

0. HMS RESOLUTE - Story Preface

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Published in the 27 December 1856 issue of the *Illustrated London News*, this image depicts a cropped illustration of the famous ship, *HMS Resolute*.

In 1855-56, as America edged closer to civil war, relations with Britain had once again deteriorated. Queen Victoria's government was recruiting American soldiers (in five U.S. cities) to fight for Britain in the Crimean War.

The two countries had already fought over Britain's recruiting efforts (on the high seas) during the War of 1812. Now they seemed poised to battle the issue once more.

Beyond the politics, Brits (at least some of them) held fairly low opinions of America. Nassau William Senior (an influential, observant political economist) illuminates contemporary British attitudes in his 1857 book, *American Slavery*. Using Uncle Tom's Cabin—a huge bestseller in Britain—to make his point, Senior writes:

*The evil passions which "Uncle Tom" gratified in England were not hatred or vengeance [of slavery], but national jealousy and national vanity.*

*We have long been smarting under the conceit of America - we are tired of hearing her boast that she is the freest and the most enlightened country that the world has ever seen. Our clergy hate her voluntary system - our Tories hate her democrats - our Whigs hate her parvenus - our Radicals hate her litigiousness, her insolence, and her ambition. All parties hailed Mrs. Stowe [the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] as a revolter from the enemy.* (Senior, *American Slavery*, pages 38-39.)

Then an incident happened which averted war and cemented friendship between the two English-speaking countries. It involved Her Majesty's ship, the *Resolute*, which had been patrolling the Canadian Arctic, attempting to find John Franklin and the men of his third (and doomed) northwest-passage-seeking expedition.

The *Resolute* was a sturdy ship, built to manage the treacherous conditions of ice-clogged Arctic seas. Though such vessels could often make way where differently designed ships could never go, they would still get trapped in moving ice packs. Sometimes the ice would crush even a well-designed ship. Other times, crews—like that of *HMS Investigator* during August of 1851—would have to "stay put" until the ice allowed them to move again.

Occasionally, the ice held a trapped ship so tightly it would not let it escape within a reasonable time frame. How one defined "reasonable" depended, among other things, on the amount of supplies available to the crew. It was, to say the least, difficult duty.

By the spring of 1854, *HMS Resolute*—one of five ships in an expedition commanded by Sir Edward Belcher to find Franklin and his men—had been trapped in ice for a year-and-a-half. Reaching Melville Island, the squadron had enough supplies to continue the mission, even though all but one of the vessels were ice-locked. Notwithstanding, Belcher decided to leave the Arctic.

On the 28th of April, he ordered his officers to abandon four ships. Everyone would return to Britain aboard the *North Star*.

The *Resolute's* crew, then located in Barrow Strait, were incredulous! Why leave before the job (of finding Franklin) was finished? Why abandon a perfectly good ship? The men were sure they could escape the ice before supplies ran out. But Belcher was firm. They were leaving.

An 1857 account of the story reflects the attitude of *Resolute's* Captain Henry Kellet, and his crew, on May 13, 1854:

*At length the sun rose on the morning of the last day, we were to spend on board our old ship, endeared to us all by many bygone associations. Without affecting any absurd sentimentality, it may easily be imagined we all experienced feelings of regret as the time approached, when we were to abandon the staunch old craft to her fate, and almost certain destruction ... by the ice.*  
(George F. McDougall, *The Eventful Voyage of H.M. Discovery Ship "Resolute" to the Arctic Regions*, page 389.)

The *Resolute's* crew returned safely to Britain, believing they would never see their old ship again. But at some point after the men abandoned her, *Resolute* broke free of the ice.

Meanwhile ... the men of [New London's](#) whaling community were busy plying the Arctic waters. In the mid-nineteenth century, oil from [whales](#) provided [fuel for lamps](#), and the Connecticut town was part of [the whaling industry](#). (Click on "Portraits of Ports" to explore a host of exhibits, including videos.)

In September of 1855, the *George Henry* (a New London whaling bark owned by [Perkins & Smith](#) and commanded by Captain James M. Buddington) was caught in an ice floe near Cape Mercy. On the 10th of September, its lookout spotted something interesting about fifteen miles away. Was it a ship? Was anyone aboard?

Days later, when they were able to investigate, a *George Henry* boarding party reached the vessel. It was the *Resolute*! Adrift and unmanned for sixteen months, she had traveled nearly 1200 miles. And not only traveled. She had safely made it through one treacherous area after another.

Although she was listing, and her insides were covered with mold, the *Resolute* was still seaworthy. Indeed:

- From [Barrow Strait](#), she'd sailed to Lancaster Sound.
- From [Lancaster Sound](#) she moved to Baffin [Bay](#), turning south to [Davis Strait](#).
- Along the way, she would have dodged rocky outcroppings, avoided dangerous ice floes and averted channels [leading nowhere](#).
- And ... the half-filled wine glasses, which Captain Kellet and his officers had used to toast the soon-to-be-abandoned (expected-to-be-lost ship), were still on the cabin table!

Captain Buddington divided his crew between the *George Henry* and the *Resolute*, sailing the British vessel to New London. It took him four months to reach port since the crew was beset by horrendous weather—including a hurricane which blew them south to Bermuda.

Perkins & Smith claimed the abandoned boat as salvage. There was a slight problem with that, however. The *Resolute* was a foreign ship, also claimed by her owner—the British government. For a time, haggling over the vessel caused the already tense relationship between the United States and Britain to worsen.

Six months into the situation, Britain gave up her rights and Perkins & Smith valued the salvage at \$40,000. Then the United States Congress stepped in.

A senator from Virginia—[James Murray Mason](#)—presented a unique proposal. The United States government would buy the *Resolute* from Perkins & Smith, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard would [completely restore her](#). She would then be returned to Britain as a gift from the American people.

On the 13th of November, 1856, the restored *Resolute* was ready to go home. Crossing the North Atlantic during more bad weather, she arrived at Plymouth Harbor a month later.

Queen Victoria had a [country estate](#) on the [Isle of Wight](#), so the newly restored vessel was towed to [Cowes Harbor](#). There, on December 30th, Her Majesty [received the gift amidst great fanfare](#).

Twenty-two years later, Victoria was still queen when *Resolute* was slated for the chopping block. Remembering how touched she had been when the ship was returned, she ordered that some of its oak timbers be made into a [desk for the American president](#). At the time, that was [Rutherford B. Hayes](#).

William Evenden, a master carpenter, carried out the Queen's orders at the [Royal Navy Yard](#) at Chatham, England. Actually, [three desks](#) were made from the vessel which had already been through an amazing life. Two are in America; one is in Britain.

In addition to the desk [used by](#) most presidents since John F. Kennedy—whose son famously [played in it](#)—another is now owned by the New Bedford Whaling Museum. It is said that Captain Buddington, the man who brought *Resolute* back to civilization, received no financial rewards for his efforts.

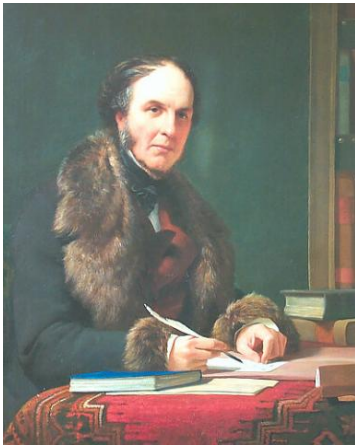
Given that extraordinary background of the presidential desk—brought to life in a [wonderful book by Elizabeth Matthew](#)—is it remotely possible that it ever contained a hidden panel inscribed with Olmec glyphs? And, parenthetically, what exactly *are* Olmec glyphs?

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/HMS-RESOLUTE-National-Treasure-Book-of-Secrets>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/HMS-RESOLUTE-National-Treasure-Book-of-Secrets>



### Nassau William Senior

Image depicting Nassau William Senior online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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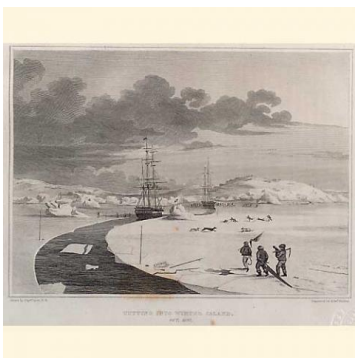


### H.M.S. Investigator in the Ice

Image described above, online courtesy Toronto Public Library - Virtual Exhibits - "Frozen Ocean - Search for the North-West Passage."

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### Search for the Northwest Passage

Image described above, online courtesy Toronto Public Library - Virtual Exhibits - "Frozen Ocean - Search for the North-West Passage."

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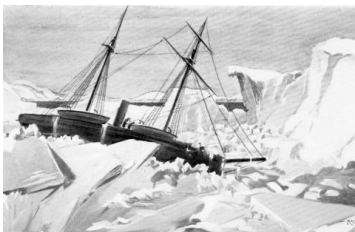
### H.M.S. Investigator - Trapped in Ice

Image described above, online courtesy Toronto Public Library - Virtual Exhibits - "Frozen Ocean - Search for the North-West Passage."

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### Trapped in Ice Packs

Image, described above, online courtesy Project Gutenberg.

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## H.M.S. Investigator - Trapped in Ice, August of 1851

Image described above, online courtesy Toronto Public Library - Virtual Exhibits - "Frozen Ocean - Search for the North-West Passage."

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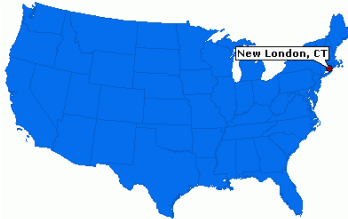


## Melville Island - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Glasgow Digital Library (at the University of Strathclyde).

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## New London, Connecticut - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy the epodunk.com website.

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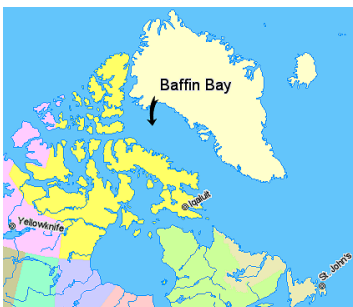
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## Lancaster Sound

Image online, courtesy Natures Crusaders website.

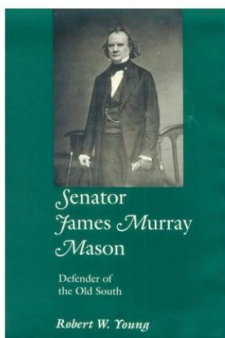
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## Baffin Bay - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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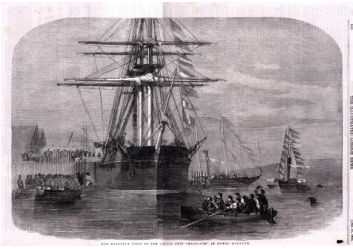


## Senator James Murray Mason - by Robert W. Young

Image online, courtesy amazon.com website.

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### Her Majesty's Visit to the Arctic Ship - Resolute

Image online, courtesy [Rhode Island College](#) website.

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### Victoria's Country Estate - Osborne House

Image online, courtesy the [isleofwightattractions.co.uk](#) website.

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### Isle of Wight - Map Locator

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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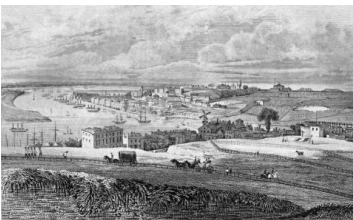


### Resolute Desk - Britain's Gift to American President

Image online, courtesy the [whitehousemuseum.org](#) website.

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### Royal Navy Yard - Chatham, England

Image, described above, online via Wikimedia Commons.

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### Resolute Desk - Oval Office of the White House

Image online, courtesy the [whitehousemuseum.org](#) website.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Resolute-Desk-Oval-Office-of-the-White-House>



### John F. Kennedy, Jr. - Playing in the Resolute Desk

Image online, courtesy the [whitehousemuseum.org](http://whitehousemuseum.org) website.

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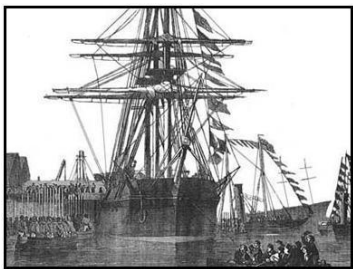
<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/John-F.-Kennedy-Jr.-Playing-in-the-Resolute-Desk>



### Map - Davis Strait

Map, online courtesy Canada DNR.

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### HMS RESOLUTE

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### Arctic Ice - Diving Under It

Clip, courtesy Video footage courtesy of Emory Kristof, National Geographic, The Arctic 2002 Exploration, NOAA-OE.

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### Killer Whales - Orcas in Action

From the BBC's *The Blue Planet: Seas of Life*, a natural history of the oceans in eight fifty-minute episodes. Copyright, BBC, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the series.

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