

Professor Kerrigan studies maritime history in Mystic

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NEW CONCORD — A professor of history at Muskingum University recently returned from five weeks of study that was so hands-on that, among other things, it found him climbing the rigging and furling the sail of a 19th century ship.

Dr. William 'Bil' Kerrigan had ventured to Mystic, Conn., as a Frank C. Munson Fellow. He was selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities from a pool of numerous candidates to participate in its Summer Institute for College and University Faculty.

Once a home port for some whalers, Mystic more notably served as an important ship building center in the early 19th century.

"It's a beautiful New England town," Kerrigan said. "They have reconstructed an historic village with re-enactors who help bring the history alive."

Kerrigan took part, with other Munson Fellows, in "The American Maritime People," a multi-week symposium on maritime history

from the colonial era to the present.

According to a news release from the Munson Institute, the purpose of the symposium at Mystic Seaport was "to provide college teachers with the opportunity to enhance course offerings by studying the influence of maritime activities on U.S. history and culture."

Kerrigan said the program did just that. "The benefit of this to my teaching was huge. What I learned will influence virtually everything I teach."

Climbing the rigging of a 19th century ship was an experience few today have the opportunity to experience. While swaying on the ropes high above the deck, he also had the opportunity to help furl the sails — a task seldom entrusted to one who has climbed the rigging for the first time.

"I did it on a calm day in port," he said. "I can't imagine what it would have been like to have been a sailor at sea sent up in a storm."

Of course, not all of a 19th century sailor's life was spent at sea. With the historic village at



Dr. William 'Bil' Kerrigan, I, of Muskingum University, and Vijay Pinch, a Professor at Wesleyan University in Connecticut aboard a sailing ship in Mystic, Conn.

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hand, Kerrigan had the opportunity to glimpse the sailor's life while ashore. For example, he had the opportunity to visit the pubs and hear the singing of traditional sea shanties.

Not only will his experiences at Mystic Seaport inform Kerrigan's instruction in the classroom, it will help him as he writes his next book.

Kerrigan recently finished a book about Johnny Appleseed that will be published on Nov. 1. The subject he will tackle in his next book will be the life of Gideon Henfield. Henfield was a privateer — someone akin to a government supported pirate — during the Revolutionary War.

To render the biography most effectively, Kerrigan believed he needed to become more conversant with specialized terminology of sailors of the period. The Mystic Seaport experience served the bill perfectly.

"This institute really helped me to get up to speed on the literature of the sea," he said.

The Mystic experience need not be restricted to scholars, Kerrigan said.

"Mystic would be a great place to vacation," he said. "It's child friendly and even adults would find a lot to fascinate them. They're really great people there; they're very nice."

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