



***The Whaling Museum & Education Center  
Of  
Cold Spring Harbor, New York***

***A Brief History by Joan Lowenthal 2015  
Revised on December 6, 2022***

In 1932 a small number of residents of Cold Spring Harbor, NY commissioned a monument commemorating the village's earlier days as a whaling port. They realized that the whaling heritage was being lost. A boulder was dredged from the harbor and erected on the village square and lists the names of the 9 vessels in the fleet or does it. There is an error on the monument.

- **The Barclay** was not part of the fleet. That ship was probably out of Sag Harbor, NY. The Edgar was left out maybe because it never completed a voyage. It was wrecked in the Sea of Okhotsk in about 1853.

In later years the monument was moved to the front of the museum where it remains today.

### ***Dedication in 1932***



Robert Cushman Murphy was fresh out of college in July 1912 when he sailed on the whaling brig the Daisy for South Georgia Island on the edge of Antarctica. He was commissioned by the American Museum of Natural History in NYC to study and bring back specimens of birds and other animals of the South Atlantic. He also realized his role as observer of the dying American whaling industry. He kept a detailed log that described the customs, techniques and tools of whaling. This log was later published into a book entitled *Logbook for Grace*.<sup>1</sup>

### **Robert Cushman Murphy**



---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Cushman Murphy, *Logbook for Grace* (Time Life Books Inc., 1947), x-xi

## Model of the Daisy



Dr. Murphy became mesmerized by Yankee whaling as it truly began on the shores of Long Island. He appropriated funds and purchased the whaleboat. Dr. Murphy originally wanted the whaleboat to be part of an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum which did not work out. He then proposed it be installed in the at the time new Hall of Ocean Life at the American Museum of Natural History. There was no space for the Yankee whaleboat in the Hall of Ocean Life so in 1936 Dr. Murphy, offered Dr. Charles B. Davenport, a friend of his and a local prominent resident of Cold Spring Harbor, the whaleboat as a gift from the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Davenport owned a sizeable collection of old Cold Spring Harbor whaling relics - harpoons, lances, guns, spades and papers. These relics were given to Dr. Davenport by a friend who was a descendant of one of the owners of the Cold Spring Harbor fleet.<sup>3</sup>

The contribution of the whaleboat from the Daisy was the impetus to start the museum. Dr. Davenport and several other leading citizens of Cold Spring Harbor incorporated the Whaling Museum Society that same year 1936. All did not go smoothly. There was opposition. One resident felt that it was not a genuine whaleboat and was really only a scientific landing boat deployed by the American Museum of Natural History. A few others objected because the brig *Daisy* that the whaleboat hung from davits sailed out of New Bedford, MA and not Cold Spring Harbor. The *Daisy* was launched, however, at Setauket, Long Island in 1872. The whaleboat remained on Dr. Davenport's lawn covered by a heavy tarpaulin for about five years until a trick was played on him. Dr. Murphy on American Museum of Natural History stationery wrote a letter to Dr. Davenport stating that someone else in a nearby Long Island town wanted the whaleboat and had suitable quarters for it. That got Dr. Davenport moving and he motivated his neighbors to raise funds for a permanent home for the boat by 1942.<sup>4</sup>

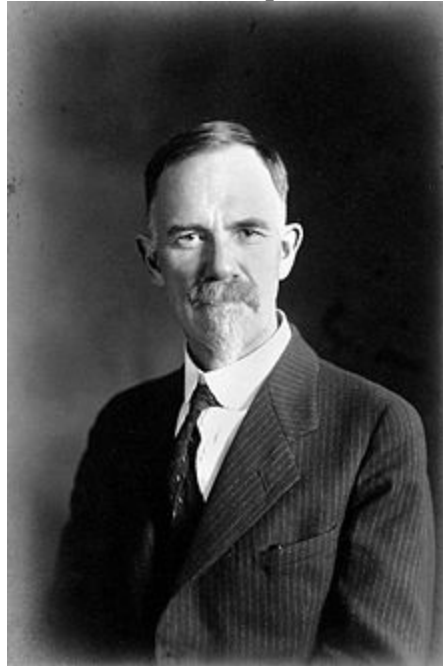
---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cushman Murphy, *The Founding of the Whaling Museum*, (Whaling Museum Society, Inc., 1967), 3-5

<sup>3</sup> *Concerning the Whaling Museum at Cold Spring Harbor And Also Something About Whales And Whaling*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Murphy, *The Founding of the Whaling Museum*, 6.

**Dr. Davenport**



## The Whaleboat

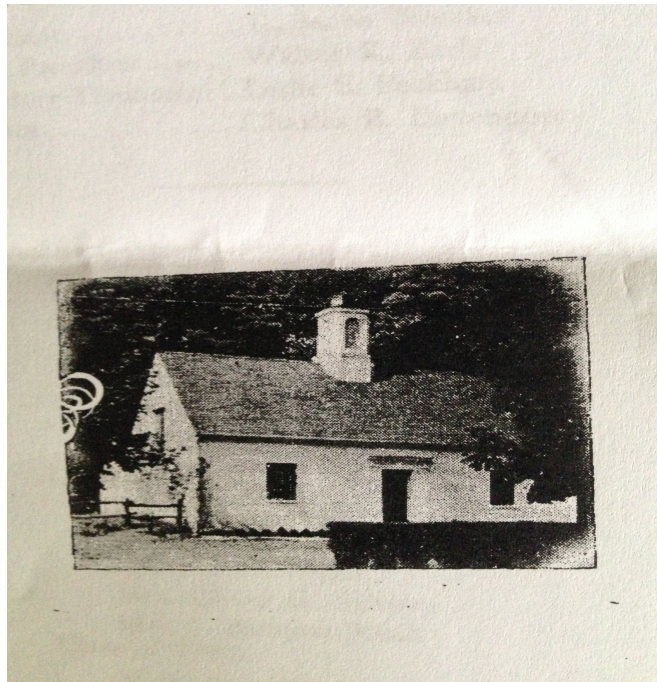


The museum was originally funded through contributions, membership dues, and donations of artifacts, services, and time. According to the Whaling Museum's *First Annual Report, July 1943* it was through the contributions of four of its directors that made it possible to purchase a 75 by 150 foot lot on Main Street, Cold Spring Harbor for the location of the museum. Edward Hewitt a local resident contributed his services as the architect of the building. The construction was done by Mr. Bradford W. Stiles at a minimum cost to the society. Construction began in the early spring of 1941 and was completed in July of 1942. The total cost of the Museum building not including the land was \$2,699.00 and was paid for by the generosity of 38 members.

The Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum opened its door for its first season on August 30, 1942. Dr. Davenport was its first curator. On opening day the total number of accessions was 248. These specimens included the whaleboat complete with all gear, a pair of sperm

whale teeth with scrimshaw, an old compass, harpoon irons, two ship's binnacles, a whale oil lamp, seaman's chest, ivory walking stick, a trypot, and several books and pamphlets about whaling.<sup>5</sup> When the museum opened in August 1942 it had no electricity and the bathroom facilities were primitive. It was only open from late May to October and only on weekends.

### **The Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum in 1942**



The statement of purpose and original aims was "The purposes and objects of the Museum are to collect, exhibit and preserve relics, writings, documents and books relating to whaling, whales, general maritime history, both at sea and on shore, and local history, principally at Cold Spring Harbor, New York and adjacent parts of Long Island, and to own and to operate for public benefit a museum building and library for charitable, educational, scientific, literary and cultural purposes which shall be open to the public, the Museum having been formed and being operated exclusively not for pecuniary profit or financial gain and no part of the Museum's assets or receipts is distributable to or may enure to the benefit of its Members, its Directors, its Officers or to any one of them."

These aims were fulfilled by the continued growth of the collection, the building, and the increase in staff throughout the years. Originally, the Museum was sustained only by membership dues, and contributions from members, visitors, and friends.

---

<sup>5</sup> T. Bache Bleeker and Charles D. Davenport, *First Annual Report*, Whaling Museum Society, 1943

Some of the highlights of those early years were the procurement of a killer whale skull in January 1944 from a whale that was beached in Orient Point, Long Island. Dr. Davenport, the curator, instead of using a slower, but easier method of maceration in a pond, he boiled the skull in a cauldron in an open shed in the bitter winter. He caught a cold, developed pneumonia and passed away in February 1944 at the age of 78.



The Killer Whale Skull

Mr. Walter K. Earle was named Acting Curator and in 1945 was named Curator, a position he kept for the next 23 years. That same year the cannon that signaled the arrival of homecoming vessels at Cold Spring Harbor was donated to the Museum and installed on the lawn. In 1947 electricity was installed and in 1953 the Museum acquired its first major acquisition – a collection of books, scrimshaw, whale craft, pictures, models, and shipping papers that had been on loan since 1944. This acquisition encouraged a building fund initiative to raise money for the construction of an addition and bathroom facilities. In 1956 the Museum received a wonderful donation of 360 pieces of scrimshaw. December of that same year the Society purchased the adjoining property of Captain James Wright built in 1894 with the intention of using the house for future development. In 1960 a museum store was set up and actually sold small bottles of sperm oil and genuine sperm whale teeth. In 1961 entrance fees were established and in 1963 gas heat was installed and a



third room was added to the building. Now with heat the visiting season was extended in 1964 from April through November.

### **Captain James Wright House circa 1894**



Another room was added in 1966 and the lower jaw of a small sperm whale was given to the Society. Mr. Frederick P. Schmitt was appointed curator of the Museum in 1971 and had his book on the history of Cold Spring Harbor *Mark Well the Whale* published. A diorama, meticulously created by Peter J. Bongo, depicting Cold Spring Harbor during its whaling days circa 1850 was donated to the Museum.

### **The Diorama**



An important year in the growth of the Museum was 1973. The Society hired a part time staff director, hours were extended to include weekends throughout the year, and very importantly a tour coordinator was hired to develop programs for visiting school groups. This was important because the Museum becomes known for their educational programs which continues to this day.

Until 1979 most of the funds were still from contributions and donations of members, visitors, and friends. This year the Society decided to have its first major drive to increase Museum membership and 150 members were added including 6 corporate memberships. To entice people to join the Society hosted a 10 kilometer road race. The fundraising was a huge success.

A community volunteer program was established at the Museum in 1981 and continues to be a vibrant part of the Museum. Students, the handicapped, seniors, and others are given opportunities to contribute their time at the Museum. A major undertaking began this same year. The museum was still lacking accreditation. This was due to a lack of storage and office space. The Board of Directors decided to embark on another fundraising campaign to restore the Wright house which was purchased in 1956. The plan was to renovate the Captain's house and move the offices to that building plus make an environmental controlled storage area in the basement. This time the fundraising event in 1982 was a gala dinner aboard the bark *Regina Maris*. The following year a benefit dinner dance was held at Seawanhaka Yacht Club in a nearby town. The Society raised \$17,000 for the proposed expansion program and by 1983 the staff moved into its new offices. By 1984 the storage area was completed.

The Museum successfully competes with more than one thousand other institutions and received a General Operating Support Grant from the Institute of Museum Services in 1984. It was the first major federal grant to be received by the Museum. That same year two benefits were held aboard the bark *Regina Maris*. Nearly \$10,000 was donated and the Museum Director, Robert Farwell proposes the establishment of an endowment fund to insure long-term financial stability for the Museum. In 1985 a Museum Endowment fund was established with an initial goal to raise \$120,000. To achieve this goal the Society launches several fundraises including an Antiques Fair, and a book signing by marine artist Ray Ellis.

The Education Center opened for the 1985-1986 school year. This space was formerly the Wright House garage. This expanded the Museum's ability to accommodate two school groups at the same time. Over 13,000 school children visited the museum this year. Most of the educational programs and workshops focus on the whaling industry, but also included programs directed at conserving the world's marine mammal population. The development of educational programs for children and adults were a priority in 1990. Schools were able to select from programs and workshops ranging in duration from 1 ½ hours to a full teaching day. New York State mandated the study of local history in 4<sup>th</sup> grade so many 4<sup>th</sup> classes visit. Programs included scrimshaw workshops, "Moby Dick"

workshops, echolocation, whales and whaling, ships in a bottle, sailor's valentines, basic navigation, and walking tours of Cold Spring Harbor.

The number of special education and handicapped students increased as teachers realized a small museum is very appropriate for these students. Museum educators worked with teachers to design special customized programs. A variety of weekend programs for children and adults were conducted including workshops on signal flags, scrimshaw, and ships in a bottle. Summer camp programs were filled to capacity.

Efforts were made to increase adult visitors to the Museum. In 1991 several grants were written to supplement funding for senior citizens programs and an adult brochure was written for distribution to senior citizen organizations, Elderhostel groups, and senior group travel companies. Also in 1991 seven in-service workshops were presented for teachers. Teachers were introduced to the range of programs available at the Whaling Museum. Eighty percent of the teachers that attended the workshops scheduled trips for their classes that year. Recently more programs for seniors have been added including a special program for seniors with dementia.

Very importantly in February of 1993 the Museum received official accreditation by the American Association of Museums. This was an honor because of the 72 accredited museums in New York State; the Whaling Museum was only the second maritime museum in New York to win accreditation. This was a very long process. In 1986 the museum underwent an evaluation of its collections, management procedures by the American Association of Museums. This was phase II of a program of evaluation the Museum undertook in 1981. By this time the Museum had over 4,000 artifacts including 600 priceless scrimshaw pieces plus thousands of valuable documents, letters, log books, and journals.

The Mission Statement now reads, "Our mission is to explore the ever-changing relationship between humans and whales through inquiry-based education and interpretation of artifacts that emphasize the cultural, scientific and environmental significance of Long Island and the Sea. We help members and visitors make informed decisions about our marine environment." This mission statement was adapted in 2012 after many months of deliberation. The reason for the shift is to help the museum become more viable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today the Museum is funded by an endowment, benefits which are usually scheduled once a year, program revenues from schools, birthday parties, scouts, camp, and family events. The Museum also receives New York State and Town of Huntington grants as well as private foundation supported grants. The Museum has corporate sponsors, mutual funds, and marketable securities. Membership from families, individuals, and libraries also are part of the funding. In addition admissions and profits from the museum store also help with the budget.

The Museum is a gem and continues to forge ahead to fulfill its mission.