

PANORAMIC VIEWS
OF WHALING BY
BENJAMIN RUSSELL



ELTON W. HALL

reading
room

OLD DARTMOUTH HISTORICAL SKETCH
NUMBER 80

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Whaling Museum*

Old Dartmouth Historical Sketch Number 80

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Panoramic Views of Whaling

by Benjamin Russell

Prints depicting whaling, although not as numerous as other genres, have always been important to collectors and cultural historians for their strong nineteenth-century romantic qualities. For the historian of the whale fishery they vary in interest from priceless to useless, since few printmakers had the faintest idea of what went on aboard a whaler, how the whale was pursued, or what the boats and equipment looked like. However, some accurate representations were produced by careful draftsmen who had been whaling or were thoroughly acquainted with the subject. Perhaps the most famous of these artists was Benjamin Russell of New Bedford, who went to sea and became an artist when his family whaling business failed. Each of the eleven prints bearing his name is regarded by historians as a reliable pictorial document and among the most desirable prints of the American whale fishery.

Born in 1803 into one of the oldest New Bedford families, Benjamin Russell was brought up with every anticipation of leading the prosperous life of a whaling merchant: his family was one of the most active in the industry, having interests in thirty-eight vessels at various times, as well as large real estate holdings. Benjamin himself held shares in ten vessels between 1829 and 1833.¹ When the Marine Bank was organized in April 1832, Russell was on the first board of directors. Edmund Wood, in an address to the Old Dartmouth Historical Society in 1911, described the Russell family business:

In 1830 we had in New Bedford, two commercial houses which at the time overshadowed all others, on the one hand were the Rotch's carrying on both foreign commerce and whaling with long continued success, on the other hand were Seth and Charles Russell, who had recently increased the prestige of that family and were rich and powerful. Some of their foreign ventures in commerce were brilliant, they carried a large bank balance in London, they owned many merchant ships and whaleships, and they had also acquired a large amount of real estate within the town.²

Thus Seth, the father, and Charles, the uncle of Benjamin Russell, were thriving, and Benjamin doubtless had no reason to believe that he would not continue in the family business. However, the Russell family was caught in a constriction of credit caused by the banking disorders of 1832 and 1833—right in the middle of what Philip Purrington described as a “splurge of material ostentatiousness” that included the building of several mansions.³ Unable to meet the notes presented by creditors, the Russell firm failed. The family were forced to forfeit their entire property because in those days of the demand note, a debtor could be imprisoned if his creditors were not satisfied. Samuel Rodman, a merchant with

close ties to many other leading families, recorded in his diary for December 30, 1833:

*Engaged at the bank & c's house A.M. The difficulties incident on the failures of Chas. Russell & George Tyson [Benjamin's brother-in-law] and the assignment of Seth Russell, making the principal business, a special meeting of the directors being also held in the afternoon.*⁴

The New Bedford banks agreed to receive a note of hand signed by Joseph Ricketson, John Avery Parker, Joseph Grinnell, and William Rodman for the sum of \$38,851.66 with the property of the Russells as security.⁵ By the following year the Custom House records show that the Russells had no interest in any vessels, and on July 30, 1835, an auction was held for the sale of twenty parcels of land including the mansions that had belonged to the Russell family.⁶

Naturally, lacking family resources, Benjamin's services were no longer required as a director of the Marine Bank. Edmund Wood recalled that Russell had drawn a caricature of the president of the bank, Joseph Grinnell, at a directors' meeting, seated at the head of the table on a block of ice. This picture was said to be "exceedingly popular with certain disappointed applicants for discount, who had been chilled by the presidential atmosphere."⁷ The drawing has not turned up but, judging by a group of cartoons Russell did later in life, he was certainly capable of such mischief.⁸

In 1841 Russell embarked on the ship *Kutusoff* of New Bedford for a voyage of three years and five months. There is no apparent reason for Russell's choice of *Kutusoff*: none of the owners had any known ties with the Russell family, nor had the master, William H. Cox, ever sailed for the Russells when they owned vessels. It was simply an available berth when Russell was ready to go. Although thirty-seven years was an advanced age to begin whaling, Russell is believed to have had the position of cooper, a job less strenuous than pulling an oar. His obituary stated that he had served an apprenticeship to a cooper⁹ (coopering having been a trade practiced by Russell's ancestors), and the settlement book for the voyage lists Russell as having the hundredth lay or share of the voyage, which was approximately that of a cooper. Eight years after the failure Russell was still heavily in debt, and the settlement shows that all of his share in the proceeds of the voyage was assigned to other persons, so that Russell received nothing himself.¹⁰

Perhaps the principal benefit of the voyage to Russell, and certainly to us, is that his experience at sea enabled him to gain thorough knowledge of whale fishery. *Kutusoff* circumnavigated the world, engaged in both sperm and right whaling, and visited many ports commonly frequented by whalers. This experience was to serve him well in the years to come.

The *Panorama of a Whaling Voyage around the World* is the earliest known datable artistic effort by Russell.¹¹ It was a painting 8½ feet high and approximately 1,300 feet long, accomplished when Russell was well into his forties, and one wonders what background he had that would suggest to him his ability to make a success of it. Earlier writers have made reference to Russell's interest in making drawings along the New Bedford waterfront as a young man, but no such identified sketch is now known. Russell attended Friends Academy and,

since drawing was considered a polite accomplishment, he might have had classes with a drawing master as part of his general education. There is certainly nothing about any of his pictures that suggests he ever had extensive training with an accomplished artist. The merit in his work is in the great care with which it has been executed and the meticulous attention to correct detail seen throughout.

After production of the *Panorama* and prior to 1867, the year Russell is first listed in the city directory as an artist,¹² he seems to have shifted from one job to another, living at different addresses, employed variously as a clerk or accountant. During this period, perhaps encouraged by the success of the *Panorama* and uninspired by life in the counting house, he began to support himself by ship portraiture and whaling scenes. The watercolors thought to be Russell's earliest include some that he did for his own pleasure, such as a portrait of *Kutusoff*. Later on, his ship portraits show care in including the name and correct flags as if to insure the approval of the owner or master who was probably the intended customer. It would be logical for Russell to consider lithography as a potential source of income, and in 1848 he did so.

One of Russell's handsomest lithographs is entitled *A Ship on the North-West Coast Cutting in Her Last Right Whale* (fig. 1). Removal of blubber and baleen is shown in the center; at left the same vessel is portrayed homeward bound. There are two impressions in the collection of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, one black and white and the other hand-colored. In the latter, printed in a different typeface in the bottom margin above the title, is an additional line: "A whale's head with the bone attached." Another impression in a private collection includes a second extra line (in the same type as that indicating the



Benjamin Russell
(1803-1885)



1. *A Ship on the North-West Coast Cutting in Her Last Right Whale*, 17¼ x 26½ in. Designed by B. Russell New-Bedford / Printed by Lemerrier, Paris / Lith by A. Mayer Under vessel at left: *Same Ship Homeward Bound*. Executed under [sic] the Care of C. Combier, Director of the American Agency, Rue Notre-Dame des Victoires, 40. Paris.*

whale's head): "Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1848 by B. Russell in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of Massachusetts." It is the only known impression with the copyright line and provides the sole documentation for the date. The evidence suggests New Bedford as the principal place of publication, but a scan of local newspapers yields no editorial comment or advertisement for the print.

Northwest Coast scenes in the *Panorama* have much in common with this lithograph, not surprisingly, as they were contemporaneous. The vessels in both are full-rigged, a form that was superseded in the 1850s by the bark (that is, a ship with fore-and-aft sails on the mizzen or aftermost mast). They have old-fashioned single topsails instead of the later double topsails, and they are four-boat ships with no hurricane houses and only simple skids for the spare boats. Spare spars and lumber were secured on two timbers ("rooster tails") protruding from the stern. The style of the bow—with its heavy cheek knees and billet head, long curved trailboards and double hawse holes for hempen cables—the broad white band and narrower sheer-stripe along the sides, and the extensive fenestration in the stern are also indicative of the 1840s.

*All illustrations courtesy of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford, Massachusetts. Text quoted verbatim from the prints appears in italics.

Russell had much of a reporter's instinct for a newsworthy item that would sell. The subject he chose for his first lithograph would have had a broad appeal because so many people in New Bedford had family, friends, or financial interests on the Northwest Coast. Although most of his ship portraits give the vessel's name and show her house flag, these marks of identification are completely lacking here, an omission that seems deliberate so that a potential customer would not pass the lithograph by because it showed a vessel owned by a rival firm. It has been suggested that the ship is *Kutusoff* or *Arab*, but Russell's watercolors of these vessels are significantly different.

Production arrangements for this lithograph were different from those of Russell's subsequent prints; it is the only one he had lithographed abroad. No large-folio lithograph is known to have been published in New Bedford prior to 1848. Since he was embarking on a venture new to both himself and his city, perhaps he felt that the name of Lemerrier, by then well established as the leading lithographic printer in Europe, would lend prestige to the print in addition to insuring as fine a job of printing as could be had anywhere.

The American Agency mentioned in the caption has not been identified, but from 1855 to 1865 the address rue Notre Dame des Victoires 40, Paris, was occupied by maritime agencies and commission houses. C. Combier, the director, may have been one Cyprien Combier, who in 1864 published a *Voyage au Golfe de Californie*.¹³ Inclusion of his name on the print might then have appeared to be a favorable endorsement to New Bedford merchants.

This work is of distinctly higher artistic merit than any other lithograph or watercolor by Russell. The subject is well defined; the ships have a feeling of mass, perspective, and three dimensionality; the figures have weight, i.e., the crowd up in the bow seems more of a group than a row; and the surface of the water and sea birds are more convincingly rendered than in Russell's other works. These factors demonstrate a more competent hand, probably that of the lithographer, Auguste Etienne François Mayer (1805-1890). Mayer, a specialist in marine subjects who worked in Lemerrier's shop, could have improved certain artistic elements and retained the correct details of the ship, thus giving the print the appearance of work by a more accomplished artist.

There are other early lithographs bearing Russell's name that were not primarily his work. They are *Sperm Whaling No. 1—The Chase* and *Sperm Whaling No. 2—The Capture* (figs. 2 and 3). The captions of both of these prints state that they were "from Drawings by A. Van Best [sic] & R. S. Gifford, corrected by Benj. Russell, Esq."; they were lithographed by the firm of Endicott in New York and published by Charles Taber & Co. in New Bedford. The Charles Taber Company was an old New Bedford firm started as a bookstore by William C. Taber early in the nineteenth century. In due course, Taber added navigational instruments, took on a bookbinder and an instrument maker, and by the mid-1850s entered the picture business. Eventually the firm was called the Taber Art Company. In 1857, Taber published a broadside of New Bedford house flags, followed the next year by a city view called *New Bedford Fifty Years Ago* after a painting by William Allen Wall, and in 1859 they commissioned a pair of whaling scenes.



2. Sperm Whaling, N^o 1.—*The Chase*. 16¾ x 26½ in. Lith of Endicott & Co. New York / Entered according to Act of Congress AD. 1859 by Charles Taber & Co. in the Clerks Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.
From Drawings by A. Van Best [sic] & R. S. Gifford, corrected by Benj. Russell Esq^r
Published by Charles Taber & Co. N^o 49 Union St & N^o 2 Purchase St New Bedford, 1859.



3. Sperm Whaling, N^o 2.—*The Capture*. 16½ x 25¾ in. Lith of Endicott & Co. New York / Entered according to Act of Congress AD 1862 by Charles Taber & Co. in the Clerks Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.
From Drawings by A. Van Best [sic] & R. S. Gifford corrected by Benj. Russell Esq^r

The *Daily Evening Standard* of July 8, 1859, carried the following notice:

C. Taber & Co. have just published the first of a beautiful series of engravings illustrative of the whale fishery. It is entitled "The Chase" and represents a boat in pursuit of one of the monsters of the deep and the boatsteerer just about to plunge the harpoon into his body. Several ships and boats are in pursuit of others of the school, and a mountainous island rises in the background. The drawing is by Messrs. Van Beest and R. S. Gifford, well known and competent artists, aided by the experience of Benj. Russell, Esq., and the picture is executed in the best style of chromo-lithography. It will doubtless meet with a ready sale.

The next morning the *Mercury* also announced the print:

Sperm Whaling—The Chase—C. Taber & Co., have just issued another of their spirited representations of the Whale Fishery, from drawings by A. Van Beest and R. S. Gifford, corrected by Benj. Russell, Esq. and lithographed by Endicott, New York. The eagerness of the whalers in close pursuit of the oleaginous monster is admirably portrayed, while the flitting of the seabirds athwart the briny waves and the whaleships in the distance give a vivid effect to the picture.

The Taber firm itself placed an advertisement in the *Mercury* beginning July 10, 1859:

"GIVE IT TO HER" Sperm Whaling No. 1. The Chase—Great pains have been taken to have this picture a correct representation of whaling. The previous representations of this subject (except a few now out of the market) are caricatures rather than true pictures. We believe this to be in the main, an accurate representation. It is well got up on the best style of the art, and finely colored. Price to subscribers \$5 for the pair, single copies \$3.

Chas. Taber & Co.

No. 49 Union St. and 2 Purchase St.

There is a slight contradiction between the two editorial pieces quoted here. The *Standard* states that the print is the first in a series, while the *Mercury* refers to it as "another of their spirited representations . . .," which implies that previous whaling prints had been issued by Taber. Another whaling print entitled *Sperm Whaling No. 2—The Conflict*¹⁴ was published by Taber in 1858, the year before *The Chase*. The title, *Sperm Whaling No. 2*, implies that there ought to have been a *Sperm Whaling No. 1*, but no such print is known. *The Conflict* was obviously not intended to be a companion to *The Chase*, for the format and details of production and publication are different. An account given by Robert Doane, who had worked in Taber's store, may well explain the problem. Doane recalled seeing Van Beest bring in three sepia India ink sketches of whaling scenes about the same size as the lithographs. Taber mounted the drawings on boards with wide margins on which he invited whalers to write criticism.¹⁵ It appears that the remarks became so profuse and contradictory that Benjamin Russell was engaged to put the drawings in order. The three sketches referred to by Doane were probably the three that became lithographs. *The Conflict* bears

the earliest date and is the only one that Russell did not correct. We may, therefore, suppose that Russell became involved after its publication and reworked *The Chase* and *The Capture* into a pair of acceptable prints.

The backgrounds of the three artists involved in this pair of prints suggest the part that each one might have played. Albert Van Beest, born in Rotterdam in 1820, was a competent marine artist who was brought to New Bedford in 1854 by William Bradford. His principal contribution to art in New Bedford was to introduce a lively and romantic spirit not previously seen in local painting. Robert Swain Gifford, a native of Fairhaven, had shown an early interest in drawing and had been befriended by Van Beest, who noticed him drawing along the waterfront. Although only in his late teens at that time, Gifford showed sufficient promise to stimulate Van Beest's interest in him. He particularly liked drawing watercraft, and his earliest sketchbooks show that he took great pains over the work.¹⁶ Van Beest, as the professional artist, probably received the commission for the prints and, both for assistance with details and as encouragement for his young friend, arranged for Gifford to have a part in the work. However, neither of these men knew anything about whaling, and to avoid the scornful criticism of those potential customers who did, Benjamin Russell was engaged to correct any discrepancies. The kinds of things Russell might have corrected would be the shape of the whale and the way he lay in the water, the gear in the boats and their positions as they approached the whale, and the ships in the background.

The second print of the pair, *Sperm Whaling No. 2—The Capture*, was not published until 1862. Perhaps Taber delayed its release in the hope that the stock of prints of the earlier *Sperm Whaling No. 2—The Conflict*, would be sold off, realizing that if he released the improved print, he would be stuck with the less successful one.

The composition of *The Capture* is not original, being derived from a lithograph by William J. Huggins entitled *The South Sea Whale Fishery*, published in London in 1833.¹⁷ The Huggins print shows a sperm whale in the same position with a boat approaching. However, the New Bedford artists have improved upon the original by making it a much more lively scene. It was no doubt Van Beest who whipped up the seas and gave the boat crew more dramatic postures and determined expressions. Van Beest's drawing for the lithograph survives,¹⁸ and it is quite close to the Huggins print. The difference between Van Beest's drawing and the finished product, which is much stiffer and less dramatic, may then represent the work of Russell and Gifford. The additions include a whaleship hove to in the background, a boat being overturned by a whale, a boat in the background going on a whale, a ship on the horizon, and a headland. The whaling scenes are certainly the work of Russell, although it is difficult to determine what Gifford may have done.

The Taber Company suffered a fire in the fall of 1862 and announced that their entire stock would be closed out immediately for cash. On November 11, 1862, they advertised in the *Mercury*: "... and we now offer the entire balance of editions of our series of engraving of WHALING SUBJECTS, three in number, price 50cts each plain, 75cts colored; New Bedford Fifty Years Ago, and the



4. View of the Stone Fleet Which Sailed from New Bedford Nov. 16th 1861. 13½ x 24¾ in. Lith^d by L. Prang & Co., 34 Merchants Row, Boston / Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year 1862 by Benj. Russell, in the Clerks Office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

The following information is included in the lower margin from left to right: Bk. Garland, Capt. Rodney French, 243 Tons, 190 Tons Stone / Sh. Maria Theresa, Capt. T. S. Bailey, 330 Tons, 320 Tons Stone / Revenue Cutter Varina, Capt. Sands / Pilot Boats Rescue & Richmond; Bk. American, Capt. W. A. Beard, 320 Tons, 300 Tons Stone / Sh. Rebecca Simms, Capt. J. M. Willis, 400 Tons, 425 Tons Stone / Bk. Harvest, Capt. W. W. Taylor, 314 Tons, 400 Tons Stone / Bk. Leonidas, Capt. J. Howland, 231 Tons, 200 Tons Stone / Bk. Amazon, Capt. J. S. Swift, 318 Tons, 328 Tons Stone / P. Boat Effort / Sh. South America, Capt. Chadwick, 646 Tons, 550 Tons Stone / Bk. Cossack, Capt. Childs, 256 Tons, 250 Tons Stone / P. Boat Vision / Sh. Archer, Capt. Worth, 321 Tons, 280 Tons Stone / Sh. Courier, Capt. S. Brayton, 381 Tons, 350 Tons Stone / Bk. Fr^s Henrietta, Capt. M. Cumiski, 407 Tons, 381 Tons Stone / Sh. Potomac, Capt. Brown, 356 Tons, 350 Tons Stone / Sh. Kensington, Capt. B. F. Tilton, 357 Tons, 350 Tons Stone / Bk. Herald, Capt. A. H. Gifford, 274 Tons, 240 Tons Stone / Sh. L. C. Richmond, Capt. Malloy, 341 Tons, 300 Tons Stone

Signal Sheet—price reduced to 37½ cents.” This is the first and only known indication of the fact that all three lithographs were in print and that they were available plain as well as hand-colored. No uncolored impressions have turned up. There is no record of the size of the editions of these prints or of how many were sold.

Russell's next lithograph was the *View of the Stone Fleet Which Sailed from New Bedford Nov. 16th 1861* (fig. 4), printed by L. Prang & Co., 34 Merchants Row, Boston. The fact that Russell copyrighted the print in his own name suggests that he intended to publish it himself. Strangely, no advertisements have been found for it in the local newspapers. The event depicted is the departure of a fleet of old whaleships purchased by the Navy Department to be sunk as obstructions in the entrance to the harbors of Charleston, South Carolina, and

Savannah, Georgia. For months after the sailing of the fleet there are advertisements for gear that had been stripped from the vessels, but none for the print. Whether Russell sold them from his home or office or consigned them to a local book or art store is not known.

This is the only print for which Russell went to Louis Prang for lithography. There were two stones used in its printing, one black and the second blue. Unfortunately, the stock on which this lithograph was printed is acidic, and the use of knotty pine boards for frame backing, along with the effects of coal heating and the moist atmosphere of the waterfront, have prevented many impressions from surviving in good condition. A number of examples that have passed through the hands of dealers have been heavily cleaned and recolored, making it difficult to know exactly what one is looking at. It is helpful to examine more than one impression.

Russell showed himself to be more journalist than artist in the Stone Fleet print. Every vessel that sailed with the fleet is included in the picture, and down at the bottom is listed under each vessel its name, the name of its master, tons measurement, and tons of stone aboard. The vessels are overlapped so that many of them would hardly be noticed were it not for the caption indicating that they were there. The print portrays realistically the tremendous traffic jam that must have taken place on Buzzards Bay on November 16, 1861.

Newspapers were forbidden to make any reference to the fleet until it was well out to sea, so that it was not until November 25 that the *Mercury* carried the following account:

The fleet went off in fine style, the pilots and masters going on board at 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ o'clock A.M. and at 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ every ship was outward bound. At 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ o'clock the pilots began to leave, and the fleet stood south. The crews consisted of 14 men each, except for the South American which carried sixteen. The cost of these ships to the Government was about \$10 per ton. Some of them were worth double that sum per ton, and all would have brought more than that if they had been broken up. Here at least, the Department has got full value for the money it has expended, and in the fitment of the vessels, the Government has had the benefit of some of our most experienced shipowners.

In due time we shall hear the result of this novel expedition. It has been admirably managed in its inception, the ships are in charge of experienced navigators familiar with the Southern Coast, and the orders of the Department, whatever they are, will be executed to the letter. We have large faith in the enterprise; and as it is an exceedingly pacific mode of carrying on the war, all our citizens will join in wishing it success.

The newspapers followed the progress of the fleet whenever they received information, as it was of considerable interest to the citizens. The notion that the vessels would have brought twice the amount they did if broken up is misleading, for if all of them were offered as junk at the same time, the market for them would vanish. There were not nearly enough facilities for breaking up that many vessels at the same time in New Bedford. In addition, the vessels had been stripped, and a good deal of money could be made selling the equipment. The

firm of I. H. Bartlett was employed to purchase the ships and fit them for the voyage, and for local farmers with wagons and oxen there was money to be made hauling stone to the waterfront. Provision of that fleet was not an act of patriotic sacrifice to New Bedford, but a good business venture. As for the remark that the government received good value for its money, it was not borne out by subsequent events, since the use of the hulks to blockade Charleston harbor was a total failure.

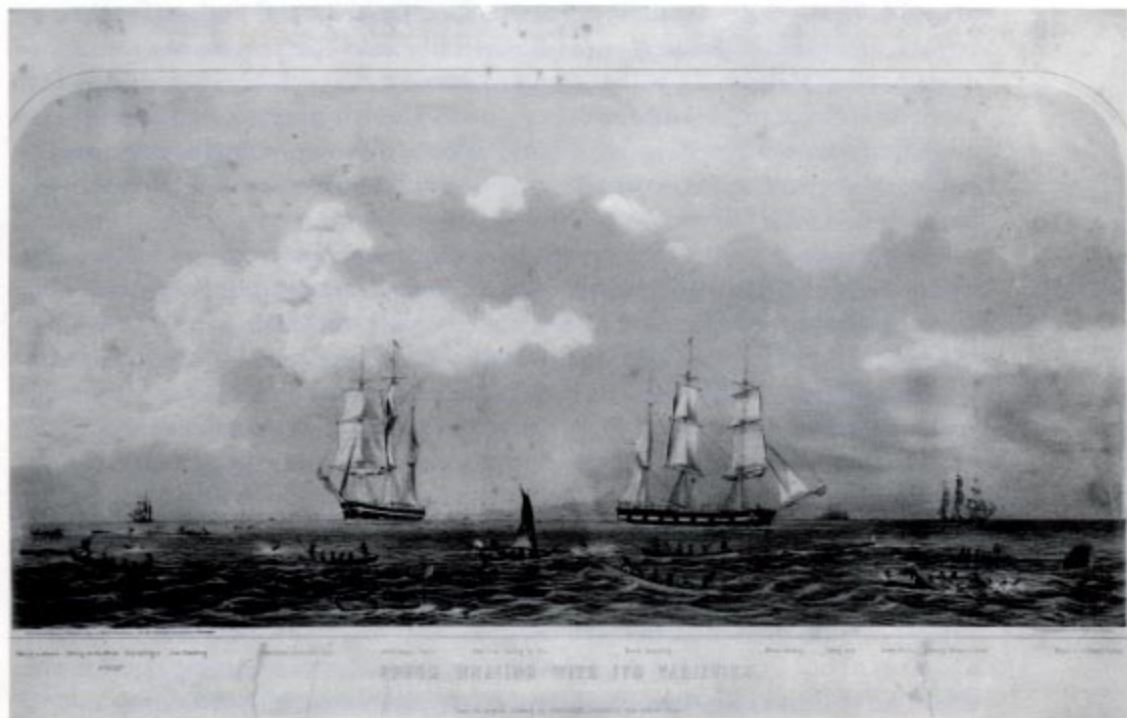
Much has been made of the departure of the Stone Fleet as an event that delivered a serious blow to the whale fishery. However, at the time the fleet of 16 whalers sailed, of which only 14 were from the port of New Bedford, there were 287 vessels listed in New Bedford and Fairhaven.¹⁹ The Stone Fleet represented less than 6 percent. Moreover, a check of the customs records shows that these vessels ranged in age from 20 to 58 years, averaging about 40. Most of them had long since paid for themselves and were close to, if not past, the end of useful service as whalers. In fact, the captains were cautioned by the Navy to use extreme care in making the passage south, and when the vessels arrived, Commander Missroon of the U.S.S. *Savannah* reported: "They are all laden with stone, but few good vessels among them, and all badly found in every respect. . . ."²⁰ Several of them arrived in sinking condition. Considering that the Navy paid a total of about \$56,000 for the old hulks, the New Bedford whaling merchants lost none of their reputation for shrewd business acumen. The *Whalemen's Shipping List*, which reported all news of interest to the whaling industry, made no more mention of the event than to list the names of the vessels sold to the government and give the date of their sailing.

The departure of the fleet, whatever effect it may have had on industry, was doubtless an exciting event. The citizens of New Bedford were supporters of the Union cause. There was an active anti-slavery organization in the city, and the presence of Confederate vessels added another hazard to whaling. The sailing of any vessel was always an important occasion, and to have twenty sail at once must have presented a dramatic sight. Prior to departure the captains assembled for a group photograph taken by the Bierstadt brothers,²¹ and they were regarded as heroes upon their return. Consequently, it was a likely subject for one who wished to sell lithographs.

The *Whalemen's Shipping List* announced the publication of Russell's two most important whaling prints on June 6, 1871:

Benjamin Russell's Whaling Scenes

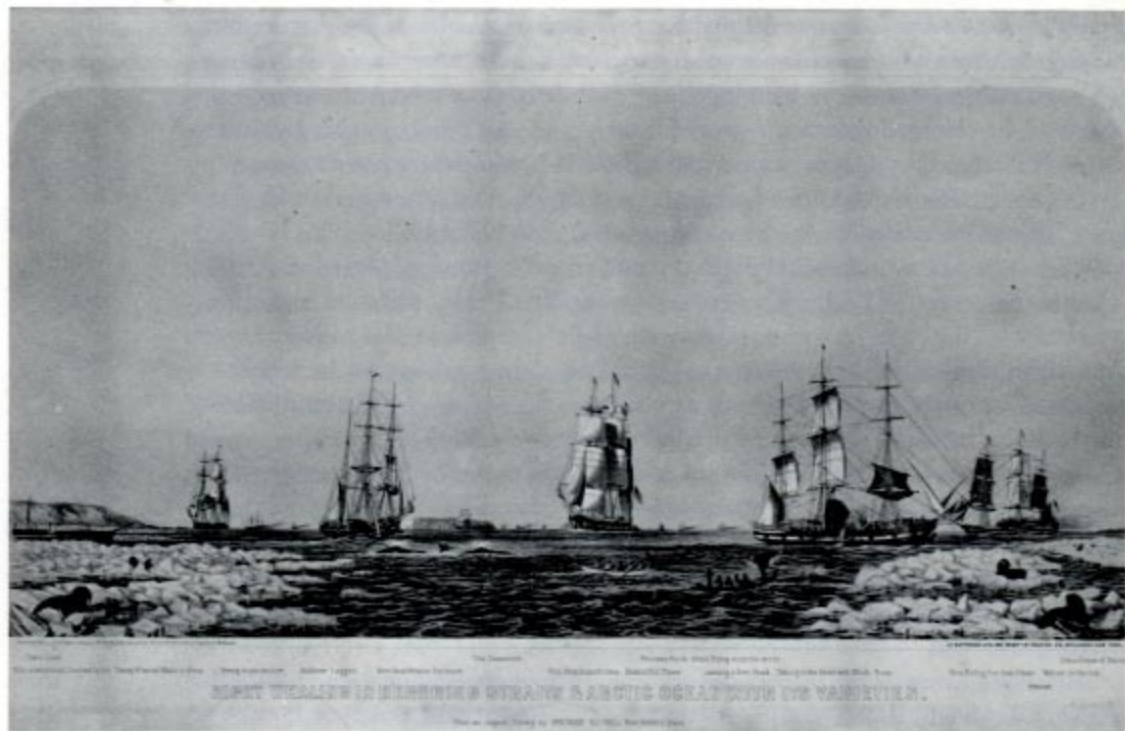
Our citizens and many whaling captains have for years past been expressing a wish that some reliable and truthful representation of Sperm and Right Whaling could be got up that would clearly and faithfully present their views without the exaggerations that have been palmed off for years as true whaling scenes, some so grossly and imperfectly drawn, as to almost deter a man from entering upon a whaling voyage; doubtless many drawn from imperfect descriptions, or imagination by those who never witnessed any of the exciting scenes of a whaler's life, and so have been led into error of the prints intended to give the public true pictures as they really are. Mr. Russell was induced to enter into the only way whereby the scenes could be obtained from actual



5. *Sperm Whaling With its Varieties*. 16 x 32½ in. Entered according to act of congress in the year 1870 by Benjamin Russell in the office of the Librarian of congress at Washington / J. H. Bufford's Lith. 490 Washⁿ St. Boston / Proof / From an original Drawing by BENJAMIN RUSSELL, New Bedford, Mass.

The following scenes are identified in the lower margin from left to right: *Waiting a chance / Setting on the Whale / Ship cutting in / Just Fastening / Fast Boat / Changing Ends / Dead Whale Waif'd / Fast Boat Rolling up Sail / Whale sounding / Whale running / Trying out / Stove Boat / Towing Whale to Ship / Whale in a flurry (Dying)*

observations, and sketching most of them on the spot, and accordingly made a voyage of forty-three months in a ship with this object in view. During that long and tedious voyage, he was having sperm and right whaling adventures brought before him in all ways, to enable him to carry out the main object he had in view in leaving home for that length of time. He has succeeded in having two views—one of each, perfected in fine lithograph style, and from captains who have criticized them very closely, they pronounce them, not only as works of art, but a clear, and truthful representation of the scenes they have long been familiar with, and fully entitled to their honest testimony, that no other views have ever been issued that will compare with Mr. Russell's labors to satisfy and gratify the community, in getting out what has long been wanted, and they have given positive evidence of their appreciation of the pictures, by taking copies of what they have experienced a pleasure and profit in, by showing their friends how they have passed many years of their lives in



6. *Right Whaling in Behring Straits & Arctic Ocean With its Varieties.* 16 x 32¼ in.
Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1871 by Benjamin Russell in the Office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington / J. H. Bufford's Lith. 490 Wash! St. Boston. 201 Broadway, New York / Proof / From an original Drawing by BENJAMIN RUSSELL, New Bedford, Mass.
The following scenes are identified in the lower margin from left to right: Cape East / Ship abandoned, Crushed by Ice / Towing Blasted Whale to Ship / Trying out at Anchor / Blubber Logged / Bow Head Whales Pursued / The Diamedes [sic] / Full Ship bound home / Boat in full Chase / Fairway Rock / Ships Trying out in the Arctic / Lancing a Bow Head / Taking in the Head with Whale Bone / Ship Boiling her last Whale / Walrus on the Ice / Cape Prince of Wales

pursuit of their calling, and Mr. Russell should be entitled to great credit for his labors.

The price of these fine pictures is only \$5 each, and will be sent to any part of the world postage free, on receipt of the above price.

These prints do indeed live up to the claims made for them in the newspaper account, which, it should be noted, was an editorial and not a paid advertisement. One could give a complete lecture on whaling using the two prints alone as illustrative material.

In *Sperm Whaling with its Varieties* (fig. 5) two whalers are shown in the middle ground hove to with their boats lowered. Because sperm whales were commonly, although not always, hunted on offshore grounds, there is only a broad expanse of ocean in the background. All along the foreground are boats engaged in the full range of whaling activities. To the left a boat is waiting its chance to fasten to a whale. Another boat is going on a whale, with the har-

pooner about to dart his iron. A third boat toward the center of the picture is going on a whale with its sail still set. By ancient custom, the harpooner (commonly called the boatsteerer by whalers) pulled the bow oar. After harpooning the whale, he changed position with the boat header, an officer in charge of the boat, who steered it until the whale was struck. It became the officer's duty to kill the whale after he had been exhausted and the boat could approach him again. This is shown under the bow of the whaler at the left.

When the whale was struck, he did one of three things, all of which are depicted in the center and right foreground. Generally he ran, as shown in front of the whaler on the right. Another response was for him to sound, or dive to a great depth. In that case, the boat would hold on to him as long as the whale line lasted, but if he did not level out or return to the surface before all the line was paid out, he would have to be cut loose and whale, harpoon, and line would be lost. While that was undesirable, it was preferable to a third alternative of the whale, which was to attack the boat, as sperm whales, being somewhat more pugnacious than other species, have been known to do. The scene near the right foreground shows a boat stove by a whale, with its crew swimming around in the water. The damage resulting from such an attack could range from simply upsetting the boat to total loss of boat, gear, and crew.

Assuming all went well, the whale would eventually tire from a 3,000-pound weight and the whalers would pull up to him, enabling the boat header to kill him with a lance, as shown at the left. If there were more whales in the area, the carcass was marked with a waif, a small flag mounted on a pole to facilitate finding it later, and the boat went off in pursuit of another. Often several boats were secured together in tandem to lighten the work of towing the dead whale to the ship. All of these activities can be seen in the lithograph, with identifying captions below.

The setting of the companion print (fig. 6) is the Bering Strait, an excellent whaling ground in June and late September, for the bowhead whales would converge there as they migrated north and south. The seascape extends across the Strait, looking north into the Arctic Ocean, from East Cape, the eastern tip of Asia, to Cape Prince of Wales, the western point of North America. The Diomed Islands and Fairway Rock are accurately shown in the middle of the Strait. In this print, Russell does not go into as much detail about pursuing the whales as in *Sperm Whaling*, although there is a chase and a lancing in the center foreground. On the left is the shattered hulk of a whaler that has been nipped in the ice. Off in the distance a blasted whale is being towed to a ship. Whales that had been killed and lost or otherwise died would eventually bloat and come to the surface. If the blubber had not become rancid it was worth saving. Such a windfall was not an unmixed blessing, however. Blasted whales were referred to as "stinkers" by whalers, undoubtedly for good reason.

Russell shows more of the processing of whales here than in *Sperm Whaling*. The second whaler from the left is cutting in, removing the whale's blanket covering of blubber. Russell's caption under this scene is "Blubber Logged," which means that the ship is completely full of blubber above and below decks. It would be useless to catch another whale until the blubber already aboard was

rendered into oil. Far in the background can be seen ships up in the Arctic Ocean with clouds of black smoke billowing up from them, indicating that they have had a successful chase and are boiling blubber. Also in the picture are some walruses lounging about on the ice, a familiar sight in the Arctic.

The bowhead (referred to in the print caption as the right whale) is a baleen whale. It has no teeth, but baleen, plates of tough fibrous material like horn, strains plankton from the water. Baleen was an article of great commercial value used for corset stays, umbrella ribs, and buggy whips prior to the availability of spring steel and celluloid. The entire upper jaw of the whale from which the baleen hung was cut off and brought aboard ship.

More than any of the prints with which we have so far dealt, these two whaling subjects reveal Russell's panoramic vision. Even the aspect ratio of the image gives it a cinemascopic appearance. Russell included within the confines of his prints much of the activity that would normally encompass a broad expanse of ocean. The ability to do this successfully required the same organizational talent as did his *Panorama of a Whaling Voyage Around the World*.

Among several impressions of each of these two prints in the collection of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society are some printed in color and others that have been colored by hand. The fact that some were printed only in black suggests that he intended to offer them both plain and colored. However, no plain impression is known, nor do any of the advertisements indicate that there was anything other than the colored version available. Perhaps Russell originally planned to sell both, but subsequently changed his mind and colored the rest himself.

Certain impressions of both prints are marked "Proof." Apparently there were a number of artist's proofs in addition to the regular edition. In the *Whalemen's Shipping List* of September 2, 1873, the following advertisement appeared:

Russell's Whaling Views

Which are highly finished, colored and are now all out of print; representing the only TRUE and FAITHFUL copies of whaling ever brought before the public.

—COMPRISING—

Sperm Whaling with all its varieties 36 x 24

Right Whaling " " " " 36 x 24

Arctic Ocean Views, (5 in a set) giving true scenes of the abandonment of our whaleships in the ice, with views of the Walrus as they were described by Captains who were on the spot, and all classed as perfect copies of that great event.

Those in want of the above rare prints will have their orders promptly attended to by addressing Benjamin Russell, New Bedford, Mass.

No charge for delivering to any part of the United States, and favorable charges for foreign orders.

The fact that this advertisement was run for over a year in the *Shipping List* indicates that the demand for the prints had been less than anticipated. It may well be that Russell had deliberately had a large part of the edition marked "Proof" as a stimulus to prospective purchasers.



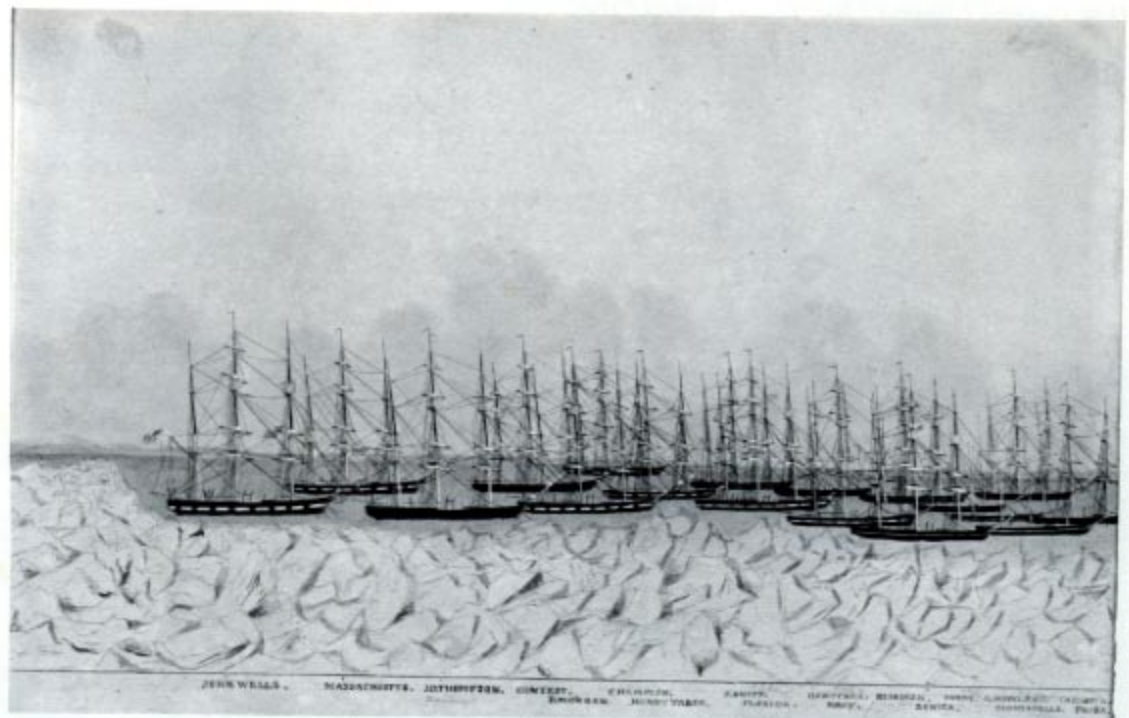
7. *Abandonment of The Whalers in the Arctic Ocean Sept 1871* / Pl. 1. 11 x 18 1/4 in.
Published by Benjamin Russell, New Bedford, Mass. / Entered according to Act of Congress
in the year 1872 by Benj. Russell in the Office of the Librarian of Congress at Washington /
J. H. Buffords Lith. 490 Washst St. Boston. / Proof
Initialed on stone: J.P.N.

Scenes, left to right: Sea Horse Islands / Roman / Point Belcher / Concordia / Gay Head / George

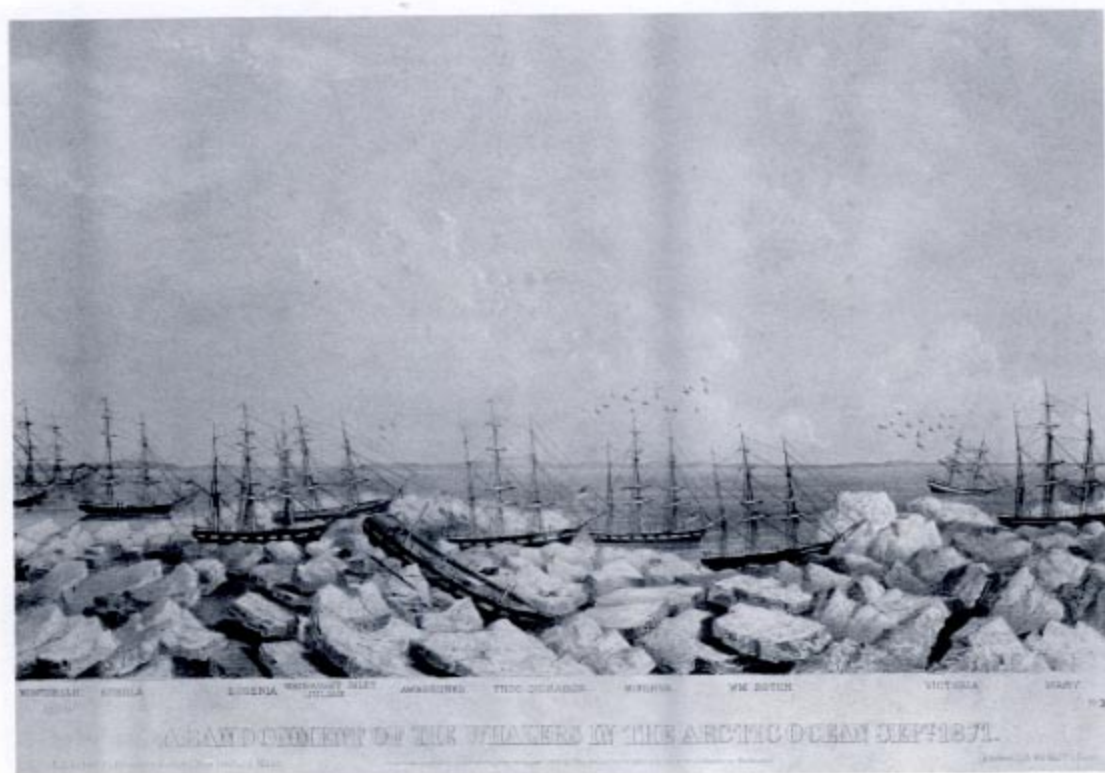
The last five prints that Russell did were a series showing the Arctic disaster of 1871 (figs. 7, 8, 10, 12, and 14). Each print bears the title *Abandonment of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean, Sept. 1871*, and is printed in black over a warm gray. The event is well documented and needs only a brief description here.²² The whaling fleet had gone to the Arctic for the summer in pursuit of the bow-head whale. There was no reason to believe that there was any extraordinary danger; whalers had been going there for many years and knew what conditions to expect. This time, however, an unusual southwesterly gale set in for four days blowing ice floes toward shore until they grounded, trapping the fleet of thirty-two whalers between them and the shore, between Point Belcher and Icy Cape. On September 2 the brig *Comet* was crushed and sunk, and less than a week later, the barks *Roman* and *Awashonks* were crushed. It was apparent that the entire fleet might meet the same fate, or that 1,200 men and a few women faced the possibility of a winter in the Arctic without food. The masters of the whalers therefore decided to abandon their ships while there was still an opportunity to escape and join other ships in clear water. On September 13, having met and signed an agreement to leave, the captains directed their crews to sail by whale-boat to the rescue vessels. This was accomplished without loss of life, but of the



8. *Abandonment of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean Sep 1871* / Pl. 2. 11 1/4 x 18 1/2 in.
 In lower right corner of image: *On Stone* by J.P. Newell. Publication data same as fig. 7.
 Scenes, left to right: *John Wells / Massachusetts / J.D. Thompson / Contest / E. Morgan /*
Champion / Henry Taber / E. Swift / Florida / O. Crocker / Navy / Reindeer / Seneca /
G. Howland / Fanny / Carlotta / Paiea



9. Preliminary watercolor for fig. 8. 13 1/2 x 18 in.



10. *Abandonment of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean Sept 1871* / Pl. 3. 11 x 18 in.

Initialed on stone: J.P.N. Publication data same as fig. 7.

Scenes, left to right: Monticello / Kobola / Eugenia / Wainright Inlet / Julian / Awashonks / Thos. Dickason / Minerva / Wm. Rotch / Victoria / Mary



11. Preliminary watercolor for fig. 10. 13½ x 18 in.

thirty-two vessels abandoned, only one was recovered the following season. Ironically, four days after the ships were abandoned, the wind went northeast and the ice was blown out. The loss was the greatest disaster that ever befell the New Bedford fleet and hastened the eventual decline of the industry.

Since the citizens of New Bedford could not go to Alaska to have a look for themselves, Russell provided a visual description of what happened. He produced a series of five watercolors, subsequently reproduced as lithographs, showing the coastline of Alaska with the ships caught in the ice or between the ice and shore. Arranging the five prints from left to right, the view stretches northeast to southwest with the Seahorse Islands just north of Point Belcher at the extreme left. The ships farthest to the north were caught there. Going southward (plate 2), more of the fleet is shown caught in the ice. Plate 3 shows the fleet at anchor between the shore and the ice, and in plate 4 the officers and crew have abandoned their ships and are proceeding to a point of rendezvous at Icy Cape before transferring to the seven rescue vessels. In the final plate the survivors are shown being put aboard whaleships in open water. Together these prints include about 200 miles of the Alaskan coast.

In 1911 the Old Dartmouth Historical Society was given four of the five original watercolors (figs. 9, 11, 13, and 15). (How the first one became separated from the rest, or what has become of it, is not known.) They are of considerable interest for comparison with the prints, for they enable one to see in what ways the lithographer departed from what was given to him.

The watercolors for plates 2 through 4, when placed edge to edge, present a continuous panorama, the bows of some vessels carrying over from one drawing to the next. It is obvious that Russell conceived of this series as an entity rather than five separate pictures. The continuity between plates 2 and 3, transcribed onto stone by J. P. Newell, breaks down considerably; it is lost entirely between plates 3 and 4. The compositions have not been changed in the lithographs to make separate statements; they simply end at the edge of the stone without the continuity of detail seen in the watercolors.

In the watercolors for plates 2, 3, and 4, Russell has left the ice pack and water very sketchy, relying on the lithographer to give form and mass to the ice as well as a surface to the water. All of the watercolors have notes written along the bottom, concerning principally details of rigging and color schemes of the whaleships. These instructions have been adhered to in the lithographs.

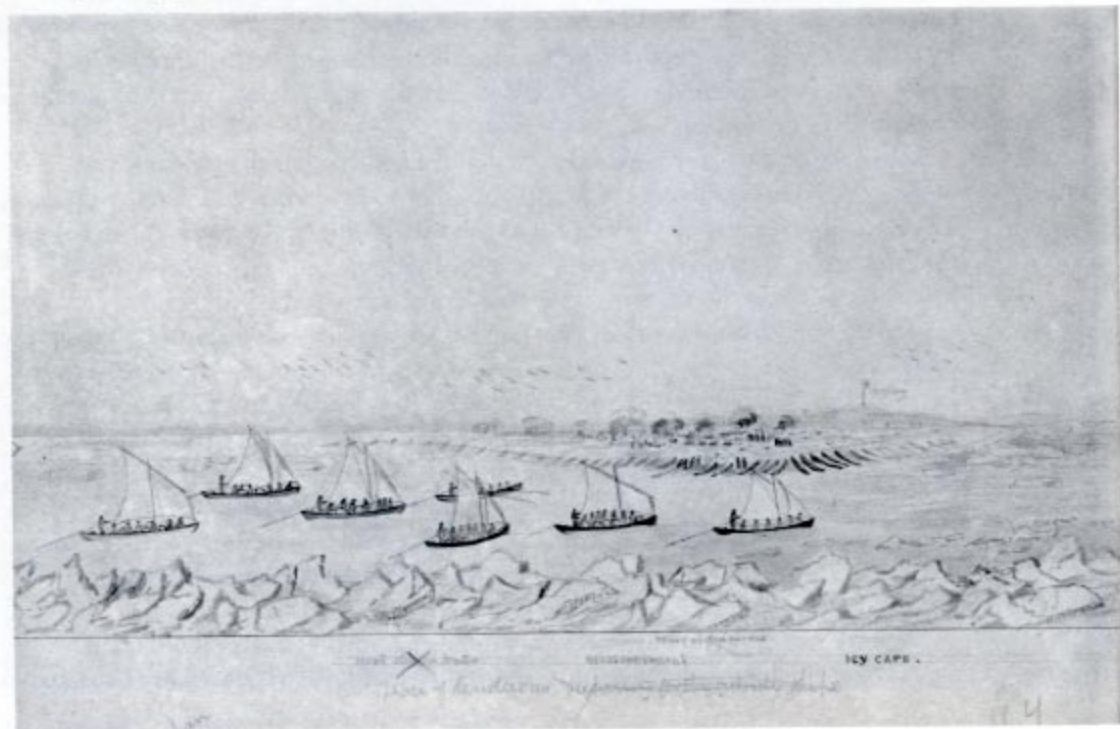
In plate 3 bark *Monticello* appears at the left, having been transposed from the right side of watercolor number 2. Some spars and casks have been added to the ice alongside *Awashonks*. A note under *Wm. Rotch* on the watercolor instructs the lithographer to alter the rig to a bark similar to *Minerva*, which was done. Other changes were trivial, such as the flights of birds and some flags.

Plate 4 shows alterations in the ice floes both in the foreground and along the shore, and the men and boats ashore have been rendered differently. The birds in the watercolor have been omitted from the lithograph. Russell apparently left a substantial amount of the finished detail to Newell.

The fifth watercolor is by far the most finished of the set, yet there are numerous minor changes between that and the lithograph. The relative positions



12. *Abandonment of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean Sept 1871* / Pl. 4. 11 1/4 x 18 in.
 Publication data same as fig. 7.
 Scenes, left to right: *Blossom Shoals* / *Place of Rendezvous* / *Icy Cape*



13. Preliminary watercolor for fig. 12. 13 1/2 x 18 in.

of the whaleboats have been changed, the surface of the water is not nearly as characteristic of Russell as is the watercolor, and small details throughout have been altered.

The differences, however large or small, between the watercolors and the prints raise the question of the basic relationship between artist and lithographer. Normally one would expect that a commercial lithographer would produce a true reproduction of a drawing submitted to him. Some differences between the watercolors and lithographs, particularly in certain nautical details of plate 5, do not appear to be ones that a lithographer would undertake on his own initiative, for it is unlikely that he would have the knowledge. There are two possible explanations for these differences. One is that Newell made corrections based upon notes, supplementary sketches, or instructions furnished by Russell. It is also possible that the watercolors at the Old Dartmouth Historical Society are not the final versions that Russell sent to Bufford. Contemporary newspaper accounts indicate that Russell produced his watercolors based on information supplied him by the captains and crews of the lost vessels. Russell may have worked up this set, shown it to the whalers for corrections, and then made a finished set incorporating the suggested revisions for Bufford to reproduce. However, such a hypothetical set of watercolors is not known to exist.

There was some delay between creation of the watercolors and their publication as lithographs. The *Whalemens' Shipping List* carried a brief note on April 2, 1872:

Russell's Arctic Pictures

The papers and the captains say they are true to life. They are in a set of five pictures, and when lithographed, will be sought for by everybody—not only as a work of art, but as a valuable record of the greatest disaster that ever befell our whaleships.

It was not until October 22, 1872, that the same newspaper made mention of publication of the lithographs:

Russell's Arctic Pictures.—To those who have not secured a set of these interesting and yet sad scenes of the whaleships abandoned in September, 1871, in the Arctic Ocean, now recently ascertained to be all destroyed by the ice and natives, except the *Minerva*, we would say that an opportunity offers itself from the few proof copies left, to obtain them by early application. We flattered ourselves that many of the ships would ride out the storms of winter safely, and again reach our waters, but all hope of them is at an end. Of the fleet of this year, we are pained to add to the great loss, three more ships that shared the same fate of the others. These scenes are vouched for by many captains who were there, as giving a true representation of the ice, ships, and every particular. All orders at home or from abroad, will receive prompt attention by addressing Benjamin Russell, New Bedford, Mass.

The matter of proof copies comes up in this notice. The advertisement of September 2, 1873 (see p. 39) ran until November 24, 1874. The fact that the supply of a "few proof copies" had not been exhausted and was still in sufficient stock to warrant advertising after two years is somewhat suspicious. Moreover,



14. *Abandonment of the Whalers in the Arctic Ocean Sep^r 1871* / Pl. 5. 11¼ x 17¾ in.

Publication data same as fig. 7.

Scenes, left to right: *Europa* / *Ships receiving the captains, officers, and crews of abandoned ships* / *Daniel Webster* / *Midas* / *Chance* / *Arctic* / *Progress* / *Lagoda*



15. Preliminary watercolor for fig. 14. 13½ x 18 in.

in the case of the Arctic pictures, there are no known impressions not marked "Proof," so it may be that Russell used the proof impressions as a sales gimmick.

Two other references to Russell's lithographs have been investigated since the initial presentation of this paper. In G. Brown Goode's report of 1887 on the fishing industries of the United States, there are two drawings captioned as being after French lithographs by Benjamin Russell.²³ One of them is from the *Ship on the Northwest Coast* (fig. 1 above); the other is a scene showing the bailing of the case of a sperm whale alongside a ship. As no such lithograph has turned up, the eleven listed here constitute all of the known prints of Benjamin Russell.

In *Sou'West and by West of Cape Cod* by Llewellyn Howland, there is a story entitled "Islands".²⁴ It includes a description of a New Bedford counting room, where hanging on the walls

were many prints and paintings by "Uncle Ben" Russell and other marine artists, which by their prodigious and accurate detail defied all efforts to exhaust their interest. "The Ship Corinthian in tow of the Ship George Howland in the Arctic"—a Russell, and so far as I have been able to discover the only imprint made of this particular lithograph—was the gem of the collection. The transparent greens of the ice, the frosty sparkle of the snow, the olive tone in the water, the sharpness of every line and curve gave to this portrait of the ships and their situation and surroundings a reality and vividness beyond compare.

The picture by Russell described here has recently been acquired by the Old Dartmouth Historical Society. It is a watercolor and was owned by Llewellyn Howland's father. Members of the Howland family have indicated that perhaps fifty years had elapsed between the time the watercolor was sold out of the family and the time the story was written. Consequently, Howland may not have remembered the medium, or, as a grandson had suggested, he may have deliberately called it a lithograph to get a rise out of his good friend Allan Forbes, the most eager and successful collector of Russell's work.

The work of Benjamin Russell is prized today for its accurate pictorial representation of the ships and scenes of the whale fishery. The newspaper articles cited above give ample testimony to contemporary regard for their verisimilitude. Further evidence is offered by a statement of expenses of a court case involving a collision between the barks *Helen Mar* and *Ontario*. Russell was paid fifty dollars to make a watercolor of the accident to be used as evidence in the hearing.²⁵ Another example of Russell's attention to detail is seen in the portrait of *General Scott* in the Allan Forbes collection.²⁶ The name board of the vessel is in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, and comparison with the watercolor shows that Russell observed not only the style of lettering but the method of abbreviation as well. Correct delineation of his subjects is what seems to have pleased Russell most, earned him the respect of his contemporaries, and causes us to value his pictures today.

1. *Ship Registers of New Bedford Massachusetts* (Boston: The National Archives Project, 1940).
2. Edmund Wood, "Benjamin Russell," address given at the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, September 29, 1911. Published by the Society in "Historical Sketch No. 33."
3. *Bulletin*, Old Dartmouth Historical Society and Whaling Museum, Summer 1958.
4. "Diary of Samuel Rodman," vol. 7, p. 110. Manuscript in the collection of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society.
5. Zephaniah W. Pease, *The Centenary of the Merchants National Bank* (New Bedford, 1925), p. 30.
6. Broadside, "Valuable Real Estate at Auction" (New Bedford, July 30, 1835). The broadside, in the collection of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, lists the twenty parcels of land.
7. Wood, "Benjamin Russell," p. 7.
8. Two of these cartoons are illustrated in Richard C. Kugler, ed., *New Bedford and Old Dartmouth, A Portrait of a Region's Past* (New Bedford: Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1975), p. 195.
9. *New Bedford Evening Standard*, March 4, 1885.
10. Settlement book, *Ship Kutusoff*. Old Dartmouth Historical Society, miscellaneous accounts 533-40.
11. The *New Bedford Mercury* of December 5, 1848, carried the following announcement:

*The Panorama
of a
WHALING VOYAGE AROUND
THE WORLD*

Messrs. Purrington & Russell respectfully give notice that their great painting of a WHALING VOYAGE AROUND THE WORLD, being now completed will be exhibited in a few days at SEAR'S HALL.

A testimonial was printed in the *Mercury* on December 7:

We upon this side of the river have been very much delighted with the exhibition of Messrs. Russell & Purrington's 'Voyage round the world,' for several evenings past, and we are not a little proud of having been allowed to witness its first exhibition. All who were present, and there were not a few who were well qualified by actual observation to judge of its merits, allow that it came fully up to the mark, in its delineation of scenes well known to our gallant whalers, and in its general features. The hall has been crowded every evening. I notice that it is to be exhibited in your city tomorrow evening, and I have no doubt that from its character and real merit, the enterprise of its spirited proprietors will meet with ample encouragement.

*Old Jack
Fairhaven, Dec. 6, 1848*

Presumably Russell's motive for undertaking the *Panorama* was purely financial, for fifteen years after the failure he had not cleared his debts, as indicated by Samuel Rodman's diary, December 13, 1848: "The Children went to the 'Panorama of a Whaling Voyage' just finished by Ben. Russell which takes the attention of the public and will probably restore his broken fortunes and enable him to fulfill his honorable intentions of pay'g all his creditors." (Manuscript in the collection of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, vol. 18, p. 182.)

It is not known exactly what part Caleb Purrington had in the *Panorama*. He was a partner in the commercial painting firm of Purrington and Taber in Fairhaven. The reference in Rodman's diary to Russell still having to pay his creditors suggests that Purrington must have put up the money for the project; it required 1,300 feet of cotton sheeting as well as the paint. The overall conception and most of the scenes were probably Russell's, with Purrington doing much of the actual work of finishing off the painting from Russell's sketches. It is hard to believe that Russell worked entirely from memory in producing the *Panorama*, particularly in the matter of views of ports and islands. However, there is no evidence of his keeping a sketchbook.

12. The 1845 and 1849 city directories list Russell as a merchant living at 81 State Street in New Bedford.
13. Information supplied by Madeleine Barbin, Conservateur, Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
14. Illustrated in M. V. and Dorothy Brewington, *Kendall Whaling Museum Prints* (Sharon, Mass., 1969), p. 7.
15. This story was related by a New Bedford artist, Lemuel D. Eldred, in an article entitled "Recollections of Albert Van Beest—Famous Marine Artist" (*New Bedford Sunday Standard*, February 15, 1914). Eldred speculated that the lithographs were the work of Van Beest alone, but a comparison of the lithograph *The Capture* with Van Beest's drawing makes that suggestion unlikely.
16. An extensive collection of the sketchbooks of R. Swain Gifford exists in the Old Dartmouth Historical Society.

17. Illustrated in Brewington, *Kendall Whaling Museum Prints*, p. 50.
18. Illustrated in *New Bedford and Old Dartmouth*, p. 108.
19. *Whalemen's Shipping List and Merchants Transcript*, November 19, 1861.
20. *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), series 1, vol. 12, p. 419.
21. Illustrated in *New Bedford and Old Dartmouth*, p. 113.
22. A good account of the Arctic disaster of 1871 may be found in *One Whaling Family*, edited by Harold Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), pp. 223-242.
23. George Brown Goode, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), section 5, plates 207 and 208.
24. Llewellyn Howland, *Sou'West and by West of Cape Cod* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), pp. 61-62.
25. Miscellaneous papers pertaining to bark *Helen Mar*, Old Dartmouth Historical Society.
26. Illustrated in *Whale Ships and Whaling Scenes as Portrayed by Benjamin Russell*, State Street Trust Company, Boston, Historic Monograph Series no. 39 (1955), p. 59.