

Captain Waterman sailed ahead

By Jerry Bowen

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Fairfield is celebrating a yearlong centennial in observance of the city's incorporation in 1903. I thought a series of articles on Captain "Bully" Waterman, Fairfield's founder, would be appropriate and would bring to light what appears to be some questionable history linked to him.

With that said, I will start with a detailed description of his last voyage as a captain before he settled in Solano County.

Captain Robert Waterman had severe reservations about sailing the good ship Challenge with the motley crew he had the misfortune of having to accept. They were jailbirds, the dregs of society, and all were below decks - drugged, drunk, sick or diseased - as longshoremen moved the ship from the South Street Pier to Battery Point off the tip of Manhattan.

There were few good seamen available since the gold rush to California had begun. Of the entire mangy group, he knew of only six that had any experience sailing a ship. Most didn't even speak English and wouldn't be able to understand commands.

The Challenge was designed to be faster than any ship that had come before.

The eminent marine architect commissioned to build it, John Griffiths, worked with the New York shipbuilder William H. Webb and Captain Robert Waterman on the design and all three joined in the effort to build the ship.

Waterman thought the Griswold brothers sponsoring the journey should have made more of an effort to recruit a good crew for a ship they owned. They were expecting Waterman to set another record, as he had done aboard the Sea Witch in 1849, and he berated himself for not having taken a greater part in the recruitment of the Challenge's crew.

The tough old captain took his anger out on the First Mate before they set sail for accepting such a derelict crew. When the First Mate talked back, Waterman fired him on the spot, ordering him to leave the ship with the longshoremen and the pilot.

With a cargo aboard from New York valued at \$60,000 and a promised \$10,000 bonus if he brought the Challenge through the Golden Gate by Oct. 11, 1851, and no First

Mate, Captain Waterman's fears were easily justified.

The Challenge swayed at anchor as Waterman watched the men stagger up on deck in a stupor. He considered promoting his second mate, Alexander Coghill, to First Mate when he noticed a boat from a nearby ship, the Guy Mannering, coming alongside. A man seated in the stern hailed the quarterdeck of the Challenge.

The man was James Douglass and Waterman immediately recognized him. He was known as "Black Douglass," one of the toughest First Mates in the fleet. Douglass immediately explained that it was necessary to be tough on the crew of the ship he just left, and now it was unsafe for him to remain in port and preferred to go back to sea. Faced with his own dire predicament, Waterman hired him on the spot as First Mate. He knew strict discipline would be very necessary with this crew.

In spite of all the problems, the Challenge put to sea bound for San Francisco on July 13, 1851.

After his usual speech at the beginning of each cruise to let the crew know exactly what he expected from each and every one of them, the crew was divided up into watches. First Mate Douglass was assigned the port watch and the starboard watch was assigned to Second Mate Coghill. Each selected the men who would stand watch with them.

While Waterman was giving his talk to the crew, Douglass and Coghill went below deck to search through the crew's seabags and chests. As expected, they found hidden stores of rum, slingshots, daggers, bowie knives, and knuckledusters along with a few pistols. All of these were all tossed over the rail.

Problems immediately began to mount as light winds were encountered on the first leg of the voyage to the equator. Irritation grew for Waterman, as he was unable to maintain more than six knots, the required speed to make San Francisco on time. With each passing day, he began to take his frustrations out on those around him.

Conditions aboard the Challenge, for the times, were better and more comfortable, with plenty of good food, but were lost on this crew of malcontents.

As the Challenge continued toward the southern tip of South America, the weather remained mild, so Waterman began extending the yardarms as much as 90 to 160 feet and adding extra sail in order to squeeze out every knot of speed he could. This was usually a very dangerous maneuver, even with an experienced crew. Waterman had a reputation for keeping extra sail on as the weather began to turn sour, even to the point of adding padlocks in the rigging when crewmembers began to complain of the danger

of working aloft.

With little wind and mind-numbing heat, tempers began to flare. The malcontent crew's malingering wasn't setting well with Douglass, who didn't hesitate to use a belaying pin to enforce his orders.

Waterman had always been a believer in enforcing strict discipline and also applied force as he saw fit, although not normally to the extent that Douglass did.

Waterman later recalled, "They would fight among themselves, cut, gouge, bite and kept in a continual row." One of the men died as sickness increased with the relentless heat. The heat raised boils on the men's skin and chafed under their clothing. Crewmen shirked their duties and tempers flared.

The Challenge became known as a "hell ship" and was ripe for mutiny. It wouldn't take much of a spark to set it off under the conditions being experienced.

As the Challenge rounded the Cape de Sao Roque, on Aug. 17 and sailed down the Brazilian coast, one of the men complained that some of his gear was missing. The incident ignited a series of events that would shadow Waterman for the rest of his life.

To be continued.

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