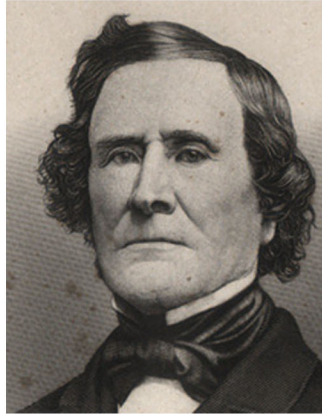




Epes W. Merchant

(1804 - 1887)



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Epes W. Merchant was born in Gloucester, May 22, 1804. He was the eldest of ten children born to Epes Merchant and Sally R. (Thomas) Merchant. Epes W., like most of the Cape Ann boys of that period, was practically engaged in the fisheries until his majority, when he became a partner in his father's business under the firm-name of Epes Merchant & Son. For many years he was one of the principal fish buyers, and his business reputation and mercantile integrity were of the highest order. His knowledge and judgment was often appealed to by the younger masters, and his kind encouragement and sound advice were often the foundation of successful business for many. Mr. Merchant was elected a director of the old Gloucester Bank, now the Gloucester National, in 1848, and became its president in 1871, which office he held until he died. He was also a trustee of the Cape Ann Savings Bank, director of the Gloucester Fishermen's and Widows' and Orphans' Association, and president of the Oak Grove Cemetery Association. Mr. Merchant was a thorough American, believing politically in the principles of protection to American industry, and development as embodied in the Whig and Republican parties. He was liberal in his religious views, being a constant attendant at the Independent Christian Church (Universalist). His life was consistent, patriotic, full of kind deeds and loyalty to his best convictions. Mr. Merchant was married, December 21, 1825, to Miss Sally Ellery Ryerson, who survives him.

taken from: History of Essex County, Massachusetts: with Biographical Sketches, Volume 2, Part 1 pg 1352 -- edited by Duane Hamilton Hurd

Epes W. Merchant died on June 14, 1887 at the age of 83 years and 24 days. In addition to the activities noted in the excerpt above, Epes also participated in other organizations. He served upon the Town Hall building committee in 1869, and was a member of the Board of Aldermen in 1874. He also served as captain under the old militia law. He was a man of methodical habits, conservative views, of generous instincts and unimpeachable integrity." He became a member of the Essex Agricultural Society in 1872.

Additional information about Epes W. Merchant comes from notes compiled by George E. Merchant, the first family historian, about the Merchants of Cape Ann.

By the time Epes W. was in his teens he had attained the height of a fisherman's ambition, a skippership. It was said of him that no smarter skipper trod the quarter deck than he. When he came of age, Epes W. chose to leave the life of skipper, and while working with his father as part of Epes Merchant and Son (their wharf was eventually home to Sylvanus Smith & Co.), became known as one of the principle fish buyers and fish producers. A writer of the time (not identified by GEM) stated "His (Epes W.) reputation and mercantile integrity was of the highest order. His knowledge and judgment was often appealed to by the younger masters, and his kind encouragement and sound advice were often the foundations of successful business for many."

Epes W. Merchant died at his residence, 26 Pleasant St. He and his wife, Sarah Ellery Ryerson had no children. His wife's obituary did note that they had an adopted daughter, Sarah E. Ellery.

From the House of Jabez -- Chronicles of the Merchant-Merchant Family by Frank R. Merchant

During the time that Epes W. Merchant was an active participant in the Gloucester fishing industry, he was a highly respected fishing captain. He was often consulted for information related to the fishing industry, and frequently quoted by writers compiling data for various public and governmental publications. of 1881 and 1884 where he shared information such as the following:

Report of the Commissioner - United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries -- 1881

from page 356: Capt. Epes W. Merchant, of Gloucester, who has been familiar with the fisheries since 1804, tells me that the first Sword-fish ever brought to Gloucester within his recollection was caught on George's Bank about the year 1831, by Captain Pugh, who brought it in and sold it at the rate of eight dollars a barrel, salted. Fishermen had before that been very much afraid of them, but afterwards a good many were caught.

Report of the Commissioner - United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries -- 1883

from page 187: Mode of fishing.-The present method employed by mackerel schooners of fishing with hook and line while the schooner lies adrift was first practiced in Massachusetts at the very beginning of the present century, and the use of toll bait began about the same time. According to Capt. Epes W. Merchant, the first man to introduce this method of fishing in Massachusetts Bay was John Story, of Rockport, about the year 1804.

from page 189: Capt. Epes W. Merchant, of Gloucester, informs us that the practice of salting mackerel was inaugurated at Gloucester in 1818. Scituate fishermen had begun this practice somewhat earlier. The methods of salting have not materially changed since that time. Previous to 1850 the vessels engaged in mackerel fishing were generally accustomed to cany butts, in which the fish were salted.

from page 310: THE LARGE VESSELS OF THE GLOUCESTER FLEET. -- About 1821 the fleet began to enlarge. The "Volante," of 37 tons, a pinkie built by Mr. Epes W. Merchant, was considered a very large vessel; then came the Independence, and afterwards the Columbus, a square-sterned vessel of 43 or 44 tons, built by George Friend, which was considered a very large vessel. These vessels went after mackerel to salt. Previous to that the entire Gloucester fleet had 'tended the fresh-fish market. Plymouth, Scituate, and Cohasset began salting mackerel in advance of Gloucester.-(Statement of Capt. E. W. Merchant.)

The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States by Geroge Brown Goode -- 1887 (section IV)

from page 14: Immigration.-According to Capt. Epes W. Merchant, of Gloucester, the first Nova Scotian came to that port about the year 1828, on the fishing schooner commanded by Capt. Elisha Oakes. As will be shown hereafter, the practice of enlisting Newfoundlanders was common as early as 1648, and has doubtless continued ever since to greater or less extent.

Capt. Fitz J. Babson, the collector of customs at Gloucester, in a letter to the Chief of the Bureau of Statistics in 1875, says: " For some years there has been a large immigration of male adults coming from the Provinces to engage in the fisheries of Gloucester. They are mostly young men and unmarried. The superior class of vessels belonging to this port employed in the fisheries, the liberal and excellent quality of provisions furnished by the owners, the prompt settlement and payment in cash for the fares obtained instead of payment in goods, &c., which is the usual manner of payment to fishermen at other places, the rapid promotion to the command of a fine schooner consequent upon skill and success, all conspire to draw the ambitious young seamen from the Provinces. " These immigrants make up to a large degree the crews of our fishing vessels, and hence the loss of life falls principally upon them. If the loss of life were confined to the native population of the town, Gloucester could not long maintain the fishing business.

excerpts above found on Google Books

The notes compiled by George E. Merchant, the first family historian, about the Merchants of Cape Ann, also includes the following information found in issues of the Gloucester Telegraph:

- Nov. 1834 - At a Grand Whig meeting held Sept. 10, was nominated on the general town committee on Elections
- Nov. 1835 - nominated as a _____ to be voted for at March meeting
- Nov. 1835 - served as sentry at Whig meeting at Union Hall on March 4
- Nov. 1836 - nominated as representative by Whig meeting
- Nov. 1836 - December 16 -- commissioned by Henry Phelps to settle an estate of Bethiah Giddings
- Nov. 1836 - chosen a director in the Gloucester Lyceum (the Gloucester Lyceum Library was established in 1830)
- Nov. 1837 - At meeting of Whigs Oct. 12, chosen with others as delegate to County convention at Ipswich
- Nov. 1838 - At town meeting March 12, on a committee with others to settle with the Selectmen, Overseers, Assessors and Treasurer.

vessels skippered by Epes W. Merchant

- 1824 Volant Capt. Epes W. Merchant
- 1825-6 Hornet Capt. Epes W. Merchant
- 1827-8 Emblem Capt. Epes W. Merchant
- 1830 Emblem Capt. Epes W. Merchant

