

In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex Study Guide

In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex by Nathaniel Philbrick

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Plot Summary

In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex by Nathaniel Philbrick tells the story of a whaleship which was attacked by a large bull sperm whale in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. After the shipwreck, the crew made a journey of over 4,500 miles across the ocean with limited provisions and in small whaleboats. Included in this narrative are the history of whaling in Nantucket, the experiences of whaling, and the effects of starvation and dehydration.

In 1819, the *Essex* set sail from Nantucket Island, Massachusetts on a voyage to hunt sperm whales and bring back the whale oil. In the first part of its journey, the men experienced a storm which knocked down the ship, and a surfacing whale that damaged one of their whaleboats. They also spent a month rounding Cape Horn.

Reaching the Pacific, the crew made several provisioning stops along the coast of South America, including the Galapagos Islands. The captain, George Pollard, set a course for the Offshore Ground, an area that had recently been discovered by whalers. On the way, the men killed a number of whales. On November 20, 1820, the lookout spotted spouts and the men boarded whaleboats to chase the whales. During this incident, a large bull sperm whale attacked the ship several times, damaging the ship beyond repair.

Thousands of miles from land, the crew gathered what provisions they could into the whaleboats. Fearing cannibals on the islands to the west of where they were, the crew decided to sail for South America. They sailed for around a month before sighting land, but the island, Henderson Island, proved to have an unreliable freshwater source and the men quickly depleted the birds and shellfish located there. Three men decided to remain on the island when the rest of the crew departed, sailing again to the east.

Facing extreme starvation and dehydration, the men would sail for two more months. Along the way, one by one, the men began to die. The first several men were buried at sea but after Owen Chase's whaleboat was separated from the other two and provisions ran low, the men began to eat their dead shipmates. By the end, all three boats would be separated from each other; one would never be found. After sailing over 4,500 miles, Owen Chase, Benjamin Lawrence, and Thomas Nickerson were rescued from their whaleboat and George Pollard and Charles Ramsdell would be rescued five days later from theirs.



Preface

Preface Summary

During the summer of 1821, sperm whales were hunted in the Pacific Ocean for their oil. For the men on the whaleships, harvesting a whale was a tough task. When a whale was sighted, six men would approach it, harpoon it, and then try to kill it with a lance. As sperm whales can reach upwards of sixty tons, it had the potential to destroy the whaleboat. Once a whale was killed, its blubber was ripped off and boiled for the high-grade oil that lit streets and lubricated machines. This was all done at sea. The tiny island of Nantucket, twenty-four miles off southern New England, had been the center of the global oil business for a century.

The Nantucket whaleship, *Dauphin*, was traveling up the Chilean coast when its lookout saw a tiny boat on the ocean. The captain soon realized it was a whaleboat. As they brought the *Dauphin* closer, they saw bones in the boat and then two men, curled up in opposite ends of the boat, sucking the marrow from the bones of their dead shipmates.

The sinking of the whaleship *Essex* was one of the most well known maritime disasters of the nineteenth century, although it is little remembered today. The event inspired Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Although Melville's novel ends with the sinking of the ship, the real-life disaster was barely beginning. Only eight men survived out of the twenty men who witnessed its sinking. The two men rescued by the *Dauphin* sailed over 4,500 nautical miles.

Preface Analysis

In the preface, Philbrick introduces the reader to the subject and focus of the book: the sinking of the whaleship *Essex* and the events that occurred as twenty men, stranded at sea, tried to survive. He notes that although this disaster was widely known during the nineteenth century, today it is most commonly known about only through the fictional account in *Moby Dick*, which was inspired by the event.

Philbrick's introduction to the book in this chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the piece. He gives enough sensational fragments of the story to entice the reader further on, to learn more about what happened to the whaleship. From his brief account, the reader is privy to the information that the *Essex* will sink because of an encounter with a sperm whale and that at least two of the survivors will turn to cannibalism to survive.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Thomas Nickerson was fourteen years old when he first stepped onto the *Essex*, seeing the vessel as an opportunity. In July of 1819, the ship was one of seventy Nantucket whaleships in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The *Essex* was old for a whaleship and small, 87 feet long and 238 tons, but she was regarded as a lucky ship. George Pollard, Jr. had recently taken over as captain and Owen Chase was moved up to first mate. Although the *Essex* was Nickerson's first ship, he had long been preparing for his first journey out to sea.

With whale oil prices climbing, Nantucket was becoming a rich town. About seven thousand people lived in the town at this time. In July 1819, as the *Essex* was being repaired and outfitted for its next journey, a comet was sighted. The appearance of a comet was said to mean that something unusual was going to happen. There had also been sightings of an unknown sea creature up and down the coast, creating further speculation among the superstitious town. As most of their life was wrapped up with the unpredictable sea, it is not hard to see why Nantucketers would look for omens and signs.

English settlers began arriving on Nantucket in 1659 and they had hoped to farm and raise sheep. Eventually, they began looking seaward. Every fall, hundreds of right whales appeared south of the island and they remained until spring. Ichabod Paddock would be brought to the island to instruct the townspeople about the killing of these whales. The first whaling included the Wampanoag, the native inhabitants of the island. In 1712, a captain looking for whales was blown farther out to sea where he saw another kind of whale. He managed to kill one and blood and oil gushed out of the animal. The oil would burn brighter and cleaner than that from the right whale and there was much more of it in a sperm whale. By 1760, the local whale population had all been wiped out and Nantucketers began enlarging their ships for further ocean going. The rise of the Pacific sperm whale journeys in the early nineteenth century meant that voyages which had once averaged nine months, now took two to three years.

Many Nantucketers were Quakers. They saw no contradiction between their religion, which called for pacifism, and their livelihood in whale hunting. They believed that God had granted them dominion over all animals, including fish of the sea. The community was tight-knit but there were distinctions and hierarchies. Where a person lived in town was determined by his rank in the whaling trade. Captains' houses generally had the best views of the harbors. The savagery of the whale hunt pervaded the town, under the surface of its pacifism. Bedtime stories were of killing whales and evading cannibals in the Pacific. Boatsteerers were considered the most eligible bachelors and there was rumored to be a society of young women who vowed to only marry a man who had already killed a whale. Yet, human death was all too familiar to Nantucketers as well. Almost a quarter of the women over age twenty-three were widows in 1810.



The community depended on a commitment of work that divided it. Whalers were away from home for two or three years and women were expected to raise the children and run most of the island's businesses. Quakerism contributed to the women's strength, emphasizing the equality of the sexes. Yet, many also developed an addiction to opium, as they tried to cope with the loneliness of the island.

Thomas Nickerson, after first viewing the ship, began laboring to prepare it with some of the other crew members. Whalers did not work for wages, but rather for part of the total take at the end of the voyage. As such, owners tried to extract as much work as possible from the sailors before it set sail. As a cabin boy, Thomas Nickerson's take would probably be around \$150 for two years work, if the ship returned with sufficient oil.

At twenty years old, the *Essex* was at the point where many ships exhibit structural deterioration. Owners were reluctant to invest more money in a ship than was necessary so it is not unlikely that the owners of the *Essex* did not repair and rebuild everything on the ship that needed it. The upperworks were completely rebuilt by the end of July. The major shareholders of the *Essex* were Gideon Folger and Paul Macy, who were prominent men in Nantucket. Owners relied on off-islanders to round out their crews, many coming from Cape Cod. By the end of July, Pollard and the owners were still short half a dozen men for the upcoming voyage.

On Aug. 5, the *Essex* was floated into deep water and the loading of the ship began. Casks for the oil were filled with seawater to keep them tight. Freshwater, firewood, and food were also loaded, in addition to the whaling equipment and three whaleboats. But the men needed to sail the ship were still missing. Outside of Nantucket, a whaling voyage was on the lowest rung of maritime activities for a seaman. Seven black sailors signed on: Samuel Reed, Richard Peterson, Lawson Thomas, Charles Shorter, Isaiah Sheppard, William Bond, and Henry Dewitt. Sailors were paid according to their rank, but those on Nantucket never regarded black sailors as equals.

By Aug. 11, everyone but Captain Pollard was on board. Another ship, the *Chili*, was also preparing to leave. Things would not turn out well for either boat on their voyage. The *Chili* wouldn't return for over three and a half years and then with only a quarter of the whale oil expected. But it didn't compare to what happened to the *Essex*.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Philbrick introduces us here to the island of Nantucket and the whaling enterprise. His discussion of these topics provides the basis for the events and discussion of later chapters. In particular, Philbrick discusses the closeness of the Nantucket community. Drawn together by their common experiences, kinship, and their ties to whaling, the community members distinguished between themselves and outsiders. Men who were brought from the "outside" to man whaling ships existed outside of these bonds and the comfort that they provided for whalers. We also see the racial hierarchy that would



occur on the *Essex* as the seven black sailors, all "outsiders," would reside in a different part of the boat than the other sailors, although they would all receive the same pay.

As the Preface and this chapter point out, whaling was a dangerous venture. For some, the harvest of whale oil was a lucrative one. For others, like Nickerson, it was less so, but he would gain the experience needed for future journeys, perhaps leading to his own ship at some point. The island of Nantucket organized itself around whaling. The community went to see ships off, watched for their return, and carried on as best they could in the two to three years that each boat was gone.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Captain George Pollard, Jr. arrived on the *Essex* the morning of Aug. 12, 1819. At twenty-eight, he was a young captain, having spent all but seven months of the previous four years aboard the ship as a second and first mate. He had received a letter from the owners telling him that he should proceed to sea, toward the Pacific Ocean, and try to take on a load of sperm whale oil.

Leaving Nantucket was difficult for any whaleship as most of the crew tended to be inexperienced. As the green hands tried to take a ship out, the captain might suffer embarrassment if it didn't go well. The entertainment-starved inhabitants of Nantucket would also be watching as Pollard and his men left. Whaleships were complicated pieces of equipment. The *Essex* had three masts and a bowsprit, as well as many horizontal spars, which held the rectangular sails. There was also a great deal of rope supporting the spars and controlling the sails. As they left, Pollard could only watch from the quarterdeck as Owen Chase, the first mate, cajoled the men out. Pollard and Chase had been together on the *Essex* since 1815. The men drew in the anchor slowly. Next, with Pollard's and Chase's embarrassment growing, the men had to get all the canvas flying. It took the men more than nine miles to set and trim the sails. Chase proved to be a taskmaster, using force to gain obedience. This surprised Nickerson and the other men who had only known him on land.

The men were divided into watches that evening, serving alternating four-hour shifts on deck. The mate and the second mate took turns choosing men, taking first the Nantucket men. Next, the mates and Pollard chose oarsmen for the whaleboats. Again, each officer tried to get as many Nantucketers as possible. Nickerson was chosen for Chase's boat. The three men not chosen became the shipkeepers, handling the ship when whales were hunted. The captain also gave a speech to the crew, officially introducing himself. Nickerson was impressed by the captain's gentlemanly approach. Throughout the voyage, the men would sleep and eat in three different areas. The captain and the mates' cabins were in the aft portion of the ship. The boatsteerers and the Nantucketers would live in the steerage, just forward of the officers. The forecabin was in the far forward part of the ship, separated from the steerage by the blubber room. The divide was racial as well as physical. But it had its own advantages as its isolation meant that the black occupants could create their own world.

By the following morning, many of the inexperienced crew were sick but Chase coddled no one. At eight a.m., he ordered all hands to prepare the ship for whaling. In order for a whale to be sighted, someone had to be positioned aloft, a task that the seasick crew did not look forward to. The men would take two-hour shifts on the head of the mainmast.



A Nantucket whaleship took an indirect route to Cape Horn and the Pacific Ocean, a course determined by the prevailing winds. First, the westerlies would push a ship south and east toward Africa and Europe. Then, picking up the northeast trades, the ship would sail toward South America. Around the equator was the often airless region, the doldrums. With the southeast trades, the ship would sail south and west into variable winds. Finally, the westerlies would take the ship around the Horn, but often in a precarious and dangerous way. The first provisioning stops were at the Azores and Cape Verde Island, where vegetables and livestock were purchased for the voyage.

On Aug. 15, the *Essex* was heading toward the Azores. Later in the day, the weather began to deteriorate. At some point, Pollard made the decision to take in some of the sails, but he left flying the main topgallant and the studding sails, usually the first sails to be taken down in bad weather. In the face of the coming squall, Pollard had two options. He could point the ship into the wind, relieving the pressure on the sails or he could turn almost 180 degrees and let the storm blow the ship with it. Most captains prefer to run with a storm and this was the option that Pollard took. But, as the men were trying to turn the ship, the wind slammed the ship, putting her in a vulnerable position. The ship rolled almost ninety degrees onto her side before finally coming right side up again, with the gravitational pull of the ballast. As the storm passed, a gloom sank over the crew. The ship had been severely damaged: several sails had been shredded, and two whaleboats had been washed away. This left the ship with only two workable boats.

Pollard thought they should return to Nantucket for repairs but Chase argued that they should continue on. He thought they would be able to get spare whaleboats in the Azores. Joy, the second mate, agreed. Pollard, instead of insisting on his way as most captains did, acquiesced to the mates and they continued on.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The *Essex* sails from Nantucket in 1819 with twenty-one men aboard. Philbrick gives more information about the boat in this chapter, including descriptions of the living quarters and the various sails. He also includes background information about the routes that whaleships generally followed as they headed toward the west coast of South America. This path illustrates how the ships were dependent on the direction of the wind to get them to where they wanted to be. This will become important in later chapters as the men try to sail to South America after the shipwreck.

We also see the first of George Pollard's decision changes. At several key points in the voyage, Pollard makes a decision, only to change it when his first and second mate argue for another option. In this case, Pollard gives in and continues the voyage even though his first instinct is to go back to Nantucket for repairs.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After stopping in the Azores for provisions, the *Essex* made its way to the Cape Verde Islands. There, the men were able to purchase a whaleboat to help make up for the ones that had been damaged. They were still short in this area, however, with only four whaleboats. This meant that they would only have one spare, when often whalships carried up to three spares.

South of the equator, halfway between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, the lookout spotted the first whale of the journey. The men began to prepare the whaleboats, placing harpoon line in the boats and sharpening the harpoons, or irons. Within a mile of the whales, the ship was brought to a near standstill and the majority of the men positioned themselves in the boats. Each boat would contain a mate, a boatsteerer, and four oarsmen. Each man had his own task as the boats harpooned and brought in a whale. Chase's boat proved to be the fastest this day, coming within harpooning distance of the whale. Benjamin Lawrence was the boat's novice harpooner, a frightening experience sometimes known to make men faint. He hadn't yet moved to harpoon the whale before a second sperm whale came up under their boat and sent the men pitching into the ocean. Pollard and Joy, in their respective boats, abandoned the hunt and picked up the men from Chase's boat. The *Essex* was down another whaleboat.

Several days later, after Chase's boat had been repaired, another whale was sighted. The men harpooned a whale, but this time did not kill it. A harpooned whale would drag the boat along at high speeds, called the "Nantucket sleigh ride," until it tired itself out and the men could come to within stabbing distance of the whale. If the whale was too spirited yet, the men would take up a boat-spade and hack away at the tendons in the whale's tail. Then, an eleven to twelve foot long killing lance would be used to pierce the whale's vital organs. When it found its mark, the whale would begin choking on its own blood, spouting blood from its blowhole. For many, including Nickerson on this journey, the first whale kill was often the first warm-blooded animal the inexperienced sailors had killed, as there were no large mammals to hunt on Nantucket.

The dead whale was towed back headfirst to the ship. The crew secured the body to the ship and lowered the cutting stage. The mates hacked a hole into the whale's side, just above the fin, and then they slowly began tearing away the blubber. Once the blubber was gone, the men decapitated the whale and the head was hauled up onto the deck. They cut a hole into the top of the case, a cavity filled with spermaceti, and used buckets to remove the oil. One or two men climbed into the case to gather the remaining oil. Before cutting loose what was left of the body, the sailors probed the intestines to look for ambergris, an ash-colored substance that was used to make perfume. Two large, four-barreled iron try-pots were set up and were full of blubber. A fire was started beneath the pots and the flames melted down the blubber into oil.



"Trying out" a whale took up to three days, with the men getting little sleep, and having to deal with the mixture of oil, blood, and smoke that clung to everything.

As the ship neared Antarctica, morale on the *Essex* worsened. They had been at sea for over four months and only had one whale to show for it. The slow progress to Cape Horn and the knockdown after leaving Nantucket only increased the feelings of tension. The crew's discontent focused on food. Officers ate much the same as they would on land, on plates with utensils and with plenty of vegetables and salted meat. They also enjoyed almost all of the fresh meat that became available and freshly baked bread. The crew, eating in their areas, sat on chests around a large wooden tub containing a hunk of salted meat. The meat was so salty that the saltwater it was placed in to make it soft enough to chew actually lowered its salt content. The crew was also only given a negligible amount of food.

One day the men found their ration was even paltrier than usual and they held an impromptu meeting. They decided to show it to Captain Pollard and file a complaint. By bringing the food up, the men violated the sacred space of the quarterdeck, which was normally reserved only for the officers. This was a challenge to the ship's authority. Pollard, in the face of the crew's rising timidity, was able to goad them back into submission. He had proven he had the ability to put the men in their place.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The *Essex* had difficulties on this fateful voyage from the very beginning. After almost being capsized in a storm several days out, the crew was able to find only one spare whaleboat and then another was damaged after the crew sighted its first whale. The delay in a whale sighting certainly affected the men's morale as well. After being at sea for over four months, the crew had been able to bring in only one whale. This meant that their journey would probably be lengthened in the Pacific as they tried to fill their holds with whale oil.

The men also challenge Pollard's authority, complaining to him about their rations. Unlike the situation after the storm where Pollard backed down to his mates' arguments, he remains solid here in the face of the crew's challenge. Although he had regained control of the crew in this circumstance, his indecision and desire to take in the crew's arguments would later doom many of his crew to death.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Sailing around Cape Horn was dangerous, although ships from Nantucket had been rounding it since 1791. Faced with storms and the dangerousness of the Cape itself, it took more than a month for the *Essex* to round Cape Horn. In January 1820, the lookout sighted the island of St. Mary's, which was off the coast of Chile and was a gathering spot for whalers. For whalers in the Pacific, the year had been a difficult one. Political troubles had erupted in Chile and Peru and it had been a terrible whaling season.

The *Essex* spent several luckless months off the coast of Chile, before beginning to find some success off the coast of Peru. In two months, the crew boiled down 450 barrels of oil, the equivalent of eleven whales. Yet, the weather continued to torment the *Essex*. The large seas made it difficult to raise and lower the whaleboats and did not provide a stable platform to cut up the blubber.

As the crew hunted, the inexperienced sailors gradually became accustomed to the business of whaling. All aspects became easier and they started to appreciate the process for it would bring them money. Yet, even more than that, each whale that was killed and its oil stored moved the men closer to returning home to Nantucket and loved ones. During the time they whaled off the coast of Peru, the crew also received letters from home, brought on the *Aurora*, which had left five months after the *Essex*.

The meeting of the *Aurora* and the *Essex* gave Pollard and Daniel Russell, the captain of the other ship, time to discuss the recent discovery of a new whaling ground. In 1818, a ship had gone farther out into the Pacific and discovered the Offshore Ground, a place with many sperm whales. Pollard understood that whales appeared there in November. He decided to head for the area at that time.

In September, the ship stopped at Atacames in Ecuador. There, Henry Dewitt, one of the African Americans on board, deserted. This wasn't a large surprise, as sailors left whaleships regularly but the timing was bad for Pollard. As each whaleboat needed six sailors, this would leave only two men to manage the *Essex*.

On October 2, the ship sailed for the Galapagos Islands, six hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador. The islands were a popular provisioning stop for whaleships as it was away from the political turmoil of South America and sperm whales were often found in the area. During their journey to the islands, the crew killed two more whales, their oil total now up to seven hundred barrels, about half of what they needed for a full journey. As they reached Hood Island, however, the crew was more concerned with a leak that had been discovered in the ship. The men heeled the ship over onto her side to expose the problem. The men gathered 180 tortoises from the island as well.



Chapter 4 Analysis

Philbrick provides more details about the ship's fateful voyage in this chapter. In doing so, he gives information about the situations that whalers faced on their journeys in the Pacific. We learn about the locations where ships often stopped to gather provisions and about the discovery of the Offshore Ground. Hunting in this area would contribute to the problems the *Essex* would face later. We also learn more about the structural problems of the *Essex*. At twenty years old, the ship was old and facing a number of issues that made it vulnerable to the elements. Although this leak would be fixed, the age and condition of the ship would contribute to its sinking later in the book.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

By November 1820, the ship was over a thousand miles west of the Galapagos, traveling along the equator. Nantucket whalers were familiar with parts of the Pacific. They had been traveling along the coast of South America for over three decades and they also knew the area around Australia and New Zealand, as some Nantucketers captained English whalers who hunted in that area. But the area lying between the island of Timor and the west coast of South America was still largely unknown to them. The *Essex* was on the edge of the unknown filled with unimaginable dangers.

The whales were proving elusive to the crew, but they finally approached a whale on November 16. Chase and his whaleboat waited for the whale to surface but when it did it was directly under the boat, throwing Chase and the crew into the water, damaging another whaleboat.

On November 20, four days later, the lookout spotted whales again. The ship was 40 miles south of the equator and more than 1,500 nautical miles west of the Galapagos. Chase and his whaleboat again went after the whale, ordering Lawrence to steer the boat close to the whale. But as soon as the harpoon hit the whale, it panicked and battered the boat with its tail, creating a hole in the boat's side. They rowed back to the *Essex* and pulled the boat up for repairs. Both Pollard's and Joy's crews were fastened to whales at this time, adding to Chase's injury. The crew onboard steered the ship toward the other whaleboats.

Off the port bow, a huge sperm whale appeared, a male that was about eighty-five feet long and about eighty tons. The whale was also acting strangely, floating quietly on the surface of the water rather than fleeing. Even though the whale was close, Chase and the others did not perceive it as a threat. Then, the whale began to move, picking up speed, and heading toward the *Essex's* port side. The men tried to move the ship to avoid it, but the whale rammed the ship. The men were amazed, as never before had a whale been known to attack a ship. The whale went underneath the ship, knocking off the false keel, and surfaced on the starboard. Chase grabbed a lance to kill the whale, but he hesitated, noticing that the flukes were close to the whale's rudder and if he attacked, the whale might destroy the steering device with its tail.

A sperm whale's design allows it to survive a head-on collision with a ship. Its battering ram shaped head is one-third its length and the oil filled cavity cushions the blow to vital organs. Less than a minute after the collision, the whale was showing signs of reviving. It veered leeward and swam about six hundred yards away. It began snapping its jaws and thrashing the water with its tail. It swam windward, crossing the bow of the ship at high speed. Then, it stopped several hundred yards ahead of the ship and turned in the ship's direction. The whale struck the ship again, just beneath the anchor. It pushed the



ship backward until water surged over the transom. One of the men noticed that water was filling the belowdecks. The whale swam off.

The ship was going down bow-first. William Bond, the steward, retrieved Pollard's and Chase's trunks from the belowdecks along with the navigational equipment. The other men retrieved the spare whaleboat and they gathered the men and supplies onboard. The ship soon capsized. Pollard and Joy now noticed that the ship was sinking and they cut their whales loose and raced back. No more than ten minutes had passed since the whale's attack to the ship's capsizing. The *Essex's* planking had probably been weakened by rot or marine growth. One naval architect has suggested that if the boat were new, she would have withstood the attack.

The whale that rammed the boat was large even by the standards of a sperm whale. Today, male sperm whales rarely grow to more than sixty-five feet. The sperm whale has the largest brain of any animal and this may be related to its sophisticated ability to process and create sounds. Females use a Morse code like series of clicks to communicate, while males use louder clicks, or clangs. On the morning that the ship sank, Owen Chase was also making clicking sounds as he nailed a piece of canvas to the bottom of the damaged whaleboat. This may have attracted the whale's attention. Some scholars have argued that the whale might first have run the ship by mistake. However, this soon became an all-out attack. Bull sperm whales are loners who challenge other males that they meet along the way.

Arriving on the scene, Pollard attempted to take control of the situation. They needed to get as much food and water out of the ship as possible. To do so, they needed to cut the masts so the hull could right. Forty-five minutes later, the task was complete. Most of the provisions were unreachable, but they managed to find six hundred pounds of hardtack, casks of freshwater, some tools and other equipment, two pistols and a musket, and several Galapagos turtles and two hogs. Then the ship shuddered and sank.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In many ways, the story of the *Essex* and its crew begins in this chapter. Although the previous chapters introduced important background information about the crew, the ship, and the first part of the voyage, this chapter introduces the attack on the ship and the terrible position that the crew find themselves in as they watch their ship sink in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This is the point where the tale of the *Essex* deviates from the tales that could be told of other whaleships at the time. The whale's attack and the events that will follow set this voyage and this ship apart from other whaleships of the time.

Philbrick also discusses briefly some of the theories about why the whale attacked the ship. Some scholars have argued that the first hit was an accident that then provoked the bull sperm whale. Others have pointed out that bull sperm whales can be aggressive towards each other and that this may have contributed to the attack.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The crew remained by the wrecked ship through the night. Their obvious next step was to prepare to leave it but this was something that the men did not want to contemplate. Finally, the men began stripping the sails off the ship, and with needle and thread from Chase's trunk, they began sewing new sails for the whaleboats. Other men built masts from the ship's spars. The winds increased throughout the day and waves splashed up over the edges of the boat, making work difficult. The officers realized that they needed to modify the boats and had the men build up the sides of each boat.

The next morning, Chase rowed over to Pollard and told him it was time to leave. As their ships were only equipped with sails and could only travel with the wind, their options were few. Pollard deemed backtracking to the Galapagos Islands impossible because of the wind direction. In the West, the Marquesas were about 1,200 miles away, but the men had heard that the inhabitants were cannibals. Several hundred miles to the south of the Marquesas were the Tuamotu Archipelago Islands. But again, they had a bad reputation among sailors. To the west of those islands were the Society Islands and Pollard felt they were a safer option and decided to sail for them. Chase and Joy, however, disagreed and argued that as they were largely ignorant of the Society Islands, the men should sail south for about 1,500 miles where they would encounter variable breezes that they could ride to Chile or Peru. They believed that this route would take them about two months and they had provisions for that amount of time. Along the way, they might also encounter another ship. Pollard succumbed to their arguments, a fatal mistake for most of the crew.

The Nantucketers' ignorance about the Pacific, which they had been sailing for several decades, is astounding. Chinese traders coming to ports such as New York, Boston, and Salem, all of which were close to Nantucket, regularly stopped at the Marquesas, providing accessible and reliable information contrary to the cannibalism rumors. Several months before the ship sailed, an article even appeared in the *New Bedford Mercury* with news about the Marquesas, calling the natives peaceful. The crew's ignorance of the Society Islands, including Tahiti, is also surprising. There was a thriving English mission on Tahiti since 1797. "Nantucketers were suspicious of anything beyond their immediate experience" (pg. 98). By deciding to take their chances heading toward areas that they knew, they were dealing with an element that they did know well: the sea.

The crew faced the prospect of a long journey in twenty-five-foot boats. The boats were designed for the open ocean and they had buoyancy that allowed them to ride over waves rather than through them. The dangers of whaling in general also gave the crew a high tolerance for suffering and peril.



Pollard succumbed to the wishes of his mates even though his first decision was the better of the options. He embraced a democratic style of command, which was better suited to a mate than a captain. Philbrick argues that his behavior throughout the voyage indicates that he lacked the resolve to overrule his officers.

With a plan, the officers set about splitting up the crew among the three whaleboats. Chase's boat would carry six men as it was in the worst shape, while the others would each have seven men. The officers' prime consideration in choosing the men was whether or not each individual was a Nantucketer. In the aftermath, ties of family and friends became most important and their clannishness increased. Pollard was given five Nantucketers, Chase had two, and Joy had none of them. Pollard made sure that his cousin, Owen Coffin, was placed in his whaleboat along with Coffin's friends, Charles Ramsdell and Barzillai Ray. Chase's boat, containing Nickerson, was preferable to Joy's from a Nantucket position. Joy had been suffering from some illness for a while already and he was given only outsiders. Although the three boats were still under the command of Pollard, each boat crew was autonomous as well, for any moment a boat could be separated from the others. Each boat was given sixty-five gallons of freshwater, two hundred pounds of hardtack, and two turtles. Pollard also gave each mate a pistol, keeping the musket himself.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The decisions that the officers made the first day after the whale's attack were important ones. Some would help keep the men alive; others would condemn many to death. Most importantly, Pollard gave in to the other officers and agreed to sail in an indirect route for South America, rather than go with the winds to the west, which would have been a shorter distance to any of the islands. The men's suspicious nature about the unknown contributed to their reluctance to sail for the Society Islands or other islands in that area, although more men may have survived had they chosen this plan. Their estimated time for the journey to South America would take perhaps more time than the men had provisions, and they would be at the mercy of the winds.

In other ways, however, the men made smart decisions. They raised the sides of the boats so that waves would not crash over them. This helped protect the men, the boat, and their supplies of food. The men also made good use of the materials that they had available, using the sails of the ship to make new sails for their boats and making masts as well.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

As darkness fell the first day away from the *Essex*, the wind steadily increased. The men were still learning to handle the rowing boats now adapted to sailing. Each boat crew divided into two watches. The officers decide that they would make every effort to keep the boats together. As well as helping each other if needed, this also was a practical decision since there was not enough navigation equipment for all three boats. The crews maintained a three-way conversation among the boats, even at night, and the men talked about their chances of survival. They hoped that they would see a whaleship when they entered the Offshore Ground, about five days sailing from where they were. Whaleships always posted lookouts so if a boat was near, so there was a good chance they'd be sighted.

The men had several options at this point. They could postpone their time there in hopes of intersecting with a whaleship but it was a gamble, jeopardizing their chances of reaching land before running out of provisions. But the original plan gave the men a sense of control, rather than waiting for the hope of sighting a ship. Whatever the plan, the men needed to make the provisions last two months. Each man would receive a half pint of water and six ounces of hardtack each day. This was equivalent to about six slices of bread and about five hundred calories. The rations amounted to a starvation diet. But as the men discovered, the biggest concern was water.

After a night of high winds, the men were relieved to find the boats still together the next morning. The officers tried to keep track of the latitude and longitude, but Pollard soon decided to abandon keeping track of the correct longitude.

By the third day in the boats, the waves were very large. One wave went over the side of Chase's boat, almost filling it with water. The men bailed, but after the boat was safe again, they discovered that some of the hardtack had been soaked in seawater. They salvaged as much as possible and they tried to dry it out in the sun. The hardtack, however, had taken on more salt, which was hard on the men's already water-deprived bodies when they ate it.

The next morning, the men discovered a leak in Chase's boat, about six inches below the water line. When Pollard's boat came close, Chase had the men move so that the bow came up into the air. Pollard and Chase managed to drive in a few nails, securing the loose plank.

By November 26, the men became more depressed. They had been sailing parallel to South America, rather than toward it. Their boats had a tendency to sideslip to leeward and because of this they knew that they were more than likely west of where they should have been. That afternoon, the wind shifted and for the first time, the men were able to steer toward South America. But the following day, the wind shift once more to



the east and then began to blow hard. They shortened the sails, but were reluctant to tie the boats together to avoid separation.

That night, Chase heard Pollard shouting to Joy and he sailed toward the other boats. Pollard told them that a whale had attacked his boat. Smaller than a sperm whale, but more aggressive, a killer whale had slammed its head into their boat and taken a bite out of it. It played with the boat before attacking one more time, splitting the boat's stem. The men tried to punch the whale and finally beat it back. Pollard transferred his provisions to the other boats.

The following morning, they made a quick repair of Pollard's boat and were on their way with a strong southeasterly wind. The men in Chase's boat began feeling overwhelming thirst, as they had started eating the saltwater-damaged bread the day before. Even after they realized what was causing it, the men resolved to continue eating the bread, as they needed the nourishment. The boats began to show wear: the seams were pulling apart and the men were bailing water out of all three boats constantly.

The next day, the men's hunger was almost as bad as their thirst and Chase proposed eating one of the tortoises. They collected the blood, although some of the men couldn't make themselves drink it. They greedily ate the tortoise and once they began eating, they found it difficult to stop. Since they had left the *Essex*, they had traveled almost five hundred miles.

The next three days, the weather was good and the wind shifted to the north, allowing them to sail toward Peru. They still faced a ferocious thirst, however. On Dec. 3, the men in Chase's boat ate the last of the damaged bread and they noticed that their thirst improved a bit after this. Over the next few days, the boats separated from each other several times but they were able to find each other and reunite the boats. The officers agreed that if they became separated again, the others would take no action to find the missing boat as too much time was being lost. On Dec. 8, the men faced strong wind gusts and rain. The boats became unmanageable in the large waves. By noon the next day, the wind had subsided and the men were surprised to find that all three boats were still together. On Dec. 9, their seventeenth day in the boats, they had traveled close to 1,100 miles but they were farther from South America than when they'd started because of the wind direction. They drew abreast of the Society Islands and if they had headed west, they would have run into Tahiti in as little as a week. Nonetheless, they stuck to their original plan.

Chapter 7 Analysis

During their first three weeks in the boats, the crew of the *Essex* faced a number of hardships and difficulties. Not only did they face hunger, thirst, and weather, another whale, adding insult to injury, also attacked Pollard's boat. Damaged boats were hastily repaired, but they remained fragile. The men existed in an even more vulnerable state. Damaged bread made their thirst worse, waves threatened to sink the boats, and storms raged. The boats were together for the time being but many aspects, most

importantly the weather, threatened this as well. Most importantly, the men were farther west of South America than when they started, yet they continued on rather than heading west toward the Society Islands. The journey would have likely been shorter and easier, as the wind would be propelling them along rather than fighting them.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The night of Dec. 9, Pollard's boat disappeared. The men on the other boats tried to locate them by calling out but there was no response. Chase and Joy decided to wait even though they had earlier agreed not to wait if any of the boats separated. Early the next morning, they saw a sail and by altering their course, the three boats were reunited again.

The men's hunger and thirst was at its worst since leaving the wreck. Chase transferred the provisions to his chest to make sure that no one was tempted to steal the bread. When he slept, he would put an arm or leg across it and keep the loaded pistol by his side. That afternoon, a school of flying fish surrounded the boat and several fell into the boat. The following day, the wind died down to almost nothing. Chase proposed that they eat the second tortoise.

On Dec. 13, the wind shifted to the north, making it possible for the men to steer the boats toward South America. Their observations placed them at least three hundred nautical miles from the light variable winds that could propel them east. Yet, the officers chose to believe that they had reached them and were devastated the following day when the wind vanished. They were rapidly approaching their deadline for reaching the variables. Their supply of water was in danger of running out. The heat became unbearable and several men in Chases' boat decided to hang over the edge in the water. They discovered that the bottoms of the boats were covered with gooseneck barnacles. The men plucked them off and ate them. They would be, with the flying fish, the only marine life the men would manage to harvest. They were unsuccessful in catching any fish other than those who dropped into the boat.

By Dec. 15, Chase's boat was taking in more water and they discovered that a plank at the bottom of the boat had pulled loose. This was problematic, as they couldn't flip the boat over to repair it. Benjamin Lawrence proposed diving underwater and holding the hatchet against the bottom. Then when Chase nailed the board back in, the end of the nail would curl back into the boat. They did this and repaired the boat.

Pollard proposed trying to row out of the calm winds. The men would be given double rations and at night, they would row. The men rowed like old men, as the last three weeks had worn their bodies down. They found the simple act of sitting a torture and it was hard for them to hold the oars, let alone row. The next day, they felt a breeze, but from the wrong direction, southeast. The men knew that if the wind didn't shift, they wouldn't have enough water to last them the time needed to reach Chile.

By Dec. 19, a month since the *Essex* sank, several of the men had appeared to have given up. The men's hair was falling out. Their skin was covered with sores and was



burned. Their eyes sunk into their skulls. But the next morning, William Wright stood to stretch his legs and saw land.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The crew's situation worsened in the mid part of December. Their bodies were showing the toll of the open ocean. Saltwater burned into open sores. The sun burned their exposed skin. The men also faced a great deal of hunger and thirst. They had existed on a starvation diet for a month.

Beyond their physical torture, the men also faced the agonizing reality that they were not making the progress toward South America that they needed to. The winds died down. The men tried rowing but this was difficult given their physical conditions. When the winds did blow, they were often blowing in the wrong direction. Given this, it was unlikely that the men would reach South America before their food and water ran out.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The men at first feared that the land sighting would turn out to be another mirage but when they stood, they could all see the beach in the distance. The men in the three boats sprang to life. Pollard and Chase examined the maps and decided that the island must be Ducie Island. The men were worried that the island might be inhabited, but they saw no sign of others when they sailed around the island.

Chase led a scouting party onto the island. They looked for a source of water. If they couldn't find any fresh water, any time they spent on the island was cutting into their already slim chance for survival. Chase's first inclination was to leave immediately. But one of the men had discovered a cleft in a rock that gave off a slight trickle of water. They decided to spend a night on the island and use the following day to search for more water. The men all slept on the beach that evening.

The morning came with the agonies of hunger and thirst. Severely dehydrated, the men began losing the ability to speak. They plucked birds from their nests but they were still unable to find more water. The rest of the island was a pile of coral that pierced their feet. Pollard and his steward had spent the day collecting crabs and birds and they roasted them up for the men.

What the men did not realize was that they were within a few hundred miles of saving themselves. They were not on Ducie Island as they thought but on Henderson Island, seventy miles to the west. Just four hundred miles to the west, a small community was flourishing on Pitcairn. They had all the food and water that the men needed.

On Dec. 22, the men again looked for water. They climbed the cliffs of the island and examined the rocks on the beach. Chase and several men went back to the rock that they had first found water at and chiseled at it, producing a hole. But no more water appeared. But several men did find a spring coming from a hole in a large flat rock. The men drank. The spring was below the tide line and was exposed for just a half hour at low tide. They filled up two kegs before the rock disappeared again. They sat down to an evening meal after collecting more birds and fish. They agreed to stay on the island for several more days before deciding what to do, as they now had water and a supply of food.

The next day they returned to the spring and collected about twenty gallons of water. They began to notice that the birds were not returning to the island. In five days, the crew had greatly exhausted their food source. Henderson Island is not rich in natural resources and has always been a difficult place for humans to live.

By Dec. 26, the crew had decided to abandon the island, feeling that on the ocean they would at least be making progress toward lands where provisions would be. They



worked on their whaleboats in order to prepare them. Chile was three thousand miles away, about twice as far as they had already sailed. The officers realized that Easter Island was one-third that distance and despite not knowing anything about it, they decided to sail for it. Three men, Thomas Chappel, Seth Weeks, and William Wright, decided to stay on the island. Pollard told the men that if he made it to South America, he'd try to have them rescued.

That evening, Pollard wrote a letter home, addressing it to his wife, Mary. At the west end of the crew's encampment, they had found a large tree and transformed it into a Galapagos-like post office. On Dec. 27, the men loaded up the boats and sailed to a beach they had seen on their first circuit of the island. They caught a few fish and birds.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Although Henderson Island did not prove to be the salvation that the men needed, it did give them a fighting chance. When they sighted the island, their dehydration was so severe that it was making talking difficult and they had existed on starvation rations for over a month. The island provided them with some food, although it quickly became depleted and some fresh water, although not a large amount. They were able to rest and refresh themselves for a few days. The days would not bring them back to their starting conditions, but it did stave off death.

Three men decide to stay on the island when the others leave. Even though the island did not provide them with enough of the things they needed, it must have been disheartening for the men to head back out onto the ocean, knowing that they might wander there until they ran out of food and water. The men who remained decided to cast their luck with the island, but they too had to realize that they might never be rescued.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Before leaving the island, Chase put a flat stone and some firewood into each boat. The stones could be used as platforms for cooking, and that night, the men cooked the fish and birds they had caught. The officers hoped to sail directly east to Easter Island but for this to happen, they needed two weeks of westerly breezes. They were still in the trades however, where the winds blow from the southeast for more than 70 percent of the year. But that night, a breeze came from the northwest as they needed.

The officers also realized that they had to keep track of their longitude, which they had not done before. The noon observation would give them the latitude and they began using an improvised log line to gauge their speed. Their compass gave them direction. From these things, they would be able to figure out their longitude.

The northwesterly breeze held for three days, before shifting to the east-northeast. The officers realized that they were too far south to reach Easter Island. The next islands were about eight hundred miles off the coast of Chile, but there were 2,500 nautical miles between the men and the islands: farther than they had sailed in the last forty-six days. They ate the last of their fish and birds, leaving them once again with a cup of water and three ounces of hardtack per man per day.

Matthew Joy soon requested to move to the captain's boat. Joy, who was close to dying, wanted to do so among Nantucketers, his own people. Two days later, he asked to return to his original boat. "His loyalty to his crew in the end greater than his need for comfort from his fellow Nantucketers" (pg. 153). By four o'clock that afternoon, Joy was dead. The men sewed him up in his clothes, tied a stone to his feet, and buried him at sea. Obed Hendricks took over command of the boat, soon discovering that Joy's illness had prevented him from keeping a close eye on the provisions. There was only enough hardtack in the boat to last a day or two.

That night, the wind blew into a full gale. Visibility was low and by eleven, Chase, whose boat was in the lead, could not see the others. They drifted the boat for an hour, hoping the others would catch up, but they did not. Chase and his men resumed the agreed upon course. Six hundred miles south of Easter Island, nineteen days from Henderson Island, and more than a thousand miles to go, Chase and his crew were alone. Chase soon cut the already meager rations in half.

Pollard and Hendricks continued on in their boats, sure that they would meet up with Chase. On Jan. 14, Hendricks' boat ran out of provisions. Pollard and his men shared their provisions with the other boat, leaving all of them with only several more days of food.



The men had been rehydrated on Henderson Island, so hunger was now the men's most desperate need, as it takes much longer for a person to recover from the effects of starvation. The week on Henderson Island had done little to restore the men's reserves of muscle and fat. They were as close to death as they had ever been.

Several days later, a large shark slammed Chase's boat. Chase tried to stab it with a lance, but found that he didn't have the strength to puncture its tough skin. The next day, a group of porpoises swam around the boat, but again the men were too weak to kill one.

On Jan. 20, two months since the *Essex* had sank, Richard Peterson declared it was time to die. He refused his daily ration of bread. He died later that day and his body was buried at sea.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Back on the ocean, the men face many of the same hurdles that they had before landing on Henderson Island. The direction of the winds prevent them from getting to Easter Island, and they are thousands of miles away from the next set of islands that they might be able to reach. Food and water are scarce again, with the men still close to starvation. They are unable to collect any food from the ocean, as they are too weak. The days after leaving the island also bring about the deaths of two men, Joy and Peterson, both of whom were buried at sea. Soon, however, the men would not be in a position to so easily let the dead go.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

On Jan. 20, eight days after losing sight of Chase's boat, Pollard's and Hendricks' boats were almost out of provisions. That same day, Lawson Thomas died. He was one of the black men on Hendricks's boat. With only about a pound of hardtack left, the men spoke about whether they should eat rather than bury the body.

Famished sailors had long kept themselves alive through their dead shipmates. By the nineteenth century, cannibalism at sea was widespread, compelling survivors to report when they had not done this. Shipwrecked sailors often ate their dead shipmates when there was no alternative.

The men reached the conclusion that they would have to do this in order to stay alive. Two months after deciding not to sail for the Society Islands for fear of being devoured by cannibals, the men were about to eat one of their own. Pollard later reported that the men lit a fire and roasted the organs and meat of Thomas. Thomas, suffering from starvation himself, probably only yielded around thirty pounds of meat. Two days later, another black man from Hendricks's boat, Charles Shorter, died. It is not surprising that two black men died first, as they had probably had an inferior diet before the sinking and studies have shown that blacks' have a lower amount of body fat. Thus, they had probably begun living off their muscle tissue before the white sailors.

Over a hundred miles to the south, Chase and his men drifted in a windless sea. With the death of Peterson, there were only three men left with Chase: Benjamin Lawrence, Thomas Nickerson, and Isaac Cole. On Jan. 26, the boat had sunk south and a bitterly cold rain began to fall. Lower body temperatures from starvation and few clothes made the men vulnerable to hypothermia. They had to sail north again, towards the equator and warmer temperatures. But the effort to do so was too much and the men abandoned the boat to its own course.

In Hendricks' boat, another man died. Isaac Sheppard became the third African American to die and be eaten in seven days. The following day, on Jan. 28, Samuel Reed, a black sailor in Pollard's boat died and was eaten. The crew was no longer operating under the same rules of conduct that they had lived under before the ship's sinking. As there were few survivors and no black survivors, it is possible that the Nantucketers played a greater role in insuring their survival than has been suggested. But there is also no evidence of overt favoritism.

Each death provided the men with food, but it also reduced the number of people who were eating as well. Yet because of the conditions, the men's bodies lacked the fat that is necessary to digest meat. As such, it was of limited nutritional value.



On Jan. 29, the night was dark and Pollard's and Hendricks's boats were having trouble keeping track of each other. Soon, Hendricks' boat had disappeared and Pollard's men were too weak to try to find it. This left Pollard, Owen Coffin, Charles Ramsdell, and Barzillai Ray, all from Nantucket, alone. They were 1,500 miles from the South American coast with only a half-eaten corpse to keep them alive.

On Feb. 6, the men in Pollard's boat began to consider their fate. Charles Ramsdell suggested that they cast lots to see who would be killed to keep the others alive. In other similar circumstances, sailors had made other choices. The crew of one ship had used their dead shipmates as bait rather than eat the corpse themselves. Pollard at first would not listen to the suggestion, but the other men persisted. Pollard again gave in the wishes of those around him and agreed to cast lots. The lot fell to Owen Coffin, Pollard's cousin. Pollard offered to be killed instead but Coffin was resigned. Lots fell to Charles Ramsdell to kill him. He refused for a time but eventually went through with the action.

Chapter 11 Analysis

It is ironic that the very thing the crew feared most when the *Essex* sank, cannibalism, became the very thing that would keep some of them alive. The men were so afraid of landing on an island of cannibals that they charted an almost impossible course toward "safety." Rather than choosing an easier sail, a shorter distance, and a greater chance of survival, the men choose the harder and longer route for fear of cannibalism. In the end, it was not cannibalistic natives that would eat them, but their own shipmates. Although this was not uncommon for shipwrecked sailors to do, the men did have other choices available to them. At several points, they chose not to sail to closer islands. They could have used the men's bodies as bait to catch fish with. Yet in their circumstances, the men probably saw the bodies as the easiest alternative for their starving bodies.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

On Jan. 28, 1821, Chase and his men lay in the bottom on the boat, using a tattered piece of canvas to shield them from the cold drizzle that fell. They had fourteen days of hardtack left but they had too few provisions and too far to go. Chase abandoned his strict rationing, realizing that if he didn't, they would all die anyway. The men were all still alive on Feb. 6, but barely. Isaac Cole declared he was giving up. On Feb. 8, Cole ranted incoherently. The men placed him on a board across the seats where he whimpered and moaned before convulsing. He died later that afternoon.

The corpse lay in the boat that night but none of the remaining men raised the option of eating the body. As Lawrence and Nickerson prepared the body for burial the next morning, Chase stopped them. The men removed the limbs and the heart before committing the rest of the body to the sea. They lit a fire, ate some of the meat, and laid the rest out to dry. The next morning, they discovered that the strips of flesh that they had laid out were turning rancid so they cooked them, giving them enough meat for six or seven days.

In Pollard's boat, Barzillai Ray died on Feb. 11. On Feb. 14, in Chase's boat, the men ate the last of Isaac Cole. They were within three hundred miles of the islands of Masafuera and Juan Fernandez. The wind was in their favor and they made good time throughout the night. At 7 a.m. on Feb 18, Benjamin Lawrence sighted a sail about seven miles away. The men worked in a desperate race to reach the ship before it was too far away. There was no lookout on the ship but eventually someone on the deck saw them.

Captains would sometimes refuse to have castaways on board. At times, they may have been reluctant to share meager supplies or feared communicable diseases. But in this case, as soon as Chase explained they were from a wreck, the captain of the *Indian* invited them on board. They were rescued on the eighty-ninth day since leaving the *Essex*. Chase had navigated them over 2,500 nautical miles with surprising accuracy.

Three hundred miles to the north, Pollard and Ramsdell sailed. They pushed east for the next five days, approaching the island of St. Mary's off the Chilean coast. On Feb. 23, it had been ninety-four days since the *Essex* sank and twelve days since Barzillai Ray died. The two men had long since eaten the last bit of flesh and were now cracking open the bones and eating the marrow. The bones became their obsession, and they stuffed their pockets with finger bones. Suddenly, the men heard shouting.

On Feb. 23, the crew of the *Dauphin* looked down from their ship and saw two men in a whaleboat full of bones. The captain of the *Dauphin* brought the two men aboard. At five o'clock that evening, the *Dauphin's* captain hailed the *Diana* and the three captains had



dinner. Over dinner, Pollard recounted what had happened. Later that night, Aaron Paddack, the *Diana's* captain returned to his ship and wrote down Pollard's account.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Roughly three months after the *Essex* had sank into the ocean, two of the whaleboats are rescued in different areas near the South American coast. Only two men remain alive in Pollard's boat and only three men in Chase's boat. Pollard and Ramsdell have eaten several of their fellow shipmates as their ordeal was progressed. They are found with a boat full of bones and have become obsessed with them, hoarding and keeping them in their pockets. All of the men are nearing death from starvation and dehydration. They suffered enormously over the months they were on the ocean and once rescued, both sets of men wanted desperately to tell their stories.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Chase, Lawrence, and Nickerson arrived in Valparaiso, Chile on Feb. 25, 1821. The men spoke openly about having to resort to cannibalism. The U.S. frigate *Constellation* was in port and the acting American consul arranged to have the men take to it. The men were placed under the care of a surgeon. The crew of the *Constellation* was moved by the men and their tale and each crew member gave a dollar toward their assistance. The men had a difficult time recovering.

A week later, the Nantucket whaleship *Hero* arrived in Valparaiso. The ship had encountered three whaleships, the *Dauphin*, the *Diana*, and the *Two Brothers*. The captain of the *Dauphin* told the *Hero* that he had the captain and another crew member of the *Essex* onboard. Pollard and Ramsdell were transferred to the *Two Brothers*, which was headed to Valparaiso. Pollard had suffered a relapse soon after his rescue and when the whaleship *Eagle* offered to transport the *Essex* survivors home, Pollard was judged too weak. The others bid him farewell and left for home. Two months later, Pollard would follow on the *Two Brothers*.

During this time, Commodore Ridgely, the commander of the *Constellation*, made arrangements for the rescue of Chappel, Weeks, and Wright from what the men thought was Ducie Island. The *Surry*, an Australian trading vessel, agreed to pick the men up but when it arrived, the tiny atoll was uninhabited. The captain studied his navigational charts and wondered if the crew of the *Essex* had made a mistake. He decided to check Henderson Island.

Once there, he had his men fire a gun. Chappel, Weeks, and Wright had just sat down to eat a bird. Birds and fish were the only animals left on the island. From the day after their shipmates left, the spring of freshwater never appeared above the tide line. The men tried digging a series of wells but couldn't reach groundwater. They collected rain from the rocks but were severely dehydrated. When they heard the gunshot, the men thought it was thunder. One decided to go down to have a look and when he didn't come back the others joined him on the beach. The crew of the *Surry* tried several times to land a boat but the coral and surf was too dangerous. Finally Chappel swam out and reached the launch. The crew discussed what to do next, thinking that they might have to return the next day. Chappel refused to leave the other two, however, and with a rope tied around his waist, swam back over the coral. One by one, the men were pulled out to the boat. The next day, Captain Raine was able to land on the island and retrieve the letters that had been left in the tree.

Three *Essex* crew members remained unaccounted for: Obed Hendricks, Joseph West, and William Bond. They were in the whaleboat that separated from Pollards on the night of Jan. 29. Months after the three men had been rescued from Henderson Island, another ship touched down there, finding a whaleboat washed up on the shore with four



skeletons inside. It is unknown whether this was the remains of these men, including the bones of Isaiah Sheppard, who had been the last crew member to die before the separation from Pollard.

During 1820 and 1821, as the crew of the *Essex* struggled for their lives on the open sea, their families were back on Nantucket, enduring one of the coldest winters on record. They had no reason to be concerned. Letters from the crew mailed from Galapagos in late October would not have reached Nantucket until February or March. Before the first survivors reached the island, a letter arrived that told of the disaster. The letter told the account of the *Essex* but was incomplete. Pollard and Ramsdell had been rescued after Chase, but their account was the first to reach home, telling only of themselves and the three men left on the island. They were assumed to be the only survivors.

On June 11, the *Eagle* arrived with Chase, Lawrence, Ramsdell, and Nickerson. Their appearance was unexpected in light of the letter. Chase discovered that he was the father of a fourteen-month-old daughter. Although word spread through New England, the disaster is not mentioned in the Nantucket historical record and the newspaper in town did not write about the disaster that summer.

On Aug. 5, Pollard returned to the island. More than 1,500 people waited at the wharves to see him once the boat was sighted. As he made his way toward home, people remained silent, letting him pass. A whaling captain generally bore a heavy weight of responsibility. He had to train any inexperienced crew, guide the ship around the Horn and back, and answer to the ship's owners. Since whalers received a portion of the proceeds at the end of a voyage, Pollard and the other survivors had nothing to show for their ordeal. It is likely that Pollard went through a lengthy interview with the ship's owners. But Pollard also had to answer to a member of his own family: his aunt, Nancy Bunker Coffin, Owen Coffin's mother. She had entrusted him with the care of her son and Nickerson relates in his account that she never reconciled to the presence of Pollard once he returned. The community was less harsh. Pollard did not allow his experiences to defeat him. He was offered the command of the *Two Brothers* soon after his return. Both Nickerson and Ramsdell would serve under him again on this ship.

Owen Chase began working on a book about the disaster and his experiences. He had kept a daily log during his time in the boats and he appears to have gotten a copy of a letter written by Aaron Paddack, the *Diana's* captain, which told Pollard's account. The book shows signs that Chase himself did not actually write the book, but the writer probably used his dictation of facts. He had grown up with William Coffin, Jr., who had gone to Harvard rather than joining a whaleship. He is the most likely to have written the account for Chase and he went on to write other historical accounts of Nantucket and the *Globe* mutiny.

The book reached the shops on Nov. 22, almost exactly a year after the *Essex* sank. Chase's account focused on what happened in his own boat. His accounts of the deaths that happened in the two other boats is limited to a brief summation at the end. In doing so, he transformed the story of the *Essex* into an account of personal trial and triumph.



He fails to mention several things that would have cast him in a more negative light. He does not mention that he and Joy persuaded Pollard to continue on after the first knockdown in the Gulf Stream. He also makes the decision to sail for South America after the sinking a mutual decision. Nickerson's account casts doubts on this as he related that Pollard had first wanted to sail for the Society Islands. Chase also does not write that he had a chance to kill the whale after its first attack. Chase would later sail on a New Bedford whaleship, the *Florida*, where he was the only Nantucketer.

Chapter 13 Analysis

One of the interesting notes of this chapter is the incompleteness and fragility of history. As Philbrick discussed earlier in the book, Chase's account of the story was recognized as the only account, outside of the *Diana* Captain's letter, of the sinking of the *Essex* for some time. Yet, when Nickerson's account comes to light years later, it is evident that Chase sought to present himself in a positive light within his account. He leaves out several of the decisions that he was a key part of that continued the crew on their journey of disaster. There is not a lot of detail here about how the other survivors reacted to his narrative. Yet, it is evident that Nickerson and Ramsdell trusted Pollard, sailing with him again.

The differing accounts point to the importance of multiple sources in piecing together historical accounts. Individuals chose for various reasons, both conscious and unconscious, to recount some parts of an event and not others. Individuals may also not be present for certain events within the larger narrative. For these reasons, using as many first hand accounts as possible helps to bring together a clearer picture. In the case of the *Essex*, the accounts are scarce as there were not many survivors and only several gave their accounts publicly or in print.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Pollard took on his second command with optimism. In 1822, he rounded the Horn in the *Two Brothers* and headed up the coast of South America. In the Peruvian Port of Payta, Pollard met with Charles Wilkes, who had just read Chase's account of the disaster. Pollard insisted on telling the young man his own version. Wilkes deemed Pollard a hero. Yet, there was at least one indication that Pollard had not escaped unscathed from the *Essex* ordeal. Attached to the ceiling in Pollard's cabin was netting filled with provisions.

In Feb. 1823, the *Two Brothers* and another Nantucket ship, the *Martha*, were sailing west toward a new whaling ground. In the last several years, the entire Pacific had opened up as whaling ground. They were sailing in the same latitude as French Frigate Shoals, a place of rocks and coral reefs northwest of the Hawaiian Islands, but both captains believed themselves to be west of the dangerous area. The *Two Brothers* struck something and was pounded against the coral reef. The men crowded into two whaleboats but Pollard seemed unwilling to leave the ship. The crew finally got him in. The boats were separated in the darkness but the next morning they saw a ship anchored not far off. It was the *Martha*, which had narrowly avoided crashing. Both boat crews were rescued and the *Martha* left for Oahu with the men on board.

Two months later, Pollard was on the U.S. brig *Pearl* that was headed to Boston. His whaling career was over, a twice-doomed captain. A rumor began to spread around Nantucket that Owen Coffin had not drawn the shortest piece of paper but Pollard. Then his young cousin, near death, offered to take his place. Pollard and his wife would never have any children of their own. He became Nantucket's night watchman and was known for his cheerful manner.

Chase would enjoy the success that eluded Pollard as a whaler. His first voyage on the *Florida* lasted less than two years and brought in two thousand barrels of oil. He returned to Nantucket in 1823 to find a second daughter. His wife would not recover from the birth of their third child, dying two weeks later. In June 1825, he married Matthew Joy's widow. In August, he sailed out of New Bedford on the *Winslow* as its captain. After a two-year voyage, he returned with 1,440 barrels of oil and he departed almost immediately on another. But the ship was damaged in a storm and had to return to New Bedford. He made one more voyage on the *Winslow* before returning to Nantucket. There, he was offered the command of one of the largest ships in Nantucket, the *Charles Carroll*. He also had a 1/32 owner's share in the ship. He returned in 1836 with 2,610 barrels of oil. But during his voyage, his wife died, leaving him with four children. He remarried a month after returning and left on his last whaling voyage.

Also in the Pacific at this time was Herman Melville, who had signed on the New Bedford whaleship *Acushnet*. He met William Henry Chase, Owen Chase's son. William



loaned him his copy of Chase's *Essex* narrative. Later in the voyage, Melville would catch a glimpse of Chase.

Sixteen months after Chase left Nantucket, his third wife gave birth to a son. The news of her infidelity weighed on him. He would divorce her after his return to Nantucket in 1840, although Chase took over legal guardianship of her son. Two months later, he married for the fourth time. He would remain in Nantucket for the rest of his life.

The other survivors also returned to the sea after their ordeal. Nickerson and Ramsdell found berths on other ships after the *Two Brothers* sank. In the 1840s, Ramsdell served as the captain for the *General Jackson* out of Rhode Island. Nickerson tired of whaling and became a captain in the merchant service. He and his wife relocated to Brooklyn, NY. Benjamin Lawrence served as the captain for several whaleships. Thomas Chappel returned to London. Seth Weeks and William Wright served as crew members on the *Surry*. Wright was later lost at sea in a hurricane and Weeks retired to Cape Cod.

Although Nantucketers whispered about the *Essex* well into the twentieth century, it was not openly discussed. Not only had the men resorted to cannibalism, but the first four men to be eaten were African American. Off-islanders seemed to forget about the tragedy. Accounts of the disaster appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1837, Edgar Allen Poe made use of Chase's account in *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. But Herman Melville made the most enduring use of the disaster. *Moby Dick* has several detailed references to the attack on the *Essex* and the climax draws on Chase's narrative. The novel was both a critical and financial disappointment. In 1852, Melville traveled to Nantucket and sought out Pollard.

By 1835, New Bedford had taken over Nantucket as the leading whaling port. Its deep-water harbor gave it an advantage, as did its proximity to the railroad system. But Nantucketers also helped with their own demise. While whalers from other ports were opening up new whaling grounds in the North Pacific, Nantucketers clung to the now depleted grounds that they had sailed over the previous decades. In 1846, a large portion of the town burned. The fire reached the waterfront and the oil warehouses. The town rebuilt, but when gold was found in California in 1848, many left to seek their fortunes elsewhere. On Nov. 16, 1869, the last whaling vessel left Nantucket, never to return.

The world's sperm population proved resilient. Between 1804 and 1876, it is estimated that more than 225,000 sperm whales were killed. In 1837 alone, over 6,700 whales were killed. Today there are between one and half and two million sperm whales, making them the most abundant of the world's big whales. By 1845, whalers did not believe that the population was in danger of diminishing, but they did notice that the whale's behaviors were changing. More sperm whales were fighting back. Whales struck several ships after the *Essex*. In 1851, for example, the year *Moby-Dick* was published, a sperm whale attacked a whaleship in the same waters where the *Essex* had sunk over thirty years before.



The *Ann Alexander* was a whaleship out of New Bedford and was under the command of John DeBlois. A large solitary bull whale rushed the mate's whaleboat and crushed it. The whale then attacked another of the whaleboats, also destroying it. The crew returned to the safety of the ship. The whale sank, turned, and struck the bow of the ship with its head. The whale rammed the ship a second time. Water rushed into the hold and the crew was forced into the two remaining whaleboats. They returned to the ship later for supplies but did not have enough for a journey to the Marquesas, two thousand miles to the west. DeBlois told the men to sail north to the equator where they would hope to be spotted by a ship bound for California. At dusk, he spotted a ship and the crew was on board the whaleship *Nantucket* by nightfall.

Nantucket became a virtual ghost town by the time the last survivors of the *Essex* died. Chase suffered in his old age, unable to escape the memories of his sufferings in the whaleboat. He began hiding food in the attic of his house and by 1868, he was judged insane. He died in 1869; Pollard died the following year.

Nickerson returned to Nantucket in the 1870s, developing a reputation as the foremost boardinghouse keeper on the island. One of his guests, Leon Lewis, proposed that they collaborate on a book together. Nickerson had talked with Ramsdell about his experiences in the boat with Pollard and with Seth Weeks about his time on Henderson Island. Thus, his narrative had details unavailable to Chase. But Nickerson also fell into the same trap as Chase, adjusting the account for a more positive light. He claimed that the men in Chase's boat did not eat Isaac Cole and he did not recount how at the end of the journey, he had declared it was his turn to die.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Both Nantucket and the survivors of the *Essex* changed after the ship's sinking. The island gradually lost the whaling industry to other New England ports with deeper harbors. A fire ravaged about a third of the town including the waterfront, increasing the difficulties. As the years past, it became a summer vacation spot.

The men also endured not only the ordeal with the *Essex* but its memories. Tragedy followed Pollard as he lost another ship, although the circumstances for the crew were much more favorable than with the *Essex*. Chase, although having a successful whaling career, eventually was judged insane, hoarding food in his attic. Although less is known about how the others dealt with their memories, they must have been haunted by their past, not least of which was having had to eat their fallen shipmates.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

In 1997, a sperm whale washed up on Nantucket. Efforts to save it were futile and it was decided that the skeleton would be saved for the Nantucket Whaling Museum. Staff members from the Nantucket Historical Society used old tools from the Whaling Museum to cut away the blubber in much the same way that the whalers over a century ago had done.

Nantucket has changed in recent decades, becoming a thriving summer resort. The history of the *Essex* does not fit neatly or comfortably into the romantic glorification of whaling. Evidence of the disaster can still be found. Pollard's house still stands, now a gift shop. Owen Chase's house remains largely unchanged. The boarding house that Nickerson later owned has become a building associated with a large hotel.

The Whaling Museum devotes a small exhibit to the *Essex*. The crew is listed, including some of the men's signatures. The ship's truck, which was found later bobbing on the Pacific, is not on display. Benjamin Lawrence's piece of twine is the only personal memento from the disaster.

Epilogue Analysis

The epilogue brings the book to a close, telling of what Nantucket is like now and a sperm whale that washed up on shore in 1997. As he discussed in previous chapters, Philbrick again turns to the memories of the *Essex*, which he argues don't fit comfortably into present day Nantucket. The narrative of the tragedy has too many taboo subjects. The men made a number of decisions that would cost them their lives. They ate their fellow shipmates and one was killed purposefully for his flesh. The first men to be eaten were also African American, a troublesome topic for a town with strong abolitionist roots.



Characters

Captain George Pollard

Pollard had been the first mate on the *Essex's* previous journey, and in 1819, he was promoted to Captain. He was a small man with a tendency toward stoutness. He had married two months before the voyage. On August 12, 1819, he boarded the *Essex* and the ship set sail. Having spent the last four years on the ship, he knew it well. But as Philbrick points out, Pollard was in some ways not prepared to captain, acting more like one of the mates. At several key points, Pollard gave in to his officers wishes, rather than demanding that the crew follow him. He allowed Chase and Joy to talk him into continuing after the ship was knocked down in the Atlantic and allowed them to press him into sailing for South America after the ship sank in the Pacific. He also let the majority rule when Ramsdell proposed casting lots to see which of the men in his boat would be killed for food. The *Dauphin* rescued him and Ramsdell on Feb. 23, 1821.

After being rescued, Pollard had a deep compulsion to tell his story of what had happened. Relapsing after rescue, Pollard remained in Valparaiso for several months after the other men returned to Nantucket, eventually traveling home on the *Two Brothers*. The community of Nantucket did not judge him harshly for the events. Soon after he returned, he was offered command over the *Two Brothers*. His first voyage out, however, Pollard again ran into trouble. Although his crew was rescued within a day, his ship again sank after running into a coral reef.

With his whaling career over, Pollard settled in Nantucket. He became the town's night watchman. He and his wife would never have any children. Pollard died in 1870.

Owen Chase

Chase was the first mate aboard the *Essex*. He was a tall man, at five feet ten inches, for the early nineteenth century and was 22, six years younger than Pollard, when the journey began. His father was a farmer, but Chase chose the sea. He was filled with ambition and made no secret of his impatience to become a captain of his own ship. He worked the men hard and demanded their obedience. His hardness surprised the inexperienced Nantucketers on the crew, who knew him as a nice, reasonable man on the island.

On the journey, Chase was a part of several important, and ultimately disastrous decisions. He and Joy convinced Pollard to keep going after the boat was knocked over and damaged in the first leg of the journey. The two officers also convinced Pollard to sail towards South America, rather than sailing west, an easier journey with the wind, toward the Society Islands. Chase's boat separated from the other two whaleboats on Jan. 14. Nickerson related in his narrative that Chase had a genius for identifying hope



in their seemingly hopeless situation. The *Indian*, a London ship, rescued Chase and the men in his boat on Feb. 18, 1821.

On returning to Nantucket, Chase began to work on a book about the *Essex's* tragedy, although he probably did not write it himself. His account is somewhat self-serving, as he left out his involvement in the decisions to continue on the voyage in the Atlantic and to sail for South America. He transformed the story into one of personal trial and triumph. He returned to the whaling business, first as a first mate and later as a captain. He found a great deal of success as a captain but his personal life was less so. He married four times, after two wives died and he divorced the third for infidelity. Late in life, he began hiding food in his attic and was judged insane. He died in 1869.

Thomas Nickerson

Nickerson served as the cabin boy on the ship. He was fourteen when the ship sailed from Nantucket. His parents had died, leaving him an orphan who was raised by his grandparents. His father had been from Cape Cod, making Nickerson somewhat of an outsider on the island.

After the *Essex* sank, Nickerson was a member of Chase's boat and was one of three in that boat to survive. He, along with Chase and Lawrence, were rescued on Feb. 18, 1821 by a London ship. After returning to Nantucket, Nickerson signed on, once again under Pollard, on the *Two Brothers*. Eventually, he and his wife relocated to Brooklyn, New York where Nickerson became a captain in the merchant service.

In the 1870s, Nickerson returned to Nantucket, becoming one of the foremost boardinghouse keepers on the island. Leon Lewis, one of his guests, convinced Nickerson to collaborate on a narrative of the *Essex*. This narrative provided information not known by Chase, but like the previous account it is also adjusted to suit Nickerson, who claimed that he did not resort to cannibalism.

Matthew Joy

Joy was the second mate. Although his family had been originally from Nantucket, they moved to Hudson, New York. Joy, along with Chase, convinced Pollard to continue on their voyage after the ship's knockdown in the Atlantic. They also convinced him to sail to South America rather than the Society Islands after the *Essex* sank.

By the time the ship sank, Joy was suffering from an undiagnosed illness, perhaps tuberculosis. He died on January 10, 1821, the first of the crew to pass away. The men sewed Joy up in his clothes and buried him at sea.



Thomas Chappel

Chappel was one of the boatsteerers. He chose to remain on Henderson Island after the men landed there rather than sail on toward South America. He was later rescued on April 9, 1821. He returned to London in June of 1823 where he contributed to a religious tract using the tragedy of the *Essex* as a spiritual lesson. He later died in Timor.

Owen Coffin

Coffin was one of the crew on board from Nantucket and was Pollard's cousin. Because of this, Pollard made sure that Coffin was in his whaleboat after the *Essex* sank. When lots were cast to see which of the men would be killed to keep the others alive, Coffin lost and was killed by Ramsdell on Feb. 6, 1821.

Charles Ramsdell

Ramsdell was one of the crew from Nantucket. He was in Pollard's whaleboat after the ship sank. After Chase's and Hendricks's boat disappeared and the men in Pollard's boat were again without any kind of food, Ramsdell suggested that they cast lots and whoever lost would be killed to keep the others alive. Ramsdell lost the second casting of lots, requiring him to kill Owen Coffin, his friend from Nantucket. At first he refused, but seeing that Coffin was resigned to his fate, Ramsdell eventually killed him so he and the rest of the men would have food. The *Dauphin* rescued him and Pollard on Feb. 23, 1821.

Ramsdell served as the captain for the *General Jackson* in the 1840s. He married twice and had six children. He died in 1866.

Isaac Cole

Cole was one of the crew and was from Rochester, Massachusetts. When the ship sank, he became a member of Chase's boat. In early Feb. 1821, Cole appears to go mad from the ordeal, including possibly suffering from a lack of magnesium. He died on Feb. 8, 1821. The men prepared him for burial, but Chase suggested that his body be used for food and the other men accepted this. He was the only individual to be eaten by the men in Chase's boat.

Obed Hendricks

Hendricks was one of three boatsteerers. After the *Essex* sank, Hendricks started in Pollard's boat. After Joy died, Pollard ordered him to take over Joy's boat. He discovered that Joy had not been able to keep a close eye on the provisions, making it



necessary for Pollard to share his boat's provisions. His boat disappeared on Jan. 29, 1821 and he was never heard from again.

Benjamin Lawrence

Lawrence was one of the boatsteerers and a Nantucketer. He was placed in Chase's boat after the *Essex* sank. He was rescued with Chase and Nickerson on Feb. 18, 1821 by a London ship.

Lawrence returned to the whaling business, eventually becoming the captain of the *Dromo* and *Huron*. He had seven children and eventually retired, purchasing a small farm at the east end of the island. He died in 1879.

Barzillai Ray

Ray was from Nantucket and a friend of Owen Coffin, Thomas Nickerson, and Charles Ramsdell. He was in Pollard's whaleboat after the ship sank. He died on Feb. 11, five days after the execution of Owen Coffin. His body was used for food by Pollard and Ramsdell.

Seth Weeks

From Cape Cod, Weeks chose to remain on Henderson Island after the men landed there rather than sail on with the rest of the crew. The *Surry* rescued the three men who stayed on the island on April 9, 1821.

William Bond

Bond was the steward aboard the *Essex*. He saved two compasses, two copies of navigational maps, and two quadrants from the sinking *Essex*. He was the last surviving African American in the *Essex's* crew and was a part of Joy's/Hendricks's boat. He disappeared with Obed Hendricks and Joseph West on Jan. 29, 1821 and was never found.

Henry Dewitt

DeWitt was an African American sailor from Boston and a member of the *Essex's* crew. He deserted the ship in Atacames, Ecuador.

Richard Peterson

Peterson was a sixty-year old African American sailor from Boston and a member of the *Essex's* crew. After its sinking, he was the sole African American in Chase's boat. He led



the men in prayers and hymns in the evening. He died on Jan. 20, 1821, exactly two months after the *Essex* sank. The men in Chase's boat buried him at sea the following day.

Samuel Reed

Reed was one of the seven African American sailors aboard the *Essex*. He was in Pollard's boat after the ship sank. He died on Jan. 28, 1821 and was also eaten by the men in Pollard's and Hendricks's boats.

Isaiah Sheppard

Sheppard was an African American from Boston and a member of the *Essex's* crew. He was a member of Joy's/Hendricks's boat. He died on Jan. 27, 1821, becoming the third African American to die and be eaten by Pollard's and Hendricks's men in less than a week.

Charles Shorter

Shorter was one of the seven African American sailors aboard the *Essex*. He was in Joy's boat after the ship sank. He died on Jan. 23, 1821 and the men in Pollard's and Hendricks' boats also ate his body.

Lawson Thomas

Thomas was one of the seven African American sailors aboard the *Essex*. When the ship sank, he was placed in Joy's boat. He died on Jan. 20, 1821 and was the first body to be eaten by his shipmates in Pollard's and Hendricks' boats.

Joseph West

West was a member of the crew and an off-islander. He was a member of Joy's/Hendricks' boat and disappeared with Hendricks and William Bond on Jan. 29, 1821. They were never heard from again.

William Wright

Wright was from Cape Cod. He was the first person to see Henderson Island from the whaleboats. He chose to remain on the island when the majority of the men sailed again for South America. The *Surry* later rescued him on April 9, 1821.



Objects/Places

Nantucket

Nantucket is an island off the eastern coast of New England. During the early nineteenth century, it was one of the most prominent whaling ports in the United States and was the homeport for the *Essex*. By 1835, Nantucket was gradually losing its prominence in the whaling business to New Bedford and other deep-water ports.

In 1846, a fire ripped through town, destroying nearly a third of it, including the waterfront and oil warehouses. Although the town was rebuilt quickly, many residents left for California when gold was discovered there in 1848. The town's population shrank. In the twentieth century, the town came back as a thriving summer resort.

The Essex

The *Essex* at 87 feet long and 238 tons, was an old whaleship by 1819, but she had a reputation as being a lucky ship. It sailed from Nantucket on August 12, 1819. A large bull sperm whale attacked the ship on November 20, 1820. The whale rammed the ship twice, causing water to fill the belowdecks. The ship sank in the Offshore Ground, more than 1,500 miles west of the Galapagos and 40 miles south of the equator.

Galapagos Islands

Located six hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands were a favorite provisioning stop for whalers. The men collected giant tortoises on the islands and did repairs on the *Essex*.

Henderson Island

Henderson Island is the island that the crew landed on after the *Essex* sank although they believed it to be Ducie Island. The island began as a coral atoll, but volcanic activity pushed land underneath it up. The cliffs on the island are between thirty and thirty-five feet high. The men found some birds and shellfish, but these were soon depleted and they found only a small source of fresh water. The crew decided to abandon the island and sail once again for South America. Three men, Thomas Chappel, Seth Weeks, and William Wright, chose to remain behind on the island. They were later rescued.



The Dauphin

A Nantucket whaleship, the *Dauphin* was a few months into its voyage in 1821 when its crew noticed a whaleboat in the ocean. This whaleship rescued Pollard and Ramsdell just off the coast of South America on Feb. 23, 1821.

Offshore Ground

The Offshore Ground was an area in the Pacific Ocean that during the early 1820s was known for its sperm whale population. Sailors thought that the whales migrated there in November. The *Essex* sailed toward this area and eventually sank here after being attacked by the large bull sperm whale.

The Azores and Cape Verde Islands

These Atlantic islands were provisioning stops for many whaleships. Livestock and vegetables could be purchased cheaper here than on Nantucket. The *Essex* stopped at these islands as well, purchasing a whaleboat to replace one that had been damaged on the first leg of the voyage.

Moby Dick

Written by Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* contained several detailed references to the *Essex* and the whale's attack.

Whaleboats

These boats were used to chase down a whale so that one of the men could harpoon it. After the whale was dead, the men would row back to the ship, towing the whale. Once the *Essex* sank, the crew adapted the three whaleboats for sailing on the open ocean, by adding masts, sails, and higher sides to the boat.

The Marquesas

These islands were the closest to the *Essex* when it sank, located about 1,200 miles away. The crew, however, feared that the islands were inhabited by cannibals and chose to sail for South America instead.



Themes

Man and Nature

In many ways, *In the Heart of the Sea* is a narrative of man's struggles with nature. The whaling endeavor itself was fraught with natural dangers and obstacles. Nantucket whalers had to contend with unpredictable storms, changing winds, the dangers of rounding Cape Horn, and other underwater dangers like coral reefs and rocks. Dangers also existed in hunting whales, where a panicked or surfacing whale could overturn or damage a whaleboat.

The crew of the *Essex* also struggled with nature on the tragic voyage that Philbrick writes about. In the Atlantic, they faced a violent storm and winds that knocked down the boat, creating a situation that was almost disastrous. On their first whale sighting, a surfacing whale overturned and damaged Chase's whaleboat. The men faced rounding Cape Horn and more storms as they made their way to the Offshore Ground. There, a large bull sperm whale attacked the ship and it sank, leaving the men at the mercy of the ocean.

As they struggled to reach land in their whaleboats, the men faced greater dangers from natural sources. They suffered dehydration, starvation, open sores, and burned skin from the sun. As if adding insult to injury, another whale later attacked Pollard's boat and a shark attacked Chase's boat. The men faced storms in their smaller boats that threatened to sink them. The winds came again and again from directions that were opposite of what the men needed to reach the land they were sailing for. The elements and the men's biological needs created a situation of suffering and extreme pain and horror for them. Although they had the plan to sail for South America, much of their time on the ocean was beyond their control.

Survival

The narrative of the *Essex* is, at the end, the story of survival for the men who lived. Of the twenty men who were shipwrecked in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, eight managed to survive despite severe dehydration and starvation. Their tale is one of horror and doing what it took in order to survive. The crew of the *Essex* chose different ways of trying to survive.

When the men landed on Henderson Island, it appeared that they might have a greater chance at survival. But the island soon proved to have a very limited supply of freshwater and not enough food to sustain all the men. When the majority of the crew decided to take their chances once again on the open ocean, three of the men decided to stay on the island. There they faced little freshwater, but they were able to gather food in the form of birds and eggs. The *Surry* rescued them on April 9, 1821.



For the men on the ocean, life grew increasingly more difficult and tenuous. Starting with Matthew Joy, the men began to grow weaker and die. Despite their sores and weakness, the men tried to maintain their course for South America. As food ran out, the men did the only thing they could to keep themselves alive: eat their dead shipmates. This gave the men who survived the food necessary to keep them going, although barely, until they were rescued within five days of each other.

Suffering

The crew of the *Essex* suffered both physically and emotionally during their last voyage. This suffering began even before the ship's sinking. Nickerson faced the prospect of leaving all that was familiar to him for the first time, venturing into an unknown world. At the beginning of their journey, many of the men suffered from seasickness. As the journey progressed the men had to face dangerous storms that threatened to overturn the ship and the reality of being away from their families and other loved ones for years at a time with little communication with them.

After the ship sank, the men suffered physically in many ways. The men had very limited provisions with them in the boats and because of this, they had to endure the tortures of dehydration and starvation. Philbrick describes what the men must have faced in one stage of their dehydration: "Saliva becomes thick and foul-tasting; the tongue clings irritatingly to the teeth and roof of the mouth...A lump seems to form in the throat, causing the sufferer to swallow repeatedly...Severe pain is felt in the head and neck. The face feels full due to the shrinking of the skin. Hearing is affected, and many people begin to hallucinate" (pg. 127). Yet, more agony would follow as eyelids cracked and eyeballs wept blood. The throat swells, making breathing difficult. In addition to this, the men also endured extreme hunger. The weather also contributed to their agony as the sun beat down on them and later, cold rains fell on them, threatening the men with hypothermia.

Although it is impossible to say which was worse for the men, their psychological suffering must have also been unbearable. The men were thousands of miles from land and safety, at the mercy of winds and the elements. They did not know when or if they would ever see their loved ones again. At any moment, their boats could become separated from one another or damaged by the ocean. The men also faced having to watch their fellow shipmates die and eventually, they were forced to make the decision to eat their dead bodies. For Ramsdell and Pollard, they had to live with the knowledge of killing one of the men in order to stay alive. They also faced the reality that any one of them could die at any time. Their situation must have seemed hopeless.

Style

Points of View

Philbrick uses a third person perspective in *In the Heart of the Sea*. In this way, the perspective gives an omniscient and historical voice, one that is reliable and that is able to incorporate more recent scholarship on the effects of starvation and dehydration. He also incorporates historical information on whaling and on the island of Nantucket. This perspective allows Philbrick to move back and forth between the historical accounts and the experiences that the men had. Philbrick is able then to describe what happened in both Chase's and Pollard's boats even after the boats have become separated. Rather than focusing on just one member of the crew, this perspective allows us to see what is happening to all the men at the same time, as we are able to see what is taking place in Nantucket.

Philbrick emerges in the first person only during a short section of the preface where he relates how he became interested in the story of the *Essex*. After that, he disappears again behind the third person perspective, using the narratives of Chase and Nickerson, as well as other accounts of the tragedy, to piece the story together.

Setting

In the Heart of the Sea begins and ends on Nantucket Island, which is just off the coast of New England in the Atlantic. In these parts of the book, Philbrick sets up the narrative by describing Nantucket, a thriving whaling port at the time, and the whaling business. He also ends the book here as he describes what happened to the survivors of the tragedy.

The bulk of the book, however, takes place on the open water, in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In the Atlantic, Philbrick narrates how the ship was knocked down, their provisioning stops, and the dangers of rounding Cape Horn at the bottom of South America. Most of the story occurs in the Pacific Ocean. Philbrick discusses the crew's stop at the Galapagos Islands and their voyage to the Offshore Ground where the whale attacked the boat. A number of chapters then relate the men's experiences in the whaleboats as they sail across the Pacific Ocean, trying to reach the coast of South America.

Philbrick also spends some time discussing the *Essex*. It was an old ship at twenty years by the time of the voyage and more than likely had some structural damage. The ship was 87 feet long and 238 tons. The men lived in three different sections of the ship, with the officers in the cabins, the boatsteerers and Nantucketers in the steerage, and the African American sailors in the forecabin.



Language and Meaning

For the most part, Philbrick uses simple language to describe the tragic voyage of the *Essex*. Although the majority of the book is free of strong or vulgar language, there are several sections that deal with the butchering of whales and how the men probably dismembered their dead fellowship mates. Philbrick does not sensationalize these topics in any way, but uses the sections to create a deeper understanding of the brutality and gore of whaling and what the men had to go through to survive.

Philbrick uses little technical language except for those terms to describe parts of the ship. When he does this, he explains the term for readers who may be unfamiliar with the terminology used by sailors and whalers. He also describes any medical terms that he uses in describing the crew's starvation and dehydration. He also makes use of the narrative of both Chase's and Nickerson's narratives, although most of the book is descriptive.

Structure

In the Heart of the Sea consists of fourteen chapters, a preface, and an epilogue. In addition, the author includes a list of the crew of the *Essex*, notes, selected bibliography, maps, illustrations, a selection of photographs, and an index. The additional materials add to the book by allowing the reader to see the path that the *Essex* followed and then the paths that the whaleboats followed with dates noted. Illustrations of the whale's attack also help the reader visualize what the event was like.

Philbrick primarily uses the accounts of Chase and Nickerson to document the tragedy, along with other historical materials and letters dealing with the event and the survivors. He also makes use of secondary sources for information on whaling, sailing, and the physical effects that the men faced from their starvation and dehydration.



Quotes

"Nantucketers saw no contradiction between their livelihood and their religion. God Himself had granted them dominion over the fishes of the sea." Chapter 1, pg. 9

"At twenty years of age, the *Essex* was reaching the point when many vessels began to exhibit serious structural deterioration." Chapter 1, pg. 19

"Like a skier traversing the face of a mountain, a Nantucket whaleship took an indirect route toward Cape Horn, a course determined by the prevailing winds of the Atlantic Ocean." Chapter 2, pg. 37

"Not until the *Essex* had crossed the equator and reached thirty degrees south latitude-approximately halfway between Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires-did the lookout spot the first whale of the voyage." Chapter 3, pg. 48

"When the lance finally found its mark, the whale would begin to choke on its own blood, its spout transformed into a fifteen-to-twenty foot geyser of gore that prompted the mate to shout, 'Chimney's afire!'" Chapter 3, pg. 54

"It took more than a month for the *Essex* to round Cape Horn. Not until January of the new year, 1820, did the lookout sight the island of St. Mary's, a gathering spot for whalers off the coast of Chile." Chapter 4, pg. 63

"Each whale, each cask of oil, brought the Nantucketer closer to returning home to his loved ones." Chapter 4, pg. 65

"Unfortunately, a whale surfaced directly under their boat, hurling Chase and his crew into the air. Just as had occurred after their first attempt at killing a whale, off the Falkland Islands, Chase and his men found themselves clinging to a wrecked whaleboat." Chapter 5, pg. 79

"It was a whale-a huge sperm whale, the largest they'd seen so far-a male about eighty-foot long, they estimated, and approximately eighty tons." Chapter 5, pg. 80-1

"With its huge scarred head halfway out of the water and its tail beating the ocean into a white-water wake more than forty feet across, the whale approached the ship at twice its original speed-at least six knots...With a tremendous cracking and splintering of oak, the whale struck the ship just beneath the anchor secured at the cathead on the port bow." Chapter 5, pg. 83

"By spurning the Society Islands and sailing for South America, the *Essex* officers chose to take their chances with an element they did know well: the sea." Chapter 6, pg. 99

"Pollard's behavior, after both the knockdown and the whale attack, indicates that he lacked the resolve to overrule his two younger and less experienced officers." Chapter 6, pg. 101



"The plan had one iron requirement: they had to make their provisions last two months. Each man would get six ounces of hardtack and half a pint of water a day." Chapter 7, pg. 106

"For the last three weeks, their bodies had been consuming themselves. Without any natural padding to cushion their bones, they found the simple act of sitting to be torture. Their arms had shrunk to sticks as their muscles withered, making it difficult to hold, let alone pull, the oars." Chapter 8, pg. 133

"By December 26, their seventh day on Henderson and their thirty-fifth since leaving the wreck, they had resolved to abandon this used-up island." Chapter 9, pg. 145

"His loyalty to his crew was in the end greater than his need for comfort from his fellow Nantucketers. The transfer was made, and by four o'clock that afternoon Matthew Joy was dead." Chapter 10, pg. 153

"That day, Lawson Thomas, one of the blacks on Hendricks's boat, died. 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, the body." Chapter 11, pg. 164

"Without a compass or a quadrant, Hendricks and his men were now lost in an empty and limitless sea." Chapter 11, pg. 174

"Then the youngest of them, sixteen-year-old Charles Ramsdell, uttered the unspeakable. They should cast lots, he said, to see who would be killed so that the rest could live." Chapter 11, pg. 174

"Chase stopped them. All night he had wrestled with the question of what they should do. With only three days of hardtack left, he knew, it was quite possible that they might be reduced to casting lots. Better to eat a dead shipmate-even a tainted shipmate-than be forced to kill a man." Chapter 12, pg. 181

"For Pollard and Ramsdell, it was the bones-gifts from the men they had known and loved-that became their obsession. They stuffed their pockets with finger bones; they sucked the sweet marrow from the splintered ribs and thighs." Chapter 12, pg. 188

"As a whaler, Own Chase would enjoy the success that had eluded George Pollard. His personal life, however, proved less fortunate." Chapter 13, pg. 212

"Although townspeople continued to whisper about the *Essex* well into the twentieth century, its was not a topic a Nantucketer openly discussed." Chapter 14, pg. 217



Topics for Discussion

After the shipwreck, why did the crew decide to sail for the coast of South America rather than the closer islands to the east? What factors (historical, cultural, etc.) led to their decision?

What were the differences in George Pollard's and Owen Chase's leadership styles? Did these differences contribute to the tragedies? If so, how?

Discuss the social hierarchies in Nantucket and on whaleships. How did a person's background affect their position and their experiences throughout the tragedy?

Philbrick mentions that Nantucketers don't talk about the *Essex* perhaps because of the race of the men who were the first to be eaten by the others. Did race have anything to do with who lived or died on the *Essex*? If so, how?

Describe the experiences that a crew on a whaling ship would have. What was the process of killing a whale? Where would the men travel? What were the ships like?

How do Chase's and Nickerson's accounts of the shipwreck differ? Are their accounts self-serving?

Discuss how the crew, townspeople, and other sailors felt about the issue of cannibalism. Under what circumstances was cannibalism acceptable to these groups?