



A photograph of Isaac Jennings, from the collections of the Fairfield Museum and History Center.

Isaac Jennings (1823-1887) followed in his father's footsteps, even though his parents did not want him to! His Father was Captain Abraham Gould Jennings. At age fifteen, restless and bored with life in Fairfield, Isaac decided to go to sea. In New York, he found employment as a **cabin boy** on a transatlantic voyage, but soon regretted his choice. Having previously tried other lines of work and finding he disliked them, the teenager felt bound to continue.

He returned to Fairfield to study navigation with the goal of becoming a captain. In 1846, while serving as First Officer, Jennings was responsible for a dramatic rescue of near-lifeless men clinging to the broken hull of their whaling vessel. On another voyage he rescued the crew of a British ship foundering off the coast of Newfoundland. Jennings achieved his goal of becoming a captain at the age twenty-five, and by thirty he was supervising the construction of a clipper ship, the *William Chamberlain*. He made numerous voyages to European ports, and sailed to Calcutta, India, and around Cape Horn to San Francisco. At the age of forty, with the outbreak of the Civil War, he retired from life at sea, and went into the paper business with an older brother.

Captain Isaac Jennings married Mary Bukley on October 9, 1855. They had two children, Mary Eliza (Minnie) Jennings (1859-1871) and Charles Jennings (1865-1950). Minnie died at a young age. We do not know the exact cause, but it was probably "consumption," tuberculosis or some other type of medical ailment.



EXCERPTS FROM THE JOURNAL OF Captain Isaac Jennings

To the reader

Whomever may be in possession of this journal will please take care and preserve it, not so much on account of its value as for the time and trouble it has taken to write it. It has cost many an off watch and “dogwatch,” when from fatigue I have fallen to sleep with my pen in hand. It has been written both in fair weather and foul, on the silvery surface of the Mediterranean and on the rolling billows of the Northern Ocean, sometimes under a Tropical Sun and sometimes off an icy coast.

On the first of June, 1838, I took my departure from home with chest and hammock bound for New York in search of a situation on board some vessel bound, **I knew nor cared not where.** . . . I at last obtained a berth on board of the Brig *Perseverence*, James Adams Commander, bound to Trieste, loaded with New England Rum and cotton . . . This was the first time that I had ever been down into a ship forecandle, and it was a hard looking place I can assure you only about 12 feet square with eight berths, the sides and top were black with tobacco smoke and dirt lay an inch thick on the deck, and dark and damp as a dungeon. The Second Mate had but just come on board that morning with myself, and not liking the appearance of things and the Capt he took his duds and left that night.

June 13, 1838

At midnight I was called by the second mate to go on deck and stand my watch for four hours. I turned out very reluctantly feeling very sorry to give up my bed hard as it was, to stand (or rather lay my watch out for I was so sick that I was unable to stand) in the cold wind and rain where the salt water was flying fore and aft. But it was of no use to back out now so on deck I went and . . . began to heave my insides out . . . **After I had got pretty well cleaned out, I sat down and began to come to my senses, or rather they to me, and think what a fool I had been to go to sea when I might have chosen some more pleasant and perhaps profitable occupation. But then I consoled myself that this was the worst of it and that I should feel better when the sea sickness had passed. In fact I did not expect to be obliged to stand watch being what they call a green hand,** and if it ever had occurred to me, I thought that there was as much sport in it as to be up until 10 or 12 o'clock.



June 14, 1838

This day I feel very sea sick. And I believe a little home sick too. And wish myself on shore once more, although I live in the cabin and am treated very kindly by the Capt. and Mate.

June 15, 1838

My seasickness is now gone and I begin to eat quite hearty at the salt beef and hard sea cakes, but oh dear! How I could go into some of my mother's pies and puddings. I would give almost anything for some milk to put into the coffee the cook makes it so strong that it is as black as himself; I have not drank a drop since we left N.Y. . . . The Capt. found that I was so fond of butter that he told the cook to take that off the table; he thinks that I must have been brought up on butter to like it so well. I told him that I used to have it three times a day and as often between meals as I wanted.

June 27, 1838

This day we are three weeks at sea, the Capt. thinks we shall have a long passage. I suppose my friends are all clad in their thin clothing at home and here I feel quite cold in thick clothes.

June 28, 1838

We have beautiful weather at present with the wind westerly course E.S.E. I have been employed at picking oakum today and as I sat down under the lee of the long boat pulling the yarns to pieces, I could not help thinking of dear home and friends and all the pleasures that I had enjoyed in my younger days. And when the thought struck me that I had now left them and perhaps forever to go out into the world and seek a living among strangers, who neither knew nor cared for me, and that of all the occupations I had chosen the worst; to be a sailor, to be kicked and cuffed about, cursed and sworn at both fore and aft, and then to sit down and pull away at some old yarns and make a handful of oakum, the amount of which after a whole day's work not be worth twenty-five cents. I say again that when I began to compare the past with the present, the thought was so painful to me that I occasionally took a wad of oakum and swabbed the big tears from my cheeks.



The medal Isaac Jennings received for rescuing the sailors from the *Rienzi*. From the collections of the Fairfield Museum and History Center.

The Rescue of the *Rienzi*, September 26, 1846

Isaac Jennings was a first officer of the *Minerva* under the command of Captain Bowen. On that September night, the *Minerva* was “mid-ocean on her passage from the Mediterranean, homeward bound.” Just as the sun was setting it was visible that a ship had wrecked, but Captain Bowen was more concerned about the “owners of the *Minerva*” than “curiosity respecting what seemed to be a useless hulk,” and he “concluded not to interrupt the voyage”

Isaac cannot live with the thought of not checking for survivors on the ship, he then goes to beg to the captain to let him and others search the wreck for survivors.

“But the first officer of the *Minerva*, a brave young fellow of two and twenty, was differently inclined. He kept the log and was naturally ambitious to chronicle something out of the common that the papers would be glad to get on arrival at New York. But more than this, his heart was touched at the possibility of deserting a fellow being – a sailor, too – in dire extremity, the thought that one poor fellow might be on that wreck, too weak to show a signal of distress, would not let him eat his supper. He pushed aside his plate and begged permission to man a boat. The Captain reluctantly consented.”

Isaac gathered a team together to search the wreckage. Isaac yells once to the silent wrecked ship and he hears nothing.



Another sailor yells “Wreck a’ho!” Again silence for a second.

“But a response did come – faint and uncanny – ‘Boat a’ho, for God’s sake save us.’”

Isaac and his rescue team were able to save the surviving 5 shipwrecked sailors. When they returned to the *Minerva*, Capt. Bowen grabbed Isaac and told him that he would never pass a ship wreck again without searching it.

“Never in my life, sir, will I be inclined to pass a wreck again without rigid investigation.”

After they returned to land, the saved sailors returned home. One sailor later became a very wealthy man, Lloyd B. Brown. He came into contact by accident with one of the sailors of the *Minerva*. Through him, Lloyd was able to track down Isaac and sent him a gold medal. Isaac was very proud and happy that he was honored with the gift. Lloyd left an accompanying message with the medal.

“It is now nearly thirty seven years since you rescued myself and companions from the wreck, and I feel as if I wanted to do something for you to show my appreciation, so I have had the medal made, knowing if the others were living they would join me in thanking you.”

Excerpts from The Rescue of the Rienzi from:

Beers, Wm. A. “A True Sea Story with a Golden Moral.” *Bridgeport Standard*, September 21, 1883. Fairfield Historical Society Special Collections, Annie E. Jennings Collection, MSB17.



Letter to Minnie

Captain Isaac Jennings brought his family aboard his ship the *William Chamberlain* from August 1, 1861 until January 1, 1862. On the first day, a man falls over board. Captain Jennings is playing with his daughter, Minnie, in his cabin. He hears a cry yell out, and runs out to the deck. Isaac began to shout out orders to his crew, he knew it would take too long to clear off a life boat and send it down to save him, so he threw out a life preserve and luckily it was thrown directly at the sailor and he was able to grab on. It took 4 men to go out and save him.

After Captain Jennings' wife, Mary, and his daughter, Minnie, return home, Captain Jennings returns to sea. Now that he is alone, Isaac misses his family, especially his daughter. On the following pages are a sample of the letter and the transcription.



Captain Jennings Writing to his daughter, Minnie

Badix Spain Jan. 20. 1862
My Dear Little Daughter. Minnie
I think it will please
you to get a letter from your papa. which
though you may not read now. you
can talk about it. and ask mama
to save it for you till you get old
enough to see for yourself what
I have written you from Spain.
a little treasure that many little
girls would like to have.
I suppose you have not forgotten the voyage
you made with papa and mama to Havana.
and many pretty things you saw
there. and all about the ship. how
she used to roll. and how mama
was frightened and thought you would
fall out of bed. but you was never
afraid of any thing but loved to
run about the cabin. or swing on
the little scup papa fixed for you
under the boat. Well your papa



Cadiz, Spain Jan. 20, 1862

My dear Little Daughter Minnie,

I think it will please you to get a letter from your papa which though you may not read now, you can talk about it and ask mama to save it for you till you get old enough to see for yourself what I have written you from Spain, a little treasure that many little girls would like to have.

I suppose you have not forgotten the voyage you made with papa and mama to France and many pretty things you saw there and all about the ship, how she used to roll and how mama was frightened and thought you would fall out of bed.

But you was never afraid of anything but loved to run about the cabin or swing on the littles scup {?} papa fixed for you under the boat. Well your papa's on another voyage over the big water in the same ship with fair wind all the time but the waves are very high sometimes and made the ship roll so hard one night that the stove tumbled over full of coals of fire but the steward heard it and gathered them up before they burnt the carpet much. I suppose your mama would have been frightened at such a time and thought the ship would burn up. I have got no Kittie with me now to set the table but a cabin boy about as black as the steward. He is now writing a letter for the steward and I had to laugh when he asked me if Cadiz was spelt Catus or Catis. Tell mama that papa thinks he has found the drawers that she said Kittie lost. When I was putting on a clean shirt. You know I used to put on a clean shirt when the pilot came



on board, well when I was putting on my clean white shirt what should I find nicely packed away but your little drawers and then papa had to laugh again at the efforts of your little industry and all the trouble you gave mama looking for the those same drawers and the blame that Kittle got for losing them. I find a great many of your little playthings left on board all giving evidence of the great bump of destructiveness on your little head, there is your once pretty doll old Catherine gave you with no head band but one leg, then there is your little duck with no head nor wings and then there is your little rabbit with ears, eyes out and all dirty and many other little things that I find hard have to look at more than ever before because they put me in mind of you and your little innocent little amusements. Could I shed tears as easily as your mama they would often have occasion to flow from emotions interrupted with joy and sorrow. For you that I have such a little darling, how sorry that we are separated. I suppose that you are talking more and more every day to the amusement as well as somethings the disturbance of those that have to listen. I think if I could be with you now I should have patience to bear with you for a while. I hope you have been a good girl and taking good care of mama and not let her fall out of bed since she have been gone. I hope that you say your prayers every night and morning and ask God to make you a good girl and return your papa safe home again. I would love to write more but I have no more space but to add much love from you Papa.