

Yankees in Haiti:
Boston Merchant Trade in Revolutionary Saint-Domingue

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes an understudied aspect of Atlantic history: the economic connections between Boston and Saint-Domingue during the early modern and early national periods. Using the Perkinses, a Boston merchant family, it explores the ways in which demand for Saint-Dominguan tropical commodities played a vital role in the development of revolutionary ideals in Boston during 1760s and 70s. After American independence, James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins asserted their newborn, American right to free trade in Saint-Domingue. There, they enmeshed themselves into the colony's dynamic, slave-based economy. Not long after their arrival, the Perkins brothers were forced to confront the slave uprising that eventually evolved into the 13-year Haitian Revolution. The revolution directly challenged the brothers' beliefs on race, racial hierarchy and slavery. Through it all, however, they continued to assert their right to free trade—even if that meant taking up arms against, or trading with, black insurgents.

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This thesis is dedicated to my late advisor, Professor Christopher Schmidt-Nowara—an exceptional historian and an even better person who left this world too soon. I will miss our conversations about history, travel and Red Sox Nation.

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Introduction

During the half-decade preceding the Haitian Revolution, James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins immersed themselves directly into Saint-Domingue's dynamic, plantation-based economy. After surviving the revolutionary upheaval that gripped their hometown of Boston in the 1760s and 70s, the merchant brothers were eager—for reasons that this thesis illustrates—to enter into the French West India trade. James, being the oldest, was the first to travel to Cap-Français (known locally as Le Cap) in the mid-1780s. James found a veritable merchant's dream in the French West Indian port city. It was clean, orderly and chock-full of opportunities to acquire wealth through trade. Over the previous half-century, Saint-Domingue had become the world's leading producer of tropical commodities, notably sugar, molasses and coffee.¹ The brothers opened a merchant firm in Le Cap in 1786. In the years that followed they made considerable profits selling New England produce for tropical commodities. They also participated in the Atlantic slave trade—the engine that powered Saint-Domingue's dynamic economy. French West Indian profits allowed Thomas (who would become the family's paramount businessman) to turn his attentions eastward to the China trade. By the 1810s, the Perkinses were one of the richest families in the United States.

The family's economic ascension, however, was not without obstacles. Less than a decade after the end of the American Revolution, and only five years after the opening of their firm in Le Cap, the Perkins brothers encountered another revolution in Saint-Domingue. The 13-year Haitian Revolution would bring dramatic changes to the colony: Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy was turned on its head as enslaved and free blacks

¹ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London ; New York: Verso, 1997), 431.

vied for freedom and equality. In the end, black insurgents would expel the French and declare themselves free citizens of Haiti. Throughout the early stages of the Haitian Revolution, James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins were forced to navigate Saint-Domingue's ever-changing social, political and economic landscape. In the process, they found themselves thrust into the revolution's most important events and face-to-face with some of its most prominent actors.

This project is an exploration of the Perkins brothers' navigation of the American and Haitian Revolutions. It is also an analysis of the trade connections between Boston and Saint-Domingue/Haiti. The project begins with an investigation into how and why the Perkineses found themselves in Saint-Domingue in the first place. Chapter One reveals the French colony's profound impact on the development of revolutionary ideals in Boston. It is argued that Saint-Dominguan molasses became increasingly important to the Boston economy during the era of "salutary neglect." Merchants easily smuggled molasses into the city; distillers then made it into rum. Boston rum, in turn, functioned as a bartering item within the city and throughout the Atlantic world. After the Seven Year's War, however, Great Britain decided to crack down on smuggling. King and Parliament worried that extra-imperial trade was weakening the British Empire while strengthening its enemies. Considering Boston's involvement in commerce outside of the empire, it is no coincidence that the city felt the brunt of Great Britain's new trade regulations. It is also no coincidence that the first commodity targeted in the post-war reforms was molasses. In an attempt to stamp out trade with Saint-Domingue, Parliament passed the Sugar Act of 1764, which began taxing imported foreign molasses.

Needless to say, those Bostonians connected to the mercantile and rum industries—the Perkinses among them—were concerned about Parliament’s actions. The Sugar Act sparked a spirit of resistance that led to, among other things, the creation of the Sons of Liberty, the Boston Tea Party and the American War of Independence. At the heart of the city’s resistance to the post-war crackdown was commerce. Throughout the 1760s and 70s Boston merchants and revolutionaries (who were often one in the same) crafted a conception of liberty tied to the idea of free trade. Patriot colonists believed that by hindering trade with places like Saint-Domingue, Great Britain was violating their *natural* and *inherent* right to commerce, and was therefore no longer fit to govern. Young James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins came of age during this period of unrest. Moreover, their family was part of the Boston merchant community and was deeply invested in the patriot cause. The Perkins brothers’ mother, father and maternal grandfather taught them the importance of free trade from an early age.

When war broke out in 1775, many Bostonians took up arms against the British. Others supported the new nation through commerce. For them, participation in a free and independent American trade system (one of their natural rights) was equivalent to fighting the British; both actions aided in the development of the American nation. Among those who hoisted the sails instead of loading the muzzle were the Perkins brothers. As soon as possible, James, Thomas and Samuel set sail for Saint-Domingue—the very place Parliament sought to deny them decades earlier. Early-republican Boston trade with Saint-Domingue was both a continuation of the city’s longstanding commercial ties with the colony and an assertion of the new, American right to free trade.

Chapter Two moves beyond revolutionary Boston and analyzes the Perkins brothers' first years in Saint-Domingue. In the years after the American Revolution the colony became the undisputed economic powerhouse of the Caribbean; it also became the United States' top provider of tropical commodities. After establishing themselves in Le Cap, the Perkinses participated in Saint-Domingue's highly lucrative commodities and transatlantic slave trades. Their commitment to liberty only extended so far; like most Americans at the time, the brothers willingly took part in the enslavement of Africans. To their minds, Saint-Domingue was not a place of brutal subjugation, but a society controlled by a racial hierarchy that ensured domestic tranquility and economic vitality. As the early modern world's most profitable colony (France's "Pearl of the Antilles"), Saint-Domingue attracted ambitious merchants from Boston and throughout the United States.

By 1789, however, things began to change. The outbreak of the French Revolution would change Saint-Domingue forever, as well as the Perkins brothers' business in the colony. Members of the colony's free black population, instilled with revolutionary ideals of freedom and equality, led a revolt against white rule in the fall of 1790. Less than a year later enslaved Africans in the North Province began a rebellion that would eventually engulf the entire colony. Long gone was the "peaceful" society the Perkinses once knew. Though they continued—with modest success—to conduct business, most of their time went to manning guard posts throughout Le Cap. In some instances, they engaged and killed black insurgents in combat. The Boston merchants participated in a foreign conflict mostly for economic reasons. The Perkinses took up arms because, despite their significant differences, they viewed the black insurgents in

the same light as the British imperial administration of the 1760s and 70s: threats to their natural right to commerce. The Perkins brothers and their partners believed that if they could help restore Saint-Domingue's prerevolutionary racial hierarchy, then regular commercial activity would resume.

The final chapter analyzes Samuel Perkins' (along with some of his remaining associates') last years in Saint-Domingue. It also examines the Perkins brothers' continued trade with the colony after Samuel's final departure in late 1793. As the rebellion wore on, Samuel and his partners took on an important role in the provisioning of colonial and metropolitan troops. In supporting the French side, they once again hoped to restore the racial hierarchy they believed to be intrinsic to the colony's economic well-being—and their profits. In September 1792 Samuel witnessed the arrival of the French Republic's civil commissioners, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel. The commissioners sought to bring the colony in line with French revolutionary ideals. To the dismay of the colony's conservative, anti-republican factions (which included Samuel), Sonthonax and Polverel began implementing more egalitarian policies regarding slavery. Tensions between republican and conservative parties erupted violently in late June 1793 during an incident known today as the burning of Le Cap.

The burning of Le Cap began a sequence of events that permanently changed Saint-Domingue. In an effort to find allies among the black population, the commissioners issued a series of decrees that abolished slavery in the colony. As a result, Saint-Domingue's prerevolutionary racial hierarchy—which had controlled social and economic relations in the colony for centuries—was severely damaged, along with most of the Perkinses' assets in the colony. Despite lingering forms of racial discrimination in

the colony, formerly enslaved men and women now exercised their rights as free and equal citizens of the French Republic. In another assertion of his right to free trade, Samuel literally risked life and limb to recoup the losses suffered and debts incurred during the destruction of Le Cap. His dangerous pursuit of financial compensation exposed him to the radical changes that the commissioners' decrees had brought to the colony. It also brought him into contact with the highest echelons of the imperial government. Samuel finally received his compensation in the fall of 1793. Samuel closed the Perkins firm and returned to Boston at the end of the year. Despite the closure of the Perkins firm in Le Cap, the family continued an indirect trade with the colony.

The period after Samuel's departure saw the rise of Toussaint Louverture. Born into slavery, the black insurgent leader soon became the unrivaled ruler of Saint-Domingue. Notwithstanding the Perkinses' positive views on slavery, they decided that trade with a black ruler—because of the importance of Saint-Dominguan commodities to the United States economy—was better than no trade at all. They traded with Toussaint throughout his time in power. Boston and other American merchants even helped persuade the Adams administration to aid Toussaint during the War of the South—a civil war between Toussaint and his one time ally, André Rigaud. The Adams administration intervened in Saint-Domingue for the express reason of protecting the trade agreements they had forged with Toussaint Louverture. When the Haitian War of Independence began in 1802, American merchants changed tactics once again: they now traded with both the French and insurgent sides. By doing so, they ensured future trade relations with the eventual victor. American merchants' desire to tap into the colony's commodity trade was so strong that trade continued even after Haitian independence in 1804—despite

Thomas Jefferson's embargo on the nation. For a short period of time, Americans were willing to conduct trade with a nation governed by former slaves. In other words, the merchants' bottom line, for the moment, appeared to trump race and politics. Regular commercial relations between the two nations continued into the 1810s, until Haiti transitioned from a plantation economy to a subsistence farming economy.²

For the Perkins brothers, life after Saint-Domingue/Haiti was no less financially successful. James and Thomas shifted their attentions to China. There, they conducted a lucrative trade in illegal Turkish opium. Similar to their involvement in the Saint-Dominguan slave trade, their participation in the opium trade had toxic effects on the local population. While in the West Indies the Perkinses played a role in the enslavement of Africans, in China they helped create a culture of drug addiction that uprooted local society. Despite its illegal nature, the brothers made their fortunes in opium smuggling. Wealth gained from the opium trade (and the slave trade before it) allowed James and Thomas to leave a lasting impact on their hometown. Among the large legacy left by the Perkins family to the city of Boston are the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston Athenaeum, Perkins School for the Blind and the Bunker Hill Memorial.

Primary and Secondary Sources

In Chapter One, I utilized a number of pamphlets, letters and newspapers to investigate how Boston revolutionaries crafted their particular conception of liberty. Among them are letters written by Samuel Adams, James Otis' famous pamphlet *Rights*

² Diplomatic relations between the United States and Haiti did become more racialized throughout the 19th century. The United States did not grant Haiti diplomatic recognition until 1863, only after the Emancipation Proclamation. Here, I argue that the *initial* withering of trade relations between the two nations had more to do with Haiti's shifting economy than race and politics.

of the British Colonies, and articles from the *Boston Gazette* and *Boston Centinel*. In terms of secondary works, Carl Seaburg and Stanley Paterson's *Merchant Prince of Boston* provided invaluable information on the Perkins family's experiences during the American Revolution. John Tyler's *Smugglers & Patriots* and Benjamin Carp's *Defiance of the Patriots* helped to conceptualize the development of revolutionary politics in Boston. John McCusker's *Rum and the American Revolution* served as an important resource in determining the importance of molasses and rum in the Boston and Atlantic economies. Lastly, Richard Pares' *Yankees and Creoles* and *War and Trade in the West Indies* remain the preeminent works on trade between North America and the French Caribbean before the American Revolution.

Memoirs, letters and ship invoices written by Boston merchants constituted the primary sources for the second and third chapters. First and foremost was Samuel Perkins' *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, which recounts Samuel's time in Saint-Domingue (1786-1793). *Reminiscences* is not without its faults: written decades after the fact, one must be wary of lapses in memory or purposeful alteration. Corroboration with other sources, however, reveals that Samuel's recollection of events is generally accurate, if not highly influenced by his own opinions. Nevertheless, Samuel's memoir serves as one of the few eyewitness accounts of prerevolutionary and revolutionary Saint-Domingue written by a Bostonian. Letters and ship invoices from the *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers* at the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) were also important resources. Thomas received numerous letters from his associates in Saint-Domingue describing the events of the revolution. On the business side, the *Perkins Papers'* ship invoices revealed the Perkins brothers' economic activity in the colony.

Letters and diaries written by fellow Boston merchants and family friends Nathaniel Cutting and Ralph Bennet Forbes provided additional eyewitness accounts of the revolution. Cutting's *Journal and Letterbooks* and Forbes' *Correspondences* (both stored at MHS) allowed me to widen my analysis of the Haitian Revolution's effects on Boston merchants, and vice-versa. Thanks to a recent surge in Haitian revolutionary studies in the past decades, I benefited from many works written by experts in the field. For general narratives of the Haitian Revolution, I made use of Laurent Dubois' *Avengers of the New World* and C.L.R. James' classic work *The Black Jacobins*. In addition, David Geggus' *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* and *The Haitian Revolution: a Documentary History* provided valuable insights.

Historiography and the Goal of this Project

As aforementioned, scholarly interest in the Haitian Revolution has increased dramatically in recent decades. Scholars have analyzed many of the revolution's major themes: voodoo, warfare and black insurgent leaders, to name only a few. A particularly popular subset in the field, however, is the study of the event's widespread international impacts. Scholars such as David Geggus, Ada Ferrer and Ashli White (among many others) have shown how the Haitian Revolution—far from a localized event—sent shockwaves throughout the Atlantic world. Recent studies have focused on the Haitian Revolution's effects on places such as Cuba, Brazil, New Orleans, Charleston and Philadelphia.³ Some of these scholarly works have focused on the revolution's influences

³ David Geggus has taken a leading role in the effort to study the Haitian Revolution's international impacts. Geggus' edited volumes include *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. D.B. Gaspar and D.P. Geggus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); and

on enslaved Africans, slaveowners and slave regimes throughout the Atlantic world. Others have analyzed the role of white and black Saint-Dominguan refugees on the social, political and economic circumstances of Atlantic port cities.

While inspired by such efforts, this study comes from a different angle. The study's novelty comes from its perspective, and from primary sources that are largely rooted in the experiences of Boston merchants. This project is not a story of Saint-Dominguan refugees in the United States; nor is it an all-inclusive analysis of the Haitian Revolution. It is a study about Boston merchants' trade with—and experiences in—Saint-Domingue more than a study of the Haitian Revolution, *per se*. Through the lens of the Perkins family, I hope to shed light on an understudied part of early-republican and Atlantic history: the economic relationship between Boston and Saint-Domingue/Haiti. This relationship, I argue, played important roles in both the American and Haitian Revolutions. In Boston, it helped merchants and patriots develop a conception of liberty tied to free trade during the 1760s and 70s. Boston merchants brought their newly conceived liberties with them to Saint-Domingue. There, they asserted their natural right to free trade by becoming active participants in one of the most important events of the early-modern period, the Haitian Revolution.

The World of the Haitian Revolution, ed. Norman Fiering and D.P. Geggus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Works by other scholars include Ada Ferrer's new work *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Ashli White's *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Matt D. Childs' *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Susan Buck-Morss' *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Jeremy Popkin's *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) and *You Are all Free: The Haitian revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Robin Blackburn's *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London; New York: Verso, 1988). This is far from an exhaustive list.

Chapter One

Finding Saint-Domingue in Revolutionary Boston

After the Seven Year's War (1756-1763) the British imperial administration implemented a series of reforms meant to return the empire to a more traditional type of mercantilism. Great Britain would no longer turn a blind eye to smuggling and extra-imperial trade in North America. Parliament increased the number of North American customs agents and gave them the power to seize any merchant ships believed to be carrying on illegal trade. In addition, they levied taxes (or duties) on imported foreign commodities to dissuade merchants from conducting trade with nations or colonies outside of the British Empire.

In Boston, where smuggling had become an important part of the economy in previous decades, these reforms were met with resistance. One of Parliament's first reforms, the Sugar Act of 1764, caused trepidation throughout the Boston merchant community by taxing foreign molasses. Accustomed to carrying on a duty-free molasses trade with the French sugar island of Saint-Domingue, Boston merchants protested the act. They worried that any disruption to the molasses trade would damage the city's rum industry. Damage to the rum industry, they argued, would have devastating effects on the entire regional economy. Since Boston's economic well-being was so dependent on overseas trade, Bostonians with less direct ties to commerce joined merchants in their struggle against the Sugar Act. Future patriots such as Samuel Adams and James Otis introduced the now-famous argument "no taxation without representation." In addition, they reasoned that among the "natural rights" infringed upon by imperial reforms was the right to conduct free trade—or in this case, to smuggle foreign molasses. In the face of

what they believed to be British imperial oppression, Boston merchants and patriots crafted a conception of liberty intimately tied to the idea of free trade.

In the years that followed the passage of the Sugar Act, Great Britain continued implementing reforms aimed at thwarting extra-imperial trade. For their part, Bostonians continued to resist any hindrance on trade: forms of resistance included non-importation agreements, smuggling, and even physical violence. Boston's slide towards revolution that began with the Sugar Act culminated with the Boston Tea Party—another act of resistance meant to protect colonists' right to free trade—in late 1773. With the outbreak of war in 1775, Bostonians not only flew to fight against the British, but also to exercise their natural right to free trade.

While many Bostonians were affected by British post-war reforms, the Perkins family provides exceptional insights into the development of revolutionary ideals in Boston, and how those ideals were tied free trade. As a family connected to the Boston merchant community, the Perkinses felt the economic sting of the post-war reforms and participated in the resistance movements of the 1760s and 70s. By the time of the Boston Tea Party, they were full-fledged patriots. When war finally came in 1775, the two oldest Perkins children, James and Thomas, leaped at the opportunity to participate in a new trade system independent British oversight—their youngest brother, Samuel, would join them later. To their minds, participation in independent American commerce was tantamount to taking up arms against the British. When James and Thomas left Boston to enter into their new nation's trade system, they went to Saint-Domingue. Their choice of destination reveals the important place the French sugar island occupied in the minds of many Bostonians. By sailing for Saint-Domingue, Boston merchants asserted their newly

conceived American liberties while *reasserting* their long-held right to trade in Saint-Dominguan molasses. In its own particular way, Saint-Domingue had a profound influence on the development of revolutionary ideals in Boston.

Smuggling with Saint-Domingue

The smuggling of tropical commodities began early in Boston. During the period of “salutary neglect” (an unofficial British imperial policy that allowed high levels of colonial autonomy in trade and governance, circa. 1600-1760), Boston merchants carried on trade with little imperial oversight. Still, trade in tropical commodities largely remained within the British Empire during the 17th century.⁴ New England merchants traded fish, lumber, horses, meat and flour for British West Indian sugar, molasses and rum.⁵ By around 1715, however, the development of the North American colonies led to a trade imbalance: the North American colonies were producing more than the West Indies could consume; moreover, the sugar islands could not supply North America’s growing demand for tropical commodities.⁶ Merchants were forced to sell cargoes at lower prices while the cost of sugar, molasses and rum increased. Throughout the North American colonies—but particularly in Boston—merchants began to turn to the French West Indies as an alternative market.

⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 128–9. Bailyn asserts that in the late 17th century New England merchants profited from England’s mercantilist restrictions. He also argues that the British West Indies were “becoming increasingly dependent on shipments of goods and provisions from New England.”

⁵ Richard Pares, *Yankees and Creoles: the Trade between North America and the West Indies before the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 37 & 92–93.

⁶ Ludwell Lee Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1958* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1940), 29.

Saint-Domingue became Boston merchants' extra-imperial destination of choice after 1715. The colonial economies of Saint-Domingue and Massachusetts were near perfect counterparts to one another. Large-scale rum distillation began in Boston around 1700 and flourished in the following decades.⁷ Boston's high demand for molasses—a syrup-like byproduct of sugar refinement used to make rum—sent merchants first to the British West Indies. Though they soon learned that because of the sugar islands' own rum industries, British planters had little molasses left for export. In contrast, sugar planters and merchants in Saint-Domingue had more molasses than they knew what to do with. For the most part, Saint-Dominguans did not distill their molasses into rum because of France's ban on imported liquors—an effort to protect the metropolitan brandy industry.⁸ Saint-Domingue's high supply of molasses was paralleled by its demand for provisions: the scarcely populated French North American colonies were far too underdeveloped to provide Saint-Domingue with efficient foodstuffs.⁹ As a result of these economic peculiarities, Boston merchants began trading New England produce for Saint-Dominguan tropical commodities—particularly molasses. Massachusetts helped provide the resources necessary for Saint-Domingue to become the world's leading sugar producer by the 1740s, while Saint-Dominguan molasses allowed Massachusetts to distill more rum than any other North American colony.¹⁰

For all of the salutary neglect of the early-18th century, extra-imperial trade was still at odds with Great Britain's mercantilist Navigation Acts—and Boston merchants had to tread carefully. France's own mercantilist restrictions (the *exclusif*) made trade

⁷ Pares, *Yankees and Creoles*, 26–27.

⁸ Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1958*, 29.

⁹ Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763* (London: F. Cass, 1963), 395.

¹⁰ Pares, *Yankees and Creoles*, 29.

with Saint-Domingue doubly challenging. But the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. Boston merchants developed a myriad of smuggling techniques to get around customs services. Peter Faneuil—one of the first Bostonians to trade regularly with Saint-Domingue—took to manning his ships with both an English and French captain.¹¹ Other smuggling techniques included false papers (i.e., pretending the molasses was from the British West Indies) and bribing both French and British customs officials. British absentee planters in London forced Parliament to pass the Molasses Act of 1733, which implemented a duty on foreign molasses imported into North America, but it was hardly enforced.¹² By the 1730s, Boston was trading more with Saint-Domingue than other North American port city.¹³ Trade with Saint-Domingue continued—and Boston rum production increased—in the following decades.

Not even the Seven Year's War (1754-1763) stopped Boston's extra-imperial trade with Saint-Domingue. Far from ceasing trade with the French West Indies, North American merchants traded with Saint-Domingue under the nose of the British imperial administration. British ministers and commanders sought to blunt France's war effort by blockading its West Indian colonies.¹⁴ North American merchants directly undermined British strategy by trading with Saint-Domingue by way of the Spanish port of Monte Cristi. Located just miles from the border of Saint-Domingue on the Spanish side of Hispaniola (Santo Domingo), Monte Cristi was a backwater before the Seven Year's War. But war brought opportunities. The port soon became a front for illegal trade between North America and the Saint-Domingue. Boston and other North American

¹¹ Ibid., 9–11. Interestingly, Faneuil was the son of a Huguenot who fled France in the late 17th century.

¹² Ibid., 54–55.

¹³ Ibid., 49. See chart.

¹⁴ Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763*, 394.

merchants sailed into Monte Cristi to ostensibly trade for Spanish sugar and molasses—but anyone in on the act knew that the tropical commodities for sale were French. Despite the fact that Santo Domingo’s sugar industry all but disappeared in the 16th century,¹⁵ one Boston merchant trading at Monte Cristi in 1760 wrote home to his benefactor describing the price of white sugar, brown sugar and molasses.¹⁶ Another merchant counted over 130 trading vessels in the harbor at one time. Small coasting vessels would exchange North American articles of trade for tropical commodities in the nearby Saint-Dominguan ports of Le Cap and Fort Dauphin.¹⁷

Boston merchants were willing to go to such lengths during the Seven Year’s War because of the economic importance of the Saint-Domingue trade to the New England economy. In previous decades, French molasses had come to power Boston’s rum industry; rum, in turn, served as the basis of Boston merchants’ trade with other North American colonies, Native America, Newfoundland and West Africa. In the words of Ludwell Lee Montague, an historian of U.S.-Haitian relations, “cheap French molasses came to be regarded as the foundation of New England prosperity.”¹⁸ When the British imperial administration cracked down on Boston’s extra-imperial trade after the war, the city’s merchant community—Perkins family among them—went to even greater lengths to protect their economic livelihood.

¹⁵ “The Sugar Economy of Española in the Sixteenth Century,” in Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 107–108.

¹⁶ Joseph Marchand to Samuel Avery, 26 February 1760, *Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts*, MHS.

¹⁷ Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763*, 456–458.

¹⁸ Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1958*, 30.

The Perkins Family and the Nonimportation Movement

James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins were born into the Boston world of trade between 1761 and 1767. Their father James and mother Elizabeth—along with their grandfather and Thomas’ namesake, Thomas Handasyd Peck—raised the three brothers and their five siblings on King Street, just blocks from the city’s Custom House.¹⁹ Like many Boston families, the Perkinses were tied to the city’s merchant community. Thomas Handasyd Peck was a hat maker and had connections to the fur trade. Peck provided gunpowder and ammunition to trappers “down east”—in particular, to trappers in what is today Maine and Newfoundland. In return, the trappers provided him beaver, fox, bear and otter pelts. Peck then either sold his fur skins and hats in Boston or shipped them to Great Britain, where they were in high demand. Peck was able to earn a successful living off of hat and fur trading: in the nine-year period between 1767-1775, for example, he shipped over 120,000 animal pelts to Great Britain.²⁰

The Perkins boys’ father was also involved in the merchant community. James Perkins, Sr. began his career as a bookkeeper for a wealthy Boston merchant but then struck out on his own. Following in his father-in-law’s footsteps, James began shipping furs to the metropole. His success allowed him to purchase property on King Street, where he housed his family and opened a shop selling furs and imported wines.²¹ From an early age, the Perkins boys were exposed to trade through both their grandfather and

¹⁹ Carl Seaburg and Stanley Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), 4. King Street was later changed to State Street after the Revolution. Thomas Perkins’ unusual middle name most likely came from a friend of his great-grandfather and Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica, Thomas Handasyd. This original Handasyd was the godfather to Thomas Handasyd Peck, who inherited the name and passed it to his grandson. The pronunciation of the name is “hand-a-side.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

father—and by the time they were young adults, their mother Elizabeth was running the family retail shop. Moreover, living just blocks from Boston’s Custom House, where merchants and ship captains exchanged news of high profits and new ventures, James, Thomas and Samuel learned of the seemingly endless opportunities afforded to those engaged in the world of trade.

The Perkins boys, however, also came of age during a time when the British imperial trading system began to undergo dramatic changes. In order to thwart the rampant smuggling that occurred during the Seven Year’s War, the British imperial administration embarked on a series of reforms meant to wipe out any remnants of salutary neglect. Undoubtedly, the administration had Monte Cristi in mind when they crafted their reforms. Trade reforms included raising duties without the direct consent of the colonists; enhancing the powers of vice-admiralty judges; increasing the number of customs officials; establishing a commission at Boston to enforce the Navigation Acts; and creating a coast guard to intercept merchant ships entering or departing colonial ports.²²

Not only an attempt to recoup debts accrued during the war by way of colonial taxes, the British reforms aimed to crack down on extra-imperial trade in order to strengthen British mercantilism and manufacturing. The British feared that by allowing the colonies to trade with outside powers, colonial merchants would turn to cheaper

²² Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 91–92. In Gould’s recent book he argues that besides an attempt to cut down on extra-imperial trade, the post-war reforms implemented by the Grenville administration were also an attempt to hold the American colonies more accountable to Great Britain’s treaty obligations in Europe. By increasing their presence in North America and becoming more economically engaged in the colonies, the administration hoped to thwart any colonial skirmishes like the ones that began the global Seven Year’s War.

foreign manufactures and damage the British export market.²³ By forcing colonial merchants to trade within the imperial system, the British would secure a reliable consumer of their manufactured goods in North America and ensure that the continent's raw materials were channeled solely through British markets. These reforms would forever change Great Britain's relationship with the North American colonies.

Unsurprisingly, one of the most unpopular segments of the postwar reforms amongst the Boston merchant community was the Revenue Act of 1764—known largely as the Sugar Act in the colonies. Put into motion by Prime Minister George Grenville, the act included—among other things—a three-pence duty on each gallon of imported foreign (i.e., Saint-Dominguan) molasses. The new duty sent ripples of consternation throughout the Boston business community: merchants, distillers and tavern keepers felt the squeeze as molasses—and therefore rum—prices began to rise. Discontent also spread to those Bostonians not directly connected to the molasses trade, but nonetheless enjoyed their rum punch.²⁴

Ironically, the new three-pence duty was a *reduction* from the six-pence duty established by the 1733 Molasses Act.²⁵ The Molasses Act, however, had never been enforced and—as mentioned above—Boston merchants developed a duty-free trade in Saint-Dominguan molasses during the previous century. Though this time around Parliament provided North American customs agents the tools and resources for effective enforcement. To the minds of Boston merchants, the Sugar Act was a threat to the city's lucrative rum industry—and by extension, the regional economy. Boston's already heavy

²³ John W. Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 75.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

dependence on extra-imperial trade may have even increased during the Seven Year's War. Colonies with large hinterlands such as New York and Pennsylvania continued to develop economically, marginalizing Massachusetts' already declining participation in British West India trade.²⁶ Moreover, according to historian John Tyler, Boston suffered more during the war than any other port city: high casualty rates of soldiers, endemic fire and smallpox in the city, and high wartime taxes crippled the economy.²⁷ Due to the economic development of Boston's southern neighbors and the regional depression brought on by the war, merchants became evermore reliant on trade outside of the empire.

But this was all at odds with Grenville's grand idea of a return to traditional mercantilism. The days of salutary neglect were over: the imperial administration, finally provided sufficient resources, would no longer overlook foreign molasses entering Boston duty-free. By actually enforcing a foreign molasses duty, Grenville hoped to make smuggling and extra-imperial trade with the French West Indies unprofitable. Required to pay the three-pence duty, Boston merchants would be forced to trade with the British West Indies. Grenville aimed to keep the profits of British colonial trade away from the French and flowing into British coffers.

The city's merchants railed against the new—or newly *enforced*—duties imposed by the Sugar Act. More than just a duty on foreign molasses, merchants viewed the imperial administration's action as an attempt to dismantle the commercial and economic structures developed during the period of salutary neglect. They found allies among those who believed that Parliament did not have the right to tax the colonies without their

²⁶ Pares, *Yankees and Creoles*, 24–26.

²⁷ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 72. According to Tyler, Boston suffered more during the war than any other port city.

consent. Even those Bostonians not ostensibly connected to the merchant community saw the importance of resisting any parliamentary attempt to tax or inhibit colonial trade.

Future patriot leaders such as Samuel Adams, for example, joined the merchants in their protests against the Sugar Act. In a letter to a Massachusetts customs agent, Adams expressed many Bostonians' uneasiness "at several Acts of Parliament lately made, by which their Trade is greatly obstructed." Should these acts stay in place, Adams feared that colonial trade "must soon be ruined." Adams linked the potential ruin of the Boston economy to Parliament's enhanced customs procedures and the new duty on foreign molasses. He argued that the "English West India Islands do not produce sufficient for the Consumption and Trade of the Continent," and that the "Duty of three Pence per Gallon on foreign Molasses amounts to a full prohibition, and must soon put a Stop to that Branch."²⁸ In other words, the duty on foreign molasses would force Boston merchants away from foreign colonies like Saint-Domingue and to the British West Indies; and the dearth of molasses exported by the British sugar islands would spell the end to Boston's rum industry.

Adams continued by asserting that damage to the molasses trade would affect other industries as well. First and foremost would be the fishing industry. He described the molasses trade and fishing industry as "mutual Supports to each other." Boston merchants had long been accustomed to trading fish for molasses in Saint-Domingue. If confined to the British West Indies, then the highly productive New England fisheries would suffer from low fish prices due to chronic oversupply. A failing New England fishery would mean added unemployment in an already depressed economy. If put out of

²⁸ "To Dennys de Berdt, December 20th" in Samuel Adams and Harry Alonzo Cushing, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1904), Volume 1, 62.

work, Adams warned, those Bostonians connected to the molasses trade and fishing industry might be “put upon contriving some other Methods, perhaps to their own great Advantage, and not so beneficial to the Nation.”²⁹ If denied employment through parliamentary restrictions, Bostonians would find other, extralegal ways to make a living.

Some Sugar Act protesters went beyond purely economic reasoning. Lawyer and future patriot James Otis—who later coined the phrase “no taxation without representation”—began to question whether the post-war reforms violated the colonists’ natural rights as British subjects in his 1764 rebuttal to the Revenue Act: *The Rights of the British Colonies*. Otis’ pamphlet provides one of the first instances of the revolutionary rhetoric that would become commonplace in the late 1760s and 1770s.

Otis turned to Thucydides, Grotius, Locke and Rousseau in his defense of the natural rights of the colonists. Natural law, according to Otis, provided colonists the same rights as those living in the metropole.³⁰ “Every British Subject born on the continent of America, or in any other of the British dominions,” Otis wrote, “is by the law of God and nature...entitled to all the natural, essential, inherent and inseparable rights of our fellow subjects in Great Britain.”³¹ One of those “natural” rights was the ability to conduct free trade. Otis called the molasses duty “unequal and unjust,” and argued that the “terrible burden” of the post-war reforms—supporting an increased number of customs officials and an anti-smuggling coast guard—should not fall on the merchants alone.³² While Otis held that the colonies were “subject to, and dependent on Great Britain,”³³ he warned of

²⁹ Ibid, 62-63.

³⁰ Otis, James. *The rights of the British colonies*. London, [1764]. *The Making Of The Modern World*. Web. 19 Jan. 2016. 38-41.

³¹ Ibid., 52.

³² Ibid., 64.

³³ Ibid., 49.

the consequences of defying natural law. “The law of nature,” he counseled, “was not of man’s making, nor is it in his power to mend it, or alter its course.” In conclusion, Otis prophesized on the inevitable outcome of Great Britain’s meddling in colonial commerce: “Those who fall on arbitrary measures [i.e., unjust duties] will meet their deserved fate.”³⁴

Otis’ arguments reflected the economic realities in Boston. The city’s economy had become increasingly reliant on extra-imperial trade over the previous half century; this reliance only hardened during the regional depression caused by the Seven Year’s War. Merchants found it necessary to oppose any attempt to curtail a trade essential to their economic security, even if that meant overt opposition to imperial laws and regulations. Due to Great Britain’s post-war reforms, the public opinion of the Boston merchant community began to turn against the Crown—the Perkins family was no exception.

The passage of the Stamp Act—another piece of the post-war reforms—in March 1765 further soured relations with Great Britain. Merchants were affected by the new tax on printed-paper because of the many legal documents required to conduct trade. Moreover, the port of Boston was closed for a time while the stamped papers needed for issuing clearances were not yet available. As with the Revenue Act, discontent over the Stamp Act permeated Boston society. As Boston’s economy suffered, the city’s merchant community searched for ways to pressure Parliament into repealing the act. In December, 250 Boston merchants (three-quarters of those involved in the import-export trade) signed the first nonimportation agreement: Boston merchants would boycott the purchase

³⁴ Ibid., 46.

of British products until the Stamp Act was repealed.³⁵ They hoped that by damaging the sale of British manufactures in North America, British merchants would petition Parliament for the repeal of the act. In large part because their counterparts in New York and Philadelphia joined the Boston merchants, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766. While it is unknown whether or not Thomas Handasyd Peck and James Perkins participated in Boston's first nonimportation movement, it is known that Peck was a member of the Sons of Liberty³⁶ (a Patriot group led by Samuel Adams that agitated for the repeal of the Stamp Act) and that both he and his son-in-law attended a celebratory anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1769.³⁷

The merchants' success, however, was short-lived. By midsummer 1767 news reached the colonies of Parliament's passing of the Declaratory Act. To save face after the repeal of the Stamp Act, Parliament passed the Declaratory Act to reassert its right to impose laws and taxes on the American colonies. The first manifestation of reasserted parliamentary rights came in the form of the Townshend Acts. The acts imposed duties on colonial imports of glass, lead, paper, paint and tea. Having already taxed foreign molasses, the imperial administration now implemented a similar three-pence duty on another of Boston's most profitable—and most smuggled—imports: tea. Adding to the Boston merchants' discontent, the acts gave customs officials the power to issue writs of assistance to search for contraband goods.³⁸

³⁵ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 91. Tyler estimates that somewhere between three-fourths and seven-eighths of the Boston merchant community signed the nonimportation agreement.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix, 269-270.

³⁷ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 21-22.

³⁸ Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89.

As with previous acts of Parliament, the Townshend Acts were opposed in Boston. On September 14, the *Boston Gazette* published a letter to the editor proposing a “project for suspending the importation of goods from G.B. until those evils [i.e., import duties] we are threatened with shall vanish.” Fresh off their defeat of the Stamp Act, many believed a second nonimportation agreement would force a similar repeal of the Townshend duties.³⁹ Debate over whether or not Boston merchants should adopt nonimportation continued throughout the winter of 1767-8. In March 1768 many Boston merchants (including Thomas Handasyd Peck⁴⁰) signed a unilateral nonimportation agreement and implored New York and Philadelphia to join them in boycotting British goods.⁴¹

The seizure of John Hancock’s sloop *Liberty*—suspected of smuggling Madeira wine⁴²—and the events that followed in June 1768 drove many merchants on the fence towards nonimportation. When news spread along the city’s wharves that the *Liberty* had been seized, the denizens of the Boston waterfront attempted to prevent the ship from being fully confiscated by customs officials. Unable to do so, over 300 rioters pelted the officials responsible for the seizure with bricks and stones; they later marched to the customs collector’s house and broke every window.⁴³ Similar to the city’s merchants, the working classes of Boston’s waterfront also realized the potential impacts of imperial

³⁹ *The Boston Gazette*, 14 September 1767, America’s Historical Newspapers.

⁴⁰ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, Appendix, 269–270.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴² Harlow G. Unger, *John Hancock: Merchant King and American Patriot* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 119 & 129.

⁴³ Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party & the Making of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 39.

restrictions on their livelihoods.⁴⁴ In response, Governor Francis Bernard called in four army regiments to restore order. The presence of British troops in Boston only heightened tensions between crown and colony. Boston merchants found support in their counterparts in New York and Philadelphia. New York merchants drafted their own importation agreement in August that was contingent on Philadelphia merchants following suit. Philadelphia postponed their decision through the winter of 1768-9, but agreed to the intercolonial Nonimportation Agreement in March 1769.⁴⁵

Despite merchants' efforts to promote *free* trade in the colonies, the irony of the Nonimportation Agreement's limitations on commerce was not lost on some observers. Thomas Handasyd Peck, among others, became embroiled in a controversy concerning the violation of the Nonimportation Agreement. John Mein—a Scottish journalist, ardent loyalist, and long time opponent of nonimportation—published an article in the *Boston Chronicle* accusing Peck of importing hats from Britain.⁴⁶ Incensed by what he claimed to be a groundless accusation, the next morning Peck hung the box that reportedly contained the imported hats outside of his shop. He asserted the box was too small to have held the alleged “Forty Dozen of Hatts.” Peck did not stop there. Later that day, he had his servant wear the box on his head as the two men paraded down King Street, past the Custom House and throughout the city. The sardonic procession purposely ended

⁴⁴ Benjamin Carp's chapter "Port in a Storm: The Boston Waterfront as Contested Space, 1747-74" in *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) reveals how Boston's wealthy merchants and working classes were in fact interconnected communities dependent on one another. John Hancock, for instance, purchased uniforms for working class participants in the Pope's Day celebrations every November.

⁴⁵ Gray and Kamensky, *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, 91-3.

⁴⁶ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 125.

outside of John Mein's.⁴⁷ Peck hoped that the spectacle would prove his commitment to the nonimportation movement and patriot cause.

Notwithstanding instances of real or alleged violations, the Nonimportation Agreement did put pressure on Parliament. With North America's three largest ports boycotting British manufactures, Parliament began to consider a partial repeal of the Townshend duties. By early summer, Parliament proposed a repeal of all the import duties excluding tea.⁴⁸ News of Parliament's partial repeal of the Townshend Acts and the approaching January 1, 1770 expiration date for the Nonimportation Agreement irreparably damaged the movement in the fall of 1769. The most ardent supporters of nonimportation tried to extend the agreement in order to push Parliament towards further repeals on colonial trade duties and restrictions. But their efforts were for naught. New York merchants were the first defectors. By May 1770 a sizeable minority of Boston merchants believed nonimportation to be pointless after the partial repeal of the Townshend duties.⁴⁹ In October the merchants voted unanimously to reopen trade on all items except tea.⁵⁰

The Perkins Boys, the Boston Massacre, and Smuggling

The conflict between the imperial administration and Boston merchants from 1764 to 1770 had profound effects. Many of the city's merchants defied British rule and, in the process, developed a conception of liberty that was inseparable from free trade. They began to view any attempt to interfere with trade as the use of arbitrary power, and

⁴⁷ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 20–21.

⁴⁸ Gray and Kamensky, *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, 93.

⁴⁹ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 158.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

an unprecedented level of rebelliousness gripped the city. Merchants and patriots used either non-violent or violent means to ensure the continuation of the extra-imperial trade systems developed during the period of salutary neglect. Non-violent resistance most often took the form of smuggling; violent measures included harassing and assaulting British soldiers stationed in the city. Perhaps more than any other incident, however, the riots that followed the seizure of John Hancock's sloop *Liberty* embodied a newborn feeling of defiance. Boston's wealthy merchants and waterfront working classes combined to form a united front against imperial trade reform. The *Liberty* incident had long-term effects in the city. Governor Bernard's request in 1768 for the installation of four British regiments in Boston began a period of unrest between the colonists and soldiers. Over the next two years tensions fermented, finally erupting on March 5, 1770 in what would become known as the Boston Massacre.

It is no coincidence that the many of the actors in the Massacre were sailors and other tradesmen connected to the maritime industry. Those Bostonians connected to trade felt the brunt of Great Britain's post-war reforms. It all began on March 2, when an underpaid soldier looking for extra work approached a group of employees at Samuel Gray's ropewalk, which provided rigging for the port's ships.⁵¹ Rope-makers were vulnerable in the face of British restraints on commerce and opposed any attempt by soldiers to take work from locals. A verbal altercation ensued between the entreating soldier and a rope-man named William Green. The tiff soon became physical. The soldier was driven away but returned with a group of comrades. The rope-makers (adept at swinging their rope-making clubs) were able to beat off the soldiers with their

⁵¹ Ibid., 149. Samuel Gray, the owner of the ropewalk, was among those killed in the Boston Massacre.

“wouldering sticks.” After meeting with the belligerent soldiers’ superior officer, Samuel Gray agreed to fire William Green.⁵² But tensions in the city remained high in the following days. On the night of March 5, witnesses described seeing a mob comprised mostly of sailors harassing British troops on King Street. The soldiers eventually fired on the crowd, killing five and injury several others. Among the dead was Crispus Attucks, a man of Wampanoag and African descent who took a leading role in the confrontation. Largely considered to be the first casualty of the American Revolution, Attucks made his living off of colonial trade as a merchant seaman and dockworker.⁵³

James, Thomas and Samuel were likely asleep when the Boston Massacre occurred. Living just blocks from the incident, perhaps the sound of gunshots and screams of “Fire! Fire!” woke the young boys. It is known that Thomas witnessed the Massacre’s aftermath the next morning. Atop the shoulders of the family servant, Thomas viewed the corpses lying just blocks from his King Street home. When Thomas wrote of the moment seven decades later, he described the scene as if it had just happened. “The impression made on my mind by the death scene, and the frozen blood in the street,” he remembered, “was of course indelible and I now well remember the location of each body, although the houses where the bodies laid have long since been replaced by new stone edifices.”⁵⁴ If their father and grandfather had not already convinced the Perkins boys of the importance of resisting imperial obstructions to free trade, the sight of the Boston Massacre and the incident’s aftermath certainly drove them towards the patriot cause.

⁵² Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 4-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

The period between the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party in 1773 was relatively calm.⁵⁵ Due to the collapse of the Nonimportation Agreement, outright resistance to British trade restrictions paused. Boston merchants, however, continued their resistance through veiled methods. One of the foremost ways they did so was through smuggling. Customs reports on seizures suggest that there may have even been an increase in smuggling after 1769.⁵⁶ Numerous articles were smuggled into Boston during this period—especially Dutch tea—but the focus here is molasses. Like in years past, merchants traded in Saint-Domingue for molasses to feed Boston’s rum industry—one of the few sectors of the Boston economy that continued to thrive during the depression.⁵⁷ For many Boston merchants involved in the molasses trade, post-war smuggling took on an increased importance. No longer was smuggling simply the *modus operandi* of trade: it now became a way to resist imperial intrusions on colonial commerce and to assert their natural right to free trade.

The amount of molasses smuggled into Boston in the face of post-war reforms was significant. In his study of the rum trade prior to the American Revolution, John J. McCusker estimates that of the 6.5 million gallons of molasses imported into the North American colonies in 1770, at least 2.6 million gallons were smuggled.⁵⁸ More molasses went to Massachusetts than to any other colony. McCusker calculates that Massachusetts alone imported some 2.5 million gallons in 1770.⁵⁹ Calculating totals for smuggled goods

⁵⁵ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 41–42.

⁵⁶ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 177.

⁵⁷ Pares, *Yankees and Creoles*, 27. Pares estimates Boston exported over 600,000 gallons of locally distilled rum in 1769. This total does not account for rum consumed locally. In contrast, the second leading exporter of New England rum was Rhode Island, at a little less 400,000 gallons.

⁵⁸ John J. McCusker, *Rum and the American Revolution: The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies* (New York: Garland Pub, 1989), 397–398.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 419. See Chart. Massachusetts imported an estimated 2,532,000 gallons of molasses. The second importer, Rhode Island, brought in less than half that amount at 1,074,000 gallons.

is never an exact science, but if the same ratio of imported-to-smuggled molasses for the North American colonies is applied to Massachusetts it reveals that merchants likely smuggled over 1 million gallons of molasses into the colony in 1770—and knowing the history of smuggling in Massachusetts, this is a conservative estimate.

A substantial amount of the molasses brought into Massachusetts in 1770 came from Saint-Domingue. As previously mentioned, Saint-Domingue became Boston's dominant provider of molasses due to a combination of economic reasons. Competition from other North American colonies, the lack of sufficient British West Indian molasses, and the French brandy monopoly drove Boston merchants to the French sugar island. There, merchants found planters willing to sell abundant molasses at low prices. In 1770, Saint-Domingue—the world's leading sugar grower—produced nearly 9 million gallons of molasses. Of that total, 4.3 million gallons, or roughly half, went to North America.⁶⁰ McCusker argues that 1.6 million (or 37%) of the molasses shipped from Saint-Domingue to North America ended up in Massachusetts.⁶¹

The importation of French West Indian molasses ensured the economic vitality of Boston's rum industry. In 1770 Massachusetts distilled an estimated 2 million gallons of rum, or 43% of the total produced in North America.⁶² Of that amount a little over 1 million gallons were consumed locally (i.e., within New England), while over 900,000 gallons were shipped overseas or coastwise. New England rum was sent throughout the Atlantic world. Coastal traders plying the Atlantic seaboard sold it in neighboring colonies; New England slavers carried it to Africa for the purchase of enslaved men, women and children; fur traders used it as bartering material with Native Americans; and

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 357. See chart.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 369 (46n). See chart.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 439.

heavy drinking New England fishermen found comfort in it while sailing the North Atlantic.⁶³ In difficult economic times, molasses and rum were some of the few bright spots in the Boston economy. The alcoholic beverage not only benefited distillers and tavern-keepers, it helped stimulate trade and economic activity. Rum enmeshed Boston in an interconnected Atlantic economy.

The period between 1770 and 1773 may have seen few overt political challenges to British reforms, but clandestine forms of resistance persisted through smuggling. In particular, Boston merchants continued their illicit trade with Saint-Domingue. More so than in previous years, smuggling functioned as a political and economic act of defiance against British intrusions on colonial trade. Boston merchants were cognizant of the essential role played by rum in the local and regional economy, and chose to defy British reforms aimed at curbing the trade in Saint-Dominguan molasses. In the years after 1773 Boston became the center of political resistance to Great Britain. The Boston Tea Party brought on a whole new set of challenges for Boston merchants. Through it all, however, they would assert their right to free trade.

The Boston Tea Party, Boston Port Act, and Flight to Saint-Domingue

The events of the Boston Tea Party began half a world away with the financial troubles of the East India Company (EIC). Queen Elizabeth I created the EIC in 1600 to establish a British presence in the Pacific. Short on money, Elizabeth and Parliament hoped that a company owned and supported by shareholders could do the work of imperial conquest for them. In the words of Benjamin Carp, “the English government had

⁶³ Ibid., 474–481. See charts on 474 and 481.

subcontracted the business of imperialism to adventurers willing to undertake the risks and reap the potential rewards of an overseas voyage.”⁶⁴ The venture proved successful and exotic eastern goods (most importantly, Chinese tea) began flowing into the British Empire; what is more, the imperial administration received roughly a third of its annual customs revenue from the Company. By the mid-eighteenth century the EIC moved beyond trading and began conquering lands on the Indian subcontinent. In 1757 during the global Seven Year’s War, the EIC defeated the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies in the Battle of Plassey. The decisive victory established the EIC’s foothold in India. Over the course of the next decade the Company ran roughshod over the subcontinent as they created an imperial administration in Bengal: the EIC collected taxes, established a military, and deprived local elites of their traditional powers. Investments were made, fortunes were won, and *nouveau riche* company men returned to Great Britain as “nabobs.”⁶⁵

The party was over by autumn of 1769. A massive drought hit the subcontinent, causing a famine that killed roughly 1.2 million people. The past decade’s frenzied investment in the EIC produced a financial bubble that burst when military setbacks and natural disasters cut into profits. The EIC was in dire straights by 1772. The Company’s economic woes brought on a credit crisis that caused bankruptcies throughout the British Empire.⁶⁶ Despite its faults, Parliament was too invested in the EIC to allow its failure. They began by assuming more control over the Company and by granting a £1.4 million bailout in 1773. Parliament then passed the Tea Act in May 1773. The act granted the EIC a tax rebate on tea shipped to North America and its first monopoly in the western

⁶⁴ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

hemisphere. As a result of the Tea Act, North Americans would continue to pay a three-pence duty on tea while EIC became the sole provider of tea for the North American market.⁶⁷

The first reports of new legislation on tea trickled into Boston as early as April 1773.⁶⁸ As Carp has pointed out, the Tea Act provoked not just a frustration among Bostonians over imperial duties, but also pervasive fears about government-sanctioned monopolies that could deprive colonists of their right to commerce—in this case, extra-imperial trade with the Dutch.⁶⁹ Fears were often expressed in newspapers. After hearing that the first shipment of Company tea had set sail for North America, the *Boston Gazette* printed an article on November 1 addressing the commissioners in charge of enforcing the Tea Act. Writing under the penname “PHILELEUTHEROS” (“Lover of the Peasantry”), a Bostonian prophesized on the possible outcomes of the EIC monopoly in North America. “If the East-India Company can, once establish a monopoly in this country in the article of tea, they may do it with equal facility, in every other article of their trade,” he wrote. To the pseudonymous author, monopoly was a slippery slope. If the EIC did not monopolize other commodities besides tea, surely the other “great manufacturing houses in England” would. The results would be catastrophic: colonial merchants would be deprived of their natural right to free trade; government-controlled companies such as the EIC would begin buying up North American property; and the whole of the colonies would be “subjected to a state of vassalage, or at best, become the mere tenants at will of a set of sanguinary, rapacious, and cruel Task Masters.”⁷⁰ In the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁸ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 193.

⁶⁹ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 20–21.

⁷⁰ *The Boston Gazette*, 1 November 1773, *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

Tea Act, Boston merchants and patriots foresaw not only a threat to their tea trade, but to their commerce as a whole. If the East India Company could monopolize the tea trade—and in doing so, put North American tea traders out of business—what would stop them from extending their monopoly to other articles of trade?

Less than a month after PHILELEUTHEROS' prognostications, the ship *Dartmouth* arrived in Boston with a hull full of Company tea.⁷¹ Two additional Company ships arrived in the following days, the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver*. To the minds of Boston merchants and revolutionaries, the EIC ships were the epitome of the mercantilist system they were attempting to defy. In the previous months the North End Caucus—a patriot group linked to the Sons of Liberty that included politicians such as Samuel Adams and a large contingent of merchants—had been opposing the sale of any EIC tea in Boston.⁷² After the *Dartmouth's* arrival, they began demanding that Governor Thomas Hutchinson return the ships to England. When Hutchinson refused the North End Caucus and Sons of Liberty came to a conclusion: the only place besides England where the tea would not threaten the colonists' natural right to free trade was at the bottom of Boston Harbor. On December 16 a group of patriots dressed as Mohawk Indians boarded the ships at Griffin's Wharf and destroyed East India Company's tea.⁷³ As with the nonimportation movement and Boston Massacre, merchants and tradesmen connected to colonial commerce played a prominent role in the Boston Tea Party. According to Carp's list of

⁷¹ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 95.

⁷² Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 199.

⁷³ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 116–140. Benjamin Carp's chapter "The Destroyers at Griffin's Wharf" provides a detailed description of the Boston Tea Party.

the 100 participants involved in the affair, more than a third held occupations with close ties to trade.⁷⁴

As one of the most familiar events in American history, the Boston Tea Party was the straw that broke the camel's back. Boston revolutionaries had moved beyond nonimportation and riotous behavior; they had organized and executed the willful destruction of property belonging to the EIC, and by extension, to the Crown of Great Britain. Imperial reaction to the incident was harsh. Parliament began forming what became known as Coercive Acts in January 1774. On March 31, Parliament passed the Boston Port Act without a single dissenting vote. The Port Act prohibited all trade in and out of Boston as of June 1; trade would remain closed until the East India Company was compensated for its losses. Parliament did not stop there. In the following months, they implemented a succession of repressive laws. The Massachusetts Government Act diminished the powers of the Massachusetts House of Representatives while enhancing those of the royal governor. Next came the Administration of Justice Act that allowed the governor to transfer trials of civil and military officials to another colony or to London—Parliament feared that trials of imperial officials held in Boston would be susceptible to mob influence. Lastly the Quartering Bill allowed for the housing of soldiers in taverns and uninhabited houses.⁷⁵ King George III and Parliament had had enough of the unruliness that gripped Boston since the passage of the Sugar Act in 1764; they would now bring the city to heel through a set of acts meant to stamp out any forms of resistance to imperial rule.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 235–239. Appendix. While referring to Carp's lists of participants, I included the occupations of merchant, ropemaker, mariner, ship carpenter, sailor, distiller, caulker, coastal trader, merchant's clerk, commercial wharf operator, boat builder and ship joiner as those occupations tied to colonial trade.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 192–194.

In many ways, however, the new acts pushed the Perkins family and other Bostonians closer to revolution. Overseas trade and coastal shipping had long formed the basis of the economy. With the port closed, business faltered: merchants, sailors, distillers, tavern-keepers, shopkeepers, tradesmen, and nearly everyone else felt the sting of the Coercive Acts. Lower-class Bostonians relied on charitable donations from other colonies.⁷⁶ The Perkins family, though not impoverished, was affected nonetheless. Thomas' mother Elizabeth—who, because of her husband's death, had taken over the family store in 1773—was unable to sell any foreign commodities.⁷⁷ Thomas Handasyd Peck's fur and hat trade was all but ruined. Only able to "carry any goods over a ferry that is but a half a mile over," he could not reach his trappers down east or ship his hats to the metropôle. If there was any good feeling towards Great Britain left in the city before the Coercive Acts, it was gone now. Boston merchants were not only unable to conduct free trade, they were barred from nearly any trade all. In a letter to his former British buyers Peck raged, "I believe such a Cruel Cursed act Could not have been Contrived but in Hell and believe the Promoters of it are Sons thereof." He then touched on the economic and social consequences of Parliament's actions. "We [the city of Boston] have some thousands of poor Widows and Orphans," he opined, "that are turned out to starve or beg which before could have got a comfortable living, although it is certain they could not have been the destroyers of the Tea." Contemplating the long-term effects of the Coercive Acts on the relationship between North America and Great Britain, Peck

⁷⁶ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 233.

⁷⁷ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 22–23.

concluded his letter with a prediction: “I believe this will cause such an alienation as will never be forgot. It is Pity it ever should.”⁷⁸ Peck would not be disappointed.

Building on alliances established during the nonimportation movement of the 1760s, the thirteen colonies convened the Continental Congress in the fall of 1774. Massachusetts delegates brought their colony’s economic concerns with them; they successfully lobbied for the implementation of another intercolonial nonimportation agreement. Passed on October 20, a nonimportation agreement known as the Continental Association banned trade with Great Britain (and therefore the EIC), Ireland and the British West Indies.⁷⁹ The nonviolent Continental Association was accompanied by violent acts of resistance to British rule. In the latter half of 1774, port cities up and down the eastern seaboard began destroying Company tea. In October, Massachusetts colonists established a Provincial Congress at Concord that effectively operated outside of British authority. In a statement to Boston merchants’ role in the development of revolutionary sentiment in the colony, the merchant and known smuggler John Hancock served as its first president. The legislative body began to train local militias and stockpile ammunition storehouses in preparation for an outbreak of hostilities. After learning about the illegal activity the royal administration ordered Governor Gage to begin seizing colonial storehouses.⁸⁰ On April 19, 1775, he sent troops to seize ammunitions stockpiled at Concord. Massachusetts militiamen exchanged fire with British troops at Lexington and then Concord. The troubles between crown and colony that began with Great Britain’s post-war reforms had finally culminated in the beginning of the American Revolution.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁹ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 228–230.

⁸⁰ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 198–200.

Following the confrontations at Lexington and Concord, British forces took control of Boston. The city's economic activity came to a standstill, resulting in a large-scale evacuation. Over 150 merchants numbered among the thousands who left in late April for the countryside.⁸¹ The Perkins boys were among the evacuees. Elizabeth Perkins brought her family to Barnstable on Cape Cod to stay with friends. The Perkinses spent a year on the Cape, until George Washington forced the British to evacuate Boston in March 1776. Weeks later the Continental Congress declared all ports open to all nations except Great Britain. Indicative of how intertwined the concepts of liberty and free trade had become in the past decade, the Continental Congress agreed on commercial before political freedom. Merchants and shopkeepers returned to Boston, and the Perkins family was back in their King Street home by mid-July. Thomas was present during the city's first reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 19.⁸²

During the war years the Perkins brothers jumped at the opportunity to enter into an American trade system in open defiance of British regulations. The children received an inheritance from their grandfather Thomas Handasyd Peck, who died in 1777; this inheritance provided them the financial freedom to begin their careers. As the eldest of the three, James began an apprenticeship at the W. & J. Shattuck mercantile firm in 1779. James, like many other Americans, came to see the United States' participation in trade as an assertion of their nation's newborn liberties. Five decades later, while addressing the crowd at James' funeral, his eulogizer spoke of James' choice to forsake a college career so he could aid in the revolutionary struggle: despite receiving schooling that "fitted him for an academical education," James decided that the "approach of the

⁸¹ Tyler, *Smugglers & Patriots*, 235.

⁸² Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 29-30.

Revolutionary War, and the discouraging aspects of the time [presumably British trade regulations], dictated the commercial career as more prudent.”⁸³ Thomas evidently shared his brother’s convictions; a few years after, he also began a career in trade as an apprentice at the Shattuck firm.⁸⁴ When his own time came, Samuel followed suit and joined his older brothers in the world of trade.

When James finished his apprenticeship in early 1782 he began to look beyond Boston. Undeterred by the continuing war with Great Britain, he booked a passage on a Shattuck ship bound for Saint-Domingue. James’ decision was not made on a whim. Growing up in Boston, James was familiar with the stories told by merchants about the lucrative Saint-Domingue trade. Once he landed in Cap Français, James went to work for the Wall & Tardy firm as a commission agent.⁸⁵ Le Cap differed significantly from Boston. Situated on a bay cutting into Saint-Domingue’s fertile North Plain, it was the first port of call for most ships entering the colony. The waterfront bustled with merchant ships from throughout the Atlantic world. Merchants haggled over prices for hogsheads of sugar and molasses, while enslaved Africans aided in the loading and unloading of ships. Undoubtedly, the colony’s massive number of slaves would have struck the young Bostonian.⁸⁶ Past the waterfront the city of nearly 20,000 stretched back in grid formation. Le Cap boasted municipal water fountains in public squares, bathhouses,

⁸³ Thomas G. Cary, *Memoir of Thomas Handasyd Perkins* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1856), 221.

⁸⁴ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 32.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1989), 31. Half of Le Cap’s population of nearly 20,000 was African slaves. The colony’s slave population of 500,000 outnumbered whites and free people of color by a ratio of 5 to 1.

masonic lodges, even a theatre that held 1,500 spectators.⁸⁷ The wealth derived from the colony's plantation economy was on display in its largest city. Le Cap captivated James; he would spend the next decade in the French sugar colony.

The end of the Revolutionary War and the completion of his apprenticeship at the Shattuck firm afforded Thomas the opportunity to join his brother in Le Cap. After receiving letters from James, Thomas was eager to see the world outside of Boston. He boarded the ship *Cato* in the fall of 1785 and began the two-week journey to Saint-Domingue. Finding that the climate did not agree with his health, Thomas returned to Boston in early 1786. But Thomas' short time in Le Cap convinced him that the Saint-Domingue trade was worthy of investment. Thomas and James used their grandfather's inheritance to open a merchant firm in Le Cap. On June 7, 1786, the *Massachusetts Centinel* advertised the establishment of the Perkins, Burling & Perkins firm at "Cape-Francois." James, Thomas and their new partner Walter Burling had "established themselves...with every possible advantage for the transaction of Commission Business" and were delighted with the "prospect of rendering such satisfaction to their employers as will insure a perfect confidence and a continuation of their favours."⁸⁸ The Perkins brothers were open for business in Saint-Domingue.

The Perkins brothers' road from revolutionary Boston to the slave society of Saint-Domingue may seem strange at first glance, but it was a continuation of the trade system established by Boston merchants over the preceding decades. The city developed

⁸⁷ Laurent Dubois provides a detailed description of Le Cap in *Avengers of the New World: the Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 22-24. Less glamorous descriptions of the city can be found in C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*, 31-32.

⁸⁸ *The Boston Centinel*, 7 June 1786, America's Historical Newspapers.

a lively—and largely illicit—trade with Saint-Domingue in the first half of the 18th century. Boston merchants would bring, among other things, fish, timber and meat to the French colony; in exchange they would receive the molasses that fueled their city's rum industry. Wealth from smuggling powered all levels of the Boston business community, and the city's economy became increasingly reliant on extra-imperial trade.

When the period of salutary neglect came to an end after the Seven Year's War, the city's merchants and patriots formed a united opposition to imperial reform—which began with the Sugar Act of 1764. Boston revolutionaries fashioned a conception of liberty tied to ideas of free trade. Nonimportation agreements were formed, riots over the seizure of ships ensued, and smuggling—particularly of Saint-Dominguan molasses—continued with vigor. Besides functioning as an economic activity, the smuggling of Saint-Dominguan molasses took on an increased political importance during the run-up to the American Revolution. Merchants used illicit trade as a way to resist imperial meddling in colonial affairs. Bostonians would not be denied what they believed to be their natural right to commerce. Tellingly, the event that began Boston's final slide towards revolution was the passage of the Tea Act, which threatened the very existent of colonial trade by establishing a government-sanctioned monopoly. When war finally came in 1775 colonists not only jumped at the chance to take up arms, but to assert their right to free trade. When James and Thomas Perkins sailed for Saint-Domingue they did so not only for the fortunes to be made there, but also because—like many other Bostonians—they believed that American liberties and free trade were inextricably linked. By participating in trade, the Perkins brothers exercised one of the very liberties

their countrymen had fought so hard to attain. The French sugar island, it seems, played an important role in the development of revolutionary ideals in Boston.

Chapter Two

“The Destroyer Came Among Them”

After fighting for the right to free trade during American Revolution, the Perkins brothers asserted that right in Saint-Domingue. Once there, they participated in the colony’s highly lucrative, plantation-based economy. The Saint-Dominguan sugar, molasses and coffee the Perkins brothers traded for played a vital role in the early-republican economy. But the Perkins firm traded in more than just tropical commodities. They also took part in the slave trade, helping to fuel the vertiginous rise of Saint-Domingue’s slave population. Despite their commitment to liberty during the American Revolution, the Perkinses had no problem enslaving Africans. In fact, they praised Saint-Domingue’s racial hierarchy for ensuring domestic tranquility and economic vitality; they also believed the colony’s enslaved population was well treated by their masters—and grateful for it. The brothers’ interpretations of master-slave relations must be taken at face-value: they made their living of the tropical commodities and slave trade; therefore, it benefited them to see prerevolutionary Saint-Dominguan society as untouched by racial discord. In letters back home James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins wrote about the fortunes to be made in the French colony. For young, ambitious merchants looking to make a name for themselves, Saint-Domingue was the place to be.

Notwithstanding the praise heaped on the colony by American merchants, change was coming to Saint-Domingue. The gathering of the Estates-General in 1789 allowed for the prospect of government reform not only in France, but also in its colonies. Delegates representing the wealthy, white Saint-Dominguan population traveled to Paris to petition the Estates-General’s successor—the National Assembly—for more colonial autonomy. White Saint-Dominguans also created provincial legislative assemblies in an

effort to assert local control over political and economic policies. Like the American colonists before them, they desired less mercantilist restrictions on trade. The colony's free black population (known locally as *gens de couleur*) also sent a delegation; they hoped to persuade the Assembly to grant them full and equal citizenship. After being frustrated by the Assembly's refusal to hear their petitions, a group of *gens de couleur* led a revolt against white rule in the fall of 1790. Less than a year later a massive slave revolt began on the North Plain. The Haitian Revolution had begun.

By August 1791 the Perkins brothers and their associates found themselves in the midst of the beginnings of the Haitian Revolution. The Perkins brothers (Samuel, in particular) believed Saint-Domingue's troubles were caused by irrational rhetoric on race and human equality emanating from France after 1789. They accused radical revolutionaries of introducing the notions of freedom and equality among the colony's black population, and in doing so, sowing the seeds of rebellion. The Perkins brothers and their associates were now forced to make harrowing escapes from—and take up arms against—black insurgent attacks. In some instances, the Boston merchants willingly fought and killed enslaved combatants vying for freedom. Boston merchants took up arms in a foreign war for familiar reasons. Like back home two decades earlier, they sought to protect their natural right to commerce; only in this case, they fought to protect Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy—the instrument that they believed ensured the colony's economic dynamism.

Life and Business in Prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue

The Perkins brothers' first years in Saint-Domingue were all they had hoped for. The Boston merchants arrived as the colony was solidifying its place as the leading commodity producer and slave purchaser in the Caribbean. The Perkins firm participated in the colony's profitable commodities and slave trades. In the process, they contributed to the social conditions that would eventually bring about the Haitian Revolution. High profits from the West India trade allowed Thomas to return to Boston and expand the family's commercial ventures. Samuel Perkins arrived soon after Thomas' departure, joining his older brother James and Walter Burling in Le Cap. Not long after Samuel became an official partner in the firm, which changed its name to Perkins, Burling & Co. By the late 1780s Saint-Domingue's booming economy and perceived domestic tranquility began attracting other Boston merchants to the colony.

When the Perkins brothers arrived in Saint-Domingue the colony was at the height of its economic power. They immediately injected themselves into the local economy, helping to fuel the island's already dynamic slave plantation system. According to François Barbé-Marbois, the intendant of the colony, in 1788 Saint-Domingue officially exported 93,000,000 lbs. of brown sugar; 70,000,000 lbs. of white sugar; and 68,000,000 lbs. of coffee.⁸⁹ Molasses export totals, though officially small (29,000 lbs.), were in reality much higher, considering that by the 1780s nearly 90% of the sugar plantations on the North Plain were producing molasses by refining their own sugar.⁹⁰ Because of the French brandy monopoly, little to none of the molasses produced

⁸⁹ Nathaniel Cutting to Thomas Jefferson, 19 April 1791, *Nathaniel Cutting Journal and Letterbooks, 1786-1798*, MHS.

⁹⁰ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 19.

in the colony went to the metropole. Instead, planters sold it to foreign merchants like the Perkins brothers. Saint-Domingue's high production levels allowed Perkins, Burling & Co. to turn hefty profits selling New England produce and manufactures for tropical commodities.⁹¹ Trade between the United States and Saint-Domingue flourished, and the sugar colony took on an increasingly important role in the American economy. By the 1780s Saint-Domingue provided the United States with the majority of its coffee and nearly all of its sugar and molasses.⁹²

Perkins, Burling & Co. traded in more than tropical commodities. Their business in Saint-Domingue also involved another valuable "commodity": enslaved Africans. Behind Saint-Domingue's increasing production rates was its meteoric rise in slave importations. From 1784 to 1790 more than 220,000 Africans were imported into Saint-Domingue, amounting to two-fifths of all slaves being brought into the Americas at the time. Le Cap served as many slave ships' port of entry into the colony. In 1790, for example, 20,000 of the 47,000 slaves that entered the colony landed in Le Cap. On the eve of the Haitian Revolution, over 500,000 enslaved Africans powered the island's economy.⁹³

⁹¹ Ship invoices from the *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers* (MHS) show that the Perkins brothers traded a myriad of items for tropical commodities. They often included fish, fish oil, flour and wooden products such as shocks, hoops and staves. Because of Saint-Domingue's plantation economy, food and lumber were scarce.

⁹² Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation : How Illicit Trade Made America* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 2013), 71. Like Great Britain, the United States began to consume large amounts of sugar in the 18th and early 19th centuries. T.H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) analyzes how North American colonists followed English consumption patterns in the years leading up to the American Revolution. For the expansion of sugar consumption from a delicacy for the upper classes to an everyday part of the working class diet, see Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).

⁹³ "Saint-Domingue on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution" in David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, eds., *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 7. The estimate for the total amount of slaves that entered Saint-Domingue in 1790 comes from Dubois' *Avengers of the New World*, 39.

Though the Perkins brothers focused mostly on tropical commodities, they also took part in Le Cap's burgeoning slave trade. If, as some historians argue, the increase of Saint-Domingue's African-born slave population helped cause the slave uprising in 1791,⁹⁴ then Perkins, Burling & Co. played a small role in bringing it about. The Boston based firm functioned as an intermediary between slavers and Saint-Dominguan planters. Firm agents boarded ships arriving from West Africa to inspect the condition of the enslaved—often referred to by Americans as “guineaumen.” They then purchased African men, women and children of “high quality” and held them until they could be sold at a profit.⁹⁵ The Perkins firm even retained a few slaves for domestic service in their Le Cap properties.⁹⁶ Boston merchants may have spearheaded the movement against British “tyranny” and may have hailed from a state that abolished slavery in 1783, but that did not preclude them from participating in the slave system. In fact, it was just the opposite: Boston merchants were willful participants in the West Indian plantation economy and the Atlantic slave trade.

The wealth derived from Saint-Domingue's plantation system allowed the Perkins brothers to expand their business into a global enterprise. In February 1789 Thomas set sail for China aboard the *Astrea*,⁹⁷ leaving James and Samuel to look after trade in Saint-Domingue. The voyage began a long and lucrative career in the eastern spice and opium trades. After the Haitian Revolution, James would join his brother in the Far East.

⁹⁴ David Patrick Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, (Bloomington, [Ind.]: Indiana University Press, 2002), 61–62.

⁹⁵ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 41.

⁹⁶ Samuel G. Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo* (Cambridge [Mass.]: J. Wilson & Son, University Press, 1886), 38. On several occasions in *Reminiscences*, Samuel Perkins refers to slaves owned by the firm. One reference can be found in his description of their escape from Le Cap after the city was burned in June 1793. A number of his slaves helped Samuel in his partners flee the city.

⁹⁷ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 44.

Though the Perkins family is known today for their ventures in China, it is important to note that they gained valuable commercial experience in the French West Indies. The Perkins brothers' time in Saint-Domingue helped inform their experiences in Asia.

Thomas brought not only Saint-Dominguan capital but also Saint-Dominguan experiences with him when he sailed for China. His interpretations of Asian societies, at least in part, were colored by his experiences in Saint-Domingue. During a stop in the Dutch colony of Batavia, for example, Thomas expressed surprise when he found that Malays—an ethnic group commonly enslaved in the colony—sold for only “one hundred paper-dollars a head.” He went on to assert that this was a low price “in comparison to the Guinea slaves in America and the colonies”⁹⁸—or more specifically, in Saint-Domingue. Later in his journey he described the Javanese as being “almost as black as those inhabitants of the coast of Guineau [Africa].”⁹⁹ Thomas applied his knowledge of the French West Indies to Asian cultures to come to grips with his new, unfamiliar surroundings. The profits made and lessons learned in the French sugar island had profound influences on the Perkins brothers' future commercial ventures in China.

Back in Saint-Domingue, the profits that allowed Thomas to travel to China continued to rise. Samuel Perkins credited Saint-Domingue's prosperity to the racial hierarchy that controlled colonial society. In his *Reminiscences*, Samuel praised Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy as strict yet fair. He believed that enslaved African laborers were content to work sugar and coffee plantations, while *gens de couleur* were more than happy to form the majority of the colonial militia. In reality, they were not. In the decades before the Haitian Revolution, enslaved Africans practiced numerous forms of resistance.

⁹⁸ Thomas G. Cary, *Memoir of Thomas Handasyd Perkins*, 31.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

They used, among other strategies, labor strikes, *petit-marronage* and poison to resist against the brutalities of plantation labor.¹⁰⁰ For their part, *gens de couleur* constantly contested their status as second-class citizens. In one instance, a *gens de couleur* faction even abducted a wealthy white planter in protest of discriminatory militia reforms.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Samuel remained blissfully unaware of the racial tensions that would eventually devolve into the Haitian Revolution.

So what can account for Samuel's inaccurate portrayal of prerevolutionary Saint-Dominguan society? In short, it was his merchant background. His interpretations of Saint-Domingue were far from unbiased; they were profoundly influenced by his career as a merchant. Samuel's livelihood was intimately bound up in, and dependent on, the slave system: if his family firm was not trading enslaved Africans, they were buying and selling commodities produced by them. In other words, he was an unequivocal supporter of slavery. Therefore, it benefited Samuel to depict Saint-Domingue as a society undisturbed by racial tensions. Samuel's descriptions, however erroneous, do provide insights into the ways in which merchants interpreted Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy. To their minds, it ensured domestic tranquility and guaranteed the colony's economic vitality. When revolution came to Saint-Domingue, the Perkins brothers and their associates took up arms to restore the racial hierarchy that they believed protected their right to free trade.

Unsurprisingly, Samuel began *Reminiscences* with a description of the colony's economic prosperity. Saint-Domingue's state of trade and general prosperity, he claimed,

¹⁰⁰ David Geggus' collection of primary source materials, *The Haitian Revolution: a Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2014), provides evidence of widespread slave resistance towards whites in prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue.

¹⁰¹ John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 109–110.

were “without parallel perhaps in the world.” The principal port cities of Le Cap and Port-au-Prince (located in the colony’s West Province) were always “filled with ships either loading or unloading their cargoes.” To Samuel, the cities’ slave populations—always content with their lot in life—were simply cogs in the economic system. Their role was to facilitate commerce. He recalled hearing urban slaves singing “cheering and pleasant” labor songs as they unloaded foreign goods and hoisted hogsheads of tropical commodities onto the numerous vessels lining the waterfront. *Gens de couleur* also had a role to play. Local militias composed of “handsome, tall, straight and beautiful” *gens de couleur* kept the bustling port cities orderly and welcoming to merchants. A visitor to Le Cap or Port-au-Prince, according to Samuel, would find no poor houses or beggars. Apart from a few “unfortunate gamblers,” the cities were the picture of industriousness and prosperity.¹⁰²

In Samuel’s description, the port city of Le Cap gave way to the colony’s economic beating heart: the North Plain.¹⁰³ The plain’s 300 sugar, 400 indigo, and 2,000 coffee plantations (worked by over 150,000 enslaved Africans¹⁰⁴) provided the Perkins brothers the tropical commodities needed to carry on business. As with Le Cap, Samuel saw no signs of racial discord on the North Plain. During his travels on the plain he encountered no “highway robberies, shoplifting, and housebreaking.” Rather, he found a security of person and property that was “as perfect as it is in New England.” Wealthy plantation owners received visitors with the “greatest hospitality and kindness,” and

¹⁰² Samuel G. Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo* (Cambridge [Mass.]: J. Wilson & Son, University Press, 1886), 3–5.

¹⁰³ Port-au-Prince also had prosperous hinterlands. The Antibonite and Cul-de-Sac plains provided Port-au-Prince with tropical commodities for export.

¹⁰⁴ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 24.

entertained their guests in the “most friendly and sumptuous manner” until they wished to depart.¹⁰⁵

Master-slave relations, in Samuel’s view, served as the foundation of the North Plain’s productive economy. He was evidently unaware of the brutal conditions of plantation life and the highly unequal relationship between masters and slaves.¹⁰⁶ Samuel claimed that the relationship between master and slave was one of “perfect harmony, mutual confidence and kindly feelings.” The New England merchant was repeatedly “charmed” by the “humanity, kind-heartedness, and paternal care” planters extended to their enslaved laborers. On one Chevalier Dup erier’s plantation, for instance, Samuel explained how enslaved men, women and children were provided clean living quarters, personal gardens to cultivate their produce for sale at Sunday market, and proper healthcare. If ill, they were not forced to work but were housed in a plantation hospital manned by experienced nurses and physicians. Sick enslaved Africans received the “most delicate and nutritious food, morning, noon and night” from their master’s own table. Moreover, benevolent and paternalistic owners like Dup erier visited their hospitals “several times in the course of twenty-four hours” to inspect the condition of the invalids.¹⁰⁷

Samuel also applauded masters’ treatment of enslaved children. For planters, special care towards the enslaved youth was worth the “investment” of time and money. They were, after all, the next generation of commodity producers. Samuel described a

¹⁰⁵ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 8.

¹⁰⁶ C.L.R. James (*Black Jacobins*, 9-11) and Laurent Dubois (*Avengers of the New World*, 45-51) describe the brutal nature of sugar plantation labor. During harvesting season—which lasted seven or eight months out of the year—slaves often worked 18 hours a day. Those slaves charged with operating the harvesting mill often lost fingers or limbs in the machinery. In addition, slaves often faced varying forms of corporal and psychological punishment.

¹⁰⁷ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 8–9.

daily routine in which an elderly enslaved woman (“dressed as cleanly as a good New England housewife”) inspected the appearance of the enslaved children. If clean and proper, a child received a piece of bread and “special marks of appropriation.” If the child had neglected personal hygiene, however, he or she was admonished with future punishment.¹⁰⁸ Routines such as these were meant to instill a sense of duty and responsibility in enslaved children. Saint-Dominguan planters, according to Samuel, began grooming their slaves at an early age.

Overall, Samuel believed that the life of the enslaved African in Saint-Domingue was satisfactory. He went as far as to state that the enslaved were “well fed and clad, and as contented and happy...as any class of laboring people in Europe.”¹⁰⁹ The island’s strict yet fair racial hierarchy ensured domestic tranquility—and by extension, high levels of commodity production. Samuel’s skewed vision of prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue was a result of his livelihood. Samuel—along with many other American merchants—believed that as long as benevolent owners cared for grateful slaves, and dutiful *gens de couleur* militias kept watch over society, they would have a steady supply of tropical products to meet consumer demand.

The Perkins brothers’ descriptions of prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue made their way back to Boston. Letters to friends and family brought word of the fortunes to be made in the French sugar colony. Needless to say, others wanted in on the action. Saint-Domingue attracted Boston merchants from up and down the social ladder. James and Ralph Forbes, members of the prominent Boston merchant family, travelled to Port-au-Prince in the late 1780s as merchant commission agents. Nathaniel Cutting, a seaman and

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 10.

privateer during the revolutionary years, traveled to the island as a slave trader. The Forbes brothers and Nathaniel Cutting were not the only Boston merchants who jumped at the opportunity to trade in Saint-Domingue after the American Revolution. Still, they are representative of the ways in which the colony functioned in the minds of merchants in the early-republican period.

By the latter half of the 1780s James Forbes, perhaps with the help of the Perkins brothers, had established himself at Port-au-Prince as a commission agent for Camfrane & Co.¹¹⁰ There, he participated in the local economy in much the same way that the Perkinses did in Le Cap. By 1790 his high profits and letters home had piqued the interest of his younger brother Ralph Forbes. In March of that year Ralph wrote to James requesting a position at Camfrane & Co. After congratulating his brother on “becoming a man of fortune” in a letter to Port-au-Prince, Ralph implored him to intercede on his behalf. According to Ralph, his current position as an apprentice at a retail firm (“J.M. & Co.”) in Alexandria put him on the “most disadvantageous terms.” Trapped in a firm “owning no vessels” and without a “prospect of getting even pocket money,” Ralph was forced to read in each week’s paper about the “many vessels” laden with tropical commodities returning from Saint-Domingue. He hoped his brother’s good word would allow him to break his apprenticeship and travel to Port-au-Prince.¹¹¹ For an ambitious young merchant like Ralph Forbes, Saint-Domingue offered an unparalleled level of economic opportunity.

¹¹⁰ The Perkins brothers were acquainted with the Forbes from their time in Boston. They also stayed in contact with them during their time in Saint-Domingue. In Samuel’s *Reminiscences* (p. 65) he mentions an incident involving a “Mr. J.G. F—” (James Grant Forbes) and the civil commissioners. It is likely that Samuel was staying with James during his time in Port-au-Prince in 1792-3.

¹¹¹ Ralph Bennet Forbes to James Grant Forbes, 19 March 1790, *Ralph Bennet Forbes Correspondences, 1790-1813*, MHS.

Nathaniel Cutting's route to Saint-Domingue differed from that of the Forbes brothers'. Nevertheless, the three merchants shared the same end goal: to derive wealth, in one way or another, from the colony's plantation system. Born across the Charles River from Boston at Cambridge in 1756, Cutting spent the revolutionary years as a privateer out of Newburyport. He went to work for a French merchant firm in the Atlantic port city of Le Havre after the war. Unsatisfied with the meager trade between the United States and France, Cutting decided to try his hand in slave trading. He chose Saint-Domingue—the New World's largest slave market—as his destination. After tapping into Le Havre's network of slavers Cutting gained enough capital to outfit two ships for West Africa. He arrived at Cape Mount (modern-day Liberia) in March 1790. He then purchased a “cargo” of Africans and set sail for Saint-Domingue. By the time Cutting reached the island a few months later, however, his capital had dried up and he was forced to sell the Africans at a loss. Cutting spent his short time in Saint-Domingue with family friends from back home in Boston: James and Samuel Perkins.¹¹² Despite his lack of success, Cutting's time with the Perkins brothers convinced him that there were economic opportunities in Saint-Domingue. On his return trip to Le Havre in the fall of 1790 Cutting began planning a second venture.

The experiences of the Forbes brothers and Nathaniel Cutting provide glimpses into the minds of late-18th century Boston merchants. After establishing their right to free trade in the 1760s and 70s, they sought to assert their right in the 1780s. As merchants, they also wanted to make money—and there was arguably no better place to do that than in Saint-Domingue. The advantages of trade in Saint-Domingue were obvious: the colony

¹¹² Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 83–85.

was a two-week sail from Boston—the most northerly of all major American ports; it exported more tropical commodities and imported more Africans than any other colony in the region; and lastly, its racial hierarchy and neat social order ensured domestic equality. In short, Saint-Domingue was a merchant's dream.

Though all that was about to change. Like British North America, France would undergo its own revolution. In the coming months and years, French revolutionary spirit would emanate beyond the metropole and to the colonies. The rumblings of revolution would begin in France's most valuable colony during the fall of 1790, when Vincent Ogé led a *gens de couleur* uprising. The *gens de couleur* rebellion would be followed by a slave rebellion that began on the North Plain and spread throughout the island. The rebellion would not end until the colony's formerly enslaved citizens overthrew French rule and established the independent state of Haiti in 1804. When the troubles came to Saint-Domingue, the Perkinses, Forbes and Nathaniel Cutting became active participants in the upheaval. While the Boston merchants certainly had strong opinions on the politics of the time, their participation in the Haitian Revolution was powered by their desire to reestablish the colony's racial hierarchy and protect their commercial ventures.

Revolution in France and the Outbreak of Violence in Saint-Domingue

While in the 1780s Saint-Domingue was experiencing unprecedented levels of economic success, France was facing a very different financial situation. In late 1788 King Louis XVI called for the organizing of the Estates-General to resolve a budget crisis brought on by years of war and fiscal mismanagement. The Estates-General also allowed for the drawing up of *cahiers des doléances* (statements of grievances) by members of each estate. In creating an instrument by which French subjects could voice their

grievances against the Old Regime, the *cahiers* began a process of government reform that would eventually lead to the French Revolution. By the fall of 1790 France's revolutionary spirit had spread to Saint-Domingue in the form of Vincent Ogé's failed *gens de couleur* uprising.

The prospect of government reform reached beyond France. Many wealthy white colonists (*grands blancs*) in Saint-Domingue initially viewed the events in the metropole positively. They sent delegates from each colonial province to Paris in the summer of 1789 to petition the National Assembly; they hoped to attain more colonial autonomy regarding slave treatment and trade regulations.¹¹³ Looking to the example of American colonists decades earlier, white Saint-Dominguans sought to rid themselves completely of mercantilist restrictions like the *exclusif*. Free trade, they argued, would allow the already dynamic economy of Saint-Domingue to increase profits.

The politics within the white colonial population, however, were complex. The same committees that had elected delegates from each province also formed their own regional assemblies—which were open to whites only. With the colonial administration in disarray because of the revolution in France, provincial assemblies in the North, West and South Provinces began asserting local control over political and economic policy. By early 1790, the West and South provincial assemblies—made up of more pro-revolution legislators—had combined into a new legislative body at Saint-Marc known as the General Assembly. Things were different in the North Province. The North had some of the colony's oldest and wealthiest planter families; many of these *grands blancs* had direct connections to the Old Regime in France and were—despite their desire for more

¹¹³ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 59-60.

colonial autonomy—more conservative than their counterparts in the West and South. Therefore, the provincial assembly in the North remained independent and stood firmly against the French Revolution.¹¹⁴ In the following years, the North's conservative political stance would play a direct role in shaping the Perkins brothers' experiences in Saint-Domingue.

The colony's *gens de couleur* population also sent a delegation to Paris in the summer of 1789. In some respects the goals of the white and *gens de couleur* delegations overlapped: they both were invested in the slave system. Many, but not all, *gens de couleur* associated with the colony's white population and showed little sympathy towards the enslaved population—some were even slave owners themselves. Saint-Domingue's *gens de couleur* population enjoyed economic and social mobility in the decades prior to the Seven Year's War. Many served in colonial militias or made livings as urban craftsmen; a modest number (mostly concentrated in the West and South Provinces) were able to accumulate enough wealth to purchase plantations.¹¹⁵

In the years after the war, however, the *gens de couleur* population faced state-sanctioned discriminatory policies meant to generate a renewed sense of patriotism among Saint-Domingue's white population. Rampant extra-imperial trade during the Seven Year's War (including with Boston merchants) led some in France to believe that Saint-Dominguan colonists were becoming less loyal to the mother country. Due to the rise of race theory in Europe, the French patriotism the crown hoped to instill in Saint-Domingue was inextricably linked to whiteness. White colonists were granted higher levels of autonomy in government and trade; the imperial administration believed that

¹¹⁴ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 78–79.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

more political and economic liberties would inspire greater loyalty to the crown. In contrast, *gens de couleur* were increasingly excluded from white colonial society.¹¹⁶ The *gens de couleur* delegation went to Paris in an effort to reverse these trends and convince the National Assembly to grant them full and equal citizenship back in the colony.

The delegates' efforts in 1789-90 were unsuccessful. The Club Massiac (a political group representing colonial planter interests in Paris) led the opposition, and the National Assembly refused to debate the issue of *gens de couleur* citizenship.¹¹⁷ Angered by their lack of success in Paris, a group of *gens de couleur* delegates led by Vincent Ogé traveled to Saint-Domingue to carry out a revolt against white rule. Ogé and his supporters hoped their actions would force the colonial assemblies to grant them equal citizenship. The uprising was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful. Nevertheless, it began a series of events that would eventually lead to the colony-wide slave rebellion of 1791.

In Samuel Perkins' version of events, the Ogé rebellion was a result of foolish revolutionary fervor and misguided philanthropy. His interpretation reveals his negative views of French revolutionary politics—Samuel and his brothers were members of the largely francophobic Federalist Party before its dissolution after the War of 1812.¹¹⁸ Radical revolutionaries, he believed, planted the seeds of revolt among the *gens de couleur* population. Samuel's merchant background also undoubtedly influenced his

¹¹⁶ For a holistic study on the changing political and social status of Saint-Dominguan *gens de couleur*, as well as efforts to instill a sense of patriotism in Saint-Domingue after the Seven Year's War, see John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti*. For the development of race theory in France, see Sue Peabody, *There are no Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁷ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 75–6.

¹¹⁸ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 169–170. The Perkins family's political views were largely conservative. Thomas ran for the Massachusetts state senate in 1805 as a Federalist.

perspective: as previously mentioned, he believed Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy was stable; thus, external pressures must have caused the rebellion. The Boston merchant believed the troubles began when *gens de couleur* delegates in Paris were exposed to the French Revolution's radical rhetoric on race and human equality—particularly that of the *la Société des Amis des Noirs* (Society of Friends of the Blacks). The *Amis* was a Parisian abolitionist group created in 1788 by future Girondin revolutionary Jacques-Pierre Brissot. The group sought to abolish slavery and the slave trade, as well as to end racial discrimination in the colonies.¹¹⁹

By the time the *gens de couleur* delegates reached Paris, according to Samuel, *Amis* members and other radical revolutionaries had infiltrated the National Assembly. They then began pushing an agenda of liberty, equality and fraternity for people of all races. In Samuel's eyes, the radicals' machinations were most visible in the Declaration of the Rights of Man—which he claimed was full of “rash and untried schemes.” The “injudicious measures adopted by the National Assembly” instilled a false sense of optimism among *gens de couleur* in Paris.¹²⁰ The delegates believed that equal citizenship was all but inevitable in light of widespread egalitarian rhetoric. When the National Assembly declined to take up the issue of citizenship, infuriated (and betrayed) *gens de couleur* delegates decided to take measures into their own hands. “When they heard it declared by the leaders of the French people that all men are born free and equal,” but were nevertheless unsuccessful in their petitions, “their active minds soon matured a plan...to compel the whites in the colonies to acknowledge their political

¹¹⁹ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1975), 95.

¹²⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 75–76.

rights,” Samuel explained. In the late summer of 1790 Ogé sailed for Saint-Domingue to carry out an uprising against white rule.¹²¹

Whether or not revolutionary rhetoric—as Samuel Perkins believed—was directly responsible for the Ogé rebellion will likely never be known. The historical significance of the rebellion lay in its effects on Saint-Domingue. The rebellion would eventually force the National Assembly to vote in favor of *gens de couleur* citizenship. The Assembly’s decision would cause further violence between the colony’s wealthy planter class and its *gens de couleur* population in months to come. Many historians believe that in the midst of continued violence and social instability, Saint-Domingue’s enslaved masses saw their opportunity to strike for freedom. For the Perkins brothers, the Ogé rebellion gave them their first glimpses of the political and racial upheaval that would grip the entire colony after the outbreak of slave rebellion of 1791.

Ogé landed in October and amassed a force of 300 *gens de couleur* rebels in the mountains surrounding the North Plain. He then took the town of La Grande-Rivière and began sending letters demanding political rights to the provincial assembly in Le Cap.¹²² Both the colonial authorities and planter class in Le Cap were anxious to quickly put down Ogé’s rebellion. They feared that the uprising might send a dangerous message of rebelliousness to the enslaved population. Among the troops amassed to march on La Grande-Rivière was Samuel Perkins. At the time Samuel belonged to a militia known as the “Volunteers” under the command of Comte de Grasse, the naval commander who blockaded the British at Yorktown. De Grasse ordered the Volunteers to join the colonial army outside of La Grande Rivière. In the hours before he departed, a nervous Samuel

¹²¹ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 6.

¹²² Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 87.

recalled filling his canteen with liquid courage (“some old rum”) and bidding adieu to his friends, “whom I never expected to see again.” Luckily for Samuel, word reached Le Cap that the army had dispersed Ogé’s rebels and forced them to retreat into Spanish Santo Domingo.¹²³ Samuel’s brief participation in the Ogé rebellion foreshadowed the Perkins brothers’ active participation in the Haitian Revolution.

Ogé and his forces were extradited by the Spanish and later tortured and executed. Ogé’s efforts, however, were not in vain. The troubles in Saint-Domingue forced the National Assembly to decide on the issue of *gens de couleur* citizenship. The Assembly passed the May 15 Decree: *gens de couleur* were declared full and equal citizens.¹²⁴ Saint-Dominguan whites of all economic standings met the decree with consternation. Wealthy planters’ initial hopes for increased autonomy withered; poor whites (*petits-blancs*) worried that *gens de couleur* might one day surpass them on the social ladder. Either way, whites realized that some in revolutionary France hoped to transport their message of equality to the slave society Saint-Domingue. In the months that followed they simply ignored the May 15 Decree: only whites, they declared, had the right to full citizenship. Some colonists—mostly ultra-conservative slaveholders—even advocated secession from the French Empire. They believed their interests would be better served if the colony were independent or under British suzerainty.¹²⁵ In response to such resistance towards free colored citizenship, *gens de couleur* combatants—particularly in the West and South Provinces—continued to resist against white rule by way of armed combat.¹²⁶

¹²³ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 12n.

¹²⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 73–78.

¹²⁵ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 89–90.

¹²⁶ David Patrick Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, xviii–xix.

The slave rebellion in August added more fuel to the racial fire. The late summer and fall of 1791 brought widespread racial violence to Saint-Domingue, compelling American merchants like the Perkins brothers to become active, armed participants in the early stages of the Haitian Revolution. American merchants participated in a foreign war because, like their counterparts two decades earlier, they sought defend their right to free trade. The Haitian Revolution, however, presented different circumstances than the American Revolution. In the 1760s and 70s American merchants fought against an imperial authority bent on impeding trade through taxes and restrictions. In Saint-Domingue, they took up arms against black and *gens de couleur* insurgents to preserve a racial hierarchy they believed to be intrinsic to the colony's economic well-being.

The Slave Uprising of 1791

The slave rebellion came less than a year after the Ogé rebellion, on the night of August 22, 1791. After a voodoo ritual on Morne Rouge (a mountain overlooking Le Cap), the rebel leader Dutty Boukman gave the signal: enslaved Africans on the Galiffet plantation took torches to the sugarcane and murdered their masters; in the following hours, black plantation laborers throughout the North Plain began to rebel.¹²⁷ Historians have long argued—and will likely continue to argue—over the causation factors of the event that began the Haitian Revolution.¹²⁸ Samuel Perkins (who happened to be in Boston during the outbreak of violence) had his own thoughts on what caused the rebellion. Like with the Ogé uprising, he believed that radical metropolitan rhetoric was

¹²⁷ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 87–88.

¹²⁸ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 55–68. Geggus provides an overview of the different historical arguments that have tried to pinpoint the cause of the Haitian slave uprising. They include, among other things, the role of voodoo religion, maroon activity, France's revolutionary upheaval, and Saint-Domingue's large African-born slave population, as well as the colony's high slave to free black ratio.

ultimately responsible for stirring up discontent among the enslaved population. Enslaved Africans, he believed, were happy with their lot and therefore had no reason to rebel. Surprisingly, considering his praise of the planter class, Samuel also laid some blame at the feet of overconfident slave owners. Irrespective of the slave rebellion's true origins, the event catapulted the Perkins brothers and their associates into the early stages of the revolution. Within days of its outbreak, they began taking up arms against black rebels in an attempt to protect the colony's racial hierarchy—and, by extension, their right to free trade.

According to Samuel, Saint-Domingue's white population became overconfident in the aftermath of the Ogé rebellion. The "whites became supine, and confident in their own power to control" the colony's *gens de couleur* and slave populations, he explained. It was in this moment of self-satisfaction that the metropolitan abolitionist Abbé Grégoire published an "inflammatory pamphlet" advocating the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue. This, coupled with the May 15 Decree, enraged the colony's slaveholders: already concerned about the National Assembly's decisions concerning the social status of *gens de couleur*, they now believed French revolutionaries sought to dismantle the colony's slave system.

Samuel explained how planters openly denounced the contents of Grégoire's abolitionist pamphlet. At the same time, planters demanded their own rights and liberties—i.e., more colonial autonomy in government, slaveholding and trade. These subjects were discussed, according to Samuel, "with great vehemence by the planters and slaveholders generally...in the presence of their house servants" and field laborers. To his mind, enslaved men and women in Saint-Domingue conceptualized freedom as

they were exposed to the hypocrisy of slaveholding planters condemning Grégoire's abolitionist tract while extolling their own personal liberties. In a rare acknowledgement of slave self-agency, the Boston merchant asked, "how could slaves...stand by and hear such conversations between their masters and not feel that the arguments were as good for *them* as they were for those who, claiming the right *as men* to be free, insisted on enslaving others?" In Samuel's analysis, the very people most reliant on Saint-Domingue's slave system unknowingly planted the seeds of its own destruction. Like the *gens de couleur* before them, once-contented enslaved Africans inspired by radical metropolitan rhetoric on race and human equality decided to take measures into their own hands—in Samuel Perkins words, "the destroyer came among them."¹²⁹

James Perkins was on the North Plain with his wife, Sarah, and their young daughter when the rebellion began. In a testament to the Perkins brothers' immersion into the Saint-Dominguan society and economy, James and his family were visiting the de Rouvrays. The Marquis de Rouvray was among Saint-Domingue's most wealthy residents and a member of the Club Massiac.¹³⁰ The group planned to dine at de Rouvray's and spend the night at the Gallifet plantation (owned by another of the colony's oldest and most wealthy planter families¹³¹) before returning to Le Cap. Things did not go as planned. As they sat down to dinner the group heard the news that enslaved Africans had risen up and destroyed the Gallifet plantation. According to Sarah Perkins, who later recounted the day's events to Samuel, the black household servants "insolence and bravado...and general deportment" soured after they became aware of the uprising.

¹²⁹ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 13–14.

¹³⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 76. At the time of James' visit, the Marquis de Rouvray was in Paris representing the Club Massiac in the National Assembly.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 17. Joseph d'Honor de Gallifet was one of the first governors of the colony in the early 18th century. He established a number of plantations that would become some of the colony's most successful.

After spending “but a short time at the table in gloomy silence,” the group decided it would be best to flee to the safety of Fort Dauphin, a port town east of Le Cap. Madame de Rouvray ordered the carriages to be readied; the group left the plantation at midnight.¹³²

During their escape to Fort Dauphin, James and Sarah Perkins witnessed a radically different North Plain than the one they once knew. The route to Fort Dauphin forced the group to pass through a small village occupied by black rebels. Sarah shuddered upon seeing the houses “filled with lights, and the slaves howling and dancing...evidently rejoicing over the events of the day.” Madame de Rouvray’s carriage drivers were forced into an untenable position: as enslaved men in the midst of a slave rebellion, where did their loyalties now lie? They stopped the carriages in the village center, unsure whether they should help their masters or turn them over to the rebels. According to Sarah, Louis Baury de Bellerive (another member of the group) reestablished a “proper” master-slave relationship with the help of his sword to one of the carriage driver’s throats.¹³³ The Perkinses and their companions reached Fort Dauphin at four o’clock in the morning. The inhabitants of Fort Dauphin provided them safe passage to Le Cap.¹³⁴ A traveler’s paradise hours earlier, the North Plain was thrown into turmoil as black rebels destroyed their plantations and sought retribution on their former masters.¹³⁵

¹³² Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 16–17n.

¹³³ Louis Baury de Bellerive was a close friend to the Perkins family. He eventually resettled in Middletown, Connecticut. His son would later die fighting during the Haitian War of Independence. See *Hall-Baury-Jansen Family Papers*, MHS.

¹³⁴ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 16–17n.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 17n.

Walter Burling, one of the main partners in the Perkins' firm, confronted the slave rebellion a week or two later. In Burling's case, he participated in armed combat against black rebels outside of Le Cap. This instance marked the beginning of the Perkinses and their associates' involvement in open hostilities. While at first glance Burling's actions might seem only to be blood lust (and perhaps, to an extent, they were), his willingness to take up arms reflected his desire to protect his commercial ventures and right to free trade. Business was already hurting due to the upheaval on the North Plain, and as black rebels marched on Le Cap they threatened to bring the city to an economic standstill. This would have spelled disaster for Perkins, Burling & Co. Walter Burling believed his efforts, along with those of the colonial militia, would help reestablish Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy—the instrument that ensured high profits for merchants and planters deriving wealth from slave labor.

In the weeks that followed its outbreak, the rebellion spread throughout the North Plain and towards Le Cap. Black rebels began to organize themselves into the early stages of an army.¹³⁶ The colonial authorities decided to send a regiment under the command of Colonel Touzard—another American Revolutionary war veteran—to halt the advance of a group of insurgents assaulting the city. Walter Burling and another Perkins firm man, Mr. Selles, belonged to Touzard's regiment. The white regiment met a group of “eight or nine hundred blacks” armed with muskets and three cannons outside of Le Cap. Burling proved himself a valiant soldier in Selles' recollection of events. He worked his way up the military formation and next to Touzard. When the attack began Burling chased down one insurgent and “plunged [his] blade into the fellow's body.” He

¹³⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 90.

took down a second by laying his pistol on his horse's back and shooting the man dead. Burling continued his pursuit even after the militia had driven the insurgents into retreat and Touzard had called for his men to fall back. Only a serious leg injury stopped Burling.¹³⁷ While Burling's attachment to the Touzard regiment did oblige him to fight when commanded, it is more likely that the Boston merchant willingly engaged in a foreign conflict to protect his company's assets in Le Cap.

While James and Walter Burling found themselves in the heart of the slave rebellion, Nathaniel Cutting and Ralph Forbes were preparing to sail for Saint-Domingue. Once they arrived, they took an active role in the early stages of the Haitian Revolution. From a modern perspective, news traveled slowly in the early-modern Atlantic world. Thus, Cutting was unaware of the turmoil playing out in the colony when he left Le Havre in September 1791. During his stay in the colony, Cutting went work for Perkins, Burling & Co. and participated in nightly guard duties. Like Samuel Perkins, Cutting held metropolitan rhetoric responsible for the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue. Ralph Forbes, on the other hand, sailed from Boston two months later. By that time news of the slave rebellion had reached New England. First and foremost, Ralph endeavored to help his brother James in Port-au-Prince; in the previous months, *gens de couleur* insurgents had begun assaulting the city. His journey, however, also had an economic component: Ralph sought to help his brother protect American merchant assets from insurgent plundering. Like Walter Burling before him, Nathaniel Cutting and Ralph Forbes were willing to risk their lives to protect their to right commerce.

¹³⁷ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 15–16n.

Nathaniel Cutting had learned a lesson during his previous commercial venture to Saint-Domingue. This time around he hoped to sell French muslins instead of enslaved Africans: a commodity that required a much smaller upfront investment. After a difficult 48-day trip—during which his ship, *Defenseur*, sailed into a hurricane and was dismantled twice¹³⁸—Cutting arrived in Le Cap harbor on November 2. Cutting went ashore to check on the health of James Perkins when he learned of the slave rebellion. He found James “much harassed & fatigued” by his constant military duties. James had recently been given “Command of all the Americans at [Le Cap] who were obliged to mount guard for the security of the City.”¹³⁹ Due to the transient nature of the mercantile industry, it is difficult to estimate the number of men James commanded; however, judging by the amount of American merchant activity in Le Cap before the outbreak of rebellion, as well as the city’s population (between 15,000 and 20,000 residents), it is likely that James was put in charge of over 100 men. Over dinner James informed Cutting of the magnitude of the slave rebellion: an estimated 70,000 plantation workers had revolted and were now wreaking havoc on the North Plain, disrupting the local economy and forcing planters to take refuge in Le Cap.¹⁴⁰

The slave rebellion’s interruption of the colony’s racial hierarchy and plantation economy had dire consequences for Cutting’s business venture. James delivered the bad news shortly after Cutting’s arrival: due to the state of the colony, Cutting was unlikely to sell his cargo at a profit. “[James] informed me that it will be impossible for me to sell the wrought muslins...which I now have with me, to any advantage in this Colony,” he

¹³⁸ Nathaniel Cutting, 25 October 1791, *Nathaniel Cutting Journal and Letterbooks, 1786-1798*, MHS.

¹³⁹ Nathaniel Cutting, 4 November 1791, *Journal and Letterbooks*, MHS.

¹⁴⁰ Nathaniel Cutting, 7 November 1791, *Journal and Letterbooks*, MHS.

confessed.¹⁴¹ Exasperated by another failed venture, Cutting penned in his diary, “I fear this fine Colony is ruined by mistaken Politics [a reference to the Rights of Man and its ill effects in Saint-Domingue]—a most unfortunate time for my affairs!” Nevertheless, he admitted, “I must make the best of a bad bargain.”¹⁴² Cutting sold his merchandise at a loss, again. Only this time around it was not inexperience that spoiled his commercial venture but revolutionary politics. From Cutting’s perspective, the radical metropolitan rhetoric he had hoped to leave behind in Le Havre had stirred up racial discord Saint-Domingue.¹⁴³ He stayed with the Perkins brothers in Le Cap—and presumably went to work for Perkins, Burling & Co.—throughout the winter and spring of 1791-2. With his livelihood wrapped up in the local economy, Cutting began mounting guard duties with the Perkins brothers. A native Bostonian and merchant himself, it is unlikely that James and Samuel had to lecture Cutting on the importance of protecting their right to free trade. He departed in mid-June, 1792, bound for Philadelphia.¹⁴⁴

By the summer of 1791 Ralph Forbes had at long last been able to break his apprenticeship at J.M. & Co. He planned to join his brother in Port-au-Prince in order to tap into the colony’s lucrative trade system. News of the slave rebellion likely reached Ralph by mid-September. He did not set sail until sometime in late-November, at which point he was aware of the extent of the slave rebellion. Nevertheless, Ralph held out hope that normal economic activity would soon resume in the colony. In his view, however,

¹⁴¹ Nathaniel Cutting, 5 November 1791, *Journal and Letterbooks*, MHS.

¹⁴² Nathaniel Cutting, 5 November 1791, *Journal and Letterbooks*, MHS

¹⁴³ David Patrick Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina, 2001). Simon Newman’s contributing chapter explores Cutting’s political analysis of the Haitian and French Revolutions. Cutting was a Jeffersonian Republican—and therefore, Newman infers, a supporter of political revolutions. His time in Saint-Domingue forced him to reconcile his revolutionary idealism with the realities of slave rebellion.

¹⁴⁴ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 89.

things went from bad to worse when he arrived in Le Cap. He learned that *gens de couleur* insurgents had besieged Port-au-Prince. In a letter from Le Cap to his brother John in Providence, Ralph wrote that his brother (“poor James”) was in a “most wretched position.” Two weeks prior a group of insurgents had “set fire to the town...and destroyed upwards of 170 houses, the principal part of which were owned by merchants & many of them filled with American goods.” The other American merchants, it seems, entrusted James with their goods when they fled the city: Ralph described how his brother was “in the midst of confusion with a large property in his hands belonging to Americans.” James found himself in the prickly position of protecting a large store of American goods from insurgent attacks.¹⁴⁵

Ralph came to the help of his brother by traveling (armed) to Port-au-Prince. “I have purchased a hanger, & put my pistols in order & as far as my aid will extend in extricating a brother, I shall exert it,” he wrote.¹⁴⁶ It is unclear whether the Forbes brothers were able to secure the American goods, but it is known that Ralph successfully reached James in Port-au-Prince. The two held out in Port-au-Prince until the siege was lifted. Despite continued insurgent attacks on the city, they carried on business in Port-au-Prince. Evidence suggests that they stayed in Port-au-Prince until the latter half of 1793; it is also likely that, similar to the Perkins brothers, James and Ralph Forbes participated in the city’s guard duties.¹⁴⁷

Despite Ralph’s less than glamorous merchant career, the young Bostonian continued to engage in overseas trade after his departure from Saint-Domingue. He

¹⁴⁵ Ralph Bennet Forbes to John Forbes, 19 December 1791, *Ralph Bennet Forbes Correspondences, 1790-1813*, MHS.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 64–65. During Samuel’s time in Port-au-Prince in 1793 he spent time with James Grant Forbes.

eventually married into the Perkins family (the Perkins brothers' sister, Margaret) and used his new familial connections to engage in some commercial ventures in Europe. His sons Robert and Thomas Forbes would later represent the financial interests of both the Forbes and Perkinses in China in the 19th century.¹⁴⁸ Like the Perkinses, the Forbes family expanded their commercial ventures from Saint-Domingue to China after the Haitian Revolution.

The slave rebellion prevented Ralph Forbes and Nathaniel Cutting from tapping into the lucrative Saint-Dominguan economy they had heard so much about. They planned to leave Boston and Le Havre to make their fortunes in Saint-Domingue. Instead, they found a colony wrapped up in a racial upheaval that had economic severe repercussions. Gone was the peaceful, stable society Samuel described in *Reminiscences*. Boston and other American merchants like the Perkins brothers were forced to take up arms against black and *gens de couleur* insurgents. As had occurred in Boston two decades prior, the Perkinses fought to protect their right to free trade. By aiding colonial authorities and white planters in their efforts to quell the rebellion, the Boston merchants believed they could reassert the colony's racial hierarchy—and by extension, its economic well-being. When Samuel returned to Saint-Domingue after the outbreak of rebellion in August 1791, Perkins, Burling & Co. would take on an increasingly important role in provisioning French troops. The Perkins brothers and their associates remained as invested as ever in seeing Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy restored and

¹⁴⁸“Biographical Sketches,” *Forbes Family Papers, 1732-1931*, MHS.

commerce reestablished. It was only when widespread violence gripped the colony that the Perkinses finally abandoned their physical presence in Saint-Domingue.

Chapter Three

The End of an Era

Upon his return to Saint-Domingue in the fall of 1791, Samuel Perkins found a fundamentally different colony than the one he had left a few months prior. Insurgent leaders controlled the North Plain outside of Le Cap and trade had all but ceased. In the months after his return, Samuel and his associates took on increasingly important roles in both in the city watch and in the provisioning local militias and metropolitan troops. By doing so, the Perkinses hoped to protect their assets in Le Cap and reestablish the colony's racial hierarchy and commerce. Samuel and his fellow Boston merchants also witnessed the arrival of the civil commissioners from France. Tensions between the republican commissioners and local anti-republican factions would come to a violent head during the burning of Le Cap in June 1793.

The burning of Le Cap thrust Perkins, Burling & Co. merchants into the heart of the Haitian Revolution. It also forever changed Saint-Dominguan society. The attack on Le Cap forced the commissioners to declare all enslaved Africans willing to fight for the republic as free and equal citizens. The commissioners expanded their emancipatory decrees in the coming months, effectively ending slavery in the colony. Samuel and his associates fled the city during the attack. In an effort to salvage what was left of the firm's assets, as well as to recoup debts incurred before the burning of Le Cap, Samuel embarked on a daring journey that would put him face-to-face with Commissioner Polverel. During his journey, he would also encounter a world turned upside down: far from the hierarchical society of the prerevolutionary period, black Saint-Dominguans now asserted their rights as citizens of the French Republic. Samuel found himself attacked, assaulted, and constantly in genuine fear for his life; but the merchant born to

revolutionary Boston never gave up what he believed to be his natural and inherent right to free trade.

Perkins, Burling & Co. closed up shop in Saint-Domingue in late 1793, after nearly a decade in the colony; but indirect trade with the colony continued. The Perkins firm, now functioning solely out of Boston, did business with Toussaint Louverture's plantation-based agricultural regime. In his effort to reorganize Saint-Domingue's labor force and maintain a prosperous economy, Toussaint reinstated the plantation system, allowing American merchant firms to do business in the colony. The Perkins brothers, despite their support of slavery, saw economic opportunities in opening relations with the black leader. Toussaint's regime was not a racial hierarchy, but it did ensure the production of tropical commodities. Money, at least in this instance, trumped race and politics.

Ever-adaptable Boston merchants changed tactics once again when Napoleon sent General Leclerc to Saint-Domingue to put an end to Toussaint's rule: they now traded with both black insurgents and French forces. After Haiti's declaration of independence in January 1804, commercial relations with the black nation continued despite Thomas Jefferson's embargo. Merchants openly flaunted presidential decrees in order to participate in Haiti's tropical commodities trade. They willingly conducted commerce with a nation governed by former slaves—once again, Boston and other American merchants showed that they would not be denied the right to free trade. U.S.-Haitian economic relations finally declined in the 1810s, when Haiti's economy transitioned from a plantation to subsistence agriculture.

Samuel's Return to Saint-Domingue

Samuel and Thomas Perkins were in Boston when the rebellion began in late August 1791. The news reached them just weeks later. A letter from a Perkins, Burling & Co. merchant in Le Cap broke the news: not only was the city under siege, the rebellion had begun to damage business in colony. Insurgent leaders controlled the North Plain, and tropical commodities were no longer entering Le Cap. Samuel set sail from Boston as soon as possible. Samuel had a myriad of reasons for rushing back to Saint-Domingue. For one, his brother James and good friends Walter Burling and Nathaniel Cutting were in Le Cap. Yet, there were also undeniable economic reasons to return to the colony: Samuel hoped to salvage the Perkins, Burling & Co.'s assets in the colony and, if possible, help restore regular commercial relations.

Samuel first became aware of the rebellion in late-September, when a letter from Arnold Wells—a Perkins, Burling & Co. merchant—reached Boston. Wells informed his benefactors of the rebellion's economic effects on Le Cap. A firm ship named *Hannah*, he wrote, had entered the harbor on August 23—the day after the rebellion began. *Hannah* was unable to unload her cargo of New England goods due to the city being “thrown into a State of Confusion.” According to Wells, martial law was proclaimed and “all business suspended.” If the ship could not unload its cargo, all perishables would spoil. Perkins firm merchants hoped to salvage *Hannah's* freight by ordering the ship captain to sail for Port-au-Prince. There, they hoped “he [the captain] will be enabled to effect the sale of his cargo.”¹⁴⁹ Within days of its outbreak, the slave rebellion began to threaten the Perkins brothers' business in Saint-Domingue.

¹⁴⁹ Arthur Wells to Thomas Handasyd Perkins, 13 September 1791, *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers, 1783-1892*, MHS.

Samuel “embarked immediately” for Le Cap when he heard the news; he likely arrived sometime in late-October 1791. Once there, he found his brother and associates in good health, but learned of the rebellion’s harmful economic effects in the colony. Trade had slowed to a trickle in Le Cap, and the black insurgent leader, Jean-François, besieged the city from his base on the North Plain. “The insurgents or revolted slaves, commanded by a black named Jean François,” Samuel recounted, “had possession of the whole plain for sixty miles along the coast, and were still burning and plundering the country.”¹⁵⁰ Like his brother and business partners before him, Samuel began performing military duties in order to protect his firm’s assets in Le Cap. Samuel and other Perkins firm merchants were not alone. According to Samuel, by this stage in the rebellion American merchants were assigned their own guardhouse; necessary arms and ammunitions were stockpiled in Perkins, Burling & Co. storehouses. James continued to command the watch, while Samuel served as his first “lieutenant.”¹⁵¹

James and Samuel Perkins, Walter Burling and Nathaniel Cutting spent the winter of 1791-2 in Le Cap guarding against insurgent attacks. Gradually, the city was fortified and limited commercial activity resumed. A letter written in late 1791 by a firm merchant to Thomas Perkins in Boston suggests that some trade continued despite the slave rebellion. According to the merchant, the firm had recently “ship’d on board the Brig *Ranger*...bound for Boston Twenty eight Hhds [hogsheads] of molasses.” In the coming days the firm expected to send an additional “12,000 lbs. of Brown Sugar...& 30 more

¹⁵⁰ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 15–17.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27n.

Hhds of Molasses” to New England.¹⁵² Able to assemble a substantial—and international—force to protect the city, Le Cap was spared the worst of the rebellion. The Perkinses’ decision to sustain their business in Saint-Domingue reflected the economic importance of the colony to the family firm. The French sugar island had treated them well in the past, and the Perkins brothers were determined to see its commerce restored.

Nevertheless, the rigors of military duty began to weigh on James by the spring of 1792. In May, after spending nearly a decade in Saint-Domingue, James set sail aboard the ship *Providence* to look after business with Thomas back in Boston. Nathaniel Cutting set sail a few weeks later.¹⁵³ Samuel and Walter Burling stayed behind to manage the firm. In September, they witnessed the arrival of the new French Republic’s civil commissioners, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel. The commissioners, along with their 6,000 troops, were sent to quell the rebellion and bring the colony in line with France’s republican government and ideology. The commissioners began to apply revolutionary—and abolitionist¹⁵⁴—values to the colonial government. Within weeks of their arrival the commissioners declared it illegal to work slaves on Sundays, limited working hours for pregnant female slaves and allowed slaves to bring complaints against their masters to local officials.¹⁵⁵

Many slaveholding colonists disagreed with the commissioners’ decrees, especially in the North. Not only were conservative, slaveholding northerners upset by

¹⁵² Perkins, Burling & Co. to Thomas Handasyd Perkins, 7 November 1791, *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers, 1783-1892*, MHS. A hogshead was a large cask often containing liquid, such as molasses. Hogsheads varied in sized, but generally held between 50 and 100 gallons.

¹⁵³ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 88–89.

¹⁵⁴ Document #45 (p. 102) in Geggus’ *The Haitian Revolution: a Documentary History* reveals that Sonthonax had an abolitionist background. As a lawyer in France, Sonthonax predicted in 1790 that “a time will come—and the day is not far off—when a frizzy-haired African, without any other recommendation than his good sense and virtue, will come to participate in the making of laws in our national assemblies.”

¹⁵⁵ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 154–155.

new regulations on slavery, they also viewed Sonthonax and Polverel as agents of the radical National Assembly. Unsurprisingly, considering his support of slavery and rejection of French Revolutionary politics, Samuel Perkins also had misgivings about the commissioners.¹⁵⁶ Traditional political power bases such as the provincial assembly in the North remained intact, serving as a base of political opposition to the republican commissioners.¹⁵⁷ The frictions among Le Cap's proslavery, anti-republican factions and the civil commissioners would come to a head in the following months. For the Perkins brothers, tensions between colony and metropole would again threaten their right to commerce.

The Burning of Le Cap

Most historians consider the burning of Le Cap as one of the most important events of the Haitian Revolution. The battle for the city and the commissioners' ensuing emancipatory decrees would forever change Saint-Dominguan society. In the words of Laurent Dubois, formerly enslaved Africans became "black Republicans."¹⁵⁸ The colony's racial hierarchy was irreparably damaged, and black Saint-Dominguans asserted their rights as French citizens. Samuel Perkins, Walter Burling and another firm merchant from Boston, James Carter, found themselves in the midst of this revolutionary upheaval. Business for Perkins, Burling & Co. began to pick up in the months before the incident. The Perkins brothers hoped that by provisioning colonial militias, and later, metropolitan

¹⁵⁶ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 32. Samuel's disapproval of the commissioners is littered throughout *Reminiscences*. He accused them of being "obnoxious commissioners," "fanatical emancipators" and "petty despots."

¹⁵⁷ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 143–4. The commissioners had the power to disband the colonial assemblies, but they chose not to in an attempt to gain the support of white population.

¹⁵⁸ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 159.

troops stationed in the colony, they could help quell the rebellion and reestablish regular commerce—and make a profit doing it. Their hopes were dashed when violence erupted in the city. Though they initially fled Le Cap for the safety of the harbor, Samuel, Walter Burling and James Carter returned to the war-torn city to secure their possessions. The Boston merchants' willingness to assert their right to free trade and property seemingly knew no bounds.

During the period between the outbreak of slave rebellion and the arrival of the commissioners (roughly one year), colonial authorities became increasingly reliant on American provisions—particularly from Massachusetts. In the fiscal year of October 1791-1792, for example, Massachusetts merchants shipped 53 cannons to Saint-Domingue; by contrast, the United States' second leading provider of cannons to the colony, Pennsylvania, shipped only 16.¹⁵⁹ Reliance on American merchants only increased with the arrival of the commissioners' 6,000 troops from the metropole in September 1792. For the Perkins brothers, the complex political situation in the North Province complicated business. Perkins, Burling & Co. merchants were often unsure whether to bill the provincial assembly or the commissioners. According to Samuel, at one point the Perkins firm was owed \$20,000; Samuel settled the dispute by appealing to the French Minister to the United States in Philadelphia, who acquired the money to pay the debt.¹⁶⁰ Overall, however, the colony was generally able to meet its obligations to American merchants, and the colonial militias and metropolitan troops remained provisioned.

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Scherr, *Thomas Jefferson's Haitian Policy: Myths and Realities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 448–9.

¹⁶⁰ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 30.

Arrangements fell apart when an earthquake hit Le Cap in the spring of 1793. Preoccupied with salvaging the city, the commissioners and colonial authorities were unable to compensate American merchants. French troops from the métropole—who had little sentimental connection to Le Cap—threatened to plunder the city when news spread that they would no longer be receiving provisions. The anti-republican governor of Le Cap, François-Thomas Galbaud du Fort, called a meeting of French¹⁶¹ and American merchants (represented by the American Board of Commerce in Le Cap) to remedy the situation. According to Samuel, it was voted that if American merchants continued to provision the city, then French merchants would set fixed prices to tropical commodities. Once notified of the *quid pro quo* agreement, American merchants began to import food and arms. Samuel estimated the value of American provisions at 900,000 livres. Perkins, Burling & Co. took a leading role, importing some 180,000 livres worth of supplies—or roughly 20% of the American provisions imported into Le Cap.¹⁶²

Though doing business in revolutionary Saint-Domingue was anything but simple. The fissures in white colonial society created competing, ever-changing sets of allegiances, and many French merchants simply ignored the governor's orders. After unloading their imports, the Americans discovered the commodities had already been sold. "When the provisions promised by the American merchants had been delivered," Samuel explained, "they found that the French warehouses which a few days before had been well stocked with sugar, coffee, cotton, cocoa, etc., were empty." Samuel believed that the French merchants, unwilling to trade at fixed prices, had sold their goods to

¹⁶¹ I use the term "French merchants" here for convenience. The merchants in Le Cap consisted of both native-born and Saint-Dominguans and metropolitan Frenchmen.

¹⁶² Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 30–31.

European buyers at a higher charge.¹⁶³ After learning the French merchants had reneged on their promise, American merchant firms—including Perkins, Burling & Co.—immediately petitioned the governor for compensation.

Galbaud was fully aware of the importance of American provisions in the fight against the colony's black insurgent forces. In mid-June, the governor ordered the French merchants pay their debts to the Americans—no exceptions. Hoping to avoid the governor's orders, the merchants appealed to Commissioners Sonthonax and Polverel for assistance; they accused the governor of decreeing “dictatorial ordinances” and obstructing trade.¹⁶⁴ The commissioners—who had long been at odds with the conservative, anti-republican governor¹⁶⁵—used the merchants' appeal as a pretense to sail from Port-au-Prince to Le Cap, seize the unruly governor and imprison him aboard the ship *La Normandie* in the harbor.¹⁶⁶

The commissioners now controlled Le Cap, yet this did little to solve the debt problem. Still without their money, the American Board of Commerce sent a delegation to the commissioners to present their current state of affairs. To the French merchants, the commissioners' response to the Board's plea was unsatisfactory: Sonthonax ordered them to promptly pay their debts to the Americans. If the merchants did not have the money, Sonthonax declared, their property would be seized and sold at public auction. Furthermore, if their properties were not sufficient, then the merchants would be jailed until the money was forthcoming. The commissioners' troops fanned out in the city,

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 155–6. Galbaud had installed himself as governor of Le Cap without the permission of the commissioners. He also opposed the commissioners' new regulations on slavery.

¹⁶⁶ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 31.

seizing property and imprisoning French merchants.¹⁶⁷ Notwithstanding their republican ideologies, the commissioners—like Galbaud—understood the necessity of American provisions.

Needless to say, French merchants were enraged by the Sonthonax's decree. According to Samuel, in the following days they switched stances once again and began appealing to Governor Galbaud for protection. The imprisoned governor—now backed by both merchants and Le Cap's traditionally anti-republican factions—began gathering supporters. By June 19, Samuel, Walter Burling and James Carter witnessed the governors' ships of war turning their broadsides towards the city. They estimated that some 800 sailors were poised to attack. Samuel ordered all Perkins, Burling & Co. merchandise to be stored on company ships. But hostilities broke out the next morning before they were able transport their goods to the safety of the harbor.¹⁶⁸ All the while, the debts owed to Perkins, Burling & Co. remained unpaid.

For many within the anti-republican population of Le Cap (including Samuel Perkins), the commissioners' ensuing actions substantiated some of their greatest fears. When Galbaud led a "rabble" of sailors into the city, the commissioners took the bold measure of granting freedom and citizenship to all slaves willing to defend the city.¹⁶⁹ Le Cap's white colonists had long suspected Sonthonax and Polverel of being agents of the National Assembly sent to liberate enslaved Africans and destroy the colony's white population.¹⁷⁰ To their minds, they now had their proof. Invigorated by the possibility of freedom, many of the enslaved took up arms against Galbaud's forces. When news of

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 144.

violence within the city reached the insurgents on the North Plain, they also entered the fighting. Black combatants turned the tide of the battle, and the commissioners' forces began overpowering Galbaud's.¹⁷¹ The commissioners' emancipatory decrees were likely a matter of political and military expediency, but anti-republican whites interpreted the orders as the beginning of a race war. Samuel, whose politics aligned him with Le Cap's conservative factions, wrote that the commissioners' decrees instructed the formerly enslaved combatants to "massacre all the whites that were found in the streets." According to Samuel, the instructions were "most faithfully executed."¹⁷²

Samuel, Walter Burling and James Carter witnessed firsthand the fundamental social and political changes that the commissioner's decrees brought to Le Cap. The three Boston merchants observed the fighting from the balcony of their merchant house. According to Samuel, chaos reigned throughout the city. "In the general panic whites destroyed whites and blacks destroyed blacks...incessant firing of musketry, with incessant roaring of cannon, was heard in every direction," he remembered. They even observed a white colonist of high social standing (he was the commander of a corps of soldiers just the day before) running throughout the city screaming, "*Sauvez-vous! tout est perdu!*"¹⁷³ The commissioners' forces, many of who were black, now controlled Le Cap. To the city's white residents—long accustomed to their superior standing in Le Cap's racial hierarchy—it must have felt like all was lost.

Samuel and his associates abandoned the city when fighting spread dangerously close to their residence. "Armed with pistols for our defense," the three men fled for the safety of the waterfront. They were first taken aboard a Baltimore ship and then

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 159.

¹⁷² Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 34.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 37.

transported to a Perkins, Burling & Co. vessel anchored in the harbor. Samuel, Walter Burling and James Carter watched the hostilities unfold from the deck of their merchant ship. Despite the turmoil engulfing the city in front of their eyes, they decided to return to the city the next day to reclaim some of Perkins, Burling & Co.'s assets. Not even outright violence would deny the Boston merchants the right to protect their commercial possessions.

The trio's sortie into Le Cap the next day revealed their willingness to risk life and limb to protect their perceived right to commerce. Afraid that the commissioners' forces might mistake them for Galbaud's men, Samuel and his partners decided to go into the city armed. On their way ashore they were joined by another group of American merchants willing to aid their compatriots; by the time they landed the host numbered around 20 men.¹⁷⁴ Samuel and his comrades safely reached the Perkins, Burling & Co. merchant house and gathered important financial documents. On their way back to the harbor, however, they were attacked by a group of black soldiers. A "brisk fire" ensued between the two groups—killing a number of the latter—before the merchants were able to flee to the safety of their ships.¹⁷⁵ The Boston merchants once again found themselves engaging in armed combat—only this time, they fought against citizens of the French Republic.

Back aboard the ship, Samuel and his partners watched as formerly enslaved men and women made away with goods and commodities held in the Perkins firm's storehouses. Samuel described how the waterfront was "lined with black troops on horseback, with long lines of mules tied to each other by their tails, and accompanied by

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 41. Hugh George Campbell, a ship captain who would later fight in the Quasi-War with France and command the USS Constitution from 1806-07, joined Samuel et al.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

black drivers.” The mules were then loaded with the “dry-goods and other articles easily transported from our stores” until the “whole bay for nearly three quarters of a mile was stripped of its merchandise.”¹⁷⁶ Formerly enslaved Africans left reminders of their previous servitude—sugar, molasses and rum—in the storehouses. They then set them ablaze. The city’s economic lifeblood, Samuel remarked, made for both an “awful” and “sublime” scene: the sugar and molasses “burned vividly,” while super-heated rum caused “occasional explosions” in the night sky. According to Samuel, the Perkins, Burling & Co. storehouse “outshone them all.”¹⁷⁷

Samuel’s Mission to Commissioner Polverel

In the weeks and months after the burning of Le Cap, Samuel Perkins essentially performed damage control; he did all he could to salvage what was left of Perkins, Burling & Co.’s assets in the colony. Nevertheless, he continued to exhibit an extraordinary commitment to the idea of free trade. After the hostilities ceased in Le Cap and the commissioners took control of the city, Samuel, Walter Burling and James Carter concluded that something must be done to recoup the preexisting debts owed to them by the French merchants. They decided to make an appeal to the commissioners. Samuel soon learned, however, that word had spread of him and his comrades’ exploits during the burning of Le Cap. A “judicious friend” informed him that, since he and his men had killed a number of blacks, Samuel “would never be allowed to reach the commissioners, but would be immediately sacrificed.”¹⁷⁸ Forced to change plans, Samuel sent Walter Burling and James Carter back to Boston with the money they managed to save from Le

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 44, 45 & 45n.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 46.

Cap—roughly \$15,000. Samuel stayed in Saint-Domingue to continue his efforts to contact the commissioners.

In the previous months, however, Spain and Britain had declared war on revolutionary France. Fearful that the revolutionary (i.e., antislavery) ideologies might spread to their own colonies, they brought the war to the West Indies. The Spanish attacked west out of Santo Domingo; ironically, they allied themselves with the black insurgents of the North Plain. The insurgents mistakenly believed that the Spanish would guarantee them freedom for their efforts.¹⁷⁹ The British, on the other hand, began seizing vessels coming in and out of Saint-Domingue as they prepared their invasion of the West and South Provinces. Walter Burling and James Carter soon found themselves in the midst of this international conflict.

On their way out of Le Cap, Burling and Carter were captured by the British frigate *Alligator* and taken to Spanish Town, Jamaica. In a letter written to Thomas Perkins back in Boston, James Carter described how the British had recently decreed, “all neutral vessels bound to, or from French Ports considered as blockaded...shall be seized and sent into some British Port for legal adjudication.”¹⁸⁰ The British feared that American merchants might be aiding their French enemies in Saint-Domingue. Burling and Carter’s capture further complicated things for Samuel. His task had now become even more important: if he was unable to recover the debts from the commissioners, then all of Perkins, Burling & Co.’s assets in Saint-Domingue (i.e., the wealth they derived from slave-produced tropical commodities) would be lost.

¹⁷⁹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 98–99.

¹⁸⁰ James Carter to Thomas Handasyd Perkins, 18 July 1793, *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers, 1783-1892*, MHS. James Carter wrote to Boston while detained in the free port of Saint-Nicolas Môle.

Unable to safely enter Le Cap, Samuel decided to sail for Port-au-Prince to seek an audience with Commissioner Polverel. Soon after their victory in Le Cap, Polverel had travelled to Port-au-Prince to govern the West and South Provinces while Sonthonax remained in Le Cap to govern the North. After a short stint in jail in Saint-Marc,¹⁸¹ he arrived in Port-au-Prince and appealed to Polverel by letter. He was informed, however, that nothing could be done without written evidence of the debt. Samuel would have to return to Le Cap and retrieve a written copy of the agreement made between the French merchants and American Board of Commerce.¹⁸²

When Samuel arrived in Le Cap he witnessed a world turned upside down. In the months after the siege Sonthonax moved beyond emancipating only those willing to fight for the Republic. On August 29 he abolished slavery completely in the North Province. Sonthonax's decree was the New World's first large-scale, immediate emancipation. In one fell swoop, Le Cap's already crumbling racial hierarchy was abolished; formerly enslaved Africans now asserted their rights as citizens of the French Republic.¹⁸³ Samuel, accustomed to the strict racial hierarchy of prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue, struggled to navigate this radically different society.

Samuel's presumptions about race and racial hierarchy were challenged the moment he disembarked onto King's Wharf for the American Consul's office in Le Cap. He received a polite (though for him, disturbing) welcome to the city. A black man sporting a white suit and gold-laced hat greeted Samuel on the docks. As the man

¹⁸¹ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 50–51. Soldiers loyal to the commissioners imprisoned Samuel. They suspected Samuel, since he was leaving Le Cap directly after violence had occurred there, might be a Galbaud sympathizer. The governor of Saint-Marc eventually released Samuel after he pled his case.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁸³ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 163–6. While slaves were given full citizenship, they were still forced to remain on plantations and, for the most part, not allowed to own property.

approached, a stupefied Samuel recognized him as André, a former house-servant to a fellow commission agent killed in the burning of the city. Freed by the commissioners, André decided to assert his freedom and equality by donning his master's clothes. André, Samuel explained, had "thought it would well become the dignity of his new character [as a free man] to wear his master's Sunday suit and carry his gold-headed chain." André counseled Samuel that Le Cap was part of the French Republic, and all blacks were to be addressed with the title *citoyen* (citizen)—anything less would be taken as an insult.¹⁸⁴ To Samuel's mind, misguided revolutionary politics had severely upset Le Cap's once profitable racial hierarchy. Shaken by the incident, he continued on towards the American Consul's office. Samuel's encounter with the city's upturned social system, however, was far from over.

On leaving André, Samuel came across another scene he never could have imagined just a few years prior. "I perceived a number of black men and one white man in the water, in the act of rolling a hoghead of sugar into a large flat-bottomed boat," Samuel recalled. The elderly white man, knee-deep in water and dressed in tattered clothing, encouraged his fellow workers: "Come on my boys, one more time now! Now for the last shove!" Samuel soon recognized him as Monsieur Laroque, formerly a man of great wealth. Samuel confronted Laroque. "What!" he exclaimed, "is this M. Laroque that I see here working like a slave?" Laroque responded, "What am I to do, my friend? It's the only way to survive." He then cautioned Samuel, like André, from using the word slave on any occasion, as it might cost him his life.¹⁸⁵ While Monsieur Laroque was not

¹⁸⁴ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 54.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

representative of most planters' experiences, for Samuel he embodied yet another of the radical—and negative—changes the revolution had brought to Saint-Domingue.

Samuel finally reached the American Consul, who accompanied him to the government headquarters. On his way through town with the Consul (a “Mr. Meyers”), Samuel received an unsuspected blow to the chest that put him on his back. “On looking up to see whence the blow came,” he described, “I saw before me a negro fellow of great size, in full [military] uniform, with his sword half drawn, glaring upon me with the most infernal countenance I ever beheld.” Because of the current social state of the city Samuel had to temper his response: “My first impulse was to break out upon this savage with a heavy curse, but as prudence is the better part of valor, a moment’s reflection cooled my anger, and I asked the fellow what he meant by striking me in that manner.” The man who struck Samuel realized he was mistaken in his man (“Moi trompé!”) and continued on.¹⁸⁶ Just weeks earlier a black man could have been jailed—or worse yet, hanged—for striking a white man. Now, in the name of the French Republic, the formerly enslaved population enjoyed full citizenship. After the incident Samuel and Meyers, in genuine fear for their lives, made haste to the government headquarters.

Once they reached the government headquarters, officials led Samuel into a “large room, fifty or sixty feet long, one end of which was filled with papers in one solid mass.” Surprisingly, considering his description of the size and state of the government archives, Samuel was quickly able to locate a copy of the agreement between the French merchants and the American Board of Commerce. He could now travel to Port-au-Prince, present proof of his unpaid debts, and receive the money owed to Perkins, Burling & Co.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

Before his departure for Port-au-Prince, Samuel decided to walk through the city he had come to know so well. To his mind, the social changes brought on by the burning of Le Cap and the commissioners' ensuing emancipatory measures were not victories for human equality, but rather a wanton destruction of a once-highly profitable economic system. Samuel worked his way to the business end of town to "see the state of [Perkins, Burling & Co.'s] house," and to take one last view at the residence where he had "passed so many pleasant and happy years" of his life. As he reflected on his family's many years of economic success in the Le Cap, he noted that the "bustle, noise and cheerful labor" once heard on the waterfront were absent, as were the ships that had plied the harbor in search of tropical commodities. "Now all was hushed as death; not even the dip of an oar or the sight of a boat," he recalled as he stepped over dead bodies littering the streets.¹⁸⁷ The slave system and racial hierarchy that controlled Saint-Dominguan society for the previous two centuries were destroyed, and Samuel Perkins would never step foot in Le Cap again.

Samuel delivered his credentials to the government officials when he arrived back in Port-au-Prince. The director of the city's warehouses promised him that he would have his pick from the first produce that came in from the countryside. He soon learned, however, that the director had reneged on his promise, selling all the delivered sugar to a ship with a French supercargo—a representative of the ship's owner responsible for overseeing the cargo and its sale. Samuel had no other choice but to request a personal audience with Commissioner Polverel.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

Samuel's meeting with Polverel did little to improve his negative preconceptions about the commissioners. In fact, the commissioner of the French Republic terrified the Yankee Federalist. "As I turned to the spot where he sat," Samuel admitted, "his large white eyes met mine with such a peculiar stare and forbidding frown that it had almost as powerful an effect upon my frame as the blow I had received in the breast from the black officer in [Le Cap]." Polverel then asked Samuel's business. In "as few words as possible," Samuel related the actions of the warehouse director. As the commissioner listened his eyes reportedly began turning red "until they looked like those of an angry tiger ready to leap on his prey." Unaware at whom Polverel's rage was directed, Samuel waited silently for a response; but his thoughts kept drifting towards that symbol of the French Republic—the guillotine recently erected in Port-au-Prince. Finally, the response came: "Go, *Citoyen*, to that villain there, and tell him from me, that if he does not pay you right away, I will put my sword into his loins." More than happy to take his leave of the commissioner, Samuel relayed Polverel's instructions to warehouse director. Unsurprisingly, the commissioner's words had the desired effect. The warehouse doors were "immediately thrown open" for Samuel's inspection and his debts were recouped.¹⁸⁹ Samuel's encounter with one of the Haitian Revolution's leading actors may not have been pleasant, but it enabled him to finally recoup Perkins, Burling & Co.'s debts.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 64.

The Rise of Toussaint Louverture and Persistence of Trade with Saint-Domingue

Samuel remained in Port-au-Prince during the fall of 1793, hoping that tensions would diminish and regular commercial activity would resume. From Samuel's perspective, however, things only got worse. In September, Polverel initiated a gradual emancipation strategy throughout the West and South Provinces. He first freed state-owned slaves and then all but coerced whites to emancipate their own slaves.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, the fall of 1793 saw the conquest of large swaths of the West and South by the British—often at the behest of Saint-Dominguan planters recently deprived of their “property.”¹⁹¹ In the North the Spanish, aided by their black insurgent allies, continued their attacks from Santo Domingo.

Samuel had seen all this before. He feared that tensions between pro-slavery and pro-republican forces would again devolve into violence. Not wanting to relive the burning of Le Cap, he officially closed Perkins, Burling & Co. and set sail for Boston aboard the *William*.¹⁹² After his arrival in Boston, Samuel retired from the West India trade, married into the wealthy Higginson family and went into insurance and investment banking.¹⁹³ Samuel's departure from Port-au-Prince marked the end of the Perkins family's nearly decade-long commercial presence in Saint-Domingue. In the coming years, James and Thomas Perkins would redirect most of the family's commercial efforts to China. But Saint-Domingue remained profitable. Notwithstanding the rapid advancement of the Haitian Revolution after 1793—in particular, the rise of Toussaint Louverture—the Perkins firm continued to trade with the colony.

¹⁹⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 163-4.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 70.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

In the months following the start of rebellion the insurgent leaders Jean-François and Georges Biassou began collaborating with the Spanish in Santo Domingo. Insurgents traded plundered plantation goods for Spanish provisions and ammunition.¹⁹⁴ Spanish support allowed black insurgents to effectively take control of the North Plain in late 1791. Support turned to alliance in the spring of 1793 when Spain declared war on France. Enticed by offerings of freedom and land in return for military service, Jean-François and Biassou had brought more than 10,000 soldiers to the Spanish side by June 1793.¹⁹⁵ Among Biassou's forces was a man named Toussaint. Toussaint had been born into slavery on the Bréda plantation outside of Le Cap in the 1740s. As a young man he was noted for his intelligence and knowledge of herbs. His master first made Toussaint his personal coachman and then steward to his plantation livestock—a position usually held by a white man.¹⁹⁶ By the 1770s Toussaint gained his freedom but retained his duties on the Bréda plantation.¹⁹⁷ When the slave rebellion began in August 1791 Toussaint remained cautious. He kept the black plantation laborers at work and protected the Bréda family from insurgent attacks. Yet after a month of remaining loyal to his former owners, Toussaint sent them to the safety of Le Cap and joined Biassou's forces.¹⁹⁸

Toussaint quickly gained the admiration of Jean-François and Biassou. From late 1791 to 1793 Toussaint climbed the command ladder within the insurgent army.¹⁹⁹ After joining the Spanish in May 1793 he and his men were able to seize the North Province

¹⁹⁴ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 107.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁹⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 170.

¹⁹⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 70.

¹⁹⁹ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 176.

towns of La Tannerie, Dondon and Marmelade from French forces. Toussaint stayed loyal to his Spanish allies until Sonthonax and Polverel began their large-scale emancipation efforts in August. The civil commissioners' egalitarian decrees were coupled with signs that the Spanish were not as committed to emancipation as originally believed.²⁰⁰ The new, abolitionist French Republic became a more attractive ally to black insurgents fighting for freedom. Toussaint began a tentative, clandestine alliance with Étienne Laveaux, the republican governor of Saint-Domingue.²⁰¹ Sometime during 1793 Toussaint shed his former master's surname Bréda and adopted Louverture (the opening). Toussaint Louverture's name reflected his growing military and political power.

Toussaint's volte-face commenced in June 1794, when news reached the island that the National Assembly had outlawed slavery in the French colonies. He turned on his Spanish allies, taking the frontier towns of San Miguel and San Rafael; these seizures effectively blocked Spanish expeditions into the North Province. The Spanish gave up their efforts to conquer Saint-Domingue and made peace in July 1795. In the following years, fighting under the republican banner, Toussaint stopped British attempts to gain a foothold in the North Province. With the help of *gens de couleur* leader André Rigaud, he eventually forced the British to withdraw from Saint-Domingue in 1798.²⁰² During his meteoric rise in power Toussaint developed close relationships with Laveaux and Sonthonax; all three men were deeply committed to slave emancipation. After coming to the aid of Governor Laveaux during an attempted coup in 1796 Toussaint was named lieutenant-governor of the colony. In May 1797 Sonthonax named him commander-in-chief of the army of Saint-Domingue. Though Toussaint was not content to stop there: a

²⁰⁰ Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, xxiii–xxv.

²⁰¹ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 129 & 143.

²⁰² Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, xxv.

few months later he unexpectedly expelled Sonthonax from Saint-Domingue.²⁰³ While Rigaud held considerable power in the South Province, Toussaint Louverture became the unquestionable leader in the West and North.

It was around the time of the British withdrawal that Toussaint began to re-implement a plantation-based agricultural regime in the North. Despite being an avowed abolitionist, he understood the importance of the plantation system to the Saint-Dominguan economy and sought to enforce it by all means necessary. Recently emancipated blacks found themselves forced back onto sugar, coffee and indigo plantations. When they attempted to grow and sell crops as independent landholders or find work in urban centers, Toussaint used the army to force them back on plantations.²⁰⁴ Though dwarfed by prerevolutionary production levels, Saint-Domingue continued to export tropical commodities.

Back in the United States, Franco-American relations began to deteriorate into what would become known as the “Quasi-War.” In short, the war was the result of the United States’ refusal to repay debts incurred to France during the American Revolution; from the United States government’s viewpoint, the debts were owed to the Old Regime, which was now non-existent. In response, the French decided to attack one of the very foundations of American nationhood: commerce. French privateers attacked American merchant ships throughout the Atlantic. The U.S. Congress, therefore, suspended all commercial activity with French ports in June 1798.²⁰⁵ The congressional act complicated matters for some American merchants: they now found themselves deprived of Saint-Dominguan commodities. While many American merchants suffered from the

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

²⁰⁵ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 223.

embargo, the Perkins brothers—like their Boston merchant predecessors three decades earlier—largely ignored government-sponsored restrictions on trade. Some Boston merchants, it seemed, had not forgotten how to assert their right to free trade through smuggling.

The Perkins firm (now headed by James and Thomas) continued their trade with Saint-Domingue under the nose of the American government. Despite being unabashed supporters of slavery, the Perkins brothers believed that the economic stability of Toussaint’s agricultural regime would allow for a profitable trade with the colony. For his part, Toussaint was more than happy to do business with American merchants. A few weeks after the embargo passed Congress the Perkins firm insured the Boston brig *Lucretia* for the purchase of 31 hogsheads of brown sugar (worth over 31,000 livres) at Le Cap, Caracol and Limbé.²⁰⁶ A few months later an American merchant residing in the colony wrote to James and Thomas expressing his optimism about trading with the black leader. “His [Louverture’s] intentions are not yet known to us, he has only said that he would soon put the Colonie in a flourishing state, which cannot be done without the revival of commerce between America and this place,” he wrote.²⁰⁷ Though the Perkins brothers and Toussaint Louverture came from very different backgrounds, they shared the common goal of re-establishing a robust trade between the United States and Saint-Domingue. In the winter of 1798-9 Toussaint Louverture would negotiate with the highest levels of the United States government in an effort to do just that.

Negotiations began in late fall 1798. Secretary of State and Salem-native Timothy Pickering suggested to President John Adams that, since Toussaint had expelled French

²⁰⁶ Invoice of Ship *Lucretia*, 4 July 1798, *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers, 1783-1892*, MHS.

²⁰⁷ Henry Forbes to Thomas Handasyd Perkins, 27 October 1798, *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers, 1783-1892*, MHS.

agents from the colony, Saint-Domingue could perhaps be exempted from the embargo.²⁰⁸ Adams and Pickering played to their political base of northern Federalist merchants by opening communications with the black leader in November. In a letter to President Adams, Toussaint wrote of his disapproval of the embargo: “It is with the greatest Surprise and tender sorrow that I see your nation’s ships abandon, for some time, the ports of Saint-Domingue.” He continued by expressing his desire to reestablish commercial relations between Saint-Domingue and the United States, and “to have the American flag in our ports.” Furthermore, Toussaint ensured safe commerce by promising to protect American merchant ships from French privateers.²⁰⁹ The ex-slave’s overtures to the American president—and northern merchants’ pleas to reopen trade with Saint-Domingue—were successful. In early 1799 Adams and Pickering sent Edward Stevens (U.S. consul general to Saint-Domingue) to the colony to begin formal negotiations. On June 26, Adams reopened trade in the ports of Le Cap and Port-au-Prince.²¹⁰

The opening of Le Cap and Port-au-Prince coincided with another threat to American shipping in Saint-Domingue: the War of the South. In what can be considered a civil war, Toussaint Louverture faced-off against his one-time ally André Rigaud. The conflict began as a boundary dispute between the two leaders, yet it quickly took on a racial dimension. Many of Rigaud’s officers were light-skinned *gens de couleur*; Toussaint’s officer corps consisted of predominantly, though not exclusively, formerly enslaved blacks. What is more, many of Rigaud’s men had been free before the outbreak

²⁰⁸ Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1958*, 37.

²⁰⁹ “Letters of Toussaint Louverture and of Edward Stevens, 1798-1800,” *The American Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (October 1, 1910): 66.

²¹⁰ Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1958*, 40.

of revolution—some had even owned slaves. As a result, many of Rigaud’s men were not deeply committed to slave emancipation. When Toussaint invaded the South his small number of *gens de couleur* officers switched sides and took up arms for Rigaud. Toussaint’s reprisals carried out by the black generals Jeans-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe were particularly brutal.²¹¹

As the fighting continued in the South, the Adams administration decided to intervene in the conflict to protect their trade agreement with Toussaint. The black leader asked for the help of the United States navy in a letter penned to Adams in August. As a man of extraordinary political tact, Toussaint was also careful to stress the commercial benefits of U.S. intervention in Saint-Domingue. “Without a navy,” he explained, “the pirates of the South who infest our shores” will continue to “pillage and assassinate with impunity all the French and *foreigners* [i.e., American merchants] they encounter.” He continued by asking Adams to help “put an end to their piracy” by sending armed ships to the colony.²¹² Adams and Pickering assented, sending American warships to blockade—and in some instances, bombard—Southern ports.²¹³ Deprived of vital provisions and arms, Rigaud’s forces faltered in the winter of 1799-1800. By summer his forces were destroyed. Toussaint now controlled all of Saint-Domingue.²¹⁴ Thus the Adams administration played a vital role in Toussaint Louverture’s consolidation of power. The administration’s decision to intervene in the War of the South was not an affirmation of

²¹¹ Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 21–22.

²¹² “Letters of Toussaint Louverture and of Edward Stevens, 1798-1800,” 82. Italics mine.

²¹³ Tim Matthewson, *A Proslavery Foreign Policy: Haitian-American Relations during the Early Republic* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 85–86. The American warship *General Greene* aided Toussaint’s forces in the crucial battle of Jacmel by blockading and then bombarding the city.

²¹⁴ Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1958*, 40–41.

Adams or Pickering's antislavery commitment. Rather, it was a deliberate move intended to protect American shipping.²¹⁵

Perkins, Burling & Co., along with many other American merchant firms, continued to trade with Saint-Domingue during and after the War of the South.²¹⁶ Merchants maintained their relations with Toussaint as he solidified his agricultural regime and began to assert his independence. Though Toussaint never advocated for complete separation from France, he did flaunt the French government's (now headed by Napoleon Bonaparte) orders by annexing Santo Domingo and promulgating his own constitution.²¹⁷ By 1802, Napoleon sent his brother-in-law, General Victoire Leclerc, to put an end to Toussaint's authority in Saint-Domingue. Leclerc landed in February with instructions to win over black generals with abolitionist rhetoric, disband their armies and then deport them from the colony. Toussaint battled Leclerc's 20,000 soldiers for months before surrendering in May; he was deported to France in June. After pledging allegiance to France after Toussaint's submission, Generals Dessalines and Christophe broke with the French when it became obvious that Napoleon sought to re-impose slavery.²¹⁸ Convinced that France no longer supported the abolition of slavery, the generals now fought for complete independence from France.

The War of Independence lasted from October 1802 to December 1803. With the Quasi-War now over, American merchants were again able to legally trade with Saint-Domingue. Yankee merchants carried on a legal trade with French forces on one hand,

²¹⁵ Scherr, *Thomas Jefferson's Haitian Policy*, 61–62. Scherr argues that John Adams feared the spread of slave rebellion from Saint-Domingue to the American South more than most southern planters. Scherr also argues that the Adams administration's intervention in Saint-Domingue was a result of their anti-French sentiment and desire to protect American merchant activity in the colony.

²¹⁶ Invoice of Ship *Rebecca*, 16 October 1799, *Thomas Handasyd Perkins Papers, 1783-1892*, MHS.

²¹⁷ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 2004, 236–241.

²¹⁸ Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, xxix-xxx.

and a clandestine trade with Dessalines and Christophe on the other.²¹⁹ By playing both sides of the field, they guaranteed future commercial relations with the victor. As in years past, Boston was a main trading partner: Arthur Scherr estimates that in 1803-4 Massachusetts exported more goods to French forces in Saint-Domingue than any other state; gunpowder and cannons likely made up a substantial percentage of total exports.²²⁰ But Massachusetts was not alone. From April to November 1803, 79 American merchant ships from 19 different ports along the eastern seaboard officially passed French customs in Port-au-Prince.²²¹ The secretive nature of American trade with the insurgent side makes it difficult to quantify, yet it was carried on nonetheless. For many American merchants, the opportunity to ensure future trade with Saint-Domingue—whether ruled by the French or the formerly enslaved—outweighed any personal opinions on race or politics.

Dessalines and Christophe's forces were ultimately victorious. The last French troops evacuated the island in November and December 1803. On January 1, 1804 Dessalines declared Saint-Domingue free and independent from France; slavery was forever abolished. In an effort to erase the memory of French colonialism the African-born, ex-slave general massacred all remaining white Frenchmen and resurrected the island's pre-Columbian Amerindian name: Haiti. Despite his hatred of the French, Dessalines understood the necessity of cultivating trade relations with other white powers. Like Toussaint years prior, he implemented a strict, plantation-based agricultural regime in the countryside. In an address to his young nation in April, Dessalines commanded his generals to "offer help, encouragement, and protection to neutral and

²¹⁹ Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, xxx.

²²⁰ Scherr, *Thomas Jefferson's Haitian Policy*, 448-9.

²²¹ "Declaration D'Arrivée," Port-au-Prince, April-November 1803, *Hall-Baury-Jansen Papers*, MHS.

friendly nations that will establish commercial relations with this island.”²²² Similar to American merchants, the newly bestowed “Emperor of Haiti” put aside personal political beliefs for economic purposes.

Dessalines’ efforts were not in vain. The United States continued to trade with the new nation. From September 30, 1804–October 1, 1805, Scherr estimates that American merchants traded over 300,000 pounds of gunpowder for Haitian brown sugar. The United States’ high re-export total of brown sugar for the period (95,618,316 lbs.) suggests that Haitian sugar remained an important part of the American economy.²²³ Furthermore, despite Thomas Jefferson’s 1806 embargo on Haiti (the francophile president hoped to mend years of strained relations with Paris), American merchant ships smuggled 72,669,603 lbs. of brown sugar into the United States during the fiscal year of 1806–1807.²²⁴ Haitian tropical commodities were still in high demand.

American imports from Haiti did not drop until after the War of 1812. Years of Jeffersonian embargos and non-intercourse acts, coupled with economic pressures brought on by the war, devastated the American shipping industry. New England—where shipping had long formed the basis of the regional economy—was particularly hard hit. By the time the industry recovered in the mid-1810s, the Haitian economy had shifted from large-scale plantation agriculture to subsistence farming.²²⁵ After decades of forced labor (by both white masters and black leaders) the Haitian people decided to cultivate the land on their own terms.²²⁶ Instead of working sugar and coffee plantations, they

²²² Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, 182.

²²³ Scherr, *Thomas Jefferson’s Haitian Policy*, 449.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 467.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 467–468.

²²⁶ Jean-Jacques Dessalines was assassinated in 1806. Henri Christophe (a participant in the assassination) took his position as the political leader of North Haiti.

began to grow smaller crops for sale at local markets. The drop in Haitian sugar production, as well as rise of Cuba as the world's new leading sugar producer,²²⁷ led American merchants to largely abandon trade with Haiti. While Haiti continued to supply the United States with some of its coffee, American merchants' longstanding, dynamic commercial relations with the island came to an end.

In the years after Haiti's transition to a subsistence farming economy, James and Thomas Perkins began focusing almost all of their commercial attentions towards China. The Forbes joined the Perkins brothers, and the two families established a highly lucrative business in the opium trade. Like in Saint-Domingue, the Perkinses put profit above all else—their actions in both the French West Indies and the Far East had negative impacts on the local society. Their tactics may have been unscrupulous, but James and Thomas nevertheless turned a hefty profit. They used the wealth they accrued in China—and Saint-Domingue before that—to leave a lasting impact on their hometown of Boston.

The Perkins brothers traded a myriad of items in China; the most profitable was Turkish opium. Chinese authorities soon became aware of the drug's deleterious effects on the local population and banned its importation in 1818. Far from seeing the ban as an impediment to trade, however, James and Thomas saw it as an opportunity.²²⁸ A ban on opium meant less competition. In order to get around customs officials, they utilized

²²⁷ For a classic work on the development of sugar production in Cuba, see Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The Sugarmill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, 1760-1860* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976). For an understanding of how Cuban leaders capitalized on the destruction of the Saint-Domingue's sugar economy, see Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). In *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital and World Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) Dale Tomich describes the rise of Cuba (and other slave regimes like the southern United States and Brazil) as a "second slavery": as slavery declined in the British and French empires, it expanded in other areas.

²²⁸ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 285.

tactics developed in Saint-Domingue. James and Thomas instructed their captains to use the code word “gum” for opium in letters. Captains hoping to sell the drug in Canton (now Guangzhou) were to moor in Macau or the on the islands of the Pearl River Delta until it was safe to unload their illicit cargos.²²⁹ Turkish opium flooded into China in the first decades of the 19th century, and the drug’s highly addictive qualities uprooted traditional Chinese society. Nevertheless, demand remained high and the Perkins brothers’ revenues skyrocketed. By the 1820s, Thomas Perkins was considered one of the wealthiest men in the United States.²³⁰

Back home, James and Thomas supported several philanthropic initiatives. The family who made their fortune off of the tropical commodities, slave and opium trades played a major role in creating the social and physical landscape of contemporary Boston. The Perkins brothers’ long list of legacies began in 1821, with the establishment of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Thomas led the effort to raise the \$100,000 needed to begin construction. Additionally, he and James each personally donated \$5,000 to the project. Before his death in 1822 James (described by one biographer as a “studious, bookish man”) contributed \$20,000 to both the Boston Athenaeum and the “University at Cambridge.” In 1826 Thomas and James Perkins, Jr. paid half of the \$30,000 required to build an addition to the Athenaeum. By the late 1820s Thomas had become involved in the founding of a school for the blind. When the school outgrew its original building, Thomas (who was suffering from deteriorating eyesight himself) donated his \$50,000

²²⁹ Ibid., 301.

²³⁰ Michael Klepper and Robert Gunther, *The Wealthy 100: From Benjamin Franklin to Bill Gates-A Ranking of the Richest Americans, Past and Present* (Secaucus, N.J: Citadel Press, 1996). Klepper and Gunther rank Thomas H. Perkins at the 78th richest person in American history. At his death Thomas was worth \$3 million, or 1/1116 of the contemporary national GNP.

Pearl Street mansion as the school's new residence.²³¹ The Perkins School for Blind still exists today in Watertown, Massachusetts. Lastly, in a fitting testament to his revolutionary childhood, Thomas provided financial support to the construction of the Bunker Hill Monument.²³²

Thomas and Samuel both retired from long and successful careers in the late 1830s. The brothers bought neighboring estates in the town of Brookline, where they spent their final years spending time with their families and cultivating gardens full of exotic flowers and fruit trees. In their late age, the brothers were known for being able to identify rare fruits by touch alone.²³³ Samuel died on his birthday, May 24, 1847, at age 80.²³⁴ Seven years later, on a cold New England January morning, 90-year-old Thomas died peacefully in sleep.²³⁵ In the decades following their deaths, the next generation of Perkinses continued to participate in the China trade. James, Thomas and Samuel's economic successes in Saint-Domingue and the Far East built the foundations for Perkins family's continued success in commercial trade.

²³¹ Cary, *Memoir of Thomas Handasyd Perkins*, 219–224.

²³² Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 319–320. The Bunker Hill Memorial was completed in 1843.

²³³ Perkins, *Reminiscences of the Insurrection in St. Domingo*, 2.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

²³⁵ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston, Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854*, 416.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of the 18th century Boston merchants grew accustomed to an unregulated trade with the French colony. New England goods were traded for Saint-Dominguan molasses. Molasses powered Boston's rum industry; rum, in turn, enmeshed the city into the Atlantic economy. By the eve of the American Revolution, molasses was an essential part of the Boston economy. When Great Britain cracked down on extra-imperial trade after the Seven Year's War, their efforts were met with opposition in Boston. Those Bostonians connected to the maritime and rum industries (which was a substantial percentage of the Boston population) worried that any impediment to the Saint-Domingue trade would damage the rum industry. Anger over trade regulations on molasses evolved into outright resistance to British rule in the late 1760s and 70s. Boston patriots—the Perkins family among them—crafted a conception of liberty that was intimately tied to ideas of free trade; and by violating the colonists' natural right to free trade, Great Britain annulled its right to govern. Molasses, of course, was not the *only* reason why Bostonians decided to break with Great Britain. Besides regulations on other popular trade items (most notably, tea), there were numerous social, political and religious reasons why individuals sought independence. Nevertheless, Saint-Dominguan molasses played an important role in the development of revolutionary ideals in Boston.

After independence the Perkins brothers and other Boston merchants asserted their natural right to free trade by traveling to Saint-Domingue—the very place Great Britain sought to deny them. Once there, they derived immense profits from the colony's dynamic plantation economy and Atlantic slave trade. Merchants like James, Thomas and Samuel Perkins, however, were in for a surprise. The outbreak of the French Revolution

began a series of events that would change the colony forever. The Haitian Revolution brought about the destruction of the colony's racial hierarchy, the abolition of slavery and the eventual overthrow of white rule. The Perkins brothers were forced to navigate the colony's rapidly changing social, political and economic landscape. In the early stages of the revolution, they willingly took up arms against black insurgents and provisioned French troops. Like back home three decades earlier, the Perkins brothers and other American merchants did so in order to protect their natural right to free trade. They believed that Saint-Domingue's racial hierarchy protected the colony's economic vitality. The Perkinses' experiences in the colony plunged them into the heart of the revolution: they experienced some of its most important events and came to face-to-face with some of its most prominent actors.

As the revolution wore on, the Perkins brothers continued their trade with the colony, whether under the control of the French or black insurgent leaders like Toussaint Louverture—at least in this case, money trumped politics. Boston and wider American trade continued with the island even after the declaration of Haitian independence in January 1804. Boston's long commercial relations with Saint-Domingue/Haiti withered away in the 1810s. After years of forced labor, Haitians began cultivating the land for their own benefit; Haiti transitioned from a plantation to subsistence farming economy. In the following years the Perkins brothers' mercantile ventures shifted eastward. In China, they participated in the illegal yet lucrative Turkish opium trade. Their smuggling skills served them well in the East. The cumulative profits from the Saint-Domingue and China trades allowed James, Thomas and Samuel to leave a lasting impact on development of civil society in contemporary Boston.

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