

Nicholas Benda

Dr. Mary K Bercaw Edwards

ENGL 3265W American Studies Methods

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Dancing on Slippery Waters: *Lagoda*, New Bedford, Whaling, and the World

Past the dangling, oozing whale skeletons and cetological displays that a visitor first experiences at the New Bedford Whaling Museum is a temple lined with Tuscan columns in rustic mahogany. Above is a copper cupola, weathered into a striking verdigris. At the heart of this temple is a dramatic sight: a whole wooden whaleship, with ivory sails and hempen lines, but at half scale. It is a model of the noted whaler New Bedford *Lagoda* – or is it? The original *Lagoda* was not from New Bedford, nor is there any evidence that the model matches the ship it purports to model. Yet, over the century that has passed since the “little *Lagoda*”¹ and its surrounding Bourne Building have become iconic representations of New Bedford, its whale fishery, and the city’s place within the world. New Bedford and its whaling museum’s self-conception, the international cultural consensus on whaling, and the public’s interest in historical and museological topics have shifted in that century. What does the *Lagoda* model represent, and how should it be interpreted? Through an analysis of the original *Lagoda*, its model and the museum built around it, and the development of social attitudes towards whales and whaling, *Lagoda* can be better understood as a model of an early-20th century antimodernist memory, more a representation of New Bedford itself than of any ship that ever existed.

¹ New Bedford Whaling Museum officially distinguishes the original *Lagoda* and the model *Lagoda* by referring to the model as “*Lagoda* (shipmodel).”

A Mystery at Yokohama: The *Lagoda*, 1826–????

The original *Lagoda* was never a full-blooded New Bedford whaleship at all. It was neither from New Bedford nor was it originally intended to be a whaleship. *Lagoda* was built in Scituate, Massachusetts in 1826 by Ezra “King Caesar” Weston II. Made of “Maine timber and Massachusetts white oak,” *Lagoda* was the largest ship in Weston’s collection, a 340-ton full-rigged ship. Information is scant on *Lagoda*’s time under Weston, though it seems it was intended for trade with Europe.² Most research on Weston focuses on the material cultural and architectural legacy he left in his hometown of Duxbury, Massachusetts, though the museum that manages his former estate brings in boats to celebrate this part of the Duxbury heritage.³ The maritime activities of *Lagoda* under Weston are a promising avenue for future research.

One enduring mystery around *Lagoda* is the origin of its name. Two stories prevail. In the most popular and traditional telling, the ship was to be named *Ladoga*, after the Russian Lake Ladoga. Somewhere along the way, a mistake was made and the ship was unintentionally christened *Lagoda*, a mistake that could not be reverted due to maritime superstition.⁴ The other story is more mundane: *Lagoda* was named for the Lagoda Mine near St. Petersburg, a source of iron in the shipbuilding industry. Michael P. Dyer, longtime curator of maritime history at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, believes the mine story to be correct.⁵

In 1841, *Lagoda* was sold to Jonathon Bourne, a noted New Bedford whaling merchant. Under Bourne, *Lagoda* was rerigged into a barque and held a successful career. Dyer reports that

² Robert Barboza, “The History of the *Lagoda*,” *The Standard-Times*, South Coast Today, August 2, 2016, <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/local/advocate/2016/08/02/the-history-lagoda/27338539007/>.

³ Sue Scheible, “Duxbury Ships Come Home to King Caesar for the Holidays,” *The Patriot Ledger*, December 12, 2014, <https://www.patriotledger.com/story/news/local/2014/12/13/duxbury-ships-come-home-to/35734311007/>.

⁴ George Sarton, “The Whaling Museums of New Bedford and Nantucket,” *Isis* 16, no. 1 (1931): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1086/346587>.

⁵ Barboza, “The History of the *Lagoda*.”

Lagoda's first voyage under Bourne took home 2,000 barrels of oil and 19,000 pounds of whalebone. Additionally, he claims that *Lagoda* would take home profits on the outfitting investment between 200 and 700%. Historian and museologist James M. Lindgren adds that *Lagoda* had one especially profitable Pacific voyage from 1864 to 1868 that brought in \$200,756, with its whaling career bringing in \$651,959 total.⁶ As a whaler, *Lagoda* was an important part of two moments in United States history, one involving Japan and one involving Alaska.

The Japanese story is a dark one. On June 5th, 1848, fifteen men fled *Lagoda* in whaleboats after *Lagoda* wrecked near Matsmai, Japan.⁷ After crossing the Strait and hitting land, the *Lagoda* crewmembers were captured by the government. From there, they were suspected of being subversive Portuguese Catholics, forced to defile Christian objects, and tortured.⁸ It was the work of two Dutchmen,⁹ Johannes Hendrik Lyvsson and Robert Browne, who alerted the American government of the imprisoned men, negotiation their release and a rescue by the USS *Preble* in 1849.¹⁰ Only five of the men who abandoned *Lagoda* survived.¹¹ The story so disturbed Commodore Matthew Perry that it was one factor that inspired his gunboat diplomatic opening of Japan.¹² However, the reports offered to the United States Navy were intentionally misleading, as the commanding officer of *Preble*, James Glynn, left out the

⁶ James M. Lindgren, "'Let Us Idealize Old Types of Manhood': The New Bedford Whaling Museum, 1903-1941," *The New England Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (1999): 184, <https://doi.org/10.2307/366870>.

⁷ Charles W. Stewart, "Early American Visitors to Japan," Sec. 116. *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute* 31, no. 4 (1905), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1905/october/early-american-visitors-japan>.

⁸ William Mcomie, "Of Whale Oil and the Spirit of Adventure: American Seamen in Japan, 1846-1850," *Jinbungaku Kenkyū Shohō*, no. 52 (August 2014): 33-35, <http://human.kanagawa-u.ac.jp/kenkyu/publ/pdf/syoho/no52/5204.pdf>.

⁹ The Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to trade with Japan while it was closed.

¹⁰ Martha Chaiklin, "Monopolists to Middlemen: Dutch Liberalism and American Imperialism in the Opening of Japan," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 2 (2010): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.0.0131>.

¹¹ Mcomie, "Of Whale Oil," 35.

¹² Erik Rangno, "Melville's Japan and the 'Marketplace Religion' of Terror," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 62, no. 4 (2008): 476-477, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2008.62.4.465>.

repeated escape attempts made by the imprisoned crew. This was probably the main factor in their cruel treatment by Japanese authorities rather than their foreign Christian background alone.¹³ Historian William Mcomie argues that this was out of Glynn's existing desire for Japan to be opened.

The literature does not describe how *Lagoda* itself and its remaining crew escaped Matsmai and returned to service. Most of the literature around this incident comes from historians of Japan, not historians of whaling, and New Bedford Whaling Museum avoids the story in its retrospectives on *Lagoda*. Perhaps the international incident remains uncomfortable in the already strained relationship American institutions with an interest in whaling might have with Japanese visitors, as the Japanese whaling industry has been a source of tension between the United States and Japan for several decades.

The other notable incident involving *Lagoda* was in the Arctic in 1871. While following whales into a small channel, 33 whaleships and 1,2000 people were left trapped in ice that had been blown in by a sudden change in the wind. Trapped and sometimes even crushed by the ice pushing the vessels against the shore, those aboard had to row and drag whaleboats through and over ice until they reached a point where seven surviving vessels could take them aboard. All hands survived, but the author Peter Nichols argues that the loss of whaleships, catch, and gear represented the killing blow to a whaling industry that had been in terminal decline since the discovery of petroleum in 1859.¹⁴ *Lagoda* was one of the rescuers, taking 170 people to Honolulu.¹⁵

¹³ Mcomie, "Of Whale Oil," 55.

¹⁴ David Green and Peter Nichols, "How An 1871 Disaster Helped to End America's Whaling Dynasty," *NPR*, January 11, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/11/462627047/how-an-1871-disaster-helped-put-an-end-to-americas-whaling-dynasty>.

¹⁵ "Old Dartmouth Historical Sketch No. 45." New Bedford Whaling Museum, November 23-25, 1916, <https://www.whalingmuseum.org/old-dartmouth-historical-society-sketches/old-dartmouth-historical-sketch-no-45/>.

The fate of the original *Lagoda* is seemingly lost to history. Some sources give a date of 1889 or 1899 for its demise, but both dates are mistaken. *Lagoda* was sold in 1886 and joined the San Francisco “bone fleet.” In 1889, it hit a reef and was condemned at Yokohama, Japan, but was repaired and turned into a collier. It was given a new name, which has yet to be discovered, thereby causing a historical dead end at the time of writing.¹⁶

On Slippery Waters: The “Little *Lagoda*,” 1916–Present

In 1903, the Old Dartmouth Historical Society was formed. By then, Norway had overtaken the United States, and with it the city of New Bedford, as the leading whaling nation and city in the world. An antimodern sentiment was present from the start. By 1900, “old stock” New Englanders / “Yankees” were only 20% of New Bedford population, with immigrants like the dark complected Cape Verdeans and less-dark Azoreans challenging the idea of New Bedford developed by men like founder William W. Crapo.¹⁷ To celebrate the Old Dartmouth Historical Society’s 10th anniversary, the sculpture *The Whaleman* was commissioned to celebrate a muscular Yankeeism that intentionally excluded the non-Anglo Saxon populace of New Bedford despite their importance to whaling history.¹⁸ In fact, people of color “numerically dominated” the whale fishery by the time the 20th century came around.¹⁹

In 1915, Emily Howland Bourne, the elderly daughter of *Lagoda* owner and whaling Jonathan Bourne, donated \$150,000 to the Old Dartmouth Historical Society to create the Bourne Whaling Museum. \$20,000 would go towards the construction of a little *Lagoda*, a half-scale model of her father’s favorite ship. As the New Bedford waterfront was decaying, the

¹⁶ Barboza, “The History of the *Lagoda*.”

¹⁷ James M. Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America: A Cultural History of the Nation’s Great Maritime Museums* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvwh8c80>.

¹⁸ Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 58-59.

¹⁹ Lindgren, “Let Us Idealize Old Types of Manhood,” 192.

Bourne Whaling Museum was built further inland as part of a Progressive Era moral cleansing, destroying boardinghouses, brothels, and saloons in the process.²⁰ The Old Dartmouth Historical Society's attack on the perceived rotting of society had taken to the built environment.

The little *Lagoda* took a year to build, launching in the November of 1916. It was a momentous affair, with then-lieutenant governor of Massachusetts and later President Calvin Coolidge being among the speakers to celebrate the event.²¹ Bourne herself kept herself distant from the spectacle around the model. She never spoke at any of the dedications for her gifts, nor did any of her own collection of notes, diaries, or letters survive. Journalist Peggi Medeiros believes she wanted to make up for some of her father's miserliness, for he did not "leave a penny to charity," but this remains speculative. Her sole request for the opening ceremony for the Bourne Whaling Museum was for "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "La Marseillaise" to be sung.²² From this, it can be concluded that, if nothing else, she perceived the *Lagoda* model to be a symbol of not only her family and New Bedford, but for the United States as a whole.

The Old Dartmouth Historical Society, suffering from budget problems soon after constructing the Bourne Whaling Museum, created a new kind of kitschy whaling spectacle around its centerpiece. At a Mardi Gras party in 1919, *Lagoda* was lit with lights and given an ocean-blue perimeter, where it was accompanied by "dancers on the slippery waters." Dramatic skits were played, chanties were sung, and a "sanitized cutting-in of a whale" demonstration was performed.²³ The model had been fully decoupled from the brutal, gory reality of whaling for the leviathan and its hunters.

²⁰ Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 60.

²¹ New Bedford Whaling Museum, "Old Dartmouth Historical Sketch No. 45."

²² Peggi Medeiros, "Who Was Emily Howland Bourne?" *The Standard-Times*, South Coast Today, November 19, 2016, <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/2016/11/19/who-was-emily-howland-bourne/24510042007>.

²³ Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 63.

Interlude: Shipmodels, Material Culture, and Museums

Is this *Lagoda* truly a model? If so, what is it a model of? When it was built, there were no plans, lines, or photos of the original *Lagoda*. Whaleship architect Edgar B. Hammond was hired to design the ship, veteran whaleship craftsmen were brought in to build it using their techniques, *Lagoda* whalers were brought in to provide suggestions, and active whaling barque *Charles W. Morgan* was consulted to fill-in the gaps. But the final product is a purely speculative work. A bowdlerized whaleship, it initially had no tryworks. On the rigging, it was said that “no one left can say you are wrong.”²⁴ Nor could it ever sail, as it lacks a keel. This *Lagoda* is not the *Lagoda* that was, but a new thing entirely, born from collective memory and nostalgia.

Despite this, it was philosophically conceived as a model, and its shrine in the Bourne Building also serves to make it like a ship in a bottle.²⁵ The model is by nature an idealized and sanitized thing, for the introduction of depictions of any sort of labor or natural event shifts it from “model” to a “scene,” as is the case with the New Bedford Whaling Museum’s model of *Lagoda* doing a cutting-in (object number 2013.25).

The ship model is itself an under researched form of material culture. As former Mystic Seaport Museum Welles Boat Hall curator Pieter Roos argued, most scholarship and curatorial research fall upon the exceptional, the boats, the figureheads, and so on. The seemingly mundane, like ship models and half hulls, are lacking in research.²⁶ Similarly, shipcarver at Mystic Seaport Museum Rich Froh found that a developed sense of connoisseurship might allow for the identification of new works by famous shipcarvers if applied to carvings that are less

²⁴ Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 60.

²⁵ Barboza, “The History of the *Lagoda*.”

²⁶ Pieter N. Roos, “Interview on Maritime Material Culture and Welles Boat Hall,” July 2025, in Person at Mystic Seaport Museum Collections Research Center.

immediately interesting than figureheads, like trailboards.²⁷

The world of models leaves open the possibility of exciting findings in terms of craftsmanship if taken as an object of material culture rather than lowbrow folk art or hobbyist projects as they often are. Ignoring the philosophical dubiousness of *Lagoda*'s status as a model of something other than itself, the craftsmanship that went into it and its lack of environmental exposure represents a treasure trove for research into the craftsmanship of the whaling industry. In the 1990s, Mystic Seaport Museum sailmakers studied the *Lagoda*'s sails and found the original scribe marks from its builders, something that vanishes from sails after going to sea for even a day.²⁸ What else could there be?

Whaleship Modernity: Dead Whales Staving Boats

When Old Dartmouth Historical Society founder Crapo founded the organization to assert white Yankeedom against a diversifying city's growing Lusophone diaspora. His belief that they could never appreciate whaling heritage has been rebuked. A visit to the tortuously named Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE) will reveal a vibrant diaspora community that has readily accepted the city's whaling heritage and the contributions of their ancestors. Portuguese and Cape Verdean restaurants abound in New Bedford's historic district, with the famous Tia Maria's being directly across from the Whaling Museum. When his organization chose "a dead whale or a stove boat!" as a rallying cry for a muscular Yankeeism, none of them could have ever anticipated what would really call the cult of whaling into question: the dead whales themselves.

The 1960s brought an intense interest in whales as intelligent, majestic beings. Coupled

²⁷ Rich Froh, "Mystic Seaport Museum Shipcarving Oral History Discussion," April 21, 2025, in Person at Mystic Seaport Museum.

²⁸ Mary K Bercaw Edwards, "Growth of Maritime Museums," Lecture, University of Connecticut Avery Point, April 21, 2026.

with the intense industrial whaling industry fishing well beyond the wooden whalers, the antiwhaling movement was born and the practice of whaling has lost its luster. By the 1980s, Old Dartmouth Historical Society had rebranded to the New Bedford Whaling Museum, and conservation topics began creeping into its interpretation.²⁹ By 2000, a juvenile blue whale skeleton named KOBO had overtaken *Lagoda* as the unofficial New Bedford Whaling Museum mascot and the Whaling Museum had become openly invested in scientific and multicultural research in addition to history. Lindgren muses that “the whale had bested the whaleship, as did Moby-Dick with Ahab’s *Pequod*.”³⁰

In 2011, a Cape Verdean cabinet was installed in the Bourne Building as part of an exhibit design theme of having guests explore the world through the eyes of a whaleship; an Azorean cabinet had already existed. Curator of maritime social history Akeia de Barros Gomes developed a joint project with museums in Cape Verde. The 21st century New Bedford Whaling Museum had thus defeated many of the tenants of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society.³¹ At the same time, however, this interpretation of the *Lagoda* room places an idealized New Bedford whaling industry at the center of the world, with other cultures at the periphery.

One object adjacent to *Lagoda* was a bust of Emily Howland Bourne’s father, long-time *Lagoda* owner Jonathan Bourne. Bourne commissioned Ku Klux Klan supporter and Confederate monument sculptor John Gutzon Borglum, husband of her friend Mary, to make this companion piece in 1916.³² Gutzon would also go on to be a sculptor for Mount Rushmore. Writings and opinions from Bourne herself are too scarce to make a definitive judgment as to her

²⁹ Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 78.

³⁰ Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 81-82.

³¹ Brian Fraga, “Cape Verdeans’ Whaling Contributions Celebrated in New Museum Exhibit,” *The Standard-Times*, South Coast Today, June 30, 2011, <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/2011/06/30/cape-verdeans-whaling-contributions-celebrated/49982235007/>.

³² Lindgren, *Preserving Maritime America*, 61.

views on race and the Confederacy, but she was known to be enamored with her physician, John Allan Wyleth, a Confederate veteran and proponent of Lost Cause mythology. She bought him a car and commissioned a bust of him, also by Borglum. The evidence points to a woman that, if not a Lost Cause proponent and white supremacist herself, found those beliefs tolerable.³³

These facts caused New Bedford Whaling Museum to voluntarily undergo several years of self-reflection after George Floyd's murder in 2020. Beforehand, Borglum was only a "famous sculptor."³⁴ New Bedford Whaling Museum chose to remove the bust after internal conversations during the Black Lives Matter movement. It was returned in 2024 for a new exhibit to contextualize the bust, *Complicated Legacies*.³⁵ Such recontextualization and self-reflection is always welcome, but could more radical reinterpretation of Bourne's gifts be possible?

Conclusion: Does *Lagoda*'s Magnitude Diminish? Will It Perish?

When Emily Howland Bourne commissioned a model of her father's favorite ship and called it *Lagoda*, she was not commissioning a model that represented a ship that ever existed, but an amalgamation of antimodernist sentiment, skilled craftsmanship, and hazy nostalgia. The Whaling Museum today tells the story of the world around its *Lagoda*, but avoids some uncomfortable memories, like those of Japanese imperialism and racial exclusion. But it is willing to recontextualize other storied objects; what is one more? *Lagoda* will survive, but its room should tell the story of New Bedford and its diverse community, not whaling.

³³ Don Wilkinson, "Complicated Legacies a Soul-Searching Exhibit at Whaling Museum," *The New Bedford Light*, March 16, 2025, <https://newbedfordlight.org/complicated-legacies-a-soul-searching-exhibit-at-new-bedford-whaling-museum/>.

³⁴ Paul Gately, "Famous Sculptor Immortalized Jonathan Bourne," *Bourne Courier*, January 25, 2006, <https://www.wickedlocal.com/story/bourne-courier/2006/01/26/famous-sculptor-immortalized-jonathan-bourne/40381142007/>.

³⁵ Wilkinson, "Complicated Legacies."

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NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER BENDA

7 Overlook Drive, Preston, CT 06365-8816 | +1 (860) 861-9045 | benda@udel.edu | [LinkedIn](#)

EDUCATION:

M.A. 2028 University of Delaware–Hagley Program, History of Capitalism, Technology, and Culture
B.A. 2026 University of Connecticut, Maritime Studies and American Studies
2025 Williams–Mystic Program, Coastal and Ocean Studies
A.S. 2024 Connecticut State Community College, General Studies, *cum laude*

FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AND AWARDS:

University Honors Laureate and Honors Scholar, University of Connecticut – May 2026

- Awarded for successful completion of a thesis project, engagement with academic discipline, and completion of 30 credits worth of Honors-designated coursework or additional projects in addition to expected coursework.

Phi Beta Kappa (ΦBK), Epsilon (E) Chapter of Connecticut – May 2026

- Offered to top 10% of class by GPA and recommendation.

Phi Alpha Theta (ΦΑΘ), Delta Omicron (ΔΟ) Chapter, University of Connecticut – April 2026

- Awarded membership in the United States' history honor's society.

Global Citizen, Universitas 21 University of Connecticut – March–April 2026

- Representative for the University of Connecticut in a U21 program on UN Sustainable Development Goals. Focused on SDG14: Life Below Water.

Frank C. Munson Fellowship, Mystic Seaport Museum – June–August 2025

- Took graduate-level courses on maritime studies and researched U.S.–Latin American maritime business history.

Museum Muse Award, Williams–Mystic Program – May 2025

- End of semester award for work integrating museum events with scholarly activities during semester.

Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, U.S. Department of State – January 2025

- Studied ecosystems and biodiversity in Islas Galápagos, Ecuador at Universidad San Francisco de Quito.

Leading Change, Universitas 21 University of Connecticut – November–December 2024

- Representative in a group consisting of students from other U21 universities. Analyzed UN sustainability challenges in education.

Writing Fellowship, University of Connecticut – September–December 2024

- Taught multimodal writing and research skills to undergraduate students in hour-long sessions.

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE:

New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts:

Curatorial Intern – June 2026–August 2026

- Will work to catalog and curate Melville Society Collection.

Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, Connecticut:

Historical Interpreter – August 2024–January 2026

- Worked in exhibits and historic trades to engage guests and promote historical education.

Department of Research and Scholarship Intern - June 2024–August 2024

- Documented institutional history and connections to build bonds between the museum, academic institutions, and local stakeholders.

Williams–Mystic Program, Mystic, Connecticut:

Archives Assistant – February–May 2025

- Worked in archive to document material for program's 50th anniversary celebration.

MUSEOLOGICAL AND PUBLIC HUMANITIES PROJECTS:

"Floating Palaces and Garden Museums: The Lives and Afterlives of American Shipcarvings,"
Shipcarving Handbook, Mystic Seaport Museum – April 2025

CONFERENCE PAPERS:

"Matanzas in the Margins: The Munson Steamship Line and the American Presence in Cuba,"
Maritime Margins: Missing Voices, Overlooked Places, and New Perspectives, North American
Society for Oceanic History – May 29, 2026

"Into the Blue: Writing, Place, and the Blue Humanities," *Wicked Reading for Wicked Problems*,
Conference on the Teaching of Writing, University of Connecticut – April 24, 2026

"The Land of Sunshine and Flowers: Steamship Companies, Nature, and Early-20th Century American
Interest in Cuba," Humanities Undergraduate Research Symposium, University of Connecticut –
April 10, 2026

SERVICE TO THE PROFESSION:

Conference Assistant, *Oceanic Melville*, The Melville Society – June 16–19, 2025

ACADEMIC SERVICE:

University of Connecticut:

Writing Center and Peer Tutor – January–May 2026

Co-President, Maritime EcoHusky Club – January–May 2026

Husky Ambassador – September 2025–May 2026

OTHER SERVICE:

Auxiliarist, United States Coast Guard Auxiliary – April 2024–Present