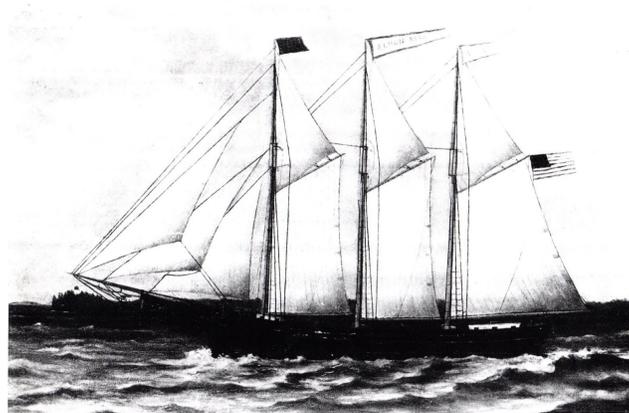


Jeremiah Ferdinand Hamilton and the Wreck of The Almon Bird

By Catherine Langley Iuliano

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Those of us who take up genealogy as a hobby, or even as a profession, know that from time to time you hit a “brick wall” - that ancestor who no one in the family knows much of about, or, for whatever reason, doesn’t appear reliably in any of the available documentation. In my case, the “brick wall” was my late paternal great grandfather, Bert Spencer.

Bert wasn’t a presence in my grandmother’s life from the time she was a small child. He and my great grandmother, Nellie, divorced when my grandmother was just a toddler and he had little contact with the family afterwards. As a result, Bert became an almost mythological figure; in other words, there were many tall tales but very few facts. I started researching him about a year and a half ago, and quickly got nowhere and stayed there. Even discussions with his granddaughter - now in her early 90’s - produced little useful information. I had nearly given up when, out of the blue, I received an email from a wonderful woman who found me on an online genealogy site. Her email began, “I think we might be related”, and indeed we are - she’s married to my great uncle, my great grandfather Bert Spencer’s youngest son! This lovely lady shared a great deal of wonderful information that allowed me to piece together most of Bert’s life, the most significant of which was the fact that his name wasn’t really Bert Spencer at all - hence my genealogical research “brick wall”. Spencer was actually Bert’s step father’s surname - Bert’s real name was Albert Hamilton. No wonder I couldn’t find him!

All of this proved to be extremely interesting, but not as interesting as Bert’s biological father turned out to be. Bert’s real father’s name was Jeremiah Ferdinand Hamilton, and he was involved in a fascinating piece of New England maritime history - the dramatic wreck of the schooner Almon Bird off the coast of Maine in January of 1882.

Jeremiah Ferdinand Hamilton (known for most of his adult life as Ferdinand, or “Ferd”) was born in Brooklin, Hancock County, Maine in about 1854, the son of Jeremiah Sr. (himself a sailor) and Martha Hamilton. Young Ferdinand, too, became a sailor and in 1876 he married

Mary Adelaide Higgins and they settled in Rockland on the Maine coast. Their only child, my great grandfather Albert Hamilton (aka Bert Spencer), was born in 1880. In November of 1881, Ferdinand joined the crew of the Almon Bird, not knowing that it would end his life less than two months later.

An interview with the captain of the Almon Bird, Clarence A. Packard, appeared in the January 8, 1882 edition of The Boston Globe following the rescue of the Almon Bird's surviving crew. The following information is excerpted from that article, as well as from "History of Essex County Massachusetts, Vol II", J.W. Lewis & Co. 1888, the January 6, 1882 edition of the Cape Ann Advertiser, and the 1882 Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine Hospital Service.

On Sunday, January 1st, 1882, the Almon Bird set sail from Rockland, Maine, bound for Alexandria, Virginia with a load of lime rock from the Rockland lime quarries. The crew consisted of 8 men - Captain Packard; the 2nd mate, Charles Chaples; and seamen William H. Harriman, brothers Horace G. and Allen M. Small, Patrick Hogan, Alonzo B. Henderson and Jeremiah "Ferd" Hamilton. The weather was "heavy" when they left port, and the crew immediately found themselves in the midst of a full-blown Nor'easter. The captain briefly considered trying to make port in Portland but feared the schooner would be dashed on the rocks by the gale force winds, so instead they put further out to sea and headed south along the coast in hopes of riding out the storm.

By Sunday night they were several miles west-southwest of Boon Island off the Maine coast in the thick of the storm. The Almon Bird "*was boarded by a heavy sea....which broke down her hatches and also caused her to leak.*" The youngest crewman, Horace Small, sustained a fractured wrist when a huge wave washed over the deck. By Monday morning, the ship was sinking quickly and the crew frantically grabbed whatever supplies they could immediately put their hands to and launched the lifeboat. Captain Packard stated "*We had no time to get suitable provisions, and all that we could take with us in the boat was some hard bread in a small barrell - about a peck in all, a quart of rum and three or four quarts of (raw, uncooked) oatmeal. We threw into the boat a few bedclothes and an old coat and launched her as quickly as we could.*" They were also able to salvage a small handsaw. The captain reported that the Almon Bird sank below the waves about 10 minutes after they launched the lifeboat. Due to their hasty departure, most of the men were scantily clad and the weather was extremely cold with a bitter wind from the northwest accompanying the heavy snow, adding to their already miserable conditions.

By early Tuesday morning the weather had cleared somewhat, though it was still bitterly cold, and in the distance they spied a fishing schooner. In an attempt to reach her, the crew broke up the little barrel containing their bread to use as makeshift oars. They paddled desperately for three or four hours but only succeeded in getting within two miles of the schooner before the wind came up again and she sailed away. By now they were more than 30 miles out to sea and everything in their boat was frozen solid. Their meager provisions were soaked with salt water

and were completely inedible. They were hungry, desperately thirsty, and had to almost continuously bail the freezing water out of the bottom of their boat, but in spite of their dire circumstances they didn't give up. They were able to fashion a makeshift sail for their small boat using the bedding they had grabbed as they abandoned ship and with their homemade sail, they were able to sail for a good portion of the day. They saw no more ships, however, and Captain Packard stated that "*our sufferings were intense.*"

The men were able to make their quart of rum last until Wednesday evening by each taking only a spoonful at a time. It did little, however, to slake their thirst and some of the crew, despite being warned of the terrible consequences, began to eat salt water ice in desperation. This of course had disastrous results and two of the crew, Chaples and Hogan, were, according to Captain Packard, "made crazy thereby."

Wednesday evening also brought their first death - Horace Small, just 16 years old, who broke his wrist in the storm. He died in his brother Allen's arms at about 10 pm. At approximately 11 pm, they sighted another boat - a brig that passed so close that they could see the lights in the cabin windows. Tragically, they were unable to make enough noise to attract the attention of the brig's crew in the dark, and she was soon out of sight. Patrick Hogan died a short time later from the terrible cold and delirium from his consumption of salt water. The 2nd mate, Charles Chaples, was also suffering from delirium and the onset of severe frostbite. In his delirious state, Chaples grabbed the handsaw and began sawing his own hands with it before the rest of the crew could stop him. He died at around 3 a.m. on Thursday morning. The crew was now reduced to five barely living men with three dead bodies frozen in a mixture of salt water and the blood from Chaples wounds in the bottom of their boat.

I'll let Captain Packard tell the next part of the story, in his own words. "*What follows seems now like an awful nightmare. Famished with hunger and actually dying from thirst, we were compelled to do that which made our hearts revolt with horror. Driven to the last resort and in an untold agony of desperation, I opened the jugular vein of the 2nd mate, who had been dead about two hours, and we wet our parched lips and throats with his blood, still warm.*" "*The draught of blood revived us wonderfully, and it is my earnest belief that it was that alone which saved our lives. Afterward, we threw overboard the body of the 2nd mate, leaving the two others lying in the bottom of the boat.*"

At daylight on Thursday, January 5th, after four grueling days in the lifeboat, fishermen from the Cora Lee out of Pigeon Cove, Massachusetts, spotted the survivors of the Almon Bird and they were rescued at last. The captain and crew of the Cora Lee immediately abandoned their fishing trawls and started at once for Pigeon Cove. The Cora Lee's Captain, George Saunders, personally arranged for the care of the survivors by the townsfolk who did their best to nurse them back to health. For all their efforts, however, they were only partially successful. Captain Packard suffered severe frostbite and both of his feet had to be amputated following his return home to Rockland. He never returned to the sea. Instead, he opened a wholesale fish market and became the president of the Rockland Common Council. He died in 1916 at the age of 64.

My great-great grandfather, Ferdinand, was less fortunate. When they were rescued both of his hands were black from frostbite, and both of his legs were frozen solid halfway to the knees. He succumbed to gangrene due to massive frostbite six days after being rescued, dying on January 13th. He was only 28 years old.

Some information is available regarding the fate of the remaining survivors, William Harriman, Allen Small and Alonzo Henderson. The 1882 Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General of the Marine Hospital Service (J.E. Sanborn, MD) indicated all three were transported to Chelsea Hospital (now Massachusetts General) in Boston for further treatment. William Harriman returned to his home in Prospect, Maine, married and had four children with his wife, Kate. He became a sea captain in his own right and died in 1924 at age 65. Allen Small returned home to Deer Isle, Maine, to his wife Emma. They also had four children and he continued to make his living as a sailor as well. He died in 1943 at the ripe old age of 82. Alonzo Henderson recovered and resided in Friendship, Maine, for many years with his wife Jane, though they later divorced, and he spent the last 20 years of his life in Sailor's Snug Harbor, a home for retired seamen in Richmond, New York.

And what of Ferdinand's widow, Mary, and young Albert, just two years old? Within the year, Mary re-married - to widower Rockwell Spencer, a laborer at the Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery in East Orland, Maine, indicating perhaps that Mary had had her fill of being a sailor's wife and preferred a husband that remained on land. Young Albert assumed his step-father's name and became Bert Spencer. He stayed away from the sea all together and went to work for the railroad. He also went on to live a very colorful life in his own right, but that, as they say, is a tale for another day.

Genealogical research is a fascinating undertaking for a whole host of reasons, not least of which is the discovery of historical events and the part your ancestors play in them. The story of the crew of the Almond Bird is much more than a chapter in my genealogical family tree, however; it's a slice of our shared New England history and the story of the dangers and hardships faced by seafaring men and their families in 19th century New England.