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**Undercurrents: The experiences of New England maritime
women, 1790–1912**

Fournier, Constance Anne, Ph.D.

University of Hawaii, 1993

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U N D E R C U R R E N T S

THE EXPERIENCES OF NEW ENGLAND MARITIME WOMEN 1790-1912

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the role of New England women in America's maritime tradition and the effect seafaring had on their lives. It questions the absence of women's experiences in nautical history and sea literature and challenges the images of maritime women as passive victims of the seafaring experience whose lives were uneventful and unimportant. The nineteenth-century Cult of Domesticity, which confined women to the private sphere, reinforced an exaggerated image of maritime women as lonely, isolated women, and continues to obscure and simplify the reality of their lives. Neither is it accurate to assume an opposing view of these women as independent and self-sufficient entrepreneurs, an image rooted in the earlier periods of this country's settlement.

This historical study examines the writings of a diverse group of coastal women from different classes and various New England coastal communities, from small Maine harbor towns to industrialized port cities. Maritime women are viewed from their own perspective, using extensive quotations from their personal letters and diaries. These private writings illuminate their personal experiences and thoughts on a variety of important issues in their lives and in their relationships with seafaring men.

The lives of maritime women, like all women's lives, were constantly influenced by change. Not only did mariners come and go, finding themselves and their partners changed with each new reunion, but society was undergoing rapid and deep alterations from the end of the eighteenth to the close of the nineteenth century. Maritime marriages were tested over and over again, forcing couples to be flexible and to create strategies to cope with changes in their relationships and society. Many women became involved in satisfying work or activities, formed various kinds of community with others, and succeeded in enjoying active, self-fulfilling lives. In the nineteenth century, when the majority of women were confined to a separate female sphere, coastal women were exposed to, and often took on, non-traditional roles. Because of the inherent conditions of seafaring, they confronted a wider freedom of choice than woman married to men of other professions. Those who took on various roles over extended periods of time began to realize that the unconditional acceptance of the ideology of separate spheres was often unrealistic, unequal, and impractical.

As maritime women gained experience in coping with their "single" status, they became more successful in overcoming loneliness and negative feelings about their marriages. Their search for alternative lifestyles increased their self-esteem and better prepared them to successfully face the probability of widowhood.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Departures. They were always the same. Always the first departures over the sea. People have always left the land in the same sorrow and despair, but never stopped men from going, Jews, philosophers, and pure travelers for the journey's own sake. Nor did it ever stop women letting them go, the women who never went themselves, who stayed behind to look after the birthplace, the race, the property, the reason for the return. For centuries, because the ships' journeys were longer and more tragic than they are today. A voyage covered its distance in a natural span of time. People were used to those slow human speeds on both land and sea, to those delays, those waitings on the wind or fair weather, to those expectations of shipwreck, sun, and death.¹ Margurite Duras, The Lover

Traditional nautical history and fiction have not focused upon women's role in looking after "the birthplace, the race, the property, the reason for the return." Instead they have been concerned with the exploits of men at sea, their discoveries of new lands and markets for trade, naval conquests, and the high adventure of whaling, sealing, and privateering. A great many works have focused upon the economic, political, and technological aspects of seafaring. Traditionally imaginative literature has described the often harsh personal consequences of a life at sea, particularly

¹ Marguerite Duras, The Lover (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 108.

for men. The heroic exploits of many men, and some women, have been popular topics for many fiction writers. Occasionally writers have briefly and superficially mentioned the sad and lonely life ashore for the women who waited for the absent mariner to return home. Because so little has been written about the life experiences of maritime women, the stereotypical image of the lonely, waiting woman dominates the popular imagination. Sea novelists have often depicted a mariner's life as a lonely existence, but they have envisioned an existential kind of loneliness--a negation of life. This near death-in-life experience is usually seen as a penalty for failing to comply with some natural or moral law.² It has rarely been viewed as a deep grieving for one's family, home, and community.

Although real women have been left out of maritime writings, romantic images of women play an important role in all things connected with the sea. Ships, sloops, schooners, and barks often bear women's names in honor of a wife, lover, sister, mother, or daughter. Even the name Cutty Sark, the most famous nineteenth-century clipper ship, came from a Scots dialect phrase meaning "short petticoat." Sailors compared ships to women and women to ships. If a woman had a good figure, she was said to "have a good build on her" or to be "a likely looking craft." A streetwalker

² Ajit Kumar Mishra, Loneliness in Modern American Fiction (Delhi, India: Authors Guild Publications, 1984) 1-8.

who had seen better days was called "a hooker," after **hoeker**, an awkward Dutch fishing boat. A prostitute who dressed to the teeth to attract customers was called a "flash packer" or "fireship," particularly if it was thought she might be carrying a venereal disease.³

Ancient religions and mythologies gave primacy to water and all creation; even the gods themselves were believed to have been born from the waters. Sea goddesses were thought to have powers over the sea. Aphrodite, the goddess of love whom ancient Europeans believed arose from the sea, was worshiped at seaside chapels. With the advent of Christianity, she was venerated in the form of the Virgin Mary, known by seafarers as "Our Lady Star of the Sea."⁴

Beneath the bowsprits of the great sailing ships winsome ladies were carved in heroic proportions. Figureheads flaunted women's bare bosoms openly as sailors believed the sea approved of naked women and naked breasts were believed to have the power to quiet storms.⁵ Real women, too, "with their aura of continuing life," were symbols of good fortune at sea. More powerful was a pregnant woman who could ensure that a ship would never sink if she gave birth during its first night at sea. However, because women possessed

³ Linda Grant De Pauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982) 4-6.

⁴ De Pauw 6.

⁵ De Pauw 13.

powerful life-giving forces, particularly virgins and menstruating women had to be kept away from a vulnerable ship or one under construction. To this day it is considered bad luck for a menstruating woman to sew on a sailor's badge.⁶

The tendency to personify the sea as feminine is nearly universal. She is often viewed as a fickle woman, sometimes warm and maternal and at other times coldly indifferent or even cruel. The poet Swinburne, one of the few detecting a warm maternal instinct in the ocean, describes her as a safe, warm place to return to. "I will go back to the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea," he wrote.⁷ Santiago, in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, refers to the sea as "La Mar," a feminine term of endearment in Spanish.

The sea has been viewed as a destructive woman, ready to kill for ethical reasons or out of sheer malice. Thus people have believed that she does as she pleases, that she is cruel as only a woman can be cruel. In her poem "Sea Lullaby," the poet Elinor Wylie, ironically personifies this view of the ocean as the stereotypical woman whose beauty and charm disguise her cruelty:

The sea creeps to pillage,
She leaps on her prey;
A child of the village
Was murdered today.

⁶ De Pauw 16.

⁷ De Pauw 2.

She came up to meet him
 In a smooth golden cloak,
 She choked him and beat him
 To death, for a joke.

Her bright locks were tangled,
 She shouted for joy,
 With one hand she strangled
 A strong little boy.

Now in silence she lingers
 Beside him all night
 To wash her long fingers
 In silvery light.⁸

Hardly flattering, this view of woman as a cold, cruel, and fickle creature who hides her destructiveness behind beauty and charm is still prevalent in popular culture and myth. This female personification of the ocean perpetuates the belief that nature and women are ultimately evil and destructive, and, therefore, must be controlled.

The commonplace female names of vessels, maiden figureheads, and feminine references to the sea have given women little prominence in seafaring history or literature. Women have traditionally been seen as left ashore to wait virtuously for their menfolks, or to fulfill the sexual desires of seamen while in port. The obvious omission of women in nautical writings has severely distorted our understanding of the historical and social development of seafaring, and of life in the New England coastal towns. Ignorance and the over-simplification of the life experience of maritime women

⁸ Elinor Wylie's "Sea Lullaby" in Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1921), qtd. in De Pauw 3.

have been nearly as pervasive in the more recent field of women's history.

A few historians have written about exceptional maritime women on land and at sea, heroically sailing vessels single-handedly around Cape Horn or maintaining lighthouses ashore. Emma Mayhew Whiting's Whaling Wives (1952), Edward Rowe Snow's Women of the Sea (1962), and Linda Grant DePauw's Seafaring Women (1982), document women at sea since 1700, mostly as rarities in an all-male world.⁹ Snow admits that men have ignored women's role in nautical life, noting that "Since the beginning of time, women have played a far greater part in the lives of men, both ashore and at sea, than the average man cares to admit...." Observing that there are 600 documented cases of women out on the ocean "at their best and at their worst," he describes his subject matter as one which combines "two great unknowns-- women and the sea." Snow seems to feel that there are some unfathomably mysterious undercurrents in the nature of both women and the ocean, and views women as only "playing a part" in the lives of men at sea.¹⁰

⁹ Emma Mayhew Whiting and Henry Beetle Hough, Whaling Wives (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952): An interesting look at Martha's Vineyard's whaling wives at sea in the mid-nineteenth century; Edward Rowe Snow, Women of the Sea (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1962); Linda Grant DePauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982): A good discussion of women's lives aboard whalers and clipper ships.

¹⁰ Snow, Introduction vii.

In recent years, abundant studies and accounts of women pioneers have been written to balance a male-dominated approach to the study of westward expansion. Similarly, America's maritime history and literature has been an account of male expansion and endurance leaving women on the periphery as "helpmates" ashore or aboard ship as the "Captain's Best Mate." It is time that women's maritime experiences be examined from a feminist perspective. However, it is not sufficient to insert a few western or nautical heroines into our stories of masculine adventure and heroism on the wild frontier or on the high seas. In their early study of pioneer women, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson point out that many of the new topics of women's history do not fit into older accounts. The more we learn about work and family roles, the more we recognize that much of men's experiences have been omitted from both traditional western and nautical history.¹¹ The family as a unit and, particularly, the wives and womenfolk were essential in sustaining both the frontier and the maritime venture and in coping with the challenges of an alien environment.

There have been some personal accounts of sea wives' experiences in a few published collections of letters and journals, written mostly by women who were at sea with their husbands. Julianna Freehand's 1981 pictorial edition of A

¹¹ Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, Introduction, The Women's West (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967).

Seafaring Legacy is such a collection of letters, photographs, diaries, and memorabilia of a Maine sea captain, Sumner Drinkwater, and his wife Alice.¹² In the 1968 edition of Letters of a New England Coaster, Ralph Griffin presents the private family letters of Captain Joseph and Abbie Griffin.¹³ This collection, without analysis or comment by the editor, gives us a realistic, earthy and poignant account of ordinary family life in a small Maine seacoast town during the era of coastal trade in the late nineteenth century. The Griffin family letters challenge the idea, usually expressed in nautical history and literature, that extreme male individualism was the basis of a seafarer's experience and identity. James Balano's edition of his mother's sea journal, written between 1910 and 1913 on one of the last downeast schooners, offers a sharp contrast to women's sea journals written during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Dorothea Balano, an educated "modern woman," articulated important questions concerning women's issues and male hegemony which her earlier sisters at sea rarely alluded to.¹⁴

¹² Julianna Freehand, A Seafaring Legacy (New York: Random House, 1981).

¹³ Ralph H. Griffin, Jr., ed., Letters of a New England Coaster (Boston & Westwood, Massachusetts: privately printed, 1968).

¹⁴ James W. Balano, ed., The Log of the Skipper's Wife (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1979).

These published collections of family writings are anecdotal rather than analytical, and (with the exception of Dorothea Balano's) are edited to center attention upon the male head of household and his prime economic and social role. The wife's and other female relatives' letters are included to add information about the husband's role in the business of seafaring, but their letters are not analyzed individually from a women's perspective. These edited collections of family writings are useful to the historian, and provide valuable data for this study on New England's maritime women.

During several years of research throughout coastal Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, I found few published, analytical female-oriented studies which focus primarily on the New England coastal woman's experience. John F. Battick, a professor of history at the University of Maine, did a demographic study of seafaring families in 1880 in the town of Searsport, Maine. In this study Battick isolated a subgroup of eighty-nine married ships' masters and found that thirty-six (forty percent) of their wives were at sea with their husbands, while fifty-three (sixty percent) were "stay-at-homes." By using demographic material as a basis for his study of maritime couples, Battick establishes a conceptual framework for asking appropriate questions about their lives. His study illuminates important aspects of a dying way of life in the

last seafaring community in Maine, and in the nation, which literally went to sea.¹⁵

Students at the Williams-Mystic and Munson Institute (in collaboration with the Mystic Seaport Museum) in Mystic, Connecticut have written some short papers about women and the sea. Six of these essays, written by undergraduate history students, ranging from twelve to twenty-six pages in length, describe the experience of sea captains' wives at sea in the company of their husbands.¹⁶ Only three papers focus upon the waiting wife at home, and the two most comprehensive of these unpublished papers are the honors theses of women undergraduate scholars in history and American Studies.¹⁷ Cynthia Hecht's and Lisa Norling's theses center

¹⁵ John F. Battick, "The Seaport 'Thirty-six': Seafaring Wives of a Maine Community in 1880," The American Neptune, 44.3 (1983): 149-154.

¹⁶ Judy Coker, "Three Women at Sea: 1830-1910," Thesis, Williams-Mystic, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1983, 1-12; Catherine Doegnes, "The Effect of Captains' Wives Upon Whalers in the Nineteenth Century," Thesis, Williams-Mystic, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1983, 1-18; Amy Oakes, "The Maid of Athens in Historical and Social Perspective," Thesis, Williams-Mystic, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1984, 1-11; Lisa Stirling Peck, "Climb Aboard: Life for Two Women on Whalers, 1856-1861," Thesis, Williams-Mystic, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1983, 1-26; Rita F. Peruti, "Portrait of a Seafaring Lady," Thesis, Munson Institute, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1972, 1-24; Pamela Whitehead, "The New England Whaling Wife at Sea: Women of Courage and Endurance," Thesis, Williams-Mystic, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1984, 1-11.

¹⁷ Robert J. Bacewicz, "The Lament of a Seaman's Wife," Thesis, Munson Institute, Mystic Seaport, CT, 1978, 1-19; Cynthia Hecht, "Always Watching for Distant Sails: A Study of Domestic Culture and Seafaring Life in the Nineteenth Century," B.A. Honors Thesis, Amherst College, 1984, 1-117; Lisa Norling, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Wife: Maritime Marriage in Nineteenth Century New Bedford," B.A. Honors Thesis, Cornell U, 3-12.

mainly on the New Bedford area during the whaling era and attempt to analyze the long-distance marriage in terms of its historical, sociological and economic implications. Both essayists examine the effect seafaring had upon nineteenth-century marriage, the domestic ideal of women's sphere, and the socio-economics of the seacoast town. Neither paper is centered entirely on the women themselves as active agents in their own marriages, households, and communities. The two theses, although well-organized and researched (particularly Norling's), focus mainly on these women as victims of the seafaring industry. Their titles, "Always Watching for Distant Sails" and "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Wife," evoke negative images of lonely, dependent women awaiting their husbands' return. They both emphasize that these marriages, characterized by physical and emotional separation, fell short of the nineteenth-century ideal.

Recently Lisa Norling has published an article on New England mariners' wives and the ideology of domesticity, based upon her previous research on maritime families in southern New England, particularly the New Bedford area.¹⁸

¹⁸ Lisa Norling, "'How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs': Mariners' Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity in New England, 1790-1880," The New England Quarterly LXV, (1992): 422-446. See also her earlier publication: "Contrary Dependencies: Whaling Agents and Whalemens' Families 1830-1870," The Log of Mystic Seaport 42.1 (1990) 3-12; and "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Wife: Maritime Marriage in Nineteenth Century New Bedford," B.A. Honors Thesis, Cornell U, 1985, 65.

Her title, "How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs," again emphasizes the negativity and the inescapable loneliness of the maritime wife. By contrasting personal records of mid-nineteenth-century maritime wives with their earlier sisters, Norling concludes that by mid-century "the pervasive power of the ideology of domesticity and its inherent contradictions" increased the maritime wife's dissatisfaction with her long-distance marriage. Couples had become highly influenced by the ideology which Carl Degler refers to as the "companionate marriage; one of nearly egalitarian interdependence, emotional as well as social and economic."¹⁹ The ideologies of domesticity and companionate marriage expanded the wife's influence within the home, writes Norling, but her increased self-awareness and the demands of seafaring exacerbated her feelings of disappointment, loneliness, and deprivation in her husband's absence.

This view of women as victims of the masculine occupation of seafaring overlooks what women were able to gain from the experience to further their own development and self-awareness. Norling's study is important in that it examines why wives of seafarers became increasingly dissatisfied with their marriages as the century progressed. These women, however, need to be acknowledged for developing new strategies for coping alone and for voicing their

¹⁹ Carl Degler, At Odds (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1980) 38.

criticism of their husbands' intensely separate careers. This was a radical assertion for women who had previously acquiesced in the expectations of separate spheres and the male demands of seafaring.

The ideology of separate spheres increased the disjunction between women's and men's lives both ashore and at sea, resulting in the development of often separate male and female cultures. Although separate spheres allowed women more freedom and authority in running the home, shore-based couples were not immune from feelings of loneliness and alienation. They often struggled to adjust to the new and strange urban, industrial surroundings of the nineteenth century. Measuring women's lives according to a social prescription which is not necessarily their own can elicit a one-sided view of their experiences. It is important to look at the maritime woman's experience, both negative and positive, from her own individual perspective, not simply by the ideological prescriptions of the dominant society.

The new social historians have begun to examine how people edit their experiences in both written and oral history to conform better to prevailing ideas and codes of behavior. Nineteenth century women wrote diaries for particular reasons and under particular circumstances. Similarly, maritime women wrote letters to their husbands for certain psychological and social reasons. Women's writings were influenced by the expectations of the larger society

which, in the nineteenth century, assumed that women were highly emotional and sentimental, particularly in the matters of the heart. In examining these female writings one must be aware that a dicotomy may exist between women's conventional, often repetitively sentimental rhetoric, and what they actually were experiencing and feeling. Like other groups who have experienced oppression, women became adept at camouflaging their feelings with acceptable language becoming a nineteenth-century woman. Karen Lystra points out in her important book on romantic love in nineteenth-century America that the intimate life of Victorian Americans was governed by fixed rules of language and behavior.²⁰

Some historians have questioned whether the ideal of the companionate marriage was ever realized by any occupational group during the nineteenth century. In an article describing what he terms the "experimental family" of the nineteenth century, Brian Strong suggests that sentimentality may have been used to obscure deeper problems within the family that no one was able to confront. There is evidence that middle-class families emphasized the "fitting together" and avoided problems of identity, especially women, and that "at best, marriages were often adjustments in which couples managed to live not unhappily." Strong says husbands in

²⁰ Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford U P, 1989).

general "rarely spent any time with their wives" and "women spent very little time with their husbands, for 'their husbands are not their companions'."²¹

In their analysis of New England women's letters and diaries, Nancy Cott and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg found that women's friendships were central to the lives of middle-class women and that men were usually described as remote, distant figures, often without names.²² This implies that many women, besides those married to seafarers, spent far less time with men than they did with other women. Maritime marriages encompassed a wide spectrum of different kinds of unions, ranging from what Degler describes as a close companionate marriage to what Strong describes as an emotionally distant marriage.

Contemporary women historians have included various maritime women in their studies as examples of the strong, self-sufficient, independent woman. Although these historians describe maritime women as being accustomed to coping alone, they fail to explore the intricacies and contradictions of their lives. Particularly in the colonial period, women took on male duties while their husbands were away

²¹ Brian Strong, "Toward a History of the Experimental Family: Sex and Incest in the Nineteenth Century Family," Journal of Marriage and the Family 35 (1973): 458-460.

²² Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) 83; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," A Heritage of Her Own, eds. Nancy F. Cott & Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979) 311-342.

working as soldiers, seafarers, or foreign ambassadors.²³ Although it is useful to show how women have acted independently throughout history, this was not the case for a majority of women in any era. Also many women were ambivalent about dealing with these male responsibilities in addition to having full responsibility for housework and child care. Variables such as a woman's life cycle, ethnicity, class, family status, the regional economy, and their physical environment all played their part in determining how women coped in any given situation.

This dissertation begins where other studies have left off and explores the effects of seafaring on the real-life expectations, experiences, values, and feelings of New England maritime women. Because of the differences in socialization and life experiences, men and women view the world differently. Changes and continuity in both men's and women's public and private lives are documented in their personal and literary writings. Women's history sources, such as diaries, letters, sea journals, memoirs, novels, poetry, children's books, and oral history, all provide us with varied information which enables us to ask some of the

²³ Laurel Ulrich, Good Wives, (New York: Oxford UP, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, Liberty's Daughters (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Elizabeth Dexter, Colonial Women of Affairs, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931) and Career Women of America, 1776-1840, (1950; Clifton: Augustus M. Kelley Pub., 1972); Caroline Bird, Enterprising Women (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1976); Lyle Koehler, A Search for Power (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1980).

following questions about the unique roles of maritime New England women:

1. What were some of the different sex role expectations of various coastal people, and how did these expectations change over time?
2. How were idealized definitions of womanhood accepted, rejected, or adapted by these women?
3. How were idealized roles changed by seafaring?
4. What was the impact of a role definition on women who couldn't live up to its implications?
5. Did contradictions between idealized expectations and daily reality produce new roles for maritime women?

My primary source material--the personal diaries, letters, and journals of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England maritime women--has been uncovered in various historical societies and repositories throughout New England. I have attempted to read these often "mundane," everyday, private writings of coastal women as seriously, patiently, and in their entirety as one would read the private writings of eminent citizens. This careful reading of ordinary women's own personal writings has given me a glimpse into lives which are otherwise inaccessible to us.

Carl Degler warns historians about the advantages and disadvantages of using letters and diaries as sources of information. The advantages of personal writings, he says, are that they reveal people's values, attitudes, and motives as well as their actions. The disadvantages of using

letters and diaries are that they do not encompass a diversity of the population and what has been preserved may not be representative of what was not saved or written at all.²⁴

Like Nancy Cott's innovative study of New England women's letters and diaries, my study focuses upon women's values, attitudes, motives, and changing feelings.²⁵ This subjective focus demands an analysis of women's personal writings in preference to secondary sources. The analysis of women's primary sources enables one to understand the relationship between changes in circumstances in women's lives and their views of their roles as women. My sampling is limited, due to the scarcity of maritime women's writings that were saved, and does not encompass a wide diversity of the New England female population. Like Cott in her study of New England women's writings, I also focus mostly upon New England, white, middle-class women of English, Protestant heritage, who were American-born residents of coastal or rural towns and cities. However, my choice of sources is even more limited than Cott's because of my exclusive focus upon women who were personally connected with seafaring men, either as wives, lovers, sisters, mothers, or daughters.

Both pioneer and coastal women left behind their personal writings, but fewer primary documents of maritime women remain in our archives. I have not found any docu-

²⁴ Degler 29.

²⁵ Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood.

documents written by women of color or by wives of ordinary seamen. These women were often less literate and many of their documents were lost at sea or were not saved. However, there does exist, in New England historical repositories, quite a number of women's sea journals. As I have previously mentioned, some of these letters or journals have been edited into collections, mostly by later family members, with little or no attempt at analysis. New Zealand historian, Joan Druett, has read an extensive collection of nineteenth-century New England women's whaling journals for her recent book, Petticoat Whalers. Although Druett's book is attractive and provides valuable new information on women's roles aboard whalers, it is not written from an analytical, feminist perspective. Chapters VII and VIII of this study are organized around important female concerns which women voiced in their sea journals aboard both whaling and merchant ships.

Although women's writings aboard ship are more numerous than those written ashore, I have chosen to focus primarily on the lives of women left ashore. These "land-locked" women have been ignored historically and their stereotypical image has been that of lonely, waiting women. This study looks in detail at these women's experiences and attempts partially to dispel this popular belief by examining the multi-dimensional aspects of their lives. The study of women ashore is limited by the fact that fewer of their

letters and diaries have been saved.²⁶ There do exist, however, four detailed journals (also a diary of daily chores) written by women ashore between 1797 and 1856, which are analyzed in detail in the following chapters. In addition to these four journals, a number of family letters have been saved in various New England archives, exchanged between female family members and men at sea. Letters from men at sea also give valuable insight into these women's lives and are often quoted in this study. These exchanges of letters, although limited in number, give us a broader view of maritime women's experiences, values, and feelings than has been previously described in any scholarly study or maritime fiction.

The 1740s marked the beginning of "a generation of women whose autobiographical writings manifested the emergence of a new female voice and a sense of self in colonial society,"²⁷ New England culture, in particular, as Cott points out, "...generated in profusion women's private writings, organizational records, and prescriptive literature...."²⁸ During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

²⁶ Many of the women's letters were lost at sea or in foreign ports as were many ships and the men who sailed them. Women were more apt to save their husbands' or lovers' letter safe at home, unharmed by the ravages of sea and weather.

²⁷ Jill K. Conway, The Female Experience in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century America: A Guide to the History of American Women (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1985) 28.

²⁸ Cott 10.

century, the major impetus for diary writing was "the Calvinistic tradition, which encouraged self-examination and exposure of oneself to God."²⁹ These women kept diaries to keep themselves busy, to quiet uncertainties, to satisfy a need to express themselves, or to help increase their religious consciousness and sense of tradition--all of which demonstrated a high level of literacy among them.³⁰

Diaries kept by American women, says Margo Culley, "contain a rich record of their lives through three centuries and are powerful testaments of their achievements, including their achievements as writers." She calls this form of autobiographical writing literature which "springs from the same source as the art created for a public audience: the urge to give shape and meaning to life with words, and to endow this meaning-making with a permanence that transcends time...." Taken together these texts document vividly the strengths, resilience, and resourcefulness of American women. In the words of Gertrude Stein, "A diary means yes indeed." Margo Cully reminds us that these self-validating diaries were motivated by women's quiet suffering and lack of a public voice:

...the strength and resilience of American women came about through much pain and anonymity. Their diaries and journals also mark with inescapable

²⁹ Cott 15.

³⁰ Cott 16.

clarity the constraints under which women have lived in American culture and their pain.³¹

Carolyn Heilbrun notes that historically female autobiography "tends to find beauty in pain, and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance."³² Because women have been forbidden to express anger and to admit openly a desire for power, they have tended to mask their real feelings through a spiritual acceptance of reality.

The personal writings of New England coastal women bring into sharp focus emotional highs and lows these women experienced in being sometimes immobilized by feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and dependency, and, at other times, motivated by feelings of connectedness and self-confidence. Coastal women often expressed a feeling of powerlessness, due to their husband's long absences at sea. They expressed frustration with the expectation that they must take on male duties and keep up with female domesticity and childcare as well. At the same time, these women's writings exhibit a strong sense of independence of purpose and a joy in social bonding with family members and friends. The main focus of this work is how different women coped with the disparity between their private feelings and their public actions, and

³¹ Margo Culley, Preface, A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present (New York: Feminist Press at the City U of New York, 1985) xi.

³² Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988) 12.

with the gaps between the realities of their lives and the social ideals prescribed by the society at large.

New England coastal women had a unique lifestyle, which differed from their country sisters. First, they were often, and for extended periods of time, thrown upon their own resources to cope alone or as single mothers. Second, because they lived in society without their husbands or lovers, their need for love and companionship was often focused on other family members or friends. Third, living in busy port towns, where foreign trade flourished, they were exposed to influences from around the world. Sea captains brought back an appreciation for art and architecture which infected other villagers, along with a wealth of exotic goods sold along Main Street. Wives of sea captains were often given the opportunity to travel to exotic ports aboard their husband's ships. Many a captain's wife saw Liverpool, the Azores, Canton, and Honolulu before visiting a town twelve miles from home. As one writer has noted, "...Maine sea captains and their families represented the most traveled segment of American society, to whom home was a ship."³³ Like pioneer women, coastal women often coped alone while their husbands explored new territories. Both often had to be ready to pick up and move on to strange and unknown destinations when the situation demanded it. Unlike

³³ Charles G. Bolte, ed. A Portrait of A Woman Down East: Selected Writings of Mary Bolte (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1983) 142.

her pioneer sister, however, the sea wife usually could choose as to whether or not she would accompany her husband on his sea journey. Also, a seafarer's wife left at home usually had the support of family and friends within a well-established coastal community, and was not isolated on a barren, lonely frontier.

Sources for this study are drawn from maritime history, contemporary family history, and women's history and fiction. This multi-disciplinary approach breaks with the traditional format of maritime history and raises new issues that can be applied to men as well as women. Studying the roles and expectations of women in their relationships with men in the family enables us to learn more about male roles and expectations as well.

Because traditional nautical history and fiction have not focused upon family life and the social expectations of coastal men and women, we know little about how seafarers interacted with their family and what community life ashore was like. Instead, their themes have generally been man against nature or man against man within the shipboard setting. Nautical history is helpful to this study insofar as it explains the changes that have taken place in American seafaring over the years. However, because women have traditionally been left out of American maritime history, it is not very useful in helping us to understand the lives of New England coastal women. The history of American

seafaring is not discussed in any detail except when it pertains to, or influences the lives of particular women, their families, and communities.

Novels about the sea, written by such famous writers as Conrad, Melville, Crane, London, Hemingway, and more recently, Wouk and Hayden, have become classics in their assessments of man's nature and his interaction with the natural world and with other men in a harsh environment. However, these great sea stories rarely explore the mariner's unnatural isolation from family and community, or his feelings of powerlessness at the hands of controlling commercial interests ashore. In reading letters written by mariners to their lovers and wives ashore, we learn that their feelings can be quite different from those expressed in such popular sea tales of male adventure as Herman Melville's Moby Dick, Jack London's Sea Wolf, and Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim. The close examination of this personal correspondence reveals that the seafaring man, like his wife ashore, was also plagued by feelings of powerlessness, loneliness, and uncertainty inherent in deep-water sailing. Neither captains, ships officers or seamen had ultimate power and control aboard ship. Common sailors were under the authority of the ship's officers and the captain must meet the demands of the ship's owners and agents. Ultimately the ship and crew were at the mercy of the uncertainty of nature--the sea, weather and disease. Mariners suffered greatly from loneliness,

perhaps even more than did the women ashore. The hierarchical structure of the ship isolated men from one another, and the captain especially was alone in his role as master of the vessel.

In contrast, two women novelists, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Ellen Chase, and nineteenth-century poets, such as Lucy Larcom, Emily Dickinson and Celia Thaxter, have focused more on life in the maritime community than on the struggle of their protagonists against the sea. Although the sea has been an important image in many women's literary writings, these female writers have been more concerned with life around them in the coastal villages or offshore islands, and with how women learn to cope with the comings and goings of their menfolk. Often they allude to the sea as a symbol of their own psychological and spiritual expression and development, rather than as a separate natural phenomenon that must be conquered to survive. The regional writing of Jewett and Chase on the sea and seafaring gives an additional insight as to how maritime women felt about the sea and foreign ports, and how they coped alone or with family in the seacoast town. This study occasionally refers to the works of women novelists and poets who use the sea as an important image in their works, but they deserve even fuller treatment than it has been possible here to give them.

The history of maritime New England women is a part of family history, as well as women's history. Thus studies by

family historians of the past decade, which help to explain the relationship between historical variation and the individual's life cycle, are also employed in this work.³⁴ The life course perspective enables us to understand the bond between age and time--the age of the individual, the social time of roles and events throughout a person's lifetime, and the role of historical time in the process of social change.

Contemporary women's history has focused upon a debate concerning the dichotomy between the public and private spheres of influence. Because women have been relegated to the private sphere, feminist historians have centered their debate on whether this private sphere allowed women more or less autonomy within their own female sphere of influence.³⁵

Examining only private and not public spheres is not always appropriate in explaining the lives of coastal New England women, who often moved in and out of both spheres. True, coastal women, like others of their day, were

³⁴ For this historical methodology see Glenn Elder, John Demos, Erik Erikson, Tamara Hareven, and John Modell.

³⁵ For an analysis of this debate see, for the positive view: Nancy Cott's The Bonds of Womanhood, Katherine Sklar's Catherine Beecher, Carol Smith-Rosenberg's "The Female World of Love and Ritual," Daniel Scott Smith's "Family Limitation and Sexual Control;" for a negative view of women's sphere see: Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood," Gerda Lerner's "The Lady and the Mill Girl," and Mary Ryan's Womanhood in America.

relegated to the private domestic sphere and did not take an active part in the male seafaring enterprise aboard ship. However, because they were frequently alone, living nearly as single women, they often became involved in business affairs and other productive activities. Karen Hansen, in her study of nineteenth-century New England working-class women, maintains that the dichotomy of separate spheres only partially reflected the lives of these women, who in her words, "were highly active in society, seemingly oblivious to the boundaries set by the household structure. Many were visiting neighbors, attending lectures, active in the temperance and anti-slavery movements, and behaving in a manner which could hardly be characterized as 'private'."³⁶ These same social activities helped coastal women to alleviate loneliness and isolation in the absence of their male partners, and, also, through close contact with other seafaring families, to insure a viable base for their absent husbands to return to on shore.

An important purpose of this study is to examine and question two lingering images of the New England maritime woman's experience. Chapter II reviews the historical literature on coastal life, first examining the image of the lonely, waiting woman, as well as poor widows, fishwives and prostitutes; and, secondly, taking a look at the opposing

³⁶ Karen Vyonne Hansen, "Transcending the Public/Private Divide: The Social Dimension of Laborers Lives, 1810-1860," diss. U California at Berkeley, 1989, 2.

image of the self-sufficient and autonomous maritime wife. Chapter III examines two women's diaries and the letters of various other women who most closely conform to the image of the lonely, waiting woman. Chapter IV examines three diaries and a variety of letters written by women who are more independent and settled in their own marriages and family than the more lonely women of Chapter III. Common themes in these women's writings are religion, motherhood, work, and community, which helped them alleviate loneliness. Chapters V and VI examine an extensive collection of letters written between a working-class couple from a small downeast Maine village. Other letters between husbands and wives also are included in these chapters to illuminate the complexities of the long-distance marriage. Chapter VII focuses upon why women decided to leave home to go to sea with their husbands, forsaking the familiar for the unknown. In Chapter VIII we see how sailing wives, under great odds, still managed to keep their "social sphere" alive through journal and letter writing, visiting in port and from ship to ship, and even constructing "new families" in foreign ports. Chapter IX concludes that traditional stereotypes of maritime women are one-dimensional and inappropriate in explaining the complexity of their lives. It also questions the exclusive use of the ideology of separate spheres as a paradigm to explain male/female behavior within a long-distance relationship.

CHAPTER II

CONFLICTING IMAGES

Poor lone Hannah,
 Sitting at the window, binding shoes:
 Faded, wrinkled,
 Sitting, stitching, in a mournful muse.
 Bright-eyed beauty once was she,
 When the bloom was on the tree:
 Spring and winter,
 Hannah's at the window, binding shoes.¹

A popular and prevailing image of the mariner's wife, lover, mother, or sister is that of a lonely, sorrowful woman who awaits the sight of distant sails from a hilltop, window or "widow's walk." This vision of women as passive victims of the seafaring experience has abounded in stories and myths since ancient times.

In Homer's Odyssey faithful Penelope fends off aggressive suitors, weaving by day and unraveling by night, waiting for her wandering husband Odysseus to return from sea.² In the late nineteenth century Sarah Orne Jewett, noted for portraying strong and independent women of coastal Maine,

¹ The Poetical Works of Lucy Larcom, Household Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1884) 1-11. Other poems with similar themes are "Hilary," "On the Beach," "A Sea Glimpse," and "The Light-Houses".

² Homer, The Odyssey, trans. E. V. Rieu (New York: Random House, 1960)

described "the far-off look" common to women of seafaring families, whose eyes were "always watching for distant sails".³ A more recent novel, The French Lieutenant's Woman, begins with a quotation from Hardy's "The Riddle" to describe the protagonist, Sarah Woodruff, first seen on the seawardmost end of a rampart watching and waiting for the return of her lover:

Stretching eyes west
Over the sea,
Wind foul or fair,
Always stood she
Prospect-impressed;
Solely out there
Did her gaze rest,
Never elsewhere
Seemed charm to be.⁴

Nicknamed Tragedy by the villagers, she appears in the first chapter typically dressed in black, "motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day."⁵

The assumptions of both traditional nautical history and imaginative literature have shaped this view of maritime women, and the nineteenth-century Victorian Cult of True Womanhood greatly reinforced it. By assuming that men's and women's worlds were separate, that men's lives were

³ Sarah Orne Jewett, "Where Pennyroyal Grew," The Country of the Pointed Firs (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1956) 48.

⁴ John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman (New York: Signet, NAL Penguin Inc., 1970) 9.

⁵ Fowles 11.

public and women's private, writers reinforced a number of polarized images of coastal women. Common stereotypes divided them into good and bad women, either virtuous waiting women and shipboard help-mates, or unfaithful wives, vengeful fishwives, and prostitutes.⁶

An opposing image to that of the lonely, waiting woman solely dependent upon her mariner's return, is that of a strong, independent woman of enterprise. Family and feminist historians of the colonial and revolutionary periods favor this more positive image of maritime women. Foreign travelers writing about the new republic praised the assertive stance of American woman as a positive attribute of the new democracy. Traveler-historian J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, a French consul during the early years of independence, was impressed by the unique independence of Nantucket women of the 1770s. In Letters from an American Farmer he describes the strong Quaker whaling wives of Nantucket, who ran the community single-handedly, taking a daily draught of opium to keep in good spirits:

As the sea excursions are often very long, their wives in their absence are necessarily obliged to transact business, to settle accounts, and in short, to rule and provide for their families. These circumstances being often repeated, give women the abilities as well as a taste for that kind of superintendency, to which, by their prudence and good management, they seem to be in

⁶ Armitage and Jameson 145. Elizabeth Jameson gives a similar polarity of female stereotypes describing pioneer women in "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West."

general very equal. This employment ripens their judgement, and justly entitles them to a rank superior to that of other wives; and this is the principal reason why those of Nantucket...are so fond of society, so affable, and so conversant with the affairs of the world.⁷

Historian Carolyn Bird, referring to Crèvecoeur's description of Nantucket women, sees them as a "laboratory example of the conditions which developed self-reliance in American women from the beginning of our history."⁸ However, one must be cautious of this image as not all women of coastal New England lived under conditions which encouraged independence and resourcefulness. Although many women functioned independently in their husbands' absence, some took on new roles reluctantly and such roles often were re-appropriated upon the mariner's return home.

These opposing stereotypical images of maritime woman have some basis in real-life experience, but they tend to be one-dimensional distortions of reality. The first step in understanding what is accurate about them is to analyze the one-dimensional perspective and contrast it with what else was going on in these women's lives. Once such images are broken down and understood within a real-life context, they no longer loom so large. If we place these opposing images

⁷ J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (1782; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1957) 141-142.

⁸ Carolyn Bird, Enterprising Women (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1976) 30.

in the context of other realities, we may begin to see with our own eyes rather than through the eyes of others.⁹

This chapter provides a broad overview of various historical studies which have dealt with colonial and nineteenth-century coastal New England. Many of them focus upon common themes and stereotypes which influenced the daily lives and social interaction of maritime women.

The Image of the Lonely, Waiting Woman

The virtuous woman left ashore has long been seen as a poor, suffering "sea widow," for it was assumed that separation from her loved one made her life incomplete. Particularly in the nineteenth century, a woman's life revolved around pleasing her man and making the home his refuge from the increasingly isolated, complex, and competitive world of work. The absent seafarer did not return home each night and, in that age, many believed that a house was not a home without the husband's presence.

Communication between seafarers and their loved ones ashore was virtually non-existent or exceedingly slow, and there was a well-founded fear that it might bring news of a loved one's death. The "widow's walk" of the New England

⁹Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, Introduction, The Women's West (Norman & London: U of Oklahoma P, 1967) 7. The Introduction to this pioneer women's anthology illustrates how popular masculine images of pioneer women have distorted our view of the settlement of the American West.

coast became an architectural symbol of the waiting woman's anxiety and loneliness. The nineteenth-century poet Celia Thaxter captures the expectant searching gaze of these women:

I climb the stair, and from the window lean
 Seeking thy sail, O love, that still delays;
 Longing to catch its glimmer, searching keen
 The jealous distance veiled in tender haze.¹⁰

This popular view of women standing vigil on railed roof tops to await the arrival of their loved ones from some far, distant port was then and still is widely held.¹¹ An awareness that many of these women waited in vain contributed greatly to this romantic image of the waiting woman. It was not uncommon for a loved one to perish at sea or become fatally stricken with disease in some distant port, never to return again.

The anxiety that the seafarer might never return was a dominant theme in the personal and public writings of many maritime New England women. Lucy Larcom, a popular nineteenth-century poet, writes of her hometown of Beverly, Massachusetts in A New England Girlhood: "The pathos of the sea haunted the town. . . . Almost every house had its sea

¹⁰ Celia Thaxter, "Expectation," Poet on Demand by Jane E. Vallier (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1982) 140.

¹¹ A.B.C. Whipple, "The Whalers," The Seafarers (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1979) 109. The "widow's walk" usually was described as a rectangular, railed platform reached by a ship's ladder through a trap door in the roof. This image is such an integral part of our historic consciousness that nearly everyone refers to it when I mention that I am doing this study.

tragedy. Somebody belonging to it had been shipwrecked or had sailed away one day, and never returned."¹²

The fears and anxieties these women felt so keenly were matched by an empty, nearly indescribable pain of loneliness in the physical and emotional absence of their love mates. Linda Grant De Pauw points out in Seafaring Women that whaling wives suffered the most from loneliness and anxiety. A Navy wife might not hear from her husband for months, a merchant seaman's wife might be separated for a year, but a whaling wife could expect to hear nothing from her husband for four or five years! Even then, "a whaling man stopped barely long enough to be introduced to his youngest child before he was off to sea again."¹³ The severe strains of separation were expressed by one whaling wife who wrote that out of the five years she had been married, only ten months had been spent with her husband.¹⁴ A first mate commented that he had been married seventeen years and had only spent two with his family.¹⁵ During the thirty-seven years Lydia was married to Captain George Gardner, he spent less than

¹² Lucy Larcom, A New England Girlhood (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889) 96-97.

¹³ Linda Grant De Pauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982) 106.

¹⁴ Stanton Garner, ed. The Captain's Best Mate: The Journal of Mary Chipman Lawrence on the Whaler Addison, 1856-1860 (Providence: The Brown U P, 1966) xvi.

¹⁵ Susan McCooey Sherman, "Lace Curtains in the Captain's Quarters," The Log of Mystic Seaport, 20.1 (1968): 11.

five years at home in Nantucket. Another whaling wife had seen her husband less than a year during her eleven years of marriage. A popular whaling yarn involves a skipper about to sail on a short North Atlantic cruise. Reminded that he had forgotten to kiss his wife goodbye, the "old salt" replied, "What is ailing her? I'm only going to be gone six months."¹⁶

There is a popular assumption that mariners were usually misogynists who went to sea to escape women. Many men loved the seafaring life, says Battick, "...because it relieved them of tedious responsibilities set, not by implacable nature, but by niggling, opportunistic, demanding and obstreperous humans."¹⁷ However, if we examine the letters seafarers wrote their wives and lovers, we find that they loved women as much as did men ashore. What they most often complained of were the stringent deadlines and dates which still must be met to please those "obstreperous humans" both in foreign ports and at home. Correspondence between mariners and their wives attests to the fact that the long separations which commercial seafaring demanded resulted in what De Pauw calls, "...an unnatural, unpleasant life for both husbands and wives." As families got larger and the husband advanced to become master of his ship, "the

¹⁶ Whipple "The Whalers" 109.

¹⁷ Battick, "The Seaport 'Thirty-six': Seafaring Wives of a Maine Community in 1880," The American Neptune, 44.3 (1983): 150.

sacrifice of a normal family life became increasingly difficult to accept." The only solution was to take the family to sea, which became quite popular aboard both whalers and traders by mid-nineteenth century.¹⁸ In the meantime, the woman who was left behind to await her husband's return must endure the lonely life of a "sea widow." This might not be so bad for a woman who did not love her husband, but for those who did, it was often a difficult and lonely wait.

Elizabeth Day Nichols gives us some insight into the difficulties and loneliness following her marriage at the age of twenty-two to a clipper ship captain involved in the Sumatran pepper trade. In a letter to her husband, she described her feelings upon his departure:

...i went down to mothers the night that you went to sea for i could not bear to see the house after It lost its chief attracion. the brig looked beautiful the morning-----sailed but if She ever comes home it will be a more joyful-----,i try not to dispar nowing thar is a merciful god to prot[ect] you while absent.¹⁹

Helen Park analyzes five of Elizabeth Nichols' letters to her husband in an article entitled "Pepper Wife." She points out how the drama and the enormous profits accrued from these long and dangerous voyages "have obscured the losses in human relationships suffered by the voyagers and their families. The women, young and extremely vulnerable

¹⁸ De Pauw 106.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Day Nichols to her husband, Dec. 24, 1828, Waters papers, Essex Institute, Salem, MA.

amid the uncertainties of long absences, had an especially difficult time, without the compensating exhilaration of the voyage itself."²⁰

In his social history of Salem, Massachusetts in 1800, Bernard Farber notes that many young men left their families in care of relatives while they spent months and even years away at sea. These long voyages took many lives between the years of 1785-1819 when Salem was developing as a seaport.²¹ Farber concludes that young adults depended upon the assistance of relatives and friends to carry out their family duties. Many young women particularly found themselves in a "chronic state of disability" while their men were overseas. This situation was especially prevalent among lower-class families, where much-needed assistance was provided by older relatives, particularly widowed grandmothers. Farber quotes the letters of Elizabeth Nichols to her husband on a long voyage to illustrate what he terms the "various

²⁰ Helen O'Boyle Park, ed., "Pepper Wife," Essex Institute Historical Collections 94 (1958): 152.

²¹ Bernard Farber, Guardians of Virtue: Salem Families in 1800 (New York: Basic Books, 1972) 180-1. "A majority of the men who died between the ages of 16 and 30 were overseas at the time" and "almost half of the men who died between the ages of 31 and 50 were also overseas....The risk of going to sea involved not so much the danger of being shipwrecked or lost at sea as the contraction of exotic diseases."

consequences of maternal disability and paternal absence for the seaman's family."²²

...I embrace the happy oppertunity of infirming you of My health wich has not been very good since you left Salem...when i think that you are again to bee gone a nother year I can hardly bear the thought....I have moved in Mr. Swasyes house close by Mothers as I have been from thar over a year and it is plesinter to bee near your friends. Eliza Bedny has lost both her children and Caroline has lost her little boy. likewise your Aunt Bedny is dead. your folks is all well and send there love to you.²³

Farber comments that Elizabeth Nichols' letters to her husband mention only female relatives, especially the close relationship between her mother and sister, who dominated her child's life.

Margaret [the sister] says she has kissed the boy a hundred Times for you. (or) Mother and Margaret...think thear never was such a child before ...Mother says you must not forget her present. She expect you will bee so proud of him that you will think he is worth a great deal more.²⁴

What appears to be female bonding in the absence of the seafarer Farber sees as a "dissipation of paternal authority in the lower segments of Salem society, while the ideal form remained patriarchal." Mrs. Nichols' letters, he says, "convey the feelings of loneliness and uncertainty of life

²² Farber 183. The Salem vital statistics show that on April 7, 1802, Hannah, wife of James Murray, a mariner, died of consumption at 33 years of age. She was married at 20, had lost two children the year of her death, had left one daughter, and her husband had not been heard of for several years.

²³ Elizabeth Nichols to her husband, May 16, 1830; Farber 185. Elizabeth Nichols died about a year after writing these letters.

²⁴ Farber 184.

in Salem families of low socioeconomic status" and "suggest a precarious situation in which her anxieties and fears drive her toward close family ties."²⁵ Farber thus views the absence of patriarchal authority and women's turning to family or other women for support as an unhappy state. He maintains that Mrs. Nichols was driven to close family relationships, not that she might have chosen these relationships out of an awareness that such female bonding could mean emotional survival.

Carl Degler ignores women's reliance on each other in the absence of their husbands and insists that this lonely state for women increased their dependence on men:

Wives of seamen, peddlers and other traveling workers spent much time waiting, worrying and coping by themselves. And though one might think such isolation would make a woman less dependent on the husband, the record says otherwise. The dependence, after all was not simply economic or financial, though it was usually that. Principally, it was emotional.²⁶

These contemporary family historians fail to appreciate how women turned to one another for support and nurturing in the absence of the male head of household. Instead historians continue to affirm the image of the lonely, waiting woman, forced unwillingly to depend upon family. They further perpetuate a one-sided, negative view of the seafarer's wife, whom they portray as a victim of the separations

²⁵ Farber 184.

²⁶ Carl Degler, At Odds (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1980) 33.

inherent in a seafaring tradition. No one can function long in a state of perpetual loneliness, and most maritime women prepared themselves for their husbands' departures by bonding with friends and relatives. Women often invited female relatives or friends to visit or sometimes even to share housekeeping with them for companionship in their husbands' absences. Lucy Grey described her first night alone in 1824 and how she was able to cope with the immediate pain of separation.

Oh husband I cannot describe to you my feeling the night you left home the house and everything about seemed melancholy. Deborah stayed with me and that was a great comfort to me....I hope dear husband that you will not give yourself any uneasiness on my account although there is no earthly friend can supply your place yet I have many valuable friends Who will take care of me. Mary I hope will come soon and spend a week or two with me. I think it would be a great comfort to me as I have to be alone a great part of the time.²⁷

Although she said no one could take the place of her husband, she admitted in the same sentence that she had "many valuable friends Who will take care of me." It appears that she found great comfort in her female friends and relatives, or at least wanted her husband to feel she was not despairing. Other women wrote about being in the presence of family or friends who greatly relieved feelings of isolation and loneliness in facing a husband's departure.

²⁷ Lucy Grey to Capt. Joshua Grey, 6 May 1823, Hooker Collection, Schlesinger Library for Women's History, Cambridge, MA.

Many women shared intimate and emotional feelings with close female friends and relatives in the absence of the intimacy and love they had shared with their lovers or husbands. In the nineteenth century women's friendships were innovative, giving women private influence, self-esteem and a positive connection with an autonomous individual who was not a family member but a peer. These friendships provided relief from authoritarian relationships and gave women a separate arena in which to choose their own companionship. Modern feminists have found it necessary to defend, in a political sense, these close nineteenth-century female relationships.²⁸ The diaries and letters examined here give evidence of just how important these female relationships were, and how they filled the gap between loneliness, isolation and autonomy, and prepared women to live independently when necessary.

While the image of the lonely, waiting woman goes back to ancient times, it gained significance in the nineteenth century with the idea of separate spheres for men and women. It implied that a woman is incomplete without a man and, as Degler suggests, fitted well with the ideal of marital companionship, which had not been stressed at an earlier period. Letters written by seafarers to their wives and lovers ashore attest to the fact that they, too, were

²⁸ Nancy Woloch, Women and the American Experience (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) 74.

emotionally dependent upon their women to help sustain them through the trials of seafaring. Couples may have shared a mutual emotional dependency, but wives ashore suffered from another more immediate and often life-threatening dependency--the threat of poverty and even death in the cessation of their husband's financial support. The romantic image of the lonely, waiting woman of novels, poetry and movies has another darker, more frightening side for women.

The Dilemma of Poor Widows

Other historians writing about New England coastal settlements often describe the root of these women's problems as financial. First, maritime wives were economically dependent upon seafaring men, whose future and survival were anything but certain. Second, mariners often had to wait many months or even years to be paid, and in the interim their families had to get by as best they could. Third, as New England port towns grew in size and economic complexity, women began to lose access to trade, becoming less involved and informed about financial matters.

Hannah Tutt, a Marblehead historian, understood the suffering of the mariner's wife, whose future, along with her family's, was solely dependent upon her husband's return. Concerned about how Whittier's poem, "The Women of Marblehead," has maligned the women of her town as "blatant

fishwives," she honors them as brave and courageous heroines.

No women have been called upon to suffer and endure more than the wives of those who followed the sea. Many a Marblehead mother has watched her husband 'go sailing out into the deep' not knowing if he would ever return and many a mother, with poverty stalking at the door, has let her son go, at a tender age, to the dangerous and untried life of the sea that he might add his mite to the support of a large and growing family and there has been more than one Hannah, as pictured by Lucy Larcom, sitting by the window watching for the lover who never returned. Their courage and bravery are part of our heritage.²⁹

The themes of patient waiting and endured loss were familiar to the female community of Beverly. Lucy Larcom's own family had been involved in the town's seafaring activities; her father had been a sea captain and her brother a sailor.³⁰ In her poem "Hannah Binding Shoes" Larcom romanticizes the hardships of the faithful and devoted woman who waits.

Twenty winters
Bleach and tear the ragged shore she views.
Twenty seasons:
Never has brought her any news.
Still her dim eyes silently
Chase the white sails o'er the sea:
Hopeless, faithful,
Hannah's at the window, binding shoes.³¹

²⁹ Hannah Tutt, "Loyalty Characterized Marblehead Women," ([Abbott Hall, Marblehead, MA]: n.p., n.d.) N.pag.

³⁰ Mary H. Blewett, "'I Am Doom to Disappointment': The Diaries of a Beverly, Massachusetts Shoebinder, Sarah E. Trask, 1849-1851," Essex Institute Historical Collections 117 (1981): 192-212.

³¹ Larcom, The Poetical Works 1-11.

However, not all wives of seafarers waited patiently and faithfully for twenty years like Hannah. Some were overcome with anger at the poverty they had to endure trying desperately to support a family alone. Others became unfaithful wives, finding solace in another man's company. Recent historical studies of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Marblehead and Salem, Massachusetts, illuminate women's economic dependence upon their seafaring men, whose future and mere survival were anything but certain. The dangers of whaling and seafaring in general, compounded by temptations to desert to some Pacific island "paradise," offered a seafarer's wife a precarious future at best. As De Pauw points out, "...odds were two to one against any individual sailor returning from a voyage."³² Mary Ryan gives us a glimpse of the other side of the romantic image of the waiting woman expressed in Larcom's poem.

Disruption of the family and its distressing economic consequences for women were particularly frequent in port towns which sent men off to sea and to untimely death. The seaboard town of Marblehead, for example, listed 459 widows and 869 orphans (500 of them females) on the relief rolls of 1790. Sailors were also wont to leave unwed mothers in American ports.³³

The chances were slim that a single woman or a widow could support her family with unemployment growing. By 1815, the city fathers, intolerant of the poor, grumbled

³² De Pauw 106.

³³ Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present (New York: F. Watts, 1983) 100.

that "the women are lazy and of consequence dirty creatures." They attributed their suffering to the women's "want of economy," not the poor state of the fishery.³⁴ In other words, these women were being blamed for their poverty, and the realities of their economic exploitation were conveniently overlooked.³⁵ It was not until 1833 that Sarah Hale's favorite cause, The Seaman's Aid Society, was organized as a model of female benevolence. Contrary to what its name may suggest, it was not concerned with Boston sailors, but with their abandoned wives, widows and children, designed to help them help themselves:

These innocent victims of male neglect were often left destitute, in chronic distress and depraved surroundings, when husbands and fathers departed for sea for long periods or forever, leaving no provision for their support.³⁶

Keyssar, in an article on widowhood in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, explains how the longevity, structure and mobility of the population of eastern Massachusetts created "a large number of widows, relatively advanced in age, whose chances for remarriage were notably slim."³⁷ The economic support of widowed women was a problem, as their

³⁴ Ryan 101.

³⁵ Christine Leigh Heyrman, Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690-1750 (New York: W.M. Norton and Company, 1984) 241.

³⁶ Woloch 105.

³⁷ Alexander Keyssar, "Widowhood in Eighteenth Century Massachusetts: A Problem in the History of the Family," Perspectives in American History 8 (1974): 116.

their property rights were restricted. The nature of the Massachusetts economy did not encourage widows to be self-supporting, but instead made them dependent upon aid from their children or from the town. Abner Howe, a Cape Cod resident, wrote to his brother in 1857 that Olive Heffler had been left a poor widow with a child whom the town had to support since her husband had drowned Down East the previous summer.³⁸ Although most wills provided for "'a widow's needs to be met and conveniences provided,' they were cared for, protected, and dependent, but unable to choose their own lifestyle."³⁹ The positive side to this, says Keyssar, was that "the widespread problems of widowhood created pressures toward the increased independence and equality of women."⁴⁰ This study shows how mariners' wives were often forced to be independent, finding ways to cope alone and to be economically self-sufficient. However, emancipation came slowly for mid-nineteenth century women, who were isolated within the domestic sphere and unable to support themselves. Unlike their earlier sisters, who had independently operated small trading and manufacturing enterprises, Victorian women found themselves excluded from the world of private enterprise. Mill work became an option for some, but most

³⁸ Abner Howe to brother, 1 February 1857, Hammer Family Papers, Schlessinger Library of Women's History, Cambridge, MA.

³⁹ Keyssar 118.

⁴⁰ Keyssar 119.

depended upon their families, the town, or an inheritance to carry them through widowhood.

In a study of remarriage in the coastal town of Newburyport, Massachusetts, Susan Griggs attributes the large number of young widows "to the frequent exposure of mariners to premature death by drowning or disease."⁴¹ Of 124 late husbands for whom any information could be discovered, the deaths of at least twenty-nine were related to seafaring:

...these men were younger than the average. More than seventy percent of all of the men of known occupation died after the age of forty, but fifty-nine percent of those who died at sea or in another port were between twenty-four and thirty-nine.⁴²

Captain John Merrill Hodgdon (1824-1914) of Boothbay, Maine who, in all of his years going to sea, was never in a shipwreck or lost a man overboard, recounted what happened to members of his family:

Our oldest son was lost at sea on a ship bound out of New York, and another son and the only daughter we had and her little boy never came back from a trip to South America. She was married to a man that went cap'n of a bark in the South American trade, and her brother went mate with him. She had a good comfortable home but she went to sea

⁴¹ Susan Griggs, "Toward a Theory of Re-Marriage: A Case Study of Newburyport at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, VIII (1977): 198-200.

⁴² Griggs 198-199. Farber 45. Farber showed a difference of eighteen years in median age at death between two classes of occupations: merchants, professionals and artisans [63.6-55.3] versus sea captains, laborers, mariners and fishermen [45.2-49.5] and stressed wealth rather than occupation as a point of contrast.

most of the time and took their little boy along with 'em.⁴³

Captain Hodgdon's son and daughter died far from home of Yellow Fever, and her little son died on the way home and was buried at sea. Captain Hodgdon wrote of premature death by disease:

It wasn't so much the lack of doctors, though, that took seafaring folks off. When one man died a natural death in his bed at home, a good many more sailed away in vessels and never come back.⁴⁴

Griggs sees the relationship between seafaring and early death explained in part by a movement toward less hazardous occupations in middle age. Many men who started out as mariners later becoming merchants ashore.⁴⁵ The analysis of letters and diaries of coastal wives points to a pattern which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. As nineteenth-century women were isolated more and more within the private sphere, making it impossible for them to earn money, they became more dependent upon their husbands' financial support. Consequently, wives began urging husbands to take up farming or some other safe and more secure occupation. This would give a wife more financial security

⁴³ John Merrill Hodgdon, "The Way It Was": The Stories of Captain John Merrill Hodgdon (1824-1914) of Boothbay Harbor, Maine, transcribed by Flora Hodgdon Bishop, Downeast Magazine (n.d.): 81.

⁴⁴ Hodgdon 81.

⁴⁵ Griggs 199; Kenneth Wiggins Porter, The Jacksons and Lees: Two Generations of Massachusetts Merchants, 1765-1844, 1937 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967) 7-9.

while her husband lived and even after his death, as then she might inherit a portion of the property.

Lisa Norling takes a different view in her recent article on the maritime marriage, stating that wives urged husbands to give up going to sea because long separations frustrated their ideal of the companionate marriage.⁴⁶ This may well have contributed to a wife's desire for her husband to stay ashore, but economic security was an immediate need during an era when women were discouraged from working or supplying services for wages. If husbands died at sea with no property ashore, wives were left "high and dry," so to speak, without any wages. They could consider remarrying for economic support, but their chances in a society where there were more women than men were slim, as Griggs, like Keyssar, observes: "Half of the widowers of Newburyport remarried, while only a fifth of the widows did, so that remarried men outnumbered remarried women by sixty-three percent."⁴⁷ Probably the men preferred younger wives, and this put the widows at a disadvantage.

Battick, in his study of Searsport, Maine, in 1880, discovered that only nine of the thirty-six seafaring women of that year died before their husbands. The average period

⁴⁶ Lisa Norling, "'How Frought with Sorrow and Heart-pangs': Mariners' Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity in New England, 1790-1880," The New England Quarterly LXV (1992): 141-142.

⁴⁷ Griggs 200.

of widowhood for the other twenty-seven women was about twenty-two years, with the longest being forty-four years. The average longevity of these widows was an astonishing seventy-three years, with the longest life just over a hundred years and the shortest only thirty years. These women survived the perils of childhood, childbirth, and even hazardous voyages at sea to live into the twentieth century.

In contrast to these hardy downeast women, the average longevity for their husbands was sixty-four and a half years. Battick concludes that, "Save as recalled by their descendants, these courageous women have heretofore gone unrecognized."⁴⁸ Until more research is done on the lives of these sea widows, we can only imagine how they survived as widows. We do not know if they became dependent upon their extended families or if they survived using their knowledge, thrift, and ingenuity, like the strong widows in the novels of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Ellen Chase.

The Negative Image of "Fishwives" and Prostitutes

Less romantic than the waiting Penelopes, Hannahs and Sarahs Woodruffs of literature, are the "fishwives" those old crones or fish-mongers who inhabited every fishing port. To be called a "fishwife" is not a complement for any woman and can conjure up various negative images of maritime

⁴⁸ Battick 154.

women's behavior, from husband-nagging to verbal abuse. A fishwife was originally a woman who sold fish and perhaps overstepped feminine boundaries in her entrepreneurial aggressiveness. The term is being loosely employed here as a stereotypical name for a woman who behaved in a deviant or unwomanly fashion. According to various community studies of colonial maritime society, women were more apt to behave in unruly ways before the Cults of Domesticity and True Womanhood had become accepted ideology.⁴⁹ Also mariners' wives, in particular, found themselves outside of conventional society. They were married but living alone much of the time, free from their husbands' direct authority. This caused them to be stereotyped as women who might well be "on the loose" and disposed to engage in illicit behavior.

In colonial times the stress and disruption caused by the absence of a father from home often led to what the Puritan courts condemned as deviant behavior. These courts punished both men and women for living apart from their spouses, except in unusual and temporary circumstances (as when a sailor was away at sea).⁵⁰ Four mariners were

⁴⁹ Heyrman; Eli Faber, "Puritan Criminals: The Economic, Social and Intellectual Background to Crime in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts," Perspectives in American History 11 (1977-1978): 83-14; C. Dallett Hemphill, "Women in Court: Sex-Role Differentiation in Salem, Massachusetts, 1636 to 1683," William and Mary Quarterly 3rd Ser. 39 (1982): 164-175.

⁵⁰ John Demos, "Husbands and Wives," Our American Sisters, eds. Jean Friedman & William G. Shade (1972; Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1976) 30.

convicted in Middlesex county, even though they may have resided with their families when ashore, because seafaring took them away from the family and its discipline.⁵¹ In a study of Puritan criminals in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, Eli Faber describes how six out of fourteen convicted widows and orphans had fathers or husbands who were mariners or ship captains at sea for a living:

Susanna Cross, for one, was the daughter of a sea captain as well as the wife of a mariner. In her husband's absence, she kept a disorderly house and behaved lasciviously with another man, for which she was ordered to pay L5 or endure a whipping. Elizabeth Martin, wife of a wealthy ship's captain, behaved lasciviously and absented herself from Sabbath's services while her husband was away at sea. Her two daughters joined her in committing these offenses; one of them, Elizabeth, was married to another mariner also at sea. John Rowson son of another wealthy captain, fornicated, and so did Sarah Poor, daughter of a sailor.⁵²

In colonial Massachusetts, the community took over the authority of absent husbands to monitor the behavior of ordinary seaman's wives as well as captain's wives.

In her thorough study of seventeenth century New England women, Lyle Koehler found that by the 1690s more and more single women were having sex without marriage, often with transients, seamen, Indians, English soldiers, Black slaves and servants.⁵³ Even married women were known to

⁵¹ Faber 129.

⁵² Faber 128-129.

⁵³ Lyle Koehler, A Search for Power: The Weaker Sex in 17th Century New England (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1980) 439.

trample upon their husbands' sexual prerogatives by having sex with another man. Hannah Uffit refused to sleep with her husband but had sex with a sailor, an occupation representing the lowest stratum in society.⁵⁴ The percentage of female criminal offenses for fornication exceeded that of other decades. Koehler states:

Despite the outspokenness (of the 1690s), occupational activity and self-declarative appearance of large numbers of women of seacoast Massachusetts, there is no record of secular women forming support groups which then pressed for equal rights.⁵⁵

Stringent social control and the threat of being accused of witchcraft by the Puritan autocracy most likely prevented these more assertive and enterprising women from organizing. In her appendix, Koehler lists several mariner's wives of Essex County, on the northshore of Massachusetts, who were accused of being witches: Elizabeth Carey married to a Charleston, Massachusetts, mariner, accused of witchcraft, escaped to Rhode Island; Mary Ingersol Cox, a Salem mariner's wife, was accused of witchcraft; Alice Parker, a Salem fisherman's wife, was hanged for witchcraft; Wilmot Reed, a Marblehead fisherman's wife, was also hanged for this "crime."⁵⁶ Although married, these women were often living alone and their presence in the community may

⁵⁴ Koehler 146.

⁵⁵ Koehler 439.

⁵⁶ Koehler, Appendix 482-488.

have been threatening to other wives, young girls, and men, leaving a vacuum in the social structure of the community.

C. Dallett Hemphill, in her study of women in court in seventeenth-century Salem, sees a connection between changes in sex roles and changes in the nature of social relations during Salem's transition from a small farming community to a bustling seaport. Women began to feel more and more economically helpless as the town grew and developed. Because of increased economic complexity, women became less involved and informed about financial matters. In the earlier years of Salem's history, an unhappily married woman was more likely to "rail and scratch" at her husband or fight back if he abused her. Women reacted to a disappointing marriage in a similar way to men. As time passed, however, they started referring to themselves more and more as "poor and woeful women," and they were more likely to seek help from the court or from friends than to fight back.⁵⁷ A significant trend was that in Salem's earlier years, before 1650, women's misbehavior took the form of more aggressive crimes, such as defamation, assault and battery, theft, and contempt of authority. This more aggressive behavior became less and less typical for women while the cases of absence from meeting and of sexual offenses rose. Hemphill concludes from her studies of the Salem criminal records that "as women became more domestic,

⁵⁷ Hemphill 164-175.

they became less likely to behave and misbehave in a traditionally male way."⁵⁸

A century later colonial Marblehead, located on a point of land just five miles east of Salem, was noted for disorderly conduct amongst its seafaring inhabitants.

Between 1716 and 1738, the number of townspeople indicted for violent crime was more than double that of Salem and for crimes against property more than triple...breaches of the peace were far more common in Marblehead than in other provincial Essex County seaports, even Salem...Trouble frequently began even before local fishermen and sailors came ashore, for the congestion of Marblehead harbor alone invited turbulent encounters.⁵⁹

Controversies between fishermen and shoremen, often over the price of fish, caused disruptions, as well as homecoming celebrations. Fishermen who had been at sea for long periods of time were unaccustomed to the constraints of local authority, and besides many of them had no voice in the elections of local officials.

...local women occasionally joined the fray, just as they had during the seventeenth century. Their participation usually took the form of domestic disputes that escalated into street brawls and cursing competitions with offending spouses...But occasionally women banded together, as they had earlier, to defend family interests.⁶⁰

Heyrman sees unrestrained private enterprise after the Revolution as a root of Marblehead's individualistic social

⁵⁸ Hemphill 174-175.

⁵⁹ Heyrman 248.

⁶⁰ Heyrman 250.

structure. Founded as a fishing camp for the benefit of Salem merchants, from the outset the fishing economy had undermined the strength of those institutions that enhanced stability in public and private life elsewhere in New England.

The risk and demands of the maritime economy caused basic discontinuities in the lives of Marblehead's seafaring families. Shipwreck, storms, and disease made the sudden disappearance and premature deaths of male family members a more familiar occurrence among fisherfolk than among farmers. In addition, frequent and prolonged absences from town probably deprived Marblehead fathers of the strong authority wielded by the patriarchs of New England's rural villages.⁶¹

The seasonal demands of fishing undermined the authority of Marblehead men over their wives and daughters. From February to September, when English sea captains and sailors swarmed into the harbor, seafarers' households were comprised almost entirely of women, girls and children. Young and adult males were away fishing for long stretches on the banks. This male absence contributed to an increase in the number of Marblehead women charged with sexual misconduct. Although Marblehead's size was just half that of nearby Salem in the early 1700s, proportionately more Marblehead women were indicted for fornication than Salem women. Nearly half of these defendants were single women or

⁶¹ Heyrman 254-255.

adulterous wives, and many of the men involved with them were not settled inhabitants of the town.⁶²

...a transient seafaring population of fishermen hired for a season and the sailors and ship captains of transatlantic merchantmen augmented significantly the illicit sexual activity of Marblehead's wives and daughters...the expansion of production and the intensification of commercial activity made family members even more estranged and strangers even more familiar.⁶³

Not only did single girls and married women become sexually involved with transient seaman swarming New England port towns, but a "subculture" of enterprising women of another type inhabited what the sailors called "Fiddlers Green"--"the Front Streets and Water Streets of Yankee Land."⁶⁴ Stan Hugill in Sailortown called these working women:

rapacious and licentious old bitches ...Most sailor pubs had girls attached, either freelance whores, easy-living waitresses or what would now

⁶² Heyrman 256-257.

⁶³ Heyrman 259.

⁶⁴ See A.B.D. Whipple's Yankee Whalers in the South Seas (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954) 181 for a description of Honolulu's "red light district," reputed as the worst of them all. "They turned it into the pesthole of the Pacific, 'Cape Horn,' the whorehouse district, was so named because of the truism that the whalers hung their consciences on the Horn on the voyage out and picked them up again on the way home. The district was known all over the world for its riotous debauches, and the whalers accordingly felt called upon to go on their wildest sprees in Honolulu." Skippers did not dare to allow their men to go ashore, not out of concern for the Hawaiians, but because they feared few would return to the ship.

be called 'hostesses,' as well as resident harlots.⁶⁵

The Madame was an important part of the brothel system, and the sailors usually called her "Mother Judge." Often wondering how such disreputable women could be called "Mother," Hugill adds:

...it is fairly easy to see why there were so many 'Mothers' and 'Mas' among the women boarding-house keepers who catered for Jack--and who often shanghaied him. In their case the explanation probably was--as we say nowadays--a mother image. Jack's life at sea was far removed from women, from mother, home, and family. Since most seamen were unmarried and rarely saw their mothers, the woman who ran their boarding-house, who fed them when ashore, and, in some rare cases, did their darning, sewing, and washing, was the nearest human being they ever met resembling 'mother.'⁶⁶

It is ironic how the "oldest profession" is associated with female caregiving, regardless of its respectability. These women became the family away from home for many a wandering sailor. Organized prostitution served the sexual needs of lonely mariners and offered them some semblance of family.

Hugill fails to draw attention to the inequalities that created the economic appeal and viability of prostitution for poor, working women. No matter how hard the temperance ladies tried to reform the seafarer or eradicate the "red light" district, as long as there was money to be made and women who needed it badly enough, this alternative lifestyle

⁶⁵ Stan Hugill, Sailortown (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1967) 72-75.

⁶⁶ Hugill 76.

remained open for the women less concerned about their reputations.

The Image of the Independent Woman

During the Revolutionary period, Nantucket was an island where, unlike other communities, women outnumbered men four and even five to one. Because husbands were away on whaling voyages for long periods of time, wives resorted to their own resources, adapting to a community of women who became accustomed to making their own decisions.⁶⁷

The men at their return, weary with the fatigues of the sea, full of confidence and love, cheerfully give their consent to every transaction that has happened during their absence, and all is joy and peace. 'Wife, thee has done well,' is the general approbation they receive, for their application and industry. What would the men do without the agency of these faithful mates?

During the blockade of Nantucket by the British, the island's women exhibited enterprise and adaptability to existing circumstances. They clothed the population with wool from the sheep they tended and the flax they grew, and "their initiative in trade gave rise to legends of blockade running that may well have been based on facts we can no longer verify."⁶⁸ There are stories of Nantucket women

⁶⁷ Bird 30.

⁶⁸ Bird 31. Keziah Coffin, while her husband was away whaling, appears to have played both sides in her pursuit of profit. Pretending to be a Tory, Keziah was granted permission by the British commander patrolling the island to use her

successfully trading in dry goods and provisions and fitting out vessels for merchant service, with business failure uncommon.⁶⁹ Writing in the 1880s from Nantucket, Eliza Barney observed that half a century earlier "all the dry goods and groceries were kept by women, who went to Boston semi-annually to renew their stock." She could recall the names of nearly seventy women who since that time had "successfully engaged in commerce, brought up and educated large families, and retired with a competence."⁷⁰

Not only was Nantucket an isolated island of predominantly women, but it also was settled by Quakers who early on asserted women's worth. Quaker theology altered traditional views of women and gave its female followers opportunities that most women lacked. Thus Nantucket provided enterprising women with a supportive environment that did not exist anywhere else in North America.⁷¹ What Crevecoeur called "incessant visiting" was extremely important for eighteenth-century Nantucket women, as it was later for

own ships to supply loyal subjects of the king on the island. Securing a monopoly of the trade with the mainland, she sold firewood and fish at the highest prices and when desperate neighbors couldn't pay, she took mortgages on their property. After the blockade was broken, Keziah lost her "ill-gotten fortune."

⁶⁹ Bird 31; Elizabeth Dexter, Colonial Women of Affairs (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931) 160.

⁷⁰ Bird 32.

⁷¹ Bird 32; Mary Maples Dunn, "Women of Light," Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton's, eds., Women of America: A History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) 115.

nineteenth-century women, a way to transcend the limited boundary of one's own household and alleviate loneliness.

The absence of so many of them [men] at particular seasons, leaves the town quite desolate; and this mournful situation disposes the women to go to each other's house much oftener than when their husbands are at home: hence the custom of incessant visiting has infected every one, and even those whose husbands do not go abroad.⁷²

It is evident in many historical writings that during the Colonial Period coastal women were actively involved in trade. Laurel Ulrich's outstanding research in the early court records of northern New England for her book Goodwives found women of seventeenth-century port towns independently active in various types of business enterprises. Hannah Grafton, the wife of a Salem mariner, traded imported items for food instead of growing or preparing it. She must have learned where to go to keep abreast of the arrival of ships and to establish contact with the proper housewives with whom to trade her more exotic goods. Like other mariners' wives in business for themselves, she operated a shop attached to her house, selling hardware and sewing notions.

Examining court cases involving fishermen, Ulrich discovered some of the responsibilities their wives had taken on as "deputy husbands." Anne Devorix "supervised spring planting and protected 'hogsheads, barrels, and flakes' at the shore from the incursions of a quarrelsome neighbor." Edith Creford of Salem frequently acted as an

⁷² Crevecoeur 141-142.

attorney for her husband, at one point signing a promissory note for thirty-three pounds in "'merchantable cod fish at price current'....These women were necessarily obliged to transact business, to settle accounts, and to rule and provide for families."⁷³ In 1710 Elizabeth Holmes of Boston and Patience Marston of Salem sat down together and settled accounts accumulated during a voyage to Newfoundland. Neither had been on ship, but they were acting as attorneys for their husbands, the owner and captain.⁷⁴ Elizabeth Dexter gives evidence that women pursued a surprising number of occupations arousing little comment:

The woman merchant, hotel keeper, teacher or printer before 1776 did her work without apology or apparent sense of restriction, and she was judged by her achievements.⁷⁵

Mary Cranch, married to John Cranch, a mariner, managed a boarding house in Boston from 1744-1769 during his absence. In 1756 she wrote an assertive letter to John Touzel of Salem demanding her one-third share of her uncle's estate:

Sir This is to acquaint you, that I would not have you take up, with Mr Manning offer of a Tenth part of Uncle Brown's Estate, by any means, but

⁷³ Laurel Ulrich, Goodwives (New York: Oxford U P, 1980) 41.

⁷⁴ Document signed by Elizabeth Holmes and Patience Marston, 1709, Barton Family Papers, Essex Institute, Salem, MA.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Anthony Dexter, Introduction, Career Women of America, 1776-1840 (1958; Clifton: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1972) xii.

defer it, till you hear further from me, I understand that a Third part of Uncle Browns Estate does belong to me, beyond all Dispute, I likewise understand you intend to come to Boston very soon, if you do not come before you hear further from me, I shall send you, a Certain Account what you may depend on, wch [which] will put the Matter beyond all Dispute--no more at present--from--
Yours--to serve

Mary Cranch ⁷⁶

Women even ran auctions at taverns for prize cargoes of European ships captured by American privateers (especially during King George's War, 1740-1748, and during the Seven Years' War, 1756-63).⁷⁷ For these "she-merchants" the arrival of a ship was a particular incentive to advertise goods, for instance as "Imported in the Hibernia, Captain Child, from London, and to be sold by Mrs. Redmond."⁷⁸

The seaboard towns of New England were prosperous around 1800 and select schools flourished according to Reverend Bentley's diary of Salem. "We have an immense number of schools in Salem...many schools kept by females for instruction of young ladies...."⁷⁹ In Boston Elizabeth Perkins, a widow with eight children and an extensive importing and shipping business to attend to, was a part owner

⁷⁶ Mary Cranch to John Touzel, John Touzel Papers, 1727-1785, Essex Institute, Salem, MA.

⁷⁷ Dexter, Colonial Women of Affairs 10. The proprietor of the King's Head Tavern in Boston was Widow Davenport, and "Widow Lawrence kept a nautical tavern in New York, for a 'Publick Vendue' of the cargo of prize ships was frequently held at her house 'on the New Dock'."

⁷⁸ Dexter, Colonial Women 22.

⁷⁹ Dexter, Colonial Women 9.

of a vessel leased to the French government. She was concerned for sick women and children and was active in philanthropies.⁸⁰

Women married to seafarers with questionable reputations also proved themselves to be independent and successful money managers. Robert Ritchie suggests that pirates' wives, like the wives of other seamen left at home for years, "had far greater authority over the finances of the family," and made many more important decisions than their rural sisters. Wives of lucky and loyal pirates may have had substantial sums to deal with.⁸¹ Pirates were often away from home from two to ten years, but many stayed in touch with their families and made arrangements for them. "This continuing web of obligation implies that some of the men never left society completely behind and that they hoped to return home. Piracy for them was an interlude in an otherwise normal life, although they hoped it would be a profitable interlude."⁸²

Mary Beth Norton in Liberty's Daughters emphasizes the importance of friendship networks and a familiar environment

⁸⁰ Dexter, Colonial Women 154.

⁸¹ Robert C. Ritchie, Captain Kidd and the War Against the Pirates (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1986) 122. The wife of one of Kidd's pirates was widowed (outlived four husbands) and was put in jail after Kidd's death. There was no reason to keep her there and after regaining her freedom, she acquired her property again and picked up part of Kidd's loot.

⁸² Ritchie 122-3.

for women left alone, like female patriots during the Revolution who called themselves "temporary widows."

....Patriot women who managed the family property in the absence of their men folk tended to find the experience a positive one. Although they had to shoulder a myriad of new responsibilities, they did so within a well-known and fully understood context: that of their own households. Accordingly, aided by friends and relatives, they gained a new sense of confidence in themselves and their abilities as they learned to handle aspects of the family affairs that had previously fallen solely within their husbands' purview. And the men, in turn, developed a new appreciation of their wives' contributions to the family's welfare.⁸³

With extended periods of experience, women learned more and more about family finances and their husband's knowledge became more outdated, remote and vague. These women's letters show an increased familiarity with business matters and a willingness to act independently. The women who had the easiest time adjusting to their husband's absence were those who were unhappily married.⁸⁴

Like Crevecoeur, most modern feminist historians have tended to overemphasize the positive independence of these early American women who so successfully carried on family businesses in the absence of their menfolk. As Laurel Ulrich points out, "...for some women the realities of daily life in coastal New England enhanced the role of deputy husbands. For others, discrepancies in education as well as the on-again-off-again nature of the role made involvement

⁸³ Mary Beth Norton, Liberty's Daughters (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980) 214.

⁸⁴ Norton 116-117.

in family business just another chore."⁸⁵ Some women were insecure in handling complex business arrangements, and most women had other things to do, namely a constant round of household chores. Women lagged far behind men in their ability to write, a discrepancy which, says Ulrich, actually increased in the eighteenth century. Instead of keeping account books, women usually were involved in an oral trade network.

...as long as independent female trade remained a minor theme within the larger community ethic, it did not threaten either male supremacy or economic unity of the family.... The role of housewife and deputy husband were two sides of the same coin ...talent for trade wasn't an ability to handle complex business affairs.⁸⁶

Upper-class women married to men of the elite merchant class were more apt to be excluded from the family business. As Mary Ryan points out, the merchants who were involved in America's foreign trade in the thriving northeast seaports came from the upper-classes. The sea captains and the descendants of the elite mercantile class were males and rich enough to dispense with the female economic partner. In the 1690s very few women appeared as stockholders of Boston's shipping fleet. Eventually a few wealthy families monopolized early eighteenth century importing, and says Ryan:

⁸⁵ Ulrich, Goodwives 43.

⁸⁶ Ulrich 46-47.

....The female presence among the city's merchant elite was entirely erased. The wives and daughters of these business leaders played only indirect and symbolic roles in the making and maintaining of the family fortune. The female's most important service was to consolidate her family's wealth and power through a well-calculated marriage.⁸⁷

John Battick emphasizes how important marriage links were for shipbuilding, ship owning, and manning vessels in major seaports along the Maine coast.

The Seaport dynasties of Nicholsons, Pendletons, Carvers, etc., perpetuated themselves by intermarrying with the same intensity with which their sea-brought earnings were jointly invested. Sons-in-law were found mates' and masters' berths in family ships. Daughters inherited vessel shares which, combined with those of their husbands, established the risk-limiting, broad-spread pattern of community ownership of vessels. And in at least one instance...a family's fortune in ship shares was protected from possible liens against a shipbuilder husband by transferring them all into the wife's name.⁸⁸

New England coastal women took on both the role of the married woman dependent upon her husband and the role of the single woman struggling with her own social and economic independence and personal autonomy. Often, as they were left alone for longer and longer periods of time, they became more independent and found meaningful activities to alleviate their loneliness.

⁸⁷ Ryan 51. "The merchant elite of Salem, for example, was an exceedingly inbred circle, with no less than forty-two marriages between cousins within a single generation. The merchants' daughters carried into marriage the name, trade connections, and capital of their fathers, thereby attaching great economic consequence to their matches."

⁸⁸ Battick 149-154.

These various stereotypical images of maritime women are one-dimensional and lack the rich description of the complexities of their lives. The following chapters focus on various maritime women's diaries and letters which illustrate that these images were a small part of the maritime woman's experiences. Their lives were never static, as these images suggest, but were constantly changing in accordance with a woman's age and other variables such as her ethnicity, class, family status, the regional economy and the kind of settlement.

The conflicting stereotypes of maritime women reflect changes in women's roles in the different historical periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of the two, the most provocative and salient is that of the lonely, waiting woman. However, the experience of the maritime woman was above all characterized by the range of feelings attached to the role. There were times when a woman, in her husband's absence, felt sad, lonely and dependent, not knowing what to do with herself. At other times she might feel independent and self-sufficient, busily involved with others or in some important activity. A mariner's wife was married yet alone and the on-again, off-again nature of the relationship required flexibility and ingenuity in order to cope with the changing situation effectively. The independence she developed in being alone enabled her to make choices regarding her own future and that of her marriage.

CHAPTER III

LAND-LOCKED WOMEN

We could not have the sea,
But we could remember words
 Like white sails blowing
Among the wings of gulls...
We could not leave on ship,
But...we could have words.¹

Words and the memories they evoked were vital part of maritime women's emotional lives. In their private writings they used words to express their most personal and subtle feelings. Attempting to come to terms with their inner conflicts concerning their roles and ideals, New England coastal women became absorbed with letter and diary-writing. Their personal documents provide us with a valuable, multi-dimensional picture of their complex lives, which transcend the simplistic stereotypes of the lonely, waiting woman or the independent entrepreneur.

In their collection of excerpts from American women's diaries, Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter view the diary in particular "as a valid literary form, one that for

¹ Kay DeBard Hall, "Words Like Sails," Christian Science Monitor 18 Feb. 1944, qtd. in Joanna Carver Colcord, Sea Language Comes Ashore (New York: Cornell Maritime Press, 1946) 17

women has been the only available outlet for honest expression." In spite of the most repressive social circumstances, some women still managed to attain "an inner freedom of personal integrity when others remained alienated from their true nature."² Women were led by an unconscious impulse to express their innermost feelings on paper and to cultivate the habit of psychological scrutiny on a more or less regular basis. The diary form resembles women's lives in many respects:

emotional, fragmentary, interrupted, modest, not to be taken seriously, private, restricted, daily, trivial, formless, concerned with self, as endless as their tasks. Confusion about the conflicting demands of love and work in relationship to the authentic self leads to loneliness, by far the most common emotion expressed in diaries; loneliness stemming either from physical isolation from normal outlets for discourse,... or from psychological alienation from one's milieu,...or from lovelessness.³

Society's restrictive and gender specific definitions of love and work unconsciously concerned many women. Confined to a nurturing role within the domestic sphere, women felt excluded from the outside world, yet they had a strong desire to participate in the world. The conflicting demands

² Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter, eds., Foreword, Revelations: Diaries of Women (New York: Vintage Books, 1975) 3-4.

³ Moffat & Painter 5. Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: Women's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835, (New Haven: Yale U P, 1977) 16. Nancy Cott points out that two types of diaries came out of the Protestant tradition: 1) brief accounts of daily tasks preformed with little or hidden self-revelation, and 2) a confessional and explicit record of one's feelings, self-examination, and even self-castigation, from a religious or secular point of view.

of what is now defined as two opposing spheres of influence, along with their social and physical isolation, caused women to feel confused and lonely. Moffat and Painter find loneliness to be the most common emotion expressed in all women's diaries, not just in those written by women involved with seafarers. The diary gave women the courage to acknowledge their demons and allowed them to bring their individuality to a fuller consciousness. By honestly and regularly examining their own thoughts and feelings, women developed a sense of self. In nineteenth-century terms they became "persons of character."⁴

Women then were limited by the cultural imbalance between work and love. The sphere of love was viewed as their domain, while men were involved in the world of work. This preoccupation with love over work left women with a warped expression of their individual potential. As a result, they often occupied themselves with "self-pity, masochism, manipulation, celebration of the torments of the heart, invalidism, madness."⁵

Mary Beth Norton finds in her survey of women's diaries and correspondence of the late eighteenth century that women habitually referred to themselves in self-deprecating and negative ways, as "weaker vessels, imperfect, and helpless." They bemoaned their lack of confidence and inarticulateness.

⁴ Moffat & Painter, Foreword 7.

⁵ Moffat & Painter 7.

They often belittled their domestic work and accomplishments, apologized for innumerable failings, and even referred to their own imbecility.⁶ This inferior self-image is apparent in the writings of the nineteenth-century maritime women presented in this chapter and is a reflection of the social world in which they lived. The negative light in which they saw themselves reflected an oblique awareness of their own psychological alienation from a direct participation in active, public life.

Women in seafaring communities, who were involved with men engaged in long ocean voyages, were particularly vulnerable to feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Maritime women, like most wives, were accustomed to depend upon their husbands for economic, social, physical and psychological support while they were home in port. When abruptly their men set sail for long voyages, the women suddenly found themselves trying to adjust to being alone and coping with the heavy responsibilities of life. Some of the duties they had to perform were traditionally male responsibilities, which women had little experience in handling. Wives of seafarers had to learn to cope with the dual role of being married, while being physically absent from their mates, and being single, yet not free to live a single life. Women caught up in this ambivalent state of being partially

⁶ Nancy Woloch, ed., Women and The American Experience (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) 73-4.

married, partially single could aptly be called "sea widows." One female correspondent referred to Nantucket women as "Cape Horn Widows."

This dual yet incomplete and ill-defined role contributed to these women's feelings of uncertainty. Their writings highlight the complexity and ambiguity of their emotions, desires and behaviors. Comparisons can be made among the women themselves, revealing the degree to which each of them conformed to the standards of her time. Each woman must be viewed, however, as a unique individual with her own way of coming to terms with the disparity between the reality of her role in a long-distance relationship, and the social ideals and expectations of the larger society. Constant accommodation and re-evaluation of her situation became a way of personal survival and growth. A willingness to accept sudden change and choose from a variety of coping strategies then followed.

The few documents maritime women have left behind testify to the deep psychological pain they suffered in the absence of their mates. Their diaries and letters give us a unique glimpse into these women's inner lives, which were filled with complex and changing emotions and thoughts. They focus not only upon the physical return of their loved ones, their chief protectors and providers, but also upon the return to "normal" or traditional married lifestyles. While their mariners were far away at sea, life was often

difficult and lonely for some of these women. They were seldom prepared to support themselves economically nor were they emotionally equipped to behave as self-sufficient, autonomous adults. Until quite recently women moved directly from their parents' homes to their husbands', allowing little or no interim for self-development or independence. It was not common or acceptable for women to live alone before marriage, to establish a career, or to participate in some venture.

At first glance, the women in this chapter appear to be exaggerated stereotypes of the lonely, anxious, waiting woman. However, upon looking more closely at their writings and their use of rhetoric, one is able to detect a desire to move beyond their lonely state of anxious waiting towards a more positive connection with a world of activity and community.

The Young, Unsettled, Single Woman

A long-distance relationship was particularly anxiety-producing for a young, newly married or engaged woman, who was not yet sure of her fiance's or husband's true character, was not yet established in any gainful pursuit, and lacked a solid network of family and friends. The two diaries which will be discussed in this chapter deal with two younger, uncertain women of the mid-nineteenth century,

who were not as yet economically, emotionally or socially secure. Analyzing nineteenth-century New England women's motives for keeping diaries, Nancy Cott suggests that feelings of uncertainty might be one of several variables (including loneliness) which motivated diary-keeping:

Unmarried women were "unsettled", in the language of the day, and had stronger motives for self-scrutiny--for self-examination of their prospects--than did married women who already had made their most significant life-choice.⁷

The historian Mary H. Blewett, in her article on the diaries of a Beverly, Massachusetts shoebinder, sees young New England women of the early nineteenth century as being severely restricted by separate spheres, which limited their chances for education and gainful employment outside the home. Their circumstances made them dependent on finding a man with "prospects." When either the man's feelings or his economic prospects were uncertain, the young woman's anxieties intensified, along with her dependency and inability to act or influence events critical to her future.⁸

If marriage did not necessarily guarantee security, one might wonder why a woman would choose to marry a mariner, when she knew that a seafarer's occupation was one of the most hazardous and that his absences would be lengthy.

⁷ Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 15-16.

⁸ Mary H. Blewett, "I Am Doom to Disappointment: The Diaries of a Beverly, Massachusetts, shoebinder, Sarah E. Trask, 1849-51," Essex Institute Historical Collections 117 (1981): 192-212.

Because marriage was considered economically and socially essential for women, not marrying usually meant being poor and being scorned as incomplete. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century coastal New England, it made economic sense to marry a seafarer, particularly if the man had the resources to advance his position aboard ship. It had long been the traditional choice of women who grew up in New England coastal towns, where there were few alternatives. Young, marriageable women might be influenced by girlfriends, who were often involved with mariners and who felt that these men offered a certain worldly charm worth waiting ashore for. Young women often romanticized their lonely relationships, envisioning the mariner's calling as a brave and noble venture. Patient waiting gave the woman left behind, like Sarah Trask our first diarist, a certain moral or even spiritual status in her maritime community: "...oh dear me, no peace for me, always gone to sea for a living, and yet it is sailors I love, they are noble and brave men...."⁹

The newly involved or recently married woman could easily epitomize the traditional, stereotypical image of the lonely, waiting woman with no other purpose in life but to await her mariner's return from sea. Nineteenth-century New England women were bound more closely to home than were

⁹ Sarah Trask Diary, 10 Feb. 1849, Beverly Historical Society, Beverly, MA.

their colonial sisters. With increased industrialization and urbanization, the work economy was no longer centered in the home. Women's direct participation in the economy declined and they became preoccupied with housekeeping, child-rearing, issues of morality and self-introspection. Women were expected to conform to the assumptions of the Cult of Domesticity, which stressed rearing a family and pleasing a man as a wife's most important goals in life. This orientation did not foster character-building or autonomy to help coastal women cope with or compensate for the absence of their men.

The romantic Sarah Woodruff, heroine of The French Lieutenant's Woman, was successful in using her lonely image to attract another man, whereas our real-life Sarah feared she might be doomed to a life alone: "I am doom to disappointment, and discourage, I dare not speak my thoughts to anny one."¹⁰

Marriage occupied the thoughts of twenty-one-year-old Sarah Trask, a working woman who lived in the seacoast town of Beverly, Massachusetts, just north of Salem. She was uncertain about her future and her marriage, as her prospective husband Luther Woodberry was absent on a long sea voyage. Speculations as to Luther's whereabouts and his anticipated date of return filled Sarah's 1849 diary. She struggled to control her feelings of despair and frustration

¹⁰ Sarah Trask Diary, 12 May 1849.

while continuing to work at binding shoes and assisting her mother in domestic tasks. Although bolstered by a group of friends in similar circumstances, she frequently succumbed to pessimism as she imagined her future. Marriage seemed especially attractive to Sarah as her only real prospect for economic security and social acceptance.¹¹

Sarah's father, a laborer, had died of consumption the previous year, and she now lived with her widowed mother and unmarried brother. In their small house, like Hannah in Lucy Larcom's poem, "Hannah Binding Shoes,"¹² she sat by the window watching the many ships enter Salem and Boston harbors while she bound shoes: "I saw so many vessels go into Boston this week and everyone I hoped would be the HSP but I found I am disappointed."¹³

Sarah expected to marry Woodberry, who had sailed away from Boston in January 1849. At the time of his departure she began a diary which "expressed her feelings, scrutinized her behavior, and gave her exercise in improving her writing

¹¹ Blewett 192-212.

¹² Larcom, Lucy, The Poetical Works of Lucy Larcom. Household Edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1884). Lucy Larcom, like Sarah Trask was also a native of Beverly, MA who returned there in 1853 to teach school. She lived on Cabot Street with her married sister and organized a private school for young girls and began to write her first poetry. Her early themes were of patient waiting and endured loss, all familiar to the female community of maritime Beverly. Lucy's father had been a ship's master and her eldest brother was a sailor. (Blewett 194).

¹³ Sarah Trask Diary, 30 June 1849.

and spelling."¹⁴ Mary Blewett points out that:

Sarah Trask's diaries expose the grim reality of anxiety, determination, and tedium that underlay the sad image depicted in Larcom's poem...Her time spent at work was also diminished by her unpaid duties helping her mother in the kitchen and doing housework. Like Larcom's "Hannah," Sarah was poor, unable to support herself on her earnings as a binder, and lonely in the absence of her prospective male provider. She felt that her future lay with him, contingent upon the dangers of seafaring.¹⁵

Blewett's article on the Trask diary focuses on Sarah's one-sided dependency on Woodberry. It thus qualifies Degler's analysis of the "mutual nature of emotional dependency between men and women in marriage."¹⁶ Luther did not share Sarah's emotional dependency, making her hold upon him tenuous and uncertain, especially since he wrote her only once the entire time he was away. No intention of their marriage was announced to the town, and "it is apparent that Luther resisted Sarah's advice and her emotional demands, choosing instead freedom of action."¹⁷ Blewett emphasizes Sarah's series of disappointments on hearing no news of Luther's return, all caused by what she termed her "wildly unrealistic expectations." Although she seemed to understand all too well the limits of her power, she persisted in her "ritual of sacrificial suffering," which elevated her

¹⁴ Blewett 193-4.

¹⁵ Blewett 196-197.

¹⁶ Blewett 198. Degler 29-50.

¹⁷ Blewett 198.

moral superiority.¹⁸ She appears as an almost exaggerated stereotype of the lonely, waiting woman. Her self-evaluating diary of 1849 expressed the conviction of her lack of power and control over outside circumstances. Despite her hopes, she felt it was useless, even evil, to complain about her situation. She feared it would be wicked if she expressed her anger and impatience, and that she must submit to God's will in order to be happy. Struggling to be more submissive and pious, she controlled her anger and desire:

...she believed that her devotion and her willingness to suffer daily disappointment would bring Luther safely home to her. This faith insulated her from the well-meaning but often terribly cruel skepticism of her Beverly neighbors.¹⁹

Carolyn Heilbrun points out that traditionally "female autobiography tends to find beauty in pain, and to transform rage into a spiritual acceptance...Women have been forbidden anger and open admission of desire for power and control over one's life."²⁰

The wife of a seafarer was expected to be brave and stoical. Sarah felt the whole town of Beverly was observing

¹⁸ Karen Hansen in her discussion of Sarah Trask says, "This same behavior by a middle or upper class woman would probably have been applauded. In the working class context, most people considered it inappropriate and ridiculous, including many of Sarah's friends and her mother." Karen Vyonne Hansen, "Transcending the Public/Private Divide: The Social Dimension of Laborers' Lives, 1810-1860," diss., U of California at Berkeley, 1989, note 127.

¹⁹ Blewett 198-199.

²⁰ Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988) 12-13.

her and she was fearful to speak her mind and be ridiculed:

No news for me, and I am disappointed, now I shall not look for news, but for their return, and hope it will be soon, I dont care if I do get laugh at, for looking so soon, something seem to tell me that they will come soon, I rather hope and be disapointed, than have anny one tell me that they will not be here yet, for that is provoking, I never believe them.²¹

She expressed her fears in her diary, along with her strong opposition to Luther's suggestion that he might seek his fortune in the California gold fields upon his return.

California, like the sea, had become a symbol of loss for Sarah and her friends:

Oh, California, that is all I hear. Most everyone is going there, and, I fear many will go that will never come back to their friends again. I am glad that I have not any friends that have gone there.²²

The knowledge that Luther was considering going to California on his return and that others thought it best angered her still more:

I must say I was a little mad today, Mother said the Salem folks thought that L. W. better have gone to California, I dont, and other folks need not concern themselves about him, I had much rather he would be [where] he is, that at California for then I should not expect to see him again and how I do if nothing happens...I wish folks would not mention the barque the H.S. Page to me, for every body knows better than me, when to expect them...²³

²¹ Sarah Trask Diary, 7 May 1849.

²² Sarah Trask Diary, 26 January 1849.

²³ Sarah Trask Diary, 10 August 1849.

Sarah loved the idea or image of the sailor in spite of the complications such a career introduced into her life: "...I love to view the water and the vessels as they sail back and forth....I do love the sailors, and the ocean and those who are kind to the sailors."²⁴ She took pride in joining other stoic coastal women in passing God's endurance test, and she believed that her devotion, faith and daily disappointments would bring Luther safely home and protect her from the skepticism of her neighbors, friends and family: "But I will keep up a good heart, and trust in God for he alone is able to guide and return him in good time."²⁵

Feeling morally superior in her faithful waiting for Luther's return, Sarah stated her disapproval of a Beverly girl who was unfaithful to her lover at sea: "...it is not right, how can she think of it, but we are not all alike, I could not do so, no never...."²⁶ She prided herself on her loyalty to a man who failed to return her commitment. Even her mother predicted a dark future and a dull life for her daughter:

...and now Mother foretells a dark future for me, but what [makes] her I cannot tell, none of the family but me are destine to so dull a life...I say to Mother; Why do you think so, she will not tell me, she tell me that I shall see, before many years But I shall hope for the best, and trust in

²⁴ Sarah Trask diary, 31 March 1849.

²⁵ Blewett 199; Sarah Trask Diary, 15 January 1849.

²⁶ Sarah Trask Diary, 28 February 1849.

god and in the end, Doubt not all will yet be well...²⁷

Annoyed that others were so skeptical of her future, Sarah replied, "I dont think it concern other folk, when they come."²⁸ In reality, she had no control as to when Luther would return; so she struggled to maintain control over her own thoughts and emotions in the face of others' skepticism. However, she continued to feel uncertain and uneasy and wrote that she would be able to work better if she could only hear from Luther: "My mind is all up in heaps. I cannot feel easy."²⁹ Anxious about the uncertainty of her future, Sarah slept fitfully:

...I am so nervous, I do not like to sleep alone for fear some one might...run away with me before morning, I do not think they would keep me long though, they would be glad to get rid of me I guess.³⁰

Her dream reflected deep fears of rejection and possible anxiety about actually being with a man. She could not resist self-denigration, although she admitted that her friend Lydia was also having a difficult time waiting for her lover as well: "...L.A.B. kind of crazy tonight, she said so."³¹

²⁷ Sarah Trask Diary, 28 May 1849.

²⁸ Sarah Trask Diary, 29 July 1849.

²⁹ Sarah Trask Diary, 12 April 1849.

³⁰ Sarah Trask Diary, 2 August 1849.

³¹ Sarah Trask Diary, 3 August 1849.

In May Sarah was delighted finally to receive a letter from Luther, but she gave no summary of its contents, only the date of his expected return. Clearly she was disappointed in "its lack of emotional reassurance," which she took out on herself: "I guess I can be Married now, that is if I can find anny one fool enough to have me...."³² Even her dreams gave her little encouragement of Luther's interest in her: "...went to bed but was rather lovesick...saw L.A.B.[Lydia Burnham] and L.W.[Luther Woodberry]....in my dreams,...and what was more L.W. did not speak to me."³³

Instead of taking a critical view of seafaring and what it exacted from the abiding woman, Sarah blamed the ocean and the will of God, over which she had no control and promptly chastised herself for her impiety:

Oh dear me, no peace for me, always gone to sea.
Sometimes I wish there was no ocean, but that is
wrong for me to murmur. It is right for God so
ordered it that he should go to sea for a
living....³⁴

In a traditionally female way, the internalized humiliation of being ridiculed by her mother and friends was transmuted into self-criticism of her own character:

...I always look on the dark side. Never mind if
we shall meet again if nothing happens at the end
of five months, but I hope before. What a silly

³² Sarah Trask Diary, 28 May 1849; Blewett 206.

³³ Sarah Trask Diary, 23 July 1849; Blewett 108.

³⁴ Sarah Trask Diary, 10 February 1849.

girl I am always dull, always thinking how long it is....³⁵

Sarah clung desperately to her fantasy that Luther's ship would return soon, although her own pessimism continually crept into her consciousness:

I am beginning to fear I shall not have my say about Luther coming home...I have been very impatient. It seems as if I can not wait for Luther to come. I am beginning to think I am an old fret, always tense about something. I am a wicked girl, I know, finding fault with our heavenly father the one who gives us all things. I will try to do better for the future. In a few years from now, I shall think the trials I now have are nothing to compare with the trials of then, if I should live.³⁶

Stubbornly she insisted on continuing her long suffering and waiting, subjecting herself to further ridicule:

Well I dont care for I shall look for them when I have a mind to, for I dont care if other folks dont look, I shall I will, I can be disapointed I know, and it will not be the first time, I guess, But I am so ugly tonight, I am beyond control.³⁷

Unfortunately Sarah's trials were not over as she concluded her 1849 diary, parting with it as one would a loving friend. She gave the following account of the heavy traffic sailing in and out of the waters around Boston harbor:

I saw a good many vessels going in and out of Beverly, 48 schooners went out of Boston, 11 our of Salem, a brig went into Lynn, 2 Brigs and 3 barks went out of Boston and 2 brigs and three

³⁵ Sarah Trask Diary, 10 February 1849.

³⁶ Sarah Trask Diary, 29 July 1849.

³⁷ Sarah Trask Diary, 10 August 1849.

barks went into Boston. A brig went out of Salem. All of them between 6 and 9 in the morning.³⁸

In her usual disparaging manner she said farewell to her diary:

Well, I must say goodbye for now I cannot write any more until I get a new book. Oh, fare thee well. And now my journal is done of seven months. But, not much improvement I fear in writing or in conduct, but, so it is. May I do better next time, much better. Sarah E. Trask, age 20, August 1849. If my friends should this book read, please excuse mistakes and writing as they will find it is bad. Oh, most beautiful journal, I must say goodbye.³⁹

Luther safely returned home from the Mediterranean, but left again with friends in the fall of 1849 or spring of 1850 for the California goldfields. Sarah's worst fears became reality. After an illness of six months, Luther died in January 1851 at the age of twenty-four. He was aboard the bark Cuba returning from California, and was buried at sea.⁴⁰

Sarah's began a new journal on May 1851 which consisted of just two entries mourning Luther and her sister Lizzy, who had died in childbirth that spring:

Oh, What is life to me now. Why care I for life, since I have seen my brightest hopes decay. Would that California had never been heard [of]...A vast change has taken place in my prospects within the last six weeks...I have seen my Best friend on earth, Depart for a far Country, with bright prospects before him and my hope was, that he would do

³⁸ Sarah Trask Diary, 14 August 1849.

³⁹ Sarah Trask Diary, 14 August 1849.

⁴⁰ Blewett 210.

well, and return safely...But how vain were my hopes, For Death has claimed him [too], for his own.⁴¹

At last freed from her waiting, "Sarah joined the Beverly community of bereaved women. She listed her friends in nine couples and noted the loss at sea of five of the nine young men":

All found a Grave in the ocean.....
While our circle of girls, have never been broken by
Death.....⁴²

Sarah's "circle of friends," described in her 1849 diary and discussed later in this study, was an important part of her daily reality and helped her cope with loneliness and waiting.

Because Sarah left no further diaries, we can only guess as to her subsequent social and psychological state. After Luther's death she gave up her diary and her shoe-binding, and remained in Beverly the rest of her life. When her mother died and her brother married, she moved in with her older sister and her husband, who took in several boarders. Sarah helped with the housework. By 1870, there were fifteen boarders, mostly young men who worked in Beverly's new shoe factories, and Sarah, then forty-one, worked with another woman her age as a domestic servant in her sister's boarding house. She retired in the 1880s and lived by herself in various small houses in Beverly. In 1892 she

⁴¹ Sarah Trask Diary, 21 May 1851.

⁴² Blewett 211; Sarah Trask Diary, 22 May 1851.

died of consumption at the age of sixty-three.⁴³ Sadly, it appears that her mother's prediction that Sarah would lead a dull life turned out to be true.

"I Believe I Became a Widow, as so I Became a Bride"

Now he is gone again to traverse the same pathless ocean, and incur the same cares and trials, to be tossed upon the merciless waves of the restless unquiet deep, while I the lonely have but to wait, or look forward to the time of his return, which now looks like an eternity, and think of the events of the past year, which have perhaps, been of greater interest to me than any year before, as being the only time I ever spent with my husband, every incident of which, is indelibly engraven upon the tablet of my heart. Some of the recollections are very pleasing, and cause a glimmering of sunshine, upon my otherwise, clouded and unhappy mind....⁴⁴

These are the melodramatic words of Rachel Hurd Putnam, writing in her diary in 1855-1856, after her husband of two years had left again for sea. Like Sarah Trask, Rachel dreamed about being by her own fireside with her husband beside her, but her expectations had only led to disappointment. Neither woman was sure that her man wished to be with her, and each took the lengthy absences as personal. Such an attitude caused them to be dependent upon outside circumstances. Neither Sarah nor Rachel was in control of her life and each felt dependent upon her man's personal whims.

⁴³ Blewett 211.

⁴⁴ Rachel Hurd Putnam Diary, 17 December 1856, 15 November 1855, Essex Institute, Salem MA.

Also, neither had an avocation or family of her own to keep her actively and psychologically occupied.

Rachel, about twenty-five years old, lived alone in a rented room in Manchester, New Hampshire, not far from her parent's home in Londonderry, where she occasionally visited.⁴⁵ After her husband's departure, she seemed to have few interests to occupy her time and her diary was permeated with feelings of restlessness and what she termed "unreconciliation":

My little chamber which has been our little home, for the past year, is home to me no longer, it is deserted and oh how lonely. I can't sew or read, but wander upstairs and down, look out of the windows, listen to the bleak winds sighing 'cold dreary winter is coming'. What a prospect! Was ever a mortal more unreconciled, away with thought! I can write no more tonight!⁴⁶

Rachel, like Sarah, felt very dependent upon outside circumstances. She admitted that she was unable to control her obsessive longing for her husband. Home was incomplete for her without his presence, and she stated directly in her diary that she had no other ambition than to make her husband happy. If she could not do so "life would indeed be a burden."⁴⁷ This sole ambition to please another made the time she spent alone quite unfulfilling and nearly unbearable:

⁴⁵ Rachel was probably born around 1830 in Londonderry, N.H. She married Horace B. Putnam on November 24, 1853.

⁴⁶ Rachel Putnam Diary, 15 November 1855.

⁴⁷ Rachel Putnam Diary, 31 May 1856.

My little chamber, where we spent so many happy hours, is deserted and unpleasant, nothing wears a cheerful aspect now. I wish I was not so dependent upon circumstances for happiness, the world is beautiful around me (so everyone says) but yet my truant mind wanders far far away, for something or somebody, it cannot find here.⁴⁸

Rachel described her Thanksgiving Day, which, although spent with her family, was still incomplete without her husband's presence:

The day has been very pleasant to all but me. There is no pleasant day; why should there be, Horace my Husband is not here, his place by my very side is filled by another; I wonder how he has fared today and if he has thought of me, as I have of him!⁴⁹

Other sea widows experienced holidays as particularly difficult times. Like Rachel, Abbie Griffin of Stockton, Maine also missed her husband at Thanksgivings, even though she lived in the midst of an extended family:

I was over to Uncle Henry's Thanksgiving day for a turkey dinner. It was very nice indeed. I should have enjoyed it highly if you had been there.⁵⁰

Abbie's Christmas was even more disappointing and lonely: "Yesterday was Christmas, and a very lonesome one for me. I was alone all the afternoon and evening till eleven o'clock."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Rachel Putnam Diary, 22 June 1856.

⁴⁹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 29 November 1855.

⁵⁰ Abbie to Joseph Griffin, 3 December 1871, Letters of a New England Coaster, 1868-1872, ed. Ralph H. Griffin, Jr. (Westwood, MA: Privately Printed, 1968) 207.

⁵¹ Abbie to Joseph Griffin, 26 December 1871, Griffin, 216.

Rachel attended a Fourth of July celebration in Manchester with Mr. Cheney, whom she referred to as her "gallant." She admitted she had a satisfactory time, but she was constantly reminded of her husband's absence and thought that a married woman should be escorted by her husband. Rachel and Abbie were lonely on family holidays, but Sarah Trask felt forgotten on Valentine's Day:

It is Valentine's Day and I don't like it a bit because no one has sent me any Valentines. Never mind, a letter from over the sea will be a good Valentine. Just such a one as I should like from my best friend.⁵²

Being housebound for five weeks with rheumatism intensified Rachel's loneliness, and she lamented that she was unable to rejoice in the beauty of spring and make herself happy: "How much I have wanted some one, whom I could feel free, to call upon, to do little favors for me."⁵³

Like Sarah's, Rachel's diary was her closest friend to whom she could disclose her most intimate thoughts and feelings:

This little journal is the only confidential friend, I have in the world, and here at least, I should dare write my thoughts, could I find words to express them...My mind wanders, but Oh! how vainly, for a partner of all my joys and sorrows; loneliness seems to be my portion, however much I may regret it...but I have no one to make me so [happy]; but must depend upon myself.⁵⁴

⁵² Sarah Trask Diary, 14 February 1849.

⁵³ Rachel Putnam Diary, 6 May 1856.

⁵⁴ Rachel Putnam Diary, 13 January 1856.

The fact that she did not hear from her husband for months at a time added to her feelings of isolation:

But I do not even hear from him, though he has been gone six months!! Dear Horace! how much I want to see him tonight--I am quite sick in body, sick also in mind, all in the house are asleep, save myself. Good night! To whom? To what? ⁵⁵

After a sleepless night she said, "...I think I stay in the house too closely. How much I miss Horace to ride and walk with me."⁵⁶ Being a proper lady of the nineteenth century, Rachel did not take the initiative to go out and enjoy herself alone or with another woman friend, unescorted by a male. Like Sarah Trask, Rachel stubbornly clung to her feelings of disappointment, which hung like a dark cloud over any enjoyment she might have experienced. She wrote: "...His absence is sufficient to cast a shadow on all other pleasures, and at times, it seems as though I could not put up with it."⁵⁷

In December of 1856, Rachel recommenced her diary nearly two weeks after her husband's next departure. She had kept no diary while Horace was home; so we may assume that keeping one helped her to cope with her loneliness during his absence. Horace had spent four weeks with her after a year's separation. Following this second departure, Rachel seemed more reconciled to being a "sea widow."

⁵⁵ Rachel Putnam Diary, 6 May 1856.

⁵⁶ Rachel Putnam Diary, 13 June 1856.

⁵⁷ Rachel Putnam Diary, 31 May 1856.

Indeed she felt this was destined for her own good. Turning her grief inward, she rationalized that in some way she was not good enough to deserve having her husband close by. Her only consolation was that Horace probably was lonely too:

I have lived with my husband but one year, though we have been wedded three times the period...And though I have in years past, considered my Husband's business, his continued absence, is almost a curse upon myself. I begin to think differently of it now, I feel that what seems dark and mysterious and hard to face, now, may prove for my own good at last...It is evident to me, that, we were never made to live together, his home will always be on the sea. I believe I became a widow, as so I became a wife. And Horace is lonely too. I know he is and feels this moment, as unhappy as myself.⁵⁸

Rachel complained again about her health, which she said was not improving. Life for her seemed to be full of ills of body and mind. It is easy to imagine that a kind of hypochondria could easily develop in women with little human contact and few worthwhile activities to occupy their minds. Although her sister was with her, she longed for her husband's company and intimacy:

I want some company these cold dreary days & nights, to fill in a measure the place of my Absent Horace, not of course that I miss his company, for I have had so little of it, that it cannot be that, but if he was here he would build the fire for me and a great many other little affairs, that I now am obliged to do myself or go without.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Rachel Putnam Diary, 17 December 1856.

⁵⁹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 8 February 1857.

Her sarcasm here veiled her anger with Horace for being away so long and so often. In both Sarah's and Rachel's diaries there is evidence of anger at being abandoned and being unable to control the circumstances of their relationships. This anger was camouflaged by feelings of obsessive loneliness, which was an appropriate feeling, passive and submissive, for a proper nineteenth-century woman to indulge. Rachel would not have considered it acceptable to rail angrily about in the streets or seek out another lover as the earlier "fishwives" of Marblehead and Salem did when they were dissatisfied with their lot. Sarah condemned such behavior as immoral and unfaithful when one of her girlfriends stepped out with another man while her fiance was at sea. Rachel did, however, allow herself to be properly escorted to social events by Mr. Cheney, her "gallant."

Another woman who found herself similarly isolated during the same period as Rachel was Lizzie Howe of Cape Cod. Both women shared the same despondent feelings about being shut up alone during the long dreary New England winter. In desperation Lizzie wrote her husband Abner:

...for I am sad and very lonely and time never appeared to pass so slowly as it does now and how to pass this long dreary winter I know not if I could only hear from you oftener it would be cheering but to be shut up so it were from all that makes life desirable is more than I am able to bear at all time. I often try to overcome such feelings and look on high for strength to support

me through very trying circumstances of life to that Supreme Being.⁶⁰

Unlike Rachel, Lizzie, like many women of the nineteenth century, called upon God to help her through her ordeal. Religion was an important emotional and spiritual outlet for many bereaved "sea widows" who were overwhelmed by feelings of loss. Rachel never wrote in a religious vein, but she did dream that her husband had returned for good, only to be disappointed again:

I dreamed last night that he had returned with the kindest heart, to roam no more, & I was just enjoying the pleasing assurance when I was told it was all a delusion. I could not believe but what he had told me was true, but when I looked for him, he could not be found & I knew that he had left me, without saying a word about it. I awoke, and found it was nothing but a dream!!⁶¹

Horace's long separations did not foster trust, and Rachel seemed plagued by an underlying fear that her husband might leave one day without telling her.

Moving back and forth between her rented room in Manchester and her parents' home in Londonderry seemed to add to Rachel's insecurity: "I find that whenever I change my place of residence, if only for a short time and distance, that my thoughts, are more constantly of him."⁶² By not

⁶⁰ Lizzie to Abner Howe, 2 October 1854, Hamer Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA.

⁶¹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 1 June 1857.

⁶² Rachel Putnam Diary, 1 June 1857.

making herself at home in either place she failed to become involved in any on-going activities or social relationships.

The pain of absence was aggravated by slow and difficult communication. Letters between ship and shore moved slowly across the Atlantic, around the Horn and across the Pacific. Often they never reached their destination at all. One whaling husband received only six of the more than 100 letters his wife in New England had sent him.⁶³ Communication between a vessel at sea and its home port was random and risky: "...a large percentage of all letters were hopelessly delayed or went astray entirely."⁶⁴ Rachel never knew when or if Horace would receive her letters:

I wrote my Husband a letter a few days since, which, is quite an event to me; though I don't know as he will ever receive it. It seems almost like sending it out of the world, it will be so

⁶³ Whipple, A.B.C., "The Whalers," The Seafarers (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1979) 109-110. In the mid-1850s Honolulu became an important whaling town and established a post office, among other amenities of home, which greatly helped this dismal situation. Before that whalers had used mail drops on various uninhabited Pacific islands, often consisting of a large box nailed to the top of a post. "Outwardbound whalers would leave packets of letters from New England for vessels already in the Pacific. Ships whaling the area would stop to pick up these letters and to drop off others that would be collected and carried home by whalers whose cruises were ending." One popular drop was on Charles Island in the Galapagos, at the head of a sheltered cove, which whalers called Post Office Bay.

⁶⁴ Elmo Hohman, The American Whaleman (New York: Longmans, Green, and Col, 1928) 86-88. Letters would be sent by every ship sailing to where the intended recipient was believed to be. Men at sea also sent letters by every ship they met, in port or in passing on the ocean, that seemed likely to reach home before they would.

long before it will reach its place of destination.⁶⁵

Rachel wrote that her frustration in not knowing whether a letter would arrive or not made her feel reluctant about writing:

Three months have passed slowly away, since my husband went to sea, and the time for writing to him, has arrived, but when I think of the distance that lies between us, and the long time, a letter will be in reaching him, it takes away much of the pleasure in writing....⁶⁶

Women often expressed more contentment in writing in their daily journals than they did in corresponding with their husbands. Sea wives frequently expressed feelings of frustration and sadness that the only means they had of communicating with their husbands, proved to be so unrewarding:

....I presume he has written me by this time, though a long long time must pass before I receive it, a slow, tedious way of communication, not so quick as we can hear from the other world, if spiritualism is true.⁶⁷

Even when letters were received, they did not always solve the problems of distance and separation, and they could bring more anxiety than comfort. A letter might report illness of a loved one, and it might be months before further news was received.

Horace and Rachel's correspondence caused frustration during his first voyage in 1855-1856. Rachel expressed

⁶⁵ Rachel Putnam Diary, 20 March 1857.

⁶⁶ Rachel Putnam Diary, 12 February 1856.

⁶⁷ Rachel Putnam Diary, 12 February 1856.

concern and surprise that Horace was dissatisfied with her letters:

He writes that he received my letters, but was sadly disappointed in them. I did not know that I wrote anything unkind to him, I did not intend to, certainly, though I must own, I have been sort of unhappy sometimes when thinking of him. I do not wish to wrong my own Husband, and do. Hope, I shall never have occasion, to think, he is other than the very kindest & best. I wish to be worthy of my Husband's best affections, and to know I have them.⁶⁸

When Horace left on his second voyage, it was seven months before Rachel received her first letter from him. She learned that his health was poor and that her letters had not given him the pleasure or comfort she had expected:

....I was happy to read the evidence of his love & kind remembrance towards myself, but sadly pained to know that he was in poor health & spirits, and that the letters I wrote him, had not been such a comfort & pleasure to him as they ought, and as I intended they should. I can think of nothing unkind, or that did not speak the warmest regard for my own Horace, I certainly felt them, if my pen failed to express it. How I wish I could see him this eve, to tell him how sorry I am, to have caused him a moments unhappiness.⁶⁹

Rachel felt that even her words failed to express her true feelings and fell short in pleasing her husband. Although correspondence helped relieve some of the pain of loneliness, misunderstandings did occur and one was unable to confront the other or explain situations or feelings clearly.

⁶⁸ Rachel Putnam Diary, 31 May 1856.

⁶⁹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 25 June 1857.

Correspondence over such a great distance, taking many months to reach its destination, was often outdated or inappropriate by the time it was received. In a typical female way Rachel blamed herself for her husband's dissatisfaction, which was likely a reaction to the disappointment and unhappiness that she was unable to disguise in her letters to him. Rachel was keenly aware of her unhappy state and admitted it never was her nature to be happy. She reprimanded herself for not being more content and consoled herself by saying she believed that Horace was as unhappy in his situation as she was in hers. Probably he was, as many letters written by married men aboard ship expressed feelings of loneliness and anxiety over their families ashore. Rachel gave her own explanation why Horace did not like her letters:

Dear Horace, he does not like my letters, because they are not written in better spirits. I will try to seem cheerful, when I write him again,, let me feel as I will. I ought to be happy, I suppose, to know that I am loved & cared for by my Horace, but during his long absence, I almost forget that it is so, I need to have my memory strengthened upon the subject that lays nearest to my heart.⁷⁰

Perhaps Horace was unhappy to read about Rachel's discontent because it reinforced his own and made him feel guilty about leaving her alone.

Another isolated sea widow, Lizzie Howe of Cape Cod, wrote in a letter to her husband in 1854 that she had tried

⁷⁰ Rachel Putnam Diary, 15 July 1857.

to be cheerful but in vain, as she, too, had nothing to occupy herself with:

Having no other occupation to take up my mind from the present gloom that pervades it I sit down to commune with you who is at all times dear and ever present in my memory....I have tried in vain to be cheerful and always do but now have given up How slender are all the tender ties that bind us to a world like this...⁷¹.

Both women needed affirmation of their husbands' love, not their criticism, particularly as they were alone most of the time. Rachel had no daily support network of family and friends, and no avocation to keep her preoccupied and enhance her self-esteem. Lizzie had the additional disadvantage of being British and therefore not readily accepted by the clannish Cape Codders. Other nineteenth-century women's letters revealed that close and loving friendships with other women did play an important role in their lives.⁷² If Rachel and Lizzie had bonded with other women as did many of their contemporaries, their experiences and moods may have been quite different. Instead, Rachel spent too many days isolated in a rented room in an unfamiliar city, and Lizzie was forced to live with in-laws who did not accept her. These lonely, isolated women were hindered by the belief that their main function in life, and the only thing that could make them happy, was to please a man by giving him a

⁷¹ Lizzie to Abner Howe, 2 October 1854.

⁷² Carol Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," A Heritage of Her Own, eds. Nancy F. Cott & Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 311-342.

home and family to return to. For the wife of a mariner this female function was constantly frustrated and so waiting became increasingly difficult unless she was able to develop other interests in life.

A woman who had been taught to spend all her time pleasing a man had little energy, encouragement or knowledge to look within herself and cultivate her dormant faculties. Also women often felt in competition with other women for the attention of men, and so they were hesitant to seek women out as friends. A maritime woman whose husband was away at sea and who lived in an inland community where there were few other sea widows probably was perceived as competition. Women have been socialized to believe that the company of men is superior to that of women. The English author and feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft foresaw the danger in teaching women the art of pleasing men as their main function in life:

Women ought to endeavour to purify their heart, but can they do so when their uncultivated understandings make them entirely dependent on their senses for employment and amusement, when no noble pursuits sets them above the little vanities of the day, or enables them to curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed, over which every passing breeze has power?⁷³

These words, published in 1792, give us a realistic picture of the sexual and social reality for many women of the

⁷³ Mary Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ed. Miriam Kramnick (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books [1792] 1985) 112.

nineteenth century. Maritime women whose chief aim in life was to please their men were left with an unfilled void in their lives as their husbands were usually at sea. The absence of their husbands left them lonely, empty and with little to occupy their minds except their intense feelings of loss. These feelings of loss or neglect became a burden and fostered in women a negative self-image. If moral principles prevent a woman from being unfaithful, says Wollstonecraft, she will become bitter and retreat into a private fantasy life instead, as did both Sarah Trask and Rachel Putnam.

Ambivalent Feelings About Marriage

In a recent book on women and depression, psychiatrist Maggie Scarf points out that because women's tasks and experiences are centered in the home, they must constantly struggle to overcome social isolation. Sociologist David Riesman confesses in a collection of articles entitled Loneliness, The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation, that most of the sad, even tragic, writings in this volume are concerned with the social isolation of women. Loneliness can be so unbearable that it will lead to an overwhelming need to interact with others, unless one gives in to it and becomes depressed.⁷⁴ One is not in a position

⁷⁴ Maggie Scarf, Unfinished Business: Pressure Points in the Lives of Women (New York: Ballantine Books 1980) 373-5.

to say, judging from the brief time Sarah and Rachel kept their diaries mainly to ventilate their lonely feelings, whether either actually became profoundly depressed.

Maritime women often appeared to be victims of abandonment by both their husbands and a society which isolated them at home. Both Sarah and Rachel had few shared activities that were meaningful to them and that brought them into contact with other people. They were isolated within a nuclear family or in a boarding house situation in which a sense of community was lacking. Having no children, they did not relate to other mothers. Their relationships with friends and family were secondary to their role as lover or wife, and this was greatly diminished by their men's being at sea most of the time. Sarah's shoebinding and Rachel's sewing, which she did for pleasure not wages, were done alone at home. These activities did not put them into much contact with other women. There is evidence in the writings of the two women that their loneliness precipitated ambivalent feelings about marriage as a wise choice for themselves, and in Sarah's thoughts, for women in general. Blewett notes that many of Sarah's diary entries were full of deep ambivalence about marriage as a way of life for herself and her friends: "In Sarah's view, a wife accepted her husband's decisions and carried the greater share of

care and trials."⁷⁵ Commenting upon her sister Lizzy's upcoming marriage, Sarah revealed her doubts:

Mary and Eliza called in the evening to see my sister Lizzy one more time before she leaves us for good for on Wednesday night at 7 and 1/2 pass she will be a bride. She must then go just where her husband says ...Marriage seems to be a great responsibility for then you must act for yourself, and almost all the care comes upon the wife. 'Tis true, the husband has a great deal more to do supporting his family, but, if they love each other they will do well.⁷⁶

Sarah recognized here the wife's passive, psychological and economic dependence upon the husband, in contrast to the man's active participation in society and independence in earning a living for both. Commenting earlier on her sister's upcoming marriage and departure from home, Sarah repeated a local proverb about the difficulties of married life:

Three brothers and two sisters I have and after Lizzy is married there will be a batchlor and an old maid left. Never mind, the happy life that ever was had is always to court and never to wed. That is what Mary Rogers [Sarah's girlfriend] thinks, and so do I.⁷⁷

She seemed to accept or was resigned to the possibility of remaining single, and insisted throughout her diary that the single state would be preferable to being trapped in an unhappy marriage:

⁷⁵ Blewett 198.

⁷⁶ Sarah Trask Diary, 19 February 1849.

⁷⁷ Sarah Trask Diary, 5 February 1849.

William Penn says, 'Never marry but for Love, but see that thou lovest what is lovely'. I think he is right for marriage with no love is wrong in the sight of God. They are never happy, always finding fault with each other and complaining of this or that. Oh, who would like to live such a life? I should not and I hope I never shall.⁷⁸

Sarah wrote about the marriages of many of her acquaintances and discussed their chances for success. As an active member in the Beverly chapter of the Daughters of Temperance, whose meetings she attended regularly, Sarah was very concerned about the impact of drunkenness on the marriages of some of her friends. She considered marriage as risky as setting out on a sea voyage, where one never knew what dangers and troubles might lie ahead.⁷⁹ Hannah Herrick, one of Sarah's acquaintances, had just married what Sarah called a "poor prospect" for a husband, and Sarah noted in her diary what she had heard about the new marriage:

M. [Mary E. Rogers] told me that T. Cook, was not very steady, now he was married, last saterday night he was so drunk, he could not walk strait, I pity her [Hannah Herrick Cook]. Yet, I dont know as she needs my pity, for she knew what he was before she married him, why did she not have a mind of her own, but she alone must suffer....⁸⁰

Sarah recognized the importance of having a mind of one's own in making the important decision to marry. However, she

⁷⁸ Sarah Trask Diary, 19 February 1849.

⁷⁹ Blewett 198.

⁸⁰ Sarah Trask Diary, 3 April 1849.

felt strong social pressure to marry as all her shoebinding friends were suddenly getting married:

Another wedding last night one of our shop girls, all getting married. Mr. Shale will not have any to work for him, if they go so fast as they have done, this two or three years. It is three years last November since I went [to work binding shoes], there as been 20 Married....⁸¹

Most working-class women of the nineteenth century had no educational opportunities to prepare themselves for a meaningful career. The tedious task of shoebinding, which Sarah and her friends saw as temporary work for pocket money, could hardly be considered a career. Their prospects depended upon a good marriage. Finding a suitable man gave a woman a sense that there would be someone there to secure her future. Through marriage she would acquire a new family identity as wife and homemaker, the most acceptable career open to young women of the period. Working-class women like Sarah chose future mates from the laboring class, usually ordinary seamen or laborers ashore. Both were vulnerable to the temptations of drink because of the hard labor and monotony of their tasks.

Sarah was also aware of the toll the sea took on Beverly's sailors, and that a mariner's wife ran the risk of early widowhood:

In winter I always think of the sailors and poor, for many do suffer in such weather as this and many sailors leave their homes never to return again, how sad the thought, that they may be Lost,

⁸¹ Sarah Trask Diary, 14 March 1849.

oh how many from this town have found a watery grave.⁸²

She pitied the sailor who must part with friends to go to sea: "Many will know what it is to leave their friends to go to sea, many that think it folly for A girl to feel bad, when her lover goes to sea, for my part I pity anny one, well I might...."⁸³ To be pitied, too, was a woman, who, upon her marriage, must leave her family perhaps for good. Marriage, like a ship, could be destroyed upon dangerous rocks or shoals and happiness might exist only for a while:

...This evening C.[Catherine, her friend] goes from her home, perhaps never to return, to make it a home agin, tis not likely that she will come home to stay as long as she has a husband, but it is better to have a home of their [own] if they can, I hope that they will do well, but we cannot tell, many are Married with bright prospects, and at the end of ten years, where are they, some have gone down to the grave, others live in trouble, while other do [well]....⁸⁴

Sarah saw marriage among her friends as risky at best, and her diary was dominated by feelings of ambivalence. Choosing a man like Luther who was emotionally and physically unavailable, might suggest that, subconsciously, Sarah did not really wish to marry but felt socially pressured at least to dramatize her involvement with a man.

Although Rachel shared Sarah's ambivalence about marriage, she had already committed herself and now had to deal

⁸² Sarah Trask Diary, 15 February 1849.

⁸³ Sarah Trask Diary, 21 February 1849.

⁸⁴ Sarah Trask Diary, 21 February 1849.

with disappointments after the fact. She was more obviously idealistic about the marriage state, which she termed "visions of her own fancy":

This day reminds me, that two long years have passed since we spoke the 'holy vows' or were made happy (if indeed we were) what a great event is marriage, especially to women, and in thinking of my own...have I in years past and gone pictured in my imagination, the joys and comforts of my own fireside. They have proved but visions, of my own fancy, never to be realized I fear. I think sometimes such a married life as mine, hardly deserves the name.⁸⁵

Her anxiety was increased by not knowing exactly how Horace felt about their separations. It was difficult for her to understand why he continued sailing, if he loved her and preferred to be ashore. Her anxiety was increased by keeping her feelings of doubt and resentment to herself:

And how feels my husband, about these continued separations? I presume he would rather stay on shore, but still he continues to go, and leave me behind. I do not dare express my feelings upon this subject, as they are, sometime, but try to banish all thoughts of them. I have no pleasure in the past, present, nor future!⁸⁶

Rachel wrote often about her dreams of a home of her own with Horace by her side: "How I wish I had a little domain of our own. That I could enjoy & admire, with all the necessary attendants to make a home pleasant & peaceful...."⁸⁷ Believing that these visions were mere fantasy

⁸⁵ Rachel Putnam Diary, 24 November 1855.

⁸⁶ Rachel Putnam Diary, 24 November 1855.

⁸⁷ Rachel Putnam Diary, 1 June 1857.

since Horace was always absent, she noted: "...But I cannot help the feelings of loneliness & regret, which creep over me sometimes and sigh for a nice little home of my own, with Horace, for the very Kindest of husbands."⁸⁸

In spite of her longing to see her husband, Rachel was ambivalent about Horace's return. She knew all too well that he would come home only to leave again. As a result her happiness would be short-lived and her feelings of powerlessness would increase:

When I am expecting Horace home soon it is the greatest possible comfort to me. Further, I scarcely think of his going again. But the moment he reaches home, and I again behold him, my all prevailing thought is that he is going again to leave me. So I can truthfully say, I dread, while I long to have him come.⁸⁹

The mariner's arrival only to be soon followed by another departure, seemed to leave the woman ashore with strong feelings of pain and dread. Psychologically it was painful even to look forward to a husband's arrival when one knew all too well that the time would soon come to say goodbye again. Lizzie Howe, too, was afraid to hope for her husband's return for fear of being disappointed:

...there is not much chance of your coming home for some time. I did not imagine there was for I dont think you want to come I never dare venture to hope concerning any thing so vain still I cannot help looking forward with a anxious heart and longing to hear when the time may arrive....⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Rachel Putnam Diary, 6 May 1856.

⁸⁹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 6 July 1856.

⁹⁰ Lizzie to Abner Howe, 2 October 1854.

These women felt powerless against their husband's or lover's economic obligations to go abroad. Rachel recognized that she had little influence over her husband's decisions:

Tis a cruel fortune that rules my destiny and hard to be submissive to its will. Yet when thinking to avert an evil, or to change the course of affairs, how altogether powerless, I find myself...little rays of Hope, illuminate my path sometimes, which would otherwise be doubly dreare.⁹¹

She was fatalistic about her own destiny and knew that her husband's return could give her little pleasure unless it turned out to be a lasting one:

If his return was to be a lasting one, there would be much more pleasure in its anticipation, but as it is, I know he only returns to go again, unless prevented by sickness. It would be dreadfully wicked of me to wish him sick, of course, but really, I sometimes think, a husband a little unwell, would be rather better than none.⁹²

Like Rachel, Lizzie Howe was disappointed by her husband's absence and was unable to enjoy any of life's pleasures when she wrote her husband, "My dear Abner send me nothing more so long as you are away I enjoy nothing here nor care for anything...."⁹³ These women viewed their marriages as their only pleasure and that pleasure was

⁹¹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 6 July 1856.

⁹² Rachel Putnam Diary, 22 June 1856.

⁹³ Lizzie to her Abner Howe, 2 October 1854.

unattainable in their husbands' absence. Lucy Grey's feelings were similar to Rachel's when she contemplated her husband's return:

I often think of the day you left and how everything appeared to me then to look forward eight or nine months but the summer has past and gone like a Dream and the time has almost expired that you expected to be absent and should you be permitted to return to your family once more I expect I shall have to pass through the same scene again as I conclude as soon as you arrive you will immediately engage another voyage but I hope you will not until I see you indeed you must not.⁹⁴

As the popular image of the maritime woman suggests, many of these women often felt lonely, isolated, empty and incomplete without their men close by to give them support and companionship. Their writings became a catharsis for their pain of separation and the fears it ignited. Contrary to the static image of the lonely, waiting woman, maritime women's emotions surfaced in a variety of ways and were as diverse in their expressions as the women themselves.

A number of these diarists admitted, however, that they turned to writing when they were feeling unhappy or in a particular kind of mood. This may distort our view of their complete experiences. Also the ideal of the companionate marriage demanded that these women refer to their spouses in romantic and loving ways. If husbands were to be their companions, it was assumed that they would be greatly missed

⁹⁴ Lucy to Joshua Grey, 19 September 1824, Lucy Grey's letters, 1817-1829, Hooker Collection, Schlesinger Library for Women's History, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

when they were absent from the home. Such writings go to great lengths to give us this impression, but what women actually did from day to day must be examined as well.

From Loneliness to Integration

While writing in their diaries, Sarah Trask and Rachel Putnam were often psychologically obsessed with separation and loneliness when they considered their circumstances. At the same time the lives of these two women were more complex than the stereotypical image of the lonely, waiting woman suggests. There is evidence in their diaries that they both took an active interest in social and community activities. Although their participation in social and community activities were not preferable to being with their mates, active involvement in social life increased their self-esteem and gave them a more positive outlook. Sarah and Rachel described their happier moments performing an activity they loved, spending time with friends and relatives, and reflecting upon nature and their own spiritual place in a vast universe. Positive moments of interaction with others had the effect, at various times, of warding off loneliness and isolation.

Mary Blewett does not include in her article on Sarah Trask's diaries any passages describing the times she spent with her close friends. These occasions can be viewed as

the most intimate interactions recorded in her diary, and they were written in a less stylized manner than her grieving for her lost love. Sarah's detailed descriptions of her interactions with her girlfriends seem more authentic in their give and take than her one-sided, rhetorical longings for Luther Woodberry's return. She discussed her beau in strictly abstract terms, as an idealized object of her waiting expectations who would by his very appearance determine her future. Nowhere in her diary did Sarah detail any time spent with her hopeful husband-to-be. She referred to him always as a distant, fantasy figure whom she hoped would rescue her soon from the monotony of shoebinding and housework. Then she could prove to the townsfolk that her patient waiting was not in vain and that they were wrong to believe that he possibly might not return to her.

Besides recording her fears in her diary, Sarah shared them with her close friends, who also had lovers at sea. This network of females "united against the masculine inclinations toward intemperance, 'tobacto,' and California" and supported one another in work and waiting.⁹⁵ Sarah's active membership in the Beverly chapter of the Daughters of Temperance exhibited her commitment and ability to join with other women to bring about change in male behavior which negatively affected women and the family. As Nancy Cott points out, women's involvement in social reform movements,

⁹⁵ Blewett 192-212.

seen as appropriate for their sex and sphere, fostered female community "that served them as both a resource and a resort outside the family. And it endowed women with vital identity and purpose that could be confirmed among their peers."⁹⁶

Sarah wrote often about walks she took with Catherine or another girlfriend to the top of a hill to gaze at the sea, which she always found beautiful. She devoted a full page of her diary to details about an outing she took with three of her girlfriends up Dodge's Hill. There they found a platform, built the past fourth of July for sending up rockets, and a large pole up which the three girls competed with one another in shinning:

Lydia went up as high as she could but did not get to the top. I went up three or four higher than she but could not go to the top because there was not anything to hold on by, and I was rather dizzy when I looked down being so much above the rest. Mary and Lizzy were rather afraid to venture up so high so they waited for us to come down. We then went down to Wenham Pond after climbing two or three walls....⁹⁷

At age twenty, Sarah still enjoyed behaving like a tomboy and was proud of being able to outdo the other girls in her pole climbing. This outdoor fun gave them a sense of adventure which girls might enjoy more freely in their younger years before they were saddled with expectations of proper feminine behavior.

⁹⁶ Nancy Cott 159.

⁹⁷ Sarah Trask Diary, June 2, 1849.

On July fourth Sarah and her friends Mary and Lydia got together again to make molasses candy. The reason, Sarah wrote was:

for our independence and such a scape I never saw before. It did not taste much like candy when it came out of the kettle for it was burnt and I was so provoked that I did not want it then. We had a good laugh over it and so it was just as well.⁹⁸

Making the molasses candy on the Fourth was an assertion of self and personal independence, as Sarah clearly meant when she wrote "for our independence." The fact that the candy did not turn out well was irrelevant. The joy came from sharing a good time and a hearty laugh with friends.

These few encounters Sarah had with her girlfriends looked back to a more carefree period of pre-adolescence. This was a time when a girl could be more herself before having to take on the more serious and responsible role of womanhood when her husband's wishes must be respected before her own. The girls could behave in unladylike ways if they wished, flaunt their own independence, and ignore for a time their quest for a suitable mate to support them. Friendship not only helped to alleviate their loneliness and feelings of being outcasts without their own man, but gave them support and encouraged feelings of independence. The girlish romps Sarah and her friends indulged in gave them a sense of freedom and a chance to exert their independence, soon to be curtailed by the responsibilities of marriage.

⁹⁸ Sarah Trask Diary, July 4, 1849.

Rachel Putnam of Manchester, New Hampshire, on the other hand, lacked female support during her time of waiting for her husband's return. Besides, being a married woman conscious of her feminine role, she would not have deemed it proper to engage in tomboy romps with her girlfriends as Sarah had done. Although Rachel wrote mostly about her loneliness and despondency, she did mention enjoying some of the small pleasures of life such as sewing, her sister Mary's visits, caring for children, attending concerts and a July celebration with Mr. Cheney (her "galant"), and nature walks at her parents' home in rural Londonderry. She liked to be entertained and enjoyed going out for amusement, particularly to plays and concerts:

Once I have been to the Museum, where they played "The Banker's Wife"...Love and jealousy were pictured in all their glory. I enjoyed myself exceedingly; wish I could be as well entertained every night.⁹⁹

Rachel had trouble entertaining herself at home, especially on stormy winter days. "I tried to while away the day by reading, but have not been in just the right mood to receive much instruction." Her sewing accomplishments gave her pleasure, but she was most enthusiastic and happy when she was invited out for entertainment:

This has been a very busy day, with me, and quite an interesting one, I have been sewing on some remarkably small and nice garments, and doing some very particular shopping. I have succeeded pretty well, and this evening we have all been to an

⁹⁹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 13 January 1856.

Etheopian Concert, where I enjoyed myself, finely, being quite partial to dark complexions. Mr. Cheney is my galant, of course, and a very good one, I find him to be.¹⁰⁰

Rachel would perhaps have been more contented in a more cosmopolitan city than Manchester. One might also wonder if she was becoming quite interested in her "galant," Mr. Cheney, but on the Fourth of July he was unable to replace her dear Horace:

On these public days, I think a great deal about my husband, for then a woman seems to need the company of a husband, if they have one. But thanks to those around me, I manage to get pushed along through the scenes enacted, and with very good satisfaction.¹⁰¹

Rachel spoke conventionally of what "a woman seems to need," but she confessed she had a good time with her substitute escort and "was pushed along...with very good satisfaction." The marriage conventions of the day dictated Rachel's opinions and feelings. However, she did admit that she enjoyed herself in the company of her friends:

New Year's Day has passed away; I received a few presents, and made some. I also took a fine sleigh ride. I begin to think my friends are as kind as any I shall ever find, and will try to content myself with my lot!!¹⁰²

Similarly Lucy Grey admitted in a letter to her husband that while she was mostly alone, she still took great comfort in her friends, who looked after her. She often wrote

¹⁰⁰ Rachel Putnam Diary, 12 February 1856.

¹⁰¹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 5 July 1856.

¹⁰² Rachel Putnam Diary, January 13, 1856.

of her loneliness, but she confessed that time now passed more quickly while he was away:

...I hope dear Husband that you will not give yourself any uneasiness on my account although there is no earthly friend can supply your place yet I have many valuable friends who will take care of me. Mary I hope will come soon and spend a week or two with me. I think it would be a great comfort to me as I have to be alone a great part of the time.¹⁰³

Rachel found comfort in visiting her parents' home, but was nostalgic for her carefree girlhood which her marriage had brought to an end:

Jan. 29, finds me at Londonderry, beneath the parental roof, where I am ever most happy; Home is indeed home, there is no place like it. And as I think of the scenes of the distant past, when all was joy & gladness, and my heart was always merry, as the joyous summer bird, I can but sigh, that they have passed never to return!¹⁰⁴

Carolyn Heilbrun notes that nostalgia, particularly for childhood, was an acceptable mask for woman's unrecognized anger. Rachel was angry that she, still a bride, was abandoned for long periods of time while her beloved was at sea. This anger was thinly veiled behind her overwhelming feelings of loneliness, sadness and deep nostalgia for the happier and more carefree time of her girlhood.¹⁰⁵

Rachel found more to do within her parents' busy household than in her lonely boarding house in the city, and she

¹⁰³ Lucy Grey to her husband, 2 June 1824.

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Putnam Diary, 19 January 1856.

¹⁰⁵ Heilbrun 15.

took pleasure in being able to look after her sister-in-law's baby:

...My time has been spent in a variety of ways since I came here, but chiefly in baby tending, a very pleasant task. My brother's wife, being very sick, Mother has taken her little child home.¹⁰⁶

That spring Rachel's sister-in-law died leaving behind her child and bereaved husband, and Rachel's sister gave birth to a son who gave the family great pleasure. Rachel missed her mother, who had left for her own home after visiting her in Manchester for a fortnight. By late spring she was over a bout of rheumatism and was able to enjoy the beauty of nature and Mr. Cheney's company again:

I think I stay in the house too closely. How much I miss Horace to ride & walk with me. Mr. Cheney is very kind and goes with me as often as convenient. I had a beautiful ride with him, a few nights since, over the falls bridge, where I have often rode with H [Horace]. Everything in nature is so lovely now, it is a great pleasure for me to be out.¹⁰⁷

In April of the following year (1857), Rachel was in such a happy frame of mind that changes in the weather did not seem to affect her. She was "riding again with Mr. Cheney my own galant," but admitted she was always reminded of Horace. She noted that she was reading a book, which she had not done for two or three years, as her husband had instructed her to busy herself with reading or writing. Rachel, like many women, needed a man to advise her and to

¹⁰⁶ Rachel Putnam Diary, 19 January 1856.

¹⁰⁷ Rachel Putnam Diary, 13 June 1856.

complete herself. Only when she went out with Mr. Chaney, friends or family did she experience life directly and feel her own pleasure from the encounter. Only then did she manage, in her own cautious and proper way, to pass the time, often quite pleasantly, in Horace's absence.

In June she again enjoyed the beauty of spring at her parent's home:

I anticipate much pleasure; everything in nature is beautiful now beyond description, one can hardly fail to be happy in viewing so much loveliness...I shall endeavor to walk through the fields & woods where I have walked with my dear absent Husband.¹⁰⁸

By the time Rachel closed her second diary, she had become more accustomed to being alone and was making more of an attempt to interest herself in hobbies and visiting friends and relatives:

Came today, again to Londonderry, I am a sort of bird of passage, here & there, and everywhere. Think I shall stay six or eight weeks and hope to get nicely recruited during the time. Summer is fast passing away and I cannot tell where it has fled. So short has it seemed, but I do not wish to impair its flight, could not if I would.¹⁰⁹

It was not Rachel's inclination to have many acquaintances. She herself noted, "I never should care for but a few friends, those I wish to love very much, (one in particular)." She mentioned in her diary that she would like to go to sea, but Horace had said that "it was highly improper

¹⁰⁸ Rachel Putnam Diary, 1 June 1857.

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 6 August 1857.

for a woman to go to sea' though he did not say so to me,"110 She longed during the hot days of July to enjoy the salt air at the seashore, but felt she would not enjoy going alone:

I think it rather hard, when H. has so much (sea), that I can have none at all, when I suffer so much for it. He tells me to go to the sea shore, or anywhere I please and I know he would be very happy for me do so but it would not be very pleasant for me to go alone.¹¹¹

Almost at the end of her second diary, on the first of August, Rachel received two little journals from Horace, which she said were the best he had ever written. She realized that he suffered greatly and that life at sea was very hard for him to bear. In thinking of "his cares and sad and lonely feelings, I can truly say that my own were wholly forgotten, and my sympathies were for him."¹¹²

Mid-nineteenth-century diarists were highly influenced by the Cult of Domesticity, which emphasized a woman's dependence upon a man who earned a living away from the home. Isolated from the economic realm of daily life, women

¹¹⁰ Rachel Putnam Diary, 8 February 1857.

¹¹¹ Rachel Putnam Diary, 15 July 1857.

¹¹² Rachel Putnam Diary, 1 August 1857. Horace eventually left the sea permanently and became mayor of the city of Manchester, N.H. from 1881-1884. The house where Rachel and Horace lived together in Manchester still stands. Horace died in 1895, leaving Rachel a widow at about the age of sixty-five years. In 1906 she moved to Cambridge, MA where she was born and died there (date unknown). The house where her parents lived in Londonderry still stands and is now the town's historical society.

were expected to conform to the conventional expectations of companionship and dependence upon men for completion of their own identities. Confinement within the home and family life frustrated many woman's desire for autonomy and relegated them to a life of marginality. Carolyn Heilbrun says: "...woman's selfhood, a right to her own story, depends on her ability to act in the public domain."¹¹³ The "safety and closure" imposed upon women of the nineteenth century forbade them to experience life directly and often left them with feelings of dissatisfaction, anxiety and loneliness.¹¹⁴ Consequently, nineteenth century women were more preoccupied with their feelings and moods than were their earlier sisters, who were busy caring for and even supporting the family economically.

A certain independence and strength of character was bred into, and forced upon, these New England maritime women. The New England upbringing and lifestyle traditionally stressed and took pride in building strong character in both women and men. Coastal women, married to frequently absent seamen, experienced a certain amount of independence forced upon them by their situation, which prevented or precluded their acceptance of traditional feminine roles adopted by other married women. Many women were able to improve their self-esteem and gain private influence through

¹¹³ Heilbrun 17.

¹¹⁴ Heilbrun 20.

activism in work, community service, religion, and the cultivation of female friendships. The maritime women presented in the next chapter became involved in these various interests, which enabled them to move beyond their loneliness and overcome their emotional preoccupation with themselves and their mate's absence.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE HELM

Down Time's quaint stream
 Without an oar
 We are enforced to sail
 Our port a secret
 What skipper would
 Incur the Risk
 What Buccaneer would ride
 Without a surety from the Wind
 Or schedule of the Tide¹
 by Emily Dickinson

New England coastal communities offered few resources designed to help maritime women cope with their temporary "widowhood." Forced to be innovative and resourceful in order to survive, they learned to cope with their uncertain and lonely circumstances in various ways. Some of them even re-invented their lives. During the same period that Sarah Trask and Rachel Putnam were recording their loneliness and anxiety, and also earlier in the late eighteenth century, other coastal women wrote letters and diaries with a different emphasis or theme. These women, too, often expressed lonely and anxious feelings which were an integral part of

¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed., Thomas H. Johnson, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960) 677.

their circumstances, especially if they deeply loved or were dependent upon their mates for companionship and economic support. To stereotype them simply as either waiting, lonely wives or as independent, enterprising women gives a simplistic and one-sided view of women whose lives were characterized by a complexity of feelings and experiences.

As coastal women dealt with separation from their mates for longer periods of time and passed through various stages of their lifecycles, they adapted and adjusted in diverse ways. The women discussed in this chapter were in their twenties or thirties, but unlike Sarah and Rachel, most of them had established families with children. Motherhood gave them new, built-in responsibilities as well as the stability of having formed families of their own. Some of them also found meaningful work to do, other than household duties, sometimes for a wage to supplement family income. This increased their independence and self-esteem. In some cases women developed a home industry of their own which was more lucrative and rewarding than Sarah's shoebinding. Elizabeth Wildes, for instance, manufactured bedspreads at home.

Women with families, particularly those in small New England towns, had a full day of chores to perform just to keep the home running smoothly and the family fed. Most of them had little time to make social calls or undertake community volunteer work. Each household task was hard work

as well as time-consuming. Women lugged water from the well, and it often had to be heated. Wood had to be carried in to get a good fire burning in the stove for cooking and for heat. Cooking was done from scratch, vegetables were grown in the garden and had to be "put up" in jars for winter. Clothes were sewn by hand and much time was spent laundering and ironing them. Margaret Hannah Gray, who married Captain Nicholas Drinkwater in 1855 in Yarmouth, Maine, said her life had been one of shirts:

When Nicholas left for foreign voyages, he would take with him fifty-two white shirts, with fine pleats and ruffles. Thus supplied, he had one clean shirt for every Sunday service that he conducted on shipboard. She made the shirts by hand, stitching the tiny tucks with her needle. Nicholas' arrival home inevitably meant fifty-two shirts to wash, starch and iron before he left on the next long voyage.²

As a respite from the tediousness of housework, religion gave some women the will to endure drudgery and their secondary status. A strong belief in God and adherence to a particular religious denomination became an integral part of their lives. The constant presence of a heavenly father represented a kind of male security, which they could always call upon in their husbands' absence. Religion provided an outlet for fears, gave women the opportunity to befriend and nurture others, and empowered them within the family and community as moral and spiritual leaders.

² FreeHand, Julianna, A Seafaring Legacy, (New York: Random House, 1981) 21-22.

Most important of all was the network of family and friends who supported these maritime women in their various endeavors. Close relationships with family members and friends and a strong faith, gave these women their strongest allies against loneliness, allowing them to love and be loved in their husbands' absence.

Three diaries and a variety of letters are analyzed in the following discussion of particular themes which coastal women stressed in their writings. Each woman's story is told separately to emphasize her particular involvement in mothering, work, religion, and networking with family, friends and community. Occasionally views and experiences of other women correspondents are included to make a particular point. This gives the reader a complete and uninterrupted view of each woman's life and her personality at the time of her writing. The term community here generally refers to women's family and friendship networks, but it may be expanded to include community organization and work as well.

The subsequent diarists attempted to act more publicly and assertively by making their own choices, if only in their own small community or family environments. Each woman had her own unique story to tell stressing her own particular interest or occupation. These diarists had settled families of their own and were more secure than Sarah or Rachel. Being mothers as well as wives gave them

additional authority in the home. They were less immobilized by uncertainty and loneliness at least at the time they wrote. Although these "more involved" women had their lonely and anxious moments, they expressed a variety of other feelings in their writings. They do not conform completely to any of the popular stereotypical images used to describe the New England maritime woman.

Religion and Coping with Change

...one year ago today I was married, and as every period in life brings its changes so hath this. But I will (lift) my heart and to voice to Him that deareth and answereth prayer that I may have patience under the trials I may have to endure and wisdom rightly to discharge the new and important duties that may devolve on me.³

Harriet Houdlette of Hallowell, Maine was very aware of the changes that occur at various stages of a woman's life. To pass successfully through these often difficult changes, Harriet (Lilly) turned to her religion for guidance. A devout Baptist, she called frequently upon the Lord to guide her through the changes in her life--childbirth, the death of her sister (and later two other sisters), frequent family sickness, and routine partings from her sea captain husband. In one year she saw her husband take ill, her sister die, and herself become a mother.

³ Diary of Harriet (Lilly) Houdlette, 1839-1844, of Hallowell, Maine, Peabody Museum, Phillips Library, Salem, MA., P. 20 of typed transcript.

...one year ago this time, that dear friend who I am now permitted to call by the endearing name of Husband was sick in Philadelphia. May the Lord grant that he may be preserved from the pestilence that walketh in darkness the sickness that wasteth at noon day, and all other evils and dangers to which he may be exposed and permitted to return in health and safety...one month ago today my dear sister Lucinda died...in the night about 12 o'clock I was taken sick...In the PM between 4 and 5 o'clock my little daughter was born.⁴

Feeling ill after the birth of her first daughter, she blocked out what was happening around her: "...my little girl is 3 weeks old today, and I have not been able to sit up but very little except I have not kept my dates correct for I have been so ill I know but little that passed around me."⁵ Shortly thereafter Lilly's husband Captain Franklin Houdlette returned home from Trieste. Each had separate responsibilities and Lilly made no further comments about their new baby. Her diary tells us little about her relationships with her husband and children, but focuses instead upon the sick and dying and her own spiritual progress.

Lilly expressed the need for a "deeper work of grace" and resolved to seek it in the "fear of God." After she visited the grave of her departed sister, she expressed a weariness with life's pain and losses. She confessed she had "...an increasing desire to follow her even as she followed Christ." She was also "...led to view the changes I have experienced during the past year, my little Harriet

⁴ Harriet Houdlette Diary 18.

⁵ Harriet Houdlette Diary 21.

grows finely."⁶ Although Lilly visited back and forth with friends, traveling by boat to various towns on the Kennebec River, she failed to describe her visits or her friends and, instead, focused on admonishing herself for not being more religious. She again reminded herself that she must seek more wholeheartedly for a deeper work of grace:

It will be 6 years tomorrow since I dedicated myself to God in the ordinance of Baptism, O Lord forgive my unfaithfulness. I am astonished at myself that so much sin and unbelief remains in my heart and that I am so prone to neglect duty. My hours of retirement have often been interrupted since I have been a mother as I have no one to leave my infant with.

Lilly regretted that her domestic duties interfered with her religious self-scrutiny. She seemed to find it difficult to integrate her social activities and her duties of motherhood with her inner need for space and self-examination. She also worried about her husband, whom she had not heard from for some time. When she did hear from him, she learned that he had been very sick with jaundice. Concerned about taking ill herself, she wrote: "Commenced weaning my babe she was very troublesome when I first took it from her, after that she went to sleep easy weaned because it wore upon me very much and I feared I might be seriously affected by nursing her through the warm weather."⁷

⁶ Harriet Houdlette Diary 31.

⁷ Harriet Houdlette Diary 32.

Having an infant, however, did not deter Lilly from considering embarking on a sea voyage with her husband: "If the plans I have formed to accompany my husband to sea this fall are frustrated I hope I shall feel resigned but in view of such a disappointment for several days I have felt quite unreconciled...."⁸ Perhaps being at sea, where there was less distraction from earthly and womanly concerns, would have been ideal for Lilly, but apparently the choice to go to sea was not entirely up to her. In the meantime, she busied herself working on her husband's accounts, quilting, spinning and joining other ladies to sew for a temperance and missionary Society.

Death, a frequent reality in the isolated villages of mid-nineteenth century Maine, was often on Lilly's mind. She was reminded again of her departed sister whose remains were disinterred after two years and placed in a tomb. Apparently one was allowed to view the body, for she commented that "the corpse looked very naturall."⁹ Shortly after her twenty-sixth birthday, Lilly enumerated the many people who had taken sick and the deaths of a father and child in the neighborhood. She attended a prayer meeting and lamented: "my heart is still cold and all my services

⁸ Harriet Houdlette Diary 35.

⁹ Harriet Houdlette Diary 45.

are at best heartless forms. Lord I beseech thee save me from indifference and formality."¹⁰

Lilly's husband gave up a sea voyage at the persuasion of friends and through a conviction of duty, but as soon as the weather turned fair again, he took a steamer for Boston to join his ship there. Lilly wrote how depressed she felt not being able to go with him to sea because of eye trouble she was having: "...my medicine made me sick...am completely under the influence of mercury...since I have been unable to read on account of my eyes it has been a great privation but I pray God to enable me to bear it with patience."¹¹

On her twenty-seventh birthday, Lilly was thankful for her many blessings and said that she was more resigned to God's will than she had ever felt in all her Christian experience. The trouble with her eyes had set her apart from the world and helped her become reconciled in her religious faith. Seeking help to enable her to put others before herself, she asked God that she not fail in her determination to love and serve her husband:

Do feel great peace and some joy. My mind has been drawn out in prayer to God of late for my beloved husband. God grant the determination I feel to love and serve him, may not be like the morning cloud and the early dew, which soon passeth away. But that I may continue to love him more and serve him better till death...I have lived so retired from the world for the last three months that I feel little inclination to mix in

¹⁰ Harriet Houdlette Diary 48.

¹¹ Harriet Houdlette Diary 51 and 58.

it, but my religion must be tested oh for grace to help me to live unspotted in the world.¹²

Lilly saw sickness and death as routes to purer religious experience and self-improvement. Like Sarah and Rachel, she believed that only through suffering could she become truly good. One cannot help but draw a parallel with young women today who deny themselves food to become more physically perfect. Many women never feel that they are right or good enough as they are and must constantly strive to change and improve themselves. Lilly's preoccupation with the dead and dying seems quite morbid in today's secular society, but it brought her closer to her heavenly father and gave her hope for a better life after death.

Lilly again visited her sister's tomb and wrote: "it was not high enough for me to see much but I would discover a likeness of her former self."¹³ She was present at the death bed of her cousin Sarah: "when the Doctor decided she could not live her friends were all permitted to see her, all at once she became perfectly sane and commenced talking to her friends entreating them to forsake false doctrines and false hopes and seek the Saviour." For four hours she spoke personally to each individual in the room beseeching them to seek God in prayer. She instructed everyone to sing as she was dying. Asking for lemonade she said, "drink with

¹² Harriet Houdlette Diary 55.

¹³ Harriet Houdlette Diary 60.

me she laid with the most heavenly countenance, till all had tasted, then she said I shall drink no more with you till I drink the new wine with you in my father's Kingdom."¹⁴

Lilly described this as the "most triumphant death I ever heard of." This "happy scene" continued until the next morning when the woman finally died and prompted Lilly to "covenant anew to love and Serve God."¹⁵ Scenes such as this continued to bring Lilly closer to her family, community, and God. They distracted her from longing for her husband's presence and renewed her dedication to God, Who came first as her redeemer.

Only a few days after her cousin Sarah's death, Lilly's sister Lydia fell sick with bilious fever. Lilly traveled to her parents home to care for her. After her illness had become worse, several other doctors were called in and several "operations" performed: "she continued in the most excruciating pain till she died." Lilly again described the death scene and how Lydia, knowing she was dying and regaining consciousness, called out to her friends and family who kept vigil at her bedside. After she passed away, Lilly confessed:

I could not pray for her to live she was so desirous to go she said Do not ask for it, and she felt perfectly resigned to the will of God but her desire was to depart. She manifested great patience during her sickness and willing took

¹⁴ Harriet Houdlette Diary 61.

¹⁵ Harriet Houdlette Diary 62.

whatever was given her till she found she could not live when she would not consent to take any more. she died.¹⁶

Unfortunately there are pages missing from Lilly's diary. Her next entry several months later related how her mother had recovered from an illness that she thought would be her last. Lilly then attended the funeral of her aunt, who had just died of inflammatory fever, and quoted, as she did routinely throughout her diary, the scriptures the minister read at the service. She added, "How great the contrast between the Believers death and those who know not God." She reflected on the recent death of so many of her relatives and friends:

How little did I think the last class meeting I was at 3 months ago that 2 of the number then present were so soon to be housed in the silent grave sister Lydia and cousin Sarah. How lonely do I feel when I look round in the class room and even in the house of God to miss so many familiar countenances.¹⁷

It is difficult for us to imagine what it must have been like to lose so many close relatives at the still young age of twenty-seven. Nancy Cott in Bonds of Womanhood maintains that "the specter of death in childbirth forced women to think on the state of their souls." The frequent deaths of loved ones might also have contributed to women's religious piety. Cott suggests that women's domesticity was more compatible with spiritual devotion than the "snares" of

¹⁶ Harriet Houdlette Diary 63.

¹⁷ Harriet Houdlette Diary 64.

the world of men.¹⁸ Harriet Martineau, a British traveler who criticized the hypocrisies of American women's expected roles, believed women were "driven back upon religion as a resource against vacuity."¹⁹ Martineau said women "pursued religion as an occupation" because they were restrained from exercising their moral, intellectual and physical powers in other ways. Religious activities enabled New England women, like Lilly Houdlette, to define themselves and find community.²⁰

In August of 1843, Lilly learned that she would be able to go to sea with her husband on his next voyage out of Providence, Rhode Island. The first entries of her sea journal give an interesting account of her week aboard ship in the port of New Orleans, and her last entries describe lying at anchor in the James River of Virginia while the ship loaded tobacco for London. Lilly told of going ashore as often as possible to attend church services, and she bemoaned the fact that her religious beliefs did not enable her to improve her temperament and give her more control: "Oh that my religion would render me social, as well as cheerful, that I might be enabled to exert an influence in

¹⁸ Cott 136.

¹⁹ Cott 137. Harriet Martineau, Society in America (New York: Saunders and Otley, 1837) 363.

²⁰ Cott 138.

favor of Christianity."²¹ Perhaps feeling socially inept, Lilly found in religion a means of filling her social as well as personal needs. Although thankful for the blessings God had bestowed upon her, she feared that her religious devotion had not been great enough to improve her character:

Since I commenced this memoranda book I have been carried [over] a period of 4 years which have rolled into Eternity. Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life. But in the midst of all the blessings I have fear that in the divine life I have made a retrograde path. If God spares my life another year I feel resolved to spend it more devoted to his service....

Concluding her diary, Lilly promised herself to continue with her religious watchfulness:

May I by strict self examination prove, or decide in the truth of the scriptures whether I love yea or nay. Written on Board Barque Edinburgh lying at anchor in James' River.

August 31st 1843
Harriet L. Houdlette.²²

Lilly was more preoccupied with moral perfection and religious idealism than with what was happening around her in the secular world. We know very little about her husband, child, family and friends as personalities, for she was more concerned with describing sickness, death and her religious hopes than her social relationships or activities with others. Lilly remained forever dissatisfied with her spiritual and moral self. As a devout believer, she viewed death as her ultimate spiritual goal. After completing her

²¹ Harriet Houdlette Diary 67.

²² Harriet Houdlette Diary 68.

diary in 1844 at the age of twenty-eight, Lilly gave birth to two more girls, Elizabeth and Mary. Although she awaited, and even wished for, her imminent death while still in her twenties, she lived to be ninety-five years old. Harriet Houdlette, a widow for twenty-four years (her husband death occurred at the age of 72), died in 1911 in Richmond, Maine.

According to Cott and Martineau, religion gave meaning to nineteenth century women's economically unproductive lives: "...religious activities can be seen as a means used by New England women to define self and find community, two functions that worldly occupations more likely performed for men."²³ The language of religious conversion echoed women's self-resignation and submissiveness while still offering enormous satisfaction to converts.²⁴

Lilly Houdlette derived considerable satisfaction from her religion, which helped her cope with loneliness and the great changes and losses she endured. Not being a social person or drawn toward work or motherhood as ends in themselves, she found in religion the personal kind of community and support she preferred. Religion did not enhance her self-esteem and independence as much as meaningful work or a community of friends might have, but it enabled her to maintain control over the many difficult changes in her

²³ Cott 138.

²⁴ Cott 139.

life. Through self-scrutiny and a faithful devotion to the spiritual life, Lilly imagined that she could rise above the petty trials and tribulations of daily life and achieve a certain power over her destiny.

Religious identity allowed women to assert themselves both privately and publicly. It gave them an authority beyond the world of men, and even provided support for those who were inclined to step beyond accepted bounds.²⁵

Religion, however, did not give solace to all sea wives enduring long separations from their husbands. Margaret Dillingham wrote her mother and sisters in Maine that she did not care to go to church as she found it "too stiff." Instead she preferred to stay home to enjoy this day of rest rather than listen to a long, tedious sermon.²⁶ Other women rarely mentioned God or church and were more preoccupied with their children, their work, or with a community of friends and relatives. However, these more secular women often wrote about significant dreams which put them in touch with loved ones in an intuitive, spiritual way. Experiencing and observing the changes in nature also provided women with a certain spiritual experience, particularly when they left the confinement of home for voyages upon the high seas.

²⁵ Cott 140.

²⁶ Margaret Dillingham to her mother and sisters from Brooklyn, New York, October 29, 1848, Maine Historical Society, Collection 153, Portland, Maine.

Mothering, Work and Family Within a Quaker Community

Lydia Hill Almy began her diary of 1797 with these thoughts:

I feel myself resined to what ever may be my lot,
my friends and nabours are exceeding kind to me,
feel very ancious at times to know the welfare of
my companion but knowing that to be impossable
must rest under the burden....²⁷

Lydia married Christopher Almy of Newport, Rhode Island on October 9, 1794 aboard a whaling ship out of New Bedford. When her husband sailed out of New Bedford for the Pacific whaling grounds, she was at home in the company of her sister Elizabeth. Despite his long absences, she was able to maintain their own home in the rural Quaker community of Smithfield, Rhode Island. This tight-knit community provided Lydia with many kind friends and neighbors, who helped sustain her in her "widowed" state.

It is evident from reading Lydia's diary that she loved and missed her "dear husband," and at times was overcome with loneliness. Hardly a day passed that she did not think about him:

my mind hath been deeply ingaged on my dear hus-
band none doth know what I endure if I had a
friend as I had once to now and then speake a word
too it would lighten my burden why due I thus
speak knowing all this to be good for me yea
better than the choicest silver or fine gold.²⁸

²⁷ Lydia Hill Almy Diary, 1797-1799, Typed Transcript, Essex Institute, Salem, MA.

²⁸ Lydia Almy Diary, 29 June 1798.

Her unhappiness, like Rachel's, was caused mostly by the lack of her husband's companionship. The intimacy between husband and wife could not be easily replaced by friends and neighbors. Lydia missed being able to share her problems and anxieties with her trusted mate:

It would ease my mind gratefully if I could have my dear husband to converse with a little now and then at such season as this have none to open my mind to my burden sometimes seems to be more than I can carry.²⁹

Like most sea wives, who seldom received news of their husbands' welfare, she worried about the dangers he must face at sea: "O the anxious cares I must now and then have for my husband[.] Baily Negar hath just been here and hath been telling the descriptions of a voige round cape horn which a black man gave him...."³⁰ Whaling was an extremely hazardous enterprise and did not allow for easy or immediate communication with those ashore:

...the lonesome moments I must now and then endure Often doth fears arise lest some misfortune hath hapned to my beloved husband that is to near and dear to me tho so far Distant whereare money will not purchase news from him yea I have often thought should be willing to give up all I have and feast on bread and water to now and then have a few words from him, to know his weelfare but saith my soul be still there is a voice that the muffling waves obey.³¹

²⁹ Lydia Almy Diary, 22 May 1798.

³⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, 5 June 1798.

³¹ Lydia Almy Diary, Thanksgiving Day, November 1797.

Her strong inner voice controlled her longings, which Lydia described as "muffling waves."³² Until she might see her beloved again, Lydia's diary like Sarah Trask's gave her great comfort and brought her husband closer to her: "...it gives me grate satisfaction to sit down and writ for it seems some times as if I was talking to my husband...."³³

In her diary Lydia recorded her mood fluctuations:

...thought as I was writting alone this eavening that if my Dear husband knew how I spent my time he would think I was very lonesome, but it is far different from that at times have no other desire in my heart but to doe the will of my heavenly Father at other times have strong desires for the preservation of my friend who hath been so very kind to me.³⁴

Like Harriett Houdlette, religion strengthened Lydia's faith in the future and helped her endure the many trials she faced alone. Her Quaker faith was extremely important spiritually, emotionally, and socially and allowed her to share her fears and emotions with others:

Abigail spoke had a considerable to which was very instructing and comfortable to my mind, and I have no reason to do right but the rest shard with me I think I ought to esteem it a great favour that such oportunity to come to me when my sperits are

³² It was common for these maritime women to express their feelings in the form of sea analogies. The sea was a powerful entity for them and represented universal human experience. Women viewed the sea not as something to be conquered in a masculine way, but as a poetic or religious symbol of the universal human soul, representing both its chaos and calm.

³³ Lydia Almy Diary, January 1798.

³⁴ Lydia Almy Diary, 2 March 1798.

thus lowe and poor as often experience such feelings³⁵

Meetings helped ward off her lonely and anxious feelings and lifted her spirits:

...have been to meeting to day think I never heard a more arouseing sermon...feeling myself at this time in need of incouragement my droopping sperits seems sunk allmost to the bottom of dispare... through the corse of the meatin I had Longing desires for my husband to have been their but knowing that cannot be must give it up and bare with patience my alotments.

She attended meetings almost daily which seemed to bring her closer to her husband: "have this day been to meeting had a very comfortable one[.] my husband was brought as it were very near to me."³⁶ Another time she described a good meeting "like a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul for it was low times with me."³⁷ Through her experience of living alone, and being in touch with herself, Lydia also learned that the spiritual world was more important to her than the material: "...the longer I live," she wrote, "the more I am convinced that the treasures of this world is not worth careing for."³⁸

Maritime women were brought closer to their absent mates through their dreams, which they often vividly remembered and recorded in detail. Like Rachel Putnan, Lydia

³⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 25 May 1798.

³⁶ Lydia Almy Diary, 1 April 1798.

³⁷ Lydia Almy Diary, 21 April 1798.

³⁸ Lydia Almy Diary, 24 February 1798.

dreamed of her husband, drawing him closer by recording the details in her diary.³⁹ A pleasant dream helped relieve her mind of loneliness: "Last knigh I dreamed of my husband which was the first time since he left me, which seemed to be some satisfaction to my mind." She dreamed about conversing very pleasantly with her husband and he assured her he was really with her and she was not asleep. Lydia said she took no account of the dream at the time, but recollected that it occurred just before she heard from her husband:

...it came so fresh into my mind this day that I have an inclination to note it down cannot express the satisfaction which I take in writeing in this manner tho it might seem very simple and foolish to some but have this on my side that I due not expect it will be exposed except to my dear husband if we should be suffered to meet again.⁴⁰

Sometimes dreams were disturbing and reflected an anxiety these women must deal with, as when Rachel dreamed that her husband had left her without saying goodbye. The longer Abbie Griffin was left alone with her two children, the more anxious she became about her husband's health. She described an intimate moment she had with her husband in a dream which frightened her:

³⁹ This habit of recording one's dreams is regarded by modern psychologists, particularly Jungian, as helpful in putting one in touch with their subconscious, and seems to be a therapeutic outlet for these early diarists as well. Gloria Steinem, in her recent book on self-esteem, Revolution From Within (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1992) recommends journal writing and dream recollection as a way to tap the unconscious and access the true self, 168-9.

⁴⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, 14 February 1798.

I dreamed of you so plain last night, I thought I should hear from you today. I dreamed of sitting in your lap, and you were holding my hands...When I woke, it seemed as thou you had hold of my hands, as many as five minutes, and I could feel your arms around me. It frightened me, for I didn't know but that you were dead.⁴¹

Apparently Abbie's dreams were a concern to Joseph's uncle, who had an interest in his ship: "Abbie has had all kinds of hobgoblin dreams about you for the last 10 days. Hope you met with no accident with your old sails, as sails are money."⁴² Lydia Almy dreamed that her husband had died: "...last night dreamed of seing my husband dead and laid out which was grate troble in my sleep but when I woke found it was a dream to my grate relief."⁴³

Like Rachel Putnam, Lydia often walked alone, feeling quite lonesome, and was conscious that sometimes it was impossible for her to control her feelings and desire for intimacy:

...had very lonesome walk it being between sunset and dark...anxious feelings that I must indure at times for my Dear Husband the rains will sometimes git loose and my mind gits far beyond the bounds where it ought to be am sensable that of myself I can due nothing.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Abbie to Joseph Griffin, 29 December 1871, Letters of a New England Coaster, 1868-1872, Ralph H. Griffin, Jr., ed. (Privately Printed, 1968) 217.

⁴² Henry Staples to Joseph Griffin, 12 January 1872, Griffin 224.

⁴³ Lydia Almy diary, 11 January 1798.

⁴⁴ Lydia Almy Diary, 5 April 1798.

During another walk, Lydia sensed that her husband was there with her: "...as I was walking home the way was very pleasant to me it seemed that I had the company of my Dear Christopher think I never felt greater love for [him] that at that time...and that I had one of the best husbands."⁴⁵

Early in the nineteenth century Joan Waterman, in a letter to her husband, vividly expressed her love and sexual longing:

...If I could have your company I should feel happy in this world for it is better than everything else. But that cannot be the case and I must be contented without it. I feel full of something that I can't express with pen or ink it seems as though I could fly to you and hug you to my breast. If I express it perhaps you may think I am foolish to write so much nonsense but I feel so much love for you that I cannot help writing it. I hope I shan't feel everyday as I do today.⁴⁶

The strict morality of the times did not allow a "good woman" to allude to sexual urges in writing. However, in the nineteenth century marriage became based more on romantic love, which was reinforced with the exchange of love letters.⁴⁷ Joan freely expressed her deep love for her husband: "...I cannot be happy without your company. I feel so much love for you this moment that I cannot express it with pen or ink, but if you was here I could express it in

⁴⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 19 June 1798.

⁴⁶ Joan to Martin Waterman, 28 January 1827, Waterman Family Papers, G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, Connecticut.

⁴⁷ Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford U P, 1980).

full." Along the side of this letter she warned, "Don't you leave this letter where any person can read it."⁴⁸

Karen Lystra, in her book on nineteenth-century romantic love, states that romantic expression depended upon total privacy and secrecy. "Suspicious of strangers and jealous of their privacy," writers and receivers of love letters "censored, destroyed, and in general fiercely guarded their love letters," she observes.⁴⁹ Lydia Almy did not write her husband love letters, but like Joan Waterman she longed for her husband's presence and wished that she could keep him from ever making another voyage.

O the ancious fealings to hear from my endeared
friend it seems I know not what to doie and how to
content myself if, we are ever suffered to meet
again I due believe it must be for contience
[conscience] sake and not intrest that will avail
for me to give my consent for the like again.⁵⁰

Children were not a substitute for absent husbands but gave much needed comfort and companionship to shut-in mothers, in spite of the heavy responsibility of single parenthood. Very often Lydia's children were the only company she had for days at a time: "Have no company but my little ones but seem to feel my self more composed than at some other times since my dear husband left me last sixt

⁴⁸ Joan to Martin Waterman, 10 April 1828.

⁴⁹ Lystra, Introduction, 3.

⁵⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, 20 August 1797.

day...."⁵¹ She often mentioned time spent alone in the company of her little daughter: "...it was lone times with me yet seem to feel comfortable this eaveing we have had no company today molly and I seems to take comfort together we call ourselves only sisters...."⁵² Like Penelope of Greek mythology, Lydia took pleasure and pride in the art of weaving: "...enjoy a contented mind have spent my time of late in the garret with my children a weaveing...."⁵³

Children often reminded mothers of their husband's absence by mentioning their fathers at unexpected times:

...much of my time hath been imployd with the thoughts of my nearest friend my little sone often puts me in mind of him this day I due not recollect that any one was speaking about them as he stood by the side of his little cosin he spake after this manner cousin Debbys dady is gone round cape horn along with sons dear Dady.⁵⁴

Lydia chastised herself for thinking about her husband too often:

...the troubles which I meet with are but very trifling as to the outward except that of my dear husband sometimes I am afraid lest I sin therein for it seemes it takes up too grate a part of my time oft does my little sone put me in mind of it...⁵⁵.

⁵¹ Lydia Almy Diary, 15 October 1797.

⁵² Lydia Almy Diary, 1 February 1798.

⁵³ Lydia Almy Diary, 14 June 1798.

⁵⁴ Lydia Almy Diary, 25 February 1798.

⁵⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 22 January 1798.

Lydia realized her husband was deprived of the company of his children, and she was saddened that he was not present to watch them grow up:

...the company of my little prattlers which my Dear husband has not the sweet injoyment of often does it cause me to shed tears to hear my little sone talk about his dear Daddy and often times when I give him something to eat he saith I will save some of it for my Dear Daddy for he will come home by and by.⁵⁶

Sue Chase, another mariner's wife, wrote her husband in 1873:

You are loosing all of babys cunning baby ways and doings--He learns very fast and would pull his Papa's whiskers for him if he was only here to give him the chance...I showed him his Papa's picture yesterday and the day before and he got very earnest talking and looking at it...I do wish my hub was at home it makes me feel bad to think you wont see the baby while he is little.⁵⁷

Although still very young, children also missed their fathers and feared they might never see them again. Lydia wrote: "...my little sone being unwell with the disintery he saith if his dady ever come home again he will tie him up he never shall go away any more he wants to see his deer dady."⁵⁸ Another timeshe wrote:

...it is jennerally the last in his mind when he goes to sleep and the first when he wakes in the morning the other morning he saith mommey due get

⁵⁶ Lydia Almy Diary, 14 January 1798.

⁵⁷ Sue Chase to her husband, 1 January 1873, Dear Fess, ed. Katherine Chase Owen, Maine State Library, Augusta, Maine.

⁵⁸ Lydia Almy Diary, November 1797.

up and make a jonneycake for Dear Dadey for he will come by and by....⁵⁹

The children were company for Lydia, but they also caused her great concern, especially when they were sick and no one was there to help her:

About 10 oclock this morning my little sone was taken in grate distress he complaining of his head mostly I could not account for it sent to the market for father but he was gone out of town I worried through the day with him haveing no one with me about sunset he seemed to be relieved have since found that he had a sore brok in his head.⁶⁰

Another time she was greatly frightened when "...my little daughter fell and fainted and was gone so long that I began to be doughtful wheather she ever would breathe again, which was very shocking to my feelings."⁶¹

Sea wives often complained about how uncomfortable they felt during stormy, windy weather. Thunder storms particularly frightened Lydia: "...we had thunder had no company save my children it was not with me as formally was not so much terrified at the terrible sound...."⁶² During the next severe storm she again felt frightened: "have had hard thunder and very sharp lightning this eavening feeling a little timid took both of my children into Isaacs [her

⁵⁹ Lydia Almy Diary, 22 January 1789.

⁶⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, 20 April 1798.

⁶¹ Lydia Almy Diary, 27 January 1798.

⁶² Lydia Almy Diary, 21 April 1798.

boarder's] room staid till the shower was over."⁶³ Both Sarah and Rachel often mentioned in their diaries the dreariness of the harsh, cold New England winters, which kept their spirits low and confined them indoors. Lucy Grey probably was thinking of her husband upon the seas when she wrote: "...I should enjoy myself very well but I am continually watching the wind and weather."⁶⁴

At the close of Sarah Trask's second diary she recorded the losses of her girlfriends' lovers at sea. On shore, too, people died quickly from some incurable sickness, from childbirth, or a contagious disease. Lydia felt uneasy about the epidemics which seemed to come and go throughout the countryside. She wrote about an outbreak of putrid fever in Providence, where people were dying or leaving town: "I often think of [what] my husband said before he went away he saith it is likely there will be a grate alteration in so long a time as eighteen monts."⁶⁵ In January of 1798 she recorded hearing the beating of a drum calling citizens to a town meeting. There had been an outbreak of smallpox and a neighbor had refused to quarantine his infected child. Lydia's anxiety increased when she

⁶³ Lydia Almy Diary, 5 May 1798.

⁶⁴ Lucy Grey to her husband, 28 December 1828, Letters to her husband Joshua Grey, 1817-1829, Hooker Collection, Schlesinger Library for Women's History, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁶⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 9 October 1787.

heard news of epidemics, deaths, and accidents. Recording them in her diary seemed to help relieve her mind of worry:

thought I should feel easiest to make a memorandum of it Eleasen jinks haveing a very sick house he having lost two daughters within a week of each other and hath an other not expected to live and several more of his famaly very sick it being called the slow fever which they have amongst them...i recollect of their looseing two daughters and one sone about two years sinc with the came disorder.⁶⁶

She was kept occupied by helping out when a neighbor became sick or a mother died in childbirth:

...have been this two days imployd in having the care of nabour peckum little infant being about two weeks old the mother died yesterday and the babe to day it seems to be a maloncoly sight to behold hanson Hulls wife also died last sixt day in child bed He is said to be near raven dis-tracted on the occasion of looseing his wife....⁶⁷

Not only did Lydia worry about her children's contracting a deadly disease, but she confessed how difficult it was sometimes to manage them alone. After traveling with them by boat, stage and on foot to her parent's home, she said, "something of a worrisome time gitting along weth my children."⁶⁸

Women like Abbie Griffin often had trouble with a son who needed the influence and discipline of his father. Aunt Miranda wrote Captain Joseph Griffin that his son was at a

⁶⁶ Lydia Almy Diary, 25 December 1797.

⁶⁷ Lydia Almy Diary, 10 October 1797.

⁶⁸ Lydia Almy Diary, 8 July 1798.

difficult age and was not an easy child for his wife Abbie to rear alone.

She (Abbie) is nice and smart, I think, but she has got a troublesome boy--not more so than most of them here. They need a large amount of care and I may say patience, especially with one at Guy's age. But she is blessed with a good share of that, so I think she will get along as well as anyone in her circumstances.⁶⁹

These women were "single parent mothers" generations before the term was coined and experienced many of the same hardships such mothers experience today. Mothers usually lived with, or closeby, relatives and friends, but they could not always be counted on to look after one's children.

Lydia also missed not having her husband to assist her with the many tasks and responsibilities of maintaining the household. Having bought wood for the first time since her husband's departure, she struggled to split the logs:

"...have several logs now left which will not split which may be provided for me...I often find the need of my kind husband but endeavour to wait with patience the appointed time..." (Later she recorded that she had returned home to find that a helpful neighbor had chopped her a pile of wood). She added that she was willing to share with her husband the burden of economic survival in order to have him remain beside her:

...have thought since I have been riteing that if I should receive so grate a favour as to behold my dear husbands face again and that if we equally

⁶⁹ Abbie to Joseph Griffin, 13 January 1872, Griffin 227.

set our sholders to the wheel and pry forward in the fear of the Lord that we shall be supported comfortable through life without our ever being parted....⁷⁰

Lydia could not always depend on relatives and neighbors to be there when she needed them. One day when her cow strayed out of town, she wrote:

...been out of town to look my cow nabout shereman being gone to nantucket had nobody to apply too to fetch her she not haveing been milked in two days as I was walking along and reflection on time past could not forbare to strow a few tears by the way finding need of my kind husband....

Unsuccessful in bringing her cow home to Smithfield, she called on her brother the next day to help: "...went to portsmouth to get my Brother Isaac to drive the cow to smithfield when he gives me incouragement of doing within a week or two so that troble is removeed...."⁷¹

In spite of all the difficulties Lydia had to face alone, she was highly energetic and involved in many activities. In addition to caring for her children, she wove, whitewashed, bottled cider, kept a cow and a pig, butchered the pig, carried wood for the fires, tanned and sold hides, took in boarders, tended a sick neighbor, helped her father with the haying, and faithfully attended Quaker meeting. In spite of all the tasks she performed, she wrote that she was not overworked and felt very healthy and energetic:

⁷⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, 19 June 1798.

⁷¹ Lydia Almy Diary, October or November 1797.

...it seems I have a grate deel of leisure time for am not hurried with work if I have done a good days work am content therewith and if done but little it does not trouble me think I never was better able to work than am now never was more healthy and fat in my life when the weather is suitable I fetch a basket of tan in mornings.⁷²

After one of her temporary boarders left, she felt guilty that she was not doing more for a living:

...am in no way to due any thing towards eanning my liveing which seems rather to distress my mind knowing that my dear husband must be exposed to wind and weathe and many hardships to endure whilst I am provided for in the best manner nothing lacking as yet.⁷³

Lydia was financially independent and actively participated in small cash transactions. One day she wrote, "Joseph Robinson came here this eavening and we settled our accounts he paid the remainder what he oed me for the skins." Another entry read: "received five dollars from Richard Arnold...it being money which I lent him."⁷⁴ However, she was not inclined to tell her relatives about her economic transactions and assertively warded off her father's and brother's curiosity and pessimism:

...father asked me how much money my husband left me or whether I had added or deminished as to my intrest since Christopher [husband] went away told him if he found out it would be more than any one else knew but my self told him had not wanted for any thing.

⁷² Lydia Almy Diary, January 1798.

⁷³ Lydia Almy Diary, 21 December 1797 and January 24, February 28, March 7, 1798. See also Norling, "Loneliness" 48.

⁷⁴ Lydia Almy Diary, 3 July and 30 August 1798. Norling, "Loneliness" 48.

...brother John came here this morning he saith how much money did Almy leve you told him I had not wanted or any thing neither did I expect too if I due as well as I can.⁷⁵

When her brother John asked Lydia if she was not afraid that her husband might die, she responded that she put her trust in "her Protector." Trying to frighten her further, he mentioned that there were the Algerians (Barbary pirates) who might capture her husband and put him in some dungeon where she would never see him again. She curtly answered that she believed she would be provided for. Lydia, whose Quaker faith gave her a strong sense of self and independence, refused to be intimidated by the negative prophesies of her male family members. Perhaps her father and brother felt protective of her and were somewhat threatened by her staunch independence. For Lydia, God was the ultimate authority over the affairs of men, and in her no-nonsense manner she told them to mind their own business as she did a curious neighbor: "nabour shearman asked me if I had spent any of the robinson money he did not find out wheather I had or not."⁷⁶

Historian Laurel Ulrich has pointed out that because eighteenth-century women lagged far behind men in their ability to write, they usually kept no account books but held a dominant role in a largely oral trade network. She

⁷⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 8 July 1798.

⁷⁶ Lydia Almy Diary, 24 April 1798.

concludes that "as long as independent female trade remained a minor theme within a larger community ethic, it did not threaten either male supremacy or economic unity of the family...."⁷⁷ However, as we have seen from the somewhat intimidating inquiries of Lydia's father and brother, male relatives and neighbors did not hesitate to find out what they could about a woman's financial transactions. Lydia mentioned throughout her diary that she wanted for nothing, except the company of her husband:

I have some times thought that I ought not to complain or think my lot was hard though I am parted from my all as I may say yet I have everything to make me comfortable and happy and want for nothing of this worlds goods except the Company of my dear husband, I have all other kind friends it seems am so mean in my own opinion I am not deserving of what I enjoy never was more healthy at no time of my life than at this both myself and my children.⁷⁸

Often Lydia seemed to feel that she was unworthy of such favors and was fearful of enjoying herself too much. After she received a letter from her husband, she wrote:

...think I enjoy grater favours than I am worthy of O that I may Keep my plase and not be too much overjoyd at such seasons as this think I never spent a day more comfortable and happy in all my life, what shall I do in return for such favours as these....⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Laurel Ulrich, Good Wives: Images and Reality in the Lives of Women in Norther New England 1650-1750 (New York: Oxford U P, 1980) 46-7.

⁷⁸ Lydia Almy Diary, 15 October 1797.

⁷⁹ Lydia Almy Diary, 5 January 1798.

Lydia referred often to such happy days and her emotions seemed to oscillate between feelings of joy and contentment, and loneliness and anxiety. Her Quaker religion helped give her a balanced commitment to work, motherhood, spiritual faith, and social involvement with a strong emphasis upon community and spiritual life. After attending Meeting on Sunday, she returned home to write in her diary and often to her husband, hoping that he, too, "may be all religion":

...this day soon after I took a seat in meeting considering of my situation in life how I was left comfortable with a plenty of everything of this worlds goods I lack for nothing it caused tears to fall from mine eyes, and I prayed in mine heart for him it seemed my heart was melted within me when our friend Elisabeth Gatchell arose and it seemed from what she said that she knew the thoughts of my heart every word seemed for me and very encourageing to my drooping sperit.⁸⁰

Lydia had many loyal friends and a father-in-law who looked after her by stopping in often and bringing her food. She seemed to have extra to spare, "...have made out comfortable for provision had som left to give to the poor never got along better at such a time think I ought to be thankful that I am thus favoured...."⁸¹ The Quaker faith emphasized sharing, and Lydia was able to lend money out and give to the poor what she did not need for herself. Father Almy who called and dined with her often, also commented

⁸⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, November 1797.

⁸¹ Lydia Almy Diary, 13 June 1798.

that she wanted for nothing: "...He saith I believe you are very happy I think that you do not want for any thing Isaac (her son) and my self...."⁸² Lydia was grateful for the company and support she received from her father-in-law and her kind friends of the Quaker community. She valued this personal give-and-take over any excess of material amenities:

Father Almy dined with me again he never comes to diner without bringing a piece of meat which is rather an advaintage to me as to my intrest and his company is very agreeable to me in my Lonesome situation believe I due not raell to say a lonesome situation when I have so many kind friends around me and every other necery injoyment and the company of my little prattlers...⁸³.

Lydia's inlaws visited her more often than her own family, who lived further away, and she spent a most pleasant Thanksgiving Day with them in 1797:

This being a day that is called thanksgiveing day have been to meeting have been favoured with very agreeable company this week past father and mother Almy came to monthly meeting and staid all night with me which gave me grate satisfaction and likewise sister rebekah hath made me a visit...

⁸⁴

She visited her own family reluctantly as it was difficult traveling over land and water with her children. On her arrival she had to endure her father's and brother's cross-examinations concerning her financial situation:

⁸² Lydia Almy Diary, 12 January 1798.

⁸³ Lydia Almy Diary, 14 January 1798.

⁸⁴ Lydia Almy Diary, November 1797.

...feel a little low in sperits but have a hope that all will work together for good had it not been thinking it a duty incombent on me I should not have left home my Parants haveing sent word for me to com and spend a little time with them...they appeared to be glad to se us father asked me how much money my husband left me....⁸⁵

In spite of Lydia's independent and private handling of her finances, she was almost daily involved in community cooperativeness. Quaker friends and neighbors were often willing to help her out with things she might need in her husband's absence. In her Thanksgiving Day entry Lydia noted that her little son had been sick with "disintary" for two weeks, but she had been helped beyond her expectation by her sister Elizabeth: "Sister Elizabeth went home last night haveing been with me about two weeks staid longer than she intended on account of my little sones being sick."⁸⁶

Elizabeth was with Lydia when her husband sailed. She visited often to alleviate her sister's loneliness and help when her children were sick. Lydia noted her lack of other female companionship:

...brought sister Elizabeth home with me to make a weeks visit which seems to be a very pleasing matter to me it being the first visit that any of the family has made me in my husband absence there never has been but one woman to make me a vis-it....⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 6 July 1798.

⁸⁶ Lydia Almy Diary, 3 December 1797.

⁸⁷ Lydia Almy Diary, November 1797.

Lydia seemed to gain attention and offers of help from mostly male friends and neighbors. After Father Almy had dined with her for several days in a row, she said, "Pery Shereman dined with me his wife not being in a situation to come I sent her some diner this afternoon....⁸⁸ A few days later she mused:

...cannot tell the reason why Friend robinson is so tender towards me he again said of me that if I kneeded any assistance as my husband was gone not be backward but let him know and I should have any thing that I kneeded if it was in his power to grant it....⁸⁹

...may not omit to mention my kind friend Edward Hall sent me word that if I wanted a pare of shoes he would make me some and wait till my husband came home for pay and if he never should return he would gave them to me.⁹⁰

At meeting, Elizabeth Gatchell, whose husband was also at sea, sensed her sadness and spoke out in encouragement:

...it seemed my heart was melted within me when our friend Elizabeth Gatchell arose and it seemed from what she said that she knew the thoughts of my heart every word seemed for me and very incourageing to my drooping spirit.⁹¹

She later visited Lydia at her home where she shared her similar lonely feelings:

I remember this evening have had the agreeable Company of Elizabeth Gatchell which was of grate satisfaction in my lonelly state she said she

⁸⁸ Lydia Almy Diary, 14 January 1798.

⁸⁹ Lydia Almy Diary, 26 January 1798.

⁹⁰ Lydia Almy Diary, Thanksgiving Day, November 1797.

⁹¹ Lydia Almy Diary, November 1797.

Knew how to share with me she had many trials to pass through her husband being at sea.⁹²

Lydia concluded that her life was quite satisfactory, and the fact that she had many friends on her side certainly gave her great comfort:

have spent the afternoon very comfortable and happy due not know that I ever enjoyd my self better in my life than I now doe it seems I have many kind friends every body is for me no body is agains me that I know of....⁹³

Lydia was fortunate in being part of a strong Quaker network. In her husband's absence, friends and neighbors provided her with the support of an extended family. They kept house and babysat for her while she did errands and attended daily meetings. Her faith and kinship relations supported her and diminished her fears of poverty and need.

Lydia, her family, and neighbors shared difficult tasks, exchanged services with one another, and were willing to help others out in difficult circumstances. Lydia often put people up at her home: "have considerable of company this eavening have provied lging for seven," and she helped others out when she could: "am this eaveing keeping house for nabour spenser being gone to Portsmouth for a few day."⁹⁴ While visiting her parents, she helped her father: "...this afternoon been helping father get in some hay...

⁹² Lydia Almy Diary.

⁹³ Lydia Almy Diary, 26 January 1798.

⁹⁴ Lydia Almy Diary, 11 June 1798 and 6 December 1797.

helped father yesterday and to day feel somewhat weary enjoy a contented mind."⁹⁵

Ulrich observes that an essential element of colonial America's preindustrial rural economy was an intricate system of community interdependence.⁹⁶ Cooperation was stressed in a Quaker community, such as Smithfield, Rhode Island where Lydia lived: "As a minority religious group with a history of persecution, Quakers traditionally sought to settle disputes, maintain discipline, and assist their membership within their own society."⁹⁷

Lydia's strong faith in the Lord reassured her that her husband would be protected and allowed her to get on with the other activities of her life. She honestly documented her fluctuating moods and was grateful for her well-being and contented moments. She was likewise sorrowful when others died from fevers, small pox, or accidents, which occurred often throughout her diary. Unlike the more unfortunate Sarah Trask and Rachel Putnam of the next century, Lydia emphasized her contentment with life more than she stressed her disappointment or loneliness. Although she missed her husband's companionship, she would not

⁹⁵ Lydia Almy Diary, 8 July 1798

⁹⁶ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Themes of Community and Self-Sufficiency in the History of New England Women," paper presented at the Sixth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Smith College, June 3, 1984.

⁹⁷ Norling, "Loneliness," 49.

act in her own self-interest and demand that he remain ashore. Her expectations were simple, and she had few desires other than a "comfortable liveing" for herself and her family and "to die a death of the righteous."

A Woman of Enterprise and Ambition

In 1789, eight years before Lydia began her diary, twenty-three-year-old Elizabeth Perkins Wildes of Kennebunk in the Province of Maine, began her laconic account of tasks performed.⁹⁸ Elizabeth took her handicraft ability seriously and enlarged her part-time activities as a mantua-maker⁹⁹ during her first marriage to a West India sea captain, Israel Wildes. She devoted every spare moment to flax-combing, spinning, knitting, warping, and weaving. In addition to her daily household routine, she found time for designing and fashioning bonnets, cloaks, and gowns for her friends. Through her own choice she became involved in designing, fabricating, and refining products far more

⁹⁸ Nancy Cott states that "the Protestant tradition produced two main sorts of diaries. One was the laconic account of tasks performed, in which the motive to disclose one's progress to one's self and God was tacit, even buried. The other was the explicit record of self-examination and often self-castigation which could also have a secular aspect"¹⁶. The Trask, Putnam and Almy diaries belong to the second category.

⁹⁹ A lady's loose-bodied robe, usually an overdress, resembling a mantle, made of handwoven cotton fiber.

luxurious than the basic necessities. Sandra Armentrout says of Eliza Wildes' diary:

In the diary of Eliza Wildes kept during the period from 1789 to 1793 we find few clues to her future ambitions, but we are introduced to an active and efficient young married woman who, in the absence of her husband at sea, balanced her days between domestic responsibilities, visiting and entertaining friends and family, selling West India goods (including rum) from household stores, occasional trips to York and Boston, church-going, and the care of three small daughters.

Armentrout speculates that her creative ability may have come from her mother, the daughter of a minister and a woman of taste, education and social standing. Eliza's father was a man of influence, a representative to the Massachusetts legislature and a large property owner in the Kennebunk area. After Eliza's marriage to Israel Wildes, she lived on half an acre of rocky land near her father's farm. She depended upon ties to her family for flax and wool as well as sociability during the long periods her husband was at sea. Eliza's son Edward recalled his mother's remarkable opportunities for education, socializing and learning handiwork and business. All these contributed to Eliza's high degree of confidence and self-esteem:

...[she] had the benefit of all the schools there were in those days. She was taught early to spin stockings, to weave her own gowns, cloaks and almost every garment, which nature...or the comfort of life demanded ...Whatever privileges then pertained to the best society of the town, Elizabeth enjoyed. The extensive business relations of her father and intercourse with those who were visitors at his house and enjoyed his hospitality,

gave her self-possession, habits of free conversation, and decision of character.¹⁰⁰

Eliza's diary testifies to the fact that she was an action-oriented person, who allowed herself no time for thoughts of self-pity, self-denigration or any other kind of self-absorbed introspection. Her daily journal recounts her amazingly wide array of tasks performed and gives us little insight into her thoughts or feelings about herself or her society. It concluded in 1793 when her husband Israel became ill and died on a voyage to England:

Two years later she married John Bourne, one of Kennebunk's leading shipbuilders, bringing her three small daughters to live with his six children from two previous wives. By 1806 when they purchased a house..., they had added six more children of their own and settled themselves and fifteen children all under the age of twenty into the commodious house at Kennebunk's Landing.¹⁰¹

Because of Jefferson's Embargo in 1807, New England shipbuilding and trade suffered severely. Eliza continued her cloak and bonnet business through these hard economic times. She even began to enlarge the sphere of her domestic labor and employment by adding a "new and important branch to her business, that of the manufacture of white cotton counterpanes [bedspreads]." With her home-based industry, Eliza was able to support her large family throughout this

¹⁰⁰ Armentrout quotes Edward Emerson Bourne, "The Bourne Family of Kennebunk," 1861, 245, The Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk, ME., 103.

¹⁰¹ Armentrout 103.

period of hardship.¹⁰² Socializing often with the leading families of southern Maine and making frequent trips to York and Boston, she found customers and opened new markets for her products. Through valuable family connections, particularly through her mother's remarriage into York society, she was exposed to the latest imported fabrics and patterns brought to Maine from England.

By the end of the eighteenth century more cotton was being grown in the southern states, and "mills in Providence, Worcester, and Beverly were spinning yarns with English-inspired machinery. It was just this spirit of the times," writes Armentrout, "that sharpened Eliza Bourne's entrepreneurial instincts. With a built-in labor force of three teenage daughters and several younger children to spool thread and wind bobbins, Bourne's manufactory was well-staffed."¹⁰³ Because of a demand for unseamed goods, Eliza had a loom made of sufficient width, requiring two persons for its operation, to complete her counterpanes in one piece. According to her son, Bourne's counterpanes "had acquired a reputation almost throughout New England." One made by Eliza's daughter Abigail was sent as a present to Dolly Madison in Washington; it bore the following inscription woven in the center:

¹⁰² Armentrout 103.

¹⁰³ George Washington, Diary from 1789-1791, ed. Benson J. Lossing (Richmond, Va.: Historical Society, 18610, 40-41) qtd. in Armentrout 105-106.

beneath this bed illustrious pair repose
 Secure from foreign and domestic foes.
 May white plumed seraphs watch around this bed,
 And heaven its kindlier influences shed.¹⁰⁴

Through the shipping connections of her husband and her large family network, Eliza Bourne was able to target an affluent market for her goods. Her prices of \$17 and \$10 were too high for most ordinary customers, who chose to weave or embroider their own instead, sometimes copying Eliza's woven patterns. She continued weaving after her three eldest daughters married and moved away. The younger sisters were instructed in the work but were not as strenuously pressed into service as their older sisters had been. In her later years, Eliza forsook her active life to devote her time to "quiet reflection and a study of the Scriptures."

Armentrout concludes that she was representative of many American women of her time who came up with a patriotic response to "the need for American manufacturing independence while also contributing to the support of their families."¹⁰⁵ Eliza followed the tradition of earlier women in seventeenth-century port towns, described by Laurel Ulrich in Good Wives, who developed their own independent

¹⁰⁴ Armentrout 108 quotes Bourne 246. The first lady sent Abigail a thank-you note, complementing her ingenuity and industry, and a pair of "the richest gold earrings and a chain" as a token of her regard. The coverlet is believed to have been lost in the White House fire of 1814 (Armentrout, 108-9).

¹⁰⁵ Armentrout 111.

business enterprises. With a large family to support and her husband away at sea, Eliza was allowed the freedom to perfect her own abilities, put them to an economic use, and thereby support her family and increase her own status and reputation. Of course, one must not ignore the advantages of her class, which enabled her to pursue her ideas and penetrate markets closed to ordinary country or working-class women. Also, women of pre-industrialized America had not yet been limited in their activities by the ideology of separate spheres. Young women like Eliza Wildes could take the initiative to earn money to support her family without being subject to critical comment by contemporaries.

A Community of Family and Friends

Sea wives' diaries and letters to husbands and relatives attest to the importance of parents, siblings and friends as a network of support. Harriet Gardner of Nantucket had a close relationship with her sister Rebecca in 1842 while her husband was on long whaling journeys. They took turns keeping house for each other and looked after each other's health:

Sister Rebecca says I must give her love dabled and twisted to you and says she will keep me in the House so I must not git any more cold in my face for I have had the toothache but have not had it out yet but I think if you was here to go with me I would try to have Spunk a nuff to have it

out--but that is lucky. Oh dear I am a hard old lady.¹⁰⁶

Harriet enjoyed, too, getting away from home to visit friends and relatives. Visiting gave many sea wives a respite from their household confinement and daily round of chores. With great enthusiasm Harriet wrote her husband about all the delightful visits she was having with friends and relatives:

Oh my dear one you do not know what a delightful visit I am having here with your sister Elizabeth. They are all so lovely and good that it seems like a little Heaven on earth. I say sometimes how I do wish that Jared (her husband) could be here. Sister Elizabeth will say never mind we are very thankful for small favours in having you, for we did not expect to see you and now we may see you and him (Elizabeth's husband) in about three years, again. How delightful that would be.¹⁰⁷

The tone here suggests that her the husband would indeed arrive home after his long absence, his visit would be similar to that of another delightful and welcomed guest! Whipple, writing about whaling wives, mentions a Lydia Gardner (perhaps related to Elizabeth), who was married to a Captain George Gardner for thirty-seven years during which time he spent less than five years at home in Nantucket.¹⁰⁸ Apparently Nantucket sea wives were too practical to harbor

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Harriet Gardner to her husband Jared, Nantucket, 12 December 1842, Gardner Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

¹⁰⁷ Harriet Gardner to her husband, September 27, 1844.

¹⁰⁸ A.B.C. Whipple, "The Whalers," The Seafarers (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1979) 109.

romantic expectations of a companionate marriage with husbands who were gone most of the time. Instead they adapted to the deprivations of the maritime marriage through their close interactions with their tightly knit Quaker community, and by cultivating other women as their companions and confidantes. Nantucket women followed the tradition of incessant visiting which Crevecoeur described in 1782:

The house is always cleaned before they set out, and with peculiar alacrity they pursue their intended visit which consists of a social chat, a dish of tea, and an hearty supper.¹⁰⁹

Similarly on the coastal mainland, women who had not established their own homes often spent months in extended visits to relatives and friends. Libby Spooner described her busy schedule for December 1858:

I am staying with Uncle Gamallels widow [.] she is alone keeping house for her father[.] I shall stay two or three weeks longer[,] when I shall go back to Grandmothers [and] stop a short time [,] then go out and stay a few weeks with Cynthia [,] then to [illegible] and back and get ready to start for home by the last of May.

Jokingly she asked her husband Caleb, "I have got to roveing so much are you not afraid you will not be able to keep me at home when you wish?" Reassuring him, she added: "well you need not fear for the more I knock about the more anxious I am to settle down quietly somewhere... 'At Home.'"

¹⁰⁹ Crevecoeur 142.

the very words sound dear to me."¹¹⁰ Like Rachel Putnam she was influenced by a society which valued home and domesticity and, therefore, yearned to set up housekeeping, but in the meantime she enjoyed the freedom of visiting.

Lucy Blythe Putnam, living in Salem and Danvers, Massachusetts in 1821 while her husband Philemon was at sea, maintained a close relationship with her mother and sister. Lucy was sad when her husband departed for sea. She wrote her mother living in Windsor, Vermont that she would keep a journal of all the news to send her. Several months later she noted:

I hope you will write again and tell me as "much as a good deal." Oh dear what would I not give to be with you. I do believe I should be stronger and better if I could be once more seated with our dear Parents beside the fireside however I do not despair of eating pumpkin and milk this winter in Windsor notwithstanding the significant looks of our friends when I talk about going.¹¹¹

Women who had husbands at sea often were drawn together to comfort one another in a kind of maritime sisterhood. Libby Spooner wrote her husband about their sister-in-law, who in her lonely state took another sea widow in to live with her: "to [sic] lonely ones together. O the life of a sailor and sailors wife, how fraught with sorrow and

¹¹⁰ Libby Spooner to Caleb Spooner, Jr., 3 December 1858, mss 80, Old Dartmouth Historical Society, Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts; qtd. in Norling, "Loneliness," 38-39.

¹¹¹ Lucy Putnam to her mother, Sarah Ingersoll of Windsor, Vermont, Danvers, MA, 25 July 25 1822, Endicott Family Papers, 1821-1840, Essex Institute, Salem, MA.

heartpangs."¹¹² Libby described this situation of two women's moving in together as a survival mechanism and gave her husband no reason to believe that his presence was being replaced by women's companionship. It was acceptable for women to become companions and comfort one another in their husbands' absence, but sea widows usually reassured their mates, sometimes in overly dramatic terms, that their absence continued to cause them great pain and sorrow.

Lucy Putnam's sister Sarah (Sally) was married to Moses Endicott, a sea captain, and the two sisters shared house-keeping and companionship while their husbands were at sea. In December of 1822 both sisters wrote their mother in Windsor. Lucy observed, referring to her husband in a formal, distant tone: "If Mr. P. should not return this Winter, I shall be very desirous to be with you. You don't know my dear Mother how homesick I do feel sometimes it appears to me that I must go." Sally's letter to her mother referred to Lucy's "old complaint," a pain in her side which she wrote was "nothing to the degree she use to experience."¹¹³

¹¹² Libby Spooner to Caleb Spooner, Jr., 3 December 1858; Qtd. in Norling, "Loneliness" 39. Norling uses Libby's words, "how fraught with sorrow and heartpangs," as the title of her recent article on the maritime marriage.

¹¹³ Lucy Putnam and Sally Endicott to mother, Sarah Ingersoll, in Windsor, Vt. 16 December 1822.

Lucy did not seem to mind being alone. She termed this solitude, not loneliness, and it was frequently broken by visits from attentive friends:

Since you left me housekeeper my dear Sister our friends have been very attentive to me in calling and expressing regret that I must necessarily pass many solitary hours but you know that to me solitude is not so terrific as to some people. Sometimes I feel sad when I think of the distance which separates me from the friends who are dearest to me but I think again that I ought to remember that I am blessed with many privileges and that I am preserved from sickness when I should feel the absence of friends more if possible.¹¹⁴

In August of 1823 Lucy wrote her parents that she was now boarding in Salem with her sister-in-law Eliza. Although she enjoyed a beautiful view of the nearby gardens, she still would have preferred being in the country with her parents, as she found the "bustle and confusion" of Salem more disagreeable than ever. She noted that she was having trouble nursing her baby and had hired a wet nurse. Two years later in August of 1825, Lucy's husband Philemon wrote her parents (as he often did), telling them that she had given birth to a second daughter and had engaged a wet nurse, the wife of his mate who had recently lost a child. That following November Lucy informed her parents of her husband's recent departure for sea and the need to move again to less expensive accommodations. As discussed in a previous chapter, many women were greatly inconvenienced by

¹¹⁴ Lucy Putnam to sister, Sarah Endicott, Salem, MA, October 16, 1822.

a shortage of funds while their husbands were at sea, often because a captain received no wages for months at a time:

...if I had no children nothing should prevent my going with him...Perhaps my dear Mother you will be surprised to hear that I intend going to Danvers* again, that while my husband is absent I think it best, as it is much less expensive.¹¹⁵

In her letter of 1830 Lucy's mother was torn between her love and longing for her daughter and her own duties as a wife:

You have no conception, what I feel for you, and how much I suffer, in not being able to be with you...As feeble as I am, I should not hesitate to set off immediately, for Franconia**, if I had nothing to consult but my own feeling. But to leave your father, in the winter season, entirely alone, I can't think of it. He wants my attention continually. But still I can't subdue by anxious longing to be with you.¹¹⁶

In January of 1839 Lucy's brother-in-law Moses Endicott wrote to Lucy's mother in Windsor of Lucy's death (the chronic pain she suffered in her side for years eventually caused her death). That following March Sally Endicott wrote her widowed brother-in-law Philemon asking him to bring his two daughters, Eliza and Sarah, to Salem to visit relations and friends. She thanked him for money he had sent to the Seaman's Widow and Orphan Society and signed the

¹¹⁵ Lucy Putnam to her parents, 15 November 1825. *Danvers--a rural town a few miles inland from Salem where accommodations would have been more reasonable.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Ingersoll to her daughter Lucy Putnam, Windsor, Vermont 13 November 1830. **Franconia, New Hampshire which again was probably a less expensive place to live than Massachusetts.

letter, "I remain truly your friend, S.R. Endicott." The widowed father must now depend upon family to look after his young daughters if he intended to continue a life at sea.

Sue Fessenden Chase of Winnegance, Maine corresponded regularly with her friend Etta Griffin (probably related to Joseph Griffin, whose correspondence with his wife is analyzed in detail in the next chapter) of Stockton, Maine in 1873. Sue and Etta exchanged news about their children, their health and weight, as well as news of their husbands' journeys and their feelings about accompanying them to sea. Etta wrote Sue from New York on her arrival from Calcutta aboard her husband's ship:

Our voyage did not turn out much as we expected when we left you, I will not try to tell you about it now, only that it has been a year of sighs & groans to me, had a very stormy passage to Calcutta & then got ashore, but now we have safely arrived here I feel quite happy & yet to-day we heard bad news. The ship Bennington is lost. Ed's [her husband's] brother-in-law was in her and had his wife & two small children. We hear the Captain & part of the crew were saved, but do not know whether his wife & children are alive or not...This is a world of trouble if we are only prepared to die it is a happy change.¹¹⁷

Etta told Sue that she could not make up her mind whether or not to go to sea again and asked Sue how she felt about the matter:

I would like to know how you feel, do you very much wish yourself board of ship, or do you find it quite as comfortable at home? ...Oh! Mrs. Chase I want to say so much I can't think of

¹¹⁷ Etta Griffin to Sue Fessenden Chase, 2 January 1873, Owen, 70-1.

anything. If I stay at home we will see each other if possible next summer. I think of you often & count you one of my dearest friends. I hope you do not dislike me altho I feel I am far from being lovable.¹¹⁸

In spite of their long separations the two women were close friends and trusted each other's advise. Etta probably had been yearning for female company after her voyage, but was perhaps insecure about her friendship with Sue after being away so long. She could not resist putting herself down, which reflects the lack of self-esteem many of these Victorian women shared.

Etta wrote Sue in her next letter that she had decided to go to sea again with her husband because he was not well and would feel lonely without her and the baby. She dreaded going: "I find it very hard work to take care of a babe, much more than I thought before I had one of my own. I do not feel at all strong myself but hope to feel better when we get in warm weather" (they were bound for Callao, Peru).¹¹⁹ She reported that her husband's sister and husband had arrived safely home after a narrow escape at sea. They had spent fifty-two hours in a lifeboat with their two children under two years of age with nothing to eat or drink. This event increased Etta's anxiety about returning to sea. Sue asked her husband to look out for her friend

¹¹⁸ Etta Griffin to Sue Chase, 2 January 1873, Owen, 71.

¹¹⁹ Etta Griffin to Sue Chase, Searsport, Maine, 23 February 1873, Owen, 73.

Etta in Callao and to tell her not to forget to write as she wanted very much to hear from her: "...you can tell her my baby dont grow as fast as he did."¹²⁰ Women shared their concerns about their husbands' absences, their children's health and progress, household tasks, and their own decisions on whether or not to accompany their husbands at sea.

Carol Smith Rosenberg has observed that in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a female culture supported women in their isolation:

a specifically female world did indeed develop built around a generic and unselfconscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks...women lived within a world bounded by home, church and the institution of visiting...When husbands traveled, wives routinely moved in with other women, invited women friends to teas and suppers, sat together sharing and comparing the letters they had received from other close women friends. Secrets were exchanged and cherished, and the husband's return at times was viewed with some ambivalence.¹²¹

Because the ideology of separate spheres isolated women from the public sphere, women turned to one another for support. They developed their own female culture based on domestic and religious values at variance to those set by the marketplace.

Female friendship was particularly close in the works and personal lives of two nineteenth-century female writers,

¹²⁰ Sue Chase to her husband, Capt. Fess Chase in Callao, Peru, 30 March 1873, Owen, 76.

¹²¹ Carol Smith Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual", A Heritage of Her Own, eds. Nancy F. Cott & Elizabeth H. Pleck (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979) 317-319.

Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Ellen Chase. Their stories, set on the Maine coast, portray strong, independent female heroines, many of whom had lost their husbands at sea. These older women are friends and role models for other women in the town, who learn to support one another through the many changes and tragedies of coastal life.

Maritime women found various ways to move beyond their loneliness and overcome their emotional preoccupation with themselves and their mate's absence. Earlier diarists of the late eighteenth century discussed more in depth their involvement with work during a time when the economy was still centered on the home. Women shared much of the work necessary to provide for the necessities of life, and were encouraged and often willing to help support the family economically. Many of these women were also busy caring for children, other family members, boarders and friends. In addition, some did paid work, exchanged services or were actively involved in religious and community work. Those who were more socially inclined led busy lives visiting friends and relatives, creating networks of friendship to sustain them in their husbands' absence. They did not view themselves as victims of the seafaring experience, but instead they created new identities and roles for themselves, within the boundaries of women's sphere where they exercised their power and creativity to stretch their roles.

As maritime women found new ways to cope alone, their self-esteem improved and they developed character and courage which helped them attain self-realization, and even question indirectly the inequities of the patriarchal marriage.

CHAPTER V

OCEANS APART

Maritime couples of nineteenth-century New England were highly influenced by the ideology of separate spheres and the companionate marriage. A close examination of the correspondence between husbands and wives reveals how role expectations became altered by continued absences and by changes in the family and society. Distinct male/female spheres were further exaggerated by the physical separation of great distances. Prolonged separations strained the marital bond and created stress for both partners. Both husbands and wives found it increasingly difficult to fulfill the expectation of their private and public roles. The wife often felt trapped at home with the duties of housework and childcare, unable to participate in the few activities open to her in the public sphere. She was frustrated that she had neither the time, opportunity nor social access to be a better "helpmate" financially. The husband felt dissatisfied that seafaring was becoming less dependable as a viable occupation for supporting a family. The increasing demands of his career forced him to spend less and less time with his family in order to support them adequately. As a shipmaster he was isolated and alone at the top of the

hierarchy aboard ship, without the family or community support which sustained his wife ashore. Such a marriage required strong individual qualities and a great deal of flexibility on behalf of each partner.

A couple's reliance upon the ideal of the companionate marriage and romantic love contributed either to sustaining or frustrating the marriage. The severest test of continuing companionship was time spent together after long separations. Many times if these reunions proved to be overly frustrating, the husband would choose to stay longer and more often at sea, and the wife would be forced to find and develop her own interests and social networks ashore.

Some historians view the companionate marriage as an ideal more than a reality, which few couples were able to attain. Carl Degler states that "the supportive qualities and dependence of the nineteenth-century wife were often matched by similar qualities in her husband."¹ Two nineteenth-century travelers to America, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville and the Englishman Edward Dicey, found this high degree of companionship to be a "great charm" surrounding American family relationships.²

The correspondence of couples included here supports the idea of mutual dependency and illustrates how the

¹ Degler, Carl N, At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1980) 38.

² Degler 38.

average American husband and wife made a confidante and companion of each other. However, their writings also reveal the high degree of stress repeated separations exacted from relationships and how much they must struggle to keep their intimacy alive. At times their insistence upon continued intimacy was unrealistic, and lacked an understanding of the heavy demands placed upon their partners.

Lisa Norling sees the extreme division between male and female roles, together with their physical separation, as complicating rather than clarifying "female identity in the heavily masculine maritime culture." The fusion of religion and domesticity encouraged women to seek salvation and self-realization in the home. "A search," she said, that "was doomed to disappointment by the demands of seafaring, which acknowledged the importance of neither."³ Disappointment was certainly a theme in these women's marriage experiences, as was revealed particularly in the diaries of Sarah Trask, Rachel Putnam and Harriet Houdlette. However, there is no conclusive evidence that wives of mariners were more or less disappointed with their marriages than wives of men involved in land-based occupations. In their diaries and letters, maritime women dealt with various other themes besides their disappointment with the long-distance nature of their marriages.

³ Lisa Norling, "'How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs': Mariners' Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity in New England, 1790-1880," The New England Quarterly LXV.3 (1992): 443-4.

This examination of the complexities of women's roles and experiences in the context of the maritime marriage attempts to reveal the wide spectrum of women's feelings and attitudes about their maritime marriages. It also demonstrates how many women were able to move beyond disappointment and resignation to establish meaningful lives. Maritime women gained strength and self-reliance during frequent and often long separations from their mates. They found new ways to cope alone and stretch the limits of their roles to their satisfaction, which not only increased their self-esteem but gave them experience and influence. The supportive female and family networks they developed better prepared them for their long widowhood, which ultimately was the fate of the majority of maritime wives. Their experience with independent living, role transcendence, female and family bonding made these women positive role models for subsequent women seeking alternatives to a patriarchal marriage.

A rigid view of separate spheres can lead to the inaccurate conclusion that Victorian men and women were emotionally isolated from one another. Many women had close and fulfilling relationships with other women, but sisterhood did not preclude satisfying romantic relationships with men.⁴ In practice Victorian gender differences and sex role

⁴ Karen Lystra, Introduction, Searching the Heart: Men, Women, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Oxford U P, 1989) 11

standards were more blurred than a strict definition of male\female spheres suggests. Historian Karen Lystra has examined the intimate correspondence of many nineteenth-century couples, and found that husbands and wives accepted the transgressing of sex-role boundaries when glossed over by protective rhetoric. Rather than strictly adhering to a rigid gender system, Victorians often skillfully used their sex roles for their own self-realization. Gender roles were more fluid in daily life and couples negotiated their goals and behavior privately and in their letters. Lystra points out that private correspondence reveals that "tender feelings and sympathetic emotions" had become an important aspect of the Victorian male role. Captain Josiah Mitchell, writing his wife around 1850, valued these feelings and emotions: "...but let fools laugh at such feelings if they will, for my part I would give but little for a man that was devoid of them."⁵ Courtships and marriages based upon love and romance could not have existed unless it was believed that men had the capacity to feel. However, masculine role expectations required men to keep the emotional part of their nature hidden from public and freely released only in private to the women they loved.⁶ In contrast, nineteenth-century women were expected to be passive and dependent,

⁵ Josiah Mitchell to his wife, 1850?, Letters of Captain Josiah Angier Mitchell to his wife and children, 1850-1873, from the private collection of Judith Ann Read Elfring, Yarmouth, Maine.

⁶ Lystra 123-125.

down-playing their public ambitions and achievements. Mariners depended, however, upon women who were strong and independent enough to move beyond the narrow restrictions of Victorian female roles.

The Mariner's Wife: Image and Reality

A sick doll may be an agreeable companion when one is at home, but not a profitable one to a poor man, or a comfort to think of when one is away all of the time.⁷

A seafaring husband might romantically imagine an idealized Victorian woman by the hearth, but practically he was aware that such a woman would be too limited by her circumscribed role to fulfill his needs. As Degler asserts, the dependency of women upon their husbands "had two sides: subordination undoubtedly, but also strength and self-reliance. Husbands not only depended on both, but required both."⁸ The absent male needed a woman who was independent and resourceful, yet willing to honor his needs and desires above her own.

Joseph Griffin, a downeast coaster captain, realized before marrying that a successful seafarer's wife must be a

⁷ Joseph Griffin (aboard schooner Lillias) to his wife Abbie at home in Stockton, Maine, 5 December 1869, Letters of a New England Coaster 1868-1872, ed. Ralph H. Griffin, Jr. (Ralph H. Griffin, Jr. 1968) 72-73.

⁸ Degler 36-37.

strong and independent woman who would nevertheless accept his role as head of the family. He was aware that the overly domesticated woman did not suit a man of meager income, especially one engaged in deep water sailing. An ideal Victorian woman might be agreeable for a man who stayed close to home and had the means to give his wife leisure time for the more culturally feminine pursuits. However for the working-class couple struggling to make ends meet, the ideology of separate spheres may have been more an ideal than a reality.

Before he met Abbie, Joseph Griffin discovered through the pain of a failed romance what type of woman he did not want for a wife. In a letter to his bride he described his caution in choosing a companion who would best fit his needs:

But I have been thankful a thousand times since that it so happened and happened as it did, for had nothing happened as I had then wished, I should have got yoked to a pleasant sickly doll. I believe I hardly met a woman in company but what I noticed her every word and motion, which I never should have thought of if some circumstances been otherwise. By these means I have got a better wife. A sick doll may be an agreeable companion when one is at home, but not a profitable one to a poor man, or a comfort to think of when one is away all of the time.⁹

Joseph was honest with Abbie about his previous romance and was practical in his realization that a "sick doll"

⁹ Joseph Griffin to Abbie, 5 December 1869, 72-73. The editors FOREWORD gives information about Joseph's immediate family members, but provides no information on Abbie's, not even her maiden name.

would not enhance his own income, or could be relied upon to take care of family affairs while he was away. He referred to his breakup with Olive Concord (his former fiance) as the severest thing he ever felt in all his life and admitted that he had had an idealistic vision of womanhood:

I had a notion that girls were angels or just one step removed from them, but I got rather rudely awakened to the fact that girls could do as rough things in a gentle way as well as boys. I suffered that to trouble me a longer time than I care to confess even to you.¹⁰

Joseph's first experience with romance awakened him to the fact that woman could make choices, too, which might not always be in keeping with a man's wishes or needs. He realized he needed a woman upon whom he could rely to take care of affairs at home. Yet she must be devoted to him enough to be willing to relinquish her independence and autonomy upon his return. He summed up his first romance: "The consequences to me were that I learned some good profitable lessons."¹¹ Joseph's openness about the past can be viewed either as confidence in his wife or as a warning to Abbie of what he did not want in a wife.

Captain Barry had similar expectations of strength from his fiance, Sarah Lord of Kennebunk, when he wrote her about losing his ship off the Welch coast:

I do not know that you will dare trust to blend your future with mine and may fear that the

¹⁰ Joseph Griffin to Abbie, 5 Dec 1869, Griffin, 72.

¹¹ Joseph Griffin to Abbie, 5 December 1869, Griffin 73.

anxieties which I create for you will be more than the happiness I can ever repay. But, no, that could not be you. I know you better than that, and misfortune only binds me more closely to you. If you could fear to be mine now that I have met with disaster, I would grant your wish to be free, and then go myself, I should not care whither.¹²

In the correspondence examined, it was always the husband, never the wife, who mentioned previous romantic involvements and specific qualities desired in a mate. Perhaps a wife might be reluctant to share such confidences openly with her seafaring husband because she feared jeopardizing his trust in leaving her ashore. It was also acceptable that a woman, being more emotional, should express sentiment in choosing a husband. Therefore, a nineteenth-century wife might be reluctant to voice practical considerations which influenced her in her choice of a mate. An already strong, independent, and accomplished woman might find a seafarer to be the ideal husband with whom she could enjoy the status of marriage and yet continue to develop her skills and influence in his absence.

Two Maritime Couples

This chapter analyzes in some detail the witty, affectionate, earthy correspondence between a twenty-five-year-old husband, Joseph Griffin, and his wife, Abbie of

¹² Charles Barry to Sarah, 26 March 1845, Dear Sarah: Incidents from the Journals of Captain Charles Barry, ed. Norman E. Borden Jr. (Freeport, Maine: The Bod Wheelwright Company, 1966) 13.

Stockton, Maine.¹³ Their delightfully written letters reflect the strong character and perseverance bred into ordinary folk from "downeast."¹⁴ The publication of the Griffins' correspondence by a descendent is a tribute to their struggle to keep humor and intimacy alive in spite of the severe hardships of their separation.

Joseph and Abbie were married May 5, 1867 when they both were twenty-four-years-old. They were of modest means, coming from ordinary pioneer folk, who had to struggle to make ends meet. They had no home of their own and boarded with Joseph's family.¹⁵ In contrast to the Quakeress, Lydia Almy, who maintained a separate residence, most mid-nineteenth-century maritime wives moved in with relatives or boarded with strangers. The ideal of domesticity required a husband's presence for a residence to be a real home. Whether wives were able to feel at home in their boarding situations depended upon many variables such as individual personality, circumstances, and needs.

¹³ Stockton is located just a few miles east of Searsport, a town which boasted having produced the most captains and mates sailing the globe in the mid-nineteenth century.

¹⁴ A sailing term, meaning to sail downwind to Maine on the prevailing westerlies. "Downwind to Maine" became abbreviated to "downeast" which now refers to the northeastern part of the Maine Coast.

¹⁵ Boarding with relatives was common in mid-nineteenth-century Maine. Few captains owned their own home and relatives always opened their homes to them. See Scott J. Dow's "Captain Jonathan Dow, The Seafaring Days of Our New England Family," Penobscot Marine Museum, Searsport, ME, 1948.

Joseph was captain of a coaster or "downeaster," a Maine-built schooner which carried cargo (mostly lumber and stone) along the East Coast. He occasionally sailed to Cuba and the West Indies where lumber was exchanged for rum, coffee, and molasses. In 1867 when the couple began their correspondence, Joseph was carrying cargo between nearby ports and had the opportunity to visit his family quite often. By 1870 he was sailing to South Carolina and to Cuba, which prevented him from visiting home as often as before.

The correspondence of Captain Charles Barry with his wife Sarah (1840-1850) is occasionally referred to here as a counterpoint to the Griffins' experiences. As both Sarah and her husband Charles came from prominent upper-class families of southern Maine and Massachusetts, the circumstances of their marriage were quite different from Abbie's and Joseph's. Sarah's choice of Charles for a husband was made more obvious by her family circumstances, which unfortunately Abbie never mentioned in her letters to Joseph. Norman Borden, the editor of Dear Sarah, does not include any of Sarah's letters to Captain Barry, but he does reveal some of the circumstances of her family life. Sarah Cleaves Lord was the attractive, twenty-four-year-old daughter of William Lord, a successful businessman and shipowner of Kennebunk, Maine. Unlike Abbie Griffin, Sarah was well educated and the oldest of nine children of a leading

Kennebunk family. Because her mother was unwell and spent the cold winter months with her sister in Washington, D.C., Sarah took on the responsibility of her eight younger brothers and sisters. She first met Captain Barry, who was ten years older than she, when she went with her father to inspect the newly built Oakland. Writing to Sarah many years later, Charles Barry described his feelings on their first meeting:

I was pleased with you from the time we met on the deck of the Oakland. I then felt and thought that there was a sympathy of soul, tastes and habits existing in each of us that I had never seen or felt in any other individual. I thought that it would enable us to live happily in each other's society if it should be our lot to be united to each other. I have not changed my opinion from that Monday morning that you rode down to see the ship.¹⁶

In choosing his future wife, Charles cited sympathetic sentiments and tastes as qualities which attracted him to Sarah. By contrast Joseph Griffin, a practical man from a working-class environment, chose a woman for her strength of character and self-reliance. This is not to say that Sarah Barry had not developed these same qualities. Particularly since she had been responsible for the care of her mother's house and younger siblings.

After making two voyages out of Boston to British East India, Charles belonged to the exclusive fraternity of elite East India merchants and shipmasters. Prior to the Civil

¹⁶ Borden 69.

War, East India men held the highest social prestige in the seafaring trade. A pretty girl from an exceptionally good family was judged as "good enough to marry an East India captain." Regardless of Charles' admirable qualities and his prestigious status as an East India captain, Sarah's father would not give his permission for their marriage to take place in 1842. Well acquainted with the long suffering of seafarers' wives, he told his daughter, "If Charles would leave the sea, I would feel quite differently about it." Sarah was assertive in her response: "But, Father, I no longer need your permission. You forget that I was twenty-one-years-old, day before yesterday. I am going to marry Charles and there is nothing that you can do to prevent me."¹⁷

Finally a compromise was reached and William Lord gave his consent if Charles and Sarah would agree to be engaged for two years, but not longer than three, before marrying. By that time, Charles could save enough money to retire from the sea and invest in some business ashore. In the meantime he would sail on the Oakland and Sarah would stay at home to help her mother with her eight younger siblings. As it turned out, Charles and Sarah did not marry until June 1845, three years after they had met and after the Oakland had been wrecked on the Welch coast. Their marriage might have taken place sooner had not Sarah's mother become pregnant

¹⁷ Borden 76.

again. Her parents persuaded her not to marry until the new baby was at least six months old. Parents at times found it advantageous for their daughters to marry mariners. This kept them at home to help with household chores and care for younger siblings or elderly grandparents.

Sarah and her mother never were close. Sarah was on more intimate terms with her Aunt Mary, who had approved of Charles from the very beginning and had promoted "the marriage that would take Sarah away from the bondage she was under at home."¹⁸

Attempting to do business ashore, Captain Barry settled down with his bride in the rooms they had rented in Boston. Charles grew restless in the trading business and Sarah was homesick; so it was decided that they would move back to Kennebunk, where Sarah's father was involved in shipbuilding. There they rented a suite of two rooms and Sarah gave birth to a son. Again feeling restless ashore, Charles accepted an offer to take command of the Delhi out of Boston. Both Sarah and her father realized that Charles had been a sailor for too many years to be happy doing anything else. Borden suggests that William Lord perhaps welcomed having Sarah at home once more to help with the family while Charles was at sea.

Charles Barry's letters to his "Dear Sarah" give additional insight into the dynamics of the companionate

¹⁸ Borden 81.

marriage. Their marriage was based more on romantic sentiments, particularly cherished by the middle and upper classes, rather than on the traditional practicality of having a helpmate. Embracing romantic love as the basis of marriage, Charles was inclined to express his affection and appreciation of his wife more directly than Joseph Griffin did in his letters to Abbie. Charles closed a letter to Sarah by saying how happy he was to have her as his wife and how satisfied he was with the way in which she filled her role as an "ideal woman":

...I will take the opportunity, dearest Sarah, of expressing to you how happy I have been in your society, and in my choice of a life companion. You have been to me all that a good wife could be. Your thoughtful affections have always clung closely around me. You have ever been interested and anxious for my welfare. You have made my home always happy to me. I confess to you that I have been perfectly satisfied, without one fault to find or one complaint to make. I think it is unnecessary for me to here express how truly devotedly and fondly I love you. Yes, yes, dearest you are the dearest earthly object to me.

This was Charles first letter to Sarah after he decided to return to sea. With a very heavy heart he said goodbye to his wife of seventeen months and his young son. Sarah, too, appeared to have been very fond of Charles and pleased with his love for domesticity, which complemented and reinforced her role as well. She wrote him after his death:

He was a gentleman in every respect. He was well-bred, intelligent, bright and lively. He did not appear like a man who was cut off from society for months at a time, and he was very domestic in tastes and habits. Everybody liked him.

In keeping with a marriage based upon romantic sentiment, both Sarah and Charles believed they should "open their hearts" to one another.

The correspondence between various couples reveals to us the qualities and coping mechanisms which enabled them to adapt to the complexities and uncertainties of long-distance marriages. The various underlying concerns which run through their correspondence are closely examined here to clarify some of the important issues that these couples had to face together.

Intimacy, Pregnancy and Family Size

The popular belief that Victorians were sexually repressed has been challenged by a number of historians.¹⁹ Sexual expression was the "ultimate symbol of love and personal sharing" among nineteenth-century, middle-class Americans.²⁰ Secrecy and censorship actually may have enhanced sexual excitement. This may partly explain why some couples, like Abbie and Joseph, enjoyed alluding to erotic experiences in an array of private and often teasing expressions. Of all the nineteenth-century correspondence

¹⁹ Lystra 57. Charles Rosenberg, Nancy Cott, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Daniel Scott Smith, and others emphasize the sexual complexity of nineteenth-century America and the gap between sexual ideology and behavior.

²⁰ Lystra, Introduction, 5.

examined, that of the Griffins' contains the most honest and light-hearted allusions to sexual intimacy and pregnancy. They heartily enjoyed teasing each other about their natural inclinations. Extreme secrecy or modesty about sexual matters, typical of upper-class nineteenth-century New Englanders like the Barrys, apparently was not the rule among these "more earthy" downeast couples. The people who settled in tiny port villages, sheltered within the safety of hidden inlets along the remote coast of Maine, often flouted in various ways proper New England decorum. Their frank irreverence toward delicate subjects, such as sexuality, would have shocked their more modest New England counterparts in larger port cities further south.

Joseph, too, was not shy about adding colorful postscripts to his letters humorously alluding to their upcoming sexual intimacy:

Who will warm those big flat feet of yours when the weather gets cold? Not a body! I suppose you will toe in when I get home by sleeping alone so long. But never mind, there will be long nights and warm shins this winter, and when the wind blows cold, we will be taking it comfortable kind-er so.²¹

He was interested as well in the sexual intentions of others aboard his ship. He made it clear that he was not the only one who looked forward to physical intimacy with his wife:

Old man Blaisdell is very anxious to get home as he has got a wife about three years younger than you are, and suppose she needs her feet warmed as

²¹ Joseph to Abbie, 22 September 1867, Griffin 11.

much as you do. He feels anxious to accommodate her as I do to accommodate you, and his wife is younger and needs a little snugger attention. I think she will get it too, as he is a pretty good fellow if he is old....²²

This honesty between a man and wife about sexuality might well have had a liberating effect upon a woman. Abbie was able openly to confront and voice her opinions to her husband about sexual and pregnancy problems. Similarly, in writing to Joseph, she openly confessed her longings for physical intimacy: "Should like right well to have a good night kiss myself tonight. I feel real hungry for one."²³

In contrast to Abbie and Joseph's matter-of-fact tone in their expression of love and intimacy, Charles Barry described his parting with Sarah in far loftier and more dramatic words:

Yes, love, it is just over four weeks since my lips were pressed to thine own sweet lips, and my cheeks were dampened with thy tears of anguish, thy bosom was pressed to mine, and our hearts beat with responsive sadness.²⁴

For nineteenth-century lovers, pain and anxiety incurred by a physical or emotional separation increased and sharpened the joys of love. Karen Lystra maintains that people then accepted and were more at home in the darker world of emotional pain than moderns who devalue emotional suffering.²⁵

²² Joseph to Abbie, 16 November 1867, Griffin 15-15.

²³ Abbie to Joseph, 20 March 1872, Griffin 250.

²⁴ Charles to Sarah, 1 January 1847, Borden 107.

²⁵ Lystra 50.

Pregnancy was a serious matter when it occurred before a couple was ready to have children. Joseph, with his usual downeast humor, chose to disguise the seriousness of pregnancy in referring to a relative in a nearby town where he anchored his coaster during a southwester:

....Hattie has got one of Myrick's bay windows under the lower corner of her corsets, which sticks out so prominent I should not be surprised to hear of a new relative popping out from it any day.²⁶

Soon after, when Abbie disclosed her similar condition, Joseph suddenly realized how much responsibility and anxiety fatherhood would entail. He constantly worried about being far from his family and yet responsible for their welfare.

We first learn about Abbie's pregnancy from one of Joseph's early letters in which he alluded to her condition with his typical colloquial humor:

I expect you will begin to grow tall before I get home again. But be of good cheer, darling, there is many a better woman in a worse fix, although none better or worse fixed for me. However, it is no use to cry over a foul wind, for it is a queer wind that blows nobody any good...Keep your head cool and your feet warm.²⁷

Although Abbie was open, like her husband, about her sexual needs and forthright about her pregnancies, she was more subtle in telling her husband about her second pregnancy. Without moral judgment, she realistically accepted the fact

²⁶ Joseph to Abbie, 25 August 1817, Griffin 7. It is unclear if Hattie was related to Joseph or Abbie as she is not mentioned in the Foreword where other relatives (of Joseph) are listed.

²⁷ Joseph to Abbie, 21 September 1867, Griffin 10.

that most women of their community found themselves pregnant before marriage:

Mrs Cummings is high op ding, so is Hannah P. too, and Frank Fry's wife is too. I think they are in a hurry, don't you? I suppose they will call it a seven-month's baby. Of course, they all are now days. I have got me a new wrapper*--thought I must tell you.²⁸

One can only guess at the result of Abbie's pregnancy in November of 1869. Nothing more was mentioned of it, no child was born, and Abbie did not write of being pregnant again until April 1871 when she was in Cuba aboard her husband's vessel.

Abbie, with their small son Guy made their first voyage to Cuba aboard the Lillias. The trip resulted in an unfortunate turn of events when Joseph was thrown into the government prison of Sagua La Grande by the Cuban government for harboring a black slave. He had requested that the ship be searched before sailing, because he had been afraid a slave might be secreted aboard. After Joseph found a young mulatto and reluctantly turned him in, Cuban soldiers came aboard and arrested him in the middle of the night. Abbie and Guy waited several months aboard a neighboring ship for Joseph's release from prison. A few days after his arrest, she revealed to him that she might be pregnant. Making a pun about her brief and infrequent correspondence, she added a postscript to her first letter to Joseph: "You

²⁸ Abbie to Joseph, 19 November 1869, Griffin 56. *a kind of loose-fitting maternity dress.

say I never fill up the sheet, so I might as well have the game as the name! If I don't fill up the sheets days, I do night times."²⁹

Abbie asked Joseph to send her some medicine (probably something that would bring on her menstrual period). In a letter to the American Consul, Joseph requested powdered bloodroot, sulfate of zinc, and aloes to be made up in common sized pills. He then wrote Abbie:

In the meantime send me word if you think you are caught or feel any symptoms like it, as it is much better to know the worst at once and done with it, but I hope and pray God it is not so. As soon as I get able to stay at home, then you may have as many children as you desire, the more the merrier.³⁰

Joseph and Abbie confronted mutually and candidly the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy under very difficult circumstances. Angry that Joseph was still being detained in prison, Abbie confessed: "That medicine you sent me did me no good. I don't think there is anything that will either. Guess my fate is sealed for this summer, but such is life and we have got to submit to it." She mentioned again not having received the pills: "I have not seen anything of those pills yet. I guess by the time I get them it will be too late to take them, that is, if I don't get them pretty soon."³¹

²⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 11 April 1871, Griffin 136.

³⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 12 April 1871, Griffin 138-9.

³¹ Abbie to Joseph, 13 April 1871, Griffin 140-1.

Abbie become reconciled to the idea of having a second child. She worried more about her husband's welfare and what would happen to her family if he was not released: "...you don't expect me to feel very well with you up there, do you? I am worried almost to death. I am so afraid you will catch the small pox. If you should, what should I do?"³² This was a legitimate worry for an inexperienced woman traveler, who had suddenly found herself pregnant in a foreign port. In Abbie's next letter she wrote that she had taken the pills with little results and had reconciled herself to having another child:

I don't think it is any use for me to take anything more (medicine) to set me going again (menstruating), but it doesn't worry me one mite. All I hope for is a girl. I hope you will make as much (money) as you expect to. Then I shall not care a bit. Think I should be just as happy as a clam if you were out of prison...But this suspense is worse than anything else...If I stay here much longer, I shall have to get me a wrapper [maternity dress] and make it.³³

The fact that Joseph was to be set free from prison with a possibility of monetary compensation for the ordeal seemed to ease Abbie's mind about having another child. At least such compensation might support her and her children in the event of widowhood.

³² Abbie to Joseph, 21 April 1871, Griffin 147.

³³ Abbie to Joseph, 23 April 1871, Griffin 150.

In February 1872, several months after Abbie had her second child, a daughter named Bessie, she candidly told Joseph how she felt about having a big family:

You say you would like to have ten more if you had the means. You would soon get sick of staying with them and would want to act off to sea as every other man does. I think you would rather be the king without the dam.³⁴

Bringing up a child alone was not easy, and Abbie, a realist, knew that money alone would not make a large family easier to cope with. She told Joseph plainly that he, being the man, could easily escape by going to sea when his family became too much for him, as some men did. However, she, being the woman, would be "stuck with the kids." She was frank in telling him how she felt about having another child: "You need not be so willing for me to have another baby. Don't think I shall be willing to have another for a good while,...."³⁵

In contrast, Dorothea Balano, sailing aboard her Maine husband's downeaster in 1912, was eager to start a family before her husband felt ready. Like Abbie, she had taken an abortive medicine while sailing in the West Indies and did not want to take such a drastic measure again. She decided not to reveal her pregnancy to her husband: "I did not tell him [her husband Fred] that I was two months' pregnant, because he would get some of that vile medicine in Barbados

³⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 19 February 1872, Griffin 243-4.

³⁵ Abbie to Joseph, 24 December 1871, Griffin 215.

and I'd get sick and have no baby." Believing that if her husband loved her he would leave the choice to her, she commented: "I think he thinks he loves me, but he has the oddest way of showing it."³⁶

Throughout her diary, Dorothea half jokingly complained about her husband's sexual aggressiveness and his resistance to her having a child:

When I refuse to play the part of sea-going concubine and assert my rights as an individual who refuses to jump at his least whim, he dredges up the mud, which he knows I despise, and does his damndest to get my goat.

In revenge for her challenging his male sexual prerogative, Fred refused to give his consent for her to have a child:

Now its the baby, which he knows I want so much. He talked of an abortion in Jacksonville. That would make it two in one year. Not on your tin-type! What a horror that would be. He needs a child to soften his hard heart and to give him something else to talk about beyond fish and sexual intercourse.³⁷

More liberated and sophisticated than sea wives writing fifty years earlier, Dorothea had to struggle hard with persistent male attitudes and values about women and their proper place. She relied on mutual love, their companionship and shared sense of humor as a safeguard against her strong assertiveness and her violation of sex role boundaries. Both Abbie and Dorothea were independent, assertive

³⁶ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 12 January 1912, Balano, James W., ed., The Log of the Skipper's Wife (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1979) 103.

³⁷ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 15 February 1912, Balano 118.

women who insisted that they be allowed freedom of choice in determining the size of their families.

In late May of 1871, Joseph was finally released from the Sagua prison. After writing the Secretary of State Hamilton Fish about his unlawful imprisonment in Cuba, Joseph reassumed coastal trading in the Lillias. Apparently, Abbie decided it was best to remain at home because of her pregnancy and did not go to sea with Joseph until the winter of 1873. Many wives enjoyed traveling aboard their husbands' sailing ships, but their anxieties increased when they considered exposing their young children to the dangers of seafaring.

The Trials of A Seafarer and Provider

In the early days of their marriage, Joseph addressed his new bride as: "Dear wife of my youth" and told her he would now be chartering stone instead of lumber from Rockport, Massachusetts to Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod, for two months. This being a seasonal job, he worried about earning enough to support his family through the long, hard Maine winter:

I do not admire the job quite as well as I should if I were getting the same wages toting lumber from Bangor, so I could drop in home once in a while and get a clean shirt. But in this job it isn't what I like, it is the dollars I am after.

We shall need some to lie back on this winter if I stay at home and I suppose I shall.³⁸

Joseph spoke of home as a place to get a clean shirt.

Similarly both Rachel Putnam and Abbie often spoke how they missed their husbands to start the morning fire. The marriage relationship was based upon an exchange of services as well as emotional sentiment, and this could not be easily replaced when couples were separated. Both were forced to take on these tasks for themselves.

Husbands at sea expressed as much dissatisfaction with the overwhelming responsibilities of their roles as did their wives left behind. Wives became more ambivalent about their husbands' careers as seafaring became more competitive and less profitable. As women acquired more power within marriage and a greater sense of self, they often questioned their husbands' career choice and urged them to leave the sea. Some men had already become dissatisfied with seafaring and found other occupations ashore. Those who were more emotionally tied to life at sea were reluctant to start anew on land, where they felt inept. They persisted in following the sea past the turn of the century, some reluctantly continuing on to master steam ships after the demise of sail. In their letters to their wives, husbands were often ambivalent about their seafaring careers and the negative influences on family life.

³⁸ Joseph to Abbie, 21 September 1867, Griffin 9.

In October of 1868, Joseph wrote Abbie from Philadelphia, where he lay sick in the Episcopal Hospital unable to sail with his ship. Concerned about being in debt, he planned to find employment there as soon as he was well:

...I do not apprehend any or much trouble finding employment of some kind that will give me a living and I hope a little something over. I feel very anxious to get out of debt, and as much as I want to see you and little Guy, I had rather stay away a little longer than meet a dun at every turn with nothing to pay with and nothing to do. I suffered too much last winter ever to wish to remain at home idle another winter, however much I might wish it. I expected to gain a vessel by staying at home last winter, but instead of that I got saddled heavier with debt and no prospects at all, and to try it over again would find myself as much worse off another spring.³⁹

Still plagued by debt a year later, he wrote:

As for money to do my share of the business, it is coming from the Lord knows where. My summer's work will be figured down to a pretty small item when all doctor bills, board, and winter fitouts are taken out, but as whining won't pay debts, it is no use to moan.⁴⁰

In spite of his concern about their debts, Joseph realized that his family's health was more important than saving money, and he urged Abbie to be sure their sick son received the best of care:

I know in my own mind Guy is still very sick and know he is where he will not lack for help. Still I suppose you will not ask for all you want, thinking perhaps to make too much work. But one thing make sure of, whatever you think the boy needs, get it in spite of all expense and contrary advice, for a few greenbacks are nothing compared

³⁹ Joseph to Abbie, 11 October 1868, Griffin, 25.

⁴⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 6 September 1869, Griffin 39.

to his life. And withal look sharp after your own health, remembering all the time that we have seen sickness enough since we were married to wish an addition from any source.⁴¹

Another sea captain enjoined his wife, "Don't suffer for the want of good things, for it gives me far greater pleasure to know that my family has them than to have them myself."⁴²

These men were genuinely concerned about their families' welfare and wanted to be assured that they had enough to live comfortably.

Another obstacle which many captains complained about in their letters and which caused Joseph much frustration was the slowness in unloading the ship's cargo in port. The longer this task took, the more it cut into the profit of the voyage. Thus the captain's pay could be affected, which was a real concern: "I expect it will take a generation of cats to get clear of the cargo now we are here, for they don't seem to feel in any hurry about discharging us...I shall clear about enough to pay your board and doctor's bills."⁴³

At sea captains often complained about the problems they had to endure with their crews. Husbands shared the troubles and concerns they had aboard ship with their wives ashore. Perhaps they hoped that this unromantic revelation

⁴¹ Joseph to Abbie, 31 August 1869, Griffin 33-4.

⁴² Joanna Colcord, "Domestic Life on American Sailing Ships," The American Neptune II.3 (1942): 202.

⁴³ Joseph to Abbie, 29 September 1869, Griffin 45.

of the trials of seafaring would help their wives be more understanding and tolerant of their moods and behavior on their visits home. David Nichols wrote his wife in Searsport, Maine what a troublesome time he was having with his sailors:

In all my going to sea, I have never had so inefficient, a ship's company. I cannot get any thing done, without being on hand all the time. I am ready to swear to the best of my knowledge, and belief, that the material which enters into the construction of the young men of the present day, must be sadly diluted....⁴⁴

Captain Barry of Kennebunk did not have a very high regard for the average sailor as revealed in his journal:

To take sailors generally, as a class, they are, in my opinion of them, miserable drunks. It is true that there are some exceptions among them but, as a body, the more I know of them the less sympathy I have for them. When they are on board my ship, under my charge, I will, of course, do everything for them which a sense of right and duty calls for on my part. But there is very little that I would put myself out of the way to do for a sailor at large who is not employed by me. To be brought in contact and have to do with sailors is one of the most disagreeable parts of a seafaring life. And 99 out of every 100 masters and officers, if you should ask them, will say the same thing.⁴⁵

In 1850 Captain Barry wrote his wife that he was in a good deal of trouble with his crew, who were in a state of mutiny, and that he was suffering from ill health as well:

⁴⁴ David Nichols to his wife, September 18, 187?, Penobscot Maritime Museum, Searsport, Maine.

⁴⁵ Borden 99.

Some of them I have put in irons one place, and some I have shut up in other places. I endeavor to keep them separated all I can. With my mates, I have to keep a night watch, and work in the bargain. We have just enough men to manage to get the anchor up, with all there are on board to work....These are the villains for whom people build sailor's homes and give so much in sympathy, when they might just as well throw oil upon a fire, for all the good it does. Nothing will ever benefit or reform sailors, except to do away entirely with paying them advance wages before the wages have been earned.⁴⁶

The autocratic hierarchy of life aboard ship was similar to the paternalistic relationship between a master and his slave. This inequality bred rebellion, which was a constant fear for most ship masters. Relating their troubles and fears to their wives ashore gave captains some emotional relief from the burdens and isolation of their difficult role at sea.

Joseph shared with Abbie his personal philosophy of how best to get along as ship's captain:

I can always do business more agreeably and more profitably by working on the smooth side. Thus, I think some of our misfortunes are more entitled to be called our blessings.⁴⁷

Joseph wished to prove to his father that he could make a success of seafaring, especially since several of his younger brothers had gone off to Massachusetts to find work in the mills. As the oldest son of a seafaring family, he felt it was his obligation to persevere in the family tradition

⁴⁶ Borden 179-80.

⁴⁷ Joseph to Abbie, 3 December 1869, Griffin 73.

against all odds. Joseph explained why he had persisted in following the sea for a living, in spite of the fact that it had not been a very lucrative career:

If it weren't for my everlasting pride, I would have knocked off going to sea long ago. Pride and some remarks I have heard have strung me on, so I suppose I must go to sea till I can lay by enough to engage in some business that will keep me out of debt and alive. And as for debt, if I ever get this saddle off my shoulders, I'll never be steeped in the same bowl again, unless something more promising in the shape of speculation than I ever saw turns up.

Joseph explained seafaring had been a difficult career for him from the start:

Since I commenced going to sea twelve years ago, my life has been one continual struggle with difficulties, first one thing and then another. The last two years it has been piled on thick and fast, but out of the twelve years, it is the only two years I have enjoyed in the least. For until I got in here I had a home, and if it wasn't very nice, it was a happy one to me and made cheerful and pleasant by the purest minded woman I ever saw.⁴⁸

In the nineteenth century men justified going to sea because of necessity and duty. Captain Thaddeus Pickens wrote his wife in 1808:

I have a strong wish to return home but interest urges me to the contrary...my only wish is to accumulate a little property that may allow me to remain with my family and with my industry be able to support them ...but without such a competency [I] shall allways be obliged to be roving about the world...the idea of continuing in that way when old is horrid. therefore [I] am willing to

⁴⁸ Joseph to Abbie, 2 May 1871, Griffin 156.

undergo any hardships while I am able to bear them.⁴⁹

Joseph's reason for continuing with seafaring was pride, but like Pickens he too was trying to accumulate funds to enter some other business.

Norling maintains that women "shared their husbands' perceptions of the necessity to go to sea," when opportunities for making a living were better there than ashore. She observes that by mid-century mariners were less able to justify going to sea because of the decline of American shipping and its profits.⁵⁰

Joseph's difficulties at sea became an extra burden and worry for Abbie as well. She felt that he should give up going to sea if he was unable to make a good living, especially if they must go on being separated:

I hope and pray you have seen all the bad luck you will ever see. I think you have had your share. I think you would feel different about stopping at home if you had plenty of money and were out of debt.⁵¹

Women left at home often felt helpless and even somewhat responsible for their husbands' difficulties and their struggles to make a living. Confined to domestic duties and childcare, a wife was unable to assist her husband in

⁴⁹ Thaddeus Pickens to Peace Bennett Pickens, June 30, 1809, Pickens Family Papers, Old Dartmouth Historical Society, Whaling Museum, New Bedford, MA; qtd. in Norling, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Wife," B.A. Thesis, Cornell U, 1984, 25.

⁵⁰ Norling, "Loneliness," 24-5.

⁵¹ Abbie to Joseph, 20 March 1872, Griffin 250.

earning a living. Moreover, she felt she could offer him only limited happiness at home when they both knew he must soon leave again. In many ways, trying to please a husband who was at sea most of the time was a nearly impossible task.

The Demise of Seafaring: Its Effect on the Family

The Griffins were well-established residents of the sleepy town of Stockton, adjacent to busy Searsport, a town which in 1860 boasted over 150 ships' masters among its population of 1,700.⁵² These downeast harbors were settled by pioneers who had left various seafaring towns of southern New England, which were dominated by large and powerful shipping empires.⁵³ "Mainers" established their own more independent, family-oriented seafaring enterprises and constructed small coasting vessels all along "the spruce-rimmed shore."⁵⁴ In 1860 there were 11,375 mariners in Maine (one-fifth of the population), and of the 759 ships' masters, half of these were "Cape Horners."⁵⁵ Maine, not

⁵² William Hutchinson Rowe, The Maritime History of Maine (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1948) 286-298.

⁵³ Griffin, Foreword. Joseph Griffin's great grandparents arrived in Stockton Harbor on April 11, 1775 from the seafaring town of Stonington, Connecticut.

⁵⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783-1860, 1921 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962

⁵⁵ Rowe 286-298.

Massachusetts, kept American sailing ships afloat into the later part of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶

As the century came to a close, shipbuilding in Maine was disappearing along with a great seafaring tradition. Letters from Joseph's relatives were full of concern about how bad the economic situation had become in Stockton. The town's shipbuilding firm, Mudgett, Libby, and Griffin, had failed and was forced to close down while owing money to everybody in town. In the 1870s Captain David Nichols wrote his wife in Searsport about the decline of American shipping, which he blamed on high tariffs:

I have not seen an American vessel since I left Mauritius, and only one since I left Montevideo. But a few years since we had the largest Merchant marine in the world. Something larger than Great Britain. Now Alas how fallen - But I must confess I feel very little interest in its enlargement. We can never compete with England whilst our duties and taxes are so high on all that enters into the construction and fitting of Ships.

He thought that this state of affairs could be improved by female suffrage if women would vote against big business:

Perhaps when we have female suffrage we may manage to have a better regulated tariff. But I presume the majority will vote the republican ticket, and as that party goes for the protection of large Corporations, and monopolies, individual enterprise will not be much benefitted by any reforms which the female Suffragians may inaugurate.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Morison 370; Dorothea Balano, whose writing is included here, was traveling aboard her husband's downeast sailing coaster through 1910.

⁵⁷ David Nichols to his wife, September 18, 187-?.

Women and men of the lower and middle classes felt powerless at the hands of large mercantile firms and growing industrialization. They observed their traditional seafaring enterprises disappear from the coast and their sons and daughters leave their shores to work in the mills and factories of larger urban centers. The ones who remained in coastal hamlets became servants and caretakers for the industrial elite, who built extravagant homes along the New England coast. Two Maine women novelists, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Ellen Chase, mourned the passing of seafaring and private enterprise where women had the possibility of exerting some influence and support. These local color writers viewed tourism, which was gradually replacing deep water trading along the Maine coast, as a demeaning substitute for strong, independent "Mainers."

Joseph was aware of the great changes taking place on his native coast which would mark the end of seafaring as a viable career. Several times he wrote Abbie and his father that he often considered relocating in Little River, South Carolina. Life in the South seemed easier and he had observed that there were opportunities for money to be made, although he never mentioned what business he would follow there. Abbie seemed to go along with this possible move if Joseph thought he could do better in the South and they could be together. Like pioneer women leaving their homes and family on the eastern seaboard to brave the overland

trail, maritime women often agreed to leave their homes and family and follow their husbands in their quest for a better living. With pioneering spirit, Abbie expressed her willingness to leave her Maine home and accompany her husband south if it would improve their condition and allow them to be together:

You spoke of going down to Little River to live, said you didn't expect I would like the idea at first, but I do. I think most anything is better than going to sea and not makeing anything. I would go anywhere for the sake of having you at home with me, for I don't think it is very pleasant to have a husband and have him gone all of the time.⁵⁸

Joseph's father was a practical man who realized that it was Joseph's turn, as the oldest son, to be the main provider for the family. He gave his approval to the possibility that Joseph and Abbie might move south and implied that his family might join them there:

You wrote favorably of Little River. Well Joseph, any place along our coast would be pleasant and warm to me, if good health, and freedom from debt, and money enough to keep us easy could be our lot. I don't expect to realize either of those conditions, but with what I have will try to be contented, and be as grateful as I can for present favors.⁵⁹

Joseph's friend Everett Grant advised him to take the opportunity to move South:

I don't wonder that you are about discouraged at going to sea, and wish you might avail yourself of the opportunity you speak of near Little River. I

⁵⁸ Abbie to Joseph, 19 November 1871, Griffin 206.

⁵⁹ Isaac Griffin to Joseph, 6 December 1871, Griffin 212.

have no doubt but there is money to be made out of that country, and the man that has got a little spare cash and plenty of pluck is the man to go there. It seems of but little use to hold on to American shipping, for I fear before it gets where it once was that the present generation will be used up to fertilize this little spot of ground we are now trying to knock a living out of.⁶

Grant himself, finding little opportunity on the Maine coast now that shipping was dying out, had packed up to seek his fortune in Philadelphia. Earning a living in rural areas of New England was becoming increasingly difficult and, consequently, many chose to migrate to various parts of the country where there were more opportunities. In Joseph's reply to Everett's letter, he expressed skepticism about taking up business ashore:

...Old Mother Eve anchored Adam out of a dead sure thing, and woman has beat man with the same cards ever since. Which simile, changed slightly, applies to seafaring men that knock off going to sea and commence business ashore. They have a dead sure thing while going to sea and are almost as dead sure to lose it when they commence business ashore.⁷

Joseph viewed the abuse of many American ship masters in Cuban ports as a sign of a growing neglect towards American seafarers. He wrote Abbie that he was suing the U.S. State Department for negligence during his imprisonment and its effect upon her health:

Doctor Way will give me a certificate of your ill health, and according to his opinion it was necessary for you to go home to receive a proper

⁶ Everett Grant to Joseph, 4 March 1872, Griffin 246.

⁷ Joseph to Everett Grant, 8 April 1872, Griffin 251.

medical examination and treatment, and that in his opinion your disability was brought on by care and anxiety of mind caused by my arrest and imprisonment in Cuba...it will be about a fifty thousand dollar point in the case we have to present to the government, which is a matter worth working for ...It is the only show we ever had for making money, so let us improve it, for the point is too important to be thrown away.⁸

Joseph was hopeful that he might have a chance to make something from this case, which would lessen the financial worries which constantly plagued him.

For the husband who placed a high priority upon his relationship with his wife and family the job aboard ship became more difficult over time. However, sea captains felt it was their duty to persevere and endure many hardships at sea to support their families ashore. Captain Josiah Mitchell wrote his daughters in 1867 from Liverpool to explain why he continued to go to sea after his wife's death:

Pecuniarily we are not rich but the times have so changed within the last few years and expenses so large compared to what they formerly were that comparatively we are poor. And it's necessary not only for my own happiness but in order to preserve for my darling children what little I have got that while my health is spared I must continue to work. I would prefer a situation on shore that would enable me to have all my children with me, but if I cannot get that, why I must take what I can get.⁹

Many seafarers looked forward to the day when they had saved enough to retire from the sea and could take up farming or some other business ashore, closer to their families.

⁸ Joseph to Abbie, 12 June 1871, Griffin 172.

⁹ Josiah Mitchell to his children, April 1867.

Jared Gardner, captain of a Nantucket whaler off Cape Horn, anticipated the day when he could leave the hardships of the seafaring life and remain home on a farm:

...for this is not to be called living to be here with a constant mind somewhere else. I am quite sure I shall get enuf this time to turn my attention to farming. Why, it will be amusement to me to be settled at home on a farm. I think that the work never will be hard enough to attempt me to come around cape home again.⁶⁴

Not all sea captains were eager to come ashore to work. Like Joseph Griffin, Captain Philip Howland was reluctant to take up farming. Writing his wife in 1852, he gave various reasons why he thought farming would be an unsuitable choice:

I should be too happy [to farm] if I did not see a life of incessant toil in store [,] one which will make a slave of thee my dearest which I cannot permit...add to this my ignorance of the business. I do not feel Equal to the task of hard bone labour,...all the hard work that falls to me is executed by willing and good fellows with pleasure...there are other things that render a seafaring life preferable the getting clear of those dreadful coughs.⁶⁵

The ideology of romantic love and the companionate marriage assumed that a husband's love, care and concern for his wife would ease the burden of the household. Although Captain Howland was concerned about his wife's being overworked on a farm, he did not wish to give up his privilege of having a crew to labor in his behalf. Although men have

⁶⁴ Jared Gardner to his wife Harriet, June 1841.

⁶⁵ Philip Howland to Sarah Howland, 26 September 1852; qtd, in Norling, "Mariners' Wives," 441.

traditionally romanticized life at sea, the complex issues that mariners had to face and their ambivalent feelings about leaving their families ashore, present us with a different picture of seafaring life. Returning to sea after a pleasant visit with his family in Maine, Captain Mitchell felt torn between his desire to be with his family and his duty as a provider: "Sometimes I think I ought not to have come away at all, but on the whole I believe I did right in coming--if not I hope to be forgiven."⁶⁶

The West and the opportunities it offered beckoned many New Englanders who were finding it more and more difficult to make a living seafaring or farming their rocky land. Abner Howe of Cape Cod wrote his brother that he would like to move to Buffalo and give up going to sea: "...if I do not see any thing that suits I shall go West in the Spring and give up going to sea and see if I can get a living on shore so as I can be with my wife and child this sepperation does not suit me nor her."⁶⁷ Many New England sea captains and their families settled in Oakland, California, often referred to as the "sea captains bedroom." This western port city had a more favorable climate than New England and

⁶⁶ Josiah Mitchell to his wife, about 1850.

⁶⁷ Abner Howe to his brother in Buffalo, New York, December 20, 1856, Letters of the Howes of Dennis, Cape Cod, 1854-1857, Hammer Family Papers, Schlessinger Library of Women's History, Cambridge, MA.

offered captains opportunities for lucrative voyages in the Pacific.

Wives often waited for the day when their husbands would no longer go to sea for a living. Because of strong feelings of loneliness and fear of widowhood and poverty, sea widows often urged their husbands to work ashore. As early as 1828, Lucy Grey foresaw a dismal future for deep water sailing. Sick with fever, she wrote her husband: "I think you will have to give up following that trade in the warm season. I wish you would give up the sea and turn farmer as navigation appears to be more and more discouraging."⁶⁸ She had previously mentioned his trouble with a larger vessel and his considerable "fretting and scolding."

All along it was the wife's duty to take care of the home as frugally as possible and bring up the children as best she could alone. Because of the way seamen were paid, women were often left with limited funds to care for their families. Wages were based upon fractional shares of the proceeds of the voyage, and men had to wait for its completion to be paid. In the meantime their families had to scrape by as best they could.⁶⁹ Although tradition and the hard climate had taught New Englanders to be frugal and

⁶⁸ Lucy Grey to her husband, 6 May 1828, Hooker Collection, Schlesinger Library for Women's History, Cambridge, MA.

⁶⁹ Elmo Hohman, The American Whaleman: A Study of Life and Labor in the Whaling Industry (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1928) 217-43.

resourceful, maritime women often became dependent upon relatives, shipping agents or the hope that their husbands would send money regularly.

Financial Uncertainty Plagued Wives Ashore

Abbie, a practical woman, was resourceful enough to find various ways to economize and get by with the small amount of cash Joseph had left her. In a letter to Joseph she related how she had taken the initiative and decided to sell some personal items of theirs for extra cash. After the fact, she bluntly told her husband that she had gone ahead and sold his coat:

I have sold your frock coat to your father and got \$10 for it and bought me a waterproof cloak. What do you think of it? Don't know as you will think much of it, but the deed is done and the cloak made up. I thought it would never do you any good hanging in the clothes press. Buy yourself a new hat this time. You need one, don't you?⁷⁰

Returning from Cuba in the fall of 1871, Abbie was closer to the time of her delivery, and she often mentioned in her letters to Joseph how little cash she had to meet expenses at home:

That letter you sent by Will Libby had ten dollars in it. Was very glad indeed to get it, for I had quite a many little fixings to get which all takes money though I have one dollar left of my other ten you left me when at home. I have not got in

⁷⁰ Abbie to Joseph, 7 November 1869, Griffin 54.

debt any yet, and I don't want to if I can help it.⁷¹

I am almost out of money. That is a doleful sound, isn't it? But I have had to get quite a many small fixings, and it has used it up pretty fast. Think you had better send me more than ten dollars next time.⁷²

I am all out of money, and have had to get some things at Uncle Henry's without paying for them.⁷³

Because Joseph was a coaster captain, stopping frequently up and down the East Coast, he was able to send Abbie money on a regular basis. The coaster Lillias was owned by relatives and other Stockton people from whom she could get cash advances if necessary:

I have had to get some things at Uncle Henry's on tic, as you tell about. I hated to awfully, but I have needed money for so many things this winter. It has taken a good deal to run me, but those who dance must pay the fiddler. I will try and do the very best I can.⁷⁴

In 1846 Captain Charles Barry arranged to leave his wife Sarah with a far larger sum than Joseph could ever have spared. Before sailing out of Boston for a year-long voyage to Bombay, he wrote his wife: "I intend tomorrow night to mail a letter for you and will enclose in it about \$140 which I hope may reach you safe. Do you think that will be enough: If not, you may go on tick for another \$100."⁷⁵

⁷¹ Abbie to Joseph, 18 October 1871, Griffin 196.

⁷² Abbie to Joseph, 5 November 1871, Griffin 201.

⁷³ Abbie to Joseph, 19 November 1871, Griffin 206.

⁷⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 19 February 1872, Griffin 243.

⁷⁵ Captain Barry to Sarah , 6 December 1846, Borden 91.

Sea wives residing in larger, more commercialized port towns, whose husbands sailed on larger vessels owned by powerful shipping firms, were dependent upon agents to advance them cash. Chapter II of this study discusses how women, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, were slowly pushed out of small trading enterprises and ship chandleries when wealthy families began to monopolize the seafaring industries. As port towns grew into cities of economic complexity, women lost control of small trade to large ship chandlers. They became more dependent upon husbands, families, agents and even charity. Norling discusses the three-way relationship linking whalemens, agents and their dependents at home. Whaling agents routinely advanced cash, extended credit, or paid bills for local whalemens's families. The amounts were later charged at high interest rates against the seamen's wages.⁷⁶

In my research at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath, I came across "scraps of paper," as Norling did in New Bedford, written by wives in the late nineteenth century to the Sewell Company. These seafarers' wives often asked for cash advances or were concerned about the whereabouts of their husbands' ships, as they had received no news or the ship was late arriving. Mrs. Walter Baker wrote from North Yarmouth, Maine in 1881: "I wright you the five lines to

⁷⁶ Lisa Norling, "Contrary Dependencies: Whaling Agents and Whalemens's Families 1830-1870," The Log of Mystic Seaport 42.1 (1990): 3-12.

ask you if you had hear of the rivel off the ship and if you wod let me know and is i em vary anksh to Know and i should like to have my money to and oblige me vary much." The wife of a Captain Hamilton wrote that she was sick and requested her husband's share. Mrs. Higgins of Phippsburg asked for money for her husband, who had returned from a voyage with a paralyzed arm and leg and was worried about an unpaid doctor's bill of \$42. Mrs. B. Perkins of Kennebunkport was worried about a late arrival of the Henry Villard in Seattle, and needed money not yet received from her husband. "Will you please tell me if you feel any anxiety about the ship?"

Abbie was not forced to depend on any agent for money, but she did count on Joseph's sending her what cash he could spare, credit from relatives and neighbors, and her own Yankee thrift, which she was proud of. She described for Joseph how she had made little Guy a suit out of his old navy coat. She went on to make more garments of which she was quite proud:

I am going to tell you what I have done this week. See if you don't think I have done well for me. I have made Guy a suit of clothes out of my old brown cape. It made him a real pretty suit and have made me a wrapper cut pannerly. It is real pretty. I have got my work pretty well done up ...I got a letter yesterday with two five dollar bills in it. Thank you for it too....

She reminded her husband how lucky he was to have a wife like her who saved him money by doing all her own work:

Just think how lucky I am to be able to do my own work. How many there are that can't do a hands turn, have to have help all the time from beginning to end. That is one thing you ought to be thankful for.⁷⁷

Although Abbie willingly practiced traditional New England thrift, she was assertive in telling Joseph she would not deprive herself of something she needed or really wanted. When she learned he was enjoying the luxury of eating blueberries, she decided to treat herself as well: "I thought if you could afford to eat blueberries, I could afford me a pair of slippers. I am very glad you came across them for they are excellent to make blood."⁷⁸ Abbie was proud of all she was able to do in one day and did not hesitate to reward herself with a new dress:

I got me a clear green dress -- don't know as you will like it, but I do. I am getting along quite well with my sewing to what I have done. I have washed, ironed, and cooked today.⁷⁹

Aboard ship, men were often forced to perform some domestic duties. Trying to do his part to economize, as Abbie did at home, Joseph told her how he had bought "16 yards of grey flannel to make you and Guy some winter fixings" and he even did some sewing himself aboard ship: "I have made me two pair of drawers since lieing here, so now I

⁷⁷ Abbie to Joseph, 3 December 1871, Griffin 208-209.

⁷⁸ Abbie to Joseph, 2 September 1869, Griffin 36.

⁷⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 24 October 1869, Griffin 50.

am fully fitted for winter with woolen clothes,...."⁸⁰ At sea Joseph was proud to help Abbie economize by sewing his own garments, but it is doubtful whether he would have continued doing "women's work" at home, where it was his wife's domestic duty to sew for the family.

Captain Barry wrote his wife Sarah in Kennebunk, "I think you would laugh to see me some days, sitting quiet and patiently darning my stockings, a thing I never did before."⁸¹ Captain Mitchell informed his wife that he had been employed for a week making over a dozen shirts he had purchased: "....The first day I put one of them on the buttons all came off and the seams opened in many places, so it has been a good job for me during the rainy weather, when tired of reading, to make them all over." He derived a great deal of pleasure and pride from his sewing, which put him into a contented, domestic mood:

I assure you I consider myself quite a shirt maker now--and may enter into the business on my return, anything rather than this--but I have really taken comfort in making them over--sewing, singing, and thinking of you. If I only had had a baby playing around should have felt perfectly content.⁸²

The exigencies of seafaring forced men as well as women to engage in non-traditional tasks. They often took pleasure in performing tasks that the other spouse normally did, and

⁸⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 29 September 1869, Griffin 46.

⁸¹ Captain Barry to Sarah, 11 April 1847, Borden 115.

⁸² Josiah Mitchell to his wife, about 1850.

were proud that with some practice they were able to become quite adept. Taking on non-traditional tasks increased men's and women's self-esteem and offered them another way to become closer to their mates.

The Trials of Single Parent Mothering

Husbands could idealize the pleasure of having children playing about them, but the reality of caring for them on a day-to-day basis was another matter. As Abbie wrote Joseph: "...You would soon get sick of staying with them and would want to act off to sea as every other man does. I think you would rather be the king without the dam." After Abbie had given birth to her second child, she began to feel resentful about having too much responsibility as a mother. She told Joseph that she was unable to live up to being the ideal helpmate: "I am afraid you have got a poor help mate for my part. I can't see where the help comes in when a wife is having children all the time, poor help me!"⁸³

During the eighteenth century women were called their husbands' "helpmate" and often engaged in the economic support of their families without comment. Abbie would have liked to do more to help her husband out financially, but she was tied to her domestic role and could do little but sell a few surplus items out of the home. In a letter to

⁸³ Abbie to Joseph, 19 February 1872, Griffin 243-4.

Joseph she described how some women in Stockton were forced by the economic hard times to supplement family income by working in the mills or doing piece work at home:

Rye [Joseph's sister] is in the shop this winter. She runs the buttonhole machine; makes a dollar and half every day. Mrs. Grover and Ella have got a sewing machine and make vests. They are doing first rate. The women make the most money here this winter.⁸⁴

Of course it was impossible for Abbie to do such work unless she had help minding the children. She was caught, as many working women are today, between not wishing to impose upon relatives for childcare and not being able to find or pay for reliable hired help.

When Abbie was first married she was proud that she could handle matters by herself. She wrote her husband: "I get along first rate alone and am not so lonely as I thought I should be."⁸⁵ However, as she was alone more often and confined to the house with small children, she became more and more discontented.

Traditionally women have usually been left alone and unaided by their husbands to perform housekeeping and child-rearing tasks without male assistance. With increased urbanization and industrialization, many young people left their rural extended families to find work elsewhere. As it became increasingly difficult to find suitable help with

⁸⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 10 January 1872.

⁸⁵ Abbie to Joseph, 19 July 1868, Griffin 19.

housework and childraising, many women were forced to struggle alone with domestic tasks. This dilemma has not yet been resolved in the twentieth century as more and more women are forced by economic necessity to work outside the home.

Before Abbie sailed to Cuba with Joseph, she stayed at home alone caring for her young son Guy. Their letters often crossed and Joseph scolded her for neglecting to write. In the following response to one of Joseph's scoldings, Abbie described all the care she must render her sick son:

He has got so he lies in the cradle most of the time, but he has to be rocked all of the time. I am rocking him now, I had to hire my washing done last week, for I couldn't get time to do it...⁸⁶.

During the spring and summer of 1869 many people in Downeast ports died of what was called the "southern fever." Abbie's father and Joseph's twenty-four-year-old brother Benjamin died of the fever. Their baby Guy became very ill, and Abbie was afraid he would never get better. She made the decision alone as to whether she would continue with a doctor who was not helping her child get well or engage a woman healer instead. Her sister-in-law related the situation to Joseph:

None of us felt like advising Abbie, and she was advised to act alone in all respects. Abbie says she is very sorry she could not write today, but

⁸⁶ Abbie to Joseph, 2 September 1869, Griffin 35.

Guy is well enough to want her and nobody but her to hold him and carry him about.⁸⁷

Abbie's in-laws willingly helped her with her sick child and gave her support, but they did not meddle in her decision-making. Wives had full responsibility for the domestic sphere and the difficult decisions it often entailed. Husbands occasionally tried to interfere from afar, but the longer they were away the less knowledgeable they were about circumstances at home.

Two days later Abbie wrote that the woman healer had indeed cured little Guy: "Guy is getting well just as fast as he can since Mrs. Lancaster has been doctoring him. I can tell you she has done a big thing for us, for I do think she has saved his life."⁸⁸ Fortunately Abbie's decision to engage Mrs. Lancaster had been a wise one. Women healers are important characters in Sarah Orne Jewett's and Mary Ellen Chase's fictional portrayals of New England maritime life. They often were the widows of Maine seafarers who had to depend upon their own resources to survive on that rocky, inhospitable shore.

After being released from the Cuban prison, Joseph recommenced coasting along the eastern seaboard. He seldom was able to get home between October 1871 and August 15, 1873, the date of Abbie's last letter in the collection.

⁸⁷ Ellen Griffin to Joseph, 6 September 1869, Griffin 36-7.

⁸⁸ Abbie to Joseph, 9 September 1869, Griffin 39.

She remained at home to care for their son and gave birth to a daughter while her husband was at sea. During this period she wrote a number of long letters to Joseph relating the many difficulties she had rearing two small children alone. She described the long, hard winters, the sicknesses and deaths which occurred in Stockton, her trouble keeping a hired girl to help with the children, and her struggle to make ends meet with little cash.

Early in her marriage, Abbie inferred that she did not take too well to housekeeping and thought she was too slow at it. It became even more difficult for her when she suddenly found herself tied down at home with a baby as well:

I get along as well as can be expected, I suppose, alone with a baby that is very slow. But you know I am slow myself, and baby is real troublesome now, but he is just as cunning as he can be...You don't know how I miss you. It seems as if you had been gone an age.⁸⁹

It was difficult to get reliable domestic help to care for small children and Abbie had trouble keeping a hired girl. The day before Christmas she wrote her husband the problems she was having caring for a new baby who took up all of her time. This gave her little opportunity to do much else, even prepare herself a meal:

Baby is awful fussy, I did not have her out of my arms yesterday....It takes me all the time to take care of her....Baby is as cross as ever.

⁸⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 5 July 1868, Griffin 17.

I believe I shall starve to death, for I can't get a chance to cook my vittles.⁹⁰

Abbie complained that she had not had the opportunity to go to town to have her picture taken and that she could scarcely take the time to write a letter:

I have had Guy's picture taken...It is out of the question to think of getting mine; I can't leave baby long enough. I haven't left her one minute yet.

...Baby says she shan't let me write tonight...Baby is crying and it is time for the boy to go to school, so I must send this now or never. Twelve o'clock and have not had the baby out of my arms till now.⁹¹

According to Joseph's Aunt Miranda, little Guy was not an easy child to bring up. However, she wrote her nephew that she was confident that Abbie was doing her best:

She is nice and smart, I think, but she has got a troublesome boy--not more so than most of them here. They need a large amount of care and I may say patience, especially with one at Guy's age. But she is blessed with a good share of that, so I think she will get along as well as anyone in her circumstances.⁹²

Joseph's sister Eva commented in a letter to her brother that Abbie's good disposition helped her to cope with Guy's mischievousness. Still having a husband present would have given her son a role model for proper behavior and relieved Abbie of some of the discipline problems in rearing a son alone.

⁹⁰ Abbie to Joseph, 29 December 1871, 7 January 1872, 10 January 1872, Griffin 217, 221; 223.

⁹¹ Abbie to Joseph, 17 January 1872, Griffin 225.

⁹² Miranda Staples to Joseph, 13 January 1872, Griffin 227.

During the snowy, cold January of 1872 Abbie struggled to make it through the winter with two small children. Joseph's father wrote his son that Abbie had been having a hard time since the baby was born, and it was nearly impossible to find a girl in town to help out. Although her in-laws were close by to give her emotional support and do errands for her, Abbie was in charge of her small family and ultimately had to care for her children alone. She felt somewhat resentful and helpless that Joseph had not enough time or money to leave his ship long enough to visit his family. She felt that he could not possibly understand what a mother must sacrifice in being home alone with a new born baby and a boy at a difficult age to look after. In a letter she unabashedly told him her limits:

I tell you don't know anything about what it is to have a little baby and be all alone. I did my washing myself this week. Got it out at half past eleven in the morning, before the baby was up. I got along with it nicely, and that is all I have done this week.

Abbie's relationships with her women friends also suffered because of her responsibilities at home caring for the children. She felt that she would impose if she brought her children along to visit friends:

I hear I am going to have some invitation out visiting soon, but I shall not go. Olive invited me up there last week, but I did not go. I am going up to Mary's next week to stay two days and take two children. I didn't think I should ever do such a thing as that.⁹³

⁹³ Abbie to Joseph, 25 January 1872, Griffin 228-9.

By February everyone was getting sick in Stockton and many people were dying. This only added to Abbie's constant fear that Joseph would contract smallpox while in the port of New York:

It is very sickly here now. Fred Day's wife died yesterday. Emma is dead, and Mrs. Daniel Blake, and quite a number lieing at the point of death. I hear the smallpox is in New York quite plenty. I don't want you to ride in the horse cars at all. I am so afraid you will catch it.⁹⁴

Not only did Abbie worry constantly about her husband's health, but also about her children, who were both sick at the same time. This added responsibility at home made it impossible for her simply to drop everything and meet him wherever he sailed into port:

You must think I have improved a great deal in my courage since leaving you if you think I can come to New York alone with two children with such a flyaway as Guy. I should be most happy to save 12 or 15 dollars, but don't think I can save it that way.⁹⁵

Because they were overburdened with childcare and household duties, wives often urged their husbands to stay home and help care for their families. Lucy Grey expressed her unwillingness in 1822 for her husband to go to sea again. Still in poor health and with a family to care for, she stoically resigned herself to carrying on:

I think I never was sensible of feeling so unwilling for you to leave home since our connexion as I was this time. It seemed for many days that I

⁹⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 19 February 1872, Griffin 243.

⁹⁵ Abbie to Joseph, 5 June 1872, Griffin 260.

could not eat or sleep. When I thought of my feeble state and the care of our family. It seemed to be more than I could bare but I found it would not do for me to give way to my feelings but must put on more courage and resolution and leave the event with him who knows far better than I do what is left for me hoping in our time I shall be permitted to see you in the land of the living.⁹⁶

By May of that same year Lucy, still not well, wrote: "I know not how to be reconciled to your going away again but I try not to worry about that till I get better,"⁹⁷ When she wrote her husband again in January of 1824 after eight months lapse, she complained of her many infirmities while he was permitted to enjoy good health. She interpreted her ill health as a kind of heavenly blessing which enabled her to wean herself "from this world of trouble and sorrow...": "I think you need not be afraid of too long a winter at home. I think I could never consent to have you go to sea again In my present situation as the cares of our family are a great task to me."⁹⁸

Sarah Barry also had a long, difficult year mothering at home while her husband Charles was on his India voyage. Not only did she care for her young son, William, but she also helped with her younger siblings, especially her four and half-year-old sister Mary. It was a happy day indeed when her husband returned to Kennebunk and announced his

⁹⁶ Lucy Grey to her husband, 22 Dec. 1822.

⁹⁷ Lucy Grey to her husband, 11 May 1823.

⁹⁸ Lucy Grey to her husband, 22 January 1824.

decision that he would no longer sail to India, but would voyage thereafter on shorter trips.

Distinct male and female spheres intensified women's responsibilities for the children by forcing them to be the sole nurturers and husbands the sole providers. Exclusive male and female duties often caused resentment between couples. Women were left vulnerable in caring for children and lacked opportunities and support in the public sphere. Men aboard ship were lonely and isolated from their families and the comforts of domesticity. Both men and women were at times content and discontent with their roles in different contexts or situations. Their very separate responsibilities in family life must continuously be re-negotiated, analyzed, and balanced if their home life was to run smoothly. Karen Lystra points out that conformity produced tension between male and female roles which resulted in fluidity of behavior, which frequently went counter to male and female ideals. Women often violated sex role expectations and then reframed them to restore equilibrium in the relationship. As women became more independent and assertive, a new dialogue in intimate relations led to sex role self-consciousness in both sexes.⁹⁹ This struggle for an equal understanding of what each other's separate and difficult roles entailed required much patience and endurance from both partners.

⁹⁹ Lystra 155-156.

The Role of the Extended Family

Extended families were often essential in sustaining the maritime couple throughout the long years of their separations. They offered support and love to the wife while her husband was away at sea. The mariner, in turn, could count on either his or his wife's relatives to look after his own family while he was absent.

Joseph's relatives contributed greatly to help sustain his and Abbie's long-distance marriage. The Griffins were influential in the seafaring community and this helped Joseph obtain positions aboard ship and acquire capital for trading ventures. His family also served as a support system for Abbie while he was away at sea. From January 1870 to April 1871 Joseph ran cargo between the southern U.S. ports and Cuba aboard the schooner, Lillias, with Abbie and Guy aboard. During this time the couple received many letters from Joseph's family. The family wrote about epidemics, people dying and babies born.

While Abbie remained in Portland through December awaiting her husband's arrival, everyone in Stockton seemed impatient for her return. Lillie, Joseph's ten-year-old cousin, wrote Abbie, whom she addressed as Sister, asking why she had not written and when she was coming home. Aunt Miranda anticipated and welcomed Abbie's return:

To be serious we have felt very anxious about you and little Guy. Isn't it too bad you went from

home so soon? I thought you would come home on the next boat. I kept the coffee on the stove till noon, and the children wore the soles all off their shoes going to the road to see when the coach came.¹⁰⁰

Abbie wrote Joseph how much she appreciated and benefited from the support her in-laws gave her: "I don't know what I should do if your father and mother weren't just as good as they can be--Uncle Henry's family is too."¹⁰¹ Joseph's Aunt Miranda and Uncle Henry lived close by with their children. They often visited Abbie and helped her out with the children and chores:

Uncle Henry's folks have been just as good to me this fall as they could be, the whole of them. When I am tired out, Aunt Miranda sends Lill and Will [Joseph's cousins] in to bring my wood up for me. She is very thoughtful and your father and mother too.¹⁰²

Lillian Rubin, writing about life in the working-class family of America, points out that extended relationships are at the heart of working-class life.¹⁰³ Abbie and Joseph socialized most often with Joseph's large extended family with whom they corresponded regularly and shared their lives emotionally, socially and economically. They were related to nearly everyone in Stockton, and Abbie lived in the same house with Joseph's parents and younger

¹⁰⁰ Miranda Staples to Abbie, 15 December 1869, Griffin 79-80.

¹⁰¹ Abbie to Joseph, 2 September 1869, Griffin 35.

¹⁰² Abbie to Joseph, 3 December 1871, Griffin 209.

¹⁰³ Lillian B. Rubin, Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family (New York: Basic Books, 1969) 197.

siblings. Uncle Henry and Aunt Miranda and their children lived nearby and wrote regularly to Joseph and Abbie when they were away at sea. This extended family owned shares in the coasters sailing out of their harbor, helped each other out in times of financial need, shared holidays and special events, and freely dropped in on each other daily. Little was mentioned about Abbie's family, the Averys, in this collection of correspondence, except that her brother Charley did sail occasionally as a mate with Joseph and her mother lived in the southern Maine town of York. Abbie was closer to Joseph's mother, who looked after her as if she were her own daughter: "Your mother has brought in my dinner, so you see if it wasn't for her, I should come up minus. Your mother has been just as good as an own mother could be."¹⁰⁴

On December 6, 1871 Uncle Henry wrote Joseph that Abbie had given birth to a baby girl that day, and that Aunt Miranda was very proud to help the doctor with the successful delivery. Joseph's father noted: "Your little tiny daughter weighs 8 pounds and 5 ounces, all rigged and ready for sea!"¹⁰⁵ He promised that he and his family would do all they could for Abbie and the baby. Wishing to make more money, he hoped his son could sell the Lillias for eight thousand dollars profit so that they could have a larger

¹⁰⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 29 December 1871, Griffin 217.

¹⁰⁵ Isaac Griffin to Joseph, 6 December 1871, Griffin 211-213.

vessel built. Abbie urged Joseph to get a larger vessel so he could take his family to sea.

Joseph let the younger members of his family know that, although he was away at sea, it was his responsibility to see that they follow his behavioral example. He wrote his cousin Eva, a teenager, a rather bossy letter complaining about her unkempt appearance. She burned his letter as he requested and wrote him back saying that she had on "a clean dress and her head combed." She seemed to appreciate her uncle's advice and affection and would try to overcome her failings "as you have pointed out to me so plainly." Today this kind of criticism would be judged as excessive meddling or puritanical watchfulness. Joseph, head of this mid-nineteenth pioneer Maine family, probably saw this reprimand as his duty to ensure that members of his family adhered to a proper style of behavior and appearance. Maintaining a good reputation for thrift, cleanliness and tidiness, and particularly hard work was a high priority in New England towns. Otherwise, one might be labeled lazy, unkept and shiftless.

Joseph's father, in a letter to his son, stressed the importance of maintaining a good reputation:

Nothing would grieve me more than to know that any one of my children had done any rash thing. I could bear poverty or hard luck better than that. A good reputation is far above riches. You will someday know the anxiety and love of parents.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Isaac Griffin to Joseph, 25 February 1871, 119.

He wrote regularly to his son Joseph, freely giving sound fatherly advise and expressing his love for his twelve children:

I feel a great anxiety for my children's welfare and happiness. A full command over one's selfish passions will bring about all we can enjoy in this world. When we can govern ourselves, our fortunes are made. Then we have no more wants than we can gratify.¹⁰⁷

A loving and supportive family network offered Abbie safety and help during Joseph's absence. The downeast outspokenness of Abbie's in-laws was spiked with an affectionate humor which kept communication open. Their honesty and loyalty to one another enabled them to resolve misunderstandings and shortcomings and retain their tight-knit sense of community.

This was not always the case for all mariners who left their wives ashore with their families. Some women complained about living with families who were overly critical of their behavior, unduly bossy or controlling. Abner Howe of Dennis, Cape Cod had a negative view of his household, run by his two unmarried sisters who made his British wife feel unwelcome: "...she has no one on the Cape Cod that thinks she is any thing to them as she comes from olde England and they are no good outsiders." Abner wrote his brother, who had left Cape Cod to settle in Buffalo, New

¹⁰⁷ Isaac Griffin to Joseph, 7 March 1871, Griffin, 123.

York, that living with the family on the Cape was not working out for him and his wife Lizzie:

I have been home one week and I wish I could leave it forever and I should if it was warm weather and the child was larger and older for Cape Cod will never do for me and my wife and our House is not large enough for me and the family to live in.

He explained that he had felt forced to live with his family because of a lack of money and because his wife, who suffered from poor health, needed help with their child:

the only reason she has stayed was to have her child and thinking it would be cheaper...she had the use of but one hand and she cannot take care of the child as she would if she had the use of both of them.

Most troublesome were Abner's single sisters, Abbie and Harriet, for whom he had few good words:

but it is no use of talking olde Maids are usely trouble to all the human flesh and if you live as I have done you will find it out....

Abner had thought well of his sisters until his wife Lizzie became pregnant and had had some trouble with them, particularly his sister Abbie:

...she had some trouble with Harriet and Abbie when she was sick a bed after her confinement and Abbie said she would never speak to her again if she did not ask forgiveness to her and that she will never do if I know it. It made my wife so sick at the time to think she could not leave the house and its inmates that her milk all dried up and she had to use the bottle for the child and they did not care what became of her nor her child at the time so I think that will do for me on Cape Cod. I have not seen Abbie since I have been home this time and I dont want to either for I have

lost all feelings for her and all respect to the reason I have not wrote you of late.¹⁰⁸

Sisterhood did not develop between Lizzie and her American sisters-in-law, but Abner hoped it might be a possibility with his sister-in-law. He wrote his brother that he planned to go to Buffalo in the spring and that he wished his brother's wife Eliza and his wife Lizzie could set up housekeeping together: "They would be company for each other if I should go to sea again and they would be happy together and they could live as cheep up their as any where on Cape Cod and be comfortable settled."¹⁰⁹ Husbands were willing for wives to move in together if it made the women more content while they were away.

Margaret Dillingham, another Maine captain's wife, preferred keeping a distance between herself and her rural extended family. She quite liked boarding alone in Brooklyn, New York while her husband was at sea, although she, like Abbie Griffin, did not think much of city folks. Still she liked the independence of boarding out far from her what she called her mother's "iron rule." Yet she still loved her home best, and her loyalties remained with her rural family. In a letter to her mother and sisters she scolded them for not writing to her, as she was alone among

¹⁰⁸ Abner Howe to his brother in Buffalo, New York, 20 December 1856.

¹⁰⁹ Abner Howe to his brother in Buffalo, New York, 1 February 1857.

strangers, and assured them that city folks would never take their place in her heart:

You caution me about forming new acquaintances, you need not fear. I have not the least inclination to make any. I am not more partial to city people than you not being to their "manners born." I find it very hard work to become accustomed to them, neither do I feel at all anxious to be....I think it very strange that you should even imagine that I should become weaned from home. What is there in such a place as this to wean a body from their home; living here, or rather staying, will that make me prize my home, friends the more when I shall once more have returned to them?

Husbands rarely moved in with their wives' families, and Margaret wrote that she felt it was her duty as a wife to settle where it pleased her husband: "I am contented here as I have told you before, because I think it is my duty to be; it is so much pleasanter for Charles when he is here...." Margaret used the excuse of "her duty" to assert her physical independence from her family and confessed: "...another thing (I will only whisper it) there is something in feeling as though I am my own mistress, could come and go, or stay at home (which I had much rather do) without anybody's leave, or asking why I do thus and so, I tell you what, it is a very comfortable feeling."¹¹⁰

Marriage to a mariner gave some young woman more mobility than was allowed a rural wife, who must remain at home to help maintain the farm and family. If a maritime couple

¹¹⁰ Margaret Dillingham to sisters and mother, 29 October 1848, Letters to mother and sisters, Maine Historical Society, Portland, Maine.

had established no home of their own, usually the case in the nineteenth century, the wife often had the choice to board in an urban port rather than in the country with relatives. Rachel Putnam, whose diary is studied in Chapter III, perhaps preferred being "her own mistress" in the larger, industrial center of Manchester, New Hampshire. There she could at least enjoy the theatre with her "gallant" rather than be isolated from social activities in her parents rural home in Londonderry. In Margaret Dillingham's case she was able to free herself from an overbearing mother by boarding out in New York. A woman also might find work in the city's mills or take in boarders herself to give her additional economic independence. According to a letter from her sister, Margaret eventually ran her own boarding house. Writing Margaret from New Orleans, her sister offered the advice to discharge female boarders or raise their board "to at least two dollars per week to break even" as male boarders would be more profitable.¹¹¹ Margaret was acting in the tradition of pre-revolutionary women like Mary Cranch, who moved from Salem to Boston around 1737 to run a boarding house during her husband's absence.

The correspondence between couples illustrates how various expectations partners brought into their marriages changed and adjusted to the demands of seafaring. These

¹¹¹ Dillingham correspondence, 11 February 1849.

nineteenth-century couples freely expressed their devotion to one another in various ways in an attempt to keep their relationships vital. Joseph and Abbie alluded to physical intimacy in a light-hearted manner to minimize the pain of their physical separation. They shared one another's concern at maintaining an appropriate family size, and Abbie, in particular, was assertive about not wanting to bring up a large family alone. Frequent coming and going tested a couple's ability to play distinctive roles and allowed them more fluidity in fulfilling them. Mutually dependent upon one another, each relied upon the other to be strong and independent in the handling of separate duties. Both husbands and wives often expressed dissatisfaction with sole responsibility for their ascribed roles. Women often challenged their husbands' long-distance maritime careers and sometimes felt frustrated that they were unable to help out financially. Husbands, too, expressed a desire to find work ashore, but many were reluctant to give up careers they had worked long and hard for and in many ways enjoyed. Parents and relatives mediated between husbands at sea and wives at home by offering their love and support.

Through each ordeal of separation, wives developed a strength of character similar to their husbands'. They learned how to ask for what they wanted and felt freer to express their dissatisfactions with their domestic role and their husbands' choice of career. Neither partner became

reconciled to continuing a life apart from one another, and both became aware of the shortcomings and deprivations of their separate spheres. They realized their lives were often incomplete without the opportunity to participate in what the other was experiencing alone.

The letters also reveal how each partner coped with separation, and how the women, in particular, sought optional roles or activities to overcome loneliness. Women left at home alone, struggling to survive and overcome the pain of loss, began to take pride in their own accomplishments. Maritime women, in contrast to women whose husbands returned home each evening, were given an extended opportunity to operate independently from their spouses much as women did during the Revolutionary War. Those who took on various roles over extended periods of time, began to realize that the unconditional acceptance of the ideology of separate spheres was often unrealistic, unequal and impractical.

CHAPTER VI

COMING ABOUT

Continuing with the examination of intimate correspondence between maritime couples, this chapter takes a closer look at how couples re-defined, on the basis of their own experiences within a marriage of separation, their expectations of one another and the function of their separate roles. Couples were forced to confront their own loneliness and dependency, the possibility of marital infidelity, and ultimately widowhood. To reduce the stress of a long-distance relationship, partners developed various strategies which helped them re-define their roles and re-establish an acceptable marital equilibrium.

Dependencies and Expectations

The discords in the maritime marriage were usually caused by different expectations each partner brought to their marriage, the difficulty of communication from a distance, and the loneliness inherent in distinct and physically isolated spheres of conduct. Couples carefully and subtly camouflaged their difficulties with humor or sentimentality. Joseph Griffin's major complaint was that his wife Abbie "doled out" too few letters, which made him feel

neglected, out of control and anxious about what was occurring at home:

As you do not think it worthwhile to write me whether there has been any rains at home, do not know which way to turn, so a fair wind may blow fifty dollars into my pocket and may blow a hundred out....¹

These words reflect the loneliness, disappointment and economic uncertainty of a husband writing his wife from a distant port. In November 1869 Joseph wrote Abbie from East Haven, Connecticut where the Lillias was being repaired after having been hit by a Nova Scotia brig. He made it clear what he expected of her in terms of correspondence:

While I am here, I want you to write every chance you can get, for I want to know just exactly how you are getting along with everything--your sewing, washing dishes, housework--with Guy, with the neighbors, and with yourself. I want every mite of news stirring about everything an hour old and an inch high, all the births, from kittens to babies, and all the deaths from turkeys, pigs, and chickens to horses, heifers, and horned animals of all kinds, paupers and pouts...I desire you will take this letter and answer all of my wants and wishes in full, just as I have got them down.²

Mariners, like Joseph, expressed a fear of losing contact with their families' activities and the goings on in their communities. In an almost childlike manner, Joseph confessed how much he needed his wife and her stability and patience. He thought too much, slept too little and

¹ Joseph Griffin (aboard schooner Lillias) to his wife Abbie at home in Stockton, Maine, Sept. 15, 1869, Letters of a New England Coaster 1868-1872, ed. Ralph H. Griffin, Jr. (Ralph H. Griffin, Jr. 1968) 43.

² Joseph to Abbie, 27 November 1869, Griffin 62.

anxiously awaited all her news. The long and often idle waiting for a ship's repair or its cargo to be loaded or unloaded gave the captain time to think of family and home. Joseph was not occupied with the everyday duties a housewife and mother must contend with, and in many ways he felt out of touch with what was going on at home. He expected his wife to fulfill all his wants and desires and inundate him with a steady flow of news while he was at sea. Abbie's letters were of utmost importance to Joseph as a way of keeping abreast with what was going on in the family, for which he took full responsibility while at sea.

Joseph discovered early in his marriage that his wife was no match for him as a correspondent, nor was she disposed to apologize for her infrequent and often brief letters. Abbie let him know she had more pressing things to occupy her time, such as keeping house and rearing a family alone. This did not prevent him from fussing about her brief "scribbles," which he felt came too infrequently:

I about made up my mind you would neglect writing me until it was too late for me to receive an answer -- naming your usual excuse didn't have time....³

Nor did Joseph seem to understand the honesty of Abbie's excuse "didn't have time." He felt she was just being neglectful or lazy about writing. He had little conception of all the nurturing and household duties a woman had to

³ Joseph to Abbie, 31 August, 1869, Griffin 33.

contend with at home, and he was unable to understand why he did not receive letters as often or as lengthy as he anticipated. It was assumed that wives would nurture their husbands as well as their children, and men often expected this attention to continue to be bestowed upon them even in their absence. When Joseph did receive what he called Abbie's "nice little sour scribble," he did not know whether to praise or blame her.⁴ Usually he resorted to scolding her in a teasing manner for not keeping him regularly informed.

Before Guy was born, Joseph wrote to Abbie in November of 1867 from Ipswich, Massachusetts to express his disappointment in not receiving any letters from her. With much idle time on his hands he chose to write long, frequent letters in an attempt to abate his loneliness:

I am really ashamed of writing you again so soon, or I ought to say, pester you so much with letters, but the fact is I have got nothing under the heavens to busy myself about and am so lonesome, I must do something to wear away the time. Still I know you say you like to hear from me when I am away from home. But I can't believe you care much about letters because there are so many things to prove to the contrary. At any rate, you do not consider a letter worth answering. Of course, you would ask me why I think so, and to make a short story long will canvass the whole matter, having nothing else to do but write...After the heavy gale on the Shoals I wrote you a good long letter and you answered it with a small half sheet. We arrived in Boston. I got a letter from all of the folks there and how many did I receive from you? The whole of none.⁵

⁴ Joseph to Abbie, 10 December 1869, Griffin 76.

⁵ Joseph to Abbie, 16 November 1867, Griffin 12.

Joseph explained to Abbie how he had acquired the habit of writing during the last three years of the Civil War. He had served in Admiral Farragut's Squadron, and there had often been long periods of idleness. Joseph's frequent and lengthy letters written to agents, friends and especially relatives are an integral part of this family collection. With little to occupy his mind, like Rachel Putnam alone at home in Manchester, New Hampshire, he devoted his energy to worrying and writing long letters, which he expected to be answered in turn.

When Abbie was expecting her first baby, Joseph became anxious and began to complain frequently about her delinquent writing habits:

I am nervous and anxious all the time, and help it I can't; so let the wheel move and I will endeavor to move it with as little fuss as possible...As soon as the heir to the throne comes along, I shall not be half so anxious and can get along without writing.⁶

He was unabashedly proud that his son would be the heir to his position in the family hierarchy. Abbie shared this patriarchal assumption that sons were more important to a family than daughters. She alluded to someone who had given birth to only girls, and so was not nearly so clever as she, who had given birth to a son on March 19, 1868.

Abbie's letters to Joseph, beginning in July of 1868, are undistinguished in terms of literary merit, and lack her

⁶ Joseph to Abbie, 16 November 1867, Griffin 12.

husband's sharp wit and vivid descriptions. Julianna Free-Hand, the editor of Captain Drinkwater's family correspondence, found forty letters from the captain and only five from his wife Alice. She confesses that "as I pored over them my bias for Alice collapsed and Sumner moved center-stage."⁷ This discrepancy in the number and quality of the husbands' and the wives' letters reflected not only the differences in their education and exposure to the world, but also how little time the women had to write. Abbie's letters, although often brief and plainly written, are still interesting in their unaffected, blunt recital of the everyday pleasures and burdens of motherhood.

When their son was still small, Abbie wrote Joseph a brief note saying that little Guy had been very sick and she had sacrificed her sleep for his care. Not having yet received Abbie's letter, Joseph was irritated and worried when he wrote her from Providence, Rhode Island:

As I can neither sleep, work, sit still, or amuse myself, I concluded to drop you a line, as from this time it will be mighty seldom I swing the quill for your edification. I have been at the post office two or three times a day ever since we arrived here looking for letters, hoping to hear a word from Guy and how he was getting along....

He concluded his letter with an attempt to persuade Abbie to write more often:

I will close this letter with my mind made up that when I again write you, you will consider my

⁷ Julianna FreeHand, A Seafaring Legacy (New York: Random House, 1981) 8.

letters worth answering, for although I like to write letters as well as I do to receive them, I will find some other way to amuse myself when in port rather than to be laughed at for my pains.⁸

On receiving this desperate and slightly threatening letter from her husband, Abbie responded assertively: "Your letter of the 15th was gladly received, but I can't say I was thankful to get such a scolding as I did about those letters. I wrote you four letters to Newport and one to Providence."⁹ Abbie and Joseph's letters often crossed, which led to misunderstandings between them and caused Joseph much worry and pain. Abbie was neither careless nor indifferent but simply too busy with children, relatives, and housekeeping to be able to sit down and write regularly.

While Abbie was visiting relatives in Portland, Joseph wrote her and complained again about not having received any news from her. He again accused her of neglect and laziness. She responded by telling him that she had to care for Lizzie (probably her sister), who was very sick and that their son Guy "is ranting over me so I can't do anything with him."¹⁰ Their letters had crossed again, and Joseph thought Abbie was having such a good time in Portland that he decided not to disturb her by going there. He was angry as he related how many miles he had walked to the post

⁸ Joseph to Abbie, 15 September 1869, Griffin 42-3.

⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 26 September 1869, Griffin 43.

¹⁰ Abbie to Joseph, 9 December 1869, Griffin 75.

office each day to see if there was a letter from her.

"However, I am very glad to hear from you before the last cat is hung" was his sarcastic retort.¹¹ He then lectured her about her cruel neglect of him:

If you neglect writing through laziness or indifference, you have a cruel way of making it manifest, and hope you have never realized how severe such punishment is. You may have a chance to learn by experience...If I thought you were keeping silent just to see how much you could aggravate me, would try and see what I could do at that game too....

After hearing from Abbie about all the letters she had sent, he admitted that he might have had unrealistic expectations and had better not push his demands further: "...but that long list of letters you told about sending when I got home, after sending a piece of my mind in advance, is enough to keep a big husband quiet, say nothing of a tame little fellow like me."

Through this long tirade Joseph unloaded his disappointment and anger at his frustrated expectations. It hopefully prevented him from "letting loose" when he joined Abbie again:

I am always ashamed of letting loose just the minute I see you again, and the very next time I get away am mad as a hornet if I do not hear from you as often as I think I ought to. Either you must write more often, or I shall have to knock off writing altogether, or you will have to stick

¹¹ Joseph to Abbie, 10 December 1869, Griffin 77.

to me like a flea to a poodle through thick and thin.¹²

Exhibiting a strong psychological dependency upon his wife and further indulging in self-pity, Joseph attempted to make Abbie understand how he felt when he received no letters from her:

By the time I get to my journey's end, perhaps you may have time to learn how much fun there is in being away from home alone. Add to it no letter, and no one to speak to that you ever saw or heard tell of before, and dying with anxiety to hear from a sick child at home, and knowing that your not hearing is owing to the carelessness or indifference of those at home whose welfare you have nearest to heart. If you can realize all that, possibly you might form some idea how I have felt before now when not getting any letters.¹³

Letter writing was a catharsis for maritime men and women separated for long periods of time, and a way to keep their affections alive. Couples counted on feelings of mutual dependency to keep the long-distance marriage intact. Some men and women took the time to keep a diary as well, which gave them an additional outlet for feelings which they were reluctant to express in their letters. Rachel Putnam and Sarah Trask became devoted to their "dearest friend," their diary. Often idle like Joseph, they found their expectations similarly frustrated by not receiving regular news from their men at sea. In contrast, Abbie was occupied with the full-time job of mothering and had difficulty in

¹² Joseph to Abbie, 5 December 1869, Griffin 70.

¹³ Joseph to Abbie, 10 December 1869, Griffin 77.

finding time to write. The differing expectations about the frequency of correspondence became a source of contention for Joseph and Abbie. He explained to her how he sometimes allowed self-pity to take over when he did not hear from her as often as expected:

When I get no letters, I feel as if you cared as little about me as you do a holey stocking that has no mate. Still I know better, for I am something like Mother, when I feel a little miserable. I try and see how miserable I can feel. I don't see what makes me feel so cussed foolish, but it is as true as it is comical. Sometimes I feel so cross because you do not write more often that I could say things that would make you bawl for a month, but at the same time would walk a dozen miles to see you and give as many dollars for just one hour's chat, and think I could then go back about my business as contented as a bear in a cornfield.¹⁴

Joseph's self-pity came from both genuine feelings of loneliness, as well as the fear of being out of touch with the family for whom he felt responsible. His commitment to his marriage and his dependence upon his wife for emotional support conform to Carl Degler's assertion that nineteenth-century husbands "were quite willing to admit dependence upon their wives."¹⁵ Degler gives the example of a couple who were separated in the beleaguered Confederacy in 1862. The husband, despite the high cost of postage, insisted on writing his wife every day. Men's dependency upon their wives, which could also be construed as a means of control,

¹⁴ Joseph to Abbie, 5 December 1869, Griffin 71.

¹⁵ Carl Degler, At Odds (New York: Oxford U P, 1980) 38.

was not confined to the middle or upper class. It was exhibited as well in diaries of men on the overland trail and in the letters of Captain Joseph Griffin.¹⁶ Moreover, the companionate marriage, based upon romantic feelings and affection, demanded a certain amount of mutual dependency, which also helped to keep the romance alive during long separations.

Many seafarers, far from home and loved ones, expressed how highly they prized letters from their families. It was painful enough for Captain Barry to lose his ship in a gale off the Welch coast, but having to let go of his fiance's cherished letters hurt still more:

In the midst of the shipwreck and all its trials, I thought of you, and after I had done all in my power for the ship, and expected to save only my life, I crept into one of the cabin windows, took my watch and purse with gold in it, and the ring which I bought in remembrance of you. I had your dear letters, which I had been reading, in my hand but I knew it was useless to try to save them. I put them back and got out of the window....¹⁷

Captain Gardner valued correspondence with his wife as a way to converse with her from a distance and as a reinforcement of their marriage vows:

What a blessing it is that we can converse together in this way and how happy I should be if I had an opportunity of sending a hundred letters by this time. I will assure you my dearest and that no chance should pass without something in the shape of a letter from the one that you honour by holding most dear. And how shall I reward you my

¹⁶ Degler 40-1.

¹⁷ Borden 13, 26 March 1845.

true and faithful wife for so you have always been since I first new you. It must be done by fulfilling the solem promises that we made together. Oh Harriet I long to hear from you again.

He worried as well that Harriet was not receiving as many letters from him because of the infrequency of meeting a homeward-bound ship to carry his letters: "Dear Harriet how am I to return my thanks to you for the kind letters that I have had from you....I have got 13 letters this voyage. Oh how I wish that you my dear had got as many as that."

Captain Gardiner cherished Harriet's letters and made them into a book which he could read again and again:

I have taken the letters that I have received from you and made a book of them. It is one of the best books that I ever read. When I peruse this little pamphlet and think of the kind advice that is from my dearest them all and think of the situation that I am in it almost brings tears to my eyes.¹⁸

Captain Barry, after he and Sarah were married, described a schedule he had devised for reading Sarah's letters to insulate him from severe pain on his outward voyage:

Do you know, my love, that I have hardly dared to read again any of the letters that you sent me in Boston. I have not been out long enough, and I must not begin to read any of them over until I get eastward of the Cape of Good Hope. Then I shall be about half-passage. If I read them again now, I might feel a little dull and think too much of home. On the homeward passage, I shall allow myself to think of home with perfect liberty and without restraint because every day will bring me nearer to it. But outward bound, it's just the

¹⁸ Jared M. Gardner to Harriet in Nantucket, June 1841, Gardiner Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

reverse and every day carries me farther from all the dear ones left behind.¹⁹

Joseph, sailing on shorter voyages, did not attempt to practice this kind of discipline with the few letters Abbie "doled out." In the following passage he intimated that if Abbie had not had the character he desired in a wife, he might not have been so anxious to marry had he known that she would be such a poor correspondent:

I am mightly glad we were married when we were, for I have felt forty times since, that me and my letters were of very small account in your estimation when I was away. If I had not studied your character and disposition more closely than I ever did any other person's living, I should have had serious doubt about putting my neck into a matrimonial halter. But I knew in my mind and felt that you were just the one I wanted. At any rate I wanted just that one, though I never felt very deeply in love with the way you doled out letters to me, for the only one I received for a long time that had the real Abigail smack to it was the one I received from you at Rondout. I suppose you think I ought to be satisfied, as you covered three small pages of note paper for me at Washington. If I could get two or three letters as I got from you in Rondout in every port, should be a good deal more contented for you to stay at home.²⁰

Joseph probably realized that he must forego being showered with correspondence for the more practical benefits of having a wife with enough ambition and practical knowledge to maintain affairs at home. One feels from reading Abbie's short, terse notes that she did not enjoy letter-writing. Not until she was alone with two small children during the

¹⁹ Borden, 24 January 1847.

²⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 5 December 1869, Griffin 70-1.

long winter of 1872-3, did she write longer, more newsy letters. It appeared, also, that Abbie did not want Joseph to feel so contented that he would prefer her to stay at home, and she tried to convince him to take her to sea. Perhaps her infrequent correspondence was an unconscious effort to persuade Joseph to prepare the Lillias to accommodate her and Guy aboard ship.

When Joseph reassumed coastal trading after his imprisonment in Cuba, apparently Abbie had decided it best to remain at home because of her pregnant condition. From October 1871 through August 15, 1873 (the date of her last letter in the collection) Abbie wrote a number of long letters to Joseph, who dropped in at home when he could. There are no more letters from Joseph to Abbie in the collection, but Abbie continued to comment on how much she enjoyed hearing from him:

You spoke of your long letter. I don't care how long they are nor how often I get them--just as often as you can afford to pay postage.²¹

I want you to write just as often as you can, if it is six to my one. You don't know how cheering it is to get a letter from you.²²

Don't, for the Lord's sake, leave off writing long letters, for that is all the comfort I have this winter.²³

²¹ Abbie to Joseph, 11 November 1871, Griffin 203

²² Abbie to Joseph, 18 October 1871, Griffin 198.

²³ Abbie to Joseph, 3 December 1871, Griffin 207.

Abbie, like Joseph, wanted and needed her husband's frequent letters. Both wives and husbands felt isolated and confined to their separate spheres and feelings were intensified by the distance between them. Women felt imprisoned by domestic responsibilities within their own homes and men were imprisoned within the hierarchial life aboard ship. They bridged their loneliness and isolation with frequent correspondence in which they exchanged romantic and nostalgic feelings. Their mutual confessions of their feelings strengthened their marital bonds and defined their love and commitment to one another. In many ways the severest test was not in keeping their romantic feelings alive while apart, but whether their relationship could adjust to the reality of their reunions.

The Stress of Homecomings

Husbands expected to be together with their wives whenever possible, particularly while they were in home port. When Joseph returned, he demanded Abbie's undivided attention above all else:

I have no appetite to visit strangers, even if they are relations of yours....I have claims on your company ahead of all brothers and sisters or anyone else except Guy, and of him I am half inclined to be jealous if he monopolizes much more than his share of your time.²⁴

²⁴ Joseph to Abbie, 17 November 1869, Griffin 55.

Like most mariners who were separated from their wives for a prolonged period, Joseph felt that he had exclusive rights to Abbie's company over the demands of relatives and friends. The Cult of Domesticity assumed that the wife would be able to run the home and take care of the children single-handedly. Yet many returning husbands assumed that their needs would take precedence over household duties, childcare, family and friends. This unrealistic expectation, like demanding a regular supply of correspondence from home, did not take into account the all-consuming aspects of mothering. This new "double duty" to nurture her husband, yet not neglect the house and children, often made the husband's homecoming difficult for the wife who must quickly adjust her priorities. It was also problematic for a woman who wished to continue being intimate with close friends and relatives or maintain an involvement in some special project at home or in the community.

Reunions were particularly stressful when both mates must face the reality of change in the other person. Memories of a loved one became outdated and fragmented over time. Norling observes that "the place to which the home-comer returns can never be the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence." Because of the irreversibility of inner time, the former experiences of a we-relationship took on another meaning.

The home had changed and the homecomer was neither the same for himself nor for those awaiting him.²⁵

In a companionate marriage, based upon expectations of affection and intimacy, husbands and wives often had very different perceptions of the separation which could lead to misunderstandings or even mistrust. Norling maintains that these expectations were constantly frustrated by the constraints of prolonged separation and unreliable means of communication:

Personal strategies for coping with the resulting emotional deprivation could not keep pace with the dramatically lengthening absences of husbands as the nineteenth century progressed...Both women and men, by subscribing to the prevailing value system (separate spheres and the companionate marriage), were prevented from reaching any sort of emotional accommodation to the unique personal consequences of seafaring.²⁶

Still emotional accommodations were reached in various ways by individual couples. The women in Chapter IV of this study, who were left home alone, found or created ways of coping with separations, which often became easier over time. Husbands became emotionally dependent upon their wife's love and support and they missed it even more when they were separated. This need gave the women left behind a greater opportunity to exert their influence. Their social connections at home, often carried on through visiting and

²⁵ Lisa Norling, "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Wife: Maritime Marriage in Nineteenth Century New Bedford," B.A. Thesis, Cornell U, 1985, 26-32.

²⁶ Norling 33.

gossip, empowered them to influence their husbands' decisions. Husbands also were inclined to behave differently when given time to reflect upon their relationship during long, lonely periods at sea. In the absence of male authority, women took full charge of immediate family concerns and determined how they should interact with other family members. If life became too unbearable without their husbands or if home became too confining with its incessant round of chores, many wives were able to convince their husbands to take them aboard ship. And most men were happy to have their wives make their ships more home-like.

Expressing Differences and Restoring Equilibrium

In his first letter to his bride, written from Provincetown, Massachusetts on August 25, 1867, Joseph apologized for leaving Abbie a "widow" and, as he frequently did, for his own shortcomings:

I have come to the conclusion to remember you in your widowhood, partly to apologize for my crabbedness while at home.²⁷

Separations often forced these men and women to re-evaluate, and sometimes change, their roles and behavior. After visiting home, the mariner, once again alone at sea, had the opportunity to reflect upon the significance and value of his family life and his behavior at home. The wife left at

²⁷ Joseph to Abbie, 25 August 1867, Griffin 7.

home had time to re-evaluate her marriage and perhaps set new priorities for herself. Wives and husbands particularly expressed regrets in their letters about their contrary moods and lack of understanding towards their mates. Several of the lonely and discontented women in Chapter III regretted that their husbands seemed discontented while at home. Because changed circumstances did not always coincide with the couple's expectations, homecomings were often fraught with stress and friction. Although wives equated home with a husband's presence, the mariner seemed to equate home with wife, friends and relatives left behind, and not with housekeeping, childrearing and other essential duties.²⁸ However, it was these same duties which almost exclusively occupied a mother's thoughts and time. The necessity to continue these domestic duties after the husband's return perhaps precipitated a "crabbedness" at being neglected. It was difficult for the husband not to be able immediately to take his place at the center of the family as he had imagined while away.

Linda Grant De Pauw challenges the popular misconception that seafaring men were so misogynistic that they went to sea to get away from women. In fact they were just as attached to women as were men ashore and looked on separation from their loved one as one of the hardships of their work. De Pauw suggests:

²⁸ Norling "Loneliness" 28.

...that the extraordinary strains placed on family life by long separations actually made families in seafaring communities stronger because their members appreciated each other more and held their affections together with prayers and letters, while families not so tested took their relationships for granted.²⁹

Abbie shared similar sentiments about her relationship with Joseph: "We can't know how much we enjoy each other's company until we are separated from each other do we?"³⁰ Her statement echoed the nineteenth-century assumption that the pain of separation gives meaning to love--sorrow defines happiness.³¹

Joseph reminded Abbie of a cool greeting he once gave her on his return home in answer to her hearty one. He admitted that he had wanted to apologize for a long time and suggested that his male ego had prevented him from doing so:

I have had it in my mind's eye to apologize to you for my coolness a good many times when we have been together. I could never pucker myself enough into being sentimental enough to do it, and look you square in the eye while apologizing.³²

He went further and apologized for all his "matrimonial delinquencies" and the times he had "...wounded her feelings, though I did not really mean to do so, for the fault was in my head not my heart."

²⁹ Linda Grant DePauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982) 11-12.

³⁰ Abbie to Joseph, 25 June 1871, Griffin 188.

³¹ Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford U P, 1989) 50.

³² Joseph to Abbie, 5 December 1869, Griffin 72.

Joseph explained that the reason he appreciated his home so much was because most of his life had been spent with sailors, whose beliefs were summed up in a song extolling the ready pleasure of a wanderer's life over the dreariness of a sober marriage bed. Perhaps the seafaring occupation depended upon the idea that men went to sea to get away from women to recruit sailors, but such an assumption held little validity for men's personal lives.

Emphasizing Victorian asymmetry of sex roles, Joseph praised his wife for being a moral example for the marriage, which he had difficulty living up to because of his rebellious nature:

With such example constantly before me, 'til no wonder I am an evil-minded man, and by living with such a good woman I am as bad again as I ever was before. It is not because I do not appreciate your worth, but because I go by contraries sometimes.³³

A woman's moral superiority only highlighted a man's shortcomings and led him further into rebellion. Joseph, indoctrinated in the Victorian male/female polarity of good and bad, was taught to establish his maleness as a thing apart. Forced to be the family provider and succeed in a career, he had been encouraged to break away from the intimate world of women and children. Going to sea for a living was a more drastic break from the family than taking up a profession ashore. The competitive nature of a man's struggle to

³³ Joseph to Abbie (from prison), 2 May 1871, Griffin 157.

succeed in the male world, along with his hierarchial relationship with other men aboard ship, made him restless and assertive. Thus Joseph was able to excuse his "bad actions" by simply saying he was just being a man, corrupted by the society of other men and alienated from family by his wanderings. However, he did hope that in time and under his wife's good influence he would eventually become a better husband: "I hope that you and Father Time may make a better husband of me if not a better man."³⁴

To balance the marital relationship, the wife was perceived as a model of virtue who attempted to please others before herself. This polarity between good and bad created a double standard which was an inherent aspect of the nineteenth-century marriage. In turn it gave legitimate power to men and valued what men did over what women did. Men were forgiven for their misdemeanors while being given the prerogative to criticize their wives for their behavior and appearance.

Apparently Joseph had expressed some displeasure with Abbie's appearance while he was at home, and later he felt guilty about his criticism. Abbie explained why she had neglected herself to do what she thought would please her husband. Caught in the typical female bind of always trying to please, she had to be equally quick to assume the blame if she failed:

³⁴ Joseph to Abbie, 3 October 1869, Griffin 48.

I don't think you had better worry much about what you said that day you left home. I don't blame you for saying what you did. I should have had my hair combed, but I wanted to get dinner ready before you went away so I let my head go and was disappointed enough when I found you couldn't stop to eat it.³⁵

For Abbie having her husband with her for dinner took priority over her appearance. She did not appreciate a lecture her husband gave her in one of his letters (not included in this collection) and was vexed that she could not have her say:

I think your sermon very good and agree with you there, but when do you think of starting out to preach, and where? You never allow me to speak to you when you are vexed about anything or in trouble in any way.³⁶

Abbie called Joseph's attention to the double standard of accepted male/female behavior and asserted her right to speak up for herself.

By contrast, feeling that it was her duty to make amends, Lizzie Howe of Dennis, Cape Cod responded to her husband's non-communicative stance in a more submissive and apologetic manner:

...sometimes I am inclined to think that I have offended you in some way when you appear so indifferent[,] if so I am unconscious of it but if there has been anything in my conversation or behavior that has displeased you[,] I should be happy to amend or recall my expressions[,] it is my duty to correct my errors if any there be[,] and I am at all times willing to do so[,] those that can be recalled and those that cannot[,] let

³⁵ Abbie to Joseph, 20 March 1872, Griffin 249-50.

³⁶ Abbie to Joseph, 25 January 1872, Griffin 229.

them be buried[.] its useless to recall past scenes it only serves to increase our uneasyness ten fold.³⁷

Lizzie took upon herself the role of peace-keeper by trying to avoid further argument. By contrast Abbie was more assertive in taking the initiative and exercising her moral prerogative as a nineteenth-century woman to lecture her husband about his tendency to swear:

You spoke of going to meeting. I am very glad you are getting so pious. Hope you will leave off swearing before I see you again, but then I could put up with that if I could just have the privilege of seeing you.³⁸

I am afraid you are getting so you swear pretty bad aren't you? Don't, if you can possibly help it, will you, for it sounds worse in you in my mind than it does in anyone else.³⁹

While at sea with Abbie, Joseph once wrote one of his brothers that Abbie was inclined to be "pretty cheeky." She was simply exercising her moral role, using it as a means of correcting her husband's behavior as he had openly criticized hers.

Harriet Gardner, too, exercised her female moral prerogative and subtly encouraged her husband to embrace religion by recounting a dream she had:

I dreamed a while ago of seeing a young man that has been on board of the Washington and I thought

³⁷ Lizzie to Abner Howe, 2 October 1854, Howe's Correspondence, Hammer Family Papers, Schlessinger Library of Women's History, Cambridge, MA.

³⁸ Abbie to Joseph, 5 November 1871, Griffin 203.

³⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 10 January 1872, Griffin 222.

he hold me that you were a very precious good man that you enjoyed religion the right way. Oh my Dear Husband is not this so I trust it is. O how delightful. Shall we enjoy ourselves if this be the case.⁴⁰

Harriet thus sought to influence her husband's behavior without openly criticizing it.

Joseph was aware that his training in masculine pursuits had given him different interests in life which Abbie did not share:

...There are many things that interest me and that I like to talk about that you do not care to hear mentioned. But for all that, no man ever lived who liked his home better than I do, or hates to leave it more when I have leisure to lie back and read, and admire what I like so well.⁴¹

When Joseph stopped off in the port of Ipswich, Massachusetts, he visited a family whom he described as not only unpretentious like his own people downeast, but also liberal with their cider. Ridiculing his wife's temperance, he added: "Just think of the position you would have been put in if you had been offered cider away from home. Anyhow, I should have been awfully ashamed if I had had to refuse it because I belonged to a teetotal society."⁴² As it turned out, Abbie admitted casually in letters to Joseph that she had privately forsaken her teetotaling beliefs several times when she was under stress. She mentioned how she had

⁴⁰ Harriet Gardner to Jared, October 14, 1842.

⁴¹ Joseph (from prison) to Abbie, 1 May 1871, Griffin 157.

⁴² Joseph to Abbie, 16 November 1867, Griffin 15.

imbibed spirits while aboard the bark Lorena in Sagua Harbor and again when left alone at home in the winter with two small children.

Abbie, on her first voyage aboard her husband's vessel, knew little about shipboard etiquette. This was highlighted by an incident that took place while Joseph was imprisoned in Cuba. He reprimanded her for her behavior: "...not wishing to hurt your feelings in the least, but wanting to know the why and wherefore, etc., and wanting to impress on your mind the fact that folks living in glass houses must not throw stones."⁴³ This reprimand referred to a visit Captains Hall and Norris made aboard the schooner where Abbie and Guy were staying. They went aboard expressly to see how Abbie was getting along and to ask if there was anything they could do. It was the same day she had first visited her husband in prison, and she failed to make an appearance. In addition they were treated inhospitably by the captain of the schooner, who failed to introduce them to his wife or invite them for supper. The captains were indignant at the reception they got, especially after they had tried to free Joseph from prison. Joseph explained to Abbie that they were obligated to strangers for favors they could not do without, and these favors must be returned with hospitality and kindness: "I explained the matter by saying you had a severe headache when you were up to see me, but

⁴³ Joseph to Abbie, 2 May 1871, Griffin 158.

their receiving no excuses naturally left the impression they had got into a den of bears, as you were the most unladylike person they ever called on."⁴⁴

This was harsh criticism of Abbie who had been brought up in a provincial Maine town by simple folks. She was not worldly, well-educated or aware of the proper etiquette expected of a captain's wife. Her lack of etiquette would have been considered "unladylike" by more sophisticated captain's wives from cosmopolitan port cities further south. Perhaps, too, she was unaware that her behavior was a reflection upon her husband and that the captains might spread the news of her inhospitality: "I don't feel as if I can afford to have my wife's name go round among the fleet in such a manner, as they told me they had mentioned the fact to several captains...." Patronizingly Joseph reprimanded Abbie as though she was his ill-bred daughter:

...whatever you do, don't be so prudish as to appear like a bear or an ill-bred school girl when a captain, out of kindness and respect to me, comes to see you. Either you must be stark staring mad or very sick to act as you did, for it does not sound any more like your actions than my actions do like a London fish fag's.⁴⁵

Joseph, because of his exposure to the outside world, commerce, trade, and foreign lands was better equipped to deal with more complex social situations. Often his expectations of Abbie matched what he expected of himself, and this was

⁴⁴ Joseph to Abbie, 2 May 1871, Griffin 160.

⁴⁵ Joseph to Abbie, 2 May 1871, Griffin 160.

unrealistic in view of her socialization and lack of exposure to the world. In her next letter, sent before she received this reprimand from her husband, she wrote: "I was quite sick that night after I got home from Sagua." It must have been stressful for her to see her husband in prison, for she did not know when he would be released, and she realized that she was pregnant far from home and family support.

Differing Conceptions of Home and Marital Bliss

Men who were away for long periods of time often idealized the home and wife they left behind. Joseph frequently indulged in idealistic imaginings of home, but he was also fully aware that certain character traits bred into men could easily interfere with marital bliss. From prison he wrote Abbie a long letter quoting poetry which he was fond of and expressing his fervent idealism:

We have in many other things misunderstood each other, but in the future let us remember the lines by Robert Burns and act up to them that:

This world sa'far as I understand
Is an enchanted fairyland,
Where pleasure is the magic wand
Which wielded right
Makes hours, like minutes hand in hand,
Glance by firelight.

These lines I think are worth their weight in gold, and I often think of them, but am doubtful if you ever remember of my repeating them, as you are not of a very poetical turn of mind. However

that does not alter the beauty of the verse which I know you can understand and appreciate too.

Joseph continued to idealize their marriage as if it was still in the courtship stage, but he did realize that his own male values of pride and ambition could very well cast a shadow upon his romantic dream:

If we could only live in such a castle as I can see now in my mind's eye, we would be the happiest couple alive, but when pride, ambition, a bad temper, laziness, and folly are grown into me through skin, bone, and all, 'Tis na' wonder the old devil is na' better than other folks," as the old Scotch woman said of her neighbor. But I think one had better be proud and ambitious, than be a thing with two legs, a goose's head, and a hen's heart, so of two evils I choose the least.⁴⁶

Maritime couples relied upon an ideal of what a wife and husband should be to sustain their relationships over long separations. Norling, in her study of Samuel Tripp Bailey's whaling journal of the 1850s, finds that he had confused the memories of his real wife Mary Ann with his vision of an ideal Victorian wife. This confusion created problems when he and his wife were reunited and he discovered to his dismay that home and Mary Ann were not quite as he had remembered. "He wrote bitterly, 'Folks little know...on shore the weary hours we Sailors have to pass' and complained that at home he could not be an honest man 'without being scolded at.' A few days later, he observed darkly, 'as for the joys of domestic life, I do not pine for them as

⁴⁶ Joseph to Abbie, 2 May 1871, Griffin 157-8.

I once did, for I find that they to[o] have their bitter draughts to be swallowed'."⁴⁷

For Abbie home was not the refuge that it was for Joseph, but instead a prison where she was closely confined bringing up children alone. Joseph, too, often felt isolated in his role of authority as captain aboard ship, where the masculine ethic ruled male behavior. Each had to find different strategies for coping with loneliness and isolation. Sharing these painful feelings through their correspondence gave both Abbie and Joseph great solace and helped to reinforce their love and commitment. The Griffins were committed enough to each other to sustain a loving intimacy and interdependence. Most important, they communicated honestly and promptly their complaints about one another's behavior. Joseph admitted that he had shortcomings which were obstacles to a happy marriage.

The problems generated by extreme isolation within separate spheres were felt by Sarah and Charles Barry as well. They began having their difficulties with one another after Sarah gave birth to her second son in February of 1850. When Charles visited at home for three weeks that following summer, he had a wonderful time with his four-year-old son Willie. The baby was too small for him to appreciate, but he clumsily tried to do what he could to

⁴⁷ Lisa Norling, "'How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs': Mariners' Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity in New England, 1790-1880," The New England Quarterly LXV (1992): 435.

help Sarah care for him. However, during this three-week period Charles and Sarah's relationship was not as blissfully tranquil as it had previously been. Having married late in life, Charles was set in his ways and accustomed to being master of his ocean-going domain, where he "ran a tight ship." Sarah, on the other hand, was used to the more unsystematic, more flexible routine of a large family where all did as they pleased, when they pleased. Nevertheless, she tried to run the house as Charles wished while he was at home. Though they had been married for five years, Charles had been away so much of that time that the couple hardly had time to adjust to one another and negotiate their differences. Karen Lystra notes that in male\ female exchanges, women were usually silenced when they commented upon the masculine role. In contrast, "middle-class men rather freely dissected the female role in exchanges with women, almost as if they saw a male prerogative in such a debate."⁴⁸ Some husbands took the same prerogative, even when far away at sea, to write their wives instructions about handling domestic matters and bringing up the children.

Exactly what happened between Sarah and Charles can only be imagined, but apparently Sarah begged Charles not to go to sea again. He could not, or would not, grant her this request because he felt, like Joseph Griffin, that he had

⁴⁸ Lystra 148-149.

not yet saved enough money to remain ashore. In a letter to Sarah after he had left Kennebunk, Charles dreamed about being home permanently and helping her out with the family:

If I could only be at home, I think we would be as happy as a snug family could be. We should then be rid of these long separations and become, all of us, assimilated to each other. You would be free from so many cares and troubles, for I would put them upon my own shoulders and you would not have to bear them all. Yes, dearest, I would do all I could to make everything at home very happy. It would be my aim to accomplish that.⁴⁹

One wonders whether Charles, if he remained at home, would be able to shed his authoritarian way of doing things and allow Sarah to run the household in her accustomed manner. He expressed concern that he had left her feeling unhappy and uncertain of his enduring love for her. A marriage which was based upon romantic love caused women, in particular, to fear that love would fade and disappear after the courtship was over, leaving them emotionally alone and vulnerable:

It almost brought the tears, my love, to see you give way to imaginary dreams about the time that will come when I shall care nothing about you and do not love you, or that you do not suit me, and so forth. It makes me feel unpleasant to have you indulge in any such thoughts, even though they have no foundation in reality. I know they cause you to feel unhappy. You should not give way to thoughts which have no reality, for I do love you, my dear Sarah, more than you can imagine. If you could, you would not indulge in such reveries.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Charles Barry to Sarah, September 1850, Borden 172.

⁵⁰ Charles Barry to Sarah, September 1850, Borden 172.

In addition, the long separation caused many women to feel uncertain of their husbands' satisfaction and love for them, especially since these feelings could not be physically reinforced from a distance.

Seafaring husbands often expressed dissatisfaction at home, partly as an outlet for the stress they had to endure aboard ship and trading in foreign ports. Wives often took their husbands' discontent, restlessness and criticism personally and felt insecure about their continuing love. Charles expressed his willingness to compromise and adjust to his wife's ways and did his best to allay Sarah's fears and uncertainties about his feelings toward her. He wrote her that he would try to accommodate to her way of living and would stay home longer next time:

...You must not think, dear Sarah, that you do not suit me, or that I am too particular, for I assure you that I am far from feeling any dissatisfaction. I do not intend to be particular, for I can accommodate myself to any kind of living. Could I be at home long enough at a time, we would soon fall into each other's ways. Were I at home permanently, I should accommodate myself to your ways, in this respect. But I am away so much that my habits of living are formed differently, that I cannot change them all at once, in the course of two or three weeks.⁵¹

Writing that he would try not to hurt her feelings again, he asked her "to endeavor not to be too sensitive, for those who have too thin a skin are apt to get smarted,

⁵¹ Charles Barry to Sarah, September 1850, Borden 172

continually."⁵² Sarah seemed to be more sensitive than Abbie and did not possess her "cheekiness" in countering her husband's criticisms. Couples had to arrive at a compromise as to what constituted permissible behavior on the part of their mates. Husbands had to learn to control their aggressive criticism and wives had to learn to speak up for themselves.

Loneliness and the Violation of Separate Spheres

Joseph felt so lonely aboard ship that he even suggested, more as a matter of speaking than a real intention, that he would rather be home performing his wife's role:

...I am so everlasting lonesome I would rather tend out a sick child than sit and wink alone like a sick goose on a mud puddle.⁵³

Abbie wrote Joseph in no uncertain terms that loneliness was no easier for her than it was for him, but that it did not prevent her from doing her household tasks:

You spoke of my not having time to think of you because I had so much to do. Don't think you spend any more time thinking of me than I do of you. One can think and work too you know, but as to lieing awake nights, I do not...I have got nicely settled keeping house, but I don't have such a bully time as you think....⁵⁴

⁵² Charles Barry to Sarah, September 1850, Borden 172.

⁵³ Joseph to Abbie, 3 October 1869, Griffin 47-8.

⁵⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 18 October 1871, Griffin 197.

Abbie made it clear that housekeeping and mothering were no easy tasks, but ones which she must get on with as best she could.

Joseph admitted that his idleness aboard ship did not help to abate his loneliness: "I am feeling more and more lonesome every day that passes, and idleness is a poor help for such a malady, and I am not inclined to work, feeling neither inclination nor muscle for it."⁵⁵ He had much idle time to indulge in lonely feelings, as did Rachel Putnam and Sarah Trask, who waited ashore. Joseph's loneliness, like theirs, was rooted in an emotional dependency caused by a lack of intimacy with others and little enthusiasm for their daily tasks. Rachel expected and wanted more intimacy from Horace to fill up the vacuum in her life; Joseph, too, expected Abbie's company and love to the exclusion of others.

Abbie was unwilling to relinquish her independent spirit, perhaps partly because her children constantly depended upon her. She did not experience loneliness as female dependency, but as a sign of her love and longing for intimacy with her husband. For the woman left behind, independence was more dearly won than for the man whose independence (in his work and in his social position) was his birth right. Because it was necessary for Joseph to maintain his male prerogative from a distance, he was the

⁵⁵ Joseph to Abbie, 3 October 1864, Griffin 47.

more possessive and controlling of the two. Without the physical presence of his wife and children, his male authority over the family became more abstract. Some husbands, perhaps fearful that they would lose control at home, continued to exert their influence on the female sphere by freely giving advice on household and childrearing matters.

Martin Waterman was intensely concerned about the moral formation of the mind of his newly born first child and advised his wife Joan:

I hope you will pay particular attention to the formation of her infant mind, and habits, and endeavour by every means in your power to form them to virtues, as you cannot be ignorant, that a great part of the happiness or misery of her future life will depend on the seeds of virtue or vice that are sown in infancy.

Joan replied, "I shall take all the pains with her that lays in my power as far as I am capable of doing everything for her good." Martin was then careful to explain that he was not attempting to usurp his wife's role as mother, who in keeping with separate spheres was more important than the father in childrearing. "the reason why I have written so much about her was occasioned by my anxiety for her welfare, and not from any want of confidence in your capability... such advice proceeds from my love to her and yourself." At the same time Martin sharply divided his responsibilities from his wife's in commenting: "my own industry, and your

prudence."⁵⁶ His preoccupation with his children's welfare came from his love for his family, but was also an attempt to maintain influence over the domestic sphere. This was an important motivation for his work at sea.

David Nichols wrote his wife that she must pay the music teacher for his daughter Clara's vocal lessons, for he did not want his daughters taught "for Charity's sake." He was concerned that Clara, in her love for music, might form an attachment to one of her professors, who he felt were generally insincere and made "undesirable husbands." Knowing men as he did, Captain Nichols felt it was his duty to influence his daughter's choice of a mate, insisting that:

Musical characters or those who depend upon it for a profession, and actors, I never wish to see my daughters connected with, in a matronial sense[.] There may be true and faithful husbands among them, but they are exceptions, and mostly figure in novels. As a rule they are licentious and untrustworthy, and the more noted, the worse their private character[.] Of course I refer to the male sex exclusively.⁵⁷

Absent fathers seemed to be particularly possessive of their daughters and worried about their involvement with young men. Captain Mitchell, after his wife's death, wrote his daughters concerning the youngest:

Next comes the Baby, Flo....I am very sorry she has got to corresponding with young gentlemen already--time enough for that after she finishes

⁵⁶ Martin Waterman to Joan, 11 May 1821, 21 July 1821, 1 July 1826, qtd. in Norling, "Mariners Wives," 430-431.

⁵⁷ David Nichols to his wife, 18 September 187?, Penobscot Maritime Museum, Searsport, Maine.

her studies. Besides it's hardly proper or becoming for a young girl to allow herself to become strongly attached to a young man she knows so little about, and we know nothing.... She is too bright and happy to be lost to us. Besides we want her ourselves for many a long year yet to give us joy and comfort at home.⁵⁸

Husbands' letters reflect the impact of the accepted ideology of separate spheres upon men as well as women. Karen Lystra observes that "men lived with one foot in each camp," actively moving between the public and the private spheres. While women had little influence and almost no opportunity in the public sphere where their husbands dominated.⁵⁹ However, women did find ways to exceed the narrow boundaries of their roles and exert influence on their husbands and the terms of their marriages.

Loneliness and Sentimentality Define Commitment

Feelings of sentimentality helped Joseph reinforce his love for his wife and strengthen his marriage under severe deprivation and hardship. In his letters to Abbie, he often looked back sentimentally upon their courtship and marriage. Abbie's letters, on the other hand, were nearly void of sentimentality. Perhaps this was because, as Joseph once wrote her, she did not possess a "poetical turn of mind."

⁵⁸ Capt. Josiah Mitchell to his daughters, 1873, Letters of Captain Josiah Angier Mitchell, the private collection of Judith Ann Read Elfring, Yarmouth, Maine.

⁵⁹ Lystra 155.

Abbie made it very clear that she missed her husband's company and was outspoken about her needs, but she was never nostalgic about the past. She was a very practical woman who was concerned about being able to cope with her daily activities and childcare as smoothly as possible, and still maintain a certain amount of freedom of choice.

Like many of the women left at home, Joseph often expressed severe loneliness and wished that Abbie and little Guy could accompany him on his voyages. He wrote her from Newport, Rhode Island how lonely and worried he was being separated from his family in port as well as at sea:

I am very lonesome indeed, much more than I thought I should be or could be, for I feel anxious about Guy and have also a slight touch of the blues. I am also a little cross, sour, sulky, and believe I have had a touch of every uncomfortable feeling I ever was cursed with, besides being blessed with a constant cold... Therefore, I will have you understand I don't mean to go to sea alone when conditions are right, so long as there is any virtue in moral suasion and fair promises...I want you where I can look at you. A pleasant face is the best medicine I know of for me, especially for my present disorders providing they sleep in the same straw.⁶⁰

Joseph, in his colorful manner expressed a loneliness as severe as any experienced by a stereotypically lonely, waiting wife:

If you and Guy were here and well in limb and pizzle, I would care little which way we went, but as circumstances now are, I would rather go toward home, hoping by the time we were ready for sea again that Guy would be in good condition to try another trip....I have finally come to the

⁶⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 7 September 1869, Griffin 37-8.

conclusion I had rather sleep three in a bed than sleep alone so long....Do not think I will allow such a thing as your staying at home so long as there is the slightest prospect of coaxing you at sea, for I am just sick enough to be cross and to need a cheerful wife to calm the troubled waters, and yet well enough to be thankful for such agreeable company. I hope that you and Father Time may make a better husband of me if not a better man... I expect you to try sea air again for your health, for I am so everlasting lonesome I would rather tend out a sick child than sit and wink alone like a sick goose on a mud puddle.⁶¹

Abbie, like Joseph, often expressed her own loneliness as a reason why they must prepare to sail together as a family. To the great disappointment of both, the family voyage often was postponed because of Guy's illnesses and, later, Abbie's second pregnancy. In contrast to Joseph's eloquent verbosity, Abbie noted simply and practically that she was unable to accompany him:

I suppose you are as lonesome as I am, but misery likes company you know. I thought when you went away I would not wait until December, but I find I have had to. I think, though, that it is better for you to go alone, as you seem to fat on it.⁶²

Although Joseph wrote Abbie that he wanted "a young wife as I am so nervous," he had to settle for the company of a "great shaggy Newfoundland dog," that he had quite a struggle trying to bathe.

Captain Barry described the pain he felt on leaving home, especially after his disagreements with Sarah, but he felt that once aboard ship he must control his homesick

⁶¹ Joseph to Abbie, 3 October 1869, Griffin 47-8.

⁶² Abbie to Joseph, 18 December 1869, Griffin 80.

feelings:

It seems an age, dearest, since I left you and I can assure you that I left home with a heavy, heavy heart. While seated in the cars going up to Boston, I found my thoughts continually resting upon home, dear home, my eyes filling with unbidden tears. I felt aware that every moment was increasing the distance which separated us. I have felt somewhat homesick, but this is a feeling that it will not do for a sailor to give way to, and I must make the best of what I cannot avoid.⁶³

Evenings aboard ship were a lonely time for Captain Barry, especially knowing that he would be separated a year from the wife he loved so much:

After dinner, my love, I read a little and, as I hardly knew what to do, I followed my daily practice and took a look at my dear little wife's miniature, kissed a lock of her hair which is neatly braided and enclosed in a paper with a lock of little Willie's. You know, dearest Sarah, that I think of you much oftener than I write, for you are the dearest treasure of my heart. I think of you and love you with my whole soul. Yes, my love, dearly, dearly do I love you. In less than two more months, I hope that I shall be comfortably seated at your side, chatting, and dancing our little boy upon my knee. The cold winter without will be forgotten in the warm happiness within.⁶⁴

Lacking the physical presence of his wife, Joseph Griffin filled the emptiness by indulging in nostalgia about the past and their courting days. "...I feel as if I would like to step back just three years and have one of our real old courting evenings over again, but still I would want just a

⁶³ Charles Barry to Sarah, 17 September 1850, Borden 173.

⁶⁴ Charles Barry to Sarah, 6 November 1848, Borden 145.

little peek at Guy to begin with.⁶⁵ In reflecting back on his courting days, Joseph shared in a letter to Abbie just how depressed he had been before they had met. He had seriously considered giving up going to sea altogether.

Captain Barry expressed nostalgia for the spot on his ship where he and Sarah had been together before he sailed:

There is one spot on the ship that will ever be sacred to me. It is where you jumped on the rail to that vessel pass which had just arrived from the sea. I shall always look upon that spot as I walk upon the deck at twilight and think of you.⁶⁶

Captain Mitchel thought nostalgically of his childhood and family in Yarmouth, Maine: "O How I too should like to be with you just to pass one fortnight in the pleasant summer season among the friends and haunts of my early days."⁶⁷

Years away from home on a whaler caused Captain Jared Gardner to confess his loneliness and homesickness in his letters to his wife: "Oh how happy I should be to see you all well and smart on that dear little Isle of Nantucket may that day soon reel round...."⁶⁸ His mother being very sick, he knew full well that he might never see her alive again. The duty fell upon his wife Harriet to send him the sad news

⁶⁵ Joseph to Abbie, 27 November 1869, Griffin 64.

⁶⁶ Charles Barry's journal for Sarah, 14 March 1848, Borden 159.

⁶⁷ Josiah Mitchell to his wife, about 1850.

⁶⁸ Captain Jared Gardner to Harriet, June 1841.

of three deaths in the family. Not surprisingly, her own feelings of loneliness, isolation and loss were enhanced:

Oh my Dear Husband it falls to my lot again to write you that our dear Mother Gardner is no more in this world of sickness and pain and now you see that God has seen fit in his tender mercy to call your Father and Mother and Sister Charlotte ['s] little boy -- all in three Months --you must think I have had many lonesome hours -- Oh I have felt if I could have you here to leane on how happy should I have been even in Sorrow. ⁶⁹

Dreams, often related by both husbands and wives, were important in bringing a couple together spiritually. These were so powerful that couples often felt, immediately afterwards, that they were physically together as well. While in Sagua prison, Joseph wrote Abbie about an "excellent dream" he had the previous night of sleeping with her in their bunk aboard the ship. He explicitly described their closely entwined position as similar to how they use to lie on cold winter nights when they were first married:

I have had many and various dreams, but none ever gave me such a delightful sensation of perfect rest and serene satisfaction as that. I almost thought we were transported to the seventh heaven and enjoying the truest and purest bliss possible for a couple to enjoy...I have felt better all the morning for it, and hope before long to realize my dream, for I feel this morning as if I would sell out everything for a beggar's commission and the privilege of roosting with you the remainder of my existence.⁷⁰

Joseph's dream of Abbie helped divert his mind from the frightful circumstances of his imprisonment. Not only was

⁶⁹ Harriet Gardner to Jared, October 14, 1842.

⁷⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 2 May 1871, Griffin 155-156.

he exposed to inmates with smallpox; he also had little to eat, nothing to read, and no clean clothes. In addition he worried about his wife's pregnancy, which would prevent her from sailing with him on his next voyage:

Nothing to read--no means of killing time what ever. And the account you send of yourself is worse than all the rest. If I have got to go to sea and leave you at home, it is harder than all the rest. It will be an everlasting prison, and worse and more of it.⁷¹

Homesick and alone aboard the bark Lorena in Sagua harbor, Abbie, too, dreamed of their being together again: "I dreamed of seeing you last night. I think I feel better this morning. I dreamed of being home last night too. How I wish we were both there!"⁷² Unlike Joseph's nostalgia for the past and dreams of physical reunion, another dream of Abbie's reflected more realistic anxieties about the future. Like Rachel Putnam and Lydia Almy, her worst fears made their appearance in her dreams. The winter Abbie was alone in Stockton with two small children she wrote Joseph about a dream she had of him which was so realistic that it had caused her much anxiety:

I dreamed of you so plain last night, I thought I should hear from you today. I dreamed of sitting in your lap, and you were holding my hands. I was so sure you were with me I woke up out of a sound sleep. When I woke, it seemed as though you had hold of my hands, as many as five minutes, and I

⁷¹ Joseph to Abbie, 12 April 1871, Griffin, 137.

⁷² Abbie to Joseph, 19 April 1871, Griffin 144.

could feel your arms round me. It frightened me, for I didn't know but that you were dead.⁷³

Joseph's uncle, Henry Staples, who wrote him often, mentioned Abbie's dreams with concern, particularly for his investment: "Abbie has had all kinds of hobgoblin dreams about you for the last 10 days. Hope you met with no accident with your old sails, as sails are money."⁷⁴ Abbie's anxious concern about her husband's welfare was indeed real for she and her children depended upon it.

Abbie's feelings of loneliness differed from Joseph's in that she expressed them as a longing for community and intimacy; he expressed more emotional dependency upon his family. Also, because she was financially dependent upon Joseph, Abbie felt particularly vulnerable alone at home with two children to nurture. She missed her husband's company and was particularly overcome by feelings of loneliness when she was alone without contact with close family members or friends: "Yesterday was Christmas, and a very lonesome one for me. I was alone all the afternoon and evening till eleven o'clock."⁷⁵ Although motherhood gave these women much comfort while their husbands were at sea, children did not take the place of a husband. In one of

⁷³ Abbie to Joseph, 29 December 1871, Griffin 217.

⁷⁴ Henry Staples to Joseph, 12 January 1872, Griffin 224.

⁷⁵ Abbie to Joseph, 26 December 1871, Griffin 216.

Abbie's last letters, we can sense her desperate longings for her husband's presence:

I felt lonesome all day yesterday. I feel real anxious to hear what kind of a passing you had. It doesn't seem as though I can wait for you to get home, I want to see you so bad. I want to see you awfully. I want you to get home just as quick as you can, if you come into the river.⁷⁶

You don't know how I miss you. Bet I have wished you here much as once since you left home. I don't know how I am going to stay at home without you if you go to California, for the days are weeks, and the weeks are months. Seems as though the time never seemed so long...

The most difficult trial for these women was being shut up in the house day after day because of severe winter weather or children to care for. They needed friends or relatives of their own generation to talk to and share activities with. Women felt most isolated when they had no one to chat with about what was going on in the community. Abbie complained to Joseph, "As to news, you need not expect any of that from me, for I don't go out of the nursery, so of course, I don't hear any."⁷⁷ Lizzie Howe wrote her husband Abner about being shut up at home with a baby and critical in-laws during a dreary Cape Cod winter:

...for I am sad and very lonely and time never appeared to pass so slowly as it does now and how to pass this long dreary winter I know not if I could only hear from you oftener it would be cheering but to be shut up so it were from all

⁷⁶ Abbie to Joseph, 5 June 1872, Griffin 260.

⁷⁷ Abbie to Joseph, 2 September 1869, Griffin 36.

that makes life desirable is more than I am able to bear at all time.⁷⁸

Lizzie, being British, was looked upon as a stranger by her clannish Cape Cod in-laws with whom she boarded. In contrast, Abbie was fortunate to be on good terms and received strong support from her in-laws.

Women felt particularly lonely after their husband had been home awhile and then departed again. Carlista Stover prayed when her husband left home: "O God, keep us all, husband on the sea + baby and mother at home so lonely."⁷⁹ Abbie expressed her feelings after Joseph left again:

Everything is just as pleasant at home as it can be, but it is not like my dear good husband....I would give all the world to be with you today. I feel as though you were lonesome, too.⁸⁰

No sooner had a couple readjusted to one another and revived their intimacy then they must again part. Getting used to separations after a reunion was one of the most difficult aspects of these marriages. Both partners must somehow lose themselves in their necessary, everyday duties to compensate for this severe emotional loss.

Children often reminded mothers of their absent fathers whom they missed as well. They asked their mothers about their fathers and when they would be coming home. Like

⁷⁸ Lizzie Howe to her husband, 2 October 1854.

⁷⁹ Carlista Stover Diary, August 19, 1877, G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Connecticut.

⁸⁰ Abbie to Joseph, 25 June 1871, Griffin 188.

other sea wives, Abbie used the child and her motherly influence as a lure to coax the father to come home:

The old saying is that when a child begins to call his father that it is a sign he is coming home. I don't think that is any sign at all, for Guy has called for Papa for the last fortnight! He was calling you this morning. I asked him if he wanted you to come, and he said, yes. I asked him if he wanted you to get into bed with him, and he said, no, very quickly. He is getting so he says quite a number of words now, but is awfully cross.

Guy says he wishes Papa would come home. He wants to see him and let him kiss his little darling sister. He says she would have to sleep with me, and he would sleep with you....⁸¹

Abbie often used Guy's demands to reflect her own wishes:

Guy said this morning he wished his Papa would come home. He thinks it is too bad you don't. I think it is a mean shame you can't make enough to come home to see your family.⁸²

He says he does wish his papa would stay at home all the time; I wish so too. I know I shall be a happy woman if ever you do.⁸³

Again Abbie used her female role, this time as a mother, in an attempt to influence her husband to come home.

Visiting relatives did not seem to abate Abbie's loneliness as it did other women's. While visiting her sister's family in Portland, she felt lonely and had little in common with city folks. She wrote Joseph that she was homesick for her downeast village and their family network:

⁸¹ Abbie to Joseph, 10 January 1872, Griffin 220-222.

⁸² Abbie to Joseph, 17 January 1872, Griffin 225.

⁸³ Abbie to Joseph, 16 April 1872, Griffin 252.

I am just as homesick as I can be. Have wished myself home much as once since I have been here; you had better believe it. If I thought you would not get here for a week, I would go home this very night. I don't think much of going visiting and staying a fortnight or three weeks myself, especially in the city,....⁸⁴

Although she was lonely in Portland, she wrote Joseph that it would be better if he sailed to the West Indies without her this time. Little Guy constantly called for his papa, became cross and fought with her sister's children, who wouldn't let him have anything. Abbie was critical of the "vulgarity" she heard from her sister's family and was anxious to be home again. Instead of enjoying a break from her household chores, she had to tend her sick sister and help look after her children as well as Guy.

Abbie enjoyed going to sea with Joseph. Her first voyage to Cuba turned out to be an unfortunate one when she and Joseph were unexpectedly separated by his arrest. During Joseph's imprisonment, Abbie and Joseph exchanged many letters between ship and prison where both felt trapped and isolated. Alone aboard a strange vessel, she experienced what it had been like for her husband at sea without the company and support of family and community:

You asked me if I had much company. I don't have any at all, nor go anywhere. I see a little and read a little, what I can find to read, so you see I have to get along about the same as you do....⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 30 November 1869, Griffin 67.

⁸⁵ Abbie to Joseph, 21 April 1871, Griffin 147.

Because Abbie had little to do aboard a strange ship in Sagua harbor, she wrote Joseph longer letters than usual. She noted that she saw little company, only Mrs. Ames (the wife of the captain of the Lorena) and very few men. This situation gave her, perhaps, an opportunity to feel the kind of loneliness her husband had experienced when he was alone in port just waiting for things to happen.

Abbie's first experience abroad was not a positive one, nor did she gain any understanding of a foreign culture and its people: "I must say I hate everyone on this island and never want to come here again just as long as I live. What keeps me away from you is that horrid smallpox." Confined to a strange vessel, pregnant with no company and little to occupy her time, Abbie was not prepared to deal with her husband's imprisonment. She did not perceive it to be her place to take the initiative to learn Spanish in order to help negotiate her husband's release. This she left up to her husband: "Gus said you have a Spanish grammar. How do you get along learning Spanish? I hope you will learn enough so you can give them back as good as they send."⁸⁶ The only compensation for their ordeal was a hope, which Joseph had confided to her, that they might make some money from a lawsuit out of this whole affair.

⁸⁶ Abbie to Joseph, 21 April 1871, Griffin 147.

Maintaining Marital Fidelity

Will betake myself to my humble but virtuous couch, hoping for a fat bedfellow and a full purse.⁸⁷

In spite of the temptations of available women in port towns, Joseph decided to remain a faithful husband. However, several times he enjoyed making Abbie jealous although she was careful not to overreact. Trying to stir up Abbie's emotions, Joseph wrote her about the temptations of women and drink in the port town of Ipswich. Visiting a crew member's home, he found the daughter to be "very pretty, quite lively, and real agreeable, and a person endowed with more practical common sense than most young ladies of her standing in society...."⁸⁸ Abbie understood that he had tried to make her jealous by talking about the pretty girls in Ipswich, but she was not too concerned or perturbed. However, five years later she reminded him of his former girlfriend, Olive Colcord. Her attempt to hide her jealousy hinted at a desire that Joseph reassure her that he no longer had any feelings for Olive:

I think it is rather a bad thing for Olive to be in New York while you are sailing out of there, but don't think it will cause me many sleepless nights. What do you think about it? I expect the

⁸⁷ Joseph to Abbie, 29 September 1869, Griffin 47.

⁸⁸ Joseph to Abbie, 16 November 1867, Griffin 15.

first thing I shall know you and she will be getting up a flirtation.⁸⁹

Another time Joseph wrote how he had to stay off the streets of Bridgeport, Connecticut as there were too many pretty girls there. He assured Abbie of his faithfulness: "I had rather have one kindly smile of modest worth than the admiration of all the brightest beauties in the state."⁹⁰

Writing about the women of Marblehead, he revealed that the "fishwives" of that notorious Massachusetts fishing port (discussed in Chapter II) had retained some of their earlier reputation.

I presume you know that Marblehead is noted for its fish, shoes, and virgins. At any rate I saw plenty of the latter kind stirring while there, and judging by the smooth and smiling faces they carried, they knew how much they were worth but cared more how much they were prized, as there are three women to every two men. The virgins tax their wits, and sometimes their something else to please and be pleased. But were all the men in Marblehead organized like me, the women could be more easily taken care of than the children.⁹¹

Joseph thought of himself as having a special way with woman, which he sometimes exhibited to make Abbie jealous. He appeared to be a faithful husband, but he tried to evoke feelings of jealousy in his wife so as to be reassured that she cared. Abbie, however, counteracted his attempts to make her jealous or too dependent by simply acting more

⁸⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 15 August 1872, Griffin 264.

⁹⁰ Joseph to Abbie, 27 November 1869, Griffin 64.

⁹¹ Joseph to Abbie, 29 September 1869, Griffin 46-7.

assertive and independent. Once she went to stay with his Aunt Miranda, who was in poor health, instead of boarding with George and Hittie as her husband had expected. He acknowledged Abbie's independence and outspokenness in a letter he wrote her: "You boarded with George and Hittie just about as much as I expected all of the time, and was no wise bashful in saying so too."⁹²

Sarah Pillsbury, another Maine coastal woman, did not exhibit Abbie's independence in visiting and traveling where she pleased. She wrote her fiance at sea in 1850 that she would not travel to Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard to visit friends without her father's and his consent. She added that she was anxious to marry so as not to trouble others. Eventually she did make the trip with a friend Adelia and wrote: "if I should ever become the wife of a sailor I should like to go to sea very much for when we are near those we love, we can endure any hardships whatever."⁹³

Sarah conformed more closely to the Victorian ideal by framing herself as a troublesome victim who must first and foremost be the devoted, obedient wife. Possibly she was disguising a desire for freedom and adventure by saying she would like to go to sea to be near the one she loved. It would not have been acceptable for a nineteenth-century wife

⁹² Joseph to Abbie, 8 August 1868, Griffin 20.

⁹³ Sarah J. Pillsbury to John F. Harden, 1849-1851, Maine Maritime Museum, Bath, Maine.

simply to state that she wanted to travel aboard ship for her own pleasure and self-development.

Dorothea Balano's husband Fred frequently tried to make his wife jealous by referring to his popularity with the women. A standing joke among his shipmates was that he thought of naming a launch the After You "so that each of his girls could be told that the boat would be named "after you."⁹⁴ Dorothea saw through her husband's bravado and testing it, she told him he should feel free to associate with other women: "Basically he's just a healthy stallion and can't get enough," she admitted. His hypocrisy was what annoyed her the most: "but when he plays Sunday School it revolts me 'tis hard not to show it, although I must not let him know that I see too far through him. He must feel superior. And so the 'wanton wiles'."⁹⁵ Complaining about his lack of interest in the intellectual and artistic guests she had aboard ship in Rio de Janeiro, she commented: "...[he] feels at home only with the harlots and whores" and says "whores and sailors go together naturally like codfish with pork scraps; he likes to tell of scores of sailors who married whores and found they made the best of wives." Dorothea added, "I can understand that the girls might like

⁹⁴ Diary of Dorothea Balano, 4 January 1912, James W. Balano, ed., The Log of the Skipper's Wife (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1979) 88.

⁹⁵ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 13 January 1912, Balano 105-106.

a change from too much changing, but what I don't like is his harping on it."⁹⁶

Fred enjoyed teasing Dorothea, who refused to allow herself to feel insecure or jealous. Understanding of his motives, she freely revealed his secrets in her diary, which she planned to bequeath to her children:

I know that he once got Nellie in trouble and paid the malpractitioner. He has tripped over his lines many times in telling me of her when he was trying to get me feeling sexy. If he'd be a bit tender and loving, less abrupt, he might get somewhere. The brute doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell with me so long as he barges in and thinks with his genitals instead of his head. Imagine asking me to invite Betty [Fred's former fiance] for a trip!⁹⁷

An educated and liberated woman of the early twentieth century, Dorothea refused to romanticize intimate relations or keep sexual matters secret as did her Victorian predecessors.

So often confronted by the "shady ladies," Dorothea devised a philosophy of her own for dealing with the more sordid side of maritime life:

Always the specter walks before me, but now I'm learning how to handle it. If he [Fred] didn't lie so, first when bragging about his conquests to stimulate me into sexual activity, when he should

⁹⁶ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 15 February 1912, Balano 118-119.

⁹⁷ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 15 February 1912, Balano 119. After teaching in Puerto Rico, Dorothea sailed home serving as a chaperone for her friend Betty, whose fiance was the ship's captain. While Betty was seasick below deck, Dorothea and Fred became romantically involved and were married shortly thereafter.

realize that such braggadocio is cold water to me, and secondly, when telling me my acrobatics are lacking in comparison to others. It's so easy for a man to lie to his wife about such things, and it's so easy for a wife to be a fool and listen. I shall find ways of treating it as mere boyishness or a lack of Baptist righteousness or something else.

Well aware that her husband had been easily "stolen away" from her best friend, Dorothea refused to play the fool and remained constantly alert, for she realized that Fred was her "ticket" for seeing the world:

It's like the Kennebec logger who must jump across the river from ice cake to ice cake, always alert. Stay alert, my dear, and stay reasonably happy in the precious empire you have carved out for yourself.⁹⁸

Dorothea, like other maritime women, had to confront realistically a husband's love for his ship and the sea, often a stauncher rival than another woman: "...he's more in love with his good feelings of accomplishment, his ship and the sailing of it, than he is in love with anyone. I'm his audience, but I love to see him act."⁹⁹ Dorothea and Fred, although "oceans apart" in temperament and interests, complemented each other and negotiated their differences with humor and playfulness.

Lisa Norling raises the question whether or not prolonged separations fostered mistrust or marital infidelity. She found in her examination of New Bedford court records

⁹⁸ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 26 March 1912, Balano 129.

⁹⁹ Dorothea Balano's Diary, 7 January 1912, Balano, 103

that divorce was no more common among seafarers than land-based couples. She also notes that another literary scholar of whaler's journals and logbooks "found widespread silence on the topic of extramarital affairs...`it was a rare hint, much less any account, of such adventures, that ever reached home, least of all from a whaleman'."¹⁰⁰ Maritime writer A.B.D. Whipple believes husbands refrained from telling their wives about their sexual escapades to spare their feelings:

There were plenty of bawdy island stories going the rounds of taproom and eating club in the nineteenth century; but for their own good reasons the skippers and mates kept them out of the logs and chronicles of the day. The wives sitting out their empty years at home were having it hard enough; no point in torturing them, even with the truth. So there was little verification for most of the stories in any of the official or reliable records.¹⁰¹

It might be added that these mates and captains were dependent upon their wives to run their households and they were not willing to jeopardize their security by telling all. However, the spread of venereal disease throughout the Pacific islands is evidence enough of mariners' philandering.

Occasionally a woman even dared to tarry at a bar in a foreign port, as Abbie related in a letter addressed to

¹⁰⁰ Norling 26; see also Pamela Miller's unpublished annotated version of Samuel T. Braley's *Journal of the Arab*, 1849-1853, 46, Kendall Whaling Museum, Sharon, MA.

¹⁰¹ A.B.D. Whipple, *Yankee Whalers in the South Seas*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1945) 181.

Joseph in Sagua prison. While waiting for his release, she saw a bark leave port and then return for a woman, only to become grounded. She reported: "He [the captain] was going to wait for this woman eight hours outside, but she got to drinking with the men and forgot herself, so rather than to go without her, he came back."¹⁰²

Dorothea Balano referred to gossip she heard about another captain's wife who was rumored to be "carrying on" with a mate on her husband's ship. Dorothea accepted the double standard in this question: "How could she possibly give herself to the Mate? Is her husband blind or does he drink? What a shame and what a bad thing for the reputation of the profession, where most of the wives are wonderful."¹⁰³ Dorothea chose to overlook the different standards for male and female behavior and the fact that they had not yet changed in the new century. Evidently the philandering of a mariner, ordinary seaman or captain, did not threaten the reputation of seafaring as would a woman's unfaithfulness to her husband.

Rarely were there any references in the personal writings of maritime families to a wife's unfaithfulness while her husband was away. Katherine Chase Owen, the editor of her grandmother's letters written to her husband at sea, admitted in her Forward that she had edited out an incident

¹⁰² Abbie to Joseph, 13 April 1871, Griffin 141

¹⁰³ Dorothea Balano Diary, 15 August 1911, Balano 44.

that took place in 1871 because the names of all individuals involved were mentioned. While a man was at sea, his wife had a baby by a school teacher, whom she met at church. The family did not want her husband to find the baby when he returned from sea; so the "waif" was taken to Portland and left on a doorstep. The affair caused considerable gossip in Bath, Maine and the teacher was "run out of town."¹⁰⁴

A.B.D. Whipple mentions a case of a Captain Owen Chase (very possibly a relative of the above family) who returned from a voyage and divorced his wife for adultery. When another captain learned that his wife had been unfaithful, he took his whaleship the Otter into a South American port, "sold her, and pocketed the money, which was an ingenious form of revenge, since his wife had sinned with the owner of the Otter."¹⁰⁵

Charles Borden in a letter to his wife Sarah referred to his steward's wife who ran off with another man taking half his pay with her. Although not often mentioned, it is likely that infidelity was fairly common, particularly amongst ordinary seaman and their women. The captain's wife would have had more to lose than an ordinary sailor's wife by being unfaithful. A wife's reputation was a reflection

¹⁰⁴ Katherine Chase Owen, ed. Dear Captain Fess: Letters from Sue Chase to her husband, Captain Fessenden Chase, 1873, Augusta State Library, Augusta, Maine.

¹⁰⁵ Whipple, Yankee Whalers, 184.

upon her husband's reputation, upon which their livelihood depended.

The Option of Going to Sea

While Abbie was home waiting for Joseph's return from Baltimore, she missed him so severely that she had decided she would not remain at home without him any longer. In spite of their previous misfortune in Cuba and her pregnant condition, she was ready to sail to be united once again as a family:

I am getting real homesick for you to get home...I didn't think I should want to leave as soon as this when I got home, but I do.

She reassured Joseph in nearly every letter that she was eager to sail with him again as soon as she was able:

...but I don't have such a bully time as you think, for I am lonesome and homesick to get aboard the vessel again. It seems more like home there than anywhere else. Think I am about as poor a hand to live at home alone as you are to go to sea alone.¹⁰⁶

Abbie felt more at home on her husband's ship than living with her inlaws in Stockton. She was perhaps influenced by the ideology of the time that a residence was not a home without the husband's presence.

After Joseph had made it home in early March for a short visit and then departed again, Abbie asked him what he

¹⁰⁶ Abbie to Joseph, 18 October 1871, Griffin 197.

had found out about a bark or a brig in Boston. She was determined this time not to be left at home alone with the children:

I want you to tell me all about it, for I do want you to get into a larger vessel for my sake, so I can go with you, for as to staying at home here alone I am not going to.¹⁰⁷

Abbie wanted Joseph to get a larger vessel so that there would be more room for his family to go to sea with him: "I wish you could get a vessel big enough to take Rye [Joseph's sister] and me next summer, or if you could get one large enough to take me alone, I would be satisfied."¹⁰⁸ In spite of all the inconveniences, such as Abbie experienced in Cuba, going to sea was an attractive option for many captain's wives who felt lonely and anxious at home alone and preferred the company of their husbands over others. It was more appealing to women with few friends, entrepreneurial interests, or real commitments ashore, than the choice to stay at home or board out in a strange city.

Abbie wanted to go to sea to be close to her beloved Joseph. Several times she closed her letter with, "Oh Joe! I wish you had a vessel. I'll bet I wouldn't stay at home alone. But never mind; I'll go when you go get one." Lonesome and concerned about her husband's prolonged absences, Abbie frequently mentioned wanting to sail with him. Early

¹⁰⁷ Abbie to Joseph, 20 March 1872, Griffin 249.

¹⁰⁸ Abbie to Joseph, 3 December 1871, Griffin 208

in their marriage after he had left home for the second time, she wrote her husband about wishing to go to sea with him: "I wish you were at home now. I got along first rate the first trip, but this one, I can't. I miss you more every day. I'll bet I won't stay at home if ever you do get a vessel."¹⁰⁹ Abbie looked forward to joining Joseph aboard ship as much as Joseph did to having her. She also clearly stated that she thought she would have fewer unpleasant household duties to perform aboard ship:

I don't think I shall need much coaxing to join you when you get back. I think I shall have fully as easy a time going to sea as I shall staying at home--probably easier. I shan't have any fires to build in the morning.¹¹⁰

Being alone during her second pregnancy was hard on Abbie emotionally, and she mentioned often how she looked forward to the day when she could sail with Joseph again. She was able to do her own housekeeping well enough, but she obviously wanted more out of life than to remain home taking care of children and performing domestic duties. In the following letter she empathized with Joseph's feelings of loneliness and encouraged him to look forward to the day she would join him aboard ship:

Am very sorry indeed to hear you are so lonesome. I think I know something about it, as well as you do, but you must try and make the best of it this winter, and perhaps things will turn 'round so I can go with you again next summer. I hope and

¹⁰⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 6 September 1868, Griffin 24.

¹¹⁰ Abbie to Joseph, 7 November 1869, Griffin 53.

pray they will, for I think I could go to sea with as good a relish as I ever did...¹¹¹.

Joseph, like most sea captains, encouraged and looked forward to his family's joining him for a voyage to provide him with a home away from home. He commented about his wife's upcoming sea journey and how he was busy making everything comfortable aboard ship for her:

I am anxious that you should try the bed--or to try you with it--I don't care which...I am getting so I don't feel either comfortable or easy unless you are around. I expect I shall get so bad pretty soon that I shan't be able to go to sea without you. Anyhow, I don't mean you shall stay at home when you are able to go with me...Drop me a line every day so I shall know exactly where to find you, for I want you to be ready to tote the minute you see me.¹¹²

Because Joseph was away from home longer than usual during the hard winter months, he had suggested that Abbie meet him in New York. Now that she had a second child, her mobility was severely limited, and she was unable to meet him in various ports as she had done previously. This time she was reluctant to leave for New York because the baby was sick, and she would have preferred that he come home:

You spoke of my coming to New York. I should be able and would like right well to come if baby was well, but should much rather you would come home. Oh I should be so happy to see you at home here once more. But if you don't come, I guess I will come to New York and go a trip or two in the vessel.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Abbie to Joseph, 5 November 1871, Griffin 200.

¹¹² Joseph to Abbie, 17 November 1869, Griffin 55

¹¹³ Abbie to Joseph, 19 February 1872, Griffin 242.

In her last letter to Joseph, written August 15, 1872, she was no longer so eager to accompany him at sea. She intimated that because he had not yet found a larger vessel to accommodate the family better, it was not necessary for her to undergo the hardships of being at sea with two children:

I don't think you had better count much on my going to sea with you this fall and winter in that small vessel with two children. Winters are getting to be most too severe I think for a woman to go, as long as you are getting so nicely weaned.¹¹⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, according to Lisa Norling's study, deep water sailing had become more and more incompatible with the ideology of companionate marriage. The loneliness of separation had become more of an unacceptable hardship for the husbands as well as the wives. As marriage became more and more romanticized, the expectations a couple had of sharing their deepest and most intimate feelings become more difficult to reconcile with long periods of separation. A desire to keep the companionate marriage intact stimulated the wife's desire to accompany her husband at sea. This has become the conventional explanation why it became common and accepted, after 1840, for many captain's wives to join their husband's aboard ship.¹¹⁵ Perhaps transferring the "home" to their husband's ship gave woman an opportunity and an excuse to go beyond their

¹¹⁴ Abbie to Joseph, 15 August 1872, Griffin 263.

¹¹⁵ Norling, "Loneliness" 28.

kitchens and at least see the world, although often viewed from the porthole of New England values.

The expectation that husband and wife should be together for mutual support was thus one of the main reasons why more and more wives joined their husbands aboard ship during the mid- to late nineteenth-century merchant trade when the "Golden Age of Sail" was coming to an end. This insistence on the part of the wives to accompany their husbands at sea could also be seen as a challenge to the pervasive ideology that a woman's place was in the home. Writers on women at sea usually maintain that the ship became the new seat of domesticity. It also could be argued that a husband's ship was an acceptable haven from which a wife could safely experience an alternative lifestyle as well as cultures very different from her own.

Couples looked forward to a time when they would no longer be forced by economic necessity to be separated. The hope of reunification sustained them throughout their loneliness. Captains anticipated spending time with their families at home or bringing them along to sea. Many looked forward to retirement from seafaring and to finding an alternative occupation which would allow them to live permanently with their families.

The Specter of a Second Widowhood

In their correspondence couples continually reminded one another of their fear of being separated by death. Statistics show that their anxiety was warranted.¹¹⁶ Of the twelve seamen that Lisa Norling selected for her thesis on the maritime marriage, at least five were lost at sea.¹¹⁷ The death of a husband at sea, often when he was still in his prime terminated many a maritime marriage prematurely. Frequently women heard about the loss of their husband's ship or read about it in the paper before receiving any letters or word from the ship's agent. This uncertainty about their husband's safety caused sea widows a great deal of worry. Mrs. E.J. Watts of St. George, Maine wrote the following letters to Sewell Company in 1905:

Having seen in the daily paper where the ship Susquehanna had arrived at New Caledonia and would like to know if you have heard from Captain Watts since his arrival there, if so would you kindly let me know as I have received no letters as yet.

Not having had any letters from Captain Watts as yet, am feeling quite anxious...having seen in the paper that the ship Roanoke was burned up, thought it possible there might be some mistake in the report. If you would kindly let me know your opinion concerning the matter, I should feel very much better.

...We hear the crew were landed on Solomon Islands, and do you know wheather or not Captain Watts could cable from those islands? I am

¹¹⁶ See Chapter II, page 14 of this paper.

¹¹⁷ Norling, "Loneliness," 24.

feeling very anxious about it and whatever your opinion may be on this matter...¹¹⁸.

Abbie constantly worried that Joseph might meet with some accident or contract some sickness. The longer Abbie was alone with the two children, the more anxious she became; she constantly worried about her husband's taking ill. In one of her last letters to Joseph she felt torn between wanting him to clear his debts and worrying about his safety:

I want you to be dreadful careful and not get sick, for if anything should happen to you, what should I do? Yet Joe, I want you to get out of debt, just as bad as you do, and I hope and pray you won't meet with any mishap. You shall have my prayers if that will do any good. I'd give most anything to have you at home tonight.¹¹⁹

Like all seafaring wives, Abbie was aware that her marriage could end abruptly through a tragedy at sea. She valued the time spent with her husband, knowing it could be the last, and attempted to make sure that his visits home with his family were as peaceful as possible.

Unfortunately for both Abbie and Sarah their marriages ended prematurely. On April 19, 1874, less than two years after Abbie's last letter in the collection to her husband, Joseph, now captain of the schooner John C. Libby, was lost at sea during a storm off Cape Hattaras. He would have just

¹¹⁸ Miscellaneous letters and notes written by mariners' wives to the Sewell Company of Bath, Maine, 1871-1905, Maine Maritime Museum, Bath, Maine.

¹¹⁹ Abbie to Joseph, 9 June 1872, Griffin 262.

turned thirty-one when his ship appeared in Stockton Harbor with all hands aboard except the Captain. Abbie was expecting her third child and gave birth six months later to a daughter, Josephine. Joseph's short life became a living legend while the unfortunate and courageous Abbie lived for forty-four more years as a widow. A few years after this shocking tragedy, one of Joseph's brothers was walking on Boston's Tremont Street when a seaman suddenly approached him and asked if he was the brother of Joe Griffin, who was lost off Cape Hattaras. Joseph's brother told him yes, whereupon the sailor said, "He was pushed." Before explaining he disappeared down a side street and was never heard from again.¹²⁰ In spite of uncertainty and adversity, the Griffins' simple and honest devotion for one another endured until Joseph's tragic death. Spiced with downeast humor, their letters attest to the strength and tenacity of Maine pioneer families who continued sailing after the rest of the nation had turned to steam.

In Captain Barry's last letter to Sarah, written on December 15 and 16, 1850, he described the trouble he was having with his sailors, who were in a state of mutiny:

I wish you immediately to have your name withdrawn from the membership and as a contributor to the Sailor's Home. Give your charity in any other way you please, but not to hardened villains. The money which I obtain by following the sea is too

¹²⁰ Griffin 274-5.

hard earned to contribute even one mill upon such unworthy objects.¹²¹

Also he wrote that his health was not what he wished it to be and that home was paradise "compared to being surrounded by a lot of hardened, reckless sailors." Finishing his letter the next day, he closed it with affection:

I must have one more kiss, my love, even if it is upon this paper. I will place one, just here, for you. Kiss our little boys for me. How dearly I should like to be home and see the little fellows....Your devoted, affectionate Charles.¹²²

These were the last words ever heard from Captain Charles Barry, who would have been forty-years-old in January 1851. His ship, the William Lord, named after his father-in-law who had it built, sailed from Savannah and never reached Liverpool, England. One can only speculate upon what might have happened as nothing was ever again heard from the ship or from any of its crew.

The widowed Sarah Barry with her two young sons continued to live in Kennebunk. Several years after Captain Barry had been declared legally dead, she married a retired sea captain, shipowner, and trader. Sarah and Charles' "Little Willie" remained in Kennebunk, practiced architecture and became locally noted as a historian and naturalist. The youngest son, Charles, became a successful businessman and

¹²¹ Charles Barry to Sarah, 15 December 1850, Borden 180.

¹²² Charles Barry to Sarah, 16 December, Borden 181.

senior partner of the mercantile shipping firm of Henry W. Peabody and Company.

It is ironic that neither captain died from the dreaded diseases their wives worried so about, but instead probably died at the hands of their own men. As no subsequent journals or letters of these women have been found, it is difficult to ascertain how they fared in later years or as widows. Both women were widowed twice in their lives: first by the sea and separation from their mates, and second, and finally, by their husband's death at sea. Their first widowhood gave them the experience of developing coping strategies and human networks which prepared them for their final and lengthy widowhood.

Unfortunately little is known about the personal lives of either Abbie or Sarah after the loss of their husbands at sea. Probably Abbie endured as a strong, independent widow who proudly brought up her three children alone, hopefully with the continued support of her in-laws. She possessed the same strong and assertive characteristics of the self-reliant sea widows who became role models for other women in the communities of Sarah Orne Jewett's and Mary Ellen Chase's novels. These independent and resilient widows of fiction are role models for other women isolated in their marriages and in communities offering limited resources. They demonstrate how the development of character through

living alone can ensure survival and a stoic contentment in spite of life's great changes.

The correspondence maritime couples left behind is a tribute to their struggle to keep love, intimacy, and companionship alive in spite of the severe hardships of their separations. Seafaring couples survived the loneliness and anxiety of long separations, the disappointment of unrealistic expectations, the stress of their reunions, the possibility of infidelity and the greatest of all fears--separation by death. Husbands and wives found ways to stretch the limits of their distinct roles and constantly readjusted their expectations and behavior to accommodate the difficult conditions of their marriages.

CHAPTER VII

SETTING SAIL

They crossed the lonely and lamenting sea;
Its moaning seemed but singing. "Wilt thou dare,
"He asked her, "brave the loneliness with me?"
"What loneliness," she said, "if thou art there?"¹
"The Watch of Boon Island," Celia Thaxter

This opening verse of Celia Thaxter's poem reflects a wife's preference for risking loneliness at sea to being separated from her beloved mate. The correspondence between devoted couples like Abbie and Joseph Griffin gives evidence that a husband's seafaring pursuits resulted in an unnatural and lonely life for both partners. Sweethearts and young married couples might endure a few separations, as Sarah Trask and Rachel Putnam were unhappily forced to do. However, once a family grew and a husband advanced to become captain of his own ship, the sacrifice of normal family life became increasingly difficult to accept. Many couples decided that the obvious solution was to take the family to sea, creating a home aboard ship.

¹ Jane E. Vallier, Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters and Works of Celia Thaxter (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1982) 172.

This chapter examines the literature on these women, the reasons they chose to go to sea, the hardships they endured and learned to overcome, and the irony of another separation, this time from loved ones left behind.

Literature on Women at Sea

Beginning in the late 1970s, a profusion of literature describing the experiences of wives and families at sea in the nineteenth century had become what history professor John Battick of the University of Maine describes as "a growth industry.... spurred by feminist activism." Battick maintains that, although these writings focus upon a neglected aspect of maritime history, they are limited by concentrating upon either the anecdotal and unusual or upon the unique experiences of a very few individuals. Because they lack historical and anthropological analysis and a broad sampling of the group the main characters represent, one cannot generalize about these women's experiences. Battick says that in order to understand women's roles in seafaring, we must use the sampling techniques of social science and establish a conceptual framework for asking the proper questions. Finally, he says, we must answer the

frequently neglected question, "so what?"² Several articles by women scholars do attempt to answer these questions by focusing upon women's common experiences at sea, the various typical and atypical roles they assumed aboard ship, and the influence they had upon the all-male world of seafaring.³

This study has focused mainly upon women Battick terms "stay-at-homes" along with a glimpse at why some women seriously considered accompanying their husbands at sea. The previous chapters emphasized women's gradual attainment of independence, self-realization, and increased self-esteem gained through coping for long periods of time alone. These attributes acquired through necessity enabled women who were permitted to accompany their husbands aboard ship (usually only ships' masters or first officers' wives) to make a careful decision as to whether they would leave home.

This chapter goes into some detail on how and why women made this difficult and even dangerous decision and what sacrifices it entailed. By examining a large sampling of women's sea journals, written aboard whalers and merchant

² John F. Battick, "The Searsport 'Thirty-six': Seafaring Wives of a Maine Community in 1880," The American Neptune 44 (1984): 149.

³ See Susan McCooey Sherman, "Lace Curtains in the Captain's Quarters," The Log of Mystic Seaport 20.1 (1968): 11-14; Bonham, "Feminist and Victorian," 1977; Linda Grant DePauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982); Joan Druett "More Decency and Order: Women and Whalemen in the Pacific," The Log of Mystic Seaport 39.2 (1987): 65-74; "Those Female Journals," The Log of Mystic Seaport 40.4 (1989): 115-125; Petticoat Whalers (New Zealand: Collins Publishers, 1991); Dodson, "The Lady Ships," The Log of Mystic Seaport (n.d.).

ships in the nineteenth century, one may determine several reasons why women left their homes for a seafaring venture.

"Caught Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea"

The decision to go to sea required a difficult choice for women--a choice of either living without their husbands' company or leaving the support and community of their family and friends. Literally they were "caught between the devil and the deep blue sea", a nautical term used to describe a difficult decision or "no win situation" which has invaded our daily speech. A sailing wife must risk isolation at sea in an alien and often frightening environment with the ever-present possibility of disaster. The alternative was to remain ashore and face separation from her beloved husband and endure constant loneliness and anxiety. Lucy Vincent learned from experience which of the two difficult choices she preferred. Frequently having accompanied her husband on his voyages, she remained at home in 1874. Realizing her mistake, she wrote:

...long lonely day. George has gone and I am so lonely, but not so lonely as he must be far out at sea. As I think of him and his lonely situation my heart seems breaking. Oh how I wish I were with him today. Gladly would I brave all the hardships and changes could I only be with him.⁴

⁴ Lucy P. Vincent's journal, 20 April 1874, Emma Whiting & Henry Hough, Whaling Wives (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953) 204; Bonham 205.

Connected to the fear of separation was the extreme devotion these women felt towards their men which permeated their journals. They were willing to give up home, family, friends, and perhaps their lives to accompany their husbands. Hannah Burgess, who later became the ship Challenger's 'old lady,' preferred the monotony of a life at sea to remaining ashore separated from her husband: "Ah...I should wish for no better company than by husband. He is the best of all to me."⁵ Lucy Smith recalled: "It is one year today since my beloved husband returned from a four years' voyage. Oh! How glad I am that I can be with him this voyage instead of being left at home, and hope he will never go another voyage without me."⁶

Often both captain and his wife recognized from experience that the real and implacable enemy of their marriage was separation. Whiting and Hough were the first to write about the sea journals of nineteenth-century whaling wives who called Martha's Vineyard home before they boarded their husbands' whaling ships. Observing how these wives chose to sacrifice their domestic security to be with their husbands, they wrote: "The challenge was incalculably grave, yet many wives made the departure and accepted the Far in exchange for all that was near and safe, gave up Society for the sake

⁵ Hannah Burgess's journal, Edward Rowe Snow, Women of the Sea (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 19962) 141; Bonham 205.

⁶ Lucy Smith's journal, 5 July 1870, DePauw 113.

of the One."⁷ Eliza Williams, who made several trips to the Pacific aboard her husband's whaleship wrote in her journal: "No privation of danger would be quite so terrible if it might be faced together. Separation--there was the essence of the power of evil."⁸ Eliza was concerned that men would suffer and die alone at sea. Many women feared widowhood and the stressful feelings of saying goodbye to husbands. They knew all too well that there was a strong possibility they might never see each other again. Bonham points out that the role of the nineteenth-century woman "was defined in terms of what they could do for their men; how they could contribute to their husbands' well-being." The coming together of a man and a woman created a balanced society according to the Victorians, and seafaring wives were archetypal Victorian women who allowed their husbands' needs and desires to influence and manipulate their lives. Although coastal women deferred to their husbands' needs and desires, these women were not typically passive, dependent, and fragile ladies. Through long periods of separation and learning to cope alone, they had developed a strong sense of character, confidence and independence. Couples who were devoted to one another were willing to test the strength of their relationship, in very close quarters aboard ship.

⁷ Whiting & Hough 8.

⁸ Eliza William's journal, Harold Williams, ed., One Whaling Family (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964).

Devoted to their husbands and unwilling to endure further separations, many nineteenth-century sea wives consented to leave the comfort of their homes and risk the dangers and uncertainties of a life at sea to be with their mates.

In contrast, there were perhaps just as many women who preferred to exercise their influence within a familiar environment, and would not consider following their husbands into an alien world. Diaries give evidence that some wives did not relish a life at sea and "would have preferred tribulations endured ashore without their husband's supporting presence."⁹ Some women were not particularly intimate with their mates and had formed closer ties with friends and relatives ashore from whom they gained strength and identity. Others might be intensely involved in particular activities or causes in their communities, which gave them satisfaction and a sense of purpose they were unwilling to sacrifice for the sake of a dangerous adventure. While husbands were away, wives were in charge of the home and given the opportunity to expand their roles in the community. Aboard ship their husbands would be in charge and they would be confined to a small cabin and expected to act in accordance with clearly defined female roles. Many felt that they would simply be exchanging loneliness ashore for loneliness at sea where they would not even be their own

⁹ Charles G. Bolte, ed., Portrait of a Woman Down East: Selected Writings of Mary Bolte, (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1983) 170.

"mistress of the home" or enjoy a supportive network of family and friends.

There were other wives who anticipated pursuing their shore-based activities and causes aboard ship in an attempt to establish there a home and even a "moral community" of seafarers. These women looked forward to the possibility and challenge of expanding their female roles and even trying their hand at other activities aboard ship. Only by taking a closer look at how these women adjusted to seafaring life and what engaged them aboard ship, can one speculate as to why they chose to leave their homes to voyage into unknown seas and lands.

The Decision to Go to Sea

Women who decided to sail aboard their husbands' vessels did not directly express a desire to escape the confinement of their domestic roles. They usually cited as their chief motivation the anxiety, fear and loneliness caused by the long separations from their husbands. This decision to accompany their husbands at sea resulted in very ambivalent feelings when the time came for their departures. Suddenly the realization of the severe sacrifice they were making in bidding farewell to all that was familiar caused them great distress. This decision required a sailing wife to exchange her familiar and intimate world of family and

female community for an alien world of male work and adventure. She must also relinquish her domestic flexibility, influence, and autonomy to comply with a rigid shipboard authority and routine. Forced to rely almost solely upon her husband's companionship, unless her children accompanied her, a sailing wife must trust him as well to navigate them safely through an Unknown of vast oceans and strange lands. This choice must have been a difficult one, overshadowed by dread and uncertainty. Despite these women's desire to be near their beloved husbands, theirs was a decision which demanded great fortitude and determination to separate themselves from familiar surroundings, family, and friends.

Tradition and the acceptance of a seafaring heritage and the career that went with it reinforced the idea that women should accompany their husbands if possible. Chappaquiddick, a sub-island of Martha's Vineyard, was remarkable in the nineteenth century for its numerous families of whaling captains and their wives. "Three families in as many gray-shingled houses near Caleb's Pond on this geographical fragment produced at one period thirty children, seventeen of whom became shipmasters, and most of the others the wives of shipmasters." Captain Ephraim Ripley's seven daughters married captains and four of his five sons were masters of whaleships. Captain Ripley's third daughter, Lucy married Captain Joseph Holley in 1827. In 1852, after a quarter of a century of married life, Lucy decided

to go to sea at the age of forty-seven on her husband's whaleship the Polar Star. One can only surmise that after years of separation this couple had decided to brave the seas together.

John Battick, in his research on thirty-six Searsport, Maine wives who accompanied their husbands to sea in 1880, discovered that a high proportion (18) were sea captains' daughters. He also found that younger and more recently married wives with younger families were more likely to go to sea.¹⁰ Perhaps these families believed it was crucial to stay together, not only to strengthen the bonds of a new marriage, but also for the children to grow up in the presence of their father. Whiting and Hough poetically describe how a woman fulfilled her duty by keeping the family intact at sea:

The small cabin of the whaleship might become the home; the heart of the family must reside there and be carried wherever the ship might go, in cold and in tropic heat, in darkness, in the long daylight of the Arctic Circle, in the violence of hurricane and typhoon. Babies must be born in strange places, and children must be taught their lessons on a whaleship's deck.¹¹

Julia Bonham points out that the decision for these women to go to sea was either made jointly or by the woman alone, sometimes in spite of all logic.¹² Captain Horatio

¹⁰ Battick 151-2. Seafaring wives made up forty percent out of eighty-nine married ship masters in Searsport in 1880.

¹¹ Whiting & Hough 4.

¹² Bonham 207-8.

Gray knew that his wife would suffer from seasickness, but both of them wanted to sail together on his 1862 voyage:

My poor Emma is suffering much from her old enemy seasickness and there seems to be no cure for her. Whiskey gives some relief as does Brandy and water--but it is only temporary--and these two remedies...produce headaches. I am very sorry that I ever gave my consent to her coming on this voyage--much misery of a bodily nature might have been spared her at any rate.¹³

In 1877 Mrs. Crapo's decision prevailed in spite of all logic when she told her husband she would accompany him across the Atlantic in his twenty-foot whaling boat. Captain Crapo's response was:

This was something I had not thought of for a moment; and, again, how could two go with such a small craft, with hardly room for one and turn around?...I knew my wife's courage, as I had seen it tested, and I knew, without argument, that when she said she was going she meant it, and that settled it. There was no use trying to dissuade her, as it would only be wasting breath, so I took the matter as coolly as possible. Had I known things would have taken such a turn I would have had my boat built a trifle larger on her account; but it could not be done now, as she was all built.¹⁴

The Crapos had a loving relationship and the captain was proud that people were waiting to meet his "spunky sailor-wife" when they safely reached the English shore:

....The crowds gathered about the house waiting for a chance to see us...Mrs. Crapo was the lion of the hour. A woman to cross the tempestuous Atlantic Ocean in a small boat like ours was what

¹³ Bonham 207.

¹⁴ Bonham 208.

turned the people's heads, and all seemed pleased to receive a word from her.¹⁵

The New York Times called Captain Crapo "bold and reckless," which he maintained was "because they were aghast that he would willing spend so much uninterrupted time with his mate...." The writers predicted that the couple would have such a row that they would return never to live together again. Bonham states that Mrs. Crapo's enthusiastic welcome by an English seafaring town supports the theory "that the independence and strength of character bred into, forced upon, women married to often-absent seamen precluded the acceptance of prevailing feminine roles by a seafaring community."¹⁶ She concludes that seafaring women did not support "the Victorian status quo" because of their independence and strength of character. Moreover that their love for their mates was "sincere and intense."¹⁷

Mrs. Crapo chose to be an active representative of nineteenth-century seafaring women. A number of other women were forced to become heroines at sea under disastrous circumstances. Mary Patten was nineteen-years-old and four months pregnant when she took command of her husband's ship Neptune's Car. For fifty-two days she successfully navigated westward around the treacherous Horn to San Francisco,

¹⁵ Bonham 208.

¹⁶ Bonham 209.

¹⁷ Bonham 209.

and she dealt with serious problems of discipline as well as a dying husband. "Leaders of the women's rights movement were ecstatic, pointing to Mary Patten as a living proof that there was nothing women could not do."¹⁸ Mary, however, was concerned about her pregnancy and her sick husband and did not become involved in the women's rights movement. Her husband died three months after her baby was born on March 10, 1857 and suddenly she was a mother, a widow, and unemployed. Although well-wishers raised a fund of \$1400 for her, she lost her spirit and contracted typhoid fever and then tuberculosis, dying at the age of twenty-three. The hospital at the Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York, still bears her name.¹⁹

Linda Grant De Pauw and other writers on women at sea tell of a number of women who were able to overcome insurmountable dangers and became heroines.²⁰ However, the ultimate challenge for a lone widow like Mary Patten was survival ashore, where women were second-class citizens with few opportunities for supporting themselves and their children. In spite of their courage and the skills they had exhibited aboard ship, these women were usually excluded from seafaring careers. Their gender prevented them from using their

¹⁸ DePauw 203.

¹⁹ DePauw 199-203

²⁰ DePauw tells of several female heroines: Carolyn Mayhew 160, Mrs. Reed 196, Hannah Burgess 197-199, Mary Patten 199-203. Also Bolte, Portrait of a Woman and Snow, Women of the Sea.

unique experiences in navigation, leadership and problem solving to earn a living at sea or instruct others in seamanship.

Not all women who insisted on going to sea became heroines like Mrs. Crapo and Mary Patten. Some were drowned when the ship capsized in a storm or was wrecked upon reefs. After Captain Pendleton's brig, E.P. Swett, went down, the grieving shipmaster wrote a friend: "As we came to the surface my wife's arms were around my neck. Presently they relaxed and fell down and I knew that my wife was dead."²¹ Many more wives died in foreign ports of some dreaded disease. Captain Hodgdon's daughter had planned to sail to Buenos Aires on her husband's ship when she heard that yellow fever was raging there. She hated to give up the trip, but finally her family convinced her to travel only as far as New York and return home after the ship sailed. Many ships were sailing out of New York and wives she knew were going along; so forgetting the danger and the promise to her family, she sailed anyway and contracted the fever, dying in a Buenos Aires hospital. Her brother died there, too, and her little son died on the way home and was buried at sea. Wanting to share the adventure that other captain's wives were enjoying, she risked her own life and her child's in

²¹ Bolte 169.

venturing from family and home.²² It has often been assumed that only men have a strong need to take such risks. Little is understood or has been written about woman's desire for adventure, for which some have been willing to give up the safety of home and family. One can speculate about possible motives which might prompt women to risk their lives at sea and in foreign lands. Was it simply extreme devotion for their mates, or were there other underlying factors?

Although there is evidence that many of the women who went to sea were indeed very devoted to their husbands, Vita Dodson suggests other less obvious reasons women accompanied their husbands. For example Charity Norton served as a peace-keeper between the crew and her tyrannical husband. By regulating "his temper and willfulness," she protected him from "retribution at the hands of the crew."²³ Others were induced to follow their husbands to regulate their moral behavior as well as the crew's. The beautiful and willing south sea island women offered temptations that few lonely seamen could resist. Mrs. Wallis, a Nantucket whaling wife heard that the native women in the Pacific swam naked. She insisted on going along on her husband's next voyage. Much to her chagrin it was true and at Pleasant

²² "The Way It Was": The Stories of Captain John Merrill Hodgdon (1824-1914) of Boothbay Harbor, Maine, transcribed by Hodgdon Bishop, Down East Magazine, Camden, Maine (n.d.): 62-83.

²³ Dodson, 60; Whipple, 118; Whiting & Hough, 34.

Island she wrote in her journal, "The girls came on board for the vilest of purposes, but they said these were not accomplished as the sailors were afraid of the captain's woman." Playing the stereotypical role of moral arbiter added for some seafaring women "a romantic aura to the rather uncomfortable prospect of spending several years at sea."²⁴ Like missionary women, they had found an acceptable female purpose for leaving home and family behind. The reasons given by scholars for women's accompanying their husbands at sea originate mostly from a traditional view of their roles. A wife's main goal in life was self-evidently to please and support her husband, rear and care for the children, and be morally responsible for holding the family together. Elizabeth Barrett's poem at the beginning of the next chapter suggests an alternative motivation--a woman's love of the sense of freedom she could experience from being at sea. Abbie Griffin repeatedly said she was eager to go aboard her husband's vessel where she would be free of tedious household chores, particularly not having to start the fire each morning. Women writing sea journals during the latter part of the nineteenth century expressed more openly and emphatically a desire for freedom, self-expression, contact with male work aboard ship, and the adventure of travel to foreign lands.

²⁴ Druett, "More Decency and Order," 67-68.

Katurah Prichard set sail from New York harbor in 1847 aboard her husband's brig Massachusetts for Charleston and then on to Europe and back. She thought of the family she was leaving behind but anticipated fulfilling her dream of adventure:

As we glided down the harbour my thoughts fell back on my home, my Parents, and Sisters and brothers I had left behind, and the many changing scenes that might occur before I could see my native town again. Then I thought how many times I had longed to brave the dangers of the Ocean, and foreign climes, to enjoy the company of my husband. I was where I longed to be.²⁵

Mary Brewster, one of the earliest and most remarkable whaling wives, revealed how she made the difficult decision to board her husband's whale ship Tiger on 4 November 1845 for two Pacific voyages:

I often find myself thinking of home and kind friends and acquaintances but have no wish to be with them at present. I have chosen my own place of residence not from the impulse of the moment, but after much calm and sober thought. In coming my own conscience tells me I was doing right...

Mary's family and friends offered her little support in making her decision to go to sea:

...and what do I care for the opinion of the world or what some who have always professed much friendship for me will say. With much opposition I left my native land few I had to say one encouraging word.

²⁵ Katurah McHard Prichard's Journal, December 1847 to March 1849 aboard Massachusetts, Peabody Museum, Salem, MA, 1-49.

Violent opposition to Mary's sailing came from her adoptive family. Her foster mother went so far as to disown her and banish her from her childhood home.

....She who had extended a Mothers love and watchfulness over me said her consent should never be given in no way would she assist me, and If I left her she thought me most ungrateful, and lastly though not least Her house would never be a home for me again if I persisted in coming.²⁶

Mary-Ann, the nineteen-year-old bride of Captain Abner Sherman, sailed from New Bedford on 21 May 1845 against the wishes of her adopted family. They not only disowned her, but they declared her dead and put up a gravestone to prove it! She has two graves: one in Rarotonga bearing the date of her true death, 5 January 1850, and the other in New Bedford claiming she died in 1845, the year she sailed on the Harrison.²⁷

Sometimes women were unrelenting and harsh in their attempts to restrict another woman's mobility, especially if it took her away from the confinement of the home. Both Mary Brewster and Mary-Ann Sherman defied convention when they set sail on their husbands' whaleships in the 1840s. Then it was still unusual, eccentric, and even scandalous for a woman to voyage on a whaler. According to Joan Druett, an authority on women's whaling journals: "Only five petticoat whalers cleared the ports of New England in that

²⁶ Mary Brewster's Journal aboard the whale ship Tiger, 1845-1848, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT; Sherman 11.

²⁷ Druett, Petticoat Whalers 29.

year 1845; five out of a fleet of 302." However, by 1848 what Druett calls "wife-carrying" had become fashionable.²⁸

Perhaps due particularly to a desire to enjoy the comforts of home aboard ship, husbands were seldom resistant to the idea of their wives' accompanying them to sea. Besides, shipboard was a home where the captain was in total command, and a wife aboard posed little threat to his male authority. There were some captains who ordered their wives, even against their will or better judgment, to accompany them aboard ship. Druett maintains that Wharton's Law--"the wife is only servant to the husband"--was still valid in the mid-nineteenth century and women were given no choice. One such wife, Eliza Brock, sailed from Nantucket on the Lexington on 21 May 1853, leaving behind three young children. Missing home most pitifully, she began her journal: "Farewell my more than father land," and added the following poem:

Home of my heart and friends adieu
Lingering beside some foreign strand
How oft shall I remember you
How oft o'er the water blue
Send back a sigh to those I love
The loving and beloved few
Who grieve for me; for whom I grieve.²⁹

²⁸ Druett, Petticoat Whalers 29. Appendix, 195-199 gives an extensive listing of "logs, journal, letters, and reminiscences of the whaling sisters in public hands."

²⁹ Druett, Petticoat Whalers 27.

Her attitude did not improve and throughout her voyage she was homesick. She did not see her home, family and friends again until June 1856, three years after she had set sail.

Another unwilling sailor, Almira Gibbs, set sail on the Nantucket just four months before turning thirty-nine after she and her husband had been married for fifteen years. She kept a journal from June 1855 to August 1859 and she decided, "When I get home, I think I shall stay and lett them that wants to a whaleing, it is no life for me." Nevertheless, she found herself on a second voyage on the Norman in 1860 from which she never returned, dying of some tropical disease in Valparaiso in 1864. These captains who were domestic tyrants, insisting that their domestic needs be fulfilled, gave their wives little choice but to follow them in their dangerous ventures.

There is a popular notion that men in the last century considered it bad luck to have a woman aboard ship, but there is little reference to this belief in the personal writings of maritime men and women. As Vita Dodson suggests: "Very probably a captain's wife of uncertain temper and sharp tongue was considered unlucky, but one who bettered the food and softened the discipline seems to have been a welcome addition to the ship's personnel."³⁰ Although vessels carrying the captain's family were sometimes labeled by the sailors as "hen frigates," especially if the

³⁰ Dodson 59.

wife was a "take charge" type, Eliza Williams referred to them in her sea journal as "Lady Ships."³¹

Joanna C. Colcord of Searsport, Maine who spent her childhood aboard her father's sailing ship wrote:

Family life at sea was made possible by the peculiar co-operative nature of ship ownership and management as it used to be conducted. A vessel was customarily built for a certain man who was to be her master, and he and his friends took shares in the enterprise.Their joint shares usually added up to controlling interest in the vessel....³²

Under these conditions, a master was allowed by the owners to take his family to sea with him. Captain's wives traveled regularly out of Maine ports on the down-easters where they reared their families and entertained in port.

Julianna FreeHand tells why ship owners believed that a family aboard their ships made good business sense:

A man living in domesticity would take better care of their property, operate it more efficiently and be less likely to take a hotel room ashore, leaving his responsibilities to the mate.³³

Apparently whaling agents in southern New England ports took a different view, according to Norling, and did not look as favorably upon wives' accompanying their husbands at sea as did owner/agents of trading vessels. It was feared that family ties would disrupt the business of whaling by

³¹ Julianna FreeHand, A Seafaring Legacy, (New York: Random House, 1981) 46; Eliza Williams' Journal, Williams 82.

³² Joanna C. Colcord, "Domestic Life on American Sailing Ships," The American Neptune II (1942): 193.

³³ FreeHand 46.

upsetting the discipline aboard ship. They worried, too, that captains would avoid some of the risks of the hunt by overseeing the action of the chase from the safety of the ship's deck rather than accompanying the crew in the small boats. Also the captain, to please his wife, might spend too much time in port or gamming (visiting aboard other ships).³⁴

In spite of agents' reluctance, by 1853 one out of every five whaling captains went to sea with their wives. Norling maintains the captains' wives were so devoted to preserving their marriages that they went to sea despite resistance from the crew, shipowners, and the hardships of life aboard ship.³⁵ Naturally a proper nineteenth-century lady would not suggest a desire for self-fulfillment as a reason to join a "rough and ready" male society. She must travel under the protection of her husband for the sake of her personal reputation and to conform to the rigorous demands of separate spheres. This does not necessarily mean, however, that some women did not have other reasons than marital devotion for wishing to go sea. Conventional female rhetoric of the period often obscured more personal desires, which manifested themselves in various ways aboard ship away from the pressures of society.

³⁴ Lisa Norling, "Contrary Dependencies," The Log of Mystic Seaport 42.1 (1990): 10.

³⁵ Lisa Norling, "Mariners' Wives," The New England Quarterly LXV.3 (1992): 437.

Not until the early 1900s did a woman named Dorothea Balano, our first seafaring feminist and cultured educator, directly state in her sea journal her own personal reasons for accompanying her husband at sea. Growing up on a farm in the Midwest, Dorothea always longed to go to sea and was pleased with herself for having achieved her goal by marrying a handsome but stubborn Maine captain. Comparing seafaring with farming, she wrote, "Ah well, let those who want to raise crops for food enjoy it; I'll eat it while the great world is being seen by little old me. Am I selfish? I am."³⁶ Dorothea realized how fortunate she was to be able to visit exotic places. "Florida is beautiful but so is Rio....How privileged I am to dwell in the best spots on earth, the beautiful coast of Maine, exquisite Rio, exotic Florida." She revealed how she planned to maneuver a trip to Europe: "I've been working on Mr. Lykes for a charter to carry some of his turpentine and pine masts to England with a call on France to pick up wine for the return cargo.... Anyhow, shall continue scheming and hope it won't send Freddie boy up the spanker mast when he finds out."³⁷

After Dorothea's early twentieth century travels, when ship masters 'went into steam' they were prohibited by

³⁶ Dorothea Balano's Sea Journal, 12 January 1912, Balano 104.

³⁷ Dorothea Balano's journal, 8 March 1912, Balano 125.

nearly all American steamship lines from taking wives or children aboard, even as passengers for a single trip.³⁸ To travel aboard ship as the twentieth century progressed, a woman must find the means to afford passage on a passenger liner, have connections to the elite world of yachting, or, more recently, join the Navy. The coming of steam was yet another technological development which defined women's place and kept her ashore.

"Following the Late Fashion"

In 1817, the Russells of Nantucket were the first family to make a home on a whaling ship. Mary Russell joined her husband aboard the whaleship Hydra, and their twelve-year-old son William signed on as cabin boy.³⁹ For a time Mary lived in Milford Haven in south Wales, her husband's home port, in order to be with him between voyages. It seems she did not keep a journal on that voyage but joined her husband and William, now a seventeen-year-old

³⁸ Suzanne J. Stark, "Mates at Sea: The Adventures of 19th-Century Captains' Wives," The Log of Mystic Seaport (1986): 29; Joanna Colcord, "Domestic Life On American Sailing Ships," The American Neptune 11.3 (1942): 193.

³⁹ Depauw 106-7. As early as 1786-1789, Catherine Greene Hickling of Boston wrote a sea journal aboard the Pilgrim en route to the Azores where her father was the American Consul. From the Azores she went to England, wrote about life there, and returned home to Boston aboard the Neptune. There are a number of early nineteenth-century sea journals written by upper-class American women, usually single, who traveled abroad aboard ship.

harpooner, in 1823 on a second voyage aboard the Emily for the Pacific. She took along her seven-year-old son Charles and faithfully recorded the family experiences in her journal.⁴⁰ A decade later, there were many whaling wives at sea aboard their husbands ships in the Pacific. Betsy Tower told another whaling wife, Mary Brewster, who was visiting aboard her ship, that "a number of ladies were out this season with their husbands. I am glad they are following the late fashion."⁴¹ In 1858 Reverend Samuel C. Damon described this phenomenon in The Friend, the Seamen's Friend Society newspaper published in Hilo, Hawaii:

A few years ago it was exceedingly rare for a Whaling Captain to be accompanied by his wife and children, but it is now very common. An examination of the list of whalers shows that no less than 42 are now in the Pacific. Just one half that number are now in Honolulu. The happy influence of this goodly number of ladies is apparent to the most careless observer.... Formerly ship owners in New Bedford were bitterly opposed to their masters bring their families with them. The reason of course, was that they feared their ships would not as speedily fill up. We believe the reverse might be shown from actual statistics.⁴²

By mid-century hundreds of New England women were traveling aboard the great clipper ships as well, and often they were more familiar with exotic Pacific ports than they

⁴⁰ A.B.C Whipple, "The Whalers," The Seafarers (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1979) 111.

⁴¹ Druett, "Those Female Journals," 116.

⁴² Dodson 59; Reverend Samuel C. Damon in The Friend (Hilo, HI: Seamen's Friend Society, 8 November 1858): 84.

were with Boston or New York.⁴³ In the second half of the nineteenth century, Maine women married to captains of trading ships joined Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard and New Bedford whaling wives to become, with their families, "the most traveled segment of American society, to whom home was a ship."⁴⁴ Square-rigged merchant vessel were well suited for family life. They were comfortable, stable, dry, with plenty of space on the after deck for a family to stroll, read, write letters, embroider, and give school lessons.⁴⁵ Women who were reluctant to follow their husbands aboard a whaler were often eager to travel as first lady aboard a merchant vessel. Although the space provided for this "royal family" was small, it was quite luxuriously decorated and required less housekeeping than a home ashore. There were fewer social obligations in such small quarters and stewards relieved the captain's wife of most domestic tasks and worries and cooked luxurious meals. Hannah Burgess, a merchant captain's wife, was the most enthusiastic in describing her contentment with her situation aboard her husband's ship:

It seems to me I never was more blest than at the present....The Whirlwind is a first-rate sailing ship...We have an excellent steward. He cooks better than I can, I am confident. The ship is

⁴³ DePauw 107.

⁴⁴ Charles G. Bolte', ed., Portrait of a Woman Down East (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1983) 168.

⁴⁵ Bolte 174-175.

supplied with provisions of every kind, and I am enjoying myself as well as any person can who has their husband's society and everything else convenient and comfortable....How rapidly the time passes on board the ship....Now where my husband is, there is my home.⁴⁶

Hannah's idyllic description, however, was not an accurate picture of what life at sea was like for her later on (as we will see in the next chapter) or for other sailing wives. Others described frightening conditions during terrible storms, the tedium, and intense heat of the doldrums, and the sickening atmosphere of a whaler, virtually a floating slaughter house.

There were women who hated life at sea and only went on one voyage, which often took several years. Joan Druett, a New Zealand scholar who has read a large number of women's whaling journals, observes that some women's writings, "even when they tried to make the best of it, are depressing accounts of discomfort, loneliness, seasickness, and a deep grinding misery of pining for home."⁴⁷ Women exchanged the anxious waiting ashore for their husbands' return from sea for a desperate longing aboard ship for a reunion with family and friends. Eliza Brock of Nantucket was one of these women who hated every moment of her whaling voyage aboard the Lexington, and wrote on New Years' Day in 1855: "Last night I dreamed of being home with my dear children

⁴⁶ Bonham 212; Burgess Journal, 26 February 1854; qtd. in Snow 146-148; DePauw 166.

⁴⁷ Druett, "Those Female Journals" 116.

but alas when I woke found it all a dream." She expressed her poignant feelings with this poem:

Tis sad to dream, on Ocean's Bed
Rocked by the waves to sleep
That loving eyes upon us smile
Then wake the heart to weep.⁴⁸

Women who disliked being at sea felt trapped, suffering from the discomfort, grime, noise, and terrible food, living out what seemed like a prison sentence. Seasickness was a real problem for many, and there were some wives who were never able to adjust to the ship's constant roll.

If a wife did not wish to endure hardships at sea, she could try to persuade her husband, as many did, to find work ashore. Jane Courtney influenced her husband to "go west" to New York or Ohio, but was unable to alter a larger destiny. Captain Courtney, who had sailed the oceans taking 50,000 barrels of oil, was killed when his stagecoach rolled over in Ohio in 1847. Many seafarers, like Joseph Griffin and Abner Howe, realized that they could not leave the sea and survive economically in New England where seafaring was waning. Instead they must consider going South or West where new economic opportunities abounded. Husbands were less likely to give up a career at sea to be with their wives than wives were to join them aboard their vessels. However, after many years at sea with their families aboard,

⁴⁸ Druett 117.

or after discovering that their wives could not tolerate life at sea, some men willing took up a new life ashore.

Other women quite enjoyed being at sea like Mrs. Smith aboard the Eliza F. Mason in 1859, about whom Eliza Williams said "Mrs. Smith likes the sea much. She has been going on the water now 10 years and has been at home a little over one year out of that in all"⁴⁹. Harriet Allen loved her whaling life and wished to be at sea forever. "If D [her husband David] and I could only have a ship of our own and go when and where we pleased!" Some loved the sea and wrote in their journals how contented they were even when "storms and quarrels disrupted the routine."⁵⁰ Another whaling wife, Mary Chipman Lawrence aboard the Addison in 1857, wrote that she was content in spite of damp, foggy, windy, cold, dreary days. "Have a nice little stove, a good cozy fire, a kind husband, and a dear little daughter. How ungrateful should I be to complain."⁵¹

Some women never returned from their voyages, others returned vowing never to go to sea again, and other formidable types remained upon the high seas for many years, where they gave birth and reared their families far from their

⁴⁹ Williams 82.

⁵⁰ Druett, "Those Female Journals," 116.

⁵¹ Whipple, "The Whalers," 122. Mary Lawrence's journal, 11 May 1857, ed. Stanton Garner, The Captain's Best Mate: The Journal of Mary Chipman Lawrence on the Whaler Addison 1856-1860 (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown U P) 1966.

homes and community. Because "wife-carrying" had become fashionable by 1850, a woman's decision to go to sea with her husband was much easier as she must no longer defy convention. Nevertheless, a woman's personality, her priorities and experiences were extremely important factors which determined whether or not her time spent at sea would be viewed positively. Much also depended upon the sailing wife's ability to establish congenial relationships aboard ship and with other seafaring families along the way. Important, also was a woman's ability to find worthwhile activities to help pass the long days at sea.

An Endurance Test for the Sailing Wife

How well a woman was able to adjust to the ship's environment was of utmost importance in determining whether or not she would find life at sea to be tolerable, and would continue to follow "the latest fashion." Some women disliked life at sea so much that they vowed never to sail again. The majority, however, seemed to have adapted and even enjoyed themselves after they became accustomed to the roll of the ship, the cramped quarters, the grime, the smell, the noise, the storms, and other discomforts. Some seafaring women discovered that conditions on board ship were not as horrible as they had expected. Although Eliza

Williams admitted that her ship's cabin could not compare with her home ashore, she found the accommodations adequate.

It is usually assumed that life at sea for a woman would be full of physical and psychological hardships. Whaling wives like Charlotte Reynolds, who spent nearly a decade at sea, denied that it was a difficult life:

Not at all, ...We had a happy time. Once in the James Arnold we went through a bad hurricane off Hatteras-- the guard rails were awash with the seas, but there are just as severe storms ashore, I have learned. Things were very nice for me aboard. I used to have my organ, and on one ship I had a bathroom.

Charlotte insisted that "her seafaring years were the happiest time of her life."⁵²

Storms and seasickness presented real problems aboard ship for many. On Eliza Williams' second day out at sea she wrote about how strange it all was to her:

...nothing but the vast deep about us; as far as the eye can stretch there is nothing to be seen but sky and water, and the Ship we are in. It is all a strange sight to me. The Men are all busy; as for me, I think I am getting Sea sick. My husband has just called me on deck to see the Sun set. It is a splendid sight to see the Sun set as it were in the water.⁵³

After just a few days out, Eliza wrote how she was beginning to suffer from seasickness:

It makes me Sea sick again; the worst sickness it seems to me that any one can have. I can hear the Men very

⁵² De Pauw 109.

⁵³ Eliza Williams' Journal, 8 September 1858, Williams, 5.

busy over my head; now crash goes some dish. All I can think of is perpetual motion on board this ship.⁵⁴

Eliza eventually adjusted to the ship's roll, but other wives never did. After gamming aboard Captain Randolph's South Boston, Eliza Williams noted:

Mrs. Randolph is not at all well. She was very much pleased to see me and said that this the first day she has set up all day for some time. She has not been on deck for 6 weeks. She has been sea-sick ever since they left the Islands [Hawaii]--5 months. Calm or blow it is all the same.⁵⁵

When Eliza was nearly eight months pregnant, she experienced her first long period of rough weather. "I don't like it at all," she wrote. "I can't go around like the Sailors, as I can in a smooth day." Even after her baby was born, she had not yet acquired her sea legs. "The swell makes the Ship roll and that is not very pleasant, though I have got very well used to it now, except when I start for some place in a hurry and get there quicker than I want to. But I think I shall practice caution now for the Baby's sake."⁵⁶

During bad weather it was particularly lonely for the captain's wife, who was confined alone below, unless she had children with her or there were passengers. Every sailor knows that is the most awful place to be in a storm.

⁵⁴ Eliza Williams Journal, 14 September 1858, Williams 6.

⁵⁵ Eliza Williams Journal, 23 January 1860, Williams 130.

⁵⁶ De Pauw 109.

Suzanne Stark vividly describes the horrible circumstances women must have endured confined below in a storm:

For hours, sometimes days, she lay propped in her water-soaked berth in the stuffy cabin which reeked of bilge. With the skylight closed and the wildly swinging oil lamp doused to prevent fire, she lay stiffly [as] the dark as sea water sloshed back and forth on the cabin floor at each pitch and roll. Her only clue to the storm's progress was the pounding of feet on deck, the intensity of the wind's shriek, and changes in the whacks, groans, and shuddering of the ship as she rose, quivered, and plummeted at each wave.⁵⁷

If a mother had children with her, she must "remain alert to quell their panic as they lay tied in their berths or held by her, often too seasick to eat the ship's biscuits or other bits of food she had at hand."⁵⁸

Some wives maintained a sense of humor during rough weather and attempted to make light of their discomfort. When it was rough, Elizabeth Waldron's colorful description was "it has been rock-a-bye-baby all day," and changeable days she called "domino days."⁵⁹ Susan Fogle Fisher humorously described her anticipation of rough seas on leaving the Ochotsk Sea for the Sandwich Islands:

For the next three or four weeks I expect to be thrown into all shapes, if I attempt to get on my feet, and at the table right fortunate shall I consider myself if I do not get the contents of my plate on my lap, but all this goes off cheerfully

⁵⁷ Suzanne J. Stark, "Mates at Sea: The Adventures of 19th-Century Captains' Wives," The Log of Mystic Seaport (Spring 1986): 26.

⁵⁸ Stark 27.

⁵⁹ Dreutt, "Those Female Journals," 123.

with the one consoling thought that if the breeze lasts we shall soon be out of heavy weather.⁶⁰

A sea-wife, suitably named Gertrude Eager West, whom Bonham describes as the "more active feminist-type" of her study, bravely prepared for a gale:

The captain had lashed me to a chair below, because I insisted upon being near him, and the fury of the storm made it impossible to stand up anywhere. When the lower main topsail, main spencer and foresail were carried away, Captain West came below and ordered me to put on all the warm clothes I could wear and to make haste about it. I was so frightened that my fingers were numb but somehow I managed to put on four dresses over my bloomers. I knew without question that I was preparing for an open boat in that awful sea.⁶¹

Gertrude's attire stirred some talk aboard ship and would have been viewed as scandalous back home in her New England village, but it was sensible and she stuck to it.

"Rounding the Horn" was a formidable test of courage and endurance for sailing wives. Maria Higgins, aboard her husband's ship W.T. Babcock in 1884 with her two children, described how she felt passing this treacherous point of land.

I pray I may never have to go through such a siege again, for I actually believe I should die of fright--My faith in a Higher Power was all that kept me from being prostrated with fear. 18 vessels passed all damaged!⁶²

⁶⁰ Bonham 213.

⁶¹ Bonham 213; Interview, Gertrude Eager West's voyage on the Horatio, 1898-1899, Whiting & Hough, 266.

⁶² Maria Higgins Journal to her family, 27 March 1884, Maine Maritime Museum, Bath, Maine

That same day Maria added that her sea experience already was making her more courageous: "During this voyage I have felt that I could never go another voyage but as the weather brightens my courage gets stronger." However, several months later during a gale she wrote, "I stowed myself down on the floor behind our bed, I was so frightened." The sea stove in their hen coop, but the hens were rescued.

Mary Wallis, on a voyage to New Zealand, Fiji and Manila aboard the Maid of Orleans of Salem in 1851, colorfully described the gales after doubling the Cape of Good Hope, when for forty days she was unable to go on deck:

Sometimes for a week at a time we did not enjoy one night of rest. The multiplicity of sounds and noises on board were truly deafening [.] every beam and board appeared to be called upon to make some hideous noise, they would creak and yell, and squall, and groan, and cry, and moan while every moveable thing would hop, and skip, and jump, and leap, and dance about as though all the Salem and Scotch witches were holding a grand wake and trying to excel each other in feats of agility.⁶³

Describing the constant role of the ship, she wrote: "Sometimes when we think we are going up we go down, and when we think we shall eat, our food is jerked to the other side of the cabin, Oh dear dear may I never know any more of Cape of Good Hope weather after this passage." Delighted to be on shore in Manila, Mary commented on the sea in personal

⁶³ Mary Davis Cook Wallis Journal, 1851-1853, aboard Maid of New Orleans of Salem, typewritten transcript 3, Peabody Museum, Salem, MA.

terms, addressing it as a man whom she could never love instead of a woman as sailors often did:

How delightful to be ashore again. Although I am under great obligation to Old Ocean, for bearing me safely on his bosom for so many years yet I am no lover of his. I am always glad to turn from him to the shores; there are more comforts to be found there but the comforts of Ocean are troublesome at best and always uncertain.⁶⁴

Mary Wallis' journal is a literary work of poetic imagery and descriptions of the sea. Filled with rich descriptions of the native customs of New Zealand, Fiji, New Caledonia and the Philippines (even the missionary trials), it is also a document of anthropological interest and value.

Wives aboard trading vessels had to brave rounding the Horn and the Cape, but whaling wives must endure the added unpleasant and dirty business of whaling--the work of a slaughterhouse aboard ship. Although much of the butchering was done in the water, the boiling always made a mess of the ship. Sometimes a dead whale, called "a stinker" by the sailors, was recovered from a beach and brought to the ship causing an abominable smell. After the Nautilus crew had recovered a stinker and killed a whale of its own, Lucy Smith observed:

Our vessel is the dirtiest place I ever saw as there has been no chance to clean up as there is the blubber of the one whale on deck besides casks of oil and the oil has run out of the blubber so it is frequently scooped up off the deck. They have now nearly finished trying the stinking

⁶⁴ Mary Wallis Journal, 1 May 1851.

blubber and got the blubber room nearly cleared.
The blubber on deck will not smell so.⁶⁵

Eliza Williams described what it was like aboard the Florida after a good catch:

...the ship is the dirtiest place that I ever saw when they are cutting in and trying out whales, especially when there is the fat of five on board...the Men were at work up to their waists in blubber...seldom have they as much blubber together in warm weather...the smell of the oil is quite offensive to me.⁶⁶

Although a whaling ship was not a fastidious New England housewife's dream, for wives like Eliza it represented the smell of money, which meant they could return home. "I can bear it all first rate," she wrote, "when I consider that it is filling our ship all the time and by and by it will all be over and we will go home."⁶⁷

These various physical discomforts at sea were the initiation rites which every sailor, male or female, had to endure. More frightening were the psychological stresses which women, and probably a number of men, often suffered. This disorder, like seasickness, was usually temporary but no less real or disturbing. Eliza Williams was aware that the everyday commotion aboard a whaler could drive anyone to distraction, especially a nervous person:

...the constant noise of heavy chains on deck; the driving of the hoops; the turning over of the

⁶⁵ De Pauw 141

⁶⁶ Eliza William's Journal, 11 November 1858, Williams 26.

⁶⁷ De Pauw 140-141.

casks of oil till it seemed as if the ship shook; and the loud orders of the Officers--all together, would make a nervous person go distracted I think, but it cannot be avoided on board a whale ship.⁶⁸

Even spunky Mrs. Crapo on her voyage to England in her husband's twenty-foot whaling boat complained: "A terrible weakness had taken hold of her, and she often said she did not care whether she ever reached England or not."⁶⁹

Captain Watts' wife went mad during a sea disaster aboard the H.S. Gregory of Thomaston, Maine. Remaining locked in her cabin with her eleven-year-old son Charles, she played the organ her husband had given her. She recovered once she was ashore but could not recollect the details of the rescue. The voyage of 1883 had been enough for young Charles, but his mother completed forty years of sailing with her husband and lived "sound as a bell" well into her nineties.⁷⁰

Captain Charles Sisson's wife sacrificed her life to remain with her husband at sea. He described her last thoughts aboard ship in 1874 in the face of her own pain and death:

...she said I have no fear of death...To think that I shall never again see my Dear Children and friends after an absence of nearly two years...I said to her that I thought she would be so much more comfortable at Home but she said no that was

⁶⁸ Eliza William's journal, 14 September 1858, Williams 36.

⁶⁹ Bonham 214.

⁷⁰ Bolte 170; Norman W. Drinkwater Jr. and Perry Holmes, n.t., Down East Magazine, Camden, Maine (n.d.).

not possible for she... would not like to be separated from me.⁷¹

Mrs. Sisson's sacrifice in leaving behind her children and friends for the sake of being with her husband was perhaps more than she could bear. She was torn by such guilt and depression that she was unable to fight off her physical illness. She died at sea soon after her husband wrote the following entry in his journal: "I came down and she was suffering very much and in reply to my questions of how she felt....Said she wished it was all over for then she could be at rest."⁷²

A touching example of psychological stress was Jane Worth aboard the Gazelle. The third mate, who spoke despairingly of the captain's wife throughout his journal, wrote these few lines in which he unknowingly revealed the suffering of Jane Worth:

Looking into the after cabin today I saw in a cradle two dolls and beside them sat a pretended mother singing and talking to them as a little girl would. It is useless to write anymore about that but I formed my opinion.⁷³

These kinds of disorders were more the exception than the rule, as most wives "found tasks and avocation which kept them busy enough to stave off these emotional breakdowns."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Charles C. Sisson Journal, 7 May 1876, Bonham 206.

⁷² Bonham 214.

⁷³ Gazelle's Journal, 10 February 1866, Whiting & Hough 114.

⁷⁴ Bonham 214.

Sea wives learned to persevere through many adversities on land and at sea, which made them flexible and often willing to give the sea a second chance.

Separation from Family and Friends

For women at sea, the main cause of loneliness and depression was homesickness. Women who chose to follow their husbands were severed from their families, children who were sometimes left behind to attend school, and female friends. Women writing at sea often expressed severe grief at having to part for such a long time from their "dear ones" ashore. This was sharpened by poignant moments of homesickness and a longing for familiar activities and places. Like women left alone ashore, loneliness was the greatest trial seafaring women had to endure. Eliza Williams pined for the two children she had left behind with her mother. She also missed the spiritual consolation and companionship of her church, which had been an important part of her life in Wethersfield, Connecticut.⁷⁵ She wrote in her diary how much she missed holidays and family celebrations. "Thanksgiving, that day of all others that we take so much comfort in at home with Friends, is over now; we knew nothing about it here."

⁷⁵ Dodson 63.

Several sailing wives mentioned how they missed being home on the Fourth of July. Eliza Williams lamented: "Oh, how I would like to be at home and enjoy this day with family and friends. We cannot celebrate it here with any degree of pleasure." She longed to be with her sons on special occasions: "Today is Stancel's birthday. Oh, how I wish I could see him! Words are too feeble to express the great desire of my heart to once more set eyes on those Dear Children, that Dear Home, Parents and Friends."⁷⁶ Jenny Prescott, too, was homesick on the Fourth of July, which was her birthday as well. "I suppose the India crackers (fire-crackers) are snapping all round you; and the house is cool and fragrant with roses and new hay. Someone will remember my birthday, I think."⁷⁷ Bound for St. Petersburg, Russia on July 4, 1838 aboard the bark Clement, Mary Dow of Newburyport, Massachusetts lamented:

Fourth of July and here I am in the great western ocean. I should really like to know where you all are at home today or where you are going. I suppose to take a ride on the beach or on some other pleasant excursion, but if I was at home I should rather take a walk in the woods for I have got almost enough of the sea and the sound of many waters has not that charm upon me it once had. I think I should prefer to hear the winds rustling through the leaves and the sweet music of birds

⁷⁶ Eliza Williams Journal, Whipple, The Whalers, 116.

⁷⁷ Jenny Prescott's Journal, 4 July 1884, Woolwich Times, Woolwich, Maine Historical Society.

than to hear the winds mournful sound sweeping over the waters.⁷⁸

Lucy Smith was sure she had made the right decision to accompany her husband aboard the Nautilus in October 1869. After two weeks at sea she wrote in her journal: "Although I have been seasick I have not yet been homesick, nor have I even for a moment thought I would wish my husband to be here without me." However, by Christmas she began to feel depressed. "Christmas is nearly gone and it has not been a very merry one to me, for I have felt unusually sad this afternoon. As I look forward there seems to be so little on earth to live for." Only her son Freddie, who was aboard, gave her a reason to go on.

Unmarried women traveling as passengers in the early nineteenth century also became weary of the sea and were homesick for their friends at home. Martha Wills, traveling aboard the Arab from Boston to Calcutta in 1849-1850, wished she were back home after a fortnight at sea:

I am sincerely weary of a sea life, and have regretted more than once that I left my pleasant quiet home to be tossed and tumbled about upon the ocean, with nothing to be seen but sky and water, excepting occasionally we descry a strange sail in

⁷⁸ Mary Dow's Journal aboard Clement en route to St. Peterburg, Russia, 4 July 1838, Peabody Museum, Salem, MA. Her journal ends abruptly on arrival in St. Petersburg. She comments on the warlike appearance of the place with soldiers everywhere and cannons and warships on the pier. Soldiers were constantly searching the Clement.

the distance, but not near enough for us to ascertain what she is, or where she's bound.⁷⁹

Later during her journey she seemed to be in good spirits in comparison to the missionary women aboard. She was critical of one missionary wife's choice to follow her husband without giving more thought to the sacrifice she was making:

Poor, Mrs. Campbell, wife to one of the missionaries, is quite homesick, and consequently her spirits are much depressed; I pity her, but think she ought to have considered the matter deeply and weighed well in her own mind, whether or not it would be possible for her to leave the home of her childhood, and give herself up entirely to one being, following him in what she considers the path of duty. I hope that time will soften her feelings and that she will be able to keep in the path which has been marked out for her to pursue.⁸⁰

Being isolated aboard ship from female community made it difficult and sometimes frightening for wives who were accustomed to seeking advice on childcare and domestic matters from other women. They now had to make difficult choices concerning the welfare of their babies alone without family and community support. Jenny Prescott was so busy caring for her baby in rough seas that she found little time to write her mother in Woolwich, Maine. "Many times when I have sat trotting the baby, I have wished I could write you, Mamma, some of the funny things that happen to the small girl and new mother, but I could not, for The Lady wouldn't

⁷⁹ Martha S. Wills's sea journal, 18 October 1849-Sept. 1850, typewritten transcript 9, Peabody Museum, Salem, MA.

⁸⁰ Martha Wills' sea journal, 35.

let me."⁸¹ Jenny missed her mother and the advice she could give her from the experience of having had ten children herself. When her baby was sick again, Jenny was not sure if it would be better to feed her condensed milk and oatmeal and wished some woman was nearby to advise her: "O, I do wish someone would tell me what to do. It is terrible to be obliged to decide about things one knows so little about as I do about babies, and babies are not Things, either."⁸²

Many seagoing children learned to enjoy life aboard ship, but Jenny Prescott's second daughter Corinna echoed her mother's desire to be back home in Maine: "Wouldn't it be nice if we could fly home to Granmama's house and then take our wings off?" Hearing a cricket chirping in the Chinese matting reminded the family of their home Down East. In spite of keeping busy with chores and her children aboard ship, Jennie admitted that her homesickness deterred her from making another sea journey: "I was never so home sick before, and if I get home safely this time I will never go to sea again, unless it is to California to visit Aunty Reed, and then I would not make the return passage if I could help it."⁸³

⁸¹ Jenny Prescott's Journal, 18 May 1884.

⁸² Jenny Prescott's Journal, 27 May 1884.

⁸³ Jennie Prescott's Journal, 25 August 1890 and 2 September 1890.

When it came time to leave the ship which had been their home for a number of years, sailing wives felt strong emotions. On Lucy Smith's arrival on New England shores in May of 1874, she had mixed feelings about leaving ship. "Although many times life on board has not been particularly pleasant...it is with feelings of pleasure not unmingled with pain that I shall bid her adieu. She has borne us safely thousands of miles and for more than four and a half years has been our home."⁸⁴

On land or sea maritime women were resilient, flexible and adaptable in making a home wherever or however possible to keep the family together. Several factors influenced New England sea captains' wives in their decision on whether or not to accompany their husbands at sea. Women who found waiting ashore intolerable for various reasons were more willing to give up what was near and familiar for the distant and uncertain. Some had few activities which interested them ashore and could only think about being with their husbands. Living with relatives, with no home of their own, tempted women to establish their own domestic realm aboard ship. There were others who disliked the constant and tedious round of domestic duties and looked forward to developing new interests at sea. "Stay-at-homes" were encouraged even more to leave the security of home by women

⁸⁴ DePauw 113-14.

who were already voyaging with their husbands and quite liked the freedom and adventure.

Most women cited devotion to their husbands as their reason for making a ship their home, but their journals and actions aboard ship reveal that they also harbored personal reasons for undertaking a life at sea. In spite of the many hardships and the isolation aboard ship, many sailing wives adjusted, found other kinds of community aboard ship and in port, and even took on new roles which a woman ashore would hardly have considered.

CHAPTER VIII

OFF-SHORE

Far out: there's not a sail in sight;
We are alone upon the deep;
And now my heart grows strangely light,
As if with wild, unfettered sweep
'T would pierce that glorious air, as now
Our vessel cleaves this surging tide,
And like the foam-flakes from our prow,
Fling all earth's petty cares aside;
'T is joy to think that I am free
As these wild winds far out at sea.¹

The powerful natural surroundings of the great oceans often unleashed nineteenth century women's creative impulses. This sailing wife poetically expresses her joy and sense of freedom being "alone upon the deep," far from the petty chores and worries of life ashore. Particularly for the poetical, the sea was a symbol of a positive experience of merging with a larger reality beyond the mundane, everyday routine of their domestic roles. Secretly, some women perceived the ocean as a highway which would take them away from the daily bondage of a patriarchal culture. Preoccupied with duties at home, they normally refrained from expressing too boldly a desire to be free from the

¹ Elizabeth G.B. Barrett, The Poems of Elizabeth G. Barber Barrett (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866) 164.

confinement of women's place. Poetry was an acceptable vehicle through which some women expressed their most intimate desires and spiritual longings. The sea was an important metaphor through which women alluded to their desire for a spiritual unification with nature and the larger world of human experience.

Emily Dickinson's poem "Wild Nights" expresses the futility of the "Heart in Port." Her image of the sea is a powerful symbol of the human emotion of merging with a larger reality--a self-realization beyond the confinements of home and a patriarchal system which denied her free expression.

Wild nights---Wild nights!
 Were I with thee
 Wild nights should be
 Our Luxury!

Futile---the Winds---
 To a Heart in port---
 Done with the Compass---
 Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden---
 Ah, the Sea!
 Might I but moor-Tonight
 In Thee!²

Celia Thaxter, a popular nineteenth-century woman poet, who grew up offshore on New Hampshire's Isle of Shoals, wrote a poem called "Land-locked," which bears a striking

² Jane E. Vallier, Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters and Works of Celia Thaxter (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1982) 82; Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960) 333.

resemblance to Dickinson's "Wild Nights" and was perhaps written the same year. Jane Vallier in her book on Celia Thaxter describes this poem as an invitation to the reader "to hear a double monologue: a song about the beauties of nature, and the tale of a woman trapped literally in her marriage and home, and psychologically in a patriarchal system which denied her free expression of the truth as she knew it. Through the imagery she reveals that it is a living death."³ The sea had a similar significance for both women poets---a positive symbol of "merging with a larger security-providing reality in which the self is immersed."⁴

Seafaring women did not always view the sea in the same positive light as reflected in the poems of Barrett, Dickinson or Thaxter. Julia Bonham in a perceptive article on women's experiences at sea, quotes Barrett's poem and observes that she "often associated the sea with death and misery in her verse." Elizabeth Barrett experienced many of the horrors of sailing life aboard her husband's ship and eventually died at sea of cholera. Bonham notes that the "interrelationship between verbal expression and mood was not a phenomenon unique to the ocean environment."⁵

³ Vallier 50.

⁴ Vallier 52-53.

⁵ Julia C. Bonham, "Feminist and Victorian: The Paradox of the American Seafaring Woman of the Nineteenth Century," American Neptune 37.3 (1977): 204.

Seafaring women vacillated between love and hate for the sea because many viewed traveling aboard their husbands' ships as the lesser of two hardships. Like Herman Melville in Moby Dick, sailing women sometimes associated the sea with the negative experiences of loneliness, isolation, and emotional chaos--feelings which engulfed them from time to time aboard ship.

Dickinson and Thaxter never experienced the reality of the seafaring life, but idealized the ocean as a metaphor for women's awakening and re-unification with nature. Sailing wives physically escaped the confinements of home, which Dickinson and Thaxter attempted to do spiritually through their poetry. Although these women, too, often viewed the sea as a symbol of their immersion in the eternity of life, they were forced to deal with the sea in practical terms and wrote avidly about their lives aboard ship. Joan Druett, who has studied and written about New England women's whaling journals, describes them as giving us "an unrivalled picture of life at sea....While men might write about whales and whale-killing, drunkenness and mutiny, the women wrote about the mundane things, the daily struggle to make a home in that most unhome-like place, a whaling vessel."⁶

⁶ Joan Druett, "Those Female Journals," The Log of Mystic Seaport 40.4 (1989): 124.

This chapter focuses on why women kept sailing journals, how they found community at sea and in port to help them overcome feelings of loneliness at sea, the roles they assumed aboard ship, and in what ways they took on the challenges presented by a predominately male environment. Because seafaring women have recently become a popular topic for nautical, family and women historians, this study does not attempt to deal with all aspects of women's lives at sea. It explores certain reoccurring themes found in women's sea journals in an attempt to answer the following questions: How did women compensate for a lack of family and female companionship and adjust to the all-male shipboard environment? How did the seafaring experience allow women to take on new non-traditional roles? In what ways did women's experience at sea encourage them to extend and enhance their traditional female roles? What aspects of the experience led to women's increased self-realization, independence and self-esteem?

"Time to Journalize"

Relieved of many domestic duties, sailing wives found more time to keep daily journals. This typically feminine past-time of nineteenth-century women they continued even more ambitiously during long days at sea. A striking characteristic of women's sea journals is that they are quite

different from the traditional ships' logs. They are thus valuable, first-hand documentations of what life at sea was really like. Like those kept by pioneer women on the overland trail, sea journals encompassed the four general categories of women's nineteenth-century journals: 1) travel diary, 2) public journal, 3) journal of conscience, and 4) daily record.⁷ The first two were written for others to read and often were sent home as a journal/letter to inform and entertain relatives and friends. Mary Brewster stated the purpose of her journal on her first day out on her husband's whaleship Tiger:

I have thought best to keep some account of this time as it passes and should I live to return my friends can see what I have been doing, where we have been, and perhaps by reading this form some correct ideas as regards my feelings whilst absent, ...It will also pass away many moments pleasantly and at some future period be a source of pleasure to my Husband and self to review these pages.⁸

The sea inspired women of a more religious inclination, like Harriet Houdlette (discussed in Chapter IV), to continue to keep a diary of conscience to check on her religious progress. As her husband's bark Edinburg weighed anchor in Providence River, Harriet saw her voyage as destined by God in Whose hands she put her complete trust:

...in a few hours it is probable we shall be on the Bosom of the Ocean, the assurance I feel that

⁷ Druett, "Those Female Journals," 115.

⁸ Druett, "Those Female Journals," 115. Mary Brewster's journal, G.W. Blunt Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT.

I am filling the situation marked out by my heavenly father enables me to put my whole trust in him and he who tempereth the wind to the shorn lamb will I trust be our preserver and protector.⁹

Women were also inspired by the sea to write poetry in their journals as did Betsy Tower, who accompanied her husband on most of his voyages. At the bottom of the pages of her journal she wrote verses expressing her love of the seafaring life. "A life on the Ocean wave is wild and free," one verse read, "A life on the Ocean is the one for me."¹⁰ Mary Lawrence composed a three-stanza poem in her journal to celebrate her tenth wedding anniversary at sea:

Stoics have smiled and poets talked
Of love's first fitful boons;
But we in heightening bliss have walked
'Neath scores of "honey moons."

Mary's husband passed the day looking out for whales.¹¹

The journals women wrote vividly depicted the joys and fears of a life at sea. These were nearly always missing from the captains' logs or writings of mostly illiterate officers and crews. A captain's log was usually limited to observations of weather conditions, whales and ships sighted. Only extraordinary events were recorded, and women's activities aboard ship were rarely seen as worthy of comment. Captain Lewis began his journal aboard the Corinthian

⁹ Harriet Houdlette Diary, 10 August 1843, Typed Transcript 66, Peabody Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

¹⁰ Druett, "Those Female Journals," 116.

¹¹ Linda Grant DePauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982) 124.

in 1866 with the following terse description: "At 9 a.m. all hands came on board and made all sail and went to sea with 32 men and wone Lady all told." He never mentions this "wone Lady," his wife Ethelinda, again until she fell and hurt her hand a year and a half later. In contrast Eliza Williams vividly expressed her feelings on her first day at sea aboard the Florida in 1858:

Now I am in the place that is to be my home, possibly for 3 or 4 years; but I can not make it appear to me so yet it all seems so strange, so many Men and not one Woman beside myself; the little Cabin that is to be all my own is quite pretty; as well as I can wish, or expect on board of a Ship. I have a rose geranium to pet...and I see there is a kitten on board.¹²

Later Eliza discussed the whaling venture in great detail in her characteristic matter-of-fact style.

After setting sail with her new husband in 1911 in his downeaster for the West Indies, Dorothea Balano confessed that she hated keeping a diary. She admitted, however, that it was "a relief valve when things go wrong or when something happens that should be recorded for explaining to my children the whims and waywardness of their roving parents."¹³ Nearly a year later she still detested writing in her diary but noted: "...I have been so busy that I have

¹² De Pauw, 108; Eliza William's journal aboard the Florida, 1858-1861, Harold Williams, ed., One Whaling Family (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964) 3.

¹³ Dorothea Belano's Journal, 14 May 1911, James W. Balano, ed., The Log of the Skipper's Wife (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1979) 15.

given in to my detestation for writing instead of living, but, for my son and daughter and some imaginary posterity, the diary must be kept alive, so will note down briefly what happened."¹⁴ She was wrong when she wrote "I'm sure my children will never get beyond page one in this diary of mine, but I really don't care, because it has served me well to record my thoughts, my spites, and some things to look back upon, such as o meu Rio, amor meu."¹⁵ In 1979 her son James published her spiritedly outspoken account of a life at sea with her capricious captain Fred.

Even at sea, some women continued to write about themselves in a self-deprecating manner and to belittle their efforts at journal-keeping. Martha Wills, an unmarried woman traveling aboard the Arab from Boston to Calcutta, berated her writing:

Here am I, scribbling away in my poor journal, poor enough it will be, as everything is which [emanates] from [me], for my brain is in such a confused state that I am not able to concoct anything worth reading, but as it is not really intended for other eyes than my own it is of no great consequence, however, I do hope that I shall be able to read some extracts from it to amuse my friends.¹⁶

Like the unmarried Sarah Trask in Chapter III, she confessed her confused state and belittled her self-expression.

¹⁴ Dorothea Balano's Journal, 8 March 1912, Balano 124.

¹⁵ Dorothea Balano's Journal, 5 May 1912, Balano 142-143.

¹⁶ Martha S. Wills' Journal 8, 18 October 1849-September 1850, typewritten transcript 172 pp., Peabody Museum, Salem, MA.

Another time Martha was concerned that her journal expressed excessive self-absorption: "Time to journalize, but cannot find much to say, excepting to express my own feelings, and I fear so much egotisme will render my journal rather insipid to any friend into whose hands it may chance to fall."¹⁷ Scattered throughout her journal are sentimental poems, several about mother and daughter; observant descriptions of nature, particularly sunsets and sea birds; and exalted philosophizing about God and Eternity.

Young Helen Jackson Piper, aboard the Benjamin Sewall bound for Australia from Vancouver, Canada, closed her sea journal in a critical fashion but assured her family she was not homesick:

Well, I must bring this Journal to a close and only wish it were better than it is, for I feel it to be a very poor affair. Above all things do not get the idea that I am homesick for I am not the least bit, and don't intend to be....please do not let this go outside the house for I should feel ashamed for anyone but your own dear selves to see it. Finis.¹⁸

Sailing wives often resorted to writing in their journals when they were at a loss as to what to do or to comfort themselves in worrisome situations. Mary Russell was the first whaling wife to go to sea and to keep a

¹⁷ Martha Wills' Journal 36.

¹⁸ Helen Jackson Piper's Journal on board the Benjamin Sewall for Freemantle, Australia. Helen Jackson Piper Papers, 1901-1959, and "The Girl in the Lifeboat," transcript by HJP and ed. William & Esther Prosser, 1959, 1-112. Schlesinger Library for Women's History, Cambridge, MA.

journal on her second voyage. One entry during a gale relates how her son William, a member of the crew, came into the cabin to comfort her when the ship was about to sink. She scribbled her prayers in her book. Eliza Williams, too, used her journal to comfort herself when conditions were upsetting. Watching a whale being killed alongside their ship was not a pretty sight, and perhaps her following description of the gory scene made it easier to handle:

I went on deck a little while the boats were fast to him. I stood looking over the stern at him, the poor fellow was too much exhausted to run but was laying still the most of the time, rolling and spouting thick blood. I was astonished on looking through the glass at him to see how thick he threw the blood out of his spout holes. They were quite near to the ship and I could see plain all the movements of the boats. The whale went down and stopped some minutes and when he came up it seemed as if he threw the blood thicker than before. He came up near the boats and threw blood all in the boats and all over some of the men. I did not like to look at the poor whale in his misery any longer and so came down below to write a few words about it.¹⁹

Like Melville's Moby Dick, Eliza Williams' vivid descriptions of whaling give us a realistic and valuable record of an era.

Even women like Eliza who were alert to the details of their surroundings sometimes complained about the lack of stimulation. "I want something new to write about," she wrote. "I have nothing now but the same thing over and over, unless I give a description of our hog stock, which I

¹⁹ DePauw 123-4.

might do if I felt much interested, for it is not to be sneezed at." Apparently writing about the ship's livestock sparked an interest as she often described it later in her journal.²⁰ Six-year-old Laura Jernegan also became bored with her journal writing, which she found less interesting than the work going on at the try pots:

the men are boiling out the blubber in the try pots. the pots are real large. when the men are going to boil out the blubber, too men get in the pots and squis out the blubber and are way up to there knees of oil. when the men at the mast head say there she blows, Papa gives them 50 pounds of tobacco. I can't think of much to write. I went to bed last night and got up this morning. we had baked potatoes for supeper, and biscute. would you like to hear some news well I dont know of any.²¹

Joanna Colcord, born aboard her father's ship in 1882 in the South Seas off the coast of New Caledonia, later wrote:

An educative feature of seafaring life was the stimulation it gave to letter-writing. Separation between members of families for long periods created a desperate eagerness to hold the absent members close, by sharing, through letters, every minor happening. We children imitated our elders and kept long and detailed journal letters, both at sea and at home, learning in this way to break through the reticence of the average New Englander and describe with some degree of vividness what we saw and experienced. I feel certain that this early training in self-expression had a profound influence in turning both my brother and myself in the direction of writing.²²

²⁰ DePauw 125.

²¹ DePauw 125.

²² Joanna C. Colcord, "Childhood At Sea," typewritten transcript, Penobscot Marine Museum, Searsport, Maine.

Journal writing provided a safety valve for sailing wives to express their fears and frustrations at sea in a predominately male world. Keeping a record of shipboard events and places visited reinforced a sense of achievement and pride for having written something worth preserving for posterity. Browsing through the pages of many women's sea journals, one is struck by how candidly these diarists expressed their reactions to this new, strange world they were experiencing; as well as how vividly they described life aboard ship, the good and evil aspects of nature, the people, culture, and scenery of foreign lands. Without a doubt many of these journals are of literary quality and provide us with an unique glimpse into how women perceived the world of the other--the world of men and people of different cultures. Women's seafaring journals offer tremendous potential for further historical, psychological, anthropological and literary study.

Finding Community at Sea

Putting pen to paper was one way women were able to connect spiritually and psychologically with the family and the community they had left behind. Women also found immediate social and physical ways to overcome their homesickness, which enabled them to better cope with life at sea. The best cure for loneliness at sea was "gamming," a

social ritual of visiting between ships at sea. This custom had developed among whalers for whom exchange of information was more important than getting rapidly to a destination.²³ There were whole floating communities of New England whaling families in the Arctic seas during the summer, and the "gam" flourished as women often spent the day visiting back and forth on neighboring ships. Visiting captains might also bring letters from home, fresh food, newspapers, and news from other ships.²⁴ Mary Lawrence awoke one morning in the Bering Sea to discover fifteen whalers around the Addison. Many of the captains and their wives already knew each other and were neighbors and relatives of one another back home. Whipple describes their get-togethers: "Just as the women had walked down the street to visit with their friends in New Bedford or Nantucket, so they now rode from ship to ship in the whaleboats whenever the weather permitted--and when the boats were not whaling."²⁵

The elaborate etiquette of the gamming ritual began with "speaking a ship": the two vessels maneuvered close enough to one another so that the two captains could speak to one another. First they exchanged news about home, whales, weather, reefs, and other ships in the area. Then

²³ De Pauw 118.

²⁴ Vita Dodson, "The Lady Ships," The Log of Mystic Seaport (n.d.): 53.

²⁵ A.B.C. Whipple, "The Whalers," The Seafarers (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1979) 124.

one captain would invite the other to gam, and if one was a "lady ship," it received the visitor because it was more homelike. The crew enjoyed the gam as well, and half of one crew joined half of the other crew so that they could do their own gossiping. While the captains met on one ship, the mates went aboard the other. A convenience called the "gamming chair" was devised for the ladies. It was a kind of armchair, often made from a barrel and rigged so that it could be raised and lowered over the ship's side. Thus the captain's wife did not have to climb a rope ladder and expose her ankles.²⁶ Susan Fisher described in her journal a typical "gam":

...we spoke the barque Shepardess, Capt. Waterhouse--He and his wife came on board and took tea with us. She was an entire stranger to me, but we had quite a good gam together. She was only eight months from home but was heartily sick of it. I 'comforted' her by telling her that she had seen only the best part of whaling, yet. We have been in sight of three ships that have ladies on board, one was an acquaintance, but we were both chasing whales and could not stop to speak.²⁷

Not only was the gam a typical Victorian social call, but the captains and ladies exchanged gifts--preserves, cookies, all kinds of pets from crickets to kittens, potted plants, as well as much needed articles. Mary Lawrence did some useful trading during several days of gamming in the Bering Sea in June 1858:

²⁶ De Pauw 118-119; Whipple, "The Whalers," 124.

²⁷ Susan Fisher journal, 21 June 1853, Whiting & Hough 28.

Mrs Skinner and myself made an exchange of articles that we most wanted. I wanted a skein of red sewing silk very much..., which she could supply me with, while she wanted a skein of blue yarn, which I had for her.²⁸

Visits sometimes continued overnight, and no woman who was starved for female companionship ever complained about the overcrowding in the cabin. In August 1853 Susan Fisher came back from gamming with the captain's wife to find four ladies from other ships waiting for her. All of them were old friends and they stayed the night. "It really seemed delightful," she wrote, "to have someone to talk with, besides getting whales and losing anchors, but the gam is up...." Catching whales was why they were at sea, so Susan Fisher bid her female friends farewell: "In a few hours we shall be many miles apart so farewell female society for the present."²⁹ Unlike ashore, female visiting at sea was under the control of their husbands, whose priority was the business of whaling. Eliza Williams commented about the joys and disappointments of gamming cut short by the hunt for whales, which definitely came first:

Mrs. Randolph stayed with me all night. Capt. R. and my Husband thought it best that we separate, as they might see whales, so Mrs. Randolph and the Boy have gone aboard their Ship. I was some disappointed, as well as herself, for we had

²⁸ De Pauw 120.

²⁹ Journal of Susan Fisher, 5 September 1853, Whiting & Hough 31.

reckoned upon a nice gam today, but it is whaling times now, and the ladies must submit.³⁰

If the weather was too rough to gam or the men were in a hurry to follow whales, the women stood atop the afterdeck houses and vigorously waved their handkerchiefs at one another. "Mrs. Gibbs and myself had another flourish of pocket handkerchiefs," Mary Lawrence wrote one windy afternoon.³¹ Sometimes, however, it was consoling for a sailing wife just to know there were other women out there at sea. Mary Dow, aboard the Clement en route to Russia in 1838, wrote speaking the ship Triumph and seeing two ladies aboard: "So I am not the only female on this wide waste of water."³²

Sailing women enjoyed visiting each other even more ashore in certain favorite ports in South America, Mexico, and the Pacific. Here ships gathered and sea wives could often spend a few days or several months ashore meeting and visiting with other sea captains' wives. Hilo and Honolulu, Hawaii were the most popular meeting places in the Pacific. There were small colonies of whaling families that came and went from these ports. When whaleships left for the dangerous arctic whaling grounds, the captains' families often preferred to remain safely in Hawaii. Honolulu had become

³⁰ Eliza Williams' Journal, 28 April 1860, Bonham 217.

³¹ De Pauw 117-118; Whipple, "The Whalers," 124.

³² Mary Dow's sea journal, 17 June 1838, Peabody Museum, Salem, MA.

the center for whaling in the Pacific. Eliza Williams on her first visit described it as delightfully homelike, almost a miniature New England:

It is beautiful and green with nice flowers and patches of Yarrow and Bananas growing. It is a pretty place...and reminds me much of home. I went out shopping two or three times and thought it a good deal like shopping at home.³³

Wives welcomed a rest from the hardships aboard ship and indulged in shopping, visiting, and churchgoing. Hawaii was where letters and news from home might be waiting, and permanent residents on the islands offered a friendly and welcoming community for these wandering families. New England women loved Hawaii's tropical paradise where flowers, beautiful scenery, and warm weather abounded. It stood in sharp contrast to the rigorous and demanding life aboard ship.³⁴ They rode horseback along the beaches and up into the valleys, enjoyed picnics, afternoon tea and croquet, supper parties and evenings of band music. "I kept wondering," one wife wrote about Hawaii, "if I had died and gone to heaven."³⁵ Mrs. Alexander Whelden, wife of the captain of the bark John Howland, dramatically praised the islands' natural beauty in 1868:

I am loth to lay aside my pen, so enraptured am I with the beauty of these islands...All that is purchasable in the capitals of the world is not to

³³ De Pauw 116.

³⁴ Dodson 63.

³⁵ Whipple, "The Whalers," 121.

be weighed in comparison with the simple enjoyment that may be crowded into one hour of life on these islands of beauty... Soon we shall say goodbye to this flowery bank, this ripple-marked shore, looking no longer upon the white caps of blooming vines, but with moistened eyes turn our gaze to the ever-changing white-caps of the restless sea.³⁶

For Sarah Luce home was aboard the ship she had become so accustomed to during the long months at sea. She stopped at Honolulu's Cricketers Hotel in 1871, where fourteen American captains, wives and children were staying at the time. When she returned to the ship after a five week visit, she wrote: "Formed several very pleasant acquaintances, made some very pleasant calls. Enjoyed some fine walks, but I am glad to get back to my home on board ship."³⁷

Most seafaring women learned to adjust to hardships and loneliness aboard ship and eventually were able to call it home as Sarah Luce did. However, maintaining a sense of community outside of the narrow limits of the ship was still important for these traveling nineteenth-century New Englanders. They struggled to keep open communication with the outside world by writing letters and journals to loved ones at home, gambling at sea and socializing with others in foreign ports. Just as visiting was extremely important in alleviating loneliness for women left ashore, gambling and

³⁶ MacKinnon Simpson, *Whalesong: A Pictorial History of Whaling and Hawai'i* (Honolulu: Beyond Words Publishing Company) 1986, 45.

³⁷ Dodson, 64; Whiting & Hough 188.

meeting other New Englanders in foreign ports enabled seafaring women to overcome the loneliness of a life at sea.

Domesticity at Sea

Besides busying themselves with such mundane daily chores as sewing and caring for children, sailing wives engaged in female-oriented hobbies which were fashionable for Victorian ladies to pursue. Clara Baker installed an organ and played Gilbert and Sullivan tunes, painted china and pictures, kept scrapbooks, and made pictures and wreaths of colorful, gelatin-laden seaweed from the Chincha Islands.

It was quite common for women to be denied galley privileges because "the kitchen was the exclusive domain of the cook." The cook and steward prepared and served the meals to the captain's family and the officers. Women cooked only as upper-class ladies did ashore, in an emergency or for fun. Washing and cleaning were other forms of "women's work" that captain's wives did only if they wished. However, many wrote about doing copious quantities of ironing like women ashore, as for example Margaret Drinkwater and her husband's fifty-two shirts for every voyage. Lucy Smith wrote: "Have finished washing but my ironing will take some time as I have ten bosom shirts, two starched dresses, besides several doz collars and cuffs." The next day she ironed from eight A.M. until three in the

afternoon and added, "My hands are almost blistered holding on to the iron. I feel very tired."³⁸

Although there were advantages to small quarters which greatly simplified housekeeping, sailing wives were committed to family life and felt obligated to perform duties similiar to what they had been accustomed to ashore.³⁹ One important differance, however, was that they must now accomplish their domestic tasks within cramped quarters, amidst the pitch and roll of the ship and with fewer amenities and sometimes less help than they had had ashore. Jenny Prescott described her chores on a typical stormy day at sea:

I have done a big day's work today. Four button-holes....It is blowing a gale and has been for twenty-four hours....The ship is hove to under a lower-main-topsail. It is very rainy and the water comes in through the skylights. Attending to the children, the cat and dog, watching and reading the barometer and bearing patiently the rolling and pitching has made my day's work.⁴⁰

Scott Dow, writing about his Maine seafaring family, tells how his sailing mother kept busy attending to household duties aboard their merchant sailing ship. Sailing with three small children (two others were left ashore to attend school), she had as much to do as any woman ashore. Four times she went to sea with a six weeks' old baby,

³⁸ DePauw 139.

³⁹ Bonham 215.

⁴⁰ Jenny Prescott's Journal, 2 September 1890.

taking a goat aboard to supply milk for the children. She had to do all the sewing for the family, wash and iron, and administer old family remedies whenever someone was sick. Yet she still found time to read the Bible through.⁴¹

Maria Higgins, a dedicated and tolerant mother, sailing with her family on the W.T. Babcock in 1884, worried about not doing enough aboard ship. She felt that she "must turn over a new leaf," even though she accomplished many domestic tasks and taught her children reading, spelling and arithmetic each morning. She and the children also tended the chickens, hens, two sheep, two pigs, and dog and cat they had aboard. Watching how her children "race around brown, wild and barefooted like Indians," she commented on how easily they adapted to sea life and that her boy was less care than on land.⁴²

A whaler was a small place and when boiling was going on, nothing was clean. Lucy Smith complained, "I have done no work for two days past except a little mending. The ship is so dirty that I do not like to get out any work." However, her son seemed to enjoy himself. "Freddie is in the midst of everything, as dirty as a little pig, then,

⁴¹ Scott J. Dow, "Captain Jonathan Dow, The Seafaring Days of Our New England Family," 1948, Penobscot Maine Maritime Museum, Searsport, Maine.

⁴² Maria Higgins' letters to her family, 21 January 1884, 5 February 1884, 19 October 1884, Maine Maritime Musuem, Bath, Maine.

rubbing around me, together with what I get from the ship, my clothes are too dirty to take any work on."⁴³

Free of domestic duties, Jenny Prescott was content to have time to read, but she admitted her guilt at being idle:

I am enjoying "Women's Rights" this afternoon. I have laid on the settee reading a novel while the cabin was washed. It is great fun. I am glad it is improper for the Old Woman to clean paint, but old habits are so strong that I think I should be tempted to shut the doors and try it.⁴⁴

Dorothea Balano, a former school teacher in Puerto Rico, worried that she was too caught up in a round of daily chores aboard her husband's ship and was neglecting her reading: "Am I losing all my intelligence and ideals in my petty round of detail? I hope not?"⁴⁵

In contrast to the trend of late nineteenth-century industrialized America where children were educated in public schools, mothers taught their children to read, write and do arithmetic aboard ship. New England women were usually better educated than their husbands who, hoping for a career at sea, had signed aboard ship at an early age. Remaining at home women received more years of education and were better able to instruct their children in academic subjects. As children grew older, they were often left

⁴³ DePauw 141.

⁴⁴ Jenny Prescott's journal, 16 October 1883, Woolwich Times, August 1982.

⁴⁵ Dorothea Balano's journal, 20 June 1911, Balano 20.

behind with relatives to continue their education.⁴⁶

Joanna Colcord described how lessons went on daily aboard her father's ship. Parents consulted with teachers at home before sailing, and they covered the same subjects from the same books that were studied ashore. What differed, wrote Joanna was: "We were living geography, although we knew only the edges of the continents....Mathematics, too, was a living subject; our vessel found the way about the world by its aid....I took my final examinations from Searsport High School in Hongkong harbor, the questions being sent out by mail, and the tests, proctored by my mother."⁴⁷

The captain's wife often nursed sailors who were injured or sick as the captain and officers had little time to care for ailing seamen. Many brought aboard their own collections of dried herbal medicines. Mary Stark, aboard the clipper B.F. Hoxie, wrote home on a passage from Honolulu to New York in 1855:

There are 4 of the crew sick & laid up---one I think has got the consumption [tuberculosis]. He has a hard cough & looks very pale & pitiful. I had a syrup made for him yesterday of boneset, catnip & a little wormwood. I don't know how good it might be, but wish I had an armful of herbs & knew the good of them & other medicine.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Dodson 62.

⁴⁷ Joanna Colcord, "Childhood At Sea," 7-8, Penobscot Marine Museum, Searsport, Maine.

⁴⁸ Stark 27.

Carlista Stover felt rewarded at sea by conducting a religious school every night and on Saturdays and Sundays. She instructed the crew about the evils of intemperance, her favorite topic, and read the Bible. She noted that attendance was particularly good after a storm.⁴⁹

The Sabbath and weekly evening meetings are all well attended, and the crew seem eager to hear the Word. Without this social 'Sweet Hour of Prayer' we should ourselves be robbed of much enjoyment and for the seamen, who have so little opportunity, in their isolated life, to enjoy religious privileges, they are rich in blessings.⁵⁰

Feeling morally responsible for the crew, she acted as a missionary aboard ship.

Purely domestic activities were not enough for whaling wives, who were fully aware that filling barrels with oil meant going home sooner. Watching boiling going on aboard the Cowper in 1853, Susan Fisher wrote: "Everyone on board is busy enough except myself and I have looked on until I am tired. I am not used to seeing so much business carried on without being able to lend a helping hand."⁵¹ Women who wanted to be involved in the commercial activities of the ship gave a female skill, such as sewing, a maritime application. Many sailing wives wrote about how they had made or repaired the ships sails. Lucy Smith had a sewing machine

⁴⁹ Rita F. Peruti, "Portrait of a Seafaring Lady," 9, Munson Student Thesis, July 31, 1972, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT.

⁵⁰ Peruti 22. Carlista Stover's journal, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT.

⁵¹ DePauw 153.

aboard, which she used "to make a mainsail for one boat, a jib for another, and canvas cover for the chronometer box."⁵² Eliza Williams contributed to the safety of her home by sewing sails for her husband's boat: "Have sowed a little for the first time, helped my Husband make a sail for his boat. Quite pleasant. Helped to finish the sail today, then my Husband lowered his boat to try the sail."⁵³

Nineteenth-century sailing wives were traditional Victorian women conditioned to perform domestic pursuits no matter whether they found themselves on a lonely frontier or upon a vast ocean. They demonstrated a great deal of ingenuity and flexibility in being able to adapt their domestic pursuits to the business at hand, whether settling a new land or surviving at sea. Many continued performing their domestic chores aboard ship in spite of having the services of a cook and steward because of habit and a need to remain occupied and to feel useful. They found creative ways to expand their domestic roles and utilized free time to read, write letters and journals, and even learned new skills.

⁵² DePauw 153.

⁵³ Bonham 215; Eliza Williams' journal, 18 September 1858, Williams 7.

"The Captain's Best Mate": Taking on Atypical Roles

Aboard ship, women yearning for adventure and an opportunity to break away from traditional roles discovered opportunities to assert themselves, improve their confidence, and to test their strengths and capabilities in ways that were impossible ashore. The exigencies of seafaring often required that women expand their traditional feminine roles and even at times allowed them to take on atypical roles. Wives who were not particularly fond of or adept at feminine domestic pursuits found that life aboard ship offered them the opportunity to try their hand at traditional "masculine" activities, such as navigation, seamanship, keeping the ships' log and accounts. A number of whaling wives' journals abound with detailed descriptions of the business of whaling, which the whalers themselves were unable to record because of illiteracy or lack of time. Sailing wives often learned navigation and were invaluable in helping to set sights and stand watch. Vita Dodson describes how resourceful wives compensated for the monotonous and lonely life aboard ship and "...created within its narrow confines a life of interest, usefulness, and comfort. Each wife brought to her ship her own particular talents."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Dodson 60.

Becoming qualified in nautical affairs often enabled sailing wives to become ship's officers of a sort by taking their turns at the helm and standing watches. Mary Lawrence proudly entitled her journal kept aboard the Addison "The Captain's Best Mate." When a woman flaunted her authority too openly, the sailors might refer to the vessel derisively as a "hen frigate." Mark Twain mockingly portrayed a whaling wife he encountered in Honolulu who had grasped the "unladylike" language of her husband's business:

I have just met an estimable lady, Mrs. Captain Jollopson whose husband (with her assistance) commands the whaling bark Lucretia Wilkerson--and she said: 'While I was laying off and on before the post office, here comes a shipkeeper around the corner three sheets in the wind and his dead-lights stove in, and I see by the way he was bulling that if he didn't sheer off and shorten sail he'd foul my larboard stuns'l-boom. I backed off fast as I could, and swung out to him to port his helm, but it warn't no use; he'd everything drawing and I had considerable sternway, and he just struck me a little abaft the beam, and down I went, head on, and skunned my elbow. I shouldn't wonder if I'd have to be hove down.'⁵⁵

Despite Twain's derisive humor, women demonstrated more expertise as navigators at sea than Mrs. Jollopson did in navigating the streets of Honolulu. In New England seaport towns navigation was considered a necessary part of a girl's education, and Dukes County Academy on Martha's Vineyard advertised navigation as a subject taught in its "female department." The captain's wife aboard the Henry Pratt taught the second mate navigation, and after her husband

⁵⁵ DePauw 138.

died, established a school of navigation in London. Mrs. Reed, wife of the captain of the T.F. Oakes, was a proficient navigator and more competent at the helm than were any of the men aboard. When the ship was in trouble in 1897, with her husband sick, the first mate dead, and the crew dying of scurvy, she took command and saved the ship.⁵⁶

When Captain William Burgess of the ship Challenger became ill off the coast of South America in 1856, his wife Hannah handled all the navigation and nursed William until he died (at the age of twenty-seven) before they reached the port of Valparaiso. Hannah never went to sea again and never remarried, for she had promised William that no one else would be her "beloved." She died in 1917 at the age of eighty-two and was buried alongside her husband in a Cape Cod cemetery.

There are more heroic tales of women's saving the ship and crew with their navigation and leadership abilities. There is no evidence, however, of a woman's going to sea as a captain of a whaler or clipper, but as Herman Melville observed, "In time of peril, like the needle to the lodestone, obedience, irrespective of rank, generally flies to him who is best fitted to command." The "him" best fitted on a ship in the middle of the ocean could well be the captain's wife.

⁵⁶ DePauw 195-6.

Commenting in later years about her life on the bark Charles W. Morgan, where she spent her honeymoon in 1896, Honor Earle admitted: "A whaler, you know, is not the place to have the liveliest time in the world, so I applied myself to learning navigation."⁵⁷ A former mathematics teacher, she had no trouble mastering figures to determine latitude and longitude and became official navigator of the Morgan between 1895 and 1905.⁵⁸

"WOMEN RIVAL NAVIGATE HIGH LINE WHALERS" ran a headline in the Boston Globe on June 23, 1907 referring to two remarkable women, Honor Earle of the Charles W. Morgan and Marion Smith of the Josephine. "Both these women are the wives of the captains and their husbands are the captains of the ships, the report elaborated, but they are considered the equals of their husbands as navigators." That season the two whaling wives were cruising the sub-Antarctic Indian Ocean competing with each other to see whose voyage would be the most successful. Honors went to Marion Smith of the Josephine, who arrived home on July 13th with a catch worth over \$100,000 in the New Bedford market.⁵⁹

Charles Church became master of the Morgan in 1910 and his wife Charlotte, daughter of a San Francisco pilot,

⁵⁷ Dodson 60; Whiting & Hough 259.

⁵⁸ DePauw 158-9.

⁵⁹ Joan Druett, Petticoat Whalers (Auckland, New Zealand: Harper Collins, 1991) 126.

became the skilled navigator and keeper of the log until the ship was laid up at the end of her thirty-third voyage in 1913.⁶⁰

Aboard the Bangalore on their wedding trip around Cape Horn in 1906, Captain Banning decided to teach his new bride Georgia Maria Blanchard navigation and about the stars. He had bought her a sextant to take sights with him and a chart to plot positions. Georgia felt at home on board as she had spent most of her youth at sea with her parents and brothers and sisters. Banning grew up at sea and was a captain before he turned twenty. The couple worked sights together-- Banning at the sextant and Georgia at the chronometer. She took her turn on deck and they worked out the position of the ship. When the sun was not out, they took sights by the stars. Georgia learned to determine latitude by the moon. She also sewed, threaded needles for the sails, and in the evening walked the decks, read and listened to the phonograph.

As early as 1789, Catherine Hickling, a single woman passenger from London to Boston, received praise from the captain of the Neptune for her seamanship, although she admitted he treated her like a child:

I often stand at the Pump with Capn Scott in his watch, he says I am an admirable sailor, never sick, first in all the Ships work, such as heaving the Log, writing in the Logbook, makeing Nettles, weaving moth, pulling ropes, standing at Helm,

⁶⁰ Dodson 64.

boxing Compass, and a variety of other employments.⁶¹

Eleanor Creesy, wife of Captain Josiah Creesy of the famous clipper Flying Cloud, served as navigator on all its record-breaking runs.⁶² Both were born in Marblehead in 1814 and were devoted to the sea. "Nellie," who had watched other women of her family waiting at home for their sea-going husbands, decided that sitting by quietly was not for her; and so she took up the study of navigation."⁶³ In 1841 they married and went to sea together as captain and navigator, never again residing in Marblehead and never having children. Captain Creesy was the first clipper ship captain to agree to his wife's judgments, which were a key factor in the Flying Cloud's success.

In 1911 Dorothea Balano, who was sailing the Caribbean and the South Atlantic with her husband Fred, was relieved when he told her that she would be helping him with the ship's accounts and navigation. With her usual sarcastic humor, she wrote, "It was a relief to know that he didn't plan to keep me confined to the bed!"⁶⁴ She quickly became proud of her achievements in studying Bowditch and

⁶¹ Catherine Hickling's journal, 1 September 1789, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

⁶² Suzanne J. Stark, "Mates At Sea," The Log of Mystic Seaport (Spring 1986): 27.

⁶³ Jerry G. Florent, ed., "The Flying Cloud" in With All Possible Sails Set (New York: Hallmark Cards, Inc.) 1979.

⁶⁴ Dorothea Balano's journal, 14 May 1911, Balano 14.

contrasted her knowledge of theory with her husband's "by guess and by God":

I figured out the sights today and am beginning to understand navigation, celectial, that is. Fred hasn't the remotest idea of the theory behind it all and I do believe that if his tables were lost we'd sail in circles....I do believe that with a bit more study I might make up our own tables were they lost.⁶⁵

The women who took to learning navigation developed a great deal of pride in their accomplishments and were often recognized by newspapers back home. While their knowledge, skills, and services were drawn upon in times of emergency, these women were not considered for or accepted into nautical careers. Unfortunately, the time had not yet arrived in America when these remarkable women would be allowed to apply their skills to a career on land or sea as a means of supporting themselves or their families. For the time being they had to be content to be "the captain's best mate."

The Prime Ruler

By living with her husband in his working environment, a sea wife had the opportunity to observe him in a position of authority. Mary Lawrence who, with her five-year-old daughter Minnie, left New Bedford in 1856 aboard her husband's ship the Addison, was convinced she had made the right decision. "We are, as it were," she wrote in her

⁶⁵ Dorothea Balano's journal, 26 June 1911, Balano 23.

journal, "shut out from our friends in a little kingdom of our own of which Samuel is prime ruler. I should never have known what a great man he was if I had not accompanied him." She added that she hoped she would continue worthy of his love, and her confidence never waivered during the following years.

Captains and wives who made the decision to go to sea together not only had the opportunity of observing each other in their respective roles, but were given the chance to become more intimately acquainted with one another. Sailing together could be a positive experience as it was for Mary Lawrence, but it could also be a disappointing one if either mate failed to live up to the other's expectations.

The job of ship's captain was one of heavy responsibility which often caused the husband to be irritable and moody. Jenny Prescott dealt with her husband's stubbornness by resorting to her journal to release her frustration. "A man who will wipe off his chin with a dull razor when the mercury stands at 84o in the coolest spot to be found should have a right to look cross as he feels, so I'll just keep still and ease my mind by writing what isn't prudent to say."⁶⁶ Jenny understood the stress upon her husband, who

⁶⁶ Jenny Prescott's journal, 20 October 1883, Woolwich Times, August 1982.

must function with little sleep and remain always alert for dangerous rocks on approaching shores:

Charley is asleep on the lounge. Poor fellow, his legs have given out. He has been walking the deck for about twelve hours, looking for land through the mist and rain.⁶⁷

Sailing in the intense heat of the Indian Ocean was so uncomfortable for everyone that Jenny wrote her sister Cassie "never to come to China with her children in South-west Monsoon time." Her husband restlessly walked the deck while Jenny accompanied him knitting by moonlight.⁶⁸

Wives were sympathetic with their husbands' heavy responsibilities for ship and crew, as well as having to satisfy the demands of agents and owners back home. "I long to see my husband free from this vexacious business," wrote Mary Brewster, expressing a sentiment common among all her whaling sisters.

The trials of the business and the supreme authority held by the captain caused some to earn the reputation of being an unbending tyrant aboard ship. Occasionally, a captain's wife would take a stand against the harsh treatment of crew members. Charity Norton, urged by the ship's owners, sailed every voyage with her husband John, who otherwise might never have come back alive. A woman of

⁶⁷ Jenny Prescott's journal, 11 October 1890, Woolwich Times, Summer 1984.

⁶⁸ Jenny Prescott's journal, 13 October and 1 November, 1890, Woolwich Times, February 1985.

strong will and formidable appearance, she was beloved by the Ionia's crew for her warm heart. She courageously stood between the crew and her husband's tyrannies, particularly when he had been plagued by desertions and had the returned men bound to the rigging. Charity came out on deck and asked her husband, "John, what are those men in the rigging for?" John replied, "I'm going to lick 'em." Firmly Charity responded, "Oh no you're not." In the face of her opposition the hot-tempered captain backed down.⁶⁹

Often a wife had to remain below listening to the awful noises of a flogging filter down from the deck. Worst of all was when a wife knew that she could do little or nothing to stop her husband's tyrannical behavior. When one of the officers aboard the bark E. Corning flogged a seaman, Elizabeth Stetson wrote, "Sylvia flogged Jose Solas for getting the ship aback I do not think it was right," and underlined the entry in her fury. Although she was the captain's wife, she was unable to prevent cruel, punitive behavior.

Viola Fish Cook's husband was a bully by nature, a "bucko," and "his sadism disgusted and appalled her." After carrying out a multiple flogging aboard ship in the Arctic, Viola rebelled against her sense of wifely duty and locked herself up in her cabin for nine months! On their arrival home her husband told everyone she had had a nervous

⁶⁹ Whipple, "The Whalers" 118. Whiting & Hough 190-91.

breakdown caused by scurvy, and Eugene O'Neill wrote a play about it. Newspapers reported that Viola cheerfully went to sea to please her husband, abandoning the pleasures of home to risk and share the dangers to which they were exposed. Viola's husband John Aikins Cook was a tough captain with "strong views on the duties owed to men by women." After nine voyages and a terrible bout with scurvy in the Arctic, Viola mutinied and said she would never sail again. John Cook was shocked at such disloyalty and when he was unable to convince her to accompany him on his next voyage, he built a brig and named her Viola. Viola succumbed to the compliment, relented and consented to sail again. This time she fell victim to beriberi and when she got home she never sailed again. In 1918 the Viola, commanded by Joseph Lewis who sailed with his wife and five-year-old daughter, disappeared with all hands.⁷⁰

Already by the beginning of the twentieth century, educated women like Dorothea Balano were more outspoken in their rebellion, at least in their journals. Dorothea recorded her spats with her husband, a self-educated and practical downeaster who contrasted with Dorothea, a well-educated and cultured woman who fortunately never lost her sense of humor. Annoyed that he expected her to be a servant aboard ship, she wrote angrily:

⁷⁰ Druett 169-171.

First real bust-up with Fred, and of today's events, the shouting, the pettiness, the empty anger, which I shall never forget, nothing will be said. But I'll not forget if I live to be a thousand years. Says Fred, among other things, 'You're soldiering.' That's sea talk for loafing. Says I: 'I didn't sign on for being a Chinese laundry'....If all you want is your clothes ironed and your sex appetities satiated, then bring aboard one of your Boston dollies and I'll pack my bag. I'll bet she won't be able to navigate outside of the bunk.

"More Decency on Board When There is a Woman"

Not only must the seafaring woman adjust to the many physical hardships of a life at sea, but she must also adapt to living in the closed, highly disciplined, hierachial male world of the ship's environs. Often women left predominate-ly female households, which were loosely organized around the members' needs and desires. On shipboard strict schedules and frequently extreme discipline were required to sail and fish the vast oceans safely. The captain's family was restricted to the officers' quarters and a small section of the deck. A sailing ship could be compared to a miniature kingdom ruled by the captain who along with his family was treated as royalty. Strict protocol must be obeyed and the family seldom ventured forward of the poop deck. While dining they sat "above the salt" and the first mate was the only outsider "below the salt."⁷¹

⁷¹ Bolte 174-175.

Officers and crew sometimes expressed displeasure or hostility towards the captain's wife as did the mate on the Gazelle towards Jane Worth by constantly ridiculing her in his diary. Jenny Prescott felt that the crew disliked having babies aboard. In a letter to her mother she described the difficulty she had bathing her baby in rough weather and commented: "just you imagine yourself surrounded by men who 'hate young-ones'....you have to finish it (the bath) with your heart full of pity for the poor little screaming child, and dread of the derision, which if not heard is felt, of those outside."⁷² Usually, however, the crew seemed to enjoy having children aboard and spent time telling them sea stories, making toys for them, and teaching them nautical skills.

Nellie Creesy was more than just a navigator who worked with the bulky sextant and had studied the sea for more than a decade. She had empathy for the crew and they respected her. She helped them out by planning healthy meals, nursing the sick and wounded, and saw that they got sufficient rest. On one occasion, she persuaded her husband to slow the ship to search for a man overboard. Many sailing wives wrote about their concern for a man overboard and their grief when a crew member fell to his death from the rigging---all quite common occurrences.

⁷² Jenny Prescott's journal, 27 April 1884, Woolwich Times, January 1983.

Traveling aboard ship made women aware of the hard life of an ordinary seaman, as Eliza Williams described in her diary:

Those Friends that are this day enjoying all the great and blessed privileges of the Sabbath on land, little know the privations and sufferings of the Sailors' life--not only being deprived of Society and Friends, they suffer the hardships of heat, cold and wet, besides the great dangers they encounter which make the Sailors' life a hard one.⁷³

Eliza's sympathy for her husband's seamen was returned: "The men, when they went on shore, often brought me Fruit and Flower, and the Captains of the ships came on board to see me and brought me something nice."⁷⁴

At the start of the twentieth century the life of an ordinary seaman seems not to have improved. In her journal of 1910, Dorothea Balano did not approve of how they are cheated by her own husband. "The life of a common sailor is worse than that of a slave. This Captain (her husband Fred) sells them clothes and soap and tobacco at one hundred percent or more profit to be paid for from their paltry twenty-five dollars a month wage."⁷⁵ She saw a relationship between how her husband thought the crew should be treated and how Latin men treated their women: "He says every boy

⁷³ Bonham 216; Eliza Williams' journal, 5 December 1858, Williams 33.

⁷⁴ Bonham 216; Eliza Williams' journal, 2 January 1859, Williams 38.

⁷⁵ Dorothea Balano's journal, 7 July 1910, Balano 7.

can make a better living going to sea and that college would spoil good seamen, making nothing but a bunch of sea-lawyers, nautical for trouble-makers. Is that thinking akin to the Puerto Rican philosophy of keeping the women barefoot and pregnant?"⁷⁶ Dorothea discovered that many of the sailors liked to read as she did:

[Captain J.W.]...reads voraciously, as I've seen many sailors do. Caught one of the black crewmen cuddled in the lee of the foreward house yesterday puzzling over a thick volume of Shakespeare. It's a good thing Fred didn't see it. He might claim that the literate sailor was up to no good.⁷⁷

Usually the crew was pleased to have a woman, and especially children, aboard because they made the ship feel more civilized and homelike. Henry Chippendale, a sailor born on a "petticoat whaler," insisted that the presence of the captain's wife had a great effect on the crew's morale:

Even though a sailor had the reputation of being rough and tough, still there was something under that rough exterior that made him want to put his best foot forward in the presence of the captain's wife. Where ordinarily he might come back to the ship drunk and reel down the dock singing a bawdy song, and then maybe cause trouble when he got aboard, if he thought Missis Skipper was apt to be about he would stop singing before he made the ship.⁷⁸

Joan Druett, in her chapter "More Decency and Order" in her recent book and in an earlier article similarly titled, maintains that a sailing wife had little influence upon her

⁷⁶ Dorothea Balano's journal, 15 July 1911, Balano 30.

⁷⁷ Dorothea Balano's journal, 21 December 1911, Balano 78.

⁷⁸ Druett 169.

husband's or the crew's moral behavior or drinking. "Sailors would be sailors whether there was a wife on the ship or not."⁷⁹ Perhaps wives were unsuccessful in reforming sailors, but what was important was that their role gave them a certain amount of status, influence, and authority. By using their nurturing skills, women gave their shipboard experience a home-like touch which enabled them to make seamen feel more at home and cared for.

Nineteenth-century women took their moral influence seriously and attempted to create an environment of peace and moral uplift aboard ship. Victorian women felt that men needed the presence of a "mother" to keep them well-behaved and civilized, and religious whaling wives took seriously their role of "angel of the house." Mary Brewster, the first woman to go whaling in the Arctic Ocean in 1849, explained her reasons for making the voyage:

I am going and in the end hope I may be a useful companion, a soother of woes, a calmer of troubles and a friend in need...I pray kind Heaven to shine upon us to prosper and keep us from all danger and suffer no ill to betide all on board of this ship.⁸⁰

Praying for the crew was the duty of the captain's wife even though ship's protocol did not allow her to speak to them. Lucy Smith was distressed when George Kanaka, a

⁷⁹ Druett, Petticoat Whalers 174.

⁸⁰ DePauw 144; Mary Brewster's journal, 2 May 1849, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT.

Pacific Islander who was a boatsteerer on the Nautilus, died and was buried at sea without being properly Christianized:

Oh how much I regret it. Had I thought he was so near eternity I would have found an opportunity to speak to him of Jesus, but being the only female on board I have feared that if I should try to see and talk with him there would be some who scoff at religion that would talk about me and say I ought not to go into the steerage. I have wanted to do right and if I have sinned by neglecting my duty may God in mercy forgive me.⁸¹

Fearing ridicule from some of the sailors, wives were reluctant to preach openly to the crew. Mary Lawrence, concerned about impropriety, allowed her little daughter Minnie to bring religion to the forecandle. One Sunday she encouraged the girl to fill her doll carriage with Bibles and wheel it down to the crew's berthing area:

She came back very quickly with an empty carriage, had it reloaded, and went again until she gave away every one that we had. She said they all wanted one, even the Portuguese, that could read. I could but think they were taken far more readily from her than they would have been from anyone else. It may be we can do some good through her.⁸²

Soon seven-year-old Minnie was running a Sunday school class, which must have been a treat for the sailors; for as her mother wrote, she had "a great many strange and original thoughts."⁸³

⁸¹ DePauw 144-5; Whiting and Hough 168.

⁸² DePauw 145.

⁸³ DePauw 145.

Calista Stover was not always as successful as little Minnie Lawrence in reaching the crew's religious conscience. Although she thought the crew appreciated her Bible meetings and that she was providing a valuable moral influence, not all the seamen attended. She often remarked that "attendance was poor and the crew was slipping back to their old evil ways":

Just as it is ashore, so it is afloat; some cannot be bothered to go to church. We have two men this voyage. One replied that he is too old and has been too long at sea and over the world to be effected by religious influences. Some tell me that they have not been inside a church for more than twenty years and have not looked into their Bibles since they left home.⁸⁴

Serving as Christian missionaries aboard their husbands' ships gave sailing wives a sense of mission and a certain status within the all male shipboard hierarchy. They believed they possessed the power to change men's lives for the better and this was empowering for the women themselves. Like woman ashore, religion and the temperance movement offered sailing wives an alternative to patriarchal hierarchy and was an antidote to their loneliness and isolation at sea.

Making the difficult decision to go to sea and leaving family and friends behind developed maritime women's decision-making abilities. Their exposure to the male world of

⁸⁴ Peruti 22; Carlisa Stover journal, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT.

seafaring, along with the opportunity to learn new skills, enhanced sailing wive's knowledge of the world and human nature. The majority learned to cope with the discomforts and the hazards of life aboard ship and developed the courage and flexibility to meet new trials with equanimity. Some learned atypical skills and were able to save lives and their ships as well as enhance their own self-esteem. Living with their captain husbands on a day-to-day basis gave them the opportunity either to reach an accommodation with their partner or to learn that life ashore amidst family and friends was preferable to living with a tyrant at sea. Traveling aboard ship for years at a time and rearing their families at sea gave maritime women additional experience and fortitude to cope with the difficulties of life and their own probable widowhood. These women's experiences are living proof that coastal women of the nineteenth century were not passive, weak Victorian ladies, but rather individuals able to survive and even thrive within or outside of the world of men.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

Women have been left out of maritime history and literature because they have been seen as passive victims of the seafaring experience. The popular image of the lonely woman waiting for her mariner's return has reinforced the belief that these women's lives were uneventful and unimportant. Contemporary historians have been influenced by this passive image of the maritime woman and have analyzed her experiences largely in terms of the restrictive dichotomy of separate male/female spheres. The nineteenth-century Cult of Domesticity, which confined women to the private sphere, reinforced an exaggerated image of maritime women as lonely, isolated victims, and continues to obscure and simplify the reality of their lives.

The experiences of New England coastal women ashore have only recently been studied historically in an inclusive or systematic way. In a demographic study of nineteenth-century Searsport, Maine, historian John Battick has looked at the number of sailing women, as opposed to those he termed as "stay-homes." Lisa Norling, studying the maritime marriages of predominately New Bedford whalers, contrasts the differences in experiences of eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century women living in the highly commercialized ports of southern New England. She concludes that the experience of nineteenth-century women ashore without their husbands was "fraught with loneliness and disappointment." Couples, she says, became more and more discontented with their long-distance relationships because these did not measure up to the ideals of the companionate marriage and the Cult of Domesticity.

In a recently published article and an earlier B.A. thesis, Norling portrays maritime women as unhappy victims of both the ideology of separate spheres and of the seafaring lifestyle. She sees them as stubbornly clinging to these ideals--failing to adapt to their husband's vocation and refusing to change their negative views about the deprivation of their own marriages. Although women gained authority and self-realization in the home, writes Norling, these gains failed to compensate them for their deprivation and suffering, and even made their husbands' absences more intolerable. "In fact," she says, "these women exchanged one form of domination for another; what they gained in individuality within marriage, they lost to a tenacious set of contradictory norms and ideals within society at large."¹

¹ Lisa Norling, "'How Frought with Sorrow and Heartpangs': Mariners' Wives and the ideology of Domesticity in New England," The New England Quarterly, LXV.3, (1992): 445.

Norling's analysis is partly correct. Most nineteenth-century maritime women did express loneliness and deprivation in their writings. However, it falls short of giving us an entire picture of their complex feelings and experiences. This reiteration of the image of the lonely, waiting woman ignores their changing feelings and what they achieved when they were not grieving over their husbands' absence. By overlooking the positive aspects of these women's lives, except in her analysis of the writings of two active, independent eighteenth-century women, Norling assumes that women slavishly adhered to their prescribed female role. In reality, maritime women recorded a variety of issues they confronted alone and as married women. They described how they used their female roles, not only to survive but to carve out their own spheres of influence in their marriages and in the larger community. When women violated certain prescribed female roles, they frequently re-framed their actions in the rhetoric of acceptable domestic, moral or religious behavior. Karen Lystra points out that nineteenth-century gender roles were more fluid in daily life than a static view of separate spheres suggests, and that both men and women privately negotiated their individual goals and behavior within the context of their marriages.²

² Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America (New York: Oxford U P, 1989) 124.

Norling's studies on mariners' wives are almost exclusively supported by quotations of negative experiences and feelings--mainly those which heighten the image of the lonely, anxiously waiting wife. By focusing upon these women mainly as mariner's wives, not as individuals in their own right, she makes judgments on the quality of their lives and marriages in relation to men. This ideological approach in terms of separate spheres tends to view only certain aspects of these women's experiences, mainly their domestic roles. Assumptions are thus based upon nineteenth-century values and standards of behavior.

By contrast, this study examines the writings of a diverse group of coastal women from different classes and various New England coastal communities, from small Maine harbor towns to industrialized port cities. I have sought to view maritime women from their own perspective, using extensive quotations from their personal letters and diaries. These private writings illuminate their personal experiences and thoughts on a variety of important issues in their lives and in their relationships with seafaring men.

Although the popular picture of the lonely, waiting mariner's wife has long been reinforced in popular literature and still is predominant in the twentieth century, real women's lives and experiences deny this simplistic, static image. Neither is it accurate to assume an opposing view of these women as independent and self-sufficient

entrepreneurs, an image rooted in the earlier periods of this country's settlement. Although these conflicting images may prevail at various historical times, neither of them accurately describes women's lives on a daily basis or over longer periods of time. The lives of maritime women, like all women's lives, were constantly influenced by change. Not only did mariners come and go, finding themselves and their partners changed with each new reunion, but society was undergoing rapid and deep alterations from the end of the eighteenth to the close of the nineteenth century. Maritime marriages were tested over and over again, forcing couples to be flexible and to create strategies to cope with changes in their marriages and society.

The marital bonds of couples whose writings are included in this study prevailed through isolation and adversity until they were severed by death. Their marriages were relatively happy, no more or less so than land-based marriages, in spite of the severe pain and loneliness husbands and wives were forced to endure. Bertrand Russell once remarked that the family was an unsuitable institution for seafaring peoples because "when one member of the family went on a long voyage while the rest stayed at home, he was inevitably emancipated from family control, and the family was proportionately weakened." Joanna Colcord, who grew up in a nineteenth-century Maine seafaring family and spent her childhood at sea, disagrees: "Something in the alternation

of close association and prolonged separation, during which unaccustomed pens learned the art of holding each other close by long journal-letters, seemed to work quite the other way. Seafaring families have remained among the most close-knit of any in the world."³ Linda Grant DePauw notes that other writers on women and the sea have suggested that "the extraordinary strains placed on family life by long separations actually made families in seafaring communities stronger because their members appreciated each other more and held their affections together with prayers and letters, while families not so tested took their relationships for granted."⁴ The shared suffering of maritime families helped them to accept each other, themselves, and their situation, and led them to develop unique and creative coping strategies within their distinct spheres of influence. Through correspondence, couples shared their emotions, both joyful and painful, with one another and kept love and communication alive. Some women exercised their newly found independence and self-confidence within a wider community, beyond the confines of home; others insisted upon traveling with their husbands aboard ship far from family and friends.

As the nineteenth century progressed, middle-class women began to express more openly their unhappiness and

³ Joanna Colcord, "Domestic Life on American Sailing Ships," The American Neptune II.3 (1942): 200.

⁴ Linda Grant DePauw, Seafaring Women (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982) 12.

frustration with domestic roles which confined them strictly to the private sphere. Many felt invisible and became aware of their lack of legitimate power. A few outspoken women dared to take these issues beyond the individual women's personal frustration and disagreement with men. They were beginning to feel a general frustration and unhappiness with the imbalance and inequality of a marriage based upon the concept of separate spheres. This sharpened awareness of women's exclusion and lack of power in the public sphere, contributed to the feminist movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Women began to question and even challenge the newly industrialized, male-dominated economic system, which separated men from their families and relegated woman to the home. Women's individual challenges to their husbands' absences from family and community, prepared them to launch a wider criticism of the entire male-dominated system.

This study celebrates women's sufferings and joys in their relationships with seafaring men. It refuses to view maritime women solely as victims, who conformed closely to the prevailing ideology of separate spheres. As women gained experience through self-realization during their husbands' absences, they became better prepared to search for alternative lifestyles. Most women married to mariners became widows at a fairly young age. Many were unable to find a suitable second husband or chose not to re-marry.

Still because of their experience in living alone, they were independent enough to live full productive lives. The scope of this study does not allow for a detailed examination of women's imaginative literature set within the seafaring community or aboard ship. However, it is worth pointing out that the works of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Ellen Chase, as well as fiction written by seafaring women, gives us an insight, both positive and negative, into the lives of these widowed women.

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