

Lecture #7: World of Fields and Fences

Suggested Readings:

John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth* (1970); Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village* (1963)
Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land* (1976); Andro Linklater, *Measuring America* (2002)
Paul Wallace Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (1968)
William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (1983/2003); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun* (2001)
Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (2004)

Outline:

I. Changes in the Land as a Two-Point Causal Argument: Stories Again

note the riddling structure of *Changes in the Land*: two-point comparison between two moments in time, Indian landscapes before arrival of Europeans compared with landscapes of Thoreau's Concord creates dramatic contrast which emphasizes difference more than similarity, so that story of book becomes question: how and why did this transformation of landscape occur?
creates tension, but at expense of cultural complexity: similarities between groups deemphasized to highlight causal differences that might explain landscape change
nonetheless gives certain perspective: material culture, relationships to environment, as windows on the ways in which people place themselves geographically and culturally, and how they subsist within natural world
central image of contrasting cultures: wooden frame house vs. wigwam >> imply different degrees of fixity vs mobility
Indian horticulture was intimately integrated into seasonal movements of hunting and gathering: migration to locations where food and other resources most abundant at any given time
material culture hinged on ability to move when ecological cycles made doing so attractive
this was in stark contrast to colonists, who sought to bring ecological cycles close to fixed homes

II. A Material Culture of Colonialism

lecture uses living history museum of reconstructed Plimoth Plantation to exemplify its arguments and interpretation: to learn more about it, see <http://www.plimoth.org> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plimoth_Plantation
key image of colonial life: the wooden house – symbolized by Saugus ironmaster's much-restored house from 1680s: fixed, stolid, with ecological cycles and relations of production made to circle around that human center
across local ecological boundaries, broader series of connections to world trade, with ship (symbolized by Pilgrims' restored Mayflower) as central symbol: ship as exemplar of capstone technology embodying many of most important differences between Indians and colonists: sawed wood, metal, textiles, ropes, navigation, guns, sails, etc.; these in turn imply outward linkage toward wider markets of the Atlantic world
first settlements stockaded for defense (offense?), implied military violence of colonial invasion
blockhouse as meetinghouse; note religious mission of settlement, metaphor of surrounding landscape as a Biblical wilderness with all the rich allusions that word implied: wild nature dangerous, savage, sinful
inside, agricultural village, functional divisions mark ecological relations of production
clearing: girdling bark from trees, planting amidst stumps, eventually cutting or burning to create fields for plowing
initial colonial settlements conducted agriculture much as Indians did: hand tools (metal blades), corn a crucial early crop; cf. also tobacco as early Indian crop brought to market within system of forced labor: slavery
woodworking as key technological difference: saws, axes, froes for cutting and splitting wood, construction becomes increasingly wood-intensive, as does burning for fires: wooden clapboards replace plaster, shingles replace thatch, eventual abandonment of half-timbered framing characteristic of wood-scarce Tudor England
livestock as crucial difference between Indians and Europeans, much else followed from these co-invaders: cattle, horses, hogs, etc.; implied ownership of animals, animal power for plowing and hauling goods to market
need to protect crops: fence as most visible physical symbol of English vs. Indian land tenure and subsistence, laws, pounds, etc.: all driven by need to bring animals and crops into close proximity and therefore separate the two
necessity for mowing & grazing lands, introduction of alien European grasses (timothy, blue grass, clover)
accompanying invasion of weeds: dandelions, nettles, plantain: Indians called plantain "Englishman's Foot"
black stem rust (which colonists labeled "the blast") as key metaphor: barberry bushes growing in weedy fence rows hosted rust that blighted wheatfields growing downwind: reproduction of European ecological relationships
complex horticulture: garden crops tended by women contained vegetables, herbs, flowers for dyestuffs, orchards for fruit; men raised grain crops of maize, barley, rye, wheat while working with larger (more dangerous) animals
task of scheduling: reproducing seasonal knowledge of peasant agriculture via the almanac, the wheel of the zodiac cycles much like Indian subsistence, but here revolves around human settlement: fixity again

III. A Moral for the Story: Abstracting Nature

largest claim: linkage to market brought increasing sense of land as a commodity bought and sold in the market
earlier land systems: metes & bounds (random, lots of conflict); French long lots fronting on rivers
U.S. preferred abstract grid of Enlightenment, codified in 1785 Land Ordinance: square mile grid units imposed in Northwest Territory by government survey to facilitate sale to settlers and speculators. grid pattern proliferated outward to entire landscape west of Ohio River: rural road systems, farmers' fields, city streets
landscape of the grid defines much of U.S.: how closely connected to Plymouth's "world of fields and fences"?