

Donald McArthur

Contributor: Donna Lucille Williams Rogers, great-great granddaughter
Portions of this text come from Janice Davis' research, Donna's cousin.

Donald McArthur had coal black piercing eyes and red hair. He was born in England, of Scottish descent, in 1827. He came to New York at the age of one. He was put in a boy's school in Saratoga, and at the age of 14, Donald sold his books and clothes and shipped out to sea on a whaling vessel. He was accompanied by three of his schoolmates.

Life on the ship was very rugged. Many died of scurvy because of the lack of fresh meat and fruit. The Officers and Captain of the vessel ate well but others did not. During a night watch Donald stole a piece of fresh meat and cooked it in his coffee pot. Realizing the piece of meat was missing the captain searched the ship and tried with no luck to get someone to confess.

Donald and his shipmates would harpoon whales using harpoons from a smaller vessel. They hated the sharks that would follow the smaller boats waiting for a boy to fall out of the boat. The boys would heat up rocks to where they were literally red hot and then throw them to the sharks and the sharks would literally tear themselves to pieces with the burning rock in them. For a time the boys were not allowed to go ashore when the ship would dock because it was feared they would run away because they were so poorly treated.

During this time many men were shanghaied aboard and made to work very hard. After many months at sea the ship docked at the Kanaki Islands. The Captain, feeling confident that the boys wouldn't run away in this tiny island in the mid-Pacific, allowed the boys to go ashore. Donald and his three friends hid in the thick tropical underbrush and up in coconut trees to hide. They only had coconut meat and milk for 3 days. They watched the ship go back out to sea. Thinking it was safe, despite Donald's warnings, Donald's friends went into town to find something to eat. All three boys were captured by men the captain had left behind. When his friend were made to reboard the ship and the ship left with his friends, Donald was safe,

Over the next 2 years Donald made friends with the Kanaki natives and, because he repaired a broken barrel for the king, he also made friends with him. Donald left the Kanaki Islands and by the age of 19 ended up in San Francisco.

From San Francisco he traveled all over the western US. He ended up in Utah in about 1863 (I have no idea how long he was there prior to 1863). In Utah Donald met Margaret Price Howells Thompson. Margaret's husband, Nils, had been scalped by Indians leaving her a 23 year old widow with a 2 year old and pregnant to boot. Donald offered to marry her. Margaret agreed, but only after she had given birth to the baby within her.

They married January 20, 1863 and had 11 children together. At one point, while living in Nevada, Donald built the Salt Wells station stop for the 20 mule borax haul,

In 1874 Donald also ran for superintendent of schools for Churchill County and won by a landslide (41 votes for Donald, 14 for his opponent Gray). Donald then moved his family to Inyo County (near Bishop) where had had secured a land grant for 160 acres. (BLM serial is cacaaa 134022)

Donald was 13 years older than Margaret. He became ill and unable to support his family. Margaret brought in the money for about a year and then sadly divorced Donald in Inyo County on October 11 1886.

I have copies of the original divorce documents for any family member interested (they were found by my cousin, Janice Davis), I also have a wonderful photo of Donald, as well as Margaret Howell and many of those descended from them. We don't know what happened to Donald after the divorce. We believe he is buried in Inyo County somewhere, just do not know where but one day I am going to give him a great big hug in heaven!