

Captain John Wiggin of Prouts Neck

By Rodney Laughton

John Wiggin was the proprietor of a small store located on the shore across from the entrance to Black Point Inn during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Wiggin, a Scarborough native, was a favorite of many visitors to the area. Described as eccentric, he had reserved for himself the title of Captain, which stood only for captain of his domain. Usually dressed in his trademark canvas coat and gray top hat, Wiggin catered to the needs of the growing summer colony at Prouts Neck. He supplied everything from soft drinks and ice cream to clams and lobster. At Wiggin's store, a visitor could rent a dory, a bicycle, a fishing pole, or a clam digger. He always had time to visit with those who passed by, whether they purchased anything or not. Visiting probably took up more time than any of his other daily activities. He was a particular favorite of children, whom he entertained by dancing and telling stories. Once he hired an organ grinder with a monkey to perform for their amusement.

Wiggin's store did a brisk business during the brief summer season. He called his establishment the "Hotel De Wiggin," a good-natured poke at the upscale hotels of Prouts Neck. These hotels took a dim view of Wiggin and his business operation. The store was a tumbledown arrangement of three rooms, none of which would have made comfortable guest accommodations. Wiggin lived there alone with a number of cats as his companions.

As a practical joke he had printed a "Prospectus for the Season of 1896." The handout advertised the services available at the store and was another way of tweaking the nouveau-riche summer tourists who patronized the summer hotels in the area. In the pamphlet Wiggin writes: "A lifeboat is here, manned during bathing hours, for the benefit of those who do not wish to be drowned." The store, he noted, had an unsurpassed ocean view. This was undeniable as the store literally stood on the cliffs that drop straight off to Western Beach and Saco Bay. Wiggin closed by stating: "Strictly temperate, no rum sold or drunk on the premises, neither beer or anything intoxicating." In reality customers could procure drink that was stronger than the Moxie advertised on the front door.

In his memoir, *Reminiscences of Prouts Neck*, J. Hartley Merrick gave a first-person account of the colorful Wiggin:

He was there in his hut in all his individual glory when I first saw him and met him in 1880; . . . nondescript outer garments of ancient and ill assorted vintage and very much the worse for wear. . . . From his general appearance it is more than likely that his garments and his boots were his close and constant companions