

The Palimpsest Captive: Narratives of Islam, the *Essex*, and Her Boy in Early Republican Culture

James R. Fichter

ABSTRACT This essay considers the American encounter with Islam in the Early Republic through the lenses of Americans' stories about the 1806 destruction of the *Essex*, a New England merchantman trading in the Red Sea, and the subsequent captivity and conversion of the ship's boy, John Poll, at the hands of the alleged "pirate" Sayyid Muhammad 'Aqil. James R. Fichter traces the shifting, sometimes contradictory features of these stories, demonstrating how changing trade and military relations between the United States and Barbary led to them being interpreted in different ways over time. This essay broadens the geography of scholarship of the early national encounter with Islam beyond North Africa to the Indian Ocean. **KEYWORDS:** American relations with Islamic states; trade in the Early Republic; Barbary Wars; Islam in U.S. newspapers; captivity narratives

☞ IN 1806 THE AMERICAN MERCHANTMAN *ESSEX* disappeared in the Red Sea. Exactly what happened is a mystery. We know the ship was looted and sunk and almost the whole crew killed. We know the cabin boy, John Poll, survived and was taken in by an Arab merchant, Sayyid Muhammad 'Aqil. We know Poll converted to Islam, took a new name—Abdullah Muhammad—and never returned to the United States. Beyond such facts, questions linger, as they lingered for Americans at the time. Why was the ship sunk? What was 'Aqil's role in the attack on the *Essex*?¹ Why did Poll live? Was he a captive? Was he forced to convert? Could he be redeemed?

The *Essex* and her boy, now long forgotten, were minor causes célèbres at the time, appearing in over two dozen American newspaper stories,² as well as in ship

1. Hermann Frederick Eilts placed 'Aqil at al-Luhayyah during the attack, meaning he could not have led the attack personally, although it could have happened at his direction. Eilts suspected the *sharif* of Abu 'Arish instead. "Sayyid Muhammed bin 'Aqil of Dhufar: Malevolent or Maligned?," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 109 (July 1973): 179–230 at 224.

2. See table 1 in the appendix for references.

logs, letters, legal depositions, and official reports created by American, British, and French nationals (among others). Over twelve versions of the story emerged (see table 1 in the appendix).

None of these stories was written by an eyewitness. Each had an intermediary, sometimes several. The stories agree on few facts—even the date of the attack is unclear³—and invest different meanings in events. Each is flawed—convenient, contradictory, and riddled with second- and thirdhand information. They are irreconcilable, and the reader should not expect the definitive truth of what happened to the *Essex* here. Yet as a body these narratives show how Americans encountered Islam not only as a religion of captivity but also as a religion of commerce (an implication imbedded in Barbary captivity narratives, too, as some of the ships taken were seeking to trade with the Ottoman Empire).

American perceptions of the *Essex*'s fate changed over time.⁴ Initially, various readings were possible. News of the survival and presumed captivity of Poll changed this; Americans emphasized Poll's *Islamic* captivity, which connected the *Essex* to Islamic maritime outrages, dominated by the conflict with Barbary: the 1785 Algerian Crisis, the renewed Algerian attacks of 1793, and the capture of the USS *Philadelphia* in Tripoli in 1803. While commercial interests arguably drove the U.S. government to fight the Barbary Wars, the religious threat of Islam remained prominent in popular U.S. discourse. Victory in the Second Barbary War in 1815 assuaged American frustrations about weakness against Islam and the risk of captivity in Islamic lands. When new American narratives about the *Essex* emerged in 1819, they had a new focus: though Poll converted and remained abroad, Americans engaging with his story ceased to associate the Islamic world with religious menace and forced captivity, emphasizing instead U.S. commerce with various Islamic regions, commerce that had underlain the U.S. encounter with Islam since the founding of the republic.⁵

The sections below examine distinct American cultural perceptions of the *Essex* story. The first considers the *Essex* tale as one about racial violence, contrasting this interpretation with the complex lived racial experience of Indian Ocean crews. The second considers the idea of 'Aqil as a religious "fanatic" in the context of contemporary conflict on the Arabian Peninsula. The third considers the *Essex* as a cautionary story in the context of ongoing attacks on the extensive U.S. shipping in

3. Eilts, "Aqil of Dhufar," 109. French sources, however, tighten the time frame to April 1806. See note 31.

4. Paul Baepler, in his introduction to *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*, ed. Baepler (Chicago, 1999), 18–19, notes that multiple captivity narratives could describe the same event differently.

5. Frank Lambert argues that economic motivations drove U.S. involvement in the Barbary Wars. However, many Americans perceived a religious menace, drawing on early modern Anglo-American encounters with Islam; Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York, 2005).

the Indian Ocean. The fourth considers initial accounts of Poll's captivity and conversion in the context of narratives of Islamic captivity and conversion during the Early Republic. The fifth considers the waning resonance of Islamic captivity and conversion in post-Barbary Wars American culture, as seen in the notes taken by two American merchant captains who interviewed the former Poll, who by then called himself Muhammad (as we shall call the adult convert).

Historians of American captivity and conversion in the Islamic world have been unaware of the stories of the *Essex* and of Poll. This essay broadens the geography of the early national encounter with Islam beyond North Africa to the Indian Ocean, where American reactions to and understandings of *Islam* varied. Many of the themes explored here—piracy, Islam, captivity, and conversion—resonate with early national discourse on the Barbary states. Yet these states—with political economies based on privateering and ransom—were outliers in the Islamic world, and the Barbary Wars were outliers among U.S. responses to Islam. American merchants traded with other areas under Islamic rule, including Yemen, Muscat, Zanzibar, and Aceh, and they endured low-level violence emerging from this trade as the cost of doing business—including attempts on U.S. merchantmen in Sumatran waters (some successful, some not) in 1789, 1797, 1802, 1819, 1826, and 1831. Yet, as the captain of the ship captured in 1831 noted, the commonplace view in America was that these attacks did not constitute a threat stemming from Islam but rather from the “wrongs they [Sumatrans] have experienced at our hands . . . that *we, Americans*, are, after all, responsible for it” by trading unfairly.⁶ Violence was part of American trade in Sumatra—and religion did not enter into the popular American understanding of that violence, although it had in relation to the attacks in pre-1815 Maghreb. American merchants sailed past Barbary to Smyrna, where U.S. trade flourished. U.S. trade with Bengal and Java, Islamic regions under European colonial control, flourished too. The Islam that Americans encountered in these places varied but was never perceived as inhibiting commerce. Before 1815 the Barbary Wars informed American interpretations of the *Essex*, but after those wars ended, Americans emphasized the economic ties that had long underlain the U.S. encounter with the Islamic world. American discourse about the broader Islamic world was caught up in the Barbary experience, but Barbary alone did not define the American encounter with Islam. American culture was also exposed to an Islamic world beyond the Maghreb, and this encounter was fundamentally different from the American cultural encounter with Barbary.

6. “*we, Americans*”: Charles Endicott, *Narrative of the Piracy and Plunder of the Ship Friendship, of Salem, on the West Coast of Sumatra in February, 1831* (Salem, Mass., 1859), 3, emphasis original; on Sumatra: James W. Gould, “Sumatra—America’s Pepperpot 1784–1873,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 92, no. 2 (April 1956): 83–152, esp. 98, 139; continued in vol. 92, no. 3 (July 1956): 203–51, esp. 213, 230; and vol. 92, no. 4 (October 1956): 295–348.

Ward's 'Aqil as Race Rioter

This section considers the ways in which racial readings of the *Essex* drew from and informed broader ideas about race. Initial accounts made no note of Poll, focusing on the attack against the *Essex*. One of the first arrived by mail from the Arabian Coast to Bombay. The American merchant captain Gamaliel Ward saw a copy there on July 3, 1806, and the *Bombay Courier* printed a copy on July 5. The Ward and *Courier* versions are identical, save for the order of a few clauses, and were probably both based on the same single source. Ward entered the news into his logbook on the 5th, noting that the *Essex*, trading for coffee in the Red Sea, had been captured, plundered, and sunk by “Caffre Slaves.” The *Essex* had taken the men aboard as pilots from the *Mendah*, a vessel belonging to Sayyid Muhammad 'Aqil. Ward reported that the *Mendah* had fallen in with the *Essex* off Kamaran Island (fig. 1) and that the attackers “murdered every soul on board,” took the cargo of silver, and sank the vessel. “The mangled bodies of several of the unhappy victims have since drifted on shore,” he wrote.⁷

Two weeks later, Ward, still in Bombay, copied another version into his log, courtesy of Captain Stevenson of the *Erin*, a Baltimore merchantman that had stopped at Mocha and collected information from unknown sources. Now 'Aqil commanded the *Mendah* himself, cruising with his brother along with “a french Capt & french mate. 164 Negro Slaves and about 40 lascars beside 4 frenchmen for a crew.” Here 'Aqil bought Kamaran as a base. Now 'Aqil was vicious, ordering a Black slave to kill the white French captain. As before, the *Mendah* fell in with the *Essex* off Kamaran, offering help with pilots. The American captain accepted, discharging his own pilot, who reported that he last saw the *Mendah* and *Essex* together on April 29, 1806. Ward claimed that it was thought in al-Luhayyah that 'Aqil had by May 5th killed the captain and crew, though, since all witnesses were apparently dead, “no one could tell whence the report came.”

Explaining how news of the *Essex* was obtained given the loss of all witnesses was a recurring narrative problem. (Some narrators did not even try. “How he became a witness to this bloody spectacle,” one narrator explained of his source, “I could not discover.”)⁸ According to Ward, days after the first reports in al-Luhayyah, a Mr. Leonard traveling through al-Hudaydah learned that “the corps of

7. Gamaliel E. Ward, entry for July 5, 1806, *Recovery* log, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass. [hereafter PEM]. Ward differs from others by dating the attack to February 1806; see *Bombay Courier*, July 5, 1806. On dating the attack, see Eilts, who places it in March or April of 1806; “'Aqil of Dhufar,” 204. French sources date the attack to the night of April 23/24, 1806: “Résultat de l'Examen des Pièces relatives a L'assassinat de Gaspard Chatelain, Au Meutre de L'Equipage d'un Batiment Américain et au Pillage et a la destruction de ce navire par l'arabe Seyed Mohamed Beni-Akil,” October 12, 1806, COL C4 129, fol. 157, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (ANOM).

8. James Duncan Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex* in 1806,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 77 (October 1941): 302.

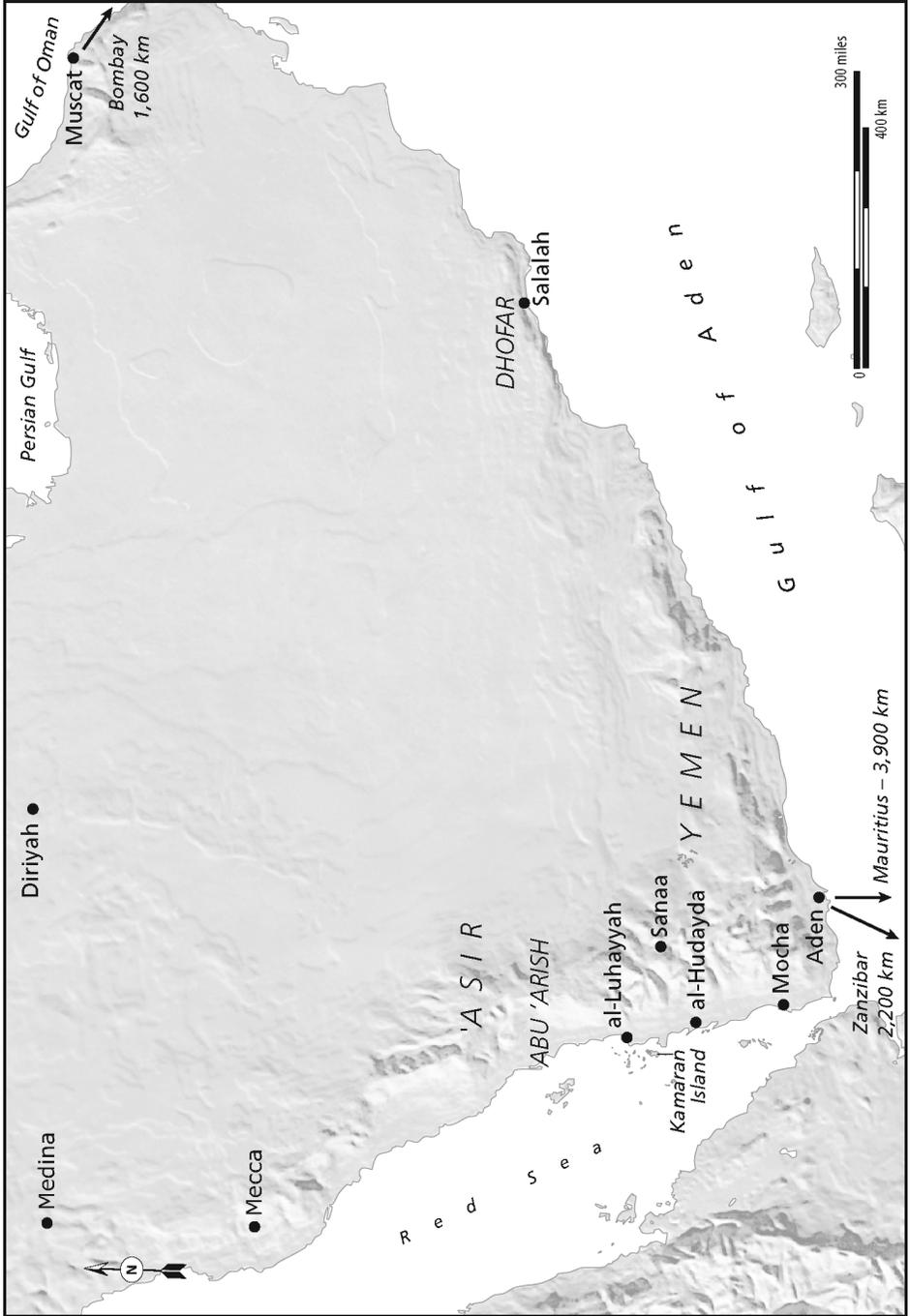


FIGURE 1. Map of Arabian Peninsula. Illustration by Isabelle Lewis. © James R. Fichter

an European had been found on the shore,” beheaded. (Ward uses “European” here to mean “white.”)⁹ Leonard brought news to U.S. merchants at Mocha—including, presumably, Stevenson—on May 14th.

The U.S. merchants at Mocha then spoke to their broker, who indicated he had heard the story but had kept silent. Ward gave several reasons why the broker might have kept quiet. ‘Aqil was prominent in Mocha. He kept a house there. One of ‘Aqil’s relatives served as the Mocha agent for Americans buying coffee (it is unclear whether this was the broker they spoke with). A conflict with American buyers endangered ‘Aqil’s business. So, despite these ties, when the *Mendah* sailed past Mocha without stopping, Ward interpreted it as a sign of guilt, reasoning that ‘Aqil was “afraid the Americans would learn what he had done” and seek vengeance.¹⁰

The Ward-Stevenson story is a palimpsest¹¹ modeling many of the epistemological problems surrounding tales of the *Essex*. It is a pastiche of sources with their details erased: the disembarking pilot, the traveler Leonard, the Mocha broker, other American merchants—none saw the attack, and none had a clear link to Stevenson. Did Stevenson speak to them himself or hear secondhand? How reliable were they? The broker concealed information. The pilot gave an oddly precise count of the men on the *Mendah* for a man who had not been aboard. Leonard never saw the corpse he reported—he heard about it. Stevenson did not explain how any of these men could have witnessed anything, but he took their stories, dubious at best and palimpsests themselves, and made a new one, obscuring how things could be known even as he posed as a narrator so omniscient he could know ‘Aqil’s thoughts. Ward then added his own layer to it.

Yet the Ward-Stevenson narrative has its advantages. Every narrative is a palimpsest, but the standard narrative is a monolithic one, its erasure of its sources nearly complete. Readers struggle to see what the author excluded or fabricated, aiming to discern the differences in meaning and emphasis between author and sources. Here, however, we have many narratives, which, in their contradiction and diversity, we may compare to one another, working out the different sources for and different meanings of the *Essex* story. And in their multiplicity the *Essex* stories let us glimpse the flow of information creating them and the commerce enabling that flow.

9. Ward also noted that “seven European Bodies were found which floated on shore—all murdered” from the *Essex* crew. Entry for July 18, 1806, *Recovery* log, PEM.

10. Ward, entry for July 18, 1806, *Recovery* log, PEM. Stevenson noted that ‘Aqil’s brother-in-law was the American agent; other sources give ‘Aqil’s brother as the agent or broker. Viscount Valentia [George Annesley], *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt, in the Years 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*, 3 vols. (London, 1809), 2:416. One of ‘Aqil’s brothers was said to be on the *Mendah*. John [Giovanni] Benzoni, an Italian living in Aden, thought the news was well known among the *banians* (Indian brokers); J. Benzoni to Charles Forbes, Esqr., Aden, May 26, 1806, India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 171–73, British Library [hereafter BL].

11. My use of *palimpsest* as an analytical frame derives from Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (New York, 2004), 95.

As Ward copied Stevenson's tale into his log—at another remove from anyone who had seen anything—'Aqil became a "pirate." This interpretive choice left unanswered questions. Why attack the *Essex* in particular? None of the Americans who wrote accounts that describe 'Aqil as a pirate explained why a merchant whose family supplied U.S. traders would jeopardize that business with piracy—or why, if he had decided to engage in piracy, he only did so once. Had someone stopped 'Aqil from attacking other ships, or would he attack again? Was the attack a commercial dispute that escalated into violence? Was there another motivation? The word *piracy* at the time covered a range of actions, from raids supported by local authorities, to armed reprisals derived from trade disputes, to sea robberies. For Ward, Stevenson, and other American merchants whose business it was to think about money, theft seemed a logical motive. The *Essex*, like many U.S. merchantmen in the Indian Ocean, carried silver coin—\$60,000 of it. American vessels were known to carry treasure. If 'Aqil struck again, other American vessels would be obvious targets. But American merchants *assumed* the motive was robbery.¹²

In explaining the violence of these acts (which a pure profit motive did not require), Ward prioritized racial over religious antagonism, focusing on slavery and complexion. He envisioned "Negro Slaves" massacring whites, leaving "European" bodies to rot. He assumed the French captain opposed 'Aqil's plan because he was white, and "no doubt ['Aqil] judged it necessary to put out of his way so great an obstacle to his villany." In the context of the recent revolt in Haiti—of which U.S. merchant captains were particularly aware—this scene of white vulnerability to Black violence was powerful. It was also a scene that had explanatory power only if readers could be

12. French sources concur that the motive was robbery. See note 31. On specie, see James Fichter, *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); and Eilts, "'Aqil of Dhufar," 200. The *Essex*'s specie was reported variously as \$140,000 (by Ward in his first version and also by Lt. Charles Court, *Panther*, to superintendent of marine, Mocha, June 8, 1806, IOR/F/257/4/5648, fols. 80–81, BL) and \$60,000 (by Ward in his second version and also by Benzoni in J. Benzoni to Charles Forbes, Esqr., Aden, May 26, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 172, BL, both presumably from Stevenson). Ward's information came from Britons, among others. Britons used the term *pirate* for violators of British commercial norms who posed a political problem for Britain or threatened Western command of blue-water shipping. These pirates did not represent Asian states with which Western states had relations (such as Thailand or Muscat), but were from unrecognized/emergent polities (the Al Qasimi in the Persian Gulf, the Sea Dayaks of Borneo) at the margins of states. They were sometimes also coopted as privateers in a potentate's cause. *Piracy* thus could indicate a variety of acts and motives. It was 'Aqil's possible connection to Napoleonic France that made him politically inconvenient for Britain (see below). This certainly should cause us to question 'Aqil's true role in this, as Eilts has. However, all accounts that name a culprit point to 'Aqil. And while the charge of "piracy" was convenient for Britain, it does not follow that the charges were fabricated. Rather, that convenience manifested itself in Britain's pursuing 'Aqil when it was concerned about him and dropping the matter when it was not.

sure the slaves were actually Black—hence Ward’s emphasis (and possible manufacture) of this point—and not the white slaves of Barbary.¹³

What would ‘Aqil be doing with so many slaves? Was he a slaver? Were they his cargo? (It was not implausible for Yemeni or Omani merchants to have slaves from Ethiopia or central Africa, and other sources also implied that ‘Aqil was slave trading.)¹⁴ Were there slaves on ‘Aqil’s crew? (Some Indian Ocean merchant officers put personal slaves on the crew and collected the slaves’ wages themselves.)¹⁵ Would ‘Aqil have armed these slaves? That would be risky. If not, he had a small number of armed men—40 lascars—which he had to divide between keeping 164 slaves in check and killing the 10 men on the *Essex*. Why court slave revolt? Or perhaps the men were Somali mercenaries¹⁶ whom Ward assumed were slaves.

In his first version of the story, Ward called ‘Aqil’s slaves *Caffres*, a term with Arabic roots: eighteenth-century Arabs called non-Muslims of African and European origin *kafir* (unbeliever). In English the term took on ethnographic and racial overtones, especially in Southern Africa (hence the “Caffre Wars”). The term was not used in the United States, but it was in Britain, India, and Cape Town, where the term either described specific African groups or referred to Blacks generally. Americans stopped in Cape Town on the way to and from the Red Sea and India. Other Americans, transcribing accounts of the attack on the *Essex*, also called the attackers “Caffres,” as did at least two British writers. Presumably with this term they referenced the race of ‘Aqil’s crew, not its religion, but in the use of the term they also pointed to the American commerce linking Cape Town and India to Yemen.¹⁷

The rhetorical opposition of a white, Christian, and American crew with a Black, Muslim, and foreign crew obscures real diversity aboard ship. Other sources describe the *Essex* as carrying not only American crew but also two “Portuguese Sea

13. Ward, entry for July 18, 1806, *Recovery* log, PEM.

14. On slave trading generally, see Ralph Austen, “The Nineteenth-Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts): A Tentative Census,” in “The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” ed. W. G. Clarence-Smith, special issue, *Slavery and Abolition* 9, no. 3 (1988): 21–44. For evidence that ‘Aqil was a slave trader, see note 31.

15. Hermann Frederick Eilts, “Ahmad Bin Na’aman’s Mission to the United States in 1840: The Voyage of *Al-Sultanah* to New York City,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 98 (October 1962): 219–77 at 221.

16. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:423.

17. American sources: “Extract from Capt Wm Austin Memnd Book,” entry for March 19, 1819, Orne Family Papers, MSS 41, box 32, folder 2, PEM; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302. British sources: extract letter from Lieutenant Charles Court, commander, the *Panther*, to superintendent of marine, June 8, 1806, Mocha, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 80–81, BL; report and free translation of Turreau interrogation, n.d. (late July to early August 1806), IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 142–44, BL. Cf. Eilts, who thinks the “caffres” were bodyguards from East Africa (and may or may not have been slaves); “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 210; and George Augustus Frederick Fitzclarence Munster, *Journal of a Route across India, through Egypt, to England in the Latter End of the Year 1817, and the Beginning of 1818* (London, 1819), 419.

Kany's" (Indian petty officers, called "Portuguese" for their Catholicism and mixed descent). After the attack, these seacunnies supposedly lived with 'Aqil at Muscat and "had been forced to turn Mussulman."¹⁸ Or, as a more racial reading put it: the surviving French officer and the *Essex* seacunnies "were forced to become arabs in order to save their lives."¹⁹ (The links between the rhetorics of religious conversion and racial transformation are discussed in a later section.) The teller of the first version of this story was a Danish sailor on the Arab ship *Monsory*. The teller of the second was a Frenchman who had taken passage on one Arab ship and served as commander on another (although the phrase "become arabs" was his English translator's). The Dane and the Frenchman were themselves proof of racial and religious diversity aboard ship. U.S. merchantmen like the *Essex* were more like the *Mendah*, with its mixed French and Indian crew, than Ward admitted. New Englander Daniel Saunders in his 1792 account of shipwreck on the Arabian coast described his crew as "twenty Whites, thirteen Lascar sailors, and one [Boston] black."²⁰ American captains hired mixed crews in U.S. ports and took on men en route—South Americans, Africans, Indians, Arabs, men from the East India Company's naval vessels²¹—to replace the dead, the impressed, and those who just left. Saunders worked two vessels between Salem and Arabia and six between Muscat and Salem. These included American and British merchantmen; the churn filling American holds with foreign crew members also put Americans on foreign ships. One of Saunders's crewmates worked his way from Muscat to Bombay on a vessel owned by "an Arabian," and to earn money Saunders joined an "Arabian ship" in Muscat port that already had three French sailors on it.²² Before the attack, the *Essex* spent two months in Yemen looking for coffee, increasing the need to replace crew (in 1806 low coffee supplies meant ships had to wait months for this cargo at Mocha; many ships gave up and traded elsewhere).²³ Finally, the captain hired an Englishman to serve as a guide to the market.

It is possible to glimpse Ward's authorship here, for not only did Ward write two versions of the story—the second expanding on the racial tension of the first—but his source for his second version of the story, Captain Stevenson, also shared the story with John [Giovanni] Benzoni.²⁴ Benzoni relayed *his* version of the Stevenson

18. Eilts, "'Aqil of Dhufar," 215, notes that Arab sailors might have joined the *Essex* at Aden. On crew diversity: Robert Allison, *The Crescent Obscured, the United States and the Muslim World, 1776–1815* (New York, 1995), 121–25; Daniel Saunders, *A Journal of the Travels and Sufferings of Daniel Saunders* (Leominster, Mass., 1797), 10–11. On the *Essex* seacunnies: Schuler to Macawlay, November 4, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 241, BL.

19. Turreau interrogation, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 144, BL.

20. Saunders, *Journal*, 10–11.

21. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:78–79.

22. Saunders, *Journal*, 3, 58–61.

23. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:403.

24. Benzoni would later be appointed assistant to Henry Rudland, the East India Company resident at Mocha; J. J. Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, 2 vols. (London, 1834), 1:173. On Benzoni, see note 10.

story to British merchant Charles Forbes in Bombay, who forwarded Benzoni's letters to the East India Company. Benzoni wrote nothing of "Caffre" or "Negro" slaves—indeed he made no mention of race or 'Aqil's crew at all. Racial violence was Ward's fixation. Instead Benzoni fixated on Anglo–French conflict—an issue Ward omitted entirely. For Benzoni, the English guide who died along with the *Essex* crew and a possible French connection for 'Aqil were the real story: he noted that 'Aqil's ship, the *Mendah*, had two French officers and four French crewmen, that it had come from French Mauritius, and that it was thought to be "French property."²⁵ Ward had also mentioned the Frenchmen, but only as part of his racial taxonomy: "French," like "European," was a synonym for white. Much of the French connection that concerned Benzoni was readily explainable: the *Mendah* was one of two vessels 'Aqil had bought at Mauritius in 1805. French cruisers had taken the British merchantman *Pigeon* off the Malabar Coast. 'Aqil bought it at prize auction in Mauritius and renamed it the *Mendah*. Since he was on a French island, some of the officers and crew he hired for its crew were French citizens. There was no French government plot here: 'Aqil, like the Americans, was simply profiting off the Anglo–French conflict.²⁶

Word that the guide, Carter, was a British spy and that 'Aqil was consorting with a Frenchman convinced English East India Company officials that 'Aqil was a French tool, the robbery of the *Essex* and the slaughter of its crew merely a cover for the real goal: killing Carter. (It is unclear whether Carter really was a spy or the Company thought 'Aqil *believed* Carter was a spy.) Other sources written by or to East India Company officials shared this reading of the incident as traceable to Anglo–French conflict.²⁷ In the colonial imaginary of Company officials, all it took was a few

25. Benzoni to Forbes, May 26, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 171–73, BL.

26. Capt. Bergeret, *Psyché*, took the *Pigeon* on February 14, 1805. On French Indian Ocean campaigns: Maurice Dupont and Etienne Taillemite, *Les guerres navales françaises: Du Moyen Âge à la guerre du Golfe* (Paris, 1995), 142–47, 170–74. British sources often refer to the *Mendah* as the *Pigeon*, but *Mendah* is used here for clarity. The other vessel was originally the *Peggy*. 'Aqil reached Mocha with his Mauritian prizes on August 26, 1805, for which see Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:418. On the capture of the *Pigeon*, see "Documents divers concernant le prize Le Pigeon faite par la division Linois (1804)," GB 113/3, Bureau des Classes, National Archives of Mauritius. Much of the prize money went to the island government; prize auctions were an important source of revenue for the island, for which see "Etat des Dépenses & Recette au Trésor de la République au Port du N.O. Ile de France . . ." 30 Prairial an 10 [June 19, 1802], COL C4 115, fol. 158, ANOM.

27. One of these was a "Free Translation" of the interrogation of a French prisoner who claimed to have discussed the *Essex* with the surviving French officer from the *Mendah* (named De[s]nou[es]). The interrogator, G. C. Osborne, explained that "[f]inding the sense of the original defective in several instances" he re-interviewed Turreau and "amend[ed]" the translation accordingly. The translation was therefore "not exactly literal." The document reflected Osborne's concerns, not Turreau's. British officials looking for French involvement cast this thirdhand hearsay as a signed deposition and suddenly had a witness testifying to a French role, which justified sending a ship. G. C. Osborne to Francis Warden, Esqr., secretary to government, Bombay, August 2, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 141, BL. There is no evidence Carter worked for the Company; however, he had just completed a private mission to Abyssinia for

white men to organize the natives, and there were long-standing fears of French Mauritians' ability to organize resistance to Company rule.²⁸ This made the two French "officers" seem threatening. In July 1806 the Company dispatched Captain David Seton from Bombay with the *Mornington* and *Ternate* to Kamaran. Seton was to force 'Aqil to give up claim to the island, to "withdraw every thing, that may be on it, either belonging to himself, or to the French," and to demolish all structures on the island. If 'Aqil did not comply, Seton was to arrest him.²⁹

In October 1806, Seton, then the new Company resident at Mocha, reported (based on unknown sourcing) that 'Aqil had alienated the Saudis by not sending them tribute from the *Essex*. In this version, the Saudis had ordered Sharif Hamood of Abu 'Arish "to seize [Aqil] and send him to Derraya" (i.e., Diriyah, the Saudi capital). But 'Aqil was tipped off, escaped, and sailed for Muscat. (This was when he sailed past Mocha, exciting Ward's suspicions.) When the *sharif's* forces arrived at Kamaran, they "took away what men [Aqil] had left there, and demolished what building has been begun."³⁰ When Seton reached Kamaran, he found nothing: no buildings, no 'Aqil.

'Aqil, far from being a French agent, had alienated France as well. The French governor of Mauritius, having heard that 'Aqil "assassinated a French Pilot in the Red Sea," ordered an investigation. The two French "officers" on the *Mendah* about whom British officials worried were, in this version, simply pilots hired at Mauritius. 'Aqil

George Annesley (then styled as Viscount Valentia); Thomas E. Marston, *Britain's Imperial Role in the Red Sea Area, 1800–1878* (Hamden, Conn., 1961), 33–34. One problem with the spy theory is the difficulty of verifying Carter's death. One of the few sources to claim clear knowledge was Annesley: he claimed that Hyder, a former servant of his, recognized Carter's body. Benzoni and Ward, relying on Stevenson, give the elusive Mr. Leonard as identifying Carter's headless corpse, which he allegedly recognized by the clothes. Annesley, *Voyages*, 3:274; Benzoni to Forbes, May 26, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 171–73, BL.

28. This dates back at least to the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War (1798–99), when French Mauritians volunteered to help Tipu Sultan against the Company; Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East 1750–1850* (New York, 2005), 149–207.

29. On Seton's mission: Francis Warden, secretary to government, to Captain David Seton, Bombay Castle, July 20, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 118–19, BL. On the attack on Kamaran and 'Aqil's supposed French connection: Annesley, *Voyages*, 3:274; and Charles Rathbone Low, *History of the Indian Navy, 1613–1863*, 2 vols. (London, 1877), 1:393. Captain David Seton was a captain in the 7th Regiment of Native Infantry, Bombay. He negotiated a truce with the Qasimi in February 1806 as Company resident in Muscat. Seton's rank: *East-India Register and Directory for 1803* (London, 1803), 246; Seton's activities in the Gulf: *The Journals of David Seton in the Gulf, 1800–1809*, ed. Sultan ibn Muhammad al-Qasimi (Exeter, U.K., 1994); and D. T. Potts, "Trends and Patterns in the Archaeology and Pre-Modern History of the Gulf Region," in *The Emergence of the Gulf States: Studies in Modern History*, ed. J. T. Peterson (London, 2016), 19–42 at 34.

30. David Seton to Bombay, October 12, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 209–14, BL. Political Department to Rear Adm. Pellew, Bombay Castle, August 14, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 159–60, BL, describes 'Aqil's buildings as "fortifications." Other sources mention a gun "battery": Schuler to Macawlay, November 4, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 240, BL.

was then said to have “slaughtered” the *Essex* crew. The governor heard that ‘Aqil had done this “under the Muscat flag” and that ‘Aqil had escaped to Muscat after the attack to “quietly enjoy the fruits of his crime.” He wrote the imam of Muscat seeking “satisfaction” for the death of a French national—and preferably ‘Aqil’s arrest. The imam replied that he had only heard of ‘Aqil’s crime after ‘Aqil had left his domains, adding that ‘Aqil had “since sailed under the Flag of the Waabi”—that is, the Wahhabi or Saudis. So much for a French plot.³¹

31. “assassinated,” “under the Muscat flag,” “satisfaction,” “since sailed”: “Rapport,” naval minister to Bonaparte, March 1808, AF/IV/1215, folder 4, item 3, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. On pilots Gaspard Chatelain and Mr. Desnoues: “Résultat de l’Examen,” fol. 157, ANOM; “quietly”: “Résultat de l’Examen,” fol. 158. Indeed, the analysis went so far as to suggest the imam as ‘Aqil’s “accomplice.” “slaughtered”: “Résultat de l’Examen,” fol. 159. The governor of Mauritius, Charles Mathieu Isidore Decaen, ordered this examination of the various documents pertaining to ‘Aqil (many of which are bound with the above). These sources were unavailable to British and American observers. They included a letter from ‘Aqil to Messrs. Dalou and Couturon (presumably a Mauritian merchant firm); three declarations from Mr. Desnoues; interviews with two of ‘Aqil’s sailors, given as Abdalla and Gouloum; an interview with Chatelain’s slave mistress, Palmire, who witnessed Chatelain’s assassination; and the declarations of several officers of the *Vigilant*, a French corsair that encountered the *Mendah* in the days after the attack on the *Essex*, first at Aden (where ‘Aqil put Desnoues ashore to conceal his actions) and again at Muscat (where Desnoues was informed by his compatriots of ‘Aqil’s actions and escape). ‘Aqil’s letter claimed that Chatelain had been killed in a dispute with an Arab sailor and that ‘Aqil had executed the assassin. The examination, however, concluded the assassin had been directed by ‘Aqil to kill Chatelain and allowed to escape. The examination summarized events as follows: ‘Aqil had Chatelain killed on the night of April 19/20 because of a debt. He was visited near Kamaran in the afternoon of April 23rd by Orne, Carter, and four sailors from the *Essex*, and, motivated by money, determined to rob the vessel. He had the six men killed then sent a boat over to kill the remaining crew, rob the vessel, and burn it in the night. He subsequently sailed as far as Aden before encountering the *Vigilant*, at which point put Desnoues and three seacunnies ashore along with the loot from the *Essex* (presumably with some guards) and received a visit from the *Vigilant*. He lied, explaining that Chatelain had died at Mocha and that Desnoues had left for Zanzibar. Having gotten rid of the *Vigilant*, he returned to Kamaran and conducted his sham execution of Chatelain’s assassin, picked up some Arab passengers and carried them to al-Hudaydah, returned to Aden to collect the loot from the *Essex*, which he had hidden there, then sailed to Muscat, where the officers of the *Vigilant* were surprised to find Desnoues aboard the *Mendah* after all. The examination focused on the suspicion that the imam of Muscat profited from and/or harbored ‘Aqil for his actions, which, Governor Decaen was concerned, indicated an anti-French lean in Muscat diplomacy; “Résultat de l’Examen,” fols. 157–62. Decaen let the matter with Muscat drop in favor of a new treaty, signed June 16, 1807, for which see “Résultat de l’Examen,” fols. 125–48. There is no evidence in French or Mauritian archives that ‘Aqil was a French agent. For British descriptions of Decaen, see “Deposition of Nicholas Hamm,” October 11, 1810, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 18–19, BL; and Eilts, “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 205. The interviews with Desnoues and the reports of the officers of the *Vigilant* on their encounter with ‘Aqil at Aden provide firm sourcing for dating this attack to April 1806. The suggestion that ‘Aqil, Chatelain, and Desnoues were engaged in slave trading can be seen by Chatelain’s and Desnoues’s role as “pilots,” a term that makes no sense on its own (local Mascarene pilots would be useless in the Red Sea), but might be a euphemism for their role as slavers on the *Mendah*, or might suggest they had specialized knowledge of slave trading ports in the Horn of Africa. There was also a debt between ‘Aqil and Chatelain of 890 piastres, a sum

Americans, British, French, Saudis: a version of the story existed in which 'Aqil offended each, and in which each glossed the meanings of 'Aqil's actions. Ironically, it was the Omanis based in Muscat, whom the French governor blamed, who would eventually assassinate him.

☞ *The American Daily Advertiser's 'Aqil as Religious Fighter*

This section examines a religiously inflected reading of the *Essex* and the broader context that informed it: Saudi Wahhabist expansion into Shi'i northern Yemen, where Americans traded. The lurid details of the *Essex* tale and the national pride it offended ensured the story "for a long time interested the feelings of the American publick."³² Newspapers copied and altered accounts of the *Essex*, emphasizing themes they thought would pique interest. One theme was the Wahhabi expansion in Arabia, a new explanation for the loss of the *Essex*. A widely reprinted article from the *American Daily Advertiser* claimed 'Aqil was Wahhabi and his crew "fanatics like himself." Here, 'Aqil met the *Essex* at Mocha (rather than Kamaran) and convinced the captain to take on thirty men for a voyage to al-Hudaydah. "At a given signal, the pirates on board fell upon the crew with their knives," the *Mendah* came alongside, "and in a few minutes not an American was left to tell the sad tale of their destruction."³³

This version, too, was a palimpsest—sourced from unnamed "Baltimore papers." It effaced earlier versions ('Aqil's crew could not be entirely Muslim *and also* include non-Muslim slaves) and catered to new concerns. It portrayed Wahhabi Muslims as violent, with the seizure of the *Essex* as the murderous extension of this religion. The Wahhabis were described as marauders who "sacked" Mecca (Wahhabi-Saudi forces took Mecca in 1803), "destroyed" the tomb of the "great Prophet Mahomet" (they plundered Medina in 1804), and "committed dreadful ravages." The House of Saud was also said to have "conquered nearly all the country situated above Mocha" (Wahhabi conquests included al-Hudaydah and al-Luhayyah in Abu 'Arish in 1804; see fig. 1).³⁴ (This first Saudi state, the Emirate of Diriyah, fell in 1818 and should not be confused with modern Saudi Arabia.) Though the 1805 U.S. treaty with Tripoli proclaimed that no "pretext arising from Religious Opinions" would inflame the U.S. against Tripoli in future, a swathe of American media perceived hostility

that makes more sense in the context of slave trading. The examination notes that the *Mendah* first sailed from Mauritius, where 'Aqil had acquired the vessel, to "various stations in the Red Sea" and then to Mocha, where Chatelain and 'Aqil settled accounts, suggestive of a slaving voyage. Chatelain was also, prior to being killed, off-loaded onto Kamaran "with his Slaves," including one "negress" ("Résultat de l'Examen," fol. 158). Before killing the *Essex* crew, 'Aqil locked up Palmire along with "Gaspard's and Desnoues's blacks" (fol. 159). Valentin likewise thought 'Aqil was using "Samaulies" (Somalis) for labor; Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:423.

32. Phillips, "Loss of the Ship *Essex*," 300.

33. *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 4, 1806, sourcing "Baltimore papers."

34. *United States' Gazette*, October 13, 1806.

from various “Mahometan Nations.”³⁵ U.S. papers described Wahhabis “plundering and destroying the vessels of every nation” in the Red Sea. (Perhaps the presence of Wahhabi-supported Qasimi raiders in the Persian Gulf led them to conceive of a broader Wahhabi threat to the seas.)³⁶ Among the Wahhabists, ‘Aqil “is said to be distinguished for his enormities on the Red Sea,” “having purchased the island of Camorin . . . which is made his head quarters, and from whence, he has spread more terror, than did the Buccaneers formerly amongst the Spaniards.” Far from a “Caffre” ship, ‘Aqil and his crew were “enemies to every nation excepting their own, the Wahebees.” Black riot became Islamic war.³⁷

This was false. ‘Aqil was no Wahhabi, at least not in 1806. The Wahhabis blamed him for the *Essex* and sought his arrest. ‘Aqil pointed his finger back at them: according to a British report of an Arab shipmaster’s claim, he “pretends to say that the Wahaby’s committed the Deed” instead.³⁸

Efforts to blame the Saudis for the *Essex* probably came from Mocha. American trade in Mocha was caught up in the conflict between the Sanaa region of northern Yemen, ruled by a Zaydi dynasty, and the expanding Saudi Wahhabists to their north. Zaydism is a form of Shi’i Islam that was shared by North Yemen elites, but not the entire populace. It is not clear whether the merchants Americans traded with were Zaydi Shi’as themselves, as Zaydi elites disdained mercantile activity, and many Western merchants contracted with Indian banians rather than Arab merchants for coffee at Mocha.³⁹ Nevertheless, Sanaa’s conflict with Saudi Wahhabists threatened the Mocha trade, a point U.S. merchants grasped. This conflict included the ports al-Hudaydah and al-Luhayyah, which were near the area where the *Essex* was lost. In 1803, the *sharīf* of Abu ‘Arish, reacting to the growth of Wahhabi power, ended his nominal allegiance to Sanaa and turned to the Saudis. But the Saudis stripped al-Hudaydah and al-Luhayyah from his domain, causing the *sharīf* to return to Sanaa. Then he flipped to the Saudis again, who agreed he could rejoin them if he paid tribute, holding ‘Asir to his north until 1809 as guarantee. In 1806 Bombay officials reported the Wahhabi reach toward Sanaa was extensive enough that even “the Town of Mocha, and its Territory” was “threatened by the Arabs of the

35. United States and Tripoli, “Treaty of Peace and Amity,” June 4, 1805, The Barbary Treaties 1786–1816, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, accessed August 10, 2017, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/bar1805t.asp.

36. On the Qasimi, see M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British Domination* (New York, 1998), 45–60; and Charles E. Davies, *The Blood-Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797–1820* (Exeter, U.K., 1997).

37. “Enormities,” *Salem Register*, October 30, 1806; rest *Poulson’s*, November 4, 1806. The *Salem Register* version appears to be a shortened version of *Poulson’s*.

38. Schuler to Macawlay, November 4, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 240, BL. Annesley thought ‘Aqil a Wahhabi in 1804, but not in 1806, adding, “I could not comprehend him.” Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:93–94, 418–19. Cf. Eilts, “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 220–21.

39. Gabriele vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition* (New York, 2005), 163–66. It is unclear whether ‘Aqil was Zaydi.

neighboring Wilds, who have become of the Wahaby sect.” When a new imam took over Sanaa in 1809, he pushed Wahhabi-Saudi forces from his northern flank. This conflict was about religion and politics: Wahhabism legitimized the Saudi house; in return the Saudis supported Wahhabi proselytizers. Zaydis from another state had religious and political reasons to oppose Wahhabi-Saudi expansion. War threatened trade, which gave Mocha merchants of any faith a commercial reason to dislike the Wahhabis too.⁴⁰

American coffee buyers reinterpreted these disputes. They disliked Wahhabis as a threat to trade but were uninterested in a generically anti-Islamic posture—they traded to Smyrna, Mocha, Aceh, and other Islamic places routinely. So the claim American merchants brought home was not that Wahhabism was a new form of Islamic fundamentalism (it was), but that it was “a new religion entirely subversive of the Mahometan faith”; U.S. merchants thus deployed Shi’i theology to attack a common commercial threat.⁴¹ This claim distinguished “good Musselmen” from bad ones (not unlike the distinctions between good and bad Indians in North American captivity narratives), scapegoating Wahhabis. Wahhabi expansion really was violent, and blaming them allowed American merchants to describe their Mocha trading partners as friends and deflect questions about the dangers they brought upon themselves by trading in a war zone.

☞ The Essex as a Lesson

This section considers the *Essex* story as a cautionary tale, as well as the U.S. Indian Ocean commerce that tale warned about. Captain Gardner of the *Thomas Wilson* brought news of the *Essex* to the Baltimore papers in October 1806 and removed Islam from the story entirely (making the *Essex* about Islam was a narrative choice not all authors made). Instead, he placed responsibility on the shoulders of the captain, Joseph Orne. Orne was well liked in Salem, but he was new to the recently opened-up Mocha coffee trade. His brother, who owned the *Essex*, had dispatched him to Mocha speculatively after hearing about the high profits other Salem traders found there.⁴² Using poor judgment, Orne permitted aboard ‘Aqil’s “brother and a number of his slaves as passengers.” Limiting how many outsiders were allowed aboard was standard procedure to prevent just such a disaster. ‘Aqil’s men were to pilot the vessel (oddly, for passengers), but rose against the crew as the *Mendah* came alongside. *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* made the issue of weaponry explicit: once ‘Aqil convinced Orne to take aboard “about 30” men, the “pirates on board fell upon the

40. Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2002), 567; Marston, *Britain’s Imperial Role*, 36–37; Harold Ingrams, *The Yemen: Imams, Rulers and Revolutions* (London, 1963), 50; Robert Lambert Playfair, *A History of Arabia Felix or Yemen* (Bombay, 1859), 127–29; Eilts, “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 183; Political Department to Rear Adm. Pellew, Bombay Castle, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 159–60, BL; Bhacker, *Trade and Empire*, 39–53.

41. *United States’ Gazette*, October 13, 1806.

42. Eilts, “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 200.

crew with their knives”—easily concealed—as “the Corsair ranged alongside and in a few minutes not an American was left to tell the sad tale of their destruction.” For Gardner, this was a lesson in vigilance. But now warned, Gardner’s readers needed fear no longer. “Fraud was resorted to,” Gardner reassured them, “otherwise they could not have taken her.”⁴³ *Poulson’s Advertiser* advised that the *Essex* “ought to prove a warning to all American captains, . . . against reposing confidence in strangers without being first well assured of their characters. It also shows the necessity of being well armed, and prepared to encounter those fiends in human shapes” when entering the Red Sea.⁴⁴

‘Aqil’s was one of many depredations American vessels endured. There were, as mentioned, attacks on U.S. shipping off Sumatra and the Barbary raids in the Mediterranean. But few attacks on American shipping were carried out by Muslim hands, and those few were usually not religiously inspired. The biggest threat to American shipping (and the biggest risk of captivity to American crews) came from the British Royal Navy. (Daniel Saunders, for instance, was never captured in Arabia, but he was impressed by the Royal Navy.)⁴⁵ Thus Gardner also reported that the British had made a prize of the *Erin* off French-held Mauritius (the *Erin* was captained by Stevenson, the source of Ward’s and Benzoni’s information). The British also “fired about one hundred musket shot” at Gardner’s vessel and impressed three of his crew. For Gardner and others, the moral of these events—the losses of the *Erin* and the *Essex* were sometimes printed in newspapers together—was not that American merchantmen should withdraw from the seas but that they should be armed and vigilant (no U.S. naval support was expected). The vigilance of Americans trading near the Saudi–Sanaa conflict was an extension of the vigilance of Americans profiteering off the Anglo–French conflict. Both conflicts profited American merchants, who intended to continue the trades. So they needed to exercise care. Gardner’s tone was matter-of-fact: the loss of the *Essex* was “melancholy” and could have been avoided, but the *Erin*’s capture and his own encounter with the British got no editorial gloss—they were the cost of doing business.⁴⁶

Unlike U.S. trade with Britain and Barbary, American trade with most of the Islamic world was uncontroversial in the Early Republic. U.S. Indian Ocean commerce represented a significant part of that trade, and when that trade was attacked, the reason was usually understood as being economic, not religious. Commercial networks underpinned the U.S. encounter with Islam in the Indian Ocean. Ameri-

43. *Alexandria Advertiser*, October 21, 1806, reprint from an item of October 19, 1806, in an unnamed Baltimore paper.

44. *Poulson’s*, November 4, 1806, citing “Baltimore papers.” Whether ‘Aqil’s crew was armed varied from story to story. Descriptions of the corpses as beheaded, or with their throats slit, suggested the boarders had knives. This was often fudged, as in *Poulson’s*, which gives enough boarders (“about 30”) to overpower the crew (roughly ten) even if they were unarmed.

45. Saunders, *Journal*, 61.

46. *Alexandria Advertiser*, October 21, 1806.

cans sailed via Cape Town and Mauritius to Mocha, Bombay, Calcutta, Aceh, Batavia (present-day Jakarta), and, later, Muscat and Zanzibar: ports where Islam was practiced, where Americans did business, and where the governments were friendly (Muscat, which ruled Zanzibar, signed a treaty with the United States in 1833).⁴⁷ In the Western Indian Ocean, Arab merchants, including merchants from the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, traded between India, Arabia, and Africa. ‘Aqil himself had extensive trans-Indian Ocean links: he owned properties in Mocha, Muscat, Malabar, and Dhofar (where he was also a local leader). He had two vessels tied up in court in Bengal at the time of the *Essex* attack; he sailed to India and Mauritius, buying vessels both times; he had had the *Zein-ool-ab-dein*, a 670-ton vessel, built and registered at Calcutta a few years earlier; and he insured his ships with British insurers. He also attempted petty financial crimes: trying to recoup a losing voyage through insurance fraud and trying to smuggle specie from Mocha to Muscat on behalf of Mocha’s brokers without paying export taxes.⁴⁸ In the Indian Ocean, Islam was a religion of businessmen, and the Muslim merchants who traded with Americans (or tried to evade taxes) were seen as sensibly putting Mammon first. This contrasted with American perceptions of other peoples, like the Japanese, who seemed puzzlingly uninterested in commerce.

To shipwrecked mariner Daniel Saunders, the Islamic world offered two alternative fates: captivity *or* business. He contrasted the violent “savages” who stole the shirt off his back and enslaved his Black crewmate with the “Arabs” who treated him with “civility,” gave food and water, and worked with “business” and “industry.” Saunders and his mates paid such civilized, business-oriented Arabs to take them to Muscat, where the crew worked on Arab ships. It was these Arabs’ knowledge of commerce that distinguished them from “savages.” Whenever Saunders expanded beyond this dynamic of savagery and commerce, he dwelt on race, not Islam, a religion he found unremarkable.⁴⁹

American commercial networks in the Western Indian Ocean were dense and chatty. Ships met in Mauritius or Bombay, and their officers discussed vessels last seen at Mocha. These rendezvous broke the monotony of sea voyages, allowed crew to send letters home, and passed along news of vessels to their owners in the United States. “Shipping News” in American papers thus noted when and where new arrivals had last sighted other vessels still at sea. Crew changed ships in overseas ports, too, allowing further circulation of information. Indirect tramping voyages and captains’ changing plans en route extended this circulation. Saunders’s ships, for example,

47. Edmund Roberts, *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochin-China, Siam, and Muscat* (New York, 1837).

48. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:93, 97, 397, 418. Annesley met ‘Aqil in 1804. On the *Zein-ool-ab-dein*, see *East-India Register and Directory for 1803*, 99.

49. Saunders, *Journal*, 11, 12, 32, 35, 40, 43, 46, 47, 62.

stopped at Mauritius both coming and going, as well as Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, Cape Town, Ostend (twice), and Britain.⁵⁰

American merchants carved out a niche in Indian Ocean ports underserved by British trade. In Mauritius and Batavia, ruled by countries at war with Britain, Americans carried a majority of foreign trade in the first decade of the 1800s.⁵¹ The American coffee trade was a reexport business. Of the 678 million pounds of coffee imported to the U.S. between 1796 and 1815, 86 percent was reexported, almost entirely to Britain or neutral European states on the border of Napoleonic Europe. Most of this came from the Caribbean, but war and slave rebellions there forced American carriers to seek alternative sources: over 122 million pounds came from Batavia and the Mauritian dependency of Réunion during this period. Yemeni coffee first appears in American import records in 1804–5; in July 1805 Annesley saw six American vessels at Mocha buying coffee, with more on the way. In 1806–7 Americans imported 1.7 million pounds of coffee from Yemen. This trade then collapsed to a mere 112 pounds in 1807–8—probably in response to the *Essex* and definitely in response to President Jefferson’s Embargo Act—rebounding to over half a million pounds in 1808–9.⁵²

During Orne’s visit to Yemen, Americans were scouring Caribbean and Indian Ocean ports for coffee to meet European demand. The *Erin* and *Essex* were probably coffee-traders, which may be another reason Gardner yoked the losses of these ships together. The big trade was buying coffee in French-aligned colonies with coffee gluts and low prices. (The Royal Navy blocked European carriers from these colonies.) Americans carried that coffee to the United States, where, once formally imported, it ceased being “French” coffee and became “American.” This “American” (and therefore neutral) coffee was reexported to markets on the periphery of French-aligned Europe, where scarcity made it expensive. Because the British kept conquering French-aligned colonies, neutral Mocha was an attractive alternative—Sanaa

50. Saunders, *Journal*, 3, 58–61.

51. Fichter, *So Great a Profit*, chaps. 4 and 6.

52. Present-day Réunion was originally called Île Bourbon, renamed Île de la Réunion in 1793, Île Bonaparte in 1801, Bourbon in 1810, and Réunion in 1815. During this period Americans referred to the island as Île Bourbon. In the import year of October 1, 1804, to September 30, 1805, Americans imported 1.7 million pounds of coffee from “Turkey, Levant, Egypt” and Mocha. This is the first mention of Mocha in *American State Papers*. In previous years, the category “East Indies, generally” appeared, but little coffee was imported under this heading. *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1832), 676, 706, 755, 791, 849. No more Yemeni coffee imports occurred after 1808–9, but at a minimum we can see that the loss of the *Essex* did not wholly stop U.S. trade to Mocha. The Embargo Act (in effect from December 22, 1807, to March 1, 1809) banned U.S. exports abroad, which in turn deterred vessels from making landfall in the United States. Americans were so prominent at Mocha that it was to American, not British, carpenters that Annesley turned to get his ship repaired, for which see Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:399, 415. For Mocha trade: William Milburn, *Oriental Commerce; Containing a Geographical Description of the Principal Places in the East Indies, China, and Japan, with Their Produce, Manufactures, and Trade*, 2 vols. (London, 1813), 1:100.

was unlikely to be conquered by British forces (unlike Mauritius and Java, which fell in 1810 and 1811, respectively). Neutral Americans could carry coffee from Yemen directly to Europe without stopping in the United States (because Yemeni coffee began as neutral cargo, it did not require a stop in the United States to be made neutral). American vessels sailing directly between Yemen and Europe without stopping in the United States were not included in the U.S.-generated customs statistics above. Orne himself had made at least one trip between Europe and Asia directly—leaving Europe with specie, trading in Asia, and returning to the Atlantic with Asian goods—which does not appear in U.S. customs records.⁵³

While direct U.S. imports from Yemen ended in 1809, American merchants continued buying Mocha coffee and taking it directly to Europe. Newspaper reports of a New York supercargo at Mocha in 1810 confirm that American merchants continued to visit Mocha. Since Americans could bring Yemeni coffee to the Mediterranean market at two-thirds the cost the East India Company did, they had reason to try.⁵⁴

Americans acquired from alternative sources products that would otherwise have been acquired from British colonies. English merchants got their coffee from Jamaica, and British Indian Ocean merchants had a profitable trade in Bengal opium; they left Mocha coffee and Smyrna opium to Americans. British merchants bought pepper from British-controlled ports in Malaya, Sumatra, and India. Americans bought pepper from Aceh, a business that comprised a majority of Aceh's foreign trade for much of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ Americans bought from Muslim sellers what British merchants got from farms or plantations in British colonies: coffee, sugar, pepper, opium. Americans also traded for cloves with Zanzibar. Between 1841 and 1843, twenty-one U.S. merchant vessels cleared Zanzibar's port, while just ten British vessels did.⁵⁶ In 1844 Captain Jonathan Marshall, HMS *Isis*, complained, "the foreign trade here [at Zanzibar] has been almost a monopoly in the hands of the Americans" and hoped that the British Indian Navy would ensure "the English" have "a fair proportion of the trade."⁵⁷ American trade in the Indian Ocean was extensive, and here U.S. merchants encountered Islam as a businessman's religion, not a captor's. 'Aqil's family's coffee business reminds us that before Americans saw 'Aqil as a captor, they saw him, just as accurately, as a businessman.

53. Affidavit sworn by William Jarvis, U.S. Consul Lisbon: Account Sales of One hundred and Eleven Bales India Cotton Goods from on Board the Ship *Essex*, Amsterdam, 1803, Orne Family Papers, MSS 41, box 32, folder 2, PEM.

54. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:363–70.

55. Gould, "Sumatra—America's Peppercorn."

56. French extracts of Zanzibar port records, May 3, 1844, OIND 15/59, ANOM.

57. Capt. Jonathan Marshall to Rear Adm. Josaline Percy, HMS *Isis*, Port Louis, February 29, 1844, ADM 1/5552, Cap M 74, p. 70, The National Archives, Kew.

Tales of the Lost Boy

This section considers the variety of narratives that wrestled with the news of Poll's survival, placing him in a context of Islamic captivity and conversion and placing his story alongside those of other Americans who joined their captors. News of the *Essex* circulated in the United States in October and November 1806. In December the *Salem Gazette* broke news that a "lad" from the vessel had "escaped the massacre" and was "preserved in servitude by the pirate."⁵⁸ News of Poll's survival prolonged interest in the *Essex* and shifted the story from piracy to captivity. Americans now interpreted the *Essex* based on what they knew from the American encounter with Barbary. American weakness, a question raised in Barbary and renewed by the loss of the *Essex*, gained salience in discussions of the boy's captivity.

John Poll came from Salem. He survived the attack, converted (freely or not) to Islam, and was raised in 'Aqil's household. For years, Americans tried to free Poll and to obtain from him an account of what had happened. But no attempt to retrieve Poll (as they still conceived the lost boy to be) succeeded, and in the end he chose to stay and remain Muhammad.

No story about Poll/Muhammad in his own hand survives. Some said he was spared only "upon his promise to turn Mussulman." Some noted that he disembarked from the *Mendah* with 'Aqil's women—implying he joined 'Aqil's household as family or slave (adoption of women and children into the captor's household was a narrative trope used to make sense of Poll's condition; Islamic law allows adults to take in and raised abandoned children, but does not permit formal adoption).⁵⁹ The *New York Commercial Advertiser* claimed in 1811 that Poll "was known to be in a state of servitude to the Pirate." In this story, a New York supercargo tried to "obtain the release of the captive boy, but also to recover from the pirate the property he had plundered" for "patriotic and humane motives." He was aided by Henry Rudland, East India Company army officer and Mocha agent. The *Commercial Advertiser* expected that with Rudland's help "the unfortunate boy would soon be released from his odious captivity" and that "much of the property" "would be recovered." These expectations proved greatly exaggerated, as was an 1812 report of Poll's death.⁶⁰ In all these stories, Poll fit a trope: either he was a forced convert, a captive slave, or dead.

Another version was related by Nicholas Hamm, who gave a deposition to East India Company police in Bombay in 1810. Hamm was navigator on the *Phulk*, a vessel commanded by 'Aqil. Hamm claimed to know 'Aqil and to have spoken with Poll.

58. *Salem Gazette*, December 26, 1806.

59. Turreau interrogation, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 142–44, BL.

60. *Poulson's*, November 18, 1812; Halls, *Henry Salt*, 1:173. Rudland enjoyed rescuing the lost—he subsequently pursued rumors that the Scottish explorer Mungo Park had been found in Africa; IOR/F/4/432/10537, BL. *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), July 5, 1811; *Poulson's*, November 18, 1812. Rudland also worked for Annesley and accompanied Annesley and Carter to Abyssinia. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:406; Deborah Manley and Peta Rée, *Henry Salt: Artist, Traveller, Diplomat, Egyptologist* (London, 2001), 21–51.

This deposition appears one of the more reliable versions of what had happened, but it paraphrased Hamm as much as quoted him, and its questions reflected the concerns of the deposer rather than the deponent.⁶¹ With his Kamaran base destroyed, 'Aqil was no threat to British interests, but he was still suspected of being a French agent and still wanted for Carter's death. A criminal trial (which might encompass the deaths of the *Essex* crew, the kidnapping of Poll, or the death of Carter) would be one way to get rid of 'Aqil. And Poll's testimony—he was the only living witness to events on the *Essex*—could make the prosecution's case. Thus the Calcutta advocate general later recommended that the British resident at Mocha “avail himself of any good opportunity which may offer of procuring the American Boy said to be in the hands of the Pirates.”⁶²

Hamm made his story valuable to his interviewers by tying it to other stories, claiming that “all the circumstances relative to the piracy + murder have been repeatedly confirmed to him, by the American Boy, whenever he spoke to him on the subject” and that 'Aqil himself had confirmed to Hamm that he had attacked the *Essex* and “put the Americans to death.” Hamm recalled meeting the surviving French officer from the *Mendah*, who told the story of the *Essex* to him in June 1806. Hamm also recalled meeting Rudland and two Americans in Mocha in mid-1810. Rudland and the Americans actually boarded the *Mendah* looking for 'Aqil, but Hamm sent them away with the lie that 'Aqil was not there. As Hamm explained to the police in Bombay, 'Aqil “had 200 armed men about him,” while Rudland and the Americans had none—Hamm thought his lie saved their lives. The next day, Hamm met Rudland and the Americans ashore in Mocha, telling them of 'Aqil and the presence of Poll. A “written application was then sent off, claiming the boy, to which ['Aqil] replied, that the Boy was not his slave, and might go if he chose, but not otherwise.” Poll would have been thirteen or fourteen years old—old enough to work on a Salem merchantman but young enough to be under the influence of his captor. Hamm claimed to have “frequently offered to countenance [Poll's] escape, but he was always afraid to attempt it.” One of the American captains at Mocha offered to send a boat to retrieve Poll if he jumped overboard at night, but the boy “refused to act.” Did Poll prefer to stay, or was he just afraid? Was he going native? He had forgotten his “Christian name” and was using the name Abdullah Sayyid Muhammad instead. He had “nearly forgotten his mother tongue.” His conversion—implied in his name change—and waning English were signs of fading ties to the United States and the difficulty of redemption. Later that year, 'Aqil was said to have sent Muhammad to Salalah, Dhofar, a port on the

61. East India Company officials were, again, concerned to make the story *seem* reliable, so they took down Hamm's story as a formal legal deposition after going to the trouble of finding a Catholic priest to swear him in. Hamm was a French citizen, an inconvenient fact in a case premised on Anglo-French antagonism, and so his deposer carefully referred to him as “Alsatian” rather than “French.” Deposition of Nicholas Hamm, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 8b, BL.

62. Advocate General Robert Smith to chief secretary to the government, Fort William, Calcutta, January 22, 1811, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 33, BL.

Arabian Sea where 'Aqil's father came from, where 'Aqil had property, and where he was the local leader until his assassination in 1829. Poll, now Muhammad, was more out of reach than ever.⁶³

Poll's case—of captivity without a definitive narrative—points to the gap between narratives of and experiences of captivity. Narratives represent captivity imperfectly; they impose coherence on chaos. They make experience understandable, altering memories and details until a story of violence and disjuncture—which on some level can never make sense—makes sense anyway. A narrative is a palimpsest that rewrites an experience even as it gives that experience meaning. This was as true of Poll's story as of others'. In "as-told-to" narratives, which all of the *Essex* narratives are, the amanuensis becomes an author. This is similar to the case of Mary Jemison, who was adopted by the Seneca. She told her story to James Seaver; Seaver claimed accuracy (the title of his book on Jemison proclaimed it to be "Carefully Taken from Her Own Words"), but he was as much an author as she. The authors were in conflict—Seaver thought Jemison kept "back many things," and Jemison was said to have claimed, "I did not tell them who wrote it down half of what it was"⁶⁴—as was true of all the *Essex* palimpsests. When two American captains interviewed Muhammad (see next section), they put words in his mouth, too. But because so many different palimpsests survive about Poll/Muhammad and the *Essex*, no one amanuensis can dominate the story.

Muhammad never wrote his story and never returned. Captivity narratives are usually autobiographical, but only the returned can write their own tales back "home." The renegade cannot. Seaver, not Jemison (she remained with the Seneca), published a *Narrative* of her life. John Demos has speculated on why Eunice Williams stayed with the Mohawks; Williams never said. Despite not returning to American life, Williams and Jemison were able to visit their American families, who lived only a few hundred miles away. For Muhammad a visit to the United States would have been more challenging. Among these stories of unredeemed captives, the unredeemed *Islamic* cap-

63. Deposition of Nicholas Hamm, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 8b, 12–17, BL; J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795–1880* (Oxford, 1968), 77. 'Aqil's role as leader of Dhofar is the reason for the title of Eilts's article, "'Aqil of Dhufar." On 'Aqil's life and Dhofar: Eilts, "'Aqil of Dhufar," 208–14; Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, *A History of Modern Oman* (Cambridge, 2015), 134–35. 'Aqil was assassinated by Omani Qara forces as part of attempts to extend Omani power from Muscat, after which Dhofar was formally under Omani rule (but not practically controlled until after 1879). On the assassination of 'Aqil: Stafford Bettesworth Haines, "Memoir of the South and East Coasts of Arabia Part II," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 15 (1845): 122; Eilts, "'Aqil of Dhufar," 211–14. The Charles Cook Sr. account transcribed in Phillips, "Loss of the Ship *Essex*," 303, gives Poll as being nine and one-half years old at the time of the attack in 1806.

64. Quotations: Susan Walsh, "'With Them Was My Home': Native American Autobiography and A *Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*," *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (1992): 52, 53. On Jemison: James E. Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1990); and June Numais, "Mary Jemison: The Evolution of One Captive's Story," chap. 5 in *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993), 145–203.

tive remains particularly unexplored. And the questions Americans asked about that captivity can tell us about American society at the time: what, Americans wondered, could possibly make a nice, white, Christian American boy convert to Islam?⁶⁵

Stories about Poll's survival had to make sense of everyone else from the *Essex* dying. Captivity narratives almost always begin with a violent attack. Stories about Poll and the *Essex* were ways to consider the possibility that victims might not survive or that captives might not be redeemed—as a way of speaking to and making sense of the broader and darker set of experiences readers knew: of massacres in which no one lived, of captivities from which no one returned, of lost children who were never found.

Autobiographical captivity narratives require the captive's return at story's end, but stories *about* Poll/Muhammad spoke to the dangers of death and non-redemption facing settlers on the Native American frontier, to British impressment facing seamen, and to captivity in Barbary and other foreign lands. Poll's story was urgent to American readers because there were many who had never returned, and as long as Poll *might* be redeemed, others might be, too.

American tales of captivity in Islamic lands told (accurately or not) of a form of slavery in which white Christians labored for Muslim overlords while Muslims of all colors went free. Poll was, in the *Salem Gazette's* telling, in "servitude." Poll's "servitude" points to older tropes from Barbary that American writers used to explain the *Essex*. Robert Davis has estimated that between 1530 and 1780, there were between 1 and 1.25 million "white, European Christians enslaved by the Muslims of the Barbary Coast." Americans suffered North African captivity throughout the colonial era, though a 1686 treaty with Algiers reduced the risk of capture. Americans suffered this captivity less often than other nationals, but the idea of white, Christian servitude in Islamic lands remained a powerful trope.⁶⁶

Some captives converted to Islam, which Americans understood as a turn away from cross *and* state. The thirteen Americans held in Algiers in 1792 yoked faith and nationality when they hoped they would not "be reduced to the Necessity of

65. John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York, 1994); on captivity, see also Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (London, 2007).

66. Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast, and Italy, 1500–1800* (New York, 2003), 23. On Barbary captivity and its significance to early modern Britain and North America, see Joe Snader, *Caught between Worlds: British Captivity Narratives in Fact and Fiction* (Lexington, Ky., 2000), 94–124; Nabil Matar, introduction to *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*, ed. Daniel J. Vitkus (New York, 2001), 1–54 at 35–38; Robert Davis, "Counting European Slaves on the Barbary Coast," *Past and Present*, no. 172 (August 2001): 87–124 at 90; Thomas S. Kidd, "Is It Worse to Follow Mahomet than the Devil?: Early American Uses of Islam," *Church History* 72 (December 2003): 766–90 at 769; Richard B. Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History* (Gainesville, Fla., 2004), 33–34; and Gary Edward Wilson, "American Prisoners in the Barbary Nations, 1784–1816" (PhD diss., North Texas State University, 1979).

abandoning our Country and Religion” but warned that, to support themselves, they would.⁶⁷ Preaching on the return of prisoners from Barbary in 1703, Cotton Mather lamented the man left behind, “wretched Christian, who Renounced *Christianity* & Embraced *Mahometism*.” “Christian Captives,” laboring side by side “with barbarous Negroes,” were tempted to “*Forget the Name of our God*” and become “*Renegado’s*.”⁶⁸ The use of the words *renegade* and *turning Turk* to describe a convert and his act expressed the religio-national turn implied in conversion. This had a legal basis: Istanbul and London had agreed that English subjects converting to Islam renounced the Crown and became Ottoman subjects. This premise was given new life when the crew of the U.S. frigate *Philadelphia* was imprisoned in Tripoli in 1803–4. The quartermaster and four crewmen converted, the quartermaster becoming informer and prison overseer. The other crew members scorned the converts as traitors to nation, God, and crew. These were not the only renegades in Tripoli. The jailer was a French renegade. The prime minister was a Russian convert, and Tripoli’s ranking naval officer, Murad Reis, was originally a Scotsman named Peter Lisle, who had arrived in Tripoli as a captive taken from the American ship *Betsey* in 1796. William Ray, of the *Philadelphia*, denounced as a “traitor” another crewman who told the bey “he preferred Tripoli to America and Mahometanism to Christianity.”⁶⁹ Americans described renegades as attaining a Faustian combination of professional success and moral wretchedness in their adoptive land. These were not unlike the stories of the supposed forced conversion of ‘Aqil’s French crew. Such wretchedness could easily be projected onto Poll.⁷⁰

Contrary to myth, converted slaves were not always freed. Nevertheless, conversion could yield material benefits. In the Barbary states, some skilled renegades reached high positions. Tales of converts obtaining native rank were tropes of Barbary literature and should be treated cautiously: most captives did not attain rank—though enough renegades did to get noticed.⁷¹ Yet the literary emphasis on elite renegades overlooks subalterns like Poll. British sailors and boys migrated to North Africa voluntarily to ameliorate their lowly conditions, and Anglophone laborers (both white and Black)

67. “Petition of Prisoners at Algiers,” March 29, 1792, in *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers*, 6 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1939–44), 1:35–36 at 35.

68. Cotton Mather, *Goodness of God* (Boston, 1703), 2, 38, 33, 39, 41. Cf. Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty & Goodness of God* (Cambridge, Mass., 1682).

69. William Ray, *Horrors of Slavery, or the American Tars in Tripoli* (Troy, N.Y., 1808), 94, 158. On “turning Turk”: Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (Cambridge, 1998), 21, 71; Patricia Parker, “Preposterous Conversions: Turning Turk, and Its ‘Pauline’ Rerighting,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 2 (Spring/Summer 2002): 1–34; A. B. C. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (New York, 1991), 125–26.

70. Benzoni, for instance, described ‘Aqil’s French crew as having “turned Mussulmen” at Aden. Benzoni to Forbes, May 26, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 173, BL.

71. Magali Morsy, *La relation de Thomas Pellow: Une lecture du Maroc au 18e siècle* (Paris, 1983).

could find living conditions in the Islamic world better than those at home.⁷² Ships' boys fled brutality—especially that of British vessels. George Annesley, Lord Valentia, was in Mocha during Poll's capture. He counted “only four white renegadoes” in town, though “numbers deserted from our fleet during their stay here.” Valentia frequently passed through Mocha and noted more runaways every time he returned (he also recorded runaways in other ports). He estimated a hundred converts over five years, from only a handful of British vessels. To his “great astonishment,” two English boys from the *Antelope* (in the East India Company's Bombay navy) “deserted to the Dola” (the governor of Mocha, appointed by the imam of Sanaa) to avoid the lash. Two more ran away shortly thereafter. Converts included men trying to avoid the Royal Navy, which suggests that conversion, far from being the outcome of Islamic captivity and slavery, was a means to avoid the very real captivity and forced labor of the supposedly Christian system of British naval impressment. Converts also included Americans, such as the seaman Burns who had “turned Mussulmaun” in order to leave a merchantman and then wanted Valentia to take him instead. An American boy on the British *Panther* also tried to escape but was recovered. The dola asked the boy whether he “were inclined to turn Mussulmaun” and offered to harbor him if he were.⁷³ In 1813 the U.S. consul to Tunis recalled a similar case of an American sailor who fled his impressment on a British vessel by “turning Turk” in Algiers.⁷⁴ Valentia lamented the “decoying away” of Christians at Mocha (which he ascribed not to a “religious motive” but to a desire for trained cannon operators). He blamed the Italian “Captain of the renegadoes” for luring them with liberality, women, and booze. Conversion-as-temptation was a common narrative device, and the class assumptions embedded in this prevented Valentia from asking other questions: had the American boy fled the *Panther* because Muslims drank alcohol or because British boatswains whipped cabin boys?⁷⁵ Valentia noted a “black renegado” in Mocha as well. It is unclear where he came from, but he seems to have been at least passingly familiar with Atlantic culture.⁷⁶ Some of these conversions were temporary—sailors

72. Samuel Chew, *The Crescent and the Rose: Islam and England during the Renaissance* (New York, 1965), 376. Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 42. Another example is Nathaniel Pearce. Manley and Réé, *Henry Salt*, 21–24.

73. “great astonishment,” “deserted to the Dola”: Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:75; “only four,” “numbers”: *Voyages*, 2:78; “turned Mussulmaun”: *Voyages*, 2:80; “inclined”: *Voyages*, 2:419. Annesley notes renegades in *Voyages*, 2:83, 84, 401, 421, 423, and in Lord Valentia [George Annesley] to Jonathan Duncan, June 12, 1804, Wellesley Papers, nos. 23 and 24, IOR/H/479, pp. 457–58, BL. “Dola” is sometimes spelled “dowllah” in other sources. Neither “dola,” “dowllah,” nor other spelling variants appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; my definition is determined from contextual evidence from Annesley.

74. Allison, *Crescent Obscured*, 111, 118–20.

75. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:75–79, 423. On conversion as temptation: Kidd, “Uses of Islam,” 771.

76. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:414. In 1801 one American noted “negro Turks”—Black converts to Islam—in Algiers. They came from either Africa or the Americas; William M. Fowler Jr., *Jack Tar and Commodores: The American Navy, 1783–1815* (Boston, 1984), 63. On

escaped work on one vessel by converting, then tried to convert back to Christianity and take work on a later vessel to leave. Valentia estimated that 100 men had converted at Mocha in the past five years but that only five of the converts were still there.⁷⁷ Whether this reflected disillusionment with conversion and their new lives in the Islamic world or the simple wish to escape work on one ship in hopes of finding employment on another is unclear. Nevertheless, opportunities for subaltern Americans (crewmen, boys, slaves, and free Blacks) to abscond abounded in the Red Sea, the Maghreb, and beyond, especially when we consider that the Americans in question included not only men on U.S.-flagged merchantmen but also Americans working on foreign merchantmen or pressed into Royal Navy service.

Not that Americans had to go renegade to flee: Western Christians prospered in the Islamic world without converting, too. These included representatives of correspondence and agency houses who handled trade for American vessels. They also included freelance supercargoes (such as the one Orne had hired) and men who had previously worked for 'Aqil (like Benzoni, who helped manage his business affairs). They included navigators (on the *Phulk*), sailors (the Dane on the *Monsory*), and gunners, technicians, and engineers (especially in Egypt).⁷⁸ None of these men converted. For these men, the Islamic world was a place of business, not captivity or conversion.

But Muhammad *was* a convert. Americans called 'Aqil's French mate a "Renegado" for his conversion,⁷⁹ a term that could have applied to Muhammad. But then he was taken as a child and, Americans assumed, held against his will, at least at first. But he was not a slave. He was 'Aqil's "adoptive" son. And how could the adult Muslim he became, raised by 'Aqil in the Arabian Peninsula for a decade, imagine life anywhere else? 'Aqil seems to have had real affection for Muhammad, and Muhammad remained with the 'Aqil family the rest of his life, making Poll, for Americans who heard of him in the 1810s, one of two things: John Poll, unredeemed American captive, or Abdullah Sayyid Muhammad, renegade and American no longer (however much he may have wanted to be both at once).⁸⁰

Black conversion, see also *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, ed. Robert J. Allison (New York, 2007).

77. Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:423.

78. On Benzoni working for 'Aqil: Eilts, "'Aqil of Dhufar," 196; Annesley, *Voyages*, 2:397. Benzoni and 'Aqil parted ways—probably acrimoniously—which may have given Benzoni reason to write about 'Aqil.

79. Phillips, "Loss of the Ship *Essex*," 302.

80. On unredeemed captives: Linda Colley, "The Narrative of Elizabeth Marsh: Barbary, Sex, and Power," in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum (Baltimore, 2003), 138–50 at 141. On captivity and Islam broadly: Colley, *Captives*, 23–134; Kidd, "Uses of Islam," 768–69; Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 23; Jane Hwang Degenhardt, "Faith, Embodiment and 'Turning Turk': Islamic Conversion on the Early Modern Stage and the Production of Religious and Racial Identity" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2005), 72–74, 78–79; Chew, *Crescent and the Rose*, 145.

☞ Captains Austin and Cook Meet Abdullah Muhammad

This section uses notes of interviews with the lost boy to determine, as much as possible, what happened to the *Essex*. It sets the interviews in the context of an American culture that had become, post-Barbary Wars, less alarmed by Islamic captivity and conversion. The story of a boy forced into Islam by a pirate was hard to forget. Sailors and merchants sailing to Yemen remembered, as did the broader maritime community. On March 9, 1819, the American merchant captains William Austin and Charles Cook Sr. met Poll in Mocha. By then Poll was a twenty-three-year-old man who gave them his “Mohammadad arab name,” Abdullah Muhammad, though Cook and Austin continued to refer to him as Poll. This was significant—a new name represented conversion and new life, separating Murad Reis from Peter Lisle and Abdullah Muhammad from John Poll. Austin’s and Cook’s use of “Poll” rather than “Muhammad” proclaimed their hope of his returning.⁸¹

Austin and Cook interviewed Muhammad, each taking detailed, separate notes. Because the notes can be cross-checked, they provide us with the closest thing to Muhammad’s own story, but they are still palimpsests—as can be seen by their use of “Poll.” The notes shift vaguely from quoting to paraphrasing Muhammad to offering the captains’ opinions. The notes conflict and are internally contradictory: Cook described the interview as “the first time [Muhammad] had conversed with any Christians since the murder of his countrymen,” for example, just before describing Poll’s earlier encounter with Rudland.⁸² It is unclear whether Muhammad spoke as he was in 1819—a young man in ‘Aqil’s household—or also as he had been in 1806—the *Essex*’s boy. The conversation proceeded awkwardly; Austin found Muhammad “has now forgot nearly all his English.” Cook concurred: “only by dint of the most persevering enquiries” could even “incomplete accounts” be recorded.⁸³ Such perseverance probably affected Muhammad’s answers. Though we can compare Austin and Cook, what Muhammad held back remains unknown. Perhaps, like Mary Jemison, he did not tell even half of what he knew. Regardless, the Cook and

81. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM. Hamm already gave his name as Abdullah Sayyid Muhammad in 1810; Deposition of Nicholas Hamm, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 16, BL. The Cook version, transcribed in Phillip, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 300–304, is the only account of the Muhammad interview(s) in print, and has been the only version discussed in the scholarship. The manuscript extract from Capt. Austin’s memorandum book, though held in the Orne Family Papers, has been overlooked. The Cook and Austin versions vary. Austin dates the interview precisely (the Cook version merely gives the interview as happening sometime between 1815 and 1825) and mentions Cook by name, indicating that he and Cook spoke to Muhammad together. Cook mentions Austin and claims Cook “had many interviews” with Muhammad during his visit to Mocha—suggesting they spoke multiple times, while Austin says he had “an Interview” with Muhammad—suggesting they spoke only once. Cook may have spoken to Muhammad at other times without Austin present, but if so, the two versions are remarkably consistent with each other, suggesting Muhammad rehearsed his answers.

82. Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302–3.

83. Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM.

Austin notes are the least mediated accounts of Muhammad's life after the *Essex*. After their interviews, Austin and Cook reluctantly accepted that Muhammad would remain behind—not as an impressionable boy, not quite as a renegade, and not as a symbol of the threat of captivity, but as a man who was unredeemable nonetheless.

Muhammad had a life in Dhofar and “a Wife whom he Dearly loves,” Austin noted. Cook put it differently: ‘Aqil “has given him a slave in marriage, by whom he has two children, to whom he is most tenderly attached,” and he “appears to have all the Comforts of life that he Can reasonably desire.” Austin and Cook offered to help bring him to the United States—“his native country,” they reminded him—but he demurred. “[H]e was fond of his children,” wrote Austin, and “unless he could take his children with him had no Desire to return.” Cook took a dimmer view of this arrangement. He described the children as “hostages” retained by ‘Aqil and implied that Muhammad was “most tenderly attached” to his sons but not to his presumably darker-skinned wife.⁸⁴ Hostages or not, it is hard to know how welcome two mixed boys and a Black or Arab Muslim wife, all speaking less English than Muhammad, would have been in Salem. Salem was a seaport town—with lascar and Muslim crewmen on its ships. But how happy would Salemites be to see one of their own raising his children as Muslims? Muhammad was welcome in Dhofar. ‘Aqil “has no Children but treats [Muhammad] as his Only Son” and “has always been his kind friend.” Cook also understood that Muhammad stood to inherit some of ‘Aqil’s “extensive possessions.”⁸⁵

Muhammad's conversion had racial implications: it was precursor to the formation of a family that was perceived by Americans as nonwhite and therefore disposable (hence the captains offered to bring *just him* to the United States). In this reading a native wife could never really be more than a mistress, to be abandoned when going home. Discussions of conversion had long had racial overtones—a shift in nationality implying a shift in race. In the 1720s a British envoy described one captive convert in Morocco as having become a “Moor”—a conversion reference that implied racial change.⁸⁶ Talk of “turning Turk” or of ‘Aqil’s French mate having to “become Arab” similarly blurred race, nationality, and religion. Muhammad seems to have understood this. He had met other Americans before Cook and Austin and was used to justifying himself to them. As Jemison had, he probably prepared what he wanted to say to the Americans before he sought them out (he must have sought them, for they would not have recognized him). He impressed Cook with his “patriotic feelings,” adding that he “felt himself strongly attached to his native country & vehemently desired to return” to America, and would have, were it not for his family.

84. Cook imagined Muhammad was waiting for ‘Aqil to die so that he could leave but also thought Muhammad could inherit ‘Aqil’s wealth, which would have required Muhammad to stay. Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302–3.

85. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302–3. Austin described ‘Aqil as a “sheikh” in Dhofar. Austin specified that the children were sons.

86. Colley, *Captives*, 99–102.

Here was the “acute tension” described by Gordon Sayre (in the Barbary context) between explaining ‘Aqil’s favorable treatment of him and showing his loyalty to home. Cook noted that Muhammad “had registered an Oath in heaven that he felt himself related to us by the ties of Consanguinity”—that is, he considered himself American *by blood*. America was still “my Country,” Austin reported Muhammad as saying. He had become Arab, but he was still American. Had the captains asked about this? Or had Muhammad offered it unprompted? Either way, the captains were pleased with Muhammad’s fidelity to America and did not ask—ecumenically enough—to just which heaven Muhammad had sworn.⁸⁷

Conversation turned to past rescue attempts. Muhammad recalled an effort, perhaps the one attributed to Rudland and the New York supercargo, in which an American ship sent a boat over, but he “was ordered below & confined in the Cabin” to prevent escape. Alas, the American ship was windward—otherwise, Cook thought “no earthly power should have prevented him throwing himself overboard” for “asylum & protection among his countrymen.”⁸⁸ If this was Rudland’s attempt, ‘Aqil’s locking Poll below deck directly contradicted ‘Aqil’s navigator, who had claimed the boy “refused to act,” out of fear. It also contradicted ‘Aqil’s claim that “the Boy . . . might go if he chose.”⁸⁹

The captains pressed him on his childhood: Muhammad had “but few imperfect ideas” of his “native Country,” according to Cook. Austin noted that Muhammad recalled his father’s clock and books. He remembered school but had forgotten his schooling. He recalled men from Salem—the merchant William Gray, the Reverend William Bentley (who had noted the *Essex*’s loss in his diary). “I can see my Country in my mind & recollect many Scenes of my Early life,” he told Austin, but, the captain reflected, “time & being Constantly among the arabs has Caused him to forget most.” Muhammad “took the turban,” as Cook termed conversion, and two years after the sinking of the *Essex* was circumcised. When Austin pressed, Muhammad politely “Declined any [further] Conversation reflecting religion.”⁹⁰

Early modern Americans and Britons did not circumcise their boys and saw circumcision as an alarming mark of conversion associated with forced captivity.⁹¹ Fear of forced circumcision was the extreme expression of the fear of forced conversion. Thus J. B. Gramaye—via Samuel Purchas—lamented the “about fiftie Boyes

87. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 303. Gordon Sayre, “Renegades from Barbary: The Transnational Turn in Captivity Studies,” *American Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 347–59 at 355.

88. Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 303.

89. Deposition of Nicholas Hamm, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 8b, 12–17, BL.

90. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.*, vol. 3, *January, 1803–December, 1810* (Salem, Mass., 1911), 258. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 301–3.

91. Chew, *Crescent and the Rose*, 444; *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., ed. C. E. Bosworth et al., vol. 5, *Khe–Mahi* (Leiden, 1986), s.v. “Khitan”; David L. Gollaher, *Circumcision* (New York, 2000), 44–52.

yearly circumcised against their wills” in Barbary. When the crew of the Elizabethan *Jesus* wound up “slaves” in Barbary, Richard Hakluyt described one unwilling convert held down by eight men: “in the ende they circumcised him, and made him Turke.” Daniel Saunders also noted the capture of his Black crewmate Juba Hill and, according to ship’s lascars, his enslavement and circumcision. Ex-renegades claimed they had been circumcised “in their flesh, but not in their hearts,”⁹² but “Apostates and circumcised Renegadoes” were welcomed back with suspicion: the permanence of circumcision implied conversion was permanent, too.⁹³ By the late 1800s Americans no longer dwelt on *forced* circumcision; instead, they willingly circumcised themselves as a public health measure to protect native-born Americans from supposedly diseased immigrants and to prevent masturbation.⁹⁴ Onanism survived, but the embrace of circumcision reflected the strengthened position from which Americans viewed Islam and the Middle East after victory in the Barbary Wars. The stories of Muhammad’s circumcision come during and just after the Barbary Wars, when, as Linda Colley has noted, the “Islamic world” was losing “its power to frighten” but was not yet tame. Circumcision was still exotic, hence Cook noted that Muhammad had to “submit to Circumcision,” but he was writing in 1819, with American victory in the Barbary Wars behind him, and there was little danger of forced circumcision for any of the other Americans doing business in Mocha. It was a curiosity, not an outrage.⁹⁵

92. Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 16, quoting J. B. Gramaye, *Relations of the Christianitie of Africa*, in Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, vol. 9 (1625; New York, 1905), 278; Jonathan Burton, “English Anxiety and the Muslim Power of Conversion: Five Perspectives on ‘Turning Turk’ in Early Modern Texts,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 39, quoting Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 10 vols. (New York, 1965), 5:301, 306; Saunders, *Journal*, 43; Matar, *Islam in Britain*, 68, 65. Circumcision also stood in for going renegade in period theater, such as in Thomas Kyd’s *Soliman and Perseda*, for which see Burton, “English Anxiety,” 50, and was seen as a potentially permanent embodiment of conversion, for which see Degenhardt, “Faith, Embodiment and ‘Turning Turk,’” 100. See also Parker, “Preposterous Conversions,” 3–6.

93. Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York, 2003), 83, 125.

94. Robert Darby, “The Masturbation Taboo and the Rise of Routine Male Circumcision: A Review of the Historiography,” *Journal of Social History* 27 (Spring 2003): 737–57.

95. Colley, “Narrative of Elizabeth Marsh,” 146; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 301. On the sense of American weakness before the Barbary Wars: Lawrence Peskin, “The Lessons of Independence: How the Algerian Crisis Shaped Early-American History,” *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 3 (June 2004): 297–319 at 298; and Gary E. Wilson, “American Hostages in Moslem Nations, 1784–1796: The Public Response,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 123–44 at 133. On Islam’s receding threat: Lawrence Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Public, 1785–1816* (Baltimore, 2009), chap. 8. On the willingness to go to war in 1815: Frederick C. Leiner, *The End of Barbary Terror: America’s 1815 War against the Pirates of North Africa* (Oxford, 2006), 47. Britons similarly shifted from fear of circumcision to confidence in it. In 1810 Byron evoked circumcision to distinguish between Britons and “Turks.” Yet in 1853 the (admittedly idiosyncratic) adventurer Sir Richard Burton had himself circumcised so that he could enter Mecca in pilgrim disguise, unburdened by fears that the

Muhammad filled in blanks about the *Essex*. Captain Orne had spent two months looking for coffee at al-Luhayyah.⁹⁶ After leaving that port, he encountered the *Mendah*, which offered to guide the *Essex* southward past Kamaran to al-Hudaydah. Muhammad recalled four crewmen rowing Orne to Kamaran. Orne “never was heard of since,” and Muhammad imagined Orne had been killed ashore.⁹⁷

The night of the attack, Poll was standing watch. (How much guilt did Muhammad feel for this? Did it affect his memory or his telling?) Seeing boats, Poll reported to the mate, who thought they were bringing back the captain. The crew remained asleep. When, instead of the captain, a “great number of Caffres” came over the side, it was too late. The *Essex* crew rushed on deck but were overwhelmed. The “head of the Caffres” told them that Captain Orne wanted the men ashore. The crew refused to go. One of the pirates took the boy below and kept him there. (Why?) From below deck, the boy listened, but he “heard no groans nor Struggles & When permitted to go on deck; did not See any blood.” The crew was simply gone. Yet, according to Cook, Muhammad was sure “that they were all murdered, as he has never been able to gain any intelligence respecting them, since this horrid catastrophe took place; whereas had they been enslaved or otherwise disposed of, he would have discovered the fact.” (Cook also spoke with “an Arab, who declared that he saw Mr. Carter, the Englishman, whom he well knew, and all the Officers and Crew of the *Essex*, on the Island of Camaran, with their throats cut from ear to ear!”) According to Austin, Muhammad was “confident that they was all murdered as he has not Seen any of them since.” Muhammad thought ‘Aqil could not have led the attack, as he was in al-Luhayyah at the time. Yet it was ‘Aqil’s *Mendah* and his men at Kamaran that had attacked. Austin thought ‘Aqil “no Doubt was Instrumental,” even if he was not present in person. Muhammad agreed that two of the *Essex*’s guns and the *Essex*’s books wound up on the *Mendah* but insisted he did not know who had led the attack. He seemed unwilling to face the possibility that he was raised by the man who orchestrated the slaughter of every other soul on the ship he had once called home.⁹⁸

operation made him less British, less manly, or more Muslim. Circumcision soon prepared Britons to govern the empire; by the 1930s two-thirds of upper-class British youths were circumcised: Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (New York, 1990), 75–78; Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 54; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. “Burton, Sir Richard Francis (1821–1890),” by Jason Thompson, last modified May 21, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4136>. See also David L. Gollaher, “From Ritual to Science: The Medical Transformation of Circumcision in America,” *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 5–36.

96. Austin noted that Orne fought with the *sharif* of Abu ‘Arish over port charges and thought the *sharif* might have had a hand in Orne’s demise, though there was no proof. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM. Cf. Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302. Kamaran is named in the Austin version. The Cook version indicated only that “Capt. Orne and four of his crew” were “ashore” but does not indicate where. This has led Eilts to assume al-Luhayyah. Eilts, “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 224. Eilts’s theory of the *sharifs* involvement fails to exonerate ‘Aqil.

97. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM.

98. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 302. Cook’s “Arab” was likely an English speaker, perhaps in British employ.

Muhammad met 'Aqil "3 days after the Ship Was Sunk." Meanwhile, a "hindoo Lascar Sailor" and a "French Renegado" looked after him. He asked the men where his friends from the *Essex* had gone. On shore, the lascar replied. As the days passed, Poll persisted—what had happened to his crewmates?—but always got "Evasive" answers. He looked in "Every part of the Ship after his Shipmates & saw no Blood nor anything to Shew that they had been Murdered on board." When 'Aqil arrived, the lascar presented Poll and asked whether they should kill him, as "Several of the People about" 'Aqil urged. It was 'Aqil's "Wife who was on board Who Interceded In his favour & saved his Life." They told the boy that "no pain should happen to him" if he was circumcised and converted. Thus, "in order to Save his life he became a Musselman."⁹⁹ It was, by Muhammad's own account, a forced conversion—but a real one all the same, one that had helped create the life he now had and refused to give up.

Austin and Cook disagreed about Muhammad's memory. Austin thought him "Confused," but Cook found "his recollection . . . clear & distinct." Austin may have meant Muhammad's language difficulties or something deeper—Muhammad's spotty memory or reluctance to face 'Aqil's role in the affair, or Austin's reluctance to accept 'Aqil as a father figure. Could 'Aqil be captor and savior? That 'Aqil was given the option to kill Poll made more sense if 'Aqil were involved and if the other crew were dead. Muhammad bore the cognitive dissonance of a captive who joined his captors—forgetting or rationalizing who committed the seminal violence making him who he was. He was a victim who, like Murad Reis and Mary Jemison, escaped victimhood by joining those who held him. He was a "human palimpsest" in Linda Colley's phrase, who rewrote the story he told himself and others to create a new identity and erase painful memories. The new identity was no less real for this. Austin did not think Muhammad reluctant to speak. His replies were "readily made & his manner & conversation Evinced his good Sense," "as Well as much reflections." How much did Muhammad reflect upon the night that ripped him from everything he knew?¹⁰⁰

Poll's youth at the time of the attack ensured his survival. He was young enough to be brought into 'Aqil's household. Youth also made it easier for Poll to adopt a new religion, language, and culture. In Austin's and Cook's perspectives, Poll's youth made him easy to dupe. The malleability Poll needed to survive and the manipulability Austin and Cook feared were not mutually exclusive. It was possible to make some sense of Poll's conversion and his decision to remain because Poll's

99. "French Renegado": Phillips, "Loss of the Ship *Essex*," 302. All other quotes: "Austin Memnd Book," PEM. Hamm indicated that Poll "owed his life to Denousse" (Desnoues), the surviving French officer from the *Mendah*. Desnoues may have been responsible for the decision to confine Poll below decks rather than kill him. Deposition of Nicholas Hamm, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 17, BL.

100. "Austin Memnd Book," PEM; Phillips, "Loss of the Ship *Essex*," 302. Colley, *Captives*, 95. Sayre, "Renegades," 356.

choices mirrored the path to adulthood in Salem society: a boy by any definition in 1806, he was a religious, legal, and economic adult in either culture in 1819. By his early twenties he was old enough to choose his own faith, too old for Cook and Austin to claim as a ward, and able to sustain himself with a livelihood. The Poll of the past was a boy who could have been “redeemed,” but for Austin and Cook there was nothing to be done about the man before them in 1819.¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, both Cook and Austin agreed that the loss of the *Essex*, even though it had happened years earlier, demanded a response. Cook lamented, “Arabs taunt & reproach [Muhammad] with the imbecility of the American Government, in suffering this nefarious & high handed offence, against the United States and the religion of Christ to go unpunished.” Cook examined the potential for an attack on Salalah, where ‘Aqil was based. Large craft could not approach, but the ruler of Mocha confirmed that a U.S. attack in Dhofar would not affect commerce at Mocha.¹⁰² There is no record that U.S. officials ever received this information or ever deliberated about sending vessels to Dhofar. It would have been a mission no one wanted.

Conclusion

The stories of the *Essex* point to a broader web of experiences: our very knowledge of Poll’s conversion is contingent on the attack on the *Essex*, without which the story of a ship’s boy converting to Islam would have gone untold. Here was a very different American, one who, unlike Barbary captives, the U.S. government never redeemed, and who lived out his life abroad.¹⁰³ How many others went “unredeemed” beyond Barbary?¹⁰⁴ How many moved to the Middle East willingly? How many freely converted (as Poll may or may not have done)? Their stories are not to be found in the government sources that dominate our telling of the Barbary Wars, but in a broader cache of documents, most of which—whether ship logs, newspaper stories, interviews, or letters—were generated by merchants. These sources have heterogeneous views of the early national encounter with Islam. Some of the most crucial documents here are found in English East India Company records, overlooked as a source on the American encounter with the Islamic world.

101. Ross W. Beales Jr., “In Search of the Historical Child: Miniature Adulthood and Youth in Colonial New England,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (October 1975): 379–98.

102. “Austin Memnd Book,” PEM; Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex*,” 304. British soundings put the depth off the “low sandy beach” at “from 10 to 4 fathoms.” Haines, “Memoir,” 119; U.S. merchants often served as consuls, so the idea of Cook or Austin seeking to represent U.S. interests is not outlandish.

103. Allison, *Crescent Obscured*, 111, 118–20. One attempt to recover these stories is Wilson, “American Prisoners in the Barbary Nations.”

104. The classic unredeemed captive was Eunice Kanenstenhawi Williams; Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive*. One might begin such an estimate by noting that more Britons than Americans were captive in Barbary and that a similar ratio were probably held outside Barbary.

In the first decade of the 1800s, Americans perceived in the loss of the *Essex* various stories: racial antagonism, religious war, and the danger of attacks at sea. The production of these stories implied the ongoing vitality of U.S. trade with the Islamic world, since that trade made these stories possible. Americans also saw the taking of Poll as part of the broader threat posed by Islamic captivity and conversion. The stories they told about an unanswered attack, the captivity of a child, and his forced conversion served as “implicit ethnographies” showcasing how Americans perceived their relationship with the Islamic world in the context of the Barbary Wars, which temporarily overpowered other narratives.¹⁰⁵ But, with the end of the Barbary Wars, the American cultural perception of the Islamic world reverted to seeing the region as a place of business. The United States’ (and especially Salem’s) trading relationship with Islamic parts of the Indian Ocean thrived after 1815. Cook’s and Austin’s voyages in 1819 were made to carry on trade, not antagonism. And as befitted merchants, their story gives monetary reasons for everyone’s actions: they noted that ‘Aqil’s men looted the *Essex* in the past, and they thought Muhammad was staying “behind” in 1819 to collect an inheritance from ‘Aqil.

There was no rescue mission, nor clamor in Salem for it, nor did Salemites seek Muhammad in Dhofar themselves. There was no profit in it. Muhammad faded from cause célèbre to curiosity as it became clear he was a one-off: there were no further “piratical” attacks like the one on the *Essex*, and Americans living, working, and trading in Mocha, Zanzibar, and other Muslim ports were not forced to convert.

As Islam became less threatening, the curiosity about Muhammad focused on race. In the 1830s, officers on several British and American merchantmen visited Dhofar, commenting on Muhammad, the white boy gone native. They noted his bad English, not his apostasy. By the 1870s Britons told of Muhammad’s military cunning and leadership of locals. By the 1890s British travelers to Dhofar told the story of a “white sheikh” who, a generation earlier, united squabbling Arab tribes: the tale, which in the 1810s had been complex and multilayered, was simplified into a prototypical “Lawrence of Arabia.” A twentieth-century U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, writing in an imperial and confident age, asked after this “American shaykh” as well, seeing in him the possibility of Arab–American understanding.¹⁰⁶ Muhammad even has his own historical novel, *The White Shaikh*.¹⁰⁷ In the initial stories, Poll was an exclamation point upon the tragedy of the *Essex*, but as American power grew,

105. Stuart Schwartz, *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, 1994), 2–3. Such tales were not expected to be factual. Colley, *Captives*, 88–98. Extract Secret Letter, Bombay, August 12, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 13, BL.

106. Eilts, “‘Aqil of Dhufar,” 217–18. There are also resonances with tales of James Brooke as a “white raja.”

107. Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, *The White Shaikh* (1996). Al-Qasimi, emir of Sharjah, is a historian who addresses the politics of the East India Company’s decision to deem the Qasimi pirates. The novel was translated from Arabic to English.

the palimpsest was rewritten one last time. Here was no terror—no captive, no renegade—but a curiosity, a man who, as the trope required, achieved rank in the Arab world (but this time stayed white). Trading around Arabia, Americans forgot the varied anxieties of earlier Muhammad stories, and all they remembered was a strange “white sheikh.”

✎ **JAMES R. FICHTER** is associate professor of European and American studies (affiliated) at the University of Hong Kong and author of *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (2010). He is researching a monograph on nineteenth-century Anglo–French empire and transportation in the Red Sea.

appendix overleaf

Appendix

TABLE 1. *Essex* narratives mentioned in this essay, in chronological order (key narratives in bold)

| Author | Role | Document | Where written | Date written |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Giovanni Benzoni | | Letter ¹ | | May 26, 1806 |
| Lt. Charles Court | Commander, <i>Panther</i> | Letter ² | Mocha | June 8, 1806 |
| Unknown | | Newspaper article ³ | Bombay | July 5, 1806 |
| Gamaliel Ward | American merchant captain | Log⁴ | Bombay | July 5, 1806 |
| Gamaliel Ward | American merchant captain | Log⁵ | Bombay | July 18, 1806 |
| Turreau | Prisoner | Interrogation ⁶ | Bombay | Late July–early August 1806 |
| David Seton | East India Company resident | Letter ⁷ | Mocha | October 12, 1806 |
| Capitaine Rapporteur Evrard | Colonial administrator in French Mauritius | Report ⁸ | Mauritius | October 12, 1806 |
| Captain Gardner | American merchant captain | Newspaper article⁹ | Baltimore | October 19, 1806 |
| Various | | Newspapers ¹⁰ | Various U.S. cities | October–November 1806 |
| Schuler | | Letter ¹¹ | Aleppo | November 4, 1806 |
| Unknown | | Newspaper article ¹² | Philadelphia | November 4, 1806 |
| Nicholas Hamm | Navigator of 'Aqil vessel <i>Phulk</i> | Deposition¹³ | Bombay | October 11, 1810 |
| | Unknown American merchant captain or supercargo | Newspaper article ¹⁴ | New York | July 5, 1811 |
| | | Obituary ¹⁵ | Philadelphia | November 18, 1812 |
| William Austin | American merchant captain | Interview notes¹⁶ | Mocha | March 1819 |
| Charles Cook Sr. | American merchant captain | Interview notes¹⁷ | Mocha | March 1819 |

Sources for table 1:

1. J. Benzoni to Charles Forbes, Esqr., Aden, May 26, 1806, India Office Records and Private Papers, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 171–73, British Library.
2. Extract letter from Lieutenant Charles Court, commander, the *Panther*, to superintendent of marine, Mocha, June 8, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 80–81, BL.
3. *Bombay Courier*, July 5, 1806.
4. Gamaliel E. Ward, entry for July 5, 1806, *Recovery* log, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass. [hereafter PEM].
5. Ward, entry for July 18, 1806, *Recovery* log, PEM.
6. Report and free translation of Turreau interrogation, n.d. [late July to early August 1806], IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 142–44, BL.
7. David Seton to Bombay, October 12, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fols. 209–14, BL.
8. “Résultat de l’Examen des Pièces relatives a l’assassinat de Gaspard Chatelain, Au Meutre de L’Equipage d’un Batiment Américain et au Pillage et a la destruction de ce navire par l’arabe Seyed Mohamed Beni-Akil,” October 12, 1806, COL C4 129, fol. 157, Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (ANOM).
9. *Alexandria Advertiser*, October 21, 1806, reprint from an item of October 19, 1806, in an unnamed Baltimore paper.
10. Various October–November 1806 newspaper accounts include *People’s Friend*, October 20, 28, 1806; *Aurora General Advertiser*, October 25, 1806; *United States’ Gazette*, October 25, 1806; *Bee*, October 28, 1806; *Farmer’s Register*, October 28, 1806; *Hampshire Federalist*, November 4, December 31, 1806; *Connecticut Herald*, November 4, 1806; *Balance*, November 4, 1806; *New-York Herald*, November 1, 1806; *Republican Advocate*, October 31, 1806; *Northern Post*, October 30, November 20, 1806; *Mercantile Advertiser*, October 29, 1806; *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 4, 1806; *American Mercury*, November 6, 1806; *Enquirer*, November 7, 1806; *South Carolina State Gazette*, November 15, 1806; *Sun*, November 15, 1806; *New-York Spy*, November 18, 1806; *Salem Gazette*, December 26, 1806.
11. Schuler to Macawlay, November 4, 1806, IOR/F/4/257/5648, fol. 240, BL.
12. *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 4, 1806.
13. “Deposition of Nicholas Hamm,” October 11, 1810, IOR/F/4/416/10298, 8b, 12–17, BL.
14. *Commercial Advertiser*, July 5, 1811.
15. *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia), November 18, 1812. Other newspaper stories from 1811–12 include *Salem Gazette*, July 12, 1811; *Newburyport Herald*, July 12, 1811; *Charleston Courier*, July 16, 1811; *Political Barometer*, July 31, 1811; and *Aurora General Advertiser*, November 18, 1812.
16. “Extract from Capt Wm Austin Memnd Book,” entry for March 19, 1819, Orne Family Papers, MSS 41, box 32, folder 2, PEM.
17. James Duncan Phillips, “Loss of the Ship *Essex* in 1806,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 77 (October 1941): 302.

