Drawing Up Silver from the Sea:
The American Whaling Industry and Its Effect on 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} Century Commerce and Consumption

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Captain Benjamin Worth, at the tender age of fifteen, was one of the many “romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men”¹ who left New England to follow the sea in 1783² seeking “sentiment in tar and blubber”.³ He was made shipmaster at twenty-seven, retired at fifty-six, and throughout his forty-one total years sailing on the briny deep, resided at his Nantucket home for a mere seven years worth of non-consecutive months. Captain Worth was one of the “fighting Quakers” that Herman Melville wrote extensively about in his epic *Moby Dick*—those “Quakers with a vengeance”⁴ from Nantucket and New Bedford who earned their livelihood on the high seas hunting the mighty leviathan. Whalers risked not only their lives but also their income in pursuit of an industry that was as volatile as the seas they sailed on and as integral to commerce and consumption as cotton. The American whaling industry played a primary role in eighteenth and nineteenth century commercial markets.

The whale fishery was the oldest profitable venture in America, dating back to Captain John Smith and his ultimate charge of turning profit for the Virginia Company of London by “taking whales...and making tryalls of a myne of gold and copper” and if failing that—“fish and furres”.⁵ Unfortunately when Captain Smith arrived off the Maine coast in 1614 he “found this whale fishing a costly conclusion, [having seen] many and spent much time in chasing them but could not kill any. They being a kinde of Jubartes and not the whale that

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⁴ Ibid, 75
yields Finness (baleen) and oyle as we expected.”  

John Smith and his crew were looking for either a right or bowhead whale and the “Jubartes” they found in abundance were in all likelihood a fin or humpback which produces very short strips of baleen and much less oil.  

After returning to England in 1614, Captain Smith wrote in his *A Description of New England* that had the whaling been successful, he would have stayed in the New World “with ten men to keep possessions of those large territories”.  

Had Captain Smith’s whales been plentiful and easily caught, the course of American history would have changed drastically, though the Mayflower passengers were equally unlucky in their pursuits six years later. They wrote at length about seeing whales off the bow of the ship:

“Every day we saw whales playing hard by us, of which in that place, if we had our instruments and means to take them, we might have made a very rich return, which to our great grief we wanted. Our master and his mate, and others, experienced in fishing, professed we might have made three or four thousand pounds worth of oil”  

And made plans to return “the next winter to fish for whale here...[as] they preferred it before Greenland whale-fishing.”  

The colonist did not have to go to the sea to find leviathans- the first encounter with a whale was likely on a beach where it had washed ashore.  

Pioneers in 1602 reported finding “many huge bones and ribbes of whales” on...
Cuttyhunk Island- one of the Elizabeth Islands southwest from the southern coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Pilgrims sailing around Thievish Harbor (named such after Indians stole a harpoon from the ship) along the Cape’s inner arm saw a dozen Indians “busie about a blacke thing” and after investigating, they came upon a “great fish, they called a ‘Grampus’ dead on the sands...some five or six paces long and about two inches thicke of fat...and fleshed like a swine.” The “Grampus” went by many names throughout history including blackfish, cowfish, pothead, and puffin-pig, though today it is known as a pilot whale- second only to the killer whale as the largest of the oceanic dolphins. The pilot whale is notorious for stranding itself on beaches which is an explanation as to why there is no indication that American colonists took up harpoons in the early 1600’s - they could simply wait for them to drift ashore.

Massachusetts had the first local ordinance pertaining to drift whales in 1641 when the Great and General Court of Massachusetts decreed that:

“Any whale, or such like great fish cast upon any shore, shall be safely kept, or improved where it cannot be kept, by the town or other proprietor of the land, till the Generall Court shall set order for the same.”

Drift whales were seen as shared property and the colonists actively organized to dispose of its communal riches. On March 7, 1644 the Court divided the town into four wards and when a whale was found in one of the wards, two people

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12 Ibid.
14 Dolin, Leviathan. 33.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 42.
from that area, chosen by lots, were charged with cutting it up, taking a
double share of blubber “for their payne”\textsuperscript{17}, and dividing the rest up evenly for
the town. After storms, two people were to “view and espie if there are any
whales cast up”\textsuperscript{18}. the penalty for failing to alert the town if there was a whale
washed up onshore was a fine of ten shillings or a public whipping.

Because of how consistent drift whaling had become, by the mid- 1600’s
whale oil and baleen was a staple commodity in the New World and could be
found in local shops. By 1641 colonists were sending barrels of oil to Bristol,
England to purchase goods to send back to America\textsuperscript{19} and in 1652 the Plymouth
Colony of Massachusetts ordered that for every whale cast on shore “or taken
on drift att Sea and brought to shore,” one barrel of “merchantable oyle”, or
thirty-one gallons, had to be paid to the treasury and delivered to Boston
where it was shipped to England\textsuperscript{20} - starting the long and often tumultuous
history of transatlantic trade between Great Britain and her colony.

While drift whaling was a communal activity done with the goal of
ridding the town of a shared problem, the newly emerging shore whaling was
the active pursuit of profit by a select group of people\textsuperscript{21}- namely Nantucketers
after nine Cape Cod men purchased a great swath of Nantucket for “thirty
pounds and two beaver hats”\textsuperscript{22} on July 2, 1659. Small groups of colonists

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 46.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 45.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 47.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 65.
seeking religious freedom from the more strictly Puritanical mainland\textsuperscript{23} partnered together, pooled their resources, and launched America’s first whaling companies. These companies were not the behemoth dynasties that came about in the nineteenth century but were primarily used as a supplementary source of income. The hunting season for shore whaling ran from late fall or early winter through mid spring, allowing the men to tend to their fields and farms and for young sons to attend school for the rest of the year. The town of East Hampton, New York hired a schoolmaster in 1675 with the stipulation that he was to start class on August 16 and keep his pupils until the end of December so as to let students go whaling until April 1.\textsuperscript{24}

The first colonial shore fishery whaleboats were modeled after the Native American canoe- made from thin cedar planks that were twenty feet long and light enough to be picked up by two men\textsuperscript{25} and used to primarily hunt the right whale which was easy prey for the colonists. Male whales measure an average forty-two feet long\textsuperscript{26} and because forty percentage of their body weight is made up of blubber, they float when killed. After harpooning one of the many right whales that frequented the calmer seaside waters around Nantucket, the whale was lashed to the side of the boat and rowed ashore to be harvested. The whaleboats hardly had room onboard for six whalers let

\textsuperscript{23} One of the original settlers on Nantucket- Thomas Macy- was fined five shillings by the Salisbury, Massachusetts court for every hour he “entertained Quakers” after allowing a group of them to seek shelter in his home during a rainstorm. Ibid, 65.

\textsuperscript{24} Dolin, \textit{Leviathan}. 53.

\textsuperscript{25} Clifford Ashley, \textit{The Yankee Whaler} (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1938), 59.

alone a complete try works and so the baleen and blubber was removed on the beach before being loaded into carts and taken in town for processing. The carcass of the whale, including all the completely edible meat, was left to rot in the surf.27

Despite the high numbers of whales caught— the largest single catch of shore whaled right whales was in 1726 when eighty-six were killed in total with an astounding eleven on a single day28 - the era of shore whaling had come to an end by 1760. Local legend tells the tale of Captain Christopher Hussey and his men who sailed out of Nantucket’s main harbor in search of whales in 1712 only to be blown far out into the Atlantic during a storm where they fell upon a school of sperm whales.29 After managing to harpoon one of the large leviathans, Captain Hussey and his crew towed it back to the beach where it was found that the sperm whale oil produces “the clearest burning and most beautiful flame that is known in nature” 30 and is worth considerably more at market than right whale oil.

The sperm is the largest of the ondontyocyte- or toothed- whales with bulls reaching over sixty feet and weighing more than fifty tons. While typically smaller, the cows are still larger than the more docile and slow moving right whale, often reaching lengths of forty feet and weighing as much as eighteen tons.31 Despite not producing marketable baleen (their thirty-nine to fifty large conical teeth, however, could reach ten inches long and weigh up

27 Dolin, Leviathan. 51.
28 Ibid, 71.
29 Ibid, 91.
31 Dolin, Leviathan. 76.
to two pounds each\textsuperscript{32}) and while their blubber is not as thick as that of the right or bowhead whale, the sperm, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in his whale memorial to the French minister in 1778, is:

“...an active, fierce animal [that] requires vast address and boldness in the fishermen”\textsuperscript{33} for, as Frederick Debell Bennett described in his \textit{Whaling Voyage Round the Globe}\textsuperscript{34},:

“...the Cachalot” (Sperm Whale) “is not only better armed than the True Whale” (Greenland or Right Whale) “in possessing a formidable weapon at either extremity of its body, but also more frequently displays a disposition to employ these weapons offensively and in manner at once so artful, bold, and mischievous, as to lead to its being regarded as the most dangerous to attack of all the known species of the whale tribe.”

It was with Captain Hussey’s discovery that Nantucket entered into its golden age and it was with the mighty sperm whale that the thirteen mile long Island, an Island of sand where the inhabitants had to fish or starve\textsuperscript{35}, became the whaling capital of the world.

As Nantucketers looked to “ye deep” for their bread, fertilizing their barren island with the sperm’s cleaner burning and much more valuable oil\textsuperscript{36}, voyages progressed from days to weeks and from months to years. Whalemen reached destinations as far away as Greenland, Guinea, and the Falkland Islands in pursuit of their quarry and the number of whaleships rose on the Island from six in 1715 to sixty in 1748 and one hundred in 1768 to over three-
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hundred in 1772. The ships evolved from relatively small sloops of thirty-eight tons to sloops and schooners of upwards of one-hundred tons and onboard try works were commonplace by 1750 enabling blubber to be rendered into oil at sea. These floating factories sold their wares nearly exclusively to the Crown- a pound of whalebone (more commonly known as baleen- the long strips found in the mouths of right whales to filter food) in 1763 was worth over five hundred pounds sterling in England- nearly eight-hundred US dollars. Nantucket, despite being physically closer to the colonies, was tied to and dependent on Great Britain- virtually all the oil processed on the Island was shipped across the Atlantic and goods it needed to survive were supplied in return.

The Revolutionary War’s commencement wrecked havoc with the mutually beneficial relationship between the colony and the motherland- two whaleships, the Beaver of Nantucket and the Dartmouth of New Bedford, after taking oil to London and returning to Massachusetts with a cargo of tea from the East India Company, played pivotal roles in the Boston Tea Party that led to the declaration of war in 1775. While struggling to remain neutral during the wars interim, Nantucket was the most economically devastated of all the American colonies. Unable to sell their sole commodity to England after being denied special permits to do so without harassment by both the British

37 Ibid, 120.
38 Ibid, 94.
39 Norling, Captain Ahab had a Wife. 21.
40 Jenkins, A History of the Whale Fisheries. 41.
41 Dolin, Leviathan. 150.
and Americans, their already tempestuous financial system floundered causing food shortages throughout the Island. Torn between the patriotic demands of the colonies and the reality that England had control of the surrounding waters, the mainland refused to trade with seemingly Tory Nantucket, often sending ships back empty and causing the price of food on the island to skyrocket:

“...before the Revolution, molasses was 2s 6d per gallon, butter l0d per lb., wheat 6s per bushel, and wood 14s per cord; but the prices rose at once to 13s for molasses, 5s 7d for butter, £7 per cwt. for flour, and £5 12s 6d for wood. The sufferings of the people from want and anxiety were extreme.”

As Nantucket found that their primary loyalty was not with the mainland and the colonies but with their business interests, the ostracized island was dealt another setback in 1775 when one hundred and thirty-four ships were lost—seized or destroyed by British warships—and fewer than thirty seaworthy vessels remained in harbor. Over one thousand hardy New England whalers had been killed or pressed into the British navy, though most chose to join England’s own feeble whaling fleet rather than fight as a traitor—most notable was Captain Nathan Coffin of the Nantucket Neptune who defiantly declared

45 Dolin, Leviathan. 155.
48 Ibid.
after being captured by a British admiral to “hang [him] if they will to the yardarm of [their] ship, but do not ask [him] to be a traitor to [his] country.”

The value of American whale oil and bone rose with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and the industry was prosperous once again, employing five thousand men who brought back roughly forty-five thousand barrels of sperm oil, eight thousand five hundred barrels of whale oil, and seventy-five thousand pounds of whalebone each year.

The juxtaposition between the peaceful Society of Friends of Nantucket and their violent and seemingly sadistic seafaring occupation was not lost in the ironic mind of Herman Melville, a whaler himself. It was perhaps most perfectly epitomized by Captain Peleg, share owner of the Pequod in Moby Dick:

“...though refusing, from conscientious scruples, to bear arms against land invaders, yet himself had illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific; and though a sworn foe to human bloodshed, yet had he in his straight bodied coat, spilled tons upon tons of Leviathan gore.”

Nantucketers were expert financiers and even better whalemens. In the industries most profitable year, 1853, the American fleet spilled the gore of more than eight thousand leviathans to produce one hundred and thirty thousand barrels of sperm oil, twenty-six hundred thousand barrels of whale oil, and over five thousand pounds of whalebone- all for a total sale of eleven million dollars.

50 Dolin, Leviathan. 140.
51 Melville, Moby Dick. 77.
52 Dolin, Leviathan. 206.
hundred and thirty pounds sterling— a single large whale could provide each member of a whaleboat’s crew with a payday equal to that which a shore-based worker might earn in a half a year.

Whalers were paid by a specified fractional share of the net profits called a lay. During times of prosperity they could range from 1/8 to 1/10, or 1/250 depending on shipboard rank. Captains, mates, boat steerers (harpooners), and coopers had a relatively short lay—1/8 to 1/100, while abled bodied seamen, stewards, and cooks had a slightly larger lay of 1/100 to 1/160. Greenhands and boys were the lowest ranking on whaler and typically earned the equivalent of 1/160 to 1/250. Moby Dick’s Ishmael thought a lay of 1/275th “would be about the fair thing” and was understandably distressed when offered 1/777th before agreeing to 1/300th.

If profits were good, pay was good—alternatively, if profits were small, wages could disappear completely:

When the ship Milton returned to port in 1836, the captain received a lay of 1/17th or $5,882; the first mate 1/22nd or $4,545; the boatsteerer 1/75 or $1,333; and the blacksmith 1/140th or $714. The best paid seaman earned $800, while the worst paid received $571. On another voyage of the Milton, one of the ordinary seamen earned only $10.10.
Seventy percent of total money earned went to the ship owners, with thirty percent to be split between the captain and the crew. New Bedford’s *Benjamin Tucker* brought back seventy-three thousand seven hundred and seven gallons of whale oil, five thousand three hundred and forty-eight gallons of sperm oil, and thirty thousand and twelve pounds of whalebone after her voyage in 1851 with the total gross value of $47,683.73. After the owners and the agents got their percentage, between $13,596 and $18,128 was left for the crew. A sailor with the lay of 1/160 earned his pay of $283.25, while a greenhand or cabin boy with a lay of 1/200th earned $226.60 for upwards of four years of backbreaking and dangerous work.

For those sailors seeking “sentiment in tar and blubber” 61, a ship was not only a source of income, but a home away from home as voyages had the potential to last upwards of four years. Yankee whalers were fine ships, though fiction generally states the contrary. The reputation of the particular stench whaleships produced was also fiction: early British Greenland whalers lacked onboard try works (large cauldrons that enabled blubber to be rendered into oil at sea) and the blubber rotting in casks caused the unmerited olfactory reputation. The life of the average vessel was longer than that of any other service, with some lasting over one hundred years. The *Truelove* of Philadelphia was launched in 1764 and made seventy-two whaling voyages before 1873, accumulating one hundred and nine years of active service before being broken up in the late 1890’s. They were built to suffer the worst the
elements could offer, though usually at the sake of comfort. Though whalers carried fewer men than a typical merchant vessel, as many as twenty-five men had to fit into the cramped forecastle (also spelled fo’c’sle), renowned for its low ceilings, no privacy, little to no natural light, and on a whaler— a greasy patina of whale oil that coated everything.\textsuperscript{62} It was, as one whaler described in his journal:

“…black and slimy with filth, very small, and as hot as an oven. It was filled with a compound of foul air, smoke, sea chests, soapkegs, greasy pans, tainted meat, Portuguese ruffians, and sea-sick Americans”\textsuperscript{63}

Whaling was seen as a means to throw off the oppressive shackles of modern life and “gather wealth in the face of danger, and snatch subsistence from the impending jaw of death”\textsuperscript{64}, though it was not for everyone. It was almost unheard of for a whaling ship to return to her home port with the same men she left with—desertion rates were as high as fifty percent during some periods.\textsuperscript{65} Herman Melville signed the articles of the Fairhaven, Massachusetts whaler \textit{Acushnet}, bound for the Pacific hunting grounds, on December 30, 1840 though he deserted after a year and a half with a fellow seaman in the Marquesas Islands where he was captured by cannibals which served as inspiration for his most profitable book—\textit{Typee}.\textsuperscript{66}

Market prices of oil and bone fluctuated as sailors had to sail longer and farther to meet the demand for a slowly diminishing resource, though the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Dolin, \textit{Leviathan}. 258.
\item[63] Ibid, 259.
\item[64] Ibid, 254.
\item[65] Ibid, 273.
\end{footnotes}
human price of the whale fishery remained the same- whaling was a perilous occupation.

...[the] perils arising from the nature of the cruising-grounds themselves which include the stormiest, most labyrinthine, and most treacherous of seas, and those most subject to typhoons, perils arising too from the very nature of their calling to the men themselves, the casualties are no more at least than fall to the lot of those who follow the sea in other pursuits. Shipwrecks there are, dreary boat-voyages for hundreds of miles, with the terrible accompaniments of death from hunger and thirst, and men fall victims to the strength and ferocity of the gigantic object of their pursuit. 67

From the famed cenotaphs lining the walls of the Seamen’s Bethel in New Bedford to the considerably darker invocation said on Nantucket instead of drinking to health of ones dining company:

    Death to the living,
    Long life to the killers,
    Success to sailors' wives
    And greasy luck to whalers. 68

Whalemen and those they left behind were ever mindful of the sea’s danger.

In an 1810 census of six thousand eight hundred and seven Nantucket residents, four hundred and seventy-two were fatherless children and three hundred and seventy-nine were widows- accounting for nearly a quarter of the female population of the Island. 69 A captain’s cry of “a dead whale or a stove boat!”70 to goad a whaleboat’s crew to battle was more dogmatic than rallying- sperm whales were especially prone to violent behavior when threatened. The most

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69 Norling, Captain Ahab had a Wife. 37.
70 Ashley, The Yankee Whaler. 110.
dangerous maneuver made by the sixty foot, fifty ton sperm against a thirty foot long and six foot wide whaleboat\textsuperscript{71} was called “jawing back”\textsuperscript{72}. In a fury, the whale would roll upon its back with it’s head above the waves, “chewing everything to splinters” with its enormous thirty-nine to fifty large, slightly curved, conical teeth.\textsuperscript{73} The equipment used in a whaleboat was equally dangerous to both man and beast- each boat carried two wooden tubs with one hundred and fifty fathoms (nine hundred feet) of coiled hemp line that could easily become entwined in a hapless sailor’s limbs resulting in instant amputation or worse- drowning if the line pulled him overboard.

The accidents resulting from belligerent whales are numerous and well authenticated. At times it has happened that in their rage they have attacked even ships, apparently treating the boats as beneath their notice.\textsuperscript{74} Most notoriously was the tragedy of the \textit{Essex} of Nantucket when she was stove (or sunk) by a whale on November 20, 1820. The \textit{Essex} set sail on August 12, 1819 for a two and a half year voyage into the Pacific Ocean to hunt the sperm whale- of the twenty-nine men onboard only eight of them would make it back to Nantucket alive after an eighty-five foot long, eighty ton sperm whale charged the ship, striking the bow twice.\textsuperscript{75} The \textit{Essex} sank two thousand miles off the coast of South America leaving her crew to survive in three small

\textsuperscript{72} Ashley, \textit{The Yankee Whaler}. 82.
\textsuperscript{73} Dolin, \textit{Leviathan}. 78.
\textsuperscript{74} Alexander Starbuck, History Of The American Whale Fishery: From Its Earliest Inception To The Year 1876 (Waltham, Mass: Alexander Starbuck, 1878), 114.
\textsuperscript{75} Philbrick, \textit{In the Heart of the Sea}. 117.
whaleboats for ninety-five days with a daily ration that consisted of an ounce
of bread, a one pound biscuit, and a half pint of water per man that quickly ran
out. Eventually resorting to murder and cannibalism, the story of the Essex
has gone down in infamy- the first mate, Owen Chase, wrote a narrative of the
tragedy which was published in 1821 under the title Narrative of the Most
Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex. Years later,
Chase’s son met a young whaler while sailing in the South Pacific and gave him
a copy of his father’s book. That whaler was Herman Melville and the story of
the Essex served as inspiration for his epic novel, Moby Dick. Melville lamented
the hardship of both the sailor and those friends and family they left behind as
his narrator, Ishmael, gazed upon the cenotaphs in the Seamen’s Bethel:

Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass; who standing among
flowers can say—here, HERE lies my beloved; ye know not the desolation that
broods in bosoms like these. What bitter blanks in those black-bordered
marbles which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable inscriptions!
What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw
upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly
perished without a grave. 77

The industrial revolution was greased with leviathan blood and whalers
had to go ever longer, ever farther, and ever deeper into the briny abyss to
supply both the United States and Great Britain’s ever-increasing demand for
oil. Due to the high duty on imported Dutch whaling by-products and an
inability to satisfy its own demand78, England continued to buy solely from

76 Starbuck, History Of The American Whale Fishery. 116.
77 Melville, Moby Dick. 37.
78 Dolin, Leviathan. 104.
America- New England whale oil and bone accounted for fifty percent of profits made in the United States preceding to the Revolutionary War and in the years following, those numbers escalated enabling the whale fishery to become the fifth largest industry in America by 1853 and the third largest industry after shoes and cotton in Massachusetts. London annually spent three hundred thousand pounds on urban street lighting, consuming more than four thousand gallons of United States harvested sperm oil a year to light their fifteen thousand parish lamps between sunset and sunrise. Previously, the only night lights in London were to be found outside every tenth house and were lit only on “dark nights” between Michaelmas (September 29) and Lady Day (March 25), usually totaling about twenty days out of the year and were typically extinguished by midnight.

Oil and whalebone, while incredibly profitable, were not nearly as valuable as another by-product of the sperm whale: spermaceti and ambergris, the former giving the sperm whale its name. Spermaceti, when at body temperature is a semitransparent rose tinted “or slightly yellowish” liquid though once exposed to air or water will crystallize into a “milky white mass” which sailors mistook for semen- spermaceti in Latin means the sperm or seed of the whale. Theories ranging from the regulation of buoyancy, echolocation, to prevention of the impact of the bends during the whale’s deep descents and

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79 Ibid, 206.
81 Dolin, Leviathan. 105.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid, 77.
ascents, to acting as a shock absorber to allow the sperm to ram things with its massive head\textsuperscript{84}, the function of the spermaceti organ is a mystery even in modern times. The spermaceti organ is a cavernous liquid filled compartment located in the head of the sperm whale, encased in a “beautiful glistening membrane” and a thick layer of muscle. Containing as much as three tons or twenty-three barrels worth of spermaceti, when mixed with bees wax was said to be” superior to the finest wax candles in color and luster and when genuine-leave no spot or stain on the finest silk cloth or linen”.\textsuperscript{85} By 1774 there were twenty-four different spermaceti candle manufactures on Nantucket alone\textsuperscript{86}-the candles were a favorite of Benjamin Franklin and could be found on church alters throughout America and Great Britain.

Aside from sunken treasure, ambergris is the single most valuable thing found in the ocean. Whalers dreamt of coming upon it for the light, inflammable, fatty substance was a “rare and exceedingly sought-after item of commerce, making it, at times, literally worth its weight in gold”.\textsuperscript{87} Going so far as to convince a sister ship that the whale they were cutting into was disease ridden in order for them to abandon it so that the \textit{Pequod} could snatch the whale up instead, not even the fictional characters in \textit{Moby Dick} could escape the lure and potential wealth that came from ambergris:

"I have it, I have it," cried Stubb, with delight, striking something in the subterranean regions, "a purse! a purse!" Dropping his spade, he thrust both hands in, and drew out handfuls of something that looked like ripe Windsor

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 77.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 110.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 115.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 86.
soap, or rich mottled old cheese; very unctuous and savory withal. You might
easily dent it with your thumb; it is of a hue between yellow and ash colour.
And this, good friends, is ambergris, worth a gold guinea an ounce to any
druggist. 88

For centuries it was a mystery, inciting even the great poets to muse upon its
source:

That happy island where huge lemons grow,
And orange trees, which golden fruit do bear,
The Hesperian garden boasts of none so fair;
Where shining pearl, coral, and many a pound,
On the rich shore, of ambergris is found.89

The opaque, ashy substance gives forth a pleasant odor when heated and is
lauded, even in modern times, for its unique quality of giving strength to
perfumes.90  Ambergris was first introduced into medicine and perfume by
Arabs who called it “anabar” when it eventually became ambre-gris in Middle
French (a historical division of the French language that covers the period from
roughly 1340 to 1611) or “gray amber” to distinguish it from yellow amber (of
the petrified resin variety), though it was thought to have the same origin.91

The Arabs were said to have also introduced it to cookery, a trend which lasted
throughout most of the seventeenth century. King Charles II of England’s
favorite dish was said to be ambergris and eggs while Arabs placed a lump in
coffee to enhance the aroma. Italians added it to chocolate and an English
cookbook in 1747 recommended it as an ingredient for cakes.92  It was valued in

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88 Melville, Moby Dick. 418-419.
90 Jenkins, A History of the Whale Fisheries. 42.
92 Dolin, Leviathan. 86.
medicine for its properties to “comfort” everything from the brain, the senses, and the heart to cure epilepsy, “womb problems”, wind in the intestines and pestilence, to provoking lust and curing the common cold.93

Ambergris was almost always found floating at sea or washed up on the shore and its source was unknown well into the 1700’s. In 1666 there were at least eighteen different theories as to its origins including sea foam, fish livers, the dung from an East Indian bird, a type of sulfur or sea fungus, fruit from underwater trees to the feces of whales and the phlegm of sea dragons.94 The whale feces hypothesis was more correct than its author perhaps realized- it is now known that ambergris is the by-product of irritation caused by squid beaks95 as they scratch their way through the whale’s digestive system.96 It is formed in the stomach or large intestine and can be eliminated naturally, though most frequently the whale sickens and dies.97 Whalers looked for sperms specifically that appeared torpid and sickly for they had a higher chance of containing ambergris. It was often observed that the whales containing the waxy substance had a “morbid protuberance” in the lower part of the belly which when cut open was found to contain ambergris.98

The finding of ambergris could make a potentially ruinous voyage profitable- the whaler Charles Morgan returned to San Francisco on June 8, 1899 after a journey in the North seas with sixty-eight pounds of ambergris

93 Dannenfeldt, “Ambergris”. 388.
94 Dolin, Leviathan. 87.
95 Sperm dissections have revealed as many as 30,000 squid beaks inside a single whale’s stomach. With each squid providing two beaks, that equals 15,000 squids consumed. Ibid. 86.
96 Ibid, 86.
98 Ibid, 397.
which sold for $28,800. The Charles Morgan had only harvested 55 barrels of oil which would have made the trip a financial failure had it not been for the ambergris.99 In 1858, the Nantucket Watchman returned with eight hundred pounds of ambergris stored in four casks (each able to hold about three and a half gallons) and sold it for $10,000.100

When a fire swept through Nantucket’s harbor in the early morning of July 13, 1846, it destroyed one third of the community, including the harbor, leveling four hundred buildings and leaving over eight hundred people homeless. The financial loss was tremendous-valued at over $24,000,000.101 In the time it took to rebuild, the crown had been passed to New Bedford and Nantucket would never reach its former glory, as eulogized in Moby Dick:

“...though in this matter poor old Nantucket is now much behind [New Bedford], yet Nantucket was her great original—the Tyre of this Carthage;—the place where the first dead American whale was stranded. Where else but from Nantucket did those aboriginal whalers, the Red-Men, first sally out in canoes to give chase to the Leviathan? And where but from Nantucket, too, did that first adventurous little sloop put forth, partly laden with imported cobblestones—so goes the story—to throw at the whales, in order to discover when they were nigh enough to risk a harpoon from the bowsprit?” 102

New Bedford and its prime location on the Massachusetts mainland, easy access to the network of railroads, and deep harbor earned it the title of the greatest

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100 Dolin, Leviathan. 88.
102 Melville, Moby Dick. 7.
2011 North Hall Prize Honorable Mention, Mansfield University of Pennsylvania

whaling city of the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{103}, though it was a short lived success. Her fleet grew phenomenally; eclipsing Nantucket’s and “nowhere in all America” wrote Herman Melville on the town that made him famous:

“...will you find more patrician-like houses, parks, and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford...all these brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea.” \textsuperscript{104}

The decline of the American whale fishery was a gradual one, though it was clear by the late 1850’s that the era of drawing pieces of silver from the sea with every leviathan killed was coming to an end.\textsuperscript{105}

The oceans seemingly vast reserve of sperm oil was dwindling and whalemen had to seek out new hunting grounds in the deadly and barren Artic regions to supply the demand. In 1850, more than one hundred and thirty whaleships were stalking the Artic Sea for the thick blubber and high quality whalebone of the bowhead whale which is native to the region.\textsuperscript{106} While smaller than the sperm or right whale, the bowhead, reaching lengths of only fifty feet, manufactured considerably more oil due to their protective layer of blubber which was often found to be two feet thick. An average sperm and right whale could produce twenty-five and sixty gallons of marketable oil respectively- once harvested, a midsized bowhead whale could produce


\textsuperscript{104} Melville, Moby Dick. 214.

\textsuperscript{105} Dolin, Leviathan. 207.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 231.
upwards of two hundred and seventy five gallons\textsuperscript{107} along with many hundreds of pounds of commercial length and quality whalebone.

Comprised of most of the Alaskan coast- ranging from the Bering Straight to Point Barrow, Alaska’s north most tip\textsuperscript{108}, the Artic whaling grounds were some of the most dangerous places in the world. The Artic Ocean, nearly three hundred miles south of the permanent polar ice pack and only one thousand two hundred miles from the North Pole\textsuperscript{109} opened for only a few months every summer. A season could be replaced by a harsh and unrelenting winter in the span of twenty-four hours as captains had to race against being trapped in the fatal ice. In 1871, thirty-three ships were crushed in the ice- twenty-two of which set sail from New Bedford- and while no lives were lost, it represented a loss of $13,000,000 to the industry.\textsuperscript{110}

Both the gold rush and the Civil War dealt the industry a blow that it would not be able to recover from when whaling all but ceased. Hundreds of whalers and more than a dozen ships set sail for California during the gold rush\textsuperscript{111} and nearly none returned- the ships were left to disintegrate at harbor in the west coast while their crews tried to find their fortunes. Massachusetts alone supplied one thousand two hundred and twenty-six naval officers out of the five thousand nine hundred and fifty-six total in the Union navy, nearly twenty-

\textsuperscript{107} Ashley, \textit{The Yankee Whaler}. 67.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Dolin, \textit{Leviathan}. 211.
one percent\textsuperscript{112}, a large portion of which were Nantucket and New Bedford whalers. Confederate cruisers such as the famed \textit{Shenandoah, Alabama}, and the \textit{Florida} destroyed over fifty Yankee whalers throughout the duration of the war and the thirty-seven whaling ships donated by New Bedford to take part in the Stone Fleet incident was evidence of how low whaling had become on the American economic scale. In a failed attempt to block shipping lanes in and out of Southern harbors, thirty-nine ships were laden with rocks and sunk at the mouths of the Ocracoke Inlet in North Carolina, Charleston Harbor in South Carolina, and Maffitt’s Channel, also in South Carolina.\textsuperscript{113} Herman Melville published his ode to the Stone Fleet incident in 1861 under the title of \textit{“An Old Sailors Lament”}:

\begin{quote}
...they sunk so slow, they died so hard,  
But gurgling dropped at last.  
Their ghosts in gales repeat  
Woe's us, Stone Fleet!  
And all for naught. The waters pass—  
Currents will have their way;  
Nature is nobody's ally; 'tis well;  
The harbor is bettered—will stay.  
A failure, and complete,  
Was your Old Stone Fleet.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

With the defeat of the Confederacy and the end of the War in 1865, it was evident that the era of the whale and whaler was over. Sailors looked to other

\textsuperscript{112} Ashley, \textit{The Yankee Whaler}. 100.  
occupations and “never again dominated the forecastle” the way they and their forefathers had for centuries.

The discovery of petroleum in Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1850 effectively tore the heart out of the American whaling industry. The demand for whale oil plummeted as cheap and abundant kerosene became the standard illuminate of choice. Even during its most productive year, 1847, the whaling industry processed forty-three hundred thousand barrels of both sperm and whale oil combined - a mark that petroleum beat during its first full year of production in 1860. Two years later the oil wells produced three million barrels compared to the entire whaling fleet’s production of a paltry one hundred fifteen thousand barrels. Even traditionalists had to admit defeat when gas came into use in the greatest whaling city of the nineteenth century - New Bedford- in 1852. Of the once more than sixty ports that had sent whaleships to sea, less than a dozen remained by the late 1800’s. The American whaling fleet had grown from six hundred and seventy-five to a high of seven hundred and thirty-five ships in 1854 before making its slow decline, shrinking to three hundred and twelve in 1870, one hundred and seventy-eight in 1880, and ninety-seven in 1890, to just forty-eight ships in 1900. By the turn of the century, whale oil could only be found burning in lighthouses and on church alters - even the rare

115 Ashley, *The Yankee Whaler*. 100.
117 Ibid, 340.
118 Ibid, 338.
119 Ibid, 362.
ambergris was replaced by synthetic materials\textsuperscript{120} and the once great industry was dead.

On August 27, 1924 hundreds of people gathered on the New Bedford docks to see the last Yankee whaler- the \textit{Wanderer} - set sail for the southern sperm whale fishery. That night, moored out in Buzzard’s Bay off Massachusetts, a violent West Indian hurricane blew up the coast and dashed the ship across the bay and into the Cuttyhunk rocks, shattering the whaler beyond repair.\textsuperscript{121} The ruin of the \textit{Wanderer} was a fitting final scene for the great era of American whaling. No longer asked to risk their lives in pursuit of the mighty leviathan, Melville’s “fighting Quakers” went on to pursue other careers as the whale oil market collapsed with the discovery of cheap petroleum. America’s oldest substantial contribution to the global market was as capricious as the ocean from which it came and as integral to the nation’s history and foundation as anything it has contributed since.

Bibliography


