

The Clerk's Black History Series

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William T. Shorey

(July 13, 1859 – April 15, 1919)

"First Black Man to Command a Whaling Ship"

William T. Shorey was born on July 13, 1859, in the Caribbean Island of Barbados. As a boy, William saw little opportunity in his homeland and did not want to follow in his father's footsteps as a sugarcane farmer. At the age of 17, he boarded a ship bound for Boston. During his first trip, William quickly learned the dangers of whaling after a whale attacked the vessel, smashing into the sides of the ship. When he arrived in Boston, he immediately began working as an apprentice whaler. In 1880, William sailed from the East Coast, around the Cape of Good Hope, and eventually to San Francisco aboard the whaler "Emma Harriman". In 1884, William made his home in California and married Julia Shelton, a newspaper publisher from a prominent black family. The following year, William received his official Master's License, allowing him to command any size water vessel, anywhere in the world. Most of his voyages were based out of San Francisco, which by 1900 was the foremost international trading hub on the North American West Coast, importing and exporting over six million tons of goods. His ships were comprised of multi-racial crews.

Although Julia ran the household while William was away at sea, she and the children would sometimes accompany William on his whaling expeditions. Julia and William would write vivid accounts of their ocean travels in letters to the editor of the Black-owned newspaper, "The San Francisco Elevator". Some brave reporters would row out to William's ship in small boats to grab scoops about death-defying experiences, coining William, the "Black Ahab", and writing articles that described him as a hero who battled monster whales and typhoons to save his crew from horrific disasters. One account tells of a 1904 voyage where whales smashed two boats to pieces, amazingly, with no loss of life. Another story told of a voyage in 1905 that returned 3000 pounds of bone and 230 barrels of oil. This meant a good profit for the owners, fair pay for the skipper, and officers and \$1 each for the green hands. Shorey's ship, the "John and Winthrop" survived two serious storms during the 11-month trip. The story Julia wrote about their three-year-old daughter Victoria's remarkable ability to steer a large "whaling bark" (a ship with three or more masts) was met with great excitement from their community. Unfortunately, one of their voyages ended tragically when their 20 year-old daughter, Zenobia Pearl became ill on a trip to Hawaii, and died soon after they returned home.

In 1907, William's ship was hit by a typhoon off the coast of Japan while returning from an expedition. His crew members reported that the boat was smashed and the sails were lost as large waves swept over the decks in a storm that lasted for 30 harrowing hours. On the same trip they almost smashed into rocks while traveling through dark and dense fog. They attributed Captain Shorey's remarkable seaman skills, calm demeanor and leadership as being the reason they were saved from certain death. The incident was likely the reason that William retired from the sea the following year at the age of 49. He continued to work as a special agent at the Oakland docks, but the remaining years of his life were devoted to his family and community.

Both before and after his retirement, William Shorey was a prominent civic figure in the San Francisco area. In 1903, he hosted a dinner at his home with influential black citizens from the Bay Area to welcome Booker T. Washington, who spoke to raise funds for his school at Tuskegee.

After his retirement, the far west end of 8th Street was renamed Shorey Street by a City ordinance. Captain Shorey was the first black Oaklander to be so honored. His home, the Shorey house, was restored and enlarged in 2007. In April of 2013, the Shorey House was designated a historic landmark in Oakland.

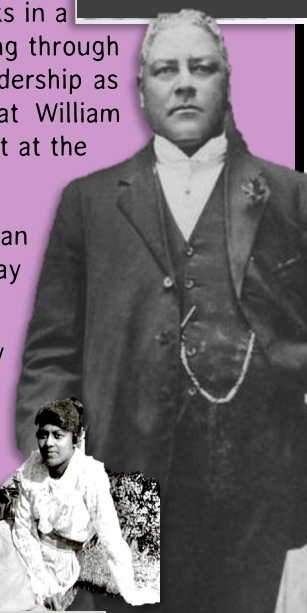
Only two of the Shorey children lived into adulthood. William Shorey fell victim to the Spanish Flu and died on April 15, 1919 at age 59. His wife, Julia died in 1944 at the age of 78. They are buried at Mountain View Cemetery, in Oakland, next to three of their children.



Zenobia and Victoria on her mother's lap.



William's whaler "John and Winthrop"



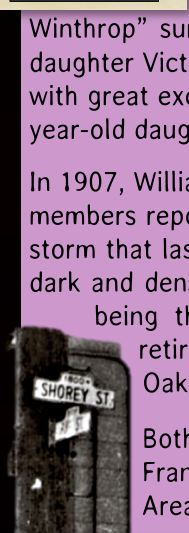
Daughter, Victoria Shorey



Julia Shorey



William & Julia



VICTORIA & SHOREY