



A REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

John Boit's Log, May 1792 - Excerpt

from *Voyages of the "Columbia" to the Northwest Coast, 1787-90 and 1790-1792*, edited by Frederic W. Howay.

The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1941

This document includes excerpts from John Boit's Log in May 1792. Boit sailed with the American Captain, Robert Gray. Notes from Frederic Howay are summarized and included below.

At Gray's Harbor

"Vast many Canoes along side, full of Indians. they brought a great many furs which we purchas'd cheap for Blanketts and Iron We was fearfull to send a Boat on discovery but I've no doubt we was at the Entrance of some great river, as the water was brackish and the tide set out half the time." [May 8, 1792] [Note: There is an account of the crew shooting at this group and even killing some. The editor surmises that the Indians may have been a party from the south.]

"Very pleasant weather, many canoes came along side from down river, [meaning upper parts of the Chehalis and Columbia rivers] and brought plenty of Skins, likewise some canoes from the tribes that first visited us. . . These Natives brought us some fine Salmon and plenty of Beaver Skins, with some Otters, and I believe had we staid longer among them we shou'd have done well." [May 1792, #9]

"Weigh'd and Came to sail, and stretch'd clear of the barr. Named the harbor we had Left, after our Captain, Standing to the South." [May 1792, #11]

"This day saw an appearance of a spacious harbor abrest the Ship, haul'd our wind for itt, observ'd two sand bars making off, with a passage between them to a fine river. Out pinnace and sent her in ahead and followed with the Ship under short sail, carried in from ½ three to 7 f[atho]m, and when over the bar had 10 f[atho]m Water quite fresh. the River extended to the NE as far as eye cou'd reach, and water fit to drink as far down as the Bars, at the entrance. we directed our course up this noble river in search of a Village. The beach was lin'd with Natives, who ran along shore following the Ship. Soon after above 20 Canoes came off, and brought a good lot of Furs and Salmon, which last they sold two for a board Nail. the furs we likewise bought cheap, for Copper and Cloth. they appear'd to view the Ship with the greatest astonishment and no doubt we was the first civilized people that they ever saw. We observ'd some of the same people we had before seen at Gray's harbor, and perhaps that was a branch of this same River. at length we arriv'd opposite to a large village, situate on the North side of the river about 5 leagues from the entrance, came too in 10 f[atho]m sand, about ¼ mile from shore. The river at this place was about 4 miles over. We purchas'd 4 Otter Skins for a Sheet of Copper, Beaver Skins, 2 Spikes each, and other land furs, 1 Spike each.

“We lay in this place till the 20th May, during which time we put the Ship in good order and fill’d up all the water casks along side itt being very good. These Natives talk’d the same language as those farther South, but we cou’d not learn itt. Observ’d tha the Canoes that came down river brought no Otter Skins, and I believe the Otter constantly keeps in Salt water. they however always came well stocked with land furs and capitall Salmon. The tide sett down the whole time and was rapid. Whole trees sometimes come dwon with the Stream. [33] The Indians inform’d us there was 50 Villages on the banks of this river.” [May 1792, #12]

Editor’s note associated with the above entry: The Columbia was a ship of only 212 tons and drew six to eight feet of water, “the extreme draft of vessels entering Gray’s Harbor before any dredging was done on the bar. The fact that Captain Gray left this harbor at evening and sailed directly southward all night, and the next morning ‘at 4 A.M. saw the entrance of our desired port bearing east-southeast, distance six leagues,’ suggests that he had obtained from the Indians of Gray’s Harbor some definite information as to the existence of a large river at Cape Disappointment. Boit mentions later on that he recognized some of these same Indians around the ship in the Columbia River, but this is doubtful” (Howay 1941: 396, fn 1).

“On the 15th took up the Anchor, and stood up River but soon found the water to be shoal so that the Ship took the Ground, after proceeding 7 or 8 miles from our 1st station, however soon got off again. Sent the Cutter and found the main Channel was on the South side, and that there was a sand bank in the middle, as we did not expect to procure Otter furs at any distance from the Sea, we contented ourselves in our present situation which was a very pleasant one. I landed abrest the Ship with Capt. Gray to view the Country and take possession, leaving charge with the 2d Officer. Found much clear ground, fit for Cultivation and the woods mostly clear from Underbrush. none of the Natives come near us.” [May 1792, entry #15]

Editor’s Note: The fresh water “can be explained by the fact that the river was then in flood with the spring freshets. In October of the same year Lieutenant Broughton of the *Chatham* did not find this condition of fresh water, and did not find as much depth of water on the sand bars further upstream. This accounts considerably for the criticisms by Broughton and Vancouver of the chart or sketch of the river given by Captain Gray to Captain Vancouver when at Nootka. That chart has never been found” (Howay 1941: 397, fn 1).

Editor’s Note: The village site referred to above was at Middle Village, “now known as McGowans and a little southwest of Point Ellice on the north bank of the river” (Howay 1941: 397, fn 2).

Editor’s Note: “The words ‘and take possession’ were inserted at a later time and are in a quite different ink. . . The interpolated words suggest a ceremony which is not yet known to have actually taken place, and one which would have been of great value to the United States officials during the boundary disputes prior to the treaty of 1846. During the first session of the Thirty-second Congress a bill was introduced for the relief of Martha Gray, widow of Captain Robert Gray, and of the heirs or Captain John Kendrick (S.B. Bill Number 526), and in that connection, on August 11, 1852, a report was filed which contained unsupported statements as to such an act of taking possession. . . “ (Howay 1941: 398, fn. 3 & 4).

“Shifted the Ship’s berth to her Old Station abreast the Village Chinoak, command’d by a chief named Polack. Vast many Canoes full of Indians from different parts of the river where constantly along side. Capt. Grays named this river Columbia’s, and the North entrance Cape Hancock, and the South Point Adams. This river in my opinion, wou’d be a fine place for to sett up a Factory. The Indians are very numerous, and appear’d very civill (not even offering to steal). during our short stay we collected 150 Otter, 300 Beaver, and twice the Number of other land furs. the river abounds with excellent Salmon, and most other River fish, and the Woods with plenty of Moose and Deer, the skins of which was brought us in great plenty, and the Banks produces a ground Nut, which is an excellent substitute for either bread or Potatoes, We found plenty of Oak, Ash, and Walnut trees, and clear ground in plenty, which with little labour might be made fit to raise such seeds as is necessary for the sustenance of inhabitants, and in short a factory set up here and another at Hancock’s River in the [34] Queen Charlotte Isles, wou’d engross the whole trade of the NW Coast (with the help [of] a few small coasting vessels.” [May 1792, entry #18]

Editor’s Note: Polack was a predecessor to Comcomly.

“This day left Columbia’s River, and stood clear of the bars, and bore off to the Northward The Men at Columbia’s River are strait lim’d, fine looking fellows, and the women are very pretty. they are all in a state of Nature, except the females, who wear a leaf Apron (perhaps ‘twas a fig leaf). But some of our gentlemen, that examin’d them pretty close, and near, both within and without reported that it was not a leaf but a nice wove mat in resemblance! !” [May 1792, entry #20].