



## UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

### The Last Autumn of James Bowdoin, 1811

by Meg Costello

Autumn was in the air at Naushon Island in October 1811, and Sarah Bowdoin was growing ever more frantic. Her husband James refused to admit that he was seriously ill. He would not hear of leaving the island and returning to Boston. James was the son of a Massachusetts governor. He himself had been a state legislator and a delegate to the Massachusetts constitutional convention. He was used to ruling, not obeying.



James Bowdoin III by Gilbert Stuart. Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Image accessed Oct. 28, 2025 at [Faculty Collections, Northwestern University Libraries, Collection of Carl Smith.](#)

The mansion house James had built above Naushon's Hadley Harbor was his refuge, a gentleman's estate where he hoped to live a cultured life just as his friend Thomas Jefferson did at Monticello. James Bowdoin had overseen every aspect of the mansion and the farms around it, down to the breeds of sheep raised and the types of vegetables planted. Bowdoin, 59, sometimes felt poorly at his Boston address, but a few weeks' respite at Naushon usually restored his health.

Now, the island's healing powers were failing him. Sarah, his first cousin and wife of thirty years, saw death written in his features.

James's great-niece, 24-year-old Elizabeth Winthrop, was staying at the Mansion House as she often did, keeping the childless couple company. Elizabeth's brother James was the designated heir to the estate, although he seemed to have little interest in it, spending much of his time in Europe. Elizabeth regularly wrote letters to her parents in Boston. It's not clear what delivery route her letters took—whether by sea direct from Naushon to Boston, or by rowboat to Falmouth and then overland to the capital. In any case, communication was painfully slow.

Around October 10, 1811, Elizabeth wrote to her father of the alarming situation on the island. James Bowdoin had rapidly declined, and her aunt believed he had only days to live, perhaps only hours. Sarah's anxiety now bordered on incoherence. Elizabeth explained that Sarah was terrified of having “no one near her capable of advising her . . . in case of his being taken away suddenly.”

Who would provide a coffin, or lay out the deceased? How would they all get off the island? The idea of being trapped in the mansion with



Portrait of Mrs. James Bowdoin III (née Sarah Bowdoin) by Gilbert Stuart. Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Accessed Oct. 28, 2025 at <https://artmuseum.bowdoin.edu/objects-1/info/280>

the departed James, with no means of escape, was driving Sarah to distraction.

A few hours later, Elizabeth added a postscript to her letter. “My poor Uncle has breathed his last but half an hour ago, he had just got off his bed and the exertion I presume was too much for him. His death must have been easy and was almost instantaneous--he died without a groan.” According to Elizabeth, Sarah was able to babble some instructions about mourning clothes but otherwise “she cannot at present think much for herself.” Sarah’s panic was contagious; Elizabeth confessed that she herself was now growing extremely nervous.

The published version of Elizabeth’s letter ends at this point. Other accounts tell us that James Bowdoin had a solemn funeral in Boston days later, and was laid to rest in the Old Granary Burying Ground. The rituals were carried out in a dignified manner.

Evidence of Sarah’s panic, however, lingered at Naushon. The house sat unoccupied as the Bowdoin estate was tied up in probate court for years. In 1819, eight years after James Bowdoin’s death, two local men, Samuel Robinson and Joseph Parker, were hired to clear out the Mansion House and prepare it for a new resident. Samuel Robinson recalled what



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*Elizabeth Temple Winthrop Tappan (1787-1860), by Gilbert Stuart. Image in the public domain, accessed Oct. 28, 2025 at Wikimedia Commons.*

they found:

“I remember it well; everything was left in the House precisely in the situation they were when the old man died, his wife and family immediately leaving it, and not stopping to take care of a single thing, the knives and forks rusting on the shelves, the beds and bedding dirty and in great confusion, family stores and provisions left without care; the house remained in this situation for seven or eight years unmolested, when Joseph Parker of Woods Hole was authorized to go and take out part of the furniture, such as beds, bedding, etc.”



THE MANSION HOUSE FROM THE HARBOR

*The Bowdoin Mansion House as shown in Early History of Naushon Island by Amelia Forbes Emerson, 2d edition (Howland and Company, Boston, 1981), plate after p. 414.*

Robinson’s account suggests that Sarah and Elizabeth fled the island within hours of James’s death, leaving a mess behind. Did they also leave his body, sitting in the chair in the northwest bedroom,

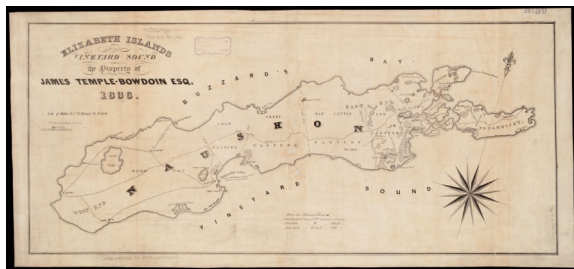
for someone else to retrieve and bring to his funeral? The written record is silent on this point.

James Winthrop, the intended heir of Naushon Island, never settled there. After some lengthy legal maneuvers, the island ended up in the possession of the Forbes family, as it remains today.

The eerie tale of James Bowdoin’s abandoned mansion raises further questions. During the eight years between Bowdoin’s death in 1811 and Robinson and Parker’s arrival to

clean the house in 1819, a rather significant event called the War of 1812 had occurred. As in the Revolutionary War, Naushon Island was a base for British warships and American privateers. Is it possible that soldiers, sailors, or other displaced people occupied the empty mansion, which had no resident or clear legal owner at the time? Perhaps it was wartime campers who were partly responsible for the mess that Robinson and Parker found.

Other odd stories gathered around the mansion. Visitors in 1825 were told that the house had suffered a lightning strike during the years it sat empty. Lightning had traveled along the interior bell system, leaving scorch marks on the walls and



*Map reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library.*

burning up the bedding in one room. The same visitors said the house, now restored to its former state, was filled with reminders of

James Bowdoin—furniture, wine bottles, books with dog-eared pages. The visitors felt an otherworldly atmosphere on the island, almost as if James Bowdoin had set the stage for his own return.

Almost 200 years after Bowdoin's death, Sukey Forbes, a summer resident of Naushon, suffered the tragic loss of her young daughter. She wrote a book about how she coped with

her grief. Given that she'd often seen ghosts in her various family homes, she felt reasonably certain that the afterlife was real. Sukey Forbes declared, "Mr. Bowdoin's ghost remains in the [Naushon] house and I have had several encounters with him." She felt comforted by his presence, as it held out the promise of a future reunion with her daughter.



*Unknown Artist, Portrait of James Bowdoin III, ca. 1771-1775. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Bequest of Mrs. Sarah Bowdoin Dearborn.*

Could the spirit of James Bowdoin still be on Naushon Island? If so, he must be a happy ghost, spreading hope instead of fear, still enjoying the place that he had never wanted to leave.

Quotations from Elizabeth Winthrop and Samuel Robinson can be found in *Early History of Naushon Island* by Amelia Forbes Emerson, 2d edition (Howland and Company, Boston, 1981), pp. 406-410. Quotation from Sukey Forbes is from a posting at [sukeyforbes.com/qa-sukey/](http://sukeyforbes.com/qa-sukey/), downloaded and saved on September 19, 2019. That website is no longer operative. A similar interview, without the ghost quotation, can be found at <https://masoncanyon.blogspot.com/2014/07/a-moving-memoir-of-love-loss-life-after.html>.