

Whaling in America

Beginning in the late 1700's, the United States, with a strong seafaring tradition in New England, an advanced shipbuilding industry, and access to the oceans grew to become the pre-eminent whaling nation in the world.

American whaling's origins were in New York and New England, including Cape Cod, Massachusetts and nearby cities. The oil was in demand chiefly for lamps. Hunters in small watercraft pursued smaller whales from shore. But by 1800s, whaling in Nantucket had become a highly lucrative deep-sea industry, with voyages extending for years at a time and with vessels traveling as far as South Pacific waters.

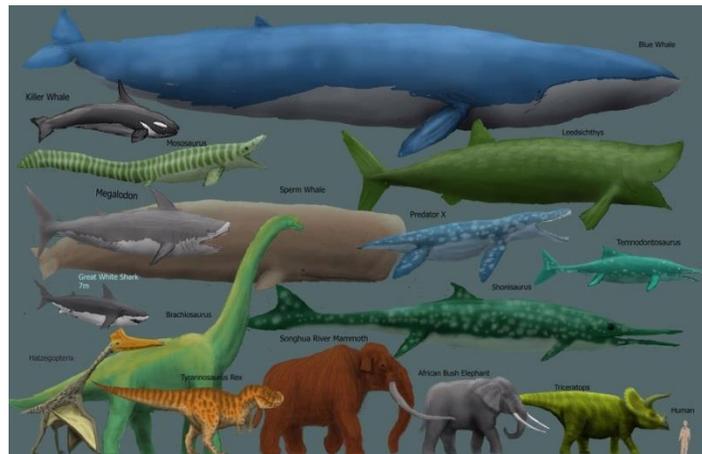
During the American Revolution, the British navy targeted American whaling ships as legitimate prizes, while in turn many whalers fitted



out as privateers against the British. Whaling recovered after the war ended in 1783 and the industry began to prosper, using bases at Nantucket and then New Bedford. Whalers took greater economic risks to turn major profits: expanding their hunting grounds and hiring foreign whalers from Africa and the Pacific.

Ten thousand seamen manned the ships. More than three thousand African American seamen shipped out on whaleships from New Bedford between 1800 and 1860, about 20% of the entire whaling force. In port the most successful of the whaling merchants was Jonathan Bourne, who opened offices in New Bedford in 1848.

Early whaling efforts were concentrated on right whales and humpbacks, which were found near the American coast. As these populations



declined and the market for whale products (especially whale oil) grew, American whalers began hunting the Sperm Whale. The Sperm Whale was particularly prized for the reservoir of spermaceti (a dense waxy substance that burns with an exceedingly bright flame) housed in the spermaceti organ, located forward and above the skull. Hunting for the Sperm Whale forced whalers to sail farther from home in search of their quarry, eventually covering the globe.

Whale oil was vital in illuminating homes and businesses throughout the world in the 1800s, and served as a dependable lubricant for the machines powering the

Industrial Revolution. Baleen (the long keratin strips that hang from the top of whales' mouths) was used by manufacturers in the United States and Europe to make consumer goods such as buggy whips, fishing poles, corset stays and dress hoops.

New England ships began to explore and hunt in the southern oceans after being driven out of the North Atlantic by British competition and import duties. Ultimately, the mid-1800s became the golden age of American whaling.

An early winter in the North Pacific in September 1871 forced the captains of an American whaling fleet in the Arctic to abandon their ships, in what became known as the



Whaling Disaster of 1871. With 32 vessels trapped in the ice and provisions insufficient to weather the nine-month winter, the captains ordered the abandonment of the ships and the three million dollars' worth of property carried on board but in the process saved the lives of over 1,200 men.

By 1890, the American whaling industry was overwhelmed by new, crippling economic competition

from kerosene, refined from petroleum. Kerosene, was a much cheaper fuel for lighting. Electric lighting in the 1900s spelled the end for whale oil. New Bedford, once the fourth busiest port in the United States, gave up whaling entirely.

When whaling was in its prime, vast fortunes were made in New England towns, particularly Nantucket and New Bedford, Massachusetts. Larger cultural influence is evidenced by former whaler Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*, which is often cited as the Great American Novel. Currently, the town of New Bedford is experiencing a revival since the 1996 establishment of the New Bedford Whaling National Historic Site which recalls New Bedford as the "City that Lit the World."

