

Grounds for Debate?

The Place of the Caribbean Provisions Trade in Philadelphia's Prerevolutionary Economy

AS NORTH AMERICAN MERCHANTS DEBATED the effects of the Stamp Act in 1765, Philadelphia's business boomed. Just a year after the act was passed, William Allen, chief justice of the Province of Pennsylvania, boasted, "Philadelphia is not only the busiest port on the American continent, it is probably busier than any port in England except for London and Liverpool."¹ Philadelphia's trade networks stretched from Britain and Ireland in the north Atlantic to Portugal and the Wine Islands in the south and served as the main conduits for the export of raw and manufactured goods, not only to the other North American mainland colonies, but also to the foreign and British West Indies. Although New York and Boston also had important economic connections to the Caribbean in the sugar, molasses, and rum trades, Philadelphia's later entry into the West India market encouraged that city's merchants to experiment with a number of secondary commodities. By the 1760s, these efforts paid off and Philadelphia led in

I presented an earlier version of this article at a joint seminar of the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Program in Early American Economy and Society (PEAES) in April 2003, and benefited from the thoughtful comments and suggestions of those in attendance. I am particularly indebted to David Hancock, Paul Clemens, and especially Roderick McDonald for their subsequent close readings, and to John McCusker and Benjamin Irvin for suggesting additional source material. I would also like to thank Jane Merritt, the 2002–2003 PEAES postdoctoral fellow, for her tutelage, guidance, and support. She is a model for how collaborative and congenial academics can be. Finally, my appreciation to the staffs and librarians of the Library Company of Philadelphia, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Public Records Office, Kew, for their time and assistance. Support for this research came from the McNeil Center for Early American Studies Barra Foundation Dissertation Fellowship in Art and Material Culture (2001–2002) and the Library Company PEAES Dissertation Fellowship (2002–2003).

¹ William Allen to Thomas Penn, Nov. 12, 1766, Official Correspondence, Penn Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

imports of ginger, pimento, and pepper, and controlled over half of the Caribbean coffee imports into North America.

Both legs of the voyage show the importance of this trade; in addition to being the source of increasingly diverse imports, the British Caribbean was Philadelphia's chief export market on the eve of the Revolution. In this respect, the city's West Indian commerce was better integrated into the region's economy than other branches, since it relied on an exchange of locally produced goods. The islands needed what Philadelphia and its surrounding hinterland produced—especially flour, bread, and lumber—and Philadelphia merchants wanted what West Indian planters offered in return, sometimes lines of credit drawn from British lenders, but more often produce, which could be sold in the city or reexported throughout the thirteen colonies and Europe.² Philadelphia's mercantile community thus found trade with the Caribbean more attractive than the dry goods trade, which was more one dimensional, depended on externally produced commodities, and required access to currency or credit.

Given the importance of West Indian commerce, it is curious that historians of nonimportation have rarely considered why Philadelphia's embargoes of 1765 and 1769 did not include the British Caribbean, or question what would have happened if they had. For the most part, dry goods merchants imported either luxuries, or items that could be produced locally or done without. But the provisions trade was different. It was the livelihood, not only of traders, but also of the region's farmers, millers, carpenters, and longshoremen who grew, processed, and transported goods from surrounding communities to Philadelphia's docks, relying on a market that had been remarkably stable for decades.

Between 1765 and 1774, Philadelphia merchants discussed how to respond to and mobilize against parliamentary legislation that sought to tighten control over colonial trade. The city's coffeehouses hosted these debates, which elucidated both the quantitative data of customs papers and port records and the more qualitative impressions merchants held about their relationships to the metropole and to each other. Scholars have contended that Philadelphia's 1765 and 1769 boycotts targeted the British dry goods trade because its preeminent position in the city's trade network made it the most useful tool for economic and political leverage. This article argues that, on the contrary, it was the size and stability of Caribbean demand, combined with the growth of specific imports such as

² Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca, NY, 1973), 276.

coffee, that caused the provisions trade—not British dry goods—to be the real litmus test of Philadelphia's patriotism.³ Philadelphia merchants did add the British West Indies to their third and final boycott of 1774, but the islands had been excluded from the first two embargoes, not because they were inconsequential, but because they mattered too much.

The Trade Routes of Philadelphia's Merchants

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Philadelphia merchants engaged in two broad areas of commerce, the dry goods and provisions trades. Although some larger firms participated in both, differences in markets, shipping, financing, and commodities imported caused most merchants to concentrate their efforts.⁴ Dry goods traders brought in manufactured goods such as furniture, hardware, glassware, paper, and ceramics—primarily from England—and a plethora of smaller wares such

³ See, as examples, Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763–1776* (New York, 1918); Charles M. Andrews, *The Boston Merchants and the Non-Importation Movement* (1917; repr. New York, 1968); Carl Lotus Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (1909; repr. Madison, WI, 1969); and Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1953).

Neoprogressives of the 1970s pointed out the major flaw of these earlier studies, which cast merchants in the vanguard of political activity, arguing that traders were reticent instead of revolutionary and more likely to support political protest if it also served their own financial interests. More than a political message, nonimportation in 1765 gave Philadelphia merchants the opportunity to clear their warehouses and reduce the balance they owed to creditors. Their reluctance to do so again in 1769 had less to do with declining interest than with dwindling inventories. See, as examples, Marc Egnal and Joseph A. Ernst, "An Economic Interpretation of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 29 (1972): 15–30, and Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), especially 247–51 and 312–38. More recently, Thomas Doerflinger modified this interpretation, contending that Philadelphia's dry goods market was chronically overstocked between 1760 and 1775, but that merchants' position in the Atlantic trade hierarchy was not under attack. While newer and smaller merchants benefited from extensions of British credit, wholesale merchants continued their trade and still imported on the same terms of credit. Thomas M. Doerflinger, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation, 1760–1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (1983): 199–202.

⁴ Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986), 78–79. Doerflinger was the first to challenge the image of colonial merchants as "jacks of all trades." His analyses of tonnage records for 1765–1775 and 1785–1787 indicate that merchants began specializing much earlier than previously thought, with 86 percent of all Philadelphia firms focusing their efforts in one of four geographic areas: England and Ireland, southern Europe and Africa, the Caribbean, or the North American coast.

as buttons, ribbons, gloves, and clothing, which Philadelphia's newspapers heralded as the latest European fashions as soon as they arrived in port.⁵

Goods shipped to England were equally varied. These included local manufactures, such as bar iron and ash, as well as flaxseed, wheat, corn, beeswax, and lumber. To help balance their trade deficit, Philadelphia merchants also reexported the produce of other regions. Rice and naval stores from the southern colonies and Chesapeake regularly appeared on dry goods merchants' ships bound from Philadelphia to the metropole, as did Caribbean rum, dyewoods and spices, and Portuguese oil and wine.⁶ But despite their best efforts, trade imbalances left colonial merchants deeply indebted to their London counterparts. Whereas only 157 vessels cleared Philadelphia for London between 1768 and 1773, 282 vessels entered the city from English ports.⁷ The value of ships' cargoes evinced an even larger imbalance, with Philadelphia's shipments to England for those years amounting to £174,376, while London imports into the city were worth more than twelve times as much—£2,003,554.⁸

Provisions merchants showed greater diversity. They dealt with Ireland, the West Indies, the North American coastline, and, by the late 1760s, southern Europe as well as England, and their trade routes took various forms. Merchants focusing on the Irish trade, such as Benjamin

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of dry goods advertising in Philadelphia before the American Revolution, see Marc Egnal, "The Pennsylvania Economy, 1748–1762: An Analysis of Short-Run Fluctuations in the Context of Long-Run Changes in the Atlantic Trading Community" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1974), especially chap. 3 and app. D, p. 313.

⁶ One of the city's leading merchants, John Reynell, described the relationship between the export and reexport trades: "We make out remittances a great many different ways sometimes to the West Indies in Bread, Flour, Pork, Indian Corn, and hogshead Staves, sometimes to Carrolina and New Foundland in Bread and Flour, sometimes to Portugall in Wheat, Flour and Pipe Staves, sometimes to Ireland in Flaxseed Flour, Oak and Walnut Planks and Barrel Staves and to England in Skinns, Tobacco, Beeswax, Staves of all kinds, Oak and Walnut Planks, boat boards, pigg iron, Tarr, Pitch, Turpentine, Ships, and Bills of Exchange." John Reynell to Thomas Smith, Sept. 4, 1741, John Reynell Letterbook, 1734–1774, Coates and Reynell Papers, 1702–1843, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁷ Customs 16/1: America, 1768–1772, Public Records Office (PRO) (hereafter cited as Customs 16/1). The records include total number of vessels and tonnage in and out of all British North American ports, the Floridas, and Bahamas. The above figures are based on records of incoming and outgoing vessels to Britain and Ireland. See also R. Fenton Duvall, "Philadelphia's Maritime Commerce with the British Empire, 1783–1789" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1960), note 40. Duvall separates vessels to England from the rest of the British Isles, though they generally appear together in customs tabulations.

⁸ David MacPherson, *Annals of Commerce, Manufactures, Fisheries, and Navigation with Brief Notices of the Arts and Sciences Connected with Them* (London, 1805), 3:486–533.

Fuller, exported flaxseed in return for linen and woolen cloth from Dublin.⁹ Others participated in a kind of triangular trade between Ireland and England, sending cargoes of local products and reexports to Ireland in exchange for bills of credit or freight. This credit or cargo was then carried to London or Liverpool and exchanged for English manufactures that returned to Philadelphia.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Philadelphia traders, such as William Pollard, facilitated economic exchanges between British merchant houses and Caribbean ports. Unable to underwrite ventures of his own, Pollard profited by arranging contracts for Liverpool merchants to bring Pennsylvania and Delaware cargoes of wood and wheat for transshipment to Jamaica, Dominica, and St. Lucia.¹¹

North America's coastal trade involved the largest number of Philadelphia's middling and smaller merchants. Unlike the dry goods trade, which required cash on hand or extensive credit, or the long-range provisions trade, which depended on larger ships and brigantines, the coastal trade relied almost entirely on small, inexpensive sloops.¹² Many of these minor merchantmen made only one or two trips a year, journeying as far north as Nova Scotia and as far south as Florida. Eighteen cities regularly appear in customs papers between 1768 and 1772, but most Philadelphia sloops sailed to one of five locations: Massachusetts, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. These five colonies comprised 63 to 71 percent of all of the city's coastal trade, although important differences existed between them.¹³

Massachusetts consistently received more of Philadelphia's imports

⁹ Benjamin Fuller Letterbook, 1762–1781, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. For information on Irish orders, see letters dated Jan. 29, 1769, July 12, 1769, Feb. 26, 1770, and June 6, 1770. Since the crop's growing cycle meant that Fuller shipped most of his flaxseed during November and December, he was free to trade with other regions during the rest of the year. Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 103–4.

¹⁰ Customs 16/1, goods identified as exports to Ireland from Philadelphia.

¹¹ For descriptions of this triangular trade, see William Pollard Letterbook, 1772–1774, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, especially letters to Mr. Brian Bayley (Kingston, Jamaica), July 29, 1772, and Messrs. Serecold and Jackson, Merchants (London), Dec. 18, 1772.

¹² While snows or ships cost between £2,000 and £6,000, a sloop or schooner could be purchased for as little as £500. Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 100.

¹³ Customs 16/1. These figures reflect the number of vessels and tonnage leaving Philadelphia between Jan. 5, 1768, and Jan. 5, 1773. Although these colonies were regularly the top five importers, they do not necessarily remain in the same order. In 1768, for example, only 745 tons were shipped from Philadelphia to South Carolina. Two years later, almost twice the tonnage, 1,342 tons, moved between the two regions. There are clear distinctions, however, between Philadelphia's major and minor trade partners. Most colonies received and sent fewer than ten sloops a year; the top colonies, by contrast, accounted for between twenty and seventy vessels during the same time period.

and exports than any other colony, but despite the trade's size it was the least lucrative of the coastal routes. New England merchants owned the majority of ships involved and, in many cases, also owned the cargoes awaiting consignment in Philadelphia's warehouses. Most Philadelphia traders, therefore, accrued only the commission for assembling outbound and inbound cargoes. Philadelphia merchant William Redwood was an exception, since the volume of his trade to the northern colonies was much higher than that of other city traders. He could thus dictate the terms of his transactions, using his Philadelphia built and registered ships for most of the traffic.¹⁴

Philadelphia merchants found trade more profitable south of the Mason-Dixon line, importing agricultural staples, such as rice and indigo from South Carolina, naval stores from North Carolina, and tobacco from Maryland and Virginia. These they balanced with exports of European manufactures, Caribbean produce, New England rum, and to the larger South Carolina plantations, flour and bread. And unlike the New England route, Philadelphia ships were also the primary carriers in these transactions, which involved so many vessels that some merchants even maintained satellite offices in the south. William West, for example, annually balanced revenues from his Charleston branch against his Pennsylvania accounts.¹⁵

Philadelphia's only significant trade outside the British Empire was to southern Europe and the Wine Islands. In return for wine and other liquors, fruits, and salt, provisions merchants sent wheat, flour, and wood to these regions, since these commodities were not among those enumerated in Britain's Navigation Acts and thus could be freely traded to foreign nations. These routes opened later than the Irish and coastal trades following a series of poor harvests in Europe during the mid-1760s, which significantly increased both the demand and price for wheat.¹⁶ This new market developed rapidly and paid well, luring even established traders,

¹⁴ Arthur L. Jensen, *The Maritime Commerce of Colonial Philadelphia* (Madison, WI, 1963), 70–76; Josiah and Samuel Coates Bills of Lading, 1786–1791, Coates and Reynell Papers; William Redwood Journal, 1749–1760, and Ledger, 1775–1809, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 77–84; for examples of Philadelphia merchants engaged in the southern coastal trade see: Levi Hollingsworth Ledger H, 1783–1784, Hollingsworth Family Papers; James and Drinker Letterbook, 1756–1759, Henry Drinker Business Papers, 1756–1869; William West Letterbook, 1783–1788, West Family Business Records, 1769–1804, all at Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁶ Customs 16/1. These figures are based on reports of inbound and outbound vessels to the ports of southern Europe and Africa.

such as the brothers John and Peter Chevalier, to shift from a combination dry goods and Caribbean provisions trade in the 1760s to a provisions trade focused on southern Europe, particularly Lisbon, after 1771.¹⁷

Despite these alternatives, the British Caribbean dominated Philadelphia's provisions market throughout the eighteenth century. The island trade involved more Philadelphia vessels than any other trade route and, in some years, almost as many as all other regions combined. The British naval officers stationed in West Indian ports, who monitored maritime activity, recorded sizable imports of Pennsylvania wheat and wood, as well as smaller quantities of beef, pork, rice, soap, candles, iron, butter, potatoes, fish, and oil.¹⁸ Wheat came as both flour and bread to feed the Caribbean's growing enslaved populations, while wood arrived as planks, boards, shingles, staves, and hoops, and was used to construct the hogsheads, barrels, quarters, and casks that held the islands' outbound cargoes.¹⁹ After enjoying a steady market during the 1740s and 1750s, merchants to the West Indies anticipated even greater profits when the military activity of the Seven Years' War shifted from the North American mainland to the Caribbean.²⁰ They valued this commerce not only because of its size but also for its profitability. Unlike in their other endeavors, Philadelphia merchants actually benefited from a balance of trade in which outbound cargoes were usually valued at least 10 percent higher than the inbound trade.²¹

As Philadelphia's primary export market, the British West Indies were of paramount importance. When Philadelphia merchants were considering nonimportation, the West Indies were invariably the city's largest customer and its principal trading partner. A comparison of the number of ships and volume of cargo carried from Philadelphia to its four major-markets bears this out:

¹⁷ John and Peter Chevalier Journals, 1757–1783, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁸ List of commodities summarized from Naval Office Shipping Lists, Jamaica, PRO CO 142 (hereafter NOSL), records of inbound vessels for 1762 and 1766.

¹⁹ The importance of Philadelphia wood imports was even more apparent after American independence, when U.S. vessels were banned from trading with the British Caribbean under provisions of Britain's Navigation Acts. Jamaican planters argued "that there is not sufficient quantity of staves and other lumber in this island for the ensuing crop, and that by means of this sudden and unexpected prohibition the planters are deprived of the means of procuring a supply for the ensuing crop, part of which for want of packages will probably perish in their hands." "Petition at the Court of St. James presented on July 2nd, 1783," *Journals of the House of Assembly*, Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Jamaica.

²⁰ Drinker cited in Egnal, "Pennsylvania Economy," 247.

²¹ Duvall, "Philadelphia's Maritime Commerce," 31–34.

Table 1: Port of Philadelphia: Volume of Exports by Region, 1768–1769

Region	Vessels Inward	Sloops Inward	Tonnage	Vessels Outward	Sloops Outward	Tonnage
Great Britain & Ireland	74	1	8,394	77	1	7,616
Southern Europe & Africa	56	7	5,001	80	8	7,255
Foreign & British West Indies	131	8	11,677	119	87	12,019
Coastwise (N. America Trade)	26	225	9,898	40	246	10,534

Source: Customs 16/1: America, 1768–1772.

Moreover, these figures, which place the West Indies at the forefront of Philadelphia’s trade, probably underestimate their significance. While some historians have described the Caribbean provisions trade as a bilateral shuttle route between Philadelphia and the island port of export, several account books by participating merchants reveal the regular occurrence of intermediate stops at other North American ports, such as South Carolina or Virginia.²² William West’s venture on the brigantine *Polly and Nancy*, for example, stopped in Charleston to offload a portion of its cargo of sugar and coffee before continuing on to Philadelphia from Jamaica. Charleston was the *Polly and Nancy*’s intermediate stop again four months later, this time receiving a shipment of tobacco from Philadelphia before the brigantine headed to the islands.²³ Even if coastal ships did not proceed to the Caribbean, much of the merchandise they shuttled to Philadelphia from other mainland colonies would have been reexported to the British West Indies. Some of the North American coastal activity recorded above thus represents an extension of the West Indian trade rather than a separate route entirely.²⁴

²² Marc Egnal describes the shuttle pattern between Philadelphia and the West Indies as bilateral in “The Changing Structure of Philadelphia’s Trade with the British West Indies, 1750–1775,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 99 (1975): 156–64.

²³ William West Letterbook, 1783–1787, especially pp. 91–101, West Family Business Records.

²⁴ For examples of interactions between Caribbean and coastal trade networks, see John Drinker Account Books, 1776–1779; Levi Hollingsworth Account Book, 1768–1775, Hollingsworth Family Papers; William Redwood Antigua Journal, 1782–1787 and Ledger, 1775–1809; and William West Ledger, 1770–1777, Letterbook, 1783–1788, and Journal, 1787–1790, West Family Business Records, all at Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Strong or Stagnant? The Status of Philadelphia's Prerevolutionary Provisions Trade

Despite these strong commercial connections, scholars have rarely suggested economic interdependence as a motive for Philadelphia merchants' decision to omit the Caribbean from their early embargoes. If mentioned at all, scholars argue that the island provisions trade suffered a period of stagnation during the mid-1760s that contributed to the instability and volatility of prerevolutionary Philadelphia's economy.²⁵ But customs records just prior to 1776 tell a different story. Table 2 summarizes Caribbean activity for Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, comparing the volume of West Indian imports and exports to each city's total trade from 1768 to 1772:

Table 2: Comparison of the Caribbean Provisions Trade for
Four Colonial Port Cities, 1768–1773

Year	Boston	New York	Philadelphia	Charleston
1768 inbound (% of total trade):	10,811 (33.8%)	6,301 (28.8%)	11,677 (33.3%)	8,238 (26.1%)
1768 outbound (% of total trade):	10,095 (29.9%)	6,981 (9.6%)	12,019 (32.1%)	5,808 (18.4%)
1769 inbound:	10,495 (25.9%)	6,924 (25.8%)	11,726 (27.6%)	6,123 (21.0%)
1769 outbound:	8,995 (24.2%)	5,446 (20.1%)	11,114 (27.1%)	5,807 (18.6%)
1770 inbound:	11,088 (28.9%)	8,695 (34.0%)	14,946 (31.5%)	9,563 (34.7%)
1770 outbound:	8,248 (22.3%)	7,005 (26.3%)	13,842 (29.5%)	7,374 (24.6%)
1771 inbound:	8,586 (21.7%)	8,191 (32.7%)	13,397 (32.1%)	8,208 (26.8%)
1771 outbound:	9,171 (23.6%)	7,708 (30.2%)	13,449 (31.2%)	6,131 (19.6%)
1772 inbound:	12,649 (29.0%)	8,170 (28.3%)	12,947 (30.6%)	6,121 (20.4%)
1772 outbound:	10,073 (23.7%)	8,076 (28.7%)	15,674 (34.2%)	5,749 (18.2%)

Amounts are given in tons with the percentage this represents of the total annual trade for each city. Based on Customs 16/1, summaries of topsails, sloops, and tonnage to and from the foreign and British West Indies for each year.

²⁵ Egnal, "Changing Structure of Philadelphia's Trade," 163–66; Egnal, "Pennsylvania Economy," 329; Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 292; Doerflinger, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation," 206–7. Doerflinger also notes, however, that while "it does appear that the years 1764–1768 were marked by severe financial stagnation," the "relevant data are not fully consistent." *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 175.

These figures demonstrate that, while other North American port cities had significant investments in the Caribbean, Philadelphia led the field.²⁶ The strength and stability of the Caribbean trade prompted Philadelphia merchant William Pollard to assert, "there certainly is no other market but those of America that the West Indies Islands can apply to, where they can be better served and therefore they still depend on us for provisions and lumber."²⁷ Moreover, the intermittent cessation of commercial activity to Britain in 1765 and 1769 strengthened Philadelphia's ties to the British West Indies. Of the city's total inbound tonnage between 1768 and 1773, the largest concentration—more than 31 percent—came from the Caribbean.²⁸

The argument that Caribbean trade declined in the mid-1760s stems from two mistaken assumptions. The first is that the West Indies and southern European flour trades can be conflated. Between 1766 and 1768, the combined commerce to these two regions did decrease, and scholars usually see 1769 as the turning point after which exports soared to 128 percent above their 1768 levels.²⁹ These trends do not emerge, however, when the regions are considered separately. While demand for Philadelphia flour in southern Europe did rise, the increase lasted only two years before declining in 1770 and 1771, leaving unaltered the city's trade patterns, with the West Indies remaining the bedrock of Philadelphia's export economy.³⁰

²⁶ For the best comparative discussion of North American port cities, including their relationship to the Caribbean, see Jacob M. Price, "Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974): 123–86.

²⁷ William Pollard to Messrs. Serecold and Jackson, Merchants (London), Dec. 18, 1772, William Pollard Letterbook, 1772–1774.

²⁸ Combined figures for 1768 to 1773 are 64,693 tons from the West Indies inbound and 66,098 outbound. Customs 16/1.

²⁹ Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 292. This statistic is reiterated in both Egnal's "Pennsylvania Economy" and Doerflinger's *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*.

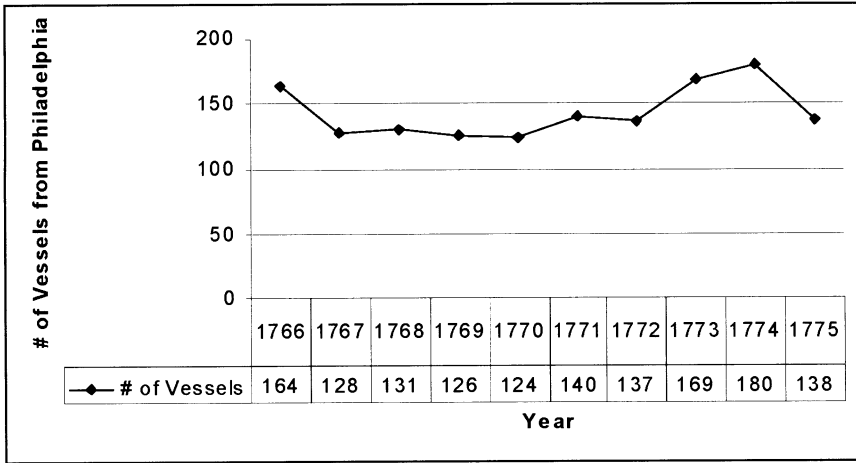
³⁰ The following works argue, not only for the significance of the southern European trade, but also for its eventual preeminence: "The Caribbean was gradually superseded as Philadelphia's most dynamic export market by Madeira, the Canaries, and the Iberian Peninsula, an area subsumed under the rubric 'southern Europe'." Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 108. See also, Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 292, and Egnal, "Pennsylvania Economy," 328–29. Between 1769 and 1770, the number of vessels to these ports almost doubled, carrying 155,233 and 165,315 bushels of wheat respectively. But these figures are misleading. The rise in Philadelphia wheat exports to southern Europe did not result in their diminution to the West Indies, as later happened with a one-year aberration of wheat sales to London. Wheat exports increased to both southern Europe and the West Indies between 1760 and 1766, and the subsequent decline in southern European exports was not paralleled by a significant reduction in Caribbean trade, based on number of ships and registered tonnage from Philadelphia to southern Europe and the Wine Islands. Customs 16/1.

The second and more problematic assumption is that, independent of southern European activity, West Indian demand diminished in the mid-1760s, and this instability, along with a concurrent oversupply of dry goods, put Philadelphia in a state of “commercial downturn” with “serious structural problems” even before Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765.³¹ One way to test this theory is to focus more specifically on Philadelphia’s major West Indian ports of call by analyzing two key variables: the number of ships from Philadelphia to the Caribbean and the cargo weight they carried.³² Figure 1 charts the number of vessels traveling to most of the important island ports:

³¹ Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 175–78.

³² In the past four decades, historians have discussed the utility of certain measures in determining economic activity and growth. Among these scholars are John J. McCusker, “Colonial Tonnage Measurement: Five Philadelphia Merchant Ships as a Sample,” *Journal of Economic History* 27 (1967): 82–91, and “Weights and Measures in the Colonial Sugar Trade: The Gallon and the Pound and Their International Equivalents,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 30 (1973): 599–624; Christopher French, “Eighteenth-Century Shipping Tonnage Measurements,” *Journal of Economic History* 33 (1973): 434–43; and Jacob M. Price, “A Note on the Value of Colonial Exports in Shipping,” *Journal of Economic History* 36 (1976): 704–24. Among other factors, their works note differences between foreign- and American-built vessel sizes, registered and measured cargo capacity, and tonnage value relative to the composition of commodities. Their arguments are compelling and should be taken into account. Comparing ship tonnage across ports, for example, runs the risk of comparing weights of different kinds of goods, without accounting for their per pound or per piece price. A pound of sugar, for example, was worth much less in 1775 than a pound of coffee. With these concerns in mind, however, some documentation does not permit analysis on as close a level as historians might prefer. Customs 16/1 and the Tonnage Books, 1765–1775, used in this article (Philadelphia Custom House, Tonnage Books, 1765–1775, Cadwalader Collection, Series 3, Thomas Cadwalader Papers, bound vols., misc. vol. 8 [a:1765; b:1768–1772; c:1765–1775], hereafter Tonnage Books, 1765–1775), for example, do not record weights per type of import or produce. Only ship type, which gives some sense of size and cargo capacity, and total tonnage are included. However, as the NOSL records for goods shipped to Jamaica and other British West Indian colonies from 1765 to 1775 do not indicate any significant shift in export composition to the city, I feel comfortable offering the conclusions found in figures 1 and 2. Intended only to track changes in the volume of trade between Philadelphia and the West Indies, and allowing for no major changes in the kinds of goods the city was importing, these cannot be used to estimate the monetary value for trade during these years, but do permit an examination of changes in the trade’s size and continuity.

Figure 1: Number of Vessels from Philadelphia to the West Indies, 1766–1775



Sources: Customs 16/1 and Tonnage Books, 1765–1775.³³

The sharpest decline in trade came between 1766 and 1767, but resulted from one aberrant year of increasing British demand rather than from competition from southern Europe. A bad harvest year precipitated tremendous demand for Philadelphia wheat, and with London merchants generally offering better prices than their Caribbean counterparts, flour shipments to the islands declined.³⁴ But the disruption was short-lived; within two years, fewer than two thousand bushels went from Philadelphia to London, and by 1770 England was importing no Pennsylvania wheat at all. Declining English and southern European demand allowed Philadelphia merchants to restore undivided attention to the Caribbean, and flour prices returned to their pre-1769 levels.³⁵

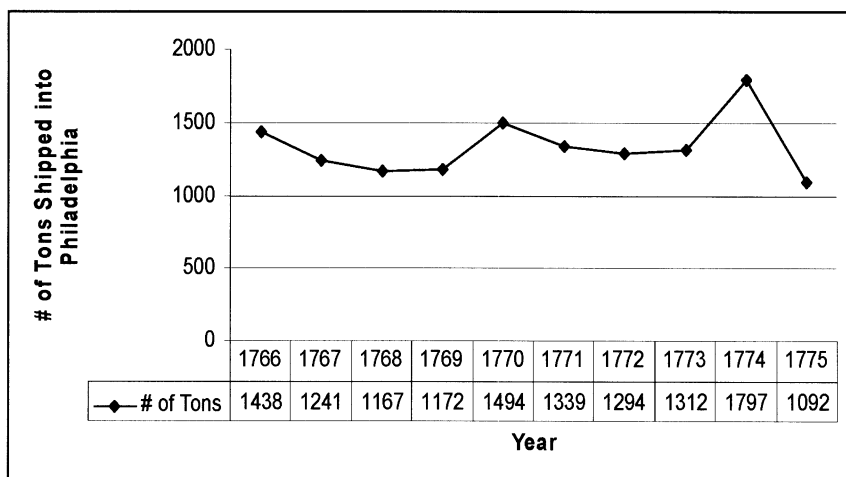
³³ Customs 16/1 and Tonnage Books, 1765–1775. As records for 1765 only include November and December, this year was not included above. Moreover, only the first three quarters of 1775 are available. If the same number of ships in the preceding four fourth quarters were estimated for 1775, the pattern would continue to climb rather than decline for that year. Figures above are based on ships arriving from: Antigua, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Martinique, Puerto Rico, St. Domingue, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Trinidad and Tobago.

³⁴ Daniel Roberdeau Letterbook, especially letter to James Habershaw, Nov. 14, 1766, Roberdeau Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Alfred S. Martin, "The Port of Philadelphia, 1763–1776" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1941), 109.

³⁵ Benjamin Fuller to Paul Abbott, Dec. 10, 1769, Benjamin Fuller Letterbook, 1762–1781.

The story is the same for West Indian imports into Philadelphia. Although some vessels did return without significant cargo, merchants were usually able to secure a viable reciprocal trade.³⁶ Figure 2 traces the tonnage of ships returning from their West Indian voyages, and confirms the pattern of a steady, even growing, avenue of commerce. Although trade decreased slightly in 1767 and 1768, it was still much higher than with any other region, and by 1769 tonnage was again growing and achieved significant increases by 1774:

Figure 2: Tonnage Shipped from the West Indies into Philadelphia, 1766–1775



Sources: Customs 16/1 and Tonnage Books, 1765–1775.

Signs of stability can be even more clearly discerned by looking at particular trade routes. Although Philadelphia's West Indian commercial network involved dozens of ports, ranging from the tiny islands of Dominica and St. Kitts to the large colonies of British Jamaica and French St. Domingue, most of the city's merchants concentrated on Barbados and Jamaica.³⁷ In 1773, 227 ships—accounting for more than

³⁶ This practice was most common in the first and fourth quarters of normal years, which coincided with a decline in the agricultural cycles of many Caribbean goods. During these months, it was common to see ships returning to Philadelphia carrying only "ballast." See NOSL for 1762 to 1769.

³⁷ Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 110–11. Between 1768 and 1773, Doerflinger records 193 voyages to Jamaica and 34 to Barbados. By this time, French St. Domingue had become Philadelphia's second largest Caribbean port of call, with fifty-four ships during these years.

half of all Philadelphia voyages to the Caribbean—stopped in one of these two places. Barbados was Philadelphia's biggest market during the first half of the eighteenth century, but by 1766 Jamaica had assumed primacy, with 42 vessels to Barbados's 18, and would not relinquish its dominance until after the American Revolution.³⁸ There were almost as many merchants as there were ships involved in the Jamaican trade. Available customs records do not include vessel owners, and the Naval Office shipping lists for Philadelphia no longer exist, but two sources, Philadelphia port tonnage books, which do not include freight but do list ship owners or consigners and places of embarkation, and Jamaican export records, which include outbound cargo, make it possible to determine who dealt in specific commodities. Over eighty merchants, some well known and others obscure, had ships set sail between 1766 and 1773.³⁹ Most sponsored only one voyage a year and many financed a ship to Jamaica once every two or three years, but others managed far more frequent interactions.

Although some Philadelphia merchants arranged consignments on behalf of British merchant houses, most funded their voyages locally, balancing costs and risks against potential gains.⁴⁰ The ledger book for Samuel Massey and his business partner, Benjamin Mifflin, outlines the expense of such an investment. From April to June of 1761, John Ashmead, master of their ship *Live Oak* destined for Kingston, Jamaica, assembled a cargo of flour, lumber, and Indian corn, as well as nails, sail-

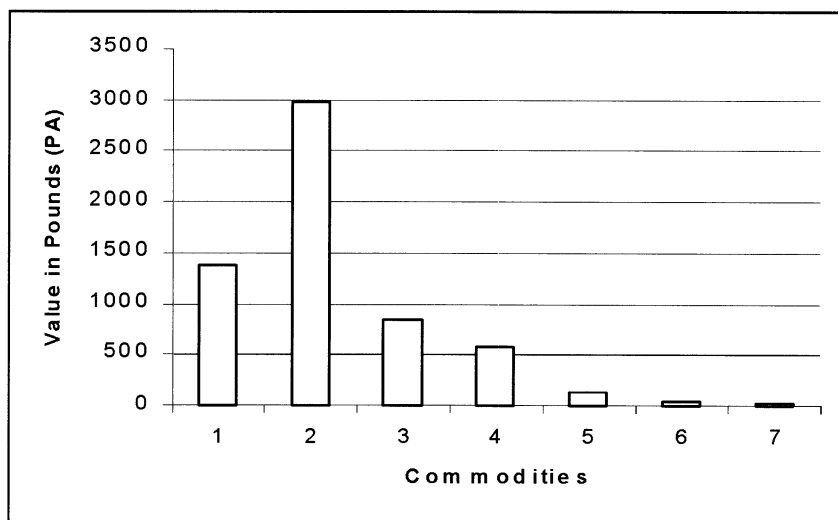
³⁸ Tonnage Books, 1765–1775, vol. 8a, 1766. The assumption that Philadelphia's economic connection to the West Indies was weakening is based, in part, on the city's declining Barbadian trade. Egnal, "Pennsylvania's Economy," 273–75. It is true that both the number of ships and tonnage between Barbados and Philadelphia decreased appreciably in the late 1760s, but rather than heralding a decline in the region's trade overall, this change represented a shift of trade from the older islands based on sugar, to the younger colony of Jamaica and a much more diverse range of exports.

³⁹ Tonnage Books, 1765–1775, based on a list of merchants compiled for 1766 to 1775. Only 1766 to 1773 are discussed here since the pattern of trade to Jamaica changed in important ways after the 1774 embargo, which included the West Indies beginning in 1775.

⁴⁰ Egnal, "Pennsylvania Economy," 279. Egnal argues that Philadelphia's ships to the West Indies were increasingly under British consignment, producing a shift in trade routes from a shuttle pattern between Philadelphia and the Caribbean, to a triangular trade that included London and involved "vessels set in a fixed course, carrying manufactures to the colonies, provisions to the islands, and sugar and rum back to England." But this represented, at most, 10 percent of the total West Indian trade, and was far more common in the older colonies of Barbados and Antigua. While Egnal includes Jamaica in this analysis, he focuses on trade to the "northern half of the island," principally Montego Bay. Kingston, however, located on Jamaica's south coast, was the island's dominant port of call during the years under consideration, and its shuttle trade was less affected by British consignment investors.

cloth, and other minor necessities for the vessel's maintenance valued at £1,189 12s. 10½d. The *Live Oak's* investment increased the following year, when materials and export goods for a second Jamaican voyage cost £1,857 9s. 9d. and was insured with another Philadelphia merchant, Thomas Wharton, for £129 5s. 0d. But these investments paid off handsomely:

Figure 3: Mifflin and Massey, Caribbean Commodities Income, 1761–1762



Source: Mifflin and Massey Ledger Book, 1760–1763, 1–42, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

1=sugar	2= rum	3= coffee
4= molasses	5=cocoa	6=ginger
7=pepper		

Massey and Mifflin's gross receipts totaled over £8,500, meaning that, after expenses, they realized a net profit of £5,323, or slightly more than 100 percent on the two runs combined, with the majority of their revenues coming from sugar, molasses, rum, and coffee.⁴¹

⁴¹ Profits this high, though the exception rather than the rule, were not unheard of. Doerflinger records proceeds of between £1,423 and £3,000 on single voyages in 1770 and 1773, respectively. *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 120.

The Case for Coffee: Philadelphia's Speculation in Secondary Commodities

While most North American ports had some dealings in Caribbean sugar and its derivatives, Philadelphia's relationship to coffee was unique and warrants closer attention. A focus on this trade provides one of the best ways to see the provisions trade's expanding potential, not only through the exports discussed above, but also increasingly through specialized imports.

In 1768 North America's combined colonies brought in 318,915 pounds of coffee, with Philadelphia's share totaling one-third, or 36.3 percent. The following year, 459,104 pounds passed through American harbors, this time 44.4 percent via Philadelphia, and by 1772–1773 the city controlled 53.8 percent of the coffee trade.⁴² The merchants responsible for these imports had to deal with a number of important variables, including the source of the coffee; the duties and drawbacks that applied to British and foreign sources; the quality of the beans; and finally, the availability and strength of the consumer market. The first three factors—suppliers, duties, and quality—were interrelated issues that offered Philadelphia merchants some options. Initially, coffee came via London from the Middle East or the Dutch East Indian island of Java, which had a reputation for quality long before British alternatives entered the market. By 1790 physician Benjamin Smith Barton lamented, “coffee from the port of Mocha or Java is most preferred, and then after that French. Coffee from the British islands is fit only for negroes and should be avoided if at all possible as it [is] too bitter.”⁴³

As Barton's correspondence suggests, merchants could also look to French sources, especially the Caribbean colony of St. Domingue. The French West Indies entered the field of coffee cultivation earlier than the British, and advances in agricultural techniques resulted in a product

⁴² Customs 16/1. Imports are recorded in hogsheads. These figures were converted to lb., one hogshead equivalent to between 12 and 14 cwt. (at 112 lb. per cwt.). Assuming an average of 13 cwt. per hogshead, the total is 1456 lb. per hogshead. Although this represents a 68 percent increase in imports over four years, coffee was still a fledgling industry before the American Revolution, and it would be inappropriate to label its procurers “coffee merchants” in the way that flour, lumber, and wine merchants appear in tax lists and business directories of the time; merchants who described themselves as “flour merchants” or “wine merchants” were making a statement about the significance of that commodity to their overall trade. Coffee did not dominate any single person's account books, though some merchants placed orders for significantly increasing amounts.

⁴³ Series 2: Subject Files, c. 1789–1815, folder labeled Botany: Potatoes, Coffee, Corn, etc., Benjamin Smith Barton Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

generally considered superior in flavor.⁴⁴ When the firm of James and Drinker brought its coffee to market in September 1756, for example, Drinker noted "we are selling coffee at 9 d. to 9½ d., but it is very dull sale as the Prize Coffee is so much better and that is sold so low."⁴⁵ The following month, the firm's coffee sales still suffered from French West Indian competition: "coffee has become a prodigious glut both here and in New York. . . . good French coffee has stagnated the sale and lowered the price even of the best of thine . . . shall continue to do the best we can with it, not having the least prospect of its rising whilst we have so many privateers to send in prizes of that sort."⁴⁶

But rarely was the decision just a matter of taste. British Caribbean coffee was much cheaper than foreign produce as a result of taxes mandated by Britain's Navigation Acts. These laws covered four kinds of commercial activity: production, exportation, importation, and shipping.⁴⁷ Production regulations sought to encourage the production of goods needed in the metropole while also discouraging competition. But a second tier of goods not only enjoyed preferential duties but also a drawback or rebate of import duties if shipped within the British Empire. Coffee, along with cocoa and, before 1767, ceramics, fell into this category.⁴⁸ By 1732, Parliament imposed a duty of two shillings per pound weight on foreign coffee and only one shilling and six pence per pound weight on British West Indian coffee, the majority of the latter duty being refundable if

⁴⁴ Coffee was introduced to St. Domingue from Martinique at least twice, first in 1715 and then in 1726, though it did not become a substantial export crop until the 1750s. From then on, it grew significantly, both in terms of volume produced and export revenue. From an estimated 7,000,000 lb. produced in 1755 the figure rose to 77,000,000 lb. in 1790. By 1789, coffee sales generated six times as much revenue as they did thirty years earlier, almost equal to the 75,000,000 livres that the colony received for its white sugar exports. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue," *Review* 5 (1982): 335–38.

⁴⁵ Henry Drinker to Robert Field, Sept. 22, 1756, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1756–1759, Henry Drinker Business Papers. According to Britain's Navigation Acts, French coffee could be brought into North America, but only if importers paid a sizable foreign trade import tax. Obtaining "prize" coffee—or coffee from captured foreign vessels—was one way around this legislation. While still foreign in origin, it was treated as privateer bounty rather than as a standard import; usually sold at auction, it was not always subject to import taxes and thus was less expensive than French coffee imported through standard means.

⁴⁶ Henry Drinker to Robert Field, Oct. 29, 1756, in *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Charles Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, 4 vols. (New Haven, 1934–1938), especially vol. 4.

⁴⁸ The drawback was first passed in 1732. See *An Act for Encouraging the Growth of Coffee in his Majesty's Plantations in America* (London, 1732). The drawback continued to be extended by Parliament throughout the eighteenth century.

shipped to England or British colonial ports.⁴⁹ Almost all of the coffee imported into Philadelphia qualified for this dispensation since it arrived on vessels built and registered in the city and had been shipped through merchant factors in Kingston.⁵⁰ Importers instructed their captains to pay the requisite duties in Jamaica and, to ensure that they received their allotted drawback, to get the coffee stamped and certified as British produce.⁵¹ Upon arriving in Philadelphia, local customs agents collected coffee certificates and paid out the appropriate rebate. The combined effect of the tax and the drawback on British imports resulted in non-British coffee—whether from the Middle East, the East Indies, or the French Caribbean—retailing for at least three times the cost of Jamaican produce. With the price of foreign coffee so high, most Philadelphia consumers were limited to British West Indian merchandise.⁵²

Merchants were also concerned with the quality of the coffee they bought. After examining a cargo that arrived from Jamaica in 1756, Henry Drinker complained that it was “very bad Colour’d and Musty, even rotten, [I] being obliged to open and hand pick some of the casks.”⁵³ The reputation of Jamaican coffee did improve over the next two decades, however. Stephen Fuller, the island’s agent, proclaimed the virtues of British-produced coffee in a letter to his Committee of Correspondence:

⁴⁹ See *An Account of the Quantities of British Plantation and Foreign Coffee, and the Amount of the Excise Duty paid Annually: And likewise an Account of the Quantities of British Plantation and Foreign Coffee separated by that Imported to and Exported from the Ports of London for Ten Years from 5th January 1763 to 5th July 1773, Distinguishing Each Year* (London, 1773), PRO T 1/511/20–21. For a discussion of the impact of the reduction on French coffee duties to the British Caribbean trade, see *Considerations on the State of the Coffee Trade* (London, 1775), PRO T/1/515/179–181.

⁵⁰ NOSL (1762, 1766, 1769); the one exception was Magnus Miller whose ship, *Industry*, sailed from the western port of Savannah la Mar with 7,000 lb. of coffee in October 1769.

⁵¹ Naval officers assigned to each port issued coffee certificates, and, in Jamaica, there was an associated administrative fee of seven shillings five pence per certificate. Revenue for “coffee certificates” is included in the annual financial report of the Jamaica House of Assembly. For a breakdown of income generated annually from coffee certificates by port, see *Votes of the House of Assembly* (1821), app. 58, pp. 386–402, Jamaica Archives.

⁵² Customs 16/1 records total foreign and British West Indian imports to Philadelphia at 115,766 lb. (1768), 203,842 lb. (1769), and 288,707 lb. (1772) in that order. Comparisons to Jamaica’s NOSL for the same years reveal that 94,540 lb., 103,640 lb., and 116,960 lb. respectively came from this one island.

⁵³ Henry Drinker to Abel James, Oct. 29, 1756, James and Drinker Letterbook, 1756–1759, Henry Drinker Business Papers.

Two of the samples were equal to the best Mocha Coffee, and two more of them superior to any Coffee to be had at the grocers' shops in London, unless you will pay the price of picked Coffee for it, which is two shillings per pound more than for that which they call the best Coffee. All the rest of the samples were far from bad Coffee, and very little inferior, if at all, to what the grocers call the best Coffee.⁵⁴

While Fuller may well have been offering a biased opinion, Benjamin Moseley, a physician and member of Philadelphia's American Philosophical Society, made almost identical claims in his *Treatise Concerning the Properties and Effects of Coffee*: "the Planters of Jamaica, after a multitude of experiments, and the most laudable exertions, have discovered the art of cultivating, picking, and curing the berries, so as to make their Coffee equal to the growth of Arabia."⁵⁵ Even distinctions between island regions emerged; coffee grown in Jamaica's higher elevations, for example, usually sold for a better price, prompting a prospective Philadelphia purchaser to counsel William Jowett Titford, owner of Mount Moreland coffee plantation in St. David, Jamaica, "I would recommend to the planters, not to covet the production of the large berries, the smallest being deemed the best by our buyers here, and fetching the most money."⁵⁶

Once coffee cleared Philadelphia port authorities, it reached consumers in one of two ways: either directly from a wholesale dealer or through a retailer. Some merchants operated stores and others sold small amounts to customers directly from their private warehouses, but most sold coffee in larger quantities to shopkeepers who, after a small markup, advertised the goods to the public. Both buyers and sellers could count on a steady and reliable price. While the prices of many other Caribbean goods varied, the average retail cost of British coffee remained steady at eight pence per pound in 1759 and 1765.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Stephen Fuller to the Committee of Correspondence in Jamaica, July 28, 1783, Island Agent Correspondence, Jamaica Archives.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Moseley, *Treatise Concerning the Properties and Effects of Coffee*, 5th ed. (London, 1792).

⁵⁶ Higher elevations resulted in smaller coffee beans that were less acidic than those grown below two thousand feet above sea level. Unknown (Philadelphia) to William Titford, Mar. 1803, William J. Titford Letterbook, University of the West Indies, Special Collections, Mona, Jamaica.

⁵⁷ Coffee prices averaged from individual sales found in John and Peter Chevalier Journals, 1757–1783; Levi Hollingsworth Account Book, 1768–1775, Hollingsworth Family Papers; William West Ledger, 1770–1777, West Family Business Records; Mifflin and Massey Ledger, 1760–1763, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The significance of coffee to Philadelphia's Caribbean import economy continued to rise. The decision of the city's merchants to focus on coffee and other secondary commodities opened a previously underutilized avenue of West Indian trade, and their innovative and successful initiatives in this arena affected the parameters of their nonimportation protests. The Caribbean provisions trade was not a marginal activity at the end of the eighteenth century—for Mifflin and Massey, James and Drinker, William Pollard, and their ilk, the British West Indies were big business.

From Copper Pots to Committees of Compliance: The Politicization of Philadelphia's Coffeehouses

The choice of coffeehouses as Philadelphia merchants' venue to protest parliamentary legislation about trade was not coincidental. Before the nonimportation debates, merchants used coffeehouses to conduct commercial activity. More than other establishments, like taverns or eateries, the world met Philadelphia in the city's coffeehouses, whose common rooms and upstairs parlors were sites for the trade negotiations that governed merchants' far-flung business enterprises.

Under the stewardship of William Bradford Jr., the Old London Coffee House opened in 1754 with 234 subscribers. Fees included use of the coffeehouse as well as a subscription to Bradford's newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Journal*, and cost between twenty and thirty shillings annually, a price merchants would have been more likely to afford.⁵⁸ Physically, coffeehouses resembled taverns and inns. On the ground floor was a large common room with a caged bar set against one wall for alcohol sales. Merchants entering this room would usually find it crowded and noisy; small circular or rectangular tables accommodated two to eight patrons, but there were quieter booths that could be reserved in advance. These tables and booths allowed for dining as well as conversation.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Randolph Boggs Papers, unpublished mss. by Mary Emma Boggs and Benjamin Randolph Boggs, "Inns and Taverns of Old Philadelphia," 186–90, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 60; Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1999), 109–10. Shields and Thompson, in addition to David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995), were important in assisting in my understanding of public houses and their role in colonial communities.

Advertisements covered the walls of the room, providing further evidence that coffeehouses were important venues for city merchants to conduct their business. One such notice, described by Samuel Richardet, manager of the Merchant's Coffee House, respectfully informed "the Merchants, Traders, &c. of Philadelphia that none but Subscribers, Captains of Vessels, and non Residents, can be allowed to put up Advertisements or Bills in the Exchange Room, or on the front of the House."⁵⁹

Proprietors reserved second-floor rooms for their subscribers and business meetings, and occasionally members rented rooms even longer as temporary offices. Here patrons browsed the business directories carefully maintained by the establishment's proprietors, such as Vincent Pelosi, who opened The Pennsylvania Coffee House in 1785. He encouraged patrons to "deliver at the Barr their names, trade, and professions, with place of abode" for inclusion in his directory, while he averred, "Likewise, another book will be opened to the Public where Captains of vessels, merchants, and brokers may register ship news."⁶⁰ On certain days of the week current rates of exchange throughout the British colonies were posted; known as exchange days, these were regularly advertised at the Merchant's Coffee House from noon to two in the afternoon and six to eight each evening.⁶¹ But perhaps the best indications of the coffeehouses' business orientation were their newspaper subscriptions. Local, regional, and international newspapers gave customers access to information about shipping successes and failures, tax and duty changes, and commodity prices. The Merchant's Coffee House boasted newspapers from "Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Baltimore, together with those of the principal cities of Europe," a hefty series of subscriptions that cost the coffeehouse upwards of £500 annually.⁶²

The Stamp Act, passed in 1765, had immediate economic ramifications for coffeehouses and their patrons. The act taxed virtually every aspect of merchants' business endeavors—from the ship registers and invoices used to conduct daily business to the newspapers used to plan future investments. Merchants naturally gravitated to the forum provided by the coffeehouses, the center of their economic activity, to express their

⁵⁹ *Claypoole's Advertiser*, June 24, 1797.

⁶⁰ *Pennsylvania Packet*, Jan. 1, 1785.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 20, 1789.

⁶² *American Daily Advertiser*, May 26, 1796. Newspaper subscription cost from *Claypoole's Advertiser*, June 24, 1797: "Nor can any others [but patrons] be allowed the use of the Rooms and Newspapers, the current expences of which amount to upwards of £500."

political discontent. John Hughes, Philadelphia's royal tax collector, was an obvious early target for local traders' hostility, and he knew from whence the threat was emanating.⁶³ He claimed to be "well arm'd with Fire-Arms" and "determin'd to stand a Siege," when he barricaded himself at home and asked "several Friends to patroll between my House and the Coffee House." That night he was lucky, his friends "come in just now, and say, the Collection of Rabble begins to decrease visibly in the Streets, and the Appearance of Danger seems a good deal less than it did." By five o'clock the following morning Hughes believed his troubles had at least temporarily passed: "We are all yet in the land of the living, and our Property safe. Thank God."⁶⁴

When the stamps and Hughes's tax-collector commission arrived on October 5, however, those who opposed the act reassembled at the Old London Coffee House and sent out orders for muffled drums to wend their way through the streets to Hughes's home. Confronted by a city alderman asking who had authorized their parade, the Stamp Act patriots replied, "they had their orders from the Coffee House."⁶⁵ Less than a month later, Philadelphia's merchants voted to join Boston and New York in imposing an embargo on British imports; nonimportation began immediately, remaining in effect until Parliament repealed the act in March of the following year. Merchants overwhelmingly supported the measure, as shown by a comparison of signatures on the 1765 agreement with available tax lists for 1762 and 1770.⁶⁶ They placed no new orders

⁶³ Although the purpose of the act was to raise revenue, it was explicitly as a means of ensuring military protection, "that the colonies should contribute more to the cost of their defense." Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 54–55. This emphasis on defense is significantly different in intent than the later revenue taxes. Rather than military support, the revenue taxes of the Townshend Acts were specifically proposed as a means of "making a more certain and adequate provision for defraying the charge of the administration of justice, and the support of civil government in such provinces where it shall be necessary." Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 172. The Committee of Ways and Means formally introduced the idea of a stamp act to raise revenue to support defense costs to the House of Commons as early as March 9, 1764. R. C. Simmonds and P. D. G. Thomas, eds., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America, 1754–1783*, vol. 1, 1754–1764 (New York, 1982), 491. Although North America's reaction to parliamentary legislation dominates the historiography, it is worth noting that British West Indian colonies consistently faced higher trade taxation rates. For a comparison of British taxes affecting North American and West Indian colonies, see Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, "The Stamp Act Crisis in the British Caribbean," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 51 (1994): 203–26.

⁶⁴ Excerpts from *Pennsylvania Journal*, Sept. 4, 1766.

⁶⁵ Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 260.

⁶⁶ Non-Importation Agreement Signed by the Merchants of Philadelphia, Oct. 25, 1765, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. While the 1765 action is usually called a period of nonimporta-

for English wares and canceled those that had not already left London. But throughout the debates of the summer and fall of 1765, the embargo's advocates focused on British dry goods, not on Caribbean commerce.

The merchant community was more divided four years later, when, in February 1769, broadsides called them to meet again at the Old London Coffee House. Various economic interests precipitated the schisms that had appeared. Importers of British dry goods such as tea, glass, and paper, directly taxed by Townshend to raise revenue for colonial defense and administration, were suffering declining demands as their prices rose to accommodate the new duties. These same merchants struggled with the ramifications of the Currency Act of 1764, which forced them to pay in specie and forbade colonial legislatures from issuing paper currency.⁶⁷ Provisions merchants, who primarily conducted their business through the exchange of goods instead of cash, were less directly affected by the monetary requirements of the Sugar Act of 1763 and Currency Act of 1764 and, moreover, they benefited from Parliament's decision to continue financial protection of some Caribbean produce.⁶⁸ The sixth article of the second Townshend Act, for example—the same act continuing the tea tax—extended the tax rebates for coffee and cocoa, as long as trade remained within the British Empire. The account books of three Philadelphia firms record the resultant commercial gains. Reese Meredith and Archibald McCall brought in 33,500 and over 29,640 pounds of coffee in 1769, garnering sales of £1,256 and £1,111, respectively, and William West grossed profits of £1,027 from coffee sales the following year.⁶⁹ Because provisions merchants' business was less directly affected by nonimportation, they were often perceived as being quicker to propose sanctions and continue embargoes, even after other North American

tion, there was, at least initially, an effort to curb consumption of British goods as well. Rather than begin immediately as nonimportation did, the prohibition on selling British dry goods did not begin until January 1, 1766. See tax lists in the collection of the Philadelphia City Archive listed as Constables Returns, 1762, partial, 1770, partial, and 1775, complete.

⁶⁷ Merchant John Reynell complained, "Unless we can get some more [paper currency] made, [I] know not what will become of us, nor how we shall be able to pay our debts." Cited in Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 182.

⁶⁸ Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 145–52.

⁶⁹ Mifflin and Massey Ledger, 1760–1763; William West Ledger, 1770–1777, West Family Business Records; figures for Ashmead and Meredith import levels from NOSL third quarter outbound vessels, Sept. 16, 1762, and fourth quarter outbound vessels, Oct. 18, 1762, respectively. For comparison prices of other West Indian goods, see also: Levi Hollingsworth Account Book, 1768–1775, Hollingsworth Family Papers; John and Peter Chevalier Journals, 1757–1783, especially 1759 to 1761; William West Ledger, 1770–1777, West Family Business Records.

colonial ports resumed trade relations with London. Dry goods merchants, on the other hand, argued that:

their case is particularly hard, as that branch of trade by which they maintain themselves and their families is entirely stopt, while those merchants who trade to the West Indies or foreign parts, still carry on their business as they did before the Agreement.⁷⁰

British dry goods importers may have seen the 1765 embargo as an opportunity to dispose of overstocked wares, but were less sanguine when trade stopped in 1769. Nevertheless, the 1769 nonimportation was limited to the British dry goods trade.

The tensions returned in 1774 when Parliament passed the Intolerable Acts, which closed Boston Harbor and initiated a third round of non-importation debates. What distinguished this embargo, however, is that, from the outset, it was an intercolonial effort. Committees of Correspondence and leading merchants had solicited support from neighboring colonies in the past, but not with the same degree of centralized decision making that the newly formed Continental Congress exerted over this third nonimportation endeavor. The result was economically more damaging to Britain and her West India colonies than the embargoes of 1765 and 1769, but the sanctions also limited the control of merchants in individual cities over the parameters of trade restrictions. Philadelphia merchant William Pollard arranged consignments contracts on behalf of Irish and English merchant firms, and his work required him to travel frequently from Philadelphia to Charleston, New York, Boston, Providence, and Connecticut. An astute observer, his letters between 1772 and 1774 include reactions of both dry goods and provisions merchants to parliamentary legislation, rumors about embargoes, and the deliberations of the Continental Congress, as well as his own personal hopes and concerns.⁷¹

At first, Pollard saw benefits to parliamentary taxation. During the 1760s and early 1770s, the number of merchants operating in Philadelphia had risen steadily until "Trade was never in such a situation as at present, the city and country are glutted with every kind of goods," with "hundreds more people in this trade (importers and retailers) than

⁷⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 25, 1770.

⁷¹ William Pollard to Benjamin Bower (Manchester), June 25, 1774, William Pollard Letterbook, 1772-1774.

can possibly support themselves and families by it.”⁷² Pollard suggested that the rising cost of doing business might eliminate some of the competition and restore steady prices and profits for those remaining in the provisions field. Initially, his aspirations seem to have been fulfilled; while a number of smaller traders and houses had difficulty securing local and British investors for Caribbean ventures, the prices of West Indian goods themselves remained relatively stable. Trade in lower grade sugars and rum was slow, but he enthusiastically reported the stability and even rise in the price of high grade sugars and diversified his interests to include coffee by March 1773.⁷³ In early 1774 Pollard began his annual tour of North American seaports to solidify contracts of British orders for the coming year. While he noted increased edginess in merchants from Charleston to Boston, as late as May he was counseling his British contacts to prepare shipments for the fall. Despite rumors of an embargo, the Continental Congress had made no final decisions, and Pollard advised Benjamin Bower, his Manchester agent, that “no ill consequences could arise from my taking orders from those who chose to give them because it will be some considerable time, before they can be shipped and in the interim it is very profitable.”⁷⁴ Just one month later, however, he was far less encouraging; writing again to Bower, he warned against placing orders, not only for the fall, but also for the following spring. Another nonimportation agreement on British trade seemed inevitable until America’s anger over Parliament’s closure of Boston Harbor was ameliorated.⁷⁵ Pollard consoled himself with the knowledge that, while his

⁷² William Pollard to Jonathan Woolmer (Halifax, Yorkshire), July 1, 1772, in *ibid.*

⁷³ William Pollard to George Whitehorne Lawrence, Esq. (Montego Bay, Jamaica), Mar. 9, 1773, in *ibid.*

⁷⁴ William Pollard to Benjamin Bower (Manchester), May 28, 1774, in *ibid.*

⁷⁵ William Pollard (New York) to Benjamin Bower (Manchester), June 25, 1774, in *ibid.*: “I am yet at a loss how to advise you, I am of opinion the fall goods will come out to this place and Philadelphia, but as to Boston they don’t know whether they will be permitted or not, all the colonies take up the distress laid on the people of Boston by blocking up the port and think it is a most unjust oppressive act, the consequence will be that a Congress is to be held here or at Philadelphia of deputies from all the colonies to consult on the most proper steps to be taken and it is generally thought that a non-importation agreement will be the event of this deliberation. I would therefore advise you to make no provision at all for next spring, unless my future letters be more encouraging which you may depend shall be as frequent as opportunities will permit. . . . I am in great hopes that Congress will conclude on sending deputies from each colony to England to petition the king and council to be heard on the subject and that some compromise will be made. . . . I did not ask one person for an order in Boston.” The same sentiments were echoed in letters to Messrs. Crowe and Taylor, Merchants (Norwich), July 8, 1774, Messrs. Tibbets and Belcher, Merchants (London), July 8, 1774, and Messrs. Langton, Birly, and Co., Merchants (Kirkham), July 10, 1774. In this last, he states “it is

British-Caribbean arrangements were forestalled, North American-Caribbean exchanges could continue apace since it appeared that Philadelphia's third embargo would follow the same course laid out in 1765 and 1769. A letter from the Philadelphia Committee of Correspondence argued that "the most proper and effectual means to be used to obtain a repeal of the said act, will be to put an immediate stop to all imports and exports to and from Great Britain until the same act be repealed"; even Boston's draft agreement, which circulated among other colonies that June, limited nonimportation and nonconsumption to British manufactures.⁷⁶

But by July 1774, the economic importance of British Caribbean commerce had heightened its political significance. Responding to the "Reflector," whose article advised both a boycott of English goods and simultaneous continuation of Philadelphia's export and island trades, "A Plain Dealer" argued that an embargo with a wider scope might be more effective. A British-only boycott was "tedious and uncertain in its operation, and will not interest one half of the number in your favor, as a more general stoppage of trade would do."⁷⁷ A week later, however, "Brutus" advised caution. He noted that a cessation of trade to the West Indies would be almost impossible to enforce: "What security are you to have that vessels, bound to Portugal, may not bear away to the West India islands?" and, even if merchants voluntarily complied, British naval power might be able to block Philadelphia's trade elsewhere in Europe, "so that to stop exportation to the West Indies would be to stop all trade."⁷⁸

As newspaper debates about the West Indies intensified, so did regional and economic factionalism within the Continental Congress. Most delegates supported a complete ban on goods traveling to or from Britain, Ireland, and the West Indies, but those with vested interests in

the general opinion at present, not only in this, but in New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Boston provinces (where I have lately been) that the events of the deliberations of this Congress will be that the members will recommend it to their respective constituents to enter into a firm non-importation of goods from Great Britain."

⁷⁶ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 29, 1774, and postscript. The West Indies were likewise excluded from the resolution passed in Maryland on June 22, and reprinted in Philadelphia on July 6, 1774, although these resolutions also specified that Maryland merchants would "have no trade, commerce, or dealings whatsoever with that province, city or town, in the British colonies on this continent (if any such should be) or with any individual therein, who shall refuse to adopt the same."

⁷⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 13, 1774.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, July 20, 1774.

the Caribbean trade tried to find room for negotiation. Representatives from Massachusetts and Rhode Island, for example, argued that codfish exports, the mainstay of their West Indies trade, were necessary to ameliorate the “cruel[ty] and distress . . . of the Creoles and Negroes of the W. Indies who have not injured us.” Their beneficence had limits, or, to be more precise, smacked of regional specificity, since they voted to “propose the supply of the W. Indies with Every necessary, Except Staves, heading, & hoops.” The latter three commodities, of course, were among Pennsylvania’s principal exports to the Caribbean.⁷⁹ Representatives from the mid-Atlantic colonies did not qualify their opposition to an embargo on trade to the West Indies, arguing that “a total Non Import and Non Export to . . . the West Indies must produce a national Bankruptcy, in a very short space of time,” and reminding delegates that “Non Exportation [was] of vastly more importance than a Non Importation—it affects the Merchants as well as Manufactures, the Trade as well as the Revenue.”⁸⁰ This special pleading on behalf of the West Indian trade received short shrift from other representatives who characterized Caribbean commodities as “Intoxicating Poisons and needless Luxuries” that should be paid for and sunk at sea “rather than [brought] ashore.”⁸¹

When Stephen Fuller, Jamaica’s island agent, spoke before Parliament he voiced increased concern as members of the Continental Congress debated using Caribbean commerce to sway British opinion: “I will now take my leave of the whole plan, and will give my free opinion of it. You [Parliament] will commence your ruin from this day, if you do not repeal that tax which created all this disturbance; you will have no degree of confidence with the Americans; people will not trust you when your credit is gone . . . if there ever was a nation running headlong into ruin, it is this.”⁸² Parliament disagreed with Fuller and the contested tax on tea remained in effect.

Consequently, merchants from Philadelphia and throughout North America’s British colonies agreed to a third embargo in September 1774. This time they included “molasses, paneles, coffee, or pimento from the British Plantations or from Dominica” as well as all goods from Great

⁷⁹ Paul H. Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC, 1976), 149.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸² Fuller’s speech was reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 27, 1774.

Britain and Ireland and East India tea.⁸³ The embargo had two phases, prohibiting British, Irish, and West Indian imports after December 5, 1774, and all exports to these regions after September 1775. Ostensibly the later date for exports came from an “earnest desire . . . not to injure our fellow subjects in Great Britain, Ireland, or the West Indies,” but nevertheless was of tremendous importance to Philadelphia merchants, millers, and farmers. A rush of commercial activity centered on the city’s ports the week before sanctioned importation ended as “produce of all sorts was brought to town and in such quantity that not enough vessels could be found to carry it off.”⁸⁴ Desperate to get their goods to overseas customers, merchants put all available vessels to use. Indeed, on December 4, one merchant mused that, at a time when the city should be preparing for war, there was “hardly a vessel in port.”⁸⁵ To ensure that they would be able to sell their existing stocks of coffee after December 5, importers appeared before the city’s Committee of Inspection and Observation to declare how much of the commodity they had in stock; in one month, the committee heard over twenty declarations of coffee cargo.⁸⁶ A second flurry of activity occurred in the final quarter of 1775 before export restrictions went into effect; in the last few months, ships to and from Jamaica increased by 34 percent.⁸⁷

Merchants scrambled to export their local produce before the end of 1775 because although trading during nonimportation might be fiscally tempting it could prove both personally and politically devastating. Philadelphia’s traders were self-policing and had established Committees of Compliance to ensure universal acceptance of their coffeehouse injunctions. Newspapers, broadsides, letters, and diaries provide evidence of the power they wielded. Standing in the front room of the Old London Coffee House in June 1770, William Semple, Alexander Bartram, James

⁸³ *Journal of the Proceedings of the Congress held at Philadelphia, September 5, 1774* (Philadelphia, 1774), 38–39.

⁸⁴ Cited in Duvall, “Philadelphia’s Maritime Commerce,” 53.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁶ Minutes of the Meetings at the Coffee House, Committee of Observation, Dec. 1774, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. After December 5, 1774 no ships were permitted to import West Indian produce into Philadelphia; the nonexportation portion of the agreement did not go into effect until September 1775. The committee assembled to ensure compliance with the prohibition on importation included: Thomas Mifflin, James Mease, Thomas Barclay, Lambart Cadwalader, Jacob Riche, Sharp Delany, Blathwait Jones, Thomas Pryor, Joseph Dean, and Benjamin Harbeson.

⁸⁷ Tonnage Books, 1765–1775. Thirty-four ships sailed to Philadelphia from Jamaica in 1774, forty-six in 1775.

Stuart, and Robert Wilson confessed to “meanly and from pecuniary motives, endeavoring to subvert the grand cause of Liberty” by attempting to purchase goods from the ship *Sharp* newly arrived from Glasgow, Scotland. After their public humiliation, William Bradford, the coffee-house’s proprietor—and a newspaper printer as well—published an account of the trial of the four men and their remarks of contrition.⁸⁸

John Drinker, on the other hand, adhered to the embargo, but ironically would suffer for it later when the account books chronicling his actions gave evidence for his persecution by the British troops who occupied Philadelphia in 1777.⁸⁹ Indeed, merchants felt the political implications of nonimportation even after independence, as, for example, when an indictment for illegally importing Irish goods during the embargo continued to prevent merchant John Montgomery Jr. from conducting business in Philadelphia as late as 1793.⁹⁰

Ultimately, the decisions of Philadelphia merchants either to support or circumvent nonimportation were not predicated entirely on economic considerations. But Philadelphia was slower to impose embargoes as a method of political leverage than its neighboring port cities, especially with respect to its British West Indian trade, largely because of the tremendous economic costs. Once it did so, therefore, nonimportation restrictions acquired a heightened political and social significance, one that persisted long after the bans themselves had been lifted.

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⁸⁸ William Bradford, *To the Public* (June 30, 1770), cited in Boggs and Boggs, “Inns and Taverns,” 190, Benjamin Randolph Boggs Papers.

⁸⁹ John Drinker Account Books, 1776–1779, especially entries for Feb. 15, 16, and 19, 1776.

⁹⁰ Thomas Smith to Thomas Mifflin, Feb. 6, 1793, Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

