

Eliza Caruthers and the SS Central America

Eliza Caruthers was so frightened she could barely breath. Sopping wet, her dress clinging to her body, she was dangling over the side of the U. S. Mail Steamship Company's sidewheel steamer the *SS Central America*. Holding on to the make-shift rope chair, she could only see the giant waves hitting the side of the ship and hear the small life boat below crashing into the *Central America*. She knew she had to let go of the rope and hoped she would hit the lifeboat, but landing in the sea had been the fate of the woman who descended right before her.

Just how Eliza got into this predicament on September 12, 1857, is the subject of this story. Let's go back in time a bit and let the records tell the story.

Eliza Gardner Russell was born on May 9, 1821 in Nantucket, Massachusetts to Peter and Lydia (Brown) Russell. Peter was a cooper by trade, three of his sons were listed in the census as "Mariners." Nantucket in the 1820s was just entering its "Golden Age." For many years, Nantucket was the premier seaport on the New England coast for whaling activities.¹ Wealthy sea captains built their homes along the shore.

In the Russell household in 1850 were Eliza's parents, her brother John Brown age 27, her brother Silvanus age 25, her sister Deborah age 19 and brother Roland age 17. Eliza at age 29 was already out of the family home. (Some family trees consulted show another three sisters but that may be the result of combining generations in error)²

The next records for Eliza show up in the records of the Oregon Biographical cards on Ancestry.com. The short entry reads:

**Caruthers, Eliza Gardner – Mrs. Daniel
Born May 9, 1821 Nantucket, Mass. Started to Oregon May 7, 1850
Arrived in Oregon 1850**

Another intriguing card reads:

**Caruthers, David Franklin Born Jan 20, 1820 Stanton, Virginia
Started for Oregon 1849
Arrived in Oregon 1849₃**

How they got to Oregon and why they traveled at different times is all speculation. The next records cause one to really wonder what is happening with this couple, for we find a marriage announcement in the *Daily Alta* newspaper published in San Francisco on November 13, 1853, some three years after Eliza arrived in Oregon.

**In this city, by Rev. Mr. Gray, Mr. David F. Caruthers to Miss Eliza G.
Russell of Sacramento. ₄**

Did the engaged Eliza travel to Oregon under her soon –to- be husband's name? Did they really marry for the first time on the East Coast? Hard to say and records don't tell us.

Meanwhile, David Franklin Caruthers, born in Virginia to John and Nancy (Brown) Caruthers had six brothers and four sisters, some of those siblings came from the marriage of John to Ann Rhodes Martin after Nancy died. Note that both Lydia Russell and Nancy Caruthers had the same maiden name – Brown. Not much of a correlation can be made of this fact because of the common nature of the name “Brown.” But again, we might speculate that the women were related and that is how David and Eliza met.⁵

The next record for David, without a listing for Eliza, is from the 1850 census for the Pilot Hill area in El Dorado County where he was engaged in mining. Was Eliza still in Oregon? We just don’t know. David, alone, shows up in the California 1852 census on the Foresthill Divide near the Middle Fork House. David shows up again in 1856 with property in Grizzly Flat, near Placerville, where he owned a house and an interest in the Neptune Company. Eliza, of course, would not be listed in the Assessor’s Records if she was not the property owner.⁶

The news of the couple comes next from the *Sacramento Daily Union* from January 13, 1857.

Another Fatal Accident in a Tunnel.

The article was picked up by the *Union* from the *Iowa Hill News* from January 10, 1857. It relates the sad but all too prevalent account of mining tunnel cave-in.

“David Caruthers, W. Perry and William Conner were at work on the Neptune Tunnel, working about forty feet from the main entrance when the collapse happened. Conner managed to escape after being hit by a falling timber and sustained only slight injury. Perry was crushed by the falling timbers against the side of the ore cart and was buried by debris. David Caruthers was crushed and likely killed instantly by the cave-in. Other miners rushed to the scene and immediately proceeded to sink a shaft about twenty feet deep in an attempt to save the two men. The accident happened at half past four in the afternoon, the shaft reached Perry at half past nine, he was severely injured. After frantically digging, they recovered the body of David by midnight.”

The news article stated:

Mr. Caruthers was a worthy, industrious man, and leaves a wife to mourn his loss.⁷

So here we have the widowed Eliza, living in a rough mining camp, her husband dead and buried in Iowa Hill. She has no children. It is no surprise that she probably wrapped his affairs with the Neptune Tunnel Company and decided to go back East to friends and family.

In August 1857, Eliza left San Francisco on the Pacific Mail steamship the *SS Sonora*, bound for Panama. Whether she was carrying any gold from the Neptune Mine, we do not know, but many who boarded the **Sonora** were literally laden with gold. The *Sonora* was carrying a cargo of 38,000 letters bound for the East Coast, gold worth an estimated two million dollars (a modern-day equivalent would be about 300 to 400 million, though estimates vary) plus about 477 passengers and 101 crewmembers including a pastry chef, a butcher and a barber, as well as all the firemen, engineers, waiters and deck crew. The passengers included 60 women and children.⁸

We don't know if Eliza had the money for a first -class cabin for \$300 or whether she traveled as one of the 400 steerage passengers in the hold of the ship. The 14- day trip to Panama was uneventful. They made the crossing of the Isthmus in relative ease on the new open car Panama railroad, all the gold was shipped in special cars. They left the port of Colon (then called Aspinwall) on September 3, 1857. The United States Mail Steamship Company's steamer, was originally christened the *George Law* but renamed the *Central America*, it was a new ship, built in 1853. Only three months earlier the ship had been in dry dock getting thoroughly overhauled. The captain, William Lewis Herndon, was a well-respected, capable man, with a long maritime career. He also led a trip of discovery to the Amazon for which he received much praise.⁹

The ship made an overnight stop in Havana and left that port at 9:25 am on Tuesday, September 8, 1857. After the tropical heat of Havana, the cooling winds that appeared were quite welcome at first. After twenty-six hours however, the cooling winds began to take on a more menacing character. By Wednesday, the winds became so strong, that passengers were forced off the deck. The wind drove the waves into mountains and valleys and the steam ship struggled to make its way through the heaving sea. Throughout that day and the next, most of the passengers were violently seasick. Historian Gary Kinder wrote: "the noise was horrendous - the howling of the storm mixed with the cries of children and the moaning of the sick."¹⁰

After darkness fell that night, the water began spilling into the staterooms. The fireman feeding the steam engine were waist deep in water and struggling to keep the boiler going. Part of the time the steamer was leaning so far over that one of the paddle wheels was out of the water. The passengers huddled in the main dining saloon. By Friday morning, the Captain finally had to impart the chilling news that the engines had flooded and they were helpless in the raging storm. He ordered all the men to form a bucket brigade and they attempted to bail out the engine room.

The passengers collected anything that would hold water: pitchers, wash buckets & barrels. They formed a line from below deck to the top deck. Many of the men on board had just come from the hard mining life but many others were barely up to the task. Nevertheless, most men worked through the night, at times even singing to provide cadence to the work. Many of the women, most of whom had been seasick (as had the men) for the last three days attempted to stand shoulder to shoulder with the men in the bucket brigade but were rebuffed by the men. The women did what they could do to provide food, water and liquor for the men when they took a brief respite from the grueling work. An account by passenger Angeline Bowley recounted – "The men worked like horses. I never saw men work so hard in my life." The women watched and prayed.¹¹

On the morning of Saturday, the 12th, they seemed to be making some headway in bailing and the winds seemed to drop. What they didn't realize was that they were now in the calm of the eye of the storm and worse was yet to come. The wind increased in power and the waves crashed over the deck. If anything, the winds and waves were more dramatic than before. The ship was hopelessly bobbing up and down, its sails shredded and its paddle wheel silent. The ship was several miles off the coast of South Carolina in the Cape Hatteras area.¹²

At about 1:00 pm, off in the distance, a crewman sighted two other ships. The Captain ordered all women and children on the deck. He ordered the women to strip off all their petticoats and any layers of clothing they had on. He advised them to take only two \$20.00 gold pieces each their pockets. Two women passengers retrieved a satchel from their soaked stateroom and poured \$11,000 in gold coins on the deck and invited everyone to take two if they had none. Another woman had a trunk filled with \$16,500 in gold and had to leave it to the sea. The women and children were fitted with cork life preservers and the crew began attempting to put lifeboats in the water, each manned with several crewmen. The first life boat smashed against the side of the steamer as did the second. The crew rigged up a rope chair lift with a foothold, advising the women to hold on tight, as they were lowered over the side. ¹³

This is the point where we find Eliza Caruthers hanging over the side of the steamer in a category two hurricane. Several of the women jumped and landed in the rising and falling life boat but others fell into the water and had to be fished out by the crew. One woman, Lucy Dawson fell into the water three times before she was smashed between the lifeboat and the steamer.¹⁴

The Captain eventually got all the women and children and a few male passengers plus the crewmen into the lifeboats. The women bailed as the sea poured into the boats and the men rowed furiously for two hours to make it to the bark *Marine* which lay off two (some sources say three) miles from the *Central America*, trying to stay in place for the rescue. The *Marine* was a two-masted brig carrying molasses from Cuba.¹⁵

Miraculously, all the women and children and a few of the male passengers and the crews of the lifeboats, some 148 people, made the shuttle crossing to the *Marine* over nine trips. Getting from the lifeboats on to the deck of the *Marine* was a terrifying experience as well. The lifeboats would rise on a wave to about deck level, the women would stand and jump into the waiting arms of the Captain and crew of the ship. Most made in on the first try but several slipped and had to be pulled out of the water. At about 8:00 pm on board the *Marine*, they watched in horror as the *Central America* slowly sank into the sea after being struck by an enormous wave. Some recalled the Captain in full dress uniform standing atop the paddle wheel, setting off distress flares. Others recalled the Captain standing beside the wheelhouse with his head down, seemingly in prayer.¹⁶

Many of the remaining male passengers and crewmen, scrambled to find anything that might keep them afloat, decking, planks, even a chair. As the ship sank, they threw themselves as far out to sea as they could to escape the sucking vortex of the sinking ship. A Norwegian ship, the *Ellen* arrived on scene five to six hours later and was able to pick up about fifty more men from the water. Over one week later, another three men were found floating in a make-shift raft. Most sources report the number of rescued at 158 with 423 or 425 souls lost. It was the greatest peacetime, maritime disaster until the *Titanic* went down. It was the greatest loss of treasure in U.S. History.¹⁷

Eliza and those on the brig *Marine*, shed their sopping wet clothes, their dresses by then hanging far below their feet without petticoats and donned pantaloons and shirts donated by Captain Burt and his five sailors and were taken to the port of Norfolk, Virginia. They arrived in

New York on September 20, 1857. In the list of missing passengers was the name of William A. Adams of Placer County. Whether he was traveling with Eliza or just a passenger from the same county is unknown.¹⁸

The sinking was quite a sensation with the huge loss of life and the lost gold. The country was, at the time, in a financial crisis. The Ohio Life and Trust Insurance Company had failed, triggering a loss of confidence and a run on many banks. The gold from California was intended to prop up the markets. Its loss made a major contribution of the Financial Crisis of 1857.¹⁹

Eliza disappears from records until a possible listing for E. G. Caruthers in the 1860 census for Yolo County. It is most likely Eliza as the birthdates and place of birth match. She was living in a boarding house and the nearest post office was listed as "Sacramento."²⁰

In 1861, Eliza was back in Placer County, where a District Court records show a lawsuit against George Bishop for an unpaid debt. At the time, George Bishop owned the Traveler's Rest Hotel and Stage stop. There was another lawsuit in District Court in 1863 again involving George Bishop. The lawsuit concerned two horses that she owned but the document also contains a bill of sale for \$1,400 wherein George had sold to Eliza all the household goods and the lease of the Traveler's Rest.²¹

In 1864, Eliza bought the Traveler's Rest at a Sheriff's Sale, mostly likely to recoup the money she had loaned George Bishop. She held the property until 1868 when she sold it to Bernhard Bernhard. Eliza probably moved to San Francisco about this time, she had a sister living there. Eliza Caruthers died in San Francisco in 1873 on June 3rd. She was only 54 years old.²²

This story has come to light because of a newspaper article in the *Sacramento Bee*. The Gold Ship has been explored again and the gold is being retrieved. Much of it, 3,100 gold coins, 45 gold bars and more than 80 pounds of gold dust, will be for sale. One very tiny nugget, smaller than a pencil eraser, is now on sale at EBay for \$300.00. Maybe it is a piece gold that Eliza had packed in her carpetbag.²³

1 Ancestry.com & www.nps.gov

2 1850 Census

3 Ancestry.com

4 Daily Alta Nov. 13, 1853

5 Ancestry.com

6 1856 Assessor, 1852 census, 1850 census

7 Sacramento Daily Union 1-13-1857

8 Kinder, Gary. Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue @googlebooks.com p. 14 Wikipedia & web.archive.org N.Y Times 1857

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12 Ship of gold.com & California's Hidden Gold by Alton Dryor @ google books

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Thanks to Donna Dimmick for her early work on Eliza and to Carol Cramer for seeing the *Sacramento Bee* story and putting it all together.

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I always learn some little bit of extraneous information when doing a research topic. Just couldn't resist sharing this one. Sideline – Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was so inspired by Capt. Herndon's trip to Amazon, he headed to New Orleans to find a ship that would take him to South America but at the time there were not ships bound for there. He decided to take a riverboat up the Mississippi instead. You have to wonder just what would have happened had he been able to find a boat to the Amazon. Buried treasures of the South Legends lost, Buried & Forgotten by W. C. Jameson



