Thankyou for the introduction and for the invitation from the Busselton Settlement Steering Committee to speak at the unveiling of the Whaler’s Wife.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, around the 1840s and 1850s, whaling was one of the largest industries in the world, and our own small town of Busselton was an important part of it. Not just the men but also the women - the wives of the whaling captains. Today we would be ashamed to kill a mighty whale, but back then - 170 years ago - few people even thought of conservation.

In the first few months of 1841, we can count seventeen US whalers calling into Geographe Bay and the Vasse, as it was known to them. These ships took home the highly-prized sperm whale oil, much more again of the ordinary whale oil – from right whales and humpbacks - and tons of baleen – the fibrous mouth material - the whales’ food filter - that was used as buggy springs, horse whips, and the hoops on skirts and corsets.

Sperm oil went into candles and soap, while the main stream whale oil was the fuel for lamps, and a lubricant, particularly as the railways start to spread out across America, as well as in paint and soaps.

In pursuing the whales that supplied this abundance, the whaling captains navigated their vessels thousands of miles in to this remote reach of the Indian Ocean, often on voyages that lasted three or four years. A few boats then had Captain’s wives on board, maybe one in ten, but by 1850 it was more common – maybe one in six.

They were much more than just passengers – they helped out in navigation, kept records of what was bought and sold and they were sometimes based on land for a time – such as here at Vasse, where they were teachers, to local children as well as their own. The whaling wives were also great letter writers, and the details they give of life at sea and ashore is terrific for anyone trying to delve into the history.
Whaling boats carried around thirty men on board, which means that in early 1841, there were about five hundred Americans hanging about off the south west of the state — more than the entire white population on land. These were floating factory ships — the men on board all hard working and very hungry, and to sustain them we sold them food — meat, chickens, fruit and milk, and from more distant locations — at Toby’s Inlet, for example - they took water and wood, the latter to stoke the fires they lit on board, to boil down the whale blubber into oil.

The American industry really hit its peak a few years later in 1846 — more than two hundred and fifty vessels set out that year, from ports such as New Bedford and Fall River, and Sag Harbor and Martha’s Vineyard.

Over a fifty year period, we can count eight hundred voyages by whalers off the coast, from North West Cape down around to Esperance.

Some captains liked the south west a lot: one of them, Archelaus Baker made six voyages off the coast over about twenty years. If you walk among the headstones down at St Mary’s Church, you will see one marking the death of man called Sowles — he was first mate on the Hibernia that Baker commanded. Sowles as an officer was one of those who did the hard work. While we don’t know, I think Sowles must have been hit by a tail or a flipper, or perhaps got his leg caught in a rope and dragged under.

There were other masters who made multiple voyages to the south west - Samuel Cook was here five times, before he was killed at sea by a whale. It was a dangerous business and the worry and the isolation of wives left at home was too much for some — they chose to be with their husbands on board.

One whaler called the Awashonks — it was named after an American Indian chieftainess — had the captain’s wife and son on board. It went from here up to Indonesia, where the captain, John Marble, contracted dysentery, and died, just as he arrived back offshore here. In the usual way of doing things, they put his body in a lead coffin to take home, and pickled it with spirits, but they didn’t do a very good job. The log records that it started to leak, so that had to put into Fremantle and get another coffin, to put the first coffin in.

The American maritime museums in the northeast of the country have huge volumes of material about the whaling industry the amazing lives of these men, in places such as Mystic Seaport and New Bedford, and I hope that in time we can duplicate or recognise the history here.

The Busselton City Council and the Settlement Steering Committee is to be congratulated for starting the ball rolling with this cultural precinct, and ensuring that it recognises the role of all the players — among them the captains’ wives.

The Americans brought more than just their company and their dollars, and their appetite for liquor: they are one of the reasons behind the court house and lock up that we see just over there. It was built mainly to serve as a deterrent to drunken American seaman, or
those who might have decided to desert their ship for whatever reason – perhaps they liked this place, quite understandably - but more likely they disliked the captain and the life.

One of the captains who gave a speech at the ceremony – to mark the start of construction - was Captain George Swain of the *Mohawk* from Nantucket. He thanked everyone on behalf of the US president but what he didn’t say was that he had six men jump ship or be declared a deserter – probably sleeping off a bout of drinking somewhere. Soon he would have somewhere to lock them up, next time he needed to.

There were many Americans who jumped ship here, and many of them jumped back on another one at some stage. One called John Wragge was hiding in the bush near the Wallcliffe property at Margaret River where the owner’s wife Ellen Bussell was home alone with her children. When she started singing to her baby Home Sweet Home, Wragge found it so moving that he burst into tears and came out of the bushes.

The sculpture of course refers to whaling wives in general, but in fact we had two of our very own. One of the families working for the Bussells was the Heppingstone family, who had a daughter Charlotte. She was supposed to accompany Georgiana Molloy’s sister on a boat to England, but that lady – Mary Kennedy - hopped off at Cape Town, and Charlotte went on to Groton in Connecticut, where she married Robert Brown who she had met earlier when he was third mate on a whaler called the *Mentor*.

Charlotte Brown came back out here at least once and probably several times over the years.

The Brown’s had a daughter, who they called Charlotte – and she married a whaleman called Nelson Haley, who was once on a whaler called the *Charles W Morgan* and wrote a book about it. The *Morgan* has just been extensively restored and sits at Mystic Seaport, a few hours up from New York.

Another of the Heppingstone family, John, sailed away on another whaler and himself became a whaling master, with half a dozen voyages around the world but mainly in the northern Pacific. And a step sister, Hannah Bryan, also married an American whaleman.

Ladies and Gentlemen I have mentioned only a few of the courageous men – and women – who sailed in wooden ships out of the north eastern ports of the United States. I suspect this audience might know of more who came here, and I am always interested to hear those stories too.

What was the legacy of the American whalers?

They certainly helped the financial health of the infant colony, in buying our produce, and in selling farm tools that were so hard to get – ploughs, buckets, rope and cloth.
They added much to the social climate – they were a diversion from the hard yards of farming, the isolation – and they added glamour, in the dances, parties and balls that they used to stage – either on board or on shore.

The whaling industry was without doubt brutal and dangerous, and we can only imagine the courage and fortitude – the guts -.of American wives to leave home and experience such demanding times.

This statue by Greg James speaks for all whaling wives, but to me it is the spirit of the two Busselton wives that I think is most beautifully captured.

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Ends

Tim Blue was invited to speak at the unveiling of the first of the Busselton Settlement Art Project sculptures, the Whaler’s Wife on March 14, 2014.

“Tim Blue was born in Busselton and began his career in journalism at the ABC in Perth. In 1974, he was appointed to London as an ABC correspondent after a stint at Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. He has produced financial programs for SBS TV and worked as a business journalist for Channel 9 and The Australian newspaper.

Growing up in Busselton, he was always intrigued by the stories of whalers off the Western Australian coast and the importance of Busselton in Australia’s whaling history. For example, in early 1841, seventeen US whalers called into Geographe Bay and the Vasse, as it was known to them. These ships took home highly-prized sperm whale oil, less valuable whale oil from right whales and humpbacks, and tonnes of baleen – the fibrous, feeding screen in mouths. These were the raw materials for candles, soap, lubricants, paint, oil lamps, hoop skirts, corsets and brushes.

In pursuing the whales that supplied this abundance, the whaling captains navigated their vessels thousands of miles into this remote reach of the Indian Oceans, often on voyages that lasted three or four years. A few boats then had wives had wives on board, maybe one in ten, but by 1850 it was more common – maybe one in six. The Whaling Wife statue to be unveiled will serve as an important reminder of the significant role some very courageous women played in Western Australia’s early maritime history.”

Information supplied by Tim Blue