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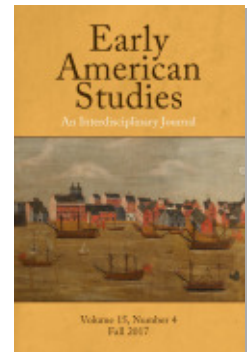
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# Situating Merchants in Late Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic Port Cities

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**ABSTRACT** Merchants living in the early modern era experienced their commercial successes and failures not only as participants in great Atlantic world networks of traders and goods, but also as residents of particular local places. Scholars' sensitive and rich portraits of port city commerce portray international traders as the decision makers who shaped long-distance trade, which in turn had a profound influence on the developing character of individual port cities. Integrating and improving across great spans of time and space, the British Atlantic merchant formed coherent networks that shared a language of credit, trust, and profitable exchange. But just as significantly, we can start to integrate the myriad daily economic choices of local city residents with those of merchants, and we can do so productively by recognizing the "cityness" of ports, a quality constituted from the constant interactions, negotiations, and perceptions of their residents within man-made and natural surroundings. This article tests how the intertwined natures of long-distance trade and local cityness affected the different commercial trajectories of three merchants in three different British Atlantic ports.

At the heart of merchants' entangled networks of trans-Atlantic commercial relations were the conditions of their particular port cities and the myriad decisions each trader made locally on a daily basis. For decades, historians have explored the fruits of these decisions, including a maturing shipbuilding industry, increasing importation of foreign goods, rising incomes and consumer desires, a slow accumulation of capital for urban

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improvements, and the free and forced migrations of peoples who crowded these cities.<sup>1</sup> These sweeping commercial changes attracted the praise of residents and visitors alike. Admiring the scores of tall masts aggregated at the water's edge every late summer and fall, many port city residents grew ever more confident about an imagined empire of relatively uninterrupted economic maturation. One mid-eighteenth-century observer noted how at Philadelphia "the key for Landing Goods is large and convenient, with Wharfs and Warehouses, stor'd with plenty of European Commodities,

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1. The list of these excellent historical studies could be very long, but start with Peter Marshall and Glyn Williams, eds., *The British Atlantic Empire before the American Revolution* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1980); David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Thomas Bender et al., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002); Simon Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Susanah Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014); Julia Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), chap. 1; Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Avner Greif, "Contract Enforceability and Economic Institutions in Early Trade: The Maghribi Traders' Coalition," *American Economic Review* 83, no. 3 (1993): 525–48; Jack P. Greene, "Transatlantic Colonization and the Redefinition of Empire in the Early Modern Era: The British American Experience," in Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, eds., *Negotiated Empires: Centers and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500–1820* (New York: Routledge, 2002); D. A. Farnie, "The Commercial Empire of the Atlantic, 1607–1783," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 15, no. 2 (1962): 205–18; Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973); Peggy Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Network of Trade and Revolution, 1713–1826* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic World, 1735–1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1986); Cathy Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Emma Hart, *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville, Va., 2010); Simon Newman, *A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, eds., *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

here being always at least 40 ships of good Burthen in the River.” By 1785 a London visitor to the city felt compelled to remark that it was “certainly the most flourishing place in America for trade.”<sup>2</sup>

In refining this rich portrait of people and goods traversing the Atlantic, historians have also become more appreciative in recent years of the immediate physical circumstances in which city dwellers lived and worked, taking care to situate widows and orphans, indigent and underemployed, bound and slave within local urban communities that were often defined by their commercial activities. But if this denser and more socially varied population has become a welcome addition to portraits of urban economic agency, it all too often remains only tangentially connected to the trans-Atlantic merchant community. For example, some scholars have admirably illuminated how city women were entangled in local credit networks, or how poor itinerants moved through towns according to economic opportunity, or how enslaved people built their material lives largely in the backyards, kitchens, and marketplace edges of the early British American city.<sup>3</sup> But how might we connect these urban residents to the wider Atlantic world of which their home cities were a part?

By the same token, many of the sensitive and rich portraits of city commerce portray international traders as the decision makers and leaders in

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2. Billy Smith and Susan Klepp, eds., *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley, an Indentured Servant* (State College, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1992), 70; entry for October 30, 1785, in Robert Hunter, *Quebec to Carolina in 1785–1786: Being the Travel Diary and Observations of Robert Hunter, Jr., a Young Merchant of London*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington, 1943).

3. For example, Ellen Hartigan O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Serena Zabin, *Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Cornelia H. Dayton and Sharon V. Salinger, *Robert Love's Warnings: Searching for Strangers in Colonial Boston* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Bernard L. Herman, *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780–1830* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Press and UNC Press, 2005); Herman, “Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770–1820,” *Historical Archaeology* 33 (1999): 88–101; Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998). For an exception, see Sherrylynne Haggerty, *The British Atlantic Trading Community, 1760–1810: Men, Women, and the Distribution of Goods* (Leiden: Leiden University, 2006). Haggerty rightly argues for commercial communities in Liverpool and Philadelphia that incorporated everyone from hucksters to trans-Atlantic merchants, but she focuses on the unifying and connected aspects of all port cities rather than their specific geographies.

local spaces, using and shaping them for purposes of long-distance trade, confidently striking deals, gathering cargoes, and dispersing trunks of imported goods wholesale and retail without significant concern for non-merchant residents' agency. Merchants lived in an urban economy but, unlike its nonmerchant residents, they were not constrained by the opportunities and limitations of a city's economy. Rather, historians have customarily focused on how merchants felt the pull of trans-Atlantic networks, faced outward toward the watery horizon, and manipulated their urban environs to facilitate this focus on far-flung markets. As David Hancock explains, "Out of necessity," merchants "were international thinkers and actors who viewed the world as a connected series of markets that they could integrate and improve." The result of this process was a "new-found allegiance to a larger community" of merchants. Similarly, Max Edelson views Charleston as a "stage on which planters took their place within the Atlantic world" and "an active site for exchange" that was directed outward. "Planters and merchants, locked in competition in their small corner of the Atlantic world, behaved as if they acted on an expansive international stage." Integrating and improving across great spans of time and space, the British Atlantic merchant formed coherent networks that shared a language of credit, trust, and profitable exchange. These entanglements in turn led to merchant importations not only of goods but also of new architectural forms, technologies, and institutional improvements that they introduced to other city dwellers.<sup>4</sup>

While it would be far-fetched to bestow agency on a city's collection of stalls, shops, and warehouses, we might nevertheless do a better job of explaining the particular environments within which traders made continual decisions about how and with whom to conduct commercial exchange. And by doing so, we can start to integrate the myriad daily economic choices of local city residents on all social levels, rather than portray sectors of city populations as either locally oriented residents or outward-facing merchants. Moreover, as urban studies scholars remind us, cities possess "cityness," a quality constituted from the constant interactions, negotiations, and perceptions of their residents within man-made and natural surroundings.

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4. Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 25; S. Max Edelson, *Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 176–81. For an example of how, in Bristol and Liverpool, increased trade had a direct effect on the built environment through merchant housing, exchanges, and docks, see Kenneth Morgan, "Building British Atlantic Port Cities: Bristol and Liverpool in the Eighteenth Century," in Daniel Maudlin and Bernard L. Herman, eds.,

A city is not a coherent whole, but rather a lived environment that looks and functions differently according to particular perspectives of its inhabitants. Cities are unique and dynamic places, not merely inert backdrops; they constitute specific settings that were acted on and shaped by their inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Thus, all urban residents existed in constant dialogue with their shifting immediate surroundings.

It follows that merchants could not consistently impose their will on cities or use them as bases for trans-Atlantic networks just as they wished. Instead, they became city dwellers whose commercial culture was influenced by their intimate relationship to the urban spaces through which they moved at various life stages. As a consequence, we argue, though elements of a shared trans-Atlantic commercial culture undoubtedly emerged to bind together merchants in the early modern world, the conditions merchants shared coexisted with profoundly local circumstances of vital importance to the outcomes of any merchant's endeavors. Merchants spoke a commercial language that bonded them across great distances, but they also held a deep understanding of their own particular port city surroundings. It mattered very much where a merchant established primary local relationships, and paying closer attention to the details of different places in which merchants built commercial relationships with myriad local people provides us with new insights into the economic culture of early modern empires, especially the ways that commerce was, in reality, never the well-oiled machine that imperial policy makers wished it to be.

We bring this reality into bold relief by comparing the commercial lives of three merchants: a rising trader in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, who depended on the interior for exportable goods; a successful Philadelphia merchant with commercial connections embedded in both his neighborhood and far-flung parts of the British Empire; and a Charleston merchant

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*Building the British Atlantic World: Spaces, Places, and Material Culture, 1600–1850* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2016), 212–30.

5. See, for example, Bob Jessop, Neil Brenner, and Martin Jones, "Theorizing Socio-Spatial Relations," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, no. 3 (2008): 389–401; Geoff Vigar, Stephen Graham, and Patsy Healey, "In Search of the City in Spatial Strategies: Past Legacies, Future Imaginings," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 8 (2005): 1391–1410; Carl Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Swati Chattopadhyay and Jeremy White, eds., *City Halls and Civic Materialism: Towards a Global History of Urban Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

who depended on the plantation economy of his region. The micro-geography of each merchant's trade within a British Atlantic port city contained an array of merchants confronting overall imperial regulations and trans-Atlantic networks while at the same time adapting to their particular places as they moved through distinct stages in their commercial careers. All of them spent time at the countinghouse and wharf, important public buildings such as the Exchange and customhouse, and the many coffeehouses near waterfronts. All of them cultivated networks at both local and transnational levels. There were, nevertheless, some striking differences in the ways that these three merchants experienced the North American, Caribbean, and British provincial ports of the Atlantic world. Together, the contrasts in these experiences urge us to attend to the particularities of the early modern port city, even while we chart the growing connections among them that were forged in this era of imperial and global endeavor.



We start our tour with Ralph Jackson, a young apprentice to a hostman in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Hostmen were coal factors, and they were among the most powerful and wealthy merchants in a city that depended on the coal trade for its wealth and its growth. Although they lost their monopoly as middlemen between mine owners and shipowners in 1751, hostmen continued to play an important role in the export of the city's principal commodity. From the seventeenth century onward, the expansion of Newcastle's coal trade had nurtured a bustling urban economy that was home to many wealthy merchants with commercial contacts throughout Europe and the Americas.<sup>6</sup> Ralph Jackson was a middling apprentice from the nearby Yorkshire town of Richmond, and he is our window onto Newcastle's commercial landscape because of the extraordinarily detailed diary that he kept, in which he documented his daily routines during the seven years of his apprenticeship between 1749 and 1756.<sup>7</sup>

6. Histories of early modern Newcastle, its environs, and its trade appear in Joyce Ellis, "A Dynamic Society: Social Relations in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1660–1760," in Peter Clark, ed., *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600–1800* (London: Hutchinson, 1984); David Levine and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham, 1560–1765* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1991); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

7. Ralph Jackson wrote nineteen volumes of diaries. He started to write in 1749, and although there is a hiatus between 1753 and 1756, he resumed his habit toward the end of his apprenticeship and continued to write for the rest of his life. His

During this apprenticeship, as he learned the generic skills of a merchant, Jackson circulated in urban locations that would have been familiar to any British Atlantic urban merchant. His diary reveals how his daily itinerary took him to the countinghouse, the wharf (or “key,” as he called it), the post house, and the customhouse. Jackson also went on regular expeditions to deliver payments and bills to individuals around the city with whom his master had accounts. At these locations he undertook an equally familiar repertoire of merchant tasks. In the countinghouse, or office, Jackson copied bills, drew up monthly accounts of coal sold, and filled in the “reckoning book.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, he learned the bookkeeping and writing skills that would make him into a functioning trader who could calculate profits and losses and maintain a polite and legible correspondence with his business partners. At the post house he delivered and collected letters, getting to know the personnel and the logistics of corresponding. Finally, at the customhouse he learned how to clear the vessels on which coal was dispatched from Newcastle across Europe and into the Atlantic world.

Jackson’s skills were largely similar to those cultivated by city merchants wherever they were situated in the Atlantic world. For example, while he was still a young apprentice, his duties were not so varied as they would become later, and his responsibilities were minimal. Like other apprentice merchants or young clerks in retail establishments, Jackson spent time in school as well as at sites of commercial business; his counterparts in many port cities likewise only gradually spent more and more time at the countinghouse. Furthermore, Jackson’s duties often involved observing rather than acting. He stood on the quay and watched how coal was loaded onto ships, gaining insight into how the keelmen loaded their small boats and took the coal out to the seagoing vessels that waited at the mouth of the Tyne, where the river was deeper. It was not until the second and third years of his apprenticeship that he began to copy accounts, deliver bills, and issue orders to the keelmen. It took even longer for Jackson’s master to entrust him with paying the keelmen and clearing ships at the customhouse. By the last year of his apprenticeship, in 1756, he was finally charged with

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diaries are at the Teesside Archives in Middlesborough and available online from the Great Ayton Historical Society at <http://greatayton.wikidot.com/ralph-jackson-diaries>. They are labeled alphabetically from A (1749–50) through U (1787–90).

8. For the drawing up of coal accounts, see Jackson Diaries, entry for March 15, 1752, vol. C, February 1751 to April 1752; entry for June 1, vol. D, May to October 1752; entry for March 17, 1753, vol. E, November 1752 to August 1753 and March 1756 to August 1756. For “reckoning book” see entry for June 8, 1752, vol. D, and entry for November 15, 1756, vol. F, September 1756 to November 1757.



negotiating business deals and commissioning repairs to boats; in other words, he had become a full-fledged merchant.<sup>9</sup>

Although Jackson's gradual rise to trusted and skilled levels of commercial activities would have been familiar to merchants throughout the Atlantic, specific tasks performed by ambitious novice merchants varied from place to place. For example, Jackson made almost daily trips to Winkhamlee Staith, the end point of the wagonways that brought coal from the rural mines around Newcastle to the waterside, where the commodity would then be unloaded from the wagons and piled into the small keelboats operated by the keelmen. The staith was the terminus for a trail devoted solely to moving coal, and it did not have parallels in the lives of most other Atlantic merchants. In many ways, the staith was a more important work location than the quay for Jackson, as Newcastle's wharves were not sites of commerce or storage but were merely transfer points for goods and people. The quay itself was public property, owned and controlled by the city's corporation. Any townspeople who sought to retail goods, build storehouses, or store goods on the wharves were immediately subject to censure by the city council. Thus, Jackson went to the quay only to observe events but never to do business.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, he shared a common experience with merchants in other metropolitan British Atlantic towns. In Liverpool, Glasgow, and Bristol, wharves were owned by corporations or guilds, not individual merchants, and as such were shipping points for imports and exports, rather than sites of bargaining in their own right.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Jackson first paid the keelmen in May 1752; Jackson Diaries, entry for May 2, vol. D. As he progressed through his apprenticeship, Jackson operated independently at the customhouse and had responsibility for keelmen's wages. "Clear'd the William of Whitby . . . and Suckey & Nelly of Lynn . . . at cust<sup>o</sup> & Town Houses both together . . . paid the Keelmen," entry for September 18, 1756, vol. F. In October 1756 he paid for keel repairs, see entry for October 16, 1756, vol. F.

10. Newcastle Common Council Order Book, Tyne & Wear Archives Service, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, U.K., MD/NC/2/6, December 16, 1771, 137, and December 16, 1778, 178.

11. For activities on the quay see Jackson Diaries, in which vols. A–F contain innumerable references to the waterfront, but only two record Jackson buying anything there—on both occasions some oysters. Kenneth Morgan and William Ashworth describe wharves at Bristol and London as spaces that were controlled by a number of urban authorities who ensured that informal dealing in provisions would not take place there. See Kenneth Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7–33; William Ashworth, *Customs and Excise: Trade, Production, and Consumption in England, 1640–1845* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2003).

The kinds of uncertainties Jackson experienced were also largely specific to Newcastle's role as a coal port. The relationship among Jackson, his master, and the keelmen was the principal source of conflict and uncertainty for the Newcastle merchant. This situation stemmed from the historically embedded working roles associated with the coal trade, which had emerged in the early seventeenth century. As Jackson advanced in his apprenticeship, one of the tasks his master frequently assigned him was the payment of the keelmen's wages. The careful management of the keelmen and their timely payment were crucial, since the coal industry's smooth running relied on their willingness to move the coal from staith to ship. Indeed, the keelmen themselves fully understood their importance; they were quick to go on strike if they were not satisfied with their working conditions. It is no wonder, then, that when Jackson failed to pay all the keelmen on one occasion in May 1752, his master reprimanded him sharply for his oversight. The 1750 keelmen's strike was undoubtedly still fresh in the memories of Newcastle's hostmen. That year, objecting to the hostmen's tendency to overload keels, and the payment of too large a portion of their wages in beer, the keelmen had stopped all river traffic for almost a month; once the strike was broken, the ringleaders were sentenced to transportation to North America. This would not be the last time the keelmen took direct action, and in 1771 they were before the court again on charges of rioting and seizing ships.<sup>12</sup>

Ralph Jackson circulated about an urban space that was familiar and relatively predictable at its countinghouses, wharves, post offices, coffeehouses, and customhouse; his daily itinerary to these places would have been replicated over and over by other apprentices and young merchants as well. While he trod a familiar path within the city, however, Jackson also learned customs of commerce that were particular to the circumstances of his coal-exporting English city. Especially tricky were the tasks of getting the coal from mine to water's edge, and then from Tyneside to boat, processes that could easily be disrupted by either the keelmen's or miners' determination to uphold the wages and privileges to which they were entitled.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this was just one of a number of ways in which embedded customary rela-

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12. Jackson Diaries, entries for March 19 and May 4, 1750, vol. A; Joseph M. Fewster, *The Keelmen of Tyneside: Labour Organisation and Conflict in the North-East Coal Industry, 1600–1830* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer, 2011); Records of the North Circuit, ASSI 45 32/1/280, March 24, 1775; ASSI 45 30/1/139, July 27, 1771, National Archives, Kew.

13. For discussion of the political economy of mining and miners in the early modern era, see Levine and Wrightson, *Making of an Industrial Society*, chap. 4.

tionships mediated the commercial experience of Jackson and his fellow hostmen.

When he took his freedom, in December 1756, the former apprentice noted that he had to swear an oath before the city's aldermen. This pledge included the statement that he promised to "from henceforth hold with our Sovereign Lord the Kings Majesty that now is, and with his Heirs and Successors, Kings and Queens of Great Britain, against all persons, to live and to die, and maintain the Peace; and all the Franchises of this Town of Newcastle upon Tyne, and be obedient to the Mayor, Aldermen, Sherrif, and all other the Officers of the same."<sup>14</sup> It was long-standing hierarchies and duties such as these, as much as the familiar array of urban spaces inhabited by Jackson, that had shaped his experiences as an urban trader. Jackson, his master, and the keelmen all worked in a corporate urban setting in which customary institutions and closely prescribed economic roles dictated the dynamic between individuals and the environment they shared. When conflict arose, acknowledged patterns of protest motivated merchants and keelmen alike as they negotiated within the boundaries not only of the city, but also of legally defined working relationships.

An ocean away during these same decades, the young Philadelphia merchant's clerk Samuel Coates shared many of Jackson's daily experience, including the regular uncertainties of markets around the Atlantic world and the requirements of good reputation and reliable credit. But Coates learned the business of international commerce and local shopkeeping in the particular environment of Philadelphia. Unlike Jackson, Coates experienced few of the constraints imposed by corporate and guild restrictions. And in contrast to Jackson, he confronted more of the uncertainties that were embedded in colonial and comparatively new urban places, where capital was short and commercial networks were still maturing. Coates managed these uncertainties personally, as a merchant's clerk, and with ambitions of someday becoming a partner with one of the city's established merchants. In his crowded neighborhood along the waterfront, Coates engaged directly with city residents in a mind-boggling array of activities to buy, distribute, and sell goods; repair and supply departing vessels; hire and pay craftsmen and laborers who made at least forty kinds of goods he needed to outfit a ship; and keep the accounts and write the letters that linked him to scores of people in Philadelphia. Although casting his thoughts outward to the Caribbean, Britain, or northern Europe, Coates spent hours every day in two small counting rooms, as well as the markets,

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14. Jackson Diaries, entry for March 19, 1757, vol. F.

shops, and coffeehouses of his native city. The local spaces of exchange and production, as well as the sites along the shoreline where preparation for voyages came together in a choreographed scenario of interdependencies, provided the arenas for most activities during his waking hours.<sup>15</sup>

In 1768 Coates advanced from his position as a clerk for his adoptive uncle, the well-situated merchant John Reynell, to become a respected (although never notably wealthy) merchant. As he transitioned from clerk to independent trader, his dockside economic culture continued to include necessary collaborations, shoulder to shoulder, with a dense community of Philadelphians dedicated to preparing outbound voyages. As a clerk for Reynell, Coates had learned early in his career that merchants could never send a ship to sea as autonomous agents, for they required the labor and services of countless neighbors. And they rarely became sole owners of departing vessels and goods, but instead shared investments in shipbuilding and outfitting. Coates knew it was essential, too, to collaborate with fellow merchants who had better access to goods and credit.<sup>16</sup>

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15. Samuel Coates Journal, 1760–1766, Samuel Coates Business Papers, series 2B, vol. 51; Samuel Coates Journal, 1767–1776, Samuel Coates Business Papers, series 2B, vol. 52; and Samuel Coates Correspondence, series 2A, box 21, all in Coates & Reynell Family Papers (hereafter cited as CRFP), Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as HSP); Samuel Coates Account and Memoranda Books, 1785–1830, 5 vols. and 1 reel, American Philosophical Society; Samuel Coates Insurance Surveys, S02266 and S02267, both recorded in 1787, at the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire, Digital Archives. For additional information about Coates's neighborhood, see "Map of Philadelphia Published According to an Act of Parliament November 1, 1762 and Sold by the Editors, Matthew Clarkson and Mary Biddle, Philadelphia" (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969); *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 6, 1731, February 8, 1739, November 19, 1741, October 8, 1747, August 18, 1748, and March 25 and July 22, 1762. For additional insights into the operation of a countinghouse, see Jacob M. Price, ed., "Directions for the Conduct of a Merchant's Counting House, 1766," *Business History* 28 (July 1986): 134–50. Many merchants in Philadelphia sold their goods directly from their warehouses, or those of friends, rather than sell from a retail store; Robert Morris conducted some of his commercial business from an office in his home at Lemon Hill, and Charles and Thomas Willing advertised about a home office in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 25 and September 3, 1747.

16. Stephen Winslow, *Biographies of Successful Philadelphia Merchants* (Philadelphia, 1864), 192–95; Thomas Westcott, *The Historic Mansions and Buildings of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1867), 67–78; Richard J. Webster, *Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), and minutes of the meeting of November 18, 1859, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 7 (1861): 159–60. For Coates's clerking practices, see Samuel Coates Journal, 1760–1766, Samuel Coates Business Papers, series

At the core of his training, Coates learned to communicate with scores of city producers, retailers, creditors, and debtors, across all occupations and classes. But like so many other city merchants, he also created hefty piles of correspondence with merchants throughout the British and French Caribbean, London, Londonderry, Antwerp, Cádiz, Bremen, Nantes, and beyond, each letter displaying his skills in long-distance business knowledge. His letters are of the sort that historians use regularly to trace the networks of trans-Atlantic commerce and elite personal relationships stretching across empires in the most pragmatic ways. But equally important, near these piles of letters was a long shelf of account books carefully documenting years of local and long-distance trade in double-entry book-keeping, as well as waste books containing jottings about Coates's daily business, day journals that recorded transactions in the partners' story, household accounts, rent ledgers, and more. Each of these modes of accounting mingled the relationships of distant and nearby trading people, and so did the piles of official port clearances, bills of lading, auction advertisements, lists of prices current from ports all over Europe, and insurance papers. Moreover, in local affairs Coates generated piles of paper and receipt books that showed initial orders for goods, delivery confirmations, eventual payments to artisans, and entries in merchants' receipt books, daybooks, and ledgers. He also managed the strongbox that held a dozen or so bills of exchange, insurance policies for voyages not yet completed, and an assortment of foreign coins, as well as the dense piles of paper scraps representing the ties of mutual reliance and accountability with scores of local Philadelphians who were vital for outfitting ships. The sheer variety, not to mention the stifling quantity, of petty orders and communications far exceeded the daily duties of apprentice hostmen such as Coates's distant contemporary Ralph Jackson. Nevertheless, each man shouldered responsibility for coordinating local business affairs that could go awry at any time.<sup>17</sup>

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2B, vol. 51; and Samuel Coates Correspondence, series 2A, box 21, both in CRFP, HSP; John Reynell Letterbooks, 1729–1773, CRFP, HSP. On clerking practices in general, see Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996), 5, 156–62; Peter Mathias, “Risk, Credit, and Kinship in Early Modern Enterprise,” in John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, eds., *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy: Essays on Transatlantic Enterprise* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17–21; Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 42–49, 135–46.

17. For heaps of paper, representing endless record-keeping on the minutest scale, see the very large collection of correspondence, receipts, accounts, and more in CRFP, HSP. In particular, see Samuel Coates Journal, 1760–1766, Samuel Coates Business Papers, series 2B, vol. 51; Samuel Coates Correspondence, series 2A, box

Even after Coates became a partner of John Reynell in 1768, he continued to cope with a dizzying array of local commercial chores: send and receive work orders, promise and make payments, deliver complaints of shoddy work, entertain demands for wages, consider apologies for late deliveries, and write endless receipts and IOUs. In the counting rooms behind the Coates & Reynell shop, one could also find old slop books (captain's notes about menus for the crew, clothing dispensed while on a voyage, fees paid at stopovers, etc.), memorandum books (of breast-pocket size and filled with a jumble of notes about purchases and payments), and loose records involving the people who made, repaired, and transported essential goods for a voyage. Shipwrights, teamsters, butchers, bakers, carpenters, joiners, blockmakers, ropemakers, sailmakers, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, coopers, and riggers, free and enslaved, contributed labor for a ship's preparation, all of it duly recorded in endless pragmatic acts of record-keeping and accounting in the partners' waste books, day journals, household accounts, rent ledgers, memo books, and receipt books. Coates's hand is evident on countless orders for goods and services, delivery confirmations, receipts and bills for caulking the hull of a ship being prepared for departure, purchases of cloth for sails, and wages for crew members. He wrote heaps of receipts to local producers for voyages' provisions. Like merchants up and down the Atlantic coastline, and undoubtedly like those living in any port city of the Atlantic world, Coates used pots and pots of ink to keep himself accountable to scores of local people and to keep workers, retailers, and sailors accountable to him. His hours spent each day in the cramped counting rooms, and the specific entanglements of his local relationships of obligation, were particular to Coates's needs or opportunities in the colonial port of Philadelphia, but the broad pattern of his commercial activities would have been familiar to merchants visiting Philadelphia from far-flung places in the British Empire.

As the paper trail bearing Coates's careful penmanship testifies, outfitting voyages rarely went smoothly, and it was the local and intimate economic exchanges of Coates's Philadelphia neighborhood that could (and did) determine how he reached into Atlantic commerce. Almost daily, laborers and craftsmen demanded early payments from him or made excuses for late ones that they owed Coates. Proceeding down Front Street, ship crew members demanded advance pay as they waited to leave, and insurance brokers avoided Coates's pleas that they pay long-standing claims for spoiled and missing goods on various voyages. The intricate system of local

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21; and John Reynell Letterbooks, 1729–1773, all in CRFP, HSP, and additional sources cited in note 15, above.

trust and obligations also failed when merchants neglected to pay small producers, captains cheated merchants and sailors, carpenters performed shoddy work, brewers supplied spoiled beer, and sailors deserted their ships. Frustrations and failures in this intricate lattice of relationships frequently strained the collaboration across class lines that was essential for successful voyages. Credit and working arrangements based on close arrangements of trust were essential, but they were regularly disrupted by complaints about poor quality of goods and shoddy work, demands for merchants to open their books, overdue bills, captains who made demands for personal favors, and insurance brokers who paid too little for spoiled or missing goods.

There are no suggestions in the Coates & Reynell archives that workers might have walked off the job as the keelmen had in Ralph Jackson's experience, however, and the Philadelphia partners rarely resorted to legal remedies for long-overdue payments from local tradesmen, for they knew that to make their private arguments the subject of public legal attention could damage the ongoing trust they needed with the city's small producers. Besides, legal proceedings were costly and time-consuming distractions from the persistent chores of commerce.<sup>18</sup> Working outside the customary institutional structures, such as guilds, that shaped economic interaction in Jackson's Newcastle, Coates instead invested heavily in the daily, intense, interpersonal negotiations that were essential for keeping the machine of seaborne commerce running in the British American port city.

Yet another of Coates's regular sites of commercial activity was the London Coffee House. In the final days before a ship was being prepared for a venture to Jamaica, Coates would have to generate yet more of a paper record, including official bonds, clearance papers, and a marine insurance policy.<sup>19</sup> Not every merchant in Philadelphia insured his vessels and goods

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18. For local disputes, see scribbled notes and receipts in series 2B, vol. 52, and series 2A, box 21, as well as correspondence and accounts in Samuel Coates Journal, 1767–1776, all in CRFP, HSP.

19. For insurance policy evidence see, e.g., Samuel Coates Journal, 1760–1766, series 2B, vol. 51, CRFP, HSP. For marine insurance disputes see, e.g., John Reynell to John Wendell, November 10, 1762; John Reynell to Howard Henderson, September 1, 1762; John Reynell to John Southall, December 18, 1762, and Reynell Accounts for October 20 and 27, 1762, all in series 1B, vol. 12, CRFP, HSP. Insurance brokerage existed in Philadelphia starting in 1743, although city merchants tried (and failed) to set up offices as early as 1721; see Francis Rawle, *Ways and Means for the Inhabitants of Delaware to Be Rich* (Philadelphia, 1725), 62–63. For examples of marine insurance brokers, see Shoemaker, Shoemaker, and Barrett, Insurance Records, HSP; Thomas Wharton Ledgers of Insurance, May 1755–December 1755, November 1756–September 1757, February 1759–October 1759

against the losses of war, piracy, storms, or the misdeeds of crews and captains, but Reynell and Coates were among the majority of Philadelphia merchants who considered insurance a necessity for most journeys. The pathways of Atlantic commerce were simply too dangerous, they reasoned, to forgo the protection of insurance if pirates seized a ship or it went down at sea. So Coates visited the London Coffee House on the corner of Market and Front streets, and across from the bustling High Street Market and the city's slave auction, to secure a policy. Since 1754 this public space had served as both a merchants' exchange and a neighborhood gathering place where city traders of all sorts could share news about distant markets and politics, settle debts, buy bills of exchange, buy and sell servant contracts, make real estate deals, get signatures on official port forms, and arrange auctions.<sup>20</sup> Soon this important focus of business would also become a center of the Stamp Act controversy; Reynell himself wrote a pamphlet opposing the act, and the coffeehouse owner William Bradford encouraged the opposition. Coates hoped to secure the signatures of many city merchants on Reynell's "Address of the Merchants of Philadelphia to the People of the Colonies, Against the Stamp Act."<sup>21</sup>

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(the three surviving volumes of his brokering business), HSP; James & Drinker Letterbook, HSP; William Gordon, *The Universal Accountant and Complete Merchant*, 2 vols. (London, 1765), 2:33–58; Leighton Stradley, "T.W. & Company: A Study of Early Marine Underwriters in Philadelphia," in N. S. B. Gras and H. Larson, eds., *Casebook in American Business History* (New York: Irving Publishing, 1939), 139–49. For early insurance offices, see H. E. Gillingham, *Marine Insurance in Philadelphia, 1721–1800* (Philadelphia: Patterson and White, 1933), 42, 46, 52; Joseph S. Davis, *Essays in the Earlier History of American Corporations*, 4 vols. (New York: Press of Review Publishing and Printing, 1917), 1:95–96; Thomas Montgomery, *History of the Insurance Company of North America* (Philadelphia, 1885).

20. There were five coffeehouses in Philadelphia on the eve of the Revolution. The London Coffee House, built in 1754, served as an informal merchants' exchange until 1834, when the city got an imposing and official Exchange; see Westcott, *Historic Mansions*, 466–80. For auctions at the London Coffee House, where Reynell and Coates disposed of glutted commodities and slowly moving goods and acquired items sold by other merchants at low prices, see, e.g., John Reynell to Joseph Whipple, October 21, 1762, series 1B, vol. 12; and John Reynell to Henry Groth, November 5, 1767, series 1B, vol. 13, both in CRFP, HSP. On the culture of coffeehouses, see David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997), 60; and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), chap. 2.

21. For the troubles in early October 1765 that John Hughes faced as the proposed Pennsylvania stamp master, and merchants' nonimportation responses centered at the London Coffee House, see, e.g. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, issues beginning



Coates made at least three trips to the coffeehouse during August 1764 to buy a marine insurance premium for one of Reynell's ships and its cargo. In a booth at the back of the establishment, Coates met with a group of seven underwriters, men of capital who were merchants themselves and occasional debtors or creditors of Reynell, to arrange coverage and costs for the ship. They settled on a premium of 4 percent of the value of the cargo, payable from Reynell within ten days of signing their agreement. As always, the underwriters drew up a detailed document stipulating that they would pay (in equal amounts) the entire insured value if total disaster struck during the voyage from port to port, subject to proof from the injured merchant, Reynell. If the vessel and its goods arrived safely at its destination, underwriters would terminate the policy and keep the premium. When Coates could not secure insurance easily for other voyages, there were already a few brokers in Philadelphia who, for a five-shilling commission per policy, would connect seekers with underwriters. The trip from Philadelphia to Jamaica was so regular that the underwriters drew up a policy with little hesitation; this had not been the case earlier in the summer, when Coates spent hours trying to secure a premium for a voyage to Hamburg that ended up costing Reynell far more than he had hoped it would. And regular or not, any voyage could result in losses that put merchant shippers and underwriters at odds with each other over disputed claims for months or years at a time. In fact, two months before one particular departure, a captain from a Lisbon-bound ship stopped over in Philadelphia and conveyed disheartening news. It seems that while it was on its way to St. Eustatius for sugar (a typical stopover of Philadelphia captains), Reynell's ship had been snatched by Frenchmen for mysterious reasons and hauled to Martinique. The crew dispersed and the ship's goods disappeared into local markets. Two years later, Philadelphia underwriters still had not settled Coates's insurance claim satisfactorily.<sup>22</sup>

Coates regularly performed a number of other duties related to choreographing the labor of local Philadelphians, duties the young Ralph Jackson might have recognized but rarely performed himself. Among these, about

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October 1765 and esp. December 26, 1765; *Pennsylvania Journal*, September 4, 1766; and the final version of the petition signed by hundreds of Philadelphians, "Resolution of Non-Importation Made by the Citizens of Philadelphia," October 25, 1765, HSP. For Reynell's involvement, see Reynell to Mildred & Roberts, November 1764; Reynell to John Day, October 11, 1765; and Reynell to John Southall, November 23, 1765, all in series 1B, vol. 12, CRFP, HSP.

22. See, for example, John Reynell to John Southall, November 23, 1765; and Reynell to Henry Groth, November 5, 1767, in series 1B, vol. 12, CRFP, HSP.

nine weeks into his preparations for the West Indian voyage, Coates made a final inspection of the barrels, tierces, and bags jammed into the ship's hold. Following this, a port officer came for a final inspection and countersigned the clearance documents. Then the crew came forward, each man carrying a small amount of personal property or a small trunk that served as a personal space for storage, a writing desk, and a table at which to eat. Coates also supplied a box of extra clothing to replace worn or lost items, as well as some thread and pieces of fabric to mend clothing along the way.

In his final act before the ship's departure, Coates handed over sealed instructions to the captain, who would keep them secreted away until he was definitively out to sea. This, too, would not have been among Ralph Jackson's regular duties, precisely because closely prescribed customary roles prevented hostmen from becoming involved in the overseas export of coal. Such tasks, however, were an essential part of a coastal exporting merchants' activities in the British colonies. A captain's instructions usually stipulated where he should visit, what authority he had to change course if he learned about good markets elsewhere, how to accept bills of exchange in payment, and how to fill the ship for its return voyage. Nominally, the vessel owner, Reynell, retained full authority over the captain's responsibilities while at sea: keeping the logbook, dispensing medicines and spare clothing, supervising work, providing adequate food to every crew member, punishing pilferers, negotiating sales in distant places, keeping inventories and clearance documents, and safeguarding the maps, medicines, compass, and ship's pistol.<sup>23</sup> In practice, however, a departing ship slipped out of a merchant's firm

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23. On captains see, e.g., John Reynell to Capt. Downell, October 26, 1753, John Reynell Letterbook, 1752–1754, CRFP, HSP; Samuel Coates to captains, November and December 1774, Samuel Coates Letter Book, 1769–1784, series 2B, vol. 55, CRFP, HSP; and Mildred & Roberts to Samuel Coates, 1772–1774, series 2A, box 21, folder 1, CRFP, HSP. Also for captains, see Thomas Willing and Robert Morris to Captain Bacon, April 12, 1757, Willing Letter Book, HSP. Willing and Morris employed over twenty captains between 1768 and 1774; Captains John Green and John Wilson served for many years. Additionally, see Stephen Dutihl correspondence and Andrew Clow correspondence, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Del.; and the extensive Brown family network of captains and merchants, in John Brown Account Books, 1774–1777, 1783–1787, HSP; Elijah Brown Jr. Journal, 1801–1805, Brown Family Papers, Business Collection no. 84, vol. 16, HSP; Shepherd Brown & Co. Records, 1801–1804, City Archives, New Orleans; Broom, Hendrickson, and Summerl to Israel Brown, St. Eustatius, April 18, 1792, and to Capt. Elisha Brown, September 19, 1792, Business B collection, 1 vol., Delaware Historical Society, Wilmington. For a different perspective, see Steven Pitt, "Building and Outfitting Ships in Colonial Boston," *Early American Studies* 13 (Fall 2015): 881–907.

grasp once it was on the open sea. Indeed, everyone involved in outfitting ships knew from experience that trans-Atlantic voyages could easily break down regardless of a merchant's financial endowments, experience, or reliable connections in other ports. A vessel might go missing or its goods be destroyed in transit; or a foreign privateer might waylay a ship on its way to a British Caribbean market and haul it into an unfamiliar port, forcing its crew to seek new employ and the shipowners to appeal to their insurers to cover losses fully.

In many ways our final and most renowned merchant, Henry Laurens, draws together the threads of urban experience that we have traced in the daily experiences of Jackson and Coates. Laurens enjoyed a long and varied commercial career in Charleston, and his extensive letters shed light on both the importance of personal connections at the British American waterfront and the spatial and institutional relationships of long-distance trade. Like Coates, in the 1740s the young Laurens spent much of his time in his countinghouse and store, which were in a prime position on the East Bay, directly across from Charleston's principal wharves. Despite working in quite different British American cities, Coates and Laurens devoted themselves in very similar ways to the delicate juggling of people, credit, and cargoes. Both merchants orchestrated the importation of British manufactures, especially textiles. Securing the successful sale of an incoming cargo required both men to attract customers into their stores, negotiating a competitive but profitable price, and judging when to send unsold items to auction for a quick sale. Laurens also dealt extensively with local craftsmen who supplied and outfitted his ships in much the same fashion as Philadelphia merchants.

Laurens additionally engaged in two forms of commerce that would have been strange to Coates: importing enslaved Africans and exporting the southern colony's principal crop, rice. Nevertheless, both city merchants had similar strategies and goals for exporting successfully. Readyng a vessel for a voyage on the Atlantic Ocean meant securing a cargo for export at a good price at either city. Each merchant strove to set prices for flour or rice on the specific terms appropriate to his crop, the seasonal conditions in which the crop grew, and the particular buyers abroad. Yet, like Coates, Laurens negotiated person to person on the wharf or in the coffeehouse. And like Coates, Laurens endured much uncertainty waiting for good weather and a variety of services falling into place before a ship's setting out on a voyage, hoping that it would arrive at a good market in Europe.<sup>24</sup>

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24. For discussions of these activities see, e.g., Laurens to James Crockatt, July 29, 1747; and to Samuel Wilson & Son, July 8, 1747, in *The Papers of Henry*

Though Laurens continued to shuttle back and forth among buyers, sellers, and suppliers in Charleston during the late 1760s, however, he also changed his relationship to important spaces in the urban landscape late in his merchant career. Laurens himself admitted in 1769 that he was “retired a little way from the Centre and Hurry of Trade.” Settled mostly in his suburban estate, the merchant had consciously placed himself “in the Country & otherwise engaged out of the Counting House,” with the result that often he was tardy in remitting bills. Laurens’s physical remoteness from the bustle of the wharf and the countinghouse was enhanced by frequent trips to his multiple plantation holdings in both Georgia and South Carolina.<sup>25</sup> For two months at the end of 1769, Laurens even left his clerk Felix Warley in charge of his merchant affairs. Warley would seem to have been an assistant with some experience since, like Ralph Jackson at the end of his seven-year apprenticeship and Samuel Coates, who as a clerk made most of the arrangements for exporting, he was given complete responsibility for assembling a cargo of rice destined for Europe.<sup>26</sup> Like William Jefferson, Jackson’s master, and John Reynell, Coates’s early mentor, Laurens had seniority that permitted a physical withdrawal from the bustle of the hot-spots of interpersonal negotiation—the quay and the staith—and a break from the daily work of orchestrating trade.

Another important urban relationship emerged, however, at this later stage of Laurens’s career. During the late 1760s and early 1770s, as both a leading merchant and an important political figure in colonial South Carolina, Laurens could claim impressive authority at a key urban institution, the customhouse. As the representation of royal authority in the commercial

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*Laurens*, vol. 1, *September 11, 1746–October 31, 1755*, ed. Philip M. Hamer and George C. Rogers Jr. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 35–36, 13–14. Also see Laurens to James Harford, December 19, 1768; to Reynolds, Getley & Co., February 2, 1769; and to William Fisher, March 1, 1769, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 6, *August 1, 1768–July 31, 1769*, ed. David R. Chesnut (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1978), 230, 264, 389–90.

25. Henry Laurens to Oswald, Grant & Co, June 14, 1769; Henry Laurens to Spencer Man, May 31, 1769; and Henry Laurens to Alexander Gray, May 26, 1769, in *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 6:589–90, 582–83, 576–78; Henry Laurens to George Bryan, May 19, 1770, in *Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol. 7, *August 1, 1769–October 9, 1771*, ed. David R. Chesnut (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1979), 295.

26. Felix Warley to William Cowles, November 7, 1769, and Felix Warley to James Grant, December 23, 1769, in *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 7:196–97, 208.

British Atlantic city, as well as the repository of imperial revenue and port records, the customhouse was a common stopping point in merchants' daily city business. We have already witnessed Jackson's regular trips to Newcastle's customhouse to clear vessels. There, the customhouse stood very prominently on the quayside, its grandeur augmented further by a 1766 remodeling in the neoclassical style and relocation of the building to a pivotal location next to the Tyne Bridge. The officers who held authority at the customhouse powerfully shaped commercial practices in any British port city, as they physically embodied the authority of the king, whose powerful presence radiated far beyond the royal allegiance pledged by Jackson in his freedom oath. The Newcastle customhouse was not only an imposing physical presence, but also the watchful eye cast on the activities of Newcastle's merchant community. Ralph Carr, a wealthy overseas merchant in the city who had regular dealings with Dutch and North American traders, was reluctant to clear ships bound for New York that included large quantities of tea and port wine destined for the French Caribbean, a voyage that blatantly defied mercantile regulations. Although Carr at first went along with the smuggling plan in 1749, which involved concealing the goods in the hold of the ship when it was cleared through Newcastle, by 1752 he was refusing to have anything more to do with this activity when it became clear that the customs officers had gotten wind of the illegal trading.<sup>27</sup>

Henry Laurens, however, had a remarkably different attitude to the customs men in his town. For a start, these officers lacked a dedicated building or a prominent presence on the East Bay. Although he wrote, "I was a favourite at the Custom house for more than Twenty Years while honest Men were in Office," in 1769 relations with the officers deteriorated following a dispute concerning the seizure of his coastal schooner and its cargo. Like Coates's, Laurens's political standpoint vis-à-vis British authority had been honed at the time of the Stamp Act, which had undermined the already weak authority of His Majesty's customs officers. In particular, Laurens was angered by the actions of Egerton Leigh, the officer who had taken his vessel on the grounds that duties were due on goods destined for sale within the thirteen colonies. Such was Laurens's ire that in February 1769 he wrote directly to Prime Minister George Grenville about the "mixture of tyranny, Injustice, and Oppression on the part of certain Crown officers toward some of HM's Innocent and most Loyal Subjects in this

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27. William I. Roberts III, "Ralph Carr: A Newcastle Merchant and the American Colonial Trade," *Business History Review* 12, no. 3 (1968): 271–87.

Province.”<sup>28</sup> Laurens’s willingness to challenge the decisions, and by definition the authority, of his local customs men highlights the strong contrast between his relationship with this institution and that of his Newcastle counterparts. For Ralph Jackson, his master, and the overseas merchant Ralph Carr, the customhouse’s solid presence, standing guard over the quayside, reflected the impossibility of directly challenging embedded authority. Newcastle traders might temporarily attempt to evade the king’s men, but they would never think to question publicly their decisions. So, while Laurens launched a pamphlet war against Charleston customs officials and openly criticized them to his fellow merchants, Jackson and Carr accepted the officers as an immovable element in the cityscape, steadily watching over the gateway of commerce.



Arriving in a British Atlantic port city ready to begin life as a merchant was rare. It was so rare that advice manuals and interpersonal correspondence regularly warned about the rigors of establishing oneself in commerce.<sup>29</sup> Merchants needed credit and connections. They needed to know how to negotiate complex local geographies and the particular customs of trade that existed in each city. They also needed to find investors and underwriters, carefully sidestepping the deceits of other traders or absconding partners, the violence of privateers and pirates, and the deep disappointments of leaky ships, moldy goods, and torrential rains. Newspapers were beginning to convey reliable information about changing local regulations and international markets by the end of the colonial era, as well as stories about the perils of being ignorant about those laws, and so merchants used these instruments of commercial knowledge widely. A host of new preprinted

28. Laurens to Ormandy & Ashburner, December 23, 1768; Laurens to Ormandy & Ashburner, January 31, 1769; Laurens to George Grenville, February 24, 1769, in *Papers of Henry Laurens*, 6:234–35, 261–62, 386–87.

29. For representative eighteenth-century clerking manuals, see William Weston, *The Complete Merchant's Clerk; or, British and American Compting-House, in Two Parts* (London, 1754); Thomas Browne, *The Accurate Accountant* (London, 1670); William Edler, *The Modish Pen-Man* (London, 1691), advertisements on final leaf; George Bickham, *The United Pen Men for Forming the Man of Business* (London, 1743); Edward Hatton, *The Merchant's Magazine; or, Trades-Man's Treasure* (London, 1697); George Fisher, *The American Instructor; or, Young Man's Best Companion* (London, 1748). On advice and advice books see, e.g., Phyllis W. Hunter, “Containing the Marvellous: Instructions to Buyers and Sellers,” in Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell, eds., *Didactic Literature in England, 1500–1800: Expertise Constructed* (Burlington, Vt.: Routledge, 2003), 169–85.

forms and pamphlets about port regulations and detecting counterfeiters and thieves, almanacs, instructional manuals for writing and ciphering, and much more was beginning to help merchants keep track of obligations to others, as well as the risks of trusting others.<sup>30</sup>

The quality and reliability of these risk-diminishing innovations varied from port to port, of course, depending on local resources and networks of skill. Another means of mitigating the risks facing almost every Atlantic merchant was the connections of family. Reliance on family members for credit or loans, introductions that opened doors onto valuable business prospects, and strategic marriages that joined not only the households of two people but the households of numerous collateral relatives as well—these were centuries-old strategies for merchants wishing to get a toehold in a new port city. But the customs related to these family unions varied from port to port. Moreover, in an era when banking, brokerage partnerships, credit bureaus, limited liability, and bankruptcy laws were largely unavailable to merchants in the British Empire, the risks they decided to take personally appear to have been quite remarkable. Though the protective wing of family connections, fine-tuned skills of letter writing and accounting, and long-standing relationships of trust could shield them against some of the worst ups and downs of the early modern commercial world, they were not always reliable.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, such eighteenth-century strategies that sought to flatten the

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30. For the range of preprinted and handwritten forms, see, e.g., Samuel Coates materials, series 1B, vol. 12, series 2B, vol. 52, and series 2A, box 21, CRFP, HSP.

31. On insecurity and adaptations to it, start with Bruce Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*; David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 223–38; John Smail, “Credit, Risk, and Honor in Eighteenth-Century Commerce,” *Journal of British Studies* 44 (July 2005): 439–56; Craig Muldrew, “The Culture of Reconciliation: Community and the Settlement of Economic Disputes in Early Modern England,” *Historical Journal* 39, no. 4 (1996): 915–42; Nuala Zahedieh, “Credit, Risk, and Reputation in the Late Seventeenth Century Colonial Trade,” in Olaf U. Janzen, ed., *Merchant Organization and Maritime Trade in the North Atlantic, 1660–1815* (St. John’s, Newfoundland: International Maritime Economic History Association, 1998); Glenn Crothers, “Commercial Risk and Capital Formation in Early America: Virginia Merchants and the Rise of American Marine Insurance, 1750–1815,” in Special Forum: Reputation and Uncertainty in Early America, ed. Cathy Matson, *Business History Review* 78, no. 4 (2004): 607–33; and Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 2012).

differences in mercantile life from merchant to merchant in the Atlantic's port cities could only do so much. Digging deeper into these cities' spaces, institutions, and connecting relationships reveals why. To function effectively, merchants not only had to master the perils of the sea and of unknown correspondents in distant cities; they also had to learn how to negotiate the particular urban environments they lived in. For both Henry Laurens and Samuel Coates, cultivating the trust and credit of the innumerable traders who inhabited the city wharves became a priority as they gathered cargoes, fixed boats, provisioned them, and insured them for uncertain Atlantic itineraries. Ralph Jackson confronted uncertainty as he managed the keelmen and miners, who were linchpins in the movement of coal from pit to market. For North American traders after 1765, uncertainty also plagued the relationship between the trader and the customs officer. All three of the men highlighted in this essay were moving through urban space as they sought to secure their commercial success, but the character of the spaces they inhabited, as well as the skills required to negotiate with the people in them, differed significantly.

To be a successful trader was thus not only a matter of building trans-Atlantic networks and crafting a reputation across oceans, but also a question of embedding oneself in the local relationships, customs, and institutions of a port city. Being well equipped to negotiate one such city would not necessarily enable a merchant to succeed in another. How would Ralph Jackson have survived on Philadelphia's bustling wharves? Would he have been able to work in the chaos of shifting temporary relationships of the colonial city, where there was also far less hierarchy or customary local authority? How would Henry Laurens have dealt with a Newcastle customhouse, where the supremacy and authority of its officers was nonnegotiable? Could Coates have used his accounting and negotiating skills effectively in Charleston, where merchants sustained necessary connections to staple crops and plantation regimes? Asking such questions reveals the contrasting uncertainties that lay embedded in the cityscapes of British Atlantic merchants; uncertainties presented almost as many challenges—different in kind but similar in their potential to derail carefully calculated plans—to a merchant's success as the perils of the vast ocean itself. So, in addition to nurturing commercial connections across the ocean, port cities harbored a pervasive localism within their townscapes. Just as merchants had to keep one eye on the town and the other one on the ocean, we should, in our efforts to understand the dynamics that shaped this imperial world, pay equal attention to the broad horizons of the Atlantic and the particular local spaces of its port cities.