Shinnecock Whalers: A Case Study in Seventeenth-Century Assimilation Patterns

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Studies of the early post-contact period in 17th century North America have demonstrated the importance of trade as an agent of social change. Indian communities gradually came to place a high value on such European goods as knives, coats, copper kettles, guns and shoes. These goods could be purchased for fur pelts as long as the supply lasted, but once the animals were hunted to near extinction the only other commodity left to sell was labour. For most of the Indians this meant work as a domestic servant or as an unskilled labourer. Indian communities along the coast of New England and on the adjacent islands were more fortunate in some respects because they had a highly valued skill to sell. They were experienced whalers. This skill enabled some of them to retain an important element of their heritage while they worked out an accommodation with the dominant white culture.

Whale hunting was a part of an ancient maritime tradition among the Indians of eastern Long Island. The drift whales, which washed ashore with considerable frequency along the southern New England coast, were a valuable food supply for aboriginal peoples. Whales often found their way into the shallow bays where they became disoriented and vulnerable to hunters in dugout canoes. The skills and strategies developed over the centuries were in great demand as soon as the first settlers decided to expand their production of whale oil and bone for the export market.

Although the role of the whale in eastern coastal cultures is not
well understood, we do know that native peoples along the eastern New England coast were observed killing whales in the 17th century. James Rosier, who accompanied Captain George Waymouth on a voyage along the eastern coast of North America in 1605, wrote the following account of a whale hunt and the ceremonies afterward:

One especial thing is their manner of killing the whale which they call Powdawé; and will describe his form; how bloweth up in the water; and that he is twelve fathoms long; and that they go in company of their king with a multitude of their boats, and strike him with a bone made in the fashion of a harping iron fastened to a rope, which they make great and strong of the bark of trees, which they veer out after him; then all their boats come about him, as he riseth above the water, with their arrows they shoot him to death; when they have killed him and dragged him to shore, they call all their chief lords together, and sing a song of joy; and those chief lords, whom they call sagamores, divide the spoil, and give to every man a share, which pieces so distributed, they hang up about their houses for provision; and then they boil them, they blow of the fat, and put to their pease, maize, and other pulse which they eat. (Burrage 1907:392)

Rosier did not mention the precise geographic location or the name of the Indian tribe. The speculation that it was the Kennebec Indians on the coast of Maine, endorsed by many scholars, has been challenged recently by Elizabeth Little, who studied both the migratory patterns of the right whale (eubalena glacialis) and the ethnographic patterns of coastal Indian communities (Little 1981; Little and Andrews 1982). She concluded that the whale hunt was more likely to have occurred somewhere between Cape Cod and the Saco River. This more southerly location of the hunt increases its relevance for insights into Shinnecock prehistory. The brief account provides some important information about the broader cultural aspects of the whale hunt. The capture of the whale was an occasion for a community-wide celebration supervised by the sagamores. These men were probably shamans who were responsible for directing the rituals associated with the spiritual forces that influenced the oceans and the whales. There are no accounts of whale hunting by the Shinnecock Indians, but there is a document which clearly indicates that the Shinnecock held sacred ceremonies centered around the fin and tail of the whale. The following description comes from David Lion Gardener’s (1840) Chronicles of East Hampton:
The most savory sacrifice made to their great deity was the tail or fin of the whale, which they roasted. The leviathan from which it was taken was at times found upon the sea shore, and a prolonged pow-wow, or religious festival was held. At these festivals great efforts were supposed to be necessary to keep the evil one without the charmed circle of their encantations. His presence, it was supposed, would defeat the pow-wow in the procurement of the favor and particular regard of the good deity. Violent gesticulations, horrid yells, and laborious movements of the limbs and body, with distortions of the features, were continued until the excitement produced madness. When the evil spirit was supposed to be subjugated, the dance and the feast commenced.

The report of the ceremonies following the killing of a whale and this account of the feast, which celebrated the discovery of a beached whale, share many similarities. Apparently the Indians made no distinction between the whales they killed and those which drifted ashore. The reports do certainly make it clear that the whale did play an important role in their religious rituals. the Indians on Cape Cod also valued the fin and tail of whales but unfortunately the records do not report any rituals (Freeman 1869(2):247).

Additional insights about this role come from the legends of the Indians on Martha’s Vineyard. Whales were referred to here as the “gift of Moshup”. According to the legends, an ancient culture hero named Moshup sent whales ashore to feed his people (Little and Andrews 1982). The pattern of drift whales, which regularly beached themselves on the shores and in the shallow bays along the Atlantic coast, may have been viewed as evidence of Moshup’s power. The whale population in the North Atlantic was probably much larger in the 17th century than it is today. Although there are no precise statistics, we do have many reports of whale sightings by 17th century observers such as Captain John Smith, Richard Mather and David De Vries (Edwards and Rattray 1932). A memorandum in the British Secretary of State papers for 1667 reported that the waters of eastern Long Island were one of the richest sources of whales on the Atlantic coast (Dow 1967).

The origins of shore whaling practices along the New England coast remain obscure, but it seems likely that the Indians adapted some of the techniques used by the Basque fisherman who hunted off the Atlantic coast in the 16th century. These adventurous pioneers began whaling on the Bay of Biscay in the 11th century (Ellis 1980).
The relationship between the Basque and the coastal Indian communities is not well documented, but it is known that the Basques traded with the Indians for furs (Williams and Bilbao 1975). Basque whalers did establish temporary camps along the shore to serve as bases for their whaling expeditions. There was undoubtedly some cultural exchange which played a role in the development of aboriginal shore whaling.

The development of the shore whaling was facilitated in large part, by the nature of the right whale which frequented the waters near the southern coast of Long Island from November until April each year. It was called the "right" whale because the unfortunate creature was such an easy prey for hunters in small boats. The right whale is a surface feeder spending much of its time close to shore consuming plankton. As if inviting pursuit, the whale swims very slowly and makes shallow dives for a maximum of 20 minutes (Leatherwood and Reeves 1983). Even in death the whale is accommodating. The carcass remains buoyant for a considerable length of time, enabling the hunters to tow it to shore.

The English settlers were quick to recognize the economic importance of the whales. An adult right whale averages about 50 feet in length, weighs approximately 100 tons, and will produce nearly 50 barrels of high quality oil, which was in great demand for lamps and as a lubricant for leather working (Beddard 1900:122). Profits from whale oil were a major source of capital during the 17th century in eastern Long Island. Private debts as well as the salaries of ministers and school teachers were frequently paid in whale oil. Within four years of their arrival, the Southampton settlers had established a cooperative community enterprise, which turned the beached drift whales into their first cash crop (Strong 1983). The townspeople divided themselves into squads which were responsible for keeping watch on the beaches, cutting up the drift whales, and carting them off to the trying stations where the blubber would be boiled down to oil. Anyone who neglected this duty was fined by the town clerk (Hedges 1887(1):54). The profits were shared by the town and the individuals who contributed the labour (Pelletreau 1874:91–93). The economic significance of the drift whales was further demonstrated in the deeds which involved beach areas. Rights to the carcasses were always carefully spelled out (Hedges 1887:150).

It was only a short time before the profits from the whale bone
and oil encouraged settlers to organize whaling companies. John Ogden, who was granted the first whaling license on record in 1650, may have pioneered the use of Indian crews. Unfortunately no contracts were recorded until 18 years later, so there is no way of determining when the Indians were first in corporated into commercial whaling. John Cooper was described in the colonial minutes of December 29, 1670 as the man who "... is said to be one of ye first that brought ye Indians to be serviceable in that design ..." (Fernow 1883:646). It seems likely that Ogden also relied on Indian crews because there were few, if any, experienced whalers among the whites.

These private companies were warned not to interfere in any way with the rights of the towns to drift whales. Ogden's company was licensed to have:

... free liberty without interruption from the inhabitants of Southampton to kill whales upon the south sea ... for the space of seven years ... Mr. John Ogden nor his company shall not deny the town's inhabitants claiming the priviledge formerly belonging to them in dead whales yet shall be accidently cast upon the shores. (Pelletreau 1871:70–71)

When a rival company was established in 1654, the town imposed an added restriction. The new company could not kill whales which became trapped in the bay adjacent to the town. The reason for this clause is not given, but it may be that Ogden's company was taking so many of the whales which floundered in the bay that fewer died of natural causes and drifted ashore for the town squads to salvage. Another possible explanation is that the town had given Ogden a monopoly on the bay. When Ogden's company applied for a renewal of his license in 1658, he demanded that no other company be allowed to hunt within the town limits (Pelletreau 1874:126). Although the documents leave many questions unanswered, it is clear that the whales were a highly valued commodity worth fighting over in court.

Another problem which led to frequent conflict was caused when a hunting party lost track of a wounded whale. If the animal was caught and killed by another company or died and drifted ashore in one of the town beaches, the claimants frequently settled the issue in court. The company licenses stipulated that unless the harping irons of a company were found in the carcass, the town could claim ownership. In cases involving claims by two rival companies, the issue was settled by identifying the marks of ownership on the harpoons
and lances found in the carcass. Laws were soon enacted requiring anyone finding a carcass with embedded irons to notify the rightful owners. The finders could claim a share for their efforts (Hedges 1887:271-272; Dow 1967).

The settlers, who had come to view the Indians as an obstacle to the growth of their community, now found themselves dependent upon the Indians for a highly valued commodity. The Indian communities were the only source of skilled and experienced whalers. Most of the men who established the early whaling companies had no maritime experience at all. John Cooper, for example, raised horses and opened the first liquor store in the Hamptons. His contribution to the whaling expeditions was limited to providing equipment and arranging for the marketing of the oil and bone. James Loper, whose knowledge and expertise were so widely recognized that he was asked by entrepreneurs on Nantucket to aid them in establishing whaling companies, developed most of his skills after he arrived on eastern Long Island. Loper was about 12 when his step-father, Jacob Schellinger, moved to East Hampton. Although Schellinger may have had some experience at sea, he is described as a “Dutch merchant from Staten Island” in the records. The traditional tools and techniques used by the Indians in the whale hunt, however, were related to the limited needs of those communities for meat. The English wanted a more efficient and systematic method, which would enable them to harvest as many whales as possible for an inexhaustible market. The answer was to combine Indian talent with European technology. The companies supplied the Indians with iron harpoons and open, double-ended cedar boats, nearly 30 feet long and 8 feet wide, designed for speed and manoeuvrability. Each one carried a six man crew: four oarsmen, a steersman and a harpooner (Wooley 1968).

The attack on the whale involved considerable skill and courage. Two boats were generally used in the hunt. These boats had to be manoeuvered within 15 feet of the whale to give the harpooners a chance to drive their lances and harpoons deeply enough into the body. Standing in the prow of the boat, with one leg braced into a notch carved in the bow for this purpose, the harpooner had to time the pitching motion of the sea and throw his shaft, with line attached, into a moving target. The harpoon had a razor-sharp point with multiple barbs jutting out just below the tip. The barbed point,
designed to lodge the shaft in the whale’s body, was not an innovation introduced by the English. According to a study done by Otis T. Mason for the National Museum, aboriginal fishermen were observed using barbed harpoons by many European explorers (Mason 1900:234–236). Barbed points have also been recovered from several prehistoric archaeological sites in New England (Moffett 1969; Fowler 1976). Prior to the introduction of European technology, the harpoon lines were probably attached to flotation devices (drogues) made of wood or inflated animal skins rather than to the boats (Little 1981:54). Edwards and Rattray (1932:196) suggest that once the light Indian canoes were replaced by the heavier cedar boats, it became possible to attach the lines directly to the vessel. The prime target for the harpoon was a spot just behind the whale’s head. If the harpoon penetrated here to the hilt of the wooden handle, it was likely to shorten the struggle.

Once the lines were set and the whale’s movements were slowed, the lances were cast into the whale. These formidable weapons had a long wooden haft and an iron shaft ending in a spear point. The harpooner had to have strength, balance and very good reflexes in order to throw these heavy missiles with force and accuracy into a stricken animal turning and twisting in the waves. If the lances hit a vital spot, the hunt could be over in an hour or so, but it was not unusual for the struggle to last for a half a day (Starbuck 1964). In spite of the harpoons and the cedar boats, the hunt was a risky business. A man who fell into the winter ocean had little chance of survival unless he was pulled out immediately.

The next stage of the operation, while less risky, was demanding. After the whale was killed, the long, exhausting process of towing the carcass ashore began. Edwards and Rattray (1932:53–54), in their account of 19th-century shore whaling, described the struggle of a crew bringing in a whale killed nearly ten miles off shore. It took them about an hour of strenuous rowing to pull the massive burden one mile. After six hours of back-breaking rowing, family and friends came out with food and water for the crew. Another six hours of work was required to finally bring the whale to shore.

Whales were towed in, tail first, at high tide and pulled up on the beach as far as possible. An anchor was attached to the lip of the whale to keep it from moving with the pull of the falling tide. Once the carcass was exposed on the drying tidal flats, the first stage
of the butchering could begin. The head was severed with axes and
boat spades. The boat-spade looked like a shovel with the blade
pounded flat and sharpened. The jaw bone, which was the only part
of the whale's skeleton with a significant commercial value, was then
removed from the skull. The crew could now begin the messy work
on the carcass. The blubber was cut into strips and pulled off with a
hawser and tackle. With the important exception of the hawser and
tackle, the butchering techniques were similar to those used by the
prehistoric aboriginal whalers (Williams 1973:181). As soon as the
blubber strips were cut free, they were loaded onto carts and waken
to the tryworks. When the tide came in again and lifted the carcass
up, the men took the opportunity to shift the body and continue
with their work. Even with the help of the tide and the tackle, the
task of shifting a 70 to 80 ton body was quite a challenge. In the
case of the larger whales, the process could take two or three days.

As soon as the blubber was delivered to the trying stations, the
strips were cut into small pieces and loaded into huge 250-gallon
kettles (Edwards and Rattray 1932:90–96). A crude stone furnace
under the kettles boiled the oil free of the blubber. The scraps of
whale flesh were skimmed out and used as fuel for the fire. As the
kettles filled, the oil was bailed out and poured into cooling vats
where it sat until the temperature lowered enough for the oil to be
transferred to barrels. The two boat crews each took six hour shifts
until the job was finished. An average sized whale could keep two
crews working for a week. The smell from these tryworks was so
offensive that the local towns passed legislation requiring that the
stations be located some distance from the nearest village (Howell
1941).

In 1668 the process of entering into contracts with Indian whalers
was begun. Previously arrangements had apparently been made in-
formally between Indian crews and white entrepreneurs. The bar-
gaining power of the Indians in this process is demonstrated by the
willingess of the colonial authorities to approve payment in gunpow-
der. Colonial laws restricted or prohibited the sale of powder and
shot to prevent the Indians from building up an arsenal which might
be used against the settlers. John Cooper's request in 1668 for per-
mission to give his whalers gunpowder was approved because "... the
designe of killing of whales and making oil, ... is work tending to
public good and deserves encouragement" (Fernow 1883:608–609).
Competition for the service of experienced whalers soon led to abuses of these informal agreements. In December, 1670 the same John Cooper petitioned the colonial authorities to enact legislation which would discourage whaling company owners from interfering with agreements reached between their rivals and Indian whalers. Whalers were generally hired several months in advance of the season and given some portion of their pay at that time. As the season neared, whaling companies which had not filled their crews often made attractive offers to Indians who had agreed to work for someone else. The Colonial Council responded with an order prohibiting any Indians under contract to Cooper from hiring out to any other company (Fernow 1883:646). These conflicts probably led to the practice of entering written contracts into the town records. The process of signing a document in front of a witness invoked the authority of the town courts over the contracts. Although the new system did not end the abuses, it may have limited them to a more acceptable level.

The contracts signed between 1668 and 1672 suggest that the system was very profitable for the whites. In April, 1668 several Montauk Indians signed a contract with a company led by Jacob Schellinger of East Hampton for the fall whaling season (Edwards and Rattray 1932:180). The Indians were to be paid three shillings a day and provided with the necessary whaling equipment. The company took all the oil and bone. Profits from a single whale could run as much as 100 pounds sterling. It was not unusual for a company to bring in from three to five whales in a season. In 1700 a man from East Hampton was able to buy a farm with the profits from one whale. Although the number of whaling companies in 1669 is not recorded, a report to Governor Nicolls estimated that "... on the east end of Long Island there were 12 or 13 whales taken before ye end of March ..." (Dow 1967:13).

The contracts signed on November 15, 1670 between Josiah Laughton and two Indians named Towsaacom and Phillip called for the Indians to work for three seasons. Their payment for hunting, butchering, and trying out the oil over a three year period was to be three Indian coats, one pair of shoes, one pair of stockings, three pounds of shot, a half pound of powder, and a bushel of Indian corn for each season (Pelletreau 1874:56–57). The whaling companies in 1687 are reported to have averaged about 150 barrels a season, enough to buy
three farms at the estimated prices of the day (Strong 1983:232). The Indians who took all the risks on the open water and did all the nasty work on shore shared very little of the profits. Three more contracts were recorded in the town records over the next year and a half with similar terms.

The competition for Indian whalers, which led to Cooper's exemption from the gunpowder laws, also prompted an exemption from the laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to the Indians. Although these liquor laws were in force throughout the colonies, they were circumvented or ignored when it served the interests of the settlers. The Governor's order granted exemption to "... such persons who employ Indians in their whaling designe ..." enabling them to give the Indians "... encouragement by affording them small quantities of strong liquor for their relief ..." (Fernow 1883:648).

The Indians responded to this exploitative system by organizing whaling companies of their own. The Shinnecock were the first to challenge the white company owners. The Indians used the same language which appears in the previous contracts to describe their "whale designe".

Know all men by these presents that we the underwritten being joined in a company for this ensuing season to go to sea for the killing and procuring of the whales and other great fish do by these presents bind ourselves jointly and severally in our own persons that god permitting ... will attend all opportunity to go to sea for the procurement of [word illegible] and to cut out and ... to save what shall ... be gotten by us ... we have here unto set our hands this 24th day of November ... (SHTA, Liber A,2:90)

Unfortunately the year is not given, but, judging from its position in the Liber book, it was sometime between 1671 and 1674. Twenty Indians signed the document, and it was witnessed by Benjamin Smith and Jonathan Morehouse. The names include several Indians who were experienced whalers and men of status in their communities. Their signatures appear frequently on deeds and whaling contracts. This ambitious attempt to compete with whites was probably doomed from the start because the whites controlled the market and owned most of the equipment. Although we have no record of actions taken by the whites against the Indian company, there is a reference to wrongs suffered by the Indians in one of the governor's messages to the town of Southampton in 1672. The local
Indians, he said, "... do groan under your hand ..." to such an extent that it interferes with whaling (Fernow 1883:663). This may have been a reference to Indian complaints about harassment. Whatever the cause, the venture was abandoned and no further mention of this unique entreprise can be found in the records. Although the company was unsuccessful, the venture undoubtedly improved the negotiating position of the Indian whalers. By 1675 all the whaling contracts called for the Indians to receive a half share of the profits.

Another indication of the improved bargaining power of the Indians was a resolution passed by the Town of Southampton which put a cap on the amount that could be paid to the whalers by the company owners. No one who hired an Indian crew could pay them more than one cloth coat and one half the blubber. This rule was later endorsed by the colonial governor (Fernow 1883:675). This practice of giving the Indians a share of the oil rather than a cash payment soon became established in New England as well (Starbuck 1964; Little 1981). Although it was an improvement over the early contracts, this "lay system" left the Indians dependent on the bookkeeping of the whites.

In 1676 the Unkechaug Indians, who lived west of the Shinnecock lands, also attempted to establish a whaling company. They had their own boats and wanted the same license which had been granted to the white companies. Their earlier expeditions had met with harassment from the whites who took wounded whales away from them. The Unkechaug appealed to the colonial governor for help, and he agreed to investigate their complaints. Finding the allegations valid, the governor granted them their license and ordered the whites to "... take notice and suffer the said Indians to to do so without any manner of lett or hinderance or molestation ..." (Fernow 1883:720).

The Unkechaugs were particularly unhappy with the lay system of payment. They asked for and were granted the right to ... dispose of their oil as they think good ..." (Fernow 1883:720). Apparently the Unkechaug wanted to market their oil to the highest bidder. This attempt to develop an equal status economic relationship with the whites fared no better than the earlier company formed by the Shinnecock. No further mention of this company appears in the colonial records.

Although the Indians were thwarted in their efforts to form independent companies, they did become adept at exploiting an already
exploitive system. John Topping, a prominent land owner who had been contracting with Indian whalers since 1672, brought a complaint to Governor Edmund Andross claiming that a group of whaling company owners had met with him in East Hampton to protest contract violations by Indian whalers. According to Topping, the Indians:

...with whom they did contract the last spring for their service in whaling this present season, who not withstanding said contracts under hand and seal do now betake themselves to ye service of other men, who do gladly accept them pretending some former engagement which they intend to hold them, soe yet ye Indians who have received goods of one man in ye spring upon ye account of whaling and now againe of another to rite them for ye sea leave their masters to quarrel. (Fernow 1883:756-757)

There is no indication in the colonial records of the Governor’s response to Topping’s plea, but there is clear evidence that the problem continued. The following year a company contractor named John Wheeler signed contracts with Indian whalers, which included a clause imposing a fine of ten pounds sterling if the Indians did not show up for work (Hedges 1887:96-99). There was another clause stating that all debts owed by the Indians to the company owner must be paid in full. The nature of the debt is not clear, but they may have been related to a clause in several contracts stipulating that the Indians had to pay for the carting of their share of the blubber to the trying station. The Indians may have been forced to remain in the employ of a company in order to pay off their debts. A week after John Wheeler’s contract was recorded, he was challenged by Jacob Schellinger for hiring an Indian who still owed an obligation to him (Strong 1983:263). Reverend Thomas James of East Hampton, who never allowed his spiritual commitments to interfere with his pursuit of whaling and real estate enterprises, also complained about interference with his Indian crews. Reverend James, one of the wealthiest men in East Hampton, often viewed his rivals as ungodly men. He complained to the town authorities that some company owners “...Contrary to all the Law of God and Man, Justice or equity goe about to violate or infringe contracts with ye Indians made by me and my Copartners for the Whale designe” (Edwards and Rattray, 1932:198).

After 1700 the whaling industry went through several significant changes. The right whales had been killed in such large numbers that few were seen along the shores any more. Today only about
300 of the right whales survive. Shore whaling continued on into the early decades of the 20th century, but it was pursued as a leisure sport or an occasional supplement to the income rather than as a major source of revenue. Between 1687 and 1707 the numbers of barrels of whale oil produced on eastern Long Island dropped from over 2000 to 600 (Sleight 1931:7). The scarcity of the right whales and the advanced technologies prompted the use of larger boats, which went out to sea for months at a time, carrying their own butchering and trying stations on board. Indians continued to play a role in the declining industry until the middle of the 18th century. In 1708 the colonial legislature passed a law which exempted any Indian contracted for whaling designs from being arrested or sued for debt during the whaling season from November 1 until April 15 (Colonial Laws 1894:610). This law was renewed regularly until 1733.

The Shinnecock involvement as skilled participants in a mutually beneficial enterprise was undoubtedly an important factor in their struggle to survive as a people and to maintain their cultural identity. Their maritime traditions enabled the Shinnecock to survive the onslaught of European settlement more successfully than many of their woodland neighbours. The ocean and tidal bays continued to be a viable source of food long after the whites had domesticated the hunting grounds. Most of the Indians who depended on the land for hunting, gathering and agriculture were forced to move west or abandon their ancient traditions and assimilate on whatever terms the whites set forth. The Shinnecock, however, were able to hold on to a small reservation located on a tidal bay near a major food resource. They were left free to adapt at their own speed and on their own terms.

This maritime orientation continued to play an important role Shinnecock history. In 1855, for example, the New York State census listed 33 mariners and 18 fishermen out of 53 adult males residing on the reservation. More recently the Shinnecock have applied modern technology to an ancient tradition. In 1979 they completed the construction of a solar heated shellfish hatchery. The only fear is that the shellfish, like the right whale, will fall victim to the ravages of an enterprising spirit which is overdeveloping the property around the bays and polluting the waters of eastern Long Island.
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