Cut From the Same Cloth
The Story of Two Clayt Morisseys

by Ann Andrew Morrissey and Michael Wayne Santos
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ann Morrissey Andrew is the great-granddaughter of Captain Clayt Morrissey and the daughter of police officer Clayton Morrissey. Michael Wayne Santos is a retired professor of history from the University of Lynchburg in Virginia and a friend of the Morrissey family.

AUTHORS’ FOREWORD

In the 1920s, writer James Connolly got it right when he noted that what made Gloucester unique was its strong ties to fishing and the sea. He mused that an “independence of spirit” is the inevitable outcome and “inheritance” of a fisherman’s calling, and when a man descends from several generations of fishermen—“that man has got something that isn’t leaving him in a hurry.”

That philosophy is an outgrowth of wrestling a living from the sea, but perhaps more fundamentally, of making a living generally in a small, close-knit community. Providing for one’s family, being equal citizens in a town where pretty much everyone knows everybody else, tends to build both character and enduring bonds. This is especially true when the work is hard and requires a special breed to do it.

In this, Gloucester is the quintessential American city, and, at the risk of sounding overly sentimental, its residents have long embodied the essence of the American spirit. While politics and major economic and social movements make headlines and become enshrined in history books, small towns and cities have preserved a way of life that has made a functioning democracy possible in the United States.

In such communities, workers and members of the middle class have traditionally interacted regularly. By doing so, they come to know each other. When laboring folks shop in small stores owned by local merchants and their children go to school together, personal relationships that cross a variety of lines are possible that are unheard of in larger metropolitan areas. Add to that the nature of work. In industries that are especially high risk, like fishing, shared dangers feed a sense of pride in skill that comes from knowing that it takes a special kind of person to do the job.
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As part of Maritime Gloucester’s Winter Lecture Series in 2021, Professor Mike Santos made a Zoom presentation to a group of approximately one hundred people about the 1920s and 1930s Fishermen’s Races. No telling of that story is complete without discussion of Captain Clayton Morrissey, who, for good reason, is also one of Professor Santos’ heroes.

In the audience that evening was Ann Andrew, who sat with her father as both listened to Santos on her computer. The talk ended, and the question-and-answer period began. The audience could see each other and their screen names, and after a lively discussion, one person asked, “I know that it isn’t possible, but the Clayt Morrissey who I see on my screen can’t possibly be THE Clayt Morrissey . . . can he?”

No, but he is THE Clayt Morrissey’s grandson. And they share a lot more than the same name. Like most citizens of Gloucester, they are cut from the same cloth.

So, consider the lives of two Clayt Morrisseys, one a fishing captain (1873–1936) and the other a Gloucester cop (born in 1936). Separated by generations and by the specific incidents of their lives, they, like their fellow Gloucesterites, were the embodiment of a way of life, an “independent spirit,” to again quote James Connolly, “that isn’t leaving . . . in a hurry.”

CAPTAIN CLAYTON MORRISSEY, THE EMBODIMENT OF THE MAN AT THE WHEEL

First, Captain Clayt as he was affectionately and respectfully known around the Gloucester waterfront. Like many Gloucester fishing captains, Captain Clayt came by his calling naturally. Born in Lower East Pubnico, Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, he was descended from a long line of fishermen. His father, Captain William Morrissey, was involved with the salt fishery in the summer and had traveled to Newfoundland in the winter for herring for years. As a youngster, Clayt worked as a deck boy on his father’s boats, learning to “think like a codfish” and to manage a crew of rough and tumble individuals. They were lessons that would serve him
well in life. He eventually became one of Gloucester’s high liners, and one of its most popular captains.

Clayt got his start at the age of nineteen. He took command of the Effie M. Morrissey, after his father got sick following the first bait up, the process of preparing the hundreds of hooks necessary to go fishing from the dories. He turned a trip that might have resulted in a broker into a successful two-month season on the Banks. Clayt never looked back. Every year, when most skippers made two trips a season, he consistently made three.

Clayt’s apprenticeship was typical. Many of the fishermen out of Gloucester represented upwards of a hundred years of family experience in the fisheries. There was a sort of inevitability to becoming a fisherman. As one man who went to sea explained, “If it’s good enough for my father, it’s good enough for me.”

Although their choice of fishing seemed inevitable, there was a special appeal to the lifestyle. There was pride in knowing that one could set one’s own goals without being told what to do. Not everyone could be a fisherman, and those who couldn’t cut it were weeded out early, and fast. In a system that promoted cooperation and mutual responsibility, there was likewise individual accountability. A poem in the Atlantic Fisherman, the so-called “home paper of the fishermen,” summed it up well:

* * *

The rules, whut there is, are fair, and square,
“Each man is expected to do his share.”
Ef he don’t wa’l sumbody parts his hair
For that is the fisherman’s way.

They don’t stop to figger out which is worst.
To swamp and go down or die of thirst,
But say “Damn the man that gives in first.”
For that is the fisherman’s way.

This attitude was a product of the rough apprenticeship system fishermen went through. Old-timers showed youngsters aboard a vessel how to do things once. After that they were on their own. As one man remembered, “You learned a lot by yourself.” Another observed that “you
didn’t grow up” so much as you were “rushed up.” The experience bred self-reliance and self-confidence among those who passed muster and also encouraged a sense of cooperation. Eager youngsters wanted to impress their shipmates as worthy of trust and thus become f’c’sle equals.

In the end, “It was up to your pride,” noted one fisherman. “It was up to yourself. If you didn’t do it, you knew you were going to get it. So, you wanted to be as good as the other guy.”

The old New England work ethic reinforced the fishermen’s culture or vice versa. It really doesn’t matter since it seemed to infect nearly all those who labored in small towns like Gloucester. Much had to do with the fact that in such communities, almost everyone knew each other and engaged in similar or complementary pursuits. In some sense, the Atlantic Fisherman poem might have been more accurately titled “The Gloucester Way.”

Reputation in such a setting mattered, and Captain Clayt Morrissey earned his in spades, which is why he captained some of Gloucester’s finest fishing schooners, including the Joseph Rowe, the Harry Nickerson, and his favorite, the Arethusa, named after one of his daughters. She was a fast boat, further adding to Captain Clayt’s reputation on the waterfront. In fact, she was so fast that Captain William “Bill” McCoy later bought her and used her as a rum runner during Prohibition.

Staying competitive and adapting to changing times also mattered. Not surprisingly, Captain Clayt kept up with the times, skippering the Cornona with its auxiliary engine, then the beam trawler Walrus, built by Cunningham & Thompson, in response to the shift away from an all-sail fishing fleet.

Still, like all captains who grew up in the days of the all-sail fleet, Captain Clayt had a soft spot for schooners, commanding Imperator on several halibuting trips after his stint aboard the Walrus. The Imperator would make a name for herself as the We’re Here in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s movie, Captains Courageous, which premiered in 1937.

The movie came out in the very last days of sail, and along with the International Fishermen’s
Races, helped to romanticize the fisherman’s way of life. The general public never understood that the REAL Captains Courageous, men like Clayt Morrissey, were far more interesting than any movie stereotype or newspaper article could portray.

Like other fishermen, Captain Clayt was about the business of fishing and got caught up in racing mania—he skippered the *Henry Ford* in the 1922 Championship against the Canadian champion *Bluenose*—only because the races embodied the essence of the schooners, and all they represented. After all, at that point, those boats had made the Gloucester way of life possible for three hundred years, something Captain Clayt, like pretty much everyone else in town, both appreciated and cherished. His final command was the schooner *Flora Oliver*, which took him halibuting until 1931.

Semi-retired after that, he never really left the sea. After a year ashore, he had his son-in-law, the boat builder Ralph Nelson, construct an offshore trawler for him, the *Nimbus*. He then skippered the pilot boat *Liberty*, chartered by Dr. Arthur Colstand of Providence, Rhode Island. A treasure hunter, Colstand hoped to find the lost British frigate, *Braak*, which had sunk in the eighteenth century, rumored to have millions of gold coins aboard. In July 1936, as he prepared for his second expedition in search of the *Braak*, Clayton Morrissey collapsed at Hyannisport, falling across the engine of the *Nimbus*. The victim of a heart attack at the age of sixty-two, he passed away doing what he loved.

There is no doubt that Captain Clayt Morrissey embodied the spirit of Gloucester and the fishermen who made her reputation by going “down to the sea in ships.” Indeed, so much so that local folklore has it that he was the model for the *Fishermen’s Memorial* (aka *Man at the Wheel*) statue that overlooks Gloucester Harbor.
CLAYTON MORRISSEY, COMMUNITY LEADER, POLICE OFFICER

Fast forward a generation to the birth of another Clayton Morrissey, born only about six months before Captain Clayt died. Like his grandfather, this Clayt Morrissey was a product of Gloucester and its close-knit community ties and unswerving work ethic. When asked what he remembers most about growing up, he says, “The good gang of friends. We used to travel a lot on foot, playing football in different neighborhoods. There wasn’t much in the way of a football, and there wasn’t any real equipment, but . . .”

Whether aboard a Gloucester fishing boat or in one of her neighborhoods, kids learned what they needed to grow up from their peers as much as from their families. As the younger Clayt Morrissey recalls, “I was the youngest of the gang. I learned a lot from them. Three or four of the guys played for Gloucester High School, and they gave me a little bit of a beating. They weren’t easy on you, but it was a good way to learn.”

And to aspire and challenge oneself to do better. “I was always going to the games at Gloucester High—the uniforms, the helmets. You always dreamed, ‘Boy, wouldn’t it be great to be out on that field someday playing football for Gloucester High.’”

Then almost as an afterthought, because bragging isn’t part of the Gloucester Way, Clayt adds, “I managed to do that for four years. Played quarterback on offense and linebacker on defense. And I also played first base. My dad taught me the position.”

Like all parents at that time, the Morrisesys wanted their oldest boy to achieve the American Dream. After graduating from Gloucester High School, young Clayt went to UMass, playing football. Still, schooling wasn’t for him. So much to his mom and dad’s chagrin, he dropped out and joined the Army in 1955.

Clayt during basic training, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 1955
The Gloucester Way—its lessons and expectations—went with him. Eight weeks into basic training, a sergeant showed up at Fort Dix, New Jersey, recruiting for the paratroops. Morrissey didn’t hesitate. He signed up on the spot and shipped off to Fort Campbell, Kentucky for parachute training.

Why? “Because most of my buddies had gone in during the Korean War, and three or four of them were paratroopers, the rest were Marines. I couldn’t go home and just say I was in the Army—they’d be all over me.” Besides, just like with those guys who went fishing, there was a certain exhilaration combined with awe involved. The Portuguese called it saudade. The Nova Scotians, sehnsucht. However one labeled it, the feeling tied a person to something larger than self. In Clayt’s case, “Every jump was an adventure. You always knew it was a toss-up if the chute would open, and when it did, there was a beautiful blue sky above you there—it was a good feeling.”

Back from the service, Morrissey married his high school sweetheart and settled down to start a family, for that too is the Gloucester Way. He worked construction, mostly in Boston, until a fall injured his back. Looking for something else to do, his friends told him to take the test to become a Gloucester police officer. He did, and he served on the Gloucester force until retirement.

Because of the nature of life in the city, where everyone grows up together and knows one another and their families, Clayt’s way of policing reflected his deep personal ties to the community and its citizens. “To protect and to serve” were second nature to him as a Gloucesterite.

Early on in his police career, for example, Clayt was assigned to parking detail. His job was to write as many tickets as possible for parking meter violations by the fishermen who frequented
the bars. According to Clayt, it was an important source of revenue for the city. However, he knew most of the guys in those bars and would instead pop his head in and tell the crowds he’d just put some money in their meters but to watch it since he didn’t want to have to write them up. The strategy made for good community relations but got Clayt transferred because, according to his boss, “Since you’ve been on duty down there, revenues are way down.”

Such lighter moments were interspersed with far more serious ones, and Clayt, like any first responder, fisherman, or worker in a high-risk profession, took these in stride. Once, he revived a drowned man by administering CPR. Another time he spotted a fire and helped to rescue a family. In typical understatement, he says of both incidents, “It was a good feeling.”

As his daughter, Ann, says, “The word that best describes my dad is loyal.” When he wasn’t at work, her father was at home. To again borrow from writer James Connolly, his nature was an “inheritance” that came naturally, handed down from generation to generation, and not to be taken lightly. Like his grandfather and father before him, Clayt Morrissey, the Gloucester Policeman, was, first and foremost, a devoted family man.
By way of example, his daughter Ann explains, “Surrounded by only girls at home, he spent plenty of time building dollhouses, watching Shirley Temple, drying tears, and giving the strongest hugs ever. His love for my mom, Ruth (Kennedy) Morrissey, was a love that few ever know. I treasure the crate filled with hundreds of love letters he sent while overseas. Loyal to extended family and friends and an avid fan, he traveled great distances to watch his nephews, then their children, compete. From a neighborhood girl playing high school field hockey to college-level football, Clayt was there, quietly rooting for them from the sidelines. What I’ve learned from my dad is that loyalty pays off. I can’t walk down Main Street without someone asking for him. At a time when we are lucky to count our most loyal friends on a single hand, how fortunate are those of us to have my dad be among them.”

But that is Gloucester’s Way, embodied in the daily lives of her citizens. Indeed, that goes a long way to understanding why Gloucester has not only survived, but thrived, for four hundred years.

Clayt enjoying a GHS football game, circa 2002. Left to right: Francis Clooney, Clayt, Gordon Anderson. In addition to being his town’s most faithful fan, Clayt enjoyed coaching the East Gloucester Vikings youth football team and his daughters’ softball teams.
MORE ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ann Morrissey Andrew is the great-granddaughter of Captain Clayt and the daughter of police officer Clayton Morrissey. She is also a Special Education Teacher at Landmark School in Manchester-by-the-Sea and a wife and mother. Ann lives in Gloucester with her husband, John, their three sons, Johnny, Will, and Ben, and their dog, Hope. A passionate advocate for students with dyslexia and their parents, she chaired the Rockport Parents Advisory Committee, was one of the founding members of Decoding Dyslexia-MA, is a member of the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Disability Rights Committee, and is currently working with the International Dyslexia Association to form a student mentor program for young students with dyslexia. As one colleague has described her, she is “mighty in determination . . . [and] packs more emotion and purpose with her words than most people.”

Michael Wayne Santos is a retired professor of history from the University of Lynchburg in Virginia. Among his books is Caught in Irons: North Atlantic Fishermen in the Last Days of Sail, reissued as Clouds of White Sail: Fishermen, Racing, and the End of an Era. He is currently at work on Bucking the Inevitable: North Atlantic Fishermen Since the Age of Sail, which will pick up the story of the fisheries in the 1930s and bring it current. Growing up in the New Bedford area, he cut his teeth on his granddad’s sea stories. Not surprisingly, much of his personal and professional interests were inspired by the passion his grandfather first instilled in him as a boy. One of the highlights of his career has been getting to know the family of THE Clayt Morrissey, and most especially the less famous Clayt Morrissey, who served his city and family in ways that have been just as important as his grandfather’s.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Captain Clayt Morrissey after a 1922 win aboard the Henry Ford. This photo belongs to the public domain.
Locals often refer to the Fishermen’s Memorial statue by different names including the Man at the Wheel, or simply the Fisherman’s Statue. No matter what we call it, the iconic statue has come to symbolize Gloucester. The concept for the sculpture is said to have come from Augustus Waldeck Buhler’s 1901 Man at the Wheel painting. But where did the details for the face, body type, and positioning come from? Was the man’s face based on an actual person? Some say it was Captain Clayt Morrissey, pictured here at the wheel of the Henry Ford in 1923, likely during the city’s 300th Anniversary schooner races.

Other sources say the statue was not based on one man in particular; rather, sculptor Leonard Craske studied and photographed the details of faces, bodies, stances, and movements of several fishermen in the early 1920s. It is possible Captain Clayt Morrissey was one of the men. Craske did indeed go aboard at least one schooner to get all details just right.

Whether or not local legend is true, one thing cannot be disputed. Gloucester had been shaping its citizens, making them all, in one way or another, “cut from the same cloth” since its founding.

The Gloucester400+ Stories Project will share more about the Fishermen’s Memorial statue in coming stories.
ENDNOTES


3 Captain John Francis, interview by Nancy d'Estang, tape recording, Mystic, CT, 19 October 1987, Mystic Seaport Museum Oral History Collection, G.W. Blunt White Research Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT (hereafter MSMOHC).

4 *Atlantic Fisherman*, August 1922.

5 Robert Merchant, interview by Virginia Jones, tape recording, Stonington, CT, 1 April 1978, MSMOHC.


7 F'c'sle is the forward part of the ship where the crew’s quarters are. Dates back to medieval times when warships had forecastles, or forward castles, as part of their design.
