

The ANN ALEXANDER and the Battle of Trafalgar: The Stories and Some Conflicting Evidence

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Introduction

The story of the ANN ALEXANDER's meeting with the British fleet shortly after the Battle of Trafalgar seems to have become an accepted part of American maritime history. In discussing merchant shipping in early nineteenth century Massachusetts, Samuel Eliot Morison says "As Nelson's fleet lay licking its wounds after Trafalgar, who should heave in sight but the ship ANN ALEXANDER of New Bedford, Captain Loum Snow, with a cargo of lumber, flour and apples – just what the fleet needed!"¹ But historians have been puzzled by the lack of documentation for this event.

This article looks more closely at what has been said about the ANN ALEXANDER's meeting with the British Trafalgar fleet. It begins by reviewing these stories. Next it outlines the history of the Battle of Trafalgar. Following this the records for the ANN ALEXANDER during 1805 and 1806 are reviewed. Finally an alternative version is presented that better fits with the facts in the preceding sections.

The Stories. Ian W. Toll has provided one of the more recent and more detailed accounts of the ANN ALEXANDER's encounter with the British fleet after Trafalgar:

The ANN ALEXANDER, an American square – rigged merchantman with a cargo of flour, tobacco, salt fish, and apples, was eighteen days out of New York when she met the British fleet off Trafalgar a few hours after its victory. That there had been an enormously destructive battle was apparent from the sea-litter floating across many miles of ocean. Bobbing on the surface were huge sections of spars and rigging, torn pieces of sailcloth, and dead seamen who would soon slip beneath the waves. Nelson was already dead and embalmed. ... Most of the British ships were still too battered to sail, and their uninjured crew were working to repair the damage while also caring for hundreds of

wounded British sailors and thousands of wounded French and Spanish prisoners. A boat from the Victory came across to the Ann to inquire if any stores could be purchased to aid in the repair work. As luck would have it, Ann was carrying a deck load of lumber, which her master was happy to sell, along with some flour and apples. He received a fair price and was paid in English gold.ⁱⁱ

Toll cites the book *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience 1775-1942* as his source.ⁱⁱⁱ However, Toll's account is very similar to one published in 1962 in a Mystic Seaport publication about the ANN ALEXANDER written by Clement Sawtelle.^{iv} This description was reportedly obtained in 1884 by George F. Winslow, a surgeon in the United States Navy, from Captain John Aiken, age 96. Aiken said:

I was born in the town of old Dartmouth in the year 1788, and was 17 years old when I sailed in the ship ANN ALEXANDER, commanded by Capt. Loum Snow. The ship hailed from New Bedford, but her port of departure was New York for Leghorn, with a cargo of general merchandise, consisting of flour, tobacco, salt fish and apples. Eighteen days out we fell in with the English fleet off Cape Trafalgar. The different ships were repairing damages which had occurred during the battle with the combined French and Spanish fleets only a few days previous. We had on our decks a quantity of lumber which had been taken on board just before our departure from New York, which I think was the personal property of Capt. Snow. An English officer boarded us and informed our captain that Lord Nelson had been shot through the shoulder and spine, and had died on board the Victory a few hours after the battle was over; and that Lord Collingwood was the next senior officer in command. We could very readily see the effects of the enemy's fire upon the English ships. The men were on the outside of the different men of war repairing the damages which had been done. The English officer returned to the Victory, Lord Collingwood's flagship, and soon afterwards came back with a request that we would let him have our lumber, a quantity of flour and some apples. Our captain agreed, and soon after the boats from the different ships came alongside and were furnished with these different articles. The captain was paid for these goods in English gold by the fleet paymaster, who came on board and settled accounts. We squared away

for the Straits of Gibraltar and on the following day came up with the new 74-gun frigate UNITED STATES, which had recently arrived at this station. They lowered a boat and came alongside. We gave them the news and sent the commander two barrels of apples.

In the acknowledgements, Sawtelle indicates that the Aiken narrative came from the family archives of Rodman S. Moeller of Cincinnati, Ohio. There is no copy of the Moeller papers in the manuscript collection at Mystic Seaport.^v Moeller's mother, Elsie (Snow) Moeller grew up in the household of her grandfather, Loum Snow, the grandson and namesake of the captain of the ANN ALEXANDER.^{vi} Elsie undoubtedly heard and read about the Snow family's maritime activities. She may well have obtained or have written copies of these stories. But there is nothing about the ANN ALEXANDER and Trafalgar incident in the Snow family papers in the New Bedford Whaling Museum's library.^{vii}

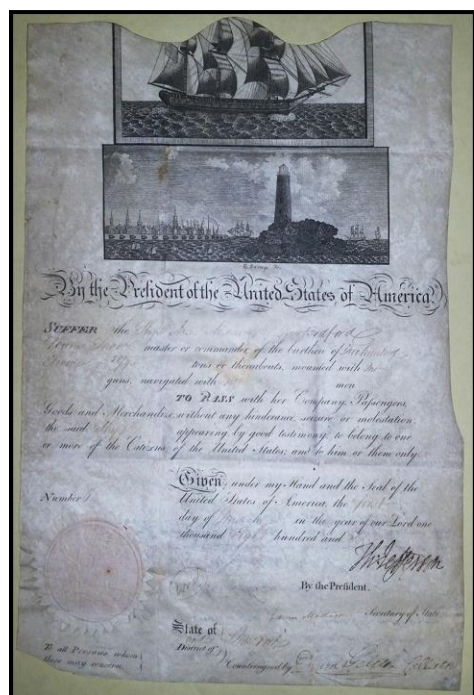


Figure 1. Mediterranean Passport for the ship ANN ALEXANDER, Capt. Loum Snow, March 1, 1808. Signed by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Mystic Seaport, G.W. Blunt White Library. HFM 218.

An identical version of Aiken's story, also attributed to information obtained by Winslow from Aiken, was published in 1892 in a history of New Bedford.^{viii} This was probably written by Winslow's son Harold, who was a reporter for the *Times* of New Bedford for 15 years.^{ix} This 1892 publication seems to be the first appearance of the story. The lack of any prior publication mentioning the event in the more than 80 years since the battle arouses suspicions.

Sawtelle also mentions as a source Llewellyn Howland's account of a letter written by Loum Snow.^x Addressed to "My dear wife" and dated at Leghorn on November 5, 1805, the letter said that the ANN ALEXANDER came upon the British fleet on 21 October 1805 during the battle. At the end of the battle Captain Blackwood of the frigate *EURYALUS* came on board the ANN ALEXANDER "to learn whether we had such cargo as could be useful to the British fleet." The cargo – "staves, parcels of oak timber, apples, tobacco, and certain of the flour lading" – was sold to the British

fleet then under the command of Admiral Collingwood. The ANN ALEXANDER reportedly remained with the British fleet during a gale that lasted several days before passing through the Straits of Gibraltar on the way to Leghorn on October 27, 1805. One problem with this account is the fact that Snow did not marry until September 1806.

Sawtelle's other sources include stories told to Robert Snow by his aunts and a February 23, 1922 article in the *New Bedford Mercury* but he notes that "confirming logs, letters or documents are, for the most part, lacking." Other variations of this story can be found in *Life in New Bedford 100 Years Ago*, which is similar to the version told by Aiken but does not acknowledge that source, and in the section about the Snow family in *Representative Men and Old Families of Southeastern Massachusetts*.^{xi}

The Battle of Trafalgar. The Battle of Trafalgar, the famous conflict between the British navy and the combined naval forces of France and Spain, occurred on October 21, 1805 off the southeastern coast of Spain near Cadiz. Numerous books have been written describing it; one of the more recent ones is *Nelson's Trafalgar: The Battle That Changed the World*.^{xii} The British fleet did not lose any ships in this battle while managing to capture nineteen ships of the combined forces. Horatio Nelson, the Admiral of the British fleet, was killed in the battle. Immediately after the battle, on October 22, 1805, a fierce hurricane-like storm began. It lasted nearly a week and caused further damage to many of the ships, especially the prize ships that had been captured by the British. As soon as the storm abated, the British ships that could still operate began towing the prize ships and the British ships needing repair to Gibraltar, the nearest port where they would be under British protection and where medical attention could be obtained for the injured and wounded.

Another top priority was to get news of the victory back to England. Vice-Admiral Collingwood had taken command of the British fleet after Nelson's death. Because his own ship, the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, no longer had masts where signal flags could be flown, Collingwood transferred to the frigate EURYALUS. On October 26, 1805, while the weather was still stormy, Collingwood asked John Lapenotiere, who was in command of the schooner PICKLE, to sail to England to deliver the news and his report of the battle. On November 4, 1805 Lapenotiere landed in Cornwall, England. He then traveled by post- chaise to London arriving there on

November 6, 1805 with copies of Collingwood's dispatches for King George III and Prime Minister Pitt, as well as to the Admiralty.



Figure 2. Battle of Trafalgar. Thomas Buttersworth. Mystic Seaport. Accession Number 1996.152.1

Nelson's flagship, the VICTORY, with his body on board, arrived in Gibraltar on October 28, 1805, having been towed much of the way; the ship had lost mizzenmast and foremast, the main mast was severely damaged, and the main yard and main top sail had been shot away. Temporary repairs were made and "with Nelson's flag flying halfway up a jury-rigged mast ... and with the pumps constantly manned because the ship was still leaking" the

Victory sailed for England on 4 November 1805.^{xiii} It arrived at Plymouth on December 4, 1805 and reached London later that month. Nelson's state funeral was held in London on January 9, 1806.

News moved slowly in the early 1800s. Napoleon did not learn of the French and Spanish defeat until November 16, 1805. The first news reached the United States at Portland, Maine on December 13, 1805 and was published by the *Portland Gazette and Maine Advertiser*. It was reprinted in Boston and Newport, Rhode Island newspapers within a week. The ship NEPTUNE brought a copy of the *London Gazette* report of the battle to New York City on December 16, 1805. This report was widely distributed.^{xiv}

The ANN ALEXANDER. Although she is probably best known for having been sunk by a whale in 1851, the ANN ALEXANDER had a long history before that time. The ship's registry says she was built in Dartmouth, Massachusetts in 1805. She was named for Ann (Tuke) Alexander, an English Quaker who came to the United States and visited New Bedford in 1804-5 to speak about the abolition of slavery. There are extensive records about the ANN ALEXANDER in the Howland Collection in the library of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

These include George Howland's financial journals, ledgers and cash books, as well as letter books with copies of his business correspondence. The financial records show that the ship was built by Joel Packard and Deliverance Smith at Russells Mills village in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Account 134 in the earliest ledger is headed "Ship ANN ALEXANDER (at Russells Mills)" with the first entry bearing the date 8 mo 22 1805. George Howland owned 5/8ths of the ship; his brothers-in-law, John Howland, Jr. and James Howland, each owned 1/8th, and Loum Snow, who had served as master on other Howland ships, owned 1/8th.^{xv} The ANN ALEXANDER was registered in New Bedford on January 29, 1806. Unfortunately, there are no New Bedford newspapers available to provide the date when she left that city but her arrival at the Port of New York was reported on February 8, 1806.^{xvi} Shortly thereafter, on February 12, 1806, George Howland's New York agents, Post & Russell, advertised that the "new, staunch built and fast sailing ship ANN ALEXANDER, Snow master, 211 tons burthen" was available for the reception of cargo.^{xvii} She left New York, bound for Leghorn, on March 2, 1806.^{xviii} The newspaper archives show no earlier mention of the ANN ALEXANDER in New York. The departure date is confirmed by two letters in George Howland's letter book and is supported by a March 1806 payment made by Howland to Post and Russell for cash they had given to Captain Loum Snow for his expenses in New York.

Snow was slow in communicating with Howland about this trip. On June 29, 1806 Howland wrote to Captain Bates who had recently returned to Providence, Rhode Island from Leghorn, asking "whether thee can tell me anything respecting the ship ANN ALEXANDER, Cap^t Snow of this Port who sailed from New York for Leghorn the 2 of March." On July 17, 1806 he sent a similar letter to Captain Payson who had returned to Boston from Leghorn.^{xix} But Howland had heard from Snow before 7 August 1806 when he wrote to Post and Russell saying that Captain Snow had written him.^{xx} On September 6, 1806 Howland wrote to Snow saying "I am happy to find thy safe arrival at New York – altho it is much later than I have been expecting thee. I had some fear respecting thy safety. I had calculated thee left Leghorn about the 26th of May."^{xxi} Snow had returned to New Bedford by September 21, 1806 when he married Nancy Swift.

Post and Russell soon began advertising again about the availability of the ANN ALEXANDER for freight or charter. The first announcement appeared on 17 September 1806.

The second, published on 1 October 1806, reads “For Liverpool. The ship, ANN ALEXANDER, L. Snow, master, will sail in ten days, having two thirds of her cargo engaged.”^{xxii} On 25 September 1806 George Howland wrote a letter of instruction to Captain Snow saying, “Thee will proceed to New York & there take Charge of the Ship ANN ALEXANDER for Liverpool and apply to Cropper Benson & Co of Liverpool to assist thee in thy Business to who thee will likewise consult respecting the future destination and business for the Ship.” He wrote to Cropper Benson & Co on 30 September 1806 “The ANN ALEXANDER Capt Snow is now aloading at New York for Liverpool. I expect she will sail in the course of a few days. ... You will of course do the needful respecting her on her arrival at your Port. I hope you will be able to obtain some return freight for her as she is a good New Ship – this is only her second Voyage.”^{xxiii}

If we are to believe that Snow and the ANN ALEXANDER met the British fleet at the end of or a few days after the Battle of Trafalgar, we must believe that Loum Snow took an unregistered ship across the Atlantic in the fall of 1805 without the knowledge of George Howland, her principal owner. This seems unlikely.

The statement about the ANN ALEXANDER meeting up with the frigate UNITED STATES and giving them news of the battle is also suspect. The UNTIED STATES was moored in the Washington Navy Yard from June 1, 1801 until June 10, 1810.^{xxiv}

An Alternative Scenario. Anyone familiar with family stories and oral history knows things sometimes get modified in the retelling. It seems probably that is what happened with the story of the ANN ALEXANDER and the Battle of Trafalgar. Snow and his crew undoubtedly heard of the battle before they left New York but were likely surprised to encounter some of the damaged ships still undergoing repair at Gibraltar in March of 1806. Lumber would have been in demand and the story of Snow selling it to an English officer may well be true. This exciting tale of encountering the Trafalgar ships and selling them the lumber would have been sent to family and friends in letters or told in person after the ANN ALEXANDER returned to the United States. When Aiken told his version of the event nearly 80 years later, there would have remained very few individuals who had been alive in 1805 and could confirm or contradict his tale. The descendants of the owners and crew of the ANN ALEXANDER might have recalled an ancestor

mentioning something about seeing some of the Trafalgar fleet and have been willing to accept Aiken's story. It is less clear why maritime historians have accepted it.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ Samuel Eliot Morison, *Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783-1860*. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 180.
- ⁱⁱ Ian W. Toll. *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U. S. Navy*. (New York, Norton, 2006), 11.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Albion and Jennie Barnes Pope. *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience 1775-1942*. (New York, Norton, 1942), 88.
- ^{iv} Clement Cleveland Sawtelle. *The Ship Ann Alexander of New Bedford, 1805 – 1851*. (Mystic, CT, The Mystic Seaport Historical Association, No. 40, 1962), 13.
- ^v Personal communication from Maribeth Bielinski, Collections Research Center, Mystic Seaport, November 24, 2009.
- ^{vi} U.S. 1900 Census New Bedford (Bristol) Massachusetts.
- ^{vii} New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library, Mss 70, Loum Snow Business Records.
- ^{viii} Nard Bolles Ellis, *History of New Bedford and Its Vicinity 1602 – 1892*. (Syracuse, NY, D. Mason & Co., 1892), 153-154.
- ^{ix} Zephaniah W. Pease (Ed.) *History of New Bedford*. (New York, N.Y., Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1918), Vol. II, 91-96.
- ^x Llewellyn Howland. *Sou'West & By West of Cape Cod*. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1947), 37-38.
- ^{xi} Z. Pearce, Ed. *Life in New Bedford 100 Years Ago*. (New Bedford, Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1922), 70; J. H. Beers, *Representative Men and Old Families of Southeastern Massachusetts*. (Chicago, J. H. Beers & Co., 1912), III, 1438.
- ^{xii} Roy Adkins. *Nelson's Trafalgar: The Battle That Changed the World*. (New York, Viking, 2005).
- ^{xiii} Adkins, 293.
- ^{xiv} John B. Hattendorf. Exhibition Catalogue: *Trafalgar and Nelson 200* (Newport, Rhode Island, Naval War College, 2005).
- ^{xv} New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library, Mss 7, Howland Collection, Sub-group 1, George Howland & Sons Records, Series A, Financial Records, Sub-series 2, Ledgers, Box 2, Volume 1 1797 - 1807.
- ^{xvi} *Ming's New York Price Current*, 8 February 1806.
- ^{xvii} *American Citizen* (New York), 12 February 1806.
- ^{xviii} *Mercantile Advertiser* (New York), 3 March 1806
- ^{xix} New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library, Mss 7 – Howland Collection, Sub-group 1 George Howland & Sons Records, Series D, Correspondence, Vol. 1, 1803 – 1811, George Howland Letter Book I, 67.
- ^{xx} George Howland Letter Book, I, 69.
- ^{xxi} George Howland Letter Book, I, 75.
- ^{xxii} *American Citizen* (New York), 17 September 1806; *American Citizen* (New York), 1 October 1806.
- ^{xxiii} George Howland Letter Book, I, 82-3 and 84.
- ^{xxiv} "United States". *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, James L. Moodey, Ed. (Washington, Navy Department, Navy History Center, 1981) VII, 415.

The author wishes to thank Laura Pereira, former librarian at the New Bedford Whaling Museum Research Library, and Edward Furgol, curator at the National Museum of the United States Navy, Washington, D.C., for their assistance with this research