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THE HISTORY OF COD IN THE NEW WORLD

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The collapse of the Atlantic cod fishery in the early 1990s was nowhere more significant than for the communities around the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, the vast fishing grounds whose cod for five centuries enriched merchants, fishermen, and the diets of four continents. The Atlantic cod famously came to the attention of Europe through the observations of John Cabot in his 1497 voyage to Newfoundland and North America. Within four years the Portuguese were fishing off Newfoundland, and in 1503 the English trade in New World cod commenced. Over the next century, and long before the founding of Jamestown or the coming of the Pilgrims to Massachusetts, thousands of vessels and tens of thousands of men associated with the catching, processing, and transport of cod crossed the Atlantic to the New World.

Although the Atlantic fisheries have long been neglected by historians, scholars today increasingly recognize the early and enduring significance of cod in the emerging economies of the earliest Atlantic coastal settlements in the New World and in the cultural and political fabric of the colonies of New England, Atlantic Canada, and Newfoundland. For centuries, the Grand Banks cod fishery constituted one of the most valuable natural resources anywhere in the Americas. As archaeologist Brian Fagan has observed, the value of the

New World fish ultimately well exceeded the gold and silver extracted by the Portuguese and Spanish in their overseas empires.

John Cabot was not the only mariner to comment upon the Atlantic's rich fishing grounds. Seventeenth and 18th century seafarers frequently remarked on the abundance and ease of catching cod as they approached North America. Typical was Samuel Standidge, a sea captain and ship owner who stopped at the Grand Banks on a 1752 voyage from Hull, England, to Rhode Island and caught 50 "fine large cod" in 30 minutes using only two hooks.¹ In 1887, the U.S. Fish Commission reported that a small inshore boat with four fishermen landed 18,000 pounds of cod in less than two days.²

The cultural conditions in the Atlantic basin transformed cod into a valuable international commodity. In the 15th century, the increasing number of church-prescribed fasting days that prohibited the eating of meat contributed to a rising consumer demand for fish protein across Catholic Europe. By the early 18th century, Spain imported almost 500 million pounds of dried cod annually or about 35 pounds per family per year. In other words, the humble cod supplied about 50 percent of protein requirements for one of Europe's most wealthy nations.³ Demand



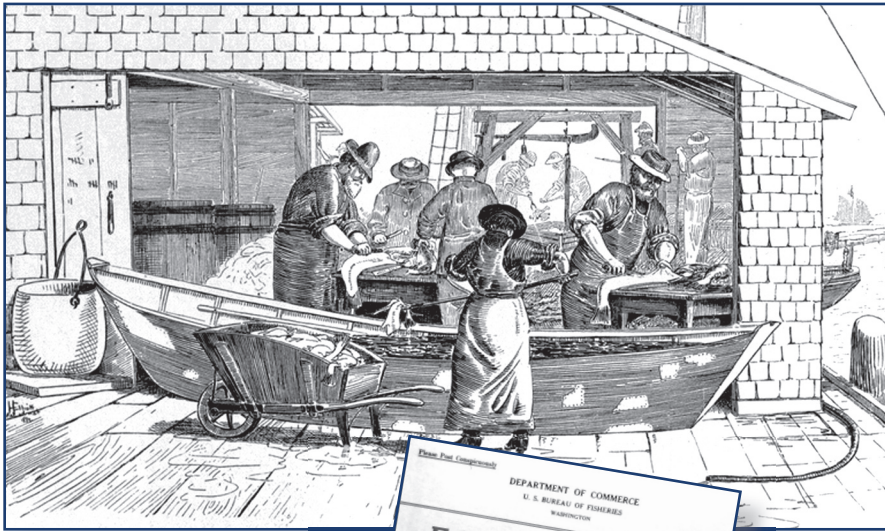
for cod also increased in the West Indies and in South America, where plantation owners purchased "refuse cod" (mostly heads and organs) as an inexpensive source of protein for the increasing numbers of slaves. Later, dried cod provided some of the protein requirements for settlers moving to the western parts of the United States. Archaeological investigations of the steamboat Bertrand, lost in the Missouri River, Nebraska, in 1865 while on her way to goldfields of Montana, for example, revealed that Atlantic cod were among her victuals.⁴

For centuries, cod represented the most highly concentrated source of protein available in quantity anywhere on the planet. When dried, the fish is 92 percent protein by weight. As a target species and commodity, it was perfect. Cod was abundant, highly nutritious, and easy to preserve. The fish's low oil content made it well suited for both "wet" and "dry" cures. When lightly salted and dried, cod can last for years without spoiling. In essence, cod was the first international commercial fishery where consumption was fully disconnected from the time and place of production. In that sense, Atlantic cod was an industrial product.

While the fishery was certainly dangerous, the economics of resource extraction were appealing. Unlike the extraction of other New World resources that required roads, mines, fences, or boundaries, the Atlantic cod fishery needed little physical infrastructure. Cod were caught with relative ease, preserved at sea or along the shore



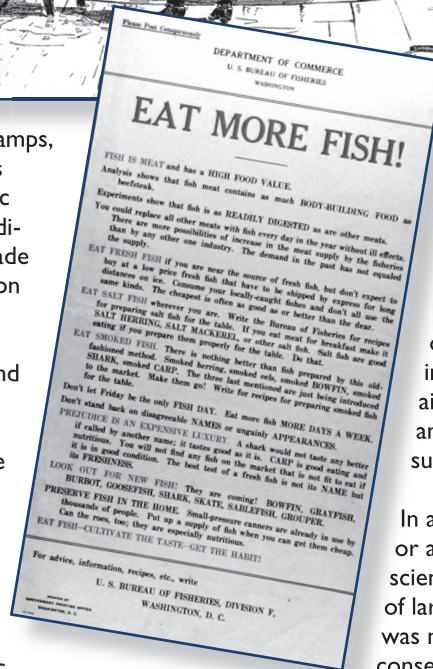
Plates from *The fisheries and fishery industries of the United States* by George Brown Goode, Government Printing Office, 1887.



at temporary fishing camps, and floated to markets throughout the Atlantic basin. These same conditions, however, also made it difficult for one nation to control, dominate, and police the fishery. During the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, England, France, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and the American colonies all vied for control and jurisdiction over the Grand Banks fishing grounds. Competition was vicious at times. The economic importance of cod made it the subject of frequent military action and diplomatic maneuvering.

Up until the mid-19th century, cod fishing remained powered by wind and muscle. Henceforth, the pace of technological change increased. For centuries, fishermen in the Atlantic cod fishery used hand-lines deployed over the side of the vessel. Then during the middle of the century, the offshore vessels began carrying multiple small boats called dories. The use of dories allowed one vessel to spread its fishing effort out over a much greater geographic space and thus increase efficiency. Many dory-carrying schooners then turned to trawl or long lines. These consisted

The Georges Bank Cod Fishery: Splitting and washing Georges Bank cod at Wonwon's wharf, Gloucester, Mass. Plate from *The fisheries and fishery industries of the United States* by George Brown Goode, Government Printing Office, 1887. "Eat More Fish!" broadside courtesy NOAA.



of a single line that ran perhaps a half a mile along the bottom. Anchored at each end, these lines held baited hooks spaced 4 to 6 feet apart. A typical "tub" of trawl line contained about 500 hooks, with each dory setting four to six tubs at a time. In 1800, a typical Grand Banks or Georges Bank schooner might have employed a few dozen hooks all concentrated in a less than 1,000 square feet of ocean bottom. By 1900, however, a fishing schooner could set out 30 miles of line and over 30,000 hooks.

The shift from hooks to bottom trawling brought further short-term efficiencies, but ultimately proved to be destructive and unsustainable. Introduced through the efforts of the U.S. Fish Commission in the early part of the 20th century, trawling had by the 1930s largely supplanted dory fishing in the United States. The second half of the 20th century saw the construction of an enormous international fleet of trawlers whose fishing efforts were aided by increasingly sophisticated electronic navigation and fish locator devices, derivatives of devices created for submarine warfare.

In a hungry post-World War II world, the idea of an untapped, or at least inexhaustible, ocean proved seductive, and fish scientists and bureaucrats alike pushed for the construction of larger and more powerful trawlers. This heedless optimism was not universally shared by fishermen. Indeed concerns for conservation had appeared fairly early. In the 1870s and 1880s, for example, Block Island fishermen lobbied hard to keep the trawl lines off of their fishing grounds. In the 1970s, old-time Newfoundland fishermen Captain Arch Thornhill recalled with disgust and sadness the waste of fish and the destruction of grounds caused by the trawl fishery he helped develop in Newfoundland. Although knowing instinctively where modern fishing would ultimately lead, Thornhill and his contemporaries from the dory age were caught up in an industrial system that offered few viable economic alternatives and little political agency.

Between 1950 and 2000, world wild fish harvest increased by nearly 500 percent and cod was scooped up in unprecedented quantities. Despite warnings from old timers and conservationists alike, those in charge of managing western Atlantic cod stocks failed to take preventive action. In the early 1990s, some advocates for the fishery claimed there was cause for optimism. In Canada, scientific models and trawl-based sampling suggested that cod stocks would rebound. Unfortunately the cod did not read the official science and failed to behave as predicted. After 1992, the verdict on the Grand Banks was clear and the greatest fishery on earth was decimated.

The volume of cod produced and the methods employed in catching, processing, and distributing it meant that the fishery occupied a disproportionately large social and cultural space in selected areas of the Northwestern Atlantic. In Newfoundland, cod has had an all-encompassing cultural presence permeating the language and even appearing on postage stamps. In the 1880s, the male head of all Newfoundland households, whether fisherman or bookkeeper, was referred to as "the skipper" and to hire or make an engagement with someone was to "ship" them.⁵ In Massachusetts, a "codfish aristocracy"—families



who could trace their wealth to the cod fishery—flourished, and a “sacred cod” carving has had a place of honor in the commonwealth capital since the early 18th century.

Although tiny Rhode Island had a fraction of the fishing industry of its larger rivals to the north, the cultural and economic significance of cod is apparent in the history of Block Island, where the twice-yearly runs of cod supported an important fishery for three centuries. In 1880, 263 Block Island fishermen harvested over one million pounds of cod—most of which was salted and dried on the island. Block Island fishermen developed a distinctive type of fishing craft. Double-ended and highly seaworthy, Block Island fishing boats coped with the heavy seas that commonly lashed the island.

The cod fishing boats of Block Island may have proved resistant to weather, but the vessels of other fishermen have not. It is estimated that more than 10,000 ships have sunk in Newfoundland waters alone—a high proportion of which were engaged in fishing. The list of sunken vessels and fatalities for the 19th and 20th centuries from ports such as Gloucester, New Bedford, and Point Judith is staggering.

The thousands of lost fishing vessels along with their associated material culture represent features in an unstudied cultural landscape that documents the rise and the fall of the Atlantic cod fisheries, changing technologies, patterns of environmental use, differing conceptions of nature, and principles of resources management. While the historical significance of cod is unchallenged, it is far from fully understood. As we struggle to protect and restore the species, it may be nearly as important to capture, and where possible preserve, elements of the human history of cod fishing. It seems likely that the lessons learned from exploring the historic material culture of cod fishing can help us better understand the condition of ecosystems prior to industrial fishing as well as the specific patterns of behavior that led to the fish’s decline.

1 *Naval Chronicle: From January to July 1800*, Vol. 3 (London: Bunney and Gold, 1800), 285.

2 *Bulletin of the U.S. Fish Commission*, (Washington: GPO, 1887).

3 John Robert McNeill, *Atlantic Empires of France and Spain* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press) 111.

4 R. D. Klippel and C. R. Falk, “Atlantic Cod in the Missouri River: *Gadus morhua* from the steamboat Bertrand,” *Archaeofauna*, 11 (2002), 23-44.

5 George Brown Goode, *The fisheries and fishing industries of the United States: Section IV The Fishermen of the United States* (Washington: GPO, 1887).



Block Island fishermen developed a distinctive type of fishing craft. Double-ended and highly seaworthy, Block Island fishing boats coped with the heavy seas that commonly lashed the island.

Upper photo: Block Island pinky boat photo courtesy NOAA.
Lower photo: Captain Nicholas Doucette bleeds the fish so that the flesh will be a pale white colour when dried. Photo courtesy Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management. Photo by John Collier Jr.

