

**Comments on *Scraping By:*
*Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore***

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“Giants” of American history passed through the rough and crowded streets of Baltimore two centuries ago. Charles Carroll, signatory of the Declaration of Independence, and once the owner of much of the land on which the town was built, was paraded through the streets nearly every July Fourth until his death in 1832. John Quincy Addams passed through and conferred upon the upstart town its favored title, the Monumental City. Abraham Lincoln hastened through the divided city under cover of darkness on the eve of the Civil War. A popular and patriotic story can be read easily off the surface history of Baltimore. Seth Rockman undertook a more difficult task. He brought back to life a wider and more representative collection of the city’s citizens and claimed for them a major role in the foundation of the republic and the acceleration of its capitalist economy. He has fulfilled a goal set with much bravado nearly half a century ago, but too soon abandoned, the determination to construct history from the bottom up.

Rockman’s accomplishment is the result of his own herculean skilled labor. He toiled in the archives as arduously as his subjects once did on the city streets and wharves. His indefatigable research ranged through the whole gritty documentary residue left by the inhabitants of a turbulent city, from printed sources, through personal papers and into the far

recesses of the Baltimore City Archives. The history profession should award a purple heart to one who labored day after day, in cold of winter and sweat of summer, in the squalid quarters that housed the municipal records of Baltimore. No simple purveyor of facts, Rockman teased complex meanings out of his voluminous sources. He rescued biographies out of the muck of the mud house work rosters, recreated whole family histories from scattered alms house records, and situated iconic figures like Frederick Douglass and hackneyed documents like the Star Spangled Banner within a context that magnified their historical importance. Not just a text book of research method, Scraping By is also a show case of research design. It combines the shrewd tactic of going deep and local with a strategic choice of location: a city that straddled North and South, slave and free, commerce and industry, all set at a critical moment in the formation of the nation and the advance of capitalism.

Scraping By deploys such exemplary historical craftsmanship in order to advance the debate on major issues in U. S. history, some the preoccupations of the moment, others, unforeseen or long neglected. Rockman's most obvious intervention in current historiography is to champion those historical subjects, the working, struggling majority, who have been overshadowed not just by the tales of presidents and tycoons, but by labor historians in the thrall of the artisans whose voices can be heard more easily in the press, pamphlets and public meetings. Rockman has created history out of the penury and hardship endured by the urban majority and recognized not just their hard work, but the initiative and creativity required just to get by. We learn of parents' who wrested the maximum support from the niggardly keepers of the almshouse, of slaves who dared to run away and make homes of their own in the city, of widows who hawked their wares around the market halls, of the children who scavenged oakum in the streets.

Rockman has fulfilled his expressed ambition to do for the Early Republic what Barbara Ehrenreich did for our time— but much more. Not content to record experience, Rockman interrogates social structure, and most importantly, restores class to its rightful place in the history of the Early Republic. Rather than obscuring other patterns of inequality Rockman uses the lens of class to bring the history of race and gender into sharper focus. He draws attention to how the economic oppression dealt to women and to African Americans stems from their relative powerlessness in the same capitalist labor market that subjugated white men. Rockman carefully disavows the notion that class trumps race and gender, arguing instead how all these “relations of rule” are “mutually constitutive “intersecting” and “overlapping”. (Rockman, p11) ⁱNot just a recitation of stock generalizing phrases, Rockman demonstrates this complex understanding of class empirically, for example, by accounts of how the widows of slave owners withstood the economic vulnerability of gender by hiring out African American slaves, male and female. Such bitter ironies do not dissolve gender and race in the category of class, but serve as a bracing reminder that issues of justice and equality cross the borders between cultural categories and cannot be contained within singular identities.

This combination of vivid description and careful social analysis armors Scraping By to do intellectual combat with canonical narratives of early United States History. It challenges scholars, teachers and pundits to acknowledge the lives, fortunes and misfortunes that teem beneath the stories of presidents, and rage against narratives of progress. Yet to my nagging frustration, popular and privileged history goes on seemingly oblivious to such critiques. In recent years Pulitzer prizes have gone to largely uncritical accounts of Whiggish progress and Jacksonian accomplishment. In this state of affairs the appropriate response to the publication of Scraping By should be not just to review it but to trumpet its message as far and wide and loudly

as possible. And in that spirit I applaud and thank the Library Company and Cathy Matson for bringing us together.

I have, however, been asked to provide some more extensive commentary and will honor Scraping By with some suggestions about how we might extend its analysis. I bring two concerns and a modicum research to this project, those of gender history and urban politics. First, I will pursue the history of gender a bit further along the lines of class which Rockman has laid out, and second I will take his economic analysis beyond labor market to issues of political economy. My own research is just beginning to move onto the historiographic territory that Rockman occupies and proceeds in an oblique and backward way. I approach the history of Baltimore from the standpoint of the 1840's and 50's rather than looking forward from the 1790's. What I am discovering is largely consistent with his findings, and leads me to marvel at the thoroughness and rigor of his research. Although I have only half formed ideas of my own about the political economy of the Early Republic I trust that this perspective might further illuminate the critical historical issues that Scraping By has put so arrestingly before us

I begin then with some riffs on the theme of gender. It must be said at the outset that Rockman, more than almost any labor, social or urban historian that I can name, has integrated the history of women into his analysis. In the process he has provided the evidence with which to distinguish gender more carefully from the other processes of subordination that make up the "relations of rule" in the Early Republic. Rockman's evidence adumbrates the unique ways that gender contributes to class inequality. Among all the differences that triggered subjugation in the early republic, gender most expressly and nearly universally conferred social dependency. This is something both more overarching and more constricting than the social divisions that are measured simply by economic status or material resources. It entails a personal relationship with

those of a superior station, a coercive intimacy that would be maintained long after slaves were emancipated and apprenticeship had become extinct. Rothman recognizes these structural and functional aspects of gender in the concept of “social reproduction” and displays some of their ideological underpinnings in images of frail and pure beings whose labor was remunerated not with wages but with charity. Rockman also exposes the ideology, the structures and functions of gender that extend beyond the ranks of the poor. The rare women who petitioned the city council for support or privileges were usually widows who followed a distinctive gender script. It might read “From necessity and the natural habit of their sex, it is well known that females cannot engage in those various occupations to which men can turn their attentions, with so much ease as well as profit to themselves.” (Rockman, p 101) Clearly gender runs deeply and differently through the class system and Rockman does well to accord separate chapters to jobs’ for working men and for working women.

When, in a later chapter, Rockman turns to the “Hard Work of Being Poor” he implicitly recognizes, that gender operates, not just through separate labor markets, but as mechanism for conjoining men, women and children into a single economic unit, albeit a fragile one. His depiction of economies of make shift assumes that somehow the disparate members of the working class household melded their individual labor power into a common means of survival and a mode of reproducing the labor force. Yet more assiduous research, through remote and scattered archives will be required, to determine just how this process operated. Did it flow from the maternal instincts of self sacrificing women? Or were families held together by the gender ideology that pervades petitions to the almshouse and to the City Council, ubiquitous references to “helpless” and “dependent” women and children? Or did the male head of the household wield the power to keep wives and children in line, contributing wages and labor to

the family coffer. Men came regularly before the mayor and city council begging succor, but characteristically petitioned for city contracts or public sector jobs and used gender to legitimize their requests. Almost invariably they presented themselves not as helpless themselves but as the head of families with wives and children to support. Clearly workingmen regarded the dependency of women and children as a fundamental part of their status and identity One wonders how this gender hierarchy was maintained. Were family economies held together by force? How many of the men (and very few women) who were sentenced to the city jail for assault committed acts of family violence.? The hard work of being poor was gendered labor and rife with conflict as well as cooperation. Be he a benevolent patriarch or a wife beater, a day laborer or an artisan, the working man of Baltimore was defined, and perhaps divided, by gender as well as class.

Rockman's attention to gender inevitably takes us beyond the ranks of the poor. He shows not just that class is ridden with gender differences, but that gender identity leapt across the class divide and intertwined itself with relations of superiority as well as subordination. This complication of gender is personified in Scraping By by the women who organized benevolent associations and issued hand bills like the one dated 1830 that bemoaned the paltry wages of seamstresses. Such Female benevolence had long and distinguished history in Baltimore, and should not be lost in the shadow of prominent males It harks back, to the Female Humane Impartial Society founded in 1811, for example which as it's name implied was conceived in f highly enlightened principles: it welcomed Catholics along with every sect of Protestants into membership. A Female Humane Society was still was still in operation in 1859, presided over by wives of such elite men as Roger Taney Supreme Court Justice, and Thomas Swann, one time President of the of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and currently the Mayor. They now operated

both a home for aged women and a garment factory on Fayette street. Its annual report boasted that it employed 80 workers and paid them more “than the starving rate usually paid by the clothing establishments.” The members of the Female Humane Society, some single, some the wives of civic and business leaders, went on to deliver a critique of capitalistic labor economics “—yet it should be remembered that is not charity but justice, that requires that remunerative prices should be paid for labor, and that is all we aim to secure.” (“Baltimore Humane Impartial Society and Aged Women’s Home, Act of Incorporation and Bylaws (Baltimore, 1855, 1859, 1860). This hint of a gender division within the local elite that pulls the strings of Rockman’s class analysis is only suggestive, but I take it as a cue to explore the wider economic and political context in which men and women scraped by.

Looking forward from the eighteenth century early Baltimore might seem like a booming capitalist economy, but looking backward from even the 1840’s the economy also bore distinct markings of what the city’s major economic historian has called pre-industrial mercantilism.(Gary Browne, *Baltimore in the Nations*(Chapel Hill, 1980) Granted Baltimore Harbor was teeming with merchant vessels destined for world markets, and that the streets were awash with commercial and financial entrepreneurship. The municipal institutions, however, placed considerable constraints on the market. The act that “erected Baltimore into a Town” in 1797 was a centuries old exercise in political economy, the issuing a corporate charter. The charter reluctantly issued by the Maryland General Assembly in 1796 was not intended to protect the rights of private capital but to grant merchants and tradesman the privileges of acting in unison to oversee and regulate the marketplace that had grown up around the inlets of the Chesapeake and the outlets of Maryland rivers. While incorporation was intended to facilitate business and increase profits to the founding fathers of Baltimore City it was a collective

political project designed to create a well regulated public economy not to unleash the private market. To this end the first goal of the act of incorporation was to gain the right of property owners to tax themselves and one another and use that money for the principle tasks of opening public streets, dredging the public harbor and constructing public markets. One of the first municipal ordinances required that all commodities put up for sale in the town of Baltimore be sold within the public market. (Baltimore Ordinances, 1798, p76) Nearly every commodity that passed in and out of the city, be it unloaded from a sea going vessel or a farmer's wagon was subject to inspection. Early Baltimore was, as William Novak would argue very much a regulated economy.

Historians like Stephen Whitman as well as Seth Rockman also made clear that the market in free labor like that in commodities emerged slowly and painfully from these traditional constraints on the economy. Slaves, apprentices, domestic servants and women in general were still in bondage to the household. Vagrants, the idle and those who could not support themselves were not simply unleashed into the labor market but committed to the penitentiary, consigned to the poor houses or bond out to charities or private families. The centerpiece of Rockman's chapter "A Job for a Workingman" was the Mud Machine, as he acknowledged, a municipal rather than a private enterprise. Dredging the harbor was an almost obsessive concern of the Mayor and City Council and funded by a quite hefty tax on property owners. (Interestingly, this public enterprise seems also to be among the best examples of an ethnically and racially mixed sector of the labor force.) Perhaps the most impressive mobilization of money and labor in the city's history was also a public effort organized from the city council chambers. The victory over the British in 1814 was not a private enterprise, nor, for that matter, of state or federal project. It was the city government of Baltimore that rose to defend the nation against the British. The City

Council raised the funds and mobilized the manpower, (slave, free, black and white) to build fortifications, secured armaments, march into battle, and stood off his majesty's navy in the Baltimore harbor. The popularly-elected city council, composed of both grand merchants and modest shopkeepers and artisans, pledged the extraordinary amount of half a million dollars for this effort.(Record Group 22, The War of 1812, The Baltimore City Archives) In the broadest meaning of the term, early Baltimore was a political, a public, economy. It had a thriving private dimension, but rather than a province of individual or corporate capitalism it operated through voluntary associations, like the local theatrical companies who arranged a musical benefit to subsidize the war effort.

Organized as a civic economy, Baltimore's achieved iconic status, displayed not only in the National Anthem but in two spectacular public monuments that celebrated the victory in the War of 1812:, one the first memorial to George Washington and the second the earliest public sculpture to honor ordinary soldiers. It was a collection of citizens that took the initiative in 1814 and agreed to tax themselves for these public purposes. .Yet Baltimore could not reach the zenith of its civic fame without some capital; that \$500,000 appropriation for the defense against the British was on loan from the city bankers. . That loan, to be repaid at 6% interest, might be seen in retrospect as the Trojan stalking horse of capital. In not yet the definitive announcement of the triumph of free enterprise it did signal that private capital was aggressively intruding into the political economy. Soon after the War, the vicissitudes of international economics, national politics, and the panic of 1819 decimated the merchant leadership of the Revolutionary era. Still the next generation of elected leaders, acting as the City Council, would hold fast to municipal policies that restrained the free market. In other words, mercantilism and the free market were on a slow but certain collision course, which seemed to accelerate after 1820.

The ledger of Baltimore ordinances indicates that some aspects of mercantilism endured right up to the Civil War. As late as the 1850's the City Council made sure that every pound of lard and barrel of flour was graded for quality and measured with accuracy. Everyone from chimney sweeps to brokers required a municipal license. City Councilmen held tenaciously to the tradition of the assize of bread. In 1834 they refined the ordinance to insure that nefarious bakeries did not evade the law by manipulating the size of their crusts. In 1840 when the city's population passed the 100,000 mark City Council voted to increase the surveillance of bakeries, conducting them not just monthly but weekly. They also devised a curious method of distributing resources outside the capitalist marketplace: fraudulent loaves would be confiscated and delivered to the alms house for consumption. (City Council Papers, RG 19, March 10, 1802, April 10, 1828).

At the same time that the municipal government monitored the local market they worked to harness public resources to encourage economic growth. In the euphoric years immediately after the War of 1812 the City Council and the Mayor pushed through expensive internal improvements, dredging the harbor opening streets, channeling the waterways. The Panic of 1819 and the mounting city debt checked the appetite for public investment, but only momentarily. Within a decade the city was once again deep in debt, much of it the cost of financing canals. Then with one extravagant gesture the civic leaders of Baltimore succumbed to the juggernaut of capitalism and its urban imperative, to compete for a market shares with other cities, namely New York and Philadelphia, or suffer stagnation. In 1828 a second generation of civic leaders, men savvy to the operations of banks, corporations, industrial production, and the inter-regional expansion of markets, initiated a bold and highly capitalized project. Gambling that an iron horse could ascent the Alleghenies they launched the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

Within a decade they would issue millions of dollars in stock and sell it on the London exchange. They did not however rely on the free market and shun the help of government. Quite the contrary, the project was utterly dependent on municipal institutions. The mayor and city council jump started the project by investing some 3 million tax payers dollars, becoming t a major shareholder in the B&O. . At one critical moment when the Railroad was stretched for cash, the City issued its railroad stock as script, redeemable as payment for taxes and other local purchases. This newfangled political economy was not a laissez faire enterprises, but quite the opposite, a case of capital commanding public resources for its own profit. (Hollander)

The political economy of Baltimore had morphed into a strange hybrid, a combination of local market controls, heavy public investment in economic growth, and a robust capitalist sector. At the same time the complaints about costly internal improvements and government interference in the free market became more voluble. One element of this increasingly complex political economy, dubbed free enterprise, rose to ascendance. It could be heard in the mayor's invocation for Lafayette's memorial service in 1825 He rewrote the declaration of independence to proclaim the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit, not of happiness, but the ability to pursue ones business without any inferences. This resistance to government intrusion became more vocal in the next decade, and took a distinctive form, complaints about excessive taxation and the rising municipal debt. . This debt, incidentally, was owed to bankers. The doctrine of free enterprise and laissez faire economics were voiced most enthusiastically by the political party that championed the common man and challenged the bankers, the Jacksonians. By 1856 the liberal principle of political economy was fully articulated The mayor put it this way. "The protection of the person and the property of the citizen in free exercise of his legitimate pursuits and functions was a principle not to b compromised or postponed for a single moment." The

Mayor enunciated the practical implementation of this ideology in municipal policy: “the necessity of lessening by every possible means, the expenses of the city.

The changes underway within the governmental institutions of Baltimore between 1797 and 1860 were incremental and too complex and consequential to be swallowed up in the telos of market revolution or consigned to the triumph of capitalism. Certainly the seeds of capitalism had been planted along the Chesapeake well before the city was incorporated. But that should not distract us from investigating the obstacles that lay in its path and the nuances, variations and contradictions in its operation. The case of Baltimore raises more questions than I can begin to answer. Was there some tipping point between market regulation and laissez faire economics? Was the market ever free? How did different classes, different economic sectors, different political jurisdictions (ward, city, state, nation) and the different political parties position themselves in the evolving political economy? Antebellum Baltimore also challenges us to confront a now familiar contradiction of American political economy, the apparent coexistence of celebrations of the free market with government subsidies, especially to large corporate enterprises and financial institutions deemed essential to economic growth.

Answering these questions and making sense of these contradictions will require careful scrutiny of the institutions and the practices of city government, the place where these economic conflicts can be observed up close. In Baltimore, capitalism ensnared itself in municipal politics at a conspicuous time, just as equality was celebrated and democracy was institutionalized. The first charter of Baltimore Town appointed a local elite as the stewards of the mercantile economy. The Maryland General Assembly, dominated by wealthy planters, imposed steep property requirements on office holders, a hefty \$2000 for members of the Second Branch of the City Council, who like the Mayor were not popularly elected but appointed by the First Branch.

Almost from the outset the electorate of Baltimore challenged this arrangement as oppressively aristocratic. Organized by the emergent Jeffersonian faction this democratizing movement was composed largely of the tradesmen and artisans with whom merchant elites forged political alliances beginning in the Revolution and extending into the ratification of the Constitution . This coalition, which formed a revolutionary militia and paraded under the banner of the Mechanical Regiment, remobilized for the War of 1812. The summons to defend the city was unusually inclusive, issued to the “inhabitants of the city” (not to citizens, property holders) and calling on them all to “meet in their respected places of holding elections,” there to select four delegates representing each ward. (City council Papers, RG 16 January 1814) This same era of democratic expansiveness, witnessed those exceptional proposals to enfranchise African Americans. Further signs of interracial democracy are found in petitions to the city council as late as the 1830’s. When fears of slave revolts led to increased surveillance of free blacks, their white neighbors came forth to urge they be granted free passage through the streets of Baltimore. In at least one case this gesture interracial solidarity seemed to connote political equality: this petition labeled a black man a “good citizen”. (Mayors Papers, RG 9, December 31, 1838).

By this time national politics had become a contest between two political parties, the Whigs with their ambitious programs of internal improvements and Jacksonian Democracy with their fierce opposition to national Banks and corporate monopolies. Long before this, politics had become a fiercely popular practice in places like Baltimore. Property restrictions on voting and holding office were suspended in 1808. Artisans and tradesmen took up positions on the City Council; a saddler and a carpenter would serve terms as mayor. At the same time, however, exceptions to democratic inclusiveness, especially those based on race and gender were made explicit and more rigid. The republican consensus fragmented along additional fault lines in

Baltimore. In the 1820's and 30's artisan republicanism evolved into evangelical Protestantism and soon spawned a nativist political faction. On the eve of the Civil War the Know-Nothing party controlled the municipal offices and, significantly, enacted a new round of internal improvements, street cars, police reform, parks and support for the B and O, whose former President, Thomas Swan had become Mayor. All this is to suggest that the transformation of the urban political economy was tied up with partisan politics and ethnic differences, in ways so intricate and volatile that I can't pretend to fully understand them. One thing is clear, however: the outcomes of these political contests, such things as taxpayer revolts and condemnation of positive government—had implications that would extend far into the future and deep into class structure.

What then did all this mean for the urban majority that just scraped by? Did they simply struggle in the shadows of momentous changes in politics and economics? Did the advances of capitalism and democracy lead only to more effective exploitation of the poor? The poor remained very much on the minds of public officials through this whole turbulent period. Poor relief was one of the first and most costly functions of the City Corporation, institutionalized in the office of Overseer of the Poor, and practiced at the ward level. The Almshouse, for all its Dickensian practices and associations, was one of the largest items on the city budget and the subject of recurrent conflict between the City, the County and the State. As Rockman points out the first, more patrician generation of leaders assumed a benevolent custody over the poor among them. I have the impressions that the complaints about the cost of providing for the poor increased in number and vehemence after the panic of 1819. City officials began to make careful distinction between the unemployed, the unemployable and the idle. The categories of “deserving” and “undeserving poor” were relatively late additions to the vocabulary of mayors

and city councilmen. The poor were also on the minds of Jacksonians who complained in 1844 that the newly elected Whig Mayor had neglected to call ward meetings for the relief of the poor. (Mayors Papers, Feb 8, 1844) Institutions for the care of the poor actually proliferated over time. The 1840's witnessed the erection of 12 new facilities providing for the poor, the widowed and the orphaned. But 11 of them were religious institutions that tended to focus their generosity on members of their own denomination. It would seem that antebellum Baltimoreans still assumed that the poor would always be with them, but began to divide the public welfare between whites and blacks, Protestants, Catholics and Jews, foreigners and natives. It would seem that care of the poor was going the way of the political economy, becoming a private enterprise. The growing number and greater diversity of those who made demands on the municipal budget no doubt contributed to the growing parsimoniousness of taxpayers. Still it seems to me that those extravagant internal improvements and increasingly indebtedness to bankers were more likely to provoke political opposition. At any rate railroad subsidies and relief of the poor competed with one another for public money, while the doctrine of private enterprise threatened to abandon the dependent population to the free market.

The poor clearly had a stake in these political contests. Were they merely passive wards of the almshouse and supplicants of charity or did they play an active part in the economic transformation of antebellum America. The text of Scraping By, as well as the petitions to the Major and City Council that I have sampled, suggest that the poor had their own reasons to chafe under the mercantilist regimen. They too faced the Hobson choice between personal freedom and material risk. Some of the more impecunious Baltimoreans were genuine aficionados of the free market. Take for example the women Rockman calls "self-employed independent contractors", who would include washerwomen, those who peddled wares through the city streets, and even

prostitutes. My unsystematic review of the police records indicates that women outnumbered men among the proprietors of disorderly houses --- and they were extreme free marketers. They seemed to prefer the corporal and spiritual risks of selling their bodies to the highest bidder to taking up residence in the almshouse, or perhaps even to getting married. The ranks of Baltimore's port were filled with refugees from family farms, and slave plantations; for them selling their labor on the open market meant social freedom as well as economic risk

Petitions to the mayor and city council of Baltimore also testify that some poor people exercised their economic freedom in direct political action. The municipal records are littered with appeals from poor people eager to circumvent the restrictions of the public market. The hucksters who appear so frequently in Scraping By are a prime case in point. The women who posed as helpless widows before the city council in 1826, were particularly adept at skirting market regulations. They purchased vegetables at a cheap cost outside the city limits and sold them without license on the footways bordering the public market (Coty Council Papers, May 8, 1826). They asserted their right to make a living on the free and open territory of the city streets. Others petitioned to set up food stalls on the wharf or vend watermelons through the sultry streets in the summer. As time passed it became increasingly difficult for the city corporation to contain poor people's entrepreneurship within the regulated markets. In 1824, for example, a group of neighbors, who claimed to be speaking "for the public generally", complained about "the introduction of a class of huckster who occupy the west side of Harrison Street in the sale of old clothing it has becomes a mere harbor for drunken disorderly persons and crowds of people of color." (Mayors Papers, April 20, 1824)

Urban mercantilism was slowly eroding, politically and spatially. Buying and selling seeped out of the public market, onto the streets and into independent shops. Poor as well as rich,

black as well as white, women as well as men acted out new principles of political economy. One widow went before the city council and issued a complaint against the landed gentleman and revolutionary hero John Eager Howard. She pleaded her case in the language of the free market: “Your petitioner is certain that you will act on the principle that the Labourer is worthy of his hire, and more particularly so, when you are informed that he has left to a helpless family leaving this world with a full conviction that his petitions before the council would be granted.” (City Council Papers, n.d. 1826) Another petitioner by the name of Catharine Oliver had perfected the new language of political economy. She went before the Mayor, the City Council and the General Assembly to demand the right to sell oysters on Sunday, and in her own shop. She won the case, beat city hall, and heralded the time when retail trade would take place in private, unfettered space, the sanctified domain of consumer capitalism. (Mayor’s Papers April 24, 1830)

I offer these shards of evidence, retrieved from the municipal records of Baltimore, in order to suggest that that men and women of limited material resources played their own parts in the transformation of the American political economy. They had their own reasons to rebel against mercantilism and embrace laissez faire capitalism, with all its attendant risks and possibilities. They too faced a Hobson choice between personal freedom and material risk. This does not, however, dispel the cold reality that not everyone had equal power to direct that change and enjoy its material rewards. Such is the ultimate tenacity of class. Those at the helm of new capitalistic institutions, like the directors of Baltimore’s banks, insurance companies and railroads, both held economic power and exercised inordinate political influence. By 1830 large private enterprises and financial capital had aggrandized considerable public resources, like subsidies for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The majority continued to valiantly “scrape by”.

Seth Rockman leaves us to contemplate how we got to this familiar impasse, and to look for what political avenues that might get us beyond it. It is some consolation to know that Baltimore still has a number of thriving public markets, lively places in the inner city which, compared to supermarket chain, offer relatively healthy and inexpensive provisions. Perhaps somewhere in their history we might find ways to imagine a democratic public economy.

ⁱ Rockman p 11