

WHAT BECAME OF BENJAMIN CLAPP?

There is an unrecorded chapter in the life of one of the Astorians. It was probably enacted somewhere in the wide Pacific, and it is hoped that some reader of the *Washington Historical Quarterly* may be able to throw some light upon the mystery.

In the story of Astoria there are many little glimpses of Benjamin Clapp, although his first name was not mentioned. Other mentions and a few letters are found in widely scattered places, and then what is known comes to an abrupt close, with a suggestion that the last chapter may contain something which connects him with this part of the world.

Diligent search has failed to throw any light upon his early life up to October 10th 1811,¹ when he sailed from New York on the *Beaver* as one of the American clerks of the Astorian expedition.² There is a little glimpse of him at the Island of Massafuero off the coast of Chile, and at the little village which later developed into Honolulu. He arrived at Astoria May 12th. 1812, and was appointed to serve at that fort along with Gabriel Franchere whom he accompanied on a voyage in the *Dolly* during October 1812.³

Duncan McDougall, the commandant of the fort was in ill health during the following winter, which threw Franchere and Clapp much together, and since they had similar tastes for music and literature, they became warm friends. Franchere recorded that he was a man of amiable character and agreeable conversation, which suggests that he spoke French fluently while his enjoyment of the "choice library" at Astoria would indicate that he was a man of considerable culture. They also amused themselves with the musical instruments at the fort, so that this pleasant little picture helps to offset some of the darker shadows which are inseparable from the story of the Astorians.⁴

The restoration of Mr. McDougall's health was evidenced by his sending Franchere and Clapp to the Chinook village to arrange the marriage which is so dramatically recorded by Washington Irving, who, however, neglected to even hint that the example of the superior was followed by his subordinate, Benjamin Clapp, who also had found that one of the Chinook damsels was most attractive and

1 For date see Alexander Henry, *Original Journals*, edited by Elliott Coues, Francis P. Harper, New York, 1897. Page 763.

2 Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 1831, I, pp. 1, 14, 24 Gabriel Franchere. *Narrative*, 1854, Clarke, Ohio, reprint 1904, page 276.

3 Franchere, 278.

4 Franchere, 279, Cox I. 118.

had accordingly gone through the necessary formalities to obtain the consent of the tribe and had then brought her in triumph to the fort as his bride.⁵

Whether he found the union distasteful, or whether his spirit was stirred by the thought of war and a desire to take part in it is not on record, merely that when Mr. Wilson Price Hunt sailed on the *Albatros* in August, 1813, Benjamin Clapp accompanied him. He may have gone merely as an assistant to Mr. Hunt, expecting to return in a short while. In any event Mrs. Benjamin Clapp remained at the fort and doubtless watched anxiously for the return of her husband.⁶

Arriving at the Marquesas Islands Mr. Hunt found a little squadron of vessels, British whalers captured by Commodore David Porter, United States Navy, of U.S.S. *Essex* and her consort. There was a shortage of seamen to man these prizes and of officers to command them, so that with conditions as they were at Astoria, Clapp was more needed in the United States Navy than he was as a clerk of the Pacific Fur Company so that Mr. Hunt willingly gave him his release in order that he might become a midshipman under Commodore Porter.

The first mention of him is on November 18th, 1813, when he was official witness to the "taking possession" of the Island of Nukihiva of the Marquesas group, which for a brief period rejoiced in the name of Madison Island, in honor of the President of the United States.⁷

On December 8th the name of Benjamin Clapp was entered upon the books as acting midshipman,⁸ and he was placed under the command of Lieutenant John M. Gamble of the Marine Corps, who was left in charge of the prize whalers when Commodore Porter sailed from the Marquesas on December 12th.⁹

His first duty was to help in superintending the transfer of whale-oil from three of the captured vessels to the *New Zealander*, which sailed with one thousand nine hundred and fifty barrels of that valuable commodity, leaving Lieutenant Gamble with Clapp and Midshipman William Feltus and barely sufficient men to navigate two of the remaining vessels, so that it would be necessary to

5 Washington Irving, *Astoria*. Chap. 56. Henry, 912.

6 Franchere, 288. Note error in Alexander Ross, *First Settlers*, 1849, Clarke, Ohio, reprint, 1904, page 264.

7 David Porter, *Memoir*.

8 Records, United States Navy. Data supplied through courtesy of Capt. D. W. Knox, United States Navy. Naval Records and Library, Washington, D.C.

9 Records, United States Marine Corps. Data supplied through the courtesy of Lieut. Col. E. R. Beadle, United States Marine Corps.

burn the *Greenwich*, which might otherwise have again fallen into British hands.

It required considerable time to prepare the two vessels and to remove as much as possible from the *Greenwich*, while to make matters worse one of the best seamen was drowned and four others stole a whaleboat and deserted.

When finally the *Seringapaten* was ready for sea, some of the men mutinied, and overpowering Gamble, Feltus and Clapp, made them prisoners and sailed out of the harbor, having wounded Gamble during the outrage. When fairly out to sea the three officers were placed in a leaky boat, while the ship sailed away, leaving them to reach the shore as best they could. They succeeded in doing so, but with much difficulty.

The number remaining was now so few that the prospect of plundering the two remaining vessels caused the natives to make an attack in which Midshipman Feltus and three men were killed, and another dangerously wounded, although he, with one uninjured seaman managed to escape by swimming, and were rescued by Clapp and some others.

There were now but eight survivors left, five of whom were either sick or wounded, but the *Greenwich* was burned and the little band sailed away, May 10th, 1814, in the *Sir Andrew Hammond*, which was one of the whalers captured from the British. Clapp and two men alone were able to work, so the voyage must have been most arduous. Yet without a chart they managed to reach Honolulu by May 25th, where Captain Winship befriended them, and they were able to obtain much needed supplies by promising to take one of the chiefs and two of his retainers to the Island of Hawaii.

It is necessary here to make a break in the narrative, since the next episode is best given by one of the participants. When the *Isaac Todd* belonging to the North-West Company sailed from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on her voyage to Astoria, she was accompanied by H.M.S. *Phoebe*, *Cherub* and *Raccoon*, since it was supposed that Commodore Porter and two American vessels were protecting the American fort on the Columbia River.

At the Island of Juan Fernandez it was learned that Porter was in that region, so the *Raccoon* was sent on to Astoria while the *Phoebe* and *Cherub* went in search of the American squadron, which they succeeded in capturing at Valparaiso, Chile, March 27, 1814. The *Cherub* then sailed to the Hawaiian Islands, and happened to leave Kealakeua Bay, of the Island of Hawaii, just before Clapp on

the *Sir Andrew Hammond* had reached that island with the three Hawaiians as passengers.

In the British Admiralty in London is the old log of H.M.S. *Cherub*, written by Captain Tudor Tucker, Royal Navy, the commander.¹⁰

"June 12th, 1814. Sunday.

"4 a.m. saw a strange Sail, made Sail in chace.

"7.30 the chace hoisted American Colours & fired a Gun to leeward. We hoisted an American Ensign & Pendant with a white Flag at the Fore Top Galt. Mst. head with Free Trade & Sailors Rights printed in it—

"At 9 fired a Shot at the chace & hoisted English Colours & at which she struck her Colours, down Boat & boarded do. she proved to be the *Sir Andrew Hammond*, an English Whaler Prize to the American frigate Essex. Sent a Lieut. a Midn. & 15 men on board her and received 2 Officers & 18 Seamen from her."

Poor Benjamin Clapp had certainly had various experiences during his half year in the United States Navy.

The following Sunday, June 19th, he was taken over to the *Charon*, where he was held prisoner, the records referring to him as the "Mate" apparently of the *Sir Andrew Hammond*.¹¹

There is much uncertainty as to the next six months. Franchere mentions him as having been at Buenos Ayres,¹² and it may have been there that he was transferred from the *Charon* to the *Cherub*, since he seems to have been released at Rio de Janeiro, December 15th, 1814. Clapp was now far from home, and presumably penniless, since he could have had but little money when he left Astoria, and there had been no pay-day for him during his year in the Navy. Somehow he managed to survive until the following June, when he succeeded in finding someone to honor his draft on the Minister Plenipotentiary.

In the records of the Navy Department is a letter from him to the Secretary of the Navy, dated July 2, 1815, from Rio de Janeiro, asking that the draft for two hundred and fifty dollars he had drawn be charged against his salary account. It was probably the first time that the authorities had known of his being in the Navy, so in order to credit him with any salary his name was duly entered on the rolls and a warrant commissioning him as Midshipman was accordingly sent to him.

¹⁰ Records in British Admiralty, (51/2206). Data supplied through the courtesy of Miss Phina Schrader, 57 Chancery Lane, London, W.C., England.

¹¹ British Admiralty. *Musters*, Series II, 4524.

¹² Franchere, 408.

But poor Clapp was doomed to troubles, and he discovered that the commission was dated November 21, 1815, instead of December 8th, 1814, which meant the loss of almost a whole year's salary. It is not therefore surprising that there should also be a second letter requesting that the date of the commission be corrected, which was promptly done and sent to him in New York where he had arrived at last.

The war being over there was no desire in the heart of Benjamin Clapp for any more service in the Navy, while the memories of the Pacific region filled him with a yearning to return. Possibly the thought of his dusky wife still waiting for him may have been a factor, since she must have had considerable attractiveness as she had supplanted the bewitching Jane Barnes in the rather uncontrolled affections of Donald McTavish,¹³ whose tombstone still remains at Astoria.

The records show that Clapp requested leave of absence "in order to perform a voyage to the Pacific Ocean" which was granted on December 23rd, 1815, and then he passes out of the picture, with merely the pencilled note "Resigned" written opposite his name, without date or details.

On what vessel he sailed, or where he went is not known; whether he returned to claim his wife or had forgotten her; whether his name figures in some further episodes or is lost in oblivion. The last chapter of his story is now a mystery.

Someone who reads this little article may be able to answer the question: What became of Benjamin Clapp?

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¹³ Henry, 912.