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THE MAN WHO BROUGHT FRESH HALIBUT TO AMERICA'S DINING TABLE LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

This video features an illustrated talk by historian and author Robert E. Viator about six generations of the Wonson family of Gloucester, who shaped the nature of fishing at America's principal fishing port in the 19th century. The talk centers on John Fletcher Wonson (1802-1867) who was the first to anchor and fish for halibut on dangerous Georges Bank in 1830, opening the banks to this new fishery; the first to order innovative schooner smacks – floating fish tanks

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– to bring live, fresh halibut back to the Boston and New York markets; and the first to use the famed “sharpshooter” clipper schooners for faster return to port. Through the story of John Fletcher Wonson and the Wonson family businesses, Viator traces the transition from salt fish to fresh fish, the growing use of ice, the coming of the railroad and the opening of new inland markets to fresh fish, and the impact of the Wonsons over the course of a century, from their sprawling complex on Smith Cove, in turning Gloucester into America's largest fishing port.

2010 Press Release: The Cape Ann Museum is pleased to present The Man Who Brought Fresh Halibut to America's Dining Table, an illustrated talk by Gloucester native Bob Viator on Saturday June 19 at 11:00 a.m.

Six generations of the Wonson family of Gloucester, Massachusetts, shaped the nature of fishing at America's principal fishing port. Following the Revolution, the Wonsons were among the first fishermen to carry their own fish in their own vessels to the American South and Caribbean, escaping dependency on middlemen. In 1808, Samuel Wonson Jr. defied Jefferson's Embargo, taking his fish from Gloucester to St. Eustatius. Acquitted in U.S. vs. Wonson, Sam Wonson won the U.S. Attorney's appeal, breaking the back of the Embargo. In 1821, three Wonsons were among the first dozen captains to “jig” for mackerel, (catching them with a lure on unbaited hooks), starting the salt-mackerel fishery. In 1830, John Fletcher Wonson was the first to successfully anchor and fish for halibut on Georges Bank, which became a major source of cod and halibut into the 20th century. In 1831, the Wonsons ordered the first schooner “smack,” a floating fish tank to bring live halibut to Boston and New York, introducing America to the taste of fresh white-fleshed fish. In 1846, Giles & Wonson ordered the first “sharpshooter”, a clipper named Romp. She raced home with her fresh fish on ice, to go by rail overnight to New York and Chicago. In 1893, at the height of a national depression, John F. Wonson & Co. became the largest fishing outfitter in the nation's largest fishing port. Bob's talk focuses on John Fletcher Wonson's impact on the fishing industry's switchover from salt fish to fresh fish.

A Gloucester native, Bob was educated in the Gloucester school system and went on to get his bachelor's degree at UMASS Amherst. His journalism major landed him a job with the Wall Street Journal, where for five years he was the slotman on the Journal's news production desk. Over the next thirty years he held a succession of writing and writing management jobs, mostly in the Massachusetts computer industry. In 2003 he was named a “History Hero” by the Bay State Historical League for his video about the rural cemetery movement in

Massachusetts. For the past ten years he has been working on a book about the fishing exploits of the Wonson family of East Gloucester. A few people may remember a series of boating articles he and his wife wrote for the Gloucester Daily Times chronicling their 1968 trip down the Intracoastal Waterway from Gloucester to the Bahamas in a 24-foot sloop. Although he and his wife are now retired to the San Francisco Bay area, his ties to Gloucester remain strong. He has a sister living in Magnolia, and he is a summer-time familiar at the Cape Ann Museum library and the Gloucester Archives. He is in the area to attend his son's wedding.

Funding for this program was made possible through a grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which promotes excellence, access, education and diversity in the arts, humanities and interpretive sciences, in order to improve the quality of life for all Massachusetts residents and to contribute to the economic vitality of our communities.

Subject List

Schooner Effie Morrissey	Schooner-smack
John Fletcher Wonson	Live well
Ann Marble Wonson	Sharpshooter
Samuel Wonson	Halibut
Samuel Wonson & Sons	Salt fish
Samuel Giles	Faneuil Hall Market
Giles & Wonson	New York Fulton St. Fish Market
George F. Wonson & Bros.	Long Island Sound
John F. Wonson & Co.	Ice houses
Franklin Augustus Wonson	Webster Pond
Georges Bank	Cape Pond
Pinky	Pirates Lane

Transcript

0:11

Good morning. I'm Courtney Richardson. I'm the director of education and public programs here at the museum. I want to welcome you here today for "The Man Who Brought Fresh Halibut to America's Dining Table, An Illustrated Talk," by Bob Viator.

Bob is a Gloucester native. He was educated in the Gloucester school system and went on to get his bachelor's degree at UMass Amherst. His journalism major landed him a job with the Wall Street Journal. Over the next 30 years he held a succession of writing and writing management jobs, mostly in the Massachusetts computer industry. In 2003, he was named a history hero by the Bay State Historical for his video about the rural cemetery movement in Massachusetts. For the past 10 years he has been working on a book about the fishing exploits of the Wonson family of Gloucester and he is a descendant of the Wonson family. And he spent a lot of time in the Cape Ann Museum, Library and Archives to do this. Although he and his wife Jane are now retired to the San Francisco Bay Area, his ties to Gloucester remain strong. We're very happy to have him with us this morning. Please join me in welcoming Bob.

1:37

Bob Viator: Good morning. Thank you for coming... and how's the sound level, Jane? Good.

Today I'm going to talk about a man who most of the world has forgotten. I first heard about him in Samuel Elliot Morrison's maritime history... reading Samuel Elliott Morrison's *Maritime History of Massachusetts*.

2:03

The vessel that you see there (schooner *Effie Morrissey*) was one of the last ones built for the company he founded, which we will be talking about today. It fished out of Gloucester until 1904, when it was sold, and for a couple years it was an Arctic explorer and then it was sent to the Cape Verde Islands where it carried passengers and freight. But it's now back in the United States, and some of you may have seen it a couple of years ago when it visited here on its way back to New Bedford, where it serves as a youth training vessel.

2:52

So, for as long as people have fished, people and fishing communities have eaten fresh fish, no big surprise. But before cheap ice and refrigeration, most people in cities ate salt fish — salt fish out of barrels often packed in brine, and it was cod, mackerel or herring.

3:20

Soaking fish in brine and drying it in the sun is an age-old means of treating cod, and salt fish has been a staple worldwide — tasty but not as good as the fresh caught kind...fresh caught cod (I had that marked as a tongue twister but I still stumbled). A fisherman from Gloucester, Massachusetts changed all that.

Who was this man who brought fresh, fresh halibut — which is not easy to say — who brought fresh halibut from Georges bank to Americas' dining table?

4:00

His name wasn't Gorton, or Birdseye, nor Ming Tsai, if you watch "Simply Made."

Who was John Fletcher Wonson? Well, he was the son of Samuel Wonson Jr., who was one of four fishermen brothers who moved up to Gloucester Harbor from Sandy Bay, or Rockport.

And since John Fletcher Wonson's father was Samuel Wonson and his brother was Samuel Wonson, I've called them third Samuel, the father, and fourth Samuel, the son — and we'll leave out the Holy Ghost — but that's how I keep them straight. And they both figure in our story today.

4:48

(Pointing to photo) This is the house over on Eastern Point or East Gloucester, where John F. Wonson was born. The original house of 1796 was only 10 by 16 feet. So, you have to... (find the right angle, there you go...) you have to strip away the dormer and the back section and the wing because it was 10 by 16 feet, which was pretty small, but a lot of Cape Ann houses were. Some of you may know it as Dr. Jeffries' house.

5:34

John Fletcher Wonson was born in 1802. In 1803, his father, the third Samuel Wonson, bought a big chunk of waterfront from the Captain Robinson Estate. You may remember Captain Robinson supposedly is the man who gave us the term "schooner."

6:00

This is what would become East Gloucester Square. The North Shore Art Association building is right about here. And, of course, East Main Street continues along the waterfront now.

Third Samuel founded Samuel Wonson & Sons, assisted ably by his oldest son, the fourth Samuel and then the youngest sons, John Fletcher, Nat and Addison, and his son-in-law, Elijah Oaks - the boys who sailed the fishing vessels. When third Samuel retired from fishing in 1831, he became the first keeper of the new Eastern Point Light. This (photo) is the more recent one. But, you know where it is.

6:51

Here (in photo) are third Samuel and his wife, Lydia, after he gave up lighthouse-keeping after 17 years. He died of cancer shortly after these pictures were taken. But these are the earliest photographs passed down in my family. As a matter of fact, I picked up the originals up in New Hampshire from my sister, Judy, yesterday. Thank you, Judy.

7:17

But back to third Samuel and his sons.

John F. Wonson got America eating fresh ocean fish by opening up Georges Bank, which we'll hear about shortly, introducing smack fishing on Georges, and he was a major contributor to making Gloucester the largest fishing port in the United States by the end of the Civil War.

It all began in 1828. Captain John F. Wonson was 25 years old. He was returning in his father's schooner *Augusta*, from a trip freighting salt fish to Wilmington, North Carolina. As he was crossing Georges Bank off the tip of Cape Cod, the wind turned dead foul. Because of the unpredictable currents on Georges, tacking back and forth over that shoal was risky: they might be carried into the breakers. So John decided to heave to until the wind came around to a more favorable quarter. So with the foresail doubled, and just a scrap of riding sail, as you see here, on the main, countering it, the vessel would stay more or less stationary.

8:35

To see if they were drifting, John then cast the lead — to check depth. Comparing depths against the soundings on the chart, John noticed a pencil notation, "good halibut grounds here." On a whim, he threw a hook and line over the side and, quote "soon succeeded in catching two halibut." This is according to a tradition relayed to the editor of the *Gloucester Daily Advertiser* 40 years later; and another quote from the same, "They were partaken of with very keen relish and were the first halibut known to have been caught on the Banks." Pretty ugly.

9:19

The halibut is the largest of the flounder family. *Hippoglossus hippoglossus* spends so much of its time lying flat on sand that its underside turns white and the left eye, which starts out in a normal position, over time, migrates around to the top side, because the fish spend so much time buried in the sand for protection. But the halibut are not just passive bottom feeders. In fact, they are very aggressive predators. Adult fish grow to 50 pounds or more, and they feed at all levels of the ocean. John Fletcher Wonson recorded finding seabirds in halibut stomachs, where the fish had snatched them from the surface.

10:11

By 1610, English were calling it Saint Georges Bank, after Britain's patron saint. They hadn't yet invented the apostrophe to indicate possessive, so to this day Georges doesn't have an apostrophe. Contact of the cold water with the air warmed by the Gulf Stream makes Georges a place of fogs, and opposing currents create swirling tidal flows, so that a vessel can be carried over the bottom at three knots or more.

10:48

Georges Bank was sort of the Bermuda Triangle of the 19th century. The yellow and red on this satellite photo indicate phytoplankton, the foundation of the food chain. The Banks swarm with juvenile crustaceans and newly-hatched fish that feed on the phytoplankton and the larger predatory fish that feed on them. The warm salty water of the Gulf Stream sweeping up from the south, clashed with the cold, oxygen-rich, less salty water flowing out of the Gulf of Maine. These opposing circulations whirled about the deep waters surrounding Georges, bringing nutrients near the surface.

11:40

By 1830, cod and halibut were becoming scarce close to the shore. So fishermen knew that Georges teamed with fish, and it was only 125 miles from Gloucester. So it was a tempting place to fish despite its dangers.

In summer, getting back from Georges is an easy reach if you've got a hold filled with fish, but in winter during the halibut season, it's not easy — the wind is flowing the wrong direction, which I'll talk about shortly.

12:25

Georges is dangerously shallow. In places, it's only two fathoms or about 12 feet. So the swells of mid-ocean break on Georges. A schooner can be carried into the breakers and in a matter of seconds, a well-found vessel is reduced to flotsam, the men in her never heard from again.

12:45

Later, after John Fletcher Wonson demonstrated how to anchor, the other cause of losses on Georges was collision. When a vessel went adrift, it was likely to crash into another one, and both of them would go to the bottom. Fishermen feared anchoring in a fast current would cause the vessel to, quote, "be drawn under." That fear held a germ of truth. When a displacement hull is moving through the water faster than it can sail, it forms a huge bow wave and a trough forms behind the bow wave, and the stern falls right into the trough, so it's pretty scary. A well-designed vessel shouldn't sink, but it feels like it might.

13:37

The Wonsons and other fishermen occasionally fished on George's in fair weather while drifting over the shoal, but they didn't anchor. Drift fishing over Georges was frustrating because you'd find a good spot and catch a couple of nice fish and then you'd drift off and into a sterile portion of the Bank — and not be so successful.

14:04

Fishermen knew that they needed to anchor on Georges, but they feared to. John Fletcher Wonson's brother, the fourth Samuel Wonson, tried anchoring on Georges in the summer of 1821. His teenage brother John Fletcher was probably one of the crew. Joe Garland re-tells the tale first published by George Proctor. "The first vessels ever recorded going to Georges to fish were three pinkies from Gloucester that ventured to the Banks after cod in 1821: Captain Sam Wonson's *Three Sisters*, Robert Morrison's *Two Friends* and the Wonson-owned *Eight Brothers*, under Elijah Oaks. Memories of that attempt to anchor on George's remained with John Wonson long after the event. What if they'd hung on a little bit longer? What if they had chosen a more favorable spot, or what if they had timed their attempt to coincide with slack water? And always, there was the memory of the ease with which he'd caught those two halibut on Georges while returning from Wilmington."

15:03

On March 5, 1830 John left Eastern Point behind, heading across Massachusetts Bay in his father's pinky, *Nautilus*, determined to give anchoring on Georges another try. Covering 125 miles in a day and a night, they came up on soundings on the northwest edge of Georges the following morning. Having timed his departure to get him to Georges about what he estimated would be slack water, and with the tide making, John dropped his hook in 15 fathoms of water and paid out anchor cable until he was in deeper water where the current would be less fierce. Easing back on the cable, he positioned his vessel over an upwelling where the dense sailing water flowing north off the bank was sinking into the less dense water of the Gulf of Maine.

16:08

The current in that depth of water wasn't fast, wasn't fast enough to cause any problems. The weather cooperated, producing a fine spring day. John's little *Nautilus*, launched just five years before, rode the swells like a gull. The crew soon had the lines overboard, and in just a few hours he'd caught 20 large halibut. Thus, John Fletcher Wonson became the first fishing captain to successfully fish and anchor on Georges on March 6, 1830.

16:50

We don't know the total weight of the catch, but we're probably talking about 1000 pounds. In the early days of the Georges fishery, the average size halibut weighed 50 pounds. Full grown females averaged 100 to 150 pounds, and large halibut landed in New England ports were not uncommonly 200 pounds. Here is a somewhat larger one. The record one is around 600 pounds, gutted, caught off Cape Ann.

17:22

Over the next 75 years, the Wonson family pioneered creative ways of bringing fresh halibut to the Boston and New York markets, changing America's taste for fish dishes.

What did the *Nautilus* look like? Well, here's Howard Chapelle's drawing of the Wonson pinky built four years earlier than the *Nautilus* for John's uncle John. Pinkies had a pink, that is, a pinched-in stern, that let overtaking waves slide harmlessly underneath. Note the continuous curve of her lines amidships. (Whoops, wrong pointer, sorry.) In the cross-section you can see nice rounded bilges. We'll be looking at a very different kind of profile later. And in case you couldn't tell from my pointing, I'm talking about this nice rounded curve, right here.

18:31

This is a model from the Smithsonian's watercraft collection for which Chapelle took the lines on the previous slide. It was once thought to be the Giles & Wonson pinky, *Tiger*. But Chapelle identifies her as the *Essex*, built in 1821 for John F. Wonson's uncle John, John Wonson.

Aboard the *Nautilus* that day, was a hand-picked crew, all related to the captain — his neighbors in East Gloucester. Assembling a crew of trusted family members was a common practice among fishermen, then as now.

19:16

Being a market fisherman was often frustrating. If several other vessels arrived in Gloucester at the same time, prices were terrible. And in winter, getting home from Georges against the prevailing winds was a long slog. After several days of bucking headwinds, the halibut in the hold were no longer in prime condition.

Selling fresh fish at urban fish markets was only a sideline for a few cod fishermen. Most cod fishermen got their income in one lump-sum in the spring. That's when they sold last year's dried salt cod to a merchant making up a shipload to send to the West Indies, or the American South. Salt fish was a major source of protein for feeding slaves.

20:06

The Wonsons supplemented this once-a-year lump-sum payment by taking their own salt fish to the Caribbean in the winter, when their vessels would otherwise be idle. Market fishing for fresh fish to sell wholesale brought in a steady trickle of silver to help with cash flow.

20:24

The Wonsons had been taking fresh ocean fish to Boston since the 1790s. A small market for fresh fish had developed in the wholesale produce market in Charlestown. Peddlers bought the fresh fish in Charlestown and ferried it across the Mystic River to the North End and peddled it through the streets. Demand for fresh fish was mostly in winter and spring, when the weather was cool, and the fish would keep longer. The trade lasted into the spring mackerel season.

21:00

In a few major coastal cities, markets selling fresh fish on ice began to appear about 1820, with the availability of cheap ice. Urban markets proliferated slowly at first, since there was no infrastructure for distributing fresh fish. Boston's Faneuil Hall Market was built in 1822, and New York's Fulton Street Fish Market opened the same year. Note that back then, Quincy Market was right on the waterfront; no Big Dig, no (Route) 95.

21:41

By 1825, ice was being used in city markets to extend the fresh fish season into summer. Frederick Tudor had by then established an industry to cut, store and ship ice from New England.

Today, we don't think much about wind direction, but in the age of sail, it was a big deal. So if the wind is coming from this direction, and you're out here on Georges, and you want to get back to Boston or Gloucester, it's almost directly into the wind. It was actually easier to go outside from Georges, around Nantucket, and rather than go down the South Shore of Long Island where very few harbors are good ones, they ducked into Montauk here and down Long Island Sound.

22:53

At the end of Long Island Sound, the East River takes you down to Manhattan. It's like the Annisquam River – it's not really a river, it's just a tidal estuary. In the Narrows at Hell's Gate, the current runs as fast as four and a half knots, or about five miles per hour. Since a vessel can't rush the tide through the East River, you have to wait at City Island for the tide to shift in your favor. So there was a good bit of sociability amongst the vessels waiting to make the transit. Crews were invited to come aboard and check out the merits of any vessel they were admiring. So at City Island, John Fletcher Wonson had observed New London fishermen working Long Island Sound in sloop-rigged smacks. A smack had a large live well built into the hull. The holes bored through the sides of the live well kept sea water circulating, so the fish got oxygen. This is a model of the *Emma C. Berry*, which is preserved at Mystic, Connecticut.

24:03

That's a 19th century improvement of a lightbulb (referring to a clever drawing of a man with a candle glowing above, to represent a new idea).

Joe Fletcher Wonson had a great idea: If we built a large smack, we could bring live halibut to New York; that would be the ultimate proof of freshness. Clearly, these Long Island Sound sloops were not suitable for Georges. They had too much sail area; the rig was not flexible enough for winter; and they weren't big enough to hold full-grown halibut. 'But what if we built something larger?' John asked himself. Why not build a schooner smack with a saltwater well built into the center section? A flexible schooner, it was better adapted to the extreme conditions of Georges. You could shorten sail more easily.

24:54

In the summer of 1830, John and his older brother broached the idea to their father, and then approached the firm's silent partner and financial backer, Samuel Giles. Giles endorsed the idea, and the firm borrowed money on a one-year note to build two smacks. The debt almost put the company under. It took more than 10 years to pay off the note.

The first well-smack schooner was ordered by Samuel Wonson & Sons in 1831. The *Forest* of 61 tons, was launched early in 1832. John Fletcher Wonson's obituary states that the *Forest*, which he commanded, was the first vessel of the kind used in the business.

25:42

The builder, Eli F. Burnham, apparently had problems building the transverse bulkheads, keeping them watertight, so it took a little bit longer than it normally would. The slightly larger *Mount Vernon*, commanded by John's younger brother, was launched a couple of months later.

26:04

Live halibut brought top dollar. By 1834 the Wonsons were using their large schooners, schooner-rigged smacks, to bring halibut to New York while still alive, the ultimate proof of freshness. This kind of market fishing was profitable. Normally, brokers ashore paid a cent or a

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cent and a half per pound for fresh dead halibut, but live halibut commanded six to seven cents a pound at Manhattan's East River markets.

Halibut comes in thick steaks that are boneless, and that quality of being boneless was probably an important part of why they were so popular. Halibut was ideal for broiling or serving in a Newburgh sauce.

26:54

The Astors and the Vanderbilts soon began serving a fish course of fresh halibut. And soon even restaurants like New York's Delmonico's were serving Halibut Newburgh.

27:09

So, how did John F. Wonson turn Gloucester into a larger fishing port? (Referring to a genealogy chart on screen) This is just one branch in the family and we don't want to get into genealogy, but I do want you to note a couple of items. You see John Fletcher here. But notice the first-born child, Lydia Greenleaf Wonson (John Fletcher's sister). She made a very fortunate marriage. She married a nice rich kid from Salem. His father was a Marblehead fisherman and I suspect that's how the Wonsons and the Giles got to know one another. And during the Revolution, Samuel Giles, Sr. was a privateer and very successful, in a brig named *Tiger*.

28:06

Now a wealthy man, his father moved to Salem and married a distant cousin of Nathaniel Hawthorne. And in 1812, the son married Lydia Greenleaf.

To fill his days as he neared retirement, Giles became an investor and mentor to a number of young men of promise in Gloucester. By 1827, having retired from the sea, Captain Giles began to invest in his father-in-law's fishing business, Samuel Wonson & Sons.

28:46

When third Samuel retired to become a lighthouse keeper, his oldest son, fourth Samuel, became manager of Samuel Wonson & Sons, with John Fletcher Wonson taking the lead in fishing. In 1840, Samuel Giles stopped being a silent partner and the firm was renamed Giles & Wonson. Samuel Giles advised the Wonsons in business matters, and he deferred to the Wonson brothers in matters concerning fishing. Giles no doubt recognized fourth Samuel's steady hand on the management tiller, as well as John Fletcher's imagination and daring. He probably used the tension between the two brothers to maintain the business's vitality.

29:30

John F. Wonson and his brothers Nat and Addison continued to fish with Giles & Wonson, from the Wonson family wharf at East Gloucester. John Fletcher Wonson stayed until Samuel Giles' death in 1850.

29:52

Giles & Wonson was one of the early outfitters. It was unusual in that it grew with outside capital from Samuel Giles. And the records left behind in the papers in the library suggest that Giles showed them how to leverage their assets to grow the business. Which they didn't use those terms but smart people were doing it way back when.

30:25

Here we see men unloading, weighing and packing halibut in ice for shipment by rail, or to urban fish markets. The best fishing for halibut on Georges was in the first three months of the year — January, February, March. Now, not good tourist weather for people like me — it would scare me to death to be out there. But those vessels that left in January spent a lot of their time hove to or at anchor, and it was a dangerous place to be in the winter.

31:03

Winter storms exacted a terrible toll. In April 1837, three schooners were lost in a gale on Georges. One, the *Fair America*, was captained by John Wonson Jr. — that's the son of the uncle I talked about before. After losing his first two cousins, because the Skipper's brother was aboard, so two brothers went down. Actually, a total of three brothers were lost in the sinking of those three vessels. After losing two first cousins, kids he played with as a child, John Fletcher Wonson and his wife apparently decided that their sons were not going to become fishermen. Over the years, 27 Wonson-owned schooners left Gloucester Harbor, never to return. Fishing was and remains a deadly dangerous business.

32:01

The projected arrival of the railroad in 1847 brought about huge changes in Gloucester fishing. Suddenly market fishing, delivering fish - fresh fish - to the railhead promised to be profitable. Fresh fish could be shipped from Gloucester on ice. To get the fish to the railhead before they spoiled, faster vessels would be needed. Giles & Wonson ordered the first of a new type of finer, faster schooner that came to be called sharpshooters. The next logical step was to ice down the fish as they were caught aboard the vessel. The Wonson smack, *Mount Vernon*, started carrying ice in 1838. By 1847, Giles & Wonson was being taxed for its own ice house.

32:52

By 1850, the need to fill vessels quickly before the catch became spoiled led to long line trawling — there is a new book out I notice — a technique apparently learned from the newly-arrived Irish market fishermen of Boston, with whom the Wonsons were now competing.

Between 1855 and '65, the industry switched from hand-lining from deck, to trawl line fishing from dories, adding to the dangers of the fishery.

33:25

The first locomotive on the Gloucester branch may have looked like this - not much fun in the winter.

Railroads brought fresh ocean fish to residents of inland cities. By the 1870s, small amounts of fresh fish on ice were going as far west as Chicago and St. Louis, and even Omaha.

To get fresh fish to the railhead faster, Giles & Wonson ordered a new kind of schooner — she was the *Romp*, delivered in 1846. We don't have the actual lines of the *Romp*, but this is a copycat design from a few years later. *Romp* had fine bow and a file bottom. Today, we call it a “v” bottom — it's flat and forms a “v”. Conservatives said *Romp* was too fine in the bow — she'd bury her nose in the first pregnant wave and go straight to the water. But in fact, she turned out to be a good sea boat, and fast. Thereafter, that's what everyone had to have. I believe Fitz Henry Lane has pictured a sharpshooter for us in one of the paintings upstairs.

34:44

By 1820, Boston's Frederick Tudor was successfully cutting ice, storing it in insulated ice houses, and it was being used to preserve meat, milk and fresh fish.

Gloucester blacksmith Nathaniel Webster decided to fill the need for ice in Gloucester. In 1848, he dammed a stream running down from Rail Cut Hill to form Webster's Pond, where the school now sits on Webster Street. Then he built a dike across the meadow from Day's Pond to form Lower Day's Pond, which is no longer there. And finally, he began cutting ice on Cape Pond in Rockport, where these pictures were taken in 1938 by my mother.

35:44

Here's a list of vessels owned by Giles & Wonson when Samuel Giles died in 1850. And if you count them - whoops, sorry about that. If you count them, you should get about 18. After Giles' death, the firm went back to the name of Samuel Wonson & Sons. Fourth Samuel and John Fletcher Wonson, who by now were old man by the standards of the time, retired from the business, and management was taken over by fourth Samuel's son, Samuel Giles Wonson, who had been groomed by his father to manage the firm conservatively. Conservative management didn't sit well with all the brothers. So in 1857, the second son took over and renamed the business George F. Wonson & Brothers.

36:42

And if you count (the vessels on a list) I think you get up to somewhere around 28. And then in addition to those vessels there were another three that they just sold. So the bottom line is, the brother expanded the business rapidly and got into some financial difficulty. In his attempts to raise capital to sustain the firm, George Friend Wonson had to publish financial information, something the closely held firm hadn't done before. So we have this data from the Peabody Essex Museum library. My pie chart shows you where the firm found its revenue, and you see that cod was still a mainstay — salt cod. Whether it was called Giles & Wonson, Samuel Wonson & Sons, George F. Wonson & Bros, whatever. It all happened here at Wonson family wharfs. The purple wharf next door is that of William C. Wonson, a son of John Fletcher Wonson's Uncle John.

37:56

Unknown Speaker: Can you give us a landmark on that now? Where is that now?

Viator 38:03

Well, you can see East Gloucester Square right here (on the map). But ... Do you know where the North Shore Art Association is? It's right about here. So this is Pirates Alley, is what they call it nowadays. And believe me, I had sat down there with my friend Joe and looked around and took pictures down there, and I never knew that that had been the family wharf.

38:41

This is how it looked. After the evaporation of the family's business — which had gone belly up.

38:51

Fresh fish on ice wouldn't replace salt cod in Gloucester until World War II. Even kept on ice, fresh fish begins to spoil after a few days, but salt cod would keep for years. And there was an established market for salt cod in inland communities. Here it is being packed on Rocky Neck in 1904 by John Fletcher Wonson's grandson, Charlie Fred. This is a price list that my grandfather saved after his cousin Charlie Fred took over the family business. Note that Charlie Fred is selling salt cod for 10 cents a pound in 1904. So, the last time I bought imported salt cod, it was almost \$7 a pound, which I think is about 6,000% inflation. I'll let you do the math. To be fair, a large part of that price increase results from the scarcity of codfish today, but even today, some people just like the flavor of salt cod.

40:04

Here's how I made it in California, Portuguese-style.

40:15

(Showing a portrait photo of John Fletcher Wonson) I don't know much about him as a man. If he was like his grandsons, the ones that I knew, he was a man of few words. Like his sons and grandsons, he was a farmer fisherman, and he came to love his wife's family farm. Ann (Marble Wonson) was a couple years behind him in school, and she grew up on the family farm, and lived there all but the last years of her life, when she moved a few rods away. She seemed to be the one who worried about money — at least, she kept the household accounts. I say this from the jottings she made in her own almanacs hung by a string in the kitchen. Unfortunately, the first of these behind jottings doesn't begin until after her husband had retired and left the business to his sons.

41:06

Samuel Wonson's farm was out on Wonson's Point here (pointing to map), and here's the Marble farm here in yellow. The Marble farm was 43 acres of quote "the great pasture" that you keep reading about. And it stretched down to the back shore here, which is off the map.

41:35

Ann's father hanged himself aboard the schooner *Reserve* in Hingham Harbor in 1820, leaving his wife and four children. The brothers, who had grown, weren't interested in taking up farming. So John moved onto the family farm and managed it with his wife, Ann. They lived together most of his life in the little farm house on Mount Pleasant Ave. at the top of Highland Street. It looks a little different today with a dormer across the front, but it's still in the family.

42:14

Four of John and Annie's sons worked for John F. Wonson & Co.

George Marble Wonson, who took over the farm, was my great grandfather. He was the great grandfather of several people here.

42:37

Fourth Samuel and Samuel Giles bought out John Fletcher Wonson's one third interest in Giles & Wonson in 1838. But he continued to fish with the firm until 1850.

42:54

In 1851, he, with two of his older sons, founded John F. Wonson & Co., starting on a shoestring with just the sloop of *Julia* and a part interest in one schooner. But they did buy this land in between the farm (pointing to a corner of the farm on Mt. Pleasant St.) and the water. They bought this swath of land down to Smith Cove.

43:26

Here's a part of that property with the familiar yellow fish house the boys built in 1860. Here it is in a painting by Childe Hassam that's down in Florida.

43:47

The company prospered during the Civil War boom, and by 1870 John F. Wonson & Co. was a major player on the Gloucester waterfront. The four sons inherited good business sense and invested prudently in new and larger vessels. Instead of becoming captains of vessels, they became captains of industry and hired captains. They created a vertically integrated enterprise — with its own vessels, wharfs, sail loft, forge, ice houses, smoke houses, warehouses, vessels and labor force. As you can see, dried salt cod was still a mainstay of the fishing industry with pickled mackerel, a strong second. That's probably because the fresh fish component here is understated because much of it was taken to Boston and New York. This is an 1870 advertisement for John F. Wonson & Co.

44:52

By 1893, John F. Wonson & Co was the largest fishing enterprise in the nation's largest fishing port. For more than half a century the company that John F. Wonson founded sent dozens of schooners along the Atlantic coast from the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, to the Virginia capes of the Chesapeake.

45:13

This table I compiled gives you a sense of the typical life cycle of a fishing outfitter. They started small, grew to the maximum that one man could oversee, with the management tools available at the time, which was eyeballs, a ledger and ink, and they declined with the owner's waning powers or when a series of accidents or misjudgments sent the firm into decline. For most of its life, John F. Wonson & Co. was one among many, neither the largest nor the smallest, except for a period in the 1890s.

45:50

Here's a list of John F. Wonson & Co. vessels at their high water mark in 1895. And you'll see the *Effie Morrissey* that we started the show with, in here (a list) somewhere.

In 1903, Franklin Augustus Wonson, the youngest of the business partners, died at age 56 of alcoholism.

He was a high functioning alcoholic but also a workaholic. In my grandfather Wonson's words, "Uncle Frank was married to the business. He kept the books and saw to a thousand details. And with his death, the heart went out of the business and the two older brothers decided to sell off the company assets and retire."

46:43

Here's how the business looked in the spring of 1905. The vessels and movable assets were sold at auction. The wharf was sold to David B. Smith & Co. next door. The following year, David B. Smith became part of Gorton Pew Fisheries.

Between 1796 and 1905, the Wonsons transformed pasture land of Gloucester's Eastern Point into a virtual company town. In addition to wharfs and fish processing facilities, the Wonsons ran a ferry, two grocery stores, a large rambling boarding house, a community meeting hall in which to hold temperance meetings, encouraged building a community church, operated a dairy farm, and a coal, ice and ballast business, and a marine paint factory, and they started the Cape Ann summer hotel industry with the Hawthorne Inn and the Fairview.

47:45

By a simple act of daring, John Fletcher Wonson opened up the Georges Bank fishery, a source of fresh fish that would provide the United States with a major source of protein over the next century, and even up to today. By progressing forward his ideas to build schooner smacks, he brought live halibut to the Boston and New York markets, creating a taste for that delicacy in those two trendsetting cities. This began a trend away from the centuries-old tradition of consuming salt fish.

48:18

Giles & Wonson, and later John F. Wonson & Co., were not giants among pygmies. Each firm in its turn had large and successful competitors. What makes the Wonsons stand out is their

The Man Who Brought Fresh Water Halibut to America's Dining Table – VL24 – page 17
staying power. Each lasted more than half a century — Samuel Wonson & Sons / Giles & Wonson from 1803 to 1865, John F. Wonson & Co. from 1851 to 1904. Over the long trajectory of each rise and fall, the two firms had many vigorous competitors. It's only for a few years that each was the largest of the outfitters. In short, the Wonsons stand tall, but they were not the only giants of the Gloucester fishery.

49:17

I'll be glad to try and answer any questions or hear anything that any of you have to say, that may be news to me.

49:31

Attendee: Can you trace the Paint Factory down to the present?

49:35

Viator: Oh, sorry. Again, please.

49:36

Attendee: Can you trace the Paint Factory from, say, 1900 down to the present?

49:41

Viator: No, not very well, it figures peripherally. I've mentioned it in my book, but I really don't know that much about it. I can't even tell you the starting date — 1863, I think, but I'm not even sure when the present structures were built. And in my notes somewhere I do have the name of ... if you ask Stephanie in the library, she can tell you. There is a woman who has done a lot of research on the Paint Factory. But I'm out of my depth here, sorry.

50:19

Viator: We have a gentleman back there.

50:22

Attendee: Is your book published now? Is it available, that's what I'm asking?

50:26

Viator: There are copies up on the front desk and there is a page for page CD Rom available for \$16, which is somewhere in here. It looks like so (holding it up) It's 367 pages, it's indexed. And this is in PDF format for either PC or Macintosh so you can do searches. If you're looking for information about specific vessels and things like that.

Attendee: That's a CD ROM of the book?

51:12

Viator: Yes, it's the book page by page.

Yes... Mr. Everett...

51:22

Attendee: Do you know in this period up to 1905 or thereabouts that mechanical refrigeration played a role or was it still all cut from the ponds as of 1905?

51:35

Viator: As I remember, in the 1860s they had steam-operated mechanical refrigeration, but the problem is that ice is so cheap in frigid New England that right up until World War II, it was cheaper to use real ice.

51:55

Attendee: So that's why you end up with... What did you say the year was that people were cutting the ice? Was it the '30s? Someone responded, it was the '30s — 1937 or something like that.

52:04

Attendee: On that same thing — I'm still confused. When they would try and get into New York City and they wanted these fish live, were they live just because they were on ice, or did they have to have water in the holds? How long could they go with these fish they'd just caught and then be quote unquote "live"?

52:27

Viator: How long were the voyages?

Attendee: No, how long were the halibut kept alive on the New York run in the beginning, and by what means before the invention of (refrigeration)?

52:41

Viator: They stayed alive because of the water sloshing around in the live well. The fish aren't eating but they can go for weeks...

52:51

Attendee: Explain briefly then what a live well is, perhaps, for those of us who don't know what a live well is.

52:55

Viator: A live well is just a big fish tank in the middle of the schooner. And so that, what they did is when they caught a halibut — real tough sons of bitches — they whacked them on the head and stunned them and got them off the hook and then threw them into the tank of seawater. And the sea water is sloshing in and out of the vessel, so it's oxygenated. And someone discovered you could kill mackerel, excuse me, kill halibut, throw them in the live well, and miraculously 99 and 44 100% of them revived. They're really tough critters. So, they

didn't eat, and as long as the weather's cold, they kept fine in the live well for a week, a week and a half — at least, that's my guesstimate. But they could make it from Georges to New York with a fair wind — you're only talking about, you know, a couple of days.

Yes...

54:05

Attendee: I know they used to cut ice down on Cape Pond up until about 1946-1947. When I was in high school, I worked for a couple of fish plants and we used to go down to the ice house in Cape Pond and pick up ice down there that was stored in an ice house with hay on the top of it. You know? I don't know when it went out of business, but I know it was in effect up until 1947.

54:32

Viator: Wow, okay. I know in 1938, in my mother's pictures, you can see what looks to me like forms for freezing ice cakes inside the ice house at Cape Pond. So I think they actually manufactured ice, by what means I'm not quite sure. You know how they compress the gas or whatever, whether it was a gasoline engine or whatever, I'm not sure.

Yes.

55:04

Attendee: Did you say that there was a pond where Veterans Memorial School is now, on Webster Street?

Viator: Webster's Pond. You know where Webster Street comes into Eastern Avenue? (Yes.) Well, if you go straight up Webster Street, I think the school is still there. There's a school sitting there on a nice flat piece of filled land. (Right.) And Nathaniel Webster put a dam across that brook, which is probably in a culvert today, because it flows out into the marsh.

55:38

Attendee: Yes, they used to flood that every winter and freeze it for skating. Because when we were kids, we used to go up there and skate all the time.

55:50

Attendee: I guess it disappeared in the '60s when they built the school.

56:00

Attendee: I'm a descendant of John Fletcher, like probably most people in the room here. And I was always told the story of one of John Fletcher's sons that got lost at sea and ended up in Nova Scotia and then came back eventually and started the cod liver oil business. Do you know much about that story?

56:16

Viator: That sounds fascinating, but I didn't hear enough. Why don't you come up and tell us about it.

Attendee: That's really all I know.

Attendee: More research!

Attendee: My great grandfather ran the smoke shop in East Gloucester, that was right on the corner there, in the square.

56:43

Viator: I want to talk to you after.

Well, we've gone an hour, so unless I hear Courtney say, no, no, no...I think we've done it.

57:05

END

Subject List

Wonson family:

Samuel Wonson, Jr.["3rd"], father of ***John Fletcher Wonson***

Samuel Wonson ["4th"] brother of JFW

Nathan Fletcher Wonson [younger brother of JFW]

Addison Wonson [brother of JFW]

Elijah Oates [son-in law of Samuel Wonson, Jr. "3rd"]

Lydia [wife of Samuel Wonson, Jr. "3rd"]

John Williams Wonson [1st cousin of JFW]

Samuel Giles Wonson [1st cousin to JFW and brother to John Williams Wonson]

Daniel Douglass [brother-in-law to JFW's Uncle Charles]

Benjamin Marble [brother to JFW's wife Ann]

Lydia Greenleaf Wonson Giles [sister of JFW, wife of Samuel Giles, Jr.]

John Wonson, Jr. [son of Uncle Charles]

William C. Wonson [son of JRW's Uncle John]

Charlie Fred Wonson [JRW's grandson]

Ann Elizabeth (Marble) Wonson [wife of JFW]

George Marble Wonson [great grandfather of Robert E. Viator]

Franklin Augustus Wonson [youngest partner]

Family businesses:

John F. Wonson & Co.

Samuel Wonson & Sons
Giles & Wonson
George F. Wonson & Bros.
Chas. F. Wonson & Co.

Other people:

Samuel Giles
Frederic Tudor
Eli F. Burnham
the Asters & the Vanderbilts
Nathaniel Hawthorne
Nathaniel Webster
Fitz Henry Lane
Childe Hassam
David P. Smith

Vessels mentioned:

Clipper *Romp*
Augusta
Nautilus
Essex
Hemisea Berry (?)
Forrest
Mount Vernon
a brig *Tiger*, owned by Samuel Giles, Sr.
Mt. Vernon
Romp
Reserve, a schooner owned by Ann Wonson's father
sloop *Julia*
Effie M. Morrissey

Cape Ann places: "Dr. Jeffrey's House"; Captain Robinson's Estate; Eastern Point Light; Rail Cut Hill; Webster's Pond on Webster St.; Day's Pond; Lower Day's Pond; Cape Pond in Rockport; Wonson Family Wharf; North Shore Art Assoc.; East Gloucester Square
Samuel Wonson Family Farm
Marble Farm "43 acres of "The Great Pasture" includes Back Shore
Farmhouse on Mt. Pleasant Ave. at top of Highland St.
Smith Cove
Yellow Fish House
Hawthorne Inn; The Fairview on Eastern Point
Gorton-Pew Fisheries

Other places:

the American South

Caribbean; St. Eustatius; Georges Bank/Bermuda Triangle of the 19th century

Boston/Charlestown/North End; Faneuil Hall

New York City; Fulton St.

Chicago

Wilmington, NC

Gulf of Maine

Montauk Point; Long Island Sound; City Island; Hell Gate Narrows; Manhattan; East River

New London, CT

Mystic Seaport, CT

New York City's Delmonico's Steak House

Marblehead

Salem

Grand Banks of Newfoundland

Virginia Capes

St. Louis

Omaha

Hingham Harbor

Florida

Chesapeake

Books/Newspaper/Authors:

Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860 by Samuel Eliot Morison

George Proctor and Joseph Garland

Cape Ann Advertiser

Wealth from the Deep: The Fishing Wonsons of Gloucester by Robert E. Viator, 2009