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George R. Coffin Journal

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1854-1857

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The son of a master mariner from Newburyport, Massachusetts, George Richards Coffin was born in Castine, Maine, on Feb. 12, 1832. Sent to Boston at the age of 19 to get his start in business as a clerk, Coffin became a wharfinger in 1854, just a year before he married Hannah Balch, the eldest daughter of a prominent Newburyport merchant. As his family grew to eight, Coffin thrived in his trade, becoming a long-time member of the Merchant's Exchange in Boston and Inspector of Grain for the Commercial Exchange in the 1870s. By the 1880s, he relocated his family to the genteel western suburbs of the city and by the time of his death in 1894, he had earned a spot in the Boston Blue Book.

This beautifully written diary was kept by George Coffin as he was starting out in life. Kept regularly, though not daily, the entries are filled with details about his budding business and personal lives, providing a rich portrayal of an aspiring young man in

antebellum Boston. Beginning during the last few months of his clerkship and courtship of Hannah Balch and continuing through their engagement and marriage to the birth of their first child, the diary is filled with descriptions of socializing at parties and lectures, religious attendance and recreational activities, and it includes his thoughts on marriage, family, and his career in business. Of particular note are Coffin's accounts of a visit to the State Prison in Charlestown, his reactions to local resistance to the capture of Anthony Burns under the Fugitive Slave Act, and the steady growth of his relationship with Hannah.

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Background on George R. Coffin

A respected member of Boston's commercial community, George Richards Coffin was born in Castine, Maine, on Feb. 12, 1832, the second child of George Coffin and his wife Sophronia (Richards). Brought up steeped in New England maritime culture, George lived in active ports including Castine and his father's hometown of Newburyport, he and his siblings Sophronia, Charles H. (b. ca.1837), and Gorham K. (b. ca.1847) retained strong connections to their mother's home in Newton and to the commercial hub in Boston. As a child, he witnessed his father, a master mariner, commanding a succession of ships, including the *Aristotle*, *Flavio*, *Republic*, *Franklin*, *Amazon*, *President*, *Oregon*, *Shawmut*, *Carolus Magnus*, and *Ocean Queen*, famously taking the *Alhambra* around Cape Horn to San Francisco in 1849. George appears to have accompanied his father on at least one voyage.

Leaving school in his late teens, George stepped into the dry-leg of commercial exchange, clerking in Newburyport before entering "into service" in Boston in 1851 to gain wider experience. Working unhappily with the Glendon Company for three years, he briefly joined the counting room at Howe and Leeds on Long Wharf, but by the summer 1854, he struck out on his own. As wharfinger at City Wharf, he earned a comfortable starting salary of \$600 per year, earning an additional twenty percent commission on three berths on Long Wharf. "I hope to do pretty well at it," he wrote.

As his business life progressed, Coffin concluded a long courtship with Hannah Stone Balch, the daughter of a socially prominent merchant, cotton manufacturer, and banker from Newburyport, William Balch. The couple wed in Newburyport on May 17, 1855, spending a memorable first night:

"Our first care was to follow out a resolve which we had made to read from the Bible every night before retiring. We have hardly finished our reading when music, soft and sweet reached our ears and listened to a second serenade. There was a guitar, a violin, and some three or four voices. Someone sang 'Then you'll remember me' very well indeed. We gave the credit of this to our friend Lewis Johnson, to whom we were indebted also for playing the piano through the evening..."

Having purchased adjacent lots in Glenvale Park in suburban Jamaica Plain, the Coffins soon began a family that would grow to include eight children: George (b. 1856), Frederick Seymour (b. 1860), Winthrop (b. 1863), Gertrude Richards (1866-1868), Anna Balch (b. 1867), Laura Stone (b. 1869), Harry Richards (b. 1871), and William Balch (b. 1877). Meanwhile he thrived in his career as wharfinger and storage agent, capped in the 1870s by an appointment as Inspector of Grain of the Boston Commercial Exchange. As he prospered, he moved into a tonier neighborhood in Brookline and a listing in Clark's Boston Blue Book.

On Aug. 20, 1894, Coffin died at the age of 62, the coroner recording the cause of death as haemoptysis (coughing up blood) without further clarification. Ownership of his elegant home on the east side of the Brookline Reservoir passed to his eldest son George, who was listed there in the federal census of 1910 living with his brothers Frederick, Winthrop, and Harry and one of his sisters, Laura.

Scope of collection

The journal of George Coffin is a sensitive record of a young man in antebellum Boston starting out in professional life, making the transition from clerk to businessman and from single life to marriage. Beginning in 1854 when Coffin was courting Hannah Balch, his future wife, the journal provides a record of Coffin's social life, attendance at church and lectures, and his shuttling back and forth to Newburyport for family and business, and it includes occasional discussion of his professional work. A fine writer, Coffin was apparently also a prolific one. This sole surviving volume includes references to previous volumes (not present).

Although most entries are not particularly long, the journal is a rich source for exploring the attitudes of a rising young businessman with aspirations to social respectability and higher standing. Genteel and conservative in the New England sense, Coffin's attitudes were revealed early in the journal when he commented on the unfortunate behavior of a friend who seemed well on his way up the social ladder. While his friend was earning a princely \$1,800 per year as cashier of the Brighton Bank, Coffin lamented that he seemed to be spending it all on a showy house with carpets that cost \$160 for the parlor alone.

"Such extravagance is wholly foolish and must have an end. If he would live of \$800 and lay up \$1000 each year he might soon become independent, but as it is he prefers spending all and years hence he will be in want perhaps. His baby wears a cloak

which cost \$30. The old and shrewd managers of the Bank must look with suspicion upon his movements and tremble for him lest he overstep his bounds."

Details of Coffin's personal relations are scattered throughout, particularly in the lead-up to his wedding and the first year of married life. Although Coffin resolved not to continue living with his parents after his wedding, duty to his wife outweighing frugality, he resolved to "live to please ourselves and within our means." He had other concerns about married life:

"We think we are both rather young and Hannah is fearful lest from being married her health will grow delicate and she only be a burden to me. The only trouble I think is that young married couples are too fond of early increasing their families and if the lady is to be immediately tied down to a child, of course she will grow sickly. I do not want to be married for this end. No indeed. It will be my aim to keep my wife in perfect health for four or five years to come, then if it shall please Providence to favor us with those little ones, we will cheerfully welcome them..."

Perhaps prophetically, Coffin records attending the birth of their first child on Mar. 7, 1856.

Coffin's personal life and socializing are regular themes in the journal, both before and after marriage. He records accounts of a pleasure cruise; a beach-side summer soiree; an excursion to Nahant; attendance at the theatre, opera, and musical performances; and a lengthy description of the Fourth of July celebration at Newburyport in 1854. His rather conventional religious sentiments temper the recreation. He provides a wonderful and sober description of being admitted into the church in Newburyport (with Hannah and her sister) prior to his wedding on Mar. 12, 1855, as well as an interesting reaction to attending a wedding conducted at the First Unitarian Church by Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "Mr. Higginson was not liked much, even by some of his admirers, and certainly he was very stern throughout the whole of it..."

Not particularly attentive to public affairs, locally or nationally, Coffin records some interesting social history, including his tour of the State Prison in Charlestown on Mar 25, 1854; hearing the alarms for a fire at Brook Farm on Aug. 8, 1854 (a later fire than the famous one that destroyed the commune); a balloon ascension by Eugene Godard (July 21-22, 1856); and the aftermath of the collision of the SS *Arctic* and *Vesta* off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1854 and the miraculous survival of the Capt. James C. Luce.

The major moral and public issue of the day, slavery, crops up at two points in Coffin's journal. Though not an abolitionist by any means, he held a generalized disdain for slavery and its extension and after attending a speech by Caleb Cushing on April 25, 1857, extolling the virtues of Manifest Destiny, Coffin was taken aback when the diplomat "rebuked Massachusetts for her checking the onward march, march, march of the nation as she has done by opposing the annexation of Louisiana and Texas in times past." He concluded that Cushing's speech would

"excite great attention and discussion from the sectionalists of Massachusetts, who see the one, great drawback, *slavery and its evils*, to the prosperity and greatness of our country. Mr. Cushing looks upon slavery at the south as an evil, no doubt, but considers it of little importance, in comparison with the great workings of Providence in the advancement and settlement of this Continent, from the overflowing countries of Europe."

Of particular note, though, is Coffin's relatively lengthy, conflicted account of the tumult following the arrest of Anthony Burns under the Fugitive Slave Act. After Burns was taken into custody, Coffin wrote (June 1, 1854) that there was "not much excitement" in the city "until a meeting was called at Faneuil Hall where speeches were made by Wendell Phillips Esq., Theodore Parker, and others and they advocated rescuing the man by force." When such an attempt was actually made, the police responded with force, and "worst of all," Coffin wrote, "a pistol was fired from the crowd which killed Mr. James Bachelder, one of the policemen on duty. Since then, crowds of persons have been seen at the Court House but the presence of military companies has kept all quiet..." The next day when commissioners ruled that Burns was to be returned into slavery, Coffin described the scene as the militia and army escorted Burns through packed streets:

"The lancers came first and then a company of U.S. troops, behind which were a large number of volunteers from the lowest of the low of Boston in the form of a square and in the centre was the slave. Each of the men had a cutlass and it would have been deadly work to have taken the slave away from them. Behind them a large cannon was drawn which was all loaded and ready at a moments warning to be discharged..."

Such a demonstration as was made to-day will do very much for the cause of freedom, and although I was glad to see the law enforced still I enjoyed more in knowing that such an infamous was this day being rebuked by thousands of people and that it cannot be a law much longer. To my mind it was wise in Mayor Smith to call out the military for seeing such a great force against them the leaders of the mob would be checked in their outbursts and much blood which would have been spilt was saved..."

The journal ends on a somber note, with the onset of the financial panic of 1857, "similar to the one which took place in 1837... The causes of this whirlwind which so suddenly came upon us in October, are numerous, and the principle one is overtrading by men of small means. Long credits have been given and paper money has been issued to an enormous extent. Large amounts have been sold to western merchants which they have not paid, and the consequence has been that our Eastern merchants have

had to take up both Notes Receivable and Notes Payable." Paying in cash, Coffin wrote that his own business has been almost as good as it was the previous year.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Elizabeth Hartmann, Nov. 2017.

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Digitized content

Coffin's journal has been digitized and is available for viewing online through our digital repository, Credo.

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Contributors

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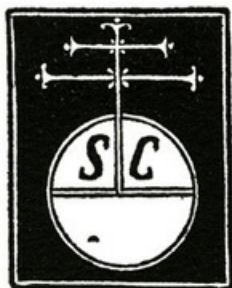
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