

SOME NOTES UPON CAPTAIN ROBERT GRAY

In a recent article in the *Washington Historical Quarterly* (vol. xx, p. 193) upon "The Widow of Robert Gray," Professor E. S. Meany has shown how very little is known of his life outside of the years in which he was engaged in his epoch-making voyages. The following remarks are offered as supplemental to that article and as a contribution towards the filling in of some of the blanks in the story.

Captain Robert Gray came of good New England pioneer stock, being distantly related to Governor Edward Winslow of the Plymouth Colony. The son of William and Elizabeth Gray, he was born on May 10, 1755, at Tiverton, Newport County, Rhode Island. (Arnold's *Vital Records of Rhode Island, 1636-1850*, vol. 4, p. 83.)

When he was about twenty years of age came the Revolutionary War. In Mrs. Gray's petition to Congress, January 17, 1846, she states that in that struggle he was in the naval service of his country; but some considerable search has failed to discover any details thereof or even to uncover any record in support. Unfortunately, Mrs. Gray does not lay any stress on this fact, though it would, doubtless, have been a strong support to her petition.

At the close of that war Massachusetts roused herself to re-establish her foreign trade, which had always been her life-blood. Navigation laws closed the ports of many European countries; but the rich Orient was open. Early efforts showed that the produce of New England was not altogether satisfactory to the Chinese and this forced the Boston merchants to seek a new medium of exchange. Just then came the knowledge of the fur wealth of the Northwest Coast which Captain Cook's last voyage had disclosed to the world. Here was the possibility of combining the trade in furs with the China trade and thereby utilizing the silky sea-otter skin in the purchase of teas, silks, cottons, nankeens, and china-ware. This thought took material form in the voyage of the *Columbia* and the *Washington*, 1787-90, the pioneer effort of Boston which enabled it to obtain and retain the trade of the coast. Captain John Kendrick commanded the expedition and the ship, *Columbia*. On the outward voyage Captain Robert Gray was on the 90-ton sloop, *Washington*; but, the captains having exchanged vessels, he returned in 1790 on the *Columbia*. On his second voyage to the Northwest Coast, 1790-93, Gray discovered the river which made him and his vessel famous—the *Columbia*. Thus from 1787

to 1793 Captain Robert Gray stands in the full glare of the light of history.

Gray returned in the *Columbia* from his second voyage on July 25, 1793. He seems to have had enough of far wandering and to have resolved upon a more settled life. He was now thirty-eight years of age, and home and wife and family began to crowd into the center of his life-picture. On January 15, 1794, he bought a "brick message and land in Back Street," Boston. Nearly three weeks later, February 3, 1794, he was married by the Rev. John Eliot to Martha Atkins, the eldest daughter of Silas Atkins, of Boston. (*Boston Records*, vol. xxx, p. 135.) His wife came of good Pilgrim line, being the fifth in descent from John Howland of the *Mayflower*. Remembering that on that decisive voyage John was washed overboard, but ultimately saved, one may pause to consider what the situation and subsequent life of Captain Gray might have been had the incident ended fatally. Mrs. Gray was born in 1771, being thus some sixteen years younger than her husband.

Captain Gray and his bride took up their residence in the home which he had just bought on Back, now Salem, Street, where they appear to have spent the first four or five years of their married life. There in November, 1794, was born their first child, Robert Don Quadra Gray, named after that genial and lovable figure, Senr. Don Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, the Spanish commandante at Nootka during Captain Gray's second voyage and for whom he entertained the deepest friendship. This boy, Gray's only son, died on October 5, 1801, aged six years and eleven months. *The New England Palladium* of October 9, 1801, has the following entry of his death: "In this town, Robert D. J. Q. Gray, aet. seven years, only son of Captain Robert Gray." Probably his early death accounts for the fact that Mrs. Gray does not mention him in her petition of January 17, 1846, reproduced in Professor Meany's article already referred to and to be found in House Doc. No. 172, 29th Congress, 1st Session, and in House Reports, No. 456, 29th Congress, 1st Session.

The second child, Martha Howland Gray, was born on May 30, 1796, and apparently named for the maternal grandmother, Martha Howland Atkins. She married Jacob Bancroft, by whom she had eight children. The descendants of these children are the only lineal representatives of Captain Robert Gray. Her husband died, August 35, 1880. She survived him, dying March 24, 1885, at the age of almost 89 years. The notice in *Boston Evening Tran-*

script, March 26, 1885, read: Bancroft, 24th inst., Martha Howland, widow of Jacob Bancroft, and daughter of Captain Robert Gray, 88 years."

The third child was Elizabeth Dennis Gray, born January 1, 1798. When she was about fifty years of age she became the wife of Charles Willey of South Windsor, Connecticut. This is an inference derived from Mrs. Gray's statement in her petition of January, 1846, that three of her daughters were then unmarried, coupled with the record of the distribution of her property in 1857 in which appears the name of Elizabeth D. Willey. From the fact that in her will (Suffolk Probate Files, No. 64,889) she mentions her husband's children, but says nothing of her own, it is inferred that she had no issue and that she was the second wife of Charles Willey.

The fourth child was Abigail Quincy Gray, born April 9, 1800. She died unmarried at some time prior to July 10, 1879. The exact day has not been ascertained; the above vague statement is merely an inference from the will of her sister, Elizabeth D. Willey.

The fifth and last child, Mary Ann Gray, was born May 18, 1801. She, too, was never married. The exact date of her death has not been discovered, but upon the same material as in the case of her sister, Abigail, it is inferred to have been at some time prior to July 10, 1879.

All this time, it is believed, that Captain Gray was usually in the coasting trade, sailing out of Boston. When the trouble with France arose in 1799 he became captain of the privateer, *Lucy*, a ship of 201 tons, mounting 12 carriage guns and with a crew of 25 men. The commission signed by John Adams, President of the United States, is dated, November 4, 1799, and authorizes the subduing, seizing, and taking of "any armed French vessel which shall be found within the jurisdictional limits of the United States, or elsewhere on the high seas." The war clouds having blown away Gray returned to the merchant service, and in May, 1800, was at Dublin and Liverpool in command of a vessel then ready to sail on her return voyage to Boston, but whose name unfortunately is at present unknown. For the information in this paragraph we acknowledge indebtedness to the Rev. Dr. Clifford Gray Twombly, of Lancaster, Pa., one of Captain Gray's descendants.

Before 1798, Captain Gray bought another house on Back Street. Nevertheless his financial position seems at that time to have been poor. In March, 1798, he disposed of it, describing it as: "a certain three story brick dwelling house situated in Back

Street—being the house I now live in.” About the same time, May 28, 1798, he mortgaged the house he had first occupied in Back Street. Two years later, presumably owing to the death of the mortgagee, he redeemed this mortgage, but by the common expedient of raising the money on another mortgage. From the names of the two mortgagees, Timothy Atkins and John Williams Quincy, one may hazard the guess that they were connections of Captain Gray by marriage—the former being, probably, a brother of Mrs. Gray and the latter having married her sister, Abigail.

“Robert Gray, Captain, Back Street,” shows in the Boston directories for 1796 and 1798. In the latter year, as already mentioned, he sold the three-story brick house which he occupied on Back Street. Where he lived subsequently is not known. He still owned the first home—that which he had bought in January, 1794. If he occupied that residence it is passing strange that his name does not appear in the next three issues: 1800, 1803, 1805. Perhaps he had temporarily removed from Boston, for “Robert Gray, house, Snowhill Street,” appears in the Boston directories of 1806 and 1807. It may be explained that Snowhill Street was very close to, in fact might be looked on as (with a turn) a continuation of, Back Street. Thereafter the name of Robert Gray disappears from the printed page, and, in 1810, comes: “Gray, Martha, Snowhill Street.” Now, the Robert Gray of Snowhill Street may or may not be our captain; but if he is not, then it is singular that, when his name drops out, a name corresponding with that of our Robert Gray’s wife takes its place. Through the issues for 1813, 1816, 1818, we have: “Gray, Martha, widow of Robert,” living, in the former year, at 19 Prince Street and in the latter years at 72 Prince Street; and so on in the subsequent directories—for example, 1820 shows: “Gray, Martha, widow of Robert,” at 83 Federal Street. These entries, it is believed, clearly relate to the widow of Captain Robert Gray and probably the entries of 1806 and 1807 refer also to him. If it be urged that this last statement cannot be correct, inasmuch as Captain Gray died in 1806 and the 1807 directory contains his name, two answers may be made: that the volume for 1807 was probably printed in 1806, and, secondly, that the date of Captain Gray’s death is not definitely known.

This brings us to the question of the date of the death of Captain Robert Gray. Mrs. Gray in her petition, January 17, 1846, vaguely says that she “was left a widow nearly forty years ago;” and the Committee of the House reporting on March 27, 1846, stated that “Capt. Gray died in the summer of 1806.” The late

Rev. E. G. Porter, a descendant, in an article on "The Ship Columbia and the Discovery of the Oregon," (*New England Magazine*, June, 1892, p. 488) writes that Gray "died in 1806 at Charleston, S.C." Greenhow, in *History of Oregon* (London, 1844), p. 237, gives 1809 as the year of Captain Gray's death. Miss Agnes C. Laut, in *Vikings of the Pacific*, p. 238, takes considerable sea-room, stating that "Sometime between 1806 and 1809 Gray died in South Carolina, a poor man." The Rev. Dr. Twombly says in a letter in May, 1929, that "Captain Robert Gray died of yellow fever on one of his voyages from South Carolina and was probably buried at sea." This appears to be the tradition preserved in the family. The files of the *Charleston Courier* for 1806 have been carefully searched in the hope that they might supply the desired information. In vain.

Captain Robert Gray died intestate, and on May 28, 1810, letters of administration were granted to his widow, Martha. (Suffolk Probate Files, No. 23,525.) In the inventory filed by her, June 11, 1810, the value of his estate is given as \$240.18, and in her account filed December 10, 1810, the four daughters are mentioned, but not by name. In taking out this administration Mrs. Gray gave a bond for \$2,000, and one of her sureties was John Williams Quincy, the husband of her sister, Abigail. If Captain Gray died in 1806 it is singular that the application to administer such a trifling estate should be delayed until 1810. Accordingly the Boston newspapers for the year 1806, 1807, 1808, 1809 and up to June, 1810, were carefully searched for any reference to his death; but in vain. As it seems incredible that a man who pioneered a trade that brought fortunes to many in Boston and whose discovery of the Columbia River formed one of the important bases of the claim of the United States to Old Oregon should pass away without some notice being taken of his decease, the search will be continued.

Mrs. Gray outlived her distinguished husband many a year—probably more than half a century. Her death is recorded in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 31, 1857: "In this city, 27th instant, Mrs. Martha, widow of Captain Robert Gray, 86." Concise! One of her sons-in-law, Jacob Bancroft, was appointed administrator of her estate. On May 10, 1858, he filed an account showing her personal estate as \$6,786.25, and that the sum of \$1,323.92½ had been paid to each of her daughters: Martha H. Bancroft, Elizabeth D. Willey, Abigail Q. Gray, and Mary A. Gray. (Suffolk Probate Files, No. 40,980.)