

History

Wine, fruit and ecstasy in Windham

Windham Center Library is home to Bacchus, the god of wine, fruit and ecstasy. It is a 2-foot-high wooden carving cut from a log of pine. This colorful, rotund, jovial god sits astride a cask, holding a basket of fruits. It has a fascinating history.



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In 1876, Abel Brooks of Hartford published Brigham Payne's history of "The Story of Bacchus." On June 10, 1776, the American Navy captured Britain's H.M.S. Bolton Brig in Long Island Sound. Capt. Edward Sneyd and three of his crew, boatswain John Coggin, John Russell and William Cook, were subsequently imprisoned in the Windham jail.

Sneyd was born in Hadlow, Kent, in 1740. In 1754, he joined H.M.S. Belvedere as a midshipman, and served four years on the China Sea. Sneyd was then assigned to H.M.S. Hannibal and did three years duty off the Spanish coast. He served as a sub-lieutenant and lieutenant aboard several ships before being appointed captain of the newly built H.M.S. Bolton Brig, commissioned in Portsmouth in December 1775. Sneyd was immediately dispatched to the

American colonies to help put down the rebellion.

Boatswain John Coggin was born in Killegan, County Meath, Ireland, in 1731. He gave his occupation as farm laborer when signing for the Royal Navy at

Portsmouth in 1750. Coggin had served under Sneyd on several other Royal Navy ships. John Russell was born at Ramsey, Hampshire, in 1749. He was an apprentice carpenter before joining the Navy in 1772. He built and repaired ships at Portsmouth, and in 1775 was appointed ship's carpenter on the brand new Bolton Brig. William Cook was born at Great Yarmouth in 1744, and joined the Royal Navy as an able bodied seaman at Chatham, Kent, in 1771.

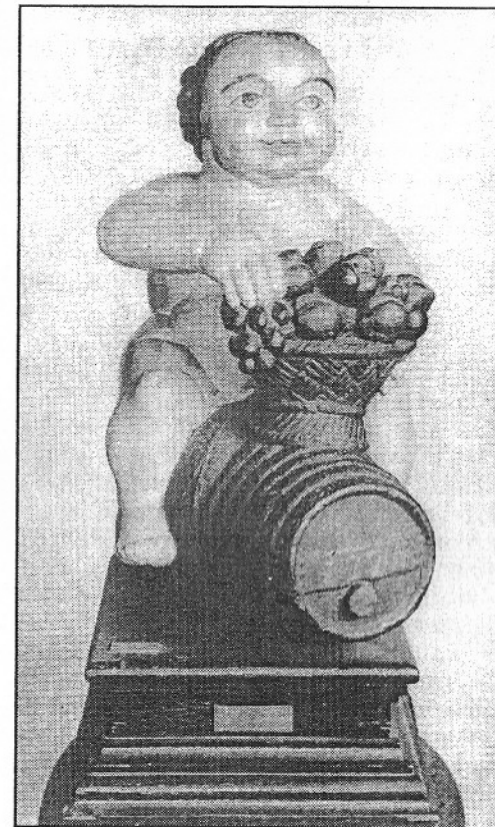
The four men were a great attraction in Windham. Many colonists were in disagreement with the rebellion, including several in Windham. The four sailors were treated very well. They worked on local farms each day, and were well fed and cared for before being locked-up for the night. The sailors were particularly fond of Mrs. Carey, a widow and the landlady of a tavern that stood

on Windham Green. Indeed, it was rumored that a romance blossomed between Sneyd and Carey.

The prisoners were very grateful to Carey and carved for her a Bacchus tavern sign with their pen knives, under the direction of ship carpenter Russell. Brigham Payne wrote in 1876 that the "generally stout, English look about the figure is evident enough when the nationality of the makers is considered." Bacchus was a common tavern sign in England. This Roman god was based upon the Greek god Dionysus. Bacchus first became a symbol of taverns in Romano-Britain, and is commonly seen on pub signs in Britain today.

Sneyd and his men were in Windham for six months. They eventually escaped. Arriving in Norwich they stole a canoe. The four escapees reached the Sound, but the canoe capsized and all but Coggin drowned. Their handiwork has survived though.

Bacchus passed through several hands in the 19th century. In the 1890s he was employed in a Hartford tavern to dispense beer and wine. Bacchus' owner, Abel Brooks, returned him briefly to Windham for the 1892 bicentennial celebrations. Brooks was convinced by the Windham Free Library Association to



This statue of the Roman god Bacchus has made its home at the Windham Free Library for 95 years.

donate the god of wine, fruit, and ecstasy to his birthplace. Bacchus returned home in 1905. Go to the Windham Free Library and pay him a visit.

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