



Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Oil and Bone: Salem's Whaling Industry



Currier & Ives lithograph, c. 1856. Men harpooning a whale in foreground and cutting-in and trying-out a second whale in background. Library of Congress.

“The whaling business of this port has greatly increased since it was introduced till it has achieved a magnitude of which all of our citizens are not aware.”

-Salem Gazette, August 1836

From the Editors

We are interrupting our series on the Derby House to present an issue devoted to a little-known, but often asked about chapter of Salem's history -- whaling in the port of Salem.

This issue was written by Lauren Fleck-Steff, a recent graduate of Endicott College who spent ten weeks with us as an intern early this summer. Lauren hails from Pennsylvania, and majored in English at Endicott. During her time with us, she learned about collections management and the enormous amount of research that goes into museum work.

As always, we invite submissions from staff, volunteers, and friends of Salem Maritime NHS. This publication is by and for you, designed to assist in the understanding and interpretation of any area of the site's history, be it an artifact, building, person, or event.

Dave Kayser
Chief of Cultural Resources

Emily Murphy
Park Historian & Public Affairs Officer

Salem's Earliest Whalers

Salem's whaling history stretches back centuries to a time not long after the town was founded in 1626. Though the exact year when whaling began in Salem is not known, evidence suggests that Salem residents were whaling before 1689 and some have argued that Salem started whaling several years before Nantucket. Regardless, crews from Salem were hunting whales with some regularity by 1690, although whaling at this time was performed only on a small scale and whalers tended not to venture very far from the coast. Additionally, because their boats were usually too small for whales to be processed onboard, if a crew managed to kill a whale, the whale had to be hauled up on land before its blubber could be boiled to make oil.¹

In the 17th century, it was oil that most American whalers were after. During this period, whale oil was frequently shipped to Europe where it was used to fuel lamps and to aid in the manufacturing of woolen products. Whalebone and baleen, which was also produced by these early whalers, was used to make a variety of products, including stays, as

1 Frances Diane Robotti, *Whaling and Old Salem* (New York: Fountainhead Publishers, 1962), 13-14.

corsets were called in the 18th century, and eyeglass frames.²

By the 1690s, Salem's whaling business had grown large enough that Salem was competing with Cape Cod whalers over whaling grounds and catches. This competition grew rather serious in 1691, when Salem residents John Higginson and Timothy Lindall wrote a letter to Cape Cod attorney Nathaniel Thomas complaining that whaling crews from Cape Cod stole whales harpooned by Salem ships on two separate occasions. It is unclear whether Higginson and Lindall were ever compensated for the loss of these whales.³

In the decades that followed Higginson and Lindall's appeal, whaling in Salem, and other New England ports, did not change drastically. Whaling continued to be performed primarily in local waters and whaling fleets remained relatively small. It was not until the growth of international trade in the latter part of the 18th century that crews began to travel greater distances in pursuit of whale oil.

2 Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery* (Secaucus: Castle Books, 1989), 5; 15.
3 Robotti, 16.



Whaling and Sealing in Colonial Massachusetts

Below: an advertisement for whale warps (the rope attached between the harpoon and the boat) in a Boston newspaper in 1713. Other whaling-related ads in early Boston newspapers include those from people claiming whale carcasses that washed up on Massachusetts beaches. Boston News-Letter, October 12, 1713

Left: an eighteenth or early nineteenth-century whale oil lamp in the Derby House. Whale oil was a relatively expensive light source in the eighteenth century, so oil lamps like these would have been most often found in the homes of the wealthy. Wax or tallow candles were still the most common light sources in colonial Massachusetts. NPS Collections

Opposite page: Seals were desirable for two reasons: first, like whales, seals have blubber that can be rendered into oil, and second, their fur was warm, lightweight, and waterproof. As can be seen in this engraving of "Winter" in the Derby House, furs were a popular fashion accessory in the 18th and 19th centuries. The lady in the engraving is wearing a fur-lined and edged cape, and a fur muff. Because of its waterproof properties, sealskin was often used as a warp for traveling in open carriages or sleighs in the winter. NPS Collections

The best Sort of Greenland Whale Warps, to be Sold on reasonable terms, by Mr. John Ruck Merchant, and to be seen at his Ware-house in Merchants Row, Boston.

Seals and Whales

In the 18th century, international trading routes connecting America with foreign ports expanded and the demand for luxury goods, like spices, textiles, fur and whale oil, rose dramatically. At about this time, new grounds known to be inhabited by large numbers of fur seals, elephant seals and whales were opened to American vessels. It did not take long for enterprising sea captains and businessmen to launch a number of vessels destined for these waters and soon many New England ports, including Salem, were sealing and, to a smaller extent, whaling, in the waters off the Falkland Islands and Antarctica.⁴

Because both seal skins and whale oil could be sold for a profit, many of the first American ships that went on expeditions to the Falklands and Antarctica engaged in both sealing and whaling. One

⁴ Robotti, 26-30.

such ship was the Salem vessel the *General Knox*, which sailed out of Boston in the 1780s. When the *General Knox* returned to port in 1784, it did so with a cargo of 600 barrels of whale oil (an average-sized whale produced between 20 and 60 barrels of oil), in addition to a load of seal skins. Often, cargos of this sort were divided and traded for maximum profit, with furs being shipped to Asia (where demand was highest) and whale oil being shipped to Europe.⁵

After the success of the *General Knox*, other Salem vessels joined in this lucrative trade, though the majority of these later vessels specialized in sealing. Salem merchant George Nichols' ship *Eunice* sailed on a sealing voyage from Salem

⁵ Ibid.

to the Cape of Good Hope in 1796 and in 1799 Salem's *Minerva* and *Concord* started off on what turned out to be two highly profitable sealing voyages (the *Concord*, alone, returning with 50,000 skins worth \$67,794.56). Two more Salem sealers sailed in 1802, but as a result of the inevitable decline of seal populations, no more sealers were to sail from Salem until the ill-fated *Britannia* was launched from Salem and wrecked off the Manchester coast in 1818. After this point, Salem only sent out two more sealers – the *General Knox* and the *Nancy*. Returning with smaller and smaller cargoes of seal skins and elephant seal oil, it was clear that the potential for profit in the sealing industry was dwindling fast and Salem withdrew from the sealing industry in 1821.⁶

⁶ Robotti, 26-38; 49.



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site was designated in 1937, the first National Historic Site in the National Park Service system. The nine acre site includes the homes of merchants and mariners, the Salem Custom House in which the famous author Nathaniel Hawthorne worked, and a replica of the three-masted cargo vessel *Friendship*. Today, the rangers and volunteers of Salem Maritime NHS continue to inform and inspire visitors with the maritime history of New England and the United States.

Salem Maritime National Historic Site

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Salem, MA 01970

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The National Park Service cares for the special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.



CANDLES, CORSETS, AND THE "WHITE WHALE"

The whaling boom of the 19th century provided cities all over the world with whale oil and bone from which a wide variety of products were made. Whale oil was refined and used to lubricate machinery and fuel lamps, lighthouse lights and locomotive headlights (with the growth of railroads and America's manufacturing industry, demand was especially high for whale oil in the mid-19th century). Sperm whale oil could be made into soap, the valuable spermaceti wax found in the heads of sperm whales was used to make high-quality candles, whale teeth served as the base for sailors' scrimshaw designs, and flexible whalebone was used to give structure to ladies' corsets, bustles, skirts and parasols. During the height of Salem's whaling industry, many of these whale-based products were made in Salem and whale oil refineries, spermaceti candle shops and other related businesses could be found scattered throughout Salem's streets.¹

Today, little physical evidence of Salem's whaling industry exists, although lists of whaling-related businesses, activities and transactions can be found in Salem's old town records. In 19th century Salem, all whaling expeditions started and ended at Salem's Custom House, where ships were registered and where cargoes were valued.² In 1837, a total of 432 Salem residents were involved in whaling or an associated profession, and many of Salem's wealthiest merchants either owned whalers or invested in the whaling industry.³ Throughout the 1830s, at least three whale oil refineries existed in Salem. The first, a sperm whale oil and candle factory owned by Caleb Smith in 1835, stood at the base of Harbor Street. By 1836, Colonel Francis Peabody owned a second whale oil refinery in South Salem and the spermaceti candles he produced there were prized throughout the world. Finally, a third oil refinery was located on Boston Street, and other refineries likely existed.⁴ However, the area known as Blubber Hollow (located near Boston Street), long believed to have housed a whale oil refinery, was actually not directly related to Salem's whaling business -- its name refers to the smell of burning whale oil produced by 18th and 19th centuries leather tanneries in the area.⁵

One final link between Salem and its 19th century whaling industry is a literary one. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was born in Salem and worked for several years in Salem's Custom House before penning his most famous novel *The Scarlet Letter*, was close friends with fellow novelist Herman Melville for a number of years. It is said that Melville was deeply influenced by Hawthorne's writings and when Melville published his epic whaling adventure *Moby Dick* in 1851, he dedicated it to Hawthorne.

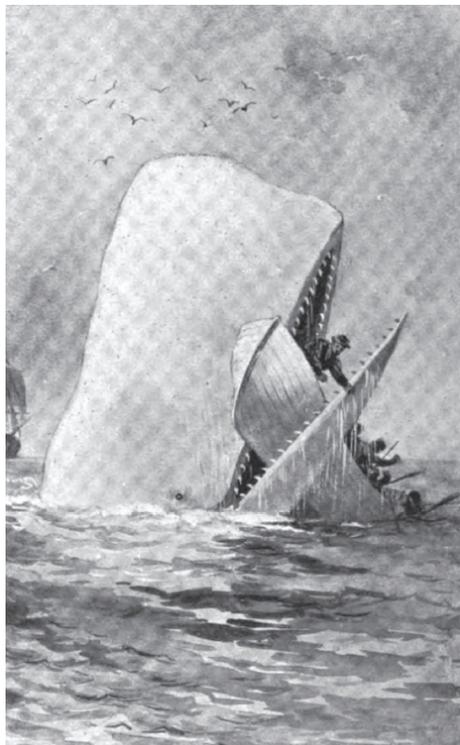
1 Frances Diane Robotti, *Whaling and Old Salem* (New York: Fountainhead Publishers, 1962), 39-40; 218.

2 Robotti, 61.

3 Charles S. Osgood and H.M. Batchelder, *Historical Sketch of Salem* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1879); Robotti, 61.

4 Robotti, 217-210.

5 Stanton, Cathy and Jane Becker, *In the Heart of Polish Salem* (Boston: National Park Service, 2009),32; Dane Anthony Morrison and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 221.



Next **TUESDAY** at 11 o'clock,
At S. White's Wharf (Derby Street),
The Hull of the
Ship Warrington, 240 tons
burthen. Also,
In sundry lots, the Standing & Running
Rigglog, Spars, Boats, Anchors, Provisions,
&c. together with various articles proper
for a whaling ship, such as Boilers,
Harpoons, Whale Spades, Winding-
Tackles, &c.
T. DELAND Auct.

Above left: illustration from the 1892 edition of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

Above right: Advertisement listing the upcoming auction of the ship *Warrington* along with items necessary for a whaling expedition. This listing appeared in the *Salem Gazette* on September 22, 1820.

A New Industry for Salem

Changing Times, Changing Fortunes

Though Salem had begun whaling in the 17th century and its sealing crews had returned home with barrels of whale oil in the 18th century, it would take President Jefferson's Embargo Act of 1807 before Salem residents began to think seriously about investing in the whaling industry.

The Embargo Act of 1807, which was intended to insure American neutrality and prevent war with France and England, marked a turning point in Salem's history. Before the embargo, Salem was a prosperous, bustling port, but after the act was passed, Salem's international trade came to an abrupt halt. For two years, Jefferson's embargo wreaked havoc on the economies of America's port cities and trade in and out of Salem slowed to a trickle. In 1809, the unpopular act was finally repealed, but it was too late for Salem. The embargo had destroyed Salem's economy and Salem's international trade never fully recovered.¹

In the years that followed, foreign goods once traded in Salem began to be shipped through larger port cities, like Baltimore and New York, and many Salem merchants relocated their businesses to Boston. Adding insult to injury was the War of 1812, which ended trade between America and England for years. By 1815, it was clear that Salem's reign as a leading international port city was over and if Salem was to survive, a new industry needed to be developed quickly.²

The Growth of an Industry

Between 1820 and 1831, a debate raged in Salem about what could be done to revive Salem's failing economy. Investing in the manufacturing industry was an option, and some residents argued that the construction of a railroad linking

Salem to Boston would improve Salem's financial situation. But there were still other residents who insisted that the whaling industry was the way of the future and, having watched other New England ports grow rich through the sale of whale oil and whalebone, the potential for profit in the whaling industry seemed endless.

By 1830, interest in whaling had risen dramatically among Salem residents and Salem newspapers began to publish articles on the whaling industry with greater frequency. In one of these articles, published on November 5, 1830, an author notes that "some gentlemen, who rank amongst [Salem's] most active merchants and most intelligent citizens, are strongly of opinion that the Whaling Business is one to which the circumstances and situation of Salem are peculiarly adapted to insure success."³

Less than a month later, another article appeared in the *Salem Gazette* which claimed that Salem's long maritime history and geographical position made it better suited for whaling "than anywhere else in Massachusetts." The author of

³ "Whaling," *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA), Nov. 5, 1820. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

this same article went on to argue that whaling was desirable, not simply because it was profitable, but because it would involve the whole community and provide enough jobs that Salem residents would no longer have to travel to find work, thereby "keep[ing Salem's] capital and . . . population at home."⁴ These same claims about the desirability of the whaling industry were echoed in other news articles published in Salem newspapers in the final months of 1830.

Clearly expressed in these articles was the hope that Salem's financial problems were nearly at an end and that whaling would not only be profitable, but that it would restore Salem to its former glory. Amid the general climate of optimism of the 1830s, investors began to equip Salem's former merchant ships for whaling expeditions.⁵ Vessels once used to carry spices and textiles to foreign ports were outfitted with whaleboats and try-works (for boiling blubber) and men were recruited for whaling voyages. It was only a matter of time before Salem's whaling industry began in earnest.

⁴ "Whaling," *Salem Gazette* (Salem, MA), Nov. 23, 1820. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

⁵ Frances Diane Robotti, *Whaling and Old Salem* (New York: Fountainhead Publishers, 1962), 56.



The whaler *Charles W. Morgan*. Mystic Seaport

¹ National Park Service, *In the Heart of Polish Salem* (Boston: National Park Service, 2009).

² Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1979).

The *Izette* and Salem's Whaling Boom

On the Wide Ocean

The *Izette*, Salem's first vessel dedicated entirely to whaling, sailed from Salem harbor on March 12, 1831. Under the direction of Captain Hoit, the *Izette* traveled from Salem to the South Atlantic before returning, a little over a year later, with 100 barrels of sperm whale oil and 1,500 barrels of oil from other varieties of whales.¹

With the success of the *Izette*, Salem's whaling industry began to grow. In March 1832, advertisements calling for young men willing to enlist in whaling voyages appeared in the Salem Gazette, and by July, four whalers – the *Bengal*, *Catherine*, *Izette* and *Pallas* – had sailed from Salem harbor to whaling grounds in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.²

In November of that same year, a second whaling company was formed in Salem and three months later, in February 1833, a third whaling company was established. Less than two years after sending out its first whaler, Salem had three whal-

ing companies and had launched a total of six whaling voyages from its harbor.³ Salem residents were optimistic about the future of their town and journalists wrote articles claiming that Salem's whaling industry could not fail. For the time being, it appeared that Salem's whaling industry was destined for success.

In July 1833, Salem entered into a contract with Boston in which Salem agreed to supply Boston with "oil for the street lamps, at the following rates, viz: -- summer oil 90 cents, and winter 1 dollar per gallon."⁴ A year later, Salem newspapers reported that, with six vessels, Salem had the eighth largest whaling fleet in the country with more whalers than Boston and New York.⁵

By 1835, however, a series of news articles published in the *Salem Gazette* indicate that Salem residents' early confidence in the whaling industry was beginning to fade. One writer, claiming that profits from whaling were too slow in coming, suggested that Salem should engage in

the "mackerel and cod fishery or manufacturing" to make money until the whaling business grew more profitable as "a four-pence close [is better] than a dollar a long way off."⁶ Another writer suggested that Salem should construct a railroad to Boston to get Salem's "stagnant and almost curdled blood . . . to circulate."⁷ But despite the growing uncertainty about the whaling business, the majority of Salem's residents remained committed to whaling, and Salem's whaling business continued to grow.

Seven whalers sailed from Salem in 1835, nine in 1836 and twelve more whalers sailed in 1837. Between April 1836 and April 1837, Salem had \$350,000 tied up in the whaling industry and its whalers brought home \$124,440 worth of sperm whale oil, 108,065 gallons of oil from other types of whales (worth \$40,866) and 37,067 pounds of whalebone (worth \$7,535). In 1836, Stephen C. Phillips bought and outfitted Crowninshield's Wharf (located off of what is today India Street) to become the "principal whaling depot" of Salem, and in 1837, the Salem Gazette reported that Salem's whaling fleet was the sixth largest whaling fleet in America, with eighteen active whalers.⁸

However, after 1837, Salem's whaling industry began to rapidly decline. The nationwide panic of 1837 – caused by a massive economic recession resulting from land speculation – made Salem businessmen less willing and able to invest in whaling.⁹ In the 1840s, a number of Salem's whalers were destroyed at sea and, due to a lack of funds, they were never replaced. After 1842, Salem never

(continued on page 7)

1 Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery* (Secaucus: Castle Books, 1989), 286-287.

2 Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), Mar. 9, 1832; Starbuck, 292-293.

3 Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), Nov. 6, 1832. Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), Feb. 5, 1833.

4 Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), July 12, 1833.

5 Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), Jan. 21, 1834.

6 Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), May 22, 1835.

7 Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), June 9, 1835.

8 Starbuck, 318; 328; 338; Frances Diane Robotti, *Whaling and Old Salem* (New York: Fountainhead Publishers, 1962), 26-38; 182; New Bedford Mercury (Salem, MA), Aug. 5, 1836. Salem Gazette (Salem, MA), June 7, 1833. Charles S. Osgood and H.M. Batchelder, *Historical Sketch of Salem* (Salem: Essex Institute, 1879).

9 "The Panic of 1837," Landandfreedom.org, <http://www.landandfreedom.org/ushistory/us8.htm>.

25 YOUNG MEN WANTED
IMMEDIATELY,
FOR the Whaling Ships Bengal and
Catherine, one half of whom may be from
the country, or fishermen from this and the
neighboring towns.
Apply to the Captains on board, or to
JOHN B. OSGOOD, Agent.
This opportunity holds out to young men
who intend to follow the sea, the great advantage
of early becoming Officers and Commanders
of Ships in this lucrative business.
March 6

Advertisement calling for men willing to sail on the whaling ships *Bengal* and *Catherine*. This listing appeared in the *Salem Gazette* on March 9, 1832.

Salem's Whaling Boom (continued)

(continued from page 6)

had more than two active whalers at any given time, although when they did sail, Salem whalers still managed to make hefty profits.

Throughout the 1840s, Salem businessmen began to invest in other industries – particularly in railroads and manufacturing – and the whaling business faded

away. In 1859, Edwin L. Drake drilled the world's first oil well in Pennsylvania and, during the oil boom that followed, whale oil prices began to plummet.

By the 1870s, whale oil had been effectively replaced by petroleum, the steel spring had taken the place of whalebone, whale populations were at an all-time low, and

whaling crews were difficult to come by. Ultimately, by the time Salem's last whaler was sold to Boston in 1871, Salem's involvement in the whaling industry already seemed but a distant memory.¹⁰

¹⁰ Robotti, 185-186; 41; 208-212; Osgood and Batchelder.



Above: a scene from a New Bedford whaling wharf, c. 1860. Customs officials are measuring the quantity of whale oil contained within casks in order to calculate the value of the cargo. A similar sight would likely have been visible along Salem's many wharves. Library of Congress.



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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www.nps.gov/sama

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA™

Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions is Salem Maritime National Historic Site's occasional newsletter, written by and for the site's employees, volunteers, and friends. Founded in 1999 by former Park Historian John Frayler, the newsletter presents research on topics related to Salem Maritime, designed to assist in the understanding and interpretation of any area of the site's history, be it an artifact, building, person, or event.

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Further Reading on Whaling and Salem History

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