

Basque whalers established the first industry in North America

Bale-ehizaren inguruan, euskaldunek Ipar Ameriketara lehenengo jarduera industrialak barneratu zuten. XVI. mendea produktiboena izan zen eta uste da mende horretan 2.000 arrantzale inguru Euskal Herriko kaletatik San Lorenzoko estuariara joaten zirela, Kanadara, hain zuzen ere. Jarduera horrek aberastasuna ekarri zuen Euskal Herrira, baleen koipearekin lortzen zen olioaren garaiko petrolioaren izatera iritsi baitzen.



It started with the Basques.” This was the sentence coined by United States President Thomas Jefferson in 1788, alluding to the fact that a few centuries earlier the Basque people had introduced the techniques of industrial whaling to the known world at the time. Native populations such as the Inuit (formerly known by the misnomer of Eskimo) had been hunting whales before then. But it was whalers from Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and the coast of Lapurdi that introduced whaling on a commercial scale, making the activity the first industry in North America.

Chronicles of the period indicate that Basques first came to North America in 1517, only seventeen years before French explorer, Jacques Cartier; however, some historians suggest they made the journey before Christopher Columbus in 1492. Whatever the case, the sixteenth century marked the golden era of Basque fishing. At that time 2,000 “arrantzales” are estimated to have set sail every year from Basque ports to the St. Lawrence River (Canada) – at that time known as Nueva Vizcaya – in search of the giant mammals that reproduced and fed in the waters of the estuary on their migration from the Arctic. Their blubber rendered down into oil was a great source of wealth for the Basque Country. According to marine archaeologist Robert Grenier, a barrel of oil from that part of the world was worth the equivalent of 7,000 dollars today.

The Basques established a number of encampments in the St. Lawrence Estuary. Archaeologists with Parks Canada (a government organization for the protection of cultural heritage) have discovered at least fifteen whaling stations dating to the sixteenth century scattered across the region. The greatest number of artifacts have been uncovered in Red Bay, Labrador, a strategic location for monitoring the whales’ migration route. Among the remains still seen today are the tryworks (ovens) used for rendering the valuable whale fat into the ‘petroleum’ of the period, cooperages for making barrels, and roofing tiles brought over from the Basque Country. On Saddle Island, facing the harbor, lie the graves of 140 whalers who never made the journey home.



Utensils from the period and graves of Basque mariners.



The relationship established between the skilful seamen and the native population people was not only commercial. The Basques also fostered linguistic exchange between Euskara and the Mi'kmaq language. A number of historical studies have documented cases of whalers leaving behind cabin boys with the Mi'kmaq people when they would return home at the end of the season. The cabin boys would then learn the native language, thus paving the way for smoother relationships the following season.

The whalers would generally set sail from the Basque Country the second week of June. It took around 60 days or more to cross the Atlantic, depending on the particular conditions and difficulties that might arise. They would reach the shores of Newfoundland in the latter half of August in time to intercept the whales during their autumn migration from the Arctic Ocean to the south seas. Once they arrived, they would prepare their encampment: wharves, tryworks, cooperages and their own living quarters. The whaling season lasted through the end of the year. In winter the harbor waters would freeze over and boats could become trapped. The whalers would only stay in America during the winter if they hadn't been able to fill the ship's hold. When that happened they would top off the load in spring when the whales began to migrate northward.

The voyage home was usually shorter, between 30 and 40 days, owing to favorable ocean currents and tailwinds. That is, if everything went well. The voyage was fraught with danger – ships could go down in a storm and whalers had to deal with European pirates.

The 'discovery' of Iceland

A variety of circumstances, such as the diminishing whale population and the Spanish Crown's petition for galleons and sailors to join the frustrated Spanish Armada, brought an end

to the flurry of Basque whalers in North American waters. In the seventeenth century Basque whalers continued hunting cetaceans off the shores of Newfoundland, soon followed by British and Dutch whalers, who extended their activity to the Arctic Ocean in search of new fishing grounds near the Spitsbergen archipelago.

In 1613 the Basques tried to hunt whales in the waters off Iceland. This new endeavor, which started out with up to 17 ships, lasted only three years, the experience proving to be as harsh as the climate. In fact, many Basque sailors lost their lives in the attempt – not drowned, but murdered – among them, Captain Martín de Villafranca from Donostia and twenty of his men.

Icelandic historians have written about the hardships faced by Basque whalers in a poor inhospitable land. The local authorities, and in particular the shift in thinking of Danish King Christian IV, played a part in the ill-fated adventure. The Danish Crown even issued decrees allowing Basque whalers to be attacked if Icelanders felt their way of life or laws were being infringed. But according to Cambridge professor Michael Barkham Huxley, expert in maritime history and sixteenth century Basque economics, it was more a question of geopolitical and commercial interests than good or bad behavior that made the Icelandic people want to keep the lucrative business of whaling for themselves.

Remnants of Basque presence in Iceland include shipwrecks off the coasts and a few vestiges similar to those found in the St. Lawrence Estuary.

The *arrantzales*, who according to the Icelandic historians covered their heads with red berets, went back to Newfoundland but now fished for cod along with whales and seals in an attempt to keep alive the trade the Basque people had passed on to other nations.