



# Vanessa Gralton

Interviewer:

All right, so we are recording. This is Emily here with Vanessa Gralton, who is going to tell us a story.

So, go ahead, Vanessa.

Vanessa Gralton:

Well, I'm not quite sure if my own story is that fascinating, but I do think the story of my house in Fairhaven is. So, a teeny bit of background is about in the early 2000s, my husband and I, who had raised our family of five, our children were still in high school and younger at that point, had started to contemplate moving off Cape Cod where we'd lived for 20 years.

Our kids were going to school off Cape. My husband had moved his business offices off Cape, so we thought it's time to maybe make a move. Couldn't find anything we liked. We were old house people. We've already had done two old houses ourselves, so we were like, "Oh, it's really, we love the character. We need the space with all these kids." And so we started venturing a little further afield, and we came across this house that we fell in love with Fairhaven. We'd never been to Fairhaven, although we'd driven past it on the highway many times. And truthfully, I always thought, Fairhaven, what a nice name that is. Wouldn't that be nice to have a letter addressed to Fairhaven, Massachusetts?

Well, I think I fell in love with the house from the online listing. My husband, God love him, supported me in it, so we found ourselves the owner of a very large house built in 1840 in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, built by the wealthiest man in Fairhaven at that moment, a man named Nathan Church, who was a whaling merchant. He owned a fleet of whaling ships.

And in short order, as we were throwing ourselves into the renovation of the house, I threw myself into learning the story of the house. And it was so amazing what I learned, showing once again, that in a really old house, you really are just the caretakers. You're really just the people who take care of it because it just is going to go on and on, if you take care of it.

Nathan and his wife Sarah, had seven children together. He had a child with his first wife who died when the child was two. So he married Sarah, his second wife. And of their seven children, only four or five of them survived to adulthood. So, they were Quakers, devout Quakers, so our house on the outside is very much like the house was on Sixth Street in New Bedford. They're large. Very large brick federal transitional Greek revival house.

And after we'd lived there for a few years, I had a very interesting thing happen one day when a gentleman knocked on my door and introduced himself as the great, great-grandson of Nathan Church, which was amazing to me. And we had a great talk. He told me a little bit that he knew. He didn't know a lot, but what he did know was that the portrait of his great-great-grandparents, the two portraits, Sarah and Nathan, were in the collection of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Now, I would never have known that at that moment, so I made it my business to come over and look at them. And the wonderful Jordan Berson showed them to me. I remember I said to Jordan, "I might get a little emotional when I see them," and I did. Because I looked at the faces of the people who built my house, the house that I'm raising my family in, that which is now enlarged by three dogs that we love, and that my birth family that lives all over the United States, loves to come and visit because we've always got enough room for everyone.

So, Jordan was able to make reproductions of the portraits for me. So, they look exactly like portraits. I mean, unless you touch them, you see the cracks in the old oil and everything and they hang on the wall in my house. And so every day, I look at the faces of the people who lived in my house, now almost 200 years ago, which is a



really amazing thing.

So then after Nathan and Sarah passed away, the house was sold to a gentleman who only owned it for a year before he died of apoplexy, which was a stroke. Then, it was sold to a man who became an insolvent debtor. Then, it was sold to a man named Walter Pellington Windsor, who was the son of Captain Alexander Windsor of the Flying Cloud fame, a clipper ship that broke the record for a sale between New York and London, I believe, which held for well into the 1900s.

Interviewer:

Wow. And so around, when was this now?

Vanessa Gralton:

1879. So, now we're in 1880s, and he was a very successful banker. He was quite affluent in the community, and he and his wife, who went on to have four children, really remodeled the interior of the house. So what you see mostly in the interior, especially on the first floor, is the renovation that they did, not what the house was. The second floor, which is much simpler, is more true to what Nathan and Sarah would've had. And this is where it connects with the Whaling Museum because Walter Pennington Windsor was very good friends with Henry Huttleston Rogers, who purchased the bank building that he gave to the Old Dartmouth Historical Society in the early 1900s, which is the foundation of this whole building, the whole Whaling Museum building.

And also the son of Nathan Church, the man who built my house, his son, Henry Augustus Church, was involved in it, and his name is inscribed in a brass plaque in the Waddles Gallery downstairs. So, I kind of always felt a real connection to the Whaling Museum kind of because of all that long before I got more involved and became a board member.

And then our house went through. It's been a constant. Every generation has left its mark. So after the Windsors' died, they left the house in 1921. It was owned briefly by someone who then sold it to the Zeit's family who owned the Zeiterion Theater. And then they lived in it for about 30ish, 25 years. And then they sold it to someone who sold it to a gentleman who turned it into a convalescent home. So it was a convalescent home from probably the mid 1960s until the early 1990s, for 25 to 30 years.

And then the people we bought it from bought it when it was a convalescent home, but it had been closed down by the state. You would not be on life support in there. It was like a place you kind of went when you didn't have any place else to go, and it was not run very well, so the state came in and closed it down. And while it was this convalescent home, the entire interior was protected. The floors were covered with linoleum, the walls were covered with plywood.

So the people we bought it from, Dan and Sharon Georgiana, they pulled all the plywood down, they ripped up all the linoleum and voila, the house was still there. Needed work. The Georgiana's worked on it for about 10 years, and I think that they were burning out.

So, we came along at just the right moment, and it was the house that spoke to me and my husband and now we've been living there almost 20 years. We moved in 2004. We didn't even move into it for three months because we had a lot to do. We had to clean and paint the entire interior. We did a small amount of architectural changes of rooms that were not usable in the state that they were in. And since then, we keep working on it. We just had to put a new roof on it this year. We need to repoint all the bricks. It's just a constant process, but when you love it, you just make it happen somehow, and it is a tremendous place to raise our family, and it's been great because I would not have gotten connected with the Whaling Museum.

I vaguely knew of it when I lived on Cape Cod, but I had never made it here until I moved to this area. And so moving here and living here, really got me interested in the whole whaling industry.

And one other thing I forgot to mention. The Panorama of the whaling voyage around the world was painted by one of the two artists, was a man named Caleb Purrington, who lived in the house across the street from mine in



Fairhaven.

So the thought had been in the back of my mind, as I was going through the Panorama several times, I wonder, did any of Nathan Church's whale ships get painted into the Panorama? And it took me, I think it was about the fourth time I walked through that sure enough, I saw the ship Omega, and that was his salute to his neighbor across the street that his ship made it into the Panorama.

So, even every time I kind of think I've unturned every little bit of information or something, something seems to pop up that I'm like, "Oh, this is so cool." So, that is the story of my am amazing house.

Interviewer:

Wow. That is really amazing that you've managed to trace the whole history of it like that.

Vanessa Gralton:

We have a good little historical society. We've got a great director of tourism. I've found the graves of many of the people who've lived in my house in Riverside Cemetery in Fairhaven, where at one point I was a tour guide, so I had a tour that I needed to do, but I must confess I deviated a little bit.

But amazingly, some of the people were actually already on the tour, so then I was able to, and then a couple people who would come on the tours were like, "Don't you live in that house now?" So yeah, it is great. But it is. Fairhaven is a great place to live in. I'm so glad I landed there and I'm glad I got connected with the Whaling Museum.

Interviewer:

Yeah, wonderful. Do you have any special, besides the sort of uncovering the history of the house, do you have any special memories in the house that you want to talk about?

Vanessa Gralton:

Oh my God, so many. I mean, we've got two of our daughters were married there, which was amazing. A ton of work. I wouldn't recommend it. It was great.

I remember one winter when my two youngest... So when we moved here, my oldest daughter had started college. My next two were away in boarding school, but my two youngest ones went to a little Catholic school called St. Joe's, which was walking distance from our house in Fairhaven. So, that was a huge improvement for me because previously my life was spent driving people constantly all over, so to move into a community where it was a walking community. We walked to the library. We walked to town hall. We walked to lots of places. That was great. And the first winter of 2004-5, when we were there, there was a tremendous blizzard, like an epic blizzard, and things were closed. Everything was closed, and the kids did not have school. The two younger ones in eighth and fifth grade at that time did not have school for a full week.

So, we were the neighborhood hangout house, and they had constructed an elaborate grouping of tunnels and all sorts of things around the house, and it was just amazing and it really felt like it really made it become home. It was really our home after that.

And we never owned dogs before because we were so busy driving off of Cape Cod all the time that I always thought, it's not fair to have a dog do this. But once we got here, we started rescuing dogs. So, as soon as we lose one, there's always another dog that needs a home, so I mean, I'll always associate this house with all the dogs that we've had and just the wonderful people and neighbors that we've met.

So it has been, as I said, a great place to live, and I'm so happy that we landed here.

Interviewer:

That's wonderful. Thank you so much. Are there any final things you want to talk about? Anything you want to



add before we stop the recording?

Vanessa Galton:

It seems like there's so much that's amazing about it. I guess what I would like to add is that if you are lucky enough to own an old house, try to treasure it and try to keep it going as long as you can. If you live in an old house on the south coast of Massachusetts and you think that there might be a chance that you have ancestors who are involved in the whaling industry, they most likely were relatively wealthy and they most likely had their portraits painted, and there's a chance that you might locate them here at the Whaling Museum. I certainly didn't expect for that to happen. And it's become like anytime someone new comes to our house and comments, "What an interesting house. What an amazing house." I say, "Well, let's start here, because it all starts with this couple."

So I mean, as you know, probably the museum has lots and lots of portraits and so much are not identified. And I'm always so grateful that Nathan Church and Sarah Church's children didn't just throw them out, but that they just gave them to the museum.

And that's another thing, don't throw anything out. If it's something you don't know what to do, give it to someone here at the Whaling Museum. They might decide we don't really need it, but it lets someone who knows more than I certainly did, or do now, make decisions like that. There's a great staff here who can look at stuff and decide if it's something that could be worth preserving for the history of this area. But I know there's lots and lots of portraits here, and you might be surprised. You might find a relative. You never know.

Interviewer:

That's great. Well, thank you so much for coming in.

Vanessa Galton:

It's been my pleasure.

Interviewer:

And telling me about your house. It sounds wonderful.

Vanessa Galton:

It is. Well, you'll have to come sometime.

Interviewer:

I'd love to.

Vanessa Galton:

You ever find yourself? Have you ever been to Fairhaven? So sadly, our one thing is we lost this little restaurant. We had Elizabeth's, the stuff of Legends, which sadly towards this last bit of time, it was kind of slowing down and we were like, "Oh, we don't." But then now we're like, "We'd give anything for it to be there." But someone is supposed to be turning it into another restaurant. It's moving very slowly, but hopefully that will happen.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I hope so.

Vanessa Galton:

I know. Isn't that terrible when you can walk to a restaurant, you get like, "Wait, we have to drive to New Bedford. Oh my goodness. When we could have just walked?"