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The Shipwrecks of Vancouver



ver Island



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Shipwreck Times

Newspaper date July 5, 1813

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Traders Insult Indigenous Peoples:

Shameful Dealings Bring About Wrecks of Boston and Tonquin

Boston and Tonquin Never to Return

The Shipwreck Times is obliged to report that the missing trading vessels the Boston and the Tonquin will never return. These vessels are thought to have shared a common doom. Their charred remains and horrid tales besmirch the noble Pacific.

Boston Sets Out On Trading Voyage

The foreboding coast of Vancouver's Island was chosen as the route for a spring-time trading mission for the Boston, a three-masted barkentine. Captain John Slater, Chief Mate B. Delouissa and Second Mate W. Ingraham were in charge of 27 hands, all told. But a breach in diplomacy cost 25 of the Boston's men their lives.

Her triple masts appeared from shore as the Boston glided into Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island on the 12th of March, 1803, seeking to take on fresh water and supplies. The order was given, "Anchors away!" and the barkentine settled five miles off a Nuu-chah-nulth village in Friendly Cove, floating in wait for the local people to arrive with trade goods.

Chief Maquinna Insulted, Avenged by His People
Chief Maquinna of the Nuu-chah-nulth and Captain Slater of the Boston dined together and exchanged gifts. All seemed well, until their relations took a surprising turn, recounted in the narrative of John R. Jewitt, a surviving crew member of the Boston. Maquinna came out to the ship bearing a welcome gift of wild ducks. Jewitt tells us that "at the same time he brought with him the gun" which had been a fowling piece presented to him by Captain Slater. One of the locks was broken, and Maquinna told "the Captain that it was pashak, that is bad; Capt. Salter was very much offended at this observation, and considering it as a mark of contempt for his present, he called the king a liar, adding other

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opprobrious terms.”

The consequences were dire! On March 22, 1803, Chief Maquinna arrived with powerful men ready to avenge his injured honour. He would not be disrespected with damaged gifts and insults! The Boston’s sailmaker Edward Thompson hid during the plunder. The armourer Jewitt was singled out for his skill with metal. Only these two men were spared. The rest of the crew of the Boston—murdered! The vessel—beached! Shipwreck Times sources have relayed that the Boston’s contents were salvaged by local people before a great fire consumed its timbers.

Tonquin Fails to Learn Lesson

The Tonquin failed to learn the lessons of the late Boston, made public after Jewitt stated that “Maquinna’s conduct in taking our ship arose from an insult that he thought he had received from Captain Salter, and from the unjustifiable conduct of some masters of vessels, who had robbed him, and without provocation, killed a number of his people.”

In 1811, Captain Jonathan Thorn sailed the Tonquin for owner John Jacob Astor. Thorn was driven by his desire to trade trinkets for sea otter pelts on the north Pacific coast, with a plan to bringing the silky furs across the ocean to eager buyers in China. He would make his fortune!

Thorn’s Difficult Temperament Renowned

Thorn’s temperament was well known. He was “so violent a man as to be thought touched in the head,” said one former passenger who had had the misfortune to travel with him. Some might say that it was his constant and intolerable disrespect that caused the wreck of the Tonquin.

“It had all been Captain Thorn’s fault. But for Thorn’s arrogance, all would have gone well,” said Lamazee. Also known as George Ramsay, Lamazee was the half-Chinook son of a British sailor, a pilot aboard the Tonquin, and a survivor of the events that are about to be recounted here.

The Tonquin journeyed to Clayoquot Sound and put in at a location in the Nootka area that Shipwreck Times sources have yet to determine definitively. Several of the local coastal peoples, perhaps from a

local Nuu-chah-nulth village but thought by some to be visiting from Kwakwaka'wakw territory further north, paddled out to meet them. Thorn proceeded to bargain over the price of sea otter pelts, but the men could not agree on their exchange.

What happened next was a grave dishonouring! Lamazee reported to the fort at Astoria that Captain Thorn forced a trader, a principal chief, to leave the ship. Thorn cast a roll of trading furs after him. The otter pelts struck the chief in the face! The unseemly behaviour of the captain would not pass with impunity, and the chief's people returned to the Tonquin under the guise of a trading visit to take vengeance. The attack surged over the decks of the trader, and the crew was overwhelmed.

Many Dead, Tragedy Aflame

But the dead were not to be counted yet. Someone was still struggling on board the Tonquin, with a hateful plan. He called out to the village at first light, and scores of men returned in their canoes. A match was lit. The hiss and crackle of the flame became an explosion! Then another! The ship's store of four and a half tons of gunpowder had been ignited. On a June morning in 1811, she was gone.

Lamazee described the tragedy. "The ship was afire from stem to stern. The bay was strewn with wreckage, dead bodies. Those who managed to find a canoe, and so escape, fled from the scene. The ship soon burned to the waterline and appeared to be sinking. The next day, she had disappeared." Two hundred villagers and the Tonquin's crew of 23 were reported lost in the violent wreck.

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SITE MAP

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