

BENJAMIN CLAPP: NOTES ON HIS LATER LIFE

These memoranda¹ are in no sense an attempt to parallel Mr. J. Neilson Barry's careful and inclusive article, "What Became of Benjamin Clapp?"² which dealt with the career of that Astorian from his first association with the Pacific Fur Company in 1810 up to his resignation from the United States Navy on Dec. 23, 1815. My aim is merely to respond, if but partially, to the Macedonian call contained in the title of Mr. Barry's article by giving the interested reader some idea of where a complete answer can be obtained. The pieces of information which follow constitute merely an imperfect skeleton of Benjamin Clapp's later career, upon which the historical researcher who may be sufficiently interested can, should he desire, construct the flesh and blood of episode and characterization, finally to reveal Benjamin Clapp "in his habit as he lived," so far as is possible.

Mr. Barry concludes his article with the information that the records show that Clapp requested leave of absence "in order to perform a voyage to the Pacific Ocean" and, perhaps facetiously, suggests that "the thought of his dusky wife"—the Chinook squaw with whom he, following Duncan MacDougall's example, had formed a connection—"may have been a factor" in his decision to return to the Pacific. Those of us who have read the detailed descriptions of the charms of the Chinook women given by Alexander Henry, Jr., and other early visitants to the Northwest Coast, would not willingly believe that it was the thought of "Mrs. Clapp," whom "Mr. D. McTavish . . . took in tow" the evening of May 17, 1815, according to Henry's journal, which lured Benjamin Clapp away from the home-land to which he had so recently returned. Moreover, Benjamin Clapp, after leaving the Pacific Fur Company for the United States Navy, had been at the Marquesas Islands, and few who have read the rapturous account of the Marquesannes furnished us by Captain David Porter would doubt that "the woman in the case" of Benjamin Clapp, "the native gal a-waitin'," would be

¹ Thanks are due to Mr. J. Neilson Barry for encouraging me to record in permanent form the information I happen to possess concerning Benjamin Clapp's later life and for furnishing me with a copy of his article; to Miss Nellie B. Pipes of the Oregon Historical Society for obtaining and passing on to me memoranda furnished by the Chicago Historical Society and the Missouri Historical Society, and also to the archivists of these institutions; and to Miss Elva C. Tooker of Baker Library for copying references to Benjamin Clapp in the Astor letter-books deposited there, at a time when this material was inaccessible to me personally. Wherever I make a statement for which no reference is given in text or notes, it is based upon my *John Jacob Astor: Business Man*, 2 vols. (Harvard University Press, 1931).

² *Wash. Hist. Quart.*, XXI, 13-17.

much more likely to have been one of these Island beauties than a flat-headed squaw of the Lower Columbia.

However, it is unfortunately still more likely that it was the Goddess of Commerce—if any such there be—rather than a woman of flesh and blood, who called Benjamin Clapp so imperatively away from his recently regained native land. Among the Astor Papers at Baker Library, Soldiers Field, Boston, in a document dealing with shipments by the American Fur Company, is a memorandum which reads: "Sold by Ogden & Clapp in Canton & the proceeds in Canton credited the Fur Co." There can be little doubt as to Ogden's identity; the reference is almost certainly to Nicholas Gouverneur Ogden, who went out as supercargo on the ill-fated *Lark*, which sailed from New York, March 6, 1813, and who died in Canton, August 15, 1823, as Astor's agent. Ogden had come back to New York for a brief period in 1816 to consult with and receive instructions from Astor, leaving Canton in February and arriving in New York, after a shipwreck, in August; he must have returned to China almost at once. Although Ogden had doubtless, during his enforced sojourn in Canton during the War of 1812, acquired a considerable knowledge of the China trade, it is unlikely that he would have the intimate knowledge of furs which must have accrued to Clapp from his experience on the Northwest Coast. What would be more logical, then, than that the two at Astor's request should associate themselves in an *ad hoc* partnership for the specific purpose of handling the Canton end of Astor's business, probably for a share in the profits? After resigning from the Navy in late December, 1815, Clapp could have left New York late in March, 1816, on Astor's brig *Macedonian*, which arrived in Canton on July 15—the first Astor vessel to reach China after Ogden's departure, while none had left Canton during the same period. Thus Clapp would have been enabled to carry on, by means of the arrangements which Ogden had doubtless made before his departure, until the return of his associate.

The above, of course, does not positively prove that Benjamin Clapp was a partner in the firm of Ogden & Clapp which over an unknown but certainly brief period handled Astor's Canton business immediately after the War of 1812; it merely creates a reasonable presumption that such was the case. The information which now follows is considerably more certain. A document headed, "Canton Co-partnership Concern Account No. 1," among the Astor Papers

in Baker Library contains this entry under date of Dec. 31, 1819, "To B. Clapp's expenses to St. Thos." Evidently at least as early as the above date Clapp had left Canton and was acting as Astor's agent in the Virgin Islands. It may be significant that on March 2, 1819, a new agreement had been signed between Ogden and the firm of John Jacob Astor & Son; Clapp was a man of high spirit and perhaps he and Ogden had failed to agree or perhaps Clapp's natural restlessness had inspired a desire for a change of scene. On the other hand it is probably quite as likely that Clapp had learned so much about China goods during his Canton period as to make him valuable as a sales-agent for such goods in the West Indies. We know from another source of Clapp's presence in the West Indies during 1819, and of the trust Astor then reposed in his discretion, for while at St. Croix he handled some delicate matters pertaining to Magdalen Astor's divorce from Adrian B. Bentzen, governor-general of the Danish West Indies.

We next hear of Clapp at the time of the re-organization of the American Fur Company in 1821. Astor, through a letter to Ramsay Crooks on March 27, had offered Clapp, who was apparently then located at Michilimackinac, a salary of \$1,200 per annum and five shares (out of 100) in the Company. Clapp, however, did not see fit to accept this apparently rather attractive offer, but countered by suggesting that he stay on at his former salary, attending while at New York only to the American Fur Company's business (instead of, as formerly, to the distinct enterprises of John Jacob Astor & Son, as well) unless Astor would make him a partner—apparently in the latter firm. Despite Crooks' strong desire that Clapp should be attached to the Astor enterprises by such a partnership, Astor repudiated what seemed to him his employee's inordinate ambition and Clapp accordingly determined to go into business for himself.

In 1822 Clapp appeared in the fur-business in partnership with George Ehninger, Astor's nephew, at New York.³

After this we lose track of Clapp for a time. Probably he was not very successful as an independent fur-trader; at any rate by June, 1827, he was evidently back in the service of the American Fur Company, for Astor at that time was planning to send him to Detroit to wind up the Company's concerns there, and in September of that same year Clapp was writing from New York to Robert Stuart at Michilimackinac on the business of the Company.⁴ But apparently his restless nature soon again overcame him and in the

spring of 1828, Clapp, then at St. Louis, announced to Wilson P. Hunt, "his determination to go with Ebenezer (probably an error for Ehninger) into business."⁵

It is evident that this second venture as an independent merchant was no more successful, for in June, 1832, we find Clapp and Ehninger trying to find security for a payment to be made to John Jacob Astor,⁶ and from a letter of May 25, 1835, it is evident that Clapp had recently been the defeated party in a suit involving \$3,000 or more, his opponent having been his former employer, John Jacob Astor. Clapp had been experiencing misfortunes other than financial about this time, for on May 4, 1834, Astor wrote to Wilson P. Hunt: "Poor Clapp lost his wife after 24 hours indisposition."

In 1835 and 1836, Clapp was listed in the New York City directory as keeping a "fur-store," but at the same time was evidently connected in some way with the American Fur Company as reorganized after Astor had sold out in 1834. Probably Clapp was one of the eight individuals (or firms) who became the owners of what had once been the American Fur Company (Northern Department), henceforth to be known by the name of the parent organization, while the Western Department came into the hands of Pratte, Chouteau & Co., which had managed the Company's business on and west of the Missouri River in partnership with Astor. At any rate on Oct. 3, 1836, we find Astor notifying Clapp that on the 5th "he shall desire payment . . . of the notes of Mr. Crooks for \$20,000 & of Messrs. J. C. Halsey & Co., for \$20,000 with the interest." Doubtless these payments were to be on account of the price paid Astor for his interest in the old American Fur Company. In other letters Astor objected to certain notes offered by Clapp as security. In the last of these letters, Apr. 4, 1837, Clapp is addressed as "Presdt. pro: tempore Am: Fur Co."

Since 1822, Clapp had apparently been connected principally with the New York end of the fur-trade, but the field of his activities was soon to be changed, for on June 6, 1837, William Brewster, the Company's Detroit agent, wrote: "It is necessary that Crooks and Clapp come West," and on July 11 he announced that he was

³ Chicago Historical Society, a circular to George Boyd from Clapp and Ehninger, New York, 1822.

⁴ Ms., Chicago Historical Society, B. Clapp, N. Y., Sept. 5, 1827, to Robert Stuart, Michilimackinac.

⁵ Ms., Missouri Historical Society, Wilson P. Hunt, St. Louis, Apr. 17, 1828, to Ramsay Crooks.

⁶ This information, and all that which follows, is taken, unless another source is specified, from letters to Benjamin Clapp in Letter Books I and II (1831-38, 1845-48), Astor Papers, Baker Library, Soldiers Fd., Boston.

expecting Clapp. On Feb. 2, 1838, Brewster was enquiring whether there was a place in the Company's employ for Clapp⁷—this of a man who had earlier in the year been president *pro tempore!*—but the situation was not really as strange as it may sound for it is probable that Clapp had decided it would be more profitable for him to obtain a salaried position with the Company than to continue his own fur-business, which we know he had been carrying on at least as late as 1836: doubtless his position as president *pro tempore* while perhaps more honorary than onerous had been even less remunerative than responsible. Apparently Clapp succeeded in finding employment in the fur-trade without difficulty, but with Pratte, Chouteau & Co., rather than with the company which had inherited the title of the Astor organization. At any rate on March 14, 1838, Wilson P. Hunt wrote from St. Louis that he heard Clapp was coming there,⁸ and on March 2, 1841, a letter from Pratte, Chouteau & Co. to the American Fur Company, New York City, was inscribed "per B. Clapp."⁹ Perhaps Crooks, who had a high opinion of Clapp's usefulness as we have seen, had induced his father-in-law, Bernard Pratte to avail himself of Clapp's ability.

Letters from the Astor office, together with the St. Louis directory, reveal that the rest of Clapp's life was spent in St. Louis. In 1842 he appears as "merchant," in 1845, no occupation given, in 1847, "clerk," in 1848, "clerk, American Fur Co.,"¹⁰ in 1851, no occupation specified. No doubt he was through all these years connected in some way with the fur-trade, either in an independent or in a subordinate position. There is a suggestion that during his residence in St. Louis he married a second time, for he and his wife, Jane F., made several transfers of St. Louis property, one to Pierre Chouteau, Jr.; although in previous years Clapp had visited St. Louis, he had not, so far as we know, before 1838 been permanently located in that city. Clapp does not appear in the St. Louis directory after 1851, and doubtless died in the following year.

The above is an arrangement of the few casual items which happen to be in my possession relating to the later life of Benjamin Clapp, Astorian and fur-trader. But in the papers of the American

⁷ Ms., Missouri Historical Society, letters from William Brewster, Detroit, June 6, July 11, 1837, Feb. 2, 1838, to the American Fur Co., New York City.

⁸ *Ibid.*, letters from Wilson P. Hunt, Mar. 4, 1839.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Pratte, Chouteau & Co. per B. Clapp, St. Louis, Mar. 2, 1841, to the American Fur Co., New York City.

¹⁰ The firm which, having its headquarters at St. Louis, had managed the Western Department of the American Fur Co., was often colloquially known, even after the dissolution of the Company in 1834, as the American Fur Co., a title which legally belonged only to the company which had succeeded to the Northern Department of Astor's organization. It is thus probable that in 1848 Clapp was still connected with the St. Louis firm rather than with that which had its headquarters in New York City.

Fur Co., at the New York Historical Society, in fur-trade collections deposited at the Chicago Historical Society, the Missouri Historical Society, and other similar institutions of the midwest, in contemporary directories and newspapers, there is undoubtedly material amply sufficient to enable any student of the fur-trade, who considers the quest worth-while, to give a complete answer to the question: "What became of Benjamin Clapp?"

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