

# Whaling

by Jennifer Stone Gaines

Though less famous than Nantucket and New Bedford, Falmouth also had her whaling ships, captains, and crews. About a dozen whaling ships called Falmouth home; six were built here. Altogether sixty-five Falmouth men were captains of whaling vessels, totaling one hundred and sixty-one voyages from 1789-1902. Most of these voyages sailed out of New Bedford. Between 1850 and 1875, 223 vessels departed from Buzzards Bay and the Sound, joining a fleet of more than 400 already in the Pacific.

If one man can be credited with bringing whaling to Falmouth, it is Elijah Swift (1774-1852). He was active in shipbuilding and in the live oak business, taking more than fifty men down to the southeastern United States each winter to cut and haul out the huge trees and deliver them to shipyards in Baltimore, New York, and Boston. Their biggest customer was the U.S. government which was building frigates and full rigged ships, including *U.S.S. Constitution*.

Mr. Swift also brought live oak lumber back to Falmouth. He tested the waters of the new enterprise of whaling with *Sarah Herrick*, 71 feet long, which was built in Duxbury in 1819. She sailed the waters of the Atlantic in search of whales. In 1821 Swift had the 101 foot *Pocohontas* built in Wareham and

sent her on two voyages in the Pacific before he became fully convinced of whaling opportunities. With "greasy luck," it was possible to pay for a ship in just one long voyage. Elijah Swift took the plunge and in 1827 started the Bar Neck Wharf Company in Woods Hole specifically to build whalers, though he also built other ships.

Woods Hole had the best harbor in Falmouth for whalers. With deep water close to shore, it easily accommodated the deep hulled ships. The previously

barren strip of land between Eel Pond and Great Harbor quickly became crowded with structures devoted to building and equipping whalers. The pier was built out into the water just east of the present Sundial Park (now enlarged for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Dock). The

marine railway slanted out into the water about where the MBL Club stands today. Blacksmith shop, cooper shop, saw pit, bake house, ropewalk, small boat shop, candle house, try house – all stood cheek by jowl along the dirt road. The place bustled with the new industry, employing about 100 men.

The 413 ton ship *Uncas*, at 113 feet, was first off the ways in 1828. Two years later *Awashonks*, at 353 tons and 104 feet followed. The next year saw *Bartholomew Gosnold* (356 tons, 107 feet) built in Woods Hole and *Hobomok* (113 feet) built for the



Whaling Plaque by Sarah Peters. Photograph by Jacki Forbes

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### *Comments by Sarah Peters*

My intention with the Whaling plaque was to give one a sense of what it might have been like to be a whaler in the early 19th century. I was struck with the remarkable job these men took on. They could be at sea for years at a time, eating poorly, rarely bathing, and accomplishing dangerous, strenuous and often tedious work. In this image, the whalers are returning from hours of whale hunting on the open sea in the hot sun. They are exhausted, and yet they still have to dismantle the whale, boil down the blubber, store it in barrels, and swab down the greasy deck before they can sleep.

The whaleboats had a crew of six, the helmsman, and five oarsmen (the forward one was the harpooner). The oarsman closest to the stern is meant to be Henry Gifford, a Falmouth native who first went to sea at the age of thirteen.

Falmouth whalers sailed in ships built elsewhere (like New Bedford) before the first Falmouth whaleship was built. This scene depicts the *Uncas*, built on Bar Neck Wharf in 1828. The date on the plaque refers to the industry's origin.

In researching this plaque I visited the half model at the New Bedford Whaling museum many times. I also went to Mystic Seaport where they have the *Charles W. Morgan* and whaleboats, complete with oarlocks and equipment. The film *Moby Dick* was helpful, as well. It is reputed to be historically very accurate in its details. I watched it many times with my boys.

Swifts in Mattapoissett. The final whaler built in Woods Hole was *Commodore Morris* (355 tons, 108 feet) in 1841.

As whaling seemed a sure way to wealth, other shipyards in Falmouth followed Elijah Swift's lead. At least one whaler was built in West Falmouth: *William Penn* in 1832 at 107 feet. Abner Hinckley was the master shipwright there, as he was in Waquoit where he also built *Popmunett* (22 tons, 85 feet) in 1836. Partial records indicate that the bark *George Washington* (88 feet) was built in Quissett in 1826. She was certainly owned by Quissett men. Solomon Lawrence, Abner Hinckley and a Mr. Shiverick, all worked as master shipwrights at the Bar Neck Shipyard, but not at the same time.

In the early days of the whale fishery, the ships sailed in the North Atlantic. Soon they extended their voyages to the South Atlantic, sailing back and forth over the whaling grounds on the same area of water looking for whales and their precious oil. Gradually the voyages became longer and longer as the whale population dwindled.

Nantucket reached its peak as the whaling capital of the world in the 1820s. In the beginning her ships were relatively small and sailed in the Atlantic, so they made shorter trips and didn't have to provision for years at a time. After the '20s the bar off Nantucket Harbor built up, and the larger ships built to accommodate the longer trips couldn't sail directly into the harbor. With an ingenious, yet time consuming method, they were lifted up and over by a steam-propelled floating dry dock called a "camel."



The whaler *Commodore Morris*, under full sail. Painting by Franklin Lewis Gifford. Courtesy Woods Hole Public Library.

The great fire of 1846 which spread from the center of town to the harbor cost shippers thousands of dollars and effectively ended Nantucket's whaling days. By this time, New Bedford had also become a major whaling port. When that city's involvement peaked in the 1850s and '60s, the city had the highest per capita income of all the United States. By then the ships were all over 100 feet long and were routinely sailing to the Pacific on voyages that averaged 4 years.

For decades, Falmouth men had been seafarers, and now with the chance of seeing the other side of the world and making real money, many men and boys signed on. If a trip were successful, the owners and captain stood to gain a huge amount of money. Even

the crew joined in the bounty through the system of "lays," which, although it changed from ship to ship, gave a proportionate share of the profits (after the owners had taken their share): captain 1/5, 1st mate 1/20, 2nd mate 1/35, boat steerer 1/75, sailors 1/150, green hands 1/180.

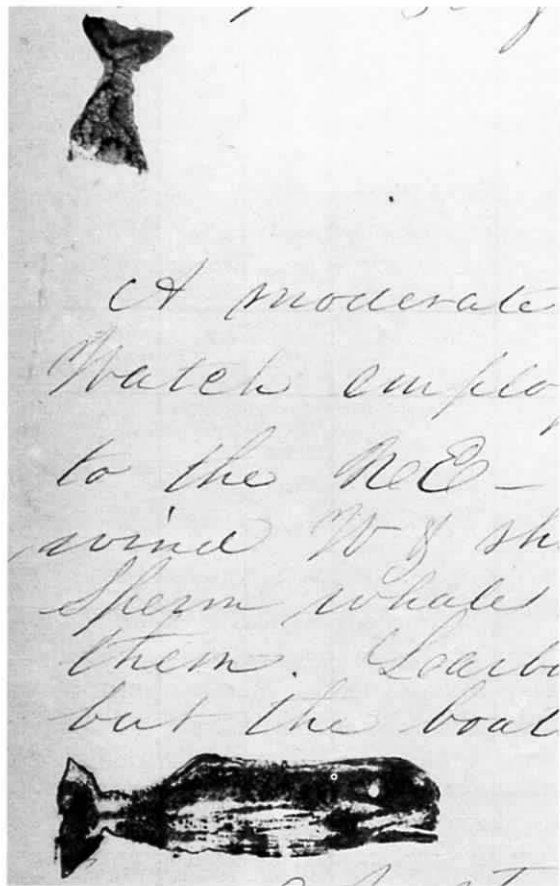
If the catch were scanty, as became common after the 1850s, profits could be minimal at best. Yet the call of adventure held strong, even to the end of the 1800s. Excitement, however, was preceded by long hard hours and dull days. Lookouts were at the masthead from sun-up to sun-down. Days and weeks could go by without sighting a whale. When one was sighted, the crew immediately sprang to life, lowering whaleboats and rowing off towards the whale. If the crew were successful, the long, smelly, greasy, smoky process of "trying out" the whale proceeded on deck.

The log books written by the captain or first mate tell of long days and no whales, of storms, of accidents and illness, of mutinies and attacks.

Many of these logs have been preserved. We can marvel today as we decipher the spidery writing and see the "whale stamps" showing what kind of whale was caught and how much oil it produced.

Often there was real danger. Whaleboats were broken up by the whales; men drowned, entangled in the lines. Captain John Tobey of East Falmouth, who captained many whalers including *Uncas* and *Awashonks*, had to amputate his own toes after a cask fell on them and gangrene set in. *Awashonks* was attacked on her second Pacific voyage. Attempting to trade with the natives on the atoll of Nemarik, the ship was attacked and overwhelmed. Many crew, the captain and the first and second mate were all killed.

The 19 year old third mate, Silas Jones of Falmouth, with four shipmates was able to reclaim the ship. He assumed command, and sailed the ship on to Honolulu where he turned her over to the American consul. Mr. Jones refused to sail her home as captain,



From the log book of the whaler *Hobomok*. Whale Stamps were used in the logs to show when whales were caught. In this example the whale tail at the top shows a whale that got away. The complete whale indicates a whale was caught. The text accompanying the stamps says that on Thursday, November 23, 1848, "Saw a large number of Sperm whale. Lowered the boats in pursuit of them. Larboard boat went on to a large whale but the boatsteerer missed him. Lat. 35.09, L. 49.58.

"...Friday, 24 Saw more sperm whales which were going quickly to windward."

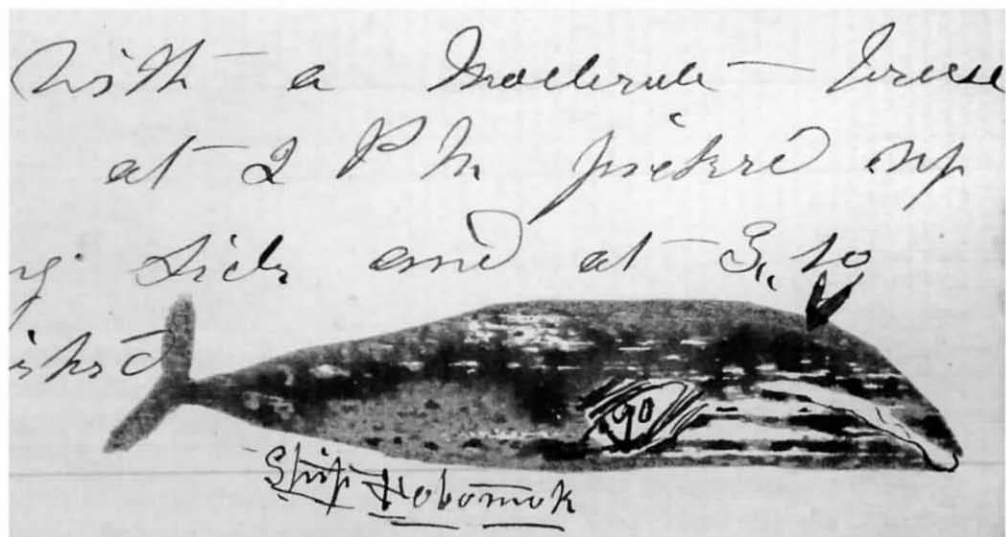
saying he was too young. However, when he was 23 he captained *Hobomok* and later *Commodore Morris*, including her last voyage before she was sold to New Bedford in 1864, making her the last whaler to sail from Woods Hole.

Often wives and children of the captains went along on voyages that lasted four, sometimes five years. In 1853 the captain's wife was aboard on one out of five whale ships. Captain John C. Hamblin of West Falmouth took his wife and growing family to sea on his many voyages. In 1871 he took his wife and their two youngest children on *Islander* out of New Bedford. His daughter Bertha remembered: "We sailed the Indian Ocean all the year of 1872 as far as I know. I do know that August 31st was my sixth birthday, and I spent it on the ship, which was anchored between Africa and Madagascar. My youngest brother was born on the ship the day before I was six. A whale was caught on my birthday, and my father promised me a watch for a birthday present... I remember my father took Mother and me over to see the Chief of Madagascar. He had seven wives... dressed in white. Their lips were blood red from chewing betel nuts." This voyage ended abruptly when the ship limped into Tasmania. There, as happened more often with the aging fleet, the captain deemed her un-seaworthy and sold her and her cargo. Captain Hamblin and his family took a steamer to London, and another to the States, returning to West Falmouth on the train, which hadn't even existed when they had left.

Mary Chipman Lawrence, wife of Capt. Samuel Lawrence of Falmouth, kept a diary in the 1850s on the whaler *Addison* out of New Bedford. It had been a hard decision to leave home, family, and church for the tiny quarters aboard ship, "shut out from our friends in a little kingdom of our own of which Samuel is prime ruler." But she goes on to say "I never should have known what a great man he was



From the log book of the whaler *Hobomok* in the north Atlantic. Log photographs by Arthur Gaines. Courtesy WHHM.



From a log book of the whaler *Hobomok* while sailing in the Okhotsk Sea just off Siberia. Here the stamp is of a blue whale. Note the number written into the empty space in the whale. This indicates the number of gallons of whale oil produced from this particular catch.



Mary Chipman Lawrence, wife of Captain Samuel Lawrence, kept a diary while on board the whaler *Addison*, sailing out of New Bedford in 1856. She was one of several Falmouth women who went to sea with their husbands on whaling voyages. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

if I had not accompanied him." During those years they sailed across the Pacific and north to the Arctic. Their daughter Minnie played with Eskimo children on the shores of the Bering Sea and delighted the crew. Occasionally they would "speak" another ship and stop to "gam," rowing across to visit. In their four years at sea, they met 142 other whalers. Twice they had picnics on the coast of Baja with other whal-

ing captains and their families. During one of the *Addison's* trips to the Arctic, Mary and Minnie stayed ashore at Honolulu where there was a busy whaling port and an enclave of New England women. Here there was a Sailors' Home and Bethel with its own "Falmouth Room" furnished by the Falmouth Ladies Seamen's Friend Society to "support sailors in an upright life."

With grief, Mrs. Lawrence records deaths of friends and whalers. Two of the *Addison's* crew drowned off whaleboats. Another died of an unknown illness, "a sad event...which cast a gloom over our whole company." Of her visits to Hawaii, she wrote of several women who died after they had been left in that seemingly safe spot by their husbands, leaving babies awaiting the ship's return. Friends welcomed their ships back, only to find that their husbands had died at sea.

She also presages the demise of whaling in her comments in the Arctic in 1859 when there were forty three ships in sight and no whales. "What a prospect! Ships in sight in all directions as far as the eye can see. If there were a few ships here, it would be capital whaling, but as it is, I suppose no one will do first rate."

The Civil War also took its toll on the fleet. Thirty-four ships were either burned or captured by the Confederates. The U.S. Government bought forty ships, loaded them with stones and sank them at entrances to Confederate harbors to enforce a blockade with a "stone fleet."

In 1871 nearly the entire Arctic fleet was frozen into the ice. Forty vessels, including *Awashonks* were abandoned and crushed in the pack ice. The men escaped in the small whaleboats and were rescued by a few vessels waiting outside the ice.



The last Falmouth captain commanding a whaler was Captain William Ellis, who returned to New Bedford in 1906 after a disastrous trip in which a large number of his crew died from disease on St. Helena.

The Bar Neck Wharf company may have seen the writing on the wall when they divested themselves first of their ships and then of the wharf during the early days of decline. Another industry, the Pacific

Guano Company, had come to town. Still, many individual Falmouth sailors sailed out of New Bedford till the very end of the era. To quote Mary Chipman Lawrence, "I do not wonder that so many choose a sailor's life. It is a life of hardship, but it is a life full of adventure." And Lewis Eldridge, years later, said of his youthful whaling voyage, "It was a pleasant, exciting voyage, and the memory of it has tingled like wine in my veins all through these years of my life."



The Candle House (leftmost) is the only building still standing in this painting by Franklin Lewis Gifford. The other buildings, from left to right, are The Bake Shop where hardtack was baked and packed for whaling ships, The Cooper Shop, and Braddock Gifford's blacksmith shop. The sawpit in the foreground is located in what appears to be the position of the Community Hall today. Courtesy Woods Hole Public Library.