

The Washington Historical Quarterly

THE TRADING VOYAGES OF THE ATAHUALPA

All students of the maritime fur-trade are interested in the life-story of this ship, the *Atahualpa*. The Indians attempted to capture her in Milbank sound. That event gave her name a prominence, as one of the two or three ships that succeeded in driving off such attacks. (It is now known that the number of such ships is much greater than was supposed.) A few years later she successfully resisted an attack by sixteen pirate junks in Macao roads. Her association for some years with William Sturgis, so well known as a Boston captain and a successful Boston merchant and ship-owner, and the uncertainty of her fate during 1812-14, add their quota in increasing the interest. The following short sketch of the incidents of her life and work, so far as they are known, is offered as a contribution towards a complete account and in the hope that it may throw light upon the environment of the maritime fur-trader.

The *Atahualpa* was owned by Theodore Lyman, one of those Boston merchants, whose energy and resourcefulness made the Northwest Coast a region of trade-suburbs of that city. She was probably built in 1799; but, as the records of the Boston custom-house for that period do not now exist, the exact date cannot be ascertained. As a new and handsome ship she made her maiden voyage to the coast under Captain Wildes. With a cargo of trading goods valued at \$18,750 she sailed on August 26, 1800, in company with her sister ship, *Guatamozin*, commanded by Captain Bumstead.¹ The records do not show the time of her arrival, but it would, probably, be about February, 1801. She seems to have traded around Queen Charlotte Islands and the neighboring continental shore. From the Indians it was learned that the "Ewen Nass," of Vancouver, was the mouth of a considerable river—the Nass—navigable for small vessels or large canoes.² When the *Dispatch*, under Captain Dorr, left for China

¹ *Columbian Centinel*, August 27, 1800; *Russell's Gazette*, August 21, 1800; Swan's *Three Years in Washington Territory*, p. 424.

² Extracts from a journal kept on the *Atahualpa*, published in *Massachusetts Historical Collection*, 1st Series, (1804) vol. 9, pp. 242 ff.

in the fall of 1801, she reported the *Atahualpa* and other traders still on the coast and that some of them would winter there.³

The old habit of wintering at the Hawaiian Islands had been gradually breaking down. The *Columbia* and the *Washington* in 1788 had set the example of remaining on the coast. Captain Wildes of the *Atahualpa* determined to follow the same course. He seems to have wintered in Goletas Channel, for he was at the Island of Galiano and Valdes (the Nigei Island of the present day) in November, 1801. Ships that spent the winter in the Hawaiian Islands usually left the Coast in September at the latest.

The *Atahualpa* kept a record of the weather at her wintering place during November, 1801. As this is the first meteorological report of that vicinity and as it tends to throw light upon the broader interests of the maritime traders, no apology is offered for its reproduction:

"Monday, November 30, 1801

"The following is an account of the weather for November 1801 at a harbour in the latitude of 51° north on the Island of Galiano and Valdes on the northwest coast. The thermometer was correctly noted three times a day: the first between eight or nine o'clock in the morning; the second at noon; and third at sunset. It was always placed on deck in a shady situation. The mean height for the month in the morning was 44°; at noon, 43¼°; evening 45°; and the mean of the three for the month 45 2/3°. The greatest rise and depression of the mercury was as follows: On the morning of the 8th, 51°, and on the 20th, 31°; the noon of the 1st, 58° and 21st 40°; eve of 7th 51° and on the 21st and 26th 41°. At midnight on the 19th the mercury fell to 30° and on the 30th to 34° above. The weather during the month has been bad; a great deal of rain has fallen, with a little snow and hail; and the easterly winds have prevailed much of the time blowing very strong."⁴

At the end of the season of 1802, the *Atahualpa* sailed for China, taking the usual route by way of the Hawaiian Islands. In October, 1802, she was at Atooi (Kauai). She then seems to have sail eastward, for in November she is found at Oahu. On 4th November she was off Niihau resuming her journey to Canton.⁴ In China the furs obtained on the Coast were traded for teas, silks, nankeens, chinaware, etc., and on 8th February, 1803, the *Atahualpa* sailed for Boston, in company with the *Belle*

³ *Columbian Centinel*, March 3, 1802; *id.* July 3, 1802; *Independent Chronicle*, July 5, 1802.

⁴ *Massachusetts Historical Collection*, 1st Series, vol. 9, (1804), pp. 242 ff.

Savage, another ship engaged in the trade to the Northwest Coast. About 13th June, after a voyage of 126 days she dropped anchor in Martha's Vineyard.⁵

No returns showing the success of the voyage are, presently, available; but it may be inferred that it was satisfactory, inasmuch as she was at once outfitted for a second visit. In command of Captain Oliver Porter she sailed again, in August, 1803, for the Northwest Coast. The *Dispatch* reported meeting her on 4th December on her way thither.⁶ She arrived in January, 1804, and traded through that season. She seems to have clung to the same vicinity as on the preceding voyage. The Queen Charlotte Islands, the southern islands of Alaska, and the neighboring mainland shores were then the happy hunting grounds of the maritime traders. It is presumed that she again wintered on the Coast. During the season of 1805, she continued her trading. The time had long gone by when a ship could obtain 1,500 sea-otter skins, or more, in a short three months; two seasons, at least, must now be spent in order to collect any such quantity.

In June, 1805, the *Atahualpa*, anchored at Milbank Sound, on the mainland coast of British Columbia, in latitude 52° 9'. There the natives made an attempt to capture her. But it will be well to allow the survivors to tell the story in their own way. The first news was brief and inaccurate. A note in the *Columbian Centinel*, April 2, 1806, said:

"The *Atahualpa* in June last on the N.W. Coast was attacked by the natives and, after an obstinate conflict in which Capt. Porter and 9 others were killed and 9 wounded, the Americans succeeded in getting off the ship, though with great difficulty. Nearly 50 of the natives were killed or died of their wounds. Among the killed on board the ship were both the mates and Mr. Plumer of Salem, Captain' clerk, a very worthy and promising young man. Only 5 persons on board escaped unhurt."

Soon after the *Atahualpa* returned to Boston there appeared in the *Columbian Centinel* of June 24, 1806, a lengthy and detailed report of the sad affair. Later that account was in substance published in the form of a chap-book by Champante & Whitrow, Jewry Street, Aldgate, London, and sold for sixpence. I have a copy of this rare little book, but, unfortunately, it has no date. The attempt on the *Atahualpa* occupies only four pages of this thirty-six page duodecimo. As I have never seen or heard

⁵ *Columbian Centinel*, June 15, 1803.

⁶ *Columbian Centinel*, April 28, 1804.

of another copy of this chap-book the story as given therein is herewith reproduced:

Dreadful Massacre

of Captain Oliver Porter, and crew of the *Atahualpa* by the North American Indians, in the year 1805.

"The *Atahualpa*, of Boston, left that port in August, 1803, bound to the north-west coast of America, for the purpose of trading with the natives. She arrived safe on the coast in the month of January, 1804; and, after visiting the several islands, and purchasing skins, on the 5th of June, 1805, weighed anchor from Chockcoe on the N.W. coast, and made sail. On the 8th arrived at Milbank Sound, and came to an anchor within musket-shot of the village. Soon after her arrival, the chief of the Indians, by the name of Kiete, came off to the ship with some more of his tribe, and another tribe that was there, and traded very briskly till towards night, when becoming very insolent, they were all turned out of the ship.

"On the 13th Kiete and his tribe came aboard in the morning and seemed much more desirous to trade than before, which Captain Porter was very glad to see. The chief mate, and two of the ship's company were then engaged in ripping the main-sail in pieces, on the quarter-deck; the second mate with two hands, repairing the main-top sail; two on the starboard side of the main deck spinning spun yarn; two more on the fore-castle making sinnet; two more on the larboard side of the main-deck, running short in the armourer's forge; the cooper was making tubs; the cook and captain's steward in the galley, at their duty, and all hands, as usual, employed on the ship's duty; the armourer was in the steerage, and the boatswain in the cabin; Captain Porter, Mr. Ratstraw, his clerk, and Mr. Lyman Plummer, (nephew of Theodore Lyman, Esq. of Boston, ship's owner) were standing on the larboard side of the quarter-deck, abreast of the cabin hatchway. The chief, Kiete, stood leaning on the rail, and called Captain Porter to look at the skins that were in a canoe, alongside the ship; the captain accordingly went to look over the side, when the chief, with some more Indians, laid hold of him, and gave a shout; immediately all the Indians alongside of the canoes, and those on board, armed with daggers and pistols, pikes, and other weapons, seized every man on deck, who were totally unprepared for so sudden an attack. A most dreadful and sanguinary contest immediately took place; when, after a short but

bloody engagement of about five minutes, the deck was completely cleared of them.

"There were about two hundred Indians, it is supposed, on board at this time; the first daggered Captain Porter several times in the back, put him in a canoe, alongside, and carried him on shore; and as we were afterwards informed by Captain Smith, of the ship *Mary*, of Boston, who was informed by the New Hecta tribe, was by them tied to a tree, in which unhappy and miserable situation he languished fifteen days, refusing every species of nourishment offered him by those savages, occasioned by his grief at this unhappy accident.

"Previous to this fatal business, there were twenty-three hands on board; ten of whom were barbarously killed, and nine wounded. Among the killed are Captain Oliver Porter; Mr. John Hill, chief mate; Daniel Gooding, second mate; John G. Ratstraw, Captain's clerk; Mr. Lyman Plummer, Peter Shooner, Luther Lapham, Samuel Lapham, seaman; Isaac Lammes, cooper; and John Williams, cook. Mr. Lyman Plummer survived about two hours after he was wounded. The cook who was most shockingly cut and mangled, languished till about six o'clock the next morning.

"Among the wounded were Ebenezer Baker, seaman, most dangerously, with daggers, he having two stabs in his left thigh, one in his back, one in his breast, and one in his neck; Henry Thompson, seaman, very dangerously, with daggers, having one wound on his right side, one on the left shoulder, another on the left arm, and two or three smaller ones on the same arm, one on the right temple, and another on the left cheek; Ebenezer Williams, seaman, had three wounds in his thigh, with daggers, two on his back, one in the right shoulder, with a boarding pike; Luke Bates, seaman, wounded on his right shoulder with a boarding pike; Joseph Robinson, carpenter, wounded on the left breast; Thomas Edwards, steward, stabbed on the left shoulder; W. Walker had two stabs with daggers, in the small of his back.

"After the deck was cleared of these sanguinary savages, several guns were fired at the village, the sails were loosened, stream cable cut and the ship put to sea. The same night they got under weigh, seven large war canoes hove in sight, with about thirty Indians in each. In this deplorable condition, with only four or five hands on board capable of duty, the *Atahualpa* shaped her course for New Heita; but the wind chopping around, put about and stood to the westward.

"On the 17th it was thought time to bury the dead, when

after having sewed them up, and got them ready for interment, prayers were read they were then buried in Queen Charlotte's Sound.

"It cannot be ascertained, with any degree of accuracy, how many of the Indians were killed in this dreadful contest. It is supposed however that the number must have exceeded forty; for a large canoe being under the ship's bow, with about twenty Indians in her, who were cutting a cable, a swivel and several muskets were fired into her, and but one Indian reached the shore.

"During the conflict with the savages, there were two barrels of powder unheaded, and a loaded pistol prepared and given to a person who stood ready, should they get into the cabin, and secure to themselves the ship, to fire into it, and blow the whole up, preferring to die in that manner rather than fall into the hands of such merciless savages."

The *Annual Register* of London, England, under the date of May 2, 1806, contains an account of the event communicated by Captain Isaacs of the *Montezuma*. As it gives some interesting details it follows:

"The ship, Atahualpa, had been lying at anchor in Sturgis cove, up Milbank sound, three days. The natives had, during that time, been remarkably civil. On the 12th of June, 1805, they came off in several canoes, and desired Captain Porter to purchase their skins; and about ten o'clock Calete, a chief of one of their tribes, desired Captain Porter to look over the side and see the number of skins in his canoe. Captain Porter was complying, but was obliged to bend over the rail, when the chief threw his coat over his head, stabbed him twice between the shoulders, threw him overboard, and gave the signal for a general attack.

"Mr. John Hill, the chief mate, was shot through the body, but ran below, got his musket, returned on deck, shot the chief, and gave him his mortal wound.

"John Goodwin, the second mate, shot dead.

"John G. Rackstraw, captain's clerk, was daggered, and died immediately.

"Lyman Plummer was daggered, and lived until the ship was got out, when he requested the surviving crew to take care of the ship, and find Captain Brown.

"Isaac Summers, cooper; Luther and Samuel Lapham, Peter Spooner, seamen; and John Williams, cook, were all killed. The cook defended himself bravely, as long as his hot water lasted,

but that being expended, they cut him down with an axe. Three seamen, one Sandwich islander, and a Kodiak Indian, were dangerously wounded. Five more of the crew were slightly wounded; and three men and a Sandwich islander were all that escaped unhurt.

"These four at length bravely rushed through the crowd of Indians, got below, and finding a few muskets loaded, fired them through the loopholes, in the break of the forecastle, which terrified the natives, and many jumped overboard. The four men then regained the deck, and after fighting some time with a few Indians, who seemed determined to hold their prize, killed or drove all overboard. One canoe was now seen under the bows, endeavouring to cut the cable; but a swivel was brought from the afterpart of the ship and discharged at them; ten were killed by the swivel, and one by a musket shot, so only one was left in the canoe.

"The crew lost their jacket knives by plunging them into the skulls of the Indians, from whence they were unable to draw them out. After the decks were cleared the topsails were loosed, when the ship swung her head off shore, the cable was cut, and after some time beating, was able to get out of the sound. Two days after they were off Newatta; the wind coming ahead, shaped a course northward.

"On the 13th of June deposited the bodies of our murdered shipmates in the deep."

The late Captain Walbran stated that in 1899 an Indian, known as Carpenter and whose wife was a descendant of the Chiefs Kaiete, pointed out the scene of the attack, a bay on the eastern shore of Spiller Channel, Milbank Sound. His informant knew not the name of the vessel nor the time of the occurrence, but the Indian tradition he detailed fits closely with the accounts above given and establishes the identity. The story was that long, long ago the Indians under Chief Kaiete attempted to capture a Boston ship at anchor in that bay. The captain, he said, while looking over the side of the vessel to see some skins in a canoe alongside was killed and thrown overboard. The Indian chief, Kaiete, was killed, as well as many sailors and Indians. The cook fought, he said, by throwing boiling water upon his assailants, which made them jump overboard; many of the Indians became bald and some were ever after blind, as a result of the water; however in the end they killed the cook. Then some Indians in a canoe tried to cut the anchor rope so that they might

be able to haul the ship on shore by means of the rope which fastened her stern to the trees on shore; but while they were so engaged the sailors fired a gun at the canoe and killed every man in it. After that the few men still on the ship were able to get her away.

After the massacre Adams, one of the survivors, brought the *Atahualpa* to Nahwittie, a port on the northern end of Vancouver Island, much frequented by the American traders. There she obtained a sufficiency of men to enable her to reach the Hawaiian Islands where she completed her crew. In November, 1805, the *Atahualpa* arrived at Canton.⁷ The furs were exchanged as usual for Oriental goods, and the ship sailed for Boston. The exact date of her return has not been ascertained; but it would probably be about the middle of June, 1806.

On 23rd October, 1806, the *Atahualpa* cleared again from Boston under the well-known Captain William Sturgis, for the Northwest Coast and China. Mr. Lyman, her owner, had then two other vessels on the coast (probably the *Hamilton* and the *Guatimozin*), and the *Atahualpa* was to spend but one year trading there. At the end of the season of 1807, she was to collect the furs obtained by the others and continue to China, to exchange them for homeward cargo.⁸ Leaving the Northwest Coast on 10th September, 1807, the *Atahualpa* was at Canton by 25th November. If she followed the usual course, by way of the Hawaiian Islands, her voyage was made in a remarkably short time. The sale of her furs and the purchase of the return cargo seems to have occasioned considerable delay. In January, 1808, she was still at Canton and was reported to be ready to sail for Boston in about three weeks.⁹ She finally departed from Canton on 12th February, 1808, and 114 days later—June 7, 1808, was again in Boston harbor. According to Captain Sturgis' memoir, the voyage was very profitable both for himself and for his owner, Mr. Theodore Lyman.¹⁰

The embargo imposed by Congress to avoid the British Orders-in-Council and Napoleon's Berlin and Milan decrees detained the *Atahualpa* until April, 1809, when she sailed again on a voyage direct to China. This time she carried specie amounting to \$300,000 for the purchase of Oriental goods. On 21st August

⁷ *Columbian Centinel*, April 2, 1806; *Independent Chronicle*, April 2, 1806, July 24, 1806.

⁸ *Independent Chronicle*, October 23, 1806; Swan's *Three Years*, p. 424; *Memoir of William Sturgis*, by C. G. Loring, Boston, 1864, p. 12.

⁹ *Columbian Centinel*, March 23, 1808; *Independent Chronicle*, May 9, 1808.

¹⁰ *Columbian Centinel*, June 8, 1808; *Memoir of Sturgis*, p. 12.

she anchored in Macao Roads. Early the following morning she was attacked by sixteen ladrone junks, some of them heavily armed. For nearly an hour a desperate fight was waged; the *Atahualpa*, like all the traders, carried a few small cannon, and her crew worked them with the courage of despair. Slowly the hard-pressed ship and her assailants drifted landward until they came within range of the Macao forts which began to throw their shot also amongst the eager pirates. The crew enheartened by this unexpected assistance, renewed the fight with even greater vigor and soon the shattered remnant of the junks abandoned the struggle. On her passage up the river to Canton she was again attacked by other piratical junks, but she finally beat them off and reached her destination in safety. The return cargo seems to have been purchased in about three months. On December 4, 1809, the *Atahualpa* sailed again for Boston, where she arrived in April, 1810. This voyage also, according to Captain Sturgis, was very successful.¹¹

The good ship was again at once re-conditioned and supplied with another cargo for direct interchange with China. This appears the irresistible inference from the following dates: The exact time of her departure from Boston has not been ascertained; but, as she only reached that city in April, 1810, it is reasonable to suppose that she again left for China about the month of July. The fact that she was at Canton in December, 1810, ready to sail for Boston, shows that on this voyage she had sailed direct to China. Her commander was Captain Beckman (or Bacon). On May 11, 1811, she was again back in Boston harbor.¹²

On 27th September, 1811, the *Atahualpa*, under the command of Captain John Suter, sailed for the last time from her home port, Boston, bound for the Northwest Coast and China.¹³ Before she reached the Coast, however, the war of 1812-1814 had broken out. The energetic ship-owners of Boston dispatched three letters of marque, including the well known *Tamaahmah*, in February, 1813, to carry news of the war and also supplies to their vessels on the Coast and in the Pacific Ocean. Dr. Morison, in his valuable *Maritime History of Massachusetts*, recounts an incident of this voyage. When the *Atahualpa* was on the coast of Vancouver island an Indian chief came aboard ostensibly to trade. An instant later a flotilla of canoes carrying more than two thousand warriors appeared from behind a wooded point and

¹¹ *Columbian Centinel*, April 7, 1810, April 14, 1810; *Memoir of Sturgis*, p. 13.

¹² *Columbian Centinel*, April 6, 1811, May 15, 1811.

¹³ *Columbian Centinel*, September 28, 1811.

surrounded the ship. But Captain Suter was equal to the occasion. He grabbed the chief by the throat, presented a pistol to his head, and threatened to blow his brains out unless he immediately ordered the canoes to depart. The order was given; Captain Suter at once weighed anchor and after the ship was under way released the prisoner.¹⁴ The *Atahualpa* and other American traders then in the Pacific sought shelter from the British cruisers in the Hawaiian Islands. There, probably late in 1813, she was purchased by Baranoff for the Russian American Company and re-named the *Bering*, and we follow her career no farther. It is said that while she was sold at a considerable sacrifice, Captain Suter with his furs and the money obtained by her sale brought back to Boston a cargo of Oriental goods that netted the owners almost \$120,000 on their original investment of not more than \$40,000.¹⁵

F. W. HOWAY.

¹⁴ *The Maritime History of Massachusetts*, by S. E. Morison, Boston, 1921, p. 72.

¹⁵ *Columbian Centinel*, April 12, 1815; *Zhizneopisanie Baranova* (Baranof's Biography), reference furnished by C. L. Andrews Esq.; *Maritime History of Massachusetts*, p. 72.