

MYSTERIES OF THE DEEP

By Tom Halsted, *CAM Docent*

THIS AUGUST MARKS A LANDMARK ANNIVERSARY for Cape Ann. Two hundred years ago, beginning on August 6, 1817, and recurring for several years thereafter, reports arose of “an unusual fish or serpent” swimming in Gloucester Harbor. By at least one newspaper account, “hundreds of people” saw the creature. Throughout the month, Gloucester citizens and curious visitors from as far away as Boston flocked to the shores of Stage Fort, Ten Pound Island, the Fort and Pavilion Beach in hopes of catching a glimpse of the creature. Their descriptions became more dramatic by the day.

The first sightings, on August 6, by two women and a fisherman, were generally discounted. The same day, according to J. P. O’Neill, author of *The Great New England Sea Serpent*, “the captain of a coasting vessel was laughed out of Lipple’s auction room when he reported a sixty-foot long sea serpent at the entrance of the bay.” A few days later, Mrs. Amos Story saw “what appeared to be a tree trunk washed up on Ten Pound Island” ... then it moved.

On August 10, Lydia Wonson saw it near Rocky Neck and thought it was 60 to 70 feet long. Later that day William Row reported seeing “100 feet of the creature borne on the water.” Amos Story gave a detailed description of the serpent he saw that day, with a head like a sea turtle and “much larger than the head of any dog I ever saw.”

On August 14 spectators lined the harbor’s shores in hopes of seeing the serpent, and they were not disappointed. The serpent was seen in the vicinity of Ten Pound Island and Norman’s Woe, and farther into the harbor, as far as Pavilion Beach. The body was said to be brown in color, and resembled in some accounts “the joints in wooden buoys on a net rope ... like a string of gallon kegs 100 feet long.”

Some saw a smooth back, others saw “bunches” on it as it undulated up and down “like a caterpillar,” others thought it moved like

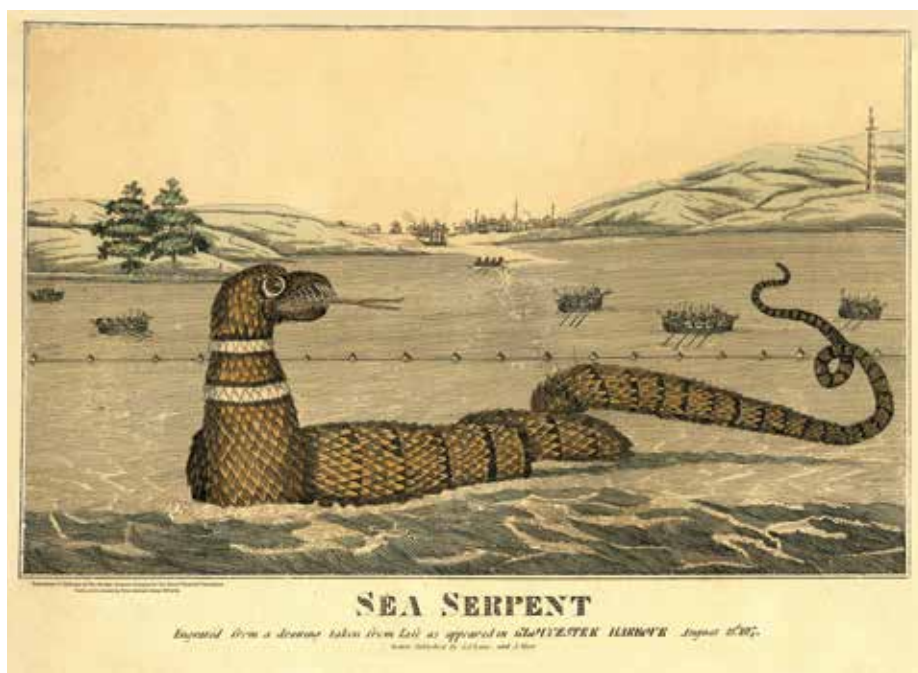
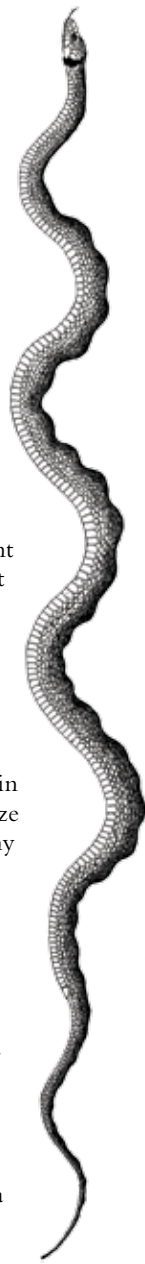
a snake slithering sideways. Two observers reported seeing a 12-inch horn growing out of the head and several saw a red forked tongue. One witness reported sighting two serpents “at play” in the harbor on August 18. By then, reports about the existence of a sea serpent in Gloucester Harbor were no longer a laughing matter.

The dramatic sightings occurred at a turbulent and unsettling time in American history. Over the preceding few years, people’s lives had been turned upside down in many ways, and unexpected, sometimes fearsome, events had become almost normal. The War of 1812 had been ruinous for American merchant shipping and hazardous for fishing vessels, which were often harassed, seized, or sunk by British naval vessels and privateers. Then, on April 10, 1815, Mount Tambora, in far-off Indonesia, erupted in the most colossal volcanic explosion in 2,000 years. The following year, 1816, was known as “the year without a summer.” The cloud of volcanic dust from the eruption blocked normal levels of solar radiation from penetrating the stratosphere, causing temperatures to plummet in much of western Europe, Canada and the United States. It snowed in parts of New England as late as July, and crops froze in the ground or failed to grow at all, causing many New England farmers to migrate westward. Elsewhere in the world, there were deadly famines in Europe, disastrous floods in China and an epidemic of cholera in India.

In the early nineteenth century, few people understood the cause or extent of such global disruptions. Many natural phenomena that we understand today were matters of mystery, and the sciences available to interpret them were almost nonexistent. It was still natural in that era to ascribe misfortune to malevolent mystical powers or as payback for human misbehavior rather than as the workings of geological and meteorological forces.

Moreover, many people believed in the existence of fearsome creatures. While sailors and fishermen were familiar with the ocean’s behavior near land and with the varieties of food fish they commonly caught, they knew nothing of the creatures that might inhabit the great depths beyond the reach of their fishing gear and sounding leads. Thus, the appearance in 1817 of a gigantic sea serpent in a New England harbor might well be accepted as a reasonable, if rare, event.

That was apparently the view of the newly formed Linnaean Society of New England. Named for the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (Carl Linné), who developed the first methodical classification of plants and ani-



(above) “Sea Serpent engraved from a drawing taken from life as appeared in Gloucester Harbor, August 23, 1817. Published by E. J. Lane & J. How.” (above right) “*Scoliophis atlanticus* copied from the specimen in possession of Capt. Beach. Report of a Committee of the Linnaean Society of New England relative to a large marine mammal supposed to be a serpent seen near Cape Ann, Massachusetts in August 1817.” Collection of the Cape Ann Museum Library & Archives.



After Captain John Beach Jr., American, 1782–1841. *View of Gloucester Harbor with the Sea Serpent of 1817, after 1817*. Engraving. Sheet: 34 x 48 cm (13 3/8 x 18 7/8 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Source unidentified. 2007.976. Photograph ©2017 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

mals, the New England Society and similar groups of interested amateurs in Europe and America were formed to promote the study of natural history. None of the members were scientists (the word did not yet exist; practitioners typically called themselves “philosophers”), but they shared a curiosity about the world around them, exploring, unearthing, dissecting, and classifying all manner of animals, plants, and minerals. They were avid students of anything that excited their curiosity, and nothing could do so more dramatically than the reports from Gloucester of the repeated appearances of a giant sea serpent.

A committee of the Linnaean Society conducted a careful examination of the evidence, beginning with an interrogation of the most credible witnesses. A detailed 25-item questionnaire was drawn up, and eyewitnesses were interviewed separately. Their reports were gratifyingly similar. The committee members’ growing conviction that a sea serpent had indeed visited Gloucester a number of times was reinforced on September 27 by the discovery and destruction (by spearing and stoning) of a three-and-a-half-foot-long “serpent” with what appeared to be “bunches” on its back near Loblolly Cove, four and a half miles from Gloucester Harbor.

Commonly described as a “baby sea-serpent,” the dead creature was exhibited widely, and the committee members were sure that it was the progeny of the giant beast seen in the harbor. The supposed new genus was given a formal Latin designation, *Scoliophis atlanticus*, and the Linnaean Society appeared to be on the path to international acclaim for its remarkable discovery.

Not everyone was convinced by the reports. To settle the question of the creature’s identity, the giant serpent would have to be

captured and killed. In an early attempt in 1817, a skilled marksman fired his musket at the beast and was sure his ball had struck home, but there was no evidence that he had succeeded. In August 1818, a year after the first sighting, Captain Richard Rich, a well-regarded and experienced whaler, was invited to assemble a crew and harpoon the serpent.

Captain Rich purposely recruited fishermen who believed they had seen the serpent, and he waited for a day when the weather and ocean conditions were similar to those on earlier sightings. When a report came in that the beast had been seen swimming near the Annisquam Bar, he assembled his crew and went off in pursuit. Rich recalled later that on August 18, when he first sighted his prey, he was convinced that the serpent was at least 100 feet long. On September 6, after repeated failed efforts, he succeeded in killing it. His harpoon’s aim was true, and the catch was hauled aboard, identified as a large “horse mackerel” — today we would call it an Atlantic bluefin tuna. As Rich later explained, he had been deceived by the behavior of the fast-moving fish, which broke the surface as it plunged ahead, leaving in its wake a series of prominent ripples on the water’s calm surface, looking not unlike the “bunches” described by earlier witnesses.

As for the “baby sea serpent,” upon dissection it turned out to be a common black snake, the bunches on its back caused by tumors under the skin [facing page]. The chastened Linnaean Society, its hopes for global fame dashed by its failures to persuade the world that a sea serpent had spent several years enjoying itself in

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The Gloucester Sea Serpent (cont.)

Gloucester Harbor and surrounding waters, lingered for a while longer but eventually disbanded in 1822.

The events in Gloucester of 1817 and 1818 were not the end of the story, of course—or even the beginning. People had “seen” sea serpents in New England waters for centuries before that time. And they still do.

While there is ample anecdotal evidence confirming the belief in such creatures, rational thought leads to the conclusion that these sightings were most likely figments of the imagination, the result of mass hallucinations and/or hoaxes. And yet ... there are objects and phenomena that are not easily explained—particularly, perhaps, for people who live by and work on the sea. It is large and deep and filled with mystery.

Resources

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Bolster, Jeffrey. *The Mortal Sea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

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O'Neill, June Pusbach. *The Great New England Sea Serpent: An Account of Unknown Creatures Sighted by Many Respectable Persons Between 1638 and the Present Day*. New York: Paraview Special Editions, 2003.

Pringle, James Robert. *History of the Town and City of Gloucester*. Published by the author, 1892.

Soini, Wayne. *Gloucester's Sea Serpent*. Charleston: History Press, 2010.



The Cape Ann Sea Serpent
Library/Archives Mini Exhibit

A selection of archival materials, including two handwritten witness statements and an 1848 newsprint account, is on view through the summer on the Museum's lower level. For further study, be sure to visit the Library/Archives, where you'll find a wealth of information.

Related Programs: CAM and Maritime Gloucester are offering two *Sea Serpent Sighting Bicentennial Cruises* aboard the Schooner *Ardelle* on Thursday, August 10—see page 12 for times and ticket information.