

William Hodgson: An English Merchant and Unsung Friend to American Revolutionary Captives

ON WEDNESDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 20, 1784, a tragedy was played out in London at 17 Coleman Street, the residence and business office of William Hodgson, a prominent warehouseman (wholesale merchant) who also dabbled in financial matters. Hodgson had lived at this address for several years and was a long-standing communicant at the restored St. Stephen's Church only a short distance down the street. According to printed accounts of the calamity, a business colleague had come to the home that morning for a breakfast appointment. Hodgson's wife, Mary, and some of their children were then at the family's country house at Chigwell, about thirteen miles outside London. A servant greeted the guest and requested he wait in the parlor. But as the visitor tarried in the receiving room, he heard a pistol blast from an adjoining room. Both the caller and the servant ran immediately to the chamber where they found the bloodied, lifeless body of Hodgson who had shot himself in the head.¹

Suicides were not uncommon in London that year, and several merchants were numbered among those who took their own lives.² But Hodgson's sudden and horrifying demise represented more than a disastrous statistic; it also terminated the career of a neglected and unrecognized Briton who had

¹ *Political Magazine and Parliamentary, Naval, Military, and Literary Journal* (Oct 1784), 244, *Whitehall Evening Post* (London), Oct 21–23, 1784, *St James Chronicle* (London) or *British Evening Post*, Oct 19–21, 1784, *Newcastle (England) Chronicle*, Oct 30, 1784 St Stephen's Church had been destroyed during the great London Fire of 1666. It was rebuilt largely under the design of Christopher Wren. Henry B. Wheatley, *London Past and Present: A Dictionary of Its History, Associations, and Traditions* (3 vols., London, 1891), 3: 310.

² Michael MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), 245–47, 268–74, 365–66.

significantly assisted America in its struggle for independence. Hodgson had demonstrated a strong affinity for the patriot cause when he labored zealously with Benjamin Franklin and others for the relief of hundreds of Americans imprisoned in England. He had also endeavored to stimulate British trade with the new United States even before its independence was recognized. Yet for all of his noteworthy efforts, this London merchant failed to receive adequate and deserved recognition, and one can speculate that it was in part due to this rebuff from abroad that William Hodgson ended his life so impulsively.

Who then was this little-known and unsung merchant? He was not the William Hodgson (1745–1851) cited in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, though both men had family roots in the north of England.³ Their progenitors had arrived in Britain in the tenth century after crossing the North Sea from Scandinavia, and the name Hodgson afterward emerged in Cumberland, Durham, Westmoreland, and Yorkshire. Family historians have recorded individuals with this surname who were subsequently involved in such noteworthy events in English history as the Wars of the Roses and the (Anthony) Babington Plot to murder Queen Elizabeth.⁴

Hodgson's last will (September 9, 1784) offers key clues to the date and place of his birth. It discloses that he left property in the West Yorkshire parish of Calverly (near Bradford) to his wife Mary. In turn, Calverly Parish records cite the marriage of one William Hodgson and Elizabeth Butler on February 9, 1713,⁵ and the *International Genealogical Index* shows that on July 6, 1725, a William Hodgson was born to Elizabeth and William Hodgson who were then communicants of St. Giles's Church, in London's Cripplegate Ward. This combined data would indicate that the Hodgsons were among the many families from England's northern counties who

³ *Dictionary of National Biography*, s v , "Hodgson, William, M D "

⁴ Geoffrey M. Hodgson, *The Hodgson Surname: Its Norse Origins and Cumbria Locations* (Standon, Hertfordshire, 1993), 59, Gordon Hodgson, *What Name Did You Get? The Thing About Hodgsons* (Calgary, Alta , 1995), chaps 1–3, David Hodgson to author, May 29, 1997 (FAX)

⁵ Will of Mr William Hodgson of Coleman Street, London, Sept 9, 1784, Probate Records, 11/1122, Family Records Centre, London, Mrs C Boddington, senior archivist, East Riding of Yorkshire Council to author, Oct 20, 1997

emigrated to London during the early eighteenth century seeking economic opportunities in the city's expanding markets.⁶

It is quite probable that William Hodgson senior was a tradesman, as were many of the parishioners of St. Giles who resided in the surrounding streets of Cripplegate. Many newly arrived inhabitants from outside London started their own mercantile enterprises in this section of the city. If so, it is possible that the younger William Hodgson received his business lessons from his father or perhaps served as an apprentice to an entrepreneur in this commercial area. Whatever his vocational training, young Hodgson was evidently on his own when he celebrated his marriage to Mary Hay on March 11, 1749, at St. Stephen's Church on Coleman Street, not far from Cripplegate. The bride's family were members of St. James's Church located in the nearby Clerkenwell district. Perhaps more than romance precipitated the wedding since six months afterwards the couple's first child, Hugh, was born.⁷

During the first twenty-five years of his marriage William's commercial ventures prospered while his family increased in size. At the time of his nuptials, he was listed in *Kent's London Directory* as the operator of a business stall at St. Mary le Bow Churchyard, not far from London Bridge. Commercial directories reveal him to have subsequently conducted various mercantile enterprises within the City of London. Although his personal business records are not extant for these years, his involvement with diverse trades—especially wholesale marketing—leads one to speculate that Hodgson participated, at least indirectly, in American commerce. He was first listed as a wholesale merchant with an address of Bush Lane, but the

⁶ *International Genealogical Index* (1992), Births, Children born to Hodgson, Surname, Father=William, Mother=Mary; Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West A Passage in the Peopling of America, on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1988), 105–6, 122–24, 274–75 St Giles's Church, Cripplegate, unique in London for its Gothic structure, was the burial site of the poet John Milton Wheatley, *London Past and Present*, 2 109–10

⁷ W H Challen, comp, *London Marriages, 1538–1754* (11 vols, London, 1932), vol 2, St Stephen's Church, Coleman Street, City of London Register (p 90), London, Middlesex, MX/REG/646, Guildhall Library London, Ralph Hyde, *The A to Z of Georgian London* (Lympne Castle, Kent, 1981), map 13 Aa, 26, *International Genealogical Index, Marriages*, Surname=Hodgson, Forename William, Spouse, Mary Children born to Hodgson, Surname, Father=William, Mother=Mary

same register also cites him as a wine merchant at this address until 1775.⁸ Perhaps it was around then that he moved to his final London residence and established William Hodgson & Co. on historic Coleman Street. (During the previous century, the thoroughfare had boasted the residence of Sir Francis Bacon and had once served as a hiding place for Oliver Cromwell.) The fact that Hodgson could afford to reside on this prominent commercial roadway was an indication of his success in business. Such mercantile successes were accompanied by the birth of several offspring to William and Mary. Birth registries at St. Stephen's Church show that after the birth of their first child in 1749 the Hodgsons had eight more children, ending with a son, Philip, born on July 15, 1774.⁹ The Hodgsons' country home at Chigwell, acquired around this time, reflected not only prosperity, but perhaps a need for parental relaxation.

Hodgson's mercantile activities also appear to have sparked his association with luminaries involved in intellectual concerns. One such individual was Dr. Benjamin Franklin, who since the early 1760s had been living in London. There, Franklin acted as a colonial agent and sought to defend the economic and political interests of the colonies from a royal government attempting to assert greater control over its North American empire. Like the Coleman Street merchant, Franklin frequented London coffeehouses, where economic, political, and quite often intellectual topics were debated and discussed. It was out of such spirited gatherings that the noted American agent from Pennsylvania and David Williams, a dissenting minister, educator, and author of controversial theological works, founded a new

⁸ *Kent's London Directory* for the years 1749–75. Listed in these directories for this period as proprietors of various commercial enterprises were two other individuals named William Hodgson. Hodgson was first listed as a warehouseman at the Bush Lane address in 1768 (*Kent's London Directory*, 1768, p. 128). He was listed as a warehouseman and proprietor of William Hodgson & Co. in the *Directory* for 1778 (p. 88). Bush Lane and St. Mary le Bow Churchyard are shown in maps in Hyde, *The A to Z of Georgian London*, 26, map 13 Aa. For evidence indicating the likelihood of Hodgson's involvement in trade with America, see Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill 1986), 55–56, 71–72, 86–87.

⁹ Ms. St. Stephen's (Parish) Church, City of London, Registry of Births, MX/R 324, Guildhall Library, London, microfilm. Wheatley, *London Past and Present*, 3: 310, *International Genealogical Index*, Children born to Surname, Hodgson, Father=William, Mother=Mary.

organization in the early 1770s.¹⁰ It was called the Wednesday Society or, more commonly, the Club of Thirteen, since the group set limits on its membership. Hodgson was an original member of this liberal-minded gathering which usually met at Old Slaughter's Coffee House on St. Martin's Lane or at the Swan at Westminster Bridge. The members discoursed upon religious, social, scientific, and political matters, including the growing strains between the American colonies and Britain. Most of the members endorsed the American cause, and perhaps it was there that Hodgson acquired his strong affinity for the American colonists. It was clearly through these gatherings that the Coleman Street merchant formed an admiration for Franklin that was evident by the time the Pennsylvania agent sailed home in March 1775.¹¹

News of the outbreak of conflict in America during the spring of 1775 had considerable effect on Londoners—particularly merchants like Hodgson. Many of these men sympathized with their colonial brethren, and realized also that the hostilities would interrupt commerce with one of their prime markets. After the Boston Tea Party in 1773 several London merchants held out the vain hope that some form of reconciliation could be reached with the North American colonists. Even when reports of the fighting in Massachusetts reached Britain, Hodgson continued to share their hope, as did his colleagues in the Club of Thirteen, antiministerial supporters of the erratic John Wilkes, Franklin's friend and member of Parliament David

¹⁰ David T Morgan, *The Devious Dr Franklin, Colonial Agent Benjamin Franklin's Years in London* (Macon, Ga., 1996), 16, 94, Cecil B. Currey, *Road to Revolution Benjamin Franklin in England, 1765–1775* (New York, 1968), iv–422, Verner W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin and a Rising People* (Boston, 1954), 102–56, David Hawke, *Franklin* (New York, 1976), 222–348, Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), chaps. 14–19, J. Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground: An Examination of the Ideas, Projects and Life of David Williams* (Oxford, 1993), xix–351, Leonard W. Labaree, William B. Willcox, Barbara Oberg, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, 1959–), 11:228n, *DNB*, s.v., “Williams, David” (Prior to his membership in the Club of Thirteen, Benjamin Franklin had been associated with other London intellectual groups, most notably, the Club of Honest Whigs. See Verner W. Crane, “The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter, *W&MQ*) 23 (1966), 210–33).

¹¹ David Williams, “More Light on Franklin's Religious Ideas,” *American Historical Review* 43 (1938), 803–10, Bryant Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses: A Reference Book of Coffee Houses of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1963), 91, 421–24, 529–36, 561, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 21:119–20, 22:22, 173–74, Hawke, *Franklin*, 346–49, Crane, *Rising People*, 154–57, Currey, *Road to Revolution*, 384–85, Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 49–60, 245–47, 268–75.

Hartley, several London aldermen, civic groups, and a number of expatriate Americans living in the capital. This last contingent included merchants such as Matthew Ridley, Ralph Izard, William Carmichael, Arthur and William Lee, and George and Thomas Digges. These pro-American advocates, both colonial and British-born, made such vehement protests against the hostilities in the colonies that the Crown issued a proclamation on August 23, 1775, threatening legal action "against all persons on any manner or degree aiding or abetting the American rebellion." Despite the Crown's admonition, criticism of the ministry's American policies persisted in these groups and in some elements of the London press during the ensuing years of conflict.¹²

Hodgson's exact role among Britain's antiwar factions during the early stages of the American Revolution is unclear. His Club of Thirteen discussions seem to have been critical of the royal government and the imperial resolve to crush the rebellion in America through military and naval action. Most of Hodgson's American associates in London demonstrated their support for their insurgent colonial brethren, and many of his colleagues in commerce favored a peaceful resolution of the dispute.¹³ Perhaps some of his north England family heritage of antimonarchical activity during the Tudor era also influenced him. Whatever his motivations, the expanding nature of the war in North America led the Coleman Street merchant to his first overt act of assistance for the rebel cause.

One of Hodgson's reasons for supporting the rebellious colonists emerged during the spring of 1777. By that time the marauding of armed American naval vessels against British shipping on the high seas had caused Lord North's ministry considerable concern. In addition, the Royal Navy's seizure of many of these hostile vessels had given the government the vexing problem of how to treat the seamen on these armed vessels, especially those

¹² Dora M. Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1930), 10–12, 79–81, John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America, 1769–1782* (Montreal, 1987), 69–93, 94–95, Solomon Lutnick, *The American Revolution and the British Press, 1775–1783* (Columbia, Mo., 1967), 58–73.

¹³ Don Cook, *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies, 1760–1785* (New York, 1995), 219–20, 224–39; Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution through British Eyes* (New York, 1980), 33–41, 76–78, 86–87, 93–95; Piers Mackesy, *The War for America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 38–39, 55–56; Clark, *British Opinion*, 92–97, 181–82; Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots*, 78–82.

captured well away from American shores. In March 1777, Parliament addressed the issue by adopting a strongly worded measure which authorized, "under charges of High Treason or Piracy," the imprisonment within Britain of mariners captured from armed vessels.¹⁴ Because prison ships, called hulks, proved unfeasible for accommodating the substantial number of arriving detainees, the government decided to reactivate some larger land-based internment centers that had been used during previous eighteenth-century wars. Two sites held most of the rebel seamen captured during the remainder of the conflict—Forton Gaol near Gosport in Hampshire, and Mill (Old Mill, Millbay) Gaol situated between Plymouth and Plymouth Dock in Devon.¹⁵

The unfortunate rebel captives who were remanded to Mill Gaol commencing in May 1777, and Forton the following month, encountered decidedly unpleasant conditions, and their forlorn circumstances soon became known in other parts of Britain. Provisions provided at the two detention facilities were substandard both in quality and quantity. One of the first inmates at Mill wrote that the rations were so inferior that the prisoners "were strongly tempted to pick up the grass and eat it," while at Forton a prisoner declared that they had been served "nothing but boiled cabbage" for days after their arrival.¹⁶ Lack of clothing constituted another serious shortcoming, since many of the first inmates had had their possessions confiscated during their shipboard confinement. Thus, by November 1777, the supervisors of British naval prisons, known as the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen and the Exchange of Prisoners, were obliged to

¹⁴ William Cobbett, comp., *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* (London, 1814), 193–5, Sheldon S. Cohen, *Yankee Sailors in British Gaols, Prisoners of War at Forton and Mill* (Newark, Del., 1995), 24–28, Catherine M. Prelinger, "Benjamin Franklin and the American Prisoners of War in England During the American Revolution," *WESMQ* 32 (1975), 264.

¹⁵ Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 30–37.

¹⁶ Richard Livesey, ed., *The Prisoners of 1776: A Relic of the Revolution* (Boston, 1854), 49, 59, William R. Cutter, "A Yankee Privateersman in Prison in England 1777–1779," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (hereafter, *NEHGR*) 30 (1876), 343–44, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 59–61.

petition the Admiralty to alleviate "the great want of Clothing and Shoes and Stockings among many of the prisoners."¹⁷

Discipline for these initial American detainees, charged in effect with high treason, was covered by a set of rigid regulations implemented by an arbitrary, authoritarian, petty, and often corrupt administrative staff. At both prisons the supervisors or agents, John Newsham at Forton and William Cowdrey at Mill, seemed to delight in deceiving, demeaning, threatening, and allegedly robbing their rebel charges.¹⁸ Nevertheless, these first American arrivals did find local champions who could, and did, spread word of their increasingly distressful situation to other prospective advocates in Britain. At Forton, it was the Reverend Thomas Wren and at Mill, Robert Heath, a local merchant and a deacon in the Calvinist Methodist church. Both of these men communicated details of the prisoners' hardships to other communities. Their descriptions in large part inspired the pro-Americans of London, including Hodgson, to mobilize in an attempt to offer relief to the prisoners.¹⁹

An ambitious expatriate, Thomas Attwood Digges, a descendant of a prominent old Maryland family,²⁰ was one of the Londoners who became apprised of the privations of the American captives in England. In November 1777, he described the captives' plight to a friend and former associate, Arthur Lee, who—along with Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane—was an American commissioner in Paris. The commissioners replied to the letter by authorizing Deane to send £50 to assist the detainees. This meager amount—plus a larger sum that Franklin arranged for his friend

¹⁷ Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen to Admiralty, Nov 25, 1777, Adm/M/404/NMM, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich England, Rev Samuel Cutler, ed., "Samuel Cutler's Diary," *NEHGR* 22 (1878), 187, Cutter, "A Yankee Privateersman," 343–44, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 61–62

¹⁸ Cutter, "Yankee Privateersman," 345, Cutler, "Samuel Cutler's Diary," 186, 309, 396, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 65–67

¹⁹ Sheldon S Cohen, "The Preachers and the Prisoners," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 126 (1990), 1–26, Sheldon S Cohen, "Thomas Wren, Ministering Angel of Forton Prison," *PMHB* 102 (1979), 279–301, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 78–82

²⁰ Robert J Elias and Eugene D Finch, eds., *The Letters of Thomas Attwood Digges* (Columbia, S C., 1982), xxii–xl, William B Clark, "In Defense of Thomas Digges," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 77 (1953), 385–89, Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 50, 53, 57

David Hartley to distribute—was inadequate, but by this time word of the internees' situation had also caused an outcry from the British opposition. On December 11, Lord Abingdon pleaded their case in Parliament and announced that he intended to promote a subscription on their behalf.²¹

Abingdon's declaration sparked antiministerial activists to organize and publicize a meeting "for the purpose of relieving the DISTRESS of the American PRISONERS." The gathering was held at the King's Arms Tavern in Cornhill on December 24, 1777, when pledges of £1300 were obtained for a subscription that grew to about £3700 by January 9, 1778. Besides Digges and Matthew Ridley, the principal organizers of the event, Hodgson was one of the most prominent of the several merchants in attendance. At this gathering his distinction within the City's business community was acknowledged by his appointment to a committee of twenty, including Ridley and Digges, that served to manage the subscription, distribute funds, and coordinate future appeals.²²

Digges was selected as the first director of this committee of concerned Londoners who subsequently engaged in diverse efforts to benefit the American prisoners in Britain. The mission to improve prison conditions received additional incentives after the American commissioners in Paris received a report from their emissary, John Thornton, who had been permitted to make a brief supervised visit to Forton at the end of 1777. Thornton wrote that the 119 Americans imprisoned there were clearly enduring a strenuous captivity and were forbidden to speak to visitors without a prison official present.²³ Part of their misery, he claimed, stemmed

²¹ Richard H. Lee, *Life of Arthur Lee* (Boston, 1829), 1:354–356; *The Parliamentary Register, or History of Proceedings and Debates of the House of Lords* (London, 1778), 10, 105–6; *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* 47 (1777), 107; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 389–90; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 83; Benjamin Franklin to David Hartley, Oct. 14–Dec. 11, 1777, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 35.67. The amount to be expended was between five and six hundred pounds.

²² John A. Sainsbury, "The Pro-Americans of London, 1769–1782," *W&MQ* 35 (1978), 443–44; *London Evening Post*, Dec. 23–25, 1777, *Gentleman's Magazine* 47 (1777), 607; *Public Advertiser* (London), Jan. 2, 1778, Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots*, 142–43, Clark, "Thomas Digges," 390–91; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 83–84.

²³ Clark, "Thomas Digges," 390–91; American Commissioners, Instructions to John Thornton, Dec. 11, 1777; John Thornton to Benjamin Franklin, Oct. 4, 1777; Benjamin Franklin to Sir Guy Cooper, Dec. 11, 1777; Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 265–66; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 86–87. For limited information concerning Major John Thornton, see *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25:26–28.

from the strict prison regulations and the corruption and petty cruelties of the prison staff. He added that one reason for the inmates' discomfort was the inadequate supply of food and clothing, a situation aggravated by the prisoners' inability to pay for these items. Thornton did not visit the more distant Mill Gaol, but his account implied that many of the same unpleasant conditions prevailed for the 289 Americans detained there.²⁴

During the months following the Cornhill meeting and John Thornton's visit, conditions improved considerably for the captive Americans in England. The better prison conditions resulted in part from the more conciliatory attitude taken by the British government following General John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in October 1777. Thus, one Forton internee noted in his diary on December 25, 1777, "Since the defeat of Burgoyne, things wear another face . . . They begin to treat us better."²⁵ Still another and equally important factor behind the amelioration of the detention environments at Forton and Mill stemmed from the active exertions of sympathizers in Britain. Through arrangements with the Reverend Thomas Wren who served as Portsmouth's connection with the London relief committee, Thornton had been able to improve food rations at Forton. Funds for this purpose as well as for personal prisoner needs were supplied primarily by the London committee, though, on occasion, Wren had to depend on the beneficence of his parishioners and on his own pockets.²⁶

Similar improvements occurred at Mill, where relief funds from London were distributed by the committee's representative, Deacon Robert Heath. One captive wrote in April 1778 to a friend in New Hampshire: "Since the

²⁴ John Thornton to American Commissioners, Dec [17], 1777, and John Thornton, Memorandum for the American Commissioners, Jan 5-8, 1778, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25 299, 350, 415-18, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 86-88

²⁵ Cutter, *Yankee Privateersman*, 347, Cook, *Long Fuse*, 279-80, 310-11, Mackesy, *War for America*, 149-60, Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels*, 195-97

²⁶ Cohen, "Thomas Wren," 288-89, Clark, "Thomas Digges," 391, 400-2, Prelinger, "Franklin and the American Prisoners," 270-71, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 97, 115-16, 151-53, 192-95

beginning of the year, we have lived very well and want nothing but Liberty."²⁷

But in addition to his legitimate activities aimed at improving the prisoners' living conditions, Digges was providing unsanctioned assistance to escapees from Forton and Mill, possibly with the knowledge of fellow relief committeemen, including Hodgson. Rebel captives had attempted such escapes almost as soon as both prisons opened. Certainly there were numerous obstacles confronting those fugitives who were successful in breaking free of Mill or the less secure Forton Gaol.²⁸ Yet a year after both prisons commenced operation, a route to freedom was available to the many escapees who managed to reach London. Assisted by funds and, often, sanctuary from sympathizers in Devon and Hampshire, the fugitives were often directed to the best "safe-house" in the capital, 23 Villars Street, Strand—Digges's residence. The expatriate Marylander later claimed (in June 1782) that he had hidden over 160 of these runaways. At his home or at other hideouts in the city, the escapees were given concealment, false papers, cash, and were then smuggled on board ships departing London for the Continent. This illicit activity was conducted with the knowledge and promotion of the American commissioners in Paris.²⁹ Such often-repeated, illegal, and hazardous operations required more than the participation of Digges himself, but whether Hodgson was directly or indirectly involved, or—as was more likely—preferred not to know, has not been established.

It was, however, in the realm of prisoner exchanges, also known as cartels, that tradesman Hodgson came to play his most prominent role in assisting the American captives. The initial efforts of the commissioners in Paris to effect such exchanges had been summarily rebuffed. Lord Stormont, the British ambassador in Paris, reflected this royal rigidity in April 1777 when he replied to a plea by Benjamin Franklin for prisoner leniency: "The King's Ambassador receives no application from Rebels, unless they come to

²⁷ *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), Sept. 3, 1778; Cohen, "Preachers and Prisoners," 7–9; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 88, 115–18, 152–54, 186, 193.

²⁸ Olive Anderson, "American Escapes from British Naval Prisons during the War of Independence," *Manners' Mirror* 41 (1955), 238–40; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 291–92; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 108–9.

²⁹ Clark, "Thomas Digges," 293–94, 405–6, 428; Thomas Digges to Benjamin Franklin, Sept. 18, 1778, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 27:420; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 109–13.

implore His Majesty's mercy." But a year later events had transpired that undermined this obdurate stance. The Franco-American treaties brought France into the conflict on the rebel side, and John Paul Jones's forays into the Irish Sea resulted in this Continental Navy officer depositing almost two hundred British prisoners in France in May 1778.³⁰ That same month Franklin renewed his overtures for a cartel through his influential London friend David Hartley. Subsequent negotiations dragged on until an exchange agreement was finally reached in December 1778. At the end of the following March the first of the cartels was finally carried out, when almost one hundred American captives at Mill embarked for France—an event that was replicated at Forton on July 2, 1779, when another one hundred rebel detainees set sail on a second exchange.³¹

Hodgson, who had already worked closely with Hartley on prisoner assistance, now became the chief intermediary between Franklin and the royal government's Commission for Sick and Hurt Seamen and the Exchange of Prisoners. Hartley's personal affairs often obliged him to be away from London, but Hodgson's prestigious mercantile and financial successes apparently gave him an opening to the commission's members. Also to his advantage was the fact that Hodgson, unlike Digges or Ridley, was not an expatriate American. (Digges himself admitted to Franklin, on January 10, 1780, "that as an American," he could not act as an advocate before the Royal Commissioners.)³² In any event, Hodgson noted his go-between status in a letter to Franklin on November 23, 1779, when he mentioned going to the office of the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen seeking "the redress of some grievances under which the Prisoners

³⁰ Lord Stormont to Lord Weymouth, Apr. 2, 1777, William B. Clark and William J. Morgan, eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 8:735–36, American Commissioners to Lord Stormont, Apr. 2, 1777, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 23:548–49, Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 263–64.

³¹ Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 122–24, 128–30, Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 275–76.

³² Thomas Digges to Benjamin Franklin, Jan. 10, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 31:364–69, Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 273, Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 280, Clark, "Thomas Digges," 410.

at Forton labor,” and where he had “much Conversation with them relative to the future proposed exchange.”³³

The proposed exchange Hodgson cited in his letter to Franklin noted that the British commissioners were demanding the Americans agree to future prisoner exchanges on a one for one basis, with the exact number of British captives for exchange to be stipulated beforehand. On January 20, 1780, Franklin declared his willingness to comply with Hodgson’s declaration that the British commissioners had rejected further cartels until complete details were received from the Americans in Paris.³⁴

Meantime, Franklin’s position was being undercut by the Duc de Vauguyon, France’s ambassador to Holland. Vauguyon had exchanged the British prisoners (left by Captain John Paul Jones) in Holland for French captives in Britain—without the approval of either Franklin or Jones. Although the Americans were consequently unable to employ the Jones prisoners for exchange purposes, Digges noted on January 10, 1780, that he was still pressing his efforts for more cartel agreements. Ten days later, in a letter to the London merchant, Franklin acknowledged Hodgson’s attempts to find a solution to the cartel difficulties. Franklin regretfully admitted that of the American-held prisoners in French ports, only about eighty Britons were available for exchange. Hodgson then wrote to Franklin on January 28 that the American internees were “suffering exceedingly” in the harsh winter weather and that the captives’ subscription was nearly “exhausted.” He added that the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen claimed that there were then approximately four hundred prisoners in Britain, and that they were willing to exchange any number of them, under supervision, with Franklin’s clear assurances that they would be traded for an equal number of British internees held in France.³⁵

³³ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Nov. 23, 1779, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 31:142–44; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 156

³⁴ Benjamin Franklin to David Hartley, Oct. 8–10, 1779, Franklin to John Paul Jones, Dec. 6, 1779; Franklin to Antoine Sartine, Dec. 20, 1779, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 30:488–89; 31:203, 265–66.

³⁵ Thomas Digges to Benjamin Franklin, Jan. 10, 1780, Benjamin Franklin to William Hodgson, Jan. 30, 1780; Hodgson to Franklin, Jan. 28, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 31:364–69, 396–98, 420–22, Prelinger, “American Prisoners,” 279–81; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 156–57.

Five days later, Franklin wrote David Hartley that the Americans then held more than one hundred captives, and said he hoped the French government would grant him many of the British prisoners they held in lieu of the prisoners that their ambassador in Holland had previously traded. On February 14, 1780, the American commissioner wrote to Hodgson enclosing a note for £100 for prisoner relief and added that he was prepared immediately to exchange "49 English Prisoners" who had been brought to the port of Lorient.³⁶

By the end of February 1780, Franklin felt confident enough to write Hodgson that the cartel was ready to proceed. The ensuing events, however, were a fiasco that proved embarrassing for the American commissioners and left Hodgson with considerable explaining to do to British officialdom. Franklin had written to his London merchant friend on February 26 that if a cartel vessel would sail from Plymouth for Morlaix "with 100 prisoners" he was quite prepared to send back "an equal number of English Prisoners here, whether taken by the Americans or the French."³⁷ Franklin had expected that Antoine de Sartine, France's naval minister, would permit him to fill the necessary complement of British detainees with more than eighty sailors recently taken by the American chartered privateer *Black Prince*. The French minister, however, intended to use these captured mariners for his own exchange purposes. Consequently, when the British cartel vessel arrived at Morlaix in early March and 119 rebel inmates from Mill were freed, the cartel ship *Milford* returned to England empty except for a receipt for the prisoners brought to Morlaix.³⁸

The Morlaix fiasco marked the effective end of the Anglo-American cartel agreements to exchange prisoners by groups. Hartley wrote to Franklin on March 27, 1780, expressing his hope that the recently bungled episode would not delay further exchanges, but Hodgson was more realistic in his appraisal. In a letter to the American commissioner in Paris the day after

³⁶ Benjamin Franklin to David Hartley, Feb. 2, 1780, and Franklin to William Hodgson, Feb. 14, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 31:436–38, 483–84.

³⁷ Benjamin Franklin to William Hodgson, Feb. 26, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 31:550–52; Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 280.

³⁸ Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 281; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 410–11; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 157–59.

Hartley's communication, Hodgson declared "the Board [Commissioners] of Sick and Hurt Seamen is disgusted at such an outcome of this business." On May 12, he added in a message to Franklin that the commissioners had decided not to accept any British prisoners held by France in exchange for Americans. That same month, Digges endorsed the sentiments of the London merchant: "Nothing is expected nor even is another talked of here." And in August 1780, both Digges and Hodgson seemed to put a final damper on the matter of exchanges when they reported that the Admiralty had refused to exchange any more Americans except "on a man to man basis," and that in the future they would accept only those captives taken by American ships in Europe.³⁹

The Admiralty also rejected Hodgson's compromise suggestion made in July 1780 that Britain dispatch American captives to France on a credit basis or else send them to New York to be exchanged there. During the following months, groups of British prisoners of war were in fact returned to England. Then, in December 1780, Hodgson wrote Franklin that the commissioners in London—who had apparently credited several American-held prisoners returned to Britain—were asserting that there were still "forty-one prisoners due," and that there could be no further exchanges, "until that debt [from the abortive Morlaix transfer] is paid."⁴⁰

Hodgson continued calling at the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen despite the unfulfilled cartel. His stature among London's mercantile classes evidently helped maintain his entry to this governmental body. Furthermore, at the request of Franklin, he interceded with London officials on behalf of individual Americans or French friends of Franklin who were having difficulties in the city. Thus, in May 1781, Hodgson notified the American commissioners in Paris that he had advanced "Ten Guineas" to John Trumbull, the son of Connecticut's wartime governor. Young Trumbull had been in England studying art under the famed artist,

³⁹ David Hartley to Benjamin Franklin, Mar. 27, 1780; William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Mar. 28; May 12; Aug. 11, 1780; Thomas Digges to Franklin, May 24; Aug. 18, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 32:159, 167–68, 327–80, 421–23; 33:207–11; Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 281–82; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 159.

⁴⁰ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Dec. 4, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (hereafter PBF), Yale University Library; William Hodgson to Franklin, Aug. 4, 1780; Thomas Digges to Franklin, July 12, 1780, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 33:60–62, 149–50; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 416–19.

Benjamin West, but had been unjustly arrested the previous autumn on charges of treason. Similarly, after receiving another petition from Franklin, Hodgson had interceded with the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen during the summer of 1781 seeking the release of other detained men. One of them was Louis-Guillaume Le Veillard, the son and namesake of a friend and neighbor of Franklin's in Passy. Young Le Veillard had been a passenger on board the cargo vessel *Lafayette*, which had sailed for America from Lorient at the end of March 1781, and had been captured by Royal Navy warships the following May 4. He was taken to London but was afterward released and returned to France the following September.⁴¹

Three Americans who were also the subjects of Franklin's petition were Samuel Curson (Courson), Isaac Gouverneur, and John Witherspoon Jr. Curson and Gouverneur were agents of the Continental Congress. Witherspoon, a surgeon on board a privateer, was the son of the Reverend John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). These men had been taken when the British captured the Dutch West Indian island of St. Eustatius in February 1781 and had afterward been brought to London. Hodgson replied to Franklin that these men had been released, and that despite his encountering some initial bureaucratic difficulties, he had been able to deliver funds to Gouverneur and Witherspoon.⁴²

Even before William Hodgson dispensed the funds to Witherspoon and Gouverneur, the London merchant became in effect the principal supervisor of the prisoner relief funds, primarily because of his laborious work on behalf of the rebel detainees, and also because of his strong prewar friendships with several Americans living in London. Digges too had shown an early concern

⁴¹ Lewis Einstein, *Divided Loyalties: Americans in England During the War of Independence* (New York, 1948), 361–65, 374–75, Claude A. Lopez, "Benjamin Franklin, Lafayette, and the *Lafayette*," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 102 (1964), 219–22. Veillard's ship had sailed from Lorient Mar. 29, 1781. See also Benjamin Franklin to William Hodgson, July 20, 1781, PBF, Clark, "Thomas Digges," 421–22, Hodgson to Franklin, May 8, July 8, 1781, PBF. John Trumbull was released from captivity in August 1781. Hodgson to Franklin, Sept. 4, 1781, PBF.

⁴² Richard A. Harrison, *Princetonians, 1769–1775: A Biographical Dictionary* (3 vols., Princeton, N.J., 1987), 2:355–56; Ronald Hurst, *The Golden Rock, An Episode of the War of Independence* (Annapolis, Md., 1996), viii, 56, 65, 75, 110–28, 133, 167, 172, 220–22; Barbara Tuchman, *The First Salute: A View of the American Revolution* (New York, 1988), 93–107, William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Aug. 8, Sept. 8, 1781, PBF.

for the captives, and had taken risks in hiding many of the men who had escaped and made their way to London. However, Digges was often away from London on secretive matters while Hodgson was much more tied to the City by his work.⁴³ In 1781 a series of discomfiting events and unauthorized actions led to Digges's disgrace, which in turn made Hodgson even more indispensable to the welfare of the prisoners.

Digges, who had ordinarily kept up his regular correspondence with Benjamin Franklin using several different aliases, had been slow in replying to a letter sent by the American commissioner on December 5, 1780, which contained £48 for Digges to add to the prisoners' allowance. The communication had also requested that Digges submit an accounting to the American commissioners in Paris listing the monies he had already expended on the captives.⁴⁴ Digges did not reply to this letter until December 29 when he wrote Franklin only that he had complied with the request to add the £48 to the prisoners' allowance. On the matter of his accounting for monies already dispensed to the captives, he replied with equivocation: "My private accts. [accounts] cannot be got for some days without great inconvenience, I being generally distant from all papers, books &c." The next month Digges drew £230 from Ferdinand Grand, the commissioners' French banker, who in turn stated on February 23, 1781, that he had not received any accounting from Digges either. Thirteen days later, Franklin, by now extremely concerned about the matter, wrote Digges demanding an immediate accounting. Then, on March 20, 1781, Hodgson confirmed Franklin's growing doubts when he wrote the American commissioner that he had been "deceived most egregiously," and that no monies had been paid out to the distributing agents at either Forton or Mill.⁴⁵

⁴³ Elias and Finch, *Letters of Thomas Atwood Digges*, xliii, l–liv; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 424–25; Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 273

⁴⁴ Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Digges, Dec. 5, 1780, PBF; Elias and Finch, *Thomas Atwood Digges*, l–li; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 424

⁴⁵ Thomas Digges to Benjamin Franklin, Dec. 29, 1780, PBF; Elias and Finch, *Thomas A Digges*, 343–45, Franklin to Francis Bowens, Jan. 12, 1781; Franklin to Ferdinand Grand, Feb. 23, 1781, Franklin to Thomas Digges, Mar. 8, 1781; Franklin to William Hodgson, Mar. 8, 1781; Hodgson to Franklin, Mar. 28, 1781, PBF; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 425–26.

Upon receipt of Hodgson's letter exposing the speculations of Digges, Franklin reacted with immediate indignation, replying to Hodgson on April 1, 1781, "What is he who can break his Trust by robbing a poor man and a Prisoner of eighteen Pence given charitably for his Relief, and repeat that Crime as often as there are Weeks in a Winter. . . . If such a Fellow is not damn'd, it is not worth while to keep a Devil." But even before this letter was written, Digges had gone into hiding and would not resurface until the beginning of the following year. Three weeks later, Franklin sent Hodgson a power of attorney to recover any missing funds, and formally made the Coleman Street merchant his principal representative on all matters involving the American prisoners.⁴⁶ Hodgson showed similar antipathy towards Digges when he wrote to Franklin on April 12 condemning the "villany [*sic*]" and malfeasance of the Marylander. The following June 29, Hodgson wrote Franklin that he had received a message from Digges who said he intended to go to Passy "to justify himself" to the American commissioner. Franklin replied skeptically, "I have not as much Faith in Digges coming here as I have in his going to Hell!" The next month Hodgson gave further indications of Digges's untrustworthiness when he made note of a report of the Marylander being arrested in Bath.⁴⁷

Hodgson, who had aided Franklin in exposing Digges, now endeavored to make good on creditors' bills totaling over £330 for assistance to the prisoners. Franklin also entrusted his London relief supervisor with new allotments to the prisoner agents at Forton and Mill. In November 1781, he sent Hodgson £400 to assist the growing numbers of detainees who were facing the oncoming winter.⁴⁸ The Coleman Street merchant worked diligently and responsibly in distributing these funds, which included an extra allowance for officers who required special assistance. At the request of the American commissioner, he also lobbied that same year for the release

⁴⁶ Benjamin Franklin to William Hodgson, Apr. 25, 1781, PBF, Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 288–90; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 426–27.

⁴⁷ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Apr. 12; June 29; July 20, 1781; Franklin to Hodgson, July 8, 1781, PBF; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 429–30.

⁴⁸ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, July 20; Sept. 4, 1781; Franklin to Hodgson, July 17; Aug. 8; Nov. 19, 1781, PBF, Prelinger, "Franklin and the Prisoners of War," 289; Clark, "Thomas Digges," 431.

of Henry Laurens. Laurens, former president of the Continental Congress, had been captured on a voyage to Europe and, beginning in October 1780, incarcerated in the Tower of London until late the following year. In March 1782, the royal government finally officially recognized the American internees as prisoners of war, and a year later the last of them were released from captivity.⁴⁹ By that time Hodgson had shown himself deserving of proper recognition from the United States.

Aside from his exertions on behalf of the American prisoners, Hodgson offered several interesting comments to Benjamin Franklin about events occurring in Britain during the last years of the American Revolution. Some of his remarks included innocuous tidbits about fellow members of the Club of Thirteen to which Franklin occasionally sent small sums. More revealing, however, were the personal observations that the London merchant made about the conflict. These remarks clearly reflect the strong attachments he had formed for the American cause. Thus, on March 10, 1780, after noting the progress of prisoner relief efforts, he declared to Franklin, "I feel as much as any American in this struggle, for it has long been a settled principle in my Breast that English and American Liberty must stand or fall together." Later that year he reaffirmed his support for American "Liberty, Justice, and Humanity," despite what he termed "severe Obloquy and Reproach" made against him.⁵⁰

Throughout 1781, as Hodgson assumed full responsibility for supervising prisoner assistance in England, he also informed Franklin of the increasing dissatisfaction in Britain over the course of the war. This antigovernment sentiment was encouraged by the arrival of news in December of General Cornwallis's disastrous defeat at Yorktown. In early 1782, the London merchant joyfully noted the dramatic governmental changes in Britain and the anticipated moves toward peace. On March 22, he wrote excitedly to his friend in France, "I shall now communicate to you the great Revolution that has happened in the Administration of the Country; there is a total Change,

⁴⁹ David D. Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens* (New York, 1915), 358–88, John Raithby, *The Statutes at Large of England and Great Britain from Magna Carta to the Union of the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland* (20 vols., London, 1811), 15:282–83, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 196–206, Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 290–91.

⁵⁰ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, July 20, Sept. 4, 1781, Franklin to Hodgson, July 17, Aug. 8, Nov. 19, 1781, PBF, Prelinger, "American Prisoners," 289, Clark, "Thomas Digges," 431.

the whole of the Old Ministry, so hostile and inimical to America are to retire, and the Government is to be lodged in the hands of those who have ever reprobated the American War and the Principles upon which it was carried on." Peace negotiations commenced in Paris the following month, but it was not until September 3, 1783, that a treaty was formally signed.⁵¹

While the lengthy negotiations in Paris dragged on, the correspondence between Hodgson and Franklin included several matters related to the work of the peacemakers. The communications reveal that during this period Hodgson was continuing his role as an intermediary. He helped oversee the release of the last groups of interned rebel captives in Britain and to arrange their repatriation to either the United States or to the Continent. British officials, aware of Hodgson's earlier efforts in helping effect Henry Laurens's release from the Tower of London (December 1781) at Franklin's behest, now engaged the London merchant as a go-between. In this regard he contacted the American negotiators in Paris about speeding the release of captured British officers in America, including Colonels Banastre Tarleton and John Simcoe.⁵²

More germane to the discussions in Paris was Hodgson's confidence about a successful outcome of the diplomatic negotiations. Thus, on May 10, 1782, he wrote Franklin not to doubt that "the peace party is the strongest [in Parliament]," and that "every reasonable concession will be made by them." On July 13, he noted the death of the conciliatory leader, Lord Rockingham, but added that he did not feel it would have a negative effect on the negotiations. Six days later he wrote that Lord Shelburne, new head of the peace ministry, had told him unreservedly that, "American independence must be admitted in the most unequivocal Manner."⁵³

⁵¹ Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York, 1965), 435–37; Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1985), 160–74; William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Mar. 22, 1783, PBF. For accountings of expenses by William Hodgson for prisoners during this period, see Hodgson to Franklin, Jan. 15; May 10; June 15, 1782. Hodgson accounts with Benjamin Franklin, July 26, 1782; Franklin accounts with William Hodgson, Oct. 24, 1783, PBF.

⁵² William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Mar. 22; Apr. 9, 11; May 10; June 7, 13; July 19; Oct. 14; Nov. 14; Dec. 12, 1782; Jan., 1783; Franklin to Hodgson, Dec. 1781; Mar. 31; Apr. 13; Apr. 26; May 27, 1782, PBF; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 200–6; Wallace, *Henry Laurens*, 387–89.

⁵³ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, May 10, 13, 19; July 19, 1782, PBF.

Afterward, following a brief visit to Paris in August, Hodgson reasserted Shelburne's resolve, and the following October urged Franklin to capitalize on the negotiations, "untill [*sic*] you have compleated [*sic*] the great and glorious work which is to teach future Kings and Ministers that the Liberties and Property of Mankind are not to be trifled with for their sport and amusement." In November 1782, the British government at last recognized American independence, and the following January 26, Hodgson, while admitting that there were still obstacles ahead, nonetheless congratulated his American friend on "the happy Issue to the horrors of War, which in my opinion has concluded in such a measure as to be a Blessing to the human Race, and to yourself, nothing could be more glorious and honourable."⁵⁴

In the Paris bargaining, Hodgson proved too optimistic on one issue: the recovery of postwar commercial relations between Great Britain and the United States and his own mercantile opportunities within such a revival. No evidence, clear or otherwise, supports the idea that during the war he personally sheltered escaped prisoners or engaged in illegal trade with the rebelling states. (This fact does not obviate the possibility that he may have participated covertly in such activities.) On March 20, 1781, he had in fact written to Franklin that his commercial enterprises "had Suffered much by the War." But on January 26, 1783, he stated to his friend that "War being over, Commercial Ideas occupy my Mind." Noting his anticipation that Anglo-American trading relations would soon be normalized, and adding that those who first got to the newly opened markets would profit considerably, Hodgson mentioned that he desired a safe pass for a ship he owned that was ready to sail for America.⁵⁵

On this matter, however, Franklin was obliged to dispel his friend's economic aspirations. The American commissioner bluntly replied to Hodgson the next month that Parliament would not "do away with every Hostile Act and permit American Vessels to come in [to Britain] without any Treaty." He also pointed out to Hodgson, "you know you have acts of Parliament forbidding you to trade with us, and our people have Acts of Congress forbidding all commerce with you." Hodgson continued to write

⁵⁴ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Aug 26, Oct 14, 1782, Jan 26, 1783, PBF, Morris, *Peacemakers*, 337, 381–82, Dull, *Diplomatic History*, 150–51

⁵⁵ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Mar 20, 1781, Jan 26, 1783, PBF

Franklin during that year, expecting that Britain would agree to a complete restoration of commercial relations with the United States, but his hopes proved ephemeral.⁵⁶

Hodgson's beneficent activities were made known to officials within the American government in addition to the American commissioners in Paris. One such individual was the influential Henry Laurens who, on his return trip to America following his release from internment in Britain, dispatched a letter from Amsterdam on May 30–31, 1782, to John Hancock, former president of the Continental Congress. In it, Laurens praised Hodgson, along with Edmund Burke and Benjamin Vaughan, for showing special concern for him during his incarceration.⁵⁷ And Franklin wrote on separate occasions to Robert R. Livingston, head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, and to Thomas Mifflin, then president of the Continental Congress, lauding the indefatigable work of his British friend in aiding the American captives. For his part, Hodgson wrote with satisfaction to Charles Thomson, secretary of the Congress that he was "very happy that [he] had at least been instrumental in bringing the matter [prisoner exchanges] to a conclusion." In this letter, the London merchant also enclosed proposed terms for the final prisoner exchanges. Congress, for its part, showed its intention to proffer fair reimbursement to Hodgson when Joseph Nourse, registrar of the Treasury, approved the payment (May 31, 1783) of 40,493.9 livres to him as reimbursement for his many expenses in handling prisoner affairs.⁵⁸

The beginning of peace negotiations in Paris, along with the move to accomplish the release of the remaining American prisoners in Britain, served only to continue and heighten the admiration Hodgson felt for

⁵⁶ Benjamin Franklin to William Hodgson, Feb 2, Mar 9, 1783, Hodgson to Franklin, Feb 25, Mar 6, 25, Apr 18, Oct 30, 1783, PBF For commercial aspects of the Treaty of Paris, Sept 1783, see Morris, *Peacemakers*, 350, 429–33, Dull, *Diplomatic History*, 160–63

⁵⁷ Henry Laurens to John Hancock, May 30–31, 1782, Papers of the Continental Congress (M 247, National Archives Center, Chicago), Wallace, *Henry Laurens*, 388–93

⁵⁸ Benjamin Franklin to Robert R. Livingston, June 29, 1782, Franklin to Thomas Mifflin, Dec 26, 1783, PBF, William Hodgson to Charles Thompson, June 6, 1782, William Hodgson Account for 1780–82, Ferdinand Grand Account for 1781, Nov 18, 1782, Grand Account for 1782–83, May 31, 1783, Papers of the Continental Congress (M 247, National Archives Center, Chicago), r 96, r 78, r 155, r 142, r 155, r 142, r 156, r 144, pp 162–70 Ferdinand Grand was Benjamin Franklin's banker in Paris and Amsterdam, see *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 23 210n

Franklin. While, as previously noted, both men had been members of the London Club of Thirteen prior to the war, it was the American commissioner's prominent role in the ensuing conflict and the two men's mutual cooperation in aiding the American prisoners that seem to have expanded the London merchant's veneration of Franklin. Hodgson possibly envisaged greater commercial opportunities in the postwar years through his connection with Franklin.⁵⁹ But in 1782 the merchant was still doing well in his own commercial enterprises and evidently could continue to do so without relying solely on trading transactions with the United States. Hence the request that he made to his American friend in July 1782, after his brief trip to Paris, seems a genuine reflection of the lofty respect he held for Franklin:

The immediate Business of our Correspondence having now in a great measure subsided, I may not be so happy in the frequent reception of your Letters, but I shall presume so far upon your Friendship, as to rest in your Memory on every Occasion that offers, reassuring you that it will give me the utmost Satisfaction on all Occasions if I can be the least use to your Friendship and your Countrymen. There is one wish My Mind has long entertained which if you would be kind enough to indulge me in, I should be very happy, it is this—that you would be pleased to sit for your Picture to one of the best Painters in France, on my Account [at my expense], that I may with rapture tell my Children, I had the Honour, in some degree to enjoy the Friendship of a Man of whom the World thought and think so highly, if you can spare leisure, I hope you will not refuse me. I am with the most sincere regard,

Dear Sir Yours most Respectfully,

William Hodgson⁶⁰

The signing of the Paris peace accords in September 1783 added to Hodgson's expectations that he might benefit personally in postwar Anglo-American dealings. True, earlier that year, Franklin had undercut as being

⁵⁹ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Apr. 9, 13; July 18; Oct. 26; Dec. 12, 1782, PBF; Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 49–60, 245–47, 268–78.

⁶⁰ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, July 13, 1782, PBF.

too premature his English friend's plans to send a trading vessel to America. But with the hostilities officially concluded, Hodgson continued to anticipate an imminent relaxation of British commercial restrictions on American trade. He also seemed to conclude that his decade-old friendship with Franklin and his numerous pro-American actions would earn him some form of recompense from the emergent United States government. Even after the final discharge of the captives in early 1783, he had acted upon requests from various American officials to try to obtain the release of their nation's commercial ships that had been impounded in British or Irish seaports.⁶¹ Appreciation for all his labors must have seemed near when Franklin wrote to him December 1783, declaring, "I shall not fail to recommend my Friend [Hodgson] for the [London] Consulship, being with unalterable Esteem and Affection." Franklin followed up this pledge two weeks later with a letter to his friend Thomas Mifflin, president of Congress. The communication offered a hearty endorsement for the London merchant:

If the Congress should think it fit to have a Consul for the United States in London, and do not appoint one of our Country to that Office, I beg leave to mention the Merits of Mr. William Hodgson a Merchant of that City, who has been a zealous Friend of America, [and] was a principal Promoter of the Subscription for the Relief of American Prisoners, and Chairman of the Committee for Dispensing the Money raised by that Subscription. He also took the Trouble of applying the Monies I furnished him with, when the Subscription was exhausted; and [he] consistently assisted with all the Negotiations I had with British Ministers in their [the prisoners'] Favour, wherein he generally succeeded, being a Man of Weight and Credit, very active, and much esteemed for his Probity and Integrity. These Services continued steadily during the whole War, and seem to entitle him to the favourable notice of Congress, when any Occasion offers of doing him Service or Pleasure.⁶²

Franklin's letter, which in effect recommended Hodgson for the consulship, was probably a welcome Christmas present to the London

⁶¹ William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Mar 6, 29, Apr 18, Oct 30, 1783, Jan 23, Mar 17, 1784, Samuel Curson and Isaac Gouverneur to Benjamin Franklin, Dec 20, 1783, Thomas Barclay to William Temple Franklin, Dec 16, 1783, Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Mifflin, Dec 26, 1783, PBF

⁶² Benjamin Franklin to William Hodgson, Dec 10, 1783, Franklin to Thomas Mifflin, Dec 26, 1783, PBF

merchant. An appointment as the American consul in the British capital—even if it paid nothing—could open innumerable future commercial enterprises for him and bring with it the attention and admiration of many Britons, in particular those London tradesmen who had very sizeable claims for pre-Revolutionary war debts and would quite likely seek his favor. Unfortunately, even Franklin's strong recommendation and the laudatory endorsements added by Thomas Barclay, an American agent in France, did not persuade the United States government. On March 16, 1784, the Confederation Congress asked the American representatives in France to convey their gratitude to Hodgson for his "benevolent attention to the Citizens of these United States who were Prisoners in Great Britain during the late War," but their resolution stated explicitly "That it is inconsistent with the Interest of the United States to appoint any person not a Citizen to the Office of Minister, *charges des affaires*, Consul, Vice Consul, or to any other Civil Department of a foreign Country."⁶³

The congressional resolution was dispatched to the American representatives in Paris who apparently passed it on to Great Britain. Hodgson probably received word of it during the late spring of 1784. There is no extant record of his response to the disheartening rejection. The thanks of the United States Congress presumably meant little to Hodgson who had such great expectations for an appointment as United States consul in London. And while his tragic suicide did not occur until the following October, the irrevocable path toward his lamentable end quite possibly commenced with this unpalatable rejection.

There were, of course, other motivations that combined to impel Hodgson to take his own life, and quite likely a full clarification will never be made. In reporting the calamitous event, the *Political Magazine* claimed that Hodgson was beset by other serious concerns and had failed to receive debt payments from America, a misfortune followed by very significant losses from stock market speculations. Michael MacDonald's recent study, *Sleepless Souls, Suicide in Early Modern England*, points out that business

⁶³ Gaillard Hunt, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789 Vol 26 January 1–May 10, 1784* (Washington, D C, 1928), 144, The United States in Congress Assembled to Benjamin Franklin, Mar 16, 1784, PBF (where Hodgson's name is mistakenly spelled Hodgden) Katherine A Kellock, "London Merchants and the Pre-1776 American Debts," *Guildhall Studies in London History* 1 (1974), 109–49

failures in the volatile mercantile environment of Britain during this period became a prime motivation for individuals to take their own lives,⁶⁴ and Hodgson, who had become so prosperous in his earlier commercial career—so much so that he could purchase a country home and offer to pay the expenses for a formal portrait of Benjamin Franklin—was psychologically unprepared to accept not only the loss of the London consulship, but also a very considerable portion of his fortune. Tragic parallels to this situation could be noted among those American stock market speculators who self-destructed during the autumn of 1929.

No documents in the Benjamin Franklin papers offer clues to Hodgson's suicidal intentions. The London merchant's last extant letter to the American Commissioner in Paris (March 17, 1784) contains no indication of any personal problems or stress. A brief message, written sometime in September or early October 1784, was sent by Edward Bancroft, who had once acted briefly as an unofficial secretary to the Paris Commissioners, to William Temple Franklin, grandson of Benjamin Franklin. Both men then lived in London, and the communication simply instructed Franklin that "any Commands you have for me in London may be addressed to the care of Mr. William Hodgson."⁶⁵ Another dispatch from Bancroft to William Temple Franklin (with the notation of only "Friday morning"), also apparently sent in September or October 1784, is slightly longer in content. Bancroft asked Franklin to read a letter that he received from Mary Hodgson and suggested that the two men travel together to the Hodgson "country house (at Chigwell Row Essex) about 12 miles from town on Saturday afternoon as she proposes, or not." Perhaps Mary Hodgson was becoming increasingly desperate about her husband's mental state; the wording does not disclose this possibility or even if her husband was still alive. In any event, Dr. Richard Price, a dissenting clergyman and prominent pro-American Englishman, made no mention of the London merchant's mental state in a letter to William Temple Franklin in early October, and,

⁶⁴ MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, 268–74, 327–28.

⁶⁵ Edward Bancroft to William Temple Franklin, Sept./Oct. 1784; William Hodgson to Benjamin Franklin, Mar. 17, 1784, PBF; Dybikowski, *On Burning Ground*, 274.

two days after Hodgson's suicide, Franklin offered no mention of the shocking event in a letter to his grandfather in France.⁶⁶

But Hodgson's suicide was given coverage in British publications. Newspapers in England noted the event, although they offered no editorial comment. This was not the case for the *Political Magazine* which appeared to take pleasure in any story that made the United States, its inhabitants, and its supporters, look unappealing. The publication declared that Hodgson's death should serve as a warning to Britons "who possess any share of common sense and prudence, that there are many bad customers on the other side of the Atlantic." It added that British merchants such as Hodgson "Must have had great faith in miracles to suppose that those who were so lately fraudulent debtors and cruel and perjured rebels, would immediately be converted into honest men and fair and opulent dealers." The same issue of this publication added other negative reports and comments that dealt with the United States.⁶⁷

There were no replies printed in the *Political Magazine* that took issue with its coverage of Hodgson's demise. There are also few extant references to the London merchant following his suicide. One such example, however, is a short, provocative message sent to William Temple Franklin from Edward Bancroft with a date showing only 1784, though it was probably penned after Hodgson's death. Written as Bancroft was returning from France, the note states that he "will take care to deliver the Packet for Mrs. H[odgson] immediately upon my arrival" in London. In April 1785, Benjamin Franklin instructed Jonathan Williams, an American agent (and his great nephew) staying in England, "to apply to the executors of Mr. Hodgson for the Ballance [*sic*] that appears due to me on his Books. Dr. Bancroft can inform you where they are." Williams replied to Franklin on May 14, informing him, "I find you must come in for your dividend with Mr. Hodgson's Creditors. I believe it will be necessary to send a Power of attorney to somebody here to receive these Dividends and give a discharge as they are paid." Finally, on July 21, 1785, prior to his departure for America, Franklin wrote to John Paul Jones, the American naval hero who

⁶⁶ Edward Bancroft to William Temple Franklin, Sept /Oct. 1784, PBF; Richard Price to William Temple Franklin, Oct 11, 1784, PBF.

⁶⁷ *Political Magazine* (Oct 1784), 244.

was then staying at Le Havre, that he had written to a "Mr. Hodgson seeking information about coverage costs for ships sailing to Canada." Most likely this "Mr. Hodgson" was related to William Hodgson—perhaps a son.⁶⁸

For all of his extensive and arduous labors on behalf of the United States, Hodgson received little in return compared to other British contemporaries. The pro-American Dr. Richard Price received an honorary doctorate from Yale College for his work. The Reverend Thomas Wren, who distributed relief funds to Americans incarcerated at Forton Gaol, received an honorary doctorate from the College of New Jersey. Reuben Harvey, a Quaker merchant from Cork, Ireland, who aided American sailors detained in nearby Kinsale, received special recognition from Congress and obtained from George Washington a miniature of the General.⁶⁹ Even the roguish Thomas Digges benefited during the postwar years. During the 1790s, he was employed by influential Americans to perform legal tasks in Britain. Later in the decade he returned to Maryland upon inheriting a substantial family homestead along the Potomac River. There he received the honor of invitations to several receptions at the nearby Mount Vernon estate of President Washington. And several Britons who helped the American cause also received personal welcomes in the United States after the war.⁷⁰

There were additional negative aftermaths that affected the career and renown of Hodgson. The United States government never provided any financial assistance to his family or his descendants. His key role serving as the intermediary in Britain for imprisoned Americans in that country and his other supportive actions have never been thoroughly detailed. And adding insult to such slights, some later American historians have even confused him with an English centenarian who bore the same name, though

⁶⁸ Edward Bancroft to William Temple Franklin [1784], Benjamin Franklin to Jonathan Williams, Apr 25, 1785, Franklin to John Paul Jones, July 21, 1785, Jonathan Williams to Franklin, May 14, 1785, PBF

⁶⁹ Sheldon S Cohen, "Reuben Harvey, Irish Friend of the American Revolution," *Quaker History* (forthcoming), *General Catalogue of Princeton University, 1746-1906* (Princeton, NJ, 1908), 399-400, *Catalogue of the Officers and Graduates of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, 1701-1924* (New Haven, 1924), 574

⁷⁰ Clark, "Thomas Digges," 436-38, Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 211

evidently was not closely related to him.⁷¹ But Hodgson's noteworthy deeds in support of a largely unappreciative nation—a nation that ironically had played a role in his tragic and sudden death—do call for some form of posthumous credit and elaboration. This account will perhaps give some measure of the man and provide the recognition he deserves.

Loyola University Chicago

SHELDON S. COHEN

⁷¹ Clark, "Thomas Digges," 390n; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 211.

