

CHARLES W. MORGAN
THE LAST OF THE WOODEN WHALE SHIPS 1841 TO 1995

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ABSTRACT

Built in 1841 by Jethro and Zachariah Hillman for Mr. Charles W. Morgan, the whaleship *Morgan* was typical of several hundred vessels of New Bedford and Nantucket. The *Morgan* is the most famous and the last existing wooden Whale Ship and one of a few tall mast sailing ships to be floating on its original bottom.

This paper will discuss the remarkable history of this ship, its acceptance to the National Register of Historic Places and its importance as the focal point of the Mystic Seaport Museum and Village.

INTRODUCTION

"The tides have risen and fallen for eons, relentless as the passing of time. In a place along the Mystic River, the tide may go in and out, but time itself appears to be almost suspended.

Mystic Seaport Museum has collected a thousand lost moments from American history and assembled them to tell the story of a nation's links to the sea. By preserving ships, artifacts, buildings and skills of the last century, the Seaport provides a window (or rather a porthole) to the world of the past. Such is not just a memory here. It is tangible, a place filled with sights, sounds, and smells of a coastal New England Village (Figure 1).

Most of the great sailing ships are gone now - lost at the bottom of the sea, burned, abandoned or scrapped - but a few are safe at their berths at Mystic Seaport. The last wooden whaleship in America, the *Charles W. Morgan*, is the centerpiece of the museum. Commissioned in 1841, and a veteran of more sea voyages than any vessel of its kind, The *Morgan* is a symbol of all the Seaport strives to achieve in the field of maritime preservation.

Like a treasure chest, Mystic Seaport has been slowly filling with the bounty of the sea since its modest beginnings as the Marine Historical Association in 1929. In that inauspicious year in the nation's economy, three residents, Carl C. Cutter,

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Edward E. Bradley, and Dr. Charles K. Stillman, made the first move to create a nonprofit institution that would preserve the rapidly disappearing traces of America's maritime history.

Why Mystic, Connecticut? This small community, located a few miles inland from Long Island Sound, is as closely linked to the sea as the Mystic River itself. The area was named "Mystic" or tidal river by the Indians who inhabited the nearby woodlands in pre-colonial times. Mystic was still a sparsely settled river valley when some of its earliest settlers began to shape its destiny through fishing and shipbuilding. While some continued to farm the land for their livelihood, others turned their sights to the sea.

The lack of significant harbor prevented Mystic from becoming an important trading port such as Boston or nearby New London, but it was home to several dozen whaleships in the years before the Civil War. As history unfolded this tiny settlement produced a legacy which would outshine any community of its size: Mystic was destined to build great ships" (1).

HISTORY

1841-1941

"In New Bedford, Massachusetts, 154 years ago, Jethro and Zachariah Hillman launched what was to become their most famous vessel, the whaleship *Charles W. Morgan*. The Morgan is typical of the several hundred whaleships of New Bedford and Nantucket, except that she is luckier than others. She sailed to every whaling ground in the world on a record 37 voyages over an active life of 80 years, and she earned more money and survived longer than any of her sisters" (2).

The ship, named for its owner, Charles W. Morgan, left New Bedford on its maiden voyage under the captaincy of Thomas A. Norton of Martha's Vineyard on July 21, 1841, and returned in 1846," (3). "Measuring 111 feet from stem to stem, and capable of carrying 319 tons, the wooden vessel brought four generations of Yankee whalers to the farthest reaches of the globe. Her 37 voyages from 1841 to 1920, each a tale of adventure and tedium, hardship and success, were charted to whaling waters from the South Seas to the Arctic" (1).

"Five years after her launching in New Bedford, the *Morgan* went to the busy West Coast whaling port of San Francisco and sailed there for 20 years. She returned to her "home" port of New Bedford in 1906. The *Morgan* was similar in appearance to the hundreds of wooden whaleships that once made up the Yankee fleet, but her record set her apart from all the rest. The profits from her maiden voyage alone exceeded the cost of building the ship, and her life-long earnings would add up to \$1.4 million. Like any working whaleship, she served not only as a factory for processing oil, but as the 'supertanker' of her day, carrying as many as 2,700 barrels of oil to light the lamps of New England homes and lubricate the machinery of the budding Industrial Revolution. With baleen and whalebone

used for everything from ladies' corset stays to umbrella handles. And ambergris, that exceedingly rare substance from the whale's intestines, was the base for fine perfumes.

Although the United States government prohibited whaling in 1971, the industry itself had already begun to die out following the discovery of petroleum in 1859. By 1921, the year the *Morgan's* active service came to a close, the American whaling industry was becoming obsolete. Lone gone are many of the vessels that flanked the Morgan at the New Bedford wharves, many burned, sent to the bottom of the sea, or destroyed during the Civil War," (1)..

"The year after her retirement, in 1920, and already an anachronism, the *Morgan*, was used to make the movie *Down to the Sea in Ships* with Clara Bow along with the *Wanderer*, the last of the square-rigged whalers. Lost off Cuttyhunk, in the hurricane of August 1924, was the *Wanderer* and through a fortunate happening, the *Morgan* was tied-up at Fairhaven during the storm and escaped damage unlike her sister ship", (3).

"Built mostly of oak and pine, much of that same original wood remains in service today, making the *Morgan* one of the country's oldest wooden ships still floating an on the original bottom. Her lowest hull has required little in the way of repair for all of her 154 years, and it is her excellent condition that bears witness to the creative methods of building ships fashion in the middle of the 19th century, practices worth learning and keeping.

The *Morgan* was patched up for her last few voyages and was a tired old vessel at the end of her whaling career in 1921", (2)." In 1924, after being laid up for several years, a small group of New Bedford men interested in saving the famous whaler founded the organization called Whaling Enshrined, Inc., Artist Harry Neeland; William H. Tripp, former curator of the Old Dartmouth Whaling Museum; George H. Reynolds, a printer, and John Bullard, a lawyer", (3) "purchased the vessel and the money of Colonel E.H.R. Green who funded the refurbishing. The *Morgan* was towed to Green's estate at nearby South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, placed in a sand berth, outfitted, and opened to the public as an exhibit. Thousands of people came in those early days of automobiling, but within ten years, the exhibit closed." (2).

"Green envisioned the construction of a miniature whaling community, but he died in 1936 before he was able to build the replica of a whaling town and without providing for the future of the *Morgan*. In 1938 the *Morgan* again withstood a hurricane. She was still in her South Dartmouth berth when the storm struck, destroying her yards, rigging, and boats. The Morgan was abandoned again until 1941 when Mystic Seaport bought the ship and arranged for towing to Mystic" (3) (Figure 2).

1941-1995

"She came up the Mystic River at the great age of 100 years, and within a month, World War II was declared. The *Morgan* was an impressive commitment for the little museum and

was soon evident when she grounded and filled with water developing a new berth. In a short time, she was pumped out and permanently grounded in a berth of sand with wooden walkways running out from the shore on both sides. Later the ship was cleaned, painted, and rigged, but with the war raging and attention focused on it, no major work could be undertaken (Figure 3).

She was fitted with new spars after the war and soon looked like a ship again though not yet afloat. Postwar exuberance, combined with the *Morgan's* earning power as an exhibit, brought about a general and rather vast expansion at Mystic Seaport. Restoration began with the replacement of the upper hull and weathered deck, an extensive project not completed until the early 1960s" (2).

The Spring of 1965 brought inspiration to members of the Mystic Historical Association determined themselves to seek designation of the whaleship *Charles W. Morgan* as a National Historic Landmark and listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Though her condition was somewhat stabilized, she was in a sand berth, and much work was necessary. Their efforts not deterred, and after much work and documentation, the *Morgan* was given such designation in the summer of 1966.

The museum had grown immensely by this time and had become so committed in other areas that the care of its collections took a back seat, leaving the *Morgan* to deteriorate. By the late 1960's, with leaking decks and worn-out rigging, she was a liability and somewhat an embarrassment. She had to be stripped of her yards and the topgallant masts in 1968 after a heavy block crashed to the deck, its rope rotted through.

To beneficially develop and prioritize the needs of the collection of ships, seemed to be the aim of the new Mystic Seaport administration that took charge at this time. Considerable thought raised the priority level of the *Morgan*, and what to do with the ship, as she remained berthed in the sand. Upon completion of many surveys and appropriation of money, the Museum Trustees, on August 14, 1970 voted to refloat the *Morgan*, with that Museum embarked on an ambitious project. Soon a lift dock was built to haul her out and bring the ship into a first-class, historically accurate condition. The Museum would also construct and staff the shipyard to handle the needs of the *Morgan* and all other watercraft.

Since this condition did not evolve overnight, sufficient time existed to rebuild the 'tween deck, (Figure 7). Renewed beam ends and knees help the ship grow stronger day-by-day. The efforts of the conservatists to right the ship gave the team an understanding of her strength and character. As the time for refloating neared, the old hull planking was re-fastened above the sand where workers could reach using locust trunnels just as Jethro and Zachariah did when they built their ships. The effort pulled in the loose planking in tight and the seams were caulked and puttied to make her watertight.

The lift dock was completed in the fall of 1973. In late September, Mr. Bob Holbrook arrived with his wonderful steam-powered lighter to dig out the *Morgan*. Upon removal of most of the ballast and helping to get the rig out of the hull, digging started. Work first

began at the stem, then up along both sides until reaching the bow. With little in the way of big tides that fall, it was in December that the long-awaited took place. There exists no documentation of the ship floating, as this happened during the dark of night. On her first day of floating in 32 years, she required pumping only twice. Upon completion of the measuring of her keel and seating the lift blocks, the *Morgan* was towed down-river to her Mystic's new shipyard.

The *Morgan* left her birth on the 7th of January, and members of the staff believed she looked about as good as some fifty years hence. Upon examination, the staff marveled at what they saw. Bits of old pine and copper sheathing still clung to her planking, but the planking itself was in beneficial condition with most of being original (Figure 4a).

Under a plastic skirt, work began on the keel, setting out to renew its two bottom layers, known as the false keel and the worm shoe. Even though the basic keel structure was sound and still quite straight, these parts of it were chafed and broken, with some sections missing altogether. Starting forward, a section at a time, the vessel's weight was transferred to bilge shores while the old keel timbers removed and new ones were fitted and fastened (Figure 4b).

Work on the hull and keel coincided with the old planking re-fastened, its seams re-caulked, and other repairs made at various locations until finally, the crew applied a layer of pine sheathing over her entire under-body (Figures 5 and 6). After four months of work, the *Morgan* was put back in the saltwater and alongside (at the berth) for two additional months while setting up the rigging. Upon completion, and for the first time since her whaling days, she would have a double topsail. On June 19, 1974, the ship made it's way upriver to be rededicated in ceremonies held at her new deepwater berth" (2).

"Every hour of labor hand hewing a timber, driving a trunnel or bending a plank was matched by an hour of research taking place behind the scenes. Since the ship was built without blueprints, as was the practice in that era, finding details of her original construction was often likened to unraveling the plot of a detective story.

Due to the efforts of the Museum to maintain the ship, Seaport visitors can now walk the decks of the *Morgan*, go below to view the blubber room and the sailors' living quarters in the fo'c'sle (forecastle), and descend into the cavernous hold where giant oak casks are stored and serve as ballast, (1).

"The ongoing effort of maintaining the *Morgan* is costly, and people may question the value received, but the restored ship is a byproduct of the undertaking. The *Morgan*, with all her problems, became a catalyst causing other worthwhile endeavors to occur. Such as the working shipyard, (2). Work on larger vessels can be observed in the duPont Preservation Shipyard, a facility unique in the world today, where craftsmen combine 19th-century shipbuilding techniques with a few 20th-century innovations. Visitors can watch ongoing work on vessels on or off the 375-ton capacity lift dock, as well as viewing a variety of operations in the main shop from the visitor's gallery.

On a smaller scale, boat-building continues daily in the museum's small boat shop. Here, using traditional methods, significant small craft types from America's past are reproduced for display or sale. Funds from such sales support the museum's small craft programs and research. In two small craft exhibits elsewhere on the grounds, outstanding examples of small watercraft are highlighted. From Rob Roy canoes to the steam launch Nellie, each vessel brings the story of its past back to life again.

In addition to the vessels Americans worked and played in, the Seaport also chronicles boats that built for the sheer joy of competition. Yachting history is a significant element at the museum. The collection includes the original New York Yacht Club building, artifacts from the schooner America that launched America's Cup tradition, videotapes of historic races, and paintings and models of famous yachts (1).

This all began one November morning in 1941, when an old, tired, and beaten icon of the past, started its trip to the future to recapture some maritime's past. Ridding high in a mackerel sky, the moon sifts through cloud patches over a black sea. The Morgan is a wraith from the past, lifting her full bows on an oily swell and poking her white jib-boom into the moon path towards the Mystic River many miles distant. She has come alive again, with a white ripple under her foot and bubbling water swirling around her quarters. Her life returned, from her truck to keelson, for this brief resurrection" (4).

Of all the attractions that draw patrons, visitors and researchers to the Mystic Seaport Museum, they all come to see the last surviving wooden whaleship in the world, the museum's flag ship, the *Charles W. Morgan* (Figure 8).

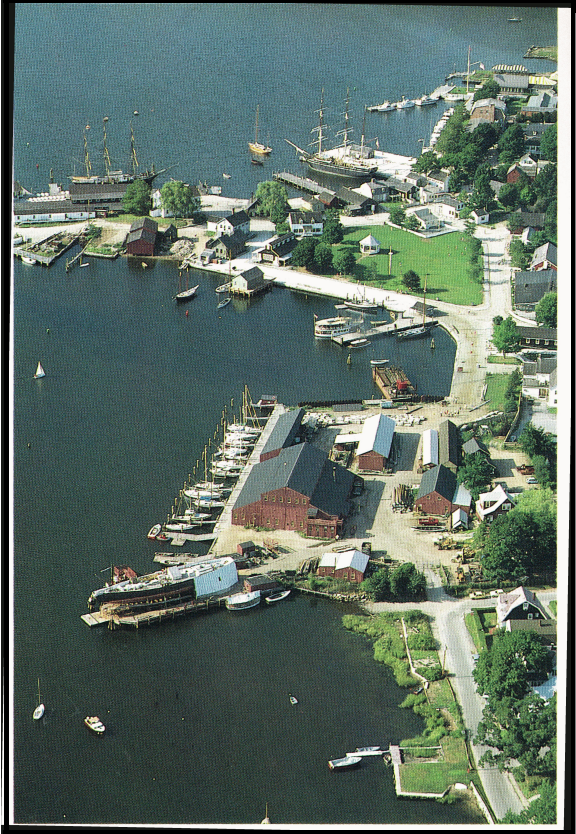


Figure 1 - Mystic Seaport

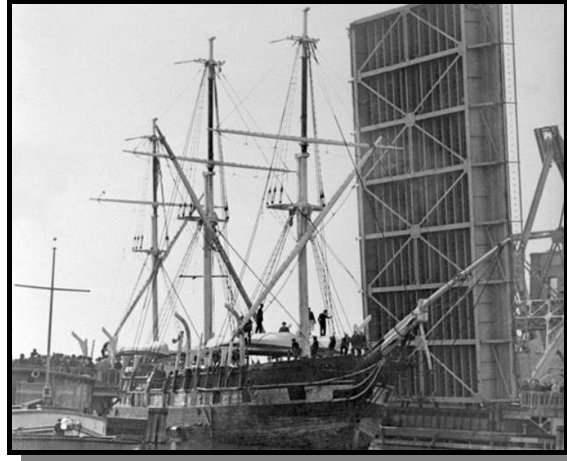


Figure 2 - Charles W. Morgan in tow



Figure 3 - Morgan in her sand birth



Figure 4a - Morgan in dry dock



Figure 4b - Working on the interior of the hull.



Figure 5 - Work on the keel ribs



Figure 6 - Work on the exterior of the keel



Figure 7 - tween decks



Figure 8 - Charles W. Morgan ready to sale

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