

Tonquin (ship)

By E.W. Giesecke

The *Tonquin*, built in 1807, was described by Edmund Fanning, its builder, as “a first-rate ship and fast sailing vessel.” The ninety-four-foot, three-masted ship was copper bottomed and carried ten small cannon, mounted. On a day of strong wind in late March 1811, the crew of the *Tonquin*, out of New York, sailed the ship across the rough bar into the Columbia River.

The *Tonquin's* owner, John Jacob Astor of New York, established a fur-trading post at the mouth of the Columbia in the spring of 1811. Called Astoria, the post became the earliest EuroAmerican settlement on the Pacific Coast between Spain's San Francisco mission and Russia's New Arkhangel (Sitka). Astor's selection as the ship's commander was U.S. Navy Lieutenant Jonathan Thorn, who was on leave from the military and had no experience in the Pacific or in the fur trade. His passengers described him as irascible and insensitive to their welfare and to the well-being of the crew. A few of the ship's thirty-three passengers who debarked on the south side of the Columbia River were partners in Astor's new Pacific Fur Company, including Astoria co-founder Alexander McKay. The others were clerks (traders), voyageurs, and tradesmen; twelve were Hawaiians.

With the new post partly built, Thorn sailed from the Columbia on June 5, 1811. The plan was to find and meet with Aleksandr Baranov at New Arkhangel, to trade supplies and barrels of gunpowder for fur skins, and to return to Astoria. The summer went by, but the *Tonquin* did not return. Rumors from Indians that the crew had been attacked alarmed the settlement. The first report that the ship was lost was recorded at Astoria by Duncan McDougall on August 11. One of the Chinooks with contacts at the post had met a party of natives from the north who had passed on the news.

Reportedly, fifty to sixty canoes of the Neweetees (Nahwitti) had followed the *Tonquin* along Vancouver Island, and some of the Nuu-chah-nulth tribe had joined in near Nootka Sound. As described later in memoirs by some of the passengers left behind at the new settlement—Robert Stuart, Gabriel Franchère, and Alexander Ross—the Nahwitti men had followed the ship, boarded it from their large dugouts, and attacked the crew. An armed struggle took place on board and, at its climax, the ship was blown up with the gunpowder it carried. None of the crew survived and approximately a hundred Nahwitti and Nootkans were killed. The interpreter with the *Tonquin*, George Ramsay, who may have been a Chinook, later returned to the Columbia. Researchers now believe the fight over the ship took place on the coastline a few miles south of Nootka Sound.

Sources

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