

Like a Lighthouse on a Stormy Night: The Seamen's Home of Nagasaki

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Nagasaki is morally and spiritually a storm centre, and the Seamen's Home is the only harbour for sailors free from the prevailing vices.

In the raucous first decade of the foreign settlement at Nagasaki—officially opened July 1, 1859—hundreds of British, American, French, Dutch, Russian, Prussian and Portuguese sailors took shore leave at the port town. Scores of “grog shops” within the settlement operated to quench their thirst for alcohol, while numerous “tea houses” in the Japanese entertainment district catered to their sexual desires. There seemed to be little call from anyone to alter the situation.

Life on shore, however, was not always easy for the sailors. There was often a price to pay for their sexual activity, with untold numbers of sailors having to be treated for syphilis and gonorrhea. They not only had to worry about venereal disease, but cholera, small pox and dysentery as well; contagious diseases being the main cause of death among seamen.

The June 1867 death of George Bunker, an American sailor, illustrates another danger faced by Western military personnel. Bunker was murdered by a Japanese samurai who struck him down from behind with a sword. Tensions increased in Nagasaki when, in spite of a detailed description of the assailant, the attacker was not brought to justice. Two months later, in the famous Icarus incident, two British seamen were killed by a Japanese swordsman as they lay in a drunken stupor at the entrance to a Nagasaki “tea house”, and the murders almost led to war between Japan and Great Britain. Only victory by the opposition forces in 1868 brought an end to the attacks on foreign sailors.

By the early 1870s both Yokohama and Kobe had surpassed Nagasaki in terms of commercial importance, but sailors continued to flock to the southern port for rest and relaxation while their ships were refueled or repaired. For most sailors this still meant wine and women, but an increasing number searched for other alternatives. This desire for a more temperate place where seamen could actually “rest and relax” coincided with the aspirations of certain members of the foreign settlement to create a more stable environment for the residential population. It was not surprising, therefore, that members of the naval and missionary communities convened to discuss the possibility of establishing a home for sailors within the foreign settlement.

The first attempt at such a venture occurred at no. 16 Oura, the residence of Rev. Wilton Hack on March 27, 1874. The meeting was attended by Rev. Henderson Burnside of the Anglican Episcopal Church, Rev. Hack of the Australian Baptist Mission, Rev. John C. Davison of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Commander Bonham Bax of the H.M.S. Dwarf, H.J. Hunt, Henry Gribble, F.A. Potter, S.R. de Souza and Capt. J.C. Cheetham. Commander Bax was elected Chair and a seven-man working committee (Burnside, Hack, Capt. A. Grange, Capt. E.G. Furber, Gribble, Hunt and H. Iwersen) was formed to collect funds and establish rules for the management of a “Sailors’ Club.”

On April 30th the committee announced that it had collected \$400, and that it would rent no. 26 Oura as the site of a Sailors’ Club to open approximately May 9th. On May 25th and June 1st benefit performances consisting of “Readings, Songs and Dances,” were given at the Club in order to raise funds for its operation, and initial reports indicated that they were quite successful. Prosperity

proved short lived, however, and the Club, which served primarily as a reading room supplied by donations from local residents, soon faltered and was forced to close its doors.

As the new year opened in 1879, an editorial in the Rising Sun and Nagasaki Express renewed the call for a Seamen's Home in town.

Nagasaki is acquiring a bad name, at least among men-of-war; and it would seem to be shunned as a winter resort for the simple reason that while numberless inducements and temptations are offered to the sailor on shore to drink, and that too often to excess, there is not one solitary house where the temperate man or the teetotaler can drop in and read the paper without the noisy accompaniments of drunken singing or angry brawls....We have reason for believing that there are at least one or two people in Nagasaki who would, if sufficient support were given them, establish a room or sailor's home...and we trust before long to hear that the hint has been carried out, and that Commanding officers will no longer regard Nagasaki as 'la bete noir' of Japan, a reputation which it has rightly earned.

The first person to move to reestablish a Seamen's Home was the Rev. Walter Andrews of the Anglican Episcopal Church, who rented a building at no. 15 Oura and began a "Reading and Coffee Room" for sailors. Andrews operated the institution until May 1882, when the newly-arrived Rev. A.B. Hutchinson of the same church took over. According to Hutchinson, "The Coffee Room, with its responsibilities, and about 200 dollars, was handed over to my sole charge, on the distinct understanding that I should be free to close it whenever in my judgment the state of the accounts made such action necessary."

The first thing Hutchinson did was purchase the building Andrews had been using and repair it. He called his new establishment the "Sailors' Institute." To help support itself, the Institute sold non-alcoholic beverages. Beverage sales on the premises and donations from various ships (primarily British) in port constituted the main source of income for the institution. In addition to being used for the relaxation of sailors, "social gatherings for tea and recreation [were] held and meetings for Divine Worship on several Sunday afternoons, by special request."

The "Sailors' Institute" functioned in this manner until the end of June 1889 when Rev. Hutchinson left town to take up missionary work in Fukuoka. Upon his departure, Hutchinson criticized the foreign community in Nagasaki for failing to support the institution. "I soon found that there was little or no practical interest felt in such an undertaking amongst the residents of Nagasaki, as was shown by the response to the last appeal for help, some four years since, which yielded five dollars only." He said that until 1886 the Institute had managed barely to support itself, but that since that time it had faced large deficits. The major reason for the deficits was the decline in business from visiting war ships, which was "partly owing to fear of cholera, and partly to the too well deserved reputation of the port for vice...."

The situation had not improved by 1889 when Hutchinson was called to Fukuoka, and when he

could find no one to take over, he decided to sell the building and its contents. At the last minute, a local resident named Alexander Air agreed to buy the building and operate it as “a Temperance Hall, combining with accommodations for sailors a Boarding House available for visitors....” The effort never materialized, however, and Air’s wife soon afterward sold the lot and its buildings.

Some members of the local foreign community at Nagasaki took exception to Hutchinson’s parting words. Editorials and letters from readers disputed Hutchinson’s charges. The editor of the English language newspaper concluded his rebuttal by saying:

The Sailors’ Institute has ceased to exist, after a somewhat long but doubtful career, so far as real usefulness is concerned. Except upon a few very rare occasions, once a year, probably, it has never been either use or ornament, and its absence will very likely be regretted by a very small minority about as often.

Thus, ten years after the Rising Sun and Nagasaki Express called for the re-establishment of a Seamen’s Home, the same newspaper roundly cheered its demise.

A third, and ultimately successful, attempt grew out of efforts by seamen from an American man-of-war and resident Protestant missionaries from 1894 to 1896. The resulting “Seamans’ Home” opened on February 3, 1896 and continued operating until just prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941.

The impetus for this final attempt came from a small group of American sailors aboard the *Charleston*, which was in Nagasaki for ten months from 1894 to 1895 undergoing repairs.

While the U.S.S. Charleston was in Nagasaki harbour, in 1894, the members of the Christian Endeavour Society came ashore from time to time on leave; they could find in Nagasaki no place to rest, to get meals, or lodgings, except in houses of ill-fame, or drinking saloons. The necessity of having some place of escape for sailors, when ashore on leave, was so evident that these young men of the Charleston determined to do all in their power to establish in this port a Sailors’ Home.

A crew member of the *Charleston* described the situation facing them in Nagasaki.

Nagasaki is the first city I have ever visited where I could not find a place to eat and sleep and rest when coming ashore without having to do so in a saloon, a gambling den, or a house of ill repute, and that is saying a great deal, for I have spent three years in travelling in foreign lands.

What was needed was a Seamen’s Home based on temperance principles. In order to encourage such an institution, the crew members donated 650 yen. “A deputation was then appointed to wait upon the local missionaries, explain their purpose, and request that an effort be made to start a Home for Seamen.” The mission achieved success in the form of donations from foreign residents in Kyushu, even though the local English language newspaper warned of pouring good money after bad, and suggested that the local missionaries use one of their own “imposing and palatial residences” as a site for the home. With the money collected a building at Oura no. 26 (ironically, a former grog shop itself) was purchased in November for 3,000 yen in the name of five local Protestant missionaries who served as the Board of Directors of the Seamans’ Home. Seeing that the home was, for all practical purposes, a reality, the crew members of the *Charleston* donated

another 400 yen to the project.

The building, known as “The Christian Endeavour Home for Seamen,” was formally opened on February 3, 1896 by the Rev. Bishop Evington. Initially, it had only nine rooms and could provide lodging for just sixteen men, but an additional 3,500 yen was used to expand the facilities. By December 1897 it had twelve rooms, 34 beds, two bathrooms, a dining room for 20, a large general room, a writing room and a library. At the close of its first decade, it could provide sleeping accommodations for 90 men, with the largest dormitory room, the Carlton H. Jenks Memorial Room, having sixteen beds. Even this proved insufficient, however, when more than one man-of-war was in port at the same time.

The major problem for the Home was that the influx of sailors was very sporadic. As many as 1,000 sailors could be in port at a time, but Nagasaki could also sometimes go months between visits from the war vessels. The other difficulty faced in the early years was the lack of a married couple to manage the institution. Elizabeth Mills operated the home for the first two years, but it was not until October 1897 that Mr. and Mrs. John Makins were hired as permanent managers. Other managers who followed included Risher W. Thornberry, Mr. and Mrs. Jonus White, Mr. and Mrs. James Hatter and Mr. and Mrs. E.A. Clark.

The first decade of the Home coincided with the peak of warship activity in Nagasaki. Events such as the Sino-Japanese War, American involvement in the Philippines, and the Boxer Rebellion meant that there was almost always business for the Seamen’s Home. Ship repairs also brought large numbers of men to port for long periods of time.

In November, 1905, the British ship *Dumbarton*, from San Francisco to Nicolaevsk, was wrecked on the Siberian coast. After suffering great hardships the officers and men reached Nagasaki and the lower deck hands were placed in the Home by the British Consul.

In this way, the Seamen’s Home became practically a self-supporting institution, operating from its receipts and a small grant from the Seamen’s Friends’ Society of the United States. Finally, even the latter support was deemed unnecessary by the Board of Directors, and the Home became financially independent. The Russo-Japanese War brought great changes to Nagasaki, however, and naval activity in the port was considerably less than it had been before the war. By early 1907 the Seamen’s Home was actively soliciting funds to continue operating. At its annual meeting in November, the Board of Directors decided that a more wide-ranging and intensive fund raising effort was needed. The result was a 1908 solicitation campaign that included a pamphlet containing a “Plea for the Sailor,” issued by the American Seamen’s Friend Society; a one-page “Appeal to the Public,” written by the Home’s Board of Directors Secretary, Albertus Pieters; and a letter from the U.S. Secretary of War (and future President), William Taft, who had visited the Home in October 1907, citing the institution as a “charity worthy of support by all Americans.”

Pieters in his appeal noted the efforts of the Home in meeting the needs of the English, American and German navies for twelve years. He requested financial assistance from “those who realize the importance of upholding the honor of the Christian nations in the Far East in a moral and religious as well as in a political and commercial sense.” The assistance was to come not only from foreign residents in Nagasaki, but from foreign communities throughout East Asia.

The person chosen to carry the appeal abroad was William J. Damson, an English teacher at the

City Commercial School who had been living in Nagasaki for about a year. Upon his departure, the local English language newspaper stated that he intended “to tour Japan, Korea, China, and the Philippines, and visit all the foreign settlements in the Far East and solicit funds for the Home.” His travels eventually took him to New Zealand and Australia as well, in search of financial support.

Damson’s efforts alone were not enough, however, and additional measures had to be taken. In an attempt to cut costs, the Board of Directors decided to partially close the Seamen’s Home during the relatively lax summer months. Other funds came in through benefit concerts at the Public Hall performed by the crews of foreign ships in port. Gradually, the prospects of the Seamen’s Home improved, and by the end of 1909 when Dr. Francis E. Clark, the founder of the Christian Endeavour movement and a trustee of the Home in Nagasaki, visited the port, the institution was once again doing well. By the close of 1910 the Home was running a surplus because of the heavy traffic in U.S. and British transports and warships at the port. 1910 also saw the return to Nagasaki of the Rev. A.B. Hutchinson, who soon after his arrival once again began to play an active role in the Seamen’s Home.

Most of the gains made in 1909 and 1910 were lost in 1911, however, with the biggest problem being diminished donations. According to the Annual Report for 1911, only sixty-seven sen was contributed locally. In 1912 an appeal for support was made for the first time in four years, as the Home continued to lose money.

By 1913 conditions in Nagasaki had improved once again, and the Electoral Board of the Seamen’s Home turned its attention to gaining independence from the Corporation in America, which held the deed to the Home’s land and buildings in trusteeship. The relationship had initially been established when extraterritoriality was abolished in Japan in order to ensure the continued operation of the Home. No longer fearful of takeover by the Japanese government and disappointed at years of little or no support from the Corporation, the Nagasaki Board requested a severance of the relationship and a return of the deed, so that it could negotiate with other institutions for support. The negotiations with the Corporation dragged on for two years, in part because of the outbreak of World War One, but were finally completed in 1915. The Board was now free to develop new institutional relationships, although this proved difficult during wartime.

The outbreak of World War One brought renewed financial problems for the Seamen’s Home as men-of-war stopped coming to the port. An appeal for financial assistance in the spring of 1915 and benefit concerts at the Public Hall and Unzen raised enough money to keep the Home open, but few activities were conducted there.

1916 would have been even worse if it had not been for the fortuitous 23-day stay of the crew of the Norwegian steamer Sygus.

The year also proved eventful in that the roof of the English church in Nagasaki collapsed in August rendering the building unusable. Because of this, Sunday English language services were moved to the parlor of the Seamen’s Home, where they remained for years.

The following year was also a slow one for the Seamen’s Home, which was able to maintain limited services through donations and a benefit concert by the crew of the U.S. cruiser Brooklyn at the Public Hall on October 1. The Home did, however, find the institutional affiliation it had been searching for when allied itself with the British and Foreign Sailors’ Society during the course of

the year.

1918 proved to be one of the best years for the Seamen's Home. It began with the unexpected housing for months of a large contingent of engineers belonging to the American Railway Service, who were en route to Vladivostok when events in Russia made it too dangerous for them to continue their voyage. The year concluded with the war over in favor of the Allies, the promise of renewed commercial trade at Nagasaki, and a balance of over 2,000 yen in the account of the Seamen's Home.

1919, while a relatively successful year financially for the Home because of the great number of U.S. transports that visited Nagasaki, was a year of tremendous change in terms of personnel. James Hatter, who had been manager of the facility for eleven years, died in February; A.B. Hutchinson, President of the Board of Directors and a long-time supporter of the Home died in August; and Anthony Walvoord, Secretary and Treasurer of the Board of Directors, passed away in September. In addition, three members of the Board of Directors—Elizabeth Russell, one of the founding members, H.W. Johns, and the Rev. R.S. Spencer—all retired.

By 1920 replacements had been found for all of the vacancies created by events of the previous year. The most important addition was that of Mr. and Mrs. E.A. Clark as port missionary and manager of the Home, respectively. The Australian couple was sent to Nagasaki by the British and Foreign Sailors' Society, who according to an agreement reached earlier with the Nagasaki Board, agreed to pay their salary. According to Mr. Clark's report to the Board at the end of the year, from August 1 to October 31, he visited forty-two ships, held sixteen services and social gatherings for 377 sailors, distributed more than 100 Bibles and other pieces of literature, and made thirty-five visits to see sick sailors in the hospital or on board ships. During the same period the Seamen's home provided more than 500 beds, served over 1,000 meals, and had 1,500 men visit its reading room. With ships once again returning to port and a salaried couple on hand to manage affairs, the future looked bright indeed for the Home.

1921 was indeed good year. The financial situation of the Seamen's Home was such that the building could be painted and a new billiard table purchased. In addition to the annual receipts of the Home, the local foreign community also contributed almost 650 yen in response to an appeal for support. The Board of Directors was feeling confident enough to assist with the manager's salary after receiving a letter from the British and Foreign Sailors' Society that it was having some financial difficulties. In December the Home entertained two groups of Japanese that quite often found themselves at odds with Western seamen—jinrikisha drivers and sampan operators—in an effort to improve relations with them.

The swing of the pendulum brought difficult times again in 1922, however, as very few ships came to port and the British and Foreign Sailors' Society transferred Mr. and Mrs. Clark to Australia in November. The Y.M.C.A. of Tokyo, which aided sailors in the Kanto area, was approached to see if it could assist the Home, but the results were disappointing.

1923 began on a promising note, as Gerald Mokma of the Reformed Church in America (residing in Nagasaki as an English teacher at Tozan Gakuin) volunteered to work as manager of the Home for a year. The other major problem for the Board of Directors was to find financial support from agencies involved in the assistance of seamen. The American Seamen's Friend Society responded with a \$300 grant while the British and Foreign Sailors' Society donated 25 pounds. In addition,

the local foreign community again contributed approximately 450 yen toward the operation of the Home.

At its annual meeting in 1924, the Board decided to change the name of the Home from the “Christian Endeavour Home for Seamen” to the “Nagasaki Seamen’s Home,” since it was no longer supported by that society. The year itself was reported to have been “one of the quietest in the history of the Home,” because of the worldwide shipping depression and the outbreak of hostilities in China. Mokma stayed on as manager until September when he was transferred out of town. He was replaced on a volunteer basis by Lester Heineman, a teacher at Nagasaki Higher Commercial School.

The following year was even quieter, as not a single warship visited the port because of continued hostilities in China. Finances were not a particular problem, since the grants from the American and British seamen societies were continued. Rent was also paid by the Nagasaki Episcopal Church and the Nagasaki Union Preaching Service, which used the Home’s chapel for services on alternate Sundays. The Home did lose its manager, however, when Heineman returned to the United States in July.

1926 was a busier year for the Seamen’s Home, as warships returned to Nagasaki and a number of merchant vessels were repaired at the port. Also, in February the Board of Directors found a new honorary manager in the person of C.B. Kinnes. The only potential problem was word from the British Sailors’ Society that it would have to substantially reduce its grant to the Home because of financial difficulties in Britain.

Even with the reduced contribution of the British Sailors’ Society for 1927, the Seamen’s Home did well enough financially to meet all of its bills, thanks to local contributions and a significant donation from the trustees of the Public Hall. Kinnes left at the end of March, but a replacement was immediately found in Martin Hoeksema of the Reformed Church in America and Tozan Gakuin, who managed the Home in his spare time. Hoeksema served until July 1928 when he returned to the United States. At that time, Samuel Kirkwood became the honorary manager of the Seamen’s Home.

With the cessation of publication of the last English language newspaper in Nagasaki in 1928, detailed local information on the Seamen’s Home disappeared. It is known, however, that the Home was still in operation during the summer of 1939 when the American Association of Nagasaki held its annual Memorial Day services there. More than likely, it remained open until just prior to the beginning of hostilities between Japan and the United States in World War Two.

The Nagasaki Seamen’s Home operated on a continual basis here for more than forty years, providing American and European sailors an alternative to the “grog shops” and “tea houses” of the city. It offered aid and comfort when needed, and a place to relax and socialize without having to consume alcoholic beverages. By providing such facilities, the Home made a positive contribution to Nagasaki that could be appreciated by foreigners and Japanese alike.

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