

Freedom and Whaling on Nantucket

by Skip Finley

The story of emancipation and its ties to whaling on Nantucket is particularly relevant in these new times of social reflection. From 1619 to the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, slavery was the law of the land in America. Nearly a century before the Civil War, Nantucket was able to find a solution.

In 1647, George Fox founded the Society of Friends in England, a group that was almost immediately persecuted for their beliefs. Fox's doctrine was that people should live thriftily, conduct themselves with honesty, and work hard. The Friends were called "Quakers," thanks to Fox once having told an English judge; "You should quake at the word of the Lord," as Friends tended to do during their meetings. To escape mistreatment in England, the Quakers relocated to America. However, even in the New World, they were persecuted by the Puritans. So with firsthand knowledge of prejudice, the Quakers ardently believed all humans should be treated with dignity and respect.

Nantucket lies in the Atlantic Ocean about 25 miles south of Cape Cod. Between the mid-1700s and the mid-1820s, Nantucket was the whaling capital of the world.

When Nantucket was settled by the English in 1659, it had an indigenous population of about 3,000. The group comprised ten British men and their families, led by Tristram Coffin, with Edward Starbuck, Thomas Macy, and Isaac Coleman among them. Coffin's daughter, Mary Coffin Starbuck, and her oldest son, Nathaniel, promulgated Quakerism after her conversion from Puritanism in 1701; her daughter (Mary) was the first white person born on Nantucket. The Quakers were a



self-sufficient, thrifty people who respected neither kings nor the leadership of non-believers. Women and men sat on opposite sides of the room during services, because equality was always central to the core of the new religion they brought with them. Opponents of taxes, the death penalty and slavery, the Quakers were among the first organized abolitionists.

No Utopia

Not all Quakers were abolitionists on Nantucket, or throughout New England where the cause was advanced, and many continued to own slaves. They were, however, among the first to voice their discomfort with its morality. In a 1716 Quaker meeting held in Dartmouth (near modern-day New Bedford), the practice of slavery was deemed "not agreeable to the truth." In 1733, Nantucket-based Elihu Coleman published "A Testimony Against That Anti-Christian Practice Of Making Slaves of Men," one

(left) Sampson Dyer, by Spoilum (fl. 1765–1805). Dyer (1773–1843) was a free man of mixed race—African and Native American, who moved to Nantucket in the 1790s with his wife, Patience Dyer (née Allen). By the time of their arrival on Nantucket, slavery had been outlawed in Massachusetts. The Dyers settled in the community south of town called New Guinea, where the island's people of color, including the few surviving native Wampanoag, lived. For a brief period after the American Revolution and lasting until the War of 1812, Nantucket shipowners engaged in the China Trade, often gathering seal pelts on the voyage out to trade for porcelain, tea, silks, and other goods at Canton (now Guangzhou). Dyer is believed to have signed aboard the ship Active as steward for a trading voyage to China in the 1790s. From 1802 to 1805, he was aboard the Lady Adams of Nantucket on a voyage hunting seals in the Juan Fernandez Islands off Chile before continuing to Canton. It is on one of these voyages that Dyer commissioned his portrait from the Chinese painter Spoilum, an artist who specialized in European-style paintings in oil of sea captains and both Chinese and Western merchants.



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View of the Town of Nantucket, ca. 1811 by Thomas Birch (1779–1851).

of the first American documents to refute the practice of slavery. Nonetheless, the change in thinking did not come all at once; some Nantucket Quakers continued to hold people in slavery decades after Coleman's publication.

From its foundations, Nantucket's New World settlers recognized that the sandy island they had moved to had little arable land and few natural resources besides the sea surrounding it. In 1672 they offered grants to two off-islanders to bring fishing and whaling practices to the island. The whaler, James Loper of Southampton, Long Island, declined, and it appears that the Quakers and the Wampanoag together developed offshore whaling without outside help. Another popular figure in Nantucket lore is a Cape Codder named Ichabod Paddack, who reportedly was hired in the late 1600s to consult on the efficacy of whaling, but the records of his involvement do not bear this story out. What is clear is that the industrious Quakers tapped



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Whaleship model, by William Meader of Nantucket (1750–1829), ca. 1765.

into the indigenous people's skills for use in developing whaling from a shore-based fishery into a large-scale industry. From about 1690 to 1715, the English, who owned the boats and tools, relied on Native men to man the island's shore-whaling boats. But they also brought with them diseases—diphtheria, smallpox and measles—to which the island's Wampanoag had no immunity. As the native population decreased from these epidemics and other factors, black men were brought in to replace the natives in the difficult but burgeoning new industry.

Nantucket Town records have included black residents since 1717. Thanks to the Quakers' rejection of slavery as an acceptable institution, by 1775 there were no slaves on Nantucket and black people on the island would find themselves free—long before their brethren on the mainland. It is worth noting that while the Friends exhibited far more tolerance for black people than most other whites in the colonies, they did not encourage integration. Indeed, blacks were not welcome into their society. As Nantucket author and historian Nathaniel Philbrick put it: "For those whose

ships required cheap and bountiful labor, the growth of the black community was a matter of business rather than the result of lofty social ideals."

The participation by black men in whaling is closely tied to the end of slavery on Nantucket. One story in particular, once believed to have been the one to have precipitated slavery's end, is instructive—and may have been able to occur only on Nantucket.

Prince Boston

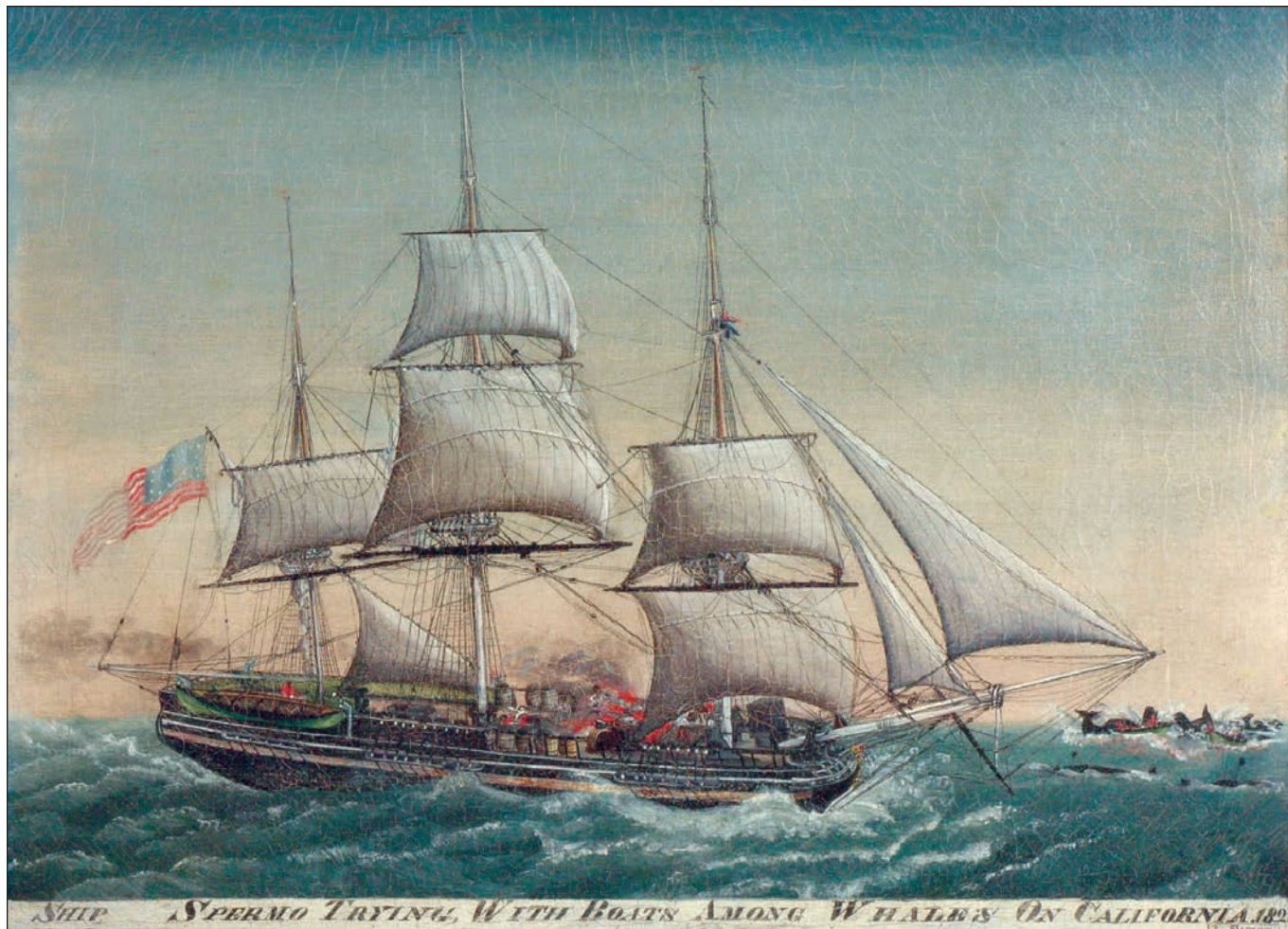
The enslaved patriarch Boston and his family had been the property of William Swain since 1739. His youngest son, Prince Boston, was born in 1750 and would become uncle to the future Nantucket black whaling captain, Absalom Boston. In 1772, Swain hired out Prince Boston for a whaling voyage in the *Friendship*, expecting to be paid for his slave's work, as he had done before with Prince's older brothers. Boston's performance as a harpooner proved good enough that *Friendship's* captain, Elisha Folger, paid Prince directly—not his owner. William Swain died while the ship was still out at sea, and his heirs sued Captain Folger for Prince Boston's wages, but lost the decision in the Nantucket Court of Common Pleas. Prince Boston subsequently petitioned for his freedom and became a free man. This was an important case in the emancipation timeline and it took place a full ninety years before the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Just two years after the Swain v. Folger court decision, in 1775, the last Nantucketer to own slaves freed them. Massachusetts outlawed slavery eight years after that, in 1783.

Another ramification stemming from that court case was that Boston's brother Seneca, a weaver, was able to buy his family a home on York Street in Nantucket in 1774, where his son Absalom Boston was born in 1785. The African Meeting House at 29 York Street, still there today, was next door. It is owned by Boston's Museum of Afro-American History Black Heritage Trail and is used for special events.

*Captain Absalom F. Boston (1785–1855),
by an unknown artist, ca. 1835.*



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“Ship Sperm Trying With Boats Among Whales On California 1821,” by J. Fisher, ca. 1823. The 296-ton ship Spermo of Nantucket made just one whaling voyage, sailing to the Pacific under Captain James Bunker between August 1820 and March 1823. It was a profitable voyage, bringing home 1,920 barrels of valuable sperm oil.

Nantucket’s Black Whaling Captains

Following in his uncle’s whaling footsteps, as a free man Absalom Boston made money on several whaling trips, rising to be captain of the *Industry* in 1822. Later, his investment in the fabulously successful voyage of the whaleship *Loper* is believed to have made him rich enough to invest in other business ventures on land. When Boston died in 1848, he left cash, property and assets with a value of \$1,351.50 (about \$37,500 today) to his heirs. At the time of his death he was a successful business-man who had worked tirelessly to integrate the island’s communities. That notwithstanding, he was buried in a segregated cemetery.

Along with Boston, other black men of Nantucket became whaling captains, including Peter Green and Edward Pompey,

who captained the New Bedford brig *Rising States* that was coincidentally owned by another black man, Richard Johnson.

Despite the fact that he belonged to a race then in slavery on board a Nantucket whaleship, he was an officer and his command coming as it did through a process of harsh elimination was nevertheless his—and he was master of his ship.

—Edouard Stackpole discussing Peter Green, in *The Sea Hunters*

Peter Green was the first black man to become a replacement master following the death of senior officers. The *John Adams* left Nantucket in 1821, with Peter Green as second mate under first mate Seth G. Myrick and Captain George Bunker II. Bunker died and Myrick and his whaleboat

crew were lost after harpooning a whale. Returning to Nantucket in 1823 as captain, Green reported the men had died the previous April. There is no record of the details of Green’s promotion, but the facts are that the *John Adams* returned with Green as captain—and oil worth \$689,905 in today’s dollars. There are no records about Green having served whaling voyages before or after his historic promotion aboard the *John Adams*, so we cannot know if he sailed in that capacity again.

After his whaling career, Absalom Boston acquired land, a store, and an inn and helped build a church and a school. His friend Ed Pompey opened a store and sold subscriptions to William Lloyd Garrison’s newspaper, the *Liberator*, and became a prominent abolitionist. Pompey was president of the Nantucket Colored



Arthur Cooper (1789–1853), portrait by Sally Gardner (1799–1862), ca. 1830.

Temperance Society and attended the New England Anti-Slavery Convention of 1834 as a representative of Nantucket. Garrison wrote to Pompey, saying he looked forward to visiting Nantucket “when I shall be able to tell you, face to face, how much I appreciate your efforts to promote the circulation of the *Liberator* and also to thank my colored brethren for their patronage.” Garrison visited Nantucket in 1842.

Buried on Nantucket in the island’s historic Colored Cemetery, his headstone in the cemetery identifies him as “Capt. Edward Pompey.” Edward J. Pompey died a bachelor in 1848 at 48 years old.

Scrimshaw sperm-whale tooth, by Edward Burdett (1805–1833), ca. 1830. Hunting and butchering whales on the high seas was dangerous, violent, gory work. But the long voyages also provided whalers copious amounts of spare time, which prompted a flourishing of shipboard folk arts, such as scrimshaw.

Committing to Equality

While freedom reigned on the island, segregation continued. When Eunice Ross, who was black, was denied admission to the local public high school in 1838, the island’s black population took a stand, led by Captain Boston and Pompey. The con-

troversy attracted enough attention that the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society decided to hold its three-day convention on Nantucket in 1841. Frederick Douglass delivered his first address to a multiracial audience on the second day of the convention, launching his career as an abolitionist and orator.

In August 1842, the Anti-Slavery Society returned, featuring speeches by Garrison denouncing the Constitution as “an agreement with Hell” and by the fiery abolitionist Stephen S. Foster, who ignited a riot (by a white mob) that lasted several days. It was on this occasion that Foster delivered his “Brotherhood of Thieves” address. Foster suggested five distinct crimes: “theft, or the stealing of a man’s labor; adultery, the disregard for the ‘requisitions of marriage’ involved in holding women as ‘stock’ and prostituting them; man-stealing or kidnapping, the act of claiming a man as property; piracy, the illegal taking of slaves from the coast of Africa; and murder, the firm intention of masters who could hold slaves only by the threat of extermination.”

In 1844, Absalom Boston and Edward J. Pompey, along with 104 others, submitted a petition to the Massachusetts Senate and House of Representatives describing “insults and outrages upon their rights.” Another soon followed, signed by more than 200 white Nantucketers—mostly Unitarians and abolitionists—in support of the petition, and in 1845 Massachusetts legislators passed the first law in the United States guaranteeing equal education. Still, segregation lasted a few more years,



with some white abolitionists refusing to send their children to the schools.

Freedom on Nantucket

The Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 (and 1850) gave Southern slave owners the legal authority to seek out and recapture slaves who had escaped, typically to the north. With proof as rudimentary as an affidavit signed by a slave owner to a judge, agents could capture not just runaway slaves but free black people. Fines were imposed upon people who hampered the return of slaves to former masters, and while Northerners were generally opposed to the laws, Quakers and abolitionists were outraged.

In 1822, the same year that Absalom Boston commanded the *Industry*, a slave catcher named Camillus Griffith attempted to take Arthur and Lucy Cooper, a married black couple living on Nantucket, into custody under the auspices of the Fugitive Slave Act. Arthur had been a slave in Virginia and had escaped to the north some time between 1815 and 1818. Lucy Cooper may have been born free. Wielding a power of attorney from the slave owners, Griffith and a court-appointed deputy went to Nantucket to get the Coopers and their children. While these men were attempting to remove the Coopers from their home, Francis Macy, a cousin of the prominent Rotch family, intervened along with “a large assemblage of persons,” including large numbers of both the black and white communities on the island, who had surrounded the house. Sylvanus Macy stepped up to suggest the power of attorney was a forgery and said, “We are not in Virginia now but in Yankee Town, and we want those colored people to man our whale ships and will not suffer them to be carried back to bondage.”¹

Portrait of a man, ca. 1857: Photographic portraits of 19th-century African American Nantucketers are rare, and this exceptional whole-plate tintype is one of the finest known. Unfortunately, the man's identity continues to elude scholars; for a long time, this image was thought to be Arthur Cooper, but this has been disproven. The man's earrings suggest he was a sailor, and his expression of strength and dignity suggests he was a man of respect and esteem in the island's Black community.

If not for the Quakers and the value of whaling, at any time black Nantucketers like Absalom Boston, Peter Green, and Edward J. Pompey could have been thrown into slavery. For whalemens sailing the world's oceans, the protection they enjoyed as Nantucketers came decades before the rest of the country followed suit.

In 1775, the last Nantucket slaveholder, Benjamin Coffin, freed his slave, Rose, and her two sons, Benjamin and Bristol. On the little island off the Massachusetts coast, black people were free of slavery before America's revolt from England; the rest of the new nation had to wait until 1865. †

¹*Republican Standard* (New Bedford) 15 May 1878.

Skip Finley, a former radio broadcasting executive, who has attempted retirement since age fifty, keeps returning to communications and is currently in marketing at the Vineyard Gazette Media Group on Martha's Vineyard, where he summered since 1955. For five years Finley wrote the Vineyard Gazette's weekly Oak Bluffs Town column and has contributed to several publications in the areas of whaling and history. This article is based on his research for his new book, Whaling Captains of Color: America's First Meritocracy (Naval Institute Press, 2020). The images in this article and most captions were provided by the Nantucket Historical Association. Visit www.nha.org to learn more about all aspects of Nantucket history.

