

Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

*My actions were
“...the plain duty of a
wife.”*

Mary Ann Patten

referring to taking command of a merchant ship.

1856



Mary Patten, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian

First Woman to Pilot a U.S. Cargo Ship: Mary Ann Patten

In 1856, pregnant with her first child and only nineteen, Mary Ann Patten took [command](#) of the merchant ship, Neptune's Car, piloted it through the treacherous waters of Cape Horn, and brought the vessel safely into San Francisco harbor, while fending off a mutiny and nursing her sick husband. She is [thought](#) to be the first woman in the U.S. to captain a cargo ship.

[Born](#) Mary Ann Brown in 1837 to a family of mariners, she grew up in the seaport village of Chelsea, Massachusetts, the first permanent settlement in Boston Harbor. Little is known about her childhood, but in 1853, she married ship captain Joshua Patten just before her sixteenth birthday. When he was given command of a merchant ship for a seventeen-month voyage, the couple requested and received permission from the ship's owners for her to join him.

During the voyage from San Francisco to China, London, and finally to New York, Patten studied navigation, learned to read charts, and the use of the ship's instruments. She also demonstrated her mathematical prowess.



allow them to chart their own course.

By the end of the first month at sea, the first mate, whose duties included navigation, had proven so reckless that Patten's husband put him in chains and confined him to his cabin. However, the second and third mates were also incompetent. Encountering snow squalls and gale-force winds in Antarctic seas, Joshua Patten began relying on his wife to verify the accuracy of their speed and course. His symptoms worsened until he became bedridden with pneumonia. Soon, he became blind and partially deaf, and the infection spread to his brain, affecting his mental capacity. Mary Patten was the only woman on board and the only person with the navigational skills to pilot the ship.

According to Patten's biographer, Tilar J. Mazzeo, author of *The Sea Captain's Wife*, when women were allowed on cargo ships, they "...were only allowed in the staterooms and on the vessel's quarterdeck...permitted to speak only to [their] husbands, their steward, the ship's first mate, and any passengers on board." In an extraordinary act of courage, Patten defied all norms and assumed leadership as Neptune's Car sailed into a storm that lasted eighteen days. She then headed away from the storms where she could better care for her husband.



Clipper ship, 1874, painted by Lai Fong, The Mariners' Museum and Park

The imprisoned first mate called for mutiny. The crew, however, stood by Patten, at least until her husband's fever broke temporarily. Better, but mentally unstable, he gave command of Neptune's Car to the imprisoned first mate, who then imprisoned Mary Patten. Within days, without access to any navigational tools, she determined that the first mate had defied her husband's orders and changed course away from San Francisco. Before relapsing, Joshua Patten ordered the first mate arrested.

Now six months pregnant, Mary Patten took command once again. Fending off pirates, she piloted the vessel through melting glaciers and treacherous storms. On November 15, 1856, Neptune's Car docked in San Francisco, ahead of three of the four other ships. She later claimed that she had been so busy, she hadn't had time to change her clothes in fifty days.

Their next voyage was in 1856, when Patten's husband became captain of the cargo ship, *Neptune's Car*. At 216 feet long, it weighed 1,617 tons and required a crew of twenty-three.

The trip was ill-fated even before the ship left port. When the trusted first mate broke his leg in a loading accident, the ship's financial backers replaced him with an untested sailor. Although Joshua Patten started feeling ill before departure, they refused to replace him. The financiers had placed large bets that their cargo ship was faster than four others taking the same route—New York to San Francisco via the southern end of South America around Cape Horn. Also, the young couple was hoping that his earnings from this voyage would provide a solid financial future and

Overnight, Patten became a national sensation as newspapers covered the story. Despite her celebrity, the ship's owners refused to pay her husband's wages. After public outcry, Mary Patten received only \$1,000, even though the cargo she had safely and quickly delivered was valued at \$350,000 (about \$13.4 million in 2026 dollars).

The couple returned to Boston, where Patten delivered their son in early 1857. Sadly, her husband grew worse, and Patten committed him to an asylum. He died soon after. Three years later, in 1861, Patten contracted tuberculosis and [died](#). She was twenty-three. One hundred years later, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York, opened Patten Hospital in memory of the “Florence Nightingale of the ocean.”

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: What kind of extraordinary courage would it take to do what Mary Patten did?

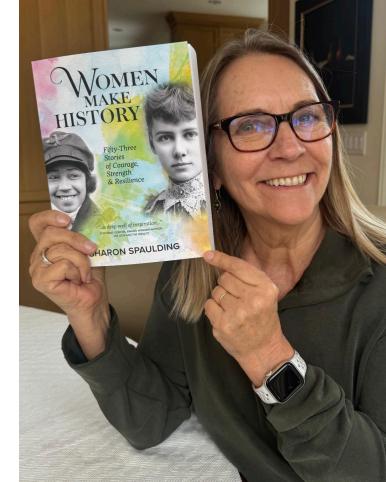
Ask a friend: Have you ever been in a position where you knew you had to take charge to survive?

You asked, I listened! For years, many have suggested that I compile some of these stories into a book. *Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience* will be published on 2/28, in time for **Women's History Month in March**. The book launch is at **The King's English Bookshop (TKE)** in Salt Lake City, the same day.

If you're in the area, bring a friend and join me **from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** for a lively discussion, Q&A, and of course, a book signing. It's free, but [requires an RSVP](#) to TKE. Books may be purchased at the event or pre-ordered through TKE beginning 2/15. Paperback, hardcover, and e-books will also be available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and IngramSpark.

Thank you all for your suggestions of women to feature, for sharing the newsletter with family and friends, and for inviting me to speak to your book clubs, businesses, community, and civic groups. I'm currently scheduling events across the country in 2026. If you would like me to visit with your group, even in another state, let me know. Zoom events are always an option.

Stay tuned for more details!



[Sharon Spaulding](#) specializes in the life and times of reproductive rights activist, Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). In 2020, Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history. Curator of Dennett's family archives, Spaulding is at work on a book about Dennett. In 2024, her manuscript was named runner-up in Book Pipeline's General Fiction category.



Spaulding received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her journalism has appeared in *Ms. Magazine*, *Smithsonian*, *New Hampshire Magazine*, *BOLD*, and others. She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and a lab named Hank.

Sharon is available to delight audiences with the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the early 20th-century suffrage and reproductive rights movements. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

Join the Women Make History Community
and help reclaim the lives of remarkable women.
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Sharon Spaulding | 40 Wanderwood Way | Sandy, UT 84092 US

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