

Whaling Captains of Color: America's First Meritocracy. By Skip Finley. 304 pp. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2020. \$42.00 cloth. ISBN 978-1682475096.

In the years leading up to the whaleship *Charles W. Morgan's* thirty-eighth voyage in 2014, historians, shipwrights, and museum professionals gathered at Mystic Seaport Museum to consider what exactly the summer tour of a historical wooden whaleship might, should, and could teach in ports around New England in the twenty-first century. Here was a whaleship whose crew ninety-three years earlier had eagerly killed and butchered large, intelligent, long-lived whales. And here was Mystic Seaport Museum, aboard this same ship, planning to do some whale watching in Stellwagen National Marine Sanctuary, inviting conservation luminaries such as Carl Safina and Sylvia Earle to stand on these same decks. So teaching about the change in Americans' perception of marine mammals was a no-brainer.

What quickly emerged in the planning, however, was that another crucial message must be told. Because the industry of whaling, both at sea and in its auxiliary supporting industries on shore, provided a symbol of the American experiment in all its personal and institutional racism and its global imperialism, but also the ship might show America's potential as a cultural, er, melting pot. If only Skip Finley's *Whaling Captains of Color* had been published before this voyage of the *Morgan*.

Open-boat whaling out of American ports from the 1700s to the early 1900s provided one of the few industries in which a man of color might rise to leadership based on merit alone. Mariners certainly brought racism from shore, but institutionally, even more so than the other maritime trades, whaling evolved to foremost reward skill.

Certainly by the time the *Charles W. Morgan* set sail in 2014, just as, coincidentally, the Black Lives Matter movement was beginning to grow, several scholars, such as Martha Putney, Jeff Bolster, Mary Malloy, Harold O. Lewis, and Donald Warrin had already completed varied and thoughtful studies exploring roles in whaling by African Americans, Native Americans, Azoreans, and Cape Verdeans. Patricia McKissack and Frederick McKissack had published the excellent, if introductory, *Black Hands, White Sails: The Story of African-American Whalers* (1999), and Penguin Classics had published a scholarly edition of *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave* (1856), with the rare account of his time as a Black whaleman. And as the *Morgan* was setting out, Nancy Shoemaker was completing her *Native American Whalers and the World* (2015). No one had yet, however, compiled a scholarly synthesis with new research into one readable volume, a book that focuses on Black captains and ownership in whaling.

One of the first passages of the *Charles W. Morgan* that summer departed from the most prolific American port for slave ships, Newport, Rhode Island. The ship then traveled for the afternoon across Rhode Island Sound and into Vineyard

Haven Harbor, only some fifty miles away. Martha's Vineyard was arguably the most influential place in all of New England in its contribution to the diversity of the early American whaling fleet. Wampanoag Native Americans from Martha's Vineyard became famous for their skill as harpooners, and because their Wampanoag communities often intermarried with free African Americans.

When the *Morgan* sailed in to Vineyard Haven that clear, sunny day, Skip Finley was one of the crowd watching. He had been researching and writing an article on the Black whaling captain William A. Martin, who was born in Edgartown in 1827 and went on to serve as captain for five whaling voyages from 1877-c.1890. Finley stepped on the decks of the *Morgan* and learned immediately that he would have not enjoyed being a whaleman himself. "The fifteen or so minutes I spent on board were more than enough," he writes. But you get the sense that Finley walked right off the *Morgan* and kept walking straight back to the Martha's Vineyard Museum and booked his ferry tickets to begin full-time research in New Bedford.

Whaling Captains of Color, Finley's second book, works on two levels. Firstly, it serves scholars of whaling history and racial history in the United States. Finley is gracious to previous scholars and databases, open about his methods, and provides easy paths to researching all of these topics further. Finley is clear about the challenges of the very title of the book: how does one define a mariner of color, especially when the shifting social and legal constructs of race were often transcribed, recorded, and defined by a quick adjective written by a white hand on a crew list or a customs document? Finley explains, for example, how the early Cape Verdean whalers saw themselves as Portuguese, as white, regardless of the color of their skin. That is, until events such as in 1852, when Manuel Pereira, a Cape Verdean sailor on a British ship, was arrested and jailed for being Black in Charleston. *Whaling Captains of Color* as a scholarly reference is easily navigated with concise biographies, tables, notes, an index, and a large collection of halftone photographs. This book is a crucial, necessary, and timely reference work for all maritime historians.

Secondly, *Whaling Captains of Color* serves as a smooth, accessible introduction to whaling and its economic and cultural importance. Finley intersperses topics such as "Ambergris" and "Ships" and "Vermin" with direct biographies of the fifty-two masters of color that he has meticulously identified in his research. In this way, *Whaling Captains of Color* is a superb and thorough entrance for general audience readers who are just learning about the history of American whaling.

Whaling Captains of Color is exceptionally meaningful and instructive, most significant in its contribution, I think, when Finley weaves the struggles of African Americans against unjust government policies and racist social attitudes on shore into his stories of American whaling at sea. "For more than two-thirds of the time whaling was a thriving industry, slavery of blacks was the law of the land," Finley points out. Finley connects this history with helpful summaries to explain abolition movements on shore, seamen's protection certificates, and the Fugitive Slave Acts. That table set, he writes of whaling through what is known about the

experience of individual people: Paul Cuffee and Absalom Boston and Lewis Temple, and also dozens of seamen, merchants, and shipwrights about whom you might never have heard, such as the ship designer, builder and whaleship owner John Mashow, who designed or built more than fifty ships, six of which were whaleships that sailed under the command of captains of color. Finley teaches that throughout the entire history of the American whaling industry, not just at the tail end, were several all-Black crew and several Black owners. And just like all whaleship captains of any background and skin color, there were some men driven by religion, some by deceit, some driven by capital, and some especially inspiring in their drive to improve the lives of their communities at sea and on shore.

As the American open-boat whaleship industry came to a close, it is fitting that Captain John Theofilo Gonsalves, born in the Cape Verde Islands, a veteran of more than thirty whaling voyages and, Finley calculates, the most successful captain of color in terms of whales killed, was in command of the *Charles W. Morgan* when it completed its final whaling voyage, its thirty-seventh, returning to southern New England in 1921.

Captain Gonsalves had been able to invest in multiple properties on shore, but because of racist policies throughout America's history, it was difficult for nearly all of these captains to build family capital and own land that could last generations. Skip Finley concludes *Whaling Captains of Color*: "Unlike their white counterparts they left no glistening white waterfront homes behind as testaments to their courage; to their families they left only pride. Little remains today of their accomplishments — tales of valor and a few monuments are all. It would be a tragedy to forget them."

Richard J. King is visiting associate professor of maritime literature and history at the Sea Education Association in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and is the author, most recently, of Ahab's Rolling Sea: A Natural History of Moby-Dick.