

Whaling

“It is hard to believe that the world groped on to the thirteenth century before discovering even the tallow candle; yet so it is. The expression that ‘mankind was plunged in darkness during the early ages’ is true in every sense.” (Optical Journal, 1904)

Over the centuries, people cut pitch pine heart-wood into long, thin splints or torches, which they carried by hand or in their mouths, as seen in Medieval wood cuts.

Photographs from the Smithsonian’s collection show examples of certain fatty birds and fish burned for light rather than food.

In 1928, Dr. Walter Hough, of the Smithsonian, wrote that in the Hebrides, people remembered having used the stormy petrel for torches.

This implied burning fatty birds had been used over the millennia, and not just by primitive peoples. (Wilson Museum)

When men discovered the art of extracting oil from the olive and other vegetable sources the use of the lamp became very general among the wealthy and noble.

From Rome the oil lamp passed successively into Germany, France and Britain. In these countries, torches, dipped in grease and a very odorous fish oil were the methods of artificial lighting until the Roman conquest. (The Optical Journal, 1904)

People Have Been Whaling for Thousands of Years

Norwegians were among the first to hunt whales, as early as 4,000 years ago. The Japanese may have been doing so even earlier.

Traditions as varied as the Inuit (who hunted in the Arctic Ocean), Basque (who hunted in the Atlantic), and Japanese (who hunted in the Pacific) relied on whales to provide material goods, as well as part of their cultural identity.

Nearly every part of the whale was used. Meat, skin, blubber, and organs were eaten as an important source of protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals.

Baleen was woven into baskets and used as fishing line. In warmer climates, baleen was also used as a roofing material. Bones were used primarily for toolmaking and carving ceremonial items such as masks. (National Geographic)

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, whaling gained popularity throughout Northern Europe.

Whale oil, also called train oil, is any oil derived from any species of whale, including sperm oil from sperm whales, train oil from baleen whales, and melon oil from small toothed whales.

From the 16th century through the 19th century, whale oil was used principally as lamp fuel and for producing soap. (Britannica)

Over time, European whaling ventures spread to North America. American colonists relied on whale oil to light most of their lamps. (National Geographic)

As early as 1535, Jacques Cartier described belugas and other great whales in the St. Lawrence River. Samuel de Champlain wrote a description of Basque whaling for right whales there in 1610.

In December 1620, before deciding to settle permanently at the place they named Plymouth, the Mayflower Pilgrims were still exploring Cape Cod and debating its potential when they had their first encounter with American Indians.

The colony's chroniclers recalled how "As we drew near to the shore we espied some ten or twelve Indians very busy about a black thing." Upon seeing the English, the Indians fled, carrying something away with them.

Later, as an expeditionary party of Pilgrims made their way on foot to where they had first spotted the Indians, they came across "a great fish, called a grampus, dead on the sands."

Two more dead grampuses lay visible in the shallows. At the place where the Indians had been seen "busy about a black thing," there it was, or what was left of it, yet another grampus, cut "into long rands or pieces, about an ell long and two handfull broad."

Saddened that they lacked the resources and time to load up on the dead grampuses, some of which were "five or six paces long, and about two inches thick of fat, and fleshed like swine" and which "would have yielded a great deal of oil," the Pilgrims turned away and followed the Indians' tracks into the interior.' (Shoemaker)

The Pilgrims' descendants later dubbed the vicinity of this landing "First Encounter" beach to commemorate the English settlement's first meeting with native peoples, but this particular first encounter also marked New England colonists' entry into the oil business.

The "grampuses" that washed up periodically on the shores of Cape Cod Bay were blackfish, or what marine mammal scientists today call pilot whales - to be precise, long-finned pilot whales. (Pilgrim-Monument-org)

To the Pilgrims and other seventeenth-century Europeans, pilot whales meant oil, the oil that would come from boiling, or trying-out, the pilot whales' two inches of swine-like fat.

Later, the Wampanoags taught the settlers what they knew of the land and how to live off it. Early on they showed them how to strip and process blubber from whales that became stranded on the beaches.



The first Pilgrim lamp was of the type known today as the iron "Betty" as shown in the drawing. Captain John Carver, first Governor of Plymouth Colony, purchased in Holland just before he sailed a Dutch iron "Betty" lamp. (Colonial Lighting, Hayward) The simplest form of lamp brought with the colonists was an iron saucer with one or two lips at the edge to hold a wick.

To coax more whales onto the beach, men would sometimes surround them in small boats and make a commotion in the water with their oars until the whales swam to their doom in the only direction left open to them. (NY Times)

The Pilgrims did not covet the oil but the money that the oil would bring once sold.

In 1620, the Pilgrim fathers William Bradford and Edward Winslow wrote: "Cape Cod was like to be a place of good fishing, for we saw daily great whales, of the best kind for oil and bone."

These were probably right whales, the animal that served as the foundation of North American commercial whaling. The bone to which they referred is the baleen that the mysticete and rorqual whales have growing in the tops of their mouths instead of teeth.

Mysticetes (such as the right whale) and rorquals (such as the humpback whale) filter their food through baleen, which is made of keratin, the same material as human fingernails. Baleen was used to make a wide variety of products, such as tools, buggy whips, and corset stays. (New Bedford Whaling Museum)

Earlier, when the Mayflower had first entered Cape Cod Bay, its passengers had witnessed an even greater bounty than a few dead grampuses strewn along the beach:

every day we saw whales playing hard by us; of which in that place, if we had 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.

The whales cavorting in New England's waters were probably right whales and justly recognized by those aboard the Mayflower as "the best kind for oil and bone." (Shoemaker)

New England Whaling

Whaling's roots in New England date back to the 17th century. American commercial whaling began when settlers took advantage of whales stranded on beaches and in shallow waters.

Oil for lamps was scarce and every drop rendered from whale blubber was a drop that did not have to be purchased from England.

Though an unreliable enterprise, drift whaling became so important that colonial authorities enacted laws governing the communal profit shares of stranded whales. (Pilgrim-Monument-org) In 1652, the laws of the Colony of Plymouth stated,

That whereas the publicke chartes of the collonie are increased and whereas by Gods providence many whales and other fishes are cast on shore in many partes of this Jurisdiction out of which the Court sees reason to require som pte of the Oyle made of them.

This Court now ordereth that of every whale either cast on shore or bought of any Indian or Indians or taken on drift att Sea and brought to shore in any pte or this jurisdiction

there be one barrell of marchantable Oyle payed to the publicke Treasury to the Collonies use to bee raised and payed as followeth, videlectet, every towne shall pay one barrell of marchantable oyle

for every drift whale cast or brought on shore and seized on within the liberties and precincts of theire severall townships or traded or bought of the Indians within their townships;

and the person or persons as first seize or cut any whale or shall purchase or trade any such whales of the Indians that shalbee soe cast on shore in any place within this Jurisdiction; out of the bounds of any particulare Township shall pay one barrell of Oyle for every such whale;

and bee or they are heerby authorized to cause all such persons as cult with him or them to pay thire equall proportions to him according to what they cutt towards the said barrell of oyle, and alsoe that there bee one appointed in every townshipp by the Treasurer to demann and receive all such oyle as shalbee due and payable to the Treasury,

And alsoe that it shall not lawfull for any person or persons of any townshipp to cut themselves or trade with the Indians for any blubber or oyle cast up or cutt within the precinctes of annother Township,

provided that if any man take a drift whale of att the sea and bring or tow it to the shore, it be accounted his owne goods; if within an harbour or mile of the shore they bee taken they bee reputed the townships where they are brought on shore.



North Atlantic Right Whale

According to the book *Cape Cod and Plymouth Colony in the 17th Century*, whaling was a particularly vital part of the economy in Plymouth:

“The whale processed on Cape Cod were Atlantic right whales, so called because they were the correct, or ‘right,’ whales for human use. They were a coastal, migratory whale, which floated when dead, and produced a good quality oil.

Most of the whales utilized by Seventeenth-century Cape Codders were beached whales, which had run aground themselves.

Other whales were taken directly at sea. Some were killed at sea or driven on to the shore from boats, and others were ‘drift’ whales which had died at sea and were later hauled to shore.

Over the century, the number of whales increased, as efforts to kill them at sea failed, and their wounded or dead carcasses later washed up on the shore.

However obtained, whales, and especially their oil, were an important item in the economy of Plymouth Colony.

Despite whale’s obvious economic significance, the historical sources are strangely silent respecting their number and processing, and it is difficult to determine how much oil a particular whale would yield.

The official records are similarly of little help, referring only to whale oil owed to the colony or to those who processed it for the town.

One clue comes from Edward Randolph. Writing to England in January 1687/88, he estimated Plymouth had exported two hundred tons of whale oil in the previous months, and predicted that whale oil would replace the fur trade as a staple of the colony’s economy.

Another comes from Wait-Still Winthrop. In a letter to his brother he mentioned a report of twenty-nine whales having been killed in one day, and that on a previous visit to Plymouth he had learned of a group who had killed six whales within a few days.

Offsetting these rather generous estimates, is Thomas Hinckley’s reference to small whales which produced between seven and twenty barrels of oil.” (Noted in *HistoryOfMassachusetts-org*)

Aware of whale oil’s marketability as lamp fuel and lubricant, English settlers in New England soon launched a whaling industry that quickly surpassed that of the Dutch, British, and other Europeans.

Up until the twentieth century, all such ventures - American and European - focused on producing oil and “bone,” which was not bone at all but whalebone, better known today as baleen, the plastic-like plates found in the jaws of baleen whales such as right whales, bowheads, and humpbacks. (Shoemaker)

Quakers Dominated the Whaling Industry

Quakers dominated the whaling industry in Nantucket and New Bedford, Massachusetts, for 150 years.

In 1690 a Quaker from Cape Cod, Ichabod Paddock, went to Nantucket Island to instruct the islanders in the methods of whaling.

Thus began some 150 years of industrial scale whaling by Quakers on Nantucket Island and the adjacent Massachusetts town of New Bedford. Vast fortunes were made as whale ships ranged the whaling grounds from the South Atlantic to Greenland, and from the coast of Chile to the South Seas.

Their target was the sperm whale whose oil and spermaceti fetched high prices in the growing industrial centers of America and Europe.

Quakers first moved to Nantucket and the New England shores in the 1650s to avoid persecution in England. The Religious Society of Friends came to dominate life on the island.

Many of Nantucket's first families - Macy, Starbuck, Coffin, Hussey, Folger, Rotch - became pre-eminent in the whaling industry. Whaling was expanding and many Nantucket Quakers were employed in it.

Quaker beliefs and tolerant labour practices made both Nantucket and New Bedford welcoming to all comers.

Many black sailors, among them escaped slaves, found work on the whale ships, some even as ships' captains.

Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott, daughter of Thomas Coffin and Anne Folger, was born on Nantucket in 1793. It could be said that the first black freedom movement began in a Quaker whale town.

By the late 18th century, as the demand for whale oil grew, New Bedford was a major whaling center. However when the Revolutionary War broke out in 1776 the whaling industry was badly hit.

William Rotch, who had moved to New Bedford from Nantucket, decided to go to Britain to set up his whaling trade there instead, with help from influential English Quakers like David Barclay.

Others followed, and by the early 1790s some 20 Nantucket families, now led by Samuel Starbuck, had established themselves in Milford Haven, in Pembrokeshire.

A Meeting House was built in 1811 and is still in use by Milford Haven Friends today some 200 years later. (Quakers in the World)

Information here is primarily from, Whale Meat in American History, Shoemaker; The Compact with the Charter & Laws of the Colony of New Plymouth, 1836; The Optical Journal, 1904; Pilgrim-Monument-org; Wilson Museum' Britannica, NY Times; HistoryOfMassachusetts-org; National Geographic.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young