Mystic Seaport Guided Tours

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

Tour: Whaling

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 marine 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, ill, 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 might 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](https://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/mcs/mammals/dolphins.html)

[Joseph Bement and the Charles W. Morgan – Log of Mystic Seaport](https://www.mysticseaport.org/mystic-seaport-log/)

[Mystic Seaport Collections: The Charles W. Morgan](https://collections.mysticseaport.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/nhls/id/9305)

[National Historic Landmarks Program – The Charles W. Morgan](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/nhl-list.html)

[National Marine Mammal Laboratory, Education Species Index](https://www.nmml.noaa.gov/species/index.html)


[Timeline: The History of Whaling in America from PBS’ Whaling: Into the Deep](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/whaling/)

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Tour: 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: cooper, 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, a farmer, or a businessman, 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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Tour: Immigration/Voyage to America

The Enduring Understanding:

The rich fabric of the United States is made up of a vast collection of cultural and ethnic groups who have come to America for a great variety of reasons. The uniqueness of this patchwork society has many strengths and weaknesses that the American people have been challenged to address. Immigrants have influenced America’s Industrial Revolution, Western Expansion, economic and social reforms. Every family has a vital story to tell in the development of the United States.

Questions to Consider Before Your Visit:

What is an immigrant? Is there an immigration story in your family history? Do you have very old family traditions which can be traced back to immigrants in your past?

What motivates people to leave their home countries and come to America?

( Poverty, discrimination, religious persecution, lack of opportunity and more. )

Do immigrants still come to America?

( Yes! Have your students research current immigration/ border events in America )

Concepts and Questions to Consider After Your Visit:

What was the journey to America like, especially in the 1900s/early 20th century? What about today?

( Long, difficult, crowded, and taken via ship across the Atlantic. Immigrants today tend to arrive in airplanes, considerably shortening the weeks it once took to arrive in America. )

Arriving at Ellis Island could be overwhelming and intimidating. Can you imagine what it would have been like to be denied entry into the United States, split up from your family, or put into quarantine?

After arrival on American shores, what are some of the immediate needs of an immigrant?

( Water, food, rest, toilet facilities, a place to stay and securing a job, to start. )

What are an American citizen’s rights and responsibilities?

( The Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities page at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website explains this beautifully. )
If you were an immigrant, even after a long dangerous voyage and separation from your loved ones, language barriers, potential discrimination and poverty, would you still advise your friends and neighbors in the “old country” to emigrate too? Why or why not?

The United States is often described as a melting pot of cultures and ethnicities; another metaphor might be a tossed salad, where cultures, ethnicities and identities mix together but can also remain separate. How important do you think it is to maintain some of your cultural identity? Do you think immigrants struggled with this as well?

**Potential Post-Visit Activities:**

After arriving at your destination, what would you need to do next? Create a plan for your first 5 days in America. Be specific: most immigrants had to start from scratch in their new country with little more than the contents of a small trunk or suitcase to help them.

What is the one item that you would absolutely not want to leave behind if you were to emigrate? Remember that this item would need to be able to fit in your luggage! Is it a practical or sentimental object? Why is this item so important to you? Tell the story behind your choice.

**Online Resources about Immigration:**

Aspiration, Acculturation and Impact: Immigration to the United States, 1789-1930

Destination America - PBS

Ellis Island: The Immigrant Experience

Immigration and Steamships: Photos from the Collections of Mystic Seaport

Immigration: Stories of Yesterday and Today and Ellis Island

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Home Page
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Tour: Force & Motion

The Enduring Understanding:

Living in a seaport community or aboard a sailing ship in the 1800s required a great amount of physical work to move objects by pushing, pulling or lifting. Simple machines make work much easier by increasing the mechanical advantage and/or changing the direction of the force. Simple physics are all around us. As human beings, we generally accept the laws of physics and are unaware of how much they regiment our lives.

Questions to Consider Before Your Visit:

What is energy? Force? Effort?

(Energy is the ability to cause change. Force is any influence that causes an object to undergo change, especially in its movement or direction. Effort is the force placed on a simple machine.)

What are simple machines?

(Simple machines are tools that make work easier. They have few moving parts and use energy to work, giving us mechanical advantage by changing the amount, speed, or direction of forces.)

What is an example of a simple machine?

(Inclined plane/wedge, screw, lever, wheel and axle, pulley.)

Why would simple machines be so useful to everyone before the invention of electricity or steam power?

Concepts and Questions to Consider After Your Visit:

Examples of simple machines are everywhere at Mystic Seaport. Do we still use simple machines today?

What are simple machines constantly fighting against?

(Friction and gravity!)

What is a compound machine?

(Two or more simple machines working together.)

What modern machines can you name that accomplish lifting, hauling, raising items of different sizes, etc.?

(Cranes, conveyor belts, forklifts, cherry pickers and elevators, to start.)
Potential Post-Visit Activities:

Imagine that you have to transport a barrel of oil to the third floor of a building. There is no elevator, escalator, conveyor belt, etc., as there is no electricity. How could you get this barrel up there? Demonstrate how a simple machine could help you accomplish this task. (Bonus points if you can build the simple machine yourself!)

Draw a diagram of a sailing vessel like the *L.A. Dunton* or a similar ship. Include as many simple machines as you can, but do not label them. Swap your drawing with a neighbor. How many simple machines can s/he find and label?

**Online Resources about Force and Motion:**

- BrainPOP – Science: Motions, Forces and Time
- Center of Science and Industry: Simple Machines
- Physics4Kids – Motion: Forces
- Science Channel: Newton’s Laws of Motion Interactive
- StudyJams! – Force and Motion