



Before the First Whalemens: The Emergence and Loss of Indigenous Maritime Autonomy in New England, 1672–1740

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WHEN recounting the rise of Nantucket’s whaling industry, memorialists and historians often begin with the same origin myth. “In 1690,” they claim, “several townspeople were standing on a hill watching the whales sporting with one another off the south coast of the island. ‘There,’ observed one of them gesturing toward the ocean, ‘is a green pasture where our children’s grandchildren will go for bread.’”¹ But, as Daniel Vickers, Nathaniel Philbrick, and Mark A. Nicholas have suggested, Nantucketers needed Native American help to reap their watery harvest. According to the dominant historical narrative, Nantucketers found in the island’s indigenous community an available, if untrained, pool of laborers who could man their whaleboats. Historians argue that Native workers joined English merchants in the whale fishery to gain access

I would like to thank Daniel Vickers, J. Marc Milner, and Martha Walls for reading earlier versions of the text and providing helpful suggestions that bettered it. Thanks also to the accommodating and gracious staff at the Nantucket Historical Association. Funding for this research was provided through the Paul Cuffee Memorial Fellowship at Mystic Seaport’s Munson Institute.

¹Daniel Vickers, “The First Whalemens of Nantucket,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 40.4 (October 1983): 560; Obed Macy, *The History of Nantucket being a Compendious Account of the First Settlement of the Island by the English together with the Rise and Progress of the Whale Fishery* (1880; repr. Ellinwood, Kan.: Macy’s of Ellinwood, 1985), p. 45; Nathaniel Philbrick, *Abram’s Eyes: The Native American Legacy of Nantucket Island* (Nantucket, Mass.: Mill Hill Press, 1998), p. 149; Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery* (1876; repr. Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Books, 1989), p. 17.

The New England Quarterly, vol. LXXXVII, no. 1 (March 2014). © 2014 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved. doi:10.1162/TNEQ.a.00344.

to cheap trade goods, but as debts accrued on their accounts, indigenous workers found themselves caught in a downward spiral of debt, which committed many Native whalers to a life of involuntary servitude to their English merchant masters.²

Such narratives, while not inaccurate, present a static snapshot of indigenous peoples' dynamic participation in the European maritime world. Native people living along the northeastern seaboard shared a deeper history with the ocean than their eighteenth-century situation evidenced. Prior to Europeans' arrival, the ocean figured prominently in the economic and spiritual lives of Native Americans. The ocean's waters seeped so deeply into indigenous cosmology and identity that even after Europeans controlled New England's littoral, Native men chose to maintain their connection to the sea by working in Nantucket's commercial cod fishery, which preceded the rise of commercial whaling on the island. Nantucket merchants readily employed Native cod fishermen, for who better to build the stages, handline for the cod, split the fish, and sail the coasting vessels that delivered the salted quintals to Boston and New York than the indigenous men who had been fishing the island's waters for millennia? Cod fishing offered indigenous men ample opportunity to exercise both autonomy and power in the seventeenth-century European maritime world. If we take a longer view of Native Nantucketers' eventual participation in whaling, then, we are able to chart their evolution from highly skilled, autonomous seafarers who had voluntarily joined the cod fishery as a viable occupation to whalers who became slaves in all but name.



Native Americans living along New England's Atlantic coastline had always been a maritime people who depended heavily upon maritime resources for their survival. In elegantly

²Vickers, "The First Whalemens," p. 560; Philbrick, *Abram's Eyes*, pp. 143–64; Mark A. Nicholas, "Mashpee Wampanoags of Cape Cod, the Whalefishery, and Seafaring's Impact on Community Development," *American Indian Quarterly* 26.2 (2002): 165–97.

designed canoes, they fished the oceans with nets and lines they had fashioned from the fibrous inner bark of the basswood, elm, cedar, or leatherwood trees.³ Like European fishermen, Native men in pre-contact North America both angled and jigged for fish in the ocean and in streams, rivers, and ponds. For angling, they made fishhooks from stone or bone, which they tied to the line with seal whiskers or wild hemp; the line was then attached to a hardwood pole for ease of casting. Jigs were constructed with large-sized hooks “weighted with a stone, without bait,” and attached to lines. Native fishermen paddled out to sea and jerked the jig up and down to hook mackerel and pollock through their stomachs. Fishermen also speared their prey with leisters, three-pronged spears made out of wood and bone or antler. The dull, wooden, outside prongs grasped the fish as the sharpened middle point pierced its back. During the annual salmon runs of late summer, as many as one thousand people gathered to spear fish by torchlight.⁴

The marine abundance surrounding New England’s indigenous people was not only integral to their patterns of subsistence but also figured deeply in their spiritual lives. The Abenaki claimed that the first boy was “born when the sea churned up a great foam, which was then heated by the sun, congealed, and came alive as a human boy.” In Penobscot tradition, Glooskap—a spirit giant—turned men who doubted his oceanic powers into fish.⁵ Further south, the Wampanoag, Massachusetts, and Mohegan believed that Moshup, a giant similar

³Harald E. L. Prins and Bunny McBride, *Asticou’s Island Domain: Wabanaki Peoples at Mount Desert Island, 1500–2000*, vol. 2 (Boston: National Park Service, 2007), p. 392.

⁴Jigging and angling both involve poles but are distinct methods of fishing targeting different species of fish. In angling, the hook—baited or not—is attached to the pole by a line. Fish are attracted to the bait and swallow the hook, getting it lodged in their throats. Jigging refers to a specific type of fishing lure consisting of a sinker with a hook moulded into it as well as to the jerky movement made with the line and the jig to catch fish, which are hooked through their bodies instead of their mouths. See Wendell H. Oswalt, *An Anthropological Analysis of Food-Getting Techniques* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), pp. 117–30, and Frank G. Speck, *Penobscot Man: The Life History of a Forest Tribe in Maine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), pp. 85–86, 83.

⁵H. L. Masta, *Abenaki Legends, Grammar and Place Names* (Victoriaville, P.Q.: La Voix des Bois Francs, 1932), pp. 85, 81.

to Glooskap, caught and broiled whales to feed to their people. Every stone or bone Moshup threw into the ocean became an island, where the people could live and from which they combed the seashore looking for beached whales, as Moshup had done before them.⁶

The arrival of Europeans, themselves a maritime people, permanently altered the lives of North America's indigenous population. The bubonic plague, carried across the Atlantic by European fishermen, swept southern New England's coastline from 1616 until 1618, killing approximately 90 percent of the Native Americans residing there.⁷ In 1620, survivors of the epidemic encountered yet another, greater threat to their way of life when English religious separatists, known as the Pilgrims, settled among them. Initially, the Pilgrims relied upon their indigenous neighbors to teach them how to interact successfully with North America's maritime environment.⁸ Yet, as ever greater numbers of English settlers migrated to New England, Native Americans soon found themselves competing directly with the newcomers for control over beaches, rivers, and bays. This European invasion of the littoral, coupled with unstable indigenous politics, eventuated in the Pequot War, a fierce and bloody battle for control of the maritime zone.⁹ Having emerged victorious, the English proceeded to buy up rights to the colonies' coastal properties and islands, thus distancing southern New England's indigenous population from its maritime bases.¹⁰ The island of Nantucket, laying twenty-eight miles out to sea from the tip of Cape Cod, was one of the islands purchased during the maritime land grab.

In 1659, Englishman Thomas Macy moved to Nantucket with his partners, including Tristram Coffin, Edward Starbuck,

⁶William Scranton Simmons, *Spirit of the New England Tribes: Indian History and Folklore, 1620–1984* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), p. 271.

⁷Robert S. Grumet, *The Munsee Indians: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), p. xix.

⁸William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1856), ed. William T. Davies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 123.

⁹Andrew C. Lipman, "Murder on the Saltwater Frontier: The Death of John Oldham," *Early American Studies* 9 (Spring 2011): 277.

¹⁰Macy, *History of Nantucket*, p. 18.

Richard Swain, Thomas Barnard, Christopher Hussey, John Swain, William Pile, Thomas Coleman, Robert Barnard, Robert Pike, John Smith, Thomas Look, Peter Coffin, James Coffin, Tristram Coffin Jr., and Stephen Greenleaf.¹¹ Each of the island's new proprietors received a share of land. Farms were built, plows were bought, and land was tilled, but Nantucket's poor soil, which already supported a large indigenous population, yielded little produce.¹² With poor returns on their crops, the islanders turned to sheep. Animals, however, required a good deal more land than plants, and land was in short supply.¹³ The proprietors had purchased Crown rights to the island, but they had secured indigenous rights only to a small portion of the island's western end. Peter Folger, who had first settled on Martha's Vineyard but had relocated to Nantucket in 1660 to serve as a Native translator, commenced land negotiations with the island's sachems. In 1662, Wanackmamak, the island's head sachem, deeded an additional third of Nantucket to Tristram Coffin and Thomas Macy. Wanackmamak's sale spurred a general land run. Native inhabitants sold off significant amounts of land between 1664 and 1692.¹⁴

English settlers needed land not only for agriculture and pasturage but also for the emerging cod fishery. In 1672, recognizing that their middling success in the wool trade and their failure to produce significant agricultural surpluses dictated a shift away from land-based industries, Nantucket's proprietors turned toward the sea. They offered Captain John Gardner, a mariner living in Salem, Massachusetts, "a seaman's accommodation . . . to set up the trade of fishing with a sufficient vessel fit for the taking of codfish." Gardner agreed to relocate in exchange for a half-share of land near the harbor, on

¹¹See Henry Barnard Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners* (1901; repr. Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1992), p. 5. For the names of the partners, see Nathaniel Philbrick, *Away Off Shore: Nantucket Island and Its People, 1602–1890* (Nantucket: Mill Hill Press, 1994), p. 35.

¹²Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners*, 2:5; Philbrick, *Away Off Shore*, p. 35.

¹³G. P. Lofgreen, J. H. Meyer, and J. L. Hull, "Behavior Patterns of Sheep and Cattle Being Fed Pasture or Soilage," *Journal of Animal Science* 16.4 (1957): 775.

¹⁴For a description of each land sale, see Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners*, pp. 115–24.

which he built a house.¹⁵ In 1673, he and his brother Richard traveled to New York to purchase a license from Governor Francis Lovelace to “buy and make Purchase of some Land by the Sea Side or else-where of the Indyan Natives” to undertake the “Designe of a fishing Trade upon the Island of Nantucket.”¹⁶ Upon his return, Richard Gardner entered into land negotiations with Nickanoose, one of the island’s sachems, who agreed to sell “for a valuable consideration” one acre of land at Siasconset, located on the eastern Atlantic side of the island. Here, the Gardners constructed a fishing stage, where the codfish was processed. After the Gardners’ stage was completed, other English families attempted to secure their own patch of beachfront property from the island’s sachems. By 1689, fishing villages hugged Nantucket’s Atlantic coastline from Miacomet to Coatue.¹⁷

Having purchased the necessary property, proprietors faced the challenge of recruiting competent mariners. White maritime workers were in short supply in the colonies. In 1635, the town of Marblehead tried to enlist industrious, godly fishermen, but those who did sign on often left the sea at the first opportunity.¹⁸ In the 1640s, when the English Civil War

¹⁵Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners*, p. 14; Philbrick, *Away off Shore*, p. 43.

¹⁶Frank Augustine Gardner, *Thomas Gardner Planter and some of his descendants: Giving Essex County, Massachusetts, and Northern New England Lines to the Eighth Generation and Nantucket Lines through the Fourth Generation* (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1907), p. 59.

¹⁷The fishing villages around Nantucket included Wonishsquam, often referred to as Squam, Sesacacha, Siasconset, Madequacham, Miacomet, Coatue, and Weeweeda. From the historical record, it can be determined that stages existed at Sesacacha, Siasconset, and Weeweeda. Each fishing village and stage was owned by one Nantucket family, but all families with an interest in the fishery maintained a presence at a number of villages. The Gardners had their main stage at Siasconset, but the Coffins also kept a factor there during the fishing season. The Starbucks built their main stage at Sesacacha but also had a fishing shack on their land at Coatue. Other families surely dominated the fishery at Squam, Madequacham, Miacomet, and Weeweeda, but primary sources for families other than the Gardners, Starbucks, and Coffins are scarce. The majority of information concerning the seventeenth-century cod fishery on Nantucket is found in Mary Coffin Starbuck Account Book, Collection 10: Account Books Collection, AB 475, Shelf D1, Nantucket Historical Association (NHA).

¹⁸See Daniel Vickers, “Maritime Labor in Colonial Massachusetts: A Case Study of the Essex County Cod Fishery and the Whaling Industry of Nantucket, 1630–1775” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1981), pp. 58–60.

raised the price of fish to such a level that Puritan men were prompted to leave their plows and take to the sea, the mainland's maritime labor problem quickly resolved.¹⁹ By the 1670s, as the price of cod stabilized, the maritime economy of Essex County, Massachusetts, was firmly entrenched, and apprenticing in the trade was a rite of passage for the boys of its fishing towns.²⁰ But only a handful of English families resided on Nantucket in 1673, and few, if any, could be enticed to leave their neatly plowed fields to take up a transient life in the fishery. Unlike the Puritan fathers on the mainland nearly forty years before, John and Richard Gardner decided not to waste their limited resources convincing Englishmen to move to Nantucket; instead, they recruited indigenous men to work in the cod fishery.²¹

The choice to do so was obvious.²² Nantucket's indigenous population outnumbered those of European origin and continued to do so into the eighteenth century.²³ Moreover, although they were not accustomed to wage labor, Native islanders were intimately familiar with the waters surrounding their island. John Gardner drew them to the cod fishery by offering them

¹⁹Vickers, "Maritime Labor in Colonial Massachusetts," p. 72; John William McElroy, "Seafaring in Seventeenth-Century New England," *New England Quarterly* 8.3 (1935): 333-34.

²⁰Daniel Vickers, with Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 96-130.

²¹Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners*, 2:129-32. A few women participated in the fishery on Martha's Vineyard. In the 1730s, Jenny Sowomog and her son, Chum, worked together in the Vineyard's on-island cod fishery. While Chum caught the majority of fish credited to his mother's account, she also "ceched" a few fish herself. See John Allen and John Hammett Account Book, AN 64-6, pp. 10-11, Martha's Vineyard Museum and Library.

²²Although obvious, the move was possible only after 1646, when the General Court passed a statute allowing Native people to be legally employed. See Vickers, "Maritime Labor in Colonial Massachusetts," p. 29. Nantucket's white settlers had an amicable relationship with the Wampanoag community, unlike Long Islanders, who feared the local Montauk. In 1643, Southampton town officials ordered Robert Bond, a blacksmith, "not to make for the Indians any harping irons [harpoons] or fishing irons which are known to be dangerous weapons to offend the English." See Tom Twomey, ed., *Discovering the Past: Writings of Jeanette Edwards Rattray, 1893-1974* (East Hampton, N.Y.: East Hampton Library, 2001), p. 13.

²³Sherburne Friend Cook, *The Indian Population of New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 43-44.

credit in his store and a dram of liquor “before they go out fishing in the morning.”²⁴ Other families on the island soon emulated the Gardners’ success. Lured by the prospect of free alcohol and a steady supply of trade goods, indigenous men willingly entered the commercial cod industry.

It was not, after all, unlike their own subsistence fishery. Native fishermen often caught more than they, their families, or their tribe could consume in one sitting or even in one season, and so Native women preserved excess fish by sun drying or smoking them. These stocks would be eaten during the winter months or traded with other tribes for copper, chert, tobacco, or foodstuffs. Yet despite such proto-capitalist aspects, the indigenous subsistence fishery was conducted on a scale and with a mindset that ill prepared its practitioners for the European commercial cod industry. The Native fishery was part of a broader food strategy that allowed its workers the freedom to choose whether they angled for cod, clubbed seals, or hunted seabirds from one day to the next; the commercial cod industry demanded that its fishermen remain on the banks, toiling day in and day out to turn a meager profit for themselves and their employer. This act of subservience toward a master, an industry, and a fish was the price indigenous men paid to become cod fishermen in the European maritime world.

Although merchants had little to teach their new workers about fishing or the fishing grounds surrounding the island, they did introduce them to European fishing skiffs. Merchants demanded—and got—competent ship handling from their Native employees, but to reinforce that expectation, they imposed fines when accidents occurred. In 1707, George Bunker fined Wochokin £2 “for staving of a fish Boat for want of caring.”²⁵ Merchants also compelled their workers to use European tools to catch the fish. The company store, however, was not a charity.²⁶ Indigenous fishermen had to purchase their own fishery

²⁴Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners*, 2:130.

²⁵George and Caleb Bunker Account Book, Collection 10: Account Books Collection, AB 553, Shelf E1, p. 21, NHA.

²⁶There are few extant account books that detail the economic lives of indigenous workers solely. The Mary Coffin Starbuck Account Book and the George and Caleb

equipment, which all Native men in the industry willingly did. The two basic goods a cod fisherman required were hooks and lines. Out of a sample of the accounts of thirty-seven indigenous cod fishermen in two account books kept by different merchants between 1672 and 1720, 100 percent of Native fishermen made multiple hook and line purchases.²⁷ Mary Coffin Starbuck sold the majority of the hooks and lines at her shop in Sherburne, Nantucket; however, fishermen in need could buy—and frequently did—extra hooks and lines at the stage in Sesacacha, where her son supervised workers during the fishing season.²⁸ Other items for sale included lead sinkers, fathom lines, skeins of twine, and coils of rope.²⁹ Generally, only indigenous men who worked in the cod industry for more than five consecutive fishing seasons bought these specialized goods.³⁰

Half of the sampled indigenous men who worked in Nantucket's cod fishery embraced a European maritime identity. They worked an average of fifteen seasons, or seven and a half years, in the industry.³¹ While many remained simple, albeit good, fishermen until they quit the business, five men in my sample acquired particular skills. Reuben, Paul Noose, and James Codpocana worked on the stage splitting cod, while Wochokin and Sanege purchased calashes and horses to cart split fish to the flakes.³² Woysoytoy, Sanege, Rueben, Paul Noose,

Bunker Account Book do so, tracking the activity of Native American account holders only.

²⁷Bunker Account Book; Starbuck Account Book. While account books offer a snapshot of the material and economic lives of account holders, much of a community's economic activity was "off the books." Macy (*History of Nantucket*) acknowledges that many workers on the island of Nantucket "exchanged their commodities with each other without keeping regular accounts. . . . A piece of chalk and the inside of a door frequently supplied the place of pen and day-book; indeed, many of their business transactions were trusted wholly to memory" (pp. 39–40).

²⁸Starbuck Account Book, pp. 3, 4, 6, 7, 43, 90, 109, 110, 119, and 146.

²⁹Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 29, 37, 67, 90, 113, 114, 146.

³⁰Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 29, 37, 67, 90, 113, 114, 146.

³¹Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 29, 43, 90, 114, 118, 119, and Bunker Account Book, pp. 21, 46, 55, 65, 83, 100.

³²Starbuck Account Book, pp. 13, 90, 119, 8, and Bunker Account Book, p. 83. A calash was a horse-drawn barrow utilizing a barrel in place of a wheel. See Philbrick, *Away off Shore*, p. 10.

Silas, Aspattawonitt, Lamentation, and Wochokin attired themselves like European fishermen. No dress code existed for fishery workers, but a few items of clothing were desirable because they offered protection against the cold and the wet. Nicolas Denys, a French explorer and colonist, noted that most French fishermen in Acadia owned a pair of boots, an apron with an oilskin exterior and wool interior that lay across the men's legs, and a hooded, oilskin body jacket stuffed with wool for warmth.³³ A few Native fishermen could afford at least a few of these articles. Woysoytoy purchased "1 paire of stuffed breeches" but had to make due with a cloth jacket.³⁴ Paul Noose and Lamentation each bought stuffed jackets, but they probably wore Native leggings instead of European breeches.³⁵ The majority of indigenous fishermen who had the money and the inclination to attire themselves in European maritime apparel paid for "cloth jacoats," "pea coats," "caps," and "weathers," better known as sou'westers.³⁶ Wochokin even knitted his own mittens.³⁷

Merchants rewarded indigenous fishery workers who integrated into the Anglo maritime world by turning them before the mast. Nantucket cod merchants, including the Starbucks and the Bunkers, taught Native men to crew their ships, which delivered salted, barreled fish to markets in New York and Boston. Every Native fisherman-cum-sailor had returned to the fishery for at least ten seasons before joining a vessel's crew.³⁸

³³Nicolas Denys, *The Description and natural history of the coasts of North America* (1672), ed. William F. Ganong (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1908), p. 276.

³⁴Starbuck Account Book, p. 4.

³⁵Starbuck Account Book, pp. 90, 43.

³⁶Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 8, 90, 109.

³⁷Bunker Account Book, p. 46.

³⁸Nantucket, as a small, but steady, producer of salt fish, chose to send its finished fish to larger markets for transshipment to the West Indies and Spain. New York and Boston mandated that the island send six barrels of cod to fulfill payment of its annual quit rent, that is, the tax the government imposed on freehold or leased land. See Worth, *Nantucket Lands and Landowners*, p. 219, and Edward Byers, "The 'Nation of Nantucket': Society and Politics in an Early American Commercial Center, 1660–1830" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1983), p. 68. The Starbucks turned ten of their indigenous cod fishermen before the mast of their larger sailing ship. Specifically, they asked Woysoytoy, Wonnanshiphoo, Wottashamoonet, Sanego, Towarre, Reuben,

This probationary period allowed the family to vet workers' dedication to the industry and loyalty to the company store. The promotion had the effect of partially deracializing the indigenous workers, transforming them from "Indian" workers into seafarers, for on board ship, they enjoyed the same privileges (termed "portage") as white sailors.

Portage, often referred to as "portledge" in the seventeenth century, was a seafarer's right to carry a small amount of goods free of charge in the ship's hold, which he could then sell once the ship reached its destination.³⁹ However, most mariners, white and indigenous alike, had little money to purchase goods to hawk. Aspattawonitt and Woysoytoy each borrowed money to buy portage items, but they did so only once, so it is unlikely that they had turned a profit on their venture.⁴⁰ Although all fishermen regardless of race had access to credit, as Daniel Vickers has noted, most young fishermen chose not to add portage merchandise to the pages of their heavily over-charged merchant accounts.⁴¹ Instead, they sold their portage rights back to the merchant for an agreed-upon sum. Between 1688 and 1712, Woysoytoy, Wonnanishpipho, Wottashamoonet, Sanege, Towarre, Reuben, Lamentation, Paul Noose, Aspattawonitt, and James Codpocana each received "portledge credits" on their accounts ranging from as little as 6 pence to as much as 10 shillings.⁴² Credits were generally applied toward the total debt fishermen owed, but sometimes indigenous men received their portage credit in the form of cash or goods. In

Lamentation, Paul Noose, Aspattawonitt, and James Codpocana to crew their vessel over the span of twenty-four years. See Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 29, 43, 90, 114, and 119. Woysoytoy and Wochokin spent an amazing thirty-two and thirty-three seasons, respectively, hauling in cod off Nantucket's shore.

³⁹The term "portledge" might be more accurate than the late eighteenth-century word "portage," because it combines the words "port" and "privilege." The custom of portage had its origins in the Middle Ages when mariners had a larger personal stake in the voyages they undertook and in the freight stored in the ship's hold. In its early form, portage comprised half of a sailor's wages. By the seventeenth century, it represented about one-third of the mariner's income from a given voyage. See Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea*, p. 83.

⁴⁰Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4 and 114.

⁴¹Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea*, p. 85.

⁴²Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 6, 7, 8, 13, 29, 43, 90, 114, 119.

1700, Woysoytoy asked that he receive his in raw wool from the Starbuck store. In the same year, Sanega accepted a 2 pence credit on his account but took home the rest of his portage in cash. Woysoytoy then followed suit, collecting the entirety of his 1702 portage—which totaled 9 shillings, 6 pence—in cash.⁴³

Credit, the foundation on which the fishing industry was built, enabled Native fishermen, like their white counterparts, to enter the business.⁴⁴ Merchants extended white and Native fishermen alike approximately £10 of credit at the company store, where they could purchase maritime supplies, foodstuffs, and household items. In return, maritime workers promised the lending merchant their season's catch. At season's end, the merchant found a buyer for the catch, calculated the value of the fish, and credited the fisherman's account for his share of the total.⁴⁵ While at the store, the fisherman often took the opportunity to restock his household supplies and fishing equipment and to buy a few luxury items.⁴⁶

Many historians who have studied the merchant–Native relationship in the late eighteenth century argue that most indigenous mariners fell into debt peonage, “a form of labour exploitation” in which English colonists controlled the indigenous populace through the court system and by manipulating “Native demand for alcohol” and trade goods.⁴⁷ The cycle of

⁴³Starbuck Account Book, pp. 4, 8, 4.

⁴⁴Specie remained scarce in colonial America until, and even after, the American Revolutionary War. See Farley Grubb, “Chronic Specie Scarcity and Efficient Barter: The Problem of Maintaining an Outside Money Supply in British Colonial America,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 18099, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18099>, issued May 2012, accessed 22 August 2012.

⁴⁵See Starbuck Account Book and Bunker Account Book.

⁴⁶Daniel Vickers, “John Roads, Fisherman of Marblehead,” in *America and the Sea: A Maritime History*, ed. Benjamin Labaree et al. (Mystic, Conn.: Mystic Seaport, 1998), pp. 48–51.

⁴⁷Peter Mancall and James H. Merrell, eds., *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500–1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 261. Selected sources citing the Native American debt peonage relationship include T. H. Breen, “Trade and Community: East Hampton's Curious Commercial Origins,” in *Awakening the Past: The East Hampton 350th Anniversary Lecture Series 1998*, ed. Tom Twomey (East Hampton: East Hampton Historical Collection, 1999), p. 278; Daniel R. Mandell, *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 62;

crippling debt, court intervention, and endless servitude that Vickers and others document later in the century was not, however, apparent in the records of Nantucket's indigenous cod fishermen.⁴⁸ While some men in the sample had difficulties with their accounts, the majority carried a manageable amount of debt—the sample average was £3.14.11 $\frac{1}{4}$ —that could easily be cleared in a season. Only 79 percent of indigenous fishermen owed money to the company store; the remaining 21 percent either paid off their accounts in full or carried a credit.⁴⁹ Surprisingly, the cohort that fared the worst in the credit game were the very men the merchants promoted. Ninety percent of indigenous men with portage credits posted to their accounts—that is, those who were not just fishermen but sailors as well—remained heavily indebted year after year.⁵⁰ The majority of their purchases reflected Native Americans' growing involvement in the maritime world and their rise in social status within their communities. Hooks, lines, ropes, and maritime apparel were listed on their account pages along with silk hoods, French heeled shoes, worsted stockings, spinning wheels, livestock, and even houses. While the material lives of certain Native individuals increasingly resembled those of their Anglo counterparts, the majority of indigenous cod fishermen eked out a modest living aided by, but not enslaved to, credit.

The success of Nantucket's on-island cod fishery peaked in 1688. Stiff competition from the mainland fishery, coupled with

Jean M. O'Brien, "‘Divorced’ from the Land: Resistance and Survival of Indian Women in Eighteenth-Century New England," in *After King Philip's War: Presence and Persistence in Indian New England*, ed. Colin G. Calloway (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997), p. 154; David Silverman, "The Impact of Indentured Servitude on the Society and Culture of Southern New England Indians, 1680–1810," *New England Quarterly* 74.4 (2001): 654; Nicholas, "Mashpee Wampanoags of Cape Cod," p. 574.

⁴⁸I have found no evidence of any Native cod fisherman being taken to court for debt or being forced to indenture himself to a merchant to work in the cod fishery to pay off an account in arrears. George and Caleb Bunker recorded a fishing indenture form in their account book (p. 8), but I have found no actual fishing indenture on Nantucket, Martha's Vineyard, or Cape Cod.

⁴⁹Starbuck Account Book.

⁵⁰This group carried an average debt of £6.7.5. Only one man in the group, Womanshiphoo, ended in the black, with Mary Starbuck owing him £0.6.5 $\frac{1}{4}$.

a decline in the cod population frequenting Nantucket's banks, gradually eroded the island's first maritime industry.⁵¹ Although the cod fishery ultimately proved unprofitable for Nantucket's merchants, their Native American maritime workers exceeded their expectations. The seasonality, fishing techniques, and ship—or canoe—handling skills were familiar to indigenous mariners. Europeans had, however, introduced their Native fishery workers to two important innovations—employment and credit—and those fundamentals stood merchants in good stead as whaling came to dominate Nantucket's colonial economy.



In 1690, whaling moved from the mainland to Nantucket. Nantucketers, understanding that they could make more money from whales than fish, converted the cod fishing villages at Siasconset, Madequecham, and Miacomet along the island's south shore to whale stations. Town leaders invited Cape Codder Ichabod Paddock to the island to teach its men how to whale. He instructed his Nantucket pupils to erect wigwam-like shacks to house the would-be whalers as well as to mount a land-secured mast in their midst so that they could keep a continual lookout for the creatures. More important, he taught them how to build whaleboats—lightweight, double-ended watercraft that moved forward and backward equally well. Nantucket's General Court recognized the value of these boats and, to facilitate their construction, temporarily lifted a ban on cutting timber at Coatue.⁵²

For the seventeenth and half of the eighteenth century, whaling was a shore-based activity. It began when a lookout shouted "Awaite Pawana," meaning "here is a whale." If he saw the creature spout again, he repeated the word "Pawana" and pointed in the direction of the spout. At that point, the whalers sprang into action. Dressing for the chase, they pulled on warm

⁵¹Starbuck Account Book, and Macy, *History of Nantucket*, pp. 260–61. In the nineteenth century, the cod fishing industry on Nantucket was reinvigorated.

⁵²Philbrick, *Abram's Eyes*, p. 104.

woolens, then their outer garments. They drew wool caps down over their ears, and they soaked their wool mittens—which the whalers often knitted themselves—in salt water. The water allowed the wool to “full up,” thus creating a rudimentary felt that, capturing body heat, kept hands warm, although not dry, during the chase. Once they were fully attired, whalers maneuvered the whaleboat to the shoreline, floated it, jumped in, and rowed it through the breakers until it punched into the open ocean. Then, synchronizing their strokes, they pulled hard toward the spouting whale. The boatheader, more often than not the only white face in the whaleboat, sat at the back of the craft and steered with an oar extending over the stern while the five indigenous crew members rowed toward their prey.⁵³

Nearing the whale, the boatheader gave the order to ship the oars. As the ocean’s pitch and roll brought the vessel within fifteen feet of the animal, the harpooner, bracing his leg against the clumsy clew, hurled his weapon. If it stuck, drogues attached to the harpoon’s multifathom line acted as an anchor, which tired the whale as it swam to escape its predators. When the exhausted whale could swim no longer, the harpooner moved from the whaleboat’s stem to its stern, making way for the boatheader, who served double duty as the lancer, to replace him at the bow. It was his job to hurl a fifty-foot lance into the whale’s rib cage. If he hit the heart or the lungs, effusions of blood bathed the whaleboat’s crew as the whale entered its final flurry. Swimming in ever tightening circles, the creature vomited up its stomach contents and thrashed its immense tail. Whaling crews had to coordinate their timing closely to avoid the whale’s deadly flukes; failure to do so resulted in a stove boat. The whale’s end came when, with a final exhausted shudder, it rolled on its side, its fin sticking out of the water. Whalers cut a hole in the dead animal’s flukes, inserted a T-shaped toggle, threaded a rope through that, and began the slow process of towing the whale, flukes first, back to shore. Once ashore, flensers cut the blubber into strips and

⁵³Philbrick, *Abram’s Eyes*, p. 152.

boiled out the oil at beach-based tryworks. The oil was then barreled and carted to market.⁵⁴

Unlike their modest success with the codfishery, merchants enjoyed a healthy profit margin from whaling. A growing number of white Nantucketers were thus attracted to the trade, and they hired an increasing number of indigenous workers.⁵⁵ In 1703, John Barnard began keeping a rudimentary account book detailing the purchases of indigenous whalers John Challins and Wequaab.⁵⁶ Richard Macy and George and Caleb Bunker started trading with Native whalers in 1707 and 1710, respectively.⁵⁷ Mary Coffin Starbuck and her family entered the whale fishery in 1718.⁵⁸ As the number of merchants on the island increased, Native mariners had more choice about the credit relationships they developed. Some men, like Wochokin, decided

⁵⁴Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), p. 50.

⁵⁵Byers, "Nation of Nantucket," p. 113.

⁵⁶John Barnard Account Book, Collection 10: Account Books Collection, AB 61, Shelf A1, NHA. The John Barnard account book highlights several problems that account books pose as historical sources. Underneath one account, Barnard referenced the sums being "caried [sic] in the great Book." Given its diminutive size, and this passing reference, Barnard's extant account book is more likely his daybook. Merchants recorded transactions on the spot into their daybooks and later transferred that information into their official account books. No such authoritative record from Barnard has survived. In fact, no book that lists purchases made by the island's indigenous community remains in its entirety. In Mary Coffin Starbuck's account book, she alludes to a "fish book" kept at Tuckanucket. She also apparently detailed various dry goods purchases by indigenous whalers on pieces of loose paper and recorded others in a daybook; these documents are lost. One of the few loose sheets in the NHA's collections, entitled "Bill of Sundries sold to James Paupamo" (4 February 1763, Collection 118: Folger Family Papers, 1676–1952, folder 2, NHA) provides a line-item listing of all the goods Paupamo purchased between 1759 and 1763 from Abichai Folger; it is even signed by James Paupamo. A similar loose paper, pasted upside down on page 48a of the Bunkers' account book, lists the names of twelve men, eight of whom were Native, followed by a monetary figure. Two of the eight Native men signed the bottom of the appended page; an ink blot obscures what appear to be two more signatures. We might speculate that such signed sheets were formal agreements of indebtedness, but without further evidence, we simply cannot be sure.

⁵⁷Richard Macy Account Book, Collection 10: Account Books Collection, AB 422, shelf A1, NHA, and Bunker Account Book.

⁵⁸The Starbucks' late entry into the whale fishery may have something to do with the family's heavy involvement and investment in the cod fishery. Though the industry started to decline on Nantucket in 1688, cod fishing still produced a modest profit. The account of Lamentation, the last indigenous cod fisherman who fished solely in Nantucket's waters in the employ of the Starbucks, ended in 1717. A year later, fishing operations scaled down and whaling ramped up. See Starbuck Account Book.

to remain with their fish merchants.⁵⁹ Familial connections dictated the loyalties of other indigenous whalers.⁶⁰ The majority of Native whale fishermen, however, established accounts with a whale merchant and entered into a credit relationship that, unlike the fishery, had the potential for large gains but for insurmountable debt as well. Between 1718 and 1759, the average debt of an indigenous whaleman increased 473 percent in comparison to the debt of a Native cod fisherman over a comparable time period seventy years before.⁶¹ Increasing debt corresponded not only to an expansion of material possessions—indigenous whalers bought 135 percent more goods than had indigenous cod fishermen—but also to the fickle nature of the whale industry. Because whale oil and bone commanded a premium price on the world market, many a whaleman dreamed of extraordinary profits. But whales were difficult to find and even harder to catch; much depended on luck. Tom Poney, an indigenous whaler who worked in Nantucket's whale industry for thirty-three years, exemplified the ups and downs of a whaleman's career. In 1726, he started shore whaling. He earned £2.16.7 in his first season. During a good season two years later, he was credited £18.7.7 for his "oyl and bone got with Paul" Starbuck. One year later, his luck took a turn for the worse. He came home with "not much £o-o-o" on a spermaceti trip he made with Nathaniel Folger. The following year, he again earned no money for

⁵⁹Bunker Account Book.

⁶⁰Starbuck Account Book, pp. 7, 90, 69, 185, 146. Whalemens Joe and Abraham Towadde, sons of cod fisherman Towarre, and Isaac Woose, relation of Paul Noose, continued in Starbuck's book only. Some whalemens signed on with two merchants.

⁶¹Starbuck Account Book. The value of colonial currency fluctuated enormously. In order to make an accurate comparison between seventeenth-century Native cod fishermen and early eighteenth-century Native whalemens on Nantucket, I converted their accounts into pounds sterling and then converted this amount into the 2011 U.S. dollar by using John McCusker's historical composite consumer price indexes. While a modern evaluation of indigenous seafarers' debts and credits are interesting, they are also ahistorical; therefore, I have only used the modern numbers to create a numerical equality between the two groups in order to compare their rates of monetary change over time. Throughout the article, I continue to cite money in the original pounds, shillings, and pence quoted in the historical sources. See John J. McCusker, *How Much Is That in Real Money?: A Historical Price Index for Use as a Deflator of Money Values in the Economy of the United States* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1992).

his season's work. As his debts mounted, Poney continued to ship out. His returns improved, but he was never able to recover from his lean years. In 1742, the Starbuck family sued Poney for debt. The island's trustees paid them £17 toward his debt and "had him sett over" to the Starbucks for "2¼ year's service." Poney's court obligation meant that he had no choice but to keep whaling for the Starbucks. Poney's luck changed yet again after his service ended. In 1749, he went on two amazing voyages with Edward Starbuck, where he earned £122.9.8 and £168.1.10 for his fall and spring seasons. Poney's luck continued to hold; his last appearance in Mary Starbuck's account book (1759) credits him with £145.3.0.⁶²

Tom Poney's story was exceptional in its conclusion. The majority of indigenous whalemens on Nantucket and in the other colonial whaling ports of Long Island, Cape Cod, and Martha's Vineyard whose accounts fell into arrears never recovered. When they could not pay down their debts, merchants sued their indigenous clients. After the suit was filed, the Native man faced one of two possible outcomes: the suing merchant paid his bail and court costs, and the whaler signed a one-, two-, or three-year indenture guaranteeing exclusive rights to his labor and services; or the court sold the account and the indenture to the highest bidder, who would then be entitled to the man's labor and services for a specified time period.⁶³ Although merchants had an obligation to provide lodging, food, and work for their indentured servants, they continued to charge them for the goods they received and to credit them for the oil and bone they caught.⁶⁴ In return, indentured workers promised to "faithfully attend and perform all and Every such whale voyage as his said master shall ship him upon and Likewise work with his sd Master on shore every Day that he shall be there unto

⁶²Starbuck Account Book, pp. 56, 26, 116.

⁶³"Sale of John Mouses from Andrew Clark to Thomas Smith," 13 June 1697, Massachusetts State Archives, vol. 30, p. 500, and Vickers, "First Whalemens," pp. 574 and 579. White merchants in Cape Cod also sued their fellow settlers for unpaid debts. The difference between suing indigenous men and white men, however, was that the colonists responded to the suit by paying up. See "A List of the Cases heard and tried at her Majesty's Inferior Court of Common Pleas holden at Barnstable for the County of Barnstable," April 1705, NA, CO 5/863, p. 285.

⁶⁴Starbuck Account Book; Macy Account Book.

by his said Master required.”⁶⁵ By depriving these Native men of their autonomy, the court reduced them from independent laborers with the option to stay ashore with their families to debt peons who had no choice when, where, or with whom they would chase leviathan.⁶⁶



Debt peonage gained increasing importance in the mid-eighteenth century as the nature of the whaling industry evolved from a shore fishery to a deep-sea fishery. In 1715, six sloops engaged in the deep-sea fishery produced oil valued at £1,100; by 1730, the deep-sea fleet had grown to thirty vessels of thirty-eight to fifty tons each, and together they contributed £3,200 to Nantucket’s economy.⁶⁷ Responding to the vicissitudes of the market, colonial whalers traveled past Nantucket’s shoals to catch Right whales and Spermaceti whales. And they took their indebted indigenous workers with them. Deep-sea whaling voyages lasted about six weeks and covered territory from the edge of the Gulf Stream, to Nova Scotian waters, the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, the Strait of Belle Isle, and even the Davis Strait.⁶⁸

The process of eighteenth-century deep-sea whaling bore many similarities to shore whaling. After the ship reached its whaling grounds, officers posted lookouts to the masthead to

⁶⁵“Indenture between Simon Porrage and Ebenezer Hallet,” 10 April 1738, Miscellaneous Bound Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS). All Native whaling indentures contained similar language. See “Indenture between John Caudanoo and John Meader,” Vertical Files II, folder 17, NHA; “Indenture between Robin Myserick and Gideon Holiway,” 6 July 1737, Miscellaneous Bound Papers, MHS; “Indenture between Jacob Zachariah and Ebenezer Hallet,” 4 March 1718/19, available in John Braginton-Smith and Duncan Oliver, *Cape Cod Shore Whaling: America’s First Whalemens* (Yarmouthport, Mass.: Historical Society of Old Yarmouth), pp. 225–26; “Indenture between Joseph Pequain and William Matthews and Thomas Thorp,” 5 October 1721, box 1, folder 53, Historical Society of Old Yarmouth Archives; “Indenture between Jacob Conet and Joseph Griffeth,” 15 January 1724/25, available in Braginton-Smith and Oliver, *Cape Cod Shore Whaling*, p. 230.

⁶⁶Vickers, “First Whalemens,” p. 581.

⁶⁷Starbuck, *History of the American Whalefishery*, p. 168.

⁶⁸Starbuck, *History of the American Whalefishery*, p. 20. See also Edouard A. Stackpole, *The Sea-Hunters: The New England Whalemens During Two Centuries, 1635–1835* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 30.

keep watch for spouting whales. The lookout cried out when he spotted a whale and pointed in the creature's direction. Once the lookout issued his call, the vessel's deck came alive as men raced to their assigned whaleboat and lowered the craft into the pitching ocean. The hunt then commenced. If a whaleboat's crew was successful in killing a whale, the men towed the dead cetacean back to the ship. Chains along the vessel's side held the floating carcass in place as the ship's officers—standing atop the dead whale—cut into its flesh with sharpened spades. A winch-and-pulley system transported strips of blubber to the deck. Crewmen then cut the large strips of blubber into square pieces and stuffed those into casks for processing at shore-based tryworks. Captains whaling in more northern climes often waited to process their catch until they returned to their home port. In southern latitudes, blubber spoiled easily. Therefore, some whaling captains brought prefabricated tryworks with them and erected them on beaches near their hunting grounds. Crews then went ashore to process the catch, which prevented spoilage and ensured an extended whaling season.⁶⁹ While monetarily beneficial to whalers and merchants, indigenous workers resented the longer voyages. English recruiters “go to the Indians Towns on the Sabbath day to look for the men or Indians” to man whale sloops, a group of Native Nantucketers complained to the Massachusetts General Court. “Wee are much Troubled for what they do and we know it is not Good,” they opined in their petition.⁷⁰ Nantucket's Native population was, however, powerless. Its young men would continue to be sent away, and their voyages would take them further from home and for longer periods of time.

Indebted Native whalers whaled when their masters found them ships. Where the ships were headed or how long they would be gone was of little consequence to the merchant. Some indigenous men negotiated at the time of their indenture the geographical boundaries in which they would whale. John

⁶⁹Dolin, *Leviathan*, pp. 95–97.

⁷⁰“Whaling complaint directed to the General Court,” vol. 31, series 228: Passed Resolves, p. 532, Mass. Archives.

Caudanoo agreed to whale “at or about the said Island of Nantucket and on Nantucket Shoals & Seas & Coasts thereabouts or Elsewhere,” but he refused to travel to Davis Strait.⁷¹ Other Native men resisted employment until their labor contract was rewritten to include extra goods or support for wives and children left at home.⁷² The system of debt peonage, the groundwork of which was laid with Nantucket’s seventeenth-century cod fishery and perfected during the island’s shore whaling years, ensured the success of the deep-sea fishery. It also destabilized indigenous maritime communities.

Desperate for relief, indebted parents pledged their sons as collateral. Robin Myserick “Bound Out his two sons John and Daniell” to Gideon Holliway until “they Severally arrive to Twenty One Years of age.” If, as the indenture stipulated, Myserick could repay his £46.12.6 debt within a year’s time, then John and Daniel would not be taken from their family.⁷³ Whether the young men were compelled to serve Holliway is not known, but the practice of indenting children to clear their parents’ debts was generally accepted in colonial Massachusetts. It is impossible to determine precisely how many Native youths left their communities to learn whaling or to perform domestic service in English households.⁷⁴

The indentured indigenous children who are visible in Nantucket’s historical record appear in probate documents, where they were assigned a monetary value in their master’s will and passed down to heirs as if each child were just another piece of the family’s silver service.⁷⁵ Even if indigenous children

⁷¹“Indenture between John Caudanoo and John Meader,” Vertical Files II, folder 17, NHA.

⁷²Vickers, “The First Whalemen,” p. 580.

⁷³“Indenture between Robin Myserick and Gideon Holiway,” 6 July 1737, Miscellaneous Bound Papers, MHS.

⁷⁴Silverman, “The Impact of Indentured Servitude,” pp. 641–52.

⁷⁵In 1721, Thomas Bunker left his wife two Native children, Peleg, worth £20, and Dorcas, worth £10. In 1735, Joshua Sevolle bequeathed his heirs an Indian boy valued at £30. When Francis Coffin died, he left his children “an Indian boy Joseph,” assessed at £25. At Daniel Folger’s death in 1748, the court placed a £60 price on his “Indian servant.” See “Court Records,” Ms. 35—Henry Barnard Worth Collection, folder 1, NHA.

avoided being removed from their families, they could seldom escape the whaling industry. Sons of whalers assumed the debts of their fathers when they died. In 1744, Isaack Tashame purchased a winding sheet for his father, John, and assumed “all the above” debts of “the old man.”⁷⁶ Isaack then had to go whaling in an attempt to settle his father’s account. More indigenous whalers used their accounts to provide for their families while they were absent at sea. Joe Toowadde supported his mother, known as “old Squa,” on his account at the Starbuck store. In March 1735, “old Squa” borrowed five shillings from the Starbucks while her son, Joe, was away at sea with Jethro Folger.⁷⁷ Tom Poney’s father, mother, and wife used his account to purchase corn, shoes, and various sundries while he was gone a’whaling.⁷⁸ Each purchase required whalemens to spend another week at the whaling station instead of with their families.

Whaling voyages kept indigenous men away from their communities longer than fishing for cod off Nantucket’s banks had in the seventeenth century. The cyclical absence of male community members frayed indigenous villages’ social fabric. We know from anecdotal evidence that many young indigenous men who went to sea died.⁷⁹ To fill the monetary gap left by their dead brothers, young indigenous women entered domestic service away from their families. Stripped of its youth,

⁷⁶Starbuck Account Book, p. 113. Native debts represented a significant portion of a merchant’s estate. Debts of special contract—those made under a covenant or sale—were listed in inventories and passed to one’s heirs as assets. In 1697, Samuel Smith “owned 255 pounds in ‘Indian Debts’ at the time of his death,” which according to his will he distributed among his family members. The practice of passing down Native debt continued into the eighteenth century. See Braginton-Smith and Oliver, *Cape Cod Shore Whaling*, pp. 172–73, 174, 176. See also Jeff and Nancy Cox, “Probate 1500–1800: A System in Transition,” in *When Death Do Us Part: Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England*, ed. Tom Arkell, Nesta Evans, and Nigel Goose (Oxford: Leopard’s Head Press, Ltd., 2000) p. 31; *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 7th ed., s.v. “special contract debt,” pp. 331–32.

⁷⁷Starbuck Account Book, p. 185.

⁷⁸Starbuck Account Book, pp. 23, 26, 55, 56, 109, 112, 116.

⁷⁹Whaling was a hazardous occupation. While few white whalers were lost in the industry’s infancy, many Native whalers died. See *Remarkable Observations: The Whaling Journal of Peleg Folger, 1751–1754*, ed. Thomas Philbrick (Nantucket: Mill Hill Press, 2004), p. 69; Starbuck Account Book, p. 62; Philbrick, *Abram’s Eyes*, p. 163; Starbuck, *History of the American Whalefishery*, pp. 31–32; *Boston News Letter*, 17–24 January 1714.

the community's birth rate decreased.⁸⁰ The number of wage earners available to support parents and elders in the future diminished, which burdened those who remained with responsibilities that incurred yet more debt.

The Native community understood the disastrous effects of debt peonage and petitioned the General Court for relief. In 1700, "some of the principal and best disposed Indians" within the province of Massachusetts protested that merchants were forcing them to become "servants for an unreasonable term on pretence of, or to make satisfaction for some small debt contracted." The court agreed to limit the terms of all indentures issued in the colony to two years and required two justices of the peace to approve the said contracts. In addition, the court empowered justices of the peace "to hear and relieve" the complaints of any bound "Indian according to justice and equity."⁸¹ The ruling did not curb suits for debt on Nantucket. While cases against Native people continued to be prosecuted, rates of repayment remained low. Indigenous debtors willing to leave family and property behind escaped to Tuckernuck Island (located to the west of Nantucket), a haven outside of Nantucket's jurisdiction where they could avoid "payment of their past debt."⁸² In an attempt to encourage Native debtors to pay their creditors, the General Court passed a temporary moratorium, an "Act Against Indians Being Sued for Debt." The legislation set out what colonial legislators saw to be the root causes for what had become a pressing social problem.

Native inhabitants of this province, out of an aversion for industry and labour, do frequently run into debt, more especially for strong drink, of an insatiable thirst to gratify their vicious inclination, and being unable to pay are brought further in debt, by imprisonment, charge of law-suits, and a rigorous pursuit, and finally made servants, which may prove of fatal consequence if not timely remedied.

⁸⁰Silverman, "The Impact of Indentured Servitude," p. 653.

⁸¹*The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay: To which are prefixed The Charters of the Province with Historical and Explanatory Notes, and An Appendix*, vol. 1 (Boston: Wright & Potter, Printer to the State, 1869), pp. 435–36.

⁸²Byers, "Nation of Nantucket," p. 62.

For two years, the court ordered, no suits for debt could be brought against Natives in the lower courts.⁸³ The law ended in 1712; the previous year Native Nantucketers were deprived of their tax shelter when Nantucket's proprietors annexed Tucker-nuck Island.⁸⁴ Desperate Native debtors found little sympathy in the courts after 1712. In 1724, Stephen Noble, indigenous servant to Joseph Meder, broke into his master's desk "when he was abroad and[,] taking thence his Indenture and absenting himself from his Service[,]” hoped to abscond. He did not succeed. Brought to court, Noble confessed, and to punish him for his theft, his service was extended for an additional four months.⁸⁵ The conviction sent a message to the indigenous community: no matter how hard or far they ran, they would never outrun their creditors.

Although the court attempted—in a paternalistic manner—to appease Native grievances, the injustices of economic inferiority, community disempowerment, and forced service in the whaling industry rankled indigenous leaders. In 1718, a group of Native Nantucket men complained that “their English Neighbors allow them but half Price for their Whaling, that they have pulled down the Indian Houses & built on their Land, that they plow across the Indians & plant in their Land, & take away their Horses & Cattle to prevent their Plowing.” Furthermore, they protested, if they sued English Nantucketers, “the Judges, Jury, Sheriff, & Clerk are the Defendants.” They asked the General Court in Boston to grant them “equal & Impartial Trials” and noted, edgily, that this was “their fourth Complaint.” Joseph Coffin, Nantucket's representative to the General Court and Mary Coffin Starbuck's nephew, dismissed the accusations of horse and cattle theft, derided the alleged destruction of Native houses, and vouched for the authenticity and authority of Nantucket's land deeds. On the subject of whaling, Coffin was particularly adamant. Native whalers had “no reason to Complain” about “being paid half Price for their service,” he harangued the assembly, “they being allowed according to the

⁸³*Acts and Resolves*, 1:640–41.

⁸⁴Byers, “Nation of Nantucket,” p. 62.

⁸⁵“Court Records,” Ms. 35, Henry Barnard Worth Collection, folder 1, NHA.

Custom of the Island, one Half, the other being allowed for the Boat & Craft which is a proportion as is allowed to white Men.” Besides, he insisted, Native people owed “the English a great Deal, who have often trusted & relieved them in their Necessities.” “The English Inhabitants,” he assured the court, “are willing & desirous that the Debts contracted by the Indians for the last five years may be fairly stated & that the Records of their Court or otherwise anything unjust or unreasonable appears in their Dealings they shall be glad to be regulated.”⁸⁶

Coffin’s defense of whaling resonated with the General Court. Members—like their legislative predecessors before them—must have recognized the economic importance of the whale fishery as well as Native people’s indispensable role in it. They declined to take up indigenous concerns about whaling, although they did promise to investigate claims regarding land, livestock, and court abuses.⁸⁷ The promise was a ruse. The General Court entrusted the matter to a select committee, which for nine years deferred its report to the next session, and the next, and then the next.⁸⁸ The only so-called justice the Native petitioners received came swiftly in 1718 when the court acknowledged that Nantucket’s court system might be partial and ordered two judges from Barnstable County (Cape Cod) to hear all Native–European cases on the island.⁸⁹ Whaling—and indigenous labor in that industry—remained vital to Cape Cod’s economy as well; therefore, the new justices consented to hear land disputes, but they demurred on maritime matters.



Nantucket’s Native cod fishermen had entered their maritime careers willingly. They had managed their merchant accounts

⁸⁶Alexander Starbuck, *The History of Nantucket, County, Island, And Town, Including Genealogies of First Settlers* (1869; repr. Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969), p. 143, and Lydia S. Hinchman, *Early Settlers of Nantucket: Their Associates and Descendants* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1896), p. 32.

⁸⁷Colonial governments passed preferential acts that encouraged the development of the whale fishery due to its economic benefit. See Starbuck, *History of the American Whalefishery*, pp. 15, 25–29.

⁸⁸See designated volumes of *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay* for the years 1708–20 (9:494 [1902]), and 1720–26 (10:289, 438, 496 [1902]), (2:611, 666 [1874]), and (13:94, 175, 689 [1905]).

⁸⁹*Acts and Resolves*, 9:560.

more or less adequately and chosen whether and with whom they would fish in any given season. In the 1690s, they retooled their skills for the shore whaling industry. As whaling changed from a shore activity to a deep-sea hunt, however, ship owners expected their Native mariners to absent themselves from their homes. Many indigenous workers had little desire to do so, and so merchants used debt to leverage their compliance. Debt peonage forced Native people to develop a different relationship with the ocean, one that divorced them from their personal autonomy and their collective agency over their maritime environment. In the late 1740s, Paul Quaab sent a petition to the Massachusetts General Court. He complained that “Indians are sent whaling and fishing and when Indians are at home then they must work for their masters . . . and let Indian live as long as he will and when he [die] English will tak[e] all what it may be [found to] bee his Estate and English will leave nothing for Indians wives or children and so they become poor.” “My money is spent,” lamented Quaab, “and the English at Nantucket say there is no hope for those Indians now.”⁹⁰ The Coffins, Starbucks, Swains, Gardners, and Husseys had grown rich, while the indigenous men who enriched them—men who traveled to distant whaling grounds for months at a time, much to the detriment of their own progeny and community—survive as little more than faceless entries in an account book and disheartened petitioners whose economic value was as essential as it was unrecompensed.

⁹⁰“Petition to the General Court by Paul Quaab complaining of English injustice,” vol. 31, series 228: Passed Resolves, p. 626, Mass Archives.

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