

## 5: Certain Inalienable Rights

PRAY SIR, WHAT IN THE WORLD IS EQUAL TO IT? PASS BY THE OTHER PARTS, AND LOOK AT THE MANNER IN WHICH THE PEOPLE OF NEW ENGLAND HAVE OF LATE CARRIED ON THEIR FISHERIES. WHILST WE FOLLOW THEM AMONG THE TUMBLING MOUNTAINS OF ICE AND BEHOLD THEM PENETRATING INTO THE DEEPEST RECESSES OF HUDSON'S BAY AND DAVIS STRAITS, WHILST WE ARE LOOKING FOR THEM BENEATH THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, WE HEAR THAT THEY HAVE PIERCED INTO THE OPPOSITE REGION OF POLAR COLD . . . NO SEA BUT WHAT IS VEXED BY THEIR FISHERIES, NO CLIMATE THAT IS NOT WITNESS TO THEIR TOIL. NEITHER THE PERSEVERANCE OF HOLLAND, NOR THE ACTIVITY OF FRANCE NOR THE DEXTEROUS AND FIRM SAGACITY OF ENGLISH ENTERPRISE, EVER CARRIED THIS MOST PERILOUS MODE OF HEARTY INDUSTRY TO THE EXTENT TO WHICH IT HAS BEEN PUSHED BY THIS RECENT PEOPLE.

—Edmund Burke,  
British House of Commons, March 1775

**B**y the eighteenth century, cod had lifted New England from a distant colony of starving settlers to an international commercial power. Massachusetts had elevated cod from commodity to fetish. The members of the “codfish aristocracy,” those who traced their

family fortunes to the seventeenth-century cod fisheries, had openly worshiped the fish as the symbol of their wealth. A codfish appeared on official crests from the seal of the Plymouth Land Company and the 1776 New Hampshire State seal to the emblem of the eighteenth-century *Salem Gazette*—a shield held by two Indians with a codfish overhead. Many of the first American coins issued from 1776 to 1778 had codfish on them, and a 1755 two-penny tax stamp for the Massachusetts Bay Colony bore a codfish and the words *staple of Massachusetts*.

When the original codfish aristocrats expressed their wealth by building mansions, they decorated them with codfish. In 1743, shipowner Colonel Benjamin Pickman included in the Salem mansion he was building a staircase decorated with a gilded wooden cod on the side of each tread. The Boston Town Hall also had a gilded cod hanging from the ceiling, but the building burned down, cod and all, in 1747. After the American Revolution, a carved wooden cod was hung in the Old State House, the government building at the head of State Street in Boston, at the urging of John Rowe, who, like many of the Boston revolutionaries, was a merchant. When Massachusetts moved its legislature in 1798, the cod was moved with it. When the legislature moved again in 1895, the cod was ceremoniously lowered by the assistant doorkeeper and wrapped in an American flag, placed on a bier, and carried by three representatives in a procession escorted by the sergeant-at-arms. As they entered the new chamber, the members rose and gave a vigorous round of applause.

All of which proves that New Englanders are capable of great silliness.

At the time of this last transfer, three representatives commissioned to study the history of the carving presented a report in which they wrote extensively on the subject of the cod trade—about trading New England salt cod for salt, fruit, and wine in Europe and molasses, spices, and coffee in the West Indies. But the report, like many accounts of the New England commerce, contains no mention of one indispensable commodity in all this trade: human beings.

In the seventeenth century, the strategy for sugar production, a labor-intensive agro-industry, was to keep the manpower cost down through slavery. At harvest-time, a sugar plantation was a factory with slaves working sixteen hours or more a day—chopping cane by hand as close to the soil as possible, burning fields, hauling cane to a mill, crushing, boiling. To keep working under the tropical sun, the slaves needed salt and protein. But plantation owners did not want to waste any valuable sugar planting space on growing food for the hundreds of thousands of Africans who were being brought to each small Caribbean island. The Caribbean produced almost no food. At first slaves were fed salted beef from England, but New England colonies soon saw the opportunity for salt cod as cheap, salted nutrition.

For salt cod merchants, the great advantage of this new trade was that it was a low-end market. Cured cod can be a very demanding product. Badly split fish, the wrong weather conditions during drying, too much salt,

too little salt, bad handling—a long list of factors resulted in fish that was not acceptable to the discerning Mediterranean market. The West Indies presented a growing market for the rejects, for anything that was cheap. In fact, West India was the commercial name for the lowest-quality salt cod.

In trade, it is an almost infallible natural law that a hungry low-end market, an eager dumping ground for the shoddiest work, is an irresistible market force. At first it offers an opportunity to sell off the mistakes that would otherwise have represented a loss. But producers increasingly turned to this fast, cheap, profitable product because it was easy. West India cure represented a steadily increasing percentage of the output of New England, Nova Scotia, and to a lesser degree, Newfoundland. Nova Scotia in particular specialized in a small, poor-quality, salted-and-dried product for the West Indies.

The first draw of the Caribbean for New Englanders was the salt from the Tortugas. But soon ships were coming back with not only salt but indigo, cotton, tobacco, and sugar. Only twenty-five years after the Pilgrims first landed, New Englanders were doing a triangulated trade. The best fish was always sold in Spain. Bilbao, with its wine, fruit, iron, and coal, became a major trading partner with Boston. The New Englanders then sailed to the West Indies, where some Spanish goods along with the cheapest cod were sold, and sugar, molasses, tobacco, cotton, and salt were bought. The ship would return to Boston with Mediterranean and Caribbean goods. They had made money at every stop.

Very quickly the next commercially logical step was taken. In 1645, a New England ship took pipe to the Canaries, then bought African slaves in the Cape Verde Islands and sold them in Barbados, returning to Boston with wine, sugar, salt, and tobacco. Shipments of salt cod followed, and soon salt cod, slaves, and molasses became commercially linked.

In preparing a museum devoted to the seventeenth-century commercial port of Salem, National Park Service officials carefully checked shipping documents, bracing themselves for an attack, and were relieved to have been unable to uncover any record of slaving on any Salem ship. But they should not take too much comfort in this. Aside from the fact that much slave trading was done clandestinely, the search for these records misses the important point. Regardless of how many ships actually did or did not carry slaves, or how many New England merchants did or did not buy or sell Africans, the New England merchants of the cod trade were deeply involved in slavery, not only because they supplied the plantation system but also because they facilitated the trade in Africans. In West Africa, slaves could be purchased with cured cod, and to this day there is still a West African market for salt cod and stockfish.

The French politician Alexis de Tocqueville, in his reflective 1835 study, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, wrote about an inherent contradiction in the New England character. "Nowhere was this principle of liberty more totally applied than in New England," he wrote. But then he went on to describe what he termed "the

great social enigma of the United States." Freedom-loving New Englanders accepted a great deal of repression and social injustice. He described the Connecticut legal code, in which blasphemy and adultery were capital crimes, and the Boston society that crusaded against long hair. The slave trade was another example of the moral contradiction Tocqueville had observed. New England society was the great champion of individual liberty and even openly denounced slavery, all the while growing ever more affluent by providing Caribbean planters with barrels of cheap food to keep enslaved people working sixteen hours a day. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, more than 300 ships left Boston in a good year for the West Indies.

The development of a faster fishing boat, the schooner, increased production capacity of this quick cure. In 1713, the first schooner was built and launched from Eastern Point, Gloucester, by Andrew Robinson, and though there were earlier European experiments with this type of rigging, the Gloucester schooner revolutionized sailing and fishing. It was a small, sleek, two-masted vessel with fore-and-aft rigging and the ability to put a tremendous amount of canvas in topsails. The name comes from an eighteenth-century New England word, *scoon*, meaning "to skim lightly along the water." In full sail with a good breeze and a flat sea, heeling at a slight angle, the vessels did seem to scoon, and this remains one of the most elegant sights in the history of sailing. But often they were out on the Banks climbing up and tobogganing down swells as high as their masts. By re-

ducing sailing time between Georges Bank and the coastline drying flakes, they increased production of West India cure.

Some of New England's best customers were the French colonies of St. Domingue (Haiti), Martinique, and Guadeloupe and the Dutch colony of Suriname (Dutch Guiana). These colonies were huge plantation economies, and the French ones were extremely profitable. After 1680, the French brought an average of 1,000 Africans to Martinique every year. Eighteenth-century St. Domingue averaged 8,000 a year. While many of the slaves were replacing others who had been worked to death, an African slave population nourished on cheap salt cod was rapidly growing.

The French fisheries were not able to satisfy this demand. The one requirement of the Caribbean market was that the saltfish be dried hard so that it could survive a tropical climate. The French lacked shore space for drying. During the eighteenth century, the limited French space in Newfoundland was whittled down to almost none. The British made their base on the eastern coast, the headlands, close to the Banks. The French fished from the south coast, Placentia Bay, where there were good ice-free harbors, the herring ran, providing bait, and New France's Gaspé Peninsula was nearby. Then, in 1713, after a fight with the British, the French agreed to leave this area and settle for access to the north coast of Newfoundland, which has been known ever since as the French shore. The area was not adjacent to other French territories, nor is it close to good fishing grounds, so it

did not offer convenient drying space. After the next war, the French position became even worse.

The Seven Years War, known in the United States as the French and Indian War, was the first global conflict. In the late 1750s, France and Britain fought each other, not only in Europe but in India, the Caribbean, and North America. On September 13, 1759, New France was lost in twenty minutes when British general James Wolfe scaled the cliffs leading to the fortress at Quebec City and surprised the French garrison under General Louis de Montcalm. Montcalm, who had known previous victories against the British, made the error of leaving the fortress and meeting the surprise attack on the flat field behind the battlements. Within minutes, both generals lay dying and Quebec had fallen.

Instead of settling for battlefield victories, the British deliberated for three years over what to take from France. Some wanted to let the French keep their cod colony in North America and instead take a sugar colony as the price for peace. Guadeloupe produced more sugar than all the British West Indies combined. But the issue was never whether sugar or cod and furs was the more valuable. It was a debate about how to best hold on to North America. Given the attitudes, the economic independence, and the growing population of New England and the other lower North American colonies, Britain feared losing North America. Some argued that the French presence, an enemy at their backs, would keep the North Americans loyal to the British. But in the end, the British thought that they had better secure as much of North

America as they could. In 1763, they decided to deny France all of its North American possessions except two tiny islands off the south coast of Newfoundland, St. Pierre and Miquelon.

Ironically, when France retained Guadeloupe but lost Canada—held its slave colonies but lost its fisheries—the demand thus created for West India cure in the French Caribbean led New Englanders on a direct collision course with the British Crown. The conflict went back to the Acts of Trade and Navigation, one of the foundations of the British Empire, according to which colonists were to sell their goods to England and buy their goods from England. Legally, New Englanders should not have traded directly with Spain and the Caribbean but were supposed to have sold their cod to England and then to have purchased Spanish wine and iron from England.

The British had good reasons to worry about North America. In 1677, ninety-eight years before the cause of American independence became a shooting war, the British Crown received a polite note from New Englanders accompanied by ten barrels of cranberries, two of corn mush, and 1,000 codfish. Perhaps not as bitter as ten barrels of cranberries, the enclosed note stated, “We humbly conceive that the laws of England are bounded within four seas, and do not reach America. The subjects of his majesty here being not represented in Parliament, so we have not looked at ourselves to be impeded in trade by them.”

What Charles did with 1,000 codfish and all those cranberries is not known, but he did absolutely nothing

about the Trade and Navigation Acts. Instead, the law was bent by the force of the marketplace. New England produced too much cod for the British market. It could not all be sold in Britain, and the British merchant fleet did not have the capacity to reexport that much cod. In spite of the Trade and Navigation Acts, the British had to allow the New Englanders to trade it.

Freed from restraint, as Adam Smith pointed out, the trade grew. By 1700, the British West Indies could not absorb all of New England’s cod. Nor could it fully supply New England’s rum industry, which was a by-product of the cod trade. Typical of the difference between New England and Newfoundland, Newfoundland imported Jamaican rum for local bottling, and still does, whereas New England imported molasses and built its own rum industry to sell in foreign markets. There were now three ways to buy slaves in West Africa: cash, salt cod, or Boston rum.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island rum producers were getting directly involved in the slave trade. Felton & Company, a Boston rum maker founded in the early nineteenth century, described the trade with remarkable candor in its 1936 drink guide. “Ship owners developed a cycle of trade involving cargoes of slaves to the West Indies—a cargo of Blackstrap Molasses from those islands to Boston and other New England ports—and finally the shipment of rum to Africa.”

Soon the British Empire was not only too small a market for New England’s cod catch but too small a molasses producer for New England’s distilleries. Total Brit-

ish West Indies molasses production was less than two-thirds of what Rhode Island alone imported. The French colonies needed New England cod, and New England needed French molasses.

Then the British Crown, after letting New Englanders taste free trade for more than a century, decided in 1733 to regulate molasses as a key step toward reasserting its control over commerce. Instead the measure turned out to be one of the first inadvertent steps toward dismantling the British Empire.



## WEST INDIA IN THE WEST INDIES

TIME SO HARD YOU CANNOT DENY  
THAT EVEN SALT FISH AND RICE WE CAN HARDLY BUY.

—1940s calypso by “the Tiger” (Neville Marciano)

In Puerto Rico there was a *pirropia*, a catcall to attractive women, that went *Tanto carne, yo comiendo bacalao* (so much meat, and I’m just eating salt cod). Today meat is cheaper than salt cod, but the expression, like *pirropias* themselves, persists. Salt cod was a cheap food, mixed with other cheap foods, to make popular dishes. While it is no longer cheap, the recipes remain unchanged. Along with salt cod and roots, the most universal Caribbean salt cod dish is Salt Cod and Rice. Originally, it was a way of stretching the salt cod supply and was often made with the tail or other scraps. Sometimes a stock was prepared from the bones and the rice cooked in that, a dish known in Puerto Rico as *Mira Bacalao* (Look for the Salt Cod).

### SALT COD AND RICE

*This is a favourite native dish. The saltfish and rice, about a half a pound of saltfish to a pint of rice, are boiled together with the usual bit of salt pork and a little butter.*

—Caroline Sullivan,  
*The Jamaica Cookery Book*, Kingston, 1893

Also see pages 257–61.