Mystic Seaport Self-Guided Tour

Pre- and Post-Visit Activities, Concepts and Online Resources

Whaling in the 19th Century

The Enduring Understanding:

Perceptions of whales and whaling have changed over the centuries. During the 19th century, whales were viewed as a valuable and essential commodity source. Whale products fueled a rapidly changing way of life, providing oil to light homes and streets, lubricants for the Industrial Revolution, and flexible baleen (whalebone) to shape fashions of the day. Re-invested whaling profits greatly influenced the development of American industries.

Essential Questions to Consider Before Your Visit:

What do you know about the biology of whales and dolphins?

(They are mammals who breathe at the water’s surface and are insulated by a thick layer of tough blubber.)

Why were they hunted and processed differently from large fish?

(In 19th century whaling, one of the primary objectives was to strip off the blubber and render it into oil, which was the final product. The flesh of the whale was not usually consumed.)

What might life have been like for men on whaling ships?

(Crowded quarters, monotonous food, harsh treatment, voyages which lasted years, low pay, very dangerous conditions.)

Why was the demand for whale products so high?

(Whale oil was used as a light source and a lubricant. Eventually it was replaced by petroleum which was discovered in 1859.)

Who profited from the whaling industry?

(Oil merchants, ship owners and ships’ captains all reaped the profits of whaling.)

Concepts and Questions to Consider After Your Visit:

Would you have signed on to become a whaleman? Why or why not?

(We can’t answer this for you, but keep in mind that while with luck and skill the average seaman aboard a whale ship could make a decent living and could advance through the ranks, many were killed, maimed, or seriously in debt by the time the ship reached its home port. Whaling was not a job for the weak!)
How did your position on a whaling ship determine your pay? Do you consider the lay system fair? Why or why not?

(The lay system was akin to a big pie chart; everyone got a share of the profits but the shares differed widely depending on your rank on the ship. Owners and investors took the biggest slice, 1/3 of the ship’s total earnings. The captain got 1/12 and so on down the line until the cabin boy, who would get only 1/250 of the revenue!)

Why is the Charles W. Morgan a national historic landmark?

(She is the last surviving wooden whaleship in the world!)

What were two major factors in the decline of whaling?

(The discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania in 1859 led to a steep drop-off in the demand for whale oil. We also hunted whales to such an extent that it became harder and harder to find them.)

Is the United States still involved in whaling? What about other countries world-wide?

(Aside from some Inuit and Native American tribes who are still allowed to whale on a very small scale for cultural purposes, whaling is illegal in America. A few other countries are still involved with whaling, including England, Norway and Japan.)

Potential Post-Visit Activities:

Whaling today is a very contentious topic. Many people around the world are passionately against the practice (there’s even a TV show called “Whale Wars” following anti-whaling activists), while others maintain that countries and cultures should have the right to make their own choices on the issue. Consider writing an essay or holding a debate exploring the pros and cons of modern whaling.

During the golden age of Yankee whaling (1840s – 1860s), whales were viewed, to paraphrase author Eric Jay Dolin, as “self-propelled tubs of high-value lard.” In other words, they were just another natural resource to exploit for considerable profit. Can you draw parallels to any modern practices we engage in today which future generations may condemn? (Logging, commercial trawl fishing, mining for fossil fuels…)

Online Resources about Whaling:

Celebrating 40 Years of Protecting Marine Mammals: NOAA Fisheries

Joseph Bement and the Charles W. Morgan – Log of Mystic Seaport

Mystic Seaport Collections: The Charles W. Morgan

National Historic Landmarks Program – The Charles W. Morgan

National Marine Mammal Laboratory, Education Species Index


Timeline: The History of Whaling in America from PBS’ Whaling: Into the Deep
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Life in a Seaport Town

The Enduring Understanding:

Coastal communities were the international entry and exit points in American for new ideas, people, products and technology. Seaport towns had symbiotic relationships with their ships and the people who worked aboard them.

Essential Questions to Consider Before Your Visit:

Why would a seaport town be different from a country town or village, especially in the 19th century?

(More diversity, more options for employment, opportunities to acquire special skills such as shipbuilding, larger variety of businesses and trades, faster pace of life.)

What is an import and what is an export? What role would a seaport town have in importing and exporting goods?

(Seaport towns were the gateways to world trade, allowing goods made in remote towns and villages to reach distant shores and vice versa. An import is something brought into a country; an export is something shipped out.)

Do you live in a seaport town today? Why or why not?

(Hint: seaport towns are located next to bodies of water!)

Specialized maritime businesses and trades evolved in seaport towns. What might some of these be? What jobs are available today vs. 150 years ago?

(In the 19th century: coopers, shipsmiths, sail makers, chandlers, ship builders, ropemakers, woodworkers, apothecaries, printers, banks...)

Concepts and Questions to Consider After Your Visit:

How did the absence of the men who went out to sea effect family life back at home?

(In communities like Nantucket and New Bedford, women held the communities together while their men were away at sea.)

How did you become a skilled tradesman in the 19th century?

(Apprenticeship.)

What form of transportation was available in town?
(If you were wealthy, you had a carriage. If you were moderately well-off or a farmer, you had a horse and perhaps a wagon or cart to go with it. If you were like many of the townspeople, you just walked!)

How would you communicate with your father, husband, brother or friend while he was away at sea? Today we are in touch with loved ones constantly, but how did this work in the 19th century?

(Letters, of course. The letter might not reach your sailor until months later, if at all!)

How did major technological advances effect daily life in the 19th century?

(Hint: steam power, the discovery of petroleum, electric lighting...)

Potential Post-Visit Activities:

What trade would you be interested in learning if you were a young man living in a 19th century seaport town? Explain why you picked this trade and keep in mind that often an apprentice had little say in what trade he would learn – make your argument as persuasive as possible in case you have to convince your parents that your choice is better than theirs!

As a seafarer’s wife, you might have to take on responsibilities usually reserved for your husband while he was aboard ship (taking care of property, finances, business deals, and more). Often sailors, whalers and fishermen were away for years at a time. Would you welcome the challenge of living a more independent lifestyle than most women had in the 19th century or would you prefer to have a landlubber for a husband? Explain your point of view.

Online Resources about Life in a Seaport Town:

Colonial Williamsburg Trades: The Colonial Williamsburg Official History Site

Connecticut History Online – Maritime Trades: Related Services, Industries and Trades

Connecticut History Online – Maritime Trades: Whaling, Sealing and Fishing

Games – The McCord Museum Online (a Montreal museum with great Victorian resources)

Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea – 19th Century Village

New London: ConnecticutHistory.org

On the Water – Fishing for a Living, 1840-1920: Commercial Fishers > Atlantic Cod
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Ships: Form and Function

The Enduring Understanding:

As world trade evolved over hundreds of years, so did the design, size, building materials and function of watercraft. Crews who live and work on board, sometimes for years, form isolated communities whose interdependent members contribute essential skills.

Essential Questions to Consider Before Your Visit:

Can you name a variety of ships and boats afloat today?  
(Cruise liners, tugboats, sailboats, ferries, container ships, submarines, scientific research vessels...)

How have ships and boats been powered throughout the ages?  
(Oars, paddles, wind, steam, electricity, nuclear power.)

What are some materials used in shipbuilding?  
(Wood, iron, copper, steel, fiberglass, etc.)

How would living conditions on a ship differ from those at home?  
(Crowded, little privacy, shared bedrooms/bathrooms [if any!], repetitive diet.)

Concepts and Questions to Consider After Your Visit:

What is the difference between the rigging on the Joseph Conrad and the L.A. Dunton?  
(The Conrad is a three-masted square-rigger. The Dunton is a two-masted schooner.)

What does the overall design, especially the living quarters and cargo space, tell us about the different functions of the Charles W. Morgan and the L.A. Dunton? What job is each ship built for?  
(For a whaling ship like the Morgan, speed and crew comfort weren’t particularly important; cargo space was. For a schooner like the Dunton, speed was much more important when transporting smaller cargoes of perishable fish.)

What tools would a 19th century shipyard use to build a large wooden ship? What tools would we use in a modern shipyard?  
(Hammers, saws, augurs, hand-powered drills, planers, caulking irons and mallets, etc. We use similar tools today but the work is much faster thanks to electricity and battery power.)
With modern technology, life at sea has changed dramatically. Consider the improvements in creature comforts like food, living quarters, and communication aboard ships. Would you go to sea today?

**Potential Post-Visit Activities:**

Design two different vessels and explain their purpose. Be as creative and detailed as you want to be (one ship could transport lollipops, the other one could be a floating zoo), as long as you can reflect the functions of the ships in their designs. Don’t forget to add labels.

Schooners like the *L.A. Dunton* were not invented in New England, but became a common model here nonetheless. Can you think of reasons why a fast, maneuverable, medium-sized schooner evolved as the leading ship design in American coastal waters? (Hint: take a close look at a map of the waterways, harbors, and coves of the East Coast.)

**Online Resources about Ships and Shipbuilding:**

[Connecticut History Online – Maritime Trades: Shipbuilding and Boatbuilding](https://www.history.uchicago.edu/encyclopedia/entry/shipbuilding-and-boatbuilding)

[Dundee Heritage Trust: Verdant Mill](https://www.dundeeheritage.co.uk/verdant-mill) (A Scottish museum about a jute mill [ropemaking])

[Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea – Historic Vessels](https://www.mysticseaport.org/museum/historic-vessels)

[Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea – Preservation Shipyards](https://www.mysticseaport.org/museum/shipyards)

[Online Resources: Independence Seaport Museum](https://www.independenceseaport.org)

[Sal Polisi, Woodcarver: A Master Craftsman in the Old-World Tradition](https://www.fordham.edu/halsell/)

[Wind, Wood and Sail: Shipbuilding in the 19th Century](https://www.windwoodandsail.com/)
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Shoreside Industries

The Enduring Understanding:

Shoreside industries including shipsmithing, chandleries, ropewalks, sailmaking, coopering and shipyards provided specialized products and services. This created a demand for skilled labor, training and employment in local communities and also enabled 19th century ships and their crews to sail further and longer than ever before.

Essential Questions to Consider Before Your Visit:

What are some shoreside industries?

(Shipbuilding, sailmaking, ropemaking, ship carving...)

Why are shoreside industries so important in a seaport community?

(They provide training, skills and employment to local citizens and attract ships from near and far for trade.)

Which businesses were replaced by modern technology? Which remain?

(Coopering, traditional ropemaking/ropewalks and shipsmithing, to name a few, were replaced by modern technology. Shipyards, chandleries (though they’re usually just called “ships’ outfitters” now), and sailmaking remain, but have changed quite a bit over the centuries.)

Concepts and Questions to Consider After Your Visit:

Shoreside industries are interdependent businesses. Can you provide examples?

(Think of a shipyard building a ship. The ship needs sails, rigging, barrels and casks, decorative elements, metal tools... this is where the sailmakers, ropewalks, coopers, shipcarvers, and shipsmiths come in.)

Why have many traditional shoreside skills like shipsmithing and coopering died out?

(With the rise of the Industrial Revolution and modern factory productions, the demand for traditional crafts became almost non-existent.)

If you lived in the 19th century, what shoreside trade would you like to learn?

Is coopering solely a shoreside industry, or could it be useful inland as well?)
Potential Post-Visit Activities:

Draw a diagram of a ship and indicate where the products or services from shoreside industries are located onboard. (Arrows may be helpful for labeling here – an arrow pointing to a sail with “sailmakers” written next to it helps make it clear who created the products.) The more detailed, the better!

Casks had different names depending on their capacities. A barrel is 31.5 gallons. A hogshead is 2 barrels or 63 gallons. A pipe is 4 barrels, 2 hogsheads or 126 gallons. A tun is 8 barrels, 4 hogsheads, 2 pipes or 252 gallons. Other shoreside industries had similar specific terms. Can you compare this with other forms of measurement which are more commonly used today? (Teaspoon/tablespoon, cups, inches/feet, yards, meters…)

Online Resources about Shoreside Industries:

Colonial Williamsburg Trades: The Colonial Williamsburg Official History Site

Connecticut History Online – Maritime Trades: Related Services, Industries and Trades

Dundee Heritage Trust: Verdant Mill (A Scottish museum about a jute mill [ropemaking])

Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea – 19th Century Village

Sal Polisi, Woodcarver: A Master Craftsman in the Old-World Tradition

Wind, Wood and Sail: Shipbuilding in the 19th Century