

**The Book in America: Economic Aspects of the Material Text**  
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**January 13, 2006**

**The Early American Economic Setting**

In March 1772, Robert Aitken used over three inches of newspaper advertising space to promote the impending publication of William Guthrie's *New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar and Present State of the Several Kingdoms of the World*. Guthrie's lengthy volume promised to educate its readers about astronomical phenomenon, peoples, languages, geology, and climates around the world. Although the book targeted a broad readership, it would likely have been most useful to mariners and merchants whose livelihoods required familiarity with different customs and cultures; it concluded with a table "of the coins of all nations, and their value in English money."<sup>1</sup>

Just a few months later, John Beatty, Henry Wynkoop, and Samuel Erwin used almost as much space to advertise the estate auction of the late Reverend Charles Beatty. Beatty was no country parson and his properties included a 152-acre plantation in Bucks County and another 56-acre plantation in Warminster. The auction also featured Beatty's livestock, wagons and carts as well as "a large variety of household goods" including "a curious and elegant collection of woodcuts, maps, and pictures" and "a large and valuable collection of books on various subjects" but most particularly, understandably, "on divinity."<sup>2</sup>

Aitken's and Beatty's advertisements represent the two extremes—pre-publication notice and mortuary vendue—of books' movements through Philadelphia's commercial world, a labyrinth of purchasing possibilities that ranged from book sellers and stationers to the back shelves of stores or shops specializing in imported groceries or the latest clothing designs where

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<sup>1</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet and General Daily Advertiser*, March 2, 1772.

<sup>2</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet and General Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 26, 1772.

occasional volumes on dining or fashion etiquette could be found. While the locations varied selection remained quite limited. Almost all books entering North America had been published in Britain. This meant that although the number of books imported to and purchased by Americans increased during the eighteenth century, their understandings of history, science, travel narratives, and polite behavior continued to be largely produced in London.

Scholars have suggested that the proliferation and standardization of buyers' behavior by the late eighteenth century resulted in a common consumer language and standardization of demand that both questioned and strengthened traditional class boundaries. This rationale is behind Richard Bushman's assertion that "amenities and luxuries began to dot the probate inventories of the upper and middling groups in society with far greater frequency than ever before" as well as T.H. Breen's proposition that an increasing profusion of imported goods "flooded American society during the eighteenth century," creating "an exceptionally rapid expansion of consumer choice, an increasing standardization of consumer behavior, and a pervasive Anglicization of the American market." Cary Carson goes further still, suggesting that "the poorer sort had made 'necessaries' of goods that were their fathers' decencies, their grandfathers' 'luxuries'" and that they even forwent "ordinary comforts in favor of equipment for specialized social activities" that surrounded imported goods.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," 233; T.H. Breen, "'Baubles of Britain:' The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," 452; and Cary Carson, "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?," 504-505, all in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (eds.), *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, 1994). In addition to the essays of this volume, I am indebted to the following works on consumer behavior and interpretation: Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York, 1938) and *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York, 1955); Ralph Davis, *The Rise of English Shipping in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, New York, 1972, c. 1962); Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982); Lorena Walsh, "Urban Amenities and Rural Self-Sufficiency: Living Standards and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1643-1777," *Journal of Economic History* 43:1 (March 1983): 109-117; T.H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 467-99; Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990); Richard Bushman, *The*

This paper explores the changing nature of early American supply and demand using the commercial landscape of pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia as its backdrop. Advertisements in local newspapers permit a geographic analysis of neighborhoods where goods were bought, and comparisons of buyers' names in merchant and shop account books with city directories and tax lists helps construct an occupational profile of the city's purchasers.<sup>4</sup> Books appear within the larger story of goods moving throughout the city, and particular attention is paid to distinctions between wholesale and retail markets as well as new versus resold or vendued goods.

### **Places to Purchase in Bulk**

Eighteenth-century Philadelphia's shops and stores came in all shapes and sizes, ranging from informal partitions in the back of proprietors' homes or businesses to specialized spaces designed to store and showcase goods. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, shopkeeping was a primary occupation, but storeowners faced increasing competition from

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*Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992); John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (eds.), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1996); Carole Shammas, "The Revolutionary Impact of European Demand of Tropical Goods," in John McCusker and Kenneth Morgan (eds.), *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge, 2000); and most recently, T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (Oxford, 2004)

Though not focusing on the colonial and early republic periods, see also: Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, 1981) and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> From the time it was founded, David Hall and Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* operated as the chief voice for those hawking their wares in print. In 1771, however, John Dunlap's *Pennsylvania Packet or General Advertiser*, later advertised as the *Daily Advertiser*, challenged the *Gazette's* authority, aggressively recruiting new customers and offering discounts for serial advertisements. The *Advertiser's* most important selling point, and the one that ultimately convinced most Philadelphia business owners to shift advertising allegiances, was its transition from a weekly to a thrice weekly publication schedule. John Dunlap changed the name of his newspaper to *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* in January 1791. In 1779, he sold the paper to John Poulson and the name changed again to *Poulson's Daily Advertiser*, which continued in print until 1839. The data in this paper is based on advertisements between 1765 and 1785.

merchants—some of whom broadened their economic activities by selling at public markets, wholesale warehouses, auction, or through retail operations.<sup>5</sup>

### *Public Markets*

In 1683, Philadelphia's first public market, "where butchers have moveable stalls," opened on Front Street, parallel to the city's docks. In 1701, additional stalls were added to sell "bread, wine, beer, wood, and other things" and town councilmen appointed a Clerk of the Market "to act as regulator of weights and measures." The market operated on Wednesdays and Saturdays and "nothing was to be sold until the ringing of the town bell from six to seven o'clock in the morning from April 1<sup>st</sup> to September," and an hour later the rest of the year.<sup>6</sup>

The Front Street market provisioned the entire city until 1745, when residents of "the South part [of the city], who lived at a Great Distance," petitioned for a second market. A new brick building featuring sixteen stalls opened on Second Street, between Pine and Cedar, that same year.<sup>7</sup> In 1746, town councilmen authorized a third market, Callowhill Market, in response to a second petition from 145 property-owners in the Northern Liberties district. High Street's market continued to expand as well, adding additional covered stalls in 1763 from Second Street eastward to Front Street.<sup>8</sup>

Public markets served both urban and rural customers. "The country people in Pennsylvania and New Jersey bring to town a quantity of victuals, and other productions," one observer remarked, and "you are sure to meet with every produce of the season which the

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the professionalization of shop-keeping see, Richard L. Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," in Carson, Hoffman, and Albert (eds.), *Of Consuming Interests*, 233-251.

<sup>6</sup> Horace Mather Lippincott, *Early Philadelphia: Its People, Life, and Progress* (Philadelphia and London, 1917), 79-80.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

country affords.”<sup>9</sup> Market vendors dealt primarily in meats and fresh produce, but public stalls abutting the market hall offered a wider range of goods. Samuel Garrigues, for example, opened a “grocery warehouse” next to High Street market that specialized in the service of “masters of vessels” and “sea stores.” Along with coffee, rum, spirits and spices, Garrigues advertised “powder, shot...iron castings...and cargo boxes.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Wholesale Merchants*

Customers seeking larger quantities of goods did their business closer to the waterfront. Here, a visitor to Philadelphia’s docks in 1774 recorded, “the voice of industry perpetually resounds along the shore” and “every wharf ...is surrounded with groves of masts, and heaped with commodities of every kind.”<sup>11</sup> Though merchants usually opened wholesale warehouses within yards of incoming ships, goods still passed through a series of steps before reaching even these nearby destinations. Customs officials determined whether imports were of British or foreign manufacture and estimated tax rebates or assessments accordingly. If taxes were owed, Philadelphia’s Excise Officers consigned cargo to dockyard warehouses under a dual lock system, one opened by a key kept in the Excise Office and the second held by the importing merchant. Merchants paid duties only when they removed their stores from the warehouse, rather than they first arrived in port. Assuming that their goods were not perishable, this gave them some latitude in deciding when to bring commodities to market, allowing time to wait out temporary gluts in hopes of better prices.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Kalm cited in *Ibid.*, 82, 278.

<sup>10</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 16, 1770.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Duche, *Observations on a Variety of Subjects, Literary, Moral and Religious; In a Series of Original Letters, Written by a Gentleman of Foreign Extraction, who Resided some time in Philadelphia. Revised by a Friend, to whose Hands the Manuscript was Committed for Publication* (Philadelphia, 1774), 3-4.

Most descriptions of merchant wholesalers focus on British dry good importers, who relied on their connections to British trading houses to assemble assortments of “sundry merchandize,” such as clothing, furniture, and ceramics for retailers and particular clients.<sup>12</sup> These special orders required negotiations between buyers and importers, the former placing a great deal of faith in the ability of the latter to balance quality, taste, and price. West Indian merchants’ wholesale warehouses, by contrast, rarely boasted a single button or creamware plate. Their advertisements featured sugars and coffee by the hogshead, rum and molasses by the barrel, tea by the box, and occasionally smaller quantities of other groceries such as raisins, corn meal, flour, or pork.<sup>13</sup> Their inventories reflected the vicissitudes of rainfall, hurricanes, or privateering which could result in shortages or surpluses of tropical goods, as much as on relationships with London brokers or the dictates of an ever-changing fashion.

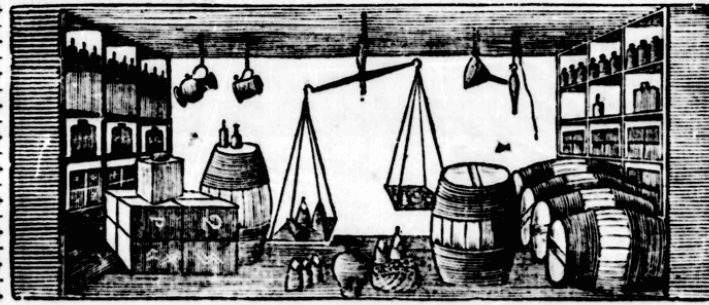
While the range of goods wholesalers dealt in varied widely, expected purchase sizes did not. William Coats’ handbill for a store, “contiguous to the Public Wharf,” offers a glimpse inside a wholesale merchant’s warehouse stockroom and provides suggestions about prospective clientele.<sup>14</sup> The single room featured no windows, much less window displays, to catch the eyes of those passing by. No counters designated spaces between buyers and sellers and no solicitous clerks appeared on hand for service or suggestions. Racks of goods lined the walls, containing row after row of wine bottles and jars, notable for their volume but not their variety. Boxes and hogsheads lay stacked against the walls and crowded the floor, while a large scale and smaller tools dominated the center of the image, suspended from the ceiling.

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<sup>12</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 115-117. See also, Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 85-9,7 and Arthur Jenson, *The Maritime Commerce of Philadelphia* (Madison, 1963), 87-106.

<sup>13</sup> Goods listed in warehouse advertisement for *Daily Advertiser*, April 18, 1780.

<sup>14</sup> William Coats, “Takes this Method of Acquainting the Public” (handbill, Philadelphia, 1772, LCP).



## WILLIAM COATS,

Takes this method of acquainting the PUBLIC in general, and his FRIENDS in particular, that he has for SALE, at his STORE, at the sign of the SUGAR-LOAF, contiguous to the PUBLIC WHARF, in FRONT-STREET, and near POOL'S BRIDGE, WHOLESALE and RETAIL;

**W**EST-INDIA and PHILADELPHIA RUM, Jamaica spirits, brandy, geneva, anniseed, cordials; Madeira, Lisbon, and Teneriff WINES; lamp oil; loaf, lump and muscovado SUGARS; molasses; green, fouchong, and bohea TEA; chocolate, rice, oatmeal, starch, indigo, pepper, ginger, allspice, cloves, mace, cinnamon, and nutmegs; cotton; 3d, 4d, 8d, 10d, 12d and 20d, nails; powder and shot, soap and candles, brimstone, allum, salt-petre, copperas, raisins, currants, madder, red-wood, fine and coarse salt, WESTON'S SNUFF, mustard, Florence Oil, &c. &c. &c.

Sea stores, shallop-mens bills, &c. put up with care, and all orders from Town or Country thankfully received, and carefully executed.

PHILADELPHIA, Printed by JOHN DUNLAP, at the *Newest* Printing-Office, in Market-street.

William Coats, "Takes this Method of Acquainting the Public" (handbill, Philadelphia, 1772). Library Company of Philadelphia.

The handbill reflects one version of pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia's commercial landscape but not the image of sociably browsing so often described by historians of eighteenth-century shopping. The final sentence of the handbill's opening salutation, however, "wholesale or retail prices," indicates that Coats had begun reaching beyond other merchants and retailers to attract individual consumers. Wholesale-retail hybrid stores became increasingly popular by the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Enterprising proprietors still stocked a limited inventory,

but began offering a variety of prices and payment options, depending on the quantity purchased and whether purchasers came with cash in hand or needed short-term credit.<sup>15</sup>

Levi Hollingsworth was one such wholesale retailer who catered to both bulk and individual buyers. Hollingsworth was one of Philadelphia's leading flour merchants and an early pioneer of vertical integration. He extended his business interests back from the wharf to include investments in river barge shipping and flour mills in surrounding counties.<sup>16</sup> Hollingsworth's heavy investment in the wheat trade also linked his interests to the West Indies, and he opened a wholesale warehouse by 1780 to manage the volume of tropical imports Caribbean planters used to pay for his flour and grain. Newspaper advertisements for his wharf district store have the traditional language of a wholesale provider with "COCOA in Barrels, Coffee in Hogsheads, and Barrels, and Sugar in ditto."<sup>17</sup> Only the last sentence, "where merchants or others may be supplied," indicated his willingness to deal in smaller quantities. His account book from 1768 to 1775, however, reveals that individual buyers formed an integral part of his business. Two things stand out about Hollingsworth's business practices. The first is that his location on the riverfront—as opposed to inside Philadelphia's retail districts—did not adversely affect his profit margin; small, individual sales represent almost half of Hollingsworth's business.<sup>18</sup> The second is that it really did pay to buy in bulk. Hollingsworth offered his better customers a discount, in some cases as much as 25 percent.

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<sup>15</sup> This last development is one of the distinctions between wholesale/retail operators, and strictly wholesale merchants, who relied principally on cash payments. See, as examples, of wholesale and retail vendors: Edward Role, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 23, 1770; John Jennings, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 6, 1770; William Keaff, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 11, 1770.

<sup>16</sup> See Brook Hunter, "Rage for Grain: Flour Milling in the Mid-Atlantic, 1750-1815" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 2001), especially chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 12, 1785.

<sup>18</sup> Hollingsworth also opened his own store by 1785. The newspaper advertisement for his retail operation not only reflects his continued trade in coffee and other West Indian products, but also local investments in iron works and flour mills outside the city; *Pennsylvania Packet or Daily Advertiser* (April 8, 1780): "To be sold by Levi Hollingsworth. Best indigo in casks, raisins in kegs, Molasses, Muscovado sugar, Bohea tea, coffee, steel, Maryland and Virginia tobacco, superfine and common flour, a quantity of bees wax & c. & c."

## *Auctions*

Wholesalers were only one of many avenues to savings. Booksellers and printers, like vendors of all kinds of wares, frequently used auctions as a means of quickly disposing of surplus or outdated volumes. Alexander Power posted a notice in the *Pennsylvania Packet* in November 1773 for a sale of new and used books, “new books to be put up at half price, and old books at what the company pleases.”<sup>19</sup> Robert Bell also repeatedly used auctions to clear his shelves, including a January 1775 sale so vast that it began “on Wednesday, the 18<sup>th</sup> of January” and continued for “five or six evenings successively.”<sup>20</sup>

Vendue sales were a common practice in North America, dating back to the late seventeenth century. T.H. Breen describes them as “a combination of modern flea markets and wholesale auctions,” a polyglot of goods offered at reduced prices that allowed “less affluent Americans” their first taste of luxuries.<sup>21</sup> During their early years, vendues most often resulted from estate sales due to death or insolvency, but by the mid-eighteenth century merchants increasingly used them to dispose of overstocked, out-of-date, or damaged goods. Philadelphia residents understood how importers’ desire to sell quickly worked to their advantage. “Vendues,” quipped one newspaper writer, were not only “places where people may get cheap bargains,” but regulators of prices throughout the city. Their inexpensive goods obliged “shopkeepers in general to sell their goods cheap; so the country is well supplied on reasonable terms, while the shopkeepers and store-keepers are kept within due bounds.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, November 1, 1773.

<sup>20</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, January 16, 1775. Printed catalogues of available titles, including legal histories, travel narratives, and dictionaries among its “many other authors of great excellence, both ancient and modern,” were available for browsing by the first day of the sale.

<sup>21</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle, and Universal Advertiser*, Philadelphia, 1772.

Not everyone greeted vendues' increasing popularity with such optimism. Critics complained about the crowds and noise which accompanied "this pernicious practice" of "putting up every thing to Auction," and argued that price wars resulted in a small "number of Vendue Masters... greatly increased to the prejudice of the shopkeeper."<sup>23</sup> Others argued vendues reduced the city's productivity by wasting time and money. Prospective buyers, an opponent contended, "go to them without any real necessity, merely to pick up bargains," the quest to save, more often than not, resulting in superfluous spending on purchases "which they otherwise might have made at home, or done without."<sup>24</sup>

In the 1760s, the lot adjacent to Philadelphia's Old London Coffee House stood vacant, making it the ideal location for auctions, large outdoor gatherings, and public events.<sup>25</sup> Located at the corner of Market and Front Streets, the Old London lay between the wharfs and shops and offered a different kind of shopping experience on the widest assortment commodities.<sup>26</sup> Newspaper advertisements record the Old London's role in slave trafficking, for example, such as that held on May 19, 1770:

A likely NEGROE MAN, To be sold by public vendue, at the London Coffee House, on Saturday, the 19th instant May, if not sold before. HE understands all kinds of housework, can wait on table, and tend horses; he has also some knowledge of country work. Any Person inclined to buy him at private sale, is desired to apply to the PRINTERS.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Moore to the earl of Hillborough (May 26, 1769), in E.B. O'Callaghan, *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols. (Albany, 1853-76), 8:167.

<sup>24</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle, and Universal Advertiser* (Philadelphia, 1772).

<sup>25</sup> Even before the Old London Coffee House was established in 1754, earlier Philadelphia coffeehouses served as vendue sites. Advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* begin listing vendues "at the Coffee House" as early as August, 20, 1730.

<sup>26</sup> David Johnston Kennedy, "Old London Coffee House" (Philadelphia, c. 1836-37). The caption accompanying the sketch notes that "coffee and liquor were served on the ground floor, and a merchant exchange occupied the second floor. It became a favored site for slave sales until slavery was abolished in Philadelphia in the 1780s." A similar sketch also depicting a slave auction, was done by Edward Mumford, "London Coffee House" (Philadelphia, undated). Both are in the LCP.

<sup>27</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 10, 1770.

Indentured servants' contracts, furniture, books, and horses all regularly appeared on the coffeehouse auction block.<sup>28</sup> Philadelphia's auctions also reflected the international nature of the city's trade connections. Several vessels—from sloops to brigantines—sold by vendue in the 1760s and 1770s, as did bulk quantities of West Indian produce, British dry goods, southern European wines and commodities from neighboring North American colonies.<sup>29</sup> In short, anything and everything could be found in public vendues for the right price.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Philadelphia's vendues grew both in frequency and size, reflecting both the dynamism of a growing market economy as well as periods of fiscal instability. As hostilities between England and North America escalated, periodic embargoes—and ultimately the declaration of war—transformed pirates into privateers and their bounty into vendued profits listed in the local newspapers next to sheriff's notices of other auctioned wares and properties. The schooner *Nancy* suffered this fate in September 1780 after being “re-taken by privateers Holker, Fair American, and Enterprise.” Bidders could view the ship and its contents, “twelve hogsheads of tobacco, some coffee and sugar,” on display at Andrew Hodge's Wharf. The goods were auctioned at ten in the morning on the pier, and the ship itself “at twelve o'clock on the same day, at the coffeehouse.”<sup>30</sup>

Fiscal dislocation caused by the American Revolution was felt as strongly in the domestic sphere as it was on the high seas. Scores of private libraries, like the collection of “most useful,

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<sup>28</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 7, 1770.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of vessel vendues can be found in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 7, 1766, October 16, 1766, April 23, 1767, June 8, 1769, March 15, 1770. Examples of Caribbean commodities: *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 2, 1767, October 13, 1768, December 14, 1769, March 15, 1770, January 18, 1775. British dry goods: *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 26, 1766, December 24, 1767, November 3, 1768, June 7, 1770, May 2, 1771. Wines: *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 25, 1766, July 16, 1767, July 30, 1767, September 24, 1767, October 8, 1767, September 1, 1768. After 1768, wine – which appeared almost weekly by vendue in the 1760s, is advertised almost exclusively by vendue stores, rather than public vendues, and retail sellers. Coastal commerce (for example, tobacco, rice, naval stores, wheat, or flour): *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 20, 1766, March 26, 1767, March 10, 1768, April 23, 1772, July 21, 1778, July 23, 1778, September 1, 1778.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, September 26, 1780.

elegant, and vivifying modern authors” many of whom were “un-come-at-able every where else on this continent” advertised by an “anonymous “gentleman” in 1782, sold at vendue between 1775 and 1783.<sup>31</sup> Public auctions allowed shoppers to hunt for bargains, often on the heels of other’s misfortunes. The “select library of elegant books” offered for sale in October 1782 might have included some of the most refined literature of the day, but seems far removed from its place of honor in family bookcases when offered to the highest bidder to appease the debtors of its former owner.<sup>32</sup>

Other books reached the auction block as a result of political partisanship. Printers and book dealers supporting the American Revolutionary cause bore the consequences during Britain’s occupation of then city. In 1778, James Humphreys, Jr., for example, watched his printing press, books, pamphlets, and paper stock—along with his feather bed and cooking utensils—auctioned off to the highest bidder after his loyalty to the king came into question.<sup>33</sup>

The volume of goods disseminated by vendue, especially after Philadelphia’s 1774 embargo on British imports and exports, led some to speculate that disreputable merchants might turn to auctions as a means of whitewashing or legitimizing illegally imported goods. Given the volume of commodities passing through Philadelphia each day, these fears were not unfounded, and in September 1775, Philadelphia’s Committee of Compliance attempted to forestall the practice by passing detailed instructions for those managing public sales. They required each Vendue Master to take an oath or affirmation that he “will not receive, or take into his possession, or dispose of by public sale, or otherwise, any goods, wares or merchandize, that he may have reason to believe have been imported contrary” to the rules governing foreign trade. Eleven men appointed to ensure compliance with vendue regulations were authorized to inspect,

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<sup>31</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, Oct. 15, 1782.

<sup>32</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, Oct. 8, 1782.

<sup>33</sup> *Pennsylvania Packet*, September 10, 1778.

with as few as three members, “the invoices and goods that may be received by the vendue master or masters” and halt sales in the absence of appropriate documentation. As an extralegal body, however, the committee’s authority had limits, depending on consumer pressure and public shaming, rather than imprisonment or fines, to encourage right action.<sup>34</sup>

The rising number of prize cargo auctions in the 1780s quickly outgrew the lot next to the Old London Coffee House. The overflow resulted in the proliferation of yet another retailing amalgamation—the vendue store—a combination of the standard vendue and wholesale warehouse. Former merchants managed a number of these establishments. Unable to support themselves in their chosen profession during periods of non-importation, they sought to capitalize on the rising auction sector.<sup>35</sup> Richard Footman made this decision in 1775, opening a vendue store featuring both British manufactures and West Indian goods on Third Street. Like an auctioneer, Footman held public sales for limited periods of time. On March 15, for example, he offered “at Nine O’Clock... the SALE of 100 pieces Irish linens” as well as other pieces of cloth and ribbons. At “two o’clock precisely” he switched to “12 quarter casks Lisbon wine, 600 weight of pepper, 20 barrels coffee” and a parcel of iron pots and furniture.<sup>36</sup> These stores shared many of the same traits as traditional public vendues, including rapidly changing inventories and cheap prices, but they were much more permanent in nature. Some operated for months, or even years, at the same address. Like wholesale merchants before them, vendue

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<sup>34</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 27, 1775: “Resolved, That if any vendue masters in the city or liberties shall refuse or neglect an immediate and punctual compliance therewith, no merchant or others ought to send any goods for sale to such vendue master or masters; and that no shopkeepers or others ought to purchase any goods, either by public or private sale, of such vendue masters - And further, that the name and conduct of such vendue master or masters shall be published in the newspapers.”

<sup>35</sup> Philadelphia’s newspapers chronicle several debates about the impact of non-importation. Some argued that merchants benefited from rising prices as goods became scarce. Others noted that an increasing number of merchants went out of business. One insightful author noted that, while traditional imports and exports had declined, those arriving through privateers had been steadily increasing, and that merchants and vendue masters were much more closely aligned than generally supposed. See *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 23, 1772.

<sup>36</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 15, 1775.

stores initially sold in large quantities and preferred cash payments. But by the 1780s, vendue stores began broadening their marketing appeal, offering sales in smaller quantities and accepting “cash or short-term credit.” Even the Continental Navy recognized the value of public sales, opening their own vendue store in the 1780s, “northward of Willing and Morris’ Wharf” to sell the increasing number of prize cargoes brought into port.<sup>37</sup>

### **Groceries, Stores, and Shops**

In 1765, Philadelphia was divided into nine wards. High Street, Chestnut, and Walnut Wards were closest to the port, predominantly commercial, and contained the city’s largest public markets. Retail districts clustered between Arch and Walnut and Front and Second Streets, but spread outwards to the farthest reaches of the city limits. In street after street and cramped back alley, retailers offered a cacophony of wares to fulfill needs and wants. Adjacent North, Middle, and South Wards mixed businesses and residences. Upper and Lower Delaware Wards contained a fair share of business ventures, but were less financially prosperous than their intervening ward neighbors; tax lists between 1762 and 1775 indicate that Upper Delaware, for example, was notable for its concentration of sailors, longshoremen and other occupations affiliated with shipping and maritime activity. Mulberry and Dock Wards were the most marginal of all, including middle and lower income housing interspersed with neighborhood businesses, butchers, seamstresses, widows, and most of the city’s free black residents.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, January 18 and 20, 1780.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the parameters and changes of Philadelphia’s city ward system, see James Daly and Allen Weinberg, *Genealogy of Philadelphia County Subdivisions* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia, 1966), located in the PCA. Between 1765 and 1780, there are no major reconfigurations to Philadelphia’s city ward system. It consisted of nine wards as determined by an act of the City Council on February 2, 1705. The Delaware River served as the eastern boundary and Front Street the western boundary for three of these wards: High Street Ward (running between Mulberry or Arch and High Streets); Chestnut Ward (between High and Chestnut Streets) and Walnut Ward (between Chestnut and Walnut Street). Upper Delaware Ward extended north of High Street Ward between the Delaware River and Front Street; immediately to its west was Mulberry ward, bounded by Front Street to the east,

Throughout the eighteenth century, shops multiplied in number and kind and grew increasingly specialized. Scores of middlemen—and women—appeared alongside the wholesale outlets of Philadelphia’s large merchants. Though significant overlaps occur between inventories, distinguishing between types of vendors helps to identify the various routes commodities were likely to travel. Grocers, for example, specialized in the sale of non-perishable foodstuffs. Isaac Gray, who maintained a grocery in Chestnut Street near Strawberry Alley, exemplified this profession. From the mid-1770s through the early 1780s, his advertisements rarely varied. He featured “coffee, pepper, chocolate, loaf and muscovado sugars, indigo, [and] spices,” as well as a variety of wines, including “Old Madeira, Lisbon, Mountain and Teneriffe wines” and “claret, red port, and sack wine.” To these he added old Jamaica spirit and brandy, as well as imported English beer and locally produced “Philadelphia bottled beer and cidar.” Less often, he offered small stores of cheese, pickles, glass or iron ware.<sup>39</sup>

The tax lists for 1775 include eighteen grocers within the Philadelphia city limits. Most, but not all, were men. Rebecca Robinson advertised an almost identical inventory of imported spirits, wines, sugars, coffee, and spices in her grocery just two blocks south of Gray’s, “to the South side of Chestnut, about mid-way between Front and Second Streets.”<sup>40</sup> Retail grocers, whose inventories best resembled those of wholesale merchants, suffered most in the 1770s from

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Seventh Street to the west, Vine Street to the north and Mulberry or Arch Street to the south). Lower Delaware Ward ran south of Walnut Ward between the river and Seventh Street; its upper boundary was Walnut Street and its lower Cedar, or present day South Street). Although some early city maps depict Vine and Cedar Streets running as far west as the Schuylkill River, no wards officially continued past Seventh Street. Characterizations of ward residents are based on occupations of residents listed of the Constables Returns for 1768, 1772, and 1775.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, April 10, 1775. See also advertisements on May 1, 1775, May 8, 1775. In July 1775, Gray relocated his store to further up Chestnut Street, between Second and Third Streets. His inventory remained largely the same. *Daily Advertiser*, July 17, 1775. See also Richard Bushman’s description of retail grocers in “Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America,” *Of Consuming Interests*, 240-242.

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, September 25 and October 16, 1775. Rebecca Robinson also appeared as a grocer in the *Constables Returns* (1775).

the escalating number of wholesale/retail warehouses and vendue stores that trafficked in imported foods. Some retailers resented wholesalers' encroachment, lamenting that the increasingly blurred distinction between the two meant that "every Merchant is a shopkeeper & every Shopkeeper is a Merchant."<sup>41</sup>

An additional forty-two Philadelphians listed their occupation as store owner or keeper in the 1775 tax lists. Warehouse and vendue stores are included in this number, but a great many other stores also operated in the city. George Habacker's store stocked coffee, sugars, teas, and spirits with "good oak scantling" and "sundry other articles."



James Thacakara, "A View of the New Market from Second and Shippen Streets, Philadelphia, 1787," American Philosophical Society. The store to the right advertised "wine, tea, brandy, and coffee."

William Graham featured coffee, rum, sugar and "an excellent assortment of striped Hollands [clothe]."<sup>42</sup> John Mitchell's store carried a much more extensive variety of textiles with his West Indian imports. "Wide Irish linens...and sheetings, a general assortment of Damasks, diaper and

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<sup>41</sup> Cited in John W. Tyler, *Smugglers and Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1986), 113.

<sup>42</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, April 18, 1780 and April 25, 1780.

huckback table linen” completed his listing of wares, which he “determined to keep a constant supply of” at “the most reasonable terms.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition to general stores, some owners identified a particular specialty, such as wine and spirits, books, or dry goods, though the variety of goods in even these specialized stores could be quite diverse. Coffee, for example, was admittedly not the main attraction at Thomas Anderton’s London Book Store of Philadelphia. Anderton devoted most of his advertising space to descriptions of traveling cases, gentleman’s desks, and an extensive library of books, primers, and prints. At the back of the shop, however, he noted that “coffee, rice, and Muscovado sugar” were available “by the barrel or smaller quantity...at the same place.”<sup>44</sup> Anderton probably had not imported West Indian produce for sale in his store. Barter had a long and respected tradition in North America by the late eighteenth century, and a more likely explanation is that one or more of Anderton’s customers had traded these goods for the books they desired. Even Benjamin Franklin accepted coffee as a kind of currency. Between November 1749 and May 1751, the Jamaica-based merchant firm of Minot & Reed paid for almanacs Franklin had printed with 290 wt. of coffee worth just over £16, and a credit from Philadelphia merchant Mr. Mifflin for another £3.14.9. In 1751, Franklin sold additional almanacs, as well as 800 books with gilt edges and 1200 sheets of paper for 590 wt. of coffee (total value not listed).<sup>45</sup>

Shops, including millineries and haberdasheries, comprised yet a third type of retail setting. Shop—as opposed to grocery and store—was the most common appellation assumed by retail businesses, with no less than 178 operating in Philadelphia in 1775.<sup>46</sup> These are the intimate interiors that have so fascinated historians of marketing and material culture, where “the

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<sup>43</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, January 2, 1775.

<sup>44</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 12, 1770.

<sup>45</sup> George Simpson Eddy, *Account Books Kept by Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1929), 85 (from Ledger D, 1739-1747).

<sup>46</sup> Based on figures derived from Constables Returns (1775).

customer already was, or aspired to be, a gentleman or a lady.”<sup>47</sup> Shop advertisements stressed three key elements: variety of stock, terms of purchase, and quality of service. Store owners peppered inventory descriptions with repeated assurances that their wares were the “BEST,” “choice,” and “the very finest” while prices were “very cheap,” with credit offered at “reasonable rates” and “moderate terms.”<sup>48</sup> Time was another critical factor, some touting goods as “newly arrived” or “just imported” while others emphasized dwindling stocks to entice prospective buyers wavering about their decisions.<sup>49</sup>

Historians have described eighteenth-century advertising as “a strikingly new commercial language of allurements” used to “spark curiosity and desire” as well as “entice potential customers into their shops.”<sup>50</sup> This new language, however, worked better for some goods than others. An understanding of weight, weave, color, design, and price might sway the decision of a customer choosing between a gingham or a muslin. Likewise, reassurances from respected bookseller Thomas Anderton might persuade buyers that Doctor Storck’s “tincture for the tooth ache” did “infallibly cure in a few minutes” while Prussian Ladies Patent Balsam really banished unwanted and unsightly blemishes, leaving “the skin delicately white, soft, and smooth.”<sup>51</sup> But sellers of foodstuffs were rarely that creative. Extensive inventories of goods still formed the bulk of most advertisements from all kinds of sellers. Some consumables, like wine, might merit descriptors such as Lisbon, Madeira, Teneriffe, or Fayal—designating ports of origin. But

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<sup>47</sup> Bushman, “Shopping and Advertising,” 250-251. See also, Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, especially chapter 4; Shammass, *The Preindustrial Consumer*, especially chapter 8 and 9. For an interpretation of the inter-play of gender in shops and shopping, see Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997).

<sup>48</sup> Language based on the advertisements of Robert Strettell Jones, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 1, 1770; Murgatroyd and Wickersham, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 15, 1770; James and Patrick Wright, *Pennsylvania Packet*, February 13, 1775.; Chamless Allen, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 23, 1785. Though cited from these specific ads, this language is representative of that deployed throughout the period under consideration.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Caldwell, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 19, 1780; Joseph Saunders, *Pennsylvania Packet*, March 27, 1775, and *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 19, 1775; George Meade, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 29, 1775.

<sup>50</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 133.

<sup>51</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 17, 1770 and July 12, 1770.

coffee, for example, almost always came from the British West Indies and vendors rarely wasted valuable space with a qualifying adjective.

### **The Politicization of Consumption**

Between 1765 and 1774, Philadelphia's wholesale and retail markets became symbols of political activism as well as commerce as merchants discussed how to mobilize against parliamentary legislation that sought to tighten control over colonial trade. The city's coffeehouses hosted these debates. The choice of coffeehouses as Philadelphia merchants' venue to protest parliamentary legislation about trade was not coincidental. Before the non-importation debates, merchants used coffeehouse common rooms and upstairs parlors to negotiate the trade agreements that governed their far-flung business enterprises, more than those of other establishments, such as taverns or inns.

The Stamp Act, passed in 1765, had immediate economic ramifications for coffeehouse patrons. The act taxed virtually every aspect of business endeavors—from ship registers and invoices to newspapers used to plan future investments. John Hughes, Philadelphia's royal tax collector, was an obvious early target for local traders' hostility, and he knew from whence the threat was emanating.<sup>52</sup> He claimed to be “well arm'd with Fire-Arms” and “determin'd to stand a Siege,” when he barricaded himself at home and asked “several Friends to patroll between my

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<sup>52</sup> The Committee of Ways and Means formally introduced the idea of a stamp act to raise revenue to support defense costs to the House of Commons as early as March 9, 1764. R. C. Simmonds and P. D. G. Thomas, eds., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America, 1754–1783*, vol. 1, 1754–1764 (New York, 1982), 491. The act was designed to raise funds for military protection, so “that the colonies should contribute more to the cost of their defense.” Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 54–55. This emphasis on defense differed from later tax acts. The Townshend Acts, for example, were proposed as a means of “making a more certain and adequate provision for defraying the charge of the administration of justice, and the support of civil government in such provinces where it shall be necessary.” Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 172. Although North America's reaction to parliamentary legislation dominates the historiography, it is worth noting that British West Indian colonies consistently faced higher trade taxation rates. For a comparison of British taxes affecting North American and West Indian colonies, see Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, “The Stamp Act Crisis in the British Caribbean,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 51:2 (April 1994): 203–26.

House and the Coffee House.” That night he was lucky; his friends “come in just now, and say, the Collection of Rabble begins to decrease visibly in the Streets, and the Appearance of Danger seems a good deal less than it did.” By five o’clock the following morning Hughes thought his troubles had passed: “We are all yet in the land of the living, and our Property safe. Thank God.”<sup>53</sup> When the stamps and Hughes’s tax-collector commission arrived on October 5, however, those who opposed the act reassembled at the Old London Coffee House and sent out orders for muffled drums to wend their way through the streets to Hughes’s home. Confronted by a city alderman asking who had authorized their parade, the Stamp Act patriots replied, “they had their orders from the Coffee House.”<sup>54</sup>

Less than a month later, Philadelphia’s merchants voted to join Boston and New York in imposing an embargo on British imports; non-importation began immediately and remained in effect until Parliament repealed the act in March of the following year. Merchants

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<sup>53</sup> Excerpts from *Pennsylvania Journal*, Sept. 4, 1766.

<sup>54</sup> Morgan and Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 260. In November 1765, Hughes received a letter asking whether he still oversaw distribution of stamped paper: “Mr. John Hughes, Sir, We have heard from publick report that you are the officer appointed to distribute stamp paper and parchment in this province pursuant to an act of Parliament lately passed in England, and we now apply to you to know whether you can supply us with stamp paper proper for cockets and clearances... We beg you will be pleased to let us have a direct answer, whether you will or not let us have the stamp papers for the purposes above mentioned. We are, sir, your most humble servants, J. Swift, D. Collier, Alexr. Barclay, Compt., Thos. Graine, Naval Officer.”

Hughes response reveals his lasting bitterness over the coffeehouse debacle: “Gentleman, I received yours of the 4<sup>th</sup> instant and cannot but infer from its contents that you are strangers in Pennsylvania, since by the tenor of your letter your appear to be unacquainted with the things that are come to pass in these our days. Therefore I think it necessary before I proceed to answer it, to give you a brief detail of what has happened. First then, I am to inform you that on Saturday the 5<sup>th</sup> October last the State House and Christ Church bells were rung muffled and two negro drummers, one of whom belonged to Alderman Samuel Mifflin, beat through all parts of the city with muffled drums thereby alarming the inhabitants. In consequence thereof a large number of people was raised and assembled at the State House where it was publicly declared, as I am informed, that if I did not immediately resign my office my house should be pulled down and my substance destroyed. But before the commotion broke up, the Gentleman assembled there in part changed their resolution and by a note they at night sent me indulged me until 10 o’clock the Monday morning following to satisfy them whether I would or not resign my office as Stamp Distributor for the Province.” See NA/PRO T 1/144/1-6, “North America, Customs and Excise, Letters fro Various Governors and Stamp Distributors on the Opposition of the Enforcement of the Stamp Act and the Difficulties of Distribution: John Hughes, Philadelphia, 1765.”

overwhelmingly supported the measure; they placed no new orders for English wares and canceled those that had not already left London.<sup>55</sup>

The merchant community was more divided four years later, when, in February 1769, broadsides called them to meet again at the Old London Coffee House. Various economic interests precipitated the schisms that had appeared. Importers of British dry goods such as tea, glass, and paper, directly taxed by Townshend to raise revenue for colonial defense and administration, were suffering declining demands as their prices rose to accommodate the new duties. These same merchants struggled with the ramifications of the Currency Act of 1764, which forced them to pay in specie and forbade colonial legislatures from issuing paper currency.<sup>56</sup> Provisions merchants to the West Indies, who primarily conducted their business through the exchange of goods instead of cash, were less directly affected by the monetary requirements of the Sugar Act of 1764 and Currency Act of 1764 and, moreover, they benefited from Parliament's decision to continue financial protection of some Caribbean produce.<sup>57</sup> The sixth article of the second Townshend Act, for example—the same act continuing the tea tax—extended tax rebates for coffee and cocoa, as long as trade remained within the British Empire. Because provisions merchants' business was less directly affected by non-importation, they were often perceived as being quicker to propose sanctions and continue embargoes, even after other North American colonial ports resumed trade relations with London. Dry goods merchants, on the other hand, argued that:

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<sup>55</sup> “Non-Importation Agreement Signed by the Merchants of Philadelphia,” Oct. 25, 1765 (HSP). While the 1765 embargo is usually called a period of non-importation, there was, at least initially, an effort to curb consumption of British goods as well. Rather than begin immediately as non-importation did, the prohibition on selling British dry goods did not begin until January 1, 1766.

<sup>56</sup> Merchant John Reynell complained, “Unless we can get some more [paper currency] made, [I] know not what will become of us, nor how we shall be able to pay our debts.” Cited in Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> Jensen, *Maritime Commerce*, 145–52.

their case is particularly hard, as that branch of trade by which they maintain themselves and their families is entirely stopt, while those merchants who trade to the West Indies or foreign parts, still carry on their business as they did before the Agreement.<sup>58</sup>

British dry goods importers may have seen the 1765 embargo as an opportunity to dispose of overstocked wares, but were less sanguine when trade stopped in 1769.

Tensions returned in 1774 when Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, which closed Boston Harbor and initiated a third round of non-importation debates. What distinguished this embargo, however, is that, from the outset, it was an inter-colonial effort. Committees of Correspondence and leading merchants had solicited support from neighboring colonies in the past, but not with the same degree of centralized decision-making that the newly formed Continental Congress exerted over this third non-importation endeavor. The result was economically more damaging to Britain and her colonies than the embargoes of 1765 and 1769, but the sanctions also limited the control of merchants in individual cities over the parameters of trade restrictions. As newspaper debates about the embargo intensified, so did regional and economic factionalism within the Continental Congress. Most delegates supported a complete ban on goods traveling to or from Britain, Ireland, and the British West Indies, but those with vested interests in the Caribbean trade tried to find room for negotiation.

This special pleading on behalf of the West Indian trade received short shrift from other representatives who characterized Caribbean commodities as “Intoxicating Poisons and needless Luxuries” that should be paid for and sunk at sea “rather than [brought] ashore.”<sup>59</sup> Delegate’s letters home evince these changing attitudes. In 1774, John Adams advocated coffee as a revolutionary replacement for tea, but by 1777 he cautioned his wife Abigail, “I hope the

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<sup>58</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Jan. 25, 1770.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

Females will leave off their Attachment to Coffee. I assure you, the best Families in this Place have left off in a great Measure the Use of West India Goods. We must bring ourselves to live upon the Produce of our own Country.”<sup>60</sup>

Stephen Fuller’s speeches before Parliament on the other side of the Atlantic reflected these same concerns. As members of the Continental Congress debated using Caribbean commerce to sway British opinion, Fuller warned British leaders: “I will now take my leave of the whole plan, and will give my free opinion of it. You [Parliament] will commence your ruin from this day, if you do not repeal that tax which created all this disturbance; you will have no degree of confidence with the Americans; people will not trust you when your credit is gone . . . if there ever was a nation running headlong into ruin, it is this.”<sup>61</sup> Parliament disagreed with Fuller and the contested tax on tea remained in effect. In September 1774, Philadelphia along with her sister colonies closed her ports to British ships for the third and final time—when the ports reopened they did so as part of a new, separate nation that would have to renegotiate not only its commercial place in the British empire, but also its mercantile standing in the world.

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<sup>60</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 6, 1775 and August 11, 1777, Adams Family Papers. His letter was in response to a July 30 letter from Abigail Adams in which she described how more than one hundred women had manhandled Boston Thomas Boylston and forced him to sell a hogshead of coffee from his warehouse. Adams Family Correspondence, 2:295-296.

<sup>61</sup> Fuller’s speech was reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (July 27, 1774).

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