

Levi Dukes and Caroline Whaling

Levi Dukes was born and raised at Plain Dealing plantation, the former Caroline County “alms house” for the poor at the end of 5th Street in Denton.

Unfortunately, the manor house was in poor condition and was demolished in 2017. Before the demolition, the Caroline County Historical Society removed the historic stairhall (c. 1792) for installation in their Denton museum.

Levi’s father was a whaling boat captain and as a child he accompanied his father on his voyages. But both his father and mother died young, and Levi was left to live with his stepmother and other siblings.

So, as a teenager, Levi signed on and served in the U.S. Navy where he saw action during the attack on Vera Cruz in the Mexican War.

Ten years later Levi Dukes was asked to command a whaling voyage that began in Caroline County in 1856. The venture was backed by a group of Eastern Shore investors, including himself.

So, where do you find a whaling vessel? Well, turns out that down at Jamaica Point, past Suicide Bridge on the Talbot County side of the river, the Hewletts operated a ship building yard.

The Hewletts were originally from Greensboro, involved in shipping goods across the peninsula to Philadelphia. But when the local economy crashed they relocated to Talbot County to start building ships. They built a brig, a two-masted square-rigged vessel, for the adventure.

Well, where do you get crew for a whaling voyage on the Eastern Shore of Maryland? We know that he signed up two African-American sailors from Tuckahoe Neck. We believe that one of them was one of the Taylors who owned our museum house at one point. He also signed up a young man from Preston, a member of the Williams family, and a runaway boy apparently from Delaware.

Levi took the ship from the Choptank River, out of the Chesapeake Bay up to Buzzards Bay, which is off Massachusetts. There he was able to enlist more crew members. He took some of what are called “square-head shellbacks,” who are Germans and Swedes who live in the New Bedford area and are veterans of various whaling expeditions. He also picked up a Gay Head sailor on Martha's Vineyard.

Now with more of a crew, Levi set out for Europe and then to the Azores where he Wills out his crew with Portuguese sailors, then continues down the coast of Africa. He goes around the Cape of Good Hope and into the Indian Ocean, crossing to the Sunda Straits past Indonesia and the Java Sea, entering into the PaciWic Ocean.

Finally, now in the PaciWic Ocean, they start whaling. They went from Java Head all the way up to Shanghai and back down again. They're very successful and loaded the ship with whale oil. But just as they're ready to start back, they're caught in a typhoon.

When the typhoon is over, they find they've been blown into French Polynesia, speciWically beside the island of Hiva Oa, the second largest island in the Marquesas Islands.

The Marquesas Islands had a notorious reputation for cannibals. Ten years before Levi's whaling adventure, Herman Melville wrote a book called *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, Melville's most popular fictional work during his lifetime. It made him notorious as the "man who lived among the cannibals."

In the book the main character is captured by the natives of the Marquesas Islands and he spends all of his time worrying about being eaten. For instance, he notices three bags hanging from the roof of a hut and asks what's in them. They say, "Oh, sort of nothing." One day he sees them open and there are three heads inside. One of them is a white man's head. So he worries a lot about that.

Melville really put the Marquesas on the maps in terms of cannibalism. His 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*, was based on an actual whaling venture gone wrong. In 1820 the whaling ship *Essex* was struck by a sperm whale and sunk. They're close to the Marquesas Islands, but they don't go there because they're afraid of cannibals. Ironically, the survivors of their harrowing months-long voyage ended up eating each other.

So, Levi's crew don't want to get caught on Hiva Oa.

I should add that a prominent anthropologist made a fairly thorough study of whether cannibalism existed in the Marquesas, and in what form. In 1910 the anthropologist described the process.

They would break your legs, so you couldn't run. They would break your arms, so you couldn't resist. And then they would sit beside you and let you contemplate what's going to happen.

Then they'd skewer you and roast you.

So Levi didn't want to land on Hiva Oa, but they didn't have many options. Their sails had blown off, and they were Wloating into the reef. Natives came out on the beach dancing around with spears and clubs and Levi said it really looked like trouble. The crew managed to take a couple of small sails and strung them from what was left of the mast. It blew them back out to sea and they were able to escape the cannibals.

Their whaling had come to an end, but they were able to retrace their steps, back around the Cape of Good Hope to the Azores where they dropped off most of the crew. Back in New Bedford they unloaded their shipment of oil. A somewhat successful and harrowing adventure.

A little postscript on this story. In his later years, Levi Dukes was known as a great teller of tales. He would hold court on a steamboat called *The Mini Wheeler* that used to operate in the Tuckahoe and the Choptank Rivers. Each time he told his story of the great whaling adventure his stories seemed to become a little bit more embellished.

He would tell stories about how he caught a 1,200-pound turtle and made a turtle pie out of it. And how he knew the natives on the beach were cannibals — they had a big pot of boiling water out there ready for dinner.

In the Winal rendition of his story, he said the more he talked, the more his wife tried to change the subject. So, uh, some things haven't changed.