**DRINKING IN EARLY AMERICA**

Rum Production in the British American colonies.

Europeans introduced sugarcane to the New World in the 1490s. Cane plantations soon spread throughout the Caribbean and South America amd made immense profits for planters & merchants. By 1750, British & French plantations produced most of the world’s sugar and its byproducts, molasses and rum.

At the heart of the plantation system was the labor of millions of enslaved workers, transplanted across the Atlantic like the sugar they produced. The establishment of the 13 British American colonies, with their surplus of raw materials, made it possible for Great Britain to engage in highly lucrative trading via the Triangular Trade routes across the Atlantic. Sugarcane plantations require slave labor. Ships from England traded goods for slaves in Africa. The ships then took the slaves to the sugar plantations in the West Indies. The West Indies sent molasses to the colonies who used the molasses to manufacture rum.

In the hot Caribbean climate, it took about a year for sugar canes to ripen. At nine or ten feet high, they towered above the workers, who used sharp, double-edged knives to cut the stalks. Once cut, the stalks were taken to a mill, where the juice was extracted. Caribbean islands became sugar-production machines, powered by slave labor. In pursuit of sugar fortunes, millions of people were worked to death, and then replaced by more enslaved Africans brought by still more slave ships.

Blocks of sugar were packed for shipment. Workers rolled the barrels to the shore, & loaded them onto small craft for transport to larger, oceangoing vessels. And, in the early 1600s sugar planters in the Caribbean began converting the waste products from sugar making into rum.

Rum was first produced to meet the local demand for alcoholic beverages and to supplement the diet of plantation slaves. After the juice was squeezed from the sugarcane in mills, it was boiled in large cauldrons. Impurities rose to the surface and were skimmed off. The juice was transferred to smaller cauldrons & then to wooden barrels or earthenware molds. The remaining impurities became molasses, which was processed & distilled to make rum. Before long, rum was an important export. Like tobacco, rum was used as currency by some merchants. Like sugar, it was easily packed and shipped in barrels. But, unlike sugar, it could be warehoused for long periods of time and age increased its value

The Molasses Act of 1733, levied heavy taxes on sugar from the West Indies to the American colonies in an attempt to force colonists to purchase the more costly sugar from Britain. The Molasses Act of 1733 was never fully enforced because of the British policy of Salutary Neglect, which basically allowed British officials to turn a 'blind eye' to trade violations.

Prior to the passage of the 1733 Molasses Act British American colonists would get molasses from all islands of the West Indies, including those possessed by the French, Dutch, Spanish & Portuguese. Molasses was an important ingredient in the colonial era. It is a byproduct of sugar cane refinement & has many uses. It was the number one source of sweetener in the world, up until the 1880's and essential for the distillation of rum. The rum industry in the West Indies was one of its major sources of income, and the rum industry in New England was growing. It was essential in the slave trade between the Colonies, the Indies, and Africa.

The problem with molasses was created due to the fact that the non-British West Indian islands were better producers of sugar cane, and therefore molasses. Those islands were able to produce more molasses and thus were capable of selling it at a lower cost to the American colonists.

The non-British West Indian islands were also better trading partners. The British islands refused to purchase colonial exports such as fish, lumber and flour because they did not need it, the non-British islands were in need of these items. The colonist were also prohibited from trading with the British West Indies in grain or livestock because it would compete with Great Britain's market, therefore they were sold to the non-British islands. Due to these factors; refusal to buy products; outlawing the sale of others; and the higher price of molasses; the purchase of molasses from the British West Indies became virtually non-existent.

After complaints about this the British passed the Molasses Act of 1733 which, did not forbid the purchase of molasses from non-British isles, but levied a tax upon all molasses imported into the colonies from non-British isles.

The enforcement of the Molasses Act was difficult, if not non-existent. The colonist found numerous loopholes in the way the tax was enforced. Such ways around the law included going to ports off route and unloading the products bought in the non-British West Indies prior to reaching their destination, and thus avoiding the tax collector.

The colonists would also alter markings on products indicating their point of origin and even bribe tax collection officers.

This law proved to be completely unmanageable but remained in effect until 1763 when the Act expired.