

The wreck of the

ALNA: 1838

Reprinted from: *The Tragedy of the Seas; or Sorrow on the Ocean, Lake and River from Shipwreck, Plague, Fire and Famine* by Charles Ellms, Philadelphia, W.A. Leary, 1848

An account of the wreck of the brig Alna on the coast of east Florida and the massacre of the officers, and part of the crew, by the Seminole Indians; and the escape and subsequent adventures and sufferings of two of the crew; September, 1838.



On the 19th of August, 1838, the brig *Alna*, of Portland, Maine, Captain Thomas, sailed from St. Jago de Cuba, bound to Boston. Owing to light and baffling winds, it was some time before the vessel got round the island, when she took her departure from Matanzas, and left the coast with a light breeze. But on the 5th of September, it came on to blow very hard; the sail on her was reduced, but the wind still increased, so that on the 7th it blew a violent gale from the north-east. The brig was about fifteen miles off the Florida coast, and drifting rapidly on a lee shore. A heavy press of canvas was now carried, to endeavor, if possible, to claw off. But the head of the bowsprit was carried away; and the sea making a clear breach over her, sweeping the decks fore and aft, the brig was again hove to, but drifted rapidly to leeward. As it was found impossible to keep the vessel off the land, the captain determined to run her on shore in the daytime, so as to have a better chance of saving the lives of those on board. Accordingly, the mainsail was lowered, and the helm put hard up. The vessel soon struck the bottom, about twenty miles north of Cape Florida, and was shortly after lifted so high on the beach by the heavy breakers, that the crew could easily jump from her to the shore. As the tide ebbed, great exertions were made to land the

stores and clothing; and a sufficient quantity of provisions and water were secured on the beach to last a month. Here the unfortunate captain and his crew remained until Sunday, the 9th of September. "On that fatal day, about noon," says Mr. Wyer, "the first Indians which appeared nigh our tent were four in number. They were armed with rifles. The mate was packing his clothes in his chest, which he had been drying that day; and the first notice we had of the Indians was the smart crack of a rifle; and at the same instant the mate exclaimed, 'O dear!' having received the ball in his hand, passing into the abdomen, as we supposed. The same Indian, being behind a tree, reloaded, and marked me for his next object, (myself, Cammett, and Captain Thomas, crouching down) which gave me the ball through the hand, passing up laterally through the thigh, coming out just below the hip joint, making a journey through the flesh of eight or nine inches. We took to the beach, (it being warm, we were barefooted) and they pursued us. Captain Thomas, having taken a long walk with Cammett, was tired, and gave out. We halted, being thirty yards ahead of him, to see what his fate might be. I saw him shot, the ball whizzing by me; and he fell on his face, and seemed to die instantly. After this, we expected no quarter, if taken. I felt approaching weakness from loss of blood, and feared I must soon give up. We very soon entered the bushes, Cammett going ahead. I soon lost him, and made my way along till night, among the palmettoes, which cut my feet cruelly; added to this, were mosquitoes, which were a formidable foe. At dark, on Sunday night, I came out on the beach, and travelled till nearly daylight. Finding my wounds bleeding profusely, I tore off the bottom of my flannel shirt, and bound them up — which continued to bleed all the next day. I lay down, and sometimes

fell down, often thinking I should not be able to rise again. My fears were increased from the trail of blood which I left behind, knowing this to be a good mark for them. Monday I continued to travel the beach — went to the river, running parallel with the sea, for water — ate nothing that day — came to New River, waded in to my neck, and swam off, finding the current setting from both shores to the centre, making it very doubtful to me, from the long time I was there, whether I could ever reach the opposite shore. Here I was about to despair. I finally got foothold and gained the shore, but found myself very much exhausted. I should think the river was a quarter of a mile wide. It was about night. I kept on — occasionally would lie down during the night, gathering the sea-weed to cover me, while asleep — when I awoke, would go on again till weary, and then take a nap.

"Tuesday morning, fair weather — saw a house ahead, which proved to be the Patterson House, as I was told by the wreckers. It is a one-story frame house, and has a long time been vacated. I hoped here to find something to satisfy my hunger, but I was disappointed. Here was another river to swim. For the first time, I saw two large alligators; and the river was full of sharks of the largest kind. I was divested of fear, and in I plunged, and landed safe on the other side, feeling no enemy to be worse than the Indians. I travelled on, my feet being very sore — oftentimes would climb a tree to see if any danger was at hand, and hoping to see marks of civilization, to encourage me in my lonely journey — ate nothing this day — swam and forded several small streams and creeks, which was very painful in my wounded situation.

"Wednesday morning came with fair weather — continued my journey as the

day previous — clambered a tree, and found a huge snake had ascended before me; he lay out on one of the limbs, coiled up, as if asleep. I was well armed with a club, but took good care not to arouse him. His size round was as large as my ankle. I had been without food three days and nights, and was very hungry. I hoped to find something to eat among the wrecked matter that had washed up to the shore, but found nothing but dead fish; and it was a hard scramble to know whether I or the pelicans and other birds should be served first, as they exist in acres, and are so numerous that fish are all taken up before they get old. A dead fish was a great luxury; and when I had satiated my appetite, I would put them on my hat to dry, while journeying on.

"An hour or two before sunset, I saw two sail, that did not appear to notice me; soon after, I saw two more, who were in pursuit of a Dutch brig. I now hoisted my shirt on a pole, and waved it with all my strength. They discovered me; and happy was I to be rescued from the many perils that I had encountered. Indians, sharks, the moccasin snake, arabs, and various other reptiles, were foes in my way; but, thank God, I have been spared to return to my friends, and tell my perilous tale."

Mr. Cammett, who escaped at the same time with Wyer, when the captain was massacred, says, "My story, in regard to the shipwreck of the *Alma*, and being surprised by the Indians on the coast of Florida, cannot be otherwise than the same as Wyer's, until we entered the bushes, where we unfortunately got separated. I remained quiet, in concealment, until the dusk of the evening; then I thought it prudent to start. I walked across the beach to the bushes, to see if their trail continued — took care to use the same tracks back, so as to deceive them — got along the beach five or six miles, and encountered a party of Indians. They saw me, and raised a horrid yell, and pursued me. I ran into a swamp, where the mud and water were about waist high. Two Indians remained where I entered, while the rest seemed to be surrounding me: they avoided the water on account of the snakes, the wreckers told me.

"I was about an hour there — concluded it would not do to stop till morning, for they would get me — got out, and took to the shore — was careful to go so close to the shore that every ripple of the water should wash out my tracks — came across a well of water that was covered, and a village of low huts, said to have been some old barracks. I took them to be Indian huts; as I saw no tracks beyond them, I was puzzled to know how to pass them. The palmettoes



"The Death of Captain Thomas, and Escape of Wyer and Cammett," as depicted in "The Tragedy of the Seas."

were like sharks' teeth, and made a noise in getting through. I was then on the border of the river — finally thought I would wade up to my neck, that no trace of me could be seen — got by in safety, lost their tracks, and began to feel as if I was delivered.

"Monday, still on the river, with trees and bushes growing to the edge. I was obliged to travel, and occasionally swim round — came to a place which I took to be two rivers that intersected this. I swam over, and found it to be an island covered with water, and the roots of the trees starting out two or three feet above ground, making a sort of bridge to walk on — tasted the water, and found it fresh — stopped and rested — a severe current on both sides. Seeing a number of sharks, I made a raft of drift-wood; but it was water-logged, and would not support me — abandoned it — took a lot of drift-wood, but could hardly keep it under me, the force of the current being so severe — reached the shore in safety; there I found the sea-shore, and kept on till 12 o'clock on Monday night. My feet were deeply cut with shells and palmettoes, and ankles so swollen, I could not bend them — my toes raw up between, and cruelly sore.

"Tuesday and Wednesday, swam several streams. I suffered with the intense heat — had no hat, and was obliged to wet my head to keep it cool — found a tar-bucket to carry water in — slept on board a wreck, with nothing but a quarter-deck left — my neck so swollen with mosquito bites that I could scarcely move my head — ate six dead fish on Tuesday, and eight on Wednesday. Wednesday afternoon, crawled into a large log. The hole being too short to admit my whole length, I took a barrel up from the shore to make out the length. Had a good nap — waking, I felt something under my chin — gave it a brush off — was stung that instant by a centipede[er] — got up, looked out, and saw four sloops making up the shore — wind

light — I anxiously kept along with them, but they did not see me — no sleep that night.

"At daylight, saw them standing in for the shore. I seized my tar-bucket to a long pole, with my knife lanyard, and hoisted it as a signal of distress; they saw it, and to my unutterable joy I was taken on board the wrecking sloop *Mount Vernon*, where I found my lost friend, Wyer, who, to my astonishment, called my name from over the side of the vessel. Thus ended my cruel adventure; and not till then was I fully sensible of my soreness. Under the blessing of God, I have been saved to return to my friends in perfect health."

Those who were murdered by the Indians, were Captain Charles Thomas, Andrew J. Plummer, mate, and John Sheafe, seaman, all of Portland, and William Reed, of Salem, cook. The only survivors were Wyer and Cammett, who published the following grateful tribute:

"It is our humane and highly-pleasing duty to say of Captain George Alden and his crew, of the wrecking sloop *Mount Vernon*, that our treatment was in the highest degree kind, hospitable, over-generous — dressing our wounds, nursing us with parental kindness, giving us clothing, regretting, when we left, that they had no money to give us, and all of us feeling as if attached with the strongest ties of friendship. On board of the *Index* they were equally hospitable; and on board the revenue cutter *Madison*, Captain Howard (our old friend and acquaintance) gave us a feeling reception, and the most cordial welcome.

"To correct wrong impressions and wicked prejudices, that exist against the wreckers on the coast of Florida, we feel bound by every thing sacred to state, that instead of being 'plunderers and pirates,' as they are often represented, it is the height of their ambition to save lives and property.

S. Cammett,
E. Wyer, Jun.