

Transcript of Lecture Delivered  
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Trade and Community:  
East Hampton's Curious Commercial Origins

In *Invisible Cities*, the twentieth-century Italian novelist Italo Calvino recounts how Marco Polo once informed Kublai Khan about all the places Polo visited on his fabulous journey to the East. For his aging patron, the traveler painted word pictures of splendid cities, each possessing a distinct character, so that in the telling of his stories they became cities of inordinate beauty, or brilliant color, or subtle light, or incalculable treasure. In the gathering dusk of his life, the Great Khan finally grew impatient, reminding the inventive Polo that although he had declaimed at length about distant cities of exotic splendor, he had failed even once to mention Venice. To this, Polo responded politely, "What else do you believe I have been talking about?" At the end of the day, Calvino's Venice was not an objective historical fact, but rather, a fertile site of imagination, indeed, a sum of human perceptions, some complementary, others conflicting, no one of them alone quite adequate to capture the many facets of the city's rich interpretive possibilities.

No less than Venice, East Hampton invites imaginative engagement. For a very long time residents and travelers have constructed stories about the history of the town, spinning out local narratives that inevitably revealed more about the interpreters than about the object of their analysis. And, of all the accounts that have been advanced to explain East Hampton to itself over the centuries, none have enjoyed greater acclaim than what might be called the tale of the original self-sufficient community. In the beginning, we learn, East Hampton was a little commonwealth, peopled by strong-willed, independent men and women, children of the Protestant Reformation who had sailed to the New World to create in Governor John Winthrop's Old Testament rhetoric "a City upon a Hill." According to this compelling narrative of settlement, the first colonists placed the general good before personal profit, and as an homogeneous community went about the business of taming the wilderness, it established impressively egalitarian institutions such as the open town meeting and common field system.

To be sure, the seventeenth-century migrants and their children understood the need to trade--with each other and with the local Native Americans--but they surely were not capitalists in any contemporary sense of the term. The myth of the founding generation--and labeling it a myth does not mean that it was untrue--acquired even greater credibility because other historic New England towns told themselves precisely the same story. Like Dorchester and Amherst in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, like the Puritan villages of Connecticut and New Haven, early East Hampton came to represent a pre-modern, pre-capitalist, and pre-industrial moment, an appealing world we had somehow lost. Not surprisingly, for more recent critics of American society, the possibility of documenting a simpler life unsullied by economic greed and wage oppression sparked deep nostalgia. Consider, for example, a jeremiad penned by one of the finest professional historians of the late nineteenth century. J. Franklin Jameson concluded his careful study of East Hampton's common lands published in 1883 with a sober reflection: One hears rumors of fine clubhouses and summer cottages, of iron piers and fast New York trains and European steamship lines; but surely one sees with some regret the breaking-up of an institution [the common fields of Montauk] which has lasted two centuries, and which carries the mind back far beyond the time of Wyandance or the

coming of the Mayflower, far even beyond the coming of Hengist and Cerdic, to the days of our German forefathers and of the greatest Romans, who first described the customs which they followed in cultivating their half-cleared fields at the edge of the solemn forests. Just as eighteenth-century European reformers once employed imagined "primitive American savages" to expose the corruption of so-called civilized urban life, evocations of pastoral seventeenth-century towns provided a convincing device for flaying material progress. The tale of the original self-sufficient community that echoes through the pages of East Hampton histories is not wrong.

Like Marco Polo's stories of various cities, it registers a particular, sometimes partisan perspective on how the community developed in the flow of time. It reflects an interpretive position often put forward by those who have come to imagine early East Hampton as a self-contained society or as a narrow stage on which the members of the first families did those things which endear them to modern genealogists. The splendidly preserved records of early East Hampton also sustain an alternative historical narrative. This one imagines a different community, one that from the moment of initial planting sought ties with a vast Atlantic world and exploited local resources with an eye to commercial opportunities in distant markets. Perhaps at the beginning the settlers of East Hampton anticipated selling only livestock and hides to traders in New England. The goals of the town's farmers were probably modest.

But whatever their expectations may have been when they initially confronted F. Scott Fitzgerald's "fresh, green breast of the new world," they soon discovered a source of personal wealth swimming offshore in the form of right whales. These oil-rich mammals did not introduce the spirit of enterprise into East Hampton--that had been present from the very first--but the whales did present some local families with sudden prosperity, a development that had a profound impact on the lives of people of three races and on the physical environment of this little community. The white migrants who at mid-century claimed East Hampton as their own most likely came from the southern counties of England. Family historians dispute whether particular founders originated in Devon, Kent, or Sussex. Probably not a few of the people whose names appear in the early town records had lived at least briefly in London. But however interesting such speculations may be, it is not necessary for our purposes to establish precisely where in southeast England the first East Hampton settlers had lived. The history of the entire area is well documented. On the eve of colonization, two forces dramatically transformed the ecclesiastical and economic character of these counties. First, the area experienced a remarkable burst of commercial activity.

In the early seventeenth century, for example, County Kent contained a disproportionately high percentage of England's town dwellers and industrial workers. The chief industry in Kent was cloth working, particularly the production of lighter worsteds and "new draperies" introduced into England during the previous century by Protestant refugees from the Low Countries. Second, the southern counties which sent so many people to the New World were centers of Reformed Protestantism, better known as Puritanism. The point is not that the East Hampton colonists had been industrial artisans or weavers before moving to America. On such matters the records are silent. Nor, in fact, do we know much about their religious experiences at the moment of transferring to the New World. What is certain, however, is that the lives of most Kentish men and women during this period were shaped profoundly by participation in a vibrant market economy and by a growing popular conviction that the Lord expected true believers to cleanse the Church of England of corruption and error. Even small Kentish farmers sold surplus grain and livestock to London buyers. Indeed,

according to historian Jack P. Greene, many years before the outbreak of civil war in England, ordinary yeomen had developed "a highly competitive, individualistic, and acquisitive 'modern' mentality." Greene may exaggerate, but no one doubts that the first New Englanders understood the workings of a complex commercial system. And, of course, the East Hampton migrants were also Puritans. Had their only concern been with material prosperity, they could have easily moved to Holland, then the most advanced industrial economy in Europe.

Many English men and women did just that, taking the safer route across the English Channel. But those drawn to New England wanted more; they pledged--again in the words of Winthrop--"to love the Lord our God, and to love one another to walke in his wayes and to keepe his Commaundements and his Ordinance, and his lawes, and the Articles of our Covenant with him that wee may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether wee goe to possesse it." It was not that they sacrificed dreams of the good life by migrating to Massachusetts Bay. Rather, they thought that economic prosperity and true religion were fully compatible, for as Winthrop reminded the first Puritan settlers, "The whole earth is the Lord's garden and he hath given it to the sons of men, with a general condition, Genesis I:28, increase and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it, which was again renewed to Noah."

These two concerns--establishing a reformed Protestant church pleasing to a Calvinist God and carving independent, prosperous family farms out of a "howling wilderness"--were major themes in the promotional literature circulating among English Puritans during the 1630s. The Reverend Francis Higginson, a founder of Salem, Massachusetts, seems to have been carried away by the rich economic potential of New England. In a short account sent back to his co-religionists in England, Higginson protested that unlike other writers of the day, he had sedulously avoided "frothy bumbasting words" in the interest of telling curious readers "the naked truth" about the rich opportunities to be found in the northern colonies. The minister testified that the "fertilitie of the Soyle is to be admired at," for with remarkably little labor it produced an abundance of grain and grass, roots and fruit, vines and firewood. In fact, he reported that "A poore servant here that is to possesse but 50 Acres of Land, may afford to give more wood for Timber & Fire as good as the world yeelds, then many Noble men in England can afford to do." How much of this hyperbolic rhetoric ordinary men and women still living in Kent believed is impossible to assess. The prospect of "poore" families so quickly acquiring fifty acres of land must have made a powerful impression, however, as did the arresting observation, "It is scarce to be beleevved how our Kine and Goats, Horses and Hogges doe thrive and prosper here and like well of this COUNTRY."

Assurances that "stockmen"--farmers who raised livestock for market--could do well in America resonated powerfully among the Puritans of Kent and neighboring English counties. By the mid-1630s the religious situation in this region had deteriorated, and the persecuting allies of Archbishop William Laud were furiously driving reform-minded ministers from their pulpits throughout the land. It was in this threatening atmosphere that people such as John and William Mulford decided to take their chances on New England. They journeyed first to Massachusetts Bay, where by the time of their arrival, the thousands of men and women who had followed Winthrop's fleet across the Atlantic Ocean had already created a scores of small agricultural communities.

Although these villages did not yield the easy abundance promised by promoters such as Higginson, they provided impressive amounts of land to their inhabitants, land for home lots, land for tillage,

land for wood, and land for livestock. The only problem for latecomers was what they perceived immediately as over-crowding. Even at the dawn of European settlement, it seemed as if an earlier wave of colonists had claimed all the best acreage. Adequate grazing rights were increasingly hard to acquire. According to Winthrop, late arriving migrants grumbled publicly about the "want of accommodation." And rather than compromise their expectations of economic prosperity and independence in the New World, they moved again, this time to the Connecticut Valley and Eastern Long Island. Although Winthrop lamented the dispersal of so many Puritans, he understood the force of their argument. "The occasion of their desire to remove," the governor explained, "was for that all towns in the Bay began to be much straitened by their own nearness to one another, and their cattle being so much increased."

Relocation within New England did not, of course, indicate slippage of religious commitment. The Reverend John Davenport and Theophilus Eaton, founders of the New Haven Colony, were if anything more scrupulous than were the leaders of Massachusetts Bay about the finer points of Calvinist theology. So too were the people who followed John Winthrop, Jr. and the Reverend Thomas Hooker to Hartford. To be sure, the men and women who made their way first to Southampton, and then to East Hampton, may have complained loudly about being "stinted," but they never lost touch with the religious impulse that had originally brought them to America. The first settlers persuaded the Reverend Thomas James to serve as their minister, paying him by the standards of the day a generous salary, and although few early church records have survived, we have no reason to doubt that James agreed on most ecclesiastical matters with John Cotton, John Davenport, and Thomas Hooker--the major spokesmen for reformed Protestantism in New England.

And in addition to their church, the East Hampton colonists acted swiftly to create civil institutions in character much like those they would have known in Massachusetts Bay, and perhaps in some places in rural Kent. They distributed land, formed an effective governing body, and established a rule of law. The first magistrates confronted several complex, potentially explosive disputes--a case of alleged witchcraft, for example--but as in other agricultural communities, most of their time was taken up with questions about adequate fencing, grazing rights, and "unruly swine."

If by some trick of time we could freeze East Hampton at mid-century, viewing the community as a single image rather than as a process, we would readily discern the outlines of a classic New England town. It seems to possess in this imagined frame all the attributes of what historian Kenneth A. Lockridge called a "Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community." The founding families of East Hampton practiced mixed husbandry, and finding themselves in a broad, open environment, rich in native grasses, they expanded their herds of livestock. No one became fabulously wealthy on the eastern end of Long Island, but then, that was not their goal. Most original settlers did well enough. With the exception of Lion Gardiner, who fancied himself as a sort of lord of the manor, the settlers of East Hampton experienced a kind of rough economic equality. Military security does not seem to have been a source of serious concern. Indeed, the local Native Americans presented no real threat to the the safety of the white community.

The Montauks were an Algonquian people, who had recently taken a terrible beating at the hands of the Narragansetts and who in their hour of need turned to the East Hampton colonists--especially to the indomitable old soldier Lion Gardiner--for protection. The whites viewed the Montauks largely

as obstructions to the expansion of grazing rather than as potential economic partners. Since the Native Americans offered no organized resistance to the town's development, the settlers probably mistook resignation for accommodation and thus, credited the desperate Montauks with friendliness. However inoffensive the Indians may have seemed during the early days, they were most definitely not welcome in the village center. In 1653 the East Hampton government decreed that "no Indian shall come to town unless it be upon special occasion, and not to come armed because...the Dutch hath hired Indians against the English and we not knowing Indians by face." As we shall discover, within a decade the colonists would miraculously learn not only how to identify individual Indians by face, but also by name. That was not something that one could have predicted at the start, for in the beginning a homogeneous, egalitarian community of Puritan farmers insisted on maintaining a clear separation of races.

In East Hampton whales deflected a predictable course of local history. They help explain--at least in this commercial narrative--why at the end of the seventeenth century the town did not look much like Andover or Dorchester, Farmington or Springfield. During the cold winter months, these slow swimming, oil rich mammals migrated to the waters off Long Island. No doubt, they had followed the same annual route time out of mind. What transformed East Hampton during 1650s and 1660s was not the unexpected arrival of the right whales, but rather a growing appreciation among entrepreneurial white colonists that oil and bone might be shipped to distant English and Dutch markets at a great profit.

At first, the little Puritan commonwealth struggled to control the temptation to turn this natural resource into private gain. The records of East Hampton chronicle the efforts of the town government to organize "whale watches." Much like militia duty in other New England towns, this shared civic responsibility involved all able-bodied men. During the long winter months they took turns scouring the beaches of East Hampton for "drift whales." As everyone understood, if these animals were not quickly processed, the carcasses would rot, losing all commercial value.

In 1650 local officials divided the households of East Hampton into two groups, much like the celebrated fire companies that later appeared in colonial American cities. As soon as someone spotted a beached whale, one of the two teams of men was supposed to turn out immediately. Harvesting the whale involved nasty, malodorous work. The men were probably cold and wet, and the town magistrates set fines for those who failed to appear. In 1653 the town passed what might be termed a "whale code," a series of ordinances laying out exactly which of the community's residents might legally share the return on oil and bone. We note that while every inhabitant was assigned to a whale company, only those who owned a home lot and thirteen acres of land could expect to profit from the oil. This law probably represented only a minor breach in the town's sense of fair play. After all, it was the members of an entire class within East Hampton--the village householders--and not a few privileged individuals who stood to make extra income from the whales so fortuitously washed ashore.

No doubt, even in the early days of settlement far-sighted men in East Hampton appreciated that killing whales at sea would be much more efficient than waiting for the animals to beach themselves. Harvesting whales in open water seems such an obvious improvement that one wonders why it took so long for the villagers to take this step. The question, however, only betrays a profound ignorance of the complexity of the challenge. Not until James Loper arrived in East Hampton in 1666 did the

local farmers learn the difficulties posed by what they came to call the "Whale Design." First, one required a substantial amount of capital, more money certainly than an ordinary stockman would possess. A whaler not only needed a small boat--usually described in contemporary records as a "canoe"--but also an expensive iron kettle in which to turn the blubber into marketable oil. These investments represented only the start. The task demanded harpoons, special knives, an array of tools, and access to tightly-fitted barrels capable of carrying the liquid product to New York or Boston, London or Amsterdam. Second, each step in the process demanded patience and knowledge. The slightest misjudgment during the preparation of the oil could ruin the entire batch. No wonder that a 1672 petition drawn up by various towns on the eastern end of Long Island confessed to having "spent much time, pains, and expense for the settling of a trade of whale-fishing in the adjacent seas, having endeavoured it above 20 years, but could not bring it to any perfection till within the past two or three years."

Although the East Hampton whalers never achieved perfection, they did quite well for themselves. The returns on capital investment were impressive. As Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury, a royal governor of New York explained, "a Yearling [whale] will make about forty Barrils of Oyl, a Stunt or Whale two years old will make sometimes fifty, sometimes sixty Barrils of Oyl; and the largest whale that I have heard of in these parts, yielded one hundred and ten barrils." With high quality oil selling on the open market for between one and two pounds sterling, a skilled East Hampton entrepreneur could hope to make a tidy sum from the "Whale Design." The good economic fortune of the Long Island whalers caught the attention of commentators in Massachusetts, and one informed New England readers in 1678 that the inhabitants of East Hampton "of late have fallen upon killing of whales, that frequent the south side of the Island in the latter part of the winter, wherein they have a notable kind of dexterity; and the trade that ariseth therefrom hath been very beneficial to all at that end of the Island."

What seems so striking in this early description of East Hampton's economic transformation is the word "all." It gives the impression that everyone in the community somehow shared in the profits of the Whale Design. The town records, however, tell another story.

After the 1660s we still encounter discussions of local whale companies, but unlike those of an earlier period--those which involved every able-bodied man in East Hampton--these companies are private endeavors. The rising demands of capital investment coupled with the pressure of quality control--a function of specialized skills in the work place--meant that only a few well-positioned families could hold their own in a highly competitive international market. The companies of this period associated with such familiar names as Gardiner, Mulford, Loper, and Schellinger were private concerns.

However one characterizes the economic transformation of East Hampton, one must recognize that it had the effect of creating a new set of relationships within the community. In plain terms, some inhabitants became partners in the Whale Design; others did not. A natural resource once defined as a shared or common opportunity had generated a level of economic inequality that none of the founders had anticipated when they first moved to East Hampton in search of open grazing lands. In his eighteenth-century history of this community, John Lyon Gardiner commented on the shift from common to private exploitation of natural resources, and although Gardiner's syntax leaves much to be desired, his account shows that this was a critical moment in the town's development. It appears

from the records that the business of killing Whales at the South side of the town in the Atlantic Ocean was regularly followed by the town & profits of the Whale divided among the Inhabitants in proportion of their rights in the town as Original Purchasers...But as soon as their lands & stock required much attention; this business was carried on with profit by Individuals. The town's good fortune created a sudden demand for laborers.

Chasing right whales in the frigid waters of the open Atlantic was dangerous work. Rowers had to pull furiously just to keep up with the prey, and it was not uncommon for an injured animal to surface suddenly, overturning a boat and leaving the crew of four or five men to survive as best they could. Since the leading members of the private whale companies had no desire to put their lives at risk, they recruited men who would, and it was during this period in the town's history that the local Indians who had so recently been excluded from the affairs of East Hampton made a dramatic reappearance as whalers. Because the Montauks proved so adept at hunting whales, white people assumed that the Native Americans must have harvested whales at sea long before the Europeans conquered New England. But a moment's reflection reveals the weaknesses of this kind of argument. Commercial whaling represented a response to the development of an international market for oil.

North Atlantic trading networks were a function of European colonization. Without these economic structures, it would have made no sense to harvest whales in the open ocean. In any case, the Montauks could easily have satisfied their own needs by processing an occasional drift whale. It is more persuasive to declare that the local Indians excelled at hunting whales at sea because in East Hampton, they had no other viable means to make money and after the 1650s were fearful for their own future.

During this period of rapid commercial expansion, Europeans and Indians defined the character of race relations through an annual cycle of labor negotiations. Some months before the commencement of the whale season, representatives of the private companies approached individual Montauks with formal, legally binding work contracts, many of which were duly entered into the town records. The whale companies agreed to provide the basic equipment that the Indians would need for the hunt--a boat and harpoons, for example--and on their part, the Indians promised to "go to sea a whale killing" and to give a "true and faithful performance." The contracts often promised the Indians a portion of any whale they managed to catch.

Within a few years, the language of these documents took on a formulaic quality, varying only in minor details. In one standard East Hampton whale contract--one signed on March 5, 1681--five local Indians pledged "each man for himself to go upon a whaling design for Benjamin Conkling or his assignees the next whaling season which will be in the year 1681 upon half share as is usual between the English and the Indians." The rigorous concern for legality in these matters seems to reveal an extraordinary commitment to equitable relations between the races.

After all, the East Hampton whale companies might have taken a different course. As they well knew, the English planters who cultivated tobacco and rice in the southern colonies had no use for such contractual niceties. They simply enslaved their workers. But before we congratulate the owners of the whale companies for their sense of fair play, we might look a little more closely at the contracts themselves. The English settlers came from a society defined by common law; they understood the meaning of due process, especially in matters related to property. By contrast, the

Montauks whalers had no written language. They defined the law within their own cultural traditions. And so, when we examine the town records, noting that the contracts were negotiated between "we, the English" and "you, the Indians," and take into account that the English signed their names to these documents while the Indians scratched personal marks, we wonder just how much the Indian whalers actually understood about the agreements.

The legal vocabulary suggests a striking imbalance in these negotiations. A contract recorded on April 14, 1675--a typical document from this period--declared that "we the aforesaid Indians do engage ourselves to go to sea from year to year at all seasonable times for these our Copartners a whale killing till we have discharged to their satisfaction all former arrears or debt we stand engaged to them." And in March 1683 Hector, a Montauk, promised that "if I do not get so much by my half share this next season as will pay the said Robert Kedy what I shall be indebted to him, then I do hereby engage to go for him the next season ensuing until such time as I have paid him whatsoever I shall be indebted unto him." Over and over we encounter the phrase "from year to year." Even to enter a whaling contract the Indian had to post a bond of ten pounds sterling.

The Indian laborer was in debt beyond his ability to pay before he had killed a single whale. The Montauk whale hunter found himself suspended in a kind of unfreedom, nominally an independent worker, but in fact bound to a specific Englishman for a period of years. In the nineteenth-century South such labor agreements have been characterized as debt peonage, an improvement over slavery to be sure, but by the same token, not a product of an open labor market.

In any case, no one ever wrote a whale contract for the benefit of the Indians. The agreements protected the private companies from other private companies which often attempted to steal Montauk laborers just as the hunting season commenced. Able-bodied Indians were in short supply, and it was a financial blow to have a crew member suddenly show up on a competitor's boat. In April 1678 the Reverend Thomas James lost his temper, warning the representatives of other companies to keep away from his Indians. Indeed, he and his partners entered into the town records "a solemn protest against any person or persons who have or shall contrary to all law of God or man, justice or equity, go about to violate or infringe the above mentioned contracts or agreements without our consent." James was not given to sociological analysis. He might have observed, however, that a sudden new source of wealth--whale oil--had created fault lines in East Hampton, dividing neighbors who so recently had journeyed to the New World to establish a covenanted community.

Be that as it may, on such occasions the Indians were frequently blamed for unfaithfulness. In 1680 one local official reported to the governor of New York that he had received many complaints from East Hampton: that they are like to be much disappointed and damnified in their business of whaling by the deceits and unfaithfulness of the Indians with whom they did contract the last spring for their service in whaling this present season, who notwithstanding said contracts under hand and seal do now betake themselves to the service of other men, who do gladly except them....so that the Indians having received goods of one man in the spring upon account of whaling and now again of another to fit them for sea, leave their masters to quarrel. It was a short step from accusations of deceit in the job market to harsher judgments against a body of Native American laborers who seemed to have flunked what was in fact a crash course in Western capitalism.

The eighteenth-century local historian John Lion Gardiner, for example, protested that the Montauks had brought their problems upon themselves, for in Gardiner's words, the Indians' "idle dispositions and savage manners prevent the most of them from living comfortable." Although the means to "living comfortable" may have eluded the Native Americans, the families who profited from the Whale Design prospered in the New World. They did not, of course, live in the manner of Spanish Conquistadores. But in comparison to other seventeenth-century New Englanders, they experienced a notable improvement in the material culture of everyday life. The vessels that sailed out of the protected waters of Northwest Harbor, filled with barrels of oil and other local products such as hides and meat, wool and feathers, returned from Boston and New York laden with consumer goods. These manufactured items originated for the most part in England.

They flowed through the stores that Abraham Schellinger and other East Hampton merchant-traders operated near the large warehouses where employees busily processed whale products. An inventory prepared by Schellinger lists practical household items such as guns, nails, and skillets. His shelves also contained imports that reveal how far the villagers had distanced themselves from notions of self-sufficiency. They purchased everything from colorful textiles to fine pewter ware. These English manufactures traveled the roads of East Hampton to individual homes where they were lovingly possessed, finding their way eventually into probate records. In these documents we once again encounter imported cloth and ceramics, brass pots, and in the case of Thomas Diament who died in 1682, a "great looking glass." Such a range of goods appeared at this time in the port cities of Boston and Salem, but in terms of physical well-being the colonists of East Hampton seem to have participated fully in a vast new consumer economy some decades before the residents of other country towns throughout New England.

Indeed, consumer desire was the engine that drove the Whale Design, for as the members of the private whale companies fully understood, without consumer opportunity large-scale oil production made no economic sense. During the period of rapid commercial expansion, men and women of African background first appeared in East Hampton. About their own life histories, we know very little. They were mentioned in community documents from time to time without surnames, as Bess, Jack, Peter, Rose, Bristo, and Hannah. They sat in the back of the Reverend Nathaniel Hunting's church. And, almost without exception, they were slaves. A crude census compiled in 1687 lists twenty-five bondsmen, eleven males and fourteen females. That figure represented just under five percent of the town's population. Like other categories of property, local blacks were listed in probate inventories that leave no doubt about the existence of slavery in early East Hampton. In John Stratton's will, for example, we find described along with a table, blankets, and pewter plates two blacks and their child, humans valued officially at fifty pounds sterling. This figure represented a very large expenditure.

Since East Hampton did not define itself around a plantation economy, and since the local Indians served as whalers, the community would seem to have had no reason to purchase so many slaves. One can only speculate about such matters. At a moment of giddy prosperity the white people of East Hampton aggressively entered a burgeoning consumer economy, and among the imported goods they acquired were black slaves. In this curious environment African Americans were at once a personal indulgence and a solid investment. The consumer engine that propelled the local economy soon overheated. The town's resource base simply could not sustain such a high level of market participation.

Like the great tobacco planters of the Chesapeake colonies who depleted virgin fields in only seven years, the East Hampton settlers asked too much of the land and the sea, and by the early decades of the eighteenth century a scene of almost limitless bounty--a place where men fearful of being "stinted" by competitors could possess all the land they desired--had begun to collapse in upon itself. At first, no one in the community comprehended what was happening. The herds of cattle and sheep continued to expand without any thought given to the grass needed to sustain them. Between 1678 and 1688 the number of sheep in East Hampton rose from about a thousand animals to over 15,000 head. In economic terms, explosive growth made good sense. After all, the livestock provided the meat and hides which merchants sold in robust markets as far away as the West Indies. And to make room for the new animals, the villagers cut down the trees, opening up pasture lands so quickly that soon local farmers began to protest that they did not have enough wood even to build proper fences. Deforestation accelerated the decline of fur-bearing animals such as fox, otter, and wildcat, all of which had appeared in the export ledgers as marketable furs. The most dramatic transformation, however, involved the disappearance of the right whales.

In 1718 an alarmed Samuel Mulford wrote to London that "there [sic] is very little [whale oil] gott to go any where: and the people are become miserable poor." Mulford was given to exaggeration, but a respected eighteenth-century historian of New York, William Smith, confirmed Mulford's observation. "The whale fishery, on the south side of the island," Smith explained, "has declined of late years, through the scarcity of whales, and is now almost entirely neglected." Like the famed striped bass of modern times, the oil-bearing mammals that had once migrated in such impressive numbers to the waters off East Hampton failed year after year to reappear. Mulford had a ready explanation for what had occurred. He blamed meddling colonial bureaucrats for the problem, claiming loudly that if the New York government would just get off the backs of the local whalers, dropping its demand for expensive licences and repealing intrusive regulations, then the good times would soon return. "The imports of whale oil and bone from New York have greatly decreased," Mulford announced, "owing to disputes with the Governor as to a duty for whales caught there. We propose that the inhabitants have free liberty to kill whales." Free enterprise was the answer to an environmental crisis. "I say," protested East Hampton's most successful entrepreneur, "that there was more people went a whale fishing on Long Island twenty or thirty years ago when they were undisturbed [by government regulations], than hath done of late, which if they had not been discouraged might have been now double that number." But Mulford's demand for "free liberty" in the marketplace was off the mark. Even contemporaries knew that state regulations had not strangled the whale industry in East Hampton. The problem was over-fishing. As one commentator noted laconically, "whalebone and whale oil...will soon grow less plentiful as the people increase."

Sometime during the first third of the eighteenth century East Hampton entered into a long period of inanition. The community closed in on itself; contacts with the outside world became less frequent. Visitors came to the eastern end of the Island not so much as deal-makers, but rather as primitive anthropologists, searching for a small pocket of settlement seemingly untouched by the corrosive force of commerce, a place that time forgot.

In 1768 John Gardiner sounded almost like a romantic poet, claiming that in East Hampton "nothing more than usual for all country towns has taken place...for this century past. Remote from their Capitol, they have lived plain Agricultural lives & generally happy." Gardiner celebrated a sturdy population of pious "grazers." And another curious traveler, Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale

College, described late eighteenth-century East Hampton as if it were a kind of living museum. "A general air of equality, simplicity, and quiet is visible here in a degree singular," the scholar observed in his journal. "Sequestered in a great measure from the world, they exhibit scarcely a trace of that activity which everywhere meets the eye in New England."

Perhaps the locals who gawked at Yale's president remembered an earlier period when East Hampton had exhibited a level of "activity" exceeding that encountered in almost all of New England. But then again, perhaps they had forgotten how the Whale Design had transformed the lives of men and women of three different races. In the gathering light of the twentieth century, we might inquire with Kublai Kahn just what it is that we have been discussing. Perhaps Marco Polo has told of a strange anomaly, a community quite unlike any other that existed at the dawn of time, one consumed by the heat of its own commercial ambition and then returned to a bucolic state that masked its original character. Or perhaps Polo only meant to remind us that in the earliest records of colonial East Hampton one recovers stories that in a more modern age we dare not ignore.

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