



The image above depicts a pivotal moment in Colonial North American history. Artist Benjamin West (1738-1820), an early Anglo-American painter, developed a style known as “epic representation” that included mythical reconstructions of critical moments in colonial history, like this one; William Penn’s Treaty Agreement with the Lenape Indians in 1682. The above work, commissioned by the younger William Penn (grandson of his namesake, the founder of the Pennsylvania Colony—depicted at center left with arms outstretched in a conciliatory and inviting gesture) was completed in 1772. The younger Penn wanted West to portray his ancestor as the architect of prolonged peace between Native Americans and Europeans in the new colony. Indeed, Native American political models influenced Pennsylvania’s, and America’s, political and constitutional evolution. In October 1988, the U.S. Congress passed Concurrent Resolution 331 to recognize the influence of the Iroquois Constitution upon the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Treaty_of_Penn_with_Indians_by_Benjamin_West.jpg.

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

Economies and Societies of Early North America, 1500-1750

© 2011, 2012 The Department of History & Philosophy, North Georgia College & State University. No use without prior permission.

Unit Goals

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- (1) Locate and understand the geographic extent of early North American settlements and communities.
- (2) Identify key early trade commodities and their roles in shaping the colonial North American economy
- (3) Compare and contrast agricultural and economic patterns of development in the European North American colonies
- (4) Understand how labor and race relations evolved across different regions of early colonial North America

Introduction

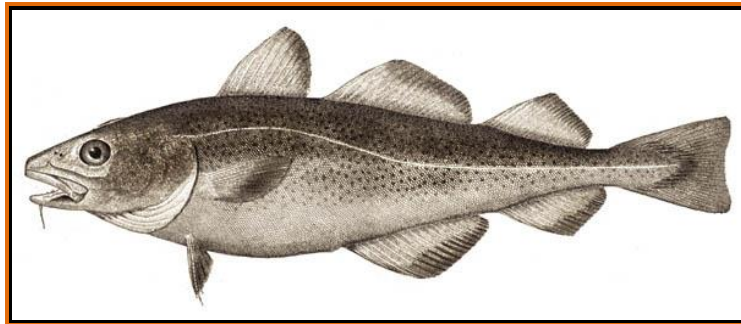
This essay examines the methods of and influences on making a living in eastern North America from 1500 to 1750. Through an investigation of how and why early Americans (including Indians, Africans, and Europeans) worked as they did, one gains a more complete understanding of what actually drove the engines of this region's past. Inevitably, the main force behind any history is the thousands of individuals who struggle to survive and shape their environment on a daily basis. Early Americans labored, loved, bled, died, traded, fought, and endured to create their world. What resulted was a multi-ethnic and multi-racial landscape still visible to modern eyes.

The stereotypical view of the "New World" in 1500 is that of a raw, unmanaged wilderness inhabited largely by Native Americans.¹ Over the next two hundred and fifty years, the French, Dutch, and British intruded into that rough environment and carved out bastions of civilization and Western culture. In this narrative, America is fundamentally a destination for outsiders moving from east to west.² Axes and hoes turned forests into fields while guns and the

¹ Charles C. Mann, "America found and Lost." *National Geographic*, (May, 2007), 37.

² Karren Ordahl Kupperman, "International at the Creation: early Modern American History," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. ed. Thomas Bender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

cheap, nutritious, preserved well for shipping, and became highly popular throughout Europe and the Americas.³



Atlantic Cod, species *Gadus Morhua*. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atlantic_cod.jpg.

It also provided an important food source for the ever-growing slave plantations on the Caribbean sugar islands. Sugar production was so valuable that all the available land on islands like Barbados went to growing cane. That left no room for local food production. Atlantic fishermen happily assisted plantation owners in filling that void.⁴

The global interconnections of the fishing trade fit in well with the **mercantile economics** of Europe's seventeenth and eighteenth-century monarchs. Rulers believed that colonies and international business ventures should enrich their nation of origin with all the raw materials and foodstuffs possible. Governments hoped such policies would fuel Europe's industrial workers to produce manufactured goods sellable to both the home empire and to the global marketplace. To stifle competition from their rivals, monarchs enforced restrictions on where and with whom their citizens could trade. For example, foreign goods sold to English colonists in America first had to ship through a port in Britain. This ensured that merchants from the mother country received a favorable **balance of trade** from the growing overseas empire. It also guaranteed a constant state of imperial competition between the major nations of Europe. As a result, Early Americans readily lived and worked in the middle of much larger global disputes. The cod industry was an integral and multi-national part of that imperial picture.⁵

Hairy Gold: The Fur Trade

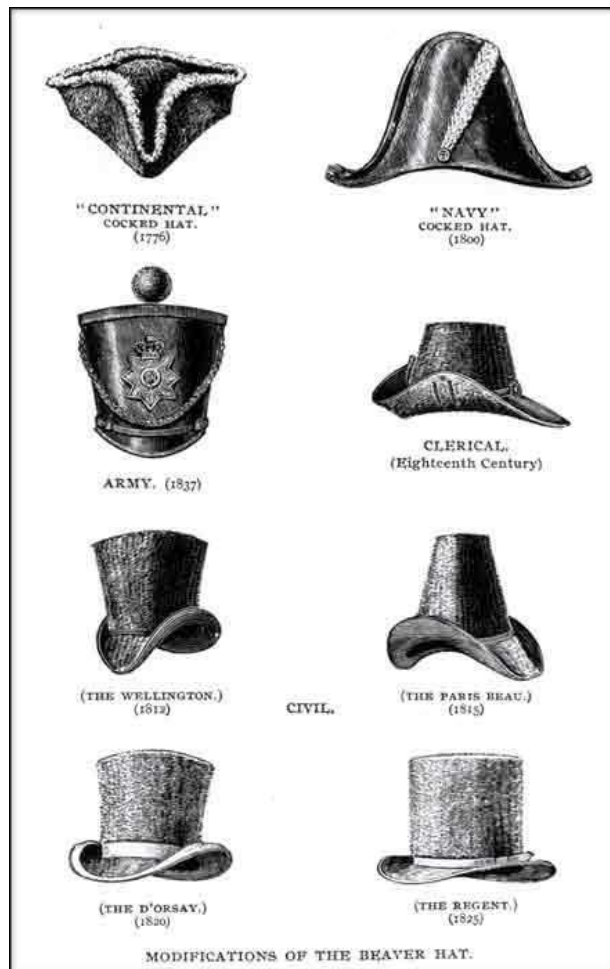
The presence of European fishermen in New England and northwestern Canada did more than line merchants' pockets and put cod on tables around the globe. It also brought them into

³ John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier : An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, The California World History Library. Vol. 1. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 547-548, 559.

⁴ Richards, *Unending Frontier*, 559; Alan Taylor, *American Colonies. The Penguin History of the United States*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Viking, 2001), 210.

⁵ Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Brave New World : A History of Early America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 283-84 ; Taylor, *American Colonies*, 258.

contact with the region's Algonquin and Iroquoian-speaking natives. In the process, the Europeans recognized another plentiful and highly profitable American resource; fur. Many natives happily traded beaver pelts for the metal axes, knives, kettles, and glass beads the anglers had on hand. The natives quickly recognized these items possessed a technical superiority over their Indian equivalents. As profits grew, Europeans realized they could make serious money trading furs. By 1585, French ships regularly crossed the Atlantic in search of America's hairy gold.⁶



The image above shows a range of beaver hats available between the late sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Such hats became necessary fashion accessories throughout the European world during this period, and their adoption by professions, military officers, and law enforcement officials guaranteed constant demand and profit for those involved in the trade. Source: http://www.georgianindex.net/America/Hats/beaver_hats.jpg.

structure ideal for making those hats.⁷ That simple quirk of nature produced an industry that united European and Native American societies unlike any other force in the early modern Atlantic world.

⁶ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 92, 97. ; Richards, *Unending Frontier*, 464-465.

⁷ Richards, *Unending Frontier*, *passim*.



The image above shows the Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Syndics of the Draper's Guild* (1662). Note the large beaver hats the businessmen wear in the work. The hats depicted likely came from American beavers hunted by northeastern Indians. Even Europe's high art saw influences from the laborers of Early America. Source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8b/Rembrandt - Klesveverlaugets forstandere i Amsterdam.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8b/Rembrandt_-_Klesveverlaugets_forstandere_i_Amsterdam.jpg).

French Canada – New France

France was the first European power to extend its reach permanently into North America's northeastern wilds. In 1608, **Samuel de Champlain** took advantage of the rich fur producing lands around the Saint Lawrence River and established **New France's** first major outpost at Quebec. The colony's population grew very slowly. This situation compelled the French to maintain good relations with the surrounding natives. To that end, Champlain brokered a strategic alliance with the nearby Huron Indians. This put the French at the heart of the northern beaver trade.⁸

The French established a respectful and efficient relationship with the Huron. Acting as intermediaries, the Huron traded corn and produce for furs from the natives who hunted them deeper down the interior river systems. These they traded with the French at Quebec in exchange for European trade goods. Next, they turned around and bought more furs from the

⁸ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 100.

inland tribes by selling the surplus French items for higher prices. Then the process repeated itself. The Indians became accomplished businesspeople and learned how to drive a hard bargain with the whites when they could. In this manner, the French and northeastern natives shared an economic model that linked thousands of people together from the Great Lakes tribes to the craftspeople of Europe.⁹

The industry did have its drawbacks. Over time, natives and Europeans entangled themselves in complex webs of interrelated circumstances. Some northeastern tribes became dependant on French metal goods, firearms, and textiles. After decades of use, their old tools and cultural methods slowly faded away. Similarly, native peoples also abandoned the practice of purely subsistence hunting to further pursue the beaver for their pelts. This undermined traditional patterns of restraint and pushed natives deeper into a market-driven, interdependent relationship with Europeans.¹⁰



The image above shows an old carved logo of the Hudson's Bay Company, which owned the original land concession that stretched across most of central and northern Canada. By the late 1700s, the company dominated the North American fur Trade. The company still exists today. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hudsons_Bay-Logo-Old.JPG.

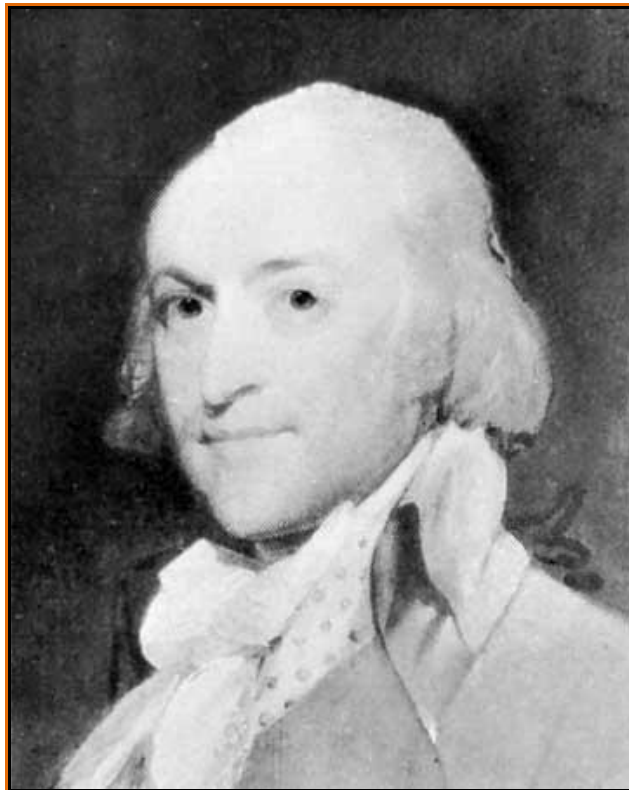
France's alliance with the Huron also pulled them into conflict with the **Five Nations** of the **Iroquois Confederacy** and their Dutch allies. Seeking to muscle their way into the fur trade, the Dutch established the colony of **New Netherland** around the Hudson River in 1614. From there they built the city of **New Amsterdam** (modern New York) at the mouth of the Hudson and established Fort Orange (Albany) as a fur trading post 160 miles up river. In this manner, the Dutch ran quality trade goods up the Hudson to the Iroquois. In turn, the Indians used the muskets and tools to fight their way into the northern fur trade. In the late 1640s, the Iroquois finally decimated the villages of their traditional Huron enemies. European diseases killed many Iroquois in the previous years and they wanted to recoup their losses with Huron prisoners. When the war was over, the Huron tribe and their trade rivalry with the Iroquois

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97, 100-101.

¹⁰ Richards, *Unending Frontier*, 472-73.

disintegrated. For some, the struggle for survival in this harsh new economic climate proved vicious.¹¹

The beaver population suffered worst of all. By 1660, few beaver remained around the southern Saint Lawrence corridor. That pattern only continued as the fur trade spread west into the 1800s. Fortunately, the American beaver survived. However, the process of hunting it markedly altered both the physical and human landscape of early America.¹²



The image above is a portrait of John Jacob Astor (1763-1848), a German immigrant who became the first multimillionaire in the United States from profits derived from the fur trade. After creating a huge fortune, he later sold his interest in the trade and purchased large tracts of land on Manhattan Island. When he died in 1848 he left a fortune of \$20 million, or \$120 billion in 2010 dollars. Astor is estimated to have been the fourth richest American in all of American history. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:John_Jacob_Astor.jpg.

Agriculture: Living on the Land

Despite its wide influences, most early Americans were not fur traders. Making a living

¹¹ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 102, 105, 111-13, 251-52.

¹² Richards, *Unending Frontier*, 509-12, 514.

off the land occupied the vast majority of the population in one way or another.¹³ Each region of European settlement developed its own scheme for agricultural success. Some chose to plant and market a valuable **staple crop**. Others focused more on growing for their own needs and selling the surplus. One region even mixed the two ideas. Meanwhile, Native Americans continued their centuries-old growing practices that both shared with and differed from those of their new neighbors. For everyone involved, the land was the great provider. How they worked and adapted to their environment determined the patterns of daily life for thousands of American people.

Staple Crop Agriculture: The Chesapeake Bay Colonies (Virginia and Maryland)

England became permanently involved in the American business in 1607, with the settlement of **Virginia**. The venture was not a quick success. The mosquito-infested swamps and polluted water around **Jamestown** gave the colonists malaria, dysentery, and typhoid fever. They also starved to death. Despite their fertile environment, many of the original colonists did not have the necessary desire or work experience to grow enough food for themselves. By the 1620s, hundreds of British settlers found untimely deaths in Virginia rather than the nonexistent gold they had hoped for.¹⁴

The colony ultimately found salvation in **tobacco**. Introduced in 1616, the Caribbean variety grown in Virginia (and later Maryland) thrived in the region's sticky southern heat. Smoking was a growing trend in Europe, and Chesapeake planters rose to meet the demand. Tobacco prices soared during the 1620s and people flooded to the area to make their fortunes. Three-quarters of them were **indentured servants**. They worked under a master for four to seven years in exchange for the payment of their trans-Atlantic passage. When their terms ran out, they could then build their own tobacco plantations. However, staple crop agriculture was a fickle business that rarely favored more than a select few. Most servants did not live to see out their indentures.¹⁵

Indentured servants provided the much-needed muscle of the early tobacco industry. Unfortunately for them, Tobacco was a harsh taskmaster. The plants needed nine months to plant, tend, harvest, dry, and prepare for shipping to Europe.¹⁶ This was a difficult process under the best conditions. In the late 1600s, things got worse. Land was harder for freed servants to get, taxes went up, and tobacco prices fell. Small farmers simply could not keep pace with the wealthy plantation owners who controlled the best fields and the colonial legislature. Angry over their circumstances and the government's failure to support them

¹³ James E. McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America*. Arts and Traditions of the Table (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 4.

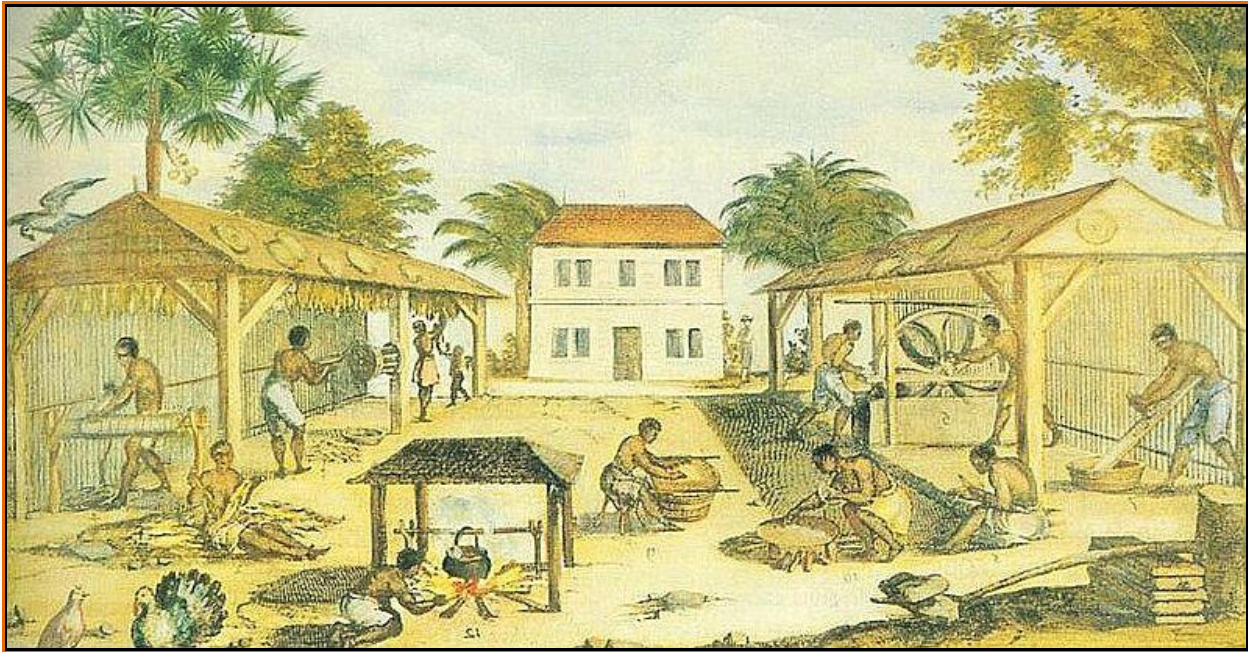
¹⁴ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 130-31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134, 142-43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

against local Indians, many servants and small farmers launched a rebellion in 1676. This uprising threatened to throw Virginia's class system into chaos.¹⁷

Tensions shortly fizzled out. However, the wealthy planters learned their lesson. Faced with class tensions, a decline in the number of white servants, and lower slave prices, the wealthy turned to African slavery to solve the problem. In 1650, three hundred African slaves lived in the Chesapeake. By 1750, that number rose to one hundred and fifty thousand.¹⁸



The above image shows slaves preparing tobacco for shipment on a Virginia plantation, from a 1670 engraving. Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/20/Tobacco.JPG>.

Coupled with that increase was a change in racial attitudes. No matter how poor a white man was, he was always superior to a slave in the Chesapeake. This blatant racism served to pacify the old class divisions by uniting the lower and upper class southern planters within a color-coded racial hierarchy.

To manage this new labor force, white planters instituted the Caribbean **gang system**. Planters broke slaves up into gangs based on their age, sex, and personal skill. The gangs then tended tobacco or corn from dawn until dusk with only a half day off on Sunday.¹⁹ Despite these harsh conditions, enslaved Africans gradually adapted to their environment as best they could. They learned English, hunted woodland animals for protein, and made time to plant small gardens with American and West African staples like peanuts, yams, and pumpkins.²⁰ The

¹⁷ Ibid., 146-50.

¹⁸ Ibid., 153-54.

¹⁹ Hoffer, *Brave New World*, 99, 165; McWilliams, *Revolution in Eating*, 113.

²⁰ Hoffer, *Brave New World*, 165 ; McWilliams, *Revolution in Eating*, 116-17.

slave's life was certainly not easy. However, they found ways to add their personality into a world of perpetual regimentation.

Subsistence Plus Agriculture: Puritan New England

Unlike the Chesapeake, New Englanders did not rely on a staple crop. They also veered away from the more individualistic plantation system and slavery in favor of **family-based labor**. Many New England Settlers were **Puritans**. They wanted to purify the Church of England by doing away with its Catholic elements and embracing **John Calvin's** doctrine of Christian rebirth and **predestination**. Not being able to accomplish this in England, hundreds of largely middle-class Puritans immigrated to Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut in the 1620s to 1660s. Their goal was to create a religious society in America rooted in staunch faithfulness and Christian community.²¹

In their agriculture, the Puritans created the most self-sufficient population of any region in early North America. Puritans sowed their fields with traditional English grains, like rye and oats, alongside newly integrated American corn. Adjacent to their homes, Puritans maintained highly diverse kitchen gardens. These domestic workhorses produced radishes, peas, asparagus, turnips, blackberries, strawberries, plum and apple trees, carrots, an assortment of herbs, and many other potential edibles.²²

The Puritans supplemented their grain and produce through raising livestock and producing dairy products. Even the poor in New England owned at least one milking cow and one dry beef cow. Most owned more. Livestock was a basic component of their lives in England that the Puritans transplanted to America. These animals provided much desired milk, butter, cheese, and meat for their tables. To that end, New Englanders constructed barns and cow houses for their animals and designated individuals to look after the town's beef herd.²³

The Puritans' meticulous agrarian methods paid off in other ways as well. With more than enough cattle to meet their domestic needs, New Englanders sold the surplus to the meat-hungry sugar islands. It was not uncommon to see herds of cattle moving through the New England countryside on their way to the slaughterhouses at Salem and Boston.²⁴ Puritans also sold their surpluses of everything from corn to timber to the British imperial market. This allowed them to buy things not made locally like sugar, tobacco, and manufactured goods from England. Unlike the Chesapeake, New England did not rely on a staple crop and the large investment in labor associated with them. This left Puritan merchants to drive hard bargains on a wide array of locally produced items.²⁵ Southern planters could only deal so much with the price of tobacco.

²¹ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 160-66, 171; McWilliams, *Revolution in Eating*, 56.

²² McWilliams, *Revolution in Eating*, 63, 66, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73-79.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁵ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 175-76.

Taken as a whole, New Englanders created a **biodiverse subsistence economy** that exceeded their needs and allowed them to set the terms of their international participation.

Mixing the Two: The Mid-Atlantic Colonies

In 1664, King Charles II of England decided he was tired of having a Dutch colony sandwiched between the Chesapeake and New England. As a result, the English captured New Amsterdam and assumed control of New Netherland. As a gesture of good will, Charles granted the colony's governance to his younger brother, the Duke of York. Thus, the Dutch experience in North America came to an abrupt end.²⁶

However, the region remained distinct from those around it. The Mid-Atlantic colonies of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania housed a collection of different nationalities and religions. Englishmen, Swedes, Dutch, Germans, Finns, and other Europeans all called this region home. **The Quakers** were the most noticeable religious group. Protestants who gave up formal ceremonies and ministers, Quakers insisted every person was equal and that God's salvation could find anyone who truly believed. They also observed pacifism. **William Penn** (1644-1718), a major figure in the Quaker community, was chiefly responsible for the creation of the Pennsylvania colony in 1682. By law, Pennsylvania opened its doors freely to people of all nationalities and religious denominations. It was a different kind of place amongst its economically and religiously opinionated neighbors.²⁷

Geography and climate blessed all the peoples of the middle colonies. With long growing seasons, good soil, and a climate ripe for wheat and cattle, the middle colonies became a thriving economic hub that mixed the southern and northern business models that surrounded them. The region revolved around family farms and family labor with an assortment of slaves and servants included in the mix. Unlike New England, these farms spread out along the landscape more like plantations than the close-knit, Puritan townships. Wheat production dominated as the region's staple crop. By 1760, mid-Atlantic farmers built an industry that supplied the majority of grain to the Sugar Islands, southern Europe, Britain, and Ireland. However, wheat's low labor demands allowed Pennsylvania farmers to grow produce for home consumption as well. The region was truly an amalgamation of both people and of regional economic ideals.²⁸

Conclusion

Early America was an incredibly diverse and economically interdependent region. From 1500 to 1750, the natural and human landscape changed rapidly due to the patterns of life established by its numerous inhabitants. It was not an easy place to survive and prosper in. Slavery,

²⁶ Ibid, 259-260.

²⁷ Ibid, 264-267, 271.

²⁸ Taylor, *American Colonies*, 267, 269; McWilliams, *Revolution in Eating*, 187-90.

environmental ruin, and rampant death were just a few of the evils tied up in North America's colonial legacy. However, many of those who worked its fields and forest made a living out of its vast and foreboding expanse. Some, such as John Jacob Astor, made millions and realized what would later become known as the "American Dream" of wealth and success. Theirs is the true history of early North America.

For Further Reading

Carlos, Ann, and Lewis, Frank, "The Economic History of the Fur Trade, 1670-1870," located at <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/carlos.lewis.furtrade>. Within the EH.net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples.

Hoffer, Peter Charles. *The Brave New World : A History of Early America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000.

Kupperman, Karren Ordahl. "International at the Creation: early Modern American History," In *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*. edited by Thomas Bender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Mann, Charles C. "America found and Lost." *National Geographic*. May, 2007.

Richards, John F. *The Unending Frontier : An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*, The California World History Library. Vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Alan Taylor, *American Colonies. The Penguin History of the United States*, edited by Eric Foner. New York: Viking, 2001.

William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003.

Online Resources

<http://www.canadiana.ca/hbc/>. "Exploration, the Fur Trade, and the Hudsons Bay Company," created by the Canadian Institute for Microhistorical Reproduction. Contains some excellent images of fur objects and commodities. Aimed at K-10 students.

<http://www.lostindustry.org.uk/EdPack/hattersdocument13.htm>. "The Hatters, Christies of Bermondsey Street" Document 13 of the Lost Industries of Southward Educational Series.

<http://www.vahistorical.org/storyofvirginia.htm>. "The Story of Virginia: An American Experience," produced by the Virginia Historical Society, and sponsored by Altria Corporation.

© 2011, 2012 The Department of History & Philosophy, North Georgia College & State University. No use without prior permission.

<http://www.statemuseumpa.org/Potamkin/index.htm>. “An Image of Peace: The William Penn Treaty,” produced by the State Museum of Pennsylvania.