

Whalers' rock art: archaeological evidence for early US bay whaling in Northwest Western Australia

Ross Anderson, Curator, Department of Maritime Archaeology, WA Museum

Jo McDonald, Director, Centre for Rock Art Research and Management, University of WA

Alistair Paterson, Future Fellow, University of WA

Rock inscriptions made by crews from two North American whaleships in the early 19th century were recently discovered, superimposed over earlier Aboriginal engravings in the Dampier Archipelago.

They provide the earliest evidence for North American whalers' memorialising practices in Australia, and have substantial implications for maritime history.

At the time, the Dampier Archipelago (Murujuga) was home to the Yaburara people. The rock art across the archipelago is testament to their artists asserting their connections to this place for millennia.

The inscriptions provide a rare insight into the lives of whalers, filling a gap in our knowledge about this earliest industry on Western Australia's Pilbara coast.

Such historical inscriptions might be dismissed as graffiti. However, like other rock art, they tell important stories about our human past that cannot be gleaned from other sources.

Whaling led to some of the earliest contacts between American, European and a range of indigenous societies in Africa, Australasia and the Pacific. But early visits by foreign whalers to Australia's northwest are poorly documented given the absence of a British colonial land-based presence in the area until the 1860s. The Swan River Colony (Perth) was established in 1829, but permanent European colonisation of the northwest only began in the early 1860s with an influx of pastoralists and pearlers. For the Yaburara, this colonisation was catastrophic. It culminated in the [Flying Foam Massacre in 1868](#) in which many Yaburara people were killed.

A few surviving ship logbooks record English and North American whalers on the Dampier Archipelago from 1801, but the heyday of whaling near "The Rosemary Islands" was between the 1840s and 1860s.

The logbooks describe American whaling ships working together to hunt herds of humpback whales, which migrate along Australia's northwest coastline during the winter months.

The ships' crews made landfall to collect firewood and drinking water, and to post lookouts on vantage points to assist in sighting whales for the open boats to pursue.

[Research](#) by archaeologists from the University of Western Australia working with the [Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation](#) and industry partner [Rio Tinto](#) found some evidence of two such landfalls in inscriptions from the crew of two North American whalers – the Connecticut and the Delta.

The earliest of these inscriptions records the whaleship *Connecticut* visited Rosemary Island on 18 August 1842. At least part of this inscription was made by Jacob Anderson, identified from the *Connecticut's* crew list as a 19-year-old African-American sailor.

Research shows this set of ships' and people's names was placed over an earlier set of Aboriginal [grid motifs](#). This was along a ridgeline that has millennia of evidence for the Yaburara producing rock art and raising standing stones and quarrying tool-stone elevated above this seascape.

The dates and names found in the inscription correlate with port records that show the *Connecticut* left the town of New London in Connecticut, US, for the New Holland ground (as the waters off Australia's northwest were known) in 1841, with Captain Daniel Crocker and a crew of 26. The *Connecticut's* logbook for the voyage is missing, so without these inscriptions we would know nothing of this ship's visit to the Dampier Archipelago.

On another island, another set of inscriptions record a visit to a similar vantage point by crew of the *Delta* on July 12 1849. Registered in Greenport, New York, the *Delta* made 18 global whaling voyages between 1832 and 1856. Its logbook confirms it was whaling in the Dampier Archipelago between June 2 and September 8 1849.

While the log records crew members going ashore to shoot kangaroos and collect water, no mention is made of them making inscriptions or having any contact with Yaburara people. Given it was the dry season, and the lack of permanent water on the islands, this lack of contact is not surprising.

But again, these whalers chose to make their marks on surfaces that were already marked by the Yaburara. By recording their presence at these specific historical moments, the whalers continued the long tradition of the Yaburara in interacting with and marking their maritime environment.

The *Connecticut* and *Delta* whaling inscriptions provide the only known archaeological insight into this earliest global resource extraction by Americans in Australia's northwest - the whale oil industry - which began over two centuries ago. They demonstrate yet again the unique capacity of Murujuga's rock art to shed light on previously unknown details of our shared human history.