Colonial Trade

Mercantilism
Most European countries in the 17th century adopted the economic policy of mercantilism, which stated that colonies existed for the sole purpose of enriching the mother country. Mercantilists believed that a nation’s strength depended upon its wealth, and wealth depended upon having colonies. These colonies would not only provide an endless supply of raw materials for the “mother country”, but colonies would also serve as a built-in market for products that were created in England. Mercantilist laws, such as the Navigation Acts, were passed to ensure that colonies only traded directly with England, and any non-English goods shipped to the colonies had to pass through England first to be taxed. In addition, any colonial exports must first go to an English port to be taxed before it could go to a foreign port. Mercantilism attempted to keep the American colonies in an economically subordinate position; for example, the Woolen, Hat, and Iron Acts all restricted the manufacture of these products in the colonies so they would not compete with the English manufacturers. Migration restrictions also prevented the emigration of skilled artisans to the colonies as England wanted to prevent the growth of colonial industry. Many of the mercantilist laws were ignored as the colonists freely engaged in smuggling and bribing customs collectors to look the other way. Thus, the precedent of free trade was firmly established in the colonies by the time England decided to start enforcing her mercantilist laws.

Molasses
In the 17th and 18th centuries, the inhabitants of the 13 English colonies along the Atlantic seaboard imported molasses from the islands of the West Indies. The largest importers were the New England colonies, where molasses was used in the highly profitable business of manufacturing rum. Some of the West Indies, such as Barbados and Jamaica, belonged to England; others, such as Santo Domingo and Martinique, to Spain or France. The colonists bought their molasses from either the British or foreign sugar planters. Because of French policy French molasses was incredibly cheap and the British suppliers could not compete. In order to obtain a monopoly of the molasses trade, the British sugar planters of Barbados and Jamaica induced Parliament to tax heavily any molasses imported into the North American colonies from colonies belonging to a foreign power. In 1733 Parliament passed the Molasses Act, part of which imposed a duty of sixpence per gallon on foreign molasses. The act was designed to force the northern colonies either to buy from British planters or give up the manufacture of rum. The colonists protested unsuccessfully against the act and then ignored it. The Sugar Act of 1764 was a revision of the unenforced Molasses Act of 1733, it imposed new duties on sugar and molasses imported into the colonies from non-British Caribbean sources and provided for the seizure of cargoes violating the new rules. The act was the first attempt to recoup from the colonies the expenses of the French and Indian War and the cost of maintaining British troops in North America.

- Molasses was the primary sweetener until the 1880’s when there was shift to white sugar.
- Molasses was so important that the founder of the colony of Georgia, James Ogelthorpe, promised each person who endured a year in Georgia 64 quarts of molasses as a reward!
- Molasses Act of 1733 imposed heavy tax on molasses imported from anywhere except the British sugar islands in the Caribbean. There was such widespread evasion of this tariff that it was lowered in 1764. Just prior to the Revolutionary War, it is estimated that colonists consumed an average of four gallons of rum per year.
- In January of 1919, a huge vat of molasses at the Purity Distilling Company in Boston exploded. What came to be known as the “Great Molasses Flood: killed 21 people and spilled two million gallons of molasses into the streets!
• Rum is born of fermented and distilled sugar cane juice or molasses, a by-product of sugar manufacturing. Most rum originates from molasses. Both juice and molasses are diluted by the addition of water and fermented with yeast and then distilled in copper pot stills.

• By the 1650’s, the British Royal Navy issued daily rations of rum, replacing beer. This tradition continued until July 30, 1970.

• Sugarcane thrives in hot, humid climates and was brought in 1493 from the Canary Islands by Christopher Columbus to the Caribbean during his second voyage to the New World.

• In the French West Indies colonies, occupied since 1635, the first piece of writing speaking about an alcohol associated to sugar manufacture is the one of Father Du Tertre (1667) who fabricates a distilling apparatus for processing the scum and rough syrup (molasses).

• In 1672, the beverage acquired the name rum. The name is believed to have originated from the term rumballion, which in the English rural slang of the time meant clamour or noise. Another name for the drink was Kill Devil, which might refer either to the harsh hangover resulting from drinking or the fact that the beverage was believed to have various generally healing effects. There have also been several other names used for rum.

• The settlers of the Caribbean Islands drank rum to heal various conditions and diseases common in tropical environment, whereas the sugar plantation owners sold rum on discount prices to navy ships in order to get them to spend time near the islands give protection from pirates. In the 1730s, the British navy started the custom of each sailor receiving daily half a pint of 80% rum. Due to various intoxication related problems, the beverage was later diluted with the same amount of water, after which it was called grog. This tradition remained in the British navy until 1969. The main reason for the sailors’ fascination of rum was the fact that it could endure long voyages better than water or beer. It was also noticed in those same journeys that the taste of rum became better as it aged.

• English ships shipped rum from America to Britain, where it also became famous. In the 18th century, rum superseded gin as the most famous hard liquor in the Great Britain. In the same century, due to a new decree by the British parliament prohibiting settlements from dealing alcoholic beverages with each other, ships started to transport raw molasses to the North American settlements where breweries produced rum from it. The new law was evaded frequently and smuggling was common.

• Shipping molasses to the settlements became a part of the famous slavery triangle. In the first part of the triangle, molasses was shipped to New England where rum was produced from it. The rum was then shipped to Western Africa where it was changed to slaves. In the last part, slaves were then brought to work in the sugar plantations of the Caribbean Islands and America.

• Later, the demand for the sugar of sugar canes decreased in Europe, as a way of processing sugar from sugar beet was invented. This also caused a decrease in the rum production as the sugar cane plantations reduced their production or quit altogether and, therefore, there was less molasses available. The area of rum distribution was for a while restricted to the islands and other individual regions where it was produced.

• In 1694, Father Labat invents the alembic (the still). A great number of sugar factories then extend the plant to include a rum distillery.
Triangle Trade
The triangular trade route which most significantly involved the American colonies originated in New England. Ships sailed to the west coast of Africa with a cargo of rum and exchanged it for slaves. The horrendous “Middle Passage” carried the slaves to the Caribbean where they were sold in exchange for sugar cane or molasses. This cargo was then carried north back to New England to be manufactured into rum. Although the local ports-of-call often varied, a ship’s revolving cargo of slaves, rum, sugar, molasses, fish, tobacco, and other crops were consistent and played vital roles in the trade.

Cod
The importance of cod in the economic success of pre-revolutionary New England cannot be overstated, as demonstrated by the name “Cape Cod” given to the peninsula of Massachusetts. John Cabot, an English explorer, discovered codfish around Newfoundland in the North Atlantic at the turn of the 14th century. Hundreds of European ships fished those waters in the summers and the French, Spanish, and Portuguese fishermen pickled their catch on board while the English established “stages” on shore to salt and air-dry their fish before returning home. The first European outposts in English America were these cod fishing camps. The cod, an ideal source of protein as it can be dried and preserved with salt, became the principal commodity of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and as one historian calls it, “the fish that built Boston.” In addition, cod served as an integral part of the triangle trade as it was traded to the Caribbean and used as a cheap source of food for slaves, and in return molasses was shipped back to New England. By the first decade of the 18th century, more than 300 ships left Boston in a good year for the West Indies.

By 1560 nearly 60% of the fish eaten in Europe was cod caught off New England and Newfoundland. Faster ships, dubbed “Gloucester Schooners” were first built and launched from Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1713. During the Revolutionary War, fishers took to war in their ships to feed their families.

The finest cod was traded in Spain for wine, fruit, and other southern European goods. Cod linked Massachusetts to Africa and then to the West Indies. Massachusetts imported Caribbean sugar, molasses, salt, tobacco, spices, cotton and indigo. Boston rum and salt cod were shipped to Africa in trade for slaves. Slaves were transported to West Indian plantations where their diet centered on New England salt cod. Britain's attempt to tax this molasses trade was one of the incentives leading to the American Revolution.

Atlantic cod can range from brown to grayish-green with small, dark spots and reach 200 centimeters in length. A female cod 102 centimeters (40 inches) long may live 30 years and can release 3 million eggs each spawning. Newly hatched cod feed on phytoplankton, later on zooplankton, later on krill. The salting of fish, mostly sardines and anchovies, was also a major preoccupation along the Croatian coast of the Adriatic. On the west coast of Istria at Isola (Izola), Capo d'Istria (Koper), Pirano (Piran), Rovigno (Rovinj), and on the islands of Lésina (Hvar), Lissa (Vis), and Lagosta (Lastovo), there was an extensive industry of curing of sardines and anchovies, along with, to a lesser degree, mackerel, horse mackerel, and garfish. The fisherman also served as curer and packer. First, he landed the fish, and washed them in sea water. Afterwards the fish were packed in small pine boxes, with salt being spread between each layer. A weight went on top to press out brine and close up air gaps. This process was repeated until the fish, about fifteen hundred in all, were very compressed.

When a string of bad harvests hit the Mediterranean food supply, coupled with the historically small catch of fish, everyone waited for the arrival of northern grain ships, and increasingly the ships brought salted fish. The discovery of the superabundant Grand Banks off the coast of
Newfoundland by fishermen from northern countries, coupled with the poverty of Mediterranean fish stocks, led to a large trade in cod (the most frequently caught fish in the North Atlantic) with the Mediterranean. The large-scale fishing of the Newfoundland banks began as early as the late fifteenth century, although Basque and Irish fishermen were there earlier. In 1598, English ships were docking in Leghorn with 5,613 casks of smoked herring, 268,645 pesci merluzzi (cod) and 513 fardi (bundles) of pesci stokfiss (air-dried cod called stockfish). Salt cod is such a well-known product in Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, and France that it is hard to remember that virtually all the cod was imported from the North Atlantic.

There are a variety of reasons for this importation. First, of course, is the lack of abundance in the Mediterranean. Although we know that salted fish was exported from Sicily to Palestine in the 1270s the fish in question was probably herring or tuna and it did not amount to a large trade. Second, the importation of cod increased not only because of Mediterranean demand but also because of favorable trade situations created by the Norwegian famine of 1315-17. King Haakon of Norway issued an edict on July 30, 1316, permitting the export of stockfish and butter only to those who could import malt, flour, salt, and similar commodities in its place. This northern cod reached Sicily through the port of Trapani. This was necessary because the salt pans of Trapani supplied the northern fishermen with the salt they needed to haul back to the North Atlantic to salt the cod.

Basque, Irish, English, and other northern fishermen had been fishing the waters off Newfoundland from a very early date, but it wasn't until the arrival of countries with the strong navies that cod fishing became big business. Once the navies of England, Holland, and France entered the fray, the small-time fishermen were pushed out.

The problem faced by open-ocean fishermen of the Middle Ages, after the weather and their fear, was how to preserve the fish in order to get them to market. The solution was to immediately gut the fish on board and pack them in barrels of brine or salt. Alternatively the fish were dried on land and shipped in that state. The fishing off Newfoundland was especially abundant because of a broad continental shelf and an influx of nutrient-rich water at the sides of the shelf, where spawning takes place. There were light ships, with only twelve fishermen and some more sailors gutting below deck, filling the hold all the way to the bridge with cod. There were also large ships that would salt their cod while still wet, and these were called "green cod." By 1500 thousands of fishermen and seamen were sailing to the Newfoundland banks in a variety of ships and bringing their salt cod either to Brittany, England, Norway, or Holland for shipment or directly to the Mediterranean. Marseille was a major entrepôt for northern salt cod and took half of the French catch of dried cod and often re-exported it to other parts of the Mediterranean such as Spain and Greece. Genoa also received a good portion of salt cod.