

## Early Newport Whaling and Escaping Slaves

Judith Navas Lund

A recent survey of Rhode Island newspapers beginning in 1763 identifies more than 200 whaling voyages entering and departing from Newport and Providence in Rhode Island before the American Revolution that are heretofore undocumented. These are found in reports of the Customs House for Rhode Island, located in Newport, then capitol of Rhode Island, a precursor to the Federal Customs system, and after the American Revolution, the Customs House in Providence District. Initially the newspapers reporting are Newport *Mercury* and Providence *Gazette*. Later, reports are included from *United States Chronicle* and a few other papers. These were found on the website Ancestrybank.org, a pay for view site, and are copyrighted by the American Antiquarian Society.

The exact number of voyages is hard to determine, because the information is usually less than complete. The given name of the master, sometimes the name of the vessel, and sometimes its rig are the usual reports. Entries and departures are noted, but it is hard to match the entries with departures because for example, a master by the name of Butler departs and a Butler enters, but at this time period before 1800, there are four whaling masters by the names of Silas, Henry, Cornelius, and Abner active in this port, so the information is not specific.

What has become evident in this newspaper search is the connection between whaling and the escape of slaves. Whaling was one employment where men of color could find escape and opportunity for advancement and it continued to be an opportunity for men of color long after slavery was abolished. Advertisements seeking return of runaway slaves appear in these newspapers in 1774 and 1775, and make it clear that whaling was considered by slaves and owners a path to freedom for slaves.

In Newport, as in New Bedford, there was a strong Quaker religious community. Quakers believed all persons were equal, so it is not surprising that some whaling masters turned a blind eye to the personal history of their crew members.

In 1774, Newport banned slavery. That didn't appear to stop efforts of owners to recover runaways. Rhode Island newspaper advertisements from 1774 and 1775 clearly portray these efforts: A typical ad is this ad that appeared in the Newport *Mercury* on May 29, 1775, corroborating what has long been understood, but poorly documented:

“Ran away from the subscriber, a Negro man slave, named WILL, alias WILL JOHNSTON, a large stout fellow, of a yellow complexion, has a remarkable flesh mole upon his left cheek, a large scar upon one of his hands, between his thumb and fore-finger, and a scar of a burn on one thigh; & has lately arrived from whaling, with Capt. Lemuel Jenkins: Whoever will take up said Negro, and secure him in any of his Majesty's jails, or deliver him to the subscriber, in Newport, shall have TWENTY DOLLARS reward, and all necessary charges, paid by James Carpenter.

N.B. Said Negro professes something of the cooper's trade, and can play upon a violin.”

Unfortunately, so far no crew lists for these early Newport whaling voyages have been discovered, leaving these ads as the only evidence of the men on these early voyages. Hopefully more historical newspapers and other sources continue to be made available digitally for researchers interested in such topics.