“A fine warm day, but very dry. This morning at 10 o’clock my elegant new ship was launched beautifully from Messrs Hillman’s Yard—and in the presence of about half the town and a great show of ladies. She looks beautifully on the water—she was copper bottomed on the stocks. She is to be commanded by Captain Thomas A. Norton.” —whaling merchant Charles W. Morgan, 21 July 1841

According to the Master Carpenter’s Certificate signed by “J&Z Hillman,” the new ship measured “106 ft 6 inches in length, 27 ft 2 and 1/2 inches in breadth, and ... her draft was 17 ft 6 inches, [and was] of 351 tons burthen.” Little could Morgan, or anyone else there that morning, have known that his ship, built to join the American whaling fleet of more than 400 vessels in the 1840s, was also beginning her voyage into American history and would alone still be at work, in a different capacity, 170 years later.

Today the story of the American whale fishery, spanning more than 200 years, is an epic chapter in our nation’s history that is largely forgotten by those outside of the maritime heritage community or beyond coastal New England. According to Judith Lund in her book, Whaling Masters And Whaling Voyages Sailing From American Ports, just over 2,700 ships carried out 14,864 documented whaling voyages during this period. In addition to its role in the economic and technological development of the country, the history of whaling reflects the important social and political changes that were going on during the nineteenth century.

Before we had gas lights or the electric light bulb, whale oil illuminated the world and provided lubrication for the machinery that would drive the Industrial Revolution. Not only was the search for whales global, so was the market for whale products. Whale oil lamps and spermaceti candles, made from the “head matter” of sperm whales, lit the homes and streets of England, Europe, and America. Oil from sperm whales was kept separate from the oil of any of the other species of whale captured because it was of much better quality and demanded a premium price. Whale “bone,” the flexible baleen found in the mouths of Mysticeti (as opposed to Odontoceti, or toothed whales), was used in ways we use plastic today. In addition to lubricating the Industrial Revolution, profits from whaling helped to capitalize it.

While the whaling industry involved the physical and economic risk of multi-year ocean voyages to often uncharted waters, it also required an active involvement in the global trade and political systems of the times. For example, while the Boston Tea Party is a well-remembered event in American history, few know that two of the ships carrying the tea were on a return voyage from London, where they had first delivered a cargo of sperm oil. In what might be considered an ironic side note to history, it was a whaleship, the Bedford from Nantucket with a cargo of whale and sperm oil, that on 3 February 1783 first flew the new American flag in the port of London.

The pursuit of whales took whalenmen across the oceans around the globe, resulting in the “discovery” and charting of vast reaches of the Pacific, Arctic, and Antarctic. Whalers—the crews from the Charles W. Morgan among them—were often the first contact Pacific islanders had with Western civilization. In a letter of support for the Morgan restoration project, maritime historian Joan Druett stated: “The Charles W. Morgan is a time capsule of immense value… it is a testament to a time when the arrival of a whaler was, for uncounted thousands of Pacific Islanders, the first introduction to Americans and their culture.”

The Morgan sailed on her first voyage...
from New Bedford on 6 September 1841. In his journal, second mate James Osborn stated she was on “a voyage to the Pacific Ocean” and added, “May kind Neptune protect us with pleasant gales and may we be successful in catching sperm whales.”

She returned three years, three months, and twenty-seven days later with a cargo of 1,600 barrels of sperm oil (a barrel is equivalent to 31\(\frac{1}{2}\) gallons) 600 barrels of whale oil, and 10,000 pounds of bone. In her eighty-year career, twenty years of which she worked out of San Francisco, the Morgan would make thirty-seven of the 14,864 voyages referenced above. These numbers provide insight into the remarkable scale of the industry.

Launched at the beginning of the decade that would be the high-water mark of the whaling industry in terms of the number of ships, crew, and cargo returned to port, the Morgan’s career encompassed both the decline of the industry and a period of enormous national growth, conflict, and change. Her whaling voyages would take her around the world, reflect all that was happening to the industry and the country and, when her last voyage ended in May of 1921, effectively take her to the very end of American whaling under sail.

Certainly no one who built her, attended her launching, or sailed on her first voyage could have imagined that the Morgan alone would survive to tell not just her story, but the story of this industry, its times, and the ships and people who were a part of it.

On 28 May 1921, Captain John T. Gonsalves sailed the Morgan back to New Bedford, having completed her thirty-seventh and final whaling voyage. After a brief reprieve in which she was used in the films Down to The Seas In Ships and Java Head, the vessel was laid up. Even at the time, some people understood that she represented the end of an era. A group of New Bedford citizens, led by artist Harry Neyland, sought to raise funds to preserve the ship. In the fall of 1924, inspired by the 26 August wreck of the Wanderer, the only other whaleship left besides the Morgan, Colonel Edward Howland Robinson Green, whose grandfather Edward Robinson had been the ship’s second owner, stepped forward. Colonel Green offered to underwrite the ship’s stewardship, bring her to his estate just outside of New Bedford, and restore her. His offer was accepted.

The ship was opened to the public on 21 July 1926 under an organization called Whaling Enshrined and enjoyed immediate popularity: 189,000 people visited the ship between 1 June 1927 and 1 June 1928. Things went along well until Colonel Green died in 1935, leaving no resources to maintain the ship. Three years later, the devastating Great Hurricane of 1938 roared up the coast with the ship directly in its path. Remarkably, the old whaleship survived the event, but not without further aggravating her deteriorating condition. In 1941, after a valiant but unsuccessful effort by the Whaling Enshrined organization to raise enough money to keep her in New Bedford, they accepted an offer from the then Marine Historical Association (now Mystic Seaport) to take responsibility for preserving the vessel. The Charles W. Morgan was towed to Mystic and passed through the Mystic River Highway Bridge on 8 November 1941, just one month before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Placed in a berth at the museum, the Morgan became the centerpiece of the growing institution and received ongoing maintenance from her waterline up. In 1973, the decision was made to refloat and haul out the ship, a feat made possible by the shiplift at the newly constructed Henry B. duPont Preservation Shipyard on the museum’s waterfront. The hull was removed from
new state-of-the-art Hays and Ros Clark Syncrolift shiplift and the construction of an environmentally compliant haul-ashore area—all told, a ten-million dollar project.

On 1 November 2008, a large crowd gathered to watch as the ship slowly emerged from the water. What they would see in the lower part of the ship was essentially the same wood that “half the town” of New Bedford had watched go into the water for the first time in August of 1841. Once the keel was clear of the water, the ship had to be moved ahead, washed off at the haul-ashore area, tracked sideways, and shored up so as to be able to withstand the work to come.

Mystic’s president Steve White has asked, “What does it mean to be the last of your kind?” For a museum, it most certainly means preservation, stewardship, and documentation. Before a single plank or fastening was removed, the museum first embarked on what was considered high priority in the restoration plan—extensive documentation of the ship. The shipyard staff describes this stage of the restoration as an archaeological effort. Archaeologists understand the critical need to document sites in situ; once a site has been excavated, no one will ever again be able to see the artifacts as they were originally situated. So too for the Morgan. Even though the whaleship has been in constant view for most of her life, certainly since she came to Mystic seventy years ago, the original details of her construction deep in the bilge and behind ceiling planking were hidden from sight. The shipwrights have understood that this is a one-time opportunity to see and document an authentic American wooden whaleship as she was originally constructed. Thus, every aspect of the ship as she existed on that day, and at each succeeding stage, has been photographed and recorded—including a 3-D laser scan of the interior and an X-ray examination of the keel bolts.

With the first stage of documentation completed, at last the actual restoration work on the hull could begin. Before any material was removed, actions were taken inside and outside of the hull to protect her structural integrity. Next, her internal ceiling planking was carefully removed, exposing the ship’s futtocks (frame sections) for the first time since 1841. The shipyard was entering a time machine. The shipyard

(above) The whaling ship Charles W. Morgan passing through the Mystic River Highway Bridge en route to her new home at Mystic Seaport, 8 November 1941; (below) The Morgan in her first berth at Mystic, high and dry in the sand. She stayed in this position until 1973, when the museum restored her so she could be refloated.
The Charles W. Morgan hauled out with the museum’s newly installed shiplift, 1 November 2008. In the crowd were members of Mystic Seaport’s Henry B. duPont Preservation Shipyard staff and volunteers, a group that was honored this past fall with the Distinguished Service Award at the National Maritime Historical Society’s Annual Awards Dinner at the New York Yacht Club. In addition to working on the maintenance of Mystic Seaport’s collection of large floating wooden vessels, individuals in this group worked on the restoration of Roann, a 1946 Maine-built Eastern fishing dragger relaunched earlier in 2008; the construction of the Freedom Schooner Amistad, launched in 2000; the 1980s multi-year Morgan restoration, and her 1973 haul-out. One former employee—now a museum interpreter—had even worked on the Morgan as a caulker and shipwright when the whaleship was still in her sand berth. Such is the heritage of passing on the skills and techniques of traditional large ship timber shipbuilding that is a fundamental tenet of Mystic Seaport.

staff would soon develop immense respect for their colleagues from 170 years ago. Their work, now visible, had begun in early January of 1841, at the same time a young greenhorn sailor from New York named Herman Melville sailed from New Bedford, Massachusetts, on a whaleship named the Acushnet. Seven months later, the Charles W. Morgan slipped down the ways, was fitted out, and by 6 September put to sea, setting a course for the Pacific. Between 1827 and 1852, the Hillman Brothers Shipyard in New Bedford built seventeen whaleships, and their work on the Morgan provides direct insights into the techniques and materials used in nineteenth-century shipbuilding.

Subsequent articles in Sea History will share the details of the restoration as it continues over the next few years, but a unique highlight of this project can only be appreciated by a visit in person. Every aspect of the ship’s restoration is taking place in full view of the public. As visitors approach the shipyard area of the museum grounds, the Morgan looms large—huge, rather—just ahead in the haul-ashore area next to the shiplift. To reach the ship, they walk through stacks of live oak, white oak, and long leaf yellow pine being worked on to go into the ship’s hull and superstructure. The shipyard’s main building houses a gallery, which displays a special exhibit about the ship and her restoration called “Restoring An Icon.” From the gallery, visitors can look over the railing and down to the open space where the work on the eastern-rig dragger Roann and the schooner Amistad was done. On any given day, visitors can witness the shipwrights at work on various aspects of the project. As I write this, a new mizzen lower mast is near complete and a piece of long leaf yellow pine, which will become a section of the port side clamp, is being shaped near some of the original knees that came from the ship’s lower hold. Exiting the building, visitors can go aboard the ship, where the weather- and ‘tween decks remain open to visitation thanks to a purpose-built stairway constructed amidships on the starboard side. A visit to see all of this is a rare and memorable experience and one that changes with each stage of the restoration. This ability to see the original fabric of the last surviving wooden whaleship is a once-in-a lifetime opportunity.

Work on the Morgan had already begun in the spring of 2009, when Mystic Seaport came under the direction of a new president. In his new role, Steve White challenged the Mystic Seaport staff and trustees with a series of questions. He asked, “If the ship—when we’re done—will be stronger than any time since when she was sailing, why wouldn’t we sail her again? Aren’t ships supposed to go to sea? If not now, when, and if not now, why?” The idea of taking
an irreplaceable historic icon—the last of its kind—to sea was not necessarily new, but, given the outcome of the current restoration, suddenly changed from an abstract idea to a real possibility. The concept is hotly debated among historic ship preservationists. While some view the restoration of a ship as incomplete without operating it in some capacity in the way it was originally intended, others consider the risk of losing such a vessel or seriously damaging it too great and believe that those who would do so to be acting irresponsibly or even recklessly.

Nonetheless, once the idea had been presented to the current leadership, the museum’s board of trustees authorized a feasibility study of the question, all based on the fundamental principles that no physical aspect of the ship could be altered and that her safety be the highest priority. In September of 2009, the board unanimously voted to approve the feasibility group’s recommendation that, when the restoration is complete, the ship make a ceremonial “38th voyage” back home to New Bedford (for a visit) and then on to the whaling grounds on Stellwagen Bank in Massachusetts Bay (now a National Marine Sanctuary) to pay tribute, not only to the thousands of whalers from history, but to the whales themselves in this new era of preservation and understanding.

The work goes on and the goals are clear. Restore this important historic ship fully and, in doing so, let her embark on a new and different voyage. A voyage that will tell the story, the whole complicated story of this poorly understood chapter in American history, as nothing other than the authentic, real thing can. Her cargo today is history in all its multi-faceted complex layers—the good, and the inspiring, but also the bad and the parts we need to remember so as not to repeat them. The 38th voyage will also serve to bring attention to important contemporary issues that a ship on the sea and her particular history can explore and the critical question of the human impact on the waters that surround us. It will be quite a trip.

Notes:
1. Charles W. Morgan collection at Mystic Seaport
2. Certificate of Measurements: New Bedford Custom House
3. Edouard A. Stackpole, *The Sea Hunters*, J.B. Lippincott Co. 1953; p.95
4. Charles W. Morgan collection

Matthew Stackpole, a former executive director of the Martha’s Vineyard Museum and an overseer at the USS Constitution Museum, is a member of the Charles W. Morgan Restoration team at Mystic Seaport.

Charles W. Morgan is in the third year of a multi-year restoration project that will be complete when the ship sets sail on her 38th voyage. As of mid-January, the shipwrights were finished fairing new futtocks and installing the new 17-foot-long section of the keelson. New copper keel bolts are being installed in addition to existing fasteners to strengthen the joining of the keel, keelson, and floor timbers. Installation of the ceiling will be the next major phase of the project. The search for materials continues. Suitable timber for a few more knees needs to be located. More long leaf pine is scheduled for delivery next fall. The width of the Morgan’s long leaf yellow pine planks

Looking aft on the starboard side. New and original 1841 futtocks side by side.
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(right) The Morgan at her berth at Chubbs Wharf at Mystic Seaport in 1992. Generations of visitors, researchers, and schoolchildren—an estimated 20 million people—have walked her decks, listened to role players and musicians tell her story, and watched as her museum crew scrambled aloft to set and strike sail at the dock since becoming a museum ship seventy years ago. The next time you see sails being set on the Morgan, it will be for real sailing out on the ocean and not just as a dockside demonstration.

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