

# CAPE ANN Museum

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### **GLOUCESTER'S SEA SERPENT LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT**

<b>Speaker:</b>	Wayne Soini
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#### **Video Description**

Wayne Soini tells the story of the local legend known as the Gloucester sea serpent. The initial famed sighting took place in 1817. From that first faithful glance, the small blue-collar fishing town was put in the forefront of American intellectual research and scientific discovery. The sighting went so far as to entice the Linnean Society to come and further investigate the phenomenon to try and confirm or deny its existence.

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Soini delves into the themes of his recent book, which centers on the people of politics during the sighting in Gloucester Harbor. The “Sea Serpent Song” (written by Soini) was sung with the audience.

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### Subject list

Justice Lonson Nash	Francis Kelly Grey
Judge John Davis	Linnaen Society of Boston
Dr. Jacob Bigelow	

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### Transcript

00:01

**Buck:**

Good afternoon and welcome to the Cape Ann Museum. I am Stephanie Buck, the museum's archivist and librarian. I first want to mention that either on the chairs or just handed out to is a survey from seARTS. Would you please fill it out and hand it in at the front desk when you leave, we'd appreciate it. Thank you very much. Before I introduce our guest today, I would like to take this opportunity to wish our video guru, Bob Quinn, a happy birthday.

00:50

Bob volunteers his Saturday afternoons to film our special programs for Cape Ann Television and for our archives. We appreciate all that he does for the museum. Happy Birthday, Bob. I would also like to remind you that the interior of Captain Elias Davis's house has been decorated for the holidays. And there will be a guided tour of the house tomorrow at two o'clock. First come first serve. Our guest speaker today is a Gloucester native, a 1966 graduate of Gloucester High School, a local historian and author, Wayne Soini. Mr. Soini is and I quote, a proud member of the Cape Ann Museum, as well as the National Writers Union and the Boston Athenaeum. He currently makes his living as a lawyer and has recently earned a master's degree in history from UMass Boston. In his latest book, *Gloucester's Sea Serpent*, Mr. Soini explores the people and the politics, the myth and the mystery, surrounding the sighting of a sea serpent in Gloucester harbor in 1817. Our thanks go to Mr. Soini for being here today, and for generously donating the proceedings from the sale of his book to benefit the Cape Ann Museum and the Gloucester School Scholarship Fund. The book can be purchased at the front desk, and Mr. Soini will be signing copies upstairs in the entry level atrium after the lecture. Please join me in welcoming the author of *Gloucester's Sea Serpent*, Wayne Soini.

02:37

**Soini:**

Thank you, Stephanie, for your introduction, and I already owe you more than I can say for the help, when you are working with me as the archivist. I want to thank Bob Quinn, for photographing this and keeping a track on our timely moving along, year by year. Happy birthday. I am going to invite a couple of people, if they would, to help me pass out some copies.

03:26

I've got to admit I didn't expect so many people. I think that may not quite be enough to go around. What I'd like to do shortly is to sing the sea serpent song with you as chorus. So, you need a copy of that. If anybody has YouTube, believe it or not, Manny Simoes, my wonderful co-student in Gloucester high school class of 66, did record me partly singing this sea serpent song. So, it is on YouTube under "sea serpent song," if you missed the chance. I want to thank my co-creators of this book, who contributed with the illustrations, Manny Simoes, who took photographs around the harbor and in the harbor, and Roseanne Cody, who I call the postcard Princess, she contributed postcards, historical postcards that are also in the book. In fact, when I was eating with my children at a restaurant nearby, a few weeks ago, my daughter popped up and said "he's the author of the Sea... The waitress said, "Oh..." I said, "Well, I had help with it. And it was Manny Simoes and Roseanne Cody." "Oh, Roseanne." So, I suddenly realized I think it very happy and good news that I'm associated with Roseanne Cody and Manny Simoes in this product. I thank you for that. It's dedicated to my parents. And I would be remiss if I didn't start by saying that I think all of us, either as parents of children or as children growing up with parents who helped us in education, have always felt that whatever we did end up producing and being citizens, it had to do with our parents and their opportunities that they limited. So, they allow us to continue on, do something.

This book was, I sent it out. It has been out a couple of months now. I sent it to one of my friends, who was about 95 years old, and George McInerney in Dedham. And he kindly wrote back a note to me. He had known people in the Cape Ann area through his life and he has some basis to give a judgement so I'll read a little bit of his letter to me. It says, "Dear Wayne, Many thanks for your adventure into the enjoyable sea serpent. The good citizens of, you did not prove to me that the sea serpent exists, but you did prove to me that the good citizens of Gloucester, continue in the, are almost as funny today as they were then.

06:32

The appearance of a monster in our presence, and I invite you to imagine this with me as we're all gathered in a group here. If suddenly in that doorway there appeared a monster of some type, similar to a huge lion with teeth, ready to spring. I take it, I believe that there are about three possible major reactions that you could come up with. I told the people in the front row there, they're going to be volunteers. Can you give me a suggested, Henry? Or can you give me a suggested reaction to a monster suddenly appear in the doorway? A suggested normal reaction.

07:15

**Another speaker**

Do you want me to act it out? ... I might faint,

07:22

**Soini**

Faint, fainting. Any other suggested reaction. *Surprise*. You'd be surprised. *Flight*. *Scream*. In a general way, I think both of those apply. I think flight is the generic of being afraid or frightened or fainting, screaming. I don't detect any heroes who would say they would fight. *Flight or fight*. Is somebody going to fight or flight and I think that's very true. And then there's a third one I'm suggesting to you, which is reflected a lot in the people of the time, documented to this day, is one of watching. Watching it. Seeing what happens, neither being fearful and fleeing, nor fighting. I suggest to you what we're left with in the documentation of the monster that appeared in Gloucester Harbor is that careful observer who's willing to write down, record what he saw, and took on other witnesses to tell their same tale. So, what we have is, I think, traditional human reaction to any monster. It happens to be inside Gloucester sea serpent, recorded at the time of 1817.

If I can recall to you, just as now, the waterfront, Gloucester Harbor, was a workplace. It wasn't Greenland, and any type of a sea serpent, two to four tons, 50 to 100 feet, cruising at three to four, a mile in three or four minutes - it was going to stop traffic. It was going to interrupt those fishing boats, it was going to interrupt merchant ships, it was going to interrupt people around the waterfront who would leave their tasks to go and look at the sea serpent. So, within the city of Gloucester, at the time town of Gloucester, I suggest to you then there were two kinds of reactions. There was a population that was in kind of a friction with itself. Some would say, essentially, watch and watch and watch the sea serpent and being interested in that, respectfully, usually, often for a religious reason that it's a visitation from God to us. We don't know why it's here, but certainly don't mess with it.

And then there's another group, merchants, fishermen, commercially interested people, who were going to say, I hope that thing leaves soon, and if it doesn't leave pretty soon, we're gonna take action of our own. So, there was a developing friction, reflected dimly in the documentation of the time. And I'm saying it probably really more clearly here than I do in the book. I've come to the conclusion that there was a, it's speculation, but I've come to my own conclusion that within Gloucester, it was quite a controversy. If you went to the tavern, if you went to the streets that went around the harbor and talked with people, some would essentially say that thing's got to be killed. And other people were saying, what are you talking about? It's a wonderful sea serpent, let's just enjoy it and watch it. So, I'd like to, with that much, read a long paragraph, a page or so, from my starting out book.

10:55

Somebody in Georgia wrote me back - this page interested them. Somebody else in Finland wrote back and said, that's the page. So, I said, all right, I'll start with this page. I'm going to read this page. This is from the first part of the book -page 39.

Gloucesterites, so far in the back of the pack that they did not know they were in competition, were being invited to ride at the front of the worldwide parade of scientific progress. The seaport of Gloucester in the northeastern corner of Massachusetts, far from great experiments, was a small town where Andrew Robinson had designed and sailed the first schooner in 1713; it was a town not built on rock, but around a body of water, fairly made to be depicted by the Hudson River School of artists, in pastels with rainbows, sails and signs of lazy breezes, where the schooner remained its basic fishing vessel, and haystacks moved on pole-pushed rafts along the Annisquam River. In 1817, around the town, you could see skiffs, sailboats, rowboats of freckled boys and beribboned girls, seine boats out at dawn for mackerel, larger ships in full sail headed to South America with the tide, and men and boys crouching in the many sail lofts of Gloucester, measuring, cutting and sewing canvas; you could hear the noise of the blacksmith's hammer against his anvil, the taps and curses of coopers making barrels, and at Some's ropewalk by the Cut, men and boys painstakingly working fibers, thickening strands into rope; and you could can smell the horsey odor of the streets blended with the effluvia of long racks of gutted, split codfish drying in the open air. The spirit of scientific discovery may have filled the American air generally, but it was lost in the drowsy air over this saltwater version of Hannibal, Missouri. The town's harbor skyline boasted two windmills, not as a sign that the town was a hotbed of technological invention, but as a reminder that old European technology was recycled. Before Judge Davis convened his little committee, there had been no likelihood that the town of fishermen, rich merchants, well-to-do captains and a few struggling farmers on the edge of the American continent, at the tip of Cape Ann, would play a historic role in the annals of American science. But through Justice Nash, Gloucesterites, who had never heard of the Linnaean project, would soon learn that no Linnaean Society anywhere could expect to discover anything bigger, uncover anything more legendary, or deal with any creature more exciting than the sea serpent who was visiting their harbor. Justice Nash would have explained to anyone who would stop scanning the horizon and listen a minute, all about the Buffon Theory, that North American animals were not as big as Old-World animals, or that its spectrum of species was not as wide as in Europe. If he invoked names, Nash would have argued that Gloucester could beat Jefferson at his own game, and that the Buffons of Europe and the Jeffersons of the South, in order to keep up with changing science would have to buy the book that Gloucester put together.

At that time, just after the war of 1812, throughout the country, there was a movement among the intellectuals and among the patriotic people, not necessarily exclusive categories, that America should take the lead in discovery. I have come across a book on one of the three members of the committee that Judge Davis in Boston put together to study the sea serpent. There was judge Davis, a Harvard lecturer named Dr. Bigelow, and this attorney named Francis Calley Gray. And in that book – well written I wish I had written it - it says the following about the period.

15:19

...Wrong page. Basically, says that in the war of 1812, they had, one, re-secured their independence as a country. And now it's time to make the nation's name known economically, intellectually and culturally. And they were looking for ways to do this. And this committee assembled for one of the ways, when they found out that there was a sea serpent in Gloucester Harbor. The other, last section I want to read to you, before we join in song, is a tribute to, a short tribute to Justice Lonson Nash, one time the Justice of the Peace around here, in 1817, and his legacy: "Nash left a living legacy, his joint product with Judge Davis, Dr. Bigelow and Attorney Gray, the sea serpent book, was the rosy fingered dawn of people's science in the United States, of the observations of ordinary men and women being judged worthy of publication. Justice Nash cast as wide a net as his federalist principles allowed, to interview people all of whose roots were outside of academia, who lacked scientific training, and whose sheer interested observation of nature, constituted the record he was charged to preserve. We have their specific, detailed and perceptive sightings because Nash took pains to make careful records of their words."

16:56

I'd like now to go to that song. If you'll notice, those of you that have it, there's a chorus in boldface, the chorus I would ask that people could join in on. Obviously, at first, you will have to pick up what the rhythm is before you know how...but, I'll provide that. Okay.

You swim with the shark and you sideswipe the whale  
With your sea turtle hid in your very long tail;  
When you swam into Gloucester you frightened the folks,  
And ate all the herring and jiggled their boats.

Sea serpent, sea serpent, your serpentine race,  
Sea serpent sea serpent, please show us your face.  
You soak up our sunshine and have summer fun,  
But you won't be a target for Gloucester's top gun.

A [culture] existence, the outside world learned,  
How you moved up and down and roundabout turned,  
In the book by Judge Davis in Gloucester's own niche;  
The book they intended to make a big splash.

Sea serpent, sea serpent, your serpentine race,  
Sea serpent, sea serpent, please show us your face.  
You soak up our sunshine and have summer fun,  
But you won't be a target for Gloucester's top gun.

Nash told about Gaffney who took his one shot,  
But undying scorn was the one thing he got.  
You skedaddled, bedazzled and swam about fine.

An [?] sea serpent, the last of your line.

Sea serpent, sea serpent, your serpentine race,  
Sea serpent, sea serpent, please show us your face.  
You soak up our sunshine and have summer fun,  
But you won't be a target for Gloucester's top gun

A Loblolly Cove critter they took for your child;  
A critical kindred, a snake in the wild.  
The snake in the book made it seem like a fake,  
And believing in you to be one big mistake.

Sea serpent, sea serpent, your serpentine race,  
Sea serpent, sea serpent, please show us your face.  
You soak up our sunshine and have summer fun,  
But you won't be a target for Gloucester's top gun.

You swim with the shark and you sideswipe the whale,  
With a sea turtle hid in your very long tail.  
When you swim into Gloucester you frighten the folks,  
And ate all the herring and jiggled their boats.

Sea serpent, sea serpent, your serpentine race,  
Sea serpent, sea serpent, please show us your face.  
You soak up our sunshine and have summer fun,  
But you won't be a target for Gloucester's top gun.

19:37

Thank you. I'm told that we can have about five or six questions, if there are any. I invite them if anybody has something on your mind. Peter, please.

**Another speaker:**

I will pose a comment and then a question afterwards. As a Gloucester High School, UMass classmate of yours, and as a fellow student...

**Soini:**

Let's hear it for the class of 66.

[indistinct]

**Another speaker:**

On a more serious note. You as a local expert now on the sea serpent and me as a user of the ocean, especially the waters off Cape Ann. Do you deem these waters safe now? Is this creature out there?

**Soini:**

I think, as a lawyer, I must be very cautious in my answer. Safe warning: these waters may be hazardous to your health. Any other questions? Congratulations. Thank you very much.

20:49

Peter is the author of books that I encourage you to read too: *Lobstering off Cape Ann*. [indistinct] Please.

**Another speaker:**

What do you think it was?

**Soini:**

I've got to admit, when I was here - I've described the story in the book - when I was here in the fifth grade in this building, in fact, with John Cunningham and Mr. Harley, my fifth-grade teacher. And we were upstairs and the volunteer docent asked us all to look at the picture of the sea serpent, which is actually also on the cover of the book here, asked us whether we believed in it. We didn't - we were in the fifth grade. What did we know? We knew everything. But it changed after studying the documents. They published documentation that was published in 1818 and not seen since, because people rejected the study, shows a very careful and detailed group of affidavits. The answer being, I do conclude that I believe. Someone in the 1840s wrote a letter to a newspaper saying that they were in a worse position than the people who saw the sea serpent and believed, because they hadn't seen the serpent and they believed. So, I must say I'm in that [?]. I didn't see a sea serpent, but I do believe. It was an actual sea serpent, a long 50 to 100-foot critter that could go up and down, dive in here and move quite fast through the water. It was seen off of Plymouth, two or three years earlier, and also in Gloucester for three weeks by, a dozen people put their affidavits together. I know that in those days swearing to God that they're telling the truth, which risked hell, this is one hell of a fraud if it wasn't. Yes. Anybody with a question, please.

**Another speaker:**

What was the Linnaean Society?

**Soini:**

Yes, that's good. I'm glad with the question. Linnaean Society was the backbone of the effort. There was a volunteer group in Boston. Approximately, it varied in numbers, but at its high tide, it was probably about 40 people, wealthy gentlemen, people with other day jobs; and on a Saturday afternoon, they would go and hear lectures on science. And they put together a collection that was, could be viewed by appointment. We could call them up or [indistinct] sent a message or anything; it said that you wanted to see their see their cabinet of seashells and



other artifacts. Linnaean Society was intending an attempt upon cataloging all life throughout the world, which meant that the ones in North America catalogued in North America, the ones in Britain catalogued in Britain, and people in the Alps look for alpine plants and animals. And then they would centrally report to, usually in Sweden, was the publication of, I think it was in Latin for a long time before it was in English. The Linnaean catalog of animal, plants and animals. Yes, please.

23:54

**Another speaker:**

The Loch Ness monster, would that be in the same category as the sea serpent?

**Soini:**

I wish I knew. I think that it was different. Because this was a sea, definitely a sea creature, deep sea creature, out of its element, not usually in the shallow water, somehow, like the herring and Gloucester or something, and stayed around for three weeks. Any other questions, in that I'd only take two or three more, please.

**Another speaker:**

I'm curious because you said Gloucester was a busy harbor at the time. Was it just 12 people in total who saw the serpent? Do you have any idea what number?

**Soini:**

It's a wonderful question because it leads me to, to remind about what I said a half hour ago. I'm more and more convinced that there was a friction in Gloucester. The people who didn't want to touch or deal with, made sacred, this animal, didn't want to be on record about - oh, I swear was so long and it did this or that. They felt it would be sacrilegious, I think, to do it. My belief is that they've come down. Hundreds of people wouldn't, wouldn't go near the water. They were afraid of it. Hundreds of people who saw it didn't want to put on record what they saw. We are left with 10 or 12 of the of the people closest to Lonson Nash, the Justice of the Peace – the people who were merchants and high level for Gloucester society, so that they were willing to take a risk because Lonson Nash asked them, it's going to this scientific committee in Boston. It might never see the light of day, but if it doesn't, it'll be in a nice book that everybody pays. It didn't happen that way, but that's the 10 or 12 people that came forward. Yes.

25:27

Yes, please.

**Another speaker:**

Is there a detailed description of [?]?

**Soini:**

There is, in fact, the Linnaean committee's object was to ask 25 identical questions of every witness, neither more nor less, and therefore the descriptions they have, how long was it? How many, how many humps did it have and all. Every witness was asked that same question. So, in a uniform way, there is supposed to be a lot of detail, not only a detailed description by that one witness but identical descriptions that you can review how similar they are. How long did you think it was? How fast was it traveling and so, so yes, the answer is very detailed, in fact very uniform in terms of the questions asked,

26:14

**Another speaker:**

What is the representation [on the wall]?

**Soini:**

Right here is where I met the *Globe* reporter. And I looked at that and I said, what do you think that is? He said it was a Chinese dragon. I think it's closer to a Chinese dragon than it is to the actual sea serpent. As is this - this is nothing like what people were describing in the affidavits. This is some artist's conception unrelated to the witnesses... I really want you to take about one more. Henry, did you have yours yet?

**Another speaker:**

Not yet. I'm working on a project right now to write an original musical comedy about the sea serpent of Gloucester.

**Soini:**

And he's got the first song!

**Another speaker:**

With children. Yeah, definitely gonna use this. And I have a question if there was ever any like nickname. I mean, it's obviously become part of the folklore of Cape Ann and you know how they call you know Loch Ness Monster Nessie and... has there ever been a nickname ascribed to the...

27:11

**Soini:**

The answer is no. And then I'll reverse it, but the answer is no. In fact, I prayed, please give me a good name for this and never came to me. So, I never did. But...

**Another speaker:**

Name her Glossy.

**Soini:**

Glossy, alright, alright, Glossy.

The reverse is also true. A man in South Carolina, within a couple of years of the sightings up here, which were publicized in newspapers, wrote a play that was called *The Gloucester sea serpent*, “*the great hoax*,” and they used the term throughout the country. Like if somebody was giving a tall tale, from this, they said it was a snakey story. So, it worked in reverse, they used the slang snakey story for tall tales. I'll tell you what - I'll take one more, but I will take other questions, but I'll be upstairs signing, nearby, right just around the corner. Yes, please.

**Another speaker:**

I was doing some research about the creature a long time ago and some [?] called her North Shore Nellie.

28:19

**Soini:**

North Shore Nellie, another nominee. All right - I'll take suggestions upstairs. Thank you very much