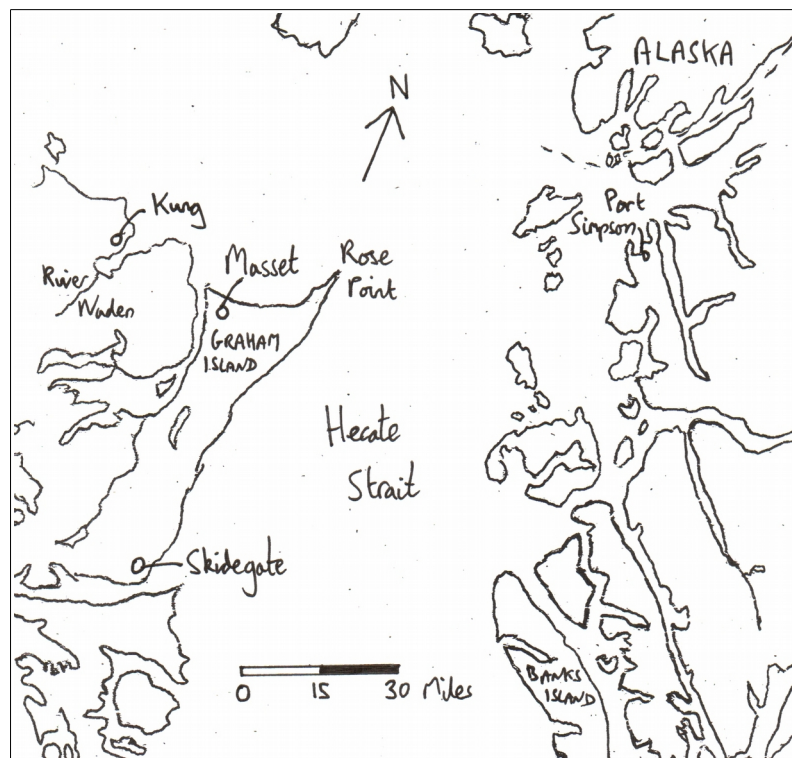


The Curious Case of the Susan Sturges



Modern Day Northern Coastal British Columbia

The Curious Case of the Susan Sturges

During her second commission of 1852-1857 HMS Trincomalee spent time in the coastal waters of modern-day British Columbia under the captaincy of Wallace Houston. This was an outpost of the empire ruled by the fur trading Hudson's Bay Company which was founded in the seventeenth century, however by the mid-nineteenth century it was threatened by its American and Russian neighbours and the local native population. The Company preferred a Royal Navy presence and the Colonial office considered it 'highly desirable that a ship of war should frequently visit Vancouver's Island.'

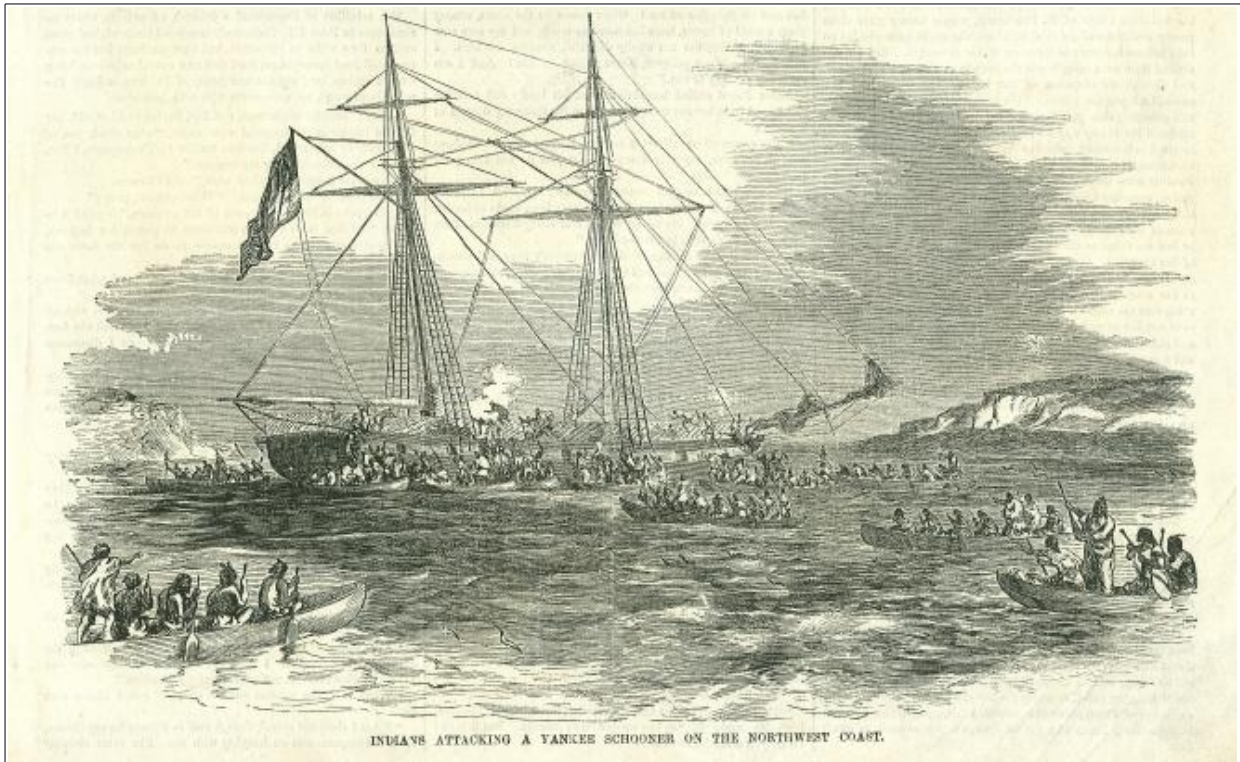
One instance of HMS Trincomalee in a 'policing' role relates to the attack by native Indians on the American trading schooner 'Susan Sturges' off Rose Point in the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Registered in San Francisco, the Susan Sturges was a small schooner (122 tons, length 81 feet, beam 22 feet, draft 7 feet) trading between the Queen Charlotte Islands and San Francisco in the early 1850s, and she participated in British Columbia's first gold rush in the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1851.

In 1852 the ship's captain, Matthew Rooney, was looking for a pilot familiar with the coastal waters around the Queen Charlotte Islands and sought out the native Indian Chief called Edenshaw based at Kung, near Nadan Harbour.

Chief Edenshaw was born in about 1810 in Gatlinskun Village on Graham Island, and engaged himself in the coastal trade in Indian slaves, acquired by the natives from neighbouring native peoples by raid or barter. By 1850 he possessed twelve slaves, receiving ten more from his bride's father when he married Ga'wu aw, a high ranking Haida woman from Alaska. Edenshaw knew the local waters intimately and was constantly in demand. Ships not only faced navigational dangers, but also raids by the Haidas, who were known to plunder vessels in difficulty.

Captain Rooney found Edenshaw at Skidegate and picked him up to return him to his village of Kung, near Rose point on Graham Island. Whilst en route to Kung, the schooner encountered a canoe from Masset and there was an exchange of words between Edenshaw and the Masset Chief, Weah, on board the canoe; Rooney did not know the language spoken. The following day one hundred and fifty of the Masset Haida led by Chief Weah in their canoes captured, pillaged and burned the Susan Sturges enslaving her crew.



A document presented to Edenshaw by Captain Rooney gives the following account:

'Port Simpson, October 10, 1852

The bearer of this, Edenshaw, is chief of the tribe of Indians residing on North Island, I have reason to know that he is a good man, for he had been the means of saving the lives of me and my crew, who were attacked by Masset Indians off the Harbour of that name. He and his wife and child were on board that vessel coming from Skidegate Harbour round to North Island, when on September 26, 1852, we were surprised by some canoes alongside. We were so overpowered by numbers and so sudden the attack, that all resistance on our part was quite

impossible, but after gaining the cabin, this man and his wife and two or three of his men who happened to come off in a small canoe, protected us for seven hours until he made some terms with which he brought to Fort Simpson and gave to me without ever asking for any remuneration. I hope that if this should be shown to any master of a ship, that he will treat him well, for he deserves well at the hands of every White man.

Matthew Rooney

Former master of the schooner "Susan Sturgis"

The release of the prisoners to the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Simpson had actually been obtained by their chief trader, John Work, by paying in blankets. Work and other whites who knew these Indians were of the opinion that Edenshaw was party to the whole affair.

The Royal Navy vessels HMS Virago and HMS Trincomalee conducted separate investigations into the incident. The Commander of HMS Virago, James C. Prevost, could not prove directly Edenshaw's complicity in the Susan Sturges affair, but he had no doubt about his share in the plunder and took every precaution against the likelihood of Edenshaw attacking his own ship whilst he was detained for questioning on the Virago. Prevost stated that Edenshaw 'was decidedly the most advanced Indian I have met on the Coast: quick, cunning, ambitious, crafty, and, above all, anxious to obtain the good opinion of the white men.'

Similarly HMS Trincomalee's investigation into the affair concluded that there was insufficient evidence to indict Chief Edenshaw. Captain Wallace Houston considered Edenshaw 'a man of great influence in the neighbourhood, and one worth treating with every consideration.'

In 1884 both Chief Weah and Chief Edenshaw were amongst the first Haidas to become Christians when they were baptised by an Anglican minister, Charles Harrison. Chief Edenshaw died in 1894.



Chief Albert Edward Edenshaw dressed in naval uniform at about eighty years of age circa 1890

Although it will never be completely known what happened between Edenshaw and Weah that day in September 1852, the first missionary to live amongst the Masset Haida in 1876 documents that some members of the tribe informed him that it was by Edenshaw's orders that the schooner was attacked and taken.

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