

19th Century Trade

Throughout the nineteenth century, Newfoundland and Labrador's economy centred on its ability to export goods to foreign countries. More than anything else, it depended on the sale of locally produced salt cod to southern Europe, Brazil, and the West Indies. Seal products gained in importance during the early decades of the 1800s, but rapidly declined after 1870 when the stocks became depleted. The mining industry also expanded near the end of the 1800s and the colony began exporting copper, iron ore, and other minerals. The impacts of these developments on overall trade, however, were insignificant when compared to the saltfish industry, which accounted for 70 per cent of the colony's exports by the end of the century.

The Saltfish Trade

Newfoundland and Labrador fishers produced a variety of grades of saltfish which could be sold in a wide range of markets in the 1800s. The island's inshore fishers produced the highest quality cure because they fished near their homes and could dry the cod almost immediately after catching it. This light-salted hard-dried product was known as shore fish and often fetched the highest prices at the marketplace. There were, however, varying grades within this category, depending on the product's size, appearance, moisture, and overall quality.

The highest grade, known as merchantable, was a thick, yellow or golden fish that was light-salted and not too dry..

Fishers who migrated to Labrador each year to harvest cod there produced another grade of fish known as Labrador cure. This product was moister, more heavily salted, and generally inferior to shore fish, largely because of Labrador's damp weather and the longer handling time needed to ship fish back to the island..

Once the fishers had caught and cured the cod, it was up to the colony's merchants to sell the product to foreign buyers. Once a shipment of fish arrived in a country, it was arranged to sell or trade the fish to an interested buyer. Sometimes the saltfish was exchanged for money and sometimes for goods which could not be produced in Newfoundland and Labrador, such as molasses or coffee.

The major markets for Newfoundland and Labrador saltfish existed in Brazil, the West Indies and in the southern European countries of Spain, Portugal, Italy, and to a lesser degree, Greece. All of these areas had a warm climate, which made access to a well-preserved yet affordable source of protein essential. Saltfish was suitable on both fronts. Moreover, none of these regions possessed large fishing grounds of their own, but many could trade locally-produced goods for cod. The European countries produced salt, fruit, nuts, wine, and other goods, Brazil offered cotton and coffee, while the West Indies exported sugar, molasses, and rum to Newfoundland and Labrador for cod.

Seal Exports

Although saltfish accounted for the vast majority of Newfoundland and Labrador's export trade during the nineteenth century, the industry did not expand during the time period and export levels remained largely the same. This is not the case with the seal fishery, which grew rapidly during the early decades of the 1800s before contracting in later years.

Other exports

Alongside cod and seal products, the sea provided Newfoundland and Labrador with a variety of other, but much less significant, exports. These included salmon, lobster, herring, capelin, and squid, many of which found markets in France, Canada, the United States, and Great Britain.

The mining industry also grew in importance near the end of the nineteenth century. A copper mine opened at Tilt Cove in 1864 and remained productive well into the twentieth century. By 1900, Bell Island iron ore accounted for about nine per cent of the colony's exports, with much of the product being sent to Nova Scotia.

Lumber exports also grew in importance during the late nineteenth century, but did not earn nearly as much as the colony's fish and mineral exports.

Imports

Newfoundland and Labrador possessed a weak agricultural base, which yielded only a small variety of goods for local markets throughout the nineteenth century. As a result, colony residents relied heavily on the importation of food and other consumer products from foreign countries. In the 1600s, many of these goods arrived from the United Kingdom and included such items as salt beef and pork, peas, hard bread, beer, fishing gear, cooking equipment, candles, and to a lesser extent, cheese, butter, vinegar, liquor, and other luxuries.

As the colony developed in the coming centuries it began to trade with other countries. By the end of the 1800s it was importing goods from Canada, New England, southern Europe, Brazil, and the West Indies as well as from Britain. The bulk of these imports consisted of food items, with many agricultural imports arriving from New England. Other imports included furniture, books, feather bedding, glassware, medicines, and other merchandise. The colony sometimes paid cash for these imports, but at other times traded saltfish or other goods.

Newfoundland and Labrador's heavy dependence on international trade, however, made its economy vulnerable to external factors over which it had no control. If the demand for cod declined or if the price of imports increased, then the colony's finances would suffer accordingly. Recognizing this danger, the Responsible Government made attempts to diversify Newfoundland and Labrador's economy into the mining, agriculture, and forestry sectors during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Article by Jenny Higgins. ©2007, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site

Copied and edited Nov. 09 for Xavier Grade 8 Social Studies. For the complete text, please go to the following site:

http://www.heritage.nf.ca/society/fish_trade.html