

Thursday, February 12, 1998

Role of Blacks in Whaling history

To the Editor:

I was in the process of preparing material for an exhibit on the black whalemen of Provincetown when I read the Jan. 29 *Inquirer and Mirror* article about Capt. Absalom Boston. While the term African-American can have a meaning that varies according to the personal definition of the speaker or writer, it is generally believed that Capt. Boston was not the sole whaling master of that description - but one of four or five.

Several hundred black whalemen worked on vessels hailing from Provincetown in the time period that began about 1870 and ended before World War I. Most were originally from the West Indies and many became U.S. citizens. There are a number of their descendants living in Provincetown now. The most prominent member of this group was Capt. Colin Stevenson (1847-1904) who lived here for about 30 years and raised a family in a substantial home in the west end of town. He was the master on 12 whaling cruises (on three different vessels) and was an officer and crew member on several others.

Provincetown launched the third largest number of whaling cruises in the history of the American whale fishery, but here that activity was historically secondary to cod fishing. (In that business Provincetown was second to Gloucester in the U.S.) Whal-

ing started in Provincetown in the 17th century and the famous Icabod Paddock, who taught Nantucketers how to whale, came from our town.

Nantucket is to be highly commended for the way that it has retained artifacts from its past and beautifully developed its historical resources. Provincetown, on the other hand, has lost or thrown away more of its material heritage than most coastal towns ever had. At this moment a 40-foot fishing vessel that is the last of its kind anywhere lies rotting away behind a town-owned museum.

In some parts of the world, I suppose, history is something to be avoided as it is often used politically to rekindle old hatreds. In that respect I think particularly of the former Yugoslavia and my wife's native Northern Ireland. But there is no reason to neglect the past here. Sad to say, over the past 25 years I have found little interest in our black whaling epoch or the accomplishments of Capt. Stevenson - either on the part of fellow natives or enlightened newcomers.

Provincetown, as everyone must know by now, imagines itself as a love-feast of diversity. Yet, if I mention the black whalemen and their contribution to the wealth of the town - even during Black History Month - people's eyes glaze over, brain circuits short out and they give me the unmistakable impression that it is time to change the subject.

GEORGE D. BRYANT

Mr. Bryant's letter offers the following notice:

Provincetown diversity will be celebrated in West Barnstable as part of Black History Month. An exhibition of photographs and artifacts will be on display in the library of the Cape Cod Community College after the middle of February. The material has been donated by George D. Bryant of the Grand Bank Archive.

The subject is the last phase of whaling activity on Cape Cod (roughly from 1870 to World War I) which employed hundreds of men from the West Indies on whaling schooners hailing from Provincetown. A few of the men eventually settled here and their descendants remain.

One of the few black captains in the history of the American whale fishery, Colin Stevenson, was in the vanguard and he and his wife owned a substantial house in the west end of town where they raised a family.

For information call Marilyn Pedalino, (508) 362-2131 extension 4458 or Augustin Dorado, (508) 362-2131 extension 4381. (Both are at the Cape Cod Community College)

For detailed information about items on display, contact George D. Bryant (508) 487-0657.