

The Washington Historical Quarterly

A SHORT ACCOUNT OF ROBERT HASWELL,

Robert Haswell, the author of the journals usually called *Haswell's First Log* and *Haswell's Second Log*, was born on November 24, 1768.¹ The place of his birth, as also that of his two brothers, is unknown; it was probably somewhere in the Province of Massachusetts Bay. He was the eldest son (and second child) of William Haswell of Nantasket, Mass., a lieutenant in the British Navy. It was therefore quite natural that Lieutenant Haswell's three sons: Robert, William, and John Montresor, should take to the sea.

Little is known of Robert Haswell's boyhood. The American War of Independence broke out when he was a child of only six years. As his father retained his allegiance to the British Crown the family were, in the autumn of 1775, interned at Hingham, Mass.; later they were removed to Abington; and finally sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia. This action was, probably, the result of a petition from Lieutenant Haswell, dated May 27, 1778, stating that the whole food supply at Abington was barely sufficient for the needs of its regular inhabitants and requesting therefore that he, his wife, and children be removed to Boston with the purpose of ultimate transport to Halifax.² Some time later, but when has not been ascertained, Lieutenant Haswell, probably accompanied by his wife and family, returned to England and settled down in Yorkshire.

At any rate, in September, 1787, Robert Haswell was in Boston, Mass. The first definite knowledge that we have of him was when, as a boy of nearly nineteen years of age, he joined the ship *Columbia* on her first voyage to the Northwest Coast. From the fact that he was her third mate when she sailed from Boston it may be inferred that he had spent some of the intervening years at sea; and there are ambiguous statements in his journals that might give some slight color to the inference.

The *Columbia* sailed on September 30, 1787, and soon differ-

¹ In his *Second Log* under the date of November 24, 1791, Haswell states that he was "23 years of age" on that day.

² *Massachusetts Province Laws*, xix, 679, 708; xx, 149, 207, 360, 425. *Massachusetts Archives*, ccxi, 193, 194; ccxv, 327; ccxvi, 87; ccxviii, 449; clxxxiv, 148, 149; *Nason's Memoir of Susanna Rowson*, pp. 27, 31.

ences arose between Captain John Kendrick, the master, and Simeon Woodruff, the first mate. At the Cape Verd Islands Woodruff left the ship; as a result Haswell became second officer. However, by the time that the *Columbia* arrived at the next port of call, Falkland Islands, the relations between Captain Kendrick and himself had become so keen that Haswell, having been assaulted by the captain, left the ship and became second officer of the sloop *Lady Washington*, her consort.

Haswell remained with Captain Gray on the sloop until July, 1789. At that date Gray took command of the ship, and Haswell went with him, probably as second mate. Captain Kendrick at the same time became master of the *Washington*, as the sloop is ordinarily called. The correspondence between Captain Gray, Captain Kendrick, and the owners, so far as it remains, has been published³ but it contains no explanation of this change of masters nor any reference to our author. Under Gray the *Columbia* sailed by way of the Hawaiian Islands to China and thence to Boston where she arrived on August 10, 1790.⁴ She has the honor of being the first vessel to carry the Stars and Stripes around the world—though she sailed from Boston under one master, John Kendrick, and returned three years later under another, Robert Gray.

The *Columbia* was soon refitted for her second voyage, notwithstanding that the first had been, financially, unsuccessful. Captain Gray was again in command. Joseph Ingraham, who had been first officer, had become the master of the brigantine *Hope*, then preparing for a voyage to the Northwest Coast; his place was taken by our author, Robert Haswell, who was promoted, it would seem, from second officer. Great expedition was shown in making the ship ready for sea; and she sailed from Boston September 28, 1790. The difference between the two masters of the *Columbia*—Kendrick and Gray—cannot be better shown than by a comparison of her voyage under each of them. Under Kendrick almost a year was occupied in the passage from Boston to the coast—October 1, 1787, till September 22, 1788; under Gray the same voyage was completed in a trifle more than eight months—September 28, 1790, till June 4, 1791. We will all be inclined to accept Gray's view: That Kendrick was not "a nimble leader."⁵

³ "Captains Gray and Kendrick: The Barrell Letters," in *Washington Historical Quarterly*, vol. xii, pp. 243-271, relating to the first voyage; "Letters relating to the Second Voyage of the Columbia," in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. xxiv, pp. 132-137.

⁴ "The Discovery of Oregon," by Edward G. Porter, in *New England Magazine*, June, 1892, p. 479.

⁵ *Washington Historical Quarterly*, vol. xii, p. 256. The dates are from Haswell's MS First Log and John Boit's Log of the *Columbia*, 1700-1793, *Proceedings of Massachusetts Historical Society*, vol. liii and in *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. xxii.

The *Columbia* on this voyage, as on its predecessor, carried a Sea Letter. It is preserved in the Archives of the Oregon Historical Society, and is as follows:

“To All Emperors, Kings, Sovereign Princes, State and Regents and to their Respective Officers, Civil and Military, and to All Others Whom It May Concern:

I, George Washington, President of the United States of America, do make known that Robert Gray, captain of a ship called the *Columbia*, of the burden of about 230 tons, is a citizen of the United States, and that the said ship which he commands belongs to the citizens of the United States; and as I wish that the said Robert Gray may prosper in his lawful affairs, I do request all the before mentioned, and each of them separately when the said Robert Gray shall arrive with his vessel and cargo, that they will be pleased to receive him with kindness and treat him in a becoming manner, etc., and thereby I shall consider myself obliged.

September 16, 1790, New York City

(Seal, U. S.)

GEO. WASHINGTON,⁶
President.”

As has been already stated the *Columbia* on her second voyage arrived on the Northwest Coast on June 4, 1791, and on the following day anchored in Clayoquot Sound, Vancouver Island. After trading through the season, in which we see Haswell performing the ordinary duties of chief officer, the ship returned to Clayoquot and went into winter quarters there. During the winter, the sloop *Adventure*, (The frame of which had been brought out from Boston) was built at Adventure Cove, as the wintering-place was called. Haswell was placed in command as her master and late in March, 1792, sailed northward in search of trade.

Not knowing that the western side of Queen Charlotte Islands was bare of villages he followed that shore with little success. Except for a few skins obtained from Cumshewa's tribe at the western end of Skidegate Channel, he found no trade until he reached Cloak Bay—the place of Dixon's and Gray's great success. Many sea-otter skins were there, but the Indians held them at what Haswell regarded as exorbitant prices. He then skirted the northern and a part of the eastern shore of the islands, calling at Naden and Masset. As his stock consisted chiefly of overcoats he found it

⁶ Copy issued by the Oregon Historical Society.

difficult to interest the natives. Returning to the westward Haswell retraced the coast to an unidentified sound on the western side. Re-fitting his sloop there he continued southward to Houston-Stewart Channel, where he met the ship *Margaret*, of Boston. The *Adventure* sailed thence, rounded Cape St. James, and traded along the east coast, a favorite resort of the vessels. Thence she headed to the continental shore and, after visiting various villages in southern Alaska, took her way southward to Vancouver Island where she met the *Columbia* and delivered to her 238 sea-otter skins, 142 sea-otter tails, 23 cutsacks (cloaks of sea-otter skins), and 19 pieces. Again the *Adventure* sailed northward—this time in company with the *Columbia*, for a few days. Then Haswell continued to the Alaskan coast, trading wherever skins were to be had. He now turned westward along the northern coast of Queen Charlotte Islands and thence to Sitka. Not finding such trade as he had expected he returned to Queen Charlotte Islands and on 4th September met the *Columbia* at Port Montgomery, a place not yet identified on their western side. As the fruits of his two months operations Haswell delivered to Captain Gray 75 sea-otter skins, 29 cutsacks, 137 tails, and 25 pieces. From Port Montgomery the two vessels sailed in company southward to Nootka Sound. There Captain Gray tentatively arranged to sell the staunch little sloop to the Spaniards, to be delivered at Neah Bay. On 28th September the *Adventure* passed over to Don Quadra, the Spanish commander, in exchange for "seventy-five sea-otter skins of a superior quality."⁷ Haswell then returned to his old berth as first mate of the *Columbia*, which immediately sailed for China by way of the Hawaiian Islands, and thence to Boston, her home port, where she anchored, July 25, 1793.^{7a}

Haswell's movements between 1793 and 1799 are uncertain. An interesting letter from him to his sister (or rather half-sister), Mrs. Susanna Rowson, dated Boston, January 20, 1796 is reproduced hereunder. It indicates that in this interval he had made a voyage of some twenty-seven months' duration and, on the same voyage it would seem, had visited his parents in England. The letter follows:

"Boston Jan^y 20th, 1796

We have been long far distant from each other my dear Susan. I have frequently heard you were well but have not had a line from

⁷ This synopsis is compiled from Haswell's MS Second Log between March and September, 1792.

^{7a} John Boit's Log of the *Columbia*, *ante*.

you these eight years. Indeed so frequently as I shift my abode and the length of my voyages is the cause.

I arrived here a few days since from England. I saw our dear parents. They were well. Monty grown a fine boy. Bill is with me and hearty. My last voyage has been twenty-seven months long, and on the winding up of it I think it will not be an unprofitable one. Sister, I hope everything with you is comfortable and happy. I saw a letter from you to Mr. Williamson. It gave me pleasure to hear you were well, but how is Rowson? I hope he enjoys his health.⁸

I think I shall tarry ashore this winter, and in the spring seek my fortune again. I hope in a few years to acquire enough to purchase a small farm, and then sit down in homely ease and enjoy the few years that may be left.

For the sea my love has almost worn me out, but I have rashly taken steps of adventure which though in this place has established my character as a seaman and sets me in the first rank of my profession yet it has impaired my constitution beyond measure and has not been productive of the gain that should be expected from such hazardous enterprises, but I have enough and to spare a friend. I have no family; Monty and Bill are my only charges. Monty is at a boarding school at Hull, and comes forward in his education surprisingly; he will be quite the accomplished lad. Bill is now at school here; better late than never; he is also learning navigation and improving fast; he has been my second officer this year and is a good seaman.

So soon as I receive an answer from you I shall write you some good long narratives, for I have a deal to tell you.

My love to your husband and accept of the best wishes of
Your affectionate brother

Robert Haswell."⁹

Samuel Hill, the father of the actor "Yankee Hill," but probably better known as the master of the brig *Lydia*, who in July, 1805, rescued Jewitt and Thompson from their captivity amongst the Indians of Nootka Sound, refers to Robert Haswell in his MS Autobiography. It is plain that Hill is in error in his dates; indeed, an earlier paragraph which plainly gave him the starting-point shows that he is not sure of the year, saying: "I think it was in the year" so-and-so. It is suggested that in the quotation which

⁸ "Monty" and "Bill" are John Montresor Haswell and William Haswell, the two brothers of Robert Haswell; "Rowson" is William Rowson, the husband of Haswell's half-sister Susanna, to whom the letter is written.

⁹ The original is in the possession of Mrs. Mabel Osgood Wright of Fairfield, Connecticut, a great-grand-daughter of Robert Haswell.

follows, the year "1795" should be "1793" and the reference to "Jan^y 1797" should read "Jan^y 1796." These alterations make the following quotation from Captain Hill's Autobiography fit in with the letter given above.

"In the autumn of 1795, I entered as an ordinary seaman on board the ship *John Jay* of Boston under the command of Robert Haswell, Esquire. We proceeded to Batavia on the Island of Java, where we loaded a cargo and returned to Boston in Jan'y 1797. While at Batavia it pleased Cap. Haswell to permit me to live on shore with him at the company's hotel, and where he permitted me to use his coach, to ride in the country or elsewhere, whenever I pleased, provided I returned before eight o'clock in the morning. And as Capt. H. required but a few hours of my time each day, I had much leisure, by which means I acquired some knowledge of the Malayan language, as spoken at Batavia, and also a very considerable addition to the stock I already possessed, of a knowledge in the ways of iniquity."¹⁰

Combining then the letter with the above quotation as altered it may be surmised that soon after the return of the *Columbia* (July 25, 1793) Robert Haswell was appointed to the command of the ship *John Jay* and sailed for the East Indies, returning in January, 1796, by way of England. This would make a voyage of about twenty-seven months, as he mentions in the letter. Perhaps the explanation of Haswell's expressed intention to "tarry ashore" until the spring of 1796 before again venturing forth upon the sea is the old one "*Cherchez la femme*"; for on October 10, 1798, at Reading, Mass., he married Mary Cordis, a daughter of Joseph Cordis, Esq., of that place. Two children were born of this marriage: Mary Haswell and Rebecca Cordis Haswell.¹¹

Probably because of his marriage Haswell on March 4, 1799, entered the United States Navy as a lieutenant. He remained in the service more than two years—until April 13, 1801.¹² He saw active service as first lieutenant of the United States frigate *Boston*, George W. Little, commander. On October 12, 1800, after an action lasting one hour and forty minutes this handsome, speedy ship-of-war captured the French national corvette *La Berceau*. Amongst the wounded was John Montresor Haswell, Robert's brother, called familiarly in the family correspondence, "Monty." He was then a midshipman. The prize was placed under the

¹⁰ From the MS Autobiography of Samuel Hill, p. 3, in New York Public Library.

¹¹ The date of this marriage is taken from *Reading Vital Records*, pp. 311, 363. Nason's date, October 17, 1797, must therefore be regarded as an error.

¹² Edward W. Callahan's *List of Officers in the Navy of the United States*, 1901, p. 253.

command of Lieutenant Robert Haswell, first lieutenant of the *Boston*. Both vessels, captor and captive, reached Boston on Saturday, November 15, 1800. Robert Haswell's share of the prize money was \$286.35.¹³

Leaving the Navy in April, 1801, Robert Haswell was appointed to command the ship *Louisa*, of Boston, for a voyage to the Northwest Coast, China, and return—a voyage which would be familiar to him from the six years (1787-1793) that he had spent on the *Columbia*. In the ship news is the following item: "Foreign Clearances—since the last Centinel—August 5, 1801, ship *Louisa*, Haswell, N.W. Coast of America."¹⁴ After the ship sailed nothing, so far as I am aware, was ever heard of her. Just another of the sea's mysteries. There is, however, a tradition in the family that his wife received a letter from him after the vessel left Boston. This might be regarded as showing that the *Louisa* was lost in the Pacific Ocean. It seems plain that she never reached the Northwest Coast, for in that year there were about fifteen vessels flitting along that shore and not one of them mentions her. How the *Louisa* was lost or where, no one knows; but in the family there is preserved a beautiful piece of painting and embroidery, representing Captain Robert Haswell's widow and his two daughters at a tomb, whilst in the distance a ship is seen dashing against the rocky shore.

The only information in regard to Robert Haswell's death is contained in his father's obituary. It reads thus:¹⁵

Deaths

"In Yorkshire, England, William Haswell, Esq., aet., 73—for many years a captain in the British navy. He married about the year 1769 [this should probably be February, 1768] for his second wife a New England lady, and bringing over an infant daughter [later, Mrs. Susanna Rowson] settled near Boston, and continued an inhabitant here until the 3d year of the revolutionary war. He was a man of integrity and a gentleman, and has given four valuable citizens to this Commonwealth; his eldest son, Capt. Robert Haswell, is supposed lately to have been lost on a voyage to the N.W. Coast—it was his third voyage; his second son [William] commands a vessel out of this port; his youngest son [John Montresor] is a Lieutenant in the U.S. Navy; and his only

¹³ Middlesex Probate Files, No. 10741. *Boston Gazette*, November 17, 1800.

¹⁴ *Columbia Centinel*, August 8, 1801.

¹⁵ Nason, p. 142, says that William Haswell (Robert's father) died February 26, 1805. See *Boston Weekly Magazine*, August 31, 1805.

daughter [Mrs. Susanna Rowson], is Preceptress in the Young Ladies Academy, in Newton."

It may be added parenthetically that Haswell's brother William who is referred to above has left us his "Remarks on a Voyage in 1801 to the Island of Guam" made when he was first officer of the barque *Lydia*; he seems to have died in the summer of 1807 whilst master of the ship *Wanderer* on the passage between Liverpool and Boston,¹⁶ and that their mother, referred to in the above item as "a New England lady," was Rachel Woodward of Boston.

Robert Haswell, at the time of sailing on his last voyage, was thirty-two years of age. With his family he resided at Charlestown, Boston, Mass. He died intestate; and on July 2, 1805, his widow, Mary Cordis Haswell, then of Newton, Mass., applied for administration of his estate, which was valued at \$4630.47.¹⁷

To Robert Haswell we are indebted for all the information, today existing, upon the first voyage of the *Columbia*, 1787-1790—the pioneer venture of Boston on the Northwest Coast. It is clear from Ingraham's references in his MS Journal of the *Hope* that he also kept a similar record of the voyage; the document, however, cannot be found.

I have pleasure in acknowledging my indebtedness to Mr. Albert Matthews of Boston for his kind assistance in the preparation of the material in this paper.

Since the above article was prepared, the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, Vol. 42, have appeared. Therein will be found, pp. 47-160, a bibliographical study, by R. W. G. Vail, of the works of Susanna Haswell Rowson, Haswell's sister. The introduction contains information upon the Haswell family before and immediately after the American Revolution.

F. W. HOWAY

¹⁶ *Independent Chronicle*, July 6, 1807.
¹⁷ Middlesex Probate Files, No. 10741.