

Small Boats

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The *Essex* was a lucky ship, but it was a sick ship. Any sailor would be happy to set sail on a vessel that had returned from over two decades of successful voyages, but during its years at sea, the iron hardware of the *Essex* had begun to rot the oak timbers—not enough to leak yet, but enough. In spite of the ship’s lucky status, the voyage that began August 12th, 1819 had tried the crew from the beginning.

Two days into the trip, loaded down for months at sea, an unexpected gale knocked the ship on beam-ends. For us landlubbers, this means that the ship ended up on its side, the beams of the deck up-ended, moments away from capsizing. As quickly as the ship was knocked down, a kinder gale blew the ship upright. Before sighting a single spout, two whale boats swung destroyed at the side of the ship, and a third lay damaged. Captain George Pollard, Jr. desired to return to Nantucket and replace the damaged boats, but first mate Owen Chase challenged his captain, afraid that returning to port so early in the voyage might spook the crew, who had already begun to whisper of omens.

What to say about mistakes here: were the ship’s owners mistaken for

appointing such a young captain (Pollard was only twenty-nine—hardly a grizzled seaman who could silence a mouthy first mate with a salty stare); was Pollard mistaken in caving to his first mate, thereby emboldening Chase; was Chase mistaken in challenging his captain? Regardless, the three boats that remained proved sturdy enough, and the *Essex* sailed on its way.

The whalers turned to their task, sailing in search of the much-prized sperm whale. Inside that Heidelberg Tun of a head sloshed the highest-grade whale oil: spermaceti. Unlike the brown, rancid smelling oil from other whales, butter blonde spermaceti bloomed waxy and fragrant. What a disappointment to find the Atlantic whaling grounds depleted.

Fortunately for the crew, they could round Cape Horn and enter the newly opened hunting grounds of the Pacific Ocean. On November 20th, 1820, cries rang out from the topmast, and the *Essex* lowered her three boats to pursue a pod of sperm whales. Captain Pollard and his mates, Joy and Chase, each commanded his own small crew aboard the thin-timbered, double-prowed vessels. The drought was over and the crew could begin the long, filthy process of filling their empty oil barrels.

Soon all three boats were fast to whales. Pollard's and Joy's boats were dragged away from the *Essex* and out of view. The whale harpooned by Chase's boat, in no mood to drag his attackers through the sea on a joy ride, swiped the side of their

boat with its tail, opening up the seams, and forcing Chase and his men to cut the line and return to the ship for repairs.

A word on whale boats. Whale boats needed to be fast so that the men could row close enough to dart whales with the harpoons. To achieve this, they were built to be light, with quarter-inch thick boards, thinner even than the line attached to the harpoon. They were shallow, twenty-five to thirty feet long, and made for six men to work away from the ship for several hours and then be hoisted and held aloft by the davits. They are definitely not the kind of boat in which you would want to spend the night, much less more than sixty nights.

Back aboard the *Essex*, Owen Chase and his men repaired their damaged boat. Having already lost the two earlier in the voyage, they could not allow the loss of another working whale boat. Then, off the weather bow, Chase spotted a monstrous sperm whale, which he estimated to be about eighty-five feet long, only two feet shorter than the *Essex* itself. Since each foot of an adult whale typically equals one ton, this whale probably weighed as much as thirteen elephants or, more simply, the space shuttle. This is what charged the *Essex*.

The whale's first blow hit the ship near the fore-chains and threw nearly everyone to the deck. In Chase's words, "the ship brought up suddenly and violently as if she had struck a rock, and trembled for a few seconds like a leaf." The *Essex* coughed her first death rattle out of sight of land and out of sight of her

captain. Chase knew to set the pumps going, but within a minute the head of the ship had already begun to settle down in the water. At this point, the situation, although dire, was not fatal.

Then Owen Chase committed his first mistake. The whale, seemingly dazed from the blow, lay still for a minute in the water along the length of the ship: head to bow, tail to stern. Thomas Nickerson, the youngest crew member of the *Essex*, reveals in his “Desultory Sketches” that Chase had a “fine opportunity to have kill^d him with a throw of his lance” but saw the whale’s tail close to the rudder and judged its potential loss too great a threat, all of which Chase omits from his *Narrative*.

As Chase had scarcely dispatched the orders to signal to the other whale boats to return, the whale had swum three hundred yards off and rounded on the ship again. What could have been a whale in its death throes was now very alive and making white water for a head-on collision with the *Essex*.

Shipbuilders regaled white oak for its strength, but oak, in long term contact with metal, especially iron, and especially in damp conditions, produces acetic acid and corrodes the metal. When iron rusts, it deteriorates the wood next to it, weakening its tensile strength. A ship whose hull has begun to rot in this fashion is said to be iron-sick.

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Chase recounts a man at the hatchway rousing his attention, crying, “here he is—he is making for us again.” Chase saw the huge whale bearing down on the ship at “twice his ordinary speed” with “tenfold fury and vengeance in his aspect.” Moments later the whale crashed into the *Essex* directly below the cat-head and completely stove in her bow. Then the whale made one more pass below the ship and disappeared into the depths of the Pacific.

For roughly the next ten minutes, Chase and his men commenced a frenzied scavenge of the ship. Chase cut away the lashings of the spare boat, and sent the steward to the cabin to save two quadrants, two practical navigators, and two compasses. They also saved the trunks that belonged to Pollard and Chase. At last, all hands jumped into the boat and were hardly fifty feet away when the *Essex* capsized and settled down in the water.

Better to have been in a ship without a rudder than in no ship at all.

Chase and his men sat silent.

Soon Joy and Pollard returned, towing two dead sperm whales. Pollard was stunned, no doubt struggling to process the dreadful scene before him. He finally managed to ask, “My God, Mr. Chase, what is the matter?”

Chase answered simply, “We have been stove by a whale.”

Two days later, the men had cut away the masts and managed to raise the ship

enough to recover some provisions: six hundred pounds of hard bread, as much fresh water as they dared load into the whale boats, a musket and powder, two horse pistols, two rasps, two files, two pounds of boat nails, and a few turtles. They had also built up the gunwale of each whale boat roughly six inches, using spare cedar boards, which allowed them to load each boat with more supplies, and fitted each boat with two masts to carry a flying-jib and two sprit-sails.

Chase's and Nickerson's accounts of what happened next differ slightly, but significantly. At noon on November 22nd, 1820, using their saved navigational tools, the men observed that they were at 0°13'N, 120°00'W, but it is best to find their location emotionally. Picture the globe, and then place your finger on the coast of Ecuador; imagine yourself sitting in an open, light boat, and slide your finger west along the equator. Stop when you despair at the immensity of the surrounding ocean. It is there we find our whalers.

If one believes Chase's account of the situation, the three of them, Pollard, Joy, and Chase, consulted the maps and came to a common consensus. According to Chase in his *Narrative*, the Marquesas and Society Islands were inhabited, if at all, "by savages, from whom [they] had as much to fear, as from the elements, or even death itself." Captain Pollard warned against the hurricane season in the vicinity of Hawaii. Therefore, it was best to try for the coast of Chile or Peru.

Nickerson, however, remembers the situation differently. According to him,

Pollard's first desire was to sail to the Society Islands, cannibals or not. Pollard estimated the trip would have taken ten days at most under favorable winds, which to be fair, in such light, open vessels, is still not a great trip. Chase, however, having previously persuaded his captain to continue the voyage with ruined whale boats and enjoying the support of the other mate, urged Pollard against the Society Islands. Pollard, finding himself outnumbered, reluctantly agreed to fight the trade winds and try for the coast of Chile.

It is tempting to pin this mistake on Pollard. He was the captain. But he was young and outnumbered and adrift, with only nineteen other souls for company.

No. This is Chase's mistake, and his mistake here was as illogical as it was fatal. By urging his captain to sail away from the mere possibility of cannibals, Chase pointed their prows toward the inevitability of cannibalism.

The men made for South America, enduring horrible suffering along the way. Weather beat the ships. Sea creatures attacked them. They enjoyed brief respite on a small uninhabited island where they found an ephemeral supply of drinking water, depleted an entire population of birds, and left three of their crew before they set sail in their pitiful vessels again. The three boats eventually separated; only two were rescued. In their final weeks at sea, the men aboard Pollard's and Chase's boats drew lots to see who would sustain the remaining men. Captain Pollard had to tell his sister that her son, Owen, had lost when the sailors cast lots

in their final dismal desire for food.

Of course, mistakes are only so in hindsight's judgement. I can declare Owen Chase's dogged insistence to avoid the Marquesas and Society Islands a mistake because we know they suffered for months and lost most of their crew. I could just as easily have been critical had he decided to lance the monstrous whale and left the *Essex* rudderless at sea because horrors are not endemic to small boats. It is not the mistakes themselves, but what we find in the wake of these missteps that makes them so fascinating: our near-inextinguishable will to survive, our determination and courage amid disaster.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, our greatest piece of American literature and most famous repurposing of the *Essex* tragedy, concludes, after Moby Dick has sunk the *Pequod*, with Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin as a lifebuoy—alone save for sharks and sea-hawks—adrift for more than a day before the ship *Rachel* saves him. Pollard finished out his life as a night watchman, shepherding the people of Nantucket. Even Owen Chase, who suffered from horrible headaches the rest of his life, unable to fully recover from his traumas at sea, hid food in his attic for the last few years of his life, preparing to survive another great disaster.