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This screenshot, from Ron Howard's film "In the Heart of the Sea," recreates what it must have been like for the men of the wrecked whaleship *Essex* as they tried to survive, without sufficient food and fresh water, aboard their open whaleboats. Copyright, Warner Brothers, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the movie. Click on the image for a better view.

Instead of sailing to Tahiti or Bora Bora—in the Society Islands—the crew of the sunken *Essex* traveled south. Sailing south wasn't the plan the Captain, George Pollard, had originally envisioned. He got off-course when he followed the recommendation of his junior officers.

Instead of reaching a safe destination in ten days, or so—like they could have done by sailing to the Society Islands—the men would be at sea for months.

Instead of traveling with fair winds, to reach the Society Islands, the three whaleboats with the *Essex* crewmen, encountered bad weather, calm winds and a host of other problems.

The disaster they had experienced, from the whale strike, would continue to worsen at sea as ever-more trying days went by.

About a month after the wreck, one of the men spotted land. Although George Pollard and his crew thought they had found Ducie Island, they had actually located Henderson Island. Their navigational charts, at the time, weren't exactly perfect.

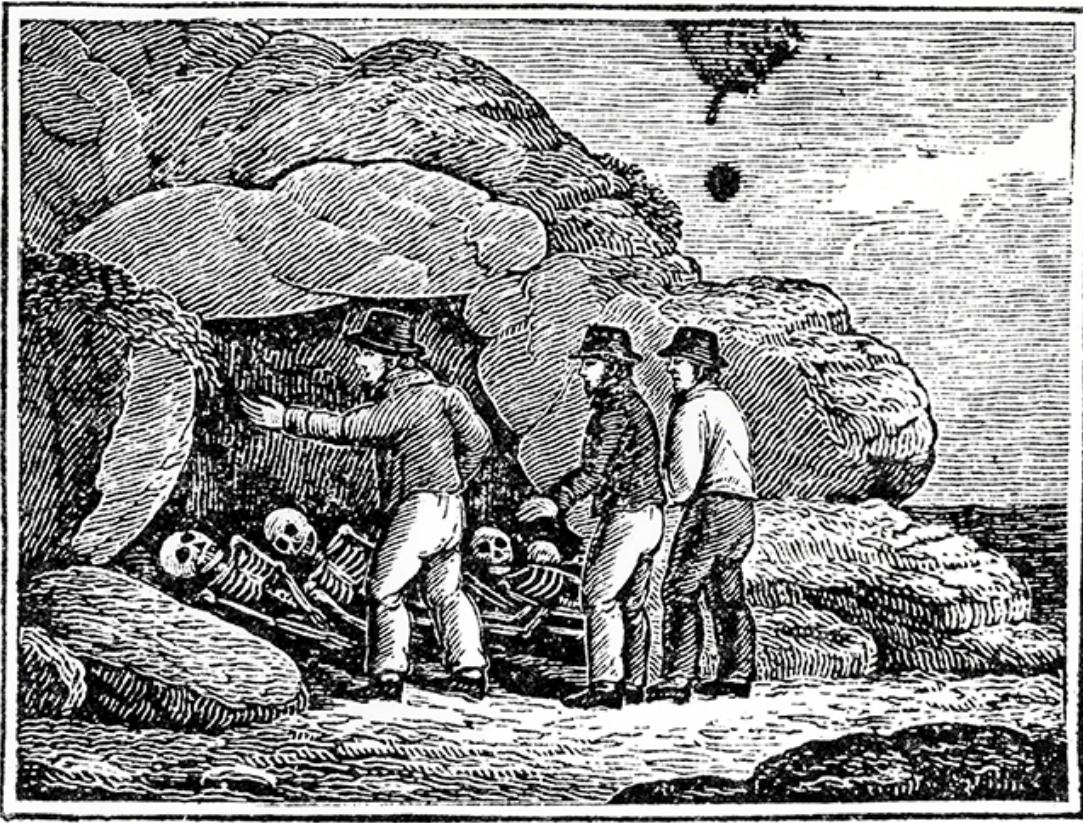
Excited to be off the whaleboats, and on land, the men were soon disappointed that the piece of island rock, in the middle of the Pacific, offered little sustenance for them.

Birds laid eggs there, but they soon stopped coming when they found their eggs were missing—consumed by starving men.

Although there was one source of fresh water, from a spring, it was very hard to reach. Because of its inaccessibility, it was insufficient to supply their ongoing needs.

After about a week at Henderson Island, Pollard realized that he and his crew had to move on. It was no place to wait for a rescue.

Three of the crew members, however, decided to stay behind (despite the skeletons they had discovered in a nearby cave). They thought the island gave them a better chance to survive than returning to an uncertain future in their constantly battered whaleboats.



The rest of the men, trying to stay together, did the best they could in their three separate whalers. Pollard and his officers were each in charge of their individual boats.

The Second Mate—Matthew Joy—was unwell. Unwell for some time, even before the wreck, he was the first to die. That event left his whaleboat without an experienced seaman in charge.

After burying the Second Mate at sea, Obed Hendricks was in charge of Joy's vessel. His boat eventually became separated from the others and neither he, nor his men, were ever seen alive again.

Sometime later a whaleboat, with several skeletons, washed-up on the shore of Ducie Island. Historians believe the remains likely belonged to the *Essex* whalers and their boat.

In an ironic turn of events, there came a time, as Pollard and Chase's boats continued to make their way toward the South American coast, that the men engaged in the very practice which kept them from traveling to the Marquesas Islands.

When someone died of starvation, instead of committing the body to the sea, the survivors used the remains to stay alive themselves. Awful as it was, cannibalism at sea happened, from time to time.

On Pollard's boat, however, the survivors did not wait for someone else to die after they consumed the last of crewman Samuel Reed. They decided to draw lots to see who would be sacrificed to keep the others going.

In a dreadful turn of events, Captain Pollard's nephew—Owen Coffin—drew the lot leading to his death.

It was an utterly agonizing event, not least for Pollard who had promised young Coffin's mother that he would keep her son safe. Thomas Nickerson, who was in Owen Chase's boat, later heard the story and included the horrifying event in his narrative:

*The Captain with his three surviving companions after a due Consultation agreed to Cast Lots - the awful lot fell upon a young man named Owen Coffin who was a nephew of Captain Pollard, who with great fortitude smiled at his fate. At this awful moment the Captain wished to exchange lots with him but to this Coffin would not listen for one moment.*

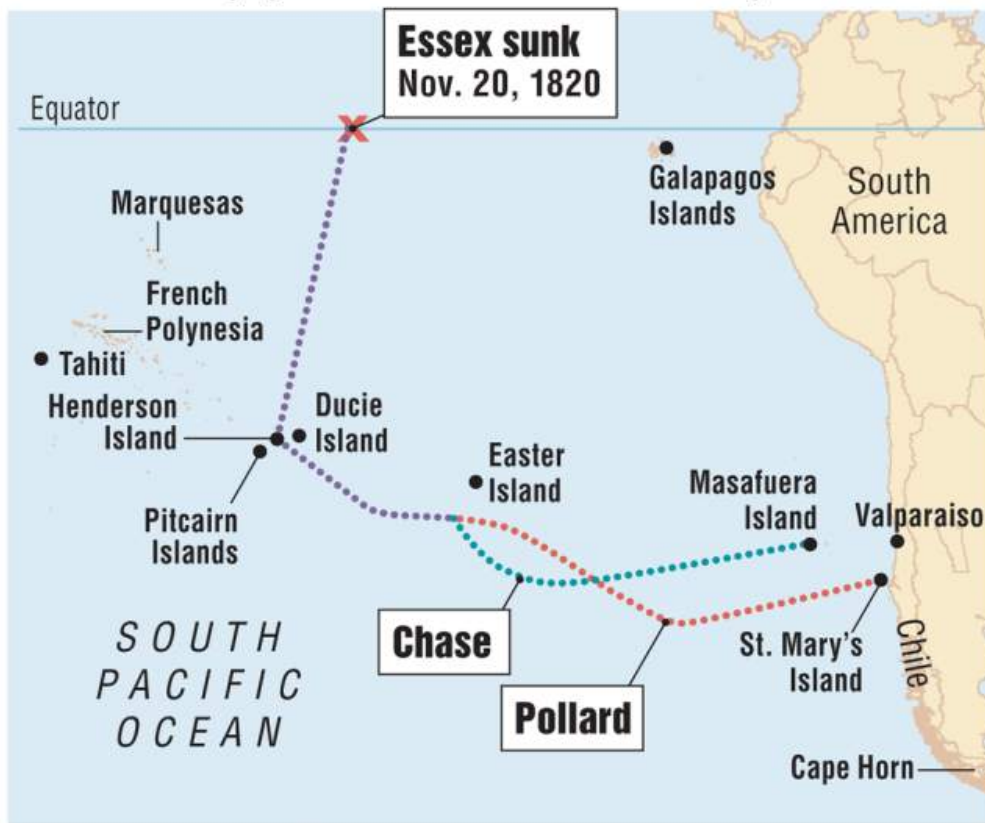
*He placed himself in a firm position to receive his death and was immediately shot by Charles Ramsdell [Owen Coffin's Nantucket-based friend] who became his executioner by fair lot. (Thomas Nickerson, quoted by Brian Simpson in *Cannibalism and Common Law: A Victorian Yachting Tragedy*, at [page 126](#).)*

The men in Owen Chase's boat—including Thomas Nickerson—also consumed the remains of crewmates who had died. They, however, did not kill anyone to feed their increasingly emaciated bodies.

Finally, in February of 1821, the two *Essex* whaleboats were spotted by different ships at different places and different times.

# Journey of the whale boats

Route crew took trying to reach South America after the sinking of the Essex.



Source: Lawrence Howard of Portland Story Theater

Greg Cross / The Bulletin

Rescuers were stunned by what they saw.

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

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

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## Media Stream



### Essex Survivors in Their Open Whaleboats

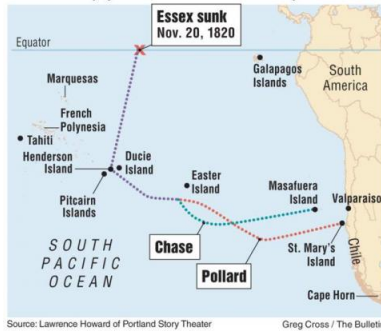
Still shot, from Ron Howard's film "In the Heart of the Sea," released by Warner Brothers as a publicity photo for the film. Copyright, Warner Brothers, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the movie.

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## Journey of the whale boats

Route crew took trying to reach South America after the sinking of the Essex.



## Essex - Journey of the Surviving Whaleboats

Map image by Lawrence Howard of Portland Story Theatre; Greg Cross / The Bulletin.

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