Seeing humpback whales breaching right offshore, or gray whales migrating south in winter to the lagoons of Baja California or back north in the spring to feed in the Bering Sea, is one of those special things we get to enjoy living on the edge of Monterey Bay.

It’s hard to imagine that within many of our lifetimes, however, the world’s largest animals were still slaughtered along the California coast and processed for pet food, chicken feed and bone meal. And much of this industry was due to the advent of shore whaling started by Captain John Davenport. Originally from Rhode Island, he had been half-owner of a large schooner that sailed between California and Hawaii from 1845 to 1852, trading and whaling along the way.

Whaling in the 1800s was a tough life, and most whalers spent many months far out at sea, going after whales in longboats using hand thrown harpoons. This was a dangerous life and often they didn’t return.

Perhaps from his visits to ports along California’s coast, John Davenport, newly married, moved west to the Golden State in 1852. He soon noticed whales right offshore, passing within view of Monterey and saw an opportunity. Recruiting a dozen Portuguese men, they began hunting humpback and gray whales with hand lances and harpoons from a ship in 1853.

Within a year, however, they began using small boats that could be rowed out from shore. This began the new enterprise that became known as shore whaling, which was also dangerous, but at least allowed the whalers to return home every night. The crews might have to row several miles offshore, harpoon a whale and then drag a 15 to 30-ton animal back to the beach for processing. This was hard work to say the least. Many of the harpooned whales, especially humpbacks, were lost when they sank.

Davenport’s whaling business was marginal economically, but it did attract a number of other competitors. He soon sold out to a group of Portuguese and went back to whaling from a larger ship for two more years. Never one to give up easily, he started a whaling station at the mouth of Soquel Creek, which was also mostly unsuccessful.

From the mid-1850s to about the 1880s, as many as 18 whaling stations were operating along the length of the California coast: at Crescent City, Bolinas Bay, Half Moon Bay, Pigeon Point, Soquel, Monterey, Carmel Bay/Pt. Lobos, Point Sur, San Simeon, Port Harford (Port San Luis), Cojo Viejo (Point Conception), Goleta, Portuguese Bend and Dead Man’s Island (San Pedro), and San Diego Bay.
Following the discovery of oil in Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859, which was soon refined to produce kerosene for lighting and heating, the economics of whaling and the value of whale oil began to decline. While the shore whalers certainly reduced the number of whales along California’s coast, it’s not clear that the reduction in numbers was a significant factor in the decline of the industry. But by 1886, only five of the original 18 whaling stations were still operating.

In the early 1900’s some new technologies, like steam powered chase boats and the harpoon cannon, led to a brief resurgence in whaling, including a short-lived Norwegian-owned whaling operation that operated at Moss Landing between 1919-1926. While whales stood a reasonable chance of evading the older shore whalers in their rowboats, steam powered ships and the harpoon cannon and bomb gun led to much higher take rates.

The Moss Landing plant used just about every part of the whales they brought in. The blubber was turned into oil used by soap manufacturers; the meat was converted to chicken feed, and bones were ground into bone meal.

Within several years of the whaling resurgence in Monterey Bay, the new tools were proving very effective and the whales were becoming both wary and scarce. By 1924, the last whale had been brought ashore and the Moss Landing station was closed, bringing an end to whaling in Monterey Bay.

What is difficult to understand, however, in 1956, thirty-two years after whaling in Monterey Bay ended and almost after a century after oil was discovered, a whaling station opened in Richmond on the eastside of San Francisco Bay. Perhaps the whale population had recovered sufficiently for whaling to become profitable again. In 1971, however, a short fifteen years later, federal marine mammal protection closed down this last west coast whaling factory, ending 118 years of California whaling.

Today, whale populations have slowly rebounded but are still not believed to be anywhere near the numbers that passed along our shores prior to human intervention.