

lifestyle



# A Sailor's Life for Me

Maritime artifacts & antiques in a Nantucket home.

by Betsy Tyler  
photography by J. David Bohl

*After* spending many

hot summers in Bermuda with her family, our collector mentioned to her husband that she had heard Nantucket Island was cool in the summer and a great place for a favorite pastime of hers, gardening. They decided to spend the next summer on the "Grey Lady," so-called because of the often foggy conditions of this island off the Massachusetts coast. It was love at first sight. Their older son, a maritime history aficionado at an early age, discovered the Nantucket Historical Association's Whaling Museum and the family's collection of maritime antiques grew from his enthusiasm for the history of the island that was once a center of the international whaling industry.

The walls of the entrance hall are painted a rich navy blue to showcase a colorful collection of sailor's "woolies" with nautical themes. Hanging over the Federal mahogany server with a single drop-leaf, attributed to Jacob Forster, Charlestown, Massachusetts, is an early nineteenth-century American watercolor of a whaling scene depicting the whaler *Rose*, where one of the Burdett teeth was carved. A pair of eighteenth-century Chinese export Nanking river scene vases rests on the table. Several nests of Nantucket baskets line the stairway.



Two centuries ago, Nantucket whalers brought home treasures from around the globe, and created some of their own in the form of scrimshaw, ditty boxes, and log books that recorded long voyages chasing whales from the South Pacific to the Kamchatka Peninsula and beyond. For a collector of maritime folk art and antiques, Nantucket is the perfect setting.

A late-nineteenth-century house overlooking the ocean became the new vacation retreat that the family relishes even in January and February when the winds howl and the tempestuous ocean reminds one of the perils of a seafaring life. A Nantucket architect and trusted interior decorator transformed the interior of the house for family living and to showcase the growing collection of folk art and antiques—most notably Nantucket lightship baskets, scrimshaw, shell-inlay tea caddies, “woolies,” and blue and white Chinese export porcelain, along with premier examples of Nantucket and New England furniture.

After the couple bought their vacation home in 2000, the wife began to look appreciatively at the handicrafts and decorative arts of the island. Her first Nantucket purchase was a lightship basket purse made by José Formoso Reyes. The term “lightship basket” refers to the origin of the craft onboard stationary beacon ships anchored on shoals around Nantucket. Examples dating from as early as 1855 were made during the months-long stay of crew members who filled some of the tedious hours making the utilitarian baskets used on ship and on shore for a variety of domestic purposes.

After the last lightship was removed from service the craft was continued in workshops on the island. Nests of baskets are extremely rare. Our collector has several antique nests made on lightships, as well as nests made by

---

**THIS PAGE, TOP:**

Situated along the coastline, the house offers views of the nearby ocean and sand dunes. A pool provides the opportunity for freshwater swimming.

**THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:**

A pathway leads down to the beach for a quick dip in the ocean or for long walks along the sand.



**THIS PAGE:**

The inviting sitting area in blue and white is highlighted by several nests of Nantucket lightship baskets. The set of five round baskets, circa 1872–1905, on top of the diminutive Massachusetts drop-leaf table, circa 1760, are attributed to either Captain Thomas James or Andrew Sandsbury. The inlaid box is a rare sailor-made jewelry box constructed aboard the whaleship *Spumo*, which sailed from Nantucket on March 24, 1833.

contemporary basket-makers Harry Hilbert, Kathleen Meyers, and Fred Ely.

In 1948, Philippine native turned Nantucket resident José Formoso Reyes, introduced the lightship basket purse with a handle and a lid topped with an ivory or ebony figure, usually a whale, a gull, or an outline of the island. Contemporary honey-toned purses and older mahogany-patina

examples by a variety of makers can be spotted on the arms of Nantucket-lovers worldwide. An often-told story is that a young man from Nantucket spotted a woman carrying a lightship basket at the airport in Paris (or Rome, or Istanbul, or Samoa, depending on who's telling the story) and struck up a conversation, remarking that she must be from Nantucket, to which she



**THIS PAGE, TOP:**

The blue and white color scheme is striking in this view of the living room; especially on the fireplace wall where delft tiles surround the fireplace opening and a rare underglaze blue Kang Hsi faceted five-part garniture set graces the mantel. The whalebone basket with an inlaid heart in the bottom is from John Sylvia Antiques, and the nineteenth-century wooden whale weather-vane is from Wayne Pratt Antiques.

**THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:**

Accompanying an elegant Queen Anne tea table retaining its original paint history is a rare and important Nantucket fan-back brace-back Windsor armchair. One of only forty known, according to Windsor authority, Nancy Goyno Evans, it is illustrated in Charles Santore, *The Windsor Style in America*, vol. II (Running Press Books, 1992). These pieces, as with most other antiques in the house, are from Wayne Pratt Antiques.





**THIS PAGE, TOP:**

The large horn was purchased in the Cotswolds, England, and was probably scrimmed by a Scottish sailor because of the thistle carved on it. It sits on top of the logbook of the maiden voyage of the Nantucket whale ship *Planter*, dated September 25, 1818–September 14, 1820, and authored by George B. Chase, the master on the *Planter*. The logbook is surrounded by shell inlaid English tea boxes of various sizes and shapes, most are from Lynda Willauer Antiques, Nantucket. The cupboard behind is filled with underglaze blue Chinese export porcelain, also from Willauer Antiques.

**THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:**

Three rare and masterfully carved scrimshaw whale teeth by Edward Burdett (1805–1833). The center tooth is the earliest dated example of an American scrimshaw tooth found at present.





The rare, diminutive Chippendale cherrywood secretary is from New London County, Connecticut, circa 1775–1790. It is filled with pieces of underglaze blue Chinese export porcelain, including two rare teapots. On the desk is a fine piece of Steuben glass engraved with a whaling scene. The English Regency chair is hand painted.







**PREVIOUS PAGE AND THIS PAGE, ABOVE:**

The block-front chest of drawers (circa 1760–1780) is a hallmark of Boston, Massachusetts, craftsmanship in the late eighteenth century. The collection of Chinese export porcelain continues the blue and white decorating scheme into the dining room.

**THIS PAGE, INSET**

A wonderful collection of Nantucket lightship basket purses of various sizes, shapes, and decoration, all signed by José Formoso Reyes (1902–1980). The earliest purses generally have a carved ivory whale on wood or ebony plaque on the lid. The rarest one shown is a coffin-shaped basket with an ivory dance card booklet mounted on a corresponding whalebone plaque on the lid. All are from Wayne Pratt Antiques, Nantucket, and John Sylvia Antiques, Nantucket. The seascape above is by Nantucket artist John Osborne from The Gallery at 4 India, Nantucket.



replied, “No, my dear, I’m from ‘Sconset,” referring to the exclusive village at the east end of the island.

Signed Reyes lightship basket purses are the most collectible of the many variations made since. Remembering the advice her grandmother, a master weaver, gave her, to “use your good things,” the collector does that, keeping a number of fine examples on a table by the door, so she can choose her favorite of the day.

Their son’s passion for all things sailor-related led to an interest in scrimshaw: carved or etched pieces of whale ivory. Sperm whale teeth are the most common canvas for etching, while utilitarian carved ivory pieces include clothespins and pastry wheels. Our collector bought her first piece of scrimshaw in her son’s name so that he could loan it to museums some day in the future. The tooth she purchased was scrimmed by Nantucket mariner Edward Burdett.

The Burdett tooth, the earliest dated American scrimshaw tooth yet discovered, came to the collector by way of Tucson, Arizona, an unlikely location for an important maritime artifact. It turned up at the *Antiques Roadshow* in that city in 2002, where guest appraiser Wayne Pratt—a nationally recognized antiques purveyor with a shop on Nantucket—immediately recognized the find. Owned by a descendant of the master of the *Origon*, John Bunker, the tooth had been presented to Bunker by crew member Edward Burdett on September 27, 1827, the date carved on one side of the tooth under the depiction of a “cutting-in” (stripping the blubber from the whale carcass) scene on the port side of the ship. The other side of the tooth shows the starboard side of the *Origon*, with two whale boats in pursuit of sperm whales, harpooners poised to strike.

The Tucson owner of the tooth, who had played with it as a child, had no idea of its importance or value and was shocked to learn that the tooth might see a market price of \$75,000 to \$125,000. Realizing that this rare maritime artifact should be on Nantucket where both the *Origon* captain and the scrimshander had lived, the owner asked Pratt

“I respond to what speaks to me.  
There is something magical  
about wonderful design.”



The mid-eighteenth century Connecticut River Valley architectural corner cupboard from Wayne Pratt Antiques was de-accessioned from a New York City museum and is filled with underglaze blue Chinese export porcelain with floral and butterfly decoration made for the Swedish market.



**THIS PAGE, TOP**

The six foot blue and white oval platter is one of only three specially made for the 1878 Paris Exposition and was found by the collector while on a vacation in France.

**THIS PAGE, BELOW:**

From Wayne Pratt Antiques, the unique tray-top Queen Anne server from Rhode Island, dating to 1740–1760, retains its original red painted surface. The contemporary whalebone ditty boxes made by Mark Sutherland are from John Sylvia Antiques, Nantucket. The painting above is by Nantucket contemporary artist Peter Quidley.



to help her find a collector who would share the tooth with the public. Pratt turned to our collector, who now owns two other Burdett teeth as well. All three teeth were loaned to the Nantucket Historical Association for the grand opening of their new whaling museum in 2005.

The collector also has a passion for blue and white Chinese export porcelain; she

began collecting the dime-store variety of blue and white as a young girl. The design concept for her Nantucket home, developed with her decorator, was to mass the porcelain on bookshelves and choose fabrics for upholstery and draperies of similar color and pattern. Most of her collection of Chinese export porcelain was acquired from Lynda Willauer Antiques of

Nantucket, where Lynda's daughter Emily is a "walking encyclopedia," according to the collector. Each piece was chosen for its design, which is mostly floral, although the collector also owns some river scenes.

Maritime paintings and "woolies"—British sailor-made nineteenth-century wool-stitched ship pictures on canvas—add to the seafaring theme of the house. At the Nantucket Historical Association's annual antiques show a few years ago, the collector walked into Diana Bittel's booth, which featured a multitude of woolies, and, according to Bittel, who had come from Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, for the show, "she immediately focused on the best example, which is rare because of its numerous sailors in the rigging of the ship." That ability to hone in on the finest has become recognized as the collector's signature. She first met Wayne Pratt and Marybeth Keene when she wandered into their shop on Main Street. Now a frequent customer of theirs—most of the antique furniture in their house is from the firm—she is known for her ability "to gravitate to the best item on display, instinctively understanding style, line, and form," according to Ms. Keene. The collector sums it up best: "I respond to what speaks to me. There is something magical about wonderful design." 🍷