



Omohundro Institute of  
Early American History and Culture  
Williamsburg, Virginia

---

The Chance of the Moment: Coffee and the New West Indies Commodities Trade

Author(s): Michelle Craig McDonald

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 62, No. 3, The Atlantic Economy in an Era of Revolutions (Jul., 2005), pp. 441-472

Published by: [Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3491531>

Accessed: 26/04/2011 17:59

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=omohundro>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The William and Mary Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# The Chance of the Moment: Coffee and the New West Indies Commodities Trade

Michelle Craig McDonald

**I**N January 1773 Captain John Ash wrote to his financial backers, the Liverpool-based firm Brown & Birch, of his safe arrival in the Caribbean. He also informed them of a change in plans. Contracted to secure a cargo of wood and mules, Ash tried first in British Tortola and then in Danish Saint Thomas without success. He sailed next to the Spanish colony of Puerto Rico where he reported: “We loaded what of the wood we could get there and sent express to the out bays near us, who returned for answer, that there was very little and so situated that we could not get at it either with ship or boats . . . we proceeded then to another design for we found neither wood nor mules, but a good deal of coffee.”<sup>1</sup> Jamaicans were unlikely to buy Ash’s coffee when he returned to Kingston because they produced enough of their own, yet he purchased between two and three thousand pounds, reasoning it could be resold in North America to offset the expense of his endeavor.

A decade later many more merchants and ship captains were discovering, as Ash had learned, the lucrative potential of coffee trading. Demand for coffee in the United States grew rapidly after 1783, both as an article of home consumption and as one of the new nation’s most profitable reexported commodities. The postrevolutionary coffee trade illustrates the importance of the West Indies to early American economic development and the increasingly international orientation of

Michelle Craig McDonald is the Harvard Business School Harvard-Newcomen Postdoctoral Fellow for 2005–6. She would like to thank Alec Dun, David Hancock, Cathy Matson, Roderick McDonald, Kathleen Montieth, Simon Smith, and an anonymous reader for the *William and Mary Quarterly* for their close readings and suggestions, and Amanda Moniz for alerting her to the case of Captain Ash at the National Archives in Kew, England. A version of this article was presented at the Program in Early American Economy and Society (PEAES) conference, “The Atlantic Economy in the Era of 18th-Century Revolutions” in November 2003 and benefited from the participation of those in attendance. Financial support came from the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, PEAES at the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Harvard University International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World.

<sup>1</sup> Captain Ash to Messrs. Brown & Birch, Jan. 24, 1773, T1/504, National Archives, Kew, Eng.

United States–Caribbean trade. Focusing on coffee helps revise the work of earlier historians who argued that, with barely a lull, Britain reemerged as America’s foremost trading partner and continued to dominate the new nation’s financial landscape. “Only very slowly did the United States advance out of its colonial economy,” suggested John J. McCusker and Russell Menard in *The Economy of British America*. “The decade immediately following the end of the war looked economically much the same as the decade preceding it, in basic structure, if not in detail.”<sup>2</sup> Yet it is in the details that differences are most apparent. Trade to Europe may have resumed along familiar lines, but McCusker and Menard underestimated the profound changes in West Indian commerce after 1783.

Before the American Revolution, most coffee entering North America originated in British Jamaica or, after 1763, the ceded islands of Grenada, Saint Vincent, and Dominica, and arrived through Philadelphia. Parliament’s decision to enforce the Navigation Acts on United States trade after American independence, with “regulations by which the exportation of sugar and coffee, from those [West Indian] colonies, in American vessels, is generally prohibited,” irrevocably altered this pattern, and did so at a time when the American coffee business was booming. Philadelphia continued to dominate North America’s coffee import market, but the city’s merchants shifted from British to non-British, especially French, suppliers (Figures I–II). By 1802 the value of British West Indian coffee coming into the United States amounted to no more than \$1 million, whereas revenue from other parts of the world rose to more than \$8 million.<sup>3</sup> Coffee’s rapid ascent and prominent place among America’s reexport trades makes it one of the best case studies to gauge how ably and quickly American merchants could navigate the volatile commercial and legal networks of a postrevo-

<sup>2</sup> John J. McCusker and Russell Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 367.

<sup>3</sup> *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States*, 38 vols. (Buffalo, N.Y., 1998). The volumes of greatest importance to this study are the first two volumes on Foreign Relations and the two volumes on Commerce and Navigation. For Parliament’s decision to enforce the Navigation Acts, see *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 641. For a comparison of coffee imports into several American states, see Figures I–II. One-quarter of these imports were for American consumers; merchants reshipped the balance to European markets. Percentages were derived by comparing total coffee reexport revenue of \$7,302,000 to total reexport revenue of \$28,533,000 for the years 1802 through 1804 as they appear in *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 642. Put in comparative perspective, by the turn of the century, American coffee reexport revenues exceeded those not only of tea but also of sugar and molasses. In fact coffee surpassed all Caribbean imports but rum in profitability, and was second only to dry goods in global American reexports.

lutionary Atlantic world where, to succeed, traders needed to be able to reallocate resources quickly (Table I).

The riskiest way to deal with complex regulations was to evade them through smuggling. Ash saw advantages to this alternative in 1773, but also advised Brown & Birch of some potential problems. Coffee was among Puerto Rico's principal exports, yet Ash had nonetheless faced significant competition. He described a "coast . . . full of vessels that can supply them on better terms than we," and suggested carrying at least one-third to one-fourth the purchase price in cash as well as an "assortment of very fine goods." Puerto Rican sellers had demanded payment in full in goods or currency, and were unwilling to trade for samples—examples of goods from future harvests—that Ash normally used to conduct business. He also noted that his vessel, the *Mary*, drew too much draft for Puerto Rico's shallow harbors. Ferrying coffee from coast to ship had required thirteen of his "best men" to leave the ship, with the remaining crew unguarded, "waiting the lucky or unlucky chance of a moment."<sup>4</sup> Ash recommended using hired hands to transfer goods in shallows, or flat boats, from bays to larger ships anchored offshore. More laborers would increase expenses. Yet Ash strongly advised the investment in local manpower.

Some American merchants continued smuggling after the Revolution, but many more evaded the spirit of the law as they tenuously conformed to its strictures. These men seized the chance of the moment to expand their businesses through international competition and legal loopholes. At the close of the eighteenth century, the British, French, and Spanish Caribbean all produced coffee, and the neutral

<sup>4</sup> If a ship captain arrived to trade without sufficient goods or credit on hand to pay in full for what he wanted, as happened esp. in unplanned voyages such as Captain Ash's trip to Puerto Rico, it was common to supply samples as payment for trade with a promissory note for the balance. If demand was sufficiently high, however, sellers might demand immediate payment or a higher percentage of the total price rather than rely on the promise of future compensation. For a discussion of the use of promissory notes in eighteenth-century West Indian commerce, see Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986), 97–126. Though admittedly later in the nineteenth century, examples of planters using future crops as leverage for current buying power can be found in the letter books of Marlborough Plantation, Manchester Parish, Jamaica, esp. "Correspondence of Mrs. B. Boucher regarding Mr. R. Boucher's Coffee Estate, Marlborough Plantation, Manchester, 1827–37" (MS 337), and Hermitage Estate, Saint Elizabeth Parish, Jamaica, Letter book of John Wemyss, Jamaica, 1819–24 (MS 250), both in the collection of the National Library, Kingston, Jamaica. For Ash's comments on significant competition, see Captain Ash to Messrs. Brown & Birch, Jan. 24, 1773, T1/504, National Archives. The unlucky chance Ash most feared was discovery by cruisers from the Spanish Main that regularly patrolled the waters surrounding Spain's island colonies in search of illicit trade (T1/504, 2, *ibid.*).

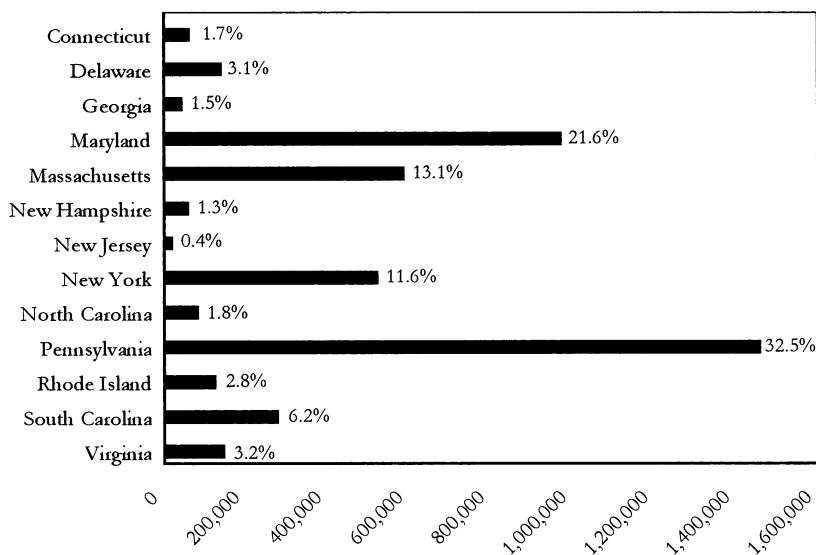


FIGURE I

State-by-state breakdown of pounds of coffee imported into the United States with percentage of total trade, October 1790 to December 1791, compiled from *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, Commerce and Navigation* (Buffalo, N.Y., 1998), I: 203.

holdings of Denmark, Holland, and Sweden offered free ports that broadened the possible trajectories of America's coffee investments further still (Figure III).<sup>5</sup> Because of the number of competing suppliers, coffee turned out to be less a tale of contraband commerce than a story about when and why smuggling would not have been necessary or profitable. The overwhelming success of the American coffee trade in the decades after independence exemplifies these opportunities and merchants' abilities to make the most of them.

Trade in tropical commodities was profoundly affected by the outbreak of the American Revolution. The British West Indies were key players in the economies of most North American port cities before the war, accounting for 20 to 35 percent of all inbound and outbound vessels to

<sup>5</sup> Though Philadelphia brought in some coffee from the East Indies and other sources, most continued to arrive from the Caribbean islands, rising from just under 4.5 million pounds in 1791 to more than 50 million pounds a decade later (*American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, I: 203, 478, 512).

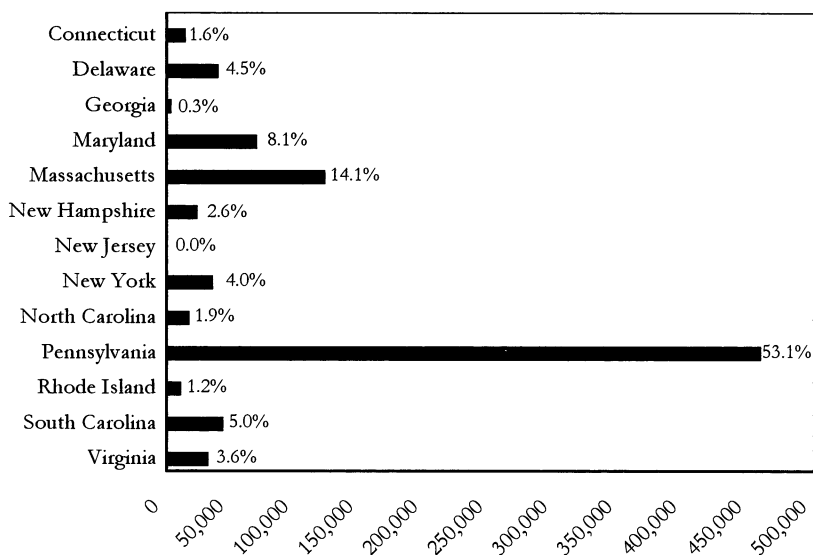


FIGURE II

State-by-state breakdown of pounds of coffee imported into the United States with percentage of total trade, October 1791 to December 1792, compiled from *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 163.

Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston from 1768 to 1772 (Table II). Political theorist Edmund Burke described the relationship between the colonies of North America and the Caribbean as “so interwoven that the attempt to separate them would tear to pieces the contexture of the whole and, if not entirely destroy, would much depreciate the value of all the parts” of Britain’s economic empire. The commercial disruptions caused by war substantiated Burke’s predictions. Though Britain tried to supplant American trade after 1776, its efforts fell woefully short; ships from the British Isles arrived only sporadically in the West Indies and often with cargoes that colonial residents deemed entirely insufficient. Food shortages repeatedly ravaged the Leeward Islands because of their proximity to foreign colonies, the sugar monoculture, and a reliance on external food supplies. On Montserrat whites and slaves alike suffered from malnutrition: “for three successive Days, Hundreds of People came to Town in search of . . . a Morsel of Bread & returned Empty.” And though Governor Hay of Barbados wrote Parliament that supplies were more than adequate, members of the British navy disagreed; General William Howe, in charge of military

TABLE I  
COFFEE IMPORTS IN POUNDS INTO PENNSYLVANIA BY REGION, INCLUDING  
PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL TRADE, 1789-91

	1789-90	1790-91
British West Indies	323,623 (23.2%)	155,222 (10.7%)
French West Indies	826,663 (59.4%)	1,180,180 (81.0%)
Bourbon and Mauritius	26,171 (1.9%)	— —
Spanish West Indies	2,986 (0.2%)	24,914 (1.7%)
Floridas and Louisiana	8,554 (0.6%)	— —
Dutch West Indies and American Colonies	110,750 (8.0%)	82,086 (5.6%)
Cape of Good Hope	— —	13,064 (0.9%)
Danish West Indies	75,947 (5.5%)	— —
Swedish West Indies	17,545 (1.2%)	1,692 (0.1%)
Totals	1,392,239 (100.0%)	1,457,158 (100.0%)

*Source: American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation, I: 83, 179.*

operations in North America during the Revolution, found almost no provisions on the island: "They have not . . . a single cask of salt provisions . . . and are in the greatest want."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Figures for inbound and outbound vessels are based on Customs 16-1—America, 1768-1772, National Archives, reports of the Naval Officer submitted annually to Parliament and permitting a comparison of basic import and export data for all North American ports, the Floridas, and the Bahamas. For a more specific breakdown by port city see Table II. For Edmund Burke's description, see Herbert C. Bell, "British Commercial Policy in the West Indies, 1783-93," *English Historical Review* 31, no. 123 (July 1916): 429.

For Britain's attempt to supplant American trade, see "Lists of Imports in British Bottoms at Kingston, Jamaica, during the War," T64/72, National Archives. The years of greatest privation were 1776 to 1778, yet scarcities continued through-

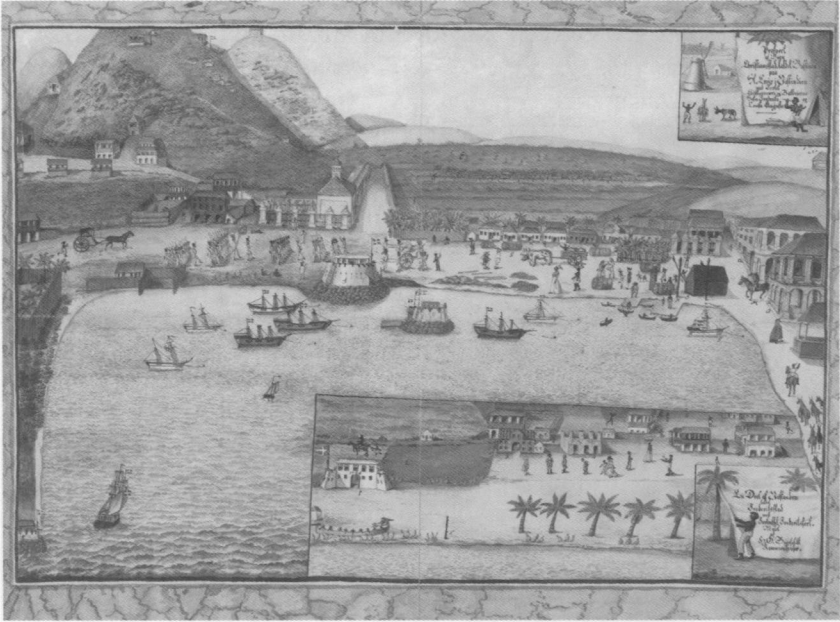


FIGURE III

H. G. Beenfeldt, *The Port of Christiansted*, 1815, watercolor, 30.0 cm x 41.0 cm. Schooners and brigs lie at anchor in the harbor, as do several small cutters (coastal vessels used for local transport). Fort Christiansvaren appears in the center of the image. To the left of the fort are the church and customhouse. To the right is a cargo being prepared for shipment. Courtesy, Danish National Archives, Copenhagen. A color version with additional explication is available on <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/62.3/mcdonald.html>.

out the years that followed. For discussions of the Jamaican House of Assembly's concerns about staple imports, see House of Assembly, Jamaica, *Journals of the Honourable Assembly* (Saint Jago de la Vega, Jamaica, 1811–1829), 7: 313, 314, 467, 577. For the effect on British West Indian production, see “Imports into England from the West Indies, 1774–83,” T38/269, National Archives. From 1775 to 1781, sugar production in the British Caribbean declined by more than 50 percent. Coffee production fell as well, primarily because of the shortfall resulting from the loss of the North American market. Figures based on annual reports by the island Naval Officer to the Jamaica House of Assembly reprinted in the House of Assembly, Jamaica, *Votes of the Honourable Assembly of Jamaica*, 45 vols. (Saint Jago de la Vega, Jamaica, 1795–1835) for each year.

For food shortages on the Leeward Islands, see Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge, 1985), 156. For those suffering from malnutrition on Montserrat, see Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2000), 160–61.



TABLE II  
COMPARISON OF THE CARIBBEAN PROVISION TRADE FOR LEADING COLONIAL  
PORT CITIES, 1768-72 (VALUES GIVEN IN TONS AND PERCENTAGE THAT  
REPRESENTS A CITY'S TOTAL TRADE IN THAT YEAR)

	<i>Boston</i>	<i>New York</i>	<i>Philadelphia</i>	<i>Charleston</i>
1768 inbound	10,811 (33.8%)	6,301 (28.8%)	11,677 (33.3%)	8,238 (26.1%)
1768 outbound	10,095 (29.9%)	6,981 (9.6%)	12,019 (32.1%)	5,808 (18.4%)
1769 inbound	10,495 (25.9%)	6,964 (25.9%)	11,726 (27.6%)	6,123 (21.0%)
1769 outbound	8,995 (24.2%)	5,446 (20.1%)	11,114 (27.1%)	5,807 (18.6%)
1770 inbound	11,088 (28.9%)	8,695 (34.0%)	14,946 (31.5%)	9,563 (34.7%)
1770 outbound	8,248 (22.3%)	7,005 (26.3%)	13,842 (29.5%)	7,374 (24.6%)
1771 inbound	8,586 (21.7%)	8,191 (32.7%)	13,397 (32.1%)	8,208 (26.8%)
1771 outbound	9,171 (23.6%)	7,708 (30.2%)	13,449 (31.2%)	6,131 (19.6%)
1772 inbound	12,649 (29.0%)	8,170 (28.3%)	12,947 (30.6%)	6,121 (20.4%)
1772 outbound	10,073 (23.7%)	8,076 (28.7%)	15,674 (34.2%)	5,749 (18.2%)

*Source:* Summaries of topsails, sloops, and tonnage for the foreign and British West Indies for each year, Customs 16-1—America, 1768-1772, National Archives, Kew, Eng.

When the war ended, many in North America and the British Caribbean hoped business would return to normal, yet two stumbling blocks stood in the way. First, United States-British West Indian trade using American vessels was banned; second, shipments to the United States were to be taxed as foreign exports. The latter issue was more easily resolved. A July 2, 1783, order in council authorized the exportation of coffee, rum, sugar, molasses, cocoa nuts, ginger, and allspice to the United States and the importation of American lumber, flour, bread, grain, vegetables, and livestock under the same tariff regulations as

British colonies; though these commodities could now move to and from the United States, they could still do so only on British vessels.<sup>7</sup>

Several of the island governments protested. The Assembly of Barbados sent petitions to the Society of West India Merchants and Planters in London, decrying the limitations on American commerce as untenable and ruinous. Jamaica's planters warned Governor Archibald Campbell that refusal to allow American shipping would result in not only food shortages but also a lack of lumber to build shipping casks, hindering planters' ability to ship local produce abroad. When Campbell rejected their requests, Jamaican planters also turned to the Society of West India Merchants, which rallied behind their cause, arguing for the reinstatement of prerevolutionary patterns of trade and requesting permission for free intercourse on American vessels. Their appeals to Parliament, however, were as unsuccessful as those from Barbados. Jamaica's House of Assembly tried again in November 1783, petitioning the governor to permit American shipping for at least a transition period of nine months, but Campbell downplayed their fears, replying: "I flatter myself, however, that from the early and repeated applications I have made to the Governors of Nova Scotia and Canada, for an immediate supply of such articles as we most want in this country, and from the encouragement given to British merchants, the articles enumerated in your address will soon be lowered in their price, and the apprehensions of a scarcity happily removed." Particularly galling to the more established British islands of Jamaica and Barbados, Parliament gave limited free port status to the former French islands of Dominica, Grenada, and Saint Vincent in compensation for occupation during the American Revolution. Planters bitterly complained that, rather than bolster the islands' own economies, free port status instead facilitated the clandestine importation of French coffee and sugar, especially from Saint Domingue. "Above 20 times the quantity of produce," they grumbled, "has been exported from these islands since their conquest than ever grew upon them."<sup>8</sup>

As privation in the Caribbean colonies grew, some island governors proved more sympathetic than Campbell. Though official policy

<sup>7</sup> See Alice B. Keith, "Relaxations in the British Restrictions on the American Trade with the British West Indies, 1783-1802," *Journal of Modern History* 20, no. 1 (March 1948): 1-2; Selwyn H. H. Carrington, "The United States and the British West Indian Trade, 1783-1807," in *West Indies Accounts: Essays on the History of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic Economy*, ed. Roderick A. McDonald (Kingston, Jamaica, 1996), 149-51.

<sup>8</sup> For the unsuccessful appeals to Parliament, see "Resolutions of the Committee of West India Planters and Merchants, Feb. 6, 1784," in Vincent Harlow and Frederick Madden, eds., *British Colonial Documents, 1774-1834* (Oxford, Eng., 1953), 256; O'Shaughnessy, *Empire Divided*, 240.

excluded American ships from trading in British West Indian harbors, governors could grant special concessions, or the temporary suspension of certain parts of the Navigation Acts, when doing so was deemed essential to a colony's well-being. As might be expected, the mother country and its colonies often defined essential and well-being differently, yet the practice nonetheless became so widespread that, in 1786, Parliament passed an act of indemnification to annually exempt governors from prosecution for Navigation Act violations.<sup>9</sup>

Governors suspended the Navigation Acts for various reasons. In a few cases, such as that of Barbados, successive governors simply prolonged special concessions indefinitely by extending the original document each time it was due to expire. Other governors responded to genuine need. Though Governor Campbell of Jamaica was unwilling to suspend the ban on American shipping in 1783, a series of earthquakes and hurricanes during the next three years forced his successor, John Dalling, to reconsider this position. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* report on the first of these hurricanes described the devastation of the island's southern port cities in July 1784: "The harbour of Kingston and Port-Royal, on the morning after the hurricane, exhibited the most striking picture of desolation: His Majesty's ships Janus and Iphegenia, the Vernon armed store-ship, Nelly (Dawson) and some small craft, being the only vessels that rode out the storm. Every other in these harbours

---

Here is Jamaica's House of Assembly petition: "We most humbly request that you will be pleased to permit the importation from the United States of America in American bottoms, of the articles enumerated in the proclamation of 2nd July last and also to permit the produce of this Island to be exported in return for the space of nine months" (*Journals*, 8, Nov. 19, 1783). Campbell's response appeared the following day, Nov. 20, 1783. Planters were hardly impressed and formed a committee to study the effects of declining North American trade on local productivity. Though the report does not specify the source for its figures, committee members argued that more than fifteen thousand slaves had died in Jamaica as the result of starvation and insufficient nutrition, resulting from recent hurricanes and "the exclusion of American vessels" (report in Bell, *English Historical Review* 31: 440 n. 67). Richard Sheridan argues that the effect of British trade embargoes on slave subsistence is, if anything, underestimated. Long periods of nonimportation, limited European and British North American supplies, and wave after wave of devastating hurricanes resulted in extraordinary damage, not only in Jamaica but also throughout the British Caribbean (see Richard B. Sheridan, "The Crisis of Slave Subsistence in the British West Indies during and after the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 33, no. 4 [October 1976], esp. 621-22, 631-32). In February 1783 Parliament voted 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, Feb. 12, 1783).

<sup>9</sup> *The Annual Register or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1806* (London, 1808), 48: 81-89. This source includes a comprehensive overview of British reactions to reductions in restrictions on United States trade.

were either sunk or driven ashore, and all of them dismasted. To give perfect account of the loss is a task at present, impossible; many vessels being absolutely sunk, of which no vestige remains, but the heads of masts that appear above water." Even under true duress, however, Dalling lifted only the ban on imports of American food and lumber; the prohibition on British West Indian exports to the United States in American ships remained in effect.<sup>10</sup>

Special concessions artificially reinstated some lines of prerevolutionary commerce between North America and the British Caribbean. They ensured that American food and supplies reach the West Indies, but were less successful in supplying American merchants with the tropical commodities their growing reexport businesses demanded. Richard Henry Lee lauded the lobbying efforts of British and American merchants in London to lift "all the silly, malign commercial restraints upon our trade with their [British] W. India Islands," yet most politicians were more pessimistic. Benjamin Harrison, of Virginia, cautioned that "the determinations of the . . . English respecting our [W. Indies] trade is really alarming and in the end will prove ruinous to us if not counteracted." Thomas Jefferson worried that "commerce is got & getting into vital agonies by our exclusion from the West Indies," and James Madison concluded that "we have lost by the Revolution our trade to the West Indies, the only [branch] which yielded us a favorable balance of trade without having gained new channels to compensate it." When diplomatic negotiations failed to produce desired results, America responded to British restrictions with financial retaliation. Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island all banned British vessels from loading American goods onto their vessels or from unloading American produce from one state into another state under penalty of condemnation. Maryland, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania imposed

<sup>10</sup> For the extension of special concessions, see Carrington, "United States and British West Indian Trade," 158. For the report on the first Jamaican hurricane, see the (Philadelphia) *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 7, 1784. Here is Dalling's lift on the food and lumber ban: "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" ("Extract from a Letter from Jamaica," Aug. 1, 1784; repr., *Penn. Gaz.*, Oct. 6, 1784). Additional accounts of the 1785 hurricane appeared in *Penn. Gaz.*, Oct. 12, Oct. 18, 1785. The 1786 hurricane was described in *Penn. Gaz.*, June 21, 1786. The article includes a letter written from Elizabeth Town, Jamaica, which voices some of the island residents' frustrations before the ban on American imports was again lifted: "Our crops will be but indifferent this year, principally owing to the last hurricane; we are also visited with a great drought—the hand of Providence is heavy upon us. That imp Flowerdew, of the customs, continues the implacable enemy of the United States, and makes sad havock among your vessels."

taxes for the docking of British vessels in their ports, and most New England states added taxes to goods arriving by British carriers. Almost all states applied higher duties to British sugar, coffee, and rum than to their French counterparts. In 1789 Congress standardized the arrangement, voting to impose “an increased duty of tonnage . . . on all foreign ships and other vessels that shall load in the United States” arriving from places where “the United States are not permitted to carry their own produce.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the best efforts of American merchants and West Indian planters, the July 2, 1783, order in council remained officially unchanged for almost a decade. The British Caribbean colonies could legally import and export certain products, coffee among them, yet more than three-quarters of prerevolutionary trade between the two regions had been carried in American vessels. Parliament offered the opportunity, but not the means, and the resulting cost of British shipping increased the price of coffee enough to encourage American buyers to look for alternatives. They had several options. Though Britain had already declared itself uninterested in negotiating with the United States, and France allowed only limited access to its Caribbean colonies in the immediate postwar period, some hoped these restrictions would encourage traders to look beyond traditional commercial comfort zones. “The Dutch and Danes,” John Adams asserted, “will avail themselves of every error that may be committed by France or England. It is good to have a variety of strings to our bow.”<sup>12</sup>

It was reasonable for American merchants to expect a warm welcome in Amsterdam, given the Netherlands’ long-standing commercial and military rivalry with Britain. The colonial officials of Dutch Saint Eustatius had been the first governmental body to recognize the legitimacy of North American claims to independence.<sup>13</sup> Competition in the carrying

<sup>11</sup> Richard Henry Lee to James Madison, Nov. 20, 1784, in Robert A. Rutland et al., eds., *The Papers of James Madison* (Chicago, 1973), 8: 145; Benjamin Harrison to Virginia Delegates, Oct. 3, 1783, *ibid.*, 7: 366; Thomas Jefferson to Madison, May 8, 1784, in Paul H. Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington, D.C., 1994), 21: 600; Madison to Lee, July 7, 1785, in James Madison Papers, Series 1: General Correspondence, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For higher duties applied to British goods, see Vernon G. Setser, *The Commercial Reciprocity Policy of the United States, 1774–1829* (Philadelphia, 1937), 62–65; Carrington, “United States and British West Indian Trade,” 150–52. For Congress’s standardization, see *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 6.

<sup>12</sup> The stipulations of July 2, 1783, were reinforced on Sept. 5 and Dec. 26, 1783 (see Lowell Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* [New York, 1928], 180). John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 16, 1783, in Francis Wharton, ed., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1889), 6: 552.

<sup>13</sup> Not only was Saint Eustatius the first to acknowledge American autonomy, some—like Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore—believed that the colony actively

trade, however, proved an intransigent barrier in United States–Dutch trade relations in the Caribbean. Holland agreed to allow American trade with its West Indian colonies of Saint Eustatius, Curaçao, and Saint Martin, as well as the Dutch “colonies upon the continent, Surinam, Berbice, Demarara, and Essequibo,” which, though “a greater distance from us . . . can not subsist without our [American] horses, lumber, and provisions.” Yet the Dutch limited what Americans could bring to the colonies and what they could take in return, especially coffee and sugar. The United States could import Caribbean coffee duty-free, but had to pay import taxes on East Indian coffees, and ship all tropical commodities, except molasses, in Dutch vessels. Some speculated that, though only molasses could be directly shipped in American vessels, “quantities of sugar, coffee, and other produce are always smuggled, as they say.”<sup>14</sup> Illegal trading may have supplied some coffee, but American merchants continued their search for a reliable, legal source.

---

aided the American cause by forwarding information about British military strategy. “The Rebels receive all their information” from the Caribbean, he cautioned, “it is first sent to the British West India Islands and from thence to St. Eustatia” (Lord Dunmore to Lord George Germain, July 31, 1776, in William Bell Clark and William James Morgan, eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* [Washington, D.C., 1970], 5: 1313–14. See also O’Shaughnessey, *Empire Divided*, 214). The province of Holland voted to support the United States as a sovereign nation in March 1782; other Dutch provinces soon followed suit.

<sup>14</sup> For trade with West Indian colonies, see John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 30, 1783, in *RDC*, 6: 618. For Dutch limitations, see “Plan of a Treaty with Holland,” Sept. 4, 1778, *ibid.*, 2: 789–98; J. Adams to Livingston, July 23, July 31, 1783, *ibid.*, 6: 591–95, 621–24. The initial draft treaty between the United States and Holland in 1778 did not include commodity restrictions on imports and exports; these restrictions were added at Holland’s insistence. Holland maintained a monopoly on the last refining stages for all the sugar cultivated on Dutch Caribbean islands and considered the increasing number of sugar refineries in North America—including several in Philadelphia—a threat to Dutch control of the industry. From 1770 to 1785, Philadelphia opened two sugar refineries; added to the two operating before the American Revolution, these represented a significant increase in the city’s sugar manufacturing capabilities. The number of sugar refineries is compared in Constables Returns for the City of Philadelphia, 1775, Philadelphia City Archives, and Edmund Hogan, *The Prospect of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1795). One of Philadelphia’s earliest published business directories, *Prospect of Philadelphia* is available at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Adams described the potential for trade between the United States and Dutch Atlantic colonies in this way: “the produce of the colonies must be brought home in Dutch ships, as heretofore, molasses excepted” (Adams to Livingston, July 30, 1783, in *RDC*, 6: 618–19). Dutch Saint Eustatius continued to play an important role in American trade in the Caribbean region as an intermediate port for American produce to the British islands (see Gordon Bjork, “The Weaning of the American Economy: Independence, Market Changes, and Economic Development,” *Journal of Economic History* 24, no. 4 (December 1964): 553.

Benjamin Franklin, acting in 1782 as a member of a European-based commission appointed by Congress to reopen commercial and diplomatic relations, approached the Portuguese ambassador. He inquired about potential American trade with Brazilian coffee plantations, but was told that Portugal “admitted no nation to the Brazills.” Franklin tried a different tack, asking if the United States might use Portugal’s “Western Islands,” such as Madeira or the Canaries, as a “depot” for importing Brazilian “sugars, coffee, cotton, and cocoa.” The Portuguese ambassador responded enthusiastically, suggesting that, if approved by his government, “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.” Unfortunately, the Portuguese court rejected the proposal.<sup>15</sup>

The commission also appealed to Spain. Another member of the commission, John Adams, wrote the Count de Sanafee, Spain’s Paris-based minister, in August 1783 to ask “whether it might not be possible to persuade his court that it would be good policy for them to allow . . . the United States of America a free port in some of their islands at least, if not upon the continent of South America?” Sanafee’s response was vague; rather than address the legal and diplomatic aspects of commercial ties between the United States and Spain, he insinuated that “his court would be afraid of the measure” as “free ports were nests of smugglers” and “afforded many facilities of illicit trade (*le commerce interlope*).” Adams countered with an alternative similar to the one Franklin had offered Portugal. If American ships could not directly import Spanish colonial coffee, 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 simply replied that “he could not pretend to give any opinion upon any of these points, but that we must negotiate them at Madrid.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> John Adams, John Jay, and Benjamin Franklin made up the first three members of the European Commission. In 1784 Thomas Jefferson replaced Jay (see Merrill D. Peterson, “Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783–1793,” *WMQ* 22, no. 4 [October 1965]: 584–610). For use of Portugal’s western islands, see John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 12, 1783, in *RDC*, 6: 538. For the Portuguese court rejection, see Thomas Jefferson Papers, Series 1, General Correspondence, 1651–1827, “United States Treaties, 1786, Amity and Commerce Treaty between Portugal and the United States,” Library of Congress.

<sup>16</sup> John Adams to Robert Livingston, Aug. 10, 1783, in *RDC*, 6: 642. Adams preferred direct trade in American ships, though he suggested importing Spanish colonial produce through third-party intermediaries as an alternative: “I asked him again 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

Having exhausted the most likely suspects, the United States Commissioners' quest for tropical trading partners led them to some very strange bedfellows indeed. In 1784 the *Pennsylvania Gazette* hinted that a commercial treaty between the United States and Russia might be in the offing. Though Russia did not possess a West Indian colony at the time, according to "letters from Holland . . . a negotiation is on foot between the Empress of Russia and their High Mightinesses the States-General" for the "ceding to the former (for an equivalent) an island in the West-Indies (believed to be Saint Martin's)." Russia, the article suggested, had "long wished for a settlement in the Mediterranean and West-Indies" to "extend that commerce which they have lately laid plans for carrying on to every part of the globe."<sup>17</sup>

Saint Martin was the smallest shared colony in the Caribbean. Holland controlled sixteen square miles and the port city of Philipsburg in the south; France, the remaining twenty-one square miles to the north. Adams included the tiny divided colony in the commission's list of possible West Indian partners in 1783, but noted, "Saint Martin is divided between the French . . . and the Dutch," and with few established towns and less successful agriculture, "it does not flourish." Even if Russia had been successful, Saint Martin could not have produced the coffee American traders desired; at best it may have been a clearing station, similar to Dutch Saint Eustatius or Danish Saint Croix, for redistributing the riches of the region beyond the legal limitations of metropolitan policies.<sup>18</sup> The *Pennsylvania Gazette* article

---

Dutch colonies." Sanafee, Spain's ambassador, only reiterated his inability to state an opinion. Adams encouraged Congress to instruct the United States minister in Madrid to "propose all these things and endeavor to obtain them."

<sup>17</sup> For information about Russian reactions to the American Revolution, see David M. Griffiths, "American Commercial Diplomacy in Russia, 1781 to 1783," *WMQ* 27, no. 3 (July 1970): 379-410. For Russia's wish for a settlement, see *Penn. Gaz.*, Aug. 4, 1784.

<sup>18</sup> For information on Saint Martin, see Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville, Fla., 1996), 211-15. John Adams to Robert Livingston, July 30, 1783, in *RDC*, 6: 618.

Though Pennsylvania newspapers were optimistic, it is difficult to predict how a Russian Caribbean colony may have benefited American trade. Several United States congressmen noted Russia's predisposition toward British interests. They questioned Russian impartiality and speculated that Russia's efforts to reduce animosity between the Dutch and British may have delayed Holland's recognition of United States sovereignty (Joseph Jones to James Hunter, Mar. 26, 1782, in *LDC*, 18: 420-21). Russia had offered to act as a mediator between the North American colonies and Great Britain in 1781, but was turned down by the British Crown (Rhode Island Delegates to William Greene, July 24, 1781, *ibid.*, 17: 443; John Mathews to Nathanael Greene, Aug. 14, 1781, *ibid.*, 17: 518-20). "It is observable by the last arrivals that the Dutch were on the point of acknowledging our



unfortunately recorded only Russia's West Indian ambitions, and not Holland's response. In January 1785 larger events—Holland's alignment with Prussia to declare war on Austria and Russia—would intercede before any possible sale could be completed.

American coffee traders, especially those in Philadelphia, had better success in the Danish Caribbean colony of Saint Croix (Figure IV).<sup>19</sup> Almost all Philadelphia-bound coffee shifted to the Saint Croix port of Christiansted in 1781 and 1782, and nearly all other commodities imported into Philadelphia followed suit. The volume and variety clearing this one port obviously meant these goods were Danish reexports, since Saint Croix did not produce the western and southern European wares packed beside the sugar, molasses, coffee, and rum headed to Philadelphia.<sup>20</sup>

---

Independance. Six of the provinces have Instructed their Deputies to that end . . . The People in every Quarter cry out aloud to their Rulers to secure for them in Time the Friendship and a share of the Commerce of America, and their Importunity seems to be too great to be resisted. It is, therefore, an Article of my political Creed that we shall soon enter into an alliance with the Dutch. The new British ministry are exerting every nerve to draw that nation into a separate Peace, and the Russian Ambassador has interposed his mediation with a Zeal which is not very pleasing" (James Duane to George Clinton, July 1, 1782, *ibid.*, 18: 617. 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, Netherlands, 2000]).

<sup>19</sup> In 1782, 126 of 289 vessels recorded cleared into Philadelphia, or just over 40 percent, came from Christiansted, Saint Croix. The remainder were divided between 28 ports; the next highest concentrations were from Hamburg (approximately 17 percent), Havana, and New Jersey (both approximately 7 percent). Figures from 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 Archives, Harrisburg, Pa.).

<sup>20</sup> The Danish West India and Guinea Company purchased Saint Croix from France in 1733. To secure the sale, company executives greatly exaggerated the colony's development: "The island, when surveyed would be found to contain not fewer than 800 large plantations besides many smaller ones" and "would yield cacao, indigo, and coffee, as well as sugar and cotton . . . of such a high quality that the plantations would be worth from 500 to 1,000 rdl. from the beginning." Instead, the first arrivals found a series of abandoned buildings and slave quarters, and an island that was still largely uninhabited (Waldemar Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies Under Company Rule, 1671–1754 [With a Supplementary Chapter, 1755–1917]* [New York, 1917], 202–5, quotation, 204).

It took time for Saint Croix to find its economic niche. Some farming took place, but rather than the diverse agricultural base lauded by company directors, small plantations only grew modest amounts of sugar and tobacco. To ensure as wide a market as possible, the Danish West India Company opted to open the island's ports to privately owned vessels regardless of nationality. The tactic worked and Saint Croix enjoyed a booming free trade economy until 1747, when rising island profits enticed company executives to try to regain a shipping monopoly.

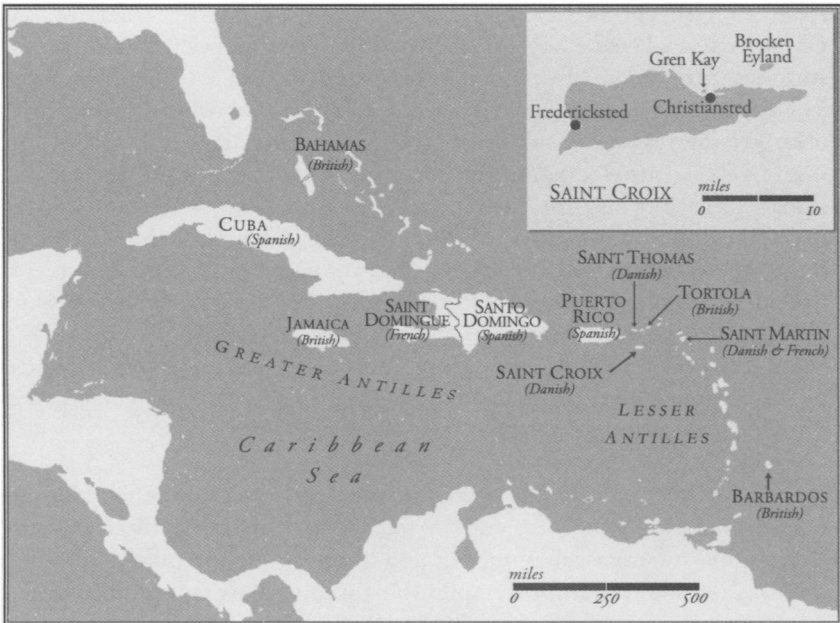


FIGURE IV

At approximately eighty square miles (or twenty-six miles long and seven miles wide), Saint Croix is the largest of the West Indian colonies settled by Denmark. Christiansted is its largest port and served briefly as the capital of the Danish West Indies in the eighteenth century. Saint Croix is located thirty-five miles south of Saint Thomas and Saint John, and approximately eighty miles southeast of Puerto Rico. Its principal industries were sugar and rum, though the island served as a strategic reexport port for a much wider range of commodities. Drawn by Rebecca L. Wrenn.

---

Through several petitions and ultimately a delegation to Copenhagen, the island's planters secured their right to trade privately with the British colonies of North America, though "all other trade with foreign lands must be carried on through Copenhagen alone" (*ibid.*, 233). In 1754 Saint Croix passed from private to royal hands and the Danish crown abolished the last monopolistic trade policies. Only once, in 1781, did the king attempt to regain some control over shipping privileges, but all such efforts ended in 1782 (*ibid.*, 231–33).

American interests in Saint Croix were admittedly fleeting, yet Christiansted played a key role for the brief time between British prewar supplies and French free ports of the mid-1780s. The Danish crown briefly attempted to assert a royal monopoly on the colony's shipping in 1781, yet the reassertion of Saint Croix's neutral status in 1782 and 1783 made it the ideal clearinghouse, not only for coffee bound for Philadelphia but also for almost everything else as well. Table III compares the numbers of ships that sailed from Christiansted with those from other ports and demonstrates that, though almost three-quarters of the ships carrying coffee to Philadelphia in 1781 arrived from Saint Domingue, more than 60 percent switched to Christiansted in 1782. Most ships continued to come from Saint Croix during the first quarter of 1783, though by June Cap-Français and Port-au-Prince reemerged as principal coffee shippers.<sup>21</sup>

France further enticed American business to its colonies in 1784 and 1785 by opening five West Indian free ports, including three in Saint Domingue, to American shipping and abolishing bans on the importation of flour and other food staples. Historians have credited these relaxations for the extraordinary rise in American exports to the French Caribbean by the mid-1780s, but just as important for a burgeoning United States tropical produce reexport business, American traders turned increasingly to French colonies for their West Indian imports as well. For those dealing in coffee, the decision is easy to understand. French coffee already had a sound reputation for quality and taste, with many consumers preferring it to British coffee even before the war. Moreover, in the 1780s and early 1790s, the French island of Saint Domingue ranked as the world's leading coffee producer, resulting in a price economy of scale unrivaled by others.<sup>22</sup> Had the application of

<sup>21</sup> The variety of ports shipping coffee to Philadelphia by the end of 1783 is remarkable; most only appear once in the lists and likely represent an effort to expend a small coffee surplus rather than any kind of established coffee trade. A handful appear regularly, though the quantities carried amount to much less than their Danish or French West Indian counterparts. Coffee shipments in 1783 arrived from foreign and domestic trading partners. Foreign trading partners included: Amsterdam, Antigua, Barbados, Bermuda, Demerara, Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Havana, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Marseilles, Martinique, Saint Croix, Saint Domingue, Saint Kitts, Saint Lucia, Saint Mark, Saint Pierre, Saint Thomas, Suriname, and Tobago. Other states traded with included: Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Virginia (Record Group 4, Pennsylvania State Archives).

<sup>22</sup> For France's further enticement of American business, see Setser, *Commercial Reciprocity Policy*, 16–19, 39–40, 88–91. For a discussion about increasing American exports to the French Caribbean after American independence, see John H.

TABLE III  
NUMBERS OF SHIPS INTO PHILADELPHIA FROM PRINCIPAL PORTS, 1781-83

	1781	1782	1783
<i>Danish ports</i>			
Christiansted, Saint Croix	15	126	66
Saint Thomas	10	5	15
<i>French ports</i>			
Cap-Français, Saint Domingue	22	1	13
L'Orient, Saint Barthélemy	6	6	—
Port-au-Prince, Saint Domingue	10	4	12
<i>British ports</i>			
London, England	—	—	12
<i>Spanish ports</i>			
Cadiz, Spain	11	1	—
Havana, Cuba	44	20	13
<i>Portuguese ports</i>			
Lisbon, Portugal	—	—	10
<i>American ports</i>			
Bordentown, N.J.	—	—	22
Boston	6	2	15
Hamburg, Pa.	—	47	1
New Castle, Del.	14	5	7
Lewistown, Maine	1	1	12
New Jersey	4	20	12
New York	—	—	50
Rhode Island	3	1	10
Wilmington, Del.	16	18	11
<i>All other ports (overall)</i>	29	32	244
Total number of inward clearing vessels	191	289	525

*Notes:* The year 1783 includes only the first three quarters. Only ports with ten or more vessels in a given year are specified by name. For a complete listing of all ports engaged in Philadelphia's coffee trade, see footnote 21.

*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 Archives, Harrisburg, Pa.

Britain's tariff on foreign produce not artificially inflated the price of French coffee to almost double that of British manufacture, more French coffee would likely have made its way to American markets before 1776. In February 1793 the French Council opened all its West Indian ports to American vessels, fulfilling a decade-long objective in American foreign policy. For the next ten years, with two important exceptions, the French Antilles supplied from half to four-fifths of all coffee brought into the United States.<sup>23</sup> Even the two aberrations,

---

Coatsworth, "American Trade with European Colonies in the Caribbean and South America, 1790–1812," *WMQ* 24, no. 2 (April 1967): 243–46; Douglass C. North, "The United States Balance of Payments, 1790–1860," in *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1960); Setser, *Commercial Reciprocity Policy*. For French coffee's sound reputation, see, as example, Benjamin Smith Barton Papers, Series 2, Subject Files, 1789–1815, folder labeled "Botany: Potatoes, Coffee, Corn, etc.," in the collection of the American Philosophical Society. In these notes Barton compares the taste of East Indian coffee with British and French West Indian coffees: "coffee from the port of Mocha or Java is most preferred, and then after that French. Coffee from the British islands is fit only for negroes and should be avoided if at all possible as it [is] too bitter." For studies of French Caribbean coffee production capacity just before the revolution in Saint Domingue, see Patrick Bryan, "Emigrés: Conflict and Reconciliation. The French Emigrés in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica," *Jamaica Journal* 7 (1973): 13–19; David Geggus, "Jamaica and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt, 1791–1793," *Americas: A Quarterly Review of Inter-American Cultural History* 38, no. 2 (October 1981): 219–34; Michel Rolph-Trouillot, "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue," *Review, A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Centre* 5, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 331–88; Rolph-Trouillot, "Coffee Planters and Coffee Slaves in the Antilles: The Impact of a Secondary Crop," in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan (Charlottesville, Va., 1993), 124–37; Geggus, "International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution" (Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture, University of the West Indies, Mona, April 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Parliament passed the first British tax on foreign coffee in 1732 as "An Act for Encouraging the Growth of Coffee in his Majesty's Plantations in America," in *Acts 1.2.3.4.5.6.7.8 of George the Second* (London, 1732). This act was subsequently upheld each time it came up for consideration. The act's principal feature was a preferential tariff, reducing import duties on British West Indian coffee from 24 d. to 18 d. per pound, retaining the higher rate of 24 d. for foreign and East Indian imports. The different tax rates for British West Indian coffee compared with those of British East Indian and all foreign coffees not only undermined competition by the French and the Dutch but also limited the viability of England's own experiments in the Indian Ocean. For the French Antilles supply, see "Decree of the National Convention, of 19th February, 1793, 2nd year of the French Republic, relative to produce exported and imported in American Vessels, to the Colonies, or to France," in *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 1: 147. On Feb. 17, 1793, the French National Convention opened their West Indian and East Indian possessions, declaring: "That all the ports of the French colonies be open to vessels of the United States . . . That all produce exported or imported in American vessels, on going out or entering in the colonies, or in France, pay the same duties as that borne by French vessels" and "that the law of the 20th of August, 1790, be suspended; and that vessels laden with merchandise of the East Indies, may be at liberty to land."

1798–99 and 1803, furnish good examples of how rapidly American merchants shifted between coffee suppliers as well as how quickly they could return to preexisting patterns of trade once crisis was averted.

The first drop in French coffee exports to America occurred during the Quasi War with France. In 1798 and 1799, the United States temporarily closed all trade to France and its colonies in retaliation for increasing seizures of American ships on charges of privateering. France's increased aggression came in reaction to American efforts to reestablish commercial relations with Britain. Under a draft treaty negotiated by John Jay, Britain agreed to relinquish its posts in the American Northwest by July 1, 1796, but retained rights to trade furs in the region. The British offered compensation for ships seized in the West Indies as a result of their orders in council, though any financial gains were offset by their requirement that the United States recompense British creditors for pre-revolutionary debts that remained unpaid. Most troubling, however, the agreement required the United States to forego its practice of neutral shipping during the current war between France and England, and for two years after the war's conclusion. Moreover, it opened British West Indian trade to American ships under seventy tons, yet prohibited these ships from exporting coffee, sugar, cocoa, or cotton to the rest of the world, or even to America itself. A treaty that asked so much of the United States and gave so little reinvigorated widespread hostility among merchants already predisposed against Britain. Congress struck the provision on West Indies imports to America, though they approved the treaty limits restricting American imports of Caribbean-produced coffee, sugar, molasses, cocoa, and cotton to American consumption and prohibiting reshipment of West Indies produce in American ships "either from his Majesty's islands, or from the United States to any part of the world except for the United States."<sup>24</sup> This last provision severely compromised the contributions the British islands could make to America's reexport trade in tropical goods.

<sup>24</sup> The final treaty language granted American merchants the right to "purchase, load and carry away in their said vessels to the United States from the said islands and ports [of the British West Indies] all such articles being of the growth, manufacture, or produce of the said islands." Moreover, Americans paid "only the same duties and charges on exportation, to which British vessels and their cargoes" were subject (*Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, Between His Britannic Majesty and the United States of America, by their President, Ratified June 24, 1795* [Philadelphia, 1795], 31–36, quotation, 32). The treaty stipulated that the United States and Britain revisit the West Indian issue in two years. The same limitations also applied to British East Indian trade with America, including the restriction of American imports of coffee to domestic consumption.

Through a circular letter to Congress, American importers bitterly expressed their dissatisfaction. "Courts of *France & Great Britain particularly the latter*, hath discovered the utmost Jealousy of the commercial Prosperity of America," the importers wrote. "They have it in contemplation not only to cramp & restrain our commerce, by prohibiting an intimate & extensive intercourse between America and their West India possessions, but to deprive us as much as possible of the carrying trade by prohibiting any American Vessel from importing into G. Britain any commodities, but those of the State to which it belongs."<sup>25</sup> In this sense the Jay Treaty, intended to encourage American commerce with the British Caribbean, had the opposite effect. Imports of British colonial coffee for United States consumers increased slightly after 1796, yet traders continued to base their overseas ventures on the coffee of other nations.

The Jay Treaty posed additional problems beyond the constriction of American trade routes. Once news of the Anglo-American alliance reached Paris, France rejected claims of United States neutrality, and began seizing American ships bound for England. France had certainly accused the United States of privateering before 1798. In the last quarter of 1796, for example, customs agents indicted forty-four American ships for illegal trading in Saint Domingue alone, but in 1797 more than three hundred American ships suffered this fate, with Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe taking the most aggressive stances. Rarely were ships' crews arrested or endangered; more often, port authorities condemned ships accused of illegal activity or forced them to sell their cargo before being permitted to leave port.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "Committee of Congress Report, Sept. 25, 1783," in *LDC*, 20: 701. See also Timothy Pitkin, *A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States of America* (1817; repr., New York, 1967), 178–79.

<sup>26</sup> For American ships illegally trading, see "Abstract of American Vessels Captured by Privateers and Gunboats belonging to the Citizens of the French Republic and carried into the French Ports of Saint Domingo," in *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 2: 55–61. Only cargoes from half of the captured vessels were included in the report and, of these, only two carried coffee. In most cases American ships were stopped because French islanders needed wheat, wood, pork, and other staples from North America, rather than for a perceived infraction in Caribbean exports back to America. French ports were open to American vessels, but exports were supposed to move only between American and French or French colonial ports; any deviation or attempt either to sell French produce outside either nation, or to bring foreign produce into the French empire (for example, combining British and French coffee) was considered privateering. The same held for United States–British commerce when such lines were temporarily reopened. Philadelphia suffered the most from French incursions because of the city's leading position in the Caribbean trade. Of the forty-four vessels French authorities accused of privateering in 1796, more than one-third belonged to Philadelphia traders. In addition

During these two years of strained French relations, American merchants used a variety of strategies to fill the commercial gap. They did not return to former British Caribbean suppliers; despite British legislative efforts, coffee exports from the British West Indies actually decreased by 43.4 percent from 1797 to 1798. Imports of British East Indian coffee rose slightly, but still amounted to less than 1 percent of total imports. Philadelphia took some advantage of the opportunity Spain offered from 1798 to 1799, increasing coffee imports from Havana and other Spanish Caribbean ports by almost 4 million pounds during these two years. Similarly, the Danish and Swedish West Indies also saw modest growth in coffee exports to the United States, though their positions relative to the American coffee trade overall remained low.<sup>27</sup>

Most American coffee merchants turned instead to the Dutch West and East Indies. Whether the coffee coming from the Dutch West Indies in 1798 had originated somewhere else is difficult to determine. The Dutch produced some coffee, yet not in quantities sufficient to account for the leap from 3.9 million pounds in 1797 to more than 10 million pounds the following year. It is possible that Dutch merchants reshipped Saint Domingue coffee to the United States during the Quasi War. Though the United States cut off trade relations with the French colonies, the Dutch did not, and some Philadelphia buyers complained that Dutch competition drove up the price of French West Indian coffee. "There are other things that attend this [coffee] trade, that should not pass unnoticed: The Danes, or rather Dutch, under Danish colours, are powerful and jealous competitors for a share in this commerce: Their flags being also neutral, they swarm here [Saint Domingue] from St. Thomas's & c.—and . . . endeavor to undersell us. The usual custom among the sellers of this article, when they arrive in town, is, at first to go into all the American stores and learn the highest price they will give, and then go and sell to a Dane for six deniers more." Coffee shipped from the East Indies was more likely of Dutch manufacture. From just under 2.5 million pounds in 1796–97, Dutch East Indies exports to the

---

to Philadelphia's fourteen ships, vessels brought into Saint Domingue came from: Baltimore (7), New York (6), Boston (5), Charleston (4), New London (2), Saint Thomas (1), Cape Anne (1), Georgetown (1), New Bedford (1), Providence (1), and Staten Island (1). The following year numbers rose even higher. A "Schedule of Names of American Vessels captured by the French and of the Circumstances Attending them Extracted from the Philadelphia Gazette and the Gazette of the United States" listed 316 captured American vessels, 47 from Philadelphia (*ibid.*).

<sup>27</sup> Coatsworth, *WMQ* 24: 247. The Swedish West Indies accounted for 13,783 pounds of coffee in 1797 and 175,213 pounds in 1798; the Danish West Indies supplied 109,027 and 2,033,108 pounds, respectively, during these two years.



United States rose to 6.4 million pounds in 1798 and almost 12 million pounds by 1800 (Table IV).<sup>28</sup>

Though Dutch East Indian coffee levels remained high after 1800, those in the West Indies dropped as soon as the United States reestablished trade relations with the French. Again, within a year, merchants adjusted their commercial links and imports from the Dutch Caribbean dwindled to their lowest point in 1802, whereas imports from the French West Indies leapt from 5 million to 26 million pounds and from there to almost 38 million pounds in 1800–1801. After two years of the United States embargo, France agreed to end hostilities and French colonial coffee imports climbed from 16 to 55 percent of total American coffee imports.

The only other significant drop in French Caribbean coffee imports occurred in 1803, during the waning years of the revolution in Saint Domingue. When that conflict erupted, the island dominated world production of sugar and coffee and was a major supplier of indigo and cotton. Historians have focused on the revolution's effect on the sugar industry, in large part because that was where most destruction occurred, yet Saint Domingue's share of the global coffee market was proportionately twice that of its share in total sugar production, and coffee growing sectors of the island sustained less damage and recovered more quickly. Did the United States import Haiti's coffee and, if so, how did it balance commercial and diplomatic interests? Officially, the United States refused to recognize the legitimacy of an independent Haiti until 1862, though Presidents Washington, Adams, and Jefferson all intermittently continued to permit travel to Haiti. Ostensibly, most ships traveled under the guise of assisting Saint Domingue's colonists during the slave revolution, but they rarely returned empty-handed. More than once during the British occupation of Saint Domingue, the need for supplies outweighed Britain's stance against United States–French colonial trade. British military leaders repeatedly opened the island's ports themselves, permitting payment for American goods in locally produced sugar, coffee, rum, and cotton.<sup>29</sup> Yet Haiti never

<sup>28</sup> For complaints of Philadelphia buyers, see *Penn. Gaz.*, Apr. 1, 1795. For Dutch East Indies export figures, see *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 350, 471.

<sup>29</sup> For Saint Domingue's share of the global coffee market, see Geggus, "International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution," 8, 11. See also Rayford W. Logan, *The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti, 1776–1891* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1941); Timothy Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy towards the Haitian Revolution," *Diplomatic History* 3 (1979): 321–36; Matthewson, "Jefferson and Haiti," *Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 2 (May 1995): 209–48. In "Jefferson and Haiti," Matthewson suggests that Jefferson used an embargo against Haiti as a diplomatic ploy to encourage Bonaparte to favorably review Jefferson's interest in

TABLE IV  
UNITED STATES COFFEE IMPORTS IN POUNDS BY CARIBBEAN REGION, 1789-1806

	<i>Swedish</i> <i>West Indies</i>	<i>Danish</i> <i>West Indies</i>	<i>Dutch</i> <i>West Indies</i>	<i>British</i> <i>West Indies</i>	<i>French</i> <i>West Indies</i>	<i>Spanish</i> <i>West Indies</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
1794-95	329,342	428,596	2,586,783	5,001,930	43,464,561	492,817	1,656,947	53,960,976
1795-96	314,140	961,706	7,751,433	4,480,463	44,688,310	681,986	2,262,457	61,160,495
1796-97	392,551	943,880	3,783,313	1,695,665	37,164,707	867,768	4,643,618	49,491,502
1797-98	13,782	109,027	3,863,472	1,372,603	42,290,705	1,109,558	8,963,478	57,722,625
1798-99	175,213	2,033,108	10,345,612	778,571	4,918,422	3,919,287	7,817,357	29,987,570
1799-1800	101,604	605,304	3,862,539	805,041	26,055,184	2,918,108	13,042,165	47,389,945
1800-1801	97,254	1,631,963	1,993,444	1,188,795	37,975,598	680,103	13,816,747	57,383,904
1801-2	53,496	200,594	1,388,881	1,764,391	25,870,126	591,445	11,017,928	40,886,861
1802-3	327,384	417,034	723,501	1,899,734	8,658,088	452,349	4,350,403	16,828,493
1803-4	698,469	2,116,340	7,979,593	1,997,162	19,605,955	4,239,074	12,001,789	48,638,382
1804-5	273,442	2,390,745	992,853	289,206	27,453,284	5,411,664	18,048,130	54,859,324
1805-6	66,833	3,585,073	2,218,818	1,440,658	29,679,201	5,102,115	13,878,954	55,971,652

Source: *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, I: 350, 367, 394, 402, 434, 441, 464, 471, 478, 514, 521, 566, 576, 580, 629, 635, 676, 682, 706, 712, 757, 760.

appears in American customs papers as a port with which American merchants conducted business; it is possible that, before 1804, customs officials collapsed exports brought back from the island with those from the rest of the French Caribbean, since regional sectors were rarely divided by island (Figure V).

The Dutch once again temporarily replaced French Caribbean coffee exports during the 1803 disruption. Dutch West Indian shipments to the United States rose by 7.2 million pounds, whereas those of their Indian Ocean colonies increased by almost 7 million pounds. The balance, just over 7 million pounds, came from an unlikely source—the French East Indian colonies of Bourbon (present-day Réunion) and Mauritius. This coffee was clearly reexported from French, British, and Dutch East Indian colonies, as 1803 was the only year that any appreciable amount of coffee came through these two locations. By 1804 patterns again reverted and, for the following two years, the French West Indies produced almost half of all American coffee imports and reexports single-handedly.

The last shift during the period under consideration came in 1806 when the Spanish Caribbean and Latin America finally supplanted the French Atlantic colonies, with much longer repercussions, first as the United States' and ultimately as the world's dominant coffee supplier. Commercial and diplomatic relations between the Spanish colonies and the United States also had a complicated history. During the closing years of the American Revolution, Philadelphia established a thriving commerce with Spanish possessions, especially Havana; forty-four vessels arrived from that city to Philadelphia in 1781, representing the single largest concentration of Spanish shipping into any North American port city, with twenty additional voyages the following year.<sup>30</sup> But in 1784

---

Louisiana and the surrounding Floridas (246–48). For an alternative interpretation, see Michael Zuckerman, "The Power of Blackness: Thomas Jefferson and the Revolution in Saint Domingue," in *Almost Chosen People: Oblique Biographies in the American Grain* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 175–218. Zuckerman argues Jefferson's support to France and French colonists during the revolution in Saint Domingue reflects his personal racist ideology and vested economic interest in restoring slavery to the island. For the opening of the island's ports, see *Penn. Gaz.*, June 25, 1794 (Charleston, May 24): "Whereas, it is become highly expedient, in order to procure a more abundant, supply of every thing necessary for the comfort and convenience of the inhabitants of such parts of St. Domingo, as are or may be under the British government, as well as his majesty's forces serving there, that vessels importing provisions and lumber into the said island from the United States of North America, should be permitted to take and carry away, in payment for the same, sugar, rum, coffee, cotton and produce of every description."

<sup>30</sup> The numbers of ships arriving from Havana in the early 1780s are: forty-four (1781), twenty (1782), but drop to just a handful thereafter; there are none, for

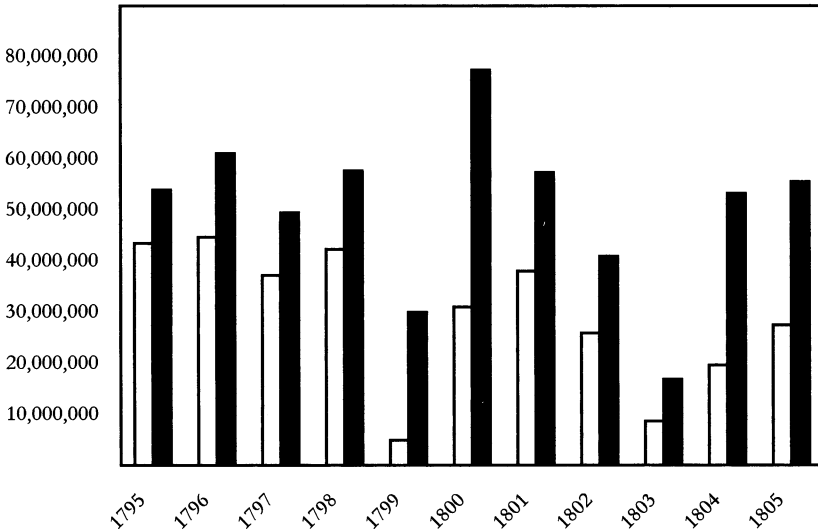


FIGURE V

Comparison of pounds of coffee imported from the French colonies into the United States and total pounds of coffee imported into the United States, 1795–1805, compiled from *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 350, 367, 394, 402, 434, 441, 464, 471, 478, 514, 521, 560, 566, 576, 580, 629, 635, 676, 682, 706, 712.

Spain banned all trade to Cuba and the island's governor issued orders for American boats to leave Havana immediately. When Spain reopened Havana to United States shipping in 1785, American hopes were high. Governor Count Galvez was considered a "confirmed friend of the United States" who "proceeded to shew every favor to the Americans there, by counteracting the very rigorous conduct of the former Governor of Cuba towards our countrymen trading to that island." Galvez's appointment in Cuba, however, was brief. He was transferred to Mexico and his successor proved far less receptive to American interests.

Subsequent restrictions against American shipping precluded any possibility of reviving a viable American coffee trade until, along with Britain, Spain experimented by reducing limitations in 1792 in an effort to attract American business away from the French. When open trade

---

instance, in 1783 (Record Group 4, Pennsylvania State Archives). For American high hopes, see *Penn. Gaz.*, May 25, 1785.

policies did not produce immediate results, however, Spain lost no time in again closing Havana's harbors. In March 1792 the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reprinted an excerpt written by an American merchant in Cuba, shocked at the immediacy of Spain's reversal in trade policies. "Yesterday a most extraordinary order was issued by the Governor relative to all foreign vessels in port; the most of them are ordered away in six days, and the remainder in eight, so that no vessel can stay longer than that time in harbour. This your own judgment will tell you is the same as a prohibition to all strange vessels; and there is another circumstance that makes the order doubly hard, which is, that all foreigners who arrive must value themselves on a Spaniard, and all their business transacted by him and in his name."<sup>31</sup>

Trade between Spain and the United States remained negligible until 1798 when, for one year, Spain again aligned with Britain to open its Caribbean and mainland ports to American ships, with the stipulation that gold could not leave the Spanish Empire under any circumstances. When it became clear that American vessels consistently violated the ban, Spain rescinded the act and closed their ports again the following year. In all likelihood the enormous imbalance of trade between French and other nations' Caribbean colonies could not have been rectified by the British and Spanish port openings of 1792 and 1798; the French Caribbean continued to account for more American imports than the colonies of any other empire before 1805 and, for many years in the case of coffee, more than all other empires combined. But changes in American shipping rights resulted in rapid mercantile reassessments and realignments. When the French and British attempted to reassert control over American shipping in 1806, Spain opted to open its ports to American vessels. The result was an almost 400 percent drop in American imports of French colonial coffee, and the Spanish West Indies, for the first time, emerged as North America's dominant supplier (Table V).<sup>32</sup> The most dramatic developments in Spain's coffee industry were yet to come; after the abolition of the slave trade and ultimately of

<sup>31</sup> For reductions in limitations, see Coatsworth, *WMQ* 24: 247. The Spanish West Indies as a whole received less than 1 percent of all American exports between 1790 and 1793. For the United States merchant in Cuba, see *Penn. Gaz.*, Apr. 4, 1792.

<sup>32</sup> For Spain's closing of ports again, see Arthur P. Whitaker, *The United States and the Independence of Latin America, 1800-1830* (Baltimore, 1941), 6-9. Figures for vessels carrying coffee to the United States from 1806 to 1812 demonstrate the overwhelming preference of United States merchants for American shipping (*American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 350, 367, 394, 402, 434, 441, 464, 471, 478, 514, 521, 566, 576, 580, 629, 635, 676, 682, 706, 712, 757, 760; see also Table V).

TABLE V  
 PERCENTAGES OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN COFFEE IMPORTATION, 1794–1806

	<i>Total coffee imports in pounds</i>	<i>Percentage imported in American vessels</i>	<i>Percentage imported in foreign vessels</i>
1794–95	53,960,976	—	—
1795–96	61,141,051	—	—
1796–97	49,491,502	93.5%	6.5%
1797–98	57,722,625	89.8	10.2
1798–99	29,978,570	—	—
1799–1800	47,389,946	91.3	8.7
1800–1801	57,383,904	88.3	11.7
1801–2	40,886,861	88.9	11.1
1802–3	16,828,493	79.4	20.6
1803–4	48,638,382	98.9	1.1
1804–5	56,141,320	80.5	19.5
1805–6	55,993,788	84.5	15.5

*Note:* Imports by foreign and domestic shipping were not differentiated before 1797 or in the 1798–99 records.

*Source:* *American State Papers: Commerce and Navigation*, 1: 350, 367, 394, 402, 434, 441, 464, 471, 478, 514, 521, 566, 576, 580, 629, 635, 676, 682, 706, 712, 757, 760.

slavery in the French and British islands, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and especially Brazil dominated the global coffee market.

Given the legal and quasi-legal methods of importing coffee, what role did the Captain Ashes of the world have to play after America gained its independence? Philadelphia's newspapers included almost weekly accounts of American ships stopped for suspected smuggling. For that matter, French, British, and even Danish ships also appear in connection with contraband coffee, though only a handful compared with the numbers of vessels that legally entered the United States each year. Accounts of coffee smuggling after the Revolution follow a pattern similar to what Ash described in 1773, though none supplies as much detail. Ash's story after he docked and unloaded his coffee is told by the Jamaican factors of Brown & Birch, who wrote their Liverpool counterparts to confirm rumors that the *Mary* had been condemned by Jamaican authorities for illegally importing non-British coffee. It seems Ash miscalculated; rather than sell his Spanish coffee in North America, he off-loaded his cargo in Kingston. To undercut local producers, "Capt. Ash was imprudent

enough to offer coffee for sale in a publick company, under the current prices considerably, which was taken notice of by a coffee planter there present." Jamaican planters did not appreciate Ash's entrepreneurship and reported the arrival of unlicensed foreign produce to local port authorities who condemned the ship that same evening. When customs officials boarded the vessel, they initially found only four casks of coffee; after a more thorough examination, however, "the people's beds [were] found full of beans" and notations on this concealment of cargo turned up in the captain's log and first mate's journal, casting more than a shadow of doubt on Ash's protestations of innocence. Brown & Birch opted to pay the penalty for importing foreign coffee rather than forfeit their ship; doing so also kept Ash out of prison, though they seemed less concerned about his welfare than that of their vessel.<sup>33</sup>

The tactics used by smugglers after 1783 would have sounded familiar to Ash, though the definition of what constituted smuggling and the connotations of such infractions differed in a postrevolutionary world. France and Britain tried to influence American political allegiance by controlling the new nation's trade routes. French ships stopped American vessels suspected of trading with Britain and the British colonies and condemned the ship or confiscated the cargo; British vessels did likewise to United States vessels in route to France or the French West Indies. In February 1794, for example, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* reprinted a letter from a merchant whose cargo, bound for Bordeaux, was 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."<sup>34</sup> The following week an English judge condemned the ship's sugar and coffee as French; according to British law, it was legally confiscated without remuneration.

The news initiated a backlash of public protest that argued British commercial incursions threatened not only the American economy but also its international reputation: "It can no longer be a doubt . . . that 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*." The efficacy of British efforts, however, depends on the reporter. In a letter to Congress, President Thomas Jefferson made privateering seem omnipresent: "Our

<sup>33</sup> Brown and Walsh to Brown & Birch, Liverpool, Mar. 13, 1773, 1–3, T1/504, National Archives.

<sup>34</sup> *Penn. Gaz.*, Feb. 5, 1794.

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 us, but our own also." Philadelphia's merchants, by contrast, seemed more ambivalent. They accepted piracy and privateering as inherent risks of transatlantic shipping; as long as incidents remained sporadic and balance sheets ultimately fell in their favor, the merchants were satisfied to count the increasing profits their trade to the West Indies furnished:

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 known. 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 . . . We are happy to hear that many of our vessels from the West Indies return with full cargoes, or large sums of money.<sup>35</sup>

Those with principally political or economic interests often interpreted the same events differently. Jefferson's image of infested harbors says more about his concerns for the acceptance of the United States in the international arena and its ability to influence commercial activity, as well as about the federal government's role as final arbiter of trade policies and regulations, than it does about the economic realities surrounding the complex issue of piracy in the era of the early Republic. The more pragmatic attitudes of Philadelphia's merchant community better reflect how the economic realities of trade had been restructured after independence. Legislation from European powers determined who the United States conducted business with, yet, rather than limiting traders' endeavors, such legislation opened opportunities to explore and compare suppliers, to strike new alliances, and to buy according to the best bargains. Philadelphia's merchants did not assume an

<sup>35</sup> For the threat to America's international reputation, see *Penn. Gaz.*, Feb. 12, 1794. For Thomas Jefferson's letter to Congress, see *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 1: 66, "Letter from President Jefferson to the House and Senate, Dec. 3, 1805." For merchants satisfied with increased profits, see *Penn. Gaz.*, May 21, 1794.



intractable position on issues such as piracy and illicit trade. Occasional acts of depredation by pirates and privateers were of far less consequence than the burgeoning trade on which these piratical schemes preyed.