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The Death of Markus Lopus: Fact or Fantasy? First Documented Presence of a Black Man in Oregon August 16, 1788

by
Darrell Millner

The introduction of the American presence in the early Pacific Northwest has traditionally been portrayed as an exclusively Caucasian endeavor. But with the recent emergence of ethnic studies as a legitimate academic discipline and the development of competent scholars from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, the traditional perspectives on this period of exploration have been broadened and revised. One benefit of this new scholarship is the story of the first documented presence of a black man in the area known today as Oregon.¹ Markus Lopus came to and died in Oregon in 1788.

The story of the death of Markus Lopus is part of the larger story of the activities of American explorer Robert Gray on his first expedition to the Oregon coast in 1788 aboard the sloop *Lady Washington*. The primary source of information concerning this episode is preserved in the log kept by Robert Haswell, a 19-year-old officer on that journey.²

Haswell details in his entry of Saturday, August 16, 1788, a landing by seven of the ten crew members in the Tillamook Bay area that culminated in the death of Lopus at the hands of the local inhabitants. Haswell described Lopus as “a young Black man . . . a native of the Cape de Verde Islands. . . .”³ These islands lie off the western coast of Africa, far enough out in the Atlantic to have served as a convenient rest and refitting station for European and American wind-driven vessels throughout the age of exploration. Lopus was not an original member of Gray’s crew when it left Boston but had signed on when Gray stopped in these islands on his way around South America.⁴ His name indicates that his origins most probably lay in the traditions of Spanish or Portuguese new world maritime activities. Blacks were present very early and in significant numbers in those seagoing traditions.



During the fateful landing in the Tillamook Bay several members of the party, including Haswell, dined and visited with the local natives in their village while other crewmen engaged in the harvest of coastal grass to be used on board ship for livestock fodder. Lopus was among the crewmen on this assignment. Lopus carelessly stuck his cutlass in the sand, and when one of the natives carried it off, Lopus followed in hot pursuit to reclaim the weapon, eventually catching and collaring the culprit. When surrounded by other natives, Lopus called out to his fellow crewman for aid. Upon the approach of Haswell and two others in response to his call, Haswell wrote that the natives:

Instantly drenched there knives and spears with savage fuery in the boddy of the unfortunate youth. He quited his hold and stumbled but rose again and stagered towards us but having a flight of arrows thrown into his back and he fell within fifteen yards of me and instantly expired while they mangled his lifeless corse.⁵

Haswell and the other members of his party only narrowly escaped a similar fate, being closely pursued on foot and over water by the natives until they reached the relative safety of the *Lady Washington* at anchor in the bay. From her deck they were able to drive off the natives by the “discharge [of] two or three swivel shot at them.”⁶ This imminent peril to the survivors of the original attack required them to leave the body of Lopus in possession of the natives. The failure to secure Lopus’s body has spawned a continuing controversy that has fre-

quently overshadowed the significance of his role as the first documented black visitor to the Oregon territory and also, unfortunately, the first black man to die there.

Given the failure of traditional historians in earlier generations to understand or acknowledge the contributions of nonwhites in the era of exploration, the Lopus episode has been the victim both of errors in fact and errors in interpretation. A common factual mistake is to attribute the incident to the later Gray expedition that discovered the Columbia River in 1792. The respected western historian William Sherman Savage contributed to this error in an article for the *Journal of Negro History* in 1928.⁷ The most persistent example of the interpretive disfiguration of this episode concerns speculation that Lopus survived the assault and subsequently fathered a well-known native American chief of mixed racial ancestry. The mistake in dates has been easily corrected. The speculation on Lopus's survival lingers on into the current period.

It was not uncharacteristic of the times for the words of a native American to be dismissed when they conflicted with the observations of a respectable Caucasian.

The longevity of the survival thesis resides in the obsessive interest that race held for Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. No other single factor concerning character or quality was as important as race during this period in establishing the role and place of an individual in American life. Early American settlers in Oregon in the 1840s and 1850s were mystified by the "negroid" biological features they observed in some of the native populations they encountered. Kilchis, a prominent Tillamook chief in the pioneer period, impressed white Americans in this way. He was described by contemporaries as a large man with African features that included kinky hair, a flat nose, thick lips, and negro heels.⁸ Over time various explanations were advanced by white Oregonians to explain these features of Kilchis. One popular theory claimed that in the late eighteenth century a ship of unrecorded name wrecked on the Tillamook coast and the crew managed to make it to land.⁹ According to this legend, the local natives, suspicious of whites, killed all the crew except for the black cook who was adopted into the tribe and eventually fathered Kilchis by a native wife.¹⁰

This tale was the generally accepted explanation until June 1930 when Lucy E. Doughty of Bay City, Tillamook County, originated a theory connected to the Lopus episode. Doughty had been requested by

Edgar B. Piper, then editor of the *Oregonian* newspaper, to contribute material to a series on Oregon pioneer history. Doughty included the shipwreck legend in her original submission, but in a subsequent letter to the editor she reversed field and offered a novel new speculation. Having read of the Lopus incident in a serialized piece in the *Oregonian* by Phillip H. Parrish, she was inspired to revise her view of the origin of the negroid features of Chief Kilchis:

After I had read this statement, I, for one, acquitted our Tillamook Bay Indians of the charge of murder. I believe that the terrified sailors saw Lopez [Lopus] struggling in the hands of his captors, bound to the tree and menaced with weapons. Hearing his wild shrieks, they thought he was being killed, and fled to save themselves. I believe he was the Black man of the tradition.¹¹

In this way Lopus was substituted for the black cook of the shipwreck legend. Obviously, Parrish had departed significantly from Haswell's account of the incident in his newspaper article that so influenced Doughty. Haswell was, of course, an eyewitness; Parrish was separated from the event by over 100 years. However, Doughty's inspiration, reflecting as unkindly as it did on the character and reputation of Haswell and Gray's crew and based on no foundation other than her own speculation, gained increasing acceptance over time through repetition and because it seemed to supply so neatly a "reasonable" resolution to a long-standing sensitive scholarly question in the context of the racial climate of the 1930s. The survival theory thus entered local lore. When later researchers tapped local knowledge it was there for their consumption and thus found its way—sometimes as rumor, sometimes as fact—into the mainstream historical treatment of the area. For example, Captain Francis Cross, when doing re-

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search for the work *Sea Venture: Captain Gray's Voyages of Discovery 1787-1793*, included the following reference regarding the Lopus incident, which had been transmitted to him by citizens of Tillamook, Oregon:

The report of [the sloop *Lady*] *Washington's* "black boy" has not been confirmed. The written statement by chronicler Haswell, which

concludes that the boy had apparently been killed by the Tillamooks, is not accepted by the descendants of white pioneers in the Tillamook Bay area. They declare that the officer's report is in error; That the boy was not killed. They insist, with good reason, that owing to the prompt retreat of the white men from the scene of violence, it was impossible for them to know if the "black boy" had been killed or if he had lived.

This denial by today's citizens of Tillamook of the death of *Washington's* "black boy" has been handed down through several generations. The descendants, moreover, refer to the fact that, before the turn of the present century, a Tillamook Indian chief had physical characteristics that were unquestionably negroid.¹²

Doughty's inspiration has thus provided "good reason" for this liberty with Haswell's original account to become incorporated into academic considerations of the expedition. As late as 1987 serious scholars continued to seek to confirm or refute this ill-born hypothesis.¹³ A rebuttal to Doughty's claims submitted in a letter to the *Oregonian* editor by a direct descendant of Kilchis, Ellen Center, soon after Doughty's original letter seems to have had little effect in squelching the creative and unfounded conclusions reached by Doughty.¹⁴ Center stated in part:

It may be very interesting for her and others to know that Kilchis has a granddaughter living at this time who can give all information necessary in his history to prove that he is not of negro descent. I am his granddaughter and can tell you anything you may want to know about the tribe. . . .¹⁵

It was not uncharacteristic of the times for the words of a native American to be dismissed when they conflicted with the observations of a respectable Caucasian.

Today there is no reason to grant merit to the survival theory regarding the Lopus episode. If it is still necessary to explain the alleged negroid features of some Pacific Northwest Indians in the pioneer period, several more likely sources suggest themselves. While traditional scholarship assumed the absence of a multiracial maritime frontier between 1785 and 1795 and wrote the history of the period to reflect this presumption, there are dissenting voices that reached opposite and more reliable conclusions. One such voice was that of George I. Quimby, who wrote in the *American Anthropologist* in 1948 that "Non-European peoples were significant minorities among the personnel of trading and exploring ships on the Northwest coast during this period [1785 to 1795]."¹⁶ In addition to many well-documented ref-

erences to Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Hawaiian crewmen on the ships of this era, Quimby cites in a section on "Negroes on the Northwest Coast" the examples of a black deserter from a Spanish vessel in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the presence of a "crew of 22 men, mostly Joloano negroes" who worked the British brigantine *Venus* on the northwest coast in 1792.¹⁷

Beyond these representative blacks in the maritime experience, several other possible biological sources exist. The arrival of significant numbers of white American settlers into the Oregon territory in the pioneer period did not occur until the 1840s and after. This is very late in the story of interracial mis-

It is well-documented that blacks played an active role in the prepioneer exploring and fur trading era in the early nineteenth century.

cegenation between native Americans and blacks in the east and midwest of both Canada and the United States, as well as in Spanish America. Blacks were a significant presence in Spanish new world activities from the early 1500s on.¹⁸ Given the proximity of the Spanish presence in California and the prominence of Spanish coastal activity prior to 1800, this source cannot be lightly dismissed. Additionally, it is well-documented that blacks played an active role in the prepioneer exploring and fur trading era in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹ The introduction of negroid biological features through overland infusions from the French, British, or American fur trading and exploring activities prior to the 1840s is distinctly possible. Returning to maritime possibilities, the infusion of South Pacific negroid features through accidental arrival (i.e., storm driven ships) or purposeful exploratory voyages into the Pacific Northwest by islanders in earlier periods is also worth consideration. The physical appearance of many South Pacific islanders, i.e., New Guinea, Fiji, etc., remains very negroid even today. Reality suggests at this late date that specific verifiable knowledge of the sources of any negroid biological strain in the native populations of the Pacific Northwest in the prepioneer period will remain inaccessible and speculative for modern scholarship.

All things considered, it is advisable to grant to Haswell and Gray's crewmen the decent and generous portion of courage that the survival theory strips away on the flimsiest foundation of individual speculation. It is also timely and proper to accord Markus Lopus the full measure of merit and recognition he deserves as a valuable member of Gray's crew and the first documented black person to reach the Oregon territory. It is a distinction he purchased with the price of his life.

Endnotes

¹Future scholarship may force Lopus to relinquish his claim to being the first documented black in the Oregon area. This will depend upon the outcome of the controversy regarding whether Francis Drake visited Oregon in 1579 during his global circumnavigation. Bob Ward of Westcliff on Sea, Essex, England, maintains that Drake sojourned at Whale Cove, south of Depoe Bay, Oregon (see *Oregonian* April 1, 1987, P-B11). If Ward's thesis proves to be true, the title of the first documented black in Oregon will rightfully fall to the black members of Drake's crew. The unpublished research of Professor Kenneth Holmes (retired) of Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, Oregon, confirms that Drake had with him at least two black males and one black female when he visited the Pacific North American coast. Excellent reference works that reveal the intimate involvement of blacks in Drake's new world activities include: *New Light on Drake*, by Zelia Nattal, London, 1914, Hakluyt Society, Second Series, No. 34; and *The Sea Dogs Privateers, Plunder and Piracy in The Elizabethan Age*, by Neville Williams, New York, 1975, MacMillian Publishing Company, Inc.

²Elliott, T. C. (Ed.). (1928, January-March). Haswell's Log of Sloop Washington, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 29 (2), 174-177.

³Elliott. (1928). Haswell's Log. P. 175.

⁴Nokes, R. (1988, January 13). Accounts of First Black in Oregon Shaded by History. *Oregonian*, p. B9.

⁵Elliott. (1928). Haswell's Log. Pp. 175-176.

⁶Elliott. (1928). Haswell's Log. P. 176.

⁷Savage, W. S. (1928, July). The Negro in the History of the Pacific Northwest. *Journal of Negro History*, 13 (3), 255.

⁸This description of Kilchis is originally found in the diary of Warren Vaughn, an early resident of Tillamook County, in describing his trip to Tillamook County in December 1852, as recorded by Fred Lockley of the *Oregon Journal* newspaper (September 6, 1938). Archie Maree Henderson, in an unpublished master's thesis for the University of Washington (1949) titled "Introduction of the Negroes Into the Pacific Northwest 1788-1842" (p. 7) also cites Vaughn as the source of this description of Kilchis, as does Lucy E. Doughty, in her letter to the editor of the *Oregonian*, June 26, 1930, p. 8, C5-6.

⁹Various versions of this story exist. Dick Pintarick in his article "Even Black Cowboys Get the Blues," (*Oregon Times*, July, 1978, p. 26),

gives another version. He recounts the Indian legend of a "Beeswax Ship" that wrecked on Nehalem Beach in the later eighteenth century and introduced a black survivor into the Tillamook tribe who eventually fathered Kilchis. He also indicates that if such a ship existed it was probably the Manila galleon *San Francisco Xavier*.

¹⁰Doughty, L. E. (1930, June 16). Letter to the editor: Tillamook Legend Argued Captain Gray's Negro Held to Have Married Into Tribe. *Oregonian*, p. 8, C5-6.

¹¹Doughty. (1930). Letter to the editor. P. 8, C6.

¹²Cross, F. E., & Parkin, Jr., C. M. (1981). *Sea Venture: Captain Gray's Voyages of Discovery 1787-1793*, St. Petersburg, FL: Valkyrie Publishing House. P. 73.

¹³While researching a book on the Gray expedition Richard Nokes, retired editor of the *Oregonian*, wrote the following to the author on May 22, 1987:

I do wonder, though, if you have any knowledge of the rumor published in the book *Sea Venture* by Cross and Parkin that Lopus did not die but lived on with the natives. His footnote explains that this information was transmitted to the author by citizens of Tillamook, Oregon.

¹⁴Center, E. (1930, August 5). Letter to the editor: The Tillamook Indian. *Oregonian*, p. 8, C7.

¹⁵Center. (1930). Letter to the editor. P. 8, C7.

¹⁶Quimby, G. I. (1948). Culture Contact on the Northwest Coast 1785-1795. *American Anthropologist*, 248.

¹⁷Quimby. (1948). Culture Contact. P. 253.

¹⁸For information on blacks in the early Spanish new world experience, including the decision to begin the large scale importation of African slaves, see *History of the Indies*, by B. de las Casas. A good translation is by A. Collard, Harper Torch Books, Harper & Row, New York, 1971.

¹⁹See Katz, W. L. (1973). *The Black West*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

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