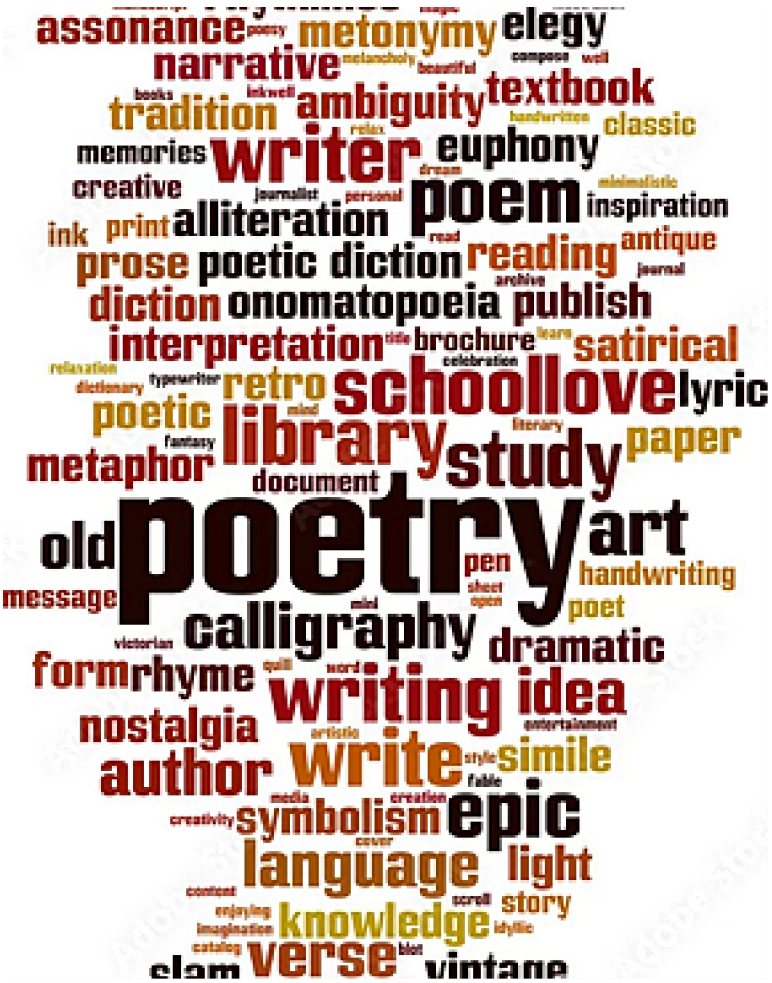
New Castle Poetry: Volume 1 Traditional



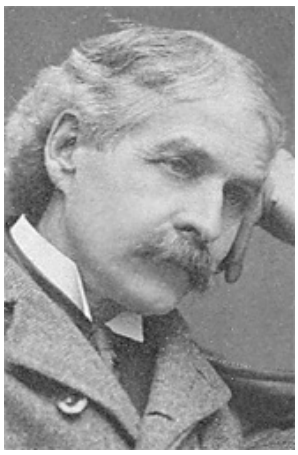
Jim Cerny
New Castle Historical Society
Essay no. 5 – published May 24, 2025.

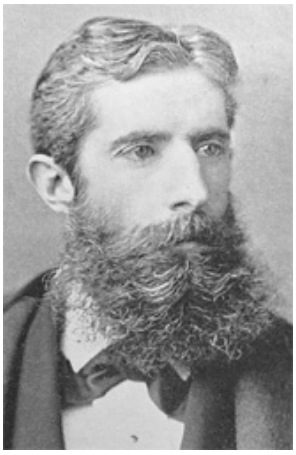
In the late nineteenth century it was popular to write poetry and publish it in literary magazines and as whole volumes. Most of those Seacoast poets are profiled in the publication *Literary Lions: Celebrating 250 Years of Print in the Seacoast*. Such poetry largely disappeared as the twentiesth century progressed, though some examples exist. Today this poetry strikes us as sentimental and orante, but was taken seriously at the time, both to create and to read.

This compilation tries to pull together poems about New Castle, set in New Castle, often by residents, but sometimes by others. While many poems are of a general nature, many were also inspired by two historic events: the gunpowder raid on Fort William and Mary (December 1774) and the building of Walbach Tower (summer 1814).

Poets represented here are:

Frost, Sarah.
Albee, John.
Houghton, George Washington.
Stedman, Edmund Clarence.
Smart, Ann Wentworth.
May, Ralph.
Woodeson, Pearl.
Trefethen, Maude H.


Albee


Stedman

Smart

May

Sarah Frost (1713-1772).

Sarah was the daughter of Captain John Frost and Mary Bray Pepperrell. She wrote two poems used on gravestones in Frost Cemetery (Albee, pp, 105-106; Maxam, p. 384).

Gravestone of Rev. John Blunt, died 1748:

Soft is the Sleep of Saints, in Peace they lie,
They rest in Silence, but they never die
From these dark Graves their Flesh refin'd shall rise,
And in Immortal Bloom ascend the Skies.
Then shall thine Eyes dear BLUNT thine Hands, thy Tongue
In Nicer Harmony each Member hung,
Resume their warm Devotion and Adore
HIM in whose Service they were join'd before.

Gravestone of Abigail Frost, died 1742:
The capitalized words are part of the iconography at the top of her gravestone.

Released from Cares at Rest she lies,
While peaceful Slumbers close her Eyes
Her FAITH all Trials did endure,
Like a Strong PILLAR Firm and Sure.
Did adverse Waves tempestuous roll,
HOPE was the ANCHOR of her Soul.
We by the OLIVE in her HAND
Her PEACEFUL End may understand.
And by the CORONET is Shown
VIRTUE at last shall Wear the CROWN.

Rev. John Blunt

Abigail Frost

John Albee (1833-1915).

John Albee is best known for his 1884 history of New Castle, *New Castle Historic and Picturesque*. He also wrote minor poetry, such as this poem about the legend of Bosun Hill that was published in his history (p. 59). The first stanza was a favorite of Brooks Kennedy.

Bos'n Hill

The wind blows wild on Bos'n Hill,
Far off is heard the ocean's rote;
Low overhead the gulls scream shrill,
And homeward scuds each little boat.

Then the dead Bos'n wakes in glee
To hear the storm-king's song;
And from the top of mast-pine tree
He blows his whistle loud and long.

The village sailors hear the call,
Lips pale and eyes grow dim;
Well know they, though he pipes them all,
He means but one shall answer him.

He pipes the dead up from their graves,
Whose bones the tansy hides;
He pipes the dead beneath the waves,
They hear and cleave the rising tides.

But sailors know when next they sail
Beyond the Hilltop's view,
There 's one amongst them shall not fail
To join the Bos'n's crew.

Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1908).
Stedman was an essayist, poet, literary critic, and banker with a seat on Wall Street. He built the stone cottage at the end of Wild Rose Lane that he called Kelp Rock, later much modified, and torn down in 2022. This is from his poem collection, pp. 319-321.

A SEA-CHANGE, AT KELP ROCK

Just at this full noon of summer
There 's a touch, unfelt before,
Charms our Coastland, smoothing from her
The last crease her forehead wore:
She, too, drains the sun-god's potion,
Quits her part of anchorite,
Smiles to see her leaden ocean
Sparkle in the austral light;

While the tidal depths beneath her
Palpitate with warmth and love,
And the infinite pure æther
Floods the yearning creek and cove,
Harbor, woodland, promontory,
Swarded fields that slope between,—
And our gray tower, tinged with glory,
Midway flames above the scene.

On this day of all most luring,
This one morn of all the year,
Read I — soul and body curing
In the seaward loggia here —
Once, twice, thrice, that chorus sweetest
(Fortune's darling, Sophokles!)
Of the grove whose steeds are fleetest,
Nurtured by the sacred breeze;

Of Kolonos, where in clusters
Blooms narcissus — where unfold
Ivied trees their leafy lustres
And the crocus spreads its gold;
Where the nightingales keep singing
And the streamlets never cease,
To the son of Laius bringing
Rest at last, forgiveness, peace.

Drops the book — but from its prison
Tell me now what antique spell,
Through the unclaspt cover risen,
Moves the waves I know so well;
Bids me find in them hereafter,
Dimpled to their utmost zone
With the old innumerous laughter,
An Ægean of my own?

Even so: the blue Ægean
Through our tendriled arches smiles,
And the distant empyrean
Curves to kiss enchanted isles:
Isles of Shoals, I know — yet fancy
This one day shall have free range,
And yon isles her necromancy
Shall to those of Hellas change.

Look! beyond the lanterned pharos
Girt with reefs that evermore,
Lashed and foaming, cry "Beware us!"
Cloud-white sails draw nigh the shore:
Sails, methinks, of burnished galleys
Wafting dark-browed maids within,
From those island hills and valleys,
Dread Athene's grace to win.

Sandalled, coiffed, and white-robed maidens,
Chanting in their carven boats;
List! and hear anon the cadence
Of their virginal fresh notes.
You shall hear the choric hymnos,
Or some clear prosodion
Known to Delos, Naxos, Lemnos,
Isles beneath the eastern sun.

'T is the famed Æolian quire
Bearing Pallas flowers and fruit —
Some with white hands touch the lyre,
Some with red lips kiss the flute;
You shall see the vestured priestess,
Violet-crowned, her chalice swing,
Ere yon cerylus has ceased his
Swirl upon "the sea-blue wing."

In the great Panathenæa
Climbing marble porch and stair,
Soon before the statued Dea
Votive baskets they shall bear,
Sacred palm, and fragrant censer,
Wine-cups —
But what vapor hoar,
What cloud-curtain dense, and denser,
Looms between them and the shore?

Off, thou Norseland Terror, clouding
Hellas with the jealous wraith
Which, the gods of old enshrouding,
Froze their hearts, the poet saith!
Vain the cry: from yon abysm
Now the fog-horn's woeful blast —
Stern New England's exorcism! —
Ends my vision of the past.

1890.

George Washington Houghton (1850-1891)

George Houghton was a journalist and writer of verse who lived in New York, publishing a book of poems, titled *Niagara*, and a short series of essays on York, Maine, titled *Drift*.

The Legend of Walbach Tower

from *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1883, v. 51, issue 305, pp. 375-376.

MORE ill at ease was never man than Walbach, that Lords day,
When, spent with speed, a trawler cried, “A war-ship heads this way!”

His pipe, half filled, to shatters flew; he climbed the ridge of knolls;
And, turning spy-glass toward the east, swept the long reach of Shoals.

An hour he watched: behind his back the Portsmouth spires waxed red;
Its harbor like a field of war, a brazen shield o’erhead.

Another hour: the sundown gun the Sabbath stillness brake;
When loud a second voice hallooed, “Two war-ships hither make!”

Again the colonel scanned the east, where soon white gleams arose:
Behind Star Isle they first appeared, then finshed o’er Smuttynose.

Fleet-wing’d they left Duck Isle astern; when, rounding full in view,
Lo! in the face of Appledore three Britishers hove to.

“To arms, O townsfolk!” Walbach cried. “Behold these black hawk three!
Whether they pluck old Portsmouth town rests now with you and me.

“The guns of Kittery, and mine, may keep the channel clear,
If but one pintle-stone be raised to ward me in the rear.

“But scarce a score my muster-roll; the earthworks lie unmanned,
(Whereof some mouthing spy, no doubt, has made them understand;)

“And if, ere dawn, their long-boat keels once kiss the nether sands,
My every port-hole’s mouth is stopped, and we be in their hands!”

Then straightway from his place upspake the parson of the town:
“Let us beseech Heavens blessing first!” — and all the folk knelt down.

“O God, our hands are few and faint; our hope rests all with thee:
Lend us thy hand in this sore strait, and thine the glory be!”

“Amen! Amen!” the chorus rose; “Amen!” the pines replied;
And through the churchyards rustling grass an “Amen” softly sighed.

Astir the village was awhile, with hoof and iron clang;
Then all grew still, save where, aloft, a hundred trowels rang.

None supped, they say, that Lords-day eve; none slept, they say, that night;
But all night long, with tireless arms, each toiled as best he might.

Four flax-haired boys of Amazeen the flickering torches stay,
Peopling with titan shadow-groups the canopy of gray;

Grandsires, with frost above their brows, the steaming mortar mix;
Dame Tarlton’s apron, crisp at dawn, helps hod the yellow bricks;

While pilot, cooper, mackerelman, parson and squire as well,
Make haste to plant the pintle-gun, and raise its citadel.

And one who wrought still tells the tale, that as his task he plied,
Ag unseen fellow-form he felt that labored at his side;

And still to wondering ears relates, that as each brick was squared,
Lo! unseen trowels clinked response, and a new course prepared.

O night of nights! The blinking dawn beheld the marvel done,
And from the new martello boomed the echoing morning gun.

One stormy cloud its lips upblew; and as its thunder rolled,
Old England saw, above the smoke, New England’s flag unfold.

Then, slowly tacking to and fro, more near the cruisers made,
To see what force unheralded had flown to Walbachs aid.

“God be our stay,” the parson cried, “who hearkened Israel’s wail!”
And as he spake, — all in a line, seaward the ships set sail.

Ann Wentworth Smart (1868-1939).

Smart was known for her poetry and probably wrote more poems about New Castle than anyone else. They were published locally in her lifetime and many are republished in the book *Making Waves* (pp. 205-214). She lived in the historic house on Main Street that is currently owned by the MacDonald family, described in the 1993 *Walkabout* book (p. 18) . Her poety is characterized as "sentimental and nostalgic" in the Maxam Book. One example is given here, a calligraphic rendering from the New Castle Cook Book, 12th edition, 1977.

The Village Church

The bell in the old church steeple,
Rings clear on the Autumn air;
Calling the faithful Islanders
To the meeting-house of prayer;
Where the pews have doors which button
Red damask cushions on seat;
Racks for the Psalm-book and Hymnal
Hard wooden benches for feet

II

When the last three strokes have echoed
And the Deacon's task is o'er,
The Parson climbs the pulpit steps:
And closes the tiny door.
From the organ in the gallery,
The tones in volume grow;
As choir rise and sing "Praise God From
Whom all Blessings flow."

III

Parson Alden reads the Scripture,
From the Prophets or a Psalm,
Offers prayer and long petition;
In a voice serene and calm;
Then the handled-box is offered
To each occupant in pew,
As they stand and face the gallery;
When the quartette range in view.

IV

Alto and soprano singers;
Hats a mass of feathery plume,
Flowing sleeves and spreading garments;
Leaving scarce an inch of room
For Leander, tenor singer,
Tall and spruce with bearded face
And the surgeon from the Barracks
With his deep resounding bass.

V

Sarah, with her rare contralto;
Fair Louise, with clear sweet voice,
Lead the anthem filled with action;
"Rejoice; again I say Rejoice."
Hymn and Offertory over;
The Parson then starts in with vim,
And there's scarce a person living
Who escaped a word from him.

VI

Saints and sinners all are mentioned.
Fort and Village: men at large;
For some slight or fancied error,
Parson Alden brings a charge.
Then the closing prayer and music;
Fervent 'Amens' from a few
At the door each hand is shaken;
With a hearty "God bless you".

VII

Simple honest lovely service,
On this Island by the sea,
Sixty years seems but a moment;
So vivid is the scene to me.
I can hear the voices clearly
(The faces never will grow dim.),
In some other land they're singing
That same sweet Offertory hymn.

by Ann Wentworth Smart

Ralph May (1882-1973).

May was a Portsmouth native, who lived in Cambridge, MA, and summered in Portsmouth in the Rundlet-May house that his great-grandfather built. He self-published a small book of poems, from which this walkabout poem is taken, also reprinted in *Rye Reflections* in May 2010. If you've ever walked that New Castle loop, notice both what he emphasizes and what he leaves out.

ON WALKING 'ROUND NEW CASTLE*

We always went down Richards Avenue,
Then through the cemetery with its happy view
Of the back river waters at high tide,
Fitting the old town's thoughts that here abide;
Then along Sagamore Road with lengthened stride,
The ashes of my pipe now cast aside,
Past Little Harbor turn, and down the hill
Beyond Love Lane, to Sagamore Creek, which will
Ever its banks with changing beauty fill.
'Twas on this creek a witch in olden days
Lived, and 'twas called Witch Creek, the dame to praise.
Beyond the bridge a short cut through the wood
Gives glimpse of lower creek in charming mood.
O'er Wentworth Road we then tramp easterly,
By friendly barking dogs, until the sea
Comes at us over the breakwater grey,
Beyond the links and Little Harbor bay.
Perhaps some sail is on the ocean blue,
Or motor boat cuts Little Harbor through.
Another world is here, as past the bridge,
We climb the hill, look southward from the ridge,
See breaking waves on far off Appledore,
And lines of foam 'long Odiorne's Point shore.
Should Isles of Shoals seem lifted toward the sky,
A storm is making, as when gulls fly high,
Or as, when, sitting miles away at home,
Sudden is heard the whistling buoy's moan.
To north, we've seen still waters and fair isles,
And Benning Wentworth's house of ancient style.
O'er crest of Wentworth hill some maple trees
Drip sap in March, eye more than taste to please.
Here we must settle which way we shall go;
If time permits, and legs do not say "no,"
It's pleasant scrambling down to Wentworth beach,
To walk more sands, to skip a stone, to reach

A bird filled path that takes us to Rose Lane,
'Cross Jaffrey Point unto the sea again.
This time the ocean swells break at our feet;
Peace, beauty, fill their slow insistent beat.
But soon we must be on our rocky way,
By outer harbor coast, a mile long bay.
Whalesback and Fort Point Light bound this demesne,
With Gerrish Island 'cross the harbor lane.

Cod Rock we pass, then, rougher shore behind,
We tread New Castle beach, until we find
Those long sands lead to that fair harbor town,
Behind Fort Point, with Walbach Tower round;
The ruined tower that arose one night,
Eighteen fourteen, for fear the British might
Pass Constitution Fort, to Portsmouth's plight.
At what is now Fort Constitution gate,
December, seventeen seventy-four, the date,
The Revolutionary War began,
Though at this time there fell no blood nor man.
Fort Point, with Walbach, long stone fort and light,
Make harbor entrance a lovely sight.
Behind it curves the harbor westwardly,
Between New Castle coves and Kittery,
Capped by its old block house, with rough stone fort,
More picturesque than with war power fraught.
Throughout, Piscataqua's swift, changing tide
Makes lovely harbor virile, deep and wide.
Towards all that we have at such length described
We now approach with due regional pride.
In New Castle the last fall flowers bloom,
In New Castle one's stay is o'er too soon.
Yet miles ahead forbid us to delay,
And nature cheers anew the further way,
As has been well described in other lines,
That hold their virtue through the changing times.
This river walk from Portsmouth to the sea

Is beautifully told by John Albee.
It would seem vain, even if words were searched,
To say more here unless to quote his verse.
All walkers around New Castle should know
John Albee's charming lines before they go.
And so we come to Strawberry Bank again,
The eight mile circle made in hours twain,
Or thereabouts in minutes and in miles,
Depending on the walkers' varied styles.
Would that one could in fitting minstrel's lay
Do justice to this walk, and on harp play,
Bringing to all who would attend their ears
Fit melody, like music of the spheres!
In sun or storm, spring, winter, summer, fall,
This is a walk of walks that ne'er will pall.

*First printed in The Portsmouth Herald, and reprinted here with their courteous consent.

Pearl Woodeson (1913-1986).
Mrs. Woodeson, as she was known, taught the first grades in New Castle schools for 29 years. This poem is from *Making Waves* (p. 136). It is untitled.

Martin Pring could not foresee
The island town that this would be
When he arrived three hundred fifty years ago.
He only saw the dark green trees
And smelled the ripened strawberries
And the river where a harbor soon would grow.

In sixteen hundred twenty-three
England sent a company
To build a fort at Odiorne's Point
To protect the bay
Later on the settlers came
Intent to fish and hunt for game
Or to fight the savage Injuns if need be.

So Great Island grew to be
Our New Castle by the sea
Where we fish and sail and farm a little too;
And through all the stress and strife
Of a peripatetic life
There's no better place to be in (the year)

Maude H. Trefethen (1874-1956).
Miss Maude, as she was known, taught elementary school in New Castle for 51 years. She taught this song to generations of New Castle children. Katie Colliton performed it as an octogenarian one July 4th! Miss Maude wrote the lyrics as a song, known as "The New Castle Song," included here as her poem. This calligraphic version is from an early edition of the New Castle Cook Book.

There's a village by the sea
That is very dear to me,
And it's there the sun shines bright,
as you'll agree;
And the birds sing, o so sweet
In this heavenly retreat -
In the village of New Castle by the Sea.

Old New Castle how we love thee,
Home of childhood's days so sweet;
And no matter where we roam
You will always be our home -
Old New Castle, old New Castle
by the Sea."

The verses above were taught to the pupils of the New Castle School by Miss Maude Trefethen, for whom the present school is named. They were sung to the tune of "Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!" a Civil War Song written by George F. Root.

~ Contributed by Ruth Hutchinson
Assistant Editor

Sources.

When a reference is available in PDF format, that is indicated in place of the traditional publisher information.

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Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane.

- James Joyce, ***Ulysses***, at start of the Proteus chapter.

Essay No. 1.
New Castle Motifs: Piscataqua Street from Atkinson to Walbach. April 2023.

Essay No. 2.
Remembering David Borden in Photographs. June 2023.

Essay No. 3.
Analysis of a Postcard: Third New Castle Bridge ca. 1904. August 2023.

Essay No. 4
Fall Wildflower Reflections. September 2023.

Essay No. 5
New Castle Poetry: Volume 1 Traditional, May 2025.

Essay No. 6
New Castle Poetry: Volume 2 New Millennium, After 2000. May 2025.