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Trade Cloth on American Whaleships, 1820-1870
“liberty with a roll of calico”

Susan J. Jerome

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Artifacts tell an important story. While researching this topic for my master’s thesis, I discovered twenty-two cloth-covered books in museum collections. Dirty, stained, and sometimes badly faded, the fabric had been overlooked, assumed to be sail cloth.

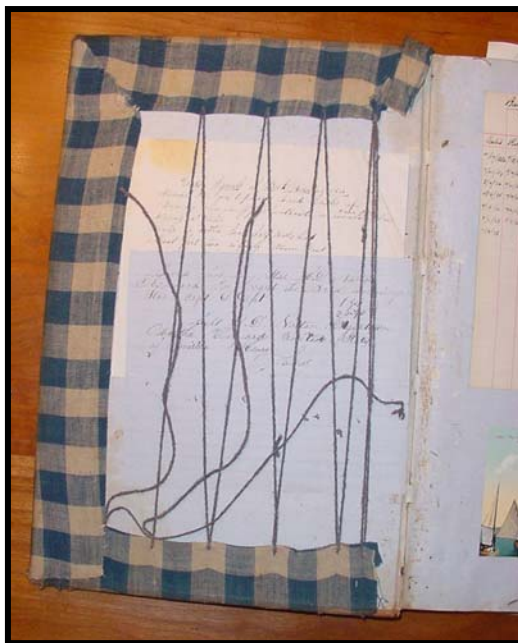


Figure 1. The inside of a covered logbook, showing the use of long stitches to hold the cover in place. ODHS Log 109. Morning Star, Henry D. Norton, master. Joseph Demock or Dimmock, mate and log keeper, also Henry Peakes. July 1857-June 1862. 27.5 x 39 cm. Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

Cotton, most of it brightly-printed, plain weave fabric, had been sewn around the covers of books purchased on shore just as we see in this picture. Several other images of the cloth covering these books will be shown. These are the fabrics that went to sea, procured from slop chests and sewn by hand onto leather or cardboard-bound journals and account books. These examples are part of the evidence presented here proving that cloth sold or bartered during a whaling voyage played an important role in the social and economic structure of whaling during the peak of America’s participation in the industry.

This presentation gives a brief look at the use of trade cloth by the captain and crew members of American whaling ships and by Native populations of the Pacific, demonstrating how fabric was used in place of any kind of legal tender. There are so many wonderful stories that I’ve had to leave out! Research is focused on ships whaling in the Pacific Ocean between 1820-1870, a time when whales provided oil for machines and lamps, and whalebone, used as a stiffener in articles such as corsets and parasols. Ships studied sailed from the ports of New Bedford and Nantucket,

Massachusetts and New London, Connecticut. Information taken from outfitting books, journals, account books and published material demonstrates how this cloth was used by the captain and crew, as well as by the Native populations with whom they traded.

New England's interest in whaling evolved while the technological innovations in spinning, weaving, and printing cotton assured a ready supply of cheap fabric. By the late 1820s, water-powered mills conveniently close to New England's whaling communities had begun to produce printed cotton cloth.

Fabric became a viable bartering commodity on whale ships when the initial monetary investment was balanced by the value given the cloth during a whaling voyage. This value could be the amount for which the fabric was sold by the captain either to the crew or to other ships. When traded for provisions, the value was measured in the number of hogs, bananas or barrels of water obtained.

The first Europeans took items for trading to any people with whom they came in contact. Ernest Dodge quotes Mendana, from Spain, in 1595, describing his trade with Natives in the Santa Cruz Islands: "For four days friendly trade went on, the natives coming and going between shore and ships—bringing food and getting feathers, beads, cloth, playing cards, and mirrors in return."¹ Whalers arriving in the Pacific Ocean by the 1820s found indigenous populations experienced in bartering with white men.

Whaling voyages from New England to the Pacific at this time averaged three to five years from homeport. It was impossible to carry enough provisions and equipment on a whaling ship to last a crew of 35 for 5 years—bartering was a necessity considered when purchasing provisions before the voyage began.

Pre-printed outfitting books identify the wide variety of objects necessary for a whaling voyage. These books list fabric as either a trading commodity, an article to be sold to recruits, or under the heading "Slops & Recruits." These designations indicate the variety of ways cloth was classified on board ship. The terms were fluid; the differentiation made when outfitting a ship does not appear to have been of importance once the vessel put to sea. Crew members purchased all kinds of goods from the slop chest—or ship's store—including yard goods. A slop chest also included everything from sewing thread and needles, clothing of all kinds, hats and shoes to soap and combs.

In 1858, the *Canton* from New Bedford prepared for a whaling voyage to the Indian and Pacific Oceans with a variety of provisions that included 4844 yards of six different kinds of cloth.²

The outfitting book for the *Camilla*, sailing from New Bedford in 1858, records the acquisition, under the heading "Articles for Recruits," of "1500 yds Bleached Cottons, 2000 yds Unbleached Cottons, 1500 yds Twilled Cottons," unfortunately with no prices. Also listed in the pre-printed

¹ Ernest S. Dodge, *Islands and Empires: Western Impact on the Pacific and East Asia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 19.

² Elmo Paul Hohman, *The American Whaleman* (New York: Logmans, Green and Co., 1928) 249.

book are “Blue (Plain) Cotton, Furniture Prints and Fancy Prints” although these were not purchased for the voyage.³

Records of the *Eugenia*, sailing from New Bedford in 1851, included 173 $\frac{3}{4}$ yards of brown drills, purchased at 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ cents. Below this, written in ink, is “The above prices are the actual cost of the slops. You will charge crew 50 % advance on these prices.”⁴ The ship’s investors, which often included the captain, expected a profit on articles sold from the slop chest. These and many other records confirm the fact that whaling ships set sail from home port equipped with thousands of yards of fabric, representing an investment of many hundreds of dollars, to be used in lieu of money during the voyage.

Herman Melville’s first book *Typee, A Peep at Polynesian Life*, published in 1846, gives first-hand information concerning how both captains and sailors used cloth. Melville sailed on the *Acushnet*, leaving New Bedford early in January 1841. In 1842, he jumped ship in the Marquesas, spending a month on shore. In this quote, he jokingly portrays the “fatherly anxiety” felt by his captain upon the discovery of his departure.

I knew that our worthy captain, who felt such a paternal solicitude for the welfare of his crew, would not willingly consent that one of his best hands should encounter the perils of a sojourn among the natives of a barbarous island; and I was certain that in the event of my disappearance, his fatherly anxiety would prompt him to offer, by way of a reward, yard upon yard of gaily printed calico for my apprehension.⁵



Figure 2. Fabric covering KWM Log 183. Bark *Sea Fox*, William W. Eldridge, master. April 1871-October, 1871. 22 x 34 cm. Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

The captain of the *Isaac Hicks* out of New London, Connecticut, “paid the cheif for aprehention 30 tobacco, 24 yds cloth” for the return of John H. Knight in October 1849 while at Oahu.

³ Outfitting Book, *Camilla*, 1858, Mss. Collection 5, series C, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Mass., 35.

⁴ Outfitting Book, *Eugenia*, 1851-1854, Mss. Collection 5, series C, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Mass., 30.

⁵ Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1996), 51.

Knight, the ship's cooper, would have been hard to replace and was charged \$17.00 for the captain's trouble and to reimburse the ship.⁶

If a captain needed to replace members of his crew, he might barter for recruits, as Samuel Prentice did in December 1859. Captain Prentice paid five axes, twenty pounds of soap, and five pieces of cloth, valued at \$12.00, for new sailors while at the Navigators.⁷ Discharged sailors could receive cloth in lieu of money; Captain William Caswell on the *Alpha*, out of Nantucket, paid George Kanaka with "40 yds of Calico at \$10.00 and 2 Red Shirts, 4 lbs. tobacco at \$6.00" in September, 1862 while at Ascension Island.⁸

Two essential commodities for which captains traded cloth were water and wood. Fresh water was extremely important, especially since the water taken aboard at the beginning of a voyage could have been sitting in wooden casks for six months or more. A whaling ship could not afford to use space for storing firewood, so the supply had to be replenished regularly. Captain Folger of the *Alpha* out of Nantucket bartered for wood and water at Wangarua, in March 1848. Wood was obtained for 138 ¼ yards of prints; water was bartered for 34 ½ yards of prints.⁹ (I found that yardage often was recorded down to the nearest 1/8 yard—even in hundreds of yards.)

Nelson Haley describes in detail how the captain of the *Charles W. Morgan*, upon which he was sailing in the 1840s, prepared for trading in the Fiji Islands. "The boats were lowered, and in the boat that took the Captain was put cotton cloth (white and blue), a box of axes, powder, some muskets, lead, calico (fancy colors), fish hooks, knives and Jew's-harps."¹⁰



Figure 3. ODHS Log 656. Bark *Montgomery*, Reuben N. Crapo, master. Charles W. Chase, logkeeper. July 1858-October 1862. 22.5 x 35 cm. Extremely close view, showing the dotted background.
Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

⁶ Account Book, *Isaac Hicks*, 1845-1850, Collection 25, vol. 82, G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Conn.

⁷ Account Book, *Camilla*, 1854-1859, Mss. 5, series D, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Mass.

⁸ Account Book, *Alpha*, 1860-1864, Coll. 10, AB 159, Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Mass.

⁹ Account Book, *Alpha*, 1846-1850, Coll. 10, AB 30, Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket, Mass., March, 1848. The book may have been kept by Captain Joseph W. Folger.

¹⁰ Nelson Cole Haley, *Whale Hunt: The Narrative of a Voyage by Nelson Cole Haley in the Ship Charles W. Morgan, 1849-1853* (Mystic, Conn.: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1990), 91.

When the boat was ashore, the Captain needed no words to trade for necessary provisions. Each party tried to have the advantage over the other during this unique economic exchange.

The Captain had us open the goods. Standing in front of the shelter, he picked from the articles brought and placed before him, holding up his fingers for as many fathoms of cloth as he would give for a hog; an ax for so many chickens; or a musket, powder, fish hooks, or whatsoever we had to trade, for so much of this or that. Sometimes, when measuring the cloth, one fellow would slyly catch the end hanging down and give it a pull, to have it slip through my hands and get a bit more. I was chosen by the Captain to measure, I suppose, on account of my arms being the shortest. He almost always had me do it, and not any of the other boat-steerers: and when a native tried to pull on me he never got a bit more than belonged to him—I looked out for that.¹¹

Haley's list of goods obtained from the Natives included hogs, ducks, chickens, turkeys, yams, sweet potatoes, coconuts, bananas, oranges, guavas, papayas, pineapples, and shaddocks (grapefruit). Fresh fruit was of particular importance on board a whaling ship, to prevent the development of scurvy amongst the crew.

A captain often had to appease the Native chief or pay for the privilege of anchoring and trading at an island. While at Wangaroa, Captain Folger paid the chief's fee of 12 yards of prints, 3 handkerchiefs, and a jackknife. He paid a King's Fee of "1 piece bleached cloth" while at Rarotonga in May 1848.¹²

The captain sold cloth to the crew for their use on shore. Nelson Haley remembered the storage of cloth in casks, brought out the day before liberty at Rotumah. Twenty-five cents per yard was a very common price for cloth: probably at least twice what was paid originally.

The day before the first watch went on shore for twenty-four hours' liberty, the cask that held the calico that was used by the men to trade with the natives for shells, fruit, and other things was hoisted on deck, and the head from it removed. Each man was allowed so many yards at the rate of twenty-five cents per yard. This he was charged with by the captain in a book, to be settled for at the end of the voyage. The men could dispose of their cloth in one day or they could make it last for the two-days' liberty, as it would be all the liberty money they could get, with a couple of pounds of tobacco to each one. Tobacco and cloth were about the only trade used at this place.¹³

Later he notes, "The officers and boat-steerers could take as much calico and tobacco as they saw fit, at the same terms."¹⁴ Officers and boatsteerers received larger amounts due to their higher status on board ship.

John Akin, on board the *Virginia*, gives this description of his fellow crew members at "Guam Ladronne Isl" in April of 1846, with these wonderful words, "it is quite a sight to see the people

¹¹ Ibid., 92-93.

¹² Account Book, *Alpha*, 1846-1850.

¹³ Haley, *Whale Hunt*, 255.

¹⁴ Ibid., 256.

from the ship going on liberty with a roll of calico and yard stick under their arm. Their yard sticks are apt to get quite short at the end of trade.”

We once more make our appearance at the Ladrões or Guam. We have 1000 barrels oil to cooper and then we shall take a cow a piece or them that likes to ride, for the Town it is 4 miles distant from the point where we land. There are two other towns but not so large. First is Suma, 1 mile from the Ship, 2nd is Ascot 3 miles. I visited them all and was much pleased with the appearance, manners and customs of the people. It is quite a sight to see the people from the ship going on liberty with a roll of calico and yard stick under their arm. Their yard sticks are apt to get quite short at the end of trade.¹⁵

What the sailors could do with their few yards of fabric and a yardstick depended upon where the captain decided to stop. Whaling ships could anchor in a bustling harbor or land a boat on the beach of a small island. Liberty at larger ports frequented by American and European vessels offered the sailors alcohol and female companionship.

In smaller harbors, shells and fruit may have been all that was available. On February 8, 1850, William Wilson, on the *Cavalier* out of Stonington, Connecticut “. . . gave [indecipherable name] a woolen shirt and his wife a piece of calico—they were well pleased.”¹⁶

Wilson recorded his slop records in the back of his journal, which included the purchase of 48 3/8 yards of calico in July 1847 and an additional purchase of 8 yards of calico in 1849. Interestingly, in 1847 the cloth was valued at 20 cents per yard, while in 1849 the price was 12 1/2 cents a yard.¹⁷ The lengthening voyage may have persuaded the captain to decrease the price of cloth—it would be poor business to arrive back home with leftover material.

Just imagine being on a whaling ship—thirty-odd men in very limited space, surrounded by water and sky, eating salt pork and hard tack at every meal, employed at the monotonous or dangerous work of the ship, sometimes sailing for weeks without the relief of sighting a whale, another ship, or even a change of weather. Fresh food, clean water, new faces, the smell of land, a chance to walk around to see new sights—sailors wanted to enjoy themselves during their liberty. Whalers, in their journals, expressed a wide variety of opinions as to what would constitute enjoyment.

John Winslow, on the *Wave*, bemoaned the presence of women when in harbor in 1852. While this quote is from the island of Madagascar, it supports information about whalers paying for sexual favours in the Pacific; a subject difficult to find in primary sources.

“. . . [T]he last of the princesses left us to night and the ladies of pleasure and I am very glad to see them go for they are as dark as midnight and for 2 yard of 5 cent

¹⁵ John Akin, *Journal, Virginia*, 1843-1847, Log 407, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Mass., Monday, April 14, 1845, 107.

¹⁶ William W. Wilson, *Journal, Cavalier*, 1848-1850, Log 18, G. W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Conn.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, March 3, 1850, and un-numbered pages.

cotton they afford all their charms which are verry few as I wish for none of them neither princess nor subjects.”¹⁸

What did the Native populations of the Pacific do with the cotton cloth, calico, blue drill, drillings, fancy prints, and furniture prints provided by American whaling ships? Melville’s wonderful image of a “slender dandy” on the island of Tahiti describes how one young Native man used foreign cloth as decorative clothing.

As the evening advanced, other members of the household, whom as yet we had not seen, began to drop in. There was a slender young dandy in a gay striped shirt, and whole fathoms of bright figured calico tucked around his waist, and falling to the ground.¹⁹

Nelson Haley was entertained at Rotumah in a house

of such size it might denote the person living there to be a chief, or some high cockalorum. . . . The curtains in this house were of the most alarming pattern, of impossible flowers and birds, done in red and blue, that would frighten an artist out of his boots but was well chosen by some whaling captain to fetch more hogs and other recruits per yard than the finest silk would here.”²⁰

This fabric was probably a “furniture print” referenced in the pre-printed outfitting books discussed earlier.

John Perkins found women in “a long loose gown from the shoulders to the ankles of ‘tapa’ or calico if they can get it” while at Byron’s Bay.²¹ Herman Melville’s narrator in *Omoo* used a calico curtain behind which he changed into a new suit of sailor’s clothes provided by his Tahitian hostess.²² Tapa cloth and “a strip of scarlet cloth of European manufacture” embellished a broken war-club in *Typee*. Tommo explained, “It required little observation to discover that this strange object was revered as a god.”²³

Sailors most commonly recorded Native people wearing bartered cloth in what they – the sailors—perceived as pieces of clothing. These two groups of people had very different concepts of appropriate body coverings. Native men in the Marquesas dressed “with a long piece of gay calico wound around the waist & hanging over the shoulder.”²⁴ In 1872, Mrs. Daniel Ricketson noted in her journal that the men on the island of Bouton (Celebes) “wear nothing but a peace of cloth round them. The chieftain and his son wears considerable clothing made of bright red cloth.”²⁵ According to Tommo in *Typee*, Natives draped fabric around the body, hanging it from

¹⁸ John Winslow, *Journal, Wave*, Providence Public Library, Providence, R.I., quoted in Briton Cooper Busch, “Whaling Will Never Do For Me”: *The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 143.

¹⁹ Herman Melville, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventure in the South Seas* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1996), 274.

²⁰ Haley, *Whale Hunt*, 257-258.

²¹ John T. Perkins, *John T. Perkins’ Journal at Sea*, 1845 (Mystic, Conn.: Marine Historical Association, 1934), 145-46. The Marine Historical Association is now Mystic Seaport Museum.

²² Melville, *Omoo*, 274.

²³ Melville, *Typee*, 213.

²⁴ Perkins, *John T. Perkins’ Journal at Sea*, 145.

²⁵ Mrs. Daniel Ricketson, *Mrs. Ricketson’s Whaling Journal, 1871-1874* (New Bedford: Old Dartmouth Historical Society, 1958), 29.

shoulders or fastened around the waist, “after their own peculiar fashion”. At Nukahiva, he observed that

“there were few things of any kind to be seen of European origin, . . . Among these I perceived the two pieces of cotton-cloth which poor Toby and myself had bestowed upon our youthful guides the afternoon we entered the island. They were evidently reserved for gala days: and during those of the festival they rendered the young islanders who wore them very distinguished characters.”²⁶

Melville understood that contact between native cultures and those of western visitors changed the indigenous populations, not necessarily for the better. He later wrote :

Except where the employment of making ‘tappa’ is inflicted as a punishment, the echoes of the cloth-mallet have long since died away in the listless Valleys of Tahiti. Formerly, the girls spent their mornings like ladies at their tambour frames; now, they are lounged away in almost utter indolence. True, most of them make their own garments; but this comprises but a stitch or two; the ladies of the mission, by the by, being entitled to the credit of teaching them to sew.²⁷

Nature gave to the people of the Pacific seemingly everything necessary for a life in paradise. As Greg Denning eloquently discusses in *Islands and Beaches*, the disappearance of a cultural institution or industry, such as the manufacture and use of tapa cloth, changed more than just the way in which the Natives of the Marquesas Islands dressed. It changed their use of time and space, their ceremonial customs, and ultimately their self-identity.²⁸ This same idea can be applied to the other Pacific islands visited by American whalers, where the introduction of foreign commodities such as fabric formed new, different cultural values for the Native populations and redefined their concepts of identity, ownership, and property.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how cloth played an important role in the economic structure found on American whaling ships. Cheap to buy and able to be stored for long periods of time in a hot and damp environment, cotton cloth fulfilled the needs of a whaling ship’s investors, captain and crew. Cloth was traded by all on board, for everything needed for a successful voyage, from wood and water to fruits and vegetables—for the goodwill of a Native chief or the companionship of a woman. This adaptable value of the fabric made it an ideal supply to take to the Pacific Ocean and created an economic system in which the trade cloth was regarded as specie—like money.

Cloth, along with tobacco and other goods, had a value defined by all parties involved in these unique economic transactions. The exchange of cloth for a wide variety of goods and services points to a flexible economic system, one that changed from one island to the next and one ship to the next. The ability to barter the fabric for needed supplies enabled the American whaling industry to prosper even when thousand of miles from home.

²⁶ Melville, *Typee*, 223-224.

²⁷ Melville, *Omoo*, 183.

²⁸ Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774-1880* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980).