



Filmmaker set to tell a whale of a tale

By **Karen Jeffrey**

kjeffrey@capecodonline.com

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On March 28, 1842, the schooner Joshua Brown left Provincetown Harbor with winds out of the northwest.

For the next 18 months, its crew chased a 19th-century American dream — riches to be found in the shape of whales.

"Whaling is an industry that shaped America, shaped the world," said Arthur Motta Jr., senior marketing and communications director at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. "Fortunes were made and lost. Lives were made and lost."

Tonight, the museum will host a premiere of "Into the Deep: America, Whaling & The World," the newest documentary from Ric Burns, who has also produced films on the Donner party and New York City, among others. He is the brother of filmmaker Ken Burns.

The rest of us will be able to view this PBS segment of "American Experience" starting at 9 p.m. Monday on WGBH, Channel 2.

Two Cape and Islands residents will be featured: Nathaniel Philbrick of Nantucket, author of "In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex," and Michael Moore, a marine biologist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

Original source material from the Nantucket Whaling Museum was used, as well as materials from the New Bedford museum.

"If you are going to learn about American history, you should learn about whaling," Motta said. "In the story of whaling we see diversity of race and culture, the growth and diversification of industry, and the American flag being carried by New Bedford boats into parts of the world that never knew about America."

In the industry's demise, "you see lessons we may be still learning today - depletion of natural resources and a need to diversify a community's industrial base, he said.

Cape's place in history

While New Bedford and Nantucket were centers during the Golden Age of whaling in the mid 19th-century, Cape Cod played a significant role in the industry, says John Braginton-Smith, whose late father, along with friend Duncan Oliver, wrote co-wrote "Cape Cod Shore Whaling: America's First Whalemen."

The elder Braginton-Smith, better known to Yarmouth residents as Jack of Jack's Outback restaurant, always believed it was Cape residents who taught Nantucketers how to whale, said his son.

Boats and crews from the Cape plied the seas hunting the whale. They stripped blubber from the great leviathans and melted it into oil used in lamps around the world. Spermaceti from the head of sperm whales was used in ointments, cosmetic creams, candles, hair pomades and machinery.

At the height of the industry in the 1840s, it is estimated that 20,000 men a year were shipping out in search of the whale, and the U.S. had a whaling fleet of some 700 vessels.

Not everyone who shipped out did so with plans to make whaling a career, said Braginton-Smith. "Many signed on as carpenters, wheelwrights."

Some signed onto crews with plans with hopes a successful voyage would provide money to buy a home or farm, said Motta. But it wasn't exactly a get-rich scheme, he said. Voyages could last anywhere from a year to four years. Working conditions were dangerous. And there was no guarantee whales would be found.

"Not everyone who went out with a whaling boat was a grizzled old salty dog," he said. "There were tradesmen and young men hoping one trip would help them establish lives and families on land ... That's one thing about whaling ships — the profits were shared equitably. That's one reason the crews were so racially diverse."

Whaling left its mark

The legacy of whaling may is not as visible on the Cape as it is in New Bedford or Nantucket said Braginton-Smith. But it's hidden in the carpentry in old captain's homes, or in whaling log books like those at Sturgis Library in Barnstable. Among the maritime jewels is the log book of the ill-fated Triton, built in Fairhaven in 1818, and eventually lost in 1895 off Hershel Island in the Arctic Circle.

Entries in both log books include daily accounts of the weather, which played a major role in any sea-going enterprise. There are daily accountings of the numbers of "fish" — as crews called whales — were taken from the sea. Occasionally, there is the personal observation, like that of the ship's master aboard the Provincetown vessel who made note on May 4, 1842, that the crew occupied itself by playing a round of "Hide the Slipper."

'Into the deep: America, Whaling & the world'

9 p.m. Monday

WGBH (Channel 2)

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