

## A Sliver of Transatlantic History of a Chip from the Chesapeake

***A Hampshire boy living in Canada kept a small piece of wood given to him by his grandfather who inscribed it as “A Piece of the American Frigate “Chesapeake”—Captured 1813”. Stephen Leacock wrote about it in 1946:***

“When we were leaving England in 1876 to go to “America” we were taken over to the Isle of Wight to see my grandfather, who was naturally delighted—so much so that he gave me from the drawing-room table at Oak Hill this bit of wood and said, “That was a piece of the *Chesapeake*.”..... but it has been only of late years, when I have been concerned with writing Canadian history, that I have been able to get full details of the fate of the old ship. I am indebted here very greatly to the library staff of the Boston Public Library.

I have always had a certain personal interest in the *Chesapeake*. I have, as I say, on my library table a “chunk” of very hard wood (teak or mahogany, I suppose), about eight inches by three inches by two and a half inches, that was originally a piece of the *Chesapeake*. I have had it for nearly [pg 34] seventy years, the kind of thing you never lose if you pay no attention to it, like the fidelity of an old friend.

The amazing thing is that the *Chesapeake* was taken over to England and is still there—all the best timbers of the vessel, built in solid as they came out of the ship, went into the making of a mill and are still throbbing and quivering all day as the mill, one hundred and twenty-three years old, still hums in an English village, grinding corn.

She was bought as she stood for five hundred pounds by a Mr. Holmes. He broke up the vessel, sold several tons of copper from the sheeting with all fittings and timber, and doubled his money. The main timbers were pitch pine, new and sound, and some of them were sold for house building in Portsmouth but the best of them were bought by a Mr. John Prior for two hundred pounds to build a mill. This he duly erected (1820) in the hamlet of Wickham. The main timbers of the deck, built into the structure intact, were (and are) thirty-two feet long and eighteen inches square. The purloins were used, just as they were, for joists.... A *Hampshire Gazetteer and Guide* of 1901 reports that the mill at Wickham made of the timbers of the *Chesapeake* is still intact and in active operation.”

In 1943 he wrote to the Vicar of Fareham who referred him to Mr. George Orwell. “I hadn't written sooner because, although I knew the *Chesapeake* was in a mill, I was looking for the mill to be on the Isle of Wight. Mr Orwell wrote me to say that the mill is still (April 4, 1943) quite as it was, timbers and all, going strong and likely to see a long while yet.

What ought to be done about it? These timbers of the deck of the *Chesapeake*—rebuilt into their earlier semblance—should have something of the sacred memory of the deck of the *Victory*. Why not buy them and give them to the United States? They should be a gift to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. Those who know that place will recall its trophies—the proudest part of the establishment. There swings still afloat the schooner *America* that won the cup in 1850 something, never recaptured; there is the old *Constitution* and the *Reina Mercedes*, and there in the great hall is Perry's flag with his “*Don't give up the ship,*” and much else.

The *Chesapeake* would build into a fine platform, the old deck reproduced, for Mr. Churchill to lecture from.”

***Oh, what poignant words: the piece of wood is lost to the museum commemorating Stephen Leacock and a replacement 'chip' from the Chesapeake is sought. Do you know where one can be found? – Ed. Passages reproduced by kind permission of Fred Addis, Curator, Leacock Museum and Doubleday & Co.Inc., publisher of The Boy I Left Behind Me by Stephen Leacock.***