

The Eventful Voyage of the U.S.S. *Alliance* in Search of the Missing *Jeannette* North Pole Expedition

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Abstract

In July 1879, the ill-fated U.S. North Pole expedition of *Jeannette*, made possible through the efforts of the flamboyant publisher of the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, Jr., embarked on an attempt on the pole via Bering Strait. By 1881, anxiety over the ship's absence led to the outfitting of several naval relief expeditions for the missing vessel. This article examines the cruise of the *Jeannette* relief expedition by the American frigate, U.S.S. *Alliance*, to Iceland, Norway and Svalbard and the seas between Greenland and Svalbard. Little-remembered today, the *Alliance* relief expedition was initiated by Bennett. His desire for increased circulation of the *New York Herald* through the reporting of Arctic endeavors assured complete coverage of the voyage by a *Herald* correspondent and maintained the Arctic in the public eye. Though unsuccessful in its primary rescue mission, the novel cruise by an American warship in European Arctic waters achieved some noteworthy results while running its share of risks.

James Gordon Bennett, Jr. and the *Jeannette* expedition

The later part of the nineteenth century was a period of active interest in the exploration of the Far North. Following the close of the long, costly and frustrating search for Sir John Franklin (1786-1847), British, German, Austro-Hungarian and Swedish expeditions, all of which received strong scientific backing were active in Greenland and the European Arctic. In addition,



Figure 1 James Gordon Bennet, Jr., publisher of the *New York Herald*. Photo: Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

the discovery of the North Pole became its own obsession as a crowded field of entrants looked to establish their own mark in the polar regions. James Gordon Bennett, Jr. (1841-1918), publisher of the *New York Herald*, held an equal fascination with the polar regions and was instrumental in organizing at least five expeditions to the North, including the U.S. North Pole expedition of *Jeannette* (1879-1881). Assuming the editorial position from his father, the younger Bennett brought his own aggressive style to the publication. Bennett was an enterprising newspaperman who had recognized that competent journalists dispatching sensational stories from exotic locales made for exciting copy and increased circulation. Never was that more apparent than in Bennett's association with Henry Stanley and his quest for Dr. David Livingstone in the jungles of Central Africa. When Stanley "found" and interviewed Livingstone on the banks of Lake Tanganyika, Stanley became an international celebrity, and the *Herald's* circulation multiplied.

Bennett realized that Equatorial Africa was not, however, the only region from which exciting copy could be obtained. The enterprising publisher was among the earliest newsmen to send correspondents to the equally mysterious and sublime North in an effort to boost sales.¹ *Herald* reporters accompanied the relief expedition for Charles Francis Hall in 1870, the expedition of Frederick Schwatka in 1878-80 and the Arctic voyage of the *Pandora* in 1875. Bennett's interest in the Arctic as a news locale even led him to financially back the *Pandora*'s 1875 voyage, subscribing to the tune of £4000 or £5000. Now, purchasing *Pandora* (renamed *Jeannette* after Bennett's sister), and outfitting the vessel at his own expense, Bennett prepared for his biggest northern adventure.

Jeannette's ambitious objective, as advanced by Bennett, was an attempt on the North Pole through Bering Strait, a different point of attack than previous attempts. Support for Bennett's plan was bolstered by the theories of Captain Silas Bent, a flag officer with Commodore Matthew C. Perry's expedition to Japan between 1852 and 1854. Fanciful theories as to the mysteries of the Arctic seas were as commonplace in the nineteenth century as they had been in the sixteenth century. Bent had compiled hydrographic observations to reach his own conclusions on the currents of the North Pacific Ocean. According to Bent, just as there existed a Gulf Stream in the Atlantic, a similar warm water "river-ocean" existed in the Pacific, the Kuro-Siwo or Japan Stream. The great warm currents of the Kuro-Siwo swept through the Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait until they rose and formed an open polar sea near the pole.² The armchair German geographer, Augustus H. Petermann, abandoning his own earlier views, adopted Bent's theory and convinced Bennett of its utility.

Lieutenant George Washington De Long (1844-81) was Bennett's hand-picked choice for command. De Long had gained Arctic experience while participating in the U.S. Navy's relief expedition in search of Charles Francis Hall. Like Bennett, De Long was wholeheartedly persuaded by Petermann's hypothesis. Bennett would bear the costs of the expedition, but by act of Congress, its crew sailed under U.S. Navy rules and regulations. Immediately prior to departure, De Long was given additional instructions. He was to search for the expedition of Adolph Erik Nordenskiöld, then attempting a first voyage through the Northeast Passage from Europe to Bering Strait. Those added instructions gave Bennett two opportunities for a news scoop. With that plan of action, *Jeannette* departed San Francisco on 8 July 1879. One month later, De Long received evidence that Nordenskiöld had safely reached Kolyuchinskaya Guba, on the northern coast of the Chukotka Peninsula, thus releasing De Long to pursue his polar objective. After entering Bering Strait, *Jeannette* was spotted by a passing whaler on 8 September 1879, fifty miles south of Ostrov Gera'd (Herald Island) heading north, then the expedition ship was never heard from again.

The *Jeannette* relief effort begins in earnest

With no word from the expedition, anxiety over the missing ship and its crew mounted. In May 1880, the revenue-cutter *Thomas L. Corwin* was given special orders to search for *Jeannette* on its annual patrol in Alaskan waters. Though extending its cruise to within sight of Ostrov Vrangelya (Wrangel Island), the *Corwin* returned with no information about *Jeannette*. Seeking a more meaningful rescue effort, a *Jeannette* relief board was convened by the U.S. Navy Department; its recommendation was for a two-pronged approach. The U.S.S. *Rodgers* was

dispatched to search the area most likely to locate *Jeannette*, north of Bering Strait. The second and less well-known expedition, that of the U.S.S. *Alliance*, was the brainchild of the newspaperman Bennett, who pushed the naval board to leave no stone unturned in its search. *Alliance* was tasked with searching the seas between Greenland, Iceland and the coasts of Norway and Svalbard, as far as 77°45'N ice permitting, in the unlikely event *Jeannette* somehow managed to work its way across the circumpolar basin. Viewed objectively, it was a location of low probability, but Bennett had powerful influence over Washington's politicians and the naval establishment and had matters his way. Secretary of the Navy, William H. Hunt, made no secret of Bennett's advocacy, stating in his 1881 annual report to U.S. President Chester A. Arthur that "the determination [to dispatch the *Alliance* relief expedition] was upon the suggestion of the liberal and public-spirited [James Gordon Bennett]."³ Of course, left unstated was that Bennett had every intention of profiting from any news of the missing expedition.

The startling news of the twin disasters of the *Jeannette* expedition and of its relief expedition of the *Rodgers* would greatly overshadow the cruise of *Alliance* on the opposite side of the polar basin. As for *Jeannette*, after drifting uncontrollably in the pack ice for months, the vessel met its fateful end, crushed in the ice in June 1881. Commander De Long and his party abandoned ship, seeking refuge on the Siberian coast by means of an exhausting sledge and boat journey across the broken ice. Taking to three whaleboats, one boat was lost with all hands in a violent storm before reaching shore. The remaining two boats, including that of De Long, managed to make landfall in the ever-shifting sands of the Lena Delta. However, all but two of the men in De Long's boat perished ashore from cold and starvation, including De Long. The men of the third boat under Chief Engineer George W. Melville were more fortunate; all survived after chancing upon some local hunters who provided assistance. The relief expedition of the *Rodgers* in the western Arctic suffered a similar fate. While wintering on the east coast of Siberia in December 1881, the *Rodgers* caught fire and was destroyed, but fortunately with no loss of life. Lieutenant Robert M. Berry commanding the *Rodgers* dispatched the *Herald's* reporter William H. Gilder on a 2,500-mile trek to a Russian telegraph station at Irkutsk to transmit the disastrous news of the *Rodgers* to the United States. En route, travelling by dog sledge and reindeer sledge, Gilder learned details of the loss of *Jeannette* and obtained copies of confidential dispatches from a messenger of one of the survivors, Engineer Melville. Gilder cabled both spectacular stories to the *Herald*, providing sensational copy for the *Herald* and captivating public attention.⁴ The *Jeannette* expedition would remain in the public eye through full-length narrative accounts, subsequently published by Engineer Melville and Lieutenant John W. Danenhower. In addition, Emma De Long, widow of *Jeannette's* commander George W. De Long, published the journals of her deceased husband. Besides his reports for the *Herald*, Gilder published his own account of the fate of *Jeannette* and the relief expedition of *Rodgers* in a full-length work, *Ice Pack and Tundra*.⁵

Not surprisingly, *Alliance*, far removed from *Jeannette's* scene of action, has received little notice and examination. Besides its humanitarian purpose, the voyage of *Alliance* presented a window of opportunity for scientific observations in a region largely unfamiliar to American interests. In contrast to the Bering Strait region of the western Arctic which was of vital importance to the nation's economic interests, including its whaling fleets, the seas between Greenland, Iceland and Svalbard were rarely visited by American vessels. Logically, mapping and scientific work in the North Pacific Ocean had been viewed as a more deserving of

appropriation by the U.S. Congress. Scientific work through the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42, and the North Pacific Exploring Expedition of 1853-56, for example, had completed extensive surveys of the Pacific waters and obtained large collections of natural history. With the purchase of Alaska in 1867, investigative activities began in earnest in Alaskan waters by the U.S. Coast Survey and the Treasury Department, among others.

Consequently, in addition to its primary search objective and in contrast to the *Rodgers*, *Alliance* was provided with a comprehensive set of instructions to gather scientific information. Those instructions included a survey by means of a track chart of the voyage, noting the extent of pack ice, icebergs and floes between Greenland and Svalbard for use by the U.S. Hydrographic Office. Though no dedicated scientist was to accompany the vessel, the broad list of scientific activities included the following: the recording of water temperatures at the surface and at five fathoms below to assess the limits of warm currents; use of a deep-sea thermometer, especially in the pack ice; the collection of specimens by means of use of drag-nets on the surface and from the sea bottom; the collection of flora, fauna and geology specimens while on land; observations of the aurora, as well as tidal, specific gravity and barometric observations. Bottles were to be thrown regularly to the sea in an effort to track the Gulf Stream and the polar currents. The instructions from Secretary Hunt noted that few organisms from these northern regions were found in American collections, and “even if not new to science, any inhabitants of the waters, properly preserved, would be exceedingly welcome to our national collection.”⁶ Recognizing the limit of such efforts, the instructions stressed that “the above observations, although simple, are highly important to the scientific men of our country and the world, who frequently deduce great results from very small material.”⁷

Outfitting and departure

U. S.S. *Alliance*, which took its name from the American Revolutionary War frigate, was a screw gunboat with six guns, commissioned on 18 January 1877. The vessel was classed as a third rate with a displacement of 1,375 tons; length, 185 feet; and beam, 35 feet. It was one of the

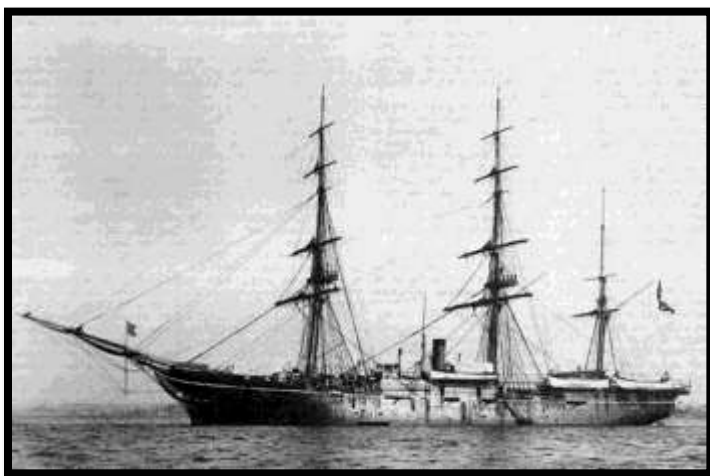


Figure 2 U.S.S. *Alliance*, ca 1890. Photo: U.S. Naval History and Naval Command, Washington, D.C.

last of the wooden-hulled warships as the U.S. Navy moved to modernize with steel construction. Straddling the transition from sail to steam propulsion, *Alliance* was powered by steam engine, but retained full auxiliary rigging.⁸ Though the U.S. Navy had generously bowed to Bennett’s desire for a relief expedition to scout European Arctic seas, it had no intention of undertaking an expensive refitting of *Alliance* for work through heavy ice or even permitting the *Alliance* to push into the pack. For that reason, in the short span of ten days, the only modifications were sheathing of the

bow with additional planking, reinforcing the stem with iron plating and raising the hatches by one foot. Two new whaleboats were added, and the ship's guns and most of its powder made way for tons of coal. The crew was sorely disappointed to learn that additional warm clothing was not part of the regulation uniform. They were therefore compelled to furnish an Arctic wardrobe at their own cost.

An accident on departure nearly multiplied those refitting costs. As *Alliance* exited dry dock at Hampton Roads harbor, a runaway timber raft, a half-mile-long and floating down the Elizabeth River, careened into the stern of *Alliance*. Fortunately, only the chain had snapped and a repair was made without a return to dry dock. Manning the ship posed greater difficulties. The specter of the missing *Jeannette* and its fate evidently loomed heavily on the minds of *Alliance*'s crew. Harboring grave concerns about their own northward voyage and a similar fate, thirty members of the crew deserted, leaving the ship short-handed on its departure. A full complement for the ship would have been 190 crewmembers, but *Alliance* departed with only about 150 men.

Alliance was commanded by career naval officer Captain George Henry Wadleigh. A U.S. Naval Academy graduate (1863), Wadleigh had served on blockade duty and in engagements in the Gulf of Mexico during the American Civil War, including the Battle of Mobile Bay. After several years of service in the European, Pacific and North Atlantic stations through 1869, he largely held shore duty at several locations.⁹ He applied for and was appointed to the command after *Alliance*'s then current commander, Philip H. Cooper, was relieved from duty at his own request due to a family illness.



Figure 3 Rear Admiral George Henry Wadleigh, 1902. Photo: U.S. Naval History and Naval Command, Washington, D.C.



Figure 4 Henry D. Macdona, correspondent for the *New York Herald*, age 29. Photo: *The Tammany Times*, June 23, 1894.

Bennett's choice to accompany *Alliance* as the *Herald*'s correspondent to deliver lively copy was Henry (Harry) Dollard Macdona (1855-1909). A New York City native, Macdona attended Manhattan College and thereafter Columbia Law School, graduating in 1877. An active personality led him to work as a reporter for the *New York Herald* while pursuing his legal degree. After graduation, he worked for ten years as a *Herald* reporter (both before and after the *Alliance* cruise), with a taste for travel, stationed in Albany, Washington, D.C., Mexico and Europe.¹⁰ He was highly regarded for his reliable and honest reporting, and his congenial nature. His hard-driving, energetic personality, coupled with a willingness to travel widely,

had obvious appeal to Bennett. A spirit of adventure to the North would overtake the twenty-four-year-old city-bred reporter like it had countless others. Macdona's lengthy columns on the voyage, some spread across an entire page, appeared in ten issues of the *New York Herald* through June and November 1881.

Macdona may have been the most well-publicized voice, but the now forgotten cruise of *Alliance* actually had several chroniclers aboard. The Navy was kept well informed by Commander Wadleigh through a series of reports to the secretary of the Navy during the cruise. Wadleigh also maintained a matter-of-fact but informative journal that recorded the daily movements of the *Alliance* and observations intended to benefit future navigators.¹¹ The unprecedented voyage of a U.S. Navy ship to Iceland, Norway and Svalbard also led Lieutenant Charles Plummer Perkins, an 1869 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, to contribute an account for the benefit of the Navy at large. Entitled "The Cruise of the Alliance," his article was published in the *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*.¹² Perkins had previously been engaged in nautical survey expeditions. He would later serve with distinction throughout a long naval career; commended for his service during the Spanish American War. In accordance with the expedition's secondary objective, Perkins's account highlighted the naval and scientific aspects of *Alliance's* voyage in thorough detail, describing its course, weather and ice conditions, currents, chronometer and compass performance and meteorological observations.

The unfrequented waters of the European Arctic captivated another crewmember to pen an entertaining account of the voyage. *Alliance's* assistant engineer, Jefferson Brown, was a nineteenth century jack-of-all-trades, skilled at whatever he put his mind to. Brown also proved to have an observant eye and a flair for the written word. He penned a well-written, engaging account of the cruise for an obscure and short-lived U.S. weekly, *Our Continent*, a Philadelphia-based publication.¹³ The feature obtained more widespread distribution through several juvenile magazines, including the immensely popular *The Boy's Own Paper*.¹⁴ Evidently, the cruise of *Alliance* to European waters and locales found a suitable youth audience in the London-based *Boy's Own*. Brown's descriptive account, delivered in a plainspoken manner, conveyed a realistic picture of unfamiliar people and places without the sensationalism that frequently marked tales of northern voyages. A skilled amateur photographer, Brown was unable to procure a camera before departure. Nonetheless, he also delivered a visual record through a series of twelve illustrations that were reproduced in each of his two publications, based on a collection of more than thirty well-executed drawings attributed to him.¹⁵

Though unknown today, like many servicemen of the period, Brown's brief biography in Hamersly's *Record of Living Officers of the U.S. Navy* speaks loudly as to his great fortitude and the vicissitudes of war. A veteran of the U.S. Civil War, Brown was engaged in the siege of Port Hudson on the Mississippi River, during which his ship, the U.S.S. *Mississippi*, was destroyed by Confederate shore batteries in an explosion that was heard over a hundred miles away. Brown was among the sixty-four sailors given up for dead, and recorded as one of the casualties by the Navy. Several months later, he appeared among a prisoner exchange fully alive. He was later involved in several heated engagements on the James River while serving with an iron-clad.¹⁶

Alliance departed Norfolk on 17 June 1881, and under favorable sailing conditions, reached St. John's, Newfoundland on 24 June. Unbeknownst to *Alliance*'s searchers, at the time they were sailing for St. John's with thoughts of rescue, thousands of miles away on the opposite side of the polar basin, *Jeannette* had met its fate. Trapped firmly in the grip of the pressing pack ice and floes for months, it had been crushed and had sunk on 12 June. *Alliance* could offer no relief as *Jeannette*'s crew prepared for a desperate escape southward over treacherous ice and seas four hundred miles to the coast of Siberia.

While anchored in St. John's, *Alliance* chanced to meet the members of another polar expedition then assembling at this out-of-the-way destination for American naval vessels, the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition commanded by Lieutenant Adolphus W. Greely. The Lady Franklin Bay Expedition (or Greely Expedition) was headed to Ellesmere Island as one of two scientific stations established by the United States as part of the First International Polar Year (the second U.S. station was in Point Barrow, Alaska). The unexpected appearance of *Alliance*, intent on its desperate mission, served as an all-too-grim reminder to Greely's men as to the hazardous nature of their own undertaking. Perhaps for that reason, Lieutenant Greely chose not to mention the encounter in his popular account, *Three Years of Arctic Service*, or even in his official report to the chief signal officer.¹⁷ The omission seems rather peculiar in light of the chance meeting of two independent U.S. military commands at this foreign port. Ironically, in August 1884, *Alliance* would lead the North Atlantic Squadron into Portsmouth harbor as escort to the relief ship U.S.S. *Thetis* returning with the six survivors of Greely's harrowing expedition.

In any event, officers of Greely's party were cordially invited aboard the *Alliance* while at St. John's. Over several days, Macdona had the opportunity to size up the commander of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition. The *Herald* newsman was evidently left with a favorable impression of Greely's grit and determination, writing that "his [Greely's] plans as he explained them to me prove him to be no laggard."¹⁸ Interestingly, though Greely intended to faithfully carry out his scientific observations in accordance with the International Polar Year, a competitive spirit of discovery had overtaken the would-be explorer. To Macdona, Greely made no secret of his overwhelming desire to reach the highest northern latitude ever achieved by any expedition. Macdona also harbored no doubts that Greely would achieve that objective.

Officers of the *Alliance* also extended Greely a helping hand. Captain Wadleigh shared all the current news about the conditions in the North with which he was familiar. In addition, Chief Engineer George Burnap of the *Alliance* offered to look over the sputtering steam launch, christened the "Lady Greely," that Greely had planned to take to the North. Greely was not pleased to hear that its malfunctioning boiler needed to be replaced. He also grumbled when denied a request to purchase gun powder from *Alliance*'s stores. On the other hand, Wadleigh was pleased with his stay in St. John's as he managed to recruit twenty experienced Newfoundland sealers, pushing his total complement to 173. The veteran seamen had seen their share of hardships in the northern waters and did not hesitate to join the expedition in furtherance of its humanitarian purpose. The lost seaman George W. De Long had a personal connection with the city and its citizens. In 1873, while a lieutenant on the search for the missing members of Hall's *Polaris* expedition, De Long made a brief stop in St. John's, which was well remembered during *Alliance*'s visit.

Leaving Newfoundland, *Alliance* encountered stormy weather; during one 24-hour gale the fore topmast staysail was carried away and the starboard lower boom was broken. The *Alliance* arrived in Reykjavik, Iceland, on 9 July, under more favorable weather. In the late nineteenth century, Iceland possessed a fascinating allure as a land that time forgot, with its distinctive geysers, glaciers and unusual geologic features. Victorian travelers trekked to Iceland for an adventuresome, but not necessarily hazardous, excursion to an exotic location. To many Americans and Europeans, Iceland's most well-known feature was the inactive volcano of Snæfellsjökull, which stands to the northwest of Reykjavik; it held the entrance to the center of the earth in Verne's popular imaginary journey. In southern Iceland, the more active stratovolcano of Hekla became a sort of pilgrimage for genteel European



Figure 5 "Snæfells Jökull." Sketch by Assistant Engineer Jefferson Brown, U.S.S. *Alliance*, July 1881. Photo: Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

travelers intent on a none-too-strenuous climb. One editorial in the *Herald*, written in anticipation of Macdonald's reporting, reflected the then prevailing view of the island and its people: "Between its isolation and quaintness Iceland can always claim the interest of the civilized world, and any new facts about her inhabitants, their homes and their life, will be read by avidity by the thousands who learned in school that the land and its people were unlike any other."¹⁹ At the time though, Iceland was not completely unfamiliar to long-time *Herald* readers. In 1874, Iceland's millennial celebration, the one-thousandth anniversary of its first settlement by the Vikings, had attracted the attention of James Gordon Bennett, Jr., with his then emerging interest in the North. Iceland held enough curiosity to merit a correspondent from the *New York Herald* to cover the proceedings and deliver a comprehensive report on the island. Bennett found a reporter eminently suited for the task, the Arctic explorer, Dr. Isaac Israel Hayes, both a gifted writer and an authority on the North. Hayes fully covered the events for the *Herald*, accompanied by Bayard Taylor on behalf of the *New York Tribune* and Murat Halstead for the *Cincinnati Commercial*.

European warships periodically visited the Icelandic capital while keeping watch over their respective fishing fleets. However, the arrival of *Alliance* in Reykjavik, the inaugural visit of a U.S. Navy man-of-war to Iceland, attracted widespread attention on the part of the local citizenry. The inquisitive Icelanders looked upon the unfamiliar warship with much curiosity, posing as many questions as the American searchers. General Governor Finesse extended a warm reception to *Alliance* and its crew, and in compliance with diplomatic protocol, Captain Wadleigh received the Icelandic representative "with proper honors."²⁰ The governor, the highest-ranking authority in Iceland, held his position by virtue of the Danish government. Though Iceland had been granted its own constitution in 1874 on the millennial of its settlement,

it remained under the executive authority of Denmark. The independent Republic of Iceland was established in 1944.

While in Norfolk, Virginia, Wadleigh had a form of “reward poster” printed in Icelandic with a description of *Jeannette* and offering an unspecified amount for its relief. He also carried two dozen photographs of *Jeannette* for distribution to fisherman at sea. As the Icelandic Parliament, the Althing, was in session, the governor made sure to distribute the leaflets to the legislators to be taken to their respective districts. In a gracious diplomatic act, Captain Dumas Vence of the French corvette, *Dupleix*, who was occupied with a survey of the coast of Iceland, furnished Wadleigh with copies of his completed charts. While in Reykjavik, Wadleigh also learned that the winter of 1880-81 had been a severe one in Iceland, the worst in the memories of the residents, which did not bode well for the *Alliance’s* principal objective. With time on their hands, Macdona and Brown played tourists and offered a running travelogue. Macdona’s account of Iceland, running over the course of three lengthy letters in the *Herald* offered a historical view of Iceland, harking back to its settlement by the Vikings, as well as a graphic view of the island’s features and its inhabitants. Perhaps looking to pad his columns, Macdona’s early letters seem a bit too verbose, filled with what even he termed extraneous “flotsam” from his notes, and at times negative commentary. Macdona’s Iceland was far from the “Arctic Eden,” that he observed in the writings of his colleagues. As one example, Macdona wrote: “That, in the broader sense of the word, the people of Iceland are a virtuous race their history attests, but judged by the artificial standard of modern society they certainly are not.”²¹



Figure 6 Track Chart of the Cruise of the Alliance. Photo: Perkins, “The Cruise of the Alliance,” 1885.

The veteran navy man, Jefferson Brown, who had seen his share of the wonders of the world, was much excited by the voyage and went to some effort to gather information. Possessed of an inquisitive nature, he collected comprehensive details as to the island and its history from the English-speaking editor of the Reykjavik newspaper, the *Isafold*. Brown also offered a perceptive view of the city of Reykjavik and the Icelandic peoples. With a technical focus as might be expected from an engineering professional, his account offered well-defined descriptions of the city’s buildings, dwellings, and markets. However, with a discerning eye to his surroundings, he offered insightful details of the Icelanders manner of dress, home life, and industry. Taking particular note of the people, Brown was particularly impressed with the preservation of their distinctive culture.²² In contrast to Macdona, who found the Icelanders an “odd people” and their “virtues” overstated by his literary colleagues, Brown’s storyline reflected a wholesome respect for the hardy Icelandic people.²³

Nine days after departing Reykjavik, and after cruising along the southern coast of Iceland, *Alliance* reached Hammerfest, Norway. There, Governor Blackstat personally called on Captain Wadleigh and offered his assistance, including distributing circulars which Wadleigh had printed in Norwegian for fishermen and walrus hunters.²⁴ This small fishing port, the most northern town in Norway, was the scene of rather momentous events during the brief stopover of *Alliance*. When in Hammerfest, a startling but sketchy report reached the Americans from the captain of a fishing boat arriving from Tromsø that U.S. President James A. Garfield had been shot, the victim of an assassination attempt. Speculation abounded in the absence of more definite information; was it his wife who was shot, was he dead, who was the shooter? The answer to those nagging questions would not reveal themselves for several weeks, though several days later they received a positive report that the president was recovering. In addition, just prior to their arrival, the steamer *Nordsternen* had grounded on rocks off Nordkapp, at the northern tip of Norway. Fortunately, the ship's hull remained intact and the distraught passengers, including some American ladies, were rescued and returned to Tromsø by another steamship that had received the distress signal.²⁵

***Alliance's* first visit to Svalbard**

Consistent with the reports received in Iceland, returning schooners from Svalbard confirmed reports of heavy ice which had forced them to retreat. The unrelenting ice had made for one of the most unfavorable seasons in more than forty years; knowledgeable fishermen discouraged Wadleigh from attempting the voyage and admonished him that the *Alliance* was ill-prepared for the icy waters. *Alliance's* commander was undeterred by the naysayers however. Leaving Hammerfest on 29 July, in another ominous sign, pack ice barred the vessel's approach to Bear Island, a solitary, rocky speck of land, midway between the northern tip of Norway and Spitsbergen. From a distance of two miles from the island, the *Alliance's* howitzer was fired twice, but no response was received nor was any sign of life observed. Falling in with a passing schooner, *Haabet*, which had sailed from Jan Mayen in the southwest, Wadleigh learned that to the northward a steady wall of ice had blocked the *Haabet's* attempt to reach Bear Island and northern Spitsbergen.

Mindful of the *Haabet's* experience, Wadleigh steered the *Alliance* to the east. Tension mounted as *Alliance* carefully threaded through an opening in the ice pack and carefully weaved its way north. On 2 August, with the veil of fog having lifted, against an azure blue, cloudless sky, the sharp mountain peaks of the island of Spitsbergen, partially draped by snow and glistening glaciers, fell into view. Spitsbergen (formerly Vestspitsbergen or West Spitsbergen) is the largest of the islands constituting the Svalbard archipelago. Like many novice Arctic mariners, the crew of the *Alliance* was astonished at the atmospheric effect of distant objects appearing near-at-hand. On the southwest coast, Bellsund was entered, but a strong gale prevented anchoring. Nonetheless, with considerable effort in the midst of a howling storm, circulars were distributed by *Alliance's* whaleboat crew among the several fishing vessels found hugging the lee shore against the face of a large glacier. However, Macdona remarked that the hardened sailors seemed apathetic to the fate of *Jeannette* and declined to respond to questions put forth to them.²⁶ Quite possibly they were simply unfamiliar with the language.

Continuing north along the coast, the broad stretch of Isfjorden, the largest fiord on the west coast of Spitsbergen at seventy miles long, was penetrated. Within the fiord, at the eastern bay of Grønfjorden (known as “Green Harbor” to English whalers), a further fourteen fishing vessels were seen anchored, frustrated by the stalled breakup; one of which, *Forsag*, had been crushed in the ice. The stop proved important as a highly regarded ice pilot from the *Forsag* was retained by Wadleigh, evidently not sharing blame for the *Forsag*’s recent disaster. Some time was spent in Grønfjorden collecting botanical and geological specimens as well as marine organisms taken by net from the boat, and several hundred pounds of coal were quarried from a vein for use in the galley (the coal was considered useless for propulsion). Macdona recorded a melancholy site in the form of human bones strewn about unmarked graves, disturbed by roving wolves or bears.²⁷ The remains, most likely those of unfortunate Dutch whalers (one headboard dated to 1709), had been laid in coffins placed upon the hard ground and simply covered with moss.

On an island at the eastern entrance to the bay, in order to measure the rise of the land, a metal plaque was erected bearing the name of the U.S.S. *Alliance* and marking its height above the low water mark. Disappointedly, the plaque placed by Nordenskjöld in 1864 for the same purpose could not be located.

Running north in a first attempt at reaching a high northern latitude, *Alliance* fell in with the persistent fogs that make navigation in ice-choked waters extremely hazardous, particularly for a large, lightly reinforced wooden warship. Taking full responsibility for the ship’s navigation, Captain Wadleigh himself manned the crow’s nest (specially constructed while at Hammerfest), in order to select the best path through the shifting leads. As the vessel crossed the 80°N parallel, exceeding their initial expectations, spirits rose as the entire crew took great pride in the achievement. Wadleigh’s instructions had directed him to sail only as far north as 77°45’N, and only if possible without endangering his vessel.²⁸ The optimism was quickly tempered as the ship was suddenly stalled by close-packed ice under a bleak, steel-gray sky. Macdona had little to add to the scene beyond the “exhilaration” of the crew as they cheered their accomplishment. Brown however was captivated by the Arctic spectacle. He volunteered a far more graphic and visual expression as *Alliance* was stopped just above 80°N:

The pack ice was very heavy, piled up in confused masses thirty and forty feet high, and extended to the eastward to Amsterdam Island [Amsterdamøya], the northwest point of Spitzbergen, where it was joined to the land by bay ice. The early part of the day was fair, the sun bright and the scene a novel one as we streamed slowly through the ice. Detached masses of ice, with all the colors of the rainbow, and of every imaginable form, were reflected on the dark glossy surface of the water; silver swans of gigantic proportions, huge mushrooms, gothic structures and blocks with cavernous recesses, brilliant in their depths with emerald light, floated about the ship, driven by the varying currents, sometimes in opposite directions. As we approached the edge of the floe, a dense, chilly fog effectually drew a curtain and hid our panorama, the sullen roar of the ice pack, the only remaining evidence of its presence, a sinister sound peculiar to the ice, resembling neither that of breakers on a rocky shore or of surf on a beach, one that must be heard to be appreciated.²⁸



Figure 7 "Hakluyt Headland. Amsterdam Island. N.W. point of Spitsbergen. N.Lat. 79°49', E.Long. 11°5'." Sketch by Assistant Engineer Jefferson Brown, U.S.S. *Alliance*, August 1881. Photo: Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

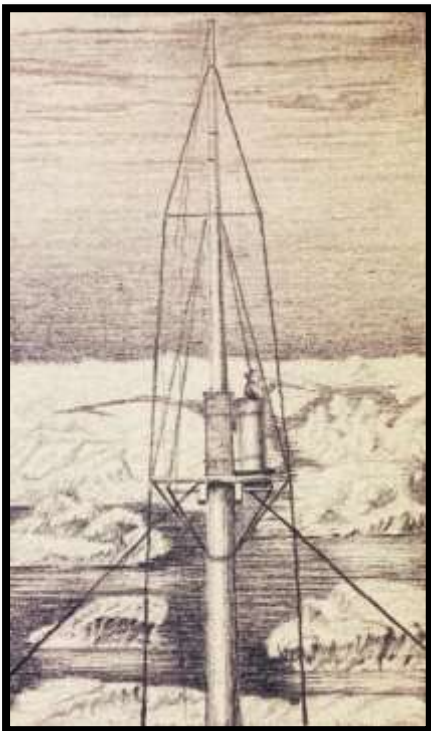


Figure 8 "Polar Ice from Crow's nest. N.Lat 80°10'." Sketch by Assistant Engineer Jefferson Brown, U.S.S. *Alliance*, August 1881. Photo: Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

Drawing on *Alliance's* steam power they attempted to progress along the edge of this pack further to the northeast, rounding Hakluythovden (or Haklyut's Headland), on the island of Amsterdamøya. In the seventeenth century, the site of Smeerenburg on Amsterdamøya had been one of the locations for the vibrant Dutch whaling operations; now it was a pitiable grave site. Though

they held out little hope for the lost *Jeannette* mariners in this desolate location, the crew of *Alliance* maintained a vigilant lookout for stranded men or the ship. Stopped again by a barrier of dense ice, the crew was occupied taking soundings and dredging. Macdona however bemoaned the lack of proper deep-sea nets and thermometers. Finally giving way to the ice, *Alliance* beat a retreat to the south end of Danskøya (or Danes Island), on 7 August. The crew spent several days frolicking, and hunting bears and myriad birds. At the same time, a whale boat was dispatched back to Hakluythovden, where another copper plaque, setting another benchmark, was placed in a bight west of the headland, and tide marks established.²⁹

On 12 August, leaving Danskøya, Wadleigh ordered the vessel to attempt to reach a higher northern latitude. Not surprisingly, the order caused some carping and a high degree of apprehension among some of the officers, who believed that they had already taken more than enough risk. Chief Engineer Burnap and Assistant Engineer Brown had little rest during the entire cruise as they were constantly on alert for fear of damage to the ship or machinery. Nonetheless, weaving its way north and east through drift ice and frequent fogs, by Wadleigh's official

account, on 20 August, *Alliance* reached a highest latitude of 80°10'N in longitude 11°22'E by steaming.³⁰ Captain Wadleigh had the satisfaction of achieving the highest latitude ever reached by an American warship. From their vantage point, they had a clear view of the island of Klovningen, with its distinctive cleft known as the Cloven Cliff. On the eastern horizon, they obtained a view of Nordauslandet (North East Land), the northernmost and second largest island in the Svalbard archipelago. According to Macdona, the announcement, “did not effect [sic] the company in the least.” Unlike the previous northing of 80°N latitude, this one did not call for “dramatic treatment.”³¹ But privately for Macdona, the achievement was a moment of pure elation. Scribbling a note to his sister amidst the heaving seas and ice, Macdona wrote:

Latitude 80°10'N, Longitude 11°22'E, August 20, 1881, U.S.S. *Alliance*.

My dear Kate,

You may live to be a horrid old maid, but I shall doubt if ever you will be again addressed by a man from such an ex alia position as this. I am now 590 miles from the North Pole, without the slightest probability of getting any nearer so I seize the supreme opportunity to scratching you a few lines which may be pleasant to remember in the days to come.”³²

Both Macdona and Brown noted with some satisfaction the fact that *Alliance* had traveled more than 540 miles above the latitude in which *Hansa* of the German North Pole Expedition of 1869-70 was crushed; and 45 miles north of the spot where *Tegetthoff* was abandoned on the 1872-74 expedition of Karl Weyprecht and Julius Payer. Macdona’s writing for the *Herald* captured a sense of place:

SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

We were in fact 590 geographical miles from the North Pole; but who, who has seen this desert of ice, piled up in hummocks and forced into mountainous ridges by a force that the mind cannot comprehend, will venture an opinion as to the years of dreary endeavor yet to be endured before man shall reach that supreme spot? Of all the desolate sights the human eye has rested on, this desert of ice, stretched out like a gaunt, bleached beggar hand to heaven, is the most subduing. Even the sea loses its music as it beats against the barrier. It moans monotonously and melancholy all the dreary years, and frets against a hydra-like impediment that, in centuries flown, was overcome and overcome only to present itself again, season after season, rejuvenated and incorrigible. The dominion of the ice is not disputed here, for even the fierce ocean is always calm just beyond the pack, and, while gales sweep through the air and elsewhere lash the sea to fury, here both seem ineffectual and waste no force.³³

Running on a southeast course, *Alliance* managed to extend its eastward traverse as far as longitude 13°15'E (in latitude 79°58'N), some ten miles northwest of Velkomstpynten (Welcome Point), when progress was halted by an impenetrable barrier of ice. Despite the benefit of steam power, with the lives of nearly 180 men under his care, a wary Captain Wadleigh was not prepared to tempt fate by reason of entrapment or destruction. A course was therefore set in the reverse.

Through *Alliance*'s voyage, only a fraction of the 160 tons of coal that was consumed by the vessel was used for propulsion. Though wind was sporadic and undependable, most of the vessel's cruising distance was managed by means of sails. On its voyage of fifty days, the *Alliance* utilized two and one-half tons of coal daily for heating and distilling, and for maintaining the engines in a state of readiness in the unpredictable icy waters. Only thirty-five tons were expended in cruising.³⁴

The "Farthest North"

Though *Alliance*'s "Farthest North" was the highest latitude reached by an American man-of-war, earlier European expeditions had exceeded that northing. The early mapping of Svalbard had been the privilege of the Dutch though, according to the Icelandic sagas, the Vikings had discovered its coast as early as the year 1194. The archipelago remained relatively unknown until 1596, when the Dutch navigators, Jacob van Heemskerck and Jan Cornelisz Rijk, with Willem Barentsz as pilot, reached Spitsbergen (believing it an extension of Greenland) on route to a so-called Northeast Passage to China. Rounding Hakluythovden at 80°10'N they reached as far east as the vicinity of Raudfjorden (Red Bay) before retreating south and west.³⁵

Prior to his fateful voyage to the Canadian Arctic in 1610-11, when his crew mutinied in the bay that takes his name, Hudson had also sought a Northeast Passage to the Orient. In July 1607, his small ship and a crew of eleven reached about 80°23'N also near Hakluythovden. Apprised of abundant whales and seals, adventurous whalers soon followed, frequently cruising up the west coast to 80°N as the ice permitted. Two eighteenth-century voyages pushed the recorded highest farther. In 1773, two heavily reinforced British warships, H.M.S. *Racehorse* and H.M.S. *Carcass*, on an expedition specifically fitted for an attempt on the North Pole, reached near latitude 80°48'N, longitude 20°22'E. Stopped by pack ice within sight of Sjuøyane (the Seven Islands), a small boat made landfall on one of the larger of the islands, Phippsøya.³⁶ Phipps's effort marginally exceeded the 1766 voyage of the Russian Vasily Yakovlevich Chichagov, which reached 80°28'N in an attempt on the Northeast Passage.³⁷

Efforts by other vessels reached comparable and higher latitudes in the nineteenth century. The British Navy had made a determined attempt on the Pole in 1818 in an expedition led by Commander David Buchan in H.M.S. *Dorothea* and H.M.S. *Trent* (commanded by Lieutenant John Franklin), reaching 80°34'N.³⁸ In the early season, finding the ice unexpectedly open to the north, the adventurous and scientific-minded British whaler William Scoresby pushed his whaleship, *Baffin*, also as far north as 80°34'N on 1 May 1822.³⁹ Though rightly proud of his achievement, Scoresby's 1822 voyage was also notable for his survey of the inaccessible east coast of Greenland. In 1827, in H.M.S. *Hecla*, Captain William Edward Parry reached about latitude 80°50'N, and by dragging flat-bottomed sledgeboats, a highest of 82°40'23'N, a record that stood for almost fifty years.⁴⁰ In September 1868, the Swedish explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld in *Sofia* set a new "Farthest North" by ship reaching 81°42'N, some ninety miles north of *Alliance*'s highest, using steam for the final miles above 81°32'N.⁴¹ Coincidentally, the highest latitude reached by *Alliance* matched very closely the northernmost limit reached by two British warships in 1807. In a sidebar to the fighting of the Napoleonic Wars, H.M.S. *Shannon*, a thirty-eight-gun frigate, and H.M.S. *Meleager*, a thirty-six-gun frigate, had been dispatched to the Greenland seas to protect British whaleships that had been victimized

by French frigates. Though unfitted for encounters with the ice, according to Captain Philip Bowes Vere Broke of *Shannon*, the vessels reached about 80°05'N, between longitude 10° or 11°W, after anchoring and surveying Magdalenefjorden.⁴² Like Wadleigh, fearing besetment, and the potential destruction of his two ships with some 170 men, Captain Broke maneuvered his ships away from the ice.

For Wadleigh and *Alliance*, a course was also set a course to the south, first for Green Harbor for coal, then onto Hammerfest. But Wadleigh was not finished with the search for the missing *Jeannette* just yet, despite one ice pilot leaving the ship due to the lateness of the season. Departing Hammerfest on 16 September, *Alliance* set her course to Spitsbergen once again. On 23 September, *Alliance* reached 79°03', sighting Prins Karls Forland on the west coast of Spitsbergen. From there, she set a course to the westward hugging the edge of the ice, working the vessel towards Greenland. With the lateness of the season, darkness was approaching in the evening hours and the weather had begun to deteriorate into unrelenting snow squalls and heavy fogs. *Alliance*'s most dangerous encounter occurred near the meridian of Greenwich, as the ship was nearly nipped as ice surrounded the vessel on all sides. Tensions were further on edge due to an accident which left the wheel temporarily disabled. With all six boilers steaming, the first time during the cruise, *Alliance* followed a zig-zag path through narrow leads in the gloom until 1 a.m. when the ship managed to escape to open water and freedom (Fig. 10). As for their only potential brush with destruction, Macdona gave an exciting portrayal of the most serious hazard faced by *Alliance*:

Great floes and blocks of ice, some of them as big as *Alliance*, floated around on all sides, and during our run out the calls "Port!", "Starboard!" and "Steady!" never ceased, and our track if marked on a chart would look like a regulation streak of lightning. Once or twice when heavy bergs were in our way it was noticed that the starboard ropes on the wheel did not work easily and they finally caught foul and would not run.⁴³



Figure 9 "Greenland ice pack & iceberg. N.Lat. 79°." Sketch by Assistant Engineer Jefferson Brown, U.S.S. *Alliance*, September 1881. Photo: Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

Freed from the ice, the correspondent matter-of-factly noted that "had we been three-quarters of an hour late to this point this description of how it all happened might never have reached the world."⁴⁴ In contrast to Macdona's correspondent peers, William H. Gilder and Januarius A. MacGahan, who delivered sensational copy, a hallmark of *Herald* reporting from the North, Macdona's accounts, though accurate, tended to avoid overexcitement or staged drama. Nonetheless, Macdona's reporting managed to convey a sublime sense of Arctic imagery

through his vivid descriptions of the exotic locale, its natural wonders, wildlife, climate and its history.

Fully complying with his instructions, on 25 September, Wadleigh set a course southward. Reykjavik was made on 9 October, where it was learned that President Garfield had died. Also, details were obtained of the ship *Jamestown* of Boston, which ran aground thirty miles north of Reykjavik and was initially possibly thought to have been *Jeannette*. After refueling, Halifax was reached on 1 November and New York City on 11 November 1881.

Aftermath

The unheralded voyage of *Alliance* achieved a modest success through its northern cruise and its extension of American naval presence to the European Arctic. The voyage was not without its hazards, and Captain Wadleigh deserves full credit for bringing his vessel safely through a high northern voyage of 10,000 miles over five months. In the opinion of Lieutenant John W. Danenhower, a survivor of the ill-fated *Jeannette* expedition, “the voyage of the *Alliance* was the most hazardous search expedition since the days of Dr. Kane.”⁴⁵ Though unsuccessful in its primary relief objective, *Alliance* fully complied with its secondary, scientific objective, gathering data and specimens in a region largely unknown to American scientists. *Alliance*'s assistant surgeon, Dr. Henry C. Eckstein, returned with a large collection of flora and geological specimens.⁴⁶ Lieutenant George Frank Elliot, later the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, was commended for his collection of fauna from the regions visited. Richard Rathbun, curator of the Department of Marine Invertebrates at the Smithsonian Institution, who examined the fresh-water fishes and marine invertebrates, remarked that the collection was “quite large and in good condition.”⁴⁷ The collection was highlighted in the catalogue of American fisheries at the Great International Fisheries Exhibition. According to Commodore J. C. P. DeKrafft, Hydrographer to the Bureau of Navigation, the hydrographic data gathered by *Alliance* in regards to Icelandic waters was considered “important,” and the meteorological and current observations were deemed of “special value.”⁴⁸ The U.S. Hydrographic Office made use of the survey work, revising its chart No. 318, entitled “The Arctic Ocean between Greenland and Nova Zemla.”⁴⁹

For Bennett, *Alliance* reporting reflected Bennett's widespread use of the Arctic as a newsworthy forum to increase circulation. Without delivering news of the *Jeannette*, or suffering its own debacle however, the reporting of the *Alliance* voyage, lively in its time, quickly faded from memory. If there was any doubt, the dramatic reports of the loss of both the *Jeannette* and of the relief ship *Rogers*, which made news in early 1882, saw to that.

As for *Alliance*'s two most prominent chroniclers, Harry Macdona and Jefferson Brown, both continued active careers following their *Alliance* experience. In 1887, Macdona left the news field behind to accept a position as an assistant district attorney for the city of New York and later engaged in a successful private law practice. In 1884, he married Amelia (Libbie) Herbert, a popular actress and socialite. Macdona died of pneumonia on 25 April 1909; his wife, Libbie Herbert Macdona, died in 1915, a victim of the tragic sinking of R.M.S. *Lusitania*.⁵⁰ Jefferson Brown continued his successful naval career, advancing to the rank of chief engineer, retiring in 1890. He died in Brooklyn on 20 January 1909.⁵¹

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