

Chronicles of Brunonia

The Wreck of the Bark Montgomery: An East Greenwich Family at Home and at Sea

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September 17, 1848

37° N, 65° W

A terrible sea on, the likes of which Captain Congdon had never seen before — as if the mighty Maker himself had unleashed the fury of the waves and roaring winds to their utmost. The captain clung to the wheel with all his strength. He could barely see for the driving rain. “Mr. Webb!” he called out, but he knew his voice would only be lost in the howling of the storm.

The *Montgomery* shuddered as a tremendous squall struck, and she leaned perilously to her broad side. Masts, yards and sails all in the water — she shifted beneath Congdon’s feet and his hands slipped off the wheel as she began to turn over.

The captain was plunged into the icy black Atlantic and struggled back up to the surface, gasping for air, only to be submerged by another crashing wave. The salty water filled his nose and throat. After fighting to keep the *Montgomery* afloat for three days and nights Congdon’s energy was flagging. *Am I to leave my wife and little ones now? Must I die at once?* Cynthia’s face filled his mind’s eye. His dearest, his only Cynthia — and Mary, and little George. *No*, it was as though a voice said to him in response, *you shall be saved*. Captain Congdon broke through the surface of the water and took a deep breath of air. *And Thy will be done*, he thought to himself. There, in the frigid Atlantic, his ship waterlogged, its Africa-bound cargo lost and the fate of his crew still unknown, a strange peace settled over the captain. He knew he would see his beloved wife again, no matter what travails he should meet.ⁱ

* * *

September 12, 1848

Port of Providence, Rhode Island

Cynthia stood on shore, trying her best to keep from crying — if the children should see her cry, it would upset them all the more that Pa was going away. She knew the months until she and John were together again would be long, nearly unbearable — but in the seven years of their marriage she had borne the loneliness time and again, waiting for John to return, watching as the children grew taller in his absence.

The small crowd on the dock was bidding farewell to the *Montgomery* as she cleared the Port of Providence. She was bound for the coast of West Africa, and laden with goods for trading. She had made the same trading voyage before, with John Congdon as first mate. The *Montgomery's* previous cargoes had included watered rum, uncured tobacco and colored beads to trade for palm oil, coffee and ivory.ⁱⁱ This voyage's cargo was insured for \$14,000—nearly three times the \$5,000 insurance on the *Montgomery* herself.ⁱⁱⁱ

She was a fine vessel: a three-masted Bark, 135 tons. Her fore and main masts would have been square-rigged, and the mizzen sails rigged fore-and-aft. That is to say, the sails of the first and middle masts would be rigged with their broad side facing the stern, perpendicular to the centerline of the *Montgomery*; the sails of the third or mizzenmast rigged lengthwise, parallel to the length of the vessel.^{iv} This kind of rigging could be handled by just a few men — a boon to shipowners such as Rufus Green, the *Montgomery's* owner, for whom a full-

rigged ship would need a very large crew in relation to her profitability. The crew of the *Montgomery* numbered only eight.

As she watched the Bark growing smaller, Cynthia gathered George and Mary closer to her. Young as they were, they understood that their Pa was going far away, that the sea was capricious and often dangerous. *God bless you and return you to me again in safety*, Cynthia thought to herself. *I can hardly wait now for the time to come.*^v

* * *

September 12, 1848

40' N, 70' W

The morning's light westerly wind, what had seemed an auspicious beginning for the *Montgomery's* passage to Africa, had given way to more blustery weather. The *Montgomery* had been half a day at sea and they were making good speed — the shoreline was well behind them by now. The darker clouds on the southern horizon didn't concern the captain yet. The *Montgomery* was a steady vessel, a fine Bark, and his crew was fit and able, even if, to the captain's dismay, they had a tendency towards drink, and it wasn't uncommon to hear one of the sailors use the name of the Lord in vain.

This voyage was Congdon's first as captain. He had sailed on the *Montgomery* before as first mate, and their successful trading in Africa and trouble-free passage home had convinced Rufus Green, the *Montgomery's* owner, that he was a fit captain. Congdon's first mate on this voyage was Mr. Webb, to whom the captain had taken an instant liking.

Congdon's hope was that with this voyage he might earn enough that his family might move to the plot of land adjacent to Cynthia's mother's house, on Marlborough Street, where the larger houses were. Their small house on Division Street in East Greenwich, Rhode Island was close enough to Main Street that it always seemed to be dusty from passing carriages. But for now the house on Division Street was home, and he could picture Cynthia there, perhaps in the keeping-room working on the sewing she took in for extra money, perhaps upstairs tending to the children. The separation was as hard to bear for the captain as it was for his wife. Yet it was a trial visited upon them by the grace of God, testing their devotion and regard for one another above the earthly physical comforts of being together. *Oh dear my Cynthia if I could only be comfortably situated with you and there I trust we should be more better satisfied however I don't know as we should, we will try and be thankful, yes thankful for it.*^{vi}

The northeasterly wind was picking up, and the sea grew choppy and gray. "Mr. Webb," the captain called. "We may take a gale from the northeast. Pull in the halyards and keep her under reefed sails." With a storm coming on, it would be best to keep the sails short so gusts of wind wouldn't blow the Bark off balance. Congdon knew that his wife worried intensely while he was at sea. *I have trembled much, thinking what anxieties could exist for you for my safety.*^{vii}

* * *

September 14, 1848

East Greenwich, Rhode Island

Cynthia sat in the keeping-room of the little house on Division Street, her sewing idle in her lap. She was trying to concentrate but kept lapsing into a quiet

reverie, staring out the window, her eyes wandering down the hill to the water, and the little finger of land beyond, covered in red maples and pine trees. *John has gone, yes, he has gone, and days, weeks and months must roll away before I shall hear the sound of his voice or see that sweet smile again.* Cynthia blinked the tears from her eyes and took up her sewing again.

It was lonely here with John at sea, even though she had her mother for company, and little George and Mary could always bring a smile to her lips. Cynthia smiled, recalling Mary's serious expression the other day when a visitor had bent down and asked "And where is your Pa?" "Gone to sea, in the Bark," she had replied in her solemn way.^{viii} Yes, the children kept her from giving in to the sadness that was always threatening to close in on her.

But at night the dark thoughts would sometimes overtake her. She longed for the solid weight of John's body beside hers, the warmth of his breath. Cynthia tried to command her feelings, tried to banish the unspeakable doubt from her mind but the thought taunted her nonetheless: *and what if he should not return. God bless you and return you to me again in safety,* she would think to herself until she could fall asleep.^{ix} On nights when it was particularly bad she would take Mary to sleep with her. Feeling as though she was protecting the little girl distracted Cynthia from her own vulnerability.

Cynthia realized she had drifted away again and shook her head to clear her thoughts, turning back to her sewing. She was working on a new pair of pants for John. The old blue ones he had taken on this voyage wouldn't last much longer — the ones she had mended so many times.

* * *

September 15, 1848

38' N, 61' W

Captain Congdon smiled to himself, holding the old blue pants that Cynthia had mended for him again. He could tell from the pitching of the Bark that he would be soaking wet as soon as he went topside. Old clothes, then: the old blue pants, an old satin vest, a green flannel jacket, and his oil clothes over them.^x

The wind was coming on strong now, blowing heavily from the south, and fifteen-foot high waves tossed the *Montgomery* to and fro as if she were a toy boat. The gale was getting worse by the hour. Up on deck, the sea was lashing right over the deck — the waves reached all the way up to the sails. The captain ordered everything secured to the deck: “Tie down the fo’c’sle!”

The pumps that were intended to remove water that washed belowdecks didn’t seem to be working — the *Montgomery* had evidently sprung a leak. Captain Congdon ordered the foresail taken in. The *Montgomery* was a fine vessel. If he could only scud her through this storm, sail before the gale without any sails, they might be able to repair the leak and continue on towards Africa as they had intended. But the angry sea showed no sign of relenting.

“Mr. Webb!” the captain cried. “Leak or no leak, if she holds together, we hold her on her course. I am determined to scud her as long as the sails and masts stand, or as long as I can steer her!” He motioned for Webb to take the wheel — he would trust no others on board to keep her on course through such a storm.

* * *

September 17-23, 1848

37° N, 65° W

The *Montgomery* had capsized. In the freezing, black water, Captain Congdon was fighting for his life as he was dragged under, again and over again. But he felt a divine imperative — he *would* live, he *would* return to the little house in East Greenwich; to his beloved wife, his children. *Thy will be done* on his lips and Cynthia's face fixed in his mind, he grabbed onto a board that had torn loose from the Bark. It was all he could do to hold fast to the board and kick with his legs. They had the foresight, at least, to have lowered a small boat in case it should come to this. To find the boat, then. Congdon could barely see through the lashing rain — but he thought he could hear voices.

“Oh Lord save me, save us.” “Oh, I can't swim, what shall we do?” “God have mercy on us!” The captain smiled grimly to himself. *Those who in perpetuity cursed their Maker and so often spoke his name in vain, and now when placed in a situation where they should see and know their inability to help themselves, how ready they were to call for aid.*^{xi} Congdon's own faith was near unshakable, and many a time he had wondered at the pride of the sailors, that they should not think ahead to their own day of judgment. Now they had to reckon with the Almighty indeed.^{xii}

Congdon couldn't tell if he had been floating in the sea for minutes or hours, but he realized that the wind was dying down. If anything, it seemed the storm had begun to blow over. “Webb!” Congdon cried with all the energy he could muster. And faintly, a response. “My Captain!”

In time, Congdon found the boat, and Webb, and the two men managed to collect the six others. The sea was still choppy, but the fearsome gale that had overturned the Bark seemed to have passed them by. The wreck of the *Montgomery* floated bottom-up before them.

The captain knew they were not yet out of harm's way. Their fate was entirely in the hands of God the father. There were no supplies in the boat — and no oars. Nothing. Such as it was, they would have no choice but to drift until they perished or were found. Cynthia's face flashed through Captain Congdon's mind again. They must do what they could to save themselves.

It was Congdon who suggested they break off pieces of board from the bottom of the boat to use as oars. As the Bark broke up, boxes of her cargo began to float up. The men salvaged what they could — flour, bread, cheese, dried apples and two casks of rum. They even recovered a piece of a sail, with which they fashioned a makeshift sail.^{xiii}

The next days were a trial unlike any other the captain had ever experienced. His skills as a leader were tested as well: he remained every inch the captain, rationing out their limited supply of food. As the noontime sun beat down on the little craft, the water that stretched to every horizon seemed to mock their hardship — there was no water to drink, only the watered rum in the casks, which Congdon measured out in sips to the men.

Perhaps the most trying moments were not those when Congdon felt as though he would nearly go mad with hunger — but rather, when they spotted a vessel on the horizon. Once, twice — to no avail. Despite their frantic yelling and waving, their little boat went unseen. The hopelessness, more than the hunger

and thirst, the sun, the cold nights, the cramped boat — the desperation Congdon felt in those moments when help was at hand and passed them by, that was the foremost test. He knew if he gave into the doubt — that they should continue to drift endlessly until death was welcome, that he should die without beholding his wife again — then he would be unable to go on. He would abandon himself to an inevitable, ignoble death. The men would be able to tell if his spirit was broken, and they were counting on him.

They had been drifting for five days — and nearly 300 miles, they would later find out — when they saw a Bark to the west. Their supply of food was exhausted. Congdon had been rationing out extra sips of the remaining rum that it might keep them from going mad with hunger, but the second cask was running low. The captain knew that if they didn't board that Bark, they would be as good as dead. "Row, my good men, *row!*"

Their desperation lent them strength, and they rowed with a fury, knowing their lives were on the line. As the Bark came into sharper focus, they began to shout — not even words, just yells of desperation. They were using up their last reserves of strength, for they knew it was their final hope.

And suddenly, miraculously, a flag was waved from the Bark *Elijah Swift*. Congdon could hardly believe his eyes when it became apparent the Bark was tacking, heading for their small craft. *Salvation*. The Lord Almighty had tested them. And they had proved worthy to the test. *My trust was in my God, my Maker.*^{xiv}

The next hours were a blur. A rope was lowered to haul the men up to the deck of the *Elijah Swift*. The *Swift's* Captain B. B. Lewis listened gravely to

Congdon's harrowing story, but not before the men were swaddled in rough blankets, eating gruel as though they had come back from the dead. In a way, they had. Congdon knew if they had gone on much longer they would not have held out. For the first time since they had departed Providence, he slept soundly, his customary nightly prayer more thankful, now, than ever he had been before.

* * *

September 29, 1848

45' N, 42' W

The *Elijah Swift* was from New York, headed for Glasgow. Congdon and Captain Lewis quickly became fast friends, and Congdon's men were more than ready to help crew the *Swift*. Congdon also occupied his time detailing the events of the shipwreck in a slim volume for his wife. He thought of her constantly. One of his greatest fears was that some other ship, bound for America, would have come upon the floating, wrecked *Montgomery* and carried news of her demise back to port — and that Cynthia would presume him dead.

On the 29th the *Swift* passed a westbound Bark, the *Susquehanna*. They signaled to her that the *Swift* had on board eight of the crew of the wrecked *Montgomery*. Congdon took solace in the idea that Cynthia would know he was safe; he would write her a more detailed letter and send it on the fastest ship out from Glasgow.^{xv}

* * *

October 2, 1848

East Greenwich, Rhode Island

It was exactly the news she had been dreading ever since the day they were married — no, since even before then, since the time when she had known her heart belonged to the handsome young Mr. Congdon, when they had been engaged eight years before. They were a good match, and his well-being was always at the forefront of her mind. *May we have the same mind in everything. But if it should so happen that we do not always think alike let us never contend and let me always feel that I am the weaker vessel and as such yield my opinion onto his. Under all circumstances let me study his happiness and as much as in my power promote it.*^{xvi}

The *Montgomery* wrecked. Her crew had apparently been rescued — but Cynthia still felt a sense of horror. Was he safe? Had he been hurt? The dispatch from Captain Dunlevy of the *Susquehanna*, which had arrived in Philadelphia the day before, had only the sparest of details: the *Susquehanna* had communicated with the *Elijah Swift* the 29th last, having on board eight of the crew of the wrecked Bark *Montgomery*. The note in the *Providence Daily Journal* was inconclusive about the actual identity of the wreck: “Bark Montgomery, Congdon, sailed from this port Sept. 12, for Coast of Africa, and is probably the vessel referred to.”^{xvii}

William, John’s brother who resided in Providence, had encouraged her not to worry: “Eight was all there was on board of the *Montgomery* and they are all safe. I think without a doubt we shall probably have news after the Bark E.W. arrives at Glasgow and there is time to get the news home.” She didn’t know if she

could wait the long weeks for a letter to traverse the Atlantic. “You must keep up good spirits, Cynthia, and trust that all will yet be well. It is unfortunate it is true, but if their lives are all spared we have the consolation that it might have worse, and as I said before I have no doubt such is the case. Had I any doubt, Cynthia, I should feel it my duty to say it to you plainly.”^{xviii}

Cynthia found William’s reassurances comforting, but nonetheless, she stayed up late at night, worried. Even if she knew her fears might be unfounded, her constant concerns for John’s safety had been validated. The sea was a dangerous place, and her constant thoughts of her husband would not keep his ship afloat. What if his return passage was to encounter a gale? What if he wasn’t so lucky again?

* * *

October 13, 1848

Liverpool

Congdon had finally managed to secure passage back to America on the *Sea*. He had bid farewell to Captain Lewis, who had been a great friend to him, indeed nearly a brother.^{xix} Congdon had lost everything save the clothes on his back when the *Montgomery* had capsized. Lewis had lent him \$30, with which Captain Congdon had purchased a little valise, and filled it with clothes sufficient to be comfortable and respectable in Glasgow society. The captain of the *Elijah Swift* had given some clothes to wear on the passage home as well, and helped him to figure out how he would make his way home.

Congdon had taken a steamer overnight from Glasgow to Liverpool. The *Sea* would embark in a few days, but a vessel was leaving that afternoon for New

York and he wanted to make sure it carried with it a letter to Cynthia. “My Dear C,” he began. “I have trembled much, thinking what anxieties could exist for you for my safety.”^{xx} To be home, in the little house in East Greenwich — with a fire on the hearth of the keeping-room, with its low ceiling stained with soot, the children playing around his feet, the smell of Cynthia’s cooking, her warmth in bed at night. But all that was impossibly far away, across the wide and treacherous Atlantic.

* * *

November 8, 1848

East Greenwich, Rhode Island

The two months they had been apart had seemed years. And it seemed to John that Cynthia had aged years in the time he had been away — her face a little more careworn, her forehead perhaps a little more creased with worry. *Thank God we are once more together again.*^{xxi} The children were older, too. George was getting to be a talkative little boy, a baby no more. And Mary wouldn’t be a little girl for much longer. “Papa! Did you have a stormy petrel come on board and sing? Did you feed it?” she asked.^{xxii}

It was good to have John home, but his homecoming made Cynthia sad, as well, because she knew it was only for so long. He would be leaving again before too much time had passed. His coming home only meant he would leave again. *Oh my husband I do long for the time to come when we may spend our days together this separation is sometimes almost heart-breaking.*^{xxiii} When she had been a young bride, she thought it might become easier once she was used to

being alone. It hadn't. But she had become more resigned to the realities of being a captain's wife in port.

And the danger he had encountered this voyage had given voice to a fear she had kept from herself for a long time: the time when they could spend their days together would be a long time coming. For now, the sea was John's mistress. And Cynthia feared it might snatch him from her one day.

* * *

April 14, 2008

St. Luke's Churchyard, East Greenwich, Rhode Island

It is the only double stone at Saint Luke's Church in East Greenwich. But only Cynthia Congdon's body is buried there. Saint Luke's is at the top of the hill, looking down towards the harbor. In the quiet and well-kempt churchyard enclosed by a tall stone wall, the granite of their gravestone is barely weathered. *Cynthia A. Widow of John R. Congdon. And Captain John. R. Congdon, died in the Sea off Cape Horn, Feb. 28, 1863.* Cynthia never remarried; she lived in East Greenwich after her husband's death at sea, a widow for 17 years until she died in 1880. John had been swept overboard in a storm off of the coast of Africa, his body never recovered. He was 43 years old.

Cynthia had joined John for one voyage — down around Cape Horn and up to San Francisco. George had come along on that particular journey, and Mary had traveled with her father as well, to Europe.

They never had the chance to spend an uninterrupted span of years together. Perhaps, even with their diaries and letters, there were ways in which they never quite knew one another. Cynthia had learned to be a mother in his

absence. John wasn't at home for his children's first steps and first sentences. The two would go for nearly a year without being able to take solace in each other's presence. Yet their devotion to one another was unflagging. Their names on the stone in East Greenwich are a memorial to that unflagging dedication. In death they are side by side, at last, to stay.

Notes

- I John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 16, 1848.
- ii Haywood, Carl. "American Contacts with Africa: A Bibliography of the Papers of the American Whalemens," p. 90.
- iii Marine Intelligence: Port of Providence, Disasters &c. Friday Morning, Oct. 27, 1848.
- iv Schüffelen, Otmar. "Glossary of common nautical terms." *Great Sailing Ships: An Illustrated Catalogue and History of 150 Extant Barks, Barkentines, Brigs, Brigantines, Frigates, Schooners and Other Large Sailing Vessels Built Since 1628*. p. 81-83.
- v Letter from Cynthia to John, February 15, 1851.
- vi John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 12, 1848.
- vii Letter from John to Cynthia, October 9, 1848.
- viii Cythia's Diary, October 10, 1841.
- ix Letter from Cynthia to John, February 15, 1851.
- x John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 14, 1848.
- xi John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 16, 1848.
- xii John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 16, 1848.
- xiii John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 18, 1848.
- xiv John's diary of the *Montgomery*, September 16, 1848.
- xv Letter from W. R. Congdon to Cynthia, October 2, 1848.
- xvi Cynthia's diary, March 13 1842.
- xvii Providence Daily Journal, October 18, 1848.
- xviii Letter from W. R. Congdon to Cynthia, October 2, 1848.
- xix Letter from John to Cynthia, October 9, 1848.
- xx Letter from John to Cynthia, October 9, 1848.
- xxi John's diary of the *Montgomery*, November 8, 1848.
- xxii Letter from Mary to John, March 24, 1851.
- xxiii Letter from Cynthia to John, October 10, 18.

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—Diary, 1852-1854. RIHS. MSS 363; S2; SS2; Box 2; Folder 19.

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Miscellaneous Papers:

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Deed, Daniel Miller to John R. Congdon, May 24, 1842. RIHS. MSS 363; S1; SS4; Box 2; Folder 13.

Quitclaim Deed from Lydia Sprague. Feb. 15, 1851. RIHS. MSS 363; S1; SS4; Box 2; Folder 13.

Witness certificate for marriage of John R. Congdon to Cynthia Sprague (St. Luke's Church, East Greenwich), March 6, 1842. RIHS. MSS 363; S1; SS4; Box 2; Folder 16.

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