



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green

Sarah Bodfish, Forty-Niner

by *Meg Costello and Thelma Spicer*

Sarah (Coffin) Bodfish was the 46th Falmouth woman to sign an [1840 petition](#) to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. We have been researching the lives of each of these women.

Sarah J. Coffin was born in Nantucket to Silvanus and Judith (Macy) Coffin on January 15, 1809. The Macy and Coffin families had been Quakers for generations, as were many other Nantucket residents. Sarah was raised and surrounded by people who believed that slavery was wrong, and that women should have a voice in public affairs.

Sarah married Russell Sturgis Bodfish in Nantucket in 1828. He was a 23-year-old master mariner from Sandwich. The couple settled in Falmouth and had three children here. When Sarah signed the women's petition in 1840, she was the mother of a seven-year-old named William Henry. Another son, an infant named Thomas Russell, had died in 1836. In 1842, she gave birth to a daughter, Sarah Russell, who lived for only eighteen months.

Sarah had shown evidence of an independent spirit when she signed her name to that controversial petition. A few years later, she took another daring step. Sarah and Russell heard that gold had been found at Sutter's Mill in California. Seeing an opportunity, they grabbed it. They quickly decided to emigrate to California, where Russell and their teenage son William might make the family's fortune by mining for gold.

Russell joined an association of California-bound migrants. This group purchased and outfitted a ship, the *Panama*, and hired Russell to be its captain. The ship left New York on February 3, 1849 and arrived in San Francisco on August 8.

The *Panama* carried 220 passengers and crew; of that number, four were female. Sarah was joined by Mrs. Everson, wife of the first mate; Mrs. Lewitt, wife of a passenger; and Mary Longley, a widow. The women had staterooms in a house on the deck and ate at the Captain's table. Two passengers, George Dornin and Theodore Messerve, later wrote memoirs about this trip¹ but neither has much to say about Sarah or the other women.



Poster in Museums' collection.



[San Francisco Bay, 1851, watercolor by Thomas Ayres. Oakland Museum of California.](#)

According to Dornin and Messerve, the men on board the *Panama* were mostly under thirty. They spent a lot of time cleaning their guns and taking practice shots at birds. Yet they weren't all rowdies. Some joined together to form a brass band, while others passed the time by reading Dickens and Byron. There was an artist named [Thomas Ayres](#) on board, and a minister led services that were well-attended. It took the ship thirty days to round Cape Horn, pummeled by fearsome gales. In the calmer Pacific waters, the men worked on crafting tools and equipment that they would need when they got to the mines. Dornin recalled, "The deck in fair weather was transformed into a workshop, where gold-rockers, tents, etc., were made."ⁱⁱⁱ Messerve described how a group stationed near the

forecastle was "drilling a large piece of cast iron for a sieve or gold washer."ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah couldn't have escaped from the noise, not even inside the women's deckhouse. Along with everyone else, she probably dined on pigeon pot pies, made from Cape Horn "pigeons" shot by the passengers.

On July 4th the forty-niners celebrated with gusto. There was plenty of gunfire, both planned and spontaneous. The ship was "fully decorated with all available signal and other flags." Prayer, and a reading of the Declaration of Independence, preceded a fancy dress ball, with music provided by the passengers' brass band. Dornin marveled, "Think of it—only four women on board, and only one with the taste or inclination to dance; yet we had a ball, and the fun was unbounded." As one of the "younger and smoother faced gentlemen," he donned a calico gown and was in "active demand" as a dance partner. What a pity that he doesn't tell us whether Sarah was the one woman who had an inclination to dance.^{iv}

Heavy fogs shrouded the harbor at San Francisco. Once the *Panama* was safely anchored, an old-timer rowed out and warned them, "Plenty of gold, but hard to get it!"^v The ship was soon emptied of passengers and deserted by her crew. They were all eager to get to the mines.

At this point in our research, with Sarah's arrival in California well documented, the U.S. Census threw us a curve ball. In 1850, it shows the Bodfish family living in two places at once. In Falmouth, on August 17, 1850, Russell, Sarah, and William are alleged to be living in the 19-person household of Ephraim Eldridge, along with several other mariners. But this census listing is clearly wrong. The Bodfishes had definitely departed for California in early February of 1849. Because nobody in town had heard from them since then, someone at Eldridge's probably told the census taker that this was the Bodfishes' last known address. The impossibility of this entry is obvious when we consider that Sarah and her family would have needed a mad dash, worthy of Phileas Fogg, to leave Falmouth in August and reach California by November, which is when their second census entry is dated.



[Abandoned vessels in Yerba Buena Bay, San Francisco, 1853.](#)



[Miners at the head of Auburn Ravine, 1852.](#)



Top: Chinese Store Ruins, Main Street, Coloma, CA, 1933. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ca0127>



Bottom: James W. Marshall Cabin, Coloma, CA, 1933. Photograph at <https://www.loc.gov/item/ca0129>

On November 8, 1850, the family is correctly listed as residing in Coloma, El Dorado County, close to Sutter’s Mill. The three of them are living with Benjamin Townsend, presumably renting rooms from him. Both Russell and William Bodfish are described as “Miners,” and each is making an average of \$10 a day from mining. This is better than their landlord Townsend’s haul of \$7 per day.

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Just eight days later, on November 16, 1850, Russell apparently managed to get counted by the U.S. Census for a third time. Russell S. Bodfish, a miner aged 40, is listed in Placerville, a town near Coloma. Sarah and William don’t appear in this household, but John Moose, 26, of New Hampshire, does. The age for Russell is slightly off (he was really 45), but this seems to be our man. Had Russell purchased this property as an investment, with Moose perhaps as a caretaker? This Placerville Russell is said to own \$1200 worth of real estate.

On July 26, 1867, Russell S. and Sarah C. Bodfish sold land in Coloma to Ezra Smith for \$150, the deed being executed before W.H. Bodfish, notary public.^{vi}

Russell and William appear on voting lists throughout the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. One of these describes William as 5’ 7” tall, with a dark complexion, brown eyes, and gray hair. In 1870, the U.S. census lists William Bodfish as a lawyer with a wife, Josephine, but the couple was divorced by 1880, when William was living alone in San Francisco.^{vii}



[Hill country at Coloma, CA, 2012.](#)

Sarah died in San Francisco of intermittent fever on April 2, 1873. She was 64 years old.^{viii} Russell last appears in 1891, living with his son on Montgomery Street.^{ix} No death record for him has been found. In his later years, he discarded the “miner” label and went back to calling himself a “master mariner.”^x

William Henry Bodfish survived the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906, but how he escaped and whether he lost any property is unknown. He died in 1908, aged 74, and was buried in Olivet Memorial Park in San Mateo County.^{xi} We don’t know where his parents are laid to rest. Nor do we know whether William had children, where he studied law, or what happened to the gold and real estate that the Bodfishes had accumulated.



[Ten dollar gold coin, Miners Bank of San Francisco, 1849.](#)

We do know that the Bodfish family helped change the course of American history. Due to the influx of so many settlers in 1849, California's timetable for statehood was accelerated. The Compromise of 1850 allowed California to enter the Union as a free state. It also abolished the slave trade (though not slavery itself) in the District of Columbia—thus partly granting Sarah's petition of ten years earlier. By voting with her feet, and moving to California, she and her family had helped to bring about this result.

The downside to the Compromise of 1850 was that slaveholders were granted more power to recover fugitive slaves. In a house divided between slavery and freedom, however, the time for no more compromises was rapidly approaching. During the Civil War, California gold financed the Union victory.

Sarah ended her life a long way from where she started, but in her principles, she didn't need to travel far. On the great moral issue of her day, she was right from the start--right where she wanted to be, just waiting for everyone else to catch up.

ⁱ George D. Dornin, *Thirty Years Ago 1849-1879*, printed on demand by Amazon. Theodore Messerve, "The Log of a 49er," in *The Overland Monthly*, Vol. LXIV, July-Dec, 1914, pp. 15-23; 187-192; 287-292; 397-403; 510-516; 606-610. Available as a free download at Google Books. Messerve includes a list of everyone on board the ship.

ⁱⁱ Dornin, p. 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Messerve, p. 516.

^{iv} Dornin, pp. 23-24.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 26.

^{vi} El Dorado County Deeds, Book L, p. 344. Cited on Family Search, family tree of Russell S. Bodfish, submitted by user "Shurtleff." A further online search revealed no more El Dorado deeds for the name Bodfish. San Francisco County deeds are not available online.

^{vii} Great Register, El Dorado County, 1867-1898. Register, 2nd Precinct, 11th Ward, San Francisco County, 1882. San Francisco, 1890, Districts 34-36. San Francisco, 1898, District 39. All viewed at Ancestry.com, California Voter Registers 1866-1898.

^{viii} Mortuary Record of the City and County of San Francisco, 1873. Viewed at VitalSearch.com.

^{ix} Langley's San Francisco Directory for the year 1891, p. 259. Viewed at Archive.org.

^x See California Great Registers, 1866-1910: film 005030115, 1873; film 005030158, 1882; film 005030278, 1890. Accessed at FamilySearch.org.

^{xi} A photo of William's gravestone is posted at Findagrave.com.