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# Cape Cod Whalers of Color

## *An Exhibit of Photographs and Artifacts*

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Materials collected by George Bryant,  
*Provincetown Historian and Writer*

1998



**Opening Reception**  
**Sunday, March 29 • 3:30 p.m.**  
*Exhibit continues through May 1*



**CAPE COD COMMUNITY COLLEGE**  
**Library-LRC Lobby**  
**2240 Iyanough Road • West Barnstable**

Basic Inventory of Exhibit Whale Men of Color

26 photographs

1 small barrell

1 stave from a oil barrell

2 quarterboards Montezuma

1 Ship Chandler's receipt

1 bomb lance

1 blubber knife

3 nautical charts

1 Early Map of Provincetown

1 Artist's rendering of Map of Provincetown, 1866

1 Ship's Anchor

2 signal flag models

1 dipping pail

1 box of David C. Stull clock oil bottles

brass tag of whaleman Jesse Cook, Jr.

1 whales tooth

1 tooth puller from Brig D.A. Small

1 domino of whale bone

1 large whale bone

2 books: Jennings Provincetown

Thrilling Adventures of Whaler Alcyone

3 crew lists includes: Sch Charles Thompson, Sch Clara s. Sparks

1 Notebook of articles concerning William T. Shorey, Ellen Rose Giles, etc.

*5 Flags*

# A little-known side to whaling

**Y**OU know, says George Bryant, "some people believe everything they read and nothing they hear. I have found that quite the opposite is true, especially when you are dealing with older people. If they take the time to talk to you about it, it's usually worth looking into."

Bryant grew up in Provincetown, attended the local schools, and was intensely interested in the industries of fishing and shipbuilding and the families and individuals whose lives depended on the sea.

A former selectman and now Provincetown's representative to the county Assembly of Delegates, he is using oral history to pursue his fascination with the people and vessels that created the multicultural community of his childhood.

Bryant recently received the Paul Cuffe Memorial Fellowship for the study of Minorities in American Maritime History from the Mystic Seaport Museum. The fellowship is named in honor of a black ship owner in New Bedford during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Warren Silva of Bangs Street was one of those "older people" to whom Bryant was referring "who took time to talk" to him about life in Provincetown during the 1890s.

"'Say George,' he said to me one day, 'Did you know that when I was a boy, most of the men on the whaling ships were colored?'" Silva grew up on Young's Court, a short distance from Pearl Street, from where the majority of the last whaling ships sailed and were outfitted.

Silva told Bryant, "We used to go down to Knowles Wharf and talk to these men. They were very interesting people. They would tell us stories about whaling and that sort of thing. Nobody ever mentions it anymore."

These men of color were English-speaking people from the West Indies, and though most of them



**Betty Burkes**

never settled there permanently, Provincetown was their home port.

In 1977, at the National Archives in Washington, Bryant discovered a number of ships' documents and an extensive collection of ships' crew lists from Provincetown. The list of the crew was required to be registered with a federal agency every time a whaling ship left port. "I am convinced from my reading of these logs that by 1870 the majority of people who sailed on Provincetown whaling vessels — and there were a couple of dozen of them — were black," says Bryant.

I asked Bryant where the owners of these vessels found black men to sail their ships, and he replied, "Recently they've rediscovered that humpback whales go to the Caribbean in the wintertime. The Yankees from Provincetown knew that 150 years ago. They chased the whales to the West Indies to the area around Beguia, a small island near St. Vincent."

George O. Knowles and Joseph Manta, two of the last owners of whaling vessels, employed black crew members from these islands. They also employed black men to command their vessels. Collin Stevenson and Shorey are the only known black English-speaking captains of whaling vessels in the history of the United States. They both lived and sailed from Provincetown. Shorey was born in the southern United States, but more is known about Stevenson than Shorey.

Collin Stevenson was born in 1847 in St. Vincent. He arrived in Provincetown in the early 1870s. His wife and daughter arrived later,

and a 'receipt for purchases' was found by Bryant in the records of his family's grocery store, written to Collen Stevenson in 1878. Stevenson became a captain on the *Alcyone*, an important whaling ship built in Provincetown in 1866, before commanding the *Carrie D. Knowles*. Both were owned by George B. Knowles, but the *Carrie* was his pride and joy and named for his daughter. Pictures of the *Carrie* with its crew taken in 1890 show most of the crew members were black.

In January 1904, Collin Stevenson made his last voyage as captain on the *Carrie D. Knowles*. Her destination was Dominica and three months later the people expecting it wrote to Knowles that it hadn't arrived. A Gloucester fisherman reported that he had seen it struggling in a storm off Georges Bank. However, five years later, in 1909, a man named Paine arrived in Kingstown St. Vincent, claiming that he had met the crew in prison in Venezuela while in prison there himself. He was very convincing, and he created a great deal of excitement. Then he disappeared from Kingstown as suddenly as he had arrived.

Mrs. Stevenson, living in Provincetown and preparing to remarry thereupon canceled her plans and returned with the wife of another crew member to prevail upon the Venezuelan government to release her husband, but not before soliciting the help of Henry Cabot Lodge. Venezuela denied the story, and it was never verified.

In Provincetown today, nobody claims a proud descendance from Stevenson, Shorey and the many black sailors who managed the whaling ships — but George Bryant is uncovering the layers of silence surrounding the men of color whose endurance brought good fortune and wealth to this historic town at the tip of Cape Cod.

*Betty Burkes lives in Wellfleet.*

**T**he frothy waves of Provincetown Harbor in search of whales starting in the latter part of the 19th century. To others, they are true men of resilient flesh and coursing blood, a group of black, West Indian, Barbadian and Cape Verdian men, who not only acted as crew members on a succession of whaling vessels, but captained at least three of those vessels as well.

Some of their stories have disappeared, forever lost in the memories of those who have died, while others lay hidden, encrusted in the hulls of ships which ghost the bottom of the seas. Thankfully, some pieces to the stories of black whalemens continue to exist. Two black whaling captains in particular, Colin Stevenson and William Shorey, made Provincetown their homes for a brief time and their stories are slowly rising to the surface through the attention of several people. One of those people is local maritime historian, George Bryant, whose information about a little-known portion of town history has been gathered in bits and pieces since 1972.

"I found an old bill at the store (my family owned, Bryant's Market) and it was for coal and personal supplies from Colin Stevenson, so he must have lived in this area of town," says Bryant. From the bill Bryant discovered, with a date penned in 1877, he suspects Stevenson lived in the eastern portion of town at one time. He later moved to a house on Race Road, in the west end.

Stevenson was of West Indian descent, born in 1846 on the island of St. Vincent. Bryant believes he arrived here at some time in the 1870's, though he has not been able to definitively nail down a date. "There were black crews here in 1870's and I think Colin Stevenson came in 1870 too. But I've never been absolutely certain," he admits.

The connection of West Indian,

and other Caribbean, whalemens to Provincetown was brought about unwittingly by the whales themselves. Bryant says that many local whaling crews followed humpback whales to their winter migration waters, which lay in the seas that encapsulated the Caribbean islands. Many men from those islands, familiar with a life on the water, returned with ships to Provincetown. Among the hundreds who came to Provincetown, if only for a brief time, was Stevenson.

A 25-year member of the Society for Industrial Archeology, Bryant says through the data he has gathered, he thinks Stevenson was a master on 12 or 13 whaling cruises. Bryant is sure Stevenson captained three whaling vessels—the Rising Sun, the Alcyone and the Carrie D. Knowles. It was aboard the Carrie D. Knowles that Capt. Stevenson met his death in 1904.

Threading together the lives of black whalemens means finding old historical documents along with trying to plumb the memories of those who may hold clues to lives largely forgotten. Displaying a piece of his part-time detective work, Bryant shows a copy of old death listings which were held at Town Hall. On a sheet bearing Stevenson's death, at the age was 58, he is listed as one of 13 black whalemens out of a crew of 16. But other documents, specifically crew lists, notes Stevenson as being a "mulatto," an out-dated term for someone of bi-racial descent.

In an attempt to discover more

about Stevenson, Bryant says he contacted someone who may have known him, a woman named Carrie D. Knowles. She was the namesake of the vessel Carrie D. Knowles, upon which Stevenson died. Bryant says that when speaking to Knowles, when she was 102, he had to frame questions that would correspond to notions of race and ethnicity she was familiar with. While hearing her comments now might tend to rip the air from a person's throat with shock, a century ago, her words probably wouldn't have raised an eyebrow.

"I asked her if (Stevenson) was black and she didn't know what that meant," Bryant recalls. "So I said, 'Was he a Negro?' and she said, 'Yes, but he wasn't a darkie.' And I said, 'What do you mean by darkie?' and she said, 'Really dark. He was obviously neither white nor black.' That was her description of him."

Bryant recalls a tale that after the vessel Carrie D. Knowles was lost at sea, Stevenson's wife remained in Provincetown for several years. She became engaged to a Provincetown resident and shortly before their marriage, she heard word from St. Vincent that Stevenson and his crew were not dead—she was told they had been spotted by a West Indian man in a Venezuelan prison. The news sent Stevenson's wife racing back to St. Vincent to find out if the information was indeed true. It is believed, Bryant says, that Stevenson and his crew were never jailed and that they had

of time when both Stevenson and Shorey lived in town. During that time, it was likely they met. "I assume Stevenson and Shorey must have known each other," Bryant says. There has yet to be any conclusive evidence upon their acquaintance.

Bryant says he has no idea how black whalemens were perceived by their peers, so he could not comment on their treatment in town. The actions of black whalemens themselves, however, might have hinted at their treatment in town a century ago. "It seems that they stayed on the boat most of the time when they were in port. Or in a building on the (captain's) property. They apparently lived on the vessel or nearby." Black captains, he says, usually were in charge of predominantly black crews. "But that wasn't always the case."

Even within those mostly segregated crews, there did exist a number that were integrated to some extent. "The crews here were often kind of a mixed bag," Bryant explains. "There was equal opportunity employment, both black and white, where anyone below the rank of boat steerer was welcomed, because all they needed were live bodies." (A boat steerer acted as a ship's harpooner.)

A number of those live bodies remained in town, where they incorpo-

simple factor of living here and having people mention things to him. On a trip to Washington, D.C. in 1977, he found crew lists, which he copied and brought back. Those lists categorize men by such factors as height, age, place of birth and "complexion." Within this category, the men were noted to have complexions ranging from light, dark ("Dark doesn't necessarily mean black," says Bryant,) or mulatto to black.

Some of the information Bryant has gathered will soon find its way into a larger venue than the paper-filled boxes that line the floor of his

house. An exhibit based upon Bryant's information will open sometime within the next month at Cape Cod Community College and offer a small, introductory lesson. But having an exhibit about Provincetown's black whalemens take place more than 40 miles away from town begs the question of why it's not here. "The reason it's in West Barnstable is

that there's no interest in Provincetown. I mean, nobody really wants to deal with it. I've mentioned it to a variety of people... They were interested, but they just don't go too far." Bryant calls himself an indiscriminate collector, and when he realized he had more information than others on black whalemens, he began to see its importance in local maritime history. He hopes others will see it as well.



Photo by Vincent Guadagno  
Former house of Capt. Colin Stevenson, on Race Road.

Provincetown is generally thought to be the most interesting and different town on the Cape but it was never more so than one-hundred years ago, before the tourist onslaught, when several branches of fishing and whaling were carried on simultaneously. Visitors called it "The City in the Sand". On and about the several dozen wharves which existed at that time were found Grand Bankers, George's Bank fresh fishermen, sloops, trap boats, shore whaling steamers, offshore whaling vessels, cold storages, canneries, smokeries, boatbuilders, chandlers, shipsmiths, riggers, caulkers, painters, sailmakers, sparmakers and all the other buildings and people who formed a very active maritime community.



Capt. William T. Shorey  
who started in Provincetown

The very last phase of whaling, from 1870 to 1915 and the men who conducted it are the subjects of this exhibit. The activity consisted of whaling largely in the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea and year by year it was increasingly manned by black men of West Indian origin. By my calculations, based upon a sampling of official US Government crew lists I conclude that over 1000 whalers were in this group. Most never settled permanently in this area but it is notable that the descendants of some make a home here. There were also a number of whalers of color from other places such as the Cape Verde Islands, but they were not as numerous on Provincetown vessels.

It all started when Provincetown and other American whaling vessels cruised the West Indies, particularly St. Vincent and the Grenadines in search of humpback, sperm and pilot whales late in the 19th century when the economic systems on the islands were changing. The old agricultural plantations were losing their attractiveness and workers were open to the idea of other occupations. Earlier, in slave days the managers had paid little attention to the products of the island waters.

It is interesting that the American whalers taught the island natives how to whale and very soon started to employ some aboard their vessels. One of the most proficient was William Thomas "Bill" Wallace who established a shore whaling station on Bequia (near St. Vincent) after working on US vessels throughout the entire region and the Atlantic for years. When he returned, he took a Provincetown bride, Estella Francis Curren, with him.

Most of the West Indian whalers continued to serve aboard the offshore vessels. Had they not provided their willing labor in this business, which required gritty application for low wages, it probably would have faded out of existence by 1880. Provincetown whalers generally worked the Caribbean from February to June -- starting with the taking of humpbacks and finishing with the pursuit of the more valuable sperm whales. The whalers would often be docked back here in the summer. To supplement their wages they often sang, danced and busked at the Knowles dock at the foot of Pearl Street. (There are contemporary accounts of this activity and some of their music was recorded and it consisted mostly of old English ballads.)

In the last phase of offshore whaling Provincetown vessels tended to be of the schooner rig and generally less than 100 tons in displacement. It is a fact that because of the relatively short length of the whaling cruises (less than a year for the most part) Provincetown ranks third (after New Bedford and Nantucket) in the number of voyages launched in the history of the American whale fishery.

Only 4 or 5 black men born in the Americas rose to the position of captain in the American whale fishery and in this distinction the owners of the Provincetown whaling fleet are to be commended. Two of these captains started their whaling careers here. The elder was Capt. Colin Stevenson, a native of St. Vincent who probably came to Provincetown in the early 1870s. Eventually he settled with his wife and family at 4 Race Road. His first command was the Rising Sun, followed by the Alcyone and last by the Carrie D. Knowles. In January 1876 William T. Shorey who was born on Barbados, came to Provincetown to work for fishing and whaling businessman Samuel S. Swift. He left for the west coast 4 years later and eventually became the most successful of the black whaling captains in our history. His later career was in the arctic whale fishery - a difficult business at best. Shorey was known for his charm in an industry that didn't often resort to it.

The families and companies who carried on the whaling business in the last phase were the Taylors, Dunhams, Dyers, Maccools, Mantas and the Knowles. With the loss of the schooner Carrie D. Knowles in 1904, the Knowles firm essentially ended its business. The Dunhams, Taylors and Dyers were for the most part agents for one whaling vessel at a time. Adam Maccool was a native of Scotland and a cooper here who became involved in the industry as an adjunct to his own business. Capt. Joseph Manta, a native of Portugal carried on to the end of the era and he was the employer and the promoter of many black whalers. The flamboyant and controversial Capt. John A. Cook involved himself in a number of whaling enterprises after his retirement from the arctic fishery but his efforts tended to be sporadic.

A few notes about the history of the industry here. The first organized whaling activity by the English in New England occurred in Provincetown in the 17th century. Icabod Paddock, the man who taught the Nantucketers how to whale came from Provincetown in that era when the whaling was carried on in boats launched from the shore. In the 18th century Provincetown was heavily involved in the Atlantic offshore fishery. After a time gap of 45 years Provincetown resumed this activity starting in 1820. It peaked in the few years following the Civil War. By 1870 70% of the men actually employed in the finfish industries here (codfish and mackerel primarily) were foreign born Irish, Portuguese from the Azores and Scots from Cape Breton Island, Canada largely because they were willing to work longer and harder than the native born Americans. The black men who came to man the whaling vessels did so for similar reasons. Most of the whaling businesses were owned by Yankees (the descendants of the original English settlers) until the end but the black workers provided them with the wealth that they enjoyed.

Provincetown, George D. Bryant March 29,1998

I wish to thank all of the people who have helped me with information on this subject over the years: My father Duncan Bryant, Francis Manta, Lurana Higgins, Robert Francis, John and Anne MacIntyre, Monroe Moore, Arturo Vivante, Carrie Cook, Georgia Ferguson, Betty Burkes, The Lester Hellers, Grace Goveia Collinson, and most of all Warren C. Silva who was the first person to give me detailed information on the black whalers 25 years ago.

Thank you to those who help with the exhibit: Marilyn Pedalino, Sara Ringler, Gus Mills, Mary Sicchio, John Grant, Linda Houle Janice Lengas, and Marjon Printing of Hyannis.