

GLOUCESTER  
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# 400 STORIES PROJECT

**Farming, Family, and Fish Cakes**  
The Diaries of Herman Fletcher Wonson  
by Susan Tracy

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## FOREWORD

If you're from Gloucester, MA, you are likely familiar with the name "Wonson"—Wonson Street, Wonson's Cove, and the Tarr & Wonson Paint Factory. In the following essay, you'll learn about Herman Fletcher Wonson (a 6th generation Wonson), who kept a daily diary from age 13 in 1873 until he passed away in 1935. His writings consisted of at least 22,630 pages in 62 diaries!

It is now 2023. We look forward to a full year of storytelling and events recognizing our 400+ years of history. A hundred years ago, in 1923, Herman enjoyed the weeklong Tercentenary (300th) celebrations at Gloucester's waterfront with its bands, pageant, airships landing on the carrier Langley, and the Fisherman's Race with the Henry Ford winner. Herman mentioned in his writings that he also enjoyed the "biggest display of fireworks" he ever saw.

The Gloucester400+ Stories Project is honored to be the first to share excerpts from Herman's diaries with the public as we enter our Quadricentennial year. We think Herman would be touched to know his descendants chose to honor and remember him, and Gloucester's history, in this way.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Tracy is the great-granddaughter of Herman Fletcher Wonson. She is carefully and lovingly transcribing Herman's diaries and hopes to share the complete collection with the public soon. Thank you, Susan, for sharing these excerpts and commentary with the Gloucester400+ Stories Project.

## ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

On the left is Herman Fletcher Wonson with his father, George Marble Wonson. Circa 1919

# Farming, Family, and Fish Cakes

## The Diaries of Herman Fletcher Wonson

BY SUSAN TRACY

Herman Fletcher Wonson began writing his first diary in 1873 during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant and continued into Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first term of office. Herman's father, George Marble Wonson, owned a thriving ballast<sup>1</sup> business, and by age 16, Herman was hauling tons of granite stones for his father with their horse-drawn carts along Gloucester's shores. In 1880 alone, the Wonsons transported 1,788 tons of ballast from Rockport and East Gloucester to the fishing schooners waiting at the city's vibrant, bustling wharves.

The weather was always paramount to anyone working outdoors or in farming, and in the 1800s, most instances of inclement weather did not stop a work in progress.

*"Jan. 22, 1885. Very cold day, mercury below zero, strong wind, Johnson had his face frozen, Elmer and Thom their noses."*

In 1891, Herman started carpentry work, often focusing on oceanside homes and resort hotels along Gloucester's Back Shore and Bass Rocks. While no one could deny the beautiful views, carpenters worked year-round and endured the "blustering" wind, rain, and snow as they worked. Imagine the Wonson family "breaking out the roads" plowing the East Gloucester streets with horse-drawn teams, pulling wooden wagons through the deep snow, and often with temperatures below zero. A simple shovel was often the only tool used in snow removal. Harder to imagine the winter storms without electric lights, which did not come to East Gloucester until the 1890s, and electricity did not arrive in barns and many of the Wonson families' homes until at least 1908.

*"Feb. 5, 1882. Snowed all last night and this A.M... All hands shoveling snow all day, had 28 men on snow, counting ourselves."*

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<sup>1</sup> Ballast was a material placed in the lower part of a ship beneath the waterline to provide stability. In the 1800s, the material was usually stone. Ballasts lowered the ship's center of gravity and counteracted the wind against the sails. Ballast was crucial to the safety of both the outgoing fishing fleet, and the foreign vessels supplying copious quantities of salt for Gloucester's flourishing salt cod trade.

## THE WONSON BARN

Mentioned throughout the leather-bound diaries, the Wonson's expansive 43-acre Mt. Pleasant Farm between Mt. Pleasant Ave and the Back Shore was the anchor and mainstay for Herman and his close extended family.

*"Aug. 1, 1885. The first street crossing was laid at the Square."*

Herman was referring to East Gloucester Square. East Gloucester was the flourishing economic center and home for most of the eleven siblings (and their families) of his grandfather John Fletcher Wonson, and of the eight siblings (and their families) of his father George Marble Wonson.

Herman had ten siblings himself, most of whom continued to live in or near East Gloucester. Herman describes building the homes and barns for brothers Percy, Ralph, and Guy, who were owners of adjacent properties to the farm, not to mention building his own home after his marriage to Lizzie Walen in 1884.

The most compelling of Herman's building challenges involved the construction of the Wonson barn, whose partial foundation can still be seen behind Herman's former house on Marble Road. Digging the cellar took several men four months, beginning in March 1882.



The Wonson family barn, 1883. Herman is said to be one of the men standing near the barn. Note the two horses in lower left of photo that almost blend into the rocks. Behind them are ballast carts.

*July 21, 1882: "teams hauled 23 tons of cellar stone from Davises old shipyard..."*

This marked the start of the daily tonnage dragged by horse uphill to the East Gloucester farm. It was hauled, one assumes rather uncomfortably, as weather indulged itself, from as far away as Annisquam, Lanesville, and Rockport.

By Jan. 1, 1884, when the Wonsons "*moved into the new barn,*" we learn that it took four carloads on the train bringing the barn frame to the Gloucester Depot "*from Down East (a cost of \$1,085.00)*", which would be around \$32,000 today. More importantly for Gloucester history, the names of the craftsmen are noted in the diary: Stonemason Wm. Sleeper, Building Carpenter Wm. Winchester, Roof Slaterer Fowler, and Painter Day, along with the names of local building suppliers.

It is probably fortunate that Herman did not live to see that formidable and fundamental structure burn down in the late 1960s; Gloucester's history is richer for his thorough description of its building and the Gloucester personnel involved.

## MARRIAGE TO LIZZIE

Our imaginations are required while reading what Herman wrote on Dec. 2, 1884, "*We were married this evening by Dr. Morris. A pleasant evening. City election John Parsons for mayor and my Father as Alderman of Ward 1.*" As this entry proves, the politics of the city elections and their relationship to the Temperance Movement<sup>2</sup> were close enough to Herman's Republican heart that we should not be surprised that he writes about it on his wedding night. Herman voted "no liquor license" in every election and actively participated in his church and Temperance organizations.

Though Herman rarely showed strong emotions in his writing, he does consistently mention Lizzie's activities throughout the journal:

- Sunday school teaching and admirable attendance.

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<sup>2</sup> The Temperance Movement began in the early 1800s and was based on the belief that drinking alcohol was immoral. Temperance groups supported legislation against drinking.

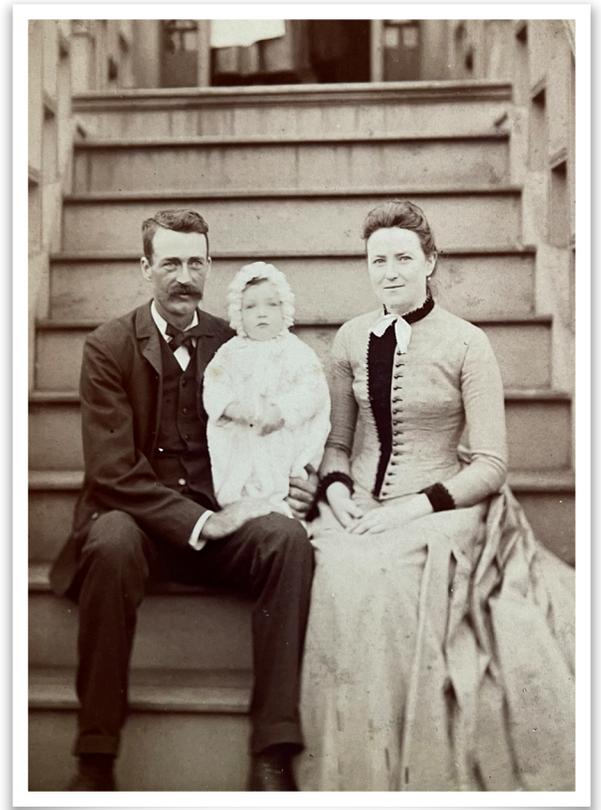
- Housekeeping tasks.
- Afternoon social calling, including the names of the hostesses.
- Her Soap and Sewing clubs.
- The autumn routine of canning the blueberries, gooseberries, barberries, mustard pickles, tomatoes, dandelion greens, jams, and mincemeat.

Most significantly, he writes of Lizzie’s loving, attentive parenting; and appreciates her extremely close relationship with her sister Hattie (Walen) Smith.

Herman was 24 at marriage, and the “pleasant” euphoria of those early years was slowly replaced by the traditional worries that middle age heaps upon us. The family circle continued to increase as siblings were married and had children, as did he and Lizzie—their son Carlton arrived in 1888 and daughter Esther in 1891.

Herman again only supplied facts when he wrote, *“Brother Guy’s son Teddy died early this morning and was buried this P.M. with Black Diphtheria, 6 yrs., 8 mo.”* The death of Herman and Lizzie’s very close friend Lizzie Stevens of Rockport, who *“died in Boston of pneumonia age 28 yrs. on Dec. 31, 1887,”* elicited the one adjective of emotion in the diaries, when he added after attending the funeral *“(sad).”*

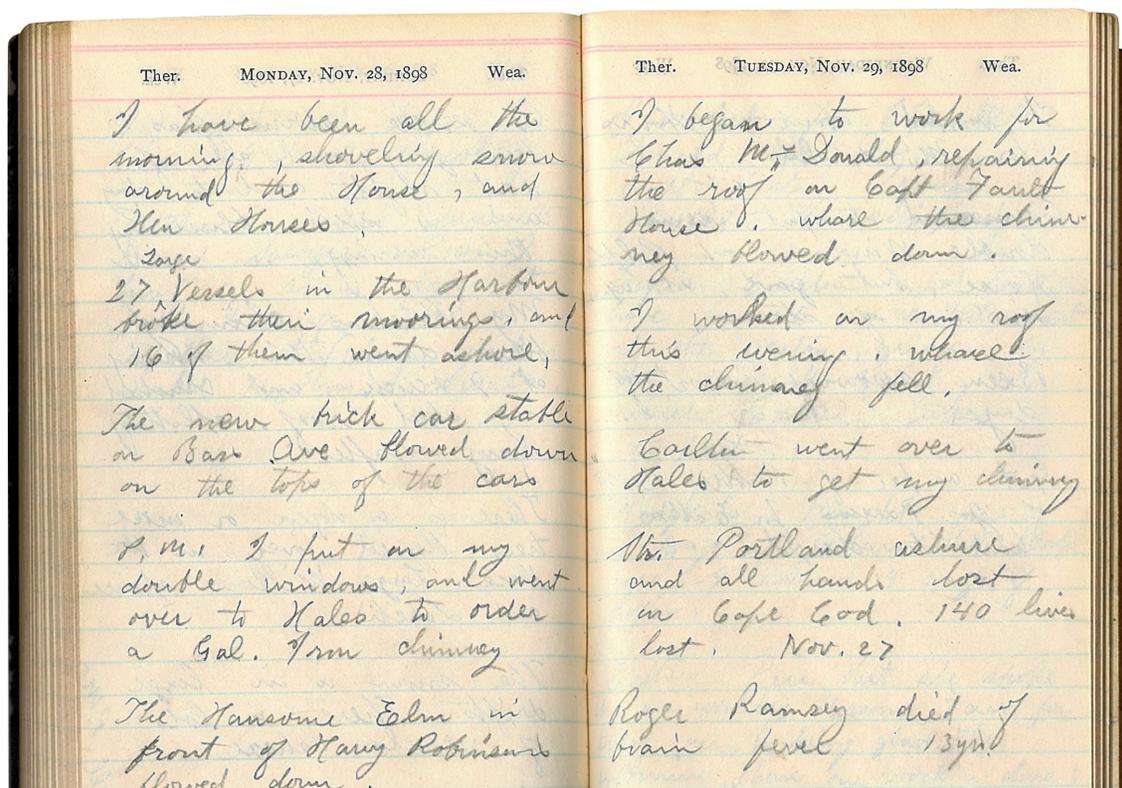
The elders were heeding Father Time’s perilous call, and the death and disease of family and friends became too frequently mentioned. Many entries describe the now astonishing notion that the doctor made personal, daily visits to the house in inclement weather, sometimes each day, even twice a day, for weeks. Each visit was recorded in the diary with a hopeful and reassuring thought.



Herman, baby Carlton, and Lizzie in 1888

Colds were particularly feared and received serious attention. A "Rum Sweat" treatment for an oncoming cold was usually followed by a trip to town to summon the doctor. In the days before the common use of penicillin, pneumonia was often deadly. Lizzie Stevens' case was only one of many deaths mentioned from pneumonia, a horrendously harsh result of a childhood cold in those years.

Herman's other more tragic, repetitive, and serious entries are of the shipwrecks in and around Gloucester at Good Harbor Beach, Salt Island, Mother Ann, Dogbar Reef, and especially the infamous Bemo Ledge. The Wonson farm reached down to the water across from High Popples Road and was thus given the salvage work for wrecks there, which ranged from dismantling and selling the wreckage to the peculiar task of burying a cargo of pigs that had drowned in the storm. In April 1897, Herman took his son Carlton down to the Back Shore to "see the graves of the 2 sailors of ship Howard wrecked in 1807." More research is needed to answer the mystery of the location of the graves.



On lower right, Herman notes a ferocious Thanksgiving-week gale that sank many ships off the New England coast, including a coastal steamer named the *Portland*. At least 140 people were lost. Also interesting to note that under the entry about the ship sinking, Herman notes the death of a 13-year-old boy, Roger Ramsey, who died of "brain fever." As evidenced throughout his journal, Herman rarely wrote of emotions, perhaps due to the times he lived in.

## PROVIDING FOR HIS FAMILY AND VICE VERSA

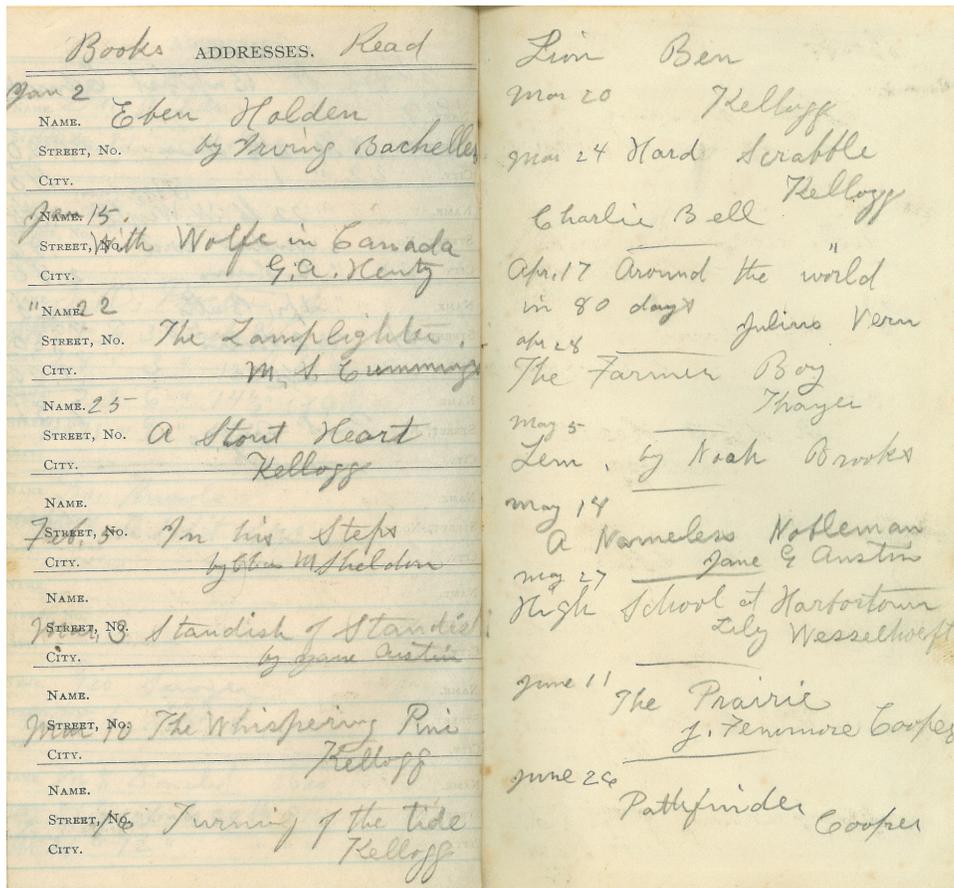
*Jan. 1895, "I have not worked to earn anything today."*

This simple passage shows Herman's rare vulnerability and concern for his financial situation. He now had a wife and two small children to support, but fortunately, he could depend on his large family to hire him for various jobs. Relief arrived with a request from Brother Arthur for a new hen house; Brother John needed frames for his greenhouse ventilation, and his Mother needed "something like a new platform built at the house." There was no unemployment insurance in the U.S. until 1935, ironically the year Herman no longer needed it. You might say that family was the Wonson's form of insurance with their family business, shared horses, shared equipment, shared food, and shared care, all constant and valued notations.

## DECLINE IN THE FAMILY'S BALLAST BUSINESS

The decline of the stone ballast business was evident in the diaries as metal replaced stones in the hulls of the vessels and pushed Herman toward his independence. His last ballast entry was in 1892, but in 1887 Herman was already looking ahead financially and had bought and set six hens, which he proudly wrote about on July 9, "got 55 chickens from my 6 hens." By 1908, Herman's poultry experiment produced 675 chicks from his 235 hens and seven roosters, and he sold 3,764 of their eggs to family, neighbors, and local grocers. Two of Herman's prominent customers were shop owners J. Fred Smith (his brother-in-law) and Freman D. Hodsdon.

Throughout the diaries, Herman was incredibly industrious and determined to provide for his family. 1908 was the same year he gathered and sold 48 barrels of apples while also working in carpentry 8 hours a day at 32 cents an hour. Herman worked through all weather for builders, especially Charles McDonald. When the poultry business increased, he would add work at night, killing and dressing as many as 20 chickens for sale in neighboring stores the next day. Without a telephone, lining up new business involved Herman traveling to businesses in town by horse cart, by foot, by horse trolley, and eventually by electric trolley. Herman never owned a car and did not have electricity in his own home until it was given in 1928 as a 68th birthday present from his son Carlton.



A list of books read by Herman in 1907. He must have read books by candlelight or kerosene lamp after a long day's work, as he did not have electricity until 1928.

After those days and evenings with farm and carpentry work, along with his written diary, Herman had the discipline to record the itemized daily and weekly money he earned from his farming, poultry, or carpentry jobs. He also meticulously accounted for the money he owed or spent within his family and with business associates. Curious examples include an entry in 1902: owing Brother Ralph \$.07 for a quart of milk, 1907: Brother Arthur \$.25 for the use of his horse, or \$14.70 to Brother Guy for collecting swill (garbage in our modern vernacular) from the summer residents on Eastern Point. Swill was a supplemental food for his chickens. It is unimaginable in 2022 for us to spend 28 cents for a pound of butter, not to mention the unusual idea of paying \$2.50 for a gallon of skunk oil that the farm sold in 1895.

## EMOTIONS AND EVENTS

The mathematical accounting revealing Herman's lifestyle is very clear. Conceivably due to the masculine forms of communication in that age, and, as mentioned earlier, Herman has left emotions unstated and emotional reactions left to our frustrated imaginations. For example,

he writes nothing describing his response to seeing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Union Theater in 1910. There's no indication of how he felt having to bring a lawsuit against a fellow carpenter, A.H. Crispin, for a pay dispute after Herman had worked building the Arthur Nelson and Ira Andrews houses. We only have the facts that lawyers John Flaherty and Wm. Pew found in Herman's favor, and Crispin was forced to settle.

Even without great emotional details, it is interesting to note which kinds of events were significant enough for an entry. When President Garfield died in 1887, Herman described all the ships at half-mast, and Gloucester's bells tolling when President Grant died. He recorded when the Battleship Maine exploded in Havana Harbor and the deaths of Queen Victoria and Pope Leo XIII. Each city, state, and national election results are written down. We know of the Gloucester schools closing for lack of coal during the national Coal Strike in 1902, and the Carpenters' Union strikes from his descriptions and his personal participation. We know Herman highly valued the exercises of each battleship held off of Gloucester and Rockport because he wrote about them with something akin to religious zeal.



1911 photo of the Wonson family: Herman and Lizzie in the back, Esther and Carlton in the front

## DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

Herman writes of trips to the Back Shore to gather sea moss for a treatment when his wife Lizzie was coming down with a cold. True to his pattern, when Lizzie did die on March 10, 1921, the diary entry noted, *"my dear wife died at 7-15 this morning, 57 yrs. 11 mo. Esther, Fred and Hattie, Carlton and Ruth, Seymour and Etta, Mr. Wilson and Mrs. Thom. Parsons called. A fine day."* A fine day likely refers to the weather, as Herman so often wrote about, no matter if there was a death. On the previous day, lifelong friend Elizabeth Kelly sent Lizzie *"a chicken and box of sweet peas"* to round out the love and support that food can demonstrate.

Lizzie's death was quickly followed by the birth of Herman's twin grandchildren, Elizabeth and Carroll, joining their 3-year-old sister Priscilla. Herman's life moved away from the poultry business, and he concentrated on carpentry throughout the rest of his life, then on to the vegetable and flower gardening he loved, and on to his immediate and extended family. In his widowhood, Herman became a passionate devotee of the plays and movies at Gloucester's old theaters: Union Hill (his first play was *Ten Men in a Bar*), the Olympia, the Strand or the North Shore theaters. Actors Basil Rathbone, Mary Pickford, and Amos & Andy were a few of the many actors listed with the shows that he often attended several times a week.

### 1920s–1930s

Family chronicles are neatly interwoven in the diaries, while the cultural items in the 1920s and 30s seem to stand independently. One can learn intriguing tidbits like how the bells and sirens rang throughout Gloucester when the Gloucester schooners beat the Canadians in the Fisherman's Races up in Halifax or how the family watched the Great Fire in Lynn in 1889 from the cupola on top of the big barn. Something like Herman's jury duty routine in 1921 involved him taking the train to Salem courthouse every day, for a weekly ticket price of \$4.84, from October until February; his pay was \$23.84 per week, illnesses, weekends, and holidays, and blizzards excluded.

On Feb. 1, 1932, Herman wrote, *"I have been in all day looking at old diaries,"* and on March 10, *"11 years since Lizzie left us."*

Herman's last two diaries were lost in the discombobulations after his death at his daughter Esther's in 1935, so we have only the entry in 1932 to tell us he was once reviewing his life and loss. While Herman's writings note many current events, there's nothing to indicate whether he ever intended or reflected upon anyone else reading his diaries in the future.

One of Herman's last entries is *"Dec. 30, 1932, glass below 0. Gloucester harbour is all frozen over. Dec. 31, glass 18 above, a little snow fell during the night, Carlton and children came over P.M. he brought me roast beef and fish cakes."*

## AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

The readings from Herman and Lizzie's Baptist Church meant so much in their lives, prompting me to borrow two phrases: "A time to keep" and "A time to gather stones together." It is time to gather memories and lessons from Herman's diaries. He began his story with the family and the ballast business; it can be appropriate to end this essay with the reminder that our present "ballast," our center of stability, still comes from family and the sense of place, grounded in the history of Gloucester. Herman Fletcher Wonson's written words are well kept, and the values by which he lived in the past can accompany us as we move toward our own futures and forward into Gloucester's next 100-year journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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