

Sturgis Library Archives

MS. 157 Journal of Captain Sturgis Crowell, 1865-1869

Extent: 1 journal in multi-folder box.

Scope and Content Note: The collection consists of a mid-nineteenth century manuscript journal of a noted Cape Cod Sea Captain. The volume dates from 1865-1869 and was kept by Captain Sturgis Crowell of Yarmouth, Massachusetts. The book bears Capt. Crowell's signature in various places along with a later ownership inscription of his daughter Annie S. Crowell (1880-1956), who taught school in at Hyannis. The journal chronicles numerous activities Capt. Crowell engaged in while at the helm of the "Orpheus" as it sailed throughout the Far East under the famous Black Horse Flag of the Weld Fleet. With over 60 vessels including 51 sailing ships, Weld's Black Horse Fleet was one of America's largest. The journal was kept by Capt. Crowell during an extensive voyage from New York to San Francisco then onto the Far East where the Orpheus dropped anchor at such ports as Hong Kong, Singapore, Batavia (present-day Jakarta), and Penang, Malaysia.

The journal contains over 100 pages of entries in Capt. Crowell's own hand as he skippered the clipper ship Orpheus across the Pacific Ocean from the United States to Asia. Among commodities transported as cargo included slabs of tin, bags of lump tapioca, boxes of gutta-percha, baskets of India rubber, cases of tiger skins, bales of buffalo hide, boxes of sago pearls, bags of coffee, bags of black pepper, cases of damar gum, bags of cloves, bundles of rattan, etc. Other entries here pertain to the ship's sails as Capt. Crowell meticulously notes the condition of each and every sail along with needed maintenance and repairs ("all the old sails to go in the loft for thorough repairs", "new house flag the black horse", etc.). He also notes structural issues involving the ship's rigging, deck planks, deck brackets, hatches, lifts, etc. ("ropes wanted", "measure carpet", "ship chandler", "lamps looked at", "steward wants", "carpenter wants", etc). At one point, he makes the rather alarming observation of the stern being "rotten". Capt. Crowell also makes numerous notations pertaining to the ship's stores as well as his personal finances and financial transactions involving other parties including various crew members and ship workers such as a few "Chinaman". This is a fascinating first-hand account of 19th century maritime trade in the Far East by a noted Cape Cod Sea Captain sailing under the famous Black Horse Flag.

Historical and Biographical Information: Lifelong Cape Cod resident Sturgis Crowell (1822-1911) was both a noted sea captain and civic leader active in local affairs. "The [Yarmouth] Cemetery is distinctive from the ordinary grounds of the town, because of an organized effort to beautify and preserve this ancient burial place. After a small donation from the town toward a suitable fence, Captain Sturgis Crowell headed a subscription with one hundred dollars, and soon had the sum of seventeen hundred dollars for this and other improvements. The granite fence was finished in July, 1884." (see History of Barnstable County, Massachusetts, 1890, p. 489). "In 1888 Sturgis Crowell and Stephen Sears bought Standish Hall on Main Street in South Yarmouth, added a story and lengthened the building, to accommodate a stage with wings and dressing room. Rechristened Standish Opera House, it was the place where local entertainments as well as many travelling theater company productions, medicine shows, and magic acts took place." (see The Town of Yarmouth, Massachusetts by Marion Vuilleumier, 1989, p. 144).

Sturgis Crowell was first and foremost a seafaring man who sailed the world's oceans for over forty years, twenty of those as a highly respected master. A direct descendant of a very old and

well-known Cape Cod family, he took to the sea at the youthful age of 10 "going as cook with his father on the coaster 'Wankinco' in the year 1832". For many years he sailed for Boston ship owner Henry S. Hallett. "His first trip as master was from New York to San Francisco, from there to Honolulu and to McKean Island, from there to Mauritius (Isle of France). He sailed on the same vessel from Port Louis, Mauritius, in 1862, to Calcutta, and then to Hong Kong, from there to Whampoa, and finally to Bombay. Because of the Civil war and the Rebel ships capturing American vessels in the Pacific ocean, he was instructed by his owner to dispose of his vessel, the 'Boston Light,' at Bombay, in 1863, which he did, selling her for £5,000 and returning home by steamer. He again became master, of the ship 'Volunteer,' William F. Weld, owner. He made another voyage from New York to San Francisco, and while rounding the Horn lost his rudder and drifted about for thirty days. After arriving at San Francisco he sailed thence to Mazatlan, and then back to New York, and from there to Altata, Mexico.

He then turned the 'Volunteer' over to his mate, and became master of the ship 'Orpheus,' William F. Weld, of Boston, owner, and in 1865 he made his next voyage from New York to San Francisco, from there sailing to Hong Kong, from there to Batavia, and back to New York. In 1868 he made his next trip from New York to San Francisco with a load of wheat, and sailed from there to Hong Kong, from that port to Manila, thence returning to New York. He again sailed for San Francisco in 1869, from there to Mazatlan, Mexico, and from there to Altata, Mexico, returning thence to New York. In 1870 he became master of the ship 'Belvidere,' under the same owner. He sailed from Boston to St. John's, Newfoundland, and from that port to Liverpool, returning to Savannah, Ga., where he loaded cotton for Liverpool. He shipped 19,000 bales of cotton, the largest shipment ever made on a vessel up to that time. Sailing back to Liverpool with his freight, he went from there to Manila, Philippine Islands, and while there, in 1872, a mutiny broke out among the crew, and he found it necessary to discharge them and ship Malays to take the ship home. After this voyage he retired from the sea and settled down to quiet life at South Yarmouth, where for upwards of thirty years he lived retired. He made his home with his wife and daughters. Captain Crowell had a creditable record for honesty and integrity.

On June 24, 1858, Mr. Crowell married (first) Emily Baker, daughter of Elisha and Polly Baker, and they had one child, Elisha Baker, who died at the age of thirteen years. He married (second) Nov. 17, 1874, Susan J. Baker, born in Hudson, N. Y., daughter of Freeman and Patience N. (Baker) Baker, and granddaughter of Freeman and Rebecca (Eldridge) Baker and of John and Patience (Nickerson) Baker...[daughter] Annie S. attended the public and high school of Yarmouth, also the State normal school at Hyannis, graduating in 1902. In 1905 she became a student at Columbia University and took the degree of B. S. in 1906. She is now a teacher in the Hyannis State normal school....Captain Crowell was the oldest living man in the town of Yarmouth, and as such held the gold-headed walking cane given by the Post of Boston--one to the oldest living man in each town in New England. The Captain was one of the last surviving sea captains who were the pride of American commerce fifty years ago." (see Representative Men and Old Families of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1912, Vol. III, pp. 1299-1300).

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