

Lecture #5: 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.
Paul Wallace Gates, History of Public Land Law Development, 1968.
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 riddling structure of Changes in the Land: two point comparison between two moments in time, Indian landscape before arrival of Europeans, landscape 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 and subsist within nature
central image of contrasting cultures: wooden frame house vs. wigwam >> fixity vs mobility
Indian horticulture 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

II. A Material Culture of Colonialism

key image of colonial life: the wooden house, fixed, stolid, with ecological cycles and relations of production made to circle around that human center. key contrast
across local ecological boundaries, broader series of connections to world trade, with ship standing as central symbol: ship as piece of technology embodying many of most important differences between Indians & colonists: sawed wood, metal, textiles, ropes, navigation, guns, sails, etc.; linkage outward to world markets
first settlements stockaded for defense (offense?), 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
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, imperatives toward 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, shingles, end of half-timbered framing
livestock as crucial difference between Indians and Europeans, much else followed from these coinvasaders: cattle, horses, hogs, etc. 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.
necessity for mowing and grazing lands, introduction of grasses (timothy, blue grass, clover), & accompanying invasion of weeds (dandelions, plantain) and grasses, etc.
black stem rust as key metaphor: barberry weed in fence rows blights wheat
complex horticulture: garden crops tended by women contain vegetables, herbs, flowers for dyestuffs, orchards for fruit; men raise corn crops of maize, barley, rye, wheat
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 landscape as commodity
earlier land systems: metes & bounds (random, lots of conflict); French long lots
U.S. preferred abstract grid of Enlightenment, codified in 1785 Land Ordinance: square mile grid units imposed on U.S. landscape by government survey in order to facilitate sale to settlers and speculators.
grid pattern proliferated outward to entire landscape west of Appalachians: city streets, rural road systems, farmers' fields
landscape of the grid: how closely connected to Plymouth's "world of fields and fences"?