Trouble on the Waterfront

On a morning early in December, 1847, Honolulu’s corps of wharf rats and assorted idlers reported for duty as usual. They were often deplored as worse than a nuisance, but no efforts against them prevailed. On this particular forenoon they had diminished room for their maneuvers. The day before a part of the new government wharf—a wood affair supported by stone pilings—had collapsed into the harbor, spilling oil, anchors, casks, and lumber. Captain Mensing of the Bremen ship Patriot got the blame and a lawsuit. He argued that the wharf was poorly built and rested on mud.

However this may have been, the accident was but the latest in a series of circumstances and events that pointed up the harbor as a source of problems as well as of progress. The harbor itself was not discovered until 1792. Captain William Brown, a trader, is credited. In 1832, Reverend Hiram Bingham met on Kaua‘i an old warrior who had lived on O‘ahu in 1792, who told the missionary that “When Brown came to Waikiki, I showed him the harbor of Honolulu, not before known to foreigners”.

Brown, in general command of the Jackall and the Prince Lee Boo (the latter under Captain Gordon), visited Honolulu again late in
1794. The English sailors helped Kalanikupule, King of O‘ahu, to defeat his rival, Ka‘e‘o, but the scheming victor had Brown and Gordon murdered on January 1, 1795, and seized their ships. These were, however, retaken by their crews. In an earlier tragedy, Captain John Kendrick of the *Lady Washington* and several of his men had been killed by a salute gun set off aboard the *Jackall*. A later casualty of the custom was the *Parthian*‘s boatswain. In November, 1825, a gun fired to salute the *Convoy* blew off his arm.  

Occasional drownings resulted when small boats from ships anchored outside upset as they tried to enter the harbor. The “common but dangerous practice” of running through surf after dark claimed two lives in October 1845. In September 1847, the well-known Chinese sugar planters and shopkeepers, Ahmow and Asam, died in the breakers.

Shipwrecks excited the port from time to time. On the night of April 8, 1825, the English whaler *Royal George* and her drunken crew piled up on the reef leeward of the harbor. The ship fired a gun and showed blue lights. The masts were cut away, but she bilged in an hour. Twelve years later, the *Diana* went ashore on the lee bank in strong trades. Luckily, 30 Hawaiians got on the reef, hauled her off, and tracked her in. Late in March 1850, the British bark *Caroline* ran onto the reef in a gale. The main mast was cut away, killing a man in the top. In that same year, wrecks of whalers adorned both sides of the harbor entrance.

Fire was a real threat. Many worried about the possibility of a mass, wind-driven holocaust (the peak number of ships at anchor was 149 on November 20, 1852). This never happened, though there were spectacular blazes. On March 6, 1844, the trader *Chenamus* ignited at the wharf. There was an alarm of powder. A drill team with augers went aboard and manufactured holes. The brig sank, leaving the deck two feet above water. It was the year’s most boring affair. Later, the holes were plugged with *kapa* (bark cloth), and the cabin windows were corked up. Fifty men then pumped for 36 hours to raise the vessel.

Arson was suspected in the case of the *Helvetia*, which burned to the waterline on January 25, 1846. The whaleship had just undergone expensive repairs at Robinson’s yard. Authorities tried
to scuttle the ship by firing guns from the fort, but failed. About 750 or 800 barrels of oil of the 1,650-barrel cargo were saved—the loss, however, amounted to some $25,000. Later the community joined in relief efforts. Fundraising papers were in four stores, a meeting at the Mansion House Hotel raised $600, and late in February, Starkey, Janion & Co. paid Captain Ezra Porter's passage home. In early September of the same year, the whaler Mercury, which was ready for sea and would have left Honolulu soon, was a total loss after fire consumed the ship and her 1,200 barrels of oil.7

Dramatic incidents these were, but nature and man created more pervasive problems. The harbor entrance—narrow, intricate, and winding—required use of a pilot. It was shallow, not accessible to ships drawing more than 20 to 24 feet of water (estimates differed). This meant that large men-of-war (including the Blonde in 1825) had to stay outside the reef.8

In the days of sail, wind was a vital concern. The usual early morning calm was the best time to enter the harbor. The tricky entrance and prevailing trades mandated that ships be towed in. During Kamehameha I's time, either gangs of Hawaiians on the reef or paddlers in from six to eight double canoes did this work. In 1823, C. S. Stewart mentioned being towed by 20 whaleboats. Thereafter, writers cited manpower only—varying numbers of Hawaiians stationed on "the flats" to drag ships in by rope. Small vessels tracked within an oar's length of the eastern reef. There was much elbowing among the Hawaiians. In September 1835, the Rasselas went aground while the islanders argued about who should work.9

An incoming ship readied for the tow thus. A boat was sent out with a long line. The ship then ran down the coast under full sail. At the boat the ship shortened sail, took the line from the boat, and fastened it to the ship's hawser. Those on the reef ran away with the line until the hawser reached them, and then they towed the ship in. Lieutenant Charles Wilkes gave a similar explanation, using more nautical terms. Sometimes the trackers waded up to their waists in surf, but low water fell some three feet, baring the reefs on both sides of the channel.10
Shipmasters usually relied on the trade winds to get them out of port, though it was also possible to tow out. When the trades were too strong, ships had to wait outside the harbor, and captains of those inside were afraid to risk leaving. Strong southerly winds also blocked the harbor, allowing no exit. Such adverse conditions could last a fortnight.¹¹

Water supply was another problem. In earliest times, Hawaiians carried water down in calabashes, and ships' boats ran some two miles up Nu‘uanu Stream to fill casks. In 1847, lead pipes brought water from a man-made pond (supplied by a mountain stream) near Jules Dudoit's place, to tanks under the harbormaster's office. But the water ran very slowly. Floating casks were filled; then they were put on rafts and taken to ships. In early to mid-1850, plans led to bringing water in iron pipes from Kapalu Spring (the "King's Spring") in Kahoʻokane. This "Nu‘uanu Water Works" cost about $10,000.¹²

From the beginning, sedimentation and deposits of one sort or another threatened the harbor. Coral was the enemy identified first. In 1809, John Harbottle, former Mate of the Jackall and Captain of Kamehameha's ship Lily Bird, who generally acted as Honolulu harbor pilot, said he knew a difference of three feet during the 15 years he had been at Honolulu. But mud and other debris were the chief concerns. In early years, heavy rains washed out upstream plantations and made the harbor a sea of bobbing taro, sugar cane, potatoes, and plantains. In 1840, Lieutenant Wilkes noted much alteration in the harbor since 1825 by deposit of silt from Nu‘uanu Stream. Seven years later, Captain D. P. Penhallow, Harbormaster, brought this to official attention. Mataio Kekuanaoa, Governor of O‘ahu, appointed W. L. Lee, Judge of the Court of O‘ahu; Captain Le Borgne, not otherwise identified; and Captain Thomas Baillie of HMS Modeste to study the matter and make recommendations. They suggested the same thing that Wilkes had in 1840—building a wall or breakwater to intercept the mud and change the direction of the current. It was done.¹³

Man joined nature in polluting the harbor. By the early 1830s, it was clear that ships dumping rocks and heavy rubbish would
one day find themselves perched on mountains of trash. Port regulations of October, 1834 (and kept in force continually thereafter) required crews to carry refuse ashore. The first-time fine was $10, doubled for each succeeding offense.\textsuperscript{14}

Pestiferous organisms plagued those afloat. Ship borers or teredos could damage a boat in a single night. Aboard ship in the harbor on a still evening, one usually heard a constant sound like a pin scratching paper. This meant that the worms were gnawing away, even though foiled by copper sheathing.\textsuperscript{15}

Roaches, mice, “snakes” (centipedes?), and scorpions infested interisland schooners. When they became intolerable the only real remedy was to sink the vessel, drown everything aboard, and then bail her out. \textit{Clementine}, \textit{Missionary Packet}, and \textit{Ha'aliilio} got the treatment. The last had been tied to guns on the wharf. Unfortunately, the schooner rolled over and dragged the guns into the harbor. Chinese bailers raised the vessel.\textsuperscript{16}

Whaling ships were small, but their great numbers created a problem during peak seasons. At such times it was hard work to reach the shore through the maze of ships, boats, and wires. Darkness made things even more difficult, and returning sailors found it arduous to locate “home.”\textsuperscript{17}

Adding to the congestion were the ever-present hulks that graced the harbor from the days of Kamehameha I. In September 1817, Adelbert von Chamisso, a German naturalist with Lieutenant Otto von Kotzebue, saw the beached wreck of the Russian American Company’s ship \textit{Kodiak}, which had brought 100 Aleuts and some Russians from Kaua‘i. A year later, she had been joined by an American ship sold to Kamehameha I. Five years after that the \textit{Ruby} and the \textit{Wellington} were hulks. In September 1834, William Ladd complained that William French’s and J. C. Jones’s old hulks were in his way. Less than six months later, nature took a hand in clearing the harbor when a hard blow drove the old \textit{Wellington} and a rotten cutter ashore. For a long time, these derelicts had preempted the two best places in the harbor. In July 1846, the hulk of the bark \textit{Conception}, formerly owned by C. Brewer & Co., was blasted into kindling. At the same time, the \textit{Basilisk} remained as hulk in residence. For four years, Lieutenant Samuel
Hunt had commanded “this rotten old tub” and “plied the Pacific in...the difficult position of being the guardian of the Queen of Tahiti”—a role in which he “showed great zeal and ability.”

Cursed though they might be, the hulks nevertheless had their uses. In 1825, Boki let the crew of the Blonde get firewood from an old, broken ship belonging to the government. Hulks served as stages for loading and repairing vessels. In 1834, the hulk Dawn was a “boatel” housing Northwest Indians when they were in Honolulu. Four years later, the Santa Barbara played the same part. Even the old Wellington, a harbor fixture for more than 20 years, did her bit. In May 1845, C. Brewer & Co. advertised rental storage space aboard. Two months later, Fourth of July salutes were fired from a hulk in the harbor.

If sick ships cast anchor for the last time in Honolulu, so did many sick sailors. Whaling was a risky business. An estimate in 1841 put loss of life at ten percent of men and officers. Assuming an average complement of from 25 to 30 men per ship leads to the conclusion that of any given crew, three would never return home. Captain Steen Bille remarked that whaleships were generally of some 400 tons and were provisioned for 40 months. Examples of full ships were the Arabella with 2,700 barrels of oil, and the Wilmington and Liverpool Packet with 2,900. A “great voyage” of the mid-1840s was that of the Magnolia, which visited Honolulu with 3,900 barrels of whale and sperm oil after being out only 25 months. This represented a clear profit to the owners of $12,000 to $15,000.

A chief cause of infirmity among whaleship and other crews was scurvy, a disease then little understood. In October 1819, the Balaena, Captain Edmund Gardner of New Bedford, was one of the two first whaleships to visit Hawai‘i. Gardner had come for refreshments after scurvy appeared among his crew. Later examples of scurvy-stricken ships are: 1824, Mary; 1827, Harvest, and Mary again; 1830, Ganges, with at least six dead of scurvy; 1844, Hydaspe, with at least six dead of scurvy, and only the captain, the mate, and one sailor able to work the ship; 1847, a number of crews suffering severely because good fishing in the Sea of Okhotsk kept them out too long; and 1849, U.S.S. Preble, sloop...
of war, which had lost 21 men from dysentery and many more incapacitated with scurvy. Forty of the crew were housed ashore in a makeshift hospital at Mauna Kilika. There were only enough men aboard to serve one boat and one battery. At midcentury, one Dr. Garrod rightly blamed dietary deficiency for scurvy, but he thought the cause was a lack of potash. 

If ailing seamen presented a problem, those enjoying health could be even more troublesome. Deserters constantly afflicted both shipmasters and the Hawaiian authorities. In February, 1811, Gabriel Franchere noted the presence of some 30 idlers and drunkards from all nations who had a still and furnished liquor to the islanders. By the late summer of 1822, Honolulu had 17 grog shops run by white men and not fewer than 100 deserters who almost overran the village. That same year an edict required deserters to be returned to their commanders. In June 1825, a new rule obliged ship captains to pay $6.00 for each deserter caught and returned, and men left behind faced six months in the fort at hard labor. But the problem continued, involving men-of-war as well as whalers and merchantmen. In May, 1826 H.M.S. Blossom sent out a press gang to round up deserters from the British Navy. It nabbed four or five men. Although the law was tightened in 1841, for some years thereafter shipmasters complained that it was too easy to desert, and that the authorities (and the general population, too) were slack in apprehending runaways. There was another side to this story, however. In a number of cases, Hawaiians took pains to deliver deserters to the fort in anticipation of rewards promised by captains. But when the captains recovered their men, they sailed without paying.

From January 18, 1845, to January 28, 1846, the Honolulu Harbormaster reported 219 deserters—190 of them from American ships. Many others had not been reported. The total fell to 168 in 1846, and by mid-1847, Marshal Henry Sea noted a decline caused by police vigilance and shipmasters' support.

Those commenting on deserters' activities agreed that the runaways exerted negative pressure on Honolulu's ambience. Captain F. W. Beechey, describing the situation in February 1827, wrote that ship jumpers lived in public houses until their
money and clothes were spent or attached themselves to females. Either way, they became dependent on the Hawaiians for food and returned the favor by encouraging their hosts in drunkenness, debauchery, idleness, and vice. The phrase, “until their clothes were spent,” needs explaining. Sailors on whaling ships were paid in “lays,” or shares of the oil, at the end of the voyage. Captains were unwilling to make more than the smallest of cash advances, so sailors had little ready money. But each captain carried a chest of clothing to be issued to crew members and charged against their lays. When the ship reached port, sailors drew clothing, which they took ashore and sold.

Desertion was not always voluntary. Seamen’s Chaplain S. C. Damon wrote that shipmasters and officers should never treat men so as to require their running away, and he threatened that in such cases he would publish names. “In such cases” the motive was often greed. Deserting sailors forfeited their lays, which then reverted to the shipowner or to the captain if he could find a way to get his hands on them.

Desertion aside, the sheer numbers of sailors in town (12,000 to 20,000 a year by the mid-1840s) menaced law and order, especially at night. The remedy was simple: get the sailors out of town. At the end of March 1826, Governor Boki ruled that seamen were forbidden to stay ashore after dark without permits from their captains. In 1841, the government began the practice of firing two guns from the fort each evening: a warning shot at 7:30 signaled sailors to go aboard their ships, and a second at 8:00 alerted police to round up stragglers. The early hour caused a great outcry among residents, shipmasters, and seamen, sparked a near riot during the fall season of 1842, and led to a petition asking for repeal of the law or an extension of the hours. A time change to 9:00 and 9:30 took effect in April 1843. Then in June 1846, the Seamen’s Chapel bell was rung at 9:30 and 10:00 to notify sailors ashore. A gun at 10:00 p.m. announced closing time for all saloons and places of amusement.

Back on their ships the sailors could still make trouble, and one of its names was mutiny. In 1826, part of the Offley’s crew rebelled; the following year the same thing happened aboard the Mercator.
Near the end of 1833, sailors on a British ship refused to get the vessel under way and went ashore, declining to return.  

The harbor funneled off many an escaping crook, major or minor. Debtors paid their bills with the foresail, to use an expression of the time. Stephen Reynolds' journal cites many instances. The notorious James F. Lewis got away with nearly $9,000, apparently working with Captain Champlin of the Henry Tuke. George Morgan, a daring burglar, almost made it to freedom. Breaking out of the fort, he hid aboard the whaleship Peruvian. But Andrew Potter, deputy sheriff of O'ahu, suspected what was up; he smoked the vessel, flushing out Morgan. In similar cases, this smoking tactic was more or less standard procedure. In June 1840, the government tried to cope with at least part of the problem. It named Paul Kanoa and three assistants officers of the "city" of Honolulu. One of their duties was to inspect all vessels for runaway Hawaiians who had lived in the town for years.  

Shipboard prostitution, though not seen as a concern by those most intimately involved, appears to have excited more interest over a longer period of time than any other waterfront issue. Certainly it had an extensive history. Stephen Reynolds gave details of events aboard the New Hazard in 1811. Four years later, Peter Corney mentioned firing muskets at sunrise to send the women out of the ship, and at sunset to bring them back. In October 1818, Golovnin charged that Europeans maintained and spread venereal disease in Hawai'i. He wrote, "At present every ship is at once surrounded by boats that bring as their most important articles of trade young women who are offered for a certain sum to the sailors by their fathers and husbands." This practice was restricted to the common people. For about three months in the summer of 1822, between 20 and 30 women lived with the sailors aboard G. F. Mathison's ship.  

In the same year, the chiefs put a taboo on such promiscuous immorality, prompting sailor outbursts against the missionaries. The taboo persisted, but in the fall of 1823, rumor had it that ships wanting women could get them by paying a dollar for each at the fort. Another strong taboo went forth in October 1825, and one
or two girls had their heads shaved for defying it. Chiefs Boki and Kalanimoku put an end to the shaving.  
This was heady stuff; however, the taboos seem to have had a constant tendency to slip out of gear. At the very end of March 1826, village criers once more announced chiefly orders forbidding women to go aboard ships for sex. But the ban appears to have become honored more in the breach than in the observance. Exactly three years later, the chiefs found it necessary to revive the taboo.

In April 1833, the prostitutes were still hanging around the landing place and going off to the ships in boats. Sailors grabbed the women and pulled them about, while islanders not part of this action gambled and made a racket.

Whatever progress had been made was nullified a decade later when the British Commission outraged the battered troops fighting under the banner of decency by lifting the current taboo against unmarried women going aboard ships. They were now free to roam at will.

Chaplain Damon viewed waterfront activities in February 1844. By this time, law again favored the forces of morality. He saw a boat holding six Hawaiian women approaching the wharf. A posse of constables extended official greetings and led the women to the fort at once. And so it went.

Ah well, it had been another day along the docks in this December of 1847. The idlers and wharf rats had done what they always did—nothing. But now the shadows lengthened. A little wave of expectancy rippled through the congregation. Soon the ships would disgorge their work-weary crews, and it would be time again for Bright Lights and Music.

NOTES

1 P 11 Dec. 1847; SIN 4 May 1848.
8 Bloxam, Diary of Andrew Bloxam 33; Robert Elwes, A Sketcher's Tour Round the World (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1854) 182; Samuel S. Hill, Travels in the Sandwich and Society Islands (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856) 97; P 9 Oct. 1841 and 18 Oct. 1845; F 1 Jan. 1844.
11 P 6 Nov. 1847 and 8 Jan. 1848; Reynolds, Journal, 5 Apr. and 1 Nov. 1827; Chamberlain, Journal, 10 Apr. and 10 Nov. 1827; F 16 Dec. 1847.


*F* 4 Apr. 1846 and 30 Jan. and 3 July 1847.


*F* 1 June 1846.

Reynolds, Journal, 7 Sept. 1826 and 30 Apr. 1827; FO&Ex 27 Nov. 1833.

R. A. Greer, "Honolulu in 1847," *HJH* 4 (1970): 80; *SIN* 11 Nov. 1847; *P* 13 Nov. 1847; FO&Ex 10 June 1840.


Chamberlain, Journal, 1 Apr. 1826 and 2 Mar. 1829.


F 15 Feb. 1844.