

0. WHALING LINGO and the NANTUCKET SLEIGH RIDE - Story Preface

1. THE CREW of the ESSEX

2. FACTS and MYTHS about SPERM WHALES

3. KNOCKDOWN of the ESSEX

4. CAPTAIN POLLARD MAKES MISTAKES

**5. WHALING LINGO and the NANTUCKET SLEIGH RIDE**

6. OIL from a WHALE

7. HOW WHALE BLUBBER BECOMES OIL

8. ESSEX and the OFFSHORE GROUNDS

9. A WHALE ATTACKS the ESSEX

10. A WHALE DESTROYS the ESSEX

11. GEORGE POLLARD and OWEN CHASE

12. SURVIVING the ESSEX DISASTER

13. RESCUE of the ESSEX SURVIVORS

14. LIFE after the WRECK of the ESSEX



Robert E. Sticker created an oil painting interpreting the “Nantucket Sleigh Ride,” an adrenalin-producing event which occurred after whalers harpooned a whale. As the injured whale reacted to the trauma, swimming away from its hunters, it pulled the small whaleboat and its crew behind. Copyright Robert Sticker, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with [Sticker's work](#).

As more and more Nantucketers hunted, captured and killed whales—including sperm whales—whalers had to travel farther and farther from home to find their prey.

In the early 18th century, Nantucketers were finding cachalot (sperm whales) in the middle of the Pacific at a place they called the “Offshore Ground.” A thousand miles, or so, off the coast of Peru, the Offshore Ground seemed to be productive.

After taking-on supplies at the [Galapagos Islands](#)—including 180 additional large tortoises (from Hood Island) to use as meat when they were so far from land—Captain Pollard and his crew sailed the *Essex* toward the Offshore Grounds.

They were one person short, however. One of the African-Americans—Henry DeWitt—had deserted while the crew was in port at an Ecuadoran village called [Atacames](#). His loss was significant, and not just because all hands were important.

DeWitt was one of three men who manned the *Essex* when the rest of the crew members were in their whaleboats, hunting and harpooning their prey. With his loss, only two people remained to do the job. One of them was the cabin boy, Tom Nickerson, by now a 15-year-old teenager.

What was it like for whalers to hunt such massive creatures? How did they actually do it? What words comprised their whaling lingo?

When someone spotted a whale—or a pod of whales—he would shout:

*There she blows!*

With that announcement, the crew had about three minutes to launch their whaleboats. Aboard each boat was the boat-steerer, the officer in charge of the boat and four rowers.

The whaleboats were fast and could cut through the water more quickly than their prey. When the boat-steerer was within reach of the whale, the officer on board would thrust his harpoon into the animal’s body.

In pain, the wounded whale would swim away or dive beneath the ocean's surface. With the harpoon still in its body, the massive animal would pull the whaleboat and its crew along behind it (since a rope connected the harpoon to the whaleboat).

This part of a whale hunt was known as the "Nantucket Sleigh Ride."

As the fast-moving whaleboat skimmed along the water, at speeds of 15-20 knots, the wounded whale would grow tired. When it surfaced, the whalers would pull themselves closer and closer to the whale, moving forward inch by inch.

When they were close enough, the mate would use a special lance to stab the whale. It was not easy to target the whale's most-vulnerable areas, however, so the killing process was not always over quickly.

Fighting back, whales sometimes wrecked the whaleboats, tossing their hunters into the water.

When a whaler yelled "Chimney's Afire!"—signaling the death struggle was almost over—the dying whale would spout blood and gore from its blow hole. Beginning its "flurry," the giant creature would beat the water with its tail, snapping at the air with its massive jaws.



Regurgitating its prey—including fish and sometimes a giant squid (a cachalot's favorite food)—the whale would start swimming in ever-tightening circles. Then ... abruptly ... it was over.

Silent and motionless, the body of the now-dead creature—sometimes weighing as much as 80 tons—turned over and began floating fin-up.

Even to a whaler, who had accomplished his purpose, this was no easy thing to watch. Enoch Cloud, an 18-year-old whaler who kept a journal, describes how awful it was:

*It is painful to witness the death of the smallest of God's created beings, much more, one in which life is so vigorously maintained as the Whale! And when I saw this, the largest and most terrible of all created animals bleeding, quivering, dying a victim to the cunning of man, my feelings were indeed peculiar!* (Quoted by Nathaniel Philbrick, page 54, *In the Heart of the Sea*.)

When the whale was dead, the crew towed it to the main boat, headfirst. Reaching the *Essex*, they secured the whale's body on the vessel's starboard side (with the head facing toward the stern).

Then they harvested the oil, beginning with removing the blubber in 20-foot strips. Men involved with the process remembered the awful smell years after they no longer sailed on whaling ships.

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WHALING-LINGO-and-the-NANTUCKET-SLEIGH-RIDE-In>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WHALING-LINGO-and-the-NANTUCKET-SLEIGH-RIDE-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

## Media Stream



### Nantucket Sleigh Ride

This image depicts an awesome oil painting, by [Robert E. Sticker](#), a highly respected American artist who lived from 1922 to 2011.

It is the artist's interpretation of the "Nantucket Sleigh Ride," an adrenalin-producing event which occurred after whalers harpooned a whale.

As the injured whale reacted to the trauma, swimming away from its hunters, it pulled the small whaleboat and its crew behind. Eventually, the whale would tire and die.

Copyright Robert Sticker, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with Sticker's work. Online via [J. Russell Jinishian Gallery, Inc.](#)

Click on the image for a better view.

J. Russell Jinishian Gallery, Inc, Robert Sticker

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Nantucket-Sleigh-Ride0>

### Capturing Whales - Chimney's Afire

Ambroise Louis Garneray (1783-1857) was a French artist whom Herman Melville mentioned in his novel, *Moby Dick*.

Famous for his marine art, Garneray created this aquatint depicting whalers, in their open boats, in the process of capturing and killing a whale. Produced in the early 1800s, it is called *Peche De La Baleine (Whale Fishery)* and is based on an original work of art by Louis LeBreton.



When a whale was in its final moments, after being fatally injured in a whale hunt, it would blow blood from its blow-hole. This would cause a whaler to yell "Chimney's Afire!" That is what we see in this image.

Blue World Web Museum includes a copy of Garneray's work in its online Maritime Art Collection. Its [curators provide the following description](#):

*This Ambroise Garneray aquatint from an original by Louis Le Breton; shows a whaleboat crew driving in to deliver the final blow to an already mortally wounded Atlantic right whale.*

*In the distance the whaleship is shown in the process of cutting in and trying out the recent whale kill.*

Click on the image for a better view.

*Ambrose Louis Garneray aquatint, from the early 1800s—called "Peche De La Baleine" ("Whale Fishery")—based on an original work by Louis Le Breton.*

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Capturing-Whales-Chimney-s-Afire>