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"The Old Stone Bank"

THE J. C. HALL CO., PROV., R. I.

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**Whaling Days in
Rhode Island**



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"
Providence, R. I.

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Whaling Days in Rhode Island

THE difficult and dangerous art of killing whales in the old-time manner is a phase of New England history that will always provide the imaginative narrator with colorful material for endless tales of adventure that will unquestionably fascinate future generations even more than they do those of the present who may have been closer to the subject because they have seen one or two of the stout wooden ships and shaken the hand of one of the last of the stout-hearted men who went "down to the sea in ships". The first New Englanders learned whaling from the Indians who were entitled to the honor of starting the industry in America. When the white man learned the value of the flesh, oil and bone of the gigantic beasts, and he decided to pursue them for profit, the Indians, who had once pursued whales with stone-headed arrows and spears attached to short lines, sailed on American ships as harpooners and demonstrated their ability to capture and kill the animals that sometimes exceeded one hundred feet in length and often weighed as much as ninety tons.



As long as whales were plentiful in nearby waters, Nantucket held first place among the ports that sent men and ships in search of the valuable prizes, but when it became necessary to send the hunters to the Pacific and other far-distant waters, it meant the building of larger boats and the transfer of leadership to New Bedford since these ships would not go over the Nantucket bar. The pioneer of whale fishery at New Bedford was Joseph Russell who sent his ships out in 1765. The first whaling vessel launched there was named the Dartmouth, and she was one of the ships that carried into Boston harbor the tea that was thrown overboard, an act causing considerable controversy. The whaling industry increased rapidly there until 1857 when the New Bedford fleet numbered three hundred and twenty-nine vessels, valued at more than twelve million dollars, and employed approximately twelve thousand seamen. It was often stated that the population of that Massachusetts seaport was divided into three parts,—those away on a voyage, those returning, and those getting ready for the next trip.

Tradition holds that there was some interest in whaling among Rhode Islanders before the Revolution, but

the first attempt to engage in the industry as a commercial venture came after the War of 1812 when Joseph Smith of Warren fitted out the ship *Rosalie* for a whaling voyage to the Pacific. The first expedition was a failure—the *Rosalie* returned to the Narragansett Bay port with less than half a cargo, at a time when whales were plentiful. The owners were so discouraged with the dashing of their high hopes for quick profits that they laid up the ship at her wharf for nearly a year. However, she was eventually fitted out again and sent away for a second try at the game with an inexperienced but resourceful and determined shipmaster in command. His name was Joseph Gardiner, and he came back to Warren, after an exciting voyage, with a full cargo that netted handsome profits for the ship's owners.

Like the news of a gold-rush, the report of the *Rosalie*'s good fortune gave tremendous impetus to the whaling industry in Rhode Island. A second ship, the *Magnet*, was immediately purchased for Captain Gardiner, while Charles F. Brown, who had sailed as mate on the former voyage, was put in command of the *Rosalie*. Both expeditions were remarkably successful. The

North America, a third ship, was hurriedly equipped, manned and dispatched to the whaling grounds in the Pacific before the other two returned to port; and, from this point the fleet continued to grow until a maximum of twenty-six ships was reached, giving Warren first place among the whaling ports of the State.

Meanwhile, Warren's neighbor, the seafaring town of Bristol, was quick to see the opportunities in the new enterprise. Ship after ship that hailed from there was withdrawn from the merchant service and manned with Bristol men and youths who knew, or were anxious to learn, how to handle harpoons, lines and lances. Among the noteworthy whalers that spread their sails for the distant Pacific during the height of the whale hunting fever were the Corinthian, which was purchased at the time, and the Leonidas, the Roger Williams and the Governor Fenner, ships that had long been active in the Cuban trade. The Balance and the old General Jackson, ships that had been captured from the British by the famous privateer Yankee, were also impressed into the rapidly developing industry; so, the number of ships increased until Bristol boasted of a fleet of twenty ships, thereby holding a

place in Rhode Island whaling that was second only to nearby Warren.

Neither Providence nor Newport, at any time, engaged in whaling to the same extent or with the same amount of enthusiasm as did the smaller sister ports lying between on the shores of Narragansett Bay. The South America, a Providence ship commanded by a Captain Soule, made one of the most successful voyages in the history of whaling, while the Bowditch, also of Providence, made at least one profitable trip. The ship Lion, taken from the Chinese trade, and also the Ocean became well-known upon the whaling grounds, but, as a general thing, Providence was content to hold fast to the regular merchant service. It was much the same with Newport as it was with Providence. Several ships hailing from the port at the mouth of the Bay pursued the much-desired leviathans for a while, although at no time did Newport show any great interest in the business.

Occasionally, one of these early whalers would become a sort of a floating reform school for the young lads of the town who were getting pretty much beyond the control of parents and teachers. The ship Boy of Warren carried a crew of this order on two suc-

cessful voyages. It was said that the idea, which must have been rough medicine for some, worked well for all concerned; the shipmasters discovered that the boys were willing workers and efficient seamen; invariably they settled down after a year or two away from home and became useful citizens; and the parents were generally satisfied with the results.

Of course, many stories about the various phases of this interesting and fascinating industry have been told and retold in any number of sea romances and narratives, and these are becoming as familiar to lovers of adventure tales as the exciting stories of Indians and the winning of the far West. But, here is a sidelight of local whaling days that "Moby Dick" enthusiasts may not have heard about. When a dead whale had been towed back to the ship and its thick, greasy jacket reduced to oil in the "try works", then the crew would sometimes indulge in a kind of jubilee, a feature of which was the frying of an enormous batch of doughnuts in the clean, new fat, which had nothing of the rancid taste that was afterwards acquired from age. This may not sound particularly appetizing to those who have never had the pleasure of eating whale meat, nevertheless it was said by

those who knew first hand, that the flesh of the whale, when properly cooked, was at least as tasty as the general run of "boarding house steak".

In towns like Bristol and Warren where, as the saying goes, "everybody knew everybody else", and where the crew of a ship was made up of young men belonging in the village, the arrival of a returning whaler was an event that seemed to affect the entire community, either directly or through sympathy with those immediately interested. It might be that John or Frank who had sailed away in the proud ship many months ago had come back home again, and then it might be otherwise. Thus, it is easy to picture the scene along the waterfront when a long-looked-for ship finally put in her appearance. In many a home there would be a trembling suspense until the captain's boat came up to the head of the crowded pier and the best, or the worst, was reported to families and friends.

The decline of the whaling business was due to a variety of causes, chiefly the discovery of petroleum. Then too, whales became scarce in their customary Pacific Ocean haunts, their pursuers never dreaming that the great sea beasts had journeyed far away to the

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Arctic waters where they could disport themselves, practically unmolested, amid huge icebergs. But, soon this refuge was discovered by man who learned to hunt his prey with faster, larger ships, and he did his hunting with deadlier, surer but less romantic methods than those which the old time adventurers used when success or disaster depended upon the sure aim and stout arm of the bow oarsman, and when half a dozen fearless men in a frail craft knew that it was either "a dead whale or a stove boat".

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent upon request.

ADDRESS

"THE OLD STONE BANK"
86 South Main Street, Providence

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THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank", is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

"THE OLD STONE BANK"