

Why Did Paulino Aboitiz Come To The Philippines?

The Liverpool Connection

By Andoni Aboitiz

Why?

Why did Paulino Aboitiz come to the Philippines? Why did he not choose to sail to the Americas as millions of Europeans did? What compelled a young man of 20 to leave his home, family and country for a distant and unfamiliar land, knowing that he would be fortunate to ever return even once in his lifetime?

We do know some of his circumstances that may give us part of the answer. Specifically, he was the youngest child and second son and thus not destined to inherit any part of the family *caserio*. We know that he was a graduate of a local maritime school and therefore would have studied navigation. These studies would have exposed him to the wider world beyond Spain. He would have also had good reason to look beyond Spain, as the country was in turmoil and had been for decades, the recent upheaval being the revolution of 1868 (*La Gloriosa*). The long-running political chaos had resulted in economic stagnation. These facts alone paint a scenario that offered a young man minimal prospect for economic advancement.

Yet, there were undoubtedly other events, situations, and knowledge that would have contributed to his decision. Indeed, the vast majority of the young men in Spain faced the same hurdles and did not leave Spain searching for a better life.

If the reader would indulge me with some license to conjecture, I have a theory why he made the fateful journey.

My story begins in the great city of Liverpool.

LIVERPOOL: The Great Mercantile-Industrial Metropolis

By the mid-19th century, the Liverpool was one of the great seaports of the world. Having built its wealth and infrastructure earlier, serving the horrific slave trade in the 18th century, it had diversified quickly upon the end of this enterprise. Strategically positioned on the Atlantic side of northern England, it was the perfect port to export the wares of North and Midlands England. As the Industrial Revolution was reaching full stride in Great Britain, the factories for textiles, iron, machinery, and ceramics, among many products, were complemented by their

proximity to the extensive dockyards of Liverpool on the Mersey River. The city was, by then, handling a large portion of the exports of Great Britain, second only to London, sometimes surpassing the capital in both volume and value.

Complementarily, to feed these same factories, Liverpool was the unloading point for a plethora of goods from all corners of the world. These included cotton, sugar, abaca, timber, and grain. Cotton was the largest single commodity, having recovered in volume with the end of the American Civil War in 1865. This fact will have some bearing on the story of Paulino Aboitiz.

On the docks of Liverpool and in the city itself, one could find every imaginable product from all corners of the world, and a broad spectrum of languages representing much of the world's peoples. Liverpool was also an important embarkation point for millions of European emigres who sailed for America to escape famine, religious persecution, political upheavals, and poverty.

Why was Paulino not one of those who emigrated to America?



An aerial view of the Liverpool and its docklands.

The Larrinaga Family

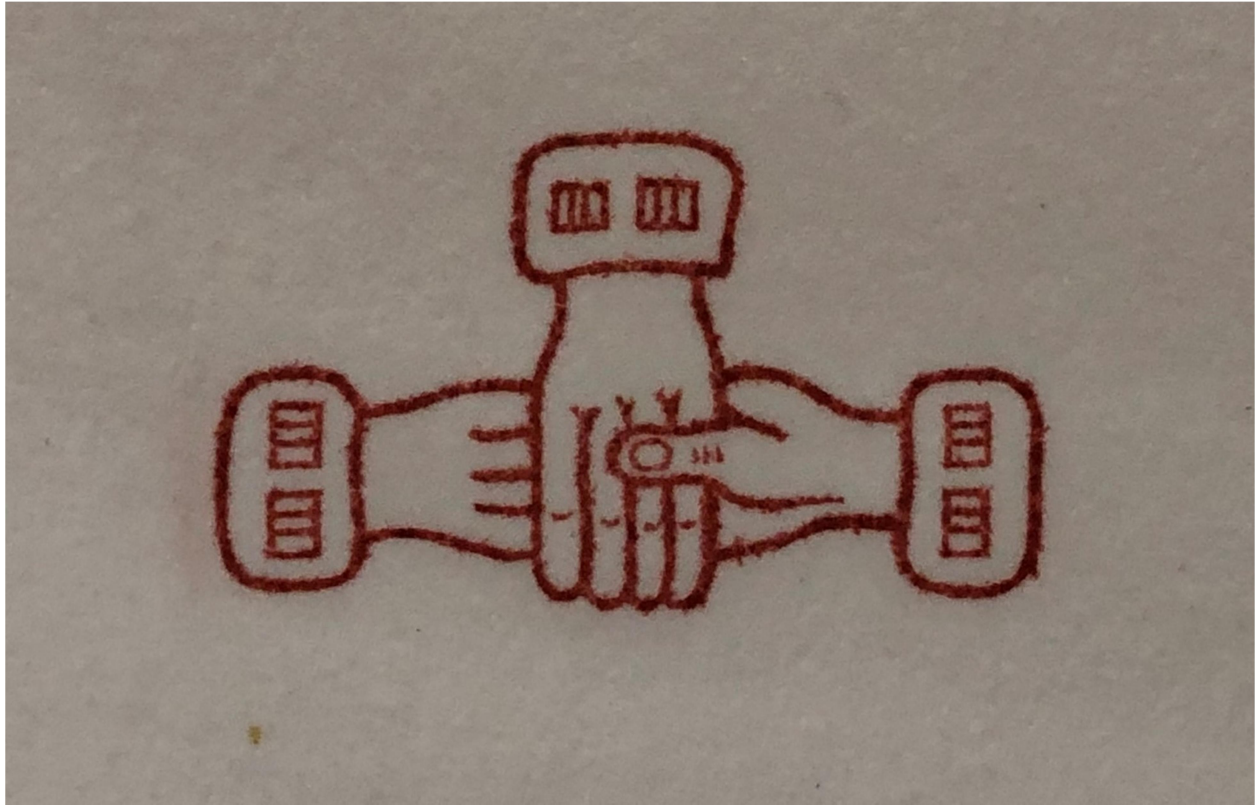
At the beginning of the 1860s, Liverpool was a great cosmopolitan city with few rivals. In this setting, the Larrinaga family, from the Basque town of Mundaka, decided to establish a shipping company based in Liverpool rather than Bilbao. This move was astute, for it was Great Britain and not Spain that had become the largest trading partner of the Philippines by the 1860s. Approximately 40% of the imports to that Spanish colony were of English origin. Textiles from the great mills of Manchester and Glasgow took the most significant portion of the hulls of ships bound for the Philippines. In return, the English merchant houses based in Manila handled a large volume of exports of Philippine products such as sugar, abaca, coffee, and indigo. Interestingly, these commodities made their way to the industrial heartland of northern England via the port of Liverpool.

The firm Olano, Larrinaga y Compania (O.L.y Cia) was formed in 1862 by three Basques with an office in Liverpool. Initially, their businesses included agencies, merchandise and ship chandeliers. In 1863, the company took delivery of their first sailing ship and began to ply the route from Liverpool to Manila as a regular service. They would deploy more vessels under the Spanish flag within a few years and become an essential link between Europe and the Philippines. In fact, till 1885, they had secured the Royal Mail Service from Spain to the Philippines.

Related to the story of Paulino is the fact that O.L.y Cia played a large part in diversifying the diaspora of Liverpool, Viscaya, and the Philippines by employing hundreds of Filipinos, Basques, and Spaniards on their ships. This fact would allow the Larrinaga family to act as sponsors, guardians, and friends for many Basque families seeking such in Liverpool. As you will see, the Aboitiz family was likely one such acquaintance.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 would change the nature of travel from Europe to the Far East in an unparalleled manner. Transit time would be reduced from 4 months (via the Cape of Good Hope) to 1 month by traversing the canal. Not only had the voyage become shorter, but also safer and more predictable.

The three partners at O.L.y Cia recognized that the opening of the Suez Canal coupled with new steam engine technology was a game-changer (in today's parlance). They were, however, unable to make a unanimous decision after weighing the risks of making the substantial investment of new vessels and an untried route. The company legend is that they decided to flip a coin to break the impasse. When the partners threw that coin in the air, physics would order a brand-new iron steamer for the new route to the Philippines. In recognition of this agreement, the company adopted the famous logo of the three clasped hands.



The three clasped hands logo of O.L.y Cia.

O.L.y Cia ordered three steamers in June 1870, with the first vessel named **BUENAVENTURA** departing Liverpool on her maiden voyage to Manila in May 1871. She arrived in Manila in early July 1871 after stops in Cadiz and Barcelona before transiting the Suez Canal.

The Philippines in 1870 - A Nascent Export Powerhouse

The Philippines by 1870 had moved away from the economic constraints of the Manila Acapulco galleon trade to an exporter of agricultural produce. Manila was no longer simply an entrepot of goods from Asia (mainly China) to the Americas and Europe. Beginning in the 1830s, the growth in exports of products such as sugar and abaca had been astounding. Manila had become the premier city in Southeast Asia when the first O.L.y Cia vessel dropped anchor in 1863. In the Visayas, the deployment of iron steam vessels by the Spanish Navy had finally curtailed the devastating slave-trading raids from Sulu, thereby opening up the islands to participate more fully in the burgeoning export economy.

O.L.y Cia would, of course, have appreciated and understood the promise of the Philippines. They were, after all, an important component in the rising trade phenomenon of the colony

with their regular sailings. Their decision to switch to steamships was undoubtedly guided by their confidence in the prospects in the Philippines. Today's modern colloquialism would term the era as 'Boom' times!

Paulino Aboitiz Makes the Voyage

The town of Mundaka at the mouth of the Urdaibai estuary is approximately 10 kilometers to Gernika and a further 20 kilometers to Lekeitio. If one town understood what was happening in the Philippines, it would have been Mundaka, where the Larrinaga family originated. The Liverpool branch of the family kept close ties with the village and probably recruited workforce there for their ships and businesses.

I can imagine that news from the Philippines would have made its way from Mundaka to Gernika and from there to the outlying towns of Vizcaya. Paulino Aboitiz would have been an eager recipient of these stories from *Filipinas* at the end of his studies at the maritime school. I visualize him sitting in Txanton Torre as the idea of the Philippines begins to take root in his mind.

The decision to build and sail the **BUENAVENTURA** would have made big news in the area. Cutting edge steamships, the Suez Canal, and a short and predictable voyage to the Philippines would have caused much palpable excitement.

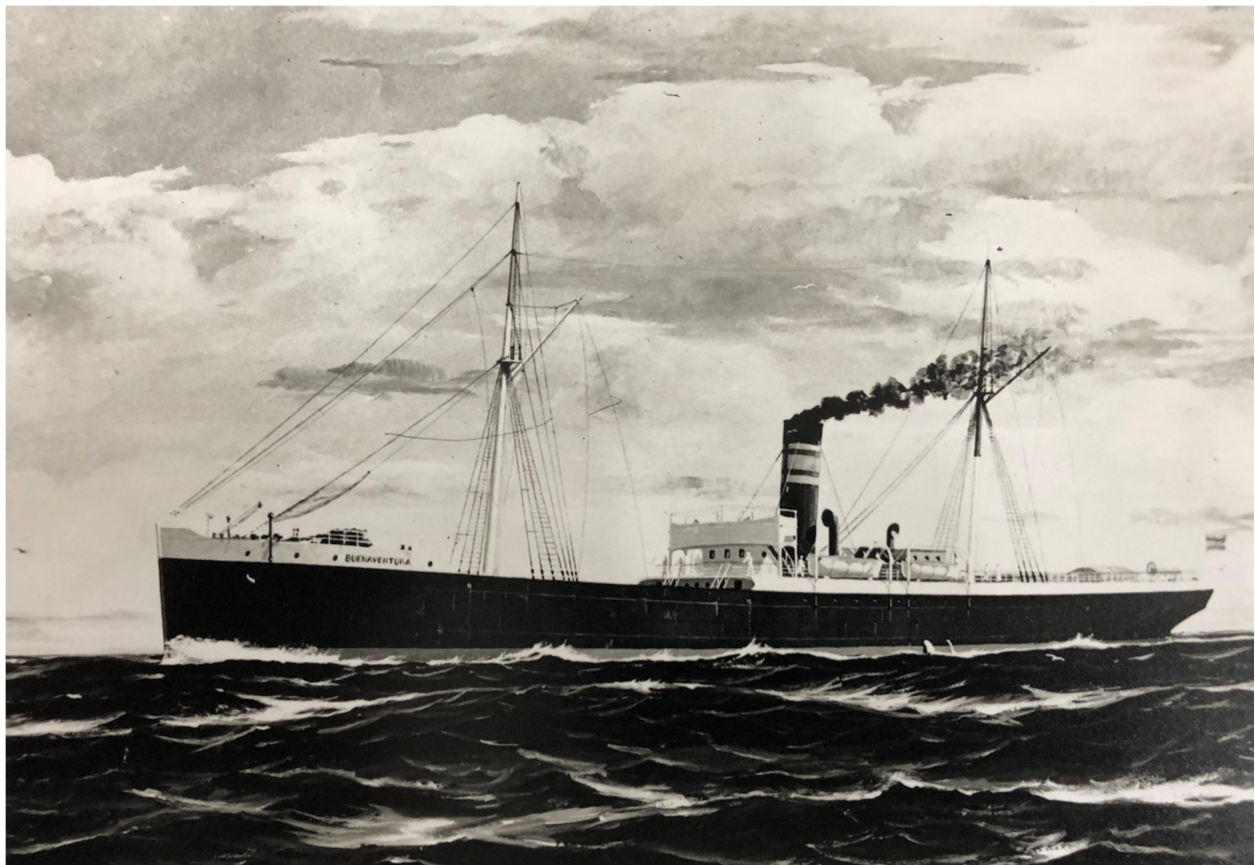
For Paulino, a confluence of events was coming to a head. By now, he was probably looking at options for a career. The dire situation in Spain would not have been encouraging to stay. The tales from the Philippines would have been compelling enough for him to consider taking the leap. Coupled with a new and comfortable means to get there, in my conjecturing mind, Paulino would have concluded that his best bet was to make the life-changing journey to the Philippines.

So, he did in 1871, as a young man of 20 with not much to lose and an adventure to gain.

Did Paulino arrive on the BUENAVENTURA?

The Aboitiz family believes that Paulino arrived in the Philippines in 1871. No documents exist expressly saying as much, and the year comes from oral history.

Having said that, if he indeed did come in 1871, it would almost certainly have been on the **BUENAVENTURA**. I conclude this as it appears there was no other choice for a travelling civilian from Spain; the O.L.y Cia was running the only passenger and cargo connection between Europe and the Philippines at that time. Manila was the only port receiving foreign passengers, even though other cities like Cebu had opened to world trade. Alternatively, he could have arrived on the **EMILIANO**, the second steamship ordered by O.L.y Cia for the Liverpool to Manila run, which sailed for Manila as well in September 1871. Hopefully, we will gain new information, but till then, I would like to believe the adventurer, Paulino Aboitiz, ensured he was on the first O.L.y Cia steamship to cross the Suez Canal on its way to the Philippines.



*The **BUENAVENTURA***

The BUENAVENTURA in Spanish and Filipino diaspora

The day the **BUENAVENTURA** departed Liverpool for Manila in May 1871, the city was not strange to Filipinos and vice-versa. Listed in the crew manifest of the **BUENAVENTURA** for its maiden voyage to the Philippines were 15 Filipino seamen (of 40 crew). In addition, the Master

of the **BUENAVENTURA** was Nicolo Larrinaga, an experienced navigator familiar with the route to Manila, having sailed the tall sailing ships of O.L.y Cia for many years now. Thus, Paulino would have stepped onboard a tiny part of the Philippines upon embarkation in Barcelona. And as the **BUENAVENTURA** carried only 40 passengers, it is not difficult to imagine that he would have struck up more than a passing conversation with the Master and fellow Vizcayan, Nicolo Larrinaga. Who knows? They may have met in Mundaka, Gernika or even Lekeitio before the voyage to Manila.

Throughout the month's journey, Paulino would have learned much about the Philippines from the crew, possibly fellow passengers, and a companion named Ugarte who had been to the islands before.

I can imagine that this voyage was the start of a lifelong relationship between Paulino and the Larrinaga family. Being Basque, the journey to the Philippines and later business associations lend credence to this conclusion.

The Liverpool connections did not end here. A much more direct relationship did follow decades later by the next generation.

Sojourn in Liverpool


We do not have the actual date when the family of Paulino left the Philippines during the second part of the Philippine Revolution (1898 onwards). Probably, sometime in the year 1900. The Philippine American War had begun by then (February 1899), with the situation in the country extremely volatile and dangerous for the family. The decision of the Americans to rule the Philippines would not be national policy till after the presidential elections in November 1900. The reelection of President William McKinley made that official. When Paulino and his family departed the Philippines, they would not have known who would be the new rulers of the country. The Filipino Revolutionaries? The American Government? Even the possibility of a takeover by the Imperial German Navy was present. Thus, Paulino left behind a life he knew for the second time, not knowing if and when he could return to rebuild their lives.

The iconic photograph of the Aboitiz family in Lekeitio unambiguously places the family in Europe in 1901 (July or August). By then, the intention of the American government to hold on to the Philippines was clear, and the new colonial masters would be speaking English.

The pragmatic in Paulino would have realized that fluency in the new colonial language would have given his business and family a significant advantage. Ramon, at 15, was at the perfect age

to be sent somewhere to learn English. We know he spent part of 1902 until 1903 in Liverpool and studied at the Liverpool Institute High School for Boys, a grammar school with an excellent reputation (Paul McCartney and George Harrison were alumni). Fernando Gracia also reveals that his grandfather, Guillermo, spent some time in the city in 1906. Fortunately, the record of the arrival date of Vidal Aboitiz is extant. He arrived in Liverpool, aged 16, on 23 September 1910 onboard the **M/V Isla de Panay** from Manila (2nd Class). He departed on 8 July 1911, boarding the **Fernando Poo** to return to Manila (3rd Class! Maybe his grades did not please Paulino!). The Compania Trasatlantica owned both these vessels, which is related to the Aboitiz-Larrinaga family relationship.

LARRINAGA LINE.



"JOSÉ DE LARRINAGA," 9,100 Tons Dead Weight.

FLEET.

Ship Name	Tons	Ship Name	Tons
JOSÉ DE LARRINAGA	9100	NICETO DE LARRINAGA	7400
VICTORIA DE LARRINAGA	8500	VENTURA DE LARRINAGA	9100
GLORIA DE LARRINAGA	8500	ESPERANZA DE LARRINAGA	8500
ASUNCION DE LARRINAGA	7400	MERCEDES DE LARRINAGA	8300
MICHEL DE LARRINAGA	7400	PILAR DE LARRINAGA	7400
DOMINGO DE LARRINAGA	7400	TEODORO DE LARRINAGA	7400
ANSELMA DE LARRINAGA	6700	MARIA DE LARRINAGA	6600
TELESFORA	6500	RAMON DE LARRINAGA	6500
			4500

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A flyer of the Larrinaga Line.

Why Liverpool?

For Ramon to journey in 1902 to a city in Europe made perfect sense and is easier to explain. After all, he had been living in Spain since the end of the 19th century. The journey from Bilbao to Liverpool would have been relatively straightforward. But why Liverpool and not London or any other city across the channel? For Guillermo, the trip would have been longer, assuming he had come from the Philippines. At 26 years old, he was, by then, engaged in various family businesses. Possibly, he was on holiday in Spain and took the opportunity to travel to a nearby European city as Ramon did. We do not know enough about Guillermo's details.

The voyage of Vidal appears to be more purposeful and offers an answer to why the three brothers travelled specifically to Liverpool.

Why did Vidal embark on such a long journey to Europe to learn English? At 16, it was much less complicated to spend a few months in Hong Kong or Singapore to study the language.



Vidal Aboitiz in Liverpool

The journey of Vidal tells me that the destination for these three Aboitiz brothers was specifically Liverpool and that the presence of the Larrinaga family in that city was a significant contributing factor, if not the main reason. Paulino would likely have enjoyed a relationship with that Basque Liverpool family that began when he was young. And this relationship would have continued through their business contacts over the decades. By 1885 O.L.y Cia had lost the Royal Mail contract and switched to act as agents for the Compania Trasatlantica, which continued the Liverpool to Manila sailings. In 1885, O.L.y Cia had changed its name to Larrinaga Line. At some point, the Compania Trasatlantica added Cebu to its ports of call. It is not difficult to conclude that abaca from the Aboitiz enterprises would have found its way onboard the Compania Trasatlantica ships bound for Liverpool. Paulino, looking to give his sons broader knowledge, would have tapped his personal and business relationship with the Larrinaga family for such an undertaking—and Liverpool would have been a city with much to experience and learn.

Liverpool and the early Aboitiz enterprises.



Cosmopolitan Liverpool

Scratch the surface of the story of the Aboitiz in the Philippines, and Liverpool surfaces. For Ramon, Guillermo, and Vidal, their times in Liverpool were, undoubtedly, life-changing. They would have seen and experienced Liverpool at the height of its glory as a world city. They would have returned to the Philippines transformed by roaming the extensive docks, reading about the commodities exchanges, and meeting a wide range of people in that city. One can trace the early Aboitiz businesses such as shipping, abaca, copra, small scale manufacturing, and commodities to what the three Aboitiz boys would have seen. Paulino did well by sending them to Liverpool.

Paulino Aboitiz, the Original Adventurer.

The story of Paulino Aboitiz, in my opinion, needs to be expanded. The narrative of his coming to the Philippines has been told in a cursory manner, albeit not intentionally. Relevant information was not available in the past, as it is now with the advent of the internet and digital records. Paulino was witness to and experienced a tremendous amount of change in the Philippines. He navigated shifting nationalist realities, revolution, upheaval, danger, and the coming of a new order. He returned to the Philippines to rebuild his business and left a framework for his sons to establish Aboitiz y Compania in February 1920. The story of Aboitiz, Family and Firm, will be much richer, and our perspectives will widen if we can learn more about his life and times. A backward look would be invaluable.