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Frank Vining Smith (1879- 1967) was a prolific artist from Massachusetts who specialized in marine painting. His impressionistic style made his paintings especially beautiful. This image depicts one of his works—a whaleship, like the *Essex*, sailing “Out of New Bedford.”

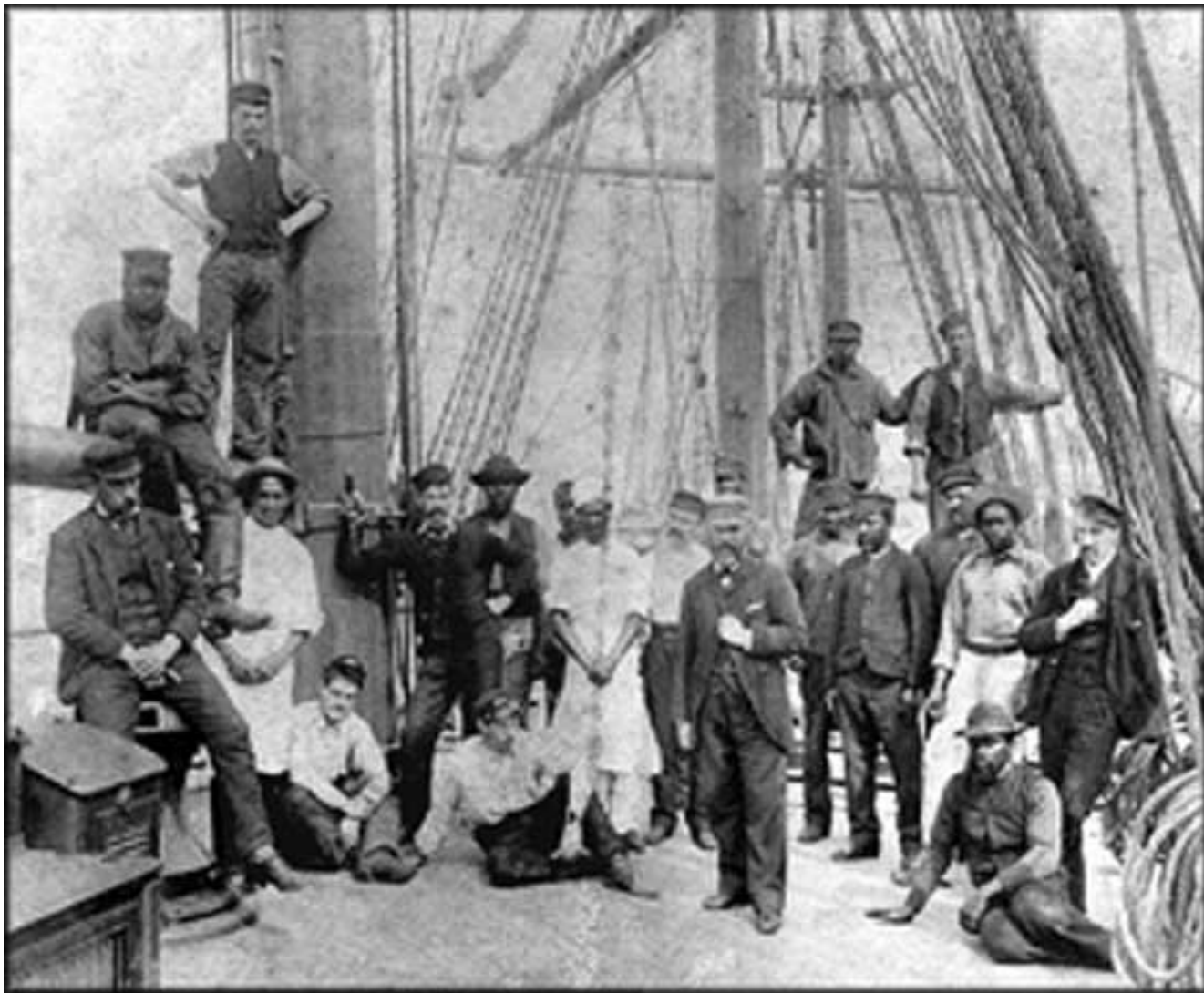
Leaving [Nantucket Island](#), in August of 1819, the *Essex* had a crew of 20 men and one fourteen-year-old boy.

The ship’s captain was 29-year-old George Pollard, a Nantucket man, who had previously—and successfully—sailed on the *Essex* as First Mate. This was his first command aboard a whaling ship.

Because so many whalers were sailing from Nantucket, by 1819, Pollard and the *Essex*’s owners had to find crew members who were from Cape Cod and the mainland. In Nantucket parlance, these off-island chaps were called “coofs.”

There were numerous coofs aboard the *Essex* when she left the harbor on August 12, 1819. Viewed as outsiders, by native Nantucketers, coofs were not part of the island’s “family.”

Even so, working on a whaler—which, by 1819, was both a ship and a factory—African-American crewmen experienced the relative equality of shipboard life. They mostly served as sailors and stewards.



Nantucketers held the key jobs and command positions. On the *Essex*, in addition to Captain Pollard, those men were:

- Owen Chase—the First Mate
- Matthew Joy—the Second Mate

The rest of the crew—beyond the steward (William Bond) and the cabin boy (Thomas Nickerson)—consisted of boatsteerers (the men who helm small whaleboats during extremely intense whale hunts) and sailors (whose main duties were aboard the *Essex* and as rowers on the whaleboats).

The *Essex* boatsteers were:

- Thomas Chappel
- Obed Hendricks
- Benjamin Lawrence

Her sailors were:

- Owen Coffin
- Isaac Cole
- Henry Dewitt (also a ship keeper who stayed aboard the *Essex* during whale hunts)
- Richard Peterson

- Charles Ramsdell
- Barzillai Ray
- Samuel Reed
- Isaiah Sheppard
- Charles Shorter
- Lawson Thomas
- Seth Weeks
- Joseph West
- William Wright

For a fourteen-year-old boy like Tom Nickerson, working on a whaler as a cabin boy was equivalent to giving up one's childhood:

Then it was that I, for the first time, realized that I was alone upon a wide and an unfeeling world ... without one relative or friend to bestow one kind word upon me. (Nathaniel Philbrick, quoting Thomas Nickerson's journal, at page 33 of *In the Heart of the Sea*).

As he left Nantucket harbor, however, Nickerson had no idea what he would ultimately face on this, his first journey, aboard a whaler.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-CREW-of-the-ESSEX-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-CREW-of-the-ESSEX-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

Media Stream

African-Americans as Whalers

During America's whaling heyday, African-Americans worked onboard whaling ships where they shared a measure of equality with other crew members. Seven of twenty-one crew members aboard the *Essex*, a Nantucket-based whaler, were African-Americans.

In this image, taken in 1892, we see the crew of a British ship. The U.S. National Park Service, which maintains the original photo, tells us [more about it](#): *The crew of the British ship Rathdown, photographed in San Francisco in 1892. The two men in aprons are the cook and steward, but the other black men are all seamen.*

Click on the image for a better view.

Image, of black men serving onboard a British whaling ship, online via U.S. National Park Service. NPS image NPS SAFR K9.28,157nl.

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