

Boston November the 30th 1867

Oh as thine eyes shall fondly trace,
These simple lines I write to thee,
What in the time, what in the place

I think of me,

Thy life, thy bliss may heaven defend
And shouldst thou by its stern decree
E'er want a true and faithful friend

I think of me, Carrie Stanley

Barnes, N. Top

Lewis H. Holmes

Willie J. Cole

Fannie A. Preble

John Perry

Carrie Stanley

George P. Tucker, Gilman L. Norwood

Mary C. Stanley
C. Isles Maine

George Tucker
Fannie A. Preble

When far away my friend you go
Will you one thought on me bestow
And let your memory oft retain
The hours we spent on C. Isles Maine

Remember me when far away,
And I will ever think of thee, Carrie

Two of Carrie's poems in her handwriting

A NATURAL HEROINE

Great Cranberry's Carrie Richardson defied the stereotypes of her day

CHERIE GALYEAN

“The good old days” is usually a vague and undefined time period, but on the coast of Maine, this term seems stamped across the age of the schooners. On the islands of today, challenged and struggling to maintain their identities and economic viability, the schooner days and their high times of adventurous sea captains, booming shipyards, and overflowing towns and schools seem distant and foreign. The wooden ships and the men who sailed them built Maine's rugged, seafaring reputation and popularized the succinct, self-sufficient downeast personality that still sustains tourism boards. These ships made the taciturn Maine captains some of the most traveled people of the era and brought romance and worldliness to the rockbound Maine coast. The Cranberry Isles, a small grouping of five islands southeast of Mount Desert Island, were home to many of these ships and their captains.

The schooner era began in the mid-1800s, spurred on by the thriving cod fishery and lumber industry. Two- and three-masted schooners were the vehicles of choice, bringing cargoes of dried fish, lumber, lime and granite to Boston and New York, picking up more cargo in these ports to carry to North Carolina, Georgia and other southern states. Many went as far as the Caribbean, picking up sugar in Cuba and rum in Puerto Rico to bring back north. A few sailed all the way to South America. For almost a hundred years, only slightly derailed by the blockades of the Civil War, Maine ships and Maine captains dominated the coast.

Islands were perfectly situated to take advantage of this boom, and these were the most vibrant years in the history of Maine island life. An easy stop between the markets in Boston and the fisheries of downeast Maine and just south of Mount Desert Island and its myriad boatyards, the Cranberry Isles were particularly well suited for those who would make their living from the sea. The Coast Guard lifesaving station on Little Cranberry Island, set up to rescue sailors from the wrecks that the high volume of boat traffic caused, recorded 15,480 vessels passing in the nearby area in eight months of 1894, something that is difficult to imagine today, when the Cranberry Isles, and Great Cranberry Island in particular, struggle with a declining year-round population and a lack of industry. But during the 1890s, there were several hundred residents on Great Cranberry Island, and enough children to fill not just one, but two schools. The people who lived there were full of stories, adventures and a liveliness that seems a world away from today's quiet island, with few working boats in the harbor and an empty school.



Carrie Stanley Richardson

In 2001, the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society decided that it was time to celebrate one of the most moving of these stories—the story of Carrie Richardson. Historical society president Wini Smart spent months digging through the society's collections, interviewing island residents, and writing a play about her, called *Carrie Richardson of Big Cranberry*, which was performed by local residents for the society's annual meeting that year. “There was a real mystique to her life that I liked,” says Smart, when asked why she spent so much time on this effort. “She seemed like a natural heroine.” Richardson seemed to take a hand in making herself known as well. “When I was writing the play, I wanted to know more about her in person,” says Smart. “At that time, [a local resident] was looking through a Dumpster, and in a box under old rope [found some of Richardson's] letters and papers. It was like [Carrie herself had] arranged it.”

Mary Caroline Stanley was born in November 1847, the oldest of ten children to be born to Enoch and Caroline Stanley of Great Cranberry. The island of Great Cranberry is shaped like a crescent, with the land hugging and almost encircling a large, shallow inlet known as The Pool. The farmhouse-style Stanley house looks over The Pool, and at that time had a large boathouse and extensive dock stretching out into the inlet. The Pool is protected, but shallow; low tide pulls out the water and turns it into mudflats.

Enoch was listed in the 1850 census as a captain and in the 1880 census as a fisherman, and he was both. Like most men of the day, he changed his profession according to economics and the season. He would fish for part of the year and travel south to New York and



Peter Richardson, Carrie's second son, playing in The Pool, circa 1893.

Boston, bringing his own dried fish as well as others' to sell. It could be an uneven living, at the mercy of the market. One archived letter to Enoch asks him to send fish and name his price, while another apologizes for selling his catch low because of oversupply. Nevertheless, Enoch was successful, with contacts up and down the coast. He held part shares in many schooners to spread out his investment.

This is the world of ships and fish that Mary Caroline, called "Carrie," was born into. Carrie attended one of two schoolhouses with the other 30 or so children on the island. It is likely that she spent much of her time on her father's boats, though there is no evidence that she or her mother ever went to sea. We don't know how Carrie did in school, but she must have been an exceptional student, since she left Great Cranberry to attend college in Boston.

The world of higher education was just beginning to consider women worth educating, so Carrie's move was quite bold at the time. It's unclear what college Carrie attended or what her studies entailed. Although she was an excellent writer with an interest in poetry, she clearly had not lost her love of the sea. Along with her other courses, Carrie studied celestial navigation. It is easy to imagine that she was the only woman in the class.

Carrie missed her life on the island, as shown in one of her short poems, written in 1864. The folds in the yellowed paper suggest that it was enclosed in a letter to those that she missed at home.

*When far away my friend you go
Will you one thought on me bestow
And let your memory oft retain
The hours we've spent on C. Isles Maine.*

*Remember me when far away
And I will ever think of thee.*

But she wouldn't be lonely for long. It is generally assumed that it was in Boston that Carrie met Meltiah Richardson.

Meltiah was from Goose Cove, a tiny spot near the current West Tremont area of Mount Desert Island. His childhood and early professional years are a mystery, but by 1853 he was living on Sutton Island,

another of the Cranberry Isles, and right across the channel from Great Cranberry. It is unlikely that he and Carrie ever met at this time. He was 20 years older than she and lived on Sutton with his wife Sarah, a Spurling. Meltiah and Sarah had been married in 1853, when he was 25 and she was 18. By 1861, they had four children.

Meltiah was a captain on the rise. In 1856, he captained the *MONTEZUMA*, a 73-foot schooner out of Tremont. It was a troubled ship, passing through ownership and captains every few years, and Meltiah wouldn't stick around for long either. In 1858 he became part owner of his own ship, the 84-foot *QUICKSTEP*. As owner and master, Meltiah would travel up and down the coast of the Americas, bringing cargo from port to port, and stories maintain that he even crossed the Atlantic. A letter written by a contemporary after his death describes Meltiah as "a man of many sterling qualities and a reliable and competent man to command his vessel."

But while his professional life was growing, Meltiah's home life was foundering. Sarah hated the sea, and was not made to be a captain's wife. They were a fatal mismatch, and not even their children could keep them together. By 1862, Meltiah and Sarah were divorced and Meltiah moved to Falmouth, Maine, continuing his trade route to Boston and New York.

The origins of Carrie and Meltiah's romance remain obscure. It's unclear how they met, or what it was that drew them together, despite 20 years and a lifetime of experience separating them. The records show that they were married in 1870, when she was 22 and he 42, and that they moved back to Great Cranberry Island. He called her "Cass"; she called him "Mell."

While it wasn't common for a wife to travel with her husband at the time, it wasn't unheard of either. There are many examples of wives who accompanied their husbands on their trips—sometimes before children, sometimes after. Even so, this was at the height of the Victorian era, when the deck of the ship and its crew were considered unfit for a woman. Mingling with the crew was frowned upon. Most seafaring wives stayed down in the cabin, mending clothes, reading, writing journals, embroidering. Occasionally, the wives would perform basic paperwork duties on the ship, including updating accounts and keeping the log.

Carrie Richardson did all of this once she went to sea with her husband, along with exercising her love of writing poetry. (Although Carrie reportedly kept a logbook of these early journeys, sadly, it has never been found.) But Richardson didn't spend all of her time keeping the logs and writing poems. Because of her education, she was uniquely prepared to be a captain's wife, and Wini Smart's interviews of older island residents turned up story after story of Richardson's navigational skills. She was frequently called on to help Meltiah fix their course. Oral histories claim that the couple sailed to the Caribbean, to South America, and even around the horn of South America. An old receipt shows that they went at least as far as Cardenas, in Cuba, in 1871, when they brought 100 boxes of sugar back to New York. There are even stories of Carrie's prowess at the tiller. Meltiah had developed a taste for alcohol and was reportedly too drunk to captain his own ship upon occasion. Carrie would take over—something that must have taken an admirable strength of personality on a ship full of men. Meltiah's drinking would turn out to be a sign of trouble to come, but at this point, the Richardson star was still rising.

In 1873, Carrie and Meltiah were joined on board by another Richardson: their son Emery. The fast and more-dependable steamers were beginning to take over the short-haul coastal trade, and Meltiah needed a larger ship to make the longer runs that schooners still excelled in. In 1874, Meltiah sold the *QUICKSTEP*, and the *CARRIE M. RICHARDSON* was launched from Henry Newman's yard in Manset. At 283 tons and 114 feet in length, the little schooner was built during the last hurrah of the three-masters. Ships the size of the *CARRIE M. RICHARDSON* would soon be dwarfed by the four- and five-masted schooners to come.

The RICHARDSON became a home for the small family. Raised partly at sea, Emery was a true seaman's child. The Great Cranberry Island Historical Society has an old ship's logbook filled with Emery's childhood drawings and practice letters. The family seemed perpetually on the move, but not always together. In an 1876 letter to her father, Carrie debates whether she will join her husband at sea. "I have not heard from Mell since he left, but I think he ought to be in New York in a week more. I shall not go next trip unless he takes a load of coal on somewhere."

Carrie's broad education and interests were developing further. In addition to her reading and writing, she was learning to play the piano, and her musical inclinations were competing with her desire to accompany her husband. "I have hired Mary's melodeon for a month and Ed Truworthy is going to give me lessons, and then if he stays all winter I do not know but that I shall stay a part of the winter . . . and take all the lessons he will give me . . . So if I can learn, I shall let Mell whistle for a part of the winter." It is likely that Carrie did stay that winter and learn to play, because sometime in the next few years, Carrie returned from a trip to Boston with a box piano.

And so it went for ten years. Carrie and Emery would sail on some trips, stay home during others, and sometimes Emery would stay on Great Cranberry with his grandparents while Carrie and Mell sailed alone. Carrie, like all captains' wives, collected treasures from their ports, including a fine set of china. The 1880 census shows that the little family lived in the overflowing Stanley household while on the island, along with six of Carrie's siblings and Meltiah's youngest son, William, 21, from his marriage to Sarah. By all standards, the little Richardson family was doing fine.

In 1883, that would all change. Carrie and Meltiah had left on a voyage, leaving Emery—ten years old at that point, and enrolled in the Great Cranberry school—in the care of Carrie's parents. Carrie and Mell were in Boston when they received word that Emery had contracted a sudden fever and died. "You can imagine their attitude when they found out," says Wini Smart. Indeed, there is no record of their sorrow; nothing to explain what happened, or to express the guilt that Mell and Carrie must have felt for not being there for their son.

The records do show that the same year, most likely in grief, Meltiah sold the CARRIE M. RICHARDSON.

The next few years were hard. Meltiah began to deteriorate. He and Carrie left Great Cranberry. He bought shares in a grocery business, but a landlocked life was not for him. His drinking continued to be a problem and his health began to suffer. Both Meltiah and Carrie were shocked when in 1888, five years after Emery's death, 40-year-old Carrie discovered that she was pregnant again.

Charles Emery Richardson, called Peter, was born into a troubled marriage. Miserable in the grocery business and in ill health, 60-year-old Meltiah likely wasn't looking for another chance at fatherhood. The family moved back to Great Cranberry and back into the Stanley house, probably seeking a change and family support. Meltiah did some fishing on local boats, but he would never again command his own vessel. Meltiah developed recurring dizzy spells and seemed entrenched in misery.

On May 23, 1901, Carrie's younger brother Arno was leaving the Stanley residence early in the morning when he noticed the body of Meltiah Richardson floating in The Pool. Meltiah had a key in his pocket, which led the family to a locked trunk in the house. Inside the trunk was a signed document requesting that the treasurer of Portland Savings Bank turn everything in his accounts over to Carrie. There was no way to assume that this was a tragic accident. At the age of 73, Meltiah had committed suicide by leaping off the Stanley dock.

An account written by a contemporary gives a good sense of Meltiah's problems. "He had been miserable with the grippe for several weeks this spring, but got better and went out fishing . . . Six years ago while leaving the home of a neighbor he suddenly fell . . . Since then he had complained of dizziness and noise seemed to affect him very much. None remember that he made any direct allusion that

he ever thought of taking his life, yet since his death many recalled expressions he made on different occasions, which form a chain of evidence that he may have contemplated such action for years."

Meltiah was buried in the Stanley cemetery next to Emery. The schooner years on the Maine coast were coming to an end by 1901. The popularity of the Cranberry Isles was growing among "rusticators," beginning the gradual shift from working island to summer island. The population of Great Cranberry Island had peaked and would continue to decline up to the present day. In many ways, Meltiah Richardson had lived the storybook history of the islands during their boom years, and he died with them.

For the next 19 years, Carrie entrenched herself in the business of Cranberry Island, buoyed by a strong religious faith. A handful of letters show her to be tough-minded, witty and extremely intelligent. She became clerk of the Union Meeting House and fought to get it reopened after it closed in the early 1900s. "The matters relating to the settlement of the Union Meeting House are about to arrive at a crisis, and in my opinion—even though I may be accounted foolish and a lunatic—I would advise you as a friend to all interested and concerned," she wrote to the new pastor, and one feels a certain sympathy for the man at the receiving end of such a letter. She battled to protect the Stanley cemetery where Meltiah and Emery lay when nearby land was sold.

Carrie lived out the rest of her years in the Stanley house. Her father, Enoch, passed away in 1903 and her mother in 1907. Carrie and her brother Lew—the oldest and the youngest of the Stanley children, 22 years apart in age—shared the house along with Lew's wife. Lew ran the boathouse and fished. Carrie collected books and hymns. She brought up Peter as best she could, though he proved to be a troubled soul. Carrie Richardson died in 1920 at 72 years of age.

Peter would live out his life on Great Cranberry. Remembered today as a happy drunk who walked around singing with a flask in his sport-coat pocket, Peter would never recover from the shadow of his father's pain. Nevertheless, he inherited his father's gifts as well as his trouble. "He was known for being able to bring a boat in out of any condition," says Smart. "He had salt water in his veins." Peter died in a nursing home in 1971, leaving no children behind.

Like Meltiah and Emery, Carrie and Peter are buried in the Stanley cemetery. On the backside of the island, the cemetery is at the top of a hill, overlooking where the Western Way between Cranberry and Manset opens to the ocean. Meltiah and Carrie undoubtedly sailed out this way hundreds of times, and on breezy summer days the corridor is still full of vessels of all shapes and sizes, catching the wind to head south. There is a monument erected for Carrie, Emery and Meltiah, undoubtedly put up by Peter. But Peter's grave lies a way off, next to that of his wife, Nellie.

The Stanley boathouse blew down during a storm in the 1960s, but the Stanley house is still standing. For years it was owned by artist Bob LaHotan, who slept in Carrie's small folding bed that she used to take on trips. When LaHotan passed away the house was turned into a retreat for visiting artists to come, take inspiration from the island, and create. The transition of the Stanley property from bustling, overcrowded home and boathouse to a quiet, contemplative artist's retreat could serve as a metaphor for all of Great Cranberry Island.

The Great Cranberry Historical Society, in addition to the play, has featured Carrie's story in its "Women and the Sea" exhibit. When asked why she has focused so much on this one islander, Smart answers, "Islanders of that time were more self-reliant than other people, and Carrie personified that. She had to be brave, and she was. She was extremely well rounded, and had female instincts at some points, male instincts at another. She was willing to take the challenge."

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