



AMERICAN
VISIONS

#73

So Glorious a Landscape



*Nature and the Environment in
American History and Culture*

by Chris J. Magoc
with Documents and Readings

SO GLORIOUS A LANDSCAPE

NATURE and the ENVIRONMENT in
AMERICAN HISTORY and CULTURE

by
CHRIS J. MAGOC
with Documents and Readings



American Visions ❖ Readings in American Culture

❖

Number 5

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A Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint ❖ Wilmington, Delaware



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First published 2002
Printed and bound in the United States of America

Scholarly Resources Inc.
104 Greenhill Avenue
Wilmington, DE 19805-1897
www.scholarly.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Magoc, Chris J., 1960-

So glorious a landscape : nature and the environment in
American history and culture / by Chris J. Magoc

p. cm. — (American visions)

“With documents and readings.”

Includes bibliographical references (p.)

ISBN 0-8420-2695-9 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-8420-2696-7 (pbk. :
alk. paper)

1. United States—Environmental conditions—History—Sources.
2. Human ecology—United States—History—Sources. 3. Landscape
changes—United States—History—Sources. I. Title. II. American
visions (Wilmington, Del.) ; no. 5

GE150 .M34 2001
333.73'0973—dc21

2001031070

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum require-
ments of the American National Standard for permanence of paper for
printed library materials, Z39.48, 1984.

THE AUTHOR

of history at Mercyhurst College
tor of *Yellowstone: The Creation*
oe, 1870–1903 (1999) as well as a
pular culture and environmental
also is the writer and producer of
(1996), a documentary film cen-
burgh. Before joining Mercyhurst,
y Historical Society in Tarentum
Erie Maritime Museum and the
Erie Maritime Museum and the
ail of History Guidebook (2001).
or Magoc spent nearly a decade
onprofit groups in Pennsylvania
wife, Mary Ellen, and their two

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CAROLYN MERCHANT

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Fate of the Abenaki in the Colonial Ecologi- cal Revolution

The breakdown of Abenaki subsistence was a process of interaction between the fur trade that disrupted traditional gathering and hunting production and introduced diseases that disrupted biological and social reproduction. Externally caused by ecological additions and withdrawals, it opened the way for a new symbolic system in which the transcendent God of Christianity replaced Abenaki animism.

The fur trade of New England that would devastate beaver and Indian began inauspiciously as an extension of regular fishing expeditions from Bristol, England, to the Newfoundland coast around 1480. The cod banks also attracted fishermen from France and Portugal as well as coastal explorers such as John Cabot (1497), Giovanni da Verrazzano (1524), and Jacques Cartier (1534). The Indians of Narragansett Bay received Verrazzano in the tradition of native reciprocity exchange patterns, trading mainly for decorative copper earrings and necklaces.

In the north, however, early exchanges involved tools and utensils. The shrewd Abenaki of present-day Maine, whose experience of the fur trade had included kidnappings by Portuguese and Spanish explorers, traded only off treacherous coastal rocks and demanded

From Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 52-58, 60-61. © 1989 by the University of North Carolina Press. Reprinted by permission of the University of North Carolina Press.

from Verrazzano "knives, hooks for fishing, and sharp metal" for tools more durable than their own. To their north, Micmac Indians on the Saint Lawrence Gulf, who waved sticks with furs to attract Cartier in 1534, also wanted the metal tools that would facilitate hunting, fishing, cooking, and sewing. Far from being passive pawns at the hands of unscrupulous traders, these Indians recognized the advantages of the new tools for their own subsistence. But as iron arrowheads, axes, knives, and kettles gradually replaced decomposable bone hooks, wooden arrows, and bark baskets, the material base of the gathering-hunting economy was transformed by a technology the Indians themselves did not control. The adoption of utilitarian technologies absorbed into gathering-hunting production initiated a transition that would ultimately become an ecological revolution in northern New England.

In the mid-sixteenth century fishermen established salt-processing stations on shore in order to increase and lighten their cargoes, and began bargaining for pelts with the Indians of Labrador, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia. Trade quickened in the 1580s when the Indians of the Saint Lawrence River provided sufficient furs to lower the price of the new beaver hats described by Philip Stubbes.¹

While the earliest exchanges of commodities for furs were a by-product of fishing expeditions, mercantile capitalists financed explorers who scouted the New England coast for profits from the beaver trade. Martin Pring, who set out to look for fish, furs, timber, and sassafras (a reputed cure for syphilis), explored the Massachusetts coast in 1603 and enthusiastically envisioned profits from the furs of the many "wild beasts" he saw there. In the year 1604 alone, Pring reported, the French had imported from Canada beaver and otter skins amounting to 30,000 crowns. On his visits to the Maine coast in 1604, 1605, and 1606, Samuel de Champlain offered the Penobscot Indians the opportunity to "hunt the beaver more than they had ever done, and barter these beaver with us in exchange." Captain John Smith identified New England's potential for furs, as well as fish and timber, on his voyage of 1614 from the Penobscot to Cape Cod. Here he "got for trifles near eleven hundred beaver skins, one hundred martins, and as many otters." He estimated "of beavers, otters, martins, black foxes, and furs of price may yearly be had 6 or 7000 [pelts] and if the trade of the French were prevented, many more: 25,000 this year were brought from those northern parts into France."²

English exploitation of Abenaki furs commenced in earnest with George Weymouth's expedition to the coast of Maine in 1605. When

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commenced in earnest with ast of Maine in 1605. When

three Abenaki dressed in beaver skins approached his ship, Weymouth signaled his desire to trade for pelts. Twenty-eight Indians returned the following day with forty beaver, otter, and sable pelts which they exchanged for "knives, glasses, combs, and other trifles to the value of four or five shillings." Seemingly eager for additional trading, an assemblage of 283 Indians with bows, arrows, and dogs encouraged the crew of fifteen to proceed farther up the river where more furs were allegedly stored. Instead, the now suspicious Weymouth kidnapped five Indians as insurance against future mischief and soon afterward set sail for England with glowing reports of abundant timber, fish, and furs in the new land.³

Two years later the English colonists George Popham and Raleigh Gilbert returned to establish a trading center at the mouth of the Kennebec, bringing with them one of Weymouth's Indians as a guide. Indian women, barely visible during Weymouth's visit, were now actively engaged in trading beaver. Having received higher prices from the French, the women demanded more than the English were willing to pay and were rejected. By spring, however, the colonists had traded a fairly good supply of furs and completed a fort. They were enthusiastic about the fertility of the land, the abundance of spruce trees for masts, and the "goodness" of the oak and walnut trees that grew open and free of thickets as in "our parks in England." Despite these successes and the eagerness of the Abenaki to trade, the harsh winter forced the colonists to return home. Nevertheless, both the English and the French continued to send trading vessels every year, exchanging iron knives, fishhooks, hatchets, kettles, and food for pelts. Faced with attacks by the Micmac to the north, who had greater access to European weapons and tools, and fated with a short growing season with sparse crop yields, the Abenaki soon came to depend on the Europeans for bread, peas, beans, and prunes and on the southern New England tribes for corn. Furs provided the exchange values needed for the European tools and food required for subsistence. What had begun as adaptation and absorption became dependency.⁴

Indians, with their access to a resource in demand as a symbol of status by upwardly mobile Europeans, were thus drawn into a system of worldwide mercantile exchange. Mercantile capitalism soon linked European capital with American natural resources and African labor in a pattern of money-mediated trading relationships often involving triangular voyages. The integral components of balanced ecosystems in the colonies became natural resources yielding fish, furs, and

timber. Enslaved Africans were transported to the New World to become human resources helping to produce the profitable monocultures of tobacco, rice, sugar, and eventually cotton. Gold and silver extracted from the American earth fueled the process and financed the voyages of the adventurers. The dependency of native American production on mercantile capitalism was the first phase of the colonial ecological revolution in northern New England.

While the first impact of Europeans had affected the relations of production, offering the Indians the means to hunt beavers and other animals more efficiently for subsistence and exchange, the second altered the relations of reproduction. In 1616 disease struck the villages. From a population of about 10,000 in 1605, the Abenaki were within a few years reduced to 3,000, resulting in abandonment of over half the villages. The disease was probably either smallpox or a type of bubonic or pneumonic plague, originating along the shores of Massachusetts Bay in 1616 and spreading northward over the next four years to the Kennebec River and Penobscot Bay, leaving fields and villages barren in its wake. Plague is transmitted by rats and fleas as well as human contagion. By the time of Champlain's voyages of 1603-6 rats had been observed leaving European ships, while infestations of fleas in Indian summer wigwams were noted in colonial accounts. A letter of 1619 describes the epidemic's effect on the peoples of the Maine coast: "in other places a remnant remains, but not free from sickness. Their disease the plague, for [so] we might perceive the sores of some that had escaped, who described the spots of such as usually die."⁵

The impact of this crisis in reproduction on Indian subsistence was drastic. Women too weak to plant or gather and men unable to hunt lay helpless in their wigwams. Hunting band cohesion on which the success of the hunt depended was destroyed. Family hunting grounds evolved into trapping territories as tribes gave up winter hunting in small family bands and remained in permanent villages near the coast. The regulatory role of chiefs and shamans was also undercut. By 1624 only seven Abenaki sagamores remained to lead their people. The traditional power of shamans to assign rewards and punishments was rendered ineffective in the face of the unknown illnesses. A second major epidemic in 1638, this time smallpox, accentuated the changes initiated by the devastations observed in 1619.⁶

The demographic catastrophes that rendered the Abenaki more dependent on exchange for their own subsistence afforded the colonists an opportunity for trading expansion. The Plymouth Pilgrims,

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who themselves needed a resource to exchange for European mer-
chandise, turned to the fur trade. By 1621 they had already obtained
from the Massachusetts Bay Indians two hogsheads (each weighing
400 pounds) of beaver and other skins worth £500. Expanding north-
ward, they traded a boatload of corn to the Abenaki for 700 pounds of
beaver pelts. After the discovery by the Dutch in 1628 of the value of
wampum (strings of white and purple shell beads produced by the
Pequot and Narragansett for religious ceremonies) among the more
distant tribes, the Pilgrims, aided both by their easy access to wam-
pum and by their corn surpluses, established successful trading houses
on the Kennebec River. In 1636, Pilgrim exports to England since the
time of settlement had reached some 12,000 pounds of beaver pelts
and 1,000 pounds of otter.⁷ . . .

The devastating changes in biological reproduction were soon fol-
lowed by equally momentous changes in social reproduction that al-
tered land tenure. In place of the Indian view of the habitat as tribal
home, the English imposed a legal concept of private property that
would convert Indian lands to trapping territories. To the Indian, white
pressure to cede territory meant extending hunting and fishing privi-
leges on tribal homelands to the newcomers. To the English, however,
it meant release of all tribal rights. Thus, two different interpretations
of land tenure were operating when, in 1646, Nutahanada, son of the
sagamore of the Kennebec River, transferred his lands to William
Bradford, "to have and to hold to them and their heirs forever with all
the woods, waters, soils, profits, liberties, and privileges any way be-
longing thereunto or arising from the same for and in consideration of
two hogsheads of provisions, one of bread, and one of peas, two coats
of cloth, two gallons of wine and a bottle of strong waters."⁸

Home to the English would mean the family farm on which colo-
nists reproduced the family's subsistence through property inherit-
ance by male sons and on which resources such as potash and lumber
could be obtained for exchange. Massachusetts Bay merchants who
bought land from the Maine Indians in the 1640s began cutting pines
and shipping them to England. English settlements appeared at the
mouths of rivers along the Maine and New Hampshire coasts where
white pine masts, yards, spars, bowsprits, and naval stores could be
cut and shipped to England. Sawmill owners soon realized lucrative
profits and were able to add general stores and gristmills. The estate of
Major Nicholas Shapleigh of Kittery, Maine (d. 1682), for example,
included an elaborately furnished farmhouse with several Irish and

black servants, farmlands with outlying marshes and fields, a gristmill, a blacksmith shop, a sawmill, 10,000 feet of boards, timber chains, mast wheels, mast chains, shallops, canoes, eleven oxen, and yokes all related to the timber trade. Henry Sayword, who died in 1679, owned a sawmill valued at £150 and 347 acres of land at £314, for a net worth of nearly £600. Less wealthy men such as John Batson (d. 1685), with holdings worth £130, claimed half a sawmill. The estate of Sarah Tricky and her deceased son, whose total worth was £153, revealed two hand-saws, a whipsaw, and a crosscut saw—all items of use in the lumber trade.⁹

By the 1640s, the relations of production and reproduction in Abenaki subsistence had been drastically altered. Withdrawals of animals and trees as commodities changed the ecology of ponds, rivers, and forests. In turn, the loss of traditional habitats in the Indian homeland meant fewer resources for subsistence production. Moreover, additions of European pathogens and people undercut patterns of biological and social reproduction, further disrupting the relations of production. These dialectical processes between production and ecology and between reproduction and production changed material life for Indians. With these changes traditional forms of consciousness also began to break down. The myths, rituals, and taboos inherited from Gluskabe* and his animal ancestors that had regulated a viable gathering-hunting economy were now vulnerable to replacement. . . .

By the end of the seventeenth century, the Abenaki, who were now almost entirely converted to Catholicism, found themselves caught between the French, who provided them with a religion that seemed to offer help for their illnesses, and the English, who supplied the food and trade items on which they now depended. An Abenaki spokesman put it to the English thus: "Thy Ministers, [never] spoke to me of prayer or of the Great Spirit. They saw my furs, my beaver- and elk-skins, and of those alone did they think. . . . I was not able to furnish them enough. On the contrary, . . . one day I landed at Quebec, . . . I was loaded with furs, but the French black Robe [priest] did not deign even to look at them; he spoke to me first of the great Spirit, of Paradise, of Hell, and of Prayer, which is the only way of reaching Heaven. . . . I asked for Baptism, and received it."¹⁰

*Gluskabe is a trickster figure in the Abenaki oral tradition who often assists the Great Spirit by teaching people valuable lessons.—Ed.

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100 feet of boards, timber chains,
canoes, eleven oxen, and yokes
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The substitution of the Christian ethic for the Abenaki ethic altered the symbolic superstructure of the Indians' economy. An ethic of moral obligation between human and God replaced the ethic of reciprocity between human and animal. While the older practices of divination, taboos, and disposal of remains continued, they ceased to function as a restraining environmental ethic in an economy in which survival now depended on the sale of animal furs in the marketplace. The Abenaki could now combine the teaching of both European cultures they had adopted. By convincing the Indians to give up manitous [charms] and fetishes endowed with life and spirit and to embrace instead a transcendent God above nature, the Jesuits prepared the way for the fetishism of commodities. Under capitalism, the properties of life, growth, and development associated with organic life would be transferred to money and the products of the market. The market would exhibit strength, weakness, depression, and death, obscuring the underlying death of the animals and their Indian equals.

The process of ecological breakdown began at the level of material culture. Production relations were altered as tools and utensils obtained in the fur trade created inequalities among neighboring tribes, and dependency relations were substituted for reciprocity. The relations of reproduction were altered by diseases and property rights that further destroyed traditional patterns of subsistence. Finally, a new religion injected by Jesuit missionaries, who consciously set out to undermine Indian animism, seemed to offer rational explanation and solace in a time of crisis and confusion. The colonial ecological revolution in northern New England that began with the fur trade was essentially complete by the end of the seventeenth century.

NOTES

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From "An Ordinance for the Gove
West of the River Ohio," *Docum
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Special Collections Division.