

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Chatham And The Chinese Slave Trade

by Spencer Grey

When the African slave trade gradually came to an end because of international laws passed during the first 35 years of the 19th century, enterprises that had depended on slave labor looked for another source of cheap labor and found it in China. Because of wars, famine, and a shortage of land, economic conditions in China were such that many Chinese, especially men, looked to emigration in hopes of a better life. By the middle of the 19th century, traffic in Chinese laborers, who at that time were referred to by the now derogatory term of "coolies," had become an important source of income for British and American ships, but chiefly the Americans. Conditions on board ships carrying these laborers were overcrowded, unsanitary, and brutal. Between 1847 and 1859 American ships carried 50,879 Chinese to Cuba, and of those 7,782 died during the voyage.

Of the many ships commanded by Chatham men, some inevitably were engaged in this trade, among them the *Independence* and the *Ringleader*, both at one time captained by Isaac W. White. When he became captain of the *Independence*, he ordinarily was paid \$50 a month, but when he carried Chinese laborers, he was paid \$95 a day. Clearly such a cargo must have been dangerous to justify such a vast difference in pay. White was engaged in carrying these indentured or slave laborers for nine years during the mid-1860s, transporting from 750 to 800 a trip from China to San Francisco and Cuba. Captain White either was unaware of or chose to ignore the fact that this trade had been outlawed by Congress in 1862, as he never mentions it.

The laborers were collected from all over China by agents who either promised them work overseas as indentured workers or simply kidnapped them. White said that they were "...poor men, starving," and therefore desperate enough to go along with the agents. He would take 750 to 800 a trip, and had to have supplies sufficient to feed that many starving men. When he got them on board, he would restrict their amount of food or else they would "eat themselves to death." Until he realized the importance of restricting their diet, he was losing as many as seven a day.

Because these laborers often were desperate and dangerous, White always kept three men on watch, with one stationed outside his cabin door. On three or four occasions, the Chinese mutinied, and one time he shot two of them but did not kill them.

Captain White kept a Portuguese interpreter on board, most likely from the Portuguese colony of Macao. "He sat at the table with me, and he always had with him a wooden paddle with holes bored in it. Soak that well in water, and it would raise a blister in each hole every time. No question came up about argument. You have to have control on a ship and keep it and never relax. Never. I ran that ship, and I ran that ship my way. And in a mutiny I didn't spare 'em. Those men didn't set down for two weeks when I got through with 'em. One time I had 49 to 50 in irons at once. So you chained 'em so; two men, wrist to wrist, hands back to back, and you hung them up on that chain between them just so their toes touched. And sometimes a shorter man was up against a taller man and, God, in the morning they were senseless. Sound cruel? It was the only thing you could do. You don't know what these men were like."

Once while bringing them to San Francisco to work on the railroad, there was an outbreak of cholera aboard the ship. White had the ill Chinese laid out on the deck where he and his first mate inspected them, and those that seemed least likely to survive were thrown overboard.

Because there were many sugar plantations in Cuba, most of the Chinese were taken there. White tells of delivering many of them in Havana: When you landed, you handed them over to an agent, who took charge. They would let them out to different trades: carpenters, coopers, trades of all work. They'd file off the boat with an armed guard lining both sides, the agents with a big whip, and let one lag and he'd catch it. They sold them out for seven years. Those Spaniards made cruel masters.

Late in his life, during an interview with Alice Wight, Isaac White expressed on several occasions his deep sorrow for having been involved in such a cruel trade. After explaining that he was paid \$95 a day rather than \$50 a week for carrying the laborers, he said, "No amount of money would make me do it now. God no. No matter what they offered me, I couldn't do it now..." Reading his comments today, we have to realize that he had to carry whatever cargo the owners of his ship directed, and he was a young man who probably needed to earn as much as possible and whose sensitivities were possibly not fully developed.



BREAKTHROUGH
The Continuing Story Of Chatham's North Beach

by Timothy J. Wood

BREAKS HAPPEN

LEARN THE LATEST AT
WWW.CHATHAMNORTHBEACH.COM

DEFINITIVE BOOK ABOUT THE CHATHAM BREAKTHROUGH
120 PAGES * MORE THAN 25 PHOTOS AND MAPS

COLOR COVER
\$12.99 at local bookstores.
Also available by calling
The Cape Cod Chronicle at
508-945-2220, or order on-line at
www.chathamnorthbeach.com

