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**The Voyage of the "Coolie" Ship Kate Hooper**

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When the merchant ship Kate Hooper left Hong Kong in July 1857 for Havana, Cuba, it was embarking on a journey that was expected to be a routine sailing, much like that of many ships of the time, carrying lucrative cargo to the West. The 15,576-mile journey, however, proved to be anything but normal or routine.

During the 174-day trip to Cuba, the Kate Hooper would endure official scorn, the death of its captain and some of its crew, and several mutinies by its cargo— 652 indentured Chinese laborers, known as coolies,<sup>1</sup> who thought they were going to San Francisco, not Cuba; they even set the ship on fire. And the journey would end with much of the ship's crew in a Havana jail.

This particular journey of the Kate Hooper came to light recently when the staff of the Mid Atlantic Region of the National Archives and Records Administration was performing preservation work on circuit court appellate files, 1830 - 1870, from the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland (Record Group 21).

At first glance, the case of James A. Hooper v. George White, et al (No. 6, November Term 1858) appeared to be routine. The crew of the ship had brought a libel for wages case against the owner, James A. Hooper, because the captain, John J. Jackson, had told them that they would receive additional wages upon completion of the voyage. Hooper refused to pay them, and the crew filed suit in district court (No. 15, April Term 1858). Judge William F. Giles ruled in favor of the crew, but Hooper appealed the verdict to the circuit court of appeals. Eventually, the case was decided by Roger B. Taney, chief justice of the United States, who was the sitting circuit judge for that area.

Intertwined among the facts of the case— coming just a few years before the United States would fight its own Civil War over slavery— was the larger question of the propriety of transporting coolies, who would be indentured laborers, like slaves.

James A. Hooper, a member of a well-known mercantile family of Baltimore, added the Kate Hooper to his fleet in 1853.<sup>2</sup> The Baltimore firm of Hunt and Wagner of built it, and it was probably named for his wife, Catherine Hooper.<sup>3</sup> A fairly large sailing vessel, it had two decks, three masts, was 205 feet in length, 39 feet, 6 inches in breadth, and 20 feet in depth, weighing a

total of 1,488 76/95 tons.<sup>4</sup> On June 15, 1854, it left New York bound for San Francisco, arriving there on October 25.<sup>5</sup> It next appeared in Hong Kong and began to transport Chinese laborers to San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> At that time the tea and rice trade was not nearly as profitable as the transportation of Chinese coolies.<sup>7</sup> Soon, though, a slowdown in Chinese immigration to California as well as increased competition in the tea trade from the British led many large sailing ships, including the *Kate Hooper*, to change their destinations to the West Indies.<sup>8</sup> Even by conservative estimates, the profit from a West Indian voyage was at least five times that which could be realized from a similar voyage to San Francisco.<sup>9</sup>

Chinese immigration to California had been the immediate predecessor to the coolie trade. For the most part, those immigrants had gone voluntarily, and American authorities had little reason to be disturbed over it. When West Indian and South American needs for labor—especially in Cuba, Peru, and Brazil—created a new demand, the coolie trade began to blossom.

The trade began in poor rural Chinese villages. Coolie agents, called brokers, would go into the countryside and procure men for which they were paid a certain sum per head. They tried to seduce the indigent villagers by offering money if they would emigrate. If the enticement of money did not work, the brokers used kidnappers to recruit for them. Although the Chinese government issued warnings to the people about these kidnappers, it is clear that kidnapping and intimidation were common, and torture was not unknown.<sup>10</sup> The Cuban investors and prospective buyers were only concerned that their agents should have enough expertise to avoid shipping the old and the sick.

The laborers, after being "recruited," were constantly under guard. When they reached their port of embarkation, they were placed in what were called "barracoons." These were nothing more than holding jails. It was here that they stayed until they were sent on board a ship. Legally, the Chinese laborers were indentured servants. Before they sailed, each immigrant signed a contract committing himself to work for eight years. The laborer would receive four dollars a month plus food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. The contracts, which were written in Chinese and in Spanish, changed very little over the years. Their basic function would seem to have been to set the traffic in indentured laborers apart from the slave traffic, which was illegal. Technically, what was auctioned at Havana was the piece of paper containing the laborer's contract. But Cubans never talked about hiring Chinese; rather they spoke openly of "buying Chinese."<sup>11</sup> The contract, as a legal document, merely served to facilitate the transfer of control or ownership of the laborer from importer to employer and from one employer to another. After the Chinese laborer's term of indenture was over, he would be given his freedom, but there was no guarantee of passage back to China.

Although the contracts fulfilled the owner's requirement to justify the legality of the coolie trade, the coolies themselves were unwilling emigrants. It has been estimated that anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of the passengers on any given ship were disillusioned and discontented with their lot.<sup>12</sup> In these circumstances, it is easy to see how unfair treatment or cruelty on the part of the ship's crew could readily spark a revolt. The absence of interpreters on many of the ships impeded communication between passengers and crew, easily leading to confrontation.<sup>13</sup>

Some 124,813 Chinese laborers were imported into Cuba between 1848 and 1874.<sup>14</sup> One scholar has stated that approximately 90 percent worked on the sugar or tobacco plantations. The remaining 10 percent worked as tailors, hat makers, cigar and cigarette makers, cooks, gardeners, waiters, or hotel and house servants.<sup>15</sup> The estimated mortality rate of the Chinese workers was disturbingly high. During the period 1847 - 1874, as many as 50 - 60 percent did not survive their indenture.

Although the coolie trade was profitable, the U.S. stood alone among all other Western nations in its opposition to it. Throughout the 1850s, while British representatives in China generally counseled the control of Chinese emigration through legislation, American diplomats for the most part urged its complete prohibition.<sup>16</sup>

Humphrey Marshall was the first U.S. commissioner to China to take notice of this trade and express concern. He arrived in China in January 1853 and immediately requested detailed information on emigration from U.S. consuls on the China coast.<sup>17</sup> Marshall, being a Southerner, regarded the importation of Chinese laborers into the Caribbean as a possible threat to the interest of Southern planters. He was worried that the various shipping companies would try to introduce them into the South. He even thought that it might be possible for the British to use the workers to colonize the Amazon basin.<sup>18</sup> He therefore advised Washington to prohibit American vessels from carrying Chinese to Latin America.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Peter Parker, a medical missionary in China who became U.S. commissioner to China in 1855, led the hardest fight to prohibit the transportation of coolies.<sup>20</sup> As chargé d'affaires to the American legation at Canton in the early 1850s, Dr. Parker came in direct contact with the cruelties and deceptions of the trade and soon became a crusader for its abolition.<sup>21</sup> While he was in Washington in the spring of 1855, the secretary of state advised him to denounce the "Coolie trade" at "an opportune time."<sup>22</sup> Upon his return to China, his first official act was to issue in January 1856 a "Public Notification" calling upon all Americans on the China coast to desist from the coolie trade, classifying it as an "irregular and immoral traffic" that was disruptive of commerce and was jeopardizing Sino-American relations. He warned those who dared to persist in the trade that they would forfeit the protection of the U.S. government and be liable to heavy penalties, and he instructed United States consuls at various Chinese ports to give copies of the "Notification" to the local Chinese authorities.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Parker's notification did little to halt the trade. Parker tried in every way to arouse public opinion and continued to lobby against the trade when he returned to Washington in retirement in 1857.<sup>24</sup>

Many U.S. trading firms ignored the notification and challenged the claim that the traffic was prohibited by U.S. laws. Their position received support from Attorney General Jeremiah S. Black, who, in an 1859 letter to Secretary of State Lewis Cass, expressed the opinion that the trade in Chinese emigrants did not come under the provisions of any existing U.S. laws and suggested that Congress alone could remedy the evil.<sup>25</sup> The number of Chinese transported to Cuba after Parker's notification clearly shows the shippers' disregard of it: 10,101 in 1857, 16,411 in 1858, and 8,539 in 1859. Between 1847 and 1856, the average numbers had been more than 5,000 a year.<sup>26</sup>

James A. Hooper, the owner of the *Kate Hooper*, was one of those who ignored the pleas of Dr. Parker. On August 18, 1857, Capt. John J. Jackson, the master of the ship, entered into a charter with Lydall and Still, agents for A. R. Ferran of Macao, to transport Chinese laborers to Havana, Cuba. There they would be delivered to Don R. R. Torices or his agents.<sup>27</sup> When the ship arrived in Hong Kong from San Francisco in July 1857, it underwent extensive renovations to make it ready to transport a large number of laborers to Cuba. The ship's carpenter, Thomas Bradford, detailed these renovations in his deposition to the court:

Her between decks fore and aft were lined with bunks; all amidships as far as the hatches would permit was lined with bunks in the same way. Upon her main deck there were four large cookhouses. Three of those houses were fitted with six large pots in them built up similar to furnaces, which by everyone that saw them was fit to cook for six or seven hundred men. . . . Down in the lower hold there were two tiers of water casks filled with water, occupying a part of the hold. The fore, main and aft hatches were fitted with carlings for gratings. These were made of iron and were put on by myself when we got to Macao.<sup>28</sup>

These hatches were encircled with iron bars securely fastened to the deck, creating impregnable cages in which the members of the crew could watch over their passengers in time of trouble.<sup>29</sup> The ship's carpenter estimated that the renovations cost more than twelve thousand dollars.<sup>30</sup> This certainly was not an inexpensive modification, and one would believe that Hooper was planning on using his ship to carry Chinese workers more than once.

With the ship now modified, it began preparations to sail to Havana, Cuba. On September 29, 1857, the crew signed on at the U.S. consul's office in Hong Kong. The ship's company consisted of Captain Jackson; First Mate Francis Bowden; the carpenter, Thomas Bradford; the coolie master, Thomas G. Taylor; twenty-four able seamen; six ordinary seamen; one cook; one steward; and two cabin boys for a total complement of thirty-eight.<sup>31</sup> The monthly rate of pay was \$75 for the first mate, \$20 for the carpenter, \$60 for the coolie master, \$15 for each of the able seamen, \$13 for ordinary seamen, \$15 for the cook, \$15 for the steward, and \$12 for each cabin boy.<sup>32</sup>

On the evening of October 3, 1857, the *Kate Hooper* set sail for the Portuguese colony of Macao. It arrived there some sixteen hours later on October 4.<sup>33</sup> Loading the supplies— water, meat, rice, and tea— took approximately ten days. Two days before leaving for Havana, the Chinese laborers boarded. They came in lighters, small vessels that held approximately fifty men, and were well guarded by policemen. A total of 652 Chinese laborers were put on board the ship.<sup>34</sup>

William A. Macy, deputy U.S. consul at Macao, reported to the secretary of state that no certificate was required from the American consulate when the coolies were carried in an American vessel, "but it has been stated that each of the coolies must have a passport from the Spanish consul residing here, and the captain a certificate of compliance with the Spanish regulations." Macy further added: "Two vessels have loaded this year (one of which was the *Kate Hooper*) for Havana, with these Chinese laborers, and in the absence of any authority to restrain them, they have been simply warned of the consequences as laid down in the decree of Dr. Parker on this subject, and required to furnish evidence that they were not violating the

passenger act. I trust some steps may be taken to restrain American vessels from engaging in the business hereafter."<sup>35</sup>

At this juncture, conflicting viewpoints arise on events that took place on the ship. A number of the crew said in their depositions that they had been unaware that the ship was going to carry coolies. When they signed on in Hong Kong, they said, they believed that it was going to carry cargo. When they saw the laborers being boarded, some of them went to Captain Jackson and requested that they be allowed to leave the ship so that they might talk to the American consul in Macao. Had they known it was going to be a "coolie ship," they would not have agreed to make the voyage. In their view, the ship needed a larger crew in order to maintain control of the laborers, and no provisions had been made to add additional members. Captain Jackson had refused to allow the crew to leave the ship since they were too close to leaving port and could not delay.<sup>36</sup> Bowden, the first mate, and Bradford, the carpenter, denied this story, claiming one would have had to have been blind not to recognize all the renovations that were being made to the ship in Hong Kong and that the crew saw all the provisions that were taken on board the Kate Hooper before it left Macao. Why did they wait so long before they complained to Captain Jackson?

With the passengers on board, the ship set sail from Macao with the morning tide at 9 a.m. on October 15, 1857. The crew was given muskets and bayonets and divided into three watches of four hours each to stand guard.<sup>37</sup> They allowed the laborers on deck rather than keep them in the hold of the ship, but those watching them were told to be watchful, and if any attempted to jump ship and swim ashore, they were to fire on them.<sup>38</sup>

Just four days out of Macao, trouble brewed. At approximately 8 p.m. on October 19, some of the laborers threatened the crew with an insurrection. Well over three hundred were on deck at the time, but the crew on watch was able to force them below deck and fasten the hatches. What caused this disturbance? Evidently the Chinese had become aware that they were not heading to San Francisco, which is what they believed to be their destination. Since the ship was sailing in a westerly course, toward the Indian Ocean and Cape of Good Hope, rather than east to North America, they realized they were heading to Cuba and rose in revolt.<sup>39</sup> The ship's owner, responding to later accusations by the crew, denied that the laborers did not know where they were headed. He said that each one of the Chinese emigrants had signed an agreement written in Chinese and Spanish that they were indentured for a period of eight years in Cuba. Further, he claimed, all those who set sail from Macao knew this and made the trip willingly.<sup>40</sup> The truth of these statements is doubtful because it was unlikely that any of the emigrants could read and write, which meant they were at the mercy of whatever the coolie agents had told them. Dr. Parker believed that these agents used any means they could to get poor, illiterate Chinese on board these ships.<sup>41</sup>

After this uprising, the captain of the ship felt it necessary not only to restore order but also to punish those who had led the revolt. On October 20, four men were put in irons, and three of them were flogged. One received forty-eight lashes, and two others received twenty-four each. The last escaped flogging because of his age (said to be about fifteen).<sup>42</sup>

This revolt was just the beginning of trouble on the Kate Hooper, however. Seventeen days later, on November 6, the Chinese again rose in revolt. Captain Jackson believed that sighting land while preparing to go through the Gaspar Straits (separating the islands of Java and Sumatra) had agitated them.<sup>43</sup> When trouble began on deck, the crew forced the men below and fastened the hatches. This did not quell the uprising. Some of the men took the straw stuffing out of the sleeping mattresses, added straw hats to the piles, and then set them afire. The crew immediately placed tarpaulins over the hatches. If the passengers did not wish to suffocate due to lack of air, they had to put out their fires. This they did. The crew then removed the tarpaulins.<sup>44</sup>

The Chinese emigrants were not yet finished. On the morning of November 7, they began to break up the wooden frames of their sleeping berths, smashed the lanterns in their quarters, and lit another fire. Again the crew placed the tarpaulins over the hatches, and again the fire was extinguished. But soon after, the passengers tried to force open the hatches, and when this failed, they again set a fire below decks. Again the crew resorted to the same measures. The tarpaulins were placed over the covers, and the fires were put out.<sup>45</sup>

Captain Jackson felt that if these disturbances continued, the ship and crew would be in danger. He therefore ordered the United States flag flown upside down to show that the ship was in distress and ordered two lifeboats to get ready in case the crew had to abandon ship. One lifeboat was loaded with food supplies, charts, and a compass and lowered into the water. A second lifeboat was hanging from the davits (a crane).<sup>46</sup>

Before the crew took any further action, a ship sailing nearby spotted the distress signal. It was an American vessel, the Flying Childers. The first mate of this ship plus six or seven crewman came aboard the Kate Hooper. The first mate asked how they could be of assistance. Captain Jackson stated that perhaps the Kate Hooper should be abandoned or even blown up.<sup>47</sup> His first mate, Bowden, disagreed. He believed the captain was too ill to render any decision of this nature.<sup>48</sup> Jackson had taken ill soon after they left Macao, and his condition worsened as the journey proceeded.<sup>49</sup> First Mate Bowden argued that if the crew stuck with the ship, they could restore order. Bowden asked the crew if they would support him, and they all agreed. He also suggested that Captain Jackson be transferred to the Flying Childers because of his poor health. He further asked for more arms.<sup>50</sup> Captain Jackson agreed that the crew needed more weapons, but he refused to leave his ship.<sup>51</sup> The first mate of the Flying Childers left and returned with his captain along with the necessary arms, which consisted of two dozen muskets, two dozen handcuffs, a dozen cutlasses, and some powder.<sup>52</sup>

With this reinforcement, the remaining fires were put out, and the hatches were raised.<sup>53</sup> First Mate Bowden asked the Chinese to identify the ringleaders of the revolt. If they cooperated, Bowden argued, they would be able to come up on deck as before. Fortunately, some of the Chinese were able to speak English, and one of them had even served as a steward for the captain of the Flying Childers two years earlier. These men were able to identify five of the ringleaders. This time, the leaders of the uprising received much more severe punishment. One of the them was bound head and foot and thrown overboard; while he was floundering at sea, he was shot by the coolie master, Taylor. Two were shot to death on the poop deck. One was hanged by the spanker gaff, and one was shot between decks.<sup>54</sup> Four others were flogged, three with

twelve lashes and one with twenty-four lashes.<sup>55</sup> Eighteen others were picked out and put in double irons and kept in irons until just before landing in Havana.<sup>56</sup>

The fearful crew decided not to return to their quarters but to sleep on deck. The Chinese were allowed to come up on deck, but only twenty-four at a time. The Flying Childers continued to follow the Kate Hooper until they sailed into the port of Angier Point on Java on November 13.<sup>57</sup> Captain Jackson realized that his crew was extremely tired from standing guard over the coolies. Jackson appealed to the harbormaster for a guard of soldiers to help him. The harbormaster said that he would be unable to comply and advised Jackson to seek assistance from the American consulate in Batavia (Jakarta), some sixty miles away.<sup>58</sup>

Voyage of the Kate Hooper, Part 2

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