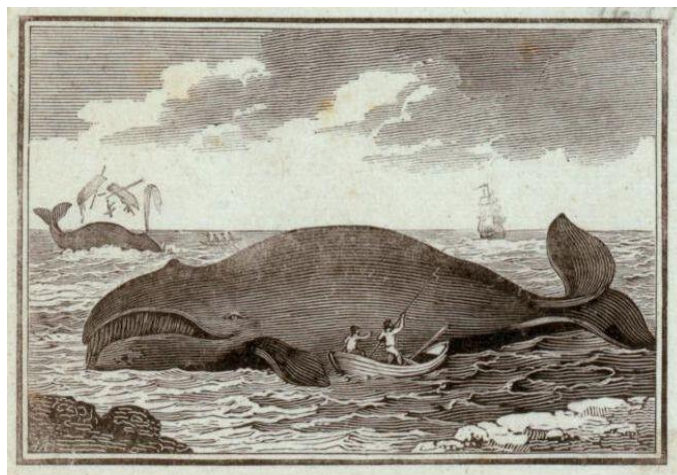


## Native American Heritage Month – Week 3

After the melting of the glacier, when the Unkechaugs migrated to Long Island, the region flourished with marine life, including clams, oysters, crabs, sturgeon, and fish species such as striped bass. Freshwater creeks, salt meadows, and shallow bays on the south shore provided rich habitats for wildlife. Their geographic region provided easy access to fish, shellfish, waterfowl, and land and sea mammals. The current Unkechaug Reservation reflects this ancient preference, situated on Poospatuck Creek, a freshwater stream on Mastic Neck flowing into the Forge River.

The economic value of oil and baleen from drift whale carcasses led the English to form shore whaling companies on Long Island. Instead of waiting for whales to beach themselves, these companies combined Indigenous knowledge with English investment, to hunt whales in shallow coastal waters. The northern right whale was a prime target due to its slow swimming and surface feeding habits, which made it easier to hunt. Beginning around 1650, English companies in Southampton and East Hampton hired skilled Shinnecock and Montaukett whalers. The hunts required courage and skill, as whalers had to get close to the whale and drive harpoons deep into its body.



During the first decades of the whaling industry (1650–1670), Indigenous whalers were paid very little for their labor. In 1670, for instance, a three-year contract offered only basic provisions such as coats, stockings, corn, etc rather than actual wages. The Unkechaugs resisted unfair labor contracts and demanded better compensation, even attempting to form their own independent whaling company in 1676. Governor Edmund Andros granted the Unkechaug permission to whale and sell their products freely. Though they never established an independent company, the threat of competition may have influenced later agreements, which gave Native whalers a share of the profits. By the late 1670s, several Unkechaug whalers had joined English companies. For example, a young Unkechaug named Worison signed a contract in 1676 with Southampton whalers, agreeing to hunt, butcher, and process whale oil and baleen, sharing in the profits.

Unkechaug whalers remained crucial to shore whaling operations until the mid-18th century. However, the near extinction of right whales forced whaling to move farther offshore, to target sperm whales in the Arctic and Southern Atlantic. The 1755 will of Nicoll Floyd granted whaling equipment to his Unkechaug servants, showing that some whale hunting persisted, but it was no longer a major economic activity. Many indigenous whalers adapted by going to sea, while others sought new employment within the English economy.

### Sources:

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