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SEA HISTORY

THE ART, LITERATURE, ADVENTURE, LORE & LEARNING OF THE SEA

The Jones Act at 100
Whaling Logbooks for
Today's Researchers
Catalpa Prison Break



PATRICK O'BRIEN

“When We See Whales”—Transcribing Captain Lawrence’s Logbook

by Mia Sigler

“Comd Morris Outward Bound Remarks on board August 14th 1849 first part light airs from the SSW. and fair weather left Woodshole harbour in tow of steamer Massachusetts of Nantucket at 12 oclock come to anchor at Tarpaulin cove at 2 oclock Am in 9 fathoms water middle part light breezes from the SE and fair weather latter part got under way at 7 o.clock and stood into the Vinyards.” —Captain Lewis H. Lawrence, 1849

So began the 1849 voyage of the whaleship *Commodore Morris*, as plainly as any other whaling voyage of the era. While the voyage itself may not have been any more remarkable than any other whaling voyage, the surviving log and chart left behind by Captain Lewis H. Lawrence offer a unique and detailed look into whaling history that is still of use today.

By the time Captain Lawrence put to sea aboard the whaleship *Commodore Morris*, the offshore Yankee whaling industry had nearly reached its peak. The *Commodore Morris* was one of more than 700 vessels in the 1849 American whaling fleet, and her crew could count on a good market for whale products, which were still in high demand, but the industry was just beginning its impending decline. Yankee whaling first found substantial commercial success in the early 18th century, when the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) could be caught in large numbers off American shores. It was not long before the regional population of North Atlantic right whales was depleted past the point of further commercial exploitation. As early as the 1750s, whaleships were forced to attempt farther travel, hunt longer, and target different whale species to return home with the same amount of whale oil and baleen they’d had in early years. In

Lawrence’s time, the sperm whale had become the new target of choice, prized for its spermaceti that could be literally bucketed out of their heads and which burned more cleanly and brightly than oil rendered from whale blubber.

Sea captains kept logbooks then and now. In addition to the official logbooks for the ship’s records, many kept rough logs or personal journals as well to document their experience at sea. Captain Lawrence was no exception. Not only were ships’ logs an important contemporary record for shipowners, captains, and the industry in which they served, they also serve today as an important primary source for historians of all kinds. Even climate scientists are discovering a wealth of information that can be gleaned from weather and environmental observations of past decades and centuries to help establish a baseline for modern studies.

Lawrence’s logbooks from the *Commodore Morris* have survived and are in the collections belonging to the Falmouth Historical Society, in Massachusetts. Captain Lawrence was born in Falmouth to a family of whalers. All of his five brothers worked aboard whaleships, and three of them were whaleship captains like himself.

I was introduced to one of Captain Lawrence’s logbooks as a student with the



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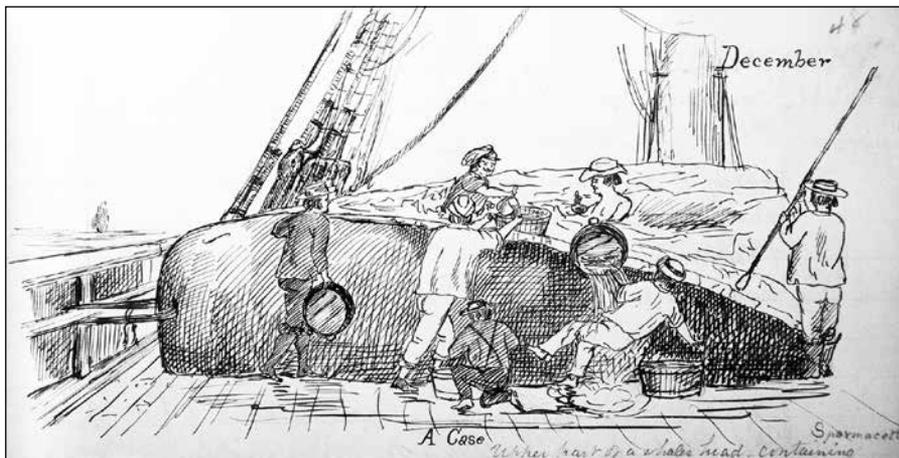
Photo of a young Captain Lewis Lawrence.

Sea Education Association (SEA) during its Global Ocean program in the fall of 2018. SEA offers undergraduate study-abroad programs that focus on marine science and maritime studies, as well as hands-on sailing operations and navigation. Half of the twelve-week program is spent on shore at the SEA campus in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and the other half is dedicated to sailing aboard one of SEA’s two sailing research vessels. Our group would join the brigantine SSV *Robert C. Seaman* off the coast of New Zealand’s North Island and sail northeast to the waters off the Kermadec Islands.

For the Maritime History and Culture class, our professor, Richard King, encouraged us to keep journals, and used this as a segue to introduce us to the project he had lined up for us. He had us break into groups and transcribe Captain Lawrence’s logbook from his 1849–1853 whaling voyage, which took place in the same waters where we would later be sailing as crew of the *Seamans*.

In addition to providing a service to the Falmouth Historical Society and historians more broadly, the transcription project showed us what can be learned from

Artist-whaleman Robert Weir’s journal illustration of scooping out spermaceti on deck from a small sperm whale’s head (1857).



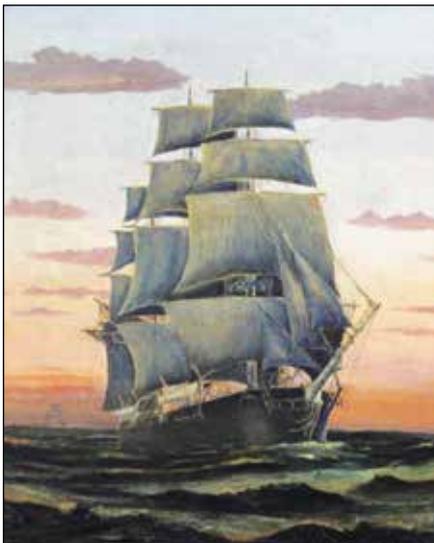
MYSTIC SEAPORT MUSEUM



SEA Semester students visit the Falmouth Historical Society not long after their arrival on campus in Woods Hole to take a look at the Commodore Morris logbook kept by Captain Lawrence between 1849 and 1853.

examining ship logbooks from past eras, especially when we would be able to compare observations recorded in centuries-old documents to our own, once we got to sea. Decoding 19th-century script was slow going at first, and we'd all sit in the library chipping away at our assigned sections, frequently crowdsourcing opinions about what word a particular scribble could possibly be. As with most whaleship logbooks of the time, each entry listed the date, po-

Whaleship Commodore Morris



PAINTING BY FRANKLIN LEWIS GIFFORD, COURTESY OF THE WOODS HOLE MUSEUM



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A sample entry from the Commodore Morris logbook, with whale flukes sketched on days that they saw whales.

sition, weather, whale encounters, and sail configuration—splitting the day's events into three parts. The more we acclimated to the daily repetition of logbook entries, the less we asked for second opinions on handwriting interpretations, more often exclaiming about some strange account or interesting detail about shipboard life. In this way, Lawrence's logbook was notably unique; where most other logs of this era are devoid of more personal or event-based entries—relegating that commentary to a personal journal instead—Lawrence's logbook was packed with fascinating accounts and informational asides. One section contains a report of attempted desertion by a rowdy crewmember; another includes a detailed description of how to safely enter the port of Valdivia. An otherwise typical entry for the day often contains a surprising line about several approaching canoes, or the play-by-play of an especially dramatic whale chase.

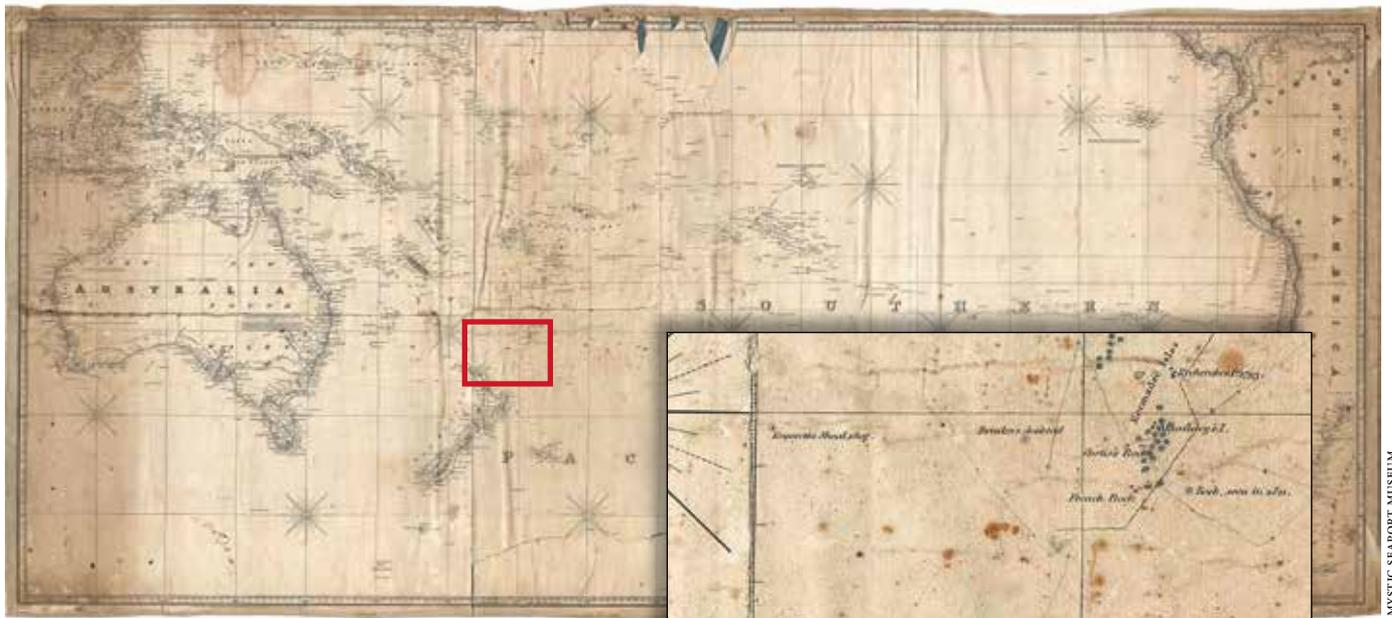
Lawrence's Logbook and Environmental History

The *Commodore Morris* sailed from Woods Hole shortly before hydrographer Matthew Fontaine Maury's compiled findings were widely available, and before naval officer

Charles Wilkes's charts of the South Pacific came into prevalent use. Captain Lawrence used a chart of the South Pacific printed by J. W. Norie in 1825. Mystic Seaport Museum has Lawrence's actual chart from this voyage in its collection, and we were able to corroborate notes in the logbook with his markings on the accompanying chart. For example, Lawrence wrote in the log that the position of a specific island on the chart seemed to be off, and we were able to see the exact mistakes to which he was referring on the very chart he used. Lawrence also recorded whale information on this chart, drawing flukes or circles where large numbers of whales were spotted or caught; these locations line up with those he writes of in his log.

Two of the students in our group worked with oceanography professor Deb Goodwin to take Lawrence's ambition of marking his whale observations on a chart to the next level by creating a GIS map of the voyage. These classmates persuaded the rest of us to go back into the transcription and find every whale sighting and capture in our respective sections of the log and record those data points in a master spreadsheet. They used this data to create a map of the *Commodore Morris's* cruise track, replacing his circles and sketches of whale flukes with color-coded symbols.

Our class finished the transcription in our final weeks in Woods Hole, and on we flew to Auckland, New Zealand, where we joined the crew of SSV *Robert C. Seamans*. During our voyage at sea, we marked the times and locations we sighted whales. We kept a large reproduction of the 1825 Norie chart in the doghouse, near our own chart, so we could compare them on a daily basis. We marveled at what Lawrence



MYSTIC SEAPORT MUSEUM

The 1825 Norie chart used by Captain Lawrence aboard the Commodore Morris. Inset shows the northeast tip of New Zealand and the Kermadec Islands as they appear on the chart. A sharp eye can make out the marks and tracklines drawn in by Lawrence.

had referred to as “Sunday Island” in his log, now called Raoul Island, and later would recall Lawrence’s long and gossipy entry about the island’s scandalous settlers. We experienced our connection to his logbook and chart in flashes and favorite passages, but in retrospect, it is truly astonishing just how much of Captain Lawrence’s meticulously recorded history we were sailing through.

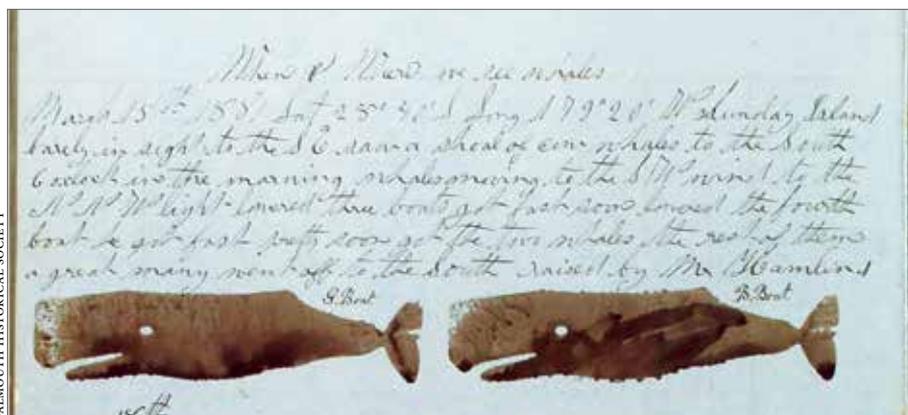
When and Where We Saw Whales

Lawrence not only wrote about whale sightings and catches in his day-to-day entries, but made a separate section to compile the locations and details of the most important whale encounters, naming it “When we

saw Whales Where we Saw Whales Etc.” The section spans 22 pages in the log and is full of meticulous notes on whale encounters that were only briefly accounted for in daily log entries. By maintaining this separate abstract of whale data, Lawrence was not only concerned with the success of this specific voyage but with his whaling career in the long term. He did the work of compiling and recounting as it happened, rather than long after the fact. He was clearly determined to make his own data and experiences useful to himself in the future, and perhaps to his brothers as well. While many captains at the time collated information from logs for future use, according to whaling historian Michael

Dyer, such collations were often given to masters by whaleship owners for reference on their voyage, so it is striking to read Lawrence’s fresh recounting of whale encounters in his logbook, which would likely later be included in some such larger collation.

Commodore Morris’s crew encountered significantly more whales during their mid-19th-century voyage than we did in 2018. In the waters northeast of New Zealand’s North Island, they spotted more than thirty whales, most of them sperm whales—successfully catching thirteen of them. During our voyage, we saw different species of whales in these waters, and in only three distinct sightings: a single humpback whale off the coast of East Cape, the thin spout of a rorqual near Great Barrier Island’s Port Fitzroy, and a small pod of pilot whales in the Hauraki Gulf. During the six weeks we were at sea in these waters, we saw not a single sperm whale. We took into account that our voyage was taking place from mid-November to late December, and thus we were unlikely to encounter any baleen whales, based on their migration patterns. Sperm whales were also unlikely to make

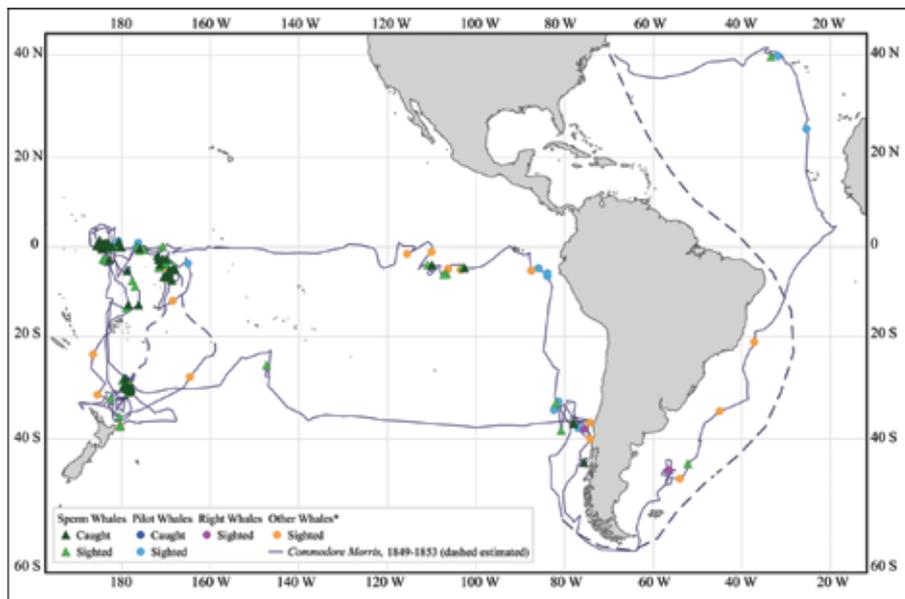


Log entry from “When & Where we see whales” on 15 March 1851.

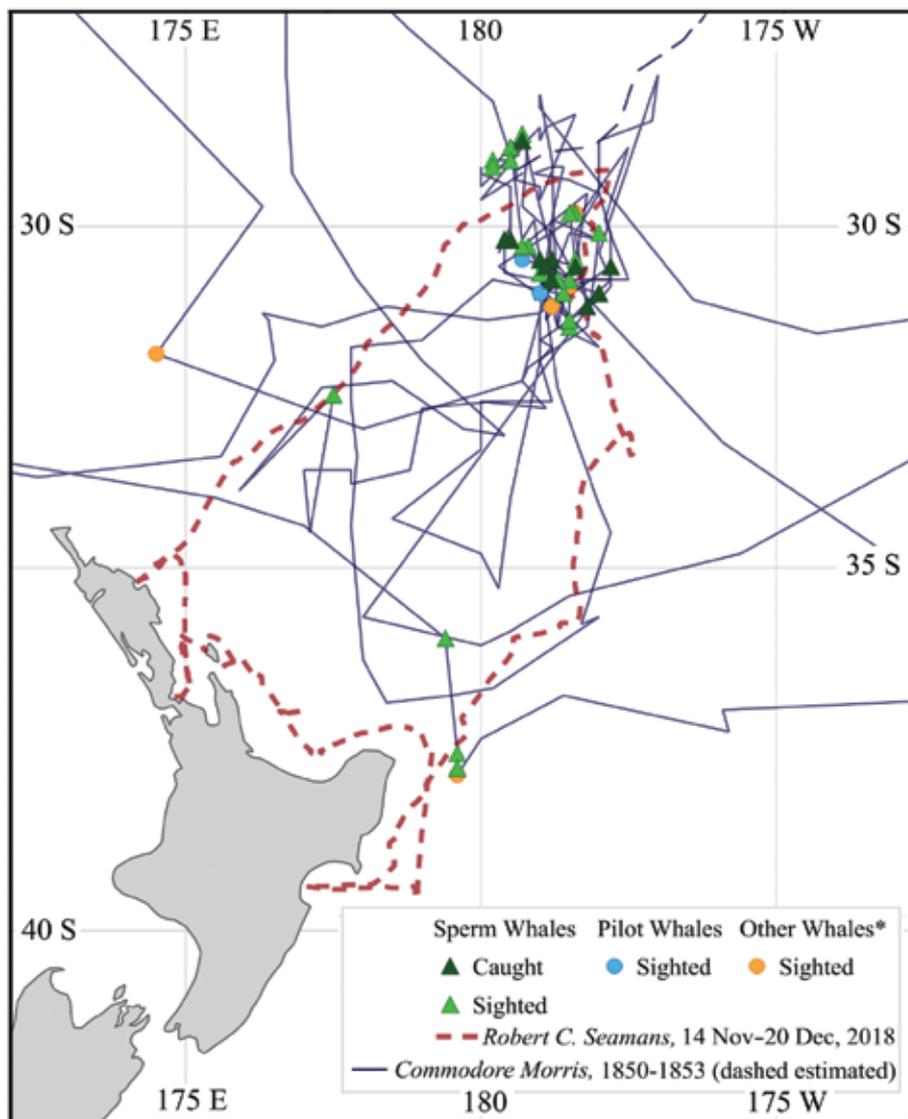
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an appearance, because females and juveniles tend to prefer warmer equatorial waters, leaving only solitary males for possible sightings. Young male sperm whales traveling in small groups can be found year-round off Kaikōura, New Zealand, but we were too far north to expect to see them along our cruise track.

That said, the *Commodore Morris* was also sailing in these same waters during November and December, albeit over 167 years ago. They did encounter sperm whales, but mostly farther north than where we were. Whaleships like the *Commodore Morris* also spent an enormous amount of time essentially loitering in areas known to have whales, making very little noise compared to modern ships, which are equipped with all sorts of noisy machines like engines, generators, and science equipment that may deter marine mammals.



GIS map depicting the *Commodore Morris*'s cruise track and whale interactions throughout their entire voyage. Credit: Deb Goodwin, Jenn Crandall, and Olivia Vasquez.



Our voyage was not chiefly concerned with whale sightings, no matter how enthusiastic we all were about the prospect; our aims in the six weeks we had at sea were to keep our cruise on schedule and to perform daily scientific deployments to gauge zooplankton diversity, phytoplankton productivity, the presence of microplastics offshore, and water temperatures, currents, and other oceanographic characteristics. The *Commodore Morris* undoubtedly saw many more whales simply because of their single priority, though their success also likely had more than a little to do with the abundance of whales in that era compared to the populations today. Global whale populations have been depleted by centuries of commercial whaling and human misuse of the ocean as a whole, through such anthropogenic impacts as overfishing, oil spills, plastics pollution, and the many disastrous effects of climate change.

The commercial whaling industry's impact on whale populations only became more dire as whaling technology advanced

GIS map showing *Commodore Morris*'s cruise track and whale interactions in New Zealand waters, as well as our voyage's track. "Other Whales" entries include killer whales, humpbacks, rorquals ("finbacks" and "sulphur bottoms"), and other whales too far away for them to identify. Credit: Deb Goodwin, Jenn Crandall, and Olivia Vasquez.

in the 20th century, as wood and sails gave way to steel and engines, and traditional hand-thrown harpoons were replaced with explosive rocket harpoons. Yet even in the era of traditional Yankee whaling, whale populations suffered heavily at the hands of whalers. For example, offshore whaling voyages decimated the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) population off the coast of New Zealand by an estimated 90 percent between 1830 and 1850. This is no doubt why the *Commodore Morris*'s crew did not report a single right whale during its time in New Zealand waters. Indeed, this pattern of regional depletion is why the *Commodore Morris* needed to travel so far from New England for more than three years, looking not for the ever-diminishing right whale, but for the highly prized sperm whale.

Today, more and more logbooks are being scanned and made available online, and some are even being transcribed, like this one, which is now available online at the Falmouth Historical Society website. Logbooks are being used not only in research like ours, but for such broad undertakings as the Old Weather Project, which uses volunteer transcriptions of logbooks to create a database of weather baselines across the globe. Logbooks are also part of a project conducted by Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) scientist Caroline Ummenhofer and University of Massachusetts Dartmouth historian Timothy Walker, using whalers' weather accounts to fill in historical climate data for areas that are largely understudied, the Indian Ocean for example, where climate change modeling can more accurately

to have got 3 whales." His recurring detailed accounts of discipline aboard the ship would remain unscrutinized, no one to know how the ever-disrespectful boat steerer Willet wildly accused Lawrence of poisoning him, even as he was being tied into the rigging for his insolence.

When writing in our personal journals during Sea Semester, it was strange to consider that someday students might be assigned the daunting task of transcribing one of our journals, or perhaps our ship's logbook, though that might prove an even drier task than transcribing a whaling logbook. Our time aboard the *Robert C. Seamans* was our first major voyage at sea. Similarly, Captain Lawrence's voyage on the *Commodore Morris* was his first trip as a captain. Perhaps that's what had him writing so prolifically and recording so many things outside of the standard logbook entry. It is strange to think about what could be done with our conscientiously maintained journals one day, about what would strike the researchers of tomorrow as odd about life aboard the *Robert C. Seamans*, and what would still ring true to the seafarers of the future. They might find our uninhibited enthusiasm for sighting whales as strange as we found the cold professional relentlessness of attitudes among the whalers aboard the *Commodore Morris*. With all the changes facing our world's oceans and its inhabitants, how will people feel when they see whales 167 years from now? †

Mia Sigler is a senior at Mount Holyoke College and an alumna of SEA Semester voyage S-283. This article was made possible by the efforts and contributions of Richard King, maritime studies professor at Sea Education Association; Deb Goodwin, oceanography professor and primary designer of the GIS map; Kerry Whittaker, oceanography professor and chief scientist during the voyage; Jenn Crandall and Olivia Vasquez, S-283 students who compiled the data for the GIS map; and the rest of the S-283 students who transcribed Captain Lawrence's logbook, with final editing by Kathryn Spencer and Mia Sigler. (The logbook and chart are online at, respectively, www.museumsonthegreen.org/archives and http://msedev.mysticseaport.org/artifacts/norie_chart_south_pacific/. Sea Education Association: www.sea.edu)



The author, Mia Sigler, at the helm of the SSV Robert C. Seamans in fall of 2018.

Logbooks as Archival History

As we discovered, ship logs as a genre tend to make pretty dry reading. They are meant to be an account of essential daily information, detailing wind direction and strength, precipitation, sail configuration and maneuvers, whale encounters, and passing mention of other ships sighted. On our modern-day voyage, we recorded much of this same information hourly in the *Robert C. Seamans* logbook. It turns out, logbooks offer a wealth of information and can be veritable data mines—something Matthew Fontaine Maury knew well even in the 1850s.

reflect changes. Additionally, a mapping project similar in purpose to our own is underway at WhalingHistory.org, which uses a combination of data from the American Offshore Whaling Logbook (AOWL) database to generate maps for specific whaleship voyages.

If our class had not been exposed to this logbook, we would never have stumbled upon Captain Lawrence's heated diatribe about ship speeds, or the lack thereof, in which he began the day's entry by exclaiming, "By Jingo how wish I had a clipper under my feet to day we would have walked up to them fellows and stood a good chance