Biography of Captain John H. Couch

Captain John Heard Couch (pronounced Kooch)(1811-1870).

On the wall of the Newburyport Custom House, a story is outlined about his founding of Portland, Oregon and his prominence in the establishment of the State of Oregon. (He was the treasurer for the territory.) But where was he born? And where did he end up living when he resided in Newburyport however brief?

When you look at his face, you can see the care of an entire city and state born on his back. Though it is not certain, he was probably born at the William Couch House at 54-56 Federal Street. William Couch, a successful shipwright, was John's uncle but it was reported that William ended up inheriting the home from John's father. Later, he tried his hand at trading by joining the brig, Mars that travelled to the East Indies. (Indonesia, Malaysia and other south pacific ports.) His contribution to the success of that journey brought him to the attention of Caleb Cushing. Cushing was so confident in this young man's ability he granted him a ship on a bold adventure. The United States was embroiled in a war of words with Great Britain on the Oregon Territory. Cries of "Fifty-four Forty or Fight" were everywhere. The U.S. was seeking to draw the line at the 54.40th parallel and tensions were high. John Couch was to take a ship, navigate in sand-bar treacherous waters on the Columbia River, load up with Salmon – go to the Hawaiian Islands and purchase a ship full of whale oil and bring the boat back to Newburyport. Unfortunately, England's Hudson Bay Company had other ideas and confronted Captain Couch at the mouth of the Columbia River. He was forced to go to Hawaii, sell the empty ship and take passage back to Newburyport.

Caleb Cushing not only welcomed the captain back but gave him another ship which John named himself, the Chenamus after an Indian chief he befriended at the Columbia River. He had previously fallen in love with Caroline Flanders, daughter of a successful ship captain, and married her in December of 1832. He traveled back again and with his cunning was able to establish a general store which became very prosperous. He took out a deed for "Couch's Addition" (Portland, Oregon of today) of 640 acres in 1842. The number of 640 acres was given as a tribute to the City of Newburyport which sued to be a separate town from Newbury and was the size of 640 acres. He became very prosperous filling his pockets and Caleb Cushing's but after five years, he returned to Newburyport in 1847 travelling as a passenger on the ship China. Why? He came

back to see his wife and to report his efforts to Caleb Cushing. He lived with her but one year and then he sailed back to Oregon with her father. Finally, he did so well that he asked his wife and three daughters to move to Portland in 1852 where they had a fourth daughter born. Today, he is considered an extremely venerated founder with statues and memorials. (The other two founders were not so well-received, one of them finally leaving town and getting himself hung in Texas!)

References:

MacColl, E. Kimbark. Merchants, Money and Power: The Portland Establishment 1843-1913. Portland, Oreg., 1988.

Oregon History Project: Captain John Couch & Caroline Flanders Couch, Written by Trudy Flores, Sarah Griffith, Oregon Historical Society, 2002.