

History of Caribbean whaling is being written in Arkansas

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

By the middle of the 19th century whale oil was as important as petroleum oil is today: It provided the main source of lighting in American and European countries.

Other whaling products at the time included a long list of commodities — margarine, cooking oil, candles, soaps, cosmetics, perfumes, animal food, corsets, umbrellas and fertilizer. Some people consumed (and still consume) whale meat.

But the mineral oil in the form of petroleum was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1859. That, together with the progressive decline of whale populations, marked the beginning of the end for the American whale oil industry.

In the 2006 History of Whaling Symposium that took place recently at the New Bedford Whaling History Museum in Massachusetts, I pointed out another possible factor contributing to this decline — lack of quality and quantity of labor.

In the thousands of whaling log-books that have been preserved, one can find how Yankee (New England)

whalers left for the Caribbean with fewer than enough sailors needed. The captains wrote that one of the reasons for the voyages was to “recruit” sailors.

That is not entirely surprising, and one can point to a number of factors that may have contributed to that lack of labor. For one thing, in 1849 gold was discovered in California and that attracted a lot of people who dreamed of becoming rich overnight. One of the industries that suffered the most was the whaling, whose crews deserted in great numbers every time they touched port on the West Coast.

Then came the increasing industrialization of the U.S. with more and more people working in factories than on ships.

At the same time, the difference of wages between merchant sailors and whalers started to widen. That, together with the harsh conditions on whaling vessels, long voyages lasting up to several years at a time, and the debt the sailors accrued by consuming the whaling companies’ supplies and services, made the whaling trade less and less attractive.

As time went by more blacks and



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“Capturing a sperm whale,” a 1859 painting by American artist William Page, captures a scene from a fictional whaling vessel. Sperm whales were one of the target species for “Yankee” whalers in the Caribbean.

recent immigrants joined the whaling crews to the point that they made up to two thirds of the crew, and some blacks even rose to the rank of captain. This was one of the few occasions one could see an African American commanding whites in 19th-century America.

But even the increasing number of

minorities was not enough to man the whaling vessels. That is why they started recruiting natives from the Caribbean. Those Caribbean natives were more than happy to work for little or nothing in exchange for a free passage to America. Some of

PLEASE SEE HISTORY, B4

HISTORY: ASU contributes to study

FROM PAGE B1

them such as William Wallace from St. Vincent and the Grenadines went to New Bedford, Mass., and learned the business of shipbuilding, returning later to his native land and beginning a shore-whaling enterprise of his own.

Another was William Shorey from Barbados, who embarked to Boston as a cabin boy and eventually became the most famous black whaling captain in the history of America.

This is part of the research carried out by graduate students and myself at Arkansas State University and has gained some attention by the fact that a university in a land-locked state is producing such valuable information on maritime history.

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