

# Whaling History



It is believed that men hunted whales as far back as the Neolithic period using the mammal as a food source. The Basque region of Spain is the first area in the world to be credited with going to sea to hunt whales as an organized industry. As early as 1600, after the discovery of the Arctic by the Dutch explorer William Barents, Dutch and British whaling fleets traveled to these cold waters. The technique used was to launch several small boats from the main vessel and harpoon the whale and then tow the speared prey back to the mother ship and tie it securely alongside it. Then the “cutting in” process began where the whale’s skin and blubber would be peeled off in long strips and brought on board the boat. The blubber would then be boiled down and the whale’s fat was then changed to oil. The remainder of the mammal would then be craved apart and each section would also be taken aboard. There was really no part of the whale’s body that did not serve a purpose to man during these times.

Native Americans knew about the value of a whale. Many local records tell that along the coast of Long Island, Native Americans would look for dead or beached whales and cut them apart for their by-products. In the 1640’s as the New England colonies were developing, the communities of **East Hampton** and **Southampton** were being formed and whaling was part of the local economy. Native Americans would often work with the colonials in boiling the blubber. There was even an ordinance passed in the town of Southampton restricting the amount of blubber that could be boiled per day. Apparently, the smell was so strong that it was making the residents sick.



The oil produced by this method could then be sold by the whalers for large amounts of money. People purchased whale oil to use in their lamps and candles. Whale oil was so important to Long Islanders that it was actually used to pay their debts and taxes. To Long Island's children, whale oil was extremely important. Many schools were closed during whaling season, from December until April... so they did not have to go to school.



On both Long Island and in New England, whales were first hunted by the “shore surf” method. First, a whaler on shore would observe a whale in the water. Immediately a team of whalers would launch out in small boats armed with harpoons. They would chase the whale until they got close enough to shoot it with their harpoons. Tied to each spear was a wooden float attached to a long rope. Once the whale was pierced with a spear, it would swim frantically until it got tired. Then the whalers located the animal and towed it back to the shore. Once the whale was dragged onto the beach, the whalers cut out the blubber. They rendered it into oil by boiling it in large iron "try-pots" right on the beach. They also took out the baleen, or bone, from the whale's mouth, and left the carcass to rot on the beach.



Whales were abundant off the New England coast. Documents written by the pilgrims on their way to the Plymouth colony told of their sailing ships passing next to schools of whales close to the shoreline. By 1700, New England had become the world's leading area for whaling. It began in Nantucket where local residents could not farm successfully due to the poor, rocky soil so they began to hunt whales. The first known sperm whale was killed in 1712.

The sperm whale was one of the most sought after mammals because of a unique substance called **spermaceti** which is a waxy oil found in an organ located within the head of the whale. This oil was a highly coveted product as the oil burnt smokeless and colorless. It made the best oil for candles and during the industrial revolution era, it also made the best lubricating oil for the factory machinery.

Beginning around 1720, the whale population in the waters just off the New England shore declined, so a new method of whaling had to be developed for deep sea whaling. New England whalers began sailing whaling sloops with square sails far off-shore to Newfoundland and farther north. They removed the blubber and stored it in barrels until they returned to port. They also harvested the baleen and threw the carcasses back into the ocean for the sharks.



During the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, whale ships were targeted by the British navy. Nantucket's fleet was reduced from 150 vessels to fewer than 30, and ports elsewhere in Massachusetts and Long Island were similarly impacted by the blockades. Many New England merchants, who still had strong commercial ties to Britain, relocated their operations to Canada, France or Britain itself.

Larger ships and more advanced weapons were being used to hunt whales. Two of the great whaling towns of the time were **Cold Spring Harbor and Sag Harbor**. In 1797 George Washington declared Sag Harbor a port of entry to the United States – today better known as a customs port of entry. Over 500 whaling voyages were made from Sag Harbor between 1790 and 1870, making great profits for those who financed and worked the whaling ships.

By the 1800s, whaling ships were sailing from New England to the Pacific Ocean in search of sperm whales. Voyages could last several years. New Bedford, Massachusetts became the whaling capital of the world. It was home to over 400 whaling ships. It became known as "*The City that Lit the World*" due to the amount of candle oil that was produced within the city limits.



Several of these crew members were African Americans and there was even one captain, Absalom Boston, a local Nantucket resident. In 1822, the whaling schooner *Industry* sailed from Nantucket to search for whales in the Pacific Ocean. What made this voyage unique was that the captain and crew were all African Americans. Also of note was the improved toggle harpoon, invented in New England by the African American blacksmith Lewis Temple.

It was one of these ships that inspired Herman Melville (at the age of 21), to write his story “**Moby Dick.**” He had once sailed on a whaling voyage back in January 1841, when he went to sea on a vessel from New Bedford, Massachusetts named the *Acushnet*.



The *Golden Age* of American whaling came in 1853 when the sale of whale products totaled \$11 million. The whaling industry continued to expand as the United States grew westward with a new whaling port at San Francisco that hunted whales in the Arctic and upper Pacific Ocean.



The whaling industry began to decline after 1859, once Edwin Drake discovered petroleum in Titusville, Pennsylvania. Petroleum oil was more abundant, cheaper and easier to obtain than whale oil. In addition, after the electric lamp replaced the oil lamp around 1879, the nation’s need for whale oil diminished. Attempts were made to further modernize the industry, when in the same year the first steam-powered whaling ship, the *Mary and Helen*, went to sea.

The industry was further challenged and made redundant after spring steel was invented in 1906, replacing baleen as a flexible solid material for fashion and other commercial uses. In 1907, Paul Poiret, a Parisian designer, introduced a “slim, up and down line” of women’s clothing, further reducing the demand for corsets and baleen products.

Finally, in 1924, the American whaling industry came to a symbolic end when the New Bedford whaler *Wanderer* ran aground during a hurricane in New England. The *Wanderer* had been embarking on the last whaling expedition by a sail-powered vessel.



In February of 1907, it is said that a 54 foot long whale was captured and killed near Amagansett. It is said to be the largest baleen whale ever recorded. The skeleton was sent to The Museum of Natural History in New York City. It was officially put on display in 1934.

In 1986, the International Whaling Commission bans commercial whaling after a global anti-whaling movement took root in the 1970s. The laws permitted whaling for scientific research, regulations that have been abused many times by various countries such as Japan. Today we go whale-watching and increasingly these mammals appear to seek out and gain satisfaction from friendly encounters with humans. Whales can even be adopted under several save the whale campaigns that started.



Nantucket Whaling ships in harbor

Some of the many products made from whales.

- Oil – used to fuel lamps and lubricate machinery
- Soaps, paint, varnish
- By-products were used and utilized in some processes of textiles and rope
- Spermaceti was used to make candles
- Whalebone was used for corsets, collar stays, buggy whips and toys
- Whale teeth were used for chess pieces, piano keys, walking stick handles and scrimshaw.