



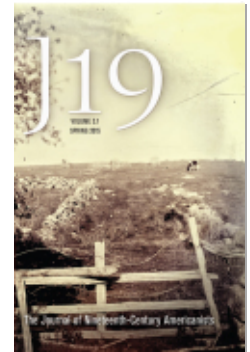
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Hardtack

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This summer I went briefly to sea on the last remaining nineteenth-century wooden whaleship in the world, the *Charles W. Morgan*. Built in 1841 in the great whaling port of New Bedford, the *Morgan* had not sailed in almost a century. After a nearly six-year restoration in her museum berth at Mystic Seaport, she returned to her element in a series of cautious yet glorious day-long voyage legs to historic ports throughout New England between May and August 2014. The *Morgan* was no longer hunting whales—good news both for the humpbacks who kept company with the ship on Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary near Cape Cod, and for the 46-foot-long inflatable sperm whale with the crowd-sourced name “Spouter” who formed part of the dockside exhibits that complemented ship’s port calls. The *Morgan* was instead on a mission to “raise awareness of America’s maritime heritage and to call attention to issues of ocean sustainability and conservation,” as Mystic Seaport described the venture.¹ I was one of a group of teachers, artists, writers, museum professionals, and journalists serving as public historians for the ship’s “38th Voyage” (voyages 1–37 took place between 1841 and 1921) with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, each of us assigned to a particular leg of the cruise.² In my academic research I study sailors’ participation in literary culture as producers and consumers of books. As a 38th Voyager I sought to occupy, however fleetingly, the very space of that oceanic imaginative community.

On the morning the *Charles W. Morgan* sailed from New Bedford, my own voyage leg, all passengers were given a piece of ship’s biscuit, or hardtack (Fig. 1). A staple of sea voyages and military campaigns for centuries, hardtack is exceptionally dry, solid, and designed to be non-perishable; it is not edible until soaked in liquid, and—if sailors’ jokes are any indication—not even then. The *Morgan* had likewise launched from New Bedford when she was first built 173 years ago, and it was easy to imagine that the rough square in my hand could have dated from that initial voyage. My bit of biscuit was appropriately adamant and baked until it looked lacquered; it had the appearance and size of a cubed saltine, but with significantly more heft. Our voyage coordinator, Maribeth Bielinski, passed them around in a gallon-sized Ziploc bag. The biscuit offering was a lovely, homemade, historically evocative sup-

plement to the t-shirts, hats, and water bottles that were also handed out that morning, each emblazoned with the “38th Voyage” logo. I put the hardtack in the pocket of my shorts, where I reached for it talismanically throughout the day’s sail, checking after it compulsively, much as I do my iPhone. Like my phone, it maintained its hard, slightly rounded edge, and did not wear or give.

I worried, as I also did about my iPhone, that the hardtack souvenir would suffer from dampness at sea. This has been a problem for centuries: how to preserve victuals—and communication and recording practices—over multiyear voyages. When Herman Melville’s Tommo rapidly becomes disillusioned with whaling life at the beginning of *Typee*, one of his complaints is about the food, especially the ship’s “store of sea-bread, previously reduced to a state of petrification, with a view to preserve it either from decay or consumption in the ordinary mode.”³ (Tommo also thought that whaling voyages were too long; I had the opposite grievance about my time on the *Morgan*.) When he jumps ship in the Marquesas with a fellow rover, Tommo imagines that the “fruits of the island” will sustain them, and thus he provisions himself with little more than some tobacco and hardtack crumbs, scooping up a “double handful of those small, broken, flinty bits of biscuit which generally go by the name of ‘midshipmen’s nuts’” (36). But the fruit they seek—and initially fail to find—amid the lush verdure of the Nukuhevan heights is the starch-like breadfruit. Even in arcadia they can neither escape bread, nor get enough of it.

After a night of drenching rain Tommo compulsively checks the hardtack he has sequestered in his clothes, as I would on the *Morgan*: “I bitterly repented our improvidence in not providing ourselves, as we easily might have done, with a supply of biscuits. With a rueful visage I now

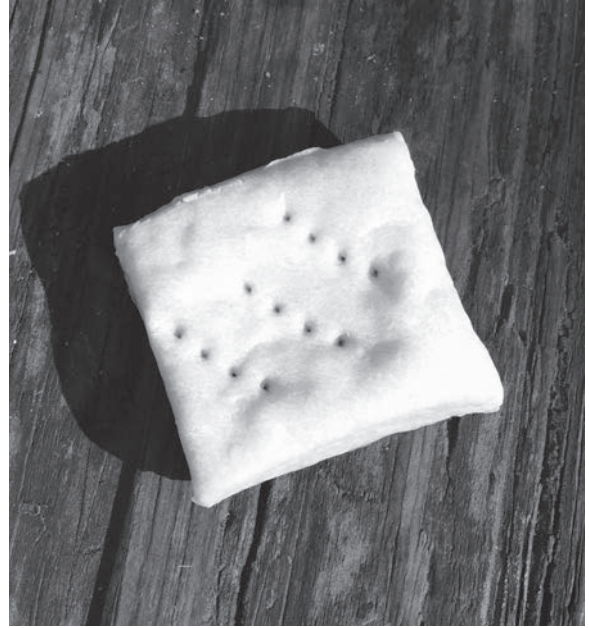


Figure 1. My bit of hardtack on the *Morgan*'s maindeck. Photo: Hester Blum.

bethought me of the scanty handful of bread I had stuffed into the bosom of my frock" (42). I had always read the scene that follows, in which Tommo and his companion Toby fastidiously catalog the contents of their "frocks" or blousy sailor shirts, as comic; it is hard not to find absurdity in Toby's extraction from his "bosom" a handful of "something so soft, pulpy, and discoloured, that for a few moments he was as much puzzled as myself to tell by what possible instrumentality such a villainous compound had become engendered in his bosom." But now I can picture, with a bit more respect, how this doughy "hash of soaked bread and bits of tobacco" nevertheless ends up providing them with hard-luck rations for three days (42). Ship's biscuit does not spoil; however pulped, it does not disintegrate.

Here is how I have come to know so much about how hardtack performs under conditions of immersion. A day or two after I disembarked from the *Charles W. Morgan* I did a load of laundry on the hot, heavy washer setting, accidentally (and to my extreme distress) leaving my biscuit in the pocket of the shorts I had been wearing while aboard.

When I extracted the hardtack after the spin cycle, however, I found to my surprise and top-gallant delight that it was wholly intact: damp but otherwise constitutionally sound, puncture marks still visible. By the next morning the cube was once again firm, although it had lost its lacquer and was somewhat darker in color (Fig. 2). I posted before and after pictures of the biscuit to social media; my friend Glenn asked whether the human digestive system could have done more to break down the hardtack than a hot wash cycle. (The biscuit fared far better, I might add, than my official "38th Voyage" water bottle, which melted and became unusable the first time I put it in

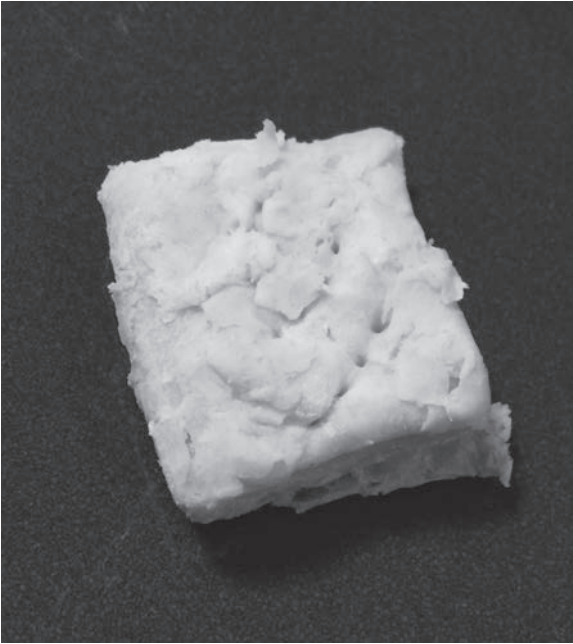


Figure 2. Ship's biscuit, after its tumble in the hot laundry cycle.
Photo: Hester Blum.

the dishwasher, even though I had placed it on the upper rack, the gentle cycle equivalent.) When Tommo and Toby's hardtack became saturated, they ate it, sensibly. My softened-and-rehardened biscuit, however, I determined to be inedible after its tumble with commercial laundry detergent—much to my daughter's dismay, as I had promised her a postvoyage nibble. I saved it as a memento of my whaling cruise, along with a couple of miniature rum bottles I had brought aboard in case there was a need for an allotment of grog. Within two months, though, mostly likely on account of my lubberly stowage technique (perhaps some lingering dampness deep within its stony heart could not escape the sandwich-sized Ziploc bag in which I'd placed it?), my hardtack developed mold and I was forced to throw it away. Water will out.

Seawater has a different temporality, however. Throughout our preparation for the 38th Voyage of the *Charles W. Morgan*, when marveling at the fact that a good proportion of her boards are original—including, remarkably, her keel—we were told that salt water is a great preservative and that fresh water leads to wood rot. The restored *Morgan* has salt packed between her frames and is washed down with seawater after a rainstorm. In the decades that the great whaling ship has spent docked at Mystic Seaport's calm riverfront wharf, protected from the lashing of the open ocean, she has functioned as a museum artifact: a work of art, not an object of utility or industry fulfilling its constitutive function. Returning her to sea for this summer's cruise, a project unlikely ever to be repeated, was a huge gamble for the museum. Could the *Morgan* sustain her integrity while washed by the open sea for the first time in a century? Upon her return to harbor on the Mystic River, would she keep?

Melville's own whaling voyage had itself departed from New Bedford—also in 1841—on the sister ship of the *Charles W. Morgan*, whose construction had been completed just a few months earlier. This added special resonance to my own experience. Even so, as both a scholar and an enthusiast, I wondered prior to my day's sail how I would (or if I should?) keep some semblance of critical distance from what might otherwise feel like historical reenactment. In the aftermath of my short time before the mast, however, I have found that immersive experience, whether in the ship's operations or in her reconstituted past, was not elemental to my interval on the *Morgan*. Instead, what I have felt most moved to write about, what has stayed with me, have been the various labors and processes of work that went into the making and remaking of the ship and its 38th Voyage—not the *Morgan* (or *Morgan-as-artifact*)

herself. The bit of hardtack that I held on to throughout my eighteen hours at sea was not required as a legitimizing token of my experience, nor was it a misrecognition of what constitutes nautical authenticity. It represented instead, directly and indirectly, the individual shaping hands that constituted the industry of whaling, that most intimate and tactile of mass industries. My “whaling” “voyage” may not have been an actual whaling voyage, just as ship’s bread is not bread (and neither is breadfruit, as Tommo and Toby discover). All these elements, nonetheless, have enormous sustaining power, whether we devour them hungrily or simply witness their resistance to rot.

Notes

1. Mystic Seaport, <http://www.mysticseaport.org/38thvoyage/itinerary/>.
2. I have also written about my *Morgan* voyage for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/18-hours-mast>.
3. Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern-Newbery, 1968), 21. Future references are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically.