

O'Cains Luck Runs Out

The lost treasure of Unimak Island

Captain Joseph Burling O'Cain was an important player in the fur trade of the Pacific Coast. He was born in 1766 in Derby, Connecticut to Jeremiah and Lauranah Johnson O'Cain. They were both from Ireland, and Joseph has often been mistakenly said to be Irish. He started as a carpenter but then went to sea. He was 22 in 1789 when he was on a British ship that sank in the Far East. A few years later he survived the sinking of a ship in the Queen Charlotte Islands. He went on to sail on eight different ships to the Northwest Coast, piloted ships for the Spanish in California, and is credited with initiating the highly lucrative practice of taking native sea otter hunters and their baidarkas south as far as Baja California.

In 1808 his luck finally ran out.

O'Cain's newly built 343 ton *Eclipse* sailed from Boston and visited China, Japan, and Kamchatka on its way to Alaska. The ship had 28 crew, including officers, O'Cain's Hawaiian mistress, and the Russian American Company sales manager (supercargo). The *Eclipse* was under charter to the Russian American Fur Company to resupply the Russians in Kamchatka and Alaska. The ship was loaded with nankeens (yellow cloth), tea, silks, sugar, rice and other items with an estimated value of \$100,000. There was also a chest of money from fur sales in China. The *Eclipse* sailed north and landed safely at Kamchatka, then turned east for Kodiak Island.

As crewman Archibald Campbell noted, "*Nothing material occurred till the 10th of September. ...about three in the afternoon, the gale increased to such a degree that it became necessary to take in the fore and mizen topsails. Whilst the men were on the yards, they discovered land off the lee bow, distant about five or six leagues (10-15 miles)..the ship's course was immediately altered from N. E. to E. About ten at night, the alarm was given that there were breakers ahead, and on the lee bow.*"

The mate wanted to veer away but Captain O'Cain thought what they had seen was only white water, and not breakers. He ordered the helmsman to stand on the course. Almost immediately the ship plunged onto part of Sanak Reef with great violence. The large waves beat her onto the rocks and in a few minutes the rudder was unshipped, and the stern-post forced up through

the rear deck. Luckily she washed over the reef into deep water. They dropped anchor and waited through a cold long night. Many of the cannons were dropped overboard to gain buoyancy.

The next morning, as the dawn light came up, they saw land to leeward. Maneuvering with the sails, since the rudder was gone, they brought the *Eclipse* closer to shore, grounding near Sanak Island about noon. Using the ship's long boat the men were brought in safely. They set up a shelter, most likely just to the east of the head of Salmon Bay with sails and spars. Gathering debris off the beach and some from the ship provided some food. They also returned to the ship using the long boat. On the 18th they built a much larger and durable shelter. Archibald Campbell considered it a fairly comfortable village. Much of the cargo was eventually salvaged, but it is not clear if the chest of coins from fur sales in China was found.

The crew suffered from the lack of fire, but when Unangax (Aleut) natives arrived on the 28th they quickly started a fire with a friction drill. The crew and passengers were delighted to eat cooked sea food and warm their hands and feet. A man was dispatched to Unalaska with news of the shipwreck and in a remarkable round trip by baidarka (kayak) voyage covered more than 200 miles in about a week, an illustration of the remarkable skills of Unangan paddlers.

Another forty Unangan came from around the island and set up camp nearby. They helped provide with food and assisted in the salvage effort. Large halibut were easily caught (when Captain Cook visited the island he called it Halibut Island) so food was not a concern. Mr. Bander the Russian American Company man in Unalaska arrived with twelve native men who could also "use the axe." He promised the assistance of Russian carpenters from Kodiak Island as well. However, to obtain this help the 25 foot long-boat had to be repaired and fitted out for the difficult voyage to Port Alexandria (Kodiak's St. Paul Harbor). The sides were built up and a canvas cover was fashioned so only the helmsman was fully exposed to the winter wind, cold, rain and snow. They left Sanak Island on the 18th of November and arrived at Kodiak on December 15th after a challenging 500 mile voyage. On the return the long boat seams failed and they were shipwrecked on Kodiak Island and barely survived. Archibald Campbell suffered severe frost bite and several amputations.

The large group on the island went to work with a will with the goal of building a ship from the wreckage. Pieces of the ship were towed in and wreckage was collected and sorted. Captain O'Cain had started life as a carpenter, so he was well suited for the enormous task of building a sloop out of wreckage in the Aleutian winter. It seems likely they dug a trough in the beach at

Salmon Bay to build and eventually launch the ship. The hull was built, mast and rigging run, and recut sails made to fit the new ship.

Work was completed in February and the ship set sail with Captain O'Cain, his Hawaiian female companion, two sailors from his crew, Ivan Bubnov (the RAC supercargo for the ship), several *promyshlenniki* (Russian otter hunters) and a group of Unangan men who had been assisting in the construction of the ship. They left on the 26th, a short day with a new moon and very dark night. It was not a good idea.

The weather in the Aleutians is wicked in the winter. Winds are very changeable, predominately from the West, and wind gusts can exceed 70 knots with sustained winds of 40 knots. February temperatures are a high of just 30°F, a low of 13°F, and average 9 inches of snow. The weather conditions must have look promising, but probably changed as they threaded their way through the islets and reefs around Sanak Island.

O'Cain would have to tack the ship into the prevailing winds to reach Unimak Pass. If they could just make the passage to the North side the winds would have been much less treacherous. However, something went wrong. The winds may have intensified or changed directions, the rebuilt ship may have leaked, the rudder may have failed, or the inexperienced crew may not have been able to make quick tacks to move the ship upwind. They were apparently driven east and north onto the South shore of Unimak Island. The shipwreck was deadly as the ship hit the ice surrounding the island.

In that year the sea ice probably came no further down the Bering Sea than the North side of Unimak Island, but the South shore in any case the island would have had a ring of attached shore ice. This would include thin ice, thicker ice churning in the heaving seas and then attached ice closer to shore.

O'Cain's luck had finally run out. He died, along with his Hawaiian woman, his dog, two sailors from the *Eclipse*, perhaps a couple of Unangan, and several *promyshlenniki*. They drowned attempting to reach shore across the shore ice. Nine of the Unangan men survived, along with Ivan Bubnov and one Russian fur trader. Little more is known about the wreck, the gold and the aftermath of the wreck.

About the Author

David A. Bainbridge grew up in the West, spending his formative years in the dry lands east of the North Cascades. He completed his BA in Earth Sciences at UC San Diego and MS in Ecology at UC Davis. He has written more than 300 articles and reports, 25 book chapters and 22 books. His special interest is environmental history and resource management.

2022. *Game Changer. World War 2, Radar, the Atomic Bomb and the Life of Kenneth Tompkins Bainbridge.* Amazon.

2021. *Tenacity: Remarkable People of the Fur War.* Amazon. 263 pages. ISBN 978-1-7351492-2-6 softbound

2020. *Fur War: The Political, Economic, Cultural and Ecological Impacts of the Western Fur Trade.* Amazon. 196 pages ISBN 978-1-7351492-5-7 softbound

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Possible camp and boat build

