

## JOHN BUFFETT AND TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION: A 19TH CENTURY ADVENTURE

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### Abstract

*John Buffett was a fascinating individual who was able to crisscross the Atlantic and Pacific oceans over seven decades in the 1800s with little financial resources. Buffett's main claim to fame is as Pitcairn Island's first immigrant in 1823 to the settlement established there by HMAV Bounty mutineers and their Polynesian companions. This study examines Buffett's oceanic peregrinations beginning in 1815 and ending in 1872. Primary sources from Buffett, and images and distance measurements from Google Earth Pro allowed me to track and analyze his journeys. The discussion focuses on the actors (such as traders, whalers, and missionaries) and colonial empires that enabled his movement across large expanses of bays, seas, and oceans. The intertwined effects of the Industrial Revolution and Eurocentrism were shrinking the world (time-space compression); these factors help understand Buffett's ability to traverse the oceans with little except his own knowledge, skills, and a desire to wander.*

Keywords: John Buffett, Pitcairn Island, time-space compression, Norfolk Island

### Introduction

John Buffett was born on July 16, 1797, near Bristol, England, and died 93 years later halfway around the world on Norfolk Island (southwestern Pacific Ocean) on May 5, 1891 (Young 1894; Silverman 1967; Nobbs 1984).<sup>1</sup> Bristol's proximity to the River Avon provided Buffett easy access to the Bristol Channel, the Atlantic Ocean, and beyond. Geographically speaking, the well-positioned Buffett had the access to venture to far off places. During his youth he apprenticed as a cabinet maker, and although he would choose a life at sea at age 17, his training with wood would serve him well for decades to come.

Buffett was Pitcairn Island's first

"immigrant" in 1823. Pitcairn (25° 04' S, 130° 06' W) is a small (two miles by one mile along its longest diagonals) and remote volcanic island in the South Pacific Ocean, almost 1,400 miles from Tahiti. Pitcairn Island became the outpost of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Polynesian companions in 1790 (see Appendix I for more information on this most infamous of mutinies).<sup>2</sup> Buffett remained on Pitcairn Island at the request of the last surviving and ageing HMAV *Bounty* mutineer John Adams (alias Alexander Smith) to serve the growing number of children descendant from the *Bounty* mutineers and their Polynesian consorts. John Evans jumped ship together with Buffett and these men arrived under sail on the

*Cyrus*, a London whaler that left from California. The *Cyrus* first touched at Oahu, before reaching Pitcairn Island on December 10, 1823 (Ford 2012). Rosalind Young (1853-1924), Bounty descendant and Pitcairn historian, recalled that Buffett had a good sense of humor and could be a jokester (Young 1894). Two months after settling on Pitcairn, John married Dorothy “Dolly” Young (1797-1863), daughter of *Bounty* mutineer Edward Young (1762-1800) and chief mutineer Fletcher Christian’s widow, Mauatua.

Buffett had excellent reading, writing, and mathematical skills, a requisite for a good teacher. Being the *Cyrus*’ shipwright/joiner, he also possessed skills transferable to general woodworking. These qualities made him a valuable addition to Pitcairn Island. Further, Buffett’s desire to find a place that, at least hopefully, would offer him less worldly temptations (Buffett 1846), made the island a benevolent place for him to find inner peace and pursue his Church of England Christian faith. Unencumbered by a wife or children, and in the prime of his life at aged 26 when he arrived at Pitcairn, Buffett had no one to answer to but himself. Buffett would become an important early Pitcairner who made numerous contributions beyond his schoolmaster duties. Initially, he also assisted with religious services through sermons and singing instruction, and later during his residence instructed adolescent boys in advanced mathematics and navigation. After relinquishing his teaching duties, Buffett focused on training the island

boys in woodworking. This consisted of creating workboxes, writing desks, and drawer chests, including those inlaid with yellowish wood (Christensen 1955). He may have been the one who kindled an interest in wood carvings (e.g., turtles, flying fish, sharks, whales, birds, chalices) among the Pitcairners that later would become novelty items sold to officers and crew of visiting ships, cruise ship tourists (Nobbs 1984), and nowadays world-wide customers over the Internet (Albert 2022).

Importantly, Buffett was the main author of *The Pitcairn Island Register* that recorded births, deaths, marriages, and other important happenings (Lucas 1929); he similarly maintained a diary while residing on Norfolk Island (Buffett 1856-1892). No account of the early Pitcairners would be complete without recognizing the contributions of John Buffett. The life of John Buffett is not just of local importance to Pitcairn Island, but the objective of this paper is to explore and understand his life in a global context. Beginning in the mid to late 1700s oceangoing voyages of discovery, scientific expeditions, colonial expansion and competition, whaling, and mercantilism were shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific. While missionaries were less active than the aforementioned activities, the London Missionary Society outfitted the ship *Duff* to transport missionaries to the South Seas. In 1797 the *Duff* delivered 17 missionaries and dispersed them between Tahiti, the Marquesas, and Tonga (Hiney 2000). These types of global pursuits offered John Buffett a conveyor belt

across the vast oceans to disparate locations such as Quebec, Jamaica, Massachusetts, California, Canton, the Philippines, Oahu, Tahiti, Pitcairn Island, and Norfolk Island. As he lived during an era of European maritime dominance spurred by the Industrial Revolution, the world was effectively shrinking—time and space were compressing.

### **Sources and Methods**

This study chronicles John Buffett's voyages using satellite images and geographic analytic tools (ruler using line, path and circle options) from Google Earth Pro; additional editing (sizing insets, annotation, drawing) supplemented with PowerPoint. Ideas from time-space compression (Shepard 2002; Warf 2008), together with the ability to examine satellite images and measure distances, helped to appreciate Buffett's ability to hop on and off whalers, traders, and colonial vessels. This is the second study I have employed Google Earth to follow a significant *Bounty*/Pitcairn character. The previous study followed "Jenny," the most traveled woman of the *Bounty* (Albert 2021). Her journey demonstrated a strong female agency that brought her from Tahiti to Pitcairn Island and back after almost 30 years. Google Earth can create a project to follow a character's journey. One can "fly" from locations using the project's table of contents, adjust map scale and direction, select 2D or 3D, add photographs and text, measure distance, among other functions. For those readers unfamiliar with the maritime nomenclature of 18th and

19th centuries, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2023) provides a convenient resource for basic nautical definitions (i.e., schooner versus frigate).

Tracking John Buffett's life journeys is possible because of his propensity to record noteworthy events while residing on Pitcairn Island (2 square miles), and later Norfolk Island (13.4 square miles). While on Pitcairn, Buffett maintained what has become known as the *Pitcairn Island Register*. This document includes vital dates such as births, deaths, and marriages, together with significant island events. With entries inherited from *Bounty* mutineer Adams, Buffett would author these entries until March 24, 1839 (Lucas, 1929). Thereafter, another early immigrant and subsequent patriarch, George Nobbs, continued the *Register* until his immigration to Norfolk Island in 1856. Buffett also chronicled his oceanic wanderings in a six-part series in *The Friend of Temperance and Seaman*, a magazine published by S. C. Damon from Honolulu, Oahu (Buffett 1846). While at Norfolk, Buffett along with others made entries in the diary ledger recording events such as "shipping arrivals and departures, births, marriages and deaths, the state of the weather, chases after whales and other remarkable events" (Buffett 1856-1892, n.p.). The diary is available from the Australian National University's Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (on 35 mm microfilm reel). The PMB graciously provided a portable document format (pdf) file of this microfilm on request, which contains over 250 pages of entries

and miscellaneous documents awaiting analysis, mostly daily weather observations (Buffett 1856-1892). The Norfolk Island Philatelic Bureau (2016) commemorated Buffett's diary ledger in the selva of its last stamp issue, *160 Years Landing cf the Pitcairners on Norfolk Island*, before Australia subsumed Norfolk's philatelic activities.

### **Time-Space Compression**

Since the 1500s, the Spanish planned to connect the Atlantic and Pacific (via the Caribbean Sea) through the 50-miles width of the Isthmus of Panama. The *El Camino Real* connected the Caribbean coastal towns of Portibelo and Nombre de Dio with Old Panama and Panama City on the Pacific coast. In 1855, the Panama Railway crossed the isthmus making it easier for merchants to send people and trade goods across the isthmus between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The United States finished the Panama Canal 59 years later in 1914. With the opening of the Panama Canal, Pitcairn Island's relative location became more accessible to global entrepreneurs (whalers, traders, and missionaries) of the era. For example, the Panama Canal shortens the distance between New York and San Francisco by more than 8,000 miles. By passing through the Canal, ships avoided the dangerous seas and intense storms while navigating Cape Horn.

Four hundred and fifty ships called on Pitcairn Island from 1823-1872 on Pitcairn Island. Seventy percent of these were whalers with around 200 vessels calling in the 1840s and less than

half that number in 1850s. This decline in whalers, coincided with over hunting, dropping whale oil prices, and the discovery of petroleum in 1859 in Titusville, Pennsylvania. From 1856 through 1872 just 25 whalers stopped at Pitcairn Island, usually one or two per year.

During the same time period (1823-1872), 20 percent of vessels calling on Pitcairn were traders. This category included ships involved with trading, pearling, passenger and migrant transportation, and even one missionary vessel. The *Camden*, a ship outfitted by the London Missionary Society, en route to the Marquesas Islands landed Captain Robert Morgan and the Reverend Heath. The former disbursed "valuable" gifts and the latter made "a most impressive sermon" (Ford 2012, 19). Traders, just the opposite of whalers, were more active in the 1850s with 38 as opposed of 20 visits in the 1840s. Finally, military vessels made up just seven percent of the visits. Naval vessels visited during 22 of the 44 years from 1830 to 1872; visits peaked in the 1850s. This coincided with activity associated with the relocation of Pitcairners to Norfolk Island (Ford 2012).

While absolute location is a constant, technological innovations in terrestrial and maritime transportation change relative location, either making a spot more or less accessible. For example, more trading stops and routes materialized with the advent of steamers that were less dependent on winds. The Reverend T. B. Murray of the London Missionary Society recounted Pitcairn's first visit by a steamer, the HM *Virago*

arriving on January 24, 1853, from Cal-lao, Peru. Before continuing to Tahiti, Captain Prevost offered the islanders a circumnavigation of their island (Murray 1854).

The next technological innovation added a steel covering to create a composite hull, a precursor to modern battleships. The wood and steel provided hardiness and the steam-powered screw and sails speed. The HMS *Pelican*—a warship sloop—the first ever wood-steel hybrid vessel visited Pitcairn Island in the late 1880s (Allward 2000). Besides the customary fore, main, and mizzen masts, the *Pelican* included a steam engine with a smokestack midway between the fore and main masts. The smokestack reached one-fifth the height of the *Pelican's* main mast and made for an unusual silhouette.

While the elderly (then in his late 80s) John Buffett resided on Norfolk Island, he lived during the evolution of ocean-going transportation from the age of sail to steam and hybrid vessels. Steel ships allowed longer hulls than wood permitted, further enhancing the capacities of warships, merchant vessels, and cruise liners. With a declining friction of distance resulting in lower costs and shorter times linked to transportation innovations, the world effectively shrank. The terms to describe a shrinking world include either time-space convergence, time-space collapsing, and time-space compression (Sheppard 2002).

Time-space compression continued, of course, after the death of Buffett in 1891. Pitcairn Island is midway be-

tween Panama City, Panama, and Wellington, New Zealand, and 208 miles and one day shorter (416 miles and two days shorter both directions) following its great circle route, the shortest distance between two points on a sphere (Thomas 2018). Throughout the 1920s, the SS (steam ship) *Remuera* made voyages between Southampton, United Kingdom, and Auckland and Wellington, New Zealand, to transport British immigrants and adventure tourists.<sup>3</sup> Pitcairn Island's site, or its absolute location, is the same with or without the Panama Canal. However, Pitcairn's situation or relative location improved with the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914. Following a great circle route between Panama City and Auckland or Wellington, New Zealand, Pitcairn Island is conveniently located midway.

Sheppard (2002) names this give and take between the constraints of space and time, positionality. For example, with the depletion of Atlantic whaling grounds, the American and British whalers ventured into the Pacific in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In January of 1789, *Emilia* became the first whaler crossing into the Pacific. When Captain Shields of the *Emilia* returned to London with 35,000 gallons of whale oil, he precipitated a near "stampede" of whalers into the Pacific (Francis 1990). Pitcairn's positionality with respect to the whaling grounds of the Pacific increased the chances that whalers called at Pitcairn Island (Lucas 1929, Francis 1990). Buffett's ability to travel the Pacific traces its origins to the *Emilia* and the arrival *en masse* of the whalers that



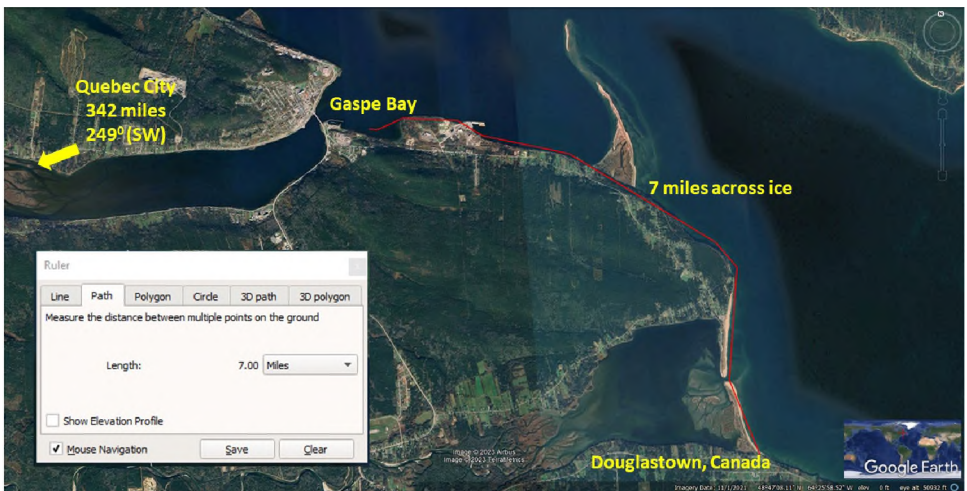
followed. The next section follows the maritime travels of John Buffett beginning in 1815 on the HMS *Penelope* and ending in 1872 on his return to Norfolk Island on the whaler *Alice*. It is highly likely that Buffett's maritime experiences began in 1815, and not the five or six years earlier as stated by Norfolk Island historian Raymond Nobbs [1984].<sup>4</sup>

### **Buffett's Preignitions**

#### **1815-1823**

During Buffett's early travels he was involved with two shipwrecks and two other vessels that foundered and required refitting. Operating during the immediate aftermath of the War of 1812, the HMS *Penelope*, a British troopship sailing between London to Quebec, struck rocks one-half mile from the shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence on the evening of April 29, 1815. According to Buffett (1846), then a Royal Navy sailor aboard the HMS *Penelope*, 42 of 120 of

the crew, or 35 percent, perished in this incident. Modern historian David Hepper estimated much higher casualties at 216 individuals or 75 percent lost to drowning or freezing, a major catastrophe for the United Kingdom's Royal Navy (Hepper 1994). Why Buffett and Hepper's casualty numbers were so different is uncertain. At Buffett's early age, information such as crew size might seem of trivial significance. Or the attempt at remembering details from 30 years earlier might have muddled his memory. David Hepper substantiated his facts from court-martial proceedings of senior shipwrecked survivors and other records available from the British Admiralty (Hepper 1994). Buffett recounted how he after the wreck ventured to "Douglastown, where we remained some days, and then proceeded across the ice about seven miles, to Gaspe Bay." Figure 1 depicts a speculative seven-mile walking route (red) across the coastline (encased in coastal



**Figure 1: HMS *Penelope* shipwrecked in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, Canada, April 29, 1815. Source: Google Earth Pro. 2022. Accessed July 27, 2023. Images: Airbus and TerraMetrics.**

ice at the time) using the ruler tool/path option in Google Earth Pro. This measurement corroborates his account (Buffett 1846, part II, n.p.). After the ice broke, he subsequently left on the HMS *Leander*, a 50-gun fourth rate frigate<sup>5</sup> of the Royal Navy, leaving Quebec City, Canada, for Portsmouth, England.

His next shipwreck experience occurred off Scituate Beach, Massachusetts, approximately 20 miles southeast of Boston. The *Weasel*, while incapacitated during a snowstorm, grounded near the shore toward the end of February 1818. The *Weasel* was on a mercantile venture traveling along the coast transporting rum from Jamaica to St. Johns, New Brunswick. The brig listed and eventually broke into pieces and according to Buffett (1846) became a total wreck.<sup>6</sup> Local fishers helped rescue eight or nine of the 19 puncheons,

therefore salvaging almost half its rum cargo (Buffett 1846). With its scattering of rock outcrops and ledges (e.g., Smith Rocks, No Mans Ledge, Sunken Ledge) located from the shoreline to one-half mile out, such a coastline presents great dangers (Figure 2).

After Scituate, it would be three years before Buffett's maritime career began again. How he returned to London and what preoccupied his time for three years is unknown. However, Buffett eventually joined as mate of an American ship, name unknown, leaving London for Guangzhou (Canton), China, in 1821. From 1760 to 1842, American and British merchant ships frequented Canton delivering furs and trading opium, and returning with tea, silk, and chinaware. So having survived two Atlantic shipwrecks, Buffett changed focus to Pacific destinations,



**Figure 2:** In this scene sandbars, rock outcrops and ledges present a challenge to coastal sailing. In combination with a snowstorm, it was a disaster waiting to happen. This bird's eye view of North Scituate Beach's (Massachusetts) coastline depicts a virtual maritime obstacle course. Source: Google Earth Pro. 2022. Accessed July 27, 2023. Data: SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO. Images: Airbus and TerraMetrics.

but initially he fared no better.

Leaving Canton, the ship lost its mizzen mast and fore-topmast during a typhoon while entering Manila Bay (Figure 3). Buffett casually noted the sale of the ship in Manila, after which he found passage on the *Lady Blackwood* bound for Chile (Buffett 1946). Notice that trading patterns, at the time, existed between current (Philippines) and former (Chile) Spanish colonies, and this provided a way across the Pacific. However, after three weeks of sailing, gale winds forced the *Lady Blackwood* onshore. This required dropping anchors, and eventually cutting masts to avert capsizing. After the winds subsided, the crippled vessel made for Rema (in the Spice Islands, Indonesia) to cut timber for masts and spars, then to Ternate (it is unclear if this location

is in North Maluku Islands, Indonesia, or the coast of Manila Bay) for refitting. Continuing, the *Lady Blackwood* sailed to Oahu (Hawaiian Islands) and then to California, where John Buffett understandably “remained some months” on shore (Buffett 1846, part III, n.p.).

Buffett returned to sea on the English whaler *Cyrus* which left from California in October 1823. The *Cyrus* first stopped at Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands before arriving at Pitcairn Island 3,770 miles distance on December 9, 1823 (Figure 4). John Buffett volunteered to stay on as the teacher and “begins keeping the Island Register Book” (Ford 2012, 12). John was a literate individual, and that made him a valuable addition to Pitcairn’s growing population. He thought exiling himself would make it easier to shun temptations of

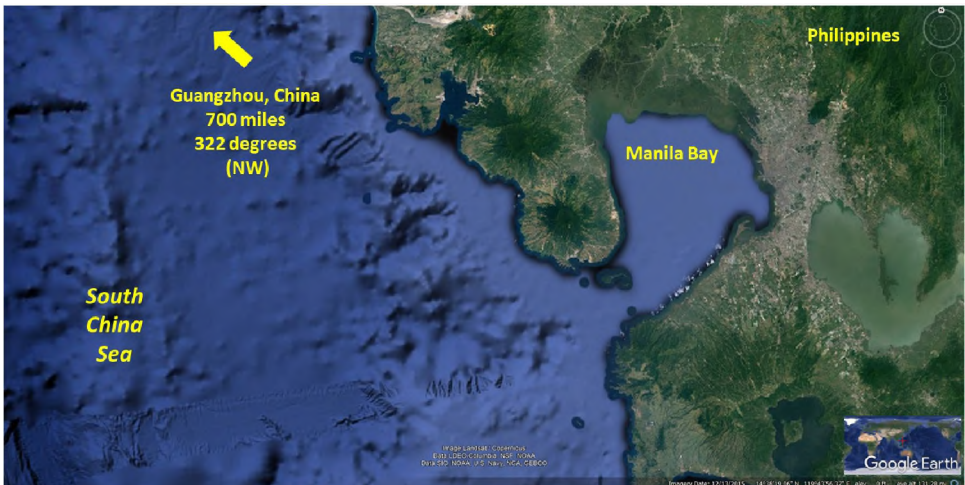


Figure 3: Travelling on an American trading ship on return from Canton, China, Buffett recounts that a typhoon damaged its masts on entering Manila Bay. This seems like misfortune as Manila Bay appears to have an excellent protected natural harbor. At Manila, Buffett boards the *Lady Blackwood*, a ship bound for Chile, although it made stops in Oahu and California, where Buffett disembarked (Buffett 1846). Source: Google Earth Pro. 2022. Accessed July 27, 2023. Data: SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, LDEO-Columbia, NSF. Image: Landsat/Copernicus.





*Figure 4: Pitcairn Island is a remote site of volcanic origin located in the South Pacific Ocean. Source: Google Earth Pro. 2022. Accessed July 27, 2023, Image: Airbus.*

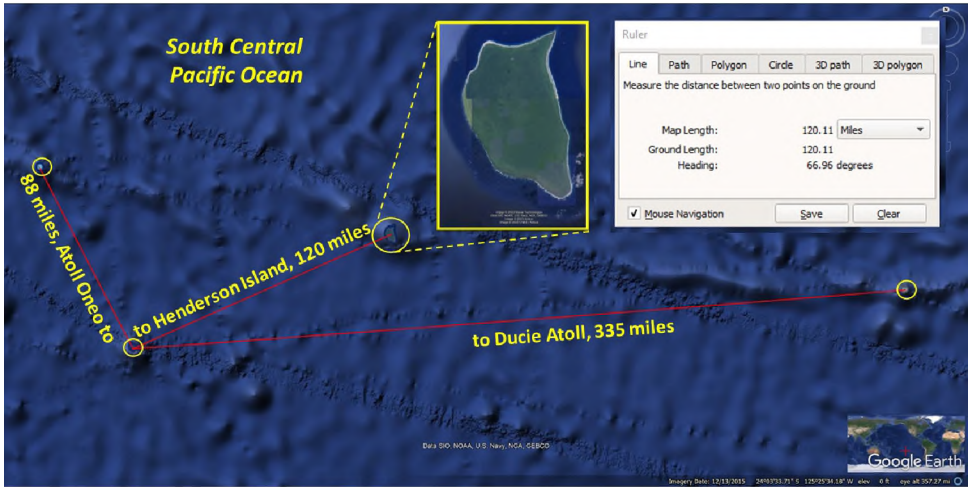
worldliness, but he would learn that vice knows no geographic limits (Buffett 1846). Buffett wrote that there were about 50 or 52 people on Pitcairn Island when he arrived in 1823. Just two years later (1825), the population had grown to 66 individuals, with 36 males and 30 females (Shapiro 1936).

### 1828-1829

On November 5, 1828, a ship arrived from Callao, Peru with just two individuals aboard, Captain Noah Bunker and George Nobbs. The arrival of these two men sans crew added a mysterious aura to their arrival. Bunker was depressed and seriously ill. He attempted suicide by jumping off a cliff, and only succeeded to break his right leg and an arm in multiple places. Captain Bunker soon succumbed to a self-inflicted overdose of laudanum (Nicolson and Davies 1997). George Nobbs (1799-1884) fared better and eventually succeeded John Adams as Pitcairn's, and later Norfolk

Island's, patriarch working as pastor, surgeon, and teacher.

Buffett tried to reach Henderson Island just months before John Adam's death on March 5, 1829. Henderson Island is an uplifted coral platform about 120-miles northeast of Pitcairn Island. Perhaps he was trying to explore the neighboring island and evaluate its potential resources. Buffett, with permission from Captain Bunker, borrowed the 20-ton decked sloop<sup>7</sup> that had surprisingly called on Pitcairn Island. Buffett aborted his venture to Henderson Island, then known as Elizabeth Island, after heavy gales thwarted the sloop's approach. The poor condition of the vessel may have also contributed to the failure to land on Henderson Island. The voyage to and from Henderson lasted ten days. Shortly after returning, George Nobbs disassembled the vessel in Bounty Bay (Figure 4). He used the lumber to construct his house. Since Buffett failed to reach Henderson Island, it is pos-



**Figure 5:** Henderson (Elizabeth) Island is an uplifted coral platform 120 miles northeast of Pitcairn Island. Pitcairn Island, Henderson Island, the Oneo Atoll and the Ducie Atoll constitute the Pitcairn Islands, a British Overseas Territory. Distances calculated with Google Earth Pro's ruler/line option. Inset map not to scale. Source: Google Earth Pro. 2022. Accessed July 27, 2023. Data: SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, and GEBCO.

sible he might have been interested in joining subsequent excursions, including those in March 1843, and August and November 1851. On subsequent trips to Henderson the islanders found miro wood (*Thespesia populnea*), a resource they have since used to sustain their woodcraft industries, including its carvings. Today the Pitcairners are managing miro for sustainable harvests (Albert 2022). Henderson is one of the four islands that comprise the Pitcairn Islands, a British Overseas Territory. The four islands encompass the largest marine reserve on the planet, as of 2023 (Figure 5).

Around the same time, January 22, 1829, supercargo (a term for a trader representing the ship's owner) Jacques Antoine Moerenhout of the schooner<sup>8</sup> *Volador* arrived at Pitcairn (Ford 2012). He contracted with the young men of

Pitcairn to work as divers for a pearl-luring expedition to Lord Hood (Figure 6) and neighboring islands (Albert forthcoming; Ford 2012; Moerenhout 1983). Buffett would have been in his early 30s, and not considered "young;" further, his name or a description of him does not appear in Moerenhout's (1983) account.

## 1831

Two years later, John Buffett was one of 86 Pitcairners, the entire population, that immigrated to the much larger Tahiti (Figure 6). The mass exit was a response to drought on Pitcairn Island around this time; since Tahiti is a high island of volcanic origin, orographic precipitation would provide sufficient a water supply. The islanders received passage on the *Lucy Anne*, a transport ship from Sydney under the escort of the HM *Comet*, which arrived on March

21, 1831.

Twelve or more Pitcairners, however, succumbed to an epidemic contracted at Tahiti, including Thursday October Christian (1790-1831)—the first born on the nascent Anglo-Polynesian settlement at Pitcairn in 1790. Thursday became feverish and delirious (Buffett 1846; Young 1894) and died on April 21, and just three days later Buffett would begin his (mis)adventure home. Diverging cultural norms between the Tahitians and the Pitcairners, and deaths from an epidemic no doubt prompted them to return from whence they came. Buffett and company left Tahiti on a 30-ton schooner for the Gambier Islands on a pearling expedition in exchange for return passage to Pitcairn Island. The Gambier Islands are approximately 335 miles northwest of Pitcairn Island. For whatever reason, the expedition “could not obtain shells” at the Gambier Islands, so the schooner landed the passengers on Lord Hood Island (also called Marutea Sud), French Polynesia<sup>9</sup>, and remained there for three weeks (Figure 6) (Buffett 1846, part IV, n.p.; Albert, forthcoming). Lord Hood Island is an atoll approximately 420 miles northwest of Pitcairn Island. Leaving Lord Hood Island, Buffett’s last leg must have touched at the Gambier Islands as he writes, “left G—in the Brig and after three days arrive safe at Pitcairn’s” (Buffett 1846, part IV, n.p.).

On April 24, 1831, the first homeward bound group of Pitcairners led by John Buffett completed their journey on the French frigate *Bourdeaux*. Buffett and company arrived back at

Pitcairn Island on June 27, 1831 (Ford 2012). Eventually, the second group of returning Islanders procured their passage with Captain Willian Driver of the schooner *Charles Doggett* of Salem, Massachusetts, arriving September 3, 1831 (Ford 2012). William Driver engaged in a mission to harvest sandalwood and sea cucumbers (*beche-de-mer*) from Fiji and exchanged these for lucrative profits in destinations such as Manila and Australia (Melillo 2015; Benz and Williams 2020). Captain Driver would also purchase tortoise shells “to take home a supply for the merchants specializing in jewelry, guitar picks, and ornamental businesses” (Benz and Williams 2000, 132).

### 1832-1837

Buffett’s letter to Commodore Mason of the South American Station alerted British colonial authorities to the arrival of an uninvited guest turned dictator, Joshua Hill, who extorted controlled over the Pitcairners between 1832 and 1837 (Buffett 1846). This letter prompted Hill to self-deport on the HMS *Imogene* in 1837. Joshua Hill arrived on Pitcairn Island in October 1832 under the false pretense that the British sent him to manage Pitcairn Island. Being of tall stature and exuding a confident persona, he intimidated the islanders and proclaimed himself President. This uninvited guest assumed dictatorial control over the social, civil and religious affairs of the islanders. Less than two years later, March 1834, Joshua Hill expelled John Buffett, George Nobbs, and John Evans from Pitcairn; they left

on the whaler *Tuscan* of London for Tahiti. In June Captain Ebril of the *Pomare*, a merchant barque<sup>10</sup>, arrived in Pitcairn with John Buffett to gather the families of the exiles. Captain Ebril transported the Nobbs and Evans families to the Gambier Islands, while Buffett and family continued onward to Tahiti. Buffett secured employment as mate (deck officer) of the American brig *Olivia*, under the command of Captain Charles Kendal. The *Olivia* returned Buffett and his family to Pitcairn Island on September 16, 1834, and later, brought the Nobbs and Evans families on October 13, 1834. As Hill's authority had diminished over the six months since, the exiles remained on Pitcairn Island. Joshua Hill eventually left Pitcairn in 1837 aboard

the HM *Imogene* (Figure 6).

### 1843-1849

Eleven Pitcairners left to explore Henderson (Elizabeth) Island on March 4, 1843, on the whaler *America*. While it is unsure if Buffett made this trip, given a previous attempt in 1829, it is possible. The Islanders returned on the *America* on March 11 with an unfavorable opinion of Henderson Island (Ford 2012). The same year, Buffett left Pitcairn Island on the *Splendid* and sailed to Honolulu, but once there he could not arrange passage to England. He returned to Pitcairn Island on February 12, 1846 on the American whaler *Hannibal* (Buffett 1846; Lucas 1929; Ford 2012). Six years later (1849) Buffett would re-

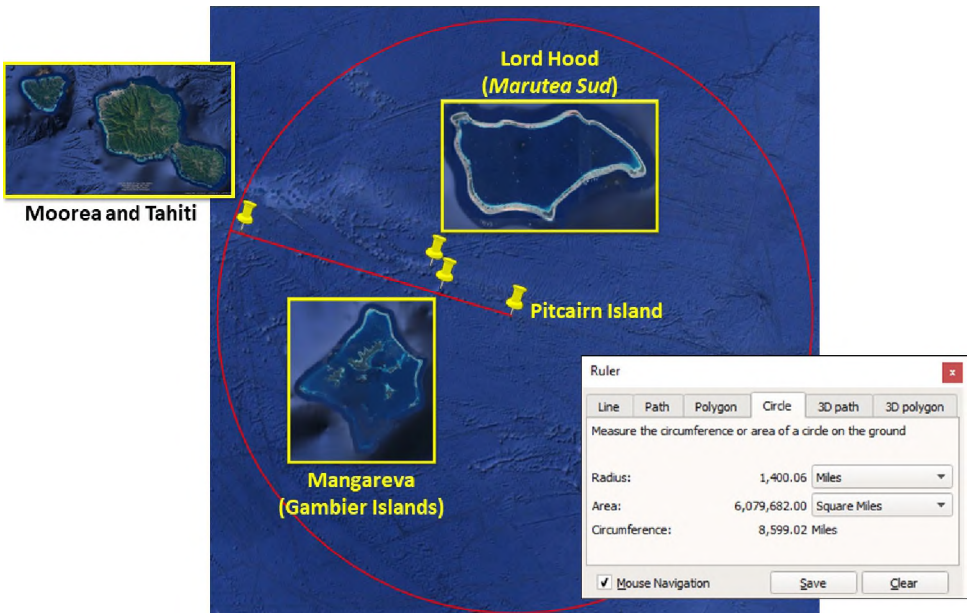


Figure 6: Buffett's travels to Tahiti, Lord Hood, and Mangareva (Gambier Islands) during the 1830s. The circle based on a 1,400 mile radius encompasses Tahiti (and its neighboring island, Moorea, Lord Hood (Marutea Sud), and Mangavera (Gambier Islands). Inset maps not to scale. Source: Google Earth Pro. 2022. Accessed July 27, 2023. Data: SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, LDEO-Columbia, Landsat, NSF. Images: Landsat/Copernicus, CNES / Airbus, and Maxar Technologies.



turn to Honolulu, Oahu, for about six months. During this period, the Hawaiian Islands were at the crossroads of British and American trade with China, whaling, sugar plantations, and Christian missionaries. He left Pitcairn for Oahu in January 1849 (i.e., Southern Hemisphere summer) and returned to Pitcairn Island on the packet<sup>11</sup> brig HMS *Pandora* on July 10, 1849 (Lucas 1929; Ford 2012). The rationale for the 1843 and 1849 trips to Oahu is difficult to know without more evidence (e.g., letters, reports, eyewitness accounts). Whether he was contemplating passage to England, or to sell the cabinets, drawer chests, and carvings the islanders would subsequently become famous for is unknown (see Albert 2022 for a history of miro wood on Pitcairn and Henderson islands).

### 1851

Ford (2012) records that the Pitcairners made two visits to Henderson Island in 1851, one in August and the other in November. On August 16, 1851, the whaler *Joseph Meigs* of New Bedford shuttled 12 Pitcairners to Henderson Island. The islanders discovered one skeleton; after returning the Pitcairners, *Joseph Meigs* departed on August 25, 1851. Another whaler, *Sharon*, brought a larger group consisting of 38 Islanders to Henderson Island to cut miro wood for carvings and furniture. *Sharon* left Pitcairn Island on November 11, 1851, and arrived on Henderson Island three days later. The visitors also assessed the island's soil, shells, coral, and water resources (Lucas 1929). While on the re-

connaissance exploration, the Islanders discovered eight skeletons reposed in a cave (Ford 2012). Other skeletons were subsequently found in 1958 and confirmed as the bones of prehistoric Polynesians (see "The Henderson Island Skeletons" from the Pitcairn Islands Study Center [2023b] for a comprehensive analysis).

It is unknown whether John Buffett was among the party of Pitcairners venturing to Henderson Island, but given that a previous attempt failed in 1829, and his interest in woodwork and carpentry, it is possible he went on either or both the 1851 excursions to scout for miro and other valuable trees. Since the *Pitcairn Island Register* does not record entries relating to Buffett during these periods, there is a slight chance he participated in these trips to Henderson Island.

### 1856-1872

On May 2, 1856, John Buffett departed Pitcairn Island on the *Morayshire* along with the island's entire population of 193 (plus one born en route) and arrived at Norfolk Island on June 7, 1856 (Figure 7). Pitcairn's increasing population and drought were that main reasons for leaving the island. Norfolk was a former prison colony on the other western side of the Pacific Ocean from Pitcairn, and almost 4 degrees latitude further south at 29 degrees south latitude. This meant the relocated Pitcairners would have to adjust their agricultural activities to a more temperate climate than their former island home. Two small groups of Pitcairners disil-



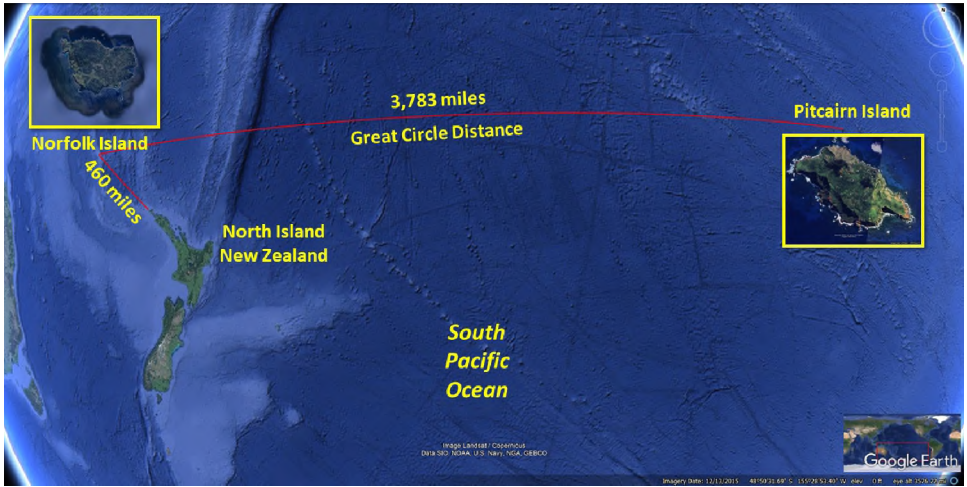


Figure 7. Norfolk Island is on the other side of Pacific from Pitcairn, and four degrees latitude further south. John Buffett relocates there with the entire Pitcairn population of 194 individuals in 1856. Early after arriving at Norfolk, Buffett ventured to New Zealand for about five months; its closest point is 460 miles southeast on North Island. Inset maps not to scale. Accessed July 27, 2023. Data: SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, LDEO-Columbia, NSF. Images: Landsat/Copernicus, Airbus, CNES Airbus, Maxar Technologies, TerraMetrics.

lusioned with Norfolk returned “home” in 1858 and 1864 to repopulate Pitcairn Island (Nicolson and Davies 1967).

Even after Buffett relocated to Norfolk Island in 1856, and in his early 60s, Buffett made an excursion to New Zealand on the whaler *Alice* (Figure 7). He returned to Norfolk Island toward the end of July 1857. It is unknown why Buffett departed for New Zealand after just one year. Nor is it known what he did during his five months there. This excursion, however, fits into his long history hopping on and off trading (pearlers) and whaling ships as an improvised public transit system.

Buffett was a part of a delegation sent to convince those living on Pitcairn Island to reconsider Norfolk Island. Thus far, I have found no details concerning the size of this delegation,

but it had a spiritual mission to encourage Pitcairners to return to their church family and leaders on Norfolk Island (Kirk 2008). That Buffett’s daughter Mary Young (1828-1901) had previously returned to Pitcairn Island might further explains his motivation—a chance to visit his daughter. He sailed on the whaler *Alice Cameron* of Sydney and arrive at Pitcairn Island on March 28, 1868. He stayed for four years leaving early July 4, 1872, on another whaler, the *Sea Ranger*, to Norfolk, and never returned (Ford 2012). John Buffett’s death is recorded by his grandson without emotion: “Grand father died at half past .9. p.m.” and “Funeral took place 4 p.m. Light SE. wind” (Buffett 1856-1892, May 5 and May 6, 1891, respectively). He had lived a long, fruitful, and adventurous life.

## **Conclusion**

Buffett's ability to move on and off Pitcairn Island during his residence (1823-1856) or to make an extended visit (1868-1872) coincided with the increasing movement into the Pacific by whalers, traders, and naval vessels primarily from Britain and America, and even France (see subheading 1831). The French were less active in Pacific whaling but were involved with mercantile and colonial pursuits. How did Buffett pay for sea passage while residing on Pitcairn Island or later Norfolk Island? Sometimes passage was gratis on humanitarian grounds, on other trips Buffett offered his services as a sailor, navigator, and shipwright and even participated on a pearling and shelling expedition in exchange for transportation (Buffett 1846).

On land, the classic time-space model of transportation depicts increasing expanse and more complex shapes of settlements via advances in mode of transportation from walking, horse and buggy, stagecoach, and railroads. John Buffett's life (1797-1891) spanned across these evolutions in transportation. Since Buffett's peregrinations occurred via ocean avenues, these land-based modes of transportation do not offer much, if anything, to explain his potential to zigzag the oceans, seas, gulfs, and bays of the planet. The ship-based empires from the 16th to 19th centuries, however, changed the relative locations of coasts, littorals, archipelagos, and islands across the globe. Buffett's life intertwined with the Late

Modern Time-Space era (1750 to 1900), a period coinciding with colonialism, European exploitation, the rise of the West, and a concomitant decline of the East (Warf 2008).

Ideas from time-space compression provide a blueprint to analyze Buffett's ability to traverse space during the Nineteenth Century (Warf 2008). So how does one explain John Buffett's ability to traverse the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. His exploits brought him to places in the four hemispheres. Buffett's lifespan coincides with almost half of the Late Modern Time-Space Era.<sup>12</sup> Of course, this era built on the previous one from 1600-1750, the Early Modern Time Space Era. This era witnessed the expansion of capitalism along with emerging trading and colonial empires evolving from Eurocentric hegemony. The British, French, Spaniards, and others (e.g., Russians) were rivals for political, economic, and ideologic dominance to subjugate and colonize outside their respective nation states. The British, French, and Spaniards were successful because of their powerful navies which carried artillery ranging from guns to cannons. The adoption of the nation-state concept created a spatial fix (Harvey 2001) that fostered rivalries to control resources across far flung regions. Improvements in navigation (e.g., Mercator projection maps, navigation charts, chronometers) spurred further voyages of exploration and discovery, scientific knowledge, and extraction (confiscation) of valuable commodities such as silver and gold.<sup>13</sup> During the Late Modern Era, as the In-

dustrial Revolution expanded its social, technological, and trade manifestations, Eurocentrism was the rule rather than the exception (Warf 2008).

Within this context one can explain expansion and competition of the British, French, Spanish, and later American involvement with Atlantic and Pacific colonial, trade, religious, or other activities dominating the peripheral places of their empires. It is important to understand that multiple perspectives contributed to understanding time-space mechanisms, including technocratic, Marxist, structuration, and world systems approach. Technological advancements alone cannot explain Buffett's ability to overcome time-space constraints of his era. While technological innovations in navigation, and later steam power, steel clad ships, or a combination of steam and steel, or the Panama Railway and Panama Canal were critical. Still other perspectives offer nuanced explanations, for example, capitalism's need to overproduce expanded trade areas, and therefore encouraged interactions between islanders and empire actors and networked previously marginalized places (Thomas 2010). These perspectives contributed to an enhanced understanding of how John Buffett and others like him traveled the world with limited personal means.

Even after arriving over 30 years after the initial settlement at Adamstown, John Buffett was an important early Pitcairner.<sup>14</sup> It is a testament to the significance of John Buffett that Nechtman (2018) critically explored our pro-

tagonist in a recent book on Joshua Hill, the once "pretender" of Pitcairn Island. Buffett's ability to traverse great swaths of the world's oceans located in all four hemispheres was a function of the period in which he lived. In the late 1790s whalers, traders, and missionaries were following earlier voyages of discoveries by British, French, and Spanish colonial navies. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Europe enabled these countries to expand their control over far flung fragments of the world politically, economically, and socially.

### **Endnotes**

1 According to the genealogical site Geni, <https://www.geni.com/people/John-Buffett-Cyrus-crew/6000000020575127877>, John Buffett was born in Hull, England. Hull is 190 miles northeast of Bristol, and adjacent to the Humber River with access to the North Sea. It is possible that he relocated at early age to Bristol.

2 Before continuing with John Buffett's life journey, it is important to examine the background on the mutiny on the *Bounty*. On April 28, 1789, Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian, deposed Commander William Bligh for supposed verbal abuse and 18 loyalist sailors into the HMAV *Bounty's* 23-foot launch (service boat) near Tofua (19°45' S, 175°04' W), a volcanic island in the South Pacific Ocean. Christian and eight mutineers together with six men and 12 women from Polynesia, a total of 28 individuals, settled on the uninhabited and isolated Pitcairn Island in January 1790 (Wahlroos 1989). To-

day, less than 50 individuals, most descendant from the Anglo mutineers and their Polynesian wives, reside on this island. Other descendants from the original 28 settlers and early immigrants, such as John Buffett, dispersed to Norfolk Island (29° 2° S, 167° 57° E) in 1856, then subsequently to New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom and other countries. Readers unfamiliar with this infamous mutiny will find a wealth of information online and on-site at the Pitcairn Islands Study Center located at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California (2023a). Further, I maintain the dissemination portal the Pitcairn Islands Research Station (Appendix I) and is available through Scholarly Works at SHSU (<https://shsu-ir.tdl.org/handle/20.500.11875/3187>).

3 David Ransom (2021) documented these journeys in photographs, and Pitcairn was a favorite stopping point.

4 Raymond Nobbs said Buffett started his seafaring life about six years prior to the 1815 start date given here. According to Nobbs, John Buffett's voyage began with an eight-month stint on the *Wanderer* on the England-Newfoundland trade, then about five years in the American merchant service. Nobbs' endnote for these details is Murray's (1860) *Pitcairn: The island the people and the pastor*, which does not corroborate the *Wanderer* or his American merchant service. While Nobbs consulted four contemporary sources and one article originating with Buffett, there is enough skepticism to warrant excluding voyages prior to 1815 for this study.

If this is true, Buffett would have been 12 years old when he first went to sea. That he gained sufficient cabinetry and carpentry skills to allow him to function as a shipwright favors that he spent his early teens as an apprentice. Buffett's six-part article in *The Friend* (1846) clearly contradicts this earlier period per Nobbs (1984).

5 The frigate of the 17th to 19th centuries was three-masted fully rigged warship with 30 to 40 canons designed for speed and maneuverability, often employed as scout or escort (Merriam Webster 2023).

6 Brig, a two-masted square-rigged ship for coastal travel designed for both naval and merchant purposes (Merriam Webster 2023).

7 Sloop, a single mast, fore-and-aft rigged sails, with a single jib (triangular sail attached high on mast to bowsprit) (Merriam Webster 2023).

8 A schooner has a foremast and main mast situated midsection of vessel, fore-and-aft rigged (Merriam Webster 2023).

9 According to the Geographic Names Server, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, December 15, 2022, Marutea and Atoll Marutea are the approved names of this atoll in French Polynesian. Hood, Lord Hood Island, Maratea, Maroutea, South Marutea Island, and South Marutea (*Marutea Sud*) are variant names listed with the Geographic Names Server (Albert, forthcoming).

10 A barque, a small ship with three or more masts (Merriam Webster 2023).

11 A packet, a fast sailing ship with purpose to deliver mail and dispatches (Merriam Webster 2023).

12 The names of the time-space eras in this section (e.g., The Early Modern and Late Modern) are from Warf (2008).

13 Per Harvey's (2001) own admission, his term "spatial fix" is often misinterpreted spurring the introduction of confusion and errors. Quoting Harvey, therefore, he coined "the term 'spatial fix' to describe capitalism's insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring. The parallel with the idea of a 'technological fix' was deliberate. Capitalism, we might say, is addicted to geographical expansion much as it is addicted to technological change and endless expansion through economic growth" (Harvey 2001, 24).

14 The capital of the Pitcairn Islands is Adamstown, named after the last surviving mutineer John Adams.

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## Appendix I. Pitcairn Islands Research Station, Scholarly Works @ SHSU and QR Code.

The image shows a screenshot of the Pitcairn Islands Research Station website on the left and a QR code on the right. The website is from Sam Houston State University (SHSU) and features a search bar, navigation tabs (By Issue Date, Authors, Titles, Subjects, Department), and a grid of book covers. The QR code is titled 'Scan QR Code' and links to the digital repository at <https://shsu-ir.tdl.org/handle/20.500.11875/3187>. Below the QR code is a 'Download' button.