"How it is, there is no telling, but islanders seem to make the best whalemen."

HERMAN MELVILLE

In the 1800s, thousands of voyages, tens of thousands of men burned hundreds of thousands of whales by travelling millions of miles across the sea. Today, countless Azorean and Cape Verdean descendants of the whaling industry make up a culturally rich community across the United States with the Port of New Bedford at its heart.
The New Bedford Whaling Museum was founded in 1903. The Museum’s mission is to interest and educate the public in the interaction of humans with whales worldwide and over time, and in the unique history, arts and culture of the region.

With collections in excess of 750,000 works of art, objects, artifacts, and ephemera, the Museum stewards a complete whale skeleton, the largest boat model in the U.S., the largest painting in the U.S., and the largest whaling focused collection in the world.

The Portuguese and Cape Verdean archives and their centrality in the Luso-American community puts the Museum in a unique position to tell the compelling yet under-appreciated story that highlights the significant Lusophone contribution to the cultural heritage of the U.S.

The Board of Trustees and its Portuguese and Cape Verdean Advisory Committees, in cooperation with the National Park Service have endorsed initiatives to tell an inclusive story of the Lusophone contribution to the U.S.

Additional support comes from the following: the Embassy of Portugal and the Portuguese Consulate in New Bedford, San Francisco, and Boston; the Embassy of the Republic of Cape Verde and the Cape Verdean Consulate in Boston; Brown University, UMASS Dartmouth, Bristol Community College, U.C. Berkeley and Boston University; and the Portuguese American Leadership Council of the U.S.

AN EXHIBITION FROM THE
New Bedford Whaling Museum

Founded, in part by, the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism, the William M. Wood Foundation and the William E. Schrafft & Bertha E. Schrafft Charitable Trust
Yankee Baleeiros!
The Shared Legacies of Luso and Yankee Whalers

This exhibition celebrates the intertwined stories of the Azorean, Cape Verdean, and Brazilian diaspora in the United States from early immigration in the 18th century to recent immigration patterns in the latter half of the 20th century. Explore how the Lusophone diaspora is integral to the development of this nation and see how distinct cultures and communities, who share similar languages, are linked by maritime commerce as well as by similar motivations for coming to the United States.

It was on whaling voyages that the first Azorean and Cape Verdean mariners interacted with and often joined American whalers. Bracketed by 4 continents, whether on isolated islands in the sweep of the trade winds, or in the “toe-hold” early coastal settlements of Brazil, the Atlantic Ocean provides a terraqueous stage, for it was on its flanks a mobile bridge of upheaval that spanned the sea.

The New Bedford Whaling Museum’s collection of Portuguese and Cape Verdean archives and its centrality in the Luso-American community puts it in a unique position to tell a compelling yet under-appreciated story that highlights the significant Lusophone contribution to the cultural heritage of the United States.

Luso-America

The US Census data suggests that 3 million people in the U.S. self-identify with Portuguese, Cape Verdean or Brazilian ancestry. These distinct cultures are inextricably linked historically through heritage, language, and the pursuit of opportunity buttressed by the international maritime network created by Yankee whaling, with the Port of New Bedford as the major gateway to the American Dream.

The Greater Providence-Fall River-New Bedford corridor is home to the largest Lusophone community in the United States. One of the largest Brazilian populations in the U.S. lives in the Greater New Bedford area, with large Lusophone communities also in Florida, California, and New Jersey.

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Words to know:

Baleeiros: Portuguese word for “whalers”
Lusophone: Portuguese-speaking people
Fogo: Portuguese and Crioulo for “fire”
So Sabi means “so good!”

Luso is derived from the Latin word Lusitanus of Lusitania, an ancient region corresponding to modern Portugal.

As you walk through Yankee Baleeiros!, consider this:
1. Do the stories of Portuguese, Cape Verdean and Brazilian immigrants resonate with you?
2. Does the exhibit give you an understanding of the 19th century global whaling industry?
3. If you were to immigrate to the United States today would your experience be different?
4. Explore broad themes surrounding the pursuit of the “American Dream”

Background Image: Clifford W. Ashley photograph of crewmen at work aboard the bark S
Sunbeam in 1904.

Bottom-left Image: Clifford W. Ashley’s Whaler and Bumboats at Brava, a 1907 painting of vendors selling fresh supplies alongside an anchored whaleship.

Bottom-right Image: William H. Tripp photograph of owners, captian, and crew on the deck of the bark Wanderer prior to embarking on the last American whaling voyage of a square-rigged vessel. The Wanderer was wrecked in a storm on Charity Island in August 1924.
Among the earliest of the European seaborne empires, Portuguese colonial influences spread from “New World” Brazil to Goa on the Indian sub-continent and into the East Indies. 16th century Portuguese mariners exploited their shipbuilding expertise to round the Cape of Good Hope in their efforts to bypass the centuries-old continental Asian Silk Road.  

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Arabic and African seafarers traveled to Cabo Verde. Cartography and hydrography were in their infancy in the 17th century, and winds, currents and seasonal weather conditions forced mariners to follow the sea-paths of least resistance. Prior to the ability to determine latitude, maritime trade routes from Europe followed familiar patterns, such as hugging the coast of Africa rather than taking off shore navigations. Sometimes not to the advantage of nearby colonies, such as Goa. In this manner the Portuguese India armadas began to open sea routes that centuries later would become the pathways for American whalers and traders. 

American colonists relied upon sea charts compiled by English cartographers who drew largely from Portuguese geographical knowledge. Pedro Reinel (1462-1542) and Diego Ribeiro (fl. 1520s), for instance, drew two of the earliest reliable charts of the Atlantic oceans that provided valuable information to other European explorers. These works helped usher in the Age of Discovery, near the end of which saw the settlement of North America by Europeans. 

During the Peninsular War (1807-1814) Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) invaded Portugal and Spain, resulting in the seat of the King of Portugal relocating to Brazil from Lisbon. Inspired by the spirit of independence ignited by the American and French Revolutions, Brazil renounced its bonds to Portugal in 1822. Foreign oil was prohibited in Brazil, so the colony supplied all of its own lighting needs through the local whale fisheries. While water was consumed locally, by the 18th century the Portuguese shore fisheries had collapsed due to overfishing of coastal species and competition from American and other European pelagic whalers. 

The New Bedford whaling fleet visited a number of Brazilian ports. The island of Santa Catarina was an attractive port of call for ships to refuel, repair, and repair vessels, while keeping down the cost of provisions. Many mariners either joined whaling crews or gained their discharge. Brazil was a favorite of the European whaling fleets as the slave traders encountered little slave resistance in the region. 

Significantly, the port of Rio de Janeiro was well depicted in the Russell Purrington Panorama. Among the many facets of this view of the port is the presence of a U.S. naval ship-of-the-line anchored in the harbor. The Brazil Squadron (1826-1905) operated out of Rio de Janeiro. Its presence was engaged in protecting American shipping in the South Atlantic and playing an important role in suppressing the trade of enslaved African people, working in concert with the Africa Squadron to stop the illegal trade of human cargo. 

In 1606, Diogo Botelho, the Governor of the Portuguese colony in Brazil, contracted Basque whalers to establish a whaling industry to hunt the right whales abundant along the coast. The Basques managed the small fishery until the mid-18th century, when the Portuguese took over, increasing its size and profitability. Hunting from shore stations, the whalers processed their catch and transported the oil and bone to Rio de Janeiro, where all that was not used in the colony was exported to Lisbon and elsewhere.

Brazilian Baleeiros

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Identity, Perception, & Reception

Lusophone immigrants were not all treated equally when they arrived in the U.S. Consider when Cape Verdean and Azorean whalers, and their families who followed them, came ashore. The welcome these two groups received might have been quite different. These inequalities persisted for over a century. Through the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, how these populations self-identified mirrored the post-Civil War struggle for Civil Rights. For example, a Cape Verdean immigrant could have three separate nationalities over the course of a lifetime: first as a Portuguese citizen from Cabo Verde, next as a naturalized U.S. citizen and lastly as a Cape Verdean citizen after 1975. Overdue the Civil Rights struggle and the U.S., and you can begin to appreciate the complicity with which self-identification and perception.

New Bedford can claim a proud legacy as it was and is today a welcoming home for immigrants. It was common knowledge that the predominantly Quaker-run town espoused an egalitarian vision of the future of the Middle Atlantic region. Yankee whaling was also relatively egalitarian, especially compared to other industries of the period. Particularly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the labor market was difficult to understand. But rather than being an anomaly in the industry, the concentration of capital, resources, ease of access to markets and industry-dominance put it first amongst its peers. The rise and fall of this 19th century energy business—nurtured to its maturity, then gradually replaced by the next boom in textiles—left its indelible imprint on the psyche of the city and on the shaping of a young nation.

In the 19th century, the port city of New Bedford was a global center of the whaling business and the wealthiest city per capita in the nation. The business economic imperatives, community and agency existed during the peak of whaling, making New Bedford a “Silicon Valley” of its day. The concentration of capital, resources, new access to markets and industry-dominance put it first amongst its peers. The rise and fall of this 19th century energy business—nurtured to its maturity, then gradually replaced by the next boom in textiles—left its indelible imprint on the psyche of the city and on the shaping of a young nation.

The expansion of this industry to far flung regions of the world was a catalyst for immigration. New Bedford became a veritable “Cape Verdean Ellis Island.” By virtue of their geographic locations in the Atlantic, the Azoreans and Cape Verdeans were inclined to look to the sea, and westward for opportunity. Whaling captains recognized their skills and encouraged them to join as crew. Over time, friends and families followed. Reoccurring patterns to immigration ensued, including desires for family reunification and the strong bonds of fraternity and fellowship, and for practical reasons such as military conscription, freedom from political repression or simply a desire to seek economic opportunity.

More than 70% of all Cape Verdean immigrants to the U.S. between 1800-1921 arrived via the Port of New Bedford.
Azorean and Cape Verdean crews could draw on centuries of maritime traditions. Their skills were so respected that by the 1860s, they comprised upwards of 60% of whaling crews. They were often willing to accept lower shares of the profits of a whaling voyage in their eagerness to leave the islands and make new homes in the U.S. By the 1920s, a majority of officers and harpooners on the 13 remaining New Bedford whalers hailed from Cabo Verde.

For many, joining whaling crews was often the best opportunity to escape the drought, famine, oppression and poverty of their homeland. Other men left to escape conscription in the Royal Portuguese army, which fought periodically in wars in Europe and the colonies.

By the 1840s, increasing numbers of whalemen from the Azores joined the crews of New Bedford vessels and began to settle in the city. Cape Verdeans began arriving in substantial numbers after the 1850s. A significant part of the population was descended from Portuguese colonists and black African enslaved people who spoke Crioulo, a language that evolved from a mixture of Portuguese and other African languages, beginning with the settlement of Cabo Verde in the 15th century.

Immigration patterns changed over time. In the late 18th century through to the 1920s, Madeiran and mainland Portuguese joined communities already established in the U.S. drawn by the emerging textile industries dominant in Fall River and New Bedford.

With the advent of the Packet Trade, large populations from different island groups, including women and children, began arriving in the U.S. Changes in immigration laws in the 1920s slowed immigration considerably.

In certain cases, natural disasters propelled migration. Similar to the disastrous Mount Fogo eruption in 1847, thousands of Azoreans chose to immigrate to the U.S. following the 1957-58 devastating Capelinhos volcanic eruptions on the island of Faial (one of 9 islands of the Azorean archipelago). Senators John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Henry Cabot Lodge of Vermont sponsored a bill and signed by Vice President Richard Nixon, leading to the Act for the Relief of Distressed Aliens “who, because of natural calamity in the Azores Islands … are in urgent need of assistance for the essentials of life.” The eruption of the Capelinhos volcano led to a wave of Portuguese immigration that brought more than 125,000 Azoreans to the U.S. between 1960 and 1980.

After Cabo Verde gained its independence in 1975, immigration patterns changed again with newcomers hailing from more of the islands and in greater numbers.

Immigration to the U.S. from Brazil is equally segmented. Surmised from genealogical records, anecdotal evidence suggests that a pattern of immigration from the Old Country to Brazil and then to the U.S. continued for the next two hundred years. Immigration also increased during the Portuguese Colonial Wars in Africa in the late 1970s and after 1974, a wave of independence movements altered the political complexion of former Portuguese protectorates. As these dependencies fought for sovereignty, it precipitated a flight of Portuguese expatriates to Brazil and from the U.S. Large scale illegal immigration occurred in the 1980’s and 1990’s as a result of economic instability in Brazil.

After joining the crews of New Bedford vessels, many whalemens settled in the city and were later joined by their friends and families.

Bonds of Fraternity and Fellowship

From the 1800’s to 1921, immigrants from Cabo Verde were the first people of African descent to come willingly to America. Immigration patterns changed over time. In the late 18th century through to the 1920s, Madeiran and mainland Portuguese joined communities already established in the U.S. drawn by the emerging textile industries dominant in Fall River and New Bedford.

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At first active largely in the North Atlantic and Eastern Arctic, by the late 18th century commercial whalers were hunting sperm whales off the west coast of South America. By the 1820s the coast of Japan, the Central Pacific, and Australia were being exploited. Whaling began on the Northwest Coast of North America by the 1830s, and by the 1840s whales in Russian seas and the coast of Alaska were pursued. Whaling had become a global industry.

Processing a whale was a necessary step for commercial whalers. After a whale was killed, it was towed back to shore, to be “cut-in” and “boiled out.” Men “cut-in” or “flensed” a whale by peeling the blubber from the carcass and chopping it up for rendering in heated iron pots on shore. By 1750 American whalers broke the bond that limited the hunt to near shore. With shipboard tryworks, oil was rendered from blubber on board, allowing whales to be pursued in the open ocean and processed immediately. The tryworks, located on the main deck, consisted of two heated metal pots set into the brick furnace. The team worked together on the whale to peel off the flesh and render the blubber. The harrowing ride concluded when the crew brought the whale to the ship, maneuvered the whaleboat alongside it, and drove the whale to death with thrusts of sharp iron lances.

In the widely adopted Yankee method, whales were spotted in the open ocean from the masthead, boats were lowered and the hunt began. When a boat was nearly atop the huge animal, hand-held harpoons were hurled into the whale, and once held fast, whaleboat and whale were tied together as the whale tried to flee. A “Nantucket sleigh ride” followed while the whalemen dangerously sped across the waves, pulled by an angry and injured whale. The harrowing ride concluded when the crew brought the boat alongside the spent whale and, with thrusts of sharp iron lances, dealt the killing blow.

Whales were brought alongside the ship for flensing. During processing, the men worked precariously along a simple wooden cutting stage, the dead whale and circling sharks a mere slip away.

“The death to the living, long live the killers, success to sailors wives & greasy luck to whalers”
—Frederick Myrick, American Scrimshander, circa 1828-29

Commercial Whaling and Yankee Innovation

Europeans have long sought whales for commercial purposes, particularly whale oil. The Basques, among the first Europeans to hunt whales, were involved in this industry over 1,000 years ago. Dutch and English enterprises in the 1600s began employing Basques and adopting their hunting methods when they established commercial whale fisheries in the North Atlantic. Similarly, colonists in British North America in the mid-1600s used their proximity to coastal whale migration routes to hunt whales, and thus began the history of American whaling. Like the native subsistence whalers, whaling remained close to shore where the huge animals could be towed in and processed on land.
From Pursuit to Preservation

Today, Brazil, Portugal, and the U.S. have embraced whale watching and whale conservation. The cultural underpinnings and attitudinal shifts to whaling and whales in the Lusophone communities in the U.S. and abroad has evolved, from the whale as a source of survival and symbolic power through its exploitation for commercial wealth, to today when laws and regulations strictly define human interaction with marine mammals. Leading research in scientific inquiry and contemporary methods of observation and study now emanates from many of these former whaling ports.

The U.S., Brazil and Portugal are world leaders in current scientific marine mammal research and regulatory practices to protect and rebuild the populations. In addition, the economic shift from whaling to involutions of whale-watching is proving highly lucrative.

At the same time, the Port of New Bedford, from which the last whaleship sailed under the command of American American Captain Azorean-Antone Edwards, the wind energy industry is maturing a century later. One might think that the whaleheads of this century being harnessed as an alternate energy source, and once again New Bedford can remain like in the 1800s—the city that lights the world.

Ironically, for the millions of whales killed and the tens of millions of dollars earned in the 19th and 20th centuries, today whale watching is a multi-billion dollar global industry with Portugal, Brazil and the U.S. leading the way.

Background:

Left-top:
The seas batter the hull of the Wanderer on the rocks at Cuttyhunk on August 16, 1924, photograph by Albert Cook Church.

Left-bottom:
Size comparison of different whale species, illustrations by Uko Gorter.