

The Use of Flags on Coastal Whaling Stations

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Introduction

The following essay is divided into two parts. To begin, the author will show how flags were used in the conduct of the coastal whale fishery. Then he will trace the historical evolution of the coastal whale fishery in Europe and in America to demonstrate how different cultures used similar if not identical signal flag techniques while engaged in whaling.

How Flags Were Used in the Coastal Whale Fishery

By March, 1644 Southampton, New York, a small community on the eastern end of Long Island, had organized and divided the village into four wards with eleven persons in each ward to watch for stranded whales. When found, the whales were divided among the inhabitants. Nantucket, Massachusetts, like Southampton, divided its island into four wards, each with a company of six men.

Three Southampton Town leaders, prior to the whaling season, were assigned the responsibility of selecting two lookouts to “Vieue and spie yf there be any whales cast up.”¹ How did the lookouts “view and spy” for whales? In the middle of each ward (about three and one-half miles apart) the Nantucket whalers erected a mast from which a lookout kept constant watch for whales.² An eyewitness in Southampton said that high poles

¹William Pelletreau, ed., *The First Book of Records of the Town of Southampton* (Sag Harbor: Hunt, 1887), 25.

²Walter S. Tower, *A History of the American Whale Fishery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1907), 26.

with pins for steps were used by lookouts.³ A second eyewitness on eastern Long Island said that “occasionally at long intervals, small thatched huts or wigwams on the highest elevations were observed with a staff projecting from the top. These huts were occupied by men on the watch for whales.”⁴



Fig. 1. Conjecture of a Whale Sighting by a Coastal Wigwam (See note 4).

How was the lookout tower used? One member of a team was selected to watch the surf every day from December through March — a period when the right whales congregated in Long Island waters.⁵ Upon sighting a whale or fish, the posted observer would climb a lookout tower and wave a signal; then someone in the village street would hoist a cornbasket there or set a flag on the mill.

A signal flag for whaling purposes was referred to as a weft (with variant forms — waff, waft, weffe, and waif).⁶ What did the weft look like? The literature reveals that capes, coats, or the signaler’s waving arms were employed

³Samuel Wood, *The History of Fish* (New York: Wood, 1815), 6.

⁴*History of Suffolk County, New York*: W.W. Munsell, 1882), 29. See also Henry Hedges, *A History of the Town of East Hampton, N.Y.* (Sag Harbor: J.H. Hunt, 1897). From the eyewitness account we are led to believe the pole extended through the wigwam. Hedges corrected that when he wrote that the weft was set on a pole not surmounting the wigwam, but set deep in the sand close by. The pole was a tree twenty-five or thirty feet high, the projecting branches extended about a foot or more to facilitate climbing. If branches were missing, wooden pins were inserted in bored holes, to further aid the climber. See also G. R. Howell, “Whaling on Long Island in Early Times,” *The Sag Harbor Express*, 16 Sept. 1880.

⁵John Strong, “Sharecropping the Sea: Shinnecock Whalers in the Seventeenth Century” in Gaynell Stone, ed., *The Shinnecock Indians: A Culture History*, vol. 6 of *Readings in Long Island Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Lexington, Mass: Ginn Publishing Co., 1983), 231.

⁶*A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* 1928 ed., s.v. “weft.”

if no flag were available.

In 1885 whalers in Amagansett, New York, relied on a weft. Theirs was a tattered old American flag which was raised on a pole from the scuttle hole in a roof of the old Edwards' homestead on the bluff overlooking the ocean.⁷ A scuttle is a small opening or hatchway in a roof of a private home large enough to admit a man and his weft. Even after the last whale was taken in 1918 the whalers continued to use the weft (an American flag) in the scuttle hole of a roof to denote the presence of fish (mossbunkers) in the surf. In all likelihood this use of the weft continued into the 1930s when the menhaden industry became highly mechanized.⁸

While this essay is about the coastal whale fishery, it is interesting to note that the weft was also used in the offshore fishery. There was an old custom in Southampton, N.Y. that whenever a homeward bound whaling vessel was sighted at sea the mill keeper would post an American flag on the mill in order to notify the inhabitants. The old saying was, "Flag on the mill, ship in the bay."⁹

(An interesting aside: Southampton beaches in the summer continue to this day to use flag poles with red, white, or blue flags. The colored flags are used to denote the surf conditions. Are these cultural relics from our whaling past?)

Whitney Smith defined a waft/wheft as a flag tied in a knot and displayed (at sea) as a signal of some emergency.¹⁰ This definition is very similar to the *Seaman's Dictionary* (1644) which states "a waft is a common sign of some extremity like when a ship doth hang a waft upon the maine-stay, either that it hath sprung a leake or is in some distresse."¹¹

Falconer's Marine Dictionary (1780) defines a waft as "a signal displayed from the stern of a ship for some particular purpose, by hoisting the ensign, furled up together into a long roll, to the head of its staff. It is particularly

⁷Everett J. Edwards and Rattray, J. E., "Whale Off": *The Story of American Shore Whaling* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1932), 51.

⁸Edwards and Rattray, "Whale Off", 145.

⁹Evelyn Hansen, Historian at Southampton Historical Society, in a personal communication dated 5 June 1995, related how her grandfather used a flag on the Corwith Mill in Southampton, N.Y. She said the flag was used to denote the presence of a local whaling ship in the ocean, headed east towards her home port in Sag Harbor, N.Y. Later, as the ship approached Sag Harbor, an American flag was hoisted on the Cedar Point Lighthouse. See Jason Epstein and E. Barlow, *East Hampton: A History and Guide* (Wainscott: Medway Press, 1975), 58. The use of flags on Southampton mills is also documented in a book by Mary Beck Slate, *Flag on the Mill, Ship in the Bay* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1887).

¹⁰Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), 30.

¹¹Henry Mainwaring, *The Seaman's Dictionary* (London: Bellamy, 1644).



Fig. 2. The American flag was raised on the Cedar Point Lighthouse to denote presence of a local whaling ship in the ocean. (See note 9).

used to summon the boats off from the shore to the ship whereto they belong; or as a signal for a pilot to repair aboard.”¹²

Obviously, the whaling application does not fit these definitions so the author researched the word in *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. That dictionary defines a waft as “a flag (or some substitute) hoisted as a signal.” A weft is Scottish dialect for waft and is a nautical term. To weft is “to signal to (a person, etc.) by waving the hand or something held in the hand like a flag.”

While it may be difficult for Massachusetts colleagues to accept, the first organized prosecution of the coastal whale fishery in America (other than by aborigines and Basques) was made along the shores of eastern Long Island.¹³

¹² *Falconer's Marine Dictionary (1780)* (London: T. Cadell, 1780), reprinted 1970 by David & Charles Limited, 310.

¹³ Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery from its Earliest Inception to*

The last known capture of a right whale off the east coast of the United States was made in 1918 by shore whalers off the coast of Long Island.

The term “weft” is an old term for flag in eastern Long Island speech and written documents. As in the *New English Dictionary* definition, the term “weft” is used on Long Island to mean: to signal (to a person, etc.) by waving the hand, or something held in the hand, like a flag. While many flags were used as wefts, only two flags on Long Island that I could document had been used by whalers; one was an American flag and the second was a white flag.¹⁴

“Whale off! Whale off!” is the cry that arose after the first appearance of a weft on the beach. It caused every able-bodied man in the village to drop his work, snatch his coat, and run to the beach. The coastal whaling industry was the underlying basis of the economy. Even the schoolmaster’s and the minister’s salaries were paid during the 1670s in whale oil, baleen, and sundries.¹⁵ Boat whaling was considered so important that every man of sufficient ability was expected to take a turn in watching and signaling the presence of whales. The community had to be sure that there was no confusion about the signal since whaling was vital to the economy.

Evolution of the Whale Fishery

Whale fishery was a well established trade during the twelfth century along the Basque coast of Spain. According to Markham, the Basque fishermen practiced their profession in the following way:

vigias or look-out posts were established on the headlands, and high up the mountains overlooking the fishing-towns, whence notice was given directly [that] a whale was seen spouting in the offing; and soon the boats were in pursuit. On the mountain of Talaya-mendi (“Look-out mountain”) above Zarauz, there are some ruined walls, which. . . are the remains of one of these watch towers, whence warnings were sent down the moment a

the Year 1876 (New York: Argosy, 1964), 5.

¹⁴An American flag is on exhibit at the East Hampton Marine Museum, East Hampton, N.Y. It was owned and used by the Rattray family during the whaling season. “There were only three whaleboats in Amagansett then, and the weft, a tattered old American flag, always went out from the old Edwards homestead on the bluff, or from Uncle Gabe’s house built later on the same spot,” Edwards and Rattray, *“Whale Off”*, 55. They also mention using a white flag as a weft.

¹⁵*History of Suffolk County, New York*, 29.

whale was in sight.¹⁶

Although the Basques continued to catch whales in their home waters right into the nineteenth century, the whales close to shore became scarce in the fifteenth century. Once the Spanish whale population had been depleted, the Basques began to search elsewhere.

Sebastian Cabot, in a passage quoted by Peter Martyr in 1555, claims that Basque fishermen inhabited Newfoundland years before Cabot's voyages in 1497–98. He describes a geographical area in Newfoundland that had been previously named by Basque fishermen.¹⁷ On the basis of that one report, modern historians have assumed that Biscayan sailors travelled to Newfoundland not only to fish for cod, but also to hunt whales.

Recent discoveries by historians and archaeologists, however, have revealed that transatlantic whale fisheries in North America were not founded as a result of Basque explorations. Instead, early Breton voyages — followed in quick succession by the French Basques in search of cod in the Strait of Belle Isle — noted the abundance of whales in the region. Soon after, fishermen from the Basque coast of Spain joined the other parties in Newfoundland. Recent archaeological research by S. H. Barkham has revealed the existence of a whaling station at Red Bay, Labrador, which operated on a more or less annual basis from the 1530s to perhaps the first decade of the 17th century.¹⁸

While the Basque fishermen were not the first, they appear to have been the most successful in the prosecution of this industry. Samuel de Champlain in 1610 writes:

Those, then, most skillful in this fishery are the Basques, who, for the purpose of engaging in it, take their vessels to a place of security, and near where they think whales are plenty. . . but if they see nothing, they return to the shore and ascend the highest place they can find, and from which they can get the most extensive view. Here they station a man on lookout. They are aided in catching sight of a whale by his size and the water

¹⁶C.R. Markham, "On the Whale Fishery of the Basque Provinces of Spain," *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* 63(1881): 969–977.

¹⁷Samuel E. Morison, *The European Discovery of America. The Northern Voyages A.D. 500–1600* (New York: Oxford, 1971), 220.

¹⁸Selma Barkham, "The Basque Whaling Establishments in Labrador 1536–1632: A Summary," *Arctic* 37.4(1984): 515–19. See also Stephen Cumbaa, "Archaeological Evidence of the 16th Century Basque Right Whale Fishery in Labrador," in *Reports of the International Whaling Commission*, Special Issue 10(1986): 187–90.

he spouts through his blow-holes. . . . Having caught sight of this monstrous fish [mammal] they hasten to embark in their shallops, and by rowing or sailing they advance until they are upon him.¹⁹

A whaling tradition appears to have existed among the Indians along the northeastern coast of North America long before the European fishery developed. According to Rattray, the Montauk and Shinnecock Indians on eastern Long Island, New York, introduced the white settlers to the whale fishery.²⁰ The Indians' whaling equipment consisted of dugout canoes, "crude" stone-tipped harpoons, lines of "Indian hemp" or deerskin thong, and wooden drogues. The Indians maintained lookout posts from November until April at which time the black right whales began to move north again — often far offshore toward cooler water. One or more dugout canoes were kept on the beach near the surf and upon the warning cry from a lookout posted on a high hill or a sand dune, the canoes were quickly launched through the boiling surf.

Waymouth's journal of his voyage to America in 1605 documented how the Indians fished for whales.²¹ The question some have asked is whether the Indians learned these techniques from the Basque fishermen or had pursued the occupation long before the arrival of the white man. The same question has been asked about the English. Did they learn whaling from the Basque fishermen? There is some evidence that they did receive instruction from the Basques. In the sixteenth century Queen Elizabeth supported a Muskovy Company of merchants, a group who traded goods between England and Russia. In the early years of the seventeenth century the company heard about the great numbers of whales to be found at Spitzbergen, Norway, and quickly organized the first English voyage to those regions in 1610, a voyage that turned out to be very profitable. In the following year they sent two larger ships and engaged six Basque harpooners from St. Jean de Luz to teach the English sailors the art of catching whales, evidence that the Basques taught the English.

There is evidence too that the English taught the Dutch how to whale, for in 1655 Peter Stuyvesant dispatched a Dutch delegation to investigate the English whaling practices on eastern Long Island.²² Thereafter the Dutch

¹⁹George Dow, *Whale Ships and Whaling* (New York: Argosy, 1967), 3–4.

²⁰Edwards and Rattray, "Whale Off", 51.

²¹James Rosier, "True Translations of Waymouths Voyage, 1605," reprinted in Harry Burrage, ed., *Early English and French Voyages* (New York: Scribner, 1906), 392.

²²Frederick P. Schmitt, *Whale Watch: The Story of Shore Whaling off Nassau County, New York* (Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.: Whaling Museum Society, Inc., 1972), 3.

West India Company took an interest in whaling in New York harbor and in the Delaware Bay. McMahon states that the Dutch established camps on Long Beach Island, Brigantine Island, and a camp and high lookout tower near the tip of Cape May, New Jersey.²³

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author would like to point out that three cultures (the Basque, English, and Dutch) built signal towers. Whether the Shinnecock or Montauk Indians built signal towers is unknown and is a subject worthy of investigation by archaeologists. All four cultures used commanding locations on hilltops or bluffs to scan the horizon for whales and yet not one of these communication centers has been studied by North American archaeologists. One culture, the English, used a weft to signal the presence of whales. Did the others?

Saint Johns, Newfoundland, has a very interesting series of signal stations along its coast. When archaeologists conducted an excavation at Saint Johns they uncovered no information about signaling. Could they have ignored evidence of signal stations thinking mistakenly that the technology had not changed over the last five centuries?

Archaeologists in Canada are presently conducting excavations of a sixteenth century whaling station in Labrador. Are they looking at the signal technology of the period? Would it not be interesting if archaeologists added a vexillological dimension to these excavations to see if the signal towers were used in similar or in different ways over the centuries by different cultures? The author is currently attempting to apply vexillological information in his study of marine archaeology, specifically studying submerged harbors and hillsides in order to gain insight into early communication techniques. Should we not, as vexillologists, encourage and support these interdisciplinary ventures that advance our own discipline?

²³William McMahon, *South Jersey Towns — History and Legend* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 6.