



Artifacts and Anchors

A quarterly newsletter for Members, Volunteers, and Friends of the Kittery Historical & Naval Society



Bob Nilson – Never a Dull Moment

Anyone who has spent time with Bob Nilson knows that he has a joke for just about any situation—which he will tell in a dry tone with a straight face—and they are all very funny jokes. A friend once suggested that Bob had an enormous library of jokes in his head with a very efficient librarian. Bob is primarily known as an artist, cartoonist, caricaturist, and raconteur with humor everywhere in his work. If you mention Bob's name among Kittery friends and acquaintances, many will know Bob as “the fellow who draws musicians,” or “the fellow who did those sketches of the Seacoast in the Herald,” or “the guy who draws with both hands,” or “the cartoonist.” Researching this article, we found many newspaper accounts of Bob's various activities—drawing the musicians of the Seacoast in Portsmouth, drawing sick children at Boston Children's Hospital, drawing local scenes for his column “Seacoast Sketchbook,” drawing cartoons for local and national newspapers and magazines, being nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and growing up aboard a Chinese junk on Long Island Sound.



Bob Nilson self-portrait

Bob Nilson's childhood was extraordinary. He really did grow up aboard a 30-ton Chinese junk in New Rochelle, New York. The boat was the *Amoy*. She was 68-feet overall, 44-feet at the waterline and 22-feet wide. With the rudder up, she drew 3-1/2 feet, 6-1/2 feet with the rudder down. Bob's father joked that they could sail her “on a wet blanket.” Bob's parents, both artists, had purchased the boat as a family home and Bob and his two brothers grew up aboard one of the most exotic sailing vessels on the Atlantic coast.

The *Amoy* was built in 1924 in China for a Dutchman who sailed her with a crew of three across the Pacific and ended up in San Francisco. That is where Bob's father, Alfred, saw the boat and—seeking both adventure and a chance to work on such an exotic and beautiful vessel—volunteered his services as crew. His first voyage on the *Amoy* was to South America. In the 1920s, the *Amoy* crossed the Panama Canal, and sailed up to Brooklyn, NY. The beauty of the boat drew many curious visitors, one of them a young wom-

an from the Art Students League of New York. That student would become Bob's mother, Rita. One thing led to another, and Bob and his two brothers were raised aboard the *Amoy*. Bob's parents were both artists—his mother painted in oils, his father in watercolor. Bob's brothers were both musical, but Bob Nilson drew. His brother has been quoted as saying that “Bob was born with an ingrown pencil.”

Bob began his cartooning career in New York City, where he worked briefly for an advertising agency but eventually made a (scant) living peddling his cartoons to various magazines as a freelance artist. His work appeared in *Esquire*, the *New Yorker*, *Redbook*, and *Playboy*.

Bob relocated to seacoast New Hampshire to pursue graduate studies (master's degree in mathematics, PhD studies in psychology).

See NILSON page 3



ABOVE: A humorous cartoon of his life aboard the Chinese junk “Amoy” drawn by Bob Nilson. LEFT: The Amoy was used by the Navy for training sailors during the Korean War.

Winter 2020

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From the PRESIDENT

As this [reader may insert descriptive adjective or expletive here] year of 2020 draws to a close, it is a good time to look both backward and forward. Looking back, we grieve for those and for what has been lost. Looking forward, we hope for a better 2021.

Here at the Kittery Historical & Naval Society, we have used the time that the Museum has been closed to good use, continuing to gather and catalog historically significant objects, documents, and photographs. We continue to scan photographs and documents so they can be more accessible to the public as digital images. We have also been involved with Kittery's Celebration Committee in planning events for the celebration of the 375th anniversary of Kittery's incorporation as a town.

As always, we very much appreciate our members and others who support our work and our museum. We appreciate your support, in the forms of finances and of encouragement. When you are planning your year-end giving, please consider a donation to the Kittery Historical and Naval Society to assist us in continuing our work of protecting, preserving, and presenting Kittery's amazing history.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, staff, and volunteers of the Kittery Historical and Naval Society, I wish you all a safe and happy holiday season and a happy, healthy, and safe 2021.

Bob

Bob Gray

P.S.: Late breaking news! You can now donate to the Kittery Historical & Naval Society online. Look for the 'Donate' button on our webpage at kitterymuseum.com

From our library:
MANNERS

Culture and Dress

IN THE
Best American Society

by Richard A. Wells, A.M.,
King, Richardson & Co., Publishers,
1890

GENERAL RULES REGARDING DINNER.

Never take up a piece of asparagus or the bones of fowl or bird with your fingers to suck them, possibly making the remark that "fingers were made before forks." These things should always be cut with a knife and eaten with a fork. If fingers *were* made before forks, so were wooden trenchers before the modern dinner service. Yet it would rather startle these advocates of priority to be invited to a dinner-party where the dining-table was set with a wooden trencher in the centre, into which all the guests were expected to dip with their fingers.

NILSON from page 1

He began teaching at various Seacoast colleges and high schools, eventually settling at Oyster River High School, where he taught a diverse subject range, from mathematics to journalism. Bob married and raised his son in Durham, NH.

In the 1970s Bob joined a newly formed New Hampshire newspaper, *Publick Occurrences* as illustrator and cartoonist. This newspaper broke the story about Aristotle Onassis-owned Olympic Oil buying up land in Durham Point with the intention of building an enormous refinery. Because this was during the oil crisis of the 1970s, state officials favored finding a New Hampshire site for a refinery, hoping



The "Trojan Horse" of the Onassis oil refinery plan, from Publick Occurrences.

it would improve the quantity of oil and gas available to New Hampshire residents. The fight against the proposal to build on Durham Point was led by the newspaper, a determined local committee, and Dudley Dudley, a NH state rep. The issue was settled by the state legislature, and Olympic Oil was forced to withdraw its proposal. The newspaper—and Bob Nilson for his cartoons—were both nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for their roles in dislodging the oil giant from the Seacoast.

Bob continued to draw. He could be seen at fairs and events around the Seacoast, drawing caricatures of great charm and wit. He found that when he had finished several days of drawing, his right hand was very sore, so he decided to train his left hand to help out. Over several years Bob trained his left hand to work together with his right hand to make a drawing.



Many local musicians were the subject of Bob Nilson's sketches.

Once he began to work with both hands, his output increased greatly. He believes he may have set a record for the number of drawings in one day (but Guinness has not been able to verify).

Bob was busy in the 1970s—his freelance drawing began to include the musicians in various Portsmouth music venues. He'd draw the musicians as they played and he became known at the old Rosa, The Press Room, The Dolphin Striker, etc., as the fellow with a sketchpad. His work became popular among artists and he was asked to feature it in a column "Guess Who" in the Portsmouth Herald.



A later Portsmouth Herald weekly column entitled "Seacoast Sketchbook" featured drawings of local scenes with a short history, and the location encrypted between x's.

Fewer people know that for 23 years after he retired from teaching Bob Nilson drove down to Boston Children's Hospital every Wednesday morning. He spent the day with sick children who were facing daunting health challenges. For comfort, he drew them pictures of themselves as they wished to be—princesses, athletes, action figures, firemen, dancers. These were cherished drawings, by children, parents, and health professionals.

Bob is also the author of a darkly humorous book entitled *The Hanging Book*—a collection of cartoons of failed suicides by hanging. Ogden Nash wrote in his foreword to the book "Being humane, I am pleased by their survival; being human, I am delighted that their survival is ignominious. I am more than grateful to Bob Nilson for giving them their come-downance." The book has been used by health professionals to talk about the difficult subject of suicide.

Bob retired from retirement to spend some years in Kittery Point with his dear friend Jackie Ellis on Moore's Island. He now spends winter months in Portsmouth, and returns to Kittery Point for the fine weather. Whichever side of the Piscataqua Bob Nilson is on is the fortunate side!



Kittery and Kittery Point scenes by artist Bob Nilson which appeared in his Seacoast Sketchbook published by The Portsmouth Herald during the 1990s.

No Small Matter:

Getting the Votes to Change 300 Years of Tradition in Kittery

The road to transforming Kittery's government from the traditional model of Board of Selectmen and an annual town meeting to the form we know today was neither short nor easy.

Some residents felt that the amount of work required to run the growing town was getting to be too much for 3 selectmen to handle, while others felt the traditional model was working just fine. Over the course of more than 10 years, the people of Kittery voiced strong feelings both pro and con to the idea of employing a town manager and replacing selectmen with town councilors, and what it would mean to the 300-year tradition of town meeting.

1955 – In the beginning

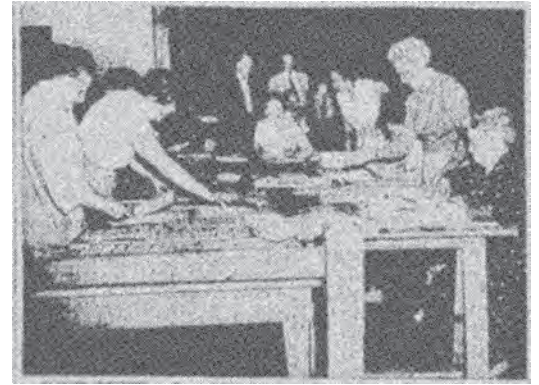
Organized action on the idea of hiring a town manager began in 1955 when Joseph W. Hoyt and 36 others presented a petition to the selectmen to place an article in the warrant for a special town meeting in October. The article would call for forming a committee to study employing a town manager to work with the selectmen. The group would report its findings before the annual town meeting in March, 1956.

Nearly 200 people attended the meeting at Frisbee School where the seven articles on the warrant were voted on. The article to establish a committee to study the town manager form of government, and one authorizing the construction of a new six-classroom school, passed with nary a single dissenting vote. Of the remaining articles, one calling for \$700 to pay for replacing a damaged police cruiser took 10 minutes of the 25-minute meeting.

The study committee authorized by the voters consisted of Carrol H. Sterling, Board of Selectmen chairman; Joseph W. Hoyt, budget and finance committee chairman; Town Clerk Burnell E. Frisbee; and six other citizens. Raymond Pettigrew was elected chairman of the committee, which adopted the name Kittery Better Government Association.

1956 – First try

A great deal of effort was put forth by the Kittery Better Government Association to explain the manager form of government. The committee hosted a series of informational public meetings leading up to town meeting March 3, when a decision would be made whether to place the manager question on a referendum in September.



Election workers, in the foreground, tallied the results under the scrutiny of town officials in the background and poll watchers on the “outside of the rail” at Grange Hall, September 10, 1956. (*The Portsmouth Herald*)

On the morning of March 3 approximately 200 persons heard the reading of the town warrant at Grange Hall where George D. Varney was elected moderator and the annual town meeting was adjourned until 2 o'clock that afternoon at Traip auditorium. There, over 600 voters sailed through a 68-article warrant in just over 2 hours. The vote on the town manager plan came only 20 minutes into the meeting after Elmer J. Burnham moved that Article 54, the referendum article, be moved up to 19th. Joseph Hoyt questioned the attorney's motive for the motion and Burnham replied he thought the matter should be taken up while “everyone is present.” The article passed on a show of hands 223 to 38. Kittery voters would now decide the fate of the proposal in a September referendum.

In the time between March town meeting and September election, numerous Public Forum letters appeared in *The Portsmouth Herald*, both pro and con, and the Kittery Better Government Association placed ads to answer frequently asked questions about the responsibilities of a town manager. Opponent of the plan, Selectman William E. Dennett, pointed out the favorable bond rating of Kittery as proof the town was already “one of the best managed towns in Maine.” On September 8 the *Herald* editorial opinion “Kittery's Chance” urged citizens to vote in favor of the town manager.

Election day, Monday, September 10, saw a heavy turnout at Grange Hall (now The Dance Hall on Walker St.). The afternoon edition of *The Portsmouth Herald* reported:

“As of 11:30 a.m. about 700 voters had exercised their privilege at Grange Hall,

the only polling place in town. Before the polls close at 7 p.m. 2,400 of the 4,000 registered voters are expected to turn out. About 400 of this morning's voters were women.”

The following day's edition reported “Kittery Rejects Manager By Margin of 92 Votes.”

A total of 2556 voters came to the polls; the manager referendum lost 1236 to 1144. After their setback the boosters of town manager government said they were planning a new strategy to get voter approval of the plan, probably trying again to get the plan adopted at next town meeting in March, 1957.

Several months after the plan's loss at the September election, Selectman William E. Dennett proposed a compromise, as reported in the *Herald*:

“Selectman William E. Dennett today proposed a municipal government plan for Kittery that would, in his opinion, ‘heal the breach’ between the town's pro and anti-town manager groups.

“Dennett—who would like to see his ‘administrative assistant’ plan set for a town referendum before the annual town meeting in March—says he is making his proposal because the September vote on the town manager plan shows divided opinion in town and ‘dissatisfaction.’” *The Portsmouth Herald*, Dec. 11, 1956.

Among other things, his plan would increase the number of selectmen from the current three to five or seven and hire an administrative assistant. Dennett, who was aligned with the anti-town manager forces, says his administrative assistant would have to be a “full-time man” who would be practically a town man-

ager, with the exception that he would be “under the selectmen in fact and not in theory.”

The Kittery Better Government Association was the only entity expressing interest in Dennett’s plan, but felt it differed little from their own except the town manager was called an administrative assistant, which they felt would detract from the attractiveness of the job.

They did support one of Dennett’s ideas, though. The committee will seek a special town meeting—to be held before the annual meeting in March—and ask voters to increase the number of selectmen in Kittery from three to seven.

1957 – Second try

In January, 1957 the Kittery Better Government Association presented the selectmen with a petition signed by eight of their members seeking a special town meeting. The three articles they proposed would be to increase the number of selectmen to seven, adopt the town manager government, and to do away with election of the road commissioner and tax collector, making them appointive offices.

The town’s three selectmen, William E. Dennett, Carroll J. Sterling, and Burgess F. Dorr, denied the petition, leading the petitioners to try another tack. They circulated a new petition, collecting 704 signatures, and asked again for a special town meeting. But the board again denied the petition by “exercising its discretion” in not calling the special meeting...since it was less than 30 days to the annual meeting. Undeterred, the committee forged ahead with getting the articles inserted in the annual town warrant, although if the town manager question was approved it would be March, 1958 before a manager could be hired due to the lack of an earlier special town meeting.

Organized opposition

By February the Self Government Committee, a new anti-manager group, is formed. It produced a flyer “March 2nd is V-Day: Vote Day—Vital Day for Kittery” which listed seven arguments against adoption of the manager plan. It protested the proposal to “turn the community over to a stranger called a town manager.”

Ultimately, the selectmen decided to separate the articles and put the town manager plan as the single issue on the ballot at election March 2. Then, according to the *Herald*, “Voters will make their choice of a five

or seven-man Board of Selectmen from the floor of town meeting March 9.”

Prior to the election, *The Portsmouth Herald* again published an editorial urging Kittery to vote in favor of the town manager plan and to ignore the opposition:

“But we have great confidence in the intelligence and good judgment of the voters...and believe they will reject the specious pleadings of the opposition and give an overwhelming “yes” to the town manager question...”

March 2, 1957 headline on the front page of the *Herald*: “**Kittery Rejects Manager Plan, Opponents Vote Proposal Down by 504 Margin**”

In addition to the defeat of the plan, 11 members of the Self-Government Committee won bids for town offices.

1964 – Third, and final try?

The town manager plan would be voted on again at Kittery’s annual meeting in March. A petition was presented to the selectmen with 315 signatures, which asked the article be inserted in the March 7 warrant. Frederic L. Andrews, Daniel O. Seaward, and a group of local businessmen began the move within the last week.

“The plan is being proposed under Maine’s ‘enabling act’ which defines the manager’s general duties, authority and responsibility, and empowers the selectmen to designate specific duties.

“The other form....would be for a town council-manager charter with legislative approval in advance.” *The Portsmouth Herald, March 6, 1964.*

Letters pro and con on the manager issue are again printed in *The Portsmouth Herald* and informational meetings by the League of Women Voters again take place. The *Herald* prints an opinion in favor of the plan, again.

Polls were open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on March 7 for election of town officers and referenda voting in Grange Hall. The following Saturday, voters reconvened at Traip Academy to act upon the rest of the 50-article warrant.

“**Kittery Okays Manager Plan by 322 Votes.**” The largest turnout for an election since 1957 voted to adopt the town manager form of government. It passed 969 to 647, a 322 vote margin.

See MANAGER, page 6

Adopting the Town Manager/Selectmen Plan

A timeline through Portsmouth Herald headlines

October 24, 1955

Manager Plan Under Discussion

Kittery May Okay Study

September 11, 1956

Kittery Rejects Manager By Margin of 92 Votes

December 11, 1956

Compromise Plan For Managership Offered in Kittery

January 5, 1957

Kittery May Vote To Hike Number Of Selectmen to 7

January 21, 1957

Kittery Backers Of Managership Make New Bid

February 20, 1957

Manager Foes Against Hiring Of a ‘Stranger’

March 4, 1957

Kittery Rejects Manager Plan Opponents Vote Proposal Down By 504 Margin

January 13, 1964

Kittery May Ballot On Manager Again

March 9, 1964

Kittery Okays Manager Plan By 322 Votes

April 14, 1965

Manager Plan Hits Snag

New Vote in Kittery

May 19, 1965

Manager Plan Wins Again In Kittery

VOLUNTEER Spotlight

Patty LaClair, who has been a volunteer for 35 years, knows just about all there is to know about the exhibits, the resources, the events, and the needs of the Kittery Historical and Naval Society and Museum. Patty has served as chair of the refreshment committee, has set up the sound system and seating and provided refreshments for Society meetings, has helped to decorate and bake for both the Museum's annual holiday open house and the Veteran's Salute, and has welcomed and helped many, many visitors discover the collections and resources of the Museum.

Patty is a Kittery native and graduate of Traip Academy. She and her husband, Steve Webber (Society Vice-President), met at the Portsmouth Bowl-O-Rama, and have been married for 41 years. They joined the Kittery Historical Society in the 1980s after coming to a lecture and realizing that they were very well acquainted with many of the members. They have been volunteering as a team ever since. Patty recently retired from the Kittery School Nutrition program after 40 years of service.

Patty says she still finds something new in the Museum all the time. She thinks more people should visit to see how much the Museum holds—"so much is packed into this small building." The most interesting thing for her right now in the Museum is the digital timeline created by Society president, Bob Gray—"so much info in there, it's amazing!" She is delighted when she is able to help a visitor search the resources available for local ancestors. "It's rewarding helping people find relatives either through the cemetery lists or the Stackpole book *[Old Kittery and her Families]* ... watching them light up when they see a display of their family."

We asked Patty how Kittery had changed over the years. She says she has seen downtown change from small shops to mostly restaurants, the loss of the drive-in theater, the growth of the Malls, and the schools reduced from six to three.

Since the pandemic, Patty and Steve have been a two-person team maintaining the



Volunteer Patty LaClair

fragile collections, exhibits, and exhibit space, all of which continue to collect dust and need attention. Patty also tends to the Museum's window boxes, keeping a brave face on the Museum during the Covid 19 crisis. Patty eagerly looks forward to the time—soon, she hopes—when it will be safe to open the Museum to the public once again.

MANAGER from page 5

1965 – But not quite final

A year after the successful vote—

"A legal technicality—no public hearing in advance of the referendum vote of March, 1964—has been found. This nullifies the 969 to 617 vote, so a special town meeting will be called as soon as possible, preceded by an officially posted public hearing—to vote upon the question again." *Portsmouth Herald, April 14, 1965*

A special town meeting is called for May 18 to take action again upon the town manager question. The meeting will serve as a public hearing. A quorum of 185 voters must be present before any action can be taken.

On that night, an almost unanimous vote of the more than 300 people present endorsed the town manager form of government again. This vote was declared valid as the final vote without the necessity of holding a secret ballot.

Earl A. White of Pittsfield, Maine becomes Kittery's first town manager on June 7, 1965. White has experience in municipal government, having served several towns after graduating from the University of Maine's first public management class in 1948. His office hours will be daily in the Selectmen's office upstairs in the (old) Town Hall on Government Street.

All facts and quotes in this article come from past issues of The Portsmouth Herald. In the next issue, Kittery's transformation from Selectmen to Town Councilors.



Kittery's first town manager, Earl A. White. (*The Portsmouth Herald*)


Spotlight on Collections



Where is this?

This 1954 picture of sheep shearing is another from our Armsden collection. Do you know where in Kittery this barn is? Answer on page 8.

Please consider making an end-of-the-year gift to the Kittery Historical and Naval Society so that we may continue our work of preserving Kittery's history for everyone to enjoy now and in the future. Any amount is appreciated. NEW! You can now donate online from our website: kitterymuseum.com. Just click the donate button.



Kittery Historical and Naval Society

P. O. Box 453, Kittery, Maine 03904-0453

Here is my end-of-the-year gift ... keep up the good work!


Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Amount Enclosed _____

Thank You!



(The Kittery Historical & Naval Society is a registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization ... donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.)

From the DIRECTOR

Season's Greetings Friends,

As we come to the end of 2020, who would have thought this would be such a historic year. Even though the world shut down, there were still so many events that will shape our history forever. Despite the Museum being closed, we have continued to reach out to share Kittery's history with the community.

Our dedicated volunteers have continued to digitize our collections, organize our artifacts, and update our databases. This is all in line with our mission to bring our history into the 21st century. We continue to work diligently toward making the information stored here only a click away.

Also, coming soon is a presentation in cooperation with The Star Theatre. "Stories from Kittery's Cemeteries" has been filmed and will be shown on Kittery's Channel 22. Stay tuned for updates on dates and times.

Although we will have to forgo the Annual Holiday Open House this year due to covid, we are already planning for a Grand Spring Opening in 2021! Hope to see you all there!

I truly want to thank all our members and volunteers for their continued support and understanding during this unique time. With you, we have been able to keep the Museum running. I wish you all good health and a Happy New Year!

See you in the Spring,

Kim

Kim Sanborn, Director

News



The Tide Mills of Kittery

This new 34-minute video about tide mill technology and history explores several abandoned tide mill sites between Kennebunkport, Maine, and Hampton, N.H. The superb aerial video segments by Jim White are enough to make viewing well worth your time.

Society president, Bob Gray, and museum director, Kim Sanborn, make appearances in the video. It premiered at the annual conference of the Tide Mill Institute, held on line in mid-November, and all are now invited to watch it at the link: tidemillinstitute.org



Kittery Historical and Naval Society
 P.O. Box 453
 Kittery, ME 03904

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Answer to Where is this? (p. 6): The location of the barn in this 1954 photo is the Hartley Farm on Haley Road. At the time, the farm was home to Francis Hartley II who was the president of Frank Hartley & Sons manufacturing chemists, 865 Islington St., Portsmouth, NH. The boy in the photo may be one of the Hartly sons, which included John and Francis IV. ¶ Thanks to David Kaselauskas for help identifying some of the men in the Fall newsletter's "Spotlight on Collections" photo of seine fishing. Dana Knight's home and dock were on Moore's Island Lane which was very close to Douglas Armsden's home. Dana is the man closest to the helm in the picture, and the man in the railroad hat is Stanley Higgins. Dick Raynes may also be one of the men.