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The First Whalemen of Nantucket

Daniel Vickers

IN the year 1690, so a Nantucket story goes, 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 If the sea was to be their garden, however, these islanders, like other American colonists, were only interested in cultivating it as their own. The thought of purchasing and managing vessels may have ignited their imaginations, but few of them entertained any wish to toil on the deep in the service of other men.

Finding help was therefore no easy task. Free men on Nantucket as in most corners of early America had seized upon the easy availability of land to establish themselves as independent producers. Accordingly, those who launched the whale fishery at the end of the seventeenth century, like all colonists who wanted to expand production beyond the limits of the household, found labor hard to procure at any price, let alone one that ensured what they felt was a reasonable rate of return. It was not the gathering of capital that troubled the first whaling merchants, for in the early years the costs of entering the industry were moderate. The demand for whale oil and whalebone was well established and markets were easy to locate, while the sources of supply were clearly visible as they swam along Nantucket's coastline. The real challenge to these early entrepreneurs was to find a few men who understood the techniques of whaling, and above all to recruit a larger group to man the oars. In most parts of the New World the scarcity of obedient and reliable workmen pushed employers to consider the institution of bound labor. Historians of tropical production generally invoke this proposition in their explanations of slavery. But should not the same principle have held true in the thinly populated northern colonies, wherever men were producing for the market? This article investigates how capitalist development in one corner of the New England economy took place without wholesale recourse to slavery or indentured servitude.

Mr. Vickers is a member of the Department of History at the University of Wyoming. He wishes to extend particular thanks to Ted Byers for his scholarly aid and criticism. An earlier version of the article was presented at the Boston University Colloquium in Early American History, March 1981, and at the Millersville Conference in Early American History, May 1981.

¹ 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* . . . (Boston, 1835), 33.

Nantucket is a low sandy island of forty-six square miles, half a day's journey by sail off the south coast of Cape Cod. The earliest Europeans to call there at the beginning of the seventeenth century found it an attractive if not especially fertile place, inhabited by 2,500 Wampanoag and Nauset Indians, who supported their numbers, enormous for an island that size, by hunting and farming, and especially by fishing.² Although they must have profited by the occasional drift whale that washed up on shore, they never pursued these great creatures on the open sea.

The first white settlers arrived in 1660 and purchased from the Indians both permission to settle at the west end of the island and rights to gather hay, graze cattle after the harvest, and cut timber on the rest of the land.³ In the decade that followed, over twenty families—Coffins, Colemans, Barnards, Bunkers, Husseys, Starbucks, Swains, Worths, Macys, and Folgers being the most prominent—purchased shares in the propriety and moved to the island. By virtue of their control over the land, reinforced by a tight policy of intermarriage, these few families maintained near-total domination over the Nantucket economy through the next hundred years.

Most of the settlers came to farm, but it was soon evident that the island contained too little room to support the generations to come. Some of the early arrivals were craftsmen whose skills must have enabled the newly planted settlement to provide some goods for itself, but certain items would always have to come from the mainland. To pay for these, the settlers began to cast about for commodities that could find markets in Boston.

Most of the colonists of coastal New England were familiar with the whales that the sea washed up and stranded on their beaches, and with the economic value of blubber and baleen. During the seventeenth century, towns from Plymouth to Long Island passed orders governing the ownership of the great creatures, the organization to cut them up, and the manner in which the first casks of oil were to be shared out.⁴ On Nantucket, where most of the beaches and beachcombing privileges remained in Indian hands, these problems were normally settled outside the white community, although in fights over the ownership of the animals the Indians sometimes turned for arbitration to the English courts. As

² Sherburne Cook, *The Indian Population of New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976), 41-45.

³ Alexander Starbuck, *The History of Nantucket: County, Island and Town . . .* (Rutland, Vt., 1969 [orig. publ. Boston, 1924]), 20-22. On the nature of Indian deeds see Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975), 128-145.

⁴ Glover M. Allen, "The Whalebone Whales of New England," Boston Society of Natural History, *Memoires*, VIII (1916), 146-158, hereafter cited as Allen, "Whalebone Whales"; Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery: From Its Earliest Inception to the Year 1876*, 2 vols. (New York, 1964 [orig. publ. Washington, D.C., 1878]), I, 7, 9, 10; William B. Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789*, 2 vols. (New York, 1963 [orig. publ. 1890]), I, 432.

their attention was drawn to the abundance of whales around the island, the settlers began to consider the possibilities of commercial exploitation themselves.⁵

Nantucketers knew that elsewhere in the colonies whales were pursued in boats from the shore. The Englishmen who settled on Cape Cod and the eastern end of Long Island had been hunting these beasts and selling their oil and bone to merchants in Boston and New York since the early 1650s.⁶ Naturally enough, the men of Nantucket came to envision these products as commodities that could right their balance of trade with the mainland. The problem was that nobody on the island really knew how whaling was carried on.

In 1672, therefore, the settlers invited a Long Island whaleman named James Loper to practice his trade on Nantucket. If he would "Ingage to carry on a Design of Whale Catching," the town would bear two-thirds of the cost, guarantee Loper a near-monopoly in the fishery, and throw in a house lot and commonage to boot. Financing the venture was clearly not a problem for the islanders, who were chiefly interested in the whaleman not for his capital but for his mastery of technique. Unfortunately, although Loper accepted the offer, he must have changed his mind, for he continued to follow the fishery from Long Island and never moved to Nantucket. Not until 1690, when one Ichabod Paddock arrived from Yarmouth on Cape Cod, did the island manage to attract a competent whaleman.⁷ Once the expertise had been acquired, however, whaling from the shore developed rapidly. Almost at once the settlers began to organize their own companies, and we have evidence that, by the turn of the century, Indians were purchasing goods from Nantucket merchants out of their earnings in the hunt. The shore fishery continued to expand into the mid-1720s, when close to thirty boats were engaged in the chase.⁸

The object of their pursuit was the right whale. Every autumn these animals returned along the American coast from a summer of feeding in the far reaches of the North Atlantic. From early November to March or April they wintered between Cape Cod and the Carolinas, usually within thirty miles of the shore. At any time during these months, whales could be spotted from the land. Nantucket was especially favored because of its position off the headland of Cape Cod, around which all whales had to swim. During the months of migration, vast numbers of them passed within a few miles of the island.⁹ The oil refined from the blubber of the right whale was of a poor grade, suitable only for outdoor lamps and lubrication. In the animal's head, however, hung hundreds of strips of

⁵ Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 128-130, 172.

⁶ Starbuck, *Whale Fishery*, I, 9-13; Allen, "Whalebone Whales," 148; William R. Palmer, "The Whaling Port of Sag Harbor" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1959), chap. I.

⁷ Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 32-33, 33n.

⁸ Starbuck, *Whale Fishery*, I, 22.

⁹ Allen, "Whalebone Whales," 141-143.

baleen or whalebone, a hard yet flexible material, which the whale used for straining food from the sea; for Europeans of the time this substance served some of the functions that plastics do today. Both oil and bone found steady markets in England.

Over the course of their lives, right whales varied enormously in size. Paul Dudley, a resident of Massachusetts and America's first cetologist, described their development in these words:

This fish, when first brought forth, is about twenty Feet long, and of little Worth, but then the Dam is very fat. At a Year old, when they are called Short-heads, they are very fat, and yield to fifty Barrels of Oil, but by that Time the Dam is very poor, and term'd a Dry-skin, and won't yield more than thirty Barrels of Oil, tho' of large Bulk. At two Years old, they are called Stunts, being stunted after weaning, and will then yield generally from twenty four to twenty eight Barrels. After this, they are term'd Scull-fish, their Age not being known, but only guess'd at by the Length of the Bone in their Mouths.¹⁰

Full-grown adults commonly produced up to 90 barrels of oil, and occasionally as much as 120 or 130, but the average produce of all right whales caught ranged around 60 barrels of oil and 750 pounds of bone.¹¹

The pursuit of these creatures from the shores of Nantucket had become a regular seasonal activity by the end of the seventeenth century. The fishery was carried on by companies of six men stationed at various points on the south and east coasts of the island. Crèvecoeur, an early visitor, related that each company "erected a mast, provided with a sufficient number of rounds, and near it they built a temporary hut, where five of the associates lived, whilst the sixth from his high station carefully looked toward the sea, in order to observe the spouting of the whales. As soon as any were discovered, the sentinel descended, the whale-boat was launched, and the company went forth in quest of their game."¹² In these slim, double-ended boats, built of cedar clapboards to a length of twenty feet, the company might row after whales the entire day among the Nantucket shoals. The method of the hunt they borrowed from the British Greenland fishery. If a company managed to draw even with its prey—not too difficult a task since right whales were lazy swimmers—the

¹⁰ Paul Dudley, "An Essay upon the Natural History of Whales, with a Particular Account of the Ambergris Found in the *Sperma Ceti* Whale," Royal Society of London, *Philosophical Transactions*, XXXIII (1725), 257.

¹¹ Allen, "Whalebone Whales," 170-171; William Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery*, 2 vols. (New York, 1969 [orig. publ. Edinburgh, 1820]), II, 156-157. One barrel of oil equaled 31 1/2 gallons.

¹² J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York, 1957 [orig. publ. London, 1782]), 110.

harpooner, perched in the bow, attempted to "fasten on" by sinking his harpoon, or iron, into its flesh. If the iron, connected by hundreds of feet of line to the whaleboat, stuck fast, the whale usually sounded in terror and attempted to flee, with the vessel and crew in tow. As the boat sped across the waves in the wake of the stricken animal, the company drew near to it at every opportunity, hurling lances and harpoons tied to heavy wooden drogues into the enraged beast, trying to bring its life to a speedy conclusion. The outcome of the chase could vary, as Dudley noted: "The Whale is sometimes killed with a single Stroke, and yet at other Times she will hold the Whale-men in Play, near half a Day together, with their Lances, and sometimes they will get away after they have been lanced and spouted blood, with Irons in them, and Drugs fastened to them."¹³

The skills required in whaling from the shore varied from post to post. The harpooner directed the chase from the bow; he gave the orders, paid out the towline when the whale sounded, and handled the actual harpooning and lancing. He needed both an understanding of whale behavior and the capacity to make rapid, correct judgments, two things that came only with years of experience. Since the success of the hunt hung largely on his ability to make his harpoons stick and to wreak damage with his lance on the poor beast's innards, he also needed strength, agility, and a rudimentary knowledge of cetacean anatomy. The steersman took his place in the stern and managed the large steering oar. Although subordinate to the harpooner under normal circumstances, he too had to make quick independent decisions, once the heat of the chase and the thrashing of the whale had begun to interrupt the regular chain of command. As accurately as they could, both of these endsmen had to follow the movements of the whale; their judgment on where the creature was headed—not an easy matter since it spent most of its time below the surface—often decided the contest. The three or four oarsmen, by comparison, were relatively unskilled, the chief requirements in this post being a strong back and the ability to row. Since handling an oar was as easy to learn as it was backbreaking to execute, the position attracted, as we shall see, a different class of men.¹⁴

On occasion, companies entered the chase alone, but more frequently they hunted in groups. Alone they stood the chance, if the whale were captured, of claiming the entire prize for themselves; with a sixty-barrel whale at stake, this could mean the equivalent on land of over half a year's wages for each man.¹⁵ In pairs or threesomes, however, though the animal

¹³ Dudley, "Natural History of Whales," Royal Soc. London, *Phil. Trans.*, XXXIII (1725), 263.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 110-111; O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 30-31; Felix Christian Spörri, *Americanische Reiss-beschreibung nach den Caribes Insslen und Neu-Engelland* (Zurich, 1677), 44-45, quoted in Carl Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636-1690* (Providence, R.I., 1974), 144-145; *Griffin & Co. v. Thomas*, 2 Mass. Vice-Admiralty Court, 27-28 (1718); *Davis v. Sturges*, 2 MVAC 68 (1720); *Cowing v. Cushing*, 2 MVAC 166 (1723).

¹⁵ One man's share of a 60-barrel whale was worth £10-15 sterling, oil and bone included, in the 1720s. For wages on land see Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible:*

would have to be shared, companies were far less likely to run into danger or to lose their prey completely. The parties might wrangle over their portions of oil and bone, but in the course of time whalemens worked out equitable methods of sharing the produce.¹⁶

If the chase succeeded, the whalemens towed the dead leviathan back to shore, where pieces of blubber were cut and stripped from its body with the help of a capstan. The blubber was wheeled off in carts to the tryhouses, where the oil was boiled out, cooled down, and poured into wooden casks. The oil, along with the bundles of scrubbed whalebone, was then hauled over the island and stored in warehouses in preparation for shipment to market.¹⁷

The whaling industry of Nantucket was blessed throughout most of the later colonial period with extraordinarily healthy markets. Owing in part to the collapse of the Dutch North Atlantic fishery and in part to rising demand in Britain and America, oil prices moved upward from about £8 sterling per barrel in 1725 to £10 in 1730, to £13-14 in the 1750s and 1760s, to almost £30 on the eve of the Revolution.¹⁸ The incentive to carry the chase out onto the deep and exceed the limited range of the shore fishery was therefore enormous. Accordingly, about 1715, when Nantucketers first discovered that another species of whale, the spermaceti, frequented the ocean waters beyond sight of land, they began sending out small sloops and schooners with crews of twelve or thirteen on regular short voyages in pursuit. Hunting from the two whaleboats carried on board and cutting up the creatures at sea, they packed the blubber into casks and brought it home every two or three weeks to be boiled out in the tryhouses that stood near the town wharf.¹⁹

The spermaceti was smaller than the right whale; it was also swifter, hence more difficult to catch; and it lacked the strips of whalebone that in its counterpart made up to half the value of the carcass. The oil rendered from its body, however, was of a higher grade than that of other cetaceans, and the pure "headmatter" culled from the case in its skull commanded

Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 114-115, and Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), 70. All prices and values in this paper have been converted from Massachusetts currency to British sterling using Table 12: Value of Massachusetts Paper Currency, 1685-1775, in Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 405-406.

¹⁶ See, for example, *Davis v. Sturges*, 2 MVAC 68 (1720).

¹⁷ O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 31.

¹⁸ Zaccheus Macy, "A Short Journal of the First Settlement of the Island of Nantucket . . .," Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 1st Ser., III (1794), 161, hereafter cited as Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket"; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1725-1734, Peter Foulger Museum Library, Nantucket, Mass.; William Rotch Journal B, 2 vols., 1769-1776, Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford, Mass.

¹⁹ O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 37; Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 157; Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 355-356; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734.

between double and triple the price of common whale oil. It was "parmeicity" that excited the islanders' acquisitive instincts and drew them out farther and farther from their native shores. By 1730, Nantucket whalers were carrying copper pots with them and establishing temporary tryworks anywhere on the coast from Newfoundland to the Carolinas that they found convenient. Finally, after 1750, merchants who wished to cut their vessels free from the coastline entirely and thus engage them in voyages of several months' duration, began to have the try-pots installed in brick housings right on the ship's deck. Such technological advances caused the annual product of each deep-sea whaler to climb from 8.3 barrels in 1715 to 16.7 barrels by the 1770s. Under this impetus, the total output of Nantucket's ocean-going vessels soared from 600 barrels in 1715, to 3,700 in 1730, to 11,250 in 1748, and finally to 30,000 by 1775.²⁰

The radical lengthening of voyages that made such growth possible transformed the character of whaling as an occupation. The shore fishery of course involved brutal and dangerous work. Storms, shoals, and angry whales could pound a whaleboat to pieces in a moment, leaving its crew at the mercy of the deep. Flying loops of towline, paid out from the craft to reduce tension while being hauled along by the fleeing beast, could wrap around a hand or an arm and snap it from the body like a brittle twig. Up the coast in Boston harbor, one extraordinarily trusting young seaman named Jonathan Webb was killed when "in coiling up the line unadvisedly he did it about his middle thinking the whale to be dead, but suddenly she gave a Spring and drew him out of the boat, he being in the midst of the line."²¹ Even a safely concluded chase was not necessarily a successful one; more often than not, all that a whaler gained from his hours of straining at the oars was an aching back. In small doses, however, all of this could be borne easily enough, especially when balanced against the spacious living quarters, the fresh food and water, and the proximity to one's family and friends that the shore fishery allowed.

Whaling at sea, by comparison, admitted none of these possibilities. After three or four months of cruising the Atlantic, the tedious spells of inactivity, the rancid meat and stinking water, the cramped quarters, and, above all, the restrictions on one's freedom wore heavily on most whalers' nerves. "No whales to be seen," complained young Peleg Folger off the Carolina coast in 1751: "Much toil and Labour Mortal man is forc^d to endure & Little profit to be Got by it."²² And as the ordinary

²⁰ Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 356-358; O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 37-38, 54, 71; Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 161; Richard C. Kugler, "The Whale Oil Trade, 1750-1775," *Old Dartmouth Historical Sketch Number 79* (New Bedford, Mass., 1980), 3-9; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734; Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757, Foulger Museum Lib.

²¹ Samuel Bradstreet, Diary, quoted in Allen, "Whalebone Whales," 154.

²² Sloop *Grampus* (1751), July 8, 1751, Peleg Folger Journal, 1751-1757, Nantucket Atheneum, Nantucket, Mass.

hardships increased, so did the physical danger. Zaccheus Macy, an eighteenth-century islander, speaking for the English if not the Indians, claimed that in all the years of shore whaling there, not a single man was lost. The annals of the deep-sea fishery, by comparison, record dozens of fatal accidents. On a voyage to the eastward of the Grand Banks, some crewmates of the same Peleg Folger were in pursuit of a large spermaceti when suddenly "she gave a flank & went down & coming up again, She bolted her head out of the Water almost if not quite down to her fins: And then pitch^d the whole weight of her head on the Boat & Stove the Boat & ruin^d her & kill^d their midshipman, an Indian Named Sam Samson Outwright." A "sad and awful Providence," Folger termed it, but not an uncommon one, at least in the experience of a seasoned deep-sea whaleman.²³ Such a life demanded levels of commitment quite foreign to the shore fishery.

Every hand was paid a share or "lay," expressed as a fraction of the whales his company caught. In the shore fishery, once the owner of the boat had taken one-quarter of the bone and oil to cover his investment, the remainder was divided among the crew; each of the six whalemens, therefore, received a one-eighth lay. On deep-sea voyages, the share of labor was further trimmed by half to defray the cost of keeping the ocean-going vessel afloat.²⁴ What all this meant in absolute amounts is difficult to tell. Different companies met with varying levels of success: some might kill several whales in a space of a few weeks, while others could pass the entire season without a single capture. The few financial records that pertain to the shore fishery, however, suggest that lays were generally unimpressive. None of the surviving account books that report "oyl & bone got along shore" mention any instances of annual earnings greater than £5 sterling.²⁵ Ocean voyages paid better over the course of the year because they could be extended through a longer season; but recast on a monthly basis, the lays of Nantucket oarsmen usually ranged no higher than £1-2 sterling per month, about what a common Boston mariner could expect to earn.²⁶ One might be able to support a household on an income of this size, but not in much comfort. Would the sons of freeborn

²³ Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 157; Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 356, 356n-357n; Sloop *Phebe* (1754), Aug. 9, 1754, Peleg Folger Journal, 1751-1757.

²⁴ Jo. Micah's Account, 1758, Miscellaneous MSS, Nantucket, Mass., American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.; Indenture of Robin Mesrick, July 6, 1737, Miscellaneous Bound Papers, Mass. Hist. Soc., Boston, Mass.; *Clark v. Cooper*, 1 Nantucket Inferior Court of Common Pleas 35 (1726); William Rotch Journal B, 1769-1776.

²⁵ Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734.

²⁶ Daniel Frederick 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), 295-296; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 414.

Englishmen consent to work in the lower ranks of this demanding trade on such terms?

Apparently not, for throughout its first fifty years, the Nantucket whaling industry recruited most of its hands from the Indian community. This was particularly true of the shore fishery. "Nearly every boat," wrote Obed Macy in 1830, "was manned in part, many almost entirely, by natives: some of the most active of them were made steersmen, and some were allowed even to head the boats." My research reveals not a single reference to white men credited with earnings from shore whaling, save occasionally as steersmen.²⁷ Likewise, the ocean-going fishery depended in its early years mostly upon Indian hands. More than half of the fifty-five oarsmen and steersmen who shipped with Silvanus Hussey, one of the island's wealthiest merchant outfitters, between 1725 and 1733 possessed identifiably Indian names. By mid-century, the balance in recruitment had tipped toward whalemens of English origin drawn mostly from the mainland; but in its early years the fishery relied to an extraordinary extent upon Indian labor.²⁸

The ownership of capital, on the other hand, was concentrated entirely in the hands of the English. That Indians could not purchase ocean-going vessels is hardly a surprise, but even the whaleboats and appurtenances of the shore fishery appear to have lain beyond their reach. A list of boat owners compiled in 1726 contains mostly the names of well-established island families. Of the twenty-seven owners mentioned, eighteen were descendants of the first proprietors, the Gardners and the Coffins alone accounting for eleven; four more came from the more prominent families among the later arrivals; only the remaining five had been born off-island. The list contains not a single Indian. On one occasion, in 1758, a native islander named Peter Micah received slightly under £1 sterling for his "1/2 of boats part" from Zaccheus Macy, a whaling merchant with whom he apparently shared its ownership. Otherwise, in neither the probate records nor the account books of outfitters were Indians ever credited with whaling investments.²⁹ In the early years of the Nantucket whale

²⁷ O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 30; Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734. This pattern is confirmed by evidence on the composition of crews from the mainland. Of 34 whalemens from Barnstable and Eastham on Cape Cod, named in a list dated Jan. 20, 1700/1, 26 were Indians. On the assumption that the 8 Englishmen served mostly as steersmen and harpooners, we can infer that almost all the oarsmen were Indians. Attachment of Goods, Jan. 20, 1700/1, Miscellaneous Bound Papers, Mass. Hist. Soc. See also James Truslow Adams, *History of the Town of Southampton (East of Canoe Place)* (Bridgehampton, N.Y., 1918), 231, 231n; E. B. O'Callaghan et al., eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York . . .*, 15 vols. (Albany, N.Y., 1856-1887), XIV, 648, 664, 675, 708-709.

²⁸ Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734. In calculating the ethnic composition of Hussey's crews, each whaleman was counted once for every voyage in which he participated. See also Vickers, "Maritime Labor," 283-294.

²⁹ Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 356n; Jo. Micah's Account, 1758; Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734;

fishery, therefore, class and ethnicity were contiguous. The English were masters; the Indians were servants; and between the two groups there was no mobility at all.

Can we explain this in strictly economic terms? Were the Indians simply too poor to buy whaleboats and equipment? Judged from probate records of the 1720s, Nantucket men who participated financially in the shore fishery normally had about £4 sterling invested in their establishments. Each company required living quarters and a whaleboat with all its accessories: oars, rigging, harpoons, lances, and hundreds of feet of high-quality line. Tryhouses had to be supplied with large trying pots, knives, spades, barrels, wheelbarrows, and a capstan. Horses, carts, warehousing, and wharfage were also necessary if the oil and bone were to be shipped to markets on the mainland. No single investor owned all of these. George Coffin, a prosperous cooper who died in 1727, owned a "tryhouse and furniture" worth £10.5 sterling and a well-equipped but ancient whaleboat appraised at £3.4. His uncle, Joseph Coffin, whose estate was probated in 1725, owned a newer boat valued with its gear at £5. A mariner named Nathan Skiffe, a newcomer to the island, held shares in two boats at his death in 1725, worth together £1.3. Outfitting a complete whaling station from scratch would probably cost over £20, but, by purchasing equipment secondhand, by sharing it, and by paying others to perform a part of the work (especially trying and carting), Nantucketers succeeded in reducing expenses to a level where most of the propertied white community could participate. In no case did shore whaling capital exceed 4 percent of the inventoried personal estate of any white islander.³⁰

Expenses such as these would have placed a far greater strain on an Indian's resources. The natives who made their way into the probate records in the eighteenth century usually owned no more than a small shack, a horse or cow, a few tools, some furniture, and their clothing—an average of only £16.6 in personal wealth. These estates were not impressive by comparison to those of their shore fishery employers, which averaged £170; few Indians could muster the funds for even a modest investment of £4 or £5.³¹

This purely economic explanation, however, tells only part of the story, for in maritime New England capital equipment of this nature was normally bought not with ready funds but on credit. In Essex County, fishermen who were no wealthier than the Nantucket Indians could

John Barnard Account Book, 1699-1738, Foulger Museum Lib.; Probate Records of Nantucket County, vols. 1-3 (1706-1789), Probate Court Office, Town Hall, Nantucket, Mass., hereafter cited as Nantucket Probates.

³⁰ Nantucket Probates, I, 59-62, 70-71, 92-94, 103, 139-141, 146-147, 157, 162. It should be noted at this point that the quantifiable documentation relating to the shore fishery on Nantucket is often slim. The probate records, for example, record the estate inventories of only eight Indians and eight more shore whaling investors for the entire colonial period. I have tried to be explicit about the size of my samples and to avoid drawing distinctions too fine for the data to support.

³¹ Nantucket Probates, vols. 1-3 (1706-1789).

secure advances in supplies well over £100 if their creditors were in the market for fish.³² Moreover, the whale fishery was profitable: the returns on a single capture could recompense the boat owner for his entire investment and more. Even a moderately successful season would have freed the Indian investor of the debts incurred in the initial outlay. Why, then, did native Nantucketers never purchase whaleboats? Were they uninterested, or did their English neighbors consider them poor risks? Perhaps allowing Indians to control their own labor did not fit into the white men's plans. But what were their plans? To resolve these problems adequately, we must retrace our steps and examine the history of economic relations between the two groups from their earliest encounters.

Nantucket is such a treeless and barren place today that it is difficult to imagine how it once could have supported 2,500 Indians. Before contact with the Europeans, almost 55 natives were squeezed onto every square mile of soil, a density many times that of mainland New England and the equal of most parts of western Europe.³³ The truth is that at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Nantucket, for all its infertility, possessed in some abundance most of what Indians required for their subsistence. Not only was the island stocked with deer and other game, but its freshwater ponds held great flocks of waterfowl, and the surrounding ocean teemed with fish and shellfish.³⁴ The Indians sustained themselves by exploiting these resources in a seasonal pattern. Like all coastal Algonkians, they lived in semipermanent villages surrounded by partially cleared fields and large tracts of forest, which they maintained by slash-and-burn techniques as hunting parks. John Brereton, who visited the islands south of Cape Cod in 1602, reported that the woods were so clear of undergrowth that "in the thickest parts . . . you can see a furlong or more round about."³⁵ Every spring, the Indians planted corn, beans, and squash among the stumps in the fields near their villages, then departed for temporary camps near the ocean. Although they came back periodically to tend their crops, most of the summer was spent along the shore, fishing from canoes, gathering shellfish, and drying both for winter consumption. That Nantucket and all of seaboard New England could support a population so much greater than the interior, testifies to the importance of marine creatures in the diet. The Indians returned from the shore in September

³² Vickers, "Maritime Labor," 76-77, 110-116.

³³ Cook, *Indian Population of New England*, 44-45; T.J.C. Brasser, "The Coastal Algonkians: People of the First Frontiers," in Eleanor Burke Leacock and Nancy Oestreich Lurie, eds., *North American Indians in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1971), 65; Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 28; Geoffrey Barraclough, ed., *The Times Atlas of World History* (London, 1978), 180-181.

³⁴ John Brereton, *A Briefe and True Relation of the Discoverie of the North Part of Virginia* . . . (London, 1602), 5-7; O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 16-17.

³⁵ Brereton, *Discoverie*, 7.

for the harvest and spent the remainder of the year based in their villages, venturing out only to hunt.³⁶

The English settlers wrought many changes in Indian society, most of them catastrophic. Their agriculture eventually destroyed the fertility of the island, denuding it of trees and exposing its soil to the relentless action of the wind. Their fecundity and their appetite for property crowded the original inhabitants into an ever-shrinking portion of the land. Most important, their diseases eventually wiped out the entire native population. In the beginning, however, the Indians entertained the idea of admitting the English as neighbors with few misgivings. Because their own numbers had been declining since the first European contacts at the beginning of the century, they were willing enough by 1660 to sell the rights to settle on what they saw as functionally surplus land. The newcomers were few in number and seemed prepared to recognize all native rights not specifically restricted by the deed of sale.³⁷ Best of all, the settlers could provide the Indians with European goods.

Both parties were eager to trade, the Indians because they recognized the low cost and technological superiority of English manufactures, and the settlers because they needed commodities to send to Boston for goods that the island could not produce. The survival of an account book, kept by the Starbuck family between 1683 and 1757, allows us to examine the nature of this trade. Until the end of the seventeenth century, almost 90 percent of the goods that Indians bought from the Starbucks consisted of cloth, apparel, and equipment for farming, fishing, and hunting (see Table I). Shoes, coats, woolen cloth, fishhooks, lines, powder and shot, horses, and ploughshares were the most sought-after items; foodstuffs were almost never purchased. In return, they brought in feathers, grain, and fish, each of which the Starbucks probably sent to the mainland. In essence, the natives were employing English technology partly in order to produce a surplus that could be exchanged for manufactured goods and probably also to save labor.³⁸

In the seventeenth century, the Indians bargained from a position of strength. Because they provided most of their own food, shelter, and fuel, they rarely had to trade from real desperation. Furthermore, as the native population succumbed to diseases, the supply of Indian goods began a parallel decline, leaving whatever the lucky survivors could produce in considerable demand. Now they could take their business to any of a

³⁶ Brasser, "Coastal Algonkians," in Leacock and Lurie, eds., *North American Indians*, 64; Dean R. Snow, *The Archaeology of New England* (New York, 1980), 76-79; William A. Ritchie, *The Archaeology of Martha's Vineyard: A Framework for the Prehistory of Southern New England* (Garden City, N.J., 1969), 81-89; "Notes on Nantucket, August 1, 1807," *Mass. Hist. Soc., Colls.*, 2d Ser., III (1815), 34-35; O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 17.

³⁷ For several instances of the English courts confirming Indian rights within the tract which the English had purchased see Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 124-129.

³⁸ Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757.

TABLE I
PURCHASES OF SELECTED INDIANS FROM STARBUCK FAMILY, 1680-1750

	<i>Cloth and Clothing</i>	<i>Food</i>	<i>Productive Equipment</i>	<i>Services, Cash, and Misc.</i>
1680-1700 (n = 12)	60	7	30	3
1701-1720 (n = 13)	35	9	38	19
1721-1750 (n = 9)	38	12	9	41

Indians were selected for the legibility and completeness of their accounts. The figures represent a percentage of the value of total purchases. See Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757.

growing number of white families that kept a stock of goods, playing one off against another, taking advantage of the scarcity of their own labor. Every white trader had to confront this dilemma: how could one maintain the volume of one's trade and keep the costs of native produce down in the face of a decline in supply and an increase in demand? Under the pressures of competition, these traders resorted to a potent commercial weapon: the extension of credit.

Too easily, historians make connections between credit and wealth, debt and poverty. While it is obvious that those who lend money must have wealth to lend, it is less clear that those who borrow are necessarily needy. The decision to extend credit is ultimately the creditor's; the amount of goods and cash he is willing to advance depends on the advantage he sees in the action. Earned interest could be one attraction, but in colonial New England, where interest rates were rarely attached to retail accounts, the primary function of credit was to enable the lender to gain control over the labor and property of the borrower. In Europe, where labor was plentiful and inexpensive, it was land, the scarcest element in the process of production, that the serious moneylender hoped most to acquire. In the New World, as the native population collapsed, land lay increasingly vacant and labor became the dearest factor. Colonial merchants advanced goods in order to assure themselves in the coming year the fruits of their customers' toil.

To virtually every Indian with whom they dealt, the Starbucks advanced enough cloth and other supplies (although never more than £10 worth) to oblige him to continue bringing in his produce. We can follow this process in detail for the Starbuck family; we know that the same techniques were also used by other settlers. Hardly a session passed in the Nantucket courts during the seventeenth century without a Swain, Hussey, or Gardner launching an action against some native debtor who was refusing to continue this exchange.³⁹

³⁹ *Ibid.*; Nantucket Court of Sessions of the Peace, 1672-1705, in County Records (1661-), vol. 2 (1672-1705), Registry of Deeds, Town Hall, Nantucket, Mass.

The courts were essential to the working of the system. Only if defaulting debtors could be apprehended could white traders be assured that Indians would honor their obligations. Under similar conditions in the Canadian west at the end of the eighteenth century, the Hudson's Bay Company attempted to use credit in the fur trade to build up a dependable clientele of native trading partners. The system functioned well enough in the wilderness as long as the company could monopolize trade through a small number of posts, but with the rise in competition from Montreal traders after 1763, the credit system became unmanageable. The Indian to whom goods had been advanced could disappear into the forest and carry his furs in the ensuing year to another trader at a different post. Where there was no legal guarantee that debts could be collected, the extension of credit was impracticable.⁴⁰ On Nantucket the collection of debts was, by the standard of the times, remarkably easy. The local courts were close at hand and dominated by magistrates, often traders themselves, who understood the need for strictly enforcing native obligations. More important, the limited and featureless confines of the island left few places to hide; unless the debtor could escape to the mainland (leaving behind his kin, his property, and his rights as a member of the tribe), he could not evade the arm of the law.

The extension of credit soon found a useful adjunct in the liquor trade. Alcohol as an item of exchange had risks: as often as not, drinking encouraged in the Indians precisely the stubborn, unpredictable, and even violent behavior that Englishmen feared most. In strictly economic terms, however, liquor possessed one enormous advantage: the elasticity of its demand. The native economy could absorb only so many blankets and knives, whereas a pot of wine or rum could be consumed in a moment and refilled. In the Canadian west, the trade in strong drink reached its peak in the period 1760-1820, when rivalry between the Hudson's Bay and North West companies was most intense.⁴¹ Likewise, on Nantucket a crowd of aggressive English traders, locked in sharp competition among themselves, employed alcohol as a means of gaining control over Indian labor. "Many of the inhabitants," noted Thomas Macy in 1676, "do frequently purchase it p[re]tending for their own use and sel it to the Indians."⁴² The chief offender in this regard was John Gardner, a settler from Salem with merchant connections, who carried on a fishing operation with the help of Indian hands. According to Macy, these merchants "have some Yeares past sent Goods to trade with the Indians upon the accompt of Fishing and otherwise and great quantities of strong Liquor have bin sent. . . . The agent here [Gardner] that carried on the Trade for the Gentlemen hath

⁴⁰ Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto, 1974), 137-138, 196.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 85, 198.

⁴² Thomas Macy to Gov. Andros, May 9, 1676, quoted in Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 59.

bargained with the Indians to give each Man a dram before they go out fishing in the Morning; but under that p[re]tence much Abuse hath bin."⁴³ Recently, Gardner had delivered a shipment of sixteen gallons to the Indians, but as it was, in the words of Macy, a trader himself, merely "a small Quantity," we can assume that the trade was normally quite vigorous. To the end of the colonial period, in fact, drink remained an important source of native indebtedness.⁴⁴

The practice of advancing credit took hold on the island because the Indians appreciated the *short-term* advantages it afforded and because each English trader wished to build up a dependable circle of customers who would be obliged to supply him with trade goods on a continual basis. As the entire body of traders turned to this system, it became a type of communal labor control, an informal brand of debt peonage. Its purpose was not to force the Indian to trade, for he was anxious to do that on his own accord, but to limit the competition over the fruits of his labor and thereby to control their price.

The white Nantucketers who launched the shore fishery in the 1690s were certain about two things. First, though they participated in the chase as steersmen or harpooners, they refused the menial labor of manning the oars. Partly, they knew that rowing after whales was exhausting and dangerous toil; partly, they thought it demeaning to work for others. After all, they had hardly moved to the island to become servants. Since Nantucket was out of the way and shore whaling was a seasonal occupation, recruiting hands from the mainland was unlikely to meet with success. Under these circumstances, the only viable source of labor was the local Indian population.

Second, the English insisted on retaining complete control of the industry themselves. In Indian-white relations on Nantucket, this was a significant departure. Until the 1690s the settlers had always advanced such capital equipment as fishing lines, powder, and shot to the Indians, interest-free, on the promise of being repaid in local produce. The natives remained independent operators, following traditional pursuits with European technology and selling their surpluses to the English to finance their purchases. Some Indians were accustomed to work on occasion in the white community—ploughing, carting, or harvesting—but almost no one worked for his English neighbors on a regular basis.⁴⁵ Now, in the shore fishery, Indians were being asked for the first time to participate not as self-employed men working with their own tools and equipment, but as servants.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Petition of Richard Coffin and Abishai Folger to the General Court, 1752, quoted *ibid.*, 161; Petition of Nantucket Proprietors to the General Court, Apr. 2, 1752, quoted *ibid.*, 164; O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 44; Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 158; "Notes on Nantucket," *Mass. Hist. Soc., Colls.*, 2d Ser., III (1815), 36.

⁴⁵ Mary and Nathaniel Starbuck Account Book, 1662-1757.

Some might argue that the Indians were not interested in investing in capital equipment on this scale.⁴⁶ Profits and accumulated wealth, it is true, were utterly foreign to the native ethos, but the privilege of working on one's own terms was not. Indifferent to legal ownership though they were, the alternative of toiling at the oars under the command of white steersmen while relinquishing one-quarter of each whale to their employers "for the Boat & Craft" was new and unwelcome. The same point—that ownership equaled control—was driven home even more forcefully when, about 1715, the launching of the more capital-intensive deep-sea fishery resulted in whalemens' lays being slashed in half. Indignantly, the Indians petitioned the General Court and complained of their white neighbors' policy of allowing them "but half Price for their Whaling." When called upon to answer, the Nantucket representative to the court, Joseph Coffin, obviously perplexed that anyone would challenge the right of an employer to determine the terms of employment, replied that the Indians had "no reason to Complain, they being allowed according to the Custom of the Island, one Half . . . which is a proportion as is allowed to white Men." The court, too, was a bit mystified by the petition and the matter was dropped.⁴⁷ It is difficult to imagine that, in the light of this incident, the Indians remained oblivious to the advantages of capital ownership.

The real barrier to investment in the shore fishery by natives was their reputation for unreliability. Although the English were willing, even anxious, to entrust the Indians with debts, they were highly skeptical of the latter's capacity for regular daily work. In the first decades of interracial trade, the Starbucks' native clients delivered their produce at irregular intervals, often only two or three times a year, and the annual volume of business swung up and down erratically. If white Nantucketers were to spend time and money building boats, forging harpoons, and purchasing cordage from the mainland, they wanted men ready to join the chase every day throughout the whaling season. As long as the natives were allowed to own the boats they worked in, they would only hang around the beach watching for whales (the English were perhaps correctly convinced), if it suited their wider economic interests; once these were satisfied, they might well head back to their villages. Such routines of work as these were inconsistent with the levels of return that the English demanded.

Whites perceived this sort of behavior as typical of a people who had "little Regard to their own wellfare."⁴⁸ In reality, what they saw as irresponsibility was more often simple independence. For those who preferred to stay on shore and work on their own, there were still ways of supporting themselves within the native economy. The supply of fish and

⁴⁶ Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 102-104.

⁴⁷ Records of the General Court, Nov. 17, 1718, quoted in Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 143; Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734.

⁴⁸ Quotation from the Petition of Richard Coffin and Abishai Folger to the General Court, 1752, quoted in Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 161.

shellfish, always the major source of nutrition for the Nantucket tribe, was almost limitless. Waterfowl were still abundant, and the herds of deer did not diminish for many decades.⁴⁹ Of an island that in 1700 was "much commended for goodness of soil," Indians still owned over half in 1690 and about a quarter in 1720.⁵⁰

While the traditional Indian economy remained intact, perhaps in the short run enhanced by the application of European technology, the human demands on their portion of the island diminished. The native population of Nantucket had been declining ever since the initial contact with white men at the beginning of the seventeenth century (see Table II)—so rapidly, indeed, that until well into the eighteenth century, the quantity of land owned by individual survivors probably rose. And since the Indians continued to enjoy free access to the sea, as well as hunting and gathering rights on many parts of the island that they had already sold, the mere fact of ownership underestimates the resources within a native's reach. The admittedly substantial estate of Jeremy Netowa, an Indian whaler who died at sea in 1728, contained not only the earnings from his voyage but also spinning wheels, livestock, and the produce of his fields.⁵¹ Even Isaac Cododah, whose estate (valued at £5.7 sterling) was the poorest of any recorded on the island in the colonial period, owned at his death in 1721, besides his personal effects, a hog and twenty bushels of grain.⁵² As Table I demonstrates, the natives did grow dependent on their English neighbors for a number of items, above all cloth and clothing; and after 1720, when they began to spend more and more of the spring and summer months in the deep-sea fishery, they had to pay white islanders to look after their fields.⁵³ Through the first quarter of the eighteenth century, however, they remained remarkably self-sufficient and could afford to be choosy about the terms on which they worked.

The white boat owners were therefore in a quandary: Indian whalers, because of their shrinking numbers and natural independence, were growing difficult to recruit. As the competition over their labor increased, and the need for discipline became evident, so too did the temptation to draw them into indebtedness and servitude.

The links between indebtedness and the shore fishery in the early eighteenth century can be viewed through the records of probate. Of the eight islanders, all white, who died in possession of whaling gear, whaleboats, or tryhouses between 1700 and 1730, six were credited with Indian debts that ranged from £8.5 to £45.1 sterling. Among the eight

⁴⁹ O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 17; "Notes on Nantucket," *Mass. Hist. Soc., Colls.*, 2d Ser., III (1815), 35.

⁵⁰ Earl of Bellomont to the Lords of Trade, Nov. 28, 1700, O'Callaghan *et al.*, eds., *N.-Y. Col. Docs.*, IV, 787.

⁵¹ O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 20, 42; Nantucket Probates, I, 129. Netowa's estate was valued at £23.4 sterling.

⁵² Nantucket Probates, I, 75.

⁵³ See Table I, and O. Macy, *Nantucket*, 42.

TABLE II
INDIAN POPULATION OF NANTUCKET, 1600-1792

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>
1600	2,500
1640	2,000
1670	1,250
1698	830
1700	800
1763	358
1764	136
1792	22

Sources: Cook, *Indian Population of New England*, 42-43; Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 158-159; O'Callaghan *et al.*, eds., *N.-Y. Col. Docs.*, IV, 787.

(five whites, two Indians, and one free Negro) with no whaling appurtenances to their name, money was owed by natives to only one, Nathaniel Barnard, and he owned a fishing operation.⁵⁴ Those who dictated the division of their estates on their deathbeds always grouped the two together. Jonathan Bunker, a farmer who died in 1721, bequeathed to his four sons "all my whaling and fishing Craft with all my Indian debts."⁵⁵ In 1725, Stephen Coffin, Jr., left to his sons, Shubael and Zephaniah, "the one half of all my fishing and whaling craft with the half of all my Indian debts," and to his wife, Experience, the other half of these debts and half of "Everything used or improved in the Carrying on and Managing the fishing and whaling voyages . . . and all my Shipping Employ'd in fishing and whaling on Nantucket shoals."⁵⁶

Indebtedness had been important in Indian-white relations since the very beginning, but to the shore fishery it was indispensable. A series of exchanges between native islanders, the English inhabitants, and the General Court in Boston makes this plain. In November 1716, an Indian named John Punker petitioned the General Court on behalf of his tribe, "Complaining of great Injustice and Oppression they suffer from some of their *English* Neighbours," and requesting that Nantucket be annexed to some other county so that, in legal contests with the settlers, they might obtain justice before impartial courts. Why was this becoming an issue in 1716? The petition has been lost, but its content is revealed by the resulting order that a committee of three be sent to Nantucket to "enquire into the Matters of Grievance Complained of; and more especially their Whaling: And Assist the Indians in making a proper Representation thereof to [the] Court."⁵⁷ The committee visited the island that winter,

⁵⁴ Nantucket Probates, I.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 121, II, 214.

⁵⁷ *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 51 vols. (Boston, 1919-), I, 137-138.

spent twelve days in investigation, and presented their report the following June. The report too has disappeared, but it must have testified to the truth of Punker's claims, for the General Court decided to act. Although for reasons of physical convenience it denied the annexation request, the court in effect conceded the Indians' difficulty in obtaining justice from the white islanders when it ordered that two magistrates from the mainland be appointed as "Justices . . . of the Peace, to Hear & Determine, all Causes and Matters of Difference, between the English & Indians, and Indian & Indians on the said Island. And that a Bill be prepared accordingly."⁵⁸ In June 1718, this bill, entitled "An Act in Addition to the Act for Preventing Abuses to the Indians," was passed and made law. Its preamble, describing these abuses, was drawn from the experience of Nantucket and its whale fishery: "notwithstanding the care taken and provided by said act, a great wrong and injury happens to said Indians, natives of this country, by reason of their being drawn in by small gifts, or for small debts, when they are in drink, and out of capacity for trade, to sign unreasonable bills or bonds for debts, which are soon sued, and great charge brought upon them, when they have no way to pay the same but by servitude."⁵⁹ The act went on to declare that no bond or labor contract could be made with an Indian without the approbation of two local justices of the peace, who would ensure (so the legislators hoped) that the Indian had entered into the agreement out of choice. It was the possibility of coercion in the drawing up of indentures that concerned them; to the idea of servitude they had no objection. Indeed, the purpose of the act was to establish a formal indenting procedure.

With the rise of the deep-sea fishery after 1716, the competition over available hands grew even more acute. Each new voyage required eight to ten oarsmen and steersmen to perform work that was both more tedious and more disruptive to the Indians' domestic economy than the shore fishery had ever been. Coercion became so routine in the recruitment process that by the early 1720s the General Court was flooded with Indian complaints of indebtedness and ill-treatment.⁶⁰ In 1725, therefore, it supplemented the 1718 legislation with still another act, the general intent of which was to reinforce the earlier laws against fraudulent indentures and to prohibit the binding of Indian householders. Recognizing the necessity, however, "as well for the English as the Indians . . . that the Indians be employed in the whaling and other fishing voyages," the court agreed to grant an exemption for the whaling towns of Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Native whalers might henceforth be bound for up to two years at a time, and their employers could contract to "assist the said Indians in building houses for them on their own lands, and furnish them and their families as well with fuel, as necessary subsistence,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 245-246.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 27; *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay*, 21 vols. (Boston, 1869-1922), II, 104.

⁶⁰ *Acts and Resolves*, II, 159, 289, 438, 583, 668, 705.

during such time.”⁶¹ An indebted Indian who entered into such an indenture would be required not only to work for his master but to procure supplies from him as well. The cycle of dependence was thus complete: whaling employers could bind their native seamen to as long a series of two-year stints as they pleased, provided that they took responsibility for their upkeep. Fraud had been prohibited, but servitude was now institutionalized.

By 1730, few Indian whalemens were working on their own account. Of those hired in both the shore and deep-sea fisheries between 1725 and 1733 by Silvanus Hussey, probably the greatest whaling merchant of the period, at least three-quarters were the indebted clients of white islanders. Listed anonymously as “Indians” or “hands,” these men were under obligation to deliver their earnings to their white masters after every voyage.⁶²

Some of these agreements were formal indentures. Jonas Cooper, an Indian mariner from Martha’s Vineyard, who was living on Nantucket in the early 1720s, fell into debt to a cooper and whaleboat owner named John Clark. Clark eventually forced Cooper to “seal, bind and oblige himself to go a whaling for him both winter and summer voyages for the space of three years.” Cooper, who was unusual in this period for being an off-islander, fled with his belongings after a year’s service, and Clark learned a lesson in the advantages of hiring local help.⁶³ A more detailed indenture survives from Cape Cod, where in 1737 an Indian named Robin Mesrick, in order to repay a debt of £9 to his creditor, Gideon Holway, agreed to “worke On Shoar and Whale for him Three years.” In return, Holway was to pay Mesrick 11s a month for his labor on land and

when he Goes on the Spring [deep-sea] Whaleing to find him a suitable Berth to Proceed in voyages In and to allow him half an Eighteenth of what is Obtained On Each of Spring voyages after the vessels Parte is first deducted and to finde him his Diat & Liquor on s’d Spring voyage into the Bargaine, and on the Bay [shore] voyages the s’d Robin may find himself Diat house room & wood and have a whole Eighth Clear according to Custom and if s’d Holway finds him Diat half his house room & wood then s’d Robin to Draw but Half an Eighth as according to custom.

The whole of Mesrick’s earnings was to go toward repaying the debt after deductions were made for clothing and other current necessities. If he succeeded in amassing the sum before the three years were out, he was to be freed from all further obligations.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 363-365.

⁶² Silvanus Hussey Account Book, 1724-1734.

⁶³ *Clark v. Cooper*, 1 Nantucket Inferior Court of Common Pleas 35 (1726).

⁶⁴ Indenture of Robin Mesrick, July 6, 1737, Indenture of Simon Porrage, Apr. 10, 1738, Miscellaneous Bound Papers, Mass. Hist. Soc.

The rarity of surviving indentures suggests that many, perhaps most, of these agreements were informal. Certain of the terms were customary and understood; others were probably in a constant state of renegotiation. Insults, threats, sulking, and brute force were all part of a bargaining idiom in which both parties tried to obtain the best terms possible. Indians were anxious to avoid the heavy hand of the island's courts, and as long as the threat of prosecution was present, merchants could usually get what they wanted without recourse to law. Naturally, records of the thrusts and parries of this subtle interchange were never kept, but an account of recruiting practices on Martha's Vineyard in 1806 may help to give an idea of how it operated:

This business of inviting the Indians is a sort of crimping, in which liquor, goods and fair words are plied, till the Indian gets into debt, and gives his consent. Taking the history from the mouths of white people only, it appears that there is often much to be complained of in the business of the voyage, both in the Indian and in those with whom he connects himself. On the one hand great advantage is taken of his folly, his credulity and his ignorance. On the other, he torments the ship or share owner with his indecision and demands, till the moment of the sailing of the ship. First, he agrees to go, and accordingly receives some stipulated part of his outfit; then he "thinks he won't go;" and then he is to be coaxed and made drunk. Again he "thinks" he "won't go" unless such and such articles are supplied; and these articles he often names at random for the sake of inducing a refusal. One Indian was mentioned to me that he thought he would not go unless five pounds of soap were given him; and another thought the same unless he received seven hats.⁶⁵

If bargaining along these lines came to nothing, merchants could resort to force. In 1747, Paul Quaab from Sakedan Indian Town at the east end of the island complained to the General Court that a man named James Gase (Chase), with the assistance of the constable and two other men, had forcibly carried him away from his home on the back of a horse and sent him out whaling, although, in his words, "I was no ways obliged to him by any account or bromes [*sic*] to go whaling so long time [f]or I never bromesth."⁶⁶ The Nantucket selectmen denied the truth of Quaab's assertions but did concede the existence of "some Evil minded persons among us that makes a trade of supplying the Indians with Rum and have had the produce of their Land and Labour for little or no value."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Edward Augustus Kendall, *Travels through the Northern Part of the United States . . .* (New York, 1809), II, 196, quoted in Charles E. Banks, *The History of Martha's Vineyard, Dukes County, Massachusetts*, 3 vols. (Edgartown, Mass., 1911-1925), I, 440-441.

⁶⁶ Petition of Paul Quaab to the General Court, May 6, 1747, quoted in Starbuck, *Nantucket*, 150-151.

⁶⁷ Petition of Nantucket Selectmen to the General Court, May 27, 1747, quoted *ibid.*, 152.

Another group of Indians objected to being dragged off to whale on the Sabbath. As they argued,

how can we be any ways be like christians when we should be praying to God on the Sabbath day morning then we must be Rowing after whal or killing whal or cutting up whal on Sabbath day when we should be at rest on that day and do no worly labour only to do sum holy duties to draw near to God and when on land then we have no time to go to the meeting and then we are call to go away again to sea whaling. how can we serve God or to worship him on the Sabbath days or at any time when our masters lead us to darkness and not In light[?]⁶⁸

Clearly, the need to spend every hour on the lookout was more obvious to the white men than to their Indian servants. Force was sometimes the only insurance that hands would be in ready supply.

Coercion was indeed the key. In the early years of the whale fishery on Nantucket, capitalism and free labor could never coexist. The continued vitality of the native economy, the declining supply of local whalemens, and the burgeoning demands of the fishery all combined to strengthen the natural bargaining position of the Indian and to leave the labor-hungry whaling merchants no alternative but the use of force. In itself, this does not explain the special importance of Indian labor. If the native islanders were hesitant to ship themselves as oarsmen on the white men's terms, surely the English boat owners could have sent their own sons to sea or procured indentured servants from the mainland.⁶⁹ That they chose not to do so suggests that free market forces alone cannot account for the entire story, but that native labor attracted English employers precisely because coercion was necessary and the natives could be coerced.

White Nantucketers, writing at the end of the eighteenth century when the aboriginal population had nearly disappeared, retained a sentimental fondness for their Indian neighbors of earlier years. Zaccheus Macy remembered them as kind and hospitable, always ready, "if the English entered their houses, whilst they were eating . . . to offer them such as they had, which sometimes would be very good."⁷⁰ In 1807 an anonymous member of the Massachusetts Historical Society described them in a similar way, adding that the natives were "religiously punctual" in their payments to the English, and that "they made excellent oarsmen, and some of them were good endsmen."⁷¹ Nevertheless, this adulation was bought at a price. Our anonymous contributor concluded, "So useful have

⁶⁸ Petition of Nantucket Indians to the General Court, July 14, 1747, quoted *ibid.*, 153-154.

⁶⁹ The boat owners of Long Island manned their craft with their own sons when Indian whalemens grew scarce in the 1670s. See Palmer, "Sag Harbor," 9.

⁷⁰ Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 158.

⁷¹ "Notes on Nantucket," *Mass. Hist. Soc., Colls.*, 2d Ser., III (1815), 36.

men of this class been found in the whale fishery, that the Indians having disappeared, negroes are now substituted in their place. Seamen of colour are more submissive than the whites."⁷² The implication was clear: Indians, like blacks, merited praise, but only as long as they bent to the white man's rule. An anecdote related by Macy, a onetime employer of Indian whalers himself, reveals this attitude in a particularly compelling manner:

But it happened once, when there were about thirty boats about six miles from the shore, that the wind came round to the northward, and blew with great violence, attended with snow. The men all rowed hard, but made but little head way. In one of the boats there were four Indians and two white men. An old Indian in the head of the boat, perceiving that the crew began to be disheartened, spake out loud in his own tongue and said, *Momadichbator auqua sarsbkee sarnkee pinchee eyoo sememoochkee chaquanks wibchee pinchee eyoo*: which in English is, "Pull a head with courage: do not be disheartened: we shall not be lost now: there are too many Englishmen to be lost now." His speaking in this manner gave the crew new courage. They soon perceived that they made head way; and after long rowing, they all got safe on shore.⁷³

In Macy's conviction of the esteem in which Indian whalers held the English, so that only the threat of a lost white man could rally them, even in the face of death, the story is almost touching. Men so apparently devoted to their masters were fond memories indeed.

What white Nantucketers perceived as natural submissiveness, however, was rather the product of a long and lively struggle. Macy came of age only in 1734, by which time the years of native independence had passed. The Indians he knew in the 1730s and 1740s, vastly outnumbered, riddled by disease, barred by their ethnicity from the avenues of social mobility, and trapped in the southeast corner of the island, were a defeated people. In truth, only the forcible deprivation of their independence had made the success of the whale fishery possible.

Neither labor scarcity nor coercion in recruitment was unique to Nantucket. The Spanish mines and haciendas of Mexico and Peru, the Portuguese sugar plantations of Brazil, and the British sugar and tobacco colonies of the West Indies and the Chesapeake all demanded a level of work commitment and submission to discipline that free Europeans were reluctant to provide, and all turned in time to the institution of bondage. Indeed, in the New World of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, New England was an anomaly, for it flourished without resorting to widespread formal servitude. Nevertheless, where conditions were appropriate, as the case of the whale fishery illustrates, colonists in Massachu-

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Z. Macy, "Journal of Nantucket," 157.

setts felt the same need to restrict labor's freedom as did their southern counterparts. Granted, by comparison to the forms of servitude that prevailed in the plantation colonies, debt peonage as practiced on Nantucket was both a gentler solution and easier to scuttle when it no longer made economic sense. The principle involved, however, was little different. As long as land in the New World remained sufficiently abundant that an ordinary European could entertain real possibilities of obtaining a plot of his own, market-oriented production and free labor would seldom keep company.