

The Mystery of the Brig *Owhyhee*'s Anchor and the Disappearance of Captain John Dominis

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Le présent article examine le rôle joué par le brick marchand Owhyhee de Boston sous le Capitaine John Dominis en établissant des relations commerciales et politiques vers la fin des années 1820 et durant celles des 1830 entre la Nouvelle Angleterre, le Pacifique du nord-ouest, le Hawai'i et la Chine. Les voyages de ce navire ont mené à la tragédie, car un membre d'équipage malade a probablement porté l'infection malarique qui a presque exterminé les premiers peuples habitant les rives du fleuve Columbia et de ses tributaires. Il y avait également un mystère, parce que John Dominis a été perdu en mer en 1846, ne laissant presque aucune information sur les origines de sa famille ou sur sa propre vie. Le manoir Dominis construit à Honolulu est devenu la résidence de la Reine Liliuokalani, qui a épousé le fils de Dominis, et la reine a passé maintes années tentant en vain de découvrir l'histoire de son beau-père.



*Fig. 1: Queen Liliuokalani
Courtesy: Honolulu Star-bulletin*

In downtown Honolulu there is a house called Washington Place. It served until 2002 as the official home for the Governor of Hawai'i and the mansion was once the home of Hawai'i's Queen Liliuokalani. Built by her father-in-law, Captain John Dominis, in the early 1840s Washington Place is now a museum and in 2007 it was designated a National Historic Landmark. It is here that this story begins.

Nearly fifty years after the disappearance of the sea captain on his voyage to China in 1846 Queen Liliuokalani is said to have witnessed a séance that was an attempt to learn about the ancestry of her father-in-law Captain John Dominis and what happened to him on that fatal voyage. She may have reflected on the struggle for power over Hawai'i that began as soon as American and English trading ships arrived in the islands in the last decades of the eighteenth century following the European

rediscovery of Hawai'i by Captain Cook in 1778. A little over a century later, during her reign, the Hawaiian Kingdom was taken over by Americans. Washington Place had been in the midst of much of this drama from the time that Captain John Dominis built it. Ray Lovell noted in a March 2001 article in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin* that "The house wasn't finished before legal conflicts involving the property, and a lawsuit filed by an Englishman against Dominis, helped trigger a five-month takeover of the Hawaiian Kingdom by a British Admiral in 1843."¹

This paper will not delve into the details of the British takeover by Lord Paulet and the restoration on 31 July 1843 of Kamehameha III but I will point out that it was not the first time that Captain John Dominis was involved in a confrontation with the British. As captain of the Brig *Owhyhee* his competitive trading tactics in the Columbia River and on the Northwest Coast brought Dominis head to head with the Hudson's Bay Company whose chief factor, Dr. John McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver, wrote in March 1829, "I am sorry to say the American Brig *Owhyhee*, Captain Dominis entered the river (Columbia) on the 28th (February) and is now anchored opposite Fort George. It is true he cannot make any thing by this measure yet he will Injure us."² McLoughlin's letters, and the "Journal of the Brig *Owhyhee*," a log kept by the first mate now in the archive of the North Baker Library of the California Historical Society in San Francisco, provide us with further details of the life of Captain Dominis from 1827 to 1830, but it seems as though very little of his ancestry, early life, and professional career as a sea captain in the employment of the Boston merchants Josiah Marshall and Dixey Wildes was known to his son and certainly remained a mystery to his daughter-in-law, Queen Liliuokalani.

Construction of Washington Place continued after the episode with the British and the house was completed a few years later about the time that Captain Dominis disappeared. He was never able to enjoy his new home. In 1846 Captain Dominis had sailed to China as a passenger on the ship *William Neilson*, accompanying ex-U.S. Commissioner Brown on what appears to have been a trade mission. Finally, after months without word from the missing brig nor sightings from any other ships of signs of a shipwreck, on 15 May 1847 the Honolulu newspaper *Friend* ran a story under the headline "The Missing Brig, Wm. Neilson": "We can with difficulty bring our mind to the conclusion that all on board have perished and not one survives to report the story of her disaster... Ex U.S. Commissioner Brown, and Capt. Dominis, passengers, and Captain Weston command the brig are removed from their families..."³ The newspaper also bore testimony to Captain Dominis, "No person in our community was more

¹ Ray Lovell, "Plan for Mansion Will Help Heal Past Hurts" in Gathering Place *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 16 March 2001 (Web site <http://www.starbulletin.com/2001/03/16/editorial/lovell.html>).

² Burt Brown Barker, ed., *Letters of Dr. John McLoughlin* (Portland, Oregon: Oregon Historical Society, 1948), p.1.

³ Ante Kovaric, "On the Descent of John Owen Dominis, Prince Consort of Queen Liliuokalani," *The Hawaiian Journal of History* Vol. 10 (1976), p. 14. See also T. Gazinski, "Captain John Dominis and His Son John Owen Dominis, Hawaii's Croatian Connection," *Journal of Croatian Studies* Vol. 17 (1976).

generally esteemed for his many excellencies as a neighbor, friend and citizen, than Capt. Dominis and his family have met a irreparable loss.”⁴ His widow, Mary Jones Dominis, and teenage son John Owen Dominis remained at Washington Place but rented out rooms to maintain it. Because the American representative to the Hawaiian Kingdom, Anthony Ten Eyck, rented it, King Kamehameha III called it “Washington Place” and decreed that the name never be changed.



Fig. 2: Washington Place

Courtesy: Honolulu Star-bulletin

When John Owen Dominis married in 1862, Washington Place became his private residence and the home for his new bride Princess Lydia Kamaka'eaha. She would become Hawaii's Queen in 1891 and seven months into her reign her husband John Owen Dominis died before she had ever learned from him what he knew about his father Captain John Dominis. The story of the séance as told by Helena Allen in her book *The Betrayal of Queen Liliuokalani, 1837-1891* was that the Queen's German language teacher, Fraulein Wolf, let it be known that her skills as a medium were available should the queen need a confidante.⁵ Consultation of astrologers, clairvoyants, and fortune tellers was something of a fad among Victorian haole in Hawaii as well as among the social circles in Europe and America from which they came, so it is not surprising that the queen was interested in what the Fraulein had to say about a vision in which she had seen King Kamehameha I. Evidently, Fraulein Wolf in the trance of a séance divulged

⁴ Kovaric, “On the Descent of John Owen Dominis.”

⁵ Helena Q. Allen, *The Betrayal of Queen Liliuokalani, 1837-1891* (Glendale, CA: A.H. Clark Co., 1982).

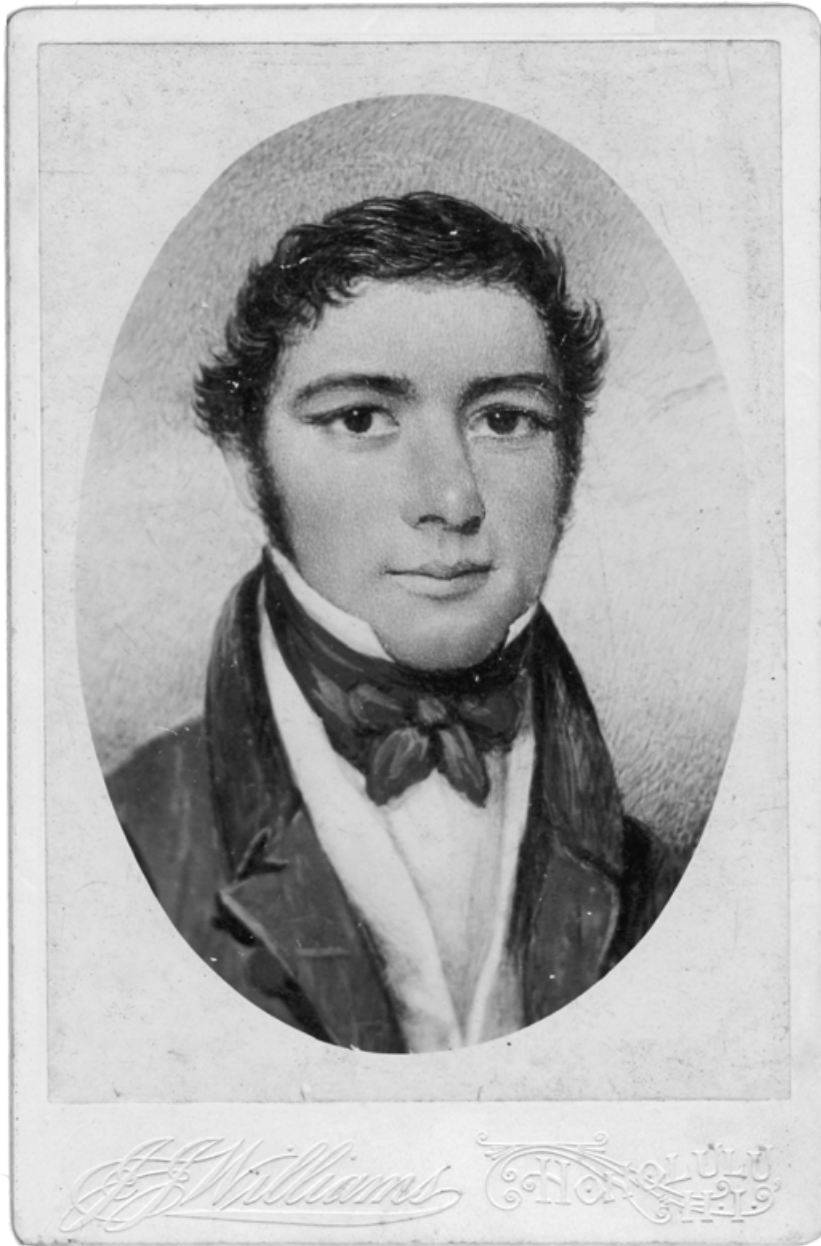


Fig. 3: Portrait of Captain John Dominis from an original miniature held by Virginia Dominis Koch. Courtesy: Hawaiian Journal of History adapted from Ante Kovaric, "On the Descent of John Owen Dominis, Prince Consort of Queen Liliuokalani," Vol. 10 (1976).

some limited information about Captain John Dominis.⁶

Following these events the queen began correspondence to Trieste and elsewhere regarding the Italian ancestry of Captain John Dominis, but without much result. She had met many of the American relatives of her mother in law, Mary Jones Dominis, when she had been in Boston in the 1880s. But apparently Mary's relatives did not shed much light on the descent of Captain John Dominis and he remained a mystery to Queen Liliuokalani until her death in 1917. So it remained for historians to delve into the Dominis ancestry. Finally, in 1976, an article by Ante Kovaric in the *Hawaiian Journal of History* presented a thorough genealogical investigation of the Dominis family records.⁷

This paper will briefly discuss the information about Captain Dominis provided by Ante Kovaric and provide excerpts from the original log of Brig *Owhyhee* located by the author in the archives of the California Historical Society, North Baker Library in San Francisco, shipping documents from the Hawai'i State Archives, and references from other sources including the letters of Dr. John McLoughlin of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Part One: The Captain

In Ante Kovaric's article, the portrait of Captain John Dominis shows a handsome young man in jacket and tie that if dating to the time of his marriage to Mary Jones means that Dominis was about 25 years old.⁸ Kovaric traces documents that show him to have been born at Trieste, Italy in 1796, the son of Vicenco Dominis and Agnes Galzigna of Rab, Dalmatia who seem to have spent several years at Trieste although most of their children were born in Dalmatia. By the time John Dominis arrived in Boston at the age of 23 in 1819 he had been raised in a part of the world that had seen the Napoleonic conquest of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia, all of which had been under Austrian rule. It seems that there was a strong identification with Italy among this Dalmatian family regardless of the politics of the region.

In 1820 Dominis began work in Boston for the merchant Josiah Marshall that would last over a decade. Through Marshall's recommendation Dominis became a U.S. citizen in 1825. Dominis had in 1821 married Mary Jones, daughter of Owen Jones and Elizabeth Lambert of Boston. By 1827 Dominis was captain of brig *Owhyhee* and sailing for the island from which the ship obtained its name.

6 Ibid. Queen Liliuokalani found a recovered yellow piece of paper thought to have been lost many years previously that substantiated this information. In her diary for 19 July 1892 the Queen wrote, "John discovered 28 years ago – latterly he wanted to show it to me and one day we had a quarrel and so he made up his mind never to disclose to me who he was and before he died he hid the paper so I shouldn't find it."

7 Kovaric, "On the Descent of John Owen Dominis." Prior to this essay information about Captain Dominis was often sketchy or erroneous identifying him variously as Italian, Croatian, Dalmatian, Bostonian, New Yorker, or some combination. In some way Captain Dominis' identity comprised each of these descriptions but not to the exclusion of other elements that comprised the multicultural American.

8 Kovaric, "On the Descent of John Owen Dominis," pp. 3-24.

Part Two: The Ship - Journals of the Brig *Owhyhee*

On the inside cover of the “Journal of a Voyage in the Brig *Owhyhee*” is an illustration of the vessel that is just over eighty feet in length at waterline if the scale is 12 feet to one inch as identified. The log was kept by the first mate, in Dominis’ name, and begins with the instructions from the owners Josiah Marshall and Dixey Wildes: “In the Brig under your command you will proceed to the Northwest Coast of America and you are at liberty to make the land as far to the northwest as you May think advisable.” They ordered him first to trade for furs in the Chatham Straits, then by 1 May to sail to the Straits of Juan de Fuca and by May 20 to the Columbia River, “and proceed as far as the fur company there,” referring to the Hudson’s Bay Company Fort Vancouver. The existence of this trading fort indicated opportunities for business, so Dominis was instructed to “collect an intimacy with those natives to entice them to bring you their skins.” But if the company were to confront him Dominis was to “endeavor to keep the peace with them but by no means be driven from the object of your voyage.”⁹ Dominis arrived in the Northwest on 10 February 1827 and sailed north to the Queen Charlotte Islands and Buccareli Sound where he traded for about two months before returning south to the Straits of Juan de Fuca as instructed. Brig *Owhyhee* anchored at Port Discovery on 17 May and stayed in the straits for a week or so before rounding Cape Flattery on 29 May and heading south for the Columbia River.

On 4 June Dominis recorded at “7 am entered the mouth the Columbia River” taking soundings at 10 to 15 fathoms in a strong tide. At “11 am came to with Kedge at 7 fathoms abreast of the cape” then hove to at 11:30, but tide was still out and the wind dying so he anchored with the chain in Baker’s Bay in 5 fathoms. There the Indians informed him that there were two other vessels upriver. Perhaps because of the competition Dominis stayed only ten days before sailing on the 14th for California.

Following his instructions to go to Bodega Bay and to “take horses on board and sheep for Oahu,” he also visited San Francisco where “the opportunity to sell the brig as long as \$15,000.00 lowest price” did not develop. Dominis loaded cargo for Oahu arriving in July. On 3 October 1827 he sailed from Honolulu for Canton, China. The route of the *Owhyee* to China was the well known course that kept to the north of the Philippine Islands but as the vessel passed through the Banshee Islands it was caught in a typhoon.

Dominis and the crew showed their seamanship in riding out the storm, and arrived in China on 30 December 1827. A document dated 22 October 1827 in Honolulu and signed by John Dominis, now held in the Hawai’i State Archives, lists the cargo on board Brig *Owhyhee*: “Fourteen hundred and thirty nine & half seal skins – one cask containing one hundred & twenty three sea otter skins,”¹⁰ currency in doubloons, gold and guilders, silver, and other items, “being marked and numbered as in the margin, and are to be delivered in the like order and condition, at the Port of Canton (the danger of the

⁹ John Dominis, “Journal of Brig *Owhyhee*: 21 January 1827 to 21 October 1830” (kept by first mate), MS 16, North Baker Library, California Historical Society, San Francisco.

¹⁰ Hawai’i Archives, M-93 Box 8A Folder 85, #171.

seas only excepted) unto Pitman French and Co.”¹¹

After trading in Canton, he continued his circumnavigation of the world and returned to Boston in the summer of 1828 via Martha's Vineyard. Josiah Marshall saw promise in another voyage and sent Dominis back to the Northwest on 11 August 1828, this time stopping at the Island of Juan Fernandez where it seems that a few peaches were taken ashore and the pits later sprouted, giving a crewman the credit for having introduced peaches to the northwest.¹² Unlike the first voyage to the northwest coast, the second voyage of *Owhyhee*, 1828-30, attracted the attention of historians such as Frances Fuller Victor, Frederic W. Howay, and Samuel Eliot Morison. Victor noted the introduction of peaches, Howay described the ship's fur and salmon trading activities, competition with Hudson's Bay Company, and the vessel's movements. Howay excerpted passages from the ship's log, the “only contemporary account” of the shipwreck and loss of Hudson Bay Company ships *William and Ann*, and, a year later, the *Isabella* as they attempted to cross the dangerous Columbia River bar in severe storms. Howay also noted that a Mr. Jones of the *Owhyhee* was sent to Fort Vancouver, “dangerously ill” on 27 October 1829 and he stated that “no light is thrown on Mr. Jones's illness; but through November, December, and January there are many references to his condition, sometimes improving and sometimes not.”¹³ It is unlikely that anyone at the time knew just how significant Mr. Jones's “intermittent fever” would turn out to be but in less than a year an epidemic of catastrophic proportions that devastated the indigenous people of the Columbia River would be traced to the Brig *Owhyhee*.

It is important to look at Dominis' competitive threat to the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade. F.W. Howay's article “The Brig Owhyhee in the Columbia 1829-1830”¹⁴ describes its arrival off the Oregon coast on 19 February 1829 after a 192 day voyage from Boston. A few days later Dominis crossed the Columbia River bar and anchored in Baker's Bay in three fathoms. The ship's log for 25 February shows the *Owhyhee* “working up the river: died away calm and a strong tide against us. Let go the sail anchor; but the chain parted and we lost it.” They grounded the next morning, but made their way to an anchorage off the Chinook village opposite Astoria. On 2 March they heard a greeting from a boat alongside and were greeted by Jedediah Smith, the famous pioneer. In the log Dominis gives him the courtesy of the title Captain Smith and on 4 March wrote a letter to Josiah Marshall that Smith would carry across the continent for delivery to Boston.

I entered the Columbia River the middle of February, inside Cape Disappointment without much difficulty. As I rec'd information from the natives the Convoy had not yet arrived, I took the opportunity to proceed upriver as far as Hudson Bay Company establishments. Before I could get inside the breakers, the wind left me calm, with a

11 Ibid.

12 Frances Fuller Victor, “Flotsam and Jetsam of the Pacific: The Owyhee, The Sultana, and the May Dacre,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* Vol.2 (March 1901), p. 36.

13 Frederic W. Howay, “The Brig Owhyhee in the Columbia, 1829-1830,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* Vol 35 (1932), pp. 15-16.

14 Ibid.

heavy swell set me toward them. I was under the necessity to come too with the Chain Anchor, a half mile from them, which cable soon parted and lost the Anchor with 25 fathom chain, and brought her too with the best bower, the only one I have to depend on.¹⁵

“The Doctor of the English came down,” Dominis continued, referring to Dr. John McLoughlin, chief factor of the Hudson’s Bay Company at Fort Vancouver. The “English cutter” anchored close to the *Owhyhee* had no doubt come down to await the arrival of the company’s supply ship and not to welcome their American competitors. But a storm was brewing in the Pacific and on 11 March the sail of two ships were seen off shore contending with the gale. Only one ship safely crossed the Columbia bar. It was the *Convoy* and Dominis’ colleague Captain Thompson brought news of the loss of the English ship *William and Ann*. The Americans set out by boat to search for survivors but found no crew. They returned in the evening with salvaged goods from the wreck and discharged them to the “English schooner” that had arrived from the fort to tend to the lost property. There were Kanaka sailors on board *Convoy* and five were received on board *Owhyhee*. Meanwhile the *Convoy*, having passed up river, had gone aground on a sand bar and *Owhyhee*’s launch with seven men went to assist. Dominis continued up river to pay a visit to the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Vancouver.¹⁶

Howay points out that “The *Owhyhee* did not merely rely upon the Indians coming to her to trade; she dispatched parties up and down the river with supplies, to trade as pedlars” and succeeded in building a steady trade in furs.¹⁷ Then Dominis left the river on 23 April leaving *Convoy* behind to trade there. The *Owhyhee* sailed north to Cape Classet and attempted to trade furs with little success but took on some salmon from native fishermen. Sailing further north he had greater success in obtaining beaver and a few sea otter skins. Twenty years earlier the same grounds would have brought more than a hundred sea otter skins but the population was over-hunted and quite depleted. Dominis met other ships at Kaigahnee, Alaska and took on board a Kanaka steward who had served on *Volunteer*. Captain Taylor also sent blankets in exchange for a bale of duffel and Captain Green of the *Herald* sent a box of muskets in exchange for navy bread. Returning south to Port Discovery, the *Owhyhee* spent two weeks collecting some 400 beaver skins and bartered for salmon that were then salted and preserved in barrels. On 4 August *Owhyhee* returned to the Columbia River across from Fort George.

¹⁵ Samuel Eliot Morison, “New England and the Opening of the Columbia River Salmon Trade, 1830,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* XXVIII No.2 (June 1927).

¹⁶ Hawaiians traveled on American ships since Captain Robert Gray took Attoo and Opie on board *Columbia Rediviva* in September 1789 and sailed to Boston arriving 9 August 1790 where Gray walked arm in arm with Attoo dressed in the feathered cloak to meet Governor John Hancock celebrating the first American circumnavigation of the world. Opie was the first Hawaiian to circumnavigate the world returning to Hawaii with Captain Ingraham on *Hope* sailing from Boston before Gray. Captain Gray sailed a few weeks later for trading in the Pacific Northwest before returning to Hawaii. Gray’s discoveries of Gray’s Harbor and the Columbia River were witnessed by Attoo before the Hawaiian completed his circumnavigation on *Columbia Rediviva* in 1792.

¹⁷ Howay, “The Brig *Owhyhee* in the Columbia,” pp. 15-16.

Captain Thompson was trading nearby in the *Convoy*. The *Owhyhee* sailed up river and reached the Cowlitz River on 17 August and finally the Willamette River on 18 August. From his anchorage at the mouth of the Willamette, Dominis set out by launch to call on Dr. McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver where he noted there were “plenty of mosquitoes.”

Convoy sailed for Hawaii on 27 September, and Dominis went as far downstream on *Convoy* as Chinook, returning by launch on 13 October. One of his mates, Mr. Jones, was “dangerously ill he removed him at once to the English fort 27 miles up the river.”

Howay states, “No light is thrown upon Mr. Jones illness: but through November, December and January there are many references to his condition, sometimes improving and sometimes not.” It was an intermittent fever. The October 1829 reference to Mr. Jones’s illness may be the first recorded evidence of the fever that was to become an epidemic along the Columbia River during the next year and ravaged native villages almost coincidentally with the departure of the *Owhyhee* from the Columbia in July 1830.

While Jones was at the fort, *Owhyhee* continued to move up and down the river, sending parties by launch to trade with the natives. The noted historian Samuel Eliot Morison possessed a writing desk that was once owned by Josiah Marshall owner of Brig *Owhyhee*. Perhaps Morison used this desk at the time he wrote in 1927 his essay, “New England and the Opening of the Columbia River Salmon Trade.”¹⁸ He points out that when Dominis embarked on the trading venture to the Columbia River Marshall and Wildes had already established strong ties in Hawaii. King Kamehameha II received a wheeled cart as a gift from Marshall in 1824 that was shipped on *Parthian* under the command of Marshall’s partner Captain Dixey Wildes. Apparently, the Hawaiian royal family was so enthusiastic about going for a ride in the cart that rather than waiting for a horse to be hitched, they ordered a few subjects to pull them along rickshaw style. Marshall’s popularity with the Royals was not only a blow by “Yankee ingenuity” against British influence but provided a foundation for Dominis’ later strengthening of a Northwest-Hawaii business connection.¹⁹

At the same time Marshall saw opportunity for a new direct trade between the Northwest and New England in salmon, Dominis spent much time in the Columbia River at places known to the natives as fishing grounds. *Owhyhee* anchored on a number of occasions at the mouth of the “Wilhammed” or Willamette River confluence with the Columbia. It is said that Dominis ventured upstream on the Willamette as far as the Clackamas River where natives gathered to fish as well as at Willamette falls a few miles further at present day Oregon City. Dominis purchased the fresh salmon and salted them in barrels, amassing a total of 53 that he carried back for market in Boston on his return there on 15 April 1831. “On his arrival, the customs officials at Boston proposed to assess a duty on these articles as from a foreign country.” Josiah Marshall protested and the case was referred to Washington. The treasury department ruled that because the salmon were caught in the Columbia River that was “not claimed as a part of the territory of the United States” the salmon must “be considered foreign caught fish.” Morison notes that it is “perhaps fortunate that no official of the British Government obtained a copy of this

¹⁸ Morison, “New England and the Opening of the Columbia River Salmon Trade, 1830.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

letter.²⁰ If Dr. McLoughlin in Fort Vancouver had known that Americans were considered to be returning from “foreign lands” on the Columbia by their own government he may urged his government to buttress the British claim to the Northwest.

But by this time McLoughlin was reeling from the impact of the epidemic of 1830, an “intermittent fever” as he called it that was thought by the natives to have originated from the *Owhyhee*. Mr. Jones returned to the American ship on 16 March 1830 after nearly half a year in the care of Dr. McLoughlin. The following day *Owhyhee* transferred cargo to *Convoy*: “Southerly winds and rain employed making ready for shifting cargo with the *Convoy* at 10 hauled alongside and received 1 box bottles wine 1 vinegar 4 gallons brandy, 1 case of 28 fresh muskets 75 Kendrick muskets 5 half stock muskets, 1 box beads.” “Kendrick” refers to Captain John Kendrick commander of the first American trade expedition to the Pacific in 1787 who became known, and criticized by some, for his trading of arms and ammunition as captain of the brig *Lady Washington*.²¹ Over thirty years later the trading muskets in the hold of Brig *Owhyhee* were described with the Kendrick moniker from the early days of Pacific maritime history.²²

Part Three: The Lost Anchor

Clackamas County historian Vera Lynch states of Dominis’ run into the Willamette River that it was “the first ocean going ship to sail as far as the Clackamas rapids.”²³ It anchored there while sending out boats to Willamette Falls for salmon, but native Clackamas natives swam out at night and cut the anchor line. The *Owhyhee* drifted downstream leaving the anchor behind in the Meldrum rapids. The anchor remained below the rushing currents and buried under shifting sands and the story forgotten over the course of time.

Over a hundred years later, in 1933, an Army Corps of Engineers dredging operation recovered an old anchor. Since no one at the time knew of the history of the Meldrum Bar, the dipper man whose dredge retrieved the anchor took it home where it remained unidentified for about thirty years. But more than the anchor had been left behind. Native Americans forever associated Dominis’ ship with the appearance of a deadly epidemic often called “the intermittent fever” or “The Cold Sick.”

Dominis’ approach to trading with natives involved the continual movement of ship and boats to trade furs and purchase salmon from nearly every village along the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jim Mockford, “The *Lady Washington* at Kushimoto, Japan in 1791,” in *The Early Republic and the Sea*, William S. Dudley and Michael Crawford, eds., (Washington D.C.: Brassey’s Inc., 2001).

²² Today the historical replica Brig *Lady Washington* sailing from home port at Aberdeen, Washington offers educational programs at sea from Canada to San Diego. The author is a member of the Advisory Council, Grays Harbor Historical Seaport, Aberdeen, Washington.

²³ Vera Lynch, *Free Land for Free Men: A Story of Clackamas County* ([Portland, OR: Artline Print, 1973]), p. 24.

river. This provided ample opportunity for mosquitoes to spread the malarial parasite from crewmen, like Mr. Jones, to natives ashore. Although Dominis did not know it, the natives had no immunity to the sickness brought in by his crew and the “intermittent fever” that began with the visit of the *Owhyhee* “spelled disaster to nine out of ten of the Columbia and Willamette River Indians.”²⁴ Some native stories describe the reason for the Clackamas Indians’ attack on the *Owhyhee* as an angry response to Dominis and his spread of the disease. But these stories originated after the fact to explain the introduction of the disease. At the time the anchor was lost the malarial plague had yet to rage along the river. It seems that the epidemic broke about the time of the *Owhyhee*’s departure in the summer of 1830.

Part Four: The Cold Sick

Robert Boyd’s book, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline Among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874* is a morbidly fascinating source of epidemiological analysis of the malaria plague of 1830 in the Columbia River. Boyd clarifies what earlier research mistakenly attributed to other diseases, such as small pox, venereal disease, influenza, among others. All of these diseases were present from the time of first contact with Europeans but none was as devastating as the arrival of malaria in 1830.

The brig *Owhyhee* spent much of its time between 4 August 1829 and 21 July 1830 at an anchorage downstream from the confluence of the Willamette into the Columbia River where the Multnomah Channel on the west side of Sauvies Island enters the Columbia near St. Helens, Oregon. Mr. Jones of course, spent half of that year laid up at Fort Vancouver suffering from an intermittent fever. The epicenter of the epidemic of 1830 was precisely between these two points.²⁵ On Sauvies Island where Lewis and Clark recorded a robust “Wappato Nation” of over 2,000 persons and estimated the Multnomah village population at 200 persons in the winter and 800 during the spring fishery, Peter Skene Ogden recorded the scene at Multnomah village in 1830: “a village containing 60 families of Indians; a few miles lower down was a second of at least equal population. A short month had passed away... All was changed. Silence reigned where erst the din of population resounded loud and lively... The fever ghouel has wreaked his most dire vengeance; to the utter destruction of every human inhabitant.”²⁶

By 1838 only a few individuals of the Wappato tribe remained and had joined other survivors from scattered tribes now residing closer to Fort Vancouver at the village, Galakanasis of Chief Cassino, that now only had population of 37 persons. Prior to the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Robert Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline Among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999). See map with author’s notation in Appendix II. See also H.C. Taylor and L. Hoaglan Jr., “The Intermittent Fever of 1830-1833 in California and Oregon,” *University of California Publications in American Archeology and and Ethnology* Vol. 43 (1955).

²⁶ Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, p. 86.

epidemic Chief Cassino boasted ten wives, four children, and 18 slaves. In one year he was left with “one wife, one child, and two slaves.”²⁷ A few miles further downstream the village Cathlapootle, also across the river from Sauvie Island, was emptied of at least 300 inhabitants recorded by Lewis and Clark in 1805. Dr. John McLoughlin recorded in a letter on 11 October 1830 that “The Intermitting Fever... has carried off three-fourths of the Indian population in our vicinity.”²⁸ Dr. McLoughlin, and other eyewitnesses such as Peter Skene Ogden, David Douglas, James Douglas, John Work, Francis Ermatinger, Hall Kelley, and many others, continued to write on the pestilence and as reports came in from further away, downstream to the estuary and up the Columbia Gorge to the falls, and south to Willamette falls, the mortality rate continued to rise. At the Columbia estuary, where Chief Comcomly of the Chinooks had greeted Lewis and Clark, an eyewitness account is provided by Francis Ermatinger who wrote in 1831, “It carried off King Comcomly with most of his subjects and those of the tribes around him. It is no unusual thing to see two or three dead bodies, in a short excursion along the river. Some of the villages were entirely depopulated.”²⁹ Comcomly had survived earlier smallpox epidemics and lived to the age of 66 years. He was buried in the tradition appropriate to a great chief and his gravesite recorded in an illustration from the Wilkes Expedition in 1844.

Soon the epidemic made it impossible for the survivors to honor their dead. Simon Plamondon wrote, “the living sufficed not to bury the dead, but fled in terror to the sea coast, abandoning the dead and dying to the birds and beasts of prey. Every village presented a scene harrowing to the feelings.”³⁰ According to Boyd the total population of the Chinookan and Kalapuyan tribes in the Columbia and Willamette river valleys was close to the 15,545 estimated by Lewis and Clark and the Hudson’s Bay Company in the early 1800s and by 1841 the number had declined by 88 percent. In sub-groups the mortality rate was over 90 percent and some villages were entirely depopulated. Hall Kelley visited the Columbia River mouth in 1834 and wrote, “little there more than darkness and blackness and desolation.”³¹ Robert Boyd describes the malaria epidemic as a plague “on a par with Europe’s Black Death of 1346 to 1351 in terms of human suffering and cultural disruption.”³²

The Black Death is thought to have killed about one third to one-half of the population of Europe in four years.³³ Phyllis Corzine makes the point for her student readers that “in modern terms, in 1990 the population of the United States was a little over 248 million. A loss of one-third would mean that about 83 million people, or the equivalent of the entire combined populations of California, New York, Illinois, Ohio,

²⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 89.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 89.

³¹ Robert Ruby and John Brown. *The Chinook Indians: Traders of the Lower Columbia* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), p.185.

³² Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, p. 5.

³³ Phyllis Corzine, *The Black Death* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 1997), p.10.

and Texas would die.”³⁴ Boyd’s study of the depopulation of the Chinook nation notes that, “despite the historical importance of the epidemics of the 1830s, within a century they had been virtually forgotten.”³⁵ This is because there were so few survivors that lived to tell the story. And, during the lives of the survivors so little was really known about the disease that killed them and so much changed in the generation that saw the number of white pioneer immigrants come across the continent to replace the native populations that had largely disappeared before the great wagon migrations brought settlers to the Columbia-Willamette valleys.³⁶ In Hawaii a succession of introduced diseases wiped out thousands of native peoples in the epidemics of 1848-49.³⁷ One wonders if Captain Dominis had lived to see the impact of introduced diseases in Hawai’i would he have recalled the intermittent fever brought on *Owhyhee* to the Columbia River twenty years earlier.

It is also possible that other ships may have brought the disease as well, but both the *William and Ann* and *Isabella* were wrecked on the Columbia bar, the former in 1829 without survivors, and the latter in 1830 having successfully been abandoned without loss of life. The Hudson Bay Company ship *Dryad* also sailed to the area but only the *Owhyhee* wintered over and sent trading parties to many villages along the rivers. And, the case of Mr. Jones’s illness and his sojourn at Fort Vancouver point to the Americans rather than the Hudson’s Bay Company as the original carriers of the disease. Native sources have also described Dominis and brig *Owhyhee* as the source of the pestilence even as the details given in a variety of forms are combined with mythological interpretations. It has yet to be confirmed when and to what extent Captain Dominis himself became aware of the connection that had been made to himself and brig *Owhyhee* with the introduction of the epidemic, but it is well known that Dr. McLoughlin and the Hudson’s Bay Company had no hesitancy in placing the blame on their American competitors. So it is likely that Dominis had learned of the epidemic through the reports of others and never returned to the Columbia in *Owhyhee*. His next trading venture to the Pacific Coast was as captain of *Bolivar Liberator* to California in 1834 and later in

³⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁵ Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence*, p.106.

³⁶ The “Black Rain” that fell on Hiroshima following the world’s first atomic bombing on 6 August 1945 resulted in the death of nearly 120,000 people of a population of 320,000 as reported by Hiroshima City Hall on 10 August 1946, and radiation sickness that followed continued to take a toll in the years following the bombing. However, in comparison to the European Black Death of the 1300s and the Black Rain of Hiroshima in 1945, the Columbia River “Cold Sick” or “Intermittent Fever” of 1830 with a mortality rate of over 90 percent was even more devastating to the population. A memorial site at Hiroshima marks the place where nuclear devastation culminated from the events of World War II. It also proclaims a vision of peace as a park where people from around the world gather in a nation that has renounced war. There is yet to be built a memorial site for the nation of Chinook peoples brought to the brink of extinction by introduced disease that may also serve as a reminder that the war on disease still continues in many places in the world.

³⁷ Robert Schmitt and Eleanor Nordyke, “Death in Hawai’i: The Epidemics of 1848-1849,” *Hawaiian Journal of History* Vol. 35 (2001).

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Part Five: The Anchor is Found

It was because of the mystery of a lost anchor found by my uncle, Stuart Mockford, that I began the historical research that led to this paper. For most of over thirty years, from 1967 to 1998, a 32 foot-ketch, *Owyhee*, a member of Portland Yacht Club's sailing fleet, could be seen at the end berth at the club's dock on the south shore of the Columbia River at Portland, Oregon. The ketch was designed, built, and owned by Stuart Mockford, who named it after the same nineteenth century sailing vessel that traded in the Columbia River from 1828 to 1830 under the command of Captain John Dominis. Stuart's choice of the name "Owhyee," an early variation of the word Hawai'i and the earliest English spelling of it's name, was not due just to his personal interest in the Hawaiian islands but because of a more direct connection with history and the original brig *Owhyhee* itself. He found its anchor!

Brig *Owhyhee*'s anchor at Portland Yacht Club

After the Indians cut the anchor loose from the ship it settled on the bottom of the Willamette River on what is known as the Meldrum Bar where the confluence of the Clackamas River enters the Willamette. For some hundred years, the silting of the Meldrum bar continued although dredging operations occurred from time to time as steamboat traffic increased in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But a thorough dredging and deepening of the river bottom did not start until the 1930s, leading to the recovery of the anchor in 1933 by the dipper man who took it home. Another thirty years passed before my Uncle Stuart, delving into local history readings while beginning to build his ketch, came across the story of the *Owhyhee* in Vera Lynch's book, *Free Land for Free Men*. The author, a reporter for the *Oregon City Enterprise Courier* and a family friend, informed Stuart that the dipper man's widow was still alive and he called on the residence to see if she remembered her husband bringing an old anchor home. Surprised that anyone had an interest in the old thing she said that her husband had put the anchor in the chicken shed. In the old out building Stuart removed a stack of fire wood and quite a layer of chicken droppings to find the old anchor nicely preserved below. The dipper man's widow was happy to see that someone found one of her husband's collected items of some interest so she let Stuart keep the anchor. Mockford's ketch *Owhyee* was completed at a Milwaukie, Oregon warehouse not far from the Meldrum bar in 1964. In 1966 the ketch was moved to Portland Yacht Club while the anchor from the original *Owhyee* was placed at the entrance of Mockford's architecture office in Oregon City where it remained until 1998.³⁸ When Mockford retired his ketch *Owhyee* from the Portland Yacht Club fleet he donated the anchor to the Portland Yacht Club where it is displayed today.

According to Les Bolton, Executive Director of Grays Harbor Historical Seaport

³⁸ Stuart Mockford, "The Tale of the Owyhee's Anchor," *The Portlight* (Newsletter of the Portland Yacht Club) (May 1998), p.7.

Authority, and captain of the historical replica brig, *Lady Washington*, the anchor found by Mockford was not the type used for the business of anchoring a large vessel but a “lunch hook” for use in temporary situations where a ship might wait for the tide or winds to change. Going back to the log of the Brig *Owhyhee* we see that the Kedge anchor was lost while crossing the Columbia Bar and Dominis had lost other anchors during his voyage replacing them when possible by trading with other vessels. So the *Owhyhee* may have had to rely on the lighter “lunch hook” at the mouth of the Clackamas while they waited for ship’s long boat to return from the Willamette falls with a load of salmon for return to New England.

The story of *Owhyhee* and Captain John Dominis is one of many inter-connections between New England and Hawaii and the Pacific Northwest during the China fur trade, of competition between American merchants and British mariners including those of the Hudson’s Bay Company, of the beginnings of the Columbia River salmon trade, of the unintentional and tragic consequences of intercultural interaction – the malarial epidemic, and of how this story was lost in part at least when Captain Dominis disappeared at sea on a voyage to China, and, in a sense nearly disappeared from history. Yet, in an attempt to prevent a permanent lacunae, the Hawaiian queen delved into the forgotten record of her husband’s ancestry and her father-in-law’s early life. Was Captain Dominis reluctant to talk to his son about his identity as an expatriate from his Adriatic homeland that had been under the control of Italy, Austria, Napoleon, and the other complexities of his heritage? Or was Dominis unlikely to talk about the past at all, having considered the implications that it was *Owhyhee* under his command that was blamed for the deaths of thousands of Native Americans?

Captain Dominis disappearance at sea in 1846 prevented a possible reflection on his life that may have been shared with others had he lived to see his son marry Princess Lydia. Then perhaps she could have asked her questions directly to the Captain rather than his son and later mystics whom she consulted as Queen of Hawai’i and resident of Washington Place. Although Captain Dominis seems for a time to have disappeared from history, the mystery of his nautical career is being uncovered like the anchor that remained lost for many years under the sands and sea.

