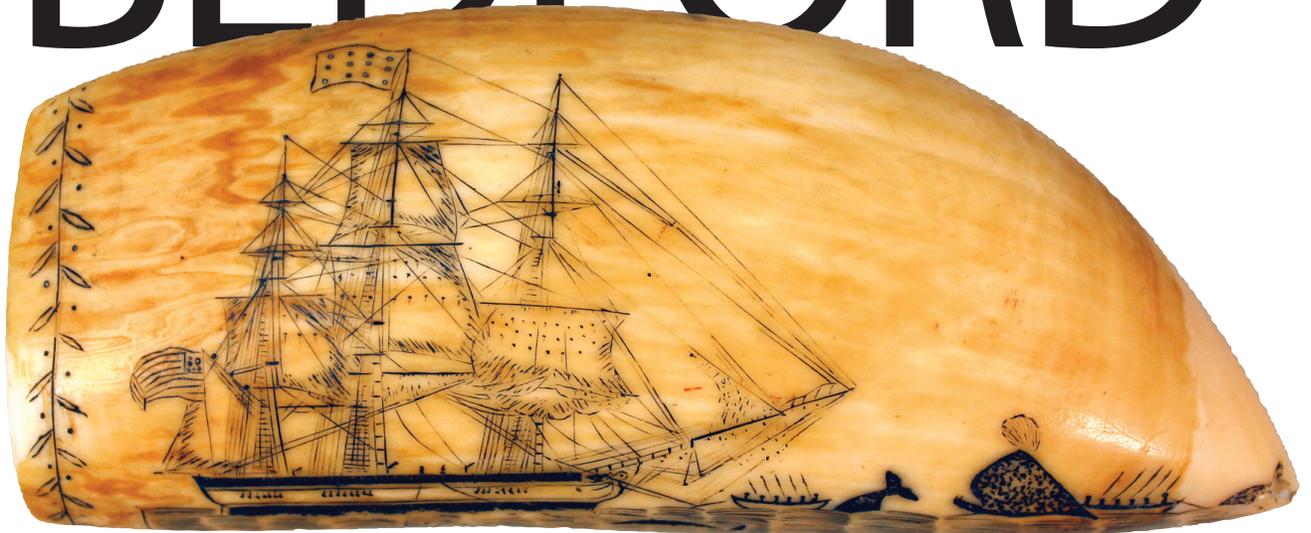


THE NEW BEDFORD



WHALING MUSEUM

LOOKING AT THE PAST WITH AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

By Cecilia Kiely



The half-size replica of whaling ship Lagoda remains a highlight for museum visitors.



ON YOUR FIRST VISIT TO THE **NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM,**

founded in 1906, you might expect to find the traditional New England historical site—old, musty, a bit out of touch. If you're traveling by land (as I was on a sunny Tuesday morning in mid-May), this feeling might be confirmed when you enter your destination into your phone's GPS and see that the museum's address is "18 Johnny Cake Hill." And when you exit 195 to Route 18, you'll pass a colorful fleet of commercial fishing boats and then navigate a maze of narrow cobblestone streets and alleyways before a quick turn spits you into the historic downtown district. Heading up to town on foot from the waterfront also adds to this impression. The New Bedford Whaling Museum looks like you might imagine: an imposing brick building on the hill. A cupola. A windvane in the shape of a whale.

But once you turn the corner and see the front entrance to the museum, it's clear there's more going on here than some ship replicas, whale skeletons, and the world's largest collection of scrimshaw. (Though if you're looking for any or all of those things—as I'll admit I was—you definitely won't be disappointed.)

In many ways, the main entrance—spanning two distinct buildings—represents the evolution of the museum itself. On the right is the original building, the National Bank of Commerce, built in 1883 and repurposed as the first home of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society in 1908. Now the entrance to the museum gift shop, this massive brick front features a classic wooden carving of a white whale, perched above a keystone arch window. On the left, the front of the new building looks like a modern library or contemporary art museum. There's a bright orange sculpture of a squid wrapping its tentacles around the sign. (Did you know that sperm whales eat giant squid?)

In addition to the main buildings, the museum exhibits now also include the renovated Seamen's Bethel and Historic Mariners' House across the street, recently reopened in a partnership with the New Bedford Port Society. And it's all now part of the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, established with the museum's help in 1996.

BRIDGING CENTURIES

Like many historical museums today, the New Bedford Whaling Museum walks this line between old and new, preserving aspects

of the traditional historical narrative while finding modern cultural relevance to old stories.

Of course they are appropriately obsessed with Herman Melville—they have a rotating gallery for Melvillian exhibits. (When I visit, the exhibit is focused on Captain Ahab's navigation techniques.) The museum hosts an annual Moby-Dick reading marathon. (I'm more surprised to find out that it only takes about 26 hours to read the entire book aloud than I am to hear that people fly in from all over the world for the event.) And the Seamen's Bethel has a small but prominent sign identifying a bench in the last row as "Herman Melville's Pew."

The new visitors' entrance, with its orange squid and modern glass, leads into a two-story atrium with a rotating exhibit. At the time of my visit the ground floor is showcasing boats designed by C. Raymond Hunt and W. Starling Burgess, including the iconic Boston Whaler. In fact, with a shiny Whaler on display alongside a pristinely restored 110 Series sloop greeting me upon entry, it might have felt more like a boat show than a museum exhibit, had it not been for the three giant whale skeletons hanging from the ceiling.

TOURING THE WHALING MUSEUM

I meet Tina Malott, the museum's marketing director who has arranged my tour, and Susan Grosart, one of the museum's expert docents, beneath these whale skeletons. Susan immediately jumps into tour guide mode, talking about the three baleen whales above our heads.

There's a humpback whale, a blue (66 feet long!), and a once-pregnant North Atlantic right whale, killed by a container ship just a month before her fetus would have been born. The blue whale was also hit by a ship. They're not sure how the humpback died, though it was missing its tongue, which hints to a killer whale attack.

At the top of the stairs, one of the newer permanent exhibits, "From Pursuit to Preservation," shows a full-scale relief mural of a whale ensnared in a fishing net with the title "The Problem of Marine Debris." Entering the next room in the display, you're greeted by a recording of sperm whale echolocation. A full-size whaleboat and the skeleton of a sperm whale are displayed side by side, and you can see

they're roughly the same length. In front of the whaleboat, a docent is talking to a group of high school students about harpoon design. This group from the Henderson School in Dorchester, Massachusetts, is one of the two school groups visiting the museum today. The other, a fourth grade class from Edgartown, Massachusetts, has started their field trip with a lesson on whale migration in one of the multimedia classrooms added in the recent renovation.

Even with the museum's renovated facilities and new exhibits, a major highlight remains one of its oldest exhibits: the half-size replica whaling ship *Lagoda*, donated in 1916 by Emily Bourne, the daughter of one of the wealthiest merchants of the era, Jonathan Bourne, Jr. (*Lagoda* was his favorite—i.e., most profitable—boat.) No room in the museum to house such a large exhibit? No problem. She donated an annex to house it as well. And most of the original collections were acquired from the descendants of ship owners.

Our tour of the main museum ends in one of the newest rooms: the Casa de Botes Discovery Center, a colorful interactive play area. When I return later that afternoon to take photos, the place is empty. Perfect. I hoist the sails, sit in the bright pink Azorean whaleboat and move the oars against the oarlocks. There's even a replica of a fo'c's'le with bunks and even some blankets so kids can lie down in the cramped quarters.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MUSEUM

When I ask about the evolution of the museum, when it started to shift focus from being an old bank building with a collection of art and nautical artifacts, both Susan and Tina point to the museum's new director, James Russell, who took the helm (sorry...) in 2008. During his tenure, he has overseen a major restoration and renovation, and the turnaround of an organization that had been struggling financially.

The whaling museum adapts to the needs of today's visitors, following the reverse course of its feature exhibit. While we as humans are moving from pursuing whales to preserving them, we're also moving from thinking of history as something that needs to be preserved—simply displaying artifacts for passive consumption—to something that should be engaged with, questioned, pursued.

My favorite exhibits were interactive and educational but decidedly low-tech. One featured a series of wooden sliders that revealed step-by-step the accounting of a seaman cashing out the end of a voyage to determine his "lay" or share of the profit. (Spoiler alert: The final slider revealed a share of \$1 and noted somewhat sarcastically that you were lucky to not come out in debt.) Another exhibit let you sniff three beakers filled with different whale oils—and compare the brown whale oils to the clear and much more expensive spermaceti. (Apparently whale oil is like vodka, the more you pay for it, the less it smells.)

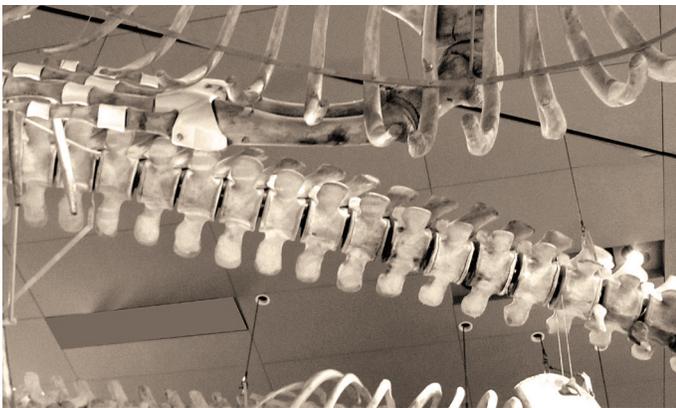
Science, technology, engineering, and math concepts are already naturally a part of the museum and the material highlighted. In fact, the new play area downstairs is in essence a collection of interactive displays highlighting STEM concepts disguised as play structures. There's a replica cask of whale oil, weighted appropriately, and two different ways to hoist it. One is a simple block; the other is a complex rigging of nearly a dozen. It's simple

Left: The face of the renovated New Bedford Whaling Museum juxtaposes the contemporary with the traditional. **Top:** The Seamen's Bethel (the 'Whaleman's Chapel' from *Moby-Dick*) memorializes sailors lost at sea. **Middle:** Kids make the perfect crew for the half-size *Lagoda* replica. **Bottom:** Original whaleboat displayed next to a sperm whale skeleton to show scale.





Left: Panoramas like this one were the original “moving pictures.”
Bottom: Three imposing baleen whale skeletons greet museum visitors on arrival.



but makes an effective point, whether the hoister is a five-year-old, a high school physics student, or a thirty-something English major vaguely recalling the concept of mechanical advantage.

What impresses me most about the museum’s educational focus is how the programs take a truly multidisciplinary approach, connecting history, literature, science, math, and cultural studies. The best example of this might be the museum’s Apprenticeship Program, which uses the museum’s resources as a training ground for high school students to realize their potential.

APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

I first find out about the museum’s apprenticeship program when we bump into the program’s dynamic new director, Christina Turner, a few minutes into my tour. (We’re still standing beneath the whale skeletons.)

The competitive three-year program offers local students from low-income families a unique combination of college preparation,

experiential education, and job training. Enrolling six students in grades 11 and 12 in its first cohort, the apprenticeship program, now in its seventh year, has 18 students total—six students in each grade.

Equipping students with the skills needed to succeed in school is a main goal of the program—and it does that well. All 53 of the students who have completed the program so far have graduated from high school, and nearly all (94%) have pursued secondary education, whether college, military service, or professional certification programs. Unlike many other college prep programs, though, the program provides students with a true apprenticeship experience—a paid job working in the museum and learning on-the-job skills. To date, more than 20 of the 53 alumni have returned to the museum as volunteers, interns, or even employees. In fact, seven former apprentices are currently interning or working at the museum.

In some ways it seems like the apprenticeship program is the modern way to do what working on a whaleboat did for many young people in the 19th century: expose them to new ideas, bring them together around a common goal, and help them realize their potential by giving them real responsibility—only, of course, the apprenticeship program has removed the constant risk of death or dismemberment and the exploitative labor practices.

Providing real employment opportunities for youth in the public schools also shows that the museum values community members as a resource, and engaging the local community does seem to be a genuine priority. Even the skeleton of the blue whale hanging in the atrium was named by New Bedford school kids.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT THE WHALING MUSEUM: OR, THE WHITE WHALE

After my tour, I walk down the hill to the waterfront. (Fun fact: The museum’s quaint address, Johnny Cake Hill, was named for the townspeople who used to picnic up on the hill, presumably eating johnnycakes, while watching the ships enter and leave the port.)

Though the city of New Bedford is no longer the richest city in the country as it was in the 19th century at the peak of the whaling era, the Port of New Bedford is currently the most profitable commercial fishing port in the United States. Scallops are the new whale here, and almost 50 million pounds of scallops are brought in to New Bedford each year. But today is a quiet day in the working port—the ferry terminal is deserted and the scallop boats are docked in the well-protected harbor, belying the fact that commercial fishing remains one of the most dangerous jobs today. (This fact will not be lost on visitors to the Seamen’s Bethel with its marble memorials listing the captains and crew of too many fishing vessels lost in recent years.)

The New Bedford Whaling Museum doesn’t simply preserve the past nor does it gloss over the inconsistencies and inequities of our history in pursuit of a shinier future. If anything, the museum stands firmly in the present—rooted in New Bedford’s rich maritime traditions and forging true connections between the city’s diverse communities. So whether you want to better understand life on a whaling ship, learn more about the whales themselves, experience science disguised as a playground that’s fun for the whole family, or see a successful apprenticeship model for the modern age in action, the New Bedford Whaling Museum is worth a visit, by land or by sea. ■

