

# Deaths and Funerals at Brooksville, Maine: Recorded in the Nineteenth-Century Diary of Margaret (Lord) Varnum

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Diaries are rewarding to genealogists for a number of reasons. They provide a fascinating look at events that occurred many years ago written by a person who had lived through them. Many diaries identify family members or at least give clues about their identity. Additionally, diaries often contain the answers to elusive questions about a birth, death, or marriage. Many diaries, however, only cover a very short period of time, which limits their ability to provide a broad-based, detailed look into the window of years past.

Margaret (Lord) Varnum (1806-1885) was born in Brooksville, Maine November 18, 1806, the daughter of Capt John and Olive (Stover) Lord. She was married at Brooksville in February 1831 to David Farnham, Jr. (recorded as Varnum in town records). Margaret was a deeply religious person who attended church on the Sabbath without failure, and she constantly prayed for family, friends, and neighbors.

Commencing December 1, 1852, Margaret began to record her thoughts of current events around her community and the country in her diary. It would span more than 32 years, during which she told of disease and epidemics, recounted shipwrecks, and recorded her reactions of the Civil War and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. She made it a practice to attend the funerals of people in her community, and soon began recording these events in her diary.

Margaret often noted the manner in which a person died, and days later would describe her innermost thoughts and feelings after attending the funeral. She wrote of children who died of whooping cough, croup, scarlet fever, and from burns when clothing caught fire. One child died when a bean caught in his throat. Another stuck a knitting needle up his nose and died from the injuries.

She wrote that Mrs. Fanny Wasson, who had been "deranged but [able] to do her work and been to meeting," committed suicide (recorded February 21, 1868) by hanging herself with a skein of yarn. She stated Mrs. Wasson had "left a kind husband and 8 brothers and their wives and a dear Mother," and had left "4 brothers away to sea." She described Mrs. Wasson's final moments:

"She washed her floars and got her dinner on and her husband went out for a Short time. as She apered more deranged he had not left her alone long at a time. when he came in the house he found She was not there but all things were doing well but he went up Stairs and what an awful sight he Saw his dear wife hung and dead. He Caught her in his arms and brought her down Stairs and tried to do Something for her but Could not. Her life was Just gone."

The Brooksville Historical Society (BHS) had the entire diary transcribed in the 1930s. A typescript copy done in 1977 by volunteers of the BHS is now available in their collection. Attempts to locate the original diary have been unsuccessful, but an undated news article reported it to have been "rescued from the partition between two walls."

Researchers of the Penobscot region will find the entries to be of particular interest. The following entries are but a few that were selected at random. The original spelling has been retained (from the typescript document), with punctuation added for clarity.

*Capt William Blodget Died tusday the 25, 1853 vary sudden. he was sick only a few hours. O how important that we should be alsow ready for death comes when we least expect it.....*

*William Lord died February 11, 1853 after a long and painful sickness. This is another call to us to be also ready.....*

*Mrs Lucy Emerson died march the 10, 18(53) and is buried to day that is another call for us to be also ready. Mrs emerson has and left her husband and her dear little Child and all her enjoyments in this world but she has gone down in the morning of her days but we hope she has gone to rest where she will suffer no more. She was in a consumption but death has no respect of persons.....*

*April 24 1853: this beautiful Sabbath morning I have the most reason to be thankful to god for his great goodness to me his most unworthy creature. The lord has restored my oldest boy to health in a great measure his sickness was the lung fever.....*

*Major Stevens died May the 7, 1853. he was the oldest man in town. ....*

*May the 11, 1853 another of our aged friends Mrs. Davis has gone to a world of spirits. Death has no respect to age nor youth.....*

*May 21, 1853 Olive francis my oldest child was Married to day and has gone to Ellsworth with her husband to her new home.....*

*Mrs abby green died Aug 29, 1853. she has gone in the morning of her life down to the silent tomb.....*

*Oct the 9. Mrs. Alien (Allen) another aged lady has gone. We hope to rest. O may this remind us to be also ready.....*

*Mr Jacsons Jones cild died June 26, 1845 (1854). This dear child was burned vary bad wich caused his death.....*

*Sept 15, 1855: I have been to funerl to day. Mrs warren Cousins little babe was buried to day. The Rev Mrs Coob attende the servicers. He made a few rmarks on the 14 chapter of Job. The Mother of the dear child is vary sick indeed. Her sickness is consumption.....*

*Sep 17, 1855: Miss Betthier Douglas died to day. Poor girl her sickness was long and painful. She died of consumption.....*

*Oct first 1855: I have just returned from funerel Hannah Jones was bried this afternoon. The Reb J Cobb preached. The tex was Job the 7 chapter 16 verse.....*

*April 29, 1865: yesterday I saw one of my dear friends die. Mrs Nelson Lord. She was taken Sick on Wensday and after great Suffering her hear (dear) babe was born and after her babe was born She fell into a Sleep and at times She would Speak and was Sensible. On Santurady she began to Sink and about 2 occk in the afternoon She died. She was a lovly woman.....her husband was absent on a voige and away. O what dreadful Newes this will be to him. 3 years Since he lost his first wife uder the Same Circumstances and his wife was a Cousin to his first wife. Margaret lord was a good woman and we hope She has gone to be forever with the lord.....*

*May 1st 1865: I have been to funeral to day Mrs Margaret lord was buried to day. The rev Mr Dodge attended.....o how hard for her dear husband. O lord remember him and bless his wounded heart. His first wife died the last Saturday in April and this wife died the last Saturday in April. These things looks mysterious to us but god doeth all things well.....*

*July 30, 1868: I have been to funeral to day. Mrs Lord was buried this afternoon. The Rev Mr ----- attended the service. She was buriod under the order of the good Templers. Abby lord was a good girl and we hope She has gone to rest with her Saviour.....*

*Aug 2, 1868: Olive and her family has moved from home to day. She has gone to live in the parsonage for a while. She has lived long with us. She has lived 7 long years with us and now She has gone and may the blessing of god rest upon her and her family.....*

*March 20, 1869: this week we hear of 3 deaths. Mr Foster and Mrs Marks. The other man I don't know his nane. Theay lived on the Cape.*

On September 23, 1860, Margaret recorded very poignant remarks concerning her own child Francis, whom she believed had perished in a shipwreck. A week earlier she had penned remarks that his vessel, the Mary Perce, was "seen bottom up nere Chatham and nothing seen of the crew" that included her "dear Francis," and wondered if her "boy [was] gone".

*Sep 23, 1860: One wek to day Since I wrote with a heavy heart....last Monday how we were about our dear Child. We feared he was gone to a wartery grave but Still I tried to have a little hope....Monday Levi returned home from the banks. He had been gone 4 months and a half....how bad he felt to think his dear Brothe was gone. In about one half after he Came home Wilbur came home from Bangor. He was at Bangor when the*

*newes Came that the Brig was lost. He Came in and looked pleasant and I said Wilbur have you not herd that poor Franc is dead. Why Mothe France is alive. O what Joyful newes.....Wilbur said he went up the Street to See if he Could hear any newes about them and he tham Say there was one man Savd. What his feelings at that none knows but god and himself he did not dare to indulge a thought that it was his dear Brother. They had the oners of the Brig a Stated Frank was taken of the wreck and was Caried to the Same place were the Brig was bound and he was the only one that survivd and a few days after we had a letter stating the particuarlars. They had a northeast Storm when 2 days out they were bound for Newhaven he says the Brig mery Perce was Capsized on her side and the Capt lashed his little boy to the rigin and they Cut away the boat but the was So high h Could not get along Side. Frank said he had just time to Jump and and untie the little boy when she went over on her botton. As I said the tried to get the boat along side in order to save the Crew but could but the Steward Swam to the and then the Capt offered up a prayer and bid them goodby and then Says the little boy died in my arms. He chilled to death and then one after another were Swept of and then there was one left and he chled to death in his arms and them he said he was left to take his turne next but Says god Spared my life. The next day a Britis Schoner came a long and throwd him a rope and he said O marga don't know how glad I was to be hauled out of the water and from there he was Caried to Newhavne and fom ther he came to Boston.....I Agaia Sit downj to write and now I have herd from his own mouth he Says he done all he Could. He took his Jacket of and wraped it around the little about Seven years old but Soon he chilled and died in his armes. After they y were all gone but one he held him in his armes till he died and then he was left to take his turen but he Said his Courage never left him. He said he had a hope to be from that wreck when taken from that he Could not speak poor boy. God has him from a wartery grave.....o what a miricl he was Spared while his Shipmats were all lost.....*

Margaret faced the same fears nearly nine years later when Frank was believed to be lost at sea a third time:

*May 29, 1869: this week has been a week of great Sorrow to us and great Joy. We heard the Sad News that the Susan Duncan sailed out of Bangor Saturday last and when out 3 days She was wrecked of Cape Cod and Capt. Turner and all his Cew was lost and the Sad news came to us that Frank was with them. o what thrilling news. O to think our dear Child had gone down in the roling ocean there there to remain until the Sea Shall give up theire dead. O how anxious to hear as we waited in Suspence. We tried to Cling to Somphing hoping he might have Changed his mind and gone in another Vessel. He Started from Bucksport in the Susan Duncan in order to go with Cap Turner and went to Bangor with him in order to go with him but what Changed his mind his wife writes. She don't know but it Seems an allwise god Saw fit to Save him a little longer. We had a letter from his wife this week that Frank was not in that*

*Vessel but She Says it Seems a miricle he was not. O when that letter Came that he was alive. O what Joy we had to know that our dear boy was yet alive. This is the 3d time we have had this thrilling news that he and all the Crew was lost. The first time he was Shipwecked all the Crew was lost but himself. The second time the Crew was all Saved and this is third time god has Spared him. O the goodness of god. O what Shall I render to my hevenly father for this great mercy. Why he left that ill fated Vessel we don't know now but we Shall hear o when I think of them dear Souls taken and mine Spared to me Such a poor sinful Creatur. O what thank giving flows from my heart. Capt Turner was washed a Shore and brought and buried. he had a wife and 2 childred. The mate had a wife and one Child.....*

It was on April 16, 1865 when she recorded that "President Lincon [sic] is dead":

*We have the most thrilling News last night by telagraph dispatch our president Abraham Lincon is dead. He was at the theater with his wife when by an assin he was Shot through the head with a pistol ball and died in a few hours. The murder is not takn yet the head of our Nation is fallen by ruthless hands. the Cause is not yet known. O what a dreadful Shock to our Nation. Jiust as the Nation was rejoicing at the present victorys our Noble presient is fallen. What Can we Say. We pray that god will Sustain this Nation in this great calamity that has Come upon them and may it humble us as in the dust and may we as a Nation implore the the help of almighty god to protect this Nation awful Calamitys. Also Mr Seward on the Same night was stabled on on his bed. He was Sick and the rufing came to his house and wanted admittance but was refused but he knoked the Servent down and entered his house and stabbed Mr Sewerd in 5 places but he is yet alive. O we hope he will Survive. O how awful. He was one of the President Cabinet. O how awful. 2 of the greatest of our Nation have fallen by ruthless hands. we hope the preperTERS (perpetrators) of this dreadful deed will be taken. We hope nothing will be done wrong in this ferful Crime. We hope no innocent one will Suffer for the guilty. I will write the particulars as I hear.*

*April 19, 1865: the funeral Sermon of the presedent is preached to day beginning at 12. the Bells is tolled at 11. it is a Solem day to our Nation.....the News was that the ruffin that shot the President was taken.....*

The transcription of the entire diary consists of 225 pages, including the index of the more than 350 death or funeral entries that were published in the *Maine Genealogist*, commencing November 1995, vol 17[4], through May 1996 18[2]. Genealogists doing research in the Penobscot County region may find the diary an especially useful source document on life and occurrences in the community of Brooksville. Included among the pages is a copy of a telegraph message from the Bangor and Castine Telegraph Company, dated Jan. 3rd 1885 in Bucksport enscribed "paid 30 collect delivery guaranteed by telegraph from Brooksville via Xn To Frank Varnum Mother died to-day buried Wednesday. (signed) David Varnum."