

Fall River Goes Whaling

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“Whaling is the most exciting, perilous, and uncertain of human pursuits.”ⁱ So wrote George Bronson in his little book, *Glimpses of a Whaleman’s Cabin*. He was describing his own adventures on the Fall River whaler *Aerial*, and, at the same time, although he didn’t intend it, the adventures of the city of Fall River in the whaling industry. He later described the industry as a lottery, which concept may explain why Fall River persisted at whaling for so long in the face of adversity.

Fall River, Massachusetts was first settled in 1670,ⁱⁱ and, although it’s hard to believe today, was considered a village of the now much smaller town of Freetown. Known as Troy from 1804 until 1834, the town was prosperous and growing in the early 1830s. The train through the town had begun in 1797. The first cotton-spinning mill was built in 1811, followed by two more in 1813. By 1830 the town had seven textile mills, a steamboat to Providence and Newport, and a newspaper as well. Those with money to invest were looking for new opportunities. They only had to look to the neighboring city

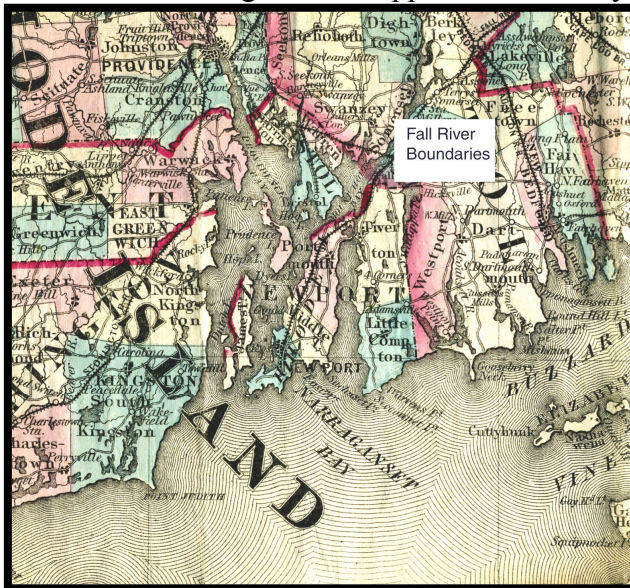


Fig. 1 Environs of Fall River, from Colton’s Railroad and Township Map of Massachusetts, etc. New York: Colton & Co., 1869

of New Bedford to see that a lot of money could be made at the expense of the whales. Profit rates from whaling in New Bedford were as high as 23% in 1823, peaking at 47% in 1826, and then beginning to decline in the 30s, more into the 40s and 50s.ⁱⁱⁱ We can do that, they must have thought, as did several other cities--- Cold Spring Harbor, New York (48 voyages), Wilmington, Delaware (15 voyages), Portsmouth, New Hampshire (13 voyages), Portland, Maine (17 voyages), Bridgeport, Connecticut (25 voyages)---all examples of towns that entered the whaling industry about 1830.^{iv}

lubrication---lubrication of delicate instruments, watches, clocks, and chronometers, as well as not-so-delicate machinery. Statistics for one Fall River woolen mill for the year 1837 show that the mill employed 65 men and 55 women, produced 150,000 yards of fabric, and consumed 6500 gallons of sperm whale oil.^v As lighting turned to petroleum products, the machines of the industrial revolution remained thirsty for whale oil.

Whale oil was in demand principally for use in lighting devices but also for

After some trouble raising money for the enterprise of whaling, the Fall River Whaling Company finally sent out its first whaler, a former New York merchantman aptly named *Gold Hunter*, in June 1832. (Her name proved providential. In 1849 she was withdrawn from whaling to carry gold hunters of a different sort to California.)^{vi} *Gold Hunter* returned from the South Atlantic in 11 months with a cargo valued at \$12,009. Her master was Thomas Brock, Jr. This was the 7th of 8 voyages made during his career, previous voyages having been made from Nantucket and New Bedford. The return for this voyage was not outstanding, 50 barrels of sperm oil, 1,250 barrels of whale oil, and 6,000 pounds of whalebone, less than Brock had made on 3 previous voyages from New Bedford.

Gold Hunter was followed by *Edward Quesnel* in September 1832. Her master was Joseph S. Barnard, a man who had already had two voyages as master from New Bedford. For three years effort, he returned with 2,000 barrels of sperm oil, not quite as successful a voyage as his previous voyage on *Courier* of New Bedford, but much better than his first voyage. This voyage of 2,000 barrels or 63,000 gallons, for a return of \$52,920, was a very good voyage for a man who knew his trade.

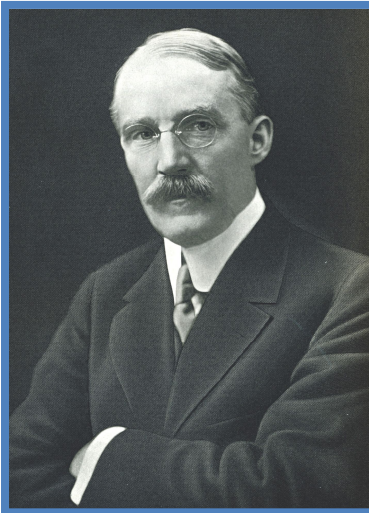


Figure 2 Nathan Durfee, son of Holder Borden Durfee and grandson of Dr. Nathan Durfee, employed 5,600 workers in his mills in 1920. From: [A History of Bristol County, Mass.](#), by Frank Walcott-Hutt. New York: Lewis Historical Pub. Co.1924.

The Fall River Whaling Company was incorporated in 1836.^{vii} Incorporation of a whaling company was not the New Bedford model, although the corporate form was coming into widespread use in other businesses at that time. Many of the small towns that entered whaling during this period tried the company model, as opposed to the limited partnership model used in the big whaling ports. The incorporation of a whaling company was intended to allow wider investment in the enterprise. The men involved in the corporation were the “iron works group,” a small number of “Men of Affairs” who were directors of the important industries and banks in the community, mostly relatives and friends of Colonel Richard Borden.^{viii} The largest whaling owner and agent was Dr. Nathan Durfee, a medical doctor who soon tired of the practice of medicine and entered the drug business, later becoming director of the iron works, the railroad, the print works, and the steamship company.

And so it continued---for another 75 voyages over the next 30 years, with less than outstanding success overall: rough calculations, based on the figures in Starbuck^{ix} show that for the 54 voyages from 1832-1862 for which there are figures, 10 voyages were really successful, about 19%, 9 voyages, or 17% broke even, and about 65% were losing voyages. Homan, apparently quoting Starbuck, points out that by 1858, 64.7% of voyages were losing voyages.^x For Fall River, that figure applies to the whole enterprise. Fall River’s last successful voyage

left in 1852. Fall River's successful voyages came one every couple of years, just enough to keep interest up. Remember the Bronson quote in the beginning---it truly was like a lottery. The few good voyages kept their hopes up for another decade.

The story of the small towns that went whaling is really Kenneth Martin's story. Martin has written about other cities, Wilmington, Delaware,^{xi} Wiscasset, Maine,^{xii} and Portsmouth, New Hampshire^{xiii} that tried to whale at about this same time period with equally poor results. He points out that these cities had an infrastructure problem as they began to whale; they had to import equipment, supplies, and whaleboats from other cities at considerable expense in order to outfit their ships. However, any seaport town with ship smiths and boat builders could soon develop the skills to make harpoons, lances and whaleboats. A look at Fall River city directories for the whaling years^{xiv} shows that the town had shipbuilders, ship smiths, coopers, sail makers, pump and block makers, cordage companies and chandleries, serving their other maritime trades, so equipment supply should not have been a problem for long. Insurance was likely to be higher in cost. There was not the large pool of vessels whaling from Fall River, so that an occasional loss would be harder for the insurance industry to absorb.

Eric Hilt, an economist at Wellesley College, wrote an interesting paper on whaling companies.^{xv} His long complicated formulae tell us what we know empirically, that whaling companies rather than limited partnerships, the New Bedford model, didn't work very well. Looking at this business from the perspective of an economist, he says one reason might be that the agents hired by the company, being salaried, didn't have the necessary incentive to do their jobs as they might have done if they were investing in the voyage. He claims four examples of agents who later were more successful under a limited partnership structure, a very small sample indeed. However, the agents listed for Fall River's whaling voyages are investors in all but one case, so they had an interest in making a voyage successful.

Hilt also suggests that another reason for less than successful voyages might be ineptitude and inexperience, and that is much more likely the reason behind Fall River's problems with the whaling industry. Fall River's agents were captains of industry, and not persons steeped in the culture of whaling. They were without the experience and connections to find good masters and crewmen.

Consideration of the relative success of the smaller towns in comparison with New Bedford is telling. The nearby towns of Bristol and Warren, Rhode Island serve as examples. Comparison of the production of voyages managed by William DeWolf, agent for 19 Bristol voyages, Bristol's principal whaling agent, that of Joseph Smith, agent for 24 Warren voyages, that of Nathan Durfee, agent for 15 Fall River voyages and that town's principal agent, with that of Charles W. Morgan, agent for 37 New Bedford voyages. These towns were whaling during roughly the same years, so time and values of whale products are equal. Calculating the returns for their voyages in a simple way, by using the dollar value of the cargo divided by the number of months the vessel was at sea resulted in low figures for DeWolf and Durfee, which is in keeping with the lack of success in those ports. The figure was a bit better for Smith of Warren, a town that had

186 voyages and somewhat more success, and half again better for Morgan, who is generally acknowledged to have done very well in the industry.^{xvi}

Why? The one figure that stood out in the various comparisons of factors considered was that of the use of first time, inexperienced captains to command their vessels.^{xvii} That figure follows the income figures: Morgan, with connections and experience in the business of whaling, used only 29% first time captains. His figure is followed by Smith of Warren, 37%, and then there is a leap to Durfee of Fall River, 53%, and DeWolf, 63%. Looking at the whole of Fall River's whaling industry, there were in all 43 men who served as masters of whaling vessels. Of those 43, 29 had their first command from Fall River, fully two thirds of the masters in all.

Furthermore, of those 43, almost 50% had no further work after one or more Fall River voyages. Comparison with a brief sample from New Bedford voyages was made to create comparative figures. Departures from New Bedford for the year 1840 were selected, a year approximately midway through the time frame for the span of Fall River's whaling industry. For those 81 departures, only 25% of the masters were new at their job. What is also striking, only 20% of the masters of those 81 voyages had no further employment, a big contrast to Fall River. This suggests that the Fall River masters did not develop very strong resumes, or stated another way, they were not very effective masters. Their inexperience showed. In the introduction to *Whaling Masters and Whaling Voyages Sailing from American Ports*,^{xviii} it is noted that losses of vessels were twice as likely to happen with a replacement master. Experience does seem to count, and the replacement masters, usually the mates forced into the position by circumstance, proved to be less able, as apparently were Fall River's first-time masters.

Another consideration is lack of experience of the agents. Very little survives from the Fall River whaling industry, handicapping its study. No one saved the history. [Contrast Cold Spring Harbor, a town that had a mere 48 voyages. That town has managed to develop a whaling museum to celebrate the town's modest participation in the whaling industry.] However, we can draw some analogies with other towns about the matter of experience in the industry. In the collections of the New Bedford Whaling Museum and the Providence Public Library, there is evidence that experienced agents and masters accumulated knowledge and used it to their advantage. As examples, the Nicholson Collection at the Providence Public Library holds an extensive collection of the records of Samuel Osborn, Edgartown's last whaling agent. Included are notes gathered from his masters detailing the locations of whales, collected over time in a large ledger, that he used in directing his captains.^{xix} There are similar notes in that collection that come from New Bedford's whaling agents J. & W.R. Wing detailing where whales had been taken, reference material that was sent out with masters of upcoming voyages.

Captain George E. Brown (of the bark *Benjamin Franklin*) shows evidence of this sort of lack of knowledge. He made three voyages for John B. Reed of Fall River. A plot of the voyage made from the logbook for the second of these three failing voyages^{xx} shows his track off the coast of Africa. When this area he chose for whaling was compared with the 1935 Townsend maps of whale sightings taken from logbook data,^{xxi} the track of his

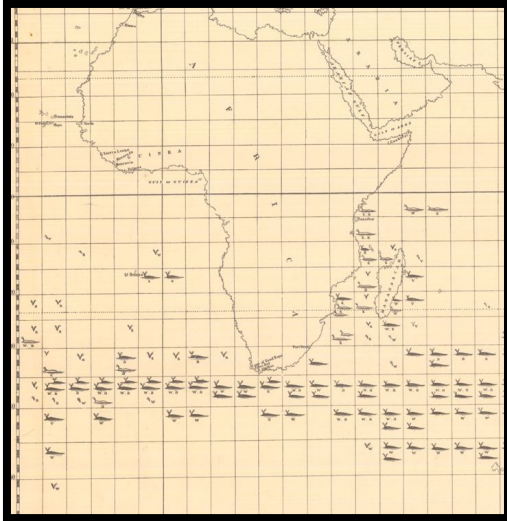


Figure 3 Whale distribution chart showing a dearth of whales off the African coast. From: *Whale Chart* by M.F. Maury. U.S. Navy Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography: Washington, D.C., 1851.

voyage showed Brown was sailing and whaling in the empty boxes on Townsend's map. He was in the wrong place to secure whales. He didn't appear to have the kind of information based on prior experience, his own or his agents', about the locations where whales had been seen or taken previously.

Fall River's vessels had more than their share of hard luck. Articles in the weekly New Bedford newspaper the *Mercury* tell of problems on two vessels:

"Revolt on the Ship *Caravan* of Fall River"^{xxii}

"Seizure of American Vessels in Chile: The Whaleship Pantheon of Fall River and the Sealing Schooner Leander of New London." [accused of violation of protected waters].^{xxiii}

Condemned and sold in foreign ports were the Fall River whaleships:

William in 1840
Taunton in 1840
Jane in 1845
Harriet in 1848
Solomon Saltus in 1850
D. M. Hall in 1855.

Burned were:

Ganges in 1840
Elizabeth in 1846

Lost were:

Edward Quesnel in 1839, wrecked on end of Long Island
Panama in 1844 in the Marquesas
Holder Borden in 1844 on Lisiansky Island
Ann Maria in 1846, missing

In all, of the 23 vessels that served Fall River's whaling industry, 12, over half, were lost, burned, or condemned in a foreign port.^{xxiv}

The loss of *Ann Maria* was memorialized in a small volume with a very large poem, written by the same George Bronson mentioned above, published in 1869.^{xxv} *Ann Maria* mysteriously went missing, never to be seen again.

Bronson tells of Fall River:

On eastern slope of Mount Hope Bay
Fall River sits a Queen today
Queen of the wonder-working loom . . .

He describes the captain of *Ann Maria*, Thomas Jefferson by name:

The hero of this tale appears
A man of hopes, but not of fears
A stalwart frame, four cubits high,
A lynx would quail before his eye.---

What dangers, Sarah, I have passed;
God, please, this cruise shall be my last. . .
One lucky voyage if heaven please
Will give us competence and ease.
“Go not once more,” his Sarah said,
“My dreams of late are full of dread;
I cannot close my eyes to sleep,
But some huge monster of the deep
Around me swim with ravn’ng maws
As they would cleave me with their jaws!”

The captain protests:

I cannot breathe in factory, wife,
It dries the essence of my life;
These brawny arms it does restrain,
And crowds the blood into my brain.

And so he goes to sea----

And the poem goes on, 43 pages of doggerel in all---lamenting the loss of the whale ship, telling of the courting of the widow by another, and the courting of her daughter by his son. But alas, the widow dies of a broken heart, the daughter soon follows, and the two men, father and son, together lay flowers on adjoining graves.

The loss of *Holder Borden* is another interesting tale that lives on today, at least in the minds of maritime lawyers:^{xxvi}

Holder Borden, at 442 tons, was Fall River’s largest whaleship. She was built in 1841 for four members of the Durfee family by Joseph Crandall, Master Carpenter, as his yard at the foot of Ferry Street in Fall River, not far from the present location of the Fall River Marine Museum. She was named in honor of Holder Borden, stepson of one of the Durfees and nephew of another, a prominent Fall River industrialist who died unmarried in 1837.

Her first voyage was a merchant run to England, where she ignominiously ran aground in the English Channel.^{xxvii} Converted to whaling on her return, she was insured for \$60,000, \$5000 less than the value placed on her. She left Fall River on November 10, 1842, and when she arrived at Honolulu 16 months later, she had 800 barrels of sperm whale oil and 700 barrels of blackfish oil. She continued to whale in the Pacific, until April 12, 1844, when she struck on shore and stuck. The crew found themselves near an uncharted island (at least on American charts) they dubbed Pell's Island after their captain Jabez Pell, but was known to the Russians on their charts as Lisianski. North and west of Honolulu, the island was sandy, the home to several varieties of seafoal, hair seals, and green turtles and a good supply of fresh water.

Having gotten themselves, 1400 barrels of oil, and supplies safely off *Holder Borden*, the crew began building a small schooner from materials salvaged from the wreck. Five months later, Captain Pell, accompanied by 25 of the crew, set off for Honolulu in the schooner they aptly named *Hope*, carrying 40 barrels of oil and cable salvaged from the wreck. At Honolulu, Pell sold *Hope* and purchased the American brig *Delaware* for \$6,500, drawing a draft on the *Borden's* owner Nathan Durfee, a common practice for whaling captains in foreign ports. Pell headed back to the island to remove the oil and valuables that he had left in care of the remaining 11 crewmembers. Captain Pell and the crew left the island with the remaining oil on *Delaware* (which proved leaky) arriving at Fall River July 8, 1845 after a voyage of 145 days.

Upon returning, the master and crew filed suit in Admiralty Court for salvage rights to *Holder Borden* and her oil. The judge found against the crew, in his opinion stating that a crew does not have right of salvage on their own vessel; that maritime policy united the interests of the mariner with that of the owner of the vessel. The *Holder Borden* case is still considered a "leading case" in Admiralty Law, laying out the obligations of master and crew to the owners of their vessels.

The island stayed uncharted, at least for Americans for yet a while. In a quirk of fate, the Sag Harbor whaleship *Konohasset* was lost May 24, 1846 on a reef at Pell's Island, about 17 miles southeast of the location where *Holder Borden* was wrecked in 1844. Captain Worth and his crew did as Pell and his crew had done, constructed a small sloop from salvaged materials, and sailed to safety at Honolulu in a passage of 42 days.^{xxviii}

The story of Fall River Captain Preston Cummings is a story of survival of another wreck.^{xxix} Cummings commanded 2 voyages on *Taunton*, and 3 on *Panama*, from 1838-1844, when he lost *Panama* in the Marquesas. While lying at anchor, in Hivaoa in the Marquesas, she was driven ashore by the wind and a heavy sea about 4 o'clock in the morning. Both anchors dragged and the vessel was lost. Three crewmembers died in attempting to land. She had onboard about 950 barrels oil, mostly sperm; 75 barrels were saved. Within about a year, Cummings was in Kaawaloa Village on Kealakekua Bay in Hawaii, where he became the area's first storekeeper and from 1847, postmaster and customs agent.^{xxx} He became a respected citizen of the area. His ads appear regularly in *The Friend* in essentially the same form from 1852-1861, advertising his wares to visiting

whaling captains. Cummings apparently suffered significant financial losses when the Civil War resulted in a drastic curtailment of whaling activity in the islands, reducing reprovisioning profits. In January 1866, before much of a rebound in whaling traffic, Captain Cummings committed suicide while on a visit to Honolulu.^{xxxii}

Although Fall River has little to remember this piece of its history, the Kendall Whaling Museum in Sharon, Massachusetts acquired a large collection of whaling-related artifacts from the descendants of Captain John Marble.^{xxxiii} A Fall River native, master of three Fall River whaling voyages and later two from New Bedford, John C. Marble was born in Assonet, north of Fall River, in 1813. He went to sea in 1832, serving first as green hand on the ship *Java* of New Bedford. He rose quickly through the ranks; by his sixth voyage, he had risen to master of the Fall River brig *Leonidas*. After the completion of his first voyage as master, he married Elizabeth (Lizzie) Church Wrightington. Their first child, a son, was born and died while Marble was at sea in command of the ship *Gold Hunter*. A second son, Freddie, was born in 1850.

The collection, now part of the Kendall Collection at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, contains 7 logbooks, miscellaneous personal papers, items of clothing, and more than 20 pieces of scrimshaw attributed to John Marble. Also included is considerable evidence of Lizzie's facility with a needle. Lizzie and Freddie accompanied Captain Marble on his last two voyages, *Kathleen* and *Awashonks* from New Bedford. While at Freemantle in 1858 or 1859, the couple met Captain Charles Perry Worth of Nantucket, master of the New Bedford bark *Draco*. Worth gave the Marbles two footstools he had made, and a Victorian chair. While at sea, Lizzie embroidered covers for the footstools and the chair, and her husband upholstered the pieces of furniture with her handiwork.^{xxxiv}

Like the other ports that saw opportunity in the whaling industry in the third decade of the nineteenth century, Fall River withdrew from the industry in the early 1860s. Many pressures conspired to make this happen. The market for whale products declined after the discovery of oil in Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859. Whale populations had been diminished by years of hunting, making the search for the prey more lengthy and difficult. Confederate raiders sought out and destroyed whaleships as the Civil War proceeded. All these factors tipped the balance that had kept the hopes of that lottery called whaling alive. *Benjamin Franklin*, Fall River's last whaler, was sold to New Bedford interests in 1862, bringing whaling to a close.^{xxxv}

Whaling is a piece of Fall River's history that has been forgotten, eclipsed by the successful and much larger story of the rise of the textile mills in that city. Though not one of its successful industries, whaling, over time, employed about 2000 men, not counting what shore support must have developed. The trade brought ethnic diversity to that city as it did to New Bedford and other whaling ports. Ironically, as the whaling industry began to diminish in New Bedford, investors there followed the example of Fall River and turned to textiles---the industry in which Fall River had successfully preceded New Bedford before she diversified to try her hand at whaling.

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ⁱⁱⁱElmo Paul Hohman. *The American Whaleman*. Macdonald Maritime History Series reprint edition. (London: Macdonald and Janes, 1970).

^{iv}Judith N. Lund, Elizabeth A. Josephson, Randall R. Reeves, and Tim D. Smith, *American Offshore Whaling Voyages 1667-1927*, 2 Vol, (New Bedford, MA: Old Dartmouth Historical Society-New Bedford Whaling Museum, 2010).

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^{vii} Eric Hilt, *Incentives in Corporations: Evidence from the American Whaling Industry*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA Working paper 10403 <http://www.inber.org/papers/w10403>. Articles about the incorporation process also appear in the [New Bedford Weekly] *Mercury*, February 2, March 4, March 25, April 7 and April 15, 1836.

^{viii} Philip Thomas Silvia, Jr., *The Spindle City: Labor, Politics, and Religion in Fall River*, Fordham University, Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of PhD, 1973, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

^{ix}Starbuck, , *History of the American Whale Fishery*.

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^{xii}Kenneth Martin, *Whalemen and Whaleships of Maine*, (Brunswick, Maine: Harpswell Press, 1975).

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^{xiv}George Adams, *The Fall River Directory, embracing part of Tiverton*, Boston and Fall River, Massachusetts, various years.

^{xv}Hilt, *Incentives in Corporations*.

^{xvi} These calculations were based on figures found in Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery*.

^{xvii}Information derived from Judith Navas Lund, *Whaling Masters and Whaling voyages Sailing from American Ports*, (New Bedford, MA: New Bedford Whaling Museum, The Kendall Whaling Museum, Ten Pound Island Book Co., 2001).

^{xviii}*Ibid.*

^{xix}Samuel Osborn, "Abstracts of the Latitude and Longitude of Whaling Grounds Right and Sperm 1871-1883," (Nicholson Collection, Providence Public Library, Providence, Rhode Island).

^{xx}*Benjamin Franklin* 1858-1860, Journal kept by Captain George E. Brown aboard the bark *Benjamin Franklin* of Fall River, Kendall Collection, Research Library, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, MA.

^{xxi} Charles Haskins Townsend, *The Distribution of Certain Whales as Shown by Logbook Records of American Whaleships*, (New York: New York Zoological Society, 1935).

^{xxii} "Revolt on the Ship Caravan of Fall River," [New Bedford Weekly] *Mercury*, June 26, 1846.

^{xxiii}"Seizure of American Vessels in Chili: the Whaleship Pantheon of Fall River and the sealing schooner Leander of New London," [New Bedford Weekly] *Mercury*, September 4, 1846.

^{xxiv}Lund, *Whaling Masters*.

^{xxv} George Whitefield Bronson, *The Ann Maria*. (Fall River [Mass.]: Almy, Milne & Co. 1869).

^{xxvi}This story is retold by many sources. The best reference for the story in detail is Ralph B. Dupont, *The Holder Borden*, *New England Quarterly*, September, 1954.

^{xxvii}Dupont, *The Holder Borden*.

^{xxviii}Finckenor, George A., *Whales and Whaling: Port of Sag Harbor, New York*, (Sag Harbor: William Ewers-Printers, 1975).

^{xxix}“American whaleship Panama wrecked,” [New Bedford Weekly] *Mercury*, July 11, 1845. See also a detailed account in *The Friend*, February 25, 1845.

^{xxx}Ron Kley, personal communication of information from his research on Preston Cummings.

^{xxxi}*Ibid.*

^{xxxii}[Stuart Frank], “The Marble Collection,” *The KWM Newsletter: The Quarterly Newsletter of the Kendall Whaling Museum*. Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring-Fall 2001).

^{xxxiii}Stuart Frank, Collection notes: The Marble collection, Kendall Whaling Museum, Sharon, Massachusetts, today part of the Kendall Collection, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts.

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