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Whalemen's Song: Lyrics and Masculinity in the Sag Harbor Whalefishery, 1840-1850

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Abstract:

Abstract for the Dissertation Whalemen's Song: Lyrics and Masculinity in the Sag Harbor Whalefishery, by Stephen Nicholas Sanfilippo Doctor of Philosophy in History Stony Brook University 2010 "Whalemen's Song" is a gender-based examination of conceptions and performances of masculinity among Long Islander whalers of European ancestry who whaled out of Sag Harbor in the 1840s. Its theoretical basis is that masculinity is culturally demonstrated in performance, with concepts and performances varying from man to man, between different groups of men, and in relation to various "others," depending upon the particulars of a situation, including the group to whom masculinity is being performed. Three basic concepts of masculinity will be discussed: the bourgeois man, informed primarily by achieving economic success and status; the evangelical Christian man, informed by concern for personal salvation and for fulfilling his Christian obligations as family provider; and the secular libertine, informed by a pursuit of immediate pleasure without regard to bourgeois or Christian moral and economic restraints. The whaleship is considered as an enclosed, mobile, industrial company under the control of a captain legally empowered to inflict severe corporal punishment, and functioning as a Foucault called heterotopia, simultaneously creating its own control, resistance, and inversion. Within the whaleship, 20 to 30 men lived and labored for 2 to 4 years, rarely going ashore. "Whalemen's Song" recognizes the individual experiences of men and women of various ethnic and racial groups, but through examining Long Island's whaling industry and whalers we can see the great differences of masculinity within one set of persons, making the whaleship an ideal for the study of varying performances of masculinity among men whose constant close contact exposed their differing, conflicting, and contested ideals of manhood with regard to labor, authority, women, corporal punishment, Christianity, and rights of citizenship. The dissertation is based upon extensive research in archival manuscripts held at eastern Long Island archives, using journals to establish whalers' masculine identities and their songs and poems as expository of these attitudes. It also extends Long Island whaling into the wider context of bottom-up gender, social, cultural and maritime history.

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