Cannibals in the Community:

The Saga of the Whaleship *Essex* and Related Accounts

By Nicholas M. Gardner
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A Note on My Source

This paper has made use of many primary and secondary sources, although the focus has been to incorporate as much primary material as possible. During the research phase of my work, I visited the Nantucket Historical Association’s archives in Nantucket Massachusetts. There I was able to view and work with the original copies of almost all of the existing Essex documents. These include the handwritten narrative of Thomas Nickerson, a first edition copy of Owen Chase’s narrative, the handwritten letters regarding the disaster, the 1819 Essex wharf book, countless articles from the Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror, as well as Thomas Nickerson’s original drawings of the attack on the Essex by a sperm whale. Throughout the paper, the bibliographic citations of these primary documents reflect transcribed versions found in Thomas Farel Heffernan’s Stove by a Whale Owen Chase and the Essex, and Nathaniel and Thomas Philbrick’s The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale Thomas Nickerson, Owen Chase and Others. Due to the delicateness of the original copies and the distance from Nantucket, it was more practical to uses these transcribed versions, although I have seen and worked with all the original copies.

Nathaniel Philbrick’s, book In the Heart of the Sea, was an extremely useful secondary source, but his analysis of the disaster does not include the level of detail regarding the acceptance of the survivors as does this manuscript. While the narrative of the disaster in this paper is similar to the narrative in his book, the similarity is a result of the limited number of primary sources regarding the Essex. As a result, my paper uses his text as a supplement to these primary sources, but I do not frame my argument on his work. Melville’s Moby-Dick has also been used to supplement these primary documents, as well as provide the reader with
descriptions of Nantucket and nineteenth century whaling. As a result *Moby-Dick* has been used both as a secondary and primary source.

My discussion of the Andes disaster is framed on the secondary account of Piers Paul Read, and the firsthand account of Nando Parrado. Read’s book, *Alive*, while a secondary source, is based on extensive interviews conducted by the author shortly after the disaster. Parrado’s book, *Miracle in the Andes*, is a memoir, and so many of the claims made by Parrado needed to be substantiated by Read. A great number of additional secondary sources have been consulted to create a coherent understanding of cannibalism. This secondary material is necessary because it provides the reader with the prerequisite knowledge required to evaluate the actions of the survivors, as well as a complete understanding of the development of the historic taboo of cannibalism. Finally, the theoretical concepts of Michel Foucault and Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon have been used to demonstrate the power that surveillance has over social actions and behaviors.
Introduction:

Cannibalism is a word that drums up a plethora of emotions. For some, it stirs a deep sense of religiosity; for others, horror and fear of death. In many, an acute awareness or a morbid fascination spur on discussions of the “cannibal”—a being so different from one’s own identity that he or she is viewed as dangerous, exotic and diabolical. For many, the cannibal is a fictitious character of the Pacific Island headhunter, constructed by popular movies, books and television shows. And yet, cannibalistic activities favor no one race over another. Evidence of cannibalism can be found in the fossil record dating as far back as the Paleolithic period (100 to 200 thousand years ago) while examples of cannibalism by non-criminals can be found as recently as the 1970s.\(^1\) Cannibalism is a common topic in popular literature and culture. One of the earliest examples of its appearance in popular literature is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and cannibalistic tropes enter the popular imagination today through movies, television and music. Because the practice of consuming human flesh has spanned such a huge portion of human history and has such provocative connotations, it is not surprising that cannibalism is a concept that stirs up such deep emotions.

In order to examine cannibalism itself, it is important to have a clear definition of the term. This can be problematic because different disciplines define it differently, but this paper will use the anthropological definition. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Cannibalism is defined as

The practice of eating human flesh, normally either out of dire need or for ceremonial purposes. The latter is more common, and usually related to a belief that eating parts of deceased relatives or enemies slain in battle allows their power to be passed on to the celebrants. The practice is not easy to prove from the archaeological record, although cutmarks on bone that relate to de-fleshing a

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corpse, the splitting of long bones, and the systematic opening of the skull to extract the brain are usually taken as strong indicators.\textsuperscript{2}

It is important to understand that cannibalism is a catch-all term for all types of anthropophagy which is defined as, “the eating of human flesh by other humans; cannibalism.”\textsuperscript{3} Anthropophagy, unlike cannibalism, is restricted to the consumption of human flesh by another human, and does not connote any special circumstances such as ritual practice, survival or warrior tradition. The term “anthropophagi” is a Greek word and comes from the root “anthropos (man) and phagein (to eat)...”\textsuperscript{4} Anthropophagi with its Greek roots predates “cannibalism,” a word that Christopher Columbus first recorded on November 23, 1492 while in the Antilles.\textsuperscript{5} In spite of its relatively modern derivation, the word quickly entered all of the European languages, suggesting that there was a need for a word to describe the practice of consuming human flesh that transcended anthropophagy.\textsuperscript{6}

The construction of the term “cannibal” can be credited to Columbus, who needed a neologism to describe the practices of the Carib tribes in his journals. The derivation of the word itself comes from an Arawak word, “cariba”, which was used to described the Caribbean tribe’s neighbors on the Lesser Antilles. “Cariba” means “bold,” and was used by the Arawaks to describe their terrifying and ferocious behavior of their neighbors. The Arawaks claimed that in war their neighbors practiced cannibalism, so it is not surprising that Columbus used “cariba” as

\textsuperscript{3} "anthropophagy" Ibid., \textless http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t23.e217.\textgreater
\textsuperscript{4} Petrinovich, \textit{The Cannibal Within}, 4.
\textsuperscript{5} Peter Hulme, \textit{Colonial Encounters Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797}, (London: 1992), 15.
a root for cannibal. As the term was adopted by many of the European languages, its derivation lost its specific meaning to just the Caribbean tribe and quickly became a generic term for any person, group or society that practice anthropophagy.

As scholars from a multitude of differing disciplines examined cannibalism, it became clear that cannibalistic behavior takes on a multitude of distinctive forms. While this paper will examine what is termed survival cannibalism, the other types of cannibalism must be discussed to delineate the specific circumstances and behavioral patterns that signify survival cannibalism. The three broadest categories break anthropophagy into endocannibalism (or the consumption of the flesh of a member of one’s own group), exocannibalism (or the consumption of the flesh of someone marked as an outsider), and autocannibalism (or the consumption of a part of one’s own body). These three broad classifications are used to clarify the connection between the cannibal and the human who is consumed.

Cannibalistic behavior is then further outlined based on the motivations of the active consumer. Most scholars agree there are five main motivations that drive a human to commit anthropophagy:

a) Gastronomic, or gustatory cannibalism— the consumption of human flesh, “to satisfy hunger, [or] provide a supplement to the regular diet…”

b) Medical cannibalism—cannibalistic behavior practiced in an attempt to reap some type of health benefit from consuming human flesh, blood or bodily fluids.

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7 Petrinovich, *The Cannibal Within*, 4-5.
c) Mortuary cannibalism—the most common form of endocannibalism, commonly defined as the consumption of the flesh of dead relatives or tribe members as a result of funerary practices, or in an attempt to imbibe favorable characteristics, spirit, or soul of the deceased.  

d) Sacrificial cannibalism—the most fantastic and, particularly for many of the early European seafaring explorers, the most shocking form of cannibalism. This is the type of cannibalism that the Aztec tribe is said to have practiced, but the extent of cannibalism in their rituals is still debated. Sacrificial cannibalism is a type of exocannibalism, where an enemy consumed in an attempt to appease the gods, perform retribution, or to absorb the bravado of the enemy.

e) Political cannibalism—anthropophagic behavior by the leader, or leading group, of a community in an attempt to intimidate both those inside and outside of the community by brutally and visibly devouring prisoners or casualties of war.

f) Survival cannibalism—also placed in the category gustatory category, but for this study it will be considered as a specific type of cannibalism. This distinction results, because survival cannibalism is precipitated only under extreme conditions when one can survive only through the consumption of human flesh, and the consequence of abstaining from cannibalism is death.

Since this paper deals with a direct examination of survival cannibalism, it is important to unpack exactly what type of behavior constitutes survival cannibalism. Survival cannibalism can only occur when the cannibal commits anthropophagy out of a dire need, real or perceived, to survive. At some point, the “cannibal” realizes that the only hope of survival, and eventual

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10 Ibid., 6.
12 Ibid., 6.
rescue, is to consume the only available, edible, resource—human flesh. Survival cannibalism occurs in cases of extreme isolation, such as after a shipwreck, plane crash, or extreme famine associated with war or natural disaster. While both circumstances may produce cannibals, this paper will be concerned primarily with cases of extreme isolation, but survival cannibalism has occurred throughout history within the larger group context of a city ravaged by famine or under siege. Examples of this include the famine that struck Cairo in 1200-1201, the siege of Leningrad September from 1941 to January 1943, and during “The Great Leap Forward” (1958-1960) in both urban and rural China.

Survival cannibalism entails the event itself—the cannibal and the cannibalized—and the reception of the survivor(s) upon their rescue and reintroduction into their community. More so than the narrative of the cannibalistic act, the reception of the survivors back into their home communities addresses much larger social and moral forces. If we examine communities where survivors return and are accepted back into the bosom of the community, we may develop an understanding of what forces, such as family ties or the unwritten laws of the sea, are capable of superseding the discursive forces of ethics, morals, laws and taboos. It is also possible to glean from the narrative of the cannibalistic act the amount of pain and agony a soul must endure before he or she breaks with the morals or customs of his or her community. By examining the forces, which push men to resort to the subversive behavior of cannibalism, it is possible to form an understanding of how much power society exerts on individuals. Conversely, when we examine the reacceptance of survivors into society, it is clear that subversive behavior can be rationalized in survival circumstances.

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13 Ibid., 6-7.
Many times, but certainly not always, survival cannibalism is resorted to only after one, or more, members of the party has already died. In this case the cannibals may simply eat their fellow comrade after his death, removing the need to slaughter a living human for food. While this scenario plays out in some situations, often the group of castaways is faced with the real possibility that most or all of them may become too weak to butcher a body if they wait for the death of one member by natural causes.

In this situation, a decision that determines the potential fate of several lives has to be made amongst the group. There are three possible decisions that can be made when the survivors reach this quandary. The first option is to continue to wait for the natural death of one member, or hold out for rescue even if it means starvation. The second alternative is to pick the weakest, sickest, outsider, or most helpless to kill, butcher and eat. The third possibility is to hold a lottery, where chance decides the victim as well as the individual chosen to kill the victim. The difficulty in this case is that the survivors often deny cannibalism ever occurred and, even if they admit to cannibalistic acts, they often claim that cannibalism was only resorted to after fair lots were drawn. This is problematic because those who were cannibalized are obviously not alive to recant that claim, or to present their side of the story.15

Aside from its multiple meaning in different disciplines, cannibalism has taken on a sensationalist connotation, which any scholar must wade through in any serious academic study of the topic. It is critical to my thesis that cannibalism is neither a fantastic nor an exotic concept, but rather a legitimate phenomena that has transcended race, class, gender, and appears in literature, popular culture, oral folklore and even mythology. Its presence in the fossil record, the

historical record and the anthropological record shows that cannibalism, or at least the fascination with cannibalism, stems from a basic human curiosity with the behavior.¹⁶

Rather than being a morbid subject that only describes deviants and criminals, cannibalism can illuminate the way society forms a sense of acceptable behavior through morals, laws and taboos. Studying how and why the norms of appropriate behavior are violated, like in the case of someone resorting to cannibalism in an attempt to survive, can show us the fragility of the forces that regulate social interaction and civilization. This approach also demonstrates the power that internalized social constructs have over the body—people will resist practicing survival cannibalism, in spite of horrific pain, until life or death depends on consumption. This type of study also illuminates the reasons the morals and taboos exist in the first place, and so it helps to develop a more complete understanding of society by exploring its boundaries, and the forces strong enough to push “normal” individuals to transgress those social conventions. Cannibalism, while existing on the fringes of society and in the absence of morality, will help the reader comprehend underlying forces that perpetuate moral discourse and determine socially acceptable behavior.

Since this paper will examine cannibalism, with a particular focus on survival cannibalism, it is crucial that the reader understand the pervasive nature of references to cannibalism in human history. As a result, the first section of this paper will deal with the construction of a narrative of cannibalism. The narrative will focus on references to cannibalism and anthropophagy spanning thousands of years of recorded history. It will start by mentioning the examples of cannibalism in ancient Greek texts, then concentrate on the description of cannibalism in the Atlantic World and its use in colonization. As a result most of the narrative

¹⁶ Lindenbaum, “Thinking about Cannibalism,” 486.
will deal with literature, art and philosophy from prehistory to 1492, then 1492 to 1820. In this
discussion cultural, political and historical factors, which have effected the public perception of
cannibalism, will be discussed and unpacked. It will highlight such influential scholars as Michel
de Montaigne, Daniel Defoe, Johnathan Swift and influential artists like Théodore Géricault
(Raft of the Medusa). This dialogue will assist the reader understand the construction the taboo of
cannibalism, and will delve into the formation of the identity of self and other.

After unraveling the narrative of cannibalism, we will examine a specific act of survival
cannibalism by looking at a case where survivors of the shipwreck of the whaleship Essex (1819)
resorted to anthropophagy in order to survive. Of particular interest in is the way in which the
survivors were reaccepted into their community of Nantucket. We will track both the short and
long-term effects of the experience on the survivors as well as on the townspeople of Nantucket.
I hope to demonstrate that the townspeople, while still uneasy about the events that transpired
after the sinking of the Essex, were still able to reaccept cannibals into their community.

A detailed comparison of a much more recent example of survival cannibalism will
follow. This comparison will employ the account of the crash of Uruguayan Air Force Flight
571. Chartered by a group of Uruguayan rugby players, this plane crashed high in the Andes
Mountains, in October of 1972. They were forced to resort to survival cannibalism after their
meager rations ran out. Upon their rescue, they enjoyed a similar reacceptance as the whalers
from the Essex. Again, I will show acceptance is not only typical, but is able to trump historical
forces and impulses as a result of the fundamental and instinctual position survival takes in the
human psyche.

Following the comparison, the morals, stigmas and legal implications associated with the
taboo of cannibalism will be unpacked and contextualized. This will be done using the classic
example of the Essex as compared with the contemporary Andes disaster. By employing the 1970’s case, I hope to demonstrate that these forces are consistent throughout history. The reader will get a sense that even in the “modern era” there is a fundamental understanding of the human instinct to survive. Each human can comprehend the force that this instinct exerts on his or her behavior, and I hope to demonstrate that it is this appreciation of this instinct that allows human beings to accept those who have transgressed some of society’s most fundamental moral discourses and taboos.

Through this examination, the reader will explore the formation of society’s morals and taboo behavior in a revolutionary and cutting edge way. Michel Foucault, in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, explored the force that surveillance plays on the individual in institutions like the prison. In his discussion he claims that these forces are internalized and self-policing results. Using Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, as an example of this type of surveillance, each individual internalizes acceptable behavior, and models their behavior appropriately. Society, while not constructed like the Panopticon, exerts similar forces on its members.¹⁷

Individuals, thus, tailor their behavior to what is considered acceptable. The connection of visibility to the regulation of behavior extends out of the penal example and into the realm of society when each member polices their own behavior to fit the norm. Because the individual knows that they are visible in their community, they are unlikely to violate the norms and customs that their society deems acceptable. Like the prisoner, subject to random and yet constant surveillance in the Panopticon, the individual refrains from transgressive behavior under normal circumstances.¹⁸ (see appendix E for a diagram of the Panopticon) What is crucial to my analysis is that in cases of extreme isolation these social norms can be violated as surveillance is

¹⁸ Ibid.
not present. Yet, each survivor understands that if they successfully survive and are rescued, they will be judged for their actions even though they were committed far from their own community. In the case of the Essex and the Andean disaster the moment that surveillance and the internalization of social norms is violated is when the survivors discuss cannibalism. It is at that moment that they have stepped outside of their indoctrinated cultures, and have transgressed normalized behavior. As the survivors discuss cannibalism, the internalized forces similar to the ones that regulate behavior in the Panopticon are transgressed because the survivors realize cannibalism—a practice so prohibited by their cultures in their particular periods in history—is their only chance to survive. However, the contradiction that exists places survival cannibals in a quagmire—if they survive they will be judge for their actions by their friends and family members who are influenced by the same social constructs that make actions like cannibalism taboo.

Foucault’s discursive model of surveillance and self-regulation will be followed, but my examination will focus on what type of circumstances or mitigating factors can cause self-regulation to break down. If Foucault claims human behavior is conditioned by social indoctrination and surveillance, then we can learn a great deal about the formation of these society by examine the circumstances that cause norms to be violated. Using the two cases of survival cannibalism I examine the decision making process of the individuals acting contrary to the forces of society. Lacking the constraints of social surveillance, and facing certain death, survival cannibals provide a unique medium for an exploration of the fragility of society and its social constructs.

The discussion of social constructs in these case studies will be brought full circle when I scrutinize they way in which these individuals were judged for their morally subversive behavior
upon reentry into society. Because of their determination to survive, their decision to cannibalize became visible, and judged in the public sphere by the same forces that dictate normal behavior.

In spite of this, communities do not shun or stigmatize survivors as one might imagine. As a result, this examination unravels the fundamental power socially constructed morals and taboos exert over individuals and human society. In both cases, those who committed seditious behavior are accepted back into their communities. Yet, had the survivors partaken in the same behavior under normal circumstances and surveillance, they would have been shunned and even prosecuted. Because of this acceptance in the face of such transgressive behavior, we can see that social norms may dictate almost all aspects of our lives, but dissolve in the face of the animalistic instinct to survive.

These two cases will demonstrate that survival is still the most basic of human instincts and behaviors. It also shows that community members who are not faced with the same circumstances can overlook an act as horrifying as cannibalism when it is employed in survival situations. In the greater sense of developing an understanding of society as a whole, this shows that in spite of the distance human civilization has come in removing animalistic behavior, human behavior at its most basic level is still regulated by a Darwinian desire for survival.  

It is this desire to survive that delineates survival cannibalism from all other types of cannibalism. While some other types of cannibalism, particularly mortuary cannibalism associated with ritualistic practices of some tribes, can be rationalized as acceptable in certain cultures, for the most part, western society condemns almost all forms of cannibalism as immoral or barbaric. However, when forced to choose between life through cannibalism or death as a result of not eating human flesh, I propose all humans, regardless of time, place or culture, can

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find a moral basis for the behavior. Instinct drives all humans to survive. Instinct is not a byproduct of culture, rather it is innate and common to every member of the human race. As a result, survival cannibalism not only trumps culturally constructed behavior, but seems to trump culture itself. Thus, it seems logical that any culture should accept an instinctual behavior regardless of their moral objections to the specifics of the act.

The cases of the *Essex* and the Andes disaster highlight the empathy that communities feel towards survivors because of their instinctual actions. Surviving members were reaccepted in spite of their actions, so empathy must trump the socially constructed forces that prohibit behavior like cannibalism under certain circumstances. By over-looking the actions of the survivors, the community members demonstrate how easily morals and taboos can be violated in life and death situations.

By examining the amount of pain and agony that these men endured before resorting to cannibalism, the power of these socially constructed morals is clear. But yet, when the survivors have no other options, their actions are rationalized and understood even by those not present. Thus, this shows the weakness inherent in our highly developed modern society—ultimately we are regulated first and foremost by the basic instinct to survive, and instincts seem to trump culturally constructed forces working on our bodies, as well as culture itself.
The Cannibalistic Narrative: Two Million Years Ago to 1492

One of the many controversies that surrounds cannibalism is the date when human first began practicing anthropophagy. This debate stems for the lack of archeological evidence that exists to substantiate the claims made by some scholars. For a period it seems clear that the global population of humans was not large enough to support cannibalism. Early, prehistoric man most commonly lived in a small single-family unit, and throughout his entire life he was unlikely to interact with more than forty or fifty other humans. Because of the amazing quantity of meat needed to sustain a clan or small band during the ice age, if cannibalism had been widely practiced the demand for meat, “would have wiped it [the human race] off the map in no time at all. And with neighbors scattered at a density of only four people to every sixty square miles, dining out would present insuperable problems.”

As population density increased, and rival clans or tribes competed for resources, the potential for cannibalism increased. While some scholars claim cannibalism may have been practiced as early as two million years ago, there is scant evidence to substantiate these claims. Personally, I find it plausible that cannibalism existed this early in human development, but until new discoveries are made it is problematic to make such claims. What is clear from archeological evidence is that by one hundred thousand years ago, cannibalism was taking place in many parts of the populated world. The development of more widespread cannibalism may have resulted from an increase in warfare between rival groups. Some have postulated that warriors may have capitalized on the availability of war dead for quick and easy sources of

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protein in the wake of battles. The practice of cannibalizing war dead may have inspired some cannibalistic practices observed by westerners upon arrival in the New World.23

Another interesting characteristic of early cannibalism is that it was not practiced, or at least no evidence has been found in every part of the world. In fact, prehistoric cannibalism it is most common in southeast Europe and southwest Asia, while, “In historical times it was largely concentrated in a good part of west and central Africa; Australia, New Zealand; New Guinea, Melanesia, Polynesia and Sumatra; portions of India and China; the northern and mainly eastern and central part of the North American continent; and much of Central and South America.”24

While it is significant that evidence of cannibalism exists in so many different regions of the globe, it must be noted that evidence does not exist for most of North Western Europe or Eurasia. Few cannibalistic traces have been found in many parts of North America, or northern parts of Africa.25 What this suggests is that in a global context, cannibalism developed in many different societies and cultures at different times. While that would suggest a human predisposition towards this type of behavior, the fact that cannibalism or evidence of the practice is not universal in all regions of the globe seems to suggest that greater outside forces, rather than instinct or predisposition alone, spawn the behavior.

The earliest mention of cannibalism in the surviving literature comes from Homer’s Odyssey.26 While the term “anthropophagi” would have been used in lieu of cannibal, its presence in the narrative of the Cyclops demonstrates a fundamental component of the term itself. Cannibal or anthropophagy has, from its first recorded use, been used to label an outsider or figure with fearsome features. The Greeks used the term “anthropophagi” to describe a race

23 Ibid., 7.
24 Askenasy, Cannibalism From Sacrifice to Survival, 18.
25 Ibid., 19.
26 Walton, Our Cannibals Ourselves, 2.
presumed to live in the land past the black sea. In the Cyclops narrative, Polyphemus live on an isolated and distant island, and features including their single eye and cannibalistic behavior cause the reader to view them as a being very different from a normal human.

Cannibalism is mentioned again and again in the surviving literature from Homer’s day on, but it is almost always colored with a bias of self versus other. During the Early Middle Ages, a reference to cannibalism exists in Charlemagne’s *Capitulary for Saxony*. Its inclusion in this document is significant because it demonstrates the trend that cannibalistic behavior is not acceptable for the self, and is only acceptable for savages or, in this case, the pagan Saxons. The Capitulary is essentially a list of laws for acceptable behavior. It includes a laundry list of offenses and fines that a violator would stand to pay. It lists crimes ranging from the murder of bishops, to the prohibition of Saxon public gatherings. Its brush with cannibalism is harsh and shows how entrenched the taboo was even by Charlemagne’s time,

> If anyone deceived by the devil shall have believed, after the manner of the pagans, that any man or woman is a witch and eats men, and of this account shall have burned the person, or shall have given the person’s flesh to other to eat, or shall have eaten it himself, let him be punished by the capital sentence.

There are two aspects of this entry that are striking and have direct implication on the taboo behavior itself. First, the punishment for any type of cannibalism or even implication in cannibalism, “or shall have given the person’s flesh to other to eat,” they are put to death. What is remarkable is that Charlemagne’s *Capitulary* makes the cannibalistic act, not just the murder, the reason for the institution of the capital sentence. While no such proof example exists, it would be of particular interest to see how Charlemagne’s minions would have dealt with a survivor cannibal.

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27 Hulme, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, 15.
The other striking aspect of the entry, and the one that deals directly with the aspect of self versus other, is the inclusion of the words “witch,” “devil,” and “pagan.” All of these terms are negatively biased and serve to represent the cannibal as someone who is distinct: he or she is a pagan possessed by the devil or a witch to be feared. When a behavior is framed in this way, inevitably, that behavior not only becomes illegal, but it also becomes taboo and transgressive. In our contemporary legal system similar laws, prohibiting cannibalistic behavior or the facilitation of cannibalism, may not exist, but the taboo of cannibalism still does, and it is this taboo which the survivor must overcome to consume flesh.

An interesting aspect of the cannibalistic narrative is that it becomes a behavior associated with the savage, “other,” only after European exploration brings Europeans in contact with native tribes accused of cannibalistic behavior. As the Capitulary shows, even in the early Middle Ages, cannibalism was something that occurred in European society. Similarly, the deep-rooted Catholic prohibitions on cannibalism show that, even after the Capitulary, cannibalism must have been widespread enough that the church would work hard to forbid it. By the time European explorers crossed the Atlantic and discover a huge of cannibalistic societies, the concept of the cannibal became forever equated with the savage.

While the cannibal was never truly absent from the pre-1492 psyche of Europeans, just look to the cannibal tropes of folk tales like Hansel and Gretel or Jack and the Bean Stalk, it may have been that cannibalism was the single most alien cultural practice of the new tribes and the one that scared the European explorers the most. Speculation as to why this was the case is just that, speculation, but it may have had something to do with the religious convictions of the explorers, or just their fear of death and the consequence consumption of their remains might have on the afterlife. Regardless, it was the sensational reports of cannibals in the New World,
and later in the Pacific Islands, that led many including influential members of the inteligencia like Michel Montaigne, Daniel Defoe and even Edgar Allen Poe to equate the cannibal with the savage.
Cannibals 1493-1820

In the decades following Columbus’s first expedition to the New World, reports of cannibals spread through Europe, and as new expeditions were mounted, more Europeans came into contact with tribes that practiced some form of cannibalism. Increasingly, though, the cannibal label began to be applied to all New World tribes, and it took on significance greater than just the “self” vs. “other”—civilized vs. savage. Shirley Lindenbaum in Thinking About Cannibals calls the cannibalistic label a “colonizing trope and stratagem.”29 The label of the cannibal became a justification for the destructive practice of colonization. While she is not arguing that it was the only justification, she claims that Europeans became so disgusted and frightened by cannibalism that its practice equated cannibals to animals.30

As colonization progressed, reports of cannibals and cannibalism in the New World proliferated. Missionaries, like Bartolome De Las Casas, were the first to pen reports on the cannibalistic practices of the Aztec and Inca. By the 1580s, scholars were already writing about the cannibals of the New World in Europe. The first and most famous of these scholars was Michel De Montaigne. His essay On Cannibals, published in 1580, was a sensational report and was widely read. It became the premier source of information about cannibals in Europe in its time, and has remained a very important treaties on the subject even today. His analysis of the practice is astoundingly understanding for the period in which it was produced.

As colonization and settlement of the New World progressed, large cannibalic civilizations like the Aztecs were decimated, but cannibalism did not disappear from European literature and philosophy, or from the minds of explorers. After Montaigne, philosophers and authors like, Daniel Defoe, Marquis de Sade, Gustave Flaubert, Joseph Conrad, Edgar Allen Poe

29 Lindenbaum, Thinking About Cannibals, 476.
30 Ibid., 476-7.
and Herman Melville all wrote and thought about cannibalism. In Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, the savage is equated to the cannibal, and it is the Caucasian Crusoe who tames and educates the brutal, savage cannibal, Friday. Like Defoe’s work, many of these scholars continued to equate the practice of cannibalism with the savage barbaric ways of the uncivilized natives of the New World and Pacific islands. The scholars who produced literature about cannibals found that their works sold well, and that there was a general fascination with cannibals.\(^\text{31}\)

As literature and scholarship about the savage cannibal became more popular, and disseminated throughout western civilization, its savage, colonial, cannibal discourse trickled down through all levels of society. By the early 1800’s even those who had never read Montaigne, Defoe or de Sade associated the cannibal with the savage. The cannibal became a fascinating creature, the missing link between man and beast. The label was associated with almost every isolated tribe especially those on the unexplored Pacific Islands. Sailors and landlubbers alike found a frightful fascination with the bestial cannibal, but under no circumstances did even the bravest men want to venture into a cannibal camp. Captains feared losing their entire crew and even their own lives if they stopped at the wrong island to replenish supplies. While this fear did not stop all explorers, most notably Captain Cook, it did make many captains stick to supply stops only at islands where it was known no cannibals resided.

Tales of savage cannibals and head hunters were passed back and forth to sailors both young and old like folklore. What these exchanges did was to supplement the fear of cannibals, and cement the self vs. other connotation of cannibalism. By labeling the cannibal as something to be feared and a being as unlike any westerner as humanly possible, this folklore of cannibalism served to further disseminate the ideas of the scholars writing in the period.

\(^{31}\) Lindenbaum, *Thinking About Cannibals*, 477.
By 1820, and the voyage of the *Essex*, the fear of cannibals in the Pacific had reached a frenzy. This fear was largely based on a fear of isolated cannibal tribes on uncharted islands—after all, exploration of the Pacific and her islands was still in its infancy. To sailors in the Pacific, each uncharted (and even many charted islands) held the potential to be cannibal enclaves, so thickly populated with these supposed savages that any provisioning stop could mean certain death. In the decades following, the Pacific was explored much more thoroughly and her islands charted. In the 1820s, the Pacific remained a vast, largely uncharted frontier, a place for explorers, whalers, and cannibals. As whalers were forced to travel farther to reach their pray, and as sea trade expanded in Asia, islands were charted, natives were found to be docile and the fear of cannibals was attenuated. Unfortunately for the men of the *Essex*, at the time of their shipwreck the fears of cannibals and the unknown islands they might inhabit was a real one, and a fear that would cause the men to head towards South America, rather than the much closer, but unknown islands of the Pacific.
Chapter One

The Settlement of Nantucket and the Birth of Whaling

Lying about thirty miles south of Cape Cod, the island of Nantucket is about 30,000 acres. It first appears in European sources on March 26th 1602, when Bartholemew Gosnold bound for Virginia noted it in his ship’s log.\(^{32}\) Settlers would not arrive for another fifty years, and the early colonization mirrored the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay after 1630. In fact, many of the earliest families on the island sought refuge from religious persecution within the Massachusetts Bay Colony. These religious refugees were Quakers, a sect, which the Puritans of the colony felt to be very dangerous. By 1659, all Quakers had been banished from the Massachusetts Bay, and that December, two Quakers were hanged in Boston for, “their heretical opinions.”\(^{33}\)

In the summer of 1659 Tristram Coffin, fearing persecution for his Quaker beliefs, accompanied Edward Starbuck and Isaac Coleman on a trip to the island to determine if it was habitable. Finding that the Indian sachems and the English titleholder willing to sell him land, Coffin began making arrangements to settle the island. Its reputation as a safe haven for Quakers led to quick population growth and by the 1680’s conflicts over land rights and land shares were breaking out. Tensions were also mounting between the Wampanoag Indians and the settlers, as the Indians began to realize that their limited supply of land was shrinking at an alarming rate.\(^{34}\) To make matters worse, the colonists’ local economy, based on husbandry and small family farms, began to stagnate by the end of the century as all possible grazing pasture was brought into use.

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33 Ibid., 16.
34 Ibid., 42.
The settlers’ solved the problem by copying the Wampanoag ways. In the fall, Wampanoags would take small boats to the south side of the island and kill the Right whales that spent their days grazing on the surface of the water. Because of their tendency to remain at the surface, Right whales were called Right whales because their accessibility made them the “right” whales to kill. Like the Wampanoags, English colonists on the mainland had been hunting right whales for a few decades, but it was not until the arrival of Ichabod Paddock in the late 1690s that Nantucketers were instructed in the art of whaling.\(^35\) When islanders became involved in harvesting whales, boats of approximately twenty feet were crewed by five Wampanoag oarsmen and a single white islander acting as boatsteerer.\(^36\) The somewhat exploitative debt labor system that white Nantucketers had established with the Wampanoag meant that they would serve as the main source of whaling laborers well into the 1700’s. Thus the Wampanoag can be credited with founding of Nantucket whaling.

The hunting of right whales continued into the 1750s, at which point their local population was decimated.\(^37\) This might have spelled disaster for Nantucket whalers, but in 1712, while hunting right whales in the waters off Nantucket, a Captain Hussey was blown out to sea by a powerful northwesterly storm. During the storm, Hussey spotted a whale with a curious spout, “Unlike a right whale’s vertical spout, this whale’s spout arched forward…This creature, Hussey quickly realized was a sperm whale.”\(^38\)


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 5. Boatsteerer is a term used by Nantucket whalers and is synonymous with helmsman. He would be the whaler chosen to steer the whale boat, using the single steering oar, to a spot close enough to the breaching whale that the harpooner could affix the whalers to the whale.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 6.
The sperm whale was a far superior animal to the right whale. Not only is it larger, but it contains large quantities of high quality oil that give off more light and burned cleaner in lamps. The Sperm whale’s head contains the oil of the highest quality, and was extremely valuable. It was this cranial, square shaped pocket of oil led to the whale’s name, “Its block-shaped head contained a vast reservoir of even better oil, called spermaceti that could be simply ladled into an awaiting cask. (It was spermaceti’s resemblance to seminal fluid that gave ties to the sperm whale’s name).” With the local populations of right whales dwindling, and the value of sperm whales now realized, Nantucketers began to turn their attention away from the local waters, to the vast oceans of the world where sperm whale populations were plentiful and fortunes could be made.

**Nantucket Circa 1819**

By the 1750s the whaling fleet of Nantucket was still in its infancy, but by this time new larger boats were being constructed and equipped with brick tryworks. A brick trywork is essentially a brick hearth placed on the deck of a ship in which a fire could be kindled. The trywork also supports a large pot in which whale blubber can be placed, and when a fire is lit below the pot the blubber eventually cooks down into whale oil. As Nantucket ships were fitted with these tryworks, they no longer needed to tow their catch back to shore to processes it. With the ability to boil down oil and place it into easily transportable casks, voyages could now be extended until every possible oil barrel was filled in the hold of the ship.

By 1819 Nantucketers had pushed into the Pacific Ocean—the home of large pods of sperm whales. These voyages regularly lasted two to three years as compared to the Atlantic

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39 Ibid., 6.  
40 Ibid., 6-7.
voyages that lasted six to nine months. As the length of their voyages steadily increased, so did the size of the whale fleet. What had begun as a few raggedy Indian hewn canoes in 1717 had grown to a massive fleet of more than 70 ships capable of navigating both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by 1819. Moreover, these ships were capable of rounding Cape Horn, a particularly harrowing and taxing passage that brought the vessel into the Pacific. (See Appendix C for map of typical whaleship voyage)

On the home front the town had a population of about 7000 (today about 10,000 people live there permanently). Thanks to consistent demand, the price of whale oil had been rising for several decades, and by 1819 many in Nantucket were becoming wealthy from the whaling trade. The town itself resembled other small whaling ports along the New England coast, but compared most closely with Salem, Massachusetts. The wharfs were always full, crowded with whaling ships, as well as smaller vessels that ferried supplies to and from the mainland. For many, life centered on these wharfs. Children spent their days playing amongst the spars and anchor lines of these ships, while the women of Nantucket always had an eye toward the wharf, watching and waiting for their husbands to return to the island.

While the community of Nantucket centered on the whaling trade, there were other features of the island’s culture that regulated life. Since its settlement, Nantucket was made up primarily of Quakers. While not as large of a percentage of the population in 1819, Quaker families still dominated all aspects of Nantucket culture. In fact, Gideon Folger and Sons, the owners of the Essex, were all Quakers, as were many other whaleship owners, captains, and

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41 Starbuck, The History of Nantucket, 358.
42 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 1. See also, William Comstock, Voyage to the Pacific, Descriptive of the Customs Usages, and Sufferings on Board of Nantucket Whale-Ships, (Boston: 1838.)
43 The estimate of 7000 persons is taken from the 1820 U.S. Census, and the current estimate of population is taken from the 2000 U.S. Census.
crewmembers.\textsuperscript{44} It is striking that such a large group of Quakers would become so involved in such a brutal enterprise as whaling who, while professed pacifists towards their fellow man, Nantucket whalemen of 1819 were mercilessly slaughtering whales.

It is also interesting that so many members of the Religious Society of Friends would be involved in whaling because of the vast wealth that it brought them. Quakers were expected to act and dress very conservatively, and yet many of those who invested in whaling were amassing huge fortunes. As their fortunes grew steadily, much of their money was put back into the Nantucket whaling fleet since there was little else on which to spend their money. This reinvestment was one of the major factors that helped to sustain the Nantucket fleet through difficult periods that wreaked havoc on mainland fleets like the Revolution and the War of 1812.\textsuperscript{45} The other consequence of the Quaker insistence on plainness in housing and dress was that some of the richest men in America in the late eighteen-teens and eighteen-twenties lived in small unassuming houses and wore bland, restrained clothing.\textsuperscript{46}

While membership in the Society of Friends prevented many successful whalers from displaying the wealth they accumulated over their lives, it did not prevent them from harshly exploiting their laborers. The most common way was to give extremely small lays to their sailors. A lay was the portion or percentage of the total profits that a whaler would get upon completion of the voyage. Because the lengths of voyages were unpredictable as was the amount of oil that might be collected, the wage labor system that worked in the merchant service did not work well in whaling. The lay system gave the men incentive to work because for every whale they captured they were essentially putting money into their pocket. Unfortunately for the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{44} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 19. See also, Everett U. Crosby, \textit{Nantucket in Print}, (Nantucket: 1946).
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 9.
\end{footnotes}
sailors, the Quaker ship owners had no religious reservations about cheating them out of a fair wage. This was so common that Melville even includes a section in *Moby Dick* where he discusses the contradiction of a pious Quaker cheating a hardworking sailor. The Quaker is Bildad, a part owner of the *Pequod*, talking to the captain of the ship Peleg:

> And I did not know but what the stingy old Bildad might have a mighte deal to say about shipping hands especially as I now found him on board the Pequod, quite at home there in the cabin, and reading the bible as if at his own fireside… ‘Why Blash your eyes, Bildad’ cried Peleg ‘thou dost not want to swindle this young man! He must have more that that.’ ‘Seven hundred and seventy-seventh [lay]’ again said Bildad, without lifting his eyes… ‘Captain Peleg, thou hast a generous heart; but thou must consider the duty of thou owest to the other owners of this ship…’

Melville, who sailed out of New Bedford, had never been to Nantucket when he wrote *Moby-Dick*, but he had served on a Nantucket owned whaleship, and would have been familiar with the exploitative lays that were given to their crews. In spite of this we can see the fiction in his account, because no whaleman would spend two to three years working for a 777 lay (an extremely small portion of the total gross of the ship), and rarely would lays exceed 200. In spite of this, there were green hands that misunderstood the way the lay worked and would insist that they be given the largest lay possible, a request most owners would have been happy to grant.

The lay system meant that whalers were not making wages for their time on board, and instead they would be paid a share of the profits of the voyage. A cabin boy, for example would receive a very “long” lay, meaning a very small percentage of the total profits of the ship. While the ship’s papers for the 1819 voyage of the *Essex* have been lost, on the previous voyage the

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cabin boy of the *Essex* made 1/198 lay, which equaled out to be about $150 for two years worth of work. 49

By 1819, the community of Nantucket was dominated by a force almost as powerful as the Quakers. As whale oil prices steadily rose, many off islanders were attracted to Nantucket to fill the crews of the 70 whaleships, which could no longer be manned by islanders exclusively. This influx of new residents caused a quasi-xenophobic reaction from the islanders, who, while not overtly attacking the newcomers, certainly tended to look out for Nantucketers before all others,

Nantucketers took a dim view of off-islanders. They called them ‘strangers’ or, even worse, ‘coofs; a term of disparagement originally reserved for Cape Coders, but broadened to include all of those unlucky enough to have been born on the mainland. 50

Nantucketers were also viewed as the best whalers, and captains competed fiercely to get the largest possible percentage of Nantucket crewmembers. Among the *Essex* crew, the same paradigm held true, and for the cabin boy, Thomas Nickerson, his lineage put him at a disadvantage,

“It might have earned Thomas Nickerson some regard on the island if his mother had at least come from old Nantucket stock, with a last name like Coffin, Starbuck, Macy, Folger or Gardner…On an island where many families could claim direct decent from one of the twenty of so ‘first settlers,’ the Gibsons and Nickersons were without the network of cousins that sustained most Nantucketers.” 51

In spite of his lacking pedigree, Nickerson had lived on the island since his parents moved there shortly after his birth. As a result, while he would always be a “coof,” he had a large network of friends, and understood the subtleties of the way the island functioned. He knew that retired whaling captains choose to live on Orange Street, the street where Captain Owen Chase

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49 Ibid., 18.
51 Ibid., 11.
(the first mate of the *Essex*) would eventually retire, and a ship owner or merchant would live on Pleasant Street. He knew that if wanted a berth on a whaleship he needed to go to the base of Main Street and loiter in front of one of the dry good stores whittling. Off-Islanders were often able to determine that the dry good store was the place to seek employment, but unless they whittled correctly they were unlikely to get the berth they wanted. Nickerson would have known that if he wanted passage as a mate he would whittle towards himself, and if he wanted passage as boatsteerer he would whittle away from himself. Many green hands, rookie whalers who had not been on a voyage, were duped or at least perplexed by the intricate practices of the whalers, but by the completion of their first voyage, most had learned correct behavioral and nautical jargon.

**The Crew of the Whaleship Essex on Her Last Voyage August 1819**

Because he was not a true off islander, Thomas Nickerson did not find his berth on the *Essex* by waiting outside the dry goods store at the end of Main Street. Instead, Nickerson had chosen to join the *Essex* crew with three of his Nantucket boyhood friends. Brizillai Ray, Owen Coffin and Charles Ramsdell all joined the crew of the *Essex* in July of 1819. They may have chosen the *Essex* because Owen Coffin’s cousin, George Pollard Jr, had just been made captain upon completion of several successful voyages as the *Essex*’s first mate. All of the boys were under eighteen, and Nickerson, the youngest was only fourteen.

Whether or not these young men knew it, they were signing up for two to three years of hard labor under harsh conditions and on the inhospitable Pacific Ocean. They would be eating a poor diet consisting of hardtack (a flat and extremely hard loaf of bread common on ships) as a

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53 Ibid., 22.
54 Ibid., 2.
staple supplemented by salted meats and any fresh fruits and vegetables or livestock that could be purchased or captured along the voyage. They would be pushed to the limit of their physical prowess, and they would be at the mercy of their superiors while on board. 55

Nickerson and his chums, like many young male Nantucketers, were excited to get their chance out on the open ocean. Their ship would be the Essex, a twenty-year-old, 87-foot, 243-ton vessel out of Nantucket. 56 While she was older and smaller than many of the other ships in the Nantucket fleet, she was not the smallest or the oldest, and she had always been a lucky ship. She had three masts, and was fast and sleek.

In spite of her impressive stature and due to the high volume of whalers that left Nantucket during the summer of 1819, Captain George Pollard Jr. had difficulty filling all of the berths on the Essex. With the addition of Nickerson and his fellows, the Essex crew stood at fourteen: Captain George Pollard Jr., First Mate Owen Chase, Second Mate, Mathew Joy, Boatsteerers Benjamin Lawrence, Obed Hendricks and Thomas Chapel, and sailors Isaac Cole, Seth Weeks, Joseph West, William Wright, Owen Coffin, Charles Rumsdell and Brazillai Ray, as well as Cabin Boy Thomas Nickerson. 57 To fill the last seven berths it was necessary for one of the Essex’s owners, Gideon Folger to call on an agent in Boston, “for as many black sailors as the agent could find.” 58 The broker was able to find the seven necessary sailors, and Samuel Reed, Richard Peterson, Lawson Thomas, Charles Shorter, Isaiah Sheppard, William Bond, and Henry De Witt joined the Essex in Nantucket. 59

55 Ibid., 59.
56 Ibid., 29.
59 Ibid., 25-6.
It is notable that these last seven sailors were African Americans. They were not slaves, but rather free laborers making the same meager lays as the rest of the white whalemens. Nantucket whaleship owners paid their sailors according to their rank not their race. This was a practice that dated back to the times when Wampanoag braves made up the majority of the whaleship crews. In spite of this, they were by no means treated as equals to the white members of the crew. Nantucket Captains and Mates were notorious for their brutality and hard driving attitude towards black sailors. William Comstock claimed that on a Nantucket whaleship, “‘[A]n African is treated like a brute by the officers of their ship…should these pages fall into the hands of any of my colored brethren, let me advise them to fly Nantucket as they would the Norway Maelstrom.’” While they were making equal wages, the black sailors on the Essex were expected to work harder and do more menial tasks for the same wages as their white peers.

One sees racial delineation in the quarters on the Essex as well. While the white quarters were segregated by rank, with the mates and captain getting the most desirable bunks, blacks were relegated to the worst cabin on the ship. (see appendix A) Captain Pollard and the other officers of the ship slept in the most aft portion of the vessel, just behind the steerage compartment where the white sailors and boatsteers resided. Separated from the rest of the white cabins by the large and filthy blubber room, the blacks were housed in the forecastle. The forecastle was located just below the bow of the boat and was smaller than the other two cabins. Its only benefit was its relative isolation from the rest of the crew. Because the cabin could only

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60 Starbuck, *The History of Nantucket*, 354.
be accessed via a hatch in the deck, and it was separated from the rest of the crew by the blubber room, the African American sailors were able to develop their own private sphere. In early August of 1819 the crew of the *Essex* had high hopes for their upcoming voyage. As Thomas Nickerson puts it in his account of the voyage,

> The ship had also been considered [sic] what seamen term a luckey ship...[and] The ship therefore having gone through a thorough repair and pounced a perfectly safe and seaworthy ship was on the whole rather a desirable ship...

The crew might have been nervous that their Captain lacked the experience necessary to command a ship, but again if we look to Nickerson’s account it seems that most were confident in his abilities, “command [was] given to George Pollard who had never commanded a ship previous, but had sailed as chief mate of that ship on a former voyage as was considered fully competent...” On the whole Nickerson’s assessment of Captain Pollard was fair. He had been a good first mate, and had been on the *Essex* since 1815, when he took his berth on her as a common sailor. He moved up through the ranks quickly, and was able to attain the rank of captain by twenty-eight. Physically, Pollard was not an overwhelmingly commanding figure. He was described as a chubby, small man, but what he lacked in physical prowess, he made up for in his fair and honest manner.

Owen Chase, Pollard’s first mate, was in many ways the antithesis of his captain. At 5’10 he would have towered over most of the *Essex* sailors. He had risen though the ranks quickly and at twenty-two felt destined to be a captain by his next voyage, “The first mate’s cocksure attitude would make it difficult for Pollard a first-time captain just emerging from the long shadow of a

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62 Ibid., 34-5.
64 Ibid., 85.
65 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 30.
respected predecessor, to assert his own style of command.” An ambitious and fiery man, Chase quickly instilled fear into the hearts of his crewmembers. After just a few hours at sea Nickerson recounts, “I was assailed by the hoarse voice of the mate calling to me in its harshest tone ‘You boy Tom, bring back your broom here and sweep clean. The next time I have to speak to you, your hide shall pay for it lad.’” Harsh and slightly cantankerous, Chase instilled the motivational fear necessary to guide his crew in the life and death situations whaling presented. Unfortunately, as an inexperienced first mate, his overbearing influence on a more experience captain eventually doomed the Essex crew to its fate.

The second mate, Matthew Joy, was the least impressive of the officers. He was twenty-six, and while only four years older than Chase, he lacked Chase’s ambition and confidence. In the early days of the voyage his health held, but by the time the Essex reached the Pacific’s northerly latitudes, it had begun to fail. After the ship sank, his health deteriorated rapidly, and he ended up being the first casualty of the disaster. While he plays only a minor role in the narrative of the disaster, his weakness may have greatly contributed to Chase’s ability to bully Captain Pollard, but this inference is not recounted in either of the surviving accounts of the disaster.

The youngest of the main characters of this saga was the cabin boy Thomas Nickerson. He has become a main character in the narrative only recently, when an account of the Essex

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66 Ibid., 31.
68 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 153.
disaster that he penned was found in the attic of a house in Hamden Connecticut in 1960. His account was an unpublished one, written in his hand, and is extremely detailed.

His account has greatly increased our understanding of the experience of the *Essex* survivors and supplements the only other first-hand account of the disaster written by first mate Owen Chase. Nickerson’s account includes several important details left out or overlooked by Chase, and is significant because his account brought him no fame or fortune, where as Chase’s was published for profit. In spite of this, even Nickerson’s manuscript is problematic. In his old age, he was unable to admit his own cannibalistic actions, but the evidence shows definitively that he was a willing participant. In spite of its limitations, the following narrative is based on the two primary accounts and several secondary, contemporary accounts of the 1819 voyage of the Nantucket Whaleship *Essex*.

**The Voyage of the Whaleship Essex August 12th 1819**

While the *Essex* sailed in August 1819, most of her crew had been aboard the vessel for several weeks before Captain Pollard boarded her on the morning of August twelfth and ordered her anchor weighed. The rest of the crew had spent the last three weeks rigging, loading, provisioning and cleaning the ship. While this practice may seem benign, Nantucket ship owners were some of the only owners in the country that required sailors to load and rig their own ships. The impetus for this must have been to cut costs, but regardless, by August 12th all the sailors knew their way around the ship.

By August fifth, the *Essex* was fully rigged and ready to be towed over the large sandbar that lay just outside of the Nantucket Harbor. Once over the bar, the ship could then be fully

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69 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 83.
70 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 17. See also, Clifford Ashley, *The Yankee Whaler*, (Boston: 1926).
loaded with the tons of supplies, rations, water and firewood she would need to complete a voyage of several years. The men loaded huge wooden barrels filled with seawater called groundteir casks. These large casks would hold all the whale oil they collected through the course of their voyage. They were filled with seawater because it ensured that the barrels would not shrink in the dry air, and thus leak. Each barrel could hold 268 gallons, and so they took up the most room in the ship’s hold. Casks of fresh water were loaded next, along with the massive amounts of firewood used to cook the whale oil down, and wooden staves used by the ship’s cooper to make more barrels. Next the crew loaded all the food which Owen Chase claims, “victualled and provided for [a voyage] of two and a half [years].”

While loading the ship, the green hands had their opportunity to take stock of the ship. She was a small ship when compared to the others in the whaling fleet, but at 87 feet long and a displacement 238 tons by no means incapable of her task to round Cape Horn, harvest whales, and return safely. The Essex was not only small, but she was aging, “At twenty years of age, the Essex was reaching the point when many vessels began to exhibit serious structural deterioration.” Her owners, while reluctant to undertake expensive structural improvements on such an old ship, redid her entire top rigging, a repair described positively by Thomas Nickerson, “The ship therefore having gone through a thorough repair and pronounced a perfectly safe and seaworthy ship…”

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71 Ibid., 24.
Now loaded by her crew, a custom that Nickerson claims is, “unjust and overbearing,” final preparations were made for her departure, and Captain Pollard boarded his craft. Pollard must have stepped aboard the *Essex* with a sense of pride he had never felt upon boarding her before. He boarded the ship for the first time as her captain and, at twenty-eight, a fairly young captain at that. He knew the *Essex* as well as anyone would know their own home, and in the previous four years he spent 41 of the 48 months on board.

In his past voyages as mate and common sailor, the *Essex* had been a successful and “lucky” ship, but that did not mean that Captain Pollard could relax and let fate take its course. He was under a great deal of pressure. In a letter written to him by, Gideon Folger and Paul Macy, the owners of the *Essex*, Pollard’s task was made clear. They instructed him to make haste to the Pacific Ocean, where he was to begin harvesting whales. At no time was he or any of his crew to partake in any illicit trade or smuggling, and upon collecting a full load of oil, he was, “to make the best dispatch for this place [Nantucket].” Pollard knew that as a first time captain this voyage could make or break his career.

As Captain Pollard ordered the anchor weighed and sails unfurled, he could only watch with disdain as his crew of green hands fumbled with the hundreds of cords, cables and sails. As the men slowly raised the sails, Pollard’s first command was underway. His first mate, Owen Chase, did what he could to keep the bumbling green hands in order. He cajoled their every move, shouting insults and curses, the likes of which many of the young green hands had never heard in placid, reserved Nantucket. For Chase and the other veteran sailors, they were not shocked to hear such coarse language. They understood that two different spheres existed in the

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75 Ibid., 86.
76 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 28.
77 Ibid., 28.
life of a sailor. A man was expected to act one way while on land, but a totally different set of standards regulated life on the ship. In Quaker Nantucket, Owen Chase would be expected act like a gentleman and carry himself in a manner that demonstrated his status as a gentleman, but on the sea it was nature that regulated behavior. Being a gentleman mattered little when the stakes were life and death. As a result, Chase’s cursing and threatening behavior motivated his crew and was not seen as unreasonable by Captain Pollard.

It was very common that the captain or the first mate would rule this way in both the whaling industry and merchant shipping. The captain and his first mate were the ones responsible for the ship and her cargo, so it was up to them to keep things functioning smoothly.

The organization of labor on each ship began with the mater [captain]…who was hired ‘to manage the navigation and everything relating to the ship’s cargo, voyage, sailors &c.’…the master was the commanding officer. He possessed near-absolute authority. His ship was ‘virtually a kingdom on its own,’ his power ‘well nigh unlimited,’ and all too frequently…he ruled like a despot…The mate…was second in the chain of command. He commanded a watch and oversaw the daily functioning of the ship. He was charged with the internal management of the vessel, setting the men to work, governing the crew, [and] securing the cargo…

Chase was responsible for the functioning of his ship, so he employed harsh techniques, which motivated the men to get the Essex under way. While they may have found his leadership abrasive, each man settled into a routine that would consume their lives for the next two years. The men were divided into two sections for meals, one eating in the forecastle with the black sailors, and one in steerage nearest the officer’s quarters. Meals consisted of a large portion of salted mean held in a tub around which the men sat. Their beverage was tea, provided in a small

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tin cup, along with a serving of hardtack. While their meals did vary, largely depending on the availability of fresh produce and meat, this first meal was a fairly typical one.

Shortly after eating, the men were called back up on the deck. Once assembled, they were split into two groups, each responsible for a watch. The watch system allowed the ship to always have men on the deck, ready in case any issue arose, while the rest of the crew slept. Nathaniel Philbrick describes the process by which the mates pick their watches as, “like children picking teams on a playground…” While it seems like a strange analogy, the watchmen with the most desirable characteristics or the closest ties to the mate and second mate were picked first. On the Essex, that meant that all the Nantucketers were chosen, then the rest of the crew followed. In the saga that would transpire as the voyage progressed, this is the first instance where Nantucket favoritism is clearly documented and present.

Once the men had been split between watches, it was time to pick the crews for the whaleboats. The whaleboats were small craft that were launched from the deck of the ship when a whale or a pod of whales was sighted. The typical whaleboat, similar to those on board the Essex, had room for five oarsmen, and a boatsteerer. One of the oarsmen was expected to serve a double function as both a rower and as the harpooner. With her crew of twenty one souls, the Essex had just enough crew members to launch three boats, and because eighteen men were needed to crew the whaleboats most of the men were selected to one of the three boats in the second round of picking. Captain Pollard as well as Owen Chase and Second Mate Mathew Joy would all command whaleboats. As with the watches, the officers did what they could to have as

80 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 33. See also, William H. Macy, There She Blows! Or the Whales We Caught and How We Did It, (Boston: 1877).
many Nantucket men in their crew as possible.\textsuperscript{81} By the time that Pollard and Chase had selected their crews, Mathew Joy was left with only off-islanders to row his boat, while the three remaining sailors not chosen for a whale boat became the “Essex ship keepers” and were responsible to keep the ship close enough to the whale and the whalers so that no one got lost.

By the second and third days of the voyage, the novelty of their new surroundings began to fade, and seasickness replaced excitement with a melancholy that made it hard for the green hands to follow orders. Each man was expected to spend, “two hours each…at the mast head everey [sic] day during the voyage looking for whales.”\textsuperscript{82} The already sea sick and miserable men were flabbergasted that their mates and captain would insist that they climb the mast to the masthead (similar to a crows nest) when the men were in such a condition that, “some said even should they succeed in getting aloft to the mast head they could not hold on for a moment and the idea of looking out for whales was altogether absurd and unreasonable.”\textsuperscript{83} One unnamed sailor, so taken aback by the order that he should take the masthead, appealed to Pollard to be forgiven of his responsibility. The request got the sailor nowhere, and he quickly realized, on a whaleship his best survival technique was to “do the best in their [his] power and finally succeed beyond their [Captain and Mates] expectation.”\textsuperscript{84}

Most of the other men quickly learned similar lessons, and determined that the best way for them to survive was to slip into a routine, not to ask questions, and complete any verbal orders they were given. As the sailors became used to the ship’s motions and the way she sailed, their ability to control her improved as did their speed. By the third day of their voyage (August

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{82} Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 89.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 90.
15th) the Essex was making good time and was under full sail. The weather had been good to this point, a fact that may have made Captain Pollard a little careless.

Perhaps because he hoped to make up time, or because of their late season departure the Essex was carrying at least one studding sail. A studding sail was an additional temporary sail that could be positioned above the three topgallant sails, which were positioned on the upper yards at the top of the mast. It was strange that the Essex would be employing a studding sail because it limited the ship’s mobility if a whale was sighted, and it was not worth the potential risk it posed if weather kicked up in the Atlantic. Because the Essex, unlike a merchant ship, was not interested in extremely fast passage, the studding sail seems to have been a miss-judgment by a rookie captain. The sails were also cumbersome to hoist and without an experienced crew difficult to take down, “For a whaleship full of green hands approaching the often tempestuous waters of the Gulf Stream with her studding sails flying indicated an aggressive, if not foolhardy, attitude on the part of her commander.”

Unfortunately for Pollard, this gamble backfired drastically. By early afternoon, there was a steady rain coming down, and the seas had picked up considerably. A squall was sighted closing on the ship from the southwest, the captain now made a fatal error. Rather than immediately shorting sail and trying to sail through the storm, or turning in the direction of the storm before it hit the ship, he continued to sail towards the squall with full sails flying.

When the ship closed within a few thousand yards of the storm, and the captain realized he needed to turn to put the storm at the back of his sails, it was far too late. In the process of his east southeast maneuver, “a sudden squall of wind stuck the ship from the SW. and knocked her

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86 Ibid., 38.
completely on her beam-ends, stove one of our boats, entirely destroyed two other and threw down the cambouse.”

What Pollard’s maneuver did was to place the ship at broadside with the wind, and the gust effectively knocked it on its “beam-ends,” which means onto its side.

Fortunately, the wind was gusting, and so in a lull between gusts, the *Essex* was able to right itself. When the ship righted itself in the powerful wind, the wind pushed back against the sails and masts, “The sails were all aback with the yards very near square which pressd [sic] the ship so far backward before the sails could be take off that the ship was very near running under stern first…”

Essentially, the ship was being pushed backwards by the wind, an extremely dangerous and often fatal problem. Fortunately Pollard was able to get the ship turned out of the wind before the glass pained windows on the stern shattered.

Although it could have been far worse, the knockdown was a costly accident that left the crew with a decision. They had lost three whaleboats with their whaling equipment, along with the cookhouse. They had two whaleboats in good condition left, but almost all whaleboats the size of the *Essex* launched three boats at a time. Because of the dangerous nature of whaling and the frequency with which whaleboats were destroyed, heading into the Pacific having only two boats with no spares was a risky move. Since a whale ship of *Essex’s* size usually carried three working boats with two spares, Captain Pollard suggested they return home to quickly re-supply and make repairs.

In most cases, whenever the captain issues an order, the crew must perform the task without question. In this case, however, First Mate Chase persuaded Pollard to reconsider. One

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87 Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 19-20. The Cambouse is synonymous with the cookhouse.
89 Ibid., 91-2.
90 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 43.
of Pollard’s greatest weaknesses throughout the saga was his inability to act on his own order when challenged by his subordinates, particularly Chase. While not captain, Chase was an ambitious and physically powerful man, and it is not hard to imagine he could bully even his superior, a rookie Captain with a quiet manner and a short chubby frame. As Chase did not recount his discussion with Pollard in his account of the knockdown of the ship, we cannot say for sure that it was he who influenced the captain. Either way, shortly after the knockdown, Pollard reversed his previous decision, citing a strong northwesterly gust, which would have made a return to Nantucket extremely difficult from their position.\textsuperscript{91} Pollard decided that the men would continue their voyage to the Pacific, and attempt to purchase additional whaleboats at each provisioning stop.

The crew of the \textit{Essex} was finally able to purchase an extra whaleboat when they reached the Atlantic Island of Maio on September 19\textsuperscript{th} 1819. The boat was washed up on a beach and in poor condition, but because the men were desperate, they decided to purchase it. They also picked up a few skinny hogs. Unlike the first half of the voyage from Nantucket to the Cape Verde Islands, a small island chain to the west of Senegal, the second stage of the voyage from the Cape Verde Islands to the Horn of South America was uneventful, until the \textit{Essex} crossed into the Southern Hemisphere and sighted its first whale.\textsuperscript{92} (See appendix C for map of Pacific)

\textbf{The Chase}

To the men of the \textit{Essex} sighting the first whale was a relief. The crew had been shaken up by the knockdown and, when after three months of sailing they had sighted nothing, many of the crew must have been concerned. A whale was typically sighted by the hand(s) on watch in the masthead, or crow’s nest. The lookout’s job was difficult because he was typically looking at

\textsuperscript{91} Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 91-2.
\textsuperscript{92} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 47-8.
thousands of square yards of ocean, trying to spot a single spout or whale tale. On this particular October day, the lookout sighted a whale spout. When a lookout did so, he would shout, “‘There she blows!’ or just ‘B-l-o-o-o-o-o-w-s!’” Upon hearing this, the crew would answer back “Where Away,” a phrase asking for the direction of the whale or pod.

As the ship closed the distance between itself and the whales, the crew sprang into actions. The whaleboats, which were positioned strategically around the ship to keep them out of the way, and protected, were launched at a moments notice. As the Essex approached her first whale, the crew was busy loading the whaleboats with the gear needed to harpoon and kill a whale. Of course they needed harpoons, and tubs of harpoon lines, but they also needed the killing implement, know as a lance. The harpoon, also referred to as the iron, was not the weapon actually used to kill the whale. The harpoon allowed the whaleboat crew to affix themselves to the whale, in doing so, they were able to remain attached to the whale as it fought and struggled, eventually tiring and floating on the surface. At that point, the whaleboat crew pulled themselves up their harpoon line, and the mate or captain used his lance to stab at the whale’s vital organs. This task was a difficult one and took many thrusts before the blubber could be punctured and the organs injured severely enough to cause death.

When the Essex was within a mile of the pod of whales, “the ship was brought to a near standstill by backing the mainsail. The mate climbed into the stern of his whaleboat and the boatsteerer took his position in the bow as the four oarsmen remained on deck and lowered the bout into the water…” Lowering the boats took both care and skill, especially in rough surf that

93 Ibid., 49.
95 Ibid., 48-9.
could smash the boat into the ship damaging one or both of the crafts. Once in the water, the remaining crew climbed into the boat down the lines used to lower it and the chase began.

Captain Pollard’s boat was the only boat on the starboard side, while Chase’s craft lay on the aft port with Joy ahead of Chase in what was known as the waist boat. Once in the water each officer took charge of his boat, manning the steering oar. The boatsteerer was responsible for steering the craft, and was expected to throw the harpoon when they got close enough to the whales. The boatsteerer was a crewmember with a great deal of whaling experience, and was expected to be able to throw a harpoon accurately after an exhausting row in which he had his back to the whales the entire time.96

Once the crew harpooned a whale successfully, they began their “Nantucket sleigh ride,” as the harpooned animal took off in fright. The boats sometimes reached speeds in excess of twenty knots in 1820, speeds that would not be reached again until the advent of powerful steam ships.97 Because of the dangers of these high speeds, when attached to a whale every crewmember had a job to do,

Aft of the boatsteerer was the bow oarsman….Once the whale had been harpooned, it would be his job to lead the crew in pulling in the whale line. Next was the midships oarsman, who worked the longest and heaviest of the lateral oars…next was the tub oarsman. He managed the two tubs of whale line. It was his job to wet the line with a small bucket like container, called a piggin, once the whale was harpooned. This wetting prevented the line from burning from the friction as it ran out around the loggerheads…Aft of the tub oarsman was the after oarsman. He was usually the lightest of the crew and it was his job to make sure the whale line didn’t tangle as it was hauled back into the boat.98

Because of their individual responsibilities and the difficulty of spotting and attaching to a whale, whalers were especially competitive when it came to the speed of their whaleboats. The

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96 Ibid., 49.
97 Ibid., 53. See also, Ansel, The Whaleboat.
98 Ibid., 49.
members of the *Essex* were no different. When whales were sighted for the first time, and the boats launched, it proved to be Owen Chase’s boat that reached the pod first. According to Nickerson, the excitement of the crew grew to frenzy as they neared the pod, and the men competed to see who would reach the whales first that. It was Chase’s boat that closed this distance first, and the boatsteerer, Benjamin Lawrence, made ready to harpoon the whale.99

As a first time harpooner, Lawrence must have been extraordinarily nervous as he took his harpoon into his hand and made ready to hurl it into the majestic beast that lay just a few feet in front of their boat. Perhaps because of his nerves, he hesitated for just a second, long enough for Chase, who had been a boatsteerer on the previous voyage, to hurl, “a continual patter of barely audible, expletive-laced advice.” at Lawrence. His hesitation provided enough time for a second whale to surface under their ship, stoving100, but not scuttling it.101 Nickerson described the incident as, “a cold bath for each man” that resulted in us having, “to return to our ship in some measure disheartened by the loss of another boat…”102 While their first attempt was unsuccessful, the crew of the *Essex* would not have to wait long before they were able to successful harvest their first whale.

**The First Kill**

After rescuing the men from Chase’s whaleboat and recovering its flotsam, the crew commenced repairing it as best as they could. It took a few days, but shortly after it was fully repaired, another group of whales was sighted. For the crew, this was a much-needed second chance. Fortunately, the harpoon stuck this time and exhausted the whale so that it could be lanced. To lance a whale, the crew let the whale exhaust itself while they held on for dear life as

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99 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 51.
100 Meaning to damage a boat, but in this context not to fully sink the craft.
101 Ibid., 51.
the whale skirted the surface of the water at great speeds or dove to deep depths in an attempt to shake the harpoon. While the whale tired itself out, the mate had to switch places with the boatsteerer; because it was the mate or captain who would wheeled the lance and provided the final deathblow for the great mammal.103

The killing lance itself was eleven to twelve feet long, with a spade-like pike blade on its head. The mate aimed for the lungs and a group of coiled arteries near the lungs. It was not easy to pierce tough blubber, and having to stab the whale upwards of fifteen times was common. The idea was that the lance would pierce the lungs and the arteries, causing blood to flow into the lungs and effectively asphyxiating the whale with its own blood. The whalers knew when this task had been accomplished because the whale would spew blood from its blowhole creating a horrific reddish pink cloud of gore, which whale men termed “Chimney’s afire.”104 (see appendix F for a typical depiction of a whale kill)

As soon as the whale emitted its foul smelling pink mist into the atmosphere, the whale men knew it was time to retreat and give the whale some space. Like a chicken with its head cut off a whale uses its last bit of strength to convulse violently. Its tail smashes the water with such fury that it turns the already frothy red water into a cauldron of regurgitated squid, fish, blood and mucus. In its final death throes, it swims in an ever-tightening circle snapping its jaws, as if to taunt the death it knows is coming. But death comes suddenly, and within a few seconds the thrashing subsides, and the corpse remains motionless on the surface surrounded by his own carnage.105

Melville describes the killing of a sperm whale,

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104 Ibid., 54.
105 Ibid., 54-5.
Haul in—haul in!’ cried Stubb to the bowsman; and facing round towards the whale, all hands began pulling the boat up to him…Stubb, firmly planting his knee in the clumsy cleat, darted dart after dart into the flying fish; at the word of command, the boat alternately sterning out of the way of the whale’s horrible wallow, and then ranging up for another fling. The red tide now poured from all side of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake.\(^{106}\)

Once dead, the crew’s work is not over. The men had to tow the carcass back to the ship where it was dismembered and processed. For the men of Chase’s boat, they did not reach the *Essex* until well after dark. They then affixed the carcass to the side of the ship for butchering and processing. The former was all done while the whale was attached to the side of the ship. Upon completion, the carcass would simply be cut free and left to float on the surface, a magnet for birds, sharks and any other sea scavengers.

**Butchering and Trying-out**

While the killing of the whale may seem gruesome, and probably horrified the young Thomas Nickerson, butchering and dismembering the whale was as graphic if not more so than the kill. To process the body, the entire block and tackle system of the ship had to be used. To employ the ship’s leverage, a hole was cut in the whale at the insertion of the fin. The men of the *Essex* then placed large hooks into this hole, which they then attached to the ships block and tackle system. By employing the ship’s weight and power, the crew could extract a large ribbon of flesh five feet wide and approximately twenty feet long. Once removed from the whale this piece of blubber would be the first to be processed as the rest of the crew continued to strip the whale.\(^{107}\)

Melville describes the process in *Moby Dick* in gruesome detail,

\[^{106}\text{Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 285.}\]
\[^{107}\text{Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 102.}\]
The end of the hawser-like rope winding through these intricacies, was then conducted to the windlass, and the huge lower block of the tackles was swung off the whale; to this block the great blubber hook, weighing some one hundred pounds, was attached. And now suspended in stages over the side, Starbuck and Stubb, the mates, armed with their long spaces, began cutting a hole in the body for the insertion of the hook just above the nearest of the two side fins. This done a broad, semicircular line is cut round the hole, the hook inserted, and the main body of the crew striking up a wild chorus, now commence heaving in one dense crowd at the windlass. When instantly the entire shop careens over on her side...she trembles, quivers and nods her frightened masthead to the sky. More and more she leans over to the whale....till at last, a swift, startling snap is heard; with a great swash the ship rolls upwards and backwards from the whale, and the triumphant tackle rises into sight dragging after it the disengaged semicircular end of the first strip of blubber. Now as the blubber envelops the whale precisely as the rind des an orange, so it is stripped off from the body precisely as an orange is...

Once this large piece of blubber, known as the “blanket piece,” was removed and hoisted onto the ship, it was hacked into small, square shaped pieces that could easily fit into the pot where the blubber was boiled into oil. While some men busied themselves with this, others lowered themselves over the side of the ship on what was known as the cutting stage. From here, the sailors were able to strip the entire carcass of blubber, finally decapitating the animal to get to its rich cranial oil reserves. As was mentioned above, the sperm whale gets its name from the high-grade oil contained in a cavity in the upper part of its head. The head of a sperm whale, “accounts for close to a third of its length...[and] the head contains the case, a cavity filled with up to five hundred gallons of spermaceti, a clear, high-quality oil...” After decapitation, the spermaceti can be removed from the case using a pail or ladle, and requires no trying-out. A single whale can produce up to 500 gallons of oil that takes little effort to extract when compared to oil from the blubber.

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108 Melville, Moby-Dick, 303-4.
109 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 55. For a step by step description of butchering and trying-out, see also, Obed Macy, The History of Nantucket.
110 Ibid., 55. See also, Ashley, The Yankee Whaler.
111 Ibid., 55. See also, Charles Nordhoff, Whaling and Fishing, (New York: 1895).
By the time the spermaceti had been removed, the whale carcass and deck of the *Essex* would have been a horrific scene. Awash with chunks of flesh, blubber and oil, the deck would have been rank and treacherous. Unfortunately for the men of the *Essex* much more work was required to process their whale. First, the chunks of blubber needed to be cut into ever-smaller pieces, usually into cubes four feet by four feet that could then be flayed into, “inch-thick slabs that resembled fanned pages of a book and were known as bible leaves.”

At this point, chunks of blubber would be loaded into the large iron pots that were placed on the try-works of the ship. Essentially, a try-work was a brick hearth where a fire could be kindled and a large caldron could be placed over it. The heat from the fires would liquefy the whale’s blubberous fat, at which point the fatty oil could be collected and placed in casks. One ironic feature of trying-out was that the whale itself contributed to the fire. While the fire was kindled with wood brought onboard, “once the boiling process had begun the crispy pieces of blubber floating on the surface of the pot-known as scraps or cracklings-were skimmed off and tossed into the fire for fuel.”

For the greenhands of the *Essex*, like Thomas Nickerson, the whole process must have been ghastly. In his account of the killing and trying-out of the first whale Nickerson remarks about how dirty the process was,

> Very soon after this we succeeded in takin a large whale…and as this was our first grease work I will make some mention of it…And by the time the oil of our first whale was train and run into casks nearly all our clothes were thrown aside upon the deck and neglected until it was nearly all spoiled and became unfit for use…

He and his fellow greenhands were so disgusted with the process that they

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112 Ibid., 56.  
113 Ibid., 56.  
114 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 102-3. See also, William H. Macy, *There She Blows!*.
continually changed their clothes, only to find that by the time they had completely processed the whale, their entire wardrobe was ruined. The *Essex* ran her try-works like she organized her watches. Each man would have a shift at the try-works and they would run continuously until the entire whale had been processed. Great clouds of black smoke would belch from the blubber fed fires, “By midnight the works were in full operation…[the] Darkness was licked up by the fierce flames, which at intervals forked forth from the sooty flues…the burning ship drove on, as if remorselessly commissioned to some vengeful deed.”  

While Nickerson may have been disgusted with the processes, he would have to get used to it, as the *Essex* would capture and kill many more whales in her voyage.

**A Challenge to Command**

One of the most dangerous conditions on a ship occurs when command breaks down and the ships crew finds it necessary to mutiny against their captain. On the high seas, a captain’s word is the law. He can marry people on his ship, and he acts as the judge and jury when there are any disciplinary infractions. As a result, a captain becomes a man the crew often fears. At the same time, however, he is also viewed as someone who can protect them from overbearing mates or from unfair conditions upon the ship as well as shipwreck and death.

For the crew of the *Essex*, Captain George Pollard appeared to be a reasonable man. Yes, he was a first time captain, but he was experienced and knew the *Essex* as well as any sailor. He had family ties to one of the young green hands, Owen Coffin, a Nantucket youth, who happened to be Pollard’s first cousin.  

And when compared with his subordinate, Owen Chase, Captain Pollard seemed like a rational man whom the crew could look to for protection and justice if they needed it.

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116 Philbick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 175.
As a result of this favorable reputation, the crew approached him when they had a problem with the conditions of the rations on the ship. While Chase does not mention the incident, for Thomas Nickerson, Pollard’s first display his hegemony over the ship stayed with him. The dispute was over the quantity of meat served for the crewmen’s meal in their “kid” (or a small communal tub from which each man ate). Nickerson relates, It was, “resolved that none should touch any of it, that when the captain cam upon deck a man should act as spokesman and take the kid aft [to him].” Nickerson, who had been ordered to repair some netting above the deck, was effectively removed from the confrontation that soon ensued. Pollard was horrified with the subordination that he felt his men were showing by bringing the kid, not only onto the deck, but also into the section of the ship where the mates ate. Nickerson describes his reaction, “I could see him change colour from white to red, from red to blue and finally to almost black…Then turning forward he called out to the men in a voice of thunder ‘who brought this kid aft, come here you damned scoundrels’” Pollard clearly enraged with his crew’s subordination continued his tirade by stomping on his jacket and even threatening the crew with death, “the captain, seeing me in my perching place called out ‘Come down here, you young rascal I’ll kill the whole bunch of you together then, bang up north west and go home.’”

While this exchange might not seem crucial to the narrative of the Essex disaster, it reflects some interesting maritime tropes. Clearly, it is unwise to question a captain even when the crew does so as a whole and under calm circumstances. While Pollard’s death threats were clearly empty, his outburst would have scared the crew who, after all, were completely at his mercy. His tantrum also highlights a sensitive issue on any whaleship, but particularly the Essex.

118 Ibid., 107. For another example of a captain dealing with rationing, see also, Comstock, The Life of Samuel Comstock.
119 Ibid., 108.
As Nickerson points out, “He [Captain Pollard] was generally very kind where he could be so, but his supply of provisions for this voyage were very small, and in this he was touched on a tender point.” Rationing food was a major concern of any captain. For Pollard, his provisions were low for a projected two-year voyage, and he was unwilling to allow his crew to strong-arm him into providing larger rations than provisioned. As we shall see, this exchange is interesting because following the sinking of the *Essex*, all three of the officers had command of a whale boat, and in only one boat, that of the weak and dying second mate Mathew Joy, were any of the ration regulations broken.

**Rounding Cape Horn**

The Horn refers to the peninsula formed by the southern most tip of South America, today spilt between the countries of Chile and Argentina. The Horn was a formidable maritime obstacle, and Rounding the Horn was extremely dangerous, especially for sailing ships that could either become becalmed or lashed by huge storms that could sink ships in minutes. For Captain William Bligh of the *Bounty* (1788), the Horn proved to be an obstacle which he and his crew were unable to overcome. Facing more than a month of sleet and freezing rain compounded with a strong head wind, he decided to turn his ship and head around Africa entering the Pacific from the east around the Cape of Good Hope.  

Nantucket whalers were familiar with the Horn and all of its dangers. Their ships had been rounding the Horn fairly regularly since Captain Paul Worth in his whaleship, the *Beaver*,

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120 Ibid., 108
did so in 1791.\textsuperscript{122} For the \textit{Essex}, the experience was far from regular. Owen Chase gives a somewhat nonchalant account of the passage,

\begin{quote}
We made the longitude of the Cape about the 18\textsuperscript{th} of December, having experienced head winds for nearly the whole distance. We anticipated a moderated time in passing this noted land, from the season of the year at which we were there, being considered the most favorable; but instead of this, we experienced heavy westerly gales, and a most tremendous sea, that detained us off the Cape for five weeks, before we got sufficiently to the westward to enable us to put away.\textsuperscript{123}

Nickerson’s account of the rounding also clearly shows the fear that the sailors had at this point in the voyage. He describes the ship as, “compelld to lay driving about almost at the mercy of the waves whilst it lasted.”\textsuperscript{124} The men were clearly shaken, but after more than a month, the \textit{Essex} successfully rounded Cape Horn for its final whaling voyage in the Pacific.
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[122] Starbuck, \textit{The History of Nantucket}, 356.
\item[123] Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship \textit{Essex},” 20-1.
\end{footnotes}
Chapter 2

Whaling and the Trip to the Offshore Ground

By January 1820 the men of the *Essex* were off the coast of Chile, but due to political instability in Chile and Peru, the sailors could not expect to have much free time in port.\(^{125}\) Once in the Pacific, the crew knew it was time to start whaling. Their first move was to sail up the coast of Chile in waters frequented by sperm whales. Their yield was somewhat lackluster, “We took there eight, which yielded use two hundred and fifty barrels of oil; and the season having by this time expired we changed our cruising ground to the coast of Peru.”\(^{126}\)

The *Essex*’s haul of oil off Chile was not impressive, but off Peru, it was much more successful, “We were on the whole rather fortunate with our whaling and in two months had taken about four hundred and fifty barrels of oil, although it was very difficult to obtain in consequence of such a high and rolling sea…”\(^{127}\) As the *Essex*’s luck improved, the sailors aboard became desensitized to their hard labor, and their foul smelling, dangerous surroundings. Even the green hands learned the motions of life on a whaleship, but as their oil casks were filled, the strain on the men increased, and their frenzied pace, combined with rough seas took their toll on both men and equipment. The whale boats, which would become so important for the survival of the men were continually damaged and under constant repair, as they were dashed and broken against the side of the ship while being launched. “Our boats were very much injured in hoisting them from the water and were on more than one occasion dashed in pieces by the heaving rolling of the ship.”\(^{128}\)

\(^{125}\) Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 63.
\(^{127}\) Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 121.
\(^{128}\) Ibid., 121.
One of the most exciting times aboard any sailing vessel in the 19th century was when two ships from the same port crossed paths with one another. That ship would bring news and possibly even mail. While the two ships were abreast, the sailors would get a chance to speak socially—or gam—a colloquial term meaning to speak socially.\footnote{Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 246. See also William F. Macy, The Nantucket Scrap-Basket, 1916, (Reprint Ellinwood KA: 1984).} For the sailors of the Essex, their chance to hear some news from home came while they were off the coast of Peru in May 1820. By chance the Essex crossed paths with the Aurora, a newly built ship that had left Nantucket of Christmas Day in 1819. The Aurora carried a few newspapers for the men as well as a bag of mail where many lucky members of the crew, including Thomas Nickerson, found letters from home. More importantly, the appearance of the Aurora gave Captain Pollard a chance to talk with another Nantucket captain, Daniel Russell, about his plans to head for the “Offshore Ground.”\footnote{Ibid., 66-7.}

The Offshore Ground was a newly discovered area in the Pacific that was rumored to be teeming with sperm whales. It had been discovered in 1818 by Captain George Washington Gardner, when he took his ship, the Globe, “more than a thousand miles out to sea off the coast of Peru [and] hit the mother load…”\footnote{Ibid., 67.} Pollard told Captain Russell that he planed to head for the Offshore ground, hoping to reach it by November, when the concentration of whales was rumored to be greatest. Pollard knew that he would have to plan ahead for the long voyage far out in the Pacific. He was all too familiar with the threats of scurvy, a vitamin C deficiency that can cause lesions and tooth loss, and knew that he would need to secure a good supply of fruits and vegetables for his voyage. His plan was to continue northward, provision in Ecuador and
then head west into the vast Pacific, stopping one last time in the Galapagos Islands, before sailing on to the Offshore Ground.\textsuperscript{132}

After heading north towards the equator, the voyage remained fairly quiet. The men purchased some fish from local fisherman who would visit their boat from time to time. They sailed close enough to land that peddlers could paddle out to sell their fish and wears. After zigzagging up the coast, the \textit{Essex} took its final provisioning stop in the Ecuadorean town of Atacames.\textsuperscript{133} This stop may have been a short, but it provided a welcome rest for the men. When they crew weighed anchor they realized that one of the black sailors, Henry De Witt, had deserted the ship. It was not uncommon for sailors to desert their ships, especially greenhands, so it was no surprise that the \textit{Essex} lost one of its crew. What troubled the Captain and crew was that his desertion came at a crucial time. Because they were planning a long and dangerous whaling voyage deep into the Pacific, they needed all hands present. With his disappearance, only two men could be left on the ship while the three whale boats, each carrying six men, were out hunting. The problem was that with only two men left on board the ship, should trouble arise, the men would be unable to hand the situation alone. But, “Pollard, in a hurry to reach the Offshore Ground by November, had no alternative but to set out to sea shorthanded.”\textsuperscript{134}

Down a man, the \textit{Essex} set sail for the Galapagos Islands, where the crew hoped to purloin a load of land tortoises, which would provide the additional rations necessary to take a risky venture into the Pacific. While en route, the \textit{Essex} still hunted, and on their passage between Ecuador and the Galapagos, the men were able to harvest two more whales.\textsuperscript{135} For the green hands, the Galapagos must have been a breathtaking and somewhat scary sight. Nickerson

\textsuperscript{132} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 67.
\textsuperscript{133} Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 131.
\textsuperscript{134} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 69. See also Ashley, \textit{The Yankee Whaler}.
\textsuperscript{135} Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 132.
was impressed by the beaches of Stephens Bay on Hood Island that he described them as, “a beautiful snow white, and in an evening appears like snow... The rocks appear very much burnd, and where there is soil it wears mostly the appearance of very dry snuff.”

Nickerson, unlike contemporary visitors, was not visiting the islands to gawk at their beauty or unique species. Instead, he and his fellow sailors were there to do some “turpining,” a colloquial term used by seamen of the Pacific to describe the way tortoises were collected. One of the many reasons that these tortoises were so prized was they were easy to catch. Sailors like Nickerson would search the islands for the telltale turtle trails, which they would simply follow until they came upon one of the gentle giants. The turtles weighed about eighty pounds, so when a sailor came to one he would flip it on its back, place a large rock on its underside to prevent retraction of its legs, tie them to canvas webbing, which would allow the creature to be carried like a backpack. Most tortoises could be collected this way, but for some large males, which could reach over four hundred pounds, several people were needed to lug it back to the ship. Nickerson described terrapinning as exhausting work and few seamen enjoyed this laborious task in the scorching heat of the Galapagos,

I have often seen an irritable seaman through them [tortoises] from his back upon the rocks breaking in the whole top shell and sitting himself down upon the rocks, call down all the bitter curses he could think of upon the head of the poor unfortunate terrapin which lay bleeding at his feet.

The tortoises were so desired because they were both a delicacy, their meat being prized for its lightness and almost buttery quality, and because they could be kept for an extremely long time with little or no care. Nickerson claimed that they could live for seven months without food

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136 Ibid., 133.
137 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 73.
138 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 133.
139 Ibid., 134.
or water, but it seems that they could live as long as a year with that kind of neglect. Either way, the tortoises provided a great deal of nourishment with little care. While they had no way of knowing it while they were collecting their prey, the tortoises they collected on the Galapagos would not only provide the men with a meals en route to the Offshore Ground, but they would also prove to be much needed sustenance they abandoned the Essex after her sinking. By the morning of October 23rd, 1820, the men had collected all the tortoises they could, weighed anchor, and embarked on nearly a month of sailing that would take them over a fifteen hundred miles west of the South American coast. They were entering waters filled with sperm whales, but their distance from land put them in one of the most remote sections of ocean on the planet. Even today it is difficult to fathom the size of the ocean itself, “sailing due west from Panama, it is 11,000 miles to the Malay Peninsula—almost four times the distance Columbus sailed to the New World—and it is 9,600 miles from the bearing straight to Antarctica.”140 Their course put them in a prime location to find whales, but in a place devoid of humans should disaster strike.

The Sinking of the Whaleship Essex

The Essex continued its westerly course along the Equator with little or no interruption until the morning of November 20th, when whales were sighted. The whaleboats were quickly lowered, and the whalers made chase. Chase’s boat was the first to reach the pod and, sighting a small whale, he made an attack. Unfortunately, his boat was, “was badly stoven on one side, and was filling very rapidly with water when each of use in the boat strip off our shirts and cram [them] into the hole which was broken.”141 At this point, the men knew that they were not going to be able to kill the whale, but they hoped by stuffing their clothing into the hole they might be

140 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 77. See also, Ernest S. Dodge, Beyond the Capes: Pacific Exploration from Captain Cook to the Challenger (1776-1877), (Boston: 1971).
141 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 139.
able to return to their ship under their own power, and thus avoid rescue. As the men in Chase’s boat returned to the *Essex* dejected, the other two boats each fastened to a whale and were speeding away from the ship.

Once the men reached the ship, the damaged boat was quickly brought onboard and examined, “after examining the hole, I found that I could, by nailing a piece of canvass over it, get her ready to join in a fresh pursuit, sooner than by lowering down the other remaining boat…”142 While we will never know for sure, it was most likely Chase’s decision to repair his damaged boat that doomed the men of the *Essex*. The reason for Chase’s culpability was completely unbeknownst to him, but modern marine biologists have determined that the sperm whale has a, “highly sophisticated ability to generate and process sound.”143 While sound alone is not enough to condemn Chase, it is highly likely that the bull mistook the noise of Chase’s hammer for a rival whale. Sperm whale clicks can be heard and interpreted for over five miles. Their tone and frequency have a distinct resemblance to the sound of a hammer hitting solid wood, so much so that some sailors nicknamed them “the carpenter fish.”144 The bull sperm whale employs a particular click, called “clangs,” “slower and louder clicks…[and] It has been speculated that males use clangs to announce themselves to eligible females and to ward off competing males.”145 This, it seems highly likely that the enraged bull must have interpreted Chase’s noises as a rival whale or a threat to his territory.

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144 Ibid., 87.
If it was Chase’s attempts to repair his damaged that attracted the enraged bull is not certain. Regardless, as Chase was busy repairing the boat, and Thomas Nickerson, at only fifteen, was at the helm of the Essex, the men on the ship noticed something very strange. Off to the ship’s windward side a, “very large spermaceti whale, as well as I could judge, about eighty-five feet in length…” When Nickerson himself spotted the whale, he instinctively shouted a warning to Chase, who instructed him to head towards the other two whale boats. The events of the next few minutes would come to haunt all the men that were on the deck for the rest of their lives.

There is some disparity in the two accounts of the exact sequence of events, but it seems that the whale floated for a few seconds facing the boat, and proceeded to go under swimming in their direction, “In less than two or three seconds he came up again about the length of the ship [87 feet] off, and made directly for us, at the rate of about three knots. The ship was then going about the same velocity.” Shortly after surfacing within one hundred feet of the ship, the whale crashed into the ship, “directly under the larboard fore chains at the waters edge with such force as to shock every man upon his feet.”

The men described the impact as similar to hitting a solid reef or outcropping of rocks, and it seems unlikely that any man could have kept his feet through the violent impact. As the whale passed under the ship, he knocked into the keel, affecting another tremendous blow on the ship. Apparently dazed from the impacts, the whale surfaced a short distance off the starboard side, and floated on the surface for a few seconds. It is here where the two surviving accounts of the disaster diverge in their most significant way. In an account, written in his own hand and not

147 Ibid., 24.
148 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 140.
for publication, Thomas Nickerson claimed that first mate Owen Chase had a few seconds in which he could have lanced and possibly killed the whale, “The last position gave the mate a fine opportunity to have killed him with a throw of his lance.” He wrote. “His first impulse was to do so, but on second look observing his tail directly beneath the rudder his better judgment prevailed….”¹⁴⁹ Fearing that if he failed to kill the whale it might smash the *Essex*’s rudder, Chase decided not to hurl his lance. In Chase’s own account, he never mentions picking up a lance or having the chance to kill the whale.

Had he known what was to come, he probably would have tried anything to kill the large bull but, at the moment when he had his opportunity, the *Essex* was still seaworthy, and a damaged or destroyed rudder would have left the men stranded over fifteen hundred miles from the Galapagos. What happened next was as unique as it was horrible. Never before had a whale rammed a sailing vessel, let alone rammed it once, then turned around and rammed it a second time.¹⁵⁰ But this enraged bull did just that, and this time at more than twice his normal speed. A cry of alarm went up from the hold, “‘here he is—he is making for us again’”¹⁵¹ Nickerson described it this way,

> Instead of leaving the ship, the monster took a turn off about three hundred yards ahead, then turning short around came with his utmost speed and again struck the ship a tremendous blow with his head upon the larboard bow and with such forces as to stave in the whole bow at waters-edge.¹⁵²

Unfortunately, the second blow to the ship was her deathblow. The whale pushed the ship with such force that, for the second time in the voyage, the ship slipped backwards with water pouring over the stern. Shouts from the hold quickly went up that she was filling with water and

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 140.
¹⁵⁰ Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 81.
¹⁵² Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 140.
in the process of sinking. As quickly as possible, preparations were made to launch the spare whaleboat, which had been purchased in the Falkland Islands. While the men managed to launch this boat quickly and without injury, they were still in grave trouble. It is interesting to note that although this is the only reported case of a whale intentionally and violently ramming a sailing ship, the sperm whale’s head is remarkably fit for use as a blunt force weapon. The cranial cavity of spermaceti protects the brain from trauma due to hard impacts and the sheer size and mass of the whale’s head makes it a fearsome torpedo when it is traveling at more than five knots. Melville even includes a chapter in *Moby-Dick*, entitled “The Battering-Ram,” where he describes how adapted the head of the sperm whale is for a head on attack. It is hard to believe that these intelligent animals did not destroy whalers more frequently with their massive crania, although they were quite adept at scuttling whaleboats with their massive tails.

Shortly after being rammed and taking on water, the men in Pollard and Joy’s whaling boats looked back, and saw the condition of the ship. Cutting their harpoon lines, they returned to the site of the disaster dumbfounded. Upon their return, they found the ship flooded and listing dangerous, but with a few compartments and hatches above water. The ship’s black steward William Bond made the most important contribution to the survival of the now-stranded sailors. While the other men had been hard at work on the pumps of the ship and cutting the lashings of the spare whaleboat, Bond had, “twice enterd the cabin under the most trying circumstances and at his peril had brot [sic] out the trunks of the captain and mate and also two quadrants and two of *Bowditches Practical Navigators*.”\(^{153}\) Along with the navigational equipment and maps salvaged by Bond, the men were able to grab two compasses. In the stress of the situation, it was

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 141.
Bond who had the presence of mind to save the implements critical to the survival of the entire group.

When the crews of the two other whaleboats reached the wreckage, they could not fathom what their eyes beheld. Their majestic ship was floating just a few feet above the waterline, badly damaged and threatening to sink completely at any point. After a quick exchange about the destruction of the Essex, Pollard began to assess the situation. His first decision was that the men would get as much food and water off the ship as possible, before she sank. His first order was to cut the masts away in an attempt to right the ship. Once away, the ship righted to an angle of about forty-five degrees. Now at a workable angle the men, using their whaling hatches, began to hack through the deck of the ship in search of stores “unfortunately for us our provisions were mostly in the lower hold and could not be come at. We could only obtain two cask of ships bread weighing 500 lbs and two small hogs…and some half dozen terrapin.”154 After collecting their meager stock of food, the men scavenged the ship for rope, sails and timber for their whaleboats.

The men spent their first night beside their beloved ship, lying in the bottoms of their whaleboats, too stunned and scared to sleep. At first light, they again scavenged for more food but found none. Over the next two days, the men constructed masts and sails for their tiny crafts. Fortunately, and somewhat haphazardly, the men also decided to strengthen their boats by raising their sidewalls. “We procured from the wreck some light cedar boards…with which we built up additional sides, about six inches above the gunwale; these we afterwards found, were of infinite service…in truth, I am satisfied we could never have been preserved without them.”155

154 Ibid., 142.
Weak Command & The Fatal Error

By nightfall on November 22\textsuperscript{nd} 1820, the men had exhausted all the supplies that could be obtained from the wreck and there was talk of leaving the \textit{Essex}. Previously in the day, at twelve noon, Captain Pollard had taken an observation and determined that they had been drifting to the north for the last two days. By this time, the swell, which had been steadily picking up due to the winds, had taken an egregious toll on the \textit{Essex}. Her entire hull had separated from her deck, and her cargo of whale oil had leeched out of her lower compartments creating a rank and pungent reminder of the greed that had drawn the \textit{Essex} to the desolate Pacific. It was Chase that had first suggested to the Captain that they make ready to abandon the wreck, but the men were so far out in the Pacific with such meager rations, the question on all their minds was where they would head once they left the wreck.

In Chase’s mind, “no further purpose could be answered, by remaining longer with her…and…it was my opinion, no time should be lost in making the best of our way towards the nearest land.”\textsuperscript{156} In this statement, Chase was correct, but his influence on the decision to head for the South American coast, instead of one of the Pacific Islands, would doom many of his fellow seamen to death and cannibalism. To determine where they should head, the officers and Captain Pollard consulted their navigational books and charts. They determined that Marquesas Islands were the closest followed by the Society Islands but, as Chase put it, “these islands we were entirely ignorant of; if inhabited, we presumed they were by savages, from whom we had as much to fear as from the elements or even death itself.”\textsuperscript{157} The men were particularly afraid of the rumors they heard about the cannibalistic tribes of the Pacific. To the seafaring men of the \textit{Essex}, the sea presented challenges, especially in their less than adequate crafts, but they were

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 35.
challenges that each man was familiar with and understood well. The islands presented unknown dangers, such as a death at the hands of cannibals, which was an unthinkable fate for Nantucket whalers.

Because their jerry-rigged whaling boats had no sailing jib, which the men could use to tack against the wind, their routes to land were limited by the direction of the wind. This meant that backtracking towards the Galapagos, from which they had come, would be impossible because of wind direction. It was possible for them to sail west towards the Marquesas Islands about 1,200 miles away, which were rumored to be havens of cannibals, so they were ruled out. Next, Pollard suggested that the men head towards the Society Islands. While he had no proof that cannibals did or did not reside there, he felt that they were the survivors’ best chance. Unfortunately, first mate Chase and second mate Joy disagreed with Pollard, and suggested that they set a course that would utilize the prevailing trade winds, taking them “south for about 1500 miles to latitude 26° south, [then] they would enter a band of variable breezes which they could ride to Chile or Peru.”

The mates estimated that their route would take about ninety-six days, based on the assumption that their crafts would cover about a degree of latitude a day. With about sixty days of rations at their disposal, the men thought they might be able to make it if they stretched them painfully thin. Unlike the firm and forceful captain he had been earlier when his sailors complained about their rations, Pollard gave into the pressure from his mates. In a fashion similar to the one they employed after the knockdown of the ship, the two mates bullied the inexperienced Captain into deviating from his instincts, and in doing so they sealed the fate of

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158 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 96-7.
their fellow sailors. Many would soon die not at the hands of savage cannibals, but from starvation and become meals for their fellow, westernized, starving survivors.
Chapter 3
The Voyage in Open Boats

After Captain Pollard reluctantly agreed to sail for the coast of South America, the decision was made to remain at the ship for the night of November 22nd, and to begin their voyage the next morning. The men spent their third sleepless night floating precariously in the increasing swell of the Pacific Ocean still only a few hundred yards from the ship that had been their homes for the past year. Pollard wanted to be sure that no other supplies could be salvaged from the ship. Unfortunately, first light revealed nothing of use. By noon, Pollard took his final latitudinal observation. The boats having been rigged and made ready for sailing in the morning, the group set off after the observation was completed. Leaving the wreck could not have been easy for the men, but Nickerson describes the moment with genuine optimism, “We now having everything in readiness at thirty minutes past 12 cast off our lines from the ill fated Essex and set all sails upon our boats…which makes a very handsome show on this our first start.”

It may have been a relief to be heading somewhere or it may have simply been that sailing their awkward crafts gave them something to do, but it seems at this point most were hopeful. The men were split between the three tiny crafts much in the way that they had been split up as whaling teams. Again, the Nantucketers were favored over the rest, but because Chase’s boat was in the worst shape he received only six men while Pollard and Joy each got seven. Pollard, pulling rank was able to get five Nantucketers, while Chase got two, while Second Mate Joy got none. For the men of the Essex, this was a time when familiarity and bonds were extremely important. “In the aftermath of a disaster,” writes Nathanial Philbrick, “ties of family and friendship are, if anything, even more strongly felt and its is apparent that the

159 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 145.
Nantucketers’ clannishness, now intensified, strongly influenced the makeup of the three crews.” Pollard made sure his crew included his young cousin Owen Coffin along with his friends, while Nickerson remained in Chase’s boat as his after oarsman.

It is interesting to note that in this case the men remained loyal to their Captain. As the ship set sail, he took command of the tiny fleet in the lead boat. This is particularly interesting as that naval tradition holds that after a ship has been sunk, the crew has no obligation to follow their captain. Yet the men of the Essex did so, and would continue to listen to and follow Pollard for the remainder of the voyage. Most of the men realized that their chances of survival were slim in their dire situation, but they knew their best chance lay in their ability to stick together, and work under the guidance of a single leader.

The reality and difficulty of sailing their modified crafts became apparent to the men as the seas began to increase as the first day of their voyage waned. Their boats were not designed for long distance sailing over open seas. They lacked a rudder, and instead were controlled by a steering oar, which was awkward when used in tandem with a sail. Each boat was grossly overloaded with approximately one thousand pounds of food, supplies, tortoises and men, almost double what they usually carried when whaling. The excess weight combined with the heavy swell forced the men to expend a great deal of their energy bailing constantly. Many lifeboat survivors complain that they needed to bail their crafts incessantly, and the men of the Essex were no exception. In spite of these hardships, the men remained reasonably hopeful. After all they had a plan, they were together and they were heading towards salvation.

160 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 102.
While their ultimate plan was to head for land in the early days, most held out hope that another whaler; fishing in the same Offshore ground where the *Essex* had sunk, would sight them. The next order of business was to decide the ration. Each mate had taken extreme precaution to protect his boat’s supply of food. Chase put most of his bread and water inside of his sailing chest, and when he slept he made sure he draped some part of his body over the chest so no man could open it without his knowledge. The mates agreed that their starting ration should consist of, “bread, one biscuit, weight about one point three ounces, and half a pint of water a day for each man.” While this ration may seem rather large, it was under one third required by the average person. This meager amount would be subsequently cut in half twice as the voyage progressed.

The weather continued to worsen as the seas got larger and the wind increased. It was a relief for the men to find that after a full night of sailing, in spite of the conditions, they remained together. The high seas took a toll on the men who were constantly soaked and freeing. Their misery was further exacerbated by sores that began to develop on their skin as a result of their exposure to salt water and sun. These sores must have been extremely painful, and being confined to small bouncing crafts, they would have been constantly reopened and irritated by the rough grain of the boat’s planks.

The rough seas began to take their toll on their crafts as well. Chase’s boat sprang a major leak on November 24th. Thanks to the supplies in his sea chest, which included a few nails, a hammer and a hatchet, the survivors were able to reattach the plank. While this was a major feat in itself, they were unable to do so before the seawater took a grave toll on their rations, “a heavy

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164 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 147.
sea broke suddenly into the boat, and, before we could snatch it up, damaged some part of it [the supply of hardtack]; by timely attention, however, and great caution, we managed to make it eatable...”

Over the next few days the men used the sun to dry the damaged hardtack, but this tainted bread would bring each of the men in Chase’s boat even more misery. As it had been soaked by saltwater, the bread, even after drying, had an extremely high salt content. Later in the voyage, when the men began to eat this bread, they became even more dehydrated. Some even suffered from hallucinations and temporary insanity as a result of an excess of sodium in their bodies.

By November 25th, the men fell into somewhat of a routine. They awoke each morning, using the same knife to shave. They spent their day adjusting their sails according to the weather and bailing their craft as needed. In the evenings they would talk of rescue, food and home. For the men in Chase’s boat, in the evenings they looked to the sole black man aboard for spiritual solace, “This evening we had prayers and a few hymns sung by a pious old colourd man named Richard Peterson which for a time drew our minds from out present miseries to seek deliverance from a higher power.” For the men, this brief interlude of prayer helped them to deal with their hopeless situation and continue to hold out the hope that kept them from giving up in the face of such adversity.

Pollard did his best to take noon observations whenever the weather permitted. To take an observation, he needed a noon sky that was relatively cloudless. Even when the weather permitted, this procedure must have been difficult in his small craft. In spite of these difficulties, Pollard would take regular observations throughout the rest of the voyage, and while his

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166 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 147.
navigational instincts may have failed him when he agreed to head for the coast of South America he brought his whaleboat almost to within sight of the port he was heading for by the time he was finally rescued. While Pollard was able to make latitudinal observations using his quadrant, he lacked the instruments necessary to calculate longitude. Because men lacked a chronometer or a log line, the decision was made to not try and calculate longitude “We abandoned the idea altogether of keeping any correct longitudinal reckoning, having no glass, nor log-line.”167 The mates would try and estimate their longitude as best as they could using a technique called dead reckoning, where longitude was estimated using latitude, wind direction, compass heading, and navigational charts.

By November 28th, the wind had abated some, but it continued to blow them in a southwest direction, parallel and slightly away from South America. While they knew they would have to head south for the first part of their voyage, the westerly direction of the wind hurt the moral of the men. As if the wind was not frustrating enough, the men in Chase’s boat were awoken about eleven o’clock that night by shouts from Captain Pollard’s boat. Apparently, in the darkness, the Captain’s boat had been attacked by a whale. “The extreme darkness of the night prevented them from ascertaining what sort of fish it had been, but we believe it to have been what is known by the name of thresher or as the whalemen call them, a killer.”168 The whale did some damage to the boat, but the men were able to mount a valiant defense, “They gave him a few severe punches in the side, with a spirit pole the only weapon at hand which drove him off, but he made a large breach in the bow of the boat through which the water was pouring…”169 It must have been a horrifying experience for the men in Pollard’s boat to be attacked in the

169 Ibid., 148.
darkness by a whale for a second time, but fortunately, with the assistance of the other two ships, the men were able to salvage their provisions, and at day break repair their damaged craft.

By November 30th, the eighth day since leaving the Essex, the men in Chase’s boat were suffering miserably. They had been surviving on the bread damaged by the salt water, and their throats and mouths craved water that they could not have. Their hunger was almost as unbearable as their thirst. The men thus decided to kill one of their two tortoises. For the dehydrated men, the highlight of killing their tortoise came when they got the chance to drink its blood. “All seemed quite impatient of an opportunity to drink the warm blood as it came oozing from the wounds of the sacrificed animal.”

While the sight of six men sucking blood from a half dead tortoise would have been ghastly to behold, it is important to remember how desperate and thirsty these men were. The men were beginning to get desperate for sustenance, and although they readily drank the blood of the tortoise, they did not eat the meat raw, “A small fire was kindled in the shell of the turtle and…we cooked the remainder, entrails and all, and enjoyed from it an unspeakable fine repast.” The tortoise feast revived the sprits of the men some, it filled their stomachs and the blood wetted their pallets. The good news did not stop there. By noon, their observation showed that they were at latitude 7°53’ S, which put them about four hundred and eighty miles from the wreck. While it was not astounding progress, it was certainly something, and the men must have slept better that night than any since the sinking of the Essex.

On the night of December 3rd, the weather took a turn for the worse and the sky got extremely dark. Up until this point the men had managed to stay together even in rough seas and

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170 Ibid., 150.
171 Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 43.
high winds. But, on this night, at around ten o’clock, the sailors in Chase’s boat lost sight of Joy’s boat. Losing sight of the second mates boat scared the men, “we very suddenly misrd the boat of the second mate, and we were alarmed at so sudden disappearance lest something had destroyed them.” As it was the first time that they had been separated, the men decided to signal to Joy’s ship, “We however struck a light, and hoisting it to the masthead of the boat, to our great joy saw it answered by the missing boat…” The rest of the night the men had difficulty keeping track of one another. They had to waste a great deal of time circling back and forth trying to locate each other. Because this was the first night spent this way, the men did not realize time search cost them, and so as more nights were spent this way, they came to the realization that they might be wasting more time and effort than it was worth trying to stay together.

Two nights later, on December 5th, Chase’s boat got separated during the night. This time he fired his pistol several times to signal to the other two boats. Again his signal was successful, and the other two boats quickly located him. On this occasion, the mean saw how problematic it was to search for each other when they got separated. Not only did it take up precious time, but each man knew their boats were already at capacity. If one boat got into trouble or, worse yet, sank, the men of the remaining boats would be forced to leave their fellow sailors to drown, or even worse, fend them off to prevent the desperate men from sinking their own boat. For these reasons, they decided that night that, if the boats got separated again, the men would not spend time looking for one another. “That night the officer agreed that if they should ever become separated agin, no action would be taken to reassemble the convoy.”

172 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 150.
173 Ibid., 150.
174 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 120.
Over the next ten days, the men continued to travel south. On December 8th, they survived a gale that blew harder than any other since they had entered the whaleboats. The storm took a toll on the men, but it was harder on their boats, which required constant repair and attention. On the 9th they once again got separated. This time, it was Pollard’s boat. Disobeying the agreement the officers made, Chase and Joy shortened sail and looked for their captain. Spending the remainder of the night like this, they once again located his ship at dawn. On December 9th, their noon observation put them at 17° 40” south, or at approximately the same latitude as the Society Islands. Nickerson remarks that, “The Society Islands [were] directly to leeward and not more than six hundred miles to the west of us. We…could have landed probably in five or six days safely with every man in good health.”\(^{175}\) Unfortunately for the men, they stuck to their original plan and continued to sail south, even though at this point in their voyage they were actually farther from the coast of South American then when they had begun sailing.

By December 13th, the men in Chase’s boat were reeling from the effects of their diet on their body. They had slaughtered and eaten their second and last Galapagos tortoise on the 11th and, while it, “again filld us with new life and vigor…our short allowance of water was barely enough to support life.”\(^ {176}\) In spite of their suffering, the weather was not cooperating, and their progress had slowed to a standstill. To make matters, worse the sun was scorching hot, only dehydrating them further. In the midst of all this suffering, Chase decided he was going to cut their rations in half to make them last longer, and in spite of their discomfort, the men responded well. “I proposed, on the fourteenth, to reduce our allowance of provisions one half. No objects were made to this arrangement: all submitted, or seemed to do so, with an admirable fortitude

\(^{175}\) Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 152.  
\(^{176}\) Ibid., 153.
and forbearance.”177 Chase was right about his men. They were showing unbelievable fortitude, but he was also fulfilling his role as a strong leader, a role, which in a survival situations can mean the difference between life and death of the entire group.

Land Ho!

By December 20th, the men had now been on half their normal supply of rations for six days. They had made little progress because there was no wind, and they were cooking under what Chase called the, “full force of a meridian sun…”178 Their morale had begun to slip to a new low, and they even found it difficult to participate in their nightly prayer sessions, “Their parched mouths made talking, let alone singing hymns, difficult. The prayer meetings along with their progress ceased.”179 The men were being frustrated at every turn, and nothing seemed to be going well. A few days before, on the seventeenth, the captain had proposed that the group row their way out of the calm. The men, so weak from inactivity, starvation and dehydration, were not only exhausted after only a few short strokes, but they were also dejected by their vulnerability and inability to determine their own fate.180 The men got some relief when the wind started blowing on the eighteenth, but they were so weak by the twentieth, they could hardly believe what they beheld by the mornings light.

As the first man in Chase’s boat, William Wright, stood up to stretch his legs, he let out a shriek. At hearing this, the men were alarmed, but when his cry was followed by, “There is land,” all the men rose to see what he was talking about. As they looked out, they could make out a small island that Nickerson described as, “a low white sand beach spread along the

178 Ibid., 49.
179 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 131.
180 Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 52.
horizon...[which] each man seemed to greet as a final end to his long confinement and suffering." The relief felt by the men at this moment must have been incredible. After a short deliberation, the three boats set off towards the atoll. As they neared the island, caution took the better of them. Still fearing hostile natives, they circled the island fire a few shots, hoping that if there were any native inhabitants they would come to the beach wondering from where the sounds come. Chase describes the island as being, “about six miles long, and three broad; with very high rugged shore and surrounded by rock; the sides of the mountains were bare, but on top it looked fresh and green with vegetation.” The men determined the island to be Ducie Island, although this was incorrect. In fact, it was Henderson Island. They had estimated the latitude correctly, but had miss calculated the longitude by about seventy miles.

After some time, the men were able to land on the island, and upon doing so most of the men threw themselves on its white sand beach to take a much-needed respite on dry land. After thirty days at sea facing almost dire odds, the man had made it to solid ground. Hope replaced despair in their frail, skeletal bodies. Once they had rested, it was time to start looking for food and water. Chase was quickly able to spear a fish using the ramrod of a musket, which by his description, “in less than ten minutes, the whole consumed bones, and skin, and scales and all.”

In spite of the calories that the fish provided, the men were in much greater need of water. Unfortunately their search was fruitless, a fact that caused Chase to seek Captain Pollard and discuss their next move. He feared that they might waste precious time scouring the island

181 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 156.
183 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 140.
for water, should they find none. Fortunately, Captain Pollard insisted that they spend at least one night and use the next day to search the island completely for any source of water. The men spent their first night on the island curled up on the beach next to their three small crafts. By the next morning, a full search was commenced. The men succeeded in catching large amounts of small crabs that lived on the beach, as well as a few more small fish, and several large tropical birds about the size of a chicken. Again, the thirsty men drank the blood from the unlucky birds they caught, but they found it did little to quench their gnawing thirst. By the end of their first full day on the island, December 21st, they succeeded in putting together a feast, but were still unable to locate water.

A good night’s sleep, with full bellies, replenished the strength of the men somewhat, but they knew they would have to leave the island if they were unable to find a reliable source of water. Their salvation came on the morning of the 22nd, when they again initiated their search for water. Most of the men set off toward the cliffs, hoping to find a spring or a vein of water that held rain runoff from the plateau above. These searchers were quickly drawn back to the beach both from exhaustion and because they saw one of their fellow sailors running up from the seas edge with what appeared to be a full cask,

Our attention was arrested by seeing one man near the beach run carrying a small keg in his hands...we ran with breathless anxiety to the spot. Here in the providence of God had been provided for us a spring indeed more miraculous presented at the latest moment of pure fresh water. It arose through a small hole in a flat rock over which the tied arose sever feet at high water and could only be come at but half on hour during low ties, being quite overflowe at all other times of the day.185

The men spent the remainder of the time that the spring was accessible filling a few small casks and quenching their unimaginable thirst. At first, the men felt that they would be able to remain on the island indefinitely. There seemed to be an abundant supply of the large tropic

birds, which were easy to catch and quite palatable. Now that they had a reliable source of water, they hoped they would not have to reenter their whaleboats and head back out to sea. Their ecstasy was short live though. Perhaps sensing that the water source was unreliable, they next set their energies to repairing their boats. Having the chance to do so on dry land, with their boats upside down, greatly improved their ability to perform the repairs, and in a short time each boat was made much more seaworthy.

The 23rd and 24th of December the men spent collecting food and more water, sleeping well at night and eating as they chose. By Christmas Day, they were unable to find the abundance of birds that they had in the previous three days. This made them uneasy. Again, there was talk of leaving the island. Instead of a large and festive Christmas dinner, the officers spent the evening debating what to do next. They decided that, “we should leave soon as possible and make for Easter Island, which we knew to be inhabited and lay very near our track but believed the inhabitants to be savages.”

In spite of their ignorance of the island’s native population, by this point in they voyage the men knew that their chances at the hands of natives were better than their chances of making it to South American on their existing stock of provisions. They spent December 26th wholly immersed in their preparations for the next leg of the voyage—seeing to final repairs on their boats and filling every vessel they had with water.

During their preparations, three of the Essex sailors came forward and told the rest of the men that they had no intention of getting back into the whaleboats. The men, William Wright and Seth Weeks of Barnstable, Massachusetts, and Thomas Chappel of Plymouth, England, felt that they had a better chance of surviving if they stayed on the island. The other sailors were somewhat saddened to see their group split up, but they realized that if the three men remained

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186 Ibid., 161.
they could spit their share of the provisions among the remaining seafarers. They gave the three men all the articles and tools they could part with and it was agreed that they would remain on the island, and help would be sent for them if any of the other boats made it to land.

On the morning of December 27th, all of the *Essex* men save for the three, climbed into their whaling boats once again and set off for Easter Island. Making one last attempt at fishing and hunting, the men sailed around to the back side of the island, but were still unable to catch more than a few small fish. At six o’clock that evening they set sail once again into the open ocean.
Chapter 4
Survival at Sea: Desperate Measures

After sailing for several days under less than hospitable conditions, the men found that by January 4th 1821, they were too far to the south to reach Easter Island. While this fact alone hurt their morale, matters were made as they exhausted their supplies of fish and meat collected while on Henderson Island. Again, they were fully dependent on their shrinking supply of hardtack. Before reaching the island their main concern had been water, but now the men were quickly realizing they would be out of food long before they exhausted their replenished supplies of water. As a consequence, the officers again agreed to reduce their bread rations, and they were now eating only three ounces of hardtack per man per day.187

By January 7th, the wind had changed, blowing out of the north, a good direction because it allowed them to steer directly for South America. In spite of their good fortunes, the health of the second mate, Mathew Joy began to fail by the next day. He asked to be placed in Captain Pollard’s boat. As the men realized that he was dying, the transfer was made. Philbrick speculates that Joy knew he was dying and may have had a desire to do so among the men to which he saw the greatest connection, the Nantucketers.188 His desire to remain in Pollard’s boat was short lived, however, and on January 10th, he asked to be returned to his own boat.

This second move became his dying wish. By the evening of the 10th, he was dead. Joy became the first victim of the Essex crew to fall to the harsh elements of the barren Pacific Ocean. Most of the crew realized that he had been sick long before entering the whaleboats after the sinking of the ship. “He had a weak and sickly constitution, and complained of being unwell

187 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 152. See also Sandra L. Oliver, Saltwater Foodways: New Englanders and their Food, at Sea and Ashore, in the Nineteenth Century, (Mystic CT: 1995).
the whole voyage. It was an incident, however, which threw gloom over our feelings for many days.\textsuperscript{189} The men committed his body to the sea the next morning, not yet ready to talk of cannibalizing one of their own.

During the night of January 12\textsuperscript{th} the men sailed through a gale, which separated Chase’s boat from the other two for the remainder of the voyage. The men again furled their sail, and waited for their companions, but after waiting nearly an hour they continued to sail on. Daylight brought no sign of the other boats, but there was no time for an extensive search. On their fifty-third day since leaving the Essex, Chase and his men found themselves all alone, running low on bread, and forced again to cut their rations to only one ounce of hardtack per man. They hoped this reduced ration would sustain them long enough to be rescued.\textsuperscript{190} However, it was just enough to keep the men alive. Chase described their hardships on this reduced diet. “We daily almost perished under the torrid rays of a meridian sun; to escape which, we would lie down in the bottom of the boat…upon attempting to rise again the blood would rush into the head and an intoxicating blindness come over us, almost to occasion our suddenly falling down again.”\textsuperscript{191}

While the situation in Chase’s boat seemed bleak, for the men in the other two boats things were far worse. On January 14\textsuperscript{th}, Mathew Joy’s former boat, now piloted by Pollard’s boatsteerer, Obed Hendricks, ran out of food. Apparently, during his illness, Joy had been unable to supervise properly the rationing of his bread supply, and had left Hendricks with quite a quandary on his hands. Hendricks asked the Captain if he would share some of his bread with his

\textsuperscript{189} Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 63.
\textsuperscript{190} Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 166.
\textsuperscript{191} Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 65.
men (knowing full well he would exhaust his supply in just a few days). Unable to say no, the Captain complied.\textsuperscript{192}

On January 20\textsuperscript{th} 1821, the next member of the \textit{Essex} crew, Richard Peterson, the old black sailor that had led Chase’s boat in prayer through most of the ordeal, died. From early morning on, he seemed despondent and consumed with an urge to die. He refused his rations saying, “Keep it, it may be of service to some one but can be of none to me.”\textsuperscript{193} After refusing his food, Peterson quietly lay down in the bottom of his boat and died. He was the second member of the crew to succumb to starvation. Again, the men committed his remains to the ocean. Not a man in the boat yet willing to whisper the thought that their fellow crewmembers might become their only food source.

While Chase and his crew were not ready to talk of cannibalism, the men in Pollard and Hendricks’s boats began to contemplate this brutal necessity. On day of Peterson’s death, another black sailor, Lawson Thomas, passed in Hendericks’s boat. “With barely a pound of hardtack left to share among ten men, Hendricks and his crew dared speak of a subject that had been on all their minds: whether they should eat instead of bury, they body.”\textsuperscript{194} It was a hard realization for the men to come to, but they were almost totally out of provisions, and cannibalism among stranded or shipwrecked sailors had been practiced by all accounts since men first ventured into the open ocean. “For as long as sailors had been sailing the world’s oceans,”

\textsuperscript{192} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 159.
\textsuperscript{193} Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 168.
\textsuperscript{194} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 165. For information on the mental and physical effects of starvation, see also Ancel Keys, Josef Brozek, Austin Hanschel, Olaf Michelson and Henry Longstreet Taylor, \textit{The Biology of Human Starvation (2 Vols.)}, (Minneapolis: 1950)
notes Philbrick, “famished sailors had been sustaining themselves on the remains of their dead shipmates.”

The first order of business for the men was to butcher the body. While exact details of the procedure carried out on Thomas do not exist, it is likely that the butcher removed his head, and possibly his feet and hands or arms and legs. The removal of these appendages was common among survival cannibals, and was done to make the body seem less human. After removal, the chest cavity would have been opened to remove, the nutrient rich organs. In his interview with Pollard, George Bennet claims that, “their remains…we roasted to dryness by means of a fire kindled on the ballast-sand at the bottom of the boats.” Thomas’s remains would have included his organs, and all other salvageable piece of flesh. It has been estimated by anthropologists, “that the average human adult would provide about sixty-six pounds of edible meat. But Lawson Thomas’s body was not average…His body may have yielded as little as thirty pounds of lean, fibrous meat.” Regardless of the amount, Thomas’s body provided the men with enough meat to survive for a few more days, and when Pollard’s boat ran out of bread on the 21st, he and his men also joined Hendrecks’s and his crew in their cannibalistic feast.

On January 23rd, a second member of Hendricks’s crew died as a result of starvation. Again, he was a black sailor, Charles Shorter. He too became food for his companions, and while they were on their second body in only a few days, the men were still running desperately low on

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195 Ibid., 165.
196 Walton, Our Cannibals Ourselves, 19.
198 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 166. For an accurate estimate of the amount of edible meat contained in the human body, see source cited in Philbrick’s In the Heart of the Sea, Christy G. Turner and Jacqueline A. Turner, Man Corn: Cannibalism and Violence in the Prehistoric American Southwest, (Salt Lake City: 1998).
food. By this time, both boats were surviving solely on human flesh, a commodity, which while keeping them alive for now, was a dwindling.

On January 26th, a third member of Hendricks’s crew, Isaiah Sheppard, died and was eaten. He became the third African American to die and be eaten. Another black sailor, Samuel Reed, the lone African American in Pollard’s boat, shortly followed Sheppard and died on January 28th. He too was quickly consumed by the remaining members of the crew, but, without more bodies, the prospects of the entire group surviving were jeopardized. With the death of Reed, William Bond, a member of Hendricks’s boat, was the sole surviving black crewmember, a position that must have left him feeling somewhat apprehensive.

Many who have read the tale of the Essex find it difficult to believe that all of the black sailors died before any of the whites, save the sickly Mathew Joy. Some are suspicious that there may have been foul play, and or outright murder by the white sailors. This would seem plausible when compared to other examples of survival cannibalism. The most notable example took place on the cargo ship Peggy in 1765. After that vessel was badly damaged in a storm off the coast of North America in 1765 her white crewmembers, dunk off of her cargo of wine and brandy, murdered the one African American on board, a slave. The men, starving and drunk, consumed the slave, but were unwilling to kill and consume any white crewmember.199

In the case of the Essex, foul play seems unlikely. It is possible that the crew withheld rations from them their black crew mates, but there is no record to substantiate this. More plausible, perhaps, is that the black sailors suffered from a competitive disadvantage when it came to survival. Because they were poor, they would have suffered from a poorer diet and more rudimentary medical care than the white sailors prior to the voyage. The black sailors may have

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199 Walton, Our Cannibals Ourselves, 19.
also suffered from an inferior diet on board the ship, as they ate in the forecastle with only a few of white sailors. “Since there would be no black survivors to contradict the testimonies of the whites the possibility [of foul play] exists… but except for the fact that the majority of the blacks were assigned to a whaleboat commanded by a sickly mate, there is no evidence of overt favoritism in the boats.”

For the men in Chase’s boat, the absolute starvation rations of only one ounce of hardtack a day was barely keeping them conscious and sane. Between January 21st and 29th, the men lay in the bottom of their boat in a half dazed, hallucinatory state. The men faded between consciousness and a dream like condition, but slept very little. Their boat was still being pushed southeast by the frustrating and demoralizing breeze. A bit of solace came on the 28th, when the wind finally changed direction and began to push them in an easterly direction towards the coast of South America. To Chase’s crew the wind brought relief, but for Pollard and Hendricks, the night of the 29th was an awful one. So weak from starvation, the men were unable to control their boats. At some point during the night the two boats became separated. Obed Hendricks, William Bond and Joseph West would never again be seen alive. The men in Hendricks boat, once separated from Pollard, had little chance of survival. Aside from lacking food, they also had no compass, quadrant or charts, and so were essentially sailing blind.

For those in Pollard’s boat their situation got even more desperate when they “consumed the last morsel [of Samuel Reed], the captain and the three other men that remained with him, were reduced to the necessity of casting lots.” The next day, the four remaining men in Pollard’s boat realized that their only available food source was human flesh, and were quickly

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200 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 172-3.
201 Ibid., 173.
exhausting the remains of Reed. They knew now they had to wait for one of the remaining four to die so that the other three could live. They feared, if they waited for one of them to die naturally, the other three might be too weak to butcher or eat the body of the deceased. Because of their fear, the four men decided that their only chance of survival was to put their fate to chance, cast lots, and kill and eat the loser.

It was not Pollard who first suggested that lots be drawn. Instead, it was his young shipmates who brought up the subject, “When first presented with young Ramsdell’s proposal, Captain Pollard ‘would not listen to it,’… ‘saying to others, ‘No, but if I die first you are welcome to subsist on my remains.’” In spite of his reluctance, Captain Pollard eventually acquiesced to the scheme, and the lots were cast,

The awful lot fell upon a young man named Owen Coffin who was a nephew to Captain Pollard, who with great fortitude and resignation cheerfully smiled at his fate at this awful moment. The Captain wished to exchange lots with him, but to this Coffin would not listend for one moment. He placed himself in a firm position to receive his death and was immediately shot by Charles Ramsdell who became his executioner by fair lot.

By all accounts, the lots were fairly distributed and all manner of formality in the procedure was followed. In spite of this, it is hard to imagine that Captain Pollard would have ever allowed the lots to be drawn had he know his own first cousin [Nickerson must have been misinformed about Pollard’s relationship to Coffin], a young man he was instructed to protect by his aunt, would fall victim to the short straw. Once he was executed, though, there was little the remaining men could do but to eat his remains. He had died so that they could live on to be rescued, a sacrifice that Pollard would never forget.

The next unfortunate sailor to die was a member of Chase’s boat. His name was Isaac Cole and he was a white sailor from Rochester Massachusetts. He died on February 8th. His

203 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 175.
death was a horrific experience for the men of Chase’s boat. When Richard Peterson had died, he did so in quiet and brave manner. Cole on the other hand lapsed into madness before his death, “He now became a spectacle of madness[.] At 10 o’clock he became speechless but being in great agony groaned most piteously.” For the others, so close to death, themselves, watching Cole’s agony must have been an extremely trying experience. He finally expired at approximately four o’clock A.M, but the men did not commit his body to the deep. Instead, they let it remain in the boat until morning when, “my two companions began as a course to make preparations to dispose of it [the body] in the sea; when… I addressed them on the painful subject of keeping the body for food!!” As the men discussed their option, they realized that their provisions would last them about another three days, and they worried that if they committed the corpse, upon exhausting their provisions, they themselves might have to draw lots.

As each man let this horrifying reality sink in, they agreed to butcher the body and eat Cole’s remains. It is interesting that in Nickerson’s account, his ability to recall detail is almost uncanny, and yet in his February 8th entry, he claims that Cole’s body was committed to the sea. Why he chose to deny his participation in the consumption of Cole’s body may never be known but, perhaps, because he wrote his account as an old man, he did not want his legacy to be tainted by cannibalism. In spite of his claim, the lion’s share of the evidence contradicts Nickerson’s claim. Because of the negative connotation of cannibalism it is understandable that Nickerson might not want to associate his legacy with cannibalism as an old man, however this should not discredit the rest of his testimony or memory. For his part, Chase includes a vivid and graphic description of the events that transpired after the decision to eat the body was made,

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205 Ibid., 170.
206 Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 70.
We set to work as fast as we were able to prepare it [Cole’s body] so as to prevent its spoiling. We separated his limbs from his body, and cut all the flesh from the bones; after which, we opened the body, took out the heart…We now first commenced to satisfy the immediate craving of nature from the heart, which we eagerly devoured, and then eat sparingly of a few pieces of flesh; after which we hung up the remainder, cut in thin strips about the boat, to dry in the sun: we made a fire and roasted some of it, to serve us during the next day.207

Chase’s description of the cannibalistic act is certainly graphic, but it does sound reasonable. The men would have instinctively looked to the internal organs for their nutritional value. They would have had no problem devouring Cole’s heart and a few pieces of flesh totally raw. After all, these were starving men, who had been reduced to drinking bird and turtle blood as well as devouring fish whole, scales, bones and all. The men’s decision to cannibalize the remains of Cole did what it was designed to do. They were able to preserve some of his flesh through cooking and drying, and for more than a week they were able to save all of their hardtack. The increase in food intake also helped the health of each man in the boat, and they began to recuperate. By the fourteenth, the men were even strong enough to be able to operate the steering oar of their craft. By February 15th, the men had consumed all of the flesh from Cole’s body. From that day until their rescue, they would have the most difficulty keeping their moral and spirits up.

On the fifteenth, Chase estimated that the men were about three hundred miles from land, and he hoped that their remaining supply of bread, two cakes, could last until their boat reached the coast. For the men who were at their physical limit and their wits end, the only solace they could find came from a westerly wind, which was carrying them towards land. At this point, the stress and hopelessness became too great for Nickerson to bear, “The next morning, [the 16th] before daylight, Thomas Nicholson [sic], a boy about seventeen years of age, one of my two

207 Ibid., 70-1.
companions who had thus far survived with me….laid down, drew a piece of canvases over him, and cried out, that he then wished to die immediately."\textsuperscript{208} Thomas Nickerson, the young eager Nantucket youth, so filled with excitement in the beginning of the voyage, had given up. For the next several hours he lay dejected at the bottom of the boat wishing death to come immediately.

**Rescue and Homecoming**

The only thing that saved Nickerson from simply giving up and wishing himself to die, was that he and his two other comrades were rescued before he had time to expire. Less than twenty four hours after he consigned himself to his fate in the wretched whaleboat, Benjamin Lawerence spotted a sail as he rose on the morning of February 17th. It was a long way off, and the men were forced to sail to it. The agony of waiting to be spotted, must have been awful. Because of their distance from the ship, and its heading there was no guarantee they would intercept her, or even if they did that the men on the ship would spot their tiny whaleboat. Fortunately, they were spotted, “Our fear was now, that she would not discover us….we however, put our boat immediately, as well as we were able, in a direction to cut her off…Upon observing us, she shortened sail, and allowed us to come up to her.”\textsuperscript{209} After explaining to the vessel’s captain that they were members of a wrecked Nantucket whaler, he quickly ordered his men to help them on board. In that instant, for the men of Chase’s boat, their ordeal was over.

Back in Pollard’s boat, the last and final man of the *Essex* crew to die was Barzillai Ray. He succumbed to starvation and the elements on February 11\textsuperscript{th} just twelve days before Captain Pollard and Charles Ramsdell would be rescued. Again, with no food left, these two men were forced to butcher, cook, and cannibalize Ray’s remains. With nothing left to sustain them, the

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{209} Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 73.
two men lived off of Ray’s body for the remainder of their voyage. They were rescued on February 23rd, 1821 by a Nantucket Whaleship named the *Dauphin*, captained by Zimri Coffin. Upon their rescue, the two were reported to be lying in the bottom of their boat, clutching the bones of their dead comrades, with smaller bones stuffed in their pockets, and larger bones strewn all over the bottom of their craft. In spite of their wretched condition, the men were brought on board and fed. They had been rescued, but their recovery was far from over, and the two men must have wondered how they would be received if they ever made it back to their beloved Nantucket.

For Chase, Lawrence and Nickerson, their vessel of salvation was the *Indian*, an English whaler out of London. When they were spotted, and the boat was drawn close to the survivor’s small lifeboat, the men realized they were too weak to climb aboard the *Indian*. After a few pitiful and unsuccessful attempts, lines were lowered and the survivors hoisted onto the deck. In spite of their excitement, Chase realized they were a wretched sight, “Our cadaverous countenances, sunken eyes and bones just starting through the skin, with the ragged remnants of clothes suck about our sun-burnt bodies must have produced an appearance…affecting and revolting in the highest degree.” Regardless of their appearance, the men of the *Indian* knew that they needed food. On orders of the captain, the men were provided with their first real meal in weeks, tapioca pudding. The men had been rescued at latitude 33°45’ S. and longitude 81° 03’ W. In their eighty-nine days at sea, they had sailed over 2,500 miles. On the day of their rescue, they were within half a day’s sail of land. While the men had spent most of their voyage almost incapacitated with starvation and dehydration, they had sailed with remarkable accuracy, a

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210 Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, Xii-iii.
211 Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 74,
testament to the nautical skill and amazing ability of the Chase and his crew, as well as Nantucket whalers as a whole.\textsuperscript{212}

Their next stop was the port of Valparaiso, Chile, which they reached within a few days of their rescue, on February 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1821. After arriving in Valparaiso, the men were taken to the U.S. Navy frigate the *Constellation*, where they were debriefed, and received the treatment necessary before they could return to Nantucket. While on the *Constellation*, the men were interviewed by the commander of the ship, Charles Goodwin Ridgeley. In a letter, he describes the conditions of the survivors only a week and a half after their rescue. “They are in a most distressed situation having been eighty nine days in an open boat and compelled to subsist on the body of the crew who died…”\textsuperscript{213} The letter goes on to state that Ridgeley had made arrangements to have a vessel stop at “Ducies” Island, where the Seth Weeks, Joseph West and William Wright, were thought to be marooned.

In Valparaiso, the news of the *Essex* survivors must have created a commotion within the American and British communities. Because of a volatile political situation in northern part of the country, however the story received very little press attention. In spite of that, sizeable donations were made to help support the men by sailors on the *Indian*, and by British and American residents of the city. The sum, being more than 500 dollars, was significant enough to suggest that news of their saga did spread, even if it was not represented in surviving newspapers. The large sum also suggests that the men were received well, and viewed as survivors not criminals. This must have been an important morale booster for the men, because from the time they were rescued they were honest about their cannibalistic acts. It is easy to

\textsuperscript{212} Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 187.

assume that the British and American residents and visitors of Valparaiso would have been sympathetic because they themselves would have traveled by sea to Valparaiso. They would have also understood the dangers of the sea, and some might have even been shipwreck survivors themselves. It seems that in the small English speaking section of Valparaiso, the men found both acceptance and tolerance of their actions. They could only hope their reception on Nantucket would be similar.

On March 17th, a Nantucket whaleship, the Two Brothers, arrived in Valparaiso carrying the last two remaining survivors of Captain Pollard’s whaling boat, Pollard and Ramsdell. They had been transferred from the Dauphin to the Two Brothers because the latter was en route to Valparaiso. When Chase’s men heard the news, they were overjoyed. They had been separated since the night of January 12th, when the boats had lost sight of each other. Pollard and Ramsdell were in as bad if not worse shape than the others already in Valparaiso. They had been rescued several days after the others, they had run out of hardtack earlier, and had been forced to subsist only on human flesh for a much longer period of time. Shortly after their arrival in Valparaiso, the men were offered a chance to return home to Nantucket by the whaleship Eagle under the command of Captain William Coffin.

All but Pollard, who was judged too weak to survive the voyage, agreed to return. The four surviving Nantucketers, Thomas Nickerson, Owen Chase, Benjamin Lawrence and Charles Ramsdell, left Valparaiso on March 23rd, 1821. Their Captain remained behind for two months, taking the time to recuperate, and tell his tale to a few fellow-whaling captains. By May he had recovered a great deal, and Pollard took passage back to Nantucket in the Two Brothers the same ship that had brought the captain to Valparaiso.  

214 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 193.
With the five surviving Nantucketers bound for home, the matter of rescuing the three remaining survivors became tantamount. As mentioned above, the commander of the Constellation, Commodore Ridgley, arranged to have the three survivors picked up by a merchant ship that would be traveling to that part of the Pacific. The Surrey sailing from London, to Sydney, was located and, “he formed a contract with that captain for the sum of eight hundred dollars to proceed to Ducies Island and rescue the three men.”215 The Surrey left South America on March 10th, and reached Ducies Island less than a month later.

Unfortunately, upon reaching Ducies Island, there was no sign of the men. The beach was barren, and a circumnavigation of the island showed no footprints in the sand or signs that the island’s natural features had been altered by humans. Because of the lack of signs, Captain Thomas Raine, the Surrey’s captain, determined that nobody had set foot on the island in an extended period of time. Thanks specifically to Raine’s navigational skills; the three surviving men were eventually found. Raine’s contract stated that he was to sail to Ducies Island to determine if any Essex survivor was still alive there, and to rescue them. At this point in his voyage, Raine was then free to continue his voyage to Sydney. Fortunately for the men still clingingly to life on a neighboring, Henderson Island he decided to consult his navigation guide and see if there were any other possible islands in the vicinity that the men might have mistook for Ducies.216

After a quick consultation with his navigational guide Raine decided to check Henderson Island, an island about two hundred miles to the west of Ducies. It was a similar atoll, and he guessed that this was where the men would be found. He was correct. On April 9th, the Surrey reached Henderson. Upon reaching the island, Raine and his men fired a few shots, and waited to

215 Nickerson, “Desultory Sketches,” 175.
216 Ibid., 175.
see if the noise would bring any of the survivors to the beach. The men, who had just sat down to a meager meal, almost ignored the shots, assuming they were thunder. In spite of the victuals that sat in front of them, one of the three decided to investigate. Upon reaching the beach he spotted the ship, and immediately shouted for his comrades to join him at the water’s edge.

Unfortunately for the men on Henderson, their tribulations were not over. The men of the *Surrey*, launched a boat, but after several attempts to land found the surf too rough, and the reefs too risky to land their craft. The men on shore would have been desperate at this point. They had no idea that this ship had been sent to save them. They had watched several unsuccessful landing attempts, and they must have wondered if they sailors would get frustrated and abandon them to their fate. Had this happened the men would have faced almost certain death. In their time on the island they had exhausted all available food sources. While they were able to subsist off of occasional meals, they had also run out of water shortly after the other *Essex* crew left the island. Apparently the tide had risen and the spring was never again fresh, so the men were totally dependent on rainwater for hydration.\(^{217}\)

For Seth Weeks, Thomas Chappel and William Wright, there must have come a point where they realized they would have to swim or they were not going to get off the island alive. It is at this point where some of the sources differ on exactly what happened next. In Nickerson’s account, related to him second hand, by a survivor from the island, Chappel plunged into the water and swam to the ship. There he was hauled aboard and given a lifeline. Nickerson claims, he then jumped back into the water and swam to rescue each of the two remaining castaways.\(^{218}\) While this might have been the case, an excerpt from the journal of the *Surrey* is much less heroic, “having worked the boats as close in as possible, the men then waded through the surf,

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 176.
\(^{218}\) Ibid., 175-6.
but with great difficulty they were got into the gig, one of them being very much bruised, by the sharp coral rocks that line the shore.”

However the men made it to the Surrey matters little, but by April 10th, all surviving Essex crewmembers were aboard ships and accounted for.

The only men missing were Obed Hendricks, Joseph West and William Bond, the three men that had remained alive in the second mate’s former boat when it was separated from Captain Pollard’s party. Unfortunately, they were never found alive. Nathanial Philbrick and other Essex scholars have speculated that the remains of the men in this doomed lifeboat may have been identified in 1825, when a British Captain made the connection to a whaleboat found washed up on Ducie Island with four skeletons inside of it. We will never know if this whaleboat was from the Essex, but four skeletons in a whale boat washed up in a section of the Pacific where we know the survivors visited does suggest that it might have been the boat carrying Hendricks, West, Bond and the remains of the last crew member to be eaten before they were split up, Isaiah Sheppard. We will never know the fate of those three men, but they succumbed to an environment and a set of circumstances that would have crippled and killed most.

For the men who had been lucky enough to survive the voyage in open boats, all were on their way to Nantucket by May of 1821. News of the disaster and rescue of survivors reached Nantucket well before any of the survivors did. Even though no survivors had yet arrived, when a letter detailing the ordeal reached the post office, it was read to a large crowd that had gathered to hear the news. Its author was a young Nantucketer named Frederick Stanford, and while his letter incited quite a bit of commotion among the townspeople, it was not complete in its depiction of the disaster. The news that Pollard and Ramsdell had been rescued reached Stanford

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well before news that Chase, Nickerson and Lawrence had been rescued. As a result, when the letter reached Nantucket, the families of these three men had little hope for their survival and must have been devastated. The letter did include reports of cannibalism, and it was reported that many residents cried openly in the streets upon hearing of such a disaster.\textsuperscript{220}

It was not until June 11\textsuperscript{th} that the \textit{Eagle} arrived off the Nantucket bar carrying her cargo of whale oil and refugees. For Owen Chase’s family, his homecoming seemed like a miracle. His family had given him up for dead based on the account of the disaster and its survivors related by Stanford. For Chase’s family, the reports of cannibalism mattered little, and they were simply happy to see him alive,

My family had received the most distressing account of our shipwreck, and had given me up for lost. MY unexpected appearance was welcomed with the most grateful obligations and acknowledgements to a beneficent creator, who had guided me through darkness, trouble, death and once more to the bosom of my country and friends.\textsuperscript{221}

For the members of the Nantucket community with familial connections to the survivors returning, the eleventh of June 1821 was a joyous day. They cared little about the means that each man took to survive. Instead, they were just happy that their loved ones had returned. These families, just like the men, knew the dangers of the sea. Whaling was a life and death occupation, in which all the men of a Nantucket family might be lost in a single year. Most islanders’, even children, knew many who had left on a voyage and had never come back. Standing before them on that June day, however, was proof that even in the face of disaster men could return. In spite of the initial joy, Nantucketers did begin to ask questions. For some silence was easier than asking questions. For others the story needed to be told. Obed Macy, the painstaking record keeper and historian of Nantucket at the time, fails to mention the homecoming, disaster or

\textsuperscript{220} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 198.
\textsuperscript{221} Chase, “Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex,” 75.
survivors in his log; while the *Inquirer and Mirror*, Nantucket’s paper at the time, did not carry a single story about the sinking that summer. On the other side of the spectrum, in the *New Bedford Mercury* stories sprang up and news of the disaster spread throughout the country in the preceding months.  

The last of the five Nantucket survivors to return to the island was Captain George Pollard, who arrived back on the island on August 5th, 1821. For the population of Nantucket, whose eyes remained seaward constantly, the approach of the *Two Brothers* was quickly noticed, and word that Pollard was returning spread fast. As the news spread through the community, onlookers began to congregate down by the wharves. The *Two Brothers* had to offload some oil before it could be floated across the bar and into Nantucket harbor, a process that would have taken some time. This time allowed a much larger crowd to gather and, by the time Pollard stepped off the boat, a crowd of more than 1500 people were waiting to see and hear the captain speak.

The trepidation felt by Pollard as he climbed off the *Two Brothers* must have been unbearable. He had no way of knowing how his fellow sailors had been received, and to make things worse he bore the brunt of the responsibility for the disaster as a captain. He knew he would face the wrath of a mother who lost her son to a game of chance, and that he was only standing before the crowd because that boy, and many of his fellow crewmembers, had died and been consumed. A funny thing happened, though, that would have intimidated even the most experienced captain. As he stepped off the *Two Brothers* to a crowd of so many people he knew, they all fell silent. Not a single person spoke or made a sound as he disembarked, and although

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223 Ibid., 199.
he must have said something, the records only recount that the crowd fell deathly silent as he walked off the ship.\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 200. See also, “The diary of Obed Macy, Winter and Spring 1821,” Third Volume Collection 96 in Nantucket Historical Association Archives.
Chapter 5

Acceptance of the Survivors, and the Reaction of the Community

For Pollard, there were several matters that needed to be settled regarding the voyage. First and foremost, he needed to speak with the owners of the Essex, Gideon Folger and Paul Macy. This process must have been difficult for Pollard who, as a first time captain, had suffered a complete and total loss of his ship and its cargo. The owners would have wanted to know every detail that led to the attack as well as why the men acted as they did. In this era, before wrongful death suits, they were not liable, but they must have wondered how so many of the crew perished. The owners of the Essex eventually found that Pollard had acted as he should have as a captain, and could have done nothing to stop the accident that preceded the disastrous sinking of the Essex. For any returning captain this process would have been trying, but for Pollard, it must have been overwhelming. Still weak from the ordeal, the journey home, and having had to resort to cannibalism, it is a wonder that Pollard’s strength held out through the whole interview process.

It did, but perhaps because Pollard knew he had one more person to whom he had to atone. That person was Nancy Bunker Coffin, Pollard’s forty three year old maternal aunt, and mother to Owen Coffin. As he had promised his young shipmate, Owen Coffin, he delivered his last message to his mother. Nickerson credits his captain with this accomplishment, “On his arrival he bore the awful message to the mother as her son desired, but she became almost frantic

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225 The limited time I had to research this thesis prevented a more thorough exploration of early American newspapers to try and construct a narrative of acceptance and memory of the Essex survivors among the greater population of the Republic. As a result, my analysis is bases exclusively on Nantucket print sources. For anyone who wishes to pursue the acceptance and memory of the survivors in the United States as a whole should consult Early American Newspapers and Readers Guide Retrospective—both available through the F&M library electronic resources.
with the thought, and I have heared that she never could become reconciled to the capt’s presence." For the rest of his life, Captain Pollard would never reconcile with his aunt. She was not a seafarer, and even if she had been it is unlikely she would have understood the environmental conditions that would have pushed Pollard to cast lots with the young Owen Coffin, forsaking his promise to protect his young nephew, and then when the lots were cast sit idly to watch his execution and eat his flesh.

While Nancy Coffin never forgave Captain Pollard, the rest of the community, with less of a personal stake, viewed his actions more favorably, and were able to accept what he and his crewmembers did to survive. Nantucket was a whaling port and an island which put it in a position that made its inhabitants acutely aware of both the customs and dangers of the sea. In this period, Nantucket was accessible only by boat, and a person might lose their life just getting to the island. As most of the island’s residents had been to sea, or had family member go to sea, they understood many of the unwritten rules and customs that regulated behavior at sea. They could converse using seaman’s jargon and they understood what types of behavior might be acceptable at sea even though it might be detestable or even illegal at home. Because of this, “The verdict of the community was less harsh. The drawing of lots was accepted by the unwritten law of the sea as permissible in a survival situation.” In fact, this seems to suggest that a different moral regulates the behavior of seaman compared to landlubbers. The men had resorted to cannibalism only after exhausting all other possible survival methods, so their actions were within the confines of the morals of the sea. They committed cannibalism in a way in accordance with the prevailing rules of the sea, and almost all of those eaten had died of natural

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227 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 202.
causes, with the exception of Owen Coffin, who, under no duress, entered a fair game of chance for his life. Most Nantucketers may have been repulsed by the lengths to which the men had gone to survive, but they could not fault their behavior as wrong or illegal.

It is difficult to trace the level of acceptance of these five men that summer in 1821, but if we look at the trajectory that each man took after the disaster, we see a pattern. Each man returned to the sea after the disaster, each man who survived eventually attained the rank of captain, all gaining the command of their own vessel. To gauge acceptance, it seems most efficient to look at each man in detail and separately.

For Captain Pollard, command came quickly after his return to Nantucket and from a seemingly strange place. On November 26, he was given command of the Two Brothers, after being recommended by its previous captain, who had become so impressed by Pollard’s candor and strength in the return voyage to Nantucket. Interestingly enough, two other Essex survivors, Thomas Nickerson and Charles Ramsdell also set sail on the Two Brothers, giving their former captain their greatest vote of confidence—joining up with him for another voyage.

Pollard’s success was short-lived though. Although he was able to successfully take the Two Brothers around Cape Horn, and into the Pacific, disaster struck again in February 1823. While off the coast of Hawaii, Pollard’s ship struck a reef in a large storm. Once again, he was forced to abandon ship into whaleboats. Petrified at first by the prospect, he eventually climbed into one of the boats. This time the whalers were rescued the next morning. For Pollard, this was the end of his career as a seaman, and for him he knew that, “I have lost by a second wreck off

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228 Ibid., 205. See also Davis, In Pursuit of Leviathan.
229 Nickerson Letter to Lewis., 182.
the Sandwich Islands, and now I am utterly ruined. No owner will ever trust me with a whaler again, for all will say I am an unlucky man.”

While Pollard was correct that no one would trust him to sail a whaling ship to the far reaches of the globe, he was not utterly finished. He returned to Nantucket. After a short stint sailing a merchant vessel out of New York, he returned to Nantucket and took a job as the town’s night watchman. While this was one of the lowest jobs in one of the lowest castes on the island, Pollard cared little. He and his wife, Mary Pollard, lived out the rest of their days on the island. They never had any children, but because of his position as night watchman, Pollard knew and, in a way, helped raise several generations of Nantucket children. Pollard did not survive the ordeal totally unscathed. He clearly felt a deep level of remorse for the deaths of his friends. Once a year he would starve himself to remember them, “he never ceased to honor those who had been lost. ‘once a year, Phinney remembered, ‘on the anniversary of the loss of the Essex he locked himself in his room and fasted.’”

For Owen Chase, profiteering started almost immediately after his return to Nantucket. He returned to a wife and children who had missed their father and almost given him up for dead. In spite of his family’s support, he had spent almost two years of his life working, with nothing to show for it. As a result, his first order of business was to employ a ghostwriter and publish an account of the voyage. That account, the Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-ship Essex, of Nantucket, was published in New York just

231 Philbrick, In the Heart of the Sea, 212.
four months after Chase’s return to Nantucket on October 31st, 1821.\textsuperscript{232} Published just days before Captain Pollard, Nickerson and Ransdell set off on their second voyage together; Chase’s account summarizes the events of the saga with a particular focus on the events following the ramming of the ship. His account was the only known full, primary narrative of the disaster until Nickerson’s hand written account was located around 1960. Chase’s account was very successful, selling enough copies to spread the story of the \textit{Essex} to almost every man woman and child in America, not to mention one American author, Herman Melville. He would use the narrative to inspire one of the greatest American novels of all time, \textit{Moby-Dick}. For his success publicizing the saga, Chase was chastised by his fellow Nantucketers who would have rather simply let the drama fall by the wayside.\textsuperscript{233}

As a result of exposing the story, it would be more than a decade before Chase would again sail on a Nantucket ship. It seems sad that out of the five survivors Chase seems to be the least accepted of the group. One cannot feel sorry for the first mate—because he spread the story of cannibalism and Nantucket whalers he fostered disdain from his fellow Nantucketers. Chase spent only about six months in port with his wife and son, who was born while he was on his final \textit{Essex} voyage. On December 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1821, he set sail as the first mate on a New Bedford whaler called the \textit{Florida}.\textsuperscript{234} In the two years following his return from his voyage on the \textit{Florida} in 1823, his wife gave birth to a second child, and shortly thereafter died. Now a single man with three children, Chase quickly remarried, choosing the widow of his former

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{232} Thomas Farel Heffernan, \textit{Stove by a Whale Owen Chase and the Essex}, (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 120.
\item\textsuperscript{233} Opinion of Nathaniel Philbrick, as stated in an Interview conducted December 20\textsuperscript{th} 2007 in Nantucket MA.
\item\textsuperscript{234} Heffernan, \textit{Stove By A Whale}, 120.
\end{footnotes}
crewmember Mathew Joy.\textsuperscript{235} On this next voyage, Chase attained the rank of Captain. Being trusted with a ship and her crew, even if the ship was out of New Bedford not Nantucket, shows that Chase’s reputation as a cannibal did not affect his acceptance or success in the whaling business. He sailed his new command, the \textit{Winslow}, through several successful voyages, and eventually returned to Nantucket in July of 1830.\textsuperscript{236}

While in Nantucket, Chase was asked to captain a new ship being built exclusively on the island. By this time, Nantucket was the largest whaling port in the world. The massive profits meant that some ships were now being assembled on the island and not just on the mainland. Chase was given command of a 376-ton vessel—the \textit{Charles Carroll}. As its captain, Chase found success, and made several voyages to the Pacific. For Chase, the success that he experienced at sea eluded him on the home front. In many ways, Pollard and Chase were opposites in their lives after the \textit{Essex}; Chase was successful in the whaling, but widowed and forced to divorce a second, unfaithful wife. His peer’s shunned him after his publication and it took almost a decade before he returned to Nantucket. Pollard, on the other hand, failed as a seaman, although he was accepted after the \textit{Essex} sinking, living a happy and long life with his wife.

After returning on his last voyage on the \textit{Charles Carroll}, Chase found that his wife had been cheating on him. After being granted a divorce in March 1840, Chase remarried, and spent the remainder of his life on Nantucket. His house was located on Orange Street, a prominent street reserved exclusively for whaling captains and successful merchants. While his family life had been less than perfect, Chase had persevered and become a successful whaling captain. While shunned shortly after publishing his narrative, even Chase was gradually re-accepted by

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 121.  
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 123.
his Nantucket brethren. They gave him the ultimate gift of acceptance allowing him to sail one of their largest whalers ever to depart from Nantucket, in spite of his publication of a story involving Nantucket, murder, and cannibals on the high seas.\textsuperscript{237}

For the other survivors, the rank of captain was not refused to them because of their actions taken to survive after the sinking of the \textit{Essex}.\textsuperscript{238} Nickerson and Ramsdell both returned to Nantucket after the sinking of the \textit{Two Brothers}. There, they were able to get on subsequent whaling ships, and both men worked their way up the naval hierarchy. Ramsdell would find success in the 1840s, when he was given command of \textit{The General Jackson} of Bristol, Rhode Island. For his part, he had a successful family life, marrying twice and having six children.\textsuperscript{239} He would not die on Nantucket, but that does not suggest he relocated because of ridicule or community chastisement. Thomas Nickerson, just a boy when the \textit{Essex} sank, had a long and prosperous career. Like Ramsdell, he worked his way through the maritime ranks, eventually leaving the whaling business. Instead, he became a successful merchant captain, and moved his family to Brooklyn, New York. He married only once, and is reported to have had no children.

Benjamin Lawrence stayed true to his Nantucket heritage. Like Pollard and Chase, he died as an old man on the island. He served as the captain of the Nantucket vessel, the \textit{Dromo}, and then became the captain of the \textit{Huron}, a vessel based in Hudson, New York. In his old age, he retired to a small farm he purchased with his savings on the eastern end of the island in an area called Siasconset.\textsuperscript{240}

Each of the men had to live with their own feelings about their actions after the sinking of the \textit{Essex}. However, the surviving records as well as the distinguished careers that each of the

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 134-5.
\textsuperscript{238} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}, 216.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 217.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 217.
five Nantucket survivors attained seems to indicate that the inhabitants of Nantucket were able to accept their behavior, in spite of its horrifying and quasi-illegal nature. Nantucket residents and tourists would continue to whisper about the events that transpired after the sinking of the whaleship *Essex*, but these whispers were usually false rumors, or simply the chatter of children. For the majority of Nantucket residents, the well-documented events remained somewhat embarrassing, but rather than blaming the participants, the events were simply not talked about. Within this matrix of tacit acceptance and an extreme reverence for silence, the survivors of the *Essex* disaster found the strength and privacy to rebuild their lives, return to the sea, become captains and raise families. Yet, all the sailors would be remembered as *Essex* survivors. Each of their obituaries mentions the disaster, and yet the disaster and subsequent events do not obscure the accomplishments of each man.

**Obituaries and Memory**

While remembered by the families and friends as more than *Essex* survivors, to the general public, the survivors of the *Essex* were to forever carry the events of that shipwreck as a permanent part of their identity. There is no place where this is reflected more poignantly then in the surviving obituaries. For Captain Pollard, who died in early January 1870, his obituary spends most of its six paragraphs discussing the sinking of the *Essex*. Beginning its discussion of the disaster with the preface of, “The death of captain George Pollard, full of years, and high on the respect of his fellow citizens, recalls again the thrilling and terrible story of the loss of the ship Essex of Nantucket, commanded by him in 1820…”241 There are two aspects of this quote that should be noted, the first is that Pollard was regarded with respect by his fellow Nantucketers by the time of his death. While they still remembered his actions as an *Essex*

survivor, by the time of his death, the story and the circumstances of his ordeal had become local history and lore, not an abomination worthy of censure in his obituary. Secondly, the story is referred to as “thrilling and terrible,” adjective that alone might not seem positive, but when the circumstances they describe are considered, they can hardly be viewed as condemning.

The paragraphs that follow describe the events of the disaster, including a discussion of the other survivors and Pollard’s subsequent appointment as captain of the Two Brothers. What seems to be missing from his obituary is a discussion of his subsequent career on Nantucket after his retirement from whaling. There is only one sentence that describes his life on Nantucket, “For more than forty years he has resided permanently among us; and now leaves a record of a good and worthy man as his legacy, to us who remain.”

242 This statement is interesting because it suggests that Pollard made little or no contribution worth mentioning to Nantucket other than his role in the Essex disaster, but it also implies that, as a member of the community, Pollard lived a respectable life even if he was a cannibal. In fitting tribute to a brave and tenacious whaler, his obituary closes with, “In respect to his memory, the flag on the Pacific Room was hoisted at half-mast during the day, yesterday.”

243 In spite of the fact that at his death, Pollard was remembered exclusively for his role in the Essex disaster, with the duration of his life Pollard demonstrated the possibility that a survival cannibal can reenter the community from which he or she left, be reaccepted and remembered as a respectable individual.

The obituary of Owen Chase, published March 13th, 1869, shares many of the characteristics of Pollard’s. Like Pollard’s the majority of Chase’s obituary is devoted to the narrative of the sinking of the Essex. The obituary even opens by blaming his death on the horrible conditions that he faced as a young man in the Essex whaleboats. Whether this was

242 Ibid.
243 Ibid.
actually the case is irrelevant, but from there the obituary dives into a full discussion of the narrative. Spending most of its body on the events of the *Essex*, the article sums up Chase’s accomplishments in the years after 1820 in one paragraph, “Captain Chase has since that time been more favored, and has gathered up many fine voyages in the Pacific Ocean and elsewhere, without accidents to his ship, or any of his officers or crews that have been engaged in these hazardous enterprises with him.”244 While the obituary does not directly refer to cannibalism, it is interesting that it mentions that in successive voyages Chase was able to avoid any losses. The piece closes describing Chase as a, “firm and amiable character…and it is only a small tribute we owe to a good man…”245 Like the obituary of Pollard, Chase is remembered primarily for his role in the *Essex* disaster, but the subsequent years after his return, he found success and respect in the community of Nantucket.

Benjamin Lawrence’s obituary, while also mirroring the obituaries of the other two men, is unique in the details included about the ordeal. Dying in 1883 at the age of eighty, it seems plausible that the detailed narrative may have been included to remind young Nantuketers about the island’s rich history. Unlike the previous discussions of the 1819 voyage, the one included in Lawrence’s obituary is the only to mention the fate of all the survivors, including those left on Henderson Island. The account also includes specific dates and recounts, completely, the stories of both recovered boats. Such detail leaves little space for a discussion of the life of Lawrence, and other than a brief discussion of his career in and out of whaling, the article makes little mention of the remainder of his accomplishments. The only part of the obituary that seems to gauge the Nantucket opinion of Lawrence comes at the very end, “Recently he has been living in

244 “Another Member Gone,” *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror*, (13 March 1869).
245 Ibid.
town, where he has died among his own people.”

Because of the xenophobic attitude of Nantucketers, this line says a great deal about the island’s view of this former cannibal. Rather than condemning him for returning to his home in Nantucket, the author of the obituary champions it, almost as though Lawrence was a famous and accomplished figure who returned home for his final days. As a result of this positive response to his return, it seems that like his fellow survivors, Lawrence found reacceptance among his fellow community members.

Unlike the previous three men, Thomas Nickerson did not die on Nantucket. While he owned a boarding house on the island, he resided in Brooklyn New York in the year of his death. He was there when he passed away at the age of seventy-nine, in early February 1883. He was the last surviving Essex crewmember, and as one might imagine, like his comrades his obituary was mainly devoted to retelling the tale of the sinking of the Essex. It is interesting that there are two surviving obituaries announcing the death of Nickerson. The first and most detailed comes from the Inquirer and Mirror, Nantucket’s home paper, but the second ran a few days later in the New York Sun. The obituary, published in Nantucket, also mentions the hand written manuscript that Nickerson produced and was a major source of information on the saga. This is interesting because it is the only known record of the existence of the manuscript, until it was found in 1960. Its inclusion suggests that by the time of his death, the citizens of Nantucket wanted to learn more about the tragic events of the Essex, and considered Nickerson more of a celebrity than a demon.

While his obituary is mainly concerned with the events of the 1819 voyage and the future publication of his manuscript, it does state that Nickerson rose to the rank of captain, and its tone connotes respect for the accomplishments of the aged captain even though their specifics are absent.

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246 “Obituary,” Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror, (1883).
When taken all together, what seems to be suggested by all of these obituaries is that each of the survivors of the *Essex* disaster was never able to live down the fame that their suffering and perseverance brought them. To add, that fame does not seem to have been based on horror or the repugnance of their actions, rather it harkened from their links to the folklore of Nantucket and the Pacific whale fishery. For Chase and Pollard, their deaths brought honors and mourning fitting of respected captains. Only a decade or so later, the deaths of Lawrence and Nickerson brought a profound desire to preserve and remember the saga of the disaster. Had the actions of these men been condemned by their fellow Nantucketers, their obituaries certainly would not have spoken so highly of their actions in the years after their return. There would have been no flags flying at half mast had Pollard been chastised as a cannibal, and it seems hard to imagine that a genuine desire to preserve the details of the narrative would have existed in the 1880s had Nickerson been branded a savage cannibal.

**To Accept or Shun?**

Clearly, for the Nantucketers who survived the *Essex* disaster the potential existed for them to rebuild their lives on their return. Each man set about this task in his own way, but it is interesting that they all returned to the sea for at least one more voyage. While this is an intriguing and perhaps shocking fact, this paper is trying to analyze the more subtle responses of the community of Nantucket to these men and their survival motivated behavior. As much time has elapsed since the incident and the return of the men, there is little left on which we can make judgments about the amorphous, unrecorded feelings of the community towards the survivors. As a result, some assumptions will have to be made using evidence from other cases of survival cannibalism, and from information about Nantucket’s demography, religious and social discourses, and from rumors we know existed during the time about the men.
From what we know about the general attitude of seamen towards survival cannibalism in other cases of extreme isolation at sea, it was definitively accepted as a reasonable practice in the nineteenth century. We also know that most people, even landlubbers, who lived among sailors in coastal communities, also, accepted the practice as legitimate if cannibalism resulted in the survival and rescue of desperate sailors. What seems to have been most important to both sailors and lay people in these communities was that a certain process was followed if cannibalism occurred, especially if the act also included the drawing of lots and murder.

For the men of the *Essex*, it seems that this process was followed fairly and so should have acted in the men’s favor when they returned to Nantucket. First and foremost, for the men in Chase’s lifeboat, their cannibalistic act does not include murder. It seems hard to believe that anyone in Nantucket could have condemned a man starving to death for eating a comrade who was already dead. While the thought of eating human flesh may be repugnant and nauseating for some, using a corpse for nourishment in a time of extreme isolation and starvation has few ethical problems. The behavior does clearly violate and transgress the taboo of cannibalism, but the members of the community of Nantucket were all too familiar with the dangers of the sea and the fragility of human life while in its throws. It is unlikely, therefore, that any Nantucketer, sailor or not, could have had any ethical or moral objection to the actions of Owen Chase, Thomas Nickerson and Benjamin Lawrence. Again, while many may have found their actions repugnant, these men simply used every resource at their disposal to survive, and while doing so, were able to stay with in the confines of ethically and legally acceptable behavior.

For the two survivors in the boat of Captain Pollard, the ethical and legal implications of their behavior are much more opaque. First and foremost, these two men not only witnessed, but

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248 Ibid., 80.
planned and partook in the killing of Owen Coffin. In spite of their extreme circumstances, had their behavior occurred under almost any other circumstances, these men would have been tried and most likely executed for their actions. Fortunately for Pollard and Ramsdell, their circumstances mitigated their legal culpability for their actions. Charges were never filed against them, nor is there any record that they were even considered once they returned. They had, however, killed a young community member and, for Pollard, a family member who had been entrusted to his care while the boy was at sea. For that reason, it seems clear that many members of Coffin’s family could never have accepted Pollard, and maybe even Ramsdell. It would be difficult for anybody to reaccept a community member if that person had to acknowledge that the cannibal was still alive only as a result of the death of their relative.

For Owen’s mother, Nancy Bunker Coffin, it was well known that, after Pollard’s return, she could no long stand to be in Pollard’s presence, although less is known about her opinion of Ramsdell. According to Thomas Nickerson, Nancy Coffin, “became almost frantic with the thought,” of Pollard’s survival as a result of her son’s untimely death, “and I heave [sic] heard that she never could become reconciled to the capt’s presence.” According to Nathanial Philbrick, “The verdict of the community was less harsh. The drawing of lots was accepted by the unwritten law of the sea as permissible in a survival situation.” It seemed reasonable to believe that the lots had been cast fairly, and the unwritten rules regulating the process leading up to the drawing of lots had been followed. All of the men who partook in the lottery discussed it before hand. They were all in agreement with the prospect of drawing the fatal lot, they all agreed that it was a necessity to draw the lots given the current stock of rations, and they all took part in the lottery voluntarily. As they had followed the steps, and because circumstances

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249 Nickerson’s Letter to Lewis., 182.
warranted the killing of one man so that the others might carry on, the judgment of most Nantucketers was not to condemn Pollard and Ramsdell, or to charge them with murder. For a grieving mother however, the steps which preceded the death of her son made little difference. Her verdict was to condemn Pollard, but it does seem clear the drawing of lots was viewed by islanders as a necessary and legitimate practice.

While Nantucket saw the actions of the men as legitimate due to the circumstances which spawned them, it is clear that the story of the Essex disaster embarrassed some members of the community, at least initially. It was viewed by many on the island as a dark secret not to be spoken of, the proverbial skeleton in Nantucket’s closet, no pun intended. Cannibalism, more so than many other taboo acts, has been stigmatized with an association to the primitive, savage, insane, criminal and prehistoric. For this reason, Claude Rawson claimed that cannibalism was a “cultural embarrassment,” when referring to a case of cannibalism among a group of British sailors.\(^{251}\) For Nantucketers, embarrassment was just what the Essex disaster brought them.

While they were able to accept the men’s actions as necessary, there were many aspects of their story which brought discomfort if not outright shame. First, the attention that Chase’s narrative brought meant that for the remainder of the nineteenth century, Nantucket and Nantucket whaling were linked with cannibalism. Given Nantucket’s reputation for a very socially conservative community, tales of graphic cannibalism and murder would have been disturbing. Nantucket was a Quaker community where pacifism and modest behavior ruled the society. Not only did the Essex story include a graphic murder and cannibalism, but it was also publicized by a survivor who was trying to gain fame and fortune.

Another factor of the story that must have upset many in the community of Nantucket was the fact that the men resorted to the drawing of lots to determine who should die. Again, as a community made up of members of the Society of Friends, Nantucket Quakers would have had a major problem with any type of game of chance. They did not gamble themselves, and looked down upon it even when others partook. As a result, in the minds of some this seemingly small detail in the narrative must have brought great consternation. It is impossible to determine from remaining records if some of the Quaker Nantucketers considered the lottery and the events that it initiated as illegitimate because of their prohibition on games of chance, but at the very least, it was another aspect of the story, which must have caused further consternation.

For those who were embarrassed by the Essex, relief from the public gaze did not occur in their lifetimes. There is something morbidly fascinating about a survival tale, especially one that includes sabotage, destruction by one of the largest mammals on the planet, cannibalism, murder, racial tension and eventual rescue. Perhaps as a result of this fascination, and the sensational circumstances of the narrative, the story of the Essex became one of the most well-known stories of the nineteenth century.

Owen Chase was the man responsible. His Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex of Nantucket which was Attacked and Finally Destroyed by a Large Spermaceti-Whale in the Pacific Ocean published in 1822, sold very well. And it seems that his extended absence from Nantucket, and hiatus from sailing on Nantucket vessels after his return from the ill-fated 1819 Essex voyage, was a result of his publication of the narrative. It appears that his willingness to publish his account so quickly made him a marked man for a time and, as a result, it is clear he was the least accepted of the survivors. Perhaps he
was even shunned for a time, but the only evidence is his absence from Nantucket for several years after his return.

He cannot be blamed exclusively for the notoriety of the disaster. Newspapers heard about the circumstances and got hold of one of Chase’s accounts, running long and detailed stories. In the archives of the Nantucket Historical Association, multiple articles recounting the disaster were common even into the 1880s, when a five-column piece titled “The Loss of the Essex” appeared. In the early 1900s two separate articles ran in the *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror*, (one on November 20th, 1920, and the second in the latter months of 1935). Accounts of the disaster were also common in many elementary school readers into the 1900s, ensuring that most Americans had at least some rudimentary knowledge of the disaster by the time they reached adulthood.

While Chase and many American newspapers disseminated the *Essex* story, no one immortalized it in the same way as one famous American author. His name was Herman Melville, and his book, *Moby-Dick*, originally titled *The Whale* published in 1851, was in many ways inspired by Chase’s tale of the *Essex* disaster. A whaler from Nantucket, the *Pequod*, was rammed by a large and enraged sperm whale and sank at the climax of the novel. We know that Melville owned a copy of Chase’s narrative, met Captain Pollard in Nantucket, and had a long and involved discussion with Owen Chase’s son about his father’s experiences after the shipwreck. Melville’s annotated copy of the Chase narrative still exists today, housed in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. While I was unable to see the book, I was able to

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253 “The Loss of the Essex, Second Installment of this Thrilling Tale of the Sea, When Nantucket Men were Forced to Cannibalism that any Might Live,” *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror*, (1935).
obtain photocopies of the annotated pages. He makes a few interesting comments that give us some insight into the way that these men were viewed upon their return to Nantucket.

The first and most telling is his meeting with Captain Pollard. He met the captain on his first and only visit to Nantucket in July of 1852. He was accompanying his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts, to the island while the judge saw to some business. After meeting Pollard he remarked, “I saw—sometime about 1850-3—saw Capt. Pollard on the island of Nantucket and [exchanged] some words with him. To the islanders he was a nobody—to me, the most impressive man, tho’ wholly unassuming even humble—that I ever encountered.” It seems impressive that one of the most influential nineteenth century American authors could find Pollard to be such an impressive man if his survival cannibalism had permanently tainted his reputation or image. Clearly, Melville, who was a seaman and had served on a whaling vessel, had a deep respect for this poor unlucky cannibal captain.

The second interesting fact that can be gleaned from Melville’s annotation of Chase’s narrative is an observation he makes on one of the first marked pages of the narrative. There, he wrote, “There seems no reason to suppose that Owen himself wrote the Narrative. It bears obvious tokens of having been written for him; but at the same time its whole air plainly evinces that it was carefully & [conscientiously] written to Owen’s dictation of the facts.—It is almost as good as tho’ Owen wrote it himself.” What is interesting about his observation is that literary and Essex scholars have tended to agree that Chase wrote the narrative with the aid of a ghostwriter, but this did not seem to bother Melville, who still chose to use the destruction of the

254 Susan Beegel, “Herman Melville: Nantucket’s First Tourist?,” Historic Nantucket, (Fall 1991, 41-47), 41.
256 Ibid., 192.
*Essex* as the climax for *Moby-Dick*. Furthermore, his belief in the care taken by Chase to dictate the narrative to a competent writer suggests that Melville had some of the same respect he openly admits to for Captain Pollard for Owen Chase.

In the years following the return of the men in 1821 to Nantucket, it was clear that there was a repressive attitude towards the ordeal and the specifics of the story, in spite, or perhaps because of the publicity it received. While several rumors were widespread enough to have made it into the surviving historiography, the *Essex*, according to Nathanial Philbrick, “was a not a topic a Nantucketers openly discussed. When the daughter of Benjamin Lawrence was asked about the disaster, she replied, ‘We do not mention this in Nantucket.’”\(^{257}\) For the citizens of Nantucket there was a repressive attitude towards the *Essex* disaster, but rumors did still circulate concerning its survivors.

It is hard for the historian to gauge how widely these rumors were believed, because they are being taken out of context almost two centuries after they were circulating. It is significant that they were known widely enough to have made it into surviving documents, but that does not necessarily mean Nantucketers subscribed to them. Because they were recounted by Melville, the rumors seem to have been well known enough that even off-islanders may have heard them. However, Melville’s insistence that the rumors were false suggests that few, even off-islanders, would have believed they were valid. Instead, these rumors have survived as a result of family correspondences from the period and show that no community, even the most conservative, is immune to gossip. The first claimed that Pollard rather than Owen Coffin had drawn the short straw in the lottery, and he had cowardly forced the young boy to take his place. While this cannot be ruled, as only those who survived as a result of the lottery were able to tell the story, it

\(^{257}\) Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*, 217.
seems unlikely that Pollard would have taken the place of his nephew, and that both Ramsdell and Pollard would have consistently lied about the circumstances of the lottery.\(^{258}\)

The second rumor was, in many ways, related to the first. It again concerned Pollard and Owen Coffin. It maintained that, “a newly arrived off-islander innocently asked him [Pollard] if he had ever known a man named Owen Coffin. ‘Know him?’ Pollard was reputed to have replied. ‘Why I et him!’”\(^{259}\) The validity of this rumor seems even less likely because the chances of an off-islander seeking Pollard out by chance to ask him about one of the *Essex* men, let alone Owen Coffin, is, statistically speaking, very slim. There is also some ambiguity in the question the off-islander supposedly asked, because he refers to Owen Coffin as a man, when by all accounts he was a boy.

While it is difficult to prove, they may have originated with the children that Pollard looked after as the island’s night watchman. When he enforced the curfew, and looked after the more mischievous of the island’s juveniles. Perhaps, out of spite, one of these children made up one or both of these tales, which have spread and survive today.

\(^{258}\) Ibid., 212.

\(^{259}\) Ibid., 212.
Chapter 6

The Legality of Their Actions

These rumors seem to have little bearing on the way Pollard was viewed by his peers, but it is remarkable that they existed at all. In spite of that, it is critical to understand Pollard’s culpability. Its seems most Nantucketers were able to rationalize the survivors actions based on the unwritten code of naval conduct. Under its discourse, survival cannibalism and even lotteries are acceptable as long as tradition is followed. In the state of Massachusetts, however, written law supersedes all other discourses. Despite the rule of law on Nantucket, none of the survivors were ever prosecuted with any crime in regard to their cannibalistic acts. Because no state or federal law banning the consumption of human flesh exists or existed in 1821, it is unlikely that any of the members of Chase’s boat would have worried about the punitive consequences of their actions.

The legal culpability of Captain Pollard and Charles Ramsdell was much more opaque upon their return. They had engaged in murder in their commission of cannibalism and murder is and was illegal at the state and federal levels in 1821. The men made no attempt to hide their actions, but rather insisted that the proper procedure had been followed and that the lots cast were fair. As sailors and subsequent castaways, the two men had let the sea dictate their behavior, and it seems reasonable to believe that each hoped terrestrial law would stay out of the affairs of the sea. Fortunately for Pollard and Ramsdell, charges were never filed, and no evidence survives that suggests charges were ever discussed.

While the men may seem lucky, in most cases of survival cannibalism from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, prosecution was the exception, not the rule. In particular, it seems that the government was content to leave the sea and its customs free of judicial
interference. In spite of that, there is one notable exception whose circumstances are similar enough to the predicament of the Essex survivors that it needs be mentioned. The cannibalistic act occurred on a British yacht known as the Mignonette, which sailed out of Falmouth England, May 19, 1884. The yacht was bound for Australia and, although she had been judged seaworthy before the voyage, once in the open ocean, it became clear she was not going to make the long voyage. The ship was lost in a storm approximately two months after departure, and the men spent twenty four days in open boats subsisting on two tins of turnips and one sea turtle. Four men went into the open boat when the Mignonette went down, but only three were rescued twenty four days later. The men had been forced to kill and eat the fourth member of their crew, a young boy named Richard Parker.

Captain Dudley and his two surviving crew members made no effort to hide their deed. From the time they were rescued, they were frank and honest about their circumstances and the method they employed in killing Parker. Unlike the survivors in Captain Pollard’s boat, Dudley and his men deviated from the accepted practice of survival cannibalism at sea—Parker had been killed without the casting of lots. The men explained their decision to forgo the casting of lots based on Parker’s weakened physical condition. Dudley explained ““on the twentieth day [of July] the lad Richard Parker was very weak through from drinking salt water. Despondent, with the assistance of Mate Stephens, killed him to sustain the existence of those remaining, they all being agreed the act was absolutely necessary…” The seamen used the defense that young Parker, as a result of his own decision to drink seawater, had become so weak and close to death,

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261 Ibid., 3-4.
262 Ibid., 6.
that the casting of lots was not necessary because the state of his health warranted that he was the best candidate to be killed and consumed.

While the rationale of their decision-making process seems reasonable, the fact that the “standard operating procedure” for a survival killing was not followed troubled the local constable and mayor of Falmouth. By the evening of their arrival home, all three men were arrested and later charged with murder. Eventually, following a convoluted and complex series of trials and appeals followed their arrest, jurisdiction of the case was transferred to the British Home Office, becoming the trial of Regina v Dudley and Stevens (1884). The complexity of the trial process was a result of a few zealous prosecutors, who seemed to want to make an example of the men, and thus invalidate the acceptance of survival as a rationalization for murder. Two of the men, Dudley and Stevens, were convicted of the crime, but in the public realm, “It was clear that in Falmouth public opinion was entirely on the side of Dudley and his men.”263 The prosecutors felt that the actions of Dudley and Stevens were barbaric and no longer had any place in the Empire. The third man, Edmund Brooks, having testified for the prosecution in return for leniency, was not charged. In effect, by prosecuting this case, the crown hoped to set the precedent that survival cannibalism by British citizens was not acceptable.264

Both Dudley and Stevens were eventually convicted of murder in a court in London. Their trial venue was moved because of the overwhelming local support for the two men. The support was based on the fact that it is likely all of the men would have died before rescue had they not resorted to cannibalism and, even though they killed Parker, he would have probably died within a day anyway. For the prosecutors the trial had been a success, yet “the survivors of the Mignonette have always been regarded as the first and indeed only individuals who have ever

263 Ibid., 80.
264 Ibid., 96. See also, Rawson, “Review of Cannibalism and the Common Law.”
faced trial for murder for a killing committed in such circumstances.”

Perhaps it was a result of the public support shown for the men, or maybe the fact that it was the first example of a prosecution under survival conditions, but by December 12, the men’s sentences were commuted to only six months.

While there are some important distinctions between the case of the Mignonette and the Essex, the case of the Mignonette demonstrates that there seems to be a general tendency not to prosecute cases of murder in survival situations. Regina v. Dudley and Stevens remains the only example of a prosecution under similar circumstances, and in Dudley’s case, his sentence was reduced to a minimal six months. Perhaps more pertinently, it demonstrates, especially in the case of the Essex, the extent to which community members are willing to support even murders that resort to cannibalism to survive. Using the example of the Mignonette to contextualize the case of the Essex, it seems more plausible that the Essex survivors received the same type of support as the Mignonette survivors, but because the Essex survivors were never tried, that support only made a scant impression in the historical record.

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265 Ibid., 161.
266 Ibid., 247.
The Donner Party

The survivors of the Essex and the Mignonette were not the only castaways of the nineteenth century to resort to cannibalism. In fact, there are numerous accounts of other survivors resorting to cannibalism, as well as many cases where cannibalism was suspected but could never be proven. Perhaps, the most famous case of this type occurred in the Sierra Nevadas in November of 1846 when a group of westward settlers were forced to spend a winter in the harsh alpine environment because of deep snow.\(^{267}\) The group became known as the Donner Party, and the controversy surrounding their cannibalistic actions still reverberates today.

The Donners traveled west for the Sacramento Valley of California, but made a series of blunders that ended up costing all the men in the group their lives. The group consisted of, “twenty-six men, fourteen women and forty-four children.”\(^{268}\) Their biggest mistake was taking the Hasting’s Route to California rather than the reliable and safer Oregon Trail. They thought that the Hastings Route would save them some time and allow them to clear the mountains before deep snow made the trail impassable. The group’s second major blunder was their slow pace in the first half of their westward journey, before they even reached the Sierras, “The party lost much time, often barley moving a mile a day. They lost more time crossing the Salt Lake Desert.”\(^{269}\)

Once in the mountains in late October, the settlers became bogged down and eventually trapped by several early snow storms. After realizing they could make no further progress, the group (now split into two groups) settled down in two camps about five miles apart.\(^{270}\) Their

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\(^{267}\) Diehl and Donnelly, Eat Thy Neighbor, 40.
\(^{268}\) Ibid., 40-1.
\(^{269}\) Askenasy, Cannibalism, 92-3.
situation went from bad to worse as snowstorm after snowstorm raged. By December 4th, the Donners had slaughtered and eaten all of their livestock—oxen, mules, horses and even dogs. Sometime close to Christmas of 1846, the Donners finally gave into their starvation induced desires. They had already eaten most of their hides and leather products, so all they had left was the flesh of their dead comrades. It is interesting to note that at first the two Indians that accompanied the settlers were unwilling to cannibalize the dead, but they too eventually gave into starvation and ate human flesh.271

Another interesting dynamic of their cannibalism was that no family member was consumed by a member of his or her family. Typically, survivors may be willing to consume their dead, but will only do so if the corpse on which they feed is someone considered outside of their immediate “group.” For the Donners, a party made up of families, the family was the core “group” uniting individuals, but in other cases survivors were unwilling to eat a white male or a soldier, but they were willing to consume a black slave or a civilian.272 It is interesting to note a gender dynamic present here. When women are present in the groups of stranded individuals, the family unit often becomes the core group uniting individuals.273 In groups where the distribution of genders is homogenous—all male—groups are dominated by other factors like race, nationality, or home community. This can be seen in the case of the Essex because the survivors tended to be united by a common Nantucket heritage rather than family loyalty. Had women been present, Pollard might have refused to consume his cousin, but they were absent, and survival instincts took over.

271 Askenasy, Cannibalism, 94.
273 This is a personal assessment made based off of the accounts I have read in researching instances of survival cannibalism. Most of the accounts that have led to this assertion come from Stilgoe’s Life Boat, Simpson’s Cannibalism and the Common Law, and Lindenbaum’s “Thinking About Cannibalism.”
By the time that both groups of the Donners were rescued, signs of cannibalism existed in both camps. All the men had died, and only eleven women and girls remained. News spread quickly as newspapers ran long articles similar to those of the *Essex* about the cannibalism and survival of the refugees. The survivors eventually made it to Sacramento and seem to have lived typical lives after the ordeal. It is interesting to note, that much of the controversy over the cannibalism exists because several of the survivors chose to deny consuming human flesh on their return to civilization. While all signs and the accounts of the members of the rescue parties seem to refute this, their denial of the cannibalistic acts may have resulted from public scrutiny or shame for what they did. It may be hard to imagine similar circumstances to any of these three previous examples given the advances in search and rescue techniques as well as the disappearance of both the sea and western frontiers, but cases of twentieth and even twenty first century survival cannibalism exist. 

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274 Askenasy, *Cannibalism*, 94.
275 While I did not find the exact article in question, they are discussed in Petrinovich, *The Cannibal Within*, 21.
276 Diehl and Donnelly, *Eat Thy Neighbor*, 41.
277 It should be noted that the case of the Donnor Party does not directly impact my thesis because the Donnor survivors never returned to their home communities. However, the case does illustrate two important points. The first is that family dynamics and gender change the group dynamics that form in survivor groups. And two, that instances of survival cannibalism, especially those involving familiar 19th century institutions like whaling and westward expansion became sensational stories that were told, almost like horror folklore, to almost every man, woman and child in the United States.
Chapter 7

Disaster in the Andes Mountains

Like the cases of the *Mignonette* and the Donner Party, there are many other instances of survival cannibalism in the historical record that share features of the cannibalism associated with the *Essex*. One of the best documented and most contemporary cases says a great deal about how modern society views individuals placed in circumstances like those of the shipwrecked *Essex* sailors. To this point, all cases discussed in this paper have been from the nineteenth century or earlier. An easy critique of this paper, then, would be that while survival cannibalism was accepted in the past, in contemporary society, individuals would be unable to understand the circumstances that drove survivors to cannibalism, and thus shun them on their return to society. Fortunately, for my analysis that the legitimacy of survival cannibalism is not localized to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is a contemporary case of just such a situation. It should be noted that this case occurred in an era after the advent of modern search and rescue techniques, but yet the ordeal is strikingly similar to those of the nineteenth century. In the 1970s, a group of survivors, forced to eat their dead, were reaccepted by their community after a harrowing plane crash and subsequent seventy two day ordeal in the Andes Mountains of South America.

Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 originated in Montevideo, Uruguay, on October 12th, 1972. The Fairchild F-22 Turbo Prop was heading for Santiago, Chile, carrying a group of forty five passengers and four crew members. (See appendix D) Most of the passengers were members the Old Christians Rugby club, a nationally competitive rugby team, who were en route to play a match against the top rated Chilean team shortly after their arrival. The players accompanied
some supporters, a few friends and family members. Women were present in their group adding a gender dimension not present in the Essex disaster, but all but one died in the crash. Unfortunately her presence had little impact the cannibalistic activities of the group because she too died in an avalanche early in the ordeal. (It should be mentioned, though, that prior to the avalanche she too partook in cannibalism.) They planned to fly over the Andes directly to Santiago, but after hearing reports of severe weather over the mountains, their pilot decided to land in Mendoza, a small colonial town situated at the base of the Andean foothills in Argentina. After spending the night of October 12th in Mendoza, the pilot decided it was safe to attempt the flight over the mountains, and the Fairchild F-22 roared down the runway, becoming airborne at 2:18 P.M. October 13th.

Because of the extreme height of the section of the Andes over which they would be flying (some peaks reaching as high as twenty-thousand feet), the pilot planned to fly along the Planchón Pass, a tight passage between the higher peaks, which would allow the plane to pass through the mountains. Not long after takeoff, turbulence and thick fog enveloped the plane. To the passengers inside, the severity of the situation was not apparent at first, but as the turbulence got more severe the passengers became alarmed. As one survivor described, “the bottom seemed to fall out of the fuselage, and my stomach pitched as the plane dropped for what must have been several hundred feet. ‘Look at this, Nando…Should we be so close to the mountains?’” Before Nando had the chance to answer, the plane’s engines screamed into action, fighting to gain altitude, but the pilot realized his error too late.

280 Parrado, Miracle in the Andes, 32.
The plane slammed its belly into a peak, knocking both wings off, and perforating the ceiling of the fuselage. Split seconds later, the tail section separated, although the plane remained in the air long enough to miss another peak, and find another mountain slope, down which it began to slide reaching speeds of over two hundred miles an hour. The wreckage finally came to stop on the snowy mountainside; the crash killed thirteen, left many more seriously injured, and those lucky enough to escape with only minor injuries in a state of terror.\textsuperscript{281}

As dazed as they were in the minutes after the crash, leaders emerged, and the survivors took stock of their situation. Just as in the \textit{Essex} case, these strong leaders would be the salvation of the group. Their ability to assess the situation and make decisions saved many more from dying in the freezing climate in the days following the crash. A number of the passengers who had survived the crash were so badly injured that they died shortly after. This included one of the two women that had not perished in the carnage of the crash. By day three, their numbers were reduced to twenty-nine.

At first, most of the rugby players, who were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three, held out hope that they would be rescued shortly. They knew their circumstances were dire, but their confidence in rescue kept their spirits high. There were several major obstacles that the men would have to deal with in order to survive. Like the men of the \textit{Essex}, dehydration was the most dangerous. While the crash survivors had access to tons of frozen freshwater, they had no heat source to melt the snow to make it drinkable. They quickly learned that eating frozen snow was not enough to replenish the water their bodies were losing and, even though it brought their dry palates relief, it only made their core temperatures drop even lower.\textsuperscript{282} The men also began to find that they needed a great deal more water because of the high altitude of the crash

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{282} Read, \textit{Alive}, 47.
site. The altitude thinned the air, causing elevated respiration rates in the survivors. As they breathed more frequently and heavily, each breath depleted their bodies of water, as they expelled water vapor with every exhale. It has been demonstrated that at high altitude a human will lose water five times faster than at sea level, so until they found a reliable way to melt snow, dehydration, not starvation, was their biggest concern.283

Their next problem was the cold. Although it was early spring in the Andes, blizzards were common and severe. Temperatures could drop to thirty-five degrees below zero at night, and the crash site was an exposed face between mountains that would only serve to channel the wind. The men had been expecting to land in Santiago and, given the season, had brought only light clothing with them. Their jeans and light wool sweaters were no match for the harsh conditions of alpine survival, and they knew that they would freeze to death if they did not work on their shelter. Using the debris from the crash, and the fuselage as a makeshift cabin, the men, led by several strong uninjured leaders, patched holes in the fuselage making their shelter somewhat wind proof. They realized they could use anything at their disposal, so seat covers quickly became blankets, and seat cushions—snow shoes. While their ingenuity failed to make them comfortable, it was enough to ensure that they would not freeze, although every member of the group did suffer from severe frostbite.284

After the crash, rationing what food they had was immediately instituted. In spite of their confidence in rescue, they realized that their meager stash of eight chocolate bars, a few caramels, some dried fruit, two cans of mussels, and three jars of jam would be the only food they would have until rescue came.285 In spite of their best efforts, by the end of the first week

285 Ibid., 46.
their supplies had been exhausted. With nothing left to eat, the men began to obsess over food. They contemplated eating the leather of their luggage, but they decided against it because of the chemicals coating the leather. With no relief their starving bodies drove them to the point where so many other survivors have found themselves in similar, bleak circumstances—considering cannibalism.\textsuperscript{286}

From one survivor’s memoir, we get some sense of the desperation these young rugby players were feeling, “I would rise from a long silence to shout…‘There is \textit{nothing} in this fucking place to \textit{eat}!’ But, of course, there was food on the mountain…It puzzles me that despite my compulsive drive to find \textit{anything} edible, I ignored for so long the obvious presence of the only edible objects within a hundred miles.”\textsuperscript{287} Nando, the survivor, attributes his reluctance to consider the bodies of his friends as a food source to the unwillingness of his mind to think such taboo thoughts, “but when my mid did finally cross that line, it did so with an impulse so primitive it shocked me.”\textsuperscript{288} It is interesting he chooses the word primitive, showing that even someone who has transgressed the taboo of cannibalism, still labels the behavior and even thoughts of it as primitive. His word choice also highlights just how embedded the instinct of survival is in our basic human psyche. Later that night, Nando spoke with a few of his closest friends and found that they too had been thinking the same thoughts. As the rest of the survivors began to talk, they finally raised it in front of the whole group during one of their evenings spent in the fuselage.

By this point, the survivors knew that their prospects of rescue were dwindling. Without food, they might not even survive until rescue came, if it ever did. They knew that their only

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{286} Parrado, \textit{Miracle in the Andes}, 94-5.
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid. 95.
\end{flushright}
chance to survive was to cannibalize their dead friends, but still many had moral and religious qualms about this behavior. Some leaders, including Roberto Canessa, the survivor who first suggested cannibalism, rationalized the behavior by claiming that God and the rest of the world would judge them for more harshly if they let themselves perish than if they consumed the dead to survive. This rationalization may have been influenced by a need to make his “primitive” thoughts conform to the modern, “civilized” discourses of religion and public opinion. Of the twenty-seven survivors left at this point, only a couple refrained from eating the flesh which was cut from the bodies and consumed shortly after the meeting. Among the hold outs was the one female members still alive in the group. However, she and the rest of those reluctant to cannibalize, eventually did engage in the behavior to survive. The survivors of Flight 571 had crossed a line into taboo activities, but they cannot be condemned as it gave them the caloric resources they needed to survive long enough to mount an expedition out of the mountains.

**Escape, Rescue, and the Aftermath**

Once the survivors began to consume their dead teammates and friends, their immediate problem of starvation was solved. They had devised a way to use an aluminum funnel to melt snow using solar energy, so their supply of water also improved. Even so, they were still in an extremely hostile environment, of which they were reminded every time a few survivors set off in an attempt to walk to civilization. The survivors were also battered by harsh blizzards. On October 29th an avalanche raged through their campsite. The avalanche killed eight more (including the last surviving woman), but it also covered many of the bodies from the initial

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crash which had been the survivor’s source of meat. The avalanche was both a reminder of their precarious situation and their reliance on the bodies of their dead friends.\textsuperscript{290}

For many survivors, the avalanche was a turning point. From the beginning some were determined to walk out of the mountains on their own. After the avalanche however, a determined few realized that they needed to make their move quickly. Attempts to walk out were made even in the first few days after the crash, but each successive attempt ended in failure between one and two days after the survivors left camp. The harsh conditions of deep snow, hypothermia, steep, impassable cliffs, and extreme temperatures meant that those who ventured up the mountain not only failed to find help, but returned in very bad shape.\textsuperscript{291}

In spite of the odds, two survivors, Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa, remained intent on hiking to help and saving their comrades. The men were not successful on their first attempt, although during their first expedition they did locate the missing tail section of the plane, which would prove crucial to the success of their second expedition. From the tail section, the men scavenged more clothing as well as insulation that they stitched into a sleeping bag. It was this sleeping bag that allowed them to endure the harsh nocturnal temperatures of the high passes they had to cross to reach civilization. Without it they would have likely failed and probably perished.\textsuperscript{292}

With their sleeping bag completed, their meager supplies loaded into knapsacks, and after several weeks of larger portions of flesh, Parrado, Canessa and a third survivor, they called Tintin, set off in a westerly direction on the morning of December 12\textsuperscript{th}. The members of the expedition wore rugby cleats and several layers of light clothing. They had only a week or so

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{290} Parrado, \textit{Miracle in the Andes}, 136.
  \item \textsuperscript{291} Read, \textit{Alive}, 95.
  \item \textsuperscript{292} Read, \textit{Alive}, 191.
\end{itemize}
worth of flesh rations in their packs, and they were going to be climbing through some of the highest and most rugged sections of the Andes. In fact, as Parrado recounts in his memoir, “We didn’t know…that the mountain we were about to challenge was one of the highest in the Andes, soaring to the height of nearly seventeen thousand feet…” It is likely better that the men were ignorant of the hardships they were getting themselves into, because their expedition would be one of the most challenging aspects of their ordeal, but it did end in success.

It took them three days to make it over the summit and begin their descent to the other side of the seventeen thousand foot peak. In the process, they realized they had miscalculated their distance from civilization. Parrado and Canessa were forced to send Tintin back to camp, taking his rations with them to supplement their own. Their climb and descent were harrowing, and certainly would never have been undertaken by experienced mountaineers with the supplies they had. In spite of their disadvantages, the men made it down the mountain and onto a glacier by December 15th. They followed the glacier to a river that they led them to signs of humans and livestock. On the evening of December 9th, the two men reached a fork in the river which prevented them from going any further in the direction they had been heading since leaving the crash. While this might have spelled disaster for the remaining survivors, luckily, Canessa spotted a man on horseback that night.

The next day, December 10th, the rider and a few of his fellow peasant herders returned. They communicated with Parrado, who was on the far bank, via notes thrown back and forth tied to rocks. Through the notes, Parrado was able to communicate that they needed food, assistance and that there were more survivors still in the mountains. Later that morning, Armando Serda,

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293 Parrado, * Miracle in the Andes*, 185.
294 Ibid., 185.
one of the peasants arrived on their side of the river, and led them to a camp where he fed the two starving men. In the following days, word that there were more survivors in the mountains reached the police chief of the district, and then the Chilean Air Force. By December 23rd, two helicopters had been summoned and Parrado and Canessa tried to describe the location of the crash site. When it became clear that description would not suffice alone, Parrado was asked to show the team where the survivors were. While it must have been terrifying to fly into the Andes again, Parrado managed to locate the crash site. Within two days, the fourteen remaining survivors were rescued.296

296 Parrado, Miracle in the Andes, 226-7.
Reception following Rescue

Like the Essex, news of the disaster and subsequent rescue spread fast. For the survivors who were brought back to Santiago, the reception mirrored that of the survivors returning to Nantucket. They were greeted by huge crowds as they hobbled or were wheeled into the hospital. The press had a field day with the news of the horrific events and extreme heroics of the teammates. The papers in Santiago titled the event “‘The Christmas Miracle,’”\(^{297}\) and their story of survival in the face of daunting odds seemed to inspire and draw support from all levels of society. Rather than shun them for their behavior, the boys became instant celebrities. This was a double-edged sword because it meant that the survivors struggled to find privacy to deal with their own feelings, but they were also received as heroes worthy of praise, not condemnation.

In the months and weeks following their rescue, the survivors found they had been transformed by their ordeal into heroes and celebrities. People lined up for their autographs and their pictures were taken constantly.\(^{298}\) It is interesting to note that the men were even elevated to a position on a level with the 1950 Uruguayan soccer team which won the World Cup. For Uruguay, the survivors of the plane crash were not to be shunned, they were to be celebrated. They had overcome so much and had done so as a team. Their fame made Uruguayans proud of their fellow countrymen and their country itself. The survivors had shown the rest of the world how tenacious and strong the human desire was to survive, and cannibalism could not mute this. They became figures of inspiration, not monsters to be shunned once in full view of the public.\(^{299}\)

Reading even the English press, it is clear that people were more concerned with the strength and fortitude shown by the survivors than the lengths to which they went in order to

\(^{297}\) Ibid., 241.
\(^{298}\) Read, Alive, 385.
\(^{299}\) Parrado, Miracle in the Andes, 249.
survive. The initial *New York Times* report of the disaster fails to mention cannibalism, but it does state unequivocally the odds that the men overcame, “A Chilean rescue worker called the feat ‘incredible. The place where the plane crashed is almost always storm bound and terribly rocky…’ Reports at the time also indicated that the plane carried very little food.” While the initial report did not mention cannibalism, it was reported within a few days. Again, even when the details of cannibalism became public, the English press did not condemn them.

Just five days after the initial reports of their ordeal were publicized, the *New York Times* ran a story titled “Two Catholic Aids Defend Cannibalism in Chilean Case.” In the article, the church officials explained, using a similar rationalization to the cannibals themselves, that while respect for the dead is extremely important, it would be a greater sin to let yourself perish before consuming human flesh, “‘A person is permitted to eat dead human flesh if there is no feasible alternative for survival’…They [The two Catholic theologians] said that there was ‘a serious obligation’ to show respect for the dead, and that eating human flesh would be a breach of this obligation ‘in almost all cases.’”

In spite of the moral and ethical issues surrounding cannibalism, two Catholic Professors from the St. Josephs Seminary in Yonkers, New York, were willing to speak out on behalf of the survivors of the crash. Their support, and the subsequent article run in the *New York Times*, shows that many Americans were unwilling to condemn the actions of the survivors. It mattered that they turned to cannibalism to survive, but the odds that they overcame and the fact that no other alternative food source existed, mitigated any blame that could be placed on their shoulders. Instead, their story became one of survival, perseverance and inspiration. It showed

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the strength of human will, and the general public witnessed the rise of the undaunted hero out of the monstrous cannibal.

In the months and years following their ordeal, each survivor dealt with his own personal feelings about the ordeal in his own way. Some became successful businessmen, scientists and doctors, while others sought comfort through drugs and alcohol. Many married and have large families today. Most recovered with time, and today see the struggles of their ordeal as the reason for their success. Parrado for his part had a difficult time in the years following the disaster. He fell into a pattern of partying, using his celebrity status to pick up women and entered the dangerous world of automotive racing. However, in his later life he was able to balance his experience by publishing a memoir and putting his energies into a successful career. In fact, Reed even states that Parrado, in particular, seems to have changed the most from his ordeal, “His [Parrado] character had undergone a greater metamorphosis than that of the others. The timid, uncertain boy had emerged from the ordeal as a dominating, self-assured man who was everywhere recognized and acclaimed as a hero of the Andean odyssey…” Since the ordeal Parrado has found strength and truth in the lessons the mountain taught him. In some ways, these lessons are what make the story of the survivors one of personal and human accomplishment not strictly cannibalism. In the years since the crash, the survivors have remained in contact, and feel a bond of brotherhood with their fellow survivors. Their story and their accomplishments may be forever linked to cannibalism but, in the face of such odds and

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302 Parrado, Miracle in the Andes, 258.
303 It should be stated that many of the survivors made a great deal of money off of the ordeal. Parrado, in particular, published a memoir that has brought him monetary gains, and today he spends some of his free time giving paid lectures about his ordeal and the lessons he learned from his experience. While this should not refute his testimony or his experience, the reader should be aware that the disaster has brought him personal gains.
304 Read, Alive, 386.
extreme scarcity, their actions cannot and have not been condemned, in spite of the transgressive and taboo nature of their actions.
Conclusion

It is hard for most to imagine the emotions, hunger, pain and suffering that the survivors of the whaleship *Essex* and Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 experienced during their respective ordeals. The gruesome nature of these events, combined with the hope and strength people find in the survivors’ abilities to overcome all odds, ensures that both cases will continue to fascinate lay readers and scholars alike. While these two narratives are certainly entertaining, I hope this paper also shows that they provided a unique perspective from which social analysis is possible.

Other historians, sociologists and psychologists have used periods when society breaks down to form a more coherent understanding of human culture, morals, taboos and laws. These events, then, become a window into society through which forces and phenomena not always visible can be viewed. Most notably, it seems that war has provided a prolific medium in which to do such analysis. They have examined the way that “normal” or “typical” humans respond to the chaos, stress and general conditions of war—looking at the rise of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the reception of soldiers returning from an unpopular, group dynamics during war time conditions, the strength that institutions such as the church provide, and the ways in which combatants form their own separate and distinct identity through veterans organizations. While incomplete, this list gives some indication of the breadth of research that has examined society in crisis in order to make some observation or conclusion about humanity itself.

To the best of my knowledge, no historian has sought to analyze how “cannibals” are received by their home communities. As a result, what is unique to this paper is that it applies the social analysis discussed above to cannibals. Many of the conditions that exist during war time are present during the survival ordeals of these men. This, combined with the life and death circumstances of survival, makes survival cannibalism, like war, a reasonable locus for this type
of study. By examining the reluctance of these survivors to cannibalize, we are aware of how entrenched is the taboo barring the consumption of human flesh in the typical human’s mind. However, in both cases, as well as the hundreds of other survival stories, people transgress this taboo with such ease that it often shocks the survivors when they reflect on it in their memoirs. These two seemingly contradictory observations show us both the strength and weakness of socially conditioned behaviors, morals, and taboos.

By employing the Foucault’s theory that socially constructed, internalized forces of social norms dictate all appropriate behavior, the reader can see how strong the forces prohibiting cannibalism were in both cases. However, when the life and death circumstances of the survivors is considered it is clear that survival trumps these internalized norms. Every survival cannibal resorts to cannibalism after exhausting all other possible food sources and options. The forces present in the surveillance act on the isolated men because it prevents cannibalism from being the first survival tactic to which survivors resort. In spite of that, when there is no other options or food sources, eventually the prospect that survival is only possible through the consumption of human flesh enters the mind of every survivor. Internalized social norms continue to prohibit the survivors from bringing up the thoughts that they are each having, but at some point survival trumps these internalized forces and cannibalism is brought up—usually in a council style setting, where each survivor is allowed to raise their own opinion and speak about their own feelings on the subject. The moment when the survivors speak about the prospect of cannibalizing one of their dead comrades, or drawing lots, is the moment when all social surveillance and internalized social discourses are forsaken. While the cannibalistic event is extremely important, I argue that it is the moment when cannibalism is discussed that survivors break with Foucault’s model that these internalized forces dictate behavior. It is at that moment
that the survivors realize that they can only violate their own moral systems and their cultural prohibitions of cannibalism to survive. As a result, when they discuss cannibalism and subsequently commit the act, all of the internalized forces of western civilization are trumped and the Darwinian instinctual force to survive takes over.

The second part of my analysis concerns the acceptance of survivors upon their rescue and reintroduction into society. Like combatants returning from war, these survivors are at the mercy of public sentiment. In most cases of survival cannibalism, even though taboos are violated, the law is not broken, and so judgment is passed exclusively in public rather than legal settings. At first, I was perplexed by the contradiction that survival cannibals (even those who murdered), were almost always judged benignly. The contradiction lies in the fact that under any normal circumstance a murderer or a cannibal would be viewed as someone to be shunned or condemned for their behavior. It is likely that public sentiment would support legal prosecution of the person or persons and, at the very least, demand the cannibal’s removal from the community.

In the case of the Essex and Uruguay Air Force Flight 571, the reaction of the community highlighted this contradiction. For the Essex, while there is no indication that the survivors became national heroes as the Uruguayan rugby players did, it is clear that the Nantucket public found no fault with their actions even when murder was committed. The five hundred dollars collected for the men while in Chile, also highlights the fact that their peer sailors and whalers found no fault with their actions and were actually tried to assist their recovery. I find it hard to believe that the staid Nantucket resident or their fellow sailors could have reconciled themselves with similar actions—cannibalism of community members and the murder of one after a lottery was held—under any other circumstances. Had the murder been committed on the island, I am
confident that the murderer would have been prosecuted. I am also certain that, had cannibalism taken place on the island, the culprit would have been ostracized, regardless of the circumstances. A similar pattern exists in the case of the Uruguayan rugby players. Upon their rescue, each man became identified as a survivor and a hero. They were not identified as cannibals, but rather as brave men who overcame all the odds to survive and be rescued. Again, had any of the men consumed human flesh while at home in Montevideo, they too would have been ostracized or even prosecuted.

It seems clear that survival is the mitigating factor. The desire to live drives survival cannibals to consume human flesh. The desire to survive also trumps the Foucaultian forces of surveillance and internalized social norms. The survivors understood that if they do not consume human flesh, they would die from the extreme environment in which they found themselves. It is this Darwinian instinct to survive, then, that takes over and allows the cannibal or cannibals to forsake all they have learned from society about appropriate behavior. While the forces of the Panopticon and internalized social norms, as Foucault has pointed out, are so powerful that men have to be pushed to the very brink of death before they will violate them, the instinct to survive is far more powerful than any culturally learned moral or taboo discourse. It seems plausible that a person faced with these circumstances would do anything to survive, but it seems much less likely someone not faced with similar circumstances could understand or even accept this behavior. However, in both cases, the members of the survivors’ home community are able to rationalize the behavior of the cannibal and accept them after their rescue.

For those living in Nantucket in 1821 or Montevideo in 1972, it would have been extremely difficult to condemn the actions of the returning survivors because they had no other options. While the actions were committed outside of the surveillance of the communities of the
survivors, anyone who argues their actions were wrong or immoral is forced to consider what they themselves would do in similar circumstances once rescue is affected and the men are brought back into the scope of social surveillance. Because human instinct drives everyone to survive, it seems almost impossible to condemn another human for cannibalism, when it is their only chance to survive. While the historical record provides no definitive proof that the residents of Nantucket or Uruguay engaged in this type of logical thought process, the overt and tacit acceptance of the survivors suggests that people did think this way. In both cases, the survivors were accepted upon their return because of the life and death circumstances of their isolation, in spite of their morally offensive and taboo behavior.

When I began this paper, I had no idea of the range of issues my analysis of survival cannibalism would encompass. It was my goal to make some observations about the rigidity of socially conditioned behavior and to show its fragility. I did not expect to run into issues involving gender, group dynamics, leadership, race and class. In considering two cases where almost all of the members and all of the survivors were male, gender is ever present in my analysis. While the impulse to survive through cannibalism is present in both men and women, the group dynamics of both cases I examined was influenced by their single gendered nature. For example, many of the survivors dealt with issues of manhood throughout both ordeals. While this may have been a factor had women been present, it was certainly emboldened by the homogenous nature of the groups. As men, the sailors of the Essex, viewed their shared Nantucket linage as their unifying characteristic, while the rugby team did what they automatically did on the playing field—worked together as a whole. Had there been some dynamics in the gendered matrix, as was described in the case of the Donner Party, the men may
have formed bonds around family groups that were more powerful than their bonds of Nantucket blood or team unity.

Leadership also took a prominent place in my analysis of the two cases. In any crisis, good leadership is essential. In both cases, strong leaders emerged, who instilled in their fellow survivors purpose and organization, as well as possessing the tenacity and skill to lead their men to safety. In both cases, however, leadership was problematic and broke down altogether. It was Owen Chase, the first mate of the *Essex*, who bullied his captain until he agreed to head for South America instead of one of the Pacific islands—a much longer route that probably caused needless death. In the Andes case, the leaders who emerged in the beginning of the disaster were unable to keep up their stoicism, and were replaced by new leaders like Nando Parrado who affected their rescue. The dynamics of leadership and decision making in survival situations adds another dimension to my analysis of survival cannibalism and social acceptance of survivors.

Race and class influenced the actions of the survivors in unanticipated ways. I had expected them to be of little importance because of the survivors’ extreme isolation and invisibility to the surveillance of society. I had anticipated seeing race and class used as socially constructed delineations of identity. Like the taboo of cannibalism, I expected them to be subsumed by the crisis at hand. While group dynamics and group identity did trump class and race in most cases, the latter played a role in dictating who was eaten when and by whom. This is particularly clear in the case of the *Essex*. Racial tensions existed in the segregated quarters of the black and white sailors, but even more disturbing, the first sailors to die and be eaten were all black. In other cases of survival cannibalism, racial minorities (such as slaves) are often the first selected to be eaten, so the experiences of the *Essex* sailors with race is not atypical. Class tended to influence the decision making process of the survivors less than race, but issues of class was
seen in the analysis of the community of Nantucket. I also used markers of class, such as status of employment, to judge acceptance of survivors after their return to both Nantucket and Uruguay.

In recent years, the concept of survival has become a phenomenon of pop culture. Television shows, depicting people handling extreme conditions, have exploded in popularity. Shows like Survivor, Survivor Man, and Man vs. Wild air in prime time in this country and around the world. Many of the books about survival I consulted were published within the last ten years. This seems to suggest, that in spite of increasing technological advances, humans still have a fundamental fascination with surviving in the wild. The pinnacle of all survival stories, though, is a story of survival through cannibalism. People have been fascinated and horrified by cannibalism for hundreds, if not, thousands of years. There has always been a market for cannibal related stories like Robinson Crusoe, or Typee. This market, combined with the current fascination with survival, makes accounts about the Essex or Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 extremely relevant today. Yet, the historiography remains thin in this area except for a few very notable examples such as Nathanial Philbrick’s, In the Heart of the Sea.

Through my research and my conversations with Mr. Philbrick, I have tried to take this paper in a different direction than In the Heart of the Sea. Rather than focusing, as did Philbrick, on the biological process of starvation leading to cannibalism, I am much more concerned with the social perception of survival cannibals. Building on his research and incorporating as much new material as time and resources permitted, I have made some important observations about society in the absence of restraint. I am confident that in situations of extreme isolation cannibalism as a last resort for survival will almost always be accepted by humans.
Survival is fundamental to the way that our instincts and brain works. For that reason, no human can condemn another human for ignoring or forsaking morals, acceptable behavior or laws to survive. I propose that these survival instincts are the reason that members of a community are able to accept cannibals when they return to civilization. Upon reflecting about the ordeal of the survivor(s), any community member eventually ponders what they themselves would have done in the same situation. Because we will always struggle to survive, we too would cannibalize if the alternative was death. With this recognition, there is no morally based position from which the cannibal’s actions can be condemned.

I believe cases like the two covered by this paper will continue to become less and less frequent as search and rescue techniques continue to improve and as the Earth’s frontiers continue to shrink. If human expansion continues, though, there will always be new frontiers ripe for exploration. I am confident that survival cannibalism is a fundamental feature of expansion and exploration, and so as long as there are frontiers there will always be isolation leading to survival cannibalism. I would predict that space exploration may be the next major locus of survival cannibalism. Due to the vast distances and extremely small number of expedition members, survival cannibalism may not be as common or as effective in space as it was on the high seas or during winter survival situations. In spite of this, space is the most isolated location imaginable, and if isolation is the fundamental requirement of survival cannibalism, then cannibalism should occur in space in the future.
Appendix:

A: Diagram of the Whaleship *Essex*

Sail Plan of the Whaleship Essex
A. mizzen sail, B. mizzen topgallant sail, C. mizzen topsail, D. main topgallant sail, E. main topsail, F. main course or mainsail, G. fore topgallant sail, H. fore topsail, I. fore course or fore sail, J. fore topmast staysail, K. jib, L. flying jib

Cross-section
A. captain's and officers' cabins, B. steerage, C. forecastle, E. hold
Deck Plan

B: Map of Nantucket Island:
C: The Route of the 1819 Voyage of the Whaleship *Essex*

![Map of the Route of the 1819 Voyage of the Whaleship *Essex*](image-url)
C: Route taken by the whaleboats of the Whaleship *Essex* after the ship went down
D: The Flight Path of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571

*The red dot demarks the approximate crash site. For an exact satellite photograph of the crash site please see http://wikimapia.org/942836/

E: Bentham’s Panopticon

The Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham
*Notice the whaleboat and killing lance, as well as the distinctive black smoke of the tryworks
G: The Complete Map of the Essex Voyage
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