



# Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

## *Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS*



Map of the West Indies, c.1850. A number of Salem's most popular imports—including sugar, molasses, coffee, and cocoa—came from the West Indies

## Sweet Geometry: The Taste of Trade

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A familiar staple in a colonial Salem kitchen was a cone of sugar, wrapped in blue or purple paper, and hung from the ceiling on a string. These cones were called sugar loaves, and sugar was sold in this cone-shaped loaf for more than 400 years. The shape originated in Venice and England began to import it as early as 1319. The familiar sugar loaf endured until Henry Tate introduced the first sugar cube in 1872.<sup>1</sup>

Some sugar loaves could weigh nine to ten pounds and would last a family an entire year. Sugar loaves were wrapped in blue or purple paper to keep insects away. The smaller loaves had a hole down the center through which a string was inserted. Housewives suspended the loaves from the ceiling and placed a piece of tin on the string to prevent ants from climbing down from the ceiling onto the loaves. Women saved the paper the sugar was wrapped in, soaked it in water to extract the indigo dye, and used the tinted water to dye a small amount of the finest wool. Sugar was such a precious commodity that it was cut into small lumps with special shears, called nippers. Sugar nippers had blades that did not quite come together and would break off small cubes of sugar.

Only wealthy families could afford sugar loaves or otherwise take advantage of the rich variety of trade goods flooding into the prosperous port of Salem. Families living further inland would not have enjoyed sugar as frequently and instead would have had to rely on honey or maple sugar. However, Salem's role as a major trading port brought in trade goods as sugar, molasses, coffee, and cocoa from the West Indies. Salem began trading with the West Indies during the 1630s, bringing this luxurious sweetener back to local housewives.

In addition to sugar's importance as a sweetener many viewed it as a medicinal commodity to make bitter herbs more palatable. For instance, a mixture of ground aniseed, licorice, coriander seeds and sugar became a remedy for coughs.

Molasses, a by-product of the process of extracting sugar from sugar cane, was the major ingredient in producing rum. The manufacturing of rum and its exportation was a very lucrative business for the New England colonies. It helped the economy grow and led them to become a valuable trading partner with the British Empire. These small sugar loaves also clearly illustrate how the “triangle trade” had a far reaching effect on the daily lives of Salem’s inhabitants.

**Notes**

Henry Tate made a fortune from his sugar cube patent. He used his new found wealth to collect works of art. Shortly after his death in 1899, he built the National Gallery of British Art in London, otherwise known as the Tate Gallery, to house his collection.

National Park Service  
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