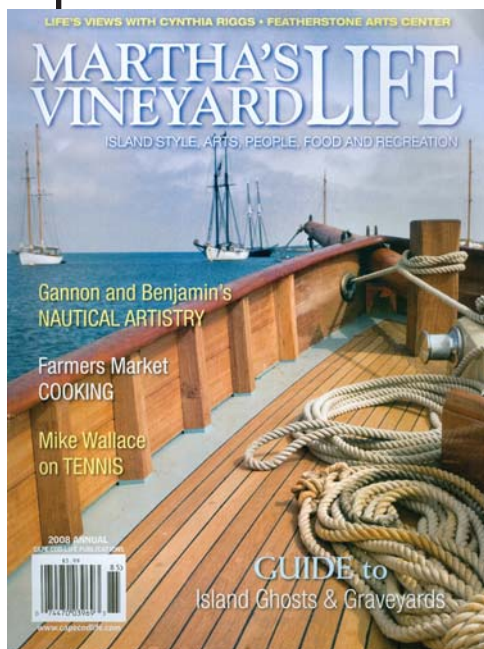


As reviewed in Martha's Vineyard Life magazine, Annual, 2008



Captain Outrageous

Already the subject of a book by Polly Burroughs, colorful 19th-century schooner captain Zebulon Tilton is the focus of a local production company's brand-new documentary.

"I sailed with Zeb quite a few times and it was always a memorable experience." -- *James Cagney*

A frequent summer visitor to Martha's Vineyard, Cagney, of Hollywood fame, was referring to Zebulon Tilton, a legendary island schooner captain who lived and sailed during the late 1800s. Born in 1866, Tilton was a charismatic Vineyard native whose antics on shore were as colorful as his life aboard the iconic vessel, the Alice S. Wentworth. Tilton is the subject of Zeb-A Schooner Life, a documentary directed by Gordon Massingham of Detrick Lawrence Productions in Edgartown and released this June.

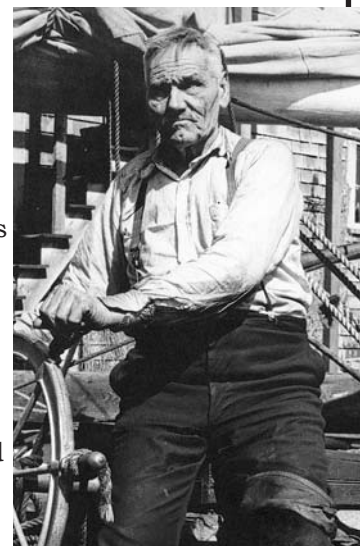
The film is based on Zeb: Celebrated Schooner Captain of Martha's Vineyard, a book written by long-time Vineyard resident Polly Burroughs. A fascinating compendium filled with original black-and-white photography, the book recounts humorous stories about Tilton that capture the salty New Englander's celebrated larger-than-life personality. Re-released in 2005, Burroughs' 1972 book was the inspiration for Massingham's documentary, and the two worked together very closely while producing the movie. "He's just been a wonderful person to work with," says Burroughs.

The passage on the pages that follow is from Polly Burroughs' Zeb. In it, and throughout the book, the author captures the American folk hero's sharp wit, canny intelligence, and ability to meet any challenge with courage and derring-do. Captain Zebulon Tilton was the real thing--his legacy will endure, so long as there are those who love the sea.

-- Susan Dewey

"They were in their prime that summer of 1921--Alice was fifty-eight and Zeb fifty-four. . . . By now Zeb was the most famous skipper in southern New England. He was known in all the ports along the coast; the Wentworth would be recognized as soon as she came up on the horizon, and by the time they tied up in port, a group would have gathered around to greet her and marvel at her captain in action. He could leap several feet up onto a wharf, with the same buoyancy as when he had won the long jump races at the Agricultural Fairs in his youth. Because he was so quick and nimble, it is not surprising that he never once fell overboard. Like most men who worked on the water, he never did learn to swim.

Most coasting schooners of the Wentworth's size carried two in crew, in addition to the captain, though Zeb felt this was just a waste of money. Routine tacking or jibing offshore was simple, with two in crew one man remained forward and one aft. When the skipper rolled the wheel hard up and the schooner began to swing off the wind, the mate aft took in the slack on the main sheet and



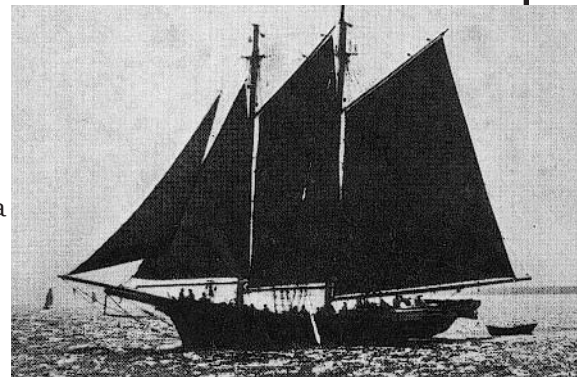
Captain Zeb Tilton

caught a turn on the quarter bit as the huge boom swung over and fetched up with a crash. The hand forward trimmed the headsheets and coiled them down. Zeb, however, handled both the helm and the main himself, while his mate handled the foresail and the jib.

In those days, one of the best cargoes a small schooner could get was oysters to be hauled from Greenport, Long Island, and other unfavorable waters as far south as the Delaware region, up to Chatham on Cape Cod. The young, three-year-old oysters were seeded in Chatham's Stage Harbor and the Oyster River where they grew another year and a half to maturity in clean water and were fit for gourmet consumption as "Chatham oysters" in restaurants of Boston, Providence & New York. . . .

On Zeb's first oyster trip one season, he was ready to sail the minute the last bushel was aboard. When they peaked up the main, the strain was too much for the old canvas of the Alice and it split down the center. Zeb couldn't wait for repairs. Another schooner nearby offered to stay with them for possible assistance as they slipped out of the harbor. Putting on all the remaining canvas she had, the Alice Wentworth moved out ahead as they sailed eastward. Zeb kept his narrow lead and when they raised the half-tide rocks at Dry Pigs off Cuttyhunk, he was careful to check the tides. Zeb was going to show who needed assistance. Since they'd be getting a head tide in Vineyard Sound, he ducked inside Buzzards Bay, sailing on up to Woods Hole. When he looked back, the accompanying vessel was barely on the horizon, miles down the sound, still bucking the tide.

As soon as the oysters had been taken off in Chatham and Zeb was paid, the sail, still unrepaired, was up and drawing in no time. Zeb had an amorous appointment in Oak Bluffs, which, as usual, he was anxious not to miss. Perhaps he'd grown careless; a bit too casual. In any event, his wife Edith and oldest daughter Rosalie had somehow gotten wind of the affair and they too were headed for the appointed rendezvous, on foot. Along the way an undertaker friend offered them a ride, whereupon they jumped into the unoccupied hearse. After their arrival in Oak Bluffs, they parked by the Tivoli Dance Hall. From inside the unlikely conveyance, they spotted Zeb waiting at the steamboat wharf, all done up in smiles as he contemplated an evening with his lady friend, who could be seen walking up the pier to meet him.



Alice S. Wentworth

The carefree pair wandered along up-street, the woman giggling at Zeb's witty remarks and both unaware that a hearse was slowly following behind. Just as they reached the boarding house where the lady had taken lodgings, the door of the hearse flew open. Out leapt Rosalie and Edith, splitting the air with language that would make a bluefish blush.

Zeb backed off, something he rarely did, and made a hasty retreat to the Wentworth, not at all pleased at getting caught at the old sailor's game. "Besides giving me hell, they was plannin' to kill me and take me off for buryin' on the spot," he grumbled to his mate.