

# Editorial Note

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This issue of the *Long Island History Journal (LIHJ)* is devoted to presenting new research on the history of whaling, an industry of singular importance to our region from the 17th to the 19th centuries. This focus is especially timely because in recent months, whales—from playful white belugas to massive barnacle-laden humpbacks—have been sighted increasingly around Long Island, thrilling the public as species not seen in decades have ventured into local waters. Breathless reports from boaters who’ve spotted a telltale spout or witnessed a whale breaching skyward have made the local news. Scientists have theorized why whales are returning, citing such factors as reduced pollution and fishing restrictions that boosted populations of menhaden, a favorite food of whales. Local officials have issued stern warnings for people to keep a respectful distance from these sojourning visitors.<sup>[1]</sup>

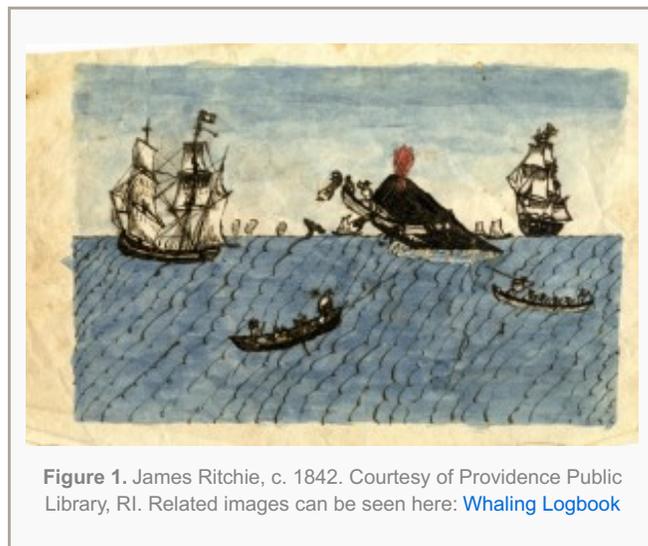


Figure 1. James Ritchie, c. 1842. Courtesy of Providence Public Library, RI. Related images can be seen here: [Whaling Logbook](#)

Given the usual rarity of whales, the general public often is only vaguely aware of their enormous significance for past generations of Long Islanders. The earliest Native inhabitants revered whales and relied on their meat for subsistence. During the colonial era, the rights to drift whales that washed ashore became a flashpoint in Indian-settler relations. With rising demand for whale products in the 19th century, over-hunting devastated many species. Whalers were forced to pursue their occupation in distant oceans, connecting Long Island to natural resources and markets around the world. Many local men, especially African Americans and Native Americans, found economic opportunities in the whaling fleets that eluded them at home. While some of this history is well documented, the authors featured in this special issue are enriching our understanding by delving into previously unknown or understudied archival and archaeological sources.

This special issue is the product of a symposium, entitled, “Long Island Whalers: Navigating a Changing World,” held at the Stony Brook University Humanities Institute on April 15, 2016. (Selected video excerpts from this event are available on the Humanities Institute’s website.) The resulting articles examine such varied topics as the impact of whaling on Long Island communities, the business model of a Sag Harbor whaleboat builder, the lyrical content of Long Island whalemens’ songs, and the central role of Native American and African American expertise in developing the global whale fishery. The symposium’s keynote speaker was Dr. Nancy Shoemaker from the University of Connecticut, who has just published two new books (reviewed in this issue) on Native American whalers who served in the Pacific. Her article highlights the remarkable story of five Shinnecock brothers who all had whaling careers.

The two final articles offer reflections on the challenges of preserving the memories of this important history. David Bunn Martine, Director of the Shinnecock Nation Cultural Center and Museum, discusses the importance of ancient whaling traditions to the Shinnecock people, drawing on the personal history of his own family which included accomplished whalers. Georgette Grier-Key, Executive Director of the Eastville Community Historical Society, emphasized the painful lessons learned from failed efforts to save the historic home of Pyrrhus Concer, an African American whaler in Southampton. In addition, Nomi Dayan, Director of the Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum, has compiled a photo essay, that includes some extraordinary images of whalemens at work, drawn from the museum’s collections.

We are fortunate that our region boasts several museums, such as the Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum and

the Sag Harbor Whaling Museum, whose mission is to preserve and interpret this important history. They strive to educate the public about Long Island's significant involvement in commercial whaling, its devastating effects on many cetaceans, and the threatened state of many species and their habitats today. We hope that the research highlighted in this special issue will increase our shared knowledge and encourage public interest in supporting these institutions.

This special issue of the *Long Island History Journal* and the symposium were underwritten by a grant from the **Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation**. We gratefully acknowledge their generous support of our on-going efforts to publish and distribute original new research about Long Island's past. We are also indebted to Jenna Coplin since this project began as her brainchild. After receiving a Paul Cuffe Memorial Fellowship (awarded by the Munson Institute at Mystic Seaport), Jenna was excited about the upswell in new scholarship on whaling and urged the *LIHJ* to devote an issue to the subject. Serving as Guest Editor, she has been fully involved in achieving that goal. Extensive editorial and technical assistance were also provided by Richard Tomczak and Jordan Helin, History graduate students at Stony Brook. Thank you, Jenna, Rick, and Jordan! Many thanks also to Professor Gary Marker, Professor Kathleen Wilson, Adrienne Unger, Rebecca Bair, Dean Sacha Kopp, and, of course to all of our authors and symposium attendees who helped make it a memorable occasion.

We would be remiss here not to offer our greatest appreciation to Dr. John Strong, who inarguably has contributed more than any other historian to researching the history of Native peoples on Long Island. In addition to writing four ground-breaking books (with a fifth on the way) and many articles, including for the *LIHJ*, John has been a dedicated teacher, valued mentor, fierce advocate, and dear friend to many. After fifty years in Southampton, he and his wife will soon be relocating to Maryland to be closer to family. While we will miss having John as a neighbor, we will continue to seek out his wisdom. Meanwhile, his meticulous, insightful scholarship will remain the gold standard for Long Island history.

Today, whale-watching tours allow us to admire these amazing creatures up close. The delighted cries of awe and wonder when we glimpse Leviathan emerging from the deep underscore the enduring fascination that whales hold for humans—now armed with digital cameras rather than steel-tipped harpoons. While the Golden Age of whaling is long gone, romantic mythologies about it endure as an integral part of American identity. As the authors in this issue remind us, however, heady accounts of whalers' derring-do in relentless pursuit of their prey can overlook the harsh realities of an industry fraught with risks, dangers, and uncertain profits; a brutal industry that eventually proved unsustainable, after the eviscerated bodies of whales, thousands upon thousands, were gruesomely rendered into industrial commodities to fuel American progress. We hope that this special issue will further our readers' appreciation for all that went into making whaling such a major aspect of Long Island's maritime heritage.

**Jennifer L. Anderson, Associate Editor**

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## Notes

[1] CBS News report entitled, "Long Island Sound Whale Watching," July 26, 2016. Video courtesy of CBS 2 (available on Youtube). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFVUEmjerC8>