True Colors, False Flags:

At Sea, a Man Could Become Whatever He Claimed To Be

by William Benemann

Elias Willard Trotter was lonely and bored. He had been at sea on the whaler *Illinois* for nearly four months (on a voyage that would eventually last over two years), and the routine of extreme idleness punctuated with manic periods of activity was beginning to wear on him. "I am getting tired of the sea," he wrote in his journal, with a blunt pencil but with excellent penmanship, "& who would not—Confined to this narrow compass with nothing new or interesting is enough to make the heart grow sick within itself. At times we have hard work & even that is a relief from the ennui of a sea voyage." But life was about to get very interesting for Elias Trotter.

In a profession that required its men to be underway for several years at a time, with long periods entirely at sea, a widely practiced social ritual evolved known as the "gam." Whenever two (or more) whaling vessels encountered each other during a voyage, it was customary to heave to so that the captains and crew could exchange information and hospitality. Advice on where whales were or were not to be found, ports to be avoided because of infection or civil unrest, sightings of pirates or enemy ships—all were common topics of conversation at a gam. If one of the vessels was homeward bound, particularly if it was returning to the home port of the other ship, its captain might agree to carry progress reports to ship owners and personal mail to loved ones.

Elias Trotter was shaking the reef out of the main topsail when he spotted a ship hull-down on the horizon. Two hours later, the whaler *Neptune* out of Sag Harbor, New York, under the command of Captain William Pierson, was alongside *Illinois*.

> The captain gammed with her & now I have to record the most singular incident in the whole voyage—Captain Pierson with his boat crew boarded us & as is usual we immediately took the for'ard hands down our forecastle & commenced gamming. There was one fellow amongst them who drew my attention, on account of his manly beauty, activity & intelligence—Conversing with him he said he was from Albany, knew me and knew all the first families there & all the principal men—His name he gave me as Charles Wheeler—Getting more interested with him, he took me aside & told me who he really was—He was Sylvanus Spencer the youngest son of old Ambrose Spencer whom everybody knows to have been the much honored Chief Justice of the State of New York—He told me his history which is one I will never forget but cannot write here on account of the little room I have to give it. But imagine if you can, if you will, the emotions with which I met here on the Eastern Coast of New Holland [Australia], one born in my native city & one who had roamed amid the same scenes and walked with the same friends that I had. Why to speak from the heart, I was overpowered with joy & so was he & the four hours we were together, were hours of enjoyment, singularity & pleasure the sailor rarely meets with—We had to part & he is now sailing in sight, astern of us—But in all probability we will never meet again.
>
> Sic transit voluptas mundi—

COURTESY THE NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

The Gam, *1926 oil on canvas by Clifford W. Ashley.*

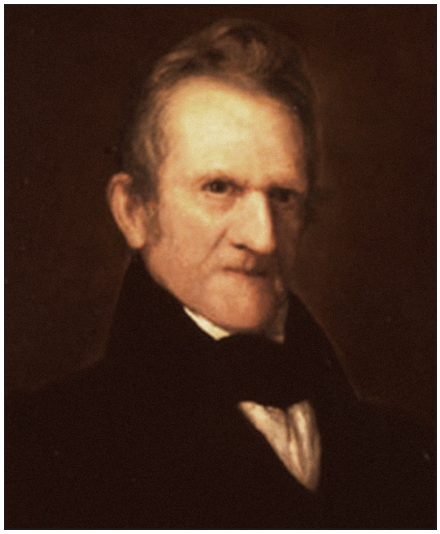
For Elias Trotter it did seem like all the pleasures of the world were merely transitory. Languorous with boredom before *Neptune* was sighted, he found his world suddenly upended by a strange sailor whose "manly beauty" and intelligent discourse held him spellbound for the entire four hours of the gam. Now he was sitting glumly in the stern of his vessel, pencil stub in hand, watching as his new friend's ship grew faint in the distance.

It is a poignant scene, but who was the man who introduced himself first as Charles Wheeler, but then confessed to being Sylvanus Spencer, of Albany, New York? Were either of those his correct identity?

Ambrose Spencer was extremely well known at the time, and if Elias Trotter grew up in Albany, he certainly was familiar with the name. Ambrose Spencer served as the mayor of Albany, Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court, and the US House of Representatives. He raised six children there, two daughters and four sons—none was named Sylvanus. One of his sons was John Canfield Spencer, who had a son named Ambrose, who would have been the right age to encounter Elias Trotter off the coast of Australia in 1845. If this was the Spencer that Trotter met at sea, his life was certainly colorful enough to fill up those four hours of gamming with a tale that Trotter felt he could not include in his journal.

John Canfield Spencer served as secretary of war under President John Tyler, and son Ambrose studied law and practiced in the state of Ohio. But the younger Ambrose was evidently not a success as an attorney. He returned home to Albany, New York, where he attempted to improve his finances by forging his father's signature. In February 1842 under the headline "An Unhappy Case," the *New-York Spector* ran the following brief notice:

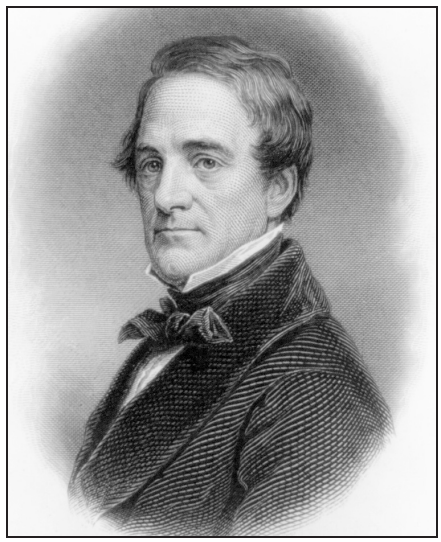
> It has been announced in several of the papers that Mr. Ambrose Spencer, Jr., of Ohio, son of the Secretary of War, has been arrested at Albany on a charge of forgery. Respect for the feelings of the distinguished relatives of the unhappy young man has hitherto prevented our noting the fact; but its publication has now been so extensive, that longer silence would be useless. We are, however, enabled to state that the conduct of the young man has been such, for some time past, as to induce his friends to suppose that his waywardness has been superinduced by partial insanity.



P.D. IMAGE VIA WIKIPEDIA.COM

In Philadelphia the *Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette* echoed the concern about Spencer's erratic behavior: "From this strange, inconsistent, and foolish conduct, his afflicted family are confident that he must be laboring under an alienation of mind. It is a sad, distressing affair."

The newspapers give no greater details of the younger Ambrose's activities or of his mental state, no specifics about other objectionable behavior, no explanation of why forgery should be an indicator of insanity, but the label stuck. When a few weeks later Spencer appeared in New Orleans, claiming to carry diplomatic dispatches intended for Sam Houston, President of the Republic of Texas, the *Cleveland Daily Herald* titled its article, "The 'Insane' Special Minister!" The *Ohio Statesman* in turn told its readers, "We happen to know that the unfortunate young man referred to has not been sent to Texas upon any such errand, and that he has not been furnished with any such instructions or documents as those described in the *[New Orleans] Bee*. The conduct of this young man has been very strange, for some time past,—so unaccountable, indeed, that his afflicted relatives have imputed partial insanity to him."



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

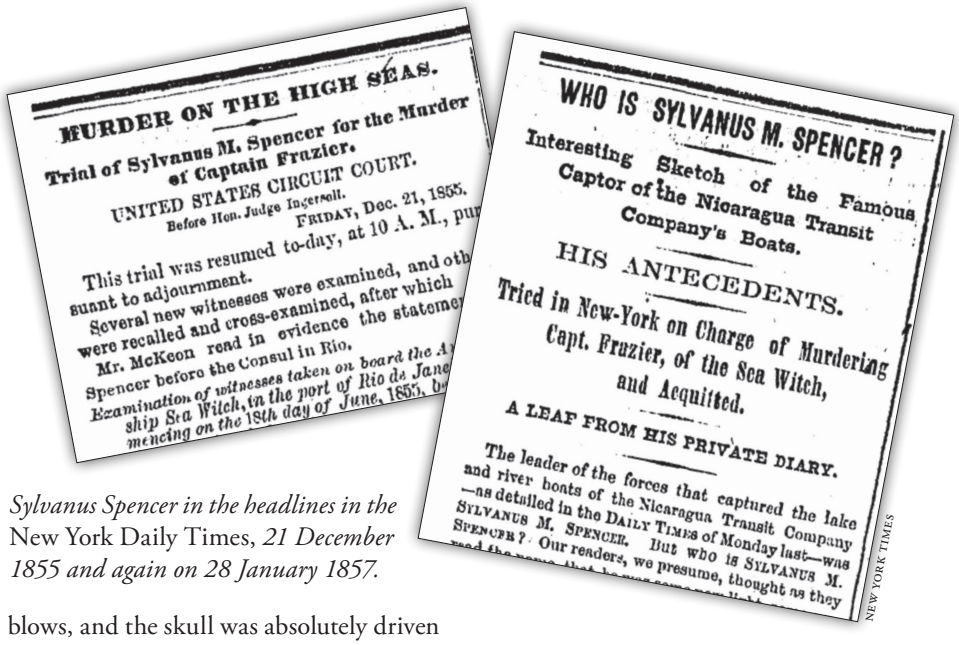
The Spencers were an extremely prominent family in New York State at this time. In 1845, Ambrose Spencer Sr. (left) was a retired member of the US House of Representatives, a former mayor of Albany, and a former New York State attorney general. His son, John Canfield Spencer (above), would have just recently stepped down as the US Secretary of the Treasury. Previous posts included serving as the US Secretary of War (both under President John Tyler) and a previous stint as New York Secretary of State.

In Columbus, Ohio, young Ambrose Spencer had gone into partnership with another forger named William B. Lloyd. The details of their personal relationship are obscure, but it is possible that the newspapers of the period hinted at a sexual liaison they were reluctant to openly discuss. Nineteenth-century American newspapers abound with announcements of sodomy arrests and prosecutions, but they rarely discuss such affairs beyond their criminal register column. *The Ohio Statesman* refers to William B. Lloyd as Ambrose Spencer's "peculiar friend"—placing that term in quotation marks to give it heightened significance for their readers. The newspaper adds, "For a long time we heard nothing of this Ambrose Spencer Jr., nor of his friend and partner William B. Lloyd, but supposed they were reposing in each other's fond embrace, singing 'Tippecanoe and Tyler too' guzzling hard cider, and pursu-

ing the old trade of the firm, for which they seemed so peculiarly fitted, both by their principles and practice!" This is the type of arch circumlocution used by newspapers of the period to make socially acceptable references to homosexual matters they did not wish to address openly in print. The wayward Ambrose Spencer never reached Texas, but was last seen in New Orleans boarding a steamship for New York in April 1842. Was this Ambrose the sailor of "manly beauty" who, signing on under a false name, joined the crew of the whaler *Neptune* in 1843 when it sailed from Sag Harbor, New York? Did he encounter Elias Willard Trotter in November 1845, introducing himself first as Charles Wheeler, and then as Sylvanus Spencer, son of the Chief Justice of New York, with an amazing tale that lasted through a four-hour gam?

Or was the stranger's name not Ambrose, but actually Sylvanus Spencer?

A Sylvanus Spencer crewing aboard a clipper ship emerges in the headlines late in 1855. On 21 December 1855, the *New York Times* ran a story titled "Murder On the High Seas," and the suspect was a sailor named Sylvanus M. Spencer. Spencer was the first mate on the clipper *Sea Witch*, sailing from New York to Hong Kong via the Cape of Good Hope. Shortly after leaving Rio de Janeiro, Spencer awakened the ship's doctor after midnight, informing him that someone had murdered the captain. Dr. Brolasky hurried to Captain George Frazier's cabin. "On the examination of the captain's wounds, it was discovered that his skull had been fractured by three distinct blows, and the skull was absolutely driven in on the brain. The captain died the next [day], and his body was placed in a hogshead of spirits to be preserved."


MURDER ON THE HIGH SEAS.

Trial of Sylvanus M. Spencer for the Murder of Captain Frazier.

UNITED STATES CIRCUIT COURT.

Before Hon. Judge Ingersoll. FRIDAY, Dec. 21, 1855.

This trial was resumed to-day, at 10 A. M., pur
suant to adjournment.
Several new witnesses were examined, and oth
were recalled and cross-examined, after which
Mr. McKeon read in evidence the stateme
Spencer before the Consul in Rio,
Examination of witnesses taken on board the A
ship Sea Witch, in the port of Rio de Jane
mencing on the 18th day of June, 1855, b

WHO IS SYLVANUS M. SPENCER?

Interesting Sketch of the Famous Captor of the Nicaragua Transit Company's Boats.

HIS ANTECEDENTS.

Tried in New-York on Charge of Murdering Capt. Frazier, of the Sea Witch, and Acquitted.

A LEAF FROM HIS PRIVATE DIARY.

The leader of the forces that captured the lake and river boats of the Nicaragua Transit Company —as detailed in the DAILY TIMES of Monday last—was SYLVANUS M. SPENCER. But who is SYLVANUS M. SPENCER? Our readers, we presume, thought as they

NEW YORK TIMES

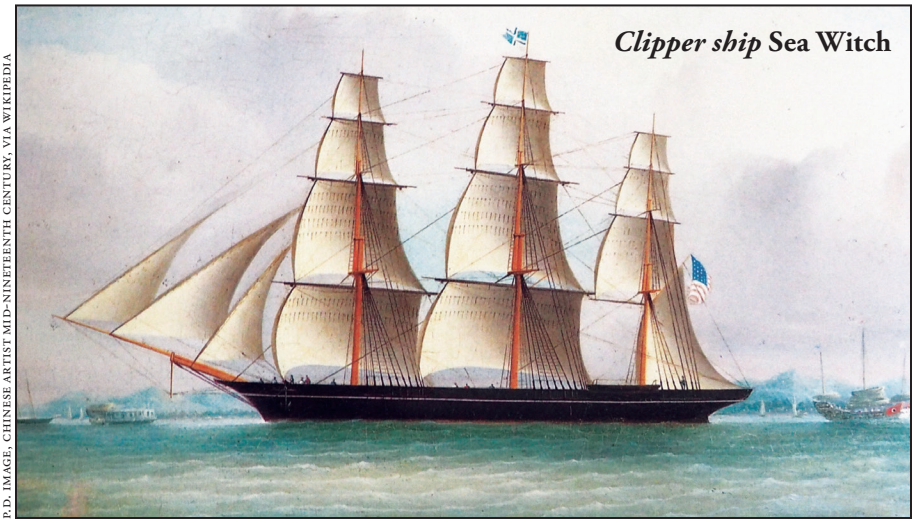
Sylvanus Spencer in the headlines in the New York Daily Times, *21 December 1855 and again on 28 January 1857.*

Brolasky suspected that Spencer was the culprit. Frazier and Spencer had had a bitter argument the night before, with the captain disparaging his first mate's seamanship skills, sneering that he was "neither an officer nor a sailor." A search of Spencer's cabin uncovered a heavy marlinspike, which exactly matched a new gash in the woodwork just above the captain's pillow.

When the ship reached Rio de Janeiro, the doctor informed the authorities that he believed Sylvanus Spencer to be the murderer, and after an interview with the American Consul, Spencer was told he was under arrest. He asked to return to his cabin "to dress himself," but while alone he tried to commit suicide by stabbing himself in the chest. The attempt failed, and he was brought to New York in irons to face trial on a murder charge.

Several of the sailors from *Sea Witch* testified at the trial, and a somewhat different picture emerged. According to the crew, the captain had been at odds with several of the men of the crew during the voyage: he had beaten one sailor with a belaying pin and had savagely whipped two of the boys with a riding crop. There was clearly more than one person aboard who bore the captain a grudge and who was not unhappy to see him dead. A marlinspike was a common tool aboard a sailing ship, and anyone might have yielded one. There was not enough evidence to prove blame, and a jury found Sylvanus Spencer not guilty.

Spencer faded from public view briefly, but then reemerged in a spectacular way thanks to his association with Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt. In 1856, the shipping magnate was locked in a dispute with William Walker, the eccentric American adventurer, who was attempting to conquer a part of either Mexico or Central America to create an English-speaking colony—with himself as president. The Nicaraguan government had granted Vanderbilt exclusive control of the lucrative inter-oceanic


***Clipper ship* Sea Witch**

P.D. IMAGE, CHINESE ARTIST MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, VIA WIKIPEDIA

route that linked the Atlantic and the Pacific by means of the San Juan River, Lake Nicaragua, and overland stagecoach. This was, of course, just after the California Gold Rush and before the Panama Canal, and transportation across Central America was busy and profitable. When Walker and his mercenaries seized Vanderbilt's steamboats to use in their fight to gain control of the country, an enraged Commodore sought someone to attack the filibusters and recapture his lost vessels. Sylvanus Spencer proved to be his man.

After his trial for the murder of Captain Frazier, Spencer found that few captains were willing to hire him, despite his acquittal. He drifted to Greytown, Nicaragua, where he first worked as a stevedore on the docks, but then he was made a mate aboard one of the river steamboats. After four months he returned to New York and presented himself to Cornelius Vanderbilt as someone thoroughly familiar with the Nicaraguan steamboat business, someone unafraid to head a military-style assault. "He was physically tough," notes historian T. J. Styles, "accustomed to command, and, most important, intimately familiar with the terrain, the fortifications, and the steamboat operations. Vanderbilt placed all his hopes—the fate of millions of dollars, of a critical channel of commerce to California, of a war involving six nations—in the hands of an acquitted murderer."

New York was agog with the exploits of the daring filibuster, William Walker, and with his unprecedented affront to the powerful Vanderbilt; and they were amazed at the sudden reemergence of the sailor who had been accused of bludgeoning Captain George Frazier with a marlinspike. At the height of the public buzz, the *New York Times* ran a story with the apt headline: "Who is Sylvanus M. Spencer?"

> Sylvanus has a history already. In the Thirteenth Ward of this City he has a good many acquaintances. What town or State has the honor of his birthplace we are unable to say. The Muse of History skipped that page of his life. The impression is, however, that he was born in New-York—first drew breath in the late Alderman Brigg's Ward. It is an established fact that he had parents, but who they were we don't know. A family named Jenkins brought him up, and in the family, as well as out of it, he was known by the pet name of "Banty Jenkins." Like the author of *Leaves of Grass*, but in a different sense, he was "one of the roughs" and a "Kosmos" in the Ward. His boyhood is presumed to have been a hard one—at least he came out if it a very hard boy. The public school system had him in hand for a long time but was not able to make much impression upon him. Indeed, to the great gratification of the old ladies of his vicinity, and quiet people generally, he utterly vanished from public gaze for the space of ten years, when he suddenly turned up at Rio [de] Janeiro, on the charge of murdering Capt. Frazier, of the clipper ship *Sea Witch*, of which vessel Spencer himself had been the mate.

We know Banty was not Ambrose Spencer, grandson of the nationally known politician, but was he "Charles Wheeler," who gammed with Elias Trotter on the whaler *Illinois* in 1845? During the ten-year period when Banty/Sylvanus "utterly vanished from public gaze," did he enchant Trotter by spinning a sailor's yarn, perhaps elaborating on a childhood fantasy that he, Sylvanus Spencer, growing up poor and abandoned on New York's Lower East Side, was actually related to the wealthy and prominent Spencers of Albany, perhaps the love child of a Spencer scion and a fallen Jenkins daughter? And might that not have been the truth? Or was "Charles Wheeler" in fact Ambrose Spencer, the Chief Justice's "insane" grandson, giving a second false name and telling Elias Trotter an embellished version of his picturesque life, buttressed by enough intimate knowledge of Albany's prominent families to make his story believable?

We know that Sylvanus M. Spencer successfully recovered Cornelius Vanderbilt's stolen steamboats, and that Ambrose Spencer Jr. was killed in Linn, Missouri, in 1876 by a jealous husband (who shot him in the street with the explanation that

MUSEO HISTÓRICO CULTURAL JUAN SANTAMARÍA

Sylvanus Spencer (1819–1862)

Spencer had stolen the man's wife and son). It is unlikely that Elias Willard Trotter ever again saw the handsome stranger who—whatever his true identity—so entranced him during an offshore gam.

The Wheeler/Spencer/Jenkins story illustrates an important point about maritime life in the nineteenth century—the fluid nature of identity among the men who went to sea. Aboard ship and away from land, a man could become anyone he chose to be, limited only by whatever maritime skills he was able to muster, his imagination, and his ability to stick to a story. With captains always suffering under a labor shortage, they were willing to sign on plenty of landsmen with limited or no seagoing experience. Few questions were asked. Sailors usually signed on for a single voyage, with a crew dispersing at the end of that period, so a man might easily rotate among several identities. Ships flew false flags to ward off enemies, to attract prey, and to avoid tariffs, and what was relatively easy for a ship was even more effortless for a man. For someone who wanted to escape, to experiment, or simply to disappear, the sea offered an unparalleled opportunity for reinvention. ⚓

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