



Frequently Asked Questions

Why are these baskets called lightship baskets?

In the mid nineteenth century, until 1983 when lightships were decommissioned, these ships were anchored up and down both coasts, including the Chesapeake and Great Lakes, warning passing ships. This was particularly important in the waters off Nantucket as there are dangerous shoals, dense fog and heavily travelled waters.

Nantucket's position as whaling capital of the world ended in 1830s and the last ship, the Oak, set sail in 1869 never to return. Many of the captains and crew from the whaling ships continued life on the sea as captains and crew of lightships. Some of the most famous names were: Captain Davis Hall, Captain Andrew Jackson Sandsbury, Roland Folger, Thomas W. Barrallay, William D. Appleton, George W. Ray, Charles F. Ray, Joe Fisher, Charlie Sylvia, SB Raymond and Isaac Hamblin.

To pass the time of this boring assignment, many of the men made the component parts on land and brought the supplies to weave while on the lightship, hence the name lightship basket. Today, while these baskets are not woven on a lightship they still referred to as lightship baskets.

Is it true that a basket is not a genuine Nantucket basket if it does not have a penny in the base?

No this is false. Encouraged by Mitchy Ray, Bill Sevrens started putting a penny in his baskets. The purpose was so people buying the baskets knew that they were not Mitchy's. It also became a fun way to date the basket. There are a small number of hobbyist weavers who put a penny in the basket to date it but most of the Nantucket contemporary, commercial weavers sign and date their baskets. Rarely, if ever, do they put a penny in the basket.

How many basket weavers are there on Nantucket today?

Commercially there are less than ten who weave on a full time basis. Some of these teach to supplement their income. There are only a handful of weavers who weave on a full time basis that have full working shops in which they make all of the components of the basket themselves. However, there are dozens of hobbyist and part time weavers who sell baskets to some of the shops around the island, yet it is not their main source of income.

When was the first Nantucket basket made? Who made it?

There is no one person to credit with making the "first" lightship basket. However, it is a safe to say that the lightship basket was popularized in the late 1850s. Although a similar style basket was being constructed before, it was 1856 when the lightship new South Shoal was commissioned and the baskets transitioned from what the whalers were making into the well known Nantucket lightship basket. Retired whalers were becoming lightship keepers and the baskets were being woven aboard the South Shoal at a steady pace, and being sold or given as gifts on shore.

How much does a genuine Nantucket basket cost?

Contemporary Nantucket baskets, that are sold on the island range in price from \$100 for a small open round basket to thousands of dollars for the more ornate and detailed baskets such as purses with adornments. Antique and some of the vintage baskets usually start in the hundreds of dollars and easily go for tens of thousands at auction, depending on the basket, condition and provenance.

Does the museum teach basket weaving?

The museum offers year round youth weaving classes. During these classes children complete a basket. Funding for the program is generously provided through grants and donations.

What makes the Nantucket lightship basket so expensive?

Time, effort, materials and individual craftsmanship contribute to the price. To many people, the baskets are works of art, an investment or collectible keepsakes.

Isn't ivory illegal? How can people still have it, use it and sell it?

It is illegal to import or export whale and elephant ivory into the United States. It is legal to sell ivory that predates the embargo act/acts of the 1970s, that is already in the US. The government agency of Fish & Wildlife monitors the enforcement of the ivory laws.