



Charles Savage in the Azalea Garden,  
1965. Courtesy of Sam McGee

*Excerpts from the “Forward” to Augustus C. Savage’s  
“Memories of a Lifetime”*

By Charles K. Savage (1903–1979), written in 1972<sup>1</sup>

I

This essay is said to have been prepared at the instance of certain of the children of Augustus Chase Savage and Emily Manchester Savage, who felt that at the age of seventy their father ought to record a few circumstances of interest for his posterity. He could hardly have supposed that his manuscript would be recorded in any way, or probably even become typewritten. However, not long after it was written President Eliot heard about it, and called the Savage house one day and asked if he might be permitted to read the manuscript. Captain Savage agreed. Later, when Eliot came back and asked if he might have a few typewritten copies made, assent was given to that proposal.

It is thought that A.C. asked President Eliot to edit the work to such extent as he should feel wise in order that grammatical and

punctuation errors be corrected. Eliot is said to have expressed the feeling that the paper should remain essentially as written, since as set forth it seemed better to project the atmosphere and personality of a highly intelligent, perceptive coastal Maine man, whose long life had been honorable and creative.

In his later life Savage was locally known as “Captain Savage,” a title often used in the nineteenth century as applicable to men who had followed the sea and had actually captained boats, even if only coasting schooners. This title will be followed in this foreword in order to distinguish the captain from his forebears and descendants.

## II

It seems a pity that Captain Savage’s memoir is so short. There must have been innumerable incidents which now, seventy years afterwards, we would so like to know. But it may be well to attempt some portrayal of the locality as it may have been and as partially developed in Savage’s day.

Captain Savage’s active life may be regarded as extending from around 1850 when he began his seafaring days in a responsible way, until about 1900, after which he had virtually retired. But his recollections begin far earlier; some of his boyhood memories are among the most revealing in his paper. When he was born, in 1832, Northeast must indeed have been primitive. Let us try to picture it. Essentially the place consisted of a few scattered farm or fishing households whose principal contact with one another would have been by rowboat or by walking along the shore. There was no road between Northeast and Seal. To find anything at all comparable hereabouts, one now would have to go to Baker’s Island, look at the few old scattered houses there and try to picture what they were like when lived in.

Even the Baker’s Island comparison is untenable, for nowadays there would hardly be a clear day, summer or winter, when you would not see several motor boats coming and going; hardly a time when there wouldn’t be an airplane seen or heard or a jet trail not visible; and if your visit at Baker’s included young company, more likely than not some broadcast rock and roll would be sounding forth from a belt radio! It is difficult indeed to comprehend the utter stillness which was here in 1832 and the immediate years following.

A call or “hello” from some man to attract a neighbor’s attention, the moo of a cow, the sound of a sheep and the clucking of hens; the wind, the distant roar of the sea on a southeaster, an occasional creak of a spar or flapping of a sail when near enough. Sometimes the stillness would be broken by gunshot. Deer were hunted and birds brought down. But that would have been occasional and noted. We are reflecting about a way of life which was rugged, hard and tough, backbreaking, and too often heartbreaking, yet withal, oh, so mercifully peaceful—a placidity which is forever lost to mankind.

### III

Yet, while placidity and stillness were present, life certainly had its darker sides; primitive living conditions, dwellings which were small and crowded, required so as over much of New England on account of limited heat. At Mount Desert the earliest houses were quite similar in type and arrangement to many on Cape Cod. Indeed, it is probable that windows, mantles, trim and doors were brought hither by boat from Boston woodworking factory suppliers, often enough the very ones from whom the Cape Cod carpenters got theirs. Another interesting speculation: marble gravestones. You find them all over New England, many (even here) carved and finished before much marble was quarried in the region. These too came from Boston, New York, and other seaports. And the marble. From Carrara, Italy, no less, brought over in great chunks for fabrication on this side. It would seem that almost all of the early gravestones were made from imported marble. Only later, after the coming of the railroads, did Vermont and Tennessee marbles come into their own.

Here on this coast in those days we picture very scattered dwellings which were small houses containing small rooms and with large sheds and barns attached. The dwellings had no running water and few if any other amenities. There was something of a balance between waste and consumption. Kitchen refuse went to feed poultry and pigs; horse manure fed the garden soil. But sanitation was little understood and in its absence the effect was devastating.

The great scourge here, as well as everywhere else in the Northeastern States, was infectious disease, a condition which was not really overcome until the present century. With living conditions

as they existed, serious infection, once started was hard to contain. All of the childhood diseases were automatically contracted: measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, to which were usually added scarlet fever, diphtheria; sometimes smallpox. But the most dreaded scourge was tuberculosis. In the small crowded family living conditions all of these went through the families. Fatalities were numerous. In many ways the conditions of life were dismal and too often overpowering.

#### IV

It is curious to reflect upon certain ways and habits which so often develop as a result of economic circumstance; for instance, extended travel. In the mid-decades of the nineteenth century Maine Coast men often, and quite surprisingly, were not at all shorebound; not at all as much as their immediate descendants.

For instance, by 1845 when he was hardly more than 12 years old, Augustus Savage already had made his first trips to Boston and New York, ports which he frequently visited throughout the rest of his life and undoubtedly was as familiar with as many who then lived in those cities. Later, his voyages occasioned his visiting up the coast to Labrador and down the coast to Jacksonville. Unlike many Maine men he never crossed to Europe, although had occasion occurred, his competence as a navigator would have permitted it.

The voyaging and trading on the part of the Maine coastal men of those days makes agreeable and adventuresome reading. But what about the women; the wives? One fears that their lot was not comparable, although in raising families probably more satisfying. But the wives had to stay at home, tend the growing brood (the husband's yearly visit home provided for that!), and do the drudgery. Only when, (and if) they survived to advanced years did their travel years come; and only then if earlier their husbands had been successful.

Augustus Chase Savage and Emily Manchester Savage had a joint and happy life which followed in a fairly mild way this general pattern. They settled down, raised a considerable family, did well—in the earlier years by the husband's coastal activities, in the latter by engaging in summer resort endeavors—and finally tapered off to a benign regard from the community and a fairly frequent diversion afield. The coming of the trans-continental railroads permitted

western travel, much of which was to pleasure. However part of one year they spent in Colorado, a stay unfortunately to help in curative therapy for an ill daughter, (Annie), who with her husband had gone to Colorado Springs for reasons of health, who lost her only child there, who did not recover, and whose death was a perpetual grief. But that was exceptional. As the Captain expressed it: “The voyage of life has been happy.”

C.K.S. 1972

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<sup>1</sup> Permission to publish this excerpt courtesy of Richard M. Savage II.