

A PENNSYLVANIAN IN THE WILMINGTON WHALING TRADE, 1841-1844

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IN THE RICH and varied maritime history of the Delaware, there has been no enterprise more colorful—and in hindsight more anomalous—than the Wilmington Whaling Company. The farfetched notion that a profitable whale fishery could be created on the Delaware River fired the imaginations of hard-nosed Philadelphia and Wilmington bankers, and an impressive though short-lived whaling trade resulted in the 1830s and 1840s. The Wilmington Whaling Company, while ultimately a failure, is an interesting indicator of the chances capitalists were willing to take during America's first age of expansion. The company's most enduring legacy, however, is the record of her whalers, which illuminates an all but forgotten episode of local history. Wilmington whaleships attracted many game young men from Delaware and Pennsylvania, eager for a taste of the excitement that whaling promised. One of these, a Pennsylvania farm boy named John Martin, left an account of his experiences which ranks with the best in whaling annals.

The Wilmington Whaling Company, with its attraction for both the rich and poor of the Delaware Valley, was the product of two general American trends in the early nineteenth century: the boom in speculative investment and a similar growth of the whaling industry. By the 1830s America's seaboard commercial centers were seized by the fervor of economic growth, and capitalists from Maine to Delaware began to dabble in corporate whaling ventures.

The pattern for these neophyte stock companies was simple but new to whaling. Capitalists invested in a secondhand vessel and hired a veteran whaling captain, and in a few years profits

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began to roll in. The whaling craze of the 1830s spread to seemingly unsuitable places such as Newark, New Jersey, and Hudson, Poughkeepsie, and Newburgh, New York. The Hudson River ports did especially well, and the luck of these enterprises attracted attention in Wilmington.¹

Wilmington, meanwhile, was at best a minor river port, exporting flour and manufactured goods in her own small fleet.² In maritime trade, the town had been almost totally eclipsed by Philadelphia. Local entrepreneurs, self-conscious about Wilmington's minor role in the economic growth of the day, and cognizant of the town's need for a special branch of commerce she could call her own, hit upon whaling.³

In October, 1833, several dozen prominent Wilmington bankers and businessmen met and resolved to charter a whaling stock company with a capital of \$30,000.⁴ The inspiration for this hasty act came from the impressive growth of the Hudson River companies. Wilmington, they thought, could just as easily cash in on what seemed a sure thing.⁵ By November the capital stock had been increased to \$100,000 with each share valued at \$100.⁶ By May, 1834, a 328-ton ship, *Ceres*, had been purchased, outfitted, and sent to sea.⁷

Although initial expenses ran very high, the hopes of the Wilmington Whaling Company were boundless. Eager to fit out more whalers, the firm successfully petitioned the Delaware legislature for permission to incorporate and sell new stock to a value of \$300,000.⁸ Incorporation marked the involvement of Philadel-

¹ *Delaware Gazette*, Wilmington, October 11, 1833.

² Sara Guertler Farris, "Wilmington's Maritime Commerce, 1775-1807," *Delaware History*, XIV (April, 1970), 232.

³ An account of the formation of the Wilmington Whaling Company can be found in Bruce Sinclair, "Treasures from the Vasty Deep: The Wilmington Whaling Company 1833-1846," *Delaware History*, XII (October, 1966), 6-24.

⁴ *Delaware Gazette*, Wilmington, October 22, 1833.

⁵ *Ibid.*, October 11, 1833.

⁶ Minutes of a meeting of the stockholders of the Wilmington Whaling Company, Wilmington, November 4, 1833, Wilmington Whaling Company Collection, Historical Society of Delaware, Old Town Hall, Wilmington (HSD).

⁷ *Delaware Gazette*, Wilmington, May 6, 1834; Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery from Its Earliest Inception to the Year 1876* (1878; reprint, New York, 1964), 314-315.

⁸ "An Act to Incorporate the Wilmington Whaling Company, Dover, January 23, 1835," *Laws of the State of Delaware* (Dover, Del., 1841), VIII, 348-350.

phia interests in the firm. Of the 2,660 new shares of stock, 2,000 were to be sold in Philadelphia.⁹ Commissioners for these stock sales included John B. Trevor, Thomas Biddle, Matthew Newkirk and Merrit Canby, all active Philadelphia bankers.¹⁰ The stock was sold at Bessonet's Coffee House Hotel, 86 South Second Street, Philadelphia, and was completely subscribed.¹¹ Since the stock sold at \$100 a share, the Philadelphia subscribers, like their Wilmington counterparts, were affluent. One Philadelphia banker, for example, is known to have held fifty shares.¹² The company was managed by seven (later twelve) directors elected by the stockholders every three years.¹³ Since Philadelphians owned most of the stock, they obviously could have gained control of the company's directorship as well; yet they did not apparently do so. Although a Philadelphian or two sat on the board, Wilmington directors remained in the majority and controlled the affairs of the firm.¹⁴ Both in Philadelphia and Wilmington, the major stockholders were individuals, not banks.¹⁵

For awhile it appeared that Wilmington had indeed succeeded in finding her own profitable enterprise. The company's relationship with Philadelphia seemed ideal: that city served as an outlet for whale oil and bone and yet in no way competed with the Wilmington ships.¹⁶ Philadelphia, on the other hand, respected Wilmington's fortitude, for she had made two abortive attempts at whaling herself.¹⁷ Rather than beginning their own industry, a number of Philadelphians were simply interested in cutting themselves in on the whale fishery. Others seemed completely indifferent to the venture. When in 1837 the ship *Lucy Ann* tied up at the Christina wharf, marking the first return of a Wilmington

⁹ *Delaware State Journal*, Wilmington, May 13, 1835.

¹⁰ *U. S. Gazette*, Philadelphia, May 9, 1835.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Allan Thomson to William D. Lewis, Wilmington, September 5, 1836, Wilmington Whaling Company Collection, HSD.

¹³ "An Act to Incorporate the Wilmington Whaling Company."

¹⁴ *Delaware State Journal*, Wilmington, November 22, 1841.

¹⁵ Minutes of a meeting of the stockholders of the Wilmington Whaling Company, HSD; Ledger, *passim*, Wilmington Whaling Company, 1835-1846, Farmers Bank of the State of Delaware, Wilmington (FBSD).

¹⁶ A large share of Wilmington's whaling products were sold to the Thomas W. Morgan Company of Philadelphia (Ledger, *passim*, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD. See especially the loose accounting sheets filed within.)

¹⁷ Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 228-229, 254-255.

whaler, the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* wondered: "When will Philadelphians wake up about this whale fishery?"¹⁸

Things seemed better than they were, however, in 1837. The early luck of the Wilmington Whaling Company had been poor, and even when fortunes improved, there was no sign of a dividend. On the contrary, the firm's directors called in stock installments whenever capital ran short in order to finance continuing company expansion. Despite the jitters of the panic of 1837 and the instability of whale oil prices, the company enlarged its fleet to five vessels by 1839. Although solvent, the Wilmington Whaling Company's assets were almost entirely tied up in expansion.¹⁹ Meanwhile, luck on the whaling grounds improved. But the patience of stockholders began to wear thin with the onset of hard times.²⁰ To combat this waning enthusiasm, the firm paid stockholders a seven percent dividend in 1840—dangerously overextending itself. The outlay for the dividend was covered when the company called in two more installments from the stockholders.²¹ What the firm needed was a run of very good whaling luck to restore the confidence of hard-pressed Philadelphia and Wilmington capitalists. Unfortunately, just the opposite occurred, for one vessel, the *North America*, was lost in 1840 off western Australia. The need to refit three other ships the next year made it clear that, in the short run at least, Wilmington whaling could not profitably compete with major Yankee whaling ports.

In 1841 the effects of the nationwide depression, felt especially in Philadelphia, torpedoed the company altogether. Investors had paid into the firm less than half the value of their stock. But some began to forfeit their shares.²² With the closing of the Philadelphia and Wilmington banks in 1841, the fortunes that local bankers had tied up in the firm began to look more attractive than whatever distant dividends whaling might yield. Consequently, in early 1842 the stockholders successfully petitioned the company directors for a general meeting to dis-

¹⁸ *Public Ledger*, Philadelphia, May 1, 1837.

¹⁹ Printed circular of the board of directors of the Wilmington Whaling Company, Wilmington, March, 1840, Wilmington Whaling Company Collection, HSD.

²⁰ *Delaware State Journal*, Wilmington, February 12, 1839.

²¹ *Ledger*, 402, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

cuss abandoning the enterprise.²³ The motion carried. At the time only one vessel was in port, the bark *Superior*, and she was put up for sale.²⁴ When New Bedford interests bought her, the sale price was divided among the stockholders as a refund.²⁵ After the ships *Jefferson*, *Lucy Ann*, and *Ceres* completed their voyages, they and their cargoes were also sold, and the money refunded. Since the *Ceres* did not return until March, 1845, these sales took quite awhile.²⁶ The company's wharf and real estate were sold in February, 1846, at bargain rates.²⁷ Counting the dividend of 1840, stockholders recovered more than eighty percent of their invested capital.

It is important to note that the Wilmington Whaling Company's demise was brought on by circumstances of economic depression and by the restlessness of her stockholders, most of whom were Philadelphia businessmen. To be sure, the company's luck at whaling was not particularly good, but the very presence of the company rejuvenated the languishing waterfront trade on the *Christina*.²⁸ The firm did manage to survive some very hard times on less than half of its chartered capital. How long it could have continued to do so is questionable; depression and high operating expenses put most of the new would-be whaling ports out of business by the early 1840s.²⁹ Ironically, the whale fishery on the Delaware River failed just at the time when American whaling in general increased phenomenally.

There is another irony. The Wilmington Whaling Company began in a spirit of local independence as a challenge to Philadelphia. In a short while, however, Philadelphia's money was the mainstay of the firm, and the enterprise became mortgaged to up-river capitalists. Ultimately, the 1839 depression's severe effects on Philadelphia sealed the company's fate. That city was heavily committed to investment in industry, and these commitments reinforced pressures in the money market. Wilmington's whale fishery was squeezed two ways: by the depression, and by

²³ *Delaware Gazette*, Wilmington, February 25, 1842.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1842.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 3, 1842.

²⁶ *Public Ledger*, Philadelphia, March 25, 1845.

²⁷ Day Book, 1841-1847, 130, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD; Ledger, 501, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

²⁸ Theophilus K. Jones, *Recollections of Wilmington* (no. 52 in the published papers of the Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington, 1909), 3-8.

²⁹ Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 342, 352, 385, and *passim*.

the possibility of more profitable investment in other enterprises.

Pennsylvania's love-hate relationship with Wilmington whaling had another, less prosaic side. The lure of the whaleships on the Delaware exerted a pull that drew not just Delawareans, but young men from other states as well. This circumstance produced one of the best known records of a whaling voyage, the journals of John F. Martin. Martin was born in Pennsylvania, perhaps in the town of Bullskin, Fayette County, in 1819, 1820, or 1822.³⁰ He appears to have grown up on a farm, the son of a veteran of the War of 1812.³¹ Young Martin made three whaling voyages out of Wilmington, shipping first as a green hand on the bark *Superior*, which sailed to the Pacific between 1836 and 1839.³² This voyage was fairly successful, and Martin's "lay," or share, was \$220.50.³³ He next signed on the ship *Jefferson*, which made a lucrative Pacific voyage from 1839 to 1841. The good catch and Martin's experience netted him \$419.84.³⁴ His third and last voyage, of which he left a remarkable record, was on the ship *Lucy Ann*, which circumnavigated the earth between 1841 and 1844.³⁵ On this voyage Martin rose to the rank of boat steerer (harpooneer), although, as luck would have it, his efforts had little effect on the company's economic position. Like similar cruises of the vessels *Ceres* and *Jefferson*, most of this voyage was carried out after the Wilmington Whaling Company had decided to liquidate, and the outcome of several seasons on the whaling grounds would have no bearing on the firm's operation.

It was not unusual for an inquisitive, intelligent mariner to keep a diary of his experiences at sea. It was unusual, though, for a man to keep two simultaneous, contrasting accounts; yet this is what young Martin did. One of Martin's journals is a terse and selective compendium of weather data and navigational reckon-

³⁰ Henry G. Martin, *Notices Genealogical and Historical of the Martin Family of New England* (Boston, 1880), 270; *Great Register of Klamath County* (published variously at Orleans, California, 1869, 1873, and at Eureka, California, 1876).

³¹ Franklin Ellis, *History of Fayette County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1882), 486-487, 491.

³² Ledger, 94, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD; Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 332-333.

³³ Ledger, 94, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 316.

³⁵ John F. Martin, "Journal of a Voyage on the Whale Ship *Lucy Ann* of Wilmington, Del.," manuscript journal, 1841-1844, Manuscript Division, Chicago Historical Society Library (CHS).

ings, fleshed out with brief entries describing the chasing and killing of whales. This spare volume, which is in the manner of a record book, is now at the Historical Society of Delaware.³⁶ Its text resembles the impersonal accounting of an official logbook, but it has much pictorial interest, for Martin took pains to illustrate dozens of the *Lucy Ann's* whaling encounters with meticulous water colors. The document is enhanced by an illuminated frontispiece, drawings of the sperm and right whale, and an exciting whaling scene. Upon his return to Wilmington in 1844, Martin gave this journal to a former shipmate, William McGahey of Philadelphia, who had sailed with him on the *Jefferson*.³⁷ Martin remained a mariner, making occasional stops at McGahey's home. McGahey apparently cherished his friend's gift. He gave the Martin journal to his own son, James, of Darby, Pennsylvania, and that gentleman presented it to the Historical Society of Delaware in 1902, more than twenty years after Martin's death.³⁸ James McGahey remembered John Martin as a man of many talents, "something more than an ordinary man, although in appearance he was a typical Yankee sailor of the period."³⁹

Martin's second, longer "Journal of a Voyage in the Whale Ship *Lucy Ann*," kept in diary form, is now in the manuscript division of the Chicago Historical Society library, where it was acquired as part of a collection during the 1920s. The Chicago journal is more than an interesting whaleman's account; it is an important piece of Americana. Aboard the *Lucy Ann*, Martin lavished great care on his diary, producing a spectacular private record. Like many seamen before the mast, Martin's knowledge of punctuation and grammar was slight, but his powers of observation and his mastery of storytelling more than overcame such formal deficiencies. The writer was clearly a hale, fine-spirited man with a knack for showing the lighter side of even the grimmest situations. Moreover, he sensed an excitement about whaling that is surprisingly lacking in many whaling journals.

There is no doubt that Martin carefully selected and narrated incidents that would entertain the landlubbers at home; his

³⁶ John F. Martin, "Journal of a Voyage in the Whale Ship *Lucy Ann* of Wilmington, Del.," manuscript journal, 1841-1844, HSD.

³⁷ James McGahey to the Historical Society of Delaware, Darby, Pa., November 21, 1902, Wilmington Whaling Company Collection, HSD.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

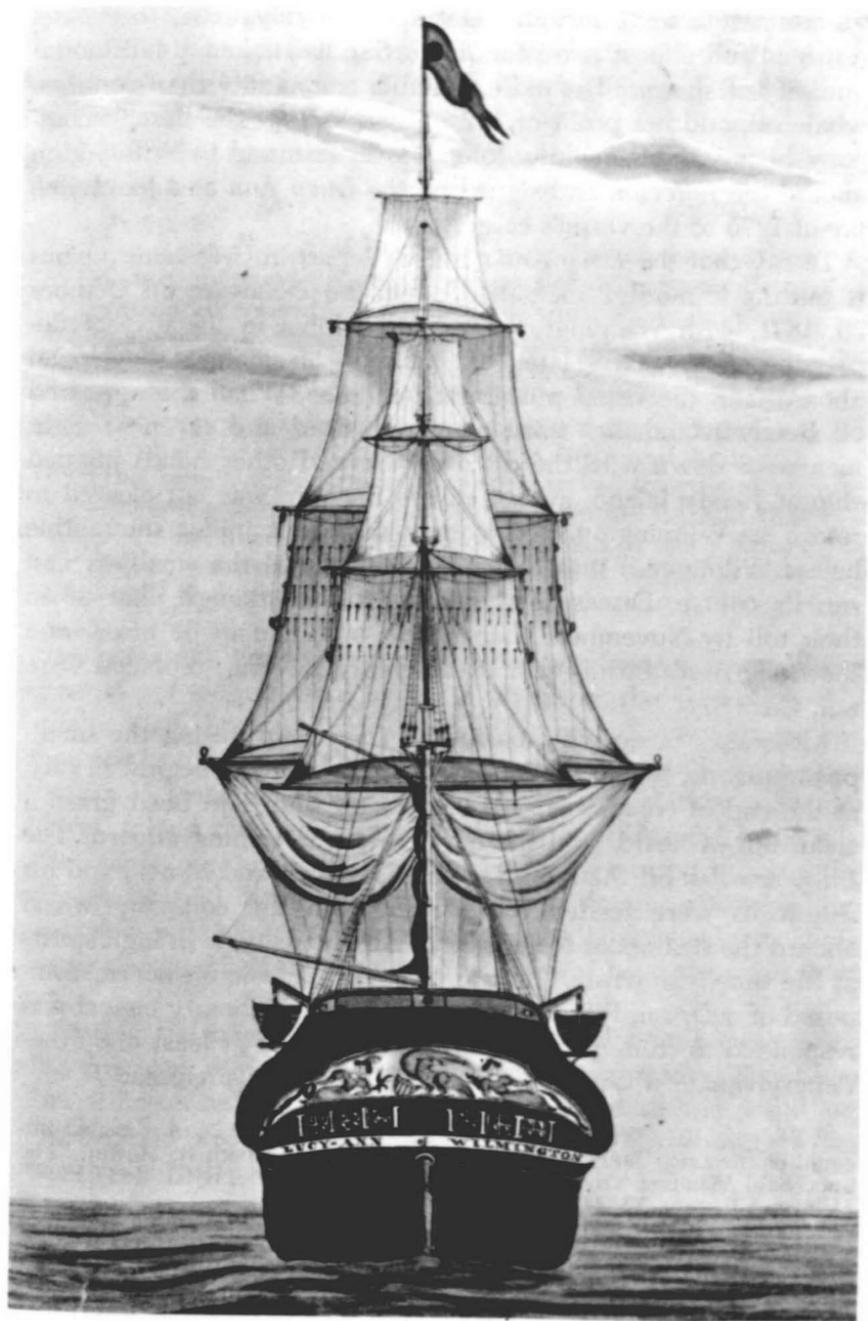
journal is not by any means casually or spontaneously written. Unlike many journalists, he avoided dwelling only on the commonplace miseries of a whaling voyage: boredom, overwork, and woefully poor food. Even when he did grouse, it was usually with a sense of good humor. His narrative is further enhanced by his innate curiosity, which inspired him to render perceptive descriptions of remote places, flora, and fauna. And, like his shorter journal, his diary is visually beautiful. It contains over two dozen amateurish but virile and handsome water-color illustrations: whaling scenes, island views, sketches of whales and fish, ship paintings, and detailed renderings of the tools of the whaleman's trade. So complete is the diary in its coverage of a whaling voyage that a reader, altogether unschooled in whaling, can read it with great ease and enjoyment. The painstaking concentration that went into these two volumes doubtless saw Martin through some very dark and boring days aboard the *Lucy Ann*.

Martin was reticent about setting down his personal exploits and feelings. He carefully directed the reader's attention away from himself and to other crew members, whose characters are more fully developed than his own. His understatement about himself is made more intriguing by tales of his horrendous narrow escapes, and one is forced to read between the carefully scripted lines to deduce that the author was a resourceful and competent whaleman. When one considers that Martin was between nineteen and twenty-two when he began his record, his account is all the more remarkable.

Martin's ship, the *Lucy Ann*, made three successful right whaling voyages for Wilmington. The ship was a typical whaler, a former merchant ship measuring about 111 feet in length and 26 feet in the beam.⁴⁰ Her tonnage was 309, about average for a whaler of the day, and she was a slow but sturdy work horse, well-suited for Wilmington service. In 1837, after nineteen months at sea, she returned from the Indian Ocean with a fair cargo.⁴¹ Her second voyage from 1837 to 1839 was more successful, but because of company obligations, its profits, like those of

⁴⁰ Register, Ship *Lucy Ann*, Wilmington, October 2, 1841, record group 41, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D. C.

⁴¹ *Delaware State Journal*, Wilmington, May 2, 5, 1837.



The Wilmington Whaleship *Lucy Ann*, a watercolor by John F. Martin.
Courtesy Chicago Historical Society Library.

the first, were insignificant.⁴² Out again in July, 1839, the vessel returned full almost two years later. She had taken a substantial quantity of sperm oil, a more valuable commodity than common whale oil, and her profit of \$12,809 was one of the best in company history.⁴³ Meanwhile, John Martin returned to Wilmington aboard the *Jefferson* and signed on the *Lucy Ann* at a handsome lay of 1/75 of the vessel's cargo.⁴⁴

To say that the *Lucy Ann's* fourth departure was inauspicious is putting it mildly. She sailed down the Delaware on October 25, 1841, with Wilmington and Philadelphia in the grip of depression. A few days later, a contagion of smallpox developed aboard, and the vessel put about for home. When she appeared off Reedy Island, her third mate was dead and seven or eight men were down with the disease.⁴⁵ Several other hands jumped ship at Reedy Island, and of course the ship was not cleared to return to Wilmington.⁴⁶ The crew was kept under quarantine below Wilmington in a makeshift clinic until the smallpox had run its course. Disease and demoralization, though, had taken their toll by November. Sixteen new men had to be hired, and the *Lucy Ann's* former first mate, Henry L. King, replaced Captain Cox.⁴⁷

Although Martin was aboard the *Lucy Ann* during the smallpox epidemic, his diary made no mention of it. It begins, in fact, at the end of November, 1841, when the ship had been given a clean bill of health and the new crew was coming aboard. The *Lucy Ann* lay off the mouth of the Christina, and Martin and his shipmates were ferried out to her from the company wharf aboard the steamboat *New Jersey*. "All Hands were in high spirits at the time," he wrote, "having a band of Music on board, composed of a Drum, Fife & Bugle, & giving three hearty cheers was responded to from on shore. . . ."⁴⁸ There was at least one other Pennsylvanian aboard, a George Miller of Philadelphia.⁴⁹

⁴² Ledger, 101, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD. A detailed account of the *Lucy Ann's* second cruise appears in Kenneth R. Martin, "The Successful Whaling Voyage of the *Lucy Ann* of Wilmington, 1837-1839," *Delaware History*, XV (October, 1972), 85-103.

⁴³ Ledger, 101, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

⁴⁴ Day book, 96, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

⁴⁵ *Delaware Gazette*, Wilmington, October 29, 1841.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Ledger, 433, 435-441, 443, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

⁴⁸ John Martin, manuscript journal, about November 28, 1841, CHS.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, April 18, 1844.

It was several days before gear was stowed and fair weather permitted the vessel's departure. On November 30 the *Lucy Ann* made her way into the Atlantic. She was bound first for the Azores and Cape Verdes for provisions, and her Atlantic crossing followed a routine that had become standardized aboard whalers:

The greatest part of the crew never having been to sea before, there was a great deal of sickness among them, nothing of consequence transpired until a few days after when in the evening at 8 bells the Captain called all hands on deck for the purpose of picking out the boats crews. I was chosen to pull the bow oar in the bow boat, which was composed of Boat Steerer, Harpooner, a young Jerseyman, a big nigger, a little one, & myself, after which the Captain made his introductory speech, which was quite brief, but to the purpose. he said that if we behaved ourselves & obeyed his & his Officers orders, we would be treated well, but if we did not we would find a customer. . . .⁵⁰

The *Lucy Ann* carried four thirty-foot whaleboats, each with a crew of six, which were lowered whenever the ship sighted a whale. Each boat was commanded by an officer, who steered the craft to the whale. The harpooneer, or boatsteerer, harpooned the whale from the bow and then exchanged stations with the officer, taking the steering oar while the boat closed for the kill. The officer customarily killed the whale by lancing it, once the whaleboat had hauled in its line and drawn alongside the wounded animal. John Martin's boat, the bow boat, was slung forward on the *Lucy Ann's* port side and was headed by the third mate.

During the transatlantic passage the green hands were introduced to the difficulties of manning the whaleboats. The *Lucy Ann* crew turned out to be an unusually prankish and jovial lot; this became obvious during the early days of the voyage, when there were still good reasons for merriment:

Wednesday, December 29th. . . . In the evening sky larking. A young fellow nic named Jersey was made fast to a piece of rope to the Old Sow while asleep in his watch

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, entry for November 28 but probably December 4, 1841.

on deck. There was a trial of skill between them who should out pull the other. Jersey, being the oldest and strongest, used the Old Sow up.⁵¹

Sunday, January 2nd. . . . in the evening there was some yarns spun, the Navigator told us he heard a woman in N. Jersey pray at the distance of 5 miles & always after her making a prayer there came up a thundering gust of wind & rain & he could prove it that very minute by his neighbours in Jersey who had heard her, which was a stumper & of course we believed it.—Another yarn was spun by a boat steerer, who swore while after striking a Sperm Whale off the coast of New Holland, the fish opened his jaws & took boat & crew into his belly. the boat steerer nothing frightened rigged his steering oar out of the whales A—se & sculled him on shore. . . .

Monday, January 3rd. Light winds & nothing to do, at night had a grand musical soiree on the forward deck with Bugle, Fife, Drum Violin, &c: the sounds were truly heart rending & would have astonished the natives [of the Azores] had there been any of them near to have heard it—⁵²

A few days later the captain made a surprise visit to the fore-castle and caught most of the men playing cards. Ordered to throw the cards overboard, the men thought better of it and instead hid the cards in their sea chests, “thinking they would be kept better from salt water damp.”⁵³

All hands received liberty in the Cape Verdes while the vessel took on stores and recruited a few men. By late January the *Lucy Ann's* course followed the Equatorial current, steering west-south-west for Brazil,⁵⁴ to touch at Grande Island in February for wood and water.⁵⁵ Approaching the equator, Martin performed an experiment:

Before leaving Philadelphia Mr. Ingham president of the summit Coal Company wished me when at sea to try an experiment with water running through a funnel. North of the line it turns with the sun. but he has an idea that

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, December 29, 1841.

⁵² *Ibid.*, January 2, 3, 1842.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, January 13, 1842.

⁵⁴ M. F. Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (sixth edition, London, 1864), plate VI.

⁵⁵ John Martin, manuscript journal, ca. March 1, 1842, HSD.

it turns against the sun south of the line. here it still turns with the sun.⁵⁶

Leaving Brazil, the vessel steered across the south Atlantic whaling grounds for the Cape of Good Hope. Additional provisions had turned the *Lucy Ann* into a floating zoo, although there was some consolation in not having to eat salt meat:

To day, we killed the black boar the greatest pest on board of the ship he was the most knowing hog I was ever acquainted with if any of us should fall asleep on deck with a biscuit in his pocket—he was sure to get it out. . . . There was not a tear shed at his death but you could see a smile on many a countenance at having sea pie for dinner Hogs are a great nuisance at sea & I would sooner go without a fresh mess for several months together than to be troubled with their filth we have now 12 pigs, 5 Turkeys, Dog, cat & 4 Pigeons, enough to make manure for a small farm—⁵⁷

Fresh rations ran short soon enough. In April, when the ship was off the Cape of Good Hope and still empty of oil, food was becoming a real problem. But Martin found humor in the situation. "Great complaints in the Forecastle to day" he wrote. "The Captain a few days ago sent us a large cheese (*it warn't strong nohow.*) we being used to dainties went into it rapid, nearly all hands were obliged to take Salts to get their insides to work."⁵⁸ Ten days later food was the main topic of fore-castle conversation:

Getting tired of salt provision. Chub began to argue seriously upon the matter said he I can go along the streets of Wilmington & see good pieces of roast beef lying in the streets & the dogs feasting on it. if I was there just now, I would drop in for snacks. only think, said he, of a good piece of Roast beef, with beautiful brown potatoes under it. oh it grieves me sore and he rolled over & went to sleep.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; and John Martin, manuscript journal, January 21, 1842, CHS. Samuel D. Ingham was a noted manufacturer and a developer of the anthracite industry who also served as a U. S. Congressman and secretary of the treasury under Andrew Jackson (*Dictionary of American Biography* [New York, 1923], 473-474).

⁵⁷ John Martin, manuscript journal, January 21, 1842, CHS.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, April 6, 1842.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, April 16, 1842.

Day to day boredom would have been enough to make food a major preoccupation aboard whalers, but such vessels were also notorious for neglecting proper diet.⁶⁰ Even so, Martin's careful accounting of the quality of food served aboard the *Lucy Ann* indicates that he and his shipmates ate better than most whalemen.

As the days wore on, the early congeniality wore thin, and familiarity began to breed contempt. On April 21 a fight erupted, and on the following day the two major offenders were bound. After an interrogation by Captain King, the man judged to have started the fracas received eight lashes.⁶¹

Some of this shipboard tension was undoubtedly due to the *Lucy Ann's* failure to sight whales. While in the Atlantic, the closest the crew had come to the real thing was the taking of a few small "blackfish" (pilot whales), whose blubber yielded a small amount of oil when boiled in the ship's brick tryworks. The ship cruised eastward in the Indian Ocean towards Australia, and on May 20, 1842, her luck changed. The boats lowered for a sperm whale, and Martin's boat got fast.⁶² After an exhilarating "Nantucket sleighride," the whale tired. It was Martin's job as bow oarsman to work the boat alongside the creature for the fatal lancing. It took many thrusts of the lance to kill this whale, and by the time he had turned "fin out," the ship had disappeared in a fog bank. Hours later the cries of the lost boat were heard aboard the *Lucy Ann*, and the exhausted hands taken aboard. The whole episode of chasing, killing, and returning to the ship had taken fourteen hours.⁶³

Whaling in the Indian Ocean was generally poor and the cruise to Australia uneventful, except for the bizarre skylarking of the crew. One man's idea of a clever prank was to drop gunpowder down the galley stovepipe as the cook was lighting a

⁶⁰ Elmo P. Hohman, *The American Whaleman* (1828; reprint, New York, 1970), 132-134.

⁶¹ John Martin, manuscript journal, April 22, 1842, CHS.

⁶² The sperm, largest of the toothed whales, was hunted for its high-grade oil and for spermaceti, a waxy substance found in its huge head, an ingredient for the finest candles (Charles M. Scammon, *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America* [1874; reprint, New York, 1968], 75). Sperm whales were the primary quarry of the *Lucy Ann* because of the greater value of sperm oil (Printed circular of the board of directors of the Wilmington Whaling Company, HSD).

⁶³ John Martin, manuscript journal, May 20, 1842, CHS.

fire. This act was apparently in retaliation for the quality of food aboard the *Lucy Ann*:

They play all sorts of tricks on the old cook on account of his meanness. . . . he is not an extraordinary clean cook. a few weeks ago when the Duff was sent down for dinner⁶⁴ I cut into it with my knife and something stopped its progress. I took it at first to be a plumb, but on examination found it to be an old soldier.⁶⁵ the duff went overboard instanter and [the cook] got off with a good cursing from all hands for his nastiness.

Awful dull times. Nothing to do, nothing to eat but old horse⁶⁶ and that stinking but tomorrow is the fourth of July.⁶⁷

Sure enough, the next day the men were served a fine pork pie.⁶⁸ While in the Indian Ocean, the *Lucy Ann* spotted an occasional American whaler and exchanged news, gifts, and advice. One of these was the New Bedford ship *Florida*, a vessel with an abundance of oil and bedbugs. To remedy the latter situation, the *Lucy Ann's* hands gave the *Florida* some of their forecandle roaches.⁶⁹

At the end of July the *Lucy Ann* made King George's Sound, on Australia's southwestern tip. Taking on needed provisions, she headed east again for Hobart, Tasmania. Whales were plentiful on the way. A few were taken without mishap. A few were not:

Monday, October 17th Fresh breezes from the S & W about 8 A.M. lowered after two right whales.⁷⁰ the bow

⁶⁴ Duff was a mainstay of the whale man's diet, a concoction of flour, grease, and equal parts fresh and salt water, boiled in a bag of sailcloth (Ben-Ezra Stiles Ely, *There She Blows, A Narrative of a Whaling Voyage in the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans* [1849; reprint, Middletown, Conn., 1971], 9).

⁶⁵ An old soldier is a used up quid of tobacco.

⁶⁶ Old horse was the whaleman's term for salt pork.

⁶⁷ John Martin, manuscript journal, July 3, 1842, CHS.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, July 4, 1842.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, May 27, 1842. Roaches were tolerated in the forecandle because they were voracious bedbug eaters. For an interesting discussion of the symbiotic relationship of whalemen and roaches see William M. Davis, *Nimrod of the Sea, or The American Whaleman* (1874; reprint, Boston, 1926), 326-327.

⁷⁰ The right whale, a slower and less dangerous creature than the sperm, yielded large quantities of low grade illuminating oil. The animal's upper jaws, moreover, yielded strips of flexible whalebone (baleen), which had a number of specialized applications for manufactures in the nineteenth century (Scammon, *Marine Mammals*, 55, 66).

boat got on to them first fastened. as soon as he felt the Iron he started to run. all the old whalers on board say they never saw a whale act like him before. he went at the rate of 60 (sic) miles an hour & there being a heavy sea on we expected every moment to be knocked to pieces. the boat in making her way through the water, hove it up on each side far above our heads. we could see nothing but a sheet of water all around us. buckets, hats, caps, shoes, &c were used to keep the boat free. after running a mile or two he sounded & nearly took our line out when the starboard boat came up & we bent on to the end of theirs. They followed the whale a couple of hours when he sounded & the line got foul & took the boat entirely under water & they had to cut. . . . an hour afterwards . . . the larboard boat fastened to the same whale, which the ship had kept the run of. he ran their line out also. we chased that devil until sundown & had to give him up after all with the loss of upwards of 500 fathoms of line & 3 harpoons that he carried off with him. we went on board completely used up.⁷¹

Shortly afterward, in company with the whaler *Salamandre* of Le Havre, the *Lucy Ann* sighted right whales and lowered again. It turned out to be a hard day's work:

we . . . pulled about a ½ mile from the ship when the whale came up alongside of the Larboard boat. the boat steerer darted and Fastened, as soon as the whale felt the Iron, he gave the boat a slap with his tail near the bow. knocked the boat steerer several feet in the air & stove in the side of the boat he raised his flukes to strike again when the crew leaped overboard to save themselves he stove in the other side. they kept the boat afloat until they got to the ship. the waist boat . . . got hold of the larboard boats line & hauled up to lance him. the whale milled & came head on to the boat. Mr. Dean tried to prick him off by pricking him in the nose with his lance to prevent him from running over the boat (at this time the bow boat had also fastened) when the whale went under water & rose up on the top of his head. it seemed to me as if he raised it up 15 feet out of the water & turned her upsidedown. the bow boat then pulled up & got a lance in him & picked up the waist boats crew. we then pulled alongside of the whale to get another lance at him when the whale raised his

⁷¹ John Martin, manuscript journal, October 17, 1842, CHS.



John Martin's painting of a dangerous moment right whaling off Australia, October 19, 1842.
Courtesy Chicago Historical Society Library.

flukes high above the boat. when Henry one of the boats crew sprang overboard and another followed him, in doing it they capsized the boat. there was a heavy swell on but we succeeded in all getting on the bottom of the boat but Henry, he jumped right in the way of the whale, he caught hold of one of the harpoons that was fast to the whale but soon left go, he was then washed on to the whales back & was washed off again. He sank 2 or 3 times when Mr. Kendrick caught hold of him & pulled him on to the bottom of the boat, a boat then came to us from the ship & we all got into her. a few minutes afterwards Mr. Dean went into a fit & continued so until we got him to the ship. the Larboard boats crew got a fresh boat from the ship followed him up & finished him. at 8 PM we had him fast alongside.⁷²

The toil of chasing, cutting, and boiling kept the *Lucy Ann* men busy as the ship made her way eastward. There were other busy vessels in the area, and the crew's few free moments were spent in amiable "gamming." On December 30 the ship made Hobart, a busy port of call for whalships, where she met the Wilmington ship *Jefferson*. The *Lucy Ann* had stowed down 1,050 barrels, 650 of them in two months.⁷³ In the 1840s Hobart was a vice-ridden town populated by exiled convicts, but it was no doubt a welcome liberty for the exhausted whalemens.

January and February of 1843 were spent off New Zealand, then the *Lucy Ann* headed north. The southern autumn brought another lull in whaling, and the numbness of boredom was relieved only by a heart-breaking explosion which burst the ship's precious beer cask.⁷⁴ The next season was spent in the north Pacific "off Japan," a windswept, chilly whaling ground detested by whalemens but usually replete with right whales. The *Lucy Ann* was less than half full, and most of her take was whale oil, not sperm. There was no question of returning home, although the crew was restless at the rumor of a season in the north Pacific. When the bad news was confirmed, some talked of leaving the ship if she put into Astoria and walking cross-country to home.⁷⁵

⁷² *Ibid.*, October 19, 1842.

⁷³ "Ship *Lucy Ann* of Wilmington," abstract found in Dennis Wood, Abstracts of Whaling Voyages from the United States, manuscript abstracts, 1831-1873, Melville Whaling Room, Free Public Library, New Bedford, Massachusetts (NBFPL).

⁷⁴ John Martin, manuscript journal, March 11, 1843, CHS.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, April 30, 1843.

The ship, of course, never got close to North America. Instead, she put in five exhausting months in mid-ocean. Foul weather and overwork fatally weakened one of the crew whose last hours were witnessed by Martin.

about 4 in the morning Manuel commenced breathing short⁷⁶ I had been sitting up with him through the night and as he drew near his last he asked me for my hand . . . but he could not speak. . . . about ½ past 4 I called the Captain & a few moments later he made his last gasp. he knew some days before that his end was near. . . .

As soon as the life was out of his body, we carried him out of the forecastle & laid him on a board under the house upon the quarter deck & at daylight washed the body and put clean clothes upon him. he was then sewed up in a piece of canvass & a bag of sand tied to his feet. . . . the body was then brought to the gangway. all hands stood around while the Captain read the burial service & with a motion of his hand, the board on which the body was placed was tilted & it sunk to rise no more. . . . The remainder of the day was consumed by the crew telling ghost stories, murders, &c. it cast a damper on all of us.⁷⁷

North Pacific right whales proved to be as hard to kill as those off Australia. The *Lucy Ann* finished her season in early September with another 450 barrels, mediocre whaling at best.⁷⁸ On June 6 Martin and his mates had a narrow scrape when a whale stove their boat "and left a large piece of skin to remember him by."⁷⁹ This was just a taste of what was to come:

Thursday June 15th. Wind from the Wd. cold & cloudy. In the forenoon raised three right whales. . . . we lowered after dinner when the larboard boat fastened, the starboard boat was the next nearest but could not get a chance to fasten. our turn came next (the bow boat) we were going on to one of the loose whales, & the boat steerer fastened. at the same time the whale milled which brought his large head on to the bow of our boat she was knocked in among the Whales immediately on their

⁷⁶ Manuel Jocin was one of several Portuguese crewmen aboard the *Lucy Ann* (Ledger, 367, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD).

⁷⁷ John Martin, manuscript journal, May 12, 1843, CHS.

⁷⁸ Wood, Abstracts of Whaling Voyages, NBFPL.

⁷⁹ John Martin, manuscript journal, June 6, 1843, CHS.

flukes they cut away at us right & left stove in one side of the boat & knocked her over, I got mixed up with the line & was taken down a considerable distance under water were I had the pleasure of feeling one of the whales. I got myself clear and got on the bottom of the boat & had the satisfaction of seeing the rest of the crew safe. the after oarsman jumped overboard exactly from the place where the whale struck. while the boat was going over their flukes I could hear the thumps of them but could not see for the spray & expected every next one to come down on myself. but I escaped with a bruised side. The starboard boat came to our assistance & we righted the stoven boat. . . . we lowered again in the evening but could not get near them. . . .⁸⁰

As before, the hands, who were nothing if not game, managed to enjoy a few lighter moments. On May 27, 1843, with one man recently deceased and five on the sick list, they celebrated the passing of their eighteenth month at sea with "a grand concert of Instrumental & vocal music on combs (Fine tooth) Triangles, pet pig, Tin pots, pans, & spoons, Cat & divers other musical instruments."⁸¹ The Fourth of July was even better. "we had *Dumpling Soup* for dinner which was an uncommon occurrence. It was marvellous."⁸²

Martin's journals, however, may be misleading, unless one considers the omissions. It was a rare whaling voyage that pleased the forecandle hands, and the *Lucy Ann's* cruise was all too usual in its arduous and humdrum qualities.⁸³ Martin's diary frequently runs for many days without a single entry of interest, betraying the paralyzing inactivity of luckless hunting and perhaps his own resultant apathy. To be sure, the *Lucy Ann* was short on "greasy luck." She was only two-thirds full by the summer of 1843, and the hands had been talking for months about going home. A long,

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, June 15, 1843.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, May 27, 1843.

⁸² *Ibid.*, July 4, 1843.

⁸³ The preponderance of whaling journals which emphasize the utter misery of the trade may be due in part to the fact that men of lively imagination and sensibility—the kind of men who would keep a careful record—were also the kind who would be most disillusioned with the whaleman's lot. It is safe to say that such men were probably a cut above the average crewman; whalers were notorious by the 1840s for shipping the very dregs of society before the mast. For interesting contemporaneous journals see Samuel Millet, *Journal of a Voyage in the Bark Willis* (Boston, 1924); J. Ross Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846; reprint, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968); and Ely, *Narrative*.

hard whaling voyage almost invariably meant a disillusioned, sullen crew, and the *Lucy Ann* was no exception. This touchiness, so typical of whaleships, almost exploded into mutiny one day after a frustrating, fruitless chase. Two men came to blows over a dispute concerning food. An officer was unable to restore order, and the captain struck one man, had him seized to the rigging, and flogged him. The men armed themselves with "scrub brooms, hands spikes, axes, &c.," and menaced the skipper, who, seizing a capstan bar, replied that he would brain the first man who approached further.⁸⁴ Captain King explained that the flogged man had been punished for insubordinate remarks, not for defending himself. This satisfied the men; they put aside their weapons, and a dangerous crisis subsided.⁸⁵

Leaving the whaling grounds in September, the *Lucy Ann* put into the Hawaiian capital of Lahaina, a customary stopover for Pacific whalers, who crowded into the harbor by the scores every spring and fall.⁸⁶ Here the crew enjoyed extended liberty ashore. Although one hand was jailed for rowdy behavior in Lahaina's famous coral fortress, the crew found the town's tropical setting and varied amusements refreshing. The powerful American missionary influence was beginning to slip by 1843; Martin noticed that while Hawaiian women dressed modestly, they were "lewd with scarce an exception."⁸⁷ The men caught a glimpse of Kamehameha III, who was scrupulously courteous, "*always bowing to sailors.*"⁸⁸ Restocked but shorthanded, the *Lucy Ann* headed again for New Zealand in early October. Five of the crew had either deserted or been discharged at Lahaina. This circumstance, coupled with the news of still another hard season, so angered the men that a general sit-down was declared on November 5. Captain King was able to coax the men back to duty by explaining that he had tried hard to recruit a full crew but had been unable to obtain replacements.⁸⁹

Three small sperm whales were taken en route to New Zealand, and those waters gave up three right whales by February,

⁸⁴ John Martin, manuscript journal, June 23, 1843, CHS.

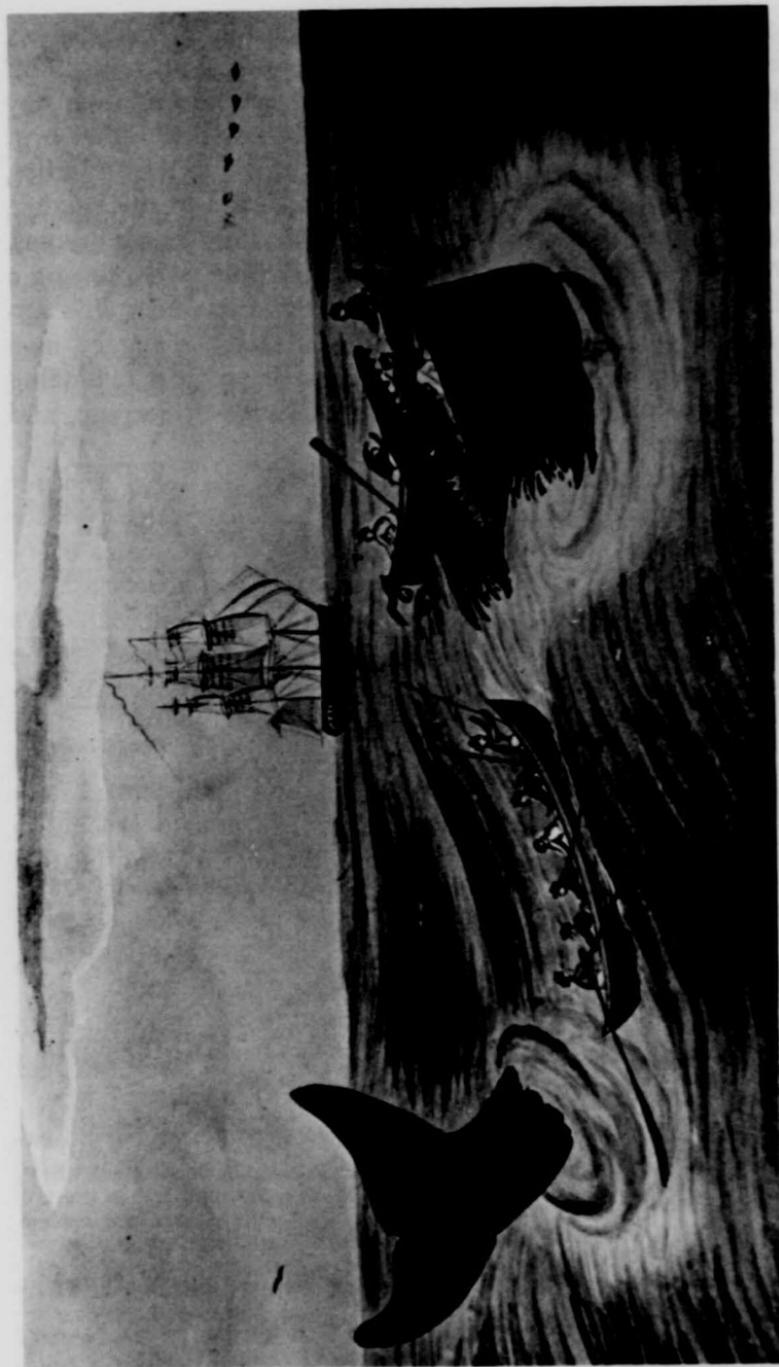
⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom* (3 volumes, Honolulu, 1968), I, 307.

⁸⁷ John Martin, manuscript journal, September 21, 1843, CHS.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, November 5, 1843.



The *Lucy Ann's* boats at close quarters with a sperm whale, by John Martin.
Courtesy Chicago Historical Society Library.

1844.⁹⁰ Martin's account grows terse in these last months of Pacific whaling. The effects of the voyage perhaps robbed him of his interest; in any case whales were sighted (if not taken) almost every day off New Zealand.⁹¹ When the ship squared for Cape Horn and home, she had 1,800 barrels aboard, only 300 of which were sperm.⁹² The ship made a stormy passage around the Horn. There were many sperm whales sighted on the River Plate grounds, and four small ones were taken.

The spirits of the crew improved at the thought of home, and the hands busied themselves scrimshawing.⁹³ The *Lucy Ann's* speciality seems to have been etching sperm whale teeth (Martin's talents as an artist made him much in demand) and canes, the latter probably made of sperm whale jawbone.⁹⁴ Such souvenirs, along with exotica acquired during brief calls at Polynesian islands, were sure to make a hit at home, and evidently many hands got busy. As the *Lucy Ann* made her slow way home, Martin remarked that "there are enough canes on this ship to supply all the old men in Wilmington."⁹⁵

The homeward voyage apparently did little to improve the crew's relationship with the cook, a man whom Martin, for good reason, considered the chief villain aboard the *Lucy Ann*:

Monday April 7th. Lively breezes from the Sd. Course N. all drawing sail set. last night the Cook lost the lock of the galley & suspected some one of the crew of throwing it overboard. he told the old man about it, he proposed putting some Tartar Emetic in the Grub to sicken the thieves. the Mate proposed fixing a musket in the Galley to go off with a spring but he concluded that Arsenic would be better and recommended it to the old man. what a brave chap. a second Julicum Ceasar.⁹⁶

The dispute with the cook cooled off the next day when the crew sighted the coast of Brazil. Here the *Lucy Ann* made her

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*; John Martin, manuscript journal, October 17, 1843–February 1, 1844, HSD.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Wood, Abstracts of Whaling Voyages, NBFPL.

⁹³ John Martin, manuscript journal, February 5, 1844, CHS. Scrimshawing, a popular leisure pastime on many whalers, was the carving and etching of baleen, sperm whale teeth or jawbone, and other materials into useful or decorative items.

⁹⁴ John Martin, manuscript journal, July 31, 1843; February 5, 1844, CHS.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, February 5, 1844.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, April 7, 1844.

last stop before home, pulling into Grande Island, where she had called twenty-eight months earlier while outward bound.⁹⁷ The hands provisioned, painted the ship, and took time out to join in the busy night life of the place. Mysteriously, four men deserted, including two Wilmingtonians and George Miller of Philadelphia. Desertion from whalers was quite common, given the hardship of life aboard. But whalemens seldom jumped ship so close to home, with their misery behind them and their lays so close at hand.

In the Caribbean, a lone, aged sperm whale was spotted and easily killed.⁹⁸ This was the crew's last fling with whaling, and the old bull's blubber brought the total of oil to an even 2,000 barrels.⁹⁹ The final tally was respectable but by no means spectacular whaling, especially in view of the length of the cruise.¹⁰⁰ The ship's additional cargo of 12,800 pounds of baleen would not add much to the profits.¹⁰¹

The last of her oil stowed, the *Lucy Ann* set all sails for home. The hands put the finishing touches on their scrimshaw, and on June 13 Cape May Lighthouse hove into view. The next day, the ship moved up the Delaware under a pilot, and on the fifteenth dropped her anchor opposite the mouth of Christina Creek. Gone were the days when a returning whaleship caused great excitement at Wilmington. Although whale oil prices, which had nosedived during the depression, were again high, it did neither Wilmington nor the *Lucy Ann* men much good.¹⁰² The crew went ashore with expectations of small reward. John Martin, a veteran with a boat steerer's lay, received only \$385.68 for his thirty months aboard, substantially less than he had earned as a seaman on the *Jefferson*.¹⁰³ Foremast hands, of course, got much less: seamen who had completed the entire cruise averaged a little over \$220 each.¹⁰⁴ While at sea, however, many had had to

⁹⁷ John Martin, manuscript journal, April 9, 1844, HSD.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, May 2, 1844.

⁹⁹ Wood, Abstracts of Whaling Voyages, NBFPL.

¹⁰⁰ On a previous voyage, the *Lucy Ann* had taken 2,600 barrels (1,400 sperm) in twenty-three months (*ibid.*).

¹⁰¹ Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 384-385. Starbuck's figures for the *Lucy Ann's* oil total are in error.

¹⁰² Walter Tower, *A History of the American Whale Fishery* (Philadelphia, 1907), 128.

¹⁰³ Day book, 94, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

¹⁰⁴ Ledger, 433-443, Wilmington Whaling Company, FBSD.

buy merchandise on credit from the *Lucy Ann's* "slop chest," which charged a stiff markup. These debts, plus whatever advances had been given crew members before the ship sailed in 1841, were of course deducted from each man's lay.

In August the *Lucy Ann* was sold. She made her way northeast to end her days whaling out of Greenport, Long Island.¹⁰⁵ Martin continued for awhile to follow the sea, but not as a whaler, apparently sailing out of Philadelphia.¹⁰⁶ In 1854 he migrated to Klamath County, California, where he and two others formed a mining company on the Klamath River.¹⁰⁷ He later took over the operation of a ferry service on the Klamath, subsequently known as Martin's Ferry, and did some ranching on the side.¹⁰⁸ He evidently prospered, for he soon operated a tavern near the ferry, advertising that "hungry travelers will be insured a good square meal for themselves and every attention to their animals."¹⁰⁹ Martin was well regarded locally and even served in the early 1870s as Klamath township's justice of the peace. In 1875 he sold his property.¹¹⁰ No further record of the man has been found.

John Martin's whaling records, however, are enough to insure his memory, although Martin himself would be surprised at this. Whatever the case, there was no sign, upon the *Lucy Ann's* bitter return to Wilmington in 1844, that any long range good had come of Wilmington whaling. Martin, like the Philadelphia investors, had been seduced by dreams of fortune. If anything, he was even more victimized than they by those transitory dreams. His diary's last, hastily-scrawled entry condemns his adventure-some folly, and, for that matter, the whole misguided enterprise: "Curséd whaling and quit it[.] Dam them [who] will not get up after night and burn their shirts to make a light to curse a whale ship."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Starbuck, *American Whale Fishery*, 418-419, 450-451.

¹⁰⁶ James McGahey to the Historical Society of Delaware, Darby, Pa., November 21, 1902, HSD.

¹⁰⁷ Mining Claims and Miscellany, Klamath County, California, July 17, 1856, Book A, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Minutes, Board of Supervisors, Klamath County, California, May 5, 1858; Assessment Roll, Klamath County, 1860.

¹⁰⁹ *Klamath News*, Orleans, California, August 25, 1866.

¹¹⁰ Minutes, Board of Supervisors, Klamath County, 1861-1872; Klamath County Records, Miscellaneous, Book B, 15; Klamath County Records, Book of Brands, 24; *ibid.*; deed, April 3, 1875, Humboldt County, California, Records.

¹¹¹ John Martin, manuscript journal, June 5 [actually June 15], 1844, CHS.