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A fitting trophy/

Sailing club award recalls city's seagoing history

During presentation ceremonies last Saturday, the Amelia Island Sailing Club received an historical commemorative award honoring those local mariners who for more than a 100 year period have perpetuated sportsmanship in competitive sailing, as well as the credo of safety in all water-related activities in the Fernandina Beach area.

The handsomely crafted trophy consists of an eight-inch solid bronze ship's bell that is mounted on a base of spar-varnished mahogany. It is the creation of a retired sailing ship's master whose fine marine joinery is practically a lost art.

The bell has an engraved ship's anchor over the inscription "A.I.S.C." representing the Amelia Island Sailing Club. On the base is a commemorative brass plate with the engraving: "1882-1982 Memorial Captain William Bell, Captain James Bell," with the engraved outline of a sailing sloop preceding the words "Island Regatta."

Across the face of the 20-inch base are 12 brass nameplates which will carry the engraved names of each individual winning the annual award. There is space available on the base for an additional 30 awards.

As a footnote to history, the Bell twins, whose entire lifetimes were devoted to the sea, lie buried side by side in St. Peter's Episcopal Cemetery in Fernandina Beach. On each headstone a ship's anchor is carved in bas relief.

Sponsors of this most unique memorial to the city's original harbor pilots are Mr. and Mrs. Samuel J. Kennard. Kennard was born in Fernandina and is the maternal grandson of Captain William Bell. Future presentations will be made at the club's annual Yuletide meetings.

Captains William and James Bell, in whose memory the award is made, were identical twins. They were born at Cape Fear, N.C., in the early 1800's. As young men they served apprenticeships for piloting in the area from Cape Hatteras south to Wilmington, Charleston and Savannah.

Both brothers were commissioned to command by the Confederate Navy during the War Between the States, each serving with commendations for bravery. Their assignment was to run the gauntlet of the federal gunships that were deployed to blockade all usable harbors of Southern ports. Their duty was to bring in to the destitute Confederacy supplies of wool, quinine, pewter and foodstuffs, much of which originated in the British Isles.

In the early days of Florida's entrance to statehood, the twins became established as harbor pilots in what is now known as "Old Town." The pilots kept their skiffs in Eagan's Creek, for quickest access to Cumberland Sound and out into the ocean.

A watchtower was built on the hill at Old Town so arriving vessels could be spotted at sea beyond the bar. When the alert was sounded, the pilots would race their individual sailing dories out to the incoming ships, the

first to arrive was awarded the job of bringing that ship into the channel and to the dockside. It is natural that skillful and daring seamanship brought the rewards, as each pilot was working independently. There were no unions or cooperatives in those days.

Competition was extremely keen, but it also was gentlemanly and sportsmanlike. However, there were some pranks. On one occasion several pilots got together late one night and placed a couple of hundred pounds of rocks under the deck boards into the bilge of another pilot's sailboat. The story, often repeated, relates that the poor fellow was so slowed with the extra weight that he could not keep pace with the other boats in their race to the sea. It was several days and much teasing from his buddies before he finally found the source of his dilemma, and — it can be assumed — took retribution.

During the early years of competitive piloting, the men depended entirely on sails. It was much later that they organized into a cooperatively shared association, and several years later that pilot boats with engines were put into service — the first of which was christened the "Sea-Dog."

William and Jame recognized the need for a place for visiting ships' crews and local families to worship. They were instrumental in building the first Episcopal church on the island. It was a small wooden structure located in Old Town long since fallen into disuse and decay.

All of the foregoing events took place before David Yulee laid out the plots and established the City of Fernandina. There were slack seasons and periods of bad weather which prompted the Bell twins to become involved in building new homes for their own families and for other harbor pilots. The restored house facing the Spanish Parade Ground on the "hill" in Old Town was built for their friend, another pilot captain, in the 1870's. The lovely old structure is now occupied by a local family.

The "Bell House" was built in 1878 and from 1900 to 1970 was the "Kennard House" and is located on the corner of 8th and Beech Streets. Today it is the "C" House. The decorative trim is a prime example of the Chippendale style and an excellent sample of an early usage in Florida architecture. This construction is of heart pine and has a coined seam metal roof. The marble mantels and fireplace facades were imported from Italy, the hardware from England, and the chandeliers from Belgium.

The "Lowe House" on 8th and Beech Streets (southwest corner) was built and lived in by William Bell until his death.

Also, the home on 8th and Beech Streets (northwest corner) was one of Captain William Bell's and built for his son, William Jr.

The home of the Lasserre family on the northeast corner of 7th and Beech Streets was another of Captain William Bell's houses. Another, with its gingerbread porticos, is located on 8th Street (southwest corner), diagonally across from Reynold's Motors.