

## **The Whales of Noepe**

**by Womsikuk James**

The seal of my tribe, the Aquinnah Wampanoag, depicts a giant named Maushop holding a whale and standing on the sacred cliffs of Gay Head. The image of the whale is a part of the tribal seal because whales have been extremely important to the Aquinnah throughout their history. The Aquinnah believe that Maushop created their island and the other islands off the coast of Cape Cod by shaking sand out of his massive moccasins. Sometimes, Maushop would give a drift whale to the people when they went hungry. Maushop and his wife, Squant, taught the first people of Noepe (Martha's Vineyard, MA) how to hunt for whales, and instilled in them the value of using every part of them.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, whales were plentiful, and it was common for them to approach the shores of Noepe. Sometimes my ancestors hunted them using special spears and dugout canoes called "mishoon." Whales were a source of awe and would have been an important source of food for the people. Archaeologists have found ancient images of whales in effigies and portable petroglyphs carved by Native peoples throughout present-day coastal New England.

Maushop was always hungry, and would often pick up whales and cook them on an eternally burning fire. The whales' blood stained parts of the Gay Head cliffs red, and the ashes from the roasted whales made parts of the cliffs black. For millennia, the people of Noepe have made pottery from the multicolored clay found there.

Some Aquinnah people say that, when the Europeans first came to Martha's Vineyard, Maushop offered to turn the Aquinnah people into whales or dolphins so that they could always remain free, and that many of our people chose to do this (Welch).

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In the 1700s, the Wampanoag and the white colonists benefited from the abundance of whales in New England. Whales were said to be so thick in the waters surrounding Martha's Vineyard that all that was necessary to harvest them was "a small boat, a harpoon, and several strong armed men" ("Whaling Tradition").

In the 18th and 19th centuries, my ancestors were an integral part of the enormous whaling industry that arose in New England. Aquinnah men were skilled whalers and were considered good luck to have aboard a ship. Many Aquinnah went to sea – some of them unwillingly. Young men were commonly told not to get drunk in New Bedford and other whaling ports lest they be kidnapped and wake up to find themselves at sea for years (MacDonald). Going to sea caused some Aquinnah people to become rather sophisticated as a result of being exposed to many other cultures, and the sailors would return home with gifts from thousands of miles away. Some of the whalers would even settle in other parts of the world (Perry, NMAI interview).

During the whaling era, Aquinnah people practiced an art form called scrimshaw, which is a picture or pattern carved and then inked into the bones, teeth or baleen of whales. Aquinnah and other seamen on whaling boats taught each other how to make these beautiful works of art in order to while away the hours while at sea for months, and whale images appeared on many of these carvings.

When Aquinnah whalers participated in the industrialized whaling of the 18th and 19th centuries, they did so out of economic necessity, and did it despite the fact that this contradicted their belief in using every part of the whale. During that era and even into the twentieth century, there were limited opportunities for our people, and whaling was a steady, if not particularly lucrative, source of income.

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Despite their proficiency at whaling, Native people were rarely given positions of power aboard whaling vessels. Very few Natives ever became mates and even fewer became captain. Amos Haskins from Aquinnah was the first and one of the only Native Americans given command of a whaling vessel (New Bedford Historical Society). In 1851, he became captain of a whaling ship called the *Massasoit*. The crew of the *Massasoit* was also unusual in that the first, second and third mates were all people of color.

Another landmark event also occurred in 1851: Herman Melville published *Moby Dick*, which is considered one of the greatest American novels ever written. *Moby Dick* was based on Melville's own experience on the whaler *Acushnet* and tales he had heard of the whaler *Essex*. One of the characters in *Moby Dick* is an Aquinnah Wampanoag harpooner named Tashtego. While the character of Tashtego is fictional, perhaps Melville came across an Aquinnah whaler during his journeys.

In 1902, a little more than half a century after the publication of *Moby Dick*, an Aquinnah whaler named Amos Smalley singlehandedly harpooned a huge albino sperm whale, the only person in recorded history to have done so ("Amos' Great White"). Measuring ninety feet long, Amos' catch showed that the massive white whale in *Moby Dick* may have had some basis in reality. Whaling collapsed around that time due to the emergence of kerosene as a cheaper, more abundant oil than whale oil and because the whale population had been reduced so sharply. Whaling is now banned in the United States.

Today, my people continue to consider whales to be important, and the elders continue to tell young people tales of Maushop and the whales. The image of a whale, whether on an ancient effigy, a work of scrimshaw, or the Aquinnah tribal seal, is a unifying image for my people, and it provides visual reminders of what our culture was in the past and is today.

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The Aquinnah still live on Martha's Vineyard and reserve the right to claim any beached whale when rescue attempts have failed. The modern Aquinnah Wampanoag continue to believe that beached whales are a gift from Maushop, and, just like their ancestors, seek to use every part of the whale. The people of Aquinnah want to protect whales and are trying to keep their waters free of wind turbines and other things which may harm their environment so that the whales can continue to visit Noepe safely (Welch). 3

To me, whales are beautiful, profoundly intelligent creatures with which humans share an extremely close bond. They have very complex emotions and social structures, and they have languages which differ from place to place and species to species. I feel a deep connection with them.

How I see whales is shaped by the history of my people. Perhaps the whales that I see now are relatives, descendants of my Aquinnah ancestors who chose to leave the land and be free in the water. Like my people, many species of whales were decimated, but they are resilient. Whales have not vanished, and with our help, they will survive.

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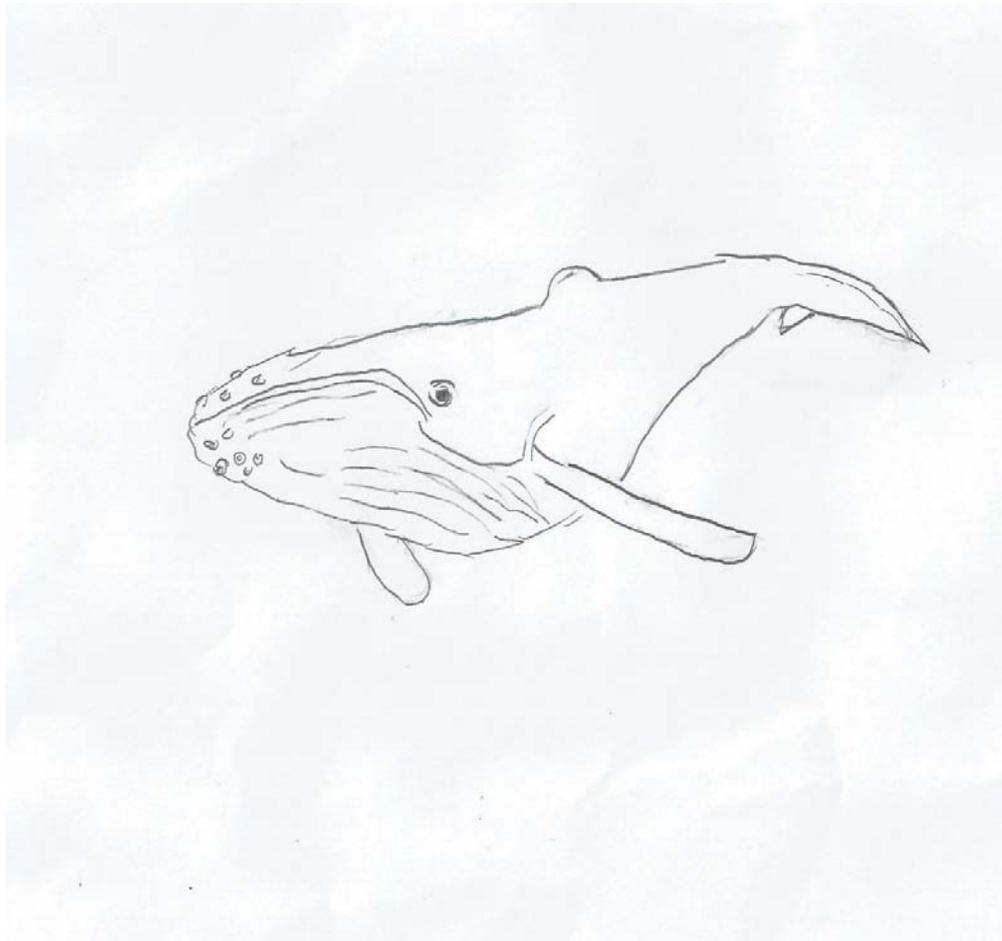
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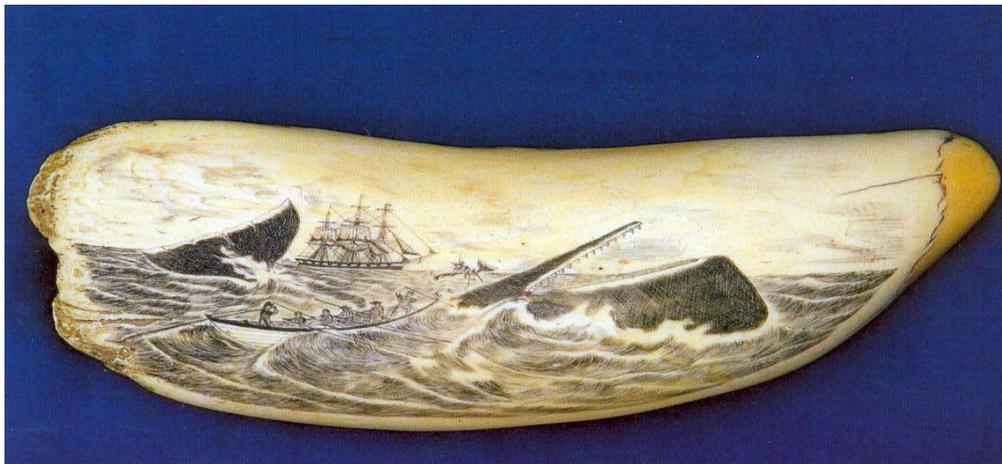
A sketch of a Right Whale, drawn by the author

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Stone Whale Effigy

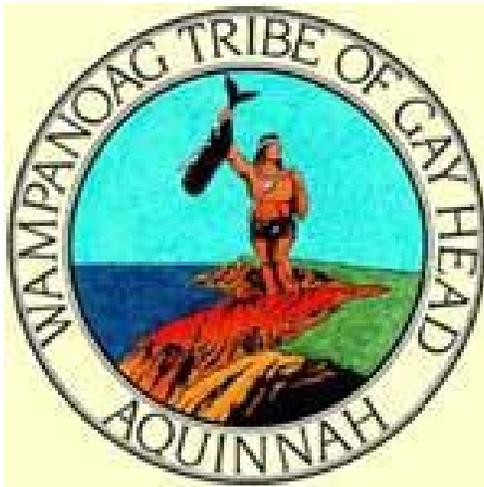
(Source: Ancientlights.org)



An Example of Scrimshaw

(Source: Main Street Books)

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The Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribal Seal

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