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CAPTAIN CORNELIUS SOWLE ON THE PACIFIC OCEAN

The name of Captain Cornelius Sowle is familiar to every reader of the story of the Northwest Coast because of his association with the troublous days of the foundation of Astoria. He was then the master of the ship *Beaver*, which was sent out from New York in October, 1811, by John Jacob Astor with supplies and reinforcements for the Pacific Fur Company's undertaking on the Columbia River. Possibly such readers, overlooking Astor's instructions and carried away by Washington Irving's rhetoric, have looked upon him as an "over-cautious or rather a timid seaman," owing to the cautious manner in which he approached the mouth of that river. It must not be forgotten also that he was then a man of forty-three; and this at a time when boys of eighteen and nineteen were frequently in command of American trading vessels. Ross Cox, who was a passenger on the *Beaver*, speaks of the "weatherbeaten face of our veteran captain,"¹ and Alexander Ross calls him "old Sowle."²

This paper is not an attempt to evaluate the life-work of Captain Sowle. Its purpose is merely to piece together a part of his life on the Pacific, covering roughly the last thirteen years.

Captain Cornelius Sowle was born at Tiverton, Rhode Island, (the same town in which Captain Robert Gray was born in 1755) on October 15, 1769. Of his early life nothing has been ascertained further than that on March 29, 1796, he married Dolly Travis, of Rehoboth, Mass.³ From the fact that when we first meet him in the Pacific he is thirty-six years of age and in command of a vessel it may be assumed that his life had been spent on the sea. But the only information that has been found concerning his movements, prior to his appearance in the Pacific Ocean in 1805, is supplied by Professor K. S. Latourette, in "Voyages of American Ships to China, 1784-1844," in *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, for 1927, p. 243. He there states that in 1803 the ship *Palmyra*, in command of Captain Cornelius Sowle, returned to Providence, R. I., from China. This voyage seems to have been di-

¹ *The Columbia River*, by Ross Cox, (London, 1832), vol. I, p. 7.

² *Adventures on the Columbia River*, by Alexander Ross (London, 1849), p. 239.

³ *The Sowle, Sowles, Sole Family*, by G. F. Ridlow, 1926, vol. II, pp. 972, 973, 1063.

rect to Canton and return, probably by the usual route by way of the Cape of Good Hope. His home, at any rate after he was married, was at Providence. An oil portrait of him hangs upon the walls of the Rhode Island Historical Society's rooms in that city.⁴

The first knowledge that we have of him west of Cape Horn is in 1805, when he was in command of a brig of Providence, the *Tabor* or *Tabour*, then engaged in trading on the coast of Chile. During that year the *Tabour* was frequently at Coquimbo, probably while sealing off the coast, where Captain Sowle, "a highly meritorious man," made many friends.⁴³ From Chile the *Tabour* seems to have sailed to China; for in 1806, when bound thence to the coast of America, Captain Sowle rescued eight Japanese from a dismasted junk.

Amasa Delano, in his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, (Boston, 1817), pp. 400f, tells the story in this wise:

"On my arrival at Wahoo [Oahu] in 1806, I found eight Japanese, who had been taken off a wreck at sea by Captain Cornelius Sole, of Providence, Rhode Island, who was bound from China across the Pacific ocean to the coast of America. After he had passed by, and considerably to the eastward of the Japan Islands, he fell in with the wreck of a vessel that belonged to those islands. He found eight men on board, whose history will be given, after mentioning the conduct of Captain Sole, as was promised in the account of Coquimbo. This generous man took the sufferers on board his vessel, the *Tabour*, and being then near the longitude of the Sandwich Islands, steered for them and landed the eight men with all their clothing and effects at Wahoo, where I found them. He left them in the care of the king, with whom he made an agreement to take care of them and provide for their support, until something should turn up for their relief. He left one of the anchors which was taken off the wreck, forty axes, and some other articles to compensate for their living while at this place. He also left a letter with them, describing their situation at the time he found and relieved them, and recommending them to the care and assistance of any visitor that might touch at this island."

Delano carried the Japanese to Macao, where they were handed over to the Dutch who sent them to Batavia in a Chinese junk; later they were taken back to their native land by ship *Mount Vernon*, of Philadelphia.⁵

⁴ Information from Mr. Howard M. Chapin, secretary of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

⁴³ *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, by Amasa Delano, (Boston, 1817), p. 301.

⁵ *Id.* pp. 410f.

From the Japanese account it appears that the junk was the *Inawaka Maru*, which sailed on January 6, 1806, from the port of Shimoda, Japan, on a coasting voyage. That day a gale from the west caught them; they cut away their masts and drifted hopelessly for seventy days and more, till of the twenty-two men only eight were alive. A translation of the Japanese version of the rescue runs thus:

"On the morning of March 20, the men sighted a ship resembling a large Dutch vessel. All on board yelled at the top of their voices for help.

"The ship heeded to the call for help and lowered a boat and the castaways boarded the rescue ship. The rescued men noticed that the rescuers had red hair and that the color of their eyes was light, this being the first time that they had seen such men.

"The men received a note from the ship's captain written in strange characters. It was later translated for them by a Dutchman, as follows:

"These Japanese men were wrecked at 'Narudokyusto' in America.

"They were helpless and so we rescued them.' This note was signed by a Captain Yahoka.

"There were 32 men on board the rescue ship which was known by the name of Moku or Waheemoku. The rescued men were given boiled rice, beef, pork, a little salt, bread, something resembling tea, which is believed to be coffee, for food. They observed that there were three holidays every month, when 'chicken stuffed with bread' were eaten.

"After sailing several days, the ship reached Oahu on April 28. The men landed on May 5, and turned over to the native officials, the ship setting sail immediately."

The Japanese account goes on to say that in August, 1806, an American ship arrived at Oahu; that on August 15 they sailed on her for Macao, which they reached on September 30, 1806; that from Macao they were taken to "Kalapa," and that ultimately three broken-down survivors reached Nagasaki.⁶

It must be admitted that it is difficult to bring the names "Yahoka," Moku or Waheemoku," and "Kalapa" into any similarity of sound with "Sowle," "*Tabour*," and "Batavia." But of the identity of the incident there can be no doubt; the dates, the number of the saved, the course of the voyage home, and the recommenda-

⁶ "Japanese Account of the First Recorded Visit of Shipwrecked Japanese to Hawaii," in *Papers of the Hawaiian Historical Society*, No. 18, (Honolulu, 1931), pp. 15ff.

tory letter, all correspond. Perhaps the Good Samaritan-like conduct of Captain Sowle in this matter may be counted for righteousness as against his alleged timidity.

Five years elapse. When we next meet Captain Sowle he is in command of Astor's ship, the *Beaver*. It is not intended to tell here the story of that voyage. Information upon it is easily accessible in Cox, Ross, Franchère, and Irving's *Astoria*. The *Beaver* sailed from New York on October 10, 1811, and arrived at Astoria, May 9, 1812. From Astoria she proceeded to Sitka, but instead of revisiting the Columbia River as had been the arrangement, she sailed to China. Despite Astor's instructions that the *Beaver* return to Astoria with news of the outbreak of war, Captain Sowle thought it better to intern the vessel at Canton.⁷ In the result the *Beaver* did not reach New York until March 22, 1816. The newspaper report of her arrival says:⁸

"March 22, 1816, arrived N. Y. ship *Beaver*, Sowle, 114 days from Canton. Cargo principally black teas, destined for Amsterdam, for which port she is to proceed."

The next time Captain Sowle appears in the Pacific Ocean is in December, 1817. He is then in command of the ship *Resource*, of New York. It is probable that that vessel sailed from New York early in 1817, and arrived at the Marquesas Islands (where we now find her) about the following August. These are merely estimations based upon the usual time occupied in such a voyage. At any rate Roquefeuil in command of *Le Bordelais*, found him on December 23, 1817, at the Marquesas, in the *Resource*. He says:⁹

"Le but de son expédition avait été originairement la pêche aux lousps marin, mais les contrariétés survenues dans l'armement ne lui ayant pas permis de partir à temps pour employer le saison de 1816, ses armateurs lui avaient donné des fusils pour faire la traite due sandal, en attendant l' époque de la pêche."

When Roquefeuil arrived the *Resource* was at anchor in Anna Maria Bay, Nukahiva Island, Marquesas group. She had finished her bartering there for sandalwood and was on the eve of departing for China. The Frenchman invited the "old" Yankee skipper to spend Christmas day with him on board *Le Bordelais*. Doubtless this—Captain Sowle's last Christmas—was passed as pleasantly as the difference in language and the distance from civilization would permit. At any rate Roquefeuil says that during that day, as ever in

⁷ Alexander Ross' *Adventures on the Columbia River*, ante, pp. 239ff; *Astoria*, by Washington Irving (London, 1836), vol. III, pp. 133f, 420ff.

⁸ *Columbian Centinel*, (Boston, Mass.), March 27, 1816.

⁹ *Voyage autour du Monde*, by Camille de Roquefeuil, (Paris, 1843), vol. I, pp. 257f. And see also, *Id.*, vol. I, pp. 253f.

their short acquaintance, Captain Sowle was ready to place his knowledge and experience at the service of the stranger. Thus Roquefeuil quickly learned a great deal regarding the islands, the trade, and the manners and character of the inhabitants.

Two days later the *Resource*, with about sixty tons of sandalwood collected during her five months stay, sailed for China, intending to call on the way at the northern part of the island in hope of obtaining more wood. Roquefeuil adds that Captain Sowle was kind enough to undertake to deliver at Macao a packet which he was sending to France and a letter for Manila.¹⁰

The *Resource* vanished from sight when she left Anna Maria Bay on December 27, 1817. For nearly a year her movements are unknown. It may be assumed that she reached Macao in March, 1818—the time usually occupied on the passage between the Marquesas and the Hawaiian groups was about a month and between the latter and China another month or six weeks. Presumably she followed her intention of disposing of her sandalwood immediately after her arrival in China. That was the only market. But this wood, which since 1810 had been imported in great quantities, was now falling in price. Roquefeuil informs us¹¹ that it had never been below \$13.00 a picul, but in May, 1819, it was only selling for \$9.00, and that from the Marquesas at \$6.00 a picul.¹²

The *Resource* probably left Canton about the month of June, 1818, to prosecute her sealing venture in Kamchatkan waters. How she succeeded and when she left that region are not known. Nor whither she was bound when she came to grief. The last we hear of her and her captain is in November, 1818, when on her return voyage from Kamchatka she strikes on a reef in mid-Pacific. The location given in the following extract from the *Columbia Centinel*¹³ might suggest that she was steering for the Hawaiian Islands when the disaster occurred, as the unnamed and unknown reef which seems to have been in the vicinity of Midway Island, was about a thousand miles northwest of the island of Oahu in that group. But it will be well to reproduce from that newspaper the account of one of the survivors:

"In the *Jane* from Manila (ar. on Saturday), came Mr. Bazillia Wyman of this town, late one of the crew of the ship *Resource*, Capt. Soule, who relates the following of the loss of that vessel. On

¹⁰ *Id.*, vol. I, pp. 258f.

¹¹ *Id.*, vol. II, p. 370.

¹² A picul is a Chinese weight of 133½ pounds. It contains 100 cattys. As Captain Cook called a catty 18 ounces he made the picul 112½ pounds. Roquefeuil says the picul was 62 kilograms which would bring it to about 136½ pounds. It was the unit by which sandalwood was sold in China.

¹³ *Columbian Centinel*, June 7, 1820.

the 20th November, 1818, on the passage from Kamtschatka, being in about lat. 28° N., and about Long. 180° E., while under easy sail at about six o'clock the ship struck on an unknown reef of rocks, the weather at the time thick and squally. She remained about ten minutes when she slid off, and on sounding the pumps found she had made considerable water; the pumps were immediately set at work, but the water gained on them fast; the foremast was then cut away, and all hands were employed in clearing the wreck and getting out the boats. After putting on board the boats provisions, water, etc., the officers and crew got into them, (as the ship was sinking), pushed off, and the ship soon after sank. The long boat having most of the provisions and water saved from the ship became very leaky, soon filled and capsized; and the contents lost; some of the crew in her swam to the other boats; others clung to her till the morning and were then taken off, and one was drowned.

"There were now two whaleboats left—Capt. Soule and 12 men in one, and Mr. Joseph Harris, the mate, and 12 men in the other; each boat had about 30 lbs. of bread and no water; the men were on an allowance of a half a biscuit per day. The boats kept company all the next day, but soon after dark the captain's boat suddenly disappeared, and it was thought they must have upset and all on board perished, as nothing was seen of her afterwards and the sea was running high.

"On the 15th of December the other boat landed on the uninhabited island of Agrigan,¹⁴ having no water for 25 days except what they caught as it fell from the heavens, which gave them one to three spoonfuls a man a day. Mr. Jos. La Roach died on 2d Dec.; Mr. Wm. Sparhawk, the 12th; Mr. Jos. Adams, 15th; Mr. Harris, the mate, fell from a rock while fishing and was drowned, the 12th Jan., 1819.

"Mr. Wyman and seven others remained on the island, subsisting on what it afforded—it having been stocked with goats and hogs—till the 17th Nov., 1819, a period of 11 months and one day, when they were discovered and taken off by a Spanish brig bound to Manila, at which place they were landed the 30th Dec. Two of the survivors went thence to Canton, two remained at Manila and three took passage to the U. S. (Two of them arrived at Salem in the *Nautilus*)."

And so ends the story of Captain Cornelius Sowle. He had just completed his fiftieth year. His life had been largely spent on the

¹⁴ The island of Agrigan is one of the Ladrone group, lying about 19° N. Lat., and 120 E. Long. This would make the distance from the wreck to Agrigan about 1,500 miles. The survivors covered this vast expanse in twenty-five days.

sea, and in it he found his final resting place—fitting end for a sailor.

In regard to the spelling of his name I have taken no steps to ascertain the exact form used by him. The name is spelled indifferently, Sowle, Sowles, and Sole. Ross Cox uses "Sowles"; Alexander Ross and Roquefeuil, "Sowle"; and Delano, "Sole." It would appear that in those days, as Sam Weller told the Court in the celebrated trial of Bardell vs. Pickwick, the spelling of a proper name depended very largely upon "the taste and fancy of the speller."

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