

THE WRECK OF THE CIRCASSIAN

By Shane Weeks & Ephraim Horowitz

EXT. SAG HARBOR, LONG ISLAND - 1876 A.D. - SUNRISE

JOHNNY WALKER, a Shinnecock Native whaler walks down a crowded wharf lined with tall ships. Johnny is an able-bodied seaman, first mate and harpooner. At 44 years old he has decades of experience at sea but has spent the past five years on shore.

Over Johnny's shoulder is a well patched seabag. In his hands he carries a five foot harpoon. He wants to sign onto a voyage to hunt whales and is ready to leave today. Some of the sailors and ship's officers recognize Johnny and greet him warmly as they hurry by.

CUT TO:

Johnny notices something is wrong. The tall ships are badly maintained, ragged and worn-out looking. The barrels that should contain whale oil are empty. A VOICE is heard. CAPTAIN SAMUEL TUTHILL calls to him.

CAPTAIN TUTHILL

Johnny!

JOHNNY

Samuel!(Salutes) Or should I say
Captain Tuthill?

The men embrace and look at one another for a long moment.

JOHNNY

My goodness! It's good to see you
again. I just saw your Ma she
caught a cold but she's fine.
Lisa, the kids. All well!

CAPTAIN TUTHILL

I'm heading there right now. Can't
wait to see them. And you Johnny?
You're looking to ship out?

JOHNNY

Family needs the money. I can't
make enough doing farm work. A
signing bonus would hold us well
through the year.

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CAPTAIN TUTHILL

Ah Johnny. You didn't hear the news? Nobody told you what's been happening?

JOHNNY WALKER

No. What?

CAPTAIN TUTHILL

The whaling industry collapsed. It's done. Here, New Bedford, Gloucester, Nova Scotia. From the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego it's done.

JOHNNY

Done? There's whales everywhere!

CAPTAIN TUTHILL

Not anymore. Not enough to make it economical anyway. This'll be my last voyage. All these are going for scrap.

CAPTAIN TUTHILL indicates the tall ships lined up along the wharf. Behind them is a towering bowsprit, with a large figurehead of a mermaid. The gilded name Regina Maris is carved beneath her.

JOHNNY

They're selling the Regina Maris for scrap?

CAPTAIN TUTHILL

Look around. All these ships came back empty. The Pacific is the only place with enough whales and there's no profit sailing around the Horn and back again.

JOHNNY

Even if I go to New Bedford?

CAPTAIN TUTHILL

You'll find nothing.

Johnny is crushed.

EXT. MAIN STREET, SOUTHAMPTON TOWN- MORNING

Johnny and Captain Tuthill ride together in a horse drawn carriage through the Town of Southampton.

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They pass the houses of well to do people and stores with expensive goods. The driver stops in front of a rich looking home. Captain Tuthill steps off, grabs his bags, shakes Johnny's hand and walks toward his house. Two well dressed children and his prosperous looking wife Lisa rush to greet him. Johnny steps down, taking his seabag with him.

EXT. SOUTHAMPTON TOWN- MORNING

Johnny walks to the Reservation a mile away. He passes by beautiful homes, wide streets and wealthy people. Many homes fly the American flag from their porches. Some have gold star banners in the windows, indicating a family member killed in war.

EXT. SHINNECOCK RESERVATION - MORNING

In contrast to the lush greenery and landscaping of the homes in Southampton Town, the Shinnecock Reservation is barren of vegetation. The houses stick out as if they are on a Kansas prairie.

Johnny passes by the Shinnecock Church, then walks down the narrow lanes of the Reservation. The houses are modest, many could use fixing up. Friendly dogs come out to greet him. Johnny pats them affectionately and they follow him home.

Johnny's wife REBECCA CUFFEE comes out to meet him. He lowers his eyes.

JOHNNY

There'll be no more whaling.
They're selling off the ships, no
money in it anymore. That's from
Captain Samuel Tuthill's own
mouth. I'm beached for good now.

Rebecca hugs him. Their twin five year olds, Kathy and Noel run around the yard playing ball. Johnny looks at his wife.

JOHNNY

What's wrong? Other than what I
already know.

REBECCA

We have four eggs, two potatoes,
flour and some lard.

(MORE)

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CONTINUED:

REBECCA (CONT'D)

And we're three dollars on credit
at the store. The cupboards bare
Johnny.

Their eyes meet in a look of concern. DANIEL WALKER their
fifteen year old son, strong, tall and handsome takes his
father's seabag from his shoulder.

DANIEL

I'm glad you're stayin' home Pa.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. SHINNECOCK RESERVATION MARSHES - BEFORE DAWN

Johnny and Daniel wait for first light in a duck blind.
They have flintlock shotguns and stand alert. Ducks fly
over. They shoot four times. One duck falls. A dog rushes
out to retrieve it. No other flocks fly over. The sun
rises.

JOHNNY

Check the net?

Daniel nods yes.

EXT. SHINNECOCK RESERVATION MARSHES - SUNRISE

Johnny and Daniel check a long gill net with practiced
hands. A short distance away is a large commercial
fishing trawler, strip mining Shinnecock Bay. The trawler
is too large for the small bay, its steam engine spews
clouds of ash and makes a ROARING SOUND.

EXT. ABOARD THE TRAWLER - SUNRISE

Sailors man the trawler's rakes. They bring hundreds of
pounds of bay scallops aboard.

EXT. - SHINNECOCK MARSHES - SUNRISE -

Johnny and Daniel check their catch. One small fish. They
pause for a moment to watch the trawler at work.

JOHNNY WALKER

Your Grandpa and I would pull
twenty fish in a net like this.
They're killin' the bay, just
killin' it.

INT. CUFFEE FAMILY HOME - 6 AM

Rebecca serves coffee, eggs and fry bread. She serves one fried egg to each of the kids. The parents share one egg between them.

INT. WICKHAM'S FARM OFFICE, SOUTHAMPTON TOWN - EARLY MORNING

OLD MAN WICKHAM owns five hundred acres of land and is among the richest men in Southampton Town. He is seated at his work table going over the books. Johnny walks up to him, hat in hand.

OLD MAN WICKHAM

Didn't go your way huh?

JOHNNY

No sir. It did not. Looks like whaling is dead on the Island.

OLD MAN WICKHAM

Well. I can give you a few days work, odd jobs that kind of thing. Can you start now?

JOHNNY

Yessir, I'd like that.

OLD MAN WICKHAM

Stables need mucking out. Ok?

JOHNNY

Yessir. I'll go right now.

INT. WICKHAM FARM, STABLES - MORNING

Johnny takes a shovel and begins to fill a wheelbarrow with manure.

EXT. WICKHAM FARM, STABLES - MORNING

Johnny muscles the wheelbarrow over rough ground before dumping it onto a huge pile of manure. He wipes sweat from his face, lifts the empty wheelbarrow and pushes it toward the stable.

Johnny moves aside as two horses and riders approach. These are Old Man Wickham's adult son and daughter.

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They are out for a morning ride. Dressed in expensive riding clothes and astride fine horses, they seem as if they are Southampton royalty.

A shadow falls over Johnny as they ride past.

Johnny pushes the wheelbarrow back to the stable. Something catches his eye that makes him stop. The clouds in the sky are ominous and threatening. He studies them closely.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, TEN MILES FROM MONTAUK POINT - NIGHT

The Circassian is a steel hulled cargo ship with three masts of sails bound for New York from London, England. She is carrying crates of bricks and 1000 barrels of soda ash and lime.

The Circassian is a formidable vessel. Two hundred eighty feet long and thirty nine feet wide. Her masts are made of steel and she draws twenty feet of water.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS is in command and he is in serious trouble. A raging storm is hitting them hard.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK, SHIP'S WHEEL - NIGHT

The Circassian is tossed by wind and seas. The HELMSMAN struggles. The ship's wheel is fighting him.

Captain Williams moves as fast as he can across the slanting deck, dodging waves and wind. He yells at the Helmsman.

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

I told you to steer 220 degrees southwest!

Captain Williams looks into the Helmsman's face. He is frozen in panic. With a small nod of his head he indicates the Captain should look at the compass.

CUT TO:

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The Compass is spinning wildly in its brass housing. Captain Williams starts to panic himself. He races below decks.

INT. CIRCASSIAN, NAVIGATION STATION - NIGHT

The NAVIGATOR is making lines on a chart.

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

Where the hell are we?

NAVIGATOR

I don't know. We need soundings.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

Captain Williams emerges from below decks yelling for the FIRST MATE.

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

Soundings! Take soundings! We need to know the depth!

The First Mate immediately organizes two seamen. SHOUTS are heard. Captain Williams looks aloft. High in the rigging the LOOKOUT is pointing and YELLING.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

Captain Williams strains to hear. He tries to look in the distance but can't see anything. Suddenly, the wind falls off and he hears the Lookout, a second later the view clears.

LOOKOUT

Montauk! Montauk!

Captain Williams suddenly spots the rocky shore and towering cliffs of Montauk Point, Long Island. They are being pushed on to the shore at an alarming rate.

CUT TO:

The First Mate has retrieved the soundings line.

FIRST MATE

Thirty feet! Oh God! Thirty feet!

Captain Williams runs to the wheel and helps steer.

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CONTINUED:

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

Port! Port! To port or we'll run
aground!

Suddenly a line snaps. A block and tackle whips from the rigging sweeping the deck and nearly missing two men before it is secured.

EXT. ATLANTIC OCEAN - NIGHT

From far out at sea a monster wave rolls toward shore. We watch as the Circassian comes into view. The wave targets the ship like a missile.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

The Lookout spots the wave and wraps his arms and legs into the rigging.

LOOKOUT

Wave! Wave!

On the deck everything grows quiet. The Captain and crew watch the wave approach. It emerges from the dark seas like a mountain.

Everyone braces themselves. A long moment hangs in the air.

The wave hits the ship broadside nearly toppling it over. Sea water floods the decks four feet deep. Sailors are nearly washed overboard.

CUT TO:

EXT. ATLANTIC OCEAN - NIGHT

The Circassian rolls to its side and its masts dip into the sea. More waves hit. Then it slowly rights itself. GROANING and CREAKING as the masts rise from the water.

CUT TO:

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

Captain Williams and the men spring into action. They spin the wheel hard over. The First Mate orders the crew to adjust the sails.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONTAUK BEACH - NIGHT

From the beach at Montauk we see the Circassian begin to move away from shore and away from the breakers.

The huge ship turns its nose back out to sea. It begins to ride the waves and the journey smooths out. The Circassian is slowly making its way to safety.

CUT TO:

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

The ship's wheel comes under control. Exhausted men rest for a moment. The Navigator comes on deck. He points to a light in the distance.

NAVIGATOR

Shinnecock Light! Twelve miles!
Keep the light to starboard and
we'll stay in deep water.

The COOK distributes rum. The crisis has passed. They are once again safely underway to New York City. Everyone relaxes. The wind lessens and then changes direction.

One by one the men notice that the wind has shifted. The First Mate raises a finger to the wind. They look at one another. Suddenly the Captain shouts orders.

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

Hard over! Hard over!!

The crew springs into action as a single unit. Within a minute the wind blows sixty miles an hour and huge waves batter the ship every few seconds.

CUT TO:

The ship is out of control. It is being driven onto the shore so fast that the Shinnecock Light grows bigger and bigger. The white sandy beaches of Southampton are getting closer.

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The Helmsman and Captain Williams fight the wheel. No effect.

We see events from the Lookout's POV. The ship is about to crash into a sandbar one thousand feet from shore. Huge waves with breaking tops are washing over it. They are heading into a surf zone from hell.

He shouts a warning then they run aground and he falls to the deck as the ship rolls.

EXT. FROM THE WATER - NIGHT

Wave after wave lifts the Circassian and smashes it against the sandbar.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK - NIGHT

Captain Williams and his men hold on for dear life. The First Mate shoots off a flare gun. The BLAST from the gun is followed by the WHOOSH of the rising flare and a distant POP as it explodes.

A red flare arcs brightly against the black sky.

CUT TO:

INT. JOHNNY AND REBECCA'S HOME - NIGHT

LOUD KNOCKS on the front door startle Johnny awake.

Johnny opens the front door revealing a monster storm and LIEUTENANT HALSEY of the Mecox Life Saving Station.

LIEUTENANT HALSEY

Johnny, I need you and your men to
come quick as you can.

Johnny ushers Lieutenant Halsey inside. Rebecca serves tea to warm him.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT -

Johnny wakes up Daniel.

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CONTINUED:

JOHNNY

Get dressed in your foul weather
clothes. There's been a shipwreck!

CUT TO:

EXT. SHINNECOCK RESERVATION, SOUTHAMPTON - NIGHT -

Lieutenant Halsey whips his horse drawn carriage into action. Mecox Life Saving Station is written on the side. The back is filled with ropes, pulleys and gear. Johnny and Daniel direct him through the Shinnecock Reservation's narrow lanes.

They pull in front of a house and in moments RUSSEL BUNN climbs aboard. They race down another street.

The horses stop short for OLIVER KELLIS, ALPHONSO ELEAZER, WILLIAM CUFFEE and SAMSON LEE waiting by the side of the road.

The carriage is now filled with Shinnecock men. It races from the Reservation toward the wreck of the Circassian.

CUT TO:

EXT. MECOX BEACH - SERIES OF SHOTS - NIGHT

The Circassian can be seen one thousand feet from shore, being beaten by waves and wind. Men from the Mecox Life Saving Station are already hard at work. A life saving boat is standing by.

A complicated apparatus called a breeches buoy is being assembled. It's essentially a zip line that can be shot to a ship in distress allowing sailors to travel to shore.

Lieutenant Halsey and the Shinnecock Crew arrive on scene. Three men from the Mecox Life Saving crew rush by. They set up a mortar with a line attached and shoot it toward the ship.

The line arcs high into the air but falls short. The men reposition the mortar for another try. They fire and again the line cannot reach the ship.

EXT. MECOX BEACH - AT THE WATERS EDGE - NIGHT

Johnny looks toward the wreck with Lieutenant Halsey.

LIEUTENANT HALSEY

What do you think?

JOHNNY

Looks like she's made of steel?

LIEUTENANT HALSEY

Aye.

JOHNNY

Looks like she's intact?

LIEUTENANT HALSEY

Looks like she is.

JOHNNY

High tide is in three hours. Dawn soon after. I say its safest to wait. If she starts to break up, we'll make our move.

LIEUTENANT HALSEY

Agreed.

He turns to BOATMAN FERRIS.

LIEUTENANT HALSEY

We're telling them to hold their position. Fire a blue flare!

Boatman Ferris takes out an enormous flare gun and fires.

EXT. CIRCASSIAN, MAIN DECK

Captain Williams leads a crew attempting to get a lifeboat over the side. Everything is going wrong. Lines are tangling. Waves sweep over them. It seems impossible to get a boat launched in these conditions.

CUT TO:

The blue flare catches their attention. They freeze in place.

CAPTAIN WILLIAMS

They're telling us to wait.

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CONTINUED:

The crew stands around for a few moments. Unsure what to do.

The COOK speaks.

COOK

I got a fire going. Coffee. Soup.
Come below.

One by one the men follow him. Captain Williams stands alone on the deck.

Captain Williams looks toward the beach. The Life Saving Crew is standing by. Townspeople have gathered to help. A bonfire is roaring. Everything needed to save the Circassian is now on shore waiting for the gale to subside.

DISSOLVE TO: