

RHODA E. A. HACKLER

Commodore John Paty: Merchant Mariner

IN THE MIDDLE of the 19th century, Captain John Paty commanded ships plying between the West Coast of the United States and the Kingdom of Hawai'i. He brought new people to the Islands, started old-timers on their journey back to their homeland, and carried cargo of all sorts. After 168 crossings, in command of the *Don Quixote*, the *Frances Palmer*, the *Yankee*, the *Speedwell*, the *Young Hector*, and the *Comet*, Paty could assert with pride that he never lost a passenger or a seaman, never lost a ship, and never had a serious accident at sea, although he did admit that from time to time an additional passenger was added at sea.

John Paty was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on the anniversary of George Washington's birthday, February 22, 1807. His father was a seaman who turned to school teaching but died when John was seven. His mother came of a seafaring family, but she too died at an early age, when he was 11. He was then taken in by his grandfather, whom he later admitted he both loved and feared.¹

At 15 John went to sea with his uncle, Captain Ephraim Paty, and quickly learned the rigors of life aboard ship, for his relative showed him no favors. Looking back on his early days at sea, John recalled, "... when I got on board ship with a hard old shellback, I found the contrast [to his comfortable home in Plymouth] very great, and my

Rhoda E. A. Hackler graduated with a Ph.D. in History from the University of Hawai'i Mānoa in 1978, where she lectured on the history of the Hawaiian Islands and the United States in the Pacific. She is a life member of the Hawaiian Historical Society, was its president from 1977 to 1979, and is a frequent contributor to The Hawaiian Journal of History.

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feelings were such at times, as to induce me to commit almost any deed of violence for the sake of revenge. At other times I wished that I had never been born."²

Nevertheless, the young man seemed to thrive on the rigorous life at sea and to have made the traditional maritime leap from the cradle to the shrouds with relative ease. Six years later he was captain of the *Edward* trading in the Mediterranean, and by 1831, when he brought the *Mayflower* home to Plymouth, he was well enough situated financially to marry his childhood sweetheart, Mary Ann Jefferson of



Commodore John Paty. Reprinted from "Journal of Captain John Paty, 1807-1868," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Dec. 1935.

Salem, Massachusetts, and settle down in Plymouth. He and Mary Ann had first met in 1828, when she was only 15 and he was "about 22." Twenty-five years later John wrote his wife "... and now you are 39; why you look as pretty now as you did then, and if possible I love you better."³

They made their home in Plymouth, but just two years later John's younger brother Henry returned from the Sandwich Islands. He persuaded John to buy a part interest in the brig *Avon* and sail in it to Hawai'i. Another brother, William, and John's wife, Mary Ann, made



Mary Ann Jefferson Paty. Reprinted from "Journal of Captain John Paty, 1807-1868," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Dec. 1935.

up the family party. They had a close call in the Straits of Magellan where they were almost captured by "Indians," but reached Honolulu safely after six months at sea.

From then on John Paty's life was in the Pacific, with Honolulu his home port. He and his brother William settled on what became Paty Drive in upper Mānoa. Since then the Paty family has been prominent in the Islands.⁴

John Paty first captained trading vessels. To assist him in this endeavor, in 1846 King Kamehameha III commissioned him as Hawaiian Consul and Naval Commandant for the Northwest Coast with the rank of commodore, a position that was recognized by the Mexican authorities and enhanced his prestige on the coast, where two years later he is listed on the maritime records as trading in the *Mary Frances* sailing between Mexico and Honolulu.⁵

In 1853, when Captain Paty was engaged in a trading venture to the Philippines in the brig *Baltimore*, he began a series of letters to his wife, which have fortunately survived and form the basis for this article. Paty left Honolulu at the end of January and returned at the end of May. During the voyage he wrote not only many letters to Mary Ann, which he kept for her to read upon his return to Honolulu, but also a journal of his life. Regarding his project, he urged her to do likewise as he believed "... that it is really a parent's duty to convey all possible information to their children which may be of benefit." So, write he did, throughout the voyage, for the benefit of his son John H. and daughters Fanny and Theodora, and also to occupy many calm days and nights at sea.⁶

Throughout the voyage Paty frequently expressed his thoughts on religion. In Honolulu he attended the Reverend Samuel C. Damon's Bethel Church; while at sea he read his Bible, but not without serious questions.

I would much sooner have my children infidels than bigoted in favor of any particular religious sect. Give them the Bible and all other decent books to read, and let them judge of religious matters themselves. I have no fear of them losing their souls, providing they treat their God and fellow creatures as they would be treated.⁷

The *Baltimore* reached Manila on February 8. Paty immediately moved to a hotel and began the process of acquiring a cargo for

Honolulu. He found the company at the hostelry very congenial, for there were a number of fellow captains from New England already there, some with their wives and children, and the principal trading firms were operated by gentlemen from Massachusetts.⁸

In Manila, he was delighted to be able to put his scanty acquaintance with Spanish to good use. He reported to Mary Ann that even his small knowledge of the language was of great help in his own trading, and that he was also sought after by the ladies from New England who coveted his assistance in their own shopping.⁹ Paty thoroughly enjoyed his visit to Manila for:

I never found an idle hour during my stay here, and I believe I have made myself a general favorite: all the ladies, the American Consul, Messrs. Rupil & Sturgis [of Russell & Sturgis, a trading house], the house of Peel, Hubbell & Co. have all paid me much respect, and treated me with great kindness.¹⁰

Although he was unable to get a full cargo, Paty sailed from Manila on March 22 with what he calculated were enough goods to produce a good profit in Honolulu.¹¹ Heading east the *Baltimore* ran into severe gales off the Loo Choo Islands, and as the weather continued to be rough he decided to put into Port Lloyd in the Bonin Islands. His ship was leaking very badly, and though the damage was all above water he feared the cargo would be damaged. During his layover in the Bonins he was able to fill his water tanks, stop all the leaks, and purchase turtles, pigs, ducks, and chickens for the ship's kitchen and two monkeys, two cats, and five dogs for his own pleasure.¹²

After a month of sailing homeward, Paty still looked back on his Manila venture with enthusiasm. He wrote Mary Ann that he was not discouraged by his small cargo and bad weather. "I want to make one more voyage to Manila in a little larger vessel and with [a] little more capital. I do believe that I can make a good voyage and want you to go with me."¹³

On numerous occasions, Paty mentioned sighting schools of whales.

I dropped a long note in a bottle at noon, and as I saw sperm whales 4 times about 6 P.M. I dropped another. I have seen sperm whales 4 times during the last 12 days, and have always dropped a bottle with a

note in it stating where seen and which way they seemed to be going, as some whaler may derive some benefit by picking up one of my notes. I have dropped about two notes a week on my passage to Manila, and so far on my passage back. You must not think that I emptied all the bottles. I found a large number on board reserved for the use I make of them.¹⁴

During this voyage Paty occasionally burst into romantic poetry:

How dear to this heart are my friends in the valley,
When fond recollections presents them to view,
My Fanny, my Johnny and Theodora surely,
But above all the others, my better half,—you.¹⁵

In addition to his trading ventures, in 1857 King Kamehameha IV asked Paty to take the *Manuokawai* on a voyage of exploration, in the course of which he took possession of Laysan and Lysiansky Islands for the Hawaiian Kingdom. He also investigated the possibility of guano deposits on Nihoa, Necker, and Gardener's Islands, and took possession of the latter two for the Kingdom. Guano was needed as fertilizer for the rapidly growing agricultural economy in the Hawaiian Islands. He also established the non-existence of many islands that had long appeared on old charts. This mission took 50 days, and while correcting existent charts was of great service to seafarers in the Pacific, it appears from Paty's journal not to have been a very exciting assignment. ". . . a considerable portion of my time has been consumed by calms and looking for banks and islands which do not exist, or are erroneously marked . . ." ¹⁶

But the greatest contribution John Paty made to the Hawaiian Islands community was as master of passenger vessels sailing between Honolulu and the West Coast of North America. Between 1837 and 1852 he made 29 trips; but in the succeeding 15 years he completed an amazing 139 passages. When he completed his 100th voyage his fellow captains welcomed him home safely once again, this time with a thirteen-gun salute. They presented him with a commodore's broad pennant of blue silk, with the figure 100, encircled by ten white stars representing the ten Hawaiian Islands, and with a chronometer; tokens of the community's appreciation of his years of reliable service.¹⁷

In 1860, Lady Jane Franklin, an inveterate traveler and the widow of the British Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin, sailed with Captain John Paty from California to Hawai'i aboard the *Yankee*. In *The Victorian Visitors*, Alfons Korn, using short quotations from Lady Franklin's *Journal* concerning the voyage, explained that shortly after Lady Franklin and her companion boarded the *Yankee* they had a difference of opinion with a fellow passenger about the use of the main cabin, which Lady Franklin considered was for her exclusive use. Captain Paty was called upon to settle the matter in the British ladies' favor. Korn continued:

Though its social atmosphere was perhaps less than ideal, the *Yankee* was not without its compensating virtues. Lady Franklin approved especially of an innovation of Captain Paty's, his 'very agreeable plan of affixing a tabular sheet on the wall between the two forward doors of the saloon,' whereby the interested passenger might inform himself miscellaneously about such matters as the daily progress of the ship, the direction of winds, and the number of miles from Honolulu. 'This plan,' adds Lady Franklin, who apparently had never encountered a similar information service elsewhere during her many travels, 'saves a vast number of questions and answers.'¹⁸

During the closing portion of the voyage, Lady Franklin and her niece spent the greater part of their waking hours in the open air. The deck was always clean, there were 'plenty of deep-seated bamboo arm-chairs easily moved,' and, while the *Yankee* proceeded at her regular speed of 11 knots, . . . [Lady Franklin] 'sat snugly in the larboard quarter looking out to sea on a level with the man at the wheel.'¹⁹

John Paty continued to ply the Pacific until four months before his death from cancer, on November 11, 1868. He was very proud that he never lost a ship in all his years at sea, never met with a serious accident, or lost a man or passenger on any crossing. His reputation for reliable, safe transportation between Hawai'i and the West Coast was an enviable one, and he set a standard for all the captains who followed in his wake.

NOTES

¹ Letters from John Paty to his wife, Mary Ann during a trading voyage from Honolulu to Manila in 1853, preserved in a typescript copy that begins on Jan.

- 25, 1853 and ends on May 22, 1853. Hawaiian Historical Society Library, Honolulu. Hereafter: Letters.
- ² PCA, Nov. 14, 1868, p.2, c.4
- ³ Letters, Feb. 3, 1853.
- ⁴ "The Journal of Captain John Paty, 1807-1868," covering his life to 1850, was printed in the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 14 (December 1935): 291-346. The original manuscript was then in the possession of his granddaughter Mrs. Edward Craft Green. The portion of Captain Paty's journal in this article came from the same source but was not included in the previously printed material.
- ⁵ Letters, May 15, 1853.
- ⁶ Letters, January 25, 1853.
- ⁷ Letters, Jan. 30, 1853.
- ⁸ Letters, Feb. 13, 1853.
- ⁹ Letters, Feb. 22, 1853.
- ¹⁰ Letters, March 23, 1853.
- ¹¹ Letters, Mar. 23 and April 7, 1853.
- ¹² Letters, Mar. 23, April 7 to 23, 1853.
- ¹³ Letters, April 23, 1853.
- ¹⁴ Letters, April 22 & May 2, 1853.
- ¹⁵ Letters, April 25, 1853.
- ¹⁶ Journal of Captain John Paty, Schooner *Manuokwai*, 1857, Interior Dept. Files (Land), AH.
- ¹⁷ P 24 Nov. 1860.
- ¹⁸ Alfons Korn, *The Victorian Visitors*, (Honolulu: U Hawai'i P 1958) 24. Excerpts from Lady Franklin's *Journal* in single quotes.
- ¹⁹ Korn 25, same punctuation.