

## New London's Captain Keeney and Eugene O'Neill

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The setting for Eugene O'Neill's one-act drama, *Ile*, is the captain's cabin of a whaling ship frozen in Arctic Ocean ice for an entire winter. The play takes place on the day that the crew's two-year commitment to the voyage is set to expire. The play is one of the early works of O'Neill, written in 1916, during his highly productive association with the Provincetown Players. The story is based upon the experiences of Provincetown whaling Captain John Cook and his wife, Viola, who took the unusual step of joining her husband on the 1893 voyage.<sup>i</sup> As the ice begins to break, the Captain must choose between returning home to preserve what is left of Viola's sanity or to press on with the voyage to avoid the shame of returning to port with far less than a full cargo of whale oil (or "ile," as pronounced by the Captain).

The idea for the plot was suggested to O'Neill by Mary Heaton Vorse, the primary benefactor of the Provincetown Players. Vorse was a wealthy writer and social activist, who allowed the group to stage their productions in a makeshift theatre built in a weatherbeaten shed she owned on a Provincetown fishing wharf.<sup>ii</sup> Captain and Viola Cook still lived in Provincetown, and Viola still suffered from the devastating mental effects of the ill-fated voyage. To avoid embarrassing the Cooks, O'Neill named the protagonist of the play Captain David Keeney. It is presumed that the character's name was inspired by an old New London sea captain, who O'Neill came to know during his many summers spent in the family cottage on Pequot Avenue.

The theory makes sense, as the Keeney name and the family's association with the sea has been a part of New London lore since the city's founding. Dozens of men have been known as "Captain Keeney" since Captain William Keeney arrived in New London with the Cape Ann Company in 1651.<sup>iii</sup> The question becomes, which Captain Keeney did O'Neill name his character after?

Since the character was named David Keeney, the first inquiry must be to determine if a Captain David Keeney resided in or around New London during O'Neill's formative years. A review of census records, city directories, cemetery indexes, and other sources reveals that a man named David S. Keeney was born in Waterford in 1814.<sup>iv</sup> He applied for a seaman's protection certificate in 1833.<sup>v</sup> These certificates vouched for the citizenship of sailors to protect them from impressment into the British Navy. There is no evidence that Keeney ever advanced to the level of captain, despite his early association with the sea. All other records indicate that David S. Keeney spent the remainder of his life as a farmer

before his death in Waterford in 1869,<sup>vi</sup> well before O'Neill's 1888 birth. It is unlikely David S. Keeney would have been familiar to Eugene O'Neill.

A man named David J. Keeney appears in an 1887 New London City Directory.<sup>vii</sup> His profession is listed as copy clerk and he was boarding in a home on Green Street. He is not listed in subsequent directories. This David Keeney does not appear to be the man after whom the character was named.

A hint as to the identity of Captain Keeney can be found in the 1960 biography of Eugene O'Neill written by Arthur and Barbara Gelb. They note that Eugene O'Neill's father, the famous actor, James O'Neill, frequently held court at the bar of the Crocker House Hotel on State Street when he was in town. They suggest that it was at the Crocker House that James O'Neill met Captain Nat Keeney, "an old Yankee sailor with a weathered face, and a spicy vocabulary." The biographers further suggest that Eugene O'Neill himself also patronized the Crocker House when he was working as a reporter for the New London Telegraph in 1912, and that he came to know Captain Nat Keeney in this manner.

Although it is likely that Captain Nat Keeney is the person whose surname was used for the main character in *Ile*, Eugene O'Neill's familiarity with Captain Nat Keeney more likely stems from an earlier period in his life than that suggested by Arthur and Barbara Gelb. Keeney was a neighbor of the O'Neill family. In fact, within a short walk of the O'Neill cottage at 138 (now 325) Pequot Avenue, lived both a Captain Nathan Keeney and a Captain Nathaniel Keeney. Captain Nathan Keeney lived at 9 (now 25) Keeney Lane. He was born in 1833 and was a coastal fisherman in his earlier years before joining the Norwich & New York Steamboat Company and captaining several passenger steamships before his 1909 death. Nathaniel Keeney lived on Converse Place until approximately 1896, when he moved with his family to 146 (now 347) Pequot Avenue, just two doors down from the O'Neill property. He also operated a fish market at Captain Thomas Scott's wharf across the street from the O'Neill cottage. It is likely that Eugene O'Neill knew both men, but due to the ill health of Nathan Keeney in his later years and his earlier date of death, it is also likely that O'Neill was more familiar with Nathaniel Keeney than he was with Nathan Keeney. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that Nathaniel Keeney was known to his friends as "Nat" Keeney.<sup>viii</sup>

Nathaniel Shaw Perkins Keeney was born on May 27, 1848. He was the son of James Keeney and Lucy Whitaker Keeney. James and Lucy Keeney had twelve children. Nat Keeney married Abbie Lester on July 10, 1871. The Lester family, like the Keeney family, were among the handful of prominent extended fishing families in the Harbor area. Captain Nathaniel Keeney was the Master of several seagoing fishing vessels, including the *Sea Flower*, and the 51 foot, square-sterned schooner *Stephen Woolsey*.<sup>ix</sup>

Captain Nathaniel Keeney was a rugged mariner, who made a name for himself in 1886 when he and his crew rescued nine men from the wrecked British schooner Hylton Castle. The British government presented Captain Keeney with a gold watch, engraved to commemorate his courageous actions.<sup>x</sup> On November 1, 1887, *The Day of New London* reported that Captain Keeney calmly piloted the Stephen Woolsey back to New London from Block Island in the midst of a ferocious storm.<sup>xi</sup> The Day noted, “Captain Keeney, as gallant a sailor boy as ever felt the breeze, stood coolly at the helm, undisturbed by the gleam and roar above him and the heavy swell of seas below him.” In April of 1888, Keeney and the crew of the Stephen Woolsey earned further praise when they helped salvage the fishing smack Favorite, which had been stranded on the shore of Shelter Island during a storm.<sup>xii</sup>

As he grew older, Keeney spent less time on the high seas and more or less restricted his fishing activities to local waters. His exploits were no less remarkable. In August of 1910, *The Day* carried the report of Captain Keeney personally spearing and landing a 125-pound loggerhead turtle, which he later displayed at his fish market at Scott’s wharf.<sup>xiii</sup> A September 1908 article reprinted in newspapers throughout the country told the tale of Captain Keeney and two other men, who were hand-fishing for striped bass in a power launch, when they hooked and landed an 8-foot, 200-pound shark.<sup>xiv</sup> A few days later *The Day* reported that when the shark was cut open, a silver spoon with the engraving “Pequot House” was found in its belly.<sup>xv</sup> *The Day* reported in September of 1911 that Keeney landed another shark, this time measuring 15 feet and weighing nearly 300 pounds while fishing for blackfish off of Ocean Beach. He promptly exhibited the shark at his fishing market at Scott’s wharf to the amazement of his customers.<sup>xvi</sup>

Upon Keeney’s death on November 24, 1926, his obituary in *The Day* noted, “Captain Keeney was formerly a member of the Jibboom Club in this city. His affable disposition and his ability to tell a story that smacked of the salt seas, made him one of the most popular members of the club.”<sup>xvii</sup> There is no doubt that Captain Keeney’s vast experiences on the water and his raconteurial skills caught the attention of young Eugene O’Neill, who spent his summers across the street from Keeney’s fish market. In fact, when *The Day* reported that Eugene O’Neill swam the width of the Thames Harbor on Saturday July 20, 1912, his point of departure was from Scott’s wharf, the site of Captain Keeney’s fish market.<sup>xviii</sup> 1912 was a significant year for O’Neill, as it was the year in which he later set his autobiographical *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. It is also the year that Eugene O’Neill fell in love with Maibelle Scott, the granddaughter of Captain Thomas A. Scott, Keeney’s landlord. O’Neill later based his character, Muriel McComber, the heroine of his play *Ah, Wilderness!* on Maibelle Scott.

There is a theory that Captain Nathaniel Keeney is the model for a minor character in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In that play, a Captain Turner, is referred to as the chatty neighbor who delays James Tyrone's return home, allowing Jamie and Edmund time to sneak a drink together. Whether Turner is based on Keeney is not known for certain, but either way, it is clear that Captain Nathaniel Keeney was a neighborhood institution, who shared with O'Neill a reverence for the sea, and the ability to tell stories about the sea that demanded the listener's full attention. It is fitting that O'Neill left a lasting tribute to him.

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<sup>i</sup> Van Duzer, Winifred, *The Tragedy of the Ice that Strangely Parallels a Broadway Play*, (King Features Syndicate, 1923); provincetownplayhouse.com, Kennedy, Jeffery.

<sup>ii</sup> Gelb, Arthur and Barbara, *O'Neill*, (Harper & Row Publishing, 1960); provincetownplayhouse.com, Kennedy, Jeffery.

<sup>iii</sup> Caulkins, Francis Manwarring, *History of New London* (H.D. Utley, 1895).

<sup>iv</sup> Ancestry.com.

<sup>v</sup> Id.

<sup>vi</sup> Id.

<sup>vii</sup> Id.

<sup>viii</sup> Archives, The Day of New London.

<sup>ix</sup> Connecticut Ship Database, 1789-1939, <https://research.mysticseaport.org/databases/ct-ships/>

<sup>x</sup> *Captain Nathaniel Keeney Dies on Meriden Trip*, The Day, Nov 24, 1926.

<sup>xi</sup> *Life on the Ocean Wave*, The Day, Feb 21, 1887.

<sup>xii</sup> *Life on the Water*, The Day, Apr 30, 1888.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Loggerhead Turtle Taken*, The Day, Aug 23, 1910.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Fishing for Bass, Get Shark*, The Brazil Times (Brazil, Indiana), Sep 14, 1908.

<sup>xv</sup> *Shark Swallowed Pequot Spoon*, The Day, Sep 15, 1908.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Captain Nat Keeney Got Big Shark on His Line*, The Day, Sep 5, 1911.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Captain Nathaniel Keeney Dies on Meriden Trip*, The Day, Nov 24, 1926.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Young O'Neill Swam Across Thames*, The Day (New London, Connecticut) · Mon, Jul 22, 1912