

CODFISH. ITS PLACE IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

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The chief bearing on the escutcheon of Massachusetts might well be a codfish. It is more than a century since the legislature voted that the effigy of a cod-fish "should be hung up in the room where the representatives sit, as a memorial of the importance of the cod-fishery to the commonwealth." But even earlier than that date, which was March 17, 1784, the cod-fish had been honored in the Massachusetts legislative hall, for the vote was that it should be suspended there "as had been usual formerly." The truth is such a fish had hung in the Old State House which was burned in 1749. This time-honored monitor hovering over the heads of legislators became the more observed of all observers after a witty retort by the ultramontane Brownson to the Congregational champion Prof. Park who had charged Catholics with worshipping images.

"Indeed we do," answered Brownson, "but what images? We worship images of the saints while you worship the image of a cod-fish, and that in the midst of your grand temple." During the recent rebuilding of the Boston State House the ancient fish appeared to the building commission out of keeping with the modern improvements, and so it was relegated to a corner of the garret. This vandalism, however, roused such indignant protests that the venerable emblem,—reproduced in a more artistic style,—was reinstated in its place of honor which it now holds more firmly than ever.

There is no danger of over-rating the influence of cod-fish on the course of American history.

It is held by not a few French writers that Breton fishermen chasing whales, unawares pushed on so far west that they

reached the banks of Newfoundland even before the voyages of Columbus and Cabot. It is certain that within a few years after those voyages the Bretons began there a lucrative cod-fishery which they have carried on to this day. When France was expelled every where from the American main she clung tenaciously to three fishing islands,—St. Pierre, and the two Miquelons — as invaluable for her cod-fishery. She retains them now a century after losing almost all her West Indian territory.

It is argued with much show of reason that but for cod-fish the Puritans would never have set their faces toward New England. We talk of Plymouth rock as its chief corner stone, but in the lowest deep behold a lower deep. Bartholomew Gosnold who in 1602 discovered Cape Cod, so named it from the fish that abounded there, and he thus furnished a descriptive name for the chart of Capt. John Smith. Smith's map was in the hands of the Pilgrims in their temporary Holland sojourn. They tell us that after hesitations whither to emigrate they resolved to go where fishing was best. The name James had on that map supplanted the *cod* of Gosnold but it was known to be given for currying royal favor, and reminded men all the more of the 60,000 cod which Smith had taken there. From the first it was foreseen that the cape could never lose the name Gosnold had given "till shoals of cod were seen swimming upon the top of its highest hills." There was talk of Guiana and Manhattan but, as Governor Bradford chronicles, "the major part inclined to go to Plymouth, chiefly for the hope of present profit to be made by the fish that was found in that country." They had heard that fishers from the west of England had made money on the Banks, and they trusted by planting themselves on a nearer base to make more. When their agents at the court of King James were asked by him what gainful business they could follow on the land-grant they sought for, their answer was the single word,—fishing! The soil at Plymouth yielded no crops till it had been fertilized by a fish thrown on every hill of corn.

Had the first-comers been provided with hooks or nets for catching cod, their first winter would have been exempt from famine. DeRasières,—the first visitor from Dutch Manhattan, wrote within seven years of the original landing: "The bay is

full of fish-of-cod. When the people have a desire for fish they send out two or three persons in a sloop who in three or four hours bring them as much as the whole community of about fifty families require for a whole day." Had Plymouth been nearer the grand hive of cod it would to-day probably outrank Gloucester as much as Gloucester outranks it. Within five years after the forefathers landed, Gov. Bradford describes a great ship as clearing from there laden with fish well-fitted to go to Bilboa or St. Sebastian with a cargo that would sell there for £1800.

The larger Puritan colony at Boston a decade later than the planting of Plymouth, was attracted thither by fishing prospects. When an early preacher to settlers in that quarter was expatiating on their having adventured into the wilderness for freedom of worship, Cotton Mather writes that one auditor bluntly ejaculated; "Sir you are mistaken, our main end in coming here was to catch fish." The Puritans knew that in 1563 for the increase of fishing parliament had declared it unlawful to eat meat on Wednesdays and Saturdays under a penalty of £3 for each offense. They needed no such law to convince them that codfish were a richer mine than any one held by the King of Spain on whose dominions the sun never set.

All along the Massachusetts seaboard fishing became the leading industry and main reliance almost from the start. The armorial bearing of the state was early understood by Indians to be the cod-fish. That totem, as the aborigines would term it, was carried by her envoys to the New York Iroquois, a distant tribe, in 1690. Puritan punsters proclaimed a fish the best emblem of justice because both bore *Scales*. The Indian name for a Puritan was *Kinshon*, that is fish.

At every step in the history of New England the value of fisheries was clear. That colony was planted and largely developed by the aid of capital furnished from the mother country. The exports from the new country to the old — furs, lumber, fish and everything else were required for paying old debts or for the purchase of new supplies. No import of money from England could be hoped for. Nor could the emigrants keep the little they had brought over. Within ten years after his arri-

val Gov. Winthrop writes sadly, "Our money was now [in 1640] gone." (Journal II., 24.)

In this emergency attempts were soon made to keep money in the country by a law which forbade carrying it out on pain of forfeiture, and by a fiat money act for coining ninepences and ordaining that they should pass current as shillings. Hence originated the Pine Tree shillings of the Old Bay State now prized so highly by numismatists. The Puritans would not read Shakespeare, but, like his Jack Cade, they decreed that "seven half penny loaves should be sold for a penny."

Fortunately necessity soon invented a more excellent way for making money plenty in every man's pocket.

A new and better fish market than that in the mother country was discovered and utilized to the utmost. The navigation act commanded that all exports be first carried to England, but when the market there proved poor, exporters pushed on to Spain, Portugal and Italy where it was of necessity good. In those rigidly Catholic countries fish was indispensable,—thanks to fasts which had been abolished in England. The demand was great and increasing. Prices were high, and payments made, when desired, in the one thing most lacking and so most desiderated in the homes of the Puritans,—which was money,—gold and silver. Possibly the term cod-fish aristocracy was an Americanism coined to define the earliest variety of blue blood which cropped out in Boston. Cod had yielded them "the potentiality of growing rich beyond the dreams of avarice" which Dr. Johnson espied in Thrale's London brewery.

But the navigation act—based on the assumption that colonies had no rights which a mother-country was bound to respect—laid on the necks of American colonists a yoke too heavy to be borne. From the outset it was evaded without any conscientious scruples—especially in regard to the trade in fish to the West Indies. It was soon so far relaxed as to authorize sending fish to all ports south of cape Finisterre—the most northern point in Spain. The fish trade,—mainly in cod, expanded and was differentiated. The refuse culls, known as poor Jack became in the sugar islands the only luxury of Sambo, the medium grades contented his creole master, while the se-

lectest variety — the dun-fish, enabled European grandees of the straitest sect in both church and state — to keep the most rigorous fasts without much mortification of the flesh.*

It is safe to say that none of these varieties of cod tasted so sweet to hunger-bidden fasters as the profits from them tasted to the Yankees when they had secured free course through southern markets. Their ciphering was of this sort: A vessel of 100 tons with twenty men fishing on the banks and voyaging to Portugal, Spain or Italy — perhaps selling half her cargo in the West Indies — will expend one thousand pounds. At the year's end her receipts may be expected to show a gain of 200 per cent.

It is no wonder that as early as 1709 the fishing navy was registered as already amounting to 30,000 tons, and that in 1741 the export trade equaled that of England itself and had risen to £100,000.

The cod-fishing was the cradle of an irrepressible conflict between the French and English colonists. In that industry they met each other first and oftenest, as well as in a life and death struggle. In all the history of our colonies we read of no such prodigal outlays and that in such arduous enterprises as those for dispossessing French fishermen. The conquest of Canada — or New France — began on its sea coast in 1713, when Acadia, where the Bretons had built their huts sixteen years before the *May Flower* sailed, was surrendered. It came to a final end there with the fall of Louisburg, the last maritime French stronghold in 1745, a decade before the seven years struggle for Quebec began. Judging by the order in which the Canadian provinces were conquered, fisheries were "the immediate jewel of the Yankee's soul." It was desirable in his view to repel the Indians from the inland frontiers where they were perpetually kidnapping and scalping, but the first and supreme duty was to extirpate the French who crippled the taking and the curing of cod.

Fisheries, in which cod has been easily the supreme element, have always been the chief nursery of the American marine strength, alike in war and in peace.

* Hildreth, I., 473-476.

"If we had a war to-morrow," Admiral Porter wrote in 1888,—"we must depend almost altogether on the fishermen of New England to man our vessels." Without these auxiliaries it would seem that our revolutionary war might have been a failure. The captures they made in the first year of it—1776 ran up to 342 vessels. They were the privateers who intercepted the transport ships bound for the British in Boston and took from them those munitions of war which turned against them their own arms, and crowned Washington's siege with success. But for Glover's brigade of Massachusetts fishermen military critics maintain that Washington and his army must have surrendered to the British in Brooklyn. But for the skill of the same naval experts the crossing of the Delaware—absolutely necessary for the surprise of Trenton—could not have been accomplished,—and probably would not have been undertaken. No statue in Boston was better deserved than Glover's on Commonwealth avenue.

That the fisheries were a chief corner stone of national prosperity was clearly seen by all the north during the war of independence. When congress began to consider on what terms they would make peace with England all members agreed that they would consent to nothing short of independence and territorial areas extending to the Mississippi, and the great lakes. New England and New York went further. They demanded all the ante-bellum fishing facilities which their people had enjoyed. Their cry was, no peace without former fisheries. It was concerning this matter that the first important disagreement arose between the north and the south. The north would fight for fish abroad even as for firesides at home. But the states south of New York, having no share in the fisheries, were urged by our French allies not to insist on them as a *sine qua non* of peace. France was a jealous competitor for the lion's share of fishing rights. Secret debates were long and heated. The result was that the American negotiators went to Paris without instructions to yield nothing of the ancient fishing privileges.

When the international commissioners came together Franklin at first demanded all Canada in the fullest meaning of the name. He had hopes of securing this concession which

would have ended the fishery dispute at once. He was, however, constrained to be content with very nearly our present limits. He then declared one essential of peace to be freedom of fishing on the Banks of Newfoundland as well as elsewhere. This claim was readily agreed to by Oswald, the British commissioner, who wrote home in secret dispatches; "I own I wondered that he should think it necessary to ask for this privilege, and I doubted whether the exclusion of the New Englanders could be maintained without continuing in a state of continual quarrel with them. I suspected that drying fish was included in Franklin's demand though it was not mentioned." After much debate drying was allowed on all unsettled parts of Nova Scotia as well as on most coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland. These and other piscatory claims were most pressed by John Adams, the New England envoy, who was indignant that he was not permitted to proclaim that there could be no peace with the refusal of any iota of fishing freedom. Nothing in his career pleased him so much as what he thus achieved. He had a seal struck with the figure of a fish upon it and the legend *Piscemur ut olim*,* to be handed down in his family from generation to generation.

After the peace which closed the war of 1812 it was held by Great Britain that all fishing concessions had been annulled by that war. This contention was resisted by the United States. "Fishing privileges," said the younger Adams, "are not a British grant as Englishmen assert, they are a British acknowledgment." He spurned the word "concession."

At the international convention of 1818 the ancient fishing facilities were, in the judgment of Adams, substantially regained. But more than one subsequent treaty has been called for.

Webster was charged—his friends say falsely,—with willingness to cede Oregon to Great Britain in exchange for coveted fishing concessions. No one who knew that Webster was nothing if not a fisherman could be persuaded that he would relinquish any particle of fishery rights. No man who had handled cod lines and nets failed of faith in him when he said, "I am

* Hor. Ep. I. 6, 57.

yours, hook and line, bob and sinker, now and forever." A fishing treaty negotiated in London by Cleveland's minister, Phelps, was refused ratification by a republican senate. A reason given in confidence was that so good a treaty would add to the political capital of democrats. In public, however, the treaty was stigmatized as an unconditional surrender.

At no point is there a more galling friction in the relations between the English mother and her prodigal sons beyond the Atlantic. New treaties will be concluded, but no settlement beyond a *modus vivendi* seems probable until the granting of all that Franklin asked for—namely, the annexation of the Canadian dominion to the older brother shall in "the unity and married calm" of greater Britain render all treaties superfluous.

Ultimate union between us and our northern sister seems a foregone conclusion. It would be in line with our history, which records analogous unions on every other side. Witness Louisiana, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, California, Oregon, Alaska. One fifth of the population born north of us have removed within our borders, and this emigration is coming faster and faster. We have more persons by four score thousand of Canadian than of English birth. The Canadians who cling to their homesteads and we are more and more drawn together by the cohesive attraction of mutual interest reinforcing the ties of language and religion, as well as of identical aspirations and endeavors.

The quarrel about fishing rights may perhaps be settled in another way, thanks to Seward's securing Alaska. The codfish which are there numberless are in no point inferior to those which are the glory of eastern waters. The occidental banks are more enormous stretching over a larger area than the square miles of Ireland. The facilities for the capture and curing of fish are greater than on the Atlantic coast.

In 1890 the cod taken numbered half a million, and but for glutting the market the supply would have been ten times greater. This industry must advance in equal pace with the growth of the Pacific slope and the extension of trade in the East Indies. According to the United States commissioner's report the gulf of Alaska and Bering sea will whiten with multitudinous sails. In this way we shall outgrow dependence on

any possible British favors. Whatever in the matter of bait, fishing or curing we have coveted and contended for will become not worth asking for or even accepting. May our fishery fights die such a natural death. *Requiescant in pace!*

The revolution wrought by codfish in our monetary nomenclature has not been enough considered.

The measures which American colonists brought from England we still for the most part retain. Our terms for length and area, as foot, acre and all through the scale are English. So are our measures of capacity from least to greatest. Our weights too from grains to tons are English. Neither the old French arpent, nor the new French meter has been introduced. We remain English in regard to all measures except those of value. Cleaving to so many heir-looms of English weights and measures why have we discarded the English measures of value, — ignoring the pound sterling while abiding by the pound troy and the pound avoirdupois?

Thanks to codfish! is the shortest answer and it is one not far from the exact truth. No colonies known to me save our own have rejected the monetary standards of their mother countries. But for colonial fisheries I see no reason to think that we should not to this day reckon in pounds sterling as well as in pounds avoirdupois and in pounds troy. But what was the genesis of the federal currency? How could it grow up out of colonial fisheries? How did we get our dollar? our recent apple of discord? The answer is simple. The exported fish brought home to us from their chief markets the bulk of the specie in colonial circulation — namely, those dollars which naturally became the real unit of value — wherever they had become the dominant coin. Any other silver would have done so.

The coin "dollar" came into the American colonies, directly or indirectly, chiefly from Spaniards. The name dollar — unknown in Spanish even now — was derived from the German tongue — and probably came into American use from the Dutch founders of New York.

The word dollar has a curious history. Ten miles from Carlsbad, so well known to American invalids, there was a Bohemian mediaeval mine rich in silver. The place was called Joachim's

thal, or the dale of Joachim, so named in honor of an ancestor of St. Joseph. The richness of the mine led in the year 1518 to a coinage with little alloy, and which thus gained high repute and wide circulation. The name Joachim's thaler, contracted as all long words must be if much used, became *thaler*, i. e., valley-piece, and a synonym of good money. Hence its good name was stolen by many inferior coins. "There is no vice so simple but assumes some mark of virtue in its outward form."

Those pieces which were minted in Joachim's thal, which was in the German empire or *Reich*, were called Reichsthäler — that is in English, Rix-dollars, in Dutch, Rijks-daalder; and in Danish with little change from the Dutch form.

The earliest use of the word which I have observed was in 1606. Shakespeare in *Macbeth* (I. 2. 62). then spoke of slain Norsemen denied burial till their king had disbursed ten thousand dollars.

When the first dollars were stamped, Spain being a part of the German empire, it was natural that the imperial standard-piece, the Reichsthaler, or rix-dollar, should be adopted as the Spanish unit of value. It thus spread abroad wherever the money minted from American mines circulated. The name, or certainly the coin was quickly known in Egypt, for George Sandys, travelling there in 1611, says that he hired a boat for twelve dollars. (p. 117.) Sandys often uses the word dollar. He tells us (p. 205) that Dutch dollers (sic) throughout Jewry and Phenicia "were equivalent with royals of eight, elsewhere less by ten aspers." He adds (p. 86) that "Constantinople was well stored with pieces-of-eight which in no place lose (ought) of their value." He found the monastery on Mount Sinai to be receiving an annual revenue of 60,000 dollars from Christian princes, and thus able to keep open house for all comers. (p. 124.)

On the western continent the name came into use not much more slowly than the coin. In 1642 it was ordained by Massachusetts authorities "considering the often occasions we have of trading with the Hollanders of the Dutch plantation and otherwise, that the Holland ducatur (sic) shall be current at six shillings, and the rix-dollar and Ryalls-of-eight shall be five

shillings." (Mass. Col. Rec. II: 29.) The next year a similar ordinance was passed in Connecticut, that good Ryall-of-eight and Rix-dollars should pass at 5 shillings. The prefix Rix is a corruption of the German word *Reich* which means empire, and coins stamped by imperial authority bore the word *Reich*. From the tendency of words to contraction, and because the syllable Rix meant nothing to ears unused to German, it was dropped in common parlance while the word dollar survived.

The name dollar could not fail to be extended to the Spanish pound which is *peso*, or piece-of-eight, [Royals or Ryalls] and to supplant in English speech that latter circumlocution. The value of each was the same. Besides, when a single word expresses the meaning of a phrase, the shorter expression will displace the longer. Thus the French word portage ousted the English word carryingplace.

Pieces-of-eight flowed into New England from southern Europe and the West Indies, partly in return for fish and partly from the half piratical buccaneers who made booty on Spanish commerce. In early Plymouth Gov. Bradford describes one Capt. Cromwell who in 1646, having made rich prizes, scattered a great deal of silver among the pilgrims, and as was feared, a great deal more sin than silver. In 1740 Capt. Hull of Newport, made such a capture that the share of every man on his ship was proclaimed in the Boston News Letter to amount to more than a thousand pieces-of-eight. In 1687 the Yankee skipper Phips, with his divers, brought up a million and a half of such pieces from the sunken wreck of a single Spanish galleon. But these spasmodic windfalls were trifles compared with the steady streams which gushed forth from the perennial fishery fountains.

The codfish dollar thus became early the real unit of value, though the pound so continued in name till near the close of the eighteenth century. The Spanish divisions of the dollar,—as well as the dollar itself, predominated in American circulation, while English names were given to the pieces. Thus the Ryall, or royal was called a nine-pence and its half a four-pence-ha' penny. These Spanish fractions formed most of the small silver — or change — current in the United States during

the first half of the present century. This fact is shown by the rates of postage which up to 1845 were fixed in conformity to the size of those bits. We see on old letters the postage marked $6\frac{1}{4}$ cts. because the smallest Spanish silverling passed at that value. Otherwise, full postage could not be fully paid as no quarters of a cent were minted. Economical men used to pay in copper, and thus saved four per cent. on their outlays. During 23 years before 1828 not one half dime was issued from the U. S. mint, and the whole number before issued was but little over a quarter of a million, (265,543); \$13,279 in other American coins were struck off on a similarly scanty scale.

Thus we owe our currency formally adopted by congress in 1786, but used in business long before, to codfish. It brought us the coin dollar as its monetary unit, and the name dollar with all its divisions — and some that still survive, as really as though every cod had held in his mouth a silverling like the fish in which St. Peter found the stater for paying his tribute and his Master's.

The minor relations and uses of our great Yankee fish are not to be despised.

The cod is of voracious appetite — and is even less fastidious than the ostrich. It has hence been praised as the great collector of deep-sea specimens otherwise unattainable by naturalists. Many are the rare and curious shells which have been obtained from its capacious and omnivorous stomach.

The oil of cod-fish has often proved more precious than its flesh. No animal oil has been found so digestible as that expressed from the livers of cod. Nothing more enriches blood with red corpuscles or adds more to the store of fat. As a remedy for rheumatic diseases and general debility its therapeutic excellence has been long known and appreciated. Its importance, however, as a specific for pulmonary consumption it was reserved for a recent period to discover, or at least to exploit to its fullest and best applications. The medicinal virtues of cod can be here only hinted at. Were half of them declared in this paper it would be accounted a quack advertisement in disguise. Let me fall under no such suspicion.

In Puritan ages codfish yielded a dish too dainty to be sent

away altogether to papists and heathen. It formed so large an element in the Massachusetts food supply that it long ago had the sobriquet of Cape Cod pork. The Puritan would not touch it on Friday lest he should become like his customers Catholic or pagan. But on Saturday he fed upon it with a zest that was all the sharper for his Friday fast, and gathering up the fragments that nothing be lost, ate the remnant on Sunday with double appetite, since he knew he was not breaking the Sabbath by non-necessary cookery.

Surveying the past and present of codfish one easily believes that the greatest is behind. Let no man say that blessings as yet un hoped for and undreamed of are not hidden within the multitudinous depositors in our national fishing banks, blessings that shall be revealed to us or to our children till the Puritan's thanksgiving that God had vouchsafed him to *suck of the abundance of the seas* * shall have a tenfold fullness of meaning.

* Deut. 33, 19.

Madison, Wis.