

# Sunday Magazine

Section  
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Brant Point Lighthouse at the entrance to Nantucket Harbor.

Patricia Sheridan/Post-Gazette

## Whaling tale puts Nantucket in the spotlight

## Nantucket returns to spotlight in film

By Christine H. O'Toole

**NANTUCKET** — On a late fall afternoon, downtown Nantucket — and I use the adjective advisedly — feels like a movie set for a high-toned historical epic.

Golden leaves are drifting into cobbled streets. A clock tolls in the church belfry. Along Broad Street, a pub signboard creaks in the wind, marking the 1840 ordinary, *The Brotherhood of Thieves*. Another carved wooden sign looms ahead, engraved with a primitive seascape: "Going On the Whale," it explains.

Nantucket, or at least the most famous incident in its nautical history, is in fact in the movies right now. The wreck of the whaleship



Christine H. O'Toole

An abandoned boat on Nantucket Bay reminds visitors of its long nautical history.

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## NANTUCKET, FROM E-1

Essex in 1820 is the subject of "In the Heart of the Sea," which opened in Pittsburgh theaters Friday. It's a rippling yarn, one that inspired Herman Melville to write "Moby Dick," and it carries a useful lesson: don't mess with angry 80-foot sperm whales.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the story is that eight men survived for 96 days in the middle of the Pacific, returned home to Nantucket, and immediately went to sea again.

One of community's long-time residents is Nathaniel Philbrick, a Pittsburgh native who attended Alderidge High School and went on to write, among many of his historical accounts, "In the Heart of the Sea" in 2000, which earned him the National Book Award for non-fiction and, of course, inspired the new movie.

I love islands and I like history, so my first visit to Nantucket was a two-fer. Thirty miles off the New England coast, the island is a well-preserved beauty with a certain aloof charm. That Carbo-esque attitude has paradoxically made it a huge midsummer tourist draw. Without the crowds, it feels more like its 18th century old self.

Two centuries after its brutal whaling heyday, Nantucket holds fast to its history and its high-toned wealth. The entire island is a National Historic Landmark, with 800 exquisitely preserved homes, churches and atheneums that date to the early 1800s. Its current population of 7,000 is exactly the same as it was in 1819, when the Essex sailed for the Pacific.

Ornate whaling captains' houses command the view to the east. Dozens of buildings recite the legacy of the island's 17th century founders, the Coffins, Starbucks, Folgers and Macys (founders of the New York mercantile dynasty). And the very rich still control its fate.

Nantucket's whaling industry crashed as the California Gold Rush began, but the island gained cachet among blueblood Bostonians and New Yorkers. The combination of acres of wild plums, cranberry bogs, sand dunes and secluded gray-shingled mansions now attracts discreet multimillionaires like Google founder Eric Schmidt, Apple founder Steve Wozniak and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry.



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A 19th-century signboard on Broad Street hung from a harpoon illustrates Nantucket's whaling tradition.

### IF YOU GO

#### Nantucket, Mass.

**Getting there:** Nantucket is an hour's ferry ride from Hyannis or 45-minute flight from Boston. Round-trip flights from Pittsburgh operate at Boston's Logan Airport and continue on Cape Air; off-season round-trip fares from \$451 round-trip on Jet Blue. Ferries operate year-round; check high-speed catamaran schedules at <http://www.flylinecruises.com>. Cost: \$41 per adult passenger one way. Car ferries operate year-round; off-season fares for cars begin at \$140, plus \$18.50 per passenger. Check schedule at [www.steamshipauthority.com](http://www.steamshipauthority.com)

**Doing there:** The Whaling Museum, operated by the Nantucket Historical Association (<http://www.nha.org>) at 13 Broad St., is closed between Jan. 1 and Feb. 13, with limited hours until April 11. Adult admission: \$20.

**Staying there:** Nantucket Island Resorts (<http://www.nantucketislandresorts.com>) operates six of the island's most luxurious hotels. The White Elephant, White Elephant Village, Jared Coffin House, the Nantucket Boat Basin and the pet-friendly Cottages and Lofts at the Boat Basin are located in the heart of town; The Wauwinet, at the northern end of the island, is a secluded waterfront getaway. Hotels are now accepting bookings for the 2016 season, which opens in mid-April.

**Eating there:** Petticoat Row Bakery (<http://petticoatrowbakery.com>), 35 Centre St., is open year-round (off-season, Tuesday through Sunday) for pastries, coffee and artisanal foods. The popular Brant Point Grill at the White Elephant and Topper's at The Wauwinet feature lobster and fresh-caught fish; Ventuno (21 Federal St.; [www.ventunorestaurant.com](http://www.ventunorestaurant.com)) adds an Italian accent to fine dining with pasta and seafood; entrees from \$30.

— Christine H. O'Toole

If you have to ask if you can afford to live here, please don't bother. You could go broke just buying a pair of preppy Nantucket reds, the scarlet chinos that have become an island cliché.

The support of generous One Percenters ensures that Nantucket can perfectly protect its past and its pristine landscape. One example lies at the foot of Broad Street,

where an old candle factory is now the home of the super Whaling Museum.

"We have a 5,000-year history of human habitation," tour guide Anne Sweidel tells me, but most of the museum's collection focuses on the years after 1641, when English-speaking settlers arrived. Whaling began locally in the early 1700s, as Nantucketers ventured into the



Patricia Sheridan/Post-Gazette

A home with a shuttered entry on a quiet Nantucket street.



Source: Esri

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surrounding waters for right whales (so named because they were the "right" ones to harvest for oil). By 1820, the island that Ralph Waldo Emerson dubbed "the nation of Nantucket" was a global conglomerate.

Circumnavigating the globe, its ships brought home enough whale oil to fuel 36 local candle factories. In 2015 dollars, the tiny community was raking in \$9 million a year.

Big-ticket exhibits flesh out the story: The museum's Scrimshaw Gallery displays arguably the world's finest collection of carved and engraved whale teeth and bones, created by sailors at leisure.

The facets of an authentic Fresnel lens from the island's Sankaty Head lighthouse illuminate a cupola with 360-degree views of the island. Pittsburgh's Heinz



The specialty of the island.

Family Foundation donated elements of an 1847 candle factory, including a massive two-story wooden press for processing spermaceti oil.

Portraits of founding families by master portraitists like J.S. Copley line the walls, and a lush cinematic introduction to Nantucket by filmmaker Ric Burns is screened hourly on the main level. Appropriately, the documentary screens in the

shadow of a fantastic 42-foot long sperm whale.

Washed ashore here in 1990, its bones plunge from the ceiling of the museum's main gallery.

"In the Heart of the Sea" has prompted a new museum exhibit detailing the sailors' ordeal, as well as a walking tour that ties local landmarks to the film (both will resume when the museum reopens in spring).

Though the town is well-groomed, it's not ideal for biking (those cobbles. Ouch). For that, I borrow a two-wheeler from the White Elephant Hotel Inn, a harbor landmark, and head for Sankaty Head.

Here's where Nantucket's mania for preservation really pays off: A conservation trust protects a full third of the island's green space. Nearly 30 miles of paved gentle paths roll through the island. The greenery effectively blocks the ocean winds — and all but a few glimpses of palatial homes. The lighthouse, a classic striped specimen, winks a welcome every 8 seconds.

At the north end of Nantucket Bay, I meet Capt. Rob McMullen at the dock of The Wauwinet hotel. We're hunting lobsters, not whales. Instead of a harpoon, I wield a pair of pliers, snapping rubber bands around the claws as he pulls them from the traps. The waves are noisy, and the silhouettes of kite-surfers and scallop boats pass the setting sun. With Nantucket in sight, life at sea seems like a dream job.

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