

Between Land and Sea

THE ATLANTIC COAST AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF NEW ENGLAND

by Christopher L. Pastore Reviewed by **Hugh Markey**



A 1777 MAP OF NARRAGANSETT BAY described the area as home to “one of the finest Harbours in the World ... fish of all kinds ... in the greatest plenty and perfection. Horses are boney and strong, the Meat Cattle and sheep are much the largest in America, (and) the butter and cheese are excellent.” In short, the map avowed, Narragansett Bay offered “every necessary of Life in Abundance.”

In *Between Land and Sea: The Atlantic Coast and the Transformation of New England*, author Christopher L. Pastore traces the ways in which the belief that the natural world was there for the benefit of mankind literally shaped the landscape of New England from the rugged days of Roger Williams through the Gilded Age and the “summer cottages” along Ocean Drive in Newport. His extensive use of primary sources provides a lively narrative by those who made their fortunes hunting beaver, cartographers creating the first

coastal maps, and merchants fighting to establish their towns as the most trade friendly. All the while, coastal regions were being transformed into something quite different from what had existed before Europeans arrived in the New World.

The first real changes made to the environment came with the interaction of two seemingly humble resources: quahogs and beavers. Long a staple in the Native American diet, quahogs were also the source of wampum. Elsewhere in this issue, Narragansett Tribal member Lorén Spears points out that wampum, contrary to popular belief, was not a form of money to First Peoples. Rather, it was a largely ceremonial decoration, used to honor accomplishments and special occasions. However, Pastore notes that Europeans quickly became fascinated with it and began a brisk trade in beaver pelts for it: “Wampum turned a largely localized, small-scale trade in furs into a region-wide mad dash for pelts. But the removal of so many beavers and the subsequent disintegration of their dams fundamentally changed the way water rolled downhill.”

Overhunting of beaver caused a chain reaction. Pastore says that Roger Williams referred to beavers as “beasts of wonder” that could “draw of great pieces of trees with his teeth, with which, and sticks and earth I have often seen, faire streames and rivers damm’d and stopt up by them.”

However, when the beavers were killed, their dams eventually washed away. The ponds that had been formed by the dams broke free, and the benthic layer dried out. Meadows grew from the newly dried soil, which in turn drew

settlers to the grassy land, which would not require the work involved in clearing trees.

Pastore traces the ways in which the coast of New England shaped history, along with some of the paradigms through which humans viewed the coast. Some regarded uncultivated (or “unimproved,” in the human-centric parlance of the day) regions as a source of ill health and felt that humans had a duty to manipulate the coastal locale. Pastore quotes Scottish historian William Robertson, who wrote, “When any region lies neglected and destitute of cultivation, the air stagnates in the woods, putrid exhalations arise from the waters; the surface of the earth, loaded with rank vegetation, feels not the purifying influence of the sun or of the wind; the malignity of the distempers natural to the climate increases, and the new maladies no less noxious are engendered.”

I had always considered the unfolding of New England history as a series of human accomplishments. *Between Land and Sea* introduces the idea of the coast as an active player in shaping the evolution of this part of America. Much of Pastore’s book specifically documents centuries of change that occurred along the shores of the bay, in Rhode Island cities and towns from Newport and Bristol to Warwick and Providence that were home to traders, farmers, merchants, and even pirates. His observations and quotations from writers of the period create a history that provides a feel for the people who chose to manipulate the coastal environment, whether motivated by religion, politics, or greed.