

The American Presence in Hobart

This paper addresses the impact of visiting American whalers on colonial Hobart. It draws in particular on research using the Australia-America collection of the Australian National Maritime Museum, material from the WL Crowther Library in the State Library of Tasmania and the National Library's microfilm records of the United States Consulate established in Hobart in 1843.

In 1803 Eber Bunker, a Massachusetts whaleman who had settled in Sydney, took three whales in Oyster Bay on his way to land Lt. Bowen at Risdon Cove to establish the first colonial settlement in the Derwent. So began whaling in Tasmania. The colonial records first identify US-flagged whalers in Storm Bay in 1804 and mention intermittent visits for the next three decades. Until the 1830s, however, most of these Americans were in transit, taking shelter or putting on water, wood and provisions. Only a handful whaled in Tasmanian waters (e.g. Aurora in Frederick Henry Bay in 1807; Rose 1808). The new settlers traded with a few American vessels, even though the colonial Governors discouraged such commerce, fearing the threat to the penal colony's isolation.

The peak period for US whaling visits was the 1840s; visits came to a near standstill after 1852, and revived after 1855, though not to the level of the late 1840s. The US presence then fell away sharply after the Civil War and finished by the mid-1880s. The US Consular shipping returns from 1844 provide a useful comparison with the standard sources in assessing the number and nature of these visits, one which fleshes out the picture of numbers and patterns of whaling activity, seamen on shore, trade in port and regularity of return visits.

The paper's principal focus is what these visits meant for Hobart. It examines: businesses and trades that benefited; the contribution to the Tasmanian whaling industry; and the Americans' social impact, and the local perceptions, of them.

By the 1840s, Hobart was emerging as the major Southern Hemisphere whaling port. Its advanced infrastructure supporting offshore whaling and the vigour of associated professions were only possible because of the foreign visitors, which by this period meant primarily the Americans. The reported purchase of land in 1847 by the US Government intended for maintenance and discharge facilities for American vessels on Battery Point reflects how significant Hobart's role became. The paper will also consider how the American presence influenced the growth and extent of the "hospitality industry".

Americans who stayed to work and, in some cases, settle were a lasting influence on the local whaling industry. Most of the masters and officers of Tasmanian whalers were colonials or British-born; in the 1850s, however, ten colonial whalers had American masters. A slightly higher proportion of officers were Americans (11 per cent between 1855-59); those recruited as crew represented a similar percentage, sustained through the next few decades, although it appears they held a higher proportion of specialised positions such as boatsteerers and shipkeepers, as well as cooks and stewards. In all, almost 300 worked on colonial whalers, some recruited from British or other vessels.

The Yankee whalers who made Tasmania home left an enduring legacy. Some, like the three generations of the Robinson family who figure in early Tasmanian history, were pioneers of business as well as mariners. The paper will also look, necessarily selectively, at examples of those who spent a period in Hobart including Richard Hazard and Bunker's son-in-law, Arnold Fisk.

Another influence was the "transfer of technology", through equipment and models of operation. A number of US ships became part of the local whaling fleet (at least eight); some

like the Derwent Hunter, Islander and Othello were operating well after US-flagged ships were rarely seen in the Derwent.

Efforts to measure the social impact of the American visitors have focused on lawlessness and drunken shore visits. Data on desertion rates and time in port add to our picture of how many Americans were in Hobart in the mid-19th Century. I argue that the whalers' reputation for riotous and licentious behaviour in Hobart Town was exaggerated. Records of convictions during the whaling period suggest that the Americans were less of a problem than local and other mariners, and even sections of the military. A study of the conviction rate of seamen between 1835 and 1882 shows relatively few sentences for Americans. In fact, the media of the day manifested the popular ambivalence towards foreign whalers, keenly aware of their economic importance.

Elisha Hathaway, the first US Consul in Hobart, arrived in 1843. The motivation for formal representation was commercial interest; for the young Republic, the flag followed trade. Congress's close attention to the welfare of US seamen was another factor. As the Consul was required to record and report, every six months or later quarterly, all visiting and departing American vessels, a detailed data base tracking American visits, including all whalers, exists from 1844 until the 1890s. Consular dispatches informed Washington of advocacy of better conditions for visiting US vessels and whalers and proposals (rejected by London) for Hobart to become a transshipment port for whale oil. The Consuls' frustration at lack of funds and effective support, especially for repatriating destitute whalers, is another theme. These records show how the US sought to enhance its emerging maritime commerce through systematically gathering information as well as on-the-ground support for American interests.

David Stuart

Sydney

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