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“Nearly Allied:”

Natural Knowledge Systems and Flexible Labor Amongst Southeastern Connecticut’s
19th Century Pelagic Hunters at Desolation Island

By

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On the morning of February 1, 1863, the New London Schooner *Pacific* lay wrecked on Fairchild Beach at Heard Island. The night before, at around 9 pm, she had “parted from her anchorage,” a fatal occurrence for any vessel being tossed about in tempestuous waters close to a rocky coastline like that of Heard. An hour later, she went “on shore.”¹ Located in the infamous “Roaring Forties,” where severe storms are common nearly year round, Heard, and its sister islands, Kerguelen or “Desolation,” would be the final resting place for at least half a dozen other vessels during the nineteenth century, many from New London, Connecticut.² The schooner *Pacific*’s crew would be shipwrecked at Heard for eight months, before the arrival on 5 February at Fairchild’s Beach of the New London schooner *E.R. Sawyer*, captained by Erasmus D. Rogers. During this time, the *Pacific*’s Captain, Alfred Turner, insisted his men continue to participate in the task that brought them to the island in the first place – that is, to collect oil from southern elephant seals (*Mirongua leonina*), which inhabit Heard during the Antarctic summer. Perhaps Turner’s move was motivated partly to combat boredom, but it was more likely opportunistic. Vessels from New London visited the island at least twice a season from November – March; with the likelihood of rescue within the year high, Turner’s insistence that his men keep working was likely a way to salvage his failed enterprise – and his reputation.

But his orders were not met without resistance. A journal left by an anonymous survivor of the wreck records the whalemen’s unrest, noting, “...it seems to me there is mutiny all round

¹ Anonymous journal of one of the survivors of the wreck of the schooner *Pacific*, 31 January 1863 – 25 Sept. 1864, Records of Lawrence & Co. (Coll. 25, Box 8/18, PAC.5.8), G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic, CT.

² Briton Cooper Busch, “Elephants and Whales New London and Desolation, 1840-1900,” *American Neptune* 40, no. 2 (1985): 121.

the house.”³ He states that several crewmembers – John Pierce, Edward Holland, and John McAldrick – were reluctant to follow orders. On August 13, seven months after the wreck, he writes, “...two men [Holland and McAldrick] that refused duty have gone over to live on Fairchild Beach. I can see how the Cat jumps in the Whale business in fact it does not take a man to be half as wise as Ben Franklin to see through to it, never mind it will all come right some day or another see if it don't.”⁴

The self-exile of Holland and McAldrick was risky – terminating their agreement to work would have terminated their right to ship’s stores – but it sent a message. Two men choosing to leave an already volatile situation would have posed a threat to Turner’s authority, and in turn, to the likelihood of survival, and the ultimate success of the enterprise; others could follow their lead. Turner needed loyalty, manpower, and workers who, if they weren’t already familiar with the behavior and habits of the southern elephant seal, would become familiar with them during their time on the island. Whalers, especially at Desolation, did not simply act as bodies – most came equipped with knowledge of their prey and hunting environment, which made each a more effective hunter and absolutely necessary to the operation. This considered, the anonymous writer’s statement is a testament to the oft-overlooked power and importance of the labor force in this industry, and especially the highly specialized Desolation Island whale and seal fishery, which played a significant role in southeastern Connecticut’s pelagic exploitation of marine mammals from 1840 – 1900.

³ Anonymous journal of one of the survivors of the wreck of the schooner *Pacific*, 31 January 1863 – 25 Sept. 1864, Records of Lawrence & Co. (Coll. 25, Box 8/18, PAC.5.8), G.W. Blunt White Library.

⁴ Anonymous journal of one of the survivors of the wreck of the schooner *Pacific*, 31 January 1863 – 25 Sept. 1864, Records of Lawrence & Co. (Coll. 25, Box 8/18, PAC.5.8), G.W. Blunt White Library.

Several sources, including Briton Cooper Busch's seminal text on the American sealing industry, *The War Against the Seals*, recognizes the Desolation Island fishery as almost exclusive to New London during the course of the nineteenth century. Busch, quoting Stevenson, notes that "After 1820...94 per cent of (American) elephant seal voyages were made by the sealers of three ports: New London, Mystic, and Stonington" and in a smaller work dedicated exclusively to the relationship between New London and Desolation, states that during the course of the trade, "roughly one out of every four whaling vessels leaving New London went to Desolation or Heard for elephant seals."⁵ Naturally, he implores, "Why their domination of the trade?" and promptly answers that the industry "flowed naturally from Stonington's specialty in fur sealing," though he recognizes the differences in locale for each industry (Stonington's fur sealing was focused in the South Atlantic, New London's elephanting, in the Indian Ocean).⁶ While the premise of Busch's argument – the Desolation Island industry was centered in New London because a similar industry (fur sealing) boasted a local history – appears at least partially correct, his explanation is incomplete.

In this paper, I argue that the collection of natural knowledge about the southern seas and its marine mammals created a versatile labor force in nineteenth century New London, Connecticut. This versatile labor force became the lynchpin for the hybrid Desolation Island whale and seal fishery and was the reason this specialized industry thrived exclusively in New London for almost fifty years. The wide base of natural knowledge that created this versatility developed as Connecticut's whalers and sealers hunted and observed both whales and seals in

⁵ Charles H. Stevenson, "Oil from Seals, Walrus, etc.," *Scientific American* 57 (1904): 23615, quoted in Briton Cooper Busch, *The War Against the Seals: A History of the North American Seal Fishery* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 170; Busch, "Elephants and Whales," 125.

⁶ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 170.

their natural environments, shared, and exercised this knowledge through participation in both trades. As New London's involvement at Desolation continued, this knowledge expanded, was recycled, and retained amongst its fleet. New London's involvement with Desolation demonstrates the use of natural knowledge as capital and as a tool for empowering workers in the nineteenth century; it allowed the men who collected it to adapt to changes in the value and availability of products from whales and seals in order to keep their industry alive – but only as long as their industry remained profitable and culturally acceptable.

New London at Desolation

“Desolation” is the colloquial name assigned by Capt. James Cook to the archipelago of islands located between 48°40' S, 69° 00' E and 49°40' S, 70°20' E on the Antarctic convergence, where cold water from the Antarctic meets warmer water from the sub Antarctic (approx. 46° - 60° S). These islands are officially known as the Îles de Kerguelen (Kerguelen Islands) and are named after French navigator Chevalier Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen-Trémarec, who discovered the islands in 1772; however, being unable to pronounce the French name, nineteenth century whalers and sealers more often used the epithet assigned by Cook to describe the name of their destination.⁷ The protected inlets of the island provide a place for southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) to calve during the Antarctic winter. Its sandy beaches, surrounded by dangerous rocky precipices, provide areas for several species of seals, including the southern elephant seal, Antarctic (Kerguelen) fur seal (*Arctocephalus gazella*), and leopard seal (*Hydrurga leptonyx*), for “hauling up,” mating, and pupping. Thus, after its discovery, the islands became a spot of commercial interest for whalers and sealers looking to exploit right

⁷ William J. Mills, “Kerguelen-Trémarec, Yves,” *Exploring polar frontiers: a historical encyclopedia* (Denver: ABC CLIO, 2003), 347-348.

whales and elephant seals for their oil, and the Kerguelen fur seals for furs.

Between 1838 and 1910, at least 110 vessels left for New London bound for Desolation and Heard Island. Countless others likely visited the archipelago to wood, water, or seal while elephanting at the Crozet's, or cruising the Indian and southern Pacific Oceans for whales. Though several firms were active in the trade, five dominated during this time frame: Perkins & Smith (1844-1857); Lawrence & Co (1856-1884); E.V. Stoddard (1848-1860); RH Chappell (1858-1869); and Williams, Haven & Co. (1870-1877).⁸ The first vessel from New London recorded as having visited Desolation did so in 1838. *Columbia*, outfitted by the New London whaling firm of Haven & Smith, left New London 25 July 1838 and returned 1 May 1840⁹ with 3700 barrels (bbls) elephant oil. The schooner *Hand*, also of Haven & Smith, left from New London bound for the Indian Ocean three days after *Columbia* and arrived home 23 May 1840; the nearly identical span of the two voyages indicates that *Hand* was probably a tender to *Columbia*. No vessels from New London are listed as having visited Desolation again until 1844. In this year, the newly established firm of Perkins and Smith sent a total of four vessels to Desolation, one of which, the sloop *Shaw Perkins*, was lost at the island with all hands. Learned and Stoddard and William Tate, who would later become two of the leading firms in the

⁸ Charles Kennon and Deborah Donovan, "Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*," "'This Terrible New Island': Charles Kennon's Journal Written Aboard the Bark *Laurens* of New London 1855 – 57," ed. Deborah J. Donovan, MA, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, 2006, 176.

⁹ There is a slight discrepancy on the return year of *Columbia*. Starbuck and A. Howard Clark list the date of arrival in New London as 1839. Decker and the National Maritime Digital Library list the return date as 1840. The similar departure dates of *Columbia* and *Hand* suggest that they could still be tenders.

Desolation Island industry, also sent their first vessels to the island in 1844.¹⁰

The trade reached its peak during the 1850s. After 1855, if a vessel was listed in the Whaleman's Shipping List or some other customs record as "bound for Desolation," it was likely that its crew also planned to visit a smaller island located in the Southern Indian Ocean south of the convergence and 260 miles to the south of Desolation named Heard Island.¹¹ It is generally believed that Captain Erasmus D. Rogers and the crew of the New London whaler *Corinthian* were the first to commercially exploit the populations of southern elephant seals that molted and mated on Heard during their visit to the island in February of 1855 after its 1853 discovery by Captain John J. Heard of the bark *Oriental*.¹² As Max Downes notes, it is possible that the island was sighted prior to 1853, but no evidence confirms this conclusively.

Nevertheless, that the first vessel to commercially exploit the resources on Heard hailed from New London is a testament to New London's extensive whaling and elephant sealing activities in the Southern Indian Ocean during the nineteenth century. Between 1 January 1855 and 1 January 1860, an average of 16.4 vessels from New London were involved in the Desolation Island trade during the course of each inclusive year. During 1858, nineteen vessels from New London were either outbound to, inbound from, or at Desolation. In 1860, the number of New London based voyages engaged at Desolation dropped to nine. From 1861-1877, this

¹⁰ Donovan, "Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*," "This Terrible New Island," 175 – 176.

¹¹ Known as "*Heard's*," "*Herd's*" or "*Hurd's*" Island during the 19th century. For the purposes of this paper, the modern day spelling of "Heard" will be used. Max Downes, "Indexing Sealers' Logbooks from Heard Island," *ANARE Research Notes* no. 97 (1996), 7.

¹² Max Downes, "First Visitors to Heard Island," *ANARE Research Notes* no. 104 (2002), 16.

average plateaued around five.¹³ After 1877, the number of vessels visiting Desolation was marginal; those that did visit appear to have done so as part of Antarctic cruising voyages that did not focus exclusively on Desolation's resources, as they had during the 1850s and 1860s, but visited Desolation as one of several destinations in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. The product desired in these later years was almost exclusively elephant oil and fur seal skins, the latter to feed a revived interest in furs in American and European fashion, though sealers exploiting Pribilof fur seals were also fueling the fur market.¹⁴ During the 1870s, Lawrence and Co. was participating in this fur trade, shipping sealskins by steamer to auctions in Boston, New York, and London to feed the growing demand.¹⁵

Knowledge of the South Seas in Southeastern Connecticut

Local natural knowledge is central to understanding the mechanism at play in New London's involvement with Desolation. Southeastern Connecticut's knowledge of Desolation Island and the Southern Indian Ocean can be dated as early as Kerguelen's discovery. An article in the *Providence Gazette*, published 7 November 1772 reported, "After three weeks of navigation from the island of Bourbon [Madagascar], the Sieur de Kerguelen discovered in 47 degrees of south latitude, westward of that island, an unknown country, which he has named South France." According to "the Sieur de Kerguelen," the "country is very fine and appears to be extremely fruitful. It is peopled by a vast number of inhabits of a blackish complexion; there

¹³ Decker, "Record of Whaling Voyages from New London Port and Value of Returns 1718 – 1909," *Whaling Industry of New London*, 120-162; Donovan, "Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*," "This Terrible New Island," 175 – 176.

¹⁴ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 128 – 129.

¹⁵ Records of Lawrence & Co., 1822 – 1904, (*Coll. 25*), G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic, CT.

are forests, and meadows, covered with numberless herds of cattle.’”¹⁶

Kerguelen’s falsified description was received well by the court of King Louis XV, though it also incorrectly recorded the island’s coordinates as 47° S, 63° E, obscuring its location for future visitors.¹⁷ Soon, however, after a second voyage to the island with an attending vessel, Kerguelen’s report was discovered as false. This infraction, as well as irresponsible conduct on subsequent government-commissioned voyages disregarded him amongst the royal court and earned him a prison sentence.¹⁸ However, Kerguelen’s lies did serve one very important purpose: it reignited European interest in and desire to locate a southern Continent. In this spirit, Captain James Cook searched for the land – albeit unsuccessfully – during his second voyage in 1773. His third voyage would prove more successful.

Captain Cook’s third voyage, beginning in 1776 and ending in 1780, after Cook’s death at the hands of Hawaiian natives in 1779, would provide Southeastern Connecticut with the first significant information on Desolation. Groton native John Ledyard served as Corporal of Marines on *Resolution*, which, with *Discovery*, traveled along the western coast of Africa, through the southern Indian Ocean and throughout the Pacific before returning to England in October of 1780.¹⁹ Both Cook and Ledyard wrote about Kerguelen Island, or “Kerguelen’s

¹⁶ “Extract of a Letter from Compeigne,” *The Providence Gazette And Country Journal* (Providence, RI), November 7, 1772, Readex.

¹⁷ This could have been a mistake due to an incorrect calculation of longitude, but it is possible that it could have also have been an intentional move on Kerguelen’s part, meant to protect his “hero” status in France by obscuring the geography of the island in order to redirect the scrutiny of the court.

¹⁸ Mills, “Kerguelen-Trémarec, Yves,” 347-348.

¹⁹ Nicholas Thomas, “Cook’s Third Voyage 1776 – 80,” *The Extraordinary Voyages of Captain James Cook* (New York: Walker & Company, 2003), 420-421.

Land,” as they called it, in their journals. Ledyard’s appeared first,²⁰ however, recorded from memory and published in Hartford by printer and bookseller Nathaniel Patten within three years of his return.

It is ragged, detached, and almost totally barren; it seems to have been fitly appropriated by nature to be the residence of the innumerable herds of sea-dogs [elephant seals], and seals that cover its shores: there are also vast flocks of different kinds of sea-birds; it is without any kind of woods, or even shrubbery, and the only plant we could find of the culinary kind was a species of wild cabbage, which was as wretched as the soil it was indigenous [sic] to.²¹

In his excerpt, Ledyard identifies several of the key attractions Desolation boasted – seclusion, ready availability of prey, and flora and fauna that could be used to supplement crew diets – that would later make it such a popular hunting ground for New London’s whaling fleet. Ledyard’s manuscript introduced Connecticut to Desolation Island, and to its potential as a resource for exploiting marine mammals of commercial interest. The official account of Cook’s third voyage wasn’t published until two years later in 1785. Advertisements for Ledyard’s work appeared in the *Connecticut Courant and Weekly Intelligencer* from 17 June 1783 through 1 July

²⁰ A narrative of Cook’s voyage, written by W. Ellis, his surgeon, and published in May of 1782 preceded Ledyard’s. However, published in London, it does not appear to have been advertised in Connecticut or Massachusetts. “Cook’s Third Voyage (1776 – 1779),” *A Curious Variety of Mazes and Meanders: The Voyages of Captain James Cook in the Global Eighteenth Century*, UCLA Library Department of Special Collections Exhibition catalog, accessed August 10, 2011. <http://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/special/cookmenu/cookcheck3.htm>.

²¹ John Ledyard, *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* (Hartford: Nathaniel Patten, 1783), 11. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtfront:@field+\(NUMBER+@band\(mtfrb+39321\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?intldl/mtfront:@field+(NUMBER+@band(mtfrb+39321)))).

of that year.²² Several also appeared in September and October in Worcester's *Massachusetts Spy*.²³ Though Ledyard's account does not appear to have been marketed outside of Connecticut and Massachusetts, it is evident that individuals in these areas had access to this information in the years immediately following Captain Cook's final voyage. Though Southeastern Connecticut's whaling activities at the time had not yet brought them into the southern seas, this early knowledge of the region and its untouched treasures would prove useful when New London's whalers needed to look elsewhere for sources of oil.

More extensive information about Kerguelen, with correct coordinates²⁴ and a detailed description of local geography was not available until Cook's manuscript was published in 1784. Cook's manuscript includes a description of the "natural history of the island," as recorded by his surgeon, "Mr. Anderson."²⁵ Anderson notes the presence of fur seals on the island, but does not

²² "Classified Ad 2 [No Title]," *Connecticut Courant and Weekly Intelligencer* (Hartford, CT), June 17, 1783 – July 1, 1783, ProQuest.

²³ "Advertisement [No Title]," *Massachusetts Spy* or *Worcester Gazette* (Worcester, MA), September 4, 1783 – October 23, 1783, Readex.

²⁴ Ledyard correctly recorded the latitude of the islands as 49°30' S, but incorrectly records the longitude as "78° 10' E." Cook's records for the longitudes of several locations visited at Desolation correspond with the generally recognized modern day location of Kerguelen, and also correspond with the timeline recorded in Ledyard's manuscript. (Both state the expedition arrived at Desolation in late December and remained until 30 December.) It is likely that the discrepancy in Ledyard's manuscript is either a misprint, or a casualty of his faulty memory. Ledyard, *A Journal of Captain Cook's Last voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, 10; Captain James Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean: Undertaken, by the command of His Majesty, for making discoveries in the Northern hemisphere, to determine the position and extent of the west side of North America; its distance from Asia; and the practicability of a northern passage to Europe. Performed under the direction of Captains Cook, Clerke, and Gore, in His Majesty's ships the Resolution and Discovery, in the years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779, and 1780, Volume 1* (London: W. and A. Strahan, 1784).

²⁵ Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, 84.

seem to mention the presence of elephant seals.²⁶ Cook himself, however, describe the coastline and nature of Christmas Harbor: precipitous, but protected.

There is a small beach at its bottom, where we commonly landed; and behind it, some gently rising ground; on the top of which is a large pool of fresh water... the depth of water, which is forty-five fathoms at the entrance, varies, as we proceed farther in, from thirty, to five and four fathoms... The shores are steep; and the bottom is every where a fine dark sand, except in some places close to the shore, where there are beds of seaweed, which always grows on rocky ground. The head of the harbour lies open only to two points of the compass; and even there are covered by islands in the offing so that no sea can fall in to hurt a ship.²⁷

The development of offshore whaling in America far predated Cook's third voyage, but the journey coincides with the beginnings of American fur sealing, and functions as the starting point for the expansion of both trades into the Southern hemisphere. While beached whales were frequently important sources of local revenues throughout the seventeenth century, American coastal whaling from rowing boats began in 1712, with the blubber extracted from the caught whales tried-out on shore. The early 1760s marked the beginning of pelagic whaling, where vessels tried out blubber on board their ships.²⁸ These vessels were initially coastal schooners,

²⁶ Anderson's excerpt in Cook's publication includes a description of the "ursine seal" which could be a description of the bear-like size of the Southern elephant seal; however, this is unlikely, as he explicitly discusses the extensive amount of hair on the "ursine seal," suggesting that it is probably a fur seal. Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, 86.

²⁷ Cook, *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*, 67.

²⁸ Decker, *Whaling Industry of New London*, 19.

and eventually square-rigged as longer journeys necessitated more sail power, stability, and hold space.²⁹ A handful of vessels whaled out of New London during the 18th century, though prior to the 19th century, the most consistent and active whaling occurred out of Nantucket. This is likely the result of the region's familiarity with the natural habits of whales through extensive land-based exploitation in Massachusetts off of Cape Cod and Nantucket during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁰ Though Nantucket and New Bedford whalers had already rounded Cape Horn and began to exploit the generally untouched population of Pacific right whales by 1791, New London's first twenty years of whaling were limited to the coast of South America, with an occasional few voyages into the Pacific.³¹ Of course, New London was familiar with Cook's travels and, by the 19th century, had read more extensive accounts of whales and seals in the Southern hemisphere; however, such a trip would have been unnecessary while the Atlantic still fulfilled its oil needs.

By the late 1820s and early 1830s, New London's involvement in the trade was more substantial and consistent. The amount of New London-based voyages leaving for the Pacific increased slightly, but for the most part, Southeastern Connecticut's attention "turned east" and south, notably, the same vicinity of familiar sealing haunts that it had been visiting since the end of the 18th century, as will be explained below.³² The first recorded voyage to the "South Seas"

²⁹ Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816 – 1906*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 38-39.

³⁰ Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery: From its Earliest Inception to the Year 1876* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1989), 8 – 19.

³¹ Decker, *Whaling Industry of New London*, 27.

³² Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 27.

was, according to Decker, aboard the N&WW Billings ship *Commodore Perry* in 1824.³³ In 1829, the New London ship *Mentor* left for Tristan de Cuhna, an island in the South Atlantic which would later serve as an important stop for whalers bound for Desolation. During the 1830s, New London whaled vigilantly in the South Atlantic. According to Decker, in May of 1833, Jeremiah Slate, later a frequent visitor to Desolation, would become the first New London master to command a voyage sailing exclusively for the Indian Ocean in search of whales; several other vessels including Joseph Lawrence's *Boston* followed within six months.³⁴ Five years later, the first New Londoners arrived at Kerguelen.

Natural Knowledge and Labor Flexibility Amongst Southeastern Connecticut

Whalers and Sealers

Southeastern Connecticut's focus in the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean during the beginning of New London's whaling career is likely due to its early extensive involvement in the region through the sealing industry, which provided its sailors with a more intimate, kinesthetic knowledge of marine mammals and geography. As whale populations in the Atlantic began to decrease, New Londoners turned to what they knew – the where and when of elephant seals and whales in the South Seas – in order to reap a profit. The New Londoners knew which islands the animals frequented, and when they were present on land in large numbers. American sealing for furs and oil began in conjunction with whaling as an attempt to maintain a profitable enterprise

³³ The term "South Seas" could have meant the South Atlantic, exclusively, though later in the 19th century, "South Seas" was generally a code word for the Indian Ocean perhaps in combination with the South Atlantic or South Pacific. Decker, *Whaling Industry of New London*, 122.

³⁴ Slate sailed aboard the brig *Ospray*, returning in May 1834 with 500 bbl whale oil. Decker, *Whaling Industry of New London*, 126 – 127.

after the London market for whale oil was closed to American whalers during the American Revolution.³⁵ More generally, it filled an economic void created by the British shut down of “the all-important West Indian connection.”³⁶ Though Nantucket spearheaded early sealing at the Falklands, Connecticut was not far behind, and almost inarguably took to the sealing industry with more creativity and fervor than any other port in New England. The first recorded attempts at fur sealing from Connecticut were executed from New Haven in the year 1790, less than a decade following the publication of Ledyard’s and Cook’s journals. Two voyages sailed from the port in this year, one to the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic off of Argentina, and the other to South Georgia, south of the Antarctic Convergence and approximately 800 nautical miles ESE of the Falklands. The cargo from these voyages was marketed in both the United States and as part of the lucrative Canton fur trade.³⁷ New Haven maintained a consistent presence in sealing throughout the end of the 18th century, though southeastern Connecticut would dominate its sealing activities from this point forward. Nevertheless, these early voyages confirm that natural knowledge of the South Seas entered Connecticut prior to the 19th century and likely contributed to the knowledge that would later allow southeastern Connecticut to harvest the whales and seals in the South Seas as they became scarce elsewhere.

According to Bertrand, southeastern Connecticut’s introduction to fur sealing occurred in

³⁵ Kenneth J. Bertrand, *Americans in Antarctica 1775 – 1948* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1971), 20.

³⁶ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 4.

³⁷ A. Howard Clark, “The Antarctic Fur-Seal and Sea-Elephant Industries,” *Fisheries and Fishing Industries of the United States*, ed. George Brown Goode (Washington, D.C.: United States Bureau of Fisheries, 1884-1887), 441.
<http://www.archive.org/stream/fisheriesfishery52goodrich#page/n7/mode/2up>.

1792 with various ambiguously documented voyages out of New Haven.³⁸ Clark lists the first voyage from the region in 1797 from Stonington, CT under the command of Edmund Fanning, who would be one of the most important contributors to the region's knowledge of world sealing and whaling grounds. Fanning's voyage in 1797 aboard the brig *Betsey* explored the Coast of Chili.³⁹ Fanning had been involved with the sealing trade out of New York since 1792, and continued his involvement through the 1830s. Fanning brought his knowledge back to Southeastern Connecticut in practical and literary form. His practical knowledge he likely passed on to his associates, including his son, William, who would later serve as managing owner and supercargo for the famous sealing and exploratory voyage (1818-1820) aboard the brig *Hersilia*, which confirmed the location of and was the first to harvest fur seals from the recently discovered South Shetlands.⁴⁰

Though early sealers and whalers were explorers by nature of their trade, exploration expanded with the rise of sealing in Southeastern Connecticut and created new opportunities for the region's whalers and sealers to exploit untouched grounds. Nathaniel B. Palmer of Stonington is perhaps best known of Southeastern Connecticut's "sealer-explorers." In 1820, while captaining the small tender *Hero* to Pendleton's fleet at the South Shetlands, Palmer is believed to have sighted the Antarctic Peninsula. This was likely not coincidental. Fur sealing, by virtue of the high turnover of sealing grounds, necessitated exploration; expanding knowledge created the means for expanding industry, and so commercial sealing voyages and scientific exploratory voyages were often one and the same. By the first decade of the 19th century, and

³⁸ *Americans in Antarctica*, 25.

³⁹ "The Antarctic Fur-Seal and Sea-Elephant Industries," 441.

⁴⁰ Bertrand, *Americans in Antarctica*, 32-33.

certainly by the time of the Palmer-Pendleton expedition, familiar sealing haunts (the Falkland Islands, Pribilof Islands in Alaska, Tristan de Cunha, Tierra del Fuego, Más Afuera, South Georgia) had been exhausted. William Fanning's expedition aboard *Hersilia* had helped to temporarily revive the fur sealing trade in Southeastern Connecticut, though the Canton market for furs was long diminished. By this point, sealers were bringing their furs home to auction and exporting some to Europe.⁴¹ An increased interest in elephant seal oil refocused the trade at South Georgia, the Crozets, and Prince Edward Island, which "...by the late 1830s...witnessed heavy elephanting."⁴² Eventually, Kerguelen was included in this list, and would become the "principal hunting grounds for the sea-elephant."⁴³ This notable shift demonstrates the ability of early sealers to adapt to a new trade (elephanting) as a result of possessing knowledge about multiple types of marine mammals.

How did this knowledge circulate in southeastern Connecticut? Information about new sealing grounds was published in the marine columns of newspapers, though secrecy was of the utmost importance to the trade; the "unmitigated slaughter" that generally occurred during the first few visits to a sealing ground ensured a poor return for voyages immediately following these initial few.⁴⁴ So if a vessel planned to return to a newly discovered sealing ground within the season, it was in its best interest not to inform anyone of its location. Inevitably, though, information did spread – necessarily, by virtue of an expanding labor force. As more men in southeastern Connecticut were hired into both the whaling and sealing trades, they became aware

⁴¹ Bertrand, *Americans in Antarctica*, 31.

⁴² Busch, "Elephants and Whales," 119.

⁴³ Clark, "The Antarctic Fur-Seal and Sea-Elephant Industries," 418.

⁴⁴ Bertrand, *Americans in Antarctica*, 31.

of new sealing grounds by visiting and exploiting them and observing the presence of seals during offshore cruises for whales. This information then naturally diffused as sealers joined new voyages to work with different crewmen and travel to other areas of the world.

Information on new sealing grounds also spread through written accounts, like that of Edmund Fanning published in 1833. Fanning's *Voyages Round the World*, was a memoir and, in many ways, a natural history of the places to which he traveled during his years sealing and exploring out of New York and Stonington. In it, he provides descriptions of the appearance, habits, and methods for killing fur seals and elephant seals.

On land, the elephant is very loggy (a sea term meaning heavy in their movements) animal, and except among themselves, or in their own defense, never make battle... When first coming to their favorite shore, (a sandy or pebbly beach) the animal is exceedingly plump, and very fat, the full grown generally yielding about three barrels of oil.

In taking the younger, a club is commonly used, and for the older ones, a lance; yet in order to overcome the largest bulls, it is necessary to have a musket loaded with a brace of balls... The loudest noise will not awaken these animals when sleeping, as it is not unusual, though it may appear singular, for the hunter to go on and shoot one without awaking those along side of it, and in this way proceed through the whole rookery, shooting and lancing as many as are wanted.⁴⁵

Interestingly, Fanning also provides descriptions of whales sighted during his voyages.

⁴⁵ Capt. Edmund Fanning, *Voyages Round the World; With Selected Sketches of Voyages to the South Seas, North and South Pacific Oceans, China, Etc.* (New York: Collins & Hannay, 1833), 349.

An excerpt from his description of a voyage across the Pacific to Canton states, "...at noon, 9° 35' north, longitude 167° 14' west...Our route, from about five degrees to the south of the equator to our present situation, must be an excellent sperm whale ground, for scarcely a day has passed, but we had sight of those valuable fish, oftentimes in very great shoals."⁴⁶ In another excerpt, Fanning directly addresses "those engaged in the right or black whale fishery," and discusses haunts along the coast of Patagonia, "the Falklands Islands, particularly in the passes between the New and Swan Islands, and between Swan Island and the Great Malone."⁴⁷ This demonstrates that natural knowledge gained by sealers was not limited to the habits of fur and elephant seals; befitting of the title assigned by historian Edouard Stackpole, whalers and sealers of the 19th century were "sea-hunters," knowledgeable in the migratory patterns of not just the species they exploited, but of all species of marine creatures they observed.⁴⁸

Thus, knowledge gained through involvement in one trade was certainly valuable to, and shared with, members of the other. Whalers came to understand seals through proximity to sealing grounds, and sealers, whales through proximity to whaling grounds. In Southeastern Connecticut, each came to understand the other's trade once again, by virtue of proximity, but also, through direct experience. In her 1835 *History of Nantucket*, Macy Obed recognizes the compatibility and similarity between the two trades, stating, "Sealing was in many respects nearly allied with whaling. Seals and whales were generally met on the same coast; it required as large vessels and as many men to engage in taking the former as the latter; the outfits were nearly

⁴⁶ Fanning, *Voyages Round the World*, 236.

⁴⁷ Fanning, *Voyages Round the World*, 490-91.

⁴⁸ Edouard A. Stackpole, *The Sea-Hunters: The New England Whalers During Two Centuries 1635 – 1835* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1953).

the same, and the voyages were of like duration.”⁴⁹ Obed’s statement likely holds true for early Nantucket, and certainly speaks to the compatible nature of the two trades, though as the fur sealing, whaling, and elephanting progressed, each certainly “developed its own methodology.”

50

Southeastern Connecticut crews often had experience in both trades, if only because the region offered employment in both; by mid 19th century, New London had become the second most active whaling port in the United States and, according to Clark (though his record is incomplete) was responsible for 75% of American Antarctic sealing voyages after 1840.⁵¹ Combined with Stonington and Mystic’s output, this number climbs to 90.8%. A review of the masters involved in the Desolation Island whale and seal fishery reveals a substantial number of individuals with experience in both the whaling and sealing trades before involvement with the Desolation Island industry, and more, bred in the hybrid industry, who engaged in both afterward. Alfred Turner, captain of the ill-fated *Pacific*, shipped on a whaler at the age of sixteen and continued to whale until he was twenty-three years old, serving as mate aboard the *Tenedos* in 1844. After an eighteen-year hiatus from the industry (for reasons not clear), he returned as master of *Pacific* in 1862, and captained four more voyages to Desolation in the succeeding ten years.⁵² Orlando Bolles of Montville served on the sealing schooner *Talima* in 1832 before serving as master of the *Francis* and the *Exile* at Desolation. Thomas Long, three-

⁴⁹ Macy Obed, *The History of Nantucket* (Boston: Hilliard, Ray, And Co., 1835), 141. Google eBook.

⁵⁰ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 165.

⁵¹ Clark, “The Antarctic Fur-Seal and Sea-Elephant Industries,” 439 – 440.

⁵² Donovan, “Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*,” “This Terrible New Island,” 175 – 176.

time master of the *Charles Carroll* at Desolation was previously master of the schooner *Hand's* 1840 and 1842 sealing voyages in the Indian Ocean. Samuel Stroud, master of the schooner *Franklin* at Desolation in 1844, boasted both whaling experience aboard the *Phoenix* in 1830 and experience on three sealing voyages to the Indian Ocean – two of which he served as master – between 1838 and 1842. The resume of Montville's James Church tells the most interesting story; from the ages of eighteen through twenty-five, he sailed exclusively on whalers (once as first mate to Desolation fellow Jeremiah Slate) before mastering two voyages, and serving as a mate on one to Desolation between 1846 and 1865. Between Desolation voyages, he served on board two whalers, and concluded his career with a sealing voyage on board the *Flying Fish* in 1873.⁵³

New London's most lucrative whaling firms began or were also involved in the sealing industry. Italian immigrant Joseph Lawrence, who, with his sons would establish the managing firm of Lawrence & Co., had "for some years previous to [1834]...been engaged in the sealing business."⁵⁴ Williams and Haven, another major player in the Desolation Island trade, was "encountered in connection with the Alaska Commercial Company's lease upon the Pribilof fur seal herd."⁵⁵ In the 1870s and 80s, as whale and seal oil began to lose its value to petroleum, shipping and auction records from Lawrence & Co. indicate a return to fur sealing to feed the revived London market. And when pelagic marine mammal exploitation held no value

⁵³ "New London Crew Lists: 1803-1879," Mystic Seaport Museum, accessed August 18, 2011, <http://library.mysticseaport.org/initiative/CrSearch.cfm>.

⁵⁴ C.A. Williams, "Early Whaling Industry of New London," *Records and Papers of the New London County Historical Society*, Part I Vol. II (New London, Conn: New London County Historical Society, 1895), 7.

⁵⁵ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 175.

whatsoever, the Lawrence's focused their capital and attention, once again, to something that did: railroad stock.⁵⁶

Flexible Labor and Natural Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century at Desolation

Southeastern Connecticut's extensive history in both whaling and sealing created job opportunities for pelagic hunters in multiple industries, which, in turn, resulted in highly skilled and flexible crewmen. From the labor's point of view, there was certainly incentive to maintain this flexibility through expanding and exercising multiple schools of knowledge. Possessing multiple knowledge systems ensured more job options for crewmen, the ability to choose the type of work they wanted to perform, and the opportunity to further expand knowledge. Involvement in the Desolation Island trade demonstrated Southeastern Connecticut's advantage of choice, and the skills of their versatile labor force. First, New London's breeding of the hybrid whaler-sealer befit the very nature of the trade. The crewmen involved at Desolation Island killed and extracted oil from whales and elephant seals, though they did not participate in both activities equally; certainly the extent to which they engaged in each varied from season to season and voyage to voyage. Certainly they were ready with the knowledge and equipment to be opportunistic. In Starbuck and Decker's works, which focus on whaling, Desolation Island voyages are treated as offshore whaling voyages, and occasionally identify either a portion – or the entirety – of the voyage's returns as elephant oil. In *Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, A. Howard Clark provides a detailed synopsis of American Antarctic fur and elephant seal voyages. In this synopsis, he identifies as sealing voyages nearly all of the New

⁵⁶ Records of Lawrence & Co., 1822 – 1904, (*Coll. 25*), G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic, CT.

London-based voyages to Desolation that Starbuck and Decker identified with whaling.⁵⁷ The work shared two identities, both of which were important to its success.

The shipping papers, which acted as the official document for the agreed-upon terms of a whaling voyage, for Desolation Island vessels managed by Lawrence & Co. provide some additional insight into the nature of the trade and how New London exercised the choice created by its wealth of natural knowledge and flexible labor force. Every offshore whaling voyage listed as having visited Desolation signed its labor and divided shares based on whaling experience. Each voyage conducted from a ship or a bark was crewed with about thirty, including a master and at least two mates, a cook/steward, carpenter, a handful of boatsteerers and preventer boatsteerers, and several ordinary seamen.⁵⁸ Voyages conducted from schooners were crewed with a master, two to four mates, one of which generally also served as a boatsteerer for the schooner's whaleboats (or, if the schooner was a tender to a larger vessel, he may have served as a boatsteerer for the larger vessel's whaleboats), one or two additional boatsteerers, a preventer boatsteerer, a cook, steward, cooper, and five to seven ordinary seamen. Crewmen were signed on as whalemens, indicating that the specialized skill sets of whalemens were desired on these voyages. However, the standard Whaleman's Shipping List forms for these voyages were modified with handwritten notes in the margin indicating that they were not simply "whaling"

⁵⁷ In Clark's work, information is spotty about voyages prior to 1840.

⁵⁸ The precise breakdown of labor for these voyages is not clear from my research. Crew lists available online provide the number of participants in each voyage, though to ascertain the exact breakdown of labor, further research is required. The Whaleman's Shipping List for the bark *Trinity's* 1869 voyage to Desolation, included in G.W. Blunt Library's Coll. 25 (Papers of Lawrence & Co.) lists a master (John Bolles), two mates, a cook/steward, four seamen, three ordinary seamen, and a ship's boy, which seems like a rather small crew for a vessel of this size. It is likely that Bolles expected to contract more seamen at the Cape de Verde's on the voyage down, which was common during these voyages, especially in the later days of the trade. Busch, "Elephants and Whales," 124.

voyages, but “Elephanting + [whaling],” “Elephanting, sealing + [whaling],” or, the word “whaling” crossed out altogether, simply “Elephanting” voyages.⁵⁹ If these whalers traveled to Desolation with the intent of killing whales and occasionally killing a few elephant seals or fur seals, it is unlikely that the voyage would have been recorded as anything more than a “whaling” voyage. By emphasizing this degree of specificity in ship’s articles, it is clear that elephanting or sealing was central to the identity of these voyages and to New London’s participation in the Desolation Island fishery.

In participating in elephanting, New London’s whalers exercised their choice; the presence of elephant oil was *the* factor that made hunting at Desolation worthwhile. Elephant blubber, which was rendered into oil in much the same way as whale blubber, was much easier to obtain than latter; by the mid-19th century, whales were scarcer and whalers had to travel further from home to find their prey. Elephant seals, however, were a relatively untapped source of oil. They were easily located; elephant seals hauled up on beaches every year to molt, mate, and give birth to their young. Though whalers were aware of the migratory patterns of whales and “stretches” of ocean in which they could likely find whales to hunt, hunting for whales required more of a search. In contrast, elephant sealing was land-based exploitation and nearly ensured an oil return.⁶⁰ For sealers at Desolation, a ship functioned as a base, of sorts; however, the primary “home base” for the operation was the land itself. Shanties were set up along the beach and several beached men might be left to winter out of these huts and kill whatever came on shore. Though they were provided provisions, a land-based operation meant that these men could also “live off the land” to a certain degree by consuming the eggs and flesh of sea birds

⁵⁹ Records of Lawrence & Co., 1822 – 1904, (*Coll. 25*), G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic, CT.

⁶⁰ Busch, “Elephants and Whales,” 123.

that nest on Desolation, as well as the vitamin C-rich Kerguelen cabbage that grows all over the island. This ensured high health, low mortality, and reduced the overhead cost of the voyage for managers.⁶¹

Furthermore, though tumultuous weather conditions created high risk, elephant seals ensured an almost continuous supply of oil and work year round. During the Antarctic winter, or the “elephant off-season,” Desolation island whalers could hunt for whales, allowing them to exercise their knowledge of whale behavior and hunting skills. Though most of their activity was still centered largely on elephanting, this ensured activity year round, eliminating the tedium experienced by pelagic whalers, as Deborah Donovan points out, and ensuring a shorter voyage.⁶² In his journal of a whaling and elephanting voyage to Desolation aboard the bark *Laurens* (1855 – 1857), green hand Charles Kennon notes this distinction. On 11 January, when the *Laurens* sighted the whaling bark *North Star* off of Heard Island, he writes, “[the North Star]...then stood out to sea doubtless on 2 or 3 years Whaling cruise. we have been exceeding fortunate for in all probability we shall be full in 3 months whilst it takes vessels frequently more than 3 years to accomplish the same.”⁶³ The importance of elephant seals to New London’s involvement in the Desolation Island fishery, despite the participants self identifying as whalers, is notable because it indicates their ability to adapt the nature of their trade to available prey. Thus, though all Desolation Island whalers were probably at least familiar with

⁶¹ Busch, “Elephants and Whales,” 123.

⁶² Donovan, “This Terrible New Island,” xxvi – xxvii.

⁶³ Kennon and Donovan, “This Terrible New Island,” 53. According to Starbuck, the longest known American offshore whaling voyage was aboard the New London ship *Nile* outfitted by Williams & Haven on 4 May 1858. The voyage, bound for the North Pacific, returned eleven years later in April 1869 and cycled through eleven captains during this time. Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery*, 564 – 565.

elephant seals, for those who weren't, hunting them was likely not seen as a "switch" to a new trade, but an adaptation of skills for the whale fishery to a land-based prey.

The trade was not completely adaptation; it was also application. These men would have been knowledgeable of sealing grounds and seal biology, provided Southeastern Connecticut's extensive involvement with seals and the southern oceans. Indeed, timing of voyages and surviving journals from vessels engaged in the Desolation Island fishery indicate a functioning understanding of the biology and behavior of the southern elephant seal, around which the trade operated. Vessels bound for Desolation left New London from late May through mid-August.⁶⁴ The voyage to Desolation usually took about three months to complete. The most traveled route cut across the Atlantic and included stops at several ports along the way, including Port Stanley (Falklands), Tristan de Cunha, the Cape de Verde Islands and Cape Town, SA. Vessels usually arrived at Desolation between late August and early November, during the end of the Antarctic winter and beginning of the Antarctic spring. This arrival only slightly preceded or coincided with the arrival of elephant seals on the beaches of Heard and Desolation in October to "pup," or give birth and mate.⁶⁵ During the Antarctic winter from April to October, visitors to Desolation generally engaged in bay whaling in the inlets and fjords of the island, where Southern right whales came to calve.⁶⁶

In his journal, Charles Kennon, describes the cycle of labor, emphasizing that voyage was divided into "seasons," based on the presence of elephant seals. On the day of their arrival in

⁶⁴ Donovan, "Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*," "This Terrible New Island," 175 – 176.

⁶⁵ Rousset, "Might is Right," 21-22.

⁶⁶ Busch, "Elephants and Whales," 123.

December 1855, he states that “The men speak very promisingly of our being full in one season or less Elephants are very plenty but the weather is dreadful no ship is able to hold there.”⁶⁷

Throughout the rest of the month, he mentions frequent trips between their anchored bark and the shore, presumably in whaleboats, to hunt various species of penguins and collect eggs and cabbage to eat; he does not, however, mention engaging in much elephanting. During this time, the elephant seal populations (juveniles excepted) would have been generally absent, leaving to feed after a three month fast during the mating season.⁶⁸ Captain Franklin Smith, a partial owner of the *Laurens*’ managing company Franklin & Smith, likely knew that elephants would be scarce during this time period and planned to spend the time performing necessary maintenance, watering, and collecting food.

At the end of December, the *Laurens* traveled to Heard Island, a relatively unexploited hunting ground for Southern elephant seals discovered only two years before, which Kennon candidly refers to as “this terrible new island.”⁶⁹ Here, the *Laurens* engaged in elephanting during the next three months, which appropriately coincides with the return of the southern elephant seals to the beaches to molt.⁷⁰ In February, Kennon states, “we are getting blubber fast. the large elephants are beginning to haul out of the water next month the largest elephants haul they call them the “March Bulls.”⁷¹ The term “March Bulls,” which Kennon likely learned from his more experienced shipmates, demonstrates colloquial understanding within the business of

⁶⁷ Kennon and Donovan, ““This Terrible New Island,”” 38.

⁶⁸ Rousset, ““Might is Right,”” 22.

⁶⁹ Kennon and Donovan, “This Terrible New Island,” 44.

⁷⁰ Rousset, “Might is Right,” 23.

⁷¹ Kennon and Donovan, “This Terrible New Island,” 61.

elephant seal behavior. Males, fattened from their post-mating feeding, may have returned to the beaches as early as December to molt, but tended to arrive later in the season (February – March), which sealing gangs expected and exploited.⁷²

Though the industry definitely revolved around the slaughtering of Southern elephant seals, whaling was still central to the operation. The extent to which Desolation whalers actually whaled varied from voyage to voyage. Charles Kennon mentions only a handful of instances when the *Laurens*' tenders returned with a whale. Compared to the extensive elephant sealing activities that took place, whaling does not seem to have been central to the activities of this specific voyage. In one journal entry, he mentions his surprise at seeing the bones of a dead whale left on the beach at Desolation, stating, there “were several Whales Carcasses the bones of which astonished me very much although I was prepared to find something large.”⁷³ As Kennon was sailing as a green hand, this confirms that *Laurens* did not take any whales on its voyage down to Desolation. This is consistent with his description of the voyage down, which does not mention taking any whales, though he does discuss sighting whales and lowering the boats from time to time in order to practice rowing. Taylor provides more extensive descriptions of bay whaling at Desolation. He states that in May of 1852, “the amount of work to be performed in Pot Harbor was dependent upon the success of the tenders whaling in the inland waters of the island.”⁷⁴ He goes on to state that bay whaling was a “contest,” stating that “for nearly four hours ten boats vied with each other for [a whale’s] capture with singular success” before one of

⁷² Rousset, “Might is Right,” 29.

⁷³ Kennon and Donovan, “This Terrible New Island,” 40.

⁷⁴ Nathaniel W. Taylor, M.D., *Life on a Whaler: or Antarctic Adventures in the Isle of Desolation* (New London, Conn: New London County Historical Society, 1929), 101.

the *Julius Caesar's* tenders closed on it.⁷⁵

What is notable, is that in both Kennon's and Taylor's accounts of whaling at Desolation, the slaughter of a whale was received with excitement, while the slaughter of elephant seals was treated as routine. He describes the crew's excitement when their first whale is received:

This morning I was aroused by loud cheering and thought I recognized the voices of some of our men, I turned round to get another doze but the sound of the anchor chain so near I thought I had better turn out, I had scarcely got on deck when a whale boat came alongside Mr Bailey jumped aboard, Capt Smith asked: have you got a fish? Yes sir (incredulously) Where have you put him? he's in the blubber room. What sort of a fish is it? A Whale Sir; A Right Whale. So? Yes Sir we caught him yesterday. Then followed an invitation for Mr Bailey to breakfast aboard the bark.⁷⁶

The crew's excitement over a whale suggests that such a kill was a novelty and perhaps more highly regarded, if only because it contributed much more oil to the voyage total than did an elephant seal. This is notable; it prevents modern observers from labeling Desolation Island whalers with the seemingly more appropriate title of "elephanters," which appears to have been their primary occupation in practice. In principle, however, their goal was simply to collect oil. As with any other whaling or sealing voyage, the emphasis at Desolation was on profit and speed; masters wanted to maximize both, and were able to by exploiting a region they knew well and where oil was cheap. Their seamless transition between self-identified whalers and sealers and vice versa demonstrates not only their flexible knowledge and competency in both trades, but their ability to use their training in each when opportunity presented itself, maximizing yield

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Life on a Whaler*, 114.

⁷⁶ Kennon and Donovan, "This Terrible New Island," 81.

and profit.

The flexibility of these individuals was not only made possible by their understanding of land-dwelling species as well as ocean-dwelling creatures; indeed, understanding prey was only a small part of a successful operation. Sailors also needed to understand geography and technology and the relationship between the two. Sometimes, changes in technology, including the vessel used, were needed as well to suit a different geography and hunting methodology. New London's use of schooners as tenders played an important role in the Desolation Island fishery; their inclusion in the operation further indicates an intimate understanding for the conditions of the Southern Indian Ocean, knowledge about the sealing trade, and necessary adaptation of pelagic exploitation to a land-based industry. In the Desolation Island fishery, a ship or a bark usually carried the mass of the labor needed to complete the operation down to Desolation and would anchor in one of its harbors upon arrival. One or two topsail schooners, which had been consistently used in the fur sealing industry, traveled with this larger vessel and served as its tenders while the vessel was anchored at Desolation or Heard. Tenders served a few different purposes. They were more maneuverable, and thus easier to navigate closer to shore and around the inlets and fjords of Desolation which allowed them to transport blubber caught from the elephant seals on shore back to the large vessel to be tried out, or rendered into oil.⁷⁷ Tenders required a smaller crew, could ferry men to a beach on the opposite side of the island to where the main ship was anchored, and could leave for a few days or weeks at a time to go cruising for whales while the ship coordinated a more sedentary operation from its anchorage.

In *Life on a Whaler*, Dr. Nathaniel Taylor, who served as doctor aboard the ship *Julius Caesar* during its 1851 – 1853 voyage to Desolation, discusses the active nature of the tenders as

⁷⁷ Busch, "Elephants and Whales," 120.

the main executors of bay whaling during the winter, and as the means for exploring and accessing relatively inaccessible parts of the island. In one episode, he discusses cruising in search of elephant seals on board the schooner *Marcia* through Tucker's Straits and up the "London River to its navigable limit."⁷⁸ The former separates the main island (La Grande Terre) from Il Foche, a smaller island located north of La Grande Terre. The benefits of the schooner tender are evident in his description of the journey: "The passage through Tucker's Straits is difficult on account of the rapidity of the tide, which, turned in one place by a group of islands, forms a deep and rapid current; and in another rushing through an opening too narrow for even our small vessel, obliges us to steer through shoal water, where the danger from sunken rocks is imminent."⁷⁹

Tenders sometimes serviced other ships anchored at Desolation belonging to a specific New London-based managing company, consolidating cost and risk for a managing firm. Perhaps most importantly, they enhanced the labor force at Desolation by providing more men to engage in the fishery and alternative working conditions for men serving on board the main vessel. Men from the ship or bark occasionally signed on with the tender (and vice versa) either permanently or temporarily during the course of a voyage, as Nathaniel Taylor did in the above-quoted anecdote, and during his second voyage to Desolation aboard the New London bark *Pioneer* in 1857. Charles Kennon describes the importance of the tenders as an additional source of labor, stating, "The crews from the schooners come aboard most days. some of them are going to ship on board the Laurens we could use twice the men we have."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Taylor, *Life on a Whaler*, 157.

⁷⁹ Taylor, *Life on a Whaler*, 155

⁸⁰ Kennon and Donovan, "This Terrible New Island," 59 – 60.

The benefits of using a tender were numerous, but the lack of one did not simply put a vessel at a disadvantage; it could prove disastrous. From 1880 – 1882, the American bark *Trinity* was wrecked at Heard Island. According to Joseph J. Fuller, John Williams, the master of *Trinity* at the time was “convinced...that he would be wrecked” because he was to occupy Heard “for the entire season without a tender.”⁸¹ Tenders seem to have been used by New London whalers very early on in the Desolation Island fishery. The parallel voyages of the Haven & Smith ship *Columbia* and schooner *Hand* from 1838-1840 suggests a coordinated effort. The same can be said for the Perkins & Smith ship *Charles Carroll* and schooner *Franklin*, which both traveled to Desolation in June 1844, and returned within a year of one another (*Charles Carroll* in July 1845, and *Franklin* in April 1846) and of the Learned & Stoddard schooner *Exile* and ship *Jason* (April 1846 – May 1848). Further research, however, is needed to confirm that each pair was working in tandem, and that these occurrences were not coincidental. If the schooners in these very early voyages were tenders, which they appear to be, then this confirms that Southeastern Connecticut’s early involvement in the Southern Indian Ocean provided New London firms with sufficient information to choose how to most appropriately execute a whaling and elephanting voyage to Desolation and to adapt their operation based on this natural knowledge.

Retention of the Desolation Island Trade in Southeastern Connecticut

As the Desolation Island trade continued it became specialized. Certainly experience was valued in all trades involving the exploitation of marine mammals. Amasa Delano, a commercial sealer at Más Afuera in the early days of the trade insisted:

⁸¹ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 172.

In voyages for seals, you must have men who understand the business, and not raw hands, who will certainly make it a losing enterprise. Out of twenty, which should be the least number for a crew, the captain and six others at least ought to be able to teach the rest of their business with skill. Such a set of men will do more and better than twice the number of those who are untaught.⁸²

This was especially true for working at Desolation, if not for the nature of the prey, than certainly for the challenging geography. Busch states, “Once begun...working in and about Desolation required great command of local navigational and weather conditions, and it was not that easy for newcomers to get started.”⁸³ This may be due in part to the fact that knowledge about Desolation was generally retained in New London; certainly other ports sent elephanters to the islands throughout the course of the 19th century – according to Stackpole, the first American whalers to arrive there were *Alliance* and *Asia* of Nantucket in 1791 – but the most intimate knowledge about the island was retained in New London because the men most intimately involved with the trade remained there.⁸⁴ Of the fifty-three masters Donovan identifies as involved in the Desolation Island trade between 1838 and 1910, at least twenty-six returned to command trips to the island, and half of these returned more than once.⁸⁵ Many more, as

⁸² Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres...*, (Boston: E.G. House, 1817): 255, quoted in Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 12-13.

⁸³ “Elephants and Whales,” 119.

⁸⁴ *The Sea-Hunters*, 194.

⁸⁵ Donovan, “Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*,” ““This Terrible New Island,”” 175 – 176.

demonstrated, were crew aboard a Desolation Island vessel either before or after they commanded a voyage to the island.

Promotion was central to the operation; boys and men who participated in the trade at a young age were valued for their skill and sought out to return. A notable example is that of Joseph Fuller, who was shipwrecked on Desolation while captain of the schooner *Pilot's Bride*. Fuller had entered the Desolation Island trade at the age of 17 on board the Williams, Haven, & Co. schooner *Franklin*. Upon his return from the voyage in June of 1862, he enlisted at the Charlestown Navy Yard to fight in the Civil War, serving as a sailor on board the guardship North Carolina. The Hartford Daily Courant, in a nostalgia piece on Fuller recounts the story of his return from war:

He had been home but two days when he decided he wanted to go whaling again and so he started for New London from Danvers by train. When he reached Allyn's Point near Gales Ferry, he met Richard Chappell, a member of the Williams Company and Chappell hailed him, saying: 'You're just the boy I'm looking for.' Captain Fuller replied: I'm glad to see you, but you're not going to 'get' me."⁸⁶

Fuller, however, consented to sail for Chappell as a boatsteerer on board the schooner *Roswell King* in 1864. Fuller returned to Desolation five more times as master of the *Roswell King*, and an additional five times as masters of the schooners *Pilot's Bride* and *Francis Allyn*.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ "Last of New London's Daring Whalers Describes Adventurous Search for Seals on Desolation," *Hartford Daily Courant* (Hartford, CT), August 22, 1920. ProQuest.

⁸⁷ Donovan, "Desolation Island Sealers New London as Recorded in Decker *Whaling Captains of New London*," "This Terrible New Island," 175 – 176.

Retaining crewmembers for sealing and whaling was not easy; Briton Cooper Busch remarks on the high turnover of men in the American seal fishery due to low pay and “dismal” work.⁸⁸ Quoting Hohman, refers to the work as, ““at its best, hard, and at its worst represented perhaps the lowest condition to which free American labor has ever fallen.””⁸⁹ However, as evidenced by the Desolation Island seal fishery, sealers and whalers did stay involved in the business – at least at the officer level and especially when engaged in the trade from a young age. Reasons for this are not clear; the most likely is that for officers, the trade provided steady work with generally decent returns for officers.⁹⁰ The trade was profitable, and New London’s monopoly on work there during the 19th century provided job security for men who had the specialized skills needed to execute these voyages.

Additionally, New London’s whaling firms were managed by some of the most influential individuals in the area, backed by considerable social and economic capital. In 1833, Joseph Lawrence of Lawrence & Co. became a founder of the Whaling Bank, later the National Whaling Bank, in New London. In 1863, his son, Sebastian, also involved in his father’s firm, was elected President of the Bank and served in this capacity until 1909.⁹¹ Henry P. Haven, partial owner of Williams & Haven, served as President of the Board of Education in New London for several years, founded the New London County Historical Society, served as mayor

⁸⁸ Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 177.

⁸⁹ Elmo Paul Hohman, *The American Whaleman: A Study of Life and Labor in the Whaling Industry* (New York: Longman, Green, 1928): 13, quoted in Busch, *The War Against the Seals*, 177.

⁹⁰ Records of Lawrence & Co., 1822 – 1904, (*Coll. 25*), G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic, CT.

⁹¹ “Records of Lawrence & Co. (*Coll. 25*),” Mystic Seaport Museum, accessed August 28, 2011, <http://library.mysticseaport.org/manuscripts/coll/coll025.cfm>.

of the city of New London, and ran as the Republican candidate for Connecticut Governor.⁹² Maintaining ties with these men, especially for masters, who enjoyed a large cut in the profits of a whaling voyage and, more importantly, men looking to become masters – would have been beneficial. Though further research is required on this subject, it is likely for these reasons – guaranteed work, generally good pay, and opportunity for advancement – that New London retained its Desolation Island whalers, its knowledge of the industry, and thus, its hold on the trade.

Empowerment and Understanding

Southeastern Connecticut's involvement with the Desolation Island trade from 1838 - 1910 demonstrates how specialized natural knowledge empowered workers during the nineteenth century in surprising ways. Both pelagic and land-based exploitation of marine mammals during the nineteenth century required an intimate understanding of worldwide geography and sailing conditions and of the biology and habits of multiple species of marine mammals. The region's early and unique connection to the southern seas through exploration and exploitation provided a wealth of knowledge to its sailors and investors that provided them with options for work and investment. These options, of course, changed as both industries progressed, and declined. But, even as the value of whale and seal oil began to decline, the region maintained an economic home at Desolation, where flexible workers continued to reap profit until the trade was deemed unnecessary due to the rise of petroleum as a fuel and lubricant.

The story also provides unique insight into our relationship with our environment; though the Desolation Island fishery was inspired by Southeastern Connecticut's early collection of

⁹² Duane Hamilton Hurd, *History of New London County, Connecticut: With biographical sketches of many of its pioneers and prominent men* (Philadelphia: J.W. Lewis & Co., 1882), 228-231.

natural knowledge – these men were naturalists in their own right – it was also necessitated by its exploitation of marine mammals elsewhere. Hunters turned to the population of fur and elephant seals at Desolation because it was no longer as profitable to hunt whales in the Atlantic or Pacific. Nineteenth century whalers and sealers understood their environments more intimately than nearly all others at the time because they needed to in order to do their jobs; certainly they noticed reduced returns as exploitation continued and understood that their work, which relied on destruction of their resource, was not likely to be self-sustaining. The populations at Desolation were never hunted to exhaustion, but certainly took a serious toll as the trade progressed. To modern sensibilities, the nineteenth-century whaler's continued exploitation of his environment, despite understanding it intimately, seems paradoxical.

And yet, the trade continued because whalers and sealers *did* understand their environment. Their natural knowledge was self-obtained and its purpose, utilitarian. But the gains exceeded pure cash; exercising their knowledge allowed nineteenth century pelagic hunters to reap societal and social benefits. The fur and whale oil trades provided the first income for a developing new nation, and the first opportunity for these men to make their livelihood and become comfortable, respected members of their communities as masters, farmers, or perhaps merchants. And knowledge, especially as it pertained to multiple fields of marine mammal exploitation, was capital; it empowered these workers by providing them with options for employment, security, and a way to adapt to changing trends. Modern sensibilities, cultured by the institutionalized field of environmental science and innovation that has allowed us to reduce our exploitation of animate creatures may be unable to comprehend the pairing of environmental understanding through natural knowledge with unmitigated slaughter. Yet it seems that it is

because of the latter, driven by markets and a human need to profit, advance, adapt, and survive, that we collected and retained any understanding at all.

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