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Rebels and Traders: The Economic Consequences of the American Revolution

*Avery Farino*¹

The archives of American Revolutionary history resound with cries denouncing the principle of *taxation without representation*. Political memory insists that the American War for Independence was a defensive one, combating the sweeping economic dominance of Britain designed to subjugate American colonists and industry alike. However, accompanying this rhetoric of liberty lies a more complex motivation, not all that concealed. When Thomas Paine's galvanizing *Common Sense* notes that France and Spain only exist as an enemy of Americans in their capacity as "subjects of Great Britain"² or when he maintains that the development of a navy is "worth more than it costs"³ because of its power to unite "commerce and protection," he hints instead at a reality in which the war was an offensive strike against Britain's political framework for commerce. In this light, the events of the 1770s were motivated by opportunism among colonial elites, both merchants and large-scale planters, who sought to shift the political ground rules that shaped and limited profit opportunities in a capitalist world.

In this sense, Revolutionary-era literature by planters calling for anti-British action and, eventually, revolution both misrepresented the interests of the vast majority of colonial agriculturalists and damaged the planters' long-term interests by threatening the plantation-based economy on which they relied. Elite merchants capitalized on this support, deploying arguments about liberty and economic sovereignty to justify their attempts to transform their own commercial and territorial prospects. In the long term, the merchants' actions also aided in the shift away from an economic system based on plantation agriculture.

Colonial Agriculturalists and Their Politics

Before 1775, colonial agriculturalists could be understood as two groups: planter elites—those with plantations of dozens, if not hundreds, of slaves—and *others*, ranging from small-scale plantation

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² Thomas Paine, Jack Fruchtman, and Sidney enslaved people Hook, *Common Sense, the Rights of Man and Other Essential Writings of Thomas Paine*, (Penguin Publishing Group, 2003), p. 24.

³ Paine, Fruchtman, and Hook, *Common Sense*, p. 43.

owners to yeoman subsistence farmers.⁴ Both of these groups, at least in part, depended on the stability and benefits provided by the British colonial system. Mercantilist policies provided a market for colonial goods within the British Empire, guaranteeing small farmers a market for their agricultural products. For plantation elites, this arrangement not only safeguarded the institution of slavery but expanded it, with the protectionist policies of the Crown shielding the plantation economy from external competition and thus facilitating the expansion of slave-based agriculture. It is notable, however, that these big-picture benefits of mercantilism were not instantly gratifying for elites, leaving the planter class to dwell on the present limitations of Britain's policies (e.g., the restrictions on external trade relationships and lack of independent naval protection that Paine references). Despite the seemingly shared incentive to protect the status quo, these competing motivations and commercial interests manifested in differing attitudes of the two groups and their understanding of the British Empire's economic policies in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

The protection framework of the British Empire, and the way it interacted with the colonies' commerce, was to the long-term benefit of large-scale American planters—ensuring both the protection *of* slavery and *from* industrialization. Nonetheless, large-scale planters favored anti-British policies like non-importation (i.e., an economic boycott in which colonists refused to import British goods to protest taxation and other British policies) because they challenged the framework through which the planters felt economically oppressed in the short term. Planters, particularly in the tobacco industry, were irritated by the Navigation Acts' provisions, which empowered British merchants in the tobacco trade to their detriment and which drove down the prices of enumerated goods (i.e., colonial goods restricted to trade only with Britain and its colonies). In the 1760s and 70s, tidewater planters—those in the coastal areas of Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and parts of Georgia—believed that “British merchants had entered a deliberate conspiracy to bankrupt the planters and seize their possessions.”⁵ This notion gained widespread traction, even accepted by Thomas Jefferson, as planters grew frustrated with the fact that Scottish and English merchants dominated the Atlantic tobacco trade.⁶ Large-scale planters also saw non-importation as a means to sustain their competitiveness as producers of enumerated goods. While some planters like George Washington had the capital and flexibility to diversify their crop production—opting to plant corn rather than tobacco at Muddy Hole and Riverside Quarter in 1762—others remained primarily dependent on the tobacco trade (an enumerated market) and became progressively aggravated with the consequences of re-exportation.⁷ The Navigation Acts mandated that tobacco be traded through

⁴ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, (Routledge, 2013), p. 56.

⁵ Larry Sawers. “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” *Economic History Review* 45:2 (1992).

⁶ Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” p. 268.

⁷ George Washington Diaries, (11 March 1748–13 December 1799), *The Papers of George Washington* (University of Virginia Press, 2008).

English ports, where customs duties could be collected, and trade regulated. This meant that tobacco received “a lower farm-gate price” from both American and British merchants who needed to ensure a solid profit after multiple legs of travel and rounds of British taxes. Distracted by these short-term frustrations, the planters were not cognizant of the regime-level protections provided by the British Empire.

Small farmers and ordinary colonists did not share this strong resistance to the British government, likely because commoners did not feel politically isolated as elites did. American farmers enjoyed more political rights than the majority of rural Europeans, with between fifty and seventy-five percent of adult white males in colonial America holding the right to vote, which was “far higher than the estimated fifteen percent who could vote in eighteenth-century Britain.”⁸ Economically, too, ordinary colonists did not have dramatic grievances with the Navigation Acts, lacking the anger necessary to spur their support for non-importation. In fact, most colonists did not purchase imported goods, and few small farmers participated in export markets, leaving them unaffected by several Revolutionary-era taxes and restrictions. Moreover, the Acts provided significant benefit to small farmers in the sense that “enumeration lowered the prices of tobacco and rice in the colonies” and that they “mandated subsidies to the producers of more than two dozen different goods.”⁹ Thus, anti-British policies, particularly those that raised consumer prices, undermined the benefits that small farmers enjoyed under mercantilism. As a direct consequence of the non-importation, “prices of domestic staples not only reached the highest peak of colonial years in 1772 but held at relatively high levels until 1774.”¹⁰ The high costs of independence continued to burden working-class individuals after the war began, with all commodity prices experiencing a “strong upward surge” by September of 1776.¹¹

The Planters’ Disconnect: Revolutionary Rhetoric vs. Small Farmers’ Realities

In light of these economic differences, revolutionary-era literature combating trade restrictions in the name of the agriculturalists, notably non-importation agreements, misrepresented the interests of the vast majority of small farmers. The *Letters from a farmer in Pennsylvania, to the inhabitants of the British Colonies* (1767), signed anonymously by “A Farmer,” aptly expose this gap. Advocating for non-importation, the “Farmer” frames certain British taxes as purely a revenue source, questioning “whether the Parliament can legally take money out of [the colonists’] pockets without [their]

⁸ Terry Bouton, “Independence on the Land: Small Farmers and the American Revolution,” In *American Revolution: People and Perspectives*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007).

⁹ Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” p. 279.

¹⁰ Anne Bezanson, *Prices and Inflation During the American Revolution, Pennsylvania, 1770-1790*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951).

¹¹ Bezanson, *Prices and Inflation*.

consent.”¹² Though this document’s author, John Dickinson, was truthful in that he owned only a small farm and few servants, he was assuredly not a farmer by trade. Born to the owners of a sizable Maryland tobacco plantation, Dickinson was a highly educated attorney, legislator, and delegate to the Constitutional Convention. His letters, in direct response to a legislative compulsion imposed on the New York Assembly (dissolved after failing to comply with the Quartering Act), ostensibly claim to highlight Parliament’s unconstitutional actions. However, the *Letters from a farmer in Pennsylvania* were simply part of Dickinson’s long-standing effort, as early as the French and Indian War (1753-1763), to write and litigate on behalf of an “American trade unhampered by unconstitutional British restraints.”¹³ Should he have been faithful to the interest of farmers, Dickinson would have afforded more attention to those who spoke out on the issue.

The debate over the merits of non-importation was spelled out in a vitriolic dialogue between Alexander Hamilton and Anglican priest Samuel Seabury, who highlighted that the policy was antithetical to lower-class interests. In October 1774, the Continental Congress passed the Association, which promised to end trade with Great Britain until 10 September 1775. Some colonists, still hoping for reconciliation with their mother country, were outraged by this assertion. Seabury was among their ranks, prompting his writing of *Free Thoughts on the Proceedings of the Continental Congress* under the pen name of “A. W. Farmer” (A Westchester Farmer). Seabury—focused on the reliance of the colonists on British goods—feared that non-importation would deprive Americans of essential commodities that they were unable to produce themselves. His writings were soon hotly contested by a young Hamilton, writing under the pseudonym “A Friend to America.” In response to Seabury’s “violent aversion” to non-importation agreements, Hamilton notes that, in preceding occasions, these agreements had been “the only thing that procured [the colonists] redress.”¹⁴ While Hamilton paints a rosy picture in which there exist no problems that “perseverance and industry may not overcome,” Seabury’s qualms with non-importation instead hint at an underlying economic anxiety felt by the majority of colonists, particularly small farmers. Hamilton believed that the colonists possessed the ability and grit to industrialize in the absence of British manufactured goods, but Seabury recognized that it requires “as much legerdemain to convert an American sailor or ship-wright into a spinster or

¹² John Dickinson, *Letters from a farmer in Pennsylvania, to the inhabitants of the British Colonies*, ed. R. T. Haines Halsey (Pennsylvania Chronicle, 1767-68).

¹³ Jane E. Calvert, “Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking in the Historiography of John Dickinson,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 34:3 (2014): pp. 467–80.

¹⁴ Alexander Hamilton, February 23, 1775, *The Farmer Refuted*, ed. Harold C. Syrett (Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 81–165.

weaver, as to convert an English clothier into a blacksmith[sic].”¹⁵ Colonists who were farmers—not just in name but in trade—were apprehensive about the industrialization that would likely follow these anti-British policies. These small farmers reasonably feared that mechanization would eclipse their role in American markets, as automation has done for the twenty-first-century non-technical working class. Furthermore, they also likely understood that they would again bear the brunt of a change in the American protection framework for commerce through rising consumer prices, just as previous instances of temporary non-importation had exposed the American colonists’ dependence on externally manufactured goods. Thus, Seabury criticizes the “smooth words of deceit” by which patriots like Hamilton attempt to convince farmers and ordinary colonists that non-importation would not threaten the price of provisions in the long term.¹⁶

Dickinson and Hamilton were not the only Founding Fathers to advocate non-importation. Benjamin Franklin, too, expressed support for such policies in his private correspondence. Franklin viewed non-importation as a means of obtaining concessions from the British Parliament and asserting the colonists’ economic rights. Following the repeal of the Townshend duties after the Boston Massacre in 1770, colonial merchants lifted their non-importation agreements, restoring commerce with their mother country. Soon after, Benjamin Franklin—then residing in London—conveyed in a letter to his colleague and confidant Samuel Cooper, a prominent clergyman and patriot during the Revolutionary War, that he believed the agreements had fostered a “disposition [in London] to treat [the Americans] more equitably,” thereby lessening his expectation of war.¹⁷ Of course, by “Americans” he meant planter and merchant elites, and by “equitably” he referred to their economic rather than political interests. This message was well received by Cooper, a patriot equally out of touch with colonial working-class interests. Cooper, a participant of the Boston Tea Party a few years later, reported to Jefferson the day following that 1773 incident, that despite the effort’s inevitable consequences, the country was united with the town and the Colonies with one another “in the common Cause, more firmly than ever.”¹⁸ In reality, tea was “a luxury that most colonists could not

¹⁵ Samuel Seabury, *A View of the Controversy between Great-Britain and Her Colonies: Including a Mode of Determining Their Present Disputes, Finally and Effectually; and of Preventing All Future Contentions.: In a Letter, to the Author of A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress, from the Calumnies of Their Enemies. [Three lines from Milton]. Author of Free Thoughts, &c.* (New York, 1774).

¹⁶ Samuel Seabury, *A View of the Controversy between Great-Britain and Her Colonies*.

¹⁷ Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Cooper, *Letters on the Easing of British-American Tensions, 1770-71* (National Humanities Center, 2013).

¹⁸ “To Benjamin Franklin from Samuel Cooper, 17 December 1773,” *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 20, *January 1 through December 31, 1773*, ed. William B. Willcox (Yale University Press, 1976).

afford,” and many were put off by the actions of the Sons of Liberty at Boston Harbor that December night.¹⁹ This private correspondence underscores the disparity between the motivations driving the revolution and the sentiments of the broader colonial population.

More public-facing literature, however, attempted to conceal these economic motivations under the guise of liberty. One revolutionary pamphlet signed anonymously as “A Tradesman” even recognized that there existed “tradesmen who [had] suffered by the non-importation agreement” but called upon citizens not to “neglect the only opportunity [they] will ever have of convincing the world that [they] are real lovers of liberty.”²⁰ With this complex interplay between economic interests and the pursuit of freedom, it becomes difficult to determine which factor is driving revolutionary fervor across the various sectors of the colonial economy and government.

Further calling into question the sincerity of revolutionary literature purporting to support the best interests of working-class farmers is the fact that this anti-British position was ironically also lauded by merchants. Merchants were often part of the commercial and trading elite, advocating for the least restrictive policies to sustain the profitability of their overseas trade. Their economic interests were closely tied to their nation’s access to markets and favorable government policies that facilitated commerce, not necessarily in tandem with those “of the people.”²¹ By contrast, small-scale farmers typically pursued more localized economic interests, relying upon the stability of local markets through which they delivered their goods and services. For the small-holders, war threatened stability; for the elites, “the Seven Years’ War taught [large-scale] farmers, merchant millers, and traders to associate war with economic opportunity.”²² The mercantile focus on expanding export-import trade, on the other hand, threatened local markets with economic fluctuations, inflation, and disruptions to the trust existing among local merchants.²³ Given these vast disparities in economic interests, merchants and small-scale farmers would not often overlap in their policy preferences. If John Dickinson’s *Letters from a farmer in Pennsylvania* truly spoke to the interests of small farmers, would he really have been heralded by merchants for this work as a “worthy and patriotic writer?”²⁴ This praise, offered by Boston merchants in advocating another 12 months of non-importation, does not reflect a unified resistance

¹⁹ Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” p. 279.

²⁰ *To the tradesmen, farmers, and other inhabitants of the City and County of Philadelphia. And will you suffer the credit and liberties of the Province of Pennsylvania to be sacrificed to the interests of a few merchants in Philadelphia? ... Sign.* (N.p., 1770).

²¹ Timothy Hall Breen. *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

²² Brooke Hunter, “Wheat, War, and the American Economy during the Age of Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 62:3 (2005): pp. 505–26.

²³ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 2004.

²⁴ *To the merchants and traders of the City of Philadelphia*, (Library of Congress, 1770).

to British rule across social classes, but rather a covert alignment among elite colonial merchants and planters. For merchants, non-importation served to clear overstocked warehouses and depress currency exchange rates, making it a useful economic maneuver rather than purely a patriotic sacrifice.²⁵ In this light, Dickinson's letters—and the routine, extra-legal attempts of the merchants to compete with their British counterparts through boycotts—while rhetorically appealing to the plight of farmers, obscured the economic costs that non-importation imposed on small producers and localized laborers.

In the same year that Dickinson's letters were published in colonial newspapers, of the 521 land-owning enslavers in Pennsylvania, fifty-seven percent owned only a single enslaved person, and another twenty-six percent owned only two.²⁶ Among the remaining 17%, only a small number of large-scale planters benefited from non-importation. In advocating for and securing these import restrictions, those elite planters evidently had an outsized impact in setting and sustaining American economic and foreign policy. The planter class, allied with merchants in their manipulation of common people, knew that “ending colonial rule transformed their prospects for commercial and territorial expansion.”²⁷ In turn, they—sometimes among the Founding Fathers themselves—succeeded in embedding their interests into the hearts and minds of those who laid the groundwork for the United States' political framework for commerce.

Farmers at War: Elites vs. Smallholders

This was not the first time that plantation elites had shown their teeth in American politics, shaping geopolitical dynamics to support their profits best. The American colonies' first navigation laws were primarily written to reflect “the interests of men who made their fortunes in tobacco and sugar.” In the first half of the seventeenth century, colonial planters feared foreign competition, particularly from the Dutch, who had recently been freed from the Spanish Empire. This short-term, exaggerated fear forged the first formal association between colonial industry and the British Empire—the first instance of the planter class acting against their own long-term interests. For several years, this protection framework existed in harmony with the interests of large and small farmers alike. Mercantilism seamlessly integrated the colonies into the English Atlantic economy, provided Americans with backing from the Royal Navy, and secured them preferential advantages in London markets. However, the motivations of the plantation elites later shifted, as new frustrations arose from falling sugar and tobacco prices. Despite the Navigation Acts' favorability writ large, the planters facilitated an anti-mercantilist push,

²⁵ Marc Engal and Joseph A. Ernst, “An economic interpretation of the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History* (1972): pp. 4-32.

²⁶ Gary B Nash, “Slaves and Slaveowners in Colonial Philadelphia,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30:2 (1973): pp. 223–56.

²⁷ Robin Blackburn, “Why the Second Slavery?” In *Slavery and Historical Capitalism during the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Dale Tomich, pp. 1–25, (Lanham: 2017.)

demonstrating a willingness to “take risks and experiment if they thought it might improve their bottom line.”²⁸

Interestingly, the planters did not rely solely on agenda-pushing through leaflets and pamphlets; instead, they also shaped the new political framework for commerce as deeply ingrained participants in the political establishment. As active agents in colonial politics, elite planters of the revolutionary era routinely relied on overseers due to their external business. This was such a common occurrence that, by the time the war started, local legislatures (particularly in South Carolina and Virginia) “declared overseeing crucial to the success of southern plantations and the defense of the surrounding countryside.”²⁹ While these double-agent planter revolutionaries were off serving their own interests in the Continental Congress, small farmers and the working class were, as in the negotiation of the original navigation laws, left out of decision-making. In this case, yeoman and small-scale planters were physically removed and employed as overseers on the plantations of leaders such as Henry Laurens, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson.

Despite being referenced and pandered to in revolutionary literature, small farmers not employed as overseers were even further removed from the politics of revolution—a product of both nature and nurture. Some historians have argued that a natural geographical separation contributed to a general apathy among small farmers, with a lack of roads, schools, and newspapers keeping them physically isolated from the nationalism brewing in urban centers. While some urban loyalists reported intentionally escaping to the countryside “to be out of Way[sic],” the pro-British disposition was in many instances a natural phenomenon. In just one example, Thomas Sherar, a farmer of Tryon County, New York, indicated that he was never asked to join the Continental Army simply on the merits of living thirty miles from their nearest base.³⁰ For some, though, a proclivity for loyalism was instead a product of a rural upbringing. Few men, for example, risked leaving their farm during the war without a patriarch’s approval, with a strong male figure representing the center of these colonial farms and families.³¹

On the other hand, there existed those humble agriculturalists who actively rejected the rebel army’s goals and mobilized militarily. Throughout the Revolutionary War, between 30,000 and 50,000 colonists, predominantly farmers, regularly served alongside the loyalists, with thousands more

²⁸ Russell R. Menard, “Plantation Empire: How Sugar and Tobacco Planters Built Their Industries and Raised an Empire,” *Agricultural History* 81:3 (2007): pp. 309–332.

²⁹ Laura Sandy, “Divided Loyalties in a “Predatory War”: Plantation Overseers and Slavery during the American Revolution,” *Journal of American Studies* 48:2 (2014): p. 366.

³⁰ Wallace Brown, “The American Farmer during the Revolution: Rebel or Loyalist?” *Agricultural History* 42:4 (1968): pp. 327–38.

³¹ William Baller, “Farm Families and the American Revolution,” *Journal of Family History* 31:1 (2006): pp. 28–44.

participating sporadically with local militias.³² Ironically, loyalist smallholder farmers who took up arms were hampered by the rugged individualism required by their lifestyle. Their charisma did not translate well into military coordination, with yeoman farmers often embodying an “every man for himself” spirit when entering combat.³³

These yeoman-turned-soldiers represented the exception rather than the rule. Michel-Guillaume Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*—recognized by historians as a genuine attempt to capture the experiences and sentiments of small farmers—provides a glimpse into why most ordinary settlers resisted the independence struggle. Crèvecoeur, through the persona of a farmer named James, highlights the content of the yeoman, “possessing freedom of action and thought,” while facing no substantial burdens from government. While revolutionary elites pushed narratives of self-governance and economic independence, some small farmers instead romanticized the status quo agrarian life as the American dream. Revolution threatened to disrupt the generational security of subsistence agriculture, the moderation with which technology was implemented into farm life (primarily incorporated to simplify women’s labor), and the greater personal autonomy not shared by some English peasants.³⁴ Many small planters, too, urged the importance of peace because they understood that revolution was fraught with risk and uncertainty. In May 1776, one of these men took to the Weekly Advertiser section of the *Pennsylvania Ledger*, insisting that a war for independence would bring “final ruin” and factionalization, while peace would allow the upcoming planter class to flourish.³⁵ The Declaration of Independence would be signed only months later, threatening the future viability of an economic system based on plantation agriculture.

The Planters’ Self-Deprecating Actions

Considering the centrality of slavery in the colonial economic system, planters’ attempts to sway public opinion in favor of revolution demonstrated a serious fault in rationality: revolution exposed the plantation economy to greater liability than commercial potential. Revolutionary thinking was immediately accompanied by ideas and policies threatening to the planters’ long-term interests, most importantly, challenges to the institution of slavery. Even before the war, the Continental

³² William Baller, “Farm Families,” pp. 28–44.

³³ Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence*, (Northeastern University Press, 1983), pp. 64–65.

³⁴ Michel-Guillaume Saint-Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer: Describing Certain Provincial Situations, Manners, and Customs, Not Generally Known; and Conveying Some Idea of the Late and Present Circumstances of the British Colonies in North America*, (N.p.: 1783).

³⁵ *To Cato. Pennsylvania Ledger: or the Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New-Jersey Weekly Advertiser (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)*, no. LXVIII, May 11, 1776: (3), Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers.

Association—as an element of temporarily severing the colonists’ economic ties with Great Britain—resolved to halt American involvement in the Slave Trade and the colonists’ business with those involved in it.³⁶ Knowing that the Slave Trade was one of the most crucial industries tying the colonists to the rest of the Atlantic world, effective non-importation required this dramatic step. Even though the Association contained a sunset clause and the practice of slavery remained intact, at this moment, the Continental Congress began to instill the idea that the Slave Trade was negotiable.

Once the war commenced, the snowball effect continued. Lord Dunmore, a British nobleman who served as the last royal governor of Virginia before the American Revolutionary War, issued a proclamation in November 1775 offering freedom to enslaved people who fought as loyalists. Dunmore’s proclamation forced the hand of the rebels, who in turn quickly raised their own slave regiment. The same month, a number of these formerly enslaved people fought in the Battle of Kemp’s Landing and “behaved like well-seasoned soldiers, pursuing and capturing one of the attacking companies.”³⁷ As the use of formerly enslaved people as soldiers grew popular, however, the necessity that occasioned their emancipation became blurred with the idea of liberty. Even James Madison, the owner of a considerable plantation in Virginia, articulated that the practice “would certainly be consonant to the principles of liberty,” highlighting the fact that both enslaved people and revolutionary elites—consciously or not—began to see slavery as a moral question and enslaved people as Americans.³⁸ After the war, these ideas lingered and developed among certain sects of the new nation, with the Pennsylvania assembly in 1780 approving a moderate emancipation law after public debate.³⁹ Despite the rampant growth of the plantation economy in the South during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, planters had taken a calculated risk, shaking the foundations of the system they relied on in pursuit of short-term goals.

Also adverse to the planters’ interests was the growing concept of a manufacturing-based economy. After the war, the new nation eagerly embraced trade expansion and warmed to the vision of industrial capitalism. In May of 1787, Tench Coxe—Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under Washington and proponent of protective tariffs and domestic manufacturing—delivered an address to the Society for Political Enquiries in Philadelphia. His speech, *An Enquiry into the Principles on Which a Commercial System for the United States of America Should be Founded*, argued that it would be more desirable for the nation to employ its own manufacturing than to depend solely on neighbors and the

³⁶ U. S. Continental Congress, 1774, *Proceedings of the Grand American Continental Congress at Philadelphia, September 5, 1774* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), 1774.

³⁷ W. B. Hartgrove, *The Negro Soldier in the American Revolution (Abridged, Annotated)* (N.p.: Independently Published, 1916).

³⁸ Madison et al., *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol 2. p. 198.

³⁹ Blackburn, “Why the Second Slavery?,” p. 11.

Americans' newfound access to free ports.⁴⁰ This line of thinking was swiftly incorporated into the newly forming American political framework, with the second law passed by the U.S. Congress under the 1787 constitution being a protectionist tariff.⁴¹ This legislation, along with a 1789 law subjecting imported goods to a five percent duty, was not only intended to help “discharge of the debts of the United States” with new revenue streams, but also to facilitate the nation’s transition into its role as a self-sufficient manufacturing power.⁴² While the movement away from plantation agriculture to a more established industrial capitalism did not occur overnight, it is clear that the revolution marked a shift in the ambitions of America’s political, economic, and intellectual leaders.

Parallel Goals, Conflicting Interests: The Planter-Merchant Dynamic

Despite these consequences, anti-British policy (up to and including independence) was pushed by the planters because the system of plantation agriculture had become so unstable and planters’ debts to British merchants so high that gambling with the future protection framework seemed rational. In considering non-importation agreements, the planters came to this decision by balancing the diminishing value of protection from foreign competition (namely from the Spanish and Dutch) and the need to outcompete Britain itself.⁴³ At the same time, the planters’ debts were at an all-time high due to their credit purchases of luxury goods through London’s consignment merchants. In the decades leading to revolution, wealthy planters, notably in Virginia, became concerned with the dominance of British merchants and “turned to new export crops, plantation manufacturing, and limited commercial activity” to remain competitive in Atlantic trade.⁴⁴ Ultimately, these ventures did not boost business for the planters; on the eve of revolution, they accepted that the only way to ensure the longevity of their wealth was to be freed of the Navigation Acts, reduce their debts, and decrease their reliance on tobacco.

For the merchants, however, the revolution was more a product of opportunity than of necessity, favorable to both their long and short-term interests. Merchants knew that “crisis gave new license” to gouge customers and suppliers while simultaneously threatening to wipe out “less

⁴⁰ *An Enquiry into the Principles on Which a Commercial System for the United States of America Should be Founded*, May 11, 1787, in *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution Digital Edition*, ed. John P. Kaminski, Gaspare J. Saladino, Richard Leffler, Charles H. Schoenleber and Margaret A. Hogan (University of Virginia Press, 2009).

⁴¹ Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” p. 276.

⁴² John M. Dobson, *Two centuries of tariffs: The background and emergence of the US International Trade Commission*. (The Commission, 1976).

⁴³ Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” p. 273.

⁴⁴ Bruce Allan Ragsdale, “Nonimportation and the Search for Economic Independence in Virginia, 1765–1775,” PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1985.

connected and creditworthy merchants,” consolidating economic and political power behind a small pocket of revolutionary drivers.⁴⁵ They also knew that a North America unencumbered by mercantilism would engage in broader international trade, breaking free of the shackles of the British Empire’s Navigation Act. Indeed, before the Revolutionary War, 55% of the colonies’ trade was with British consumers, with negligible direct trade with other markets. By 1790, the British share of American trade declined to thirty-one percent of the nation’s exports, with another sixteen percent making its way to other northern European markets.⁴⁶

While colonial planters and merchants were aligned in their support for expanding the American trade network, American merchants at the same time sought to pursue an interest competing with the plantation system: the formation of a manufacturing-based economy in the new nation. Given merchants’ long-standing promotion of competitive mechanization, planters should have regarded their supposed allies with caution, aware that a post-war industrial pivot could ultimately undermine the plantation economy and the reliance on enslaved labor. Despite their public disavowal, political elites were often kept abreast of merchants’ early efforts to engage in the pursuit of “improvements and secrets of extraordinary value,” or what would now be considered intellectual property theft.⁴⁷ One of the leaders of this covert intelligence collection was merchant Thomas Attwood Digges, a close correspondent of George Washington who was born directly across from Mount Vernon on the Maryland side of the Potomac River and later spent much of the eighteenth century living in Europe, furthering the patriot cause. Targeting gifted artisans, developers, and entrepreneurs, Digges worked on behalf of American political and merchant elites to transport technological development back to the United States. In one such instance in the 1790s, Digges sought the expertise of William Pearce, an inventor of spinning and weaving technology whom he called “a second Archimedes” due to his knowledge of the double loom.⁴⁸ By 1791, Digges provided descriptions of the function and utility of the loom to George Washington through their correspondence, providing new possibilities for productivity and profit in the manufacturing sector, with little regard for either the small farmers who could not compete with industrial resources or

⁴⁵ Tom Cutterham, “The Revolutionary Transformation of American Merchant Networks: Carter and Wadsworth and Their World, 1775–1800,” *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 18: no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–31.

⁴⁶ David E. McNabb, “Post-Revolutionary War Commerce and Trade,” In *A Comparative History of Commerce and Industry, Vol. I: Four Paths to an Industrialized World*, (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016).

⁴⁷ Alexander Hamilton, *Report on Manufactures*, communicated to the House of Representatives, December 5, 1791 (Childs and Swaine, 1791).

⁴⁸ Carroll W. Pursell, “Thomas Digges and William Pearce: An Example of the Transit of Technology,” *The William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History* (1964): pp. 553–554.

planters who relied on a plantation-based economy.⁴⁹ Even further than simply pursuing those who could lead the American transition into manufacturing, Digges also sought to acquire a vast workforce of skilled Europeans to emigrate to the United States. Distributing copies of Alexander Hamilton's *Report on Manufacturers* among the manufacturing districts of England and Ireland, Digges hoped to induce many to move to the United States—a process he noted would improve as “the Slavery by blacks decreas[ed].”⁵⁰ Digges' endeavors to promote skilled European immigration presented a radical departure from the agricultural status quo. By implicitly challenging the institution of slavery and offering a new vision for the American working class, Digges' actions served to drive a tremendous shift in the nation's economic landscape.

Despite these competing interests, planters and merchants joined forces, capitalizing on the opportune circumstances of the late 1700s to pursue greater profits. Facilitating merchants' and planters' ability to bring about revolution in this particular historical moment were the decade's apt social and demographic conditions for the diffusion of liberty-centred literature. Approaching revolution, the growth of densely populated urban centers and inland communities heavily influenced the spread of revolutionary writings. Moreover, after the French and Indian War, Britain gained a vast territory previously held by the French Empire, inspiring a westward migration of colonists seeking to alleviate pressure on the eastern seaboard and to assert control over the newly acquired territories. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, “the great southward migration brought waves of settlement to the piedmont,” forcing the colonists into frustrating confrontation with British policies like the Proclamation of 1763, which restricted westward expansion beyond the Appalachians.⁵¹ Because appeals to “higher ideals than greed may win more support,” the array of anti-British grievances boiling among the colonies at this moment became the revolutionaries' advantage.⁵² In this socio-political context, elite merchants reframed their quest for profit as an inability of the Americans to “tamely submit” to the increasingly oppressive mercantilist system out of their “innate love of liberty and the British constitution.”⁵³ Through these well-choreographed pleas, an elite class managed

⁴⁹ Thomas Digges, “From Thomas Digges to George Washington, July 1, 1791,” *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, (University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008).

⁵⁰ Thomas Digges, “From Thomas Digges to Alexander Hamilton, April 6, 1792,” *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (Library of Congress).

⁵¹ Rachel N. Klein. “Inland Civil War” in *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760-1808* (Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture, 1990), pp. 78-108.

⁵² Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” p. 279.

⁵³ Samuel Farmer Wilson, *History of the American Revolution, with a Preliminary View of the Character and Principles of the Colonists, and Their Controversies with Great Britain*, (Baltimore: N. Hickman, 1843).

to convince the colonists to fight a war against the ‘forced’ purchase of manufactured goods and commercial services that “tended to be the best and least expensive available anyway.”⁵⁴

Previously, this rebellious milieu among the American colonists was not a factor in the planter’s self-interested political strategy. In 1715, William Byrd II of Westover—one of colonial Virginia’s wealthiest plantation owners—similarly sought to achieve a greater degree of economic sovereignty in the colonies due to his growing disappointment with falling tobacco prices.⁵⁵ He, too, attempted to rebrand his political action as an effort “to limit the Crown’s prerogative in the colony in the interest of the liberties of Virginians.”⁵⁶ However, lacking the support of an elite network vying to transform the American political framework for commerce, Byrd never achieved the acclaim of the Founding Fathers’ revolutionary movement and was unable to usurp Royal Governor Alexander Spotswood’s post. Whether it was due to the success of revolutionary writings like Paine’s *Common Sense* and Dickinson’s *Letters from a Farmer*, the instrumental support of merchants in furthering liberty-loving messages, or simply a product of the times, the American Revolution unfolded in a moment ripe for political, social, and economic change. Under these circumstances, the planter class—to their ultimate detriment—ushered in a new age of industrialization. American merchants took their chance and ran with it.

⁵⁴ Menard, “Plantation Empire: How Sugar and Tobacco Planters Built Their Industries and Raised an Empire,” p. 315.

⁵⁵ William Byrd, *The Diary of William Byrd II of Virginia* (National Humanities Center, 1709-1712).

⁵⁶ Kevin Joel Berland. *The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover* (Omohundro. *Institute of Early American History & Culture*, 2001).