

The “Wily Savage” A Tale of Kamehameha’s Time

Donald D. Johnson

In the Bancroft Library collection at the University of California, Berkeley, is a manuscript entitled “Solid Men of Boston.” Historian Adele Ogden has attributed the document to William Dane Phelps of Boston, on the basis of some clever historical detective work, and she has tentatively dated it at about 1868.

The manuscript deals with the early experiences of New England men in the fur trade of the Pacific coast, from Alaska down to California and Mexico. The period involved runs roughly from the 1780s to 1815. Hawaii figures prominently in the story, especially since Phelps has based much of his manuscript on journals kept by members of Boston’s Winship family, whose contract with Kamehameha in 1812 purported to establish a joint monopoly of the sandalwood trade from those islands to China.

At several points the Phelps manuscript gives us revealing insights into the attitudes of the Boston men of the time, and of Phelps’ own time, concerning Pacific islanders and the peoples of the northwest coast. One of Phelps’ stories concerning Kamehameha I and his dealings with foreigners at Honolulu bears repeating for these reasons.

It seems that the Hawaiian monarch had entered into a contract with two of the Winships and Captain William Heath Davis, by which the latter were granted control over the export of sandalwood and cotton from the islands. The full text of the contract is given here in Phelps’ manuscript. Then, after the first cargo of sandalwood had been sent to China (cotton apparently did not become an export crop from Hawaii in this period), the War of 1812 broke out. British sea power was so strong on the Pacific that American traders were effectually bottled up in various ports, including Honolulu. The manuscript notes the capture of the trading ship *Charon* and adds that the Winships’ *O’Cain*, *Isabella*, and *Albatross* “were blockaded nearly three years at Hawaii.” Then comes the story:

Donald D. Johnson is Professor of History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

When the ships were blockaded in Honolulu, there had been a considerable quantity of the above articles [sandalwood] sold in Canton, and there remained in the hands of J. P. Cushing, Esq., at Canton, about \$80,000 to the credit of the King, waiting for an opportunity of remitting it to him with safety. Mr. Cushing chartered a Portuguese ship at last, and dispatched for the Islands, but the captain delayed her departure until he lost the Moonsoon [sic], put into Manilla, and waited a change, and was six months in reaching Oahu, which he ought to have done in sixty days. In consequence of the non-arrival of the vessel from China with the money and goods belonging to the King, the company were placed in an awkward position, which was increased by the false representations of an Englishman who had resided many years with the King. (John Young, afterwards Governor of Oahu). Acting for the interests of an English concern in Canton, he influenced the King to believe that the company never meant to pay him, and he refused to fulfill the contract. On the arrival of the Portuguese ship the captain was instructed by the company to deliver the China goods to the King, being one-half of the amount due him, but to keep the dollars on board, intending to retain the money in their hands as security for the King's good faith. In case, however, that an English ship of war should make her appearance off the harbor, the captain was then to land the specie as the property of Tamaahmaah to prevent its being captured but by an ingenious ruse of the wily savage, was prevented. One of the King's daughters was an inmate of the residence occupied by the captain; she overheard the conversation with the Portuguese captain and the instructions he received from the company, and of course informed her royal father of the whole matter, and he soon brought the proverbial deceit and cunning of the 'Islands of the Pacific' in to play against Yankee caution. It was usual in those days to keep a lookout from Diamond Hill (a high promontory south of the harbor), for vessels heaving in sight and bound in. The signal was made by one or two natives appearing on the summit and holding up their arms. The character or size of the vessel was indicated by the number of persons exhibited, viz: for a small vessel but one or two were seen, and proportionally for a larger; for a large man-of-war, and approaching the harbor, the notice was given by an excited crowd on the mount. Having his plans secretly arranged, the signal was made, a big ship of war coming, and the word was soon spread, she had English colors. The Portuguese captain hastened to land the money; the King received it and the big ship disappeared.

Here the story ends, followed by another comment on the perfidy of Polynesian chiefs who more than once failed to keep contracts signed with these good Boston merchants. There is an interesting contrast in the judgments meted out by the author of the manuscript to New England businessmen on the one hand and to Polynesian and Northwest coast Indians on the other. What is condoned or even praised as "Yankee caution" or shrewd business practice for one is condemned as treachery or dishonesty for the other.

It makes a good story, anyway, though one wonders at the ease with which an "excited crowd" could be mustered on the summit of Mount Leahi. From all available evidence, moreover, the great Kamehameha was no longer resident on the island of Oahu at the time of this supposed event. And the identity of the "daughter of the king," her choice of residence, language skills, etc., remain clouded in mystery. Finally, the writer of this note is not aware of any corroborating evidence for this story from any contemporary sources. Perhaps this was just one of the tales with which old sea captains once whiled away the hours in Boston, or in Honolulu.