

0. A WHALE ATTACKS the ESSEX - Story Preface

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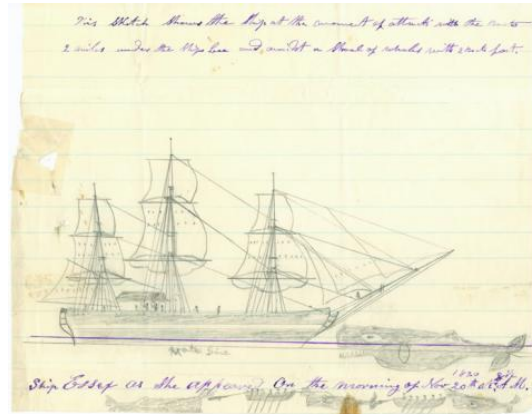
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About five years before he died, Thomas Nickerson wrote a 105-page narrative (with illustrations) which he called *The Loss of the Ship "Essex" Sunk by a Whale and the Ordeal of the Crew in Open Boats*. It tells the story of how a whale attacked his ship, the *Essex*, on November 20, 1820. This image depicts one of the illustrations in his manuscript. More than a century later, the work was donated to the Nantucket Historical Association.

Thomas Nickerson was at the helm of the *Essex* while two whaleboats were out—hunting for whales—and one whaleboat was on deck, undergoing repairs. Unexpectedly, Nickerson saw a huge sperm whale off the ship's port bow.

The whale was a male, measuring around 85 feet long and weighing around 80 tons (160,000 pounds). It was less than 100 yards away, floating quietly on the water's surface. Its huge head, which was covered with scars, was pointing toward the ship.

Occasionally sending exhaled air through its blowhole, the whale seemed to be watching the ship. After spouting two or three times, the watching whale dove underwater, then surfaced about 35 yards from the ship.

The creature's tail was about twenty feet wide. Pumping his tail, up and down, the whale gained speed as he swam toward the port side of the *Essex*. With its gigantic head, the whale rammed the ship just forward of the fore-chains.

To the men on board, it seemed as though the ship had struck a rock. Never before, to the knowledge of anyone, had a whale deliberately attacked a ship (although, at night, ships had occasionally—and accidentally—plowed into whales).



After striking the vessel, the whale passed under the ship. It bumped the bottom so hard it knocked-off the false keel (which was a 6-by-12 piece of timber). The whale surfaced near the boat's starboard quarter.

Owen Chase, who was repairing his damaged whaleboat, saw the whale immediately after it surfaced. In his narrative of the disaster, Chase writes that the whale seemed stunned by the violence of the blow to its head.

The stunned whale floated beside the ship with its tail a few feet from the stern. Chase was in a position to harpoon the creature, but he took no action.

Although Chase makes no mention of this in his narrative, Thomas Nickerson covers the subject. Years later, when the cabin boy was a man, he writes that the First Mate took no action because he was worried that the whale could harm the ship's rudder.

That kind of damage, however, would have been far-less severe than what actually occurred.

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

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