

MOBY DICK AND 19TH CENTURY WHALING

The 19th century whaling industry was one of the most prominent businesses in America. Hundreds of ships setting out from ports, mostly in New England, roamed the globe, bringing back whale oil and other products made from whales.

While American ships created a highly organized industry, the hunting of whales had ancient roots.

It is believed that men began hunting whales as far back as the Neolithic Period, thousands of years ago. And throughout recorded history, the enormous mammals have been highly prized for the products they can provide.

Oil obtained from a whale's blubber has been used for both lighting and lubricating purposes, and the bones of the whale were used to make a variety of useful products. In the early 19th century, a typical American household might contain several items manufactured from whale products, such as candles or corsets made with whalebone stays.

When a whale was killed, it was towed to the ship and its blubber, the thick insulating fat under its skin, would be peeled and cut from its carcass in a process known as "flensing." The blubber was minced into chunks and boiled in large vats on board the whaling ship, producing oil.

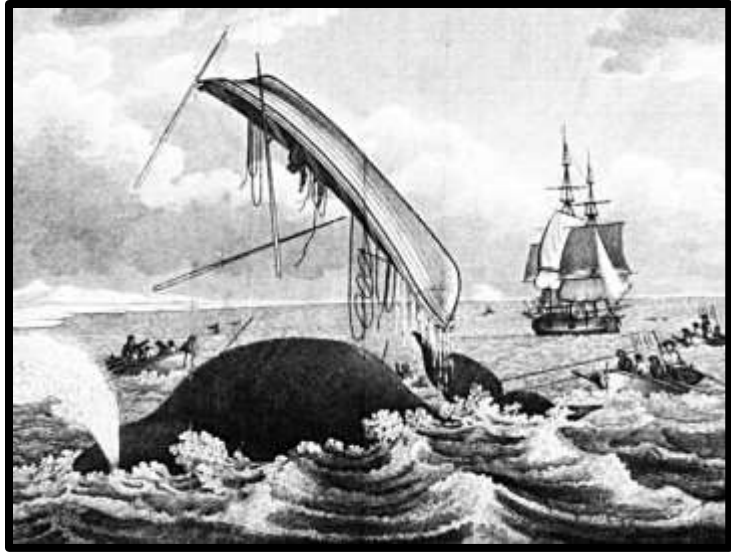
The oil taken from whale blubber was packaged in casks and transported back to the whaling ship's home port (such as New Bedford, Massachusetts, the busiest American whaling port in the mid-1800s). From the ports it would be sold and transported across the country and would find its way into a huge variety of products.

Whale oil, in addition to be used for lubrication and illumination, was also used to manufacture soaps, paint, and varnish. Whale oil was also utilized in some processes used to manufacture textiles and rope.

Origins of Whaling Fleets

The Basques, from present day Spain, were going to sea to hunt and kill whales about a thousand years ago, and that appears to be the beginning of organized whaling.

Whaling in the Arctic regions began about 1600 following the discovery of Spitzbergen by the Dutch explorer William Barents. Before long the British and Dutch were dispatching whaling fleets to the frozen waters, at times coming close to violent conflict over which country would control the whaling grounds.



The technique used by the British and Dutch fleets was to hunt by having the ships dispatch small boats rowed by teams of men. A harpoon attached to a heavy rope would be thrown into a whale, and when the whale was killed it would be towed to the ship and tied alongside. A grisly process, called "cutting in," would then begin in which the whale's skin and blubber would be peeled off in long strips and boiled down to make whale oil.

Dawn of the American Whaling Industry

In the 1700s, American colonists began developing their own whale fishery (note: the term "fishery" was commonly used, though the whale, of course, is a mammal, not a fish).

Islanders from Nantucket, who had taken to whaling because their soil was too poor for farming, killed their first sperm whale in 1712. That particular species of whale was highly prized. Not only did it have the blubber and bone that other whales had, but it possessed a unique substance called spermaceti, a waxy oil found in a mysterious organ in the massive head of the sperm whale.

It is believed that the organ containing the spermaceti either aids in buoyancy or is somehow related to the acoustic signals whales send and receive. Whatever its purpose to the whale, spermaceti was greatly coveted by man.

By the late 1700s this unusual oil was being used to make candles which were smokeless and odorless. Spermaceti candles were a vast improvement over the candles in use before that time, and some people have said they were the best candles ever made, before or since.

Spermaceti, as well as whale oil obtained from rendering the blubber of a whale, was also used to lubricate precision machine parts. In a sense, a 19th century whaler regarded a whale as a swimming oil well. And the oil from whales, used in machinery, made the industrial revolution possible.

By the early 1800s, whaling ships from New England were setting out on very long voyages to the Pacific Ocean in search of sperm whales. Some of these voyages could literally last for years.

A number of seaports in New England supported the whaling industry, but one town, New Bedford, Massachusetts, became known as the world's center of whaling. Of the more than 700 whaling ships on the world's oceans in the 1840s, more than 400 called New Bedford their home port. Wealthy whaling captains built large houses in the best neighborhoods, and New Bedford was known as "The City that Lit the World."

Life aboard a whaling ship was difficult and dangerous, yet the perilous work inspired thousands of men to leave their homes and risk their lives. Part of it was the call of adventure, but there were also financial rewards. It was typical for a crew of a whaler to split the proceeds, with even the lowliest seaman getting a share of the profits.

The world of whaling seemed to possess its own self-contained society, and one feature which is sometimes overlooked is that whaling captains were known to welcome men of diverse races. There were a number of black men who served on whaling ships, and even a black whaling captain, Absalom Boston of Nantucket.

The Golden Age of American whaling extended into the 1850s, and what spelled its demise was the invention of the oil well. With oil extracted from the ground being refined into kerosene

for lamps, the demand for whale oil plummeted. And while whaling continued, as whalebone could still be used for a number of household products, the era of the great whaling ships faded into history.

Whaling, with all its hardships and peculiar customs, was immortalized in the pages of Herman Melville's classic novel *Moby Dick*. Melville himself had sailed on a whaling ship, the *Acushnet*, which left New Bedford in January 1841.

While at sea Melville would have heard many tales of whaling, including reports of whales that attacked men. He would even have heard famous yarns of a malicious white whale known to cruise the waters of the South Pacific. And an immense amount of whaling knowledge, much of it quite accurate, some of it exaggerated, found its way into the pages of his masterpiece.

Was Moby Dick a real whale?

The great white whale portrayed in Herman Melville's classic novel *Moby Dick* was fictitious. But remarkably, it was based on a real animal. A huge albino sperm whale with a violent streak had fascinated whalers and the reading public for decades before Melville published his masterpiece.

The whale, "Mocha Dick," was named for the island of Mocha, in the Pacific off the coast of Chile. He was often seen in nearby waters, and over the years a number of whalers had tried and failed to kill him.

By some accounts, Mocha Dick had killed more than 30 men, and had attacked and damaged three whaling ships and 14 whaleboats. There were also claims that the white whale had sunk two merchant ships.

There's no doubt that Herman Melville, who sailed on the whaling ship *Acushnet* in 1841, would have been quite familiar with the legends of Mocha Dick.

In May 1839 the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, a popular publication in New York City, published a lengthy article about Mocha Dick by Jeremiah N. Reynolds an American journalist and explorer. The magazine's account was a vivid tale purportedly told to Reynolds by the eccentric first mate of a whaling vessel.

The story by Reynolds was noteworthy, and it's significant that an early review of *Moby Dick*, in the *International Magazine of Literature, Art, and Science* in December 1851, referred to Mocha Dick in its opening sentence:

"The new nautical story by the always successful author of *Typee* has for its name-giving subject a monster first introduced to the world of print by Mr. J.N. Reynolds, ten or fifteen years ago, in a paper for the *Knickerbocker* entitled *Mocha Dick*."

It's little wonder that people remembered the tales of Mocha Dick as related by Reynolds. Following are some excerpts from his 1839 article in the *Knickerbocker Magazine*:

"This renowned monster, who had come off victorious in a hundred fights with his pursuers, was an old bull whale, of prodigious size and strength. From the effect of age, or more probably from a freak of nature, as exhibited in the case of the Ethiopian Albino, a singular consequence had resulted — *he was white as wool!*

Viewed from a distance, the practised eye of the sailor only could decide, that the moving mass, which constituted this enormous animal, was not a white cloud sailing along the horizon.

On the spermaceti whale, barnacles are rarely discovered; but upon the head of this *lusus naturae*, they had clustered, until it became absolutely rugged with the shells. In short, regard him as you would, he was a most extraordinary fish; or, in the vernacular of Nantucket, 'a genuine old sog,' of the first water."

The journalist describes the violent nature of Mocha Dick:

"Opinions differ as to the time of his discovery. It is settled, however, that previous to the year 1810, he had been seen and attacked near the island of Mocha. Numerous boats are known to have been shattered by his immense flukes, or ground to pieces in the crush of his powerful jaws; and, on one occasion, it is said that he came off victorious from a conflict with the crews of three English whalers, striking fiercely at the last of the retreating boats at the moment it was rising from the water, in its hoist up to the ship's davits.

Adding to the white whale's ghastly appearance are a number of harpoons stuck in his back by whalers who failed to kill him:

It must not be supposed, howbeit, that through all this desperate warfare, our leviathan passed [unscathed]. A back serried with irons, and from fifty to a hundred yards of line trailing in his wake, sufficiently attested that though unconquered, he had not proved invulnerable.

Mocha Dick was a legend among whalers, and every captain wanted to kill him:

From the period of Dick's first appearance, his celebrity continued to increase, until his name seemed naturally to mingle with the salutations which whalemens were in the habit of exchanging, in their encounters upon the broad Pacific; the customary interrogatories almost always closing with, "Any news from Mocha Dick?"

Indeed, nearly every whaling captain who rounded Cape Horn, if he possessed any professional ambition, or valued himself on his skill in subduing the monarch of the seas, would lay his vessel along the coast, in the hope of having an opportunity to try the muscle of this doughty champion, who was never known to shun his assailants."

Reynolds ended his magazine article with a lengthy description of a battle between man and whale in which Mocha Dick was finally killed and towed alongside a whaling ship to be cut up: "Mocha Dick was the longest whale I ever looked upon. He measured more than seventy feet from his noodle to the tips of his flukes; and yielded one hundred barrels of clear oil, with a proportionate quantity of 'head-matter.' It may emphatically be said, that the scars of his old wounds were near his new, for not less than twenty harpoons did we draw from his back; the rusted mementos of many a desperate encounter."

Despite the yarn Reynolds claimed to have heard from the first mate of a whaler, legends about Mocha Dick circulated long after his reported death in the 1830s. Sailors claimed that he wrecked whaleboats and killed whalers into the late 1850s, when he was finally killed by the crew of a Swedish whaling ship.

While the legends of Mocha Dick are often contradictory, it seems inescapable that there was a real white whale known to attack men.