

**THE RELATION OF THE
FISHERIES TO THE DISCOVERY
AND SETTLEMENT OF NORTH
AMERICA**

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The relation of the fisheries to the discovery and settlement of North America by Charles Levi Woodbury

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CHARLES LEVI WOODBURY

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RELATION OF THE FISHERIES
TO THE
DISCOVERY AND SETTLEMENT
OF
NORTH AMERICA.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, AT CONCORD, JUNE, 1880,
AND THE MASSACHUSETTS FISH AND GAME PRO-
TECTION SOCIETY, AT BOSTON, 1880,

BY

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GAME PROTECTION SOCIETY.

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THE RELATION OF THE FISHERIES
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DISCOVERY.

THE desire to find a short route to the Indies stimulated Columbus to the discovery of America. The success of Magellan in the south excited other explorers to seek a passage by the north or northwest to the Indies. A mental conviction, not born of knowledge, pushed them on from the time of Cabot, and has not yet spent its force. Thirty years after Columbus's discovery, the land here was supposed to be the back part of Cathay, and he had long been dead before geographers began to suggest these lands were a continent. In 1540 the French patent to Jacques Cartier describes Canada and Hochelaga as forming one end of Asia on the west side.

Whilst gold and the spices of India were exciting the cupidity and the enterprise of Europe, small was the attention given by the great to the humble occupation and daring energy of the craft of fishermen who ranged the most dangerous parts of the stormy ocean in pursuit of cod, herring, and mackerel. No literary idlers collected their lore and dressed it in popular form. No path to fame was supposed to lay across the gurry-covered deck, or to be enfolded in the well-tanned seine. Hakluyt and Purchas, Peter Martyr and Cortereal, deemed it hardly of moment to mention these men of the harpoon and the hook and line and seine; and when they sought them for information, which was not infrequent, what they obtained from the close-mouthed craft was regarded and used as their own original matter. Dimly among the printed records of early voyagers, and amid the

mouldering papers in public archives, can we catch a trace of what this craft were about at the time when modern literature claims that America was discovered by royal expeditions and lord high admirals under flags of Spain or England, France or Portugal. Yet there are some grounds for believing that "the skippers" and "the sharesmen" were on these shores before the admirals. In the European settlement of those parts of North America which are contiguous to the fisheries, it is curious to compare the potential influences of the royal charters and their grantees with those the fisheries exercised in bringing about the settlements and occupation of the shores by the European race. I shall present some crude views on this subject, which, in connection with latest investigations into the protection and restoration of the cod-fishery to its former prosperity, have formed the subject of an address lately given before a society in a sister State organized for the protection of fish and game.

THE GRAND BANKS.

When were they discovered?

The great Admiral Columbus came no farther north than the latitude of Florida. The Cabots make no mention of the Grand Banks. These, then, did not discover them. The younger Cabot describes the "Isles of Baccalaos," which may be the Magdalen Isles or Cape Breton or some other and unimportant islands on the coast of Labrador or Newfoundland; but there are no islands on the Grand Banks. How came this Bristol-born Englishman in a royal ship to use this Basque word "baccalaos" in place of the word "cod," which all Somerset and Englishmen use, unless he found it so applied already to these islands? As a discoverer, in emulation of Spanish and Portuguese world-famed explorations, for his owner and master, Henry VII. of England, he would *scarcely* have been giving a Basque name to islands he discovered. It is, then, improbable that Cabot gave this name, and it is prob-

able that he took the name of Bacallaos from those who had preceded him there. Cabot, his reporters say, stated this was the native name for this land ; but we know the philology of the word better than he did ; and admitting that he reported the Indian correctly, the proof is more convincing that the Basques had been there before him.

The next voyagers whose narratives have come down to us are Cortereal, Verazzano, Gomez, and John Rut ; but neither of these professes to have discovered the Grand Banks. Rut states that at Newfoundland he met at the harbor of St. John's eleven sail Normand, one Breton, and two Portuguese fishing vessels. An English play, an "Interlude," cited by Nichols in his life of Cabot, with the attributed date of 1510, states that, —

" Now, Frenchmen and others have found the trade,
That yearly of fish there they lade,
Above a hundred sayle."

There are still earlier notices of the fishermen. Among these, the most active were the Basques, who, their traditions say, were drawn there in the pursuit of whales.

The name of Cape Breton, as well as that of Bacallaos, is taken from the Basque language.

These Basques were an old race, living partly under the French and a part under the Spanish government, plain fishermen, far from the influence of the royal expeditions for discovery of routes to the Indies, and indifferent to the question about the Indies, living in a poor country, not influential at court nor distinguished in letters. They were the originators of the whale fishery, and had been known long before Columbus's time as hardy fishermen and enterprising whalemens, seeking their game in its favorite feeding grounds. It is to be remarked that the names of places, islands, harbors about the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, and Cape Breton are mostly *Basque* or French. It is claimed by those who ought to know that the natives used Basque names for the

implements of these fisheries, and even on Cabot's authority, that they had at his discovery adopted the Basque "baccalaos" (rather than the French "morue") to designate the codfish and the country.

It is claimed, then, that they were pursuing the whale and the baccalaos on these banks and shores for an indefinite time prior to Cabot's voyage, and were, excluding the Norwegians' and Icelanders' voyages, the first Europeans to visit this part of North America. I think these propositions may be affirmed on the records. Neither Columbus, Cabot, nor Cortereal drew the French and Basque fishermen to that coast. But Cartier and Gomez found a lively cod-fishery going on, and Cartier run over their whaling grounds. The fishermen discovered for themselves these coasts, how early none can tell; but the fairest analysis of Cabot's remarks leaves the logical inference they were here before he came.

Authors writing prior to 1550 admit the Basques were whaling and fishing on this coast as early as 1504; but as they assign no proof that these people began then to fish here, the admission that they were here then is no denial that their enterprise began a generation sooner. No argument can be drawn from the silence of the Basques, except that the enterprise was good enough to keep for their own use. They knew the court favorites would rob them of its profits if they published the news, and the *discoverers par le roi* would hardly wish to mention that fleets of European fishermen hovered near the harbors of "Prima Vistu" or "Baccalaos." The royal explorers were searching for the Indies, but the fishermen cared for no more spicy breezes than those that dried their fish and fanned the fires of their try-kettles on the shores of Norumbega.

Until it can be shown that the chartered explorers discovered the Banks of Newfoundland prior to the Basques, the silence on both sides remains very natural, but it does not weaken the Basque argument for priority. The Count de

Premio Real, Consul-General of Spain for the Dominion of Canada, has lately revived attention to this subject, and pressed the claims of the Basques with an array of facts and ingenious arguments, in which he has the support of several eminent historical investigators of Quebec and some in this country and Europe.

VERAZZANO IN NEW HAMPSHIRE.

Verazzano, an Italian captain in the employ of the French government, sailed from Europe in 1523, and struck the American coast in latitude 34° N. He ran to the northward, describing the coast with great clearness. It would seem that after leaving Narraganset Bay he landed on our New Hampshire coast. His descriptions apply to points in the limited region between Cape Ann and Cape Neddock; and, aided by a life-long familiarity with the appearance of that coast from the sea, I cannot resist the inferences that the places where he describes trading with the natives, his boat pulling to the edge of the breakers, and throwing to the natives on the rocks things they had to barter, by means of a line, and hauling in the return "truck," and that where he made an inland excursion, must either have been at the east end of Cape Ann or near the mouth of the Piscataqua River. The weight of the whole description, the northeast course he sailed on leaving, and the islands he saw, are alone consistent with the hypothesis that the Piscataqua was his point of departure. This, too, is confirmed by "the lofty hills" which he saw distant in the interior, "diminishing towards the shore of the sea," a description fitting the appearance of the first ranges of the New Hampshire mountains,—not the White Hills, but those of Northwood, Strafford, Alton, and Brookfield, Gunstock in Gilford, Teneriffe in Milton, "diminuendo" to the coast hills like the

"butter pots," Bonnebeag in Berwick, Stratham Hill, Frosts, and Agamenticus in York.

Any visitor at the Isles of Shoals may notice the correspondence of the description with the view. From here alone on the coast he describes could he, by the dead reckoning and course he gives, have sailed along the coast for "fifty" leagues northeast, either actually or approximately, and have found on such a course the thirty islands he refers to on his port side. It will be observed, that after sailing this over-estimated fifty leagues, he hauls his course to east and then north for one hundred and fifty leagues. As Portland is a few miles north of the latitude of Seal Island and Cape Sable, this east course, to have carried him on his voyage, must have begun as far south as Portland or Seguin, and have been, as he states, first east (till he rounded Cape Sable) and then north.

The White Mountains are rarely visible in summer from the sea at the Isles of Shoals, from which they are ninety-six and two thirds statute miles distant, true bearing north, $20^{\circ} 31' 40''$ west. Their utmost range of visibility for the sea horizon is one hundred and five statute miles. The first range I have indicated, which is only some thirty miles inland, forms an imposing background to the view of the land till you have passed Cape Neddock; whilst Agamenticus and other hills near the shore break the monotony of the foreground, and together with the first range serve as landmarks for the fishermen, helping them to find their various fishing-grounds in the perilous winter fishery. For these many landmark hills they have for centuries had a complete set of names among themselves, which are unknown to geographers or to the people living about the foot of the mountains.

I know of no point east of Agamenticus where Verazzano's description of the hills in the interior diminishing towards the coast can be faithfully applied. At Camden there are hills near to the shore which close the view inland.