

Connecting the Kingdom:
Captains' Discretion, Conversation, and Partnership
in the Transatlantic Tobacco Trade, 1720-1776

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BA History and Economics, The College of William and Mary, 2015

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

University of Virginia
December, 2017

In 1768 Captain Robinson impressed his employers enough that they hired him to select a crew, provision his vessel, sail across the Atlantic, meet with planters, factors, and merchants in Virginia, load his vessel quickly, and sail back with undamaged tobacco in his hold. Through luck and cunning, Captain Robinson successfully avoided pirates, destructive waves and winds, and death, likely using threats and violence against his crew in the process. Thousands of captains successfully managed the voyage Captain Robinson made, but hundreds failed. For his trouble Captain Robinson received a wage, privilege, and possibly part of the proceeds of the voyage, but little recognition. Virginian William Nelson wrote of Captain Robinson, “he seems to be sober and industrious; but with your Interest here, & your son’s Diligence & Application you might safely send a Broomstick to load a ship for you.”¹ Nelson’s dismissal of Robinson suggests the importance of captains remained implicit to colonists as it has to the historians who studied them. However, the daily duties captains performed and the relationships they forged facilitated the convergence of colonial and British mercantile culture.

Ship captains lived their lives in distant worlds: in British Ports, along the Chesapeake Rivers, and on board their vessels. Though merchants, factors, and planters occasionally crossed the Atlantic, captains often provided the only connection between the colonies and Britain. They used these connections to shape the opinions and expectations British merchants had of Chesapeake market actors and vice versa. In the late seventeenth century the decentralized and unplanned venture system empowered captains to make business decisions that affected the outcome of their voyages. As trade became concentrated in permanent firms, British partnerships stripped some of the decision-making power previously granted to captains. However, the uncertainty associated with ocean sailing and long periods of absence forced firms to continue

¹ William Nelson to John Norton, July 9, 1768, in *John Norton and Sons: Merchants of London and Virginia*, ed. by Frances Norton Mason (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1937) 57.

delegating some business decisions to captains. In addition, as captains' autonomy waned, their crucial role in connecting British merchants and markets with colonial markets waxed. As more vessels traversed the Atlantic with more captains at the helm, those captains facilitated moments of understanding between market actors separated by the Atlantic, which facilitated market integration.

During the seventy-five years before the American Revolution colonial American economic culture in the Chesapeake converged with British economic culture. Jack Greene argued that British and colonial societies became increasingly ordered and coherent while embracing differentiation and complexity.² The British-Chesapeake mercantile culture evolving in the eighteenth century fits Greene's convergence and development model. By the 1770s merchants, shopkeepers, and planters, large and small, internalized a profit motive and worked to maximize their productivity. They largely accepted the terms of trading partnerships and respected debtor-creditor relationships.³ Finally, they internalized the need for transatlantic market information and developed relationships with informants and news sources accordingly.⁴ These internalized values composed the early capitalist mentality that influenced market actors in the Chesapeake and Britain.⁵

² Jack P. Green, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 172.

³ Lorena S. Walsh, *Motives of Honor Pleasure and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607-1763* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) Jacob M. Price, *Capital and Credit in the British Overseas Trade: The View from the Chesapeake, 1700-1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 128-137.

⁴ John J. McCusker and Cora Gravesteijn, *The Beginnings of Commercial and Financial Journalism: The Commodity Price Currents, Exchange Rate Currents, and Money Currents of Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Netherlands Economic History Archives, 1991), 324.

⁵ Paul A. Gilje summarizes the debate over the rise of capitalism in "The Rise of Capitalism in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, 1996. Two stars of the debate are Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) who argues for a transformative capitalist moment in the early 19th century and Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) who cautions against the term revolution to describe to market's influence in the 19th century.

Ship captains, as transatlantic middlemen, facilitated the convergence of mercantile culture between Britain and the Chesapeake. During this period more vessels crossed the Atlantic, more goods flowed between British ports and Chesapeake wharves, and trade became more organized and centralized. Captains facilitated this transition by conveying and interpreting information on both sides of the Atlantic. Captains effectively filled this role because they built trust with merchants and employers in Britain and merchants, shopkeepers and planters in the colonies. They built this trust by successfully dispatching their duties. Thus, Chesapeake mercantile culture converged with the same in Britain, in part, because of the exertions of the thousands of captains who crossed the Atlantic during the eighteenth century. Though the American Revolution disrupted trade between the Chesapeake and Britain, new citizens of the United States and British merchants drew on their common pre-war cultural values as they renewed and forged new trading relationships in the post-war years.

T.H. Breen is foremost among historians who contest these claims. Breen argued Tidewater planters developed a more aristocratic tobacco mentality that sharply contrasted with the calculating market-oriented zeal of British merchants.⁶ Breen's analysis simultaneously underestimates the calculating capitalist mercantile culture embraced by Chesapeake planters and overestimates its power for British merchants. Lorena Walsh examined not only the planter correspondence, which provided the source base for Breen's study, but also the plantation records he dismissed.⁷ Walsh found the Chesapeake planters were savvy businessmen who used their resources effectively, exploited their comparative advantage, diversified effectively, often kept careful accounts, and planned for the future.⁸ Second, evidence suggests British merchants

⁶T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)

⁷ Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 73-76.

⁸ Walsh, *Motives of Honor*, 7-8.

valued their mercantile relationships more than Breen claims. Merchants settled bankruptcy claims out of court, granted extensions on credit during bad harvests, sometimes at a loss, and corresponded about marriages, births, and health with interest and enthusiasm.⁹ This evidence and the experience of mercantile captains suggest Breen downplayed the convergent mentalities of British merchants and colonial planters.

Captains brought planters, farmers, merchants and native peoples in the Chesapeake the goods they desired and Britons the “noxious weed” they smoked. In the process captains brought market actors on both sides of the Atlantic into more routine contact with one another. The relatively porous nature of ship captaincy allowed minimally educated younger sons and nephews of merchants and lucky first mates to influence wealthy merchants and prominent planters. The connections captains forged between planters, shopkeepers, and merchants facilitated the convergence of British and American mercantile culture and laid the groundwork for post-revolution global trade. The capitalist mentality captains constructed encouraged market actors to work for profit, invest their capital, value market information, and internalize time pressures.

Captains found entry into British trading ventures difficult but far from impossible. Zahedieh, Doerflinger, and Hancock observed that in London, Philadelphia and Madeira, merchants entered overseas trade relatively easily, especially during their era of formation in the seventeenth century. Men needed capital, luck, cunning mixed with caution, and white skin to succeed as merchants. Ship owners looked for similar criteria when hiring ship captains. Owners

⁹ Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy, 1660-1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 93-95, Price, *Capital and Credit*, 133, Agreement between Robert Paterson and the owners of the *Neptune*, 15 September 1729, Glasgow Burg Register of Deeds B10/15/1457, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

hired men they believed might be “sensible sober [and] diligent” and took pains to attach these men to their interests.¹⁰ The requirements excluded many men but provided some with opportunities previously closed. A minimally educated young sailor with connections in the merchant community, or a significant amount of luck, could hope to become a captain by his early twenties. Captaincy, when done well, brought young men increased responsibility, respect, wealth and opportunity.

The experience of Charles Ridgely illustrates how connections helped a man become a captain in the tobacco trade. Charles Ridgely, born in Maryland in 1733, became a sailor at a young age, possibly at his father’s request though his descendant claimed he “ran away to sea” as a boy.¹¹ As a second son, Ridgely likely exploited his relationship with his ship-owning father and brother to help him find a job as a captain. At age 23, Charles Ridgely sailed on what was likely his first voyage as captain from London to Virginia in 1756 in the snow, *Baltimore Town*.¹² Between London and Virginia, French privateers captured the vessel and imprisoned Ridgely at Carhaix in Northern France.¹³ Somehow, Ridgely negotiated his freedom as the Maryland Gazette reported on November 10, 1757, “the *Baltimore Town* Capt. Charles Ridgely, who was thought to be lost, is safely arrived at Hampton.” Captain Ridgely continued to sail after this disaster. In 1759 he captained the *Charming Nancy* for James Russell, a prominent London tobacco merchant.¹⁴ In 1760 Ridgely married and around 1763 he stopped sailing and pursued

¹⁰ William and Thomas Nelson to Edward Hunt Esq & Son, July 26, 1770, William and Thomas Nelson Letterbook, 1766-1775, Small Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries, Charlottesville, Va.

¹¹ Helen West Ridgely, “Seafaring in the time of War, 1756-1763,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 10 (1915): 5.

¹² A snow is a type of two-masted vessel. Captain Charles Ridgely Logbook, Ridgely-Dorsey Papers, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD.

¹³ Captain Jehosophat Rawlings to Monsieur Charles Ridgely, April 25, 1757, Ridgely Family Papers, 1757-1949, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore MD.

¹⁴ “Annapolis November 10,” *Maryland Gazette*, November 10, 1757, Vaughn W. Brown, *Shipping in the Port of Annapolis, 1748-1775* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1965), 43.

planting, trading, and managing part of his family's ironworks, eventually amassing 12,000 acres of land in Maryland and constructing a Georgian mansion as a country retreat.

Captain Charles Ridgely lived to age 57, experienced extraordinary luck, and was blessed with a father and brother who possessed wealth and connections which likely assisted him in obtaining a captain position. However, though kinship connections helped a man become a captain, they were not essential. Fewer than five percent of ship captains shared the same last name as the managing owner of their vessel.¹⁵ This number significantly underestimates the kinship connections involved, because it excludes matrilineal connections and does not account for all the partial owners. However, it suggests that while nepotism influenced hiring decisions, owners also hired captains without familial or friendship connections. As the number of ships crossing the Atlantic increased the demand for captains also increased. If a trusted captain recommended his first mate to owners searching for a captain, the able mate might succeed to captaincy without connections in the merchant community.¹⁶

Regardless of a captain's familial connections, all captains acquired a basic education. The librarian at Westover, William Proctor, advised a friend "how soon as they [your children] are able you would put them out early to learn Trades... let them, if you can, read, cast up accounts, but beware of more lest it spoil good Tradesmen."¹⁷ Proctor's observations on the appropriate education for tradesmen applied equally to captains. All captains wrote their employers regularly and read their replies. Their full literacy rate contrasted sharply with the 67.6 percent of common sailors who could sign their name.¹⁸ Captains also computed simple

¹⁵ Shipping Returns CO5 1441-1450, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Richmond, Surrey.

¹⁶ Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry: In the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 127.

¹⁷ William Proctor to his Brother, October 27, 1740, *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 10 (1902): 298.

¹⁸ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 307.

equations in the process of keeping accounts and provisioning their vessels.¹⁹ While captains like Andrew Anderson might have had a hobby like music, basic literacy and numeracy were the only general education a captain needed to carry out the tobacco trade effectively.

In addition to reading, writing and basic accounting, captains needed training in navigation. They primarily acquired this training from captains, though some navigation schools emerged in early eighteenth century Britain. Some families apprenticed their young men to captains who taught them the science of navigation. However, captains commonly taught intrepid boys and young sailors the science without a formal apprenticeship.²⁰ In addition to the possibility of learning navigation, young sailors earned wages and freely moved between ships or undertook other professions, unlike their apprenticed peers. Despite their formal agreements, Naval-recruiting officers impressed merchant sailors and apprentices almost indiscriminately. Scottish merchant John Lawson complained, “the press here for Seamen is so hot... the whole of the Salley’s hands was impressed and her best apprentice it will be hard to get her manned.”²¹ Few families believed some additional training and a little protection warranted sacrificing five to seven years of their son’s wage earning potential and his freedom. As a result, families only occasionally apprenticed their young men to ship captains.

Young men aspired to captaincy not only because they gained ultimate power on their vessel but also because captains earned high wages. Captains in the tobacco trade typically earned about £4 or £5 per month, making their base yearly earnings around £48 when

¹⁹ Andrew Troup Receipts, Lockhart Family Papers, privately held, microfilm, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Ledger from the Ship Dove’s Voyage to Barbados, Antigua, & Virginia, James Watson, merchant, Greenock Ship and Cargo account Books, 1741-1749, National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh.

²⁰ Roland Pietsch, “Ships’ Boys and Youth Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Navy Recruits of the London Marine Society,” *The Northern Mariner* 14, (2004): 19; Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, 118-121.

²¹ James Lawson to Mr. John Semple, August 10, 1759, John Semple, John Jamieson, and James Lawson, merchants, Glasgow and Maryland, Letterbooks, 1758-1762, National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh.

continuously employed.²² Common sailors typically earned £1.5 per month, though this wage increased during wartime. A first mate typically earned between £2 and £3 a month. In addition to his monthly wages, a captain also commonly received privilege, granting him use of part of the vessel freight-free to transport goods on his own account.²³ Charter agreements might stipulate an amount of space granted to a captain to ship any good or the amount of a particular good, like wooden staves, a captain was allowed to transport. Given that tobacco might earn £8 per hogshead and freight might cost between £7 and £15 per ton (four hogsheads), depending on market forces, trading goods freight-free could augment a captain's earnings considerably.²⁴

Frugal first mates and captains, especially those without families to care for, acquired significant capital. Ambitious mates might use that capital to buy partnership in a vessel and, thus, captaincy. Even when captains gained their captaincy through family connections, they often invested their capital in their vessel. As Table One illustrates, between 7.69 and 26.39 percent of captains were the managing owners of their vessels. This number likely underestimates the number of captains who invested in their tobacco vessels because relevant records list only one owner and, typically, multiple partners invested in vessels. Partnerships were typical because a 240-ton vessel cost about £1,680 to build, making sole ownership a risky and almost impossible undertaking.²⁵ By investing in their vessels captains also earned profits from the returns of the voyage, meaning that one successful voyage could earn them a high wage, privilege, and returns on their ownership share.

²² "Account of the Men's Advance £24-10" n.d. Lockhart Family Papers.

²³ Rediker, *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 131, 305-306.

²⁴ *The Virginia Gazette*, 19 Septemebr 1777; Deposition of Aaron Black, 13 January, 1738, Deputy Notary Public Book, 1734-1743, Maryland Hall of Records. Deposition of Robert Brown, Captain, John Shaw, Chief Mate, and Robert Steward, Second Mate, 13 May 1748, Notary Public Book, 1744-1797, Maryland Hall of Records.

²⁵ James F. Shepherd and Gary M. Walton, *Shipping and Maritime Trade and the Economic Development of Colonial North America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 242 -243. See note 60 for more details on this calculation.

Captains invested their earnings in vessels but they also enjoyed luxuries. Captains like Moses Robinson displayed their success by furnishing their cabins with “Silver Spoons, Curtains, Table Linnen &c.”²⁶ A well-furnished cabin not only provided captains with the comforts of home but also impressed the merchants and planters who visited and dined with the captain on his vessel. For young captains trying to claim a place among the mercantile elite, the physical trappings of success symbolized their ascendance.

Table One: Vessels Recorded Entering Virginia Ports, 1725-1765

	Number of Vessels	Average Burthen	Average Hhds of Tobacco	Percent of Vessels with Captain as Owner
1725	79	99.671	241.924	26.39%
1727	147	110.354	288.395	23.81%
1739	110	117.364	305.809	17.27%
1745	143	126.259	332.909	7.69%
1749	153	137.296	310.375	8.55%
1752	203	123.365	284.571	15.27%
1758	178	141.478	273.326	13.33%
1761	161	145.981	317.294	11.86%
1765	164	147.620	322.086	16.56%

Source: Shipping Returns, Kew²⁷

Between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century a captain’s control over his firm’s business outcomes contracted. During the eighteenth century formalized Scottish stores, consignments, and the cargo trade replaced less ordered adventuring, supercargo, and informal visits from ship captains. Previously, firms empowered captains to determine when and how best to collect tobacco from their Chesapeake contacts and encouraged them to forge new relationships. During this period captains sought out business. But by the mid-to late-eighteenth century, tobacco-trading firms regularly stationed firm representatives in the Chesapeake all year. Alternatively, some firms formed long-enduring consignment partnerships with

²⁶ Moses Robinson to John Norton & Son, September 6, 1771, *John Norton and Sons*, 182-183.

²⁷ Shipping Returns CO5 1441-1450, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Richmond, Surrey.

Chesapeake residents. As the tobacco trade became more systematic and the majority of business became concentrated in the hands of larger and longstanding firms, the captains' role shifted. As captains' role in forging and integrating unstructured trading networks declined, his role in connecting distant partnerships quickly and effectively became increasingly important. By connecting business partners, captains facilitated the convergence of American and British mercantile culture and shaped its structure.

During the seventeenth century captains participated in a relatively unstructured tobacco trade which empowered them to make on-the-ground decisions for the men who hired them. Some captains sailed up and down rivers soliciting purchases from the planters and low-capital salesmen who lived along the riverbanks. Captains might also visit county court days where they arranged to collect tobacco from the local planters.²⁸ While this system vested the captain with immense power, it necessitated lengthy stays in the Chesapeake and proved highly inefficient. Captains more commonly transported a factor to the Chesapeake who remained for a few months or a few years to manage the sale of goods and collect tobacco for a British firm. When these transient visitors to the Chesapeake were in place they worked with captains to organize loading the vessel.²⁹ While factors eased the loading of vessels, captains always lingered for long periods of time in the Chesapeake.

Around 1690 captains began transporting goods on consignment more frequently. While planters advised their friends of different merchants' reputations, captains could also persuade planters to establish a relationship with a new firm. William Byrd II illustrated the power a captain could exert when he shipped two hogsheads of tobacco to Thomas Camberlyn observing,

²⁸ James H. Soltow, *The Economic Role of Williamsburg*, (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1965), 35.

²⁹ Jacob M. Price, *Perry of London: A Family and Firm on the Seaborne Frontier, 1615-1753*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 30.

“By the recommendation of Capt. Talman whose ship rides over against my house, I am encouraged to begin a correspondence with you.”³⁰ After planters established consignment relationships, a captain visited the large planters who had pre-arranged relationships with the merchants who employed him. The large planters typically owned thousands of acres and possessed slaves or servants who cultivated tobacco for their masters. After filling their vessels with consigned tobacco, captains delivered the tobacco to British merchants who sent goods back to the consignment planter. Planters paid for the goods, advanced on credit, with the next year’s tobacco crop. This process repeated itself year after year. While captains might not know how much tobacco a planter could consign in any given year, the ongoing relationship between planters and merchants made loading the vessel slightly more predictable.³¹

Though neatly outline above, early eighteenth century captains’ collection techniques overlapped and loading the vessel occurred slowly and chaotically. Vague charter agreements granted captains significant leeway. Merchants instructed captains to apply to the “Agents Factors Correspondents or Assignors” of the said merchants for tobacco. Merchants also provided a goal for collection like 300 hogshead of tobacco within 100 days or less.³² Beyond these minimal instructions, merchants empowered captains to interpret the local market and make calculated decisions to load the vessel quickly. However, local conditions often stymied a captain’s best efforts. A captain’s sailors might have to roll hogsheads from a planter’s home miles overland to long boats waiting to ferry the crop to the vessel. Long boats occasionally capsized in transit, prolonging further the loading process.³³ During seasons of drought or

³⁰ William Byrd II to Thomas Camberlyn, in *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover Virginia, 1684-1776*, ed. Marion Tinling, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), 554.

³¹ The consignment trade has been widely studied. For more see Soltow, *The Economic Role of Williamsburg*, 33-41; Breen, *Tobacco Culture*; Jacob Price, “The Last Phase of the Virginia-London Consignment Trade: James Buchanan & Co., 1758-1768,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 43 (1986); Price, *Perry of London*, 31.

³² Charter between Stephen Sandwell... and Philip Smith & Martin Smith, 1738, Deputy Notary Public Book.

³³ Deposition of Adam Spencer, August 29, 1734, Deputy Notary Public Book.

disaster vessels might clog the rivers, thus forcing captains to lower their freight rates and prolonging the period required to load the vessel.³⁴ Between 1694 and 1701, captains spent an average of 99.9 days in the Chesapeake loading their vessel.³⁵

The unpredictability of the tobacco marketplace declined as the eighteenth century progressed. In 1676, 481 firms imported tobacco to London from the Chesapeake. By 1719 this number fell to 111 and continued to fall, reaching 56 by 1775. As Chart One indicates, London experienced steady trend tobacco import growth between 1700 and 1776, while the number of firms importing tobacco contracted. Though Bristol and Liverpool's importation rates remained constant, the number of firms participating in the tobacco trade declined.³⁶ The number of English firms participating in the tobacco trade contracted partially because transient adventurers could not compete with consignment merchants and partially because tobacco prices stagnated between 1680 and 1710, thereby driving out all but the best capitalized firms.³⁷ By the mid-eighteenth century the remaining tobacco-importing firms primarily specialized in tobacco trading. Their intimate knowledge of the trade and longstanding relationships in the Chesapeake reduced the decision-making power the firms granted to ship captains.

The rise of the Scottish store trade also restricted the autonomy granted to ship captains. As Chart One illustrates, the Scottish began importing significant amounts of tobacco around 1720 and by the 1750s their importation rivaled English firms. The captains employed by Scottish firms sailed primarily between Glaswegian wharves and the firm's tobacco warehouses in the Chesapeake. The Scots innovated the tobacco trade by establishing stores in the

³⁴ John M. Hemphill, II, "Freight Rates in the Maryland Tobacco Trade, 1705-1762," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 54 (1959): 41.

³⁵ Sheppard and Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade*, 198.

³⁶ Jacob M. Price and Paul G.E. Clemens, "A Revolution of Scale in Overseas trade: British firms in the Chesapeake Trade, 1675-1775," *Journal of Economic History* 47 (1987): 11, 25, 29.

³⁷ Russell R. Menard, "Economic and Social Development of the South," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States: The Colonial Era* ed. Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 262.

Chesapeake. The stores purchased tobacco from any local producer, large or small, and advanced goods on credit when the tobacco offered fell short of the goods' cost. The shopkeepers then consolidated the tobacco in a few warehouses in anticipation of the captains' arrival. A shopkeeper's careful coordination smoothed a tobacco captain's collection and reduced the number of decisions he made on behalf of the firm.³⁸ Unlike the adventure and consignment captains, captains employed by Glaswegian firms could expect a full load of tobacco to be ready upon their arrival.

The efficiency of the Scottish store trade significantly reduced the number of days captains spent in the colonies. As Chart Two indicates, the number of days per vessel-ton captains from the Scottish Clyde River spent in the Chesapeake fell by two-thirds between 1727 and 1767. This efficient system allowed Captain Troup to make four trips to Virginia from Glasgow between August 11, 1768, and December 31, 1770, almost two per year.³⁹ Efficiency gains were not confined to captains from the Clyde, however. London also reduced the number of days per vessel-ton by about half during this period. Part of the efficiency gains in the London trade resulted from the increasing importance of the cargo trade after 1763, in which local Chesapeake merchants ordered cargos of goods from an English merchant on a twelve-month credit.⁴⁰ Within twelve months the Chesapeake merchants remitted tobacco to repay their debts. Like the consignment and store trades, the cargo trade, carefully coordinated between merchants, limited the decisions left to captains.

In the century before the American Revolution, captains lost a significant amount of the decision-making power firms originally vested in them. However, outlining the trend reduction

³⁸ Examples of coordination between Scottish shopkeepers and Glaswegian firms can be found in the George Bogle Papers, 1696-1777, Mitchell Library, Glasgow and Neil Jamieson papers, 1757-1789, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁹ Blanford Sailings and arrivals, n.d., Lockhart Family Papers.

⁴⁰ Price, *Capital and Credit*, 127.

in influence on business outcomes does not mean firms reduced captains to mere cogs in the trading system. In the 1770s, firms still authorized captains to make decisions that determined the profitability of a voyage. A captain chose how many sailors he needed and hired his crew. Charters stipulated the vessel must be “strong & well & sufficiently maintained fitted and Victualled tackled appareled and furnished with all things needful and necessary for her intended voyage,” but they left the implementation of this charge to the captain’s discretion.⁴¹ Captains like Andrew Troup decided how much food each sailor required, and from whom to purchase this food, often switching provisioning merchants when they found a lower price and occasionally cutting corners.⁴² Captains also arranged for vessel repairs after storms and worm infestations.⁴³ These business decisions illustrated the trust merchants vested in their captains and this trust provided the foundation upon which captains built and maintained transatlantic partnerships.

As a ship captain’s control over the business outcomes of a firm contracted, his role in connecting merchants with planters, shopkeepers, and merchants in the Chesapeake increased. During the eighteenth century the amount of tobacco exported from the Chesapeake increased, the number of captains crossing the Atlantic increased, and each captain spent fewer days in the Chesapeake.⁴⁴ The increasing rate of trade allowed firms to exert more control over the trade.

⁴¹ Charter between Stephen Sandwell and Philip Smith & Martin Smith, 6 July 1739, Deputy Notary Public Book.

⁴² For example, in April 1769 the carpenter, Thomas McGill, provided Captain Troup with planks and Peter Campbell supplied his water casks and beef. By July 1770, David Laird provided the *Blanford’s* planks and Andrew Trumbell its water casks and beef. Changing who supplied his vessel suggests that the captain compared price and quality among available vendors and changed his custom when there was an advantage to do so. The deposition of Richard Harrison, John Patterson, Edward Lloyd and Thomas Wingham, 11 October 1734, Deputy Notary Public Book, 1734-1744, Maryland Hall of Records illumines a moment when sailors suffered desperate hunger.

⁴³ Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of the Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era* (Newport News: The Mariner’s Museum, 1953), 46.

⁴⁴ See Chart One for tobacco expansion, Table One for increasing vessel trend, Chart Two and Sheppard and Walton, *Shipping, Maritime Trade*, 198 for reduction of days in port.

However, planters, shopkeepers and merchants, separated from their trading partners and firm representatives by the Atlantic, which took on average 11½ weeks to cross west and 6½ weeks to cross east, craved more control.⁴⁵

While captains could not grant any market actor the control they desired, captains could provide information to market actors on both sides of the Atlantic. In the process they facilitated mutual understanding and the convergence of mercantile culture. As small tobacco farmers visited Scottish stores more frequently, and plantation owners and merchants corresponded more regularly, British and Chesapeake market actors “articulated and rearticulated” their understanding of the marketplace.⁴⁶ As captains translated and interpreted these seemingly distant worlds, they forged a British Atlantic mercantile culture. First, market actors participating in the production of British Atlantic mercantile culture accepted that each actor worked for profit and valued time. Second, they largely respected the terms of transatlantic partnership and avoided litigation when possible. Finally, they valued mercantile information, updated partners when possible, and received market intelligence hungrily. These values had their roots in seventeenth century practice and strengthened during the eighteenth century. As communication facilitated by captains increased, mercantile culture in the British Atlantic converged.

In 1772, George Norton, a partner in a London trading firm eloquently defended Captain Moses Robertson when others cast aspersions writing that he was “so well convinced of his Innocence that I think his Character has been most villainously traduced.”⁴⁷ Merchants vested so much trust in captains like Robertson because years of faithful service proved captains deserved it. By the time Robertson’s accuser lodged his complaint, Robertson had been working for the

⁴⁵ Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 51.

⁴⁶ David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 156.

⁴⁷ George Norton to John Hatley Norton, November 3, 1772, *John Norton and Sons*, 278.

firm for at least four years and continued to do so for years after. Captains like Robertson built trust by faithfully fulfilling their duties. Every time a captain loaded his vessel quickly, forged a new trading relationship for the firm, or avoided disaster upon the seas, he proved his value and unique knowledge to the firm.

Captains earned the trust of the firm but no market actor granted the other absolute trust. When a captain encountered disaster on the seas he pledged an oath in front of a notary public making “protest against the wind and the seas” to provide merchants with a sworn defense of his behavior.⁴⁸ Merchants usually accepted these protests and pursued the matter no further. However, occasionally Chesapeake correspondents protested against a captain’s “Negligence or Mismanagement” in loading the vessel.⁴⁹ Chesapeake correspondents often reported their annoyance when captains failed to deliver their goods undamaged or pick up their tobacco before departing.⁵⁰ Despite these reports, merchants rarely brought lawsuits against captains. Between 1750 and 1830, the Scottish Admiralty court prosecuted only eight cases of shipwreck.⁵¹ Scottish merchant James Lawson summarized most merchants’ attitude when he lamented a lawsuit saying, “there is neither profit nor pleasure in [it].”⁵² The British Atlantic was not a deeply litigious culture because merchants found proof elusive, lawsuits difficult to prosecute, and trust essential to maintain the system.

Not only did merchants trust captains but they knew captains possessed unique insights and vernacular knowledge that might prove useful to them. For example, when Semple, Jamieson and Lawson, merchants in Glasgow, contemplated purchasing the ship *Potomack* from

⁴⁸ Deposition of John Brown Catsby, June 9, 1746, Notary Public Book.

⁴⁹ Protest against a Vessel Master Peter Franklin by Daniel Delaney, 1739, Deputy Notary Public Book.

⁵⁰ Robert Anderson to Cuthbert Jones, July 2, 1711, Robert Anderson Letterbook, 1698-1717, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

⁵¹ Gordon Jackson, “Marine Insurance Frauds in Scotland, 1751-1821: Cases of Deliberate Shipwreck Tried in the Scottish Court of Admiralty,” *Journal of Maritime Law and Commerce* 35 (2004): 432-434.

⁵² James Lawson to John Semple, June 13, 1759, Semple, Jamieson, and Lawson, Letterbooks, 1758-1762.

Mr. Glasford, Lawson wrote to Semple saying, “as soon as the tobacco is out of her Captain James Montgomerie is to view her and to let me know his opinion of her value.”⁵³ Lawson believed Montgomerie’s ability to assess a ship’s worth exceeded his own and, as a result, refused to make a large capital investment without consulting him. Similarly, in 1773 Joshua Johnson empowered Captain George Cook to purchase a vessel for the firm’s use.⁵⁴ Merchants sought the advice of captains and trusted their decisions because captains possessed unique knowledge that could not be provided by any other actors.

The trust captains built by repeatedly fulfilling their duties effectively and their unique position in the system allowed captains to become interpreters of the Atlantic. As trade in the Atlantic became more systematic, market actors needed more information to carry out their duties successfully. Shopkeepers needed to know when ships arrived so they could have tobacco waiting at warehouses. Merchants needed to know what goods colonists craved so they could purchase them in Britain and how the tobacco crop looked so they could decide how many ships to send the next year. Consignment planters needed to know which merchants were sending vessels to the Chesapeake that year and how many so they could divide their crop, thereby diversifying and reducing risk. Every market actor needed to know what prices they could expect for their tobacco in the opposite market so they could choose how much to buy and sell. To succeed in the increasingly systematic British Atlantic, market actors needed more information and captains, sometimes only captains, provided it.

Captains delivered the letters merchants, shopkeepers, and planters penned to provide their partners with information. Apart from packet ships, which operated on and off during this period, and occasional passengers, captains acted as the sole postmen of the Atlantic. An

⁵³ James Lawson to John Semple, April 23, 1759, Semple, Jamieson, and Lawson, Letterbooks, 1758-1762.

⁵⁴ The Firm to Capt. George Cook, June 15, 1773, Wallace, Davidson and Johnson Letterbook, 1771-1774, Maryland Hall of Records.

impressive amount of mercantile correspondence flowed across the Atlantic through captains. For example, during his first year as a small-scale colonial factor, Robert Baine wrote letters to seventeen merchants and friends primarily in Greenock and Glasgow, which he sent by eight different captains.⁵⁵ Merchants relied upon the correspondence and were irked at best and anxious at worst when they did not receive news from their trading partners. Their anxiety stemmed from intimate knowledge of the consequences of silence. For example, when Captain Creamer failed to deliver a letter to Joshua Johnson immediately upon his arrival, Johnson missed directions to insure the goods on a vessel that that sank on its transatlantic voyage.⁵⁶

The letters captains delivered helped shopkeepers, merchants and planters organize their trade because contracting loading times increased a voyage's profitability. However, their correspondence also facilitated understanding of the commercial climate on the opposite shore and provided market participants the opportunity to advocate for their interests. Glaswegian merchants like George Bogle wrote to their shopkeepers inquiring which goods colonists most desired.⁵⁷ Shopkeepers answered their queries and interpreted the local climate in the colonies for their merchant partners an ocean away. When William Cuninghame and Company ordered James Robinson to call in debts, he warned, "this method [harsh collection] has its inconveniences, it may surprise and embarrass many of the best customers so as to occasion there leaving the Store."⁵⁸ Planters also participated in the transatlantic epistolary conversation. The planter Richard Corbin shaped his merchant partner's expectations and provided valuable information when he wrote, "I think it impossible for any Single Mercht in the trade to load a

⁵⁵ Letters of Robert Baine, May 29 1759 to January 1760, Robert Baine Account Book, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁶ Joshua Johnson to the firm, February 19, 1774, in *Joshua Johnson's Letterbook 1771-1774: Letters from a Merchant in London to his Partners in Maryland*, ed. Jacob M. Price, (London: London Record Society, 1979), 122a.

⁵⁷ George Bogle to John Bogle, April 25, 1750, George Bogle Papers.

⁵⁸ James Robinson to William Cuninghame & Company, July 29, 1774, William Cuninghame & Co Letterbook, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Ship of 300 hhds.”⁵⁹ In the letters captains delivered, merchants, shopkeepers, and planters demonstrated that they believed information facilitated cost minimization, time management, and thus profit maximization.

British merchants and Chesapeake planters and shopkeepers not only cared what their correspondents wrote but also what captains experienced, predicted, and observed. By the end of the colonial period a 240-ton vessel cost about £1,680 to build and the tobacco from a single voyage could easily net merchants more than £2,000.⁶⁰ Given that the typical free white colonist’s average annual income in 1774 fell within the range of £10.7 to £12.5, merchants stood to lose sums unfathomable to common men when a shipwreck claimed their vessel.⁶¹ Merchants expected captains to provide epistolary updates on their activities because, while silence might be circumstantial, silence might also spell disaster.⁶² When a merchant firm overextended its credit, a lost vessel could force the firm into bankruptcy.⁶³

Captains understood merchants’ fear and took steps to ease their anxiety in the letters they entrusted to other captains. Andrew Anderson assuaged the fears of his Glaswegian employer, George Buchanan, when he wrote, “I take this opportunity to Acquaint you of our safe

⁵⁹ Richard Corbin to John Hanbury, September 1, 1758, Richard Corbin Papers, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

⁶⁰ Shepherd and Walton, *Shipping and Maritime Trade*, 242-243. This number was calculated by multiplying a £7 cost per ton by a 240-ton vessel, which Zacheideh asserts was average in the late seventeenth century. The Annapolis port records suggest this is a reasonable size throughout the colonial period. Vaughn W. Brown, *Shipping in the Port of Annapolis, 1748-1775* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1965), 39-73. While £7 per ton is likely an upper bound according to Shepherd and Walton, it is a reasonable estimate. However, the costs of shipbuilding varied significantly based on location (vessels were less expensive in the colonies and less expensive in New England than New York or Philadelphia) and, thus, this estimate should be viewed with caution. Hogsheads typically contained around 1,000 pounds of tobacco. John M. Hemphill, II, “Freight Rates in the Maryland Tobacco Trade, 1705-1762,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 54 (1959) 40. Given that the average price between 1730 and 1775 was 2.13 pence per pound, an average hogshead cost £8.87. For a more thorough examination of price fluctuation see John J. McCusker, “Wholesale Tobacco Prices in Virginia and Maryland, by Region: 1647–1820,” in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, edited by Susan B. Carter, et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 275-284.

⁶¹ Alice Hansen Jones, *Wealth of a Nation to be: The American Colonies on the Eve of Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 63.

⁶² James Lawson to Captain Samuel Paterson, August 31, 1759, National Records of Scotland.

⁶³ Joshua Johnson to the Firm, February 19, 1773, *Joshua Johnson’s Letterbook*, 65.

arrival in this river on 17th June after nine weeks Passage from Greenock.” He further assured Buchanan that, “I shall embrace every opportunity to write you sir.”⁶⁴ Conversations via letter, like the one between Andrew Anderson and George Buchanan reinforced the trust between the businessmen and reassured Buchanan that Anderson respected the terms of their agreement. They also suggest the businessmen’s focus on the importance of time for profitability. Buchanan knew the longer the captain’s journey took, the more costs accrued for the voyage’s provisions and sailors’ wages. As merchants, captains, and Chesapeake marketers corresponded, commenting primarily on timing, pricing, and goods, they reinforced the importance of time and profit.

Captains knew the state of shipping, but they also observed local conditions and merchants valued their additional perspectives on the state of colonial trade. As Matthew Bogle, a merchant in Glasgow, put it when writing to Captain Dunlop, “pray Advise Me as you have opportunity about my Tobacco & the State of the Crops in Virginia.”⁶⁵ Captains could provide insight because they regularly dined with colonial merchants and planters on board their vessels, visited their shops and homes, and met them at court days.⁶⁶ In his essay on the history and culture of the tobacco trade William Tatham observed that the captain, “is obliged to be frequently on shore, and sometimes at a considerable distance from his ship.”⁶⁷ These sojourns on shore acquainted captains with the men who cultivated the land and these men’s expectations for their future crop. Their face-to-face conversations also gave captains a chance to explain the actions of their merchant partners and answer any questions Chesapeake-dwellers might have.

⁶⁴ Andrew Anderson to George Buchanan, July 1758, Andrew Anderson Journal Book, Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

⁶⁵ Matthew Bogle to Captain Dunlop, January 29, 1730, George Bogle Papers.

⁶⁶ Moses Robertson to Mr. John Norton, May 25, 1770, *John Norton and Sons*, 135.

⁶⁷ William Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco*, (London: printed for Vernor and Hood, 31, Poultry, by T. Bensley, Bolt Court, Fleet Street, 1800), 212.

These in-person interviews enlivened relationships between merchants, planters, and shopkeepers that existed primarily on the page.

Similar in-person interviews occurred between captains and merchants in Britain. Captains visited the stores of merchants to deliver letters and news. Like their colonial counterparts, these in-person conversations gave merchants an opportunity to ask specific questions of an authoritative observer whose opinion the merchant trusted. Captains also spent hours at coffee shops when they were in port. Though merchants and captains could find information and informants in any coffee house, coffee houses with specific imperial connections emerged. The Virginia and Carolina coffee house catered to tobacco traders and the Lloyd's coffee shop in Lombard Street became a hub for insurers, ship owners, and captains.⁶⁸ These coffee shops provided captains, merchants and other businessmen space to mingle, discuss their experiences and opinions, and conduct business. William Mylne successfully made arrangements for passage across the Atlantic on the spot when he visited a coffee house in London and requested details from a captain lingering there.⁶⁹

Captains did not confine their intelligence to correspondence and in-person conversations. The proliferation of news sources, especially specialized mercantile newsletters, in the eighteenth century increasingly provided market actors in the Atlantic with the knowledge they craved. In the Chesapeake the *Virginia Gazette*, first published in 1736, and the *Maryland Gazette*, published intermittently after 1727, apprised shopkeepers and planters of mercantile news. These papers provided planters and shopkeepers living close to Annapolis and

⁶⁸D. E. W. Gibb, *Lloyd's of London: A study in Individualism*, (New York: Macmillan, 1957), John J. McCusker, "The Demise of Distance: The Business Press and the Origins of the Information Revolution in the Early Modern Atlantic World," *The American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 310-312.

⁶⁹ William Mylne to Nancy, August 29, 1773, *Travels in the Colonies in 1773-1775 Described in the Letters of William Mylne* ed. Ted Ruddock (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 12.

Williamsburg with information about the arrival and departure of vessels.⁷⁰ Advertisements placed by shipmasters and merchants informed residents where they could purchase goods recently imported from Europe.⁷¹ Captains also placed advertisements to solicit consignments of tobacco from local brokers, explaining how to arrange for collection. As relationships became more firmly entrenched and loading vessels more streamlined, the average captain solicited consignments less often. However, the practice never disappeared completely and as late as 1773 masters like Thomas Lilly still advertised that they would transport tobacco to London on consignment.⁷²

Occasionally these Chesapeake newspapers also printed sensational stories about the conduct or experiences of captains. For example, citing Captain Maclcod as its source, the *Virginia Gazette* relayed a sensational tale of a captain who raped the sister of a Madieran merchant, stole goods from his employer, and died “raving mad” leaving a wife and several children “in a deplorable condition.” Characterizing the captain’s behavior as “very strange and perhaps unparalleled,” the moralizing tale entreated captains to “learn caution against illegal, violent and immoral attempts,” and merchants to “survey well [captains’] characters.”⁷³ Captain Maclcod’s sensational story and its subsequent interpretation by newspapermen reinforced the importance of trust in partnerships by policing the behavior of merchants and captains.

Newspapermen valued captains as sources for mercantile information on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1692 the Lloyd’s coffee shop in London began printing *Lloyd’s List* on a weekly basis. *Lloyd’s List* provided subscribers with price currents, records of the arrivals of vessels into

⁷⁰ “Williamsburg: August 19,” *Virginia Gazette*, August 19, 1737.

⁷¹ *Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1773.

⁷² “For London: The Ship Planter,” *Virginia Gazette*, May 13, 1773.

⁷³ “London: April 20,” *Virginia Gazette*, July 7, 1768.

Britain, and ship news.⁷⁴ Ship captains were among the informants who provided Edward Lloyd and later editors with the information stamped across its pages. While at sea, captains regularly boarded the merchant vessels they encountered and recorded any intelligence the crew provided.⁷⁵ Captains also regularly sailed in formal or informal convoys with other vessels.⁷⁶ As a result, if a vessel fell behind the captain could easily report the last time he had seen the vessel when all was well. Alternatively, if bad weather befell the convoy captains reported the extent of a vessel's damage and which shipyards were busily repairing it. When seas and waves claimed a vessel, captains reported their somber news in the ships news section of *Lloyd's*.⁷⁷ Whether the news from a captain relieved or troubled a merchant, he always preferred knowing the state of his investment.

Captains interpreted the Atlantic world indirectly by carrying letters and newspapers and directly by writing letters, conversing with merchants, shopkeepers and planters and providing information to newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. The letters captains wrote and delivered, the newspapers they contributed to, and the conversations they conducted reinforced early capitalist values. Captains and the actors they connected worked for profit, invested their capital, valued market information, and internalized time pressures.

The captains of tobacco trading vessels risked death to enrich themselves and gain power in the British imperial merchant community. As the pace of trade accelerated and its structure

⁷⁴ McCusker and C. Gravesteijn, *The Beginnings of Commercial and Financial Journalism*, 324, "Ship News," *Lloyd's List*, July 14, 1741.

⁷⁵ John Wasdell, *Journal of a Voyage from Cape Fair North Carolina to London*, Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; Entry by John Dow, April 13, 1784, April 17, 1764, May 1, 1764, August 18, 1765, *Log Book of John Dow*, Mitchell Library Glasgow.

⁷⁶ Entry by John Dow, October 14, 1764, *John Dow Log Book*; example of an informal convoy, Commander Julian Legge Esq., *A Remonstrance to the Masters of Merchant Ships Under Convoy of His Majesty's Ship Chesterfield under my Command at Sea*, Oct 8, 1758, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, Richmond, Surrey.

⁷⁷ Ship News, *Lloyds List*, October 27, 1741.

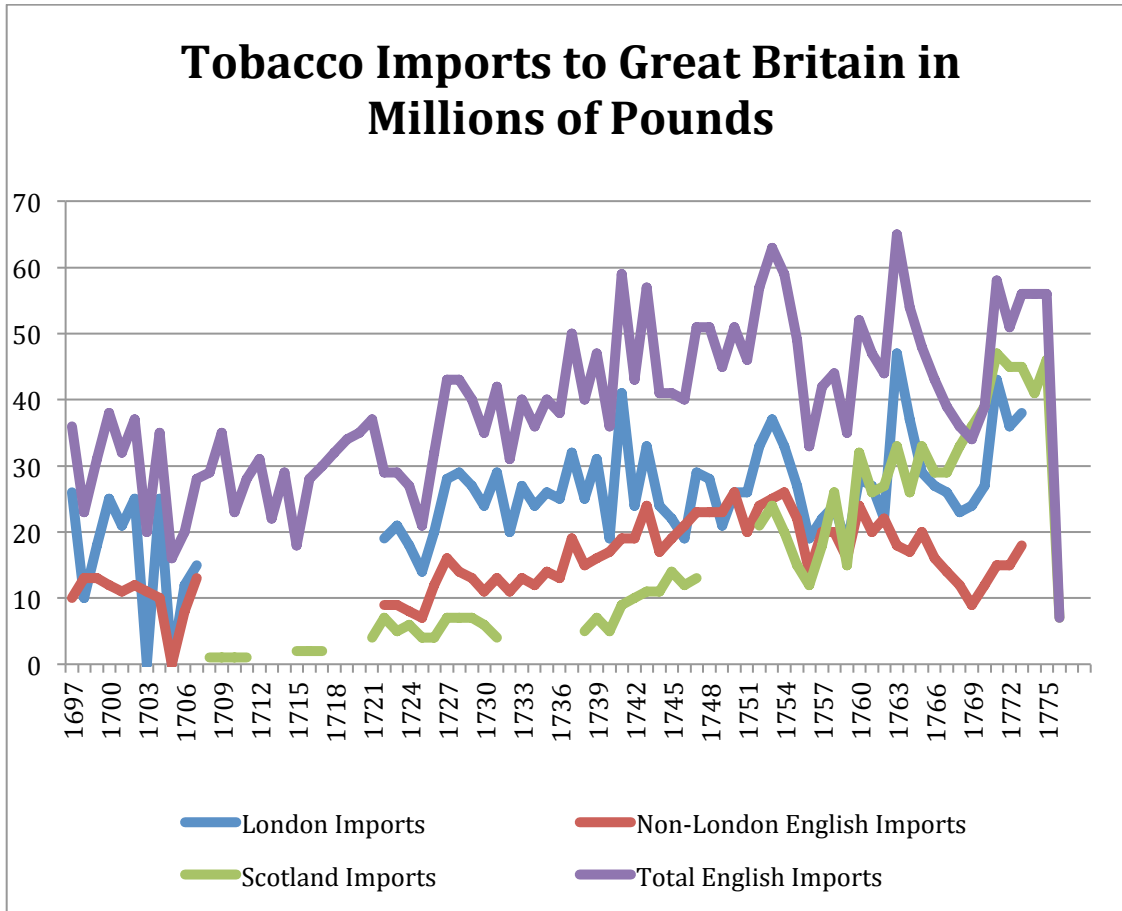
shifted between the 1720s and the American Revolution, a captain's role transformed from auxiliary businessman to interpreter of the Atlantic. As interpreters of the Atlantic, captains explained the market and market mentality they encountered on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Merchants, planters and shopkeepers trusted their interpretation because captains possessed unique vernacular knowledge and repeatedly proved their worth by successfully and efficiently delivering tobacco and other goods.

The 1770s ruptured the system of trade that developed during the eighteenth century. First, the credit crisis of 1772 forced merchants to call in some of the debts planters and small farmers had amassed, putting some merchants out of business and enraging planters who had grown accustomed to liberal credit. Shortly after, the American Revolution sent shockwaves through the tobacco trading system. Revolutionaries pushed loyalist agents out of the colonies and embargoes closed the Chesapeake Bay to British trade. The lengthy Revolution forced some firms into bankruptcy and the American economy stagnated in the post-war years. Though the Chesapeake still exported between forty and sixty million pounds of tobacco per annum to Britain after the war, the tobacco trade never regained its pre-Revolution prominence.⁷⁸ Though the economy struggled, the core characteristics of mid-eighteenth century mercantile culture – profit motivation, respect for the terms of partnerships, and valuing time and information – endured. These values strengthened to become the nineteenth century American and British capitalist mentality.

⁷⁸ McCusker, John J., "Tobacco imported into and reexported from Great Britain: 1697–1791." in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, ed. by Susan B. Carter et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Appendix

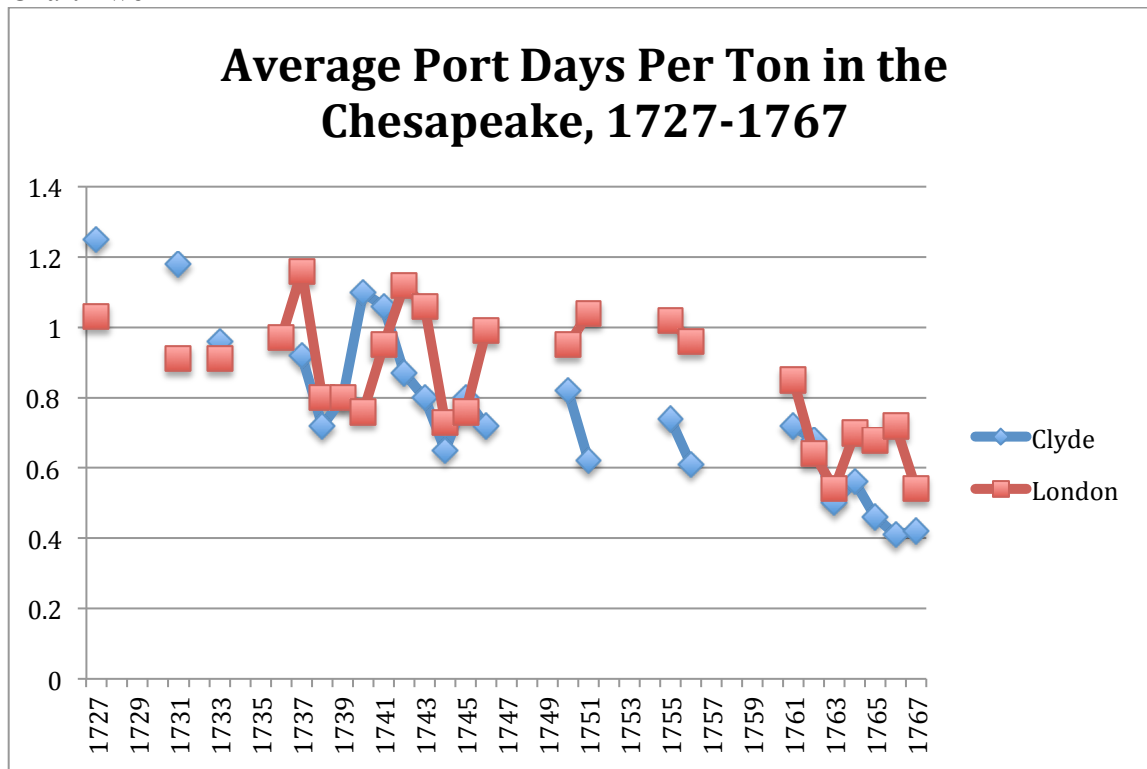
Chart One



Source: McCusker, John J., "Tobacco imported into and reexported from Great Britain: 1697–1791."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ McCusker, John J., "Tobacco imported into and reexported from Great Britain: 1697–1791," in *Historical Statistics of the United States*.

Chart Two



Source: Stephen Gregg Hardy Dissertation⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Stephen Gregg Hardy, "Trade and Economic Growth in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1999), 469-470.