

The adventures and ramblings of a sailor

ca.1840

1 vol., 213p. (0.1 linear feet)

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The son of a Revolutionary War veteran from Fairfield County, Conn., Reuben Nichols went to sea as teenager and spent a quarter of a century sailing the Atlantic aboard merchant ships and privateers. After rising to become master of the New York and Savannah packets *Exact* and *Angeliq*ue in the 1830s, he retired to a life on shore near Bridgeport.

This vigorous account of a life on the antebellum seas runs Nichols' childhood hardships through a series of adventures at sea in war and peace. An observant and effective writer, Nichols describes voyages to western and northern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and South America during and after the War of 1812. During a colorful career, he took part in the

operations of warships and privateers, witnessed attempted mutinies and desertions, rescued the abolitionist John Hopper from a mob in Georgia, and was drawn into the struggles for colonial liberation. His experiences aboard the privateer *Kemp* and descriptions of Haiti, Cape Verde, Spain, Gibraltar, Turkey, and Argentina are particularly evocative.

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Background on Reuben Nichols

Reuben Nichols' improbable life took him from his beginnings in tragedy and poverty to traveling the globe as a sailor and eventually to life near Bridgeport, Conn., as a shipbuilder and would-be politician.

Born in Nichols Farms (now Trumbull), Conn., in 1794, Nichols was just two when his father Reuben (1751-1797), a tailor and veteran of the Revolutionary War, died of consumption. Left to her own scant resources, Nichols' mother Abiah placed out one his siblings by one to relatives until she decided to resolve her financial woes by remarrying. At the ripe age of nine, Nichols saw that he had become "an unwelcome inmate in my mother's house," and requested that he, too, be sent away to relatives. When he was placed with Israel Hawley (1751-1836) in 1805, a paternal relative from Monroe, Conn., Nichols could have been convinced that his life was turning for the better. But as would happen often in his life, he discovered that good fortune and adversity were often partners. In about 1810, a bitter dispute with Hawley over plowing escalated to blows, and Nichols walked off the job, quite literally, with the intent of returning home. Once there, however, he discovered the old home deserted, and even though a neighbor, Ozias Burr (1773-1836), agreed to take him in, good fortune was not on his side. Burr offered work for the teenaged Nichols, but shorted him on pay, leading Nichols to take off on his own again.

Life began slowly to take a better course once Nichols found his way to sea. Traveling to Bridgeport, he signed on with a "Boston coaster," the *Antoinette*, beginning a quarter century of work aboard a succession of merchantmen and privateers, and slow ascent in rank. During the years of the War of 1812, Nichols was introduced to the nautical life in journeys along the eastern seaboard, throughout the Caribbean, and as far as away as Lisbon, sailing aboard merchant ships such as the *Martha*, the *Aristomenes*, and the *Sylph*.

The violence and chaos of an Atlantic world embroiled in war made for extraordinary experiences. Among other adventures, Nichols was tricked into joining the crew of the *Intrepid Bolivar*, a ship under command of Luis Brion that fought for Venezuelan independence by seeking prizes on the Spanish Main. Jumping ship in Aruba, he made his way to Haiti, still suffering the pangs of post-revolutionary turmoil and a place, as he noted, where "all white men were looked on with much suspicion." Accompanied by a Haitian officer who spoke no English, Nichols walked from Jacmel to Port au Prince and with the assistance of the American consul, secured a berth aboard a privateer, the *Kemp*, which had the distinction of capturing a string of prizes in the final weeks of the war.

Yet peace between the United States and Britain did not bring peace at sea. Never one to leave success unsullied, Nichols was impressed into the British Navy, seeing action against the French aboard the *Pandora* and securing his release from the Navy in London only through the personal intervention of Ambassador John Quincy Adams. As the imperial and colonial conflicts persisted, so did his adventures. After a disappointing stint aboard the *Independence*, cruising off the coast of Spain, Nichols deserted in Buenos Aires where he soon learned that the *Le Brack*, a privateer of 36-guns, was looking for hands. Discovering that the ship's captain, David Jewett, was a fellow native of Connecticut, Nichols convinced the commodore to take him on as Master Mate. A couple of prizes and a thwarted mutiny later, Nichols turned his promotion to good end, becoming Master of the merchant brig *Exact* in 1829, a New York and Savannah packet that sailed as far asea as the eastern Mediterranean.

Nichols' final command came in 1836 when he accepted an offer of one-third ownership of a New York and Savannah schooner, the *Angelique*. This would prove to be a turning point in his career, but not in the way he expected. In Savannah in 1837, Nichols learned that John Hopper, the abolitionist son of the abolitionist Isaac Hopper, was being threatened by a pro-slavery mob who intended to tar and feather him. Although rescued temporarily by the city's mayor, Hopper clearly needed a way out, and Nichols provided it, hiding Hopper and helping him find passage north.

As a consequence of this assistance, however, Nichols gained a reputation as an abolitionist among his fellow ships' captains and trading partners. Although he insisted he was not one, he was widely reviled and shunned. The situation resulted in Nichols buying out his partners in the *Angelique* and to clear his finances, he sold the ship in 1838 and returned to dry land to farm. Though waylaid by other nautical schemes, he eventually settled in Stratford, Conn., adjacent to Bridgeport, and reportedly

engaged in shipbuilding and local politics.

Scope of collection

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Among the particular highlights of the narrative are the superb account of Nichols' journey from Jacmel to Port au Prince; his engagements with (and on) British ships; the description of his time in London, during which he witnessed the return of British troops from Waterloo and won the assistance of John Quincy Adams to escape his impressment; and his detailed account of the rescue of John Hopper from an angry mob in Savannah and its aftermath. As fantastic as these incidents sometimes seem, several can be corroborated independently. The Hopper story, for one, was widely noted in the abolitionist press at the time, Nichols' command of the *Exact* and *Angelique* are confirmed in New York directories, and the history of the otherwise undistinguished *Kemp* is well recorded.

Nichols' manuscript is incomplete, ending abruptly in mid-sentence, but the condition of the paper on the last surviving page suggests that it may have been incomplete for many years. Whether more was written, or if so, how much, remains unknown. Although the author was identified by the source of acquisition as Reuben Nichols, the author's first name does not appear in the manuscript and is hard to confirm in other sources.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from William Reese, March 2016.

Processing Information

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Although the memoirist does not disclose his first name, elements of his family history can be confirmed. Of particular note is an 1838 application for a Revolutionary War widow's pension -- successful -- filed by Abiah Lewis, widow of Reuben Nichols.

Summarizing that application, Reuben Nichols was born in June 1751 and as a resident of New Stratford, Conn., served during the war as both infantry and cavalry as a member of Capt. Salmon Reeds Company and later Capt. Samuel Blackman's Company (apparently part of Ezra Starr's Regiment of Light Horse). In the autumn 1777, he married Abiah Beers (born March 21, 1761), the daughter of Barney Beers of New Stratford Parish (now Monroe). After Reuben's death in Bridgeport on May 17, 1797, Abiah remarried in January 1, 1802, to Benjamin Hazard Lewis (called Hazard), who died in 1825. Among other miscellaneous information noted is that Sarah Hawley, wife of Abel Hawley of Monroe, was the daughter of Reuben's half-brother, Benjamin Nichols, while his brother Daniel Nichols died in 1837. Abiah had a brother Daniel Beers.

Abiah Lewis died in Bridgeport in December 26, 1840.

Bibliography

For a description of the rescue of John Hopper see Lydia Maria Child, *Isaac Hopper: A True Life* (Boston: Jewett, 18454), which reproduces a letter from Hopper thanking Nichols.

Nichols is listed as master of the *Exact* (1835-1836) New York and the *Angelique* (1837-1840) in Edwin Williams, *New York as it is* (N.Y.: T.R. Tanner, 1837-).

Language:

English

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