Whalers' mixed blessing

BLACK HISTORY MONTH
BLACKS FOUND OPPORTUNITY — AND DANGER — IN A CRITICAL 19TH CENTURY TRADE

act2 | The 78-year-old triathlete
WHAT MAKES SHEILA LURIE ISAACS RUN, BIKE AND SWIM
Long Island's black whalers are receiving long-delayed attention two centuries after they risked their lives in one of the most dangerous and essential industries of their time.

New research by scholars into the impact of local African- and Native American peoples in whaling; an upcoming symposium on the subject at Stony Brook University; a new book on the history of whaling on Long Island — as well as popular depictions in such films as “In the Heart of the Sea” — are all helping shine the spotlight on a group long consigned to history’s margins.

“It’s an important story,” said Jennifer Anderson, associate professor of history at Stony Brook and the organizer of the symposium, which will be held in April. “These are the people who built Long Island.”

They also helped fuel the rest of the young American republic: While killing the mighty sea creatures may seem abhorrent to us in the 21st century, whale oil lit the lamps of America and lubricated the gears of the young nation’s new machines.

Long Island was at the center of it.

Coastal whaling had been going on along the Island's...
shores since the mid-1600s, but as the Industrial Revolution created greater demand for oil, the sheltered ports of Sag Harbor, and to a lesser extent, Greenport and Cold Spring Harbor, became centers for the new, large-scale whaling operations of the early 19th century. While fortunes were made, lives were lost. “Whaling was a cross between working in an oil refinery and a slaughterhouse, with the chance of drowning thrown in,” said Richard Doctorow, collections director of the Sag Harbor Whaling and Historical Museum. “It was not a job the upper class would want to get involved in, and socially, sailors and whalers were at the bottom of the heap. Which meant that, of course, this was a job available for African-Americans.”

Though historians disagree on exact figures, there are estimates that between one-quarter and one-third of all the American whaling crews were people of color. “It was the first integrated
industry in the country,” said Nomi Dayan, executive director of the Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum and author of “Whaling on Long Island,” scheduled to be published by Arcadia Press this spring. “It’s not to say that racism was totally absent. On the whale ships, crews were often segregated.”

INDUSTRY SHAPES EASTVILLE

Working together in the hunt for whales, African- and Native Americans from Long Island created bonds of kinship and family, forming mixed-race enclaves that still exist, such as the Eastville section of Sag Harbor and Freetown in East Hampton.

The heart of Eastville — St. David A.M.E. Zion Church, built in 1840 — owes its existence to the young black harpooneers and boat steerers who left farms and villages on Long Island for the high-risk opportunity of hunting the leviathans of the sea. Blacks from Virginia and Maryland, some of them runaway slaves, came to Long Island, too, to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by Sag Harbor’s growing whaling business.

“Whaling dollars helped build that church and the community,” said Georgette Grier-Key, executive director of the Eastville Community Historical Society.

In her research, Queens College archaeologist Allison McGovern identified 54 men of color who sailed out of Sag Harbor for just one of the major whaling companies between 1828 and 1859. Considering that there were about a half-dozen companies operating during the port’s most active years (1820-45), there probably were hundreds in total.

Many of the black and mixed-race men who sailed out of Long Island and other ports were from the same families. On the East End, prominent names included Plato, Pharaoh, Cuffee, Concer, Walker and Green. Their involvement in the whaling industry could mean both upward mobility and shattering loss, as the experience of the Platoss shows.

When gradual emancipation
in New York began in 1799, members of the Plato family of East Hampton were among the first free heads of household to show up in censuses. Plato men soon gravitated to whaling. Charles Plato, one of the three founding members of the Eastville church, was a whaler. So was Isaac Plato, who in 1828 appears in the account book of a Sag Harbor store as “Captain Plato” and purchased sets of dishware and cutlery, lumber and other items.

“It is tempting to imagine,” noted Brown University researcher Emily Button, who discovered the document, “that [Plato] was building and furnishing a home after time at sea.”

The same apparently prosperous Plato family would be struck by tragedy 16 years later. Around 1845, another Isaac Plato, a third mate on the Sag Harbor whaler Hudson, drowned in the Pacific Ocean. Eighteen years later, Silas B. Plato — likely his brother — also died at sea. He had sailed out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, on a ship called the Eagle as second mate and, according to probate records, died “fast to a whale,” meaning that he was tangled in the lines of a harpoon and dragged underwater, like the fictional Captain Ahab in “Moby-Dick.”

Mates were the officers on a whaling ship. They were second only to the captain in authority, suggesting that black whalers had opportunities at sea they didn’t have on land.

“Life at sea was a meritocracy,” Doctorow said. “You don’t get promoted if you don’t know what you’re doing. A whaling ship was one of those rare places in 19th century America where an African-American could be the boss.”

And it wasn’t just the men at sea who were involved. Ancillary industries developed around whaling on Long Island, whether it was supplying food to the ships for their long voyages or building the barrels to store the oil. Many of the women of the Green family in Eastville were seamstresses to the whaling captains’ wives; some were successful enough to buy their own land.

WHALERS EARN RESPECT

Black men from Long Island continued to be involved in the industry later in the 19th century. A few years ago, a Hofstra University archaeological excavation of the Jacob Hart home, in one of the traditionally black enclaves of Setauket, yielded a bottle that contained a derivative of sperm whale oil, suggesting that Hart had been a whaler, or at least a seaman, as a young man. The conclusion was supported by his 1931 obituary in a local newspaper, which described Hart as “a much-respected colored citizen.”

Hart would have been at sea in the late 1800s. Two men of color who became well-known figures on the East End in the mid- and late 19th century — Pyrrhus Concer and Stephen Pharaoh (aka Stephen Talkhouse) — also started their careers as whalers.

Concer became famous for having been one of the first black men to visit Japan when his whaling vessel stopped there, and later became a ferryboat captain in Southampton. After his whaling career, Pharaoh served in the Union Army during the Civil War, toured with P.T. Barnum as “Last King of the Montauks” (which he wasn’t) and gained fame as a long-distance walker.

For people of color involved in the industry’s heyday on Long Island, participation in whaling was a source of pride for generations to come. Grier-Key points to a series of tintype photographs taken of prominent Eastville whalers and their families after the Civil War.

“They don’t look downtrodden,” she said. “They look happy and satisfied, and that says something.”

Black History Month events

LISTINGS from E2

Memorial Library, 700 Hempstead Tpke.; free, 516-354-5280, elmontlibrary.org

HUNTINGTON
DJ KOOL HERC AND FRIENDS DANCE PARTY
Listen and jam to rare music DJ’d by the man credited with originating hip-hop music in the early 1970s; 9:30 p.m., Cinema Arts Centre, 423 Park Ave.; $15, 631-423-7611 ext. 14, cinemaartscentre.org

HUNTINGTON STATION
FILM: ‘THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL’
TV movie adaptation of Horton Foote’s Tony-nominated play; set during the final years of the Jim Crow South, it follows one woman’s quest to reconnect with her past (2014), not rated, 1:30, starring Cicely Tyson, Vanessa Williams and Blair Underwood, 7 p.m., South Huntington Library, 145 Pidgeon Hill Rd.; free, 631-549-4411, shpl.info

FEB. 20
ELMONT
LEGENDARY CLASSIC R&B DOO WOP
Eddie and the Starlites, revisit the romantic era of rhythm and blues featuring a variety of songs, 2 p.m., Elmont Memorial Library, 700 Hempstead Tpke.; free, 516-354-5280, elmontlibrary.org

PORT JEFF
FILM: ‘THE COLOR PURPLE’
A black Southern woman struggles to find her identity after suffering years of abuse from her father and others over 40 years (1985), rated PG, 1:55, 130 p.m., Port Jefferson Library, 100 Thompson St.; free, 631-473-0022, portjefflibrary.org

RIVERHEAD
FILM: ‘THE LAST KING OF THE MONTAUKS’
Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Talkhouse, who led a successful rebellion; 10 a.m., Riverhead Library, 330 Court St.; free, 631-727-3200, riverheadlibrary.org

More listings on Feb. 21