

Whales And War: How the Confederates Destroyed the Northern Whaling Industry and Why the Union Let it Happen

As the CSS Shenandoah halted the whaling vessel the Abigail on May 27th, 1865¹ in the Okhotsk Sea (off the Siberian coast),² a Confederate boarding officer proclaimed to whaling captain Ebenezer Nye, “We have entered into a treaty offensive and defensive with the whales, and we are up here by special agreement to dispose of their mortal enemy.”³ Captain Nye was deservedly surprised, conceding to the boarding officer, “but who on [E]arth would have thought of seeing one of your Southern privateers up here?”⁴ The Shenandoah and other Confederate steamboats roamed international waters seeking Northern whaling vessels in an effort to diminish the supply of whale oil, a popular commodity used at the time for lubricant, soap, and, perhaps most importantly, as a source of light.⁵

The Confederacy had concluded that whale oil was so important to the North that it was willing to chase Northern whaling ships as far as Siberia to destroy them. As Confederate Lieutenant Semmes remarked to a mournful whaler after capturing his vessel, “[e]very whale you strike will put money into the Federal treasury, and strengthen the hands of your people to carry on the war.”⁶ From one perspective, the Confederate effort was a resounding success: its

¹ "The Pirate Shenandoah." The New York Times. Last modified August 27, 1865. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/08/27/archives/the-pirate-shenandoah-her-cruise-in-the-arctic-seas-wholesale.html>.

²Hunt, Cornelius E., *The Shenandoah; or the Last Confederate Cruiser*. (HardPress, 2018. First published 1867 by G.W. Carleton & Co. Publishers.) Kindle Edition. Loc 1140

³ Ibid, Loc 1140

⁴ Ibid, Loc 1140

⁵Dvorsky, George. "1846: The Year We Hit Peak Sperm Whale Oil." Gizmodo. Last modified July 31, 2012. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://io9.gizmodo.com/1846-the-year-we-hit-peak-sperm-whale-oil-5930414>.

⁶Semmes, Raphael. *Memoirs of Service Afloat: During the War Between the States*: pg #449 1869. Accessed February 23, 2019. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/ack4712.0001.001/431?rgn=full+text;view=image;q1=azores>.

seizure of so many whaling ships during the Civil War contributed importantly to the destruction of the industry. The whaling fleet was reduced to half of its former size, insurance rates surged, and investment halted.⁷ The industry was not able to recover from the damages, and although the last vessel left a New Bedford port in the 1920s, whaling had been rendered obsolete long before then.

This Southern “victory,” however, was quite limited, as the North was focused on other military and economic priorities and thus tolerated the whaling seizures as a necessary price to achieve a larger objective. But, given the Northern economy’s perceived reliance on whale oil, why did the Union not intervene to protect these ships from Confederate attack? The answer is threefold: inadequate Naval resources that were devoted to other priorities; the difficulty of finding the raiders; and the diminished economic importance of whale oil.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the United States whaling industry was a dominant force in the economy. Whaling made up around 5% of GDP in the early to mid-1800s.⁸ By 1846, the U.S. was home to 735 out of the 900 whaling vessels in the world,⁹ and, in the prior year, the industry had procured 18 million gallons of whale oil.¹⁰ Whale oil was more popular than lard oil or coal oil at the time due to the alternatives’ odors and low quality.¹¹ Low prices and reliable supply had supported the use of whale oil for decades.

⁷ Mello, Mark. *A Compact with the Whales: Confederate Commerce Raiders and New Bedford's Whaling Industry 1861-1865*: pg #34. May 9, 2017. Accessed February 22, 2019. https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1226&context=honors_proj.

⁸Kaiser, Brooks A. "The Transition from Whale Oil to Petroleum." Accessed January 28, 2019.

⁹Applebome, Peter. "They Used to Say Whale Oil Was Indispensable, Too." *The New York Times*. Last modified August 3, 2008. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/nyregion/03towns.html>.

¹⁰Butz, Stephen. *Energy and Agriculture: Science, Environment, and Solutions*, Cengage Learning, 2014. Google e-book, pg #40

¹¹"The whale oil myth." *History of sustainable energy*.
<https://sustainablehistory.wordpress.com/bioenergy/the-whale-oil-myth/>.

When the Civil War broke out, the Confederacy thus sought to destroy the whaling industry in the hopes that it would cause significant damage to the Northern economy. The Provisional Congress of the Confederacy granted Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, the power to authorize letters of marque and reprisal,¹² allowing private citizens to attack Northern ships without legal repercussions.¹³ That didn't prove effective, however, so President Davis also organized the Confederate Navy to attack whaling ships directly. As a result, in June 1861, the CSS Sumter, commanded by Lieutenant Raphael Semmes, embarked on a voyage with the goal of ravaging Northern commerce. It sank one whaling vessel, causing between \$30,000 and \$40,000 in damages.¹⁴ The Sumter was, however, abandoned in early 1862.

In July 1862, after Britain sold the Confederacy multiple vessels (clandestinely, to appear to maintain neutrality in the war), the attack on Northern whaling fleets intensified. One of these vessels, the CSS Alabama, also commanded by Lieutenant Semmes, targeted the Azores area, as the number of whales (and whalers) in that region was exceptionally high due to the augmented concentration of algae and plankton (food for whales).¹⁵ The Alabama sank sixteen whaling ships and burned thousands of barrels of whale oil, along with other supplies, amounting to a net loss of over \$200,000.¹⁶

The CSS Shenandoah took up the fight against Northern whalers after the Alabama was destroyed in 1864. The Shenandoah, commanded by Lieutenant James I. Waddell, targeted the

¹²Matthews, James Muscoe (b. 1822). *The Statutes at large of the provisional government of the Confederate States*. Richmond: pg #101. 1864. Available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, American History, 1493-1945, From The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.
<http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/GLC00534> [Accessed February 21, 2019].

¹³ Mello, *A Compact*, pg #5

¹⁴ Ibid, pg #11

¹⁵Semmes, *Memoir of Service*, pg #421

¹⁶Mello, *A Compact*, pg #20

Northern Pacific region, where whaling ships had migrated in search of more abundant whale populations. Waddell was, by and large, very successful in his mission: at the end of his voyage, he and his crew had destroyed twenty-five whaling vessels, costing the industry over \$1 million in damages.¹⁷

The Union did not protect these Northern whaling vessels partially because of inadequate resources and other Naval priorities. Days after the outbreak of war, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln issued a blockade on all Southern ports. The blockade required a daunting 2,500 miles of coast to be covered by the mere 40 Union naval ships operating at the time.¹⁸ Given the limited number of vessels available, virtually the entire Union Navy had to concentrate on the blockade for it to succeed. The Union was so desperate to blockade the Southern coast effectively that it was even willing to sink old whaling ships to block entries to Southern harbors (a hint about how unconcerned the Union was about losing whaling ships).¹⁹

The focus on the blockade provides the first explanation for why the Union did not pursue the Confederate raiders. The goal of the Union blockade was to damage the South's economy by limiting commerce. Since the intent of the Confederate's attacks on whaling ships was to damage the Union's economy, and not to augment the Confederacy's, the raiders escaped the thrust of the Union's naval strategy.

Another reason the North did not pursue the raiders was the difficulty of doing so. The Southern vessels were too distant and spread out for an effective Union eradication effort (and again, especially if that meant sacrificing ships from the blockade). According to the Secretary of

¹⁷ Mello, *A Compact*, pg #32

¹⁸"The Navies of the Civil War." American Battlefield Trust. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/navies-civil-war>.

¹⁹Mello, *A Compact*, pg #5

the Navy during the war, Gideon Welles, "it would be an act of folly to detach vessels from the blockade and send them off scouring the ocean for this roving wolf (i.e., the Confederate raiders), which has no country, no home, no resting-place."²⁰ Given the low probabilities involved in finding the raiders, it was strangely cost-beneficial to let them continue destroying whaling ships. The Boston Post articulated both the impracticality of chasing after the ships and the cost it would burden the Union with: "It costs our Government, in a pecuniary point of view, much more than the value of the ships destroyed to keep a whole fleet out looking after the slippery scoundrel, like ten cats looking for a weasel in a hundred acre lot."²¹

Finally, the Union did not pursue the Confederate cruisers because the whale oil industry was already becoming less important for the economy. Even before the war started, the dominance of whale oil began to wane. The massive genocide of whales during the 19th century (an estimated 8,000 whales in 1853 alone)²² led to a significant depletion of the whale population, which also explains why Northern whalers had to travel as far as Alaska during their expeditions (the supply elsewhere was already depleted).²³ Standard laws of supply and demand suggest that as supply goes down, price goes up. Indeed, as the whale population declined, the price of whale oil surged: in 1843, whale oil was \$0.63 per 1/2 gallon; in 1854, the price had

²⁰Welles, Gideon. "Effectiveness of Small Ships." In *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, by Edgar T. Welles, 497. Boston and New York, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911. Previously published in *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson (v.1)*. 1864. Accessed February 23, 2019. https://archive.org/stream/diaryofgideonwel00well/diaryofgideonwel00well_djvu.txt.

²¹*The Boston Post* (Boston, MA). "Letter from England." April 7, 1863. Accessed February 23, 2019. <https://newspaperarchive.com/boston-post-apr-07-1863-p-1/>.

²²Applebome, Peter. "They Used to Say Whale Oil Was Indispensable, Too." *The New York Times*. Last modified August 3, 2008. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/nyregion/03towns.html>.

²³Dvorsky, George. "1846: The Year We Hit Peak Sperm Whale Oil." *Gizmodo*. Last modified July 31, 2012. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://io9.gizmodo.com/1846-the-year-we-hit-peak-sperm-whale-oil-5930414>.

risen to \$1.92 per 1/2 gallon.²⁴ The rise in price, in turn, invited experimentation with other sources of oil.

Indeed, a new fuel source soon entered the market: kerosene. Obtained by the distillation of petroleum in 1859, kerosene quickly became a cheap alternative to whale oil.²⁵ In 1860, sperm oil prices were \$1.60 per gallon, and kerosene prices were \$0.75 per gallon.²⁶ Throughout the war, kerosene continued to displace whale oil as Americans' primary illuminant, making it less vital for the Union Navy, even if it had the capacity, to protect the whalers. Indeed, as early as 1860, the U.S. government had determined that kerosene was a more effective product to burn for light.²⁷

An indication of this ongoing technology shift is that the destruction of whaling ships did not produce a price increase. Indeed, in 1896, after the war had ended, and the fleet of 735 whaling vessels that merchants had begun with had been reduced to only 39,²⁸ the price of whale oil dropped to \$0.20 per 1/2 gallon, a sign that cheap and more readily-available kerosene had supplanted whale oil for the US's illuminating needs.²⁹

The diminished economic importance of whale oil thus also explains why the Northern Navy didn't bother to pursue the Southern ships. Indeed, towards the end of the war, the Navy had ample resources to protect the whalers: by 1865, the US Navy had become the world's

²⁴Pees, Samuel T. "Whale Oil: Historic Prices." Oil History. Last modified 2004. Accessed January 28, 2019. <http://www.petroleumhistory.org/OilHistory/pages/Whale/prices.html>.

²⁵"Timeline 1602 to Present." New Bedford Whaling Museum. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/learn/research-topics/timeline-1602-to-present>.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷"The whale oil myth." History of sustainable energy. <https://sustainablehistory.wordpress.com/bioenergy/the-whale-oil-myth/>.

²⁸Dvorsky, "1846: The Year," 2012

²⁹Pees, "Whale Oil," 2004

largest, comprised of 600 ships.³⁰ While the Union used many of these ships to maintain the blockade, it still could have delegated some of them to stop the Confederate raids. Nonetheless, only one ship (USS Kearsarge) was ever used to combat the Confederate seizures of the whaling fleet.³¹ Had whaling been as vital to the Northern economy as the South had concluded it was, the North would have used more of its available ships to protect the industry.

The Union's willingness to protect resources that it actually deemed vital is vividly illustrated by another commodity: gold. When Confederate cruisers threatened gold shipments from San Francisco, Navy Secretary Welles was aggressive in ordering protection. The day after Cornelius Vanderbilt spoke of the dangers to his steamer, carrying gold, Welles immediately sent out a vessel to protect it.³² He later wrote to Vanderbilt, in reference to other gold-carrying boats, "extended convoy seems to be needed... and will be given if you so desire."³³ The Union understood that a convoy was necessary when a crucial industry was at risk. Its decision not to intervene in the Confederate seizure of whaling ships stands in stark contrast to its protection of gold shipments and thus only underscores that the Union recognized that the whale oil industry was obsolete and not worth saving.

³⁰"10 Facts: Civil War Navies." American Battlefield Trust. Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/10-facts-civil-war-navies>.

³¹ Mello, Mark. *A Compact with the Whales: Confederate Commerce Raiders and New Bedford's Whaling Industry 1861-1865*: pg #20. May 9, 2017. Accessed February 22, 2019. https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1226&context=honors_proj.

³²Ruppert, Joseph Murray. *Hurry All to Sea: Union Naval Strategy to Counter Confederate Commerce Raiding*: pg #65 August 9, 1993. Accessed February 23, 2019. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a268096.pdf>.

³³Welles, Gideon. Letter, "Letter from the Secretary of the Navy to Cornelius Vanderbilt, esq, offering extended convoy for the California steamers," August 31, 1864. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924051350829;view=1up;seq=209>.

In the end, the Civil War drastically altered the Northern whaling industry. Confederate raiders were wildly successful in destroying Northern whaling vessels and hurting investors. But the creation of an alternative source of light at this time would have likely killed the industry anyway. The Union recognized the inevitable displacement of whale oil into a second-tier fuel and was content with Confederate ships being distracted by chasing whaling vessels. By not intervening, the Union allowed the Confederates some Pyrrhic whaling victories, and saved a few whales in doing so.

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