

The Life of Capt. John Dunning Pennell  
By Rowan Joyce



If one were to spend an afternoon strolling through the Bowdoin Pines of Brunswick, Maine they would come across a mossy cemetery seemingly untouched by time as the slabs of granite speak of centuries gone by. One of the most impressively polished markers in the plot is the stone edifice of one Captain John Dunning Pennell. Born in 1828 and died in 1878, the man was so influential in local maritime history that the esteemed poet Robert P. T. Coffin took it upon himself to write an entire biography about him and his wife titled “ Captain Abby and Captain John.” Unaware of this fact, I chose Pennell because I figured that a man with an impressive gravestone and a birthplace of Brunswick would hold some kind of exciting story. This man spent his entire life focused on the task of being a captain, it ran in his blood. The Pennell family shaped Brunswick into what it is today which is why it is so exciting to find one particular individual who made a name for himself internationally but returned in death right

back to his place of birth. In a town of maritime ship production, along a seafaring coast, John Dunning Pennell began his journey from a small start but gathered stories from the far reaches of the world. These stories deserve the cobweb brushing and retelling that I hope to present in a most engaging manner.

### **Introduction**

John Dunning Pennell was born on April 14, 1828 in Brunswick, Maine to parents Jacob and Deborah Dunning Pennell. The Pennell family had been in Brunswick since 1764 when Thomas Pennell II purchased land. Pennell Shipbuilding Company was located on the head of Middle Bay in the area that came to be known as

Pennellville.<sup>12</sup> Started by Thomas III and later taken over by his five sons, the company became renowned in Maine as the producer of fine brigs, barks, ships, and schooners.<sup>3</sup> The vessels were crafted from white oaks found in the Brunswick Plains and worked on by local men.<sup>4</sup> John was



Figure 1. Capt. William Pennell's house.

destined for sea as the youngest of eight brothers, there was never a question as to whether or not he would indulge in the family trade. He attended the one roomed Pennell schoolhouse down the hill from his house before he moved on to the town school, and then later a business school in Portland.<sup>5</sup> John was a studious young man for he wanted to learn the technicalities of the trade before he even set foot onto the deck of a sailing vessel.<sup>6</sup> A pious and quiet fellow, John attended service at the First Parish Church with his family along with Forest Church with the younger Pennells and Bowdoin students. It was at Forest Church that John first met Abby Reed, his later

wife.<sup>7</sup> At age nineteen John returned to Brunswick and entered the family shipyard. Working for common wage amongst the town men, John mastered the job of carpentry, carving and hammering wooden nails.<sup>8</sup> He earned the name “Young Mizzenmast” after the mast next to the captain’s cabin, tall and solidly built. John excelled at the fine workings of carpentry and focused on all tasks of modelling and finishing.<sup>9</sup> John learned to sail with Capt. Thomas Skofield on the *Screamer* when he was twenty-four years old.<sup>10</sup>

### **On the Ocean**

The last ship John Pennell made was also the first ship he ever set sail with; the *United States* in 1855. He served as first mate under Captain J. D. Blanchard and John kept the log for the travel. Sailing to and from New Orleans with cargo of first cotton and then immigrants, Pennell was swept up in the throws of his first voyage.<sup>11</sup> John joined the *Wellfleet Harbor* with Captain Wescott for a short while after Captain Blanchard parted for Haiti but returned home to Middle Bay that summer with a mission. In his return to Brunswick, John successfully captured the heart of the girl he had twice before written about in his pocket notebook. Abby Reed was a sweet redhead from the Orr family line. Her great-grandfather Clement Orr purchased Little Sebascodigan Island which became known as Orr’s Island.<sup>12</sup> Abby Jacob Reed and John Dunning Pennell were wed on December 3, 1857.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 2. The bark *William Woodside*.

The next place where John’s history picks up is his official command as captain aboard the *William Woodside* on January 21, 1859.<sup>14</sup> March 12, 1859 saw the return of John to his little wife and her joining

his life at sea.<sup>15</sup> As John sailed for Europe and passed the Rock of Gibraltar, Abby learned the techniques of navigation as a boredom exercise.<sup>16</sup> Capt. Pennell returned to the states in New York Harbor on February 29, 1860 following a year touring Spain and Venice. Back in Brunswick, the *Deborah Pennell* was revealed as a tribute to John's dear mother and the next bark under his command.<sup>17</sup> The maiden voyage of

the *Deborah Pennell* followed a path down to New Orleans from which both John and Abby sent home a series of letters describing the young men training aboard the ship.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that Capt. John Pennell did not engage in any Civil War activity as he sailed out of New Orleans



Figure 3. Bark the *Deborah Pennell*.

at the time of March 9, 1861, spent a week back in Brunswick, and then left for the open ocean for three and a half years.<sup>19</sup> John and the *Deborah Pennell* experienced their first shipwreck in April 1862 when large gale winds crashed the keel into the Delaware Capes. Thankfully the ship was salvageable and continued on her way the following month.<sup>20</sup>

John and Abby's first child was born on the *Deborah Pennell* on September 5, 1862. Tragically the baby died on September 22 after being "taken very sick in the evening with convulsions," as John wrote in his captain's log.<sup>21</sup> The unnamed baby boy was crudely preserved in a barrel of rock salt, salt pickle, and liquor and strapped to the mainmast where it stayed for a year until being sent off with another ship back towards Maine and a proper burial.<sup>22</sup> At the time of Gettysburg back in the States John was sailing in the Indian Ocean and making his way towards rounding the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>23</sup> John's logs follow several large gale storms as the

*Deborah Pennell* rounded Cape Horn and entered Pacific waters.<sup>24</sup> On December 12, 1864 the couple's second child was born at sea somewhere off the coast of South America.<sup>25</sup> Arthur Reed Pennell had a worrisome first month as he appeared to flip flop in health each day, this was especially concerning since John had lost his first son in a similar condition. Thankfully the baby survived and later lived to be thirty-eight.<sup>26</sup>

John returned to Middle Bay in 1865 to a tragic sight: his brother James Henry Pennell had fallen and died. A hush fell over Pennellville as the brain power behind the company was gone.<sup>27</sup> In fact the Pennells only pushed out four more vessels, the *Addie Decker*, *Oakland*, *Galveston*, and *Benjamin Sewall*.<sup>28</sup> In April 1869 John faced his first mutiny on the *Deborah Pennell* while it was docked at Port Key Francis unloading sugar. The crew men became restless over hours of labor and raised a riot, which John tried to calmly sort out. When one of the men knocked John unconscious, the first mate Elias barreled towards the perpetrator and took him down.<sup>29</sup> Abby gave birth to the couple's third son John Frederick Pennell on August 1st, 1870.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most exciting day for Capt. John D. Pennell was the launching of his master



Figure 4. The *Benjamin Sewall* sits in the Pennell shipyard.

ship the *Benjamin Sewall* on October 27, 1874. The entire town of Brunswick had gathered to feast and witness its push off into the ocean blue. General Joshua Chamberlain joined the

occasion to speak while the crowd watched in sunny awe of the final Pennell creation.<sup>31</sup> The

*Benjamin Sewall* sailed towards Liverpool that winter and then journeyed around the Cape of Good Hope with Welsh coal cargo.<sup>32</sup> Aboard the ship was the four person Pennell family, Arthur and Freddie included. John noted that the new ship was far superior in handling tough gale winds that had given *Deborah* serious trouble.<sup>33</sup> The South Atlantic and Southern Indian Ocean were especially rough as John tried to visit trading tropical islands.<sup>34</sup> John noted that the speed of the *B. Sewall* was so great that it only took six weeks to travel between Trieste and Gibraltar.<sup>35</sup>

August 3, 1876 saw John parting with his family in Brunswick where they had found a new home in the Skofield house on Park Row and leaving for a lone trip. This trip followed a course around Cape Horn, up to San Francisco, and down to Callao where the vessel picked up another load of guano.<sup>36</sup> Suddenly, an incredibly exciting event quite literally rocked the boat on May 9, 1877. A massive earthquake hit the area of the Haunillios Islands and slammed the *B. Sewall* into a furious rocking, sending John crashing down onto the deck with stars in his eyes.<sup>37</sup> The ship had to undergo repairs including “recaulking and sea-metalled.” The job came out to nearly five hundred dollars.<sup>38</sup> John sailed back to the family and the three others joined the deck in April of 1878. Their destination was Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This was their last sail together.

### **Afterwards**

While in Rio de Janeiro, John suffered from excruciating headaches bad enough that he was issued into the hospital.<sup>39</sup> John Dunning Pennell died on July 5, 1878 in the close care of his beloved Abby after a fitful night of terrible dreams. Capt. Pennell’s body was embalmed and



Figure 5. Fred Pennell, son of Capt. John Pennell, stands in front of a painting of the *Benjamin Sewall*.

sent back to Brunswick aboard the steamer *Tycho Brahe*, accompanied by his wife and two children.<sup>40</sup> August 14 marked the funeral where seemingly the entire town of Brunswick made an appearance to lay to rest one of the finest captains ever known in Maine.<sup>41</sup> Captain John Dunning Pennell was laid to rest in Pine Grove Cemetery under the arches of the Bowdoin pines, a location that is still easily accessible today. Buried with his wife and two of their children, the family plot stands impressive against the wearings of old age. The stone marker reflects the nature of John in life: tall and stoic. John is remembered in history as someone who excelled in their craft with quiet brilliance, a leading hero to the Pennell name and an important figure in Brunswick history.



Figure 6. Capt. John D. Pennell's grave in Pine Grove Cemetery.

## Endnotes

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4. Robert P. Tristram Coffin, *Captain Abby and Captain John: An Around-the-world Biography* (Nobleboro, Me.: Blackberry Books, 2002), 66-67.
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6. *Ibid.*, 72.
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8. *Ibid.*, 68.
9. *Ibid.*, 69.
10. *Ibid.*, 73.
11. *Ibid.*, 75-76.
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14. *Ibid.*, 97.
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16. *Ibid.*, 123-127.
17. *Ibid.*, 187.
18. *Ibid.*, 194.
19. *Ibid.*, 195-201.
20. *Ibid.*, 123.
21. *Ibid.*, 208.
22. Rebecca Roche, "Capt. Abby & Capt. John Pennell," *Capt. Abby & Capt. John Pennell*, January 01, 1970, , accessed June 11, 2019, <http://pinegrovebrunswick.blogspot.com/2011/12/capt-abby-capt-john-pennell.html>.
23. Coffin, *Captain Abby and Captain John*, 217-218.
24. *Ibid.*, 233.
25. "Arthur Reed Pennell (1864-1903) - Find A Grave...," *Find A Grave*, , accessed June 11, 2019, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/39642520/arthur-reed-pennell>.
26. Coffin, *Captain Abby and Captain John*, 242-245.
27. *Ibid.*, 259.
28. John D. Pennell, *Chronological List of Pennell Ships*, List compiled by John D. Pennell and kept by the Pejebscot Historical Society., Pejebscot Historical Society, Brunswick, Maine.
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31. Coffin, Captain Abby and Captain John, 279-284.
32. Ibid., 288.
33. Ibid., 290.
34. Ibid., 303.
35. Ibid., 305.
36. Ibid., 321-323.
37. Ibid., 325.
38. Ibid., 328.
39. Rebecca Roche, "Capt. Abby & Capt. John Pennell," Capt. Abby & Capt. John Pennell, January 01, 1970, , accessed June 11, 2019, <http://pinegrovebrunswick.blogspot.com/2011/12/capt-abby-capt-john-pennell.html>.
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