

The Wreck of the "Philosopher" *Helvetius*

Helen P. Hoyt

Among the many whalers in the Pacific in 1832-1834 was the *Helvetius*. Formerly a merchant vessel, she made her first voyage as a whaler to the Pacific and the Sandwich Islands in 1832. She had been designed and built in Philadelphia in 1804 by the renowned shipbuilder, Isaac White, for Stephen Girard, merchant prince and financial wizard.

Girard, born in Chatron, France, in 1750, first pursued his seafaring career between Bordeaux and the West Indies. Then he sailed as a first officer between New Orleans and New York. In 1776, in partnership with Thomas Randall of New York, he bought the *Jeune Bebe*, intending to trade with this ship between New York, the West Indies, and New Orleans. On his second voyage, during the American Revolution, he was pursued by a British frigate and battered by a storm; he took refuge in the Delaware and on June 6, 1776 anchored off Philadelphia. Here he established his home and business. On October 27, 1778 he became a naturalized American citizen.

Of the twenty-four vessels Girard owned either wholly or in part, his favorites were four built and owned by him exclusively. He named these after his four favorite French philosophers: Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvetius, and Montesquieu.

William Rush, the famous early American shipcarver of Philadelphia, was commissioned by Girard in the late 1790s to carve portrait busts of each of the philosophers. These were used as the figureheads of the ships bearing their names.

When Girard died in December, 1831, only two of the four "Philosophers" were still afloat, *Helvetius* and *Rousseau*. *Voltaire* was wrecked in 1822 and *Montesquieu* in 1824, off the Netherlands coast. Girard left most of his estate to found the famous Girard College of Philadelphia for white orphan boys of Philadelphia, New York, and New Orleans; he never forgot that in these cities he had started his successful maritime career.

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Girard's will has been the subject of many court actions, because his French relatives and their descendants have bitterly resented his leaving the bulk of his estate to Girard College. The will definitely states that the College is for *white* orphan boys, and today a court hearing in process has not yet decided whether to integrate it; Girard stipulated that if colored boys were admitted, the estate would revert to his French family.

In order to liquidate the estate's assets, the two floating "Philosophers" were sold at auction in March, 1832. *Helvetius* was ninety-six feet long, twenty-eight feet broad, and fourteen feet deep. While owned by Girard, she had traded between European ports and Philadelphia, been interned in France during the War of 1812, run the British blockade and the American embargo, and smuggled opium from Mediterranean ports to Canton, China. Now she was sold for \$6,600 to a group of fifteen owners from New London, Stonington, and Norwich, Connecticut, and from Westerly, Rhode Island. Immediately after the sale she was taken to New London and converted for whaling.¹

On July 8, 1832, under the command of George Seymore Brewster of Stonington, she set sail for the Pacific on her maiden whaling voyage. *Helvetius* was in Honolulu harbor on April 12, 1833 and again on April 17, 1834. She was one of the whalers that anchored in the Lahaina, Maui roadstead during most of her time in Hawaiian waters. Captain Brewster was a teetotaler, and it was easier to control his crew at Lahaina in respect to liquor and desertions. While in that port on April 14, 1834, he, with other captains and ship officers, formed "The Marine Association for the Suppression of Intemperance at the Sandwich Islands."

Approaching these islands in the fall of 1834 after his summer's northern whaling voyage, and with 1,400 barrels of oil aboard, Brewster found the open Lahaina roadstead untenable. A bad "Kona" storm, with strong winds from the southeast, heavy rains and high seas forced him on to Honolulu.

In 1834 there was no lighthouse on Diamond Head. There were two buoys at the harbor entrance. A black one marked the beginning of the narrow channel entrance to the harbor on the port side of incoming vessels; a white one marked the limit of the off-shore anchorage. These were unlighted. Approaching vessels did not enter the harbor after dark, but wore off and on during the night, keeping well out to sea.

It was daybreak, November 9, 1834. The storm had scourged the islands for two days. Honolulu huddled miserably under the continuous deluge. The grass huts leaked badly; the kapa which lined the better grade of such dwellings, soaked through by rain seeping through the thatch, hung in strips on the walls. Earthen floors were soggy and swollen, cut by rivulets of water. Many of the sodden adobe huts collapsed, forcing their wet inmates to seek shelter with more fortunate neighbors. The crooked, unpaved, narrow lanes, usually so dusty, were flowing streams of liquid mud, for the adobe walls, built to mark property lines, slowly disintegrated under the constant rain, and added more muck to that already in the byways.

Swollen streams had filled the harbor with mud and debris. Coconuts, sweet potatoes from patches farther up Nuuanu Valley, branches of trees, dead

chickens and drowned dogs floated among the twenty-one whalers and numerous trading and inter-island vessels anchored within the harbor, thankful to be safely through the narrow channel and berthed in the land-locked and comparatively calm waters. Against the reef, whipped by the southeast wind, huge combers thundered and broke. It was a bad night to approach the shores of Wahoo (Oahu).

On the mauka-Waikiki corner of Exchange and Blonde streets (today Merchant and Nuuanu), surrounded by a wall of coral rock, was a large trading store and home. Built of coral blocks, it was two stories tall with a shingled roof. Wooden steps led to a wooden thatched lanai, and a wooden door, which could be closed and securely fastened, barred the entrance to the store. Here in 1834 lived the trader, harbor pilot, and auctioneer Stephen Reynolds with his part-Hawaiian wife, Susan Jackson, and their two children. Except for the collapse of an adobe storage hut in the back yard, the weather had not affected their well-built home.²

Before daybreak on November 10, there came a loud knocking at the door. Reynolds, aroused from sleep, went downstairs and opened up. Three men, a ship's mate and two seamen, confronted him. Their whaleship, *Helvetius*, approaching Wahoo between midnight and one a.m., had been driven onto the reef on the Waikiki side of Diamond Hill (Head). In the stormy darkness, no one had heard her guns or seen her predicament. Captain Brewster had sent them ashore in a whaleboat to get help. Would the experienced sailor and pilot, Reynolds, come to their aid?

Ships in trouble off the shores of Wahoo were sure of help. Trader or whaler, they were the life-line of the town. Reynolds hurriedly made arrangements to use the *Rasselas*, recently bought by trader Eliab Grimes; he borrowed two launches, one belonging to merchant William French, one to John C. Jones, trader and American consul. These he placed, with several whaleboats, aboard *Rasselas*. Even in their sodden misery, enough Hawaiians were willing to man whaleboats and canoes, and also to wade out onto the reef along either side of the channel. Here, pulling lines attached to her bow, they towed *Rasselas* against the wind and out to sea, where she could maneuver herself. A wreck on the reef, so near at hand, was exciting—and who knew what salvage might be theirs?

By seven a.m. *Rasselas* was off Diamond Hill and as close as she dared come to the reef where *Helvetius*, heavily laden, was firmly embedded. The rain had stopped, but surf was still running high.

We quote now from Reynolds' terse diary:

Arrived on board [*Helvetius*] about 7 o'clock, got Anchor on two casks, chain on the launch to carry out astern—everything miscarried—the anchor was let go just under the Stern—got the Cable into the Hawser and hove taught [sic]—got the second Anchor and part of the Chain into Mr. French's Launch—the rest of the chain into the other Launch—attempted to haul out by Halser [sic]. So much swell the anchor carried the boat down by filling—by this time there was four feet water in the hold. Surf made some—Ship surged hard.³

It was hopeless, with the surf pounding *Helvetius* more and more firmly

onto the reef. In order to lighten her, wrote Reynolds, “. . . Cut Fore and Mizzen Masts away—which carried main mast head and main topmast away. Top gal’t yards and masts had been sent down previously. Heavy surges on the ebb—Lower hold full of water.”⁴

At five p.m., with the wind still blowing hard from the southwest, causing yet more swell, Reynolds took *Rasselas* back to Honolulu harbor to get additional help. The oil had to be unloaded if anything was to be saved.

Once ashore he sent out an appeal for aid, going himself to King Kauikeaouli (Kamehameha III). The king was interested. Certainly he would help. His exchequer was low; he owed money to all the traders and most of the grog shops in the village. Salvage was in his mind. He sent his runners through the town, placing a *kapu* on all work by his male subjects for two days. All able men were to report at the harbor and go aboard the king’s brig *Neo* to salvage the oil from *Helvetius*.

At two a.m. on November 11, *Neo*, swarming with Hawaiians, was towed out of the harbor. Kauikeaouli himself was aboard to direct operations. Two hours later the brig *Loriot*, owned at this time by John C. Jones, and the schooner *Unity*, belonging to William French, were also towed through the channel. The stiff southwest wind had died away, and gentle westerly trades were blowing. The sea was calm.

The day was spent getting ready to unload the oil. Reynolds wrote: “Commenced getting the empty casks from between decks. Cut the upper deck at fore and main hatches—tackled to the mainmast. . . . Cut the upper side of the lower Deck. By three p.m. got under good way in getting oil out.”⁵

During the night of November 11 the salvage vessels lay off and on Waikiki until they had light enough to continue their work, and at seven the next morning, they started cutting away the mainmast. By this time the king’s brig *Becket* was taking a main role in the operations. But *Helvetius* had come to her end. Weakened by two days of incessant pounding on the reef, with her masts and rigging gone, the larboard side fell in, and out from the huge hole in her hull floated her barrels of oil.

The Hawaiians wailed. Kauikeaouli saw his dreams of salvage vanishing. He hesitated only a moment; then, standing on *Neo*’s deck, he shouted to his subjects, ordering them into the ocean after the barrels! That morning, swimming and struggling, the Hawaiians salvaged between four and six hundred barrels of oil and safely stored them aboard *Neo* and *Becket*. All easily removable stores were lightered to *Unity* and *Loriot*, and the wreck was left to the waves. Wrote the American Protestant mission business agent, Levi Chamberlain: “The sight of a ship dismasted beating on the rocks is a very melancholy one.”

The four salvage vessels arrived in Honolulu harbor and began discharging oil and provisions. Reynolds called at once on Consul John C. Jones and asked him what to do with *Helvetius*’ crew, all of whom were safe. It was Jones’ responsibility to provide for them until they could either be shipped out on other vessels or given jobs ashore. Apparently they were accommodated at Alex Smith’s (a grog shop as well as a boarding house), because sixteen days

later Smith presented Jones a bill for \$46.50 for providing extras for them. Jones objected; only their board and room could be paid for by the U.S. government, and the consul felt that Smith was making unauthorized charges. We do not know the outcome of this dispute.

In the Honolulu of the 1830s, each trader fought the other, taking all the advantage he could get. The only time they banded together was when they battled the American mission and its reforms. Now the question was, How much of the oil and provisions rescued from *Helvetius* was salvage, and how much belonged to the ship's owners?

Captain Brewster was an experienced sailor, although only twenty-three years old when *Helvetius* died on the reef. He came of an old Stonington seafaring family. His father and two brothers were sea captains. George started his maritime career when he was nine years old, shipping as cabin boy on a coastal vessel plying between New London and New York. He had made trips to the Mediterranean and had gone sealing and whaling out of New London to the Atlantic whaling grounds, gradually working his way up until, in 1831, he got his first command—the whaling bark *Frances*. *Helvetius* was his second. Now he fought to retrieve his cargo and to protect his owners' rights from the Honolulu traders.

Reynolds appointed a committee to decide on the amount of salvage due each salvor; this group (John C. Jones, Kauikeaouli, William French, George Pelly, and George Brewster) met with Reynolds and concluded that each salvor would get one third of the oil he had saved. Quarrelsome Pelly, Hudson's Bay Factor in Honolulu at the time, had edged himself into the picture thus: Standing on the sands of Waikiki on November 14, Reynolds at Brewster's order had auctioned off what remained of the wreck, and Pelly had bid her in at \$340.00. Kauikeaouli had been completely discouraged when told that he had better sell his salvaged oil to an American cheaply, because, after it had passed into his hands, it had become foreign oil and therefore subject to payment of the tariff as such before it could enter the U.S. Kauikeaouli had appointed Pelly his agent, telling him to sell the oil in Honolulu. William Sturgis Hinckley, American trader and owner of several ships, bought the king's share of the salvage from Pelly.

Day after day Reynolds auctioned off sails, chains, boats, cables, anchors, rigging, spars, barrels of salt pork and beef from *Helvetius*. Hinckley finally won the commission of transporting the oil back to New London on his bark, *Don Quixote*, with freight charges set at \$4.70 a barrel for oil belonging to others, and at \$4.25 for oil salvaged by Brewster's own crew. Brewster himself was to sail as mate of *Don Quixote* under master John Paty. So the oil began to go aboard *Don Quixote*.

Then Brewster and Pelly quarreled. Pelly maintained that *Helvetius'* affairs no longer concerned Brewster; they were Pelly's business now that he had bought the wreck. Pelly also demanded an extra commission for handling matters! Brewster protested. Both parties willing, a two-man board of arbitration was set up: William French for Pelly; Ranaulph Dacre, supercargo of the British brig *Mary Dacre*, for Brewster. The board awarded a five percent

commission to Pelly, and each arbitrator got \$5.00 for his work. Dacre immediately gave his five to the Oahu Charity School in Honolulu.

But George Brewster's troubles were not over; now the traders, Brinsmade and Ladd, entered the scene. They called on Brewster with the news that they had been hired to represent the crew. The crew wanted one third of the value of the oil they had salvaged from *Helvetius*. They finally were awarded two and one half percent of the worth of cargo they had salvaged from their own ship! Beset on all sides, Brewster relieved his tensions by going shopping to replenish his lost wardrobe. At William French's he bought a beaver hat for \$7.00, and a canister of tea for \$1.00.

On January 7, 1835, *Don Quixote*, master John Paty and mate George Brewster, sailed for New London. Aboard were hides, as well as *Helvetius'* oil. Of this oil, only 203 barrels now belonged to the former owners of the wrecked ship; Hinckley had bought the remainder. Eight adult passengers and four children were on hand.

It was an eventful voyage. Off the coast of South America the bark sprang a leak, and on April 2 put into Valparaiso for repairs. On April 20 she set out again, but used up all her provisions about June 19, in the Caribbean. Fortunately she met *Niobe* of Baltimore and was able to re-stock. On July 1, 1835 she arrived at New London, and began landing the 203 barrels belonging to *Helvetius'* owners. It is interesting to speculate on how much they lost. They carried \$12,000 insurance on their ship, but we are not told how much Brewster retrieved from auction sales in Honolulu.⁶

This misfortune did not end Captain Brewster's nautical career. He sailed again a few months later as mate on the whaler *Philetus*. Still later he became master of several merchant ships, even making one trading voyage around the world. In 1855 he retired from seafaring and settled in Stonington, his home town. He then had plenty of opportunity to wear a beaver hat, for he was elected to the General Assembly of Connecticut, was chosen twice as Selectman, and was a member of the Board of Borough Burgesses, a Justice of the Peace, and a Director of the Stonington Savings Bank. His death was melodramatic. Standing over the casket of his elderly aunt, delivering her funeral eulogy, he was suddenly stricken with a heart attack, and died at once, aged 71.

Helvetius' wreck lay on the reef for two months. Daily groups of Hawaiians, swimming and in canoes, visited her, removing whatever they could find to sell in town. Late in January George Pelly, angered by the pilfering, hired *Becket* to go out and bring what was left of the hull into Honolulu harbor. For \$7.25 William French unloaded the hull and had it carried into Pelly's yard. On October 14, 1835, while repairing the British whaler *Tuscan* it was found that her bowsprit was too rotten to use again; fortunately *Helvetius'* bowsprit was in good condition and an excellent fit besides. So once again part of Stephen Girard's old "Philosopher" put to sea. There is no record of what happened to the figurehead.

"Philosopher" *Rousseau*, auctioned off at the same time as *Helvetius* to settle Girard's estate, was bid in at \$9,400 by George Howland, a Quaker of New Bedford. While altering the ship for whaling, Howland, who disliked

Rousseau's philosophy, had the figurehead destroyed. However, he did not change *Rousseau's* name. There are two possible explanations: (1) To do so would have entailed additional expense and fees, according to U.S. maritime regulations; (2) in sailors' lore, to change a vessel's name brought bad luck to the ship. The Hawaiians in purchasing ships paid no attention to this superstition, always giving a Hawaiian name to the vessels they bought. For many years *Rousseau* sailed the Pacific, and was in and out of Honolulu harbor. In 1893, still belonging to the Howland family, she was condemned as unseaworthy and destroyed in New Bedford.⁷

NOTES

¹ Her owners were: Acors Barnes, John Brandige, George R. Lewis, Thomas W. Williams, Jonathan Starr, Jr., Robert Coit, Thomas Potter, Ebenezer Learned, all of New London, Connecticut. From Norwich there were William Williams, Jr., William H. Law, Alfred Lee, Joseph Perkins. From Stonington was Ephraim William and from Westerly, Rhode Island were Amos Barnes and Rouse Babcock (New London Custom House Records, Permanent Register No. 17, Mystic Seaport Marine Historical Association, Inc.)

² It was not until later that Stephen Reynolds established his residence on Union and Hotel Streets. In 1834 he was living over his trading store at the location indicated (Stephen Reynolds Journal, March 13, 1838). A letter of January 15, 1968 from the Peabody Museum, Ernest Dodge, Director, gives the author permission to use quotations from this journal.

³ Stephen Reynolds Journal, Nov. 9, 1834.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, Nov. 10, 1834.

⁶ *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), Friday, May 15, 1835. The following insurance companies in New London issued insurance on *Helvetius*: The Union Office, \$5,000; Marine and Fire Insurance Office, \$7,000.

⁷ Other sources used but not identified in footnotes include: Henry W. Arey, *Girard College and Its Founder* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, Printer, 1854), passim.; Marion V. Brewington, *Shipcarvers of North America* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishing Co., 1962), p. 35; M. V. Brewington, "Maritime Philadelphia, 1609-1837," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 63, p. 111; Charles Lyon Chandler, "Early Ship Building on the River Delaware," *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, Vol. 213, No. 5 (May, 1932), p. 541; John Bach McMaster, *The Life and Times of Stephen Girard, Mariner and Merchant* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1918), Vols. I and II, passim.; Harry Emerson Wildes, *Lonely Midas. The Story of Stephen Girard* (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, Inc., 1943), passim.; *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), July 11, 1832 and May 13, July 14, 1835; *Daily Evening Transcript* (Boston), May 19, May 30, June 13, July 1 and July 13, 1835; *Evening Mercantile* (Boston), May 13, June 13, July 6 and July 13, 1835; *Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot* (Boston), May 12 and May 16, 1835; *Ka Lama Hawaii* (Lahaina, Maui), Maraki 28, 1834; *The New London Gazette*, April 4, 1832, Jan. 22, 1834 and July 1, 1835; SIG, 1836-1838, passim.; *The Stonington Mirror*, Sept. 2, 1882; Levi Chamberlain Journal, Nov. 10, 1834; William French Account Book, Nov. 22, Dec. 22 and 30, 1834 and Jan. 16, 1835; Broadside, "The Marine Association for the Suppression of Intemperance," April 14, 1834; Emma Brewster Jones, *The Brewster Genealogy* (Boston: 1908), p. 335; Stephen Girard records and letters, Girard College Library, Philadelphia; Directory, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1808.