

# Swimming Oil Wells

Whaling in Alaskan waters flourished in the mid-1800s—whales were a valuable source of oil and baleen and essential to Inuit livelihoods.



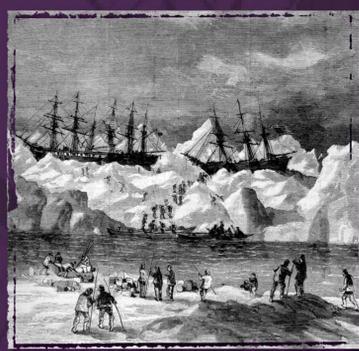
Whale oil had other uses besides lighting  
Photo courtesy of Kahn Fine Antiques and Works of Art  
kahnfineantiques.com

## Giants Light the Way

In the 1840s, Americans found the huge bowhead whales in the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean. Whales supplied oil for lamps and lubrication for guns and the machines of the Industrial Revolution. The baleen, called whale bone, was used to make many practical and fashionable items. One bowhead could produce over 100 barrels of oil and its baleen could be up to 13 feet long. The oil from about 12 whales filled a whaleship. By 1851 more than 200 ships were hunting whales in North Pacific waters.



This vintage advertisement for Royal Worcester Bon-Ton Corsets is from the October 1902 issue of "The Delineator" magazine.  
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Abandonment of the whalers in the Arctic Ocean, September 1871, including the *George Gayhead* and *Concordia*. Scanned from the original *Harper's Weekly* 1871.  
Courtesy of Robert Schwemmer Maritime Library

## To the Rescue

Whalers frequently faced Arctic storms and unpredictable pack ice. Every year, ice trapped at least one ship. More than once, the Inuit people helped whaling crews get to safety and provided them with food and shelter. The early whalers returned to their Atlantic seaport homes with many Inuit artifacts and a lot of information used to promote U.S. acquisition of Alaska.

## Whale of a Harvest

The Native people harvested about 100 whales a year, while the Americans took over 2,000 bowhead in 1850 alone. The whalers knew the huge whales were essential to the lives of the Inuit people, but continued to hunt all the whales they could. They had long admired the skills of the Inuit whalers and hired crews of Native people to hunt for them, paying them with flour, sugar, and other foods foreign to the Inuit people. By the 1920s, only about 3,000 bowhead whales remained worldwide. By then, kerosene had replaced whale oil for lamps and fashion styles changed.



Baleen is clean and ready for shipping from Point Barrow, Alaska, by traders and whalers.  
Photo Courtesy of the Alaska State Library, Reverend Spriggs, 1899-1908 ASL-PCA-300 ASL-P30-39



Dutch whalers near Spitsbergen, 1690  
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### Timeline:

March 30, 1867	April 9, 1867	June 20, 1867	October 18, 1867	July 27, 1868	July 27, 1868	August 1, 1868	August 15, 1868
Seward and de Stoeckl negotiate Treaty of Cession	U.S. Senate ratifies treaty	Russia and U.S. exchange ratifications	Ceremonial transfer of territory at Sitka	Congress appropriates \$7.2 million to complete purchase	Congress passes Customs Act for Alaska	U.S. Treasury issues check	Russia cashes check

150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Alaska Treaty of Cession  
1867~2017