

SEABORN

Written by **CYRUS A. BUFFUM** | *Captain Alexander Wadsworth, a hard-bitten sailor from Duxbury, Massachusetts, took to the sea at a young age. He had little choice. Born in 1808, on the very shores settled by his Pilgrim ancestors, he came from a lineage of old salts. His father, a shipmaster and a merchant. His grandfather, one of the great shipbuilders of Massachusetts.*

In his 30-year career as a master mariner, Captain Wadsworth commanded more than fifteen different vessels, nine of which were built in his native home of Duxbury. He'd sail the world over, passing through, as he described it, nearly all the scenes incident upon a sea-faring life.

On the Favorite he journeyed to the Mediterranean for citrus, currants, nuts, and coffee. Aboard the Hyder Ally, he traded sugar from Havana. He commanded the Falco to Rio de Janeiro for hides and horns, and the Minerva to Charleston for a load of Carolina Gold rice, which he then ferried to London. He ran wine from foreign ports, ice from Walden Pond, and ballast from San Francisco's Telegraph Hill.

On occasion, his men would die—some from yellow fever, others from sudden squalls. Once, in the years leading to the Civil War, Captain Wadsworth's crew of free black sailors was imprisoned in Charleston for violating South Carolina's [unconstitutional] Negro Seamen Act. And on another voyage, all of Captain Wadsworth's men abandoned ship upon arrival in San Francisco for a chance to strike gold in the California hills.

Each ship brought a new voyage. And each voyage brought uncertainty.

I grew up on Cape Cod, in the town of Barnstable, in a village a mere 30 miles from where the great shipmasters of Duxbury once lived.

Though both New Englanders, neither of my parents was from the Cape. My mother grew up in the rural countryside of western Connecticut, on an old dairy farm in a house built in 1798, together

with her large Irish Catholic family. My father, born in Massachusetts, was raised by his mother in the public housing of Manchester, New Hampshire.

During the Summer of Love, my mom was 17, finishing high school, and my dad was 19, enlisted in the Army as a combat photographer on the front lines of Vietnam. They met some years later, drawn together by chance in a photography class in college. They married in 1975. And shortly thereafter, moved to Cape Cod.

They rented a small cottage in Hyannisport and had my sister in 1979. From the stories I recall, these early days involved cockroaches in a decrepit apartment and walks on the beach where greetings with Rose or Jackie Kennedy were not uncommon.

By 1982 they had bought a small plot of land in the village of West Barnstable, and there they built a home. Our cedar-shingled house was heated with a wood burning stove and surrounded by the privacy of undeveloped land. It was a quiet home, atop a quiet hill at the end of a quiet dirt road.

My childhood was near perfect. Our town was simple. Our elementary school's mascot was a lobster. And my memories of playing in the yard with my brother and sister, and of family walks through the woods, are thick and many. West Barnstable had an old village store that was called The Old Village Store. There, we'd buy 100 pieces of penny candy for a dollar, and we'd put what remaining coins we had on the nearby railroad track to watch as passing trains flattened them like pancakes.

The fact that I lived three miles from two shorelines [Cape Cod Bay to the north and Nantucket Sound to the south] meant little to me then. Our family didn't boat. Seafood was not a significant part of our diets. And of all places, I'm fairly certain I learned to swim in a lake.

Of course we'd visit Sandy Neck in the summers and take swims in the frigid waters along the rocky beach of Cape Cod Bay. Family photos were captured in the dramatic dunes that defended the inhabited peninsula from Atlantic breakers. And always, when driving "into town" for a dentist appointment or for a treat on Main Street, I'd marvel at the ships dotting Hyannis' commercial waterfront. School field trips involved the occasional whale watching tour, and I do have a few special memories of eating sea pickles from the Great Marsh and

hanging from beneath a dock with friends as currents from Barnstable Harbor's 12-foot tidal range swept my body horizontal.

But the Cape Cod that served as the backdrop to the iconic figures of New England—from the passengers of the *Mayflower* to the great fishermen who built an entire economy on the backs of whaling and cod—was, for me, merely the backdrop of my childhood. Life, for the most part, was on land.

Captain Wadsworth's wife, Beulah, and son, Francis, often accompanied him on lengthy passages. One such voyage began on the docks of Boston, not far from their home in Duxbury, near the end of 1852. Ship Seth Sprague, named for his grandfather, was loaded with ice, ordered by Frederic Tudor—known as Boston's "Ice King"—to be delivered to his icehouse in Madras, India. It was then on to Calcutta for "gunny bags, goatskins, shellac, dyes, and saltpetre" for the return trip to Boston.

Captain Wadsworth prepared the ship, readied his crew and sailed eastward, then southward, crossing the Atlantic Ocean and the equator once, around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, into the Indian Ocean and northward over the equator again. Four months and more than 14,000 miles later, they entered the waters of the Bay of Bengal and arrived in Madras, having lost to the tropical climates only 15 percent of the ice aboard.

Three weeks after leaving Boston, Beulah, an old hand at seafaring, discovered herself to be pregnant. Despite the obvious concerns, Beulah always looked on the bright side and was comforted by the thought of reaching Calcutta before giving birth. However, upon arrival in Madras, her condition had deteriorated and she began suffering from intestinal pains and other complications.

Captain Wadsworth sailed out of Madras on February 4, 1853, expecting to make the 800-mile passage in four days' time. There he could seek assistance from a physician and provide the adequate care Beulah so badly needed.

Alas, as the Seth Sprague and her crew made way across the Bay of Bengal toward the Sandheads of Calcutta's Hooghly River, the monsoon let up and stillness fell upon them.

Captain Wadsworth described the helplessness of sitting upon a tranquil sea, "There has scarcely been a ripple on the water. The surface looking like molten lead most of the time."

The ship lay becalmed for two weeks more. And on Monday, Febru-

ary 21, Beulah complained a great deal of pain in her back. At 10PM, “a fine little boy was born.” He was named Alexander Seaborn Wadsworth, known simply as Seaborn

When I was 13, my mom signed my brother and me up for sailing lessons at the Wianno Yacht Club, a beautiful institution perched on Osterville’s West Bay. We took two weeks of classes that first year and enrolled for the entire summer the year after. Late to the game compared to my classmates who, for the most part, had been knocking about in boats since birth, I always felt like I was playing catch-up. Soon, however, I began helping around the club. I became a sailing instructor and, eventually, joined the race team. Quickly, my life between March and September became driven by the wind and by the waters off Cape Cod.

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I’d have my first beer aboard a friend’s dad’s boat while anchored in West Bay. [The dad wasn’t onboard at the time.] I’d swim at night and go skurfing on lunch breaks with the other instructors. I’d lose many items to the sea over the years. First sunglasses. Then a pair of shoes. An anchor once. And later a close friend.

I learned to live with dried salt on my skin, and learned to love the smell of sun-bleached Chuck Taylors. I remember the summer I got a splattering of freckles on my shoulders from the length of time I’d spent on the rail of a sailboat. I crewed aboard the classic 12-meter yacht *Nefertiti* [one of the contending boats in determining the defender of the 1962 America’s Cup], and distinctly remember watching in awe from below the boom as the mainsail was raised like a cotton-white blanket filling the sky.

We’d travel to Martha’s Vineyard by motorboat to compete in the Edgartown and Vineyard Haven Regattas, with a chain of dinghies in tow. I remember the first time I made that passage, from mainland to the island, by sail—a 15-mile journey. I was at the helm of a 14-foot sailboat; my friend and I dangled over Nantucket Sound from the edge of our modest vessel. We had accomplished a great voyage over a conquered sea. I was proud. When my parents separated, the ocean brought relief. Being on the water always gave perspective.





Upon seeing Seaborn's newborn face for the first time in the early morning light, Beulah declared with sparkling eyes, "This is the brightest little fellow I ever did see." But soon, Beulah began suffering again. For five days and nights Captain Wadsworth remained by his wife's side, holding her hand, combing her hair, giving her drinks, and changing her clothes. On Sunday the 27th, nine-year-old Francis was called into the state-room to see his mother. Beulah told him to be a good boy, to mind and love his dear father and aunty and newborn little brother. She told him to tell her friends she loved them all. She told him she'd say a good deal more tomorrow.

Alone now with his wife of eighteen years, Captain Alexander clasped Beulah's hands tightly. He promised, if anything happened, to return her body to Massachusetts, and to bury her in the little graveyard under the tall oak trees. His bold blue eyes swelled with tears. Together they prayed. Beulah's mind began to drift, and her body became cold. Captain Wadsworth asked gently whether she knew who he was. "You are my dear, dear husband," she said, wrapping her arms around his body, drifting peacefully into death, "with a smile on her countenance."

The ship's carpenter was ordered to build a coffin. Captain Wadsworth dressed his wife in "one of her old familiar dresses" and lay her body in the coffin filled with spirits. A wet nurse was engaged and preparations were made for a return sail to New England.

When I was 18, I left Cape Cod and moved south to attend the College of Charleston. As a Yankee expat in South Carolina I soon learned of the regional stereotypes much of the world has of coastal New England. The distance from home gave me perspective and forced reflection of how fortunate I was to grow up in such a place. The many moments of snowy winters and water-filled summers became more permanently etched in memory. My pride for my sense of home grew, and soon my identity became tied indefinitely to the place I was raised. A thousand miles from home, it was as if I became a true New Englander.

I traveled abroad after graduation but soon returned to Charleston. It was around this time I began discovering the stories of my ancestral past—of Captain Alexander Wadsworth and of his son Seaborn, my great-great-grandfather. Answering an out-of-the-blue email pleading for genealogical insight, my aunt Margo mailed

me two manila envelopes of family documents—birth certificates and death certificates, pension papers and family trees—each document helping me further trace my lineage back. I began putting together the pieces of the lives that came before mine—the stories of the individuals upon whose foundation I had unknowingly built my life. My middle name, Alexander, began to make sense. As did my dad's, Wadsworth, a name I only thought of as peculiar for most of my life. I continued to search and discover, first slowly, then with absolute obsession.

The sea appeared as a constant in many of the stories I learned. Soon, I began to realize the extent to which water had shaped my own life—how it too had remained a constant behind many of my decisions and influential experiences. I felt grateful and equally obliged to maintain this force—to protect the resource that had given me so much, even if it meant doing so far from home.

I founded a conservation organization called Charleston Waterkeeper and for the next six years I committed every ounce of myself to the cause. We worked to protect the quality of Charleston's waterways, to ensure the public's right to clean water for fishing, swimming, sailing and drinking. I became intimate with the harbor, rivers, creeks and wetlands. I fell deeply in love with the power of the sea, with the sophistication and delicacy of a coastal ecosystem, and with nature's resilience in the face of man's ignorance. For six years I worked to build this organization. I worked to protect the waters I had come to love for recreation and inspiration, for work and worship—the very waters that carried Captain Alexander Wadsworth and his crew to port over 150 years earlier.

But after all this work, I could feel the erosion of my New England foundation. It had been many years since I sailed the waters of West Bay and the memories of my childhood home were becoming more distant. Around this time a dear friend of mine passed away after an unexpected battle with cancer. Her name was Jean. She was a quick-witted New Englander who loved the Red Sox and who, too, was driven by the sea. In her final days, in one of the last emails she

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wrote to me, Jean quoted a passage from Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World*: "To young men contemplating a voyage I would say go."

When I think of home, of Barnstable, of that brave peninsula stretching eastward from the edge of New England into the heart of the Atlantic, I feel rooted. I think of the rocky shoreline of Cape Cod Bay, of the soil I played on as a kid and of the beauty of the Massachusetts coast. I think of history—of the stories of great shipmasters, of great activists and abolitionists and of the pledge for independence at the hands of patriots and pilgrims. I think of my many ancestors who have called New England home, and I think, too, of how grateful I am to be able to refer to it as such.

Last summer, I stepped out of my role with Charleston Waterkeeper, and I returned to this special place. I spent a month in Barnstable—the longest I had been on the Cape in over a decade. And I began to reconnect. I sailed again on West Bay. I drove past the quiet dirt road in West Barnstable where I'd ride my bike. I ordered lunch at the Old Village Store and spent hours at the nearby library, devouring the sections devoted to New England, nature and the sea.

For the entire month of August I read and wrote and sat in an old cottage on the edge of West Barnstable's Great Marsh. I watched the swallows dive overhead, timed the rise and fall of the tides, watched the marsh grass bend as gentle winds passed seaward. I swam in the nearby creek. I watched the sun rise and set, and looked forward to returning the following day.

I visited Duxbury, the place Captain Alexander Wadsworth called home. I found the house he was raised in as a boy, and I walked the waterfront where he'd first gone to sea. I visited the Mayflower Cemetery—the final resting place of so many of New England's great heroes. Each ship commanded by Captain Alexander Wadsworth had its place on the towering granite stone that marked his life. I stood in the little graveyard beneath the tall oak trees by Beulah's grave and read the words that covered its side: "Wife of Alexander Wadsworth, who died on board the Ship Seth Sprague on the passage from Madras to Calcutta." And etched on a simple stone nearby:



Alexander Seaborn Wadsworth
1853 - 1936
Born on Ship

It's been written of Captain Alexander Wadsworth that "in all his trips to all the ports at which American Ships called, he had never seen a place that suited him as well as Duxbury." And for me, after my return to Barnstable, after many years away, I share the Captain's sentiment for a small New England town with a seafaring heart, and I know that no place will ever suit me better.

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