

# *Chronicles of Brunonia*

---

## Searching for Home: Accounts of a Sea Captain's Wife

Stephanie Bernhard

<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/cob>

---

Copyright © 2008 Stephanie Bernhard

Written in partial fulfillment of requirements for E. Taylor's EL18 or 118:

"Tales of the Real World" in the Nonfiction Writing Program, Department of English, Brown University.

*I think you do not forget Cynthia and those who are dear to her, who are this day on the wide wide ocean, deprived of the happy privileges you enjoy, but not deprived of the presence of Him who can make glad the heart, as well on the seas as on the Land.*

— *Diary of Cynthia Sprague Congdon  
aboard the Hannah Thornton, 1852*

*Brazilian Coast: October, 1852*

From the deck of the *Hannah Thornton*, the horizon looked almost the same to Cynthia Sprague Congdon as it had from the pier at Greenwich Bay, where she used to watch for her husband John's return. Same gray, indistinct line — but without the familiar islands to break it up, the line soon lost all meaning. John told her they were sailing parallel to a country called Brazil, a land she knew nothing about except that it was thousands of miles from her native New England. And her journey was just beginning: over the next 18 months, the *Hannah Thornton* would continue south along the coast of South America, round the perilous Cape Horn into the Pacific Ocean, sail north all the way to San Francisco to unload her cargo — and then repeat the whole journey back to New York. Cynthia felt dizzy just considering such stretches of time and distance; her four-foot, ten-inch frame had never felt tinier. Maybe if she closed her eyes, she could forget the roll of the ship beneath her feet, and the sound of sails whipping in the wind, and the tropical heaviness of the air. She might even imagine herself back home in Rhode Island.

No. Cynthia tried to tell herself that this humble but sturdy triple-mast bark was home for now. Here, she could stand by her husband's side the way a wife should. Here, she would not be alone and pining as she had since 1841 when John, then a second mate and just a suitor, first left her, age 21, to sail for

Calcutta. That departure had thrown her into a fit of despair, which she channeled into a diary addressed to John. "Dear absent friend," she wrote a few weeks after he left, "I have not mentioned you in some time but is it because I have thought less of you? No I assure you it is not for you are almost continually present with me in my imagination and I sometimes fancy myself with you far at sea." When John finally returned in March of 1842, he promptly married Cynthia. She bore a daughter, Mary Remington Congdon, later that year. But John left on another voyage, this time as first mate, just as Mary was learning to speak. When he returned in 1848, he found her a proper little New England lady. He also met his son, a bright, plump toddler christened George Barrell Congdon.

Cynthia endured one more separation from John from 1849 to 1852. Even her mother Lydia, who lived nearby and helped with the children, could not relieve the terrible loneliness that continued to plague her. In March of 1851, she wrote a decisive letter to her husband, saying "it seems to me that I can never bear to be separated from you again. Why did I not say that I would go with you when you wished to make an arrangement with your owners, for me to be with my John. I cannot tell why it was, for I am sure I wished to go." Cynthia proved as good as her word: she agreed to accompany John, now a captain, on his next journey. Her first diary entry begins with a careful accounting of the crew and passengers: Mr. Moore first mate, tall and reserved, with a scornful eye; Mr. Kenney second mate, scruffy and swore often; one steward notable for his ragged clothes; one cook; 27 sailors, mostly Irish; and assorted passengers, including three women, two with children. Weather first day sailing: pleasant, with favorable winds.

Aboard the *Hannah Thornton*, Cynthia clutched George's hand. Now six years old and just learning his letters, he was rapidly outgrowing the suit she had sewn for him only months before. His big sister Mary, who was staying in Rhode Island with Lydia, was probably ready for a new dress as well and would have no mother to sew it for her. Cynthia realized with a pang that Mary would need a woman's cut by the time she saw her daughter again. A brutal wave bucked the *Hannah Thornton*, forcing Cynthia to grab the deck's railing to avoid falling and throwing her ankle-length skirts into disarray. She would have liked to ask a crew member where to find John in her moment of weakness, but she didn't want to interrupt him. Cynthia recalled the words she had written in her first diary a week after her marriage: "Let us never contend, let me always feel that I am the weaker vessel and as such yield my opinion to his. Under all circumstances let me study his happiness and as much as in my power promote it."

A deep voice from behind called her name. Cynthia turned to see John: tall and straight, with dark hair swept back from his high forehead and whiskers outlining his strong jaw. Years of exposure to sun and sea winds had tanned and toughened his skin, making him look older than his 33 years. But the creases framing his pale blue eyes only accentuated their warm expression: John rarely smiled with his mouth, but Cynthia could tell in a moment when he was pleased, as he was just now. He took her tiny hand in his and kissed it; any further display of affection would have been inappropriate on deck, where sailors and passengers could look on. But the gesture was enough to remind Cynthia why she had come on this voyage.

"We're making good time," John said. Cynthia smiled. She was his.

*Patagonia: Thursday, December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1852*

At the sound of four bells, or around 6 a.m., Cynthia awoke in her berth, her spirits lighter than they had been for weeks. Morning sunshine streamed in from the tiny window above John's empty bunk, and the *Hannah Thornton* rocked gently on a calm sea. Sick headaches, bouts of which had plagued her for years, had chained her to bed for the beginning of the month. John even delegated some of his duties to a grumpy Mr. Moore and sat by his wife, bathing her forehead in vinegar and rubbing mustard, thought to stimulate the blood, into her feet. Just when she was beginning to improve, her first Christmas at sea left her homesick. She baked cakes for the sailors and read some verses with George, but could not stop thinking about the glowing fireside at home in Rhode Island. There, harsh frigid winds would have torn the last leaves from the trees and swept the landscape brown and gray, but Mary and Lydia would have stayed warm around the hearth, comforting each other with their presence. Here on the South Atlantic, the breeze felt as balmy "as August at home," and Cynthia could not convince herself that Christmas had come.

Her mood had improved yesterday, for when Cynthia was on the deck sewing a jacket for the unfortunate steward, the watchman gave the cry of "Land, ho!" causing a tumult as all the passengers rushed to starboard. The Patagonian coast looked like little more than a dark mist to Cynthia, but she could not tear her eyes from it for minutes on end until she realized her knuckles had locked from gripping the railing so hard. This morning, Cynthia thought, smoothing

George's hair and kissing his forehead to wake him, she might use the looking glass to glimpse an Argentinean fishing village.

But Cynthia's heart sank again when she emerged from the cabin, George running ahead, and looked hungrily to starboard to see — blue. Nothing but blue water all around, meeting the blue sky above, imprisoning her in an enormous sphere of space. "I felt tired of the water," she wrote later. "I thought of home and wished myself there."

Cynthia abandoned her original project of finishing the steward's jacket, and instead hauled a trunk of her own clothes on deck with a sailor's assistance. John had advised her ages ago to air out her wardrobe and make sure none of the garments had grown moldy, as commonly happened on long voyages. Cynthia never felt the necessity of looking through her clothes because she wore the same two or three simple, ankle-length washing dresses every day. She would rather devote her time to creating new, practical outfits for her husband and son than looking after her own. But she knew she could not concentrate on needlework in her distracted state, and besides she thought it might do her some good to surround herself with a few vestiges of her former life, of home.

Cracking open the heavy oak trunk, Cynthia could barely contain her relief when a musty but certainly not rancid odor met her nose. She pulled out voluminous hooped skirts in plaid, striped, and patterned taffeta; stiff whalebone corsets edged in lace; and reliable cotton petticoats that needed just a shake and a good starching before they would be ready to wear again. Cynthia felt her spirits lift as she thought of the day when she would be able to reassume her on-shore

dress — maybe in a few weeks, if the bark made good enough time around Cape Horn to stop in Valparaiso, Chile for a short break.

She reached back into the trunk; this time, her hand fell upon a tiny, worn leather-bound volume: the Hymn book from which Mary had learned her church songs. It, too, had miraculously survived the mold. A bit of paper fluttered to the deck when Cynthia carefully smoothed open the book; she caught the scrap before the breeze could carry it overboard. Her hand sprang to her heart when she realized it was the paper baby doll Mary had cut out just months earlier. “The tears came to my eyes in a torment,” Cynthia wrote in her diary. “It brought the little creation right before me, and home and all its scenes came into my mind with renewed freshness, Dear little one how glad would I be to see you, and know of your welfare. God bless you all, and take care of you, and bring us home to safety and peace.”

The skies darkened and temperatures dropped as the *Hannah Thornton* pushed south over the following week. Her next sight of land would be the looming cliffs of the dreaded Cape Horn.

*Cape Horn: January 6, 1853*

Forming the northern bound of the Drake Passage, the strait dividing South America and Antarctica, and the Atlantic from the Pacific, was Cape Horn — a treeless island that rears up from the tempestuous sea like a tombstone. Indeed, the bodies of countless captains, sailors, passengers, and ships found final rest in the waters off the Horn from its discovery in the early seventeenth century up to the completion in 1914 of the Panama Canal, which outmoded use

of the Horn as a shipping route. Monstrous steep waves, which often reach 30 feet and occasionally climb to 100 feet in height, wrecked many vessels; icebergs, which roam the seas even in the summer months of January and February, spelled doom for others; and howling east-west winds drove still others into hazardous shoals in which they foundered. Regarding the southern winds, sailors of the day liked to say that “below 40 degrees, there is no law. Below 50 degrees, there is no God.” Cape Horn is located at 56 degrees south latitude.

Cynthia was guardedly optimistic about the *Hannah Thornton*'s passage around Cape Horn, which, on the mild, sunny afternoon of February 6, 1853, she could see 30 miles in the distance. From her perch on deck, she could enjoy the blue sky and calm sea that had evaded the bark for several days. “I must say I am thus far agreeably disappointed,” she wrote in her diary, recalling the horror stories both first hand and legendary that John had told her about the Horn. Maybe Cynthia's first voyage into the Pacific would begin with serene waters. “I think we are very much blessed if this weather continues with us a little more,” she added hopefully. “We will soon be around this dreaded place.”

But she had probably not put her pen down long before the weather began to turn. It would be many days before the sea would again be calm enough for writing, so she never described fully the approach of the first storm or the crew's reaction. In his published journal *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Charles Darwin tells of his own encounter with the Horn in 1832. Like Cynthia, he experienced a deceitful spell of pleasant weather during which he admired the island's stark beauty. Soon, however, Cape Horn “demanded his tribute. ...Great black clouds were rolling across the heavens, and squalls of rain, with hail, swept by us



with...extreme violence.” Richard Henry Dana, Jr. describes a similar experience in his seafaring account *Two Years Before the Mast*, writing that during an 1834 passage “we found a large black cloud rolling on toward us from the south-west, and blackening the whole heavens.”

On any sailing vessel, the sudden approach of so severe a storm called for one response: reduce the sails’ surface area. When John saw that ominous cloud threatening the *Hannah Thornton*, he would have cried for Mr. Moore to sound the alarm. “All hands on deck!” Mr. Moore would have cried, while Mr. Kenney clanged the bell to awaken any sleeping off-duty sailors. “Haul down and clew up!” Mr. Moore shouted, his voice already challenged by strengthening winds. At this point, John ordered Cynthia and the rest of the passengers below deck to wait out the storm. In her tiny cabin, clutching George to her chest as her needlework and bible slid across the floor, Cynthia did not see the crew shimmy up the bark’s three masts, reefing some sails and furling all the others.

Though nausea immobilized her, she could think only of her husband pacing the deck as the ship pitched and shook and was tossed about like “a plaything of the ocean,” as she would later write. How small John seemed in the face of those apocalyptic waves! How easily one might sweep him into the heaving sea and tear him from her forever! — A surge of water beneath the cabin door interrupted her thoughts, and a scream lost to the winds tore from her throat. “I was afraid, afraid, very afraid,” she wrote later. Never releasing George, she prayed to God that she and John might live, and they might one day return home and see their daughter Mary. This time, she would get her wish.

The storms did not abate over the next several days; Cynthia was rarely allowed on deck until the seas calmed. Later, she recorded her observations on one of the rare occasions John permitted her to venture outside: “The beautiful Albatross have been our companions, all the way around, and the harder the storm, the more numerous the birds. I have seen them — asleep riding on the tops of the mountain waves, and then down again in the deep valleys, as quietly as our own geese, at home, in the pleasant grass surrounded pond.”

*East Greenwich, Rhode Island: April 20, 1863*

The papers were resting on the end table in the parlor, the sunny little low-ceilinged parlor with its old upholstered chairs and friendly hearth where, just four days earlier, Cynthia had sat at her sewing as always. Maybe she had to strain her eyes a bit more to thread the needle now than a decade ago, but her work was still impeccable. The sleeve she had been sewing for John would fit him perfectly when he returned from his most recent voyage. After accompanying John on all his travels up through 1859, Cynthia had stayed home for the past two trips. The half-finished garment was still draped on the arm of the chair, where she had left it last Thursday when someone knocked at the door.

Cynthia had risen when she heard the knock, straightened her skirts, walked across the wide-planked floor and pulled the latch. Henry, John’s lawyer brother from Providence. His face, pale and drawn, said enough. Cynthia heard a hoarse, wild shriek and realized with surprise that it was rising from her throat. Or somewhere deeper, nearer.

Steady hands grasped her arms — the scream had sent Mary, now a locally-admired beauty of 21, to the door. She staggered under her mother's limp weight until Henry stepped in and helped assist Cynthia to a sofa. Supporting her mother's head, Mary searched Henry's face.

“What has happened?”

Cynthia's brain registered a few words of Henry's response: Gale. Overboard. Cape Horn. But only now, four days later, was her mind beginning to put these words together. She needed to see them in writing. For the first time since hearing the news, Cynthia was alone in the house. Mary and George, who had come home from school the day before, had gone for a walk together. The papers, neatly folded, were resting on the end table. Inches away, Cynthia's needle pinned John's sleeve to her chair. She picked up the papers and sat.

She unfolded the first: a letter to Henry from one of the owners of John's ship, the *Caroline Tucker*. “It is my painful duty to inform you of the loss of Capt. John R. Congdon. ...off Cape Horn in a heavy gale of wind, he being washed overboard. ... Every effort was made to save Capt. Congdon without avail. ... That those he has left behind may be reunited to him in that better land where gales and tempests are unknown is the wish of your friend.”

Taking a breath, Cynthia kept her hands steady as she refolded the letter. Her heart quickened when she saw a long, thin notebook folded lengthwise into thirds. Carefully, she flattened the creases and opened the fragile volume to find pages of her husband's familiar cramped, miniscule handwriting.

She flipped to the last pages of the journal and began reading in mid-February, when John was approaching the Cape and gale after gale was ravaging the ship. One storm tore a hole in the hold, causing a leak so disastrous that John ordered the spare pump brought down, and even he took his turn bailing water alongside the sailors. On February 25, after a week of misfortune, despair began to show in his diary. "I am tired of Cape Horn," he wrote. "Hope and pray we shall get clearly around by, if so catch me never again. I have made an oath if I get home all right, before I come again I hope to be blind so I can't see so as to be able to come to sea. I have promised never to give her another voyage."

The words burned into Cynthia's eyes. Why hadn't she been with John? Why wasn't she standing beside her husband in his moment of need, as she had promised she would so many years before? She imagined his strong, callused hands: how easily they had encircled her tiny wrist, supported her elbow, caressed her fevered brow. And in return, she let him go away without her; she sat in her dry, comfortable home while John battled and finally fell to nature's fury. Maybe if she had been on the *Caroline Tucker*, she could have calmed her husband, or at least begged him to rest from his labors and conserve his strength....

"February 26, 1863: I did this one letter for you my C. Oh how glad I am my C. you are not here. You would be troubled now. I had much rather be alone in all my trouble; it is bad enough for me, yet I can face it...." Cynthia's breath left her all at once. Well, there it was. John absolved her. In his love, he cared more for his wife's comfort than for her presence. He didn't need her by his side. What

of the shirts she had sewn? the children she nurtured? the faith she promoted?  
the home she created?

“February 27: Bleary gale from west a very bad sea ship very uneasy I can’t write.” The words were barely legible. Cynthia imagined John scrawling the line in his rattling and bucking cabin, hair askew and dark bags beneath his eyes from stress and lack of sleep. Cynthia remembered all too well how his stomach would have been turning and how making the slightest movement felt impossible. Yet John would have had to run out on deck and expose himself to the howling winds — how would the crew hear his commands? — and flying water — was it rain or sea or both, stinging his eyes?

Cynthia never understood how John could keep his balance on deck, but she knew he did it that dark night, knew he ran fore and aft urging the sailors to haul, tie, clew and reef to save their lives. But the pumps weren’t working fast enough, and the hold was rapidly flooding — the water level reached nearly six feet by the early hours of the morning. The extra weight unbalanced the ship, causing her to sway drunkenly from side to side. And now John was at the helm, directing the pilot, and now he ran to port to because he feared the foremost mast might fall, and he was looking up so he didn’t see the foaming wall of water rise to port. By the time John turned his head, it was too late to grab on to the nearest rope or peg like the rest of the crew had. The wave crashed over the deck, and for a moment all seemed silent as every man plunged into a new world of frigid darkness and banging elbows; John felt a hand (the first mate later said he had tried to save the Captain, but barely managed to save himself) grasping his own,

but he couldn't hold on and then the roar returned to his ears and the ocean swallowed him.

Cynthia stared at the blank space beneath John's last journal entry, but it yielded no answers, no comfort, no hope. Gingerly, she closed the volume and placed it back on the table. She sat in her parlor for a long time, dry-eyed and empty and very much alone.

*Cynthia Sprague Congdon lived in East Greenwich until her death in 1880. She never remarried.*

## Bibliography

### *Documents:*

Congdon, Cynthia S. Diary, 1841 – 1854, in the Congdon Family Papers, MSS 363, Box 2, Folders 18 and 19, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Congdon, Cynthia S. Correspondence, 1851, in the Congdon Family Papers, MSS 363, Box 2, Folders 17, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Congdon, John R. Diary, 1863, in the Congdon Family Papers, MSS 363, Box 1, Folder 9, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Congdon, Mary R. Diary, 1861 – 1865, in the Congdon Family Papers, MSS 363, Box 2, Folder 39, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Dickens, A.C. Letter to Henry R. Congdon, March 1863, in the Congdon Family Papers, MSS 363, Box 3, Folder 27, Rhode Island Historical Society.

### *Books and Texts:*

Dana, Richard Henry, Jr. *Two Years before the Mast and Twenty-four Years after*. Vol. XXIII. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. [www.bartleby.com/23/](http://www.bartleby.com/23/) [April 17, 2007].

Darwin, Charles. *The Voyage of the Beagle*. England: Penguin Books, 1989; Project Gutenberg, 1997. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/944> [April 17, 2007].

Druett, Joan. *Hen Frigates: Wives of Merchant Captains Under Sail*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Holden, John. *Glossary of Nautical Terms (c. 1814)*. Maritime Knowledge, 1997. <http://www.psych.usyd.edu.au/vbb/woronora/maritime/Glossary.html> [April 17, 2007].