

Whaling Museum tells of grisly trade, life on land

By BROOKE DONALD
Associated Press

NANTUCKET — On New Year's Day 1998, scientists, historians and hundreds of curious residents gathered at Low Beach on this island's eastern end to look at a 46-foot long sperm whale that had lost its fight against an infection.

The massive corpse was messy — it smelled, was bloody and attracted flies.

But it immediately had the respect of the heartbroken onlookers, who recognized the deep water diver as a symbol of Nantucket's golden age, when this small island off the southern tip of Cape Cod had an international reputation as the whaling capital of the world.

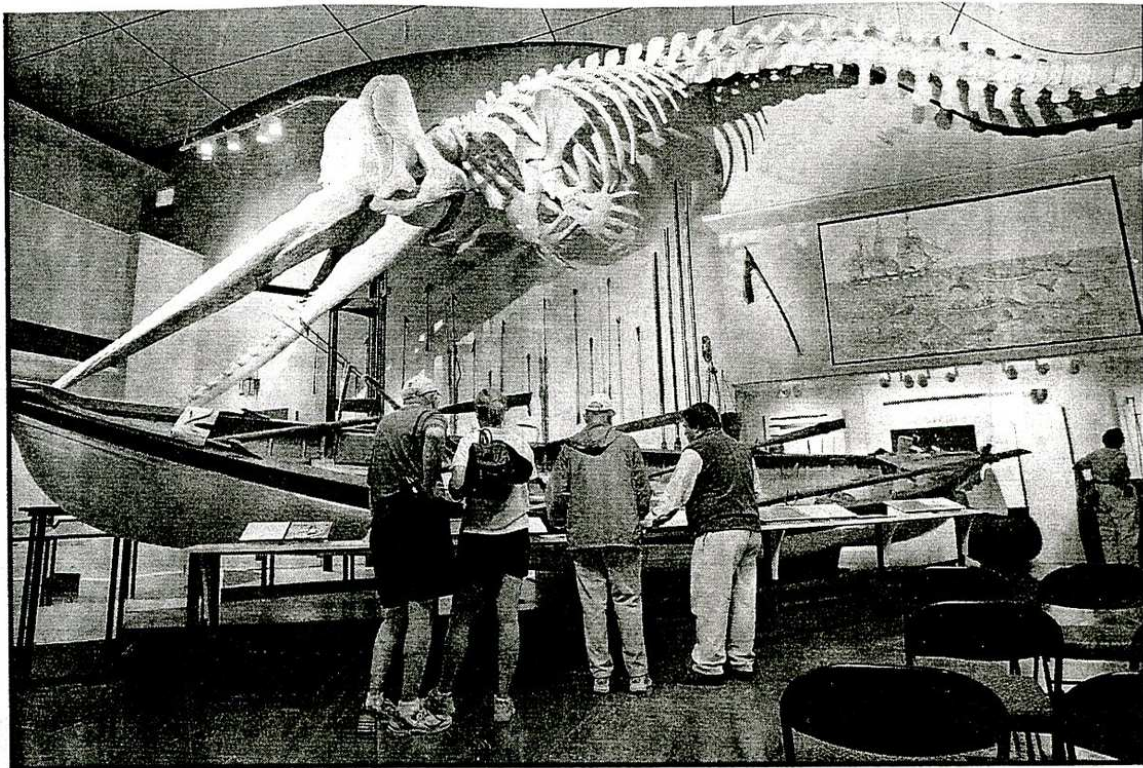
The beached whale provided a unique opportunity for residents to get a hands-on glimpse of the island's past. Scientists and historians set out to preserve it for others.

Now, after several years of cleaning and preparation, the whale's skeleton hangs, as if it's diving, in the main gallery of the island's newly restored and expanded Whaling Museum. The dramatic display, which is juxtaposed by a full rigged whaleboat, is the centerpiece of the museum's collection and the starting point to discover the island's rich whaling past.

"It really was poetic and symbolic for that whale to be a sperm whale," said Niles Parker, chief curator of the Whaling Museum.

"This is the whale that Nantucketers left the island for years to hunt, that produced the oil that lighted lanterns around the world, that got the island noticed as one of the most prosperous ports," he said.

At its heyday between 1800 and



Visitors examine a whaling boat under the skeleton of a 46-foot long sperm whale at the Whaling Museum, on the island of Nantucket. After several years of cleaning and preparation, the skeleton hangs in the main gallery of the island's newly restored museum. AP photo

Where to go

1840, Nantucket's harbor bustled with the coming and going of whaling ships and coastal merchant vessels. Along the wharves, barrels of whale oil were off-loaded from ships. Wagons wheeled the oil along the cobblestone streets to candle factories and refineries.

Many whalers brought back souvenirs from their travels, influencing the styles and tastes on the island. Portraits from England, ceramics from Japan and tapestries and spices from the South Pacific

all were stuffed into sacks to bring to wives, children and friends back home.

With its \$14 million expansion and renovation, the museum now has the space to show all of these different aspects of life on Nantucket during the whaling era.

"In the old museum, we just didn't have the room to show as complete a picture of whaling life as we wanted to," said Cecil Barron Jensen, a spokeswoman for the Nantucket Historical Association.

The expansion added 40 percent more exhibit space, increasing the size of the museum to 28,000 square

age.

"All the new exhibits have definitely increased my understanding of Nantucket — who lived here, what family life was like, how the candles were made, everything," said Mary Jensen, 44, a nurse on the island. "It's fascinating really, and they've done an amazing job of telling the stories."

The stories, of course, still include ones about the grisly trade itself.

In the museum's main gallery where the whale skeleton hangs from a contoured ceiling, harpoons, lances and other tools line one wall. There are brief explanations of the dangerous hunt, including a description of a "Nantucket Sleigh Ride," the terrifying adventure of a whaleboat being towed behind a whale that's just been harpooned.

The ride weakens the whale until it lies exhausted on the surface of the ocean, allowing whalers to spear it with a killing lance.

"The dying whale's spout turns red with blood and the crew cries out, 'Chimney's afire,'" explained Jensen.

There is also an exhibit dedicated to the crew of the whaling ship Essex, which inspired parts of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick."

In 1819, the ship sailed from Nantucket on a routine voyage. Fifteen months into the trip, in the middle of the South Pacific, an enraged 85-foot-long sperm whale twice rammed the Essex, sinking the ship.

Fearing cannibals on the islands to the west, the crew sailed in three tiny whaleboats for the distant South American coast. Many would eventually succumb to hunger, thirst, disease and fear.

"Some eventually resorted to cannibalism themselves. It was miserable," Jensen said.

feet. The 1846 candle factory that housed the original museum also has been restored and now is just one wing of the museum.

There are galleries dedicated to the influence of the Quaker religion on Nantucket, the role of women and the culture of the Wampanoag Indians, who were living on the island in 1659, when the English arrived.

Other displays note the diversity in the whaling industry and include a portrait of Absalom Boston, an African American whaling captain who, in 1822, was the first to lead an all-black crew on a whaling voy-

On the museum's second floor is an air conditioned room that houses the museum's extensive scrimshaw collection.

Whaling crews would pass the time between spotting whales by etching pictures of the hunt, their girlfriends or wives and other scenes into whales' teeth that were distributed by the captain.

The breadth of the museum's collection seemed to impress visitors.

"It's incredible how much has been preserved here," said Philip Backus, of Hamden, Conn. "I'm an antiques collector and own harpoons, and I still learned something here."

What if you want to go?

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The Nantucket Whaling Museum features the skeleton of a 46-foot-long sperm whale, exhibits on the whaling trade, an extensive collection of scrimshaw and galleries on the role of women and influence of the Quaker religion on the island.

WHERE: Whaling Museum, 13 Broad St., Nantucket.

WHEN: Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thursday evenings until 9 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.

ADMISSION: \$15 for adults, \$8 for children 6-17.

MORE INFORMATION:

<http://www.nha.org> OR
(508) 228-1894 Ext. 0.