

John Mashow (1805–1893)

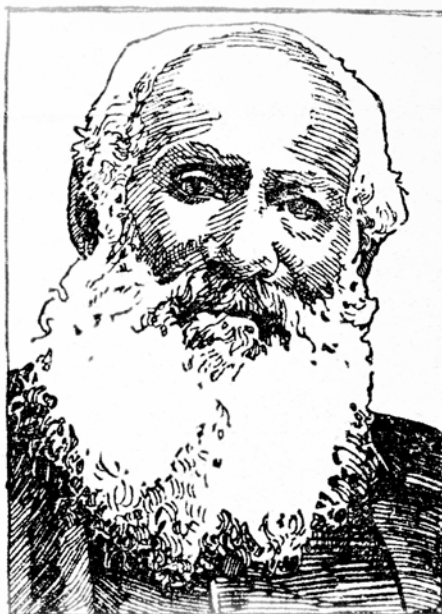
From Slavery to Master Shipbuilder and Designer

by Skip Finley

I rather vividly recall seeing the line-drawn sketch of John Mashow in an old New Bedford newspaper article while researching my book, *Whaling Captains of Color—America's First Meritocracy*. The newspaper clipping is located in the whaling scrapbook collection of the New Bedford Whaling Museum Library, and I was going through it to locate background information on some of the whaling captains I was including in the book. It is exceedingly rare to find portraits of persons of color from the era when Mashow was alive, before the Civil War. He was obviously a man of the moment to have had his portrait included with the newspaper article titled “Old Time Shipbuilding,” followed by the subtitle, “A Mashow Ship Considered One of the Very Best.”¹ He wears a slight smile in the picture, a rare depiction for a portrait of a black man during this time period. There is substantive information in the article about Mr. Mashow’s prolific work as a shipbuilder and architect, but little on how he came by those skills.

Born in 1805 to a slave mother and slaveowner father—a rice planter in Georgetown, South Carolina—John Mashow arrived in Massachusetts in 1815.² He had been freed by his father of the same name, and thanks to the assistance of a member of South Carolina’s Thatcher family, young John was sent to Massachusetts in the care of a northern Thatcher family member.³ In about 1818, Mashow became apprenticed to shipbuilder Laban Thatcher in the bayside village of Padanaram, just a couple of miles south of New Bedford. The influential Thatchers had moved there from Cape Cod in the 1790s, built a wharf, shipyard, windmill, and a magnesia factory, and changed the area’s name from its native Wampanoag name “Ponogansett” to a biblical-based name (from Padan-Aram in ancient Mesopotamia).⁴

Over the years, Mashow pursued his craft in Padanaram along its wharves and shipyards on Apponagansett Bay, an inlet protected from the open Atlantic by the larger Buzzards Bay, easily accessed by its navigable deep-water approach from the



John Mashow as depicted in the New Bedford Evening Standard on 29 October 1904.

ocean. On 17 July 1830, he married Hope Amos of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, and they soon started a family. She bore him eight children.⁵

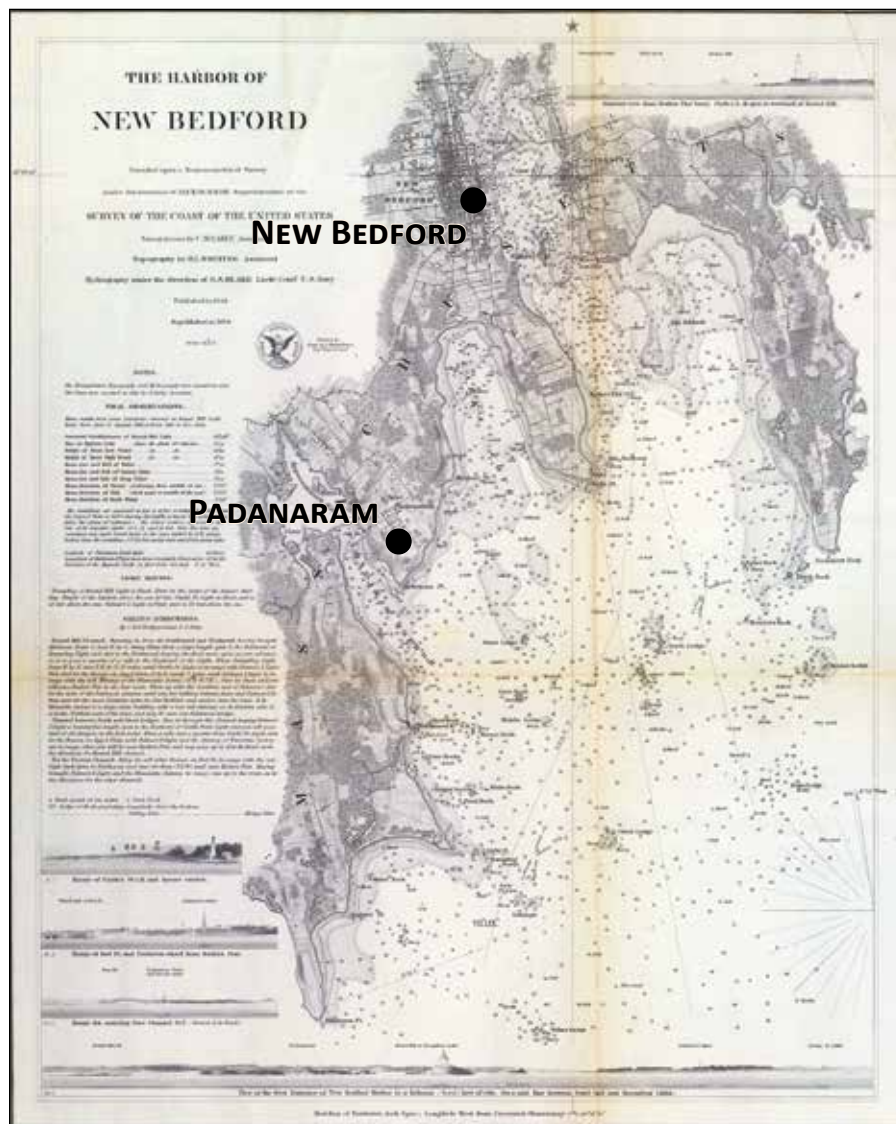
Literate and fairly well-educated, Mashow founded his own shipbuilding company in 1831 after earning his Master Carpenter’s Certificate, required by the Collector of Customs to certify ships.⁶ From the prism of his life’s work and accomplishments, while the apprenticeship gave his career its start, he was clearly gifted in myriad ways. With more than 100 ships credited to his designs, construction, or both, twenty built between 1833 and 1858 were whaling vessels.⁷ These averaged 275 tons and collectively embarked on more than 139 whaling voyages. They amassed revenues from the capture of about

The Mashow-built whaling barque Tropic Bird at Tabor’s Wharf.

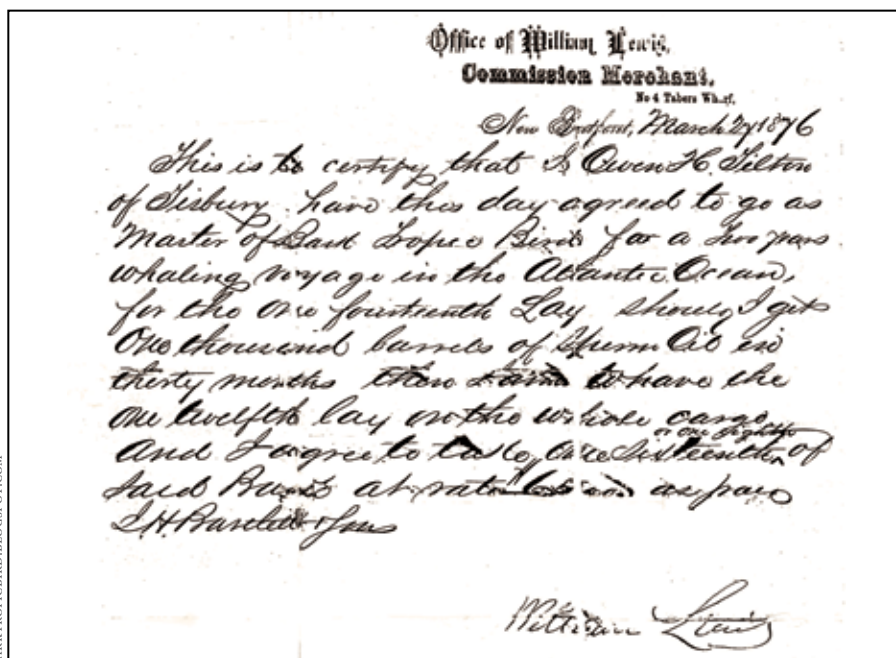


2,795 whales that produced sperm oil, whale oil, and whalebone worth about \$7,326,000—the equivalent of \$181 million in 2019.⁸ In 1845 John Mashow joined forces with Alonzo Mathews, James Madison Babbitt, and Frederick Smally to found the Mathews, Mashow & Company shipyard at Padanaram.

In 1851 John Mashow built *Tropic Bird*, which in the course of its 34-year whaling career would complete thirteen whaling voyages, bringing home more than nine million dollars' worth of whale products as cargo. At 163 tons, it was the fourth smallest of Mashow's whalers. He and his partners launched two more ships that year: *Sea Queen* (240 tons) and the *A. R. Tucker* (123 tons), the smallest of the Mashow whaling ships. The *Sea Queen's* production totaled almost \$12.5 million in revenue across a 37-year working life. *A. R. Tucker*, with eighteen whaling voyages in her working life and earning approximately \$17 million from harvested whale products, was second only to *Morning Star* and *Cape Horn Pigeon*, which each embarked on nineteen whaling voyages. These Mashow-built ships had long working lives: *A. R. Tucker's* 57 years of service was exceeded only by *Morning Star* with 62. *Morning Star* was the most productive of the Mashow ships, earning \$28.5 million, with *Cape Horn Pigeon* ranking second with about \$23.3 million.



DAVID RUMSEY MAP COLLECTION



(above) 1850 map of New Bedford and Buzzards Bay and approaches from sea. John Mashow's shipyard was in Padanaram, a short sail from New Bedford.

(left) Letter dated 27 March 1876 from the "Office of William Lewis, Commission Merchant" spelling out the terms of Captain Owen Tilton's contract to take command of the whaling ship *Tropic Bird*.

"This is to certify that I Owen H. Tilton of Tisbury have this day agreed to go as Master of Bark *Tropic Bird* for a two year whaling voyage in the Atlantic Ocean for the one fourteenth Lay. Should I get one thousand barrels of Sperm Oil in thirty months then I am to have the one twelfth lay of the whole cargo and I agree to take one sixteenth or one eighth [inserted] of said [at rates] as paid(r) I. H. Bartlett & Sons. [signed] William Lewis"



NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Original builder's half-hull model of the Matilda Sears. This vessel was built by John Mashow in about 1856 and sailed for twenty-six years. Her five whaling voyages brought in whale products valued at \$10.9 million today.

Among the Mathews, Mashow & Company designed merchant ships and whalers was the 319-ton *Aurora*, built in 1856 for \$16,267.77.⁹ If we use the costs of building *Aurora* for a baseline, it could be imputed that these ships were built for approximately \$51 per ton. The combined tonnage of the twenty Mathews, Mashow & Company whalers comes in at 5,507 tons. This figure multiplied by \$51 per ton comes to \$280,857. Adjusted for inflation over the period of time in which they were constructed and operated, the vessels built by this shipyard produced a total value of \$7,257,345 (in 2019 dollars), or about \$362,867 per ship.

To offset some of the capital needed upfront to build and outfit a ship for a voyage, shipbuilders often retained a share of the vessels they built as partial payment.

Mashow held shares in seven ships. For thirty years, his ships had a reputation for putting them among the best on the water.¹⁰

Maritime life was a family tradition in the region, and several of the Mashow sons went to sea as crew aboard whalers out of New Bedford. At least one of his sons, Isaac H. Mashow, went to sea in a vessel his father designed and built. Isaac Mashow was signed on as a boat-steerer aboard the whaler *Benjamin Cummings* on its voyage to the Pacific from 1854–1859. The ship was owned by Tucker & Cummings when it left Dartmouth, Massachusetts, on 14 November 1854; it returned to Massachusetts nearly five years later with 1,624 barrels of sperm whale oil valued at over \$2.7 million today.¹¹ Isaac Mashow cleared \$152 from the voyage, while Matthews, Mashow & Company, which owned 4/64 of the



NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

The whaling ship Benjamin Cummings was the namesake of its owner, who owned an imposing Italianate-style home in 1854 at 411 County Street in New Bedford. The New Bedford Preservation Society includes it on its walking tour of historic homes.

barque, made \$2,199, according to final settlement accounts. The partnership also owned shares in the *A. R. Tucker*, *Cape Horn Pigeon*, *Matilda Sears*, and individually in other whalers.¹²

Like many of his contemporaries, Benjamin Cummings re-invested his profits in whaling and grew wealthy. The barque bearing his name was launched in 1846 with a full-length sculpture of its proud namesake as its figurehead. Across its twenty-one years of whaling, the *Benjamin Cummings* provided over \$8.3 million of revenue for its owners.¹³

Whaling ships at the wharf in New Bedford, 1868. John Mashow's career straddled the peak years of American whaling, when nearly two hundred whaling ships hailed from the port of New Bedford.



PHOTO BY JOHN TIRRELL, COURTESY NEW BEDFORD FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Alas, the Mathews-Mashow partnership would not last as an entity after 1858, but their ships lasted well into the 20th century. *Morning Star*'s final whaling voyage returned to port in 1914. One vessel (not a whaler), the schooner *Thomas Borden*, was not completed until 1861.

A notable example of a Mashow-designed whaleship was the 341-ton whaler *Nimrod*. Built in 1841, it was constructed with "white oak, live oak, yellow pine, and locust with copper fastened through."¹⁴ During the Civil War, three Mashow whalers—*Nimrod*, *Benjamin Tucker*, and *Jireh Swift*—along with more than sixty others were burned to the waterline by the Confederate raiders CSS *Alabama* and CSS *Shenandoah*.

John Mashow built the 454-ton *Jireh Swift* in 1853. Its first whaling voyage took it to the northern Pacific and lasted nearly four years. The 122-foot ship collected 45

barrels of sperm oil, 2,719 barrels of whale oil, and 14,900 pounds of whalebone—together worth more than \$3.5 million for the single trip. On 22 June 1865, *Jireh Swift* was destroyed after leading *Shenandoah* on a chase through the ice fields of the Bering Sea. It is likely that the last shots of the Civil War were fired that day, as Com-

mander James Waddell, Confederate States Navy, having been away from the continent for many months and lacking fresh news of the war, later claimed he was not aware of its conclusion weeks earlier.¹⁵

It is easy to see from the listing of Mashow Whale Ship Records how valuable the *Jireh Swift* was to its owners. After

MASHOW WHALE SHIP RECORDS			
Category	Ship	Year Ship Returned	Cargo Value*
Largest Revenue Voyage	<i>Jireh Swift</i> **	1857	\$3,548,551
Largest Sperm Oil Voyage	<i>Sea Queen</i>	1866	\$ 108,426
Largest Whale Oil Voyage	<i>Jireh Swift</i>	1865	\$ 112,520
Largest Whalebone Voyage	<i>Jireh Swift</i>	1857	\$ 37,616
*in 2019 dollars			
**at 454 tons, <i>Jireh Swift</i> was Mashow's largest whaling ship			



The Mashow-built barque Morning Star had an incredible 62-year lifespan. Between 1853 and 1914, she completed 19 whaling voyages.

NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM



The 122-foot Jireh Swift was the largest of Mashow's whalers and the most profitable. She was captured in June 1865 in the Arctic by the Confederate raider CSS Shenandoah and subsequently torched and burned to the waterline.

building the schooner *J. W. Flanders*, Mathews, Mashow & Company declared bankruptcy in 1858 as a result of the financial downturn of 1857. Two other ships, the *William Gifford* and the *Thomas Borden*, must have still been under construction, as they were completed in 1858 and 1861 respectively. When the Mathews-Mashow yard closed, John Mashow received a public testimonial as "a thorough, practical master shipbuilder and a most worthy and respected citizen."¹⁶

The name of John Mashow deserves to be ranked, undoubtedly, with those of our best naval architects....John Mashow, a man of

color, who from humble origin like many other men of true genius has risen to the highest rank as a naval architect as well as shipbuilder. He was born in 1805 ... in Georgetown, South Carolina, the child of a white man, but born of a colored mother, the slave of the father. By a provision in the will of the father, John ... was sent North to learn the trade of a ship carpenter, which he states was in accordance with the wish he had frequently expressed to the father, always objecting to any other occupation proposed to him.

—*The Mercury*, New Bedford

The barque William Gifford was not launched until a year after the Mathews-Mashow shipyard closed. In her 19-year working life, she brought home \$5.3 million worth of whale products. In this painting by Charles Sidney Raleigh (1830–1925), the ship is shown with a white hull under full sail. She is flying four flags: the Union Jack, the American flag, and two with the initials "W. G." She was named for William Gifford, who acted as agent for a number of local whaling ships, including the Charles Drew, Minerva, and William Gifford.



A group of prominent whaling ship owners and merchants presented him with a document that paid tribute to his work. It read:

Mr. John Mashow of Dartmouth is highly esteemed in this District as a thorough, practical master shipbuilder and as a most worthy and respected citizen ...As a Draughtsman, skillful Naval Architect and excellent builder, he has no superior in this section of the state.¹⁷

John Mashow pursued his career independently after the shipyard closed, including the 140-ton clipper/schooner that was built in 1861 in South Dartmouth for Benjamin Rodman, Esq. A Boston newspaper described it as a “large water boat.”¹⁸ In 1868 he built the *New Bedford*, a barque touted as “one of the best specimens of that

kind of mechanical work we have ever inspected.”¹⁹ A year later he built a small schooner, the 44-foot *Juanita*, for a Captain Richard Flanders from Martha’s Vineyard.²⁰

There are a host of other newspaper articles referencing additional ships built and repaired by John Mashow until he was listed as a “ship carpenter” in New Bedford city directories upon his death in 1893.²¹ His obituary read:

John Mashow, a well-known ship-builder in the palmy days of New Bedford’s whaling interests, died at his home in Dartmouth today in his 88th year. He has built some of the finest and staunchest of the vessels which comprised the whaling fleet ... He was honorable and upright in his dealings, and commanded the respect of all who knew him.²²

Mashow’s long successful career would be an achievement for any man during this era, but it is all the more remarkable for a black man to have achieved most of this before the end of the Civil War. Sadly, after such proven and acknowledged success, little remains as a memorial to this man. To date, the sole vessel honoring him was the fishing schooner *John Mashow*, built in 1846 that was probably built, designed, and named by Mashow himself. ⚓

Skip Finley, a former radio broadcasting executive, who has attempted retirement since age fifty, keeps returning to communications and is currently in marketing at the Vineyard Gazette Media Group on Martha’s Vineyard. For five years Finley wrote the Vineyard Gazette’s weekly Oak Bluffs Town column and has contributed to several publications in the areas of whaling and history. His second book, Whaling Captains of Color: America’s First Meritocracy, was published in 2020.

NOTES

¹ New Bedford Whaling Museum Library, Scrapbooks (7/15/16), unnamed, undated newspaper article, “Old Time Shipbuilding” by William G. Kirschbaum

² Sidney Kaplan, *American Studies in Black and White: Selected Essays 1949–1989*, University of Amherst Press, MA 1991, 234–236; Owen H. Tilton life at sea, <http://barktropicbird.blogspot.com/2009/04/>

³ Spencer Jourdain, *The Dream Dancers—An American Reflection Upon Past Present and Future: Volume One, New England Preservers of the Dream of the Dream 1620–1924*, Shorefront, Evanston, IL, 2016, pgs. 24–26.

⁴ *South Coast Today*, “Padanaram’s Rich History Flavored by Ship Building, Salt” by Auditi Guha, 20 July 2014. www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20140720/news/407200321

⁵ Isaac H. Mashow was a boatsteerer onboard the whaler *Benjamin Cummings*, during a voyage from 1854 to 1859.

⁶ Patricia Carter Sluby, *The Innovative Spirit of African Americans—Patented Ingenuity*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT, 2004, pg. 11 [source: Portia James]. The Real McCoy: *African American Invention and Innovation, 1619–1930*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1989, pgs. 33–35.]

⁷ Sidney Kaplan, *American Studies in Black and White: Selected Essays 1949–1989*, University of Amherst Press, MA 1991, page 235

⁸ Author’s Estimates: These estimates are based on a formula factoring for the generic size of whales (in barrels), gallons per barrel, prices by year and the inflation-based value of dollars in 2019. Sources include: Inflation Calculator, www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1914?endYear=2019&amount=1; Ship Data, Judith N. Lund (et al) *American Offshore Whaling Vessels 1667–1927*; Barrels per whale: Elmo Paul Hohman, *The American Whaleman*; Gallons per Barrel: F. D. Ommanney *Lost Leviathan*, Price per gallon/pound: Alexander Starbuck *History of the American Whale Fishery*, (to 1876); Price per gallon/pound: Reginald B. Hegarty, *Returns of Whaling Vessels Sailing from*

American Ports, (1876–1928). For a host of reasons some of this data may be inaccurate and are best used for perspective.

⁹ Spencer Jourdain, *The Dream Dancers*, pgs. 24–26.

¹⁰ New Bedford Whaling Museum Library, (7/15/16), unsourced, undated newspaper article, “Old Time Shipbuilding” by William G. Kirschbaum

¹¹ Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery*, Waltham, MA, 1878,

¹² *Mr. Tashtego—Native American Whalemen in Antebellum New England*, Nancy Shoemaker; Project Muse, University of Connecticut, see National Archives Project, Ship Registers of New Bedford, Massachusetts, (3 volumes, Boston, 1940).

¹³ Author’s estimate

¹⁴ Spencer Jourdain, *The Dream Dancers*, pgs. 24–26

¹⁵ The ex-slave, the doomed barque and the American President, www.sea.museum/2012/04/10/object-of-the-week-the-ex-slave-the-doomed-barque-and-the-american-president

¹⁶ New Bedford Whaling Museum Library, Scrapbooks (7/15/16), unsourced, undated newspaper article, “Old Time Shipbuilding” by William G. Kirschbaum; Commercial Fishers: Whaling, www.americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/3_7.html

¹⁷ *Footsteps: African American History*, Vol 1 Issue 3, May 1999 c1999-Page 47. *John Mashow, Master Shipbuilder*. Wiscat #-STWI-492841; <http://barktropicbird.blogspot.com/2009/04/>

¹⁸ *Boston Commercial Bulletin*, 7/13/1861; *New York Herald*, 11/6/1861

¹⁹ *New Bedford Evening Standard*, 7/28/1868

²⁰ *New Bedford Mercury*, 4/9/1869

²¹ *Long Island Historical Journal* Vol. 2, No. 1, pages 41–52; “African American Whalers: Images and Reality” by Floris Barnett Cash, pg. 48

²² Sidney Kaplan, *American Studies in Black and White: Selected Essays 1949–1989*, University of Amherst Press, MA 1991, page 236