yale. He continued in that position for 53 years until his death in 1913, a highly regarded leader of the community.

His son, Harry Dering Sleight carried on his father's work until the start of World War I, when he sold the paper. (Slide 37: Harry Sleight's 3 books) But he made his own unique contribution to the Rysam legacy by authoring 3 books of local history, THE SLEIGHTS OF SAG HARBOR in 1929, SAG HARBOR IN EARLIER DAYS in 1930 and THE WHALE FISHERY ON LONG ISLAND in 1931, works that provide a lasting and valuable record of east end life.

William Rysam Johnson left no gravestone behind. He was buried in a family plot with its own vault, but the land on which the vault was placed was later sold for development. All the early family burials are now recognized by this simple marker. (Slide 38: Rysam - Sleight vault, approach) (Slide 39: Rysam - Sleight vault close-up) The accomplishments of William Johnson Rysam's descendants are the Captain's true and lasting monument.

A note on sources: The story of William Johnson's life can be found in his will located in the Suffolk County Records Office, Riverhead, New York; in Harry Dering Sleight's 3 books; in the East Hampton Town Records and the East Hampton Trustees Journals, in Henry P. Hedges's and Jeanette Edwards Rattray's genealogies, as well as in the sources specifically noted in the text.

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