

THE MAYFLOWER OF THE WEST

The sweeping panoramas that are the views from the windows and walkways of the Wickaninnish Inn and Pointe Restaurant encompass a clear line-of-sight, across Templar Channel to Echachist Island.

For centuries a vibrant centre of Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation whaling, fishing, ceremony and trade, the beaches and forests of Echachist now lie silent and almost deserted.

On a June morning in 1811 Echachist echoed with the chants and prayers of the warriors of the Wolf Clan as they prepared to attack a ship, lying at anchor just offshore.

The ship was the American fur-trading vessel *TONQUIN* and what was about to unfold would prove to be a defining, pivotal moment in the intertwined histories of Euro-Americans and North America's original inhabitants.

June 1810 – New York-based fur baron John Jacob Astor founds the Pacific Fur Company, with a view of breaking the British and Russian monopoly of the lucrative sea otter trade on the Northwest Coast of America.

With a warrant from the President of the United States to establish that country's first permanent outpost on the Pacific Coast and the backing of a number of influential partners Astor purchased the three-year-old vessel *TONQUIN* and fits her out for a voyage that will see her, amongst other things, become America's *MAYFLOWER* of the West.

The *TONQUIN* was 98 feet in length and pierced for twenty guns, however, the exact number and type of cannon carried is not exactly known.

August 1810 – Astor signs on United States Navy Lieutenant Jonathan Thorn as the *TONQUIN*'s master. At the age of 32 Thorn is a career Navy man, a hero of the Tripoli Wars with the Barbary Pirates and the first and still the youngest ever Superintendent of the New York Navy Yard.

Frustrated by his high profile yet unsatisfying desk job and eager to gain more sea time Thorn eagerly accepts Astor's offer of command and takes a leave of absence from the United States Navy.

The *TONQUIN* is supplied and fitted out for an extended trading voyage.

Her mission will be to sail via Cape Horn for Hawaii where she will re-supply and take on further crew and then proceed on to the Columbia River, where she will establish a fort and trading post.

Having done this she will cruise the coast of what is now British Columbia, trading with First Nations for sea otter furs and thence on to Sitka, Alaska where she will deliver to the Russian American Company a substantial amount of gunpowder, in return for additional furs.

On completing her cargo she will sail for Canton to exchange her furs for spice, ceramics, tea and silk, then return to New York to make Astor yet another fortune.

September 1810 – The *TONQUIN* is ready for sea.

Onboard are four of Astor's partners in the enterprise; experienced Scots-Canadian fur traders Alexander McKay, Duncan McDougal, David Stuart and his brother Robert.

September 1810 (cont'd) - There were eleven Canadian trading clerks, eighteen French Canadian voyageurs and a crew of twenty-one, mostly New York Quakers, including Lieutenant Thorn's sixteen-year-old brother James.

Thorn's opinion of his shipmates was far from complimentary. He felt his authority threatened by the presence of Astor's partners and accused them and the clerks of "*daintiness*" and "*effeminacy*". He considered the French Canadians "*landlubbers*", "*braggards*" and "*no better than barkeeps or tinkers*". Even his civilian American crew lacked the discipline and respect for naval authority to which Thorn was used.

Before the *TONQUIN* slipped her lines there was a violent argument between the partners and Thorn over accommodations which led to a warning by Thorn that he would "*blow out the brains*" of any man who dared to question his orders.

This warning, though wisely heeded, set the tone for future encounters.

On September 6th 1810 the *TONQUIN* set sail.

Off New York's Sandy Hook the *USS CONSTITUTION* dipped her ensign and fired a salute as the *TONQUIN* cleared the coast on the first leg of her ill-fated voyage.

October 1810 – Early in the month the Cape Verde Islands, off the coast of Africa, are sighted and although water is already being rationed Thorn, fearing an encounter with a British warship, does not put in and continues on his southward passage.

Thorn is becoming more and more annoyed with such inconsequential things as "*gossiping amongst the partners, the singing of sea-shanties, the telling of tall stories and the keeping of notes and journals*"; all things he considers distractions to the smooth running of his ship.

December 1810 – On the fourth of the month the *TONQUIN* comes in sight of one of the two hundred rugged islands that make up the Falklands archipelago.

Now desperately short of water and fuel for heat and cooking the *TONQUIN* comes to anchor at Port Egmont on Saunders Island and crews are sent ashore to fill water casks and cut tussock grass and peat for fuel.

After five days Thorn considers the vessel's needs satisfied and fires a signal cannon for those ashore to return to the ship.

One shore party, which includes one of Astor's partners, are exploring the far side of the island and fail to make it back to the ship by the appointed time.

Perhaps deciding to teach the laggards a hard lesson, Thorn orders the anchor raised and puts the *TONQUIN* out to sea.

The nine men left abandoned had no illusions about Thorn turning back for them. Seeing the ship leaving without them, they scrambled aboard their twenty-two foot boat and manned the oars with certain desperation. For three-and-a-half hours they struggled to reach the *TONQUIN* in heavy seas. At times the wind would ease and they would gain a little ground, then they would ship a large wave and the distance would increase. As the sun went down the wind shifted and the *TONQUIN* gradually lost headway, enabling the exhausted men to reach safety after a harrowing six-hour ordeal.

On Christmas Day 1810 the *TONQUIN* rounded Cape Horn and entered the Pacific Ocean.

February 1811 - On February 11th, from high atop the *TONQUIN*'s mainmast the lookout's call of "*Land Ho!*" was heard as the snowy peak of Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano rose above the horizon.

Thorn turned the ship towards Kealakekua Bay, where thirty-two years before Captain James Cook had been killed and cannibalized, and came to anchor in fourteen fathoms.

February 1811 (cont'd) – On the morning of the 13th the *TONQUIN* was surrounded by canoes manned by islanders of both sexes and overflowing with all manner of fresh fruits and vegetables. A lively trade developed in exchange for such items as glass beads, iron rings, needles, fishhooks, twine, thread and cotton goods.

Thorn had hoped to obtain a supply of pork, both live and slaughtered, then replenish his water supply and be on his way, but this proved to be wishful thinking.

The lure of such a paradise on a crew who had been too long at sea quickly became an obstacle that even Thorn, with no shortage of anger, threat or argument, could easily overcome.

Thorn could only seethe with impatience as the crew, clerks, voyageurs and partners availed themselves of the many exquisite charms that the island had to offer.

Finally, Thorn was able to get his people back on board and sailed on to King Kamehameha's royal residence at Oahu, where once more the *TONQUIN* came to anchor, off what is now Honolulu.

Kamehameha proved to be a shrewd bargainer and insisted on payment for pigs and pork in either Spanish or Mexican dollars, as he was in the process of having a warship built in a British yard and they required cold, hard cash.

Finally, a deal was struck and a hundred squealing hogs joined the goats, sheep and poultry already corralled on the *TONQUIN*'s deck.

Although the vessel was now grievously overcrowded with both men and livestock Thorn, at the urging of the partners, reluctantly took on twenty-six additional crew, mostly Hawaiian islanders; sixteen to be indentured into service at the intended fort on the Columbia and the remainder to service the ship.

On the last day of the month, as the *TONQUIN* was made ready to sail, Thorn once again demonstrated his intolerant disposition through a repeat performance of the Falkland Island affair.

A boat had been sent ashore to collect a few remaining articles when a favorable wind sprang up for the *TONQUIN* to get under weigh. Thorn ordered the anchor raised and took full advantage of the offshore breeze to stand out to sea. Some of the crew ashore scrambled to the boat and pulled on the oars for six hours in tempestuous seas until Thorn relented and hove to, in order to pick them up.

One man had been marooned due to the longboat's hasty departure.

Little did he know that he would be the luckiest man in the *TONQUIN*'s company.

March 1811 – The warm and fragrant breezes of the tropics soon gave way to the bitter squalls of the North Pacific and life onboard the *TONQUIN* became increasingly miserable. Progress slowed as one storm after another swept down upon the ship with rain, hail, sleet and snow, which froze in the rigging as it fell.

At one point, a violent argument ensued when the partners and clerks demanded that Thorn distribute cold weather clothing that they knew he held in the ships stores. Guns were brandished on both sides, but cooler heads prevailed and the matter was grudgingly resolved without bloodshed.

The most violent storm saved itself for last; freezing the sails and rigging and washing nearly all the livestock overboard.

Finally, after twenty-two days at sea, the *TONQUIN* made landfall at the mouth of the Columbia River. Standing three miles offshore Thorn's most immediate problem was to find a safe passage across the river's offshore sandbar and through the maelstrom of conflicting tides, currents, standing waves and whirlpools which guard the entrance to the Columbia.

March 1811 – Despite the fact that a gale was blowing, Lieutenant Thorn ordered his first officer, Ebenezer Fox, to lower the longboat and find a way through the waves breaking over the bar. Fox, an experienced seaman, clearly saw the impossibility of the task and made his thoughts known to Thorn, upon which the captain turned sharply to his officer and said, “*Mr. Fox, if you are afraid of water, you should have stayed in Boston*”.

Rebuked, Fox and four men set off.

They were never seen again.

The next morning, the *TONQUIN*, which overnight had drifted closer to shore came to anchor under the cliffs of the aptly named Cape Disappointment.

Three attempts to cross the bar and sound a channel were made using the ship’s pinnace.

The first two resulted in unsuccessful returns to the *TONQUIN*’s side, while on the third the pinnace was sucked into the current’s race and disappeared upriver.

The *TONQUIN* followed under partial sail and was ultimately carried across the bar by the tide, her keel grinding ominously over sandbar after sandbar and with waves breaking over her decks, forcing those aboard into the rigging.

Miraculously, the *TONQUIN* was swept into the relatively calm waters of Baker Bay, where she came to anchor for the night, but there was no sign of the pinnace or its crew.

The following morning a number of First Nations canoes approached the ship laden with furs, but with five men missing there was little appetite for trade.

Search parties were sent ashore and eventually found three survivors.

With the whole expedition by now thoroughly dispirited by the loss of eight good men during their approach to the coast, it was seen by some as an omen that boded ill for the rest of the enterprise.

April & May 1811 – With the approach of summer 1811 the nightmare voyage that had brought the *TONQUIN* to the northwest coast was beginning to fade in the minds of those that had now to turn their attention to building a settlement, fort and trading post.

The livestock that had not been washed overboard were ferried ashore and work began on assembling the prefabricated timbers of the thirty-ton schooner *DOLLY*.

Clatsop First Nation headman Daitshowan was recruited to lead an expedition upriver, in order to find a suitable location for the fort.

Four major First Nations inhabited the region where the *TONQUIN*’s people now found themselves; the north shore of the river was the territory of the Chinooks, who had been known to coastal traders since the days of Gray, Meares and Vancouver.

Their territory adjoined that of the Wahkiakum who had been first contacted by Euro-Americans only four years before by the Lewis and Clark overland expedition.

The south shore was the homeland of the Clatsop and at the mouth of the great Columbian estuary the Cathlamahs held sway.

After several expeditions upriver the decision was made to establish the new trading post between Point George, so named by the Royal Navy’s Captain George Vancouver, and Tongue Point, on the south side of the river.

Not all the partners agreed that this was the best site, but Thorn was anxious to land his cargo and be on his way northwards along the coast, to trade for furs as far as Sitka, to return briefly to the settlement in the fall and thence on to China.

As usual, Thorn got his way and twelve men with tools and provisions for a week departed in a longboat, leaving the *TONQUIN* to follow once a safe channel and anchorage could be sounded.

April & May 1811 (cont'd) -Crossing the river to the southward the *TONQUIN* finally came to anchor and work began on constructing Fort Astoria (on the site of what is now the modern-day City of Astoria).

There was work enough for everybody; land to be cleared, gardens to be planted, fort, accommodations and trading post to be constructed.

Four of the *TONQUIN*'s guns were shipped ashore and mounted on a raised emplacement. By now the area's First Nations were frequent visitors to the *TONQUIN* and the fledgling settlement. At one point, enraged by the constant stream of First Nations who were encouraged by Duncan McDougall (appointed by Astor as expedition leader) to come aboard, Thorn complained loudly of the "*Indian ragamuffins*" and promptly put an end to all bartering within the confines of the *TONQUIN*.

With all of the cargo intended for Astoria ashore Thorn was at last able to ready his ship for sea.

June 1811 – After having established Fort Astoria, Astor's orders to Thorn were to have him cruise the coasts of what are now Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and southeast Alaska, trading for sea otter furs with the area's First Nations.

The *TONQUIN* was to stop at the Sitka, Alaska headquarters of the Russian North American Company and deliver a prearranged shipment of four-and-a-half tons of black powder, in exchange for more furs.

From Sitka the *TONQUIN* was to proceed on to Canton, China, discharge her cargo and take on silk, spice, ceramics and whatever other prized products of the Orient were available. By the fall, Thorn was to return to Astoria and re-supply the fort, before returning to New York, by way of the Horn.

On June 5th 1811, the *TONQUIN* weighed anchor and picked her way through the sounded channel, across the Columbia River bar and out into the open North Pacific.

Onboard, in addition to Thorn and his crew of twenty-four, was Pacific Fur Company partner Alexander McKay and company clerk James Lewis.

Before clearing the coast the *TONQUIN* encountered a First Nation's canoe.

Amongst those onboard was a Quinalt native by the name of Joseachal, who not only spoke Chinook trading jargon and English but had acted as navigator on at least three previous Euro-American fur trading voyages and was related to the tribes of western Vancouver Island through the marriage of his sister to a Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation chieftain.

Thorn took him onboard as pilot and interpreter.

Four or five days after leaving Astoria, the *TONQUIN* entered what is now known as Clayoquot Sound and came to anchor off the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation community of Echachist.

At the time of the *TONQUIN*'s arrival, the Tla-o-qui-aht numbered some 13,000 individuals. Their territory extended from Woody Point on the Westcoast of Vancouver Island to Neah Bay on what is now the coast of Washington State.

Under the rule of their high chief Wickaninnish the Tla-o-qui-aht were known far and wide for their whaling prowess and were renowned up and down the coast for the speed and seaworthiness of their canoes.

Tla-o-qui-aht warriors were fearsome in battle, highly disciplined and extremely well armed; in addition to their traditional weaponry the Tla-o-qui-aht had in their armory at least five hundred muskets, bartered for sea otter pelts from the procession of fur traders who had been visiting their territory since the late 1780's.

June 1811 – Chief Wickaninnish had proved himself many times to be a shrewd and savvy diplomat and trader, through his interactions with British, Spanish and American visitors. Under his and his predecessor's leadership the Tla-o-qui-aht had subjugated all the other major tribes in the area and many considered him the virtual Emperor of Vancouver Island, his authority, power and wealth eclipsing that of his more famous neighbour to the north, Chief Maquinna of Nootka Sound.

Wickaninnish's dealings with the British and Spanish had been, for the most part, cordial and productive; however, there had been a number of incidents over the years, between the Tla-o-qui-aht and American traders, that had led to open conflict and gained the Tla-o-qui-aht a reputation amongst the "Boston Men" as savage and unpredictable people.

Partner Alexander McKay was aware of this and duly warned Thorn, but the advice, as was so often the case, was ignored.

Chief Wickaninnish, on at least two occasions, had attempted to purchase an armed vessel from visiting traders without success. On one occasion he had paid a hefty deposit in prime sea otter pelts for a ship to be built at Boston and had specified exactly the size, rig and armament of the vessel. The American trader who had taken the order and the deposit never returned to Clayoquot Sound.

Adding insult to injury, another U.S. vessel had arrived in the Sound in the summer of 1810, requesting the services of Tla-o-qui-aht hunters to accompany the ship on a voyage in search of fur seals.

A group of Tla-o-qui-aht signed on, but instead of being returned home after the hunt they were marooned on the Farallon Islands, off the coast of California and left to their own devices.

After an epic overland journey, in the course of which most would die at the hands of other First Nations, the two starving, wayward survivors had arrived back in Tla-o-qui-aht territory in mid-May of 1811 to tell their sad tale to their countrymen.

Just weeks after their return, the *TONQUIN*, Stars and Stripes flying at her stern, hove to and anchored in the heart of Wickaninnish's realm.

Soon after the *TONQUIN*'s arrival, Alexander McKay was invited to spend some time ashore at Echachist, leaving Thorn and Lewis to take care of business.

Trade was brisk, but as might be expected, given his overbearing nature, Thorn was soon at odds over trading practices.

He became enraged when Tla-o-qui-aht chieftain Nuukmiis complained that he was being cheated and slapped the man across the face with a rolled-up pelt.

Outraged at this insult and humiliation Nuukmiis and his men departed the ship immediately and returned to Echachist.

On learning of this incident McKay hastily re-boarded the *TONQUIN* and urged Thorn to set sail immediately, but typically his advice went unheeded.

A few days later, very early in the morning, a party of Tla-o-qui-aht in canoes, loaded with furs, came alongside the *TONQUIN* and was allowed to board.

Soon after, several more canoes arrived and their occupants too were allowed to clamber up the boarding nets to the deck, now crowded with crew and Tla-o-qui-aht and festooned with furs and trade goods of every description.

Several members of the crew, alarmed with the excessive numbers, aired their concerns to Thorn and McKay, but the Captain saw nothing to fear given the ample firearms at hand.

McKay continued to entreat Thorn to get under weigh. Finally Thorn agreed.

June 1811 (cont'd) – As soon as Thorn gave the order to make ready for sea the Tla-o-qui-aht produced knives and clubs from within their bundles of furs and attacked.

McKay was one of the first to fall; struck on the head and thrown overboard, where the women in the canoes finished him off with their sharpened paddles.

Thorn defended himself desperately, but was ultimately overpowered and bludgeoned to death.

One by one the crewmembers fell, until only those high in the rigging survived, ultimately managing to lower themselves by ropes into the ship's hold, by way of an open hatch where they reached the armory and drove the Tla-o-qui-aht back into their canoes with musket fire. During the height of battle, Joseachal, the interpreter and pilot had slipped overboard and was hidden by the womenfolk under their piles of furs.

For two years he would remain amongst the Tla-o-qui-aht, until finally making it back to Astoria to tell his tale.

Four uninjured members of the *TONQUIN*'s crew attempted to escape in the ship's boat but were quickly driven ashore by the Tla-o-qui-aht, captured, taken to Echachist, tortured and killed.

The *TONQUIN* drifted on the still waters of Templar Channel, her sails flapping uselessly in the breeze.

The following morning the Tla-o-qui-aht returned to the ship's side, where they encountered a single crewmember beckoning them to come aboard.

This lone survivor is believed to have been either clerk James Lewis or ship's armourer Stephen Weeks and although seriously wounded he had managed to lay a trail of black powder to the ship's magazine.

Once the Tla-o-qui-aht warriors had re-boarded the ship in great numbers, the last of the *TONQUIN*'s people touched a fuse to the trail of powder, resulting in a massive explosion which blew a portion of the ship's stern out, transformed the deck into a maelstrom of flying splinters and loosening the ship's seams below the waterline.

In addition to instantly killing the lone crewmember, the explosion killed upwards of one-hundred-and-fifty Tla-o-qui-aht, injured many, many more and left the surface of the sea for a hundred yards around strewn with wreckage, trade goods and body parts.

The crippled *TONQUIN* continued to float upon the summer sea, but water slowly began to fill her holds.

As the afternoon westerly wind blew up, a few surviving, able-bodied Tla-o-qui-aht attempted to tow the doomed ship, across the Channel to Tin Wis, in order to beach her, but before they could reach shore the stricken *TONQUIN* settled to the bottom, with only her masts, sails and rigging clawing at the sky.

This event so decimated the Tla-o-qui-aht warrior class that for a number of years after the womenfolk would dress and pose as warriors, whenever rival tribes approached their territory.

Word of the *TONQUIN*'s destruction traveled fast and far and wide and caused the traders to the coast to avoid Clayoquot Sound for many years to come.

The sands of Templar Channel immediately began to swallow up the wrecked ship's hull, the Tla-o-qui-aht salvaged what they could, the currents swept off loose items and the bitter storms of winter carried away what remained above the surface of the sea.

By the spring of 1812 no trace of the *TONQUIN* remained visible.

Attempts to locate the Holy Grail of British Columbia Shipwrecks have been undertaken since late in the 19th century.

With the advent of self contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA), in the late-1950's and early 1960's search efforts, by groups from British Columbia to Oregon, were mounted in earnest.

During the 1970's and '80's sophisticated remote-sensing equipment was introduced to the effort, but although some tantalizing clues were found along the way, no definitive evidence of the last resting place of the *TONQUIN* was ever found.

It was as if the sands of Clayoquot Sound guarded the *TONQUIN*'s grave jealously.

In the summer of 2003 a commercial crab-fisherman fouled one of his traps on an unknown obstruction in Templar Channel.

A local diver was called to investigate and found the trap snagged on a small piece of metal protruding from the bottom.

Further investigation showed that this object was a portion of a deeply buried anchor; this would prove to be no ordinary anchor lost by some forgotten ship.

When raised to the surface it was clearly identified as being of a type not manufactured after the year 1780.

It was of a size and design that a ship such as the *TONQUIN* would have carried.

From its' condition and orientation it was clear that it had been stowed aboard a vessel at the time of loss and was not being used to anchor one.

The twelve foot wooden stock is constructed of woods not native to the Pacific coast.

The canvas and twine wrapping on the anchor's ring was perfectly intact, but there was no evidence of an attached anchor line.

The ring itself was "frozen" 90° to the stock; indicating that it was in a stowed or "catted" position at the bow of a vessel when lost.

When the thick iron oxide concretions were removed from the anchor they contained hundreds of blue, glass beads, of a type used in the maritime fur trade prior to 1830. They constitute the largest collection of their type ever found at an archaeological site in the Pacific Northwest.

The beads themselves are covered with curious, horseshoe-shaped pockmarks that were possibly caused by an explosion.

X-rays of the iron oxide concretions show other manmade objects contained within them.

Magnetometer and sub-bottom profile surveys of the area around the anchor find show a number of deeply buried anomalies.

Core samples driven ten feet into the seafloor have retrieved more beads of the type found encrusting the anchor.

Investigations will continue for many years to come, in order to unlock the secrets of this site.

Skeptics and some individuals with vested interests scoff at any claims that these artifacts and materials might be associated with the Mayflower of the West, the Holy Grail of British Columbia Shipwrecks; the fabled *TONQUIN*.

Admittedly this evidence, though compelling, is still circumstantial but what is for certain is that no other trading vessel of the *TONQUIN*'s era was ever lost in the vicinity of the anchor find. Furthermore, the anchor's location corresponds generally to where historic accounts place the *TONQUIN*'s loss and exactly to where the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation have always known Astor's lost ship to lie.