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Owen Chase was an officer aboard the whaleship *Essex* when it left Nantucket in August of 1819. This image, by an unknown artist/photographer, depicts Chase during his youth. Online via Nantucket Historical Association. Although the *Essex* was decimated by the second whale strike, it was still floating when Captain George Pollard and his whaleboat crew returned to the main ship. It was clear to everyone, though, that the ship would sink in the Pacific.

There was plenty of fresh water and food aboard the *Essex*, but the crew could not transfer it all into their three small whaleboats.

They had about 600 pounds of hard tack—a kind of hard bread—and some Galapagos-area tortoises which also made it into the whaleboats (which the men had built-up by around eighteen inches, using cedar boards from the wreck, to keep from getting swamped by the Pacific's waves).

After cutting down some of the sails and rigging from the main ship, which would help the men further transform their whaleboats into small sailing vessels, crew members were ready to leave their crippled ship forever.

But ... where would they go?

- Because of the rigging of their whaleboats, the men had to sail *with* the wind, not against it. As a result, it would be impossible for them to set a direct course to the western coast of South America.
- The [Marquesas Islands](#), part of French Polynesia, were closest—about 1,200 miles away—but the men had once heard that cannibals lived there.
- Captain Pollard thought they should sail for the [Society Islands](#)—also part of French Polynesia, including Bora Bora and Tahiti—a journey of about ten days. Owen Chase disagreed.
- The First Mate thought that “going up the coast” of South America would be better. Although a much-longer journey—first sailing south to latitude 26° (around 1,500 miles away), then catching a band of variable breezes to help them reach Chile or Peru—Chase thought his plan was a better option.

- Matthew Joy, the Second Mate, agreed with Chase. If all went well, “going up the coast” would take about 56 days. The men had enough provisions for 60 days. And ... hopefully ... they would be spotted by another ship so they could be rescued at sea.

Once again, Captain Pollard overruled himself (like he did when the *Essex* was only four days out of its Nantucket home port). For whatever reason, he deferred to the recommendations of his officers instead of relying on his own—arguably better—judgment.

The survivors of the whale attack would undertake a journey of more than 3,000 miles, instead of a much-shorter trip to the Society Islands. Thomas Nickerson later wrote about Pollard’s decision:

Not wishing to oppose where there was two against one, the Cap’ reluctantly yealded [yielded] to their arguments. (*The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale*, by Owen Chase, Thomas Nickerson, at [page 131](#).)

Calling Pollard’s decision to follow Chase’s recommendation a “fatal error,” Nickerson—in later life—also asked this rhetorical question:

How many warm hearts has [have] ceased to beat in consequence of it? (*The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale*, by Owen Chase, Thomas Nickerson, at [page 131](#).)

Let’s investigate the answer to that question.

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Media Stream



Owen Chase during His Youth

Nantucket Historical Association; Unknown photographer

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