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Bedford's William F. Gragg... A Historic Navy Career

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Overview

William Francis Gragg (1810 – 1864) lived in Bedford, Massachusetts, along with his wife Maria (Cloutman) and family. Where the family lived in Bedford is the subject of continuing research. Many families with the name of Gragg appear in Bedford's history, including farmers, shoemakers, harness makers, soldiers, sailors and merchant ship captains, but the history of William F. Gragg is worth further note.

We do not know where Gragg was born and reared, but records show that his father was Stephen Gragg, from Exeter, NH, and his mother was Maria Munion Gragg, from Bridgewater, MA. He married Maria Cloutman on 28 March 1830 in First Church, Boston. They had four children, George William (b. 1832), William F., Jr. (b. 1834), Mary M. (b.1841), and Maria E. (b.1851).

The first official mention of the William F. Gragg family in Bedford appears in the Bedford Census of 1855.

All members of the family are listed, and his occupation was “laborer.” However, by 1857 William F. had joined the U.S. Navy. He served on the US steam frigate *Mississippi* during its second cruise to Japan and China between 1857 and 1860. After returning from that voyage, he was back in Bedford as a “porter” according to the census of 1860. He then re-enlisted in the U.S. Navy in June of 1862, serving on multiple ships during the Civil War. His service ended when he was mustered out upon his death from typhoid fever on December 24, 1864.

Gragg is buried in Shawsheen Cemetery along with his wife, three of his children and other

members of the family.

Military Service

William F. Gragg had two stints in the U.S. Navy. The first was on the U.S.S. Mississippi for its voyage to China and Japan between 1857 and 1860. The second was during the Civil War on board three ships involved in supplying the Union troops, conveying wounded soldiers to hospitals, and transporting prisoners as part of the blockade of the coast of the Confederate states.

The Cruise to China and Japan, 1857 to 1860

Gragg served as a Surgeon's Steward on the historic cruise of the U.S. steam frigate Mississippi to China and Japan from July 1857 to February 1860.

During this eventful voyage, Gragg maintained a log with important eyewitness documentation of life on a US Navy war ship. His account was published in 1860.

An original copy of the book is in the Harvard College library, a gift of Richard Henry Dana, who is well known as author of the book *Two Years Before the Mast*. Gragg's book was scanned as part of Google's Book Search and is available on-line as well as in both hard cover and paperback versions from Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Gragg's log was very well-written and provides a good read for those interested in mid-eighteenth century history. He covers a wide range of topics associated with life on a Navy cruise including lists of officers, complement of sailors, inventories of stores and coal, events such as courts martial for petty and criminal offenses, gun salutes (what kind and how many) for dignitaries, and shipboard drills to ready the crew for military action if needed. In addition to the drills, other distractions were conducted to counter boredom on long periods of inaction. A theater group was formed and plays were put on for the crew as well as for visiting dignitaries. During holidays, all hands were called to "splice the main brace," which was to take a tot of whiskey at government expense! He documented the dates of arrival at each port visited by the ship along with the average daily distance covered, thereby providing a measure of speed attained by the Mississippi.

Perhaps the highlight of Gragg's book is his description of such historic events as the English and French assaults on Chinese forts during the Second Opium War, the installation of the first U.S. Minister to Japan, and his personal experience of being among the first Americans allowed to overnight in the Jeddo (Tokyo) imperial district. His descriptions of the ports of call throughout the cruise and of the associated military and government protocols during the ship's visits provide a colorful account of the period. Among the ports he described in detail were Madeira, St. Helena, Capetown, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao, Manilla, Peiho,

Shanghai, Shimoda, Hakodate, Nagasaki, Ningbo, Canton, Tokyo, Penang, Barbados, and St. Thomas, before the ship finally arrived back home in Boston in February 1860.

Civil War Service, 1862 to 1864

After his cruise and the publication of his log, Gragg returned for a time to his home in Bedford. In June 1862, he re-enlisted and continued his military career during the Civil War as Surgeon's Steward on the Housatonic, Canandaigua, and Circassian, all ships that were involved in the blockade of the Southern US shoreline. His service on the USS Housatonic must have been interesting; it was torpedoed and sunk by a submarine of the Confederate Navy, the first successful sinking of a war ship by a submarine. The Circassian was in the US Navy's West Gulf Blocking Squadron, supporting the Union cause by supplying the troops, bringing wounded soldiers to hospitals in New York and Boston, and moving Confederate prisoners to secure locations. U.S. Navy records document the movements of the ship from Boston to New York to Virginia and all the way to the coast of Texas. The record shows that the Circassian arrived at the Boston Navy Yard needing repairs on 14 December 1864. Boston was his last port of call.

Gragg died soon afterwards on 24 December at home in Bedford of typhoid fever, a disease he presumably contracted during his service.

Family Follow-up

Gragg's widow, Maria, applied for state aid from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a result of his death during service. It took until March 1889 for the General Court of Massachusetts to approve her petition. Their sons also served in the military.

George served in Company K, 6th Massachusetts, United States Volunteers for the nine-month campaign in 1862-1863 and after being discharged, re-enlisted in the US Navy to serve on the same ship (USS Circassian) as his father in the same role as Surgeon's Steward. William F., Jr. served on several US Navy ships in the North Atlantic Squadron, ending up in command of the USS Delta in Virginia. Daughter Mary M. married Henry W. Davis, a farmer in Grafton, MA in 1867. The youngest daughter Maria married George Lucas. They and their two children are also buried in Shawsheen Cemetery.

Carl Hanson is a retired acoustical engineer who has lived in Bedford with his wife Signe since 1967. After moving to their home on Springs Rd. in 1973, they became interested in the history of the antique house and property. Researching the deeds, they found the names of first home owners, William and Mary Gragg. Carl's research provided the background for the story in this issue.

