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The Blubber Hunter

Cape Cod Captain Ebenezer Nye in the Arctic

by David C. Churbuck

At the highest point of the Cataumet Cemetery on Cape Cod stands a cenotaph to the memory of Captain Ebenezer Franklin Nye, "*who lost his life in the Arctic, winter of 1879–80, Aged 57 years.*" The monument hints at the untold story of an indomitable seaman, adventurer, survivor, and hero who vanished in the frozen wastes of the Chukchi Sea.

Ebenezer Nye was born at home on October 13, 1822, in the village of Pocasset on the eastern shore of Buzzards Bay. He first shipped out in June 1841, at 18, a young man of modest stature who stood five feet seven inches tall, with light hair and a pale complexion. He proved a capable seaman on his first three voyages, and by the fall of 1848 he was sailing as chief mate of the New Bedford whaler *George and Susan.* In August 1849, while hunting off the Marquesas, Nye's whaleboat was dragged over the horizon by a harpooned sperm whale. Unable to find the ship, Nye and his whaleboat crew navigated for seventeen days using a crude sextant fashioned from odds and ends in the boat. When one of the sailors died, "the men considered eating his flesh the next day if they did not reach land," according to a published account.

A porpoise jumped into the boat during a squall, sustaining the survivors long enough for them to reach a remote island. There, Nye crawled onto the beach, found a puddle of rainwater, and filled his shoes to carry it back to the boat and revive his parched crew. After regaining his strength, Nye sailed the boat to Tahiti, where he caught a ship bound for San Francisco. From there, he took command of a schooner bound back to the east coast of the United States but lost the small ship in a storm and was eventually rescued by a passing ship that carried him home to New Bedford.

In 1855, when Nye was 33, he assumed his first command of a whaling vessel—the New Bedford whaler *Mount Vernon.* In June 1856, while hunting whales near Jonas Island in the Sea of Okhotsk, the ship was holed by ice and began to founder. In a letter published in the missionary newspaper *The Friend*, Nye wrote:

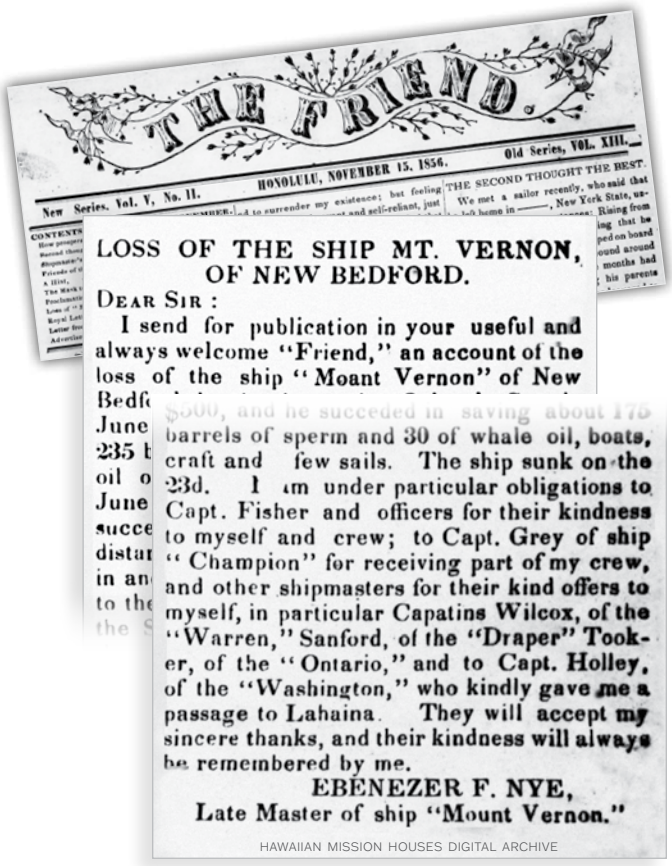
> On Sunday, 15th [June 1856] …. at meridian [noon] in steering through a strip of scattering ice, under easy sail, we struck a piece on the port bow but did not think it hard done until one of the men came up from below and said he heard water running into the ship.

Nye went below and confirmed the sailor's report. The crew cut up the foresail to fother the hole in the hull, but the patch failed. Nye proclaimed the effort "useless, as we had but just time to clear the boats and save a few things before the ship was full of water and went over on her beam ends, most of the men saving nothing except what they stood in."



PHOTO BY DEIRDRE O'REGAN

The Nye family burial plot on Cape Cod offers a window into the fortunes—and tragedies—of a 19th-century New England family, whose lives were shaped by both the sea and the Civil War. Dominating the lot is an imposing obelisk marking the grave of Lt. Ephraim B. Nye, who was killed in the Civil War. Nearby stand the stones of his father, Capt. Ebenezer Nye, who outlived both of his sons, and of Capt. Ebenezer F. Nye, the subject of this article. Ebenezer F. Nye's stone marker memorializes him, but his remains were never recovered after he was lost in the Arctic.



THE FRIEND.

New Series, Vol. V, No. 11. HONOLULU, NOVEMBER 15, 1856. Old Series, VOL. XIII.

THE SECOND THOUGHT THE BEST.

LOSS OF THE SHIP MT. VERNON, OF NEW BEDFORD.

DEAR SIR :

I send for publication in your useful and always welcome "Friend," an account of the loss of the ship "Moant Vernon" of New Bedf... June ... 235 b... oil o... June ... succe... distar... in an... to the... the S...

$500, and he succeded in saving about 175 barrels of sperm and 30 of whale oil, boats, craft and few sails. The ship sunk on the 23d. I am under particular obligations to Capt. Fisher and officers for their kindness to myself and crew; to Capt. Grey of ship "Champion" for receiving part of my crew, and other shipmasters for their kind offers to myself, in particular Capatins Wilcox, of the "Warren," Sanford, of the "Draper" Tooker, of the "Ontario," and to Capt. Holley, of the "Washington," who kindly gave me a passage to Lahaina. They will accept my sincere thanks, and their kindness will always be remembered by me.

EBENEZER F. NYE,
Late Master of ship "Mount Vernon."

HAWAIIAN MISSION HOUSES DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Captaine Nye's account of the loss of the *Mount Vernon* was published in the Honolulu newspaper, *The Friend,* on 15 November 1856, nearly five months after the sinking.

The crew did not suffer long in the ship's boats on the open sea, as another whaler was cruising in the same area and rescued them. The crew was taken aboard the *Barnstable;* once aboard, Nye sold the salvage rights to the ship, still awash, for $500 to *Barnstable*'s captain, Nehemiah C. Fisher. Fisher's crew was able to recover "about 175 barrels of sperm and 30 of whale oil, boats, craft and a few sails."[1] Nye reported that the *Mount Vernon* finally sank on the 23rd. The *Barnstable* eventually put in at Lahaina, Hawaii, where Nye disembarked and eventually made his way back to Pocasset after about a year away from home, only to learn that his first child, a daughter, had died in 1856 while he was at sea. Daughter Caroline was born in 1858, followed by another girl, Helen, in 1862.

The Civil War was well underway by then, and in 1862 Nye returned to sea, taking command of the 40-year-old whaling ship, *Abigail.* The war had driven up the price of whale oil, so he set a course for the rich whaling grounds off the Russian coast, where he was confident that they would be able to fill their holds with oil and whalebone. Capt. Joshua Beane, writing in his memoir, *From Forecastle to Cabin,* said Nye "was an old cruiser in the sea and knew every bay and beach in the whole country." The *Abigail* entered the Okhotsk in early May 1865. President Lincoln had been

[1] *The Friend* (Vol. V, No. 11, Nov. 15, 1856, p. 85)



COURTESY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

An Incident of Whaling by William Bradford (1823–1892). In the late 1840s, New England whaling captains began making regular voyages to the northern Pacific and Arctic waters. Success often depended on venturing deep into the pack ice, where ships were sometimes trapped for days or even weeks and, in some cases, damaged beyond recovery and had to be abandoned.

assassinated and Robert E. Lee had surrendered a few weeks prior, but the whaling fleet in the far reaches of the Pacific had no way of knowing that the war had ended.

The *Abigail* was probing the ice pack when a full-rigged ship with auxiliary steam, flying the flag of Imperial Russia, came into view. Nye altered course to meet her, only to discover that the Russian flag was a ruse. As the *Abigail* neared the foreign ship, its false flag was struck, and the flag of the Confederacy was set in its place. Nye would soon learn that the ship was a Confederate raider, CSS *Shenandoah,* commanded by Captain James Waddell on a mission to destroy as many Yankee whaling ships as possible and thus strike a blow to a mainstay of the Union's economy.

Shenandoah had sailed from Great Britain in October 1864, bound for the Sea of Okhotsk, capturing and burning whaling ships along the way. Among the items Waddell seized from the whalers were their whaling charts, which he used to locate the rest of the whaling fleet, then converging off the Russian coast to hunt bowhead and grey whales.

As the two ships converged on the open sea, *Shenandoah* fired a single warning shot, then lowered its boats to approach and board the unarmed whaler. Nye was informed that his ship was now a Confederate prize. Cornelius Hunt, *Shenandoah*'s master's mate, wrote:

> [Nye] looked at him for a moment, scratched his head, laid in a fresh chew of tobacco, and then remarked as coolly as if giving the order to heave up his anchor, "Well, I s'pose I'm taken! But who on earth would have thought of seeing one of your Southern privateers up here in the Okhotsk Sea? I have heard of some of the pranks you fellows have been playing, but I suppose I was out of your reach.
>
> "Why the fact of the business is, Captain," replied the officer, facetiously, "we have entered into a treaty offensive and defensive with the whales, and are up here by special agreement to disperse their mortal enemies.



CSS *Shenandoah*
by Patrick O'Brien

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

"All right! My friend. I never grumble at anything I can't help, but the whales needn't owe me much of a grudge, for the Lord knows I haven't disturbed them this voyage, though I've done my part at blubber-hunting in years gone by. But it's cold talking here, come below and take something to warm your stomach, while I get my papers."

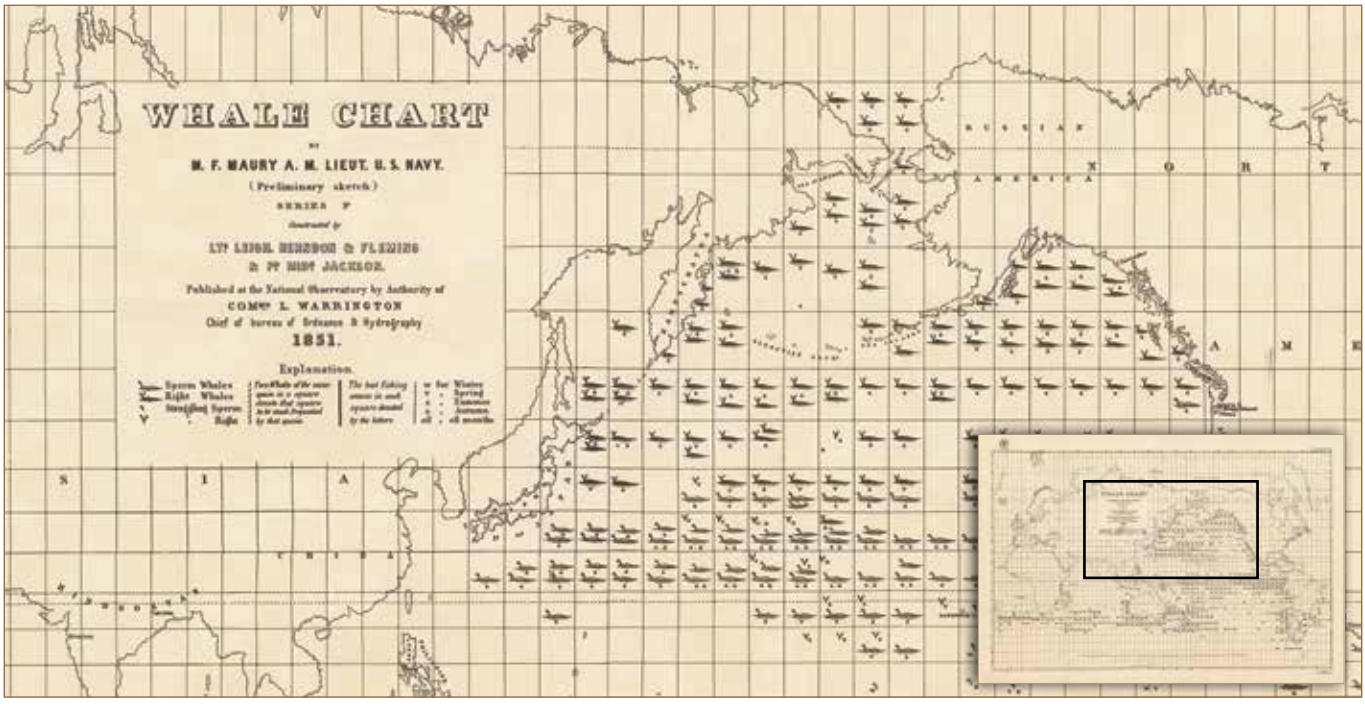
That "something" was the two dozen barrels of whiskey brought along to trade with natives for furs. The barrels were labeled "to be used in case of sickness," but when the Confederate sailors discovered them, they began, in Hunt's words, "the most general and stupendous 'spree' I ever witnessed. There was not a dozen sober men on board the ship except the prisoners, and had these not been ironed, it might have proved a dearly bought frolic."

Captain Waddell waited impatiently for the boarding party to return with the *Abigail's* papers. A second boarding party was dispatched, but they broke into the cache of corn whiskey as well. By nightfall, most of the *Shenandoah's* crew, including some of the petty officers, were so drunk they had to be physically confined to quarters.

It was early in the season, so there wasn't much oil aboard the *Abigail,* but 40 years of butchering whales and processing blubber and oil had impregnated her timbers. All Nye and his crew could do was watch as their ship was put to the torch and became engulfed in flames, illuminating the sub-Arctic sky. The *Shenandoah* had embarked on its mission short-handed, and Waddell was eager to recruit volunteers from *Abigail's* crew. Nye's second mate, Thomas Manning of Baltimore, signed on as the raider's acting master's mate, promising to guide the Confederates to the Yankee fleet. Hunt called Manning a "reprobate by nature," who had "been hired to vote for Lincoln by a drink of whiskey," adding that it pained him to see Captain Waddell "accept the services of the most disreputable of men."

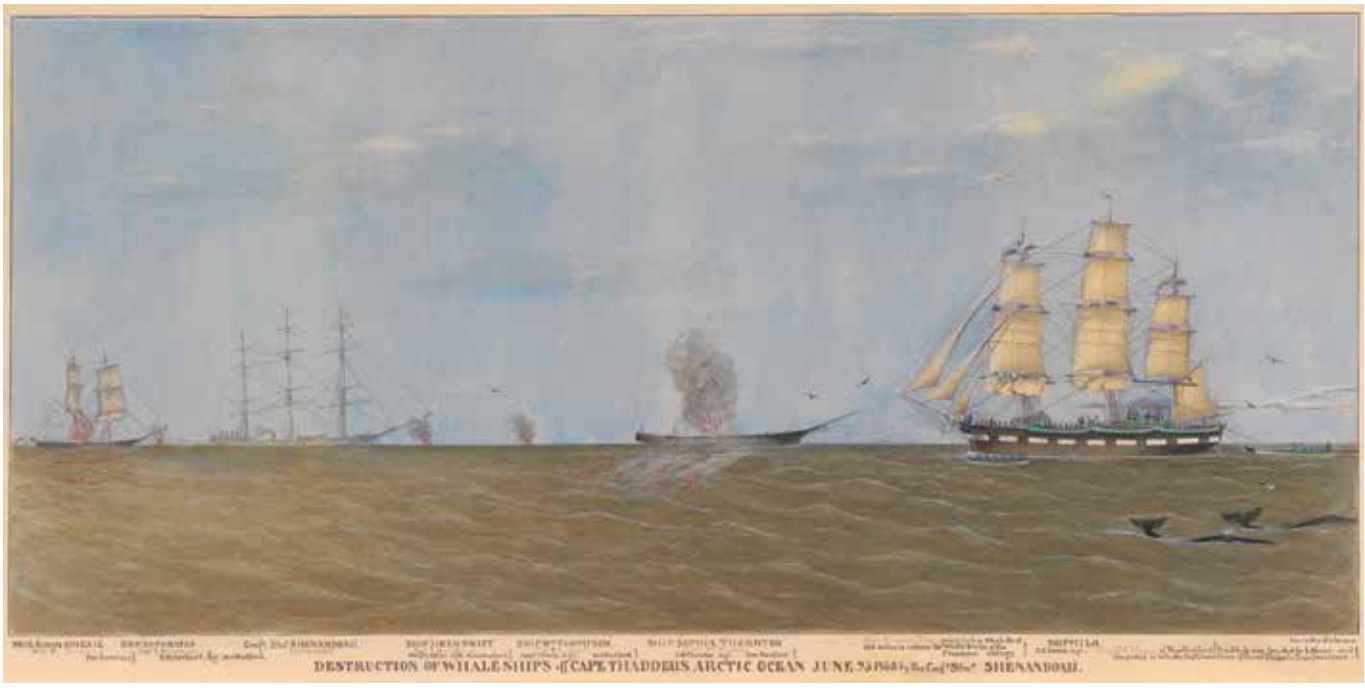
Nye and the rest of his crew "stood out resolute against all inducements held out to them and earnestly besought permission to land on the Siberian shore, from whence they imagined they could get off and join the Russian whaling fleet, cruising in the vicinity." Denied their request, the whalers "took the disappointment philosophically, as they did the rest of their misfortunes." Hunt admired Nye's *sang froid* during the capture and burning of the *Abigail*: "[he] gained the good will of our officers by his never-failing good humor under adverse circumstances, and the shrewdness and tact he displayed upon all occasions."

Guided by the turncoat Manning, Waddell attempted to sail west to reach the rich whaling grounds where Nye had lost the *Mount Vernon* in 1856. The *Shenandoah* was



DAVID RUMSEY MAP COLLECTION

Detail from Matthew Fontaine Maury's 1851 Whale Chart. Maury collected data from thousands of ships' logbooks to produce maps of the seasonal distribution of whales. Whaling captains relied on these charts to guide them to the most productive hunting grounds. During the Civil War, CSS *Shenandoah* used them to locate the rest of the whaling fleet.



NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

***Destruction of Whale Ships off Cape Thaddeus Arctic Ocean June 23 1865 by the Conft Stmr* Shenandoah** by Benjamin Russell (1804–1885) depicts the *Shenandoah* (shown 2nd from left) assault on the American whaling fleet. On the right is the New Bedford whaler *Milo,* which was spared destruction after her captain gave bond and agreed to carry the captured whalemen to San Francisco. In the far distance off *Milo*'s starboard bow, the artist depicted Ebenezer Nye "going in his whaleboat 180 miles to warn the whale ships of the steamer's doings."



US NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

not built to sail through ice, however, and left the Okhotsk to sail to the Bering Sea. In late June, the Confederates surprised Yankee whalers in the Gulf of Anadyr and burned six ships. Their outraged captains showed Captain Waddell newspapers from San Francisco reporting that Lee had surrendered and Lincoln had been assassinated, but he "replied he was prepared to hear of the assassination of Old Abe, for he had expected it, but declined to put credence in the statement of the surrender of Lee or the capture of Richmond. That they would not place any credence in any report they saw in Yankee papers."

The *Shenandoah* chewed through the fleet, capturing or burning 29 ships and taking the captured whalemen onboard. At one point there were so many men crowded onto her decks that Waddell feared an uprising. When the barque *Milo* was captured and bonded for $46,000, Waddell sent her with three other ships to carry the captured sailors to San Francisco. Nye was transferred to the *Milo,* where he and a small group escaped in two whaleboats and sailed away, undetected in the fog, crossing 180 miles of open ocean to warn the rest of the whaling fleet.

Capt. James I. Waddell, CSN (1824–1886)

During the Centennial celebrations in New Bedford on 4 July 1876, US Congressman William Wallace Crapo praised Nye's bravery:

> Among the incidents of this rebel raid should be mentioned the praiseworthy action of Capt. Ebenezer F. Nye, of the *Abigail*, after the loss of his ship, in saving as far as possible the fleet from destruction. The *Milo* had been captured and bonded, and had received on board a large number of prisoners. During the following night Capt. Nye organized an expedition of two boats, and at early dawn left the *Milo*. While the *Shenandoah* was pursuing her piratical work, these brave men, following along the fields of ice, pulled north in their open boats 180 miles, and there found a number of defenceless whalers, giving them the information which saved them from capture. It was a gallant act, prompted by the humanity and executed with the cool determination of the hardy sailor.

After the war, Nye returned to Russian waters in 1867 in command of the *Stella*, whaling in the Shelikhov Gulf. On 12 August, as the *Stella* was searching for a previously harpooned whale near Big Grampus Island, Nye wrote that the wind "hauled to the west" around midnight, accompanied by a thick fog and a strong tidal current. "About one o'clock in the morning, land was discovered right ahead, but though every effort was made to clear it the ship struck, with the tide falling."

After losing the *Stella*—his fourth wreck—Nye returned home, where he bought shares in several coastal schooners and filed a $10,000 claim for the loss of the *Abigail.* He continued to sail through the rest of the 1870s, crossing the country by rail to San Francisco to take command of a series of whaling ships—the *Janus*, the *Louisa*, the *Camilla,* and the *Cleone*—for voyages to Alaska and Siberia.

In August 1879, aboard the *Mount Wollaston* off the Alaskan coast, Nye wrote to the *New Bedford Standard-Times* describing the horrors he witnessed that spring. The natives relied on walrus meat to sustain them through the long Arctic winter, but whalers had extirpated the herds for their oil and tusks. Nye visited the settlements on St. Lawrence Island, south of the Bering Straits, bearing witness to the aftermath of a terrible famine:

> Fully one-third of the population south of St. Lawrence Bay perished the past Winter for want of food, and half the natives of St. Lawrence Island died, one village of 200 inhabitants all died excepting one man. Mothers took their emaciated children to the burying grounds, stripped their clothing from their little emaciated bodies, and then strangled them or let the intense cold end their misery. It is sad and heart-rending to hear them tell you how they suffered.

As Nye was at sea off the Alaskan coast, the US Arctic Expedition got underway from San Francisco aboard USS *Jeannette*, commanded by Lieutenant Commander George W. De Long. Ultimately bound for the North Pole, the expedition explored the coast north of the Bering Strait and entered the ice pack of the Chukchi Sea along Siberia's northeastern coast. A veteran of sailing in northern latitudes, Nye had advised De Long before he put to sea that sailing in the Arctic was a gamble.



USN Lt. Comdr. George De Long (1844–1881)

> You, Lieutenant De Long, have a very strong vessel, have you not? Magnificently equipped for the service, with unexceptionable crew and aids? And you will take plenty of provisions, and all the coal you can carry? Then, put her into the ice and let her drift, and you may get through or you may go to the devil, and the chances are about equal!

USS *Jeannette* would eventually become trapped in the ice near Herald and Wrangel Islands. Somewhere nearby were two New Bedford whaling ships, the *Vigilant* and Nye's *Mount Wollaston.* On 10 October 1879, Captain Bauldry of the steam whaler *Helen Mar* reported seeing the *Vigilant* and the *Mount Wollaston* "in a sluiceway or channel of open water, from 70 to 80 miles southeast of Herald Island." When neither whaler returned to San Francisco, concerns grew that the ships were stranded in the ice.

> As to the safety of the crews, there is a difference of opinion among the whaling captains. They are generally of the belief, however, that it will be a "close

> shave" if any of them succeed in reaching the land and finding their way to a native settlement. All are united, however, in saying that if any man can extricate himself from the perilous position, they are undoubtedly in, that man is Captain Nye, of the *Mt. Wollaston*. —*The Call,* 6 December 1879

On 17 January 1880, the *New York Times* reported:

> A petition is in circulation … requesting that as soon as navigation opens next Spring the Government dispatch a war vessel to the Arctic Ocean to the relief of the whaling barks *Mount Wollaston* and *Vigilant*, and the exploring yacht *Jeannette*. It is claimed that Capt. Nye had an extra supply of provisions on the *Mount Wollaston,* in anticipation of wintering in the Arctic region.

In May 1880, the revenue cutter *Corwin* was dispatched to break up the seal hunters' illegal trade in rum and guns, which was despoiling the natives of Alaska and Siberia, and "also to make diligent search for the whaling barks *Mount Wollaston* and *Vigilant,* reported to have been caught in the ice within the Arctic Ocean last Autumn, which endeavoring to return through Behring [sic] Straits from their season's whaling, and if found to render any assistance possible."

The *Jeannette's* plight became a sensation because the expedition had been financed by New York newspaper tycoon James Gordon Bennett Jr. as a publicity stunt. USS *Jeannette* drifted for nearly two years before it sank 350 miles north of Siberia in May 1881. The *Vigilant* and *Mount Wollaston* likely succumbed to the ice during the winter of 1879–80. In July 1881, the *Thomas Pope* returned to San Francisco carrying third-hand news of an abandoned ship discovered in the Chukchi ice pack. Captain Baker of the *Progress* had relayed to the captain of the *Pope* that a band of Chukchi seal hunters told him they had found the hulks of the *Vigilant* and *Mount Wollaston* trapped in the ice and had looted the *Vigilant* of some money and guns.

The *Venture Signal* of 12 July 1881 reported the gruesome news that "Indians found three corpses only on board the *Vigilant*. From their appearance it was apparent they had died in their first year of captivity in the ice." By "appearance," the newspaper delicately omitted the macabre detail that the corpses found aboard the *Vigilant* were on deck in wooden boxes and that the bodies had burst open after freezing, thawing, and putrefying in the summer heat.

The *Whalemen's Shipping List* published a report by the *Rainbow,* adding more details about the two wrecked ships: "Captain Lapham reported to have heard from the natives along the coast that they had seen in the ice in the vicinity of Cape North, two vessels, with spars and masts gone and housed over, several dead bodies on board… Capt. Nye's dead body is said to have been recognized by two natives." Another report claimed Nye's gold-rimmed spectacles were discovered about the *Vigilant*, leading to speculation that the crew of the *Mount Wollaston* had abandoned ship and taken refuge aboard the *Vigilant*. Whatever occurred during the winter of 1879–80, Nye was presumed dead.

Ebenezer Nye came from a long line of mariners, but his younger brothers did not follow him to sea. While he was at sea, his younger brother, Lt. Ephraim Nye of the 14th Massachusetts Battery, was killed in action at Fort Stedman in Virginia on 25 March 1865. Another brother, William Foster Nye, founded Nye Lubricants in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, which produced refined oils for watches, clocks, and chronometers. In the late 1860s, he bought an entire catch of 2,200 stranded pilot whales and expanded the business until, by the late 1880s, Nye Lubricants was among the world's largest suppliers of refined lubricant oils.

William Nye founded the Onset Bay Grove Association, a religious cottage community on the shores of Buzzards Bay. He was also a spiritualist who believed the dead could be contacted by the living. In 1908, he contributed the following account to the *Light: A Journal of Psychical, Occult, and Mystical Research:*

> On the eve of February 22nd 1889, when nothing was known their fate, my brother, Captain Ebenezer Nye, of the "Mt. Wollaston," came sat the audible voice séance of Mrs. Nelson Collins, and revealed to us the sad intelligence in his own voice, painfully assuring me—in reply to my question; 'Is it true that you with your hardy crew have perished and now come back to us?—'Yes, dear brother, it is true that I am born to the life eternal. I am with mother in her beautiful spirit home.' I said to him: 'Hard, indeed, will it be to us if this is your sad fate.' His reply was: 'I know it. That dear old father—he told me to make a short voyage and not make another, but tell him I will be the first to meet him when he comes over.' This was his last intended voyage—his twentieth to that rigid ice-bound sea for the valuable bowhead whale. ⚓

David Churbuck is the author of *The Book of Rowing* and *The Illustrated History of the Union Boat Club.* His next book, *The Lost Whalers: Shipwreck and Survival on the Siberian Sea,* will be published by Pegasus Books in autumn of 2027. He writes about Cape Cod's maritime lore at www.churbuck.com.