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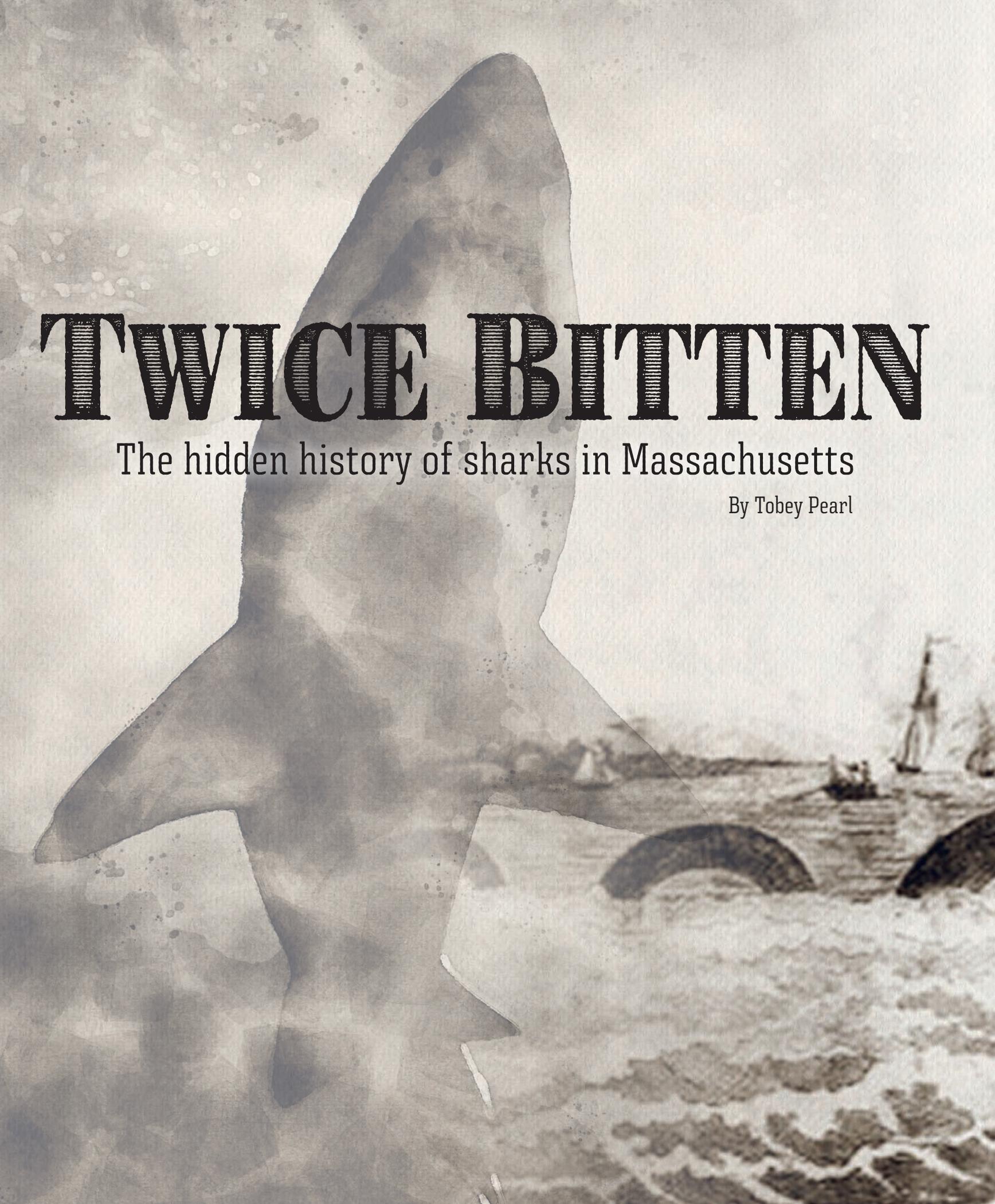
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The hidden history of sharks in Massachusetts

By Tobey Pearl

On July 12, 1830, twelve miles off the coast of Swampscott, Massachusetts, Captain Nathaniel Blanchard noticed something peculiar. He had sailed with family members on the schooner *Finback* before taking individual dories, small wooden vessels, out for fishing. From Blanchard's dory, he looked out at the dory that carried his 52-year-old father-in-law, Joseph Blaney. He could see Blaney in distress, cradling his hand, trying to regain his balance.

Blaney furiously waved his hat to signal for help. Something massive was bearing down on him from under the water. The creature—whatever it was—had already bitten the older man's arm. The large shape cut back around Blaney's dory, trailing a wake through the water that rocked the old man's boat back and forth. As Blanchard took in the sight of the enormous creature barreling toward his father-in-law's dory, he rowed across the water, hoping to come to the aid of his father-in-law, who still waved his hat in distress. Beating the water with his oar in

a desperate bid to reach Blaney, Blanchard would have been drenched both in seawater and sweat.

In an instant the shark shattered the calm swells once more, erupting through the water's surface, and landed squarely on Blaney's dory, dwarfing the old sailor's small frame. The creature reportedly thrashed toward Blaney while both were aboard his boat. Oars knocked against the boat's creaking gunnels as water sloshed into the dipping vessel. And then the entire tableau—man, hat, shark, boat—"instantly disappeared and the water appeared in a foam."

In the place of the deadly struggle, effervescent sea foam swirled gustily over the water. The shadowy waters perhaps masked blood as Blanchard waited. The shark either still had hold of Blaney, teeth grasping and plunging into his flesh, or it waited nearby. "A robust, courageous man," Blaney would have struggled to escape, but as local histories eulogized, the shark "devoured" him. The sea coughed up the dory from its depths without a sign

of the old fisherman other than Blaney's hat, drifting quietly on foam-covered dark blue swells.

With plenty of fish close to shore in Nahant Bay, the sheltered waters north of Boston supported several sleepy coastal villages, and Swampscott fishermen felt little need to venture farther out—at least not until the Nahant Hotel went up across the bay. Pleasure-seekers from Boston came out and demanded delicacies from the ocean depths. These city-dwellers disdained local haddock. Proud Swampscott fisherman soon gave way to a new generation of lobstermen. Ebenezer Thorndike of Swampscott invented the lobster trap in 1808 to meet this growing need.

The demands of the booming tourist industry pushed the fishermen far from shore into the range of long-gone whalers, men of another time who would have known how to dispatch an attacking shark. Herman Melville grimly described such efficient efforts in *Moby Dick*: "mariners, darting their long whaling-spades, kept up an incessant



murdering of the sharks, by striking the keen steel deep into their skulls.”

Back on shore, Blanchard directed his anger toward the apex predator of the sea. His fury became an epic quest for justice. The search for sharks began almost at once, and his hunt yielded results. He caught two possible man-eaters, one of which measured 16 feet. As Blanchard later reported, “the female appeared to be the most voracious and spiteful of the two, and seized upon the bait like one long accustomed to the fat things of the sea and sand.” He displayed one shark to the public in Boston, perhaps at the new Boston Society for Natural History, the precursor of present-day Museum of Science.

The story might have ended there but for a strange and implausible twist. The Blaney family stood at the cusp of a bizarre and unlikely multigenerational struggle with sharks. And perversely, the Blaney family’s next shark encounter would help obscure Massachusetts’s shark history rather than reveal it.

On a pleasant day in August 1879, almost fifty years after Joseph Blaney’s fatal shark attack, Blaney’s grandson, Frank Blaney, took a dory out to fish with a friend off the coast of Swampscott. On the same waters where his grandfather met his demise, Frank Blaney encountered a shark. During his terrifying contact with the predator, he may have been struck by the improbability of yet another shark attempting to overtake one more member of the Blaney family.

At first glance, the parallel

encounters within the same family indeed suggest extraordinary coincidence. Sharks, like fisherman, though, “return to the same hunting locations each year,” both attracted to prime conditions. As noted chief shark scientist for the Massachusetts Department of Marine Fisheries Dr. Greg Skomal points out, once “sharks have found the restaurant... they’re waiting for the doors to open.” Media reports document seal sightings in Swampscott waters as early as 1854 and as recently as 2015, verifying the enticing nature of the feeding grounds.

While it is remarkable that two members of the same family faced down sharks, that happenstance is overshadowed by a baffling fact: Frank Blaney could not identify the creature as a shark. Nor could his friend. Nor, when they trawled the beast into port, could the oldest fisherman in Swampscott.

When Frank Blaney encountered the formidable creature at sea, he noted its “tail resembled that of a shark” and that it weighed almost four hundred pounds. He marveled at its fins, its nearly foot-wide mouth, and its “greyish-white belly.” He even acknowledged that it was “something resembling a

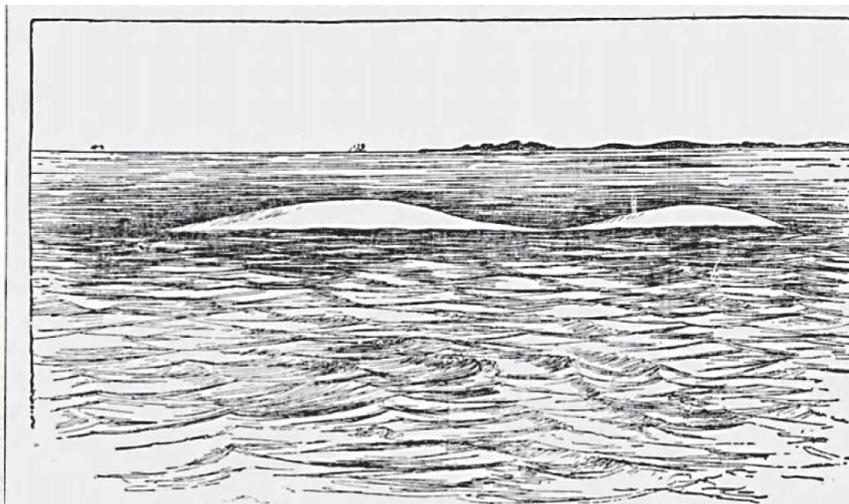
fish.” But after careful consideration, he concluded he had snared “one of the most peculiar specimens of the piscatorial tribe,” a sea monster.

Recent reports of the notorious sea monsters that plagued the waters around Swampscott and the nearby seaside villages of Nahant and Gloucester had clouded Frank Blaney’s conclusions. This was only natural after the lengthy Boston Globe article from two years earlier, which detailed the ongoing “terror” caused by the local Nahant Sea Serpent that year.

Local sea monster sightings had begun years earlier. In 1817, a sea monster nearly caused a panic when a crowd of hundreds stopped by the water’s edge of Nahant Bay to take in the spectacle of a large beast moving with menacing assurance. Terrified locals dubbed it the Nahant Sea Serpent. The Linnaean Society of New England, an organization dedicated to the advancement of natural history, welcomed a detailed report on the serpent, which noted the animal’s searching face that poked out almost a foot above the ocean’s surface. The creature’s head was adorned with a “spear about twelve inches in height.” Frightened witnesses later described its

forty-foot long body, marking it as “a snakey species.” The fantastic sea monster provoked primal fear. Few questioned the society’s classification.

That same year, Gorham Norwood of Gloucester worked the fields near Loblolly Cove when he heard a commotion and a boy calling out. Hurrying toward the noise, he spotted a serpentine creature trying to hide under a rock



THE SEA SERPENT AS SEEN OFF NAHANT FROM THE DECK OF THE YACHT PROMISE.

NO MORE A MYTH.

Continued from the First Page.

of similar size and appearance arose out of the water. That part of the fish which was between humps was submerged, giving to the animal a snake-like look. No tail was visible, and the humps which showed above the water were without fins of any kind. No serpent and the others who saw the creature to say that it was not of the piscatorial tribe, that it was not

The serpent went to sea in the vicinity of Nahant, skimming the shore en route. At Polly Cove we stopped for a time and departed himself, and a Higgin Cove fisherman who was at Nahantville for bait said he attempted to keep up with the fish in his dory; but was unable to do so. One lobsterman, who was hauling his pots, was nearly frightened out of wits by the appearance of the monster skimming the dory. He dropped the lobster pot into the sea and fairly made his three pipe smoke as he pulled for the shore. The fisher is making but a very rapid and cautious approach. For three or four

Lewis were at work on their trawle when they noticed an unusual commotion in the water a short distance away. In a few minutes a strange-looking object approached them, moving, they say, at a speed of something like 25 miles an hour. As it drew nearer the marine monster, for such it proved to be, raised its peculiar-looking head some six feet above the water and gazed about with great bulging eyes. **SEEN AT MARBLEHEAD.** No Longer Reasonable Doubt that Mar-

plaza of their cottage on the ocean side. It appeared just southwest of Marblehead rock, and was taking a direct course along the shore, headed for Ison. The two ladies crossed the road went up on Mr. Masters' piazza, which commands a fine view of Massachusetts bay. By the time they reached there, sea monster, which was traveling a very rapid gait, was in the vicinity of Mr. Moore's rock. It traveled along at the rate of 25 miles an hour, and paying no attention to the vessel which it was

Rendering from *The Boston Globe* on July 30, 1896, showing what the boat looked like to onlookers.



and used his pitchfork to subdue it. With a white underside complemented by a “bluish lead colour” on its tail, self-appointed naturalists classified the animal as “the progeny of the Sea Serpent.” A predator capable of crawling out of the ocean and onto the shore horrified. The hunt was on for the spawning beast before it could further populate the waters and shores with its kind.

A young man, Matthew Gaffney of Gloucester, took it upon himself to kill the sea monster and save the coastal villages on the bay from the looming threat. Having witnessed the dreadful creature several times before, he went out on the water with his brother and a friend and shot at it. Gaffney later described the scene in a deposition. “I aimed at his head,” he stated, which was “as large as a four-gallon keg.” He professed certainty that he hit his mark, noting “there is no person in town, more accustomed to shooting, than I am.” Gaffney expressed shock that the beast “turned towards us immediately...and I thought he was coming at us.” It might have been a scene from the novel or movie *Jaws* a century-and-a-half later.

At the last moment, the creature dove low into the depths. But before it disappeared entirely, Gaffney made an important observation. “The under part of his head appeared nearly white, as did also several feet of his body.” The beast’s glistening white underside, the telltale marker of great white sharks, is familiar to even casual present-day viewers of Shark Week. At the time, though, few scientists could capably identify one. The sea monster assessment offered by a fisherman seemed sufficient.

By 1879, the year Frank Blaney struggled to identify the sea creature he encountered, most nineteenth century men and women living along coastal Massachusetts would have shared his trouble classifying a shark. The fixation on sea monsters helps explain this confusion—one that partially concealed Massachusetts’s robust history of shark encounters. Local lore had taken hold and outpaced science.

Throughout the nineteenth century, hundreds of witnesses observed sea monsters off Massachusetts’s coasts. Some of these sightings almost certainly involved large sharks. Recent news coverage often highlights the past rarity of sharks near local beaches. In fact, while there may well be an uptick in shark activity in Massachusetts’s waters, it is actually part of an unrecognized continuum that reflects the misunderstood legacy of sharks in our waters. Like Frank Blaney, our perception has been obfuscated by the maritime lore of past generations.



This winter, look for Tobey Pearl’s nonfiction book, *Terror to the Wicked*, which tells the true story of the Plymouth Colony murder, manhunt, and trial that ended a war.

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