

New England Whalemens

Part I: Nantucket 17th to the Early 18th Century

by Bob Bachand

Sitting atop a platform erected along one of Long Island's Atlantic beaches, a lookout scanned the coastline for signs of whales. Nearby, a small hut often served as a shelter for these 17th century whalemens. Off in the distance, a whale broke the surface, expelled a V-shaped fan of water vapor and exposed its smooth finless back. It was the sought after North Atlantic right whale. Remaining at the surface for a few minutes, the cetacean re-submerged moving its broad, paddle-shaped tail back and forth as if waiving before disappearing from view.

Whaleboat crews consisted of six men. Generally, each of these early whalemens was expected to share the duties of lookout. When a whale

was thus a relatively easy target for the 17th century, shore-based whalemens. In addition, the cetacean's body consists of 40 percent blubber. When the whale was killed, the blubber caused it to float and allowed it to be towed back to shore on the surface. Its characteristics eventually led to the name "right whale" (to hunt). A full-grown adult could provide 90 barrels or more of oil, but it was of poor quality, used mainly in lighting outdoor lamps. The adult also furnished the crew with valuable whalebone – baleen – that functioned as the era's plastic material. It was used in ladies' corsets, buggy whips and parasol ribs.

When feeding, the right whale swims near or at the surface with its mouth open. It takes in



Baleen - Wikimedia commons

quickly saw the value of drift whales.

Drift whales and later those harpooned near shore, were dragged up on the beach by means of a capstan consisting of an upright, spool-shaped cylinder with a line. The apparatus was turned by hand on an inner shaft. The same type of mechanism was used for weighing anchors. Once the creature was secured on the beach, it was cut up into chunks, carried by cart and taken to the tryworks (brick furnace with pots) and placed in the boiling pots. Once the oil was boiled out, it was allowed to cool and was then poured into wooden barrels. The stench of whale oil rising from the boiling pots was nauseating, permeating the skin, clothes and air. It was said to even choke those at a long distance downwind of the process. On Long Island, residents of Southampton complained sufficiently to have the town pass an ordinance to limit the offensive odor.

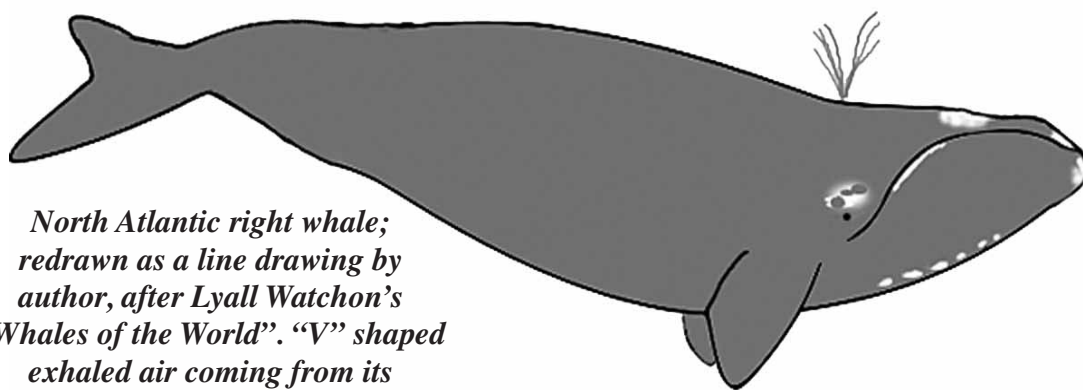
Around 1650, eastern Long Island and Cape Cod whalemens began hunting cetaceans just off their respective coasts. The oil and whalebone was then sold at New York and Boston markets. In 1672, Nantucketers tried to hire James Loper, a Long Island whalman, to teach them the craft. Agreement was reached between the two parties, but Loper never showed up on the island. Finally, in 1690, the islanders succeeded in attracting another whalman-expert, Ichabod Paddock. With the knowledge on hand, nearly every family on Nantucket became involved in whaling. By the mid-1720s, some 30 island whaleboats were engaged in the trade.

Nantucket was the perfect place to conduct shore whaling. In late autumn through mid-spring, right whales returned to their feeding grounds, passing just a short distance off the island. As told by author Daniel Vickers, in 1690, an islander watching the parade of whales offshore observed, "There is a green pasture where our children's grandchildren will go for bread."

As more islanders got involved in whaling, the Native Americans became a rich source of labor. By this time however, their numbers had decreased to about eight hundred. White man's diseases had quickly killed off many of them – a trend that would continue to decimate Native American populations.

In the next article, we will follow the whalemens as they set out across the seas in search of more rewarding whaling grounds.

Bob Bachand's book *Coastal Atlantic Sea Creatures: A Natural History*, is available online, full text, via the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk: http://www.maritimeaquarium.org/student_resources.html.



North Atlantic right whale; redrawn as a line drawing by author, after Lyall Watchon's "Whales of the World". "V" shaped exhaled air coming from its blowhole.

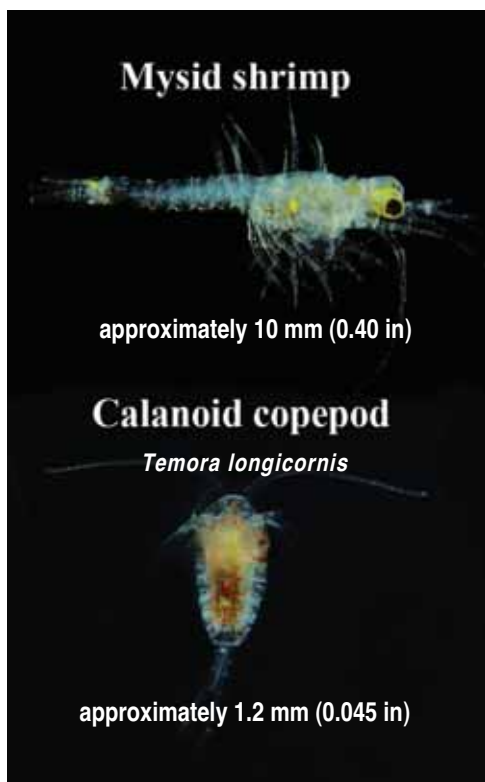
was spotted, a signal flag was raised alerting the rest of the crew. The boat was launched and it was sometimes joined by other nearby whaleboats. The harpooner stood at the bow, directing the steersman, while the other men strained at the oars, fighting surf, seas and currents. As they approached their prey, the crew fell silent so as not to spook the giant. The harpooner then thrust his harpoon as deeply as he could into the cetacean's blubber. A line, which was already tied to the harpoon, was payed out as the wounded creature tried to get away. The other end of the line was tied to a drogue - a log or large block of wood – that served to slow and exhaust the animal. Some whalemens were known to leave the line attached to the whaleboat. A wounded whale that tried to dive away from its human predators, could easily sink the attached boat if line was not payed out in time. If a harpooned whale remained on the surface, it occasionally towed the boat's crew on a wild ride that eventually took on the name of "Nantucket sleigh ride."

The right whale can easily reach between 35 to 60 feet in length and weigh some 60 tons. But it is a slow swimmer, seldom exceeding 6 mph. It

water, closes its lips and expels it out the sides. In the process, the whale filters out small planktonic crustaceans with its flexible plates of baleen fringed with bristles. It then swallows them. The cetacean can consume between 1 to nearly 3 tons of plankton per day.

Long before the arrival of Europeans to our shores, Native Americans sought out drift (stranded) whales, using them as a food source; their bones were fashioned into tools. Some authors have stated that the tribes also hunted the giant creatures from their canoes on open water (Hunt's, 1840; Eggleston, 1884; Spears, 1908; Farr, 1983; Vickers 1983 and others). But there is scant proof that it occurred. The Native Americans however, soon became an important part of whaling crews as the early colonists began whaling offshore. The major center for colonial whaling during the late 17th and 18th centuries was Nantucket Island.

The first settlers arrived on Nantucket in the late fall of 1659 to find a Native American population of 2,500 or more inhabitants. Over the next decade, at least another 20 colonial families arrived, purchasing land from the Wampanoags and Nausets. The newcomers



Mysid shrimp

approximately 10 mm (0.40 in)

Calanoid copepod

Temora longicornis

approximately 1.2 mm (0.045 in)

Zooplankton typical of North Atlantic right whale's diet.

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