



“how far the colonies have served the trade of the mother country”

Europeans view the commercial ties between Britain and the American colonies, 1699-1760

In the 1600s Britain’s attention was focused on Europe—winning wars and gaining territory, wealth, and “market share”—not on its colonies and their commercial promise. But events between 1688 and 1713 changed Britain’s priorities. With the Glorious Revolution, victory in intercolonial wars, and the 1707 union of England and Scotland, the “United Kingdom of Great Britain” became a first-class power. Commerce was its engine, the colonies its fuel, and Britain needed more fuel. “By giving a new priority to overseas expansion,” writes historian Alan Taylor, “the English committed their empire to maritime commerce rather than to European territory—a dramatic shift that elevated their American colonies to a new importance.”¹ Presented here are the perspectives of six Europeans that trace this “dramatic shift.”

1699 ***“if they have encouragement from England”***

The great improvement made in this Province [Carolina colony] is wholly owing to the industry and labour of the Inhabitants. They have applied themselves to make such commodities as might increase the revenue of the Crown [England] as Cotton, Wool, Ginger, Indigo, etc. But finding them not to answer the end, they are set upon making Pitch, Tar, and Turpentine, and planting rice,² and can send over great quantities yearly, if they have encouragement from England to make it, having about 5,000 Slaves to be employed in that service, upon occasion, but they have lost most of their vessels [ships], which were but small, [in the] last war by the French and some lately by the Spaniards, so that they are not able to send those Commodities to England for a market, neither are sailors here to be had to man their vessels.

Edward Randolph, Surveyor-General of His Majesty’s Customs for North America, writing to the English Board of Trade and Plantations on his official visit to [South] Carolina, 16 March 1699³

1704 ***“How easily, then, can one who knows business here make money!”***

. . . I traveled with the rest to Pennsylvania, about 60 hours [180 miles] distant from here. . . . After my arrival I sold the rest of my merchandise even more advantageously than in Maryland. Nothing is sold under 50 per cent profit, most goods bring more than 100 per cent. How easily, then, can one who knows business here make money!

Philadelphia is a city twenty-two years old, whose growth and fame is to be preferred to most English American cities. I was astonished to see the difference, compared with other cities of this country [colony] with regard to her size, splendid edifices, daily construction of new houses and ships, the regularity of the streets, the abundance of provisions, at a much cheaper price than in the neighbouring cities. But the strongest reason why there is such an influx of people from other provinces is partly due to the liberty which all strangers enjoy in commerce, belief and settlement, as each one understands it, and also because the money has 50 percent more value.

Francis Louis Michel, nobleman visiting from Switzerland, 1704⁴

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Alan S. Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 2001), p. 293.

² I.e., since cotton, wool, etc., earned too little profit, they have begun producing naval stores (pitch, tar, and turpentine) and planting rice.

³ *Narratives of Early Carolina: 1650-1708*, ed. Alexander S. Salley, Jr. (Scribner’s, 1911), p. 207.

1724

“reap sufficient profits for their pains”

. . . Any person may conceive the great profit and use to trade in general by having the marshes [of Virginia] turned into meadows, the rivers confined to deep channels, by passages being contrived at the falls, and the upper parts of the rivers being made navigable. England is the mart and storehouse whither the manufactures and vendible [sellable] goods of Virginia for the most part should be sent; and after the English have culled what they like and have occasion for, surely they are so skillful in merchandise [merchandising] that they could vend [sell] to other countries the overplus of these commodities and reap sufficient profit for their pains. . . .

These projects would tend to the great interest of the plantation [colony of Virginia] as well as the good of thousands of poor or idle English, and the advantage of the English dominions and trade in general; and besides the benefits above-mentioned, we may further observe that by such means our inferior people that now are clothed with rags, being promoted to circumstances that would afford it, would yearly expend vast sums in good apparel, household goods, etc., which they must be supplied with from Great Britain, whereas now that are not only useless but even are noxious branches of our society; to which class we may reduce at least (I believe) 1/20 part of our people, who might thus be put in a method not only to maintain themselves handsomely and live well, but likewise by their consumption of goods would support thousands of families in the manufacturing of such commodities as they may have occasion for. And the addition to our public riches, which would be required in the advancement of the fortunes and estates of all these mean [poor] people, would arise from the increase of our foreign trade, in supplying other countries with those commodities, many of which we now even buy ourselves; so that in reality these folks might be maintained and provided for well at the expense of foreign nations, without the least charge or contribution (in effect) of our own fellow-subjects. . . .

The extent, the wealth, the numerous inhabitants, the hands employed, the goods consumed, the duties and customs occasioned by the plantations, especially such as Virginia, are well worthy the most serious consideration, and claim the greatest favor and encouragement in the trade and manufactures of those places, which are vastly larger than all his majesty’s dominions in Europe, and in time may become as considerable, they being at present one of the chiefest causes and main supports of our trade, and bringing as much money into the treasury, and the purses of merchants and other people, as most other parts of the world to which we trade.

Rev. Hugh Jones, Anglican minister visiting from England, in *The Present State of Virginia*, 1724

1748

“they almost vie with Old England”

It is, however, of great advantage to the crown of England that the North American colonies are near a country under the government of the French, like Canada. There is reason to believe that the king never was earnest in his attempts to expel the French from their possessions there, though it might have been done with little difficulty. For the English colonies in this part of the world have increased so much in their number of inhabitants, and in their riches, that they almost vie with Old England.

Now in order to keep up the authority and trade of their mother country and to answer several other purposes, they are forbidden to establish new manufactures, which would turn to the disadvantage of the British commerce. They are not allowed to dig for any gold or silver, unless they send it to England immediately. They have not the liberty of trading with any parts that do not belong to the British dominion, except a few places; nor are foreigners allowed to trade with the English colonies of North America. These and some other restrictions occasion the inhabitants of the English colonies to grow less tender for their mother country. This coldness is kept up by the many foreigners such as Germans, Dutch,

⁴ William J. Hinke, ed., trans., “Letters Regarding the Second Journey of Michel to America, February 14, 1703 to January 16, 1704, and His Stay in America till 1708,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 24:1 (January 1916), p. 294.

and French, who live among the English and have no particular attachment to Old England. Add to this also that many people can never be contented with their possessions, though they be ever so large. They will always be desirous of getting more and of enjoying the pleasure which arises from a change. Their extraordinary liberty and their luxury often lead them to unrestrained acts of selfish and arbitrary nature.

Peter Kalm, Swedish biologist travelling in the British colonies and in French Canada, 1748-1751, in *Travels into North America*, publ. 1753-1761

1757 *“it is . . . natural for people to flock into a busy and wealthy country”*

The general plan of our management with regard to the trade of our colonies, methinks, ought to be to encourage in every one of them some separate and distinct articles such as, not interfering [with Britain’s trade], might enable them to trade with each other, and all to trade to advantage with their mother country. And then, where we have rivals in any branch of the trade carried on by our colonies, to enable them to send their goods to the foreign market directly (using at the same time the wise precaution which the French put in practice — to make the ships so employed take the English ports in their way home); for our great danger is that they should in that case make their returns in foreign manufactures, against which we cannot guard too carefully. . . By this means Great Britain and all its dependencies will have a common interest. They will mutually play into each other’s hands, and the trade, so dispersed, will be of infinitely more advantage to us than if all its several articles [goods and products] were produced and manufactured within ourselves. . . .

. . . [The reader] will see how far the colonies have served the trade of the mother country, and how much the mother country has done or neglected to do towards their happiness and prosperity. Certainly our colonies deserve, and would fully reward an attention of a very different kind from any that has ever yet been given to them. Even as they are circumstanced, I do not in the least hesitate to say that we derive more advantage, and of a better kind, from our colonies than the Spaniards. . . .

The barbarism of our ancestors could not comprehend how a nation could grow more populous by sending out a part of its people. We have lived to see this paradox made out by experience, but we have not sufficiently profited of this experience, since we begin (some of us, at least) to think that there is a danger of dispeopling ourselves by encouraging new colonies, or increasing the old. If our colonies find, as hitherto they have constantly done, employment for a great number of hands [workers], there is no danger but that hands will be found for employment. That a rich, trading and manufacturing nation should be long in want [need] of people is a most absurd supposition; for besides that the people within themselves multiply the most where the means of subsistence are most certain, it is as natural for people to flock into a busy and wealthy country that by any accident may be thin of people, as it is for the dense air to rush into those parts where it is rarified. He must be a great stranger to this country who does not observe in it a vast number of people whose removal from hence, if they could be of any use elsewhere, would prove of very little detriment to the public. . . .

. . . The great point of our regard in America ought therefore to be the effectual peopling, employment, and strength of our possessions there, [and] in a subordinate degree the management of our interests with regard to the French and Spaniards. The latter we have reason to respect, to indulge, and even perhaps to endure; and more, it is probable, may be had from them in that way than by the violent methods which some have so warmly recommended and still urge, tho’ we have had some experience to convince us of their insufficiency. But the nature of the French, their situation, their designs, everything has shown that we ought to use every method to repress them, to prevent them from extending their territories, their trade, or their influence, and above all to connive at not the least encroachment; but this in such a manner as not to strain our own strength, or turn our eyes from serving ourselves by attempts to distress them. But as we are now in the midst of a war, until that is decided, it will be impossible to say anything satisfactory on our connections with French America, until we see what the next treaty of peace will do in the distribution of the territory of the two nations there.

Edmund Burke, British statesman, in *An Account of the European Settlements*, 1757

. . . My first attachment, as it is natural, is to my native country [England]. My next is to America, and such is my affection for both that I hope nothing will ever happen to dissolve that union, which is necessary to their common happiness. . . .

VIRGINIA. *“A spirit of enterprise is by no means the turn of the colony.”*

. . . In matters of commerce, they are ignorant of the necessary principles that must prevail between a colony and the mother country. They think it a hardship not to have an unlimited trade to every part of the world. They consider the duties upon their staple as injurious only to themselves, and it is utterly impossible to persuade them that they affect the consumer also. Upon the whole, however, to do them justice, the same spirit of generosity prevails here which does in their private character; they never refuse any necessary supplies for the support of government when called upon, and are a generous and loyal people. . . .

It is hard to determine whether this colony can be called flourishing or not, because though it produces great quantities of tobacco and grain, yet there seem to be very few improvements carrying on in it. Great part of Virginia is a wilderness, and as many of the gentlemen are in possession of immense tracts of land, it is likely to continue so. A spirit of enterprise is by no means the turn of the colony, and therefore few attempts have been made to force a trade; which I think might easily be done, both to the West Indies and the Ohio. . . . The Virginians are content if they can but live from day to day. They confine themselves almost entirely to the cultivation of tobacco, and if they have but enough of this to pay their merchants in London and to provide for the pleasures, they are satisfied and desire nothing more. Some few, indeed, have been rather more enterprising, and have endeavored to improve their estates by raising indigo and other schemes; but, whether it has been owing to the climate, to their inexperience in these matters, or their want of perseverance, I am unable to determine, but their success has not answered their expectations.

MARYLAND. *“much the same as that of the Virginians”*

The character of the inhabitants is much the same as that of the Virginians, and the state of the two colonies nearly alike. Tobacco, to speak in general, is the chief thing attended to in both. There have been some attempts to make wine, and it is certain that the country is capable of producing almost sort of grapes.

PENNSYLVANIA. *“a rich and opulent state arising out of a small settlement”*

Can the mind have a greater pleasure than in contemplating the rise and progress of cities and kingdoms? Than in perceiving a rich and opulent state arising out of a small settlement or colony? This pleasure every one must feel who considers Pennsylvania. . . .

The trade of Pennsylvania is surprisingly extensive, carried on to Great Britain, the West Indies, every part of North America, the Madeiras, Lisbon, Cadiz, Holland, Africa, the Spanish main, and several other places (exclusive of what is illicitly carried on to the Cape François and Monte Christo⁵). Their exports are provisions of all kinds: lumber, hemp, flax, flaxseed, iron, furs, and deerskins. Their imports: English manufactures, with the superfluities and luxuries of life. By their flag-of-truce trade, they also get sugar, which they refine and sent to Europe.

Their manufactures are very considerable. The German-town thread-stockings are in high estimation, and the year before last, I have been credibly informed, there were manufactured in that town alone, above 60,000 dozen pair. Their common retail price is a dollar per pair.

The Irish settlers make very good linens. Some woolens have also been fabricated, but not, I believe, to any amount. There are several other manufactures, viz. [which are] of beaver hats (which are superior

⁵ Cape François and Monte Christo: ports on the Spanish Caribbean island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic).

in goodness to any in Europe), of cordage, linseed oil, starch, myrtle wax and spermaceti candles, soap, earthenware, and other commodities.

THE JERSEYS (West and East). “deprived of those riches and advantages”

The country [colonies] in its present state can scarcely be called flourishing, for although it is extremely well cultivated [farmed], thinly seated [populated], and the garden of North America [grain-producing], yet, having no foreign trade, it is deprived of those riches and advantages which it would otherwise soon acquire.

NEW YORK. “has acquired great riches by the commerce which it has carried on”

The inhabitants of New York, in their character, very much resemble the Pennsylvanians. More than half of them are Dutch and almost all traders. They are, therefore, habitually frugal, industrious, and parsimonious. . . .

The present state of this province is flourishing. It has an extensive trade to many parts of the world, particularly to the West Indies, and has acquired great riches by the commerce which it has carried on, under flags of truce, to Cape François and Monte Christo [ports in Spanish Hispaniola]. The troops, by having made it the place of their general rendezvous, have also enriched it very much. However, it is burdened with taxes, and the present public debt amounts to more than 3000,000 *l.* [English pounds] currency. The taxes are laid upon Negroes and other importations.

RHODE ISLAND. “By this kind of circular commerce they subsist and grow rich.”

As the province affords [generates] but few commodities for exportation — horses, provisions, and an inconsiderable quantity of grain, with spermaceti candles being the chief articles — they are obliged to Connecticut and the neighbouring colonies for most of their traffic [goods to trade], and by their means carry on an extensive trade. Their mode of commerce is this. They trade to Great Britain, Holland, Africa, the West Indies, and the neighbouring colonies, from each of which places they import the following articles: from Great Britain, dry goods; from Holland, money; from Africa, slaves; from the West Indies, sugars, coffee, and molasses; and from the neighbouring colonies, lumber and provisions: and with what they purchase in one place they make their returns in another. Thus with the money they get in Holland, they pay their merchants in London; the sugars they procure in the West Indies they carry to Holland; the slaves they fetch from Africa they send to the West Indies, together with lumber and provisions, which they get from the neighbouring colonies; the rum that they distill they export to Africa; and with the dry goods, which they purchase in London, they traffic in the neighbouring colonies. By this kind of circular commerce they subsist and grow rich.

MASSACHUSETTS. “a rich, populous, and well-cultivated province”

The province of Massachusetts Bay has been for some years past, I believe, rather on the decline. Its inhabitants have lost several branches of trade which they are not likely to recover again. They formerly supplied not only Connecticut but other parts of the continent with dry goods, and received specie [coin money] in return; but since the introduction of paper currency they have been deprived of [a] great part of this commerce. Their ship trade is considerably decreased, owing to their not having been so careful in the construction of vessels as formerly. Their fisheries too have not been equally successful. They have had also a considerable number of provincial troops [British soldiers] in pay during the course of the present war [French and Indian War] and have been burdened with heavy taxes. . . .

However, notwithstanding what has been said, Massachusetts Bay is a rich, populous, and well-cultivated province.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, Anglican minister visiting from England, 1759-1760,
in *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America*, 2d. ed., 1775