Magic, Luck, and My Passage on the 38th Voyage of the Bark Charles W. Morgan

Many have called the Charles W. Morgan a “lucky ship.” I don’t know about that. While it is true that over the eighty years of her working career and for almost two decades afterwards this ancient whaler had eluded more than her share of the disastrous vicissitudes endemic to her trade, including fire, rot, and hurricanes, the word “magical,” I think, may be a better description. Throughout history ships have been described as lucky (or not), or worse; Joseph Conrad wrote of one ship in “The Brute, A Piece of Invective” (1907): “if she wasn’t mad, then she was the most evil-minded, underhand savage brute that ever went afloat.” “She’s a lucky ship” is a common turn of phrase, but in the case of the Morgan, while it may even be true, there seems a bit more to it. Luck is too easy an idea for the full freight of meaning embodied in this historic ship. Winning the lottery is simply luck, but skill and talent are curiously intangible. Belief anchors faith and faith inspires, inspiration elevates the whole into a universe of unseen possibilities, and that’s magic. As long as we’re attributing supernatural qualities to inanimate objects we might as well go whole-hog. I prefer magic to luck and there is magic in the Morgan. The ship has a marvelous story, one that has captivated artists, authors, craftsmen, and others attuned to the capturing of momentous perceptions.

Here is a vessel built for whaling in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1841 by men who did nothing but build whaling ships. Once a year for nine years between 1826 and 1835 (more or less: they took a few years off in the mid-1830s and in 1834 built two vessels) and then periodically thereafter, Jethro and Zachariah Hillman of New Bedford built superb ships for the whale fishery. They did not build ships at a breakneck speed like some yards did, several of which produced ships at more than twice their rate. The Hillman Brothers built their whalers carefully for some of the most important whaling agents in the town, invested in their own handiwork, and, whether by cause and effect or simply luck, all of their ships had long and successful careers.

The Hillman brothers’ shipyard, described in the New Bedford city directories as being located at the “foot of Maxfield Street,” was evidently little more than a big patch of dirt and a building with space enough for lofting the great timbers needed in the construction. Jethro and Zachariah each lived nearby, and the whole neighborhood surrounding Maxfield Street was home to
shipwrights, joiners, coopers, riggers, sail-makers, and other mechanics of the maritime trades. Down the block was the “Beetle's Yard.” This entire city block surrounded a common where William and Rodolphus W. Beetle had their spar yard; in the surrounding buildings were tool makers and other craftsmen, and on the waterfront another block away was the Wilcox and Sherman lumber yard. In short, the Charles W. Morgan was built by a community devoted to the vessel’s mission at the height of their skills. The broadaxes of the wrights who hewed her white oak keel and the slicks that shaved her tenons may well have been made by Braddock D. Hathaway, whose tool shop was located at the Beetle Yard. More talent, belief, faith, and inspiration went into the shaping of every piece of timber in a vessel produced in the Hillman Yard than may easily be guessed.

The ship was named for the man who commissioned her building, a Quaker from Philadelphia who married the daughter of another Quaker who had spent his own youth working in the spermaceti candle factories in Newport, Rhode Island, before himself marrying the daughter of a whaling merchant from Nantucket. Family connections like these formed the basic structure of many of the town’s whaling firms. The principals involved in the ultimate creation of the Charles W. Morgan included William Rotch, Sr., a son of Joseph Rotch of Nantucket who commissioned the first ship ever built in Bedford Village, the merchant carrier Dartmouth, in 1767. Quaker patriarch William Rotch, arguably the single most influential person in the origins of the commercial whaling industry of the United States after the American Revolution, and his wife Elizabeth Barney of Nantucket had eight children, six of whom survived childhood and one of whom, Sarah, married Charles W. Morgan in 1819. Thus, the Charles W. Morgan was the product of the American maritime culture at its apex and at its heart. 1841 was already a great year in American whaling history. Herman Melville shipped out that year, as did New Bedford artist Benjamin Russell. 1841 was also the year William Whitfield plucked the Japanese fisherman Manjiro Nakahama from his castaway state on a barren island in the North Pacific and the year Francis Allen Olmsted’s Incidents of a Whaling Voyage came to press.

In 2014, I was fortunate to have been selected as a 38th Voyager, planning to use my time on shipboard on the passage from Vineyard Haven to New Bedford to gain a better perspective on the creative processes whalemen may have tapped as they illustrated their whaling journals. To more fully invest myself in the magical aura of the Charles W. Morgan, I chose to walk from my house in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, out to Cape Cod and then to take the ferry from Woods Hole out to the Vineyard. I made this choice to enable rumination, imagining all of the local men engaged in whaling in 1841 in the towns
through which I would pass including the whaling port of Fairhaven, the shipbuilding port of Mattapoisett, and the whaling port of Marion. I then sailed on a catboat across Buzzards Bay to Cataumet and slept in the house of whaling master Ebenezer F. Nye (1799-1891) before continuing on to the shipbuilding and whaling port of Falmouth, visiting Woods Hole, and like Ishmael himself, ferrying further on to my ultimate port of embarkation.

Being onboard the vessel as it passed through Quicks Hole and tacked up Buzzards Bay into New Bedford was a powerful emotional experience. The radiant faces of my friends as this iconic vessel tied up at the wharf in New Bedford evoked pure joy, a deep and transcendent emotion, possibly akin to the realization of one's best beloved returning home after a long and uncertain absence or a physical reaction to the unexpected fulfillment of a long-suspected desire. Of course the vessel's history added to the excitement, but I also felt the slightest twinge of imaginative connection between my own experience and the thousands of American whalemans who longed for the moment of homecoming over the course of their long voyages. It was this magical connection, indeed, that I sought, and found, walking the sun-dappled pathways, rose-scented with birdsong, past salt marshes that had not changed appreciably in 5,000 years, before folding myself, and my tired feet, into my bunk in the forecastle of the bark  

Charles W. Morgan.

—Michael P. Dyer
New Bedford Whaling Museum