Harvesting the Sea

New England fishing vessels usually headed for the Grand Banks, one of the world’s richest fishing areas. The Grand Banks are a series of raised underwater plateaus off the southeast coast of Newfoundland. Many kinds of plants and fish flourish in the shallow water of the Grand Banks. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, fish stocks started declining. In 1977, Canada declared its exclusive fishing rights to most of the Grand Banks. Strict conservation measures were put in place to restore the populations of cod, flounder, turbot, ocean perch, haddock, and other species.

New England Whaling

New England whaling began as a shore-based operation. Small ships would set out when a whale, usually a right whale, was spotted. The whale would be killed and dragged back to the beach to be stripped of blubber, which provided oil for burning. In 1712, a Nantucket ship killed a sperm whale. Its oil burned cleaner than that of right whales, and its prized spermaceti could be used to make candles. Soon the sperm whale became the whale of choice and was hunted globally by New England whalers.

Farms and Towns

Farming in New England was not easy. The growing season was short, and the soil in many places was rocky. Most farmers practiced subsistence farming. That is, they produced just enough food for themselves and sometimes a little extra to trade in town.

Most New England farmers lived near a town. Colonial officials sold large plots of land to groups of people—often to a Puritan congregation. The congregation settled the town and divided the land among its members.

This pattern of settlement led New England towns to develop in a unique way. Usually, a cluster of farmhouses and a meetinghouse were built around a common—shared land where public activities took place. Because people lived together in small towns, a diverse economy developed. Farmers sold produce to shopkeepers; shopkeepers had enough customers to make a living. Along the coast, seaport towns shipped farm products and provided a marketplace for goods coming into New England.

Harvesting the Sea

The Atlantic Ocean offered many economic opportunities. Near New England’s coast were some of the world’s best whaling and fishing grounds for mackerel, halibut, herring, and other fish.

New England’s forests provided everything needed to harvest these “pastures” of fish. Wood from oak trees made excellent ship hulls. Hundred-foot-tall white pines were ideal for masts. Shipbuilders used about 2,500 trees to produce just one ship!

The forests were a valuable resource. Soon New England was exporting timber, as well as fish, to the world. As merchants grew rich from exporting these goods, their ships began carrying goods produced in other places as well. New England’s ships became an important part of international trade.

Throughout New England, the population benefitted from the wealth being created in the seaports. The colonists were soon competing with England’s fishermen, shipbuilders, and merchants. As coastal towns like Boston, Salem, and Newport grew rich, the English government began to take notice.

The Navigation Acts

According to the economic theory of mercantilism, the mother country was supposed to profit from its colonies. As the American colonists prospered, England wanted to make sure that it profited.
from colonial prosperity. So the English government began passing the Navigation Acts in 1651. The Navigation Acts had four major provisions designed to ensure that England made money from its colonies’ trade.

1. All goods had to be carried on English ships or on ships made in the English colonies.
2. Products such as tobacco, wood, and sugar could be sold only to England or its colonies.
3. European imports to the colonies had to pass through English ports.
4. Officials were to tax any colonial goods not shipped to England.

The colonists resented these laws. Merchants ignored the acts whenever possible. England had trouble controlling colonial shipping and patrolling the long coastline of the colonies. Smuggling—importing or exporting goods illegally—was common. England also had great difficulty preventing pirates, like the legendary Blackbeard, from interfering with colonial shipping.


Connect To Today

PIRACY

In the late 1600s, England faced a problem that it had helped create—Atlantic piracy. For decades, England had encouraged pirates to attack Spanish shipping. But as England itself grew rich from commerce, pirates began attacking English ships. They also smuggled goods into and out of colonial ports.

Rich cargoes have always attracted pirates. Today, piracy flourishes in southeast Asia, especially in the busy Malacca Strait between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Each year 50,000 ships, carrying half the world’s oil shipments, pass through the strait. Hundreds of ships are attacked annually. Vessels are often hijacked and the crew held to ransom. In 2004, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia agreed to fight piracy in their waters.

Modern coastguard on the lookout for piracy near Guam

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Make Inferences Why was piracy a threat to the mercantilist system?
2. Draw Conclusions Why are modern pirates attracted to the Malacca Strait?

Answer: To ensure that it made money from its colonies’ trade.

Connect To Today

Piracy

Ask students to describe their image of a pirate. (Possible Answer: sailors with eye patches, bandanas, earrings, parrots, and swords)

• How might pirates today differ from those in colonial times? (Possible Answers: Pirates today may have more modern dress and weapons. They may have power boats instead of sailing ships.)

• What do pirates today have in common with pirates of colonial times? (Possible Answer: They both attack ships for financial gain.)

CRITICAL THINKING ANSWERS

1. Make Inferences It interfered with colonial shipping, creating a loss of money and supplies.
2. Draw Conclusions The Malacca Strait is very busy, so there are many ships that can be attacked.

More About . . .

Blackbeard

Blackbeard, whose real name was Edward Teach, was a famous pirate who attacked colonial ships. His nickname came from his thick black beard. Blackbeard was known to put lit wicks in his beard and hair during battle to enhance his frightening appearance. Blackbeard operated around the Virginia and North Carolina coasts in a ship called Queen Anne’s Revenge. His pirating career was short, spanning from 1716 to 1718, when he was killed in battle. Through the years, many people have searched for the treasure supposedly buried by Blackbeard. It has never been found, and many believe it never existed.

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