

- Fijian *Tabuas*
- Tracking A *Tabua*
- Sperm Whale Teeth

# Scrimshaw Observer

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## Introduction: Fijian *Tabuas* and Two Famous Scrimshaw Artists<sup>1</sup>

by Stuart M. Frank

The *tabua* (pronounced *TOM-bwa*, in two syllables, not three) is a ceremonial object traditionally made and cherished by Fiji islanders: a whole sperm whale tooth, highly polished, characteristically crudely incised and pigmented with letters from the Latin alphabet, and always with piercings drilled at each end to attach a necklace of braided sinnet fiber. The tooth would thus hang horizontally if worn by a Fijian man on a ceremonial or ritual occasion. The typical *tabua* is inscribed with what appear to outsiders as random, haphazard sequences of letters: their significance or meaning, if any, is evidently unknown even to the Fiji Museum or its renowned former curator, Fergus Clunie, who catalogued the collection and has been the outstanding authority

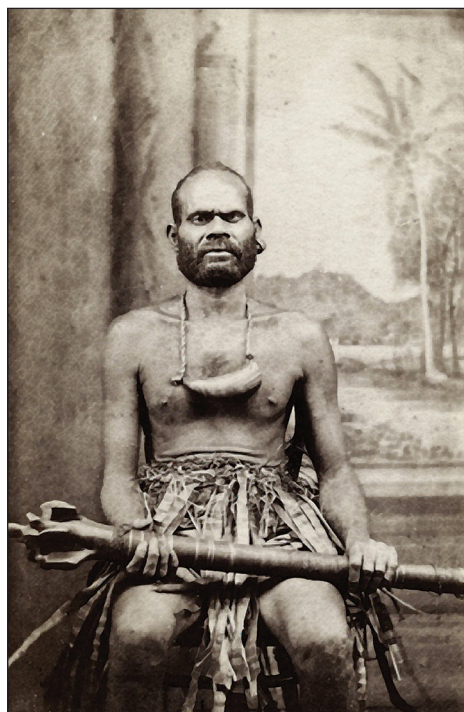
on the indigenous arts and weaponry of Fiji and Tonga.<sup>2</sup> The polished, incised tooth is routinely darkened to a soft amber or sienna color by the application of oils, and allegedly further darkened and patinated by repeated exposure to traditional council fires. Traditionally, the *tabua* is the single most valuable Fijian possession, signifying wealth and position, a trade commodity used as collateral for all manner of transactions, as a dowry for a marriage, for the purchase of property or livestock, and as a reward for valor in warfare or some extraordinary service to a Native of high standing or a distinguished foreigner.

As the Fijians were not whale hunters themselves, prior to contact with foreign visitors to the Pacific whale teeth were presumably extracted from stranded and drift carcasses. But beginning in the late 18th century and throughout the 19th, they were typically acquired by barter from British and especially American whalers and China traders. Whalers, by the time they reached Fiji, could be counted upon to have some whale teeth already on hand. As Mary Malloy explains in her article, for China traders whale teeth were a means of procuring *bêche de mer* ("sea cucumbers") and sandalwood that could be traded on the Canton market for Chinese silks, porcelain, and tea.<sup>3</sup>

"A Fijian warrior from the highlands wearing a *tabua*." Studio photograph, dated 1873. The *tabua* was "normally an important item of presentation, not an ornament"; pictures of Fijians actually wearing them are extremely rare. *Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, England*



Fijian *tabua* (pendant whale tooth) on its indigenous sinnet-fiber necklace. Photo by Richard Donnelly. Kendall Collection, New Bedford Whaling Museum.



There are myriad stories of *tabuas* being presented to outlanders for services rendered, and to dignitaries on account of their exalted status. Teeth with whalers' scrimshawed pictures were sometimes bartered away to Fijians because the teeth themselves were so valuable there, and the Fijians converted them to *tabuas*; there are also whale teeth that were originally Fijian *tabuas* and were subsequently engraved by whalers. In articles in this issue, Daniel Elias discusses an outstanding specimen that was engraved by the Britannia Engraver or Edward Burdett, and Mary Malloy traces the context of another that was scrimshawed by William Sizer (formerly known as the *L.C. Richmond* Engraver until his identity was established a decade ago).

In 1826, when Britannia, Edward Burdett, and William Sizer were still actively whaling, Nantucket whaler William S. Cary (1804-1883) was shipwrecked in Fiji, the

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### A Word from the Editor

Thanks to the longstanding expertise of Daniel Elias and Mary Malloy, we are able again to present an issue with an actual theme, this time having to do with the relationship among whalemen's scrimshaw, the Pacific trade in sperm whale teeth, and the indigenous Fijian tabua. It features teeth by two famous American scrimshaw artists and, surprisingly, two native Fijian whalemén-turned-Methodist missionaries, with some substantial background highlights that we hope will prove informative and useful. There's also some follow-up related to the previous issue.

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sole survivor of the massacred crew of the ship *Oeno* of Nantucket. He was rescued by a Native chief and eventually formed an *ad hoc* partnership with fellow-Nantucketer David Whippy (1802-1871), who had been abandoned there by a trading vessel in 1824. The partners imported and accumulated whale teeth, exported sandalwood and *bêche de mer* for the China trade, and functioned as intermediaries, translators, barter merchants, retailers, and mercenaries for the Natives and visiting mariners, receiving a portion of their payment in the form of sperm whale teeth.

Cary returned to Massachusetts in 1833, but Whippy continued on alone in Fiji until the end of his days.<sup>4</sup> This would have made a plausible conduit for whale teeth to fall into Fijian hands, and perhaps for *tabuas* to be traded in the other direction.

Following the two articles about Anglo-American scrimshaw on Fijian *tabuas*, is a note about *tabuas* bearing the names of three Fijians — two of them probably sometime whalemén — who became active as Methodist missionaries in the Fiji Islands.

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 Extracted and revised from my *Biographical Dictionary of Scrimshaw Artists*, MS in progress © 2021.
- 2 Fergus Clunie, *Fijian Weapons and Warfare*, Bulletin of the Fiji Museum N° 2, 1977. *Tabuas* are examined in intricate detail by Clunie and others in a special issue of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* entitled "Tabua and Tapua: Whale Teeth in Fiji and Tonga," Vol. 122, N° 2, June 2013.
- 3 See my "The Origins of Engraved Pictorial Scrimshaw," *The Magazine Antiques*, 142:4 (New York, October 1992), pp. 510-521. Also: Mary Malloy, "Boston Men" on the Northwest Coast: *The American Maritime Fur Trade* (Kingston, Ontario and Fairbanks, Alaska: Limestone Press / University of Alaska Press, 1998), *passim*.
- 4 The *Oeno* had "struck a coral reef and ran aground on the remote Fijian island of Vaoa. A raiding party of Fijian warriors... killed all of the twenty-one members of the crew but Cary, who survived by hiding in a seaside cave for two days. A Vatoan head-man discovered the stranded sailor, took pity on him, and welcomed Cary to his village" (Edward D. Melillo, "Making Sea Cucumbers Out of Whales' Teeth: Nantucket Castaways and Encounters of Value in Nineteenth-Century Fiji," *Environmental History*, 20, April 2015, p. 450). Whippy was a seaman in the merchant brig *Calder* whom Captain Peter Dillon "deposited... on a Fijian beach to gather tortoise shell, mother-of-pearl, and sandalwood for sale at the bustling entrepôts of Canton and Manila" (*Loc.cit.*). Leaving a man or even an entire boat crew for later pickup on some remote island to gather marketable goods was a common practice in the hunting-and-gathering trades at the time and became fairly standard in the sealing business of New London and Long Island. However, Dillon failed to return to Fiji for *thirteen years*, "leaving Whippy to fend for himself": in 1826 he had discovered the wrecked ships of the missing French explorer La Perouse on the island of Vanikoro, and had sailed with the news to Calcutta; and so on (*Loc.cit.*). By that time, Cary had left Fiji in the schooner *Tybee* of Salem (*Ibid.*, p. 464). His narrative, based on his journal, was published as *Wrecked on the Feejees: Experience of a Nantucket man a century ago, who was sole survivor of whaleship "Oeno" and lived for nine years among the cannibals of South Sea Islands* (Nantucket, 1922 and 1928).

## From One Island to Another: Tracking a *Tabua* / Scrimshaw from Fiji to Nantucket by Daniel Elias

In the summer of 2002, at the Tucson stop of *Antiques Roadshow*, a local woman presented a piece of scrimshaw for appraisal. The tooth had been in her family and bore images of a ship and an inscription, "Origion of Fairhaven / Commanded by John Bunker / September 27, 1827." Appraiser Wayne Pratt of Nantucket and Connecticut sat with Lisa Hulette and told her several things about the tooth. He said, first, that it was beautifully and deeply carved, secondly, that it was a

very early date for an American whale tooth, if it should prove to be such. Pratt also put a very high range of value on the tooth: \$75,000 – 125,000, more than almost any other tooth had sold for at auction to that date, save the teeth depicting Darwin's *Beagle* voyage<sup>1</sup> and perhaps a few *Susan's* teeth by Frederick Myrick of Nantucket.

Subsequent investigation places the tooth at the highest levels of the scrimshander's art, at a date critical to the development of

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## From One Island to Another *continued from Page 2*

American scrimshaw [Figs. 1-3]. Beyond that, though, it opens a vista into economic relations and cultural distortions introduced by triangular trade practices involving Pacific commodity producers, American shipping, and the economic powerhouse that was China in the early 19th century. Diving even deeper into the pathway by which this particular tooth came into Lisa Hulette's family, the tooth illuminates political changes wrought by the conjoined impact of rapacious capitalism and Protestant Christianity on an island nation.

The tooth was initially thought to be by Edward Burdett (1805-1833) of Nantucket; however, Judge Paul Vardeman has provisionally assigned this *Roadshow* tooth to the Britannia Engraver, an as-yet-unidentified British scrimshaw artist who likely had a role in teaching or exemplifying scrimshaw techniques to Burdett, as their styles are markedly similar. The date inscribed on the tooth pinpoints it at a moment when Burdett was producing his very first works of art, possibly on board the *Japan*, as described by Vardeman in 2014.<sup>2</sup> A related *Origion* tooth, also ascribed to the Britannia Engraver by Vardeman, exists in the collection of the Bostonian Society, now on deposit at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts [Fig. 5-6].<sup>3</sup>

The subject tooth is decorated with a typical scheme, the ship depicted on one side with boats lowered and engaged with a pod of whales [Fig. 1], and on the reverse with sails backed, cutting-in-



**Fig. 1:** Fijian tabua / Ship *Origion* of Fairhaven: The Chase. Photograph courtesy Nantucket Historical Association. Collection of Janet & Rick Sherlund.



**Fig. 2:** Fijian tabua / Ship *Origion* of Fairhaven: Cutting-In. Photograph courtesy Nantucket Historical Association. Collection of Janet & Rick Sherlund.

to starboard [Fig. 2]. American flags are shown in both views. Gripes — light ropes securing whaleboats from swinging under their davits and which Vardeman mentions as uniquely the mark

of Edward Burdett — are shown on the stowed whaleboat aft. The carving is deep, with laurel garlands encircling both ends, at the tip of the tooth with dots between the leaves, at the base without dots. A laurel garland underlines the inscription carved across the bottom face of the tooth, which is also bracketed left and right with sets of concentric arcs, with very light tick marks between every word [Fig. 3]. PEM's *Origion* tooth shows more highly developed floral clusters, a double wreath of laurel garland at the tip, with



**Fig. 3:** Fijian tabua / Ship *Origion* of Fairhaven: Inscription "Origion OF Fairhaven / Commanded BY John Bunker / September 27-1827." Photograph courtesy Nantucket Historical Association. Collection of Janet & Rick Sherlund.

dots between all laurel leaves at both ends and between each word of the inscription. The strokes defining ocean waves on both teeth are sinuous, rather than the simple arcs found on the *Japan* tooth described by Vardeman, and gripes are shown holding the whaleboat on PEM's tooth as well.

It is tempting to think that this *Roadshow* tooth must have been made within a few months of an imagined meeting between Edward Burdett and the Britannia Engraver, launching Burdett's scrimshaw career.

Beyond the importance of the tooth's esthetics and authorship by a known, early, and talented scrimshander, it bears two holes drilled in the top face and a honey-colored surface that identify it as a *tabua* [Fig. 4], the embodiment of ultimate spiritual and political power in Fiji, an archipelago of some 350 islands in the western Pacific. The gift of a single *tabua* at this date could command allegiance in war, assassination of an enemy, the marriage of a daughter, a ship-full of provisions, or any other commodity or service available in the archipelago. Prior to the arrival of whalers at the end of the 18th century, drift whales and stranded carcasses were the only source of sperm whales teeth; chiefs monopolized these rare symbols of power.



**Fig. 4:** Fijian tabua / Ship *Origion* of Fairhaven: Top surface, showing the holes drilled for a *tabua*. Photograph courtesy Nantucket Historical Association. Collection of Janet & Rick Sherlund.

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Fig. 5: Ship *Orizon* by Edward Burdett, verso:cutting-in. Image courtesy Peabody Essex Museum and Revolutionary Spaces.



Fig. 6: Ship *Orizon* by Edward Burdett, bottom: inscription "Orizon OF Fairhaven." Image courtesy Peabody Essex Museum and Revolutionary Spaces.

At this period worldwide whaling was increasingly focused on spermaceti oil, extracted from sperm whales. A clean-burning fuel in its raw state, it could also be processed into candles, which were more easily stored and shipped than the original oil. These portable spermaceti products were exported to light the brick and brown-stone row houses of the developing upper and middle classes in England and America, and formed the basis of the greatest fortunes accumulated in Nantucket and other New England whaling ports. The recently opened Offshore and Japan whaling grounds were rich in sperm whales, and teeth were a byproduct, available for scrimshaw, but also for trade with Fijians.

Hybrid *tabua* / scrimshaw teeth such as this one are known, though relatively rare (see Mary Malloy's article in this issue). The Peabody Essex Museum and the British Museum each have hybrid teeth which appear to be partially finished scrimshaw traded into Fiji to become *tabua*, and then collected out of Fiji again late in the 19th century by a British colonial administrator, J.S. Udall [Fig. 9]. It has been assumed that such a course was the rule for hybrid teeth, given their importance in traditional Fijian culture, politics and economy. However, the subject tooth

is the only one to have been produced at such an early date, and one of only two known by important scrimshaw artists. Its quality as a masterwork of sailors' art, in comparison to the unfinished nature of other hybrid teeth, put this tooth at the very top end of the range of this select group of *tabua* / scrimshaw.

Lisa Hulet provided a detailed family history: she is a direct descendant of the captain named in the inscription, John Bunker (born on Nantucket, 1784; died in Fairhaven, 1855), through his daughter, Rebecca Bunker Kilton. The tooth had been in the family ever since, passed down, often from mother to daughter, through the generations. She also mentioned her mother's brother, who had knocked a chunk off the tooth while playing with it as a boy; and that her grandfather was a packet boat captain on the San Francisco run at the turn of the last century.

It is Hulet's family history that makes this tooth a powerful lens through which to view events in the Pacific islands during the 19th century. The fact of its descent to Hulet through the family of the captain named in the inscription proves a curious case: that it was a *tabua* first, and only later carved by a British or American hand. A transaction such as this is unexpected for all of the reasons already quoted about value in Fiji; more so at such an early date. Unpacking the meaning of that exchange adds a wealth of detail to understanding of the powerful influences at work in the Pacific during the 19th century.

European naval powers long sought to monopolize access to the riches of the Pacific Ocean, through control of the waters off the two Capes — the Cape of Good Hope at the southern extremity of Africa, and Cape Horn in South America — which mark the limits of the Atlantic. Closed to other European countries and their colonies by Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries, and by the British once England's navy took military control of

the oceans in the 18th century, the Pacific remained off-limits to American colonists because of a royal monopoly granted to the British East India Company. Following the American Revolution, however, newly independent Americans flooded into the Pacific to exploit untapped sources of wealth, including whale oil, and to build a vast river of trade with China.

Western markets had been fascinated with Chinese tea, ceramics, silks, and other fine manufactured goods since Marco Polo first established the Silk Road.<sup>4</sup> Finding what China wanted in exchange became a quick path to riches. British and American traders fanned out across the Pacific chasing a range of luxury commodities including sea otter skins, turtle shell, sandalwood, and *bêche de mer* — sea cucumbers. One or two cargoes of these precious goods could make a fortune for those lucky enough to own a share of the voyages, in some cases changing their lives forever. The effects on local island people throughout the Pacific were as sudden, and brought change too, though of a different character. Stranded or disaffected sailors, termed *beachcombers*, became important links between locals who knew where resources could be found, and captains who could transport them to markets where they were most valuable.

In addition to the *Orizon*, teeth by Burdett and the Britannia Engraver bear images of American and British whalers *William Tell*, *William Thompson*, *Daniel IV*, *Elizabeth*, *Charles*, *Ranger*, *George and Susan*, *Pacific*, and the trading vessels *Chinchilla* and *Tamaahmaah* [Figs. 5-6]. These last two vessels, commanded by the Meek brothers of Salem, Massachusetts, appear on a single tooth attributed to the Britannia Engraver in the PEM collection, and are of particular interest here.<sup>5</sup>

A maroon narrative titled *Wrecked on the Feejees*, written by Nantucketer William Cary (1804-1883), was published by the *Nantucket Journal* as a weekly serial during July and August of 1887, following its discovery in a fish-house below the bluff in Siasconset, a village on the eastern shore of Nantucket. It tells the story of Cary, a whaleman, stranded in Fiji when his ship, the *Oeno*, foundered and the rest of the crew were killed by Tongan warriors carrying out a raid against a Fijian island. Cary describes



experiences under the protection of local chieftains, his thoroughly unexpected meeting with Nantucket childhood playmate David Whippy, and their subsequent adventures over the course of several years, until Cary found his way back to Nantucket in the 1830s.

David Whippy (1801-1871) had set out from Nantucket on a whaling voyage nearly ten years earlier. Though a Nantucketer, he didn't take to the life of a whaler, jumped ship, and found a permanent home in Fiji. He made himself useful to local chieftains and to captains of whaling and trading ships landing there, as interpreter, advisor, and pilot, facilitating and trading in both sandalwood (already scarce and soon extinct in Fiji) and sea cucumbers, or *bêche de mer*, an unassuming creature of the shallow ocean floor. Both of these commodities, in high demand in China, were eagerly sought by New England traders, among others, with disastrous results for the ecosystems they inhabited. The *Tamaahmaah* and *Chinchilla* were both *bêche de mer* trading vessels.



**Fig. 7:** Brig *Tamaahmaah* of New York, John Meek, commander. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum of Salem.



**Fig. 8:** Brigantine *Chinchilla* of New York, Thomas Meek, commander. Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum of Salem.

Gathering and preparing *bêche de mer* is highly labor-intensive. The effort required to harvest the animals from the seabed, clean them, cut and transport large quantities of firewood to boil, smoke and dry them, and to build temporary factories to prevent rain from wrecking the crop during the lengthy process, required an army of local workers. Whippy, as a permanent resident of the islands and under protection of an important chief, was able to marshal the necessary labor to prosecute the business, and had the language and negotiating skills necessary to communicate with the trading and whaling fleets.

Working as a fixer in the affairs of European and American traders, Whippy had access to muskets, powder, and ball, and earned his keep locally as a mercenary, helping chiefs rout their local rivals. Fijian society was warlike in the extreme, with a vast catalog of spear and mace forms (including spears shaped like

squids and clubs like flowers), so lethal skills and equipment were in high demand.

Cary details life in Fiji. He explains the process of curing and packing *bêche de mer*. He gams with — and occasionally sails on short cruises with — crews of the *Quill*, under Captain Kinsman; *Glide*, Captain Henry Archer; and the *Clay*, Captain Benjamin Vandeford, all *bêche de mer* and sandalwood traders out of Salem, Massachusetts, among others. He recounts multiple battles in which he and Whippy fought on behalf of one or another chief. In Chapter VI, describing events of March 1828, he recounts a transaction that, only a few months earlier, could have provided the scrimshander with the *Roadshow* tooth: “We killed all who had not made their escape, plundered the town and set it on fire, then marched back to Navario, singing songs of victory. Here we were paid for our services with hogs, turtle, fishing nets and whale’s teeth.”

With this scene sketched out by Cary, and by following Whippy’s subsequent career and the people and events with whom he was associated through five decades of life on the islands, it is possible to observe much of the complicated dynamic of foreign arrivals in the Pacific. Through the 19th century, nearby Tonga developed better trade relationships with visiting mariners, as evidenced by their nickname, “the Friendly Islands,” in contrast to Fiji’s “the Cannibal Islands.” With a ready supply of sperm whale teeth to purchase allegiance, Tongans made common cause with the poorer, highland tribes of the larger Fijian islands, against the wealthier coastal elites. Western diseases arrived and decimated the population.

The explosive emergence of a commodity market economy in cotton and sugar during the mid-19th century resulted in enslavement of much of the population by British and other Western businesses. Loss of political and religious authority, combined with frequent epidemics of novel diseases brought from afar, destabilized the government, and forced David Whippy’s patron, self-styled King Cakobau,<sup>6</sup> to cede Fijian sovereignty to Britain in the 1870s. Ultimately, the British “pacified” the hill tribes through a series of massacres, and imported laborers from India and elsewhere, further reducing the power of indigenous Fijians and reshaping the political culture of the island nation to facilitate their mercantile ends.

This story, of a single, extraordinary whale tooth and the history it reveals, displays the impacts of rapacious capitalism, imposed Protestant Christian values and introduced diseases on an island nation. It is striking that even this most warlike and threatening of island cultures, with a proven reputation for cannibalism, an unmatched armory of fearsome weaponry, and a culture that celebrated war and domination above all other pursuits, was unable to prevent economic and spiritual capture by the capitalist and Protestant Christian systems of cultural domination engendered across the Pacific during the 19th century by Europeans and European Americans.

*Dan Elias is well known to most of us as the former host of Antiques Roadshow on PBS. He was later on the curatorial staff of the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem, and more recently was chief curator of the Nantucket Historical Association. He continues to keep a thumb on the pulse of the world of marine antiques. Coincidentally, he was one of Mary Malloy’s grad students in museum studies at Harvard.*

## From One Island to Another *continued from Page 5*

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Several teeth were scrimshandered aboard HMS *Beagle* by James Adolphus Bute (1900-1877), a Royal Marine on the *Beagle*'s 1831-36 voyage, commanded by Robert FitzRoy (1805-1865). On the *Beagle*, FitzRoy conducted horological, meteorological, and hydrographic studies for the Royal Navy, while Charles Darwin (1809-1882), whom FitzRoy had invited to accompany him on the voyage, developed the materials that led to his *Origin of Species* (1859). At least seven, possibly eight *Beagle* teeth are known, each labeled and signed "J.A. Bute," illustrating various episodes of the voyage. Two specimens were reported by Alan Granby; others have been identified in the William J. Boylhart Collection; the St. Andrews Preservation Trust Museum in Scotland (reported by Michael Gerstein); Sotheby's London, Dec. 2, 2003, #224; Bonham's London, Sept. 126, 2009, #192; and a private collection (reported by Parke Madden in 2020). —SMF
- 2 Paul E. Vardeman, "The Britannia Engraver and Edward Burdett," 26th annual Scrimshaw Weekend, New Bedford Whaling Museum, May 17, 2014. —SMF
- 3 In the course of researching this tooth, previously unknown crew lists from the inception and completion of the *Orion*'s 1825-29 voyage were located in the National Archives and Records Administration, Waltham, Massachusetts and forwarded to Whalinghistory.org, where they will be made available to the public. —DE
- 4 The *Travels* of the Venetian explorer Marco Polo (1254-1324) on the Silk Road to China (1271-95) were published circa 1300. —SMF
- 5 The *Chinchilla / Tamaahmaah* tooth, along with a Susan's Tooth by Frederick Myrick, are cryptically listed in the 1831 catalogue of the East India Marine Society (founded 1799; now PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, the first scrimshaw to be accessioned into any institutional collection. —SMF
- 6 Ratu Cakobau is himself directly associated with two *tabuas* and a whale tooth memento; see the article "Three Missionary *Tabuas*," below. —SMF

## Sperm Whale Teeth for Trade in the South Seas and China

by Mary Malloy

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, American ships swarmed into the Pacific in search of whales and resources to trade in China — including seal and sea otter pelts, and sandalwood. In the archi-

pelagos of Fiji and the Marquesas, sandalwood was harvested by the Indigenous people and traded to Yankee ships until the forests were depleted of the aromatic wood. Sperm whale teeth were the most desirable objects of exchange.

The first Americans to learn of the presence of sandalwood in Fiji and its value in China were hunting seals on the coast of Australia. In 1803, Captain Isaac Pendleton of the ship *Union* of New York was convinced by a Sydney merchant to undertake a side-venture to Fiji, where the ship was unfortunately wrecked on a reef with all hands. The owner of the ship, Edmund Fanning — who would become the most active promoter of American ventures in the Pacific — nonetheless immediately sent another ship, the *Hope* to Fiji in 1806 with specific orders to get sandalwood and take it to Canton. Captain Reuben Brumley described in his journal (later published by Fanning) that while small metal goods, bolts of cloth, and other miscellaneous items were used for acquiring provisions,

sandalwood was purchased with glass bottles, adze or hatchet blades called *tokas*, and sperm whale teeth. Known in Fiji as *tabua*, the teeth were drilled to hang across the chest of high ranking individuals, or incorporated into *civitabua*, where the tooth was cut and shaped to fit around a pearl shell as a protective breast plate [Fig. 11-13]. *Tabua* are still used in Fijian ceremonies today, and appear on one of the nation's coins.

Because the early voyages to Fiji used Sydney as a provisioning stop, access to sperm whale teeth was relatively easy. Both American and English ships were hunting whales and seals in the vicinity and several of them participated in the



**Fig. 9:** Sperm whale tooth polychrome engraved by seaman William Sizer (1801-1840) aboard the whaleship *L.C. Richmond* of Bristol, R.I., circa 1835, and later converted to a *tabua* by a Native Fijian, who drilled the ends and crudely inscribed the back with the letters "PIVD." *Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum of Salem, Mass.*

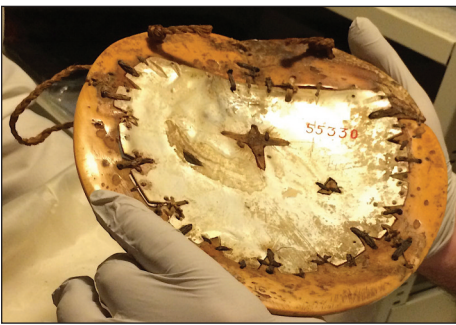


**Fig. 10:** Fijian *tabua* made from a sperm whale tooth previously scrimshawed anonymously with a whaleman's scene of a whaleship cutting-in to starboard, circa 1830. The reverse side has the usual kind of enigmatic inscription by some Fijian hand, in this case "JUNIA TUI." Note the two holes: if the *tabua* were traditionally suspended on a fiber necklace, the scrimshaw would be upside down. *Kendall Collection, New Bedford Whaling Museum.*





**Fig. 11:** Fijian Civitabua. Sperm whale ivory, pearl shell, and iron nails. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.



**Fig. 12:** Reverse side of the Fijian Civitabua. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



**Fig. 13:** Fijian Civitabua. Florence Museum of Anthropology. Photo by Mary Malloy.

sandalwood trade as they transited through the Fijian archipelago enroute to China with sealskins, including the *Favourite* and *Criterion* of Nantucket in 1805, the *Jenny* of Boston in 1807, and the *Eliza* of Providence, R.I. in 1808.

William Lockerby, chief mate of the *Jenny*, described in his journal how negotiations to trade with the local chief at Bua

Bay were opened with the presentation of five sperm whale teeth. When the *Eliza* wrecked on a reef nearby, crewmen from the *Jenny* assisted Captain E.H. Correy in an attempt to recover some of the 20,000 Spanish silver dollars that were his principal cargo for Canton. Nine thousand dollars that had been seized by Fijians was quickly handed over in exchange for sperm whale teeth, which were much more valuable in the local economy than the coins.

In his *History of Fiji* (1946), historian R.A. Derrick wrote, “Fijians would give as much wood for a large tooth as for five or six axes.” According to Derrick, Fijians also prized faux teeth carved from elephant ivory, which were “much in demand,” though he does not give a date for this or document it with an historical source. “The largest of these manufactured teeth procured vast quantities of sandalwood,” he wrote, “and were so highly prized that chiefs would come from distant islands to see them.” Derrick claims to have had in his possession “a large tooth, about two feet long, the property of the late Ratu Tui Savura of Bau. Another, or perhaps the same one, is said to be held by a chief at Tailevu; it is kept in a special box, seldom shown, and credited with magic powers.” Alas, no images or other references to this intriguing object can be found.

When the sandalwood was depleted in Fiji, Americans turned their attention to the Marquesas. The first ship to engage in the trade there was the *Hunter* of Boston, which arrived at Nuku Hiva in March 1811. Captain William Rogers collected 200 tons of sandalwood, and sperm whale teeth were essential in keeping the wood coming and in procuring provisions for the ship. As in Fiji, the teeth were an emblem of rank among the Marquesans and were carved into a number of different ornaments. The *ha’akai*, an ear ornament, continued to show the shape (and bear some of the weight) of the tooth, even after much of it had been carved away [Fig. 14].

The *Hunter* went on to China, and after the cargo was sold, returned immediately to the Marquesas. Having run out of sperm whale teeth, Captain Rogers bought elephant tusks at Canton and set his crew to cutting them into faux teeth en route. Unlike Derrick’s claim for Fiji, the result here was unconvincing. The Marquesans, according to John Child, who kept a journal of the voyage, “tell us our ivory is not good.” Five years later, when the French ship *Bordelais* arrived to trade for sandalwood, the Marquesans were apparently still talking about it, because Camille Roquefeuil wrote in his journal that the elephant ivory, which Rogers’ crew had “fashioned on board into the form of whale’s teeth, not having been able to procure them in sufficient quantities [had] produced him a large profit; but the natives soon discovered it, and cannot now be deceived by it.” (The *Bordelais* had actual sperm whale teeth on board.)

When David Porter, captain of the U.S. naval vessel *Essex*, arrived there during the War of 1812, he encountered Americans involved in the trade. In his journal, which was first published in 1815, he noted that sandalwood was plentiful and that a ship “may be loaded with sandalwood at this island, and the only object of trade necessary to procure it, is ten whales’ teeth of a large size; and for these the natives will cut it, bring it from the distant mountains, and take it on board the ship; and this cargo in China, would be worth near a million of dollars.”

This was a gross exaggeration of the value of both the teeth to the Marquesans, and the sandalwood to the Chinese, and it was coupled with a ridiculous suggestion that teeth could be easily procured in the Galapagos Islands, where Porter had captured a number of English whalerships. Boston merchants eagerly passed on the information nonetheless.



**Fig. 14:** Pair of Marquesan *ha’akai* (ear ornaments). British Museum, London.

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## Sperm Whale Teeth *continued from Page 7*

Captain Samuel Hill of the Boston ship *Ophelia* wrote in his journal in February 1816:

The object of my visit to the Galapagos Islands is to procure whales' teeth, which are said to be found in great numbers on the northern shores of Banks Bay, or the Lee Bay in the Island of Albermarle. If successful in finding a sufficient number of these teeth I shall proceed with them to the Marquesas Islands to procure sandalwood by purchasing it with the teeth.

Bad weather kept Hill from going ashore at the Galapagos, and he never made it to the Marquesas. A few months later in Hawaii he met Captain Isaiah Lewis of the Salem brig *Panther*, who told him that "the eagerness with which [Marquesans] formerly had sought for whales teeth had almost entirely subsided," and "firearms and ammunition were now the articles most in demand." But other ships had already left New England relying on Porter's information.

When the Boston merchants William Bordman and Paschal Pope sent the new ship, *Sultan*, to the Pacific in 1815, they put a box of sperm whale teeth on board for Captain Caleb Reynolds to use in the Marquesas trade: "Whales Teeth are now said to be the best article, & that [sandalwood] cannot be procured at the Marquesas, except for that." But they also told him that at Albermarle Island in the Gallapagos, "we are informed that Whales Teeth may be found on the Beach, buried in the sand, from Whales that die in the Bay, & are driven on shore — or, if that source fails, you will no doubt be able to obtain them from the Whale Ships you will meet about there."

It will be adviseable to obtain of considerable quantity of these Teeth if you can, at a price not very exorbitant, & this you would be most likely to do from the English ships, which would not be so likely to know their value to you, as the Americans for the latter since the publication of Porters Journal, may estimate them at an extravagant price. — They will be serviceable to you, if in the Course of the Voyage,

you visit any of the Islands in the Pacific to procure Sandal Wood, and they will always be useful in procuring provisions there.

A last possible source for the teeth was to buy them back from Indigenous people to whom they had been traded: "Some Whales Teeth were sent in the *Cossack* to the Sandwich Islands to purchase provisions, if the natives have not cut them up you can buy them for a trifle."

Bordman and Pope paid a lot for the box of teeth put aboard in Boston, despite the fact that sperm whaling was a thriving business in the Massachusetts ports of Nantucket and New Bedford. At this time, before scrimshaw became the art of the whalers, the teeth were apparently not being returned to the home ports in any numbers. The last item on the *Sultan's* cargo manifest is "1 Box Contg 48 Whales Teeth 36<sup>lb</sup> 11<sup>oz</sup>," valued at \$130.00," which B&P acknowledged was "purchased by us here ... at an extravagant price." (The extravagance is easily illustrated by a comparison to other items on the cargo manifest. "One thousand & ten bars round Iron" was worth \$99, and "four hundred & seventy nine bars flat Iron" was worth \$145.)

The instructions also included a guide to evaluating individual teeth:

You have on board a box of these teeth, the two largest marked N<sup>o</sup> 1 are very valuable from their size, and being very solid — those marked N<sup>o</sup> 2 are also valuable from being very solid & round, & these the Natives would hang round their necks for ornaments without cutting, but of the first they will make a variety of ornaments — Those numbered 3 are of no great value except for the purchase of provisions ... Formerly the whalers considered them of little or no value, and perhaps by the time you might visit the Islands, the supply has been such that the Natives may esteem them less.

The owners of the *Sultan* knew about Captain Rogers' gambit with the elephant tusks aboard the *Hunter*; included in Reynolds' instructions was a reference to Rogers' success in the Marquesas. There is

also a tantalizing suggestion that if the *Sultan* got a valuable enough cargo in seals and sea otter pelts that sandalwood became superfluous, the captain might be able to sell the teeth in China: "The Whiteness of the Whales Teeth is very superior to that of the Elephants Teeth, & it may be well to recollect that the large ones would sell in Canton." (This is the only reference I have seen about Americans selling teeth in China.)

The *Sultan* made two lengthy stops in the Marquesas, from May through September 1817, and April through June 1818. Reynolds opened his first negotiation with a chief at Nuku Hiva whom he called "Mannahaw," by presenting him with "a small whales-tooth," and procured fifty tons of sandalwood on the visit. But by the time he left the Marquesas for the last time, so many teeth had been brought in on American ships that the value plummeted. In May 1818, Reynolds bought 1,500 pounds of sandalwood for three muskets, and gave seven sperm whale teeth to purchase fourteen pigs.

Back home, Bordman and Pope had heard of the change in value. On 6 October 1817, they wrote a letter to Captain Reynolds, and put it on their ship *Volunteer*, then bound from Boston to the Pacific. "By our last advices from the Marquesas," they wrote, "nothing but Muskets would procure Sandal Wood." It was received too late to make a difference; Reynolds had already learned the lesson firsthand.

When they were rare, sperm whale teeth were highly valuable and prestigious markers of rank across Polynesia, but they became commonly available as American whaleships came increasingly into the South Pacific. Yankee whaleships not only had the teeth on board, but also regularly recruited Polynesian men into their crews, who could then obtain the teeth for themselves in the course of a voyage. As they became readily available to people of inferior rank, their value as a symbol of social distinction declined. Simultaneously, their usefulness in the sandalwood trade declined just as the wood was eradicated. Happily for collectors today, the timing coincided with the creation of the first pieces of American scrimshaw. And some of these were pictorial works on what had been, or what later became, Fijian *tabuas*, such as the one at-



continued from Page 10

tributed to Edward Burdett or the Britannia Engraver circa the 1820s, and the one by whaleman William Sizer [Fig. 9] in the 1830s.<sup>1</sup>

*Dr. Mary Malloy was for many years professor of humanities at the Sea Education Association in Woods Hole, taught several semesters of postgraduate museum studies at Harvard, and maritime humanities in several semesters at the Hopkins Marine*

*Station of Stanford University. Her principal books are “Boston Men” on the Northwest Coast and Souvenirs of the Fur Trade, in addition to four novels and a forthcoming book on the history of American trade in the Pacific.*

## ENDNOTES

### <sup>1</sup> \* Sources:

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- Derrick, R.A. *A History of Fiji* (Fiji Government Press: [1946; 1950] 1968). (Quotes are from page 41.)
- Lockerby, William. *The Journal of William Lockerby: Sandalwood Trader in the Fijian Islands During the Years 1808-1809; With an Introduction and Other Papers Connected with the Earliest European Visitors to the Island*, edited by Sir Everard Im Thurn and Leonard C. Wharton (London: Hakluyt Society, 1925).
- Malloy, Mary. *Devil on the Deep Blue Sea: The Notorious Career of Captain Samuel Hill of Boston* (Jersey Shore, Pa.: Bullbrier Press, 2006).
- Porter, David. *Journal of a Cruise*, 1815, with several reprints in the years following. (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute: 1986). (Quotes are from page 309).
- Reynolds, Caleb. Shipping papers of Captain Caleb Reynolds, Peabody Essex Museum, MSS 364.
- Roquefeuil, Camille de. *A Voyage Round the World, between the Years 1816-1819, in the Ship Le Bordelais* (London: Printed for Sir Richard Phillips and Co. Bride-Court, Bridge-Street, 1823).
- 2 It is not known exactly how a scrimshaw tooth engraved by William Sizer (1801-1840) of Chester, Connecticut — previously known as the *L.C. Richmond Artisan* — fell into the hands of the Fijian who made it into a *tabua* [Fig.9]. Perhaps the artist swapped it away himself during a landfall in Fiji; or perhaps it was among his personal effects when he died in Fiji in 1840 and it simply remained there; or perhaps a surviving shipmate bartered it, knowing that whale teeth, with or without scrimshaw, were the most valuable barter objects in Fiji. This one has a pasted-on label with the handwritten inscription, “*Tabua* given to me by Hon. W.S. Carew, S.M. Comm. for Colo East, Fiji.” According to Fergus Clunie, Walter Sinclair Carew was a New Zealander who came to Fiji as a cotton planter in 1868, in 1874 he was appointed Resident Commissioner of Native Lands for “Colo East” (Tholo East, a province of Viti Levu on Great Fiji Island), and he was later a magistrate and a member of the governing Executive Council. But how the *tabua* found its way to a senior British Colonial administrator a generation after Sizer’s death remains unexplained. —SMF



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# Epilogue: Three Missionary *Tabuas*

by Stuart M. Frank

Two other remarkable *tabuas* may be unique and are worthy of comment. One is an uncommonly large and unusually broad tooth, 7 ½ inches (19.1 cm) long, making it among the largest and heaviest *tabuas* on record [Fig. 15]. Rather than

typical in the Islands), whence he obtained the oversize tooth and decorated it handsomely with an occupationally derived moniker.

The whaling documents do not reveal anything about the Fijian man at issue:



**Fig. 15:** *Tabua* inscribed “WILIAME BALEINASUVA.” Fiji, 19th century. 7 ½ inches (19.1 cm). Kendall Collection, New Bedford Whaling Museum.

being enigmatically incised with seemingly random Latin letters, it is actually boldly chiseled and cut with the name “WILIAME BALEINASUVA” in serified Latin capitals.<sup>1</sup> In the Romance languages, *baleine*, *ballena*, and *baleia* (in French, Spanish, and Portuguese, respectively) are the words for *whale* — though not including the sperm whale; and *beleinier*, *ballenero*, and *balleiro* mean *whaleman* or *whaler*, irrespective of the species hunted. *Suva* (a common Fijian surname) is the principal town, principal port, and administrative capital of Fiji. The implication is that this *tabua* was made by one of the many Fiji Islanders who served in the crews of visiting whaleships, and that the inscription is the Fijian owner’s adoptive name, the surname being a combination of the word for whale (*baleine*) and the name of Fiji’s principal town (*Suva*), meaning *William the Whaleman from Suva*. It is extremely rare that a *tabua* be so explicitly inscribed; that the letters be so well and clearly formed; that the inscription be so finely carved — actually sculpted; and that there is a presumed maker and owner, a Fijian who adopted the name William — on Fiji the name was alternatively rendered *Wiliame* or *Viliame* — when he shipped on a whaling cruise (probably as a seasonal hireling, as was

the *tabua* is the only available evidence. But the record from Fiji is somewhat more informative. Years after the Yankee whalers were mostly gone from the South Pacific, a William AKA Wiliame Baleinasuva — probably the man himself but possibly a namesake son or

nephew — was a Protestant minister, a member of the Australasian Methodist Ministerial Conference. During 1887-94 he represented the Koroalau Creek district of Cakandrovo (Cakaudrove), on Vanua Levu (the second largest island in Fiji), and beginning in 1895 he was at the Navuloa Methodist Church, an important center of Methodism in Fiji that until 1907 was the seat of the Methodists’ Theological College for Ministers and Bible School for Catechists.

The only known similar manifestation is a lesser example, an otherwise conventional *tabua* that is clearly inscribed “RAVONO” and “SAWAKASA” [Fig. 16]<sup>2</sup> — another departure from the cus-

Fijian name, and Sawakasa is a district on the island of Fiji, north and slightly east of Suva. Thus, this *tabua* appears to have been inscribed according to the same principle as the analogous one by Wiliame Baleinasuva: a Fijian named Ravono from Sawakasa was presumably hired on for a seasonal circuit in an unidentified whaling vessel. His whaling exploits have not been identified. On shipboard such a man may have been known by some kind of Anglicized name — for example, “William Gordon” and “William Taber” were “Feejee” Islanders in the crew of the New Bedford bark *Pioneer* in 1873; or would have appeared on the manifest merely as John Kanaka, Bill Tahiti, or Charley Hawaii (whether or not he was actually from Hawaii), or something of the sort.<sup>3</sup> In light of Wiliame Baleinasuva or a kinsman with the same name having been a Methodist missionary in the 1880s and ’90s, it is worth noting that an Elimotana Ravono from Sawakasa was one of 55 Methodist missionaries — Fijian, Samoan, Rotuman, German, Scottish, Irish, and English — who arrived on the island of New Ireland (nowadays part of Papua New Guinea) in the ship *John Wesley* in August 1875. From there, Ravono was posted to the village of Kabanut.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Wiliame Baleinasuva and Ravono Sawakasa join Edward Burdett and William Sizer as sometime whalemen whose scrimshaw appears on authentic *tabua* — except that Fijians Wiliame and Ravono presumably made the *tabua* themselves and put their own names on them.

Among several antique *tabuas* in the New Zealand Museum “Te Papa Tongarewa” is a large specimen, anonymously engraved on



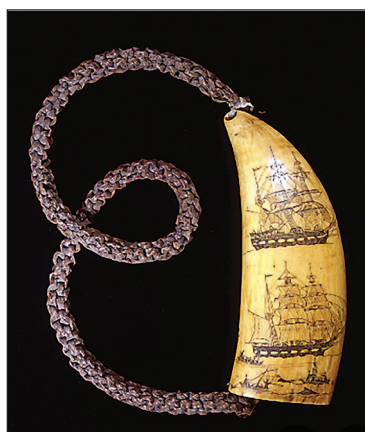
**Fig. 16:** *Tabua* inscribed “RAVONO SAWAKASA.” Fiji, 19th century. 6 ¾ inches (17.1 cm). Rafael Osona Auctions, Nantucket, Aug. 5, 2017, #23.

tomary Fijian practice of incising *tabuas* with a series of ill-formed and possibly arbitrary Latin characters. *Ravono* is a

both sides in the classic whalemen’s manner with copies of two mid nineteenth-century fashion plates of standing

## Epilogue: Three Missionary *Tabuas* continued from Page 13

women. The British Museum has one too [Fig. 17]. But the Te Papa Museum also holds a *tabua* bearing the sculpted name “RAT[U] ELEJIA” [Fig. 18], which has specific Methodist connections. A Fijian chief known as Ratu Ravisa of Viwa converted to Christianity in 1845, adopted the name Elijah, and became active in the missionary work of the Wesleyan Methodist church. Sadly, Ratu Elijah was killed in 1853 while trying to help end a regional conflict. The Te Papa also associates that same Ratu Elijah *tabua* with another Fijian chief, Cakobau, with whom Elijah had “several meetings” during Elijah’s missionary work. Ratu Cakobau converted to Christianity in 1854, a year after Elijah’s death, and under Cakobau’s leadership “the first modern government of Fiji was established in 1871, before British annexation in 1874.”<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 17:** *Tabua* made out of a scrimshaw tooth portraying two whaling barks, one with boats lowered in pursuit. It was collected by Sir William Lamond Allardyce (1861-1930), who lived in Fiji from 1879, served as governor (1901-02), and went on to be a colonial administrator on other islands. *British Museum, donated in memory of her husband by Lady Elsie Elizabeth Allardyce, 1931.*



**Fig. 18:** *Tabua* inscribed “RAT[U] ELEJIA”, circa 1845-53. *By permission of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, #FE012538.*

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Kendall Collection, New Bedford Whaling Museum; illustrated in Frank, *Ingenious Contrivances, Curiously Carved* (Boston and New Bedford, 2012), Fig. 8:23.
- 2 Osona, Aug. 5, 2017, #23.3
- 3 The New Bedford Free Public Library whaling crew database has 386 voyages listed for seamen pseudonymously surnamed “Kanaka” and its variants, 47 for the names “Maui” and “Mohee,” and 34 for “Tahiti.”
- 4 Margaret Reeson, *Pacific Missionary George Brown 1835-1917: Wesleyan Methodist Church* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2013), pp. 83f.
- 5 There recently turned up at auction in England a polished and apparently quite desiccated sperm whale tooth measuring 6 ¼ inches, which, while

it is not a *tabua*, bears a silver-metal plaque, engraved “A gift to me from / CAKOBAU / Fiji 1853” (Michael J. Bowman, Newton Abbot, England, Jan. 30, 2021, #67). Also notable is a bulbous *tabua* inscribed “George Arthur Maurice Hamilton-Gordon 1877.” He was the 2nd Baron Stanmore, six years old at the time, the son of the 1st Baron Stanmore and grandson of Prime Minister George Hamilton-Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen. The father, Arthur Hamilton-Gordon (1829-1912), 1st Baron Stanmore, was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, served as Governor of Fiji (1875-80), and donated his collection of Fiji ethnographic materials to the university in 1878 (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge).



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## Correction and Follow-Up: Fall 2020, Volume 4, Nº 2 & 3

by Stuart M. Frank

**Correction:** In the previous issue, I misquoted Sanford Moss’s analysis when I stated that the so-called Charles Wesley figures were crafted from shark vertebrae [Fig. 19]. Dr. Moss replied, “It is possible that one or more of them were from sharks — but not vertebrae... The [Whaling] Museum’s ‘John Wesleys’ appear to be very similar to the California Mission examples... and I expect that these also may be dried chondrocrania (brain cases) from a small species of shark...” Alternatively, Moss speculates that they could be “cervical vertebrae from a larger ‘reptile’ in the older classification... [such as] sea turtles or large tortoises...” —SMF



**Fig. 19:** Three “Charles Wesley” figurines in the treasury of the Mission San Carlos Borroméo, Carmel, California. Each slightly larger than 5 ¼ x 5 ½ inches (13.5 x 13.5 cm). *Composite of photos by Donald Boger and Mary Malloy.*



**Fig. 20:** Anonymous oil painting of the Mission San Carlos Borroméo on a slice of whale vertebra, based on a photograph of 1882. 20th Century. Size 16 ½ x 15 ¾ inches (41.5 x 39 cm), only 5/8 inch (1.6 cm) thick. *Photo by Mary Malloy.*



**Fig. 21:** Painting of the Mission San Carlos Borroméo (detail of Fig. 20), based on a photograph of 1882. *Photo by Mary Malloy.*

**Follow-Up:** In the previous issue we presented paintings and sculpted models of the Mission San Carlos Borroméo in Carmel, California, made by the local shore-whalemen, mostly as votive donations to the mission itself. Since then, a very similar oil painting of the mission has come to light, painted in oils on a flat slice of whale vertebra, based on the same 1882 black-and-white photograph as the others, and inscribed, “Carmel Mission / 1770” [Figs. 20-21]. It appears to be one of the early twentieth-century types reported by Ryan Cooper that were peddled by “an elderly fellow known only as ‘Whalebone Charlie.’” —SMF

# Scrimshaw Observer

Welcome to the Winter 2021 issue of the  
Journal of the Antique Scrimshaw  
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## *In This Issue*

- Fijian Tabuas
- Tracking A Tabua
- Sperm Whale Teeth



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