

The Whales Have Returned to their Home

On Herman Melville's 200th Birthday from New Bedford to Cape Cod

by Michael Heinrich

New Bedford is the former whaling capital. The city itself shines thanks to its brilliant past even today. From here, in the 19th century, sailed thousands of ships on the chase for spermaceti whales. In January 1841 the poor Melville was hired on board the whaling ship *Acushnet*. The trip provided the fodder for worldly success: *Moby Dick*. New Bedford has not forgotten its famous novelist, or the whales. People were shaped by the legacy of the city's whaling trade, that made it one of America's wealthiest cities in the 1850 and 1860s. During this era, whaling was the most profitable venture. The lights of New York and London were illuminated with spermaceti from the sperm whales. Spermaceti candles were the most coveted of all in the very best houses. They burned soot-free with a brighter flame than other candles. The ship owners, mostly Quakers, were entitled to a golden nose.

New Bedford is sober, and business minded. It is the largest fishing port on the east coast. New Bedford is not touristy and the perfect spot to start your journey in the footsteps of Moby Dick! In 1996 the National Historic Park was established, the places on land that inspired Melville for his book. On Johnny Cake Hill stands the historical seafarer's home with the chapel that, in the book, played such an important role. The cenotaph of Captain Swain next to the northwest window shows the circumstances under which Captain Ahab dies in the book, the same way many whalers met their end. Just because whaling was so dangerous, seafaring men felt the need to pray for a safe return before they departed on a whaling voyage. That is exactly what Melville did. The bench on which he, by God's divine service, ate is branded.

The bow-shaped pulpit tells a strange story. This pulpit was afterward added to the book and the movie was adapted. As the John Huston movie adaptation, with Gregory Peck as Ahab, reached the cinemas in 1956, it was so successful that many Americans visited the venues shown in the movie. The problem was that they anticipated seeing a pulpit that did not even exist! The Port of New Bedford first heard a few complaints for several years then decided to create a dummy after the film's example. In 1961 this was installed, and Americans were very happy from then on.

Definitely worth a visit is the Whaling Museum also in the same neighborhood. Here visitors learn from the *Essex* about the fate suffered in the book by the *Pequod*. Its story is central to Melville's idea of a killer whale. In 1820, a huge sperm whale rammed the ship after which it sunk 3,700 kilometers off the Chilean coast in the Pacific. The records of first mate Owen Chase convey the picture that the angry whale acted with full intention. For 90 days the 21-man crew rocked in three small boats on the ocean before their salvation. It is the spectacular ruin of a whaling expedition but hardly the only one.

From New Bedford several daily ferries run to Nantucket. On the island is the former home of George Pollard, captain of the *Essex* and model for Melville's character Ahab. His fictional character Ishmael begins not by chance from Nantucket on his fateful voyage of the *Pequod*.

The island is also known for its great whaling history. For a period of time, this was the whaling capital of the world. However, around the middle of the 19th century the waters of the American east coast were fished of all its whales and ever larger ships and crews were needed, ship owners diverted to New Bedford because of its better resources. Also, on Nantucket is a whaling museum. Here stands the only remaining whale oil press in the world.

In Nantucket and New Bedford are alone 13 of the 40 places, museums and attractions named that the Whale Trail in 2018 connected. The Trail extends from Harvard Museum of Natural History to whale watching in Provincetown. Yet the sea giants have returned to their ancestral waters on the east coast. The discovery of cheap kerosene rescued the whales, in a way, as well as the American Civil War to further decline the whaling industry. In 1871, the last whaler left Nantucket.

The whales have not only returned also have the horror of the bloody hunt has also disappeared. It is now possible to depart from many places on the coast to go whale watching. The sea giants tolerate the ships alongside them as they feed without fear. A little luck will bring a perfect snapshot although many whales tend to meet up at their hunting grounds.

On the ships of *Dolphin Fleet* of Provincetown, one finds a naturalist who knows the habits of these creatures well. They also know the individual whales and records data about the whale population. A part of ticket revenue is also in a fund dedicated to protection of these whales.