

Captain and Navigator, Husband and Wife— Josiah and Eleanor Creesy's Record Run

by David Hirzel

In 1851, the quickest way to get from New York to San Francisco was by sailing a full-rigged clipper ship around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America. Long, tall, and lean, this new type of ship became the most desirable means of passage, with accommodations for cargoes that would bring in a big profit upon their safe arrival at the Golden Gate and for a few well-heeled travelers able to afford the cost.

The Transcontinental Railroad had yet to be built (that came in 1869), and it would be another 63 years before the Panama Canal would be completed

to allow passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The Cape Horn route was long and treacherous, requiring months of hard sailing driven by a brave and skilful sea captain and crew. Having left New York, a ship might not see land again for five months—if it was lucky. If very unlucky—never again. A ship would not be posted “missing” until at least six months had passed before she failed to arrive at San Francisco.

It was a long and hard way to go, but at the time still the most efficient. Clipper ship captains were under pressure to drive their ships hard and make

the passage in record time. Not the ideal place for family time, but more than one ship's master brought his wife onboard, as had been done for years by captains of whaling ships and other ships sailing distant sea routes.

The Clipper Ship

To the armchair sailor, the “clipper ship” calls to mind the image of a graceful tall ship, powering her way through the seas under a cloud of full-bellied white canvas sails, with a sharp bow cutting through the waves. The sun shines benignly on the scene, full of promise and the lure of exotic ports in far-off lands.



Donald McKay's *Flying Cloud*. Painting by Antonio Jacobsen (1850–1921)

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Sometimes this romantic image holds true; more often the ship suffers through storms and contrary winds, doldrums, and near-mutinies on her long voyage around the Horn.

Josiah Perkins Creesy was known as a hard-driving captain. His wife, Eleanor, serving as the ship's navigator, piloted the brand-new clipper ship *Flying Cloud* to a record-setting maiden voyage from New York to San Francisco, a run of more than 16,000 miles. Three years later, the couple smashed that record with an even faster time, a record that stood for 135 years, broken at last by a modern high-tech sloop. Captain and Mrs. Creesy were a formidable team.

Josiah Creesy was a sailing ship captain long before he ever met Eleanor Prentiss at a dance. At age 27—both of them—they were “older,” with no desire to have children. He found in her a woman not only willing to travel the seas with him but a wife who had long sought a mariner for a partner, as she came from seafaring stock and her sea captain father had taught her navigation. As the captain's wife, she would share the relative comfort of the master's cabin and potentially bring the calm of a woman's presence to the otherwise uniform masculinity of a sailing ship's crew.

Eleanor (Prentiss) Creesy was born in Massachusetts, in 1814. Her parents gave her as good an education as would befit a girl at that time when a young woman's prospects were almost exclusively focused on marriage and family. Her father owned and operated the schooner *Californian* out of the family's hometown of Marblehead. He took her along on his voyages up and down the East Coast and, at her request, taught

her how to navigate the ship—not just the rudiments, but the whole fine art and practice of celestial navigation, as well as meteorology, currents, and the mathematics to pull it all together. The navigator's job combines a mathematically detailed reckoning of the ship's constantly changing location on the trackless sea with an astute understanding of climate and weather, mechanics of the hull, rig, and sails. Of these, working out the mathematics of latitude and longitude, complicated as it is, was the easy, predictable part.

As a young woman, Eleanor became bored with shoreside life and the prospect of entering the dreaded realm of “spinsterhood,” should she remain unmarried. Marriage to a successful sea

captain was a good option for a woman who wanted to sail the world, and when a marriage proposal came from Captain Creesy, she did not hesitate to accept. Captain and Mrs. Creesy tied the knot in 1841.

Although Captain Creesy had no real need for another navigator (he was used to handling that task himself), over the next ten years he came to rely on his wife's navigational skills as they sailed together aboard the *Oneida* from New York to China and back, bringing crates of Chinese tea to the American market. Eleanor did much more than take the occasional sun-sight with her sextant; she handled the whole range of course-plotting for those five voyages, while Josiah remained in command



FROM THE CLIPPER SHIP ERA BY ARTHUR H. CLARK, 1910, VIA PROJECT GUTENBERG

Captain Josiah Creesy. There are no known contemporary depictions of Eleanor Creesy.

of everything else related to the ship and its operations. The Creesys figured out how to work together in a meaningful way that transcended the conventional roles on the distribution of power within a marriage. Their newly styled union, first put to the test during the voyages in the *Onieda* from New York to Canton, would lead to their record-setting run in *Flying Cloud* in 1851.

Flying Cloud

In 1851, the California Gold Rush was in full swing, and redesigned clipper ships, referred to as “extreme” clippers, were all the rage. Hardly a week passed without one of the daily newspapers in cities up and down the eastern seaboard touting the launch of another “greyhound of the seas” and speed records being set for the voyage between New York and San Francisco. Longer, leaner, and faster than the other, more full-bodied, cargo ships, these extreme clippers were the thoroughbred racers of the shipping trade and would test the ultimate skills of the captain and navigator.

For those who could afford the premium rates, passage aboard an extreme clipper ship around Cape Horn was as good as any of the other cross-country routes. For those in a hurry to strike it rich in the gold fields, speed—or the illusion of it—was worth the cost. Even so, the typical passage from New York, at 160–180 days in 1847,¹ was hardly fast.

The full-rigged *Flying Cloud* was the newest vessel launched from the East Boston shipyard of shipbuilder Donald McKay. Departing on her maiden voyage from New York on 2 June 1851, her holds were filled with general cargo for San Francisco that were in demand on the West Coast. Only two years prior, the city had been a sleepy outpost on the far side of the continent; now it was the destination for thousands of men who would have a growing need for a wide variety of supplies.



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Matthew Fontaine Maury, “Pathfinder of the Seas” (1806–1873)

In the deckhouse, eleven passengers occupied the six staterooms. No one knew, on that day, that they were sailing into the record books. The captain and his wife only knew that with their new ship and the sailing directions just published by Matthew Fontaine Maury,² they had a good chance at a fast passage.

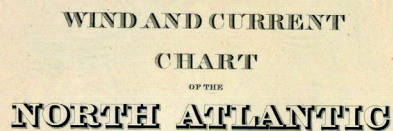
Pathfinder of the Seas

For all the risks they took in hauling cargo across stormy seas all around the world, sailing ship captains were a conservative lot. They tended to follow the same tried-and-true sailing directions on their approach to Cape Horn that had been the rule of thumb for centu-

ries. Tradition mandated that the ship must sail well to the east, a thousand miles or so towards Europe, before putting the helm over and heading southwards to avoid contrary winds and currents believed to confound passage around the easternmost point of Brazil. Few ventured to challenge the conventional wisdom.

Maury, “the pathfinder of the seas,” started to assemble innumerable data points from the logbooks of the ships making oceanic voyages and showed that near-shore routes along the coast of Brazil would indeed produce the fastest passages. As head of the Depot of Charts and Instruments at the US Naval Observatory, Maury recognized

(opposite page) Maury's *Wind and Current Chart of the North Atlantic*, 1848.

Superint^{dt} of U.S.N. Observatory

WASHINGTON

Compiled from Materials in the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography

Commodore Lewis Warrington

Chief of Bayan.

Drawn by Lt. W. B. Whiting, U. S. N.

1848.

3rd EDITION 19250, NO.1, SERIES A

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Note.
The winds are denoted by small branches, the head of the branch pointing in the direction whence the wind blows, the character of the branch designating the character of the wind and the divergence of its sides the extreme variation in direction of wind. Squalls are represented by dashes appended to the

<i>character with which they are connected.</i>	
<i>a gale of wind</i>	<i>drift with squalls</i>
<i>a fresh breeze</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>a moderate breeze</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>a light breeze</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>a very light breeze</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>light airs</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>light variable airs</i>	<i>do</i>

Part of the day a moderate breeze from S.W. and part of the day moderate from E. by S.
Part of the day a fresh breeze from S.E. and part of the day a light breeze from S.
A moderate breeze varying during the day from S. by the westward to S.W.

The *Romex* numerals denote the degrees of Sigmætic Variation as observed by the vessel near whose track they are placed.

The volumes represent the seasons: Black Winter, or the months of *Winter*, *Jan.*, *February*, *March*, *April*, *May*, *June*, *Summer*, or the months of *July*, *August*, *and* *September*; *Blue*, *Autumn*, or the months of *September*, *October*, *and* *November*. The books by *their characters*, represent the months. An *introduction* from — *page*
under the first month of each season: if *Black*, *December*, if *Green*, *March*, if *Blue*, *June*, if *Red*, *September*. A *bracket* line — represents the
second month of each season, as *January*, *April*, *July*, *and* *October*, in a
dotted line — the third or last month, or *February*, *May*, *August*
or *November*, according to the colour of the season.
The names of our or European vessels are in Roman letters;
the names of merchant vessels in Italian.

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the wealth of data that logbooks contained, observations about wind, currents, and weather for any given day, for any square mile of ocean on Earth. To gather even more data and in an effort to standardize what mariners were recording, he created an *Abstract Log for the Merchant Service*, a form distributed to all oceangoing merchant ships, with marked sections for recording the wind and current direction and speed observed at the latitude and longitude noted for a ship's position with each entry.³

Where were the most favorable winds blowing and how consistent were they? From which direction and at what strength were they most likely to be found? Where were the limits of the doldrums? What was the set of the current in any given location? In what is surely the earliest conception of "big data," his book and companion charts held the key, but sailing masters were at first hesitant to put them to use. The few who did reported excellent results with greatly improved passages. As one example, within the year of its being published, the Baltimore barque *W. H. D. C. Wright* shaved seventeen days off its typical run from Baltimore to Rio de Janeiro.

Eleanor Creesy Embraces the Challenge

In 1850 Eleanor Creesy bought a copy of Maury's newly published *Wind and Current Charts* and was determined to try out its recommendations. Her husband was onboard with the idea, and when they put to sea on 2 June 1851 aboard the recently launched extreme clipper *Flying Cloud*, rather than heading east out of New York, they plotted a course southwards according to the new sailing directions and began their record run.

Of course, no book of generalized sailing directions can guarantee the presence or absence or direction of wind

on any given day. While it is the navigator's task to locate the ship's position on the globe, the captain's job is to use the winds as they are found, to direct the ship as nearly as possible in the course planned. Detours in search of the more favorable winds are a part of the routine.

Flying Cloud crossed the doldrums near the equator in only four days; those who rejected Maury's suggestions were two weeks in getting through. Better winds favored them south along the coast of Argentina as well, but adverse weather was bound to hit. When a furious gale descended on the ship on 9 July, Josiah shortened sail to carry only staysails and close-reefed topsails. A burst of wind ripped the staysails to tatters. The fore and main topmasts split and carried away. Rolling uncontrollably, the ship dipped her yardarms into the sea on either side.

Any captain worth his salt is prepared to deal with emergencies at sea, and Josiah Creesy was a veteran sea captain. When the gale died down, he had the deck cleared of splintered timbers and tumbled gear and set the crew to restoring the rig. Repairs at sea like this were a matter of course for all sailing ships far from port for months at a time, but after the main topsail carried away for a second time on 12 July, the Creesys began to wonder if their ship had been too lightly built.

Well south now, the shortest route lay dead ahead through Le Maire Strait, a fifteen-mile-wide gauntlet between the coast of Argentina and Staten Island. Most ships avoided this narrow seaway alley—once committed, there is no turning back. Any route around Cape Horn is fraught with danger; nevertheless, the long way around was considered relatively safer than an inside passage. The winds in this "graveyard of ships" blow from west to east around the Horn, and indeed around the world. Over 800 ships had been overwhelmed

here, lost without a trace. Seldom do the winds allow an easy westing. Most ships of that era took weeks or months to make the passage from the Atlantic Ocean into the Pacific, but the Creesys put their faith in Maury and steered for the strait. Maury's sailing directions showed no alternative to facing the dead-on headwinds blocking their way west around it, and, in this case, luck, more than the skill of the navigator and the competence of the captain, came into play.

As *Flying Cloud* entered the strait, an easterly fresh breeze—that rarest of winds in that part of the world—propelled her easily through the Drake Passage and westward to the Pacific Ocean. In just four days she had rounded South America and was now headed northwards to San Francisco. Eleanor Creesy had guided the ship over one of the fastest passages thus far yet recorded: 8,200 miles over the course of 51 days, an average of 160 miles per day.⁴

They still had to contend with variable winds and doldrums that interrupted the broad belts of southeast and northeast trade winds. But these winds, and the best way to take advantage of them, were already well anticipated by Maury's sailing directions, recommending a course swinging far to the west. It meant sailing more miles, but would likely guarantee better winds and a shorter time overall.

Between noon sights on 20 and 21 July, Eleanor found that the ship had covered a truly remarkable distance: 374 nautical miles in 24 hours, a world record for any sailing ship.⁵ The captain noted the achievement in his log, along with other notes on the day's sailing—setting and taking in sail as squalls hit and other sea conditions and ship activity. Despite a gathering storm, the ship drove on. By 2 August, she logged another 992 nautical miles (1,440 statute miles) in three days. The way was clear for an end-to-end record-setting



COURTESY OF THE STOBART FOUNDATION

Flying Cloud Arriving in San Francisco from New York, by John Stobart

voyage. Well off the coast of California, the time had come to take advantage of westerly winds. By the 24th she was heading straight for the Golden Gate. Baffling winds slowed her progress to a wearying 52 miles made good, but by 2 AM of 31 August, the ship hove to just 30 miles off the Farallon Islands, awaiting daylight before proceeding through the narrow Golden Gate and towards the burgeoning city just beyond.

The *Flying Cloud* splashed her anchor at San Francisco's North Beach later that day. The run from New York had set a new record: 81 days 21 hours. To show that their record run wasn't a fluke, three years later the Creesys broke

it again by another 9 hours—in the same ship along the same route. That new record for a sailing vessel around Cape Horn would stand challenged but unbroken until 1989.

Legacy

Captain Josiah and Eleanor Creesy, aided by their brave choice to rely on Maury's charts, proved the way to more efficient sea travel. Eleanor's remarkable navigational skills, a rarity for a woman to have in that era, and the captain's decision to rely on her skills, enabled the *Flying Cloud*'s record-setting voyage, and the one that followed. Their example remained a guiding light for

sailing ships until the Panama Canal opened in 1914, rendering passage by the difficult sea lanes around Cape Horn a thing of the past. ⚓

David Hirzel has written extensively about tall ships and polar exploration, with books about Tom Crean and Louise Arner Boyd (available at amazon.com) and articles in *Sea History* and *Marlin'spike*. This article is adapted from a chapter in the upcoming book *The Superpower of Small Teams: Inspiring Stories of Risk, Innovation and Success* by David Hirzel with co-author Brad Borkan, to be published by TerraNova-Press later this year.

NOTES

1 "The Centennial of Pressure-Pattern Navigation," by Lieutenant Commander John Lyman, US Naval Reserve, *United States Navy Institute Proceedings*, March 1948, p. 309.

2 Maury was a career officer in the US Navy in 1851. He later earned a reputation as a traitor when he joined the Confederate Navy and the rebellion of the Southern states at the start of the Civil War in 1860.

3 *Matthew Fontaine Maury, Scientist of the Sea*, Frances Leigh Williams, Rutgers University Press, 1963, p. 150–151.

4 *Flying Cloud*, David W. Shaw, p. 214.

5 *Flying Cloud*, David W. Shaw, p. 227.