

Contact: Dan McFadden, 860.572.5317  
dan.mcfadden@mysticseaport.org

### *Charles W. Morgan* History

The *Charles W. Morgan* is the last of an American whaling fleet that numbered more than 2,700 vessels. Built and launched in New Bedford, Mass. in 1841, the *Morgan* is now America's oldest commercial ship still afloat – only the USS *Constitution* is older.

Whaling was at its height when she was designed and constructed. Thus, she represents the epitome of a ship type that was an important part of America's maritime and economic history. Whale oil and the profits it generated helped fuel the industrial revolution. Much of the capital from whaling was invested in new ventures – textile mills, railroads, and manufacturing to name a few. The *Morgan* illustrates that history and the role whaling played in the development of American economic power and growth.

Whaling is also the story of a young nation finding its role in the world. As opposed to merchant vessels carrying cargo from one port to another on set routes, the whaler's destination was the sea itself. The pursuit of whales took them to the far reaches of the globe. In many cases, a whaleship was the first contact distant peoples had with the United States. The stories, songs, and artifacts sailors brought back to America from their trips contributed to the nation's cultural education.

Over an 80-year whaling career, the *Morgan* embarked on 37 voyages, most lasting three years or more. Built for durability, not speed, she roamed every corner of the globe in her pursuit of whales. Upon spying a whale, she would lower her boats and the crew would set out seek to harpoon their prey. If successful, the whale would be towed back to the ship to be processed for its oil, bone, teeth, baleen, and other materials. The search was time-consuming and laborious; days and weeks of boredom followed by moments of terror.

Known as a "lucky ship," the *Morgan* successfully navigated crushing Arctic ice, hostile natives, countless storms, yet throughout her career she never failed to return a healthy profit to her owners. That luck continued in her retirement from whaling in 1921. After a brief movie career as a set in the films *Down to the Sea in Ships* (starring a young Clara Bow) and *Java Head*, she was bought by a wealthy investor who put her on display at his waterfront estate near New Bedford. Upon his death, she was derelict for some time, but survived the hurricane of 1938 and eventually made her way to Mystic Seaport (then the Maritime Historical Association) on the eve of Pearl Harbor in November, 1941. She has been here ever since.

Now a National Historic Landmark, more than 20 million people have walked her decks since she went on display at Mystic Seaport. Where once she hunted and processed whales for profit, her purpose now is to tell an important part of our nation's history and the lessons that history has for current generations.

###