

# SAILING ABOARD THE CHARLES W. MORGAN

By William G. Hanson

The Mystic Seaport Museum, in Mystic, Connecticut, spent five years on a massive restoration of the *Charles W. Morgan*, a whaling ship which sailed once again this summer after a hiatus of more than ninety years. I was fortunate enough to be chosen as a voyager on one leg of this historic 38th voyage. Thirty-seven previous voyages had her traveling world wide spanning an eighty year career.

I have been a professional artist (and member of ASMA) for over thirty years. My intention, as a 38th Voyager, was to fully absorb this historic experience in sketches and photographs. These visual depictions will lead to studio paintings over the course of this winter.

My working goal is to paint from life. As this is not always possible, the more understanding and hands on experience, the better the art.

My primary focus was on the crew's involvement in keeping the *Charles W. Morgan* under sail. As this was my first time sailing on a square rigged ship, the learning curve was steep. In preparation for this historical sail, sketches were made of the hull restoration and the stepping of the Morgan's masts. As with many of my fellow ASMA members, time was also spent on deck over the

years as a museum visitor, which provided a comfort level with the ship. Many attempts had been made to completely read Herman Melville's classic novel *MOBY DICK*. This time, with a new-found carrot dangling before me, success was not only achieved, but the book was truly enjoyed. I mention previous involvement with the *Charles W. Morgan*, as the museum artifact, only to accentuate my shock and joy at seeing the boat in a completely new environment.

On May 17, 2014, the Morgan was towed away from the Henry B. DuPont Preservation Shipyard at Mystic Seaport Museum, headed for Fisher's Island Sound where a small flotilla created a grand entrance into the New London Harbor. There to welcome the Morgan was a fireboat, with all hoses spraying skyward, followed by *Roann*, Mystic Seaport Museum's fully restored Eastern-Rig Dragger, and finally the Tugboat *Sirius* with the *Charles W. Morgan* under tow. From a distance, she quickly became the focal point in a busy commercial maritime setting. Her rigging intact, the new custom woven cotton sails in place, and her sea trials in Fisher's Island Sound completed, the 38th Voyage had begun. Her ports of call included Newport, Vinyard Haven, New Bedford, Mass Maritime Academy, and Provincetown, where I joined the voyage bound for the Stellwagen Bank and the long anticipated meeting with whales.

On July 11th, it could not have been a more beautiful day. The evening stage was set in the outer harbor, past the break water, with clear skies, calm seas, and an enormous perigee moon. The ten minutes our launch took to clear the breakwater from MacMillan

Pier, gave clear view of the ship, in her rightful environment. To my mind she was ready to sail the seas of the world, and at this moment made an everlasting impression on me.

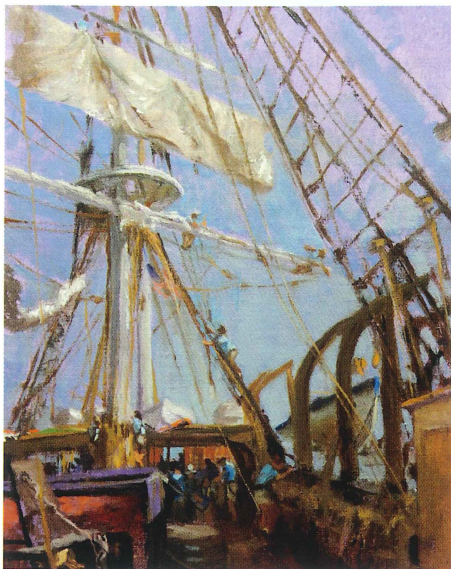
This was the history I desired to paint. No longer the museum artifact with which I had become so familiar, the *Morgan* had returned to her former glory.

Once on board we found a berth in the forecabin, while later on deck, stories were shared until well into the night.

The early morning deck was quiet in preparation for the full day ahead. Rafted with the Mystic Whaler, we boarded her for breakfast. As we prepared to weigh anchor, the Morgan's crew went aloft. With much activity on deck, commands were given, both crew and guests hoisted and pulled lines, and things move rapidly, everyone with a specific focus. The deck was cast into shadow as the sails were hoisted. With only light air, we tacked and the Morgan responded. I was standing in the shadow in the tri-works, when all five foresails simultaneously backed around, reflecting immense light on the deck.

Having just finished reading Melville, and still under his spell, I will describe this burst of light as a silvery white pathway "to the starry archipelagoes and the white breakers of the milky way."

This moment will be recorded on canvas (with apologies to Melville). It is a story that I find compelling, every time I recall it. What a glorious sight the boat must have been from shore, every sail out, when "thar she blows" could be heard, and a whale boat was lowered. Hearing the whales, sometimes even before their spray is visible, places one in the moment, both the historical and



"Making Ready" - 8" x 12" - Oil on Panel



"Weighing Anchor for Stellwagen Bank" - 8"x10" - Oil on Panel

the present. This was one of the many things my imagination had not taken into account, but an understanding that was necessary in the telling of this story.

After all these years, 'peace talks' were held with the whales of Stellwagen Bank. One lone whale boat could be seen amidst a host of whales, no harpoons this time, but lots of rowing.

One overnight and a full day on an authentic whaling ship, on the sea surrounded by whales...the intangible things of which paintings are made.

