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Recommended Citation

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A Girls' Song: Recounting Women and the Nantucket Whaling Industry, 1750-1890

Natalie Mitchell
The University of Akron, William's Honors College
Honors' Thesis
23 September, 2019

The Nantucket Girls Song

I have made up my mind now to be a Sailor's wife,
 To have a purse full of money and a very easy life,
 For a clever sailor husband is so seldom at his home,
 That his wife can spend the dollars with a will that's all her own,
 Then I'll haste to wed a sailor, and send him off to sea,
 For a life of independence is the pleasant life for me,
 But every now and then I shall like to see his face,
 For it always seemes to me to beam with manly grace,
 With his brow so nobly open, and his dark and kindly eye,
 Oh my heart beats fondly towards him whenever he is nigh,
 But when he says Goodbye my love, I'm off across the sea
 First I cry for his departure, then laugh because I'm free,
 Yet I'll welcome him most gladly, whenever he returns [sic]
 And share with him so cheerfully all the money that he earns
 For he's a loving Husband, though he leads a roving life
 And well I know how good it is to be a Sailor's Wife.¹

This song was shared among neighbors after a Quaker meeting, sung with friends in the streets of Nantucket town, and carefully transcribed into the journal of a woman alone at sea on her husband's whaling vessel. The song was most famously recorded in the back pages of a journal kept by Eliza Spencer Brock while aboard her husband's whaling ship between 1853 and 1856. Brock received the poem from a Martha Ford, the wife of a physician, while visiting an island on this voyage.² Reproduced by Nantucket women throughout the 1800s, this song was popular among the wives of whalers as it evoked the emotional dissonance they felt when their husbands left on multi-year whaling voyages. A visitor to Nantucket in the late 1700s through the 1800s would notice the lack of young men on the island, and the preponderance of women taking on roles that were typically considered more masculine. This lent itself to the imaginations of contemporaneous writers, with many romanticizing Nantucket in nonfiction works on the industry

¹ Transcription from the postcard in Appendix 1.

² "What is the Nantucket Girls Song?" *The Nantucket Historical Association*, <https://nha.org/research/nantucket-history/history-topics/what-is-the-nantucket-girls-song/>, Date Accessed: 1/7/2019.

and island or in fiction works weaving tales of the bittersweet lives of whaling wives. These works of fantasy give some insight into American culture and ideals of the 1800s, but do not provide accurate representations of the lived experiences of these women. “The Nantucket Girls Song” fits somewhere between fantasy and reality: as a fantasy crafted by these women, within the reality of the industry’s impact on their lives.

Nantucket was a unique place that offered opportunities for women and for the whaling industry not available on the mainland, such as the separation from more traditional Victorian domesticity and the intensification of the whaling industry which stemmed from the community’s isolation. As result, Nantucket became a symbol of sorts for what the whaling industry could do for women. The height of whaling on Nantucket spanned the mid-18th century through the late-19th century, so an examination of women’s roles on the island during this period provides insight into the intersection of gender ideologies and the industry. Nantucket’s community and lifeways did not develop out of the influence of the whaling industry alone, though the empty space, both physical and temporal, between Nantucket women and their whaling husbands was largely a result of the industry’s presence. Many factors played roles in their development: from the island’s isolation to the prominence of the Quaker faith. The picturesque island and the unique community living there served as inspiration for both fiction and nonfiction authors of this period, and portrayals of this “world” were fairly popular—if not entirely accurate.³ Authors often crafted these portrayals with a preconceived narrative in mind related to the author’s notions about American society and appropriate women’s roles. This usually meant the author exaggerated either

³ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), Kindle edition; Joseph C. Hart, *Miriam Coffin; or The Whale-Fisherman*, (Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2016, Kindle edition).

the perceived positive or negative effects of women's increased economic power on Nantucket, depending on the ideas they were advocating.

Though it is impossible to craft an all-encompassing image of what women's lifeways looked like on Nantucket, turning towards sources written by these women such as diaries and letters in addition to analyzing fictionalized portrayals such as poems and novels allows for a clearer picture of women's roles and lifeways on the island as well as their intersection with American society. These sources reveal glimpses of how Nantucket women interacted in their community and reacted to the unique living conditions on the island. Wives of whalers on Nantucket experienced a severe emotional strain that stemmed from the separation from their husbands as it disrupted their expected lifeways, or customs and practices related to daily life, that was typical of the period. Empty space defined their marriages: the distance between themselves and their husbands as well as the long periods of time spent apart. These empty spaces were huge factors in shaping the lifeways on Nantucket; influencing the social, religious, and economic roles of these women. In order to track their lifeways, it is advantageous to explore the history of European settlement and whaling on the island going back into the late 1600s. This background lays important groundwork for discussions of fictionalized portrayals of Nantucket's community and how gender roles manifested on Nantucket.

Background

Nantucket island is intrinsically tied to the whaling industry because of the importance of the island in the history of whaling in America, as well as the industry's influence on the island and the ways of life of its inhabitants. Making this connection between the island and whaling is important to understanding how the industry was able to have such a strong impact on women in the community. Nantucket is an island of about 100 square miles, located approximately 30 miles

east into the Atlantic ocean off the coast of what is now the state of Massachusetts. Interest in whaling on Nantucket goes back to 1672, when the white colonial population on the island invited a whaleman from Long Island to hunt whales with Nantucket island as his base of operation.⁴ Though he did not accept this offer, by 1690 a man named Ichabod Paddock had set up the first shore whaling operation on the island.⁵ Those involved in this early industry focused their efforts on right whales. Although right whales' oil was of poor grade, they were considered desirable for their baleen which served a multitude of functions in manufactured goods of the time.⁶

The right whale was the focus of the operation until 1715, when Nantucket whalers began hunting the sperm whale.⁷ Within this shift, the whaling voyages increased in length, which led to the industry putting a greater strain on the wives of the men who went on these multi-year voyages. This cetacean was so desirable because not only did its body contain versatile oil used for margarine, lamp oil, and soap, the whale's head also contained sperm whale oil, which was highly sought after because it was easier to work with and was cleaner than other whale oils.⁸ Prior to the 18th century, any whaling that occurred on Nantucket was shore whaling, or took place within sight of the island's shore, partly because there was a plentiful population of right whales in this area. After 1715, the whaling industry on Nantucket boomed partly due to high demand and rising prices which required entrepreneurs to attempt to extend both the distance and duration of these whaling voyages.⁹ The fact that sperm whales were more common far from the shores of

⁴ Although "whaler" is the most common term used in reference to one who works on a whaling vessel "whaleman" has also been an accepted term, likely as a shortened version of "whale-fisherman".

⁵ Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalers of Nantucket", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1983): 562.

⁶ Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalers of Nantucket", 562-563.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 565.

⁸ Eric Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2007), 112.

⁹ Daniel Vickers, "Nantucket Whalers in the Deep-Sea Fishery: The Changing Anatomy of an Early American Labor Force", *The Journal of American History* 72, no. 2 (1985): 281.

Nantucket also spurred this shift to longer voyages.¹⁰ As the journeys became more intensive, the demands on the island's labor force increased. In these early stages of the industry, crews brought the blubber back to the island to refine it on shore, but by 1730, the whalers took the refining equipment with them and setting up temporary refineries along their routes. This process intensified further when, by 1750, it was common for whaling vessels to install refining equipment on the ships' deck. This innovation remained the norm for whaling vessels for more than a century.¹¹

Nantucket was uniquely situated to be successful in the whaling industry because of its location on an island. Because the community was isolated from the mainland, the members of the community stayed involved with the processing of the whales from harpooning, to refining, to creating goods with the spermaceti and oil. This set them apart from mainland whaling ports which usually sent the whale remains off to be processed elsewhere.¹² This isolation that resulted from both catching whales and processing the whale oil in one community meant that those in the community began to identify with the industry and rely on it not only as their main economic source, but to an extent as the backbone of their community. With approximately 20 families maintaining primary control of land, resources, and the economy for the first century of white settlement on the island, as well as holding the highest positions on whaling ships, it is clear how central the whaling industry was to success in the community.¹³ These families controlled the

¹⁰ Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalemen of Nantucket", 565.

¹¹ Ibid, 566.

¹² Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 147.

¹³ Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalemen of Nantucket", 561; To give some scale here, Godfrey of *Godfrey's Nantucket Guide*, written in 1882, noted that the island's population was around 4,000 at the time of his writing, but thought it had been as high as 10,000 in the past (5). Though he may be exaggerating a bit on the higher end of his scale, more recent estimates place the population size during the mid 18th century around 5,000.

whaling industry on Nantucket, and their descendants became some of the wealthiest whale boat captains in the industry.

Contemporaneous writers crafting images of what Nantucket's community ought to be often implied that the community was homogeneously white. This image of the community often necessitated the glossing over of Native Americans' contributions to and exploitation through the whaling industry on the island. Though these white families maintained control of the industry, for the first fifty years of the whaling industry, when they were hunting right whales, the majority of those employed in the industry were from the island's Indian community.¹⁴ In a history of the island written in the 1830s, Obed Macy states that "The Indians being with the whites much of their time, they became conversant together, and learned each other's language, which rendered the former very useful in the whaling business. . ."¹⁵ This description ignores the whaling industry's exploitation of Native Americans, which is not surprising considering that it was written by a white Nantucket man living during the 19th century. The more accurate reason as to why Native Americans got locked into low-level positions on whaling vessels is the racist idea that non-white, non-European people should do menial manual labor while the white workers make far more money doing less manual labor in higher positions. Despite this precedent, about halfway through the 18th century white men began to take more and more whaling jobs, as well as a wider variety of these jobs, particularly when the industry began proving to be more profitable.¹⁶ This

¹⁴ Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalers of Nantucket", 568.

¹⁵ Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket: Being a Compendious Account of the First Settlement of the Island by the English, Together With the Rise and Progress of the Whale Fishery; and Other Historical Facts Relative to Said Island and its Inhabitants*, (Boston, MA: Hilliard, Gray and Co., 1835), 42.

¹⁶ Daniel Vickers, "The First Whalers of Nantucket", 568.

also became necessary as the Native American whalers died from the diseases that spread on the whaling ships and by the white settlers.¹⁷

Though mainland communities were involved in the whaling industry as well, Nantucket's relationship with the industry was unique in that every step of whale oil processing, from hunting the whales to rendering the oil, all remained within the community. When Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a French-American writer, visited the island in the late 18th century he recognized that, "the industry exerted by the people of Nantucket, hath hitherto enabled them to rival all their competitors; consequently, this is the greatest mart for oil, whalebone, and spermaceti, on the continent."¹⁸ Crevecoeur cites the mass of goods and materials available on Nantucket that were results of the containment of all aspects of the whaling industry onto the island. This allowed for the economy and community of Nantucket to be almost entirely focused on the industry. Due to this prominence, the whaling industry held the most common occupational choices for men on Nantucket. Crevecoeur is highlighting the plucky, hardworking nature of Nantucketers in a slightly idealized way, as he visited the island as the industry was reaching its apex.

A guide written by Edward K. Godfrey for visitors to Nantucket in the late 19th century acknowledged this prominence as the author nostalgically looked back at this apex when he stated: "It will be safe to address at least every second man you meet as 'Captain,'. . . This is easily accounted for from the fact that they were for some many years a seafaring people".¹⁹ Though the author of this visitors' guide was attempting to be humorous, his joke was based in the truth that the whaling industry was integral to keeping the economy afloat, and most men on the island were

¹⁷ Elmo P. Hohman, *The American Whaleman: A Study of Life and Labor in the Whaling Industry*, (Clifton, NJ: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, (1928) 1972), 50.

¹⁸ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010. Kindle edition), Location 1933.

¹⁹ Edward K. Godfrey, *Godfrey's Nantucket Guide*, (Nantucket, MA: Lee and Shepherd, 1882), 65.

involved in the whaling industry somehow. The industry defined social structures on the island particularly relating to marriage, though it expanded beyond this level. When these men were as young as fourteen years old they started working on whaling vessels, filling smaller roles such as cabin boy or rower.²⁰ Since whaling was so intrinsic to Nantucket's isolated community during the 18th and 19th centuries, it is perhaps the best location and time period to observe how women responded to the shifts in lifeways prompted by the industry's presence.

Though the whaling industry certainly created circumstances that prompted women to take on typically male roles on Nantucket, such as managing the economy at the family and community level and taking on leadership positions in the church, it cannot be given all the credit for their autonomy. Women's flexibility in their status within the community on Nantucket was apparent even before the presence of the whaling industry, with this flexibility being seen in white women's creation of tightly-knit social circles that often doubled as economic relationships. Women in mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century American colonial societies often filled complex gender-roles that presented a large space in which women could operate while still meeting societal standards.²¹ This was true on Nantucket as well, with women filling a variety of roles that expanded upon or went outside of the traditional domestic roles of housewife and mother. An example from the mid-1600s of this evolving status on Nantucket is the first colonial couple married on Nantucket, Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck. In this couple, Mary was the one able to read and write, and she was the one who made financial decisions on behalf of herself and her husband.²² Instances such as this are common throughout Nantucket's history, and increased with the rise of the whaling industry. Earlier examples of women's power show that the economic and

²⁰ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 1933.

²¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750*, (Random House: New York, 1980).

²² Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 90- 93.

social power women held in this community may have been amplified by the whaling industry, but the industry itself cannot be pointed to as the only reason for female power on the island.

Women's flexibility in their community statuses on Nantucket was also influenced by the dominance of the Quaker faith on the island. Women held leadership roles in this Society of Friends, and with the religion being dominant from the end of the 17th century through the 19th century, this had a sustained impact on the power structures on the island and dynamics between men and women. Nantucket woman Mary Starbuck and her children were early converts to Quakerism, and Starbuck's conversion was an important part in the Society of Friends becoming integral to the island's culture. Upon her conversion and with, ". . . a majority of the islanders, influenced by this woman. . ." the religion spread in the island community.²³ Many of the practices and characterizations of Nantucketers hold similarities with those attributed to Quakers. Quakers were often noted as being frugal, prudent, having detailed religious knowledge, and prioritizing their children's education.²⁴ These attributes are similar to those given to the Nantucket population more generally, highlighting the influence that Quakerism and the island's population had on one another.

A background on the prescribed economic and social ideals for women during this time period is necessary to understand how Nantucket women ascribed to or deviated from what was expected of them in a more standard mainland American community of the mid-18th century through the late-19th century. Archetypal American women were expected to subscribe to the canon of domesticity and make their household duties their vocation. This was true for married and unmarried women, though married women were also expected to have less leisure time than

²³ William Root Bliss, *Quaint Nantucket*, (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1896), 81.

²⁴ William Root Bliss, *Quaint Nantucket*, 75.

unmarried women.²⁵ Prescribing women a “natural vocation” that relegated them to the home created an impossible life for women where their work was also their home, meaning that they had no place to recover from work; nor did they have much time for leisure or a reason to leave the house, limiting their social opportunities.²⁶ With coverture of a woman’s economic identity coming with her marriage, a woman’s assets became her husband’s and her name ceased to appear on economic documents: being replaced by his. This kept women essentially out of the economic world and solidified the divide between the man’s “public sphere” and the woman’s “private sphere”. This description of prescribed roles for women in society does not describe the reality of women’s experiences on Nantucket, but helps in understanding how the whaling industry changed the way in which they moved through the world.

The community on Nantucket was tightly-knit, partially influenced by the spatially restrictive nature of island living, which created a contrast with the empty space that characterized women’s relationships with their husbands. The conditions on Nantucket during the 18th century were noted as being slightly overcrowded, with an average of 1.46 families per household on the island.²⁷ This likely is partially a result of the large labor force drawn by the whaling industry, but the dense in-town population did promote a very tightly-knit community on the island. The implications of this statistic combined with the religious and familial ties present on the island and the strain put on the wives of whalers, led to a strong community bond between these wives. Community was extremely important to the people of Nantucket, with festivals such as the “veal feast” and the “shearing feast” being important to the character of the island. These feasts were

²⁵ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 74.

²⁶ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 74.

²⁷ Arthur J. Worrall, *Quakers in the Colonial Northeast*, (Hanover, NH and London, England: University Press of New England, 1980), 172.

part of the fabric of the community, and women played a strong role in these events. An example of this appears in a description of the “veal feast,” which was an annual celebration of the luxury of fresh meat in which the town came together to kill a calf as acknowledgement of their thankfulness. This was followed by large, two-day family reunions where the townspeople enjoyed more large feasts. For those who could not attend these festivities, portions of the feast were delivered wrapped up in large napkins. These napkins were later incorporated into wedding dresses for the women of the island, showing how important community, and thriftiness, was to these women.²⁸

Historiography

In the mid- to late-1800s, the bulk of the books written about Nantucket and about the whaling industry’s presence there were authored by men who not only lived on the island, but whose family wealth was directly tied to their success in the industry. Alexander Starbuck was a member of an old and well-respected whaling family, with these familial connections influencing his work on the industry.²⁹ Edward K. Godfrey wrote *Godfrey’s Nantucket Guide* in 1882, and the small book acts essentially as an advertisement for the island. It emphasizes how friendly Nantucketers are, how beautiful the island is, and the success of the whaling industry. These Nantucket-based sources are useful in studying the island because they provide insight into the mindsets of those directly impacted by the industry, though the bias intrinsic to these works is best kept at the forefront of the reader’s mind.

²⁸ Anna Davis Hallowell, ed. *James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters*, (Boston, MA: Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and company), 1890, 29.

²⁹ Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery from its Earliest Inception to the Year 1876*, (New York, NY: Sentry Press, 1878).

This paper engages with New England women's historiography, the study of Nantucket, and the whaling industry.³⁰ The history of women in New England from the 1600s through the 1800s has been studied in depth by many historians, notably Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Mary Beth Norton, Kathleen Brown, and Nancy F. Cott. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Good Wives* deals with the 1650s through the 1750s, which is roughly the one hundred years preceding this paper's time-frame. These historians have explored the lifeways of New England women and their work is highly influential to the continued study of this topic. When it comes to 20th and 21st century studies of Nantucket, those that are the most widely-read are often written by Nantucketers, particularly Nathaniel Philbrick. Though Philbrick has done extensive work on documenting the history of Nantucket, he continues the theme from the 1800s of Nantucketers writing about their own island in a way that emphasizes its exceptionalism.³¹ Though this is not universal and should not discount all of the work by Nantucketers, there is still a lack of research into the history of Nantucket by non-local scholars. The history of the whaling industry is often studied by maritime historians, for obvious reasons, and military historians such as Briton Cooper Busch.³² There are historians writing within the past 20 years who have discussed the intersection of women and the whaling industry in New England, most notably Lisa Norling who has done pioneering research in the field through the examination of whaling wives' journals and correspondence.³³ Looking at

³⁰ The "New England women's historiography" I refer to is mostly centered on white Anglo-American women, as this is the focus of historians such as Ulrich, Norton, Brown, and Cott. This, going along with the fact that I focus on the portrayal of the Archetypal American woman who was always white during this period, led me to narrow my research so as to make fewer generalizations.

³¹ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 1. In reference to Altar Rock, a point near the center of the island, Philbrick states: "It is a faraway pace on a faraway island but well worth the trip. . ." By using this statement to open his work, he is clearly laying out his positive feelings associated with the island.

³² Briton Cooper Busch, *"Whaling Will Never Do for Me": The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century*. (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

³³ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*.

how 18th and 19th century American women interacted with this industry provides insight into the lifeways of these women and their communities, as well as how gender was performed in an economic context.

In *“Whaling Will Never Do for Me”*: *The American Whaleman in the Nineteenth Century*, Briton Cooper Busch takes a look at life aboard whaling vessels, with the argument that there was a severe pressure put upon those involved with the industry by the time it had reached its height in the mid nineteenth century. This study focuses on the daily lives of those on whaling vessels, touching on racial and gendered dynamics, as well as how life was controlled while at sea. The strain focused on in this book is similar to that which is the focus of this paper as it applied to the wives of whalers. Lisa Norling’s book *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* looks at the whaling industry in New England, focusing on New Bedford and Nantucket and how these wives related to the cult of domesticity. Norling looks at the erosion of typical understandings of gender while those involved in the industry attempted to hold on to these roles. Both Busch and Norling have explored how the bounds of the cult of domesticity and gender roles of the period applied in practice rather than in prescription, which leaves space for a study of how the women of Nantucket engaged with the whaling industry and their society.

Reality on Nantucket

Nantucket women expressed a humorous, bittersweet take on their reality on the island through sharing sentiments such as those reflected in “The Nantucket Girls Song.” This was a fantasy forged in these women’s reality, making it particularly interesting when looking at how the industry impacted their emotional and mental health, as well as their social interactions involving commiseration in the absence of their husbands. Looking at creations of their own such as this song, journals, and letters, as well as newspaper articles from the island’s paper *The Inquirer*

and Mirror, allows for a more complex understanding of life on Nantucket than was provided in contemporaneous works of fiction or filtered nonfiction. This section will start with a tightly focused look at those women who were closest to the whaling industry in order to explore its direct impact, then more diverse examples will come into play.

It is easiest to explore women's experiences with the whaling industry by looking at how their lifeways on the island shifted as a result of the industry's dominance; however, a small percentage of Nantucket's women also accompanied their husbands on whaling voyages. These women were often captains' wives, and though they represented an economically privileged minority of the island's population, their experiences aboard these whaling vessels heavily informs the literary representations of whaling wives and of the industry itself. Whaling wives are portrayed as plucky, pious, and slightly adventurous as they venture out to sea, and portrayals of the industry were informed by the journals of the wives on whaling vessels and their descriptions of their experiences. The *Inquirer and Mirror*, an island newspaper, noted in January of 1859 that, "a few years ago it was exceedingly rare for a whaling Captain to be accompanied by his wife and children, but it is now very common".³⁴ With the "Nantucket Girls Song" emphasizing the joys of living on the island without a present husband, a question follows of why women left this environment and commit to years at sea in a generally uncomfortable and dangerous boat. This answer is complex, individualized, and cannot be fully discerned through available sources; though it is likely tied to an individual's desire to uphold Victorian domestic ideals by creating a "home" onboard the ship and tying her identity to the presence of a husband.³⁵

³⁴ "Forty Two Wives of Whaling Captains in the Pacific", *The Inquirer and Mirror*, January 11, 1859, 2.

³⁵ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 264.

In 1859, when the aforementioned article was published, there were 42 women on the Pacific Ocean accompanying their ship captain husbands. The author of this article makes a point to say that these women had been a positive influence on the whaling crews of these vessels with, “the happy influence of this goodly number of ladies [being] apparent to the most careless observer.”³⁶ The article goes further to insinuate that the ships with wives on board have a higher likelihood of making it back to port unharmed.³⁷ The emphasis on the safety of these vessels was likely intended to address the concerns of sailors who did not trust women on their ships, whether for superstitious reasons, or reasons related to the gender roles assigned to men and women during this period. There was a common superstition held among sailors that having a woman on your vessel was bad luck, making the vessel likely to sink.

Having a fuller view of the social environment that these women lived in aboard whaling vessels is helpful in understanding how the women responded to the culture and climate of the industry. These sailors did not only dislike having women aboard because of these superstitions, but also because they did not want the captain’s wife to put them on the captain’s bad side. Because of the separate and idealized spheres in which men and women existed during this time, women were often lonely aboard their husband’s ship as they attempted to make space for themselves outside of the ideals of the period, interacting only with their husband or their children, if they had any.³⁸ This dynamic led to the whalers and the captain’s wife remaining distant from one another, with the captain’s wife existing merely as a mild annoyance to the whalers.³⁹ In this way, empty space continued to define these husband-wife relationships. Yet, even with the prescribed

³⁶ “Forty Two Wives of Whaling Captains in the Pacific”, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 2.

³⁸ Hacksell Springer, “The Captain’s Wife at Sea,” In *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, edited by Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, 92-117, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 95.

³⁹ Hacksell Springer, “The Captain’s Wife at Sea,” 95.

separation of spheres, the crew often distrusted the captain's wife, in part because this separation took place within close quarters. They also thought she would report back to her husband if she was unhappy with any of their behavior.⁴⁰ Maritime historians have often characterized American sailors as intensely masculine and in direct opposition to more feminine qualities, likely due in part to the gendered language used in discussions of seafaring.⁴¹ The masculinity of the space, combined with the fear of the captain's wife using her direct line to the captain to report on the sailors' actions, amounted to the wives of captains not having many meaningful or positive social interactions while on board.

In reality and in fiction, being a captain's wife aboard a whaling vessel was associated with a lonely existence. Women on whaling vessels attempted to cope with these feelings of isolation by creating a private space for themselves within this masculine, public sphere in which they had to exist but were not welcome. A captain's wife was confined to close quarters and did not have many points of interaction outside of her husband, who spent virtually the entire duration of the voyage managing the vessel, causing him to usually be too preoccupied to spend time with her. A whaling vessel did not contain a large living space to begin with, so a woman attempting to carve out her own space was faced with a challenge.

. . .the world of the captain's wife ended with the cabin, the saloon, and the stateroom she shared with her husband. . . These were the limits within which she must move and live not for days or weeks but for years on end, her confinement broken only by occasional visits back and forth with other whaleships, or interludes in ports where she could stay ashore in a hotel.⁴²

⁴⁰ Hacksell Springer, "The Captain's Wife at Sea," 95.

⁴¹ Margaret S. Creighton, "Davy Jones' Locker Room," In *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, edited by Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling, 92-117, (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 119.

⁴² Emma Mayhew Whiting and Henry Beetle Hough, *Whaling Wives*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), 7.

The small quarters and limited human contact of the whaling ship stood in stark contrast to the tightly-knit social atmosphere these women were used to on the island of Nantucket, with their social networks being important parts of their livelihood at home. It was common for women on ships to write in their journals about how much they missed their friends and family, or to wonder what life was like at home without their presence. In the very first journal entry of Mary Chipman Lawrence's whaling vessel journal, Lawrence writes that she leaves her hometown, ". . . with a sad heart, knowing not whether we should ever behold the faces of friends near and dear to us again on earth."⁴³ Though Lawrence lived in New Bedford, Connecticut, not Nantucket, she did keep a very detailed account of her time on her husband's ship which can help fill out an understanding of the female experience on a whaling vessel, and her heartbreak at leaving home was a universal feeling for these women.

Journals are useful windows into the thoughts of wives on whaling ships, though they often tailored their entries with a certain image and audience in mind. Mary Chipman Lawrence's journal was extensive, with an entry for almost every day she was at sea. Many of these entries were only a few lines to record the weather, or account for the activities of the day such as going up on deck, feeling seasick, or recording updates regarding the crew's progress toward catching whales.⁴⁴ Her longer entries often included updates on how her daughter, Minnie, adjusted to life on the ship, or Lawrence's own inner musings on religion. For the first month, Lawrence recorded that Minnie was often seasick, but towards the end of the December of 1856, Lawrence wrote, "Minnie is very happy. I think she enjoys herself as well as if she were at home."⁴⁵ This description holds

⁴³ Mary Chipman Lawrence, *The Captain's Best Mate: The Journal of Mary Chipman Lawrence on the Whaler Addison 1856-1860*, Edited by Stanton Garner, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1966), 3.

⁴⁴ Mary Chipman Lawrence, *The Captain's Best Mate: The Journal of Mary Chipman Lawrence on the Whaler Addison 1856-1860*, 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

throughout her journals, with many entries mentioning that Minnie was, “. . .running about on deck and making new acquaintances.”⁴⁶ Although her child was free to explore the ship and interact with the crew, Lawrence herself very rarely mentioned any interactions with the men on the ship, including her husband. When the crew met with people from outside the ship’s crew, Lawrence mentioned her interactions with that person as well. It seemed as if she were more likely to interact with new faces, rather than with the crew she was with for four years, or she did not warrant these interactions worth writing about. It is unlikely that she would have left these interactions with the crew and her husband out of her journal entirely, however, considering the mundane topics she often discussed.

When it came to writing on religion, she often wrote about it in relation to the natural beauty that surrounded her. With the idealized roles for women during the period prescribing that they be pious, these religious entries show that Lawrence filled these roles. In one entry, Lawrence described how she: “Went on deck in the evening to witness the creative power of our Heavenly Father, and nowhere more than on the ocean can it be displayed.”⁴⁷ These journal entries in which she described her emotions tied to the natural environment surrounding her as well as her religion are often the most detailed. She stated her purpose in writing her journal as something that, “. . . might be useful to myself or my child for future reference,” so it makes sense that she used it as a general log of weather and location from day-to-day, with descriptions related to religion interspersed throughout.⁴⁸

Victorian domestic ideals influenced how women crafted their social ties. During the 18th and 19th centuries in America, women and men generally travelled in different social circles and

⁴⁶ Mary Chipman Lawrence, *The Captain’s Best Mate: The Journal of Mary Chipman Lawrence on the Whaler Addison 1856-1860*, 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

women's social ties were often kept close to home as they were family-related, connected with their church, or were women who lived nearby. These were the people who existed in a woman's sphere, and it was unlikely that a lower to middle class woman would branch out much further. The cult of domesticity, which confined women to caring for their children and their households, and the strictly homosocial environments of the mainland were not the prominent forms of socializing on Nantucket.⁴⁹ Since their husbands were off at sea, women relied on their social networks for companionship and support.⁵⁰ Crèvecoeur was on the island long enough to see how the social networks operated when the whalers were home in comparison to how they operated when the whalers were at sea. He described the island when the men were gone as such: ". . .this mournful situation disposes the women to go to each other's house much oftener than when their husbands are at home: hence the custom of incessant visiting has infected every one, and even those whose husbands do not go abroad."⁵¹ This demonstrates how the unique ways of moving through social situations that originated with the wives of whalers came to permeate Nantucket's culture as a whole, with women unassociated with the industry showing similar social habits. When a husband came back from his voyage he would socialize with the same groups his wife had established in his absence, rather than trying to usurp the women's control.⁵² De Crèvecoeur was witness to this as well, writing: ". . .the young fellows, equally vigilant, easily find out which is the most convenient house, and there they assemble with the girls of the neighbourhood."⁵³ These men are characterized as being excited participants in these established social circles.

⁴⁹ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-74.

⁵⁰ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 219.

⁵¹ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2349.

⁵² Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 219.

⁵³ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2349.

As an isolated community, Nantucketers' construction of social circles differed slightly from other New England communities of the period. In a standard American community of this time there was separation of the husband's and the wife's social circles, with men having more control over social mobility. In the Nantucket microcosm, the husband was not around to make personal social connections outside of the whaling vessel so he joined in with his wife's group. It is also possible that with the freedom afforded to these women with absent husbands, upon the husband's return the wife simply continued to spend time with her social group whether or not the husband approved because of the relative power she held in the relationship. This social life was not only integral to the daily lives of the women on a basis of visiting with their friends, it also contributed to their economic ventures and success.⁵⁴ Commercial involvement by the women of Nantucket was very community-based, with the success of a woman's business being determined in part by how well-connected she was in her community, making social visits imperative to a thriving economy.⁵⁵ Their frequent social calls to one another provided the medium through which their business was often transacted.

Nantucketers' courtship patterns were paced by whaling voyages, with marriages generally happening fairly early in life or far later than usual due to the gaps of time where whalers were away from the island. Traditionally on Nantucket people were married early on in life, typically in their late teens or early twenties. Though this was common throughout the rest of New England at the time, Nantucket was still unique because on average young people on Nantucket got married about two years earlier than others across New England, and there were fewer single people on the island than in other communities.⁵⁶ Hector St. John De Crevecoeur noted that, “. . .almost

⁵⁴ Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*. (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000), 15.

⁵⁵ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

everybody here is married, for they get wives very young; and the pleasure of returning to their families absorbs every other desire.”⁵⁷ This note implies that Nantucketers’ commitment to family was stronger than an average American family during the late 18th century, but knowing that Crèvecoeur exaggerated what he saw as positive qualities of his experience on Nantucket there is likely a more probable explanation for the early and high marriage rate. It is more likely that because of the long periods of time the men spent away from the island, which started early in their lives, as well as the high mortality rate associated with whaling, the couples on the island simply got married whenever they were both on the island at the same time. With limited time and high risk, young couples often got married early and had children early in order to have enough time to make a family together. These relationships dealt with their fair share of complications stemming from the early courtship. With blocks of time and vast distances interfering with courtship, people on Nantucket often got married fairly early because of the inherent risks and uncertainty of the industry, though those who did not pair off early then got married far later than the average in New England at the time, as they had to wait to be in the same place at the same time. An example of how complicated these courtships could become as a result of the strenuous schedules the industry necessitated is seen in the early stages of Ruth Grinnell’s and James Sowle’s relationship. James went out on his first whaling voyage around the age of 13 and over the next 13 years prior to his marriage he went on at least five more voyages. He only remained in his hometown for between two and six months at a time. This means that at some point in these small gaps of time he met Ruth, courted her, and married her.⁵⁸ Time was a scarcity for courting couples in whaling communities, which changed the style of courtship from the norm.

⁵⁷ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2079.

⁵⁸ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, c2000), 165-167.

The “Nantucket Girls Song” highlights the bittersweet feeling the wife of a whaler had in her husband’s absence. These conflicted feelings of freedom and sorrow are partially explained when the short periods of time that these couples actually spent in the same place are taken into account. These short periods of time spent with their significant other also gives deeper meaning to the line in “The Nantucket Girls Song” which expresses how “every now and then I shall like to see his face, For it always seemes to me to beam with manly grace.”⁵⁹ Where this line is wistfully reflecting on seeing one’s husband after long separations, it also highlights how the couple does not spend enough time together to really fight, with all of the author’s memory being consumed by her husband being kind and handsome. Short periods of courtship and brief interludes on the island between whaling voyages meant that the couples did not have much time to see the bad in one another, as they were consistently in a fresh and exciting phase of the relationship. The whalemens spent only brief amounts of time at home so instead of moving towards longer periods of courtship as was common in other American communities at the time, whaling communities such as Nantucket often held on to an older form of courtship where a person’s transition from single to married “. . . occurred over several weeks and culminated not with the wedding but with the new couple independently ‘setting up housekeeping’.”⁶⁰ This tradition held on longest in whaling communities because of the short periods of time that the men spent at home compared with the long periods of time spent at sea and it is inconceivable that a couple could court for long periods of time or plan a wedding in the amount of time they had available to them. Though these marriages were rushed in many senses, it was said that because of the prosperity of the whaling industry and the life whalemens could afford, “. . . a Nantucket good-wife asked for no better fortune

⁵⁹ Unknown. SC588. 2000s. Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket Massachusetts.

⁶⁰Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 181.

than ‘a clean hearth and a husband at sea’.”⁶¹ Though this quote is an oversimplification of the positive impact having a whaleman as a husband could have on a woman, it does help explain the sort of lifestyle prescribed to whaling wives during this time.

Nantucket couples marrying young allowed for the men to go off to sea early, yet still have their affairs taken care of by their wives while they were away. Some wives, such as Kezia Coffin, were excited to be allowed the opportunity to shape their own financial futures. Other wives would not have chosen to be so independent and separate from their husbands if they had an option, particularly considering what the social norm in American societies was at the time. Many on Nantucket fell somewhere between these two extremes. The whaleman Peter Folger’s wife wrote a letter to him which said “I lack for nothing this world affords but only your good company. I hope it won’t be long before I have your company.”⁶² Women were capable of being economically valuable members of their community who enjoyed their economic freedom while still missing their husbands’ company. According to letters exchanged, the men were very loving and affectionate to their wives when they were at home and they missed them terribly while at sea.⁶³

This being said, many of the whaling ports on Pacific islands such as Honolulu were known for their involvement in the sex trade, which meant the men had the opportunity to be unfaithful to their wives while on voyages.⁶⁴ The men write in their descriptions of the islands they visited as having women who were very friendly and offered sexual favors to them, such as what one sailor from the whaling vessel the *Tiger* expressed about their stop on the island chain of Hawaii

⁶¹ Anna Davis Hallowell, ed. *James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters*, 1890, 28.

⁶² Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 219- 220.

⁶³ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 184.

⁶⁴ Eric Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America*, 179.

by writing that, “every female is open for the desires of sailors.”⁶⁵ It is more likely that the whalers were interacting with women who were part of the sex trade and the men simply recorded versions of their experiences on these islands that separated their actions from any seemingly illicit behavior. This tailored version of their visits to Pacific islands also put the blame for their actions on these “friendly” women rather than taking ownership for their behavior. They do this by exoticizing these women and playing to the “noble savage” trope seen often in the writings of colonizers in order to make the women seem uneducated, pure, and simple rather than acknowledging the exploitation they experienced.⁶⁶ Whalers saw their time on shore while far away from their homes as a sort of respite where they could do as they pleased to relieve tension while on a long voyage.⁶⁷ The distance and infidelity put a strain on relationships impacted by the whaling industry causing stress for all parties involved, though turning to religion helped couples through these tumultuous times.

As early as the 1670s, Quakerism was the dominant religion on the island, tying it tightly to the island’s culture and lifeways.⁶⁸ Although the earliest Euro-American settlers on Nantucket were not Quakers, they were friendly to Quakers. According to a contemporaneous history of the island, the first white settlers were “. . . mostly Baptists; there were some Presbyterians, and a few of the Society of Friends.”⁶⁹ The historian describing this makeup of the early settlers then goes on to detail how well these disparate religions got along and how tolerant everyone on the island

⁶⁵ Joan Druett, *Petticoat Whalers: Whaling Wives at Sea, 1820-1920*, (Auckland, NZ: Collins New Zealand, 1991), 6-8.

⁶⁶ John Dryden, “Almanzor and Almahide, or the Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards, a Tragedy, Part First,” *The Works Of John Dryden, Volume 4*, (Printed for William Miller, Albermarle Street, by James Ballantyne and co. Edinburgh, 1808). This work includes the first recorded use of “noble savage” trope in 1672.

⁶⁷ Elmo P. Hohman, *The American Whaleman: A Study of Life and Labor in the Whaling Industry*, 88.

⁶⁸ Arthur J. Worrall, *Quakers in the Colonial Northeast*, 62.

⁶⁹ Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 39.

was of one another. Part of the reason these early Nantucket settlers left the North American continent was the disagreements they had with their churches in Massachusetts regarding their belief that they should give shelter to Quakers. This, combined with periodic visits from Quaker missionaries throughout the 17th and 18th centuries which over the generations turned this colony of Quaker sympathizers into Quakers themselves, made the island a stronghold for the Quaker faith in America.⁷⁰ With the island having such a long Quaker history, it follows that the wives of whalers turned to their Quaker community for support and friendship in their husband's absences. The Quakers are called the "Society of Friends" with good reason. The bonds of community were very strong within the group and held up on a large scale, around the entire Atlantic rim, and on a small scale, on the island of Nantucket.⁷¹ One tenet that separated Quakerism from most other Protestant religions at the time was that women were able to be active participants in the church, and this manifested rather strongly on Nantucket.

Alongside the effects of the whaling industry, Quakerism helped to foster the independence of women on Nantucket. A core belief of Quakerism is the "spiritual and intellectual equality of the sexes."⁷² It has been suggested by Quaker and gender historians studying the eighteenth and nineteenth century that Quakerism influenced Nantucket's men to succeed in whaling, but also fostered the women's assertiveness and independence that was uncharacteristic for the period.⁷³ This shows that Quakerism may have aided in community building on Nantucket in ways that can not be boiled down to the "spiritual and intellectual equality of the sexes" and likely had to do with

⁷⁰ Arthur J. Worrall, *Quakers in the Colonial Northeast*, 72.; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783-1860*, (Boston, MA: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1921), 155.

⁷¹ Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture*, (New York, NY: Octagon Books, 1980), 14.

⁷² Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 219.

⁷³ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*,

the other tenets of the religion as well, such as “. . . ‘plain living’ and self-restraint, spiritual self-negation, and group conformity.”⁷⁴ At the same time, the whaling industry allowed for this belief system to gain strength on Nantucket. Because of the absence of many of the men who were potential leaders in the church, women were able to have stronger leadership in the church, and took part in the Society of Friends meetings both in the sex-segregated meetings, and then later in meetings that were no longer separated by gender.⁷⁵ It should be noted that even with higher numbers of women being involved in the Quaker leadership than was seen in other Protestant communities at the time, Quakerism was often more egalitarian in theory than in practice with only select women having the opportunity to take on religious leadership roles.⁷⁶ One of the first Quaker ministers on the island was Priscilla Coleman, a woman who belonged to a notable family on the island, so although the opportunities were limited women did take advantage of them, particularly those who were already advantaged in some way.⁷⁷ As was expected, women from higher class, well-respected families were more likely to hold economic and religious leadership positions.

It is possible that the Society of Friends on Nantucket was more progressive than those across the rest of New England at the time because of the island’s isolation. While Quakers were known for their simple clothing and seldom playing music or dancing, those on Nantucket were looser in these regards. Kezia Coffin, a well-off woman on the island, was known for dressing fashionably and buying musical instruments for her daughter.⁷⁸ This removal from the Quaker

⁷⁴ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 53.

⁷⁵ Larry Ingle, “A Quaker Woman on Women’s Roles: Mary Penington to Friends, 1678.” *Signs* vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1991), 593.

⁷⁶ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 60.

⁷⁷ Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 57.

⁷⁸ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 144.

norm was by no means universal on the island because some at the core of the Society of Friends frowned upon Coffin and others like her. However, by looking at women like Coffin who belonged to well-regarded families who then deviated from the norms set by the church while simultaneously maintaining their status in the community, Nantucket's unique relationship between religious and economic power is seen.

Crevecoeur, on his visit to Nantucket, attributed the island's success in the whaling industry partially to Quakerism. He believed that the children were raised with high moral character because of the tenets of Quakerism, and this carried over in to their future occupation of whaling.⁷⁹ With women doing the majority of the child rearing, it meant that their religion played a large role in their everyday family life and eventually in their children's futures in the whaling industry. Women on Nantucket were expected to be pious, as was the standard for women in most American towns and cities, and this religious devotion was also considered important to their child rearing. Women professed to this expectation of piety, as was noticeable in the letters they sent to their husbands while they were on whaling voyages. Ruth Grinnell frequently wrote in letters to her fiancé about religion, writing passages such as: "I sincerely hope my own dear James does not take Gods name in vain. . .," and ". . . remember that you are momentarily exposed to danger and that God alone is your protector, and can you expect him to guard you while you continue in sin and disobedience to him."⁸⁰ Notions such as these were expressed in many of the letters sent by these women, to assert themselves in a pious and caring position in their relationships. Expressions of piety were important to the identity of these women as it grounded them in a more traditionally feminine role, particularly in the context of their abnormally strong presence in the public "male" sphere. Another

⁷⁹ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 1893-1901.

⁸⁰ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 171.

traditional feminine role that women struggled to fill was that of child rearer, with a decline in fertility accompanying the height of whaling on Nantucket.

A fertility decline among Nantucket couples from the late 17th century to the mid-19th century provides some empirical evidence to support the loneliness that accompanied women as their husbands left for years on end. In a comparison of data from 1680 and 1840, there was a notable decline in fertility among married couples.⁸¹ There was a general decline in American fertility starting around 1800, attributed to industrialization, urbanization, and shifts in the availability of farmland and in the demographics of America. There are historians who argue for evidence of fertility control in America at this time as well, though more research needs to be done on this front.⁸² Because Nantucket did not experience industrialization and urbanization to the same extent as the continental United States, they did not experience a fertility decline for the same reasons.

The evidence for a fertility decline on Nantucket during the 1800s was likely a result of its geographical location and the lifeways and small-scale industrialization associated with the whaling industry. The population was highly concentrated in one town because of the island's unsuitability for farmland. This made it a very urban community, whose dependence on a single industry made it vulnerable to economic crises.⁸³ This potential for volatility and cramped town living complicated the process of raising large families. The cause of Nantucket's low fertility rate could simply be a result of fewer men being on the island at any given time so fewer babies were being born, but it could also have more complex reasoning tied to the independence held by these

⁸¹ Barbara J Logue. "The Whaling Industry and Fertility Decline: Nantucket Massachusetts, 1660- 1850" *Social Science History*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Autumn 1983), 427- 456.

⁸² Barbara J Logue. "The Whaling Industry and Fertility Decline: Nantucket Massachusetts, 1660- 1850", 427-428.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 428.

women. With the women taking care of the majority of the economic and social interactions in the community, which would in a more typical American society be up to their husbands, they had less time available for bearing and rearing children, and may have wanted to spend more time doing work rather than taking care of offspring.⁸⁴ “. . .[T]he extended absences of husbands, brothers, and fathers seem to have engendered a high degree of self-reliance, a knowledge of and interest in world affairs, and an aptitude for business matters in the women they left behind. . .”, which all combined may have made the women less likely to bear and raise large families because of the difficulty of juggling all the aspects of such multifaceted lives.⁸⁵

The risks associated with the whaling industry were influential in the emotional lives of women on Nantucket in their creation of a tenuous situation of worry and uncertainty. Whalers tended to be young men who either were married to young women or were unmarried. This meant that during the early years of marriage, these couples were separated.⁸⁶ Whaling came with the consequence of shorter marriages due to the high mortality rate of whalers.⁸⁷ Whaling was a very risky occupation and the wives were worried that their husbands would never return and their children would have to be raised in a single-parent household. Because their husbands were gone so often, these wives essentially had to act as single mothers most of the time.⁸⁸ This also contributed to the strong community on the island because the women often helped one another take care of their children. There are conflicting results from studies regarding the use of intentional fertility control on Nantucket, though the most recent studies imply that it is unlikely

⁸⁴ Barbara J Logue, “The Whaling Industry and Fertility Decline: Nantucket Massachusetts, 1660- 1850”, 427- 456.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 428.

⁸⁶ Barbara J Logue, "The Case for Birth Control before 1850: Nantucket Reexamined," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15, no. 3 (1985), 374.

⁸⁷ Barbara J Logue, "The Case for Birth Control before 1850: Nantucket Reexamined," 375.

⁸⁸ Barbara J Logue, “The Whaling Industry and Fertility Decline: Nantucket Massachusetts, 1660- 1850,” 248.

that women intentionally lowered their likelihood of becoming pregnant.⁸⁹ Given this, it is likely that the lower fertility rate was a result of the time commitment and obligations that the economic station of these women required, alongside the absence of their husbands. These reasons trace back to the toll the whaling industry took on the individuals and the marriages, and the changes it promoted in lifeways on the island such as fairly widespread opium use amongst these women.

Nantucket stands in contrast to other American communities during the mid-1700s through the mid-1800s with white island women potentially self-medicating or expressing their individual freedoms by take opium more recreationally. In this period, opium was commonly prescribed by doctors for various ailments so its mere presence on the island is not particularly notable.⁹⁰ What is notable is that there is evidence of many women on Nantucket taking opium on a regular basis, and to a broader extent than was typical in America during the late 1700s through the mid-1800s. There were many opium bottles found scattered in the remains of Nantucket's Great Fire of 1846, which gives some physical evidence, but there are scant records from Nantucket women discussing opium use with one another.⁹¹ This suggests that it may either have been seen as shameful or was a practice that was not considered worth writing about in letters or diaries. This topic needs to be approached with care, as it would be easy to project a modern diagnosis of addiction onto these women in lieu of following the sources to get a clear picture of the role opium use played in their lives. This section will attempt to piece together the brief mentions of opium use on Nantucket to create an image of how this drug impacted the quality of life of the island's women. Though it was very common for doctors of this time period to prescribe opium to their patients, Crevecoeur implied in his writings that the women's use of opium was heavier than would be expected if they

⁸⁹ Barbara J Logue, "The Case for Birth Control before 1850: Nantucket Reexamined," 371-91.

⁹⁰ John C. Kramer, "Opium Rampant: Medical Use, Misuse and Abuse in Britain and the West in the 17th and 18th Centuries," *British Journal of Addiction* 74, (1979): 377.

⁹¹ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 220.

followed standard doctor's orders. In Crevecoeur's 1782 visit, he noted that many of the women took opium every morning. His description of their consistent use of the substance was as such: "they would be at a loss how to live without this indulgence; they would rather be deprived of any necessary than forego their favourite luxury."⁹² The way Crevecoeur described their use of opium implies that the ingestion of opium was not a recreational activity or simply taken in accordance to the doctor's orders, but may have been compulsive. He discusses opium in the context of how Nantucket's society was, "perfectly free from error or folly. . ."⁹³ Crevecoeur's placement of these two ideas was likely not an accident; he was likely attempting to offset the opium use with the implication that society was so "perfect" that it was not negatively impacted by the prominence of opium. Returning to the above discussion of fertility, it is possible that the opium use on the part of Nantucket's women was a detriment to their fertility rate because heavy use tends to suppress ovulation and menstruation in women; though with the lack of concrete data on opium use on the island it is hard to determine its effects in this specific community.⁹⁴

It is possible that some Nantucket women were using opium because they were self-medicating for their loneliness in their husbands' absences, or because they were exercising their independence in his leave. Opium was used for a variety of ailments during this period, and a book published in 1700 by a man named John Jones stated that, "While its special value was in easing pain, bringing sleep, and stopping fluxes (diarrhoea and vomiting primarily), it was also a means to comfort and invigorate the sensitive soul."⁹⁵ Noting that it was used as a comfort and to invigorate one's soul, it follows that it would be used to alleviate the loneliness that the wives of

⁹² Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2383- 2391.

⁹³ *Ibid*, Location 2391.

⁹⁴ H. Kalant, "Opium revisited: a brief review of its nature, composition, non-medical use and relative risks," *Addiction* vol 92, issue 3 (March, 1997): 272.

⁹⁵ John C. Kramer, "Opium Rampant: Medical Use, Misuse and Abuse in Britain and the West in the 17th and 18th Centuries," 379-380.

whalers felt, as well as the feelings of disassociation from their prescribed gender roles. The framework that the industry provided for their lives, with their husbands being gone for long periods of time, meant that they could not fulfill their prescribed roles of wife and mother in a traditional sense, which added to the strain they felt. If a woman were exercising her independence in this societal framework by taking opium, which was fairly taboo in Nantucket's Quaker community, she would have been taking advantage of her independence and would have been breaking some of the boundaries which existed for women in the context of their self-expression. Women with high social standing such as Kezia Coffin and her group of friends were known to take opium practically every morning.⁹⁶ The fact that Kezia Coffin and her friends were collectively known to take opium implies that the activity could have been a social one that was possibly confined to a particular social class, but there is not much evidence in that regard. Opium use most likely was more common among well-off or powerful women in the community because they had the funds to purchase the drug as they saw fit.

Medicine was part of a woman's sphere for much of the history of Nantucket post-European settlement, so it follows that they felt comfortable self-medicating with opium. A major route through which Coffin and, most likely, other well-off women obtained opium was the island doctor, Dr. Benjamin Tupper.⁹⁷ Before there was an island doctor, ". . .the healing art was practised almost exclusively by females, and more confidence was placed in their skill than in the knowledge of men professionally educated."⁹⁸ Though these women practicing medicine was not connected with the prescription of opium in any recorded way, their medical knowledge does demonstrate that women on the island were well practiced in taking charge of their personal health. As the

⁹⁶ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 145.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 145.

⁹⁸ Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 41.

doctor prescribed opium to his patients and its prevalence among groups of friends, it follows that these women were likely comfortable enough in their own community and in their medical knowledge to be able to take opium freely.

Similarly to women taking care of medical needs on the island, with men living on whaling cycles where they spent about three years at sea and three months on land, women needed to take control of the island's economy in their husbands' absences. It was up to the island's women to keep Nantucket's economy afloat for long periods of time. It is helpful to think about the relationship between these whaling families and their money as a sort of maritime paternalism; where a dependence of the family on the head male in the household was created, leaving his family "helpless" in his absence.⁹⁹

The small, generally unrecorded transactions of the women of any given family kept the household running in the man's absence. The records of the economic transactions of these women are not the easiest to follow, as their civil identities were "covered" by that of their husbands' upon marriage. As explained by an 18th century legal authority, Sir William Blackstone: ". . . 'by marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law, that is, the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended during the marriage. . .'"¹⁰⁰ With this coverture of a wife's identity, it is not always easy to parse through which economic interactions were completed by which spouse, but combining this economic data with that of the whaling voyages (such as who was aboard the ship and the duration of the journey) can provide a clearer picture of just how frequently women acted economically under their husbands name. It is also important to note that just because a woman was acting under her husband's name did not mean that she was only performing actions that he

⁹⁹ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a wife: New England women & the Whalefishery, 1720-1870*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 33.

had specifically condoned. Some women just undertook the most basic economic responsibility and kept their household stable and comfortable in their husband's absence. Others were a little more bold with their economic transactions and were proprietors of storefronts in town, opened schools, or invested money. The prescribed ideals on Nantucket during the early 19th century were that, "The female part of the community cordially joined and united in these economic principles [of being frugal and responsible with funds], always helpful and careful to make all practicable savings in their department."¹⁰¹ Using the economic power she held as a result of her husband's absence allowed her to have more agency in economic decisions than was prescribed to American women of this time.

While the typical Nantucket woman kept her husband's ventures alive in his absence and guided his economic interests, some women such as Kezia Folger Coffin went above this standard. She was the epitome of a woman taking advantage of the economic freedom which came with living in a whaling community, and was often used as an extreme positive or negative example of how a woman behaves with this freedom, depending on the author's views.¹⁰² While Coffin's husband was away she not only managed the household's finances, but also opened and operated a school and traded small household goods with other island residents.¹⁰³ This economic activity built up over time as she made business deals in London and broke from Nantucket's traditional Quaker ideas by building a lavish house, buying her daughter expensive musical instruments, and hiring the first lawyer in Nantucket history in 1773.¹⁰⁴ Even in the wake of this hire, lawyers remained few on the island, with Hector St. John de Crevecoeur attributing this scarcity to the

¹⁰¹ Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 40.

¹⁰² Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer.*; Joseph C. Hart, *Miriam Coffin; or The Whale-Fisherman*.

¹⁰³ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 142.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 144- 145.

upstanding and honest population of the island.¹⁰⁵ The excess to which Coffin doted upon her daughter was particularly frowned upon because Nantucket women— influenced by Quaker beliefs, the economics of the whaling industry, and the spending habits of other families on the island— were supposed to, “. . . guard their children against unnecessary expenses arising from costly fashions: and to teach them to be moderate and prudent. . .”¹⁰⁶ Despite these prescribed duties, Coffin took advantage of the economic benefits of the whaling industry and is an interesting example of how this industry provided opportunities for women to thrive economically. The initiative she took in these financial decisions separated her from the women whose sole economic focus was keeping their husbands’ business ventures intact in their absence. This is not to say that these women did not have as full an understanding of economics— their focus remained on keeping their family afloat rather than venturing into entrepreneurship and breaking with the norms of the island as Coffin did.

Since women during the 18th and 19th century were not usually trained in transacting business beyond the purchase of household goods, women on Nantucket made do with their experiential knowledge as well as what their husbands expressed to them, all of which was aided by the social and familial relationships they had forged with other women in the community. Articles from the longstanding Nantucket newspaper, *The Inquirer and Mirror* give a clearer picture of how much economic power Nantucket women held, as well as insight into what islanders thought about the economic power of women on the island.¹⁰⁷ An article from March of 1866 remarks upon the number of women employed in France. “The books of nine-tenths of the retail

¹⁰⁵ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2259.

¹⁰⁶ Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ I do not include author names for the *Inquirer and Mirror* articles cited throughout this section because they did not have names attached to them.

shops in Paris are kept by women. The office-boxes of all the theatres are tended by women. . .”¹⁰⁸

This article shows how many avenues of employment are open for women in France in comparison to women in England or America. The author paints working women in a positive light, and shows that they were seen as desirable contributing members of society on Nantucket, with Nantucketers striving to increase the number of working women.

The *Inquirer and Mirror* articles regarding female employment did not all discuss women taking part in the economy as an inherently positive thing, though it was uncommon for an article to explicitly refer to working women as a negative aspect of society. This is likely because they recognized the void these women filled in their husband’s absences, making their economic interactions necessary. There were a number of articles written in the second half of the nineteenth century that mulled over the idea of women working and hypothesized about their abilities, effectiveness, and the extent of their prospects in the economic sphere. One published in 1879 in the *Inquirer and Mirror* commented on how “. . . very curious and interesting [it is] to watch how fast and how far the work of the world is falling into the hands of women.”¹⁰⁹ The author then followed this observation with a series of rhetorical questions regarding how successful women could be and what opportunities they gained as they became more prominent in business. The tone of this piece, as well as a number of others written between 1870 and 1883, is slightly amused, with the author generally not taking these female workers seriously, while still acknowledging them as a part of economic reality.¹¹⁰

A very short article from *The Inquirer and Mirror* summed up how integral women were to business and acknowledges that the women of Nantucket were important parts of the economy:

¹⁰⁸ “Female Employment in France,” *The Inquirer and Mirror*, March 3, 1866, 4.

¹⁰⁹ “Business Women,” *The Inquirer and Mirror*, Saturday April 5, 1879, 1.

¹¹⁰ “Progressive Employment of Women,” *The Inquirer and Mirror*, Saturday September 17, 1870, 4.; “Women at Work,” *The Inquirer and Mirror*, Saturday May 26, 1883.

Caught with Scissors.

The retail book business in Nantucket is largely controlled by women. Among the dealers are Ellen H. Coffin, Harriet H. Macy, Mary F. Coleman, Mary A. Jones and Phebe W. Clisby. Inasmuch as women write the books, buy the books and read the books it is only fair that they should sell them.¹¹¹

This short article expresses a lot about how integral women were to Nantucket's economy and what sort of woman could run a business on the island. Although the article focused on books, these same concepts could be applied to other goods sold on the island: women made them, bought them, and sold them. The names of the women who were specifically mentioned as book dealers is telling in regards to the preponderance of wealthy women who were involved in business. Coffin and Macy are the last names of two of the men who originally purchased Nantucket in 1659, meaning that their descendants mentioned in this article had "old money" and knowing how much Nantucketers valued family history in their small community, also had a good standing in the community because of their long history.¹¹² This gave them a leg up when starting or managing a business on the island. Women who did manage to operate a business on Nantucket shared a sense of camaraderie, showing that the strong sense of community on the island was not limited to strictly social groups or activities. In other maritime communities, such as Salem Massachusetts, it was common for a wife to operate her husband's business if he needed to transport goods or travel for a few months.¹¹³ What caused Nantucket to differ here was the length of whaling voyages in comparison with a trip to transport goods. While these transports typically lasted for a few months, whaling voyages during this period were usually two to four years in length. This created a demanding environment for women who were presumably already taking care of a household and children in addition to keeping shop for their husband for such long spans. The strain caused by

¹¹¹ "Caught with Scissors", *The Inquirer and Mirror*, Saturday August 9, 1890, 5.

¹¹² Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket*, 4.

¹¹³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750*, 27.

the volume of work was alleviated in part through their social groups forming support systems. Women who operated businesses worked together, traded together, and even organized a group photograph together to show solidarity with one another.¹¹⁴ There were more economic opportunities for the women of Nantucket than those on the mainland, and despite the camaraderie shared amongst the businesswomen of Nantucket, there were still class barriers that made it more likely for upper-class women of good standing to be proprietors.

Fantastical and Fictional Representations of Nantucket

The whaling industry and Nantucket women have gone through processes of idealization and demonization in contemporaneous literature. During the late 18th century and the early 19th century, two notable men visited Nantucket: Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and Joseph C. Hart. These men came away from their visits with differing perspectives on the whaling industry's impact on women in this society and both later wrote about their experiences. Exploring these perspectives helps to give context to the conversation surrounding how women's roles on Nantucket were shaped by the whaling industry. Crevecoeur held a positive view of how the industry impacted women, and expressed it throughout *Letters from an American Farmer*: a series of fictionalized letters based on Crevecoeur's real experiences in the British colonies of America during the seven years prior to the American Revolution, consisting of various reflections on American society in the late 18th century. In Joseph C. Hart's *Miriam Coffin; or The Whalefisherman*, the author took a more negative view on the whaling industry's impact on women's happiness and on how they raised their families and served their husbands. Hart's novel was based on interviews he conducted with Nantucketers, with a great deal of his story being based on the Coffin family, though his writing mobilized these interviews to support his opinions on the

¹¹⁴ See Appendix 2 for a group photograph of the proprietors of "Petticoat Row".

industry and on Nantucket women. Hart was writing during the 1830s, a full 50 years after Crevecoeur. Because of this, it is possible that Crevecoeur was simply seeing an earlier iteration of the island's culture and as the whaling industry grew between the visits of the two men, Hart saw a different, seemingly worn-down iteration of this culture and their accounts are both accurate in the authors' minds. Their writings showed how widely the perspectives on Nantucket culture, and on how the women interacted with this society, varied among writers of the time.

Hector St. John de Crevecoeur stated his purpose in writing *Letters from an American Farmer* as such:

My simple wish is to trace [the inhabitants of Nantucket] throughout their progressive steps, from their arrival here to this present hour; to inquire by what means they have raised themselves from the most humble, the most insignificant beginnings, to the ease and the wealth they now possess; and to give you some idea of their customs, religion, manners, policy, and mode of living.¹¹⁵

Crevecoeur's intention in writing his book was to give accurate insight into Nantucket's culture and people, although it is clear from his thesis that he advancing an agenda that emphasized the morality and hardiness of Nantucket's inhabitants. He found them to be very thrifty and hearty people, and he complimented how they used the ocean for profit in place of their land which was barren.¹¹⁶ His compliments of the people of Nantucket often had root in their productivity in the adversity of their environment: "It is but seldom that vice grows on a barren sand like this, which produces nothing without extreme labour".¹¹⁷ Crevecoeur's compliments of the island's inhabitants in their roles as parents reflected these roots as well, as he indicated: "Frugal, sober, orderly parents, attached to their business, constantly following some useful occupation, never guilty of riot, dissipation, or other irregularities, cannot fail of training up children to the same

¹¹⁵ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*. (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010. Kindle edition), Location 1573.

¹¹⁶ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 1598.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, Location 1866.

uniformity of life and manners”.¹¹⁸ Not only did he emphasize the success of the families of the island, he also made note of the fact that there are no enslaved people on the island and he attributed this to their right-mindedness and other positive qualities he associated with Quaker beliefs.¹¹⁹ The fictionalized and exaggerated characterizations of Nantucketers have many similarities with perceptions about Quakers during the same period. From the early 1700s, Quakers were noted for their, “. . . exactness in religious knowledge; for habits of order, prudence, and thrift; and for careful attention to the intellectual education of their children”.¹²⁰ These characteristics were all attributed by Crèvecoeur to the people of Nantucket, which shows the influence of Quakerism on the island.

When it came to the women of Nantucket specifically, Crèvecoeur’s complimentary tone continued. He believed them to be very strong and prudent women, particularly in the absence of their husbands. Crèvecoeur wrote about how the repeated absence of their husbands gave the women, “. . . the abilities as well as a taste for that kind of superintendency, to which, by their prudence and good management, they seem to be in general very equal.”¹²¹ In this quote, de Crèvecoeur acknowledged the measured control that the women had over their household and affairs in their husbands’ absences, and went further to imply that they were on an equal standing as the men of the island when it came to managing these affairs. His descriptions of the women of Nantucket served to make these women seem like ideal wives in the mind of a late 18th century liberal-minded man. He emphasized their manners and piety in equal measure to their independence and thriftiness.¹²² Reference to these qualities appeared frequently throughout de

¹¹⁸ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 1893.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, Location 2293.

¹²⁰ William Root Bliss, *Quaint Nantucket*, 75.

¹²¹ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2341.

¹²² *Ibid*, Location 2366.

Crevecoeur's writing, and he applied them to social interactions with women, as discussed, and to economic transactions as well. "To this dexterity in managing the husband's business whilst he is absent, the Nantucket wives unite a great deal of industry".¹²³ This faith in the capability of Nantucket women was a strong theme in Crevecoeur's writing, which accented his liberal ideas. These liberal ideas came through as Crevecoeur focused on specific social issues, such as slavery and women's rights, throughout the book. He was essentially using his writings to present Nantucket as a utopian society of sorts, where there was no slavery and women were (almost) equal to men, to show what an American community at the time should strive to achieve. Crevecoeur used his complimentary observations of the community and women of Nantucket to present a utopian ideal of what an American community should be.

Where Crevecoeur was idealizing Nantucket women in his filtered nonfiction, Joseph C. Hart used them as a cautionary tale. In *Miriam Coffin; or the Whalefisherman*, published in 1834, Joseph C. Hart began by writing kindly of Nantucket's population, though as his story continued and he went beneath this surface he established and revealed parts of the society that he found distasteful. With the strength of the cult of domesticity during this period, Hart's work acts as a response to Nantucket women's rejection of these prescribed domestic roles. He gave similar compliments of the people of Nantucket to Crevecoeur's, by referring to them as: ". . . industrious and enterprising people. . .", and then continuing to describe the women of Nantucket as ". . . modest, virtuous, and agreeable, and thriv[ing] with a commendable industry at home. . .".¹²⁴ These descriptions serve the purpose of establishing what the common ideas were about the people of Nantucket so when Hart described what he sees as wrong with this society, he could highlight how

¹²³ Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2383.

¹²⁴ Joseph C. Hart, *Miriam Coffin; or The Whale-Fisherman*, (Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2016. Kindle edition), Location 531-549.

they contrasted with what the majority said or wrote about the island's culture. He even pointed out that, "the people would think for themselves; and they refused to look through Jethro's spectacles. It is a good republican example to bow to the will of the majority. But the majority, nevertheless, do not always decide well".¹²⁵ This quote pushes Hart's point that even though the majority on Nantucket were content with women's roles in the island's economy and community, in this case what is best for society in his mind is not always what the majority agrees upon.

Joseph C. Hart was not as complimentary of the whaling wives as Crèvecoeur was, with his story acting as a rather harsh cautionary tale of what can happen when women have economic power.¹²⁶ In Hart's fictional account of island life, based on interviews with people living on Nantucket, he was critical of how much economic freedom Nantucket's women are afforded. Throughout this piece the title character, Miriam Coffin, disagreed with her husband, Jethro, on matters of finance and morals with him often deferring to her judgement, though the outcome of these decisions were often poor. Hart uses clues throughout his writing to denote the inherent naivete and poor decision-making skills of the women about which he wrote. One such clue was Hart's inclusion of Miriam Coffin hiring the first lawyer in the community. On Nantucket, as in much of New England during the late 18th century, lawyers were seen to be a sign of corruption within society, so those who dwelled there took pride in how few lawyers were on the island.¹²⁷ To illustrate that Miriam Coffin did not know any better yet still had the final say in her family's affairs Hart writes about how she hired a lawyer, Grimshaw, for her family. "Grimshaw did not come off as well, and Jethro looked upon him with suspicion. 'No good can come from a visit

¹²⁵ Joseph C. Hart, *Miriam Coffin; or The Whale-Fisherman*, Location 853.

¹²⁶ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 143.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 145.

from a lawyer,' thought Jethro. His wife Miriam thought otherwise."¹²⁸ In this section Miriam befriended this lawyer, requested his services, and invited him to live in her home with her family, where he proceeded to cause mischief and focus more on hunting game and fowl than on helping the family who hired him.¹²⁹ This situation was based on the real lives of Kezia Coffin and her lawyer, Phineas Fanning, which brings Hart's fiction into conversation with reality. To continue making her seem less likeable and more foolish, Hart revealed that Miriam was, ". . . somewhat of a royalist in her sentiments. . ." which to the American audience reading this book, painted her in a negative light as well.¹³⁰

To point to her naivete and lack of self-awareness, Hart wrote a scene in which Miriam made a bet with a male character that the women of Nantucket did not, ". . . constantly interlard their conversation with sea-phrases", with the stakes being if he won he could take Miriam's daughters to a ball and if she won, he had to buy her a satin bonnet.¹³¹ The fact that Miriam agreed to these terms painted her as frivolous because in this Quaker society wanting luxurious clothes was considered unnecessary. Her lack of self-awareness was apparent in the fact that in the very next vignette she had she lost this bet by using sea-phrases herself.¹³² With Miriam's character, Hart was attempting to show that although the whaling industry may have given women more confidence and decision-making power in their society, this was not necessarily a good thing. In the end, Miriam's reckless actions are quelled, with Jethro telling her, "-Get thee gone to thy kitchen, where it is fitting thou should'st preside:- Go- go to thy kitchen, woman, and do thou never meddle with men's affairs more".¹³³ Hart used this book to show that he believed that women

¹²⁸ Joseph C. Hart, *Miriam Coffin; or The Whale-Fisherman*, Location 2315.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, Location 7036.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, Location 2364.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, Location 2430.

¹³² *Ibid*, Location 2494.

¹³³ *Ibid*, Location 6737.

made foolish decisions, financial and otherwise, which he compounded by writing the men as constant “voices of reason” throughout the book.

The other women in *Miriam Coffin; or the Whalefisherman* were also written as dislikeable or constructed to represent parts of society that Hart looked down upon. Hart described an association of the women on the island which “. . .constituted themselves a secret society, after the manner of the Free-masons” and had sprung up in rebuttal to the Freemason Society’s presence on the island.¹³⁴ The interactions of the women in this society were described by the author as having a “. . . laughable, and sometimes irritating, effect.”¹³⁵ Here women are portrayed as having a petty response by forming their own society simply to bother the men who were part of the masonic society. Another character the author writes at length about is Judith Quarry, who was a fictional older woman on Nantucket. “‘What scare-crow is that?’ demanded Imbert of the girls, as they approached. ‘It is the fortune-teller;- poor Judith Quarry,’ answered Ruth with a touch of pity in her tone.”¹³⁶ The decision to write an elderly female in this society as a mystical, suspicious, and pitiful character shows that Hart intended to make women of all ages, not just the young wives of whalers, into untrustworthy and unsavory characters. Hart’s negative portrayals of women show that he was trying to point out how the women’s economic independence and assertiveness brought out what he saw as the worst in them.

A real member of the Nantucket community who these two authors have differing takes on is Kezia Coffin, and these takes reveal much about the two authors’ interpretations of the community. Coffin lived from 1723 to 1798, so it is possible that both Crèvecoeur and Hart could have met her on Nantucket during their mid-18th century visits. Coffin was the wife of a successful

¹³⁴ Joseph C. Hart, *Miriam Coffin; or The Whale-Fisherman*, Location 1557.

¹³⁵ Ibid, Location 1585

¹³⁶ Ibid, Location 2134.

whaleman, John Coffin, and was a member of a respected family on Nantucket. She was also known for pushing what was considered appropriate in Nantucket's thrifty Quaker society by enjoying a more frivolous lifestyle. Crèvecoeur spun her actions as such: ". . . she is the wife of Mr. [Coffin], a very respectable man, who, well pleased with all her schemes, trusts to her judgement, and relies on her sagacity, with so entire a confidence, as to be altogether passive to the concerns of his family."¹³⁷ This quote shows how, according to Crèvecoeur, Mr. Coffin trusted his wife with full familial responsibilities and deferred to her judgement. This description of Kezia Coffin differed strongly from that of Joseph C. Hart. In his novel, *Miriam Coffin; or the Whalefisherman*, Hart thinly veiled his critiques of Kezia Coffin by writing the character of Miriam Coffin, who poorly managed her husband's money and made financial decisions that ended up backfiring. Not only did Hart base Miriam's character on Kezia, but he based the character of Grimshaw on Kezia Coffin's real lawyer, Phineas Fanning, who in 1773 was the first attorney to reside on Nantucket.¹³⁸ A fairly accurate description of Hart's portrayal of Kezia/Miriam came from a genealogist and historian Benjamin Franklin Folger who referred to her as a, ". . . very capable woman but lacking very much in principle."¹³⁹ This describes how Hart thought that although the women of Nantucket may have been knowledgeable on economic issues, they did not apply this knowledge well and in the long run it negatively impacted a society based around heterosexual family units with traditional colonial gender roles.

¹³⁷ Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Location 2374.

¹³⁸ Lawyers were seen as a sign of a corrupt society, which is why it is so significant that Kezia- a woman- hired the island's first lawyer. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 145.

¹³⁹ "Lacking in principle" may be in reference to Coffin's deviation from Quaker values or her general perceived shadiness. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and its People, 1602-1890*, 151.

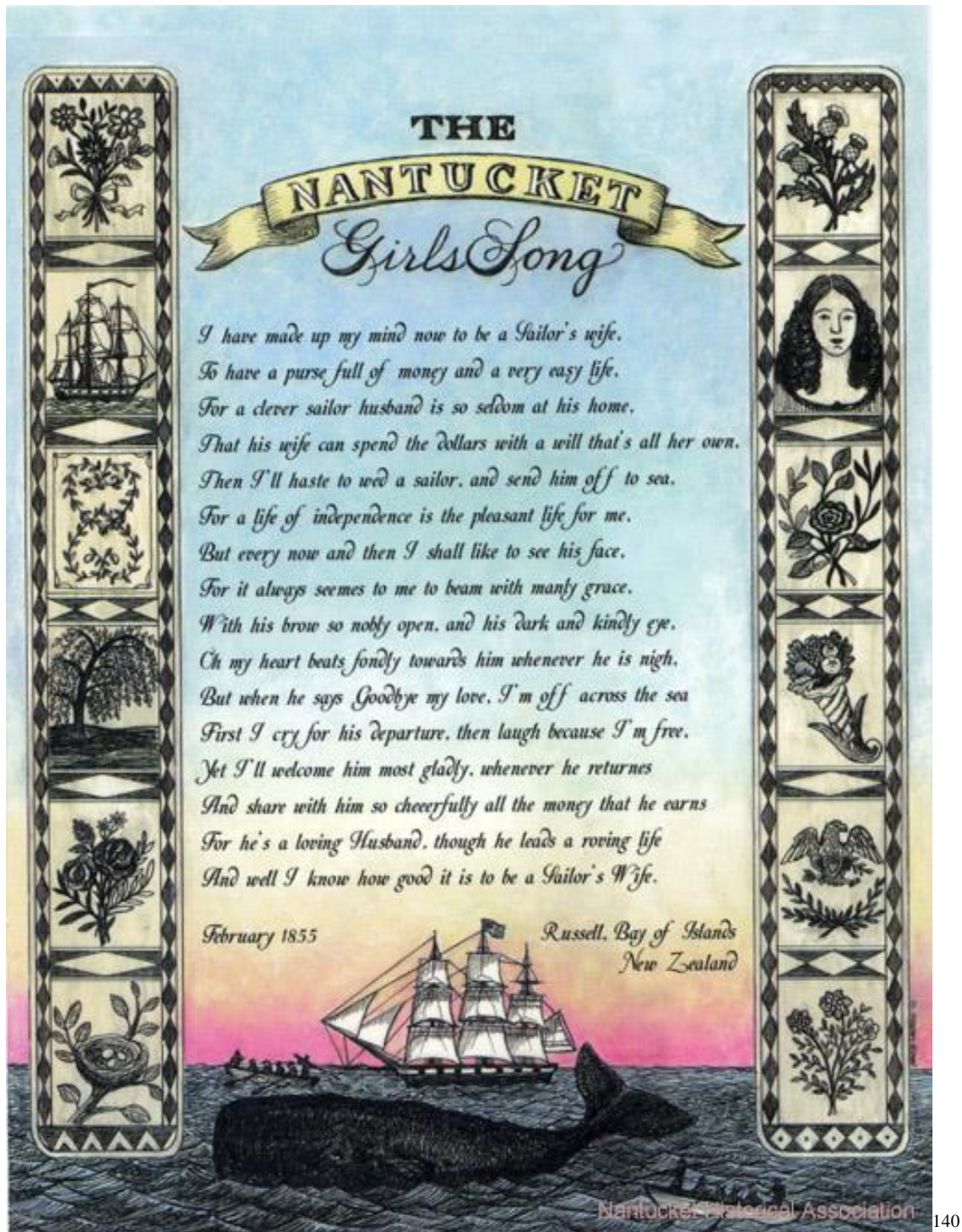
Comparing Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's take on Nantucket society and the women of Nantucket with that of Joseph C. Hart helps illuminate a range of social views regarding these economically powerful women. Since both of these men gave primarily anecdotal accounts with little evidence, they cannot be looked to for strictly accurate information on the women of Nantucket. They do, however, provide examples of how outsiders reacted to the unique culture on Nantucket.

Conclusion

Authors of both contemporaneous works of fiction and "nonfiction" display incomplete versions of these 18th and 19th century Nantucket women and push their personal beliefs about society. Critical readings of these contemporaneous works shed light on women's prescribed roles during this period and how these compared to the ways in which their roles manifested in daily life. The fictionalized portrayals of the bittersweet lives of white whaling wives and the mobilization of Nantucket as a liberal man's paradise were both themes of these works; while these themes were not entirely accurate, they do help to paint a picture of how the fantasy of Nantucket differed from reality. Contrasting the reality of women's lives on the island with the fictionalized portrayals of the period also brings the intersection of literature and history into the discourse. Understanding this intersection can help clarify why women filled roles in certain ways and why they were portrayed in certain ways, as well as the strain these women felt and how this feeling was integral to their life decisions and lifeways. The whaling industry impacted women's social and economic roles on Nantucket, changing the ways in which they expressed economic power and moved within social groups. The industry created empty space and blocks of time that these women spent away from their husbands, which defined much of their lives. The industry, in part, created an emotional dissonance in these women, which informed their lifeways.

The industry's effect on the island was not the sole contributor to these women's lifeways, with religion playing a large role in the development of the island's character and the temperament and socialization of the inhabitants. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century women on Nantucket did not all fit into homogenous social, religious, or economic categories as works of fiction and "nonfiction" may lead one to believe, but understanding the dominant social, religious, and economic lifeways on Nantucket can help to get a clearer picture of the world in which these women were living and how they reacted to and interacted with it. The experiences of women on Nantucket have to be understood at the intersection of their social and economic lives, with no one woman serving to represent the "typical" Nantucket woman. Expanding the definition of a woman's sphere during this period on Nantucket fills in how they interacted with their world and provides a better understanding of life on Nantucket.

Appendix 1



¹⁴⁰ Unknown. SC588. 2000s. Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket Massachusetts.

Appendix 2

A group of female proprietors in front of their storefronts on Centre street, or “Petticoat row”, 1890.¹⁴¹ This photograph shows the camaraderie these women had with one another as business owners, as well as the prominence of women in Nantucket business. They controlled businesses on this street so heavily that it was nicknamed for them, with the name “Petticoat Row”.

¹⁴¹ Harry Platt, *P1662g*. 1890. Nantucket Historical Association, Nantucket Massachusetts.

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