Peleg Folger (Josh Hamilton, voice-over):
Thou didst, O Lord, create the mighty whale,
That wondrous monster of a mighty length;
Vast is his head and body, vast his tail,
Beyond conception his unmeasured strength.
But, everlasting God, thou dost ordain
That we, poor feeble mortals should engage
Ourselves, our wives and children to maintain,
This dreadful monster with a martial rage.

Peleg Folger, 1754.

Callie Thorne, voice-over:
Death to the living,
Long life to the killers,
Success to sailors' wives,
And greasy luck to whalers.

Narrator: On the hot and sultry morning of Thursday, August 12th, 1819, with the price of whale oil on the rise, and the world sunk deep in a debilitating economic depression, an 87-foot, 238-ton whaleship called the Essex weighed anchor off the island of Nantucket, sailed east past Great Point lighthouse, and headed out onto the surging currents of the North Atlantic for what would prove to be the most haunting and horrific voyage in the history of American whaling. The ship was in many ways a microcosm of American whaling at the time. Owned by a group of Quaker merchants on Nantucket, and manned by a characteristically mixed and motley crew; each of whom had a stake in the outcome of the voyage and a share of the profits, no matter how small.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: The Essex had been a fairly typical ship going into this; in fact, if anything, was regarded as a lucky ship. She had been good to her owners and good to her men, coming
back regularly with decent loads. Nothing special about her, she was getting old – she was twenty years old, which is getting towards the end of the life of a whaleship, but there were no signs that anything extraordinary was in the cards for the Essex.

Narrator: In addition to her 28-year-old first-time captain, George Pollard, and his able but headstrong 22-year-old first mate, Owen Chase, the ship’s twenty-one man crew included seven newly recruited black sailors out of Boston, five veteran Nantucketers, five off-islanders, and two young men - Captain Pollard’s cousin, Owen Coffin, and his cabin boy, Thomas Nickerson, an orphan - who at 17 and 14, respectively, were scarcely more than boys.

Thomas Nickerson (Vincent Kartheiser, voice-over): It was perhaps the most pleasing moment of my life when I at the age of fourteen went for the first time aboard that ship. She was to be my home for the coming three years, and black and ugly as she was, I would not have exchanged her for a palace. Thomas Nickerson.

Narrator: They were ultimately bound - after a long zigzagging course down the Atlantic past the Azores, Africa and Brazil - for the deep green waters of the Pacific off the coast of Peru. They were hunting sperm whales - huge, big-brained, deep-ocean creatures prized for the luminous character of the oil that could be rendered from their immense bodies, and for the hundreds of gallons of spermaceti oil - finer still - contained in their massive block-shaped heads.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: This was the beginning of the Industrial Age. And before petroleum, the oil that was lubricating the machines, lighting the urban centers of America and Europe, was whale oil. And before there was Mobil Oil headquarters, there was Nantucket, and it was Nantucket sperm oil that was making the Industrial Revolution happen and providing the first global economic engine America would know.

Daniel Vickers, Historian: Whale oil was the highest-quality illuminant and the highest-quality lubricant that human beings could produce. And the western world was becoming a richer, more productive place in the later 18th and early 19th centuries. And that drove the price of oil higher and gave whalers an incentive to go further and further and further.

Narrator: That August night in 1819, however, as the doomed ship headed out into the blackness of the Atlantic, no one in their wildest dreams could have imagined the fate that lay in store for the industry
itself, for the tiny island that was then its capital, or for the ship and its 21-man crew whose dark and
dreamlike voyage would haunt the memory of American whaling for generations to come, give rise to
one of the most remarkable works of literature ever created by an American, and, like whaling itself,
raise large and searching questions about the relation of human beings to each other, to other species,
and to the planet.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Well, the poetry of whaling, I think, is the deepest and darkest poetry of
America really. Because at the center of it is the whale - this huge creature - eighty tons, in some
cases, that can attack a human being but possesses a secret, possesses oil, that in the early 19th
century was really the heart blood of American commerce. But there's also the sea. So you have this
creature in this vast wilderness, and I think it's the wilderness aspect of the sea that gives it the poetry
that goes way beyond anything that we're familiar with today. It's a deep language.

Lisa Norling, Historian: There's something very primordial about the epic hunt - one of the basic things
that human beings have done since we started to walk upright - but it's the biggest, it's the most
extreme, it's the farthest away, it's the longest voyages, the riskiest kind of endeavor. And so it taps
into something very basic about human existence and experience.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: It's partly the size and magnitude of everything that
creates this huge response; partly that the whale is the biggest creature that's ever lived. No dinosaur
was ever bigger than the biggest whale that's still alive. Partly, the length of the voyages. I mean,
everything is so much beyond anything that we can imagine.

D. Graham Burnett, Historian: There are industries - the kind of cultural import of which outstrips
even economic importance, and whaling was economically very important. But its peculiar combination
of danger, and romance, and exoticism meant that it took up considerably more space in the collective
imagination than it did even in the bankrolls of the early republic.

Narrator: Pursued from the start with a single-minded drive and tenacity, no other enterprise more
vividly expressed the untrammeled human energies unleashed in the new world following the founding
of America.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: There was something about the entrepreneurial spirit of the people that chose
to settle in the colonies before the United States became the United States, something that they
brought with them. They wanted to succeed, in their own terms, in this new land. And whether it was the entrepreneurial spirit, the desire to make money on your own, the willingness to risk a lot, the Americans just latched onto whaling early on and wouldn't let go. And they did become among the greatest whalemens of all time.

Daniel Vickers, Historian: From beginning to end, from the recruitment in Nantucket in the 17th century through to the final voyages out of New Bedford, it would always be difficult for the industry to keep up with the problem that it creates which is the destruction of its resource base.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: For the most part, very few, if any whalemens were really concerned about the whales' fate as a species. They viewed whales as floating profit centers to be taken advantage of, not preserved. You can find statements about the possibility of sending some of these species to extinction. But they were more concerned with that putting an end to their industry than they were about the need to save the whales.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): And still another inquiry remains - whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase and so remorseless a havoc; or whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff. Herman Melville.

Narrator: Right up to the very end, however, the whalemens themselves had only one place to go - ever farther, ever longer, ever deeper - out onto the seemingly infinite wilderness of the sea until at last there was no place left for them to go.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: It was an endeavor that inspired so much of what would become the defining characteristics of America. I mean, there is violence, there is a spiritual sense of destiny, there is this intense parochialism that drives you to go around the world and conquer the world. And then, always, at the center of it, is this bloodlust for the hunt. I mean, that's the definition of America, as far as I can tell, and it all happened in American whaling in the 17th, 18th and 19th century.

Narrator: English, Dutch and Basque whalemens had already depleted the right whale populations along the shores of the Old World when on November 9th, 1620, the 102 passengers of the Mayflower rounded the tip of Cape Cod and finally made landfall off the coast of Massachusetts. As the daylight
grew stronger, the sea-weary pilgrims were astonished to see teeming pods of right whales spouting and frolicking just off the bow of the ship.

**Stuart Frank, New Bedford Whaling Museum:** When one's speaking about the great whales - the big whales, the whales that are 40, 50, 60, 80 feet long, and weigh tons and tons and tons - there are really two discernible groups. There are the odontocetes, the toothed whales, and the only big one is the sperm whale and all the rest, the mysticete whales, the baleen whales.

**Michael Moore, Marine Biologist:** Before the petrol-chemical industry, oil from these animals was hugely valuable. And the sperm whale in particular had the spermaceti wax from its head, which could be processed into oil for lighting and later for lubricants and also for cosmetics.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** In the spermaceti organ was up to 23 barrels of spermaceti oil, which was the most valuable of all whale oils. It was used both directly in lamps, but also to make spermaceti candles which were a favorite of Benjamin Franklin, and burned very brightly, and produced very little soot.

**Michael Moore, Marine Biologist:** In contrast to sperm whales, the baleen whales have an oil but less valuable, but what they do have is baleen, the filtering system that hangs down from the roof of the mouth. And the baleen essentially is the plastic precursor. Anything you do with plastic today you could try to do with baleen.

**D. Graham Burnett, Historian:** What did whalers do? Whalers turned creatures of darkness - these God-spited, vicious monsters - into the sources of light.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** When the colonists got here, they sort of recreated whaling as it had begun many centuries before. Instead of going out after the whale, there were many more whales offshore and many of them died for multiple reasons, and they would wash ashore. So, in the earliest years, drift whaling was a very active enterprise. And Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts Bay, writes in the early 1630s of three or four whales coming ashore on the lower part of the Cape every year and men from his colony going there and cutting them up and boiling down their blubber into oil. Drift whaling went on for a number of decades. But then the men decided, "Why should we wait for Providence to bring a whale to us? Let's go out and attack them on their own terms." So shore whaling sprouted up and down the coast. After sighting a whale offshore, they'd hop into these 25-foot
whaleboats, go through the surf, row up to it, harpoon it, bring it back in and process it on the shore. And that went on for many decades and was very successful up and down the Eastern Seaboard.

Narrator: By 1720, shore whaling had become an inextricable part of the culture and economy of the American colonies - from the tip of Cape Cod to the shores of Long Island, and beyond. By then, the center of gravity of whaling itself had begun to shift, out towards a wind swept spit of land off the coast of Cape Cod, which the Wampanoags called "Natocket" - "the far-away place" - and which, over the next hundred years, would rise to become one of the greatest whaling capitals the world has ever seen.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Nantucket is a crescent of sand, only 50 square miles, almost 30 miles out to sea, and it's out there. It's as far out there as you're going to get. And out that far, anyone who lived there was basically at sea along with those out on ships.

Daniel Vickers, Historian: The great advantage that Nantucket had at the time was that it had a completely unexploited population of whales. And when you look at the geography of the American coast, the track of the right whale comes up from the tropics, and then it hits Long Island, and then they all have to hang a right. And so this hundred-mile-wide band of right whales funnels past Nantucket, which sticks further out into the Atlantic than any other piece of the American coastline. And so that was an enormous advantage and made the early Nantucket industry incredibly profitable and productive.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: And the story goes that in the late 17th century, some Nantucketers were up on a hill looking out in the ocean, and someone said, "That is a green field in which we will go to prosper." And they had to hire someone, Ichabod Paddock, to teach them how to do it. But they also had a native population, the Wampanoags, who had been harvesting whales that had washed up on the shore for centuries. And those were the ingredients that led to the blossoming of whaling on Nantucket.

Narrator: One last breakthrough remained before whaling on Nantucket could finish taking flight.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: About 1712, as legend has it, Captain Christopher Hussey was leading his men out on a short shore whaling voyage to kill some right whales when a storm blew up. And he and his men were blown far offshore.
Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Far enough where he came across a whale with a different kind of spout he had never seen before. Instead of the right whale's upward spout, this one went forward. He's in the middle of a storm - he kills the whale. The blood and oil of the whale still the waters in a biblical fashion. Brings it back, and this is the sperm whale, the one with the truly high-grade oil. And this was Nantucket's destiny. The sperm whale beckoned them beyond where they had been before and they would follow this whale everywhere.

Narrator: The discovery of sperm whales off the coast of Nantucket sent shock waves rippling through the island community - which almost immediately begin to gird itself - as if for a kind of war.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: In the head of the sperm whale is a reservoir of spermaceti. This is the good stuff; it's as clear as vodka when you first open it up. But as soon as it touches air, it begins to oxidize and begins to look like sperm. And so, the sperm whale was the high end of the market - the absolute best oil you could get - and Nantucketers were really leading the way.

Narrator: No one ever mastered the difficult and deadly arts of killing sperm whales more proficiently than the pious, plain-spoken Quakers of Nantucket.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: There's something about the Quaker religion that breeds a strength of community that the people in Nantucket were able to build upon. They had a very good business sense. They were very hard workers. They had a cohesive social fabric at home, so when the men went off, the women kept the community running and stable.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: There's a spirituality to it; there is a sense of social cement and control; and there's a sense of identity - it's a spiritual endeavor. It lent itself to a real religious sense of destiny. You know, "Quakers with a vengeance," as Melville would call them and I think this was a Quaker war when it came to the sperm whale and it was a little horrifying to see the enthusiasm, and the sort of spiritual ruthlessness, that Nantucketers had when it came to whaling.

Narrator: In the beginning, when the offshore grounds near Nantucket still teemed with pods of sperm whales, the voyages were relatively brief. But as the near shore population dwindled, whaleships began venturing further and further out into the Atlantic, up to Newfoundland and the Davis Straits, out toward the west coast of Africa and down toward the Caribbean, and the equator, and beyond - on voyages of increasing length and duration, made possible by the increasing size of the ships - and, after
1750, by the advent of onboard brick and iron try-works which effectively transformed the vessels into floating factories - unmoored to land, and free to roam ever further afield on longer and longer voyages in pursuit of their prey.

**Peleg Folger (Josh Hamilton, voice-over):** July 25th, 1752. In our boats after whales, we struck a yearling. At the yearling's side the cow always keeps, and presently she was struck likewise and at last we killed her by much lancing. In her flurry, she made a miserable rack of our boat in a moment. Yet we were all taken up well and not one man hurt. Praise the Lord for His mercies and for His wonderful works to the children of men. Peleg Folger.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer:** Sperm whaling was difficult; it was intricate. It required a myriad of skills that you just could not pick up. You had to grow up with this, and it began with harpooning the whale. To achieve this is one of the more spectacular athletic endeavors, because you’re not only heaving a harpoon. You’re on a 25- to 30-foot whaleboat, in the middle of the ocean, getting tossed around and you’re throwing this at a moving target. But it’s not just killing the whale - you’ve gotta cut it up, and this is where it becomes more like a factory. And these people were not just hunters, they were also some of our first factory workers except they were afloat off in the middle of the world, on a ship, cutting up these whales, rendering the oil. But then you had to get the whale oil back to market and then sell it. And so they were also merchants - very sophisticated merchants. And to top it all off, because you were killing off the whales, you were going to literally uncharted parts of the globe in pursuit of these whales. And so these people were explorers like none other the world has ever known. And so it's exploration but it's fueled by lethal killing.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** And Nantucketers took whaling to its highest degree before the American Revolution. In the years just prior to the American Revolution, there were 360 whaleships leaving from American ports. A hundred and fifty of them were out of Nantucket. And over 50% of the profits that New England earned by selling goods to Old England came from the sale of whale oil and baleen. And, in a very concrete way, the profits earned from whaling helped the colonies become stronger to the point where they were ultimately able to rip away from the mother country.

**D. Graham Burnett, Historian:** There’s a fantastic speech given by Edmund Burke in the English Parliament in 1775. He takes the floor to announce to his compatriots that they better watch out, because this upstart colony of theirs is running rampant over the world’s oceans. He says, you know,
"We send our sailors as far south as they can go chasing whales, and what do we find there but a bunch of American whalemen. We send our sailors up to the extremest reaches of the poles, and who do we find there? A bunch of American whaling vessels. No sea," he writes, "but what is vexed by their fishery." So Americans were well-known as a kind of global powerhouse, via the whaling industry, long before they were a global powerhouse geopolitically.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): Thus have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires. The Nantucketer, he alone resides and riots on the sea; he alone, in bible language, goes down to the sea in ships. There is his home; there lies his business. For years he knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthman. With the landless gull, that at sunset folds her wings and is rocked to sleep between billows; so at nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales. Herman Melville.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: The American Revolution had a devastating impact on the whaling industry. Whaleships were destroyed, at port and at sea, at an alarming rate. Nantucket, which had 150 whaleships before the American Revolution, had fewer than 30 at war's end.

Lisa Norling, Historian: Nantucket was hit really hard by the Revolution. Their closest economic ties were with London, which was the major market for their whale oil and other whaling products. And they tried really hard to stay neutral and they couldn't.

Narrator: Some Nantucket merchants, seeking safer havens, now began to shift their base of operations to new ports on the mainland - including a sleepy seaside hamlet on the Massachusetts shore, called Dartmouth.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: After the American Revolution when some of the most successful whaling merchants of all decided to depart from Nantucket and settle in what later became New Bedford, they helped that small town rise to become the greatest whaling city of the 19th century.

Narrator: The American whaling fleet was just beginning to recover in the winter of 1790, when news reached Nantucket that a British whaleship, the Amelie, had rounded the horn of South America for the
first time and breached the deep green waters of the Pacific. No event since the discovery of sperm whales off the coast of Nantucket would have a more seismic impact on the industry.

Lisa Norling, Historian: 1790, they round Cape Horn; whalemen go into the Pacific, enormously rich whaling grounds. They find tons of sperm whales and other whales that are enormously lucrative. But to get there takes a long time. And, once you’re there, you’re there for a long time. And so instead of voyages being kind of seasonal - being three months, five months, six months - they’re now years in duration.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: By 1820, and whaling was taking off at a time when the rest of the country was in economic depression. So that Nantucket was poised to enter what would become its golden age where the entire Pacific would become its backyard. This is a country poised to become what America would eventually become: a world power. And this was now a state-of-the-art industry. I mean, the ships - we think of them as square-rigged, quaint little crafts - but these things were state-of-the-art, decades in development. They were not only the perfect factory ship for rendering the oil, they could go anywhere. They were magnificent exploration vessels, and they lasted pretty darn long under horrible conditions. One of these ships could sail up to a Pacific atoll, could stand by as three whaleboats went out and brought back a 60-ton whale, and yet it was also a home for several dozen men for three, four years. And so, they were the spaceships of their day, where they could travel to unknown worlds, killing whales and rendering the oil. This was a technology that I think is much more like what we're thinking in terms of, “What if we have to leave this planet, and, you know, go to other solar systems?” Well, the Nantucketers were doing it in the 19th century. And the universe for America at that point was the Pacific, and the Nantucketers were the true astronauts of American history.

Narrator: By the second decade of the 19th century, American whaling and America itself were poised on the brink of an astonishing era of growth and expansion - the ships pushing ever further out across the globe on voyages of increasing length and duration - seventy vessels a year leaving Nantucket alone - destined for unknown waters on the far side of the world. But of all the ships launched from all the ports during whaling’s hectic golden age, none would cast a longer shadow over the memory of American whaling than the voyage of the Essex, which set sail from Nantucket on a sultry August afternoon in the summer of 1819.
Gideon Folger and Paul Macy (Philip Bosco, voice-over): Captain Pollard: As thou art master of the Ship Essex now lying without the bar at anchor, our orders are, that thou shouldst proceed to sea the first fair wind and proceed for the Pacific Ocean, and endeavor to obtain a load of sperm oil and when accomplished to make the best dispatch for this place. Wishing thee a short and prosperous voyage.

The owners of the Ship Essex, Gideon Folger and Paul Macy.

Thomas Nickerson (Vincent Kartheiser, voice-over): August 12th, 1819. As the land receded from our view and sunk beneath a western horizon, there seemed a sudden gloom to spread over me as I for the first time realized that I was alone upon a wide and an unfeeling world, without one relative or friend to bestow one kind word upon me. Thomas Nickerson.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: When you look at the map of the Atlantic, there were ways you had to go. The prevailing winds blew you to the east, and so you would follow those to the Azores, and the Cape Verde Islands, where Nantucketers would often load up with provisions because they could get them much more cheaply than they could in New England. And then they would begin to head south, down towards Cape Horn, trying to find whales all the way. And the Essex had a fairly typical run with one great exception.

Narrator: Two days after leaving port, the ship was struck by a sudden squall so violent it knocked her on her beam ends, ripping away the main top gallant sail, and almost sending her to the bottom. The ship righted herself at the last moment but not before three whaleboats were damaged or destroyed. The Essex sailed on, but sea-worthy replacements for the damaged vessels were never found. By January 1820, following a month-long battle with gale force winds and bitter weather around Cape Horn, they had finally rounded the southern tip of South America, and entered the warm, sun-drenched waters of the Pacific.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: And it’s suddenly warm, blue, sunny and the Essex had emerged from the darkness of the Horn and all of that pain and terror of the knockdown. Well, they quickly come across some whaleships that say, “No, the whaling isn’t very good here - it’s not so good at all. We’re beginning to fish out the west coast of South America. But there is a newly discovered whaling ground - the offshore ground - thousands of miles out, farther than the Essex has ever gone. We’re going to go for it.” I think some stomachs must have rumbled with that: “Whoa, that’s where we’re going? On this relatively little ship, we’re going to the offshore ground - between 2,000 and 3,000 miles out.” I mean,
that is far out. And this was early in Pacific whaling. I mean, this is when all the islands that would become very well-known to whalers are entirely unknown - only known to them through rumors - rumors of cannibals. And the offshore ground takes you right up in that vicinity. The Marquesas, Tahiti, sounds great to us today, but back then, who knew?

Narrator: In October 1820, with 850 barrels of oil in the hold and 550 still to go, George Pollard ordered the helmsman to steer the *Essex* west - out into the vast and trackless wilderness of the Pacific, heading toward the offshore grounds, looking for whales.

Lisa Norling, Historian: I think that one of the really fascinating things that makes seafaring in general and whaling in particular so fascinating is what it's like to be at sea. And you're out there and all of the reference points that you're used to on land are gone. And there's a way in which time and space kind of merge. The romantics in the 18th century and early 19th century often referred to the sea and voyages as the closest you could get to the sublime, because it really is transcendent, that experience of being sort of without reference points on this fluid medium with just the horizon and so there's a sense that you're much closer to the eternal.

Daniel Vickers, Historian: Most of the time they were doing nothing. There was a culture onboard a whaling ship which had to accommodate itself to long periods of deep inactivity and then short periods of extraordinarily high activity. I mean, right around the clock, no pause for anything. Brutal, backbreaking work.

Stuart Frank, New Bedford Whaling Museum: People sometimes marvel at the skill set that one needs to have to go whaling - the courage and the acuity, alertness, and the physical stamina. I think it's no different, really, than marveling at the skill set one needs to be a successful soldier under tremendous pressure. And, in fact, there have been psychologists who've reflected on the post-traumatic stress dimensions of whaling voyages, likening them to experiences in wartime because of the level of stress.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Well, you know, you're on a typical whaling vessel in the middle of the Pacific. And everybody's bored and just sitting around when one of the lookouts sees a whale. "Thar she blows!" And, suddenly, this whaleship becomes a furious center of activity, as they ready the whaleboats. A good crew could get their whaleboat ready to go in under a minute, and put it in the water, and off they go, rowing furiously. Six men per whaleboat, out towards the whale.
Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: The officer would be in the back, steering, and the men would be rowing. They could go about 6 knots under oars.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: You're closing on a whale. And you're trying to be absolutely quiet, because you don't want the whale to know you're there. And so the mate is whispering to his crew, urging his men on in hushed whispers, usually with plenty of swear words, telling 'em to hurry up. And you can hear it breathe when it surfaces. And it's a very human sound. And there was an awful stench associated with it as well. And the only one who can actually see this whale is the mate at the steering oar. And as they're rowing, they're exhausted. And finally they approach, where it's time to throw the harpoon.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: And the officer would cry out, "Stand up and give it to him!"

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: The harpooneer stands up, takes up the harpoon. And there he sees it - the whale - black immensity of a creature. And he knows that when he throws this thing, he's gonna turn this passive, sixty-ton monster into an infuriated beast. And there were many a first-time harpooneer who would literally faint when presented with this option. But if he didn't faint, he threw the harpoon.

Margaret Creighton, Historian: And I think this moment - when you are attaching a harpoon to the whale - that's the moment of crisis. And that's the moment that some of these men find so compelling that they actually return to this work again and again.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: The whale could have one of three reactions: it might turn around and smash up the boat; it might dive deep to the bottom; but, most commonly, it would just take off across the surface, towing the boat behind it. Anywhere from, say, 20 minutes to over 24 hours.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Sperm whales can go up to 20 miles an hour. And here they are, on a 25-foot open boat, getting dragged along on what became known as a Nantucket sleighride. They're pinned to the flanks of this whale, and the whale begins to exhaust itself. And now they have to get themselves to within stabbing distance of the creature. So they gradually begin to pull in the harpoon line. By this time, the mate has changed places with the harpooneer, because the mate always gets the
honor of the kill. And he takes up the killing lance, with which they would try to get what was known as the “life of the whale” where the coiled arteries are near where the lungs are. And so he begins to stab this creature with this long killing lance.

_Margaret Creighton, Historian:_ This killing is something that demands respect. And it also is a moment of continuing danger too. Boats are stove right and left, men are thrown into the water, jaws emerge and clamp down on boats with regularity. Mayhem, when this boat is stove, or shattered to pieces, or blown to bits in the air. And there is nothing like it.

_Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar:_ He wouldn't aim for the heart, because it was too deeply buried in the whale - nor for the brain, because it was encased in too much skull - but, instead, aim for the very large lungs that lie right on the surface of the back. And, basically, he's trying to cut them up, so that the whale can't breathe very well.

_Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer:_ And it often took fifteen attempts at finding the life of the whale, and so all this blood is just flowing down. It's a river of gore. Until, finally, he finds the life, and the whale begins to choke on its own blood. And so a geyser of gore would erupt. They would yell out, “Chimney's afire!” And, often, they were drenched with the whale's blood. And they knew this meant that the whale was going to die. And so they would disengage themselves, move back, and watch as the whale would go into what was known as its “flurry.” Where it would begin to swim in ever-tightening circles, vomiting squid and whatever it had eaten. And then it would suddenly die and lie there, fin up, in a pool of its own blood and vomit.

_Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar:_ It's such a savage, brutal way to kill something. It's not a quick death; it's a long, drawn-out, nasty death. And eventually, the whale would just die. One fin would come out, and they would call that “fin out.”

And then they would have to row back to the ship, towing this huge, inert mass. An average whale was 40 to 60 tons, but they could sometimes be up to 85 tons. And they could average only about one mile per hour towing the whale. Often five miles was a pretty common distance. Because the horizon of a whaleboat is about five miles but, at times, even further than that.

_Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer:_ It was often dark by the time they finally made it back to the ship. And you tie it up to the ship, and in the next three days begin to peel the blubber from this huge creature.
And it's been compared to peeling an orange. What you do is, you hack out a piece where you put a large hook that is suspended from the mast, and you then hack around it to create the blanket piece. It's about five feet wide, and you begin to tear this piece of blubber. And the blubber is about six inches thick. It's not like our kind of fat - it's a very hard, fibrous material. And they're cutting it away, as they peel up this blanket piece.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: And they stripped the blubber off the whale so the whale's slowly turning in the water, and the weight of just the blubber is pulling the whole ship over, so that it feels like the masts are gonna come out of her, because of the pressure of just lifting that one piece of blubber. And then they'll cut off the bottom of the piece of blubber, and it weighs about a ton when it's cut off. And, as they cut it off, it snaps across, and the whole ship moves quickly.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Finally they peel it all, and then they have to decapitate the whale. And you bring up the head and you put it on the deck, put a hole in the head, and sometimes one, two people go inside to ladle out this oil from the head, and the deck is just messy with oil and blood. And by this time, you're beginning to light the fires for the try-works and you have pieces of blubber that have been cut into small pieces, fan-like sections known as "bible leaves." They throw this into the try-pot and it starts to bring it down into oil. And it's bubbling and all the crispy bits, known as the cracklings, float to the top. And as they float to the top, and the fires are really going, they start to use the cracklings instead of wood. And so this whale is rendered with fires that are stoked with its own body.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: And they get covered with the thick, greasy smoke, which smells just horrible. Melville says, in Moby Dick, that it smelled like the "left wing of the Day of Judgment; it was an argument for the pit."

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: It would go on for days at a time. And they were completely exhausted by the end of it - and clean up the ship, as if nothing had ever happened, and go out again.

Josh Hamilton, voice-over: A trying-out scene has something peculiarly wild and savage in it, a kind of indescribable uncouthness. There is a murderous appearance about the bloodstained decks, and the huge masses of flesh and blubber lying here and there, and a ferocity in the looks of the men, heightened by the red fierce glare of the fires.
Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Well, November 20th, 1820, the Essex was about almost 3,000 miles off the coast of South America. They're almost smack-dab on the equator. It's a beautiful day. Perfect day for killing whales - not much wind, sunny - and there is a pod of whales to leeward. And they send out their three whaleboats. And Owen Chase, in his whaleboat, gets a whale. But the whale slaps the side of the whaleboat with its tail, opens up a seam, and they have to let go of the whale and go back to the ship to repair the vessel.

Narrator: Two miles off the windward side of the ship, Captain Pollard and the second mate had also fastened onto whales and were being dragged towards the horizon. Back on the Essex, Chase and his men hoisted their damaged boat up onto the deck, and set to work repairing it. It was 8:30 in the morning.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: And so Chase is putting a piece of canvas on the broken portion of the whaleboat. Tommy Nickerson - who's had a birthday, so he's all of 15 - is at the helm. And he's ordered to steer the vessel down towards the other whaleboats when they notice something, a very large sperm whale. Biggest whale they've seen so far. Eighty feet long - eighty-five feet long - as long as the ship itself. And it's behaving oddly. It's just sitting on the surface of the water, with its head pointed towards the side of the vessel. And no one's too concerned, but then this whale begins to move towards the ship - dives down. But when it surfaces, it's picked up speed and this huge block-like head is pointed right towards the side of the Essex. The men realize what's happening and shout out to Tommy Nickerson to hard up the helm, in an attempt at an evasive maneuver, but it's too late.

Thomas Nickerson (Vincent Kartheiser, voice-over): I heard a loud cry from several voices at once, followed by a tremendous crash. The whale had struck the ship with his head at the waters edge with such force as to shock every man upon his feet.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: The whale goes underneath the ship, begins to surface, knocks the vessel side to side as if they're in the middle of an earthquake. And then it surfaces on the starboard side of the ship - head towards the bow, tail towards the stern. It's just knocked out. It's so close that Chase takes up the killing lance, and motions to kill this huge creature. But then, he relents. He notices that the tail of the whale was within inches of the rudder. And, if provoked, this creature could take out the steering device and they'd be in big trouble, thousands of miles from land. But if Chase knew what was about to happen next, he would have risked the rudder, because suddenly, this huge creature
springs to life, swims several hundred yards to leeward and does a behavior typical of an infuriated bull sperm whale – snaps its jaws with a percussive force that can be heard for miles. And then it takes off again, swimming ahead of the ship, turns around and comes straight at the bow of the Essex.

Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): I turned around and saw him about one hundred rods directly ahead of us, coming down with twice his ordinary speed, and it appeared with tenfold fury and vengeance in his aspect. The surf flew in all directions about him with the continual violent thrashing of his tail. His head about half out of water, and in that way he came upon us, and again struck the ship. Owen Chase.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: And the whale slams into the bow of ship, crushing it like an eggshell. And even, according to one account, driving this 283-ton vessel backwards. It eventually disengages its head from the fractured timbers of the bow and swims off, never to be heard from again. For these men, this was unimaginable – where the creature that you always assume is sort of passively out there, that is your prey, turns you into the hunted. I mean, this was unbelievable. And the ship is now sinking, very quickly, bow first. They have one spare whaleboat. They begin to frantically try to rig it up. And as they do that, the African-American steward goes down below - even as the ship fills with water - and comes up with some navigational guides and compasses. And as he makes his way to the deck, the ship is beginning to cant towards the port side. The men have taken the spare whaleboat to the edge. The ship's about to flip on top of them. Everybody tumbles in and they row away as fast as they can. And they were just two boat lengths away when, with an appalling groan, the ship capsizes. And it doesn't sink - it just lays there, on the side of the water. And the emotions that these men must have had looking at- this was their home. This was how they were going to get back to Nantucket. And it wasn't going to get them back to Nantucket.

Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): The captain's boat was the first that reached us. He stopped about a boat's length off, but had no power to utter a single syllable; he was so completely overpowered with the spectacle before him. He was in a short time, however, enabled to address the inquiry to me, “My God, Mr. Chase, what is the matter?” I answered, “We have been stove by a whale.”

Thomas Nickerson (Vincent Kartheiser, voice-over): Here lay our beautiful ship, a floating and dismal wreck, which but a few minutes before appeared in all her glory, the pride and boast of her captain and officers, and almost idolized by her crew. Thomas Nickerson.
Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): November 20th, 1820. Amazement and despair now wholly took possession of us. We contemplated the frightful situation the ship lay in, and thought with horror upon the sudden and dreadful calamity that had overtaken us. Every countenance was marked with the paleness of despair. The crew of the ship are saved. But all that remain to conduct these twenty beings through the stormy terrors of the ocean, perhaps many thousand miles, are three light boats. Owen Chase.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: The whaling industry definitely spread out in waves throughout the world. And as near-shore populations became depleted, they had to go farther offshore to find a profitable number of whales to pursue. They find one space, they fish it out, and then they go to the next point of opportunity. Which is what caused them to radiate outwards, and, ultimately, end up sailing the seven seas, literally, looking for whales. It also caused the voyages to extend from a week, a month, a year, to up to four years was the average during the golden age. And the all-time record was eleven years. And as more and more whales were taken out of the ocean, just mathematics argued for them to go farther afield, and find new stocks to take advantage of.

Narrator: The Essex went down at a crucial moment of flux and change in the history of American whaling, and at the start of the most tumultuous and fateful period of growth and change in the history of the American republic. Over the next forty years - from 1820 to the eve of the Civil War - propelled by the forces of a vast Industrial Revolution, the restless young nation once huddled along the Atlantic shore, would hurtle across the American continent with breakneck speed. Its population tripling to more than thirty million in less than forty years. Its landmass expanding to more than three and a half million square miles in all. As the nation surged west - fueled by a constantly rising tide of whale oil - all the possibilities, both bright and dark, of the young republic, would come to the fore.

Michael Moore, Marine Biologist: The wealth that was generated by the Yankee whalers fueled the expansion of this country. So that out of the banks of New Bedford - the richest place in the world in 1850 - came the necessaries to head west, build the railroads and all of those things.

Narrator: The golden age of whaling had begun - at once its highest peak - its most extravagant and storied era - and the beginning of the end.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: The golden age was a brief period, if you look at the history of all whaling, but it was an extremely dynamic period, and it was an extremely profitable period. Urban areas and
populations were exploding. And there was so much demand for whale oil and other forms of lighting, that the whaling industry continued to grow, despite increased competition. It was really in the 1820s, when Nantucket was still a major whaling powerhouse, that New Bedford started inching up. And by the end of the 1820s, New Bedford had taken the lead.

**Stuart Frank, New Bedford Whaling Museum:** You needed a much larger workforce. You needed an infrastructure for shipyards, and for the production of whaleboats and harpoons, and cordage, and all the other things that a place on the mainland, like New Bedford, could provide.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** It truly was a golden age. In 1846, 735 American whaleships sailed on the world’s oceans, out of a total of 900 worldwide. Seventy million dollars was invested in infrastructure. 70,000 people made their livelihood from whaling, directly or indirectly. There were 20,000 men who populated those whaling ships and went out in search of whales all over the world. In 1853, the most profitable year, they killed more than 8,000 whales and generated profits of $11 million. This was an enormous industry. It was a time when as many as sixty other American ports decided to jump on the whaling bandwagon. It’s when San Francisco became a main whaling port. It’s when Hawaii became a major stopping point for whaleships on their cruises to the Arctic after bowhead whales. Whalemen were often the first Westerners to appear in many locations in the world. They helped to discover upwards of 200 islands. They went to places where there were no charts, there were no maps. They helped the United States government to produce maps that people could use as they sailed around the world.

**Narrator:** Increasingly now, the massive changes in scale and global reach were transforming every aspect of the whaling industry.

**Stuart Frank, New Bedford Whaling Museum:** And you find that, more and more, the whale fishery's becoming larger and larger - the need for product is becoming greater and greater - so that the whaling voyages are venturing further and further away - and the vessels are getting larger and the crews are getting larger, and it becomes much less personalized a kind of industry, much more a factory mentality in the management strategies of whaling. Wages begin to be less sensitively conceived by the management. The boys are no longer your cousin and your nephew and the guy down the street - they’re kids from all over the country - yea, and all over the world, who are infusing themselves into the many vacant positions that become available. They were paying bonuses to drag guys from these
cities not only to New Bedford, and Nantucket and New London, but to Sag Harbor, and to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and some of these outports.

Margaret Creighton, Historian: At this time you're going to see men who are going to sign aboard a whaleship coming from all walks of American life. You're going to see men who are not making it on farms, factories, runaway apprentices. You're going to have your group of inexperienced sailors. You're going to have your veteran sailors, a group of men of color. Some hailing from the United States, some hailing from across the globe.

Stuart Frank, New Bedford Whaling Museum: There were fugitive slaves, for whom this was a good way to lay low for a while. There were escapees from the Portuguese military service in the Azores Islands, and Cape Verde, and Madeira.

Lisa Norling, Historian: By the 1830s, there's huge numbers - thousands of young men who are coming from all over the world - very diverse - who work in the whaling industry just for a voyage or two, or even part of a voyage. And then they take off somewhere else, desert. So there's a differentiation, even onboard ship, of people who are in it for the long haul, who are going to be promoted, who are responsible for the ship and the process. And then this huge pool of much more diverse, transient and also - from the perspective of the ship owners - expendable labor.

Narrator: Faced with the rising costs of longer voyages, many owners cut corners every way they could - stinting on food, shrinking the whalemen's share of the profits, and often hiring captains willing to work the men mercilessly, then once the hold was filled with oil, drive them from the ship, through cruelty and neglect.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: During the golden age, whaling, for the average whaleman, was a miserable pursuit. It was, as one of them said, an "enormous filthy humbug." It was a miserable existence, especially for the men before the mast. They would spend most of their time in the forecastle, or fo'c'sle, where as many as 24 of them would be cramped under the main deck, in this room that had no natural light; that was hot, that smelled, that had cockroaches, rats. And as the period wore on, the gulf between those at the top and those at the bottom, in terms of their wages, widened considerably and it wasn't that good of a deal for a foremast man, or a green hand, to go on a four-year voyage. Sometimes they'd come back in debt or having only earned a couple of pennies a day.
Narrator: It was, one man said, “perhaps the most demoralizing service of any upon earth.” “It would be better to be painted black and sold to a southern planter,” another whaleman agreed, “rather than be doomed to the forecastle of a whaleship. It is the most doggish life that ever fell to the lot of mortal man.”

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: It was hard to keep labor onboard, because of the conditions, and the desertion rates were sometimes astronomical. It was rare for a whaleship to return from a voyage with the same complement of men that it left with. But at the height of the golden age, there were 20,000 men shipping out on these whaleships every year. And it is amazing that so many people could be enticed to pursue this difficult, dangerous profession.

Narrator: In the waning days of December, 1840, a restless, twenty-one-year-old one-time school teacher from upstate New York, arrived in New Bedford, looking for work on a whaleship. On December 25th, he signed on board a whaleship called the Acushnet, and nine days later, set sail for the South Pacific. "My life," he later said, "began that day."

Andrew Delbanco, Writer: Herman Melville was a young man adrift. He had no profession that was waiting for him. He had little formal education. And he did what other young men in the 19th century did when they found themselves in those circumstances, he went to sea.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: And he sailed down around Cape Horn, and up into the Pacific. And when he got to the Marquesas, he jumped ship and spent a month ashore. Then joined a second whaleship, an Australian whaleship, named the Lucy Ann, and onboard her he was involved in a mutiny, eventually incarcerated in a Tahitian jail, escaped from that. And then joined his third whaleship, which was a Nantucket whaleship, the Charles M. Henry. So if you heard the story of his life, you wouldn’t actually believe that it had really happened. I mean, it sounds like a made-up life. But it's a real life, and it's very similar to others.

Andrew Delbanco, Writer: He became friends and comrades with people from all around the world of great diversity of color and temperament and language. He really believed in the dignity of the common man and discovered that on a whaleship. He discovered their capacity for heroism, and self-sacrifice, and solidarity with their friends, and their reliable moral instincts about good and evil. He really believed in those principles of democratic equality.
Narrator: For three years, he wandered the Pacific, coming to know every aspect of the whaling industry in intimate detail: the cruelty and the exploitation, the violence and the danger, the courage and the generosity, the beauty and the wonder.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): There you stand a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were giant stilts. While beneath you and between your legs, as it were, swim the hugest monsters of the sea. There you stand, lost in the infinite series of the sea. Until at last, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came. Becomes diffused through time and space, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over. Herman Melville.

Margaret Creighton, Historian: That's why Melville puts so many of his reveries at the masthead. And sailors emphasize this, this is a place where you do dream, and where you do appreciate the magnificence of the world. This is a place where men understand the depths, or the expanse, of the world.

Narrator: One night in August, 1841, far out on the Pacific, less than a hundred miles from where the Essex had gone down twenty years earlier, he had a chance encounter that would change the course of his life completely.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): On board the Acushnet, on the passage to the Pacific cruising grounds, we encountered another Nantucket craft and gammed with her. In the fo'c'sle, I made the acquaintance of a fine lad of sixteen or thereabouts. A son of Owen Chase, the first mate of the Essex and one of its only survivors. I questioned him concerning his father's adventure, and the next morning, he handed me a complete copy of his father's extraordinary narrative. The reading of this wondrous story upon the landless sea, and so close to the very latitude of the shipwreck, had a surprising effect upon me.

Narrator: The tale of what happened to the men to the Essex, adrift on the wide and unforgiving waters of the Pacific, would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): November 21st, 1820. The morning dawned upon our wretched company. Watches had been kept up during the night in our respective boats to see that none of the spars...
Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Here they are, presented with this wreck of a ship. And the first thing they realize is they've got to rig their whaleboats to survive in the open ocean. And so they build them up by a foot and a half, and they rig them as little schooners. And they take as many of the provisions as they can fit, and they figured if everything went right, they could survive for two months on the provisions they had.

Narrator: The crew of the Essex spent two days salvaging everything they could from the hold of the sinking ship. The situation was appalling. The closest known islands, the Marquesas, were more than 1,200 miles to the west - the coast of South America, a staggering 3,000 miles to the east - but in fact much farther, given the prevailing winds and current.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: And so they have a decision to make - “Where do we go?” And the obvious thing is to follow the trade winds which would blow them to the west, towards the Marquesas and the other Pacific islands. And Pollard says, “Look. I think we should go with the trade winds. It’s the only way we’re going to get there without running out of food.” But the other officers, led by Owen Chase, disagree.

Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): We examined our navigators, to ascertain the nearest land, and found it was the Marquesas Islands. The Society Islands were next, islands we were entirely ignorant of and if inhabited, we presumed by savages, from whom we had as much to fear, as from the elements, or even death itself.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: They said, “We don’t want to become a meal for cannibals. Let’s go back to South America, and this is how we’ll do it. We can’t go against the trade winds. But if we sail south for a month, for a thousand miles, we’ll get to the variable breezes, where we can turn left. And if everything goes right, after another month we’ll be on the shore of Chile. We’ll be virtual skeletons, but we’ll be alive, and in a civilized port.” And Pollard decides to reverse himself, and says, “Okay, we’re going to do that.” And this was the fatal error. Because instead of everything going right, everything would go wrong. Just a few days out, they begin to realize that they're not going to starve initially - they're going to die of dehydration.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: They were within hours of people beginning to die when, miraculously, they sight an island, Henderson Island. It’s still thousands of miles off the coast of South America, but they know they’re not going to die of dehydration - at least not now. And so they drink the water, but within a matter of days, they’ve killed just about every living thing within walking distance, and they realize they can’t all live here. They’re going to starve if they stay here. So the decision is made, “Well, South America is still 3,000 miles away. Let’s go for it.”

Narrator: On December 26, as the beleaguered party prepared to set off again in their frail crafts, three crew members announced they were staying behind. On New Year’s Eve, following an emotional parting, the seventeen remaining voyagers pushed back out onto the surging currents of the Pacific. Day after day, the three forlorn vessels sailed on through the blank immensity of the ocean, battling mountainous waves, worsening wind and weather, and increasing hunger and malnutrition. The men struggling to hold on and to keep the three boats from being separated. With each passing day, the company grew weaker.

Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): January 3rd. Our birds and fish all now consumed, and we have begun again upon our short allowance of bread. January 10th. Mathew Joy, the second mate, died suddenly at 4 o’clock. We sewed him up in his clothes, tied a large stone to his feet, and consigned him in a solemn manner to the ocean. January 27th. Hunger now violent and outrageous.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: The three boats would become separated, one never to be seen again. And what begins to catch up to them now is starvation. They begin to run out of food. And as men began to die, they began to realize that if the rest of them were going to live, they had to eat the bodies of their dead shipmates.

Owen Chase (Josh Hamilton, voice-over): February 8th. Isaac Cole, one of our crew, died in the most horrid and frightful convulsions. We kept his corpse all night. When I addressed the men on the painful subject of keeping the body for food, it was without any objection agreed to, and we set to work as fast as we were able to prevent its spoiling. We separated his limbs from his body and cut all the flesh from the bones. After which we opened the body, took out the heart, which we eagerly devoured, and then ate sparingly of a few pieces of the flesh. Thus did we dispose of our fellow sufferer.

Narrator: One by one, the men died, in extremes of horror and agony - the men next to them, near death themselves, unable to do anything to help or relieve their suffering companions. The African-
American crew members fared worst. By February, all six were dead, and the remains of four of them had been butchered and eaten by their companions.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: At first, they ate the bodies of the people who died. But eventually, in Captain Pollard's boat, they were reduced to drawing lots.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: It would be down to four of them - Pollard and three teenage Nantucketers, including his young cousin, Owen Coffin. And they had reached the point where they were all starving, and there was nobody left to eat. And one of the boys said, "Let's exchange lots and see who will be the one to sacrifice themselves so the others might live." And so they would draw lots, and the lot would go to Owen Coffin, Pollard's cousin. And the story goes that Pollard said, "My boy, if you don't want to do this, I'll kill the first one that touches you." The boy had been raised a Quaker, was at this point, his sufferings were such he said: "No, I like my lot as well as any other." They had to draw lots again to see who would kill him. That went to Charles Ramsdel. And so he would shoot his friend, and they would consume him.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Eventually, in February of 1821, almost within sight of the Chilean coast, a Nantucket whaleship, the Dauphin, would see a derelict whaleboat unlike anything any of them had ever seen. It had been through hell, and they couldn't see any people, it was just floating there. And they sailed up, and they looked down, and there was Pollard and Charles Ramsdel, sort of curled up in fetal positions, their eyes bulging from their skulls. And they were sucking the bones of their dead messmates. They were trying to live off the marrow in those bones. And they were so far gone that they were initially frightened by the sight of these other people.

Narrator: George Pollard and Charles Ramsdel were rescued on February 23rd, 1821. Five days earlier, the captain of an English whaleship called the Indian, cruising three hundred miles to the north off the coast of Chile, had spied a small boat desperately trying to overtake them. On it were the emaciated figures of Owen Chase, Benjamin Lawrence and fifteen-year-old Thomas Nickerson. In Lawrence's pocket was a ragged twelve inch piece of string he had methodically twined throughout the whole nightmarish journey.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: It was three months at sea. And they covered more than 4,000 miles - longer than Captain Bligh's epic open-boat voyage, much longer than anything Shackleton encountered. There would be five men taken from the whaleboats alive, all of them Nantucketers. The only three
non-Nantucket survivors were those three men who stayed on Henderson Island. So a grand total of eight survived the *Essex* disaster. Twelve people died, and most of them African-Americans.

**Narrator:** Herman Melville returned to New York in the fall of 1844 - resolved to make a name for himself as a writer - rapidly publishing two well-received, if conventional, novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*, based on his Pacific wanderings. But the story of the doomed ship sunk by a giant whale would continue to haunt him.

**Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over):** All the sufferings of these miserable men of the *Essex*, might been avoided, had they, immediately after leaving the wreck, steered straight for Tahiti, to which there was a fair trade wind. But they dreaded cannibals.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer:** I think the story of the *Essex* was a very personal story for him, because the crux of the story is they decide not to go to the Marquesas, because of the fear of cannibals. Melville had that same dilemma. He was on a whaleship. He wanted to desert, but the only available island was the Marquesas, where there were cannibals. Melville decides to embrace the unknown. To go to the Marquesas, live with the cannibals, he would write *Typee*, which was his first novel, an instant best-seller, it made his career. And so, I think, in *Moby Dick*, you have that understanding that, you know, there is another choice and look what it can present. It's not just fear and terror and darkness. There is wonder, and diversity and excitement out there, and they all exist together. And in *Moby Dick*, he channels both sides in a way that no other person in the world could have written that novel, at that particular moment. Because he internalized all those issues and created, through the voice of Ishmael, one of the greatest voices in American literature.

**Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard):** Call me Ishmael. Some years ago - never mind how long precisely - having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world...

**Narrator:** In the tale he now began to unfold - of a doomed Nantucket whaleship, called the *Pequod* - manned by thirty sailors from every race and corner of the planet, and commanded by a stern Quaker captain called Ahab, who will stop at nothing in his quest to kill the immense white whale that has maimed him - he would see an allegory of the human condition, and a riveting parable, both bright and dark, of the recklessly expanding American republic.
Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: He's trying to incorporate everything into it - a discussion of science and a discussion of religion and a discussion of human limitations and a discussion of truth and justice - as well as an adventure story. And, it's just kind of huge and sprawling, just like the whale is so enormous.

Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: I mean, it's all there in Moby Dick. He was there, he saw it, he knew these people, and yet, he had had time to reflect. I mean, if you took Moby Dick, you could go to a different planet and recreate a whaleship and go whaling. The DNA of the fishery is there. Melville understood the poetics of the engine of the American economy at that point. He got to the poetry and the magic and the mystery that engulfs not only us but whales and planets. And he dove very deeply and he dove so deeply that he never really came out of it.

Narrator: Traveling from New York to New Bedford and finally out to the far shores of Nantucket, at once out in space, back in time and down into the deepest recesses of the human soul, the novel's restless, brooding everyman narrator, Ishmael, signs on board the whaleship, Pequod - whose bewilderingly mixed and democratic crew includes a tiny fugitive slave boy named Pip, a giant South Sea islander named Queequeg, and the steadfast Wampanoag harpooneer, Tashtego - all of whom, with their comrades, will be propelled to the ends of the earth by their relentless search for the leviathan.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): With huge pronged poles they pitched hissing masses of blubber into the scalding pots, or stirred up the fires beneath 'til the snaky flames darted, curling, out of the doors to catch them by the feet. The smoke rolled away in sullen heaps. To every pitch of the ship, there was a pitch of the boiling oil, which seemed all eagerness to leap into their faces. As the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night. Then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging in that blackness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul.

Andrew Delbanco, Writer: Melville was well aware that the Americans were the best in the world at killing whales. They were like bringing the business of whale-killing to a new level. They had the best technology, which is why they were at sea for so long, because these ships were both killing machines, and also factories for turning whales into marketable commodities. So he understood that America was on the cutting edge, and that it was carrying this idea of democratic man to places where such ideas
had never been contemplated. And he associates this reckless and unbelievably capacious expansion that the United States is undergoing in this period as a kind of messianic spread of the democratic ideal. And the whaleship is a kind of vanguard of that. But he was also aware that these energies were brutal, and destructive, and relentless and merciless. And, of course, he was aware that the expansion of the United States was the selfsame thing as the expansion of slavery. So he saw this duality about America. And he felt it as a very deep feature of humankind and turned the whaleship into an allegory. Very literally and clearly so. I mean, there were thirty states; there were thirty sailors, federated along one keel. So it's certainly the case that the Pequod is an allegorical representation of the United States heading toward disaster.

Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar: When you're reading Moby Dick, it just seems like it's going to keep and going, just like a whaling voyage. But suddenly, you're to the end. And the last three chapters seem to come so quickly, and the book just kind of speeds up and then bang, the ship is lost. It's struck by the whale and it sinks. And you can't quite believe it, although, of course, it's the only ending it could possibly have.

Narrator: At the very end, as the ship goes down - in one of the greatest passages in all of literature - all America and all humanity seem implicated in the catastrophe that overtakes the Pequod.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): "The ship? Great God, where is the ship?" Soon they saw her, only the uppermost masts out of water. While fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooneers still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea. And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight. But as the last whelmings intermixingly poured themselves over the sunken head of the Indian at the mainmast, leaving a few inches of the erect spar yet visible, together with long streaming yards of the flag, which calmly undulated, with ironical coincidings, over the destroying billows they almost touched. At that instant, a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar. A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-grasp, kept his hammer frozen there. And so the
bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her and helmeted herself with it. Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf. A sullen white surf beat against its steep sides. Then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.

**Narrator:** He finished the novel in the summer of 1851, one week before his 32nd birthday, and sent the final pages to his publishers, convinced he had created a masterpiece. But, as if in anticipation of the collapse of the industry and the republic, he had plumbed so deeply in his novel, *Moby Dick* was destined to sink to the bottom of the sea almost as soon as it was published and take Herman Melville's literary career with it.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** Right before *Moby Dick* came out, he was a writer on the rise, and he thought that *Moby Dick*, his magnum opus, was gonna launch him to the heights of writing fame. But it did exactly the opposite -- it started his slide towards obscurity. It was just too wild of a novel for the people of the era to fully absorb. And the reviews that came out of *Moby Dick* were absolutely scathing. And for the rest of his life, he never achieved the fame that he so dearly wanted.

**Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer:** America of the 1850s was no longer interested in its maritime wilderness. It was the wilderness of the West. The Gold Rush had changed everything. And so even though he was writing in the white heat of the whaling moment, it was too late when it came to his audience, because their attention had strayed to the West.

**Narrator:** Devastated, and bewildered, by the failure of the book, Melville would soon leave novel-writing behind entirely, turn to poetry, little of it published, and end his career as a custom's inspector in lower Manhattan where he died in 1891, at the age of 72, all but forgotten as a writer.

**Narrator:** The most frenzied, profitable and far-flung decade in the history of American whaling would come right at the very end, just before the downturn came. Year after year, more and more ships went out, and the slaughter continued to widen. The vessels now sailing to every ocean on the planet, chasing not only sperm whales, but right whales, hump backs, California grays, and bowheads from the tip of Cape Horn to the Arctic circle and beyond. Here and there, some voices were raised in consternation. “The poor whale was doomed to utter extermination,” one whaleman wrote, “or at least so near to it that too few will remain to tempt the cupidity of man.” But still the slaughter continued.
In the fall of 1850, with the slaughter of bowhead whales in the Arctic pressing the species to the brink of extinction, an anonymous letter was sent to the editor of The Honolulu Friend, signed simply, “From a Polar Whale.” “I write in behalf of my butchered and dying species,” it read. “I appeal to the friends of the whole race of whales. Must we all be murdered? Must our race become extinct? Will no friends and allies arise and revenge our wrongs?”

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** There are debates about exactly how many whales were taken. But one of the best estimates is that there were somewhere in the order of almost 250,000 sperm whales taken during the bulk of the golden age.

**Narrator:** By the end of the 1850s, fewer and fewer whalermen could make the numbers work.

**Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar:** It’s partly that they’ve killed so many whales that are pretty close, and it’s harder and harder to find enough whales to fill a ship. And voyages are becoming longer and longer and longer and, therefore, it’s not economically sustainable.

**Narrator:** But it was the recovery of a new kind of oil in the hills of western Pennsylvania in 1859 that would spell the real end of the American whale oil industry.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** Colonel Edwin Drake in 1859, drilled a well in Titusville, Pennsylvania and up through the ground came an almost limitless supply of petroleum that could be turned into a flood of cheap kerosene. And almost overnight, the whale oil industry went into steep decline.

**Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Melville Scholar:** 1859, they discover petroleum. 1861 is the beginning of the Civil War. And with the Civil War comes the loss of so many whaleships. Approximately forty-five whaleships were sunk in the two Stone Fleets off Charleston and Savannah.

**Stuart Frank, New Bedford Whaling Museum:** American whaling never really recovered from the depredations of the Civil War and the economic and technological changes that took place in the 1860s.

**Eric Jay Dolin, Writer:** And then during the 1870s, there were major disasters in the Arctic, where dozens of whaleships were crushed in the ice. So it was a slow, long decline. But after the 1850s, the whaling industry was only a shadow of its former self.
Narrator: For a few decades more, sustained mainly by the hunt for baleen whales in the Arctic, the American whale fishery limped on into the new century and down past the end of World War One as the profits steadily fell, and one by one, the ships were taken out of service.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: At the end of World War I, there were only a couple of dozen whaleships remaining, and some of them were making more money as props in silent movies than they were whaling.

Narrator: The end finally came in the summer of 1924.

Eric Jay Dolin, Writer: In August of 1924, the Wanderer was tied up to the docks in New Bedford. Hundreds of people were there to see it off, including dozens of journalists. And what had brought them down to the docks that day was a belief that the Wanderer was going to be the last of the Yankee whaleships to head out to sea. The next night, the Wanderer moored out in Buzzard's Bay, and a hurricane came up and sent it scuttling across the bay into Cuttyhunk rocks, where it was dashed against the rocks. And that provided a fitting final scene for the great era of American whaling.

Narrator: And so American whaling passed from the scene. Though even as it did, around the world, the killing continued and intensified as the ships grew larger, and the technology improved, and the uses for whale products diversified.

D. Graham Burnett, Historian: For all the enormous importance of the 19th century global whaling industry where the Americans were, of course, the dominant force. What followed in the 20th century, with industrial whaling, represented a still larger extraction of resources from the world's oceans. I mean, in essence, all the whales taken in the 19th century constituted a drop in the bucket with respect to the 20th century industry.

Narrator: As American whaling receded into memory and myth, its glory days would come increasingly to be commemorated, and kept alive in the public mind, by two fatefuly interrelated events - one real and one imaginary. One buried in the darkest and most irretrievable depths of whaling's past, the other destined first to sink into its own kind of oblivion but then to rise again triumphantly, long after its author was dead and gone - at once the greatest legacy of American whaling, and, in many ways, its greatest achievement.
Nathaniel Philbrick, Writer: Years later, when a young woman asked her mother, "What is the Essex?" The mother said, "Miss Molly, we do not talk about the Essex on Nantucket." It was the buried secret that everyone whispered about - but it was nothing that anyone publicly wanted to talk about. All the survivors of the Essex would go back to sea, within months of their return. But Owen Chase, the most aggressive of all the whaler, he was the one who would never be able to escape the tragedy. And even though he was able to have an exemplary whaling career, the Essex was something he could not shake. Because he would be the one who late in life would begin to hide food in his attic, would have headaches that he could not control, and would eventually have to be institutionalized. And George Pollard? He seems to have dealt with the disaster. He would go back to sea on the whaleship Two Brothers and they fetch up on French Frigate Shoals, southwest of Hawaii, in a storm. The ship is pounded to pieces by the coral, and that was the end of his whaling career. He would become the town night watchman. Every November 20th, he would lock himself in his room and fast in memory of those who had died on the Essex. And everyone who met him, commented on what an extraordinary man he was, including Herman Melville the summer after he published Moby Dick who would write, in the back pages of his own copy of Owen Chase's Narrative of the Essex, "Met Captain Pollard on Nantucket. To most islanders a nobody. To me, one of the most extraordinary men I have ever met." And after Melville dies, there is a note that's pasted to his writing desk, that says: "Keep true to the dreams of thy youth. " And I think with Moby Dick, he achieved those dreams. I mean, with all the darkness included. And yet, it dropped silently into the reading public.

Narrator: In 1919, 28 years after Herman Melville's death, and 68 years after the first failed publication of Moby Dick, the centennial of his birth sparked renewed interest in his neglected masterpiece. It would come to be recognized as one of the most imperishable achievements in the history of American literature, one that carried within it for an era even more recklessly expansive and oil-consuming than Melville's own - the seeds of a radical transformation in the way human beings understood their relation to each other, to other species and to the planet. As if the restless energies that had propelled whalersmen around the world had also helped propel a widening awareness that the one-time whaler had found a way to put into words.

Andrew Delbanco, Writer: I think, for instance, of the great chapter, later in the novel, called "The Grand Armada," in which we look through the surface of the ocean through Ishmael's eyes. It's a tranquil day. He describes the surface of the ocean "as placid as a lake." And through the surface he
sees the figures of mother whales nursing their young. And the description is so exquisitely beautiful that you really feel as if you are in the presence of a writer who is, in effect, praying out loud. This is the feeling of religious awe, that he is recovering from those moments as a young man aboard ship.

Herman Melville (Robert Sean Leonard, voice-over): Far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes as we gazed over the side. For suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers. And as human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the same time, and while yet drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence. Even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of Gulf-weed in their newborn sight. Herman Melville, 1851.