

“MUTINY IN THE HARBOR”
Joshua Slocum’s Lost Week in New London©

Years before setting out on his famous circumnavigation in SPRAY, Capt. Joshua Slocum was the Master and part-owner of the full-rigged ship NORTHERN LIGHT. On Friday, August 4, 1882, that vessel was towed into the Port of New London with a broken rudder which had disabled her on the Sound while bound from New York on a voyage to Yokohama. Onboard was a cargo of 18,000 cases of kerosene, 150 tons of coal and several hundred tons of general merchandise. In addition to reporting this unplanned arrival, the next-day’s edition of The New London Day stated in its “Marine Matters” column that the vessel was to be repaired at a local yard so that it could proceed on her voyage. However, on the same Friday evening of her arrival, the crew of NORTHERN LIGHT “refused duty” and sought to get ashore claiming to have been shanghaied in New York. In response, Captain Slocum reached out to New London Mayor Robert Coit who sent two individuals on board “armed with the authority of special constables.” He also made complaint to the Captain of the U.S. revenue cutter GRANT, who promptly sent an officer and boat’s crew to deal with the mutineers. They were confined in the forecastle deck house with two watchmen on guard. The Day reported the work stoppage in a separate article in the Saturday edition noting that

If the men continue to refuse duty when the ship is ready to sail today they will be taken ashore in irons and sent to jail, but the chances are they will be meek and penitent enough after their night’s experience of Uncle Sam’s method of discipline for disobedient tars.

That optimism persisted as the Marine Matters column in Monday’s edition reported that the crew who “had refused duty Friday night have come to terms.” But the predictions proved premature both as to the ship being ready to sail and the odds being in favor of meekness and penitence. A Saturday examination by “Scott’s¹ divers” found a lower pintle broken and the upper bent out of line. So “the rudder was unhung on Sunday by Crocker & Davison’s² sheers and taken to the ways for repair” with the modified prediction that the ship likely would not be ready to sail before Wednesday. And then, on Monday morning, seaman Frank Murrin escaped from the deckhouse by raising a window while the guards were absent. He freed the rest of the crew who assembled on the main deck where they “stood silent and sullen, a band of determined outlaws, with mutiny stamped upon their countenances and murder in their hearts.” Capt. Slocum ordered them to surrender their sheath knives and one crewmember turned his over but Murrin denied having one. When Mate Marvel Knowles went to put

¹ Captain Thomas A. Scott, namesake of Capt. Scott’s Lobster Dock on Hamilton Street and principal of the former T.A. Scott Company marine construction company that built Race Rock Light.

² According to their website Crocker’s Boatyard was established the year before, in 1881.
<https://crockersboatyardinc.com/167-2/>

handcuffs on Murrin as instructed by the Captain, Murrin drew the sheath knife the Captain had overlooked during his pat-down of the ring-leader. Murrin stabbed Knowles four times, one "in the pit of the stomach." The Captain and the Second Mate drew revolvers to hold back the rest of the crew who had surged forward. With the help of local authorities and those from the GRANT, the mutineers were eventually sequestered and locked up. Knowles, apparently near death from loss of blood, was taken to the Bacon House where he later was well enough to identify his assailant.

On Thursday, Judge Butler of the New London Police court heard testimony from the Sheriff and the physician who attended to the mate's wounds. Murrin's attorney said he would introduce evidence showing that the mate was guilty of gross brutality and that his client was acting in self-defense. Crewmember testimony established that the root cause of the mutinous behavior was the conscription forced upon them in New York and the Mate was singled out for his harsh treatment of those who had complained.

The "Marine Matters" column of The Day for Friday, August 11, 1882 noted that the ship NORTHERN LIGHT was expected to finally set out from New London the next day, bound once again for Yokohama. The GRANT would be conveying the ship to deep water. A blurb in Saturday's edition confirmed that Capt. Slocum had filled the vacancy caused by the stabbing of his first mate Knowles and was expected "to sail for Japan today with his punished and penitent crew of ex-mutineers."

NORTHERN LIGHT's voyage eventually did come to an end with the vessel reaching Yokohama but Capt. Slocum's troubles with crew did not. When the second mate took sick in that foreign port, he was replaced by ex-convict Henry A. Slater who incited a mutiny shortly after the vessel departed for New York. Slocum placed Slater in irons and kept him locked up for the entire 53 days it took the vessel to reach port. Upon arrival, Slater sued Slocum in Federal Court for false and cruel imprisonment. As reported in The Day on Friday, January 18, 1884, Slocum was convicted and fined \$500.00 despite a leniency petition having been circulated by fellow master mariners.

Reference to the Slater case and the imposed fine was the lead-in for yet another New London Day article two years later, on December 11, 1885. Under the headline "CRUEL CAPT. SLOCUM" and a sub-head proclaiming "His Conduct Alleged to be the Same as he was on the Northern Light," it described the recent New York arrival of the Bark AQUIDNECK at the end of a tug's tow hawser in a dismantled and "generally disabled condition." Slocum's biographers have explained that the fine and other expenses arising from the Slater case caused a forced sale of NORTHERN LIGHT after which he purchased a part interest in the much smaller AQUIDNECK. The Day article went on to explain that, although the vessel survived the storm that dismantled her, a crewmember went missing and was logged as "lost overboard," only to mysteriously make himself known and make out a complaint of abuse when the vessel reached port. Other crewmembers joined in the accusations and a warrant was issued for Slocum's arrest but he could not be found to be served.

It can be said that Slocum's weeklong experience in New London inspired him to acquire and rebuild SPRAY and, in 1895, take that vessel on the worldwide trip he wrote about in his famous book, *Sailing Alone Around the World*. While in New London dealing with the mutiny on NORTHERN LIGHT, "Captain Slocum himself said to a representative of The Day that he once thought the height of his ambition would be to command a fine ship, but his experience now

leads him to wish he had a cabin in the backwoods or a fishing smack instead." SPRAY, of course, began life as an oyster smack which, according to Slocum biographer Anne Spence may have once sailed out of Noank. Capt. Slocum's troubling experiences after leaving New London, first with Slater onboard NORTHERN LIGHT and then with the crew of AQUIDNECK no doubt doubled his resolve to become a solo sailor leaving behind interactions with unruly crew and the several claims of cruelty, legitimate or not. Complete and lasting solace was not to be however. Despite apologizing to Slocum some years later, confessing that he had been manipulated by the crew, Slater resumed his attack on the Captain's reputation in 1896 when SPRAY reached Australia where Slater, coincidentally, happened to be living. The resulting bad press put a damper on Slocum's otherwise popular reception but his reputation survived when he returned home from his circumnavigation to a hero's welcome. He tried farming for a while on the Vineyard but soon set off again in SPRAY on his last voyage which ended with his mysterious disappearance in 1909.

By William H. Welte

Sources:

The New London Day, 1882; August 5, 8, 9,11, 12; 1885, December 11.

The Search for Captain Slocum, A Biography by Walter M. Teller

Alone at Sea: The Adventures of Joshua Slocum
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