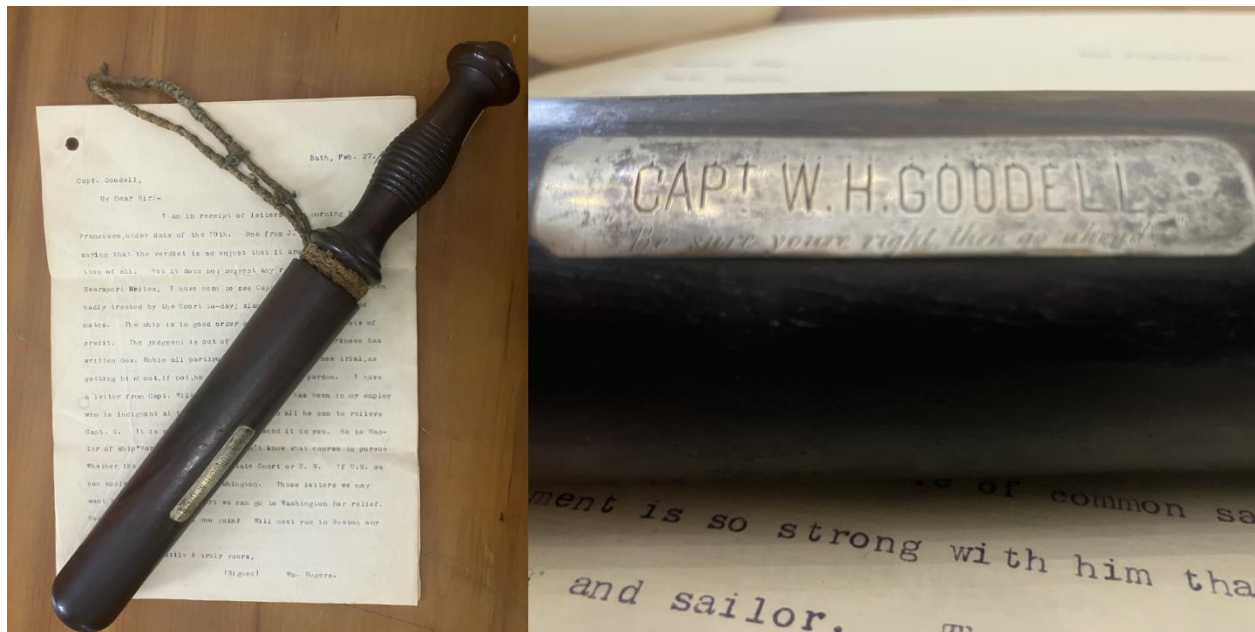


Cruel Captain Meets His Match with Union

By Cipperly Good, the Richard Saltonstall Jr. Curator of Maritime History

There have been murmurs over the years of Searsport sea captains and their cruel tactics to ensure shipboard discipline. A recent acquisition of Captain William Heagan Goodell's shipboard tools and papers has brought it clearly into focus. Among the objects we received is a billy club with a plaque etched "Capt. W.H. Goodell." Upon closer inspection, I saw a faint inscription: "Be sure youre right, then go ahead." This put me on the alert as I delved deeper into the other contents of the collection during the cataloguing process.



Billy club with plaque inscribed: "Capt. W.H. Goodell 'Be sure youre right, then go ahead'" with a transcription of letters from shipowner William Rogers to Daniel S. Goodell Sr. regarding his son's trial. William H. Goodell Collection, 2025.11.5 and PMM 123.

Perusing the logbook of the ship GOVERNOR ROBIE, which includes William H. Goodell's voyage from San Francisco to Liverpool between April 23 and August 31, 1885, my eye was caught by a series of entries. First mate William McKenzie had been keeping the log, so when the handwriting changed, I knew something was up.

LOG of the <i>Gov Robie</i> from San Francisco towards Liverpool										LOG of the <i>Gov Robie</i> from San Francisco towards Liverpool									
OCCURRENCES and REMARKS										OCCURRENCES and REMARKS									
HOURS	R.	F.	COURSES	WINDS	Lat	Long	Dist	Time	Remarks	HOURS	R.	F.	COURSES	WINDS	Lat	Long	Dist	Time	Remarks
1	5		N 45 E	11					Came in with strong	1									put Mate off duty for neglect
2	5								SW gale and heavy	2									of work and no attention to my
3	5								snow squalls	3									orders. This by setting an example
4	5								and high sea running	4									of mutiny to all hands on board
5	4								continues so far (the 24th)	5									W.H. Goodell
6	4									6									Master
7	3									7									
8	2									8									
9	5									9									
10	7									10									
11	10								Ship under plain sail	11									
12	11									12									
1	10									1									
2	9									2									
3	9									3									
4	11									4									
5	11									5									
6	11									6									
7	11									7									
8	11									8									
9	11								Pumpers and lights	9									
10	11								carefully attended	10									
11	11									11									
12	11									12									
Distance per Log										Distance per Log									
Variation 2.6										Variation									
COURSE 177.6										COURSE									
DISTANCE 177.6										DISTANCE									
DEPARTURE 177.6										DEPARTURE									
ON THE LOOK OUT										ON THE LOOK OUT									
MEN'S NAMES										MEN'S NAMES									
SIDE LIGHTS HUNG OUT										SIDE LIGHTS HUNG OUT									

Logkeeping duties transfer from First Mate William McKenzie to Captain William H. Goodell Sr. in the logbook of the ship GOV. ROBIE, Antwerp to San Francisco 1884-1885. William H. Goodell Collection, PMM 123-1.

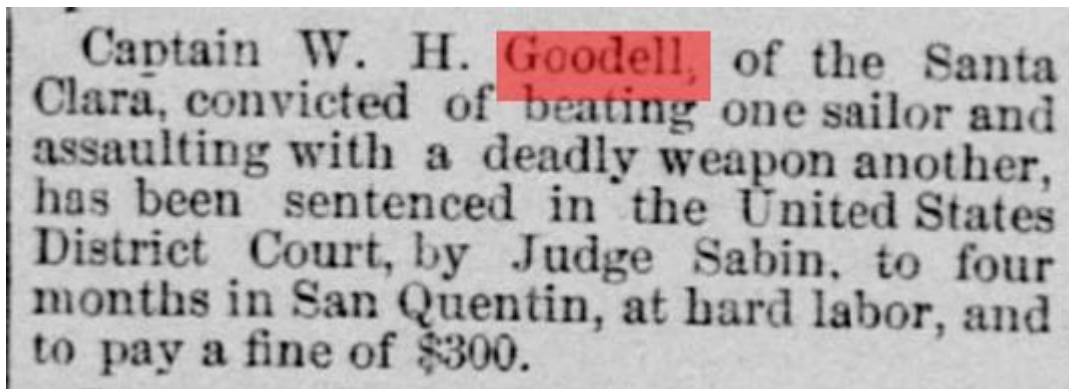
On May 26, 1885, Goodell writes: "[the mate is] off duty for neglect of work & my orders & being impertinent to me -W.H. Goodell." Goodell takes over writing in the log until May 28, when McKenzie seems to have returned to his good graces. Yet those good graces are fleeting. On June 25, Goodell once again takes over the log and retains the duty for the remainder of the trip: "1st mate off duty for neglect of work and no attention to my orders thereby setting an example of mutiny to all hands on board -WH Goodell, Master." McKenzie's punishment is revealed on June 26: "Mate off duty—put him forward and second mate made mate and one of the boatswain aft as 2nd mate."

2																			
3																			
4																			
5																			
6																			
7																			
8																			
9																			
10																			
11																			
12																			
put Carpenter in Drums 2 hours										put Carpenter in Drums 2 hours									
for being lazy & slow with his										for being lazy & slow with his									
work & duty in Shop & carelessness										work & duty in Shop & carelessness									
cutting up hatch covering & water way										cutting up hatch covering & water way									
while caking & not with his salt										while caking & not with his salt									
Distance per Log										Distance per Log									
Variation										Variation									
COURSE										COURSE									
DISTANCE										DISTANCE									
DEPARTURE										DEPARTURE									
ON THE LOOK OUT										ON THE LOOK OUT									
MEN'S NAMES										MEN'S NAMES									
SIDE LIGHTS HUNG OUT										SIDE LIGHTS HUNG OUT									

Captain William H. Goodell Sr.'s entry about the carpenter in the Logbook of the ship GOV. ROBIE, Antwerp to San Francisco 1884-1885. William H. Goodell Collection, PMM 123-1.

The first mate is not the only one to draw William's ire in the logbook. On July 30 he writes: "Put carpenter in irons 2 hours for being lazy & slow with his work & duty in ship & carelessness cutting up hatch coamings & waterways while calking—not worth his salt."

It was the return voyage from Liverpool to San Francisco from October 1885 to February 1886 that Goodell ran afoul of the law. Browsing through the business letters in the collection, I found an envelope entitled "Letters Re Father over SF Trial." It is not surprising that San Francisco in 1886 was the site of the trial. Sailors founded Coast Seamen's Union, the precursor of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, AFL-CIO, on a San Francisco wharf on March 6, 1885. At sea, the captain's word was law, and the captain and his mates enforced that law through corporal punishment. The Coast Seamen's Union argued through their 1895 publication *The Red Record*, that "the system ... originated and is maintained upon the theory that brutal ships' officers can by threats and violence compel a small crew to do the work of the larger number of men required under a just system." Although it cannot be confirmed through primary sources, I speculate that the Union was waiting for a crew subject to cruelty on the high seas to test their might in court. William H. Goodell and the crew of the GOVERNOR ROBIE were to be one of the early test cases in February of 1886.



Sacramento Daily Record-Union (Sacramento [Calif.]), February 19, 1886.

In his defense notes for the trial, Goodell writes of sailing from Liverpool on October 12, 1885. While being towed out of port, the steamship hawser broke.

The mates and crew in a drunken state more or less useless to perform their duties ... [it] was necessary to make sail fast as possible to enable us to fetch out clear of the land. While making sail I sang out three or four times to one of the crew ... to go higher up and loose the [sail]. Owing to the strong wind and noise he could not hear me. I then fired off two shots from my revolver in the air to the leeward, not at him or within 30 yards of him. I did it simply to attract his attention that he would look downwards the deck and I could make him understand my orders. ... Two months later while off Cape

Horn I was obliged to put two men in irons. I did so because they had been insolent to me, neglectful of their duties and would not obey my orders, setting a bad example to others of the crew and in a state of mutiny at a time when all hands was required to work ship. I placed them in irons with the clear understanding that they would be let out when they would promise to go to work, obey orders and conduct themselves in a proper manner. One was in irons 24 hours, the other 36 hours, during their confinement they were sheltered in the half deck, allowed their regular food and blankets to cover them and were let out of irons as soon as they promised to do better and went to work. This is the full extent of punishment inflicted on crew during the passage. On arrival in San Francisco complaints were lodged against me for cruel treatment. ... Seaman were afraid to testify in my favor owing to the influence of the Seamans Union Society.

In a series of letters to and from William's father Daniel Smith Goodell, Sr., a ship captain, shipyard owner, and shipowner with interests in his sons' commands as well as other Searsport cargo ships, we get more context for the story. These letters, from fellow captains and the ship GOVERNOR ROBIE's owner, offer indignation at the verdict, while acknowledging Goodell could have tempered his discipline. One can read into the fear of fellow captains that they might be the next to appear in court.



Billy club and transcription of letter from William Rogers to Daniel S. Goodell, Sr.
William H. Goodell Collection, 2025.11.5 and PMM 123-16.

William Rogers, the Bath shipbuilder and owner of the GOVERNOR ROBIE, wrote to Daniel Goodell a series of updates on the trial. On February 19, 1886, Rogers writes:

I am receipt of a telegram. ... 'Captain Goodell sentenced four months State Prison for assault at Sea, petitioned for new trial.' ... Captain Goodell has no doubt been indiscreet on the passage, and ought to have taken into consideration the fact that San Francisco is the "Haven of Rest" for the Sailor.

An update from Rogers on February 21:

I am in receipt of the following 'Probably change sentence to jail.' ... I infer from the above dispatch that in their consultations & endeavors for new trial with the judge, the best they can do with him is to change the sentence ... but you know California has the reputation of being very severe upon the Officers of a ship which in any way are complained of by the crew.

A final dispatch arrived on March 3 from Rogers: "I am in receipt this morning ... the following, 'Capt Goodell sent to prison'."

Fellow Searsport captain James Nichols, who was able to attend the trial in San Francisco, wrote to Daniel Goodell on February 18:

Every one that I have heard speak about it says his sentence was a most wicked, prejudiced decision. ... It is the general opinion that it was a put up job to extort money and get the crew paid off [halfway through] the round [trip] voyage. Capt. George Harkness, of Camden, who is an intimate friend of [Maine] Gov. Robie, has written to [Robie] asking him to use his influence to have this decision set aside.

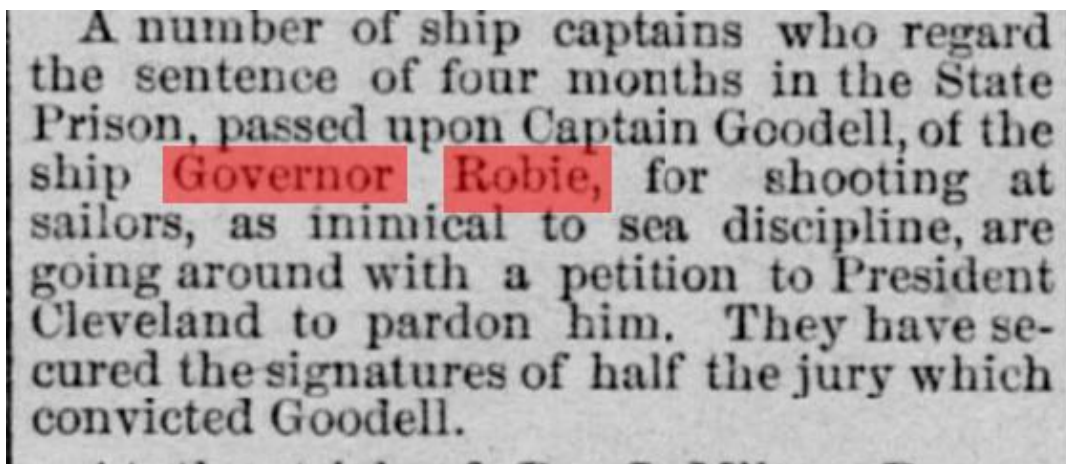
Bath sea captain Wiley R. Dickinson wrote to William Rogers on February 19:

The sentence passed upon [Goodell] is very unjust, far from humane in the opinion of all who have any knowledge of the nature of sailors that we get these days. Capt. Goodell may have used his authority beyond sound discretion, but if that is the case, the Judge on the Bench has exceeded him two hundred fold, and were I a sailor before the mast would prefer Goodell to Judge Sabin ... the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sentiment is so strong with [Sabin] that he is not fit to judge between Master and sailor. ... There is a society here called "Sailor's Union"; they have worked the case up and deserve credit for their zeal, but to say there is justice in the matter, I cannot, and every Master

here or any one acquainted with seamen can readily see that the thing has been for effect and not for fact, and principle.

The prosecuting Assistant U.S. Attorney Carroll Cook even wrote in Captain Goodell's defense for a commutation of his sentence, as evidenced by a March 19, 1886 letter to a California U.S. Congressman William W. Morrow:

I regretted being called upon to perform such duty on account of my personal friendship for the Capt. ... I am forced to confess that his conviction was due more to the inexperience of his counsel, than to my ability as a prosecutor or to the evidence against him. Many salient points of evidence which would have explained the transactions were wholly overlooked and not brought to light in his defense, while every point that I possibly could get legitimately before the jury was shown against him by sailors who were not cross-examined. I understand he is about to apply for a pardon, he having been sent to States Prison and I have been requested by his father to write to you. ... My duties as a prosecutor are now over and I can but suggest to you that he is as far as I can learn the first Captain who has been sent to States Prison in the District and to my knowledge was not as guilty and did not deserve such punishment as much as other Captains whom I have prosecuted and who have been let off with a County Jail imprisonment ... it would be but justice to have his sentence commuted.



A number of ship captains who regard the sentence of four months in the State Prison, passed upon Captain Goodell, of the ship Governor Robie, for shooting at sailors, as inimical to sea discipline, are going around with a petition to President Cleveland to pardon him. They have secured the signatures of half the jury which convicted Goodell.

Sacramento Daily Record-Union (Sacramento [Calif.]), March 12, 1886. Eventually President Cleveland pardoned Goodell on April 28, 1886.

Readers will not be surprised that this was not Goodell's first charge of cruelty. The only difference is that the Coast Seaman's Union now had sway with the courts. The San Francisco *Morning Call* October 5, 1883 edition covered an earlier example of William Heagan Goodell's cruelty. I will give you the *CliffsNotes*: Seaman John Bilson charged

Captain Goodell with shoving him, stamping him in the face with the heel of his boot, and then sending Bilson to stand on the pilothouse as punishment. While Bilson was going to the pilothouse, Goodell struck him on the head and shoulders with a wooden belaying-pin, and upon the completion of Bilson's 20 minutes standing on the pilothouse, caught him by the throat. What was Bilson's infraction? Not hauling on a rope to Goodell's satisfaction and talking back: "I am hauling, sir." The three mates of the GOVERNOR ROBIE were also charged with various counts of cruelty. Other charges against Goodell were striking seaman John Malngren while he was at the wheel, knocking him down, and striking him in the side. Goodell also carried a belaying pin in his pocket and "roundly cursed the crew, walking up and down the deck and threatening them; he also told the first and second mates to go into the cabin, saying that they were no mates, and struck at the third mate." Goodell was acquitted of the charges and paid a \$1,000 fine.

It seems the Goodells did not temper their cruelty even after William went to state prison. On September 20, 1890, the Boston district court fined brother Daniel \$350 for tricing up and flogging his seamen. Nor was William Goodell the only Searsport sea captain to find himself in the crosshairs of the Coast Seamen's Union. The Union published the *Coast Seamen's Journal*, which recorded stories of cruel treatment at sea. In 1895, the editor of the journal compiled 63 stories of captains who had not been brought to justice for their sadistic cruelty, in a publication known as the *Red Record*. Of the 63 stories, we find one of Captain Edward Dyer Peters Nickels aboard the ship MAY FLINT, charged with crushing body parts and holystoning the face of a sailor.

While we do not know when William Goodell received or commissioned the billy club with the plaque, the admonition to "Be sure youre right, then go ahead" does point to the fact that some lesson was learned from the trial. While refraining from beating one's crew seems not to be the takeaway, at least the trial tempered his immediate reaction to do so. The Coast Seamen's Union and subsequent 1915 Seaman's Act finally protected the welfare of American merchant mariner. By that time, global shipping went by steam, which required less crew, and many of Searsport's sailing ship captains had retired.