

# The Daily Astorian.

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No. 133.

## SEVENTY YEARS AGO.

John Jacob Astor's Letter to Hon. John Quincy Adams, Relative to the American Establishment of Astoria.

New York, Jan. 4, 1813.

Sir:—I have the honor to receive your letter of the 24th ultimo. Indisposition has prevented me from acknowledging the receipt thereof at an earlier period.

You request information of arrangements made at or about 1814, by the northwest company and citizens of the United States, by which that company became possessed of a settlement made at the mouth of the Columbia river by citizens of the United States. The settlement to which you allude I presume is "Astoria," as I know of no other having been made at or near the mouth of that river. Several circumstances are alleged as having contributed to the arrangements by which the northwest company came into possession of that settlement, but chiefly to the misuse of confidence which had been placed in Mr. McDougal, who at the time the arrangements were made, and at the time my agent, Mr. Wilson G. Hunt, was absent, acted as sub-agent.

I beg leave briefly to state that contemplating to make an establishment at the mouth of the Columbia river, which should serve as a place depot and give further facilities for conducting a trade across the continent to that river and thence to the ranges of the northwest coast and country to Canton in China, and from thence to the United States. Arrangements were accordingly made, in 1810, for a party of men to cross the continent for the Columbia river. At the same time I fitted out the ship Tonquin, carrying twenty guns and sixty men commanded by the late Captain Thorn, lieutenant in the United States navy.

The ship sailed in September, 1810, having on board the means of making an establishment at Columbia where they arrived on the 22nd of March, 1811. They landed, found the natives friendly and built a fort, erected a house, stores, &c. This being accomplished, Captain Thorn left thirty men in possession of the place to await the party who were to make a voyage overland, these also happily arrived, though not till several months after. On or about the 14th of June, Captain Thorn left the Columbia river with a train to make some trade on the coast and then return to the river, but unfortunately Thorn never returned. At about two hundred miles north of the Columbia he put in a bay to trade with the natives. Not attending to the precautions necessary, as he had been instructed to do, to guard against an attack, he suffered a whole tribe of Indians to come on board and about the ship. An attack was made; he was overpowered, fire was communicated to the magazine, the ship was blown up and every soul on board or near her perished.

In 1811, I fitted out another ship, the Beaver, carrying twenty guns with a duplicate cargo to the ship Tonquin and sixty or seventy men. The captain, Fowles, was instructed to sail for the Columbia river and in search of the men who were sent across the continent, as also of the Tonquin. The Beaver sailed from this port in October, 1811, arrived in Columbia in May following; found the establishment and landed such men, goods, provisions, etc., as the establishment was in need of.

My instructions to the captain were that after supplying the establishment, he should proceed to

"Chatka," a Russian settlement, for the purpose of trade, and then return to Columbia, take what furs we had and proceed to Canton and thence to New York; had accordingly left Columbia (and most unfortunately Mr. Hunt, of Trenton, New Jersey, my chief agent on the river with him, sailed as directed for the Russian settlement and effected the object; but instead of following instructions to return to Columbia he sailed direct for Canton leaving Mr. Hunt at the Sandwich Islands to await the arrival of another ship which I promised to send from this port in 1812.

The ship Beaver arrived in Canton and received there the news of the war. I had sent orders to the captain to return to Astoria but he was fearful of being captured and remained in safety at Canton till the war was over, when he came home. In consequence of the war, found it inconvenient to send a ship in 1812, but I did send the Lark early in 1813, with directions to the captain to sail for Columbia and to stop at the Sandwich Islands for information.

Being within a days sail of those islands the ship in a squall of wind was upset, and finally crippled on the beach of one of those islands, a wreck, ship and cargo totally lost. Here was met Mr. Hunt, who after all the information he received, and my great desire to protect the establishment at the Columbia river, procured an American vessel, took some provisions, sailed and arrived in Columbia river. He there learned that Mr. McDougal had transferred all my property to the Northwest company, who when in possession of it by a sale, as he called it, for the sum of about fifty-eight thousand dollars, of which he retained fourteen thousand dollars for wages said to be due some of the men from the price obtained for the goods, and he having himself become interested in the purchase and made a partner of the Northwest company, some idea may be formed of this man's correctness of dealing. It will be seen by the agreement (that of which I transmit a copy) and the inventory that he sold to the Northwest company eighteen thousand one hundred and seventy and a quarter pounds of beaver at two dollars, which was at that time selling at Canton at five and six dollars a pound; nine hundred and seventy other skins at fifty or half dollar, which were selling at Canton at \$5 and \$6 per skin.

I estimated the whole property to be worth nearer two hundred thousand dollars than forty thousand. About the sum I received in bills on Montreal. Previous to the transaction of Mr. Dougall who had already established trading posts in the interior and were in contact with the Northwest company. It is now to be seen what means have been used by them to counteract my plan. It is well known that as soon as the Northwest company had information of my intention and plan for conducting my commercial operations, they dispatched a party of men from the interior with a view to arrive before my people at the Columbia. These men were obliged to return without affecting their object. In the meantime representations were made to their government as to the probable effect of my operations on their interests and requesting to interpose in their behalf. This being in time of peace the government did not deem it advisable to do so. So soon, however, as war was declared those representations were

renewed. Aid was asked from the government and it was granted. The frigate Phoebe and sloop-of-war Ranecon and Porcupine were sent from England with orders to proceed to Columbia river and destroy my property. They sailed from England early in January 1813.

Arrived at Rio Janeiro, Admiral Dickson ordered the Phoebe frigate with one sloop to pursue Capt. Porter in the frigate Essex, and the sloop-of-war Ranecon to the Columbia. She arrived there, took possession in the name of the king, and changed the name of the place from Astoria to Fort George. Previous to this the Northwest company had dispatched another or second party of men to the Columbia. They arrived in absence of Mr. Hunt. Mr. McDougal gave them support and protection and they commenced after some time to negotiate with this gentleman.

The reason assigned by him for his conduct will be seen by an extract of a letter said to be sent by a Mr. Shaw to the Northwest company, and of which I send a copy. The plan by me adopted was such as must materially have affected the Northwest company and the Hudson Bay company, and it was easy to be foreseen that they would employ every means to counteract my operations, and which, as my impressions, I stated to the executive of your department as early as February, 1813, as will be seen by the copy of a sketch of a letter which I wrote to the secretary of state, to which no reply was given. On repeated applications some time after, aid was promised me, but I believe the situation of our country rendered it inconvenient to give it. You will observe that the name of the Pacific Fur company is made use of at the commencement of the arrangements for this undertaking. I preferred to have it appear as a business of a company rather than that of an individual, and several of the gentlemen engaged—Mr. Hunt, Mr. Crooks, Mr. McKay, Mr. McDougal, and Stuard—as were in effect, to be interested as partners in the undertaking, so far as respecting the project which might arise, but means were furnished by me and the property was solely mine, and I sustained the loss which, though considerable, I do not regret, because had it not been for the unfortunate occurrence just stated, I should have been, as I believe, most richly rewarded, as it will be seen that the difference of price in beaver and other skins alone, say what I received and the value of them at Canton at that time, is about \$60,000. I am, sir, your obedient servant.

JOHN JACOB ASTOR.

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Yours truly, JOHN F. FLETCHER.

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