



Representing Oceanic New England

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IN the winter of 2024, the long-buried wreck of the schooner *Ada K. Damon*—a fishing vessel that ran aground in 1909, broke up, and was eventually buried beneath layers of silt—re-emerged from beneath the sands on Crane Beach in Ipswich, Massachusetts. Dazzled by the vessel’s sudden reappearance (after an especially dramatic king tide), local reporters described the wreck as a “surprise” and a “wild discovery.”¹ Over the last twenty years, the *Ada K. Damon* has made a few cameo appearances on the beach as erosion and hurricane winds have dramatically reshaped the coastline around Ipswich. As responses to the ship’s latest surfacing suggest, however, many residents and beachgoers have come to see shipwrecks like the *Ada K. Damon*—and the deeper histories of sailing, labor, and peril that they index—as incongruous presences in coastal spaces now associated primarily with leisure.

Like many other spots on Massachusetts’ North Shore (and the New England coast more broadly), Crane Beach has become a popular destination for swimmers, sunbathers, and day-tripping families; the nonprofit conservation organization that manages the beach estimates that more than 350,000 New Englanders visit the picturesque beach every year.² But as the battered remains of the *Ada K. Damon* make clear, Crane

¹Eli Rosenberg, “‘Totally a surprise’: Large piece of ship that wrecked in 1909 washes up on Crane Beach,” *NBC Boston*, February 21, 2024. Marjo Catalano, “High Winds Uncover Wild Discovery at Popular Massachusetts Beach,” *Townsquare Media*, March 25, 2024.

²“Crane Beach on the Crane Estate,” Trustees of the Reservation.

Beach was not always a leisure destination. For centuries, the shores around present-day Ipswich were occupied seasonally by members of the Agawam people, who fished in the waters and raised crops on its grassy highlands. After the 1670s, Euro-Americans farmed the area's salt marshes and piloted an ever-expanding fleet of fishing vessels and commercial ships through the treacherous waters of Ipswich Bay. Crane Beach—like many other coastal locales in New England—remained a workaday place defined by toil, dangerous conditions, and bodily risk through much of the nineteenth century. As John Gillis, Matthew McKenzie, and other scholars have shown, New Englanders saw their region's oceanic environs as storehouses of extractable value, as conduits for the necessary but hazardous business of trade, and as wastelands of chaos and danger—and not the sort of places where one might seek healthful recreation, aesthetic experience, or valuable real estate.³ Those who lived along the coast often built their homes as far as they could from the sea and oriented their homes away from its unpredictable and hazardous forces.

As the nineteenth century progressed, middle-class New Englanders gradually adopted a new perspective on their oceanic environments. Eager to escape the heat, crowds, and dirt of area cities, tourists used the period's growing railroad network to explore the region's mountains and shores. Enterprising developers built hotels and rentable cottages to accommodate these travelers, and by the end of the century a host of seaside resorts—from exclusive enclaves like Newport or Bar Harbor to more affordable escapes like Old Orchard Beach in Maine—dotted New England's coastlines.

As this new coastal culture emerged, artists and writers—including, most famously, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Winslow Homer, and Celia Thaxter—sought creative inspiration and spiritual meaning in New England's oceanic environments. Called by the “lure of the sea,” these and other

³See John Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), and Matthew McKenzie, *Breaking the Banks: Representation and Realities in the New England Fisheries, 1866–1966* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).

creators reimagined New England's working beaches and waters as elements of a romantic wilderness animated by timeless natural forces, a sublime space where the modern visitor might leave the trappings of civilization behind and contemplate the eternal rhythms of wind and tide.⁴

Over the past few decades, scholars have addressed the material and cultural histories of New England's oceanic environments from various angles. Historians have elucidated the global maritime industries (especially fishing, whaling, shipbuilding, and the trade in enslaved persons) that powered New England's historical economies and tracked the legal-political conflicts that have arisen around its marine spaces and resources.⁵ But as the shifting sands of Crane Beach demonstrate, New England's marine environments carry the traces of countless other, lesser-known pasts, buried legacies of labor, peril, and creative practice that await further explication.

The essays gathered in this special issue explore New England's oceanic history and culture from an array of disciplinary perspectives. Analyzing works of oceanic art and literature made between 1815 and 1950, our contributors survey the ways that New Englanders reckoned with their region's transforming shorelines and took stock of New England's shifting place in the broader oceanic world. Addressing hurricane memorials, paintings of seaweed gathering, whaling prints, literary and cultural imaginings of fishing, and abstract seascapes, the following essays shed new light on the creative ways that artists and writers of the long nineteenth century represented New England's oceanic climate, justified and critiqued the region's maritime economies, reflected nostalgically on its customary coastal lifeways, and developed novel pictorial forms around its islands and inshore waters.

⁴This phrase is borrowed from Alain Corbin's book, *The Lure of the Sea: Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750–1840*, which charts the dramatic resignification of the ocean over the course of the long nineteenth century.

⁵See, for example, Philip Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whalefishery, 1720–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Taking an expansive view of the region, our contributors consider cultural works that explore its social, economic, and environmental connections with maritime locales across the globe—including the Caribbean, northern Europe, and the South Pacific. In this way, the essays embrace what contributor Kimia Shahi calls an “oceanic vision of New England,” a conception that emphasizes continuities across geographic forms and experiences rather than difference and distance, highlighting the flow of people, material goods, and cultural practices across national boundaries.

In their efforts to unpack the cultural and environmental histories of New England’s coastal waters, our contributors draw on a recent body of scholarship—variously called “oceanic studies” or “blue humanities”—that has sought to reassess the relationships between humans, human culture, and water in all of its forms. Taking cues from Phillip Steinberg, Margaret Cohen, Steve Mentz, and other scholars in the blue humanities, the essays in this issue seek to understand the materiality of the ocean and its ecosystems, to work out ecological (rather than anthropocentric) approaches to cultural analysis, and to recapture histories of oceanic thought and environmental critique that might be useful to scholars, activists, and citizens grappling with the littoral consequences of climate change. As a region whose population centers, primary economic sectors, real estate, and public spaces are concentrated on its coasts, New England is already facing the challenges posed by rising sea levels and extreme weather. It is our hope that the essays in this special issue—which plumb the ways that historical New Englanders thought about their region’s environmental vulnerability, about oceanic resources and their depletion, and about the human costs of maritime enterprise—may help inform efforts to reckon with these and other environmental crises.

As our contributors demonstrate, New Englanders have long been sensitive to the predicaments and possibilities intrinsic to coastal living. Examining the conflicts that arose around a proposed memorial to the Great September Gale of 1815—a Category 4 hurricane that devastated Providence, Rhode Island, and cut a swath of destruction through the region’s

interior—Ross Barrett’s essay reconstructs the divergent ways that public leaders and everyday citizens remembered the tropical storms that hit New England in the nineteenth century and understood the region’s place within the Atlantic hurricane belt. Arguing that the region’s hurricanes inspired enduring patterns of official denialism and vernacular commemoration, Barrett’s essay reminds us that representations of environmental disaster have long had tremendous stakes and catalyzed political contention.

Naomi Slipp’s essay surveys the rich economic and creative practices that arose around the traditional practice of seaweed harvesting in New England and the broader Atlantic world during the long nineteenth century.⁶ Analyzing New Bedford artist Clement Nye Swift’s *Une charretée de goemon sur une plage de Bretagne (A Cartload of Seaweed on a Beach in Brittany)* (1878) as a complex intervention in a transnational milieu of seaweed art and commerce that linked the United States and France, Slipp shows that the painting shapes a nostalgic vision of traditional coastal labor that gave voice to period anxieties prompted by coastal industrialization on both sides of the Atlantic.

If scholars have not devoted much attention to seaweed, the same cannot be said of whaling. Herman Melville’s work alone has generated shelves of books; in recent years scholars have studied the industry’s ecological implications, global reach, and place in energy history intensively.⁷ Visual representations of whaling culture, however, have received comparatively little attention. Building on the scholarship of Jennifer Schell and Jamie Jones, Marina Wells’s essay explores the critical work

⁶Previous scholarship on the cultural interest in seaweed includes Michele Navakas, “A Book Full of Seaweed,” *Huntington Frontiers Magazine* (Spring/Summer 2018): 8–12; and Molly Duggins, “Pacific Ocean Flowers: Colonial Seaweed Albums,” *The Sea and Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literary Culture*, eds. Steve Mentz and Martha Elena Rojas (Routledge, 2016): 119–34.

⁷See, for example, *Whales, Whaling, and Ocean Ecosystems* ed. James Estes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Jamie L. Jones: *Rendered Obsolete: Energy Culture and the Afterlife of US Whaling* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023); Heidi Scott, “Whale Oil Culture, Consumerism, and Modern Conservation” in *Oil Culture* eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 3–18.

that popular prints did to attract young men to New England's whaling industry. Focusing on a pair of engravings marketed by the disabled Connecticut whalemens Cornelius B. Hulsart—the first whaling prints sold in the U.S. by an American artist—Wells shows that early whaling images shaped stirring scenes of heroic whalemens and successful whale hunts that worked to consolidate a mode of maritime masculinity keyed to the rigors of the industry and to normalize the business for its owners, its workers, and the greater consuming public.

As Alison Glassie's essay demonstrates, New England's deep-rooted fishing economy inspired an equally rich array of literary and visual interpretations during the long nineteenth century. Studying works of regional fiction, local histories, and novels (most centrally, Rudyard Kipling's *Captains Courageous* of 1897) that use the technologically-advanced but dangerous schooners developed by fishermen in late nineteenth-century Gloucester, Massachusetts, to playfully scramble the period's gendered conceptions of fishing, Glassie's essay unsettles customary narratives of commercial fishing as an exclusively male sector and elucidates the critical role that the family played (as a fundamental unit of labor) in the cultural discourses that arose around a quintessential New England business.

In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate the aesthetic insights and provocations that modern American artists—including Childe Hassam and Marsden Hartley—discovered in New England's islands and coasts.⁸ Building on this important research, Kimia Shahi's essay turns our attention to the oceanic work of Reuben Tam (1916–1991), a peripatetic Hawaiian-born modernist whose summer visits to Monhegan Island, Maine, in the 1940s and 1950s inspired the artist to undertake an intermittent series of striking semi-abstract paintings. Examining four of the artist's Monhegan canvases against the backdrop of his upbringing in the Pacific, Shahi's essay repositions Tam as an archipelagic painter whose work unfixes geographical

⁸See for example *American Impressionist: Childe Hassam and the Isles of Shoals*, eds. Austen Barron Bailly and John W. Coffey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); *Marsden Hartley's Maine*, eds. Donna Cassidy, Elizabeth Finch, and Randall Griffey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

boundaries and national identities. By putting Monhegan in touch with Hawai'i, Shahi argues, Tam's paintings resist entrenched continental approaches, challenge familiar conceptions of land and water, and formulate a modernist aesthetics that replace the proprietary gaze of traditional landscape with a more fluid sense of relation to place and belonging.

Taken together, the essays in this special issue offer a fresh account of the art and literature of New England's nineteenth and twentieth-century coasts. As they shed light on some of the understudied figures that contributed to the region's vibrant oceanic culture, our contributors demonstrate that the experience of coastal life inspired New Englanders to develop innovative forms of visual and writerly expression that recalibrated prevailing modes of representation, troubled normative conceptions of place and identity, tapped into the hope and anxieties engendered by historical change, and gave voice to nascent forms of ecological consciousness.

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