

Integrating Sustainability into Hist 352:  
America in the Colonial Era, 1600-1763  
Fall and Spring Terms, 2016-2017  
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As currently configured, Hist 352 is essentially a course devoted to the creation of the thirteen colonies that declared their independence from Britain in 1776 and became the United States of America. Its themes are necessarily but not exclusively political and to a lesser extent economic. If one is to apply a contemporary gloss to them, they probably relate better to Brexit than sustainability. I caution that the course modifications I propose are provisional; all must be tested and adapted as experience and the actual teaching of the course indicate. Students who take Hist 352 thinking that it may shed some light on why the American Revolution occurred might not take kindly to finding themselves immersed in one that spends time on the effects of the immigration of the honeybee—or vice versa, for that matter. Success, as I calculate it, will involve finding ways to embody a few historically conceived sustainability questions in lots of smaller narratives in ways that students may find strange but that will yet engage their attention and interest.

Principally I will give more prominence through lectures, readings, discussions, and exams to two matters that I already touch upon, but not so extensively that they can be easily or fully integrated into the course. I will make them less course outliers by having them appear in any number of the smaller stories that are part of the necessary pedagogical business of any history course but in ways that link the stories together.

First, I will place greater emphasis on what Alfred W. Crosby brought to historical attention as the Columbian Exchange. It can be argued that by reuniting the evolutionary history of the Old and New Worlds European seaborne expansion introduced biological change of far greater significance than political and economic. And so the pollination introduced by the inadvertent importation of the honeybee deserves some place in the course as surely as the more advertent ones from colonial borrowings from the Opposition ideology of English political radicals in the eighteenth century.

Second, I will consider the role of the Little Ice Age in European expansion. Historians quite properly worship context in the never-ending battle to achieve historical understanding, and the climatic conditions in which people lived in the period from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century definitely changed for the worse, though there is disagreement that cannot be resolved within the limits of Hist 352 about the degree, duration, and causes of this change. If one abandons a more traditional explanation—that the source of the Little Ice Age lay in the decline of the number of sunspots—for the more contemporary one of Richard Dull of the University of Texas—that the destruction of Indian societies from European epidemics produced deficits in the Earth's carbon budget—then one is dealing with a vocabulary of causality that links it to the contemporary discussion of sustainability. Of course, the Early Modern problem as Dull defined it was a deficit in the Earth's carbon budget, not the present one of a surplus. But no matter what one settles upon as responsible for the Little Ice Age, its effects upon Early Modern Society are generating some of the most cutting-edge questions about the history of the period. I

will ask my students to read a useful summary of the scholarly discussion as the entire literature is too voluminous and incorporates too much non-North American material to be included in the course except in summary form.

The Columbian Exchange and the Global Crisis will form the sustainability base that can be drawn upon as students and I move along in the course to read about and discuss matters that form the more customary stories of the colonial period—e.g., political instabilities, creation of political elites, economic development, slavery, demographic change, European-Indian relations, land use and expansion, etc. These can be considered separately from each other and from sustainability, but one gains depth and coherence in understanding them if one contextually links them to sustainability.