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Clipper *Southern Cross* Had Strong Historic Ties to the Town of Dennis

By Kevin N. Keegan

Member, Dennis Historical Society Board of Directors

Even though the clipper *Southern Cross*—seen above in one of artist Fitz Henry Lane's most famous maritime paintings—was built in Boston, the ship's history is inextricably linked to the town of Dennis.

The first connection is through Ezra Howes Baker (1811-1876), the third son of captain Judah Baker (1771-1830) and Mercy Howes Baker (1779-1865) of South Dennis (Judah's namesake windmill was later moved to Bass River, where it may still be seen today). Ezra went to sea by age 10, spent three years as a cook on a coaster and

fisherman, and by age 16 was made captain of a schooner and sent to Maine in search of a cargo of lumber.

Ezra continued as a mariner involved in buying and selling cargoes until the late 1830s, at which time he moved to South Boston as a founding partner of a company that later evolved into Baker & Morrill and that dedicated itself to profitable foreign and domestic trade as the owner of a small fleet of ships. He later maintained a summer residence in West Dennis at 60 Old Main Street, which he visited from 1844 to 1866. The house was later owned by—and is named for—Ezra Thacher (1829-1896) and is still there today four lots down from the present-day Captain Theophilus Baker House and Barn at Jericho Historical Center.



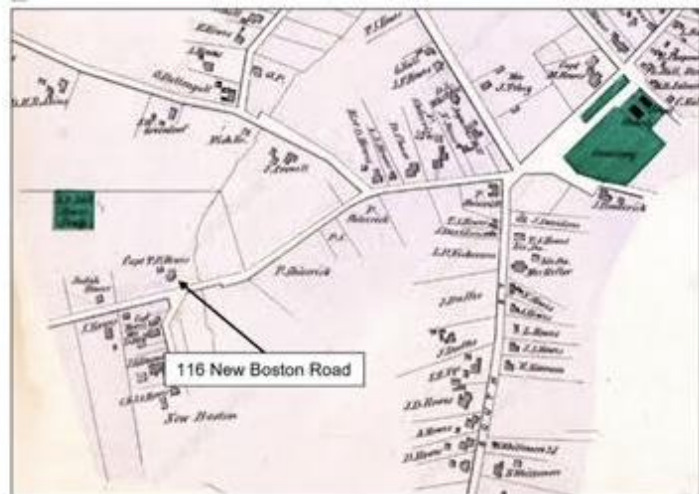
The 1834 Ezra Thacher House at 60 Old Main Street in West Dennis was the summer home between 1844 and 1866 of Ezra Howes Baker (left).

Baker & Morrill commissioned *Southern Cross* to be built in 1850-1851 in a nearby South Boston boatyard by brothers Edward and Harrison Briggs. The medium clipper—at 938 tons and with a notable figurehead of a gilded eagle on a wing—was 170 feet long, 36 feet at its widest point, 21 feet deep, and named for what her owners, including Ezra, believed was the most beautiful constellation found below the equator in the nighttime sky. Since 2005, an excellent reproduction of Fitz Henry Lane's 1851 painting of *Southern Cross* in Boston Harbor has been part of the permanent collection at the Dennis Maritime Museum at the West Dennis Graded School House.

An article in *The Boston Atlas* datelined May 5, 1851, provided a contemporaneous description of *Southern Cross* as it moored at Central Wharf: "This beautiful vessel is a fair medium between the extreme sharpness of the clippers recently built here, and the New York packets. Possessing rounded lines, finely formed ends, good rise and length of floor, no doubt need be entertained of her success as a swift sailor, and what is more, of being a trust-worthy vessel in a heavy sea. Her bearings are such that she will

endure driving, when, perhaps, a vessel of leaner ends might be compelled to shorten sail. She is beautiful sparred, and well rigged. As a whole we consider her a ship of beautiful proportions, well-built of good materials, handsomely finished, and liberally found.”

Southern Cross launched that May under original captain Levi Stevens of Truro, who took 136 days to travel from Boston to San Francisco via Cape Horn during a voyage that saw the ship twice lose all three topgallant masts: first seven days out of port and later during high winds off the River Platte near the Uruguay-Argentina border. Stevens was replaced as commander briefly by captain John Paine before the ship was handed over—in succession—to two Dennis master mariners: captain Thomas Prince Howes and captain Benjamin Perkins Howes. Between the two, they commanded *Southern Cross* continuously from 1852 to 1863.



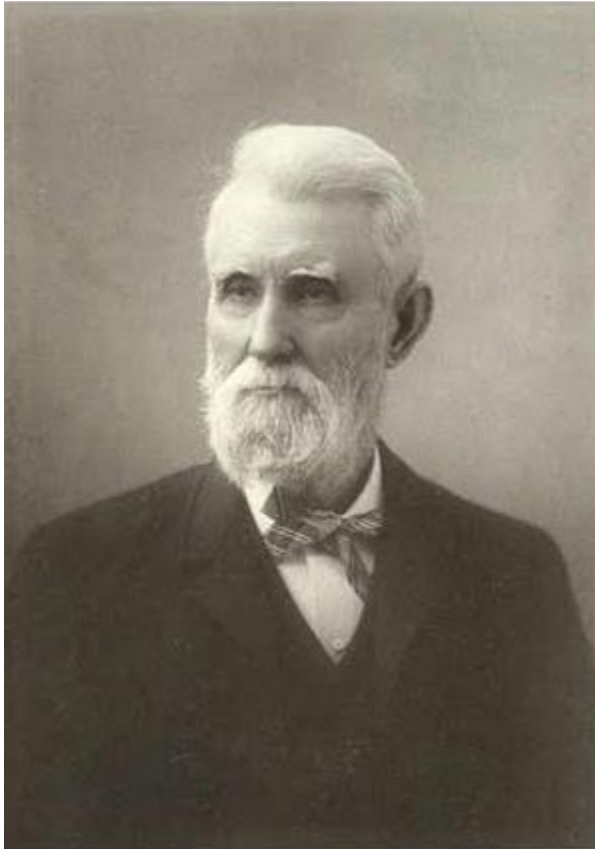
According to both an 1858 map and the 1880 map above of Dennis Village, Thomas Prince Howes (1817-1894) lived at 116 New Boston Road in a house that survives to this day. The home was built in the early 1700s—possibly 1704—and is now situated on about 32 acres adjacent to the ancient Howes Family Cemetery. Thomas married Deborah Bassett (1816-1860) in 1842.

Thomas’s first voyage aboard *Southern Cross* was from Boston to San Francisco starting in June 1852 and notable for a fire aboard ship 15 days before reaching Montevideo, Uruguay. During the following seven years, Thomas made five additional trips aboard *Southern Cross* from either New York or Boston to San Francisco, including at least one trip from Boston in which fellow Dennis seaman Benjamin Perkins Howes served on board.

On his final voyage to San Francisco in 1859, Thomas and his crew witnessed the Aurora Australis—now known as the Southern Lights—near the tip of South America in what scientists today believe was the greatest solar storm of all time. Thomas resigned his command of *Southern Cross* that year to become master of the ship *Alarm* and later

served in the mid-1860s as captain of *Wild Hunter*, the Shiverick-Shipyard-built clipper first commanded by East Dennis mariner Joshua Sears (1817-1885).

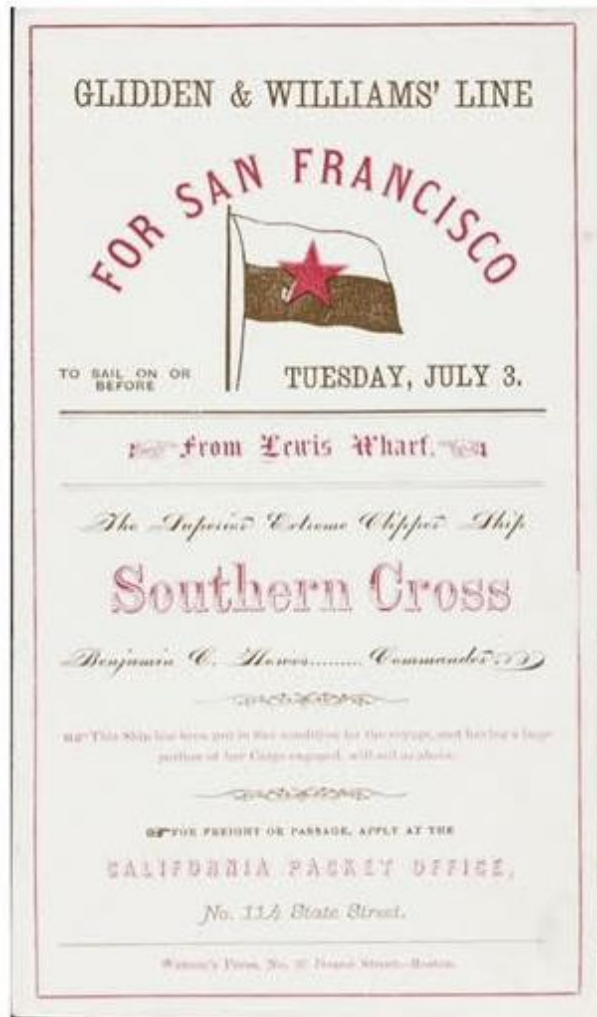
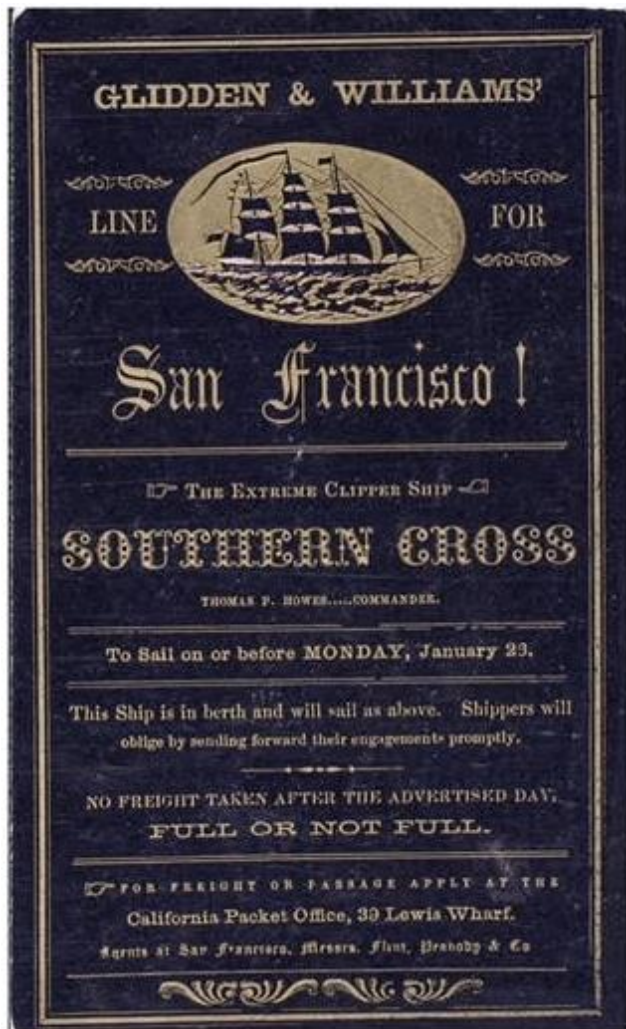
At the time of his passing in 1894, Thomas was one of the oldest members of the Boston Marine Society—having been inducted in 1855—and one of its past presidents. He spent one term in the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature in 1878, had been a member of the Dennis School Committee, and had served as the Dennis school system's superintendent. Thomas is buried in the Howes Family Cemetery in Dennis Village, accessed via Bramble Lane.



CAPTAIN THOMAS PRINCE HOWES
1817-1894

In 1859, Thomas was succeeded by Benjamin Perkins Howes (1835-1866) as captain of *Southern Cross*. The son of Nathan Howes (1794-1868) and Lydia Sears Howes (1794-1848), Benjamin likely grew up in a house somewhere on or near Seaside Avenue near Corporation Beach, and he made at least one Boston-to-San-Francisco-and-back run as captain aboard *Southern Cross* before he returned in 1860 and married his neighbor Lucy Jane Lord (1842-1926), the daughter of Dr. William Lord (1809-1892) and Lydia Getchell (1804-1877). Two conflicting census records from that year show Benjamin and Lucy living both with his parents and with her parents. The newlyweds had a three-week honeymoon before Benjamin returned to the sea for a 19-month voyage aboard *Southern Cross* that took him around the world.

The Baker Library Special Collections at Harvard Business School includes among its artifacts a *Southern Cross* logbook kept by William Howes, who served under Benjamin on that voyage between 1860 and early 1862 from Boston to San Francisco and subsequently on to Hong Kong, Saigon, Macao, Bangkok, and then home via Africa's Cape of Good Hope by way of Falmouth, England. According to the logbook entries, the ship cargoes at various times during the circumnavigation included coal, flour, quicksilver, specie, wheat, salmon, bread, rice, sugar, hides, horn, teak, rosewood, yellowwood, and straw mats. The second leg of the trip—from San Francisco to Hong Kong—was made in a record 32 days while carrying 413 passengers in steerage.



From the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, these are two advertising cards seeking cargo for *Southern Cross* for trips from Boston to San Francisco: one showing Thomas Prince Howes as commander (left) and one showing Benjamin Perkins Howes as commander.

As he set out on his next voyage in late February 1862—from Boston to San Francisco and back—Benjamin took along his wife Lucy rather than leave her home for another

extended period. Upon his return from this voyage, he was inducted into the Boston Marine Society.

After still another trip to San Francisco in 1863—again with Lucy, who gave birth at sea to their son, George Willis Howes, who would tragically pass in infancy just two weeks later—*Southern Cross* headed to Buena Vista, Mexico, for a load of wood dye (used for making Union uniforms in the Civil War), and then the ship headed around Cape Horn en route to Boston. Near the equator and still about 20 days out from Massachusetts, *Southern Cross* was intercepted by the Confederate privateer *CSS Florida*, a steamship under Captain John Newland Maffitt with orders from the government under Jefferson Davis to prey on Northern commercial shipping.



Lucy Lord Howes (1842 - 1926) wrote a journal that included her time aboard the clipper *Southern Cross*, seen here in a China Trade ship portrait likely executed for her husband Benjamin in 1861 while the ship was off Hong Kong. The painting was exhibited at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1974.

In a journal entry from years later—published by the Dennis Historical Society in book form as *Privateers, Pirates, and Beyond: Memoirs of Lucy Lord Howes Hooper 1862-63 1866-1909* and transcribed by her great-granddaughter Gerry Geddes Buss Watters—Lucy remembered the events of June 6, 1863: “They crossed our bows and kept off until they were sure of our character, then got up steam and came down on us. There we were stuck fast, if I may use the expression, for there was not a breath of wind, and the sails all hung flapping.... As the steamer came alongside she proved to be English built, but the crew wore American uniforms and carried the English flag at its peak... They lowered the boat and filled it with men, with the first Lenit [First Lieutenant] Mr. Stone. They came on board and [Stone] placing his hand on Benjamin’s shoulder, said ‘You are our prisoner.’... I was allowed two trunks and my cats. Benjamin packed a valise and took a chest of curiosities, and the Babe was preserved in a tin of spirits. Then we

took leave of the Good Ship and went on board the *Florida* as prisoners of war.” The Confederate crewmen plundered the vessel for valuables before *Southern Cross* was set on fire and abandoned.

Six days later, Benjamin, Lucy, and four *Southern Cross* officers were transferred to the French vessel *Fleur de Para*—the 14 additional crew stayed aboard *CSS Florida*—and brought to Ceara in northern Brazil. From there they caught a ship bound for New York and made it safely back to Dennis. According to the two-volume *American Clipper Ships* by Octavius Howe and Frederick Matthews, the “claim filed by the owners of *Southern Cross* [Ezra Howes Baker and Baker and Morrill] for the loss of their ship was \$55,000 for the vessel and \$10,000 for freight money.”



Once home, Benjamin understandably took a hiatus from his seafaring life until the Civil War was over. During that time, he financed the building in a Danvers shipyard of a 308-ton brig he called *Lubra*—seen above in a painting acquired by the Dennis Historical Society in 2011 and on display at the Maritime Museum at West Dennis Graded School House—built especially for trading along the China Coast and in the East Indies. In tonnage, *Lubra* was about one-third the size of *Southern Cross*.

Benjamin and Lucy again went to sea together in 1865-66, taking *Lubra* to San Francisco before heading across the Pacific. After visits to Hong Kong, Saigon, Yokohama, and back to Hong Kong, disaster struck. About a day out from Hong Kong, Chinese pirates armed with pistols and swords attacked and boarded *Lubra*, killing most of the crew—some shot as they sought refuge in the ship's rigging and others drowning when they jumped overboard—and locking Benjamin and Lucy in the captain's quarters while the pirates ransacked and looted the ship. A pirate then entered the locked quarters and shot and killed Benjamin. The raiders set fire to *Lubra*, though Lucy and four remaining crew members—including first mate Henry W. Hall (1844-1880) of Dennis—were able to save the ship and get her back to Hong Kong Harbor. Lucy put little of this in her diary, but three months after the attack she writes, "After robbing us and murdering such of the crew as they could get at, they shot Benjamin in cold blood.... The horrors of that night I will not recall, for six hours we were in momentary expectation of death by the sword."

Benjamin was buried in the Hong Kong Cemetery in Happy Valley. Lucy helped local magistrates identify the head pirate, who was caught, tried, and hanged. She returned to Dennis but shortly thereafter moved to Maine and married Sylvester Hooper. Her memoirs are available through the DHS website.

Editor's Notes: *Thanks to Henry Kelley II, Diane Rochelle, Ann Croston, Pat Corcoran, and Maureen Sullivan for their help in finding out more about the lives of Ezra Howes Baker, Thomas Prince Howes and Benjamin Perkins Howes....*