

CAPTAIN WILLIAM THOMAS SHOREY AND SHOREY STREET

by

Peter Thomas Conmy
City Historian, Oakland

Under date of March 20, 1970, the East Bay Negro Historical Society, through its secretary, Mrs. Ruth Lasartemay, addressed a letter to the City Clerk of Oakland inquiring whether Shorey Street in Oakland had been named in honor of Captain William T. Shorey, a negro master mariner. The letter asserted that by Ordinance No. 2616 passed by the City Council on August 5, 1907, the name of Short Street in the Fourth Ward had been changed to Shorey Street. The communication continued, "We understand that the street was changed to honor one, William T. Shorey, a captain of a whaling vessel and a resident of Oakland", and then propounded the request, "Would you please give our Society the data and circumstances surrounding the honor."

After diligent search, Harold Jacobson, Assistant City Clerk, sent the letter to the City Historian, after having written thereon, "Unable to find any information in Council Minutes or in Ordinance. Told Mrs. Lasartemay that we would forward to Dr. Conmy in case he has any info."

The name of Short Street was indeed changed to Shorey Street by Ordinance No. 2616 which was approved on August 24, 1907 by Mayor Frank K. Mott.

A study of the Ordinance shows that in all about fifty street names were changed by the instrument. Apparently it was a trans-action that was long overdue, and was intended to eliminate numerous duplications. As the city grew and territory was annexed the municipality inherited street names that conflicted with those of already existing ones. For example, there was a Second Avenue on the east side of the lake and now by virtue of the annexation of 1897 there was found to be Second Avenue in the northern area which was given the name Shafter Avenue. Third and Fourth Avenues here were re-named Lawton and Manila Avenue respectively. By the same criteria a second College Avenue was changed to Hawthorne Street.¹ The primary purpose of Ordinance No. 2616 appears to have been eradication of duplication in street names. Secondly, of course, the application of new names in some instances honored individuals, and in others represent convenience only. There can be no doubt but that Shafter Avenue honors General Shafter of Spanish American War fame, and the re-designating of Peralta Avenue between Fourth Avenue and Lake Merritt as Cleveland Street commemorated the twentieth president of the United States.

At the August 5, 1907 meeting the City Council apparently had a full agenda. On the following day both Oakland papers, the Tribune and the Post Enquirer, devoted considerable space to reporting the numerous transactions but both are silent as to the half-hundred changes in street names giving strength, therefore, to the inference that this was considered a routine matter.

Before proceeding to a determination of the reasons which caused the name of Shorey to be given to Short Street, it may be well at this point to present a biographical summary of Captain Shorey.

WILLIAM THOMAS SHOREY, 1859-1919

William Thomas Shorey was born in Barbados, West Indies, on January 25, 1859. His father was William Shorey, a native of Scotland, who had migrated to the West Indies, had become a sugar planter and had married Rose Frazier, a creole negress, who has been described as a "Beautiful woman." William Thomas was the oldest of eight children. Because of the economic status of his parents he went to work at an early age and learned the trade of plumber, but appears to have preferred the sea. Therefore, he shipped on a vessel bound for Boston. On the voyage he made the friendship of the captain who in turn introduced him to Captain Whipple A. Leach of Provincetown, Massachusetts, under whose tutelage he studied navigation, fitting himself for qualified seafaring which became his career.

This was a period of history in which whaling still flourished as a major industry in New England. In 1876 he made his first voyage into the North Atlantic and the Eastern Arctic beyond. On this expedition he joined the crew as a greenhand in whaling but before it ended he had advanced to boat steerer, a hazardous assignment which required great skill in the strong, icy currents, and handling belligerent whales.²

A three year cruise and California. Shorey now joined the crew of the Emma H. Herriman and embarked on a cruise that was to last for three years. This whaler plied into the South Atlantic, then to the west coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope, to Australia and Tasmania. Thence across the Pacific to the west coast of South America and ending in the port of San Francisco. During this voyage he was promoted from Third Officer to First Officer indicative of the maritime capability of this negro sailor. In San Francisco the ship was sold to McGee and Moore of that city. Sale of the vessel is explained by the fact that at this period the whaling industry in New England was on the wane and the west coast held better possibilities. Many Atlantic whaling vessels were destroyed by Confederate raiders during the Civil War. There were factors too, as Tompkins points out

Not only war, but the ravages of nature struck the American fleet the very time when William Shorey was on the threshold of his career. In 1871 sixty-eight whale-ships were lost in the Arctic ice, including twenty-two from New Bedford alone. In 1876, the year Shorey made his maiden voyage on a whaler, the Arctic again claimed a large number of ships....

During the period in the late nineteenth century when whaling was becoming a moribund trade, other factors in the national economy were booming; wages and working conditions in general were improving, while the reverse was occurring in the whaling industry.

Whaling had always been a very difficult, demanding and, dangerous occupation. Crewmen were frequently maimed or killed in pursuit of leviathan. Work on board a whaling ship was hard, unpleasant and tedious. Living quarters were cramped and dirty. The food was tasteless and literally rotten. Discipline was harsh. The pay was very low, and the crew had to buy necessaries at exorbitant rates. Seamen frequently returned from a cruise of several years' duration with only a few dollars to their credit, and in many cases actually in debt. Given these conditions, it is little wonder that when better paying, less hazardous, and more appealing jobs became available the crews of whaling ships became largely composed of those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.³

A western mariner. Shorey now elected to remain on the west coast. The Emma H. Herriman was readied for a cruise to the Arctic. On this he served as Second Officer. On the second voyage he functioned as First Officer and on the third as Master of the vessel.

This was in 1886. The records show that Captain Shorey commanded the following ships until his retirement from the sea in 1909, namely, the Emma H. Herriman, 1886-92; Andrew Hicks 1892-94; Gay Head 1894; Andrew Hicks 1894-1902; John and Winthrop 1903-1908. 4 After reviewing Shorey's record from the documents now extant, Albert M. Harmon, Librarian of the San Francisco Maritime Museum, offered to this writer the following opinion,

It is undoubted that Captain Shorey was an extraordinary man. I have examined crew lists of the voyages which he made and was astonished to find that his crews were largely white, a rather outstanding achievement for a colored master at that time, or indeed any time. 5

That he was an "extraordinary man" is stating it mildly. The San Francisco Chronicle on November 26, 1907 ran a feature story about Captain Shorey's superb craftsmanship when the Jonathan and Winthrop was endangered seriously in a storm. Coming out of the Okhotsk Sea the ship was beset by two devastating typhoons. Overcoming these dangers the ship entered a dense fog in Bowsail Channel and when it lifted was only twenty feet off a reef. Returned to port the crew spoke highly and reverently of their Master or as the Chronicle reported, "The men on board say that nothing but Captain Shorey's coolness and clever seamanship saved a wreck." 6

A honeymoon at sea. On an unknown date in 1886 Captain Shorey was married to Julia Ann Shelton of San Francisco. She was a native of that city, born June 10, 1865. She was the daughter of Frank Shelton, a native of Arkansas and a whitener by trade. The Shelton family resided at 4 Gerke Alley, a small street on the slopes of Telegraph Hill. 7 Now Master of the Emma Herriman, Shorey and his bride set forth on a cruise. First, they went to Mexico and then across the Pacific to the Hawaiian Islands. While they were there Mt. Pelee erupted and the lava ran down the mountainside eventually reaching the sea. As a result, the waters were heated to such an extent that the fish were killed for miles around the harbor. Julia Shorey was interested in ecology and wrote an interesting letter of description to the editor of the San Francisco Elevator which was published. After days of enjoyment at Honolulu Mrs. Shorey accompanied by other wives of seafarers boarded another ship for the mainland, and Captain Shorey and his crew took the Emma Herriman into Arctic waters in the interest of whaling. A good year elapsed before he returned home. 8

Family. Voyages. Five children in all were born to Captain and Mrs. Shorey, four girls and one boy. The children, all born in Oakland, and their dates of birth were Zenobia Pearl, August 19, 1888; Elvira J., November , 1891; Hazel E., June , 1893; Victoria Grace, August 1, 1898 and William Thomas Jr., May 25, 1902. Two died in infancy, one at the threshold of adult life and two survived into advanced years.

In 1894 as Captain of the Gay Head and accompanied by his wife and infant Hazel, Shorey set forth on another voyage. By the time the Hawaiian Islands were reached the child had become seriously ill. Mrs. Shorey left the ship with the sick child and on another vessel returned to Oakland. It was well that she did so because Hazel succumbed on April 4th and two days later was laid to rest in the family plot in Mountain View Cemetery, beside her little sister Elvira, who had died, November 18, 1893 aged two years and one month. The life span of infant Hazel was ten months and four days.

Zenobia Pearl Shorey, the oldest child, died in the family home at 1774-8th Street, Oakland, on November 26, 1908, aged twenty years and two months. Cause of death was tuberculosis. Her remains were interred in the family plot in Mountain View Cemetery.

When Captain Shorey passed away in 1919 he was survived by his wife, Julia, and two children, William and Victoria. William received the final summons on July 20, 1969, and Victoria Grace, who by marriage had become Mrs. Willie Francis, followed on January 12, 1971. 9

As stated above, Captain Shorey followed the sea until 1909. Space will not permit a detailed account, but because of the hazardous conditions which prevailed in the Arctic waters, there are many acts of bravery on record. And, on some of these voyages he was accompanied by his wife and daughter, Victoria. At an early age she learned to hold the steering wheel. Beasley quotes Mrs. Shorey as saying about her daughter, "Victoria is a remarkable sailor. She knows all the ropes and has the perfect command of her father". 10

The following quotation from Beasley's work appears to describe well both the seamanship of the father and courage of the child,

"In an ice-drift off the coast of Siberia trouble was picked up.... On a wild, stormy night we were driven into an ice-drift at Shanter Bay, and when daylight came we found ourselves caught by ice on every side," said Captain Shorey to-day using the plural pronoun with evident reference to himself and the baby. "There was nothing else we could do but wait for the ice-fields to break up, and for eight days we lay wedged in the drift while the tides carried us back and forth ever threatening to carry us on the rocks or dash us on the shore." This did not alarm the baby. Finally the ice was carried out to the open sea and the drift released the whaler.11

RETIREMENT FROM THE SEA, CITIZENSHIP AND OTHER INTERESTS

Captain Shorey reached the half century mark on January 25, 1909. At that time he had been a seafaring man for over thirty-five years and had been a Master Mariner for almost a quarter of a century. His had been a strenuous life and the time had come when he sought a less arduous existence. Accordingly, he retired from the sea, but until the time of his death kept his license in effect. This he had renewed on November 12, 1908, and after five years re-issued on November 18, 1913. His final renewal was dated November 21, 1918. The last license shows his eligibility for command of a heavy vessel and reads as follows:

Department of Commerce
Steamboat Inspection

6197
Issue No. 44

This licenses William T. Shorey to serve as Master of any ocean or whaling steamer; also Master of sail vessels of over seven hundred gross tons, any ocean.

November 21, 1918

James Guthrie
U. S. Local Inspector of Hulls
Joseph P. Dolan
U. S. Local Inspector of Boilers

Retired from the sea Captain Shorey accepted employment on the docks as a Special Police Officer with the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. By the Police Commission of San Francisco he was appointed a Special Officer on January 8, 1912 and this remained in effect until his death seven years later.

Citizenship. Captain Shorey had long deserved to be a citizen of the United States and had taken out first papers but because of his long voyages they had lapsed because he was unable to apply for second papers within the statutory life of their issuance. On December 7, 1908 he had again taken preliminary papers and this time because of his retirement, was successful in completing the process. On November 27, 1912 he appeared in the Superior Court of Alameda County and was admitted to citizenship by Hon. Frank B. Ogden, Judge. His petition alleged that he had come to the United States about August 20, 1870; that his wife was Julia Ann Shorey and that he was

the father of two children living, namely, Victoria Grace Shorey, born in Oakland, August 1, 1893 and William Thomas Shorey, Jr., born in Oakland, September 10, 1902. He had lived in Oakland since February 24, 1884. Witnesses to the petition were William Whipple Purnell, physician, 3130 California Street, Berkeley and George Ingraham, attorney, 1345-53rd Avenue, Oakland. Physically he was described as belonging to the Black Race; height, five feet eight inches; weight, one hundred eighty-six pounds. 13 A month following his admission to citizenship, Captain Shorey, on December 28, 1912 registered to vote and gave his party as Republican.

Religion. In religion William T. Shorey was a high church Episcopalian and held membership in the old St. John's Episcopal Church located at 8th and Grove Streets in Oakland. This appears also to have been the religion of his wife Julia Shelton Shorey and of his family. When he died his body was taken to St. John's Church for services prior to interment. The obituary notice relating to the funeral of his daughter, Zenobia, who died in 1908 advises that her body was to be taken to that church for a "high mass" and then to Mountain View Cemetery. The funerals both of Mrs. Julia Shelton Shorey and Mrs. Victoria Francis were from St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Broadway and Lawton Streets, Oakland.

DEATH

Captain William T. Shorey died in Oakland on April 15, 1919. At that time his age was sixty years, two months and twenty-one days. Cause of death was lobar pneumonia. The obituary notice indicates membership in Golden Gate Lodge No. 3007, G.U.O. and A.O. of F. No. 7804 of San Francisco.

Mrs. Julia Shorey survived her husband by a full quarter century. Her end came on March 12, 1944 and was caused by arterio-scleratic heart disease. Her age was seventy-nine. Mrs. Shorey had been very active in the affairs of Beulah Rest Home and at one time was chairman of its board of directors. She held membership also in the Companions of the Forest, the Household of Ruth and the Herames of Jericho.

William T. Shorey, Jr., died on July 20, 1969, having been preceded in death by his wife, Audrey, who went to her rest in 1962.

The passing of Mrs. Victoria Francis on January 12, 1971 marked the death of the last remaining child of William Thomas Shorey and Julia Ann Shelton Shorey.¹⁴ On display in the Oakland Public Museum during 1970 was a picture of Captain and Mrs. Shorey and a son and daughter, presumably William Jr. and Victoria. Under it was a caption reading, "Captain William T. Shorey was one of the very first black men to achieve a master's license for sailing ships of more than 700 tons, and ocean or whaling steamer."

SHOREY STREET

As noted earlier the action of the City Council on August 5, 1907 changes Short Street in the Fourth Ward to Shorey Street. Issued 1904-05 the Vade Mecum describes Short Street as "North of Goss from Pine".¹⁵

The name was changed to Shorey Street. The "why" is clear but the "after whom" cannot be established by documentary evidence. It has been suggested that the change of name honoring Captain Shorey was noted in a negro magazine known as Oakland Sunshine. If this is so there may be in some obscure place an extant copy, but the great libraries do not have it. The Library of Congress has scattered issues for the years 1915, 1920 and 1925, but none for 1907. Gregory's American Newspapers shows that the Bancroft Library of the University of California in Berkeley has some issues, but for 1907 the only one is that of December 21st. California State Library in Sacramento likewise has no pertinent issues in its collection. Therefore, unless in the future, a copy is found proof of the council's intent to honor Captain Shorey must be based upon other than direct evidence.

It must rest upon tradition and circumstances. A review of the name Shorey in Oakland indicates but one other person after whom conceivably the street might have been called. This was Albert Shorey, a distinguished member of the Oakland Police Department. He was born in Kennebec County, Maine, February 2, 1837. He completed his high school in Coburn Institute and taught elementary school. Later he joined his brother in a pile driving business in New Orleans. He served in the Union Army during the Civil War. This was followed by two years in the government service. In Oakland he was appointed a special officer in 1870 and a regular officer in 1872. He rose to the rank of detective and at the time of his retirement was the senior officer of the Detective Bureau. At age sixty-eight he died in Oakland, December 24, 1905, just a few months after his retirement. His funeral took place from First Congregational Church on December 26th where Oakland Lodge No. 188, F. and A. M. conducted services.

Although Detective Shorey bore a fine record in the Police Department, it is unlikely that Shorey Street was named for him; for, if it had been, there would be undoubtedly a tradition to support it.

GOOD OAKLAND RACIAL TRADITION

Oakland appears to have been free from racial bias. When one realizes that in some parts of the nation there has been segregation even in cemeteries and discrimination even in the interment of negro war heroes in white cemeteries, it speaks well for Oakland when it is recalled that Captain Shorey purchased a plot in Mountain View Cemetery in 1894.

That Captain Shorey and his family attended St. John's Episcopal Church, founded originally by an all white congregation, and during a period when in certain sections of the United States churches were segregated by law, is indicative of Oakland's toleration.

In keeping with this fine spirit which prevailed in 1907, it is not at all unlikely that the City Council named a street after a negro sea captain, who stood out in the community as both a good and brave man. Such is the strong tradition. This could be made into a fact if the present City Council, as the successor of the body which sat in 1907, took action so as to clarify the matter.

FOOTNOTES

1. San Francisco had a similar problem which caused much conflict in the delivery of mail. On May 19, 1909, the Board of Supervisors authorized the Mayor to appoint a commission to recommend changes. In compliance on June 16th the commission was named. This body filed its report on November 8th, and after hearing public protests where demanded, voted the changes by Ordinances 726, 988, 989, and 1029.
2. The dangers of this voyage are explained by Tompkins, "On one of his early voyages Shorey almost lost his life while pursuing a sperm whale. "Evidently enraged", he related years later, 'the whale attacked first one boat, smashing it, then a second one, and then attacked the one I was in. By good fortune we were able to fire a bomb into him which, exploding, killed him and saved us'. E. Berkeley Tompkins, "Black Ahab: William T. Shorey, Whaling Master," California Historical Quarterly 51:1 (Spring 1972), p. 78. Shorey's words as quoted by Tompkins are from Pacific Commercial Advertiser, February 25, 1908.
3. Tompkins, op. cit., pp. 77-78.
4. This list may not be exhaustive. There is evidence that he made two successful voyages on the Alexander but on a third lost her in an Arctic ice pack without loss of life.

5. Letter from Albert M. Harmon to Peter T. Conmy, May 4, 1970.
6. San Francisco Chronicle, November 26, 1907, 9-1-2. In addition to the Chronicle account this event also is described in Delilah L. Beasley, The Negro Trail Blazers of California (Los Angeles: 1919), pp. 125-126.
7. Gerke Alley runs easterly from the eastern side of Grant Avenue between Filbert and Greenwich Streets for 114 and a half feet. It is 20 feet wide. The Shelton lot was the innermost parcel on the south side, 20 feet wide and 50 feet in depth. Property owned by Frank Shelton (Block Book of San Francisco 1894).
8. Data summarized from account in Delilah L. Beasley. The Negro Trail Blazers of California. (Los Angeles, 1919), p. 125.
9. The plot in Mountain View Cemetery was purchased by Captain Shorey on February 15, 1894. Its location is Section 14B, Lot 290. Elvira's remains, which had been interred temporarily in another location following her death on November 18, 1893, were the first to be placed in the Shorey plot. Mrs. Victoria Grace Francis was a Civil Service employee of the City of Oakland for a number of years. On January 16, 1948 she was appointed an Intermediate Typist Clerk in the Health Department. She resigned her employment, March 23, 1952.
10. Beasley, op. cit. p. 127
11. Beasley, op. cit. p. 126.
12. These inspectors were almost legendary on San Francisco waterfront. They were known popularly as the team of Guthrie and Dolan. Equally well known was their Supervising Inspector, John K. Bulger.
13. Alameda County Clerk, Vol. 208, p. 244, Certificate of Natrualization No. 329199. By this action Mrs. Julia Ann Shorey although born in San Francisco, became a citizen of the United States. At that time the marriage of an American woman to an alien caused her to lose her citizenship and take that of her husband. Upon their marriage Mrs. Shorey had become, therefore, a citizen of the British empire. For a discussion of this point see MacKenzie v. Hare, 239 United States 299, decided in 1915. Following that decision the Congress enacted legislation permitting women citizens of the United States to retain their citizenship upon marriage to an alien. 8 U.S. C.A. 801.

The dates of birth of Victoria and William are not correct. According to the Alameda County Recorder's Office, William T. Shorey, Jr. was born May 25, 1902, and Victoria on August 1, 1898.

14. An article in Oakland Tribune regarding the death of Mrs. Francis states that she "was the daughter of Capt. William T. Shorey, one of the first black sea captains. Shorey Street was named after him." 32F-4.

Vade Mecum, Manual of Oakland, Berkeley and Alameda, p. 89, (Oakland: U. S. Industrial Co., 1904). That there was much confusion concerning duplication of street names is evident from the following significant statement on page 94, "The duplication of names, which to one unacquainted with Sections and Districts, is very confusing, was the result of absorption of tracts into one municipality.