The Lost Fleets of the Western Arctic: Preserving a Significant Element of the Maritime and Cultural Heritage of Alaska and the United States

By Bradley W. Barr

Abstract

In 1848, Yankee whalers first entered the Chukchi Sea. The ensuing 66 years of commercial whaling in the western Arctic had a profound impact on the history and culture of the Beringia region, its resources, and its people. In this period, more than 160 whaling ships were lost. The stories from these journies are compelling, filled with tales of danger, heroism, sacrifice, and loss so common in arctic adventures, and of great interest to a broad audience of the American public. These are highlighted by: the exploits of the Confederate Sea Raider *Shenandoah*, seizing 24 and burning 22 whalers in the Bering Strait, months after the Civil War had been lost; the 32 whalers sunk by the ice and more than 1,200 crew stranded in the disaster of 1871, where all survived; the dozen whaling ships lost in the same location five years later, with more dire consequences; and the events of 1897-98 that compelled the U.S. Government to drive more than 400 reindeer over 700 miles through the deep arctic winter in an attempt to bring food to whaling crews stranded in Barrow. Few if any of these shipwrecks of the "Lost Fleets" of the western Arctic have even been discovered, despite a rather richly documented history. The NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has initiated a project to search for and document what remains of the "Lost Fleets". The re-telling of these stories is intended to not only engage and inform the public about this very significant place and time in the maritime history of the nation, but also of the people and cultures of the Beringia region whose lives we so profoundly changed by these events.

Introduction

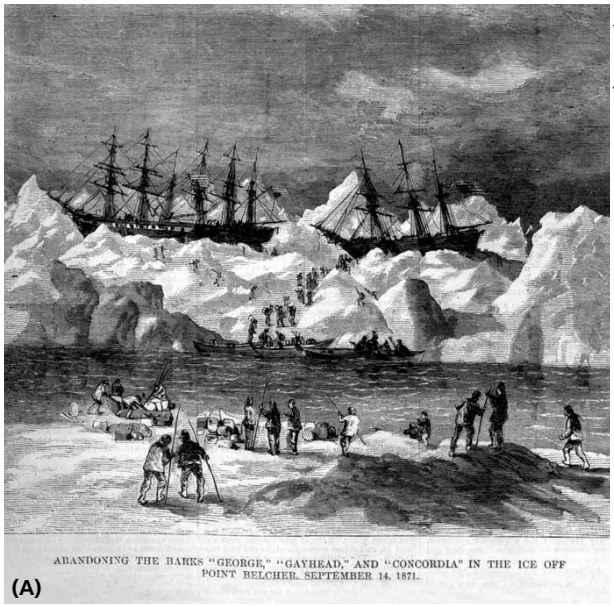
During the latter half of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, whaling fleets from a variety of nations concentrated their efforts far to the North, among the bergs and ice pack of Alaska's north slope. This was one of the last refuges of the oil-rich bowhead whale. The harsh extremes found in the Arctic made the hunt particularly hazardous, and on two occasions, 1871 and 1876, whole fleets were trapped by the ice and crushed. These losses marked the downfall of the American whaling effort, already in decline due to the impacts on marine mammal populations and the American Civil War (*Bockstoce 1986*).

From Captain Thomas Roys first passage through the Bering Strait in 1848, in the whaling bark *Superior*, until the last whales were taken by the commercial whaling fleet around 1914, the western Arctic was one of the most important places in American whaling. This intense human activity in the region changed the face of the Arctic both ecologically and culturally (*Bocktose 1986*).

According to Chaffin (*2006*), between October 1864 and November of 1865, during a desperate campaign to strike a blow to the economy of the North, the Confederate sea raider *Shenandoah* seized a total of 38 ships of commerce, and burned 32 to the waterline. Prowling the western Arctic, over a period of less than a week in late June of 1865, the *Shenandoah* captured 24 whaling ships and sunk 20 in the waters near the Bering Strait. The *Shenandoah*'s captain, James Waddell, and his officers did not believe reports from the vessels they were destroying that the war had already ended, some three months earlier. All ships' personnel from these captured vessels, numbering over 1,000 according to the ship's records, were released unharmed, and only two of the crew of the *Shenandoah* lost their lives during the epic voyage. The total loss to the whaling industry was estimated at $1.4 million ($19.7 million in 2000 dollars).

Photograph courtesy of Robert Schwemmer

Figure 1. Shipwreck timbers.



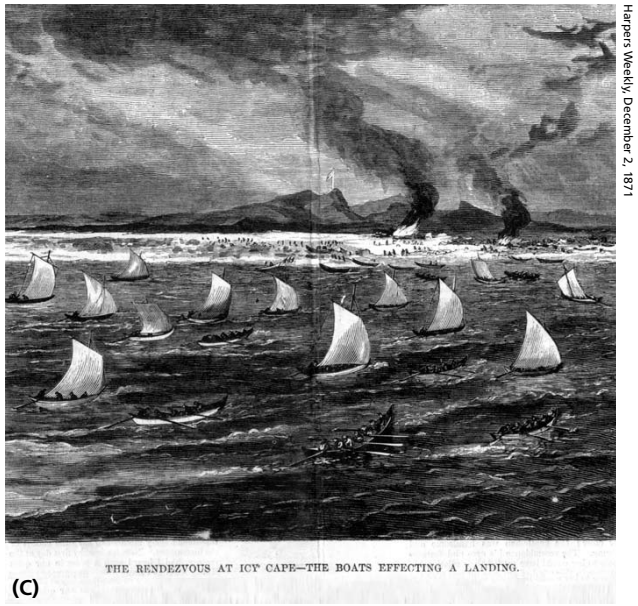


Figure 2. A) Abandoning the barks 'George,' 'Gayhead,' and 'Concordia' in the ice off Point Belcher; B) Barks 'Arctic' and 'Progress' receiving the crews of the wrecked and abandoned ships south of Icy Cape; and C) The barks at Icy Cape - the boats effecting a landing.

As chronicled by Bockstoce (*1986*), in August 1871, 32 whaling ships from Hawaii, New England, and California had come to the icy waters of the Arctic in the pursuit of the bowhead whale. The pack ice being close to shore that year left little room for maneuvering of the fleet but whales were relatively plentiful, and while there are whales to catch, the whaleboats go off to hunt. The whaling captains counted on a wind shift from the east to drive the pack out to sea as it had always done in years past. Instead of moving offshore, the ice pack suddenly and unexpectedly trapped all 32 ships between ice and shore in a constantly and quickly diminishing lead in the ice with no chance to escape to open water. The captains conferred, crafted a joint declaration describing the reasons for the abandonment, unanimously approved and signed the declaration, then began the very treacherous process to evacuate all 1,219 men, women and children by way of the ships' whaleboats. In these frail craft, the ships' crews rowed 90 miles south past Icy Cape where they were rescued by seven other whaling ships whose captains and crews gave up what was likely to be their own very lucrative whaling season to ferry the survivors to safety. Although the journey in the whaleboats required them to row through ice-choked and heavy seas, not one life was lost. Of all the ships abandoned to the Arctic winter of 1871, only one ever sailed again. The remaining 31 vessels were crushed by the ice and sunk or burned after they were abandoned. The economic blow to the whaling industry was staggering. Loss of the ships and cargoes was estimated at $1.6 million ($22.5 million in 2000 dollars). This loss was most keenly felt in New Bedford, which was home port for 22 of the ships lost that year. Interestingly, however, few of these ships were replaced in the fleet, and most of the insurance paid to the whaling companies was reportedly invested in other industries, evidence of the beginning of the end of Yankee whaling.

These are compelling and historically significant stories from our whaling heritage, and there has been a recent surge of interest in these events. A number of historical volumes have been published in the popular press over the last few years. While interest in these events continues, much research remains to be done. The prizes left in the wake of the *Shenandoah*, the subsequent losses of 1871 and 1876, combined with other whalers abandoned and sunk by ice and gale in this region, left a legacy of shipwrecks and artifacts scattered throughout the Bering Strait and along the shore and nearshore waters of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Over the past several years, researchers associated with the Barrow Arctic Science Consortium have been conducting an archaeological and historical survey of some of these coastal and submerged sites related to the 1871 event in the Chukchi Sea (*Beebe 2007*). Regarding the prizes sunk by the *Shenandoah*, very little field work has been undertaken thus far. Of what has been reported to be more than 160 whaling ships lost in these waters of the western Arctic, none, except those that were beached, have been identified and documented. This is a story of our whaling heritage without a final chapter…what remains of these lost fleets and what we can learn from these artifacts.

Discussion

As mandated in the National Marine Sanctuary Act, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) is responsible for effective stewardship of America's maritime heritage resources. Working in collaboration with the State of Alaska Office of History and Archaeology and others, the ONMS Maritime Heritage Program is bringing additional resources and assets to support this fascinating and important work. Maritime archaeologists and historians employed by NOAA are already involved in whaling heritage survey and preservation efforts across the nation. For NOAA, the "Lost Whaling Fleets" of the western Arctic represent a partnership project in the context of our larger national whaling narrative. As regards to the 1871 and 1876 disasters, NOAA seeks to work in collaboration with local researchers in Alaska, bringing new platforms and advanced underwater technologies to the ongoing investigation. Ships conducting offshore magnetometer and side scan sonar surveys, and aerial Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) flights will provide essential information on what remains of these lost whaling vessels. Also, NOAA will help interpret and communicate these events to a national audience, bringing the considerable experience and expertise of the NOAA National Marine Sanctuary education, outreach and communication staff with web-based education and outreach, video production and telepresence to help tell the story.

As to the brightly-burning American whaling vessels the *Shenandoah* left in its wake, background research is being conducted, potential partners being identified, and preliminary planning for what field surveys might be undertaken in coming years—perhaps linked to the upcoming Sesquicentennial of the Civil War—is in the very early stages of development. This research continues and expands NOAA's long involvement with Civil War history and heritage at the Monitor National Marine Sanctuary.

Conclusion

Through this work in some of the most remote places on Earth, the NOAA's Marine Sanctuary Program will tie together places emblematic of our whaling heritage—New Bedford, Nantucket, Hawaii and California—through national marine sanctuaries associated with these stories from our whaling past. NOAA will weave together these compelling accounts of the icebound whaling fleets of the 1870s and the epic story of the *Shenandoah* with what is learned from field research conducted by NOAA and its partners to enhance and expand the American public's understanding and appreciation of this historically significant chapter in America's maritime history.

Placed in the larger national context of beginning to develop a national system of marine protected areas focused on maritime heritage, part of the ongoing work of the joint NOAA/DOI Marine Protected Areas Center, it will be initiatives like "Lost Fleets" that will be needed to help define and construct this mandated national system of marine protected areas. By confronting questions such as what the criteria might be for sites comprising the maritime heritage element of the national system, and how places like the western Arctic might fit in that system, we help to move toward the sort of robust and comprehensive national MPA system envisioned by the framers of the Executive Order that created the Center and the vision for this national system.

Acknowledgements

Mike Overfield, Bob Schwemmer, Hans Van Tilburg of the ONMS Staff comprise, with the author, the core team behind the Lost Fleets Project at NOAA. For additional information regarding the Lost Fleets Project, go to http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov

REFERENCES

Beebe, Randolph. 2007.
Documenting the Wrecks of the 1871 Arctic Whaling Ship Disaster. Unpublished manuscript.

Bockstoce, John R. 1986.
Whales, Ice, and Men: The History of Whaling in the Western Arctic. University of Washington Press. Seattle, Washington.

Chaffin, Tom. 2006.
Sea of Gray: The Around-the-World Odyssey of the Confederate Raider Shenandoah. Hill and Wang. New York, NY.