

George Merchant, Jr.

(1828 - 1906)



George, Jr. and Mary (Douglass) Merchant

George Merchant, Jr.

Master mariner, seine manufacturer, an expert on fishing matters, and councilman of Gloucester 1857 - 87. This is who George Merchant Jr. was, in addition to being the husband of Mary (Douglass) Merchant and the father of nine children.

Capt. Merchant was the oldest son and second child of George and Lucy (Norwood) Merchant. He was born on Aug. 3, 1828. He and Mary Douglass, daughter of Robert and Mary (Parsons) Douglass, were married on March 5, 1851. George first went to sea at age 12 and continued to be involved in the trades related to fishing for the remainder of his life. A good part of his work life was spent as a seine repairer, and this business was located in one of the buildings at the end of the Shute & Merchant wharf. (He was the first cousin of William T. Merchant and Abbie (Merchant) Shute.)

Based on information from the notes of his son George E. Merchant, and noted in his obituary, one would conclude that George Merchant, Jr. was lucky to have had such a long and good life. While working as a mariner, he was lost overboard at least three times.

VALUABLE INVENTION -- NOV. 11, 1883

George Merchant, Jr. was granted a patent for a new and improved block for use in place of the old metal rings on purse seines for the purpose of drawing the bottom of the seines together after being thrown around a school of fish. Those who have them on trial in practical use the past season pronounce them to be a great improvement over the old method, being much quicker, and easier to handle, thus making the chances for catching the fish much greater. We understand that the charges for the use will be but a small sum over the actual cost of the block. Mr. Merchant not being one of those who are inclined to "bleed" a brother fisherman, and therefore we would advise all interested to investigate in time for next season's work.

**WELL-KNOWN CITIZEN DEAD
CAPTAIN GEORGE MERCHANT PASSED AWAY THIS MORNING
WAS LONG CONNECTED WITH THE FISHERIES IN MANY WAYS**

Capt. George Merchant, born August 3, 1828 and died May 5, 1906 age 77 years, 9 months, two days.

The above dates mark the beginning and the end of a life for another of Gloucester's honored citizens and the breaking of a chain in a large family circle, with consequent sorrow and grief to many friends and acquaintances.

Mr. Merchant dated his ancestry from Jabez Merchant, the first of the name in Gloucester, who came with his brother Ebenezer from Yarmouth (sometime before 1721). Back of that date was John (Marchant) of Braintree, 1636, and still further back the name has been traced by his son, George E., to Gloucester England in 1220. On maternal side, from the wife of Jabez, Mary Butman Babson, he was descended from John Robinson the "father" of the Pilgrim Colony.

His great-grandfather was William, one of the grandsons of Jabez, the original settler, who was a lieutenant of a military company in the revolution, and the town record shows that he advanced money to pay for the services of one of the three month's companies who fought at Bunker Hill. William's son Epes and two brothers served as coast guards, patrolling the coast from Eastern Point to Rockport during the war of 1812, one being captain of the East Ward Company.

William, the grandson of Jabez, and four sons came from Pigeon Cove and settled at the head of the harbor, so called, and were pioneers in the fishing business in that section. The original site of their fish place is occupied by the warehouses of Shute & Merchant. (note -- it was Hannah, his wife and sons who came to Gloucester from Pigeon Cove after his death.)

Born to poverty 77 years ago, the second in a family of 13 children, all of whom were reared to adult age, Mr. Merchant early found life struggle for existence.

His first voyage to sea was in the schooner "Emblem", a craft of small tonnage, he being aged 12 years. In the entire season but 28 bbls of mackerel were taken, so that his labors added little to the family store. Two years later, when but 14 years of age, he occupied the responsible position of cook on the schooner "Phebe Ann", going to the Georges. Then in succession he sailed on the schooner "Clinton" and the schooner "Clarion", a portion of the time bringing in live halibut in the well of the craft, for both were smackers. Then change was made to the schooner "Rockaway", in 1848, sailing with his uncle Gorham as master, this craft being of the "improved" type of sailing vessels, as compared with the partially decked open boat and the pinkey. This was the great "mackerel" year.

The following year, 1849, found him for the first time, treading the quarter deck as the skipper, but only for a short time, when he gave up command to the late Capt. Aaron D. Wells. While on the Georges, after a severe storm, he one day baited his hook throwing the line overboard, remarked that "this is to be my last fish on this bank." His comrades laughed, but so it proved to be, for on his return he left the sea and set up in the business on shore.

Two years later found him however, part owner of the schooner "Gypsy Queen", a boat of 24 tons, which was sailed in conjunction with his brother-in-law, Capt. Solomon Rowe.

A brief period on shore followed and the scene changed to the old schooner "Centerion" and 1857 found him in full command in pursuit of his first seining voyage. From that time on till 1873, Mr. Merchant was constant to this fishery, and to him was due many of the improved methods of the conduct of this industry. Notably in the line was the introduction of the mackerel pocket, which he first put to practical use, although others were experimenting along the same line.

At one time during this period, he was also interested in the attempt to establish the whaling industry at this port when the top sail schooner "Retrieve" was fitted under the command of Capt. Charles Marchant of Fresh Water Cove for a trip to the coast south of Sandy Hook in search of whales, several trips being made but the project being finally abandoned.

In 1873 he left the sea and set up his abode on shore, establishing the seine repairing industry as a permanent business, with the late Joseph Simpson as a partner. From this time on, to the date of his retirement from active business two years ago, excepting the years 1878-79-80, he did a large share of this kind of work, and invented and put to use the greater part of the improved machinery now in service in the business. In the years named (above), his old love of the sea life returned and with his sons George E. and Orlando, he purchased and commanded the schooner "Hattie B. West". George E. serving as had his father before him as chief cook.

In his service upon the ocean, many narrow escapes were had from disaster to both vessels and crews. Personally he was overboard on three occasions when the loss of life meant but the breaking of the thread as it were. In 1849, in Gloucester Harbor he was unceremoniously dumped into the ocean by the sliding of the load of sails, but saved himself by diving beneath the canvases and swimming. Again, in 1861, he was thrown overboard off Race Point by the topping lift, as the main boom swung across the deck, the vessel running wing on wing under a good breeze at the time. Fortunately the rope broke and as it trailed astern, he caught the end and was towed for quite a distance before being rescued, a part of the time being underwater, his father being the one to jam the wheel hard down and bring the vessel up into the wind. Later in Portland Harbor he fell from the bowsprit and was taken with the tide beneath the vessel, coming out under her stern, and was able to swim to the bobstay after he got his wind, and clambered on board, much to the surprise of his shipmates.

In the prosecution of the seining industry he came into conflict with the Maine authorities on several occasions and once when his vessel was "seized" as a porgy pirate, he promptly ordered the men ashore at the point of a pitch fork, being backed up by his crew.

From the time of his establishment of the seine repairing industry up to within a few years, he has been much consulted by the United States Fish Commission as an expert on the fisheries; at many of the exhibitions where the commission has been an exhibitor, his handiwork could be seen in models of seines, boats and fishing appliances.

In his early days, Mr. Merchant, inheriting his talent from his father who was a musician of some note, playing the "fiddle", the guitar and cornet with no ordinary skill. With the late Professor J. Jay Watson many happy hours were spent on sea and shore together making melody which brought cheer to all who listened.

Mr. Merchant, while deeply interested in town and city, aspired to public office on but two occasions, being elected councilman from ward one in 1885-6, the latter year being the first year of service of his son, Ex-Mayor George E. Merchant, and it being the only time the father and son served together. He served on several important committees, notably highways and claims and he was largely instrumental in the establishment of the main drain on Washington Street.

Mr. Merchant has been a consistent member of the First Baptist Church since 1869, and regularly attended the services until failing health forbid. Some twenty years ago he organized and for several years conducted a neighborhood Sunday School, holding sessions in the building owned by the late Deacon Andrew Parker on the corner of East Main and Parker Streets.

At one time Mr. Merchant contemplated the life of a marine artists, and to this end he studied with the lamented Fitz H. Lane. While the project was given up later, numerous canvasses in the possession of his family and friends attests his skill with the brush.

Mr. Merchant married in 1852 Miss Mary Douglass, a descendant of Jeffery Parsons the first, who bore him nine children, six of whom, together with the widow, remain to mourn his death. Mary J, wife of James M. Woodbury, Hon. George E., Orlando, Robert Clifford, Joseph Carlton, and Percy W. Merchant.

Of the original family of 15 persons, he is the seventh to cross the dark river. His father died in 1899 aged 91 years, his mother dying in 1860, One brother, Gorham A. and three sisters, Lucy A., Julia A., and Isabelle Bowen are dead, while three brothers, Sidney of Wakefield, Edwin and Albion H., and five sisters Sarah E., wife of Soloman Rowe, Mary E., widow of Elisha Lufkin, Miranda, wife of Charles Jackman, Emily C., widow of Abraham Tarr, and Laura J., widow of Edwin McIntire survive him.

The funeral will take place from his late residence on East Main Street at 2 o'clock Monday afternoon.

The children of George, Jr. and Mary (Douglass) Merchant

Mary Jane	1851 - 1944	Robert Clifford	1864 - 1936
George Edward	1853 - 1929	Joseph Carleton	1867 - 1961
Orlando	1856 - 1930	unnamed son	1870 - 1870
Flora Estelle	1858 - 1860	Percy Washburn	1873 - 1937
Eugene Howard	1861 - 1863		

additional information about their children

Mary Jane married James M. Woodbury, and they had the following children:

Clarence Howard, Clara Edna, Herman Foss, Helen Carleton, James Arthur, Irving Merchant, and Elmer Mason

George Edward married Charlotte E. Lufkin and they had the following children: Eugene Howard (twin), Fitz Otis (twin), Ernest Howard and George Edward, Jr.

Orland first married Charlotte Jane Gray, and they had the following child: Roy Douglass

second married Mary Garland Wonson, and they had the following child: Miriam Wonson

Robert Clifford ... never married

Joseph Carleton married Bertha Barr, and they had the following child: Joseph

Percy Washburn married Sarah Lois Goodwin, and they had the following children: Raymond Presson, Lois Rachel, Russell Carleton and Percy Albert



30 East Main Street
the home where George, Jr. and Mary raised their family

if you are interested in more detailed information about any of these Merchant families, please use the contact link on the web page -- a pdf with more data for all the Merchants who are known to have descended from Jabez Merchant (1695-1773) is available



George, Jr. and Mary taken in 1898



Percy W, George, Jr., Robert Clifford and unidentified child

George Merchant, Jr., was keen on making sure some aspects of the fishing industry be preserved for the historical record. In 1883, he donated a number of items to be exhibited at the Great Fisheries Exhibition held in London.

Part of these items were directly related to the seine purse block that he had invented, but not all. In addition to those items, he also donated a collection of games mariners would play during their free time when away on fishing voyages. These items are no part of the collections held by the Smithsonian Institute. The game below can be seen thanks to their online American History site.



Fox and Geese Game Board

This 9-inch square board with 32 holes was made for playing Fox and Geese, a game of strategy between two players. The rules of play for Fox and Geese are simple: one player controls the fox, while the other controls the geese. The fox can move in a straight line in any direction and, as it jumps over geese, the geese are removed from the board. To win, the fox must break through the entire line of geese. The geese are only allowed to move forward or sideways. To win, they must corner the fox so it cannot move.

He also was often the provider of pertinent information about the Gloucester fishing industry, particularly aspects related to the seining for fish. In some ways, he was considered an expert on these things, and his comments were included in the reports to the United States Fish Commission.

67.—THE INCIPIENCY OF NIGHT-SEINING FOR MACKEREL.

By GEORGE MERCHANT, Jr.

[From the Cape Ann Bulletin.]

As early as 1864, seining operations were conducted in the night-time for pogies, as many of the old pogie fishermen (of whom I am one) can testify. Up to 1874, no mackerel of any account had been caught in this manner, although there had been a few exceptional lots. In 1874, and up to 1877, a larger quantity was taken. Since the latter date, it has been the general custom of the fishermen in the latter part of the summer and fall to expect to capture the greater part of their trip in this manner.

GLOUCESTER, MASS., *November 9, 1881.*