



Laura Jernegan: Girl on a Whaleship



In October, 1868, Laura Jernegan, a 6-year-old girl from Edgartown, Massachusetts set out on a three-year whaling voyage with her father, mother, brother and the ship's crew to the whaling grounds of the Pacific Ocean. While on her voyage she kept a journal, that is now kept at the Martha's Vineyard Museum. Through reading her journal we learned much about the life of a whaler and what it was like to be on a whaling ship.

Lesson:

1. Read Laura Jernegan Story
2. Explore the pictures of her actual journal, try and read her writing!
3. Go to this website: <http://www.girlonawhaleship.org/> and learn so much more about the life of Laura and what it is like on a whaleship.

Laura Jernegan: Girl on a Whaleship

Over 150 years ago, six-year-old Laura Jernegan was living in Edgartown with her younger brother Prescott and their parents Helen and Jared. Helen was a school teacher and Jared was the Captain of *The Roman*, a ship that sailed away from Martha's Vineyard in search of whales. (See attached ship model picture)

Captain Jernegan missed his family when he was away on long trips, so in the fall of 1868, he decided to bring them along. In October, the *Roman* sailed with the Jernegan family and a crew of 31 men headed for the **Pacific Ocean** where there were many whales. (See attached map of their journey) They hunted for whales because whale oil was used for heat & for light.

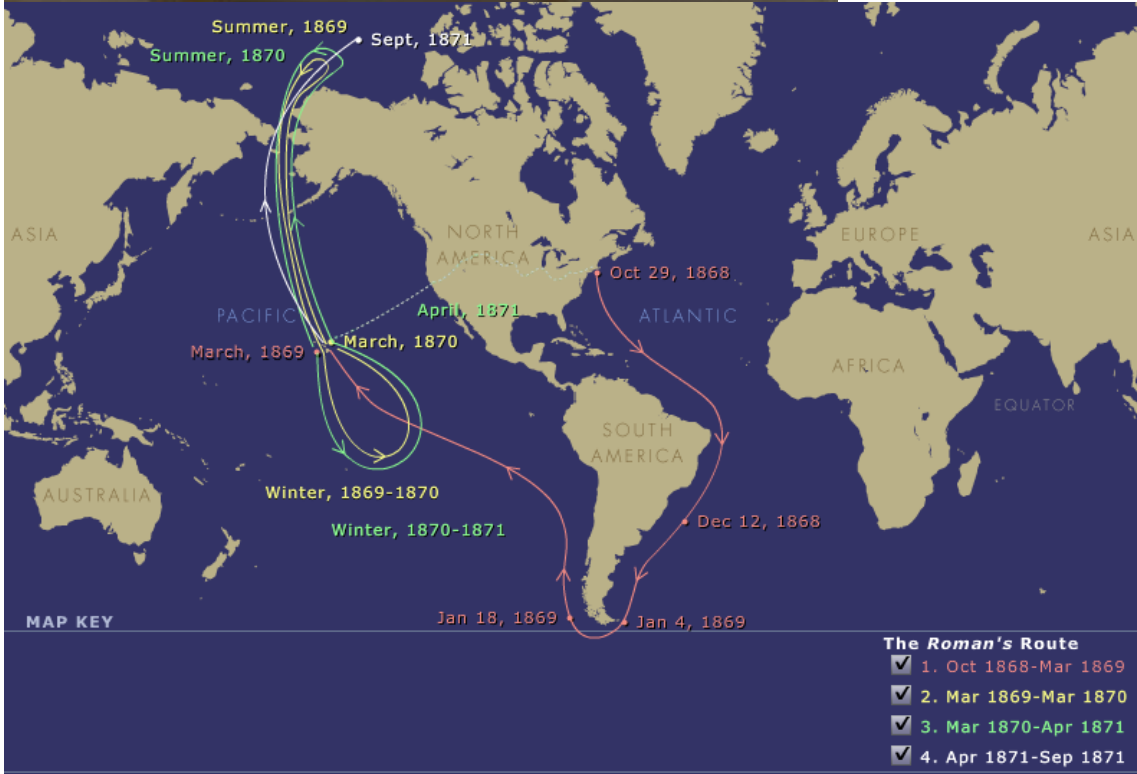
It was unusual for women and children to go on these often-dangerous trips which lasted months, sometimes years. The Jernegan family did their best to make the *Roman* their home at sea. They had pet chickens (who gave them eggs) and goats (who gave them milk). Prescott even had a kitten. Laura and her brother shared a room where they had a bunk bed designed so that they wouldn't fall out. A small "house" was built up on deck at the rear of the ship where Laura & Prescott could play safely and do their school work; Laura would also paint and do needlework & knitting with her mother.

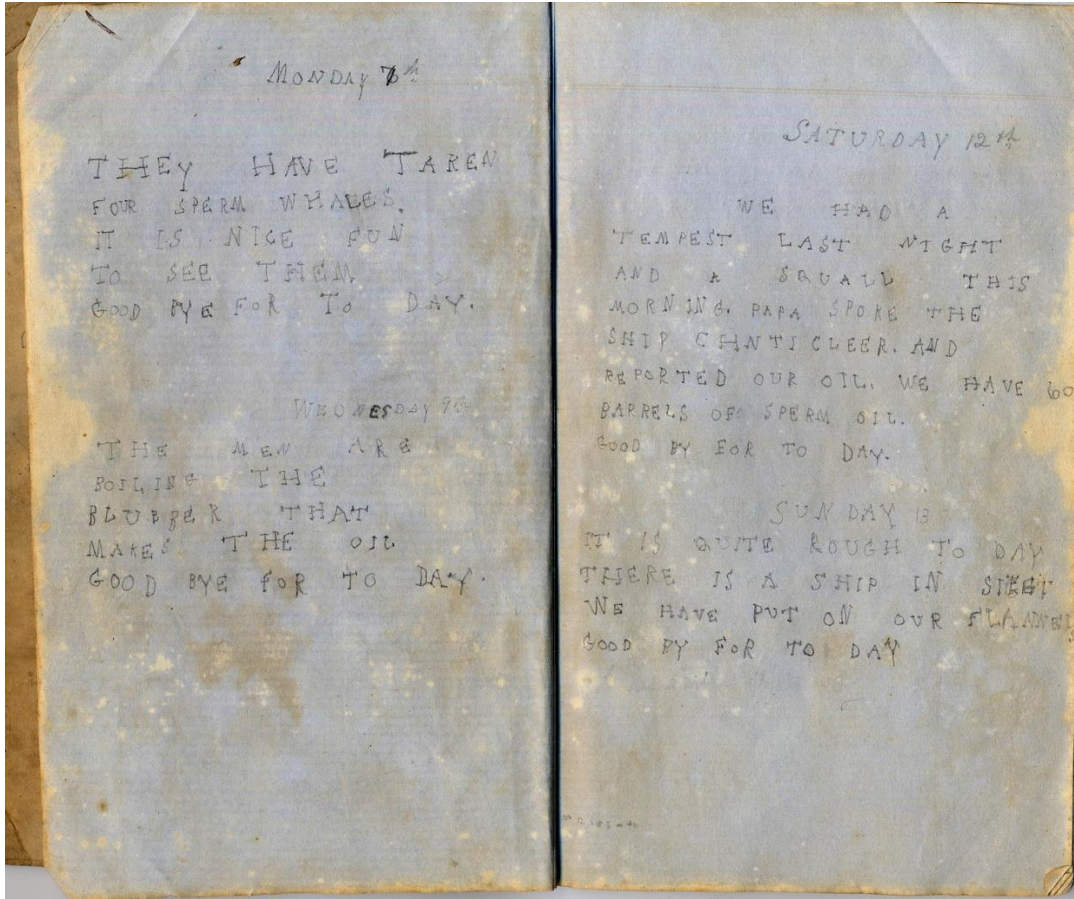
One of the reasons we know about Laura's time on the *Roman*, is because she kept a journal. She would write the date, about the weather and other things she & her brother did. (See attached journal pictures)

Often weeks would go by without seeing any other ships on the ocean. So, the day that Laura saw a "mystery" ship on the horizon (where land meets sky) was exciting! She was curious and nervous and wanted to find her father to tell him. After searching everywhere, she came back up on deck in time to see "the mystery" ship come up alongside the *Roman*. It was another whaling ship and they were lowering whale boats

to row crew members over to the *Roman*. Suddenly she heard her father's voice saying, "Hello Brother!" Climbing aboard the *Roman* was her Uncle Nathan, also a whaling captain from Edgartown. He was captain of the other whaling ship. This meant that Laura got to watch crew members from the two ships have a "GAM". The sailors had a chance to visit, share news from home and exchange supplies. They would sing sea shanties ([Listen to some here](#)) and dance. It was a nice break from the sometimes boring and other times hard working times aboard a whaleship.

The crew worked hard day and night, harpooning whales and burning their blubber on deck. This work was dangerous, and also a little stinky! The smell of burning blubber was not a pleasant one. They had to share a bunk with one other sailor and only could bring from home what would fit in a shoebox. So maybe only one change of clothes (again, a little stinky!) For these reasons it was not typical for a family to be on a whaleship, so we are so lucky to have Laura's journal.





MONDAY 7th

THEY HAVE TAKEN
FOUR SPERM WHALES.
IT IS NICE FOR
TO SEE THEM
GOOD BYE FOR TO DAY.

WEDNESDAY 9th

THE MEN ARE
ROLLING THE
BLUBBER THAT
MAKES THE OIL
GOOD BYE FOR TO DAY.

SATURDAY 12th

WE HAD A
TEMPEST LAST NIGHT
AND A SQUALL THIS
MORNING. PAPA SPOKE THE
SHIP CHANTICLEER. AND
REPORTED OUR OIL. WE HAVE 60
BARRELS OF SPERM OIL.
GOOD BYE FOR TO DAY.

SUNDAY 13

IT IS QUITE ROUGH TO DAY
THERE IS A SHIP IN SIGHT
WE HAVE PUT ON OUR FLANNETS
GOOD BYE FOR TO DAY

Notice how much Laura's handwriting and grammar improves as she gets older and keeps learning on her long journey!

Friday 17th. 1871.

it is quite pleasant today. it is quite rough today. Papa is making a book-case. we had lobster for supper. I cant think of much to write. I have been swing to night. and prescott he loves to do to. The longitude was 115 37. Papa is fixing the watercloset I am going to
good by
for today.

Saturday 11th

Lulu died last night it is quite quite smooth today. It does not blow very hard today. I am eight years old. and Prescott is four. Prescott has just gone down below. It is most dinner time. and I am very hungry we are to have fresh mutton for our dinner. Papa put up a hammock for Prescott and me. Mama is going to make a sack for herself. Papa is fixing the sink good by for today.