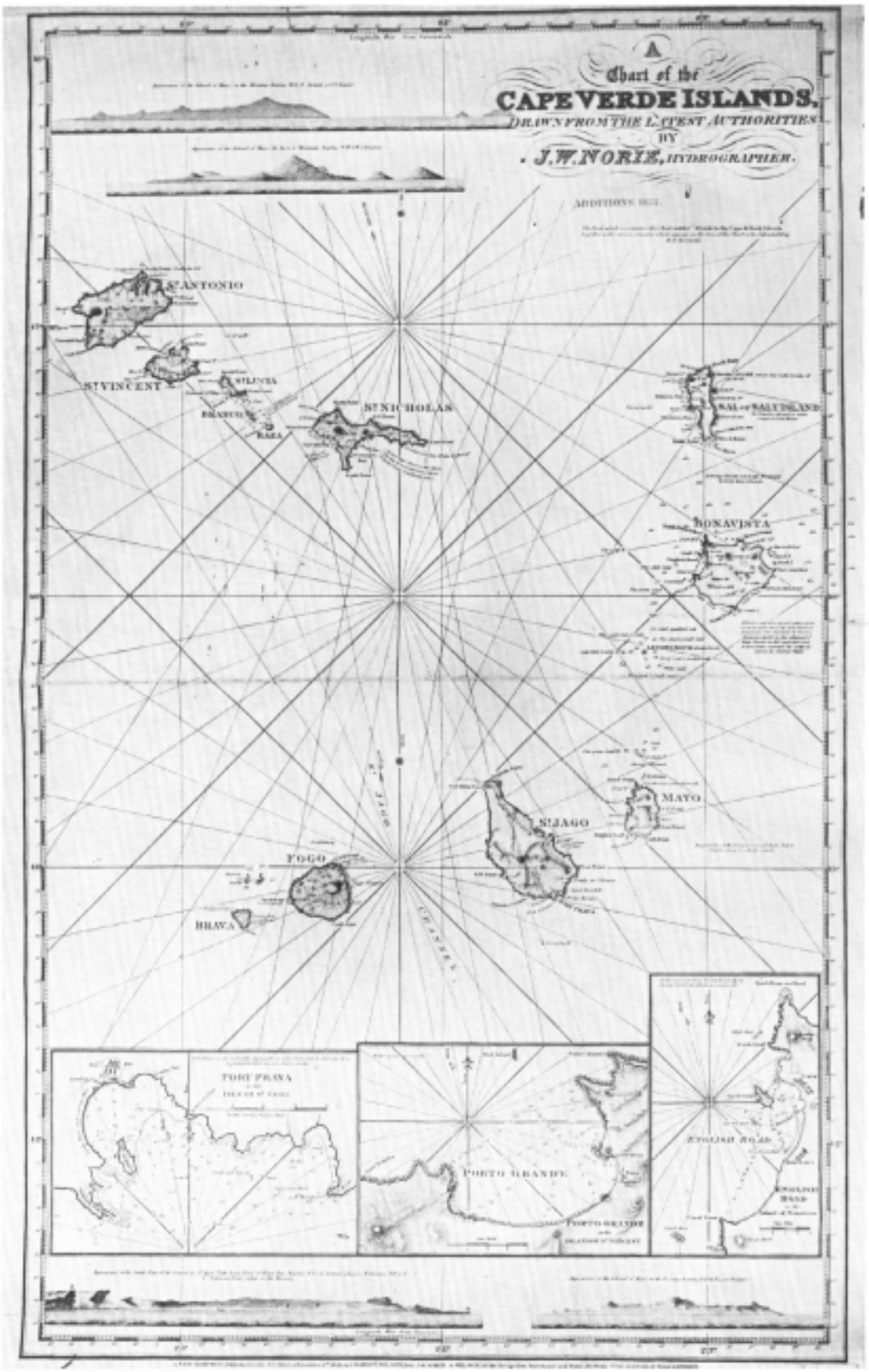
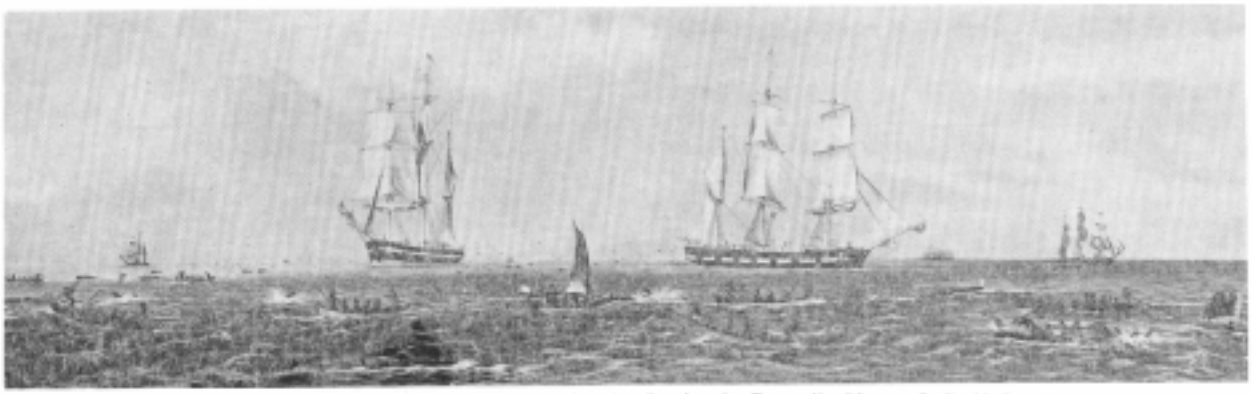
CHAPTER II
WHALING



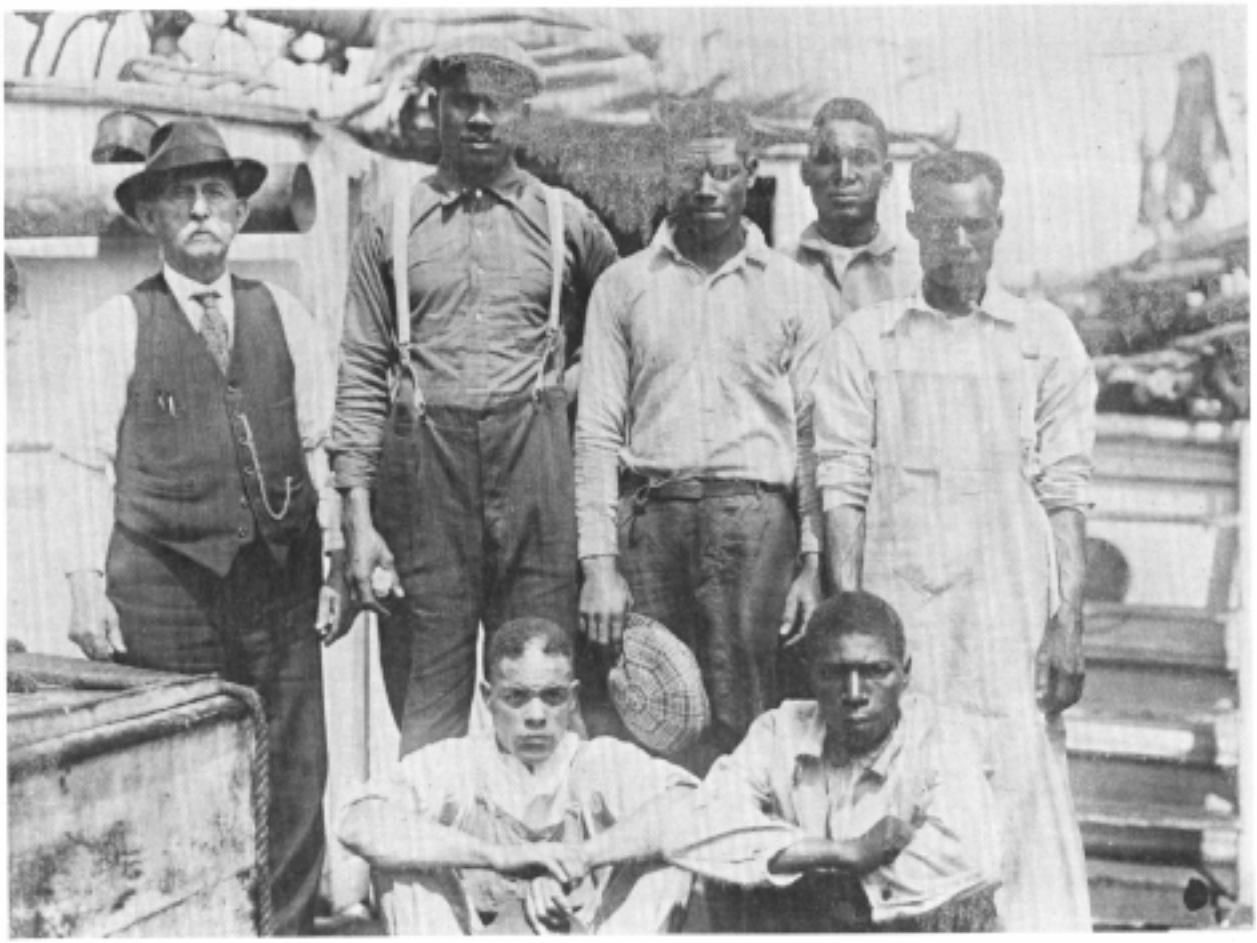


Sperm whaling. From an original drawing by Benjamin Russell. *Photo O. D. H. S.*

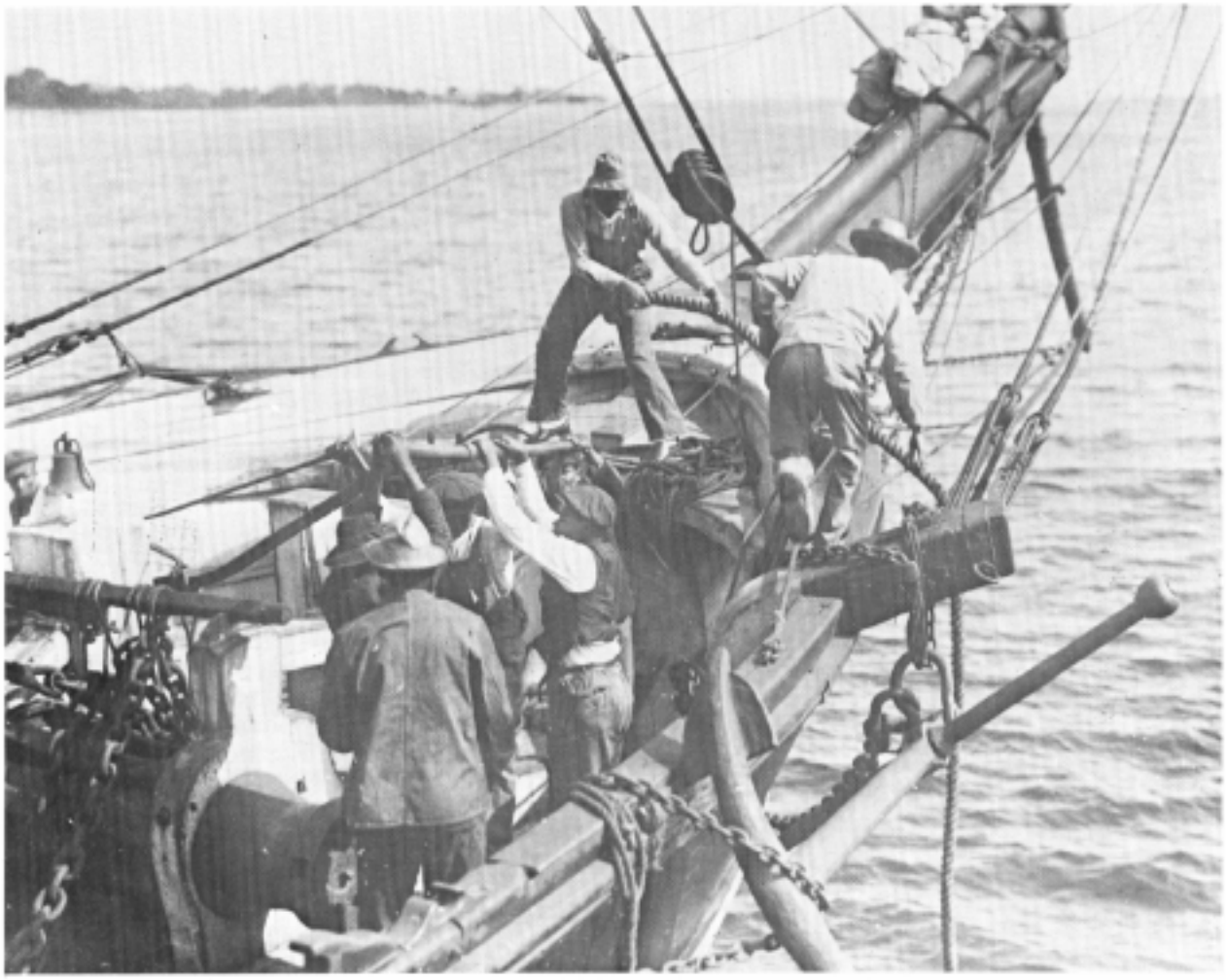
Before the American Revolutionary War, New England whaling ships were sailing off the Cape Verde Islands and picking up crewmen from the Islands and from the West Coast of Africa.

> A large population of the best harpooners, steersmen, and all round whalemen had for long been Portuguese-speaking Africans. . . .In almost all the crews, the African figured very prominently and those from Portuguese West Africa proved particularly outstanding as whalemen. These crewmen, known collectively as Bravas, usually far surpassed all others of whatever racial or national origin.[35]

The frugal Yankee owners actually preferred to recruit men in Cape Verde for the Cape Verdeans "worked hard to save what they could while on board the vessel and they could be hired for much less money than American seamen. Furthermore, they made a disciplined crew."[36]



Crew of the bark *Wanderer. Photo O.D.H.S.*



Crew members aboard the *Wanderer* hauling in the lines and making ready for sailing. *Photo © Holcombe.*

For a poor boy in drought stricken Cape Verde, obtaining a berth on an American ship was a dream come true. Already during the first decades of the nineteenth century, three-eighths of the crews of the Nantucket whaling ships were colored.[31] The shantytown where they lived on the outskirts of Nantucket came to be known as "Guinea-Town" or "New Guinea." From about 1825 to 1875, an average of 100 whaleships per year called at the Cape Verde Islands for supplies, men, and recreation.[38]

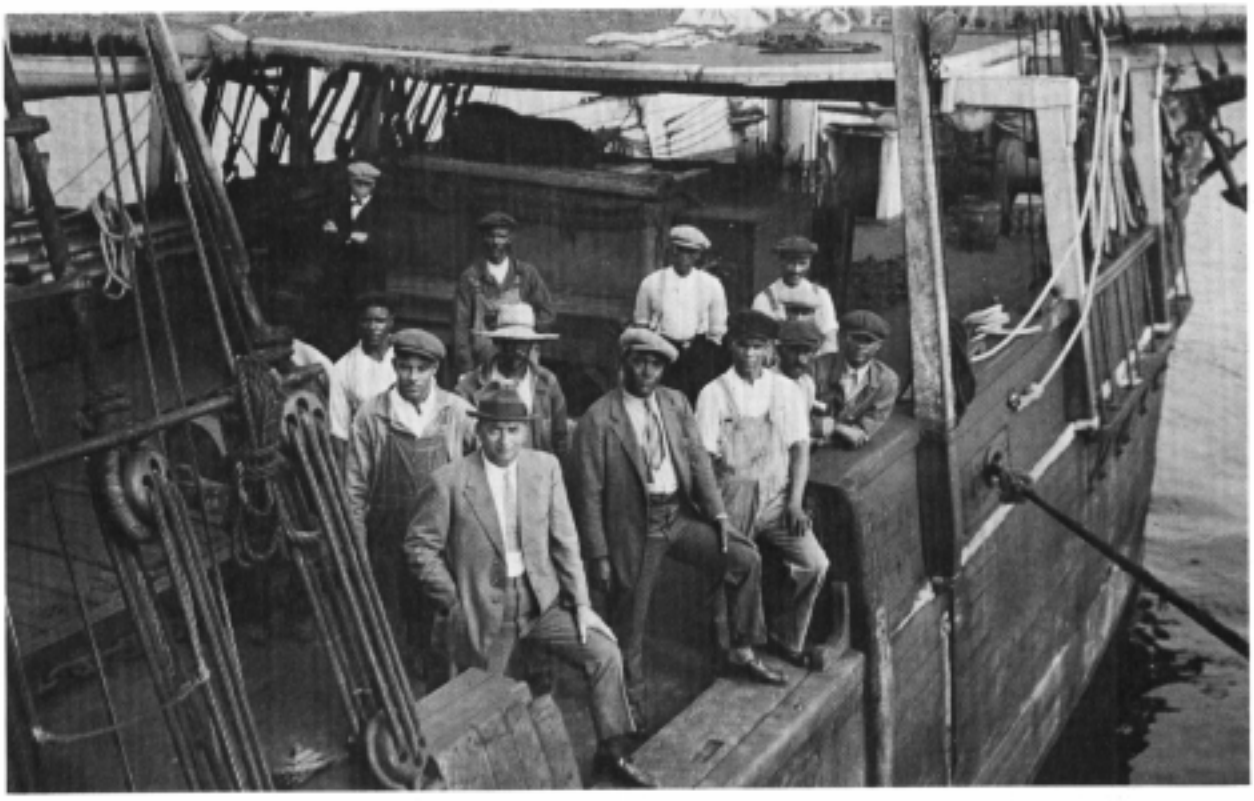
By the end of the whaling era most of the crews out of New Bedford were Cape Verdeans. The crew of the *Greyhound* loading their gear aboard. 1920. *Photo O. D. H. S.*

The Cape Verdean poet, Jorge Barbosa, wrote of the legacy of the whaleman's contact with Cape Verde.

> Ship Ahoy. ... Ship Ahoy
> Americans are arriving
> Midst the hubbub of the quay
> There are tears of joy
> Fugitive crystals
> Lighting up the women's eyes.
> All have passed by
> -Chinese, negroes, Americans,
> Dutchmen-
> All have passed by
> and casually left
> their race
> in the bellies of the harlots
> of the port[39]

The whalers in turn often contracted venereal disease on the islands; hereditary syphilis was reported endemic in Brava, Fogo, S. Vicente and Sãotiago.[40] Already in 1885, John Rich aboard the *Nancy* of Boston wrote, "we diverted ourselves with the inhabitants" of the islands. The chronicler of the voyage of the ship *Hannibal* spoke of "negro women, who talked to us many smutty English words, making lascivious, undecent gestures with their bodies, which were all naked."[41] The 1849 logbook of the *Mattapoisett* records the crew went ashore "drinking spirits and playing with the wenches."[42] The author of the journal kept aboard the *Chili* "found the rest of them in a little shanty discussing the merits of the aquadients."[43] The Captain of the *Richmond* "finding them intoxicated and very disobedient ... threatened to kill the first man that came to rescue them."[44]

Illustrated whaling journal, 1838, recording a ships arrival at São Nicolau and Fogo. *Photo O. D. H. S.*



The bark *Wanderer* of New Bedford on sailing day 1924. Capt. Antone T. Edwards and first mate J. A. Gomes in foreground *Photo O. D. H. S.*

Often undesirable American-born seamen were left behind and more docile men were recruited in the Cape Verde Islands leaving the U.S. Consul the problem of returning the seasick "greenhorn" or troublesome sailor.[45] The whalers frequently took aboard escaped slaves and criminal fugitives which greatly upset the Portuguese authorities.[46] Usually the young men who shipped out were of the lower classes-darker skinned Cape Verdeans. Many times they returned as poor as they left.

The case of a sperm whale hoisted aboard the *Charles W. Morgan. Photo O. D. H. S.*

Whaling itself was a risky occupation. An enraged eighty-five foot whale could smash a whale boat to kindling, killing the crew instantly or dumping them into the sea to be drowned or to be eaten by sharks. Accidents were frequent aboard whaling ships, and the Cape Verdean "hands" did not always escape injury. On one voyage of the *Greyhound*, a whale smashed the third mate's boat and broke the leg of the boatsteerer, Thomas Oliviera, which had to be removed after gangrene set in; Seaman Lopes' ankle was also injured; Steward John Barros died from drinking bad water; and Frank Fereira fell twice from aloft receiving a severe eye injury.

Bark *Greyhound*. *Photo O. D. H. S.*

The mate in charge of one of the whale boats dropped from the *Pedro Varela* with a crew of greenhorns was a black man. "When we get up 'long side the whale those of you out here for the first time'll want to jump overboard on the side opposite the whale. Well don't do it! STAY IN THE BOAT!" The mate steered the frail craft so as to come up behind the big spermwhale, over the dangerous flukes (tail) of the whale. In the bow, the boatsteerer, a Cape Verdean named Antonio, stood poised with the harpoon, ready to hurl it. Suddenly the whale spouted a jet of water and moved to dive. Antonio drove his harpoon deep into the whale and let out a shout of "Fasto!" The mate gave a quick command "Stern All" as all crewmembers pushed hard on their oars to get away from the whale. The tail of the whale rose and flukes smacked the water where the whale boat had been a few seconds before.

"Bailing the case" aboard the *Sunbeam*. Removing the rich oil ladden tissue from the head of the sperm whale. 1904. *Photo O. D. H. S.*

The whale surfaced and started to tow the boat at an incredible speed. Whalemen came to call this spine chilling experience "a Nantucket sleigh ride." Frequently, boats were overturned as they pulled through the waves or a man caught his hand in the line being let out and lost it. The boatsteerer continuously poured water over the rope to prevent the wood from burning and stood by with an axe to cut the line if the whale decided to dive. After a half hour of being towed miles away from the mother ship, the whale slowed down and the whale boat quietly rowed up to the giant sea monster to hurl the fatal lance. The whale immediately became enraged smashing his flukes several times against the surface of the water in order to destroy his attackers, before he dove again. The mate directed the crew to look down in the water; suddenly the enormous head appeared below the surface a hundred feet from the boat "Stern All!" The crew pushed hard as the boat jumped back and the whale shot out of the water directly in front of the skiff. The mate plunged another lance into him, as they maneuvered the boat out of the whale's path. The whale made one more attempt to smash the boat but this time the mate's lance reached the lungs and the water slowly turned red.[47]

After killing the whale came the drudgery. "Of all the ungainly things to tow," said one whaleman "a dead sperm whale is the worst. You could stick your oar two, three times into the same hole in the ocean before making any progress." Then the blubber had to be stripped off the whale before the sharks got to it. This was also dangerous work. Antone Fortes of São Nicolau aboard the *Athlete* stepped between the cutting stage and the whale and lost his leg which ended his whaling career.[48] The blubber was then boiled in large kettles aboard ship. For each whale killed, the men had to toil for several days cutting, stoking the furnace, covered with the whale oil and choked with smoke.

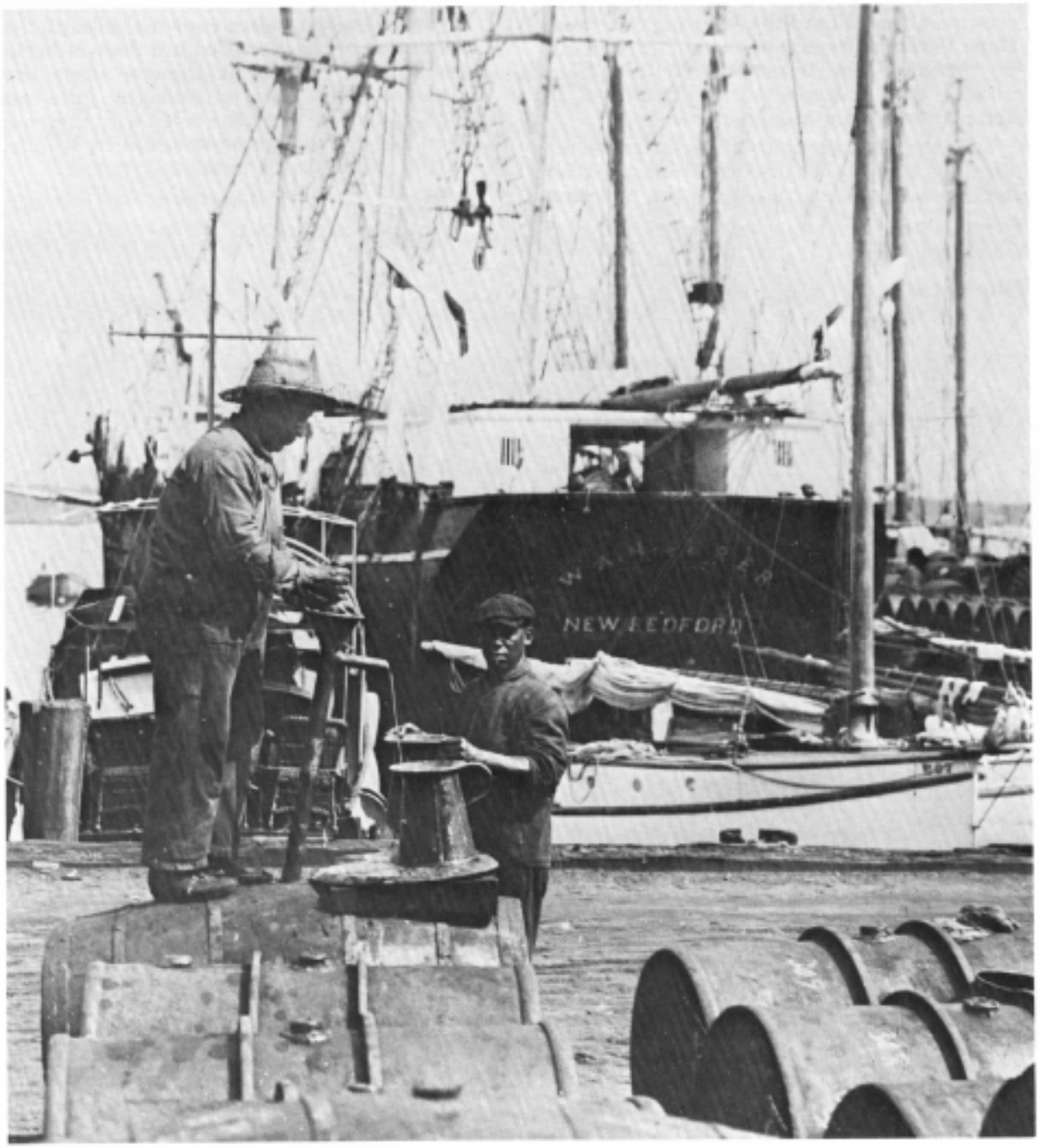
Young boys tending the *try works* aboard the whaler *California*, c. 1903. *Photo M.S.C.*

Whaling was also monotonous, in addition to being dirty and dangerous. For weeks, even months, no whales would be seen. The crew would repair the gear and carve scrimshaw to pass the time. During the periods of calm, food and water became foul and fights among the crew often broke out because of the heat. There was a near mutiny aboard the *Pedro Varela* because of the poor food and bad water. Captains were reluctant to enter major ports for fear their crews would desert them. They often stayed away from home port several years. One Cape Verdean who spent four months on a whaler received only twenty-five dollars for his work as the shoes, clothes and tobacco supplied to him on the ship had been deducted from his pay. The net earnings per voyage of foremast hands in twenty-three voyages made by three representative vessels during the years 1836–79 was $30.47.[49]

Nho Mocho Brito, a Boa Vista seaman, mending the lines aboard the *Ernestina*. *Providence Journal Photo.*

It was not a profession to hold men who had other alternatives. Young white sailors switched to merchant ships or sought their fortunes ashore after one whaling voyage experience. Many Cape Verdean seamen also looked for work in the expanding textile mills of New Bedford, but others returned to sea for there was little racial discrimination aboard the whalers and a man was recognized for his abilities.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, anyone who completed his first voyage to the satisfaction of the captain had little difficulty in shipping out as a harpooner on his second voyage. Harpooners ranked as officers and it was easy to advance to mate, even without formal schooling, for a harpooner who brought in several whales safely. Many mates could not write up a log (indeed, they often could not even speak English) or navigate with a sextant, but were given the rating of an officer, such was the shortage of skilled seamen towards the end of the whaling era.



Pumping oil on the New Bedford docks. *Photo © Holcombe.*

Manuel Lawrence, captain of the *William Grozier* for instance, was recruited at age thirteen from the island of St. Antão and worked his way up from cabin boy. Captain Valentine Roza, another famous whaler was also a Cape Verdean boy picked up in Brava by a New Bedford whaler. He learned navigation from the wife of the master of the vessel and went on to become master of the *Canton*. Toward the end of the whaling industry Cape Verdeans made up the majority of the crew on most New Bedford whalers. Twenty-six of the thirty-three crewmembers aboard the *Morning Star* were Cape Verdean, twenty-one out of thirty-three on the *Sunbeam*, twenty out of thirty-four aboard the *Josephine*, and fifteen out of sixteen aboard the *Adelia Chase*.

There were great rivalries between the whaling ships. There were often races between the ships to reach the whaling grounds first. Once as one of the whale boats of the *Hicks* was pulling up to a whale, the harpooner of the *Grozier*, Claud Oliviera threw his harpoon forty-two feet to strike the whale first. There was a dispute over the whale, but all agreed it was a remarkable feat.

The Cape Verdeans were universally regarded as "hardworking, honest seamen." When all others abandoned the old sailing ships, the Cape Verdeans bought the decrepit vessels out of their earnings as seamen and kept patching them up with loving care. Eventually, they came to own almost all that remained of the New Bedford fleet, either by purchase or by default. In some cases, they received the ships as outright gifts and "sailed them all over the earth with their own crews and made a modest profit by whaling in the old and tried manner."

Workmen aboard the *Sunbeam*, 1904. *Photo O. D. H. S.*

Theophilus Freitas of São Nicolau was captain of the *Pedro Varela* for her last voyage in 1918. He was also mate on the *Charles W. Morgan* which frequently stopped in Cape Verde for provisions and seamen and now remains preserved in the Mystic, Connecticut, seaport. Other Cape Verdean whaling captains of courage and perserverance included Teofilo Gonzalez of Brava, Luis Oliveira, José Senna, Julio Fernandez, and José Perry. Joseph Gomes wrote an autobiography of his whaling adventures, *Captain Joe,* in 1960.[52]

Whaleman Valentine Fermino of São Nicolau who went to sea at age 14 and came to America on the Provincetown whaler *Ellen F. Swift* died recently at the age of 93 in New Bedford.[53] Boatsteerer Joaquim "Jack" Pina who shipped-out in 1900 on the schooner *Adelia Chase* and "never lost a whale" lived to be almost 101.[54] A few Cape Verdean whalers are still around to thrill young people with their tales — Joaquim Almeida of New Bedford and harpooner José Daluz in New York, who still has a big barrel chest and swears that even now he could stop any whale.

Crew members of the bark *Wanderer* pose in front of the wreck of their ship on August 26, 1924. *Photo courtesy Joli Gonsalves.*