

Captain Freeman Kennedy Reed

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The story of Captain Freeman K. Reed of Boothbay Harbor, Maine is largely unknown outside his family circle. However, his trials and tribulations deserve to be remembered and recounted. Lost at sea and leaving no body to bury, Captain Reed's descendants and curious historians alike must instead visit the Boothbay Regional Historical Society to uncover the life of this noteworthy seaman. The Historical Society, based in the Captain's former home, keeps his story alive through its collection of his private logs and journals. Captain Reed's forebears were intriguing in their own right: Revolutionary War fighters, merchant marines, and founders of the town of Boothbay. This report acts in the name of preservation, working to protect the Reed's legacy from the ravages of time, illuminating their family name for generations to follow.

Born on the 24th of May in 1841¹, Freeman Kennedy Reed grew up on the same Boothbay homestead as his father and grandfather. Reed was born with the sea in his blood. Tracing his lineage back three generations leads to Andrew Reed I ², an Irish immigrant who helped found the town of Dunbar, which would eventually become Boothbay Harbor. Andrew Reed I had eight sons, four of whom went on to become sea captains.

Andrew Reed II and Andrew Reed III, his son and grandson respectively, both served in the Revolutionary War. Andrew Reed II served as a colonel, while the latter served as the captain of the privateer *Salamander*. Andrew Reed I's other sons, David, Joseph, and Paul, also served as naval captains, leading trading ships in and out of the Boothbay Harbor region. ³ Joseph Reed, the second-youngest son of Andrew Reed I, sired a boy named Paul Reed. Paul Reed, in turn,

begat Freeman Reed Sr., the father of Freeman Kennedy Reed. Despite his own father's calling as a sea captain, Freeman Reed Sr. was a farmer ⁴ and kept the same homestead as his ancestor, using the land to feed and provide for his family. He married Mary Kennedy and had four children with her, Freeman Kennedy Reed, William, Jane, and Eliza. The birth of their fourth and final child, Eliza, culminated in Mary's untimely and unexpected death. Reed Sr. remarried and fathered four more children, Harriet, Abigail, Mary Frances and Abby Emma. Although the son of a farmer the ocean always intrigued Freeman Reed Jr., and as a child he was able to learn the ways of the sea by hanging around the busy harbor in Boothbay. In an 1856 diary entry he describes such ventures, saying, *"Today I went to the dock and watched the ships arrive. I talked with the boys there and learned from them about the water."*⁵

In 1861 on May 25th, at the age of 25, Freeman Kennedy Reed Jr. married Elizabeth Fisher Blair and went on to have three children with her, Fullerton Paul, Kate and Elizabeth. ⁶At the same time, in the 1850s and 60s, the growth of "regular steamer service..." in the Boothbay Harbor Region began to allow for reliable transport to the hubs of nautical industry, "Bath, Portland, and Boston..."⁷. As a result, there was a slow but steady increase in commercial activity and travel in the Boothbay region. This burgeoning nautical industry intrigued Reed Jr. and sold him on a life at sea. The sea life would eventually take him all over the globe, leading him to domestic and foreign shores in the pursuit of commerce.

Freeman Reed Jr. began his seafaring career working as a deckhand on shipping vessels sailing out of Boothbay Harbor. In his personal diary in 1861, he wrote about working for

Captain Benjamin Lewis of Portland, formerly of Boothbay, on the shipping vessel *John G. Richardson*.⁸ Over the next eight years Reed Jr. moved steadily up the maritime ranks and eventually, by the late 1860s, received command of his own vessel, the *Starlight*. Built in Bath, Maine the *Starlight* operated internationally under the captainship of Reed Jr. leaving the shores of New England for the distant West Indies, Santo Domingo and Baracoa.⁹ Reed's command of the *Starlight* was not without incident: in 1877, in the Chesapeake Bay near Virginia, the *Starlight* collided with rocks in the shallow water and sank, with Reed Jr. nearly drowning in his cabin. Fortunately, the water was shallow and the ship was saved and repaired by October of the same year.

Over the winter of 1877 the *Starlight* ventured to the West Indies carrying potatoes and lumber for a small town on Cape Haiti. In January of 1878, Reed Jr. wrote of the ruined town in his captain's log, saying "It is a very fine location but the city is in ruins having been destroyed by an earthquake in 1842, and never rebuilt..."¹⁰ Following the trip to Haiti, Reed Jr. directed the *Starlight* to Baracoa, Cuba. Returning with fruit in its hold, the ship then sailed to Maryland to collect timber that would be used in the Bath shipyards for boat construction. The service of the *Starlight* ended with a final trade expedition to the Dominican Republic town of Santo Domingo where Reed Jr. happened upon the remains of Christopher Columbus, "buried in a lead box with his name on a silver-plate outside..."¹¹

Following the end of the *Starlight*, Reed Jr. assumed the helm of many other ships, including the *S. P. Hitchcock*, a schooner commissioned and constructed in Bath. From 1874 to

1883, Captain Reed Jr., commanded the *Challenge*, the *Standard*, and the *Telumah*, all schooners operating as international trading vessels. Finally, in 1884, Reed Jr. took control of the *James S. Lowell*, another Bath-built schooner. A thirty-seven thousand dollar vessel, the *Lowell* was primarily used to transport ice from the Kennebec River to Southern ports. Besides ice, it plied the seas between North and South America carrying sugar cane and other natural products.¹²

However, the earlier misfortune with the *Starlight* seemed to foreshadow the fate of the *Lowell*. In August of 1884 near Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts the *Lowell*, with Reed Jr. at the helm, collided with the *USS Tallapoosa*, a former Civil War heavy arms gunship captained by Lieutenant Commander John F. Merry. While the *Lowell* emerged relatively unscathed, the *USS Tallapoosa* actually sank due to the crash and was later raised and restored by the U.S. Navy. The *USS Tallapoosa* was described as a ship “with the reputation at the Navy Department for getting into trouble...”¹³ The collision was assessed in court and to the surprise of many, the blame was placed squarely on the *Lowell*, despite Captain Reed having had the right of way at the time of the collision. In spite of the *USS Tallapoosa*’s reputation as a ship that “navigated... as if they believed that everything on the coast would give way for them.”¹⁴ Reed Jr. was initially faulted for the accident, until it was eventually pursued and dismissed in a higher court. In Reed’s own words, “It [the accident] is the most careless piece of work I ever saw.”¹⁵

Over a roughly thirty-year period Reed Jr. captained six commercial ships, carrying everything from logwood, sugar and coconuts, to potatoes, lignum vitae, and mahogany wood. Until he assumed the helm of the ill-fated *James S. Lowell*, Reed Jr. was reputed as a good

captain: competent and successful, albeit a bit unlucky. From his beginnings as a humble deck hand to his eventual position as the captain of multiple shipping vessels, Captain Reed lived a noble and successful life deeply intertwined with the ocean that had always surrounded him.

Unfortunately, as was the case for many maritime men of his time, Captain Reed Jr. met his demise at the hands of the angry Atlantic Ocean. In 1889 the *Lowell*, loaded with ice, sailed out from the very place it had launched its maiden voyage, Boothbay Harbor. Its first stop was to be Philadelphia. On the ninth of September the fog was heavy, but the water was calm. Captain Reed's final *Lowell* log entry reads, "6:30 P.M., September 9th. No work today. The night is peaceful and the water is clear, but the fog continues to surround us..."¹⁶ Overnight the fog gave way to a storm as the winds began to pick up. Testimony from survivors indicates that hurricane conditions arrived on the morning of the tenth. At around nine o'clock in the morning, Captain Reed came out to the deck. According to survivor W.H. Merritt, the last man to see Captain Reed, the captain "saw a heavy following sea rushing upon them..."¹⁷ He then shouted to Merritt, "Look out! It's coming!"¹⁸ Thanks to his captain's final command, Merritt was able to grab onto the spokes of the wheel and anchor himself against the crashing waves. When he was finally able to let go of the wheel and look around, there was no sign of Captain Reed save for a "fragment of his oil coat"¹⁹ which was tangled in the ship's rigging. In the end only two sailors and the captain died, all three swept off by crashing waves. The *Lowell* began to break apart in the gale and the remaining members of the crew were forced onto the quarterdeck for survival. They drifted for two days until the passing *Havana* saved them.²⁰ The rest of the surviving crew

members were safely transported home. As for the *Lowell*, it was left to drift alone, carried aimlessly by the waves. By rough estimate it traveled thirteen hundred miles in its forty-seven day voyage until succumbing to the ocean near the Grand Banks of Newfoundland.²¹ Like the *Lowell* itself, the body of Captain Reed was never recovered. He was left to rest in the ocean from which his life had been shaped, born into the sea by family history and left to lie there forever.

Despite coming from a significant family in the history of the Boothbay Region, Captain Freeman Kennedy Reed's place in Maine's maritime history is largely unknown. It is hoped that, unlike the *Lowell*, which disintegrated and disappeared at sea, Captain Reed's story will now be remembered and commemorated. Today, the Boothbay Historical Society continues to quietly tell Captain Reed's diverse story, a tale beginning with a life of ordinary commercial success and ending with a violent voyage into the storm that wrecked his ship and claimed his life. Lost in the sea, the ocean has gradually taken his body, burying it deep in the recesses of the abyss. This report hopes to illuminate his name and preserve his story, lest the sands of time similarly obscure the noble legacy of the Captain Freeman Kennedy Reed.

Notes

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15. Ibid. 241.
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17. Rice, 245.
18. Ibid. 245.
19. Ibid. 245.
20. Unknown Sailor. "Untitled Sketch", 1889, pencil sketch, Boothbay, Maine, Boothbay Region Historical Society.
21. Rice, 246.

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