

[Two young people aboard the *Daniel Webster* bound for Boston, 1853, record their impressions. Fran, from her hospital bed in 2010, lets her imagination go to them.]

**Day 16. Quarter deck, Thomas and Bridget, reading.** “I still say, we should be writin’ all this down instead of tellin’ it to each other. Best we find a paper, a scrap of something to write on. A pencil, too. Lest we forget. Do ye go ask Mathew, he’s your friend. Can he not find us maybe the waste paper of the captain’s log? I can get us a pencil.”

Bridget always had the bright ideas, thought Thomas. “Aye, lass, I’ll ask him, just maybe.”

**Day 18. Quarter deck, Thomas and Bridget, reading, writing.** True to her word Bridget brought a pencil. Thomas had found a passenger’s log, discarded and wet, moldering under the ropes. Its back cover was torn off, its leather bindings stiffened by saltwater, and it was missing pages. He held it carefully due to its battered condition, and read aloud the words, “Aboard the vessel are a good many sick and vomiting these days,” written by the previous owner and lost during the recent storm.

Though they called it each by their own name, and though it was called by its previous owner something else again, the two youngsters took the journal as their own and began to write in it. They knew it to be their record and were impressed by the responsibility of it. When they found pages already too much written-upon they squeezed in a few more words. If there was no space left at all, they tore those pages out but still had plenty left to fill. The log was serviceable and gave them many happy hours in each other’s company transcribing their memories from the first weeks and their observations of the day-to-day aboard the ship. One held the journal, transcribing, while the other recited the words to be recorded.

They wrote of the many trials of the ship’s crossing, the sickness, lack of privacy, cramped living quarters, all the stuff of their daily lives and of those around them. Living conditions were primitive. This they had known from the outset but now they had firsthand experience of it. There was no immediate relief in sight at this early stage of their passage. They

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had become used to about a foot and a half of width for sleeping in the narrow, closely packed bunks, less when you had to account for someone to pass. “Mere inches,” Thomas pointed out, “Should a sleeping man’s leg or arm be flopping about in the passageway unbeknownst to its owner there could be serious risk of harm. Do ye add that in, please.”

Thomas and Bridget felt lucky all things considered, for skinny as they were, they could slip in and out better than most.

They wrote about the passengers, the things they brought on board. Food provisions. Staples, sacks of potatoes, heavy, big, entirely un-seaworthy. Mementos. There was room for the bare necessities only. Maybe a small heirloom, an engraving or a pewter spoon, treasures despite their small size. Many of the families were led by mothers bringing the family wealth to the New World to join the fathers who had left years ago. Thomas Griffin had no food, no additional clothing and no treasures apart from cobbler’s tools and Mam’s Bible. She had insisted upon it but he was ready to toss it overboard at the first occasion.

Fran sympathized with the youngsters’ lack of possessions but could not get her mind around it to imagine the poverty of things.

*Readers, she lived her whole life amassing furniture, china, bargains, and clothing, clothing, clothing. She was a shopper at the old Filene’s Basement -- meeting her friend at the “Better Bags Department” (because they called themselves better bags) -- and these were her favorite things, the markings of her solid middle-class aspirations as the wife of a physician. As Boston grew into the city it is today, landmarks like Filene’s disappeared; it was the sign of the times taking with it the intimacy of the shared surroundings in which my mother grew up. The loss of things became all too clear one day as I was listening to an interview airing on one of the Thanksgiving Storycorps radio broadcasts; an elderly lady from my mother’s neighborhood talked about shopping with all the other “shoppahs” from all the “neighbahoods” of the city. I felt I was hearing my mother speak. I think she only wished she was shopping there again.*

They wrote about the passengers fortunate enough to be able to write and the advice they sent home by letter. “Don’t bring tea,” they put in the journal. “Coffee is much preferable to tea, the water being so bad that it quite renders the tea insipid and tasteless.”

But, Thomas thought, of all the things to write home about, who would think to use up an inch of precious paper on coffee...or tea for that matter.

A letter might say, “Most people throw up after eating their first meal on the ship.” Or another might understate, “Family and others sick much of the time,” by way of illustrating life at sea and the passing of a loved one whose constitution, weakened by poor nutrition and freshly assaulted by seasickness, succumbed within a month. Seasickness was a constant companion. Those who adjusted to the constant rocking and bouncing were the envy of their fellows as they scurried about; they became as sure-footed as the crew. Others, however, spent the entire trip bedridden which in many cases hastened death. Surely the days did pass slowly for those afflicted, struggling to stay hydrated and nourished.

Thomas and Bridget recorded the travails, if only by writing them down might they be lessened somewhat and guide those who might later read their words and take note of the danger. They wrote of the stench of vomit and unemptied chamber pots. And the night noises and body functions of hungry unwashed humans. Steerage rapidly became fetid; with Bridget in tow he tried to escape at all times. Bridget endured the darkness and dampness and stale air with the most discomfiture. The constant jousting about from weather and waves made even standing difficult, and this was so even on the days when the crew congratulated each other on fair weather sailing. Storms—they were a different story. During a storm the crew latched the door to steerage closed. Such a fright! Trapped below for the duration! It was general panic for all but the most robust and resilient. Say goodbye to sleep, it was all about sliding here and there around the cabin in the pitch blackness of close night.

It was taking its toll on all of them, thought Thomas. He was noticing symptoms about Bridget who had confided in him about folk broken out in fevers and bloody stools. He had overheard the crew whispering about illness spreading and was fearful lest they no longer allow

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him to join them in friendly jest; this would have been a painful circumstance for he had the gift of gab and was fond of passing the time of day with every Tom, Dick and Harry among the crew. Above all, Thomas thought, it was important to thwart any rumors; the Captain must not gain full knowledge of the condition of the passengers lest he order an infectious person to be dropped overboard.

**Day 26. Quarter deck, Thomas and Bridget, writing.** “Today is October 25, 1853, weather: grey molten clouds, gusty; seas: swollen; temperature: cold as a witch’s tit. Oh, sorry,” Thomas mumbled, catching himself. “Maybe as ye’d not put that last bit in there,” he said. Bridget scribbled furiously.

Thomas and Bridget found themselves up top after the storm. Bridget today was paler than usual. She had set herself the task of writing about more domestic things and was at great pains to get the list right, as if she was running out of time.

He continued, “Saturday night, another storm, it continued the whole of Sunday. First Mate told me that the crew love the violent agitation of the waves in a storm, the heaving of the vessel from side to side. Dangerous, but we made near ten knots, such a wild ride! When there’s a blow like that, it’s a happy occurrence, the crew say. Makes ye take notice as when the weather turns fair, no such progress can be made. See today, the shifting of the wind to fair has caused our sailing speed to decline. Alas.”

Thomas stopped his recitation to consider his friend. He let his voice strengthen, to serve as a buttress against his growing concerns for her. She was listless. In between bouts of coughing which caused all manner of snorts and guttural noises she brought up packets of bloody phlegm that she did her best to hide. Is she hungry, he thought, noting at the same time that she was not much interested in food. By this the third week Thomas saw that Bridget was thinner. He could not help but look away.

“We commence our fourth week this day at sea, and have a tolerable knowledge of the kinds of food provisions that are most needful for a voyage to America: first and foremost,

oatmeal. Grits of oatmeal and barley are popular, molasses too, because these don't pour so easily and are not easily wasted." Bridget wanted to get it right.

Thomas joined in the listing of important provisions, "Potatoes -- they are of the greatest value, and this not because I am an Irishman," he said. "They're filling, don't rot easily, there's nothing more valuable although care must be taken to lug them on board. Heavy, indeed, those sacks. What wouldn't I give for a roast potato with a little buttermilk at this very moment."

Bridget chewed the pencil and directed her glance at Thomas. "How thirsty we are at sea, Thomas! I do dream of the day when my parched throat and I are clear of the ship and free to drink fresh clean water in great quantities. My berth neighbors, they drink port wine but I do not care for it. They say good port, in moderation, is very reviving on the sea; spirits, however (and don't go tellin' that to the crew!), not so useful. (Shall I add that?) Bottled ale, they say 'tis good for drink but for the temperate amongst us cider mixed with water is best. It slakes the constant thirst and offers a better and cooler drink for what ails the stomach too.

"As to staples, flour is essential but watch out for weevils! Flour gives us cakes and breads and pancakes. Just the thing for a weak constitution. Eggs are used much; when well grazed, or put in salt pickle for six hours, and well packed, eggs keep fresh a considerable time." Turning to Thomas she confided, "This I learned from my berth neighbor, Mistress Addams, whose vast experience I credit. She tells me that for spices, pepper and ginger are in most use." Bridget looked up to make the point, then bent back to her work.

"Hey there, Chief Note Lady, slow down!" said Thomas. "You are supposed to be writing and talking to me, that's the fun of it. There's plenty of time." He nudged her arm in a friendly way so that she could see he was teasing.

"Say, Bridget, will there ever be a soul to take notice of what we're learnin' here?"

Bridget ignored him and continued to scribble furiously, not to be distracted from her observations and hoping that writing about food would bring on the appetite for it. "Salt, or hung beef, pork, bacon or hams, all are excellent; veal when salted, and afterwards watered, can be boiled with beef or bacon to make a hearty soup -- very desirable. I have seen a family bring a

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quantity of pickled fowl, which when they watered it down and boiled it became a delicious meal. Pickled cabbage is useful, too, any pickled item in fact, for a pickled diet serves best whilst sickness prevails.”

She continued, “Biscuit! The diet of seamen. To consume it we passengers must needs pour boiling water over it, let it steep, then toast it before the fire. Buttered, it goes down as pleasantly as loaf bread, I have tasted it myself. Otherwise it is rock solid and capable of cracking a tooth. Oat bread baked in the galley oven answers well with our tea or coffee. Cheese, ‘tis needful for the food list as well as split peas for soup and lastly, vinegar, butter, and potted herrings.”

Bridget took a break from the list. Not for long. She re-commenced with food preparation and the instructions for it.

“To preserve new milk for a voyage, take several small jars, clean them well. Pour the milk within, and after corking them closed, put the jars into a large pot of water, and boil the lot over a good fire. When done, pack the jars in a hamper, or in some other place as dry as you can find. You will see that the milk keeps sweet the whole of the passage and is entirely suitable for milky tea or drinkin’ plain.”

Turning to Thomas she said, “This recipe was tried by a man of truth, who travelled last season to Philadelphia. Mistress Addams told me she heard he drank the milk upon his arrival and wrote home that it had not soured, in fact, it was as sweet as the day the cow gave it up. Now your turn, Thomas. What’s your favorite? Then talk about the dishware.”

“There is a meal much eaten round about, called ‘beggar’s dish,’” said Thomas. “Peeled potatoes and either beef or bacon cut in thin slices, the whole of it mixed throughout. A most satisfying meal. When seasoned with pepper, the stew is much esteemed.”

Thomas tried to recall what he had heard by way of the housewives below-decks. “Delft ware, ye well know that blue and white pottery from Holland? ‘Tis not suitable for common use on a voyage, say the good women. Tin porringers, they recommend, for soup or stew, or wooden cups and trenchers, those will break less than any other type. The best housewares at sea what

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with the constant motion of the vessel. Likewise, a tin kettle, very useful in boiling meat. Ye hang it on the bars of the grate at any time. Highly accommodating especially at the caboose stove where so many families are boiling their dinners at once.”

It was food that they wrote mostly about. Food, glorious food. The memory of it. The lack of it. The preparation of it. The sour taste of it today. The occasional pot-boiler stew that the Cook got going, like the time he made a wedding meal that quite lifted the spirits of the bride and groom and everyone and made them feel that life was not all drudgery. Food gave some little spark to the time’s passing and to the occasions for celebration and to the travelers’ as ways to have a little fun, sometimes dancing on deck, playing games, making new friends. Underlying all their difficulties was the central bright fact of the start of a new life, untrammelled by their previous, with fresh bread aplenty in loaves they dreamed bigger than the ovens they were baked in. It was, as Thomas said, the bonds of poverty would stay in Ireland. No more poverty of things. As the ship made way it could be heard here and there, from the lips of those sturdy enough to reflect, words of wonder and adventure, as of time having stopped and started up again, time existing for the passengers only as they moved through the never-ending sea...

Fran sensed the motion of the vessel as she sensed her own body traversing through space.

*Journal: what makes my mother sleep like she’s on a ship? Swaying this way and that. Need to ask the staff about that.*

...It was as though the claims of their previous lives were being loosened and unmolded in favor of the arc of their new narrative. There was no end of excitement at the approach of a new home and all the new things to get to know. The two youngsters had no end of things to write and dream about. And so passed many a day.