



**Fairfield Museum**  
EXPLORE *the past*, IMAGINE *the future*  
370 Beach Road, Fairfield, CT | 203-259-1598  
www.fairfieldhistory.org

# Character Portraits

## Isaac Jennings



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 approve. His father was Captain Abraham Gould Jennings. At the age fifteen, restless and bored with life in Fairfield, he 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 ship captain at the age of 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.

Captain Isaac Jennings married Mary Bukley on October 9, 1855. Their daughter Minnie was born in July, 1859. 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.



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.

## Traveling with Mary and Minnie

Captain Isaac Jennings brought his family aboard his ship the *William Chamberlain* from August 1, 1861 until January 1, 1862. 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.



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## Traveling with Minnie

Cádiz 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



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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 puting on my clean white shirt what



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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 hand 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, form 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 your 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 ei 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.