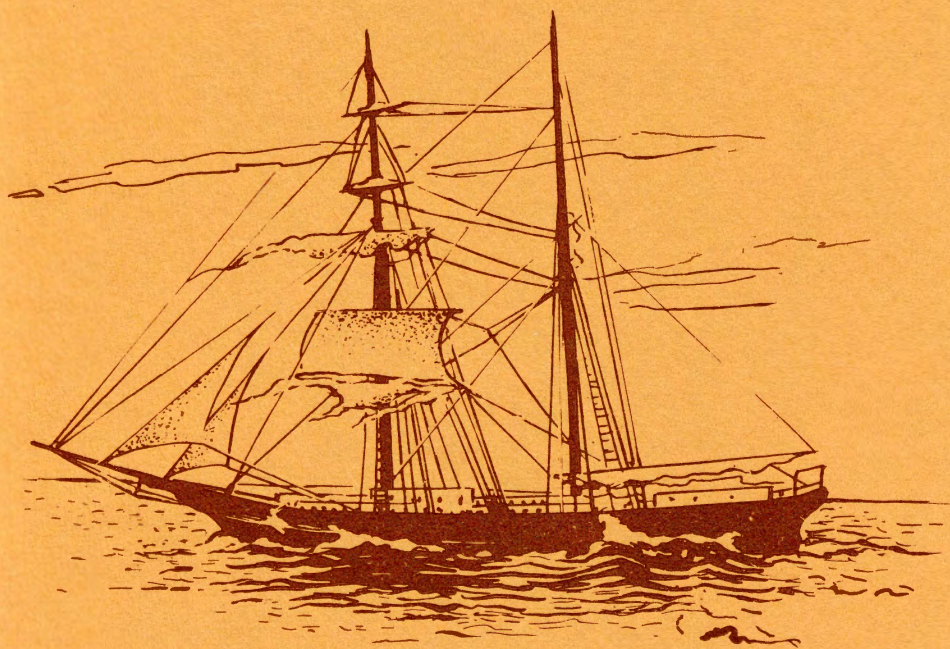


THE
MARY CELESTE

The Odyssey of an Abandoned Ship



The Atlantic Companies

Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company
Centennial Insurance Company
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New York, New York 10005

. . . as long as men "go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters" the story of the *Mary Celeste* will be read and re-read, overshadowing all others in the history of marine insurance.

FOREWORD

The story of the *Mary Celeste*, the ship found drifting in mid-Atlantic in 1872, abandoned by her passengers and crew, is one of the most celebrated mysteries in the annals of the sea. It still attracts the attention of maritime historians and scholars.

The Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company, founded in 1842, is the only surviving insurance company that underwrote a portion of the insurance on the *Mary Celeste* at the time of her ill-fated journey. The present Atlantic building, the third to occupy the site on the corner of Wall and William Streets, contains a small museum dedicated to her, called the Mary Celeste Room — a safe harbor at last for the famed 19th century mystery brigantine. This room, appropriately, simulates a marine underwriting office of a by-gone era and houses memorabilia of the *Mary Celeste*, a painting and a 35-inch model of the ship.

In 1942, on the 100th anniversary of the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company, the late Charles Edey Fay, a vice president of the Company, wrote a history of the *Mary Celeste*. The following is a condensation of the book.

The Mary Celeste Begins Her Voyage

Early on Tuesday morning, November 5, 1872, this small brigantine of 282 tons was towed from Pier 50, East River, New York City, to a point off Staten Island in the lower bay, where, owing to strong head winds, she dropped anchor. Two days later, November 7, she made a fresh departure on a voyage destined to lift her from comparative obscurity into pre-eminence in the annals of the sea. Her master, Captain Benjamin S. Briggs, was accompanied by his wife, Sarah Elizabeth (nee Cobb) Briggs and their daughter, Sophia Matilda, age two. According to the U.S. Shipping Commissioner's record, the vessel's complement numbered eight, consisting of master, first and second mates, cook (steward) and four seamen, making ten persons all told, aboard the vessel when she began her voyage.

Her destination was Genoa, Italy, and 1700 barrels of alcohol made up her entire cargo. On November 15, eight days later, the British Brigantine "Dei Gratia," 295 tons, Captain David Reed Morehouse, master, with 81,126 gallons petroleum left Venango Yard, Weehawken, N. J. in the port of New York, her advertised destination being Gibraltar where she was to call for orders that would determine her ultimate destination.

Heavy Weather

It is a matter of record that, in the closing months of 1872, the Atlantic Ocean was in an unusually tempestuous mood. Vessels arriving at New York and other North U.S. Atlantic ports reported very heavy seas and winds of gale force. With these weather conditions the two brigantines made their way eastward. It is known that the "Dei Gratia" experienced very heavy weather. From

the time she left New York, up to November 24, her fore-hatch remained battened down, and her main-hatch was off for only one hour. It is probable that the "Mary Celeste," which sailed a week earlier, encountered similar conditions.

Unexpected Adventure

Until December 4, the passage of the "Dei Gratia" was devoid of unusual incident. To her company of eight, the forenoon of that day brought no foreshadowing of the stirring events soon to follow. At noon, the afternoon watch consisting of 2nd Mate John Wright, Seamen Augustus Anderson and John Johnson came on. Johnson was at the wheel with Captain Morehouse nearby, when between 1 and 2 o'clock (December 4, Civil Time, December 5, Sea Time) a sailing vessel was sighted on their port or windward bow. She was four or five miles distant headed NW by North and in opposite direction to the course of their own vessel which was SE by East. The wind was from the North. Viewing her through the glass, Captain Morehouse could see no one on board the vessel which was of the same rig as their own. She was under very short canvas and on the starboard tack. At about 1:30 1st Mate Oliver Deveau, off watch, was called on deck. Scanning the stranger which was making about 1½ to 2 knots and "yawing some," Deveau agreed with Morehouse that she was in trouble, although no signals of distress were visible. The Captain decided to "speak" her in order to render assistance if necessary. For that purpose, they hauled wind and hailed her. Receiving no response, Captain Morehouse ordered a boat lowered and sent Deveau, Wright and Johnson over to investigate. On reaching the vessel, Deveau and Wright boarded her, while Johnson remained in the

small boat alongside. After an examination lasting about a half hour, they returned to their own vessel and reported to Captain Morehouse substantially as follows: The derelict was the "Mary Celeste" of New York. There was not a living thing on board her. Her boat was gone.

Two sails were set-jib, fore top staysail and lower fore-topsail. The main-staysail was hauled down and lying loose on the forward house. All the rest of the sails (7 in number) were FURLED. The pumps were all right, but 3¹/₂ feet of water was found in the hold. Some of the running rigging had been carried away, and some parts of it were hanging over the sides. The binnacle had been knocked out of its place and was injured. The compass was destroyed. The wheel was not lashed. Anchors and chains were in their proper place. The fore and lazarette hatches were off, but the main hatch was battened down, lashed with two spars.

The Ship's Log

In the mate's cabin they found the Ship's Log and on the cabin table lay the Log Slate or temporary log. The cabin was wet and the forward house was full of water up to the coaming. The Chronometer, Sextant, Navigation Book and Ship's papers were missing. Contrary to the oft reiterated reports there was NO FOOD OR DRINK on the cabin table, and there was NOTHING COOKING ON THE GALLEY STOVE. The latter had been knocked out of place and was stone cold. The men's clothing, pipes and oil-skins had all been left behind, indicating a hasty departure. The testimony on these points was clear and definite. A sword — with stains on it — was found under the captain's berth.

The Ship's Log has been methodically kept up to date. On the Log Slate found on the cabin table, the following

entries had been made under date of Monday, November 25:

“At 5, made the Island S. (Saint) Mary’s bearing ESE.” At 6 A.M. a similar entry, with slight variation, read as follows: “At 5 o’clock made the Island of S. Mary’s bearing ESE.” After this came the final entry: “At 8 Eastern point bore SSW 6 miles distant.” These were the last authentic words from the “Mary Celeste” — her farewell message.

Her position at that time was approximately Latitude $37^{\circ}01$ North; Longitude $25^{\circ}01$ West, indicating that she had just passed the Island of St. Mary’s (Santa Maria), the easternmost of the Azores group. When found abandoned by the “Dei Gratia” on December 5 (Sea Time) she was approximately 378 miles east of the position indicated by the last entry on the Log Slate as above noted. As she was then headed NE by North and in the opposite direction of her intended course with only three sails set, it was evident that she had been turned about (perhaps more than once) during the nine day period of her presumably undirected wandering — the plaything of the vagrant winds and waves.

An Astonishing Menace

One can readily imagine the interest with which Captain Morehouse and the other members of his crew heard the astonishing report of the boarding party. Here was an abandoned brigantine with not a living thing on board — a potential menace to every vessel crossing her erratic path. With the exception of some necessary replacements in her sails and running rigging, she was perfectly seaworthy. It was then believed that the value of her hull and cargo might run as high as \$80,000. Deveau, the 1st Mate who had previously commanded

a brig, argued that, with a couple of men, he could take the "Mary Celeste" into Gibraltar, with bright prospect of a substantial reward for a successful salvage operation, and he was eager to undertake it. He is known to have been a man of large frame, of great physical strength, and absolutely fearless as well as an experienced seaman.

Salvaged

Captain Morehouse, mindful of his obligation to the owners of his vessel and of his responsibility for the safety of his crew, at first demurred. He reminded them of the risks involved in sailing their own vessel with a diminished crew over a stormy stretch of about 600 miles of ocean. As for the "Mary Celeste," only slightly smaller than their own vessel, it would be an extremely hazardous undertaking for the very few men — three at the most, he could spare for the purpose. Finally he consented, letting Deveau take two seamen, Charles Lund and Augustus Anderson, men who had not gone in the first boat. By the time they reached the "Mary Celeste" it was about 4:00 o'clock, and with sunset due at about 4:39 there was much necessary work to be done before nightfall.

Between 8 and 9 o'clock of this Wednesday evening (December 4, Civil Time, December 5, Sea Time), the three men had the vessel pumped dry after three hours' work, and "sail was set on her." It took two or three days to set her to rights. They had fine weather at first, and for several days the two vessels kept company. During that time, the "Mary Celeste" spoke her escort three or four times. By Wednesday they were near the northwest coast of Africa and approaching the Straits of Gibraltar. When they got into the Straits, "the weather come on

to blow hard” and was “thick with rain.” During the night, the two vessels “lost sight of each other.” Journey’s end for the little brigantine finally came on Friday morning, December 13, when the sight of their destination — Gibraltar — gladdened the tired eyes of three nearly exhausted men who had performed a noteworthy feat of seamanship, having sailed a derelict a distance of about 600 miles. Little did they dream that their bright hopes of reward were destined to remain unfulfilled. They found their own vessel, the “*Dei Gratia*” had arrived there on the evening before (Thursday, December 12).

The Hearing

Shortly after arrival, the “*Mary Celeste*” was taken into custody by T. J. Vecchio, marshal of the Vice Admiralty Court. On Wednesday, December 18, the Court began its hearings on the claim of David Reed Morehouse, Master, “and for the Owners, Officers and Crew claiming as salvors.” The Court then proceeded to hear the sworn testimony of Deveau, Wright and Lund, Anderson and Johnson, and the hearings continued for several days. On December 23, the “*Dei Gratia*” received orders to proceed to Genoa to discharge her cargo of petroleum, sailed with Deveau in command, leaving Captain Morehouse at Gibraltar to receive the expected salvage award. On January 16, Deveau was summoned by the Court to return to Gibraltar to give further testimony.

Her Cargo

The owners of the “*Mary Celeste*” were naturally anxious to have the vessel continue on her passage, and deliver her cargo of alcohol at Genoa and thereby earn

her Freight Money. There was a possibility that, in a falling market the consignees might in consequence of undue delay, refuse to accept delivery. Captain J. H. Winchester, principal and managing owner of the "Mary Celeste" went to Gibraltar to accelerate the vessel's departure, but the Court refused permission. Finally, after a delay of 87 days, the "Mary Celeste" left Gibraltar on March 10, 1873, under a new master, Captain George W. Blatchford of Wrentham, Massachusetts with a new crew.

On March 14, 1873, the Court announced its award of £1700, the equivalent to about \$8,300, which was a great disappointment to the salvors and was regarded by authorities in the insurance and shipping world at that time as wholly incommensurate with the hazardous character of the service rendered.

The vessel's cargo of alcohol was insured in Europe. The hull insurance was carried by the following American insurance companies:

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Maine Lloyds | \$ 6,000 |
| Orient Mutual Insurance Co. | 4,000 |
| Mercantile Insurance Co. | 2,500 |
| New England Mutual Insurance Co. | 1,500 |
| | <hr/> |
| | \$14,000 |

The insurance on Freight on Charter was carried by the Atlantic Mutual Insurance Company of New York, today the only survivor of the five American companies carrying insurance on the vessel's memorable passage.

Theories, Numerous and Fantastic

Theories as to the cause of abandonment of this sea-worthy vessel have been numerous, various and often fantastic. With the passing of the years, the legends and attempted solutions have multiplied, with the result that

it has become increasingly difficult for the world to know whom and what to believe. Only a few of the narrations of the past half century give evidence of care, conscience and a knowledge of seamanship. An adequate analysis of even the most plausible theories would require more space than is available for the purpose. The case of the "Mary Celeste" remains the most outstanding, fascinating and unsolved mystery in the annals of the sea, and because it is still veiled in mystery, it continues to fascinate the interest of people all over the world. Although Charles Edey Fay's book was published in 1942, hardly a month passes without inquiries on the subject from far distant places.

The Author's Theory

It will be recalled that the "Mary Celeste" carried 1700 barrels of alcohol. It is probable that, in encountering stormy weather, her hatches had remained closed during most if not all of the voyage up to the day of abandonment. Under these circumstances, the hold had been getting little or no ventilation. The vessel having left the comparatively cool temperatures of New York, and having passed through the Gulf Stream into the milder climatic areas of the Azores, it would not be surprising if the atmospheric changes had been producing some effect upon a non-ventilated hold containing 1700 barrels of alcohol, some of which may have leaked.

It is possible that Captain Briggs, mindful of the character of the cargo and necessity for ventilation, took advantage of the calm or light wind prevailing on the forenoon of the 25th and ordered the removal of the bar of the forward hatch. It was at this juncture that something of unusual character happened. The uprush of fumes from an unventilated hold, into which the con-

tents of all or part of 8 barrels of alcohol had leaked, may have been so strong as to alarm the crew, and if confronted by this sudden and imminent peril, and fearing for the safety of his wife and child, and the members of the crew, Captain Briggs may have given order to launch the ship's boat which was lying across the main hatch. As the wind, presumably from the west at the time, and the vessel's course approximately east by south, it is probable that the boat was launched from the leeward side, which, under the circumstances, would then have been the port side of the vessel. As an additional precautionary measure, Captain Briggs may have directed one of his men to break out a coil of rope for a tow line, so that if the threatened danger should pass, they could return to their vessel.

The tenseness of the situation can easily be imagined as they anxiously awaited the moment when all hands would be in the boat and they could cast off from the "Mary Celeste" and put as much distance as possible between themselves and the danger threatening them.

They could not foresee that the morning calm was not to continue. Sudden and violent squalls are of frequent occurrence in the Azores, and according to the meteorological report, something of this character must soon have happened, for it states that in the afternoon of that date, a wind of gale force prevailed over this area of the Azores. Under the impact of such wind, the vessel may have lunged forward so suddenly as to break the improvised tow line, leaving the occupants of the boat striving with frantic but futile effort to overtake the onswEEPing "Mary Celeste." A heavy rain accompanying such a gale would have materially increased the difficulties of the people in the small boat. It seem probable that with its little company, she was blown to the

southeastward, away from the nearest land, Santa Maria, and out into the broad reaches of the Atlantic — with about 800 miles between them and the coast of Portugal — and soon were overwhelmed in a gale-swept sea.

Another Theory

Among the most recent attempts to explain the mystery of the “Mary Celeste” is that of Captain Dod Orsborne, in an article in “Life” Magazine of December 6, 1948, entitled “The Phantom Islands.”

In 1936 Captain Orsborne was on a job for the British Naval Intelligence and his diesel powered vessel, the “Girl Pat,” a 68 foot overall length, was cruising off the coast of French West Africa when she landed unexpectedly on a sandy island. After getting off, she soon landed on another, spending altogether four days thereon before getting afloat and continuing on her destination. During this time, Captain Orsborne states, islands were rising and disappearing.

He was later informed by a French Foreign Legion officer that “French scientists attribute the islands to a great river that flows under the Sahara Desert and empties somewhere on the floor of the Atlantic, 60 to 100 miles in the outlet of this underground river and at intervals the sand clogs the outlet completely. Then the dammed river, increasing its pressure, finally succeeds in belching the tremendous barrier of sand into the ocean. These sudden upheavals of sand form islands that rise to the surface, later settling and sinking below again.”

This experience led Captain Orsborne to conclude that it was “not only possible but probable that the ‘Mary Celeste’ could have sailed farther south than her recorded positions.” He knew of instances where steam-

ships had deviated considerably from the correct course when the navigation was done by dead reckoning. If a steamship can err 20 miles in an 80-mile trip, he argues, "it would be easy for a sailing vessel to err 600 miles in a 3,000-mile crossing of the Atlantic — and they frequently did." On this basis, Captain Orsborne proceeds to elaborate his theory that this is probably what happened to the "Mary Celeste."

