Building Communities: The Medieval Roots of America's Freedom

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The roots of America's freedom lay in the Middle Ages. The intellectual insistence on human dignity and free will made by St. Augustine of Hippo and Peter Abelard was made side-by-side with technological advances that provided the means for freedom. The ancient world's intellectual approach to technology was not matched by deeds: the Romans built their roads and monuments without the use even of a workable horse collar. Humans had been the power for Mediterranean civilizations. The Middle Ages had another problem, one familiar to settlers in America: too few people. New solutions had to be found in which animals or environment took the place of individuals.

One of the most important medieval triumphs for colonial North America was in food production and processing. Among the many freedoms sought by emigrants from Europe was the freedom to control the products of their labors. Writings from colonial settlers repeatedly describe their new home as, literally, a land of milk and honey.

The project "Building Communities" explores the medieval contribution in technology to colonial America. Farming patterns, building construction, food processing, and settlement foundation all were virtually unchanged from the innovations of the Middle Ages. The proximity was both intellectual and chronological. Both the Jamestown settlement and the Massachusetts Bay Colony were closer to the Medieval Period then the reelection of President George W. Bush is to the invention of the "horseless carriage."

This phase of the "Building Communities" project investigates the role played by iron production and milling as links between medieval Europe and colonial America. They meet at many points, from weapon making to town building, but one important item is food, especially bread. This basic foodstuff for the Middle Ages and Colonial America determined more than a menu. For its control also meant the difference between liberty and servitude. How was it grown, where was it milled, by whom was it baked, and, finally, what was the cost to consume it? Important questions all, and the answers come from sources as diverse as Icelandic Sagas, French paintings, colonial American songs, and scientific treatises.

This investigation concentrates on mills and mining, particularly flour milling and iron production. For the Pennsylvania State University these are of natural interest. The colonial commonwealth of Pennsylvania abounded in mills, and they were a source of great profit to their proprietors. Mining was another source of wealth of the citizens of Pennsylvania, and an antique iron furnace greets visitors at the southeastern entrance to the university.

The Mill

Stereotypes are rarely fair, but they have the unfortunate habit of remaining with us. One persistent stereotype from the Middle Ages to rural America is that of the sly miller. Geoffrey Chaucer's miller in his *Canterbury Tales* has made the trade synonymous for sharp practices and self importance: "He was a thief of corn and meal; on a sly lookout always to steal." This importance was real enough for medieval and colonial people alike.

Mills developed and refined in medieval Europe, particularly in Britain, provided the model for North American mills as settlers in Penn's Woods or the lands of the Lords Baltimore, brought with them their technology from their homes. As was true during the Middle Ages, the colonial American mill was more than a place to grind grain. This was the essential heart of a community, from the grain waving in the fields to the loaf on the baker's board.

In colonial America, unlike medieval Europe, each family had the right to produce its own bread. Medieval mills were part of the lord of a manor's rights. The lord of the manor held the milling monopoly, although, in theory, he was supposed to have enough mills for his subjects and to pay for the mill's repairs. The tenants of the manor had to grind their corn at the lord's mill; the usual fixed rate of toll collected by the miller was one-sixteenth of the flour.

The situation in the new world was different. Mills were built wherever a convenient power supply could be found. People could also bake bread at home from any type of source: rye, pumpkins, barley or corn. Yet, the type of mills they constructed, their preference for wheat bread, and baking methods were all directly taken from the technology of the Middle Ages.

The Forge

The production of iron and its manufacturing uses provided a link between the European Middle Ages and Colonial North America. Throughout the early medieval period there was a search to find improved iron smelting methods. The impurity of the metal had been a concern, so much so that the Beowulf poet specifically mentions "good old swords" as preferred weapons because the metal produced by the Romans was superior to contemporary pieces.

This began to change during the Viking Age, when an improved smelter was developed in Norway. The increased purity of the iron is reflected in larger plowshares and longer swords. Different societies benefited at different times, however, and the Icelandic *Laxdale Saga* describes a warrior whose fighting ability was hindered by the need to straighten the blade of his old sword between blows. The explosion of trade and commerce by the end of the tenth century continued the improvements to iron. Plowshares became larger and new areas in Europe were open for cultivation. Iron nails permitted the construction of larger ships, to carry the increasing amounts of cargoes.

Iron is a direct connection between medieval Europe and North America. About the year 1000 a Viking named Leif Ericsson made a colony in what is now L'Anse aux Meadows

in Newfoundland. The colonists, like their successors six centuries later, imported many things for their subsistence, including a bull. They also needed other goods, such as iron. Across a stream from the colonists' buildings was constructed a bloomery for the iron that was worked at the forges set up beside the main buildings.

Iron nails replaced wooden dowels to join planks, and iron shoes for horses and oxen permitted them to pull greater weights. Fights for control of iron deposits, such as those in southwestern Scotland, influenced political as well as economic concerns. During the English expeditions to Ireland in the twelfth century the troop ships carried nails and implements made of iron as necessary supplies. By the end of the Middle Ages, the manufacture of iron was essential in order to supply materials for construction, warfare, agriculture, and trade.

The dependency on iron and steel was carried to North America by settlers from Ireland and Britain. The famous village smithy was the industrial center of any town or farming community; remembered today in place names such as Old Forge or Valley Forge. Iron deposits were sought out and exploited in order to free the colonists from dependency on imported supplies. Proximity to iron sources often determined the prosperity of a settlement, while the difficulties of transporting the metal in its various stages of production lead to the early transportation networks of the canals.

Summary

The debt of colonial America to Medieval Europe was large. In the following essays, activities and illustrations, the extent of that debt is explored.