

## Christopher Hussey Blown Out (Up) to Sea - by Ben Simons

The first Spermaceti whale taken by the Nantucket whaler was killed by Christopher Hussey. He was cruising near the shore for Right whales, and was blown off some distance from the land by a strong northerly wind, when he fell in with a school of that species of whales, and killed one and brought it home. At what date this adventure took place is not fully ascertained, but it is supposed to be not far from 1712. - Obed Macy, History of Nantucket (First Edition, Nantucket: 1835), p. 32.

IN THE INTRICATE MAZES OF HISTORICAL research, sometimes a bright thread appears that has all the attraction of a mythical golden strand. That was the effect of Quaker historian Obed Macy's 1835 account of Nantucket's first encounter with a sperm whale. Almost every subsequent retelling of the Nantucket whaling story uses Macy's brief paragraph to launch the great epic story of Nantucket's whaling empire. It was during that accidental voyage of "discovery" that Nantucket's long relationship with the sperm whale was born. The only question is— was it true?

The appeal of Macy's foundation story proved so strong over time that it became subject to wild creative embellishments. By the early twentieth century, for instance, Ivan T Sanderson feels confident enough to describe "Captain Christopher Hussey's bearlike figure . . . more like the figurehead on a ship than a man." Even in more sober scholarly accounts, the story always appears with an absolute authority, as in Elmo Paul Hohman's *The American Whaleman*: "In 1712, when Christopher Hussey was blown off shore in a gale and captured the first sperm whale far out at sea. ..." With repeated force, Macy's tale became an authoritative foundation story anchored firmly at the outset of a great tradition. How surprising, then, to look into the Barney Genealogical Record and the Vital Records of Nantucket, and to discover that in 1712 the said "Captain" Christopher Hussey was either a six-year-old boy or already twenty-seven years deceased!

Obed Macy does not list the sources he used for the famous passage in his *History of Nantucket*. Naturally, modern historians have been perturbed by the reference. Edward Byers writes in his *The Nation of Nantucket* that the story is "almost certainly apocryphal." Elizabeth Little, in a paper on "Early Whaling," credits the capture story, "though not by a Christopher Hussey," but "this first sperm whale capture may have been made by one of his grandsons, Sylvanus Hussey or Bachelor Hussey." Nathaniel Philbrick also retains the story in *Away Offshore*, but changes the protagonist to an unknown "Hussey."

There is little doubt that Nantucketers began to encounter sperm whales at some time near Macy's "not fully ascertained" date of 1712. A far more believable story in Macy's *History*, also dated to 1712, describes a sperm whale "found dead and ashore, on the southwest part of the island." After a bitter dispute with "many claimants," including a representative of the British Crown, and the "natives" [Macy] who first found it, the proprietors disingenuously asserted their claim to the carcass due to a retroactive right "comprehended in their purchase of the island." The excited populace considered the teeth, spermaceti, and blubber of the sperm whale "worth their weight in silver."

The earliest Christopher Hussey (1598-1685) was born in Surrey, England, and was one of the island's first purchasers. Christopher was married to Theodate Bachelder, daughter of the radical Quaker minister Stephen Bachelder. Christopher was often referred to in records of the day as "Captain Christopher Hussey," but appears never to have set foot on Nantucket. He was long deceased by the year of the initial capture in 1712. His son Stephen Hussey was one of two early Quakers on Nantucket, and a strong and even "rude" voice for the full-share men during the Half-Share Revolt. Stephen's two sons Bachelor (Bachelder) [1684-?] and Sylvanus [1682-1767] figure actively in the scant records of the early whaling industry on Nantucket.

According to records in the State House in Boston, among the Nantucket vessels registered at the time were two sloops: "April 24, 1711, Sylvanus Hussey, sloop Eagle, 30 tons, built at Scituate, 1711; July 30, 1713, Sylvanus Hussey, sloop Bristol, 14 tons, built at Tiverton, 1711." Sylvanus Hussey, son of Stephen and grandson of Christopher, had organized one of the earliest whale oil companies on Nantucket—Sylvanus Hussey & Company. Though small-tonnage sloops were used in the coastal trade, at that time they were also being fitted out specifically for whaling on the "deep." Whoever it was that was caught "cruising near the shore" VB when blown off to sea, the vessel ^ that carried him and his crew may well have been owned by Sylvanus Hussey or his associates.

Another clue comes from one of the earliest account books to survive from the time that was kept by Nathaniel Starbuck Jr. It contains perhaps the earliest documented record of spermaceti on Nantucket in the year 1712: "1/0 on permaseeta 000/01/000." Another mention appears in 1714 under the account of "Bachelder Husey": "5/0 on oil of permasetta 000/10/00." Other names with "permaseeta" accounts are Nathaniel and John Barnard, John Coffin, and George Gardner. There is no way to tell for sure whether the spermaceti listed in those accounts came from the whale washed ashore or a mythical whale encountered at sea. However, the second mention of a Hussey family member in connection with sperm oil suggests that Stephen's two active sons, Sylvanus and Bachelor, might have been involved in an initial capture. Pending further evidence, those two Husseys are the closest we can get to the mythical "Captain Christopher Hussey" who captured Nantucket's first sperm whale. (Another Christopher Hussey was born in 1706, far too late to be involved).

It seems unlikely that Nantucketers, although increasingly involved in the business of the Right-whale fishery and in laying claim to "rack" or "drift" whales washed ashore, had never seen or encountered sperm whales before 1712. In fact, there is testimony to earlier encounters. Frederick C. Sanford wrote an account of the American whale fishery for the U. S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries in 1882 in which he states: "In 1670, William Hamilton succeeded in taking the first spermaceti whale off Nantucket, and from that time for nearly two hundred years Nantucket successfully pursued the business." The identity of Hamilton is not further known, nor does Sanford provide a source for that early capture.

Given Nantucket's proximity to the Gulf Stream, where sperm whales frequently congregate and feed, there must have been other such encounters, whether or not they

resulted in an actual capture. Elizabeth Little suggests that Nantucketers carried on die early whaling trade in larger volumes than records indicate, in part because it was a "cute" practice, conducted in somewhat clandestine circumstances with a "marked similarity to smuggling." Whether or not sperm whale oil was part of this early invisible trade practice is difficult to say, but the myth of a definite "first capture" remains questionable.

It is interesting to speculate why the myth of Captain Christopher Hussey became so engrained in the imaginations of generations of Nantucketers and historians writing about Nantucket. Origin myths are always attractive, especially for communities that settle in a new locale, all the more so if they gradually displace an indigenous population. Similarly, a tradition with the grandeur of the Nantucket whaling story tends to seek a point of origin that at once explains and appeases all that would follow: notice the accidental, involuntary quality of the first capture, as if Nantucketers were merely driven to their pursuit of the sperm whale by chance. At the same time, in those early days of Nantucket seafaring, there were many incidents of small craft being "blown out" to sea, many of which resulted in tragic deaths. Perhaps the myth of the early encounter with a sperm whale after being "blown off" to sea was a way for the historical consciousness of the emerging community to cope with all of those watery deaths. In any case, the myth of Captain Christopher Hussey being "blown off some distance" from the shoreline of his new Nantucket homeland and encountering the first sperm whale in the island's history is a rich tale that belongs to the overflowing basket of Nantucket legend.

Ben Simons is the NHA's assistant curator.

#### Source List

Barney Genealogical Record

Vital Records of Nantucket Town

NHA Research Library: Green Files, "Hussey" Worth Family Papers, U. S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries, Report of the Commissioner for 1882 (Washington, G. P. O, 1884), Edward Byers, Nation of Nantucket (Boston, 1987).

Elmo Paul Hohman, The American "Whaleman" (New York, 1928).

Elizabeth A. Eittle, Nantucket Whaling in the Early 18th Century (Nantucket Algonquin Studies No. 16.: Nantucket, 1981).

————— Indian Whalers of Nantucket: The Documentary Evidence (Nantucket Algonquin Studies No. 13: Nantucket, 1992)

Obed Macy, History of Nantucket (First Edition, Nantucket, 1835).

Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Offshore* (Nantucket, 1994). Ivan T. Sanderson, *Follow the Whale* (Boston, 1954).

Alexander Starbuck, *The History of Nantucket* (Boston, 1924).

Originally published in *Historic Nantucket*, Summer 2004 (Vol. 53, No. 3), p. 9-10