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Whaler involvement in slave trade explained at historical society talk

By Robert Barboza
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WESTPORT – Westport Historical Society president Tony Connors finally got to deliver his twice-delayed talk about Westport whaling master Edward Davoll on March 3, as part of the society’s continuing winter lecture series. For the large crowd of local history fans, the lecture was worth the wait.

“A Westport Whaleman Goes Slaving” was the topic, a simplified but misleading description of the 1860s affairs that led to Davoll to be indicted for aiding ship owners known to be involved in the illegal slave trade. For the record, Connors noted, “He never bought and sold slaves, he just abetted it.”

The Westport captain was living in New Bedford when he was arrested and released on bail for those charges. He died of typhoid fever in that city before the case came to trial, so he was never convicted of breaking the federal anti-slavery laws, either, the researcher said.

How did a promising young captain of successful whaleships end up ferrying and outfitting illegal slave ships? “Why did he do it? He needed money... he was down on his luck. “The slave traders went looking for men like him” who knew the Atlantic Ocean and needed work, Connors explained.

His lecture explained much about the life and times of Edward Davoll, his personal story, and the circumstances that led to his “alleged” but certain involvement in the lucrative business of buying and selling men, women, and children into slavery, an illegal practice in the U.S. at the time. It was a highly-condensed version of the biography of Davoll that Connors will publish through the UMass Amherst university press next spring.

The book is the end product of six or seven years of research into Davoll, including the collection of 30 or more of his letters, newspaper accounts of the times, and court records related to the federal human trafficking charges that he faced at the end of his life, Connors said.

Perhaps the letters provide the best clues to Davoll’s background, experiences, and mindset. “They’re very well written letters, with impeccable grammar, and reasonably good spelling,” Connors reported about the young man who grew up near the Head of Westport.

One of the letters hints at the pervasive racism of the times, with Davoll describing the aborigines encountered on an 1858 cruise off Australia as “horrid, dirty objects” shortly before the ship went aground on that country’s coastline. That hint of a racist attitude may have helped justify his later involvement with slave traders, the lecturer said.

In historical perspective, the story plays out at the end of the whaling era, when many local captains and seamen were looking for work to replace the dwindling number of whaling voyages. Then in 1861, at the start of the Civil War, maritime commerce dwindled even more, and for some mariners, the despicable business of slave trading was better than starvation, he explained.

Certainly, more profitable than whaling or trading – often paying 10 times the usual wages, he noted. Many former whalers would join the profitable business, or assist it in some way.

On the personal level, Davoll’s career at sea is typical of many others in these parts. He made his first trip on a whaler out of Westport Point at age 17 on a short voyage around the Atlantic under Captain Pardon Cook. “He (Cook) was black, and so were some of the crew,” Connors noted, a situation not so common in those days.

Davoll’s second sailing in the early 1840s was on a year-long whaling trip, followed by a two-year trip on a ship sent to the Indian Ocean and South Pacific. By then, he had enough experience to be a boatsteerer, helming the little whaleboats sent out to harpoon the leviathans the whalers chased.

In 1848, Davoll was made captain of the whaleship *Cornelia*, at age 25. "It was pretty unusual to make captain by the age of 25," so he must have been an excellent sailor, Connors suggested. He served as master of that vessel for three reasonably successful voyages, finding time while on land to court and marry Lizzie Brownell of Westport.

Next, he served as master of the *Iris*, an old 310-ton whaler built at the Head of Westport. After sailing to the Indian Ocean in 1858, he headed south to Australia. The ship went aground, was seriously damaged, and had to be condemned; perhaps 100 barrels of whale oil could be salvaged.

The crew blamed Davoll for the shipwreck, though the owners did not. But, Connors said, he returned to Westport with a reputation as an "unlucky captain" whose skills might be suspect. Having trouble finding work, Davoll finally gets a job from a Mattapoisett whaleship owner to captain a two-year cruise.

On his next job, the mysteries related to Davoll begin. Connors said he "he sorts of disappears for a year" from the whaling business. Some research showed he was working as the captain of a different vessel, a 400-ton whaleship bought by a New York slave trader, sent to New Bedford for refitting in preparation of a long voyage.

Local and federal officials suspected the ship was being converted into a slave trading vessel. With a huge hold and a large cargo capacity, plus facilities for storing and cooking food, "a whaler was nearly a perfect disguise for a slaver," Connors explained.

Davoll sails the ship to the Azores, then disappears for a while. The ship continues on to the coast of Africa under a temporary Spanish captain, where about 700 African men, women and children are purchased as slaves. Some 100 die en route to Cuba, where they are sold to labor on the island's sugar cane plantations.

Even with the losses, the illegal trip would have been hugely profitable, Connors suggested. Common seamen on slavers may have made \$500 for a round trip – up to 10 times a year's usual wages – and captains would be paid "thousands of dollars" for their efforts, he indicated.

But two crew members, tricked into signing on for a whaling trip and disgusted with the work, reported the successful and illegal voyage to authorities when the ship returned to New Bedford. The slave trader's front man in the city was indicted for slave trading; Davoll disappeared again for a while, dodging the federal authorities, before being arrested in 1862 as an accessory to the plot.

He was out on bail when he caught typhoid fever in the city, and died in 1861. The newspapers covering the trial had ruined his reputation, even though he did not live long enough to be tried and convicted.

Davoll's wife died shortly after her husband, and a spinster daughter also died young, ending that branch of the family line in these parts forever.