

*Owen C. Spooner.*

While engaged upon this book, during the past winter, the compiler was informed that there was a quiet, unpretending gentleman living in the town, who, although he had never received any recognition from

the government, or any credit whatever for it, had made a discovery many years ago which had been of immense value to navigators ever since, and that was the discovery of sunset longitude. The gentleman referred to was Mr. Owen C. Spooner, who was born near New Bedford in 1805. In early life he was a sailor, and the following facts in relation to his discovery are here given in order that his name may not sink into oblivion. As the compiler understands the matter, Lieut. Maury has heretofore had the credit of discovering sunset longitude; but if Mr. Spooner was the discoverer, he should have the credit of it, and he is worthy to be placed among "distinguished Nantucketers."

In answer to the compiler's inquiries in regard to the matter, the following article appeared in the *Nantucket Journal* of Dec. 1, 1881, which tells the story:—

*Credit to whom Credit is due.*—There are doubtless many who are not aware that the credit for the discovery of sunset longitude, though in an English nautical almanac claimed by a British admiral, rightfully belongs to Mr. Owen C. Spooner, of this town.

On the voyage previous to that of the discovery, the second mate, Mr. Charles Clark of Maine, remarked in presence of the mate, Mr. Hoeg, and Mr. Spooner, that he believed sunset longitude could be obtained.

On the following voyage, in the ship "Atlantic," Dec. 16, 1840, when in latitude 4.18 S., just before sunset, Mr. Hoeg, then captain, said to Mr. Spooner, "Note the time by the chronometer, and let us see about this sunset longitude." The captain, mate,

and Mr. Spooner worked upon the knotty problem until dark, when the two former gave it up. Not so Mr. Spooner. *He* persevered three hours longer and obtained the longitude, 116 W., and it corresponded with that of the afternoon. That night he forgot to write up his journal. The next morning they got a sunrise longitude, which agreed with the forenoon's, and so they continued to test it, thus proving its correctness beyond a doubt.

They informed every ship they spoke of the discovery, and by the time they arrived at Tahiti it was very generally known. Many disbelieved it, but Capt. William H. Gardner, of the "Richard Mitchell," confirmed it by stating that he had navigated his ship from the Society to the Galapagos Islands altogether by sunset longitude.

In the next issue was published the following:—

*Sunset Longitude.*— Upon reading the article in our last issue regarding the discovery of sunset longitude, a gentleman called on us and made the following statement: Said he, "In 1853 I was a passenger on ship 'Seaman,' of Baltimore, Capt. William B. Daniels, bound from San Francisco to the Eastern States. Just before sunset one afternoon the captain said to me, 'I wish you would note the time by the chronometer; I want to get a sunset altitude.' I had heard of this method of obtaining longitude, but had never seen it tried, so I noted the time; and soon after the captain announced the longitude and that his morning's longitude was not quite correct, adding, 'Lieut. Maury did a great thing for navigation when he discovered sun-

set longitude.' 'Lieut. Maury!' I exclaimed, 'he did n't discover sunset longitude!' and then I gave him an account of its discovery as I had heard it, similar to that published last week. 'Well,' said Capt. Daniels, 'this is news to me. I have always heard it attributed to Lieut. Maury.' The captain, in common with many others at that time, was keeping a separate account of winds and currents for Lieut. Maury, United States navy, on blank charts furnished by him, and when he made out his statement for that day he added in a foot-note the information I had given him, telling me that if he ever heard from it he would communicate with me. As he never did, I presume no notice was taken of the matter."

Again in the same paper of Dec. 15, 1881:—

*Sunset Longitude again.*—Since our last issue, we have learned from Mr. Owen C. Spooner the following additional facts attendant upon the discovery of sunset longitude: The "Atlantic" touched at Tahiti after the discovery; and among the vessels at that port was the ship "Columbus," of Nantucket, Capt. William B. Gardner, which had three men sick on board. As there was no doctor at Tahiti, the "Columbus" proceeded to Callao, where an American frigate was stationed, that the sick men might have the benefit of medical treatment from the physician attached to the frigate. Commodore Maury was a lieutenant on this man-of-war, and then and there for the first time heard of the discovery of sunset longitude from the first officer of the "Columbus," now Capt. Henry F. Coffin, of Brooklyn, who had learned it from Mr. Spooner.

Lieut. Maury "saw through" the whole thing in a moment, and expressed great surprise that it had never been discovered before. He also said he would use his best endeavor to obtain for Mr. Spooner some substantial recognition from government of the service he had rendered navigation ; but Mr. Spooner never heard anything from him.