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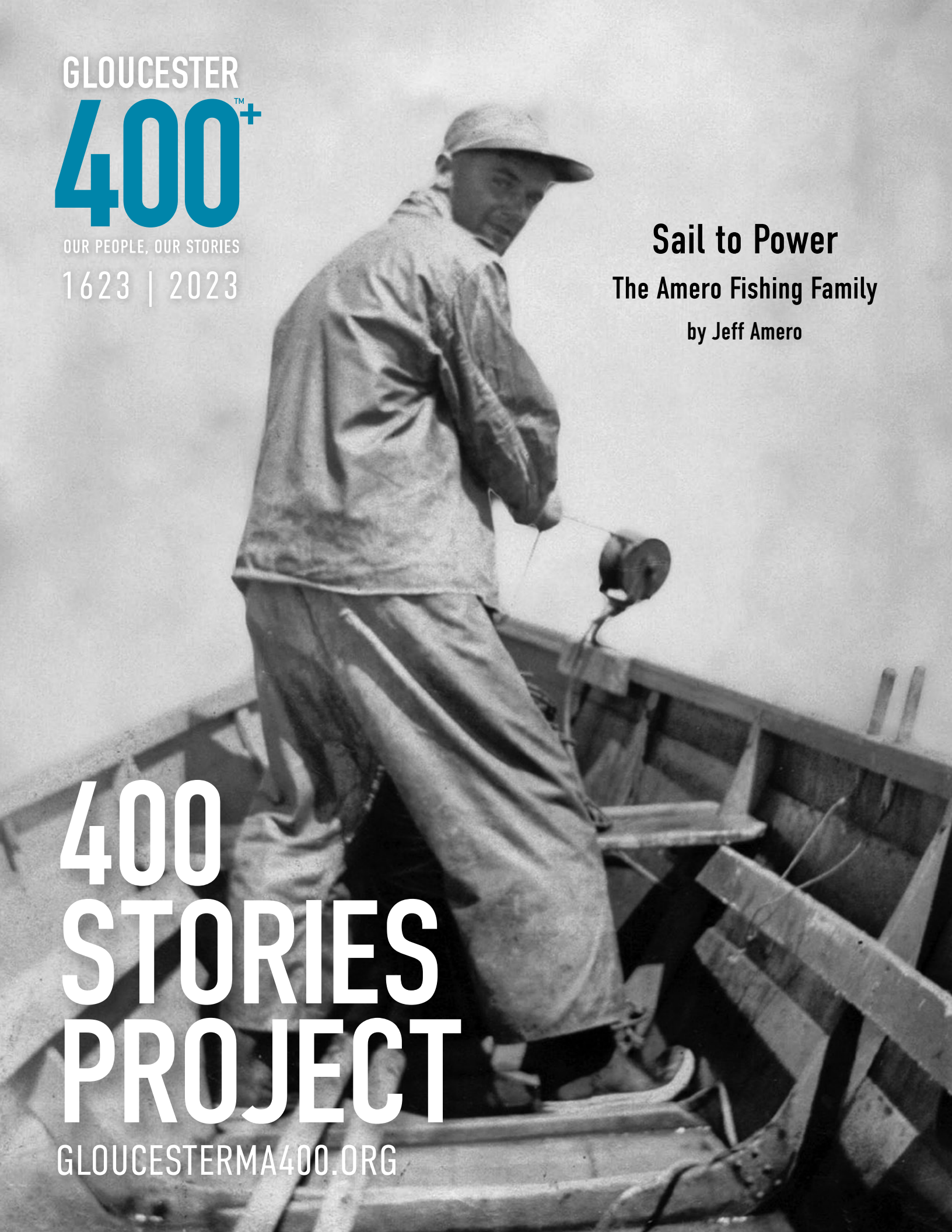
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1623 | 2023

Sail to Power
The Amero Fishing Family
by Jeff Amero

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ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

John Ellsworth “Ellie” Amero, dory fishing, circa late 1920s–early 1930s. His dorymate took this photograph before they brought in their catch.

FOREWORD

My grandfather Nelson “Nels” Amero was a highliner fisherman during one of the most productive and important periods of the modern fishing era. It was an unprecedented transitional period for the industry, which was moving from sail to power. This story chronicles the Amero family during the 1920s–1940s and the changes to the fishing industry during that time.

Nels and his wife, my grandmother, Maude (Powers) Amero were originally from Nova Scotia where their Acadian descendants had lived since 1640. They emigrated from Nova Scotia to Gloucester with their two young children in the early 1900s. The family would grow to nine children, many of whom worked in the fishing business. This is my tribute to them, the Amero fishing family.

Sail to Power

The Amero Fishing Family

BY JEFF AMERO

Nelson Amero came from a fishing family in East Pubnico, Nova Scotia, a fishing village outside Yarmouth. Ancestral records show that he had been to the United States several times in the early 1900s to scout ports to work and live in before moving his family to Gloucester. His wife, Maude, came from Jordan Falls, near Shelburne, Nova Scotia, a small town near East Pubnico.

Over the years, Nelson proved to be a skilled fisherman in Gloucester. He was primarily known on the waterfront as “Capt. Nels.” He became a captain of several vessels in the Nova Scotian fleet, including the *Florence E. Merchant*, a sailing and motor-propelled ship. In 1928, Capt. Nels commissioned the Arthur D. Story shipyard in Essex to build his fishing vessel, the *Doris F. Amero*. The ship was 78.4 feet long and 20 feet wide, had a draft of 9.7 feet deep, and weighed 75 gross tons.¹ This was considered a mid-sized ship in the Gloucester fleet. The ship was built and rigged as a traditional schooner and launched on May 2, 1928. It was named after Capt. Nels’s daughter and my aunt, Doris Fay Amero.

At the time of the launching and putting the *Doris F. Amero* to work, Capt. Nels Amero was 43, and his wife Maude was 39. They had nine children; eight were boys, five of whom were



The launch of the *Doris F. Amero* from A.D. Story Shipyard in Essex, May 2, 1928.

old enough to go fishing on the new vessel. At the time, their older sons were LeRoy "Roy," 20; Bernard "Barney," 19; Stanford "Stan," 17; John Ellsworth "Ellie," 16 (John/Ellie was my father); and Earle, 15. They had one daughter, Doris, who was 13. The twins Richard "Richie" and Robert "Rob" were 7, and Eugene "Gene" was eight months old.

The *Doris F. Amero* began her fishing career under sail, although powering it with an engine was always part of the plan. Schooners had been the predominant type of fishing vessel out of Gloucester since the early 18th century. They were designed for a speedy trip to and from the fishing grounds, and their holds were large enough for fish and supplies. The ship's lines were similar to the *American Eagle* (built as the *Andrew & Rosalie* in Gloucester in 1930), still sailing out of Rockland, Maine.



Six of the Amero brothers, circa 1926.



Capt. Nels Amero at the wheel of the *Doris F. Amero*, circa 1930.

The *Doris F. Amero* was primarily berthed at the Sherman B. Ruth Wharf on Duncan Point along Vincent Cove. This area was a thriving hub for Gloucester's Nova Scotian fishing fleet. Everything needed for a fishing boat was on this wharf: machine shops, fuel, provisions, and fishing gear. The wharves in that area changed dramatically during the urban renewal of the late 1960s; many were altered or eliminated. Buildings were razed, and streets were reconfigured to create

Harbor Loop. Vincent Cove was filled so that Rogers Street could extend eastward. Sherman B. Ruth Wharf was demolished, along with other wharves. It would have been where the current Americold's cold storage facilities at 69 Rogers Street now stand, specifically behind the parking lot where trailer trucks unload.

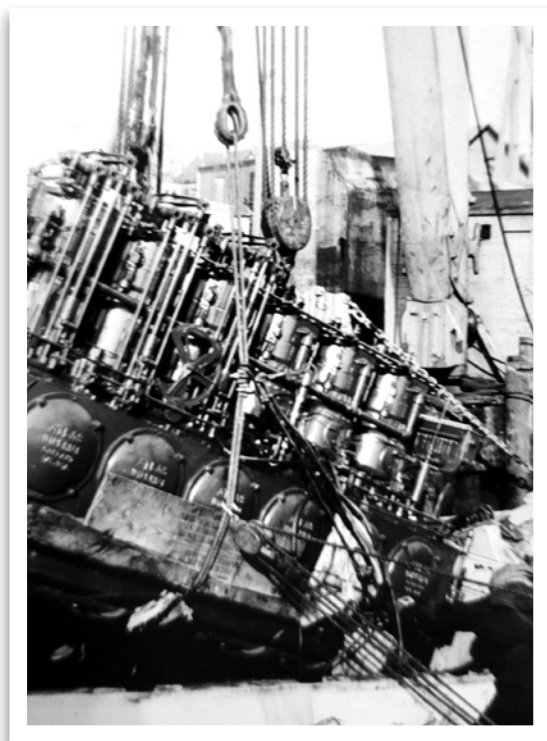


The *Doris F. Amero* rigged as a schooner.

The late 1920s to early thirties was a transitional period of great significance for the Gloucester fishing fleet. The conversion from sail to diesel power propulsion transformed the fishing industry like no other time. There weren't as many large fishing ships being built since a boat powered by a motor didn't require multiple dories and a large crew.

Although some larger vessels had steam engines since the turn of the century, steam-powered trawlers required many men to deliver the steam power, and space was necessary for coal storage. Large crews were needed to operate these large ships. With the arrival of diesel engines, steam power became obsolete.

The diesel engine was the power source of choice for ships the size of the *Doris F. Amero*. The ship was built with the lines and rigging of a traditional schooner, but dragging by diesel propulsion was also included in the design.

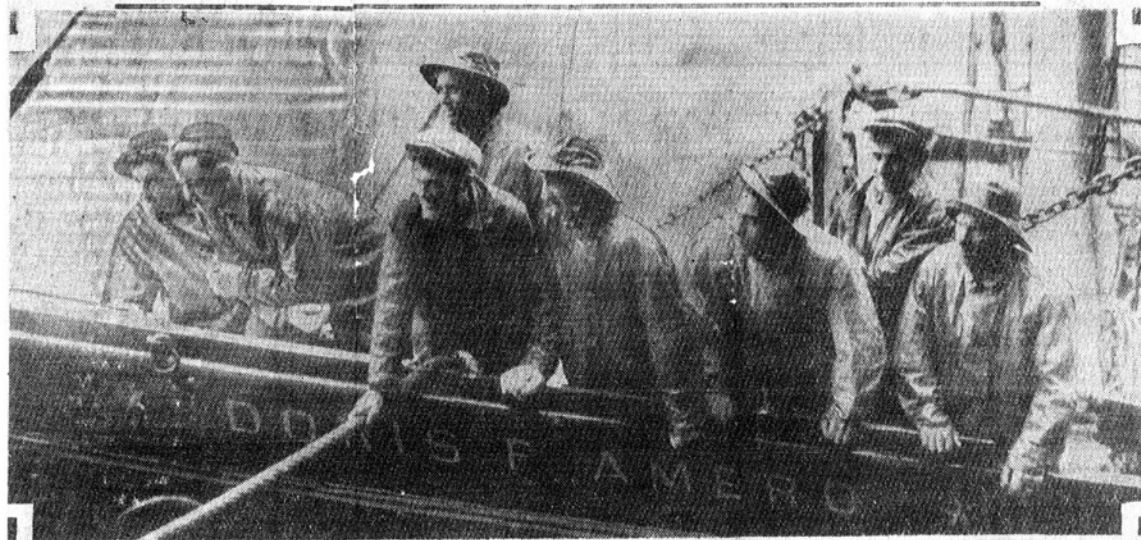


Barney Amero putting a diesel engine in the *Doris F. Amero*, circa 1930.

This change in technology also brought on the necessity of machine shops to install and support the motors. In the early 1930s, Capt. Nels's son Barney and his partner, John J. Burke, who owned many boats in the Nova Scotian fleet in Gloucester, opened a machine shop on the Sherman B. Ruth Wharf.² Early in the *Doris F. Amero's* career, the shop installed a diesel engine in the ship. The engine was a 140-horsepower Atlas-Imperial Diesel engine, one of the most common engines used in the Gloucester fleet.³

The *Doris F. Amero* became more profitable after a transition to diesel power. Stories of her success, photographs, documents, and clippings about her years of fishing are in a well-preserved family scrapbook, the

FISHERMEN RESCUED AS BURNING BOAT BLOWS UP



Captain and crew of the Gloucester fishing schooner *Doris Amero* who rescued Capt. Peter Hanson and his four men from sinking dory in which they had put off from their burning ship, the dragger *Colleen*, owned by O'Hara Bros., Boston, off Nantucket Shoals. The *Colleen* blew up as the fire, caused by a short circuit, reached her gasoline tanks and just as Capt.

Hanson and his crew were being transferred to the rescue boat. The rescuers, left to right in front, are John Amero, William Maher, Capt. Nelson Amero, John Hickey, Michael Crowe and Andrew Larsen. In rear are Thomas Murray and James Powers. The *Doris Amero* arrived at the Fish Pier early today. (Staff photo.)

FIVE FISHERMEN SAVED IN SHIP EXPLOSION

Five Boston fishermen, rescued from a sinking dory perilously close to their burning ship, landed at the Fish Pier today aboard the craft of their rescuers.

No inkling of the near tragedy of the sea was known until the rescued men stepped off the dragger, *Doris Amero*, and told fellow fishermen of the heroic work of Capt. Nelson Amero and his crew.

The rescued are Capt. Peter Hanson of Melrose and four who made up the crew of the "*Colleen*," owned by O'Hara Bros.

They were off Nantucket Shoals when a short circuit started the boat ablaze.

Capt. Hanson ordered his men to abandon ship and the five piled into one dory. They had no time to gather up their effects.

Heavy seas sloshed over the side of the dory as those at the oars struggled to leave the vicinity before the imminent explosion of gasoline tanks.

Two miles away, Andrew Larson, lookout on the *Doris Amero*, sighted the burning vessel.

Capt. Amero halted his fishing to make the rescue and came upon the men in the sinking dory less than 10 minutes before the burning *Colleen* was ripped by one blast and then another.

The *Colleen* was on an experimental fishing trip for the purpose of trying a new kind of net. The vessel was valued at \$60,000.

Gloucester Daily Times article of a rescue of another ship by the *Doris F. Amero* crew. Capt. Nels and John Amero onboard, 1932.

primary source for many of the pictures in this story. Some articles told tales of rough trips and drama while on fishing trips.

Two articles from the autumn of 1932 describe especially rough fishing trips. On one trip in October, the crew of the *Doris F. Amero* rescued five men in a sinking dory off the Nantucket Shoals after the dragger *Colleen* blew up following an electrical fire that started on the boat and reached the gas tanks. The five fishermen from Boston were brought aboard the *Doris F. Amero* by Capt. Nels, my father John, and four other crewmen.⁴

On November 29 of that same year, an article in the *Gloucester Daily Times* reported that the boat had been caught in a gale on Georges Bank while my grandfather Capt. Nels and my father, John Ellsworth, were aboard.⁵ My grandfather is sometimes referred to as the “skipper” in the following article:

LOCAL DRAGGER HOVE DOWN ON THE BANKS
*Crew of Sch. Doris F. Amero Had Thrilling Experience –
Captain Thought Their Doom at Hand*

Her pilot house wrecked and her cast iron sheathing on the starboard side broken, the local dragger Doris F. Amero, Capt. Nels Amero, arrived from Boston yesterday with 7,000 pounds of sole, with a harrowing tale of being hove down on Georges.

Saturday morning at 1 o'clock, the Amero was fishing on North Shoal, a 20-mile stretch of shallow ground, when it began to blow hard from the northeast. (John) Ellsworth Amero, a son of the skipper, together with Michael Crowe, were standing watch in the pilot house aft. The skipper ordered shortened sail and went below to his bunk after giving orders to run her off the shoals into deep water.

About an hour later, the skipper decided to go on deck and get his bearings, but before he could do so, there was a sudden rush of a mountainous wave, and the Doris F. Amero heeled over on her beam. Gallows went into the water, and the fare of the fish and other articles on one side, slid down to the other.

Down she kept going, Capt. Amero says, and he felt that everything was over, he couldn't get on deck on account of the craft's list, while the gang forward in the forecas-tle all shouting that the vessel had collided with some other craft, came crawling from their bunks.

Broken glass from the windows of the pilot house came sweeping into the cabin on a stream of salt water, and those in the bunks of the cabin were frightened.

Still, the Amero kept going down to leeward, and just as suddenly as she heeled over, she came back on even keel.

The skipper and crew took stock of the damage and found that the pilot house containing the skipper's son and Crowe had been almost completely wrecked and that the heavy cast-iron sheathing on the port side, placed there to protect her planks from the dragging doors, had been broken and ripped from its fastening.

"It was one of the roughest times I have ever experienced," the skipper said to a Times reporter this morning. "And when she began to go down and kept going, I felt that we were all gone and if she hadn't been a fine seaboat, I guess we would have."

At some point, my father, John, gave up fishing, instead choosing jobs on the waterfront. Perhaps trips like these contributed to his change of occupation.

Changing from sail to power changed how fish harvesting was carried out and the range where the boats the size of the *Doris F. Amero* could fish. Powered by diesel, it could go on trips to the south in the winter months for better weather and the ability to fish closer to shore. A new 200-horsepower Atlas engine was installed in 1935,⁶ providing more power for the trips south and for more power for dragging. Typical port destinations for the *Doris F. Amero* and others in the Gloucester fleet were Cape May, New Jersey, and Norfolk, Virginia.

The species of fish caught also changed with the ability for more range and power for drag fishing thanks to the more powerful engine. Following the fish landings in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, reports from the early years of the *Doris F. Amero* saw a pattern of fishing for ground-fish during the winter, mackerel seining in the spring and fall, swordfishing in the summer months, and then going back to dragging when the cold



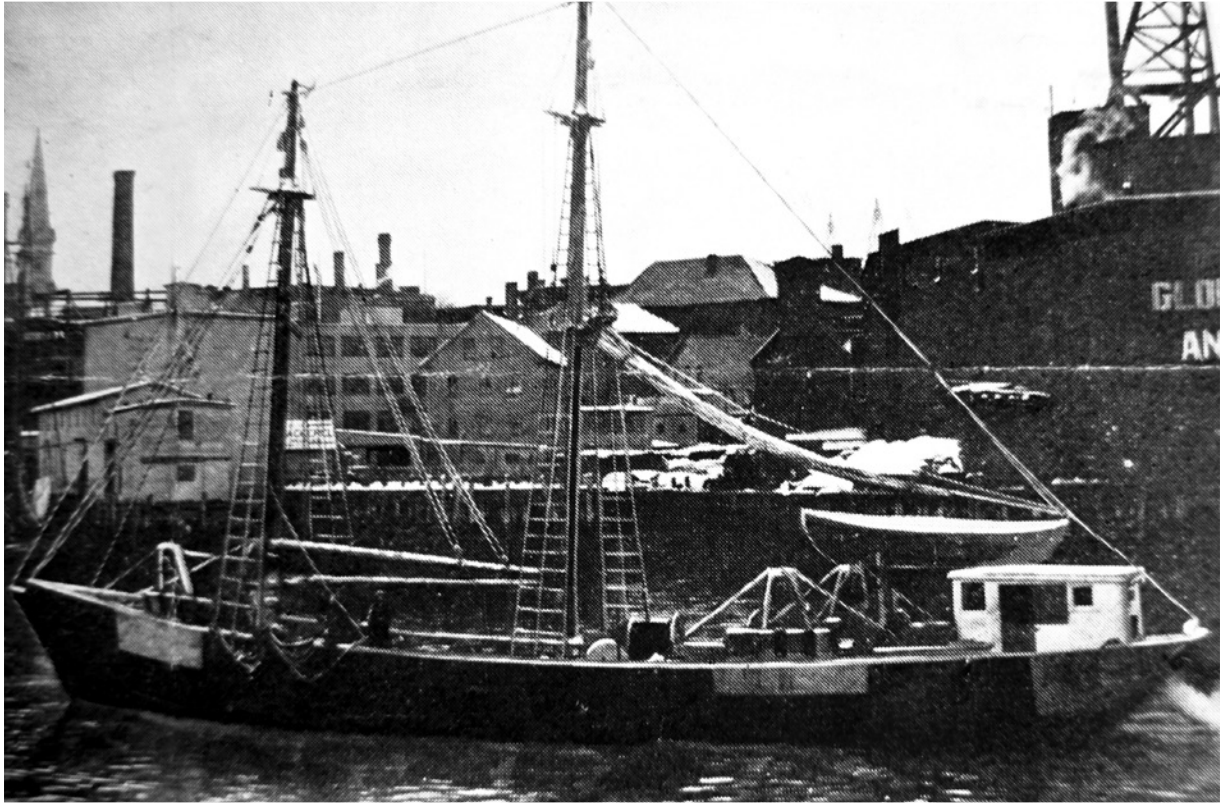
Capt. Nels and Maude's only daughter, Doris Fay Amero, for whom the boat was named after.

weather came in. Winter fishing in New Jersey and Virginia after the holidays were generally for groundfish. In the mid-1930s, the *Doris F. Amero* targeted ocean perch, aka "redfish," with great success. By 1936, with swordfish prices dropping due to foreign competition, the focus was on redfish, where the catches were substantial, and the days at sea shortened. Landings of 100,000 pounds were not uncommon, and the *Doris F. Amero* consistently had significant landings, especially for a smaller boat in the Gloucester fleet.⁷

In 1942, the *Doris F. Amero* had the third-highest catch of the Gloucester fleet with 2,297,000 pounds, only 400,000 pounds less than the much larger Corinthian (112 feet) owned by Gorton-Pew Fisheries.⁸ During the height of the redfish landings and for over 25 years, the *Doris F. Amero* and other top producers sold most of their catch to Cape Ann Fisheries, located in the Fort neighborhood.⁹

On May 6, 1945, a ceremony was held at Cape Ann Fisheries with 2,000 people in attendance to witness the company receiving the coveted "A" award. The award was given by the U.S. Navy for outstanding achievement in production in the fresh and frozen fish business during the war effort. Dignitaries from all levels of government and fishing industry leaders were on hand. The *Doris F. Amero* had been unloading catches (mostly redfish) at the wharf for 20 years and was a top supplier. During the glorious ceremony, Capt. Nels was beside manager John Del Torchio, and the *Doris F. Amero* was docked at the wharf.¹⁰

The Amero family went on to fish on the *Doris F. Amero* into the 1940s under Capt. Nels, but his sons (my father and uncles) went in varied directions. Roy, the oldest son, was a lifelong fisherman. Over the years, he went on to skipper the *Doris F. Amero* and several other fishing boats. Capt. Nels's second oldest son, Barney, also skippered the family boat but spent much of his time on shore founding A & N (Amero & Nally) Machine shop on Sherman B. Ruth Wharf and owning several Gloucester fishing vessels. Barney purchased the *Doris F. Amero* from his father in 1947.¹¹ Stan Amero worked on the *Doris F. Amero*, captained her, and worked on several others. He died at 36 in 1947 when he accidentally fell through an opening on the wharf, close to where the *Doris F. Amero* berthed.¹² My father, John, primarily worked on Sherman B. Ruth Wharf. He also served in WWII. Earle was injured on the boat, which ended his fishing career, and he eventually became a master machinist.¹³ The three younger sons, Richie, Bob, and Gene, did not fish on the *Doris F. Amero*. Both Richie and Bob served in WWII.



The *Doris F. Amero* in Harbor Cove, Gloucester during the 1940s.

By the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Capt. Nels was retired from fishing. He passed away in 1963 at age 78. A tribute in the *Gloucester Daily Times* called Captain Nelson “One of the finest fishermen that ever sailed from Gloucester” and said he was “highly esteemed in every port, here and in the Maritimes.” His wife Maude had predeceased him in 1958.

Capt. Nels’s oldest son Roy worked on several boats both as captain (including the *Doris F. Amero*) and crew. He was on at least four documented boats that sank. In December 1935, he was on the mackerel netter *John K*, which sank due to overloading.¹⁴ The crew rowed for over 15 hours before being rescued by a passing dragger. As a captain, Roy was saved from a sinking ship, the *Marie and Winfred*, during a blinding snowstorm off Provincetown in 1952.¹⁵ He was also the captain of the dragger *Superior*, which sank.¹⁶ As a crew member on another fishing trip in November 1977, the dragger *Sea Breeze* sank off the coast of Maine. Roy and one other fisherman drowned.¹⁷ He was 69. Roy Amero’s name is on the *Fishermen’s Memorial* in Gloucester.



Barney, Roy, and John "Ellie" Amero, circa 1942.

Barney went on to own many fishing vessels, including the *Curlew*, *Emily Brown*, *Pilgrim*, *Puritan*, and *Sylvester F. Whalen*.¹⁸ His son, Bernie Jr., and grandson, Bernie III, were machinists, and they preserved most of the photos in this story. Earle's son Jon was also a machinist, and his grandson Jeff (my second cousin) currently owns and runs a machine shop in Gloucester, J & L Welding

and Machine, and also manufactures marine products used throughout Gloucester. Jeff owns several waterfront properties where my grandfather did business, including the site of Cape Ann Fisheries. My half-brothers John and Lem were not in the fishing industry nor was my sister Joan. When I was younger, I worked on several wharves and went lobstering full-time for a few summers. My son Brian has also been commercial lobstering and offshore fishing.

The *Doris F. Amero* was sold in the 1950s to John B. Novello of Gloucester¹⁹ and sunk off Chatham on May 18, 1960.²⁰ It was in water shallow enough to dive, and the ship's wheel was recovered. It was brought home to Gloucester several years ago.

Looking back at the Amero family has brought me closer to this not-so-distant past. My father, John "Ellie" Ellsworth Amero, was born in 1911 and raised in Gloucester. Growing up on Columbia Street, he worked for my grandfather on the *Doris F. Amero* for many years and on the Sherman B. Ruth Wharf, which I have been told he loved doing. He married his first wife Gladys Firth in 1935, and they had three sons, Nelson, Lemuel, and John Jr. After serving in WWII, he divorced his first wife in the early 50s and married Hilda Thome (my mother) in 1952. I have one sister from this marriage. The family moved to Seattle where he worked for Boeing, and Western Gear Corp. where he helped build the turntable for the rotating restaurant which sits upon the Space Needle. Days before I was born in 1962, he died from heart failure at

age 50. Heartbroken, and with two young children, my mother, Hilda, moved back to Gloucester and raised us on her own. My aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sister, and family friends all spoke glowingly of my father and have always told me how easygoing and pleasant he was. I have never heard a bad word spoken of my dad and wished I had the opportunity to spend some time with him. My mother never remarried and always wished she had more time with my dad. Researching this story takes me back to dad's time and I can envision the old wharves, ships, and Gloucester.

The women in the Amero family were the backbone of the men who went to sea fishing. Many of these trips were long, sometimes for a month while they went out swordfishing. Some winters the boat was seeking warmer waters in the mid-Atlantic as far as Norfolk, Virginia. As I went through the *Gloucester Daily Times* archives, I saw meetings in social groups, fundraising efforts during the war, and social events posted. Of course, the wives were raising children, keeping the house in order, and showing amazing strength during challenging times. Even when the men were fishing local trips, the turnover from one trip to another was swift, and the amount of time spent at home was often minimal.

Researching and writing this story has given me a window into the past, and at times, I feel like my dad is telling his stories through others. It has allowed me to meet the family I never knew.



Hilda and John Amero
(the author's parents), 1952.



Capt. Nels and his wife, Maude,
with youngest son, Gene, circa 1933.

AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you to Larry Maver for photo restoration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Amero is a cartographer, owner of Cape Ann Mapping, and GIS manager for the City of Cambridge. Jeff lives in Rockport, MA, and grew up in East Gloucester. He is currently working on a project mapping the historical wharves of Gloucester Harbor, some of the same ones where he spent his childhood. Jeff lives with his wife Jackie and two children who reside on Cape Ann: Julia and Brian. Julia and her partner, Jim Rash, recently welcomed a baby girl, Adele Mae, in September, 2023.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Doris F. Amero* launch date and dimensions provided by Essex Shipbuilding Museum.
- 2 As recalled by Barney's daughter-in-law, Lucille Amero.
- 3 *An Island No More* by Ronald Gilson, published 2006, pp.120–123.
- 4 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 10/27/1932, p.1.
- 5 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 11/29/1932, p.1.
- 6 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 12/2/1935, Squib's Reporting, p.1.
- 7 Much of the information on fish landings, innovations, and waterfront happenings came from daily reporting by the *Gloucester Daily Times'* Squibs From the Waterfront report and the *Times'* Fish Bureau from 1933–1947, normally found on page 1.
- 8 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 12/30/1942, Fish Landings, p.5.
- 9 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 05/07/1945, p.5.
- 10 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 05/07/1945, *Cape Ann Fisheries is Presented with Achievement A*, pp.1 & 5.
- 11 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 10/1/1947, p.1.
- 12 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 05/26/1947, p.1.
- 13 Info on Earle Amero from Kellie Amero Stobie.
- 14 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 12/03/1935, pp.1 & 6.
- 15 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 01/30/1952, pp.1 & 8, and Provincetown History Preservation Project
- 16 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 11/12/1953, pp.1 & 8.
- 17 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 11/14/1977, p.1.
- 18 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 02/26/1977, article by Peter Prybot.
- 19 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 04/13/1963, p.3.
- 20 *Gloucester Daily Times*, 05/19/1960, pp.1 & 12 and 05/20/1960, pp.1 & 12.