



VINTAGE CHASE

SHIPWRECK OF
THE
WHALESHIP ESSEX

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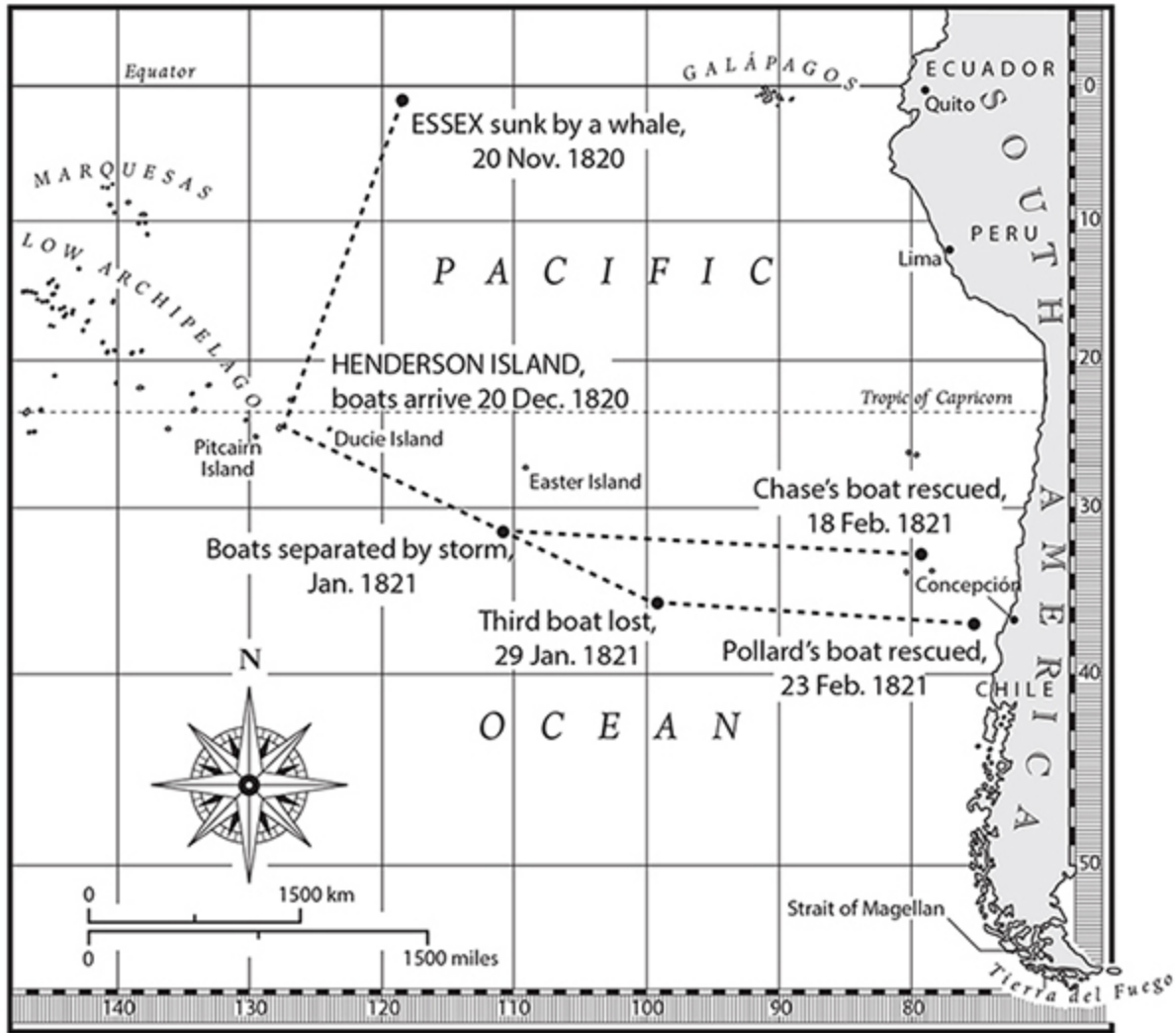
ABOUT THE BOOK

On 20 November 1820, just south of the equator, the whaling ship *Essex*, spotted and pursued a shoal of sperm whales. As the crew started harpooning, the largest whale – some 85 feet long – rammed the *Essex* twice and ‘stove in her bows’. What followed was an epic three-month voyage in open boats across storm-tossed seas. Only eight men survived, sustained by eating those who died.

This edition includes Owen Chases’s famous account, as well as memoirs by two other crew members and a facsimile of Herman Melville’s notes on Chase’s narrative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Owen Chase was born in 1797 and worked as a whaler in Nantucket. In November 1820, the whaleship *Essex*, of which Chase was First Mate, was struck and sunk by a sperm whale. His subsequent account of the three-month-long ordeal that followed was published in 1821 and inspired Herman Melville to write *Moby-Dick*. Afterwards, Chase continued to work as a whaler, embarking on several further expeditions until 1840. Despite many years at sea he married four times during this period. Chase's latter years were haunted by memories of the disaster and he was eventually institutionalised. He died in 1869.



Map of the shipwreck and subsequent voyage of survival

OWEN CHASE

Narrative of the Most
Extraordinary and Distressing
Shipwreck of the
Whaleship Essex

With supplementary accounts of survivors
and Herman Melville's memoranda on
Owen Chase

Foreword by Tim Cahill
Introduction by Paul Lyons

VINTAGE

FOREWORD

ON November 20, 1820, the whaling vessel *Essex*, out of Nantucket, spotted a “shoal” of sperm whales. It was a fine clear day, about eight in the morning. The ship lay off the west coast of the Americas, just south of the equator, almost equidistant from the Galapagos Islands and the Marquesas Islands, sometimes referred to as the islands farthest from any continent on earth. Two whaling boats, very lightly built for rowing speed, were lowered from the *Essex*. The crew pursued and harpooned three of the whales when the largest of the cetaceans, a creature some eighty-five feet long, rammed the vessel not once but twice in the space of ten minutes, and “stove in her bows.” All twenty hands survived the attack and assembled in three of the “fragile” whaling boats, the very ones used to chase and kill whales. The *Essex* itself slowly rolled onto her mast and, over the space of two days, sunk. The crew had time to recover some bread and several kegs of drinking water, along with necessary navigational equipment.

Sailing some three months and three thousand miles in the flimsy open boats, the whalers suffered terribly from thirst and hunger. Only eight men survived the ordeal. One of the three boats was lost at sea. Six of the men who died of hunger and thirst were eaten by survivors, in order to sustain life.

An account of the “unparalleled sufferings of the captain and crew” was written a year later by one of the survivors, Owen Chase, then twenty-three years old, first mate on the *Essex*. The book was little read in its time, and never reprinted, though the story of the *Essex* and the vengeful

whale who sunk her circulated through the whaling community in Nantucket. Some twenty years after the publication of the book, Herman Melville borrowed a copy of the narrative from the son of Owen Chase, and read it on a whaling vessel plying the South Pacific. "The reading of the wondrous story upon the landless sea and close to the very latitude of the shipwreck had a surprising effect on me." Eight years later, Melville began writing *Moby Dick*.

That the narrative of Owen Chase was an inspiration for Melville's masterpiece is undeniable. Modern readers, possessed of sensibilities and sympathies foreign to whalers of Chase's time, will likely find a certain poetic justice in the tragedy. Chase himself seems dimly aware of this: "I began to reflect on the ... deadly attack ... by an animal, too, never before suspected of pre-meditated violence and proverbial for its inoffensiveness." The attacks on the ship, Chase states, "were calculated to do us the most injury, by combining the speed of the two objects." The whale's "aspect was most horrible and such as indicated resentment and fury. He came directly from the shoal which we had just before entered, and, in which we had struck three of his companions, as if fired with revenge for their sufferings."

The reader who wishes to compare the destruction of the fictional *Pequod* with the historic *Essex* may conclude that Herman Melville stacked the metaphysical deck. The *Pequod*, for instance, was on a sealing expedition. No other whales were struck, and the great white whale's fury is made to seem wholly malevolent. It was perhaps necessary that readers' sympathies not be unduly divided.

Melville, in his notes on the narrative of Owen Chase, included here, suggests the book must have been written for Chase, but very probably from his direct narration off the "nine or ten scraps of paper" on which he kept notes. Indeed, much of the prose seems stiffly posed, as in a portrait painted by a journeyman artist, skilled in detail but

lacking in inspiration. The authors are careful to commit nothing that may be considered philosophy—aside from several nods towards divine providence—and the reader is obliged, willy-nilly, to consider various aspects of morality. What makes one man strive to survive when others give up and wait for death? Is a passive suicide preferable to endurance of endless suffering?

Melville was not interested in the epic journey in open boats across storm-tossed seas—a feat of navigation and survival that rivals those of Shackleton and Bligh. The sailors might have set out to the west and made for the Marquesas (or Tahiti), but feared—incorrectly as it turned out—they might there become the victims of cannibals. The irony, not specifically commented upon by Chase but mentioned by Melville, is that, by sailing southeast to Chile, they compounded their own misery, which included the painful decision to consume the bodies of their deceased companions. (Indeed, in a second boat, lots were drawn and an unfortunate young man voluntarily offered himself up to be shot in order to feed his fellows). Fear of cannibalism drove them to cannibalism.

Various aspects of the Chase narrative make for fearful and compulsive reading. In the latter stages of the voyage, the men lived in such proximity to death that each successive breath must have required an act of will. Two men on Chase's boat chose to die, announcing this determination ahead of time. Then they lay down and were dead within a day. These men were buried at sea. Later, to save themselves, the survivors ate the remains of the third man to die. Chase precisely describes the disposition of the body, and one learns this rather hideous fact: On short rations, it takes three men seven days to consume the flesh of another human being.

The present volume contains two missionary tracts. South Seas missionaries of the day collected tales of privation and debauchery among indigenous peoples: It

was a kind of tabloid pamphleteering in the interest of salvation. The first tract is the statement of Captain Pollard, who commanded the only other surviving whale boat from the *Essex*, and which contains an account of the decision to draw lots in the life or death lottery. The second tract is a short account of three men from the *Essex* who made the decision to remain on a small island the whale boats had encountered. Chase and Pollard found almost no fresh water, and very little to eat. They chose to sail on. The men who remained on the island sought shelter from the elements in a cave, where they encountered the skeletons of eight men, probably marooned sailors like themselves. This is the stuff of great ghost stories, made all the more terrifying because it is surely the truth. The three men were subsequently rescued.

There are certain discrepancies among the various accounts of the shipwreck and subsequent voyage, but it is the narrative of Owen Chase that one comes to trust. There is a certain stalwart honesty in this book that was admittedly written "in the hope of obtaining something of remuneration." In fact, it inspired one of the great masterpieces of American literature, and, even today, one can hardly read it without imagining that there is at least one more great novel buried, gemlike, somewhere in its wonderfully stiff and stoic prose.

TIM CAHILL
March 15, 1999

INTRODUCTION

I

[Nantucket] seems to have been inhabited merely to prove what mankind can do.

—Hector St. John de Crevecoeur Description of the
Island of Nantucket

THE narrative of the wreck of the *Essex* of Nantucket, as told by the first mate of the *Essex*, Owen Chase, is a Nantucket story. Anchored to the history of the whale fishery and America's economic expansion, its principal actors embody a Nantucket world view, with all its pious industry and perseverance. And it is ultimately a story about what mankind can do.

Owen Chase, the only one of the *Essex's* eight survivors to write an extended account of the wreck, and thus its primary historian, was a dyed-in-the-wool Yankee. His paternal ancestor landed with Governor Winthrop in 1630, and his maternal ancestors were among those late seventeenth-century Quakers who, disgruntled with the mainland Puritan theocracy, decided to resettle on the sandy island of Nantucket. They were thrifty and hard working, living off what the sea provided. On his mother's side Chase was a distant relation to Benjamin Franklin.

The early Nantucketers integrated whaling methods learned from Native Americans with their own (crews often included Native Americans), and extracted oil from whale blubber on tryworks erected on the beach. The Nantucketers used the whole whale; bone was used to make women's hoopskirts, waxy spermaceti to make

candles or salves. By the eighteenth century Nantucket had become synonymous with whaling, and the combination of the islanders' plain, enterprising brand of Quakerism and the daily trials of the sea forged a particular Nantucket character and salty idiom.

Nantucket whaling grounds expanded dramatically after 1712, when Captain Christopher Hussey's ship was blown by a storm beyond the customary Nantucket fishing limits, and Hussey fell in with a school of sperm whales and managed to kill one. Sperm whales—which yielded a superior quantity and grade of oil—had been thought of as rare and hard to take, and fishing had stayed close to shore. Within a few years of Hussey's catch whaling ports sprung up all along the eastern seaboard, and captains were chasing sperm whales around the world, charting the currents, surveying coastlines, and establishing trading posts. Whaling was the new frontier, the vanguard industry that carried America into the Pacific.

Greater distances meant longer voyages—generally of two to four years. In *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville writes of a character named Bulkington for whom “the land seemed scorching to his feet.” There were many Bulkingtons in the Nantucket fishery, men who would return and spend a month at home with their long-suffering wives, then take off again for the other side of the earth. It was not unusual for a whaler to have grown children, two to four years apart in age, that he had seen for a total of one year. The profits were great, and so were the perils. There was something of the fatalistic adventurer's spirit of cosmic gambling about these men who made their fortunes pursuing creatures twenty times the size of an elephant in small wooden boats—that and a deeply ingrained sense of their own hereditary intrepidity. “A Nantucket man is on all occasions fully sensible of the honor and merit of his profession,” Owen Chase writes, “no doubt because he

knows that his laurels, like the soldier's, are plucked from the brink of danger."

The whaling industry flourished until the American Revolution, during which the fleet was nearly wiped out, and many of its ablest seamen were lost at sea or imprisoned by the British. Thirty years later, when it had largely recovered, the fleet was decimated again during the War of 1812. The years following the end of that war saw an unprecedented expansion. New Bedford came to rival Nantucket as a whaling center, but with oil prices and demand rising there was plenty of room for both and a bustling need for labor. Ship builders and whaling crews increasingly included Portuguese, African Americans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders in particular. In his preface to the narrative, Chase describes the influx of capital into the recovered fishery as "energies burst out afresh." He alludes to the commercial and scientific benefits of the American presence in the Pacific, and appeals to Congress for "deserved government patronage" of whaling and naval protection. These contexts are not incidental to the narrative. Indeed, they speak to Chase's and his compatriots' providential sense of the importance of whaling to a broader American enterprise; as well as to their "shock" when—in an instant—their "pleasing anticipations" of profit are "dejected" by a "most mysterious, and overwhelming calamity."

II

Their lives have ever been one continual round of, hair-breadth escapes.... Many a tale of danger and toil and suffering, startling, severe, and horrible, has illumined the pages of the history of this pursuit, and scarce any, even the humblest of these hardy mariners, but can, from his own experience, narrate truths stranger than fiction.

—Alexander Starbuck *History of the American Whale Fishery* (1877)

ON June 11, 1821, the *Eagle*, Captained by William H. Coffin, returned to Nantucket carrying four survivors of the wrecked whaleship *Essex*: Benjamin Lawrence, Thomas Nickerson, Charles Ramsdell, and Owen Chase. Legend has it that the ship flew a black flag from its mainmast, indicative of death at sea, and that the crowds on the wharves solemnly parted before these men, who had been presumed lost and who had a true story to tell of suffering at sea that rivaled any recorded in fiction.

On August 12, 1819, the *Essex*, captained by George Pollard, had sailed from Nantucket with a crew of twenty-one for the South Pacific, outfitted for a two-and-a-half-year cruise. Fourteen of the crew were white Americans, six were African Americans, and one an Englishman. One sailor disembarked at a South American port. The rest were wrecked when a rogue whale stove the ship. The crew salvaged what it could from the wreck and divided into three boats. After five weeks they came upon Henderson Island (which they believed was Ducie Island), but found insufficient provisions. Three men decided to take their chances on the island and the rest shoved off. The boats eventually parted ways. It was two months before two of them were rescued, and by that time both boats had resorted to cannibalism. The third boat was never heard from again. Eight men survived, including the three on Henderson Island.

Nantucketers were accustomed to firsthand stories of shipwreck and privation. In a small whaling community, in which many were related by birth or marriage, nearly everyone had lost someone dear to them to a watery grave. The annals of the American whale fishery are full of matter-of-fact entries like “lost off the coast of Brazil with all on board,” or, simply, “missing.” Many stories of sailors who had survived storms, or fallen among pirates, or lived for a