

The Voice of Commerce

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On September 19, 1820, John Coffin Jones Jr. was appointed United States Agent for Commerce and Seamen at the Sandwich Islands. Why did he accept the post? Possibly because he was already agent for the prosperous firm of Marshall and Wildes of Boston at the Sandwich Islands, and by accepting the additional responsibility from his country, the firm and he, himself, might hope that through his reports to Washington the voice of commerce in the Pacific would be heard more clearly by the United States Government.

John Coffin Jones Jr. was a son of New England. His father was a prominent Boston businessman and politician, who had served as speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1802 when John Quincy Adams was a member of the State Senate.¹ Young Jones was baptised on June 26, 1796, by the minister of the Brattle Street Church in Boston,² and seems to have gone to sea at an early age. When he acknowledged his commission as Agent for Commerce and Seamen to the then Secretary of State, his father's former legislative colleague, John Quincy Adams, he mentioned two previous voyages he had made to Canton and an extended visit to the Sandwich Islands,³ and J. J. Jarves in his *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands*, includes an illustration of a small oil painting of Kamehameha I which was presented to the Boston Athenaeum by John C. Jones, Jr. in 1818.⁴

In April of 1821, Jones reached Honolulu⁵ and settled down as U.S. Agent for Commerce and Seamen and as agent for Marshall and Wildes. He conducted the business of both his agencies from a two-story frame building near the Honolulu waterfront, a building which Charles Stewart in 1823 identified as "the American Consulate".⁶ He lived in a house located on Fort Street,⁷ and by 1829 had a "country seat on the plain towards Manoa."⁸ He had at least two families. In 1826 he "married" Hannah Holmes,⁹ daughter of a New England sea captain, Oliver Holmes, and his Hawaiian wife (the widow of Capt. William Heath Davis, a prominent sandalwood trader in Honolulu). Jones and Hannah had one daughter, Elizabeth.¹⁰ He also formed an alliance with Lahilahi, daughter of Don Francisco de Paula Marin, a Spaniard, and his

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Hawaiian wife, and fathered three children, Francis C., Rosalie C., and John C. Jones Jr.¹¹ However, neither of these unions was blessed by Christian clergy, and Jones does not seem to have considered himself actually married to either of the ladies. Richard Brinsley Hinds, who visited Honolulu in 1837 as a surgeon aboard HBMS *Sulphur*, noted in his *Journal* on July 19th, that during a party aboard the British ship the French Commander, M. Petit Thouars, and some of his officers “. . . were invited to meet the English and American consuls, and the ladies of the former.”¹² However, in December, 1838, Jones returned from one of his periodic business trips to California with a Spanish lady whom he introduced to Honolulu as his wife.¹³ This apparently enraged Hannah Holmes Jones, who promptly petitioned the Hawaiian Government for a divorce on grounds of bigamy. The charge was upheld by the King and led to his writing Jones on January 8, 1839, that “. . . I refuse any longer to know you as consul from the United States of America.”¹⁴ However, Jones appears to have provided for his families as he saw fit. He supported the establishment of the secular Oahu Charity School in January, 1833, for children of foreign and mixed parentage, served as a trustee,¹⁵ provided a bell for the school’s cupola,¹⁶ and even after his marriage to the Spanish lady, served as Chairman of the Committee of trustees and subscribers of the School in 1839.¹⁷

As United States Agent for Seamen at Honolulu, Jones had a burdensome responsibility. In his first report to the Secretary of State on December 31, 1821, Jones complained of the commanders of American ships who were in the habit of discharging troublesome seamen at Honolulu and taking on Hawaiian hands. This practice deprived Hawaii of good men and left Jones with some rather undesirable ones.¹⁸ In addition, there were deserters to cope with, and in 1826, when the USS *Dolphin* arrived in Honolulu, Jones reported to the Department of State that her commander, Lt. Percival, “. . . has been enabled to establish many wholesome regulations at these Islands for the security of good order and the protection of Americans and their property,”¹⁹ and that the presence of the Navy was particularly effective in preventing desertions. Again, in November of 1826, Jones was helped by the Navy, this time by Captain Thomas Ap Catesby Jones of the USS *Peacock*. Soldiers of the Hawaiian Government rounded up all sailors found in Honolulu and took them to the American Consulate, where they were interrogated by Captain Jones, Governor Boki of Oahu, Consul Jones, British Consul General Richard Charlton and Mr. Mareno (Don Marin), who served as interpreter. If a man was not vouched for by one of the officials present, he was given the choice of shipping in the USS *Peacock* or in one of the whalers presently in Honolulu harbor.²⁰ But this was a continuing problem in Honolulu, as Jones pointed out to the Department of State the following year: conditions aboard the whalers made their seamen “. . . ready to engage in any outrage that they imagine might improve their condition or free them from their bonds.” He wrote that the only solution was the posting of a U.S. naval vessel at Honolulu, at least during the periods between March and May, and October and December, when the whalers gathered at the port.²¹

Sometimes the deserters took one of their ship's boats with them when they escaped. One of the first letters from Jones to the Governor of Owhyhee (Hawaii), John Adams, warned him of the desertion of an officer and five men from the Ship *Foster* of Nantucket, and the suspicion that the men and the boat had gone to his island. "Should the people make any resistance in the delivery of the boat, you are authorised to use any force to take her from the scoundrels who stole her . . . and you are hereby warned not to harbour, employ or trust any of the men mentioned as they will in due time be taken prisoners to the United States, where death may be their position."²² Rather strong language from an American Commercial Agent to the Governor of Hawaii, but then Jones' correspondence does not reveal him to be a temperate man.

Many seamen were put ashore because of illness, and they became the special concern of Jones. This was a responsibility and an expense. In 1825 he explained his disbursements at Honolulu on behalf of seamen as being very heavy, as many men were put ashore without funds, and that in addition, in 1822-23 the crews of three wrecked American vessels were brought to the islands.²³ In 1834 the situation was still difficult. In the first place, there was the question of what amount of money was due a seaman discharged in Honolulu from a whaler. "The crews of ships in the whaling business are always shipped on a lay to receive a stipulated proportion of the quality of oil obtained and brought home, and therefore the masters of these vessels conceive there can be no claim for any extra pay to such seamen discharged in a foreign port. I have ever made it a practice however to demand in all such discharges three months extra pay at the usual seamen's wages in merchant vessels from this port."²⁴ This practice was not calculated to endear the US Agent to the whalers' captains but was certainly in the interests of the seamen. Jones went on to explain to the Department that "The number of seamen annually discharged at this port from American whale ships is very large and their maintenance very expensive, as they are generally disabled men, either by sickness or injured by the many casualties to which the seamen on a whaling voyage are exposed."²⁵

Caring for the sick ashore was difficult, for there was no hospital in Honolulu, and for a time the Commercial Agent maintained a separate house at Waikiki for the men.²⁶ When they recovered, he often had trouble getting them passage back to the United States, as we learn from a letter written by Jones in September of 1828 to the Secretary of State complaining of a Captain Charles P. Swain of the American Ship *Fortune* of Plymouth who refused to take a destitute seamen with him, even after he had been offered \$10.00 passage money.²⁷ And trying to keep track of all these transients was too much, although Jones was helped to some extent when a local newspaper was finally started in 1836, in which he could advertise for news of "Thomas B. Greene" whose mother wanted word of him.²⁸ It seems clear that being the US Agent for Seamen was not a sinecure. While Jones was in New England in 1824 he left his co-agent at Marshall and Wildes, Thomas Crocker of Boston, as Acting Commercial Agent.²⁹ When Crocker was obliged to return to Boston

himself at the end of 1825, he reported to the Department, "On my departure from the Islands I did not leave any agent as there was no resident who would accept it was respectable and responsible owing to the very frequent and troublesome calls upon him, and being a place destitute of all law as regards the whites, . . ." ³⁰ These problems did not deter Jones, however. He returned to the Sandwich Islands in early 1826, with the renewed blessing of the Department of State, which was untroubled by the post's being temporarily vacant, but worried about a lack of vouchers for Jones' expenses. ³¹

Meanwhile, Jones had a living to make for himself and his establishment. Marshall and Wildes, the Boston firm for which he was agent, was one of four American mercantile houses mentioned by Charles Stewart as being in business in Honolulu in 1823. ³² When Jones arrived in 1821 the sandalwood trade with China was still thriving. King Kamehameha I had controlled, or monopolized, the cutting and exporting of sandalwood during his reign, but after his death in 1819, Kamehameha II was unable to enforce the conservation policies of his father, and unrestricted cutting of sandalwood soon threatened to deplete the hillsides of this rare wood. But, while the wood lasted, and the market held up in Canton, the American merchants in Honolulu competed fiercely with each other for the valuable cargoes, and pressed on the Hawaiians all sorts of goods which were to be paid for in sandalwood. Among the letters from Jones to Marshall and Wildes in Boston which are quoted by Morison ³³ are suggestions for cargoes which would sell in the Islands, including cloth, muskets, spirits, fancy articles, ships and billiard tables. ³⁴ Marshall and Wildes even sent out two frame houses, one of which the King bought. ³⁵ In 1821, Jones reported to the Department that 30,000 piculs of sandalwood were sent to China in American ships that year, and estimated that the price for this wood in Canton should be about \$300,000. ³⁶ The Hawaiian chiefs were becoming increasingly indebted to the American merchants in Honolulu (the Archives of Hawaii files contain a number of notes given by Boki to Marshall and Wildes ³⁷), and payment was slow in coming. The question of the settlement of such debts was brought up by Lt. Percival of the USS *Dolphin* when he visited Honolulu and called on the Hawaiian chiefs in 1826, and according to Jones' report to the Department, "All debts due to American citizens from these people have been in Council acknowledged to be public debts and assurance given of their speedy adjustment." ³⁸ Thereafter some payment was made to the traders, but in the Archives of Hawaii there is a note of indebtedness dated November 2, 1829, from the King, Regents and Chiefs to Messrs. Jones and Meek for 4,700 piculs of sandalwood which was finally marked settled on August 1, 1843. ³⁹ Jones must have been sorely tried, for in addition to the reluctance of the Hawaiians to pay their debts, he suspected that they were being encouraged to put their resources to other purposes. In an intemperate letter to High Chief Hoapili-Kane of Lahaina, Jones on December 29, 1829, demanded the payment of a debt, ending with the comment that ". . . if you can procure funds to build a church, you can also procure them to pay your honest debts, the want of ability will not be admitted, and I insist on having my pay." ⁴⁰

In addition to the trade in sandalwood to Canton, and the provisioning of whalers stopping in the Islands, generally at Honolulu and Lahaina, for supplies and recreation, there were a certain number of ships sailing from Hawaii to the Pacific Northwest Coast. But trade with the Indians there for sea otter skins was greatly inhibited when in September of 1821 the Emperor of Russia closed the coast to non-Russian vessels. The edict began to be put into effect in 1822, and Jones reported to the Department that the American Brig *Pearl* of Boston was not only ordered out of Sitka, but was boarded by the men of a Russian frigate off the coast.⁴¹ In 1823, he reported that he had been informed that four Russian armed vessels were cruising the coast, “. . . with a view of preventing that lucrative trade which Americans have for so many years uninterruptedly pursued.”⁴² The Treaty of 1824 with Russia eased the restrictions on American trade along the coast, but when the treaty terms expired ten years later, Baron Wrangell, Governor of the Russian American Colonies and Post Captain in the Navy of H.I.M. of Russia warned American captains that “. . . the right of visit in the Straits, Harbours (sic) ports and sounds within the territory of Russia, that is today; northward of 54° 40' latitude, to vessels or ships belonging to the United States, has now finished, . . .”,⁴³ and in 1836 the Captain of the Brig *Loriot* protested to Jones that Russian naval vessels were patrolling the North West Coast of America and preventing trade.⁴⁴

The *Loriot* may have been a “trouble ship,” however, for back in September of 1833 she had been seized and detained in San Francisco by officials of the Mexican Government, and her Master and Supercargo both lodged strong protests to the United States Government through Jones.⁴⁵ Jones himself was very concerned with trade with California. He visited there frequently and in 1837 warned the Department of State of trouble among the residents of Alta California who were rising in revolt, from San Francisco to San Diego, declaring their independence and expelling the Mexican officials.⁴⁶ In a later despatch to the Department Jones explained that the rebelling Californians had asked for help from the Russians at Fort Ross, and he feared that if such aid were given, the consequences would be grave for American interests in California. The Russian settlement had been gradually moving south toward the San Francisco River, and one of the conditions attached by the Russians to their aid to the Californians was the extension of Russian lands to the San Francisco River and navigation rights on those waters. Further, Jones warned that having achieved that, the Russians would work northward to the Columbia River, and thus control much rich land and a good harbor.⁴⁷

Jones' despatches to the Department of State seem to cover every aspect of trade concerning Hawaii and draw a picture of the situation Americans met in the Pacific area. He appears to have been a perceptive reporter and by that gauge a good Agent for United States Commerce.

When Charles Stewart first came to the Sandwich Islands in 1823 he described being welcomed by “Tameha-maru, the favourite queen of Riho-Riho,” who took the arm of the American Consul, Mr. Jones, and with him showed the newcomers where to land,⁴⁸ and at the funeral of “Queen Keopulani in

Lahaina" the procession of foreigners was led by Mr. Jones, who had come over from Honolulu for the occasion.⁴⁹ But by 1829, when Stewart returned to Honolulu aboard the USS *Vincennes*, Jones seemed to have fallen out of favor with the Hawaiian rulers. At that time the King and the principal chiefs addressed a protest to Captain Finch of the USS *Vincennes*, accusing Jones of maltreating a native and lying about royal morals.⁵⁰ Captain Finch was unwilling to take sides in the dispute and urged the King and his Chiefs and the Americans to ". . . exercise forbearance towards each other."⁵¹

The years passed, and it is difficult to find out what Jones' relations were with the local authorities. Certainly they did not approve of, but probably understood, his womanizing; they cannot have been happy about his pressing them for debts owed him and his firm; and as converts to the Congregational Church, they may have resented his opposition to their missionaries. But Jones supported his mistresses and children, saw that a school was established for the education of the youngsters, and left them eventually with ample means.⁵² It was his duty as a businessman and agent for a reputable firm to try to obtain payment of all debts due the company. As for relations with the missionaries, they were complicated by his suspicions that the missionaries were working against him⁵³ and the fact that, although he himself was not a Catholic,⁵⁴ at least one of his mistresses, Lahilahi, was.⁵⁵ "Forbearance" does seem to have been exercised as Captain Finch suggested, for Jones continued to serve in Honolulu as United States Agent for Commerce and Seamen until April of 1839⁵⁶ and maintained his business and resided in the islands until 1844, when he sailed for California,⁵⁷ apparently for the last time.⁵⁸

John Coffin Jones, Jr. spent nineteen years as United States Agent for Commerce and Seamen in the Sandwich or Hawaiian Islands. There seems to be ample evidence that during those years he devoted much of his energy to aiding seamen ashore in Honolulu and to reporting to his government developments in the commerce of the Islands and of the Pacific, as he saw them. If he often urged the government to despatch an American man-of-war to the islands, its presence rendered a service to all commerce, not just to the firm of Marshall and Wildes. When he gave the United States government facts about the sandalwood trade, explained the problem of debts due from the Hawaiians, and warned of Russian moves on the Pacific coast and revolts in California, his reports provided information which might be needed in the formulation of American policy.

I suggest that during his tenure in Honolulu as United States Agent for Commerce and Seamen, John Coffin Jones, Jr. did what his government asked him to do as its agent and at the same time provided American commerce in Hawaii and the Pacific with a voice which could be heard in Washington.

NOTES

- ¹ H. W. Bradley, *The American Frontier in Hawaii* (Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1942), p. 90n.
- ² J. M. Callahan, *Johns Hopkins Studies XIX*, 39n, quoted in footnote by S. E. Morison, "Boston Traders in Hawaiian Islands, 1789-1823," *The Washington Historical Quarterly*, XII, No. 3 (July 1921), p. 177.
- ³ Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Honolulu, 1820-1903 (Microfilm-National Archives) Oct. 2, 1820.
- ⁴ J. J. Jarves, *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands* (London: Edward Moxon, 1843), p. 206.
- ⁵ Consular Despatches, Dec. 31, 1821.
- ⁶ C. S. Stewart, *Journal of a Residence in the Sandwich Islands during the Years 1823, 24, 25* (London: H. Fisher Son and Jackson, 1828), p. 92 and p. 311.
- ⁷ R. J. Baker, *Sketches and Maps of Old Honolulu* (Honolulu, 1950) Plate No. 10.
- ⁸ C. S. Stewart, *A Visit to the South Seas in the U.S. Ship Vincennes, during the years 1829-1830* (New York: John P. Haven, 1831), II, p. 141.
- ⁹ FO & Ex, Dec. 20, 1843.
- ¹⁰ Marin Genealogy, AH.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, and Journal of Stephen Reynolds, August 6, 1827.
- ¹² R. B. Hinds, "The Sandwich Islands," from his *Journal of the Voyage of the 'Sulphur'*, Transcribed and edited by E. Alison Kay, *The Hawaiian Journal of History*, Vol. 2, 1968, p. 110.
- ¹³ SIG, Dec. 8, 1838.
- ¹⁴ FO & Ex., Jan. 8, 1839.
- ¹⁵ Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 304.
- ¹⁶ R. J. Baker, *Honolulu in 1853* (Honolulu, 1950) p. 15.
- ¹⁷ SIG, Jan. 12, 1839.
- ¹⁸ Consular Despatches, Dec. 31, 1821.
- ¹⁹ Consular Despatches, May 8, 1826.
- ²⁰ The Journal of John N. Colcord, 1793-1845 (unpublished manuscript, AH), p. 8-9.
- ²¹ Consular Despatches, July 1, 1827.
- ²² FO & Ex., April 10, 1823.
- ²³ Consular Despatches, Nov. 5, 1825.
- ²⁴ Consular Despatches, Feb. 8, 1834.
- ²⁵ Consular Despatches, Feb. 8, 1834.
- ²⁶ SIG, May 19, 1838.
- ²⁷ Consular Despatches, Sept. 10, 1828.
- ²⁸ SIG, Nov. 19, 1836.
- ²⁹ Consular Despatches, Dec. 31, 1823.
- ³⁰ Consular Despatches, Nov. 9, 1825.
- ³¹ Consular Despatches, Oct. 19, 1825 and Nov. 5, 1825.
- ³² Stewart, *Journal*, p. 158.
- ³³ Morison, p. 201.
- ³⁴ Consular Despatches, Dec. 31, 1821.

- ³⁵ Bradley, p. 61.
- ³⁶ Consular Despatches, Dec. 31, 1821.
- ³⁷ FO & Ex., 1826.
- ³⁸ Consular Despatches, May 8, 1826.
- ³⁹ FO & Ex., 1829.
- ⁴⁰ FO & Ex., Dec. 29, 1829.
- ⁴¹ Consular Despatches, Dec. 20, 1822.
- ⁴² Consular Despatches, Sept. 1, 1823.
- ⁴³ Consular Despatches, Feb. 23, 1835.
- ⁴⁴ Consular Despatches, Nov. 24, 1836.
- ⁴⁵ Consular Despatches, Mar. 30, 1836.
- ⁴⁶ Consular Despatches, Jan. 10, 1837.
- ⁴⁷ Consular Despatches, Mar. 12, 1837.
- ⁴⁸ Stewart, *Journal*, p. 94.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- ⁵⁰ FO & Ex., Oct. 30, 1829.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 3, 1829.
- ⁵² Documents in Archives of Hawaii regarding Probate No. 494-J. C. Jones Jr. and statements regarding property settlement of Jones' children.
- ⁵³ FO & Ex., Dec. 29, 1829.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, June 16, 1837.
- ⁵⁵ Archives of Hawaii records.
- ⁵⁶ Consular Despatches, April 8, 1839.
- ⁵⁷ P, June 1, 1844.
- ⁵⁸ The events leading to Jones' removal from his post at Honolulu are another story, hinging on the affair of the Brig *Clementine* which brought Catholic Missionaries to Hawaii once again in April 1837 (FO & EX, May 22, 23, 24, June 14, 16, 17-1837; SIG, April 22 and May 6, 1837, June 3, 24, July 8, 15, 1837; Consular Despatches, Nov. 21 and Dec. 2, 1837) and the charges of bigamy brought against Jones by Hannah Holmes in December 1839 (FO & EX, Jan. 12 and Jan. 8, 1839).