

MASSACHUSETTS

'In the Heart' of history

New film about whaling ship Essex puts spotlight on charming Nantucket, which offers visitors a chance to step back in time

BY CATHERINE MALLETTE
Special to the Star-Telegram

NANTUCKET, MASS.

Just above our heads, stretched out along the wavelike curved ceiling of the Nantucket Whaling Museum's Gosnell Hall, is the 46-foot skeleton of a sperm whale, its massive head and jaw tilted downward as if the mighty creature has just taken a dive into the sea.

On Jan. 1, 1998, the bull whale rang in the new year with a spectacular and tragic, yet uncannily timely, death on the beach of Siasconset, the tiny village on the eastern end of Nantucket. The whale's death on a beach was a remarkable thing in itself, as most perish in the deep seas, their skeletal remains finding their way to shore only after nature has ravaged the bones.

For those steeped in Nantucket lore, though, the whale's arrival had an almost mystical, mythical quality that brings up the question of the whale's intentions: Could he have known

SEE NANTUCKET, 8D

that the Nantucket Historical Association, in celebration of its 75th anniversary, would be launching a \$10.8 million, two-year renovation and expansion of the Museum, and that he would provide the perfect visual centerpiece? Was his arrival a shout to Nantucketers, a "don't forget about me" reminder of the source of their glorious history?

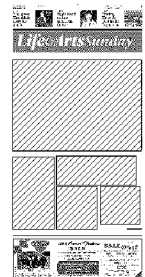
It seems unlikely, and yet.

And yet, there was the title character of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville's great white whale with a vengeance, who hurled himself upon longtime nemesis Captain Ahab aboard the Nantucket whale ship Pequod.

Fiction it was, but fiction based on startling truth.

In 1820, the Nantucket whale ship Essex went down, struck by a whale that rammed the ship repeatedly with his massive head. The strangeness of this situation, unheard of in the whaling industry, caused first mate Owen Chase to later write in his diary, "The blows were placed to do us the most injury, the attack could come from only premeditated violence."

My husband and I are in Nantucket, Mass., and



we've just finished watching, here in Gosnell Hall, *Nantucket*, an excellent documentary on the island's history.

To prepare for our trip, David and I have been listening to the audiobook of *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whale-ship Essex*. Written in 2000 by Nantucket's Nathaniel Philbrick, the book, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction, tells the tale of a 20-man crew that, after 15 months at sea, loses its ship in the whale attack, and then, with very few provisions, sets out in three whaleboats to try to make it 3,000 miles to the coast of South America.

Only eight men survive, and the story is every bit as nail-biting, horrifying and inspiring as you might think.

In fact, this is why we are here. On Friday, Warner Bros. Pictures is bringing *In the Heart of the Sea* to the big screen, directed by Ron Howard and starring Chris Hemsworth, and Nantucket is happily promoting the film, hoping to bring more attention to the history of this 14-by-3 1/2-mile sandy island nearly 30 miles off the coast of Massachusetts and already one of the nation's most exclusive destinations.

The film faces *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* for holiday box-office attention, but it's getting plenty of good buzz. As *Star-Telegram* film critic Cary Darling wrote recently, "The fact that Warner Bros. pushed its release from March to the heart of Oscar season means they must have liked what they saw and

have high hopes audiences will, too."

We look now at the vintage whaleboat in front of us, wisely placed below the looming whale skeleton. These were the relatively fragile vessels attached to the sides of the ship, only about 28 feet long and used in the hunt of the whale, not intended for long journeys or survival in open water.

Hanging on the walls of the hall are harpoons used during Nantucket's heyday as the whaling capital of the world. In a display case are artifacts from the Essex — maps, documents and a short length of twine, made by Benjamin Lawrence during his 93 days lost at sea.

I am inexplicably happy to see the twine, which plays a small role in Philbrick's book. It is like a little message sent through the generations to all who stand before it: Survive, it whispers. Survive.

AN OLD FRIEND

The day is sunny and cool, and I decide to take a run. We're staying at the White Elephant Village Residences, with their traditional cottage charm and loads of luxury features, including rare blue marble counters in the bathroom (which also has a pristine soaking tub and a glass-enclosed shower).

To be honest, with my mind immersed in the tragedy of the Essex and its starving whalers, the degree of comfort is a little overwhelming.

I head outside, stopping to admire how the new Residences mimic the weather-shingled houses that also line this street.

A turn to the right would take me toward the main streets of town with their tony shops and restaurants, but instead I go left, toward the quiet waters of the northern beaches. Nantucket is an old friend I am happy to see again. I first came here in the '80s, working summers at a guest house. Over the years, I've returned too many times to count.

After a brief stop at Jetties Beach, just one lovely spot among the island's 80 miles of pristine beaches, I head up the bluff past stately homes with neatly manicured hedges, white picket fences, trellises draped with roses and the island's signature hydrangea bushes with pillowy blue mounds of blossoms that echo the clear blue of the sky.

On Cliff Road, I turn onto the bike path that runs alongside the vast plains of grasslands and moors covered with acres of pink-flowered *rosa rugosa*. The island has more than 32 miles of bike paths, many created in the past decade to encourage people to explore the natural beauty of land that has remained largely unchanged by the passage of time.

In 1963, the Nantucket Conservation Foundation was formed, and its work has been remarkable. More than 45 percent of the island is preserved, including these open spaces and also hidden forests, bogs, pine barrens and salt marshes.

ISLAND'S HEYDAY

I think about the *Nantucket* documentary: Once

— and for a long while — Nantucket was known as the most cosmopolitan place in the world. Sperm oil fueled the American Industrial Revolution, and Nantucket was at the center of it from the mid-1700s to the mid-1830s, with its robust whaling industry featuring state-of-the-art vessels.

Whalers were the astronauts of their day, going where no man had gone before, and the kingpins behind the industry built mansions in town to reflect their status.

Like all good things, this heyday came to an eventual end. The supply of whales dwindled: Nantucketers had to go farther and farther to try to find them, and trips to the Pacific were long and expensive. Meanwhile, the nation tapped into new sources of wealth: A different kind of oil was discovered in Pennsylvania, while gold was found in California.

Then in 1846, what would become known as the Great Fire broke out, destroying almost all of the buildings along Nantucket's waterfront. The Civil War put the final cap on the industry, and Nantucket fell into depression and off the map for the next hundred years or so.

Then there was a shift in the wind, and like Sleeping Beauty, the island reawoke, reinventing itself as an ideal spot for tourism with its more than 800 pre-Civil War homes, cobblestone streets and historic sites, including the country's oldest operating windmill and the Atheneum, where Frederick Douglass made his first anti-slavery speech,

and where people once gathered to hear the deep thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The preservationists and the conservationists got to work, with the can-do spirit and confidence of their seagoing forefathers.

To learn more about the island's history, David and I take a walking tour offered by the Nantucket Historical Association.

SEE ISLAND, 9D

We learn that while the men were at sea, the women of the island took care of business. Our group settles into the seats at the Quaker meeting house on Fair Street. Our guide tells us that in 1702, an itinerant Quaker minister came to town, and soon the island gave itself over to the religion, which embraced not only hard work and a sense of destiny, but also spiritual equality of the sexes. And so a tradition of strong, determined women was born.

Maria Mitchell discovered a comet in 1847 and became known as one of the greatest astronomers of the century. In the same era, Lucretia Coffin Mott, born in Nantucket, became one of the country's leading abolitionists.

ROOTS IN COMMERCE

It's a short walk to the top of Main Street, where we look at the mix of shops around us — Murray's Toggery Shop, known as a source for those preppy pants called Nantucket Reds; the old-fashioned drugstore; and Nantucket Looms, where upstairs, craftspeople weave together one-of-a-

kind blankets and rugs that blend practicality with art.

Our guide tells us about the island's deep roots in our nation's commerce. One of the early settlers was named Thomas Macy. One of his descendants, R.H. Macy, left the island of Nantucket for the island of Manhattan, where he started a dry goods store that became a department store.

The Folgers were another early island family. James A. Folger went out looking for gold in California and ended up setting up a coffee enterprise.

The old streets and buildings of Nantucket carry the stories of those who have come before. In the Greek Revival Hadwen House on Main Street, I study the vestiges of a life led by the family of a former ship merchant. I wonder: Was the checkerboard floor cloth in the front entry imported from Europe? What games did the family play at night in the parlor? Could they ever have imagined that time would bring tourists like me into their home?

Back at our hotel, David and I collapse into comfortable chairs on the front porch of the main building, enjoying complimentary port and freshly baked cookies. A girl darts into a nearby door and comes out with a scooter, taking off into adventure.

We walk to dinner that night at Brant Point Grill at the White Elephant, the Village's older sister, which is right on the harbor. When we first got to the island, we headed straight to the White Elephant's spa for a couples' massage that instantly

erased our mainland worries.

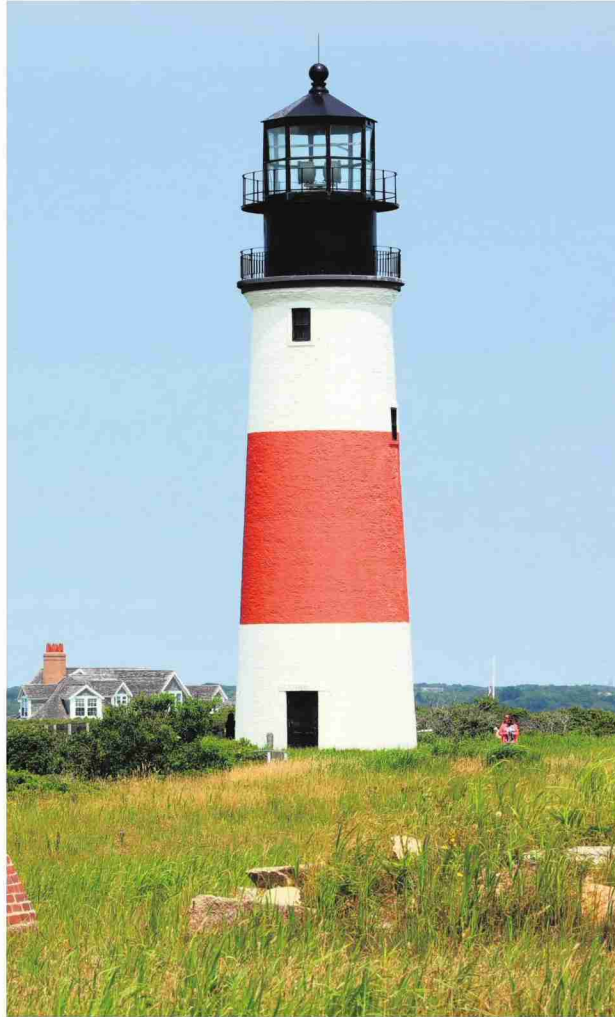
INFLUX OF WEALTH

The former whaling capital has reclaimed its national cosmopolitan spotlight. With the influx of summer people (Nantucket's population now swells from about 10,000 to 50,000 or more in the peak months) has come great wealth, and an abundance of trendy four-star restaurants, high-end boutiques and outdoor adventure opportunities, from fishing and sailing to tennis and disc golf.

New in-town luxury hotel options also abound. White Elephant Village is part of the Island Resorts group, which also includes the White Elephant, the Jared Coffin House, the Boat Basin's Cottages and Lofts, and the Wauwinet, a 34-room inn nine miles from town that is the only Nantucket property that is part of the luxury hotelier association Relais & Châteaux.

We've had a perfect weekend, a healthy mix of fresh air and sea salt, history and culture, and over-the-top indulgences. Wow, life is good.

And it's fun to think that our next Nantucket experience may well come through the big screen with a CGI leviathan that will undoubtedly make us jump in our seats — another mythical, magical whale that will remind us all of the simple, hopeful lessons of this faraway island in the heart of the sea: Survive. Survive.



Amon Focus

A lighthouse provides a classic Nantucket tableau.



Nantucket Historical Association

The skeleton of a sperm whale is displayed in the Nantucket Whaling Museum's Gosnell Hall.

Top 10 things to do in Nantucket

It's a small island, but there are so many great things to do. This is my own list of must-dos.

1. Bike to the beach. My favorite path leads to Madaket Beach, on the island's west side. Have some fresh fish tacos at Millie's and wash them down with lemonade, an island-made craft beer or a cold drink with tequila.

2. Visit the Whaling Museum. Watch the *Nantucket* documentary and sign up for one of the walk-around tours. This is the best way to get a crash course in island history.

3. Have an ice cream at The Juice Bar, downtown on Broad Street. The extra calories of a fresh waffle cone are worth it.

4. Hole up in a bookstore. Nantucket has two independent stores, Mitchell's Book Corner (on Main Street) and Nantucket Bookworks, both owned by the same person, and both loaded with regional titles and novels set in Nantucket.

5. Time your visit to a festival. In April, come for the Daffodil Festival and

watch the parade of historic cars and trucks amble up Main Street bedecked with flowers. In May, there's a Wine Festival weekend, while June boasts both the annual Book Festival and Film Festival. There's a Garden Festival in July and a Cranberry Festival in October. Christmas Stroll is in early December.

6. Stop at Something Natural on Cliff Road, and pick up some sandwiches made with freshly baked Portuguese bread for a beach picnic.

7. Get in or out on the water. Charter a boat, rent a kayak or stand-up paddleboard, or at least dip your toes in the bracing waters of the Atlantic.

8. Take in a movie at the Dreamland, newly renovated but still with an old-school feel, or the more intimate Starlight Theatre.

9. Have breakfast (served all day) at the Downyflake at 18 Sparks Ave., which has been cooking up good food for 80 years.

10. Shop! Whether your tastes run to fine art, handmade crafts like the traditional lightship baskets, silly T-shirts about the man from Nantucket, brightly colored tunics, designer clothes and accessories, or Kobe beef steaks ready for the grill, Nantucket has the shop for you.



Amon Focus

Learn about the island's history at the Whaling Museum.

If you go

Getting there

You can get to Nantucket by sea or air.

- There are two ferry lines that run from Hyannis in Cape Cod: Steamship Authority (508-477-8600) and Hy-Line Cruises (508-778-2600).
- The nearest airports are in Boston and Providence, R.I. If you prefer to fly into Nantucket Memorial Airport (ACK), you can, of course, arrive by private plane. There are no direct commercial flights from Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. You can fly to Boston and then take a connection on Cape Air (or, seasonally, Jet Blue), or (again, seasonally) fly through Newark, N.J., on United or through New York's JFK on Delta or Jet Blue.

Getting around

If you are renting a house far from town, you'll probably want to rent a car or, even better, a four-wheel-drive vehicle. If you are staying close to town, bicycles and taxis are your best options.

Go to www.wheelsheelsandpedals.com for car-free alternatives and www.nantucketchamber.org for more transportation options.

Staying there

- White Elephant Village: Residences & Inn, 19 N. Water St. Rates start at \$595. www.whiteelephantvillage.com.
- For other options, see www.nantucket-ma.gov/visitor.



Nantucket Island Resorts

Yachts fill a harbor at Nantucket.



Nantucket Island Resorts

The White Elephant Village Residences combine traditional cottage charm with modern amenities near downtown.



Jonathan Prime

Chris Hemsworth stars in *In the Heart of the Sea*, based on a true story.



J. Coutre

Nantucket, known as the Faraway Island, is today an exclusive getaway with gorgeous beaches.



William DeSousa-Mauk

The Three Bricks on Main Street are identical homes built by whale-oil baron Joseph Starbuck for his sons.



William DeSousa-Mauk

Hadwen House, also on Main Street, is a Greek Revival home built in 1845 by a whaling merchant.