

Gideon & John Woodwell Shipyard

Bottom of Marlboro Street

(Also known earlier as the Woodwell & Hale Shipyard)

(1757 to 1852)

Gideon Woodwell was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1720 but found him left an orphan when just two years old and was taken to Newbury at the age of eight in 1744. In 1746 he was enrolled in the company of Colonel Gerrish and took part in the expedition under command of William Pepperell which captured Louisburg. (A cannon ball from that battle is on display to the left of the entrance to the Superior Court House at Bartlett Mall.)

He was First Lieutenant of a company in the regiment of Colonel Jonathan Bagley stationed at Fort William Henry on Lake George in 1756. During the summer of that year he was commissioned by Governor Shirley then commander-in-chief of the British forces in North America and placed in charge of the ship carpenters who built three sloops and several hundred whale boats for the transportation of troops and supplies to Ticonderoga.

In 1757 he was enrolled in the Alarm list of Foot Company in Newbury of which Joseph Coffin was Captain. Coffin and Gabriel along with a company of men from Newbury marched to Cambridge on the alarm of April 19, 1775 and remained there for six days in which they then returned to Newbury with leave.

He successfully commanded a merchant ship for a few years and earned enough to return to Newburyport to establish the Woodwell shipyard (Later called Woodwell & Hale) about 1762 and from that year to 1773 built fifty-two vessels. The yard was closed during the Revolution and from 1783 to 1790 ten vessels were built his son John and son in law Enoch Hale being associated with him. He married first Hannah who died in 1772 and second Ruth Goodwin on July in 1781. He died in 1790 and is buried at the Old Hill Burying Ground.

He ended up residing at 241-243 Water Street.



Gideon Woodwell Junior was born in the house in 1750. He was one of a party of seventeen men who captured the British ship *Friends* off Plum Island in 1776. (This was the famous ship seized by privateer Offin Boardman when the British Captain mistakenly thought he was approaching Boston.) Gideon, Jr. served in the navy during the Revolutionary War and War of 1812. In early life he learned the trade of

ship carpenter from his father and in 1797 he helped build the frigate *Constitution*. In 1812 when that famous vessel made her escape from a British fleet he was on board as ship carpenter. He died in 1840 aged 90 years.

Another descendent of Captain Gideon Woodwell was John, born in 1752. He was associated with his father and Enoch Hale in carrying on the industry of shipbuilding under the firm name of Woodwell & Hale.

The yard was unoccupied for a few years after the death of the Senior. During this time John Woodwell built a few vessels on the Kennebec River near Bath Maine. At the beginning of the 19th century he and his sons John David and Gideon re-established the business in Newbury and from 1800 to 1853 built nearly one hundred vessels varying in size from 50 to 300 tons register. In 1799 John and his brother Gideon had a contract to build half a war vessel for the government. (William Cross ship builders constructing the other half)

Another notable descent of Captain Gideon Woodwell was Mary born in Newbury, 1758. She married Enoch Hale who was a descendant of Thomas Hale who was prominent in the early history of Newbury. Enoch Hale served in the Revolutionary army and was a shipbuilder associated with Captain Gideon Woodwell.

Woodwell Shipyard

According to Robert K. Cheney in Maritime History of the Merrimac, the Woodwell shipyard built small vessels for nearly a century in the same location in Joppa. Young Gideon Woodwell came to Newbury after the death of his parents. He was cared for by the shipbuilding Johnson family, relatives of his mother. Young Gideon learned the trade at an early age and worked at the Johnson shipyard at the foot of Federal Street. By 1756, the war between Great Britain and France in North America was underway. Mr. Woodwell was commissioned and placed in charge of the shipwrights who were building "Battoes & c. for Transporting the Forces Destined for the Intended Expedition against Crown Point."

Of 56 gross tons, Schooner Pinkie Wellfleet built in 1829 by the Woodwell shipyard on Water Street. The Woodwells specialized in the smaller craft compared to the 100 ton plus ships built on Merrimac Street.

Returning to Newburyport by 1758, Gideon Woodwell bought land between Water Street and the river, extending from near the foot of Marlboro Street to Goodwin's Landing. Nearly a century later, 160 small vessels, mostly schooners, had been constructed by several generations of the Woodwell family. Launching of vessels took place during high tide in a creek that crossed Water Street near Woodwell's Avenue.

During the American Revolution, little shipbuilding took place. Gideon Woodwell was a captain in the militia and joined other locals marching to Boston in 1775. After his return, Mr. Woodwell became a ship carpenter for Stephen and Ralph Cross and Jonathan Greenleaf. By the late 1780s, Gideon's sons John and Gideon, Jr., and son in law Enoch Hale joined under the firm name of Woodwell and Hale. Mr. Woodwell died in 1790, and his family continued shipbuilding until 1852 when the shipyard finally closed. In 1876, John G. Plummer walled and filled the land that once was the Woodwell shipyard.

The Woodwell family was also involved in other construction projects. In 1827, at a cost of \$1,380, they rebuilt the Parker River Bridge in Newbury and repaired it in 1839. The bridge had been built by another shipbuilder, Ralph Cross. They repaired the Plum Island Bridge in 1850.



Of 56 gross tons, Schooner Pinkie Wellfleet built in 1829 by the Woodwell shipyard on Water Street. The Woodwells specialized in the smaller craft compared to the 100-ton plus ships built on Merrimac Street.

References:

241-243 Water Street, Newburyport Historic District, Survey date sheet, 1984.

241-243 Water Street, Vision Appraisal, City of Newburyport, 2018

Clipper Heritage Trail, www.clipperheritagetrail.com

Custom House Maritime Museum www.customhousemaritimemuseum.org

Historical Society of Old Newbury and Cushing Museum www.newburyhist.org

Maritime History of the Merrimac by Robert K. Cheney, Newburyport Press, 1964

Newburyport Public Library Archival Center www.newburyportpl.org