

The Portsmouth Yacht Club And *The Lady Member*

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(Originally published in PYC Centennial Yearbook, 1998)

During its 100 years, the Portsmouth Yacht Club has been the recipient of a number of historical artifacts. The Club has some models of well-known ships, early signal flags, a very large oil painting of the ship *Frank Jones*, and the most outstanding of all, a larger-than-life female ship's figurehead.

This figurehead stands in the corner of the Club dining room. Mounted there, she slants forward as she would if she were on the prow of a ship. She is nearly seven feet tall. Her hair is blonde and is held back from her forehead by a circlet of gold laurel leaves. Her eyes are blue, and, although her face is noble, there is no expression. Her tunic is light blue and draped to show her shoulder and part of her bosom. The skirt is dark red. Her feet are bare and rest on the red and yellow "waves" of the base. Her right arm is extended away from her body, lifted high. The hand, with its curling inward fingers, is holding a staff about two feet long which is tipped with a gold triangular block. She is an arresting figure. She gives the impression of movement, of wind blowing her tresses and clothing. Since she was carved at the end of the Civil War, she could easily be meant to represent the figure of Liberty.



In 1994, the Ladies Group of the Club decided that, because the Club was approaching its one hundredth year, it was time to have "The Lady" restored. Her paint was flaking, and, where these flakes had fallen, one could see that her tunic was once a much darker blue. Further examination revealed that her belt, then black, used to be a gold leaf. Her right side, near a window, showed fading paint caused by the bleaching effect of ultra-violet rays. Many hair-line cracks were evident, as were some serious larger cracks. Obviously, her wood was shrinking as aged wood does.

The Ladies Group obtained three estimates from conservationists to determine the cost of her restoration. The most qualified and reasonable was the American Conservation Consortium, Ltd., of Fremont, New Hampshire. The President of the firm, Marc Williams, examined her with great thoroughness and discovered that her belt was originally gold and was able to decipher the inscription on her belt buckle. This inscription is of the utmost importance in researching her origin. It reads *"Carved by Woodbury Gerrish in 1865 and Donated to the Portsmouth Yacht Club by Josiah F. Adams in 1909"*.

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Gerrish is a familiar name in the Portsmouth area. Josiah Gerrish is listed in early Portsmouth directories as a cabinet maker, undertaker, coffin maker, and ship's carver. His shop was located at 16 Daniel Street, and his home at #6 Franklin Street. Later directories locate him on Bow Street, Water Street, then again on Daniel Street. At one time, he shared his workshop with John Bellamy, a man well known for his carvings of eagles and furniture. (There are eight handsome and substantial chairs carved by Bellamy in the Naval Museum in the Portsmouth Navy Yard, and his eagles are in numerous public buildings in this area.) Gerrish also shared a shop and was a partner in business with Josiah F. Adams, undertaker and "furnisher". This is the man who later gave the figurehead to the Portsmouth Yacht Club.

Woodbury Gerrish was born in 1812 and died on May 11, 1898. He was apprenticed to Ebenezer Lord in 1833. In 1834 he ran away, which caused Lord to advertise for him, offering a substantial reward. This was evidently successful, as Gerrish returned and continued learning his craft. A most charming rocking horse was carved by Woodbury Gerrish for Lord's grandson, Jay. The rocking horse is said to be in a children's museum in London, but has also been reported as being in the Dearborn Museum. When Gerrish was 23 years old, he became a journeyman, the next step after apprentice.

A further note on the life of Woodbury Gerrish is an advertisement in the *Portsmouth Journal* in July 1863. "*A new ship of 1000 burthen, building by Messers. T & T is to be launched about the 1st of August. The figure and stern piece by Mr. Woodbury Gerrish are very handsome specimens of carved work. The design of the former is an alligator and needs only life to make it real. Mr. Gerrish has taken stand formerly occupied by Joseph Henderson on Bow Street. He has already established a rep as a carver and will gv satisfaction to those hom or abrd who may call him in this or any dept of his bsns. 24 Oct. - 1000 - blt by contract to JM Tredick and Salter Tredick.*" This serves to establish him as a highly desirable and skillful ships carver.

Several references were found about him having carved a larger-than-life figurehead of Benjamin Franklin for the ship *U.S.S. Franklin*. It is an extremely rare piece of work because it is signed "Woodbury Gerrish", something that ship carvers rarely did. The *U.S.S. Franklin* was rebuilt at the Portsmouth Navy Yard in 1853. At this time, both Bellamy and Gerrish were working in the shipyard. At present, that figurehead is displayed at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The *Franklin* served as a flagship to Commodore Steward in the Pacific and continued in service until 1852 when she was rebuilt in Portsmouth and the new figurehead carved. (The original figurehead had been carved by John Rush, a noted carver, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.)

Ship figureheads have long been a method of identifying ships. Some 'heads represent the owner, the owner's wife, daughter, or some other person germane to the ship. Animals are occasionally used. They are a form of folk art developed from the need to identify a ship to lowly sailors unable to read as well as to represent the name of the ship, such as "The Gloria B." or the "William Jones".

The obituary of Woodbury Gerrish in May, 1898, at the age of eighty-six, mentioned that he had lived in Cambridge for the last twenty or twenty-five years.

Josiah F. Adams, donor of the figurehead, is listed in the 1905 directory as boarding at 27 Washington Street and having a warehouse at 5 Daniel Street. At this time, he was a widower. An earlier directory (1867) has a half page advertisement showing him to be a "Funeral Director, Embalmer, and Furnisher". Adam's grave site is in the South Street Cemetery. The gravestone says he was born on July 9, 1830 and died April 22, 1916. he was married to Maria Class, who was born on May 16, 1828 and died April 19, 1903. Judging by the size of his advertisement and the considerable size of his tombstone, Adams was a success in his business.

The minutes of the Portsmouth Yacht club for December 3, 1908 yield a bit more information on "The Lady". The Board of Directors voted to accept the figurehead from Josiah Adams. Mr. Daniel Trefethen and John P. Holmes were appointed to arrange for acceptance, probably meaning that they arranged the location and positioning of this rather large and unwieldy figure within the clubhouse. On March 4 of the following year, a vote of thanks was extended to Mr. Josiah Adams for the figurehead presented to the Club, and the privileges of the Club were extended to him for the coming season. Another vote of thanks was given by the Board to Mr. Daniel Trefethen and George Ducker for repairs and decoration. The Consortium doing the restoration on the figure has found that, at one time, the raised arm was broken and repaired using a dowel and several layers of wood glue and nailed with contemporary nails. It would seem that this is the reference made in the minutes. The "decorations" may refer to having her painted and gilded, which would be consistent with the Victorian style and the findings of the conservator. It is felt that, originally, she was painted all white to emulate marble, which was fashionable at the time. Further discoveries of the conservator have revealed that her hair, now yellow, was ash blond, her eyebrows were dark brown, and the gold circlet in her hair was originally green.

More references to her in the Club's minutes evoke a certain sly charm. A vote of thanks was extended to Mr. John P. Holman as one of the (word impossible to make out) in charge of *our lady member*. In August of 1909, the last reference found notes that thanks were extended to Mr. Ceffo Johnson for the new lid (?) presented to *our lady member*. (At this time in the Club's history, there were no female members.)

The connection between Woodbury Gerrish and Josiah Adams is obvious. They shared a business, possibly the undertaking establishment on Daniel Street. One can only speculate on how Adams, during the 19 years between Gerrish's death and his gift of the figure to the Portsmouth Yacht Club, acquired the figure. It would seem that he truly admired Woodbury Gerrish and felt that a donation of his work to a yacht club would be fitting kind of memorial to his respected friend.

To this day, a special mystery adds to her many charms, and that is, "Why was she carved? Was she intended for a ship which was never completed? Or for a ship which never came in for a scheduled restoration? Or might she have been a demonstration by Gerrish of the very best of his skills and perhaps a gift to his friend Josiah Adams? We may never know the answers, and perhaps we really do not want to. Nothing can diminish the singular beauty of The Lady, nor can any facts about her background further enhance her beauty.