



George Pollard, Jr. was captain of the *Essex* when she was “stove by a whale” on November 20, 1820.

From Nantucket, Pollard was 28 years old at the time he was given his first command (the *Essex*). At times when he had to make difficult decisions, he allowed his junior officers to influence him.

At sea, the captain is in charge of the ship, and it is the captain who makes the decisions - even if those decisions are unpopular.

Just a few days out of Nantucket, the *Essex* was damaged by a sudden squall. Pollard wanted to return to home base, for repairs. Owen Chase (the First Mate) and Matthew Joy (the Second Mate) talked him out of it.

With a damaged ship and missing whaleboats (which the storm had swept away), the *Essex* crew continued on their whale-hunting journey. They never did replace the smaller boats with vessels of equal value.

After the horrific events of November 20, 1820 - when the *Essex* was twice-rammed by a massive sperm whale - Pollard wanted his men to set-out for the nearby Society Islands (which include Tahiti and Bora Bora). It would have taken them about ten days to reach that destination.

Instead of listening to their captain, Chase and Joy expressed a different opinion. They wanted to sail toward the coast of South America - a journey, given the small boats they had, of several months.

Weighing the opinions of his officers against his own judgment, Pollard changed his mind. The men would do their best to reach the southern coast of South America.

After surviving the harrowing and exhausting journey, in an open whaleboat, Pollard returned to Nantucket. Still a respected captain, despite his unforeseeable loss of the *Essex*, he was placed in charge of *Two Brothers* (another whaleship).

Concerned that he and his crew would not find enough whales in either the Atlantic or the Pacific, Pollard headed toward Japan. It was early 1823, and the Japanese Grounds were newly open for whalers.

As *Two Brothers* made its way in ever-worsening weather, Pollard and his ship approached a very dangerous part of the Pacific Ocean known as French Frigate Shoals. Pollard did not have reliable charts, and it was hard for him to navigate by the stars because the sky was mostly overcast.

As the storm and its wind gusts pushed *Two Brothers* closer to danger - on February 11, 1823 - Pollard was unaware he was so close to the French Frigate Shoals.

Thomas Nickerson - the former *Essex* cabin boy - was sailing with Pollard again. He later recalled what happened when the ship unexpectedly crashed into the coral reef:

*It was raining and blowing hard at Seven Bells with a high rolling Sea, one of the men remarked that the water alongside looked whiter than usual. . . . I had just put my hand upon my Coat when the Ship Struck with a fearful Crash.*

How did the Captain respond?

*Capt. Pollard Seemed to Stand amazed at the Scene before him. . . (See [excerpts from Nickerson's narrative](#) regarding the *Two Brothers*' wreck.)*

It must have been truly amazing for Pollard to realize that he was about to lose another ship. That's especially true in light of the conversation he'd had with a Navy midshipman (serving aboard the U.S. schooner *Waterwitch* ) who'd asked Pollard:

*...how he could think of again putting his foot on board ship to again pursue such a calling.* (Quoted by Nathaniel Philbrick at page 114 of *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602-1890* ).

Pollard answered with an “old adage” about lightning strikes:

*He simply remarked that it was an old adage that the lightning never struck in the same place twice.* (*Away Off Shore*, page 114.)

Unfortunately, lightning struck twice for George Pollard.

Even as his “reasoning powers had flown,” Pollard cared for his men as *Two Brothers* foundered. Nickerson wrote a poem about it:

*Deep lost in thought, his reasoning powers had flown,  
He Cared for Others Safety, not his own,  
And when the boats prepared, he lingered yet,  
And Seemed his own Salvation, to forget.*

Leaving the stricken vessel in two open whaleboats, the entire crew was safely rescued the next day by the whaleship *Martha*.

Pollard’s whaling days were over. As Nickerson recalled:

*Captain Pollard Returned* [to Nantucket] . . . and relinquished the Whaling business for ever.

Years after the wrecks of the *Essex* and *Two Brothers*, Herman Melville visited Nantucket Island. He sought-out George Pollard, to talk with the man who had skippered the infamous whaleship. By this time, Melville had published *Moby Dick*, his still-famous novel (which was *not* famous at the time).

Melville, also a whaling man, had learned the *Essex* story from the son of Owen Chase (who gave the future writer a copy of his father’s book). Captivated by the real story of the great whale, and the ship it had ruined, Melville based his *Moby-Dick* tale on those events.

Hundreds of years after the wreck of *Two Brothers*, employees of NOAA (the U.S. government’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) were exploring near French Frigate Shoals. The area is now part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (covering almost 140,000 square miles of ocean west of Hawaii).

It was August, of 2008, and the NOAA maritime archaeologists were nearly ready to leave for the day. Then ... someone spotted something unusual. Was it a nineteenth-century anchor from a whaleship?

NOAA tells us what the team found:

*The age and size of this anchor gave the impression that it was not simply left as a mooring in an anchorage. After snorkeling around in the area, the team came across the first clue that this site was more than a lone anchor: a trypot [used to transform whale blubber into whale oil] set into a hole in the reef top.*





*This discovery initiated a larger survey of the area, and soon two more trypots were discovered (for a total of three), another large anchor, and hundreds of bricks scattered in pockets of the reef. As the team explored further along the shallows, hawsepipes and the remains of standing rigging were discovered.*



The following year, another team returned to the site. They were hoping to identify the ship which had once held all these whaling items:

*In 2009, the maritime heritage team returned to the unidentified whaling shipwreck site at French Frigate Shoals (referred to by the team as the "Shark Island Whaler" for the sandy island nearby) in order to conduct an ecological survey at the site.*

*At this time, the team came across an exciting new portion of the wrecksite. In addition to the discovery of a fourth trypot, three blubber hooks, a grinding wheel, and a kedge anchor, the team found four small cast iron pots that resemble small trypots. There are records describing the sale of these type of cast iron pots in Nantucket for use on ships.*

*The team also came across what appears to be the tip of a whaling harpoon, another exciting discovery with the potential to yield information about the identity of this site.*

In 2010, the archaeologists realized they had found the remains of Two Brothers, Captain Pollard's ship:

*It wasn't until May of 2010 when a small team was able to return to the site that maritime archaeologists began to believe they were indeed looking at the scattered remains of the Nantucket whaleship Two Brothers.*

*At this time, the team uncovered an incredible collection of whalecraft (the tools of whaling) on the seafloor. Four more whaling harpoon tips (for a total of five), four whaling lances, ceramics, glass, and a sounding lead (among dozens of other artifacts) all date to an 1820s time period with an American provenience.*

*The preponderance of evidence suggested to the team that they were looking at the Two Brothers, the only American whaler lost at French Frigate Shoals in the 1820s. Both the South Seaman and the Daniel Wood were lost much later than the Two Brothers, and reports of their losses place them far away from the location of the Two Brothers shipwreck site.*

*The team completed a second site plan carefully documenting the location of these artifacts south of the initial site discovery area from 2008. These site plans help maritime archaeologists better understand the process of wrecking, and compare it to the accounts of the survivors of the Two Brothers tragedy.*

*Survivors describe a wrecking event so violent and confusing the sailors barely had the time to launch small boats and paddle away before the vessel became a complete loss on the reef.*

With that "violent and confusing" wreck, the whaling career of George Pollard, Jr. was over. After a short stint on a merchant vessel, he spent the rest of his days as Nantucket's night watchman.

George died on the 7th of January, 1870, at the age of 78. Herman Melville described him with these words:

*To the islanders he was a nobody. To me, the most impressive man, tho' wholly unassuming, even humble - that I ever encountered.* (Quoted by Hershel Parker in *Herman Melville: A Biography*, Volume 2, at [page 117](#).)

The image, at the top of this page, depicts Captain Pollard's signature. No known images of him survive.

Credits:

Facsimile of George Pollard, Jr.'s signature. Online via Nantucket Historical Association.

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/George-Pollard-Captain-of-the-Essex>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/George-Pollard-Captain-of-the-Essex>

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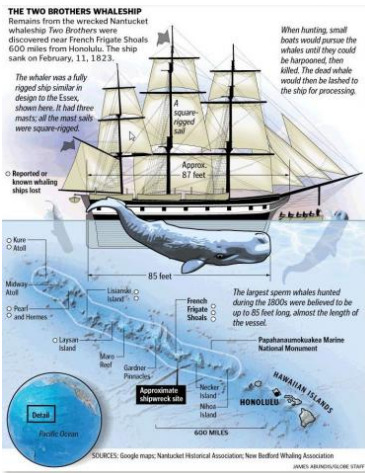


## George Pollard - Whaling Trypot from Wreck

NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) photo by Tane Casserley. Public domain.

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## George Pollard - Map Depicting Lost Whaleship

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