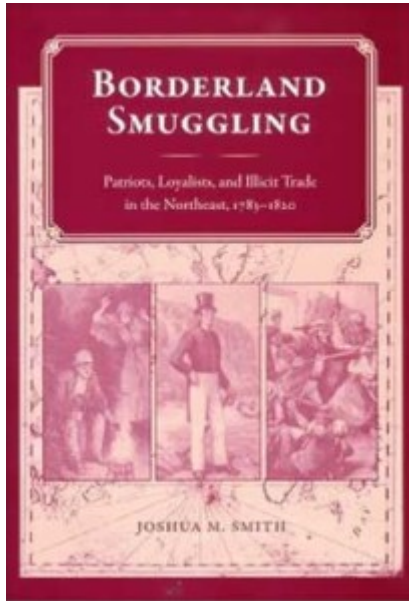


# Resisting State Authority on Passamaquoddy Bay



Joshua M. Smith, *Borderland Smuggling: Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783-1820*. Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 2006. 160 pp., cloth \$55.00.

In this short but exhaustively researched book, Joshua Smith provides a detailed account of the maritime smuggling trade between Maine and New Brunswick. The story begins in 1783, the year that the former became an American state and the latter a British colony, and ends in 1821, the year that the New Brunswick government's efforts to control its plaster trade were abandoned. Aside from this commerce, smuggling from the United States was largely the product of the British Navigation Acts, which banned American ships from the new colony's ports, and the 1807 American trade embargo, which banned the colony's ships from American ports. Most of the resulting smuggling took place on Passamaquoddy Bay, which the author describes as "one of the great smuggling centers of the Atlantic world in the first decades of the nineteenth century" (66).

Passamaquoddy was an ideal location for smuggling because of "the indeterminate border, frequent fogs, numerous secluded coves, beaches, and islands, and its placement at the interface between the mighty commercial British Empire and the rising agrarian American republic" (13). But this was not smuggling as we normally think of it, with low-bulk, high-value commodities such as alcohol or drugs hidden in small compartments. Rather, the main products in question were American flour, salt beef, naval stores, and New Brunswick gypsum or plaster. The latter may have been "mere stone," as one observer noted, but its properties as a calcium-rich fertilizer made it highly valuable to farmers in

the American wheat-raising heartland of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Indeed, it may well have been "British North America's most valuable export to the United States in the first decades of the nineteenth century" (97).

The plaster trade through Passamaquoddy Bay jumped from one hundred tons in 1794 to thirteen thousand by 1802 (42), and it would continue to increase thereafter. Because of its low unit value and the high freight rates, producers transported the product across the border on their own small vessels, thereby upsetting the merchants of Saint John who wished to carry it in their larger vessels directly to market in New York and Philadelphia. By necessity, such an activity took place largely in the open and depended on the support of the local populace, which ensured that customs officials had little choice but to turn a blind eye if they wished to remain in the community. Indeed, these officials generally played a supportive role in what was often a complex process of evading state regulations. Crown customs officers operated quite independently, for they were not responsible to the colonial government, and their American counterparts were equally corrupt. During the embargo period, for example, a shipload of plaster would be nominally seized by the U.S. customs officer; it was then valued at 25 to 50 percent of its real worth by court-appointed appraisers who were usually plaster merchants and smugglers themselves. When a bond for this amount was put up by the owners of the plaster, the ship was released, effectively meaning the owners still made a profit while the appraisers were paid a per diem by the government and the customs officer received a portion of the plaster's value as a reward for the "seizure."

Smugglers also used more violent tactics such as kidnappings and beatings in order to intimidate the authorities, leading to the so-called flour war and plaster war, but Smith insists these were not examples of preindustrial popular resistance, in the Thompsonian sense. Rather, the smuggling business represented the effort of small producers (who claimed simply to be free traders) in an economically marginal environment to take advantage of external market demand, and it contributed to the growth of the local middle class that took part in it. The fact remains, however, that the farmers who were also the builders and owners of the coasting craft that carried the gypsum were claiming the fruits of their labor by defying the political economies of mercantilism.

Loyalties were largely to the local community, and the border only strengthened those ties by necessitating mutual cooperation against outside authority. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the smuggling trade represented a refusal "to believe that their neighbors across the border were different from themselves" (10). Borderland studies generally examine long-established populations that have been divided by an arbitrary boundary, but this was not the case for Maine and New Brunswick. Many of those who settled north of the border did so for political reasons. Smith's assumption that smuggling fostered a mutual sense of community is clearly true, to some extent, and all preindustrial rural populations shared a deep distrust of outside authority, but smuggling could and can take place between peoples of distinctly different

values and cultures who were and are simply willing to take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by an international boundary. In his concluding chapter, Smith provides some interesting examples of a common borderland outlook on Passamaquoddy Bay, but he also states that—contrary to the charges of New Brunswick’s governing elite—there is no evidence that the colonial population had been infected with “a leveling American ideology” (106).

While he leaves the impression that the boundary line and customs duties represented a hindrance to local economic development, Smith does not dispel the possibility that the opposite was true. Certainly, the Passamaquoddy area experienced sudden prosperity during the embargo and War of 1812. Further research is required, then, to test some of this study’s assumptions, and little reference is made to the broader borderlands literature. But the book is well written, with relatively few typos or errors (e.g., on page 116 one sentence states that William Newcomb died in 1796 while the next says that this took place on October 2, 1795). The most glaring oversight is the failure to include a map to guide the reader through the complex geography of the Passamaquoddy area. *Borderland Smuggling* is, in short, an interesting and informative account of how material self-interest and local loyalties trumped broader allegiances in the northeastern borderland of the early nineteenth century.

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