

Brother Jonathan Exhibit - Ships History

We'll Find a New Captain...

by Goodyear K. Walker

The Brother Jonathan was a fast ship and was well-liked by her crew and passengers. She began her life in the California Gold Rush boom and ended it in the West Coast trade.

Edward Mills, a New Yorker who had tried competing on the trans-Atlantic trade with no particular success, ordered the Brother Jonathan. He then decided to try cashing in on the hoards who wanted passage to the riches of California. In 1850 there were three ways to get to California: overland by wagon, horse or foot; by fast clipper ship around Cape Horn, or the Isthmus route, where you took a boat to Chagres (now Colon); or by foot or mule across the jungle to Panama, where you took another boat to San Francisco. Much treasure and blood were spent trying to dominate this route, mostly by New York bankers and shippers, but Mills thought he could play with the big boys.

In the spring of 1850 Mills let a contract to build the Jonathan to the shipyards of Perrine, Patterson and Stack, of Williamsburg, New York. She was launched on November 2, 1850, and finished up early in the following year. As originally built, she was 220 feet long and 36 feet wide. She had upper and lower decks with two, 70-foot salons which were fully decorated with gilt and enamel. She carried two masts and a vertical beam engine built by the famous Morgan Iron Works driving two, side-mounted paddle wheels, each 33 feet in diameter. Mills paid \$190,000 for her.

The Brother Jonathan was to start on the New York to Chagres portion of the Isthmus run in March of 1851 under Captain Charles Stoddard. Mills had formed his Independent Opposition Line, but didn't have any boats on the Pacific side, so he cut a deal with another company, the Empire City Line, to pick up his passengers at Panama and speed them to San Francisco and the gold fields. Stoddard left New York at the end of March and set off down the coast, bound for Chagres. He stopped at Havana, Cuba and Kingston, Jamaica before crossing the Gulf of Mexico to Chagres. He arrived in mid-April, offloaded his passengers and cargo, and took on the new passengers, treasure, and cargo that had arrived from San Francisco. Forty-five miles of riverboat and mule train journey separated the Jonathan and her contract mate, the S.S. Union from each other. On the return trip the Brother Jonathan only stopped at Kingston and returned to New York setting a new round-trip record of 31 days.

Captain Stoddard was replaced by a Captain Mills for the Jonathan's second voyage, which left New York at the end of June. He lost time to a hurricane off the Carolinas and was late into Kingston, but made up the time on the way to Chagres. But disaster had struck on the Pacific side, and the S.S. Union had gone ashore on July 5, 1851 while on the way from San Francisco to Panama, and the Jonathan's passengers were stuck. The new Pacific Mail Steamship Company, running in opposition to the Empire City Line, would not honor tickets issued by Mill's line as the tickets cost considerably less. But the Brother Jonathan had a schedule to meet, and returned to New York, leaving her passengers to find their way north as best as they could. Such was travel during the Gold Rush.

The Brother Jonathan's third trip was a repeat of the second. She made excellent time from New York to Chagres, but found that the Empire City's new steamer, the Monumental City had failed to arrive at Panama. This was the end of Mill's contract with the Empire City Line, and he signed the same sort of contract with the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. Under this relationship, the Jonathan made several successful trips from New York to Chagres and back.

The main competition for Mills and the Pacific Line was Cornelius Vanderbilt and his Independent Line. Vanderbilt had arranged an exclusive deal with the government of Nicaragua (some say money changed hands) to ferry passengers across the isthmus from San Juan de Nicaragua to San Juan del Sur. Vanderbilt had two small river steamers and a large pack train of mules to move passengers from east to west and a fleet of three steamers on the Pacific side: the Pacific, the Independence and the North America.

On the Atlantic side, Vanderbilt had only two steamers, the Prometheus (sic) and the Daniel Webster. He had been negotiating with Mills for an arrangement with the Brother Jonathan for months, feeling he needed a third steamer to meet all contingencies. But disaster changed his plans as the North America went aground 70 miles

south of Acapulco and became a total loss. Vanderbilt decided to buy the Jonathan outright and send her to the Pacific side. The deal was cut in March of 1852.

Before going west, the Brother Jonathan was completely rebuilt under the direction of Vanderbilt. Her fine clipper bow was cut down to a more practical and seaworthy straight stem, another mast was fitted at the stern, and her accommodations were increased to handle 750 passengers.

After sea trials, the rebuilt Jonathan left New York for San Francisco in June of 1852 bound for round the Horn. She made the trip with 288 passengers in 144 days and was formally incorporated into the Nicaragua Line. The history of this company over the next five years has more convolutions and coups than most third world countries as various bankers, stockholders, operators, and governments struggled for control of the profits. But in 1856, the Nicaraguan government cancelled the company's charter and confiscated what equipment it could, ending all transit across the country. The Pacific and the Brother Jonathan were put up for sale and bought by Captain John T. Wright. The Jonathan was repainted and renamed becoming the Commodore, and put on the run between San Francisco and Seattle, with stops at Portland and Vancouver. Gold prospectors were on the move again heading for the British Columbia discoveries. Business was brisk.

By 1861 the Commodore was showing her age and came back to dock in San Francisco. It was leaking so badly that special pumps had to be rushed to the dock to keep her afloat. She was sold to the new California Steam Navigation Company which had her taken to North's Shipyard for a complete overhaul. She spent seven months in the yard and was almost completely rebuilt. Two new boilers were installed, all of her planking was replaced with Oregon oak, and she was returned to her original two-deck configuration. All of the passenger cabins were done in California redwood on the main deck and a new 120-feet long dining salon was added to the upper deck. Passenger space was reduced so she could carry up to 850 tons of cargo. The new line spent \$90,000 on her and gave her back her original name. She was relaunched as the Brother Jonathan early in December of 1861.

On the 15th of December, she made a trial run to the Farallon Islands and was pronounced ready for service. On the 19th, she left for Vancouver. Between 1862 and 1865, the Brother Jonathan established herself as one of the best steamers on the Pacific Coast and made a fortune for her owners. She once carried one thousand passengers north during the Salmon River gold rush and made round trips from San Francisco to Portland of sixty-nine hours each way, the best time on record.

Captain DeWolf took over the Brother Jonathan in June of 1865 after the previous captain was shot in an argument with a southern sympathizer just after the end of the Civil War. While on the Columbia River, the Jonathan collided with the sailing barkentine, Jane Falkenberg, damaging the Jonathan's hull. When she returned to San Francisco, Captain DeWolf told the company that she needed to be hauled out and repaired, but they decided to do the job at the dock.

Business was good, perhaps too good. Cargo had piled up on the dock for the lack of carrying capacity, and now the Jonathan was there and scheduled to go north. The day before she was to sail, Captain DeWolf told the company's agent to stop accepting cargo, as the ship was already too deep in the water, and she hadn't even begun loading her passengers. But the agent refused, and when Captain DeWolf said it was too dangerous to sail her in this condition, he was told that if he didn't take her out, they would find a captain who would. The company's agent then ordered aboard a three-stamp ore crusher, weighing several tons, which was placed aboard, directly over the patched spot in the Jonathan's hull.

On July 27th and 28th, 1865, the loading was finished on the ship. The purser was busy storing away or listing an unusual amount of cash for the trip. Major Eddy, a U.S. Army paymaster, came on board with \$200,000 to pay the troops at Fort Vancouver, Walla Walla, and other posts in the Northwest, probably in greenbacks. William Logan, government Indian Agent for the Northwestern Region, may have brought gold coins on board for the annual treaty payments to the tribes. This money was paid to the tribes to keep them on the reservations, and they were usually paid in gold. It has been said that crates of \$20 gold pieces were loaded, some for a private transfer for Haskins and Company, and possibly some for Wells Fargo and Company.

By noon on the 28th, the Brother Jonathan was ready to go. Steam was raised, the lines cast off, and the paddles began to turn. But the ship didn't move an inch. So deep was she laden that her bottom was firmly embedded in the mud. They waited for the afternoon tide and hired a tug, and the Jonathan sluggishly left the dock, backwards, with 54-crew members and 190 passengers aboard. She passed through the Golden Gate

and turned north, into a strong headwind and heavy seas. It only got worse as they slowly worked north and very few passengers were in any condition to show up for dinner.

Around two in the morning of the next day, the Jonathan pulled into the harbor at Crescent City to offload a little cargo. By 9:30 she was back underway. With the storm building, Captain DeWolf headed more west than north, to get safely around the strung-out rocks of St. George's Reef. But the speed was down and the storm was building, and it took two hours to make about 14 miles northwest of port. By then Captain DeWolf noted that the vessel was hardly keeping her own, and decided to run back to Crescent City to wait out the storm.

At noon the Captain took a sun sight, and plotted his position "four miles north of the latitude of Point St. George." The ship was brought to a more easterly heading, which steadied her a bit, and headed closer to shore. The ship came up to Seal Rock, where it was relatively clear, and Captain DeWolf ordered a course "Southeast by South," to head for the Crescent City breakwater. The charts then used showed no obstructions between his ship and safety. The captain ordered a mate forward to ready the anchors for use.

As the mate worked on the anchor, he suddenly saw something beneath the water and yelled back to the wheelhouse, but it was too late for the Jonathan. The waves lifted her and dropped her on a pinnacle of rock rising 250 feet from the ocean bottom. The rocks penetrated her hull between the bow and the foremast, then the next great wave carried her further, tearing her bottom out all the way to the bridge. The great weight of the ore crusher dropped through what was left of the bottom of the ship through the hull weakened by her previous collision. The force of the wind and sea twisted the Jonathan around until the bow pointed directly at the shore, some four miles away. Five minutes after she hit the rock, Captain DeWolf knew there was no hope of saving the ship, and ordered crew and passengers aft to "try and save themselves."

The Jonathan carried four iron lifeboats and two wooden surfboats, with a capacity of 250 people, but getting them off was more than the crew could handle. The first lowered boat capsized immediately and drifted under the stern of the dying ship. The second boat, full of ladies, was being lowered just astern of the paddle wheels on the starboard side, when a giant wave hit the ship and smashed the lifeboat into the ship. The first officer, a Mr. Allen, managed to get the passengers back aboard the Jonathan just before the lifeboat was totally smashed to pieces against the hull.

Fifteen minutes had gone by since the ship hit the rock, and she was breaking up fast. The Third Mate, Mr. Patterson, decided to have a go with one of the surfboats. He gathered up five women, three children and 10 crewmen and herded them into the boat. He began lowering the boat and the ship again careened over hitting the little boat. Patterson managed to get the damaged boat away with difficulty and the lucky survivors turned to see the Jonathan go down by the bow and slip beneath the waves. Three desperate hours later the little boat pulled into Crescent City harbor. Four boats tried to leave the harbor to go out to the wreck site for rescue, but all of them had to turn back just outside of the breakwater, the storm being too much for them. It was two days before anyone could reach the site and there was nothing but scattered wreckage when they got there. Of the 244 people on board, only the 19 in the Third Mate's boat survived. For several weeks bodies and wreckage came ashore from Cape Sebastian, Oregon to Trinidad Head, California, but most of the dead were never recovered. It was the worst wreck on the Pacific coast up to that time and what was left of the cargo and gold aboard? Only a new name on the charts—Jonathan Rock.

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