

Louisiana Crops & Fur Resources

As in the case of colonies, the prime objective was to develop industry to help the colony to prosper. The early Louisiana colonists were farmers and fishermen, merchants and traders. Two unusual crops grown in the early Louisiana colony were indigo and wax myrtle trees. The French had experimented with the bayberry or wax myrtle tree, and humans have used the wax myrtle from Mexico to Pennsylvania. In 1721, Father Charlevoix recommended the development of an industry for the wax-bearing plants in Louisiana. By removing berries from the tree and placing them in a cloth sack, then placing the sack in a vat of water over a low fire, the wax separated from the berry. The water was heated to about 109 degrees F, causing the wax to form a film on the surface of the water, which was removed and allowed to cool. The greenish-yellow wax was formed into candles. Bienville encouraged the development of the wax industry. Michael de La Rouvilliere wrote of one of the settlers, Sieur De Dubreuil, who manufactured 6,000 pounds of wax. Planters began to develop wax myrtle plantations, with some plantations having as many as 2,000 wax myrtle trees. New Orleans became the center of the wax trade in North America.

When the first Europeans arrived in Louisiana they found a land rich in natural resources. The early colonists were quick to make use of Louisiana's wildlife resources. Furs were a symbol of wealth and nobility in Europe. By that time, fur-bearing animals had become scarce in Europe. Louisiana and New Orleans not only offered the opportunity to trap furs in the large delta region, but also acted as a port of trade for the fur industry of the entire Mississippi Valley. From the time of its founding in 1720, New Orleans became a major fur center. Buffalo, deer, bear, otter, lynx, and fox hides and pelts were all shipped to Europe through the port of New Orleans. In 1763, two New Orleanians, Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau traveled up river to set up trade with the Indians in the Mississippi Valley. They constructed a small fort and trading post where the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers merge. The small fort grew to become the city of St. Louis.

Evidence exists that the muskrat occurred in Coastal Louisiana marshes as early as 10,000 years ago. The muskrat did not become prominent in the fur trade until the 1900's. Early trappers trapped mink, otter, and raccoons in the 1800's; they also hunted alligators (See www.alligatorfur.com/education/edumaterials.pdf for printable lessons and activities on Alligators). Alligator hide boots, shoes, handbags, etc. were in great demand in Paris. By 1960, the alligator population was at an all time low and the reptile neared extinction. A law was passed in Louisiana in 1963 that



made it illegal to kill or hurt alligators in anyway. Louisiana legalized the controlled harvesting of alligators in 1972 and the reptile is no longer in jeopardy of perishing.

Alligators have dens, which they occupy usually during the winter. The alligator hunters began burning the marsh as a way to find the alligator dens. The burning brought a change in the type of vegetation, favoring three-corner sedge, the preferred food for muskrat. By 1910, the first serious muskrat trapping in Louisiana had begun. Muskrat populations grew at such a rate that in 1912 cattle ranchers in Cameron Parish were paying a bounty of five cents a pelt for them.

By 1912, fur trapping had become important enough for the state legislature to impose a closed season on mink, otters, muskrats, and raccoons. The law stipulated that these animals could be taken only by licensed trappers and only from November 1 to February 1.

The first statistics on the fur industry in Louisiana were kept for the 1913 trappers' season. The report by the Department of Conservation indicates that 5 million pelts were trapped; more that 4.25 million were muskrats.