The Whalehunt: A Tale in Images

Photo: 4 Whaleboats in Pursuit. Whaling Museum of Cold Spring Harbor.

The following Images are from the collection of The Whaling Museum & Education Center of Cold Spring Harbor.

They were taken by Long Island scientist Robert Cushman Murphy while aboard the Daisy (1912-1913).

They provide a unique insight into the actual whalehunt & processing of the blubber.

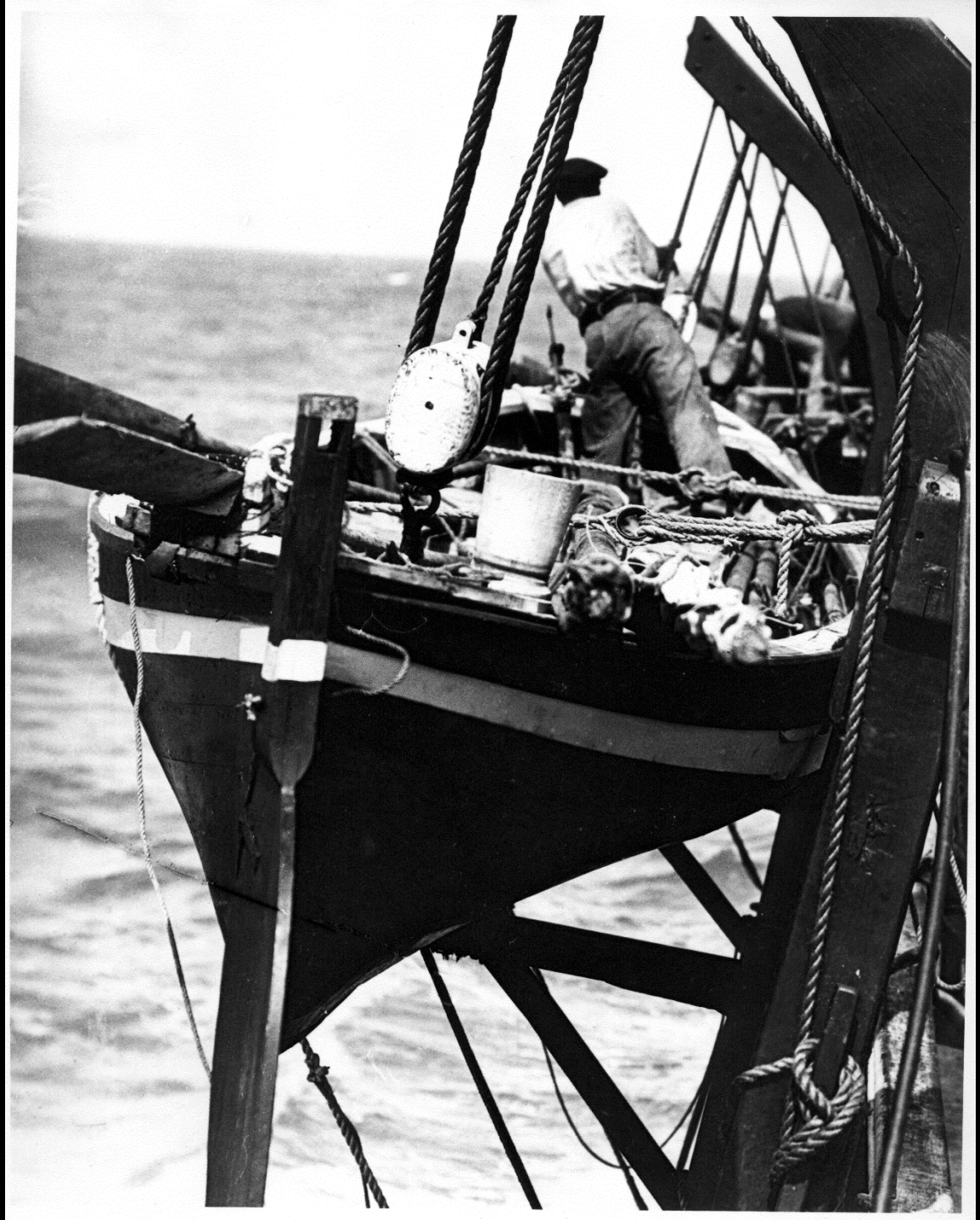
In 1871-72 Nehemiah and son George built the 439-ton brig Daisy in Setauket. The Daisy, with ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy aboard, sailed on one of the last sail-powered whaling expeditions in 1912-13.

The story of his experiences was recorded by Murphy in his book Logbook for Grace.

(In 1916, while carrying a cargo of beans, the Daisy sprung a leak; the beans reportedly swelled and the ship sunk.)

Two whalers stand in the ship's lookout stations for two-hour shifts, located high on the ship's masthead 100 feet above the deck. They wait to catch sight of a bursting spout in the monotonous landscape. Prizes, such as tobacco or money, often went to the first sightings of a whale. Whalers would also report sightings of other ships, weather changes, and other wildlife. The greenhand on the right is Conrad Peters of Dominica.

“Blows! Thar she blows! Dead ahead!” A sperm whale bursts to the surface after a deep dive. The crew quickly springs into action.

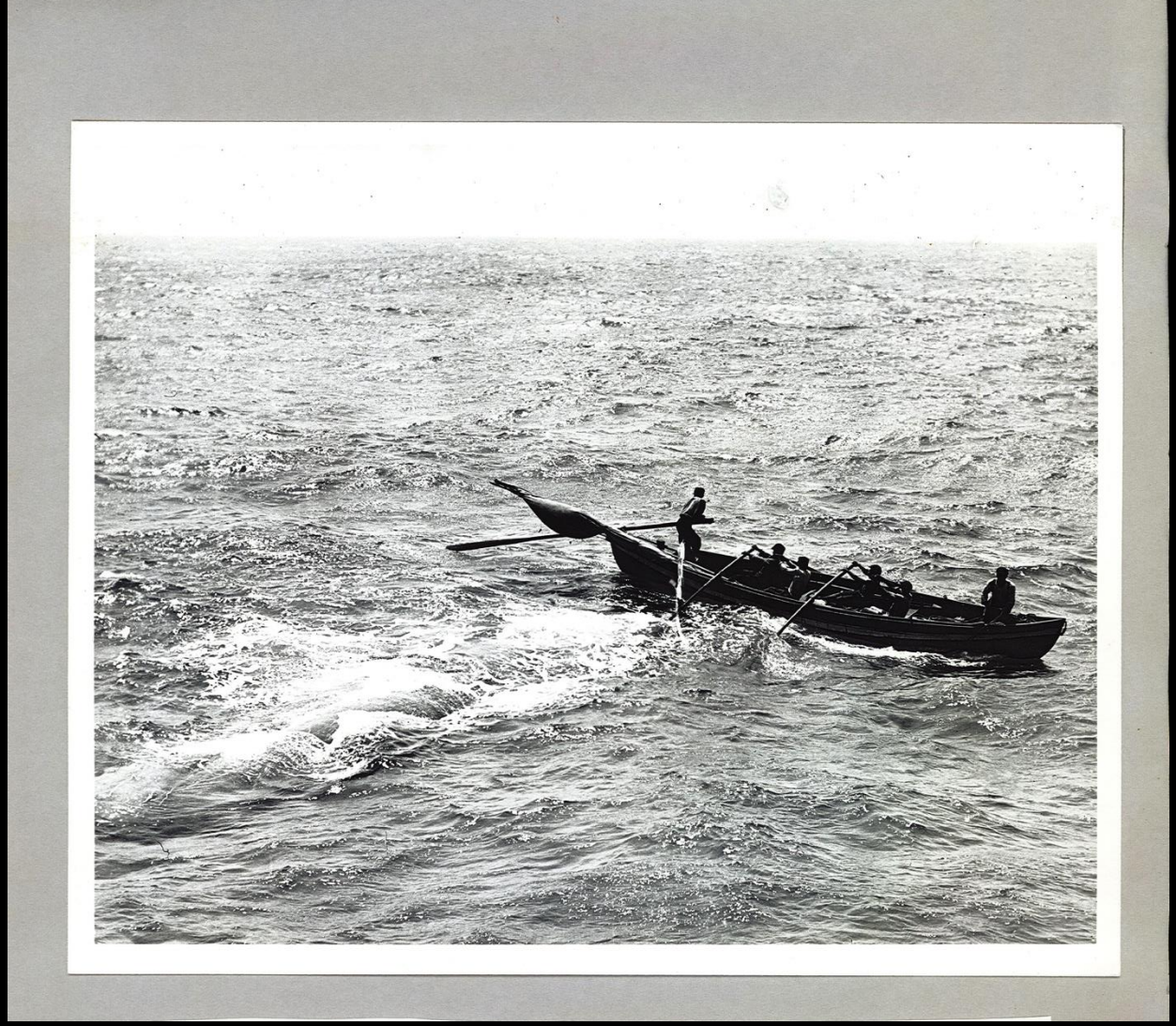


There were always 6 men working in a whaleboat; 5 would sit at their rowing positions, three to starboard and two to port, and the sixth was the boat header in charge. The harpooner would sit at the bow. Note the loggerhead, a wooden post to the right of the pulley, around which whale line was wrapped.

“Lower away!” After a whale sighting, the captain would give command to lower the whaleboats. 2-3 were typically used in a whalehunt; it was important to team together in case one boat was capsized or wrecked by the whale.

Technology meets toil.

Because of the uneven rowing manpower inherent in five rowing positions, the oar length varies between sixteen and eighteen feet in length to compensate. Oars were marked with 1-5 stripes at their tips, which designate their specific rowing positions.



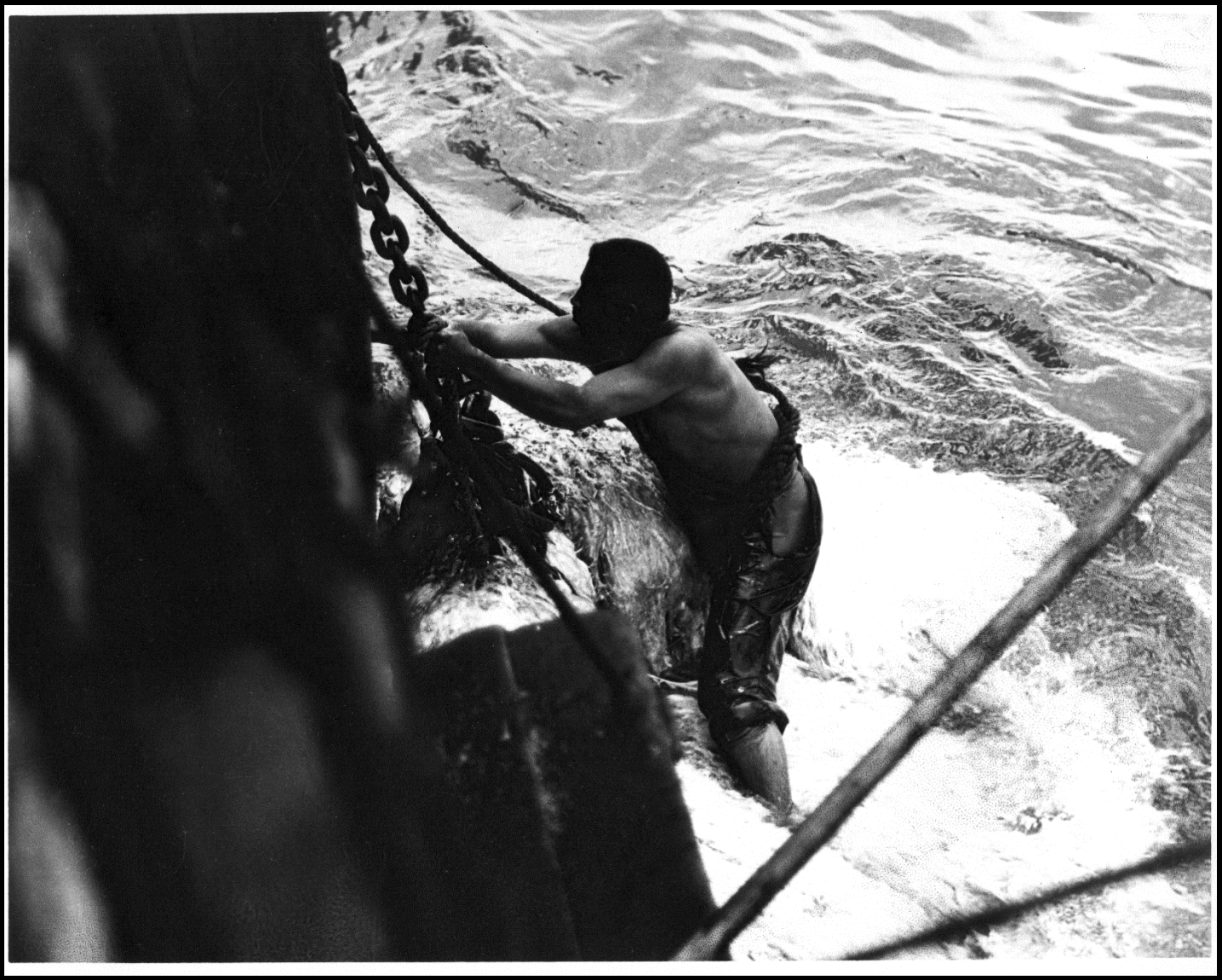
When the end of the whale's life was near, the harpooner and boatheader would switch places, and the boatheader would kill the whale by using a lance, which has a long, thin blade. In the event of an emergency (such as a quickly diving whale, or a very angry whale), the harpooner would use an ax to cut the line free. As a last resort, a bomb gun to be used in defense of a whale.

Whaling Museum Collection

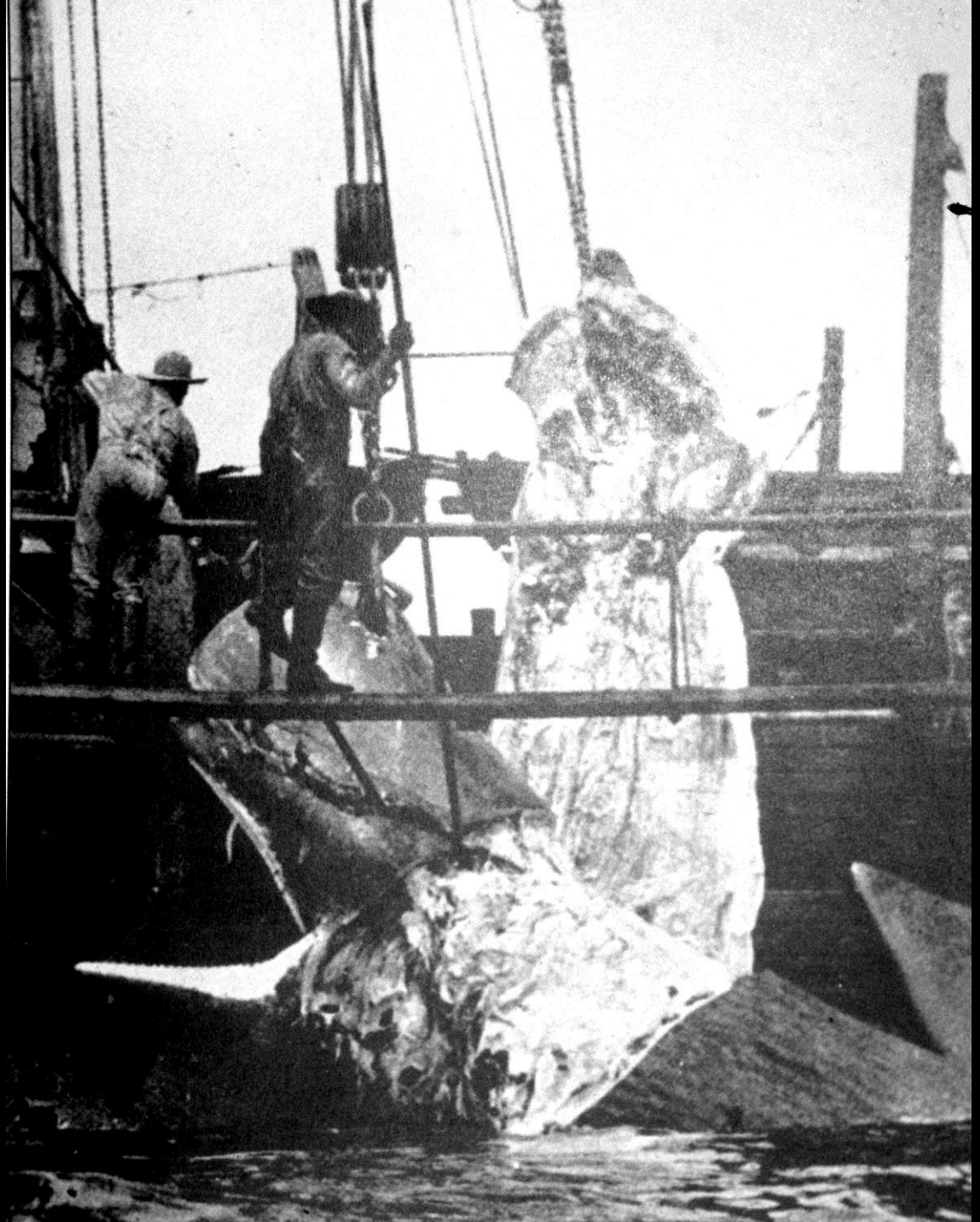
The sperm whale now floats, lanced and dead. The third mate, Mr. Almeida, prepares the carcass for towing, which is a slow, heavy drag back to the ship.

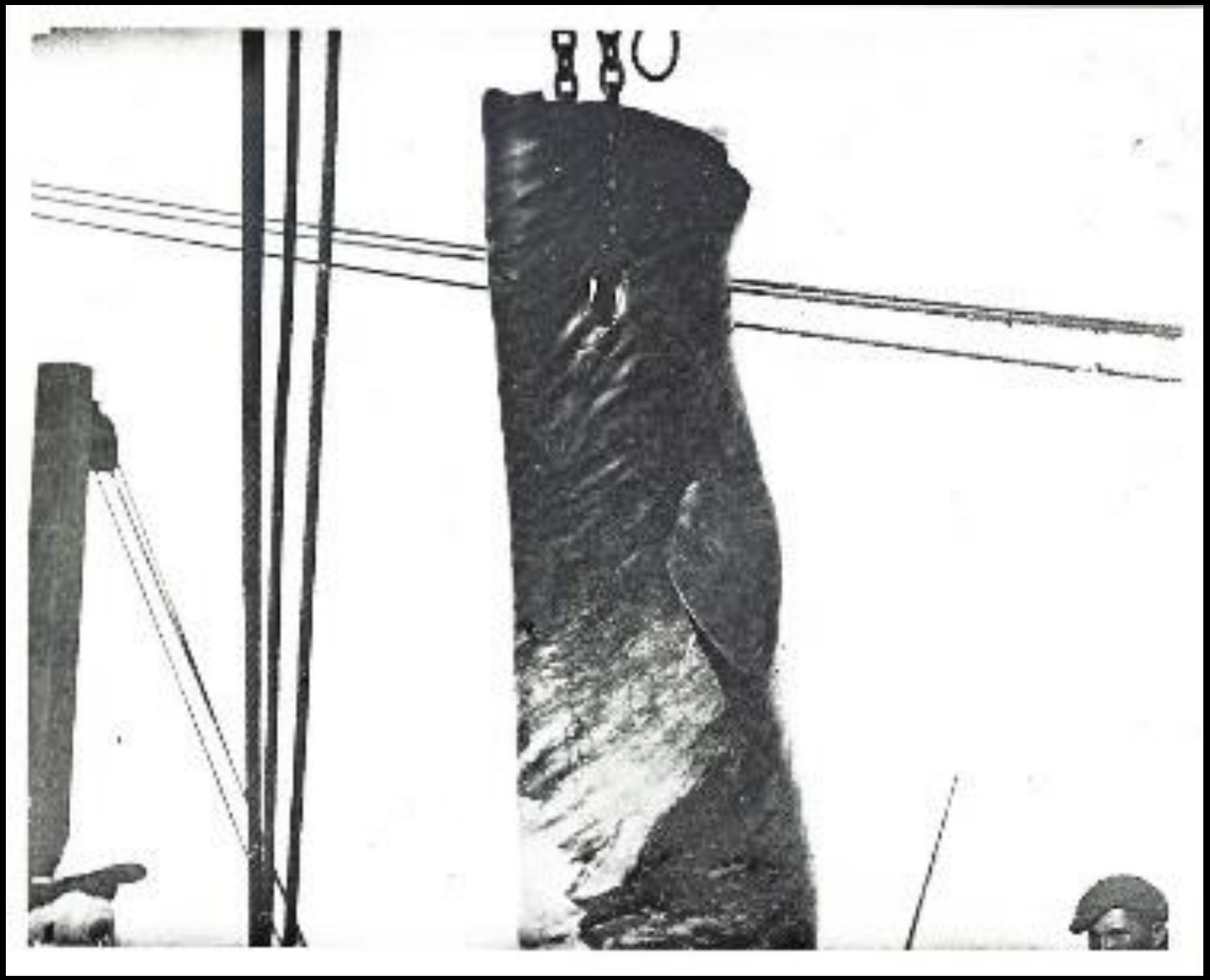
The crew works to secure the whale to the side of the ship. The captain (wearing the white hat) is shouting commands. Note Murphy's personal 17' Swampscott Dory hanging, which he used to collect ornithological specimens.

Whaleships were rigged with a 10-foot long cutting stage, suspended over the sea by two planks. Mates would lean on the waist-high railing to separate the blubber and sever the head with their spades. Note how John da Lomba, First Officer, keeps weight off his painful left foot, the result of an accident.



The boatsteerer José Gaspar dons a canvas “monkey belt” to secure himself. One can imagine the bravery required to stand on a giant, slippery whale in the rolling, sloshing sea while the water was infested with sharks. A blubber hook would be placed in the blubber near the flipper, and the blubber would peel off in a large, spiraled piece. While the waters here appear black and white, in reality they would have been a stunning red.





A large “blanket piece” of blubber, complete with the whale’s right pectoral fin, is lifted onto the deck.

Murphy wrote: “Blocks may crack, stout ropes and the links of chains may part, but blubber holds.”

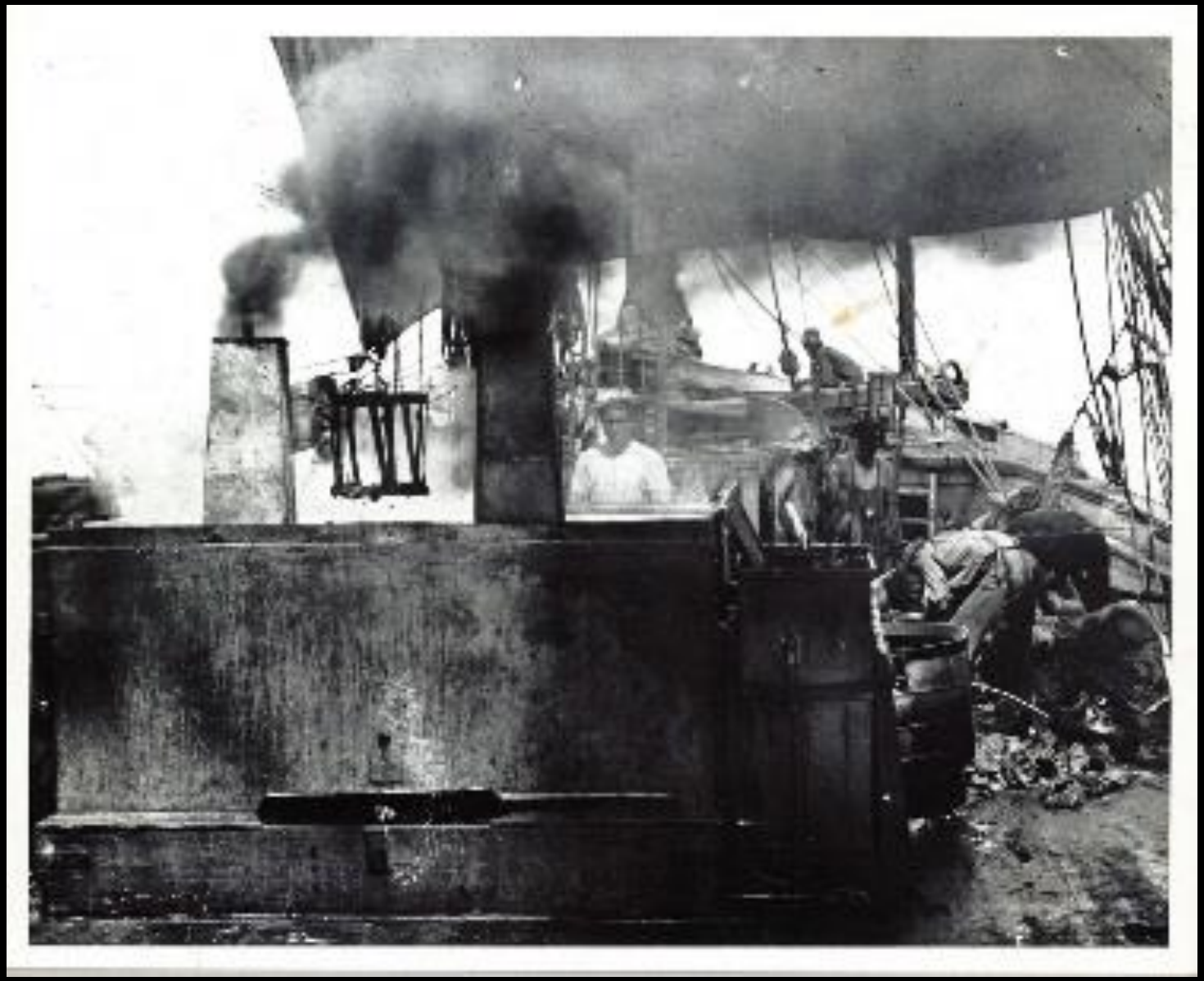
Blubber is more than just fat: it is a unique type of connective tissue containing many blood vessels. Blubber plays an important role in storing energy (especially for nursing mothers), insulation, and buoyancy.

Freddy Lundy and Jean Paul of Dominica use blubber hooks to drag cargo to the main hatch.

The deck would have been a slippery mess!

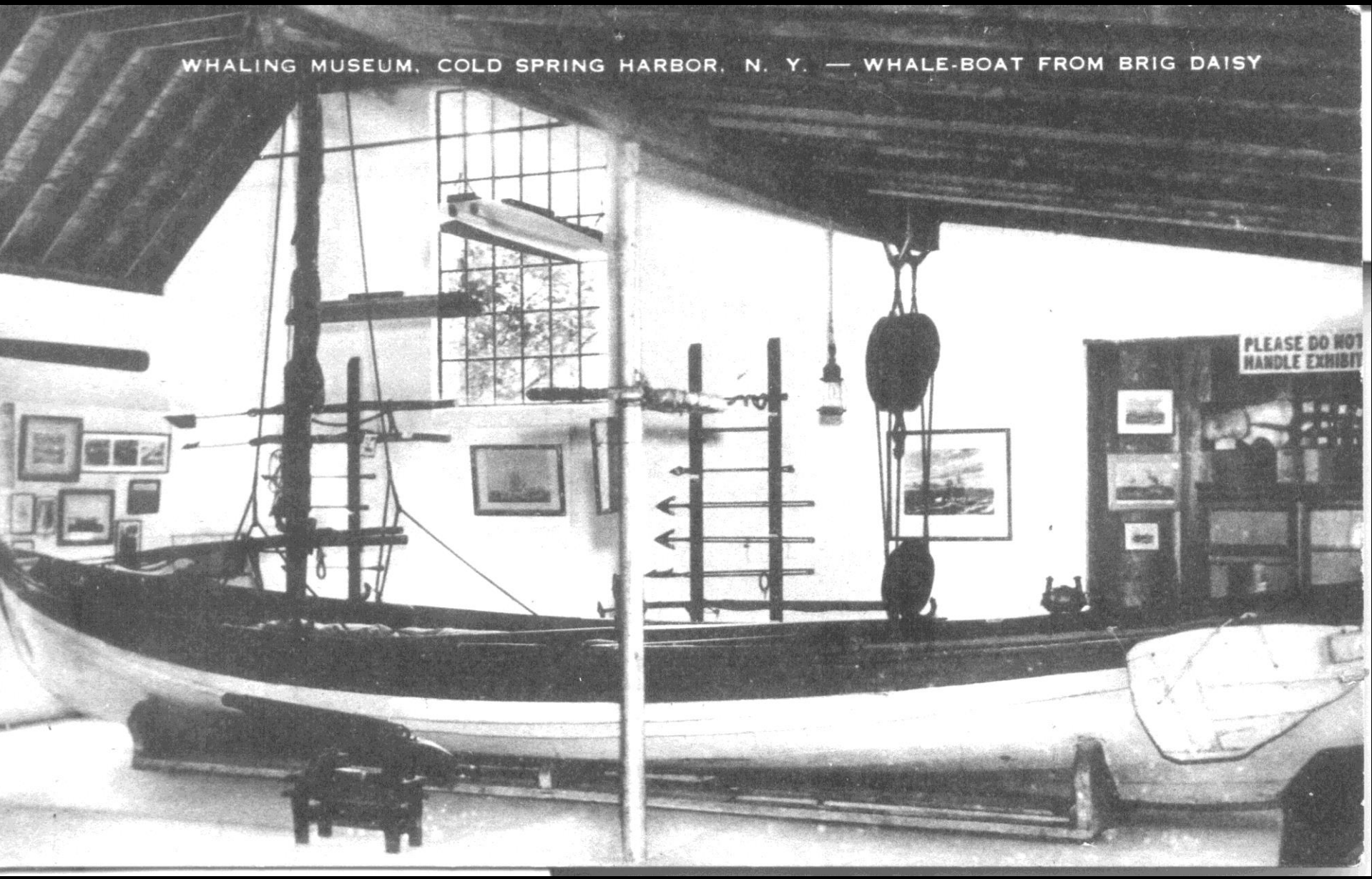
Blubber is cut into “horse pieces,” and finally into “bible pieces,” looking much like an open book, and boiled in a trypot, which resembles a giant cauldron. Jean-Baptiste from Martinique, on the right (one of two sailors to die on the voyage) pushes blubber towards Ferleón from Brava.

An overhead view of the process of extracting oil from blubber. W hen the crew would hit a goal of filling a certain number of barrels, doughnuts were fried in whale oil as a reward.



Notice the thick, black smoke that characterized whaleships, which were often smelled before they were sighted. The oil was cooled in cooling tanks (on the right) before being run through a canvas hose to be barreled. Care was taken that not a drop was wasted – even the deck drains were stopped up in case of a spill.

A homeward-bound Daisy. Murphy published "Oceanic Birds of South America" and went on to a career as curator of birds with the American Museum of Natural History. He passionately lead many conservation causes, including battling DDT and preserving Fire Island. A Long Island school and park have been named for him, as well as a feather louse, two mountains, a spider, three birds, an Antarctic inlet, plant, and fish.



The Daisy's whaleboat is now part of the collection of The Whaling Museum & Education Center of Cold Spring Harbor.