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Hunting the Whale

New Bedford, Massachusetts, was once one of America's richest towns. In 1840, it was called "the most expensive place to live in all New England." Great houses lined its streets. Its lovely parks and gardens rivaled those of English lords. All this wealth came from the sea. In fact, it came almost entirely from one sea animal—the sperm whale.

People of the New England coast have depended on the sea for their living since they first reached its shores. Its river inlets and bays provide fine, safe harbors. In the 1800s, whale hunting supported many New England communities. New Bedford was the leading whaling port in the world. In 1857, it had 329 whaling ships, more than all other American ports put together. They employed 10,000 men. Shipowners built most of the town's great mansions. Those who processed and sold the products of whaling grew rich, too.

The sperm whale is the world's largest toothed whale. Males can grow up to 60 feet long. They weigh as much as 45 tons. In those days, whale oil, or blubber, was used to light lamps and heat homes. A large whale could yield more than 100 barrels of this oil. Other kinds of whales were also hunted for their blubber. But the substance called *ambergris* (AM•bur•gris) is found only in the stomach of sperm whales. Ambergris was used in making fine perfume.

The sperm whale's most valuable product was found in its huge head. This was another kind of oil, called *spermaceti* (spur•muh•SEE•tee). When cooled, it turns into a kind of wax. Scientists still aren't sure what the whale needs it for. But people had many uses for it in the 1800s. It was made into expensive, almost smoke-free candles. It was used in women's makeup. And it was the best oil to keep machinery running.

New England whalers first hunted close to home. But by 1820, sperm whales were gone from coastal waters. Whaling ships became larger, and voyages longer. Whalers studied the habits of sperm whales. Females and young lived in groups and stayed in warmer oceans. The highly prized males lived alone except at mating time. They migrated to all but the coldest waters. A whaling voyage of the 1850s might circle the



globe and last three years. One voyage of the ship *Nile* took 11 years, from 1858 to 1869.

Whaling crewmen were paid with a share of the profit from the voyage. A captain's share was usually one-twelfth. But many captains owned their ships. If so, they were entitled to half the profit. A green sailor on his first voyage might get one-750th, or less.

In 1859, the first oil well was struck. Petroleum soon became cheaper than whale oil for lighting, heating, and running machines. There was a lower demand for whale products. Whaling began to decline. And so did New Bedford and other whaling communities. The last American whaling voyage left port in 1928.

New Bedford today has a museum that honors both whalers and their prey. Whaling was a dangerous line of work. Sperm whales fought back. Many ships and crewmen were lost at sea. But the whales got the worst of it.

Put an X in the square beside the best answer.

1. New Bedford whalers hunted sperm whales mostly for their _____.
 oil bones meat teeth
2. This article mostly describes _____.
 how New Bedford became wealthy the business of whaling in the 1800s
 what science has learned about whales the dangers of hunting the sperm whale
3. You can decide from the article that _____.
 ambergris is no longer used in making perfume
 only male sperm whales have spermaceti oil
 shipowners received half the profit of a whaling voyage
 the sperm whale today is an endangered species
4. Which of these events happened *second*?
 New Bedford had 329 whaling ships. The last American whaling voyage left port.
 The first oil well was struck. The *Nile* left on an 11-year voyage.
5. Which of these statements is an opinion?
 New Bedford was New England's most expensive place to live in 1840.
 New Bedford once had more whaling ships than all other American ports combined.
 The male sperm whale can grow up to 60 feet long and weigh 45 tons.
 Whaling crewmen were paid with a share of the profit of the voyage.
6. In paragraph 6, the word *green* means _____.
 seasick inexperienced wealthy saving whales



Write your answer to the following question on the lines below.

Make a list of the effects of the decline of whaling on New Englanders. Which do you think was the most important? Why?
