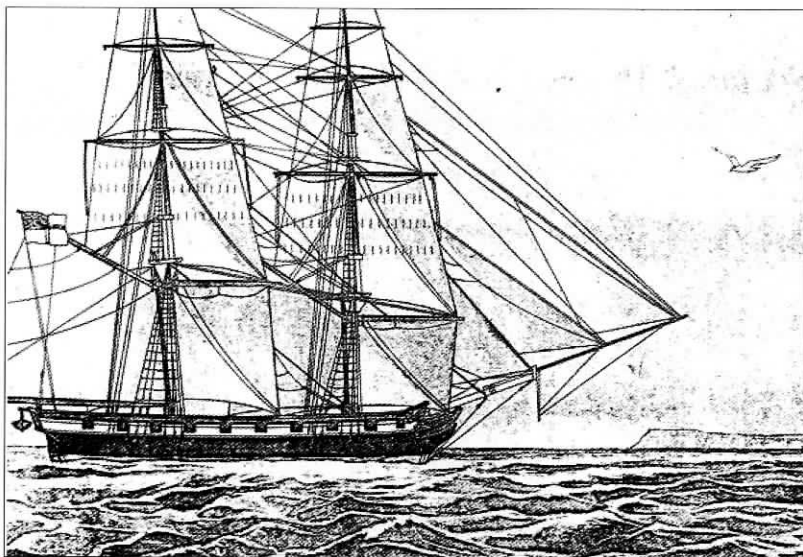


# The Cannon (and Cannonball) Controversies

by E. Graham Ward



H.M.S. *Nimrod*. Details from British Archives. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

Historians, and researchers in general, like to distinguish between “primary source” and “secondary source” material. Primary source materials are original documents or artifacts from the period under study. Secondary source materials are steps removed from the event and mostly written works such as books, magazine articles, and encyclopedias. But what if secondary sources disagree with one another? One solution is to try to find a primary source. What if a primary source is unavailable or, if available is, for some reason, unreliable?

Let’s take, for example, the cannonballs fired by the British brig-of-war (or is it a sloop-of-war, or a brig-frigate. Sources disagree) *Nimrod* in its bombardment of Falmouth on January 28, 1814. What happened

is clear enough, the town was shelled; but what kind of cannon ball was used? In this case we have both a primary source document and a number of artifacts; namely, cannon balls recovered. The document, a letter to a Boston newspaper written the day after the event from Capt. John Crocker which describes what happened to his house. He says that, “The greatest sufferer was myself, having eight 32-pound shot through my house, some through my outbuildings, and many through my saltworks.” The problem with this document is that no 32-pounders have been found among the 250 or so fired.

In an article about the bombardment in *Treasure Magazine*, Bob Perry quotes from Robert Fraser of Cohasset, calling him “the foremost authority on the War of 1812 in Massachusetts.” Fraser said that *Nimrod* could not have possibly fired 32-pounders because this weight cannon was not authorized for “a vessel of its size.” Mr. Fraser’s book on the war was not accepted for publication because, according to him, it was “too scholarly.” “People want fluff and things kept simple. Their attention span seems less than that of a mentally retarded clam,” he wrote in a letter to the Falmouth Historical Society.

On the other hand Craig Cartier, writing about his group’s research [Plymouth Archeological Rediscovery Project (PARP)] says, “By the 1820s...most ships, especially ships of the line, were armed almost

exclusively with 32-pounder carronades [a cannon built by the Carron company which was lighter and larger in bore].” Since *Nimrod* was built in 1812, he stated, “it was fitted out in the same manner.” The whole issue may be for naught since in an aside for his *Treasure* article Bob Perry says that a 32-pounder and a 24- pounder are “virtually ...indistinguishable without weighing them.”

The final issue in dispute to be discussed here is the provenance of the four cannons salvaged by the Kendall Whaling Museum. (The Museum is now out of business, having given most of its collection to the New Bedford Whaling Museum.) The Museum claims the cannons are from *Nimrod*. The PARP group disputes that. But first some background to the argument: *Nimrod* seems to have possibly gone aground twice in the Buzzards Bay vicinity, once in Quick’s Hole (between Pasque Island and Nashawena

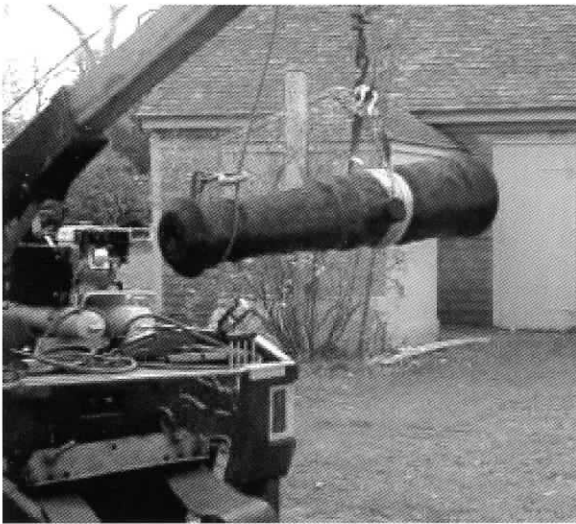
Island of the Elizabeth chain) and once off Great Ledge in the Round Hill area near Dartmouth, MA. For the first grounding there is pretty solid evidence - a primary source, the Captain’s log. After going aground, and being unable to pull itself off with an anchor arrangement, the Captain decided to lighten the ship. He ordered the crew to off load some of his cannons. He described this as “we got off” some cannons. Here the dispute starts. Did he mean he threw them in the water or did he lower them into waiting barges. Another British warship, *Superb*, was watching out for him at the time and could have provided more barges. Also *Nimrod* carried the lighter cannons now (1814) used by the Royal Navy, making them easier to lift with a boom. So far, no cannons have been salvaged in Quick’s Hole.

The cannons in question were found off Dartmouth across the bay but the grounding itself is in question



Cannonball stuck in an elm tree trunk, currently on display at the Falmouth Historical Society. The tree was in the Village Green area and was felled during the hurricane of 1944. Remnants of the War of 1812? Courtesy Mary Sicchio, Falmouth Historical Society.

since it does not appear in *Nimrod's* log. An American ship being chased by *Nimrod* does claim to have lured the British ship onto the ledge, however. (The cannons themselves were discovered by Mr. Kendall himself while diving in the area. He subsequently received permission from the state to run a salvage operation.) The Kendall Museum seems to have assumed that the Captain meant 'tossed into the bay' by "got off." As a result, the Museum raised enough



The disputed cannon being delivered to the Falmouth Historical Society in 1999. Courtesy Mary Sicchio, Falmouth Historical Society. Photo by Judith McAlister.

money to finance salvage operations and they did raise four cannons. In their final report of the salvage in 1995, the Museum said that the cannons were from *Nimrod* and generously distributed them to various historical societies, among them Falmouth's. Enter PARP and Mr. Cartier. In his 2004 report on the Great Ledge cannons, he argues that it is "extremely unlikely" that the cannons are from

*Nimrod*. He calls the Great Ledge grounding "a legend" and faults the Kendall people for false assumptions. In fact the site does house other artifacts such as a small mortar, a cannonball, and "metal objects partially buried." He theorizes that these other objects suggest that a whole ship may have sunk. "They [the Museum] saw cannons, had heard that *Nimrod* dropped cannons to free itself after she got stuck, they surveyed cannons on the floor, they raised the cannons, all because they assumed that these cannons were associated with *Nimrod*...[They] ignored alternate possibilities." Craig thinks that the Museum conducted "a superficial investigation" and that the cannons possibly belong to a "small British ship...associated with the attack on Dartmouth on September 5, 1778."

Meanwhile Falmouth's cannon sleeps quietly in its alkaline infused tub, and in its own shed. Perhaps in time, 100 years has been mentioned, the chemicals will have done their wonders and the cannon will be rust free and ready to be displayed.

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Mark A. Schmidt, *Executive Director, Falmouth Historical Society and Museums on the Green* added the following information.

*The Falmouth Historical Society has plans to mark the actual anniversary of the Attack of the H.M.S. Nimrod in 2014 with a display of its housed cannon and surrounding legends. Additionally, plans are being formulated for a symposium on the war to commemorate the event. The Society has always intended to have the cannon out for display to mark the 200th anniversary and looks forward to 2014 with great anticipation.*

