

Coffee's Creole Economy: Post-Revolutionary Patterns of Trade

**Presented as part of the
Program in Early American Economy and Society Annual Conference
Library Company of Philadelphia**

November 6, 2008

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On February 14, 1780, James Elford, late head clerk for the Collector of his Royal Majesty's Customs in Kingston, Jamaica, took the stand and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Over the next several days he testified before an astonished court that under the direction of the town Customs Collector, and in collusion with the Comptroller's Office and several of the city's prominent merchants, he had for three years routinely allowed ships from all nations to arrive and leave port for a fee.¹ Elford outlined the program in detail, including how participating parties divided bribes—or “gratuities,” as he called them—and falsified customs records and shipping manifests. He also described the rates and the range of goods involved, among which coffee was almost omnipresent. When coffee was loaded as contraband cargo onto an American ship, its captain paid “seven pounds, sixteen shillings, and five pence” for officials to look the other way. Coffee was also on a British brigantine sent under flag of truce to Hispaniola, following a bribe of thirty-five pounds, and on a Dutch sloop that unloaded cargo duty-free, for fifteen pounds. Coffee was even one of the “sundry contraband and dutiable goods” that Jamaican dock workers sent home on British packet ships for a mere three pounds and four shillings.² The court was not only shocked by the extent and duration of the Kingston scheme, but also by how Elford and his partners defended their crimes. They saw themselves as savvy entrepreneurs working hard to reestablish commercial patterns disrupted by Britain's war with America, not smugglers.

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¹ NA/PRO T 1/559/101-107, “Affadavit Respecting William Fenton,” 1780, p. 101.

² *Ibid.*, p. 101-105.

In 1783 Parliament reclassified American ships as foreign, severely curtailing British Caribbean trade to what had been its second most profitable commercial partner after Britain and its first recourse for most basic needs, including food. Within a few years, however, Parliament loosened its policies, largely in response to endemic supply problems, and doubled the number of West Indian ports licensed to conduct business with foreign vessels—Kingston among them. France, Spain, Holland, and Denmark likewise opened and closed colonial ports throughout the 1780s and 1790s, resulting in a legal and commercial landscape difficult to understand and easy to manipulate.³ Elford's case was one of many that worked its way through court systems around the Atlantic during the immediate post-revolutionary period, revealing how defiance of metropolitan policies resulted less often from politics or subterfuge than the simple desire to ensure steady, reliable inter-imperial partnerships with traders who understood efficient business practices.

Much of the coffee that flowed in and out of Kingston under Elford's watch, whether grown in Jamaica or rerouted from elsewhere, ultimately went to North America. America's demand for coffee rose rapidly after 1783 fueled both by home consumption and a growing global re-export trade, and its traffic demonstrates the enduring importance of the West Indies to early American economic development and the increasingly international reach of United States-Caribbean exchange. The coffee economy thus does not fit easily into the work of earlier historians who argue that Britain quickly re-emerged as America's foremost trading partner and continued to dominate the new nation's financial development. Trade to England may have resumed along familiar lines, but West Indian commerce changed profoundly after independence

³ U.S. coffee imports rose from just under 4.5 million pounds in 1791 to over 40 million pounds per annum less than ten years later. Most coffee arrived from the Caribbean, although some coffee came from the East Indies and other sources. *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1832-1861), V: 203, 478 and 512 (hereafter *ASPCN*).

and did so at precisely the time that America’s coffee business was booming.⁴ By 1802 the amount of British colonial coffee coming into the United States was valued at just under \$1.5 million, while that from other parts of the world had risen above \$8 million.⁵

Table 4.1: United States Revenue from Commodity Re-Exports, 1802-1804

Re-exported Commodity	Value of Re-Exported Article
Merchandise paying ad valorem duties	\$9,772,000
Coffee	7,302,000
Sugar	5,775,000
Cotton, cocoa, indigo, pimento, and pepper	2,490,000
Teas	1,304,000
Wines	1,108,000
Spirits of every description and other articles	782,000
TOTAL	\$28,483,000

Source: Figures taken from an 1806 Congressional report, “Commerce with Great Britain and her Dependencies, and all Parts of the World,” which compared U.S. trade to Britain and its colonies with that to other parts of Eastern and Western Europe, the rest of the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and the South Seas. *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, vol. V: 640-642.

Roughly a quarter of America’s coffee was for domestic consumption while the balance went back overseas, making up ten per cent of the United States’ total export income and twenty-five per cent of its re-export income.⁶ Put in comparative perspective, by the end of the

⁴ John J. McCusker and Russell Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press published for the Omohundro Institute, 1985), p. 367.

⁵ *ASPCN*, V: 640-642. Combined imports from all British West Indian islands were valued at \$1,480,000; imports from all non-British sources was \$8,373,000. This creates a total import value of \$9,853,000. If the total re-export value for the same period was \$7,302,000, then \$2,551,000, or 25.9% remained for U.S. consumption.

⁶ Figures taken from an 1806 Congressional report, “Commerce with Great Britain and her Dependencies, and all Parts of the World,” which compared the volume U.S. trade to Britain and the British colonies for the several years with those to other parts of Eastern and Western Europe, the rest of the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and the South Seas.

eighteenth century Americans made more money trading coffee than sugar or tea, cocoa, and wine combined—high figures for a commodity not produced domestically. Coffee revenues relied on continued access to Caribbean plantations which, after 1776, was neither guaranteed nor stable. Its rapid ascent and prominent place among America’s re-export trades makes for an excellent case study on how the new nation’s investment in regional enterprise grew after independence and how ably and quickly its merchants navigated a volatile post-revolutionary Atlantic world where, to succeed, they had to reallocate resources quickly. Their efforts, and those of the planters, diplomats, and neutral traders with whom they did business, created a hemispheric market based on international competition and legal finessing too systemic and entrenched to be considered illicit. It was, instead, a complex, growing business system best understood as a creole economy.

The Failure of Free Trade

America’s coffee traders lost access to their suppliers as soon as war with Britain broke out. Jamaica sent nearly as much coffee to North America as to England in 1772—399,808 pounds and 440,655 pounds respectively. But as tensions escalated, exports to the mainland declined over ninety per cent and by 1777 had dropped to zero.⁷ War-time privateering provided some respite. Andrew Frazer, Britain’s ambassador to Paris, told members of the Board of Trade in early August 1776 that the *Amiable Reine*, a British brigantine captained by Paul Berthelot, a French colonial, had been captured by the American sloop *Swan* leaving Martinique, brought to

ASPCN, V: 640-642. Percentage derived by comparing total coffee re-export revenue of \$7,302,000 to total re-export revenue of \$28,533,000 for the years 1802 through 1804.

⁷ Figures based on annual compilations of Jamaica’s Naval Office Shipping Lists for 1772 through 1788, recorded in the House of Assembly, Jamaica, *Votes of the Honourable House of Assembly, Jamaica*, 45 vols. (St. Jago de la Vega: David Douglass, Alexander Aikman, and Alexander Aikman, Jr., 1795-1835).

New York, and its cargo of coffee, sugar, tobacco and indigo confiscated by the colony's Admiralty court. Though Berthelot claimed to have filed for restitution, Frazer suspected chicanery since, he reported, many French colonists secretly sympathized with American interests and "surrendered" their ships voluntarily.⁸

The importation of coffee from French colonies became much easier the following year when France joined the revolutionary effort and opened several colonial ports to American ships. A few merchants even celebrated rising wartime profits. "All our ships have been and continue to be employed in carrying flour to the French and Spanish Islands," reported Philadelphia merchant Robert Morris, "our port is filled in return with West India produce."⁹ Two Saint Domingue ports, Cape Francois and Port au Prince, accounted for 90 per cent of all coffee imported into America by 1781; the addition of Martinique brought the French Caribbean contribution to over 93 per cent, the balance coming from Spanish Hispaniola (six per cent) and British Dominica and Grenada (less than half a per cent each).

Table 4.2 Caribbean Coffee Imports into the Port of Philadelphia, 1781

Port City	Number of Shipments	Lbs. of Coffee	% of Total
Cape Francois	15	1,779,150	87%
Port an Prince	10	131,830	6%
Hispaniola	5	122,930	6%
Martinique	1	12,350	Less than 1%

⁸ NA/PRO SP 78/306, "Letter from Captain Frazer to Lord Viscount Weymouth," January 20, 1778. Britain also captured several French ships during the American Revolution. The number of coffee casks auctioned from such prizes was routinely equal to, if not higher than, those carrying sugar as listed in NA PRO C 114/36, Chancery Records, Sale of Cargoes of Prizes, 1779. For more information about Andrew Frazer, see Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. VII (New York: MacMillan Press, 1908), p. 669.

⁹ Edmund Buron, "Statistics on Franco-American Trade, 1778-1806," *Journal of Economic and Business History*, IV (1931-32): 571-80; Robert Morris quoted in Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina for the Omohundro Institute, 1986), p. 209.

Dominica	1	6,650	Less than .5%
Grenada	1	170	Less than .5%

Source: Records of the Office of the Comptroller General, Port of Philadelphia Records, Registers of Duties Paid on Imported Goods (1781-1788); 6 vols. (Record Group 4, Pennsylvania State Archive, Harrisburg, PA).

Access to non-French coffee sources remained hampered, however, by the continued exclusion of American ships from the harbors of other nations. Congress responded by appointing John Jay, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin to oversee negotiations and authorize trade treaties with several European nations as well as the Barbary Coast. A multi-national approach sought to ensure America's economic autonomy from Britain, explore new trade partnerships in Europe, and reopen commercial relations in the Caribbean.¹⁰ This last objective, of course, held the most interest for coffee importers and exporters. When the revolutionary war ended, many in North America and the British Caribbean hoped business would return to normal but two impediments remained—Britain's ban on trade between the United States and its West Indian colonies in American vessels and foreign export taxes on colonial produce shipped to the United States. A July 2, 1783, Orders of Council resolved the latter issue with Parliament authorizing importation of American lumber, flour, vegetables and livestock under the same tariff regulations as British colonies in return for coffee, rum, sugar, molasses, coca nuts, ginger and pimento; but these commodities could still only move to and from North America on British vessels.¹¹

¹⁰ These included France, the United Netherlands, and Sweden with whom the U.S. already had treaties of commerce, as well as England, Hamburg and Saxony, Prussia, Denmark, Russia, Austria, Venice, Rome, Naples, Tuscany, Sardinia, Genoa, Spain, Portugal, and the Barbary States of the Porte, Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis & Morocco. Nations listed in Thomas Jefferson, *Diaries*, entry for Jan. 4, 1784. See also, Merrill D. Peterson, "Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783-1793," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 22:4 (Oct. 1965): 590-591.

¹¹ *Journals*, 8: February 12, 1783. For more information about British Caribbean and American positions on trade policies in the immediate post-Revolutionary period see: Alice B. Keith, "Relaxations in the British Restrictions on the American Trade with the British West Indies, 1783-1802," *The Journal of Modern History* 20:1 (March 1948):1-2 and Selwyn H.H. Carrington, "The United States and the British West Indian Trade, 1783-1807," in Roderick A.

What Jay, Adams, and Franklin sought to accomplish was an ambitious endeavor for any nation, much less the fledgling United States whose small army and even smaller navy would prevent it from achieving its objectives militarily.¹² Congress gave its European commissioners their strongest weapon—American purchasing power—and threatened discriminatory tariffs and market restrictions for nations refusing trade treaties with the United States. Between 1783 and 1784, the commission approached several potential trade partners, sometimes offering more than one commercial option. The most direct path between ports, these three statesmen quickly realized, was rarely a direct one, and their correspondence reveals the circuitous routes that ships, coffee, and captains traveled despite what looked like neatly segmented empires on contemporary maps.

Given the Netherlands' long-standing commercial and military rivalry with Britain, members of the commission quite reasonably expected a warm welcome. "The Dutch," John Adams mused, "will avail themselves of every error that may be committed by England."¹³ In 1776, colonial officials in Saint Eustatius had, after all, been the first governmental body to

McDonald (ed.), *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the History of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic Economy* (Kingston, 1996), pp. 149-151. Coffee export taxes in 1783, calculated for the amount of coffee America imported in 1772, would have been roughly £7,000 sterling.

¹² In a letter to James Monroe, Jefferson argued that the states presented a stronger foreign relations front together than individually: "my primary object in the formation of treaties is to take the commerce of the states out of the hands of the states, and to place it under the superintendence of Congress." Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, June 17, 1785, Paul L. Ford, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. (New York, 1892-99), 8:231. In 1785, a number of states challenged Congressional authority by asserting their own modified commercial systems. By October of that year, a frustrated Adams wrote to Jefferson that states should be coerced into complying with federal economic policy to ensure national interests: "it is impossible for any country to give to another more decided proof of preference than our thoughtless [individual] merchants have since the peace given to this in matters of commerce." John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Oct. 3, 1785, Thomas Jefferson, *Papers*, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651-1827, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter TJP and LOC).

¹³ John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 16, 1783, in Francis Wharton, ed., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (Washington, DC 1889), 6:552.

recognize the legitimacy of North American claims to independence.¹⁴ But competition in the carrying trade impeded United States-Dutch trade relations in the Caribbean. Holland would allow American ships to land in Saint Eustatius, Curacao, Saint Martin, and Dutch “colonies upon the continent,” Surinam, Berbice, Demarara, and Essequibo, but limited what they could bring or take in return.¹⁵ Dutch West Indian coffee was duty-free, but Dutch East Indian coffee was taxed as foreign produce and all tropical commodities, except molasses, had to be carried on Dutch vessels. The offer was little better than Britain’s, and though Adams speculated that even these modest gains might open the door to opportunity (“some quantities of sugar and coffee are always smuggled, as they say”), the search for a more reliable supplier continued.¹⁶

In July 1783 Benjamin Franklin wrote the Portuguese ambassador in Paris about the possibility of U.S. access to Latin American coffee plantations, but was rebuffed; “Portugal admitted no nation to the Brazills,” he was told. Franklin then suggested that American ships could use Portugal’s “Western Islands,” such as Madeira or the Canaries, as a “depot” for importing Brazilian “sugars, coffee, cotton, and cocoa.” This time the Ambassador seemed more enthusiastic, suggesting that, if approved by the Portuguese court, “they could furnish us [the United States] with these articles at Lisbon fifteen per cent cheaper than the English could from their West India islands.” The court, however, rejected the proposal.¹⁷

¹⁴ Andrew O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 214.

¹⁵ John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 30, 1783, 6:619; “Plan of a Treaty with Holland,” Sept. 4, 1778, 2:790-798; John Adams to Livingston, July 23, 1783 and July 31, 1783, 2:623 all in *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*. The initial 1778 U.S. draft treaty with Holland did not include commodity specific restrictions on imports and exports; these were added at Holland’s insistence.

¹⁶ John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 30, 1783, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, 6:619.

¹⁷ John Adams to Livingston, July 12, 1783, *Ibid.*, 6:539; Merrill D Peterson. “Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783-1793.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 22:4 (Oct. 1965): 593. See also, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651-1827, “United States Treaties, 1786, Amity and Commerce Treaty between Portugal and the United States.”

The commission also appealed to Spain, with John Adams asking Spain's Paris-based minister, Count de Sanafee, "what objections there could be to admitting American vessels to the Spanish islands of Cuba and Hispaniola, to carry their produce ... as they did in the French and Dutch colonies?" Sanafee demurred; "his court would be afraid of the measure" since "free ports were nests of smugglers" that "afforded many facilities of illicit trade." Adams then echoed Franklin's offer to Portugal. If American ships could not directly import Spanish colonial coffee, he proposed, could the produce "be carried to the free ports of France, Holland, and Denmark, in the West Indies...in Spanish vessels, that they might be there purchased by Americans?" Sanafee replied that "he could not pretend to give any opinion upon any of these points, but that we must negotiate them at Madrid."¹⁸

United States commissioners' quest for tropical trade then led them to consider some very strange partners. In 1784, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* thought a commercial treaty between the United States and Russia might be in the offing.¹⁹ Russia did not own a West Indian colony at the time, but according to some Dutch sources, was negotiating the purchase of "an island in the West-Indies (believed to be St. Martin's.)"²⁰ Saint Martin was the smallest shared colony in the Caribbean, controlled by Holland in the south and France to the north. Adams had included the tiny, divided island in a list of possible West Indian partners but noted that, with few established towns and limited agriculture, "it does not flourish."²¹ Even if Russia had succeeded,

¹⁸ John Adams to Robert Livingston, Aug. 10, 1783, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, 6:628.

¹⁹ For information about Russian reactions to the American Revolution see: David M. Griffiths, "American Colonial Diplomacy in Russia, 1781-1783," *William and Mary Quarterly* 27:3 (July 1970): 379-410.

²⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 4, 1784.

²¹ John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 30, 1783, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, 6:619. For Saint Martin's place in Lesser Antilles trade see: Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.), *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville, 1996).

Saint Martin could not have grown the coffee American traders desired; at best it could have been a neutral clearing station similar to Dutch Saint Eustatius or Swedish Saint Bart's that circumvented the limitations of mercantilist policies.²² The *Pennsylvania Gazette* made no mention of Holland's response and shortly thereafter, when Holland joined Prussia in declaring war on Austria and Russia, any prospect of sale vanished.

Coffee traders, especially in Philadelphia, had better luck with Denmark. Danish Saint Croix, Saint Thomas, and Saint John formed the second smallest West Indian empire after Sweden, but American merchants' recognized their value as neutral trade entrepôts as early as 1777. In a letter to some Virginia associates, Robert Morris recommended Saint Croix where, he noted, traders "have access to all the best Markets in that part of the World." One could "buy or sell and in case of a French War may there Charter Swedish Ships to carry any number of Goods to S[ain]t Eustatia...or as you say to S[ain]t Lucia."²³ By the last three years of the revolution, almost all Philadelphia-bound coffee, as well as most other commodities imported into the city, was coming from Saint Croix's principal port, Christiansted. The goods were, of course, Danish re-exports since Saint Croix neither manufactured the European wares nor produced the coffee, sugar, molasses, or rum it was shipping to North America.

²² Although Pennsylvania newspapers were optimistic, it is difficult to predict how a Russian Caribbean colony would have benefit American trade. In the early 1780s, Russia served as intermediary in the ongoing commercial and military disputes between Holland and Britain over the West Indian and Levant trades. Several U.S. Congressmen, however, noted Russia's predisposition towards British interests. They questioned Russian impartiality and speculated that Russia's efforts to reduce animosity between the Dutch and British might have delayed Holland's recognition of U.S. sovereignty. Joseph Jones to James Hunter, March 26, 1782, Paul H. Smith (ed.), *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, 26 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1976-2000), 18:421. See also, Alastair Hamilton, Alexander H. de Groot and Maurits H. van den Boogert (eds.), *Friends and Rivals in the East. Studies in Anglo-Dutch Relations in the Levant from the Seventeenth to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Leiden - Boston - Köln, 2000).

²³ Robert Morris to William Bingham, Feb. 16, 1777, *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 6:303.



Illustration 4.1: H.G. Beenfeldt, “Port of Christiansted,” watercolor, 1815. Courtesy Danish National Archives.

The coffee they sent, though still lower than pre-revolutionary import levels, filled an important commercial gap and the colony’s rising profits caught the eye of the Danish crown which briefly attempted to impose a royal monopoly on shipping at the end of 1781, but soon repealed the measure after vociferous protest—including a delegation to Copenhagen.²⁴

²⁴ Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule, 1671-1754 [With a Supplementary Chapter, 1755-1917]* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1917), pp. 202-205. See also: *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1904-37), 27:721: Wednesday, October 22, 1783; Rosencrone, Minister of Denmark, to Benjamin Franklin, July 8, 1783, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, 6:519-527, including the “Counter Project of a Treaty with Denmark.” For restrictions on U.S. shipping from the Danish West Indies to Europe, see page 527 of the “Explanation of the Counter Project of a Treaty of Amity and Commerce Received from Denmark,” in which the Danish Minister distinguished between U.S. ships intended for the United States, permitted free of restrictions, and vessels bound for Europe, over which Denmark retained exclusive rights.

Table 4.3: Ships Carrying Coffee into Philadelphia, 1781-1783

PORT OF EXPORT	1781	1782	1783
DANISH PORTS:			
Christiansted	15	126	66
St. Thomas	10	5	15
FRENCH PORTS:			
Cape Francois	22	1	13
L'Orient	6	6	12
Port au Prince	10	4	0
BRITISH PORTS:			
London	--	--	12
SPANISH PORTS:			
Cadiz	11	1	0
Havana	44	20	13
PORTUGUESE PORTS:			
Lisbon	--	--	10
U.S. PORTS:			
Bordentown, NJ	--	--	22
Boston, MA	6	2	15
Hamburg, PA	--	47	1
New Castle, DE	14	5	7
Lewistown, ME	1	1	12
New Jersey	4	20	12
New York	--	--	50
Rhode Island	3	1	10
Wilmington, DE	16	18	11
All Other Ports	29	32	244

Source: Records of the Office of the Comptroller General, Port of Philadelphia Records, Registers of Duties Paid on Imported Goods (1781-1788), 6 vols. Record Group 4.90, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, PA (figures above drawn from volumes 1-3). Please note the last quarter of 1783 is unavailable, and only ports with more than ten vessels in a given year are included.

Special Concessions

Parliament's rulings temporarily benefited Danish colonial coffers, but limited the options of American importers and proved even more disastrous for America's former trading partners. The British Caribbean, already strained by unusually severe hurricanes and droughts during the 1760s and 1770s, lacked a large shipping fleet.²⁵ Consequently American vessels had carried more than three-quarters of pre-revolutionary trade between the islands and mainland.²⁶ Post-revolutionary trade policies cost United States merchants their livelihoods but West Indian planters and their enslaved laborers lost their lifelines. Coffee and sugar exports throughout the British Caribbean fell more than 50 per cent by 1781, coffee shipments from Jamaica alone dropping 41 per cent as early as 1777, primarily from loss of the North American market.²⁷ Though Britain promised to fill the void its efforts fell woefully short; ships to the West Indies arrived only sporadically, and often with insufficient cargoes while coffee, sugar, cotton, and spices moldered unsold in West Indian fields and warehouses. The Barbadian House of Assembly petitioned the Society of West Indian Merchants and Planters in London, decrying the

²⁵ Richard Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 156. For more information about the impact of weather disasters on Caribbean food production in the immediate pre-American Revolutionary period, see: Sherry Johnson, "El Niño, Environmental Crisis, and the Emergence of Alternative Markets in the Hispanic Caribbean, 1760s-70s Markets in the Hispanic Caribbean, 1760s-70s," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 62:3 (July 2005): 355-410.

²⁶ Figures based on NA/PRO Customs 16/1: America, 1768-1772, reports of the Naval Office submitted annually to Parliament which compile basic import and export data for all North American ports, Florida, and the Bahamas.

²⁷ NA/PRO T 64/72: "Lists of Imports in British Bottoms at Kingston, Jamaica, during the War." For discussions of the Jamaica House of Assembly's concerns about staple imports see House of Assembly, Jamaica, *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica*, 14 vols. (St. Jago de la Vega, 1811-1829), 7:313, 314, 467, and 577 (hereafter *Journals*). For the impact on British West Indian production, see NA/PRO T 38/ 269: Imports into England from the West Indies, 1774-83. Figures based on annual reports by the island Naval Officer to the Jamaica House of Assembly re-printed in the House of Assembly, Jamaica, *Votes of the Honourable Assembly of Jamaica*, 34 vols. (Saint Jago de la Vega, 1795-1835) for each year (hereafter *Votes*).

ban on American ships as “untenable” and “ruinous.”²⁸ Jamaica’s planters warned their Governor, Archibald Campbell, that blocking American ships cut off lumber as well as food supplies and made it impossible to build enough casks to ship local produce abroad. They begged Campbell to petition for a reduction in coffee and sugar import taxes, but he rejected their requests as subsequently did the Society of West India Merchants.²⁹

But as privations grew, some island governors did respond. Parliament had outlawed American ships in British harbors, but governors could grant special concessions—temporary suspensions of certain Navigation Acts—if deemed essential to a colony’s well-being. Unsurprisingly, the metropole and its colonies often defined essential and well-being quite differently, although local gubernatorial concessions had become so widespread by 1786 that Parliament passed an act of indemnification exempting governors from prosecution for Navigation Act violations.³⁰ In a few cases, such as Barbados, successive governors simply prolonged special concessions indefinitely by extending the original document as it was due to expire.³¹ Other governors responded only to particular circumstances, and while Campbell had been unwilling to permit American ships into Jamaica in 1783, earthquakes and hurricanes over the next three years forced his successor, John Dalling, to reconsider.³² Even genuine hardship

²⁸ Society of West India Merchants, Resolutions of the Society of West Indian Merchants and Planters in London, February 7, 1775. Original minutes from 1760 through 1780 are available in microfilm at the Royal Commonwealth Society, London.

²⁹ Vincent Harlow and Frederick Madden (eds.), “Resolutions of the Committee of West India Planters and Merchants, Feb. 6, 1784,” *British Colonial Developments, 1774-1834: Selected Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 256; O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, p. 240.

³⁰ *The Annual Register or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1806*, 80 vols. (London, 1791), 46:81-89. The *Annual Register* includes a comprehensive overview of British reactions to reductions in restrictions on U.S. trade.

³¹ Carrington, “The United States and the British West Indian Trade,” p. 158.

³² The *Pennsylvania Gazette* described the devastation of the first of these hurricanes to the island’s southern port cities on July 7, 1784; additional accounts of hurricanes appeared on October 12 and October 18, 1785.

only persuaded Dalling to allow imports of American food and lumber for four months, while his decision to maintain the ban on exporting coffee and other produce in American ships made payment difficult if not impossible.³³

The governors of Dominica, Grenada, and Saint Vincent, ceded to Britain by France in 1763, were the most lenient. Planters from Jamaica and Barbados complained that proximity to French Martinique and Guadeloupe, where American business was welcome (legally between 1778 and 1782 and less so thereafter), facilitated so much clandestine exportation of coffee and sugar from the Ceded Islands that “above twenty times the quantity of produce has been exported from these islands since their conquest than ever grew upon them.”³⁴ Admiral Horatio Nelson thought the number higher still. Special concessions, he contended, allowed colonial governors to remake British law at their whim. “To see the American ships and vessels with their colours flying in defiance of the law,” he wrote the British Admiralty in 1785, “and by permission of the officer of customs landing and unloading in our ports was too much for a British Officer to submit to.”³⁵ Such tactics brought essential goods into beleaguered Caribbean colonies in return for coffee and other West Indian produce bartered in return, but could not create a sustainable substitute for pre-revolutionary trade. To secure greater access, especially where governors were less tractable about foreign shipping, Americans took another tack by making their ships—often with the help of port officials—un-American.

³³ “Extract from a Letter from Jamaica” dated August 1, 1784, reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 6, 1784: “On account of the apprehensions of the inhabitants, from the late dreadful hurricane, the Governor and Council have given permission, for the space of four months from the date hereof, to vessels of all nations, and all sizes, to bring in lumber and provisions --- but not permitted to carry the smallest quantity of produce from the island.”

³⁴ *Journals*, 8: February 12, 1783.

³⁵ NA PRO CO 152/64: “Horatio Nelson to Lord Sydney, November 17, 1785, Nevis., B.W.I.”

Flying under False Colors

Americans used forged papers and foreign flags to smuggle goods during the American Revolution, but the practice became so pervasive after independence that some British colonial governors thought “the Genius of all West Indians without distinction, seems turned to piracy and freebooting.”³⁶ Both British and French colonists understood that loading colonial produce in American ships was illegal after 1783, but felt they had little choice; Americans wanted coffee and sugar although and “they are conscious it would be extremely improper to do [trade] under their own colours, whilst their ports shut against our vessels.”³⁷

Henry Johnson, a Boston and Baltimore provisions merchant, relied on customs officials’ willingness to look the other way for the right price. Johnson had traded with Jamaica before 1776, but shifted to Saint Domingue after America’s 1778 treaty with France and turned a tidy profit in coffee, sugar, and molasses imports for the next few years. When war ended, he hoped to establish both British and French lines of business, but was disappointed with what he termed “Parliamentary stubbornness” that prevented him from doing so, and was even less pleased when France re-closed its ports after 1782.³⁸ Franco-American commercial relations in the last years of the American Revolution had disenchanted the French, and when trade to continental Europe failed to materialize French metropolitan merchants saw little use in perpetuating a system that allowed American goods to freely enter French markets and American ships to profit from

³⁶ For a detailed account of St. Eustatius’ role in supplying military equipment, see O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, 213-237. For naval orders, see: NA/PRO CO 101/21, Macartney to Germaine, Oct. 22, 1777, and Naval History Division, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 7 vols. (Washington, DC, 1964-, 1:949; 3:254; and 4:604.

³⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 7, 1784 and April 19, 1786.

³⁸ Henry Johnson, Letterbook, 1783-1785, Maryland Historical Society; for information about Henry Johnson’s pre-revolutionary trade see, Anne Rowe Cunningham (ed.), *Letters and Diary of John Rowe, Boston Merchant, 1759-1762 and 1764-1779* (Boston: W.B. Clarke and Co., 1903), p. 312. See also, Richard S. Chew, “Unforeseen Troubles: Baltimore’s Atlantic Trade and the Commercial Frustrations of the Confederation Period,” paper delivered at the Program in Early American Economy and Society Conference, Library Company of Philadelphia (Fall 2003).

carrying French colonial produce abroad. U.S. traders like Johnson, on the other hand, reacted swiftly to what he considered a commercial betrayal. Whereas a third of the ships that brought coffee to America sailed from Port-au-Prince, L’Orient, and Cape Francois in Saint Domingue in 1781, the next year, that number had dropped below 1 in 15, or less than seven per cent.³⁹

Instead of a peace-time boom, Johnson instead faced foreign coffee duties in both French and British ports and cast around for ways to lower expenses. He suggested to James Demie, a Saint Domingue merchant in Cape Francais, that “should your port be shut against Americans, you will have an opportunity of doing something clever here under the French flag.” To merchant firm Marie & Company in Port-au-Prince he wrote “whether we have permission to enter your port...seems doubtful,” but proposed that “should your trade be carried to the Mole of St. Nicholas...vessels under the French flag will bring the produce of your island to this Continent much easier than the Americans.”⁴⁰

It is difficult to know what percentage of Johnson’s business was conducted through these kinds of identity manipulations, but according to letters written to his brother he had also used British “papers” for trade purposes by 1784. “You will not forget the proposition I made,” he wrote, “respecting the vessel under British colours. I do believe there is an opening there.” If a voyage “could be done this quarter, I would soon have a set of British papers,” he noted, but if conditions changed, could just as easily “put the vessel again under American colours.”⁴¹

Johnson was not alone. One American newspaper brazenly reported, “by a vessel just arrived

³⁹ French ports made up 38 of 199 Caribbean ports that sent ships to North America in 1781, and only 11 of 163 ships arriving in 1782. Records of the Office of the Comptroller General, Port of Philadelphia Records, Registers of Duties Paid on Imported Goods (1781-1788), 6 vols., Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.

⁴⁰ Henry Johnson to James Demie, November 8, 1783; Henry Johnson to Marie & Company, November 8, 1783; and Johnson, Johonnot & Co. to Francis Johonnot, February 21, 1784, Johnson, Johonnot & Co. Letterbook, Maryland Historical Society.

⁴¹ Henry Johnson to Francis Johnson, March 6, 1784, Johnson, Johonnot & Co. Letterbook.

from the West Indies,” that “English merchants are obtaining foreign papers in a clandestine manner in order to carry on a trade with us,” while another declared “the French and British West India islands refuse admittance to American vessels but in a very limited way...to whom and where can her citizens look for some participation in the commerce of the world?”⁴²

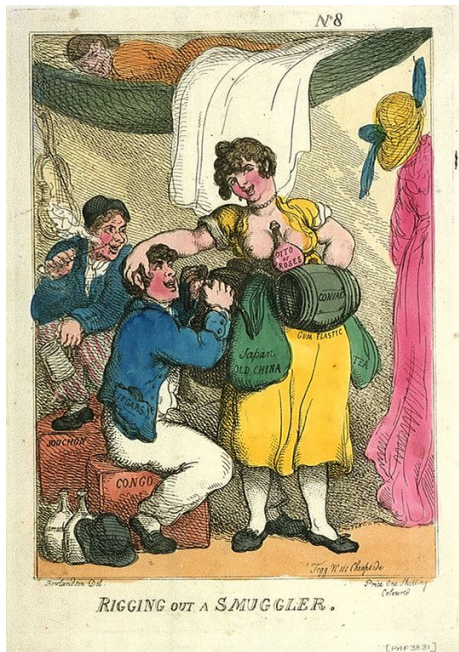


Illustration 4.2: Thomas Rowlandson, “Rigging out a Smuggler” (1810) depicts illicit tea, sugars, tobacco, and other wares being tucked into a woman’s skirts, emphasizing that contraband commerce works best when attractively packaged as something other than illegal activity. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.

The ease with which Johnson’s ships could become American, British or French indicates collusion with insiders who either produced such papers or knew those who did. Colonial governors were sure that local customs officials and port authorities both permitted entry of improperly registered vessels and sold forged trade documents. Governor Thomas Shirley, for example, protested that thousands of pounds of coffee and sugar changed hands for American produce in the British Leeward Islands by methods “contrived to evade the restrictions of the late Order of Council.” Lieutenant-Governor James Edward Powell likewise reported that Americans routinely smuggled coffee brought by British ships from Jamaica to the Bahamas and

⁴² *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 7, 1784 and April 19, 1786.

Turks and Caicos. And Governor Parry of Barbados reported that one American vessel not only failed to pay export duties but had set sail with Bridgetown's customhouse officer aboard whom, Parry had no doubt, could "provide the means and access to any British port in the West Indies."⁴³ Governors' reports still included accounts of foreign ship captains who landed for dubious reasons such as seeking hospitality, mistaking ports, or needing repairs, but they were alarmed by how many more were brazen enough to follow Henry Johnson's lead by using forged paperwork. If European nations restricted trade to their ships, then Americans simply became "British," "French," or "Spanish" for as long as necessary to complete their business. Despite the lamentations of Parliament and colonial governors, these tactics succeeded because the Caribbean supported them. When Nelson seized four American ships flying the British flag in 1785 he not only faced the resentment of the ship's crews but also the indignation of British port agents who promptly issued a writ for Nelson's arrest. Only by remaining on his ship did Nelson escape imprisonment, though he was charged with "arbitrary action" and ignoring local court proceedings.⁴⁴

Free Ports

The ease with which American coffee merchants moved between empires in the early 1780s caused some European countries to reconsider their ban on American shipping—clearly ineffective in practice if not policy. Meanwhile Congress applied more pressure in 1789 by passing the Tonnage Act that imposed special duties on ships arriving from nations or colonies

⁴³ Herbert C. Bell and David W. Parker, et. al. (eds.), *Guide to British West Indian Archive Materials in London and in the Islands for the History of the United States* (Washington, D.C. 1926), pp. 33 and 265.

⁴⁴ NA/PRO CO 28/110, pp. 345-46.

where “the United States is not permitted to carry their own produce.”⁴⁵ Free ports, a handful of which had operated successfully before American independence, perhaps offered a satisfactory alternative to free nations. The concept was still relatively new to the Atlantic world; Holland had opened the first free port in Saint Eustatius in 1757 to encourage direct trade to North America, and Britain responded by opening five of its own—Kingston, Savannah la Mar, Montego Bay, Saint Lucea, and Port Antonio in Jamaica. France followed suit with Guadeloupe three years later but moved the policy one step further, permitting North Americans to purchase coffee, sugar, and rum as well as sell horses, lumber, and provisions, the first time duty-free applied to exports as well as imports.⁴⁶ The popularity of the new option underlay Parliament’s passage of the Revenue Act of 1764 to limit “the clandestine conveyance” of coffee, white and clayed sugars, indigo, wine (except, ironically, French), and several kinds of silks and cloth from Persia, China, and India—anywhere in British America. This act more than doubled the tax on foreign coffee and sugar, but instead of ending North American’s trade outside the British Empire only drove up the price of both commodities and encouraged Denmark to open Saint Thomas and Saint John as free ports a few months later.⁴⁷

The pre-revolutionary free port system paled in comparison to the extensive network that flourished after 1785. Jamaica’s free ports, temporarily closed during the war, reopened after 1787 as did those in Roseau, Saint Georges, and Kingstown, the capital cities of Dominica,

⁴⁵ *American States Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 6.

⁴⁶ NA/PRO CO 318/1, Colonial Office and Predecessors, West Indies Original Correspondence, “Freeport Laws,” p. 69. For a good overview of the British free port operation, see: Frances Armytage, *The Free Port System in the British West Indies, A Study in Commercial Policy, 1766-1822* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1953).

⁴⁷ Figures derived from Danby Pickering (ed.), *Great Britain: The statutes at large ... [from 1225 to 1867]*, 46. vol. (Cambridge: Printed by Bentham, for C. Bathurst ; London, 1762-1869). See also: David Watt, *The West Indies: Patterns of Development, Culture and Environmental Change Since 1492* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 278.

Grenada, and Saint Vincent respectively. By 1790, Britain had opened seven additional free ports in the Bahamas (Nassau and Caicos), Bermuda (Hamilton), Tortola (Road Harbour), Antigua (Saint Johns), Trinidad (Saint Joseph) and Tobago (Scarborough).⁴⁸ These ports were not necessarily as free as their name implied; the nations permitted to use them and goods they could buy or sell varied tremendously depending on the port as well as local conditions and needs.

Coffee and sugar, the Caribbean's two largest cash crops, were conspicuously absent from most British free port legislation; only Nassau, Bahamas, Bermuda and, after 1793, the Caicos and Tortola, could trade in either. These islands, of course, did not produce these staples. They received exception in order to encourage importation of French coffee from Saint Domingue and Spanish coffee from Puerto Rico and Cuba for re-export to London.⁴⁹ But Bermuda and especially the Bahamas were close enough to North America to tempt some captains to look for a better market. Stafford Dickinson, late master and commander of the sloop *Necessity* testified, for example, that those wishing to do business with North America simply filed proper manifests to British ports with customs authorities and then, "notwithstanding such clearances," used bad weather or diminishing supplies to excuse emergency landings in the

⁴⁸ Parliament voted in February 1783 to "permit the produce of such British islands as have been captured by the enemy during the present war to import in neutral bottoms ...for a limited time." *Journals*, 8: February 12, 1783; see also, NA/PRO CO 318/1, Colonial Office and Predecessors: West Indies Original Correspondence, "A Statement, shewing the names, and positions of the several West India Free Ports, the Free Port Articles of Trade, and the Policy," p. 80-81.

⁴⁹ Other cities, including Exuma in the Bahamas and Saint George and Pembroke in Bermuda, petitioned to trade coffee; Parliament's Council on Foreign Trade even seconded their proposals so long as prices remained relatively stable. There is no evidence, however, that either the West Indians' petitions or the Privy Council's suggestions were carried out. NA/PRO CO 318/1, p. 81 and NA/PRO PC 1/63/24, Records of the Privy Council, "Representation of the Lords of the Committee of Council for Trade and Foreign Plantations with the Draught of an Order in Council declaring His Majesty's Approbation of certain Ports in the Bahama and Bermuda Islands therein named, to be ports for the importation of sugar & coffee the produce of any foreign country or plantation pursuant to an act passed in this session of Parliament entitled 'An Act for Regulating the Allowances of the Drawback and Payment of the Bounty on the Exportation of Sugar and for Permitting the Importation of Sugar and Coffee into the Bahama and Bermuda Islands in Foreign Ships.'" June 13, 1793.

United States. The practice was so common, according to Dickinson, that Bahamian captains rarely informed their crew of ships' itineraries. "All intended Voyages to America to trade," he stated, were kept "a profound Secret" lest they were "stopped on the Island" or by "British armed vessels at Sea."⁵⁰

France, despite closing its ports two years earlier, also reopened a limited number of free ports, including Guadeloupe and French Guiana in 1784 and most of Saint Domingue's major ports as well as Saint Lucea, and Martinique the following year.⁵¹ Historians have credited these actions for the extraordinary rise in U.S. exports to the French Caribbean in the mid-1780s, but American traders turned increasingly to French colonies for their West Indian imports as well.⁵² For coffee traders, this was an easy decision. Saint Domingue led the world in coffee production by the mid-eighteenth century, offering an unrivaled price economy of scale.⁵³ By 1789 French colonies provided at least sixty per cent of the coffee entering the thirteen states. By 1790 and 1791, both the volume of French coffee shipped and percentage of American trade this represented had risen further still, from 58 to 77 per cent (see tables 4.4 and 4.5).

⁵⁰ Case No. 33, *Taylor v Sloop Polly*, Court of Admiralty for the Port of Philadelphia, October 20, 1778. David Library of the American Revolution, Film 5, Reel 4; *Revolutionary War Prize Cases: Records of the Court of Appeals, in Cases of Capture, 1776-1787*.

⁵¹ W. G. Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765-1914* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 40

⁵² For discussions about increasing U.S. exports to the French Caribbean after American independence, see: John Coatsworth, "American Trade with European Colonies in the Caribbean and South America, 1790-1812." *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 24:2 (April 1967): 243-266; Douglas C. North, "The United States Balance of Payments, 1790-1860," in National Bureau of Economic Research (ed.), *Trends in the American Economy of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); and Vernon G. Sester, *The Commercial Reciprocity Policy of the United States, 1774-1829* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1969).

⁵³ For recent work on French Caribbean coffee production just before the Haitian Revolution, see Michel Rolph-Troillot, "Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves in the Antilles: The Impact of a Secondary Crop" in Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan (eds.), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), and "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue," *Review, A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Centre* 5:3, (Winter 1982): 331-388.

Table 4.4: French Caribbean Coffee Imported into the United States, 1789-1790

State	French Coffee (in lbs.)	Total Coffee Imports (in lbs.)	France's % of Total U.S. Coffee Imports
New Hampshire	8,126	11,953	68%
Massachusetts	290,533	669,191	31%
Rhode Island	32,068	37,015	87%
Connecticut	26,111	70,551	37%
New York	144,534	307,843	47%
New Jersey	16,635	18,649	89%
Pennsylvania	826,663	1,392,219	59%
Delaware	146,011	160,607	91%
Maryland	609,511	824,431	74%
Virginia	82,593	195,481	42%
North Carolina	29,002	83,548	38%
South Carolina	116,376	236,906	49%
Georgia	49,430	66,641	74%

Source: States appear in the order presented in *ASPCN*, I: 64, 68, 73, 74, 76, 81, 83, 88, 89, 92, 97, 99, 101, 634, 676, 682, 706, 712, and 757.

Table 4.5: U.S. Coffee Imports from all Parts of the Caribbean, 1790-1791

Region	Coffee (pounds)	% of Total Coffee Imports
French West Indies	3,432,385	77%
Dutch West Indies	559,613	13
British West Indies	346,875	7
Spanish West Indies	51,689	1
Danish West Indies	28,715	.7
East Indies	25,138	.6
Swedish West Indies	8,895	.1
Portuguese Brazil	1,108	>.01
West Indies (General)	8,472	.1
Other	15,783	.4
TOTAL:	4,478,676	100%

Source: *ASPCN*, 1:195.

Some British coffee continued to reach American buyers, often via French free ports, albeit through less conventional routes. Members of Dominica's House of Assembly, for example, noted discrepancies between plantation accounts and customs records as early as 1787. "It appeared," that the customs office "had produced a sum very far short of what ought to have been expected," and the House demanded a report comparing internal records with those sent to London hoping that "not only the deficiency would appear, but the several delinquents." The island's Treasurer was flummoxed, unable to account for how his records and those of the Customs House could "so far disagree."⁵⁴ One answer could be found in Court of Vice Admiralty dockets which contain ample evidence that coffee moved regularly between British Dominica and neighboring French islands. Pierre Rondeyon, a mulatto overseer for Joseph Vidal whose plantation lay in Saint Joseph's parish testified that in February 1792 he set out for Dominica's capital Roseau with two canoes carrying over one thousand pounds of coffee. En route "a large ship lying at anchor at Woodbridge's Bay" hailed the vessels. Rondeyon initially paid no attention, "whereupon a musket or some kind of gun was twice fired at the said boat from the ship" and he agreed to stop "from an apprehension that otherwise himself or some of the Negroes...might be killed or in some way injured."⁵⁵ Rondeyon was brought aboard the *Prosperine*, one of many British frigates patrolling the coastline to discourage illegal intercourse, and questioned by Commander James Alms about his business.⁵⁶ He replied that he was taking

⁵⁴ House of Assembly of Dominica, Minutes: March 13, 1787-Feb. 28, 1793, September 27-29, 1787, Dominica National Archives.

⁵⁵ Court of the Vice Admiralty, Miscellaneous Records, 1792, "Deposition of Pierre Rondeyon, overseer of Joseph Vidal against James Alms, Esq., Commander of His Majesty's Frigate *Prosperine*, dated March, 17, 1792," Dominica National Archives.

⁵⁶ Rondeyon did not speak English so his interview was conducted via interpreter. For most of the eighteenth century, more Dominicans spoke French or French Creole than English and many of these formed the majority of the island's coffee planters. Thomas Atwood recorded in 1791: "the principal and most productive of them [coffee plantations] belong to the French proprietors, who raise great quantities of coffee, which they dispose of to English

sixteen bags of coffee from Vidal's plantation "where it was produced, to Messrs. Braychay and Suart, Merchants of Roseau they having purchased it to resell in Basse-Terre," Guadeloupe's capital port. When Alms explained the illegality of such transactions and asked to see a "permit for the coffee" to verify that export taxes for moving goods from a British to French colony had been paid, Rondeyon responded in disbelief that "he had not" moreover "he had been long accustomed to carrying coffee in like manner and never before had heard of such a thing as a permit being requisite."⁵⁷

Ultimately, Rondeyon's Roseau merchants managed to persuade the courts that he had misunderstood their instructions whereupon the coffee was released into their custody with a strong admonition to secure appropriate documentation in the future. But Rondeyon's testimony is richly detailed, describing the labor needed to transport coffee to various ports, as well as the length of time and kinds of vessels each route required. By his own admission and that of the merchants who contracted his service, Rondeyon had coordinated the movement of coffee around Dominica's coasts for years, so it is difficult to believe that he "misunderstood" the destination of this particular shipment and far more likely that the British navy had managed to capture two canoes out of untold numbers that he had successfully sailed to Guadeloupe.⁵⁸

merchants." Though ceded to the British in 1763, Dominica was recaptured by the French in 1778 and held until 1782. Britain reclaimed Dominica in 1782 and it was officially returned to Britain by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Thomas Atwood, *The History of the Island of Dominica: Containing a Description of its Situation, Extent, Climate, Mountains, Rivers, and Natural Productions*. London, 1791, p. 81.

⁵⁷ "Deposition of Pierre Rondeyon," pp. 2-3.

⁵⁸ There are several gaps in Dominica's Court of Vice Admiralty records and many are extremely fragile and unavailable for use. But other vessels stopped with coffee from those years that were available include: Court of the Vice Admiralty, Miscellaneous Records, 1793: "Public Notice of the Brigantine Les Sans Cutattes, dated February 1, 1794;" and "Examination of Robert Walsh regarding the Brigantine Thomas, dated March 4, 1794;" in Miscellaneous Records, 1796: "Claim of George Pilsbury late Master of the Vessel and Cargo, dated Oct. 28, 1796;" "Dominica, Our Sovereign Lord the King against the Ship Victoria, dated July 29, 1796;" and "Dominica, Our Sovereign Lord the King against the Schooner Dolphin, dated July 29, 1796."

Neutral Shipping

Throughout the early 1790s, France and Britain sought to shape influence American political allegiance by first appealing to and then attacking the new nation's trade routes. French ships stopped American vessels suspected of trading with Britain and its colonies, condemning the ships or confiscating the cargoes; British vessels did the same to United States ships en route to France or the French West Indies. In February 1794, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reprinted the letter of one merchant whose cargo, bound for Bordeaux, had been diverted to London. English merchants agreed to pay the going rates for the ship's flour and rice but "a quantity of coffee she had on board, belonging to us, they were endeavoring to make French property of."⁵⁹ The following week an English judge condemned both the ship and the coffee as French which in accordance with British law was then confiscated without remuneration.

The news initiated a backlash of public protest. Britain's commercial incursions threatened not only the American economy but also its international reputation, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* opined: "the tendency of certain measures is to shake the public credit of this country to the foundation—to reduce the value of our exports more than one half . . .to deprive us of what every other nation has always considered as an advantage—our neutrality."⁶⁰ The efficacy of British efforts, however, depended on the eye of the beholder. In a letter to Congress, President Thomas Jefferson considered privateering an omnipresent threat. "Our coasts have been infested and our harbours watched by private armed vessels...They have captured, in the very entrance of our harbours, as well as on the high seas, not only the vessels of our friends coming to trade with

⁵⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 5, 1794.

⁶⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 12, 1794.

us, but our own also.”⁶¹ But American’s traders remained ambivalent, accepting foreign privateers as an inherent risk of trans-Atlantic shipping as long as incidents remained sporadic and balance sheets ultimately fell in their favor.

That many of our vessels had been condemned in the West Indies is certain; that others have been detained and ill treated, is equally certain; that some have been legally condemned for breach of revenue laws, cannot be denied; and that some have been falsely reported as condemned, when they were not, is now well know. At any rate our shipping is not all lost, as some would make us believe, for scarce a day passes, without some arrivals from the West Indies, and this day there were five reported on the coffee house books.⁶²

Jefferson’s image of “infested harbours” says more about his concerns over international acceptance of United States autonomy than it reflects the realities of the Atlantic economy in the era of the early republic, whereas the pragmatic attitudes of the merchant community reveal how business relationships had been restructured after independence. European powers’ decisions to open or close their ports and honor or disregard American neutrality determined with whom the United States legally conducted business. But rather than limiting regional interaction, such legislation opened opportunities to explore and compare suppliers, strike new alliances, and find the best bargains. Occasional depredations by European privateers were of less consequence than the burgeoning trade in goods like coffee still conducted—despite France and Britain’s best efforts—largely by American ships.

⁶¹ *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 1: 66 “Letter from President Jefferson to the House and Senate, Dec. 3, 1805.”

⁶² *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 21, 1794.

Table 4.6: Percentages of Domestic and Foreign Coffee Importation, 1794–1806

Year	% of coffee imported into the U.S. in American vessels	% of coffee imported into the U.S. in foreign vessels
1794–95	—	—
1795–96	—	—
1796–97	93.5%	6.5%
1797–98	89.8	10.2
1798–99	—	—
1799–1800	91.3	8.7
1800–1801	88.3	11.7
1801–2	88.9	11.1
1802–3	79.4	20.6
1803–4	98.9	1.1
1804–5	80.5	19.5
1805–6	84.5	15.5

Source: *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 350, 367, 394, 402, 434, 441, 464, 471, 478, 514, 521, 576, 580, 629, 635, 676, 706, 712, 757, 760.

A Revolutionary Opportunity

Wars between France and Britain from 1792 to 1805 put American vessels in harm's way, so much so that by May 1798 the United States was in an undeclared war with France.⁶³ But Americans exploited these same disruptions to find trade niches and make new inroads into European markets, using strategies as controversial as the sources of their goods. Congress initially responded to news of a slave revolt in Saint Domingue by aiding the revolution's suppression, and passed a series of bills between September 1791 and June 1793 for French relief totaling \$726,000.⁶⁴ American merchants, however, sensed profits, and after Britain

⁶³ For more information about America's involvement in the Quasi-War, see: Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi-War with France, 1798-1801* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, 1987) and Howard Nash, Jr., *The Forgotten Wars: The Role of the U.S. Navy in the Quasi-War with France and the Barbary Wars, 1798-1805* (South Brunswick, NJ: Barnes, 1968).

⁶⁴ Donald R. Hickey, "America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti: 1791-1806," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2:4 (1982): 364. The loans were drawn against America's existing Revolutionary war debt to France.

evacuated the colony in 1798 began pressuring the Adams administration to reopen diplomatic relations with the rebel government.

Developments on the European front influenced Adams' decision. French and British commercial blockades had reduced American trade east across the Atlantic to a trickle, while Congress had banned all trade to the French empire with the onset of the Quasi-War. This had so devastated American finances that Federalists began actively encouraging Toussaint L'Ouverture to seek independence as a means of disentangling Saint Domingue trade from U.S. conflicts with France. L'Ouverture, in return, offered to close Saint Domingue ports to European privateers, who were using them to stage attacks on American vessels. Congress responded by passing a law authorizing the President to reopen trade with any French "island, port, or place" if it was considered to be in the best interests of the United States, and Adams issued a formal proclamation reopening trade on August 1, 1799.⁶⁵

Within a year, the number of ships sailing from Saint Domingue to the United States almost doubled, those to Philadelphia rising from 63 in 1789 to 121 by 1790, and 282 by 1796.⁶⁶ Among them were those of Edward Hall, a Baltimore merchant in Aux Cayes, whose letters chronicle the rapid reversal of fortune once the U.S. opened its ports to the embattled French colony's trade. In 1798 Hall wrote to one of his ship captains, that Saint Domingue's economy was reduced to a subsistence level as "every person waits the return . . . of the Americans." Until then, he claimed, locals would "only buy from hand to mouth."⁶⁷ But by June 1799, Hall

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 365-67.

⁶⁶ Figures derived from Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Philadelphia, Inward and Outward Volumes, vol. 1-3, Records Group 36, National Archives and Records Administration, Mid-Atlantic Regional Branch. See also: James Alexander Dun, "What avenues of commerce, will you, Americans, not explore!:" Commercial Philadelphia's Vantage onto the Early Haitian Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 62:3 (July 2005): Table 1.

⁶⁷ Cited in Richard S. Chew, "Certain Victims of an International Contagion: The Panic of 1797 and the Hard Times of the Late 1790s in Baltimore," *Journal of the Early Republic* 25:4 (Winter 2005): 593-595.

seemed confident that change was imminent and confided in another captain about news from Baltimore that “communication would without doubt be soon opened between America and St. Domingo.” He began acquiring stock, including 199 hogsheads of sugar, 120,000 pounds of coffee, 35,000 pounds of cotton, and 630 barrels of flour. Hall, of course, understood that America’s commercial decisions did not ease the problems in the waters surrounding Saint Domingue which teemed with privateers of all nations so, to distribute his risk, he divided his cargo between several vessels. He shipped all of his flour (worth \$16,000) and 848 bags of coffee (worth more than \$15,000) on the schooner *Holstein*, a Danish vessel that he hoped might be less of a target than an American ship. The remainder of his coffee, as well as \$1,500 in specie, was loaded onto the *Penelope*, and both vessels sailed for Saint Thomas. En route the *Penelope* was seized by a British frigate and subsequently condemned by a British Vice Admiralty Court, but the *Holstein* arrived safely, and though legal battles over the *Penelope* tied up Hall’s profits for several years, he ultimately realized over \$12,000 from the venture.⁶⁸

Coffee trading continued even after Jeffersonian Republicans took office in 1801 and banned direct trade between the United States and Saint Domingue. Horace Lane sailed with the American privateer *Sampson* that was carrying arms and ammunition to black Haitian revolutionaries during the summer of 1804. The *Sampson*’s voyage was motivated not by revolutionary patriotism, but by profit, returning from Port-au-Prince with six hundred tons of coffee and other goods, as well as thirty-two white women and children. The passengers were ransomed to a French government that promised cash rewards for any white colonists brought

⁶⁸ Edward Hall to Captain John Johnson, June 30, 1799, and Edward Hall to David Stewart & Sons, July 26, 1799, in Edward Hall Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

out of the embattled former colony, while the coffee—illegal to import directly—was remade as “prize” goods for auction blocks in Philadelphia and New York.⁶⁹

Other coffee traders found relief through neutral intermediaries. Though the United States could no longer do business with any part of the French or former French Caribbean, the Dutch could and did. Philadelphia buyers took advantage of this loophole, all the while complaining about the middlemen’s inflated prices. “There are other things that attend this trade, that should not pass unnoticed,” reported the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, “The Danes, or rather Dutch, under Danish colours...swarm here [Saint Domingue] from St. Thomas’s & c.,” where their usual custom was to secure from Saint Domingue planters the best price for coffee, and then start a bidding war between American and Danish exporters that drove up prices.⁷⁰

The invasion of Saint Domingue by French forces in February 1802 upset coffee production and exports dropped almost 25 per cent, and later that year full-scale rebellion resumed in Saint Domingue in response to Napoleon’s reinstatement of slavery in Guadeloupe. New waves of violence brought the colony’s foreign trade to a virtual standstill and coffee imports recorded in Philadelphia’s customs registers dropped from almost 26 million pounds to less than 9 million pounds between 1801 and 1803. After Haiti declared independence on January 1, 1804, however, coffee imports steadily increased again, and although Haiti never appears in American customs papers, customs officials would have included Saint Domingue imports with the rest of the French Caribbean before 1804 that once again accounted for over half of America’s coffee.

⁶⁹ Horace Lane included his account of the *Sampson* in his autobiography *The Wandering Boy, Careless Sailor, and Result of Inconsideration* (Published for the author by L.A. Pratt, 1839). See also: Myra C. Glenn, “Troubled Manhood in the Early Republic: The Life and Autobiography of Sailor Horace Lane,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26:1 (Spring 2006): 74-76.

⁷⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 1, 1795.

America’s advances in the West Indian trade worried London’s West India Merchants Lobby, who convened to discuss the precipitous drop in foreign demand for British sugar and coffee. They first blamed the outbreak of the Quasi-war with disrupting trade, then thought that Holland’s recent break with Spain caused “a temporary cessation of exports to any of the Dutch ports.”⁷¹ But upon closer examination they found the real culprit was competition from America for the West Indies carrying trade. Between March 8 and September 10, 1799 American ships “chiefly laden with sugar and coffee” accounted for 146 of the 220 vessels entering the Danish port of Hambro alone. Another 56 ships came from Portugal, 18 from the “neutral” West Indies (most likely Dutch), 7 from the East Indies and 3 from Havana. Even the few British ships that did make it to port, the report succinctly noted, rarely carried West India produce, but appeared with “quantities of woolens, hardware” imported from Germany. America was making even more significant inroads exporting coffee to Italy, France, Holland, Germany, and even Britain itself. Together these destinations raised United States coffee exports from just below one million pounds in 1791, to over 42 million pounds by 1807.⁷²

Table 4.7: Destinations of U.S. Coffee Exports, 1806-1807 (in lbs.)

Export Destination	1806	1807
Russia	--	149,271
Prussia	222,351	--
Denmark and Norway	606,621	756, 511
Holland	21,833,438	19,909,956
Great Britain	2,543,370	1,052,075

⁷¹ NA/PRO CO 318/1, Colonial Office and Predecessors: West Indies Original Correspondence: “Extract from the Minutes of the Meeting of the West India Merchants held at the Marine Society’s Office, London, September 24, 1799,” pp. 187-189.

⁷² Timothy Pitkin, *A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States* (Hartford: James Eastburn and Co., 1817), p. 167, 170.

Hamburg, Bremen, etc.	5,306,950	2,644,511
France	8,282,965	11,088,529
Spain	236,113	456,428
Portugal	687,006	44,801
Italy	4,948,814	3,490,495

Source: Based on figures in Timothy Pitkin, *A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States* (Hartford, 1817), p. 171, Table 3.

America’s political economy evolved during the first two decades of independence. Foreign relations efforts of the early 1780s used trade as a tool of diplomacy—one of the few America could deploy to force acceptance of broadened commercial principles and secure political autonomy.⁷³ When Jefferson took office, he still decried the “embarrassing commerce under piles of regulating laws, duties, and prohibitions,” and asked whether America could “be relieved from all its shackles in all parts of the world.”⁷⁴ But free trade depended on at least two willing participants. Unable to secure such an arrangement, America’s ambassadors tried a variety of solutions to meet the new nation’s commercial needs—courting limited trade treaties, suggesting circuitous routes through European free ports and fighting vigorously to protect United States maritime neutrality. American merchants were even more creative, enlisting the assistance of Danish and Dutch intermediaries, customs officials, and colonial revolutionaries to satisfy a commerce growing beyond all recognition in size and scope. Inter-imperial trade had existed before the Revolution, but the variety of ways coffee moved into and through North America between 1783 and 1805 reveals an important shift in both the scale and pervasiveness

⁷³ See especially Jefferson’s *Report on the Privileges and Restrictions on the Commerce of the United States in Foreign Countries*, begun in February 1791, in which he argued that U.S. foreign and economic policies should be synonymous. Paul Leicester (ed.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* 10 vols. (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1892), 6:470-484.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6: 479.

of the industry. Some activities were obviously smuggling, and deemed so by the courts. But ships sailing under “flags of truce” or putting into port during “times in distress” were harder to condemn outright, often evading the spirit of the law while clinging precariously to its strictures. Understanding revolutionary and early republic business networks within this regional context downplays the American Revolution as a pivotal event in shaping the Atlantic economy and argues against the historiographical tendency to separate North America’s colonial and early eras. The United States economy did, of course, differ from its colonial predecessors, but its growing control of the Atlantic coffee trade depended on remaining enmeshed in larger systems of diplomacy, dependency, and trade.